

Book 5

Prologue

*"A horse and fall was all it took
For every last to take the hook
Now the kitchen's full of cooks,
And the pot it is boiling*

*Crown of this, crown of that
They all chase after the hat*

*Princess said she has a right
Princess said it'd be a fight
So princesses are all aflight,
And the pot it is boiling*

*Crown of this, crown of that
They all chase after the hat*

*The wheel spins us all around
Up and north, south and down
Ebb or flow, we'll still drown,
And the pot it is boiling*

*Crown of this, crown of that
All of this for a hat,
While the pot it is boiling."*

-*"Too Many Cooks"*, a Proceran folk song written and grown popular during the civil war

The wolves were at the gate.

Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer, Prince of Rhenia and Princess of Salia, Warden of the same West that was currently burning to the ground, did not wonder when it had all gone wrong. She was not an unintelligent woman, and so believed she'd already identified the point of failure with accuracy: the moment where she'd assumed Keter would remain quiescent. She hadn't, though, not truly. Cordelia had believed there might be an increase in raids coming from the Kingdom of the Dead, perhaps a tentative incursion into the Alamans lakelands. That was the very reason she'd forced through the Highest Assembly the very unpopular taxes that had funded the restoration of all major fortresses north of Brabant, that she'd taken only a meager portion of the armies of the lakeside Alamans principalities and her Lycaonese kinsmen. There would be burning, she'd thought, there would be

bleeding. But the borders would hold until the grim business of pacifying the east was done and full attention could be turned to the evil that lay behind the walls of Keter. In a word, she had assumed the Hidden Horror was a fool.

There was a young man at her Salian court by the name of Gabriel, a commoner who'd had the benefit of an education in letters by the House of Light. He had, several years ago, penned an interesting treatise called *Fulcrums of History*. A repudiation of sorts to the looming presence of *On Rule* over Proceran politics at the highest rung. It argued, rather eloquently, that disaster came to empires by an accumulation of smaller factors that drained the life out of them instead of through failures of will or cleverness, as the author of *On Rule* had argued. It had been, Cordelia felt, an attempt to explain the resounding brutality of the civil war by a scholar who had been born in its aftermath. It had concluded by arguing that the solution to such degradation was 'an injection of fresh vitality', in this case personified by Cordelia herself leading the traditionally aloof Lycaonese south to force an end to the wars. The conclusion was not as well written as the rest, and largely flattery directed at her in hope of an appointment. He had obtained it, though the flattery had not been the reason. Anyone displaying the sharp insight of the earlier chapters could and should be used by her administration.

She thought of that treatise, sometimes. To apply the logic behind it to her current situation, for there had been a clear accumulation of factors over the last few years. Strength and coin spent influencing foreign wars in Callow and the League. Erosion of her authority over the Tenth Crusade, by both Proceran factionalism and the prominent role of the Chosen, followed by the bruising strategic defeats of the Battle of the Camps and the assault on Red Flower Vales. Once the cracks were there, they had only broadened. Tensions within the Great Alliance grew. The Levantines had been less than eager to defend the heartlands of the Principate, even against Wasteland legions. A trail of burnt cities and granaries from Bayeux to Iserre had been the consequence of that, further weakening her standing within the very alliance she had assembled. Further disaster struck at Thalassina, with the Warlock obliterating the better part of the Ashuran war fleets along with the city he'd come to defend. Worse, the Chosen had now decided to buck worldly authority entirely: the Saint of Swords had openly admitted Procer was to be the pyre birthing her *better world*, and now the Grey Pilgrim had refused her order to immediately slay the Black Knight instead of capturing him.

The heroes could no longer be relied on. They would, from now, oscillate between being useful but uncontrolled battlefield assets and major strategic liabilities. The rulers of Dominion of Levant, her nominal allies and comrades-in-arms, were now attempting to twist her arms for better concessions after a war

they were currently *losing*. Magon Hadast and the Thalassocracy of Ashur, her sole remaining solid ally, had been inflicted two vicious setbacks in a row. The disaster at Thalassina could have been recovered from, but the League of Free Cities had smelled the blood in the air and finally sallied out. The League's fleet – essentially the Nicaean fleet with what few ships the other seaside cities could spare – had torched the last war ships of Ashur and sacked the city behind them. The Thalassocracy had effectively been evicted from the sea, and in a matter of months the blockade around its island would start causing major food shortages. There was a very real possibility that Ashur would have to capitulate within the year, else it would simply wither on the vine. Worse, the Hierarch had sent out armies as well, the full muster of the League. Still, had even a losing battle been given by her southern army down in Tenerife, the situation would have been salvageable.

Instead her entire net of spies in the League had somehow missed that the entire host had gone into the Waning Woods, only managing to warn her the army had disappeared off the surface of Creation a week before it reappeared on the outskirts of the Principality of Iserre. Cordelia did not consider herself to be faint of heart, yet she almost shivered at the notion of taking an army through that murderous patch of trees. How much of their army had they lost, passing through? A tenth, a quarter? Half? There was not a single creature of flower in the Waning Woods that was not violently hostile to the existence of humans on Creation. Regardless of the... practicalities involved there, however, the southern Principate had now turned into a strategic nightmare. The First Prince was no great general but even she could see as much. The twenty-thousand strong army she'd stationed in Tenerife to avoid this very outcome was now marching north in all haste, but the map splayed in front of Cordelia betrayed a stark situation. Were the Alliance forces not staggered, not dispersed, they would have held the advantage. Instead it was bloody chaos.

The surviving Legions of Terror, bereft of the Carrion Lord but still under the command of the infamous Marshal Grem One-Eye, had fled into northern Iserre. Their supply situation, her generals assured her, would soon turn dangerous: they were marching through lands they'd already thoroughly pillaged on their way south. They were still around eighteen thousand hardened veterans, including a dragon, led by one of the finest military officers of the age. Behind them, split in two staggered armies, eighty thousand Levantines were in hot pursuit. If reunited, Cordelia believed they could crush the Praesi. But they were not, with a few weeks of distance between them and no way to join up without allowing the Legions to slip the noose. Behind the armies of the Dominion, the host of the League followed. Reports on their numbers fluctuated with every message: fifty thousand, forty, more than a hundred. A brave Iserran outrider had come

close enough to find out some of the 'soldiers' were actually scarecrows held up by gargoyles, which had the reek of the Tyrant's scheming. Far behind all these, her southern army of twenty thousand was exhausting its soldiers to collapse trying to arrive in time. The situation in the region was not impossible to salvage, but the dangers were obvious.

Cordelia was unwilling to gamble the fate of the Principate on such odds, and so she had taken action: she'd ordered general conscription in Salia. The bottom of the barrel was being scraped raw, but she'd put together twenty thousand levies. Had she further enforced the decree, or even broadened it to neighbouring principalities, she could have easily tripled that amount. There was, unfortunately, no point in doing so. There were no armaments for the conscripts to use, and dwarven representatives had flatly refused any further sale without even bothering to explain why. Giving reasons to humans was, presumably, beneath their dignity. This entire debacle had the ugly reek of Catherine Foundling's meddling about it. If there was one saving grace to this entire debacle, it was that the Highest Assembly had finally understood how close to the edge the Principate had come: without even need for her prompting, the personal armies of every single royal not already at war had been sent to reinforce her levies. It would still be a month before the last arrived, but her twenty thousand would swell to forty and gain a bevy of princes and princesses along with badly needed professional officers. Strategic considerations now dictated that the moment this army was readied it was so be sent by ship down to the coast of Iserre, where it could reinforce the Levantines against the Praesi and link up with the others field armies before giving battle to the invading League of Free Cities. Cordelia had that very command drafted on parchment and staring back at her from the surface of her bureau, awaiting only her signature. The fair-haired woman watched her inkwell for a long, silent moment. She did not reach for the quill, instead rising to her feet.

The wolves were at the gate, but not only in war-torn Iserre. *Woe, Cordelia. Woe to the north and to the south.* Agnes' words were branded into her mind, the constant reminder that if she made even a single mistake the Principate would end. The First Prince of Procer tread softly until she stood by the tall glass panes of her personal solar, a magnificent view of Salia spread out below her. Frost touched the glass, and the city as well. First snow had already come, though it had melted quickly enough under the sun. The next fall would remain a little longer, and so it would continue until a thorough blanket of pale was draped over the capital. Fingers larger than was considered fashionable in a courtier, much less royalty, pressed against the cold glass. A taste of the north, a taste of home. Rhenia would be as much ice as stone, by now, fresh sets of fortifications being made out of a mixture of frost and gravel. The winds at night would be so loud they'd drown out even the howling of the packs roving the

mountains. Her lips tightened, her throat closed up. Pressed against her heart, beneath the Rhenian blue dress she wore, was the last letter her kinsman Friedrich Papenheim would ever write her. She'd had to excuse herself, when she first read it. It would not do to weep in front of even her most trusted.

"I should not," she whispered against the window, her breath blooming in fog.

She did it anyway, once more. Trembling fingers claimed the parchment and she looked upon Friedrich's rough scrawl of a calligraphy. He'd never thought much of letters, not that many of her people did, and the words were as rough as the man had been.

The dead are coming.

I sent the young south. We will hold as long we can.

I am sorry. I cannot do more.

Dawn is in your hands, Cordelia.

We will meet again come the last summer.

Her eyes burned with tears she did not allow herself to shed. Hannover had fallen before she ever received the letter, the man who wrote it dead and ash. She'd loved Friedrich, she thought in the same way she still loved her uncle. Trust and comfort and bonds of blood sacred to them both. He could have been the heir to Hannover, had Uncle Klaus not named her that, and a lesser man would have resented her for it. She still remembered when she'd been fourteen, the announcement fresh, and she'd met him for the first time since. He'd smiled, rough hands pressing a bracelet into her palm. Not a single dark glance, not a single harsh word. Only a slip of leather with rattling teeth affixed, all carved with old Lycaonese blessings. *For luck*, he'd smiled. In the years since then, Cordelia had bought and been gifted some of the finest jewelry in Procer. On all of Calernia, truly speaking. And still, under the dress at her coronation as First Prince of Procer, rattling teeth had dug into her wrist. Gold, gold could be found everywhere in the world. Freely given affection could not. The First Prince of Procer wiped her eyes, grateful she'd already done away with her cosmetics for the day. The letter was slid back against her heart, weighing more than parchment ever should.

Across the rest of Lycaonese lands, cities and towns and villages would empty. The old and the young would flee into the mountains, and the rest of her people would prepare for war. Ploughshares beat into swords, cutlery melted into spears. Tables would be hacked up for wooden shields and lovingly tended-to mail come down from mantles. The Enemy was coming and her people would march to meet it at the passes, as they had unflinchingly since the days the word *Lycaonese* first meant something. Cordelia fingers curled angrily against the glass. Impotently. They could not stand alone. They were brave and they were strong and they were more than anyone had the right to ask of them, but they

could not stand alone against the endless hordes of the Dead King. They needed reinforcements, they needed the south to raise its banners and come stand with them. And it was her duty to see to that, wasn't it? There had never been a First Prince of Lycaonese birth before her, and there might never be again. The Dead King had come to wage full war on the Principate of Procer for the first time since its founding, and only now did while a Hasenbach sat the throne. She owed it to her blood, to her home, to her honour to abandon all this southern madness and march north to stand against the horror that would devour all the world.

"And I am going to fail you," she whispered brokenly.

Because victory south meant taking all that remained of the Grand Alliance to fight the Dead King. Because the Chosen had held Cleves until Princess Malanza's army arrived to reinforce them and the principality still stood. Because Hainaut's coast was swarming with the dead, but she had ordered her uncle to take it back instead of returning to fight for his own home. *And mine.* She'd met the eyes of man who'd been father to her since she was a girl, and told him that if he disobeyed her orders and marched his soldiers home instead she would have to order him seized for treason. There would be no coming back from that, she knew. She'd seen the lay of it in his face. But in the end, all four principalities of her people could be taken by the Enemy without much greater cost than soldiers and mines. If the Kingdom of the Dead broke into the heartlands of Procer, its already ravaged farmlands, the entire realm would starve through winter. Hunger would kill a hundredfold the work of soldiers. *Because even alone, you will stand long enough to save the rest of Procer and the Alamans will not.* She was abandoning everything she had ever loved for the sake of people who still called her a savage behind her back. Who mere months ago had been plotting to destroy her.

"Because we must," Cordelia bitterly said.

Using the words of the line whose duty she was failing to justify that very failure. She was damned, just as the hard-eyed warlord in Callow had warned she would be. *Let me be damned, then,* she thought. The wolves were at the gate, gathering in ravening packs. Summer friends and bitter foes, a procession of the viperous and the apathetic. Heroes who would bring salvation with a torch, villains cloaked in murder and madness. Let them all come, baying for the end of Procer. If she had to war against all the world to save her people, she would. The Warden of the West walked to her desk, dipped the quill and signed the fucking order. Before it even dried she had another scroll unfolded, her feathered quill dancing across. *Dredge it out,* she wrote. *Prepare it. Fire against fire.* The Augur had found a path through, narrow as it was, and it began with a corpse that was not a corpse beneath the waters of the lake at the heart of Procer. The

Ashurans, it was said, had called on a masked and hallowed presence at the Battle of Thalassina. Cordelia Hasenbach would call on a lot worse if she had to.

Dawn was in her hands, and she would not let it fail.

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The Empire was dying a slow, messy death.

Alchemical concoctions had allowed Malicia to resist the call of sleep beyond what even her Name would allow, though she knew there would eventually be a price to pay for that. It was still necessary, for rare was the hour that must not be spent dragging her wayward realm back from the suicide it was so utterly intent on committing. It was grim, thankless work, moreso now than ever before: two blows had come in quick succession, and as a result her authority was thinning. Thalassina had, to her still raw grief, been the first. The woman named Alaya had wept over the loss of her old friend, when she'd heard the news. Wekesa had been dear to her in a way that very few people had ever matched or surpassed — only one, if she was to be honest with herself — and to lose him over what should have been such a simple matter... But while the Dread Empress of Praes could afford most luxuries known to Creation, time to mourn was not one of them. Not when Warlock's last blaze of vengeful glory had wiped out a city of nearly one hundred and fifty thousand people, along with her realm's largest and most prosperous sea port.

There were survivors, a meager thirty thousand or so. Whatever Wekesa had used affected them, for within a day of fleeing the city ruins they'd begun to wildly mutate. Eyes and cysts growing over skin, teeth turning to stone, even a case of hair turning into straw. Malicia ordered a quarantine for the refugees, uncertain if the affliction would spread, but it turned out pointless. Every last one of them was dead within a week, seemingly cooked from the inside by the fading remnants of Wekesa's sorcery left inside them.

As far as her agents had been able to determine, there had been only a single survivor to that catastrophe: the Hierophant. Young Masego had been observed to walk out of the wreckage in ash-covered robes, and her attempts to contact the boy had not gone well. The first messengers she'd sent on foot, and once they came within a hundred yards of him their heads had simply *caved in*. She'd ordered scrying rituals, after that. Of the ten mages she'd used, only one had survived the backlash. Healers managed to stop the screaming before the vocal chords gave, though there would be no salvaging the eyes that had rotten and fallen out from their sockets. That survivor had babbled about a 'sea of death', not coherent enough for a more comprehensive report, and bitten through her tongue before the night was out. Necromancy had revealed the dead woman's soul to be even more damaged than the

corpse, which worried Malicia a great deal. Even Warlock at his peak had resorted to rituals and specialized tools to tinker with souls. His son evidently need not, and was shambling his way back to Callow through unknown means: he would frequently disappear for a few days at a time before her agents caught sight of him again, moving too quickly for it to be purely on foot.

There was going to be a reckoning in that, and the best she could hope for was that it would be Ashur that'd bear the cost of it.

Thalassina alone would have been a crisis. High Lord Idriss had been one of her closest political allies for decades, the wealth of his holdings and his remarkable breadth of indebted of great use in keeping the influence of Tasia Sahelian and the Truebloods at bay. Malicia had never counted the man a friend, but she had respected him and made good use of his ambitions. In the wake of the dissolution of the Truebloods and the marginalization of Wolof, whose latest High Lord she had bound to her too deeply for anything but complete subservience, she'd been preparing to set him up as the natural rival to the Moderates led by High Lady Abreha of Aksum. Competition over court appointments would have neatly neutered both of them and kept them busy while Malicia set to laying the groundwork for what the Empire was to become. Instead Idriss was gone, along with most of Thalassina, and Abreha Mirembé was now the second most powerful individual in Praes. The sack of Nok and the destruction of the only other seaport of the Wasteland had dealt crippling blows to Malicia's prestige, which had already been steadily eroding under the constant Ashuran coastal raids.

From Wekesa's death, she had inherited the stuff or rebellion: the Thalassocracy was no longer raiding, which allowed household troops and legions to withdraw, and doubts were now being raised as to her ability to successfully defend Praes. If not for her treaty with the Dead King, there would have been a coup attempt by now. As it was, overwhelming pressure was mounting at court for High Lady Abreha to be named her Chancellor. If she did not swiftly act to suppress dissent, the situation would grow out of control. Her most direct tool in this should have been the Legions of Terror, of course, but as things stood Malicia knew they could not be used. Sitting calmly in her seat at the table where the Dark Council was usually held, the Dread Empress of Praes watched the kneeling Soninke mage before her and idly tapped a finger against the wooden table's surface. Ime stood at her side, her spymistress a shadow silent and still.

"It is confirmed, Your Most Dreadful Majesty," the young man said. "Foramen has fallen."

"Of that much I was aware," Malicia sharply replied. "*Elaborate.*"

"As of two days ago, a goblin army of imprecise size – at least ten thousand, less than fifty – attacked the city after sending a

vanguard of infiltrators over what we now believe to be at least a month," the imperial mage hastily said. "They attacked under cover of night, after having slain the watchmen on duty and opening the gates. The city was fully occupied by morning, after which the goblins seized control of the city wards and cut off our ability to scry."

Not a single bit of news that Ime had not already brought her as of the morning the city was occupied. She truly had been too lax on the contingent of messenger mages directly sworn to the Tower, she thought. While their primary duty was to serve as couriers for orders, they'd also been granted funds to acquire and pass on local information from wherever they were posted. A way to keep a finger on the pulse of the Empire without ever leaving Ater. Yet if the best they could offer her was what half of Praes knew two days after Malicia learned of it, perhaps their funding needed to be reassessed.

"Do you have anything else to report?" the Empress mildly added.

The young mage hesitated.

"Rumours have begun to spread in Okoro and Kahtan that these foreign attacks are being used as a veiled knife by Your Most Dreadful Majesty to eliminate the High Lords entirely," he finally said. "Our branch officers in these cities believe the whispers are too widespread to be of natural provenance."

Malicia's eyes narrowed the slightest bit. That was, in fact, fresh news. Perhaps mere discipline would suffice, then.

"You are dismissed," she said.

The Imperial mage rose only to bow, and retreated from the room backwards with his eyes fixed on the floor. The Sentinels quietly closed the door behind him, and the Empress leaned back against her seat.

"Abreha prepares for a serious challenge, it seems," Malicia said after a moment.

Ime finally stirred to movement, sliding into the seat at her left.

"It was inevitable the moment Thalassina happened," the spymistress said. "Foramen just handed her the opportunity on a silver platter."

They both knew why the rumours being spread were much more dangerous than they seemed at first glance. Ime's agents had obtained greater detail of what had taken place in Foramen after it fell. High Lady Amina Banu had been skinned alive along with every other member of her line in the city before being drawn and

quartered before the eyes of the entire city. Revenge for Dread Emperor Nihilis fashioning a leather cloak out from the hide of the matrons that refused to surrender when he crushed the Fourth Goblin Rebellion, or so they claimed. As the leaders of every single goblin rebellion in the last six hundred years had committed a variation of the same empty atrocity, Malicia could note that there had been a great deal more revenge taken than injury done. Unfortunately, the Banu of Foramen and the Kebdana of Thalassina had both been effectively ended as a bloodline. Oh, some distant relatives could be rustled up – the Banu in particular had been a tribe before a line, and were famously more a family thicket than tree – but that thorough an extermination would end them as political entities for generations. More than that, for the Kebdana. Foramen could be taken back, but it was dubious that Thalassina could ever be rebuilt given the toxicity of the former city's emplacement.

Two High Lord lines centuries old destroyed in the span of a year. High Lady Abreha would find many willing ears, when she cast Malicia in the role of one trying to exterminate the highest rung of Wasteland aristocracy.

"She needs to die," the Empress said. "And quickly."

"The Eyes are already exploring possible avenues," Ime replied without missing a beat. "Though she was a viciously paranoid old bat *before* taking a swing at the Tower, so the odds are not in our favour."

Malicia closed her eyes, mind unfolding. Angles, angles, there were always angles. The knife that took the killing blow need not be hers.

"Her agents at court," she said slowly. "Have they been preparing petition?"

"We've confirmed four," Ime said. "I believe the one requesting that she be formally summoned to the Tower to answer for tax irregularities is the one she'll truly back."

Casting herself as being attacked by the throne while ensuring she was in Ater to gather support. Not the most inspired of opening moves, but then Abreha had always preferred boldness to elegance.

"Have our people change the text for one of the red herrings just before presentation," Malicia ordered, opening her eyes. "High Lady Abreha will request a formal mandate and court title, for the sake of stabilizing Praes in the midst of war."

"Overreach would give us an excuse to swat her around," the spymistress reluctantly agreed.

"Swat?" Malicia smiled. "Nothing of the sort, Ime. How does one kill a lion without a spear?"

Her spymistress simply raised an eyebrow.

"Throw a cut of meat," the Dread Empress of Praes said, "halfway between it and a bear."

She drummed her fingers thoughtfully against the table.

"We will grant this petition, for we have great trust in the loyalty of dearest Abreha," she lightly continued. "As the Blessed Isle is still formally an Imperial territory, granting governorship over it is my right. Given the unfortunate refugee situation, it is evident there is great need of a stabilizing influence there."

Ime let out a low whistle.

"That gets her household troops at the Callowan border," she noted. "And nobody else will want to get tangled up there, so support will cool down. The reaction in Laure is the real danger."

"Have the regency informed that its protest over Praesi refugee incursions were duly noted, and I have appointed a governor to remedy the situation," Malicia said. "Of course, High Lady Abreha's mandate ends at the border. Should she provoke the Kingdom of Callow, it is not on the behalf of the Tower and any punishment doled out by the regency would not be taken as an act of war between our realms."

"Should such a provocation be arranged?" Ime asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Prepare one," the Empress said. "I will not pull the trigger unless it is made necessary."

There was a beat of silence.

"My Empress," the spymistress finally said.

"You have doubts," Malicia noted.

"Callow just slapped us across the face," Ime reminded her. "There was a signed royal decree recognizing the independence of the 'Confederation of the Grey Eyries' before the city had even fallen."

With Catherine's own signature, which the Empress suspected had by now been used more often by Hakram Deadhand than the woman herself.

"The Matrons must have reached out to them months ago. And it's only a matter of time until barges carrying munitions and goblin steel start sailing across the Wasaliti to equip the Army of Callow. They're effectively funding a rebellion against the Tower, though Gods only know how they got a loan from the dwarves."

"Given Catherine's continued absence, I imagine an amount of brutal murder was involved," the Empress drily said. "Though that is ultimately irrelevant. The Legions of Terror will move to blockade Foramen. Neither munitions, steel nor gold will flow. The bargain will remain entirely ink."

"We're in no shape to fight against Callow," Ime quietly said. "We are divided, bloodied and beset with a goblin rebellion."

"Callow is in no shape to fight against us," Malicia replied, and raised a hand before her spymistress could object. "Marshal Juniper has raised a significant army, but it cannot move east. If the Black Queen still somehow seeks alignment with the ailing Grand Alliance, it must participate in the campaign against the Dead King. If she seeks to kill Cordelia's grand design instead, it will fall on Salia instead and decapitate the Principate by surprise. Both offensives would be of great scale, and she has neither the manpower nor the resources to engage in war on two fronts."

Silence reigned for a moment after the mild tirade, the other woman refraining from contradicting her. Ime – Lindimi Sahelian, once, before she'd cast that name aside – was aging. No amount of potions, rituals or cosmetics could truly hide it anymore. Her skin was wrinkling, her body losing its spryness. Even a branch Sahelian could expect to live a few decades longer than the average Praesi, but time would catch up eventually. Part of Malicia grieved that. Part of Malicia had to begin considering a replacement. She read hesitation, on Ime's face. No, not hesitation. *Reluctance*. There were very few subjects where she had not given her spymistress to speak her mind fully and openly. Not even Lindimi's participation in the slaughter of Amadeus' kin when still served the Heir as warded subject, though it was one to be approached with care.

"Say it," Malicia ordered.

Ime's lips thinned.

"You have not spoken to the Black Queen face to face since Akua's Folly," she slowly said. "I do not think you truly grasp the woman we're dealing with anymore."

"A crown will not change her nature," the Empress said.

"What happened in Liesse did," Ime replied. "She reminds me..."

Reluctance again.

"... she reminds me of Nefarious," the spymistress finished quietly. "After the Wizard of the West broke his power. There's a sickness in her, Malicia, and it has little kinship with reason."

It had been many years, since Alaya had last thought of Dread Emperor Nefarious. In a way, that'd been a deeper victory than simply killing the wretched man – she had grown *beyond* him, the wounds and the fear and the pain. She'd not hidden from remembrance of him, she'd simply let him disappear into utter irrelevance.

"Winter can be predicted," Malicia said. "Rooted as it is in what she once was."

"She's unstable," Ime flatly said. "And I'm afraid of her. We all should be. She threw a bloody lake at the crusaders, and that was her being *diplomatic*. If that pretence is discarded, what will we be facing? You speak of armies, but I think of a mountain falling from the sky above Ater. Of Okoro drowned by an ocean unleashed. She's not the Carrion Lord's apprentice anymore, Malicia. She'd a vicious, angry thing bearing a fairy court's worth of power and I deeply dislike the risk of us making her feel cornered. She may yet come out with teeth and claw, damning all else."

Where was this fear a year ago? Yet the Empress knew the answer. It had not yet come to fruit, because a year ago Wekesa had still been alive and poorly inclined towards the Black Queen. How quickly slight wounds had turned to mortal ones, Malicia thought. Procer was being smothered by the armies of the dead, Ashur strangled by the fleets of the League and the hosts of Levant were embroiled in the mess that had been made of Iserre, headed for doom or crippling. All three nations sworn to end her, bleeding out in broad daylight. And yet Praes was dying as well, by wounds of its own making. The Matrons to the south, High Lady Abreha to the north. Legions she held only by the barest of leashes, one that could only be tugged by causing mutinous sentiment in the aftermath, and with the coming of winter the Imperial granaries would have to be opened lest there be food riots. The grain would run out, eventually. And to the far west, someone had taken Amadeus from her.

She was alone. There was no one else that would – that *could* – avoid disaster.

Left to scheme on their own, when the granaries ebbed low the High Lords would begin musing war on Callow to acquire its own reserves. The goblins would not end the border of their rebellion at Foramen unless they were *made* to. And the moment collapse seemed inevitable, some clans of orcs would begin eyeing the weakened lands to the south of the steppes for plunder as they had under the reign of her predecessor. Some would stay loyal,

but all that would accomplish was civil war among the Clans. She had to avoid reaching the tipping point, whatever the cost. For if she succeeded? If she asserted true control once more? Then she had won this war, and all the wars that would follow. The Grand Alliance would break. The League of Free Cities would either collapse into squabbling or by trying to keep the Thalassocracy contained. And Callow would have a choice: uneasy alliance with the Tower, or standing alone against a Kingdom of the Dead that had just devoured most the west. It always came down to survival, didn't it? Outlasting what you could not beat.

"I am," Malicia said, "the ruler of Praes."

"So you are," Ime murmured.

"Let us teach them once more," Dread Empress Malicia, First of Her Name, "precisely what that *means*."

The Empire might be dying, but these lands were no stranger the walking dead.

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Somewhere in eastern Iserre, under a full moon, a flicker of flame parted the night. It died quick enough, leaving behind only the cherry-red end of a lit pipe. The young woman holding it breathed in deep of smoke before blowing out a shoddy ring. Pearly white teeth were bared under moonlight, afterwards.

"Let's try this again, shall we?" Catherine Foundling said.

Behind her, streaming out of an ink-black gate, a sea of raised sigils poured out in utter silence. Obsidian and iron, furs and mail, spears and swords and things stranger still.

For the first time in many years, the Empire Ever Dark was at war with something other than itself.

[DroughtBringer](#)

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

New Year, New Chapter, New time to vote/
Go Vote!

[DroughtBringer](#)

And, as a reminder, we also have a Discord going: <https://discord.gg/7P4vMkm>

Also, if you enjoy the guide and would like to support ErraticErrata then here is a link to his Patreon! <https://www.patreon.com/user/overview?u=3523924>

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Thank you everybody who voted, we are back on top of the Weekly, Monthly, and Yearly counts!

[erraticerrata](#)

And so Book V sounds off. We're back, folks. As this is the first update in forever, there's also the extra chapter of the month up – Peregrine II, a continuation of last time's Pilgrim POV. As usual, accessible through the Extra Chapters tab on the right.

Dainpdf

Hate to bother you, but was there ever an announcement of the winners of the great popularity contest?

[Liliet](#)

Catherine, and Dread Emperor Irritant

Dainpdf

Thanks.

caoimhinh

Yeah, we all love you and are happy for your return, but WHERE. IS. INDRANI?

Lavir

On her to Callow most likely.

Taichi

I imagine they've gotten news of Wekesa, and she's looking for Masego.

Cap'n Smurfy

I assume she's occupying a new role directly under the Queen of Callow. Or maybe on top the Queen.

letouriste

not just indrani. most of the characters pretty much disappeared from book 4. Can't wait to see them again

caoimhinh

Wasn't Ime's real name Sabra Niri, with kinship to the High Lord of Okoro?
Why is it suddenly Lindimi Sahelian, a relative of the ruling line of Wolof?

It was stated as such in Book 4 chapter 5: Interests.

{“Sabra Niri,” I said, tone caressing the words, and she shivered. “I was surprised, to learn of your kinship to the High Lord of Okoro.”
Her name had been learned, not given, and this made difference. It was still a foothold. Fear spread in her mind like a drop of ink in water. Thinned, yes, but contaminating every part of her. I could taste it, even through this thin link of sympathetic sorcery.}

And there was a foothold, so it can't be that it was a wrong name. Otherwise, Catherine's Fae Power wouldn't have taken her. Ime was even shown later on as being stressed over the matter.

kelioez

Ay, well caught, I was wondering about that too

caoimhinh

Welcome Back!!

Skaddix

Good Start as expected things are going poorly for Cordelia and Malicia. Though unless Cat is about to attack Malicia might be able to weather the storm since she mostly directly has to put down a Goblin Revolt. And heck the Goblin Revolt might even help her a bit since I doubt the Goblins know precisely which cities are loyal to Malicia and which oppose her.

IDKWhoitis

I'd give the goblins more credit than that. They might be in cahoots with the new High Lord already.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Agreed. I have no doubt whatsoever that the old bats know a lot of what is going down.

[Javvies](#)

Nah, at most, they are planning to backstab any High Lord they work with for specific mutual advantage against others – they have a lot of hate for the High Lords.

If the Matriarchs are planning to work with anyone, it'll most likely be Cat – after all, she may be a Callowan half-Wallerspaw, but she's Amadeus's protege, already has the only Goblin Colony outside of the Eyries, actively hates the High Lords, and isn't going to continue High Lord policies as regards the orcs or goblins.

Dainpdf

Cordelia is also getting an unexpected boon, since Cat is bringing a whole empire full of demigods to fight Neshamah. That will probably distract him from destroying her childhood home.

She brought them to Iserre, so she's either extracting Black, or gating whatever army is willing to side with her (hopefully the one from Free Cities) north to fight the undead.

Dainpdf

Good point. Her last interactions with both the Sve Noc and the dwarves seem to indicate she intends to take the fight to the Kingdom of the Dead, but that's not that close to Iserre. Maybe she wants to link up with Black's army (with or without knowing he's no longer with them)?

Vhostym

She wants to take the fight to the Kingdom of the Dead eventually, but first she needs assurance from Cordelia that they will leave the Drow alone there and stop their invasion of Callow. So I think the first thing she'll do is make a display of force. Though actually, she may just be there to pull Black out of Procer like she mentioned she'd do, since I don't think she knows he's been captured yet.

Dainpdf

Maybe. I don't know why Sve Noc would sanction this expedition, but such is the nature of time skips.

[Liliet](#)

I suspect Sve Noc delegated the entire thing to Catherine. I mean, the entire reason she agreed to come to the surface was that Catherine gave off the impression of knowing what was going on up there, and also incidentally the impression of being overall fairly trustworthy and genuinely invested in her plan

of having the drow cork in the Dead King. And not get massacred by the dwarves. Which is the extent of Sve Noc's own ambitions re: this whole mess.

So, y'know, [that](#).

Dainpdf

Pretty sure not getting drowned in dwarves was a huge factor, as was finding a place for her people.

I just think she'd have some questions about making a stop on the way there to fight some of Cat's surface enemies when Neshamah is already going to be a terrible opponent.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, it's not like she doesn't know Cat's got her own interest involved.

And I see Cat's soujourn to Iserre as part of her plan to gather forces against the Dead King, which, y'know, is going to help the drow die less in the process.

Insanenoodlyguy

And really, "they are enemies right now, we need to bloody them so they want to be friends" is going to make more sense to her than "If we help them I'm sure they'll change their minds" anyway

[Liliet](#)

the Matrons know EXACTLY who's loyal and who isn't

danh3107

IT'S BACK

IT'S BAAACK

IDKWhoitis

Well, it's been proven that Warlock literally nuked the city.

Also, Cat, you horrifying little creature, how I've missed you.

nick012000

I think you might be more right than you think. Keter's Law, right? Warlock ascended to godhood, and that means that he'd release a bunch of waste magic into the environment. We know

that the Dead King nuked a city when he ascended, so it makes sense that Warlock would as well.

Vhostym

He didn't really ascend, just drew on truly inhuman amounts of power, but I think you're right that most of the death and destruction was from the Due. Though I am curious how, or if, Masego was excluded from the damage.

[Liliet](#)

It was a specific condition of the command Warlock gave to the power he'd gathered, I imagine, seeing as how it was the point. "Destroy everything except Masego". It went haywire from there, but the core objective was kept to.

werafdsaew

Masego has a Name; those people always get special treatment

[sengachi](#)

I mean, Masego killed people with proximity and maimed the souls of those who scried him because of a "sea of death". Who says he actually was unaffected?

[Liliet](#)

...also, uh. A good point 🤔

Big I

"A blind boy treading through a dead city, carrying the deaths with him – lash and ladder, into ever deeper darkness."

That's one of Hierarch's visions from the Book 4 epilogue. I think it's about Masego and that he somehow harvested the dead from Thalassina, either their souls, the power from their death, or both.

naturalnuke

Welcome back! This is much more what I expected, bravo 🙌

[Euodiachloris](#)

OK – out of Cordelia and Malicia, I don't know which is going to head for the headache pills faster upon discovering the full extent of the souvenirs Cat brought back from her trip abroad.

Amadeus, who I dearly hope is still in the land of the breathing, however... He might bust a rib trying to simply chuckle instead of rolling on the floor in laughter.

Dainpdf

Cordelia and Malicia (or at least Ime) are likely to be relieved, at least to a point.

Cordelia, because Cat is bringing a whole empire of Drow to sucker punch the Dead King. Malicia (or at least Ime), because Cat is no longer a deranged fae, and thus less of a liability.

luminiousblu

Malicia has no real way of not knowing Catherine is no longer a fae. We also don't know what the fuck her new abilities actually entail – she's clearly somehow bought the loyalty of the Drow, so unless the Night has given her the ability to keep the title of Queen of Winter but none of its power (or unless Akua magically counts as "Duchess of Winter" for the tiny shard she still holds), Catherine clearly has a new ability more than equal to Winter if it's still holding her entire court in check.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

That, or she just holds the respect of them cause their god said to.

Dainpdf

Pretty sure Cat has the Drow because she bargained with Sve Noc to lead the Drow to a new home in the Kingdom of the Dead.

Plus she seems to be some kind of high priestess of Sve Noc (priestess of the priestess? I guess we need a new name for the gals), which gives her influence over the Drow even if her raw power doesn't make them obey.

RoflCat

No, if anything Malicia should start to get worried.

She wasn't afraid of Cat because Cat was Winter and thus follows a certain pattern as is Fae nature.

However, now that Cat is back to 'gloriously mortal'? Nobody is going to predict her plan so easily anymore, especially not when she's got a whole new Name, or an equivalent to it, to her.

Heck, given that Cat's Goddesses are not exactly a fan of either Above (who shun them, branding them as Evil) or Below (the whole rigged deal), I think there's a lot of room for beating the crap out of both sides (specifically the Heroes on one side, Dead King on the other)

Dainpdf

Pretty sure they're still at least nominally on the side of Below. And yes, I agree, but it does make her both more amenable to negotiation and much more stab-able.

[Liliet](#)

That's the fun part of the side of the Below: it's very, very nominal in nature 😊

Dainpdf

Until you are manipulated into a cage fight with a demigod.

[Liliet](#)

That's the unfun part.

caoimhinh

They will be scared shitless, the only relieve will come from the fact that they won't face annihilation, but let's not forget that they hate not being in control (Malicia is so obsessed to the point of her paranoia leading her to take measures to get power without relying on Amadeus, yet it was the thing that caused him to get at odds with her, thus beginning her fall).

Accepting that Catherine is the one who can help her save her people is going to be a pill hard to swallow for Cordelia, but she will do it, because she actually loves her people and because an alliance with Cat would assure her a position of dominance in Procer.

And yeah, Amadeus will laugh like a madman proud of his daughter. Or he would probably stare not-smugly at whoever is around in such a way that loops back to being smug.

Now the thing to wait for is Neshamah and Bard's reactions.

SHARKS

There's also the fact the cat is also bringing along the newborn god she helped create. That is probably going to cause a few people some concern.

Cpt. Obvious

Yep, love the Necroposting... Again...

Also remember that Cat was pretty dangerous walking around with the domain of Winter in her. And she was an ordinary mortal just a few years ago.

Now she's the high priest of Sve Noc, a god freshly minted out of the drow composit being that has wielded the domain of night for millenia. Or was that "only" something like five centuries? On one hand the wandering bard and the dead king gave me the impression it's millenia, on the other hand the way the dwarves talked it sounded more like centuries.

Well whatever the case Sve Noc has a lot more experience with how to use the power of a domain. Heck they even have the formal training of both warrior and mystic. And now, freshly ascended to the status of of god they now have both Night and Winter as their domains.

That's way more dangerous than Cat was with the mantle of winter. And now she's the first high priest of Sve Noc and is leading the Drow Empire into the war.

Yep, nothing to worry about here. I mean it's not like the drow is making the goblin matriarchs seem like the golden standard for trust and loyalty or the goblins at large look like pacifists and philanthropists...

Yea let's rejoice in knowing that Catherine Foundling are now once again mortal and have had her claws pulled. This should be a welcome change of pace for both Cordelia and Malicia I'm sure...

luminiousblu

Cordelia has no particular reason to worry immediately since Catherine's ire is pointed towards Praes for now which implies that Catherine sees Procer as less of a threat and also less of an enemy than Praes. Since Catherine has, in the past, actually offered alliance, the implication is that Catherine sees common ground with Procer and despite the fact that things may have changed since then, unless Cordelia sends a missive and is turned down with prejudice, the beleaguered First Prince might still hope for a renegotiated non-aggression pact between her state and Callow.

She won't lose anything anymore, not when the state is decimated by fighting Neshamah; depending on how much damage there is, she might actually be able to claim a diplomatic triumph if she can pull off a peaceful resolution and/or aid from Catherine.

So Malicia, really, is more worried, because Malicia has too many problems to deal with already while Cordelia can at least take comfort in the fact that both attacks are not happening at once.

luminiousblu

Ah, I misread the last part. Somehow I thought "Empire Ever Dark" referred to Praes not being at war with Callow for forty years.

In that case, well, if diplomatic attempts fall through I think Cordelia will probably faint.

Skaddix

Well Cordelia has plenty of reason to worry. Masego's Parents are dead cause Cordelia and her Grand Alliance/Crusade. So is Masego really going to say sure Cat lets sign a Liesse Accords with them? I seriously doubt it. Also there is nothing that keeps Cordelia especially safe.

Malicia has her Deal with the Dead King that no one really knows the details off. So even if the Goblins keep pushing, its doubtful they can go all they way to the Tower and even if they do. The matrons seems smart enough to not want to trigger that clause. Same for the High Lords and Ladies, they want for now a Chancellor, not a new Empress or Emperor for the same reason.

So I say short term Cordelia is in serious trouble. But she is pretty good if she weathers the current crisis. Malicia though is more concerned midterm to longterm. Malicia has basically until the Dead King is dealt with to sure up her position.

Antoninjohn

Dread Empress: "Cat can't attack us she only has one army and she would need two.". Cat: "It's nice to have an extra army of all powerful demigods to attack thing with."

Dainpdf

Poor Neshamah won't know what hit him.

...who am I kidding, he was probably watching the whole adventure and eating popcorn.

byzantine279

Knowing him this whole little war is just a way to gather reading material for the next few millennia before the cork pops.

WuseMajor

The Empress really tends to underestimate Cat. It's a persistent failing, and a very dangerous one.

Admittedly, Bard does too, which is possibly the only thing that might save this situation.

Vhostym

The Bard might be underestimating Cat, but we really have no way of knowing. However, considering she orchestrated the creation of Sve Noc and seems to have lots of ways of knowing things, I wouldn't put planning this out of the realm of possibility. We don't know what her end game is, and we definitely don't know what she knows.

[Liliet](#)

The only estimation of Cat Bard has expressed was what she said to Neshamah.

Who, er, might be her friend, but is not exactly her ally.

Bard's a lying liar who lies. We don't have enough data to guess what she /really/ thinks of Catherine and her plan. The consequences of her actions so far have been, on a long-term strategic plane, actually somewhat aligned with Cat's goals: both First Liesse and Second Liesse were horrifying catastrophes (one narrowly averted), but Cat ended up hugely politically profiting from both. And thanks to Bard's meddling in the Free Cities, didn't end up saddled with narrative suicide in the form of keeping Akua's fortress.

I don't think it's an accident, or that Bard is just that incompetent. I think this means that Catherine's successes fit into her plans quite well.

It's, uh.

Confusing.

Haihappen

Seconded! The Bard is a red herring in a bullshit sandwich wrapped in mystery-meat fried fin fibbing oil served with a hefty portion of misdirection fries.

[Liliet](#)

...I just realized there's a third army in that mess, and that's the Legions. Sure, they aren't Catherine's SPECIFICALLY, but she's the person who can gate them out of there.....

Death Knight

Should be interesting conversation since both Scribe and Grem hate her for giving their Black Knight "but a flesh wound".

werafdsaew

All would be forgiven if she plays an instrumental role in his rescue.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

I'm looking forward to it *a whole lot*.

Sparsebeard

We don't know if she can still gate though...

She didn't seem to have gone through Arcadia to march the drows...

byzantine279

They are using a gate, it's just a gate of Night rather than Arcadia. The full implications of that are unknown.

Cap'n Smurfy

Cat obtained the boon of travelling through Arcadia unimpeded from the Monarchs of the Far. Since it was Cat who got this and not the Queen of Winter she can probably still do this but by powering the gates with night.

[Liliet](#)

Cat got the boon of traveling through Arcadia unimpeded, but she has to get there first. Her ability to /open/ gates was not part of the deal, it was Winter power.

Agent J

Winter wasn't erased, it was merged with Night. Cat just used an ink black gate to bring her drow forces to eastern Iserre. Why are we having this debate when she literally just used a gate in this very chapter?

[Liliet](#)

You think?

There's a bit of a time issue there. The Levantine armies still haven't caught the Legions, and the region through which they're chasing each other is much smaller than the

distance from Everdark to Iserre, and she would have started later than that merry chase began.

Admittedly it's possible that between the Night and the underground passages that dwarves opened to them, they managed to go not through Arcadia. That brings us back around to the same point though: if the dwarves were willing to let the drow through their territory to far south from the war they're actually supposed to be fighting (against the Dead King), they might as well let the Legions through, too.

Agent J

When did the dwarves grant Cat military access through their territories? It wasn't mentioned in any of the negotiations far as I'm aware.

[tijayarnie](#)

I need to know everyone's reaction to the Drow

Death Knight

Should be interesting seeing as the Drow has traditionally been aligned with Below.

Are the Princes and Priests of Procer against the ropes enough to accept Catherine's aid? She did say she wanted to join the Grand Alliance? Will Hanno and the Pilgrim's band stand side by side with the Army of Darkness or will they pull a Praesi and sharpen their blades while the Enemy is at the gates?

Woo this is gonna be good....

[Liliet](#)

Considering Hanno's Free Cities adventures with the Tyrant and also with Bard, but also particularly considering his origins – being unwilling to condemn his mother who literally put a curse of Below on government officials – I'm guessing he's going to stand with Cat fully willingly.

RanVor

Two things:

1. His mother was being lynched for crimes she didn't commit, and
2. Hanno wasn't a hero at the time.

[Liliet](#)

She, ah, did commit the crime, though.
She was being marginalized and shunned for no bigger crime

then being Praesi, yes, but then she absolutely DID call on Below's debt to her for a lifetime of worship, killing herself and calling down a curse on Ashuran officials. She DID do that.

And Hanno was asked if he would renounce her actions, and he said that he wouldn't, and that's how his journey / started/. That's what /led/ to him being a hero.

RanVor

I think you misread something. She called on Below's debt BECAUSE SHE WAS ABOUT TO BE LYNCHED.

[Liliet](#)

I think you are misremembering.

"anno knew his family was not wealthy enough that they would have been able to afford a driftwood funeral for Father, that his body would have never been set on a raft for the eastern tide to take back to the faraway home of all Ashurans, but that it would not even be buried in consecrated grounds wounded him. The Gods Above would know their own, and the soul of a good man would be brought at their side, but for profane earth to be the tomb of his own father was a shameful thing. The priests laid blessing upon the whole mine and spoke the names of the lost, but that was as much to allow work to resume as to honour the dead."

^^^ the actual injury was the lack of grave for Hanno's father.

"Without Father, his mother would be expelled from Barcalid District and sent into quarantined grounds. "

""
"He asked her, then, if she wanted to go home. She told him his father had been home, and that it was now beyond her reach. The morning after, he found her gone when he rose."

It was not lynching that was coming, just being expelled, and she was not focused on that part, Hanno himself was.

"It was instinct that had him find her but it came too late. **The same committee that had left his father to mass grave** was attending the districts where pensions were due to widows and widowers, and on that day that had come to Barcalid.

"Gods of my ancestors, grant me due," Zoya of Thalassina snarled, throwing the tile at their feet. "Blood for blood, life for life. Let every breath be a torment, every night a terror, every pleasure turn to insipid ash. **Let them have no rest or peace until my love lies in the grave he earned.** *I curse you to this with my last breath.*"

Bolding mine.

Zoya of Thalassina was pissed at injustice towards her husband, not towards herself.

She turned to Below to remedy that injustice.

And Hanno failed to condemn her for that.

IDKWhoitis

Considering how Catherine's plans normally result in everyone losing (including her), I think she might twist Cordelia's arm (or break it) before she helps her.

I also believe just the mere fact that Cat will gate out the Legions will screw Cordelia over since she just sent several large army groups to NOT the Dead King Front, and now they are functionally hundreds of miles from being useful.

If Catherine goes and knocks out Praes before engaging Dead King, she improves her bargaining position. The Grand Alliance can theoretically take another couple of months slugging it out with the Dead King, and Cat or Callow owes them no favors.

ninegardens

I mean, sure, BUT, you're bargaining position can be improved even further by "You see all these armies of yours that are in the wrong place? Give me treaty and a Black Knight, and I will give you transport."

[Liliet](#)

Cat WOULD break Cordelia's arm gladly, I imagine, in the literal personal sense, but I don't think she would take it out on Procer. Not after losing Winter and being utterly horrified by the decisions she'd made while holding it. Under influence or not, I predict that Cat's going to counterbalance her strengthened ties to Below (being a priestess of an Evil goddess and all that) by a renewed dedication to lowercase good.

She'll twist everyone's arm precisely as much as needed so that people she's trying to help would, y'know, stop

fighting her, and get the accurate idea that accepting help good and fighting drow bad.

Not any more.

Cap'n Smurfy

Same. An interlude of every ruler's reaction to the news "and Catherine Foundling now has an army of Drow" would be a thing of beauty.

bad nombre

And new, completely unknown powers with a foreboding theme 😊

[Javvies](#)

Huzzah. Cat is back.

Malicia has badly misjudged Cat. Ime isn't entirely right (as far as her information goes) but she's not wrong, either. Backing Cat into a corner generally ends badly for everyone involved, unless they're either Ascended or well on the path, ie, the Dead King or Sve Noc ... Malicia is nowhere near that level on a good day. And Malicia is not having a good day, and isn't likely to have one that isn't bad anytime soon.

—

Cat is invading Procer ... how much does she know about what's been going on while she's been underground?

Also ... very interested in what Cat can do these days beyond light her own pipe.

[Miles](#)

I guess she wields night now?

Ime's relation to akua seems like it will be important too

Dainpdf

In Malicia's defense, no one was expecting Fakerine to turn back into Cat. Or for her to somehow recruit the effing Drow into something reassembling an army.

[Javvies](#)

Cat was never not Cat.

And it's not like even a "Fakerine" being backed into a corner by Malicia is somehow an improvement over backing Cat into a corner.

Remember, as Ime says, Winter Queen Cat dropped a lake on the

Proceran Crusaders when she was (a) being “diplomatic” and (b) very carefully trying to limit the damage she did so that a diplomatic resolution would still be viable and (c) trying to work around a dozen Heroes. WQCat doesn’t have those restrictions when she’s dealing with Malicia. And while Cat hates Procerans, it’s not like she is any more fond of Praesi, especially Malicia, especially post-Folly. And, the only reason Cat’s megagate was stopped and messed Cat up in the process? Grey Pilgrim pulled a miracle out of his ass. Malicia isn’t going to get a miracle, and if Cat were to pull another megagate, she’d disconnect from it before it could be broken ... if it can be broken quickly without a Miracle or Mage-Name.

Cat recruiting the Drow to enter the surface is actually kind of a mixed blessing for Malicia – sure, it gives Cat an army she didn’t have, but it also means Cat’s less likely to be in a position where she has to go all out and/or pull a Bonfire-type operation against Praes.

Dainpdf

Well, Cat admitted she wasn’t herself when hollowed out and filled with the stuff of Winter. Plus Warlock thought so, and he was quite knowledgeable about such things.

As for the backing into a corner, Malicia started her career facing powerful, deranged villains. I believe that’s mostly what she was counting on – such villains tend to self destruct eventually.

Of course, she was playing with fire. I agree harrying Fakerine was a dangerous game, and that Cat being back is good news for everyone. It’s just that Malicia’s position was better thought out than you made it out to be.

Oh, and I’m pretty sure Cat does not hate Procerans. She just hates Procer’s tendency to invade neighbors (more specifically, Callow).

IDKWhoitis

To be fair though, All Cat has to do to fuck over Praes is burn the Green Stretch, and retreat to Callow for a defensive war. Malica would be dethroned in a brutal civil war that would eat itself alive.

This is with or without a mega gate that could or not be blocked or broken through spells and magecraft.

bad nombre

My take on this is that the mortal soul and Winter are different substrata. Cat's soul was imprinted onto Winter as a simulation of a mortal soul. But it was an imperfect simulation so she drifted away from how a mortal would think.

Whether or not Cat was herself depends on how one feels about simulations. I'm inclined to say that Winter!Cat was still Cat because she hadn't held her mantle long enough to entirely lose herself. Every day she drifted further into being Winter with some minor affectations and a mortal past.

I think the Dead King knew how to ascend with a perfect simulation of his original soul within his new mantle... and I think Masego will be able to do that too. His mastery of souls and insight into divinity point to this.

luminiousblu

Queen of Winter!Catherine was not "not Catherine". That's the excuse she tries to make for herself but everyone tells her she's full of shit immediately.

Dainpdf

...everyone? Warlock seemed to think so. And he hated her.

Also, that's not what I got from that conversation with Sve Noc. So who are you basing this on?

[Euodiachloris](#)

Catherine was "fake" in the same way somebody who is drunk or high is "fake". To put it another way, she was in an altered state, true; but, when they are in a manic or depressive part of their cycle, somebody with bipolar disorder is still themselves, however differently they act.

That definitely was Cat... with her brain on Winter rather than on Squire. Or on what she's on now, which is Night (once removed).

Dainpdf

That is not what Warlock seemed to indicate on the subject. Or what Cat seemed to indicate on the subject. There was *some* Cat in there, but mostly she was a mold into which wintry goodness was poured as filling.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Apparently you've never been near a drug-induced psychosis. 😊 Altered states are tricky and profound

things. And, it's not a lie that "the chemicals made me do it", but how what was done was done? Still shaped by the underlying personality, however different others think the outcome.

You're still you, even with a lesion-riddled, dementing brain that can't make even three quarters of the connections it used to. Generally not a you people who knew the whole you enjoy being around, and thus won't consider that you to be still be you, but however much warped and reduced... that crumbling framework is still you.

Just as you are not the kid you were because you've added and lost bits. But, that kid and you? You.

BarthHumphries

How different do you have to be from "you" until you aren't you anymore? Were Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde truly the same person? Physically you're you, and your personality is going to inform your changed persona, but I think a strong argument could be made both ways, that you're no longer you and that you are still you.

luminiousblu

Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde were literally the same person, the entire book repeatedly beats you with the fact over the head. Hyde IS Jekyll, he's the bad side of Jekyll, the side Jekyll tried and failed to get rid of. Jekyll and Hyde is at least partially about how you can't just run away from the bad side of you by pretending it doesn't exist. Just like Catherine was absolutely told that she can't run away from the things she was capable of, the things she's still capable of, by blaming it all on Winter.

In any case, Warlock didn't say Catherine wasn't Catherine, he was quibbling about trivial stuff like whether or not she's human and arguing about souls. Trying to argue that 'w-winter was corrupting you h-haha' is bullshit, it's like saying that the carefree, fun-loving prince who put on the crown isn't the prince anymore because now he has to act with the authority and weight of a king. It IS him. He's changed. We call it growing up in real life.

Catherine is the one who chose to put on the Crown of Winter. She's the one who planned to get the

Title from the Duke of Violent Squalls, she's the one who decided to fuck the consequences and let loose the dam. People have always commented on how Catherine is no longer the girl who chased after Black's shadow, even less the girl who was sure that she was in the right, no longer someone that her old self would emphasise with. That doesn't make it 'not her'. In life, there are choices you make that lead you down roads where you are changed utterly – you could argue that **every** road you could take will do so. Catherine happened to take one where there's outside influence, but unless you want to argue that Black's mentoring made her "fake", and the changes she went through during the war games made her "fake", and Second Llesse made her "fake", Winter Sovereign Catherine is fully Catherine.

In any case, I'm completely unconvinced that Winter, without the alienation from overuse that got shoved onto Akua eventually at any rate, actually affected her logic. Sve Noc actually calls her out on this, you need decades, centuries for that to actually start melting your mind. Cat's had it for maybe a year, it'd be a wonder if she had gain so much as an inclination towards blue clothing. Catherine's responses were generally vicious while she was the Winter Queen. They were also generally reasonable, and the things she's most horrified about are also things that have near-direct parallels in our own history done by great empires and respected leaders.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Even decomposed and three thousand years forgotten, your physical remains are... what remains of you. 😊 To cease being you requires a rewrite and reboot of reality by, say, something like a specialist demon that eradicates everything of a thing for a living. Merely a different take on you due to damage or change is still you. However heartbreaking the change to those around you (and even to your own dismay).

Simple as. 😊 Change happens to you as you go along, and it can be fantastic, horrible or both.

Dainpdf

It's more like there was an actress playing Cat than that Cat was drugged out. If a doppelganger studies

one superficially, then wears one's skin, is it really the same person? I would say not.

[Liliet](#)

That first one was Warlock's opinion.

Masego disagreed, and Masego was proven to be right when ripping away Winter left old Cat behind. She was still there, just... under influence.

Dainpdf

Considering Cat's size relative to Winter, I believe it safe to assume that what was there was mostly Winter taking a Cat-like demeanor.

luminiousblu

Sve Noc, Akua, and Masego all say to varying degrees that Warlock is full of shit. We've been shown that Warlock is neither infallible nor the pinnacle of magic, and considering that Masego has the ability to fuck with souls directly without rituals, Akua used a fae soul as a power source for her flying city and is was merged with Winter, and Sve Noc is a pseudodeific entity with thousands of years of brute-forced knowledge dealing with the collective souls of her entire species, I'd take their opinion over his.

Also, "an actress playing Catherine" doesn't even make sense. What happened to the original one? Do you actually buy the idea that the original one straight up died? Did Sve Noc bring her back to life? Is she just a triple zombie now?

Catherine being influenced or controlled was literally something she made up to excuse herself and it's immediately swatted down by someone who knows way more about how fae mantles work and little reason to lie to her.

[Liliet](#)

I think Sve Noc had a much higher bar for 'influence' than Catherine did, not giving a fuck about the little things (like making fae eat their fingers) that left Catherine horrified. That, and the whole 'human vs drow' thing.

Catherine is /tangibly/ different after she accepts the mantle, and it was getting fairly unsettling.

And yeah Catherine did literally die and get remade in the stuff of Winter, during Second Llesse. The question of whether the copy is equivalent to the original is like the existential horror of Star Trek transportalizers excuse me warp pads or whatever they were called. Warlock had one opinion on it, Masego has another, and Masego's is better founded.

Hum, actually Masego had a good reason to consider Wekesa to be full of shit on the matter: remember the little incident during the northern crusade campaign when Saint cut Catherine's mantle and she went temporarily mortal, to the point of resuming normal bodily functions? It was Catherine's /non/-existence, rather than her existence, that was the trick played on Creation. Masego knew that.

Dainpdf

Masego doesn't so much refute warlock as deny him. He accepts Warlock's reasoning and evidence, but denies the conclusion.

Sve Noc was arguing over whether Cat is culpable for her double's actions. Of course, we know in the end she chose not to kill her, which is endorsement that Cat as she is now is not, in fact, very culpable for them.

And Akua... is Akua. She'll say whatever she needs to get ahead. Plus, she's not exactly known for her restraint and wisdom with regards to the consequences of consorting with otherworldly beings and/or removing one's soul from one's body.

As for the original, she was, effectively, dead. Now she's back, as she did once before.

RanVor

Although it is undeniable that Cat was influenced by the Mantle of Winter, I find the notion that she's not responsible for what she did during that time rather insulting. It seems like a cheap cop-out to avoid dealing with issues caused by Cat's descent towards, for the lack of a better word, villainy. It's not an honest change of heart, it's just a reset.

Dainpdf

There was much more Winter in there than Cat.
Plus, Cat did a lot of bad before this.

RanVor

And that's where our views start to differ.

[Liliet](#)

I agree with RanVor on this.

"I was drunk" is not a good excuse for hitting someone while driving, because you fucking chose to drink. In fact, drinking and driving is an offense unto itself.

Catherine is responsible for everything she did while after Winter's influence, because killing a Duke of Winter to take his power was /her/ brilliant idea, and every single step she took since then was a fairly informed decision.

On that note though, Cat didn't really fuck that much shit up while under Winter's influence. She took oaths and kept Vivienne close for a reason – she was a very careful drunk driver XD

The influence was there, but because Catherine was aware of that fact – even though she couldn't / feel/ all of it – she kept it at bay.

She was like a drunk driver who refuses to go over 10 kmph because she knows she's drunk and would rather slow to a crawl than hit someone.

Catherine is fully responsible for everything she did while under Winter's influence.

That doesn't mean there isn't a difference between her actions and mindset with or without it.

Malicia's about to learn that Winter!Cat was not the scariest Cat can be 😊

luminiousblu

Making people eat their fingers? Look, to begin with, the fae aren't exactly human. It's debatable whether or not they can't just regrow said fingers and are too terrified of Catherine to do it, since it's meant to send a message.

“Tangibly” different? Howso? Because it looks to me like any other story of the weight of the crown and somesuch. Nothing she does is actually unreasonable, except the idiotic way she refused to learn to use her mantle correctly, and that seemed more like a “and man grew proud” thing, or a reflection of how Catherine knows less than nothing about magic.

“existential horror of Star Trek”

It’s just the Ship question and it’s hardly existential horror. Though philosophy has a lot to say on the matter, what’s agreed upon is the fact that it doesn’t actually matter, it’s mostly an academic point. At what point does the ship become a new ship, well, at what point does the captain actually care, you know? Catherine was clearly in control. You can argue that all of her fae tricks made her more than human but on a mental level she wasn’t somehow being puppeted by Winter. She’s the one who decided to take on Winter and then decided to break the dam, WQ Catherine was as much a “fake” Catherine as Angry Catherine or Horny Catherine are fake.

[Liliet](#)

We know Fae can’t regrow body parts because of the precedent of Larat’s eye. He wouldn’t be that pissed at Ranger if he could simply regrow it.

It’s hard to tell the specific examples of Winter influencing Catherine, but IMHO, the entire tone of the story changed in Book 4. Sure, some of that was maturity / weight of the throne, but note how differently she feels once Winter is gone. I’d compare it to depression, to a degree: making things matter /less/, blunting her passion, cooling her fire in every respect except the most dangerous ones.

Her /empathy/ is gone or blunted, the most immediate reason people care about things. Catherine is an empathetic person, counterbalancing the cold reason at the heart of her: she simply feels bad at seeing others suffer, even if she can shut it down. It’s a different thing than caring about someone personally, it’s the immediate feeling when something is /right in front of you/.

As a fae, Catherine kept her /morals/ – the more abstract reasoning of what is right and wrong, and

she kept her /attachments/. Empathy though, the thing she used to figure out what her morals were in the first place? She needed fucking *Indrani* of all people to tell her that she was crossing lines, and Indrani punches empathy in the face every time she meets it.

Catherine *reacts* less to the world around her, in Book 4. There's a lot more calculation and a lot less emotion to her POV, compared to early Book 3 before she got Winter (which I believe started tangibly influencing her immediately).

She still manages to grow and develop, even through Winter. That's what makes this confusing: Catherine in the last six chapters of Book 4 is not the same Catherine as in the first chapters of Book 3. She's not the same Catherine as in the immediately preceding chapters either, though.

Amoonymous

Well, Cat's whole deal with the dwarves (for the dwarves to allow all the drow to leave) was that they'd be going to fight the only real threat to the dwarves – the Dead King.

She is still invading Procer technically – and first reactions to her host should be rather amusing – but she's almost certainly going to offer to help Cordelia.

Javvies

Cat's going to want Amadeus back in one piece and with his soul properly attached and unaltered, cities are just so breakable, you know.

Death Knight

Hey, it's not like the Principate can bitch about a veritable army of demigods showing up on their doorstep unannounced. After all, this is just an "expeditionary" force.

Liliet

How did Ime not know about Malicia's meeting with Cat in Keter? They absolutely did speak.

C_B

Thus the "face to face" caveat – Malicia was there via flesh puppet.

Liliet

And a scrying link somehow counts as more 'face to face' than a meat puppet?

zenanii

Through a meat puppet. Not face to face.

[*Liliet*](#)

Face to face, not through a meat puppet or a scrying link, Malicia and Catherine hadn't seen each other since Catherine was in Ater at the beginning of Book 2.

Sure, their conversation during Akua's Folly, which Ime refers to, was specifically through a scrying link and not a meat puppet, but I'm not sure what kind of feedback a scrying link has that a meat puppet doesn't. It should be the other way round if anything.

taovkool

It's back!

Now let the madness begins!

Dainpdf

Ooh. Seems promising. Though I wonder whether Cat intends to stay on the campaign in the west instead of returning home to help her beleaguered adjutant and conscience.

Also, I wonder how she'll react when news of what happened to Masego on his family trip. At the very least, Indrani will want to go keep the man company.

...of course, that assumes Masego is actually making his way to Callow as opposed to a beeline for Cat.

[*Liliet*](#)

Well, Callow didn't get set on fire in her absence, so they can't be /that/ beleaguered! They can handle it! It's not like there are interpersonal issues that Catherine blithely ignored between them or any fun news waiting for her about their resolution or anything...

I have no idea where this is going.

byzantine279

To be fair to Catherine there, there wasn't anything she could have done about said interpersonal issues.

[*Liliet*](#)

She could have, like, talked to them more and had them talk to each other before sending them off to fix the country together.

Hindsight is 20/20.

Dainpdf

Right? I wonder how Cat is going to react when she returns to find Hakram has -1 hand. Plus whatever changes Vivienne has been through.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

"You did WHAT?! Admittedly I have little to no room to talk here, but,"

[Euodiachloris](#)

"How could you lose a hand?! At least I have a habit of growing back, replacing or jury rigging a cheat to cover what I wind up missing! You've not picked that trick up, yet: don't use it again until you do!"

[Liliet](#)

;u;

Antoninjohn

A corpse that is not a corpse in a lake, I think the Bard mentioned that angel in a talk with The Lone Swordsman. I wonder how much night Cat will get when she kills it.

[onedollargum](#)

I imagine it's more a demon that went missing.

werafdsaew

No way that's a demon; the Heroes and her own Church would turn on her in a heartbeat if she's trying to use a demon.

Death Knight

I think it might be a sleeping deity, only brought to the field when Procer is in dire straits. Or it could be a legendary Named Wizard, the same Wizard that once fought with Triumphant that resulted in the Titan's Pond being formed.

Lavir

Or the Sve Noc who is now a god.

nick012000

I'm pretty sure it is. Look at her thoughts. "Let me be damned, then." "Fire against fire." Now consider that Procer was playing pretty heavily into the villain role during the invasion of Callow, and I'm pretty sure that Below is angling to get her a Villain Name, most likely that of her distant ancestor who fought against Neshamah prior to his ascension – the Witch Queen.

[Liliet](#)

I figure using an angel's corpse as a tool counts as damning to someone as Pure in some respects as Cordelia is

That corpse was in the lake Hengest, the one Liesse was built by. The corpse in the lake Iserre may also be an angel, but that would be repetitive. My money is on something remaining from the Old Iserre, the city that was sunk into the lake by the dwarves.

Antoninjohn

There was the angel that the White Knight summoned in Salia when the First Prince was going to give children as tribute

[Liliet](#)

The Rebel Knight, I think, not White.

Shaerick 68

"The first messengers she'd sent on foot, and once they came within a hundred yards of him their heads had simply caved in."

Oh, how I've missed this. Welcome back, EE!

[onedollargum](#)

They had eyes on the inside ;D

[Euodiachloris](#)

That's what happens when you're too busy doing stuff to realise the frenzy metre is about to end you. xD

oliverwashere

Typo thread:
so be sent-> to be sent

Cordelia fingers -> Cordelia's fingers stuff or rebellion->stuff of rebellion
given her spymistress to speak-> given her spymistress leave to speak
She'd a vicious -> She's a vicious

Anon

I like the opening, but as one of the people who was not at all a fan of what ended up happening with Catherine and the Drow at the end of the previous book, I really think that long-term it's gonna depend on what Catherine ends up becoming – having her 'revert' to being a priestess/follower indebted to a god directly would be a massive setback, imo.

But I suppose we'll wait and see.

Snowfire1224

Who wants to guess how many chapters/interludes in we'll be when we finally find out what happened to Idrani?

caoimhinh

Catherine should mention her in chapter one, I really don't think she won't at least say what Indrani is doing or whether she is alive or dead.

I really, really hope Indrani is alright.

[Liliet](#)

If she wasn't, Catherine wouldn't be so cheerful talking to the dwarves.

Major character deaths have impact in guide. If Indrani was dead we'd already know.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

No one. Absolutely no one will see her coming.

[sugarrollblog](#)

Not sure what Catherine will do Iserre. Is she going to take the city before the League does? Grem is also heading down there. Iserre is bound to be interesting as too many armies are converging on it.

Grem is heading out of there, actually, and the Levantines may have already passed it in their pursuit. If I had to guess, she

couldn't scry from underground and was heading for Black, and is going to gate north the highest bidder.

[sugarrollblog](#)

Right, so the Legions under Grem and the Levantines are moving away from Iserre. Catherine brought a fully armed Drow army with her. A little bit of an overkill just to pick up Amadeus I think. She might be there for something else.

byzantine279

I think she's there to pick up Black, his remaining legion, and make a ridiculous public announcement about the drow in front of as many witnesses as physically possible.

Allafterme

I wonder what her reaction will be when she learns dear old Pilgrim has taken Black prisoner...

byzantine279

Meh, Black (probably) escaped. She's probably going to be too busy trying to figure out where Black wandered off to.

[Liliet](#)

"Uuuuugh. I take my eyes off him for five minutes and this is what happens. Fine, dear teacher, take care of your own stupid business while I'm busy saving your people from your sideways backfire of a plan. Ta-ta, try to be alive next time we meet"

[NZPIEFACE](#)

As many important witnesses as physically possible. How would Tyrant and Hierarch possible miss this?

[Euodiachloris](#)

She would need to give Kairos some notice. Refreshments and a comfy chair take time to magic up. 😊

Snowfire1224

If she can't scry underground how does she know where Black even is?

Skaddix

I wonder if this leads credence to my theory that Warlock and his Husband made Masego with magic and that Masego is actually half

Devil or Demon Cause Masego is moving in a weird way, at unnatural rates and seems to be passively rekting any human that gets close.

[onedollargum](#)

I think it's probably the blow-back of literally tugging a god's hand to slap down their own people.

luminiousblu

"Hierophant" is the equivalent of "Archmage" for Clerics in D&D ("Warlock", in case you're wondering, refers to a type of spellcaster who makes pacts with demons). Trying to scry an archmage without his knowledge or against his will is a poor idea at the best of times.

Also, moving in a weird way sort of implied to me that he was either flying or teleporting.

"But teleporting is impossible!"

Well, Hierophants are known for their miracles...

Atagan

I assumed he is kinda in autopilot using gates to make short jumps and with some kind of automatic/subconscious defence against everything thats not a friend

luminiousblu

Really I wonder how "teleporting" works in this setting. In D&D, teleporting technically takes you through the Astral Plane across an arbitrary distance, but that's because the Astral Plane is the place you go when you're nowhere else, it's the representation of the "place between places". That said, going through Arcadia is, well, it's suspiciously similar. More like ethereal travel but I wouldn't really be surprised if Masego realised the inherent similarities.

[Liliet](#)

It's been mentioned that teleporting is impossible, as is generating matter out of nowhere, but since both of them can be emulated in 1000 ways the distinction is largely academic.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, and Masego sure did make wooden pillars appear out of nowhere when pulling his binding trick, Catherine actually commented on how utterly terrifying it was that he could do that suddenly.

It's equally possible he's /actually/ teleporting here and not using some kind of extradimensional shortcut...

NerfGlastigUaine

Just finished first week back to college, tired as all hell. Saw this chapter and all my fatigue washed away, replaced with pure, octane-fueled hype. Thank you so much for being back.

Someguy

>How quickly slight wounds had turned to mortal ones, Malicia thought.

Gee. Really Malicia? I'm sure the Allied powers thought the same regarding Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles right when Germany shoved a spiked gauntlet (WW2) up their ass.

Ali Khan

So warlock sacrificed himself and an entire city of over a hundred thousand souls for his sons survival. It's confirmed that hierophant can affect the souls of his targets even through scrying. Didn't dread emperor revenant also sacrifice that many souls for apotheosis? It looks like masego has gotten quite a power up.

byzantine279

Masego witnessed the power of Above and Below. Only a sliver of each, but as someone whose power is to usurp miracles... Well, he's probably almost as strong as WinterCat was. Stronger even, since he knows what to do with it. I suspect he may have let that one mage last long enough to deliver a message.

luminiousblu

Warlock doesn't seem to have "sacrificed" the people who were killed, at least in the magical sense, just included them in the blast radius because he couldn't really give a damn. You know I find it dubious how Akua is largely hated for killing a hundred thousand in Liesse, but Warlock is given a pass despite doing essentially the same thing. It really does matter whose side you're shown.

byzantine279

The reasoning behind it matters a little too. Akua did it because she needed an army. Warlock did it because he had more power than he could control and considered literally everyone except Masego acceptable losses. Including his husband. So it was a cold & calculated decision for power vs a last act to save his son.

[Liliet](#)

Akua's slaughter was a calm and calculated plan carried out over a large amount of time.

Wekesa's last act was an act of desperation and self-sacrifice, as well as sacrifice of one of two people he loved most in the world for the sake of the other.

One was an atrocity, the other a tragedy.

That said, Wekesa was also 100% a horrible person, and loving him and crying about him doesn't stop me from knowing that. And Akua being a mass-murderer doesn't stop me from loving her and wishing her all the best.

So, y'know, nuances.

luminiousblu

I dunno man, I would rather know that my murder at least was a step on the path towards greatness than know that it was literally just an accident haha sorry bro. Maybe that's just me though but like, if I have to die anyway I'd like it to at least have been useful.

Ravenfrost

blind boy treading through a dead city, carrying the deaths with him – lash and ladder, into ever deeper darkness.

I think Masego took the 100k souls with him and that's the reason for his power up and soul manipulation.

Oshi

He's looking for his father's soul in all the mess.

byzantine279

So any bets on how the Warden of the West (Is that a Name now? That sentence looks like she's taken a Name.) is going to react to Cat appearing out of nowhere with an army of ridiculously powerful drow, declaring war on the Dead King, and probably asking for a truce until the world stops burning? ...Because I think she may have an aneurysm and die. Because this is ridiculous even by Cat's standards. ...Then again having seen it happen I suppose that makes sense. I have no idea how she pulled this off even having witnessed it.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Nope, never will be a name either.

[Liliet](#)

Why do you think so?

haihappen

A Name is a Role. Warden of the West sounds like a Role, but is more of a formal title for the First Prince, which, as repeatedly reinforced, will never be a Name for the reasons that Procerians believe more in the might of many than in the might of One.

These titles simply do not have the cultural groove to become Names.

But getting a Name without realizing that it is happening is reinforced by both Vivienne and the *SPOILER for the current Extra Chapter Peregrine II*.

[Liliet](#)

I think with the degree of disaster currently happening in Procer, Warden of the West might have gone from a ceremonial title to a very real thing in the minds of people, putting it on track to being a Name.

The phrasing in the chapter certainly suggests that.

[sugarrollblog](#)

Malicia thinks that a legion blockade will prevent the exchange between the goblins and Callow? Catherine can open portals and she knows this—Ime knows this. I can understand them failing to consider the Drows but this? There is no excuse for the two of them to miss this. They're supposed to be smart.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I sincerely doubt that the goblin Matriarchs will trust a portal anywhere near their caves.

werafdsaew

But they control Foramen now

chawpi_tuta

I wish theres a map so i can see how truly fucked bitch princess is. Also it seems the player start summoning god to the table

[sugarrollblog](#)

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/maps/>

[Barthumphries](#)

Where is Iserre on this map: <https://practicalguidetoevil.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/continent-map.pdf>

[sugarrollblog](#)

Near the center of the continent

Aotrs Commander

Well, nice to see that, for a change, everyone else is getting as much crap as Cat has been.

Though at this rate, the entire continent is likely to be entirely depopulated to the point of collapse whatever happens...

I can't help but feel Praes has been dealt a mortal blow with the permanent loss of it's major port – even if it survives the current crisis, that catastrophe seems like it will spell long-term disaster for the nation that was already dancing on the edge of a starvation cycle. And, of course, desperate people with a penchant for insane sorcery equals what could be a rather nasty final lashing out before the end,

[Liliet](#)

They're going to need to rely on Callow!

The Praes/Callow united nation is going to be real... but it won't be the Tower in charge.

Someguy

The Callowan Conquest of Praes.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

Doesn't really matter to Black which way it goes, does it?
As long as it holds, he's fine with the outcome XD

HandyCapped

You know Erratic is back when this story is suddenly number one on top web fiction.

Al

New Book on my birthday? Hell yeah!

Daemion

This is my understanding:

Night and Winter got merged into one and are now either. This provided the necessary power for Sve Noc to ascend to godhood. Cat is no longer a fae noble but a mortal human again. As compensation she's now the (high) priestess of Sve Noc, which gives her nearly full access to their power (what do we call that? Winternight? Nightwinter? Ninter? Wight?^^). Technically she should be able to use it as the Mighty do, which means she hasn't become any weaker and luckily she learned all their skills while she was down there. The primary advantages are that her mind is her own again, usage of more power won't turn her into a cliché villain and she's no longer affected by wards.

That is a major upgrade, even factoring in that her human body is limping again. It's a bit unclear what role Akua plays now. She's a soul bound to Cat's cloak, but has since been empowered by Winter and by Night. She's not alive again... I think. But... what is she now?

Imagine the fun and chaos when someone prepares to take on the Queen of Winter and instead the Black Queen arrives, wrapped in Night and followed by an army of Sigils. This is going to be so epic.

Now she simply has to rescue Black, pick up the marauding legions, secure the goblins and then kick everyone's ass to bring peace to the continent. Should be a piece of cake. 😊

Re-uniting the Woe is next on the agenda. Perhaps Hakram would enjoy a Hand of Night to go with his Deadhand? Perhaps Masego would enjoy being hugged by Cat and Indrani? Perhaps Thief would enjoy giving up all the responsibility of a regent to Cat?

Haihappen

Pretty sure Vivienne is transitioning to a Name Adivor, Regent, Heiress or something in that general direction. The hints where there: How she started changing again (or never stopped), and how she lead a spy network instead of thieving about; and for some time was the direct advisor to the Queen.

She is positioned as a successor to the title, and probably Name. Basically all is missing is the Black Queen's seal.

Hakram may even stay with her, but there I am unsure. Perhaps if Cathrine ordered him to stay as an Adjutant to Queen Vivienne.

Then the new Murder-Squad would be Cathrine, Masego, Indrani, Akua, Hakram/X (because the Five Man Band is a thing)

X -> Black, Ivar, ... no more names that seem plausible.

RanVor

Vivienne ending up with the Name of Heiress would be delightfully ironic, however unlikely it may be...

[sugarrollblog](#)

Yeah, Thief will transition to a hero ruler name. Physical changes has already manifested and she is becoming more regal in appearance. Cat will hand over the queenship to her and objections to Callow joining the grand alliance will all but disappear since Callow will now be ruled by hero. Cat will remain as the necessary evil of the nation to deal with the ugly things they are faced with.

[sengachi](#)

Fimbulwinter 😊

[sengachi](#)

Wait. I'm not sure I'm thinking of the right mythological winter. Is fimbulwinter associated with sunless days or am I thinking of the wrong apocalypse winter?

SlumberryStorm

Thanks for the Birthday gift, and for the great story

Yet another cook

Wait, those aren't the lyrics of Too Many Cooks!

♪ It takes a lot to make a stew,
A pinch of salt and laughter too...

Chapter 1: Visitation

"Even a devil can be merciful once."

– Callowan saying

The night was full of shadows and every last one answered to me.

Fairy gates had never been quite as precise an art as I would have liked, particularly when the needle was threaded half-blind, but these days I had more than Masego or Akua adding up the numbers for me. The sisters understood these matters in a way no mortal ever could, and considering it was their – ours, I supposed – army I was taking through Arcadia they'd not balked at charting the path for me. Well, that wasn't entirely true. Komena had complained about being a goddess, not a cartographer. I'd wholeheartedly agreed: after all, a cartographer would have given

me an answer instead of petty whining. You'd think finishing apotheosis would have done something for her sense of humor, but instead I'd been given an indignant silent treatment for a few days. Which was fine by me, really. There was only so much croaking I could take from the damned birds they'd sent with me. The night-feathered crow on my left shoulder stirred in displeasure and I snorted.

"Fine, fake birds," I said. "That better for you?"

Indrani cleared her throat, less dainty scoff and more middle-aged dockworker about to spit.

"Catherine, you're talking to the crows again," she said.

I shrugged.

"It's fine as long as I don't expect to hear them talk back, I think," I noted.

"Caw," the crow on my left shoulder drily said.

The word, not actual cawing, because Andronike had developed a taste for the sardonic since shaving off a sliver of her godhood and sending it off with me.

"Wind's real loud tonight," I said, blithely pretending I hadn't hear anything.

"Well," Archer mused, "*it is* winter."

And wasn't it just? The heartlands of Procer were pretty as a painting, under moonlight. Open fields of driven snow, sparse trees trickling down icicles and the occasional game wandering through the frost. It said a lot about the drow, I thought, than an army of fifty thousand of them hadn't scared off every beast for four miles around it. There'd been some childlike wonderment at first, when the grey-skinned host had first witnessed the world covered in white. Drow centuries old patting at the snow like they couldn't quite believe their eyes, strangers as they were to a surface winter. I remembered that fondly, the innocence of it. There were some things that even millennia of constant bloodshed could not entirely erase. Tonight, though, there would be no wide-eyed fascination. The warriors I'd sent out had moved out across the snow like ghosts, melting back into the darkness they'd been born to.

Indrani had come to keep me company as I stood, watching the small town in the distance. My friend – we'd shared a bed more than once, by now, but lover ill fit what lay between us – was half a shadow herself, the hooded leather coat she wore over fine mail hiding her face away from the light of the moon. Now and then I could see her hand twitching slightly, the urge to reach

for the large bow strapped to her back only barely repressed. Archer had never been one to shy away from a fight, which was the reason I hadn't sent her out with the drow in the first place: corpses weren't what I was after. Not tonight anyway. There were a few long years ahead of us, I knew, and there would be blood spilled before they came to a close. *Whose, I thought, is the important question, isn't it?*

"What's the place called again?" Indrani asked.

More out of need to fill the silence than true curiosity, I suspected.

"Trousseau," I replied anyway.

Finding a hunter out in the plains had been a lucky stroke, and result in a vague notion of where we were in Procer. Somewhere in eastern Iserre, for one, which was what I'd been aiming for. Unfortunately said hunter had never gone all that far from her hometown, and had little news of what was currently taking place in the Principate. No map, either, but that much I'd expected. Those were damned expensive, and even halfway-accurate ones not usually in the hands of commoners.

"Bit of a shithole, to be honest," Archer said.

Trousseau probably had no more than a thousand souls living in it, most of the time, but these were not that. War and conscription would have thinned the town. I'd decided to charitably attribute how run-down the place was to the removal of so many able hands, though odds were the place was poor enough it looked like this even on a good year. There were as many huts as houses, all huddled around a few streets that were more streaks of cold mud than anything, and what cattle could be seen held in pens around the town was thin and sickly. Though Indrani's gaze had lingered on the ramshackle and no doubt biting cold huts, I'd been more interested in something that wasn't there. Namely, walls. I honestly couldn't think of a single town of a thousand in Callow that wouldn't have at least a palisade up, or tall piles of stones without mortar. For my purpose of the night, however, that defencelessness was not unhelpful.

"If it were worth putting on a map, Black would probably have burnt it on his way south," I said.

She hummed in agreement, and only spoke again a few heartbeats later.

"You think rumours about what's happening to will have trickled into here?" Indrani asked, glancing at me.

"Worth a try," I grimly said.

Archer's footing shifted almost hesitantly, and I blinked in surprise when she put a comforting hand on my shoulder. I could almost feel the warmth of her through the cloak and doublet, and my heart beat a little faster. Not because of attraction, this time, though that was never far. That I could feel warmth at all was still a feeling I could only luxuriate in.

"We don't know he's in trouble," she said.

"He should be back from Thalassina by now," I replied. "And still we can't make contact with the Observatory. *Something* happened."

"He could be buried up the neck in some hidden library," Indrani smiled. "Only to remember the rest of Creation still exists in a few months."

The smile was slightly forced, I knew her well enough to tell. I wasn't the only one worried about Masego and the resounding silence from Laure.

"Shouldn't it be me comforting you, anyway?" I said.

"He can take care of himself," Archer quietly said, though her eyes flicked east anyway.

I clasped her bare fingers with my gloved ones, squeezing tight, and she shot me an amused look before removing her hand. Where our conversation would have wandered after that would remain a mystery, for I felt a ripple in the Night headed our way. Mighty Rumena – crow-Komena pecked at my shoulder and I rolled my eyes – *General* Rumena, I mentally corrected, had not ceased in its attempts to sneak up on me even though not a single one had succeeded since I'd become First Under the Night. It was hard to pull a Night-trick on someone who had a finger on the pulse of that very power.

"So, the way you don't leave footprints in the snow," I called out. "Is that an illusion, or are you so feeble and delicate you're light enough not to leave one?"

Grey fingertips appeared out thin air a few feet in front of me, coming down to tear away at a veil of Night and revealing the creased face of the ancient drow. Even stooped the bastard was taller than me, which unfair in so many ways, and ever since it'd been appointed to the command of the southern expedition it'd made a point of looming over me whenever it could.

"Many are the mysteries of the Night," General Rumena vaguely replied.

I eyed him skeptically.

"So where'd we land on whether or not I have power of expulsion from the faith again?" I finally asked crow-Andronike.

"No," she replied.

"Maybe," crow-Komena said at the same time.

The two crow-shaped slivers of Sve Noc turned to glare at each other.

"There can be no-" crow-Andronike began.

"It is necessary that-" her sister interrupted.

I smothered a grin, though not quite well enough. Both turned their glares towards me. That was never going to get old, was it? A heartbeat later I was yelping as a pair of godly crows started flapping around my hair and pecking vengefully at my scalp, though I valiantly managed to shoo them away with only minimal loss of dignity. The two of them flew off, possibly off to torment some poor luckless rabbit. Made of Night as they were they hardly needed to eat, though that certainly hadn't stopped them from toying with the animals they came across. Amusement bled out of me a moment later and I turned my eyes to Rumena.

"Report," I ordered.

It did not bow, not that I'd expected it to.

"The town has been seized," the old drow said.

"Casualties?" I asked.

"Seventeen wounded, no dead," General Rumena mildly said. "Some stubborn souls insisted on resisting confinement."

I chewed on my lip. Too much to hope for this to be entirely bloodless, I supposed. I'd tell Akua to have the wounds healed if she could. And if the people were willing to take healing from the likes of us which was less than certain.

"No priests?" I asked.

"None resided within. There is a moan-haste-ree to the north where servants of the Pale Gods hold court, but they only visit infrequently," the old drow said.

"Monastery," I corrected absent-mindedly. "Good, that would have complicated things."

Priests tended to frown upon dark hordes beholden to eldritch horrors of the night strolling into their backyard, and I'd rather not cut one's throat if I could avoid it.

"Send a sigil up to keep an eye on the monastery road," I finally said. "No blunders tonight, Rumena."

"Ah," the general mildly said. "Will you be absenting yourself, then?"

To my side Indrani shook with a suppressed laugh, the filthy traitor.

"You just wait," I grunted. "One of these days I'll talk the damned crows into letting me write your holy book and there'll be an entire hymn about how much of a prick you are."

I began the trek towards Trousseau immediately, carefully refraining from hearing Rumena's skepticism at my ability to rhyme on purpose even as Archer cheerfully waved him goodbye.

As usual, I was surrounded by insubordinate backtalk and wanton treachery.

—

There were a few houses near the centre of the town made of stone, but this wasn't one of them. I approved, truth be told. From what I'd read, large towns and cities in the Alamans parts of Procer were usually governed by an official appointed by the ruling royal – quite often some toady or relative that could be counted on to keep the coin flowing towards the principality's capital. On occasion, some wealthy landowner ended up in charge instead but given that those occasionally got ideas about who should be the local royalty that was rarer. In smaller towns and villages, though, a degree of freedom emerged. Someone needed to be in charge so the lawmen and the tax collectors would have an arm to twist, but the people were left to their own devices as to who should be picked. Trousseau should be small enough for that to apply, and that the town's mayor was living in a wooden house instead of a stone one implied wealth hadn't been why he was put in charge. Half a dozen drow bearing the mark of the Soln Sigil were keeping a sharp watch on the premise, and if the ripple I was feeling in the Night was any indication my old friend Lord Soln itself wasn't far.

It had amused the Sisters to send what little remained of the army I'd once led against them on the southern expedition. I wasn't complaining: the oaths binding us might have been broken, but they were quicker to obey my orders than most drow. The covenant under Winter had left marks that would not easily be erased. On another night I might have taken the time to flush out Soln from its hiding place and share a few words, but not this one. I had business to finish, and no inclination to delay it. As far as I was concerned, the quicker we moved on from here to undertake our campaign proper the better.

"Want me to come with?" Archer idly said.

I glanced at her, catching a glimpse of her hazelnut eyes under the hood. I read an expectation of boredom there, but still she had offered. I did not fight the flush of affection that brought out in me.

"No need," I said. "Find something to entertain yourself, I'll catch up."

She smirked.

"Bound to be at least *one* tavern in this dump," she mused.

"We pay for what we take," I reminded her.

"Gods," she muttered under her breath. "Between you and Akua I feel like I've joined the most ironic nunnery in Creation."

I grinned and waved her off.

"Don't get too drunk without me," I said.

She grinned back, and promised not a thing. I watched her saunter away for a moment, coat swaying behind her, but before long my gaze had returned the door in front of me and the good mood drained. The two closest drow were looking at me from the corner of their eyes and I offered a nod.

"Restrict interruption to Peerage and my own people," I spoke in Crepuscular.

"Losara Queen," one murmured back, though both bowed.

I left it at that, and knocked at the door out of habit. There was a long beat of silence, before a male voice hesitantly bid me to enter. *Ah*, I thought. The last people to come in would not have been so polite. I pushed open the surprisingly well-oiled door and entered. A man was standing by a brazier, my eyes lingering only long enough to note he looked only in his mid-thirties before they pressed on to take in the rest of the house. One bed, shoddy as it was, but four cots. The table was old but well-maintained, and the roughly-hewn chairs struck me as of recent make. Not much else to see, aside from wooden shelves filled with foodstuffs. When my eyes returned to the man, his face had gone ashen. His hands were still above the flames, but now they were trembling. I wiped my snow-sodden boots on the straw by the door before offering a bland smile.

"I am told your name is Leon," I said in Chantant. "And that you are mayor of Trousseau."

The man drew back as if struck. It was almost comical, given that he stood at least two feet taller than me and was built like a sandy-haired ox. Almost.

"You're the Black Queen," Leon shakily said.

"And so introductions have been seen to," I mildly said. "Take a seat."

Something like anger flickered across the man's face. Not someone used to be ordered around in his own home, was he? But even as his jaw squared, his eyes came to rest on the sword at my hip. Caution won out, and slowly he drew back a chair and sat down. Wiping my boots one last time, I limped across the floorboards and sat across from him. I could have drawn on the Night to chase away the pain for a time, but I disliked relying on that measure unless blades were out. I leaned back against the chair, the Mantle of Woe bunching up as I did, and calmly took off my leather gloves.

"I have questions to ask of you," I said.

"I am the mayor of a half-empty town," Leon replied. "What could I possibly know of import to a queen?"

His gaze was steady, I thought, and his back straight. But he'd not quite managed to hide his hands away from me, and I could see how tightly clenched his fingers were. Afraid, but trying not to show it. I wondered if he expected he'd be dead by the end of this conversation. My reputation in Procer had been less than gentle even before the entire fucking priesthood of the west had declared me Arch-heretic of the East.

"More than you think," I said. "Peddlers come through, even in a deserted town. And peddlers carry rumours."

"I put little stock in rumours," the mayor replied. "And so know little of them."

I glanced to the side, already knowing what I would find. The bed was large enough for two. Some of the cots were too small for adults. The man had a wife and children. All of which were currently under the guard of my drow in a previously house. When my gaze returned, Leon's face had grown tight. The steady gaze was gone, replaced by desperate fear.

"No merchant has passed in months," the Proceran said. "We are not a town with coin to spend. Those few of wealth have already left."

I raised an eyebrow.

"For where?" I asked.

"Iserre," he said. "Walls and safety."

I leaned forward.

"Safety from what?" I pressed.

The man grit his teeth. I could see them war on his face, fear and principle. I was, to be honest, admiring his spine. How many of my countrymen would have it in them to even hesitate answering a question, if a villain of my repute was asking it? I'd not sat in conversation with a human other than Indrani in months, and in some ways this felt fresh to me. I could see the tremor in his arm, the beading sweat on his brow. This was not a drow, I thought. I understood the shape of this one's thoughts, the milestones by which he saw the world.

"Heavens preserve me from the Enemy," the mayor of Trousseau shakily said. "Still my tongue and ward my hand, that I may give it no succour nor relief."

I slowly breathed out, studying him. I might have continued, if not for the knock on the door.

"Enter," I said.

The door opened to reveal Akua Sahelian's silhouette, and closed after she fluidly stepped in. I cocked an eyebrow, meeting her golden eyes, and she nodded. *Good*. She leaned back against the wall without a word and I turned to the mayor.

"Do you see the Heavens in this room, Leon?" I softly asked. "I don't. There's just us, and the consequences of our choices."

"I will not sell out my home, Black Queen," the large man said. "Not an inch, not a league."

The fear had not left, I thought. And yet he'd said it anyway.

"I hold your family," I said.

The tone was casual, as if discussing the weather. I had learned from Black that mildness could be much more disquieting than the most thunderous of wraths. Leon swallowed drily. I had not made threat, and would not need to. My name itself was a threat, these days.

"Even so," he said, tone thick with grief. "Gods, even so."

To do right, even if it cost you everything. That, at least, the Houses of Light on both sides of the border taught just the same. I thought of Amadis Milenan, then, and wondered what such a man had ever done to deserve a subject like this. Nothing. But then that was the whole point, wasn't it? That the underserving so often ruled. That there could be more heroism found in a

terrified man sitting across a monster and refusing to answer a question than in an empire's worth of royal lines, or a legion of heroes.

"It's a strange thing, fear, isn't?" I said. "I have known those who rule by it. I have fought those who deny its very existence. And yet I have come no closer to understanding what splits the brave from the mad."

I met his eyes with equanimity.

"But I do know one thing, Leon of Trousseau," I said. "That knot in your stomach, right now? That part of you that keeps your back straight when death meets your gaze?"

I did not blink. Neither did he.

"That is the weight of the choice you made," I said. "Remember it, in the years to come. Learn from it, grow from it. Because one of those days you might find someone else sitting on my side of the table – and unlike me, they might not admire what you chose."

I pushed back the chair and rose to my feet, picking up my gloves and slipping them on. The mayor hesitated.

"That's all?" he said.

I smiled, thin and mirthless.

"Do you know why we praise bravery, Leon?" I said.

He did not reply. Did not dare to, I supposed, when it seemed possible he might survive our little chat after all.

"Because it surpasses our baser nature," Akua spoke from behind me, and I could feel the smile in her voice.

I could see the moment when the man understood, the anger and the sadness and the burning indignation.

"Someone talked," I gently said. "Someone always talks."

I limped back into the cold, and left him to sit in his silence.

Go vote!

We're still low on where we were before! Let's get back up there!

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

Skaddix

So does Akua have a body now?

[Liliet](#)

She is, at the very least, tangible.

That does not necessarily mean she's alive.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Being closer to lich than shade is still the nearest she's been to herself for a while.

Akua is well used to being tangible some distance away from that which contains her soul, after all. *shrugs*

[Liliet](#)

True ;u;

Huh, it's entirely plausible her soul per se is still bound to the mantle, isn't it? She had her chance to cut and run if she allowed Cat to perish against Sve Noc and took the cloak for herself, but she didn't do that.

That sounds coherent.

Skaddix

Akua seemingly has a body which I guess makes sense. She even has her eyes back since I don't think making a body and putting a soul in it would be two had for two goddesses. They probably leashed her though.

Oh how wrong they are about Masego. That is going to cause some drama. Though maybe not seems more convenience and lust.

Interesting though that they cannot call the Observatory, there should be other mages there that they can call so that really should be setting off more alarm bells. So either Masego got back and simply passively soul flayed everyone and is not taking calls or some other force decided hey while Cat is missing and Masego is in Thalassina why not attack. I mean we are missing quite a few heroes so its not inconceivable they launched an attack to take down Cat's communication hub and top non named Mages. Cat does have a more powerful army but she is also like Cordelia and Malicia lacking in Intelligence so much so she is trying to

interrogate a Mayor of an insignificant town that Black decided wasn't even worth sacking.

Gunslinger

I have to wonder why the sisters cannot do the scrying for Cat. Surely they are powerful enough

IDKWhoitis

It might be that they don't know how. In the tunnels below, Scrying may be absolutely useless as it cannot penetrate the rock (its been noted several times). The Magiological advances on the over world may have never made its way into the Underdark, since Scrying seems to have had difficulty in reaching even Procer.

This is before we get to the components needed, like Sea dredged rock and other materials that aren't found in the Under dark or in Rural Procer.

Or Juniper just conscripted all the mages in the Observatory, since they weren't needed to watch out for Heroes as the cease fire/Dead King has them all busy.

Dainpdf

If technology were the issue, Akua could probably provide any advancements necessary.

Rook

Probably won't even be horrifying, considering how much fun she's currently having with the Hero bandwagon.

In her current state she's likely to pop out a bauble that only works when you hold it to your heart and truly - believe- in your friends or something.

RanVor

Completely useless, then.

Argentorum

Akua is a master of lying to everyone. Especially herself.

I'm sure it would work once before she fell over laughing at the conceit.

RanVor

No, it wouldn't if it required Cat to believe in her..

Skaddix

There is no way Juniper cripples their main scrying center and communication center willingly. Juniper values communication and intelligence gathering which is what the Observatory provides. So I find it hard to believe she left no one at all in the building. Especially since we have seen one standard imperial mage makes very little difference in any fight. Named and Higher Level Mages matter sure but Warlock has made it quite clear you either have or you don't. We saw Cordelia and Malicia so it doesn't seem like they ordered an attack which limits the options to Masego or Hero Action...could be League of Free Cities or Dead King but the last two are more stretches.

IDKWhoitis

I could see Juniper reducing the number of Mages and level of Coverage. Sends maybe 50% of mages for field training and diverts focus from Counter Intelligence in Callow to Active Scrying on the Callow/Praesi border.

Theres also the White Caps, so there no guarantee that a fully staffed Observatory could get coverage over the mountains.

[theothin](#)

Could be just that its current levels of staffing aren't enough to reach any place Cat has been recently, with all the stuff in the way.

And we don't know what exactly she's been dealing with back home.

Dainpdf

Might not be a question of raw power; the Observatory used the sympathetic link of Winter water as a medium. Maybe the Night takeover ruined it, but I'm betting something more sinister is afoot.

Andrew Mitchell

That makes a lot of sense.

medailyfun

why do they even need scrying when they can send a messenger by Night gate

Dainpdf

That's a good question. Perhaps a Drow messenger wouldn't work, though. They don't know the geography of Callow and they might get attacked on the way. And Cat is decidedly not sending Indrani away.

magesbe

I was thinking that about the Observatory as well. Unless some property of it makes it so she can't scry it from afar without Masego being at one end, something is up.

IDKWhoitis

White Caps are probably also interfering, as the Observatory was never proven to be able to beat those traditional limitations. Last time, Cat was at least in Keter.

Skaddix

That doesn't make sense since Cat and Indrani don't mention White Cap interference as a reason they cannot call the Observatory. Especially considering they have two goddesses and Akua.

[Liliet](#)

They also don't show worry about anyone but Masego, and there's no reason to bring White Caps up if it's obvious to both of them.

White Caps mean they can only call the Observatory from Iserre if Masego is in it. They're worried that they can't because it means he isn't, and that's what they're talking about.

Dainpdf

Might be Light effery. Above has been busy.

Dainpdf

Main question is why would they know of the observatory. I suspect Masego's assistant. Perhaps at the bidding of Malicia.

Skaddix

??? I don't think its grand secret that Masego raised a Mage's Tower. Malicia officially and publicly had to approve it. Its also has protections sure but its not invisible to the naked eye.

Dainpdf

Yes, but what it is used for is a secret. A random mage's tower is not that appealing a target – its likely heavily defended, and operations in it are likely to be both costly and have unpredictable effects.

Liliet

What does Masego's mage tower have to do with this? That's in Marchford. The Observatory is in the palace in Laure. Nowhere near each other.

And yes, this does imply Masego abandoned his highly coveted mage tower in favor of a new shiny bauble the minute Catherine gave it to him. Sounds like him, to me.

Fuodiachloris

I think it is more Massego. It is his, and it's probably tied to him in a number of ways. And... he's gone a little Lovecraftian for now. It's probably left a dent.

danh3107

Rumena and Soln are still alive, that's pretty sweet. I wonder if that Berserker guy is still alive as well.

Also,

Two ravens? Come on hunin and munin you can be a bit more creative

Dainpdf

Who needs creativity when you're a goddess? Also, quick! Someone, put out one of Cat's eyes so she can play at being Odin.

Considering Larat was the prince of Nightfall, I foresee a very specific outcome of his deal with Cat.

ChillyPepper

I was feeling like a madman with no one bringing this up. 😊

Gunslinger

The return of the Guide warms my cold heart. Blessed Indrani alive and sleeping with Cat. Rumena still being the best Sasser.

>Between you and Akua I feel like I've joined the most ironic nunnery in Creation."

And Akua shaping up to be best hero

Dainpdf

But the Grey Pilgrim...

[Liliet](#)

But Hanno!

Lavir

But the Saint of Swords,

Argentorum

But Champion!

[Liliet](#)

I AMEND MY PREVIOUS OPINION IN FAVOR OF YOURS

RanVor

But Amadeus! 😊

[Liliet](#)

he's not one yet. We'll see how he ranks when it happens 😊

RanVor

Well, I know, and I hope it will be never. But I couldn't resist the temptation to spoof this prediction.

[Liliet](#)

You're welcome.

Fan

Wooooo making my day, thanks!

magesbe

So much amazing. Catherine is as great as ever, her interactions with Sve Noc is hilarious, and Rumena is still the best Drow around. A little surprised that Ivah hasn't been mentioned. I had thought he'd remain a part of her inner circle, but I guess he's been demoted.

On other news, I'm worried about Masego. I hope he doesn't do something rash.

SilverDargon

Rash, what a fun word. In this case it may be insufficient though. When I imagine Masego's next steps after having seen both the deaths of his parents, an ocean of blood, and the actual face of a god, words like "Unhinged" or "Demented" come to mind.

Suffice to say he is well beyond rash at this point and I just can't wait to see what kind of awesome he unleashes on the world next.

Dainpdf

Give him a little credit. He's not so fragile as to completely break from a couple of deaths (though I will buy scarred).

Dainpdf

Ivah is likely not powerful enough to merit too high a station in the presence of the likes of Rumena.

Skaddix

All I will say is it doesn't really bode well for Cat's Precious Liesse Accords since what got his parents killed the Grand Alliance and Crusade from Cordelia. Now sure Masego might rage against the Gods but Procer is a far easier target to test his powers on and reek bloody vengeance on.

[TeK](#)

He's not stupid.

caoimhinh

He is more likely to aim his anger at the Thalassocracy of Ashur, since they were the ones who invaded Thalassina and caused Wekesa's death.

Ashur has long since being hinted to be a hated country as they have forced a monopoly of maritime trade and they have a harsh caste system (the tiers) that treats the people on low levels like trash.

[theothin](#)

The easiest target to take vengeance on is Praes for pulling his family into their politics. Which doesn't seem odds with the Accords.

Author Unknown

Rash? Masego would never! The ruin he inflicts upon the world will be meticulously calculated. Granted there might need to be some experimentation, but only for the sake of improving efficiency.

Andrew Mitchell

We don't know if Ivah survived. It seems like most of Catherine's drow army did not.

soonnandnaanssoon

Devil May Cry

Dainpdf

Poor Leon. He picked the socially optimal choice for this Prisoner's Dilemma, but someone else chose the selfish way out.

And yay for mortal Cat again! She didn't break the man's spine. I respect that.

Also, crow-goddess baiting sounds like a great game.

Rook

Honestly it turned out about as well for Leon as it possibly could. Kept his Heroic backbone in front of the current generation of boogeyman and got a lesson in why you don't be brave without being smart; all without his wife and kids tragically perishing. Or even being maimed a little.

Not that there was any real chance Catherine would've followed up on her threat in the first place, considering a senselessly murdered family is about as obvious a setup for a grim avenging Hero as it gets. But hey, it's the thought that counts.

Dainpdf

Good old Machiavelli: "never offend a man you don't intend to kill". Also, Fakerine would have definitely either broken the man or killed his family. She'd have been all grim and sorrowful about it, but she'd have done it.

[onedollargum](#)

Fakerine? Isn't she more "real" than she was before though?

Dainpdf

Fakerine was the Sovereign of Moonless Nights. She's gone now.

RanVor

Honestly, I don't think Winter Cat would do it either.

Dainpdf

She planned to enslave an entire people, release the King of the Dead on Procer... I don't know, that sounds to me like someone capable of murder. Also, recall her interaction with Lady Ime over scrying.

RanVor

I think you're misjudging the Sovereign of Moonless Nights pretty badly here. Of course, you arrive to your conclusions by taking things out of context, so it's pretty much expected. It's very much not about being able to do anything. Every single atrocity perpetrated by the Sovereign of Moonless Nights have been out of perceived necessity. She may have been ruthless, but never without reason. Sure, she could kill that man, but there'd be no point. That would be just another senseless casualty, and she did go out of her way to avoid those, as you choose not to remember.

Dainpdf

It is easier to perceive necessity when one has fewer compunctions about the act in question. In any case, I believe Fakerine more likely to prey on the man's fear and break him rather than kill his family as punishment.

However, if the situation arose, she could very well go into thought about the importance of keeping up one's threats, so as to not diminish their value. Cat said what kept her from doing it was admiration of the man's bravery. When did we see something like that from grim Fakerine?

RanVor

Since I disagree with the preexisting assumption you base your entire reasoning on, I refuse to engage into this pointless debate that would inevitably lead us nowhere.

[Liliet](#)

I don't agree with the term Fakerine, but I do agree with your estimation of her likely actions. She'd have gone farther with the man with fewer brakes, even though she probably wouldn't have killed his family for real.

[Liliet](#)

Leon's stand was kind of stupid to begin with, given Catherine wasn't asking for classified military intelligence or anything

like that, just local news. There's no harm in giving them to her for many reasons starting with her being able to obtain them in 1000 other ways.

It wasn't pointless though: it was a question if his personal morals and backbone and bravery, and I think Catherine recognized that.

It was interesting to see.

Dainpdf

One assumes when the villain is asking things, she'll be using them for nefarious purpose.

Also, answering her would have meant giving her news of Black, and withholding such news from her might very well make a difference.

...plus, religion (especially the kind that is sold in Creation) does not often breed nuanced thinking.

[Liliet](#)

I'd say it's absolute terror that doesn't breed nuanced thinking.

Raiseth

Aaaaand the purpose of this whole spectacle was what, O Mighty Queen?

Mmm.

To find out what kind of person ran the town, I guess, but I can't see why it'd relevant to her in any case, unless she suddenly decided to permanently occupy the town...

Huh. It looks like instead of meeting the Dead King head on, Catherine is going to march to Salia with "friendly reinforcements, to be deployed at her Princeship's convenience", or else. First Prince is gonna be so glad.

RoflCat

To get information.

She basically split the people likely to have useful information around, then individually interrogate them (Akua being one of them or is in charge of the rest of the interrogations)

The Mayor kept to his belief and kept quiet, but someone else spoke.

Likely his own wife, when presented with the "I have your child" threat, that's why the man went through a lot of emotions upon realizing that.

Author Unknown

I don't see why his wife would be more likely than anyone else. These aren't soldiers; this is a village so safe it doesn't even have walls. And most of the people there probably have very little, if any loyalty to procer. That's assuming the person offering the information even realized the import of what they are saying. To them, the other side of the kingdom may as well be the moon. Moreover, people, or at least ill educated people, from small towns have a rather myopic view of the world.

Sol Invictus

because of drama. this is a world where stories shaped the world.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think that applies to individual non-Named.

[Liliet](#)

I'd say the primary purpose is to leave behind news of where she is and what she's doing.

Rook

More importantly, it's a layer of protection. Karmic retribution is a pretty scary Above-themed weapon in a world where tropes are life and death. On the flip side, the opposite holds equally true.

The Senseless Killer almost always gets their comeuppance by some side effect of their history.

The Honorable Boogeyman that is surprisingly decent to normal folk though? They tend to find a lot more success. Sometimes even surviving or accomplishing their goal.

The best part is they don't even have to be a decent person. Just by being caricaturized as a total loon but turning out to be polite, respectable, and reasonable (but still evil), you automatically get points just for being so far above the incredibly low bar that was initially set.

[Liliet](#)

Good point ;u;

And Cat would be looking to establish this reputation for more immediately political purposes, too.

Politics and narrative have a lot in common: they're both about presentation and PR. The difference is just that one of them doesn't need actual other people to be informed of what is going on.

Rook

That's true as well. Sometimes rumors travel farther than any messenger, and it's a lot harder for leadership to stir up the common people against a villain when said villain is known to avoid harming commoners.

[*Liliet*](#)

Mm!

[*Liliet*](#)

You know what this made me think about? Queen's Gambit, and that one guy faced with the decision to obey his orders or commit treason. I feel like the reputation the Legions have established for not messing with civilians (and the lovely touch of the surrender demand clarifying that even in the even they take the city by force they'll only kill every *armed* person) that swayed him towards the decision he settled on (even though it didn't end up relevant)

IDKWhoitis

Cat, Crows, and Woe, Oh my.

thisismyName

First Under the Night = FUN!

Pronounceable, and oddly appropriate in comparison to her previous state.

Andrew Mitchell

Well spotted!

randodude

i might have been misreading some parts, but the implications that our little pair of ravens can read cat mind at will is rather horrifying.

twice, one with mighty/genreal Rumena and once with the bird/fake bird

[*Liliet*](#)

I mean, they're goddesses. That seems par for the course.

I love the touches of how Cat got them to fight and then they pecked at her in retaliation when they realized what she did

and of Komena complaining and getting sass in response

Cat is Cat ♥

randodude

cat sass is so strong it's affecting her patron goddess's

[Euodiachloris](#)

I don't think they really mind underneath all the bickering: they've admitted to having needed this shake-up for centuries. 😊

[Liliet](#)

I love how Komena is the one more indignant at Cat's shit, but also the one arguing in favor of her getting more power/authority

caoimhinh

I wanted a longer chapter or one that showed more, but this one was interesting in its own way displaying the new dynamics and power-relations between Cat and the Night. I look forward to her finding out everything that has happened in the half-year of her absence.

Also, Indrani is good and kicking, cool. Shared bed more than once, eh? with Cat being all addicted to mortal's sensory pleasures, that's to be expected, I guess hahaha.

Typos found:

- It's fine as fine as long as I don't expect
- what's happening to will have trickled into here
- which unfair in so many ways
- under the guard of my drow in a previously house

[Liliet](#)

Why wouldn't they, really?

And I love the touch of them both being super worried about Masego but Indrani being the one to comfort Cat ♥
his girlfriend and his cousin (who is also his girlfriend's girlfriend)

oliverwashere

Some typos:

I hadn't hear anything.

hear > heard

than an army of fifty thousand

than > that

and result in a vague notion

result > resulted

up the neck in some hidden library,

up the > up to the

out thin air > out of thin air

which unfair > which was unfair

returned the door > returned to the door

as it discussing > as if discussing

fear, isn't? > fear, isn't it?

plantsbeans

> You think rumours about what's happening to will have trickled into here?" Indrani asked, glancing at me.

to Masego?

Javvies

Hmmm.

I don't get why the mayor was so opposed to talking to Cat about rumours – there's no way that the rumors he has are sufficiently current or contain high level information or secrets. That is not the hill I'd have thought he would choose to die on – she's basically asking for common information that she could get from literally anyone.

That they can't get in contact with the Observatory is absolutely a bad sign ... though if I understand the timing properly, Masego should have made it back some time ago, relative to Cat returning to the surface with the drow in her wake.

Compy

In regards to the mayor not talking – he has principles. "Im a leader of a town in a capital G Good nation, anything I tell the Black Queen will give her something to use against the people of Procer, therefore no matter the question I must give her nothing, even in the face of death or worse.

luminiousblu

I mean it's not really such an odd stance in the context of the minions of the Big Bad Evil Guy (arguably Catherine IS said BBEG) vs. a Good mayor of a failing town
You could get the information from anyone, and anyone doesn't include men of valour and so on.

Javvies

Eh ... it's the sort of information that someone could pick up after spending some time and money in a local tavern or bar. Common knowledge really isn't the sort of thing you risk much in trying to keep a secret.

Unless you're expecting that the messenger might get killed or something, then you might gamble that keeping your mouth shut is going to be less bad than being the bearer of bad news.

Hell – if Cat had someone capable of subtle social infiltration with her, she literally could have sent them to with some money to a bar to ask about rumors and learned everything she asked the mayor about.

TeK

Unfortunately she only has drow, an Arch-Heretic of the East, a she-ghost, and the worst of them all – Archer.

Euodiachloris

You forgot her long-time companion and friend... sardonic humour. 😊

luminiousblu

It's less about how effective it'd be and more about just not talking to her on principle. Is it absurdly stupid? Yes, but that's where principle gets you...

Liliet

Mm!

There's a reason Catherine didn't just dismiss him as stupid. She understands the value of doing stupid things sometimes, just because you feel like you have to.

crysjal

We confirmed they reproduce, not that they have penises.

RanVor

That's not true. We do know for sure that the Mighty Bogdan had one.

Skaddix

I mean the fact the Black Queen rolled into town with a Drow Army and is asking you questions as the Mayor of small town that wasn't worth her mentor, Black sacking. Tells said Mayor that Cat doesn't actually know anything. If she did know anything about the ley of the land, why would she come to you? He is on the Side of Good, she is on the Side of Evil. Ergo he thinks any information he gives her will be used against Procer and the Grand Alliance and the Crusade.

Cat really probably should gone home first and regrouped I think that is a tactical mistake quite frankly. Especially since she cannot get in contact with the Observatory.

Argentorum

Remember though, she knows that Black is taken captive and I'm pretty sure she either knows or suspects he's going to be in Salia. There's no time to go to Callow, regroup, night gate again, regroup and then save Black.

In the real world, the extra time might not matter. But the price we pay for instantaneous travel in this setting is Narativium.

To top it off, remember, the Drow are marching north to fight the Dead King. That they most certainly have to get to ASAP, and black, of course, still has to be rescued beforehand. Though, I love thinking about the expression on Cordelia's face when she realized that Cat is going to save her home when she could not, would not, do it herself.

[Liliet](#)

She doesn't know about Black being captive. The latest news she has is that he was with the Legions.

werafdsaew

It took the Woes about 3 weeks to travel from Northern Callow to Keter. Traveling back to Laure would have probably taken at least a month.

[TeK](#)

I think from him it's more akin to Ukrainian village leader telling Nazi officer during WW2 what he knows "about rumors". Chances are, he would rather try to murder him with kitchen axe, then accidentally provide him with crucial information.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm!

Not likely to be effective, but makes the difference in making the entire land hostile to them.

Well, except for the collaborators 😊

😊😊😊

good thing Catherine isn't *actually* fantasy Hitler, despite having the reputation of one 😊

😊😊😊

Liliet

He was too scared of her to think straight.

His response to fear was to dig his heels in and do the exact opposite thing.

Reminds me of Cat staring down Black during their first meeting, just because he was trying to scare her ;u;
(that one was less stupid, but the basic principle is the same)

Aston Whiteman

Cat still remains completely insane even according to gods.

For acting like she's living in a story.

Priest Cat!!

RanVor

So Mighty Sass is *General* Sass now...

I'm surprised that the Peerage hasn't been dissolved when Cat lost Winter.

TeK

Why would it be dissolved, it just changed hands.

Sugar Roll

In this chapter, Cat doesn't know yet that the League's army is in the area. I reckon she'll find out soon from this village and maybe we'll get to see her having a face to face with the Heirarch and the Tyrant.

TeK

"Moan-haste-ree"

How suprisingly accurate. All three in fact.

Aotrs Commander

See, this is why I don't buy Cat being under the influence of Winter and not her own control. Five minutes in and she's already corrupting two goddesses, what chance would poor, innocent Winter stand against that?

Cap'n Smurfy

Centuries old and Mighty Rumena still has the sassiest sense of humour. They continue to be Best Drow.

Zaver SaintCloud

Just spitballing here; How would a hymn about Mighty Rumena being a prick actually begin?

Yeah

The mighty lord of shadows deep blessed by darkness shags poor sheep.

Oh woe thy land for it is lost to rumena of the permafrost.

[crysjal](#)

The Mighty Rumena, was such a prick. Which is odd as his species has no dick.

[Liliet](#)

We actually know it does, thanks to Mighty Bogdan.

It just doesn't translate to gender.

[Adrian_V](#)

They do have, they are just really asexual or at least not as horny as we humans.....it would be funny if Cat refound appreciation of her sex life makes it seem like she is a seaxual beasts to the drow....then they spread these rumours until they grow and give her a reputation as a virgin killer or something xD

Nimmo0110

There one was a drow from the ever dark
And that he did was ever stark ...

Although I think the ever dark is the dnd term for the under ground drow nation

[Liliet](#)

that was Underdark I think

C_B

There once was a Drow named Rumena...

TwilightGlimmer

Cat needs to convert Robber and assign him the hallowed task of penning hymns for the faith

[Adrian_V](#)

I love it, its almost cute how Cat marvels at the small things and how appreciative she is of them, is like she realizes she got a second chance is not going to waste it, also so far the whole thing with Sve and the night seems like a good deal, i loved the crows and if later on Cat gets an eyepatch i am naming her She-Odin xD

As for the future i had this impression that Cat will somehow end up saving the Lycanoesse, maybe even move Green's army there, it would be a great move: she proves her intentions, does something good in a real sense not the "good" above interprets, and may even wrest control or the loyalty of those provinces for callow, at least they will probably remember who stood with them in their hour of need instead of leaving them to die as a buffer.

Feel free to ignore this or not even read it, but if you have free time on your hands you could really help me, this <https://freebitco.in/?r=17541850> and this <https://btcclicks.com/?r=c3fc9fc5> are referral links to 2 PTC/faucet for bitcoins, they are completely safe, those 2 are some of the oldest and famous of their like (They are freebitcoins and BTC clicks respectively if you want to google them for more info). They provide a completely free way to earn bitcoins with a simple click. What are referral links? It means that by creating an account with those links provided i get a commission from every click/action you do to earn bitcoins (40%). Why am i posting this? well i live in venezuela, to say the crisis is killing us is too little, for many of you using these is way too slow but for me even a single dolar could be the difference with being able to pay my college and graduate, or even eat 3 meals. So if you create an account and use it even just 1 day, or 1 time per day when you remember you would really help me survive here.

Apologies to Erraticerrata for this but i don't exaggerate when i say i am growing scared and desperate with how things are developing here.

[Liliet](#)

Cat being appreciative of small things is something that really drives home the difference Winter made. It's what makes her POV such a joy to read right now, and provides so much contrast to the depressed tone it had before.

The warmth of Indrani's hand, the drow's collective marvel at snow, the return of The Height Indignance (not that this ever really went away ;u;), the admiration of a common person's mundane heroism, the considerations of whether or not she should use Night to quell pain in her leg – all of those things.

And of course, wanton treachery and insubordinate backtalk ;u;

[Adrian V](#)

Yeah, what i like more is that Erraticerrata is not being ambiguous at all, those are clearly portrayed as virtues and advantages, mostly her ability to adapt and better comprehend about everything from people to their motivations. Like to really understand things she needs to be able to feel all of that, in fact i can see how the experience with winter helped her since she still remembers how she felt and acted so she can also draw on those experiences.

On another note next time i will try to stay awake and post earlier, hopefully more people see the second part of whatever i comment (and i mean second part, if i don't have anything important related tot he chapter i won't post, that would be insulting to the author, or at least i think so)

[Liliet](#)

♥

yeah!

Mikasi

I wish I could think of someone to commission to get a picture of First Under Night Cat with crows on her shoulders and a night gate behind her. Because that is an EXCELLENT image in my head.

[Liliet](#)

Look on reddit for cool fanartists. There are people!

imagesbe

So is "First Under Night" a Name, or just a title like Black Queen?

AdrianGrey

Just a title. But I expect Cat will be getting a Name by the end of this book. It made sense for her not to have one when she was the not-really-human Sovereign of Moonless Nights, but now that she's mortal again I expect it's high time for her to be re-incorporated into Creation's Story.

Sugar Roll

I think she transitioned to the Black Knight already which is the reason why Amadeus lost it.

TeK

Doubt it. She was not a Squire, and Black is Praesi name. You don't get it by reforming eldritch gods.

Yotz

Indeed. From the exchange between Black and Bard we can gather – under the certain assumptions – that the Name of Black Knight is now free to be claimed. Cat's old claims were devoured by Winter with the remains of her old Name, so in order to become the new Knight she had to make a new claim first. Which would be probable course if she either knew what happened to Black; or was tasting waters, so to speak, by making claims each arbitrary period of time to see if it sticks.

As to possibility of her claiming a Name – this ties closely with the theology behind the New Gods. So far all the Names were Bestowed by either side of the original Players; now we see rise of the new generation – The Undeath, The Instigator, The Night... possibly, The Will of the People.

With current trends charted, Cat have little to no chance to be Bestowed by ye Aulde Gawds; what remains to be seen then, is if the NKOTB would be able to grant a Name – not necessary to Cat, only to Cat, or to Cat first.

Liliet

I don't think Names are bestowed by Gods.

I think they're bestowed by the narrative, which is why Neutral names like Thief exist – neither Above nor Below actually need to approve of a Name being created/claimed. They might have some influence over names that are, like, ABOUT being a servant to Above/Below, and of course there are the Choirs, but I think even those are both restricted to people who've already chosen the path leading them to the Choirs (William fled to the woods to scream before he met the angel), and kind of *have to* bestow power on those – as evidenced by Cat forcing the

resurrection out of them. They tried to push her into claiming another Name. They didn't succeed.

The Above and Below have set up a system, and while they sure can give little nudges here and there, most of their participation in the world is automatic in a way, like priests calling on their power and Below'd debts being called in. They obey their own rules, and they aim for mortals to determine the wager on their own. That's possibly why Intercessor is the way she is: even as a tool of the Gods, she still has her own free will, and not the broken obedient kind, the Named fuck-you-I-do-what-I-want kind.

And I think Cat already has a new Name. She's too much of a *Named* to not have one, and unlike Amadeus who'd been basically doing nothing since his defeat until we saw him, not laying claim to anything because of not pushing events around in anyw ay, Catherine is an active player. She's already a Named, I don't think one can lose this status so easily. There's a reason Squire sort of stuck around even after being mostly obliterated by the aborted transition into Black Queen: there's inertia to those things.

Catherine has a Name, I'm certain of it.

What it is, though, can be straightforward and logical... like Priestess... or it can be anything but 0.0

Yotz

Well, even if the system is automated to that point – of which I am unsure – Names still do have a source: like Dichromatic Knights being clearly linked with Above/Below, with their own sets of abilities and limitations. That doesn't preclude Bestowed/Whatever-is-the-analogue-term-for-Below-'cause-I-can't-remember-it-for-the-sake-of-Saint-Phuk from having a free will: Black laid a claim, he was granted with a Name, he didn't excel in usual mindless carnage correlated with the Name, ergo his Name became weak. Just as it was with Cat while she was a Squire. So, the jury is in debate on this one.

What I was implying, though, is the consequences of the Apotheosis among the native denizens of the Creation: in essentiality, NPCs of the sandbox evolving into Players... well, in the case of Bard that would be a transition of PC into Player – but regardless.

In becoming the Third Side in the Game they may serve as another, new source of Names, be the process of

Bestowal so to say “manual”, or automated. Come to think of it, with the deep automation in place, a new class of Names coming from the new source may come into reality much more easily – simply as a byproduct of the System.

In short, Cat can haz a Naem, of course; but if it is indeed so – in if it *is*, the Name of what nature... we shall see.

PS: And as in regard to “Players” – I consider only individual entities from Above/Below to bear that status. Even if Creation is a multiplayer openworld sandbox, Players are by definition outside of the Game. That’s the reason of them being so anxious about Neshamah – they didn’t want him to escape from localized server cluster into the big Net.

[Liliet](#)

yeah, I think the point is that the mortals are Players, and the Above/Below are the DMs. I think that’s a more accurate description. And apotheosis makes you a more powerful / more permanent player, but never a DM.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I agree with Liliet that Names ultimately come from the Narrative, but I’ll strengthen her qualification: Once a Name has been established as specifically Good/Evil (or perhaps more strongly as Holy/Damned), the respective gods can bestow that name.

But we’ve already seen that fae titles closely resemble mortal Names, so I’d assume that Night titles are now also comparable, especially since Night absorbed most of Winter. And Cat is now High Priestess of Night, so that’s her place in the Narrative.

Interestingly, it would seem that the Dead King does *not* have the power to grant comparable distinctions, or we’d surely have met some of them in Keter. He may not be as much a god as he thinks.

[Sugar Roll](#)

My interpretation is that the Squire Name was suppressed by Winter before. When Winter was removed, she was back to the Squire.

The conversation (quoted below) between Catherine and Sve Noc posing as Hakram feels like the moment of transition to me. Together with the fact that Amadeus lost his Name at roughly the same time convinced me of this. Shouldn't be long now until we know for sure.

"I should never have been queen," I said. "At most a temporary regent while looking for a better candidate. There are things I'm good at, but ruling isn't one of them. I should have put my effort to those instead and left the crown to someone suited for it."

"And what it is that you're good at, if not this?" Hakram pressed.

"Breaking things," I said. "Facing the monsters so that the real work can take place behind me."

Yotz

Mebbe, mebbe.

I'd have to re-read some parts to either agree or disagree with you conclusively.

Which would be sometime after I sate my *thirst* for literary excesses and/or graphomaniac tendencies. Which is to say – not in this century, it seems //sadface.

Either way, you are on the point that will know for sure soon enough.

Lucas

Also don't think so, but it's at least a good reason for Amadeus being nameless.

Although we don't know if he actually lost it, only that he doesn't have it right now. And we also don't know if it was all willing or not

Allafterme

I wish EE introduced Names with both in capital and in bold, so people would finally stop treating every introduced title as a Name.

Andrew Mitchell

It's so, so, SO good to have the Guide back again. 😊

Especially the sas:

> "Caw," the crow on my left shoulder drily said.

>

> The word, not actual cawing, because Andronike had developed a

taste for the sardonic since shaving off a sliver of her godhood and sending it off with me.

Yotz

So, the Two-Faced Goddess of Night Everlasting rules over the shadows of any kind.

Akua Sahelian is a shade.

Therefore I hereby pronounce her to be the First among the Seraphs of The Night.

Saktiwijayarahman

Let me take a second to admire Leon of Trosseau balls. Dammit, the balls of steel indeed.

Chapter 2: Stirrings

"Everything happens for a reason, and this time the reason is that I godsdamned said so."

– Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow

I let Akua trail behind me as we walked through the half-frozen mud.

Archer hadn't been wrong, I thought, to call this place a shithole. But where she likely saw it as sloppiness on their part, a refusal to pull up their sleeves and improve their own lot, to me Trousseau reeked of desperation. Too many hard years, too many taxmen more interested in their tallies than what those cost to the people who made up the numbers. I didn't like it, that she thought that way. I could admit that to myself. There were times where her indifference to the lot of others galled me deeply, because it ran against what I'd been raised to – that when it got dark outside, everyone was in it together. I'd learned, though, to follow that somewhat callous belief to its source. The Ranger. I'd loved the stories about Indrani's mentor as a child, certainly more than those about the Calamities. After all she'd been absent for most the Conquest, and unlike the others she wasn't Praesi. The last specks of that childhood fondness had waned when she'd answered an offer a help by nearly murdering me on a whim. What Black saw in her I didn't know and doubted I would ever understand, but I could make my peace with that. What she'd done to Indrani, though? That was another story.

She'd taught Archer that her fate would only ever be defined by her own hands, and that I could only approve of, but she'd left the lesson half-finished. She'd never told my friend that she was exceptional, that not everybody could be like her. That sometimes people failed and gave up, and that didn't make them *unworthy* in some way. Just tired and hurt and without an answer as to why they should keep trying. It was an easier way to live, I supposed. Looking a misery and believing it was the miserable solely responsible for it. Never aching at the sight. *But I don't think it's a better one*, I thought. Maybe it was unfair to blame the Lady of the Lake for passing down beliefs she seemed to genuinely hold to, but I wasn't inclined to fairness when it came to the Ranger. She had her claws too deep in too many people I loved, and I could only think of the marks she'd left behind as wounds.

"I don't suppose we have a destination in mind?" Akua mildly said.

She'd caught up to me while I was deep in thought. I could not help but notice from the corner of my eye that her dress of pale and gold was untouched by the mire we were passing through, or that she left no footprints. Not quite alive, not quite dead. As in so many things, Akua Sahelian was straddling the line.

"There's a knot of drow further down the street," I replied. "And I could only think of one reason so many would gather in one place."

The shade kept to silence for a moment.

"She has been getting more rowdy, not less," Akua finally said.

Even with the wind that had me wishing I'd wheedled a scarf out of the drow before leaving, her voice was perfectly heard. Couldn't be sure whether that was just an oratory skill she'd picked up in Wolof or some kind of sorcerous trick, not that I cared all that much. Convenient was the word that came to mind more than anything else.

"We all cope in our own ways," I replied. "It'll run its course in due time."

Indrani had come very close to dying, in the battle for Great Strycht. Not because of a Mighty, some glorious duel she would now be laughing about. When the Sisters had eviscerated my hold on Winter they'd flooded their city with frost. Archer had been out on the edges, when it happened, picking her targets and stirring up the pot. But she'd still been caught in the mess, and Winter unleashed was not something you just walked off. I suspected that in way the brush with death wasn't what had unsettled her. She'd been riding that horse for years now, and enjoyed every moment of it. It had been that when death came

knocking, the bow in her hand and the blades at her side couldn't have done anything to stop it. The realization that sometimes a steady sword-arm wasn't enough, even if you were clever and brave and burning with the need to leave a mark on the world.

"And if it doesn't?" Akua said.

"Then we'll deal with it," I calmly replied. "All of us, together."

The shade sighed.

"I don't suppose that a reminder you've not spoken with our informant would be of any use before we get entangled in yet another drinking binge?" she asked.

I glanced at her amusedly.

"Are we pretending you can't recite every answer they gave you verbatim?" I said.

"I can do the intonations as well," Akua casually boasted.

"Of course you can," I said, rolling my eyes.

I didn't bother to knock when we got to the tavern, or at least what I assumed to be that. It was ratty enough it didn't have a sign hung outside, though I did remember reading somewhere some parts of Procer had put a tax on that. I'd be in a better position to cast judgement on that if some Fairfax who'd seen drinking liquor as sinful and debasing behaviour hadn't put up a bewildering array of punitive taxes on everything alcoholic not even a century ago. *Still*, I thought, eyeing the bare and windowless wall outside. *At least the next king dismissed the measures.* For all I knew, some prince out there was still lining his pockets with this sheer stupidity. The door was unlatched and the mangled carpet in front of it suffered the attentions of my boots for a moment before I entered. Calling what lay at the centre of the dirt floor a fire pit would have been overly generous, I thought, considering it wasn't even lined with stone. The place was cramped in some fundamental way, from the narrow walls to the twisty tables. There was a room in the back which I deduced to be the owner's sleeping place as well as the kitchen, insofar as this place could be said to have one of those.

Akua closed the door behind me, and already Indrani was waving us over. She'd shrugged off her coat and somehow divested herself of her mail, leaving her in dark green tunic and trousers whose tightness were quite flattering to her frame. I glanced back up and saw a smirk touching her lips, so she'd definitely caught that. *Well*, I admitted to myself, *it wouldn't be the first time.* Or likely the last, honesty compelled me to admit. The return to mortality had left me with all sorts of hungers in need of

sating, and I probably would have sought her out if she hadn't done it first. I was only human after all, and even now that thought had a pleasurable ring to it. I shot a look around and found no trace of the tavern-keeper, turning to raise an eyebrow at Indrani.

"It got a little too much for the old man," Archer languidly shrugged. "Got some of our minions to bring him somewhere for a lie-down."

"You didn't do anything, did you?" I asked, frowning even as I took off my gloves.

"Aside from empty a bottle in the short span of time since you've found this place," Akua drily added.

My eyes found the cheap bottle of red she was referring to, along with her four still-full sisters lined up neatly to the side. One was already open. The shade passed me without a sound, sliding herself in a stool across the table Archer had claimed. I unclasped my cloak and followed suit, hesitating for the barest fraction of a moment before sitting on Akua's side. The stool there struck me as marginally less likely to break if I moved around a bit.

"Just a bit too much agitation for him, I think," Indrani told me. "What with the drow walking the surface again and the wicked minions of the Black Queen patronizing his humble establishment."

Akua's own comment got as a response a gesture that would have seen me spanked by the orphanage matron if I'd ever been caught doing it in public.

"Temporary eviction would have been necessary regardless," the shade said. "If we are to discuss business on the premises, that is."

"Aw, shit," Archer complained, eyeing me balefully. "Really, Cat?"

"I'd rather do it in here with a fire and an open bottle than out there in the cold," I shrugged.

"Fine," she waved away. "But I'd like to lodge a formal protest."

"Pass it along to my secretary," I drily said. "Triplicate, standard form."

Indrani turned her gaze to Akua.

"Sadly, as a mere spirit I cannot be handed such forms," the shade blatantly lied. "They'd go right through me."

"I liked you better before we taught you to be an ass," Archer complained.

"No you didn't," Akua said, full lips quirking.

Indrani did not contradict her, and neither did I. After what had taken place in Great Strycht it was... difficult to distrust the Diabolist as much as I once had. I wouldn't be taking my eye off her anytime soon, sure, but it was hard to forget that when we'd all reached the end Akua could have chosen to cut and run, and hadn't. That meant something. Given that she was perhaps the most skilled liar I'd ever met, figuring out exactly *what* it meant was the trouble.

"So, someone folded," I said, steering us towards safer waters. "How out of date is what they had to tell?"

"She has a relative in the monastery to the north she sees regularly," Akua said. "And the sisters there are part of the general correspondence of the House of Light, regardless of their relative insignificance. The last direct letter is a month old, one could generously assume the news themselves two weeks older than that."

I raised an eyebrow.

"That quick?" I said. "I thought we were in the middle of nowhere."

"Two day's ride away from the minor city of Rochelant, as it happens," Diabolist corrected. "To the west. In a broader sense, we are skirting the eastern edge of the principality of Iserre."

I drummed my fingers around the table, idly noting it kinda looked like someone had digested it for a bit before it'd ended up here.

"Closer to Callow than I thought we'd end up," I said. "That brings up unpleasant questions, in retrospective."

"Could just be that you traded Winter for crows, Cat," Indrani said. "You and Zeze were screwing about with the stuff for everything, back when the Observatory was raised."

"I was not given the opportunity to observe the arrangements in great detail," Akua conceded pre-emptively. "However, I am intimately familiar with the artefact used at the centre of the array. It should not have been affected by our latest alliance and its..."

She paused, golden eyes taking me in.

"Metaphysical repercussions," she settled on.

I snorted. How delicately put of her. I wasn't truly beholden to the Sisters in any way that could be considered vassalage – that would have rather defeated the point of what I was supposed to be to them – but it remained a fact I'd thrown Winter under the horse and been handed a direct tap to what had become of the Night afterwards. The power was a lot more volatile, true, and tended to exhaust me physically in a way my mantle never had. On the other hand I'd stopped going raving mad whenever I reached a little too deep and I could enjoy hot soup again. In a lot of ways, I still believed I'd ended up on the better side of that evening.

"So why aren't we able to reach Juniper, then?" I said.

"She's finally succumbed to Hakram's charms and the bedroom door is locked under pain of death," Indrani suggested.

"Sabotage is a possibility," Akua said, more practically. "The Empress will still have agents in Callow, and might prefer your communications crippled. As for why Sve Noc could not reach out directly-"

"I know, you've already said," I waved away. "Masego warded that thing so ridiculously viciously not even they want to risk putting their fingers in it."

I felt a well of pride at the fact that Hierophant had somehow put up defences around the Observatory so harsh even a pair of living goddesses were wary of attempting to force them, inconvenient as it was at the moment. And he'd done it while remaining within allocated funds, too, which was just another feather in his cap as far as I was concerned.

"Doesn't seem like Malicia's style," I finally said. "If you'd said she was listening in I'd buy it, but breaking it entirely? She prefers appropriation to outright denial when she can swing it."

"There are other possible culprits," Akua said. "More with motive than means, but a few with both. The Dead King. The heroic segment of the Tenth Crusade. The royal court of Arcadia. Perhaps even the Wandering Bard."

"That doesn't really narrow it down, does it?" I grunted. "Still, I'd tend to scratch off the Bard from the list. Black's pretty sure she can only meddle through Named, and those we sent back to Laure would know better than to get involved with her."

"Ugh, you two are yammering on about who *could*," Indrani said, pouring herself another cup. "But that's just means, and we got a lot of nasty surprises assuming we knew all about those. Maybe wonder about who *would*, instead? Whose kind of play is this?"

I eyed her cup with a raised eyebrow, and with a put-upon sigh she finally bothered to fill mine. And Akua's, though I was still less than certain if drinking would actually do anything for the shade. I sipped at what turned out to be truly horrid concoction distantly related to wine while actually mulling over what Archer had said. Who would strike like this? The Grey Pilgrim came to mind. He had the brains for it, and the benefits would be obvious. With the Augur still telling Cordelia Hasenbach how the pieces were moving, we'd have lost our eye in the sky while the Tenth Crusade remained largely unaffected. Neshamah had the know-how, but it seemed a little light-handed for him. At the moment he'd have other cats to skin anyway: he should be hip-deep in angry Lycaonese right about now, and that lot didn't know how to die easy. Assuming the Bard wasn't involved, though assumptions were particularly dangerous when it came to that thing, that left the fae. And unless someone had fucked up real bad back home, they shouldn't have a foothold in Creation that'd allow them to pull that kind of thing.

"The main benefit is confusion," I finally said. "We'll be moving blind out here, and unable to organize with Juniper."

"Someone's putting their bet on riding the chaos better than the rest," Akua murmured.

A disquieting thought, considering for once it wasn't me.

"The room's pretty crowded this time," Indrani said. "All it takes is a few punches thrown, and..."

She dropped her palm against the table, the clap ringing loudly in the empty tavern.

"In the spirit of that perspective," Diabolist said, "perhaps one of the rumours I collected needs to be reassessed."

I cocked an eyebrow invitingly while continuing to subject myself to the disaster Archer had obtained as table wine.

"We appear to be entering an all-out brawl between half the continent," Akua said. "The legions Lord Black took into the Principate are currently in this very principality, and being pursued."

My heartbeat quickened. *No*, I told myself. *He'll have a plan. He always does.*

"By who?" Indrani asked, sounding surprised. "These are Conquest officers, you're telling me Proceran scraps actually think they could win against them?"

"The armies of the Dominion of Levant," the shade replied. "Though there's been word of conscription in Salia, so they might not be alone."

"That's not half the continent," I pointed out with a frown.

"The League of Free Cities appears to have joined the fray," Diabolist said. "With a significant army, though the numbers put to it vary."

I let out a low whistle.

"Are you telling me Tenerife has fallen?" I asked. "Because that's not good news for us."

The First Prince had sent twenty thousand soldiers to hold that border, and if the army had been slaughtered then that was twenty thousand men gone that'd have been rather useful up north. The drow exodus would strike like a hammer at the Dead King's back when it arrived, but I knew better than to believe the Sisters had any chance of winning that war if the rest of Calernia didn't get its shit together and move against him too.

"I cannot speak as to what happened to the army garrisoned there," Akua said. "But I can tell you, however, that the League's host is said to have emerged out of the Waning Woods without having given battle prior."

I blinked in disbelief. Indrani, on the other hand, fell into a deep belly laugh. Gods, Vivienne had told me last year that the Tyrant of Helike had been sending agents into the region. Still, I'd assumed it was as way to infiltrate the heartlands of the Principate. Not march an *army* through the place.

"You're actually serious, Shadehelian?" Archer got out, chin still quivering. "Someone was mad enough to take a bunch of soldiers through that?"

"Reportedly," Akua said, unmoved by the hilarity. "One can only wonder at the losses taken. Regardless, the point of interest is that they emerged in Iserre specifically. And they seem intent on giving battle now."

"That's going to get messy," I said, rapping my knuckles against the wood. "Unless Hakram and Vivienne birthed a diplomatic miracle while we were in the Everdark, which I'm not counting on. I really don't want to start a war with the League."

"And it ties in to Indrani's earlier words," Diabolist said. "There is another who prizes chaos as you do."

My lips thinned.

"The Tyrant of Helike," I said.

She nodded slowly.

"While aside from mounting confusion I can ascribe no direct benefit to such a measure being taken-"

"- for an old school madman like him, making everything messier might be benefit enough," I grimly finished. "Shit. I don't like having an army on the field without knowing where we stand with them."

"Kind of the point, isn't it?" Indrani shrugged.

I glanced at her, noticing we were now on the third bottle even though neither I nor Akua had finished our cups.

"The uncertainty, I mean," Archer said. "It's kind of like having a stranger pointing a crossbow at you while you're in a swordfight. Every time they twitch your hackles go up, and the tension will grow until someone does something real stupid to get out of the situation."

Akua's position in her seat shifted by the barest amount. She was, I suspected, actually impressed. Now and then it was good to have a reminder that Indrani was a lot sharper than she liked to let on.

"So whoever's leading that host is fucking with every other commander on the field just by being there," I mused. "That does sound like the Tyrant from the reports. We sure the Hierarch is still alive? He seemed a lot more interested in telling me to hold elections than invading anyone."

"Our informant is simply a relative, and the monastery rather minor," Akua said. "There was only so much to be learned. I suspect the appointed ruler of Rochelant will be better informed."

That still meant at least three days – drow moved fast, but not as fast as horses – of walking around Iserre with no godsdamned idea of what was going on around us. I didn't enjoy the notion, but then I didn't really have a better path to offer. Asking the Sisters to force the wards on the Observatory, assuming I could even talk them into it, was a lot more likely to result in that place collapsing or someone losing a finger than it was in an enlightening conversation.

"Then that's where we're headed," I said. "I'll hash out the details with General Rumena. Indrani, you good to walk?"

"Am I ever not?" she drawled.

"You'd better be," I warned. "Because I'm not staying in this town a moment longer than necessary. We all know what happens to the drow at dawn, I'm not losing moonlight I don't have to."

Archer smirked.

"Would you like to race me just in case, Cat?" she said.

I snorted.

"Please," I said. "You're pretty fast, but you can't outrun a gate."

I pushed back the chair and rose to my feet.

"Catherine," Akua said quietly.

I glanced at her.

"You can come, I suppose," I said. "Though why you'd want to talk with the crabby old bastard is beyond me."

"Catherine," Akua Sahelian gently said. "Sit down."

My eyes narrowed, and I brushed back a lock of hair that somehow fallen free.

"There's more," I said.

"Cat, sit down," Indrani said. "She wouldn't ask without a reason."

I felt a flicker of surprise at Archer's comment, though maybe I shouldn't have. I'd told her everything that had happened in Great Strycht, and the barbs she still traded with Akua had a lot less bite to them than they used to. Gingerly I sat back down, keeping the weight off my bad leg.

"Marshal Grem One-Eye is in command of the retreating Legions," the shade said. "The Black Knight is believed to be dead."

I picked up my gloves, fingers closing around the leather.

"So?" I said. "All that means is that some part of whatever the Hells he's after involves people thinking that."

"Not unless he was willing to sacrifice a full Legion detachment for that purpose," Akua said.

The leather started creaking and I looked back at my hands, finding them squeezing the gloves tight.

"Was a body shown?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"Then he's not dead," I flatly said. "And someone is about to have a very bad day."

"Catherine, the possibility has to be entertained," she slowly said. "It would change the situation significantly."

"It changes nothing. Because he's *not fucking dead*," I snarled. "I'll take his damned head off for not warning me he'd pull this, but he's not going to get killed by some pissant hero in the middle of nowhere."

The shade opened her mouth again, but Indrani raised a hand.

"Akua," she said. "Best let that one go."

She was humouring me, I realized. It stung that Archer of all people, who besides myself and Masego likely knew the most about my teacher, would so casually write him off. Angrily I pulled on my gloves.

"Finish your drinks," I coldly said. "We'll begin the march for Rochelant within the hour."

[DroughtBringer](#)

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

I'm too lazy to tell you to vote, so just... do what you want with this link I've given you.

Maginot

But the admonition...the stern command reminding us that this in an interactive experience and we owe our part...
I always know its the end of the chapter when I see "Voter, Vote!"

Ravin

0715 UTC we are at 892....get us to a thousand ppl

NerfContessa

Well, 5hat was an interesting chapter, if not an 3xciting 9ne.

Lets see if black actually turns a new leaf... 😊

[NZPIEFACE](#)

This is the first time I'm going to be saying this in a while, but thank you so much for releasing these punctually at the same time of the day every release. It's great to sit back and relax at 6 PM while reading a chapter of PGTE, it's a brilliant way to start my evening.

caoimhinh

For me, the chapters are posted exactly at midnight.
I live in Colombia, South America.

Valkyria

Got to say the same really.
But for me, I get them in the morning and that way I can use the time on the bus way better than just sitting around waiting. And it's a really nice start into the day too.

[Liliet](#)

5 AM for me, so I just read them when I wake up.

Best way to start the day 10/10

Lucas

I get them at 4am.
Helps me wake up without hitting the snooze button. 😊

matesbe

Someone's going to have a bad day, Cat? I agree. You'll be inflicting that bad day on those who currently hold him captive.

Dainpdf

Last time we saw him, Maddie seemed inclined to cause his captors a bad day himself.

[Liliet](#)

Cat knows what's up ♥

Jake111

Oh, truly. Saint and Pilgrim are facing something so much more dangerous than the Black Queen, Harbinger of Woe, First Under the Night, Slayer of Gods and Demons.

They're facing a scared girl desperate to save her father. Now that's a story you don't want to be on the wrong side of.

Gunslinger

So much to love in this Chapter. EE answering most of the questions we had on Wednesday as well as the endless debates after book 4 ended (people who guessed cats not going to be a Sve puppet got it right)

Also touching how bother mentor and mentee both dash out the possibility of the other being dead.

> And he'd done it while remaining within allocated funds, too,
That's the true miracle there

IDKWhoitis

Black is going to slap her for dying stupidly, again.
Cat is going to punch him for trying to pull a final showdown and almost dying, again.

The reunion is going to be great.

Rook

On the other hand, she just traded raw strength for flexibility and judgement, got the entity she traded the strength to working with her anyway, and slapped Below in the face rather than playing their game. On top of that she added an entire ancient empire to her arsenal while conveniently shunting the logistics of managing the army and newfound power pool to far more capable personnel.

He'll be livid on the outside and beside himself with pride on the inside.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, Black's going to approve of what she pulled, even if he's going to have a headache as a result.

(I mean, this frankly doesn't top First Llesse, where dying was an explicit part of the plan from the beginning, and Black was proud as fuck of her for that one)

Catherine's opinion on his antics though? 100% going to be less flattering.

Insanenoodlyguy

I think it does top it. It's one thing when you KNOW you are going to lose and factor your death into being a positive for the plan.

This time she didn't see it coming and still managed to improvise her way into something that still looks like a "Just as keikaku." That is more impressive, really.

[Liliet](#)

It tops it in terms of sheer awesome.

Doesn't top it in terms of sheer "yay let's go die", which is my point re: Amadeus getting pissed or not.

Dainpdf

Right? So many answers. So many questions.

CFAR

Did he truly stay within allocated funds, or did he supplement the official appropriation from his own/his father's personal funds?

[Liliet](#)

I mean if he's invested his own funds into Callow's infrastructure that's even more impressive ^^

IDKWhoitis

I sense Cat carrying through her promise on some level. Like a knock out blow, or trying to stab him again. But it's going to be really funny, as Black isn't as strong as he used to be, and he's going to be pissed off that Akua is still walking around in a sense.

Dainpdf

He seemed headed for a new Name, last we saw him. The fact that the Bard was egging him on was not ominous at all.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Oh, Amadeus might transition. But, just to be a burr in Bard's sock, he won't go in the direction she prepared him for – even if that was reverse psychology she was aiming at.

He'll find a way to bounce down the mountain she didn't think of. And, might take out a goat or two on the way, as well. 😊

[Liliet](#)

As much as I personally adore Amadeus on every level that exists, I think Bard's read on him is better than his read on her. And I think he knows this.

He's going to dance, dance, dance on her strings, and the best he can do is make sure he's actually doing something that's in his own interests, and not screwing himself over out of petty spite to her.

Insanenoodlyguy

Not sure about that. Bard is not invincible or omnipotent. She's good. She's very good, But she can and has been beaten. I think she really did want him to become Emperor, and her read on him wasn't necessarily wrong. I think if she didn't show up, he probably would have become emperor the way he wanted him to (even if he is Benevolent as some speculate, that doesn't mean he becomes Benevolent at the RIGHT point for her purposes). He'd be playing the game again proper, and be easier to account for and eventually, move past when he went the way of all Emperors. He'd probably do it anyway just to help out his Daughter. The thing is, she's underestimating his willingness to self-mutilate just to succeed, and right now he's success is measured in part on "Fuck you Bard." He's been determined to win as a villain and "win his pissing contest with the heavens." but now I think he'd be more receptive to the Foundling school of "Be whatever works." The benevolent theory would support that, it'd be him both still mocking but also using the Heavens.

I now see a still unlikely but now possible future where Emperor Benevolent rules with Chancellor Sahelian at his side. Everybody flips their shit when a young Prasi she picked up touring the country becomes the Dread Kingdom's first WHITE Knight.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, I don't think she underestimates that willingness, because she counted on him doing what he did at Second Liesse, and he broke his alliance with his best friend and put himself in a coma for two days.

I think Bard's planning for exactly the thing that's going to happen 😊

Nguyen Hong Hai

Also do notice that Bard can still be surprised like with Hierach or White Knight (Bard just full wtf with the guy)

Dainpdf

Well, at least that'll mean he learned from Sabah's death. Fool me once...

[Javvies](#)

Awesome starter quote.

And Cat is absolutely right, though likely understating things when she says that someone is about to have a very bad day in connection to Amadeus disappearing after a Legion died.

Tyrant of Helike versus Cat. And he's the one hitting the chaos button, not her. For now, anyways.

Cat and co will likely try to link up with Grem (and Scribe) and his Legions. That'll be interesting to see.

...

I'm seriously confused about the timing of things. Some storylines cover less (or more, depending) time than storylines that they are nominally concurrent with.

Dainpdf

Such as?

About Cat's reaction: yes, she's right, though not completely. She's right that he's alive, but wrong that it was all part of his scheme.

[Liliet](#)

I'm guessing she's still shaken after his Second Liesse play. That was not okay on any level, and it's the first thing Cat's mind goes to, after the possibility that he's actually genuinely dead. Which she can dismiss safely enough, because if he'd gotten that last stand he was hoping for, the entire Procer would know for a fact.

Ah, family.

Dainpdf

It's still a thing how she just assumes he couldn't die unintentionally. Also, during Second Liesse she was Fakerine. The emotional bond is much more real now, so she's feeling it way more. Thus the negation.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think the difference that Winter made was that strong. It changed her reaction to the trauma (I don't think mortal!Cat would have gone for stabbing, as appropriate as it was narratively lmao), not the trauma itself.

And she's sure he can't be really dead for a reason: a villain of his power and notoriety doesn't just get quietly offscreened. Everyone who knows anything at all about the Praes/Ashur front knows how Warlock went, it's

not missable. And if Black had really died, it wouldn't have been a fart-out anticlimax. There's a reason he expected a last stand and called the Below "cheapskates" for being denied it. Cat's looking at larger patterns, and the writing is on the wall: he's not dead.

She's certainly oblivious of all the options in between though 😊

(Admittedly, I'm not certain of the proportion of rational analysis to pure denial in her reaction. She certainly asked if there was a body, so there was *some* reasoning to it, but that was the point she got stuck on, it seems: that if there's the slightest chance he's not definitely dead, she's going to act like he isn't, and fuck everything else. Ah, family)

Dainpdf

Really, Tariq could very well have killed him at some point there. Maddie lost his Name, so he was mortal enough. Also, he probably wouldn't get a final boom as large as the Warlock, who paid his dues much more faithfully.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, Tariq could have killed non-Named Maddie, but for some reason didn't. This is a story-driven universe. If Tariq's plan had been to kill him, he'd have gotten his last stand.

Not as large as Warlock's, true. But large enough that the news wouldn't sound like "well, he disappeared along with a Legion detachment getting slaughtered, so we're assuming he's probbly dead even though there's no body".

Dainpdf

Makes sense-though I am sure if anyone on the side of Good is capable of disposing of a major villain quietly, Tariq is.

[Liliet](#)

...True.

If he made that an objective, he probably could.

Insanenoodlyguy

This. Her flaw is assuming that it's all part of his plan, but she's not wrong that he's a high enough tier that no body = no death. somebody would have to have

attested to seeing his unmoving soulless corpse, even if it was only his killer who did so in a prolonged dual or the like. Even then you'd have to at least procure his head to be sure.

Though her planning is not bad. By stubbornly insisting he's not dead she's pushing the narrative towards a moment where he's going to show up just when it seems like her faith is about to be broken.

Liliet

It's possible that Cat has reached the level of storycraft where she can intuitively tell impulses that she should follow to push the story in her favor, from impulses she needs to suppress or Bad Things Will Happen.

Because that was definitely an impulsive reaction ^^

Death Knight

Oh no, Amadeus don't die so good.

Skaddix

So the main options for the Observatory are still some Heroes, the Tyrant and Masego himself. I still Heroes are the most likely assuming there is not a massive time jump between Epilogue to Prologue to Chapter 1.

In Epilogue we saw Hierarch swearing revenge but didn't have too much active planned. The Tyrant did have some stuff kicking but the Observatory has plenty of mages and two Named. So unless Tyrant went himself I just don't see the dynamic duo having the firepower (of Named and Mages) to kill most of Cat's Mages and beat Hakram and Thief granted this pair is the weakest in direct combat. Does he really have time to do that and then high tail it back. Maybe these two have gotten some new talent (Named). It does fit the Tyrant MO though that is true.

Masego is on option if he just passively killed everyone due to rage or some sort of uncontrolled power transformation but that requires a massive time jump from Prologue to now cause previously he was making his too Callow but wasn't close according to Malicia. Also you figure the Observatory had to be sacked recently cause otherwise it be in the Prologue since Malicia and Cordelia were mostly about the state of the war. Cordelia might not have great intelligence in Callow but you figure Malicia wouldn't miss a raid on the Observatory especially since its connected to the Palace.

That leaves the Heroes who I still think are the most viable options since we have no idea where Hanno is and the Heirarch vision assuming its recent and not future sight. It did feel real time based on Sve Noc blocking the sight while Cat was presumably meeting with the Dwarves. Could have been Hanno landing on a beach getting ready to lead a raid with his team on the Observatory and Callow's Capital.

SpeckofStardust

In order to mess with the Observatories communications all you really need to do is mess with the communication abilities, for that all you need to do is set up a jamming field, which the Tyrant could have one set up around him which Catherine happens to be in.

Skaddix

They have Akua and two Sve Noc avatars. There is no indication that anyone of their people cannot use magic or miracles. You would think Akua would mention some sort of jamming field while their speculating about matters. I don't see a jamming field being likely. Not to mention Tyrant would have to be stretching that field pretty far.

Gunslinger

The Tyrants Wish aspect seems to act like a miracle anyway. He could wish communication blocked and then it happens.

This is just speculation for despite talking about it twice we still don't know the rules or limitations of it

Allafterme

I dunno, Tyrant is more likely to shunt scrying attempt to a local brothel than outright blocking it...

[Javvies](#)

On the other hand, most of the Heroes are, or should be, tied up fighting the Dead or sitting on Amadeus. Might be some getting directed to face the Tyrant of Helike, or hunting Grem and his Legions.

But the main point is ... I really don't think that a surprise Hero raid on the Observatory is likely, between the probable lack of Heroes available to hit it, and the fact that one of the major functions of the Observatory is to spot Heroes coming, and track them once they enter Callow.

Skaddix

Should be maybe but the point is plenty of Heroes are MIA. Whereas unless the Tyrant got some new talent, he have to go himself cause Hierarch not useful in direct combat and we don't know of any other talent that could beat plenty of mages and two Named working with the pair. The Heroes though have the Named for this raid as there are dozens of them with plenty MIA. Whereas the Heirarch and Tyrant are the only named we know the Free Cities have available for any raid. And the Heirach hasn't shown any usefulness in combat.

Its a perfectly viable target its the main communication hub and intelligence gathering center for Callow. Take it out means no more secure magic communications and no more long range scrying. I mean sheesh the ladies discuss why its important in this chapter. Taking it out cripples Callow's ability to coordinate their armies and spy on other players in the War. Just cause its good at tracking heroes doesn't make it unbeatable especially with the top mage in Callow, Masego, not being present.

But you are right it could be Masego got back and killed everyone.

Javvies

I doubt it was Heroes, between the Dead King invading, the need to sit on Black with major firepower, and the Tyrant of Helike doing an end run around the Proceran Border, the Heroes should be busy – too busy to find a way through the border to strike deep into Callow.

Plus – as previously noted, one of the primary reasons behind creating the Observatory in the first place was to have early warning and tracking of Heroic incursions. That should take surprise off the table, and there's no way the Observatory wouldn't be actively defended, and enough regular people can bring down Named.

The only Hero operation that I think would be viable would be a Heroic Thief-type Name that managed to nick the artifact at the center of the Observatory.

Skaddix

Yeah the Tyrant doing it personally make some sense given the prescience of his army. Assuming the Observatory cannot track Villains although you assume it just track Named. Then its not a stretch to assume while his army was walking through the Woods. The Tyrant and an elite strike team used his Gargoyles to fly in undetected and sack the Observatory. Before flying to join his army as they exited the woods on Procer Lands.

Javvies

Ehhhh, I kind of doubt that whatever is going in with the Observatory is because the Tyrant of Helike attacked it – I'm pretty sure his hands would have been full getting his army through the murder woods. Plus, Refuge would've been in his way, and while he's crazy, I don't think he's quite crazy enough to go there and piss off the dwarves at the same time.

Also ... because I have faith that Masego's wards and defenses around the Observatory (in addition to more mundane measures) make attacking the Observatory a decidedly nontrivial endeavor for anyone and everyone.

Unless you take the easy way out, like Malicia and/or a High Lord might have, and have someone toss some goblinfire at it. Although, I'd have to say that would be an astonishingly stupid move for one of them – Masego would lay down an epic smiting and make a gruesome example out of them when he found out who attacked his Observatory.

If where they are would require use of the mage relays, if something happened to them, that could explain things, though I'd expect them to comment that the relays weren't functioning properly.

Rook

I think there is no interference, just a misunderstanding. It might be as simple as the states Masego and Catherine are in at the moment.

Catherine just transformed from some sort of Catherine-shaped snow angel in a mountain of Winter to a mortal with free access to Night II – electric boogaloo. It could be that she isn't wholly cut off from the observatory, but it's just not configured to recognize her new metaphysical outfit. After all, the strongest walls in the world are worth shit if you can't recognize an impostor walking through the gate, and Catherine just swapped out her identification card.

It normally wouldn't be an issue if Masego was in good shape, he'd have ways to recognize it was still her. But he's not. He just watched dad turn himself into an avatar of a literal hell-god and shatter himself against an avatar of a literal heaven-god. The dude is wandering back to callow so out of his shit that anything coming within throwing distance of him implodes in on itself.

Of course Catherine & co think it's external interference, that'd be the natural assumption. How could they ever guess what happened to Masego while they were away? On the other hand, of course Masego hasn't prepared a contingency for this. It isn't exactly common for someone to shed half a Fae realm to

create a new god and revive an empire older than the dirt
Callow was built on.

Skaddix

Yeah except Akua, who is pretty good mage stated Cat's changes and Sve Noc apotheosis should have no impact on the central mechanism for the communication hub. Now she could be wrong but I read that as our author telling us something is going very wrong or went very wrong at the Observatory.

I argue current Masego kinda falls under outside interference.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Masego going through a Man Was Not Meant To Know period of adjustment probably would have knock-on effects on his major artefacts, since they're kind of linked to him.

And, the Observatory is his baby.

[theothin](#)

It's not really his artifact, it was taken from Akua. But we know he can fuck up scrying from a distance. He's even doing it right now.

Insanenoodlyguy

I am wondering is she a mage again? Presumably she'd ask for that to be back in her body if it's an option. Either way I'm sure she can do a crazy impressive amount of things with night.

Dainpdf

Could be the Saint – the old woman seemed very keen on fighting Cat. Not really her style to go for intelligence, though. And Tariq has deader fish to fry. The Tyrant, on the other hand, has a history of messing with magic and infiltrating enemies, likes people confused, and is near the Callowan border.

Skaddix

That is good point since its on the way apparently Tyrant could have made a pit stop in Callow before catching up to his army once they exited the Woods.

matesbe

I don't think that's the case? I feel like it would have come up in Malacia's interlude if part of Callow got sacked.

[Dresden 67](#)

Not really. Laure is on the opposite side of Callow from the Waning Woods, and is heavily defended by Hakram, Vivienne and the Army of Callow, including hundreds of mages and thousands of magic-resistant knights. I have a hard time believing anything short of an army could get through all that.

Skaddix

You seem to be forgetting Tyrant single handily destroying a whole army. Beyond that Hakram and Thief are when compared to other Named nothing special in a direct fight. Thief is worthless considering Hakram easily defeated her pre Name. Meanwhile Hakram skills also skew more support, he is better then Thief but he aint exactly elite in melee combat by any stretch of the imagination and he just chopped off his hand which will do him no favors.

[Liliet](#)

The army he destroyed wasn't the unholy fusion of the Callowan knight orders and post-Black Legions of Terror that is Juniper's Army of Callow. True, the Named would not make much of a difference there, but Juniper would, if not annihilate him, at the very least make it into a prolonged campaign and not a lightning raid.

Mike E.

How can you not consider Hakram elite in melee? We have plenty of onscreen examples of him kicking ass and taking names, and once he waded into an insane combat situation solo simply to prompt the triggering of his 3rd Aspect. On top of being Named, he is a greenskin.

[Liliet](#)

Depends on one's definition of "elite". Archer kicks his ass effortlessly to the point of him deliberately looking for excuses to avoid fighting with her. He's a Named with martial abilities, but his Name is not martial-focused.

Skaddix

Pretty much this. Hakram is impressive compared to the average melee fighter. But he is not special compared to Named Melee Fighters (anyone who is not using Miracles or Magic) so Masego and Tyrant would not. I count Cat and Hanno those as Melee focused as

while sure they have special abilities they tend to close range to fight. Not just blast from range.

Hakram was never elite before getting Named as a fighter. Beyond that his Powers lean more to fixing Cat's weak points ie Paperwork, Logistics, Management and his primary style before was duel wielding axes and he just cut off his hand. Beyond that Hakram is not a Mage or Priest killer so sure he is more durable against magic but he is not slicing through spells.

As noted Archer kicks his ass and Archer doesn't even stand at the top. Ranger is the best. She is always learning, can instantly master any skill, and can transcend the limits of mastery to go further beyond. On top of that she is a Half Elf so she starts with stat advantages even beyond an orc. Then you got Saint of Swords who is a domain onto herself who can basically cut anything. Then we have Archer who routinely beats the crap out of Hakram. Honestly of the relevant Name we do know much about from Lone Swordsman's Group to Woe to Calamaties to Hanno's Team to Pilgrim's Team. I think one could easily make the case that the only melee combat focused foe Hakram could beat is the Thief. And honestly Thief would probably rank better if we included spellcasters. She can at least steal spells and miracles. Hakram has got to dodge or try to tank.

[Liliet](#)

I kind of wonder about Archer vs Saint

[Euodiachloris](#)

I'm pretty sure Hakram could have taken Mr Jingles, John the Hunter. The Bumbling Conjuror would entirely depend on the dice roll.

[Dresden 67](#)

There's a big difference between the ramshackle army of Atalante, made up of mercenaries, town guards and conscripted peasants, and the Army of Callow, with professional regular and heavy infantry, sappers, mages and magic resistant knights, hardened by battles against fae, wights and Crusaders and led by veteran officers.

RanVor

But do veteran officers really make a difference against thunderbolts raining down from the sky?

[Liliet](#)

Yes. They make the difference between people hiding behind heater shields and enduring the assault while mages shield them from the worst of it, and people breaking ranks and running.

caoimhinh

It could be that the Mages at the Observatory died by accident as a consequence of trying to contact Masego in his current state (although I hope it's just Masego closing the connection for now).

It would explain the lack of contact method, as Malicia's own mages died horribly in their attempt, the Mages in Callow might have tried to contact Masego shortly after the destruction of Thalassina and suffer the setback (we still don't know if it's a conscious or unconscious method he is using to kill all who gets in his range, although I personally think it's a conscious decision), we don't know if the field of death around Masego could recognize the intentions or identities of the scrying mages before killing them, so Juniper might have ordered the Observatory closed after an incident, or the Mages might have died and thus the Observatory abandoned.

RoflCat

I think it's Masego.

To be precise, that he basically turned Observatory's full power for his purpose, likely 'searching' for...well, any traces of his parents.

Like, maybe Masego either is in denial that those two are totally dead, or he accept that, and is now searching for where their souls might've gone to.

And so he's looking everywhere, including into Hells or other dimensions, where a soul might go to. Then he'll bring their souls back, and he'll prove to them that someone coming back from beyond is still the same person, not just a fake with all their memories/personalities.

Gunslinger

Ooh I like this. Makes sense for Masego to do such a thing too.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think the Observatory is physically damaged or has been physically attacked. It's likely a magical / abstract way of disrupting its communication capabilities. Which Masego will

likely easily see through and restore once he gets there, but he hasn't yet.

RanVor

Let's not forget that the League (and, by extension, the Tyrant) has access to Atalantian priests, who are known, among other things, for their ability to block scrying...

[Liliet](#)

Oh.

I think we've got bingo.

That's the theory I'm banking on, now. I'd forgotten about League priests!

Yotz

Mobile anti-scrying emitters? Hmmm...

The question is: Atalantians. How do they work?

Are they act as ADW, damping every/some of the attempts to scry in the vicinity; can block address scrying by, say, the identity of something or other; or just shut down whatever they want on the general principle of "ah dun wanna".

Also – from where exactly Cat tried to contact her (?) capital and Observatory. If she did so from the Everdark – well, there is an army of the dead between her and the recipient. With the literal unliving god doing essentially whatever he wants and/or able to screw the general order of things. And, The Crown. And the necromantic Wasteland of Calernia, for war – war never changes.

Also, Golden Bloom. Elves may left this world for the time being, but *something* surely remained. Not to mention their general attitude towards untermensch and Cat in particular.

If she tried to contact Laure from where she is now, which we can assume from the text – well, I already outlined my standing in the first paragraph: in that case the League is most probable culprit for sure – the question is how they done it.

If she tried to do it from the Arcadia, however, somewhere in between Everdark and her current location; or from several points during the march... Well, all bets are off, then.

I'd speculate that Observatory is a part of Masego, and since he is now, most probably, in the Orrery... If I'd to blatantly misapply some wording templates to it, *ahem*: **every sufficiently powerful scrying device is indistinguishable from Fog-of-War generator**. And since Masego doesn't want to

be found, Observatory hides with him.
...And Laure – but that's just a side effect.

Daemion

So, what exactly happens to the drow at dawn?

Agent J

Finally, someone's asking the real questions. Maybe they pull a Gargoyles and turn to stone with the sunrise.

Until proven otherwise Rumena is now General Brooklyn.

Daemion

Don't you mean General Hudson? I mean, he is old and cranky...



Rook

Gown turns back into rags, coach and horses turn back into a pumpkin and mice. They can still leave behind their glass shoes though.

Dainpdf

If it's anything like DnD, reduced vision, dizziness and generally reduced combat ability.

Might be they also lose most their access to the Night, or lose consciousness. Or maybe they do turn into stone, who knows.

Daemion

Drow served as mercenaries on the surface before. Granted, those were exiles who had barely any night in them but I don't think people would employ mercs that can't participate in most battles.

Dainpdf

Cat seemed to believe marching in the day was an impossibility. This does, however, reinforce the idea that, whatever this is, it's connected to the Night.

caoimhinh

Not an impossibility, an annoyance. They are a species of people who hadn't been under sunlight for millennia, it's to be expected they experience discomfort, weakness or outright pain when exposed to it.

RanVor

I mean, it's kinda given that the Night only works at night...

Dainpdf

It's likely, though it'd do well to remember Winter worked all year long.

Insanenoodlyguy

It's one of those "drawback to power" things, I'd think. Those drow had barely any night in them, so effects were minimal. the same effects on these ones, who are chock full of the stuff, are much more debilitating, whatever they are. Didn't come up underground because no sun, but now they are exposed to their natural counterpart and Winter isn't thrilled with it either so the power boost's effects on this have ranged from nothing to actually making it worse.

[TeK](#)

The notions about Indrani and not being worthless for failing were something I needed to hear, in the depth of my depression. This novel always gives me a push I need. Thank you.

[Liliet](#)

Guide is good actually ♥

oliverwashere

Typos:

an offer a help
>an offer of help

Looking a misery
>Looking at misery

caoimhinh

Nice, things are heating up, should be a chapter or two before the armies meet again.
It's going to be a really messy and entertaining battle, I bet. And then operation 'Rescue Mentor' can begin.

Typos found:

- answered an offer a help / offer of help
- I suspected that in way / in a way
- The leather stared creaking / started

Dainpdf

Interesting chapter. Answers all around. A few questions, too:

- will Cat find love again?
- do Drow melt in the sun like popsicles?
- what happened to the observatory?
- will Cat chop Adjutant's arm off for giving Vivi a hand?
- what is Kairos up to (the eternal question)?
- will Cat find good booze again?

caoimhinh

The only one I can answer is the last one: Yes, Cat and Indrani are definitely sacking up the local good booze in the next city they enter. And when she gets back to some order, she will hit the wine again like no tomorrow, until Hakram makes her stop XD

Dainpdf

And now he can't even rely on an oath to keep her from it. Plus she has a liver again to put on the line.

As for finding good booze in the next city, you never know. Maybe they have terrible alcohol.

luminiousblu

'That didn't make them unworthy...'

Arguable, from an existentialist standpoint. What is even Cat's philosophy at this point? I get it's a CoA story so you can't expect true consistency but it feels like a proper mess right now.

luminiousblu

The hell? I didn't hit reply...

[Liliet](#)

Cat's philosophy is what she's stated: when times get dark, we're in this together.

The strong should help and support the weak.

Mike E.

I was about to say that as a Named she can burn off the alcohol immediately, but then I remembered that she has not had an actual Name in quite some time (but is she still in a transition point and therefore has some Named abilities...she had some when she was in competition for Squire)

Dainpdf

That, plus considering she (used to?) drinks to get drunk, she'd be unlikely to burn the alcohol.

[*Liliet*](#)

I think she only did that under Winter's influence, before Winter her vice of choice was wakeleaf.

RanVor

I don't think Winter had anything to do with that, actually. The Second Llesse hit her really hard.

matesbe

No it was definitely because it was the only thing that took the bite out of Winter. She said as much earlier.

[*Liliet*](#)

It did, yea, but drinking while Wintered didn't actually get her /drunk/, just less Wintered.

Incidentally, converting her to full Winter was a part of Black's plan that he failed to tell her about.

>_>

caoimhinh

Then she will have to loot from the armies. Procer's princes keep good wine and luxuries even on campaign, and the Tyrant always has quality stuff, although his liquor probably has quite a dose of arsenic to give it a unique taste.

Dainpdf

I hear his arsenic is of superbly high quality. Let's hope Cat can still survive mundane poisons now that she's no longer a glorified Yuki Onna.

lol

>"Was a body shown?" I asked.

>She shook her head.

>"Then he's not dead,"

In a world that runs on story logic, this isn't denial.

Yotz

To quote one old cranky sasser: *The report of my death was an exaggeration.*

In regards to someone with Black's reputation in *our* world, it would be prudent not only to see, but to thoroughly examine the body on molecular level. Just to be *more-or-less* sure...

[Liliet](#)

WELP

IT'S INSUFFICIENT INFORMATION TIME

of course Cat can't contact the Observatory, that would just smooth the situation over and allow her to make informed decisions -_-

Someguy

Incomplete unverifiable info is a waste of time in a multi-party shit-show like this. Which is why Tyrant just blinded the Observatory.

[Liliet](#)

Are you saying that Kairos restricted Cat to incomplete unverifiable info by blinding it, or are you trying to say he did Cat a favor by cutting off her access to one source of such? XD

morroian

Or should could , you know, gate to Laure

[Liliet](#)

Gates aren't teleportation. Going to Laure would take up from a month of real world time, and then same to go back. They don't have the luxury of flitting around wherever.

Antoninjohn

Cat will probably kill a lot of the chasing army's after hearing about Black and his trips having a plague shoved on them and not knowing if he is alive

[Liliet](#)

No, I don't think so. Catherine cares more about her plan than about him, she's reiterated that multiple times. She's going to be distraught on a personal level, not throwing away her entire strategy (which is to get everyone pointed at the same foe who is incidentally not her).

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I'm really not sure how feasible that is. She basically brought out an empire of a traditionally Below race to the forefront of the geo-political landscape and currently no one is sure what she's going to do with it.

They could be as large as a threat as the Dead King.

[Liliet](#)

> Catherine Foundling
> feasible

I think you're missing a logical step in there somewhere XD

Cat's going to diplomacy them to death, not actually slaughter soldiers she has a use for herself!

[NZPIEFACE](#)

That's exactly my point. After the Dead King is over, they're going to try dog piling her.

[theothin](#)

The drow are the ones she's sending to be the front line against the Dead King. There is no "after the Dead King is over" where they don't know exactly what she's doing with them.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah... we'll see if Cat is so naive as that.

[Liliet](#)

my god, rereading comments after the series ends is AMAZING /vaguefutureposting

[NZPIEFACE](#)

As someone that's somehow procrastinated reading this for three years, I appreciate you not spoiling it.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Frankly, Cat is trying to kid herself.

If faced with him in trouble at a distance close enough to see it, she knows damned well she'd drop every plot she has in hand in the rush to help him. And, thereby screw them both over.

It's why she's keeping away from any known vicinity of his.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

Not going to take revenge, though.

Adrian V

I am intrigued with HOW the Tyrant pulled that off, was it name related, sorcery or good old spy work? (AKA physical sabotage). An now Cat knows about Black, is almost sure that between the next 3 chapters she is going to decide finding out about him, she probably will know more in the city but that still won't be enough so hopefully she will go the army.

What happened to the drow at dawn?

letouriste

well, i'm similar to cat. i still think black is the original main character of this story and can't die without fulfilling his purpose. Purpose not currently filled

NotQuiteHere

Ah the old "protagonist believes something that no one else does that eventually turns out to be true cliché" huh. Exciting! I wonder if this one will be subverted or not?

Liliet

Definitely not.

We know more of Amadeus's arc than Cat does. There's Stuff Building Up. He's not just alive for the sake of her being right, she's just independently correct about him being alive.

Morgenstern

Unless even that was a ploy by the Bard, Black currently has almost infinite Plot Armor – and the most dangerous thing of all: he KNOWS about that now. If anything was a mistake of the Bard's, this should be it... Telling your players as the GM that you (at least currently) need them for the plot, that the Game's Gods are not finished with them (yet)? Baaaad mistake if they're strategic powerplayers out to get you and crap on your plot...

Liliet

I think the biggest problem with this is that Black doesn't know what Bard's plot /is/. Can't foil someone's intentions if you have no clue what they /are/.

RanVor

But you can try, and who knows, maybe you'll happen to guess correctly?

Liliet

Yeah but the best guess to make is that she wants him to do *exactly the thing he's thinking is the best idea*, and "whatever I decide to do will be what she predicted" is not the kind of game I think Black'll allow himself to be pulled in.

RanVor

Theoretically yes, but if everything he might possibly do or not do might be according to her plan, there's no point in overthinking it – it leads only to paranoia and indecisiveness (which is likely the point). Even if he decided to sit back and do nothing, that too might be what she intended for him. The only reasonable approach is to ignore her and do what needs to be done regardless.

Liliet

Exactly what I'm thinking.

Bard was careful to not drop any information about her own intent and only comment on him and the overall situation. This means the only non-stupid approach is to ignore her intent entirely and go after his own goals, just keeping in mind that there's a wildcard at the table.

Which would make her success or failure wrt him entirely depend on how good she is at reading him and guessing what he wants and how he'll operate to achieve it.

Moginheden

Why isn't Cat just gating to the Observatory? Why is she in Iserre at all?

Winter gates reduced travel time, but distance and direction still mattered. Callow was on the way between the Everdark and Iserre so it would make a LOT of sense to drop in and catch up on current events before moving on to Procer. This wouldn't increase travel time to Iserre more than a day or so under Winter's system and would be an obvious strategic advantage to know what you are getting into.

If Night interfacing with Winter changed how gates work then the travel time might be removed as the Night-based shadow walking

was hinted to do. If that's the case though, she should gate back home as soon as she can't scry there to figure out what's going on.

Even if Callow is off-limits for some reason, why is she talking about a 3 day march to the nearest city? If it's 3 days away over land where other armies might intercept them, (what seems to be implied.) Then it's probably less than a day away by gate, and you don't need to worry about the Tyrant while in Arcadia.

Moginheden

Even if she doesn't want anyone knowing she is out, opening a gate a few kilometers away from the city, and sending a single person to sneak in and get a report would make a lot of sense, (not sure who would be more stealthy between Archer and Cat right now. Neither of them favor stealth as a primary tactic, but both have been proven very capable of it when the situation warrants it.)

Yotz

Probably reasons are twofold.

First – she can't gate by her own will anymore, at least – gate on strategic level. Her power is borrowed from the Sisters – and while on average that was a good deal, she lost the ability to surestep navigate through Arcadia. She needed one of the Sisters to chart a course for her and the army to gate in. Which brings us to the part of ability/will – Sisters are either not willing to plot a course for her to gate to Laure neighborhood, or are unable to do so due to Observatoty's wards.

Secondly – the question of time. Tempo of the operation planned may not allow such frivolities as gating to random places at random times. There is not enough data to state/disprove that with a sufficient degree of certainty so far, imho. We shall see soon, I believe.

In any case, contacting Laure by more mundane means was in order, but – now the option is moot, and we have what we have.

[Liliet](#)

Callow is not on the way to Iserre, and if I have to guess, the distance/time relationship isn't linear there. Traveling through Arcadia is fast, but also some time is lost just by virtue of entering/exiting it. Even in a straight line making pit stops along the way could extend the journey several times over.

Moginheden

Check the maps linked at the top. The Everdark is in the north east. The straight line from it to Iserre passes through the Golden Bloom and western Callow, (especially since they "are skirting the eastern edge of the principality of Iserre.") now depending on where in the Everdark they were, they might not go straight past the observatory, but a little detour seems like an obvious benefit when Cat has been out of the loop for I'm guessing 3 months now? (although I'm not sure exact timing.)

As for entering and exiting taking huge amounts of time, I've never heard of that before, and it's directly countered by Cat using gates for short range travel on a battlefield occasionally. Arcadia was always much shorter distance than reality, (I think consistently and linearly but I'm not sure on that.) The reason it was hard to predict times was that time itself was weird in Arcadia. 1 hour of in reality might be a day in Arcadia or a second.

RanVor

Funny thing, I checked the maps too and the straight line between the Everdark and Iserre doesn't go anywhere near Laure. In fact, it barely touches the northern border of Callow.

Moginheden

Laure would be a bit of a detour, but not a huge one. Remeber they aren't in the city of Iserre they are at the eastern edge of the province. It does depend on where in the ever dark they started from where exactly the line goes; but even dropping in Harrow or Hedges would let them catch up on current events, (although it might be harder to hide that Cat is returning to the fight, so I would still have detoured a bit to the observatory)

[Liliet](#)

I suspect time losses would be proportionate to how many people you're trying to transport with the gate.

Also, imagine a drow army popping out in the middle of Callow. "Hi, it's me, your Queen, now also Priestess of the drow! Do not be alarmed!"

It's... kind of Cat's responsibility to keep her new allies away from her land to prevent tensions there I think 0.0

Moginheden

Nothing like that kind of time loss has been mentioned when using gates. Also Cat does not need to bring the drow

out with her in Callow. She opens a large gate in the Everdark, moves to where Callow lines up in Arcadia with her army, opens a small gate and goes through herself leaving behind the drow, gets an update, goes back to the gate's location and opens a new gate, then she will be back with her army in Arcadia and can move on to Iserre.

She has done this before when she dumped the leaders of the first drow city in Arcadia.

[Liliet](#)

Hum, maybe you're right.

It's not like erratic to just miss things like that, though. I'm sure an explanation will come up at some point.

Moginheden

Now if Cat had gone to the northern front of Procor vs the dead king, you'd be right that Callow is out of the way. But for some reason she went to the southern front.

[clintcleez](#)

I'm wondering the same, she is guessing for no reason when she could just directly find out

Zaver SaintCloud

Speaking from the depths of Chicago Winter right now; do not under any circumstances underestimate the power of hot soup.

indubitably

THANK YOU for writing this story – I found it recently and have just finished bingeing my way up to present day, which makes me both proud and incredibly disappointed because now I have to WAIT for the next chapter, a stunning and absolutely unprecedented inconvenience (woe is me). Oh well, 1000% worth it – the Guide has become one of my favourite works of all time. I'll be here eagerly on upload days from now on. Thanks again.

Andrew Mitchell

Welcome to the club. The Guide has a strong fanbase and there's always lots of positive and interesting discussion in the comments section.

Regarding having to WAIT: One of the great things about the Guide is that EE is incredibly reliable with posting new chapters. There's one EVERY Monday, Wednesday and Friday, plus a bonus chapter each month. I suggest you subscribe to updates

via WordPress or the RSS feed so you get your regular dose asap!

EE is able to keep up the fast pace due to the supporter of readers via Patreon. Look for the link on the right of any page to add your support if you can.

Chapter 3: Orison

"My son, I offer you the greatest gift a ruler can give another: a widely reviled predecessor."

– Extract from the infamous 'Sensible Testament' of Basilea Chrysanthé of Nicae

I'd used to love winter in Laure, as a child.

Sure, once in a while charcoal and firewood prices went up so the matron had to cut corners but as a rule I'd gotten to enjoy the snow in the streets while having a warm house awaiting me after. It took mere hours for the blanket of pale to turn to mush or soiled mess, but before time ran out there'd been a lot of fun to be had. We'd made a fort in the steps of the broken old hatcher's house, once, and pitched snowballs at everyone passing for the better part of an afternoon. It'd ended when we'd accidentally caught some Taghreb legion mage instead of a Liessen merchant. Luckily enough the man had been more amused than angered, and instead of chewing us out he'd used sorcery to lift half the damned fort and dump it back on our heads. We'd all fled shrieking into the streets, soaked in snow and red-faced, while he laughed loudly. Gods, how old had I been? Seven, eight? I barely remembered anything from back then, nowadays, but that one memory of the sunny winter afternoon might as well have been seared into my eyes. The matron had remonstrated us pretty roughly for coming back to the orphanage drenched, but I was pretty sure she'd been hiding a smile.

It'd taken me a long time to realized how lucky I'd been, getting a childhood like that. Sure we had lessons and curfews and the occasional lean week, but Callowan orphanages had been funded by the Tower. The coin had kept coming, and we'd been *protected* in some abstract way. Everyone had known that the orphanages were the Black Knight's own notion, and the shadow cast by my teacher's displeasure had been as a giant's back then. It'd been easier, hadn't it? When it all seemed so large and simple, and all you had to do to change things was climb to the top. Foe and friend, victory and defeat. I'd picked up the knife that night

believing myself clever enough to see through the pretence of black and white, but that'd just been scratching the surface. Sometimes things happened that were too complicated, too far-reaching, to be called something as clear-cut as a victory or a defeat. Sometimes you could hate the people you most needed to clasp hands with and love those that would be most dangerous to your heart's desire. My eyes flicked to a tall silhouette in the distance, treading the snow without a trace. She had her back to me, so there would be no glimpse of golden eyes, but there was no mistaking her for anyone else.

Sometimes you could grow fond of someone even if you couldn't forgive them and never would.

I let out a steamy breath, watching the vapour rise up. That had me itching for my pipe, though I was equally reluctant to take off my gloves and reach under my cloak to indulge in my little vice. It was a cold night out, and it would be hours yet before dawn rose. I could have drawn on the Night to warm my bones, or more accurately chase away the cold, but some part of me twistedly enjoyed feeling the bite. Not so long ago it would have been nothing to be but another faded colour, another not-sensation washing up against the thing passing for my body. The moon above us was shrouded by the clouds, but light filtered through. Enough that I saw the crows streak across the darkness, feathered frames of Night batting their wings in utter silence. I dipped a finger into the power the Sisters had opened to me, sharpening my eyesight for a heartbeat, and caught a glimpse of crimson on the talons the pair. They'd killed tonight, then. *If all they require for their altar is the occasional rabbit, I can make my peace with that.* Their descent was almost a dive, but they failed to make me stumble when they landed on my shoulders. They'd kept back their talons, and made of Night as they were they weighed near nothing unless they particularly wished to. I tightened my cloak around my shoulders and cast a meaningful glance at the bevy of drow escorting me. The warriors bowed low and scattered across the snowy landscape.

"Rochelant," Komena said, a strangely human voice leaving her crow's throat.

"There will be blood," Andronike said.

Wasn't there always? Stainless victories were not in my nature.

"As little as possible," I said. "We come for knowledge, not conquest."

Crow-Komena's laughter sounded like cawing, which we both knew she was doing on purpose.

"So speaks the roving catastrophe," Andronike said.

I could have gone pithy in reply to that, but my mood had gone sour after the conversation in the tavern and the march in the cold had done nothing to improve it. I simply grunted back wordlessly.

"Fickle thing," Komena chided. "Is this tossing of insults not what you told us to practice? Why do you now shy away?"

"I stand by what I said," I replied. "You want to stay grounded? Talk with people in a way that isn't prayer or orders. My friends were my anchor when I was deep in Winter."

"Friendship," Andronike said, sounding somewhat skeptical. "A human concept, not of the Firstborn. Kinship in interests is ever passing."

"Yeah, I'm not exactly holding my breath you two starting to feel all warm and fuzzy inside," I sighed. "This isn't about that."

"Imprecise," Komena noted. "Elaborate."

"Banter's informal," I said. "It puts you on equal footing with the other person, if only for the duration of that exchange. And for you two it's even more important, because to be halfway decent at it there's a lot of things you have to pick up on: the situation, the timing, what lines you can and can't cross. It forces you to *think like a person* while you do it."

"It will not change what we are," Andronike said.

"None of us can do that," I replied. "What we *can* do is make sure you still understand what a mortal is. That you don't become so utterly removed from reality you march yourself off the cliff."

There was a long moment of silence broken only by my boots creasing the snow.

"You are being sexually promiscuous with your subordinate, which is humorous for unclear reasons," Komena tried.

I closed my eyes and counted to five. *At least she's trying*, I told myself.

"We'll, uh, keep working on that," I muttered.

I flicked a glance at crow-Andronike, but she did not have another drow attempt at humour to throw my way. Well, either that my reaction to her sister had scared her off. The crow-shaped sliver of goddess turned towards me in indignation, much to my amusement. Yes, clearly she was beyond such petty feelings. No, I wasn't thinking that just to appease her. I muffled my chuckle with my gloves. The slight ebb upwards in my mood disappeared the moment the distraction ended. I was in the dark, in more ways than one. And some of the things hidden from my view mattered

more to me than others. I hesitated, fingers clenching and unclenching.

"Ask," Andronike said.

"Since you ate Winter," I said. "Your... abilities have grown."

"Beyond your understanding," Komena said. "Though that is not a high wall to clear."

That'd actually been pretty decent, I noted. Insults came much easier to her than humour, which really wasn't much of a surprise. I cleared my throat.

"Could you find out if someone is dead or not?" I quietly asked.

"Yes," crow-Andronike said.

Ah, but would they?

"No," crow-Komena said.

"I know there'd be risks," I said.

"Of which you warned us yourself," Andronike said.

"If you start swinging your apotheosis around on the surface, something a lot older and meaner is bound to start swinging back. That story doesn't end well for you," Komena said, pitching her voice in an eerily perfect mimicry of mine.

The leather gloves crinkled as I closed them into a fist.

"There are strategic reasons why the information would be important," I said.

"Not enough to warrant the possibility of provoking an entity our match," crow-Andronike said. "You know this."

"Sentiment is unseemly," crow-Komena said.

"Don't do that," I sharply said.

They stilled for a moment. They were not used, I thought, to being spoken to in this way. And we all knew that the part of their power they had sent with me was enough that they could kill me if they so wished – my best defence against it, after all, had been granted to me by their favour. But I would not hold my tongue. That was the whole point of my being named their herald, the First Under the Night: having someone that hadn't been raised to worship them to argue with them, force them to reconsider what they believed. They might not always agree with me, and frequently did not. But entirely separate from our military alliance and the diplomatic authority they had granted me was the

real foundation of our accord. *A cat may look at a king*, the old Callowan saying went. Though the unfortunate pun had me gritting my teeth, it was a decent way of putting it. It was my damned purpose to disagree with them without sweetening my words.

"There's nothing wrong with feeling things," I said. "You take that out and all you view is skewed. They're not the only thing to take into consideration, often not even the most important, but they *do* matter. Logic alone leads you to ugly ends because you're dealing with people, not statues. If you remove that element just to feel clear-sighted and superior, you're going to shoot yourself in the foot repeatedly."

"Your tone," Andronike said.

"Is exactly what it should be," I replied, unflinching. "If you are right and correct in your own view, make your argument. If all you can quibble about is my phrasing, maybe you should be thinking instead of trying to chide me."

That didn't please them, but then it wasn't supposed to.

"You provided what you promised," crow-Komena conceded. "Yet the refusal remains. Employ other means."

I would, the moment I could. There was a storm taking shape in Iserre and I suspected Black would have a better idea than most of what it was really about. He was the only person I trusted who'd ever spoken with both the Hierarch and the Tyrant of Helike, strange as the nature of that trust could be. *I trust people to act according to their nature*, Malicia had once said. A Wasteland way of thinking, but there was truth to it. I remained alone with the crows-that-were-not-crows on the long march, buried in silence until dawn came.

—

"It is a dangerous weakness," Akua said. "Though I suppose inevitable in some ways. Power never comes without a cost."

The sun had begun passing the horizon, and with the light of morning something like a shiver had passed through fifty thousand drow. Tents had been hastily raised and my host hid away under them before dawn even finished. The sentinels forced to remain out in the sun did so after boiling water to make herbal concoctions that would keep the awake through the sudden wave of tiredness. Dawn, I had learned, was when Sve Noc's power ebbed lowest. I would have assumed noon to be it, but Akua had offered a complicated explanation as to why that was not the case I'd failed to understand twice before I got her to simplify it into something comprehensible: dawn was the death of the night. As a metaphysical concept, that had more weight than the rest. For some reason that apparently required me to have read a lot of

books I definitely had not before it became sound and evident logic. The tent she was keeping me company under was open at the front, but the thick linen walls did cut away at the worst of the wind nicely. It made the wait tolerable, though I was actually debating taking a nap.

"This is an inconvenient one," I said.

"Surprisingly light," Diabolist retorted. "They are still physically able, after all. Simple temporarily bereft of their access to the Night."

"They'll also be out like a light for a few hours," I grunted. "That's a recipe for a morning attack and you know it."

The transition from night to dawn was taxing on drow bodies in a way that led to exhaustion, and effectively prevented the expeditionary force from being truly fighting fit for at least three to four hours. And they'd be tired for the rest of the day as well as being fragile little mortals if I didn't leave them sleeping a little longer than that, though at least that I could push later in the day. It wasn't like other armies didn't have to sleep, of course. But having a fixed time for that was a liability, and there would be no keeping that under wraps forever. The moment we began operating near other armies, there'd be outriders and scouts on us at all times and much as I liked to insult Proceran royalty they were not above basic pattern recognition.

"Hence why joining forces with the Legions of Terror remains a priority," Akua said. "Fifty thousand warriors led by Mighty able to operate flawless in the dark are nothing to scoff at, and a fortified camp held by legionaries would allow us to exploit that advantage relentlessly."

"Until we have allies, it makes occupation of anything concrete difficult," I reminded her. "Taking something at night will be easy enough. Holding it through the day another story."

"Fortunate, then, that occupation is not our intent," Akua serenely replied.

That and I still had a few cards to play if things got bad, though heroic presence would make the whole matter chancy. They tended to do that, as a rule. At least the Dead King should keep a good chunk of them out of my hair for the foreseeable future. I cast a look back at my bed, which was essentially a pile of covers and inexplicably flat cushions, and finally gave up the notion of a lie-in. Maybe after I worked out some of the tension in my body. I rose with a grunt, curtly refusing Akua offered helping hand, and buckled my sheath back onto my belt.

"Who has the watch again?" I asked the shade.

"Lord Ivah," she replied.

Ivah, huh. It'd been a while since we'd had a proper chat. Unlike some of the Peerage, who seemed discomfited by how easily they still obeyed me and so made themselves scarce, my old guide had remained at hand. Unfortunately it was also a pathfinder of some talent, and so often sent out ahead of the expeditionary army. Might as well take the occasion today, I didn't know how long it would be until the next. Though was I was higher than General Rumena in the pecking order of the Empire Ever Dark, it was in charge of leading the expedition. While I could give orders and dismiss its own, the details of the duty rosters remained at its discretion. I could have intervened, but was reluctant to do as much without a better reason than liking having Ivah around. Akua followed me out of the tent and onto the camp wordlessly. After years of commanding legionaries, the sight of the mess around us had me wincing on the inside. The layout of this place was a bloody maze, all haphazard tents with no real thought given to quick deployment and no chance of a bloody palisade being raised. Rumena wasn't a fool, so it'd been pretty thorough about putting sentinels in place during our vulnerable ours, but it'd admitted to me in private that it could not turn a gaggle of tribal sigils into the kind of army the Empire Ever Dark had once fielded with less than a month before the campaign began.

Assembling a functioning chain of command had been miracle enough, in my opinion, which should count for quite a bit considering I was now the foremost priestess of an entire race.

"Have you considered using a staff?" Akua suddenly asked.

She'd pulled slightly ahead of me, I only then noticed. I could go quicker, in all honesty, but I was in no real hurry and this pace was most comfortable.

"My limp's not that bad," I shrugged.

"It pains you," the shade frowned.

"When it loses its novelty I'll get herbs for that," I replied. "That's what my pipe was for in the first place."

We turned around a cluster of tents, the smallness of the gap rather irritating to my eyes. She resumed the line of conversation afterwards.

"Unnecessary suffering is exactly that," Akua said.

"I'm still fighting fit," I said with irritation. "And if I need a little nimbleness, I'll call on the Night to make it withdraw for a bit. I got the juice directly from Sve Noc, daylight won't stop me."

"It does significantly weaken you," Diabolist retorted.

I rolled my eyes. So the kind of power I could call on went from terrifying to merely appalling after dawn. It was still more than I'd ever had to work with as the Squire by an almost absurd margin.

"Yet that was not my meaning," Akua mildly continued. "I worry more about what embracing this implies of your mindset."

I watched her from the corner of my eye, and she did not meet my gaze. Worry, huh. The words she chose were never an accident.

"Sometimes it's a good thing," I said. "To remember what it feels like for the people who don't make pacts with gods."

"I had thought you estranged with contrition, dearest," she said, tone prickly.

"I won't wallow," I flatly replied. "But I won't lose sight of it twice either. A lot of people are going to bleed before this is over, Akua."

I brought up my fingers to block the sun from my eyes, feeling the shade studying me.

"Now and then it's worth the sting to feel a part of what you're going to dole out," I finished quietly. "It's be a kinder world, if we were all made to remember that."

"Kindness," Diabolist mused.

"Not a Praesi favourite, I know," I drily said.

Not much grounds left to cover before we reached the edge of the camp. Already we were passing drow so wrapped up in cloth the only seen could be seen was their eyes, though those were sharp and peering at the horizon. Ivah should be somewhere within the small thicket of bare trees I could see ahead, by the feel of the presences in the Night. Even when bereft of the power, they still left an impression. I slowed when I realized Akua had stopped. She was looking at me with narrowed eyes. Ah. Irritated her, had I?

"Is that what you think?" she said.

Not irritation, I thought. Disappointment. Fancy that.

"Are you sure, Akua Sahelian," I said softly, "that you want to get in an argument with me about the moral fabric of the Wasteland?"

"I had a great-uncle," she said. "By the name of Thandiwe."

My eyebrow rose.

"Fascinating," I said.

"I found him to be, as a child," Akua casually admitted. "He was, after all, stricken from family records."

"Maybe he used the wrong fork during the cannibalism ritual," I suggested.

Much as I disliked to admit, though, she had my attention.

"My mother would not speak of," she said, "and so naturally I pursued the matter secretly."

A half-smile quirked her lips.

"He was a sorcerer of great promise," she said. "As is custom among our line, as a boy he was brought to the deepest part of the Maze of Kilns. There he was made to sacrifice one dear to him, and for months after remained silent."

So it wasn't just you, I thought. Had Tasia Sahelian been made to do the same by her own mother, I wondered? How far back did the wounding of their own children go, for it to have earned the name of tradition?

"The lesson was believed to have been taught," Akua said. "And it was. One the eve of his sixteenth year, Thandiwe Sahelian stole several tomes and artefacts from the family vaults and fled to Mercantis, where he pawned them for a small fortune he used to make a home further south in Nicae."

I snorted.

"I imagine that went over less than pleasantly in Wolof," I said.

"Rage is an apt description," she mused. "Which only worsened when he began to thrive after entering some sort of merchant consortium and became comfortably wealthy even by Praesi standards. Enough to seek the protection of the Basileus, which the Empire sought favourable trade terms with in those days."

"Clever, then," I said. "Though I'm wondering as to your point. The man sounds decent enough, but he *left* Praes."

Akua inclined her head.

"And yet he was also a Sahelian," she said, and even now there was an undertone of pride when she spoke the name. "The blood of the original murder, unhallowed from the cradle. I am told that he kept to the Gods Below even on that foreign shore."

"He grew past his roots," I said.

And I'm not so sure you have, I thought. She looked up at the morning sun, her silhouette wreathed in light for a heartbeat, and there was something about her smile that unsettled me.

"You have seen the worst of us," the shade said. "And through that knowing taken our measure. But there *is* more, Catherine. We are not beyond kindness, not even the highborn. If even a Sahelian can have the taste for peace, there is yet something left to be kindled."

"If you want to be known by more than the ugliest parts of you," I said, "perhaps you should show them to the rest of the world. Maybe the capacity is there, Akua, but we don't judge by capacity. It's the choices you make that matter."

"Ah," she murmured. "And how many of those do we really have, in the end?"

One hundred thousand souls, I thought. *That was a choice. It's the weight on the balance by which you will be judged, and what could possibly even the scales?* I cleared my throat, uncomfortable the lingering silence.

"Your great-uncle," I said. "What happened to him, after?"

Golden eyes met mine.

"The old Basileus died. His successor refused the Empire's terms outright," she said. "And so my grandfather, a noted alchemist, took to his workshop. If he is so ashamed of his blood, I am told he said, let us relieve him of it."

Neither of us blinked.

"Thandiwe Sahelian sweated out every drop of blood in his body within the year," Akua said.

We finished the rest of the walk in silence.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Go Vote!

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

[DroughtBringer](#)

And, believe it or not, I actually have something besides voting! Wow! That never happens!

Over on Spacebattles, KnownParadox has started doing a Liveblog of A Practical Guide to Evil.

If you do not know what that is, it is where someone, in this case KnownParadox, reads through a text, in this case (because it wasn't obvious) A Practical Guide to Evil, and reacts to parts as they are reading. It is a fairly cool experience, as it lets you feel kind of like you are reading The Guide again for the first time, and makes for a fun way to re-read The Guide.

If you're interested, then come look at the link below. At the moment the first Three chapters have been posted, and more are forthcoming.

<https://forums.spacebattles.com/threads/where-i-read-a-practical-guide-to-evil.718471/>

konstantinvoncarstein

(About Above and Below): "I imagine the the one who wanted to micromanage their joined Sims account is the evil one while the one who wanted to see what would happen if the Sims were left on there is the good one."

It's so cute! 🤖

Sonder

Isn't it the other way around? Evil let's folk do their own thing and good tries to micromanage them?

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, it is as you say 😊

Skaddix

Feels kinda Filler. I mean unless one of this relatives books or artifacts becomes relevant. We already no Praesi can be kind but don't favor it.

[Liliet](#)

And once again someone declares character development / relationships in fiction to be filler.

I am shocked. Truly.

Skaddix

Cause it is the Drow part can be predicted with some knowledge of RPGs. And we already know all Prasei are not monsters with zero companion. Heck Cat's short story at the start tells you that seeing as said mage didn't kill a bunch of kids for a prank. We already had Cat and Akua bonding as well. Lets get to some other characters.

[Liliet](#)

The drow part can be predicted with some knowlege of RPGs?

We, uh. Still kind of needed to know for certain.

caoimhinh

To be fair, the whole 'Akua telling a story of an unknown uncle' part was filler indeed.

We didn't learn anything plot-relevant, Akua's character wasn't developed, and it also didn't shed any new light on Praesi culture.

We (and Cat too, for that matter) already know for a fact that Praesi are not incapable of love, companionship, mercy, kindness, and honor; literally every Praesi character (including the members of the 15th legion) are proof of that, though we also know that they look down on displays of affection, the nobility holds in contempt those who can't hide their emotions and consider mercy a weakness.

Akua herself has already shown that she cared about her father (although she thought her father was weak for not being capable of intrigue she still preferred him that way because he was happy like that) and Barika (who Akua considered weak and a bit dumb, but still kept her around because she was loyal; and she was the one loss she actually felt after the battle of Liesse at the end of William's rebellion).

Cat's interaction with Sve Noc, on the other hand, was character development and relevant.

[Liliet](#)

I'd say it's important than the conversation took place, and the relevant information is the interaction between Akua and Catherine, itself.

Nobody

Suddenly feeling as if this Sahelian has some connection to Hanno's mother.

[Liliet](#)

Ashur and Nicae are rather different places. I doubt they met

Scholar

Let's all remember, dear friends, our dear friends...the previous chapters. How many times has seemingly

'inconsequential' information been foreshadowing we just didn't catch?

Personally, I'd love to see a crimson rain made of blood sweat. 😊

Rook

The point is that maybe the Praesi aren't so different from anyone else. The same moral from the Indrani/ranger story applies to even the villainy of the east.

It's a sweet song to believe people are the way they are solely because of their choices. Because they deserve it, because of the mistakes they made. Maybe it's easier to think that way, but the whole point of the last chapter was criticizing that idea. Because people are weak and sometimes they don't have a choice, sometimes they're not strong or special or great enough to stand up on their own, but that doesn't make them worthless.

It was the same with the drow in the entire last volume. Cannibalistic murderers they may all be, we now know for a fact that none of them could have dragged the empire ever dark out of the pit on their own. How many choices did any of them really get that mattered, in the big picture?

Maybe the Praesi are the same.

Maybe Catherine is the hypocrite here, not Akua, her personal experiences and wounds blinding her from seeing them for what they are.

Not villains that need to be beaten or destroyed, but villains that need to be saved. No different from the poor villagers that gave up, or drow that were made to kill each other, or callow being forced to become a battlefield again and again. That's what Cat needs to do to truly *win*. To break away from Above and Below's game. Redeem the same people that hurt her, knowing that the real enemy aren't the people being driven by the whip but the one holding it.

Oshi

Oh god Pilgrim succeeded didn't he? Shes gonna be fucking redeemed. That's what all this moral clap trap is about.

Rook

I don't think it's so much redemption in the capital-G Good sense. It's more along the vein of the moral outrage Black has against Above (and to a lesser degree, Below) for giving him so little choice as to the major outcomes of his own fate.

Think of it as a chess game. You're either consigned to being a Black piece or a White one, with no choice in the matter. The whole point of Catherine's choice when fighting Sve Noc was pointing out the real problem – the players. Above and Below. You don't win by beating up the other pieces, you win by getting the pieces to stop fighting long enough to gang up on the players.

Akua's point is that it's incredibly hypocritical of Cat to blame some of the black pieces (the Praesi) as if they were black by choice, just because they might have personally hurt her in the past.

The pilgrim is all about destroying black pieces or converting them to become white. Amadeus is all about being a black piece but winning anyway, even if his own piece is taken. Catherine is about poking both players in the eye, because she's terribly unamused at being a piece in general; but if that's her game then she needs to be consistent.

luminiousblu

But that's the thing, isn't it? They are black by choice. Even her uncle, Akua specifically states that he worshipped Below for the rest of his life, even if he fled.

The problem with Catherine is that she views the world as divided into good and evil, instead of Good and Evil, and thinks that one should imply the other.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think Cat's going to switch sides, which is what Pilgrim wanted, but she was never not on the side of lowercase g good, even if she sometimes wasn't perfect at holding to it.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Not in the way he'd like, no.

Cat is, fundamentally Callowan – which means she needs bashing over the head with the concept that Praes didn't start out as screwed up as it has become, and that the people inside it are still people.

Above and Below have a lot to answer for, for both have allowed atrocities in the name of their game.

luminiousblu

"Because people are weak and sometimes they don't have a choice, sometimes they're not strong or special or great

enough to stand up on their own..."

Bullshit. The entire point of the last chapter is that even when you're weak, you do have a choice. "The only choice that really matters", in fact.

The Mayor had literally nothing. Catherine could've ended him with a word, possibly less than a word. He still refused to talk under pain of getting his family killed. He could do not better but he chose to make the choice he would be proud to make again. Do I agree with his choice? No, I think it was stupid, but that isn't the point, it doesn't matter what I think, it matters what he thinks. He chose a side. He was too weak to serve it in full, but he did what he could and made his peace with the fact that he'd done everything he was capable of.

What do you think being 'strong' or 'special' means, really? You don't need to be 'strong' or 'special' to do something you'd be proud to do again. You might fail, but you tried, and that's good enough if you can do no better. Someone who falters halfway to the finish line and collapses is still better than someone who jogs two thirds and then walks away of his own will because he can't be arsed to keep going, that's what the last chapter was.

"...but that doesn't make them worthless"

If you come from a certain mindset that I disagree with, they might not be "worthless". They are, however, certain "worth less". From a narrative perspective, especially in worlds of Good vs. Evil (instead of Grey-Grey morality), the person who is willing to stick to his guns to the very end is heavier than the person who swaps sides or caves in to threats. Even villains, because there is something to be respected in a villain who genuinely believes in what he's doing whether or not you agree with it.

"How many choices did any of them really get that mattered, in the big picture?"

In a world of Good vs. Evil, the choice that matters is which side you go on. That's more or less it. Akua's episode sounds like it's saying "even Praesi can be Good", but that's not really it. She's saying "even Evil can be good", and note the lowercase. What choice does anyone have that "really matters"? Callow is a crown that will eventually pass. The culture of Praes isn't the same from century to century – hell if nothing else, the whole culture of starvation thing couldn't have predated Sinistra's weather bomb. The Sahelians seem to have risen to prominence only after the Miezens left. Procer didn't even exist for the longest period of time. Names themselves come and go and new ones pop up with seeming regularity, even outside the context of the current story timeline. Hell, apparently slavery was considered Good,

capital G, way back when, and it's not anymore; it might be considered Good again in a thousand years. All of these things "don't really matter", not in the end, not even on Neshamah's timescale let alone the Bard's or the game of Above and Below. And of course, neither do the Drow. If you talk about choices that "really matter", then you have to look at personal choices, and you can always make a personal choice that matters – that's what the last chapter was.

"Maybe Catherine is the hypocrite here"

It's not about hypocrisy. Hell even if it is, it doesn't matter. The pot calling the kettle black doesn't mean it turns white.

"Not villains that need to be beaten or destroyed, but villains that need to be saved."

Now, this is high-handed bullshit. Villains that 'need to be saved'? Saved from what? Saved from themselves? From their own dreams or their own goals? Maybe even from their own choices? Do you think everyone in this world is a child incapable of taking responsibility for their own failures?

"To break away from Above and Below's game."

Villains, especially Named, are Nietzsche-style Übermensch (so are Heroes, actually, given a world where God literally isn't dead). To claim you're "saving them" is literally the biggest insult you can offer one of those. These are people who have made their choice, and are convinced that they are the choices that matter. You taking away that choice because 'it's bad for them' means all you're really doing is setting up a second game within the metagame of Above and Below, where you're the only choice. Sure, that solves the problem. You can't chafe against the iron walls of your prison if you build a second, wooden prison inside of your cell.

"Knowing that the real enemy aren't the people being driven by the whip but the one holding it."

There is no whip. People choose what they do for themselves. "Fate" is just narrative consequence, railing against it is as idiotic as railing against entropy, or gravity, or the zeroth law of TD. To live in this world is to live with the fact that stories exist. You can change the stories, but blaming everything on the 'whip' is like attributing the internal combustion engine to laws of compressional heating. The "how" is confused for the "why".

Even Black's railing makes no goddamn sense. Evil always loses, but for Evil to even be in a position to lose, Good has to lose first. That's how stories tend to go – for the rebel to overthrow the tyrant, the tyrant has to seize power; for Robin Hood to save the peasants, the peasants have to be in trouble; for the King to repel the orcs, the orcs need to

be invading. The very fact that Praes is consistently an Evil country, with Good countries opposing it, disproves Black's honestly whiny notion that Evil is destined to lose. Terribilis II foiled several Crusades and reconquered his homeland, more or less for good, right after what seemed like the final triumph of Good that cast down Sauron's Towe – I mean, the Tower. From the perspective of Good it could've seemed like nothing but the triumph of Evil: Sauron come again and his Tower is higher than ever.

Liliet

I agree with you that if you take Black's anger at face value it sounds whiny af.

The actual point comes out if you connect it with the context of what he'd just been explaining to Catherine, when he goes into the speech. He's angry that Praes was drawn into the game and doesn't get to quit, and any villains who try to help are only allowed a villainous sort of victory, ie a transient one that doesn't make things better in the long run.

tl;dr Black is angry that Praes is Evil and its inhabitants don't get individual choice about being surrounded by it 😊

Rook

I'm the one speaking high-handed bullshit? Sorry, but I'll have to throw that accusation right back in your face. It's easy to judge people by the sacrifices they didn't make when you're not the one making the sacrifices.

"There is no whip"? Seriously, after an entire volume about an entire race that were given the "choice" to cannibalize each other for millennia by an automagically binding contract with Below made on their behalf, before their ancestors were even born? After just now getting an example of the kind of consequence that comes to Praesi for abandoning Praes and Below, even partially?

The point isn't that there physically aren't choices, the point is that the choices are between bad or worse. Praesi can either play the wasteland game, or bleed all their blood through their skin. The Drow could either kill each other, or have their entire race die anyway. See any meaningful choices there?

The thing you're completely ignoring is that not everyone starts at the same starting line. Not everyone starts with the same advantages or disadvantages. The point of "saving" the praesi isn't excusing them for their crimes so much as

giving them that ideal freedom of choice that you like to pretend already exists by burying your head in the sand.

Is it a reality that people are consigned to different circumstances? Yeah. Do you have to live with it? Yeah.

That doesn't make it right. That doesn't mean things should stay the way they are because that's how it's always been.

You want to talk about personal failures? You're right, the greatest personal failure isn't failing, but not trying. And if you see the state of the world with all these flaws and refuse to attempt correcting those problems, using cop-outs like 'everyone makes their own choices' or that people are what they are solely because of 'personal failures'? You're the biggest failure of them all. Because at that point you're so scared of trying that you're pretending there's no need to try at all. Convincing yourself that it's like 'fighting against entropy'

People aren't the way they are just because of what choices they make. You don't choose where and when to be born, and people are often a product of their upbringing more than anything. There is no baby in the world born dreaming of becoming a psychopath or an abuser.

luminiousblu

"It's easy to judge people by the sacrifices they didn't make when you're not the one making the sacrifices." Whataboutery. I'm not saying it's not alright, or not normal, to bend under pressure. That's what True Neutrals do. I *am*, however, saying that it means you literally matter less – especially in a world where picking a side can straight up grant you plot armour.

"Seriously, after an entire volume about an entire race that were given the "choice" to cannibalize each other for millennia by an automagically binding contract with Below made on their behalf, before their ancestors were even born?"

That is not a "whip". That's like arguing that the Byzantine Empire's situation in the later stages of its life was a "whip". The actions of your predecessors affect the choices available to you today. The actual contents of the choice are completely irrelevant to the fact that the choice exists.

"the point is that the choices are between bad or worse" Irrelevant. You tried pulling the last chapter as an example, but the last chapter gave the mayor a choice between Horrible and Terrible, and he chose the one he believed in. What you're missing is that the choices

involved aren't about the material impact, or even spiritual impact. It's about agency. Will you make your choice, or will the choice be made for you? Are you the main character of your own life, or are you a side character even there?

"See any meaningful choices there?"

The choice between Good and Evil. Yes. I do see a choice there. I'm not even religious but if you had any notion of how Abrahamic religions or – before them – Zoroastrianism works you would recognize the pattern. You can choose to be Good, or you can choose to be Evil. Neither is actually invalid, but you must make the choice. Stop thinking of things in terms of empires, timelines, or life and death. This is about personal choice, not about historical pivots.

"The thing you're completely ignoring is that not everyone starts at the same starting line."

I'm not ignoring it. I'm dismissing it as irrelevant. Your choice doesn't need to be successful or long-lasting to be a choice. To choose – that is, in and of itself, the freedom you're given. That is, in fact, the only freedom anyone is ever given in this series. You can't say the Praesi have no choice and then turn around and claim Callow, or Procer, or even people in real life (who aren't bound by a Story) do. You are, as you said, always affected by your background. You can't escape that, you can't even equalize it, it's inherently impossible due to straight up physics. You just have to deal with it and realize that people are defined by the choices they make. They're presented with different choices – a poor man will never be presented with the choice to fund a well for a village out of pocket, and a rich man is unlikely to ever run into the question of whether it's better to work day and night trying to secure your daughter's dowry or to spend time with her while you still can – but they'll always have choices, and we can judge them by those choices. We DO judge them by those choices. That's what happens in real life.

"That doesn't make it right."

There is no right and wrong. It's either true or false. Arguing the Story is right or wrong is like arguing the Fireball spell having a twenty foot radius blast is right or wrong or the fact that if you jump off a tower you take 3d6 damage unless you make a tumble check is right or wrong. You're running into the is-ought problem.

"with all these flaws"

And here's the point where we diverge. I see no flaws. I see things I disagree with and I would get rid of the

things I disagree with, but there's no inherent flaws to any of this. You don't have to say something is wrong for you to not like it.

"using cop-outs like 'everyone makes their own choices' or that people are what they are solely because of 'personal failures'?"

These aren't cop-outs. These are the hard truths in a world where you have metaphysical concepts of Good and Evil right there. Good is just as hamstrung by this as Evil, for the most part, but the key is that you can always make the personal choice to stand by what you believe in or to bend to someone else's will. To be a main character, even if your tale is minor and meaningless, or to be a side character in the story of someone who matters more than you, because they were the mover instead of the moved. Read some Nietzsche.

"You don't choose where and when to be born, and people are often a product of their upbringing more than anything. "

And that is completely irrelevant. We judge people by the things they do. If you read Sauron's backstory, he comes off as sort of screwed over by everything, Melkor, Eru, everyone; but when it comes down to brass tacks, it is Sauron who couldn't overcome his paranoia and fear, and turned to darkness when he had a chance to return to the light. Nobody except maybe Gandalf pities him for that, and Gandalf's pity is quite the same as the Grey Pilgrim's (whose name is a reference to him) – "He's a pitiful monster, but a monster to be destroyed nonetheless." You can't shrug off responsibility or agency because you were born in a bad place, not if you want to matter. Again – look at the Mayor, who was put in a bad spot but made the choice he could live with. Hell look at Akua deciding to rebel against an entire empire, look at fucking Catherine in Chapter 1 of Book 1 when she made the choice to fight the guards. You can always make a choice, and it is "the only choice that ever really matters."

Rook

I don't think you're understanding the point of the message, let me try to make it simpler.

The point is that although people can and should be held responsible for their actions, you can't hold them responsible for who they are.

Have you ever considered why places like Praes produce so many Terribilises and Akua Sahelians? Is it just their blood that's foul, is it just random chance? Do all those kids born in Praes get up one day and make a

choice to become that kind of person because Praesi genes are just shit? Of course not.

Sure you can and should hang the Akuas of the world. Sure you can and should hold them accountable for what they do. But understand that at some point even Akua Sahelian was born an innocent infant and was a blameless child. That's the real problem, that's the point. Two year old Akua Sahelian never made a choice one morning to grow up to be a psychopath that murders a hundred thousand people. The problem is what caused that kid to become what she is today, and it takes an unbelievable amount of willful ignorance to believe it just happened on its own or that it's because of some sort of failing in personal responsibility.!

It's extremely small-minded to treat the Akua sahelians and the Amadeuses of the world as the 'enemy' or the 'problem. They're not the problem, they're the symptom. The problem is the circumstances that cause them to become broken people, and the enemy is everything that perpetuates those circumstances. EE even made the concept easier to grasp by putting a face and a name to it, in the form of the Bard whose entire goal is to keep those circumstances intact.

Akua has a right to be disappointed in Catherine. She treats the Praesi people like the problem when she of all people should know that – regardless of the fact that many of them aren't forgivable and many of them do need to be held responsible for what they did – the problem isn't the people so much as the circumstances that create them.

[Liliet](#)

(I don't think Bard is the problem here)

Rook

We'll have to agree to disagree, I think she's by far the biggest problem here.

Her entire existence revolves around making sure everyone is on one side of the game or the other. Capital G Good or capital E Evil. The Hierarch didn't wound her because he was powerful, he wounded her because he didn't choose Above or Below. The failure to convince or manipulate him into doing so is what really set her back.

I sincerely believe that without the Bard's intercessions, countries like Praes would have had a

real shot – over the hundreds of years – of becoming far less awful than they are now.

Liliet

I think that the interpretation that this is what her job is, isn't actually for certain 100% confirmed canon. It's a popular fan theory, somewhat well-founded, but it's not actually a fact yet.

luminiousblu

You 'can't hold them responsible for who they are'? What the fuck does that even mean? What can you hold a man responsible for if not for himself? People make choices. Circumstances shape those choices. That doesn't mean the person doesn't make the damn choice.

"Have you ever considered why places like Praes produce so many Terribilises and Akua Sahelians? Is it just their blood that's foul, is it just random chance? Do all those kids born in Praes get up one day and make a choice to become that kind of person because Praesi genes are just shit? Of course not."

"It's extremely small-minded to treat the Akua sahelians and the Amadeuses of the world as the 'enemy' or the 'problem.'"

See, this here is why I find talking to you incredibly tiring because you're still, even now, making it out as if Evil were somehow inferior to Good. Akua and Black aren't 'the enemy', nor are they 'the problem'. In fact, they're not even 'a' problem. Not by the standards of this world.

"Sure you can and should hang the Akuas of the world" See? It's difficult to talk to you about problems and so on when even as you say "the Akuas and Amadeuses aren't the problem", you evidently think of them as people to be gotten rid of. Even if you think of them as a symptom instead of the disease you still are clearly biased and have made your decision ahead of time that they're somehow wrong and need to be 'treated' – which is why I said it's absolutely insulting. These people are adults who have made their decision. If I came along and told you all of your values were wrong, and therefore I'm going to be taking them away and re-educating you the 'right' way, I think you'd probably be pretty goddamn angry about it. Which is why it's so damn tiring to talk to you about circumstance, blame, and responsibility – you're already convinced that one of the sides is wrong,

instead of realising that from the very beginning the entire point of the Named system is that you're not right or wrong; you're someone who's the main character of your story, or you're not.

"Some sort of failing in personal responsibility" Stop trying to attribute blame. It's impossible to have a discussion with you because you think I'm trying to excuse someone, or to defend someone, or to blame someone, or to damn someone. No. You are responsible for making a choice and the choices you make. Your circumstances are not a valid defence. Just because daddy neglected you as a kid and Stephen was a huge jackass to you during school and kept taunting you about how easy your sister was doesn't mean you're not responsible for murdering twenty people in broad daylight with a submachine gun.

"Akua has a right to be disappointed in Catherine." Yeah, for other reasons. Not for disapproving of Praesi culture, which is clearly what she actually disapproves of – Catherine has a right to disapprove of most anything, and Praesi culture hasn't really sat well with her since the very beginning. It's not as if Catherine thinks of every single Praesi as monolithically and cartoonishly evil, or else her characterisation has backslid all the way to Book I.

"Regardless of the fact that many of them aren't forgivable and many of them do need to be held responsible for what they did" I don't agree with any of this moralising, just so you know. Personally I find Catherine's simpering about humanity this and humanity that more unforgivable than anything Black's pulled.

[BarthHumphries](#)

> Which is why it's so damn tiring to talk to you

I haven't been part of this conversation, but it's just a meaningless internet argument. If you walk away from the discussion and the other person thinks they "won" because you didn't refute their latest post, it's no big deal.

If you're tired of the conversation, just stop. Hope this helps. 😊

Rook

This isn't a whole new idea that exists in guide verse, it's a very old and very well documented phenomenon.

It's the exact same type of shit as people being born into a poor family being more likely to be poor, people that grew up in the hood being more coarse than people in upper middle class suburbs, and people born many south African countries becoming literal murderers, because that's what happens when your environment has you choose between being conscripted as a child soldier or dying.

People are largely a product of how they are raised, and their character or perspective determined far more by where and when they're born than whatever choices they make growing up. You can hold the individual responsible for their crimes but it's hilariously wrong to try believing the cause is because of personal failings, as if nearly anyone else wouldn't have turned out similarly in the same situation.

You're so enamoured with the idea of pinning blame on a stray dog for *choosing* to act like a stray dog that you totally reject the notion that it's more important to focus on what keeps causing these dogs to turn stray in the first place. It's ludicrous.

luminiousblu

Me? Pinning BLAME? Have you read anything of what I'm written? I don't think a single thing in this entire story was worthy of blame. Nobody has done anything I think was worthy of blame, there is no blame or fault to be attributed in making decisions that you believe in. You're the one who's arguing from a moral standpoint, not me. I'm simply pointing out that people do have free will, and that's the entire point of the last chapter – that even when all of your choices are shite, you do have a choice.

Do you know anything about what you're even talking about? Do you know what the is-ought problem is? Do you know what an Nietzschean ubermensch refers to? I don't generally like insulting people but at this point it's not even an insult I genuinely need to know if I'm wasting my time talking at someone who can't or won't understand. Because it seems to me you're trying to make this into some sort of political bull about how poor people can be ruined by their upbringing or how bullied kids aren't

really at fault or whatever the hell you're trying to communicate because it sure as hell has nothing to do with what I'm saying or the setting this takes place in. It's right there in chapter one, Black says it again in chapter 2, and it's constantly repeated throughout the series, the Wandering Bard says it outright with William (and I know you're about to kneejerk about how evil and unreliable she is, but I don't buy that – the Bard is the most objective character with the fewest crippling blinders we have access to). You always have a choice – to be dragged along or to drag the world along – and that choice that you always have is the one that really matters.

Javvies

Yeah ... that's a huge downside.

On the other hand, they should be able to join up with Grem and his Legions before the Crusaders figure out the weakness of the drow at dawn.

nipi

But would Grem be an ally? And for how long? Remember Cat wants to join the alliance against the Dead King while Praes is allied to him.

Darkening

Depends on what ends up happening with Black I suppose. These legions were the ones that followed Black's lead and basically mutinied against the empire, so they'll follow his lead if he comes back I imagine. I expect Black would be horrified at the idea of letting the Dead King expand beyond the natural barriers that have been keeping him bottled up for millennia and letting him become a potential threat to the empire. Not sure how Malicia would react to them coming back to the fold if they did head back to the empire. I suppose her position is precarious enough that she'd probably welcome the troops, but the troubles with the goblins might raise questions about Sacker's loyalty. I certainly wouldn't expect them to subordinate themselves to her, but an alliance might be doable. At least to get Black back and to get them out of their current mess.

Liliet

““Shit,” he finally said. “You’re sure?”

“We are,” Eudokia said.

"Then the entire north is about to be hip-deep in dead men," Grem bluntly said. "I can't think of another reason for Hasenbach to pull out. The Iron Prince only let us burn our way through the heartlands without lifting a finger because he judged toppling Callow as quick as possible was how the war would be turned around. He wouldn't leave the Vales if he had any another choice, not after committing for so long."

"That is my assessment as well," Amadeus said. "And it means our horizons have just expanded a great deal.""

""I can think of few things more foolish than to underestimate Alaya," he quietly said. "Even now. She's never been one to act without a plan, and that we do not understand her moves should be source of fear and not contempt."

"Odds are she's the one who made a pact with the Dead King," Ranker said.

"It could have been Catherine as well," Amadeus frankly admitted. "She thrives in chaotic situations. It's led her to the bad habit of creating them knowing it improves her chances of victory even if it significantly increases collateral damage as well.""

^^^ Amadeus's reaction to the whole Dead King business.

He's not a fan, but he's not exactly morally outraged lmao.

Either way, I think the Legions are likely to sign on with Cat just out of practicality at this point: it's that or get crushed by the armies converging on them. And Grem and Scribe know Black supported Catherine in this conflict, hell that the conflict was only ever allowed to emerge because of Black's own conflict with Malicia and was a direct result of it. Black didn't just leave, he effectively set Catherine against Alaya when doing so.

They won't be happy at working with her, but I don't think the "going against Malicia" part will be a sticking point.

medailyfun

he had not known the full scope of the pact at the time.

[Liliet](#)

True, but he had no reason to assume any limitations either.

I think he just assumed the situation was ultimately handled by the people who had a better grip on it and focused on his own part.

And in the hypothetical where he's with the Legions and Cat's asking him to join the fray of handling it, I think he'd agree, yeah.

Allafterme

At the very least she can offer them to be ferried the legion to the one remained on Callow for temporary alliance within Iserre

Someguy

Praes can be your ally while still engages in sabotaging you.

[Barthumphries](#)

Typo thread

It'd taken me a long time to realized how lucky I'd been
Change realized to realize

There were others but the author ignores these anyway so...

caoimhinh

Ah, I didn't see your comment, I left a list of the typos I found in another comment below.

[Liliet](#)

Nice to have the confirmation that Catherine is indeed going for the obvious correct move: joining with the Legions. That's going to be a fun conversation :3

Also nice to see the details of Catherine's relationship with Sve Noc. I love how Catherine has serious and thought out arguments in favor of banter ♥ ♥ ♥ Guess when one of your subordinates keeps pestering you about how you shouldn't be this informal, you end up refining your understanding of why you keep doing it anyway ♥

(ilu Juniper never change)

I'm looking forward to the talk with Ivah.

And, dang. That sure was a conversation. I'm curious to see where it leads.

nipi

Not sure its that obvious considering he wants to join the Grand Alliance.

Liliet

Amadeus literally helped her out with that, sending her the correct paperwork for the request.

NZPIEFACE

"When it loses its novelty I'll get herbs for that," I replied. "That's what my pipe was for in the first place."
"Unnecessary suffering is exactly that," Akua said.

I wonder if the Grey Pilgrim will come to the same mindset as Cat if he ever gets near apotheosis.

Darkening

Nice chapter, good to see all the screaming people were doing about how OP the drow are has an answer. Power has a price indeed. Still, come nightfall an army of people able to give a fight to named has a ton of potential once they have allies to guard them during the day. On another note, I find the concern about other gods Sve Noc expresses interesting. Makes me wonder just how many there are running around. We've seen the orc god captain killed, warlock's said to have dissected a couple, and then there's Neshamah and our new Night goddesses. Maybe the king of the elves? Not sure whether to count Bard, she's more a conduit for the Gods to act on the world than a bearer of power in her own right. (Also, is she restricted to Calernia? I don't *think* we've gotten any notion she might be active on other continents, but then the story is pretty limited in scope to this continent for the most part) Anyways, I'm curious how many more old gods are lurking in the background somewhere like that orc was.

Dresden 67

We know there's also a god in the Greywood, the forest in Callow north of the Fields of Streges.

Lavir

It was stated to be more of a nature spirit

caoimhinh

If the Sisters want to learn to banter, they should take lessons from Mighty General Rumena, Lord of Sick Burns and Cool Replies. Also, the moral of Akua's great uncle's story is one we already knew: that Praesi and their highborns have the capacity for kindness, they just are so brutally ruthless that they kill those who display it, and even look with contempt to those that express

their genuine feelings (As was seen by Akua's interaction with her father, and her care for Barika).

Typos found:

- it would have been nothing to be / nothing to me
- crimson on the talons the pair / talons of the pair
- holding my breath you two starting / to you two
- to be halfway decent / halfway
- Well, either that my reaction / that or my reaction
- keep the awake / keep them awake
- Simple temporarily bereft / Simply
- the Dead King should keeping a good chunk / should be keeping
- Though was I was higher / Though I was
- It's be a kinder world / It'd be
- One the eve / On the eve

[Liliet](#)

The interesting part was not the story Akua told, but the fact she told it and the manner in which she did.

The point she was trying to make, and just in general the tone her conversations with Catherine have.

It's very interesting.

Argentorum

The difference between Akua and her uncle is that she learned her lessons too well.

How many choices do we have? Less than we would hope, but always more than we thought. Acceptance is the choice Akua made. She will not be allowed to shirk the weight of it at the very end, I think.

Agent J

Acceptance is a choice, true. But so is Rejection and her uncle paid dearly for it. The point, I think, of Akua's story is that she's damned if she does and damned if she doesn't.

I don't think she wants to shirk responsibility so much as to be understood. The inciting incident was Catherine's offhanded remark on the Praesi take on Kindness. She wasn't irritated by it, she was disappointed.

[Liliet](#)

Exactly.

burdi

still waiting for cat's new Name

caoimhinh

And Amadeus's new Name too. Many are of the opinion he will be Chancellor.

Lavir

He does have a claim for Emperor, as he killed the previous one.

[Liliet](#)

No, actually, Alaya poisoned him. Amadeus reminisced at some point about how much he'd have loved to kill him personally in as painful a manner as possible, but Alaya had dibs XD

PhilzuNeide

I think First Under the Dark is her new name.

[Liliet](#)

It doesn't really sound like a Name. Names are archetypes, expressions of a concept. Can you imagine First Under the Night to be written in lowercase, while referring to Catherine? Even just a part of it? First is not a Name stem.

Like, you can say: Malicia is the empress of Praes, Amadeus was Malicia's knight, Catherine was Amadeus's squire, Hakram is Catherine's adjutant, Vivienne is/was a thief, Indrani is an archer, Masego was Wekesa's apprentice, etc. While saying "Catherine is a first" or "Catherine is the first" doesn't convey any useful information. It couldn't be given to her as a nickname or used to refer to her in a children's story.

This is the difference between just ceremonial titles and titles that are potential Names. Saying "Cordelia is a warden" or "Cordelia is the warden of the West" sounds pompous but not inaccurate, doesn't it?

Antoninjohn

Well it's not like the God's Above will give Heroes the aspect Dawn which will suddenly weaken any Drow they fight

Oshi

Which will promptly get flattened by the Priests of Night. You can only go so far before the other side gets to do things too.

[Dresden 67](#)

Except there already are heroes with light and sun themed aspects. No direct intervention required.

Hell, the Mirror Knight already has an aspect called Dawn.

Lavir

His aspect is a passive not an attacking one.

[Javvies](#)

His Dawn Aspect is a passive stacking buff/augmentation. Every Dawn he sees, he gets a little stronger and faster. I'm pretty sure Above planned to send him after Ranger in a few years.

anon

Come to think of it, wasn't there already a hero who had the aspect Dawn which made him slightly stronger every time the sun rose?

Xinci

I have been thinking of all the metaphysical Dawn stories in-story and without and I see already a hero calling the light to their chest and shining the Light. Birthing a Dawn in the darkness, perhaps even a flying one rising to make the weight even higher. Not even mentioning how big the Dawn Knight is now. Good plays a long game indeed, well so does Evil but damn they got em good this time.

Skaddix

Suggest they have matchups against Hanno. Since most of his powers literally have him using and channeling light.

luminiousblu

>Logic alone leads you to ugly ends because you're dealing with people, not statues.

Yeah uh I'm not really sure about this line. All things considered, if "logic alone" leads you to ugly ends, that just means you forgot to take in a few variables. It's not as if you can't logically treat displays of emotion.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

I believe the point that Cat was trying to make is that thinking strictly logically causes you to think "if A is true, then B is always true." When dealing with emotions, it can be "if A is true, then french onion soup, except that this is my dearest enemy, so SQUIRREL!"

luminiousblu

And my point is that emotion isn't actually illogical, which is a horrendous cliché that needs to snuff it as soon as possible. Emotion is a factor you take into account. It's difficult to pin down, which is why we say it's "illogical", but even someone who's livid and seems to be "not thinking" isn't being illogical – he's just using an entirely different set of values.

Having different values is what we call "mad", yeah, but if there's a method to the madness (and there always is) then you can theoretically figure it out.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed strongly.

Emotion is a shortcut to logic, if nothing else, actually. You don't need to ponder deep implications of an action and how it will reflect on the world at large if you know that it pisses you off / makes you happy.

Admittedly it doesn't always hold, but then logic can be fallacious too.

pagesbe

I think Catherine was warning Sve Noc away from using the same kind of logic Malacia did in Liesse. She didn't account for the human factor; she didn't account for the fact that Akua might massacre Callowans by the tens of thousands, and she didn't account for how livid Catherine would be that she let that happen, or that Amadeus might take offense to her doing something that he had spent nearly his whole life trying to reject and prove wrong.

[Liliet](#)

Admittedly Malicia seems to have accounted for Catherine quite well. Had Amadeus stayed within the alliance as the stabilizing influence he'd been previously, Catherine would have stayed within the dotted lines. It was the conflict with him that led to the whole balance of power imploding.

But yeah, this.

caoimhinh

A curious thing is that, in fact, the reason for Alaya's current crisis is entirely emotional. She is obsessed with control and became paranoid about Amadeus having more physical and military power over Praes than her, so instead of looking at him as her most

loyal companion, she thought of him as a potential threat for her rule despite knowing full well that he had no interest in such.

This led her to support the whole Akua's Folly in order to get her own weapon against the world that didn't rely on Amadeus, yet in doing so she triggered the Crusade, made Catherine further the separation of Callow from Praes (Although Malicia took measures to prevent a full secession), and also drew Amadeus away from her, which in the long run has cost her Wekesa too, since he died due to the Crusade.

Liliet

I don't think this analysis is entirely accurate.

Yes, it stems from Malicia stewing inside her own head, but the worry about Amadeus's power base not being hers was not the only thing there, and even within it, the idea that Amadeus might turn on her was not the only or the biggest thing.

Part of her control issues was *questioning his judgement*. Amadeus himself has, like, reverse control issues, where he'd Rather Have Someone Else Be In Charge, even if he's like 90% sure he knows better. Like he'd love it if Malicia agreed with him on everything and follow his plan exactly but he's not willing to actually take a stand and insist. Not until it's all gone up in flames already, and even then his next action is to fuck off to the border and pretend nothing is happening. Even in his yelling match with Alaya in the epilogue he ends up being like 😊 @ her suggestion that he come home and agreeing with it while having an entirely different idea of how it's going to happen.

Anyway, Amadeus being like "I think this but I'm not SURE and I think you're better at this than I am" puts Malicia in a rather... stressful position. If he's so sure he doesn't know better, *maybe he really doesn't?*

According to her internal monologue in Epilogue 4, she worried that Amadeus was being self-destructive. That he was going to start a war that he'd die in, and that it was his at least subconscious intention. We the audience know that Amadeus is better at separating out his personal bullshit from geopolitics than *that*, but how would Malicia know if he always deferred to her judgement when pressed?

She's not wrong that he's suicidal, and it's not wrong of her to think "holy shit, what happens *when he's not*

there" wrt the power base thing. She strikes up her own relationship with Catherine more or less behind his back, because she doesn't *know* that he's got a plan there that will work. She sees he plans to die, which she is literally correct about, and she's not a fan. Literally nobody is Amadeus oh my god what the fuck-

ahem.

Anyway, I'm saying Amadeus's issues played a huge role in Malicia Doing A Stupid. She might be better than him at administration and intrigue, but she's not better at geopolitics and storycraft, and that... came as a surprise... to both of them? He never *taught* her about it, because he just kind of assumed she already knew all of those things, but she didn't?

I see Amadeus's "you will surpass me, Catherine" as a thing of the same caliber as his absolute unquestioning trust in Malicia. Also incidentally as his romance with Hye which still gives me heebie jeebies and never will not, and just... bluh. She's awful??? Amadeus you have shit taste?

Anyway, yeah. Reverse control issues, and Malicia's worry *for Amadeus's life*.

[Liliet](#)

P.S. I think this "I think I'm right but what if someone else knows better" waffling is also the source of the confusing bullshit that was Amadeus's actions in Book 4. He supports Catherine in everything but doesn't actually actively take a stand in a conflict that he... effectively... initiated? He kind of low key rebels against Alaya but not really? He gives Catherine the paperwork for the application to the Grand Alliance but goes ahead with his plan to undermine Cordelia's influence anyway? Which, I mean, maybe he thought it would help but have you tried *coordinating* Amadeus,

and his dialogue with Ranker in Queen's Gambit, Declined. "If the new generation thinks they're wrong let them beat me first" Amadeus that's literally the worst way to decide anything you Praesi dumbass-

reverse control issues spiraling. Let whatever happens happen, as long as I'm not the person making the decision!

(He recognizes his responsibility for the decisions he's made and their consequences, and considers it

cowardice to blame anything on Fate. Doesn't stop him from being fatalistic anyway???? Amadeus please stop)

[Liliet](#)

P.P.S. Epilogue 3, not Epilogue 4, geez @ my stupid ass. WordPress pls implement an edit function

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I think that line was more supposed to be pointing out her hypocrisy when she's the one talking without thinking it through. She just wants to know if Black is fine or not.

SilentWatcher

No one comments on the best line i have read in a long time?
"Did he use the wrong fork in a cannibal ritual?"

[Liliet](#)

The comment below this one was meant to be a reply...

[Liliet](#)

Reminds me of another Best Line, from Epilogue 4

"“I make a very good lentil soup,” Amadeus suggested.”

Truly they are father and daughter ;u;

Prince vlad

Its written that there are 30,000 drow but weren't there 50,000 drow in the last chapter did they split or this is a genuine mistake by the author?

[Liliet](#)

Where did you see thirty? I paid attention to this when rereading the chapter after seeing your comment, and it says fifty at least twice. I, uh, ~~might have not paid attention to every single word anyway, so it's possible there's a place where it's typo'd into thirty. Knowing erratic that's the exact opposite of surprising~~

Halwar

Hey guys, I started translating PGE for my friends in free time and 'cause I didn't saw translations in russian online I'm not posting it. Do you know, is Erraticerrata against posting? (of course if I will be translating for large audience, I'd like to add a link how they can benefit me in addition to Erraticerrata's) I saw that he didn't want EPUB to circulate, so

maybe there is a reason in lack of translations of this masterpiece.
So as not to bother, maybe there is some FQ section where i can look into it?

caoimhinh

There was a comment long ago, where someone asked Erraticerrata for permission to translate PGE to Spanish, but Author refused because he is planning to have the book published.
He might have changed his mind on the subject, but I don't know, your best chance is to write a comment asking about it in a reply to his comment next chapter so he can answer your doubt.

Chrischinbrush

Just popping in to say I, for one, LOVE the idea of the Priestess of Night with a staff.

naturalnuke

'Fate is not a force, it is just a consequence of the choices we were always going to make.'

Ex-reader

Honestly, I am very disappointed with the recent developments. I started reading this story for pragmatism, for practical evil, not practical good. Why did Catherine suddenly decide to change coats NOW? After all these times? And her power is also borrowed, and unlike Winter relies entirely on the goodwill of the Sve Noc, gone with a snap of a finger. I came for progressive fantasy, and so I will take my leave. Thank you for everything, the ride has been fun.

Konstantin von Karstein

The big theme of the story is that practical Evil is basically indistinguishable from practical Good.

Chapter 4: Reconnoiter

"I see how it is. We agree to single combat and of course you can still use your enchanted sword, but I bring a single massive flying fortress and suddenly it's 'treachery' and 'against the

spirit of the agreement'."

– Dread Emperor Perfidious

Ivah wore my colours painted on its face, as did the drow around it.

Silver on purple, a tree with twin incomplete circles under the branches. The Lord of Silent Steps – though the power of that title had waned in weight with the devouring of Winter itself – still stood tall and blade-thin, pale grey features split by vivid eyes that split the difference between silver and blue. The long overcoat and scarf it wore was flattering to its frame, though the face still remained so profoundly inhuman in some ways I could not help but find it unsettling. The drow had been made from a fundamentally different mold than humans, for all the superficial similarities. The colours the first member of my Peerage wore were unsettling in a different way, though, a reminder that as far as the Empire Ever Dark was concerned I still remained the ruler of the Losara Sigil and a member in good standing of the Sisters-blessed cabal making up the southern expedition. That I had left Ivah to rule and refrained from exercising that theoretical authority since we'd left the Everdark seemed to matter little in the eyes of the Firstborn. There seemed to be an assumption that as First Under the Night I simply found it beneath me to meddle too deeply in earthly affairs. The drow knelt when Akua and I arrived, conversation having died out before we even entered the thicket of trees.

"Well, you look slightly less pissy than before," Archer announced.

I squinted at my friend in confusion.

"Why are you hanging upside down?" I asked.

Indrani was currently hanging off a branch by the mere edge of her boots, scarf and coat rumpled by the merciless grasp of gravity. None of the drow seemed to think there was anything unusual about this, a sure sign they'd been subjected to her presence for much too long.

"It helps me think," Archer sagely replied.

I flicked a glance at the drow and they rose back to their feet.

"You don't have to pretend she's funny, you know," I told them. "Deep down, she also knows that she isn't."

"It is not my place to comment on the wisdom of Mighty Archer," Ivah replied.

There was a beat.

"Should it be granted to me," the Lord of Silent Steps added.

I smothered a grin. Taking well-deserved potshots at Indrani was the sole common ground between all peoples of Calernia. I'd bet even the Dead King would yank her chain if given the opportunity. Archer let out a strangled noise of protest, trying to swat at the drow's head, but instead got tangled in her own coat and began swinging precariously. We all pretended not to see Akua whisper something under her breath just before the branch Indrani was hanging off of suddenly broke and she fell with a yelp.

"All quiet this morning, I take it?" I asked Ivah.

I kept my eyes on it, though even through this careful precaution I could not help but hear Indrani muttering imprecations in half a dozen different languages. For a heartbeat I missed Masego so vividly my heart twanged. It should have been him, forcing her down the tree after she pulled at his metaphorical pigtailed one time too many. I hid the sudden shift in my mood as best I could, forcing a smile as I faced Ivah.

"We appear to be alone in the region," the drow acknowledged. "No runner left from Trouseau after we departed, and so one might presume our presence is still currently unknown."

With the Sisters swatting aside everything remotely like scrying headed in our direction, it might not be wrong. I wouldn't presume, though. Not with Above having so much skin in this race, and Choirs having grown so loose-lipped over the last few years.

"We'll see," I replied. "It'd be an advantage to remain in the woodworks until we strike, but rumours could have a use as well. It'll depend on where the others' armies are relative to us."

I'd rather avoid a battle in Iserre if I could, given that every corpse made here was a warm body that couldn't be thrown at the Dead King, but given some of the players involved I might not have much of a choice about it. I fully intended on evacuating the Legions of Terror that my teacher had led into Procer, after all. Which I imagined would be a less than popular notion with some people, given that they'd been merrily burning their way through the heartlands of the Principate until recently.

"Cat," Archer said.

I rolled my eyes, continuing to face Ivah.

"You've seen the lay of the land on the way to Rochelant," I said. "Will it be bloody ice and snow all the way?"

"Cat," Archer repeated, and this time her tone commanded my attention.

I pivoted slightly only to realize she wasn't even looking at me. Her eyes were peeled on the horizon, to the south. I couldn't see anything there, but then I was no longer Named. That hardly meant I was without tricks, though. I pulled at the Night, untangling a cool thread and sinking it into my eyes. It took a few blinks to adjust, but after that I could see just as well as Archer. I let out a breath of surprise when I caught sight of what she had. *Riders*, I thought. Nine of them, on tall grey horses with long manes and tails. The soldiers on them were in light armour, though sets swaddled in thick furs and heavy cloth hats. Those were spears at the side, I noted, not lances. And they had blades but no shields.

"Akua?" I said.

"Levantine," Diabolist replied. "Though without colours visible I cannot not tell you from which region."

"Well now," I murmured. "Isn't *that* interesting."

The armies of the Dominion of Levant should be making their way through southern and central Iserre right about now, if the rumours were to be believed. Hot on the heels of Marshal Grem's legions. So what were outriders doing this far out to the east of the principality? They were still about a mile and a half out, but these were flat plains so the chance they hadn't seen the massive army of fifty thousand drow encamped was negligible. They were riding closer, though. Most likely trying to get a read on whose camp this was, which would be difficult to make out from that far out.

"I have questions for them," I said.

I felt Indrani's smile without needing to look at her.

"Thought you might," she said.

I cocked my head to the side, still studying them. With the sun out and the imprecisions inherent to a working at that distance, trapping them would carry risks. Best to tinker with the odds a bit first.

"Archer," I said. "Kill the horses."

A good longbow, the kind the Deoraithe used, could have a range of about four hundred yards. Effective killing range should be about half that. Legion-issue crank crossbows, the finest on the continent, could reach three hundred and fifty yards and could be expected to score kills at around one hundred and fifty. I had just casually asked Indrani to kill nine horses in motion at over ten times that distance, and the grin on her face told me she did not doubt for a moment she could do it. I watched with fascination as Archer strung the almost comically large longbow

she usually kept on her back. It'd been crafted in the Waning Woods, I knew, from some sort of magical tree. Then additional enchantments had been laid on it. Back in the old days, Nauk had once tried to draw the string back and nearly broken his arm trying. That the most physically powerful mundane orc I'd ever met couldn't even get that string to move an inch told me everything I needed to know about the absurd amount of tension there was to her bow.

The thing was, I thought as I watched her work, was that most of this was Indrani. Oh, I felt the whisper of power than was an aspect invoked. **See.** But that just allowed Archer to wield the kind of eyesight and foresight the woman who'd taught her to shoot would have by simple virtue of her elven blood. The strength to pull the string came in part from her Name, which up close and personal allowed to be slug it out with the likes of Adjutant and titled fae. But if Hakram, or I for that matter, had been granted the exact same strength and sight we wouldn't have been able to make those shots. The skills, the part that couldn't be replicated? That was all Indrani. Years upon years of nocking and releasing until her fingers bled, until the movements became such a natural part of her there no longer needed to be thought involved. Indrani could and had made a bloody mess of most everything that came up to her when she had her longknives in hand. But it was when she had that bow in her hand that something about her *thrummed*, that it all came together and I remembered that Archer was more than just a name.

It was Name, and she held it for a reason.

Eyes fixed ahead, she breathed out and like poetry in motion she drew and released. Not a single movement wasted, not a single pause. It was almost hypnotic to watch, like waves on the sea – there was no pause or separation to any of the process. Nine arrows flew, a smirk tugged at her lips and before the projectiles even reached their apex I reached for the Night. My eyes were on the Levantines and I felt talons dig into my shoulders, the Sisters with me even if their crow-forms were not. Whispers sounding in my ear, I held my will into shape and forced the Night to match it. And then waited, watching the riders as the arrows struck home. The first hit between the eyes of the lead horse, sinking straight into the skull and killing it instantly. The ninth arrow went straight through the eye of the horse even as the rider began to realize its companions had been attacked. For every arrow to claim a kill had taken perhaps a single heartbeat, from beginning to end.

Sometimes I forgot how terrifying the people at my side really were.

"And now, for the next trick," I said.

Under the Levantines the ground turned to ink-like darkness, growing from a single small mark to a broad circle. The Sisters held my hand, guiding the needle as I threaded it through the fabric of Creation, and when the gate opened every one of the outriders fell through it. If they'd still been on their horses, alert instead of trying not to be crushed by their own fallen mounts, the process might have been slow enough for them to flee it. Night had won over Winter, in the end, and so dawn had its costs. As it was, though? I let the Sisters guide my hand once more and another gate bloomed in front of our group. Seven heartbeats later, nine riders and their dead horses tumbled through. One was screaming in terror at the fall through the sky of Arcadia he had just escaped, though that ended when he felt an obsidian spear-tip pressing against his throat. He swallowed loudly as my sigil surrounded the lot of them.

"Good morning," I smiled brightly. "I thought we might have a little chat, just you and me and all these heavily armed people surrounding you."

My gaze swept across the soldiers, most of which were still in shock. Some had pulled muscles or broken limbs on arrival, the poor fucker to the rightmost having his horse right over his leg. Yeah, that was shattered for sure. It was only when I saw the uncomprehending gazes taking me in that I realized the slight strategic mistake I had not accounted for. I looked at Indrani and Akua.

"I don't suppose either of you speaks any of the Levantine languages?" I grimaced.

Twin shakes of the head. So no Lunara, Ceseo and what was the third one again? Couldn't remember at the moment. Well, it hardly mattered anyway. I couldn't speak or understand any of them. I'd been meaning to get around to learning some tradertalk, which tended to be understood everywhere in southern Calernia, but I'd had higher priorities as of late.

"What I understand of Lunara is insufficient, but outriders sent to operate in the Principate's heartlands should have at least one individual fluent in a Proceran tongue," Akua pointed out. "If only to speak with the local inhabitants. I have some knowledge of tradertalk that could be of use, in the unlikely event this is not true."

My eyebrow rose. Made sense, and worth a shot regardless.

"Any of you speak Chantant?" I asked in said tongue.

"Who the fuck are you people?" a middle-aged mustachioed man growled back.

It was a very impressive mustache, I mentally conceded. It was refusing to be cowed by the scarf meant to cover it, defiantly peeking out over the edge.

"And there were go," I smiled, shifting to Crepuscular. "Ivah, go wake up General Rumena if it's asleep and bring it back here. We appear to have gotten our hands on fresh intelligence."

"By your will, Losara Queen," my Lord of Silent Steps bowed.

I nodded back fondly, watching it move out swiftly to carry my orders. I turned back to the Levantines.

"Surrender your weapons," I said, back on Chantant. "And remain seated on the ground. You are now joint prisoners of the Empire Ever Dark and the Kingdom of Callow."

That'd been a calculated move. I hadn't truly needed to bring Callow into it, or mention the freshly revived name of the ancient drow empire – which, given that the region was still known as the Everdark, meant didn't take any real brilliance to be able to put together the identity of the grey-skinned warriors surrounding the prisoners. It told me something useful, though: everyone who stilled or went pale could understand the language I was speaking. Out of the nine, four gave a visible reaction. One did not, save for moving back to lean against a tree, but the calculating look in his eyes told me he'd not missed a thing. *This one's already thinking of how to get out of this mess*, I decided. There were no visible marks of rank on any of them, but I'd guess he was an officer. Clever sorts could be useful, if inclined to talk, but they could also screw up an interrogation pretty badly if allowed to speak up. Best to separate these before we got into it.

"You're the Black Queen," the maybe-officer suddenly said.

In Chantant, too. Interesting.

"In the flesh," I replied, the irony known to few quirking my lips.

The statement had been the offered opening of a conversation, if I was reading this right, but I remained disinclined to allow the prisoners to know what the others had and had not said. People were always more inclined to fold if they believed someone already had.

"Bring them back to camp after taking the weapons," I ordered the drow. "Leave the one who just spoke behind."

I cleared my throat before addressing the Levantines.

"You were told to surrender your weapons," I said. "They will now be collected. Resist and you will be subjected to force. Obey and you will be treated fairly. I will not warn you twice."

They were soldiers, I thought, but also sworn to a crusade. A warning wouldn't be enough for all of them. One of the outriders tried to reach for his scabbard and got a spear through the palm for it, which had another screaming and struggling until one of my warriors decked him in the mouth. Maybe the officer did not resist. I let the drow of my sigil escort the prisoners without a look and gestured at those who remained to step back. It was sunny morning out, the air was crisp and I met the gaze of the Levantine prisoner without blinking.

"Name, rank?" I asked.

"Wasim of Tartessos. I am second in this band," he replied.

Tartessos was... the second northernmost city in Levant, if I remembered correctly, which was for some inexplicable reason built on the edge of the Brocelian Forest. I'd read in some history that the people from there were known to be hardy and ruthless, which considering the boiling cauldron of beasts they lived next to only made sense. I heard Archer unstring her bow before moving to lean against a tree, likely already starting to get bored and paying only the barest necessary attention to this. Diabolist, though, had been studying this Wasim the whole time in silence. I could trust her to pick on anything I'd miss.

"You are an outrider," I said. "In the service of the Dominion?"

"I gave oath to the Lord of Malaga when there was a call to arms," Wasim said. "By the will of the Holy Seljun, he holds command of half the forces of Levant."

"Implying there is no unified command for the armies of the Dominion," Akua noted in Crepuscular. "That could be of use. Levantine nobility rules its lands with only the barest homage paid to their Seljun, so their leaders might chafe at taking orders from anyone else."

I inclined my head in acknowledgement, never taking my eyes off the prisoner.

"Where are the Lord of Malaga and his army, at the moment?" I asked.

How much are you really willing to tell me when I've made no threat?

"Marching for the capital of Iserre," he replied.

"Lying," Diabolist said.

I sighed.

"And we were doing so well, until that," I said. "You struck me as a clever man, Wasim of Tartessos."

I flicked my wrist at Archer. A heartbeat later a longknife was buried up to the hilt into the tree Wasim was lying back against. Less than an inch away from his jugular. I met his eyes squarely.

"Clever men don't make the same mistake twice, do they?" I asked.

The soldier swallowed loudly.

"They do not," he hastily agreed.

"Where are the Lord of Malaga and his army?" I mildly repeated.

"When I was sent out, they were preparing to take a defensive position to the southwest of here," Wasim said. "Near the town of Maleims."

"To defend against who, exactly?" I frowned.

"The League of Free Cities," he said. "They march against the Tenth Crusade, led by the Tyrant of Helike and their madman Hierarch."

My frown deepened. I'd been under the impression the forces of the League were much further south. They were either moving much more quickly than should be possible for a sizable army, or I'd been misinformed.

"Could be a detached force instead of the main host," Archer suggested in Lower Miezani.

She'd regained a semblance of interest in this, it seemed. Probably because she'd gotten to throw a blade at someone.

"They came from the Waning Woods," I said. "That means they don't have a supply train. If they start splitting forces, either they split their limited foodstuffs as well or the detachment starts foraging."

And there wasn't much to live off of in this region. Sure they could start sacking towns and small cities for their reserves but even then the Legions of Terror had pretty much picked clean most of the principality. You couldn't take much food from people already only the verge of starvation. It could just be a bad decision someone up the chain of command had done – either incompetence or lack of information – but that didn't smell right to me. If they were that incompetent and ill-informed, they wouldn't have made it through the Waning Woods in the first place.

"If we assume the League force was sent out with sufficient supplies, then something prompted that investment of resources," I finally said. "Something we don't know about, but the League's generals do."

"Wasim," Akua said. "Was your band of outriders sent out with specific purpose?"

The Levantine man grimaced.

"We were to investigate rumours," he said.

"Of?"

"Skirmishes between two armies," Wasim admitted. "Legionaries and the League."

I traded a look with Akua. There was no way, we both knew, that the legions under Marshal Grem could be this far east. But there was another army on the continent that fielded legionaries.

So what the Hells was the Army of Callow doing out here, and why the Hells was the League of Free Cities fighting it?

Esryok

Hurry hurry hurry, boys and girls, men and women of all ages, step right up step right up. We've got something for everyone, links you can click on, "voting now" buttons you can click on, a long list of fictional marvels you will wonder at! Make your way over to <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> and see for yourself!

(go vote)

Dauntless

Vote!!

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

Someguy

"I see how it is. We agree to single combat and of course you can still use your enchanted sword, but I bring a single massive flying fortress and suddenly it's 'treachery' and 'against the spirit of the agreement'."

– Dread Emperor Perfidious

I take it that prior to his ascension, Perfidious' given name was Albion?

[tmeenaks](#)

I mean, man has a point. He had to lie, scheme, murder, and commit multiple warcrimes just to get his throne while his Callowan equivalent tugs on a sword stuck in a rock and boom. King of Callow. And don't get me started on what those enchanted swords are. The damned lone swordsman got a feather of an angel as his weapon. I think a couple flying fortresses would even the field a little, in more ways than one

Skaddix

I feel blue balled I want them to find them about Masego and the Warlock and the fall of a city. Looks like we are getting there.

Interesting the Tyrant and Hierarch are not where they thought. If I had to guess a fast moving army that is never where you think it is does seem Tyrant like.

Dainpdf

Not just that, but no one knows their numbers, either.

The two might be connected, if we assume that all the previously reported League troops were scarecrows carried by gargoyles.

nipi

That just begs to question. How many gargoyles does he have? And how useful are they in a fight?

Decius

How many scarecrows can one gargoyle carry?

[Javvies](#)

The plot thickens.

But seriously ... it's a very good question. At a guess, if it is the Army of Callow, they could have been sent to link up with Grem and company and ensure that they were able to make it back to Callow. Or to cover a withdrawal from an attempt to rescue Amadeus.

Or they could be wrong, and these rumored Legionnaires are actually Grem's.

Dainpdf

Maybe Callow got nervous looking at the Tyrant so close to the border, not actually attacking Procer.

naturalnuke

Maybe this whole thing is just a clever(read:batshit insane) plan by the Tyrant.

Death Knight

Clever and batshit insane are always awarded after the plan succeeds or fails respectively. With the Tyrant, it's 50/50.

Dainpdf

I bet it is. Probably the first step, too.

I still wonder when he's going to provoke Neshamah, though. Seems to be one of the only people in whose eyes he hasn't spit yet. Though I guess Cat nasty count, as well...

Dainpdf

*may

Death Knight

Well Neshamah is the OG Evil. I think Kyros might just gush in his presence.

nick012000

The Dead King isn't OG Evil. He was predated by the Twilight Sages, at the very least. He's just one of the oldest *surviving* evils.

Jeremy

So. In Iserre alone, there are 18 k Praesi Legionnaires (including Grem One Eye and the dragon Catastrophe), two Levantine armies totaling 80 k men, the League's forces (somewhere between 40 to 100 k, with the Tyrant and Heirarch), 20 k Proceran troops with reinforcements on the way, Cat, Archer, and Akua with their 50 k drow... and now the Army of Callow.

What glorious, utter chaos this is all going to be. Exactly as planned, I suspect.

Randodude

I can hear a faint sound of the Benny hill theme chase scene.

Now that would be a sight to see

[*Liliet*](#)

Yes, that... that sounds like it accurately describes Iserre right now.

Nguyen Hong Hai

"Once again the land is on fire and it's not my fault".
Yours truly.

Dainpdf

Meanwhile, none of these people are fighting the Dead King...

nipi

Wonder if the the Dead King has a secret pact with that "wonderful child"?

Dainpdf

Maybe. The big question is how long until Kairos betrays him.

Also: maybe the ancient monster under Helike is just a means of communication with Neshamah? I wonder.

Yotz

It seems, we are heading into the Ancient Mosters' Land steadily.

I mean – your friendly neighborhood Nyarlathotep, elves, DK, the Dweller Under Helike, the dead yet still alive thing to be dragged out of the lake on Cordelia's order, *something* on the lower levels of goblin catacombs... When there may be Demons in Hierophant's custody who – perhaps – were released or let loose due to recent events. And the Archer's Best Friend, the Absinthe One, who *supposedly* was dealt with by the Peregrine and Co... The last Red Letter looming on the horizon, for the sake of all things foul and unholy...

PS: Plot twist – the Thing Under Helike was Bard!!!
111oneoneeleven

Also, I need to cut down on ellipses.

Yotz

Also, that's quite an assumption here – to think that Kairos haven't betrayed Neshamah the moment supposed deal was sealed.

Or, more seriously – DK would be quite an oaf to not include that sudden but inevitable betrayal in his designs and plan around it, just like Tyrant would plan around that planning, and then it just Traitorouses all the way down.

Faiir

It sure does sound like four armies and one!

danh3107

A chapter with some meat, nice nice. I suspect that we're going to be running into some familiar characters here soon. We just may get to seeThief (if her name hasn't changed) and Hakram again.

Raved Thrad

Maybe a ViviCat reunion is in order?

"Hi, Vivienne."

"CAT!" *awkward spontaneous hug*

"Uh, hey, you missed me? Did things go to shit that badly?"

"Cat, you're... you're warm."

"Er, yeah, about that..."

"So warm..." *camera pans away*

Gunslinger

Sadly she's as straight as a razors edge

Yotz

Raved Thrad

Breaking out of the group hug, Masego's gaze shifted repeatedly between Viviane and Catherine.

"You're both pregnant."

Hakram, still one-handed, nearly dropped his drink "What?"

"They are both pregnant."

"Er... actually, so is Indrani."

Suddenly, Masego went weak in the knees. "I'm going to be an uncle," he said, dazedly, as he sat on the ground.

Eyes glinting evilly, Catherine smirked. "Just think of it as practice for when you and Indrani decide to hatch one of your own."

Yotz

Well, someone need to be a Loki in that saga – let's just hope that one of the children wouldn't have eight hooves...

Raved Thrad

Who knows what powers the First Under The Night possesses?

Nerfnow

So just to make sure right?

The following forces are currently on the southern front of this world war right

The league army with unkown numbers but we know the tyrant and heariach are with it

The dominion army of 80k split into 2 forces of 40k and under unkown names or leadership

The 20k porcer border army rushing after the league by passed there position

Black legion of 18k under the command of grem and scribe

And at salia there will be 20k conscripts army and there gathering all the remaining nobles armies to bring that up to 40k under control of cordelia and other nobles

And finally we have a heroic band that has Amadeus captured that has saint, pilgrim and the rogue sorc in is heading to saila

Sup

And since we know that the gods above has authorized the destruction of porcer to win whatever they want, only the bard, saint and cordelia know this it means we got a lot of groups with vastly different agendas plotting in this region thag cat has no way to findout before there plots come to fruition

Cordelia – make sure porcer survive and is now unleashing a doomsday weapon to fire, has nominal control of the porcer forces gathering at salia

Gods Above – authorized the destruction of porcer, has an herioc band here and with Pilgrim here thay also give them ability to manipulate the dominion armies at the right time and can also hijack those armies of porcer if they can get a hero to the leadership, and they have Amadeus and are using him to bait others to

Amadeus legions – currently in disarray with him captured, still got Scribe and Grem may be retreating or in pursuit of the heroes to rescue him

The League- Tyrant is a wildcard who may know whats going on but we know Hierarch goal is to bring the choir of judgement to justice and that he been scrying randomly

Out of these groups only the heroes and league know about what cat had done and know about the drow

[Liliet](#)

Saint of Swords is not Gods Above.

[Dresden 67](#)

^^^ This. I don't know why people assume that the Saint speaks for any Choir other than her own, much less the Gods Above.

[Javvies](#)

It's likely related to the fact that Saint appears to have been working with Bard to arrange the downfall of Procer, implying that Above had signed off on it and directed Bard to assist.

[Dresden 67](#)

We don't really understand the relationship between the Bard and the Gods. We also know that the Bard works in mysterious ways. What she seems to want out of a situation frequently has nothing to do with her actual goal.

[Liliet](#)

^^^ This.

[Liliet](#)

She's not even connected to a Choir! Very few heroes are actually!

[Dresden 67](#)

She probably doesn't have a Choir, but we don't know for sure. There was a line back in the Kaleidoscope interludes that made me think she might.

Something about how 'Compassion isn't my wheelhouse', implying that something else is.

[Liliet](#)

I think we would have known by now.

I think it was said that 'she cut Heaven with her sword' or something else confusing like that about how she became a hero, and Tariq has described her as having spent her life 'blurring the boundary between thought and act'. That speaks to me of someone who very much doesn't have anyone giving her directions from Above, nor empowered by anyone's choice but her own.

But, true, we haven't exactly had *explicit* confirmation or anything. That I remember, at least.

RanVor

Because let's face it – she would have no way of pulling off the bullshit she intends to pull off if she didn't have Heavens behind her.

[Liliet](#)

You're assuming she's estimating her capability to pull it off correctly.

RanVor

Well, I guess she might be *that* stupid, but if she's not a credible threat, why even bring it up?

[Liliet](#)

She found a pivot and yanked on it.

Named are always credible threats, however unlikely the odds. Saint is the definition of lone wolf who doesn't care what anybody else thinks about what she's doing, from what we've seen of her. We **SHOULD** be scared, even if her plan is bloody stupid.

RanVor

Sure. Except it's bullshit.

Saint's plan is a massive behemoth of a plot that would require at least majority of the heroes manipulating a continent-spanning story to change the balance of power forever. Something like that is not introduced unless it can actually happen.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think that's what her plan is.

We'll see.

RanVor

Well, I'm basing my opinion on what she told Cordelia in Fatalism III. I don't think she's cunning enough to lie in that conversation. I might be wrong, of course, but she spelled out her plan pretty clearly.

[Liliet](#)

Here's the quote.

““You don't understand what this is, do you?” the Saint smiled. “This is not the War of the Grand Alliance or the second invasion of Callow. It's the Tenth Crusade. You slapped the gauntlet down, girl, and now Below's picking it up. There is no compromise to be had anymore, no subtle manoeuvring. You declared war on the Hellgods, and the sword will not return to the sheath until one side falls.”

“A crusade can be waged intelligently,” the First Prince said. “It must, or it will fail like those before it.”

“That's where you misunderstand,” the Saint amiably said. “You think all of this...”

Her hand moved to encompass their surroundings.

“Is inviolable,” she continued. “It's an understandable weakness. You rule here, after all, and love for your people is no sin. But everything dies, Cordelia Hasenbach. Even empires.”

The blond woman paled.

“This is treason,” she coldly said. “As good as a confession you seek the destruction of the Principate.”

“This whole damned house is rotten to the bone, girl,” the Saint said. “You've toiled and troubled and fought like lion, but it'll die with you. You know that already, deep down. Maybe the Principate was what it should be, ages ago, but it has not been in a very long time. It's greed and power and lies, hungry wars and treachery made into the mortar of palaces. The sickness is all it knows, now.”

"You are mad," Cordelia spoke in a hushed whisper. "Gods Above, your mind has gone and you would take all of us with it."

"Oh, we'll bleed," the Saint mused. "We'll lose badly, at first. And then we'll claw our way back up, inch by inch. Evil always wins at the start, but it's us who owns the conclusion. And from the ruins something better will rise. This empire's already a corpse, but we'll send it off with a pyre glorious enough it'll redeem the old faults."

"I will have you arrested," the First Prince of Procer said. "I will have you killed, if that is what it takes."

"You just worry about getting the armies marching," Laurence de Montfort dismissed. "Odds are I won't survive the scrap, but that's all right. It's a good war to die in. It'll be the crusade that settles it, you see: too many old monsters came crawling out on both sides. Won't be the kind of losses a side can recover from."

"You are not listening to a word I say," Cordelia whispered, aghast.

The Saint of Swords rose to her feet jauntily. The First Prince's muscles clenched, though she managed to flinch when the Chosen approached her. The old woman clapped her shoulder.

"Keep your chin up, girl," she said. "Sacrifice is always ugly business, but we'll come through in the end. To rise from the ashes, there needs to be a fire first."

The Saint of Swords strolled out, boots slapping against the stone, and the sound of the door closing behind her was the death cry of an era."

Oh, and a little before that

"Not merely the conclave," she deduced. "It is your own notion to have the Black Queen named Arch-heretic of the East."

The old woman grinned harshly.

"They were eager enough, truth be told," the Saint said. "Just needed a little push. That I needed to give it at all is what got me in such a meddling mood. You're flinching, Hasenbach. You've been

down here too long, the iron's beginning to rust.""

From this, I read the following: Saint has opinions on Procer and how it's run, and her opinion is that it's objectively coming to an end, and the only choice they get to make is how many of the Enemy they take with them. Her conclusion being "all of them if possible". While counting Catherine as Enemy.

She thinks it'll work out this way on its own, if she just gives it a little push. She sees it as *inevitable*, not a convoluted plan.

RanVor

Well, my interpretation is that she intends to draw all the forces of Evil to Procer, to fuel the narrative momentum of the Crusade with its destruction, with a side benefit of purging a corrupted nation to make place for a pure one. It makes sense, in a rather demented fashion.

[Liliet](#)

My interpretation is that she sees all the forces of Evil as *already converging* on Procer, and the only choice is whether they (cowardly) try to make a truce or fight until the end.

RanVor

So this is it. I think we have to agree to disagree, because I don't see how either of us has any chance to actually convince the other.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed.

It's been an interesting discussion though.

[Javvies](#)

I think Saint is hoping/expecting/aiming for the forces of Evil to pull something along the lines of another Triumphant – mass conquest by Evil, followed by everything falling apart on them with a new generation of rising Heroes.

Sounds massively complicated, but when you realize that it's predicated on "Heroes and Good always win in the end/eventually, no matter how good a

winning streak Evil has had earlier", Saint doesn't actually have to do all that much, though. She just needs to keep the Crusade from being smart about things, ie stopping a truce with Callow to prioritize the Dead King, keep the Crusaders trying to fight in all directions simultaneously. That is, all Saint thinks she needs to do for her "plan" to "work" is ensure that the Crusade/Good-aligned forces, go down fighting Evil, and then the next generation of Heroes who do the liberating and defeat Evil will be in a position to forge a new nation based solely on the principles of Heroism and Above out of the ashes.

Liliet

Heroes don't win on the basis of having a quality power base. They win on the basis of being right. If Laurence believes she is right, she has basis to believe she will win. And she doesn't need other people to confirm her opinions to think she's right



Javvies

Thing is, Saint doesn't actually have to actively do all that much to get her "plan" to work – after all Heroes always win in the end, even if the Villain had a terrifyingly good run in the middle of things. Saint's trying to set up the Dead King to pull a Triumphant – conquer successfully and then collapse with a new generation of rising Heroes.

Liliet

Exactly.

She doesn't need Heavens' explicit support to think it will work, she's just confident that her read on the situation is correct.

RanVor

You're almost right. Almost.

You see, all Saint has to do is to ensure that nobody will question the necessity of having to fight all Evil nations on the continent at once – and for that, she needs majority of heroes on her side, just because they could easily challenge her on that. And the only way to get all those heroes to subscribe to

her insanity is to have at least a guarantee of non-interference from the Heavens.

Javvies

I think that it doesn't matter as much to Saint's "plan" whether or not anyone on the Crusader side questions the necessity of fighting everyone else, as long as nobody can actually prevent the Crusade from fighting someone. After all, Saint didn't seem to care about Cordelia questioning the "plan" and calling it stupid.

And she pretty much locked that in already when she got Cat declared Arch-Heretic of the East. Because there's no way to cut a deal with or otherwise avoid fighting the Dead King, the Tyrant of Helike/League, or even Praes (eventually). But Cat and Callow don't really need to fight Procer and the Crusade on offense, and if the Crusaders don't attack Callow because they're busy fighting elsewhere ..

Oh man, there's an explanation for why the Army of Callow might be in Procer – Saint (or someone aligned with her plan) swiped some Crusader troops and raided Callow to provoke a response into Procer.

That said ... I'm pretty sure that while Above may or may not have explicitly ordered Saint to take this course, they certainly aren't objecting to it.

RanVor

Actually, the League can be neutralized laughably easily by killing the Hierarch or otherwise removing him from power. He's the only reason the League even exists as a unified political entity. Once he's gone, their cohesion will collapse almost instantly.

Praes is pretty much crippled by now, and prolonging the conflict is unlikely to help here. Malicia's best option is to withdraw from the war and prepare for seemingly inevitable clash with Callow.

Callow and the Empire Ever Dark are already working against the Dead King. The only reason they aren't allied with Procer yet is that the Good guys are too dumb to realize that.

The only enemy Procer actually has to fight is the Dead King (and the Ratlings, but they haven't attacked yet). All others can be quickly pacified, delayed or even allied with... Unless somebody makes sure they aren't.

Javvies

Ehhhh, killing the Tyrant of Helike would probably require a Heroic Band, or at least a group of Heroes working together, to accomplish. And they'd probably need to get through his army somehow, which makes a sudden decapitation strike decidedly difficult for a pickup group of Heroes without an army in support, at which point you're more or less back to fighting it out.

Anyways, the point is, even if people question the idea if fighting everyone they can simultaneously, unless they have a way to stop fighting some of those opponents, and keep them from attacking at the same time, there isn't really all that much anyone can do to really stop Saint's plan from proceeding at this point.

As an analogy, Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican residents can complain about Federal priorities and Trump as much as they want, but without statehood (or moving to a state and becoming an eligible and registered voter there), they can't do all that much to change things.

Besides, most other Heroes are probably busy dealing with the Dead King, not thinking through what Saint is "planning". After all, most Heroes generally don't actually need to do much thinking ahead and/or planning – they can afford to just charge in blindly and have faith and trust in Above and Providence that things will work out all right (for them/their goal) in the end, because that's the way the world and story tends to work if you're a Hero. That is, even if there are Heroes who would oppose Saint's "plan", most, if not all, of them probably don't even realize that Saint has a "plan".

Gunslinger

Wait why is this? She wouldn't be a hero if she didn't have their approval. Plus Pilgrim seems to have been in on her plan too

Liliet

She had their approval to *become* a hero. Doesn't mean they whisper in her ear about her every action, only the Choir of Mercy does that. And we have Word of God confirming that it doesn't work like 'fallen paladin' rules: the further you stray from your Role the weaker you get as a Named, and heroes who betray their morals end up broken inside. There's no explicit revocation of the powers granted.

Do we have any kind of indication Pilgrim was in on the Arch-Heretic plan? It goes rather directly against his stated motivation for not allying with Catherine before Keter – he wanted to help keep Cordelia's dream together.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

Brokndremes

Porcer -> Procer*

...sorry.

edrey

this is way too much, only the dead king army miss there, only one thing, i believe akua spoke in lunara in the battle of the camps, three words but still

Dainpdf

Oh, good catch! Gotta check it out, but it may be the beginning (or middle? End?) of some nefarious plan she's brewing.

[Liliet](#)

She said she knows /little/ of it, not that she doesn't know it entirely.

Let me pull up the quotes and check.

““Glory in strife,” the beggar screamed out in Lunara.

Did Catherine know any Levantine tongues? Most likely not. Still, a responding battle cry was in order. It was the heroic thing to do. Something about Callow? Akua pondered her understanding of Catherine's temper. I am angry, the sorceress decided, because I am disappointed as I have mystifyingly failed to grasp that the Heavens prefer their pawns powerful yet rather dim. I must now protect the venerable sanctity of farms and countless peasants everywhere, as I am very concerned with their fate even though they are ignorant and full of lice.

"Fuck off and die," Akua called back, tinting her voice with wrath."

...okay this is not the quote I thought this would be.

Also we don't know for sure if she answered in Lunara. She comments that Catherine likely wouldn't even understand it, and she's actually trying to live up to her disguise here. Actually even with the assumption that Akua speaks Lunara I get the impression that "a corresponding battle cry" would make sense as a response to the tone, just Catherine /also/ crying out in this situation even without understanding the words.

And "glory in strife" strikes me as the kind of word combination that, presuming Lunara is at least distantly related to Chantant which Akua knows, could be recognized even with a dim grasp on the language. Hell, even without a relationship like that I remember "glory" being one of the English words I knew at the age of like... 8.

I don't think Akua has anything to gain from being dishonest here.

Paollo passoline

Thank you!

Dainpdf

Damn. Quite the cliff to hang from.

Also, much appreciate all the Archer and Cat (and Akua) time on this chapter. They've become quite a team. Thank you for the chapter!

Darkening

Well that's ominous as hell. Not many reasons I can think for Callow to be around here. I've gotta admit, I'm very curious to see how the League's army performs. They've got the stygian spears with their incredible reputation that we never got to see used back in book 2, the very disciplined Helikean army, the fanatics of Bellerophon that will probably die before breaking and finally have good military leadership, and the standing armies of the others. I'm curious if mercantis got in on this too, hiring up what's left of their mercenaries, or if they left the official cities of the league to fight this on their own. Or maybe it's funding their supply situation. They can certainly afford it. But really, this diverse toolkit of different armies, led by a Tyrant, which is a Name with a well deserved reputation on the battlefield. I can't wait to see what he does with them, with most of the heroes too busy with the dead king to bother him.

Dainpdf

I doubt Mercantis is parting with any money unless they're somehow being given more. Unlike the rest of the League, they have no need to obey the Hierarch (who seems to hate them, given his comments on their envoy way back).

[Euodiachloris](#)

I don't think anybody actually *likes* Mercantis. 😞

Dainpdf

For the right price, though, Mercantis will like **you**!

Nerfnow

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Amadeus legions – currently in disarray with him captured, still got Scribe and Grem may be retreating or in pursuit of the heroes to rescue him

The League- Tyrant is a wildcard who may know whats going on but we know Hierarch goal is to bring the choir of judgement to justice and that he been scrying randomly

Out of these groups only the heroes cia the god above and league via Hierarch know about what cat had done with the drow

Skaddix

Not really Saint of Swords flipped the table cause she thinks Procer is too far gone and too corrupt. But she doesn't work for a Choir like Pilgrim or Hanno so there is no proof she did it cause the Gods Above told her.

[Liliet](#)

^^^ this. We know Pilgrim wanted to keep Procer intact when he spoke to Cat before the Keter expedition. The Choir of

Mercy, at least, certainly didn't have a pre-existing intention to condemn it.

RanVor

If so, then either Tariq doesn't know about the plan (which I find unlikely, considering he's currently disobeying Cordelia), or he's since got on board with it. Assuming the latter is true, that's at least two heroes with the power and authority to make it happen. I imagine that if the Heavens were opposed to the plan, they'd at least let their favorite minions know they're disapprove of what they're doing.

[Liliet](#)

Or he low key disagrees with Saint but finds it more productive to rope her into going along with his plan than to argue / oppose her, now that the deed is done.

And the Heavens don't seem very fond of giving their minions their opinions when they disagree. See: the fucking House of Light schism. If they allow two parts of the House of Light to excommunicate each other without weighing in on the disagreement and while still providing Light to both, they aren't going to interfere with mortals settling their wager with Below.

Choirs do – interfere, that is. Saint isn't connected to a Choir, though, and different Choirs seem to have very different opinions on how things should be done.

You're FAR overestimating the cohesion there.

Gunslinger

Hmm this answers my previous question but I'm still torn by it. Dooming Procer to the Dead King is a pretty big thing. Not something Tariq would let by easily. In fact his previous opposition to its destruction could be his personal opinion but if the gods above spoke to him he'd fold

[Liliet](#)

Gods Above don't speak to their heroes.

RanVor

Not directly, no. But the Choirs do, so the option is still on the table.

[Liliet](#)

True!

Dainpdf

Could be. I'd wait for a more explicit position before I judge him.

Pilgrim is definitely ruthless enough to let a kingdom die if he believes it will serve the greater good. He does not have the same hatred of nobility that Saint does, though.

Dainpdf

Heroes have a clear ability to disagree with the choirs (lethal though it may be, with judgment), perhaps with the exception of Contrition.

We saw that in the latest Tariq interlude, where he could have refused to go and stayed with his not-wife, and with the fact that heroes can fall.

Heck, I'm not sure but I suspect if Saint continues going for maximum butchery of all she deems evil she might fall herself.

[Liliet](#)

^^^ this.

The side of heroes has full free will and as much independent autonomy as the side of villains does, just less infighting.

Dainpdf

I wouldn't say "full" considering two of the three choirs whose effects we've seen in detail eff with the head of the recipient, but outside that yes.

[Liliet](#)

Depends on how you define "free will".

I don't get the impression that the angels fucked with Willy's head much, he was already contrite before meeting them, they just more or less confirmed what he was already thinking in a grand divine way – which also happens to match the dynamic in all other hero/choir relationships we've seen. Hanno was confused about the concept of justice and rather remained so after meeting Judgement, Tariq more or less summoned the Ophanim to him through the power of thinking the exact same

things they do (and they don't talk to him when he's thinking things they don't agree with, see: his family drama in the bonus chapter. I get the impression that Choirs can't fuck with the heads of *Named* much, I mean fuck Catherine's genuinely prone to being contrite but she still told Contrition to fuck off successfully *while seeking resurrection from them*. Named are more or less defined by having strong will and conviction that cannot be shaken easily even via supernatural means, and angels don't have a super special backdoor to that, even with their own champions.

Dainpdf

I'm not sure whether Will and Hanno got their Names before speaking to the choirs. Actually, no, I'm pretty sure they didn't. And Cat seemed pretty sure that Contrition can basically browbeat any mortal.

Heck, people were impressed she stood up to the choir. That implies it was not fully expected. Part of that is she's wasn't that contrite back then.

There is more wiggle room with Judgment – see the boatman – but to refuse them will break a mortal – again, see the boatman.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, they got their Names in the process of interacting with the Choir, your point? Catherine stood up to Black's Name-pressure before she was Named too. Will isn't a result of being Named, it's a prerequisite.

And Catherine, again, *came to them*. With a demand, at that.

You do have something of a point, the Choirs are bloody terrifying. I don't think I'll fold on this until I know the boatman's story though

[Javvies](#)

The Choirs are bound by the rules of the story/narrative – remember, she rearranged things to be playing a quasi-heroic Role in that moment – she claimed to be the heir to the Throne of Callow, with an enemy, and pulled the Sword from the Stone – that's a "Heroic Moment" that leaves you living

– the Narrative mandated that she walk out of that a living person, not undead or a disembodied soul possessing her own corpse.

She demanded that the angels play by the rules of the Narrative and give her the resurrection to which she was Narratively-entitled, and then she popped out a new Aspect of Take on them when they tried to resist.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

And the story doesn't say "and then the angels overwrote the hero's will to make them their puppet". The story says "the angels empowered and guided the hero".

Dainpdf

Oh, my point was that the Choir didn't appear to Named and then convert them. How that was relevant to what you were saying now eludes me. Apologies.

[Liliet](#)

...basically, the tl;dr of my point is that the question is not whether or not the Choirs are *capable* of subverting the mortals' free will (they are if they try, we know that) but if they *do*. To their chosen champions, specifically. Named are universally strong-willed enough that merely being near an angel won't overwrite their entire personality the way it happens to an average person – again, that's a prerequisite.

My argument is that they *don't*. Whether it is because they don't have the capacity to or because they choose not to is not, to me, a meaningless distinction, since I see them as more of an automated system than individuals capable of meaningful choices.

[Liliet](#)

* not a meaningful distinction. Fuck. WORDPRESS EDIT FUNCTION PLS

[Euodiachloris](#)

The Choirs are more insidious than just reaching into potential heroes' skulls to remake those brains the way they'd like them to be – they find

people willing to choose to let them... direct... them, instead.

Which involves... influence. But, consent to hand over the keys to the locks is sought. Always. Good luck evicting the new... perspective... afterwards, though. 😊

[Liliet](#)

That's about as far as I can see it going, yeah.

With the clarification that I don't think Choirs have deliberate agency in this: it's a more-or-less automated system, angels aren't moral agents. Antropomorphizing them is a mistake 😊

Yotz

Contrition may stand as an exception not due to Heroes bound to it not having the option to disagree, but due to them being so traumatized by their own acts that they simply unable to chose it.

Also, Saint may be following the footsteps of the last of the Greyhill Paladins, if you are correct.

Dainpdf

Well, if one has the ability to guilt almost anyone into compliance, isn't it essentially taking away their free will?

TBH Justice does a similar thing, except by throwing one's imperfection into one's face until one submits.

Yotz

I'd say that's more akin to a conspiracy of convenience – arguably, last true moment of free will for each Choir-connected comes in the moment of formal request from a mortal; after that, mortal's interests are either in complete alignment with the Choir's (Contrition), or are always of secondary importance and subservient to the supreme moral absolute of the Choir (Judgement).

Elaborating on that – in case of Contrition time may heal the wound, lessening the motivating drive of the original crime, but since the Choir is changeless by its nature, it maintains status quo by constantly reopening wound and reverting mortal to a starting point – until the contrition quota

would be met. Which is to say – not in mortal's life, probably.

With Judgement one simply surrenders the morally dubious right to judge to unarguably morally impeccable source – the Choir. In such case all one need is faith – for even if you can't understand why exactly the punishment was meted out in each particular case, you have unerrable, sinless, by definition morally superior Choir to lean on; and simply devout yourself to fulfilling their will. After all, they know better than you, their vision is clear, and their Judgement is not clouded by lies, preconceptions, and sentiments. If you go against their will, you are left to rely on your own sense of just – your faulty, flawed understanding of it. Which goes against your nature that led you to the Choir in first place.

Now, Mercy is an odd one in such perspective. Not long ago, there was a bout of discussion in regards to imprecise nature of suffering measurements and consequences of that imprecision for relation between the Chosen and the Choir.

Given that many – if not all – situations where Mercy is involved can not be solved with clean-cut choice between some suffering and *no* suffering; but, rather, routinely devolve into a choice between arbitrary non-zero amounts of suffering; the roles of mortal and Choir in that pair may be reversed.

Since the Choir of Mercy can't make a choice that'll lead to increase of the world suffering, but are forced to choose nevertheless – the mortal takes on active role in the union. The weight of choice lies on him, freeing the Choir from Azimov's trap ; of course, the mortal must face the repercussions for increasing the measure of pain, which makes the Chosen a sole exception to the inaction rule – and we see Pilgrim reflecting on how he is damned, but being at peace with it, since by accepting the evil on himself, he spares the others from it and all the pain related.

In essentiality, Chosen of Judgement and Contrition forfeit their right to free will by surrendering the burden of choice for clarity of vision in former case; and seeking redemption – and damn the price! – in latter. Each problematic situation you may find yourself in would be immediately solved up on-high – all you need to do is to follow instructions as precisely as you possibly can.

Chosen of Mercy come as more free-willed simply because it's they who make all the decisions in their union – unlike the strict non-negotiable dictate of two other Choires. Mercy usually simply informs you that there is pain somewhere, and someone ailing. How to resolve situation is up to you in such case. You'll be damned by any choice you'd make – but at least you soothed some pain, and made the world a bit happier. That's why, probably, Mercy doesn't make formal contracts – they just make you feel, and leave actions – or inactions – to you. You seek Justice, you seek Redemption – but Kindness finds you by itself. And its blade cuts deeper than Judgement or Contrition could ever even imagine.
...or could've, if they could imagine things in first place, that is.

[Liliet](#)

It's been repeated many times that Hanno is a very atypical hero of Judgement. "I do not judge" is an exception. Normally, Judgement heroes are very much known for meting out their own verdicts.

You can't extrapolate a pattern from what we *explicitly* know to be an exception.

Yotz

But then again, what are the qualities need to receive a positive answer from Judgement? I mean, if they routinely chose only people of certain mindset, those people would act simply as semi-mindless appendages of the Choir: they'll have enough free will to seek and destroy, but not to act beyond the dogma.

Then again – the pool is too shallow for concrete conclusion, even with Hanno being atypical: we just can't tell what typical is here.

[Liliet](#)

Very true.

Dainpdf

Quite the essay.

Yotz

Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa...

Dainpdf

That was a compliment. It was insightful and interesting.

Dainpdf

Oh, and I prefer to think of it as her pulling a Miko Miyazaki.

Yotz

...
And now I need to re-read that too.
Damn you, Sheoldred...

RanVor

So am I the only one who sees obvious ways the Heavens can benefit from Laurence's plan?

Dainpdf

Just because the motives seem to fit doesn't mean it's happening. And I suspect you have a different perspective on the Heavens than I.

But do tell me how it helps their quest of preventing pain and eradicating evil.

RanVor

Oh, I am sure that my perspective on the Heavens is VERY different than yours.

For starters, I do not believe that preventing pain is anywhere near the top of their list of priorities. Sure, there are the Ophanim – but that's only one Choir, and even they care more about smiting Evil than actually sparing people suffering.

In my interpretation, the gods – all gods – are dogmatic. Their first priority is winning the wager. The way they try to achieve it differs between Above and Below, but in both cases, all other concerns are subordinate to that main goal.

Now, the Principate of Procer is obviously faulty as a Good nation. The nobility is corrupt, self-serving and impious. The tenets of the House of Light are perverted to serve earthly pursuits. The common people are oppressed and forced to fight in petty civil wars, giving their lives for greed of

the Princes instead of protecting their land from the predations of Evil. It's not hard to understand why the Heavens would be displeased with that. I don't see why wouldn't they consider it expendable enough to sacrifice it to ensure the downfall of their opponents' greatest success, especially considering that when they win, they can build another, better nation on top of it.

You can, of course, disagree with me, but I have neither time nor energy to argue with you right now, so don't expect me to reply.

Dainpdf

It is doubtful whether the Saint's plan will guarantee the downfall of the Dead King, or even Cat or Malicia. I also doubt that Cat counts as the greatest success of the Gods Below, especially now that she slipped the apotheosis trap. Malicia is also floundering, herself. Is the largest good nation in Calernia really worth sacrificing for this? Especially when it is in the middle of fighting the Dead King? This strikes me as throwing the baby out with the bath water.

RanVor

I meant Neshamah, but whatever.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

tfw you give your regency to someone on the good side and they join the fight against the baddies but you come back with a baddy army

caoimhinh

Interesting, so the Legions of Callow are also in the region? Time for gathering forces!

Typos found:

- It'd be and advantage / an advantage
- given that ever corpse made here / every corpse
- Will it by bloody ice and snow / Will it be
- I cannot not tell you from which region / I can not tell you
- The thing was, I thought as I watched her work, was that / delete one of the 'was'
- power than was an aspect invoked / that
- allowed to he slug it out / allowed her to slug it out
- people already only the verge of starvation / on the verge

Nerfnow

Seems to me that the that we underestimated the Heroes and there are doing the same thing the dead king did with his plan back in the day,

By taking Amadeus to Salia they taking initiative and forcing a fight there and by giving that breaking speech to Cordelia they got her preparing something no one would have predicted and can be blamed on the villains in the aftermath

And since Cordelia is gathering the rest of the porcer nobles that either werent in the city to begin with or on the frontlines the destruction of Salia will be the effective end of porcer as the the remaining nobles on the frontline will be easy pickings for heros to influnce as they fight by heros side against whatever

And since most will believe that the villains were behind it no one will be left that knows what the heroes are plotting

lqueenofblades1

Why do you keep saying "Porcer" lol. It's "Procer"

Yotz

Probably because of close reminiscence of character traits of Proceran High Society with that of porcines depicted in fables and folk tales.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

To Pork, or not to Prok. Is that the question?
Yes, our Proceran folks are depicted with a distinctly Porcine nobility. The biggest influence (current terrestrial tech here) on whether the Pig you raise grows fast is what & how much you feed it. So our society depicts Pigs as greedy. Proceran has waged war of conquest against every neighbor nation. Greed = Conquest.
That is all

[Liliet](#)

I like this idea ;u;

[Sugar Roll](#)

Whoa, Cat just said she didn't have a Name anymore. So the Squire and the Black Knight Names are up for grabs.

lqueenofblades1

We don't know if Black has transitioned. Squire is up for grabs, we don't know about Black.

And honestly, I'm hoping that Abigail chick becomes the Squire.

[Liliet](#)

We know for certain that Black has lost his Name from the Epilogue. He's not out of the woods as far as being Named and generally tangled in the story, but Black Knight isn't him anymore.

"Ah, already under the spell. He had neither heard nor felt the man cast. Interesting. He truly was bereft of even the smallest trace of his Name."

"“I am,” Amadeus said, “no longer the Black Knight.”

“You don't fit that groove anymore,” Marguerite said. “

[Liliet](#)

And I'm hoping Ines does. Abigail seems far too determined to NOT make any more effort than she absolute has to. Blindingly competent non-Named is the path she's walking by choice ♥

Andrew Mitchell

Now that's a VERY interesting idea. Fits with the text nicely:

Andrew Mitchell

"Ring the bell, soldier," the man in plate said.

His eyes were wreathed with light, she saw as she faced him. No, with Light.

"Chosen," she croaked out.

"Go," he said. "Your courage tonight did not go unnoticed."

[Liliet](#)

Yes! I [made an analysis back then on it being likely](#), and I still haven't seen a reason why it wouldn't be.

Except for the meta reason of the number of people I expect to get heroic Names now reaching three, so maybe my logic is flawed somewhere.

Or maybe we're going to get a lot of new Heroes real soon



Yotz

The question is: how?

There are not that many reliable pathways between Callow and that part of Procer, to my recollection: Northern Pass near Harrow; Red Flower Vales, utterly devastated by the Warlock and the Witch; and Waning Woods.

...Plus the fourth option, of which below.

First option would imply some sort of deal between Cordelia and Regency – which brings the question: what was promised; while Vales can be reopened by more or less mundane means – in which case, that may be purely Callowan initiative.

Third variant is completely improbable without Wild Hunt cutting a deal with either Regency or Hellhound personally – for neither of them have insanity of that particular hue that is needed to just brute-force your way through that hellscape, paying for passage with lives. Which brings us to the branching path – instead of using Hunt's influence to clear the way through the Waning Woods, whoever cut the deal with them could opt for a Gate option with assistance from certain one-eyed mischief-maker.

Then there is a fourth option.

Once which doesn't rely on the Army of Callow, but comes with its own slew of sub-branches.

When Wekesa rerouted hellgates by creating a stable portal loop, there was a significant contingent of legionaries left in Hell. There is a person who holds dominion over nearby part of the Weave. Forced to survive, legionaries might have made a deal with a certain DK, and now are unleashed on the south of Procer since they, technically, does not belong to him, and therefore are free from the limiting factors of his condition.

Alternatively, they weren't able to survive incessant onslaught by the local denizens, and consequently were revived by the DK with the goal of using them in partisan/provocateur actions behind the enemy lines.

And lastly and very alternatively... Part of the Left Behind or not, but certainly of the Legions – well, remember all those tall-tales about *another* person who, according to rumours, would've been able to gnaw a part of Hells for herself. May she never return, as they say. Well, there may be an itsy-bitsy mishap with the last part, about never returning...

//wildmassguessing(walloftext).end

[Sugar Roll](#)

They could have gated with Larat. Not sure if the wild hunt's oath to Catherine is still stands but if it does, that would have been it.

Yotz

I mentioned that under the Hunt clause – ending with “certain one-eyed mischief-maker”.

But – yes, that’s an option.

On a side note – if Drow are now so susceptible to Night/Day metaphysical cycle, how Devouring of Winter affected the Hunt, both Winter and Summer sides, I wonder?

Antoninjohn

Maybe the troops the Warlock left in hell came back, Cat would be happy with that

[Liliet](#)

Omg yes

Mike E.

But how tainted would they be? I recall Zeze purging a group of non-legion soldiers in the middle of one of the Liesse battles because they had been exposed to corruption for a very brief period and he was following legion protocol for exposure. Can’t imagine being trapped in hell coming out any better.

[Fayhem](#)

It’s specifically demons that can taint/corrupt mortals, and those are each drawn from a specific hell; the chunk of the 15th that Warlock abandoned was left in one of the hells inhabited by devils, not demons. In other words, profoundly inimical and hostile to mortal life, but not inherently corruptive. Remember, good ol’ Nussy set up a whole civilization in one of the hells and the people who live there appear to be more-or-less normal; or at least, as normal as you can be when you’re living in a society custom-designed by the Dead King. So I’d still call that chunk of the 15th showing up ever again a very long shot, but it’s not intrinsically impossible. Just very, very unlikely.

Yotz

Depends on whenever they come into contact with a Demon of Corruption during their involuntary residency there or not. Per protocol demands Zeze purged anyone who was hit by metaphysical fallout of heavy Demon usage in the area, not just anyone who fought against random devils. And given that corruption is specifically that particular Demon domain... Though, I see how, say, incessant hatred towards anything and everything, being a byproduct of Hatebringer’s influence, can

be considered corrupting influence despite not being *corruption* per se.

But still – all things considered they may come out squeaky clean in essence, if slightly singed in form.

[Liliet](#)

Only specific Hells have demons.

Galvador

Which sister will fall to the dead king i wonder.

[Liliet](#)

Why

Galvador

Because it would be very tragic and impactful if it happened so it might. Dunno if it counts as rule of cool but something like that.

[Liliet](#)

And let's all give a collective prayer of thanks to Erratic for not doing things "because they would be tragic and impactful".

RanVor

I honestly think there's nothing wrong with doing things that are, as Galvador put it, "tragic and impactful", as long as they are not ass-pulls and don't contradict the established facts within the story. Tragic events create tension, and tension is good and necessary.

[Liliet](#)

It's a little more complicated than that.

We've had tragic and impactful deaths in the story – and every single one of them served to push character arcs, character relationships and thematic points forward. Nilin, Nauk (sort of), the Gallowborne and personally John Farrier, Sabah, Wekesa&Tikoloshe. Every single one of these events kept echoing for a while after it happened, and the latter two are going to keep echoing yet. They changed the entire setting into 'a place where two of the Calamities have just died'.

If someone dies, it's not just 'impactful' in the 'the readers will be sad' way. It's impactful in the 'the

entire setting gets shaken up by the fact that this is a thing that can happen in it' way. That's the kind of scale that major character deaths work on in Guide.

What narrative and thematic benefit would there be to one of the sisters dying? How will it push the story forward? How will it change other characters' actions and attitudes?

Will this change be good for the story?

That's how you fucking write character deaths. That's how Erratic does.

RanVor

Well, of course you have to build upon it. That's how writing works, and that's what I meant by creating tension. Everything has consequences that have to be taken into account. That doesn't mean it shouldn't be done. It just needs to be done well.

[Liliet](#)

I didn't mean that "erratic refuses to do things on the basis that they would be tragic and impactful". I meant "erratic does not consider the potential for tragic impact to be sufficient basis for story events to happen".

I meant that just because it would be really sad if something happened, doesn't mean it will, in Guide. It would be *really* tragic and impactful if Indrani died during the Sve Noc fight, but it would also serve no useful purpose for the narrative, so she didn't. And I called it back then that she wouldn't because it was bloody obvious, and because I've learned to trust Erratic not to pull this kind of shit just for shock value.

Deaths get properly built up to, in Guide.

You can't just say "gee when will a sucky thing happen" and expect that it will.

RanVor

I disagree. Something being tragic and impactful is a valid reason to do something in story, and there's nothing wrong with that. But it needs to be done well, with all consequences taken into account – otherwise it would disrupt the flow of the story, instead of changing its direction.

[Liliet](#)

I think we're having a terminology issue about the word "impactful".

My point is that the story needs to *demand that specific impact*. Not just "an impact."

I don't disagree with you, and I don't think you disagree with me. Do you really think one of the sisters will die before the end of the story? What do you think the impact of that will be, if you do?

RanVor

I don't have an opinion on that. As a general rule, I don't make predictions for the story, because I suck at predicting stuff, and also because I like to concentrate on what *has* happened, rather than what *would* happen. I might try to predict immediate consequences of a particular development, but nothing more far-reaching than that.

My point is that if Erratic wants it to happen, it will happen, and it will be brilliantly executed, because that's what Erratic does. I have nothing more to say on the topic, make of that what you will.

[Liliet](#)

You're not wrong.

RanVor

Oh, and I should probably clarify that by "impactful" I mean "an unexpected event that changes the direction of the story".

Also, I do not consider either of the Sve Noc sisters dying *that* tragic and/or impactful.

[Liliet](#)

Well, I'm not sure why we were arguing then XD

RanVor

Generally it's because my words keep being misinterpreted, but I'm not sure if this is the case now.

Galvador

Funny thing is tragic and impactful things tend to happen in guide more than you realize. Liesse' fall, warlocks death, cat getting stabbed in the hearth to get her powers instead of her hand, those things didnt have to happen.

This is a story about stories, are you surprised that tragic and impactful choices are common? This story thrives on tropes and this is one of them.

[Liliet](#)

?

What are you even arguing with? What do you think is my point?

Because it's not "tragic and impactful things don't happen in guide".

It's "erratic doesn't kill off characters for shock value".

Skaddix

Hmm wonder if this lends credence to my idea that the Hierarch and Tyrant did sack the Observatory. I don't see why else the Army of Callow would come out to clash with the League of Free Cities Armies near the Callow border. Seems a sizable army as well so something had to force the clash. The lack of knowledge on where the Free Cities are probably comes down to the Scarecrows are up to which seems a Tyrant ability combined with Hierarch Farsight spying.

Wonder if Hakram and Viv will make an appearance soon or if we just run into Juniper.

I assume the frequent Masego references are foreshadowing to things changing when he comes back. Which we know but the characters wont, I wonder if it might actually be Tyrant and Hierarch that drops this bombshell.

[Dresden 67](#)

I disagreed with your theory originally but I have to admit this does make it more plausible.

Skaddix

Fair enough. Its kinda hard to figure this out without a timeline since we don't know about the time from Epilogue to Prologue to Chapter 1.

Given though that this series has realistic time for troop movements of weeks with Arcadia and months without. Then you figure there has to be some reason for Callow to move a large amount of their forces away from the Praes Border and towards the Procer Borders. Now they could also try to be saving the Legions but I don't see that as an independent move without some deal with Malicia we didn't see and she didn't mention in the Prologue. With Juniper's mother dead and potentially Black, they got no real reason to try to save the Legions and make such a big move without Cat.

So I think it's more likely Tyrant and Hierarch made a move to blind Callow. Especially since Hierarch saw everyone else. Dead King is tying down most of the Crusade, Praes has a Goblin Rebellion, Masego is gone but coming back more powerful/angry, Cat is coming back soon, Hanno is off somewhere, Seer is getting visions. But all in all Callow is sitting fine with no one in a position to attack them. The duo had a narrow window to get in and take out the Observatory before Cat and Masego got back and I think they took it. Plus 4 different armies clashing in the same region sounds full Tyrant chaos strategy.

Yotz

Again, logistics.

Given the protections Masego had there are still functioning, and are powerful enough to scare away the Sisters, hypothetical strike force employed by Tyrant must be at least on the level of Fae or Mighty to strike at the capital of Callow without being noticed by the Observatory and/or mundane means, or numerous enough to disregard being noticed.

Even mobile emitters in faces and assorted bodyparts of Atalantian priesthood wouldn't be able to conceal crucial data – if you see a cataract in your all-seeing-eye, you can bet that in the middle of the blind spot the enemy lurks. And if that spot is moving – an army can intercept whatever is, regardless of knowing precisely *what* it is.

So, that leaves us with small group of high-powered individuals sneaking in – despite the Burning Eye; infiltrating the place that Fimbulwinter is afraid of; and defeating certain Fadila Mbafero without consequences on tectonic scale – all while leaving enough defense systems intact to scare a pair of Goddesses away afterwards. Seems out of the realm of “improbable” and straight to “impossible” to me.

Now, said that – the Tyrant may have a wunderwaffe of some kind, or lead his whole army to strike at Laure while gargoyles are imitating his presence in the Procer, or

something equally insane like that.

But if – if, mind you – he indeed done something to the Observatory, I'm more inclined towards accepting blanket area denial by the Atalantians, than outright sacking of it by direct military incursion of some kind.

Secondly, if he indeed sacked the Observatory, it makes no sense for the Army of Callow to chase him into Proceran land. Left without their all-seeing recon and with dubious provider of gating ability – who shouldn't be trusted by default to boot, they should be focusing on protecting Callow with more mundane applications of military doctrine. Chasing him away from Callow – sure, but chasing an obvious bait into the obvious trap – that's some truly legendary level of incompetence on the part of the military command.

[Liliet](#)

^^ this.

The Observatory has to be physically/magically intact, and Juniper is hypercompetent.

We know those facts.

nipi

Might we get a copy of the map with all the current locations of the armies marked on it?

[Liliet](#)

Not any earlier than Catherine gets it I imagine ;u;

Aotrs Commander

So. 'Drani fired and killed nine shots at what is something on the order of 4000 yards (2.3 miles, near as dammit) – at sufficient distance Cat had to use magic to enhance her eyesight to see the target.

(While I can't find the source now, a few years ago, for a now-abandoned RPG I wrote, I managed to get some data on human visual acuity and my notes say that you can about see a man at 1 1/3 miles with the naked eye, and excellent eyesight at just over three miles; also worth noting that on level ground, a six-foot human can only see a little over three miles before the Earth's curvature gets in the way.)

The longest-range recorded sniper kill, which comes, remember, from a highly-trained specialist using modern weapons and gear (including telescopic sights) is 3800 yards.

One of the biggest long-range/accuracy issues with bowfire start to come from the arrows themselves, especially if they are not, like, aluminium manufactured, because wood is imperfect. (Modern snipers use special ammunition, even, to much higher spec than your regular assault rifle.)

'Drani just shot nine arrows in (assuming Cat was being a little dramatic with "under a heartbeat") in probably no more than one to three seconds with a 100% accuracy, with a weapon with a significant flight time, at that range, massive error margin.

I am pointing that out here, for you all, because I want everyone to appreciate how FUCKING INCREDIBLY GOOD A SHOT Indrani is.

We are talking "better than Hawkeye and Green Arrow combined" by several orders of magnitude.

RanVor

Well, neither Hawkeye nor Green Arrow are Named.

[Liliet](#)

what else is Hawkeye if not Named

RanVor

A superhero?

[Liliet](#)

Hawkeye doesn't have superpowers last I remember. He's just awesome through the power of being really fucking awesome. That's the thing in fiction that Names are a reflection of.

RanVor

Batman does not have superpowers either.

Also, unlike Hawkeye, do have superpowers.

RanVor

*Named do have superpowers.

Edit function, please!

[Liliet](#)

Oh.

I replied to your comment from the notifications panel so I didn't see the correction.

This makes more sense than what I assumed you meant (that Hawkeye does have superpowers and I'm just marvel ignorant, which tbh I largely am)

[Liliet](#)

And Batman's what, non-Named?

Names are, on a meta level, commentary on protagonists getting to pull off unlikely stunts / having the narrative exaggerate their capabilities as far as suspension of disbelief will go. Badass Normal superheroes are *food* for this. And non-Badass Normal ones are too. Superheroes and supervillains are part of the prototype for the hero/villain framework in guide.

Yotz

Cheap-ass Robin Hood wannabe.

[Barthumphries](#)

> a six-foot human can only see a little over three miles before the Earth's curvature gets in the way

Six miles, not three. 😊

Aotrs Commander

All the results I saw on my google search for "how far can you see" said for a six-foot human, on level ground (slash sea level) the horizon was about three miles (5km).

Yotz

Eh, radius versus diameter.

Also, definitions of the "mile" differ.- Chinese mile ("li") is standardized as 500 meters, making your field of vision roughly 10 li – but that's splitting the hair, so we can ignore it.

Yotz

Not to mention that human eye can see up to 45-50 km (30 miles) in more or less decent conditions – far beyond the horizon curve.

[theothin](#)

Not 4000 yards. From earlier in that section:

"So what were outriders doing this far out to the east of the principality? They were still about a mile and a half out, but

these were flat plains so the chance they hadn't seen the massive army of fifty thousand drow encamped was negligible. They were riding closer, though. Most likely trying to get a read on whose camp this was, which would be difficult to make out from that far out."

A mile and a half is about 2600 yards. So over ten times the killing range of longbows and crossbows, but not ten times the overall range.

Still absolutely ridiculous, of course.

Aotrs Commander

It was a little open to interpretation. Indrani's eyes were "peeled to the horizon" and Cat, assuming she doesn't have vision problems, shouldn't have had any difficulty spotting mounted moving humans at a mere mile and a half (she would have needed Night to magnify for details) – and even a mile and a half is closer to twenty than ten times the 150-yard crossbow kill range.

(Notably, however, even in the modern era, most firearm and even tank engagements are still fought at around the 1500-yard mark because of terrain, so, as you say, it's still quite ludicrously good shooting regardless.)

Mike E.

That paragraph was easily the best of this chapter. Indrani is badass. And I love the description of her bow draw weight. Reminds me of Shadbows from the Stormlight Archive, where only Shadbearers had the augmented strength to draw one.

Allafterme

4 chapters in and it started to look like a fine f*cking mess already. I love it 😊

plantsbeans

I like the admiration for Archer's abilities – I've been missing that.

Chapter 5: Consult

"I inherited not an empire but a house on fire: fall in line, lest we all burn."

– First Princess Éloïse of Aequitan

There were few things as frustrating as looking at something you *knew* how to do, had done, and yet did not understand in the slightest. The half-page of equations and formulas that I'd gotten Akua to write down for me was exactly that, when it came down to it. A practical, measurable representation of what I did when I 'threaded the needle' through Creation when making a gate. It'd been gibberish, the first time I glanced at it, but at least I'd thought I knew why. To put it bluntly, I lacked the tools to make the tools that'd give me a *chance* of making the tools that would allow to comprehend what was going on. More than nine tenths of mages were incapable of using High Arcana or even comprehending the principles behind it, after all, so considering I did not have even the slightest trace of the Gift I'd never exactly been in the running. These were numbers, though, so there had to be at least part of them I could grasp. Something that'd allow me to run on more than instinct and power, because neither of those were truly mine when it came down to it and I'd not forgotten my old lessons. Borrowed power always turned on its user.

So I'd buckled down, put away the wine and tried to figure this out from the bottom. The very basics of Trismegistan sorcery, which Diabolist assured unlike most theories of magic out there at least had mostly observable underlying principles. I didn't have a library to ransack, sure, but I had the most viciously distinguished Sahelian in a few centuries around to pick the brains of and two literal goddesses on my shoulders. Both of which had been practitioners of high skill, before they got desperate enough to call on Below. It... wasn't going very well. Not because my tutors were incompetent, they weren't. Much as it pained me to admit it, Akua was better at explaining the magical in mundane terms than Masego had ever been and likely ever would be. As for the Sisters, they could literally *show* me what they meant. I just didn't have the knack for this. It didn't come naturally to me the way the sword and stories had. Even languages, and Gods knew I'd learned quite a few of those by now, were easier to get a handle on. Not easy at all, sure, but if I put in the work even without the crutch of the first aspect I'd ever earned I could make visible progress.

This, though? I'd finally memorized the classical table of elements and most the relationships involved, but aside from a refresher in all things arithmetic I'd not gotten much out of these new studies. Being able to name the limits of sorcery and a handful of fundamental laws didn't mean I understood them, not truly. I could name past examples of those limits being hit but

it was damnably hard to extrapolate as to how other practitioners might hit them in the future. Like having a phrasebook for a foreign tongue, then being asked to write a philosophical essay in it. So much of sorcery was about context, years of learning and studies, and I simply didn't have that. I wasn't sure I ever would, to be blunt, or that trying to obtain it was the best use of my time. Practically speaking, I got more out of a spar with Archer than I did of an hour learning about ritual theory. I passed a hand through my hair – it was unbound, for once – and sighed. The unpleasant truth was that if I'd started these studies years ago, just after becoming the Squire, I might be getting somewhere useful by now. Instead I was stuck depending on the advice and understanding of others.

That wasn't necessarily a bad thing, I thought. Not all the time. But I'd walked into some nasty messes lately by sheer arrogant ignorance, and I couldn't count on my friends to pull me out of them every time. Not with the kind of opposition there was out there. There were some heroes I'd survive blundering against, but that didn't hold for all of them. And the heroes were almost a second thought, compared to the ancient thing that was marching south at the head of undead hordes. I gathered the handful of parchments splayed across my low table and slipped them back into my saddlebag, closing the clasp. I'd been circling the same few paragraphs for the better part of an hour now, there'd be no progress made today. Besides, I'd begun another project. The Everdark had been a wake-up call in a lot of ways: about how I'd been fighting, about who I should be fighting. And there, like in sorcery, ignorance and recklessness had begun to cost me quite a bit. If I was to get involved in the wars scouring the Principate – and I was, it was the only possible way I could see of getting the Liesse Accords signed – then I couldn't just go in like a drunk brawler and swing at everything in sight.

The Dead King was on the march, and that changed everything.

I couldn't keep dropping geographical features on armies when I'd be needing those same armies to take the field against Keter before long. Not only was I weakening the same Grand Alliance I needed to keep from collapsing, there was a very real risk that everyone I killed down here would get up and start fighting for the other side at some point. Burning the dead would greatly limit the spectrum of necromancy that could be used on them, Diabolist had assured me, but not prevent the magic entirely from being used. Even a mass grave filled with ashes could be a threat if the Hidden Horror got his hands on it. Diplomacy would be the preferable option here, but I'd tried that before and my knuckles were starting to bleed from the amount of times the door had been slammed on them. I'd been named Arch-heretic of the East, and while back in Callow that'd been met with indignant riots the title would weigh a lot more in the eyes of the western half of Calernia. That I'd effectively been made the head of the drow

religion would only make it worse, and there would be no keeping that under wraps for long. The only way I'd get the other nations to sit at the table was if they no longer believed they could really win against me without losing everything else.

Which meant I was going to have to kill some very powerful people before the year was out.

The Grey Pilgrim couldn't be one, because if I killed him then the Dominion wouldn't stop before either was I buried in pieces or their country was a heap of cinders. I'd made my peace with that. While not someone I'd ever trust, he was someone I could work with. The Saint, though? I'd need her head on a pike before I got anywhere. Considering I had serious doubts even dropping an entire mountain on that old monster would kill her, I needed to prepare something that would. The voice in the back of my head that sounded like my father kept reminding me that relying on an artefact was the kind of foolishness that got villains killed, but that wasn't what I was doing. Not exactly. I was crafting a tool, in the same way a goblin alchemist would craft munitions. My sword and scabbard had been propped up against my table when I took them off my belt, and I leaned over to grasp them now. No goblin steel blade, this, or shard of Winter given shape. I'd made a request of Sve Noc before we left the Everdark, when my strategy had begun to take shape, and it had been fulfilled.

The scabbard was carved obsidian, a tale writ in runes of some fool girl who'd made an accord with sister-goddesses. The characters were twined around something else, a declaration of intent: *Losara Queen, First Under the Night*. There was power in putting truth to stone, especially when you had been part of the story told. The blade within the sheath had not left it since the first rest, the only visible part being the long handle of onyx and amethyst. I'd learned the uses of those stones well, in the last few months. One to ingest power, the other to facilitate communion and connection to the divine. Closing my fingers around the handle I closed my eyes as well, breathing in deep. The Night slithered through my veins, answering the call, and I felt the weight of the crows on my shoulders. They approved, these quarrelsome goddesses of mine. That was not nearly as reassuring as they believed it to be. I focused, clearing my thoughts and-

-and the folds of my tent were unceremoniously pushed open.

"The Queen of Callow alone in her tent, 'handling her sword'," Archer mused. "There's *definitely* a joke in there."

I bit back an irritated reply, eyes fluttering open. The Night turned to smoke, leaving me, but there would be time enough later. Every hour I could spare, in fact.

"I assume you came in for a reason?" I said.

"There's word from our scouts on Rochelant, so Rumena wants to see you," she replied.

I grunted in answer, rolling my shoulder questioningly. The pop that eventually ensued served as a reminder that sitting on the ground for a few hours had actual physical consequences these days. I put my hand against the table to push myself up before pausing under Archer's bemused gaze. I chewed on my lip, then called on the Night again. Darkness gathered around the sword and scabbard like flies to honey, for a moment emptying the inside of my tent from every speck of shadow. I heard Komena laughing in my ear, before she leant her hand to the shaping: making power stable and solid was always more difficult than just seizing it. I leaned on the long, crooked staff of ebony now in my hand to drag myself up to me feet. Indrani's hazelnut eyes were studying me curiously.

"Gonna tell me what that was about?" she lightly asked.

"There's no point in having advisors," I said, "if I don't occasionally take their advice."

"Ooh, *cryptic*," she praised.

"Well, I am a priestess," I drawled back. "You may now guide me to my humble flock, wench."

She grinned.

"You know, in Alamans romances that have very nice illustrations of what Wicked Priestesses of Evil should wear," Archer informed me.

I rolled my eyes and pulled ahead of her. She was still trying to convince to wear clothes that in this weather would get me frostbite in very inconvenient parts when we got to the mouthy old drow's tent, but that was where the easy mood died. Rumena Tomb-Maker had looked unflappable even when throwing gauntlets down simultaneously at the feet of both the Longstride Cabal's most dangerous Mighty and myself at the peak of my mastery over Winter. That it now looked somewhat disturbed while looking at the map of Procer we'd taken from our Levantine prisoners was not a good sign. Akua was already lounging in the back of the tent, which was deserted save the two of them. Less than surprising, given that it was still daylight out and most drow hadn't yet emerged from their dawn-induced slumber. The general barely glanced at the staff I was leaning on, but I felt Diabolist's gaze linger. I did not meet her eyes, instead limping to sit across from the old drow who had greeted me with a mere nod. Archer unceremoniously dropped down at my side, though given the flask that'd mysteriously appeared in her hand I doubted she'd be paying much attention to the proceedings.

"Report," I simply said.

"Lord Ivah has returned from Rochelant," Rumena said. "The city is already under occupation."

My brow rose, and my wariness as well. Humans stepping on other humans wouldn't wrinkle the Tomb-Maker's brow, which meant there was more to this.

"By who?" I asked.

Akua cleared her throat.

"While Lord Ivah was not familiar with the banners being flown, it offered detailed descriptions," the shade said. "Two emblems are being flown: that of the Hierarchy of the League of Free Cities and the personal heraldry of the Theodosians of Helike."

I started in surprise.

"I thought the Hierarchy had refused a banner?" I said.

"He did," Akua amusedly replied. "It is blank cloth, and so even more easily recognizable than heraldry from a distance."

I mulled over that. The Hierarchy's personal banner would be flown regardless of his actual presence, given that he was in theory the supreme commander of the military forces of the League, so that didn't give us much. Neither did the Tyrant's family colours being up there, unfortunately. The villain was essentially a sack full of wet and angry cats made into a person, so schemes were only to be expected. None of this, though, explained why Rumena was feeling unsettled.

"There's more," I stated, and it was not a question.

"As there were no armies encamped outside the walls and no visible watch in place, Lord Ivah infiltrated the city," Rumena said. "The humans within appear to have gone mad."

"Define mad," I said.

Akua stepped in.

"There appears to be a revolt taking place," she said. "Citizens are forming tribunals and killing officials and prominent individuals after public trials, under the supervision of Helikean soldiers."

I blinked.

"Supervision," I repeated slowly. "They're not being forced?"

"Lord Ivah reported feeling the urge to join these 'trials'," General Rumena said. "And that the urge grew stronger the longer it remained within. This is... unusual. Though this took place under the glare of the sun, such influence over our kind has no precedent to my knowledge."

I felt talons digging painfully into my shoulders and winced. The Sisters weren't pleased that someone might be meddling with minds of one of their own, even one who'd chosen to swear itself to my service.

"Aspect, you think?" I asked Akua.

"Hard to tell without taking a closer look," she admitted. "Large-scale manipulation of minds by ritual is not unprecedented – Dread Emperor Imperious once compelled an entire army to suicide – but the Carrion Lord's scuffle with the forces of Helike should have killed a significant portion of their most skilled practitioners. I am not certain they could accomplish such a working anymore. Not directly."

She paused.

"There is, of course, another path possible," Diabolist said. "Binding an entity capable of such influence would require fewer mages, though it would carry significant risks."

I closed my eyes and counted to ten.

"Tell me someone didn't summon a fucking demon in the middle of a continental brawl," I asked.

"Someone didn't summon a fucking demon in the middle of a continental brawl," Indrani eagerly replied, the slightest of slurs to her voice.

I ignored that, for all our sakes.

"Akua?" I pressed.

"In other times I would wager only the full Stygian Magisterium capable of that tier of diabolism," the shade finally said. "But the Tyrant of Helike has proved... surprisingly well-informed. I would not dismiss the possibility out of hand."

I clenched my fingers into a fist until the knuckles paled. Of all the *violently idiotic* things to do. If a demon got loose with this many armies in the region, the damage could be... Staggering. We could lose the entire centre of Procer in a month, if it went wrong, and by the time the dust settled the final contest over who owned Calernia would be between demon-corrupted puppets and the armies of the dead. Where were the fucking heroes when you actually needed them? A whole warband was willing to show up for

the Battle of the Camps but this somehow did not require their attention? I forced myself to calm down. Angry thinking was sloppy thinking. We didn't know for sure it was a demon. It could be an aspect or a ritual, or half a hundred tricks I'd never heard about. We'd plan for the worse, but I wouldn't allow myself to get stuck in the perspective it was necessarily what was taking place.

"All right," I said, letting out a long breath. "Our approach needs to be adjusted."

"How so?" General Rumena asked.

"If this is the Tyrant screwing with Procer with sorcery or his Name, we let it go," I reluctantly said. "I'm not starting a war with the League over this, ugly as that reality is."

"If our assumption is correct and the 'legionaries' the League were seen skirmishing with are truly the Army of Callow, we might already be at war with them," Akua pointed out.

"We don't know for sure," I said. "It fits, and my instinct is that Juniper's out there, but I'm not going to act based on just that. It could be deserters from Marshal Grem's army, or a raiding force he sent out. It could be a scheme, if someone knew we were coming, to bait us into starting that very war. And even if *was* Juniper, we don't know the context of those skirmishes – and note they were that, skirmishes. Not a field battle."

"You do not believe that, not truly," the shade said.

"My beliefs are irrelevant," I sharply replied. "There's too much at stake here for hasty decisions, and too much we just *don't know*. Someone out there set up this game, Diabolist, and until we know who that is I'm not picking any fights I don't have to."

Silence reigned after that, and Akua simply inclined her head in deference.

"And if it isn't?" Archer nonchalantly asked. "Magic or an aspect, I mean."

I put a hand on the low table, feeling the cool polished surface against the warmth of my flesh.

"Containment," I softly said. "Observation. Then, if necessary, we purge everyone inside."

I would not allow a demon to run rampant this close to so many armies and Named. I would not allow the *Tyrant* to wield that dangerous a tool when both those things were so close, as that might even more dangerous. If the city could not be saved, then I would see it burned to the ground. It was the closest thing to

mercy I could still offer. The Liesse Accords would ban the summoning of demons any circumstances, I thought with irritation, not that it meant anything until they were signed. *Allowable Use of Non-Creational Entities, And Circumstances Therein*. There was an entire section of the treaty dedicated to this stuff. Considering what it had to say about angels it wouldn't be all that popular with some people, but then others would be less than pleased about the parts pertaining to devils.

I did not mind beginning to enforce the sheerest common sense onto this continent at swordpoint before signatures had been put to the Accords, if it proved necessary.

"Then you would have us prepare for battle," General Rumena said, tone neutral.

"You have your orders, Tomb-Maker," I said.

There was a whisper of power in the tent, and the phantom weight of the crows on my shoulders. The old drow took in the sight of the Sisters manifest and immediately bowed its head.

"By your will, First Under the Night," it replied. "I will begin preparations immediately."

The weight was gone, quick as it had come, and I let the general leave the tent without further comment. My eyes moved to the map on the table, the small stones that had been placed on it. We were a day's march from Rochelant and whatever awaited us there, now. There'd be answers soon enough.

"If it is not a demon," Akua suddenly said, breaking through the silence. "If the Kingdom of Callow is not at war with the League... Then there might be an opportunity awaiting."

I picked up the black stone representing our army and spun it idly between my fingers. My gaze remained on the inked borders and cities of the Principate of Procer. On the few coloured stones marking the forces we knew about. The two armies of the Dominion, the rumoured Proceran relief force coming from Salia. The most likely current operating theatre of the legions under Marshal Grem. Where we'd believed the armies of the League to be, though that would need reassessment. And far to the south, the duped border army of the First Prince desperately hurrying back towards tactical relevance. The thorough interrogation of the Levantine outriders had wielded more information than anticipated, even if a lot of it was rumours.

"You want to make a deal with the Tyrant of Helike," Indrani guffawed. "Because *that's* going to end well."

"An alignment between Callow and the League alone would force the Grand Alliance to the peace table," the shade pointed out. "The

addition of the Empire Ever Dark further tips the balance. We would be as much of an existential threat as the Dead King, in some aspects. The alignment need not last forever for concessions to be extracted."

There was a pattern somewhere in there, I thought. Oh, it looked like sheer bloody chaos at first glance but I'd fought wars before and something about this was raising my hackles. Someone had helped this storm to brew, and that meant someone would benefit from it. Malicia had once told me that when beginning a scheme, one must first consider the desired outcome. She was a lot better at this game than I'd ever be, but I could derive some use from that lesson: what did the players in Iserre want? The Grand Alliance wanted to crush the invasion as swiftly as possible before sending all its forces north. The Legions of Terror, if their march upwards was any indication, wanted to use the northern passage to retreat towards Callow. The League was the entity hardest to predict. It had two heads, the Hierarch and the Tyrant, and it was unclear who was really holding the reins of the horse. *If anyone is at all*. If they'd wanted territorial gains, I thought, they would not have come this far north so early. It would have been sounder sense to smash the Proceran border army in Tenerife then quickly move to occupy a few southern principalities while the Principate was forced to deal with other threats in the heartlands. Instead they'd joined the complicated dance taking place in Iserre.

"See, the problem with that is that at some point we're at a table with the Tyrant," Indrani said. "That's basically throwing jugs of oil at a bonfire, Akua. He's gonna fuck *someone* before that conference is done, and it might just be us."

Remove the League forces from Iserre, and what did you get? Eighteen thousand veterans under Grem, my own southern expedition of fifty thousand and possibly a portion of the Army of Callow. All of which would join up into a single force when faced with external foes. Against that, a relief army from Salia that should be at least thirty thousand to be worth throwing into the mess. Eighty thousand split in two from the Dominion. And maybe, though to be honest the chances weren't great, that army of twenty thousand from Tenerife would make it in time to participate. I doubted anyone from the League would have been able to predict the kind of army I'd come back with, but then they might have just been betting blind on my coming back with *some* kind of force. East against West, to paint in broad strokes, the Grand Alliance had us beat in numbers. We'd have better soldiery, though, and unless the heroes stepped in we'd have the only Named on the field. If truce couldn't be reached there would be a clash on a massive scale, and one of those coalitions would come out of it shattered. Put back the League onto the field, though, and suddenly the difference was obvious. Like Indrani had mused days ago, neither coalition could commit to that kind of a clash

because both ran a risk the Tyrant would come swinging at their back when they were occupied.

This, I decided, couldn't be the Hierarch's game. Unless the man was hiding deep cunning and political acumen behind the rambling letters and had been playing some of the finest minds on the continent – and also me – like fiddles then this wasn't his doing. It would be the Tyrant of Helike, moving through him. *No one can make a deal with the League, because the madman ruling it will refuse to make one out of principle*, I thought. And the Tyrant, if the Eyes of the Empire were to be believed, had been the one to arrange for the Hierarch to be elected in the first place. That did not feel like a coincidence. I closed my palm over the stone I'd been twirling, then absent-mindedly knocked it against the surface of the table.

"But if you're trying to prevent one side from being crippled," I murmured. "Then why are you stirring the pot?"

If the objective was to keep the East and the West from bloodying each other to the extent that no one would be able to stand against the Dead King, it would run against the grain to keep shoving chaos into Iserre. Which he was absolutely doing, if the situation in Rochelant was what it sounded like. *Unless you really don't give a shit about the war*, I thought. *Because the war is just a way for you to get at something so it doesn't matter who wins it, so long as they don't win it too early*. But if that was really the case...

"Catherine?" Akua said.

My head rose. I hadn't realized until now, but silence had fallen over the tent.

"Call Rumena back," I ordered. "There won't be a demon in Rochelant. I'll be heading to the city with a small escort, while the army under it needs to be moving elsewhere. And *fast*."

"And what will be doing there?" Indrani asked.

It had never even occurred to her, I thought affectionately, that she would not be coming.

"Paying a visit to my eternal friend," I said. "To find out what it is exactly he needs so badly from Cordelia Hasenbach."

Alex

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Someguy

Or this could be purely Hierarch's game considering the use of Trials. How Tyrant benefits from this in the long term is a riddle wrapped in an enigma stuffed into a sack full of diseased rats.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

Heirarch would be against scheming as a principle. Making schemes is not Following The Will of The People

stevenneiman

Maybe, but the People executing the puppets of Wicked Foreign Oligarchs sounds more like something that he might do with an Aspect than anything else. Possibly without even deliberately using said Aspect.

nipi

You thing the Tyrant wouldnt find masking his actions as such amusing?

Rook

In the Hierarch's eyes, the law is defined as whatever is voted to be lawful by the People

If the People collectively decide to do something that helps the Tyrant, it not only becomes lawful but also retroactively rewrites Bellerophon history so that it has always been lawful and such that the People have never taken any action to the contrary.

In fact even the retroactive rewriting would cease to exist since it has always been that way, and mention of such untrue, unlawful acts would result in immediate execution.

luminiousblu

That's what he likes to say, but the People have voted, and they've voted to, well, "consort with wicked foreign oligarchs". Hierarch doesn't believe in Bellerophon, Hierarch believes in Bellerophon as it was to him.

NerfContessa

Likely the tyrant wants her hand in marriage.

After all, he must be the combined reincarnation of
irritant and treacherous :p

Aston Whiteman

He wants Evil to win. Old time Evil.

Percula1869

Black is the one who wants evil to win. The Tyrant wants evil
to behave like traditional evil even though it loses.

[Liliet](#)

Black wants a victory for Praes.

And also no more starvation, war, pissing off neighbours,
flying fortresses, diabolism, blood sacrifices, abusive
nobility, oppression of ethnic minorities...

A victory for Evil. Yes. Definitely. And he'll have a
detailed explanation on how it *definitely is one*, with
theoretical basis and everything ;u;

RanVor

If the wager works the way it was described in the excerpt
from the Book of All Things at the very beginning (which
is not the most reliable source, but it's the only one we
have so far), technically any successful nation under
Below counts as a victory for Evil. Diabolism, etc. is
welcome, but not actually a prerequisite.

[Liliet](#)

True!

I do strongly question what happened to the drow wrt
that though.

RanVor

They fucked up.

[Liliet](#)

...Fair.

luminiousblu

Attacking the Dorfs is a poor idea at the best of
times. They basically just went the way of Carthage.

luminiousblu

Black doesn't want Evil to win. Black just wants to win, period. Bard and Tyrant were on point when they called him just a collection of gears. Black doesn't have a goal beyond winning but dresses it up in pretty colours, while Tyrant pretends that all he wants is to win but is ironically more principled about it because what's the point of winning if you can't act like a winner?

[Liliet](#)

I'd say you're discounting too much of what originally motivated Black's *definition of winning*. He's not principled, no, but there's the point of what he actually *wants to accomplish* and *why* he cared about that in the first place.

The way I read it, he was, yes, increasingly focusing on his plans for the sake of his plans, wanting to win while losing sight of what the point of victory was supposed to be in the first place. Then Bard metaphorically decked him in the face at Free Cities, and he started pulling his head out of his ass a little.

““Is the Empire as it currently stands so worthy of survival?” the Black Knight murmured. “I think not. If it cannot adapt, then let it perish. Out of the ashes we will raise something other than a snake devouring its own tail, shattering the world with its throes as it seeks to sate empty hunger.””

[\(Book 4, Interlude: Red the Flowers\)](#)

““A better world,” the Black Knight murmured, looking up at stars that were not those he'd been born under. “Oh, I have wondered. What it might mean, what it would look like.”

“We made one,” Ranker said. “It's on fire now.”

“And who set the flames?” he smiled. “Cordelia Hasenbach. Catherine Foundling. Kairos Theodosian. Children, in our eyes. Yet is it not the right of the younger generation to look at the work of that which came before it and judge it insufficient?””

[\(Book 4, Interlude: Queen's Gambit, Declined\)](#)

...

““I still do not believe,” Amadeus of the Green Stretch murmured, “that I am wrong. That our methods, our works, are to be so easily discarded. If these younglings want to prove themselves worthy of shaping the world, well...”

He bared his teeth.

"Let them come," he said. "Let them earn it. If they can surpass us, then the sin is ours."

"And if they can't?" Ranker asked.

"Then they fall into line, or face destruction, and we fight one last great war," he said. "The one that will matter.""

...a little.

We'll see how that one goes.

luminiouslu

That's not my point, though. Black might have nominal goals, but they're ironically not the point of his fighting. Black is so concerned with being victorious that he doesn't care about actually being a victor. It's not that he needs to regain sight of what he's fighting for because he really isn't fighting for anything, not anymore. He puts everything through the fire and is okay with it burning if it's not up to scratch – but is he really?

You're pointing out the fact that he's alright with the Empire burning as a sign he's pulled his head out of his ass but I see it somewhat differently. The thing that sets someone like the Tyrant, Neshamah, or any old school-villain, apart from the likes of Black and Malicia is the inherent understanding of transience and a sort of egotism that puts the self above everything else. The Diabolist wasn't fighting for the greater good, she *was* the greater good. It's not so unusual to fight for yourself. To people like Diabolist, the concept of 'everything they've ever built crashing down' is irrelevant because the fact that they were built at all is a monument to their ability.

Black clearly isn't this type of person – he doesn't fight for himself. But he's also not an idealist or else he wouldn't be alright with the things he's built being pulled down simply because they're stronger, or else he wouldn't be angry at the Heroes for winning because let's be honest, behind all the hemming and the hawing the facts on the ground are that most Heroes are just goddamn stronger than the villains, and if calling in a Choir is part of their assets then they'd need to be stupid to not use it. So what is he then? I bet he doesn't even know himself. He's not going to go down without a fight, because the only sin is defeat, and defeat is an inherent sin. That's it. When it comes down

to it, he just doesn't want to lose, but at the same time doesn't know how to win.

Liliet

I don't think the "things he built being pulled down because they're stronger" means the thing you think it means.

The person who's going to be pulling down things he built is Catherine, who he personally taught and knows that she shares his ideals and is if anything more idealistic than him. It's not a defeat for his ideal for her to take over, he's just torn between "does she know better or do I know better". It's just a question of judgement and competence.

He knows what he wants: peace for Praes. Peace, justice, equality, *not fucking starving every other generation*. From there, it's just a question of how to achieve it.

He had a very specific plan for a while, and while pursuing it lost sight of drawbacks. He kept compromising, allowing lesser evils in the pursuit of abstract eventual "it will be better later". Then it rapidly dawned on him that his compromises ended up in Liesse and basically just allowed the Empire to backslide. And he wasn't okay with that. If what he built turned out to not work, then let it fucking burn!

I don't think he doesn't know what he wants. He wants lots of things. Malicia's happiness, Catherine's success, Praes being less of a continental embarrassment, orc liberation, to stick it to heroes, Callow's prosperity, to prove that he's right about everything, to maybe not have to kill quite so many people. For his friends to live.

And then he prioritizes, and then it turns out that even the things he's put highest priority on maybe aren't all that compatible, and it's just... hard 😞

luminiousblu

Catherine's ideals have nothing to do with what Black wants, because from beginning to end Catherine's story is about Callow, not about the Empire and the Empire can take a hike and starve if it means Callow stops being invaded every generation. The starvation, that may have been Amadeus' goal once upon a time. It might be his goal again, now that he is no longer the

Black Knight, but I'll wait until I get some evidence that's the case.

"To prove he's right about everything"

See that right there? That's the core of him, or was, if he's actually changed. To prove he's right, and in this case he's the same as Catherine was for a while back in Book 2-3. Black doesn't care about the rest of that stuff, they're a means to an end, and that end is that he's the one who's right. That's fitting considering the side he's on, but it also means that – funnily enough, for all his talk about escaping the system – he's the embodiment of the system. Not even as a Well-Intentioned Extremist, because his intent never comes into play.

Liliet

Catherine can't tell the Empire to take a hike. I mean she's going to, for now, but she can't just say "nope none of my beeswax" long-term. Because Aisha. Because Hakram. Because Robber. Because the Legions of Terror that became the Army of Callow have a reason for being there. She's made promises in Book 3, both implicit and explicit. She had to put them off because of the Crusade, but they remain a thing.

Not to mention, as Black pointed out to her once, if Praes goes back to its pattern, Callow is going to keep getting invaded every other generation. Catherine wants peace, true long-term lasting peace, and for that she *needs* to settle Praes somehow.

I love to call Amadeus an idiot, but he isn't, not in this regard. He didn't just give Catherine power for the hell of it, he deliberately guided her towards this specific position. Her main cause is and will always be Callow, but Praes is a hanger-on that she can't shake off.

And yes, I think "proving he's right" is only one of the many motivations in play, and not one that's going to win. He's admitted to being wrong before, and while he's proud, he's not *that* proud.

It's going to be a conflict. And I think his better nature (which he has) is going to come out on top.

KageLupus

Black is trying to break the Conservation of Narrative Energy:

Evil can't win. Evil can't even break even. Black is trying to make it so evil (Praes) at least doesn't have to play the game.

luminiousblu

"Evil can't win. Evil can't even break even."

So Black says, but the history of the world doesn't support it. Hell if nothing else the fact that Praes went down once in its history, and was immediately restored stronger than ever, is proof that Evil is constantly breaking even, even in face of massive quantities of supposedly overpowered heroes with supposedly unfair advantages. If the other side is constantly cheating, but your side never really loses, then either you're cheating too or maybe they're not cheating after all.

It's weird how fixated he is on this, really. Back in Book 1, Catherine and Black had a conversation about symmetry where Cat noted that for every Villain with Destroy there was going to be a Hero with Protect. The flipside that he's either never considered or willfully ignores is that for every Hero with Bless, there is a Villain with Desecrate. For Evil to lose against Good, Evil has to win first. For the plucky underdogs to win, they have to, well, be the underdogs. Evil can't win, because neither can Good.

[Liliet](#)

The thing is, the interests of Evil that win don't line up with the interests of *people* who live in the Evil country. Evil leaders win all the time, but only if they aren't trying to better the lot of their people long-term. That kind of victory is what Evil doesn't get, and that's what pisses him off.

I don't think he's raging at the right part of the machine, in the Madman speech. It's not the heroes' fault that the grooves that Dread Tyrants burned in Creation are awful and hard to break out of.

But "maybe Praes should stop being an Evil nation"... is maybe less doable than trying to redefine Evil to include being good to its people. Because culture and religion and tradition all these things that are much harder to break and forge anew than the institution of Legions.

luminiousblu

"Evil leaders win all the time, but only if they aren't trying to better the lot of their people long-term. That kind of victory is what Evil doesn't get, and that's what pisses him off."

Because that is what Evil is. I don't think it's true that they can't better the lot of their people – Terribilis II apparently did just that before he overstepped and tried to break the pattern of half a continent on his own – but the key is that it has to be self-centred. Helping can't be what's at the core of you if you're Evil. You could make a paradise – and really by most standards the Dead King has done just that, assuming Malicia's talk as the servant in Book 4 wasn't just lying out the ass – but it has to be done for yourself, first and foremost. Whether to fulfil your ego, to guarantee your immortality, to reign as king eternal, or just to flip the finger to philosophers and show that yes, it can be done, and you're the one to do it.

"But "maybe Praes should stop being an Evil nation"... is maybe less doable than trying to redefine Evil to include being good to its people. Because culture and religion and tradition all these things that are much harder to break and forge anew than the institution of Legions."

Oh come on. Reread what you just wrote. Are you seriously trying to argue that changing a culture – which is actually rather easy, if rarely entirely controlled – is more difficult than literally supplementing metaphysical laws written over thousands, if not tens of thousands or more, years in a single lifetime using a single nation is anything but bull? With the very idea that he's going to change things he's utterly failed, because his motivation isn't to change things but simply to show that it can be done – that he can be more important than everyone who's come before. And that might be possible, but it would also simply reinforce the real groove he's trying to break out of, without admitting it – that Evil can be something other than only selfish. Which is impossible as far as I'm concerned.

[Liliet](#)

Well, he is changing culture. He can't *start* with changing the cornerstone of it, though, which is worshipping Below. It's the thing that's the hardest to shake.

And we can juggle the definition of the word "selfish" until the end of time. There's a position that nobody can be truly selfless unless they're a literal automaton/computer, because deriving satisfaction from successfully helping others is also selfish.

I don't think Amadeus is as good at this as he thinks he is. You have a point, and he has blinders on – he is also Praesi, he also grew up worshipping Below, and changing that to Above is likely to not just be a solution that occurred to him at any point. People who worship Below aren't going to be majority evil people, just because I believe the majority of people aren't evil, and what they worship has no correlation with their moral character. If all Praesi are formally speaking Evil, but most of them are just regular people, it makes sense to dissociate uppercase E Evil from lowercase e evil.

Harder to keep that up when you're Named, though.

Mental Mouse

The thing is, we have in our own culture several icons of "affable evil", who in political terms would have no problem with keeping their populations content. The most overtly political of them is of course Machiavelli – he and Amadeus would totally love each other.

In more recent times we have the "business advisor" Robert Ringer (*Looking Out For #1*), and Anton LaVey of Satanic Bible fame – they are all about the self-centered thing, but I'm pretty sure that in political contexts they'd also "get" that pissing off large numbers of people is almost as dangerous to your own welfare as pissing off individual powerful people.

RanVor

The problem is, the argument that "for Good to win, Evil has to win first" is full of shit. This is not about that. It's about the status quo that overwhelmingly favors the Good side. Sure, Good can't eradicate Evil completely, but it doesn't need to. Just upholding the status quo is a victory for Good. A loss of Good is not really a loss as long as it's not permanent, and it never is. They build to last because they don't have to keep starting again from the scratch all the time. Evil can't afford that – whatever they

achieve is going to be overturned in short order.
That's what Amadeus was mad about in his speech.

[Liliet](#)

It doesn't really hold as a general rule, though. The existence of Evil nations that have survived centuries an millenia proves that. The Tower stands. Stygian Magisterium stands. The Dead King... yeah.

It only really applies to the specific issue of trying to fix Praes's food deficit problem.

Incidentally, that's what Black's fixated on u\((-_-) \

RanVor

Well, nope. The Evil nations continue to exist because Below will not let Above get that ultimate victory so easily. That doesn't mean they don't suffer constant setbacks and collapses in a way the side of Good has never really experienced. They appear to be quite evenly matched at the first glance, but in reality, Good is far ahead of Evil in this race.

Also, the funny thing with the Dead King is that his ascension didn't actually alter the overall balance of power at all. He never actually accomplished anything of significance against the side of Good, and he knows that if he tried, it would be his end.

[Liliet](#)

Fair!

Lots of ways to look at this situation, I suppose.

Either way the way for the Evil nations like Praes to actually get ahead is to *stop being Evil*.

We'll see how the Callow/Praes situation goes :3

luminiousblu

"status quo that overwhelmingly favours the Good side"

What the fuck does that even mean? The status quo is a victory for Good? The Dead King is a final boss level character, he only doesn't kill everyone because it's against his interests to do so and at any point in time he might decide it suddenly is now

in his interests – like what happened right now. Just because Sauron can't be arsed to come outside and play doesn't mean Good is winning.

"A loss of Good is not really a loss as long as it's not permanent, and it never is."
Nor is a loss of Evil a loss since it's never permanent. Praes has been around for a thousand fucking years and it's literally just mortals, there's a blip here and there but then again Good has blips too, they came extraordinarily close to straight up losing when Triumphant beat the entire continent like a crippled slave. Hell, if the Dead King is to be believed, there's three divine-class entities in the world – himself, the Wandering Bard, and Sve Noc. Maybe Catherine too, but that depends on the nature of being the first priestess. Just think about that – of four possible pseudo-deities, three are firmly Below and one is beyond the game entirely. Rigged in GOOD'S favour?

Are you going to argue that because Evil never manages to make any headway into Good's territory, it's rigged against them? But look there – neither has Good ever made any real headway against Evil. There's no excuse for that, not when we're constantly told Good is stronger, it cheats, it's all rigged in their favor. If I play dice for thousands of years with loaded dice and am still only breaking even then I have to face the facts – either their dice are rigged too, or mine weren't rigged after all.

"They build to last because they don't have to keep starting again from the scratch all the time."
They build to last because it is in the nature of Good to build for those other than yourself, while Evil is defined by believing that everyone else can eat shit and you -are- righteousness. Not even Black is exempt from that. Good is about the knowledge that you're not the only person in the world; Hanno and the Grey Pilgrim are probably the most overt cases of this, but even William, in the end, thought of what he was doing as the last service of a damned man, the person marked for Hell who could act as a grey guard, doing the dirty work that would've ruined him had he not already been ruined. Catherine is the opposite – she's willing to be damned, as long as she gets to do what she wants.

Remember how I expressed incredulity about it's rigged in Good's favour? Let's return to that. Imagine a country that nukes itself every few years

and is constantly on the verge of literally starving to fucking death, and its offices are acquired and kept apparently almost exclusively from poisoning people to death. That would've caused an immediate collapse in any historical country, or even most fantasy countries. Yet Evil chugs on. The hilariously incompetent Bellerophons – emphasis on hilarious, but incompetent all the same – hasn't imploded yet, despite being surrounded by neighbours that – in real life – would've simply partitioned them, like what happened to Poland. The Dead King is apparently completely untouchable because the Crusades never even got close to the Hellgate itself, let alone the man proper. Praes, for all of its bumbling and its joke schemes, is apparently impossible to topple. Stygia, which is basically Sparta if viewed through the lens of the Persians or the most vicious Athenian propaganda, has outlasted its historical peer in relevance by a massive margin.

Fucking hell when Heroes take a dump on villain leaders, it apparently never lasts long enough to make a difference and I won't believe it's for lack of trying. They'd pulled down the Tower twice and it's risen each time, the Chain of Hunger is hasn't been exterminated yet despite being almost entirely mindless and has a way to either violate conservation of energy or can harness an effectively infinite power source (it has to be asked – what the hell are they eating? They can't be only relying on cannibalism because as hilariously morbid as that is, it defies how nutrition actually works – meat might have a higher energy density, but that energy has to come from SOMEWHERE).

If anything, the fact that Evil polities are objectively built like absolute garbage and yet truck on in defiance of economic theory, sociology, political reality and plain common sense is a mark against Evil, because what can you call that but rigging?

“Whatever they achieve is going to be overturned in short order”

Because such is the nature of Evil. It is transient and that isn't a bad thing. It is transient not in the sense of being easily defeated but in the sense of being focused on the self. The entire POINT of Evil is that it always begins, and ends, with you. Black is not exempt from this. The concept of institutional power is nice and all, even modern, but as we've seen with the Saint of Swords it doesn't

hold any water in a world where there are main characters who actually matter and then there's the rest who could be replaced with any other faceless fodder for all the actual plot (read: course of history) cares. For all Black's tried to stabilize things, we're constantly shown and told that the way he does things means it all comes tumbling down after his own death.

Liliet

Well, Black's entire goal was to try to figure out how to keep things going after his own death. As an optimist, I believe in his success 😊 I believe that Catherine is it, and that Black himself has already kind of faded into obscurity from Praesi politics, deliberately at that, just to prevent his strength from accidentally destroying the change he wanted to bring. Even if he was conflicted over that decision.

I largely agree with you, though. If you look at Evil's success through the lens of evil/Evil's own philosophy, Evil's actually successful as fuck.

It's just that Amadeus doesn't share that philosophy, and according to Kairos's and Akua's remarks, might or might not be entirely genuinely ignorant that such even exists. He holds the basic viewpoint of a Good ruler: what about my people? How can I best take care of them?

He then proceeds to go about it in a Below-sponsored manner, which isn't as effective as he wishes it was, and that's his entire point in whining about how the system is rigged. He's not playing the game the way it's meant to be played, and to him that's a mark against the game itself. Like, what, are Praesi entirely not allowed to try to better their own lot?

(That's Below's fault, not Above's, I would say. But the blame game is largely pointless, and Below are the ones giving him power – even if it's just a little – while Above are the ones that keep trying to topple his designs, so...)

(And funny thing: Below WERE in fact sponsoring him, if just a little bit. Praesi ARE allowed to better their own lot, they're just not given help in it. The system is flexible if you push hard enough, and Black pushed damn hard)

(And then it started to snap right back on his fingers, but Catherine functions as a doorstopper there, and it might prove effective yet)

(will, IMHO)

Cpt. Obvious

I've read comment after comment Evil this Evil that, and the same about Good. What it seems people are ignoring is the basics of what's behind this conflict.

Creation is a construct the Gods use as a proving ground to settle an argument. The argument being should their people be ruled over or guided to become all they can be?

The Gods above are all about stomping out free will. They feel its perfectly fine for them to put their fingers in the pie whenever they want to. They bestow their heroes with ridiculous powers but not a longer life. They are also pushing the into becoming zealots if they weren't already from the beginning. Both the Lone Swordsman and Hano the White Knight are good examples of this. The Lone Swordsman was guilt tripped into his role, and Hano has relinquished every choice directly to his God by allowing the toss of the coin to determine all choices. For all their willingness to meddle in the lives of their subjects they do not want to promote free will, and thus even their best toys will succumb to the ravages of time. Their most powerful heroes will age and die just like everyone else. This lessen the risk that they will outgrow the control of their Gods and start to question the game. Rebellion against the Gods can not be allowed.

The Gods below however require their "chosen" villains to actively grab their name, sometimes even compete for them, but they doesn't seem to care about subservience. They rather seem to discourage their chosen from depending on divine intervention. You may pray for it but unless you have proven yourself extremely capable they either will ignore you or they'll punish you. Even if you've proved worthy their intervention will come at a terrible cost. Wekesa who was one of their success stories got the intervention he asked for, but even then it came at a terrible price. It cost not just his life and his husband's many millennium of awareness, but also the lives of over a hundred thousand people and the town. And all this so his son would live.

The Gods below doesn't want sniveling subjects. They want their chose to succeed by their own devices. And to aid in that they are granted a life span only limited by their own ability to keep improving.

That one side is called "Good" and the other "Evil" isn't really that important. Nor are the labels "Hero" or "Villain" much to go by. Villains can for villainous reasons do surprisingly much good while Heroes can cause a lot of suffering for heroic reasons. And anything a Hero does, no matter how horrible the consequences, is "For the Greater Good"

While villains do cause death and suffering they don't have the luxury of blaming it on "the greater good". When Praes invade Callows it's to secure access to arable land to avoid starvation. When the armies of Good comes knocking its because "God said so".

When Black and the Legions of Dread came knocking it was with more of a plan than the usual invader. Traditionally the invaders either ranted about how they brought salvation even in death to the people of Callow, or they just told them to hand over the food or they'll be killed.

Callowans being "Angry horse people" didn't respond well to either version. The first guaranteed an uprising fuelled by a desire for revenge that would be treated as a loved family heirloom to be cherished for generations, and the second would add the birth of a shitload of home brewed Heroes to the mix.

Black negated a lot of the blowback by the rules he imposed. The commoners, most of whom never came anywhere close to the fighting, got to pay less taxes than before, got payed better and were actually safer than before the invasion. Even the House of Light remained active with little change being noticeable to the common man. Orphanages operating on the Empire's dime took in and educated the most unfortunate of society, thus removing a large pot that historically had bred a lot of Heroes.

Together with careful culling of those who showed signs of emerging heroism this proved to be a pretty successful strategy. But for "Angry horse people". Callowans are world class when it comes to holding a grudge.

Heroes were dangerous in several ways. The powers granted them was just part of it. Even disregarding any powers the heroes tends to act like catalysts inciting rebellion. The threat of this wasn't really a military issue as the Legions most probably would have had little problem stomping out those. However every rebel killed would mean the outstanding debt of Callowan revenge would go up, increasing the likelihood of yet another uprising and so it would continue to escalate until there were no Callowans left to carry the grudge.

However just killing off the entire nation of Callows were not a practical solution. Not only would it mean the fields would lay untended with no food going to feed the people of Praes, but it would guarantee a deluge of Heroes would descend on Callows and Praes, most likely leading the way for the combined armies of Good.

By improving the quality of life for the concurred and culling those who showed signs of heroism he saved a lot of lives. Though that's not how he looked at it. In his head Black saw it as preserving assets. By keeping a lid on heroism there would be more people working to keep food on the tables in Praes. Keeping the body count low also meant it would take longer before the axis of Light could drum up support for a new war.

In effect evil was doing a lot of good, not in an effort to do good but because it furthered its long-term goals.

At the same time it's interesting to note that in the eyes of the Gods above everything Black achieved, including minimizing suffering and strife was evil simply because it served the interest of the Gods below.

And I have totally forgot why I was writing this. I think it had something to do with the way a lot of the comments seem to miss that in this story world the labels Good and Evil is just that, labels. Good can do evil, and it will still be labeled as being done for the greater Good. Heroes who leads people to rebellion against impossible odds which ends up causing a lot of death and suffering with no gain whatsoever to show for it is lauded for their heroism even when it was blatantly obvious from the beginning that there was never any chance they would win.

From beginning to end it's a competition between gods. One side who is holier-than-thou and the other egging their pawns to break all the rules they can, but also letting them deal with the backlash.

I'm rambling again ain't I?

Now I'm starting to doubt that posting this is such a good (yep, a pun. Deal with it...) idea. But I guess anyone making it far enough to reach this deserves the punishment.

danh3107

So cat's trying to learn calculus while only knowing algebra, rusty algebra. I feel that cat, I really do.

[machinetell](#)

Or matrix math.

SpeckofStardust

Oh dear god she's going to get 'elected' in order to be able to deal isn't she?

The madwoman.

[BarthHumphries](#)

We can only hope. 😊

caoimhinh

Catherine Foundling, First President Under the Night
My bet is Vivienne is transitioning from Thief to a Queenly title over Callow, so that will work out fine, too.

caoimhinh

Queenly Name*, sorry.

Quite Possibly A Cat

I wonder how Deadhand would react.

"So, I see you're on top of your game. Cutting off that hand was a great..."

"I'm Queen of Callow now."

"...mistake."

Lark

> Citizens are forming tribunals and killing officials and prominent individuals after public trials

Well, well. What aspect has Hierarch found himself, I wonder? And how willingly is he using it, given that it may well be messing with The Will Of The People?

IDKWhoitis

Probably placing entities on *Trial*. He did it to Bard, Above, and Below. He is truly neutral after all.

lol

Indict.

Andrew Mitchell

A guess: his aspect is Democracy.

[Liliet](#)

Aspects are always verbs.

Elect?

[Euodiachloris](#)

Vote. 😊

RanVor

That's why I like Anaxares so much ;D

Akuabestgurl

More like Democrazy eh

Skaddix

Well people killing their former oppressors does sound like Hierarch Aspect.

Cat does raise a good question what are the Heroes up to. We know what Saint has a Faction setting a trap with Black. We know what some are fighting the Dead King. We still have no idea what Hanno is doing. The Hierach's Vision had him raising sword on a beach which seems pretty random.

[Javvies](#)

Hanno is probably fighting the Dead King's invasion.

d_o_l

Hanno is fighting the Dead King. It was in the epilogue or final interlude of the last book.

[Liliet](#)

Interlude: Tryptich. He showed up in the first part, in Ines's POV.

[Javvies](#)

At least Cat is using her brain.

Though the situation is decidedly confusing, at least it is confusing on purpose.

caoimhinh

My only question is why Cat didn't even mention or consider the possibility of the Bard acting there.
Cat wouldn't be forgetting the Bard now that she isn't Named, would she?

[Liliet](#)

...huh.

That's just creepy enough that I wouldn't discount the possibility.

I think a more mundane explanation, though, is that there is no benefit to considering Bard. It's like including the possibility that a meteorite will fall on your head when planning opening a small business. It might! Does that knowledge help? No!

nipi

The Bard only works through named.

Author Unknown

That theory has been disproved. After all, she talked to Black when he was no longer named.

[Liliet](#)

"Powerless you ain't, Maddie". Just because he doesn't hold a Name doesn't mean he's not still entangled in the strings of Fate, and he specifically explicitly has potential for a new one (or several).

Bard doesn't have the literal rules-of-the-game limitation of only being able to appear to Named. She still acts entirely, as far as we know so far, through actions of Named individuals, whether by choice, by convenience or out of inability to be effective otherwise.

[Javvies](#)

Ehhhh ... if it's Bard, she's using somebody else to do things via proxy.

There's no real point in considering Bard at this moment. Bard has a decidedly ill defined agenda concealed behind a web of lies, bullshit, and deception.

Whoever is physically involved, they'll be doing it for reasons of their own, in addition to whatever push in this direction Bard gave them. And as such, the only factors that can realistically be judged are their own reasons, ignoring Bard.

[Liliet](#)

^^^ Yes, this!

Bard's not a faction of her own. She makes other players less predictable, not makes them move according to her will.

SMHF

I'd love that if it was true... but Black remembered her just fine after losing his name. So once again logic ruins another good theory 😞

[Liliet](#)

I mean, he wasn't thinking about her until she literally appears in front of him. It does not disprove the possibility that Bard just has a low key anti-memetic effect on non-Named that only gets disrupted when someone else brings her up / she's literally right there.

darkening

I'm... fairly sure juniper has commented on Bard, but I couldn't say whether that was only after someone else brought her up I suppose

[Liliet](#)

Catherine Is A Giant Nerd

[Euodiachloris](#)

Tactical geek (with some politics – reluctantly with the politics).

[sivarajan](#)

Revolt sounds like a Bellerophonian Aspect.

haihappen

A better Aspect name would probably "Liberate", as the Will People Of The People liberates them from the Wicked Despots and False Leaders

[Liliet](#)

Oh, yeah, this is the best one proposed so far I think ♥

[sivarajan](#)

Liberate sounds Good. Isn't Bellerophon Evil? A Hero, the Sword of the Free, might have founded the city (hinted but unconfirmed), but I think it is currently sworn to Below.

[Javvies](#)

Depends on who is being **Liberated** and what they're being **Liberated** from.

If you are being **Liberated** from mortality, you're probably ending up dead or undead, not getting some form of immortality.

If you're being **Liberated** from obedience to laws against murder ... that could easily end badly.

Or if you're **Liberating** murderers and rapists from prison, that's not exactly something that's Good, either.

Whether an Aspect sounds like it leans towards being Evil or Good doesn't matter that much, unless it's related to something that is exclusive to or prohibited to its followers by either Above or Below, though a Hero is probably not going to be in a position where they get an Aspect that has stereotypically Evil implications/connotations, ie a Hero isn't likely to get an Aspect called Torture or something. On the other hand, Evil mostly doesn't care about the implications/connotations of Aspects, though a Villain almost certainly can't get a Resurrection-type Aspect the way a Hero can, Resurrections being the domain of Above, not Below – however, a Villain could probably end up with an Aspect that converts a corpse into higher grades of undead.

Cpt. Obvious

If anything Bellerophon could be said to be under the tyranny of the people. I highly doubt that they have a state religion as any God, above or below, having any more power over the way of the people goes against the governing principles of Bellerophon, most glorious city of the free.

Bellerophon is aligned with Evil not because they swear to the Gods below but because they refuse to bow to the Gods above.

Good or Evil. The Gods above does not recognize anything in between while the ones below couldn't care less.

Cpt. Obvious

Oh how I hate auto correct and writing on a phone...

[chris S](#)

How about **Judge**?

It'd fit perfectly into Bellerophon's mentality, and would work for Hierarch's beliefs.

The citizens driven by his aspect to **Judge** their rulers as Wicked Despots Ruling With An Iron Fist Who Must Be Overthrown.

SilverDargon

Do mine eyes deceive me or did Cat just directly refer to Black as her father?

"The voice in the back of my head that sounded like my father kept reminding me that relying on an artefact was the kind of foolishness that got villains killed"

If this happened before then I certainly didn't notice it.



[Dresden 67](#)

It happened once before, when she was talking to Sve Noc at the end of Book 4.

fbt

good catch, i also think it's never been quite this explicit before, although really not new info otherwise. Her convo w/ archer about her relationship w/ Ranger was pretty darn clear even if their words danced around it.

[Liliet](#)

Cat periodically drops the f-word, and it's a jar every time.

Well-written ♥

Roxx

Oh gods, if Cat is Black daughter, and Archer is Ranger daughter(ish), does it mean that Cat is sleeping with her sister?!

[Liliet](#)

Well Ranger and Black are a long-distance relationship, not a family unit, so... nah.

I have been ignoring this implication for the last two books and I'm not going to stop now 😊

stevenneiman

Yeah, I noticed that as well.

One thing that's kind of interesting is that of the five and a half calamities, only one and a half aren't confirmed to have

at least adopted children. Ranger seemed to consider her apprentices like children (though she was a horrible parent), Black had Cat, Captain had a husband and three kids IIRC, and Masego and Tikoloshe had Masego.

There was no real indication that Eudokia had any real personal connection to anyone except Black, and we don't really know enough about the Assassin to say, considering that they've had exactly one on-screen appearance where they were even identifiable.

[Liliet](#)

clearly Eudokia and Assassin are secretly a married couple, with a dozen children growing up safely in... uh... what's the safest place... let's say the Kingdom Under XD

caoimhinh

Well, missions to Assassin are delivered by Amadeus giving a piece of paper with the target's name to Eudokia, so... who knows XD

[Liliet](#)

I'll tell you more.

““We both know they will give you nothing of worth,” the Webweaver said, but she was smiling. “Leave them here. The only redeeming aspect of tonight is that I'll get to see Assassin's face when I tell him he botched the job.”

There was something in the woman's eyes that would haunt the Taghreb's dreams for months to come.

“He's going to be in a *mood*,” she said with delight.”



(though I'm pretty sure Eudokia wasn't consulted for Assassin's participation at Liesse, given how tailored it was to violate Cat's trust in Amadeus and make her mad at him)

OmniscientQ

You know, I'm starting to think that, at the end of the Guide, there's going to be some huge M. Night Shyamalan twist that flips the story around and reveals that Assassin was the main character of the story all along, and then we'll have to go back and re-read the entire thing looking for the hints that were dropped.

[Javvies](#)

Eudokia/Scribe isn't actually one of the Calamities. The Calamities are/were Squire/Black, Apprentice/Warlock, Ranger, Cursed/Captain, and Assassin. Scribe and Malicia, while Named associated with Black and the others, are not themselves Calamities.

[Liliet](#)

Honestly I think as far as Eudokia goes it's splitting hairs.

Malicia, yes, is separate from the group. But the only reason Scribe isn't known as one of the Calamities is that she's lower-key than most of them and joined after they established themselves as such. She's a full part of the dynamic.

[Liliet](#)

The first time she did (sort of) was actually in the first half of Book 3.

““As far as I'm concerned, the closest thing I'll ever have to a father is down south killing fools,” I replied coldly. “And he doesn't have a last name. Born a farmer, you see.”

Then, there's the whole deal in Liesse, which was her and Black at the very least acknowledging what was going on.

““You let me believe she took you prisoner,” I said. “You had the means to warn me you weren't. Why didn't you?”

“In part because I was not certain you would be able to deceive her,” he said. “In part because of the story you used to become Duchess of Moonless Nights. It was my understanding that if you slew Assassin while believing he was me, it would prevent the eventuality of a... repetition of pattern.”

Patricide, he'd danced around saying. Even now neither of us were comfortable with the implications of the word.”

Then, there was the bit at the end of Book 4 which killed me even deader than the previous two somehow.

““I am angry,” I correcting, baring a grin that was all teeth and defiance. “Truth is, Andronike, I've been angry all my life. At the Praesi for owning my people, at my people for being owned. At my father, for being so much less than he could be.”

Catherine does so *rarely*. But denial's no longer the name of the game ;u;

[Liliet](#)

Wait, how could I forget the first and most epic straightforward f-word drop!

[Book 3 Chapter 57: Revolve](#)

““Does it get easier?” I asked. “Carving away pieces?”

Pale green eyes met mine.

“Yes,” he said.

It was a lie. We both knew that. But I loved him a little, for saying it anyway.

The last part I remembered of that night was my father’s hands putting a blanket over me.”

caoimhinh

It also happened the night she thoroughly broke up with Killian, she had a discussion about it with Black and cried, that chapter ended with “The last part I remembered of that night was my father’s hands putting a blanket over me.”

She has admitted it to herself quite some a few other times, even in a conversation with Indrani she let it implicit. I look forward to when she finally admits it in front of him.

[Liliet](#)

...yeah.

This one 😊

(and they’ve as good as admitted it both of them, in the unsaid patricide discussion after Liesse. But the time when she actually calls him that to his face can’t be anything less than utterly epic)

[000matthew000](#)

it is Black. I think it is n note for her change in outlook.

[sivarajan](#)

The last sentence of Chapter 57: Revolve, Book 3, from a bit more than a year ago.

[Ben Serreau-Raskin](#)

I am deeply looking forward to this meeting.

IDKWhoitis

I see Cat getting along with Tyrant, they both exploit chaos for gains. So they may both dance this macabre to the hilariously horrifying end. Everyone watching this is going to lose.

Skaddix

I did speculate Cat would find out about The Rise of Darth Masego, The Divine Death of Warlock and the Grand Doom of Thalassina from the Tyrant and Hierarch and that seems pretty darn likely. So it will be interesting to see how Cat reacts when the duo drops that bombshell on presumably Indrani, Cat and Akua. I assume that is the elite squad that is going in.

I mean I am glad Cat is confident in her sword but I somehow doubt it will bridge the gap between Saint and Cat in a direct fight. Cat might win exploiting stories I suppose. Archer is a much better fighter and got ragdolled by Saint. Of course this does draw a parallel to Hanno, I believe they both have magic swords now.

Drunken Dwarf

Well considering she has never been drawn, I would assume she is going for the classic 'this sword may only be drawn against a true opponent' story. Then again we are talking about the woman who invented the zombie goat tactic, so 50/50 chance the sword actually explodes.

[benthelynx](#)

Both? Both.

MagnaMalusLupus

Ah ah ah, zombie _suicide bomber_ goats.

[Barthumphries](#)

When the unstoppable force meets the immovable object, we find out which is actually unstoppable/immovable.

WuseMajor

Honestly? I'm betting that the sword is a one use magical explosive and she's planning on tricking the Saint into drawing it.

Nerfnw

Hub, maybe Hierarch is doing a practice by putting the concept of procer to trial before doing it to thr choir

And Cat is still underestimating how much influence the Gods Above have with their heroes and how far they go to win this game

Radivel

The more the Gods Above interfere with Creation, the more the Gods Below can as well.

Cpt. Obvious

Not really their style though. Those below are betting that given time and free will their people will prove to be "better" than those controlled by the above.

Better being largely undefined, but probably they are treating it like a game of last man standing.

Whatever the case it will take more than a little tampering from above before the below enters the fray. And if that happens there's good odds they'll be pretty pissed their villains weren't able to handle the situation themselves.

caoimhinh

So Cat is gathering power to unleash it against the Saint of Swords, Noble Phantasm style?

Cool, I wonder what her Excalibur's name will be. It reminds me of some Xianxia stories where Intent and Qi is accumulated inside a sheathed blade for a long time to be released in a super technique that uses up all the gathered energy but it's a certain-kill move.

It's always nice to see her refer to Amadeus as her father.

Why hasn't Cat thought about the possibility of the Bard being involved? This kind of mess where Cat noticed it seemed like someone had predicted something big would happen seems like the kind of stuff the Bard would do.

Finally, I was re-reading the Guide, and in book 3 Interlude Commanders, there was a mention of "The Princes' Graveyard" in the epigraph by Juniper, we hadn't seen such battle, right? That's some awesome foreshadowing for the incoming battle where according to Cat "important people need to die but the armies must live".

Typos found:

- before either was I buried / I was
- who owned Calernia would between / would be between
- even if was Juniper / even if it was
- that might even more dangerous / might be even more dangerous
- ban the summoning of demons any circumstances / under any

circumstances

-what will be doing there? / what will we be doing there?

Liliet

Keep in mind that we know more about what Bard has been doing than Catherine does.

Information Catherine has:

- Bard's semi-involvement in Summerholm that ended with Cat Speaking to her to shut up;
- Bard "getting into William's head at the end", as told by Vivienne;
- Bard's involvement in the Free Cities;
- Bard being possibly involved with the Augur's rise;
- Bard's presence at Liesse;
- Bard's involvement with Neshamah's rise;
- Bard's involvement with the sisters' rise.

Information we have and Catherine doesn't:

- Bard's little talk with Akua when she was letting out the demon (unless Akua has shared that, which she might have but also might have forgotten about / not considered relevant);
- Bard chasing away two Emerald Swords from their mission to kill Akua;
- the hints we have at the heroes' connection with her / knowledge about her (Pilgrim and Saint mentioned her briefly during Kaleidoscope, and the drinking stuff left behind before Cordelia's talk with Saint);
- Bard's conversation with Anaxares that ended her time as Aoede;
- Bard's conversation with Neshamah as he exited the portal;
- Bard's conversation with Amadeus in the Epilogue.

We know Bard has been meddling with the Tenth Crusade and around it actively. Here's what Catherine has got:

"The Bard had been considered old even in the days of Sephirah's fall. Gods, how long had she been around?"

I did not consider myself all that inclined to fear my enemies, admittedly sometimes even when I should have. But as the whetstone slid against the edge, I admitted to myself that for the first time in ages I was genuinely afraid of an opponent. Heroes, even those who could tread all over me, I could cope with. There were ways around power, around the laws of the Heavens. They could be tricked and twisted. But something like the Wandering Bard? She might have set in motion the sequence of events that would lead to my death decades before I was even born. If Black was to be believed, she could not be killed and even if she somehow was anyway she'd only return with a

different face. There was no telling what she knew or how she knew it. There was no telling where she was and what she was up to. How could an entity like that be beaten? The sharp song of stone on steel held no answers, soothing as it was.

I'd believed that I understood the game unfolding across Calernia. That I could guess, if not know, the motives and intents of the other players. The Tenth Crusade, the Empire and the League: the three powers on the board, as far as the nations of mankind went. My attempts at seeing through the Dead King were now revealed to have been little more than presumption, but light had been shed on more than that mistake alone. There was more going on behind the crusade than faith and ambition. Hasenbach might have refused my terms because of political considerations, as I'd previously believed, or she might have been moved by a whisper in her ear years ago that only now clicked into place. I could no longer trust any of the actors to act according to the rules I'd believed they obeyed, because I'd been blind to half the war even as I fought it. Which now took me to the very place I'd been struggling to avoid since I took the crown: I had to take measures to insure the survival of Callow while in the dark about the objectives of all the other forces in play.

Fuck, for all I knew the Bard was interceding in my favour. I'd had strokes of bad luck, sure, but exceedingly good one as well. I wasn't unaware that Black had been arranging things quietly in the background so that opportunities would land in my lap ever since I became his apprentice, but there were things beyond his ability to arrange. The Bard had been in the thick of it, at Liesse, when I gained back the aspect I lost and snatched a resurrection out of angelic hands. Had she been beaten there, or had that restoration been the purpose all along? Hells, had she pulled strings for me to win just so I'd fuck up with Akua the following year and Second Liesse got the Tenth Crusade going? I could go mad, trying to find the hand of the Wandering Bard behind every turning point of the last few years. But then could I really afford not to look for it? If I kept my eyes closed, I'd lose. Or whatever else she had in mind for me.

She'd admitted to the Dead King that he'd been too clever in his scheme for her to be able to crush him, but that'd been centuries and centuries ago. When she was still learning her Role. I had to face the possibility that even if I made all the right choices I might still end up broken because the Bard had shaped the choices I'd be able to make so she couldn't possibly lose. I felt shards of stone pass through my fingers, and noticed with a sigh that I'd crushed the whetstone without even meaning to. That was my only one, too, I'd have to borrow Hakram's from now on. I picked up my scabbard with a sigh and

sheathed the longsword. So much for any of this calming me.
There were no easy answers to be had. "

It's true that she seems to be forgetting that Bard could be behind every shadow. But is that really a bad thing, when the alternative is madness and paranoia?

Ιούλιος Καίσαρας

"The villain was essentially a sack full of wet and angry cats made into a person"
And Hierarch is a weaving machine of political messages -.to his constant desperation.

[benthelynx](#)

Sacrificial typo thread:

" "You know, in Alamans romances that have very nice illustrations of what Wicked Priestesses of Evil should wear," Archer informed me."

Looks like two potential sentences both partially came into being here.

"And what will *we* be doing there?" Indrani asked."

caoimhinh

"In Alamans romances that have"
I would replace that with they so it would be:
"In Alamans romances they have"

I got a few other typos in my comment above, too.

Gazing Rabbit

You know what I want? I want the Tyrant to have a crush on Cat. Trying to awkwardly flirt with her during meetings and such. Cat isn't sure if he's genuine or whether it's a scheme, but then rolls with it because it sounds like fun.

[Liliet](#)

He's a teenager. I don't think Cat would go for it.

haihappen

I could picture the Tyrant flirting indirectly but obviously with Akua. Like, VERY obviously. Only to irritate the others and throw them off balance.
Or suggesting a political marriage of Cat with the Hierarch, you know, for funsies.

luminiousblu

Catherine can't be older than like, twenty herself. She was eighteen when she was dealing with Akua. It'd be sort of cradle-robbing but a university sophomore hooking up with a high schooler doesn't sound that weird.

The main issue is that Catherine seems to be mentally unsuited for any sort of actual relationship, and I don't mean unready but unsuited. She thinks of things in terms of victory.

[*Liliet*](#)

Hum, how old was Catherine at the time when it was mentioned that Kairos was sixteen? You're right, there's probably less of an age difference between them than I've been thinking.

Catherine has a lot of 'actual relationships' with people. *Primary romantic partnership* hasn't worked out for her so well before, yes, partially because she's too busy doing other things for any romantic partnership to be primary.

She's been doing pretty well with Indrani though 😊 what with the relationship not being primary partnership nor trying to be, because that's not actually necessary for anything at all 😊

/irate poly aroace rant over

ninegardens

Poly, Aro, Ace...

Honestly, that is not a combo I expected to see.

If there's no romance, and no sexy, and you have multiple people in the category, I'm trying really hard to tell the difference between "Poly, Aro, Ace" and the power of Friendship.

No intention to judge/criticize, am only try to picture in my head what this would look like, as I am 50% of way down the Ace spectrum, and several friends are Poly and it is... really hard to communicate between those philosophies sometimes.

Or maybe you just meant that there were Poly considerations, or Ace ones, or Aro ones, all of which are valid, but not necessarily assumed to be in play all at the same time

[*Liliet*](#)

No, I meant what I said. Aspects of poly philosophy that I care about line up with aro ace anger about putting

too much priority and importance on the idea of “a couple”, in the traditional romantic+sexual way. Relationships can be different, and they all matter. Friendships matter, family relationships matter, and you can have many romantic relationships at the same time that aren’t the least bit cheapened by not fitting the “couple” archetype. It’s easier to be aro and it’s easier to be ace in a world that recognizes that, and it’s easier to be aro ace in a world where people don’t go “but how can someone survive without a primary romantic+sexual relationship”

[Liliet](#)

Also, see: Masego. His current positioning in the group is my ideal wish fulfillment scenario, because he gets to have a primary queerplatonic relationship with Indrani that does not require compromise/sacrifice on either side’s part because it’s not monogamous on her part.

That’s my poly aro ace point.

ninegardens

This makes sense to me. Thanks heaps for explaining.

For me, friends who are Poly are often the ones who get stuff least... but I suspect that is just my friends, and I can totally see what you are saying about less emphasis being put on the “Primary relationship” thing, how those philosophies line up in that regard. Also see what you mean about how a poly set up as with Cat/Archer/Masego allows for really close relationship while still allowing things to remain platonic for Masego.

luminiousblu

“Catherine has a lot of ‘actual relationships’ with people.”

Claptrap. Catherine has lovers. She does not have a relationship in the romantic sense of the word. Archer she treats like a family member who’s also good for fingering. There’s a difference between someone you enjoy sleeping with and someone you hold a relationship with.

“partially because she’s too busy doing other things for any romantic partnership to be primary”

Rather because Catherine cannot fathom not being in nominal control. Her closest approximation is goddamn Hakram, who she implicitly trusts if only because Hakram himself has no agenda whatsoever outside of Catherine.

ninegardens

You know... this might be just a matter of word use disagreements.

It sounds like you are using "Actual relationship" to mean a particular type of romantic relationship, while Lilieth might be referring to a much broader category of thing, which includes Such things as Catherine's relationship to Black, Juniper, Masego etc etc etc. "Human relationship" – in the sense of relating to one another.

All these things are important relationships in her life. In many of them (Black, Masego, Archer etc) she is distinctly not in control, and she is okay with that. In some sense, (especially Book 1-2), one of Cat's defining traits was her ability to collect a group of people who were loyal to her, and yeah, there was control, but these people were loyal to her because she met them on their terms. She was a friend first and commander second.

So yeah, if you mean "Balanced monogamous romantic partnership", then I agree, we haven't seen Cat do one of these in the past two years worth of story (or whatever its been). But like... so what? Plenty of people go for 2 years without having that sort of relationship, and there are many REASONS for that... not all of which indicate they are incapable of it.

In terms of the broader def of relationships... I'd say that Cat has indicated some ability at this in the past... but I kind of have to agree that a large number of her relationships with other people are messed up/twisted in one way or another. (honestly, her interaction with Masego seems to be the most balanced one and healthy one)

I'm not sure how much this says about Cat, and how much it says about the situation she finds herself in.

The fact that she apparently has literally no friends from the Orphanage might be a bad sign... or just a sign that the Author wasn't interested in those characters.

luminousblu

The original conversation came about from a hypothetical teenage crush that Tyrant might gain on Catherine and whether or not it'd be weird. It's obviously not a "human" relationship, but a relationship in the sense of a significant other. You don't have a crush on someone you'd like to be friends with.

As far as that sort of relationship, Catherine has basically been said outright to be incapable of handling it. Some of those are just insults which touch on truth (Malicia), some of those are her coming down too hard on herself, and some of them are just plain related to how she sees the world. Catherine does not see compromise and never has. All of her 'compromises' were either forced on her from a position of weakness or not compromises at all, insofar as she still got the things she wanted. That's not how you maintain relationships.

"The fact that she apparently has literally no friends from the Orphanage might be a bad sign... or just a sign that the Author wasn't interested in those characters." It's explicitly said that she had no real friends there. Not enemies, necessarily, but not friends. Because Catherine doesn't particularly like the feeling of being an equal to someone, and likes it even less than the feeling of being inferior. If you're inferior that means you're out of your league. If you're equal to her, and not implicitly taking her orders, that means you're a competitor, and Catherine has never been alright with those.

Javvies

Ehhhh ... as far as the lack of friends from her orphanage days goes, Cat was effectively an outsider in the orphanage, being half(or more) Daoine, plus she wanted to join the Legions, unlike all the other girls.

She had few, if any, interests in common with most, if not all, of the other girls.

Plus, with her latent Name-potential (and quasi-Heroic tendencies), it's unlikely that the staff would have urged her and the other girls to be closer together.

luminiousblu

– Being Daoine has never been shown as some sort of crippling handicap against anyone but the Orcs.

– Joining the Legions wasn't exactly widespread knowledge. Catherine is mutely surprised back in like, chapter 2 when Black (Scribe?) guessed she was saving up money to go to the College.

– That honestly is not an excuse. If anything it makes it worse. How ridiculously narrow-sighted do you have to be if you have nothing in common with anyone around you? Hell you don't even need to be alike to be friends – the futbol team captain who

never shut up and the girl who was literally a mute cripple were best friends, because one liked to talk and the other loved listening.

– Plus, with her latent Name-potential (and quasi-Heroic tendencies), it's unlikely that the staff would have urged her and the other girls to be closer together

Oh come on, that's an unfalsifiable statement. You could excuse everything before the rapist guards with "Black's agents were onto her".

Liliet

Actually, I had the thought that the orphanage staff would likely try to discourage other girls from being close to Catherine, too. Regardless of Catherine's own ability to make friends, it makes sense as something they would do, both to hopefully discourage Catherine from her plans by creating the impression that nobody shares her ideas, and to prevent other girls from being dragged to a death sentence with her if it fails. Just, looking at this from the perspective of people who are trying to care for these children while knowing that Black's receiving regular reports on them, it's 100% something that would be done as a standard policy. Hero potential? Isolate them and discourage them. It's literally part of the point of the system Black set up, to tamp down on the heroic inclinations of the younger generation as much as possible.

(And it has worked admirably. Catherine who had friends and support in her 'fix things' inclinations would be a lot worse a candidate for the apprenticeship Black offered, she'd have stronger ties to Callowans and their rebellious moods and less readiness to make friends out of Praesi, which is something Black specifically wanted for her for his plan.)

And that aside, the first problem you see in Catherine's hypothetical potential relationship with Kairos is Catherine's inability to compromise? Really? Like, that's the reason you think it wouldn't work? And if Catherine were just a little softer, her+Kairos would be the perfect couple?

Yes, Catherine isn't soft. She's idealistic and refuses to back down on her principles even if it makes her a hypocrite. She has expectations of the

world, demands in fact, and she will not compromise on trying to do what she thinks is right. And she won't accept a romantic partner who doesn't live up to her idea of what her romantic partner should be like.

As this person, she is perfectly likable and has attracted not one but two distinct and partly mixed friendgroups: the 15th officers and the Woe, and I'm looking at Rumena, Ivah and the Sisters and seeing Catherine binding even more people to herself. She's magnetic and charismatic, and she's warm and good to be around, just the way she is. Indrani went on a whole rant about it in the Everdark.

And the Cat/Indrani/Masego poly angle is the cutest ship in existence so I just don't even know 😊

luminiousblu

"And that aside, the first problem you see in Catherine's hypothetical potential relationship with Kairos is Catherine's inability to compromise?"

I wasn't talking about Kairos, but why relationships aren't her angle in general. You can't have a normal relationship if you need to be in control literally all the time with no give.

"Just, looking at this from the perspective of people who are trying to care for these children." And my point is that you can go so far down the rabbit hole that Catherine's own character never comes into play at any point in time before the story. It's an established character flaw that Catherine has tunnel vision, an extraordinary sort of defiance where she'll do things she dislikes just to be contrarian about it and prove she can do it anyway, and has trouble compromising or viewing others as equals, I don't see why it shouldn't go back to before she became the Squire.

Hell if you want to play the "discourage heroism" card, I have one to play too. "Plucky orphan, disliked by everyone around her for dreaming bigger, who has no friends, no family, no roots, but a burning desire to change the world for the better and doesn't mind if she gets hurt doing it". Sound familiar? Sounds like a premade D&D character, doesn't it? Having roots helps you avoid becoming a Hero. William, Hanno, the Grey

Pilgrim, Vivienne, Hunter – all of these either lost their roots or discarded them. A plucky young'un who can't find peers because she was too different is a recipe for disaster if you want to avoid Heroes.

"And she won't accept a romantic partner who doesn't live up to her idea of what her romantic partner should be like."

You know how hilariously ridiculous this sounds, right? You're proving my point for me. Catherine doesn't want this, but if some girl told you she was waiting for a prince on a white horse to take her away you could tell her that it's not going to happen. She won't compromise – and so, she is unsuited for relationships with real people. You know, the type with flaws.

[Liliet](#)

"You can't have a normal relationship if you need to be in control literally all the time with no give."

The thing is, that's very much not how her close relationships work. She's actually argued with Juniper about this, when Juniper insisted she should enforce the chain of command and Catherine said that wasn't the kind of outfit she was running.

You are specifically 100% entirely inaccurate about this. People around Catherine would if anything prefer if she was a little more confident in herself and was a little less worried about asserting too much control over others.

She gave Vivienne a bloody *killswitch*. An override command that would force her to obey Vivienne's will. How is that "needing to be in control all the time"?

She was worried as fuck about Masego going to... the heart of the country that's currently her enemy... to help it... and to personally help the person who's repeatedly expressed the desire to see her dead...

and she still ceded to Masego's point about how he didn't need her permission to go. Which, I mean, remains true regardless of what she thinks of it, but it specifically contradicts your point about her relationships: she saw the other person's autonomy and ceded to it.

The only relationship where she needs to be in control all the time is the one with Akua, and even that's been morphing more and more into a trust-based relationship of equals, despite all the practical considerations to the contrary.

And if a girl told me she was holding out for a prince on a white horse and seemed perfectly happy to go without a relationship until one turns up, I would recognize that girl as my younger aro ace self who didn't know what aro ace was, or a lesbian, or just someone who doesn't want a bloody relationship for the sake of a relationship, and I'd be like YO YOU GO FOR IT BUDDY YOU HOLD OUT FOR THAT PRINCE. Higher standards mean lower interest, *and that's not wrong in itself*. If Catherine was whining about "boohoo why can't I get a girlfriend/boyfriend" you'd have a point, but *note how she isn't*. She doesn't have something she doesn't want; what a great indicator of her lack of ability!

^^^ in this last paragraph I used the word "relationship" to mean the couple kind, but everything above it uses it in a wider sense. Personal relationships aren't that different whether they are romantic or not. Catherine does have the capacity to connect with people, listen to them and cede control. You can't base your analysis on her on a single disaster teenaged romance (and for that matter Catherine had a bloody good point about Killian and human sacrifice and it's an entirely fair thing to have as a deal-breaker, I can expand on that if you're interested).

You have a point re: heroic stories and few relationships. It was remarked by an agent of Black's that she "doesn't have the traditional heroic capacity for forming strong friendships", so there's something there. Still, that something sure wasn't in play in the War College, was it? Discounting the possibility of outside meddling, I'd say it was a mindset: War College kind of selected for people who have the same basic view of the world, on a level, as Catherine does. She wasn't able to connect well with people who don't have it: note how back in Laure her most cordial relationship seemed to be with Ebele, the legionary who frequented the tavern.

It is, in fact, a thing. It's not control issues, though. The other way round, like I said: Catherine's an anxious bub who tries to arrange as many double checks on herself as possible. Yes, she's authoritative, but it's not the same thing as not knowing how to back down.

[Liliet](#)

I didn't mean the romantic sense of the word 😊

[Liliet](#)

What Ninegardens said.

Non-romantic relationships don't matter less. You can't just judge Catherine's ability to form healthy bonds with other people based on her one (1) attempt at having a girlfriend that fell apart eventually. Not when she has a whole healthy friendgroup that functions with 0 romantic drama despite the immense potential for it with all the unrequited crushes fluttering around. Catherine's relationship with Indrani being defined as "friends" and not "lovers" is a sign of its health, and a sign of Catherine being actually very good at managing her relationships: she and Indrani figured out a structure they were both comfortable and happy with, instead of trying to fit into an awkward and restrictive and inconvenient traditional framework.

No, Catherine doesn't do primary romantic partnerships. Yes, it's largely because she's too fucking busy being in charge of a large scale attempt to unfuck her region and probably the whole continent. And guess what! It's not obligatory! Catherine doesn't *have* to have a primary romantic partnership, or space for one in her life, in order to be good at relationships and connecting with other human beings!

luminiouslu

Stop being so defensive, you're on a random tangent ranting about...I honestly don't know. Romantic freedom? I have no goddamn idea what you're on about, you first claim you weren't on about romantic relationships (when the topic at hand is what happens is Kairos wants to bang Catherine, presumably for more than a one night stand), then you come around and say "b-but nothing's wrong with not having one anyway!"

My point is that Catherine's personality is, in fact, not suited for relationships, and it has nothing to do with her being 'busy' as she likes to excuse herself,

since that is in fact nothing but an excuse. Tyrants, kings, and warlords throughout history have found time for lovers, and I don't mean rape slaves or political marriages. Someone like her will always find another thing she needs to be in control of. Oh I don't doubt that she can still have relationships and friendships, but treating someone with their own agenda as a life partner is beyond her.

In any case, try to separate your own frankly overwhelming views on what I presume is romantic freedom, nontraditional relationships, and polygamy from the matter at hand. Which has nothing to do with any of that.

[Liliet](#)

Alright, let's talk about the matter at hand.

Kairos x Catherine.

He sacrificed several thousand civilians to make flying towers that he didn't even intend to keep for longer than a day.

Like, he killed them.

For what basically amounts to 'the lolz'.

He's hilarious, yes. But any hypothetical crush he can have on Catherine is not going to have any relevance to the fact that he's awful, and she is at best willing to tolerate his existence because she can't afford to antagonize the League.

And you were putting it as though Catherine was "not mature enough" for a relationship and as though her not having space for it in her *more busy than most historical rulers* life makes her somehow weaker / less capable / less mature than someone who would.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Yeah, but Tyrant got his Name at 12 or something. Villains don't age.

luminiousblu

They don't age past whatever they think of themselves as. Catherine has grown taller, check the end of Book 3 – she notes that she's now taller than Black. And in any case, twelve-year-old brats being sexually promiscuous is hardly unheard of in legend. Cú Chulainn

made cuckolds out of half of Ulster by the time he was seven years old. Somehow.

NZPIEFACE

I was just trying to argue that it was stealing the baby from the cradle or whatever the metaphor is.

Liliet

Masego got his name before the age of ten. So did Indrani.

Warlock had grey hair. Sabah looked very nearly her real age.

The appearance of Named reflects their image of themselves. I don't think Kairos would picture himself as an eternal 12yo.

...though of all people who would... if anyone would, it's as likely as not to be him. Eh.

ninegardens

I mean, to be fair, this is Tyrant we're dealing with...

I'm not sure if his flirting would be awkward, or just kind of amazing in a Supervillinous magnificent bastard sense. Sure, he's a insane cripple with creepy eyes and possible evil intentions... but I can't imagine him being awkward about it.

Skaddix

I don't know we never seen any proof that Tyrant cares about Sex lol. So far he and Hiearch seem pretty asexual. And I certainly don't see that impacting their decision making at all.

Honestly Tyrant strikes me as more likely to like someone like Akua lol then Cat. Even if his chaos style and mastery of stories is Cat like. Cat has moral limitations that would clash with Tyrant.

Liliet

As a local asexual who craves representation everywhere I can see even a shadow of it, I would like to inform you that not having sexual relationships or potential for them brought up in a politics-and-war-centered narrative where you're a side character antagonist doesn't make one asexual.

Akua's more likely to be aromantic and/or asexual than Kairos is, based on textual evidence, because Akua has actually

expressed views on sex and relationships that lines up with aspec stuff, while Kairos has simply not been examined from that angle at all.

The same applies to Anaxares. Sometimes, even allo people are just single 😊

Skaddix

Its harder to judge Tyrant cause he is young still and was busy making moves. Hierarch though is what 30 or 40 so its easier to judge him as probably not much interested in that stuff. I think Akua likes sex just fine at least when she was alive, not a romantic though that is for sure.

[Liliet](#)

‘Liking sex’ and ‘being a romantic’ have very little to do as a concept with asexuality/aromanticism. Those are about having attraction to people. Which I couldn’t really explain to you what it is because I’m aromantic and asexual myself, but it exists apparently! And I’ve seen no indication of caring about it or having it or any inkling of what it’s like in Akua’s POV when she talks about how she views sex. “This person is probably good in bed” is not attraction.

It’s likely that Akua’s aroace-ness stems from trauma more than anything, and it’s possible that it will change with time as she recovers.

(Which she clearly has been, despite the whole ‘collar ghost’ status being at Catherine’s side has clearly been healthy for her emotionally)

Sexual orientation is fluid actually, it’s a thing that comes up in the aro ace community, and the conclusion is that we’ll have everyone as long as they share our experiences, whether there’s an external reason or not.

And meanwhile, someone can have attraction and lower libido, too. That’s also a combination that’s possible.

(And Masego meanwhile is a lovely poster child of having all meters stuck solidly on 0 and being perfectly comfortable with it <3)

Antoninjohn

Now Cat will work together with her trusted friend against the mass brainwashing summon of Procer

[Liliet](#)

We don't really know that what Cordelia's calling on will be a brainwashing summon, necessarily. I doubt we'll get a literal beat for beat repeat of Liesse.

Skaddix

Also brainwashing didn't work last time though the army did get further against the Dead King than any other. So it might work this time if the quality of Named against the Dead King is better. Wonder if there is a type of Angel that is especially good at beating up undead.

[Liliet](#)

The point of the previous Crusade angel summon was to override the political bullshit and get the First Prince's head out of their ass.

Cordelia IS the First Prince. She doesn't need mass brainwashing summons when she already has the political authority and acumen to get people to not be completely awful&stupid about the situation.

McKing

"First Princess"?

Intentional or a mistake? Cordelia, I believe, stresses that the title is First Prince of Procer, regardless of gender.

[Dresden 67](#)

Cordelia's title is First Prince because she's Lycaonese, and their titles are the same regardless of gender. Aquitaine is an Arlesite principality.

[Liliet](#)

It's Cordelia's personal quirk. Lycaonese principalities did not have female rulers for a lot longer than the rest of Procer, and while Cordelia has I believe herself acknowledged in her narration that it's backwards of them, she still takes pride in her national identity. If she's the Prince of Rhenia, she's also the First Prince of Procer, and nobody gets to pretend she's not Lycaonese.

It's a similar power move to Catherine refusing to change her last name. Yes, it's Foundling. You now have Queen Foundling. You're being ruled by an orphan from an Imperial Orphanage, who had her last name picked by the Praesi administration, and doesn't see the slightest problem with it 😊

Letouriste

Ok...i don't get It.

Only thing I understood is that sword will definitely explode some day

WuseMajor

Oh Cat, you are so very mistaken about how able you are to work with the Pilgrim. Heaven wants a huge fight now, so the "Heroes" are going to oppose any attempt to stop it out of "principle" and the one orchestrating that will be the Pilgrim, using the Saint as his "bad cop" so he can fake being a kind and understanding grandfather.

Who do you think got you named Arch-Heretic in the first place?

[Liliet](#)

Saint, actually.

Pilgrim literally refused an alliance with Catherine out of the desire to keep the Grand Alliance together, while Saint's move was to destroy it.

Whether or not Saint has convinced Pilgrim to get aboard the ship now that it's sailing, it wasn't his idea originally, and he only left Callow (abandoning his designs there) after the Arch-Heretic bomb dropped.

RanVor

Quite the opposite, in fact.

RanVor

Saint doesn't intend to destroy the Grand Alliance, but to reforge it into an actual alliance that will hold for centuries. To do so, she needs to eliminate politics as a factor determining the level of cooperation between the Good nations, and Procer in its current state stands in the way.

[Liliet](#)

Wait, where did she say that?

RanVor

She didn't state it explicitly, but that's the most logical outcome of her designs. Collapsing the Grand Alliance doesn't make sense from her perspective.

[Liliet](#)

It does if she thinks it's the ultimate symbol of political greed and corruption. Which it kind of is, and even Cordelia has been getting frustrated at Levantines and Ashurans being in it for territory grabs and assuming she is, too.

The Grand Alliance is kind of a trainwreck in terms of Good.

RanVor

In its current shape, yes, it is a failure. But the IDEA is good, and that's why it needs to be reforged, not destroyed. Saint doesn't think Cordelia is wrong, just insufficiently fanatical. With Procer on the brink of destruction, Ashur and Levant will have no choice but surrender to the heroes to survive, which will allow Laurence to remake the alliance according to her vision. Cordelia's dream will be preserved, even if the First Prince herself won't be part of it anymore.

[Liliet](#)

I think you're projecting your own understanding of the situation on Saint. Just because it sounds like a logical conclusion from her thesis doesn't mean it's the one she would come to.

[Liliet](#)

like I'm not saying you're necessarily wrong, just that we don't know that

RanVor

I base my reasoning on the assumption that Saint knows the rough shape of the situation and is at least competent enough to pose a threat. It is possible that I'm wrong and she isn't, or that she has no idea what's going on, but I wouldn't bank on it.

[Liliet](#)

I think Saint's worldview wrt governments and alliances might be idiosyncratic enough that she won't come to the same conclusion even with the same base premises and full knowledge of the situation.

[Javvies](#)

Problem with that is it's not actually a clean slate.

I'm pretty sure that Saint wants Evil to pull something akin to a Triumphant here – successful conquest followed by everything falling apart latest on in a few years with a new generation of rising Heroes.

And the new generation of Heroes are the unquestioned leaders and founders of a new regime.

When you base things on the premise that Good ultimately wins in the end, no matter how good a run Evil had earlier on, it's harder to reform/alter something in the way you want it to be, than it is to let Evil destroy it utterly and have Above help you replace it from scratch.

WuseMajor

As far as meeting the Tyrant goes, I am not sure what will happen. He can see what people truly want, in their heart of hearts. The real question is what he does with this information.

I could imagine him supporting Cat or opposing her and her (and us) not being able to tell the difference.

I could also imagine his metaphorical scouter exploding if he tried that on Akua.

ninegardens

See, the main issue I see with the Tyrant is his incredibly high quality arsenic, which Cat is no longer immune to (No longer being named)... then again, I guess that is the kind of thing that Night could deal with... so probably fine.

SpacyRicochet

I reread the final lines. I did think Hierarch was a plausible choice. But she's saying 'eternal friend' and 'he'.

Both Tyrant and Hierarch are not eternal. And 'he' rules out Bard. I really think the Dead King could be the one in the city.

ninegardens

Tyrant has sent a number of letters pledging his "Eternal Friendship" to Cat, Cordelia, Malicia, Black, The Kingdom under, The gnomes, the elves, the wandering bard, and Elton John.

Okay, maybe not all of those, but "Eternal friendship" I'm pretty sure was one of Tyrant's phrases, usually accompanied by high quality arsenic.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Friendship till death!

[Liliet](#)

Also the ratlings. He sent one of those to the ratlings.

SpacyRicochet

Ah, that makes more sense. Tyrant probably then, who triggered Hierarch's Aspect somehow? Still doesn't sound like Tyrant's Aspect.

burdi

"The only way I'd get the other nations to sit at the table was if they no longer believed they could really win against me without losing everything else."

So in the end catherine came to conclusion just like Malicia with her doom weapon

in the end she need power

[Dresden 67](#)

Yeah, except Malicia was planning on holding her doom weapon over the rest of Calernia's heads forever. Cat just needs a good enough position in the short term to bring the Grand Alliance to the table.

The doom weapon was obvious hero bait, it would have brought endless waves of them until one succeeded. Cat just needs to beat the Saint and a few others, then leverage her advantage to get the Liesse Accords signed.

ninegardens

So here's a question- what would the story weight have been if Malicia got the doom weapon, and then created a treaty (say, equivalent to the accords), saying that the damn thing was illegal and granting Procer etc liscence to dismantle the damn thing as soon as the treaty was signed. None of this "Hold it over them forever" but instead "Hold it over them for five minutes while asking them to sign a reasonable treaty so that no one (myself included) ever makes one of these again."

What would Story even make of that? Would it still count as hero bait if the heroes had already been offered a reasonable diplomatic route to removing the damn thing?

[BarthHumphries](#)

Evil Supervillain is about to create a doomsday device.
Should us heroes go stop that? 😊

Also, agreement through duress doesn't count so i doubt the accords would hold for very long in that case.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, except Catherine's going to threaten to kill heroes and destroy armies, while Malicia's threat would have been to irreparably damage the fabric of Creation and let hordes of devils out into countrysides at will.

One of those is politics and power struggle. The other is "kill it with goblinfire right now no matter the cost".

RanVor

That the differences in personality lead to different practical applications of the conclusion doesn't mean that the logic behind it isn't the same.

[Liliet](#)

Sure, it is.

And Catherine had even agreed with Malicia on her plan, back then.

The underlying idea was not what the problem was with Malicia's plan. Execution was.

Zaver SaintCloud

I just want to say that I appreciate the distinction she makes; "The finest minds on the continent... *pause* ... and me.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine's self-burns are highest quality ♥

Zaver SaintCloud

I didn't even fear as a burn, in the traditional sense. Rather a grudging admittance that when it comes to intrigue & grand strategy, she's the small fish struggling to just keep swimming.

Captain Amazing

I predict the insanity in Toulouse is from the kanenas. I think they have enforcement methods other than murder to make people abandon a basic human trait like ambition. Also, I think the Sisters will be declared to be the "Gods Below" as far as

Bellerophon is concerned because they have the right to vote in the councils. It's never been done before so there is no prior precedent.

ninegardens

So... possibly a dumb question/theory... but how sure are we that the Bard is on the side of "Good"?

I mean... is she trying to make Good win, or is she literally some kind of spirit of "Keep the game running", smiting down anyone who disturbs the rules... on EITHER side. [I think we can all agree that to the best of appearances she is not actually good in the traditional earth sense]

I mean, she showed up for Sve Noc, apparently offering a deal on behalf of Below...

and sure, she's been trying to break Black, but is that because she is "Good" or because he is trying to damage the game?

And if that is the case.... then what the heck is the role of the Dead King?

I mean sure, his actions seem pretty bad... but his timing and attack are COMPLETELY in Cat's favour... and potentially in favour of breaking the game (If Cat get's her treaty etc etc)

Andrew Mitchell

I think you're 100% spot on with "keep the game running". She has appeared to be acting for both Above and Below and she's actively working against Cat and Black who are both trying to break the game. The Deak King's on the side of Below but he's been extremely careful not to give Above any story leverage that would see him undone. Having said that, he recognises that he's currently stuck in a seemingly endless rut so perhaps he sees Cat trying to break the game as an opportunity for him to break out into something new as well?

Rewdy

> The general barely glanced at the staff I was leaning on, but I felt Diabolist's gaze linger.

Diabolist's thoughts : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5aopMm7UGYA>

Chapter 6: Furor

"The words of one sage are wisdom, the words of a hundred a riot."

– Atalantian saying

What was it with Proceran cities and looking kind of shoddy?

Rochelant at least had bothered to put up walls at some point in its history, which the Callowan in me could not help but approve of, but those miserable piles of mud and stone looked like they hadn't seen a day's maintenance in the last century. I wouldn't need sorcery to knock those over, just a sapper with a few tools and a pile of firewood. On the other hand, I couldn't help but stare at the size of the place – come winter, and we were definitely there, there must have been at least twenty something thousand people living in there. Rochelant was a goblin's dream playground, all wooden thatched houses and narrow alleys, but by Proceran standards this was considered a *small* city. There would be a handful of those in Iserre alone, with the eponymous capital being significantly larger. Sometimes it boggled the mind how many people actually lived within the borders of the Principate. Sure, these were the heartlands and by far the most densely populated part of the realm, but I wouldn't be surprised if the total population of Procer beat that of Callow and Praes put together. *But the behemoth is quarrelsome, and slow to wake*, I thought. That'd been the sole saving grace of the Principate's bordering nations since the crowning of the founding First Prince. Yet both those flaws would have to be fixed, if the war up north was to be won.

There was a reason I would have peace as set by the Liesse Accords or no peace at all. Procer resurgent, purged of all its weaknesses, might be almost as dangerous to Calernia as the Dead King himself. Cordelia Hasenbach did not strike me as particularly ambitious when it came to acquiring new territories directly – her game had always been a diplomatic in outcome, when she was the one leading the dance – but there was no guarantee her successor would be so inclined. I wasn't going to bloody Callow and its allies just to enable the latest imperial expansion of the 'Wardens of the West', as the rulers of this realm so arrogantly titled themselves.

"Ivah wasn't making it up," Archer mused. "They really *haven't* bothered to put up sentries. Bold, I've gotta say."

The walls were only about a dozen feet high and I had doubts they were thick enough to resist even a single good hit from a trebuchet, but the part Indrani had focused on was perhaps the most important: there was not a soul patrolling atop them. Or guarding the city gates, which were as wide open as such a narrow gap allowed. The snowy dirt road leading to them had been use

recently, though. There were hoof marks leading into the countryside, so whoever held command in there was fielding at least some patrols. I pulled at the reins of Zombie the Fourth, though the dead horse I'd spared from ending up in a drow cookpot to serve as my undead mount instead showed no reaction to the gesture. Necromancy, insofar as I was truly doing that – and Akua had expressed her doubts on the subject many a time – had gotten a little rougher since I'd traded in Winter for Night. Whatever strange spark of intelligence my good little abomination Zombie the Third still held wherever she was – unnecessarily – grazing at grass was absent from my new mount. The Sisters insisted this was a consequence of my raw handling of Night, but I disagreed. There'd been something to Winter that was missing in the Night, even after the latter had devoured the former. Crow-Andronike stirred on my shoulder, displeased, but did not take up the argument. It was probably for the best that her sister had remained with the southern expedition, because she most definitely would have.

"The smoke means chimneys and fires are still being used," Akua noted from my other side. "In large enough amount it cannot be solely the soldiers of the League doing so. That implies some degree of coherent thought remains to the inhabitants."

"Not a demon, probably, unless it is," Indrani summed up.

Diabolist looked deeply pained at the phrasing, but did not disagree. I smothered a smile and urged Zombie forward with a twist of will. The company of drow around us was heavy on Lords, at General Rumena's insistence, though to be fair I hadn't bothered to argue. Ivah, Soln, Sagas and Vadymir: the majority of my surviving Peerage was trailing the three of us, with around four dozen rylleh of mixed sigils following behind them in turn. As long as the moon was out, the power at my back was the equivalent of fielding a small army. In power, anyway, and that was always tricky business. All that was necessary for them to turn into a mere fifty drow was the right ward or miracle. They'd been predators among predators, down in the Everdark, but where the Firstborn had been shedding their own blood for millennia up here the war had two sides. For all their centuries of fighting and deep wells of Night, I often wondered how well my Peerage would truly stack up against a well-trained hero. *We'll have to find out, eventually*, I grimly thought. I shook off the thought and turned by attention back to the present.

The closer we got to the city, the more I became convinced there were eyes on us. There was not a soul immediately through the gates, which made that rather interesting. Andronike's sliver of godhood on my shoulder should be quite enough to make a wreck of any attempt to scry us, implying *something* was actually watching us directly.

"Archer?" I murmured.

Even under the hood and cloth I saw her brow creasing.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Indrani said. "But I'm guessing if these people can't even put together the coin for decent walls they shouldn't have enough to put up gargoyles on them."

Akua stilled.

"Helikeans are fond of animating stone," the shade said. "Though admittedly they've rarely succeeded at anything larger than a dog."

Now that I knew what to look for, I could make out the small silhouettes that'd wedged themselves into holes and fissures. Imp-like sculptures of rough stone, some with the heads of dogs and others more lizardlike. Many had wings, though not all. I'd missed them at first look, I thought, because none of them were moving even the slightest bit. Not even the eyes.

"No sentries, huh," I said. "Looks like our good friend the Tyrant is a little more careful than he lets on."

Ivah slid up to me, head already bowed, but I waved away the apology before it could be spoken. It'd been the kind of detail someone unused to having to consider what people could and could not afford – in essence, not a drow – might have missed. Living in massive ornate ruins could be a blind spot of sorts, and both Ivah and its scouts had spent their whole lives living in the remnants of their old empire. Interesting, though, that the mistake would fit so well. Had the Tyrant gotten lucky, or was there more to it? Regardless, it seemed that my army's last visit to Rochelant might not have been as discreet as we'd previously thought. The Tyrant of Helike, I suspected, would be waiting for us.

"You'll know next time," I simply told Ivah. "Mistakes are to be expected. It doesn't matter, so long as you learn from them."

"As you say, Losara Queen," the Lord of Silent Steps murmured back.

With a bow it retreated, just in time for us to enter Rochelant in lockstep. The gate above us was arched, and I felt petty satisfaction at noting that my earlier prediction of poor wall depth proved entirely accurate. The muddy road into the city ahead of us was probably the closest thing to an avenue there was to be found in here. Broad enough for a cart to go through, anyway, which had probably been the measure it was built on.

"Akua," I simply said.

Diabolist met my eyes, inclined her head and as we passed in the shade cast by a house she vanished into thin air. She had her instructions already. My arguably finest expert in sorcery would be taking a look at the influence taking hold of Rochelant, though she was to retreat and return to me the moment she started feeling it herself.

"It is here," Andronike spoke from my shoulder. "Like waves lapping at the shore. There is a source further in."

"Not feeling anything," Indrani noted.

"For which we give thanks to the Night," I mildly replied.

I had no intention of walking into a place like this without one of my crow-goddesses serving as a shield.

"My thoughts exactly. Hail the Sisters, all that good stuff," Archer snorted.

She'd never been one to meet a deity and not debate whether to try to stab it, I recognized with a sigh.

"We head for the source," I told the drow. "Andronike?"

"None may hide from me after dusk," the crow claimed.

That might even be true, as I immediately felt a pull in the Night guiding me forward through the streets. Given how narrow they were, the drow had to spread out over rooftops to keep even a semblance of formation. They did so in utter silence, ethereal silhouettes in the moonlight that left no mark and bore no weight. We'd left the main road behind, and with that any semblance of this city not being a nightmarish mess of cramped alleys. Tough sometimes it was so tight that Archer couldn't even stay at my side, our journey through was informative in some ways. There were still people inside the houses, though not nearly as many as there should be this late out. The sounds in the distance told me that Ivah's report of 'tribunals' had not been idle chatter: I could hear shouting in Chantant, the bay of a mob out for a good hanging. The first trial we came across was on the steps of a House of Light, and the sight of a roiling mob of nearly a hundred had me ordering my horse to a halt. The Procerans did not pay us the slightest attention, though the other foreigners did. Watching on passively from a distance, a dozen soldiers in scale armour were standing apart from the crowd. Sword and board men, the lot of them, though the mail beneath the scales going down to their knees was a style of armour known to me. Helikean, though these men-at-arms were missing the javelins their lot was reputed to bear.

The Tyrant's soldiers looked at us, but before long returned their attention to the citizens. *So you knew we were coming*, I

thought. *Or your orders are not to care about outsiders coming in.* Gaze returning to the Procerans, I tried to parse out the mixed shouts of Chantant and Tolesian they were using interchangeably and found only mixed success. The man they were attempting to hold a tribunal over was obvious, a brother from the House of Light wearing what had once been very nice robes now ripped and dirtied. Accusations bribery and withheld healing were tossed at him, but my interest lay in the fact that there were other priests among the crowd. Shouting with the others, red-faced and thirsty for blood. Whatever was animating these people, even priesthood was no opponent for it.

"They're not resorting to violence yet," I noted out loud.

"That robe didn't rip itself," Archer replied.

Yes, but she was missing the point. For all the anger and fervour stirring up the crowd, they were not simply tearing the accused apart. The process was rough and loud, but accusations were being laid and witnesses called. Some law, I suspected, was being obeyed. But whose? It was certainly not the laws of Iserre, or even those few that held for the entire Principate. We stayed long enough to see the crowd begin voting on the seven among them that would make up the tribunal and pass the sentence, though I did not remain to witness what would be the inevitable conclusion. There were already headless corpses staining the front of the House that told me the nature of it. The Helikean soldiers parted wordlessly for us when I rode past them, Archer at my side. None of them caught sight of the shadows following me by way of the rooftops. Three more of these trials we encountered as I let the Night guide me further into Rochelant, each headed for grim ending.

"There's something in the air here," Indrani grunted as we passed the third.

"Blood," I flatly replied.

I glanced to the side as she pulled back her hood a fraction, revealing troubled hazelnut eyes.

"This almost feels like a domain, Cat," she said. "Only wrong. Winter was cruel, but it was... clear. This has a fever to it, a sickness. Whatever's at the centre of this, it is *mad*."

I shivered, fingers closing tightly around my ebony staff. I'd heard what she did not say. It was mad, and so it was dangerous – and we were head towards it.

"And still we advance," I said.

Stillness held for a moment.

"Well," Archer said, pulling down her hood. "Not like we ever let good sense get in the way before."

I sent Zombie forward, knowing there was a grain of truth to that. Andronike's talons dug into my shoulder as we made our way out of the alley not long after, a sign we'd reached the source of this bloody dream. The clamour could be heard long before I saw anything with my own eyes, the wave of sound that was hundreds of people talking and screaming and moving. Before us stood what was likely a marketplace, though packed full with citizens as it was that could only remain a guess. Men and women were standing in line in the back, up against a tavern, and I watched as the one in front was dragged to the side and beheaded before the parted corpse was dragged away out of sight. Immediately the tribunal that'd passed the sentence returned to the mob, and voting began on who would make up the next as the second in line in the back was brought to the front. This was it, I thought. Even with the crow goddess on my shoulder shielding me from the worst of this, I could feel something rippling in the air. A steady pulse like a heartbeat. Leaning on the height temporarily granted to me by my horse, I followed the sensation to its source.

There was a table to the side of the proceedings, more a pile of crates than anything else, and at it sat a single man. Tanned in the way of the Free Cities, he was dressed like a beggar in worn robes too loose on his frame. Which was thin, though not the thinness of the heathy. He looked like he'd had too many lean meals, or perhaps like the fire in those grey eyes had eaten away at his body from the inside. The Hierarch of the League of Free Cities, for this could not be anyone else, was middle-aged and balding. His eyebrows were thick and bushy, both they and his sparse beard warring between white streaks and dark brown. One of his boots, I could not help but notice, had been so poorly sown back on the sole was coming off at the front. I looked at him, saw him scribbling on a clay tablet while intently following the proceedings, and felt the slightest bit of fear. He looked like no one, I thought. But coming from his body like an invisible current was some deep and terrible power the touch of which could be felt over all of Rochelant. It was not reaching into my mind, not yet, but it felt as if raising my hand would allow me to feel the unseen ripples.

"That's an aspect," Indrani said, voice hushed. "*Gods*, how can that be an aspect?"

"Andronike?" I asked.

The crow-goddess did not reply for a long moment, until I turned my head to look at her. If a bird could look uncomfortable, I saw, it would be something like this.

"This is... difficult," Andronike said, voice tight. "The pull is strong."

My fingers clenched.

"You're having a hard time fighting him," I croaked. "What the Hells is this, Andronike? He's Named, not..."

"Faith," the crow got out. "This is faith, Catherine Foundling. Pure unadulterated belief, untainted by doubt or hesitation. It *sings*, and the world sings back."

"Faith in what?" I asked.

"Nothing," Andronike hissed. "A snake eating its own tail. It is bleak madness screamed by endless throats, and it would stand tribunal over the Gods themselves."

I swallowed. And the Tyrant of Helike was using this man as a *pawn*?

"We need to leave," Archer said. "We're not ready for this. Not without Masego."

I breathed in, breathed out. Fear was the death of reason. None of the reasons I had come here had changed. If anything, the depths of the man I was still looking at made it *more* important to get a handle on what the League was after. I allowed my staff to slip my fingers and hit the frozen ground. Calling on a breath's worth of Night, I used to support to get off my horse. Indrani sucked in a breath.

"Cat, this is a trap," she said.

"And still I advance," I ruefully smiled. "Andronike, safeguard them."

The crow left my shoulder, a few flaps of her wings landing her atop the head of the eerily-still Zombie.

"It will sing to you, First Under the Night," the goddess warned.

"Ah, but that's the trick," I told her, baring my teeth. "You can't go mad *twice*, o goddess of Night."

Limping against my staff, I slipped into the crowd. The sound and power beat at my eardrums like a ram, in some way intertwined, and it took me by surprise hard enough some man almost elbowed me off my feet. I grit my teeth and shoved back with my staff. It should have stung, but the man was too busy screaming his vote in Chantant to notice. Going straight through would see me trampled, I decided, so I made my way to the edge instead and began circling around. The pounding in my ears was relentless. Again and again it came as I stumbled around half-blind, until I could

almost make out words. Almost. I caught my breath against a half-fallen stall, and only then gathered enough attention to notice the woman staring at me. She was, it was almost too absurd to think, aggressively nondescript. There was a muted look to her face, as if her thoughts were halfway elsewhere, though as she narrowed her eyes I felt something brush against my mind.

Somewhere very far away, Sve Noc bared their teeth in displeasure.

The stranger paled, eyes turning bloodshot, and clutched her forehead as scarlet began dripping out of her nostrils. *Shouldn't have done that*, I thought. *In there be monsters, my friend*. I immediately felt dozens of stares settle on me, but I ignored them and began the journey again. Not far, now, and where the Hierarch was seated a gap had formed in the crowd. I pushed the last woman out of the way, though I froze just after. I could have sworn I'd hear someone whisper in my ear, though the words had been indistinct. My fingers clutched the staff and I drew comfort from the sensation of the Night within, letting out a deep breath and putting myself together. The Named, I saw, had not so much as glanced at me. Neither did he bother when I stepped around the makeshift table until I stood behind him. I glanced down at the words being scribbled on the clay tablet with a stone stylet. That wasn't Chantant, I noted. I didn't recognize the language, although at one of the words was very close to the Mtethwa for 'protest' so it might be tradertalk. The second Maleficent had held the region under her grasp for long enough there'd been some bleed into the local tongue, I'd read.

"Will anyone but you actually be able to read those?" I said in Chantant.

I'd meant to speak lightly, but my voice came out rough instead. The Hierarch finally paused in his writing, turning to look at me. There was something calm, almost resigned, to the stare. As if nothing of Creation could truly ruffle his feathers.

"Irrelevant," the Hierarch replied in the same, tone chiding. "Transcripts must be kept of trials held."

I blinked. Huh. Not the answer I'd expected. The power battering at my mind was weakening, I felt, slowly but surely. Did the aspect require concentration?

"I am-"

"You have the look of a foreign tyrant," the Hierarch accused.

"Back home it's called regular tyranny, though," I replied, and immediately bit my tongue.

I'd really thought I was done with the whole taunting dangerous, powerful madmen thing but apparently old habits died hard. The Hierarch's brow furrowed as he seemed to seriously mull over that. The battering ram slowed even further.

"That seems logical," he muttered. "It should be passed on to the Republic for consideration."

Then he turned those dark eyes back on me.

"You do not deny the charge of tyranny?" he pressed.

"You already laid out your stance in our correspondence," I said.

He seemed vaguely surprised, then thoughtful.

"You are Cordelia Hasenbach," the man stated, half-questioningly.

A moment passed, while I was genuinely at a loss for words. *Ah*, I thought. *So this is why the Tyrant thinks he can make a pawn of you.* For a heartbeat I debated actually pretending I was the First Prince just to see if I could make some trouble for her, but discarded the notion just as quick. Best not to roll dice when they had teeth and a noted fondness for biting.

"Catherine Foundling," I replied. "Queen of Callow."

If he felt embarrassed about the mistake, he didn't show it in the slightest.

"There's no such thing," he told me sternly.

"Queens or Catherine Foundling?" I said. "Because one of those debates is a lot more philosophical than I'm equipped to handle."

Behind us the clamour of the crowd had quieted some, but by the sounds of it the trials hadn't stopped. Neither had the aspect, I thought, at least not entirely. But what had been a trumpet earlier was a murmur now, and that I could handle while keeping most of my wits about me.

"Aristocracy Is A Festering Wound Upon The People," Anaxares of Bellerophon gravely informed me. "May Hail Strike It Repeatedly For A Thousand Years."

That seemed a little excessive. There shouldn't be much left to hail on after the first century.

"Preaching to the Choir there," I said. "I've never fought a war against someone who didn't have some sort of title."

"Yet you are a queen," he said, blithely ignoring his previous assertion there was no such thing.

"For the moment," I shrugged. "I intend to abdicate when it's feasible."

"So your kind always claims," the Hierarch said, eyes turning flinty. "Give me the right, they say, give me the laws and the swords. I will keep you safe until the storm has passed. And service becomes rule, rule becomes tyranny until *lovingly* the yoke is fastened around our necks."

Like the hammer on the anvil, the ram against the gate, the dull pounding of his power began to sound in the distance. Slow. Swelling. Implacable. But I would not be cowed that easily.

"Is this why the League has gone to war?" I asked. "To end crowns?"

There wasn't a single thing that changed about him, I thought. He was still a skeleton of a man in ill-fitting robes, a scarecrow with a scowl. Not a single thing had changed, and yet... If I strained the ear, I could hear the chorus. The howls of the mob. Chains ripped apart, palaces toppled and bones being crushed. Torches starting a fire that would spread across the world. A song of revolt, of rebellion. I could feel it, like warm wine running through my veins. It was harsh and unforgiving, but oh how *glorious* it was. How easy it would have been to partake of it and let that warmth swallow me whole.

"We are all of us free or we are none of us free," the Hierarch of the League of Free Cities said, voice like steel. "There is no middle ground. And for the lashes struck at our back, all will be called to account – if gallows must be raised for devils and angels alike, *so be it.*"

I almost, out of sheer contrariness, pointed out that devils did not die but only disperse. *But would they really, if it was this man passing the sentence?* Suddenly I was not so certain. My mistake, I thought, had been trying to think of him as either a terror or a fool. Fear had dogged me, wading through his aspect, but it had retreated as we spoke. As the man proved to be so uninterested in his surrounding as to be lost. I'd allowed the cadenced little phrases, the obvious mistakes and ignorance, to lull me into believing him... adrift. Living in his own world. But Black had warned me about people like this, hadn't he? About Named who did not see Creation as it was but how it *should be*. Men and women who embraced their vision so deeply they bent the world around them to match it. My mistake, I thought once more, had been to believe he must be only one of the two. He was not.

The Tyrant of Helike had not sharpened this blade so carefully to cut a mortal empire, I decided. There was a broader game unfolding.

"It's a pretty dream," I said. "A pretty speech. But you ended it before you got to the end – the part where you declare war on the rest of the continent for those same pretty things, and it eats you alive. It's not a fight you're going to win, Hierarch."

The man's lips quirked, his face serene save for the scorn.

"War against Calernia," he said amusedly. "As if tearing down masters was the same thing as warring on their slaves. You betray yourself, tyrant. You think I wage war on them?"

The stylus flicked at the crowd of Procerans. The axe went up, the axe went down. Another dead man, dragged into the alley.

"The old faceless thing bade me to choose a side," the Hierarch said. "And at long last, I have."

My eyes narrowed. The old faceless thing. There weren't a lot of entities out there that would fit that epithet. Anaxares of Bellerophon smiled, crooked teeth bared.

"You think us outnumbered?" he said. "How many of us are there, tyrant, and how many of *you*?"

I could have wounded him, then. Not with a blade – here and now, even if he did not lift a finger, I did not think that would end well for me – but with words. A reminder that he marched with slavers and monsters, that his own League would turn on him in due time. That he should get his own fucking house in order before tossing stones at mine. Or maybe that power would fail him, in the end, and that like the city-state that spawned him his road would end in blood and whimpering. But there would be a place and a time for that, and it was not tonight.

I had seen the sword, and must now see its wielder.

"It's a lovely song," I said instead. "But it's always easier to break than to make."

The Hierarch's gaze returned to the trial, where the accused was being dragged to the fore.

"There will be one for you as well, one day," he said.

"But not tonight," I said.

"Not tonight," he softly agreed.

I left as the man bent back over his tablet, hand moving anew to write words only he could read.

It was past time I had a chat with the other madman in this city.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Go vote!

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

Wry Warudo

Found the Hierarch

taovkool

For the People!

SpacyRicochet

Yes! Oh Hierarch, ultimate ruler!

nipi

Heresy! I charge this ally of tyranny with treason. No man is above another.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Alas, this very forum system revels in placing those who speak first above those who would seek to respond to them.



Skaddix

Hmm Tyrant next chapter that should prove more fruitful.
Cat knows Hiearach has dealt with the Bard.
Another Masego mention so I assume next chapter or whenever Cat meets the Tyrant. The Tyrant will drop that particular bombshell.

I am still confused is the area of effect from the Hierarch Faith? Or is it his Faith enhancing an Aspect to extreme degree. Seems almost like the Ability that Angel of Contrition used to force millions to march against the Dead King. Of course that was a good deal more powerful.

Dainpdf

Black said confidence powers Named. Who could be more confident than a man so deep in the throes of madness?

[daegone823](#)

The same way the Saint of Swords has improved her own aspects through meditation in seclusion. The saint probably has an aspect like cut that could make strong slashes, which matured to making slashes that could fire from afar, later on after meditation she could literally cut creation with her blade.

I believe the hierarch has been able to intensify the effects of his domain by increasing the area of effect as well as the power that while weak is able to penetrate all eventually. This power can only be maintained as long as he maintains his purpose(dwarf name). Thus whenever he is distracted or his thoughts wander to anything besides writing laws, judgement, he weakens.

So yes it is an aspect, a domain aspect similar to Champion's and Fall, but he has been able to increase effectiveness through his faith which is believing in the people. He is a name that has been created by the tyrant in order to control a power that can nullify the bard simply because his story allows him to. He is a secret weapon against entities who mainly use story narratives. By leaving everything to a vote the tyrant has harnessed the power of the mob similar to a roman emperor harnessing roman citizens against any other would be power.

Skaddix

Fair seems the weakness of Bard is dealing with mortals with Faith as so far Hanno, Tyrant and Hierarch have all must with Bard by leaning into the Faith and thus being unpredictable because of that. You are right class Black noted that Named are more powerful when they lean into their name. Although that does tend to lead to some degree of tunnel vision.

caoimhinh

I wonder if Cat will convince Kairos of joining her by promising to give him the greatest war against the greatest enemy, the Dead King. That might be a diplomatic way to make a temporal deal between them, of course, Kairos will betray her, but would be sometime in the future instead of now.

[Liliet](#)

Why would Kairos need Cat to offer him that? The Dead King is right there. He knows about it. He can go fight him himself if he wants to.

Now, the entertainment of trying to craft an alliance against the Dead King? That might just be right up his "let's elect a Bellerophon Hierarch" alley.

Rook

I honestly think the Tyrant does have a big overall end game and even the dead king is too small fry to be in his sights.

I think he's aiming at Above and Below. The entire idea that there are only two sides, there are only two choices to choose from. The nature of the weapon he crafted tells a story there.

He probably doesn't give a ratting's ass about the people or their democracy, but what the Hierarch stands for is a perfect knife if your goal is to turn a 'true or false' question into a multiple choice one.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

Catherine's 'fall in line or else' alliance could provide entertainment on the way, though. Oh, he'd betray her obviously, but I think this fits his idea of fun (more so than attacking DK)

luminiousblu

"I am still confused is the area of effect from the Hierarch Faith?"

It's a case of being the god of your own world. A Domain is – outside of the Guide – essentially an area where you reign supreme over all other comers. It can be a physical plot of land or a metaphysical or conceptual one. In the Guide, it seems to be both at once really – you have a conceptual or metaphysical domain, and actually invoking the domain actively forces your surroundings to adhere to it. Hence, when Catherine invoked her Domain, she made her surroundings into a Moonless Night.

Yardaze

dang, Hierarch got scary.

[Javvies](#)

Hmmm.

Not entirely sure how I feel about Heirarch now.

Ah, yes, the old "good sense hasn't stopped us before, why should we let it stop us now?"

And unholy fuck – that's a brutal, if perhaps situational, Aspect.

Kairos playing a dangerous game – even by the standards of Evil rulers.

Rook

The thing is, Catherine is the exact same type as the Hierarch. The hilarity of it is that she just had an entire internal monologue about what a scary, dangerous madman this guy is, but the only reason she can casually walk into the eye of his vortex – one a goddess was struggling with – and have a casual conversation, is because they're fundamentally similar types.

"Names who did not see creation as it was but what it should be. Men and women who embraced their vision so deeply they bent the world around them to match it"

Girl, that's literally a description of you. Some know-nothing orphan teenager with shit for talents that – out of sheer stubbornness – managed to beat back the hells, bend a choir over her knee, eat half a faerie realm, bring down a Flying Fortress city, and win a war against a national superpower. Then you walked into an ancient mysterious empire with two and a half people to pick a fight with everyone living inside it; and instead of, y'know, dying, you broke a several millenniums old curse and walked out with a goddess older than your ancestors grandfathers on your shoulder. Also an army that puts most surface nations to shame.

The Hierarch is just weak person that draws in far stronger, far more capable people around him by sheer force of conviction. A complete fool and a madman to anyone outside his pull, but a center of nearly fanatical devotion to people inside of it, despite his ignorance and weaknesses. He's obviously not the smartest person there and half his followers could probably pulp him into a quivering bloody mass if they felt like it, but they all just follow His vision instead. Does that remind you of anyone?

Catherine is just like the Hierarch, except with more sarcasm and proper armor.

Skaddix

I mean they are similar in the sense that they both want to do the best for Normal People who aren't Rich, Named or anyway special. Just vastly different motivations and techniques.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

I think they're completely different.

Catherine started out as Hierarch: blind to the currents that drive the world and convinced of her own infallibility. Since then she's gained insight into the geopolitical and economic forces behind the world (Praes vs Callow), learned to use the skewed lens of the narrative and gleaned information on the biggest players such as the Bard and the Dead King. She has

lost her extremism and her naive, simplistic view of the world.

The Hierarch is the opposite. He's completely blind to the realities of the world to the point where he thought Cat was Cordelia and the Tyrant is using him as a pawn. He doesn't have any considerations for the people he claims to be championing nor the political reality of what he's trying to do. Will he go around the entire world issuing trials? How will he enforce his political system? How many people will die after the existing leadership is removed? How is he different from any other madman that says "this is how the world should be"?

luminiousblu

You're looking at this the wrong way.

"Realities of the world"

What ARE the realities of the world? There's a saying that goes, "each one of us believes ourselves to be the most sensible people in the world". The Hierarch has faith in what he does, and from the point of view of Name Lore, that's all that matters. Who are you to tell him he's wrong? What if you're just blind? In the face of overwhelming belief in what he's doing, you can't really oppose him. Those realities you're talking about have already been washed away in part – the League of Free Cities has basically folded up behind an uncooperative hobo.

"where he thought Cat was Cordelia"

Because there's no real difference, to him. He doesn't know who is who, but he also doesn't care.

"He doesn't have any considerations for the people he claims to be championing."

The Hierarch is not championing persons, he is championing The People. Two entirely different things. Every single person in the world could die, and you could still, in theory, be saving The People.

"How will he enforce his political system? How many people will die after the existing leadership is removed?"
Irrelevant.

"How is he different from any other madman that says "this is how the world should be"?"

And that's the crux of the matter. How is ANYONE different from any other madman who looks at the world and says, "not the way I like it"? Do you really think he's that different from any of the other Named – or even some of the bigger non-Named? He's more ideological than practical, but in a world driven by stories they're almost the same thing – an

actual deity has trouble overcoming his apparently passive mental influence. People who aren't just as mad as he is can't compete with him, and Named in general are mad.

Cold Cyberia

How is maintaining his political system irrelevant? It's his established goal to make sure The People rule. If he has no mechanism to enforce this, someone will come into power either through corruption or inertia.

That's what I mean by the realities of the world – he's not making a sustainable change. Instated, he's having a tantrum like a reality warping baby. Moreover, he's being used as a pawn by the Tyrant, who certainly doesn't give a shit about The People.

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All hail the communist republic.

Liliet

This is a very good comparison point. Catherine and Hierarch have just enough similarities that contrasting them is effective.

It's a contrast, though. And the contrast is that... in the end, Catherine is *right* and Anaxares is *wrong*. Not even in terms of ideology or morality, simply in terms of facts. Catherine has them, and understands them. Anaxares does not, and refuses to. His position is one of stubborn willful ignorance, while Catherine's is that of a quest for knowledge and understanding.

That's what makes the difference between them.

(and before someone starts on "Catherine is an unreliable narrator": *she is not the only one we have*. There are lots of other POVs in the series, and in terms of basic facts about how the world works, they support Catherine's position... while Anaxares's bullshit is transparently obvious even in his own POV)

Rook

Completely disagree. See, that isn't how arguments or differences in belief work.

Different perspectives don't come from one person being right and the other person being intentionally stupid. They happen in the first place because both people think they're right and they're sensible. Any time any two people have a difference in opinion about anything, you have to go into it

realizing this instead of digging in your heels with “one person is right and the other is wrong, how stupid of the – other person – to be so wrong”. At that point you’ve already become part of the problem.

Catherine isn’t right, nor is Anaxares wrong. The opposite isn’t true either. They both have parts they’re correct about and both have blinders that leave their stances less than perfect. If you really wanted to you could frame anyone as right and anyone else as wrong. “Amadis and Cordelia were on a quest for peace with a small sacrifice while Catherine’s is one of pride that saw a hundred thousand people die without changing anything for the better”. See how easy it is?

“Facts” are also a word that gets thrown around a lot in arguments while often being useless, because people often conflate their own opinions with fact and even when you don’t, different contexts often make the ‘facts’ different.

Let’s try an example.

An American says everyone needs a gun to protect themselves, that’s a fact. A Brit says no one needs guns to protect themselves, that’s a fact. They’re both actually correct, and both wrong in a bigger context. Because in the context of America where guns are already prevalent the former really is a fact. In the context of Britain or the general UK where even the police often don’t bother carrying, the latter really is a fact. Both are partially wrong though, because they started off with ‘I’m right and they’re wrong’ instead of both trying to get a handle on why there’s a disagreement in the first place. In a bigger context, they’re the same type person making the same type of argument, the only real difference is the rather trivial one of where their particular perspective is rooted.

[Liliet](#)

See, you have a point, normally.

Except wilful ignorance is *literally Anaxares’s ideology*.

Rook

His ideology is willful denial actually, not ignorance. Very important distinction.

For example, when he says that there is no such thing as a queen, that doesn’t mean he literally has no idea what a queen is. He clearly does know, by the fact that he blatantly talks about said nonexistent concept of queenship five seconds later. I don’t believe that bit

of detail in this chapter was just fluff or a joke actually, it's a fairly important nuance that was slipped in.

What he's doing is denying the legitimacy of the concept. No different than the principiate pretending Catherine wasn't the ruler of callow, it's a flat denial out of principle, not that Cordelia is too stupid to wrap her mind around the concept of Catherine being a ruler.

It's not exactly some insane fairytale idea either, even though for theatrical purposes this particular web serial frames it as such. You see it in political conflicts in the real world all the time, for example the way mainland China won't acknowledge Taiwan as an independent country. Or NK leadership claiming there is no greater country than NK.

It isn't ignorance, it's a deliberate political or ideological stance taken for a very specific purpose – protesting the legitimacy of a concept being applied to the real world. It's a stubborn tactic and a questionably ethical one at best, but far from 'stupid'.

[Liliet](#)

You do have a point, Anaxares might just be a lot less insane than he comes across as.

He still deliberately ignores most of the information he gets from his Aspect, or he would have recognized that Catherine wasn't Cordelia 0.0

RanVor

I don't think he actually doesn't know how Cordelia Hasenbach looks like. He just doesn't care. A Foreign Tyrant is a Foreign Tyrant, further distinction is meaningless to him.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, I'm seeing the point here.

Zachary

Anaxares even mentions himself in an earlier chapter that he's fully aware of the blinders he wears. He is just strongly committed to the idea that only mass consensus that determine things. And in some ways he's not wrong; his argument in response to Catherine says she plans to abdicate was 100% spot-on and the same

argument that can truthfully be used against the wealthy in our own society (that even if they try to make pragmatic excuses for maintaining their hold on ill-gotten wealth, they have no legitimate claim to it to begin with).

At the end of the day, monarchy is obviously bad, even if Anaxares takes direct democracy to an impractical extreme. Catherine can't see it because it's not something she cares much about and still holds the "common sense" beliefs of the society she lives in (that regular people can't be trusted to make decisions about who leads the country).

luminiousblu

Everyone is so sure that they're right, and that everyone else is wrong. Such is the human condition, but not everyone can be right at the same time.

How is Catherine right? Does she have the facts? If there's one thing that's remained constant about Catherine, it's that she has no fucking idea what she's doing. Ever. Her knowledge is constantly patched up by those with greater intelligence and expertise, and when she tries to go at it alone she makes an utter mess of things that she only scrapes out of by being either rescued or via what is essentially plot armour.

"she is not the only one we have"

The Wandering Bard would strongly disagree with how Catherine sees the world, as would the Saint of Swords and the Ranger. All of the narrators we see in any real depth are the ones that happen to see the world the way Catherine does. Black and Malicia see the world the way Catherine does, in large part. Cordelia doesn't see the world the same way at all, but she uses a knockoff realpolitiik which seems reasonable in large part to us, as readers, because it's the way our world works – and hence since Catherine thinks she's reasonable and presents herself as so, we think of Cordelia as somehow thinking the same way because she's also reasonable.

Warlock and Masego see the world through the lens of overlapping rules, which isn't how anyone else sees it. Ranger and to a lesser extent Archer are hedonists, they see the world as their oyster, until someone takes it from them. The Grey Pilgrim is literally Gandalf, and the Saint of Swords sees things in the shade of maximising the advantage of Good over Evil, and True Neutrals can eat it. It's so easy to dismiss them as just wrong, isn't it?

And how does Anaxares see the world 'incorrectly'? There's very few things he's said that are outright wrong. He calls people Wicked Foreign Oligarchs but that's just an opinion of his. He claims that he'll have the gods stand trial, and well, that's what he's aiming for. Where is he actively WRONG?

[Liliet](#)

How about the part where he assumed Catherine was Cordelia despite having most definitely seen them both in Receive visions?

How about the part where he preaches Bellerophon doublethink 100% seriously as a great idea? There's a point where trying to be neutral on a question just *doesn't work*.

Jonnnnz

Welp, Heirarch isn't wrong, but he's not right either. That being said, he seems to be having fun for a change

Dainpdf

He talks about the slippery slope of asking for power... Yet he seems to know nothing about the slippery slope of violent revolution.

He declares war on all tyranny, by acting like a tyrant. Taking away people's ability to think?

What he desires is still autocracy, anyways. Not of one ruler, but of a state that is simultaneously owned by all citizens and yet respects none of them.

Yotz

Because none of us is as cruel as all of us.

Dainpdf

Unless one of us is a goblin.

RoflCat

What if all of us are goblins?

[Euodiachloris](#)

Then you have the Matrons to worry about. 😊

Yotz

Ah, yes – the famous Robber Paradox: total sum of cruelty of a carnage of goblins is equal to cruelty of any randomly selected participant of carnage.

(*)carnage – the collective noun for a group of goblins.

grzecho2222

I don't think he takes away their freedom, it seems more like he FREES them to the point they are free of fear of consequences and retribution. ABSOLUTE FREEDOM to the point of madness

[Liliet](#)

And they also follow Bellerophan laws on top of that.

Dainpdf

Considering they seem to be following the laws of his home city, which really shouldn't have spontaneously come to them, I'm more inclined towards "rook away their volition".

RanVor

Considering how deeply Bellerophan laws are rooted in the riot mentality, I don't think it's that big of a leap.

Dainpdf

Things like keeping a record? And if they really had come up with an equivalent of bellerophan law on their own, wouldn't they be rejecting the Foreign Despot at the desk?

[Liliet](#)

the procedures they're following are too complicated to emerge spontaneously *this fast*

luminiousblu

What you're saying is irrelevant to the point that when it comes to faith there doesn't need to be such a thing as right or wrong, especially if your faith is so strong as to warp reality. The Hierarch is right, essentially, because he thinks he's right, and he's wrong because others think he is.

And in any case, the Dictatorship of the People is sort of his goal. It's not about the persons involved. We are all of us free, or we are none of us free, doesn't refer to individual people. "All of us" can be treated as a singular noun.

Dainpdf

Faith is of the self. He warps reality with his power, but outside his range (or to those powerful or stubborn enough to resist) he is still logically inconsistent. As most madmen are.

He still speaks as if he brought freedom to tyranny, when he only brings tyranny of a new kind.

Dainpdf

"come winter, and we were definitely there"
Was this a pun? Please tell me it was a pun.

"You can't go mad twice, o goddess of Night."
Wouldn't bet on that.

Damn, Hierarch is scary. Yet the Tyrant is scarier still... for now, at least.

Also, gee. People comment *fast*.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine seems to have been leaning into her role as a priestess, here. Giving thanks to the Night, commenting on Indrani never meeting a deity she didn't consider stabbing – and this quote struck me as a reminder of the fact Catherine is powered by faith, too. Not faith in Sve Noc as a goddess, per se, but faith that drove her to give her power to Sve Noc in a literally self-sacrificial move because she believed that it was the right thing to do.

Catherine is mad in the exact same... *dismension* as Anaxares is. Their faiths cannot overlap, they directly contest each other. He can't subsume her without breaking her.

caoimhinh

Cat has faith in herself and what she is doing, while also being the receptacle of all her people's faith.

[Liliet](#)

It's funny how Cat might have more faith effects going for her than the literal goddesses she's currently a priestess of.

Snowfire1224

She also ha faith in the Leisse Accords, which I've noticed she is mentioning more and more.

[Liliet](#)

see: "what she is doing"

Dainpdf

Cat's faith in what she believes to be right is much less fanatical or distorted than Anaxares's. She has confidence and conviction enough to not break in front of a Choir, so she won't break in front of him, but I wouldn't say they are parallel in madness.

WuseMajor

I'll grant less distorted. I'm not sure about less fanatical.

Dainpdf

Considering she has yet to start brainwashing people (okay, Fakerine did that, but Cat said she's sorry and it was wrong) or state that the Gods themselves will stand trial for disagreeing, I'd say she's less fanatical.

Rook

"Justice only matters to the just"

"I would have peace as set by the Liesse Accords or no peace at all. "

Let's be real here, the only reason she doesn't have her sword pointed at Above and Below is because she thinks she can achieve her goals even with them still around. Otherwise, no doubt she'd try to put steel through their necks without a shred of hesitation.

I mean yeah she isn't as rebellious as the guy whose whole world is about rebellion, but completely discarding all notions of fairness or peace not on her own terms isn't exactly a moderate position.

Dainpdf

Those are not equal to brainwashing. Heck, one of the main reasons Thief joined Cat was that Will was not above doing that exact thing.

I find it a signal of less fanaticism that one tried to reconcile one's goals with the fundamental forces of creation as opposed to putting them on trial.

[Liliet](#)

They are parallel in conviction and devotion.

Devotion is not the same thing as fanaticism, conviction is not the same thing as madness, though guide seems to use 'madness' to strong for 'strongly motivating conviction overriding common sense'.

[Liliet](#)

* to stand for

Antoninjohn

Cat has made a nice new friend, together they will crush those foreign tyrants

caoimhinh

Cat is totally going to bullshit her way through Hierarch's trial and say she is not a despot but an elected leader of the Drow. And he might be insane/stupid enough to believe that if the Drow vote and declare her innocent from the charge of Tyranny.

Then he will be her eternal friend against the rest of foreign despots XD

[Liliet](#)

No, in that case he's going to *actually* get the drow to vote, not just take it on faith / ask him in a regular manner.

I wouldn't be surprised though if Catherine withstood his trial.

[Liliet](#)

* ask them. Now THAT is a typo, considering there aren't he/him drow in existence -_-

Yotz

Afair, there are – among the lowest class, breeders. They renounce it to become "it" when they successfully claim the right to be considered Mighty.

[Liliet](#)

????

No, all drow use 'it' pronouns, regardless of genitalia.

Yotz

Hm. I was under impression that only the Mighty do so.
Oh well...

Yotz

And I even managed to remember why I was under such impression – the Ivah introspection chapter, the scene with Archer.

When Indrani calls Ivah “boy”, he wonders why she used the “cattle term” before remembering an ancient text, and mistaking her words for a subtle reference.

Since the “cattle”.in this musing most probably refers to the nisi – breeders and workers of the Drow society (since there are no other slaves in the concurrent Everdark), I made a presumption that they still use genders derived from biology – unlike the Mighty.

[Liliet](#)

Earlier Ivah said ‘cattle have no gender’ so it’s even more confusing than that.

And the takeaway is that there’s no gender in the end, period.

Yotz

If we are to posit that genders of the Mighty are derived from power level and not from biological sex, this paradox will cease.

In such... conceptuality, let’s call it that, we have the Mighty Ivah speaking about ‘cattle’ that has no ‘genders’ – id est, they are too weak to be considered Mighty and have one, since Mighty’s gender would be directly derived from the level of personal power and nothing more. That doesn’t preclude ‘the cattle’ from having their own set of gender roles specifically derived from biological sex. Misunderstanding stems as such from usage of incompatible meanings behind the word: Ivah was asked about male/female delineations, while it answered about cattle having no individual power worth noticing, much less speak of, while both sides of discussion used the same word for describing entirely different concepts.

If this is the case, then having a ‘cattle gender’ would be downright shameful for any Mighty – id est, for any who *can* be considered ‘a Drow’ from Mighty’s point of view.

Also, your stated takeaway on this is just plain wrong, my dear. Even if my speculations are just that – empty speculations, Drow have at least one gender: the *Mighty*.

[Liliet](#)

I think you're weaving complexity where none need exist. Why do you insist on there being SOME way for nisi to have gender roles? All drow use the same set of pronouns. Except the Sisters.

I'd say the two genders drow have are "Priestess of Night / everyone else".

[Liliet](#)

The only exception are the sisters, who use 'she/her' even after all of these years. They're literally the only drow with a gender.

Gender is not a requirement for having sex and birthing children.

Yotz

So, this is the point where I recall a nickname given to Lev Bronstein in due time.

The Demon of Revolution.

[gaminganthology](#)

The Will of the People Will Not Succumb to the Likes of Foreign Tyrants. All Will Be Made to Stand Trial in Front of the People for their Crimes be they Demons, Gods or All of Creation.

342

What about Fae?

[Liliet](#)

Nobody cares about the fae.

Or at least Anaxares doesn't, and he knows *everything* about the Will of the People and what they *really* care about, right?

Death Knight

The Hierarch's main strength is that he's found a way to weaponize the same mechanics that govern the birth and strength of a Name: Faith of The People.

I sincerely believe this man is the most dangerous person in this setting.

Huh, maybe this was the Bard's play? Anaxares only joined the Tyrant's march after he spoke with the Bard.

So now he's moving North and the Dead King is moving South. They will meet and not even the King of Death will escape the judgment decreed by the People.

That's why Bard told Neshamah he can have free reign, that the Bard won't interfere: She doesn't need to; Hierarch is already on his way!

"The arrow's knocked long before you let the sparrow fly."
"Devils give us what we want and let us find our own way to the Hells with it."

-Catherine Foundling, circa Book 1

IDKWhoitis

Sounds like her.

I wonder if the Dead King truly can be considered a tyrant over the people, as most of his subjects on Calernia are dead.

Halinn

He would certainly be able to have a good debate with Hierarch about it

Death Knight

He rules an entire hell. He fits the bill of a Tyrant to a T.

Sure, the people in his proximity (for the only true rulers of the People are the People themselvds) are (un)dead but do you really believe death absolves you from judgment of the People?

Nay friend, in Bellerphon even the dead shall stand trial and be judged by the Will of the People!

By the Will of the People May a thousand Undead Suicide Goats defecate and blow up upon the gilded delusions of the Tyrants and their Eldritch Masters

By the Will of The People, long live Bellerphon, peerless jewel of Creation! By the Will of The People, long live the Hierarch!

[Mental Mouse](#)

Remember, he drove the Bard away, and it wasn't for a while after that, that he came out on the move. I think Heirarch is a spoke in the Bard's wheels as much as for everyone else.

werafdsaew

So are we never going to get an explanation to the strange winter necromancy and it's place in the story? Kind of disappointing if this is all there is.

naturalnuke

I personally suspect it had to do with Winter being a power of narrative and having a will of its own. A bit trickles in, and suddenly the zombies are both no more and no less alive than the fae.

IDKWhoitis

I feel like Winter had a heavier grip on Necromancy, as there is that law of Winter "You own what you kill."

So Cat had a much tighter bond with the strings she seized within the animals she killed to Necromancer when under the influence of Winter.

Absent Winter, Night doesn't confer ownership the same metaphysical way over things you kill. Maybe Cat being Winterized also had a hand in why Akua is so bonded to Cat right now, post death.

This has interesting implications as to Cat and Akua dynamic without Winter, as Akua has shown herself to be more Independent now.

werafdsaew

I'm more bothered by the fact that this Winter zombie plot thread didn't really lead to anything. If you take this part out the story would be unchanged.

[Liliet](#)

I think it was less a plot thread and more a worldbuilding thread, a la "here's how fucking weird fae powers are".

But also, Zombie the Third still lives. Un-lives. Sort of. We might get back to that yet.

TheVenomRex

I would suggest a reread, because it doesn't appear dropped at all, from my vantage point.

At first Lisse, Mesago comments on how her own

zombification was far easier than it should have been, her name quest in the first few chapters has her soul overrun by zombies.

Cat has been linked to unusual necromantic powers and prowess, from the very beginning of the story. The winter zombies were not a isolated set up, but a reminder that Catherine is linked to undeath.

At least, I think so.

werafdsaew

But there's no punch line. And now that she lost Winter, it's unlikely that it will be relevant again.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, she might not have killed that horse herself.

IDKWhoitis

When Cat makes Mounts, like the previous horses, or the goats, she mentioned in the first book that it was easier to make those "bonds" if she killed it herself. Black also taught her to kill them herself so she could completely own what she killed.

Ryzen

I miss winter, hope to see it reappear further in the story. The whole Fea arc was to get that power on Calernia and now it's been traded away for Night. Without winter, it's not just the Necromancy plot line, but all the Fea ones that lead to nothing.

[Liliet](#)

don't forget the Wild fucking Hunt stil out there

IDKWhoitis

I would love to hear Black, Cat, Hierarch, and Tyrant discuss ethics over some wine. I dont think anything truly productive would result from it, but it would be a meeting for the history books.

"4 Crowned Mad Named on Power".

[Liliet](#)

Replace Amadeus with Neshamah and NOW it's a party.

I don't think Amadeus would have much to say, considering he very specifically *did not* get crowned, rather deliberately. He

specifically offloaded this kind of final judgement call on someone else – specifically Alaya – and even after being like ‘nope she’s not competent fuck’ he took himself out of the game instead of taking the reins.

He’d probably just sit there like “I am the wrong person to comment on this” and “what Catherine said”.

Neshamah, Catherine, Kairos and Anaxares, though? Now THAT would be beautiful.

naturalnuke

It’s like revolutionary France found communism half way through.

taovkool

That is actually a surprisingly accurate summation of the situation.

Man, Hierarch is seriously bullshit.

[TeK](#)

You just don’t know about Russian Civilian War.

[Liliet](#)

It’s a mixture between it and the French revolution. Only worse.

And, thankfully, limited in scope 🤨

[TeK](#)

I meant that Great October Revolution WAS the mixture of communism and French revolution.

taovkool

["Catherine Foundling," I replied. "Queen of Callow."

"There’s no such thing," he told me sternly.

"Queens or Catherine Foundling?" I said. "Because one of those debates is a lot more philosophical than I’m equipped to handle."]

Why am I getting the feeling that Hierarch was talking about Catherine as a non existence instead of a Queen?

Lots of bullshit happened to Cat that I wasn’t exactly clear on what her status is right now.

[Liliet](#)

> "Yet you are a queen," he said, blithely ignoring his previous assertion there was no such thing.

I mean it's funnier of Hierarch just contradicts himself within two sentences.

But it's scarier if he meant Catherine.

Both? Both.

Allafterme

It skirts dangerously into inclusive or territory. We are talking about a man who correctly deduced Wandering Bard's nature with a single glance...

[Liliet](#)

Yepp.

Fun!

luminiousblu

He's objecting to the term "Queen of Callow" as a whole. Queens exist, but they don't have dominion over areas such as Callow, since that would imply they're -supposed- to be in charge. It's the same nominal stuff that got Catherine titled Queen in Callow back at the peace table.

[Liliet](#)

you're probably right

Aston Whiteman

And EE showed this many times.

Now the Hierarch shows power.

He's a great character.

I wonder if him and Cat will be good friends.

Cat also has the power of Insanity just on a bigger scale.

Actually, how many characters in the setting realize Cat is truly insane?

[Liliet](#)

stares at Amadeus you fucked up a perfectly good hero. Look at her, she's got anxiety

magesbe

At the very least Indrani does, and possibly the entire Woe. Amadeus might. Maybe some of Cat's senior staff.

That's pretty much it. Catherine can fake being 100% sane very well.

[Liliet](#)

I think she's a little past that point.

Literally everyone in the setting knows Catherine Founding is insane. What's rare is realizing how sane she is about it.

Aston Whiteman

That's the best comment. The main character fakes being sane 100%.

Snowfire1224

I recall the Duchess of Dethriate... Deotraite... I give up I forgot how to spell it but you know what I'm talking about, but back to my point was that in the interlude, I believe it was called Commanders, during the Fae arc I recall her deciding that Cat was very mad and that whatever black did to train her broke her mind because of how she talked back to the fae princess. I'm imagine she's not the only one who reacts that way when observing Cat.

[Liliet](#)

Deoraithe.

And yeah Kegan and Ranker's perspectives during the Battle of the Camps were the best ♥

caoimhinh

Wow, it seems to me that Anaxares is the character with the most character development in the series.

He went from a comical idiot believing in his failed democracy while expecting death, to a stubborn guy refusing to do anything while being sad that his fake democracy ordered him to not die, then he became a badass who desired to fight for humanity against the Gods, now he is an insane hypocrite divorced from reality and forcing everyone to agree with his ideology or die, claiming to fight for the slaves while slaving everyone himself in a blatant way while blissfully deciding he doesn't notice it.

He is still brainwashed and a mad idiot, of course, but there has been quite a lot of development within that spectrum, which is impressive.

A faithful example of the brainwashed eventually becoming the brainwasher.
He is victim and victimizer both.

Typos found:

- had been use recently / this is either 'had been used' or 'had seen use'
- spared form ending up / spared from
- Tough sometimes / though
- though packed full with citizens as it was that could only remain a guess / so if it was that, it could only remain a guess
- and at is sat a single man / at it
- I used to support to get off / used it as support to get off

Xinci

He really does follow the will of Below now. Though there are problems in that the gaps of opportunity to become more may be blocked by the chaotic turning of the Orobosian mob. I am quite glade to see the portions of Mend going about their business.

A lesson to be learned here for Cat especially with her current role, faith, pure and unadulterated has power. Blind and glorious power that needs many to see but still may crush many under its weight without even stopping to know if the are ok. Dark miracles abound when your culture knows well the power of sacrifice. Now if only you could find ways for it to be pure and willing... I suppose we shall see if the Drow can figure out ways to leverage their own culture to adapt against such culture. Would require some cooperative introspection. Hmm adapt a brand of Night to check for such manipulation and grow with it off of sacrificial principals perhaps? Something based on the Night's ever mutating and growing nature.

Feels like a wasted opportunity now that Cat didn't safeguard her following of unread and actually allow them time to change and grow. I do wonder if Zombie the 3'rd may grow further back in Arcadia. Or if she will just move about changing over time in the Everdark.

Someguy

Did Cat accidentally pull an Irritant? She foisted the job of Goddess onto Sve Noct and the 1st Named she meets on the surface is one with the capacity to execute gods.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine has been following in Irritant's footsteps ever since First Liesse.

There is a part of their souls that is *kin*

[Antony444](#)

Cordelia Hasenbach is not going to like at all what happens here when she hears of it.

Compared to all other opponents, the Hierarch is causing problems she will need years to solve, if she ever can.

The Dead King? He's leaving a mountain of undead in his wake and you have to burn all of them.

The Black Knight? Destroy his armies and rebuild the lands he had torched.

The same is true for everything Catherine can do.

But the alliance Hierarch-Tyrant? Give them enough time, and what they're doing to Rochelant, they will do to the entire Principate of Procer.

And it will destroy the Princedoms, I have no doubt about it.

This chapter has made clear enough being an aristocrat, a king, a priest or anyone influential/important will not protect you against the glorious madness reigning around the Hierarch.

For any realm like Callow it would have already been bad, but we had many, many examples since the start of this story that the Princes and Princesses of Procer really don't care about the peasants and anyone they have under their boots.

'The Tyrant seeks to end Procer' may very well be about the Helike Tyrant after all...

Panic

So many comments about the mad and insanely cool Anaxares. Yet everyone seem to have repressed the mentioning of the

"aggressively nondescript" woman who attempted to mind read Cat.

Now tell me how many people do we know who can go aggressively nondescript? Say a certain Scribe maybe? Or perhaps taking it one more step insane, a certain Assassin?

matesbe

My money is on the Auger.

matesbe

Never mind that's dumb. Yeah possible Assassin.

[Dresden 67](#)

That was one of the kanenas, Bellepheron's secret police.

Panic

Why would the Executors of The Law need to hide from The Will of The People of Bellepheron?

[Liliet](#)

She was not hiding, she was simply not separating herself from the People, as being a kanena does not make her more important or special.

It's pretty simple, really!

Someguy

Because they are the ones who violate the Will of the People and their Laws most.

[Liliet](#)

Word of God says they arent

danh3107

I can't believe people didn't pick that up right away, it's pretty obvious.

RanVor

The Hierarch of the League acknowledges only two gods – the Will of the People and the Procedure.

[TeK](#)

I have a distinct suspicion, that Hierarch is a tad crazy.

What is wrong with Tyrants though? Humans are innately predisposed towards vertical hierarchy. We want Tyrnts, we want someone to choose for us, and take responsibility. Someone to blame, someone to follow. Or something. The distinction really blurs when you think about. What's the difference between a slave of a man and a slave of an idea? None, from where I am standing, just for some weird reason, being a slave to the ideal is somehiw preferred.

And the notion of freedom. An illusion, temporary constructs of a feeble human intellect, trying desperately to justify the existence, that is without meaning or purpose. Whatever freedom you have, it's freedom from something. And if you free from something, it is already a relationship, a fetter. And as such, not a true freedom. You can't be free, it is inherently impossible. As long as you exist, you exist in relationship to something, and as such, dependant of that something to qualofy as existing. The same is with freedom, really.

I hope I articulated myself right.

[Liliet](#)

This is very fun in theory, right up until the point where the person in charge of you decides to kick you and take all your

stuff. Then you suddenly realize how you want to be free to punch them in the face and take your stuff back.

To the revolution!

[TeK](#)

Oh, but that's the point: the notion of personal property comes at the cost of the restriction of freedom. As do all benefits of civilization. We are slaves of our own making, a food for enormous grinding jaws of the system – and we are better off like that. Only a blind man cries for freedom. An honest one fights for *privilege*.

[Liliet](#)

No.

grzecho2222

To quote "Freedom by definition is absolute", it is not that you are forced by something to do anything. Take for example eating. It is up to you if eat. Sure you will die if you don't, but you will die, because of YOUR CHOICE. You can always choose, even if it will be the final choice.

In context of the story the conflict between Cat and Hierarch is a bit as Polish–Soviet War of 1919-1920, which was basically Uprising under Dictator versus People Revolution. Country that regained freedom by manipulating its conquerors and making global conspiracy and wanted to govern itself with its dictator retiring when he isn't needed versus People Party that wanted to free whole world. With or without consent. Also there were basically chariots with machine guns involved.

[TeK](#)

"Your choice" is self-delusion, the kind I was talking about. Kind of sickening one, personally. It is not up to you to eat. You are conditioned by your biology and your experiences and your environment. You do not choose to eat, you eat because you are hungry. Bet you never starved. Try to stop breathing "on your own choice", see what happens. I bet you will *freely decide on your own without outside influence as an individual* to start breathing shortly after. The slave blind to his chains is doubly enslaved. Freedom is absolute by definition, and as such, **does not exist**.

On the historical point – yeah, Bellerophon quite clearly inspired by various anarchist and communist government forms that spawned out of the rotting remains of Russian Empire. Although their war with Poland was far more pragmatic – they

tried to help communists in Germany, particularly in Bavaria, if I am not mistaken.

[TeK](#)

Also, gotta remember Russian classic: russian rebellion – senseless and merciless.

PurpleHello

This chapter made me realise something funny: this entire series is a (broad strokes) analogy for democracy! Think about it: the voting process is the battles.

Changes/policies/big decisions are made/implemented/justified by whichever side with the bigger turnout or strategies winning. And then the other side(s) who lost immediately complain and kick up a fuss and promise another big battle and then focus on that. None of the sides like each other or want to work together. No side is 100% good or right or whatever – in fact all of them are morally dubious and untrustworthy. Hierarch is somewhat akin to a archcanist-socialist taken to the illogically extreme. It's not a perfect comparison (I have no idea where Wandering Bard would fit in) but this chapter got me going in this direction and it's pretty funny so I thought I'd share.

[TeK](#)

By that comparison evolution is democracy too.

taovkool

By the way, I just noticed something weird. At the prologue, Ime (Malicia's spymaster) was called Lindimi Sahelian but back at Book 4 chapter 5: Interest, Cat called her Sabra Niri on a relation with the High Lord of Okoro.

A typo mistake or an intended difference? Clarification would be appreciated @erraticerrata.

taovkool

Forgot this wasn't SB. Ignore that @, if you will

[Liliet](#)

I suspect intended is more likely, but it IS odd.

Zaver SaintCloud

I miss Zombie The Third 😞 Even moreso now that I am reminded we will probably never get an explanation for the instances of independence that it showed; sassing Cat after it saved her, munching on grass, etc. Also it gave Cat an excuse to be angry at people if they broke her flying horse.

NZPIEFACE

All of the Winter Zombies have intelligence if they're given enough time.

Liliet

I would argue against the idea that we're not getting an explanation. The topic has been brought up again, I think we're still building up the subplot. And Zombie the Third appears to be still alive (sort of), just not with Cat.

doominator10

" Devils did not die but only disperse. But would they really, if it was this man passing the sentence? "

It is the Will Of The People that all Foreign Entities not abiding Under the Definition Of Life, as is Proper and Collectively Agreed Upon by The People, shall be Henceforth sentenced to Life, And Summarily Executed according to the Writ of the Third Declaration Of The People. By the Will of The People, long live Bellerophon, peerless jewel of Creation!

Liliet

...all I get out of this is crying about Tikoloshe again...

ninegardens

So... Anaraxes is super nutso and all... but also in terms of "Breaking the game" potentially... he seems high powered... not "Part" of the game (Above or Below), and like...super liable to have the power to make a treaty BINDING.
So... right now he is sort of broken and stupid, but in terms of potential for future good (not "Good") he seems way up there.

Andrew Mitchell

Oh, I like the way you're thinking here. Binding everyone to the Liesse Accords would reduce future conflict. To actually do that he'd need to change and become willing to engage with wicked foreign oligarchs; which may be too much of a barrier to overcome.

Liliet

No, that's not what the barrier is. Kairos is the very definition of a Wicked Foreign Oligarch, Anaxares stands on that position and will stand on it forever, yet he works with him.

The problem is that he has a larger plan in mind, and depending on what exactly the plan is, he might consider

Liesse Accords... redundant, inessential, counterproductive (as they acknowledge the existence of non democratically elected rulers I imagine)

The issue really is just selling him on them.

Anon

En taro Anaxares I guess?

aran

"Aristocracy Is A Festering Wound Upon The People," Anaxares of Bellerophon gravely informed me. "May Hail Strike It Repeatedly For A Thousand Years."

Somehow Anaxares is the character who most seems like he stepped out of a Discworld novel. The one he probably reminds me of most is Vorbis.

Zopilote 506

...aaaaand this is why Anaxares is the best character

Chapter 7: Fellowship

"Fool me once and it'd best be fatal, for my reply certainly will be."

– Dread Emperor Vindictive II

"What the *fuck* was that?" Archer hissed.

They hadn't fled the marketplace, of course, because big important bird-goddesses like Andronike couldn't possibly flee – I yelped and slapped her away. If the damned Sisters kept pecking at my head like this I was going to go bald at some point. Fine, they had *redeployed* away from the mob and the madman feeding it. I looked down at the fist bunching up my cloak in the front, which was Indrani's.

"You'll have to be a little more specific," I said.

She scrutinized my face for a moment, before grimacing and releasing me.

"Well, if you can be a heel you probably still own your mind," she said. "That was stupid, Catherine. We weren't even near the crowd and we could still feel it when he got pissed."

"It was necessary," I said, brushing down the folds of my cloak.

"Don't you start with that speech," Archer growled. "If I got a copper for every time you talked about necessity-"

"You still wouldn't be able to afford your drinking habits," I drily interrupted.

The look on her face was thunderous, so I smoothed away the humour from my expression.

"I'm serious," I said. "I needed to take the measure of him. When someone lets a lion loose in the pen, you don't pretend it's not happening – not unless you're ready to lose the whole flock."

"That's what we have Vivi for," Indrani insisted. "The Jacks-"

"Would have been in that crowd, hollering for blood," I flatly replied. "You know that. It was a calculated risk, Archer. Since when do –"

I bit down on my tongue. I knew exactly since when she'd started taking issues with those. I was in no danger of ever forgetting the sight of Indrani half-devoured by frost, only hanging on to life by a thread – and, I had recently learned, the preservative properties of ice according to the classical table of elements.

"Finish," Indrani quietly said.

"Not a conversation we should be having in the middle of an alley in a city under occupation," I evaded.

"*Finish*," Indrani repeated, coldly.

"Even Akua is worried, Archer," I said. "I know you like to handle things on your own, but it's not getting better."

"I'm fine," she told me forcefully. "Or is disagreeing with you a sign of cowardice now?"

"I didn't say that," I replied.

A year ago we wouldn't have been having this conversation, I thought. But then a year ago there'd been fewer defeats to our name, fewer close calls and wounds that would never quite heal. An emotion I couldn't quite recognize twisted her face, until she winced.

"It doesn't matter if we're in an alley, Catherine," Archer finally said, taking a step back. "Because there's nothing to talk about."

I wondered if she even noticed how her fingers were twitching towards the strap at her side where she usually kept a flask. *Probably not*, I decided. I knew from personal experience that we tended to be blind to the methods we used to bury our fears until they were pointed out to us. Her way, at least, I was familiar with. Some nights I wondered if I might have disappeared all the way at the bottom of the bottle after Second Liesse, if Hakram hadn't dragged me back. I hesitated under moonlight, a reply on the tip of my tongue. I'd had a talk with Diabolist once, about her mother. About the difference between a person and their title, the way Praesi considered them entirely different entities. I still disagreed with what she'd said, the painful contortion of personhood her people had to put themselves through just to live with what they did to each other, but sometimes I could also see a grain of truth to it. The woman in me wanted to find a quiet place, a safe one, and try to soothe what was eating at one of my closest friends in the world. Even if it meant leaving Rochelant. But the queen knew there was still work to be done tonight, that this business was only half-done, and that what lay within Indrani would keep until morning. The queen won, in the end.

Didn't she always?

"This isn't done," I told Indrani.

"It is for tonight," she replied.

Getting back atop Zombie's saddle had the taste of defeat to it. Wouldn't be the last of those, before this was all done and over with. We pressed on deeper into the city, Named and priestess and a crow-that-wasn't surrounded by a pack of silent killers.

A kinsman of sorts awaited us.

—

The place the Tyrant of Helike chose for his lair served as my first glimpse into the man's mind. There would have been a few places in Rochelant royalty could claim to maintain a semblance of comfort: the official quarters of the appointed ruler of the city, the mansions of the influential and the wealthy, a House of Light to empty and desecrate. Instead, Kairos Theodosian had settled in the shop of a middling money changer. Someone whose very trade was the exchange of one currency for another. The entire city block was crawling with soldiers and much more discreet gargoyles, what must have once been a largely unimportant street turned into the heart of the League's occupation of Rochelant. There was no military sense to the

location, I thought. It was poorly placed to deploy troops or send messengers, not to mention surrounded by very flammable shops. No prestige to such a choice, either, as money changing was not a profession of particularly good repute. This was a villain making a jest that quite possibly no one would ever get, in defiance of more practical choices, simply because he could. My teacher's lessons, I decided, would not be of great use here. The Tyrant was one face of the coin he'd spent a lifetime melting down so the metal could be put to better use.

Black did not make deals with people like this, did not negotiate. He killed them as quickly as he could to limit the collateral damage, then ripped out what had spawned them root and stem so he wouldn't have to come back and do it again a decade down the line. That wasn't an option for me, so I'd have to handle the madman a different way. I led Zombie in a canter down the street, rows of men-at-arms armed to the teeth watching me carefully. Idly pretending to brush back my hair, I gestured for the drow following from the rooftops to stay back. I didn't know what kind of the defences the Tyrant would have prepared, to know I was coming with the likes of Andronike perched on my shoulder and still feel comfortable allowing me into Rochelant, but it was best not to test them. Archer and the crow-goddess I kept at my side, until a mounted officer approached us at the very edge of the defensive perimeter. She kept her sword sheathed at her side, though by the look on her face she would have preferred otherwise. I halted my horse without needing to be told, my companions following suit.

"Queen Catherine," she called out in crisp Lower Miezani.

"That would be me," I said. "And you are?"

"General Basilia," she said. "You were expected. Safe passage is granted to you by the writ of the Tyrant of Helike."

Her gaze flicked to Indrani and Andronike.

"To you alone," she meaningfully said.

"Catherine," Archer said under her breath. "This is-"

"He needs me alive and on the field," I mildly replied. "It's not that kind of trap."

"You don't know that for sure," she insisted.

"Certainty is a luxury I can rarely afford," I said. "If it goes south, gloat all you'd like. Andronike?"

"Not beyond my reach," the crow stated, eyeing the changing house.

"Good enough," I grunted.

Zombie resumed his advance and I entered the dragon's lair. General Basilia cast me a dark glance as I passed her. Someone wasn't happy I was being allowed in, evidently. Wasn't sure why she was being so ornery – I'd had the man her Tyrant had usurped the throne from shot back when I was still the Squire. Surely that should earn me some measure of fondness? *Apparently not*, I drily thought, feeling her gaze remaining on my back as I rode forward. The heavy and layered wards I could feel washing over my skin with a distinct tingle made it clear that distrust truly was the order of the night. The soldiers parted with silent discipline until I reached the steps of the changing house, leaning on my staff to dismount with a muted curse. A man-at-arms came up to take Zombie's reins, but I clicked my tongue in disapproval.

"I wouldn't recommend that," I said. "He bites."

A twist of will had my dead horse baring his teeth. The soldier stepped back, a glimmer of fear in her eyes. I'd spent long enough idling, though, so up I went the worn steps and through the already-open door. The inside was lit up with torches and magelights, which almost surprised me. I'd half-expected some innocent soul to be serving as fuel instead. A sweeping glance was enough to give me an idea of the inside: a large common room for trade to be held, with a counter at the back in front of twin doors leading to backrooms. A few tapestries in the manner of the Free Cities had been hung on the walls – most of them about Theodosius the Unconquered – but the room had been largely stripped bare. It only made the fresh additions more glaring: two rows of twisted little gargoyles, some bearing trumpets, were wiggling around and chattering like vermin. Between them a red carpet had been set, leading up to a throne literally resting on the back of a foursome of pitiful-looking gargoyles.

On it was the Tyrant of Helike, Kairos Theodosian.

So frail, I thought. Curly dark brown hair and olive skin made his ancestry clear, but these were by far the least striking parts of the villain. One of his eyes was deep red, as if blood had seeped into it, and his sickly frame looked like it could be blown over by a stiff breeze. Opulent robes in rich purple, covered in part by a long strip of cloth of gold draped over the front, boasted broad sleeves but not quite broad enough to hide that the arm he kept covered was trembling. No crown was set on his brow, but he was casually toying with an ivory scepter ending in a golden roaring lion's head. I could feel the enchantments wafting off of it even from the other side of the room. The Tyrant took one look at me, good eye widening, and convulsed. For a heartbeat I was worried that the Night had somehow hurt him, but the convulsion erupted into raucous, heartfelt laughter. I

blinked, taken aback. I flicked a glance at the nearest gargoyle but it just put out its tongue at me. I discretely kicked it while the Tyrant kept laughing his guts out. Eventually the villain got himself under control, wiping tears out of his eyes with trembling hands.

"Oh, that is a *fine* jest indeed," he said, then peeked at the floor. "You never disappoint."

I cleared my throat.

"I don't suppose you'd care to share," I said.

The Tyrant smiled at me in the way of man for whom smiles came easy and meant little.

"You are so short," Kairos Theodosian said. "It is quite delightful."

He was a good liar, I decided, but I'd known better. Just by looking at me he'd learned something, and I had no idea what. I set that aside for later consideration.

"Bet I could beat you in a footrace, though," I said.

The smile broadened into a grin and he sprawled unceremoniously across his throne. Which was, I was only now noticing, outrageously gaudy. And I'd been in the Tower, I damn well knew what gaudy looked like.

"A pair of crowned cripples running through the streets," he cheerfully mused. "If we charged for seats we could make a killing."

Suddenly he twitched.

"Ah," he said. "But where are my manners? Courtiers, announce our guest."

To my horrified fascination, the trumpet-bearing gargoyles raised their instrument and began blowing into it. Which had mixed results, since assuming they even had lungs they would be made of stone. And that most didn't have lips. After the musical atrocity ended in a whimper, the Tyrant raised his hand regally.

"Black Queen, I welcome you to my humble court," he announced.

"The honour is mine, Lord Tyrant," I deadpanned.

"Please, take a seat," the villain waved away airily.

A waddling gargoyle carrying a plush cushioned seat above its head made its way across the carpet, setting it at my back and bowing with a chittering sound before running away.

"Much appreciated," I said.

I eyed the seat skeptically. No obvious sorcery to be found. I prodded the cushion with my seat, but it did not seem to be filled with rusty razorblades or poisonous snakes. I glanced back at the Tyrant and found him looking at my staff quite intently. Well, only one way to find out for sure. I settled down and found it a little worn, but otherwise not prone to treacherously turning on me. It was a relief for my bad leg to be seated after this long riding, and I let out a little sigh of comfort.

"I wonder," the Tyrant of Helike nonchalantly said, "if you'd consider telling me who that's meant to kill."

I met his gaze, and wondered if it was just my imagination or the red eye had gotten a little redder.

"No idea what you're talking about," I lied.

He chuckled.

"A staff is a sword is a prayer," the Tyrant grinned. "It's clever little bit of work. More patient than your reputation would imply."

I shrugged, keeping away from my face how wary his too-perceptive eyes were making me.

"Well, I did find religion recently," I said. "I'm told it can be a calming influence."

"You seem well on your way to beating people to death with it," he praised.

"You're one to talk," I smiled. "Your man down the road's a lot more dangerous than Night on a stick. I don't suppose *you'd* tell me who that's meant to kill?"

The Tyrant pouted.

"That'd take all the fun out of this," he said. "And why even bother, if we're not having a good time?"

"Huh," I said. "Black must have *really* wanted to kill you."

"There's no need to be so oblique about it," the Tyrant amusedly said. "He's alive and in the hands of the Grey Pilgrim. Somewhere in Iserre, last I heard. The man is of little interest to me."

I *had* been aiming to wheedle information out of him after broaching the subject, true enough. My eyes narrowed. So why was he offering it to me so freely? Even as I forced myself to remain focused, my pulse quickened. He was alive. Gods, he was alive. I'd known he would be, but it was still a weight off my

shoulders. *Unless this is cruelty*, I thought. *Unless he's lying*. I kept my voice steady.

"It's a little disquieting, being on the other side of the chaos for once," I said.

"I am but a humble servant of my Lord Hierarch," the Tyrant piously assured me. "And you need not worry, I would not lie to such a close and beloved friend."

"I would never doubt you," I lied. "I think of you as a brother, really."

Did he know I was an orphan? By the way his lips quirked, yes, he most definitely did.

"As your friend," I said. "I wondered if you would answer a question for me."

"Always," the Tyrant swore, hand over heart.

I raised an eyebrow.

"Are we at war?" I asked. "I've been hearing troubling rumours about League soldiers and legionaries."

"Alas, there have been some slight misunderstandings," the Tyrant sighed. "Your Marshal of Callow seems to have mistaken our curiosity for a fully armed battalion trying to assassinate her."

"Mistakes happen," I said, keeping my voice calm.

It took an effort of will not to clutch my staff so hard it creaked. He'd tried to kill Juniper, the smug little monster. *Or he's trying to put me off-balance*, I thought. The Theodosian had a lazy smile on his face, but his eyes had never left me. I had no control here, no real leverage to use against him. That was the misstep, I decided. Trying to remain in control. There would be no winning that sort of game against the likes of the Tyrant of Helike.

"I see only one solution," I said.

"Do you?" he said, smile expectant.

I smiled back, broad and friendly and just a little bit guileless.

"Would you like to secretly be allies?" I offered.

The smallest flicker of surprise on his face, gone before it could even be fully seen, was the herald of scoring my first blood of the night. His answering grin was gleefully malicious. See? I might have been with only women for the last few years,

but I still knew what men liked – you know, shady military alliances that would be discarded at the earliest convenience in favour of wanton betrayal. He twirled his scepter thoughtfully, though that did little to hide the eagerness on his face.

“As your friend,” Kairos Theodosian said. “I feel like I should warn you that rumours have long existed – patently untrue, I assure you – that I am a treacherous blackguard, if you’ll forgive my language.”

I painted surprise over my face.

“You?” I faintly said. “That seems rather unjust. I mean, I had your nephew shot and he seemed like the real villain to me.”

“I did hear about that,” the Tyrant mused. “Wasn’t it under truce banner?”

It hadn’t been, strictly speaking, not that the rumours ever bothered about that.

“In my defence,” I said, “he *did* call me a witch.”

He seemed amused.

“Oh, Dorian,” the villain fondly said. “You always did have more lungs than wits.”

“I can see why that would make you hesitate, though,” I mused. “So let me reassure you, I have absolutely no intention of sharing our secret treaty with the First Prince to try to force her hand into allying with me and crushing you utterly.”

He let out a loud cackle, arm shaking uncontrollably under his robes.

“Are you lying?” the Tyrant of Helike grinned, revealing a curved stretch of pearly teeth.

I leaned forward.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Am I?”

A heartbeat passed.

“I can’t tell,” he said, sounding deeply pleased.

“A sound foundation for military alliance,” I said.

“The only kind worth making,” the villain cheerfully agreed. “A bargain made, then, Black Queen.”

He gently tapped his scepter against his chin.

"I suppose," the Tyrant said, "that I should ask you who we've allied against."

I leaned back.

"Intercession, you might say," I said.

His brow rose.

"Well now," he murmured. "Someone's been digging up secrets."

"Calernia's full of graves a little more shallow than they should be," I replied. "And I've heard the two of you have scores to settle."

"She has quite the game afoot," the Tyrant told me. "Even I know only part of it."

"I've quite a few glimpses of things she's been up to," I said, "but no bird's eye view, so to speak."

"That sounds," the villain said, "like a trade worth making."

I smiled. Dangerous as it might be to tell this man anything he didn't know, I needed the semblance of a handle on what the Wandering Bard was up to more than words could properly express. Everyone else on the board I could make out at least vague objectives for, but the Intercessor? She was still in many ways an unknown, and one with too many irons in the fire to be left to her own devices. I might not trust the Tyrant of Helike a single drop, but as far as I knew he was the only man alive who'd ever pulled one over the Bard. If anyone could be of use to me, it was him.

"Ah, but before we begin horse-trading," he said. "As my most trusted ally, I have a suggestion to offer you. If I may, Black Queen?"

"Call me Catherine," I said. "And by all means."

"You must call me Kairos, then," the Tyrant said. "Before you leap into the loving embrace of our dear Cordelia Hasenbach, I would have a look at her little scheme down south. You are not the only one robbing graves, in a manner of speaking."

"Curious," I evenly said.

"Something's being dredged out of Lake Artoise," Kairos confided, "that might of interest to you."

"And why would that be?" I asked.

"One does not make war on the same enemy for decades without learning some of their bad habits, Catherine," the Tyrant said.

That was unfortunate, as I could only think of one person the First Prince had crossed blades with for that long. More worryingly, the most recent mistake I could put to Dread Empress Malicia's name was the Doom of Liesse. If Cordelia Hasenbach was intent on going down the same road this war was about to get much, much worse. Not that I'd take Kairos' word for this. Like the fate of my teacher, it was another truth I needed to get my hands on. I fished out my pipe and stuffed it under the Tyrant's disapproving stare, black flame licking at my fingers just long enough to light it. I shook my hand to get rid of the lingering heat, then inhaled deep. The wakeleaf warmed my throat, and I made myself comfortable. I spewed out a stream of acrid smoke as Kairos wrinkled his nose in distaste.

"Now," I smiled. "I believe there was some talk of horse-trading."

When the eye went deeper red, this time, there was no question of whether or not it was my imagination.

[*DroughtBringer*](#)

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

taovkool

The Black Queen and the Tyrant making an alliance.

Not that surprising, to be honest. Loved their sass though.

Dainpdf

I ship it. And by ship it I mean please put Kairos in a box and ship him far away from me and everything I love.

Yet another surprising application of lakeomancy.

Jeffery Wells

It is truly a flexible branch of magic.

danh3107

That was interesting to say the least, although now I imagine erratic is going to cut away from what would most likely be an interesting conversation to show us the aftermath.

Like he's done for most of the major interactions that would've been interesting to see in the entire story, like Cat bargaining with the dead king.

Oh well

Argentorum

This was the interesting part of the conversation though. The rest is going to go like this.

Kairos: "Bard has been trying to do x y and z"

Cat: "Oh that's cool, have you heard what she did to the drow though?"

Kairos: "I hadn't old chump, but that's quite facinating."

Cat: "So was yours, same time never?"

Kairos: "I promise never to stab you in the back, friend."

Cat: "I promise never to do it first, pal!"

And then Cat rides off to go do actually important things. Sure more of Cat and Kairos verbally sparring might be fun, but it would also be ultimately meaningless, because this *obviously* isn't going to be the final confrontation. And while knowing the x y and z the Bard's been up to would be interesting, there are many more interesting ways to reveal that information.

And if there's one thing Erratic does well, it's letting the characters know things the reader doesn't

TL:DR I really don't see what you're complaining about.

danh3107

You should almost never be in a position where in a first person narrative things are hidden from your perspective. Our perspective is the narrator's, and not knowing what they're talking about is incredibly frustrating as a reader. Sure we can infer what the Liesse accords are, but they're still Cat's primary motivation and we as the reader have no clue what they're about besides random snippets we sometimes get.

It's incredibly frustrating, because we should have that information there's almost no reason not to. It creates dissonance between us as readers and Cat as the primary person who shapes our perspective, which is not a good thing when we're in first person. We have problems relating to and understanding her motivations, which makes it harder to get invested in the story and care about the stakes.

I know I'm not the only person who feels this way, that's why I'm complaining.

Andrew Mitchell

I understand why you (and others) could find it frustrating. I suggest not projecting your feelings onto all readers though. I don't share your concern at all. I dislike novels that spell out every little detail because it slows the pace too much. I also prefer it when I put in the mental effort and am rewarded when I figure out an aspect of the story before it's revealed in text.

Wry Warudo

I dunno, I kind of prefer it when we don't have all the details. For example, moments like when Thief showed up and stole the Sun or Cat's plans at First Liesse wouldn't have the same impact if we knew all her plans ahead of time.

[theothin](#)

Yeah, Unspoken Plan Guarantee is a thing for a reason.

[Liliet](#)

Seriously yeah.

Hearing a character's long term plans in detail is how you know things aren't going to go according to plan.

luminiousblu

I presume the reason that we're not told what the Liesse Accords are is that it'll never actually come to fruition and just fall apart at the drop of a hat, or else just be completely worthless.

The Liesse Accords is like trying to get the USSR and the USA to sign a wide-ranging treaty, then actually abide by said treaty, and then force all of their vassal and allied states to do the same. It's inherently not feasible and unless EE has a really decent reason why it works this time I'll be sorely disappointed if it doesn't blow up in Cat's face.

RanVor

I kind of get your point that it's not feasible (although I vehemently disagree), but if it's not going to work, that's all the more reason to talk about it in great detail. The failure wouldn't be even half as impactful if it wasn't properly established what was actually lost.

caoimhinh

Not really, it's more along the lines of "This is a legal document that's many pages long, so these are the

generalities of what it says and the important bits of its objectives" it would be impossible and unadvisable for EE to actually show us the specific content of the Liesse Accords, given that they are bound to be a long document full of legal terminology.

Besides, the Accords right now are just Catherine's version of them, once negotiation with other leaders starts, there will be some modifications, although Cat has already said that many of the things there are not open to negotiation, like the banning of the use of Demons.

[sengachi](#)

It's not third person narration though. It's third person limited omniscient with a primary focus and cutaways to secondary focuses. Like, this is **exactly** the narration style you use when you want to take advantage of a disconnect in knowledge between the reader and a primary focus character. The goal of a narration style like this is to make the reader **think** about what's going on inside the head of the primary focus character, to see and be shown their motivations and thoughts rather than be told them.

If that's not what you prefer in your stories that's fine. If you want to complain about that on the grounds that you'd personally prefer the story another way ... well I don't see the point, it's far too late for erratic to change the narration style now, the most effect you can hope to have is demotivating erratic and that's kind of a dick move. Like, you can? I guess? Just don't be surprised when the people who don't share your frustrations are vocal disagree with you.

[Mental Mouse](#)

There are quite a number of reasons why a first person narration may not reveal all there is to be seen – indeed, a number of classic author's tricks depend on exactly that. The classic, of course is the Unreliable Narrator, but even "well-meaning" narrators may miss things due to their own bias or perspective.

More generally, such elisions are often key to pacing the plot and avoiding distractions from the story. They can be also be used for more exotic purposes; ISTR that Agatha Christie wrote one mystery where the murderer turned out to be... the narrator.

[Zharethzhen](#)

Dude, I could not agree with you more. Keeping secrets in a first person pov is widely considered bad writing (at least

as taught in creative writing classes). It is the biggest thing that frustrates me about this story (though obviously I keep coming back because it is otherwise really good).

SpeckofStardust

True, after all I think we the readers already know everything both sides here know about bard, and while it be interesting to watch all the interactions we got the truly important stuff out of the way.

Still this chapter has me honestly be considering Catherine X Kairos Which is the first time I have been considering her showing something close to interest in a guy.

The fact that this.

"See? I might have been with only women for the last few years, but I still knew what men liked"

Is basically a jab at her never showing any interest in men so far in this story has me amused.

That, and the line "He let out a loud cackle, arm shaking uncontrollably under his robes." implies that the interest is mutual.

grzecho2222

I died

[*Liliet*](#)

If you consider that a negative, that's a jab at it; if you consider that a positive, it's just straight up the best joke.

Catherine/Kairos platonically political marriage ftw tho

Skaddix

I mean she really wanted to bang Warlock and they don't like each other at all. So she has shown interest in guys before. Her getting wet for Warlock actually suggest she wouldn't go for Kairos lol.

[*Liliet*](#)

oh ya good point lmao

Death Knight

That is his MO. He does something similar with awesome battles too, such as Ranger vs The Summer Queen or how exactly the Heroes managed to capture Black.

Truthfully it is kind of annoying but I don't write the story so "thems the grapes luv"

Argentorum

I can see missing the Ranger vs Summer Queen fight being annoying. But that serves the purpose of building both characters up. We didn't know how strong either of them really were going into the rest of the Second Liesse arc, which raised tension. In addition, we **still** don't know how strong Lady Ranger is, which help paves the way for us not knowing how to evaluate her eventual conflict with Cat (because you know it's coming).

As for the heroes vs black... Not really? He was literally nameless at that point, as was confirmed later by the Bard. The fight between him and half a dozen heroes, including the old monsters of Saint and Pilgrim? There's not a fight. Either of those two could have beaten Black as he was on one leg with a wrinkly arm tied behind their back. And was Pilgrim really going to let one of the younger heroes attempt to handle black and risk his own plan either by Black getting himself killed or somehow beating up on a novice hero? Given the amount of care they showed around transporting Black later, I highly doubt it.

So here's how the fight went. Black charges, Pilgrim smacks him once with the stick, they tie him up and cart him away.

Really, I'm confused about the people who are constantly crowing "show this, show that!" when it is almost painfully obvious that nothing of actual importance would have occurred during those scenes. That Erratic is skipping over boring filler scenes, legal jargon, and nothing of value, for the parts that actually do matter.

I, for one, have not missed a single scene that Erratic has 'skipped' and I enjoy greatly the lack of those filler scenes that do nothing to advance the story like we get in so many Fanfics and similar works that never reach the end of book one (let alone book 4) because the authors get bogged down in trying to show every little thing...

Andrew Mitchell

100% agree with this.

[Liliet](#)

actually fun fact! we DO know how that fight went, sort of, and you're almost 100% correct

"Unless the Saint of Swords was intent on confessing her deep affections for him – unlikely, since **she took great relish in punching him unconscious** before enchantments were laid"

Saint's the one who punched him out ;u;

caoimhinh

Agree. But there were 2 scenes of importance that I wanted to see and yet they were skipped:

-Sabah's death, as the last she was shown she had beaten the Valiant Champion to a bloody pulp of broken bones and even exhausted her Aspects before the domain shattered.

-Ratface's death. He was (along a bunch of characters including Anne Kendal) killed off-screen and we found out when Cat walked into the room and received the news of the assassination of key members of Callow's government.

Both would have made very emotional or meaningful scenes.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Eh... in both cases, I think the reaction of the survivors was more important. Showing Sabah's death would have been a matter of EE making up power-exchanges that would have been ultimately irrelevant (because she was fundamentally killed by Plot), while Ratface was not a POV character to begin with.

SpeckofStardust

...
This is beautiful.
I have no idea who react worse to this little 'chat' but the interactions here are wonderful.

[Javvies](#)

Hmmm.
Kairos probably noticed the lack of Winter and whatever Cat's current Name-related status is. And possibly something to do with noticing her links to Night.

Kairos attempted to kill Juniper? That's not going to be forgotten or forgiven. Be it in Callow or by many of us who like Juniper.

Big I

If you're talking about why he started laughing it's probably because of him using his Wish aspect, which let's him know a person's desires. It is pretty ironic that Catherine is motivated by a sincere desire for peace

Rook

It's also incredibly ironic that Amadeus' successor is turning out to be the exact same type of Villain that he spent his entire life trying to rip out from the face of creation.

You'd expect his spawn to be a sharper collection of gears wrapped in steel, and instead what walked through his door is a priestess madwoman with a mind like goblin munitions being set off inside a cave.

Wolper

I'd say they're not quite the same at all. Him and her have very similar goals – not identical, but similar, and the same sort of.. simultaneous disdain for, but skillful use of, the Narrative. They use it as a tool but try to avoid full-heartedly embracing it like the Tyrant, which leads to great power but also paralyzes you and restricts your options. Their methods are different, sure, but ultimately the thing that matters is Evil is a tool for them, not a goal, and one that they'd gladly throw in the trash if they found something better.

Dainpdf

Cat is quite pragmatic as well. Or, one might also say, practical.

...it has just occurred to me that Black is practical and has been Cat's guide in her journey. He's her Practical Guide to Evil.

[Liliet](#)

The joke is that Kairos is as pragmatic as Black is, in his own way. He just chooses different tools for the job.

It's something of a blind spot that Amadeus has, that the tools he disdains as impractical are in fact practical, just for a different purpose. I think if he realized earlier in his career that the reason he's so fundamentally opposed to Kairos's type is because he thinks like a hero and has a hero's goals his mind would legitimately implode lmao. The idea that Evil borrowing Good's methods is only pragmatic if it borrowed Good's *goals* first is just... so blatantly obvious as to be completely unnoticable.

It's not the madness that Black took issue with, it's the villain aesthetic matching the aesthetic of the Wasteland eating itself. The joke is that his issue with it is that he *cares* and *takes offence*.

Catherine being this exact sort of madwoman in thinking, but aimed at the same goals and ideals and principles he shares? Yep, suddenly turns out he approves of the mindset and the results it produces deeply 😊

RanVor

Amadeus himself isn't particularly sane either.

[Liliet](#)

see you're getting it ♥

Dainpdf

Good catch.

[David Lynch](#)

Yeah, I'd suspect that he's impressed that Cat doesn't have a Name any more. (Which, to be fair, in a conflict with someone like the Bard is probably a fantastic trick to be bringing along...)

[Liliet](#)

Also a good point!

Argentorum

This may be the most fun Cat's had since she ripped Akua's heart of her chest and crushed it.

Yotz

Ah, yes – when Cat took Akua's heart and soul for her own... Such a touching story of a budding romance and innocence of youths.

Puts a tear to my eye every time.

caoimhinh

It's the best Shojō manga story ever.

Not sure how well does that mesh with Amadeus and Hanno being more or less harem protagonists.

caoimhinh

They are Seinen and Shonen MC, respectively, of course. XD

[Liliet](#)

The most fun anyone's had in this narrative since Akua got to rip Cat's heart out of her chest right back in the name of friendship.

That was admittedly fairly recently *and I do love the frequency here*

MJ

Well now that they've given each other their hearts, the ship is all but sailed isn't it 😊

[Liliet](#)

This joke will never get old for people who genuinely ship it (like me)

Erebus42

The Tyrant is always a treat, and Catherine playing his game is simultaneously concerning and delightful.

[Ben Serreau-Raskin](#)

This interaction was everything I ever wanted it to be. This marks the first time Cat has been on the playing field with someone in her weight-class who shares her preference for buckwild out-of-left-field chaos. This whole conflict is going to come down to getting resolved through shenanigans.

Dainpdf

I just want to see how many impossible things they do before the loser's last breakfast.

[Liliet](#)

"I triple dog dare you" – this entire conversation

[daegone823](#)

Does she even have a name?

I mean she doesn't even have an aspect. To me she appears to be similar to the house of light clerics, who are empowered by their religion allowing them to heal with miracles without knowing what they are doing but through faith. She is just another priest, insult intended. Still she was able to brave the Heirarch's

control and trade wits with the tyrant, so maybe having a name is not all it's cracked up to be.

Still linking each aspect to character growth was exciting to say the least. Whenever a character used an aspect it would remind me about the life changing moments that caused the aspect or cause me to question what they went through. Even unknown characters could have there unknown stories through the aspects they used in battle.

I still have hopes for new names, I still look for bold lettering in each chapter to rekindle something that may have been lost.

This post turned into something else.

[David Lynch](#)

Two chapters ago she explicitly said (well, thought) that she wasn't Named.

Rook

I think she's at the point of growing beyond a Name by now, it would almost be a few steps backwards to get one. Having a Name makes you strong but also rigid. It defines what you are and intensifies your strengths but also emphasizes your weaknesses. Being rigidly defined means your opposition has your measure from the start; it means they can use that against you and there's not a damn thing you can do about it.

Although I wouldn't put it past her to yell out an aspect-like catchphrase as a distraction before stabbing someone. You might see some bold letters yet.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

To me it feels like she's kind of in the same boat as Black, ironically enough. She doesn't have a name, but the way she lost it was through sacrifice rather than going against it. She lost Squire when she fully embraced Winter, but the Fae are so story focused she didn't lose any narrative momentum (and in fact gained some along with power). Even after giving it up, she's still at the center of things both politically and narratively.

I've been thinking for a while that the fact that certain tropes emerge in the life of a Named, even without being perpetrated by another Name (the way people react to them, their backstories mattering for the purposes of character growth, etc) means that even people without Names can benefit from their stories if they position themselves right to take advantage of the tropes as the form.

Cat's Name is gone but the ripples of her story are still moving outwards and since she's still moving to reinforce them it seems like both prevents her from getting a new Name. She still has the same will to change a broken world, as evidenced by being able to shrug off the big H's trial fever last chapter. And since all her power now is basically stored off-site, she doesn't have any metaphysical barriers to becoming something new, like any other mortal.

I'm rambling a bit now but the TL:DR is that Cat to me feels like she's closer to a new Name than she has been since second Liese and whatever comes next seems like it will have less strings attached, given that it's not being filtered through the tint of weaponized magical depression.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Edit: *nothing prevents her, not both. Derp. :p

medailyfun

a Name is a Role threading on the Reality Grooves, it's quite possible she's threading totally new path thus not falling into any existing Role

[Liliet](#)

I don't think she's THAT unique. Like no more than all Named are. Depending on her moves from now on, she is likely to hit a mixture of existing cultural grooves, which as I understand is how new Names are made if you hit them hard enough.

And if anyone has story weight to single-handedly burn an entirely new groove where one wasn't before, it's Cat.

medailyfun

> even people without Names can benefit from their stories if they position themselves right to take advantage of the tropes as the form.

same thing in our reality, bro, that's why the book is important to me

Dragrath

Conceptually I don't see her having a name as that would require ties to above or below. Remember her deal with Sve Noc and the appeal towards the shared element of being pawns for the gods. Cat wants both above and below to loose for having used Callow as a plaything so lacking a name seems symbolic.

Dainpdf

Names don't require allegiance, though some include it. See Names like Squire, Archer, Thief which can be Good or Evil, and transit between the two.

Dainpdf

Pattern of three. She refused a Queen name the first time she was in Liesse, had the possibility of one taken from her by Black the second. Third time she'll get one and it'll stick.

[Liliet](#)

I like this idea.

Skaddix

I like but also I think Cat really underestimates the impact of personal charisma and trust. If she wants the Liesse Accords to work and not force signings at the point of the sword she needs the major players to trust her and her leadership. Abdicating and handing over Callow to someone else is not going to work if she is downgrading to not being in Charge of some country. Cause well the players signed the deal with her not with anyone else. So are they really going to trust and/or fear whoever Cat picks as successor somehow I doubt that. I just don't see when its time to sign this treaty various powers being down for her abdicating. I especially don't see Sve Noc signing off on Cat leaving.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, Catherine NEEDS to make this treaty not rely on personal charisma, because she intends to make it last more than one generation?

Skaddix

Well sure but she needs it to not fail in the early years she can let someone takeover when she dies.

[Liliet](#)

Depends on how long you think "early years" are & how long you think Cat's planning to live.

MJ

She already had her third chance. She could've been Queen of Night and Winter, but she surrendered her title instead.

Dainpdf

One, that was not in Liesse.
Two, pretty sure what was at the end there was not a Name.
Three, it was also not queenhood.

RanVor

I hope there's no such pattern then, because poor Liesse deserves to be left alone.

Dainpdf

And yet, have the people of Calernia shown any predisposition towards leaving things that should be left alone, alone?

[Liliet](#)

A Name is just a role in the story assigned according to the kind of awesome that you already are. It comes with some amplification, sure, but as Cat has mused wrt Indrani recently, the key is always the person's own essence.

Cat doesn't have a Name and it makes no bloody difference because she's still *her*. If anything, there's now no distraction of the Squire story that she bucked so hard it landed in the next country over.

If what she is now coalesces into a coherent story role that fits Calernia's cultural understanding, she'll get a new Name. But at the level she's slugging at, it'll barely make any difference. Just another thread to weave into the tapestry.

I do think we'll see new Names, though. Not everyone is Cat 😊

[Euodiachloris](#)

Sure we'll get new Names. New Heroes will hove into view, all freshly-minted, not even with their second or third aspect... And, it will take them several goes at floundering against the fact that Cat simply has no aspects they can counter by growing a brand spanking new one as the plot would like to demand before Above will have to admit it needs to come up with a different tactic. 🙄

[Liliet](#)

I was thinking Ines, Cordelia and Amadeus :3

RanVor

Ines, maybe. Cordelia, doubtful. Amadeus, HELL NO.

[Liliet](#)

I'm curious what your prediction is actually. Do you think he's going to stay non-Named until the end of the story? Or do you just mean he'll get a pre-existing Name and not a new one? (not what I meant by 'new Names' but maybe that's not clear)

RanVor

Wait, you meant Names in general? If so, change NO to YES.

[Liliet](#)

AH

SHOULD HAVE READ THE NEXT COMMENT



you got so used to arguing with my theory you didn't even notice I wasn't talking about it? XD

(btw I actually now think its 50/50 Amadeus isn't getting a new Name at all)

RanVor

Well, yes.

Skaddix

I expect a cutaway since that usually occurs when terms matter. Cat and Dead King didn't get a cut cause Dead King was always taking Malicia's Deal

I am still waiting for the Masego Bomb. And interesting Tyrant did provoke Callow somehow.

IDKWhoitis

Good to see Cat can still get under the skin of even the most tricky of opponents.

Are we going to see a repeat of Book 1? Betray Ally 1 to Ally 2, for Ally 3 to stab 2, then wipe out a weakened big bad?

[Liliet](#)

That's what Kairos is wondering, too 😊

Skaddix

Anyway looks like Cordelia is probably trying to raise an Angel interesting how she plans to do that with no Hero besides the Auger. Tyrant wants to steal it since we know he has been laying a trap for an Angel. Could be some sort of lesser god I suppose

since Sve Noc has made it clear they don't want to alert any ancient powers to their presence or ascension. So you figure that will come into play eventually.

I keep seeing people thinking it's an angel. Wasn't the Liessen one large enough to have the entire city built on top of it's personal sublayer of Creation. Not something you can actually dredge out.

Dainpdf

Angel corpses seem to be highly metaphorical, since that one had a church as part of it.

Dainpdf

He has? How do we know that?

Dead King is unlikely to lie about that kind of stuff.

Dainpdf

I must have forgotten that point. It's been a bit since that visit. Thanks. Do you happen to remember in what chapter it was that he mentioned it?

[Liliet](#)

““In a manner of speaking,” the Dead King said. “Praesi have slain and tricked them into falling, as have I. Yet the Choirs stand, for their existence is fixed. A dead angel does not detract from the whole. It remains as it ever was.”

“They have to play by the rules,” I said.

“Oh yes,” Neshamah murmured. “And they will pay for that, in time. That delightful child in Helike wove a trap for them right under the Intercessor's nose. I expect the end of that play to be nothing less than magnificent.””

[Book 4 Chapter 35: Stroll](#)

Dainpdf

Thank you!

Also, Calling Kairos a “delightful child” just comes to show Neshamah is completely nuts.

[Liliet](#)

I mean.... I agree with him.

He's *the delightfulest*.

You just have to tilt your head the right way ;u;

Dainpdf

He's a delightful adult. Body frozen in time or not.

[Liliet](#)

I mean... he's Catherine's age or slightly younger.

It's valid to call them both children even from my point of view, and I'm barely older.

For Neshamah? Everyone short of Intercessor is.

Dainpdf

I had thought he was older than that. In any case, being an adult is more about absolute age and frame of mind than relative age.

[Liliet](#)

His frame of mind is having a lot of fun as he fucks shit up.

Not quite child, no, but 'adult' does not strike me as an accurate descriptor either.

RanVor

He was sixteen at the point of his introduction. He should be somewhere between eighteen and nineteen by now. That said, he certainly isn't very mature.

Dainpdf

I had this idea somewhere that he was in his thirties. Wonder where I got that from...

[Liliet](#)

You might have been thinking of Anaxares, who is.

Or you might have gotten confused by the fact his nephew was older than him.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I suspect Hierarch *is* that trap.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, probably!

nick012000

I don't think it's an angel that she's dredging out of the lake. I think it's more likely that it's a demon, instead.

magesbe

Ironically, I don't think any of the information he gave Catherine was a lie. Funny that.

And the chances of him being behind the Observatory's silence have increased by magnitudes.

[Liliet](#)

Why put effort into making up lies when you can just tell the truth and watch the other person confuse themselves?

Kairos prefers energy-efficient methods ;u;

naturalnuke

Sometimes when a sword comes swinging the best thing to do is step in.

Dainpdf

Or ally with the sword.

...I fully expect this conflict to involve flaming flamingos at some point.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Do you have something against chocolate fountains, because.....

Novice

Kairos and Catherine in an alliance in the middle of the biggest shitstorm the continent have ever seen? Calernia really can't catch a break huh.

[Liliet](#)

TBF at least this way they're not swinging at each other.

Calernia's bloody lucky.

Sylwoos

What's the point of a alliance if not to create opportunity to swing at each other?

Liliet

Well hopefully it's more likely to be knives in the back and not y'know mountains flying around.

Coming closer means you need to swing less wide.

Dainpdf

This was delightful. The people from the League are all great.

caoimhinh

Each city of the League has their own take on insanity.

Atalante is full of emotional people, religious fanatics and also love debates like ancient Athens but never actually convince each other of anything, so they are stubborn in their beliefs.

Helike is a bunch of Tyrant fans who love conquest and war in Hell-like slaughter.

Bellerophon has the brainwashed Communist-like in their fake democracy.

The Secretariat of Delos is bureaucracy gone mad.

The Magisters of Stygia are slavers and think themselves above everyone. thinking that anyone besides the Magisters is mere cattle to be used until death.

Penthes has five idiots fighting over the title of Exarch and until one of them triumphs the city is paralyzed.

I don't know yet what madness Nicae has, but odds are that it has one.

RanVor

"[...] in Hell-like slaughter." I see what you did there. But don't forget Helike is Good half the time.

IDKWhoitis

I think Nicae has to play the straight man. They do have the power to request things of the Hierarch.

However, they do love to fight over Naval shipping lanes like Venice, even if they have failed 4 of the last 5 times. They only won this one time because Warlock nuked the other half of Ashur's ships.

caoimhinh

That seems to be the case.

Unless... does being the only sane person in a group of crazy count as a form of madness?

[Dresden 67](#)

Actually Penthes is down to two claimants to the title of Exarch, they apparently managed to murder the others.

caoimhinh

Oh, I didn't remember that...
Well, good for them, they got rid of three idiotic politicians that only were quarrelling instead of doing something for the good of their country. That's progress XD

Dainpdf

Nice has the issue with the duumvirate, but I don't know if that counts.

Antoninjohn

Now Cat can use the true secret power of friendship, having five people to beat up one person at the same time

Skaddix

I wonder if Masego and Indrani will go all Bonnie and Clyde and go off on a killing spree for awhile. Since they both seem to be in very bad moods post Vol 4. Masego cause his parents got killed and Indrani cause Sve Noc almost killed her. Indrani and Cat seem to be having issues and the sex probably didn't help matters. Plus Indrani and Masego are not like Viv and Hakram, they don't really care about the overall mission or the Liesse Accords. They hang with Cat cause she is fun and they get to see new things and learn new things and get new challenges. But mostly they care about getting stronger Ranger in the Martial Arts and Hierophant in the Mystic Arts.

I do wonder what the Tyrant is going to do with an Angel.

Skaddix

Crap I mean Archer but she is Ranger's daughter. She simply worse cause she lacks those Half Elf stats but her Name can eventually compensate the difference. Really need to boost magic resistance, I am guessing Elves have way better Magic Resistance.

magesbe

They hang out with Catherine because she's their friend. I refer you to Indrani's speech to Catherine in Book 4 where she told Catherine that the Woe was loyal to her because of who she was and how she treated them, like family.

That said, even if they see Catherine like family, it's not 100% out of the picture for them to take a hiatus to get their own shit together.

Skaddix

I think Cat is fun follows under the Friend part. But yeah they are friends but their missions are different. Indrani and Masego want to ascend to greatness at their chosen disciplines. Cat wants a better World. Viv wants Callow better which ties into Cat's mission and Hakram at least says he wants to make things better for Orcs. Callow has a broad mission while they have personal missions.

MagicTurtle

CatXKairos ship confirmed

caoimhinh

Curious Kairos and Black Queen Cat, that's a colorful pair.

pagesbe

Is it just me, or is the next chapter a bit late?

caoimhinh

It is late, by almost an hour already.
Let's hope it gets released in the next few minutes, there's also an Extra Chapter, the continuation of Pilgrim story; that might be a reason for the delay.

Hopefully EE is alright and can deliver the chapter soon.

[Javvies](#)

Agreed, though, depending on where EE is based (I don't remember) – there are places in the world where the weather has been absolutely terrible the last few days.

caoimhinh

So I heard. Apparently, there was even a tornado in Cuba that killed almost 200 people, too.

Andrew Mitchell

There seem to be more and more weather extremes all around the world. My home town in Australia has just had it's hottest January EVER... We're f*ing the climate up for sure.

Aston Whiteman

Vote?

SMHF

Normaly an hour long delay should be nothing, but EE is probably the most punctual person on Patreon. I just hope he's fine.

caoimhinh

Chapter up!!

Aston Whiteman

Seriously, hope EE is OK.

I just woke up to snow while checking chapter.

dadycoool

Four years later, this conversation is still quite the treat. The eternal friendship between these two tyrants remains the single greatest thing to come out of this story.

Chapter 8: Veracity

"A pleasant lie finds more ears than a sharp truth."

– Proceran saying

"Seriously?" I said. "I mean, I know you're with the old guard about this stuff but this is pretty on the nose."

"The classics became such for a reason," Kairos stiffly replied.

He sounded a little miffed, I noted.

"I bet you even have a speech, don't you?" I mused. "Some tortured extended metaphor about the nature of Creation and our role in it."

The Tyrant of Helike glared at me woefully.

"This rook represents the inherent emptiness of moral philosophy," I suggested. "Maybe mention something about how Good is prone to stagnation and therefore fundamentally inferior."

"Do you even know how to play?" he challenged.

I glanced downwards at the shatranj board a pair of his little twisted gargoyles had brought. I picked up a footman and wiggled it a bit.

"This moves diagonally, right?" I beamed.

His eyes closed, even the red one.

"You pain me, Catherine Foundling," Kairos said. "You pain me deeply."

I hummed thoughtfully, then took advantage of his distraction to turn the board around. The poor gargoyles it was resting atop squeaked in dismay, though they didn't flinch.

"I'll take black," I said.

I discreetly pocketed the footman from the white side of the board I'd not for a moment intended to give back. His eyes opened just a moment too late to catch me red-handed.

"This is most improper," the villain protested.

"They don't call me the *White Queen*," I pointed out.

"Are you so bound by what others think of you?" Kairos gallantly tried.

"Point for effort," I said. "But I've had better."

I opened the game most illegally by pushing forward a footman.

"I had something for this," the Tyrant muttered. "Give me a moment."

He didn't even bother to comment on my open cheating before moving up a knight. Well, it wasn't like I was going to stop anyway. I was passable at shatranj, but years of being punitively demolished at the game by Vivienne and Hakram had made me aware of my limitations. Vivienne in particular liked to allow me to think I could win before methodically flogging the conceit out of me.

"Weren't we horse-trading?" I reminded him.

I pulled at my pipe and breathed out, letting the cloud of scented smoke waft up. Another footman went up, propping up my

centre. The Tyrant let out a little noise of agreement, then snapped his fingers.

"Exactly," he agreed. "Imagine, if you would, that you were a deity."

"Not my cup of tea," I drily replied.

"Evidently," Kairos mused, too-sharp eyes flicking across me. "Yet humour me."

"Done," I said.

He was being a little too slow to move, so I moved again. The Tyrant of Helike raised an eyebrow, and I painted embarrassed surprise over my face. Like I'd thought he'd already taken his turn, which was clearly the only reason I would keep going on. I withdrew the footman with a contrite smile, but only one square of the two it had moved.

"As a deity," the Tyrant said, moving up a footman to contest the centre, "though of unfathomable power you find yourself limited. Unlike the likes of us, who can command – Catherine, why is one of my footmen missing?"

"Desertion is an inevitable part of war," I sagely replied. "So, we can move every piece but the Gods can't. That the gist of it?"

"You're taking all the enjoyment out of this," Kairos complained.

"That *is* my favourite part," I revealed.

One of my knights went up, my opponent staring with suspicion at the legal movement. That was fine, I wasn't going to nudge it up until he was distracted anyway.

"Consider that perhaps one piece in ten can be moved," the Tyrant said. "Exceptional pieces, to be sure, or at least made to be so. Yet they must be sufficient to both carry out your godly intent and influence the other pieces, which sadly move largely according to their own petty desires."

A few moves in quick succession as we traded footmen in the centre and I moved up my priest under cover of pretending to put away the pieces I'd taken.

"That sounds like you don't believe the House of Light is a faithful servant of the Heavens in this earthly world," I chided. "Which would be *heresy*, Kairos. For shame."

"Ah, and so you touch upon the second limitation," the Tyrant said. "That these disobedient pieces not only have the gall to not directly answer your desires, but they also dare to influence the pieces that *do*."

"As a goddess, I am most displeased by this," I blandly said.

"As well you should be," Kairos agreed. "Bloody chaos, not at all the orderly matter you had envisioned. Sadly, direct intervention would be costly in more ways than can be easily understood. A more... elegant solution is required."

"Someone who can dole out the nudges I cannot," I said.

"The proverbial finger on the scales," the Tyrant of Helike smiled. "Of course, such an entity would need to be constrained. It is a tool, after all. It would not do for it to get *ideas*."

"Bindings," I said.

The left side of the board was turning into something of a debacle for me, I saw. My dear friend was a fair hand at the game, and I was now down a priest. That was fine, since as the defender of all things Evil I could boast of a certain talent at necromancy – a reasonable explanation for why said priest had mysteriously reappeared on the right side of the board. And all it'd taken was kicking a gargoyle so it would yelp and my opponent would look.

"Three things she always keeps," Kairos Theodosian lightly said. "She speaks, she sees and she knows stories."

He eyed my returned priest with a degree of skepticism, forcing me to withdraw it from the board. Time for contingencies, then. My fingers closed around the stolen white footman under my cloak, allowing Night to seep inside drip by drip.

"There's two sides to a coin," I said.

The Tyrant conceded to that with a slight inclination of the head.

"Three things she always flees," he said. "Promised death, direct touch and her heart's desire."

Truth, I decided, though cloaked in vagueness. Some things I'd already known – Black had put her in the face of certain death thrice, during the Liesse Rebellion, and she'd been forced to withdraw for a time – other's I'd only suspected. If 'direct touch' really stood for an inability to directly intervene, anyway. It might go a little further than that, though. Vivienne had once mentioned to me she'd never seen the Bard take a wound she was not directly responsible for receiving. As interesting as the Tyrant's words were was the fact he could speak them at all. Where *had* he learned all this? Back when I'd still had him on the list of possible invaders of Callow I'd gone through what records the Eyes of the Empire had on him, and Helike as a whole. There'd been persistent rumours that something was kept under that city-

state's palace with oracular abilities, but with the rumour came the restriction of only one question possible. I could think of half a dozen ways to get around that, sure, but if Helike had unrestrained access to that potent a tool they wouldn't be one of the powers in the League. They would *be* the League, their banner flying above every rampart in the region.

"Fleeing her heart's desire," I casually repeated. "You almost make the role sound like a punishment."

The Tyrant smiled.

"I have a theory," he said. "You see, for someone to *truly* make a mess on this board, they would need certain qualities. Perception, affinity, knowledge. A combination thereof. You understand my meaning, yes?"

"An awareness of patterns," I said.

"Exactly so," Kairos replied. "And, plague as I am by a suspicious nature, it occurred to me that these qualities are as rare as they are useful. That neither Above nor Below are prone to waste in such regards."

My fingers stilled over the rook I'd been about to take in hand. Eyes flicking back up, I studied his face.

"An elegant solution, you called it," I softly said.

Poison made into remedy. A trap inherent to the lay of Creation. It made, I thought, a horrifying amount of sense.

"Were someone qualified to be trouble," he echoed. "They would be most qualified to quell it."

I moved up the rook, took a knight I'd been careful to strip of protection.

"And interesting theory," I said. "Though we strayed from our purpose. Should such an entity exist, what would it *want*?"

Kairos' eyes came to rest on me, unblinking.

"Horse-trading, Catherine," he said. "Not horse-*giving*."

My pipe held nothing but ashes, by now, so I leaned back to empty it on the head of one of the gargoyles. I could have garbed what I had to say in vagueness and a touch of the cryptic, but he'd win out if we played that game. No, best to cough up my part in a way that benefitted me as well. There was as much to learn from questions asked as secrets offered.

"She knew the Dead King while he was still mortal," I said, after stowing away my pipe. "And watched his rise with great interest, from as close as she could."

The Tyrant's lips quirked.

"And what was she looking for?" he asked.

Interesting, I thought. Kairos had understood my meaning earlier when I'd mentioned *intercession*, and the only individual I'd ever heard call the Bard the 'Intercessor' was Neshamah. Considering the Dead King had mentioned the Tyrant had reached out to him when we'd spoken in Keter last year, I'd assumed the information came from there. But it seemed he wasn't fully aware of the history between those two, if that question was any indication. Not that I could reasonably assume I was, but odds were I knew more about than that most. Including even this damnably well-informed man, looked like.

"How villains are made," I said.

He was good, I thought, but that red eye gave it away. The triumph he was feeling, like something he'd suspected for years had just been confirmed. So, my eternal friend had encountered an application of that knowledge at some point. I'd heard that entire conversation, including the parts I hadn't mentioned, so I had a suspicion as to what was important here. *I won't solve the riddle with the tools they gave me, so it seems I must learn craftsmanship of my own*, the Bard had said. Her methods were her own, no gift from the Gods. Which meant she was capable of making mistakes. I thought of the madman down in the city, silently recording trials, and wondered if I had not just discovered a very important piece. Kairos had arranged the election of the Hierarch. Kairos had dealt a defeat to the Wandering Bard.

That did not feel like a coincidence.

"Your turn," I said.

I was talking about more than the game, as we both knew.

"War is a messy business," the Tyrant of Helike casually said. "Not at all a precise tool. Of course, it is not without its uses. Sometimes when you need something dead, where a dagger will not do a landslide will serve."

Which begged the question, of course, of what exactly the Wandering Bard had failed to see stabbed. This couldn't be about the Calamities, it wouldn't make sense. They might have been a successful outlier in sustained victory for Evil, insofar as my father really cared about waving the banner, but getting rid of them couldn't be the *point* of this. I didn't doubt for a moment that she'd branded Black in the Free Cities just as harshly as I

had branded the Lone Swordsman that fateful night in Summerholm, but there would have been no need for a crusade to hammer that nail fully in. The Doom of Liesse had killed the trust between Black and Malicia, which made it just a matter of time until the partnership keeping Praes together collapsed. She didn't need to start a war, or a Grand Alliance, to send the Dread Empire scuttling back to the old ways.

"A lot of people get killed in landslides," I noted.

"Losses are losses," Kairos waved away. "I suppose it would be more apt to compare it to a fire being lit. One can do quite a bit with a fire, if one can guide where it burns."

My brow furrowed, and I barely paid attention to the move I made on the board. If he was implying the Bard had either started – or, more likely, fed and sped up – a continental war to clean up loose ends, then she'd have a finger on both sides. An argument could be made that by screwing with Black she'd given the East a push, since through him she could get at both Malicia and myself. That sounded horribly risky and requiring an amount of insight and foresight that should be fucking impossible, but we were dealing with an entity that even the Dead King claimed to have never won against. I had to at least consider the possibility. It was where she was guiding the Tenth Crusade through that I was having trouble to understand. The Grey Pilgrim had influence in Levant, sure. But the foremost Ashuran hero was the White Knight, who as far as I knew had no real ties to the ruling class of the Thalassocracy. And arguably the most powerful Proceran hero was the Saint of Swords, someone I very much doubted Cordelia fucking Hasenbach would take political advice from. Which made the whole theory fall apart, since the First Prince was the mortar of the Grand Alliance and by far, even now, the most powerful member. And since we were operating under the assumption the Bard couldn't just walk up to someone not Named and pull the strings, this put all the rest into question.

"Incomplete," I said. "At the very heart."

Kairos smiled, and it twisted his face into something barely human.

"She has a cousin, Catherine," he reminded me.

My fingers clenched. *The Augur. Shit, I can't believe I forgot about the Augur.* That was a very dangerous angle. It should be hard to manipulate an oracle, but then what we knew about the Augur's power – and the Bard's, for that matter – was limited. Even information about Agnes Hasenbach herself was thin on the ground. It was known, however, that her crowned cousin trusted her a great deal. Why wouldn't she? The Augur had helped her win the civil war that put her on the throne in the first place. Still, it didn't mean that the First Prince was in the Wandering

Bard's pocket. Not even close. But it did mean that the Intercessor could get the right words at the right time to end up in Cordelia Hasenbach's ears. I met the Tyrant's eyes and found open amusement in them. He was well aware that even if I went to the First Prince with this she'd just see it as me poisoning the well on one of her most effective advisers. A kinswoman, to boot. *And you're pleased, you little shit, because you know that means actually allying with Hasenbach just got a whole lot more risky,* I thought.

"Assuming you're right," I said, refraining from voicing 'and not feeding me a well-crafted lie to make this war even more bloody than it already is', "then a lot of effort has been expended. She has been *visible* in way she can't often have been before."

If she meddled this heavily every few decades, there would be damned records of it. That implied something was forcing her hand here and now, or she was after something worth the risks. The moment word that something like the Wandering Bard was out there pulling strings, a lot of her influence waned. And these weren't the days of the Kingdom of Sephirah anymore: cleaning up all mentions of her wouldn't be as easy as it would have been back then. Not unless she had some divinely-gifted aspect for that specific purpose, but I very much doubted that. Sparse as they were, there *were* records of her existence. Black had found some, and myself others.

"Indeed," Kairos said. "What makes this age different, I wonder?"

There was no answer following, just me losing my last priest to an unwise trade.

"Yeah yeah, trading and not gifting," I sighed.

I paused, drumming my fingers on the side of the board. What could I get out of him, by telling him this one?

"On at least one instance, she struck a bargain on the behalf of Below," I finally said.

His brow rose, and I got the impression he was distinctly unimpressed.

"The bargain was not struck with Named," I added quietly.

My eyes were on his red one, awaiting a reaction, but I found none. His lips quirked into a smile and I got the distinct impression I'd been played. Had the glint of triumph earlier been a fake out? To hide a lie when I caught it, or to take away my attention this very moment – when something he actually minded me knowing was on the table? *Tricky bastard*, I thought. Getting a read on him was like trying to paint on smoke. That'd been a risk

from the start, though, I conceded. It was the questions that were telling the tale here.

"How was she summoned?" the Tyrant pleasantly asked.

Gotcha, I thought. He hadn't know that was possible, then. Because this wasn't about specifics – we both knew that even if I'd learn the specifics of the ritual the Sisters had used to reach out to Below I wouldn't share them with him – it was about fresh risk introduced to already existing plans. He needed to know if some pious, desperate soul out there could call out to Above and get the Intercessor a foothold instead. Which meant whatever he was up to, the Wandering Bard could still fuck it up if she got an in. *So is that why you've been sticking to the Hierarch like a leech?* I thought. *He's not just your sword, he's your shield as well?*

"She was not sent for," I said. "She was sent. Audience was bought and paid: desperation, blood and need."

His good eye narrowed.

"And?" he pressed.

"There was a lot to lose," I said. "You could call it *weight*."

Somehow I doubted everyone who slaughtered a priesthood in their own seat of power and prayed got a personal visit from the Bard with terms to offer. Below, the Intercessor had as good as admitted, didn't want to lose the entire Everdark to a catastrophic blunder by the Twilight Sages. I tossed him that last part as a bone, a reassurance of sorts. It'd take more than a Proceran prince losing his holdings to get the Bard an angle. Of course, with our good friend Neshamah on the march the stakes for our little scuffle had been raised rather high. The Tyrant wasn't out of the woods yet, and so I smiled pleasantly at him.

"You dropped this, by the way," I suddenly said.

I tossed him back the footman I'd stolen before the game even began. To my surprise he failed to catch it, and it bounced off his chin and down on the floor. He eyed me with displeasure, and while he bent to pick it up I casually switched the places of my last rook and my queen. That ought to stave off kingtip for a few more turns.

"This has been invested with power to explode," Kairos amusedly accused when he straightened again.

Ah, so he *could* sense that. Good to know. The Night wasn't exactly subtle stuff, but that he could discern the intent I put to it wasn't something I'd been entirely certain of.

"I'm offended you would even say that," I said, hand over heart. "I gave this back to you because of my deep and abiding belief in fair play."

"You really are terrible at this game," the Tyrant of Helike noted. "I can't believe even after so much cheating you're losing this badly."

"It's part of the metaphor," I lied. "Like the whole horse thing."

"Elegantly done," Kairos praised. "I believe we were speculating as to the bounty worth the risks being taken."

I did not reply, half-debating reaching for my pipe again as I watched him.

"There is one element singular to our little war," the Tyrant idly continued. "A common friend, I believe."

The Dead King, was it? Wasn't sure I bought that. Oh, an argument could be made. After the series of disasters that had been the crusades headed into the Kingdom of the Dead, it might have been easier to assemble a coalition of that sort if it was initially headed for Praes instead. But it didn't fit with Neshamah's methods. It wasn't like there'd never before been chaos south of the lakes for him to take advantage of. The Hidden Horror was still kicking around through careful application of the epithet's first part.

"And?" I said, echoing his earlier rejoinder.

"Quite the stage, isn't it?" Kairos said. "A crusade turned to the Tower. The might of the west spent, but not broken. The east eating itself alive, to various degrees. Our friend comes rather late to the banquet."

So that was his story, then. Neshamah had come out to play because he'd been invited, as he had been in the days of Dread Empress Triumphant. The invitation meant he wasn't *the* Enemy but instead *an* enemy. This little continental waltz of death was the Intercessor finally tying up her oldest loose end, having set out her finest bait to draw him out. It was neat and tidy notion, so naturally I distrusted it. It wasn't that I would but it beyond the Wandering Bard to have engineered this butchery over several decades – if not more – just to put down the King in Keter. I had no doubts she'd be capable of it, whether morally or in actual capacity. But the story felt wrong to me. The Intercessor striking out after the arguably most prominent champion of Below, Kairos beginning his scheme with the Hierarch to kill or cripple her before she could. Sure, that would end up counted as a win for the old crowd. Procer devoured, the arbiter of the godly pissing contest losing an eye in the grand old tradition of Evil

and what Good nations managed to survive the wreck would be eclipsed by the Below-aligned powers remaining on Calernia. That was the thing, though.

This was too *simple* a game.

Which meant the Tyrant of Helike had fed me secrets, armed me with just enough to interfere, and now intended to loose me into the middle of all these delicate plans being laid down. It also meant he was lying to me, or close enough, but I couldn't find it in me to be offended by that. Might as well blame a fish for swimming.

"Interesting," I said.

Then I shrugged and tipped my king. It was, after all, just a game. And I'd already gotten what I came from. The Tyrant watched me with a smile as I rose to my feet, leaning on my staff.

"I expect I'll be seeing you soon," I said.

"How could I disappoint my closest ally?" Kairos replied.

I only took a few steps before turning, mostly on a whim.

"What would actually happen," I asked, "if you won?"

The Tyrant laughed, the sound of it strangely honest.

"Ah, Catherine, that's the entire point," Kairos Theodosian smiled. "*Finding out.*"

I waited until I'd left the changing house to snap my fingers. Enough Night had been fed to the piece for the entire set to be shattered in the explosion. I supposed that, in a way, it could be considered my rebuttal.

If the game got out of hand, I wasn't above breaking the board.

[*DroughtBringer*](#)

Go vote!

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

[*erraticerrata*](#)

First update of the month, which means extra chapter in the Extra Chapters tab. This is one is a continuation of the last, titled "Peregrine III" and from the POV of the young Grey Pilgrim. For

those wondering, there's one last of those left before we end that storyline.

caoimhinh

You know, EE? An international team of avid readers was about to illegally cross a few countries to go on a quest to make sure you were fine.

When the most punctual person in the world is suddenly late, we get worried XD

danh3107

You've never been on a bus in Alaska, those men and women are almost supernaturally on time.

Skaddix

Hanno is the foremost Ashuran Hero? Has he been busy since we last saw him.

Tyrant seems similar to Black.

IDKWhoitis

Tyrant is similar to Black without the worry for what happens in the Aftermath. Both of them want to make the point, but only Black cares if Calernia is still standing in the end. Tyrant might believe the universe will screech into non existence, but doesnt care.

[AAvidAnteater](#)

A little more about Black-given our new understanding of the Bard as a role, I believe Bard might be trying to get out of this "trap" by pushing Black into it-first she refers to him as a claimant, and also notes how adept he at understanding stories. I think we'll see this developed more as the story goes on. Finally, I know a couple of other readers referred to Cat calling Black her "father." Its possible Cat is beginning to accept Black as that, but I think stories themselves might be at play. In the same way Cat could gain real advantages against the Duke in the Winter arc by pretending she was his descendant, stories may have begun molding Cat into Black's daughter.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Oh my. "I have a job for you... namely, mine!" And the irony is, Amadeus tried and failed to do that to Cat...

theart0fwar

Laughing so hard at that chess game.

> I discreetly pocketed the footman from the white side of the board I'd not for a moment intended to give back.

> I opened the game most illegally by pushing forward a footman.

> Another footman went up, propping up my centre.

> He was being a little too slow to move, so I moved again. The Tyrant of Helike raised an eyebrow, and I painted embarrassed surprise over my face. I withdrew the footman with a contrite smile, but only one square of the two it had moved.

> A few moves in quick succession as we traded footmen in the centre and I moved up my priest under cover of pretending to put away the pieces I'd taken.

> The left side of the board was turning into something of a debacle for me, I saw. My dear friend was a fair hand at the game, and I was now down a priest. That was fine, since as the defender of all things Evil I could boast of a certain talent at necromancy – a reasonable explanation for why said priest had mysteriously reappeared on the right side of the board.

> He eyed my returned priest with a degree of skepticism, forcing me to withdraw it from the board. Time for contingencies, then. My fingers closed around the stolen white footman under my cloak, allowing Night to seep inside drip by drip.

> I moved up the rook, took a knight I'd been careful to strip of protection.

> I tossed him back the footman I'd stolen before the game even began. To my surprise he failed to catch it, and it bounced off his chin and down on the floor. He eyed me with displeasure, and while he bent to pick it up I casually switched the places of my last rook and my queen. That ought to stave off kingtip for a few more turns.

> "This has been invested with power to explode," Kairos amusedly accused when he straightened again.

I have this nagging feeling that this whole game is an extended metaphor for Cat's journey, but I can't quite map it out. Is the beginning her rigging William to blow up in everyone's face?

Vortex

I am not sure it is Kat's Entire journey that was in metaphor, but I figured the rook and queen swapping positions

was when she sent back thief and adjutant to run the kingdom while she chased the drop around.

NerfContessa

Absolutely amazing interplay here. Smirked the whole chapter.

Really looking forelward to the next encounter with the tyrant...

Sylwoos

Cat is the footman? She's a piece stolen from good, infused with power outside of her role who's gonna break the board.

[eleniaturner](#)

I am late to this party but: Cat is the reason the game got out of hand in the first place.

IDKWhoitis

"Masterful play", by both parties.

The Chess, The Performance, and the Power.

I would enjoy Cat and Tyrant interacting again before they try to brutally murder each other.

[doominator10](#)

Why not during and after too? No need to limit ourselves.

Skraeling

curse your sudden but inevitable betrayal!

Skaddix

So Cat still doesn't know about Masego. Darn...

grzecho2222

Half expected him to enter in the middle of the Tyrans sentence saying somethinglike:

"Yes, yes very intresting, but..."

taovkool

Maybe breaking the board was the entire point?

I mean the Wandering Bard sounded like she was up to a lot of game-breaking shenanigans back in her days and got herself stuck in the Intercessor role for it. Now, she wanted out of it, maybe?

Cicero

Yes it seemed clear to me that Cat is a potential replacement for the Wandering Bard, which might be why Above, Below, and even the Wandering Bard have not targeted her for elimination.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Wait, Cat? I was thinking Amadeus....

danh3107

Now that's what I'm talking about EE, what a great chapter and it was well worth the wait.

Robert12

Am I reading to much into this or did good somehow re-purpose triumphant and turn her into the bard?

[Javvies](#)

Bard way predates Triumphant.

[Javvies](#)

The only thing I can think of that's noticeably different now on a Named level is the sustained success of Black's school of Pragmatic Evil.

On the other hand, Bard didn't start moving yesterday – she's all about the long game, so she likely started moving years ago – probably before it was apparent that Black's plan in Callow was quite so successful in having Cat being Callowan Named loyal to him.

Kairos is up to something ... still not much idea of what it could be.

caoimhinh

For me, it's clear that "the thing the Bard failed to stab, so has to bury under a landslide" is Catherine, or more exactly Amadeus' legacy of Practical Evil, that much was shown in the few chapters that have been in Intercessor's POV.

[Liliet](#)

There was only one actually, Epilogue II.

You might be confusing it with times when she shared philosophy/explanations with other people.

caoimhinh

Hmm, true.

Still, the point stands. She outright stated that now that Contrition (William the Lone Swordsman) had failed maybe Judgement(Hanno the White Knight) would do the trick.

[Liliet](#)

well now I gotta reread

...ok i havent even gotten to Bard's POV but god

"It was an unusually poetic thought for Amadeus, a man not particularly prone to sentiment outside of some very defined boundaries."

AMADEUS OH MY GOD

a natural 1 on self-insight roll ;u;

...ok rereading that is fascinating and made me remember that I like Bard a lot actually 0.-

anyway

"Keeping the bottle, if not the cup, she strode out into the sun. The White Knight was bound to be close, or she wouldn't be there. Contrition, in the end, had not done the trick.

Maybe Judgement would."

she does not specify what exactly the trick was -_-

(my suspicion is flipping, not killing. redemption.

contrition tried to force redemption on Cat and it didn't work. there was a potential redemption story for her in Liesse if William had not been that much of an idiot about opposing her while she was doing lowercase good, that's my read)

Considering that Contrition led more than half of the Crusades, I think Bard was indeed angling for a hike to Keter. Not everything has to revolve around the protagonist.

Besides, she knew what the Hierarch was about and still invited Neshamah into Creation. Whatever is going on, she believes her duties will allow her not to enforce the rules he keeps breaking, at least this time.

[Liliet](#)

Oh yeah that also.

randodude

i am not so sure anymore,

that was the old bard talking to William , while she was

bound to what was then a local story,
she tailored herself into something the lone swordsman can
understand, into a certain narrative.

i don't doubt that the legacy of Practical Evil, is one of
the pieces on the board, but i don't think that this is what
the bard is aiming at, i think it is more of a consequence of
the endgame state of Calernia, or perhaps an enabler of her
true goal.

[Liliet](#)

^ Agreed.

Over Due

Did anyone else notice that Cat referred to Black as her father?
Did I misread that, or did I miss something in an earlier
chapter? Is she being literal or figurative?

Wry Warudo

She's been calling Black her father for a while now; iirc the
first mention was when she broke up with Killian

[Liliet](#)

I love how it's still "Black" most of the time, so every time
she drops the f-word is jarring af.

She's been doing that with increasing frequency. The first was
when she was doing a sick burn on Talbot for asking that she
pick a different last name ('the closest thing i have to a
father'), the second (and the first direct&explicit one) was
when she broke up with Killian and came to his tent for
comfort, the third (sort of) was the acknowledgement of the fae
patricide story involving him between them, the fourth was
"angry at my father" when talking to Andronike, and in these
latest chapters it's been happening more and more.

Sounds like Cat's coming to terms with it 😊

caoimhinh

She has been referring to him as her father for quite a while
now. Each time she is more open about it.

ninegardens

So... possibly stupid, but is it stated whether or not Cat
knows if she is being metaphorical or literal on that one.

She's died a whole bunch of times and got mixed up in story
juice, and I can see her losing track of such a detail.... and
it just seems weird to somehow just start using that term

without noticing (heck, I know how long it took me to start applying it to a step-dad, and that was with a whole lot of time, and a marriage, and me making an actual DECISION involved... not just accidentally thinking that way).

I guess what I mean is that the "Mistake" seems off somehow. Like important plot point kind of off.

Liliet

I think Catherine is not being either 'metaphorical' or 'literal' about it. He's her *adopted father*. That's a fact in her eyes, because he acts like one and she thinks of him as one, and they've both acknowledged that to each other during the post-Liesse discussion. She doesn't think he's her bio father, but that doesn't matter any more than the fact Masego isn't biologically related to either of his fathers, too. Adoption overrides biology.

I actually just found the first time this was brought up in [the last numbered chapter of Book 2](#):

"“I was not criticizing you,” my teacher said, lips twitching. “Quite the contrary.”

I might still have to kill you, one day, I thought as my cheeks warmed. The longer I knew the man, the more complicated my relationship with him grew. I'd thought, when I first became the Squire, that I would have to fight him tooth and nail for every scrap of power. Instead he'd had my back every step of the way, battering down doors I couldn't open on my own. I loved him a little bit for that. For seeing something in me I'd always believed was there, but that no one else had ever acknowledged. I also hated him for it, because I could no longer think of him as the enemy. Warlock had said that one day I would have to make a choice, and I believed him. And when that day came, when the knife was in my hand, I knew that if I killed him I'd miss him. As a teacher, as a mentor, as perhaps the closest thing to a father figure I'd ever had.”

Then in Book 3 in Reunion, the pre-Liesse conversation they had:

"“Oh there's still a few years left in this hide, if I avoid the right mistakes,” he said. “There will be dangers in facing Diabolist, to be sure, but I am aware of the stories I must sidestep.”

Gods but I was glad to hear that. Because there was a picture that could be painted in Liesse, one that involved my mentor and my rival and the bloody succession that had been the way of villains since the First Dawn. I wasn't...

Fuck, I knew Black was a risk. That as long as he lived there would always be limits to how far I could push things with the Tower. But I wasn't ready for him to die. I wasn't sure that I would ever be. It wasn't even just that I felt safer with him, the hazy memory of a warm cloak around my shoulders threaded with the bone-deep certainty there was not a line he wouldn't cross to keep me alive. I worried my lip. It'd been easy to tell Grandmaster Talbot that the monster in front of me was the closest thing I'd ever have to a father, when he was so very far away. It was harder to do it now that he was here with me. It would have been breaking a pane of glass we'd always been careful to keep there, even if sometimes our hands pressed against that divide close enough to feel the other's warmth. The hard girl with a distant father figure, I thought mockingly. When did I become such a hackneyed banality?"

No mistakes were involved.

Cat's made a choice, and she's leaning into it on purpose. Because fuck stuffing affection into a box.

This IS a plot point, in itself.

ninegardens

Yeah, I know she's thought of him as a father figure in the past...
but that's the THING, yeah... in all those past cases, she's used the phrase "Father figure", and now she isn't, and there IS a difference.
And yeah, I see the thing with adoption and all that jazz... but... but those too are different situations.

I'm not saying you're wrong here, just... that something has changed, and it's weird, and hasn't been fully explained.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, the moment of change was explicit.

[Chapter 57: Revolve](#)

> I found my feet taking me back to camp instead of the bonfire, where I knew Hakram would be. I had no taste for the conversation that awaited there, would not for a long time. Instead I found a tent, still lit with magelight even at this hour, and let the wards wash over me as I entered. Black was seated on one of his rickety stools, his thin shirt for only armour as he poured over papers arrayed before him. He took one look at me, then let out a breath that was almost a sigh.

> He leant back to claim a cup from his bedside and filled it with the wine at his table, pressing it into my hands. I could have sat across from him, but instead I went on his bed. I folded my knees against my chest and cradled the cup. I barely remembered what it had felt like, to be a child, but it must have been something like this. He did not speak, but neither did his eyes return to the papers.

> [...]

> The last part I remembered of that night was my father's hands putting a blanket over me.

That's the moment of change and the moment of choice.

Of course, immediately after it got buried under the whole "you did WHAT" of Liesse and of him *trying to get her to kill him*, Winter numbness freezing that development in place until Cat shook it off.

But the decision, the change, it was already there.

[Barthumphries](#)

Maybe she is thinking of him as Father more now because that's his new Name?

[Liliet](#)

omg

I mean... he didn't lose the Name of Black Knight until Queen's Gambit, and you can't hold two Names at the same time, but...

hey, Cat was called the Black Queen before she was ready to transition from Squire, too 😊

[Barthumphries](#)

Father of the New Evil, just like George Washington (in the United States) is colloquially known as the Father of our Nation.

[Liliet](#)

awwwwww

Rook

I think the bard might actually want the same thing as Kairos, despite what she's obligated to attempt accomplishing.

He said it himself, she flees from three things. When she fled from the Hierarch when he refused to pick a side, which one of those was present? I think the only one that can truly apply is the desire of her heart.

Catherine, I believe, is so busy looking elsewhere for the Bard's game that she's missing the clue right under her nose. What if Catherine can't find the the key piece in the Bard's plan because she is the key piece? A piece that cant outplay the bard – no one can – but she can break that board on which she can't lose, no matter how much she wants to.

It would also very neatly wrap up why Amadeus is actually important in the big picture, despite his goals being focused on the mundane smaller picture. "Father" is what she just called him in her little monologue. He's not the billiard ball, he's cue. That's why she nudged him directly, he's the tool to indirectly move the piece that she'd otherwise be obligated to sabotage, this late in the game.

It's why everything she's done points to weakening all sides on the board, not breaking them. So that when the Bard's infantry-piece bomb goes off, everyone is too worn out to stop it.

Rook

*the cue

The other two contextual clues come together as well.

Why some ordinary teenage kid from some backwater town with no extraordinary talents has been toppling ancient powers as old as the continent left and right. How she grew so quickly and gained exactly what she needed at exactly the right times. If she was fed, intentionally grown – just like that infantry piece – by the oldest and scariest monster, it makes perfect sense.

It makes sense what the Bard mentioned before. About how she created the Hierarch, of all things, back before she knew better. Why she created something that goes against everything she is. He's a failed precious attempt. The hands-on direct influence that her fetters forced her to sabotage, that couldn't win against her as a result.

Catherine is just MK II. Or III. Or V. Or however long this has been going on.

Maybe the real reason Kairos has taken such an interest in Catherine is precisely because he can tell what she was created for.

ChillyPepper

`Why some ordinary teenage kid from some backwater town with no extraordinary talents has been toppling ancient powers as old as the continent left and right.`

The parallel realities flashback thingies she has before kneeling before Diabolist indicate that she is anything but ordinary. Just wanted to point this out.

Rook

Sure, not exactly some random pauper, but every parallel was well within traditionally human limits.

Her flashbacks were things like a mob boss, a hero, a general. Achievements at the end of a long life. Impressive beyond a doubt, but not something that boggles the mind when you hear those types of people could have started out from nothing. It doesn't invite disbelief to think that a person could reach those heights mostly on their own merits.

Some of the things she's been doing the last few volumes though, they defy all common sense. Devouring an entire half of creation beta and becoming something akin to a god at the ripe old age of, uh, 19? I don't remember the exact age, we know she barely got out of high school age just recently. Or using that to create a literal deity and reviving a race out of some mangled ruin that predates the history of the nation that spawned her? The scale is a bit off

Sylwoos

And given that the world revolve around story trope, ordinary teenage kids from some backwater town toppling great power is probably the norm. How many Dread Emperor have fallen to such heros?

Fayhem

Bard didn't create *this* Hierarch; that was Tyrant's play. Bard was referring to creating the Name of Hierarch itself, that in this manifestation of the Name Anaxares wound up assuming through Tyrant's manipulations.

Someguy

>If the game got out of hand, I wasn't above breaking the board.

Neither are the Gods Above Cat.

caoimhinh

I'm re-reading the Guide, and something was brought to my attention. This is what Hakram told Cat just before the Battle of Second Liesse against Akua:

"We're winning," he said. "Just by standing here, we're winning. Because they only rule us only as long as we let them, and the moment that truth bleeds it dies. They can kill every last one of us and it won't matter, because as long as the banner's been raised once someone will rise to carry it again." Baring fangs, he met my eyes.

"They wouldn't let us have a seat at the table, so we broke it," Hakram said, and there was a savage satisfaction to him. "That will not go quietly into the night, no matter what happens today."

And a few paragraphs later he said this:

"That's the thing with eras, Catherine," Adjutant said, hard-eyed and proud. "They come to an end. So let's bury it together, the two of us – this fucking Age of Wonders they built on our backs."

So it's all coming to that, one way or another, a lot of Players are getting closer to the point of contemplating the breaking of the board, and thus the Game is coming to an end.

[Liliet](#)

And so, Catherine's favorite metaphor for war is shatranj played improperly.

Pieces that don't obey with Duchess Kegan.

Several boards that people are playing on without knowing they are different with Pilgrim.

And now it comes to a fucking culmination and I love her.

caoimhinh

This was a very interesting and funny chapter, thanks. Some revelations, lots of speculations. Time to start looking for the Legions and plan Amadeus' rescue!

"a successful outlier in sustained victory for Evil, insofar as my father really cared about waving the banner"
Aaaww Cat is so cute calling Amadeus father more frequently.

"what exactly the Wandering Bard had failed to see stabbed"
You, of course, Cat. As the heiress of Practical Evil. Of course, taking down Neshamah might be in the cards, but it's never a single-layered game, there are always multiple objectives and possible paths of action.

Typos found / how it should be:

plague as I am by a suspicious nature / plagued
knew more about than that most / about that than most
I would but it beyond the Wandering Bard / put it beyond
gotten what I came from / what I came for

[bookhero123](#)

Thanks for the chapter!

This part of the monologue was the most precise representation of the series,

["You really are terrible at this game," the Tyrant of Helike noted. "I can't believe even after so much cheating you're losing this badly."]

I don't usually comment but this particular part just sums up Cat through the whole series, she has done so much and was ready to sacrifice even more but in the end she lost more than she won. Truly EE is a prodigy among the writers. Thanks you so much for this amazing series.

edrey

the thing the bard failed to stab are practical evils, they are a new kind of evil she doesnt know how to deal, one or two are find but more? i dont thing so, first the hashmalin then the wars, lets not forget that the plan of amadeus was to trascend the pattern of callow and praes, a new evil nation of practical villians

SINISTAR

I don't quite think that's it. While Black and Co's methodology is relatively new, and arguably a threat, keep in mind Cat's concluded the story the Bard is building is contrary to taking out individuals who are much more dangerous. There's some pieces on the board we don't know of yet.

... I suspect at least *one* of those pieces is Triumphant.

Dot

the whole chess game was a metaphor to the game between Good and Evil with cat as the stolen piece

[Screwfloss](#)

Why is Cat calling Black her "father" all of a sudden? Does this make sense to anyone?

werafdsaew

She's been doing that for a while now

[Liliet](#)

It's been a subplot for a while, particularly in the Second Llesse arc. Look into the "Reunion" chapter for some of Cat's musings on it.

SINISTAR

It's a subtle, quiet thing, Cat and Black have had this relationship feeling for a while, but they've always suppressed it. However, in losing Winter, Cat has been forced to do some soul searching. Simply, Cat has chosen, on some level, to accept what her feelings for her father figure are, in spite of any other misgivings, where before there was always a fine line in between them.

[Liliet](#)

This subplot first culminated at Second Llesse ("neither of us spoke the word patricide"), but that ended with such an unholy mess with Cat so badly traumatized, she kind of put off processing it until Winter fell off.

At which point she apparently rapidly decided that the issue does not deserve any further consideration and fuck the fine line ♥

[dgj212](#)

Oh my god, I ship Cat and Kairos so much right now.

Andrew Mitchell

Wow, just... Wow. I am so impressed by this chapter. Humour and subtlety both in abundance.

TBH I didn't get 75% of the subtle interplay between Kairos and Cat. I'm looking forward to reading the existing 30+ comments because I'm sure others will have seen more deeply than me.

Cat's cheating, and Kairos' reaction (or lack of) were the absolute highlight for me.

Loved this chapter so much.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine learned how to play board games from the Calamities.

This is the least surprising thing in all of existence.

I love it so much.

Jordan Leighton

I understand less and less of what's happening, but it's still pretty good.

Digitize27

It can't just be me that sees a lot of similarities between the proposed reason that the Bard is as she is (She was uniquely good at fucking up the Gods' plans so was re-purposed to facilitate them) and Catherine herself.

Is Bard grooming a successor? Engineering a situation where she is forced to lose in order to prove that Cat is better at this game than her and is therefore more worthy of her punishment?

[Liliet](#)

I'm seeing it too.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Or, maybe, Amadeus. If Bard does somehow get herself smashed before the board goes splody, *that role and Name* are left flapping in the breeze.

And, Amadeus is Mr Story Patterns, not just Cat. 😊

[Liliet](#)

That would b so horrifyng, I love it

patrar

Notice it's Amadeus, not Kat that gets all the 'talks' from Bard. Amadeus who's getting more and more isolated. First Captain dies, than Alaya ruins their relationship with her power plays and now Warlock died. The Legionaries who died to the Pilgrim's plague are another facet of this. And of course, Praes is on the way to ruin. The rest of the Calamities are much less important to him emotionally. All that remains is his pupil/daughter Katherine. If the Bard manages to perma-kill her he'll be alone. That's when he disconnected enough from the mortal world to replace Bard. He'll ask for a miracle to get Kat back and instead become 'the intercessor' forever denied his heart's desire.

From Story-lore perspective Kat can't be the Intercessor's replacement or her instrument to destroy the Gods' gameboard. There's not enough personal connections between the two. They met a few times during her clash with the Heiress and Lone Swordsman and she studied the Bard from afar since then but they don't meet and speak. The story is thus too sterile. Sure much of her machinations was geared to destroy Kat and Callow but both are Amadeus fruits of love and labor. They're the obstacles, not the goal.

Aotrs Commander

I love how Cat appears to be the only person that can even get to and exasperate even KAIROS, who has pretty much otherwise spent his whole time being such a easy-going manic.

Sylwoos

Probably because she stole his part. He was the one supposed to blatantly cheat to his opponent exasperation, not the other way around.

[Barthumphries](#)

Typo thread:

It wasn't that I would but it beyond the Wandering Bard to have engineered...
Change but to put.

There were others but erratic isn't going to read this typo thread anyway so...

[Barthumphries](#)

Typo thread:

It wasn't that I would but it beyond the Wandering Bard to have engineered...
Change but to put.

There were others but erratic isn't going to read this typo thread anyway so...

nipi

Ah yes Cat. Not afraid of breaking the board... over someones head.

WuseMajor

Tyrant, this is what it's like for other people to interact with you. Remember that in the future.

WuseMajor

The qualities he described Bard as having are pretty similar to Cat's strengths. What if the Bard wants to die permanently, but to do that, she needs to find a replacement?

L

How come Cathrine never has name-dreams of black knights other than Amadeus?

patrar

She only wants to emulate Amadeus brand of Practical Evil, not any of his predecessors. Besides, I'm not sure Squires can receive revelations from beyond the grave.

Randelman

Is there anything preventing Catherine from claiming a Name now? I know she couldn't when she was all fae but surely that isn't stopping her anymore.

Sturmii

Cat kind of forgot that 1) apotheosis shouldn't happen that often and 2) she was suddenly declared arch heretic

Chapter 9: Patient Knives

"No man is an island, Chancellor. We've tried the ritual, the result is mostly screams."

– Dread Emperor Malignant III

We were an hour out of Rochelant when Akua returned to my side. The night was still young – I knew that better than most – so we'd not wasted moonlight by lingering on the outskirts of the city until she finished. The sooner we caught up to my drow army the better, as far as I was concerned. Still, after she returned in a whisper of power on frost I called a halt. My Peerage took the following dismissal gracefully, and why wouldn't it? They'd not stood in my deeper councils even when I was still their sole mistress, not even Ivah. It would have been convenient if there'd been a log or rock to sit on as we spoke, but Creation did not seem in an indulging mood tonight. At least getting off the damned horse for a moment was a relief to my calves and arse. I'd forgotten how irksome the cramps coming with long rides could be, when you weren't used to horsemanship. Winter had seen to those, before, and my Name taken off the edge before that. Gods, at least it wasn't as bad as the return of my monthlies. The surprise had been more than slightly unpleasant, when I'd had my first moon blood in years down in the Everdark. That Archer evidently found my discomfort hilarious had been no help at all.

I stretched my legs out carefully, leaning on my staff, and my 'war council' assembled around me. A bird, an archer and the shade of a dead woman. There'd probably been Dread Emperors in the old days that had more reliable-seeming councils than mine, and wasn't that a troubling thought? The shade bowed with

exquisite precision, but neither crow-Andronike nor Archer took it upon themselves to add even a semblance of ceremony to the affair. A sad day indeed, when the Doom of Liesse was the best behaved of my companions.

"Lay it on me," I said.

Usually that would have prompted a dirty joke from Indrani – whose occasional evening in my bed had done absolutely nothing to curb the racy comments of, to my mixed amusement and despair – but tonight she kept her mouth shut. I had to force myself not to look at her. This was not the place, now was not the time. The thought felt like a betrayal of sorts, true as it was. The people in the stories threw aside little details like this in the name of friendship all the time, didn't they? It'd been a long time since my story had been that clean or pretty, though, and sometimes I doubted it ever had been.

"There are at least eight thousand Helikean soldiers in Rochelant, though no more than twelve thousand," Diabolist reported. "No soldiery from any other of the Free Cities could be found."

I chewed on that for a moment. Old reports from the civil war in the League had the total muster of Helike at twenty thousand, but that army had sieged three cities since and stormed two of those three. The Tyrant might have recruited since, of course, but green troops wouldn't have the discipline I'd noticed in the soldiers holding Rochelant. And they'd marched through the Waning Woods a few months back, anyway, so further losses were to be expected. Assuming the Tyrant hadn't stripped Helike itself bare, inside that little Proceran city was the majority of the army his city-state could field. Considering Kairos Theodosian was the presumed general of the League's united armies, that held interesting implications. Who was giving out orders, if not him? Whatever reports I'd read about the League's military commanders were likely out of date by now, but unless someone had been hiding a very skilled general under a rock there should be no one of staggering competence. The other reputable professional army in their region was the Stygian slave phalanx, but while the Spears of Stygia had officers their orders ultimately came down from the ruling Magisterium of that city. Powerful warlocks, but not necessarily the most able of generals.

"The League's going to be a fucking mess if it gives battle unless the Tyrant returns," I bluntly said. "Which he shows absolutely no sign of doing right now."

"Good news, then," Archer shrugged. "Either they'll be thrashed or they'll stand back and let us settle the mess."

I frowned, not so sure about that. Kairos wouldn't be crippling his own army this early in the dance, it was his most valuable

avenue of pressure on everyone else. If anything, he'd want to preserve its strength while the Grand Alliance and my own hodgepodge coalition bloodied each other for a bit. If he held command of the only mostly intact host on the field, everyone else would have to step carefully around him. On the other hand, if I was reading him right, he couldn't just stay out of the melee either. He had to prove to be *some* sort of threat, if his way to victory involved both himself and the First Prince at the same negotiation table. The Hierarch was a forest fire in the making, sure, but the man alone wouldn't be enough to have the likes of Cordelia Hasenbach flinching. *Unless he stops haunting small cities and stirs up larger pots*, I mused. Which would be difficult to implement, since the Hierarch should need to be in whatever city he stirred and the Helikeans didn't have fairy gates to quicken their advance. As far as I knew, anyway.

"We'll see," I finally said. "Akua, you studied the Hierarch's... pull?"

Diabolist nodded, face calm but gaze visibly unsettled.

"I am nearly certain this was an aspect," she said. "And absolutely certain this was not the result of using some entity bound and bargained with."

Archer spat into the snow, and I shared the sentiment.

"No one gets that strong a boon from their Name without a cost," I said. "It's not a city-killer he's wielding, not exactly, but it's almost as bad. William had to put his life on the scales and call down a bloody Choir to attempt something in the same league."

"Contrition's touch was stronger than this, practically speaking," Akua dispassionately noted. "Closer to absolute in its effect, a result of the Choir's own nature. The Hierarch's influence seems to be closer to a nudge than a decree – I would wager it relied on grievances already existing."

"Useful, but not what I'm asking you about," I said.

Diabolist inclined her head in concession, then hesitated.

"This is not fact, only supposition," she warned.

I simply cocked an eyebrow. Her suppositions were usually rather solid, as they should be. Even before I'd ripped out her soul and bound it to Winter, broadening her horizons, she'd had an education in matters eldritch that likely less than a dozen people on Calernia could boast of surpassing. And even then, not in every subject.

"The nature of the aspect might be extremely situational," Akua said. "That is usually the case with more powerful aspects – either that or they are outright uncontrolled."

My lips thinned. Uncontrolled did seem possible, since I doubted Anaxares of Bellerophon had done much experimenting with his abilities. But when I'd spoken with him, the pull had lessened while he engaged with me. Until I'd irked him, anyway. Reaction to emotions, maybe? That was hardly unusual with Named.

"Situational," I repeated, implicitly inviting her to elaborate.

"I saw more of the city than either of you, I believe," Akua said. "It struck me that, aside from the tribunals, there seemed to be no unnaturally-driven actions taking place."

Archer snorted out a laugh.

"So his trick is only good at making trials?" she said. "Takes all sorts, I suppose."

I was a lot less amused. Considering Kairos was the hand behind the Hierarch, I didn't believe for a moment that even an aspect so narrow couldn't be used to birth a hellish mess. There were a lot of important people – important entities, even – that would leave a disaster in their wake if they ended up getting behead by an alleyway tribunal. By now I was nearly certain the First Prince's neck wasn't what the Tyrant was after, but if I entertained the notion that it *was* for a moment? Using the right pivot, civil war could be sown in the Principate just as the Dead King started making gains up north. There was no need to expand on what kind of a disaster that would be for the rest of the continent.

"Judgement," I said, honing in on what I considered the important kernel. "You think his aspect is bound to the concept. Stronger when he's standing in judgement, or inciting others to do the same."

Akua nodded.

"I am not certain how much you know of Bellerophon," she delicately said.

Unlike Masego, she was usually more diplomatic than to outright call me ignorant to my face.

"They rule by popular vote and appoint officials by drawing lots," I replied. "Terrible at war, though their city-state is too much trouble for anyone to want to seriously attempt annexation. They hate Penthes to the bone and they've got some sort of mage order that suppresses internal rebellions. Like to

execute each other a lot, so I can see where the Hierarch gets it from."

I knew more than that, but little relevant to our conversation. It was mostly anecdotes from histories which as a rule tended to take an amused, tolerant and slightly condescending view of the city. Good for a laugh, but not people to take too seriously. The rest of the League seemed content to leave them to their own devices in their dirt-poor holdings, only intervening for a cursory slap on the wrist when they agitated at the borders.

"It was not a city my education covered in great detail," Akua admitted.

Which was pretty damning, since the Sahelians would have gone out of their way to thoroughly brief her on any nation of importance.

"That said, there is one detail to their democracy that my tutors found of interest," Diabolist continued. "While it well-known that all citizens of Bellerophon have the right to cast a vote in the city's popular assembly, not so that the Gods Below have one as well."

I cocked an eyebrow, reluctantly amused.

"One vote," I said. "For the whole lot of them?"

"Indeed," Akua replied, without a speck of humour to her voice. "A droll detail, in most situations, though the Hierarch's abilities change matters. You see, this makes the Gods Below honorary citizens of Bellerophon according to their own laws."

A heartbeat passed.

"You can't be serious," I said. "They think their laws apply to the Gods?"

"Half of them, anyway," Indrani snickered. "Wonder if they ever took the bastards to court?"

"Archer," I hissed. "*Think* about this. The Hierarch's mad as can be, but he believes in that tripe. Believes it hard enough it ripples across a whole city – and he's under the impression he has a right to put even Gods on trial."

I bit my lip, glancing at Akua.

"If he made an attempt," I said. "What would happen?"

The shade looked dismayed.

"I have no idea," she admitted. "There has never been a precedent as far as I know."

Ah, Catherine, that's the entire point, Kairos Theodosian told me. *Finding out.* Would he turn on Below like that? He might, I grimly admitted to myself. Akua herself had told me that when the Hellgods had taught the Wasteland about 'sacred betrayal' they hadn't excluded themselves from the chain of treachery. I had no reason to believe their teachings in Helike ran along different lines. And if the man truly bought into Evil, he might not even see it as a betrayal. Or rather, he'd think about betrayal very differently: a holy thing, an act of worship. Which didn't mean in the slightest that the Gods Below wouldn't answer it by making a crater wherever the offence was given. The size of that possible crater, though, was the part worrying me most. A city, a province, a realm? A *continent*? It was one thing to make a play of the alleged purpose of Creation, as the Liesse Accords were meant to but quite, another to take a swing at the Gods who'd actually created the world. I wasn't opposed to the act in principle, to be honest, but if all it took to end Above and Below was a pair of bold madmen we'd be long rid of them.

"Well, there's a new name on the list," I finally said.

"Which one?" Archer drily asked.

"The one with the people we need a solid plan to kill," I said. "Akua, I want a record of everything you observed of the Hierarch and his abilities. We'll start from there. He might be like Malicia, a Named with little combat weight. That hardly means he'll be easy to kill, but at least he's away from his seat of power. That ought to make it possible, at least."

Unless, I suddenly thought, *he's carrying his damned seat of power with him.* Did he just need to be near a mob, any mob? Was his aspect really that versatile, for all its apparent narrowness? I set that consideration aside for the moment. We wouldn't get a proper assault plan done standing out here in the cold anyway, and preferably I'd want more than just us contributing to it. It'd be best if the full Woe could be involved, it'd rather broaden the toolbox we could call on to get it done. This was still speculation anyway, I reminded myself. It might be the Tyrant and the Hierarch would settle for some lesser madness behind the headsman's axe they'd be swinging. But expecting the worst was only good sense, at this point, and you could never have too many plans to kill dangerous madmen. Oh Gods, I was starting to sound like Black. Which reminded me...

"I'll see it done," Diabolist replied with a nod.

"Speaking of dangerous madmen," I said. "Black's still alive according to the Tyrant."

My two companions held their tongue, but I caught them sharing a look.

"Yes, he could be lying," I sharply said. "But Kairos also mentioned him to be a prisoner of the Grey Pilgrim, which strikes me more as an attempt to send me after the man than dangled false hope."

"It could be both," Indrani bluntly said.

"We know there's no heroes with the Levantine armies," I pointed out. "Which, if the Pilgrim was in Iserre to intervene in this fight, is where he would attach himself. If he's actually in the principality – and the Tyrant wouldn't send me on wild goose chase when he could send me into actual danger instead – then there's a reason for it. Escorting a dangerous prisoner to Salia would fit. Unless either of you has a better explanation?"

"Speculating with this little information is rather pointless," Akua said. "The Pilgrim's schemes run deep."

I was a little impressed that she, of all people, had the gall to say that about someone else.

"Still not sure why the old man wouldn't just slit the Carrion Lord's throat, to be honest," Indrani said. "Not like he's been shy about that sort of thing until now."

"Bait," Diabolist suggested.

"We're already here," Archer snorted. "We have to be, to get anything done. I guess he could be after the other Calamities, but why borrow a torch when the house is on fire?"

I couldn't disagree, though I really wished it were otherwise. Especially if the Pilgrim was actually headed for Salia, which was the only destination making sense if they were traipsing through Iserre. Sure the Principate's capital was massive and well-defended, but it was also the most populated city on Calernia bar none. Somehow I doubted Warlock would care all that much if he had to incinerate a few hundred thousand people to get my teacher out of a cell, but in principle the Grey Pilgrim *was* supposed to care. I supposed a funeral pyre of dead innocents by the thousands might set in stone the story of those who'd committed such a massacre being righteously slain by heroes, but that was a damned dark way of going after an end that could be reached through other methods.

"Indrani," I hesitantly asked. "If he was killed, how would the Lady of the Lake react?"

She grimaced under her hood.

"Can't be sure," she said. "Odds are she'd cut whoever wielded the knife, at least, but she's not his keeper. If he sailed his ship into the reefs on his own, and it sounds like he did, she

might not see reason to take revenge. She's not a Calamity anymore, Cat. She didn't go after the heroine that killed Captain either."

That might have been because she considered the remaining Calamities to have a better claim to that death, I had privately thought, but if anyone would know the truth of this it was Archer. It irritated me a little that the Ranger could band with people for years and then leave those bonds behind when it suited her, but then she'd not struck me as a woman dripping with tender sentiments.

"Which leaves diplomatic leverage," Akua said. "The Empress' deep fondness for her right hand is no secret. Neither, to be frank, is your own attachment. Hostage-taking to secure the left flank of the Principate while war is waged against the Kingdom of the Dead would be a gamble, but if successful then well worth the costs. And if a single individual could be used for that purpose, it would be the Black Knight."

"He burned through quite a chunk of the Proceran heartlands not a year ago," Indrani whistled, sounding impressed. "If Hasenbach thought up that scheme, she's got ice in the veins and no lack of nerve. Her people are going to be howling for his head."

The First Prince did have both, I silently conceded. And this was the best explanation I'd heard so far, assuming this wasn't actually *Black's* plan and we were all swinging at mist – which I wasn't quite ready to discard as a possibility yet.

"We'll find out sooner or later," I said. "Regardless, if the Pilgrim is in the region you should know what that means."

Akua's face was the picture of serenity, but she did not speak and that was telling. Indrani had been with me for longer, though, so she followed the thought to the conclusion.

"We'll run into the old man at some point," she mused. "And with blades out, most likely."

"Vivienne figured out one of the quirks to his Name," I said. "We confirmed it at the Battle of the Camps – to put up his stronger stuff, likely to avoid getting killed, he needs to intervene on someone's behalf. Assuming we manage to assemble all our forces in the field before we run into him, the weak link is obvious."

Andronike, still on my shoulders and interested enough in the proceedings not to interrupt so far, stirred with displeasure at the thought yet unexpressed. That made it, I told her silently, no less true.

"The drow," Akua said. "The consequences of dawn are a dangerously exploitable weakness."

"If he knocks out the southern expedition we lose a lot of fighting power," I said. "The Legions have held ground against him before – at a cost, but we held. If he wants to cripple us, he'll be going after the drow."

"That means he'll take the offensive," Archer mused. "Or at least, his soldiers will. That way he has people to save."

And it might just be that the more people in peril there were, the greater the power granted to save them would be. He'd been no pushover at the Battle of the Camps, when he got going. Considering the amount of troops running around Iserre that was not a pleasant notion to entertain.

"He's a tricky sort," I said. "But his arsenal isn't endless and we're not without backing of our own. If he strays too far from his Name we can slap that down. I'll pit Night against Light any day, when we've got our lovely goddesses along on the field."

"Aspects, then," Indrani frowned.

"He's not going to blast an entire drow army into oblivion in a storm of Light," I agreed. "I don't care how much miracle wine the Gods make him drink, no one can stomach that kind of power without burning out. So he'll hit us where it hurts, with something he's personally strong in. And back at the Battle of the Camps, when he got all miraculous on us he was using a very specific kind of light."

"We cannot kill him without ending chances of any diplomatic agreement with Levant," Diabolist reminded me.

"No," I agreed. "So that's not what we'll go after. The opposition isn't the only side with miracles, these days, even though ours need to be bought and paid for."

I met the shade's golden eyes.

"Make me a well, Akua Sahelian," I ordered. "I don't care how many Mighty you have to rope in, get it done and *quick*."

Diabolist flicked a glance at the silver of godhood on my shoulder, but found nothing there to fear. She wouldn't, I thought. After all, Andronike's crowing laughter was echoing in the back of my head with no sign of ceasing. She *would* be amused by that, I supposed. There was a degree of irony to my plan being, in essence, the first teaching of the Sisters. I rolled my other shoulder, limbering the muscles in an attempt to distract from the dull of throb of my bad leg. The staff could only help so much.

"All right, that's enough for now," I said. "Let's get moving, I want to cover as much ground as possible before dawn catches us."

If I'm not wrong, we'll be joining General Rumena just in time to kick the hornet's nest."

"That's why good boots are important," Indrani laughed.

I was gladdened her mood had shifted, though I had to wonder how long that'd last.

"Also crushing one's enemies," Akua seriously said, then paused. "For justice, of course."

I rolled my eyes and left them to it, heading back to my horse. I slipped onto the saddle, then waited for the sounds of their bickering to fade as they pulled ahead.

"Andronike," I said. "If I needed you to look south for something..."

"Not until my sister is at my side," the crow said. "Something clouds my sight."

Yet another reason to reunite with the southern expedition as fast as possible, I thought, spurring on Zombie to catch up with the others.

If Cordelia Hasenbach had gone grave-digging, I needed to know what she was digging *for*.

[DroughtBringer](#)

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

[Javvies](#)

I particularly like the opening quote.

As suspected, Hierarch's Aspect he was using on the city is heavily situational.

What if Tyrant's planning on having Hierarch put both Above and Below on trial? Along with Bard and maybe the Dead King.

Gunslinger

Judgement the aspect vs the Choir of Judgement is going to be fascinating.

Also is it me or did Cat jump to the conclusion that Heirarch is mad enough to put the gods on trial too quickly?

HardcoreHeathen

"We are all of us free or we are none of us free," the Hierarch of the League of Free Cities said, voice like steel. "There is no middle ground. And for the lashes struck at our back, all will be called to account – if gallows must be raised for devils and angels alike, so be it."

If he's willing to Judge angels and devils, it's not a big step from them to the Gods.

stevenneiman

There's also the fact that the greatest authority on Above, Below, and the Bard called installing Anaxares a masterstroke that he managed to get past the Bard. But she hardly needs that evidence to figure out that he plans to judge the Gods when he did literally say it almost in so many words.

NerfContessa

Indeed.

The actual Co feontation was all it had promised, and the aftermath might even yet be more....

[Euodiachloris](#)

He makes the Had Hatter look both clean and balanced. He's busy being the centre of a mobile revolutionary Reign of Terror. Plus knowing that Keiros has stuck himself to this disaster on legs like glue *and* has been able to spit in Bard's eye, which means...

Yeah, it's not a leap in the dark.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Mad Hatter, even. Dunno how that typo happened. 😊

werafdsaew

But Below are subject to Bellerophon's laws because they're honorary citizens because they have 1 vote. The same is not true of Above.

[Javvies](#)

Below is, collectively, considered a citizen of Bellerophon (effectively).

The precedent is thus set that even the Gods are subject to and under the jurisdiction of Bellerophon's laws.

All are subject to the laws of Bellerophon, citizen or otherwise.

The Hierarch's judgy Aspect employs Bellerophon's legal practices, not those of where he is physically located.

stevenneiman

Bellerophon has no treaties or diplomatic immunity agreements with the Heavens. The Gods Above are presumably omnipresent. Ergo, they are committing Bellerophan crimes on Bellerophan soil by claiming to be better than others.

beleester

If you're a citizen of Bellerophon, you are subject to their laws and they can put you on trial. If you're not a citizen, you're a Wicked Foreign Despot and an Enemy of the People, so they'll put you on trial anyway.

2xMachina

No, forgo the trial.

As a non Citizen, you are automatically guilty, please proceed directly to the execution.

Do not pass through the court,
Do not collect \$200.

luminiousblu

The key here is equality. NOBODY is higher or lesser than anyone else, titles be damned. Ironically, Hierarch is derived from Hierarchy, which literally means 'ranked system'.

[Euodiachloris](#)

He's a walking set of contradictions wrapped in paradoxes packaged as an enigma... all vaguely steered by a very definite troll.

There're a lot of reasons to treat him like a really horrible reality virus that could lock the entire network down until you cough up the Bitcoin and your grandmothers' maiden names. <_<

Wry Warudo

So Cat wants a well now. Is she going to lose an eye to drink from it?

Andrew Mitchell

I don't understand the well reference. I'm hoping someone can explain it.

Javvies

IIRC, in Norse Mythology Odin gave his eye to the Norns (Norse Fates) in order to drink from the Well of Mimir ... can't remember if I've got the name of the Well right. Gave him knowledge or foresight ...

Then Odin hung himself from Yggdrasil for a while for more knowledge/foresight/power.

I'm a bit fuzzier than I thought I was on my Norse mythology.

caoimhinh

I think it was actually Mimir that demanded Odin to sacrifice something if he wanted to drink from the well, and Odin proceeded to take his own eye and throw it into the well, so Mimir let him drink from it and obtain its wisdom. Later on, Odin is said to have found Mimir beheaded, and took his head to Asgard where he would put it next to the throne and use Necromancy to reanimate it and ask advice occasionally.

Javvies

I thought the Norns were in there somewhere ... might have been something about them guarding the Well ...

At least I was in the neighborhood, but damn, I really am past due to have myself a refresher on Norse mythology.

At any rate, I think it's more likely that Cat will try to toss Pilgrim down the well to contain him, rather than try to drink from it to gain wisdom (or anything else other than just a drink of water).

caoimhinh

They "came out" from (or possibly live in) a hall standing at the Well of Urðr or Well of Fate. That's one of the 3 water bodies at the roots of Yggdrasill, the other 2 are the Well of Mimir and the spring Hvergelmir. So your memory isn't that off.

I don't remember what the lesson about wells the Sister gave Cat was about, she mentioned it being the first, but I can't recall.

sengachi

He hung himself for poetry iirc.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

New headcanon: Odin as an edgy teen.

mavant

He hung himself for knowledge (names, runes, charms), half blinded himself for wisdom (via mimir). The poetry thing was from mead brewed by dwarves from the blood of Kvasir, which he just... Stole. Not a perfect pattern of three, there.

caoimhinh

Hey, I was doing a bit of reading on mythology and folklore; and found that traditionally the Leader of the Wild Hunt is associated with Odin. So Larat's lack of one eye has a bit more meaning, and Cat being Queen of the Hunt adds another Odin reference to the list. Hahaha

stevenneiman

Odin also has a pair of pet ravens named Huginn and Muninn, which travel all over the world and report what's going on to Odin, so the Night's ravens add to the joke.

caoimhinh

Now that we are on Odin's references, Cat had a wolf-like companion in her Name, which was a beast, similar to Odin's wolves Geri and Freki (Greedy and Ravenous), she had an undead winged unicorn from the Fae realm, which is the closest thing in the Guide to Odin's eight-legged horse Sleipnir. Now she is building her own Gungnir (which was Odin's spear) in her staff (which is a sword).

We can always find plenty of references if we stretch things enough XD

stevenneiman

I don't recall anything about a wolf on Cat's end, but she does have two ravens who tell her things.

caoimhinh

As I said, her Name was like a wolf, it was said many times by her. At first it was simply a beast with wolf-like grin, but when she met the first demon her name was shown to be like a wolf made of shadows.

werafdsaew

Maybe it's a well of power instead of a water well?

Someguy

>The night was still young – I knew that better than most – so we'd not wasted moonlight by lingering on the outskirts of the city until she finished.

Cat made a pun. First Under the Night and all that.

d0m1n1c

Not a pun; she was just noting that Night gives her power and knowledge over night.

icouldbeusingmytimebetterJoe

You the real way this series ends is the gnomes come out of nowhere and nuke the whole continent 🤔

haihappen

For which the Hierarch would put them on trial for "Gross Disturbance of Public Peace"

[*Euodiachloris*](#)

Given that they're gnomes, there's a chance that public decency would also get a goosing. Depending on which brand of gnome. 🤔

Skaddix

Seems like a good break point to shift to another character. I get the sneaky feeling that the Gods Below are going to use that 1 vote somehow.

luminiousblu

There's an annoying loophole.

- Time is a creational illusion, according to Warlock; past and future aren't really different.
- One vote is one vote, exactly.
- If you kill literally everyone, you have the only vote.
- Time is an illusion, so you can vote to make murder legal retroactively before you do it.

konstantinvoncarstein

It would be funny to see the betrayer "betrayed" by his own laws.

Anyway, it is more realistic than a mortal succeeding in judging Below. The powers of the Named applied only in Creation, and the Gods are by definition outside of it. I'm not sure if they would just ignore the whole thing, or blast the Hierarch to oblivion.

Decius

The gods are omnipresent, and so exist in creation as well as outside of it.

konstantinvoncarstein

So the Hierarch will be exterminatused:)

Andrew Mitchell

Very interesting discussion of the possible reasons/strategies in play for the Grey Pilgrim keeping Amadaus alive. I wonder if they've considered all the options or if there's another purpose at play.

Any ideas?

Aston Whiteman

Cats bad leg.

[Liliet](#)

They don't know he's antagonizing Cordelia in the process.

Which only makes this more confusing.

caoimhinh

They are making theories while lacking a lot of information, they don't even know Wekesa is dead yet, so I'm guessing the real discussion about what the Pilgrim is planning will have to wait until they meet with Scribe, which will have more information and allow them to paint a bigger picture of the situation.

IDKWhoitis

Anyone else wondering what Black is doing with all this off screen time?

Is he slowly driving Sword Saint insane? Thinking up witty one liners for when Cat/Ranger/Someone rescues him?

caoimhinh

Probably deciding what his new Name will be XD

[Liliet](#)

IKR

I want an interlude from where he is so badly ;u;

Gunslinger

If EE did donation bonuses on his patreon where we could vote for interludes it would be epic

[Liliet](#)

tbh revealing information is important to structure & narrative tension, it's not exactly something to leave up to the readers

[theothin](#)

Well, he's probably racking up head injuries, for one thing.

IDKWhoitis

I figure Grey may have had to separate Saint from Black after the 2nd incident. Although we can speculate that Black can probably still get under the other heroes' skin too.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Amadeus had "winding up the tight clocks" as a superpower even before became Squire. I bet he can get under her skin from ten miles away. XD

[chris S](#)

"Judgement," I said, honing in on what I considered the important kernel. "You think his aspect is bound to the concept. Stronger when he's standing in judgement, or inciting others to do the same."

Without trying to sound smug, I totally nailed it back in chapter 5 with my aspect prediction.

Antoninjohn

Maybe it's a typo and she was meant to say wall not well

MagnaMalusLupus

I doubt it. A wall is useful for defense, but a bunch of Mighty gathered together to create a source of power under a mage skilled in high arcana? That's a well of power alright. The question is what she'll do with it.

Gazing Rabbit

Possible Names for the person formerly known as the Black Knight? I would Name him The Arch-Strategos, or maybe The Black Atch-Strategos.

oliverwashere

Could the ritual that Dread Emperor Malignant iii is referring to be one to transform a man into an island?

Gagar

Oh shit

Didn't found next chapter button. I'm finally caught up.
Great story so far, thanks EE!

[Adrian V](#)

2 things: who else wants black to drop a "when can i see grandkids" joke to cat? An can someone understand the quote or why is there? i mean what hidden meaning or relation to the chapter this has? And what does a ritual have to do with the saying?

[Javvies](#)

"No man is an island" is also a saying used in reference to the human social need to have friends, family, and/or other social connections and interactions.

Bootmoon

It's of my theory that the gods whom created creation may not actually be the gods below and above, and that they too were wrought for it's working. With this assumed my calls for their death, which I have repeatedly from the beginning, now being attemptedly delivered it seems by mr Hierarch, may actually not result in creation ceasing to exist!

Or not, and I'm wrong, and this is the single greatest threat on the board should it even be possible.

I suppose they might, even if they are the true gods, just die and creation keep on spinning (if it in fact spins, I would guess so given it orbits the sun). Hard to say.

One does wonder about if free will in this context was the point or a pretext, given the presented nature of the debate/game, given the god's meddling, and the very notion of entangling all of this in fate driven story contrivance, kind of making it a mildly defunct philosophical exercise in many respects.

And then the question as to if the game is in fact rigged such that Evil always loses, or if it's actually a difference of strategy between above, trying to win every time, and below, biding time and power for only the greatest gambits.

Excited to find out! Or not, either is good.

Chapter 10: Capture

"The key to popular reign is to blame the previous ruler for your every blunder and claim ownership of their every success, while avoiding the opposite. As a sign of my abiding love for you, my son, I have simplified this process by leaving you to inherit only a large amount of blunders."

– Extract from the infamous 'Sensible Testament' of Basilea Chrysanthé of Nicae

We ran into the scouting party about half a bell before noon. Fifteen drow all wrapped up in furs, covering the grounds with admirable speed even though in the light of day they must feel half-blind. We saw them before they saw us, as this was a long way from the Everdark and it was a hard business keeping out of Archer's sight while on open field. I urged Zombie to pull ahead, leaving my Peerage and companions to catch up. I did not call on Night to sharpen my gaze, disinclined to begin exhausting my body when there might very well be trouble ahead. General Rumena was a veteran, though the host it commanded now had little to do with the once-professional armies of the Empire Ever Dark. More importantly, I'd sat on its councils when it tossed duties and responsibilities at sigils like one would toss a bone to a hungry dog. Aside from the weary contempt for the Mighty under its command it did not hide quite well enough, I'd taken note of how it usually disposed its scouts and lookouts.

We weren't close enough to have run into spotters keeping an eye on the back of the southern expedition, and these weren't spread out enough to hold that duty besides. They weren't numerous enough for a full-on scouting party, though, and that was what had me riding hard. Fifteen was plenty enough to have good odds the band wouldn't miss anything moving, and few enough they'd be able to travel fast. No a scouting party, no. But if I had to canvass a fairly broad region for a small group, I'd send one or two dozen of those groups in staggered order to get the job done. General Rumena, it seemed, was looking for us. Hailing the drow confirmed as much. They'd been sent by the Tomb-Maker with the suggestion that my group hurry, since events to our south were unfolding at an even quicker pace than I'd wagered they would. An attempt to infiltrate the camp had been made last night, and prisoners taken.

I bid the scouts – dzulu one and all, by the looks of them, from the Brezlej Sigil – to spread out and recall the other bands, waiting just long enough for the rest of my escort to catch up.

Akua and Indrani were the only ones in my company both curious and willing to ask answers of me. I indulged them willingly enough.

"The hornets are already out of the nest," I told. "Someone tried Rumena's camp. I'll be riding full tilt, I need eyes on this as soon as possible."

"We could gate," Diabolist suggested.

"I'm not lighting up a beacon of our location for everyone looking," I said, shaking my head. "Archer, don't spend your strength too much trying to keep up. If there's trouble I'll want you at the tip of the spear."

She slowly nodded and my gaze moved to Akua.

"My orders for you haven't changed," I said. "It'll have to wait until nightfall, but prepare the necessities."

"It will remove the Mighty of use from the field for days," Diabolist said. "It might be more sensible for me to serve on the field until the situation is less... delicate."

She was useful in a scrap, true enough. I still turned her down without a moment's hesitation.

"Make me a well," I calmly said. "That is your priority, bar none. There's no point in deploying you to wipe out a few companies if a week later we're caught unprepared by heroes and lose a hundred times that number. If you've time on your hands, assemble a schedule for the Mighty who will contribute. Take measurements, give me options. If you've still hours to waste after that, consult with the Sisters. We'll get only one shot at this, Diabolist: if we miss it's going to cost us something fierce."

She didn't argue any further after that. I suspected she rather wanted to, though there was no trace of it on her face, but she knew well enough by now not to push when my heels were fully dug in. Not that she knew why they were dug. I'd shared a lot of my suspicions with my companions, during our journey to catch up to the army, but not all of them. There were some I'd rather keep to myself until I had more information to go on. I rode on after that, straight south as the Brezlej scouts had told me. I kept to a quicker pace than them, on my latest Zombie, though that should be no surprise. I kept to a quicker pace than even riders whose skill made a mockery of mine simply because my horse would never tire. I was willing to damage the corpse a bit, if it got me there faster. It was a little past Afternoon Bell when I found the southern expedition's army. On the way I'd run into another band of scouts, which I sent out with the same duty as the Brezlej, and then three successive screens of lookouts. Rumena

had tightened the watch now that we'd entered troubled waters, I noted with approval.

Andronike had flown away in silence long before I got anywhere near here, and I couldn't feel either her or her sister in the labyrinth of tents. There was a pulse I could barely make out further south, though. It sang to me, cool and comforting like a good night's sleep come autumn. I rode into the camp, noting this late most drow had wakened, and ran my gaze along Rumena's layout. It was a lost cause to get the southern expedition of the Empire Ever Dark to behave anything like a proper legion, with a carefully laid out camp and raised palisades before sundown, but since I'd left my general had forced some form of structure onto the chaos. Sigils raised their tents together, by the looks of it, with the larger ones on the edge of the broad circle the entire lot of them formed and the smaller ones filling that outline. Two clear paths, one facing north and the other south, had been cleared out – though I noted while riding down the northern one that it was hardly straight. Wobbly was a generous assessment, but it was already better than the utter lack of arrangements the drow had kept to until now.

Mighty Brezlej met me in advance, introducing itself as the appointed *islne-ravce*. It meant 'keeper under the glare of the sun', more or less, if I'd understood the emphases correctly. I took that to mean commander of the watch when it was daylight. Broadly muscled, short and a little thick around the waist the Mighty was strikingly unusual for a drow but I had no time to spare on the matter. I was informed that General Rumena was currently at a forward position, preparing a detachment to take the nearby town of Lancevilliers if it proved necessary.

"I was told there was an attempt to enter the camp," I said, staring down from atop my mount.

"That is so, Losara Queen," Mighty Brezlej agreed. "Twelve enemies, nine of which still live. They have been separated and we identified the one we believe to be the leader."

"You've interrogated them?" I asked.

"Though questions were asked, they have refused to answer them," the drow said. "It was spoken under Night that they should not be touched."

Brezlej murmured prayers under its breath after saying the last sentence, under my steady stare. Well, at least Rumena wasn't getting up to the torture of prisoners of war while my back was turned. Still, 'spoken under Night'. That meant one of the Sisters had meddled, which was unusual to say the least. Who'd be important enough for them to speak? Maybe some bold Proceran royal with spirit but little brains to match had decided to gild the family name by taking a look at the foreigners, I mused.

Prince Amadis was a cunning enough intriguer, but the Principate's royal bloodlines tended to be large and many-branched. If a tree bore enough apples, one of them was bound to be inbred enough to try sneaking up on drow at night. I ordered Mighty Brezlej to prepare a full report of the ways the situation had changed in my absence, and to send the Mighty Archer directly to me should she arrive. I would, meanwhile, be having a chat with the officer among our catches of the night.

Drow, sadly, were not used to taking prisoners – it was simply not the way they were used to waging warfare. Night was best harvested from corpses, and when it wasn't the insult was meant to be dealt to a living foe sent back into the wilds as a sign of contempt. That meant they had little experience holding captives, or raising structures to keep them. So far tents had been the makeshift solution, with the isolated prisoners tightly bound inside, but that wouldn't work forever. It was all well and good when we only had a few, but if a few companies laid down their arms we just wouldn't have enough spare tents to keep them. Four Soln dzulu were keeping guard at the corners of the tent where the officer awaited, looking bleary-eyed but attentive, and I met their deep bows with a nod before parting the flap and going in. I froze in surprise. Hanging down from the wooden frame holding up the dome-like tent of leather and linen, a small form was sleeping. I recognized regulation-issue undershirt, the skinny frame it was on and even the cast of the face covered in part by a too-large blindfold. *Robber*, I almost said, but then stopped. The leather and rope bindings were too loose to really keep someone from a race as flexible as his in place. And given goblin hearing, my entrance should have wakened him. So why was he still pretending to be asleep? A torturer wouldn't-

I rubbed the bridge of my nose and forced down a sigh. It was a good thing I hadn't walked further into the tent. Leaning against my staff, I crouched down to take a better look. Robber did not stir, but I felt him tense. Took me a bit, but I found what I was looking for. A thin, dull metal wire covered by snow leading up to a hook cleverly set into a sharper, barely peeking out from a pile of furs. No doubt the other end of the wire, which I couldn't see, was anchored solidly and the wire itself tensed for a hair-trigger. One step on it and the sharper would blow, then he'd pop out of the bindings while the enemy was stunned. Knife to the throat, and off he went to try his hand at a getaway. Drow clearly needed better schooling in looking for hidden armaments, I decided, if they'd missed both a knife and a sharper trap while stripping him. I pushed myself back to my feet, then carefully picked my angle and positioned my staff. With a quick hand I lobbed the sharper through an opening in the tent flap, calling out *scatter* in Crepuscular, and turned even as it blew in the muddy snow outside. I was a little impressed he tried to knife me without even taking off the blindfold or fully slipping the bindings, I'd admit. My Special Tribune had been keeping sharp.

Not sharp enough I didn't catch the wrist under the hand holding a slender blade, though.

"The wire's new," I mused. "Won't shine under light like the old stuff would, and something must have been done to make it more sensitive. Pickler's been busy, I see."

I grinned even as Robber went stiff as a board. I took a moment to yell out at the guards not to come in.

"Boss?" he hissed out.

"I'm not seeing a salute, Special Tribune," I mildly said. "Do you really want to find out what's *below* Lesser Lesser Footrest?"

The knife immediately went over his heart, which was the closest to an actual salute he'd given me in years, and deft green fingers hiked up his blindfold.

"Well I'll be damned," Special Tribune Robber said, large yellow eyes blinking. "It *really* is you. Wait, you could be an impostor. Tell me something only Catherine Foundling would know: what is my official salary as Lesser Footrest?"

"That I don't let Indrani put ribbons in your hair, you adorable little princess," I drawled.

"I don't even *have* hair," he complained. "And you know she'd glue on really coarse stuff just to spite me."

For all that he was leaning into the exchange, I did not miss the way his eyes flicked towards my bad leg and then towards my chest. Since I was pretty sure he wasn't looking at my tits – not that there'd been much to look at – that meant he was checking if I breathed.

"Leg's back," I agreeably told him. "So's the more-than-decorative breathing."

"There's actual colour to your cheeks, Boss," Robber bluntly said. "Like being out in the cold did something."

"That's a long story," I said.

"Did you murder another demigod?" he mused. "Does doing that twice, like, cancel it out?"

"Oh, stop hanging like a bloody gargoyle and put that knife away," I sighed.

My eyes narrowed as I remembered Mighty Brezlej's full summary of how he'd ended up here, though. I waited until he'd deftly landed in the snow and taken off the blindfold before pressing the subject.

"You tried to infiltrate the camp with just a tenth," I stated.

His mouth parted to reveal a short flash of hungry, needle-like teeth.

"That what the greyskins told you?" he said. "We only tried the outer perimeter, not the camp. Then it was all sorcery everywhere, and Sergeant Slicker's flesh melted off his bones. Another two of my crew reached for blades and they had holes in the head before they could draw."

I grimaced.

"Gods, Robber, what took you to even try?" I said. "Hakram and Vivienne knew where I was headed – it should have been envoys sent, not scouts."

"We didn't even know it was the drow," Robber admitted. "Just an army and not a small one. And there's been, uh, instructions from up top even if we run into the greys."

"Instructions," I repeated blandly.

He grimaced.

"We couldn't know if you were still alive, Boss," he said. "And if you were, that it'd be you in charge. And even if you looked in charge, that it was really *you*."

He paused, then squinted at me.

"You *are* in charge, yeah?" he asked.

"Some," I said. "It's an alliance with limits to it. But I've got the ear of the people running the show, you might say."

"Thank the fucking Gods," Robber muttered. "That you're back more than for the greys, I mean. This campaign is turning into a bastard mess, Boss. It'll be good to have your hand holding the reins again."

"Then you'll have answers," I flatly said. "About what Juniper's doing campaignin here in the first place. I distinctly remember leaving my army on the *other* side of the Whitecaps."

His lips quirked, sharp and mean.

"Well, Lady-Regent Dartwick got invited by our good friend the Prince of Iserre to 'clear out bandits and foreign agents from his lands', y'see," Robber told me.

My brow rose. I honestly couldn't imagine Vivienne willing to risk the Army of Callow at the say so of a Proceran prince, which likely meant Prince Amadis' arm had been twisted until he gave

said invitation. Might not be Thief's notion at all, I decided. Hakram? What would he think we could gain from intervening here?

"What are we using Amadis as a pretence for?" I bluntly asked.

"Taking out the Carrion's Lord legions from here with a semblance of clean, the way I hear it," my Special Tribune said. "They were on the edge of a wipe, and no one wanted that. Plan was to prop him Amadis as a banner to force Procer to give us room, pop in, pick up Ol' One-Eye and his people then then pop out."

"By fairy gate," I slowly said.

Which meant either Masego was back, with a titled fae bound, or the Wild Hunt had not been freed of its oaths when Winter ended up in the Night's belly. That was a relief, to be frank. I was bound by oath to Larat aside from the Hunt's own terms – seven crowns and one, still to be delivered – but I'd not been sure that would be enough. The sooner I could have a good look at the fae the better.

"Yeah, the Hunt's been all darling since you sent them back," Robber said. "Which is suspicious as all Hells, if you ask me, but apparently putting that to verse and having a choir sing it to Marshal Juniper is 'reprehensible' and 'a flagrant breach of regulations'. I mean, it was only the middle of the night."

I smothered the smile, though not quite quickly enough for him to miss it. The humour waned, though, when I remembered what we were speaking about.

"But you're still here," I said, stating the obvious. "What happened?"

"We gated in just fine," the goblin said. "Ran into a League force two days in, but after they missed taking the Hellhound's head they mostly kept their distance. Made contact with Marshal Grem when the scrying block shut down for a bit-"

"The scrying block," I said. "Wait, more important – you can still scry sometimes?"

"It's like rolling dice," Robber said. "Kilian says the block is something massive already using the sky, but once in a while it looks elsewhere – then there's a short window where we can use the old rituals. And I do mean the old ones, Boss. Dunno if you noticed, but the Observatory went the way of an orc with the key to a liquor shop. No one can get it do to anything, and when we left Callow the pools were starting to evaporate."

I clenched my fingers. Shit. Someone had definitely targeted us, then. If it were just Iserre being screwed with I could put that to a ritual or miracle we ended stumbling into, but the

Observatory wouldn't get in that bad a way if someone hadn't aimed for it. And just like that, Kairos was back in the running for the prick most likely to be responsible. It seemed very much like his kind of play – he might have planned the ritual in Iserre first, then gone after the Observatory because it'd allow my forces to bypass it. If there was anyone who wanted everyone in this principality blind, right now, it was the Tyrant of Helike.

"Marshal Grem," I said, setting that trail of thought aside for now. "He's also still in Iserre?"

"We tried to pull him out," the goblin told me. "The Levantines were starting to catch up when we arrived, too close to risk it, so the Hellhound had us gate in between their armies to force them to retreat. And it worked fine – the Legions gained a few days of lead while the Dominion got really angry at us being there. But then we tried to gate out, and on the other side was a godsdamned sea of boiling pitch."

My fingers tightened around my staff.

"That doesn't sound like Arcadia," I said.

"Best we can tell, it was one of the Hells," Robber snorted. "No one went in to check, you know, on account of the *sea of boiling pitch*."

"And it's all been leading there since?" I asked.

"Worse," the goblin said. "It changes. Mostly Hells, so far, but once in a blue moon we get Arcadia again – not that we can travel it, since no one's sure we'd be able to leave after entering. Hakram ordered an end to the attempts after we almost let out a horde of devils into the camp."

"What has Masego said?" I frowned.

"*Shit*," Robber said, eyeing me warily. "You haven't heard."

My stomach dropped.

"Tell me," I ordered.

"The Lord Warlock blew up Thalassina sky high trying to hold it against Ashur, himself included," the goblin told me. "Place is a graveyard, even those that fled got some sort of magic sickness and cacked it."

"Masego?" I softly asked.

"Word from Praes is the warlock's get made it out," Robber said.

I let out a shaky breath. Thank whatever Gods were listening for that.

"Empress had people looking for him, anyway," he continued. "No one knows where he is though. I know Deadhand and the general staff kept something about him under seal just before we gated for Procer, but I haven't managed to ferret it out yet."

"We'll find him," I grimly said.

His fathers were dead and he'd likely fled through the Wasteland alone with Malicia's agents hounding him every step of the way. He must be a wreck of grief and exhaustion, I thought. I didn't like this talk of magic sickness at all, either, considering he must not have been far from Thalassina when this all happened. I reluctantly forced myself to focus on more immediate concerns. There was little I could do for him right now, much as I hated to admit it.

"Juniper's stuck between the Levantine armies, then," I said. "Is she close? For that matter, is Marshal Grem backing her?"

Robber's wide eyes thinned with sudden alarm.

"I never reported back," he said. "Boss, we have a problem. If Nauk still thinks your greys are a Proceran army, then he won't leave his dug-in positions. Which means you're about to lose a quarter of the Army of Callow."

Well, I darkly thought, it *had* been that kind of a week so far. Why stop now?

[DroughtBringer](#)

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Skaddix

So Cat finally finds about Masego.

And the Observatory did get targeted. Callow cannot gate. Meanwhile Scrying blocker has gone up. Wonder who is causing all that seems beyond what the Tyrant and Heirarch should have access and the Dead King is not exactly close by.

[Liliet](#)

Observatory might just be in tune enough with Masego and/or Winter to get metaphysical blowback from shit going down.

Jeffery Wells

Akua stated just after the Winter/Night merging that due to the way Winter has been used in the Observatory the transition should not have significantly affected it.

My understanding based on what Masego said while scrying in Thalassina is that Winter simply makes a better material for scrying, not that it supplies any power or other function. If so, the new Night should not be any different, and may even be better.

pagesbe

So in summary: It's a SNAFU.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Give it five. It could hit FUBAR.

[Javvies](#)

When it rains it pours.

I feel like Kairos is full of hax and bullshit, and he's pulling stuff off that shouldn't be remotely viable.

Skaddix

Yeah this all seems a bit beyond Kairos abilities. I mean taking out the Observatory with Masego gone sure. But a massive scrying block and shunting Gates to the Hells instead of Arcadia. That seems a bit beyond his wheelhouse unless he went out and recruited some new talent. Kairos ain't a spellcaster himself as far as we know and all this seems to require great expertise beyond just spamming his Aspect Wish which otherwise doesn't seem to have any limits at all.

[Javvies](#)

Spamming/abusing an Aspect like that is supposed to/should have side effects.

The only thing I can maybe thing of is that he might be using a combination of Aspect-spam and wildly abusing the concept of "first step always works" – and the latter has to have some limits applicable to it, otherwise somebody could have a step one be something like "exterminate the population, normal, Named and other, of Calernia" or "exterminate the dwarves" or "conquer the gnomes" and automatically succeed because it's their step one and step one always works.

Quin

It needs a good on the narrative and if you run into heroes your narrative gets replaced with their narrative. It's a tricky game to play, but if you know how to BS then you'd be surprised at what can be done... Like getting a bunch of people to somehow build and navigate a drill to attack a city from underneath or butchering countless virgins to have a hero slay a monster.

The art of BS is not an art one takes lightly or uses foolishly young soul.

konstantinvoncarstein

I doubt that even Warlock or Hierophant could do something like that.

Taichi22

Kairos is the kind of villain that pays off his debts later, not now.

It's quite possible he's doing all of this, and just telling the Gods Below to put it onto his tab. His credit is certainly good enough.

[Miles](#)

I'm pretty sure it was Cat. Night absorbed some of winter and the hell that night is tied to absorbed the part of Arcadia that Cat's slice of winter was tied to.

Similarly the water in the observatory was conjured from Arcadia

The scrying is probably one of Masego's Anti-proceran-scrying measures malfunctioning because of the observatory being messed up.

werafdsaew

I don't think it's him, because if it is there should be some foreshadowing about it.

IDKWhoitis

You don't think Robber is Robber or you don't think Kairos is responsible?

werafdsaew

I don't think Kairos is responsible. Assuming whatever responsible for taking scrying out of commission has been

properly foreshadowed before, then the only thing that fits is the Angel Cordelia's dredging up

Decius

I think that both the Dead King and the Empress have enough established resources that they could interfere with static strategic elements of Callow with non-precise timing.

If it was a tactical assault gate that was diverted, or if scrying worked right up until the moment when it was really critical, that would require specific foreshadowing; but a general attack against a known strategic advantage doesn't need to be introduced before it happens.

caoimhinh

Well, Kairos has been pulling off stuff that shouldn't be feasible for him since the very beginning. Rituals of High Arcana, hacking Wekesa's scrying connection with Masego, making Anaxares Hierarch by force, feeling Hierarch's Aspect vision on him, having knowledge about stories matching that of the Bard, building great machines fueled by sorcery, etc. If the Tyrant had some assistant that's also a Named sorcerer like Warlock, that would make sense, but all being on account of the resources of Helike and his cunning, does not justify the things he has done so far.

That said, scrying over the entire sky to the point of blocking all other scrying and hacking the fae gates must be beyond him.

My guess is that it's the Dead King's doing. Despite the distance, Neshamah is one of the greatest sorcerers of all time and also has an army of undead Named both from Good and Evil and from all races which could assist him in any ritual he might perform, so he can pull off massive and absurd things like this.

[Liliet](#)

The gates to Arcadia most definitely suffered blowback from the Night/Winter merging.

Observatory likely got taken out either by that or by Masego's meltdown. Or both: one weakened, the other finished off.

The scrying though? That, yeah, is probably either Kairos or Cordy.

...or the heroes deciding to join in on fucking up everyone's day
u\((-_-)\u

[Fayhem](#)

> The gates to Arcadia most definitely suffered blowback from the Night/Winter merging.

I mean, it's been established that the Wild Hunt can only open gates when Larat is leading them. Let's not rule out treacherous lieutenant getting his treachery on just yet.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think he could have opened gates to Hell previously 0.- or this would be a more known fae ability

[Euodiachloris](#)

That touch might be a certain lich king with a kind of sense of humour and way too much transdimensional knowledge in his little toe. Who had plenty of time to view (and meddle with) active fae linkages at work in front of him. *shrugs*

[Fayhem](#)

I mean we've never really gotten a breakdown of what all the known fae abilities are, but you're right that it would minimum be new information. Let's be honest though, it would be exactly like Larat to have a major ability that he could have used all along that he just never mentioned because nobody asked. Or heck, it could be a combo; the merger with Night changed what the fae bound to (previously bound to?) Cat could do, and Larat's capitalizing on that for good ol' fashioned treacherizing. Time will tell I imagine.

[Liliet](#)

True!

danh3107

Yay Robber's back, yaaaaaaaaaaaaay the whole crew is coming back!

Someguy

Then it turned out Ratface faked his death to ferret out the Eyes and other hostile agents in order to preserve the Callowan Economy from sabotage.

Big Brother

Man, I'm glad to see the little shit that is Robber. Nauk coming back soon is even better.

Darkening

Nauk's a little creepy these days. Good to see Robber though.

Helirous

"block is something massive already using the sky, but once in a while it looks elsewhere "

pretty sure this is not kairos. by bet is on a angel of judgment or something else heavenly. i don't think anything else has this kind of presence and would be summoned at this point of time here

caoimhinh

Could be an Angel, since we know that there are at least 2 Choirs involved (Judgement with Hanno and Mercy with Pilgrim), the other option would be the Dead King, since Neshamah is a great sorcerer on his own and has many undead Named under his command that could be used for massive rituals.

The other option (albeit unlikely) would be Masego somehow screwing with the scrying due to his trance after witnessing a sliver of Divinity summoned by the priests and Wekesa's temporal apotheosis in Thalassina. He might be performing some ritual in order to get a read on the Gods or something along those lines.

Decius

Sounds like Creation has an audience. And sometimes it cuts to commercial.

Sylwoos

I would bet on Masego, he could be remotely using the observatory to extend his conscientiousness and disrupt everything in the process.

antoninjohn

Heroes interference behapse

IDKWhoitis

I know the Tyrant is always a possibility, but I like to blame old bastards, I think its Bard. She's pulling some meta story which forces Cat to get too busy to properly intervene.

This may be a delaying action more than anything, and she is likely using manipulation to get the Pilgrim to help out in this somehow. Or Cordelia has all the priests putting up anti-magic fields fearing that Callow's new army is here to kill her. Or the Old Witch of the Forest is blocking stuff.

Regardless of method, I think the intention to screw with Callow's movements, and by proxy Cat's. is the Bard's. Man, I can't wait until Cat fulfills her promise to knife the physical manifestation of Fate.

[benthelynx](#)

I'm leaning to the dead king myself.

IDKWhoitis

He seems awfully busy though, does he really have time to screw with Catherine?

Also, since he is more magically advanced, and can intercept (and potentially do worse) messages, the scrying block doesn't seem to make much strategic sense. Especially since Legions and Callow in Procer center will really screw with defenses he plans on overrunning anyways.

Although, if Dead King had a way to parachute corpses, or otherwise cause necromancy fuckery in Salia, he could want the backline to be clear of forces...

[benthelynx](#)

It may well not be aimed at Cat at all – there are a number of his enemies in that broad area

IDKWhoitis

There's no way this magic is cheap, especially over a large area at this intensity. I suspect there is a specific target.

Valkyria

Anyone speculating it's Masego who set up that block?

If it's unrelated to the observatory being out of commission of course.

Witnessing a real god and stuff has got to do something to his powers... Maybe he does not realize he's hindering his friends too... or does not care (probably being in an emotional crisis and all). Maybe he singled out someone he thinks is specifically to blame... so he's out for revenge or just generally creating havoc. How could he do that better than in this boiling pot of armies currently running around?

I'm not saying he would go against Cat and their allies, but maybe he thinks of the block as a minor inconvenience...

caoimhinh

Hmm, what if he is trying to scry on the Gods? Like, he witnessed both the descent of divinity and the ascension of his

father to godhood for a moment, so Masego might be performing some ritual to get a read on them, which would explain the messed up state of the Observatory since the one with ultimate control of it is Hierophant.

It could also be that something is staring back at whatever Masego is doing. these hypotheses are interesting but my own guess is that it's Neshamah messing with them.

Valkyria

Yes it's most likely that he's responsible for all of that. But since most comments were either discussing him or maybe the tyrant as the culprit, I wanted to point out the wildcard Masego currently is.

Neshamah is more likely of course, since he's old, powerful and we have only the barest ideas of what he's actually capable of.

Also it would make more sense for him, whatever his agenda might be, since Masego never really had an established goal so far. Well except for studying and experimenting with magic.

That might have changed since the recent events though. Even if he's not responsible for the scry block and messing up the gates, that is something to keep in mind. If something changes your view of the world it's witnessing an actual god and ascension.

someguy

his father's ascension ? Wut !!????

Warlock was vaporized and Tikoloshe was dispersed back to hell.

caoimhinh

I don't mean that Wekesa is alive and currently a god. He is dead, yes, but Wekesa's became a god for a moment before his death and used that power for the last strike, which is why the entire fleet was vaporized and the city of Thalassina was destroyed beyond repair.

Remember:

[He reached out for it then, what they'd shown him. The barest glimpse of the godhead, but oh so gloriously full.

"Reflect," he whispered.

For a moment, for an eternity, Wekesa was unto a god.

He snapped his fingers and the world broke.]

From Interlude: Inheritance

muffin

"I never reported back," he said. "Boss, we have a problem. If Nauk still thinks your greys are a Proceran army, then he won't leave his dug-in positions. Which means you're about to lose a quarter of the Army of Callow."

Lose them to what?

Valkyria

„Juniper's stuck between the Levantine armies, then."

Well...probably to a pincer attack of those.

Akim

Thanks for the obvious Fan Service. I missed the little bundle of wickedness.

I also think that the Fairy Gate messup has to do with Warlocks dead since one of his aspects was to overlay something with a matching hell.

Or it is Masego Gate-Scrying all hells to find Tisholoke for which he sucked the Observatorium dry

Andrew Mitchell

"Or it is Masego Gate-Scrying all hells to find Tisholoke for which he sucked the Observatorium dry"

I very much like this idea!

[Liliet](#)

Masego knows better than that. I doubt he would be *left unaware* that 'Loshe died and didn't just flee.

Andrew Mitchell

Oh yes, Masego knows for sure Tokoloshe is dead. And he knows that he will respawn in hell without his binding and memories too. Maybe, just maybe, Masego has some ideas about finding Tokoloshe and restoring his binding and memories.

someguy

Maybe the cataclysm left an echo of Warlock and Tikoloshe in Arcadia.

Digitize27

Quote seemed very similar to the one about "I give you the greatest gift I can give to a new ruler: a universally reviled predecessor." Which was also a Nicae quote from the same source.

Vagrant

After reading through some of the comments I got this idea.

Scrying is impossible "cause something big is already in the air".

The wild hunt gates somehow all lead to hells instead of back to arcadia -> callow.

Maybe the evil equivalent of a choir at play here?

Could rationalize this idea with the symmetrical escalation Good&Evil seem to do a lot. And Cordelia was doing something with an angel corpse, right?

[Liliet](#)

Evil equivalents of angels are devils, as unorganized as they are. It's not a perfect symmetry bc the sides are very different.

Vagrant

Hm, maybe though, they gated in before the merge of winter&night and the gates now simply don't connect to arcadia anymore. If Cat, akua and or masego learn to choose the hell, they will be able to attack on the hidden horrors flank! For justice and friendship!

Quite possibly a cat

Something using the sky that looks elsewhere sometimes? Not sure what that could be. Maybe Bard? She would certainly want to keep an eye on the Tyrant. Although that would indicate a new level of blatantly interfering for Bard.

On an unrelated note, isn't there an Absence Demon wandering around? I don't think that's the scrying block, but it could have damaged something important for the Observatory.

The Tyrant might have blasted the Observatory too.

What could be screwing with the Arcadia gates though?

[Liliet](#)

The absence demon most definitely got killed by heroes under Grey and Saint's command during the Northern Crusade campaign.

Berder

It hadn't occurred to me until now, but Masego has been through a magical cataclysm, and didn't he still have some little bit of demonic essence contained in his arm? Wonder if he's been corrupted, or if that might even be the "magical sickness" killing Thalassinians.

[Javvies](#)

Masego used the Corruption Demon essence/ichor at Second Liesse, against the demons called up by the defenders and their summoners/controllers in the outer defenses.

That should have used all of it, and if his countermeasures against it had failed while he still had it, exposure and the subsequent symptoms likely would not have been subtle enough to hide, certainly not for the years it's been since then.

soma

No one going to mention that vivi became Cat's Callowan Chancellor? Lady-Regent in caps?

Andrew Mitchell

I think it's probably a title (like First Prince) rather than a name (like Black Knight)... But I hope I'm wrong.

Viv transitioning to a new name would be quite an exciting development and a good thing for Callow.

[benthelynx](#)

A chancellor name though? Those don't tend to be good for almost anyone involved

Andrew Mitchell

No, almost certainly not IM0. Callow is not Praes

[benthelynx](#)

Even so, the names draw from stories (both stories in our world and theirs) and there aren't many on either side that would work with that narrative. Callow also knows many of the praes stories.

someguy

Now I'm hoping Robber joins Night's budding religion to increase his longevity.

Chapter 11: Forced March

"A hundred battles, even victories, will always lose you the war."

– Theodosius the Unconquered, Tyrant of Helike

When I'd been told that General Rumena was at a forward position, in my mind's eye I'd envisioned a Legion outpost: neat palisade with a dry moat in front, raised tower to serve as a better vantage point. Stone for everything instead, if it was meant to be a long-term outpost and funds allowed. I should have known better, by now, to expect more than a pack of tents and heavy screens of scouts.

"Your people are sloppy, Boss," Robber said. "Nettles me a bit they caught my boys at all."

The tone had been casual and the words mild, which was a telltale sign he was considering knifing a few drow to even scales the goblin way – which was to say, inflicting twice as many wounds as you'd received and then rubbing dirt in to make sure infection took. I might have taken it as face value, the posturing and the easy cutting lines, if I hadn't seen him raw after losing people right before the beginning of the Battle of Three Hills. For all that Robber liked to put himself up as a goblin's goblin, much like me he'd never quite learned how to make losses stop bruising. Juniper had always disapproved of that. Soldiers died, and it should not be taken lightly or misused but that was the nature of being a soldier. She'd always had the knack for keeping it distant. There were some people who had that in them, I supposed – Hakram did, and once upon a time Ratface had as well. Akua acted as if she belonged among those, but sometimes I did wonder. *Is that who you are, or what you trained yourself to be?* I didn't turn around to look at him where he sat side-saddle on my horse, all bunched up behind me, but I pitched my voice to be well understood.

"I'm not happy some of ours got killed, Robber," I said. "But there will be none of that. Like it or not, you came in quiet and ran into a watch that acted exactly as a watch should."

"They don't see so well in the day, though," the goblin mildly said.

"About as well as humans," I said, then dipped my tone towards a warning. "And I could warn you they've got entities behind them the sun doesn't blind but I won't have to, will I? Because I gave you an *order*."

His teeth clicked softly as his mouth shut. He wasn't happy about this – neither was I, even though I knew the fault did not lie on the side of the drow – but he knew better than to push.

Legionaries baring blades on drow was the very last thing I needed right now. As Special Tribune, the goblin had the standing to sit in on most war councils: he knew better than most how precarious the situation was for the Army of Callow right now. Juniper had done well, in all fairness. Being stuck between two hostile armies that together made up near the double of your forces was no easy mess to squeak out of, if the enemy generals weren't fools. And they were not, in this case. But her carefully laid plans had failed to account for one of the madmen on the stage, and now a crippling blow was coming. If we didn't move fast enough to prevent it, anyway, which was the opposite of my intention. We'd get there in time even if I had to march the drow until they collapsed. I had absolutely no intention of losing ten thousand legionaries and the general that was the finest vanguard in Callow bar none.

There'd been a time where I would have been more effusive in describing Nauk, but the man under assault to the south wasn't the same one I'd shared meals and fires with. If anything, the occasional similarities made the whole situation more disturbing – they put in relief everything that had changed when the Warlock had 'healed' him. *I might not have to stay this way*, I thought. Hope was always dangerous, but the thought refused to leave me. Warlock, for all his power and learning, had been a mage. Healing was an academic matter to them, a thing of physicality and measured energies. Most of what Summer's fire had taken from Nauk was not anything the Sovereign of the Red Skies could bring back. I was no mage, and the more I learned the more I realized the endless depths of what I did not know. But these days I had goddesses at my back, and miracles in my hands. What sorcery had failed to return might not be beyond the reach of the Night. Winter had been match for Summer, hadn't it? And Winter had been consumed. But hope was dangerous, and so I had kept my own council.

I rode into the camp at a brisk pace, having barely slowed from the gallop that brought me there, and ignored Robber's malicious cackle at the splashes of muddy snow that drenched warriors too slow in getting out of my way. There was no missing where General Rumena itself would be: at the heart of the camp, within a tall pavilion, twin heartbeats of power whispered to me. The Sisters had known of my coming for some time, though conversation was difficult if we strayed too far from each other. They should have felt the urgency of my purpose, though, and Komena at least had served as a high-ranking officer many years ago. Between her and Rumena, I was not beyond hope that the six sigils whose banners I'd spied had prepared for immediate advance upon my arrival. I reined in Zombie with a thought when we arrived in front of the pavilion, sending a shiver of Night down my bad leg to make

leaping down into the snow tolerable. It would ache later, I knew, but what patience I had left was better spent on other matters. Special Tribune Robber followed suit in his freshly-cleaned leathers and mail, shortsword at his side and crossbow at his back. The sapper's bag hanging off his other side was still full, the drow not having bothered to paw at the munitions after making sure there were no maps or papers.

The goblin swaggered at my side as I entered the tent, baring his needle-like teeth at every warrior eyeing him. Well, he wasn't one of the candidates I'd had in mind when I'd considered how to establish friendly ties between Callowan forces and the southern expedition. Maybe I should even consider this a good thing, I mused. The sooner the drow learned that trifling with goblins tended to end up in bear traps and mocking laughter the better, and who could get that point across faster than Robber? The war council awaiting me inside had few familiar faces aside from Rumena's, as it turned out. Mighty Jindrich was the only one I knew even remotely – he'd apparently survived the mess in Great Strycht largely on account of being too angry to die – though names were hardly impossible to know considering their sigils spelled them out. Room had been left at the low table of obsidian and granite for me to join them down on the carpet, but instead of moving to do so I cast a look around. In the shadows of the upper pavilion I caught sight of a pair of crows. Their dark eyes rested on me, but they did not speak either in thoughts or words. The Sisters, it seemed, were currently disinclined to meddle. From the corner of my eye I caught Robber looking exactly where I was, though from the way his gaze swept over the goddesses without slowing I suspected he'd not been allowed to glimpse anything.

"General Rumena," I greeted, leaning on my staff. "Many Mighty. At my side stands Special Tribune Robber, an officer in my service. He will be seated with us for this conversation."

A few of the Mighty seemed displeased, but they stowed that away when my stare moved towards them. There was a reluctant bit of shuffling about until room for two was made. The sole goblin present's amused smirk was a nearly physical thing. He might not speak Crepuscular, but he knew how to read a room.

"Losara Queen, First Under the Night," General Rumena pleasantly greeted me in Crepuscular. "And... company. Please, claim seat at this table."

"Our nice drow friends invited you to sit, Robber," I translated in a mild tone. "And you're going to be nice to them in return, aren't you?"

"I will offer them every diplomatic courtesy you've taught me, Boss," he smoothly agreed.

Well, there had to be at least one or two of those. Right? Not willing to take the plunge of thinking too deep about that, I sat myself down at the table and silently declined an offer of *rodleva*. While a few of the drow were sipping at polished cups of the brownish, warm mixture I'd never taken to it. That it involved butter made from the milk of a creature that looked cousin to a lizard would have put me off even if the liquid didn't smell like cheese sent to the gallows and left for a week under the sun. Given the finer nose of goblins, no doubt Robber was taking it as torture.

"I won't waste time on idle talk, given the situation," I said. "I've had a fresh report from the Special Tribune including the location of an army in my service that it less than a day's march from here. I assume our scouts have already found it?"

Rumena inclined its head.

"That and more," it replied. "There is a force of horse-riders in the area that has been hunting our warriors."

I frowned. If the Dominion already had cavalry this far behind Nauk's back, his situation was worse than I'd been given to understand.

"Levantines?" I said.

"They do not bear the sigils as drawn by the Mighty Shade," Rumena said.

Akua had used charcoal and skins to draw everything she remembered of Levantine heraldry, which was largely the great bloodlines but still much better than the previous nothing we'd had. I flicked at a glance at Robber, who was currently engaged in a staring contest with a very pleased Mighty Jindrich.

"Special Tribune," I said. "When you left, did the Dominion have cavalry at the army's back?"

The goblin let out a whistling breath.

"No," he said. "But it might not be them, Your Majestic Terribleness. The riders, did they have bows?"

I almost translated for Rumena, until I remembered it spoke Lower Miezan just fine. It nodded when I met its eyes.

"Helike cataphracts," I said. "*Shit.*"

I'd had a conversation with Juniper, once, about which Calernian cavalry was the finest. It'd been the knights of Callow in my eyes, of course, and the Hellhound had conceded that on open field and charging that was the case. She'd noted, though, that there was one other mounted force on the continent that would be

able to take my countrymen apart. Helikean *kataphractoi* were more lightly armoured, as a rule, and unlike Callowan horse rarely used lances. They were, however, exceedingly well-trained in the use of curved bows meant to be used while mounted. There'd been no war between the League and Callow that would see the two forces conflict, and Helike as a city-state certainly couldn't afford to field as many cataphracts as there'd been knights in the heyday of Callowan chivalric orders. But with matched numbers, Juniper had been of the opinion that given room to manoeuvre the Helikean horsemen would be able to slowly whittle away at Callowan heavy horse while taking minimal losses. And considering no other army on Calernia fielded mounted archers, there was no mistaking these for anyone else no matter the banner.

"Let me guess," I sighed. "Less than four thousand overall, no infantry with them?"

"That is so," General Rumena agreed.

Well, there was the rest of the Tyrant's army. I'd suspected it wasn't the full muster back in Rochelant, but I'd expected what remained to stay with the the League's armies. Silly me, not anticipating Kairos would send his city's entire cavalry contingent to stir up the pot as much as physically possible.

"All the more reason to link up with General Nauk's forces," I finally said. "If we want to drive them off on foot, we'll need Callowan crossbow companies."

Come night, it was true, a few packs of Mighty could probably tear through the Tyrant's horsemen. But then somehow I doubted they'd risk that. They'd raid during the day, harass the expedition and retreat before a counterattack could be mounted. The drow didn't have proper companies, after all, they had tribes. Some of those had archers and javelinmen, but getting a cohesive volley fired at the cataphracts would take too long – unless we took all the archers out of their sigils and made companies of them, which would be difficult. Not even a year ago most of these people had been at each other's throats, and they weren't used to taking commands from anyone but their own Mighty. Who'd be quite infuriated at having their warriors taken from their command, besides. I could see it done, of course. I had the Sisters at my back and General Rumena commanded respect from all but the most stubborn. But they weren't trained to fight this way, and I was wary of eroding my goddess-given authority by using it too much. It was one thing to follow a high priestess to war against the contemptible surface peoples after the enterprise was blessed by the Night itself, another to remain all nice and supportive when said high priestess started chipping away at your subordinates. Proof, I supposed, that not even open divine favour was enough to get me out of fucking politics.

I needed the Mighty supportive, if I was to get steer this war to the right kind of ending.

"How soon can we set out?" I asked.

"Seven *pridnis*," Genera Rumena replied without missing a beat. "Though we number only six thousand, Losara Queen. Fighting under pale light will carry risks."

About two hours, I thought. We still had most of the afternoon until the sun set, but we wouldn't get there today so that wasn't what he meant. Our destination was past the town of Lancevilliers to the south. Even accounting for the second wind the drow would get after nightfall, the lethargy coming with dawn meant we wouldn't be able to both arrive at Nauk's position in Sarcella and be in fighting fit before at least Noon Bell. Unless I used a gate, which would get us there in hours but also light up the destination for anyone looking. I wasn't ready for the Saint and the Pilgrim quite yet – if I drew them to that battle, I might just end up losing more than just the ten thousand under Nauk.

"We'll have to regardless," I said. "I ordered Mighty Breznej to send reinforcements our way before leaving, but we can't afford to wait for them. Send back runner with an order to catch up as fast as they can, with a warning about the Helikeans."

In a silent flutter the crows landed on my shoulders, and there was no further talk after that. Open divine favour, I mused, did have its perks.

—

We got to Lancevilliers before nightfall, not that it made much of a difference. The town was half-empty and there was no one in there remotely inclined to get in the way of an army. I would have preferred to avoid Proceran eyes entirely, but even a snowed-in road made for a quicker march than the countryside. I left behind a hundred drow led by Mighty Sudone to – *gently*, I made very clear – interrogate the locals for anything they might now. The southern expedition itself had standing orders not to lay a hand on anyone but soldiers unless they were attacked, and to refrain from looting. The first one had been a hard sell, though the second surprisingly not. The Firstborn were amusingly skeptical that anything of human make could ever rival the works of their own kind, and centuries of barter economy meant they put little stock in silver and gold. Furniture and furs turned out to be the main temptations: both wood and furred creatures were a rarity underground. I'd leaned on Rumena to allow for supply requests to be lodged with the Mighty when it came to furs, given the weather, but for the furniture I had no sympathy. We weren't going to start dragging around nice Alamans *bureaux* anytime soon, no matter how nice they looked in tents. I'd also laid down a rule against rape, though that'd mostly been a formality. Drow

hardly even slept with their own kind, sexual interest in humans was nonexistent.

Ivah had once informed me that its kind considered the most visible characteristics associated with men and women – beards, breasts – to be somewhat vulgar. It had said that in a tone implying it was paying me a compliment, which when I'd grasped why had achieved something of the opposite effect. Sadly, Archer had yet to tire of talking about it.

Our pace significantly quickened after dusk, even dzulu moving at a pace Robber found impressive. Well he'd compared them to goblins, anyway, which in his eyes probably counted as a compliment. Not many non-goblins would agree, I suspected. Mighty Sudone and its hundred caught up a few hours in, bearing wild rumours but nothing of any real use. I used our time to brief General Rumena and its cadre of sigil-holders on the military happenings of the last few months in Iserre as related to me by Robber. How the Army of Callow had ended up stuck between two hosts of forty thousand Levantines I covered only the broad strokes of, focusing on their current inability to gate out. What had followed was, in essence, my marshal trying to pull the wool over the eyes of the enemy commanders and partially succeeding. The Dominion had moved to crush Juniper, the army to the north throwing a delaying force in the way of Grem's legions before sending the rest of its number after her own forty thousand legionaries. The southern Levantines had not bothered with such subtlety, marching in full battle array towards the Army of Callow. The idea was, by the looks of it, to end the Callowan army before turning against the other forces in the principality: Grem and the League. The Hellhound wasn't that easy to end, though. She'd decisively marched south and forced a minor battle against the lower Levantine army before she could be stuck in a pincer.

Reluctant to risk an all-out battle before the northern reinforcement arrived and their numbers grew overwhelming, the southern Levantines had given ground after the day's battle. My soldiers did have something of a reputation, when it came to facing rough odds – and the Levantines had not boasted that. Juniper had then split the Army of Callow into four columns of ten thousand and fled under cover of night. Two columns had gone eastwards, to slip around the northern Levantines, while the remaining two had gone westwards and made sure they were loud about it. One of those columns was under General Nauk, the other General Bagram. The latter had taken a moment to place – he was an orc, once General Istrid's second-in-command. Until recently he'd been tasked with holding Summerholm, but evidently he was moving up in the world. Nauk had been tasked with baiting the southern Levantines into following him, while General Bagram was to serve as reserve and guard his back in case the northern army wanted to try assaulting the western columns. It was classic

Juniper, I thought when Robber first told me about it. Depending on enemy action, she could redeploy and put the hurt to them however she wanted.

If the northern Levantines went after the Hellhound's two columns, she only had to keep them marching until Grem's force could hit them in the back and the pincer manoeuvre became Callow's. If they continued marching to join up with their southern comrades, the four columns would escape the noose and join up with Grem's host. If the southern Levantines went after Nauk and Bagram, they'd be led in a merry chase until Juniper and Grem came down south together to relieve the western columns. If they marched east or north, instead, once again the four columns escaped disaster and linked up in northern Iserre. It'd seemed to work, at first. The last Robber had heard of the eastern columns, they had the northern Levantines after them. The problem had come when Nauk's column was hit from the back even as the southern Levantines came after them. Helikean cavalry had ambushed his rearguard, slowing his advance just long enough for the Levantines to gain grounds and begin their own cavalry raids. Messages from General Bagram had ceased, presumably because cataphracts were killing the messengers, and his column had never come to reinforce Nauk's. What followed was a ragged retreat, eventually tumbling into the minor city of Sarcella which fell to the column without a fight.

Sarcella had no walls, most its people had fled because of the roving armies in the region and the city garrison had apparently 'retreated towards a more defensible position' the moment they saw an enemy host approaching. Knowing he was in a bad position, Nauk had raised field fortifications in Sarcella and held the grounds against a probing attack by a Levantine vanguard of around sixteen thousand – which didn't want to commit to more before the full forty thousand were there. He'd planned to start the retreat once more after forcing an opening, but rumours of a large force marching towards his back had forced him to delay and send scouts lest he blunder into a battle he could not win. Said force was my drow, which was biting irony. Taking reinforcements for foes might very well see a quarter of the Army of Callow slain in the heartlands of Procer.

There were still things unaccounted for. No one knew where the Hells the column under General Bagram was. I doubted even Helike cataphracts could tie down two forces over twice their size, but the Tyrant might have more tricks up his sleeve. I'd been inclined to think that between reports of my drow army – an unknown – and the *kataphractoi* it might just be that General Bagram had written off Nauk's column as done for and begun full retreat, but Robber had given me the first bit of good news in a while when explaining why that was unlikely. Adjutant was with the column, nominally as an observer but in fact because he was keeping an eye on the two western columns. Tyrant or not, I'd put

my faith in Hakram coming through. If he wasn't backing up Nauk there was a good reason for it. That, or he was on his way already. Gods, let it be the second. Even assuming Nauk's forces hadn't been mauled too badly holding Sarcella against a second assault, I was only bringing six thousand drow as reinforcements. And one goblin, I supposed. None of us could be sure whether or not the entire Dominion force of forty thousand had arrived yet, or if it was still only the vanguard, but if it had... Well, under the light of day the Firstborn were disorganized light infantry with poor armour and disparate weaponry. Six thousand of those in addition to what remained of Nauk's army might not be enough to see us through to the night and the accompanying swing of the balance.

Dawn cost us four hours, to my seething impatience, but I used the time to nap and get my hands on a decent steel longsword. I'd fed my sword-within-the-staff throughout the night, but I had no intention of using it yet. I could wield it as a staff, but polearms were hardly my specialty and I was a lot more fragile than I used to be. Best to put the odds on my side in every way. We moved out the moment it was physically possible to, and by Morning Bell we could see Sarcella.

It was hard to miss it, what with the way it was on fire.

[DroughtBringer](#)

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NerfGlastigUaine

Hey so this is completely unrelated to the current chapter, but does anyone know what "Miezan" means? Nearly every significant name in this verse has a significant meaning, but I can't find one for Miezan.

danh3107

The Miezens were not!romans who sailed from another continent and enslaved a good portion of Calerina. Lower Miezan is the primary language of callow and one of the ones Praes uses. The Miezens enslaved all of Praes and brought over Ogres and superior magic.

[Javvies](#)

I think the question was more about the real world origin/
source of the name "Miezan".
And for that, I've got nothing.

Sean

Given that the sappers of the Malazan Empire were an
inspiration for the integration of goblin munitions into the
Praes and Callowan armies. I wouldn't be surprised if the
"Miezan" were a bit of a nod towards Malazan Book of the
Fallen.

Lark

It might be a reference to Mieza [1], where Aristotle taught
Alexander the Great.

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mieza,_Macedonia

[NZPIEFACE](#)

"Aristotle taught Alexander the Great."

holy shit, what?

caoimhinh

That's a pretty famous bit of history. The king of Macedonia
had Aristotle teach young Alexander (who was around 13 at
the time) in exchange for rebuilding Aristotle's hometown,
until he was 16. It's also said that Aristotle was a big
influence on Alexander's future conquering campaigns.

Alexander the Great was awesome in every aspect of his life,
apparently XD

Drock

well not at ruling or building a lasting empire

[Bhale](#)

Except ruling as far as I recall. He was on a roll for
some time, conquering western Asia, but when he was
finally defeated by India with its elephants, he fell to
drinking, gambling and whoring around (both genders).
When he died, his entire empire was divided among his
subordinates who actually ruled the empire, although in
regions.

Which reminds me, when are there gonna be elephant riders
in PGtE??

caoimhinh

Ehmm... Not really, He didn't lose in India, his own army mutinied because they were tired of the long years of campaign and because he was adopting too many of the Persian customs.

They demanded and convinced him to return to Macedon after a series of victories in India, where he even founded 2 cities (Bucephalus and Nicaea), Alexander died on the way back, after a series of fights and another mutiny turmoil within his own armies.

The account of Alexander spending his last days drinking and fucking is said to be because the death of his best friend (who some modern people think was his possible lover) who fell ill likely to poison and died a few days before Alexander's own poisoning.

Elephants riders are in another continent, I bet, likely used by Indrani's people XD

[Javvies](#)

...
Kairos is seriously full of hax and bullshit.
And what the heck is he even after that he's pissing off everybody?

—
—

This bodes poorly.

[crysja1](#)

The fact we don't know means it'll be something impressive.

ByVectron!

I thought that Cat and Kairos were pretending to be friendly? Wouldn't she be able to reach out and ask, "Hey, would you mind NOT chasing my Callowan army for a bit?"

[theothin](#)

No, see, they have a secret alliance so they have to pretend to NOT be friendly. So this is obviously necessary to sell the ruse.

[Taltos Dreamer](#)

I am certain The Tyrant would listen studiously. He would explain this grave error will be rectified immediately! Tgen double the troops chasing her army.

Twigsssss

Like Black, the tyrant wants to fight the gods and the enslavement caused by the stories. But unlike black, who fights the gods with logic and meticulous plans, the tyrant fights with chaos.

We've already seen him do things that appear to be crazy but actually totally make sense if you understand how the shape of stories affect this world. For example the first step of a villains plan always works so he repeatedly would start a new plan, do the first step, and then abandon it for yet another plan.

And recently we just found out one of his major objectives is to defeat the bard. I think for this particular goal he and Cat really are in alignment.

danh3107

Yay the berserker guy lived too!

Also, Ivah calling Cat flat as a compliment is incredibly amusing to me.

Someguy

She's gonna be blamed for the "Burning of Sarcella" as per the usual.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Yup. After all, it's quite solidly tangentially related. Ish.



IDKWhoitis

Place your bets ladies and gentlemen, what color will the flames become once Cat starts fighting?

1:6 Stay the same

1:3 Black

2:1 Green

I personally expect Green with flashes of White and Black.

HardcoreHeathen

"Ivah had once informed me that its kind considered the most visible characteristics associated with men and women – beards, breasts – to be somewhat vulgar. It had said that in a tone implying it was paying me a compliment, which when I'd grasped why had achieved something of the opposite effect. Sadly, Archer had yet to tire of talking about it."

Do you understand the importance of this?

Hanno can't defeat her. He serves the Choir of Justice, and Justice will never allow it, because...

FLAT IS JUSTICE

caoimhinh

She is not a Loli, she can't lay claim to that power!

LMAO.

Valkyria

I really want Cat to slam open the metaphorical door and tell them: Guess who's back, b****es!
Followed by slapping the enemies with Night bullshittery so hard they don't know right from left anymore.

The whole informative chapters were pretty cool, dotted with the occasional bit of banter and sarcasm... And also important, showing progress and setting the mood for the current situation... but I do miss the good old days of reckless battles against all odds and the badass moves.

agesbe

It's daytime, so while she does have access to Night, not nearly as much and thus she's unlikely to lead with a massive AoE attack.

Valkyria

I know that. I just said I want her to, not that it's likely. She also does not have as much power to throw around like she had back with winter. So it's not gonna happen anyways. Doesn't change the fact that I would love seeing that.

Sean

I'm not sure insofar as absolute limits go, but on average I would think she should be able to call down more power now that she has Sve Noc to filter the principle alienation.

Valkyria

I think it's less about the alienation than the thing that she's human again. Using that much power takes a toll on her, so she isn't able to utilize as much power as back when she was some sort of winter construct.

It was even mentioned that it now cost her something to call on the power of Night. Meaning she can't use it as reckless anymore and has to think carefully about how to spend her resources.

I think that's also why Akua is supposed to make her "a

well" to draw from in which her might pour their Night. It will increase Cat's power without her spending all herself. Only a guess though.

Liliet

I'm not sure how it compares to alienation though. I think Cat can use more now than she could back before she had Akua (and later also the drow) drawing principle alienation away from her.

werafdsaew

No discussions on what is blocking their scrying? Sve Noc must have some idea

Valkyria

I guess the rescue mission is more important right now, since at the moment there's not much they can do about the block, even if they knew who the culprit was. And when they're going to act, more people for the cause is always better than less.

Lavir

Obviously the heroes or a choir, I put my money on the Grey Pilgrim.

Taltos Dreamer

I suspect it's Masego himself...seething with rage and dealing with a glimpse of the true nature of Below. Also possibly either infected with or the source of the "magic plague" we heard about affecting those who were there.

Skaddix

I mean Masego is nowhere close so it makes no sense he be blocking Scrying in Procer when he is still running through Praes.

Taltos Dreamer

I dislike the phrase "makes no sense" because it usually means you just didnt see it from a particular direction...

It said "something is using the sky." That sounds like heavy duty scrying to me. The kind of thing Masego could likely do...use the observatory at a distance.

Which would probably do weird things, like affecting the scrying ability of those he is watching and make the observatory scrying pools, idk, evaporate?

Antoninjohn

The Night is dark and full of terrors

[Not a robot](#)

“largely on account of being too angry to die”

So Mighty Jindrich is Doomguy confirmés, right?

RanVor

Not really related to the chapter, but it occurred to me that I'd like to know more about Theodosius the Unconquered. He seems to be an awesome character.

[Adrian V](#)

Who else thinks the city on fire will end up being compared to Nauk learning from her? For that matter maybe it has something to do with him thinking “now what would Cat do?” xD

pagesbe

It's just occurred to me that the Drow... aren't nearly as scary as they seem on paper, on their own. They're basically an army of Named, with their leaders being high-tier Named level, but only at night. During the day, they're rather unimpressive, and their lethargy at dawn is an enormous weakness. Any commander worth their salt who knows this about the Drow (and it's easy to figure it out) will only engage during the day, and when it is day, they'll press as hard as they can (like right at Dawn, for example).

That said, when supported by not-Drow, their biggest weaknesses become not quite as big.

RanVor

And it only occurred to you now?...

Viconr

Missed k in last word in

“I left behind a hundred drow led by Mighty Sudone to – gently, I made very clear – interrogate the locals for anything they might now. “

HardcoreHeathen

I love Ciaphas Cain, so I'm happy to keep seeing more of Abigail.

I wonder if we'll get to see a scene of her and Cat interacting in a non-professional manner. I don't really feel like Cat has made any new non-Named friends since the War College.

HardcoreHeathen

Woops; this was supposed to be on the other chapter.

[Screwfloss](#)

Why is she feeding her sword-within-the-staff? What was she feeding it? Is it an animal? Has it been mentioned before?

[Screwfloss](#)

I remember the staff, just not her feeding it. There are so many typos in this story that it's impossible to guess whether the author really meant to say "fed" or whether it was a typo for something else.

Chapter 12: Relief

"After Isabella the Mad was appointed to the command of the hosts of Procer to turn back the forces of the Tyrant Theodosius, the First Prince asked of her when she expected the war to be brought to a successful conclusion. 'It should take,' she famously replied, 'about a hundred battles.'"

– Extract from 'The Banquet of Follies, or, A Comprehensive History of the First League War' by Prince Alexandre of Lyonis

It was around half an hour before Noon Bell that we got close enough to Sarcella to get a decent idea of what was happening inside. Well, aside from the fire. That one had been pretty obvious even from miles away, which in my surprisingly extensive experience of setting fire to things wasn't a good sign for the people in the area. As it turned out the city of Sarcella itself was, well, almost offensively Proceran. How anyone could bother to shell out coin for an elaborate ring of ogre-tall statues and arches around their city but not a proper curtain wall was beyond me. Oh, sure, whoever that tall bald man in furs with a sword was might be nicer to look at on a sunny day, but that was the kind of thinking that got you invaded by the Legions of Terror. The damned things were granite, too, which I vaguely remembered being one of the cheaper stones floating around Principate markets. Bastards hadn't even been able to afford marble or limestone, had they? There was still a tax on granite back from the days of

House Fairfax, I was pretty sure, though it wouldn't have been applied in over forty years – trade with Procer had understandably hit something of a low point after the Conquest. I supposed the saving grace of the whole affair was that granite statues would at least take more than a single glancing trebuchet shot before breaking.

Still, for all that at least Sarcella was slightly more defensible than I'd expected. It'd been raised on a few lazily-sloped hills, so there was some incline to work with, and unlike the flammable nightmare maze that had been Rochelant this city had a few paved and relatively straight avenues for troop deployment. Some parts of the outer city had houses of wood and stone clustered so tightly together they were impassable, a wall in fact if not in name. I couldn't quite get a look at the furthest reaches of Sarcella, but it looked like it'd been the same parts of it burning for most of our march: with a little luck, the flames had run into row stone houses or a ditch of some sort. I really hoped it'd been accident, to be honest, because if it wasn't odds were it'd been Nauk giving the order and if that was the case I might be responsible in a broader, metaphysical sense. Well, it was my army, but aside from that I doubted Rat Company officers had been so prone to tactical arson before they'd come under my command. Aside from Robber, anyway, who in these matters did not count since he was both a goblin and a sapper – the moment he'd chosen that career track at the War College he'd grown beyond saving. Regardless, most of the southeastern corner of the city was a hellscape of flames and smoke but it wasn't spreading much further out. Which had done absolutely nothing to prevent the inhabitants of Sarcella from fleeing in a panic.

That was even more obvious than the fire, in a way, because the Procerans were crowding the road out Sarcella like a massive flock of startled birds. There were at least five or six thousand civilians streaming out of the city, with more behind, and they were moving at a slug's pace. Few of them had carts to carry their possessions, and those that did got stuck on the muddy road out more often than not. The overwhelming majority were carrying everything they could of what they owned in bags or tied on their backs, a roiling exodus of people and goods. Some were even dragging furniture, with at least one very nice *armoire* put on planks and dragged by two middle-aged men. Probably the most expensive thing they owned, I mused. The river of fleeing Procerans filled the road in full, moving forward sluggishly, and as my gaze lingered on the *armoire* I realized why they'd been allowed to drag even furniture out of the danger. General Rumena caught up to me after I reined in my horse ahead of the first fleeing civilians, our six thousand warriors still further behind.

"This is madness," the old drow said, eyes contemptuous as it watched the civilians. "Why was this allowed to happen?"

"Because Nauk's tactical acumen has improved," I replied. "Watch the city's sides, Tomb-Maker."

He caught what I had quickly enough. Levantine light cavalry out in the snow, at least a thousand on either side. Not massing for an assault, at the moment – if I had to guess, there'd be crossbows and spikes awaiting them at every street large enough for a charge. But if I were the enemy commander, I'd keep them there to force those crossbow companies into remaining there where they weren't shooting at my soldiers. Maybe strengthen the cavalry numbers when things got heated on the main front enough that a simultaneous charge on both sides could serve as the killing blow for the entire Callowan army. Having to watch both sides as well as the city's back, where the avenues were the largest and most open, would have been a waste of soldiers. So I was thinking Nauk had encouraged the Procerans to flee with their possessions, neatly filling that space with scared civilians the Levantines couldn't ride down without starting the kind of major diplomatic incident that'd send cracks going down the Great Alliance. I was honestly impressed with my general. He'd never been a fool, but his cleverness had always been a military one. It now seemed his thinking had expanded to other theatres. Unfortunately, at the moment his clever trick was also preventing us from reinforcing him quickly. I weighed down my options in silence.

I could probably scatter the crowd with some application of Night, but should I? That'd be leaving a hole in Nauk's defensive perimeter, most likely. There'd be enough of a risk I'd have to leave drow behind to hold that territory, and considering the size of those cavalry contingents it would have to be at least two thousand warriors. Light horse or not the Firstborn just weren't used to facing down cavalry charges, and they lacked the bows, pikes and discipline to be naturals at turning them back. Slipping in through one of the flanks would take longer, though. Maybe an hour or so, and I wasn't sure I wanted to take that risk without a better notion of how the fight for the city was going. There was no point in arriving neatly if the delay cost us the battle. And that the fight was going, there was no doubt about that – I could make out the command horns and the faint sound of screams and steel even from where I sat. There was nothing quite as catastrophically loud as a hard battle, was there? Clenching my fingers, I spit to the side.

"Rumena, pick out two thousand warriors," I said.

"Will you be spitting on them as well, First Under the Night?" the old drow drily asked.

"That one's a bit of a stretch," I replied without missing a beat. "Careful with those, you know your back's not what it used to be."

"At least one of us should live to reach old age," Rumena smoothly retorted.

Damn it. Was it really too much to ask to get the last word against it even once? The fact that my bloody goddesses were quite literally crowing in the back of my head at this most recent of defeats only made it worse. My eyes flicked ahead. It wouldn't be long before the first fleeing Procerans arrived in shouting distance, but I'd have the drow at my side before it came to that. I yelled at Rumena to fetch me Robber while it was at it, watching it stroll away to carry out my orders. I looked up at the noon sky, that vast spread of blue without a single cloud to temper the glare of the sun. It was good fighting weather, I thought. Mild for a winter day, and the snow might thaw a bit if it kept up. Twin shadows flickered into sight, gliding down with lazy grace, and I turned my eyes back to the Procerans as the crow-shaped slivers of godhood landed on my shoulders. They ran their metaphysical fingers down the spine of my thoughts, partaking of my intent.

"First time I ever saw Black use the trick, I wasn't sure it was one," I mused. "The second time, though? I promise myself I'd make it my own one day."

"Not a subtle tool," Andronike said.

"Yet versatile," Komana opined.

We left it at that, for now. General Rumena came back holding a wiggling Robber by the scruff of the neck – impressive, considering it was day and my Special Tribune still had his armour on – before offering him up like some kind of furious green cat.

"Get on," I said, cutting in before the goblin could complain. "There's a war on, Tribune. Rumena, tell our warriors to stick close to me and not spread out."

"As in all things your guidance is paramount, Losara Queen," it replied.

I detected the faintest hint of sarcasm in that, due to my unparalleled courtly sentivities.

"Wait, you speak Lower Miezán?" Robber hissed out. "You prick, you pretended you-"

I cleared my throat, and with ill-grace the goblin scampered onto the back of my mount. I patiently watched until my six thousand

drow formed into a rough column. The vanguard of the fleeing civilians had finally noticed our presence and distant shouts in Chantant and Tolesian sounded. Some angry, some curious, some afraid. I could have tried to engage, but to be frank I didn't have the time to be gentle about this.

"Follow," I called in Crepuscular.

My staff of ebony rose, and I reached for the Night. The Sisters helped me shape it, refine my intent and cut away the impurities until all that was left was *fear*. I felt Robber stiffen behind me, then almost defiantly loosen his limbs and grip. Zombie started at a gallop without further ado and the drow followed behind me.

With screams of blind terror, the inhabitants of Sarcella parted like the sea.

It was a simple enough working that maintaining it wasn't too much of a strain, especially with the guidance of the Sisters, but I was noticeably tired by the time we reached the tall arch that was the broadest entrance into the city. There'd been a few incidents making our way down the road, civilians who reacted to even supernatural terror with aggression, but they were beaten down and thrown to the side without any deaths involved. One drow was nicked by a wildly flailing sausage knife and was loudly mocked by the rest of its sigil for the rest of the walk, but that was the closest thing to a casualty we incurred. To my approval, the sight of my army approaching by the largest road into the city was met with hastily assembled palisade and at least half a hundred crossbows. From atop my horse I could even see messengers running further in to ask for reinforcements. I rode up ahead of the drow, allowing the fear to die and my shoulders to loosen. I felt like I'd run a footrace – in a metaphysical instance where both my legs were still in good shape, it should be said – but I was tired and not exhausted. Tired I could work with. It was old hand to me. The Sisters took flight before we were hailed, more interested in taking a look at the killing than staying around for the formalities.

"Close enough, stranger," an officer called out from atop the palisade. "Identify yourself. This city has been seized by the Kingdom of Callow, in the name of Her Majesty Catherine Foundling – are you friend or foe to her?"

I cocked my head to the side. A mop of blond hair could be made out from under the helmet, and that was definitely a Liessen accent tainting the hail spoken in very shaky Chantant.

"Yes, Boss," Robber murmured, sounding utterly delighted. "Are you friend or foe to *Her Majesty*? I think a case can be made for both. Tough call to make, really."

"You're talking to her, lieutenant," I called back in Lower Miezan. "Split those palisades and take me to General Nauk."

"Come off it," the Liessen laughed. "You're way too short. If you're the bloody Black Queen then I'm Empress of Procer."

Blowing up the palisade was not an acceptable response, I reminded myself. It was *my* palisade, technically speaking, so it was doubly beneath me to do so. Robber shook convulsively behind me, trying not to cackle out loud. There was some talk coming from out of sight, behind the palisade, then a goblin's head popped over the edge. I squinted. I'd seen that one before, though I couldn't put a name to the face. He was one of Robber's officers.

"Captain Borer," the ingrate gargoyle behind me provided, still snickering.

"Open the way immediately," the goblin ordered. "Your Majesty, welcome back."

I inclined my head in thanks. The Empress of Procer turned white as a sheet. I barked out orders in Crepuscular for the drow to follow me in good order, then put Zombie to a trot as the wooden fortifications were dragged open. Captain Borer, unlike his commanding officer, snapped a textbook-perfect salute when I approached. There were less than a hundred soldiers here, most of them crossbowmen, though I suspected with the runners I'd seen move out earlier that was about to change. I glanced at the still-pale Liessen lieutenant, who'd joined the throng of officers gathering around me, and cocked an eyebrow.

"Your Highness," I drily said. "What a surprise to find you here."

He forced out a shaky laugh, but ended up choking on it for trying to swallow nervously while keeping it up.

"Who's in command here?" I asked.

There were lieutenants and sergeants here, but no one any higher up the ladder. Unusual.

"That would be me, Your Majesty," Captain Borer replied. "I am the sole captain of this front."

Not a good sign, I thought. Not only was the goblin a sapper, he was part of Robber's cohort – which was detached from the usual chain of command, by my personal authority. Sappers were usually passed over in favour of the closest same-rank officer when it came to combined commands, which was hinting at a severe officer shortage.

"You're relieved, Captain," I said. "Behind me are foreign troops from the Empire Ever Dark, to be considered auxiliaries for the duration of this battle. They'll be holding the area in your place. Robber?"

The goblin leapt down with unnatural agility, landing with a flourish.

"Boss?" he asked.

"Gather your full cohort, then join me wherever the general staff has set up," I ordered. "Captain Borer, I'll need you to appoint a liaison to the drow. At their head is General Rumena, who'll be advancing deeper into the city with four thousand infantry. Have it led at a location allowing for easy deployment to the fronts."

"I'll see it done, ma'am," the goblin saluted.

There was a shudder of whispers through the assembled officers, looks were cast at the grey-skinned warriors still advancing towards the arch. The drow in the front ranks were looking back, looking distinctly unimpressed by the first human city most them had encountered.

"Merciful Gods," a tall, dark-haired man with sergeant stripes said. "Drow. I thought they were stories."

"Stories start from something, sergeant," I amusedly said. "And our friends came out from the Everdark to fight on our side. Do pass the word along that they can be rather touchy, though. It'd be best if a little distance was kept."

The stares I got at that made me rather uncomfortable. It was just a handful of officers, I thought, already part of my army anyway. And still I wondered if there'd be as much awe on their faces, if they knew how badly botched and misguided my journey into the Everdark truly had been. I doubted it. All they saw was old stories with strange weapons and eerie eyes come to swell our ranks. Shaking my head, I dismissed the thought.

"I'll need someone to guide me to the general staff," I said. "Is General Nauk holding command from there, or has he gone to the front?"

The awe was gone, whisked away in a heartbeat.

"Ma'am," Captain Borer quietly said. "General Nauk no longer holds command. He was killed last night when the assault began. Legate Abigail is the current commanding officer."

I was in front of my soldiers, I couldn't show weakness. And still I closed my eyes. *Breathe in, breathe out. Control. You can grieve when the city's no longer burning, when your people are no*

longer fighting. He'd not been the same man I had called my friend, but I'd come to hope... *Hope is always dangerous,* I remembered. My eyes opened and my voice came out calm.

"I will need a guide, regardless," I said. "Let's get to it."

I pulled my hood over my head, then Zombie impatiently stepped into the avenue and away from my officers. Thirty heartbeats later, I had my guide and I rode the city with dried eyes.

Pittance that it was, it was all I could afford to spare.

—

The high command for what I'd been informed was currently being called the 'Third Army' – presumably Juniper's four separate columns each having been granted such a number – was clearly buckling under the weight of its responsibilities. It'd been a mansion, once, though clearly a wealthy merchant's and not a noble's as it was near the heart of Sarcella and not one of the more rarefied quarters. The location had been well-chosen, close to most of the arteries of the city and so easy to get messages to and from. I was ushered through a parade of wide eyes and gasps, until I reached what must have been the war room. It was at the very highest of the mansion, with broad windows overlooking the parts of the city either currently fought over or burning down. My attention, though, lingered on the fact that there were too few people here. A few aides, a few messengers, mages and hornblowers. But the actual officers? Less than ten. There were more tables loaded with scrolls and maps than there were people above the rank of tribune in here, which was stark statement as to the state of the Third Army. The presumed commanders saluted tiredly when I entered, obviously warned in advance, but I noticed the gaze of several brighten at the sight of me. I offered a smile, and turned to the only person in the room wearing a legate's insignia.

Legate Abigail, I realized with a start, was younger than me. Barely twenty, by the looks of her. I'd come across her once or twice before Akua's Folly, and later Juniper mentioned her to me before as the woman who'd drowned the incipient riots in Laure through strategic use of the royal palace's cellars. She'd had a field promotion to legate after that, so she'd have the authority to keep the capital in order, but I was surprised the Hellhound had chosen to confirm the promotion afterwards. At most I'd expected her to move up from senior tribune to commander, after an actual legate relieved her. Were we really that hard up for high-ranking officers? I set aside the worry for now, looking over the younger woman discretely. Her black hair was slightly longer than Legion regulations allowed, but acceptably so for a foreign campaign. Sunburnt cheeks, watery blue eyes and a delicate nose. She had dark rings around her eyes like she hadn't

had a good night's sleep in much too long, quite visibly exhausted. She was taller than me, I noted, but then who wasn't?

"Your Majesty," the legate croaked out in that thick Summerholm accent. "Gods, am I glad to see you."

The general staff around her really was absurdly sparse, and what remained was in rough shape. There was a senior mage – Soninke, it'd be years before any Callowan was fit for that command – with a face whose rosiness betrayed recent mage healing and a staff tribune missing her right arm up to the elbow, but that was it. No senior sapper, no kachera or supply tribune. Two commanders, and one large orc tribune, but that was no proper general staff. What the Hells had happened here?

"Legate Abigail," I replied with a nod. "Our drow allies found Special Tribune Robber's tenth, and I hurried a march here with a first wave of six thousand reinforcements. I'm beginning to suspect the situation is worse than what was described to me."

A few mirthless smiles bloomed at that.

"It's a bloody mess, Your Majesty," Legate Abigail said. "General Nauk swatted their first probe on Sarcella and the vanguard drew back, so we figured they were waiting for the rest of the army. But then they attacked last night, completely out of the blue. We think some noble showed up, riled them up for it."

"Are you saying Nauk and the rest of his senior officers were lost on the frontlines?" I frowned.

"Them Dominion priests hit a meeting of the general staff," she replied. "Lanterns, I think they're called. One moment it's night, then it's bloody Light everywhere and most the room is dead. I was looking into a supply discrepancy so they didn't get me and Oakes-"

"Legate Oakes," the orc at her side provided in a gravelling voice.

"-Legate Oakes was walking the perimeter, so he didn't get hit either," Legate Abigail seamlessly adjusted.

I hid my amusement at the interaction, and the habitual ease it had come with.

"You're senior to this Legate Oakes?" I asked.

"By a day, ma'am," the woman ruefully replied. "Marshal Juniper said we were to serve under General Nauk and Legate Jwahir for proper blooding."

She paused.

"I guess we did get that, in the end," she darkly said.

Well, wasn't this a mess. It wasn't like I had another commander to pull out of my sleeve – Rumena was arguably the most veteran, but it had not familiarity with Legion tactics and was needed to keep the drow orderly besides – so she'd have to do. I could take command myself, sure, but if this was as bad as it sounded like I'd be needed in the thick of it.

"Then you've just received a field promotion, General Abigail," I grimly replied. "Congratulations. Now tell me how deep into the dark we are and, while we're at it, why the Hells this city is on fire."

[DroughtBringer](#)

Guys the votes are low! Get to voting!

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

Flobert

Good chapter, glad to see the Cat back with her Army. Nauk dying before cat could be reunited is saddening though.

[daegone823](#)

He was ripe for a name, the Burnt Berserk, the Hollow, or here hoping he is revived once more, as in three times alive, Nauk the Undying. There is still a chance at least in this universe.

He would therefore be like Urgot or Sion. My favorite champs.

naturalnuke

Born in blood, and fire, and darkness, made and unmade, Nauk;
The Orc, The Burned, The Undying.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Man, Abigail really got on to the Shounen protagonist promotion track, didn't she.

Someguy

No, this is the Trapped Behind Enemy Lines promotion track. Though it's usually a (Space)Navy trope. So Abigail is stuck an Anabasis (Xenophon) tale.

Argentorum

I'm still waiting for her to turn out to be Malicia's spy or the Bard or something.

You don't bite off a Fae's jugular with your teeth and drink its blood without having something else up your sleeve.

d0m1n1nc

I don't think she's either; we did get a POV from her a while back, remember?

We had one for Athal, too (almost to the very end).

NerfContessa

Ah, Abigail.

Prince John would have loved her.

John the terrible, that is, from empire of man.

[sengachi](#)

You're right, that's *exactly* the narrative poor Abigail is stuck in.

Skaddix

Abigail keeps climbing the ranks. Awfully convenient though that she just happened to be out of range of the attack. Seems odd with scrying down that the Priests would know where the General Council was meeting and be able to strike so effectively. Maybe they got a few Heroes with them and/or maybe we got some spys. Abigail does seem surprisingly competent and I tend to be suspicious of rapid risers.

RIP NAUK. Also appears Cat hasn't told Indrani about Masego yet so that could be a problem.

Allafterme

Abigail is like Ciaphas Cain HERO OF IMPERIUM expy which means two things:

1. Bountiful field promotions, especially when she didn't want them
2. She is to be considered alive, even with contrary evidence.

Hardric62

Eh. Tavi got lucky in Codex Alera too, I didn't complain then, see no reason to complain here either.

Except for the 'Nauk is dead' part and the (again) blatant hypocrisy of Good. But I don't expect this to go unanswered for long.

Skaddix

I don't know an honest to god precision strike to take out the leadership sounds pretty Good as far as these things go. They hit the leadership and nothing else, brilliant decapitation strike. My question are more how they actually knew where to aim.

Allafterme

Providence? There are probably one or two heroes among the Levantine host or Choirs are at the one-upping their bullshittery...

RoflCat

And I'm awaiting the next time they try that shit, there'll be crows cawing their death.

Aotrs Commander

Sounds like absolutely textbook adventurer "scry-and-die" tactics, to me. (More hazy on the "scry" part with stuff being interfered with, but the principle is the same.)

Knobbling the Evil Enemy High Command is exactly the sort of thing I'd expect from the good guys, even *actual* Good guys and not the substitute that pretends it is from Above. (And the bad guys. And the neutral guys. Any the "has even a modicum to tactical acumen" guys.)

It's just good (in the comparative, not in moral sense) tactics, and, if it works, hopefully forces the other guys to surrender without unnecessary bloodshed, which is beneficial on the moral level (if you're Good and you care about that) and the practical (whether you're good or not).

naturalnuke

Thing is that with their policy of killing greenskins no one is going to just surrender.

Battles of annihilation make people fight to the last because that's the outcome either way and spite is a powerful motivator.

[Liliet](#)

Do they have that policy? I don't remember where that came up.

Chrischinbrush

Maybe not specifically stated, but heavily implied. There's multiple mentions by Heroes and people from Good nations about their disgust of greenskins.

[Dresden 67](#)

How is it hypocritical? Catherine did the exact same thing back before the Battle of the Camps. You can't really argue that Nauk isn't a legitimate military target and if anything killing the leaders of an 'Evil' army is more morally defensible than slaughtering ordinary soldiers.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, people are seriously looking for every excuse to get out of "Hero Antagonist" uncomfortable zone.

Sorry guys, we're stuck in it 😊

RanVor

What infuriates me the most in the side of Good is that they're somehow okay with using morally dubious methods to win, but when the other side does the same, it's suddenly Blasphemy and Vile Trickery. Come on, guys, either stick to your own principles, or stop shitting at others for not sticking to them.

[Liliet](#)

Eh, I mean people who call things that are mostly politicians/propagandists/idiots like Willycakes and Dorian. I have yet to hear anything about vile blasphemous trickery from anyone Levantine.

RanVor

The Lanterns declared Cat the Arch-Heretic. Just saying.

[Liliet](#)

Politics, politics, politics 😊

RanVor

Well, the very fact that they engage in politics is a mark against them anyway.

[Liliet](#)

You're highly idealistic wrt organized religion.

RanVor

Not at all. It's just that you can't be truly good and engage in shady politics at the same time. So either the information that they're behind the whole Arch-Heretic deal is simple slander, or they aren't as pure as they want people (and, by extension, us) to believe, and I strongly suspect it's the latter.

[Liliet](#)

I mean I never expected that the Lanterns are pure white. It doesn't reflect on the ideals of Good, though, just on the people following them with all the hypocrisy and imperfection of y'know *people*?

RanVor

Then why am I not allowed to be mad at them for being hypocrites?

[Liliet](#)

I mean you're *allowed* whatever.

But we have 0 evidence that the people who made *this* (rather prudent both tactically and morally) decision intersect in any way with people who made *that* decision.

The point I'm talking in circles around is that the side of Good is not a hivemind. This is like saying 'why can't women decide on what they want' because one woman loves McDonalds and another hates it and loves sushi. It's not hypocrisy, it's different people having different viewpoints.

Even within the same faction – like the Lanterns – the people making political decisions and the people on the frontlines are... likely to be different people. IMHO.

RanVor

We have zero evidence that they're any different either. But I wasn't talking about them. I was talking about a particular view that seems to be very prevalent on the side of the Heavens, namely "we are allowed to go as far as it takes to win, but when they do that, it's abhorrent".

[Liliet](#)

This is the thing: who, exactly, has expressed both parts of that view? Like there are people who say 'the other side does that and is abhorrent' while politely overlooking their own side doing the same and there are people who say 'we go as far as it takes to win' and look at goals and not methods of the opposing side either.

caoimhinh

Well, to be fair, she IS a villain who bullied an Angel into giving her reincarnation and became a Fae-like being with high necromantic powers. So she was pretty close to what any of the heaven fanatics would call an abomination. Now she even made a deal with the Ever Dark, we know her reasons and the inside story, people from the outside wouldn't see her actions as anything good, even leaving behind the obvious politics that were at play in that decision (and Bard's involvement, as she was hinted talking with Saint of Swords at the holy see of Procer's church).

RanVor

To be even fairer, she never did anything to them, or even anyone else they care about. They're targeting her out of simple prejudice and are so full of themselves they won't even let her explain herself, but that's to be expected, considering they're religious fanatics. What shouldn't be expected is them deciding to declare her the Arch-Heretic over obviously more Evil and hostile Malicia for no real reason other than to spite her.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think Cat was declared Arch-Heretic by people who *understood the situation*. Or cared about what it really was, considering Saint of Swords had a hand in that and she's only too well known for violence against authority she doesn't like.

RanVor

It's a simple fucking common sense that the Tyrant in the Tower is the archest of all Arch-Heretics in the East. So common, in fact, that most people didn't even realize it's possible for someone else to be branded the Arch-Heretic. Which means they had to dig up some obscure regulations to even

justify holding a conclave over it. Something like that is not done on a whim.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, I imagine it's far more common knowledge to actual priests than to secular authorities?

Skaddix

I think Pilgrim stated it best Cat is Arch Heretic because she is shifting the Balance of Power by shifting Callow to the Gods Below. Praes will always be Evil. But Callow switching teams from Good to Evil represents a permanent shift (or multiple century at least) in the Balance of Power that cannot be allowed. So there is something metaphysical about Good and Evil.

Now Saint did it more cause she thinks the whole system is corrupt and wants a New World Order. The Good Nations are not Good Enough for her. And while Named don't tend to rule Good Countries, they can certainly exert a great deal of influence. As both Saint and Pilgrim have taken out Good Leaders with no repercussions. About the only restriction on Heroes seems to be killing other Heroes.

As for Gods Above and Below they don't really exercise as much direct influence people think. As shown Callow Priests and Procer Priests split the religion but the Gods Above didn't take away all healing from Callow. So there are some rules on how directly the Gods on either side can interact. Angels and Demons and Devils have a great deal more Freedom to act on the material plane. Gods need certain conditions to do anything hence why the Bard does most of the work.

konstantinvoncarstein

From their perspective, Callow was ruled by an immortal, evil no-more-human being, who had already bullied an Angel. Personally, I would not want to have that on my continent.

Furthermore, this kind of actions is that of "classical" Evil. And there is no negotiation possible with that.

Unwise

I... kinda ship it?

[chris S](#)

Can we get a big F for that off-screen death. Poor Nauk, first he dies, then Warlock resurrects him as a shell of his former personality. and then he gets blown up by a holy-magic powered bomb.

Aotrs Commander

I think that is one criticism that I have of the Guide is I have the impression that ErracticErrata does seem to have a little bit of squeemishness about actually **showing** protagonist-side characters dying. It's happened basically every time (bar Warlock) – Nilin, Captain, Ratface (and the rest of the council) and now Nauk. One or twice is co-incidence (or made sense in context, given the narrative being from Cat's PoV a lot of the time), but considering the cut-aways from other viewpoints, it has at this point formed a bit of a pattern of tell, not show with these deaths and I think that does those characters a disservice. If die they must (and I am often very vocuallly against gratuitous or unnecessary character death, let it be noted), the emotional impact ought to be properly felt by the reader (as we got with Warlock) – at least some of the time. I don't expect it all the time, of course (doing any one narrative thing to excess is problematic[1]), but, as I say, at this point, we have had a bit of a pattern.

[1]Except Cat's snark, that's impossible to have too much of.

Milpool

Yea, this is starting to get into a bit of a rut for a series that supposed to be all about clever awareness of story tropes. How many other beloved old characters are we going to have die off-screen with little to no explanation and no fanfare? I love the series, but this is starting to get a little frustrating. There's no satisfaction, no closure in it. They're just, whoop, gone one day.

[Liliet](#)

Well, it *is* also a story about war, would be kind of disingenious to write it without anyone Cat cares about getting killed in a horrifyingly random way.

werafdsaew

How are those 2 things you mentioned mutually exclusive with one another?

caoimhinh

Yeah, it's really annoying at this point.

I mean, taking the case of Ratface for an example, we didn't need an epic battle or long narrative making us feel that we'll miss Ratface (And EE has already proven he can do that even with a previously unknown character, like in the case of Cordelia's cousin who died fighting the Dead King).

With half a chapter showing Ratface (and maybe the rest of the council) doing his work, and suddenly being surrounded by assassins and ending at that, it would create anticipation, an emotional built up for when Cat receives the news. Instead what we got is Cat arriving somewhere and someone says "hey, this person is dead." characters being written off in such manner as if they were irrelevant, feels anticlimactic, annoying, and does a disservice to the characters. If characters must die, it should be done in a better way than the "hey, did you know? he died" treatment that so many have received.

[Liliet](#)

I would hate having to read through that for no payoff other than 'yep he died'.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Please remember that what we are reading is essentially a second draft. e^2 will go back over his work when he readies it for publication, and may add some of those scenes.

caoimhinh

I don't know about that, though I really wish he would add that, but he doesn't even edit chapters here to fix the typos we point out in the comments, so I don't know if he would make such major changes in the printed version.

[Liliet](#)

I mean yeah, this is the first draft. He's not editing the first draft, that's pointless.

caoimhinh

I disagree.

It's never pointless to fix typos. If there are mistakes they should be fixed, the very point of a draft is to be edited and errors fixed before publication. Even if what we are reading here now is not what he will publish later on, it's weird to not fix the typos or inconsistencies (Like Cat's bad leg that for some chapters was the right, in others the left, then dropped specifying at all, later said to have been healed by angelic resurrection but brought

back by fae transformation and then again said that fae transformation had healed it but Cat giving up Winter brought back her bad leg).

Errors should be fixed as soon as they are found, even if he wants to make a new version for printing, it's still for the best if he takes this (the base material) with as few errors as possible, and it also makes it more pleasurable for future readers of this version too.

[Liliet](#)

On one hand, fair.

On the other hand, it's a lot of work to write as much as consistently as erratic is, and I'm not one to say he should be doing more on top of that.

Andrew Mitchell

I've got to agree with you here Liliet.

EE is committed to 13 chapters a month. And of consistently good storytelling too. That's a HUGE output and it's way, way more than most people ever produce. I know I could never do it...

If EE wants to keep up the momentum and save all the typo corrections for publication, then that's absolutely fine by me.

caoimhinh

True, but fixing the typos on a novel isn't "doing more" for an author, and fixing the typos that readers point out is on his benefit in the long run, too.

As for consistency I think there are only 2 inconsistencies that I have noticed: Cat's leg and Ime's name (According to book 4 chapter 5 her name is Sabra Niri, with kinship to the High Lord of Okoro, but book 5's Prologue calls her Lindimi Sahelian).

No one points out typos out of malice, readers just want the errors to be fixed so that the quality improves, but there are comments pointing out typos all the way back to volume 2 which haven't been fixed. There's no real justification for that, since those typos were pointed out the within 2 days of the chapters being released, and editing doesn't take more than a couple of minutes.

Now, if he let dozens of chapters with typos accumulate, and then has to read through all of them to find and fix the typos before publishing a new version? THAT is what will be a lot of work.

I believe everyone who has read this series up until current chapters now loves it and is convinced of the amazing talent of EE, he delivers great chapters at an amazing pace (to the point where if a chapter is late we don't get angry at him, but the comments start filling with people worried for him, since he is always punctual), but ignoring typos pointed out by readers is a bad decision/habit that should be changed, as it's on the best interest of everyone to fix those as soon as possible.

[Liliet](#)

"True, but fixing the typos on a novel isn't "doing more" for an author"
it literally is on a 'what do I spend my time on' level

Also, you know how the second draft is usually made compared to the first draft? It's rewritten from scratch. You just scrap the first draft and write the entire thing anew. There IS no point to fixing typos.

luminiousblu

Have you noticed that they're ultimately unimportant side characters? Side or tertiary characters (Captain and Nilin were tertiary at best, don't pretend otherwise, and Ratface dangles between tertiary and side leaning tertiary). Captain stopped being relevant in any way past book 1, Nilin was barely present during the half-book he existed, and Ratface is mostly relevant as a background "oh, he did something else again" sort of person.

Killing them off quietly shows that they're not supposed to register.

Wry Warudo

I love how Rumena managed to troll Robber

IDKWhoitis

Oh, just wait for Robber's retaliation.

[sengachi](#)

There is probably no person in the story more qualified to meet that challenge than Rumena. They've spent the last millennia sassing demigods, spitting in the face of providence, and surviving a combative hellscape that genuinely outdoes the goblin warrens. Let Robber come. In the Tomb-Maker he has finally met his match.

caoimhinh

Remember Indrani also managed to annoy Robber and get on his nerves.

Chapter 6 of Volume 4 displayed it very well.

[sengachi](#)

Indrani was Robber's equal and peer. Rumena may simply be out of Robber's league.

caoimhinh

As I remember it, Indrani had Robber beaten by a huge margin, everyone of his attempts were met with her laughter, while she got on his nerves with every sentence.

Rumena is just too cool in his way of doing things. He's Lord of Sick Burns and Cool Replies XD

[Euodiachloris](#)

Those two have the beginnings of a beautiful– um... a pointed? pointy? relationship. 😊

Gunslinger

The next favorites poll is gonna end with Rumena at the top for sure

[doominator10](#)

"...why the Hells this city is on fire."

Catherine's thoughts: ' I'm probably going to somehow get blamed for this too.'

[Liliet](#)

Catherine's thoughts: "This probably is somehow my fault even without me knowing about it or being around, isn't it"

Raiseth

Catherine probably doesn't realize her forces attract the most pyromaniac arsonists this side of the sea.

Decius

Of course she knows. That's how she found them, by following the pyromaniac attraction.

Shoddi

It is directly her fault, as originator of the "Foundling Gambit". Probably codified in the field manual of the Army of Callow by now.

Someguy

NAAAUUUUKKK! 😞

[Javvies](#)

Well, Nauk dying was inevitable.

Abigail has done well for herself, though this is nothing like what she was expecting when she got her promotions.

Huh. I thought it was sort of widely known that Cat was short. I suppose she grows in the telling and looms large in stories about what she's done.

Yeah, there's no way anybody can blame Robber and his pyromanic and kleptomantic ways on you Cat. Not legitimately, anyways. Probably won't stop some people from trying anyways.

Also ... the Lanterns can drop long ranged smites on people? That's ungood. They'll probably be priority targets when night comes.

[Dresden 67](#)

I doubt it was long range, the Lanterns are noted as warrior monks who regularly hunt monsters. It makes sense that they're capable of stealth.

In fairness morally speaking it's no different from what Catherine did before the Battle of the Camps. Nauk was undeniably a legitimate target.

[Javvies](#)

So you're saying the Lanterns didn't need much range because Nauk and the troops with him are/were totally incompetent?

They nuked a meeting of Nauk's general staff and there was no warning. That sort of thing generally takes place all behind your lines in a secure and guarded area.

To stealth their way in to hit it at short range, the Lanterns would have needed to bypass the Callowan lines, pickets, and patrols, plus get around the guards and patrols

around the location where the meeting was taking place. Oh, and that's not counting the magical defenses and alarms that would be around.

Sorry, but I could perhaps buy a Hero or group of Heroes pulling something like that off, but not regular humans. So, IMO, the Lanterns had serious help from somebody/ something (if only in knowing where and when to hit), or ... they have a massively broader skillset of powers granted by Above than we thought they did, and probably broader than anybody on Cat's side thought they did too.

[Liliet](#)

Oops, I think I have a theory.

Grey Pilgrim 🤨

grzecho2222

"some noble showed up, riled them up for it"

[Liliet](#)

Yep 😊

[Javvies](#)

Nah, Pilgrim's probably more or less fixed to wherever he's holding Amadeus. Unless Amadeus has escaped, then Pilgrim is probably trying to recapture him.

[Liliet](#)

They were on the road, remember? Moving through countryside

Sylwoos

Aren't they the same guys who melted a mountain?

Like it or not, it seem the Above's priest hold power comparable to the Praesi mage and the not-quite-mighty drow (don't remember their exact name). So far in the story, we've seen many group of human holding comparable power when working together, so nuking a tent isn't exactly a unbelievable feat. We also saw quite a lot of long range attack, like when Diabolist mage put fake-cat in a box from the other side of a battlefield.

[Javvies](#)

My concern with the Lanterns successfully nuking the command tent isn't that they could do it at range, it's more the fact that they knew exactly when and where to strike, and we don't have any prior indication that priests normally have scrying capabilities. I'm inclined to think that they probably needed and had some help with targeting, probably Named help, under the presumption that more direct intervention by Angels would have been noticeable, and that Above wouldn't burn direct interference points on something so (relatively) minor.

Decius

A single spy in the Army of Callow?

[Javvies](#)

Ehhhh ... I could see a spy for the Praesi (or some faction thereof) being in the Army of Callow, but I don't see all that much likelihood of a spy for Levant or Procer. Remember, the Army of Callow is comprised of Callowans, former Legionaries, and a few straight from Praes recruits (mostly orcs and goblins) that signed on with Cat's armies instead of the Legions.

Besides, again, timing is an issue as well as the communications chain from the theorized spy to the Lanterns.

Far more likely that they had help from some sort of Hero.

luminiousblu

The Lanterns sound like Clerics, and those are almost always presented as the equal of sorcerers or wizards. Their robes just have holy symbols instead of magic circles on them. If the Lanterns brought out say fifteen dozen dudes and fired a laser beam via ritual it seems plausible, especially since scrying is completely blocked off by priests.

caoimhinh

I feel like when Ratface died. It's out of the blue and annoyingly anticlimatic.

It's one thing if they are shown fighting or given a scene to their deaths, instead of being in the back of the story for a few chapters and then suddenly Cat enters a room and someone says "And he's dead"

Although we can be optimistic and think Nauk might be just in a coma again or something, odds are he just got written off from the story just because EE felt like it, same as with Ratface.

Liliet

If we got a death scene for every meaningful death, there'd be far too many death scenes.

And the tone would have shifted to 'gee look how many heroic officers there are' or 'this is how people die' which is not the point of the story.

People aren't forgotten after they die. I find that a far better treatment writing-wise than heroic death scenes.

caoimhinh

Every meaningful death should be shown as they are meaningful, they deserve a scene. They wouldn't be too many scenes, it wouldn't even take a whole chapter to show the last moments of the character. Even Istrid got a last scene showing her death (Unlike Afolabi and Orim who were at the same battle) but Ratface and Kendall got just "hey they got killed" and that's it.

Do you think that if Wekesa's death had been off-screen would it have the same effect on us as readers?

There's a reason meaningful deaths are shown, it because they are MEANINGFUL.

You are right that keeping the memory of a character alive is good and makes them influential beyond their deaths, but that's not happening here, or else name one character that's still actively mentioned or influencing things after they died. At the most is Cat's occasional mention or complaint about how things are harder to do now that Ratface is dead and that has happened no more than four times in the whole volume since he died.

Akua is the only character that had remained influential after her death and that's because she is still walking around as a shade.

Liliet

I think we have different definitions of influential. Sabah, Wekesa, Ratface all stayed in the narrative after being dead; Anne Kendall was an unfortunately minor character even when alive. Nilin actually got more impact after his death, from where I stand. Same for the poor Exiled Prince lmao.

I'd say their deaths get to be plenty meaningful even without having to shoehorn a narrative progression into them. Wekesa's death was epic and had a story in it, so it

got shown onscreen; deaths that are just depressing don't need that.

Skaddix

Sabah was offscreen so Bard could screw with Black. But also did we really want the heroine skinning her on page?

Weseka was epic mostly cause you cannot really have a spellcaster go down without going all out and to drive Masego forward for a presumably Darker Arc.

Cat is the Lead, the Woe/Akua are the next level down and the Calamities/Scribe/Malicia are another level down.

But basically the issue is Cat's wars have to have cost and that is shown in her former friends biting it but you cannot just off the Woe. So someone else has to pay since the point of the series is not really to glorify war.

[Liliet](#)

I'd say Wekesa's bigger impact was his conversation with Tikoloshe.

We did hear from Sabah right before her death, we just didn't see the moment itself.

And yeah, what you said re: why this is happening.

caoimhinh

I know what you mean, and I partially agree. Nilin's death was used as a minor plot device, simply to show that Akua had lot of influence, though it also had the effect of making the readers have multiple emotions, which was pretty good. But even his death was shown and used better than most, as he was a casualty of a battle that was shown. Sabah's case is weird because we saw everything up until she had practically already won (Champion was beaten to a bloody pulp, broken bones and all Aspects exhausted while Sabah was in full form, with one Aspect left) and then it was "she died" which while narratively coherent in the way Bard expressed it, still makes little sense and was not finished well. If the last of the battle we had seen was Raphaella using her last Aspect, and then Amadeus found out Sabah died as explained by Bard, it would make more sense.

The problem with the way so many deaths have been handled is the off-hand manner of just writing them off as “hey, he died” instead of at least building up to the event, or at least giving them a last scene that showed things. Even Killian who is the Senior Mage in the whole army under Masego, has been written off a bit after breaking off with Cat, despite being said that she is doing important things and even attending most of Cat’s general staff meeting she doesn’t have dialogues anymore, which is weird.

Anyways, as it is now, those kinds of meaningful deaths being done in a meaningless way are a disservice to the characters and done willingly by the author, because we already know for certain that EE can make even a one-chapter-only character be badass and remembered, he could have made a good last scene for Ratface, Kendall, Nauk, etc.

It doesn’t have to be epic, it can be depressing, but it should be shown something, or prepare a built up or anxiety for the uncertainty before the reveal.

Liliet

TBH Sabah had a huge death flag and it made perfect sense to find out later then she died. You might have noticed (or not) that at the start of the battle she comments that Champion’s form is mostly suited to fighting beasts, not humanoid armed opponents, and that’s why she has the advantage.

And then she fucking forgets that and shifts into Beast like SABAH NO

I knew that was a big SABAH NO when we were leaving her POV 😡

Killian is a whole other kettle of fish yeah.

But I’d say that Nauk’s death has been built up to by the very fact that they’re at war, that Nauk was heavily injured once already, and that he’s known as the best vanguard – the guy who is sent to charge into the most dangerous places. It’s the least odd thing in existence that he died at some point, and the point is to remind us of that. It wasn’t dramatic, there wasn’t anything much to see about it. Rocks fall, everyone dies.

Same goes for Ratface and Kendall. We’ve already had Anne Kendall survive one assassination attempt; we’ve heard Ratface talk about how he always assumed he’d die railing at the Tower. Everyone knew what kind of game

they were playing; that Cat's manoeuver at Keter backfired that badly behind her back is the entire point. We didn't get to see it because she didn't get to see it; the very fact she didn't, that she wasn't there, that it happened entirely outside her control, hit her hard. That's what the impact was DELIBERATELY MEANT TO BE. And it was conveyed to the readers by having them in the same boat as her – not there for it.

caoimhinh

Yes, but and so it would have made sense if in the battle displayed Raphaella had managed to best Sabah, but she didn't. Champion was beaten to a pulp by Captain, and she used up all her Aspects without anyone to heal her while Sabah still had one Aspect left. If she had defeated Sabah on screen, or if she had still being fighting when the POV changed (like the example I proposed of Champion activating her last Aspect against Sabah as the last scenes from that fight), it would make sense, but Raphaella had already lost when the POV changed, she wasn't just wounded or in battle shape, she was so thoroughly broken that her Aspect broke apart. And yes, Heroes get second wind and Narrative power-ups but that still was a bad way to conclude that match, just the Hero defeated by Villain and then jump to another scene where they are informing the others that the Hero won and that's it. Unsatisfying.

It is true that anyone can die, and it's fine to have Cat unaware of things, but to have us in the dark too, and eliminate a group of characters like blowing off a candle is bad. We could have at least gotten a last scene for them, so that we would get a built-up of emotion and anticipation. Saying "people die at war" is not enough to justify the meaningless deaths, they got offed as they were irrelevant and that is annoying.

Worst is the way it's handled, that indifference "so, they died" and move on, that's not how this entire serial was building up to be, and that's why it's so glaring, because the narrative had led us to see that events are significant and deaths are too, with an author so talented that he can make an entirely new character coming out of nowhere be memorable. So it's frustrating how these characters were just gone as if they didn't matter.

[Liliet](#)

Sabah beat Rafaella to pulp *and then let the Beast take over*. We've had sufficient setup that heroes aren't beaten until they're dead that the mistake was obvious / horrifying to me.

And nope, it is *meant* to be glaring and frustrating and upsetting. Dramatic death scenes make the whole thing feel more fair, and that's the entire point: it isn't. There isn't a story to tell about how this person died. They just did.

They mattered, and they continue to matter now that they're dead. But their death was random, sudden and out of nowhere, because *this is war*.

Are you upset with Ashen Priestess not getting a death scene?

Decius

The death scene would be the general staff meeting, followed by "And then everything blew up".

Because someone on the Good side decided to be effective, and that means not giving the enemy good scenes.

caoimhinh

That would have still been preferable than the "ah, he died yesterday".

It doesn't have to be an epic fight, but those characters deserve a last scene.

For example Ratface finishing his work and then being surrounded by Malicia's assassins and going "oh, shit." when noticing them, unsheath a knife and say "come on, fuckers." would leave us wondering what happened and whether he survived, and then we get to know at the same time as Cat that he got killed by the assassins.

Kendall reading a report of the activities in the Kingdom and thinking about its current state and the measures that have to be taken, and then a "she never saw the knife" at the end. Would have been fitting.

Nauk and the officers sitting in the tent, they discuss, analyze their options, worry about Robber's group and finally make a decision of what to do, "and then the room blew up" at the end of the scene.

Much better than just writing them off with a cold treatment as if they were nameless mooks like the ones who die by the hundreds on each battle of the armies.

Aotrs Commander

I (as I commented up-thread) think we should have a bit more of split-difference. As it is, of all the characters who have died, only one of them was on-screen. Much as I dislike character death generally – you may thank Marvel for that, X-Men comics, lookin' at you – I feel that – at least some of the time, we should actually bear witness to it.

By the same token, I can also understand why sometimes it makes more sense not to show it. My personal opinion is just that we have had a shade too much of the latter and not enough of the former.

As fate would have it, the instance in which character death is handled the best in anything I've seen or read is Naruto, actually. Not only are the deaths meaningful, their impact is felt literal decades later in the show – and it ALSO isn't the last time we see the characters, because there are flashbacks (and even raising of the dead!) which obviates my major complaint that after you kill a character off, you can't tell any more stories with them.

caoimhinh

I agree with you. The problem isn't that characters died, is the meaningless way that they did, without even proper built-up, expectancy, uncertainty or a last scene to show us.

Papalamus

I believe that it is NB atural in the EE world that character not protected by narration dies off screen. It is world shaped with stories, and if you just a Cat hound without her protection why should you be immortal? Now, when we have Tyrant, Hierarch Grey Pilgrim, soon-to-be-named-again Black, Drow army generals, Winter/Night goddesses, even Malicia not safe.

caoimhinh

Is not the fact that they died, it's the way it was done. You can't be seriously saying that having characters that have been in the story since Volume 1 get killed off-screen and we find out simply when protagonist enters a room and someone says "hey, they got killed". That's a really bad way to eliminate a character.

luminiousblu

There's a difference between a meaningful character and a meaningful death. Meaningful characters don't inherently have meaningful deaths. Boromir dying was important so it got shown on-screen, the actual circumstances of the death itself conveyed something important about the story and wrapped up the character's development as a genuinely good person who was led astray by the Ring, and added weight to the story where being a good person fighting for a good cause can still die having accomplished nothing (because Merry and Pippin were taken away anyway).

What does Nauk's death add? His character had essentially been burned away, he was suffering from some sort of partial amnesia, so beyond a generic 'oh I remember now' sort of scene it can't add to his character. It wouldn't add weight to the story because people already died both on and off screen. What it actually DOES add is the idea of irrelevance, helplessness, and just-so. Nauk was ultimately irrelevant in the grand scheme of things, named but Nameless, just a king redshirt commanding an army of redshirts. Catherine was underground for apparently months, and knew of nothing happening aboveground, so she had no way of knowing what was happening. And Nauk was in with his army, escaped death once, but this time it caught him, and it was going to happen at some point where someone finally rolled a 13 on his d20 instead of constant natural 2s and 1s. This wasn't ridiculously bad luck or anything coming from Nauk, this was him having his stupidly good luck finally burn out.

[Liliet](#)

This.

Meaningful character doesn't necessarily mean meaningful death.

Sparsebeard

I think it might be intentionnal, Named get foreshadowing, death flags and narative deaths.

Mortal, mortals just randomly die...

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

There was a whole in-universe point made of this.

Cicero

Poor Abigail, how many more promotions can she get?

lol

Hey, that's Queen Abigail the First, The Accidental, you're talking about!

IDKWhoitis

After General, only really Field Marshal, but I don't think Callow has enough troops/armies to justify that. Unless she gets stuck as a pseudo marshal for the drow. Other than that, Juniper could get killed, and get Aby can take her place.

Or worse yet, Aby might get pegged as Cat's replacement for when Cat wants to retire.

[Liliet](#)

Queen Abigail grows increasingly likely the more the running gag of her promotions goes on ♥

caoimhinh

Abigail might even get a Name, General or something like that. Promoted all the way to the top XD

[Liliet](#)

Why do people keep inserting Names everywhere? Abigail is determined to be as unmotivated and self-oriented as possible. She is very much not someone who imposes her will on reality, which we know is a requirement for someone to be Named. She's like the definition of 'swept along with the tide'.

Sometimes non-Named get lucky as well.

caoimhinh

I meant it as joke, actually.

She reminds me of Tanya from Youjo Senki, who just wants to live safely and work comfortably behind a desk but keeps being deployed to the front lines because she is Cursed with Awesome.

[Liliet](#)

Oh yes, that's Abigail ♥

imagesbe

Well that, and the fact that that anime's interpretation of God was petty and spiteful and determined as hell to get her killed even though he wasn't allowed to do it

directly. But yes, it was partly because Cursed with Awesome.

[sengachi](#)

I'm pretty sure that accurately describes this world's gods too.

magesbe

This is true, but it's unlikely (thought strangely possible) that the Gods here have a personal grudge with Abigael.

caoimhinh

Being X wants her converted, not dead, actually. The Cursed with Awesome comes from the fact that Tanya was born with A-class capacity for Magic, so there's no way they aren't going to send such young and powerful mage to the frontlines no matter how talented she is as a strategist. hahaha

[Liliet](#)

well now I'm going to be looking that up

caoimhinh

It's a series of Japanese Light Novels called Youjo Senki (War chronicles of a little girl) also known as The Saga of Tanya the Evil, It's very good and has a unique protagonist, and also has a very interesting way in their narrative, you can find the english chapters through novelupdates.com It also has a manga and an anime of 12 episodes covering the first volume; there's an animated movie to continue the events of the anime in the makings and planned to be released later this year.

It was my favorite anime released in 2017, it has an amazing OST, with awesome opening and ending songs.

magesbe

Eh. It's true I didn't finish the anime, but from what I got God originally reincarnated her into a fantasy medieval wartorn country to try to force her to become his worshiper, including literally making it so that to fight she needed to pray to him, but Tanya is aggressively atheist and even though she acknowledges that He's a higher power she refuses on principle to view him as God.

Eventually he starts doing things like manipulating generals to put her back on the front lines just when she's about to go off them, or provoking another country to attack hers to force her into danger again. At that point he's really just trying to kill her off, because if she is killed he's going to obliterate her soul, but if Tanya lives to die of old age, she gets to reincarnate naturally, and he's super salty and refuses to lose the bet (to make her become his worshiper or get killed).

caoimhinh

It's not a medieval world, it's a parallel of ours in the 20th Century, they are right at the start of the first World War.

It's also not really so much fantasy as having a boost in abilities, the magic there is closer to low-level ESP used to power-up their weapons (fueling the flying machines, making explosive bullets, having higher range, penetrating power, barriers, etc)

I'd recommend you give it another run and watch it again until the end. It's really good.

luminiousblu

Their depiction of God is actually generally perfect, once you allow for reincarnation. If dying a sinner doesn't send you into the big fire down under then all he's really doing is trying to brute force entrance into Heaven. He's concerned with souls, not lives, and that's actually accurate to the Biblical God. Looking at stuff like what happened to Lot's wife and how Jesus went on and on about "eternal life" as "Heaven", as far as big man G is concerned once you're a rotten apple, you're not an apple at all.

If anything it's really Tanya who's being a complete idiot about this. You don't judge a higher being with lesser standards, it's like trying to directly measure the volume of a sphere by using a ruler. She's also pulling the Discworld atheist thing, because why would you actively spite a being who could snuff you out with a finger just to be a dick about it? She can't win, after all; Being X is actively not interfering as much as he could because he's holding out for a change of heart. Tanya has literally seen the face of God one-to-one, knows that it's God no matter how much she tries to pretend it isn't, and is deciding that

she's going to be self-righteous instead of essentially just living a decent life.

I mean, Akua nearly managed to become the Guide's version of Tanya, up to and including "tipped her fedora at god".

luminiousblu

Akua didn't really tip her fedora at Gods Above or Below, as best I can tell. It was mostly Catherine, Black, and Masego doing that.

Decius

Empress, if she remains incautious.

Shoddi

Or maybe the second First Under The Night.

Allafterme

Wait, did she made a reverse-Gandalf?

[*Liliet*](#)

Hm?

Allafterme

Think of Gandalf at the end of Helms Deep siege, riding on a white horse in front of cavalry, blinding the enemy with a brilliant light radiating from his white staff...

[*Liliet*](#)

Ah yea

theart0fwar

Long range smite. Mhh. Wonder what the drawbacks are.

Papalamus

What about drawbacks of lakedropping?

It actually makes sense, that opposite side has its own plans and stays proactive. Though such strike would be impossible if Masego was there. If Good couldn't stay for themselves, there wouldn't be a Good states at all possible

[*Walter*](#)

Rumena is kind of the best.

SpeckofStardust

So Catherine the First under night is up against the religious group called Lanterns.

The worst possible match up and she gets it.

RandomFan

Worst? Lanterns light up night, and are useless in the day. If the name is thematically accurate, it means both are specialized in fighting at night, but- night outlasts any lantern, in the end.

At least, that's my optimistic prediction.

konstantinvoncarstein

Anyway, the most powerful drows are Named in all but name 😊
So I think they can just apply brute force on the Lanterns to kill them

Sparsebeard

Sad thing is, each lantern killed is one less lantern to use against the Dead King.

And somehow I think they would be very usefull against the undead...

konstantinvoncarstein

The entire Tenth Crusade in a nutshell

IDKWhoitis

So, is Cat going to be a bit more smitey or she going back to her roots of killing things hard?

She could also start emulating Black in the middle of an army, lifting them up and pushing them harder than mortally possible.

antoninjohn

Well the Lanterns killed one of Cat's closest friends but it will probably all work out fine it's not like she has a reputation for holding grudges. Oh wait she Callowen.

[Liliet](#)

otoh she's palling around with Akua

grudges to Cat are like wet soap in the shower
she just can't catch 'em

Javvies

She killed Akua and bound her soul to the collar of her cloak.

Plus, Akua's both actually useful, and inclined to prove herself useful and not start trouble because Cat's all "Evil" and "Needs to be stopped".

Also, Akua considers Cat being declared Arch-heretic of the East something of an honor to be proud of ... the Lanterns will consider that reason to keep trying to kill Cat and everyone on her side and ignore everything she tries to say.

The Lanterns are very much not Akua. Two massively different situations.

Besides, Cat is a good Callowan ... and she was just thinking about possibly being able to cure/fix Nauk with Night. The Lanterns just might be turned into an example.

Liliet

I was just pointing out that Cat is not very good at the Callowan propensity for grudges, emotionally. She cares about people far too much far too easily for that. Example #2: Black, who she specifically said in Book 1 she'd hold a grudge against *forever*... and then, uh, didn't.

And the Lanterns killed an enemy commander, not a city full of civilians. Cat doesn't operate on Protagonist Centered Morality.

You're not wrong that it'll be harder for Cat to get along with them. It's literally the political aim of the current campaign though.

Dresden 67

Yeah, Cat isn't enough of a hypocrite to hate the Lanterns for assassinating her officers. Turnabout is fair play.

taovkool

Silly Cat, the city is always on fire with you around.

Morgothra

So Cat returns to find the Callowan army is divided and in trouble – could this have been the plan by someone higher up? It's not Junipers style, but one of the others might have had the guts to do this deliberately, as Cats story would practically ensure she showed up just in time.

[Liliet](#)

What do you mean? I don't think either Hakram or Vivi do story weaving on that level, and it's not exactly guaranteed to work either way (see: Willie Angels and overreliance on a pattern of three)

Morgothra

You're right that no one has the right MO for this to be that kind of gambit and it probably isn't, but it feels like something that could be done in this world – in a similar vein to the heroes being fairly sure Cat would wake during the battling the camps – her personal story is heroic enough that mysteriously vanishing then turning up with help when her side needs her most could be predicted.

[Liliet](#)

The heroes *could not count* on Cat *not* waking up, I would say. The shape for the story was there, didn't mean it couldn't fluke out.

Either way, though, that was a much simpler situation with much fewer moving parts. The last time anyone had seen Cat she was going into the Everdark with a treacherous advisor and Ranger's student at her side on a frankly ill-advised diplomatic mission, and it's been several months since then. A lot more unknown variables than a post-battle coma.

The thing with stories in Guide is that they overlap and get disrupted by each other. Your story can be pitch perfect but if there's suddenly a new bigger one rolling into town it can be broken anyway.

You need Bard level information/perception to be able to manipulate things on that kind of scale.

RanVor

Well, so much for Nauk. But honestly, I'm not sure why I'm even surprised, considering this is a universe where Anyone Can Die unless they explicitly can't. This is the prime example of how ridiculously unfair the concept of Names is.

Also, Rumena might very well be the snarkiest character in the entire Guide.

konstantinvoncarstein

He even manage to score a victory on Robber! 😏

NotQuiteHere

What's the Augur doing? Could she have helped them aim?

Liliet

Doesn't seem like her speciality. She's a fortune teller, not a scrier.

Adrian V

Ok how about Cat somehow revives Nauk in a sort of familiae way, somethign like Akua but less bindings and more mutual agreement? She is a priest for a religion now and Nauk already worshipped her, almost at least xD

superkeaton

[Another One Bites the Dust Intensifies]

Still, arson, backtalk, comradery through group mockery, and a generally rough situation, Cat's back where she belongs.

Raved Thrad

"You are in command now, Admiral Piett."

aran

For a very short moment I mixed up Nauk's and Hakram's names, and was like "0_0 Cat about to go full John Wick on someone"

Nauk's death also bites, though.

Letouriste

Bloody hells, I so wanted a cat-nauk talk again.

Q

it seems like Abigail is a bumbler always coming close to dying and being lucky enough to just miss it. She keeps getting promoted and in her pov stories we always see her lamenting how out of her league she is

Interlude: Beheld I

"Necessity's children are sometimes clever but always bloody."
– Queen Yolanda of Callow, the Wicked (known as 'the Stern' in contemporary histories)

Godsdamnit, somehow she'd still ended up stuck in charge.

Legate – no, General now, because clearly someone Above was out to get her – Abigail had counted her blessings when she'd gotten word the Black Queen had come out of nowhere to save the day. The queen could take command, and she could go back to being as far as physically possible from the fighting while also not being expected to make any decisions that actually mattered. That was the trap, Abigail darkly thought. They lured you up the ranks with the promise of better pay and less people shooting arrows at you, until you got dragged so high you had to watch out for the noose instead. And she knew damn well what *field promotion* meant, thank you very much. It meant 'do the work, Abigail, but we'll only pay you what your last rank offered, and also best not fuck up or the Hellhound will eat your liver'. But she couldn't exactly say any of that out loud, so General Abigail smiled all pretty for the very dangerous woman holding a staff that made people panic if they looked at it too long.

"I'm honoured, Your Majesty," she lied.

Queen Catherine's lips twitched the slightest bit. Abigail hid her flinch well. Could the Black Queen actually read thoughts and look into souls? Surely that was just a rumour. Still, best not to risk it and change the subject. You never knew with Named.

"The fire wasn't our fault," Abigail immediately said. "Wasn't us who started it, either. I swear. The Lanterns ran out of the city after hitting the general staff and our people went after them. The chase ended up going through a grocer's shop and there wasn't no food in there, but there were candles and oil jugs."

The Black Queen arched an eyebrow, saying nothing.

"It wasn't us," Abigail insisted. "I have five official reports showing it was some big Levant woman who broke into the room and tipped over the candles. We can't be blamed for this, we even tried to stop the spread!"

Catherine Foundling's lips twitched once more, and she patted the Abigail's shoulder with open sympathy. She tried not to tremble at the touch. You were always less likely to get your blood frozen solid if you smiled.

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" the queen mused. "But I've been saying that for years, and no one ever believes me."

The – temporary, if she had anything to say about it – general paled a little at the notion that she could end up getting a reputation like the Black Queen's. Abigail had been in Summerholm when entire quarters burned green because the Squire needed to flush out a hero. Hells, she'd never have been dumb enough to enroll in the Legions if her family home and shop hadn't been

part of the cinders. Too late to bail now, though, she admitted to herself. She wasn't sure if even temporary generals were allowed to retire. Maybe she could get herself thrown out, she mused. Might be time to consider getting 'accidentally' pregnant. The queen's amusement passed quick enough, and Abigail straightened her back to look like she hadn't been thinking of what was technically an attempt at desertion.

"How many Lanterns struck?" Her Majesty asked.

"We believe twenty," Abigail said, comforted to be back on practical matters. "Twelve managed to escape the city, most of them killed while running."

Only one of them had died during the attack, though it'd been a Hells of a kill. The Callowan wouldn't forget the sight of Nauk Princekiller's fangs having snapped straight through the neck of a priest anytime soon. Not when Light had melted his plate before he even got moving, drips of molten metal leaving a trail of how he'd leapt for the kill even dying. The general had been a bloodthirsty bastard, no two ways about it, but no one had ever called him a coward. Her thoughts stalled. General Nauk was supposed to be an old friend of the queen's wasn't he? From the War College, and the early Fifteenth. Abigail really hoped the Black Queen didn't ask about the body, since she'd have to admit there was no splitting the corpse from the melted armour and no fire at hand would burn hot enough for both – the matter had been put aside for now, since there were more important things to take care of. It was odd, Abigail thought, that something mattering to her mostly because it'd gotten the three veteran Legates that should be standing in her shoes right now killed could actually be tragic to someone else. Especially to the likes of the Black Queen, who had burned and buried dozens of thousands. Even monsters had friends though, she supposed.

"Is a second strike by them likely?" Her Majesty asked.

The Queen of Callow was staring at the battle map even as she spoke, dark eyes tracing the lay of the cohorts and fortified choke points. Abigail had done what she could. There'd been no keeping the Belles Portes quarter after the disorder of a decapitated general staff had allowed the Dominion to take the bridges and secure a foothold behind them, but she'd had houses collapsed on the outskirts of the quarter and kept them contained in there by her own jesha of two thousand until a better defence could be assembled. The Levantines had since driven the Third Army back to the outskirts of Beaumontant quarter and mounted a push that took Couteau D'Or, pretty much claiming the entire middle-southern and south-western parts of Sarcella. Since then it'd been a nasty slugging match, since the Dominion had run into the raised defences and goblin traps she'd ordered set up at that line.

The two fronts had quieted some, but that was just preparation for a serious assault in Abigail's opinion. And if the next one passed her defensive lines? The Third Army was fucked, to put it bluntly. She'd been forced to send the reserves to the frontlines to slow down the fall of Beaumont until the sappers were done, and with companies still stuck keeping an eye on the cavalry to the city's sides there just weren't enough soldiers left to take back grounds if they were lost to Levant. If the lines broke, it was all downhill from there. Or that'd been the situation an hour ago, anyway, Abigail of Summerholm thought with a hard smile. Now the Black Queen was back, so it was time for lakes to start dropping. It took Krolem clearing his throat to realize she still hadn't answered the question Her Majesty had asked.

"We, uh, don't believe so," Abigail hastily said. "Senior Mage Dastardly has trip wards in place she believes will warn us if they do, but our priests say if they try anything that large again so soon they'll burn out."

The Queen of Callow blinked in surprise and tore her gaze away from the map. It was a pretty human gesture for some immortal evil-fae thing, Abigail decided. With the long, unbound brown hair and the lightly coloured cheeks, Catherine Foundling looked more like a young woman who hadn't slept in a while than the infamous victor of Second Liesse and the Battle of the Camps.

"Our priests," Her Majesty repeated. "We have *priests*, now?"

It was the temporary general's turn to be surprised. Had she really not heard?

"The House of Light split after it came out what you did in Keter, Your Majesty," Abigail said.

The Black Queen's face went blank as a wax mask. The Summerholm girl pressed on with haste.

"After it was outed you went to the Crown of the Dead to kill the Dread Empress and prevent her making a deal, they called for a Callowan conclave," she said. "They split over whether or not to name the entire Tenth Crusade graceless. About two thirds went against, but the Salian conclave's decrees were declared heresy by unanimous vote. Wasn't enough for some, though: the last third walked out and pronounced the Tenth Crusade to be godless Proceran intrigue. Nowadays they call themselves the 'House Insurgent', Your Majesty. Hundreds enrolled in the army as healers."

For a moment the silence in the room was thick as oil, then the Queen of Callow glanced to the side. There was a half-empty bottle of wine at the edge of the table, leftovers from when Abigail had taken pity on Dastardly's pain at having an entire cheek and eye grown back. It was her last bottle from Callow,

too. The Black Queen grabbed it, sniffed at the rim and visibly brightened before taking a long swallow. A little sigh of pleasure followed.

"Oh, that's the stuff," Queen Catherine muttered. "Been way too long."

She shook her head, afterwards, and got back to business. *So no one's going to die*, Abigail mused. *That's nice*. Tanners didn't have to worry about things like that, she knew. *No, Abigail*, she thought, *think of the ferret-faced cousins. Stick the course, how long can we really be at war anyway?*

"Well," the queen said. "You've had an interesting year, I see. We'll set that aside for now, General Abigail. Your reserves aren't marked on the map, how many have you held back?"

"They, uh, are, Your Majesty," Abigail replied.

She leaned over and tapped her finger near the five cohorts holding the grounds between the fire and the edge of Beaumontant quarter. There was nothing held back because the reserves were on the front. The queen grimaced.

"I was afraid of that," she said. "That's going to get messy. These, are they paved roads or bridges?"

The Black Queen was pointing at the four grey streaks representing the bridges going into Belles Portes, and Abigail told her as much.

"How broad is the river?" Her Majesty asked.

"At the bridges, around twenty five feet," the temporary general said. "It's broader further west, going towards the source. Stays about the same going east, though a mile downriver it'll start splitting and narrowing."

The queen frowned at the map pensively. Abigail cleared her throat.

"If you're thinking of using munitions on it, ma'am, we've already tried," she said. "General Nauk had our sappers take a look, wanted to use that to repulse the first attack. It's frozen too deep, though, took an entire cart of demolition charges and it didn't spread all that far."

"Munitions aren't what I have in mind," the Queen of Callow calmly replied. "General, if we hold until sundown our retreat is assured. Cracking the river will buy us that breathing room, but only if you can push the enemy out of the city first. We need a moat, not an obstruction."

Abigail tried to think of a very polite, professional way of saying that this couldn't be done but it wasn't her fault. While she was considering what would work best, the Black Queen pressed on.

"I'll be taking five hundred drow and Special Tribune Robber's cohort with me," Her Majesty continued in that same even tone, eyes remaining peeled on the parchment. "That grants you three thousand and a half fresh warriors to break the deadlock."

"They're dug in good, ma'am," General Abigail said. "Unless the drow can scale walls barehanded-"

"They can," Catherine Foundling casually said, like it was nothing out of the ordinary. "While light infantry and currently no more physically able than humans, they have extensive training in raiding tactics. I'd suggest you send a number of them here-"

The Queen of Callow's finger tapped the boundary line between Beaumontant and Couteau D'Or, which by Abigail's reckoning was a line of tightly-packed merchant homes facing outwards.

"- to split the Levantines up, then thin your right flank to reinforce your left," she mused. "A hard assault on this 'Couteau D'Or' quarter will have them packed tight in the open when they draw back into Beaumontant, and a few sapper companies can bloody them into retreat from there."

General Abigail squinted down. The right flank had better hard defences, it was true – she'd had a guild house's lower level barred and turned the flat rooftop into a shooting galley for her crossbowmen – and it would hold against attack for a while even if thinned. With the recommended distraction and enough forces moved to bolster an assault on the left flank, this could possibly work. That'd still leave a pack of very angry Levantines with their blood up holding Belles Portes, though, and that quarter was the door to Sarcella. As long as the Dominion had their foothold there they'd keep bringing in troops. If the Levantines mounted a hard counterattack after the Third Army had left its defensive positions, the quarters it had taken might be just as soon taken back – and it wouldn't stop there, Abigail knew. With the kind of losses that the assaults would bring, the Third Army might end up driven out of Sarcella entirely. That'd be the end of them, with the Levantine cavalry hacking them to pieces as they retreated into the plains.

"That's only workable if the river is cracked," General Abigail finally said. "And unless you intend on taking less than a thousand light infantry out onto plains where the Dominion fields at least that much in cavalry, to get to the river you'd need to go through Belles Portes – which we can't take, until the river is cracked."

The Black Queen smiled, thin and sharp and just a little mad.

"There's another way through, as it happens," she said.

Abigail followed where the gloved finger was pointing on the map. She choked.

"That's the part that's on fire, Your Majesty," she said.

"So it is," Catherine Foundling cheerfully said. "Get ready for the offensive, general. I'll want it beginning within an hour."

The Black Queen patted her shoulder once more and limped out of the war room, humming what Abigail was pretty sure was the opening notes of the *Lord of the Silver Spears*. She was also, the leader of – temporary leader, Abigail corrected – of the Third Army noted, still holding that half-empty bottle of Vale summer wine.

"Tribune Krolem," she whispered. "I need you to looking into something."

The orc leaned forward eagerly.

"Find out who you can lodge a protest to, if the Queen of Callow steals your wine," General Abigail said.

—

The cattle-dwelling reeked.

Everything about the Burning Lands was mad, Mighty Jindrich decided. This land had never truly known order, not even in the days before the Tenets of Night, and while the Firstborn sought enlightenment through sacred strife – *the worthy take, the worthy rise* – the cattle had grown fat and insolent for that absence. The Mighty bared its teeth at small eyes peeking through a shuttered window, pleased at the squeak that sounded from inside the house. The shutters were wood, Mighty Jindrich saw. Most the house as well. How disgustingly decadent, that these Prokeren could afford to make a city mostly of wood. Even sigils of the Inner Ring were not so wealthy: it had taken an effort not to beat the cattle that had found it fit to *burn* wood, of all things. The Tomb-Maker had said that the Prokeren owned many forests, and that even if they allowed their wooden houses to rot and break they could afford to make new ones. Madness, waste and madness. Mighty Jindrich might have taken from the cattle what it knew not how to appreciate, had the First Under the Night not forbidden it.

The sigil-holder of the Jindrich let its eyes stray from the cattle-things trembling in their dwellings, instead turning to Losara Queen. Honour had been given, when the First Under the

Night had picked Jindrich and many of its sigil to accompany it into battle. More so than could be truly grasped, for Losara Queen was the voice of the Night and so honour given by it was honour given by the Night itself. What more esteemed accolade could there be? The presence of the *gobberin* marred the situation some, but not so much that it grew beyond enjoyment. The green creatures were not true cattle, having many years ago warred against the *nerezim* with great fury and viciousness. They were being made to bear strange packs and drag carts, but no beasts of burden they. The leader of the pack, this Robber, it had spirit. If Losara Queen was to have servants from the Burning Lands, worse stock could be drawn from than a being that would mock Mighty at their own table. The pack following the Robber was just as dauntless, and already Losara Queen had ordered warriors of the Jindrich and the Cohort to sheath their blades thrice. This was pleasing, for sharing purpose with the weak and cowardly made for a weak cabal.

Mighty Jindrich threw back its head and hollered when their promised destination was reached, the sharp calls sounding out in defiance of the pale light. Its sigil answered in kind, approaching the heat and smoke of the blaze storming ahead without a speck of fear. The Mighty strode forward, elbowing some *gobberin* wearing strips on its shoulders and laughingly slapping aside the knife it pulled. The First Under the Night stood first before the blaze, as well it should. Even in the pale light of the sun Losara's silhouette seemed shaded, soot and ash falling at its feet as it watched the flickering flame. Jindrich bowed respectfully before approaching. It had bargained with this holy one when it was still but a strange curiosity, a creature borne by these lands yet capable of slaying Mighty. It'd also intended to betray Losara as soon as the Rumena were dealt with, as was only fitting. Since then, Mighty Jindrich had been taught the extent of its foolishness. What could a Mighty hope to do, against the very herald of Sve Noc? Some ill-made things calling themselves Firstborn still murmured of Losara Queen being *human*, but this was crass ignorance. What human could possibly bear Sve Noc on its shoulders, speak for the Tenets?

No, Losara Queen was the get of Night itself. It would return the Firstborn to these lands and wrest a realm out of the hands of the Pale Gods, usher the Empire Ever Dark born anew. And Mighty Jindrich would be there to share in that glorious thing, drenched in the blood of those that dared to test the Tenets of Night.

"Losara Queen, we stand ready for war-making," Jindrich said. "We will tread this blaze, should you wish it so."

The holy one smiled, white teeth flashing like ivory in shade.

"Miracles don't come cheap, Jindrich," the First Under the Night said. "And there are only so many I can bear. Fortunately, I have something almost as dangerous to wield."

The Mighty smiled, pleased at the sharing of wisdom.

"What may this be, Losara Queen?"

The holy one's eyes crinkled in amusement, and it inclined its head behind them.

"Madmen, Jindrich," the First Under the Night said. "Never underestimate what a few of those can accomplish when told something is *impossible*."

Behind them the *gobberin* had opened begun empty the carts, to work with wood and steel to raising strange wooden structures and nail them solid. Skins reeking of vinegar were taken out from the bags, and boxes of snow prepared. Long staves of metal and wood, some with broom-like endings and others not, were prepared and made wet with a strange concoction kept in bottles.

"Prepare yourself, Mighty Jindrich," Losara Queen said. "We'll pass where the blaze is weakest, but to hesitate is death."

"It was ever thus," it laughed, and raised its fist to the sky.

All is Night, Mighty Jindrich yelled out, and its sigil echoed in kind. For a moment, it thought, that prophecy drowned out even the roar of the fire.

—

"I missed this," Special Tribune Robber admitted.

There'd been some good laughs, since the Boss had gone underground to take over yet another nest of vipers in order to throw it at one of the other nests of vipers. He'd gotten to hunt Imperial agents in the streets like animals with the Guild of Assassins, stuck it to the Matrons while negotiating for munitions in Thief's name and even gotten to see what happened when you sent back a High Lady's threatening envoy by trebuchet. There'd been deaths, too, but no anyone he cared too much about. Well, Hakram had somehow managed to lose another hand but sad at was Robber was looking forward to the truly legendary amount of sarcasm the Boss would inflict him over it so it could be called a draw. Pickler was still both mind-blowingly lovely and completely out of reach, especially when putting shady dwarven gold to nefarious purposes, but that was just the way of life. Robber of the Rock Breaker Tribe, also known as the Lesser Footrest to Her Majesty the Queen of Callow, had started to figure he'd seen it all. He'd been to more places most goblins ever would, killed people in most of them and participate in the

strategic arson of not one but *several* cities. He was no longer young, by his people's standards, and he'd wondered if it might not be time to start thinking about a glorious death.

Then the Boss had come back, and she was as superbly mad as ever.

She'd left as some sort of bastardly immortal fae thing and come back breathing and smelling like a mortal, with an army of bloodthirsty treacherous magical dark elves she'd somehow become a religious figure for if he'd picked up on the chatter right. And she was going to use them to wage war on half the continent, so she could make it sign some sort of treaty then use that to attack the Hidden Horror as a united front. She also had in stand a blackwood staff that felt to his senses like some sort of silent, monstrosly large predator and she was talking shit to some possibly god-like crows that no one but her seemed to be able to look at directly for more than a fraction of a heartbeat at a time. Robber had been close to those things for hours, and even avoiding to look at them he'd since been plagued with some of the most horrifying nightmares of his life. Gods, it was just like coming home. And now she'd decided that the best way to use tactical surprise was to attack through where no one had positioned troops, which had happened because the place in question was on fire. So he'd casually been informed that his cohort was to build several examples of a lighter siege turtle so that she could stuff seven hundred soldiers in them and run through a city fire, in order to crack a frozen river. All the while and enemy army and several larger cavalry contingents were on the prowl.

No one did crazy like the Boss. There was a *reason* goblins volunteered to enroll in the Army of Callow, and it wasn't the Hellhound's winning personality.

"You know, sometimes I wonder if there's something in the water back in the Grey Eyries," Catherine Foundling drawled. "It'd explain a lot about goblins. Isn't lead supposed to make people go mad? How likely is it that there's some in your wells?"

"I wouldn't know, I've only ever drunk the blood of my enemies," Robber shamelessly lied.

"That sounds rather unsanitary," the Boss said. "Zeze says there's all sort of humours in that."

The inside of the modified siege turtle was stiflingly hot, even with all the preparations. Skins soaked in vinegar and water, boxes of snow to cool the air coming from the slight openings above and poles coming out of the shuttered panels that allowed enterprising drow to push down anything still on fire that came too close. Beneath the bottom rim, still-burning embers could be swept with broom-like poles when they were layered too thickly or skins of water used to put out open flames – though the smoke and

vapour from that was wicked, and had already scalded a few unwary goblins. Each of the shells allowed for fifty people to hide under, fourteen brave turtles having tried the blaze. One had been struck by a falling beam barely twenty feet in, and less than ten of those inside had managed to crawl screaming back to the safety of outside the fire. The outer ring was the most dangerous part, though, they'd know that from the start. The fire had begun somewhere deeper in, and spread out more or less in a circle depending on where stone and space obstacles could be found. Past that part there'd been progressively less flame and more smoulder, though that hardly meant there was no danger. More than once the lack of air or the heat of what was left to breathe had made soldiers pass out.

The lucky ones fell inside the shell when there were enough in shape left to carry them. The others were left behind for the fire to take. The Boss had made it clear she couldn't start calling on her tricks without putting the river work at risk, and there was no point in trying this at all if she exhausted herself trying to keep everyone alive. Another turtle was lost when its warriors misjudged what they were stepping on under the ash layer and got themselves over red-hot stone, a chunk of the drow immediately dropping with screams as their thinner boots got torched through and the turtle fell for lack of enough people holding it up. The structure turned into an oven within moments, and the four survivors only lasted long enough to make it out in the open – which wasn't any more survivable than inside. Robber had been blessed enough to share a shell with the Boss herself, and she'd been utterly nonplussed the whole way through. Her face had darkened every time a turtle was lost, but they'd pressed on anyway. Everyone inside was sweating like a pig, including her. Robber watched the Queen of Callow pat down her cloak while hobbling forward and cleared his throat.

"Looking for something?" he asked.

In front of them a pair of drow shifted the panels open, knocking down a wooden wall half-devoured by flames and almost entirely blackened. The panels closed, and the turtle came forward. Soon they'd reach the last crucible, the second part of the outer ring – and after that, out onto the snow.

"Would you happen to have matches on you?" the Boss casually asked.

"Sure," Robber snickered, reaching for his sapper's bag.

Sadly all the munitions delicate in the face of heat had to be removed, but he still had a few goods left to peddle. Including a set of pinewood matches, which he handed to his queen. She let out a noise of appreciation then shoved her staff into the crook of her arm, produced from her cloak an already stuffed pipe and struck the match. Within moments it was lit, filling the turtle

with the acrid scent of wakeleaf. She carelessly dropped the match on the ground, where it fell on embers and almost instantly began burning up.

"That is *cruel*," Robber admiringly said.

And yet when he flicked his eyes, he caught most the drow smothering grins. Gods, they actually enjoyed the Boss being like that didn't they? Kind of an asshole, and utterly indifferent to the fact that they were strolling through a bonfire of a city if it got in the way of her petty pleasures.

"I waited until we were on the last stretch," the Black Queen defended herself.

She added something in the drow tongue afterwards, and the drow roared and sped up. Robber was pretty sure, by the tone, that it was along the lines of 'put your back into it, I haven't got all day'. After that it wasn't long until through the thin openings made into the wood he was able to glimpse the silhouettes of tall granite statues, and a mostly open way to there. Which was for the best, given that some of his minions were starting to slow down and only kept from passing out by biting their lips bloody. There was a sudden crash behind, and the Boss called out in drow tongue: the porters at the back opened the shutters there, revealing a large wooden plank had scythed through the middle of the turtle right behind them. Catherine breathed in sharply at the sight, then cast a look in front. *Not out of the woods yet*, Robber thought. Another call in drow-tongue. The shutters were shut and the advance resumed. Eleven turtles made it out onto the snow, out of the fourteen who'd set out.

There were some, Robber thought, who'd call that a miracle.

[DroughtBringer](#)

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

Go vote!

Aston

Go Cat with your power of being an ordinary but insane human.

Love the fire walking scene.

Cat is slowly winning as the series winds down to a conclusion.

Hope she has many more mad ideas.

[theothin](#)

I don't think we're approaching the conclusion yet. We're pretty early in the fifth book, and from what I understand, Erratic is currently planning on a total of six. Still time for all sorts of things to go wrong!

[Javvies](#)

I love Robber POVs. He's awesomely hilarious. I really want to know more about what happened in Callow while Cat was gone now.

Poor Abigail, I'm pretty sure you don't really have anyone who you can complain to when Cat steals your wine. Hakram, maybe, since he wanted Cat to stop drinking so much. But, as Robber noted, Cat's going to have all kinds of fun ripping on Hakram for losing another hand.

Agent J

Trust your instincts. The answer is, indeed, Hakram. Remember Indrani's tavern crawls? When in doubt, send the bill to the Deadhand. You'll be reimbursed promptly.

Rook

He'd probably reimburse her by making the field promotion permanent and doubling her workload

[Euodiachloris](#)

But, hey... actual pay. This is what winning looks like, right? 😊

Author Unknown

He should send her some grog as compensation. Let her try to complain about it without insulting Hakram or orcs in general.

stevenneiman

Not his style. I feel like he would totally just add the price of a new bottle onto her pay as a general. Alienating people like that isn't wise even if it is funny, but using it as an opportunity to make her slightly more inescapably stuck being a general would be totally practical. And just as funny.

[Liliet](#)

I could 100% see Hakram sending her a new bottle of wine with an apology note along the lines of "I'm sorry for

my alcoholic queen and I'll have a stern talking-to with her about it"

...ok probably not but he would 100% *think* that. While sending her a new bottle of wine and reimbursement for the old one.

Matthew

This is easily one of my favourite chapters to date. Catherine is magnificently mad, and Robber is always a scene stealer 😁

nipi

Yup. Cat broke her promise of not drinking while on campaign.

Argentorum

She broke it, because she is allowed to **lie** now. Hakram can be angry all he wants.

RanVor

It is in equal parts amusing and aggravating that everybody seems to think the only reason Cat kept her promises as the Sovereign of Moonless Nights was because she was incapable of breaking them. Did it not occur to any of you that she might have thought being honest to her friends is a good idea?

[*Liliet*](#)

IKR.

Sure, it was easier for Cat to stick to her promises when she was physically incapable of breaking them, but there's a reason she made so many of those: she *wanted* to keep them.

Andrew Mitchell

No, I don't think so. If I recall correctly, that oath was finished when Hakram and Cat were reunited after the battle of the camps (Procer's invasion of northern callow).

stevenneiman

I think my favorite part was either the way that Abigail responds to everything with a mixture of hidden terror at the Black Queen and an inner monologue which bears striking similarities to the way Cat thinks, or the wonderful list from Robber about how awesome Cat is, composed entirely out of things nobody sane would consider good.

[Liliet](#)

Yes.

Both of these are so good ;u;

stevenneiman

"Be more careful with those, Hakram! Hands don't grow on trees! Well, except for that one experiment by (insert Dread Emperor here), but even he admitted that was a bad idea."

Shequi

Dread Empress Manipula, I'd wager 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

So that's where the maledendrons in the Wasteland came from!

NerfContessa

Amazingly well done indeed. And robber never disappoints.

[rogueofstorms](#)

Jindrich's POV was amaze! "the get of Night" bahahaha. I really hope we get more drow POVs in the interludes because it makes for a really awesome aside.

[sengachi](#)

Seeing the perspective of the Mighty is awesome, but at some point I'd really love to see the perspective of some lesser drow for context. I think it would be a fascinating difference.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed.

Privilege within drow society is the fucking *best* topic to potentially explore

HandyCapped

I dunno, privilege is a pretty hard word for something you fairly(unfairly?) murdered yourself repeatedly into.

[Liliet](#)

"Privilege" is not a reflection of fairness, only of perspective, in this context.

[Mental Mouse](#)

He's not entirely wrong, given Sve Noc created Cat's current body.

danh3107

First we have General Abigail, Hero of Callow

Then Mighty Jindrich, he lusts after huge guts to spill
and we end it with the glorious lesser lesser footrest.

What a great chapter

lol

You're saying it wrong, it's General Abigail of Summerholm,
HERO OF CALERNIA!

RanVor

Bets on her managing to kill Neshamah by accident?

Gareth Hughes

Bets on her becoming queen of callow after cat?

[Liliet](#)

absolutely betting on that
maybe not too much but god it's too funny to not entertain
as a possibility

Rook

Mighty Jindrich would probably find a way to interpret
Catherine stepping in cow shit as some sort of holy miracle

It's amazing. I hope it lives.

LokeshC2

Well, considering that she's had years of supernatural
training to work up her awareness, there must be some divine
reason for why she would step into cow dung. And no. I am not
stooping so low as to entertain any 'intercessor pushed her'
theories.

Owyn Beleforte

Well, Hakram had somehow managed to lose another hand

but sad at was Robber was

looking forward to the truly legendary amount of sarcasm the
Boss would inflict him over it so it could be called a draw.

Also, long live the lesser lesser footrest.

IDKWhoitis

Smoking while walking in a city on fire. Gods damned, Cat knows how to march in style.

This shit is going into the books as the time the Black Queen took a stroll through hell to get to the battle quicker.

caoimhinh

She loves the smell of fire in the morning. It smells like victory XD

I'm a little bit disappointed she didn't just light her pipe from a burning house or something. "The Black Queen burned the town of Sarcella down so she could smoke her weed classy" does have a certain ring to it.

nipi

No no no. She doesnt light it herself. She hands the pipe to one of the drow or goblins who go out to clear a path. "While youre out there be a dear and light it for me."

[theothin](#)

Its effect doesn't sound much like weed. I've been reading it as basically being adderall.

[Liliet](#)

Does Robber not know it's a painkiller? I just wonder, bc 'walking most of the way without it' sounds like the more badass feat here

[sengachi](#)

Oooohhhhhh dang, that's a good catch.

magesbe

At this point I'm kind of expecting her to use Night for the painkiller, but she might be conserving everything to break the river.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

[dominator10](#)

I fully expect Juniper to be reading a report about suitable recompense for when the Black Queen appropriates an acting general's wine when all this is said and done.

...

And summarily ignore it.

[Liliet](#)

foist it off on Hakram
Not Her Problem Please And Thank You

Jonnnney

Elves are ageless and made of flesh. Fae from Arcadia are immortal and are made of magic. The fae don't breed they merely come back to life when the seasons change while elves breed via the trees or something(the elves on this continent have no children because they slaughtered the original inhabitants of their forest). Elves can breed with other races the normal way to get half elves.

Jonnnney

Hey now Abigail has shown to be able to use wine to yield strategic success. Taking her booze is like taking Catherine's fire.

Novice

A so-called queen stealing something that is rightfully her general's? Now you see the Oppression inherent in the system. Down with the Foreign Wicked Tyrants!

naturalnuke

Technically where they're from they're just called Wicked Tyrants.

[daegone823](#)

I think out of all the races:
Fae, Dwarves, Human, Goblin, Human, Undead, Giants, Demon(?), Angel, Ogre, Orc, Elf(what is the difference between Elf and Fae?)

we can have another popularity contest if needed. Hopefully author see this.

[boballab](#)

Traditionally beings like Elves, Nymph's, Hags, Gnomes, Pouka's, Pixies and others I don't recall off the top of my

head make up what is called "The Fae". In that context that makes all Elves, Fae but not all Fae are Elves.

matesbe

The difference between an elf and fae is... literally everything. They are completely different species. They are as different as humans and fae are.

Not the least of which is that elves are beings of the normal world while Fae primarily dwell in Arcadia.

[daegone823](#)

Any other differences because you mentioned location that is all?

What is the difference Wise Magesbe?

nipi

Fae probably cant be killed permanently

[Dresden 67](#)

They're entirely different species.

Fae are creatures of Arcadia, made by the Gods before Creation. They are truly immortal, even when they're killed they eventually reincarnate in a different form.

Elves are a species that were created at the same time as humans, orcs, goblins and everything else in Creation. They actually originate on a different continent, they came to Calernia 3000 plus years ago. They're eternally young and have some unusual abilities but they can be killed permanently.

I really don't understand why you'd assume they're the same.

Jonnnney

Elves are ageless and made of flesh. Fae from Arcadia are immortal and are made of magic. The fae don't breed they merely come back to life when the seasons change while elves breed via the trees or something(the elves on this continent have no children because they slaughtered the original inhabits of their forest). Elves can breed with other races the normal way to get half elves.

matesbe

As others have said in great detail, but I shall bestow upon you my wisdom and list some other differences:

Fae aren't even alive as we know it, they are basically parts of Arcadia personified. They are stuck in a story, especially in Arcadia but even to an extent outside. Elves are (relatively) ordinary living beings. They are born in Creation. When they die, the same thing happens to them as happens to any other living being. When Fae die, they basically respawn for the next round of the story. Don't know if that still happens after the courts united.

Elves get stronger the longer they live, Fae will never change in power unless they're a Prince/Princess that becomes Kind/Queen. Elves can selectively ignore one rule of creation (or at least the stronger ones can), Fae are bound by creations rules as long as they are in it.

You not knowing the difference between Elves and Fae isn't just something to miss because some skimming here or there, it requires actively not paying attention to considerable swaths of the story.

[daegone823](#)

I am so glad main character is no longer a far, so I won't have to bother. Confused me in high school with Shakespeare, confused me in dungeons and dragons play through, got worse after reading Dresden files, why would this story fix my affliction/ ignorance.

Thank you though I think with the help of the community I have a better grasp this Killian is a quarter elf not fae.

[Liliet](#)

I mean every single story/setting has a different distinction between elves and fae. If you think it's the same everywhere, no wonder you're confused 0.0

Pethrai D'arkos

What? No! Killian isn't a quarter-elf she's a quarter-fey. That's why she can't do higher sorceries, because at those power levels her magic tries to manifest flaming wings which her body is not physically capable of handling.

Mind Ranger is a half-elf.

Darkening

You forgot Devils, they're distinct from Demons, and the Drow are different than elves, and while we haven't seen them in person, Gnomes are confirmed to be in setting, with ridiculous technology.

[Euodiachloris](#)

And, the Gnomes could, if we're very unlucky, be... Kender.
Which would, indeed, be a scary, scary thing.

[boballab](#)

You know Cat is going to get blamed for that fire now that she used it in a wickedly devious plot.

[Decius](#)

She DID drop a lit, used match in the area where the fire started.

naturalnuke

The heroes investigating the scene later will have a field day with this.

[daegone823](#)

Also am I the only one who is happy that Nauk actually got a heroes send off. Truly happy that author including something for our finger chewing orc.

I don't know; it looks just the tiniest bit too cool and drawn out, especially right after the previous chapter's lengthly complaints in the comments. At least he didn't gain a Name out of nowhere.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think it wasn't pre-planned, I think people were just complaining prematurely.

Faiir

This was glorious!
Another!

[Hakurei06](#) [sengachi](#)

Who else is looking forward to whatever the hell it is that happens when drow kill and harvest a Lantern?

Atagan

My bet is that they try but Night and Light are incompatible so they have to harvest everything except the holy things in a

priest's corpse. Or maybe they do manage to and we get miracle wielding, night sworn, winter dipped drow.

Dragrath

Moonlight is a thing especially since she is no longer the Duchess of moonless nights promoted Queen of Winter...

[Sugar Roll](#)

Word on the street is, the fastest way to become a general in the army of Callow is through arson.

Decius

"you went to the Crown of the Dead to kill the Dread Empress and prevent her making a deal"

"Yes. That's exactly what I went there to do."

[sengachi](#)

I mean ... it's not entirely wrong.

Insanenoodlyguy

It's exactly what she can say before Cordelia.

"I went to the Crown of the Dead to kill the Dread Empress and prevent her making a deal with the Dead King. Killed her twice and ruined some of the Dead Kings toys, and set some stuff on fire, though I'm sorry to say I didn't kill her enough times to prevent the alliance."

Then she just looks at Grey Pilgrim cause that ones going to be hard to counter.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think she made a secret before Cordelia or anyone else on that level about what she went to Keter to do.

Now, stories spread in general populace always simplify – and in this case, they happened to simplify away the unpleasant and also not-working-out part :3

Not that killing Malicia worked out, but Catherine put a great deal more effort & risk into that part.

I'm still kind of amazed by the fact that that, like... happened. And the entire Woe was like 'sure yeah killing her over the fact she'd sell out half the continent if given the chance to make the deal sounds like a good reason to tangle

with the Dead King's powerful servants and potentially piss off the Hidden Horror himself while we're on his territory'.

"This seems rather ill-mannered, as she does not own it" – Masego, being the darling that he is.

Catherine fully 100% deserves the credit she got for this, even if it's also sweeping under the rug an uglier fact.

[sengachi](#)

"You know what they say about the Callowan army?"

"What do they say?"

"Goblins volunteer to join."

"... dear Gods preserve us."

antoninjohn

Levant "We have all the ways to attack us blocked off with fortifications and lots of trips or on fire, there is no way they can mount a working counter attack now."

Cat "Look at weak spot in their defence line."

Callow General "Your grace, that's a field of burning buildings"

Cat "The fire not green so let's get going through them"

RanVor

Double miracles!

I'm curious what the priests will tell upon witnessing the Night.

konstantinvoncarstein

"Oh shit", I suppose

Ashen Shugar

lol. Despite now being in the same position, Abigail still thinks Cat started the fire.

nipi

Robber might be inching towards a name seeing as how he can sense power in Cats staff.

Also Cat, dont teach the citizens of murder below that being mad is something they should be desiring.

[Euodiachloris](#)

That, or the Sisters Gruesome are messing about by deliberately making the thing so very highly ominous that even Muggles with

a half-way decent sense of self-preservation can pick up on it.
shrugs

Wyvern

Since when, exactly, has Robber had a half-way decent sense of self-preservation?

[Liliet](#)

I think the staff is just inherently ominous, obvious from a regular mortal's perspective as well. It's miracles after all, not magic, much less precise in its effect.

Mike E.

This was so worth it just for Robber's POV.

"gotten to see what happened when you sent back a High Lady's threatening envoy by trebuchet."

[Liliet](#)

The Pickler bit was so cute ♥

nipi

Anyone else thinking that the dwarves dont meddle much in the affairs of the surface dwellers because they have some kind of agreement with the gnomes restricting them to "below the mountain"?

Oshi

Dwarves have a civilization that is so big the surface world would fit in a cup as far as they are concerned. Why would you bother worrying about Alaska when you are setting the continental US?

Jonnnney

The dwarves are larger than the small nations of Calernia, but they still fear the hidden horror and there are nations larger than said continent out there. Calernia as a whole is but a small piece of a much larger world

Jonnnney

The gnomes don't seem to care about any other than keeping their trchnogical superiority. Remember that the continent of Calernia is barely important in the grand scheme of things. The elven empire that the Golden bloom came from is larger than the entire continent. The dwarves aren't someone who can be smaked down easily but they are not on Par with the gnomes.

Sylwoos

Dwarf technologies is definitely stepping on the gnome's toes. It's not a coincidence that the most advanced race of Calernia happen to live underground where no crying work and flying ship aren't a threat.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think so. All we've seen is magic – runes, lava elementals – and regular siege engines, just very well-made.

Nowhere near modern tech, and gnomes would be past that by now.

Zaver SaintCloud

Times like this, I really wish the stories had Tags, so I could actually go back and find stuff. For example, I vaguely know General Nauk, but would be nice to reread his screen time from the War College and first battles. Abigail is more familiar, and now I want to read again her fights against the Fae, especially when she infamously earned the reputation for eating them, lol. Seriously though, please please think about Tags. Finding anything specific in prior chapters is effectively impossible.

[Liliet](#)

google "site:practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com Nauk"

not a replacement for tags but a surprisingly good way to find stuff

Cicero

Abigail is in Kaleidoscope IV

theart0fwar

> and participated in the strategic arson of not one but several cities.

Aaah, goblins.

tbarim

Bets on whether Abigail becomes Queen of Callow?

[Liliet](#)

she will

[Dresden 67](#)

Nauk is in almost every chapter of the second half of Book 1 and the battle scenes in Book 2 aren't hard to find in the Table of Contents.

We never actually saw Abigail fight the fae, she was introduced in Interlude: Skirmish 1 and 2.

[Daniel E](#)

Much obliged! Though I think my original point remains valid. For Abigail, I'm thinking of the conversation she has with some Orc, where she gets complimented on eating the Fae like an Orc would, but in truth it was just a blood spray in her mouth. It was like 1 paragraph, but finding it without Tags would be an arduous process, to say the least. If I could look at every story marked 'Abigail', that would reduce my searching to all of 5 minutes.

Cicero

Kaleidoscope IV is where we hear about Abigal drinking the blood of fae.

[Hoeru](#)

Best chapter in ages. LOVED IT!

[Adrian V](#)

Now i want more interactions between Abigail and Cat, from both POVs, i almost feel she got promoted so the author had a reason to get them in the same room more often.

Now maybe its a redherring, maybe it is only me wishfully thinking, but am i the only one who thought the description of how Nauk was killed is curious, i mean it sounds like the heat did nothing to him directly, i doubt this is a case of him being alive encased in iron (although...) but maybe they had to "cheat" to kill him, something like banishing his soul from his body even when the body didn't have a wound, anyway maybe the way he was killed left the door open for more hands on intervention.

Of course this all assuming the Lanterns didn't go all stabby once they saw him not burning...

[Liliet](#)

I wonder if Abigail is an organically developed running gag, like "hmmm I need a POV here... oh hey Abigail exists" or if her story was pre-planned from the first time she came up.

Exec

TYPOS:

1. she patted the Abigail's shoulder
2. "It was odd, Abigail though,"
thought*
3. "south-western partss of Sarcella"
parts*
4. "I need you to looking into something."
look*? go looking?
5. "had opened begun empty the carts"
6. "but sad at was"
but sad as that was*?
7. "and participate in the strategic"
participated*
8. "She also had in stand a"
in hand*?
9. "All the while and enemy"
an enemy*

[onedollargum](#)

Fire Walk with Me.

Viconr

Hmm... They could not remove Nauk's body from his armor and
couldn't burn/melt it...

I sense some sort of dreadknight or something in the making.

[Adrian_V](#)

I nearly forgot!!

Is no one going to comment on how weird it is that some drow
could turn into extremist hippies? or maybe hippie isn't the
right word...ecologically conscient? mmm anyway i can just
picture some of them starting fights so someone doesn't fell a
tree or something xD

Mikasi

It's more to the fact that wood is precious in the underground.
Sort of a reverse scarcity situation. They don't understand
that, as long as the forests are tended right, there's an
almost infinite supply. Thus why Jindrich thinks the idea of
someone having access to an entire forest is nothing but lies.

AKA Stone is cheap in the Underdark, but your average wooden desk is a treasure.

werafdsaew

Since Cat is going to be using the Night anyways to unfreeze the river, why not just gate in there directly instead of going through the fire?

[Liliet](#)

1) She has a limit on how much Night she can call upon in quick succession before, well, burning out.

2) I think opening a gate to Arcadia lights a much brighter metaphysical flare for anyone who's looking than strictly local effects.

Skaddix

1) Yeah Cat has more control especially with Sve Noc helping her on the more complicated aspects but she has so to speak smaller mana pool and less Stamina. As she is not a Named or Fae Abomination. She is simply Human.

2) Gates to Arcadia are unreliable right now and are currently being shunted to various Hells. The Fae don't know why. Masego is on a bender and cannot be reached. While Sve Noc and Akua haven't really had a chance to study the issue. Not to mention Sve Noc doesn't want make it obvious they recently under went Apotheosis by throwing around too much raw power. So reliable Gates are out for the probably most of this volume at least.

[Liliet](#)

There were no issues with Sve Noc using the gate, 'charting' the path for Cat. I suspect it has to do with them calculating it manually, as opposed to fae doing it reflexively

Skaddix

Have we seen them Sve Noc try to gate since they landed? The Army of Callow had no problem gating into the region. Its once they got to the region that they found themselves unable to reliably Gate.

[Liliet](#)

Hm, that's one possible mechanism of how it works, good point,

[Adrian V](#)

And all of that is harder during the day, if it was night she probably could do it like that. Or at least use some night to protect against the fire somewhat.

Cicero

Good thing Cat only had drow and goblins with her for that trek through fire. Orcs are notoriously afraid of fire you know. Especially Hakram, his delicate constitution would have made hick sick like a dove.

Mlissa

So far away we wait for the day
For the lives all so wasted and gone
We feel the pain of a lifetime lost in a thousand days
Through the fire and the flames we carry on

Vicont

Wait, Abigail said she wasn't there during Lanterns' attack.

"Them Dominion priests hit a meeting of the general staff," she replied. "Lanterns, I think they're called. One moment it's night, then it's bloody Light everywhere and most the room is dead. I was looking into a supply discrepancy so they didn't get me ..."

But then she thinks

"The Callowan wouldn't forget the sight of Nauk Princekiller's fangs having snapped straight through the neck of a priest anytime soon. Not when Light had melted his plate before he even got moving, drips of molten metal leaving a trail of how he'd leapt for the kill even dying."

That's kinda contradictory.

[Javvies](#)

Not necessarily.

The "checking into a supply issue" means she wasn't in the primary target zone when the Lanterns struck, not that she wasn't necessarily nearby or able to see what happened.

Besides ... Abigail's statement could just as easily be describing her memories of viewing the aftermath. Nauk killed his target, and the bodies remained where they fell when the surviving Lanterns withdrew.

Vicont

Wasn't in primary zone – maybe, but what – she was checking papers somewhere conveniently in line of sight?... Well, she

COULD be checking something not important enough for staff room, but specifically in sight of General to be on his call... Yes, like taking subordinate out of the room into another, but leaving doors open, that's possible.

Viewing the aftermath – no, her memories sound like direct witness to me.

Still think author simply taken two different variants and forgot about it.

Interlude: Beheld II

"A good sword will find a use, or make one."
– Levantine saying

This was to be an iron day, Captain Elvera could feel it in her bones.

Twenty years she'd served as an officer under the Lord of Tartessos, then a further eight under his daughter the Lady Aquiline – and before that she'd been part of a Brocelian band, as both spearwoman and striker. It was the last of those experiences she drew on now, trusting the instincts that had seen her survive iron days ranging from chimeras maddened to an entire flock of ensorcelled drakes. Something nasty was about to come for the army that had been under her command until yesterday's dusk, and they were not prepared. Elvera might be old and slow, these days, but she'd seen more bloodshed than the rest of this army of pups put together. They thought a few honour feuds and sanctioned hunts had them prepared for war, but it had not. The Army of Callow had spent most of a night and day making that viciously clear to anyone with eyes to see. It was just her luck that Razin Tanja, of the Binder's Blood, had been stuck with blindness for want of glory. *Just a fucking boy*, she thought, not without bitterness. Some eighteen summers youth who saw a way to hallow his already hallowed line in sending soldiers charging to their deaths at Callowan hands.

Bones creaking as they would not have twenty years ago, the captain walked the streets of Beaumontant quarter with her twenty sworn swords at her side. A trail of smoke from the east, the quarter still aflame even now, marred the blue sky like stroke of charcoal. Under it the soldiers of the Dominion of Levant clustered behind thick planks of wood and half-broken houses, never daring to look across the divide for long. Callowan

crossbowmen had proved to be mercilessly accurate from their distant perch, the sallow-eyed goblins never hesitating to put a bolt in any soldier out of cover for too long. Elvera saw no need to tempt such a fate by advancing too close, having already taken a good look when she led the assault that failed there that very morning. While red-clad legionaries had slowly retreated under the charge of the armsmen of Malaga and Tartessos, the damnable Callowan sappers had torn down two streets' worth of structures and raised palisades between the houses standing behind – leaving an open killing field of stone and wood trapped with blasphemous munitions and vicious steel traps. Elvera had lost three hundred men trying to force a way through before she called a retreat under crossbow volleys and spellfire.

The Callowans knew war, these days, in a way few soldiers of her homeland did. Captain Elvera was old enough to have fought in the Sepulcher War, when the Barrow Lord rose from the depths of Brocelian Forest and struck out with his host of bespelled beasts, barrow-spirits and Blood traitors. She'd taken a hammer blow to the arm that never quite healed right dragging Lord Romeran away from the onslaught, and for that earned both captain's rank and the suit of plate she still wore – enameled with the colours of the Slayer's Blood, a rare honour. She'd even fought in the thick of it at River's Bent, holding the shore sword in hand until the Bestowed slew the Barrow Lord in honourable combat and the Peregrine freed his soul from its earthly prison. That'd been war, but Levant had not known its like in the many years since. The Kingdom of Callow *had* and its soldiers carried those hard lessons with them. There'd been rumours, of course, fanciful tales that made it even as far as Tartessos – of fairies riding on wings of flame, of a city aflight and spewing out armies of ravenous dead, of a gate opened into the very Hells that unleashed endless hordes of devils. Elvera had not put much trust in these, knowing how stories grew with telling and miles, but now she wondered.

The captain had breached shield walls, under morning light, and seen under the helms more than just Callowans. Greenskins and Wastelanders standing elbow to elbow with warriors born to the Kingdom of Knights, striving and killing and dying together. Singing those harsh, bitter songs the Callowans were so fond of. Ten thousand of these without a speck of horse, their commanders slain by the Lanterns in the dark of night, had turned what should have been a rout into a bloody and costly stalemate. There was spine in that army, Captain Elvera thought, perhaps more so than in her own. She'd seen too many green boys and girls empty their stomachs in the mud when they came across the butcher's yard in Belles Portes quarter, where the wounded and dying had been brought for what healing could be had. The stink of shit, death and bile had not sickened Elvera's nostrils in many years, but at least she had known it before. The eager young captains and their just as young warriors had not, and it had made them

flinch. Not that Razin Tanja, heir to Malaga, had been moved by the wails and spilled entrails. No, the boy was already ordering preparations for another push against Callowan defences.

The Tartessian slowed her walk when she reached the outskirts of Beaumontant, near the streets leading into Couteau D'Or. The Tanja boy would be holding council with captains there, but she was in no mood for exhortations and castigations from some pup of a southern Blood. Instead she spoke with the soldiers she'd led into the jaws of the jackal that very morning, preparing them for what was to come. Those officers had broken their bones on Callowan defences earlier, and so were more willing to listen to an old woman's advice than most. They gathered around her, the sworn swords of captains that were attending to the noble boy who'd taken command from her.

"A simple shield wall will get your people killed," Captain Elvera said. "The sappers prepared the grounds to break up tight formations, and their mages will use fire to batter at what holds."

"It's the traps that have been bleeding us the worst, Red Ella," a middle-aged man with a heavy Malagan accent replied. "They've sown caltrops everywhere and the spikes go straight through leather soles."

Elvera let the use of her old sobriquet pass without comment. She wasn't so long in the tooth as not to slap the insolence out of a soldier's mouth if need be, but these officers had never known the sobriquet as the insult it'd been meant to be – just a name other old soldiers called her by, when the ale was plentiful.

"Better those than the buried explosions," a young girl in heavy scale grunted. "Those'll shred a man up to the waist, and sharp pieces shoot out to carve at those near. I'll call anyone a fool who says we've seen the last of those."

If they had the mages or the war hounds of the Lord of Malaga's host with them, the Callowan killing field could have been taken apart slowly but surely. But the vanguard had been ordered to attack without them, and so soldiers would die instead. Dark as the thought was, there was nothing Elvera could do about this and she would not further darken a dark day by speaking ill of the boy commanding this host. Even if he was a glory-thirsting Blood throwback from the least reputable of the founding lines. Command of the army had already been taken from her, she would not take an axe to morale or risk being sent away from the front by speaking out of turn.

"I'll speak plain," she said. "Whoever you send in front will likely die. We'll have to bridge the gap with corpses before we can get to them with blades. Split in smaller bands with shields

above the heads and move fast, that ought to thin the costs. But make no mistake, this will get bloody.”

The talk did not please them, though they had expected no salvation from her. Elvera had made no mystery of it that she thought it foolishness to attack the dug-in Army of Callow inside a city with so slight a numerical advantage. Even without walls. If they’d had a three or four thousand warriors more then encirclement and assault would have been a sound scheme, but they did not.

“We should wait for the Lord’s army,” a voice called out from the back.

There were mutters of agreement. For all that the captains were attending to Razin Tanja, they were not all so certain of his scheme to press the attack and this had bled into the lower ranks. The Malagan captains would follow one of their native Blood through Crown and Tower, but there were Tartessos captains as well – furious still at her removal from command – and those captains who had answered the call of the Holy Seljun, not the Lord of Malaga. The latter of these would not easily throw aside the notion of a patron meant to inherit a title, but neither would they destroy their own companies without concrete promises made. The boy’s initial strokes of brilliance had earned him some renown, it was true. Using Proceran smugglers who knew of secret tunnels into Sarcella to bring a war-party of Lanterns into the city and kill the enemy commanders had been inspired, Elvara would freely admit, and not a risk she would have taken in his place. Lanterns were powerful, but few and precious. Striking at Belles Portes while the Callowans were in disarray had been good sense, and if not for a sudden enemy delaying action might well have won the city.

Pressing *now*, though, when the enemy was ready and waiting? The heir to Malaga was making his inexperience plain for all the captains to see, and it would win him no friends. And yet this kind of talk would not do at all, for an army without a leader was just a mob bearing arms.

“We have bled the Army of Callow harshly with our attack,” Captain Elvara replied. “Let none gainsay this. That is worthy feat, and with wisdom we may yet accrue greater honours.”

If her plate was not enchanted, she would have died in the heartbeat that followed. The barbed javelin struck at the hollow of her throat, where only a leather collar protected her, but Elvara had years ago paid a binder to make the material strong as iron. The bone tip of the javelin broke, though it still took her breath. Even in her surprise the old captain followed her instincts and ducked behind a fence – just in time to avoid an adeptly thrown sling stone that would have caved in her forehead.

"Attack," she roared out. "Back to your soldiers! Tartessos, follow my lead."

A score of officers were already dead by the time she finished speaking, and a few of her sworn swords with them. More were slain trying to flee, though the clever broke into houses to avoid that fate. Elvera risked a glance over the edge of the fence and caught sight only of grey-skinned silhouettes in furs stalking across rooftops before another javelin had her ducking back down. They were seizing the roofs between Beaumontant and Couteau D'Or, she realized with dismay. That'd be throwing away soldiers unless it was the prelude to a strike on one of those quarters, which meant that in defiance of all common sense the Army of Callow was back on the attack. Cursing under her breath, the old soldier prepared to make a run for it. Someone needed to get the Tanja boy out of the way before he got himself killed and the army's spirits dropped into the pit, and who else save her was there? It was going to be an iron day, she'd felt it hours ago, and now that the iron had been in the fire long enough it'd grown red and burning.

Captain Elvera traced the Mark of Mercy with wrinkled hands, then steeled herself and ran out of cover.

—

Edgar was kicked awake, none too gently, and blearily rolled over.

"I was just resting my eyes, I was," he immediately claimed.

A heartbeat later he remembered he'd been allowed his rest, captain's orders, and his fear turned to resentment. The legionary pushed himself up, leaning against the wall, and began to glare at the source of his pain. Just as quick, resentment turned back to fear.

"Get up," Sergeant Hadda grinned, baring twin rows of fangs. "The war's back on, boy."

Edgar counted himself lucky that after the hard fighting of the night and morning he'd been exhausted enough to pass out in his armour, aches in the back or not. Sergeant Hadda was not the kind of officer you ever wanted to keep waiting when she gave an order. He fumbled for his sword-belt under the orc's amused gaze, and after slipping it back on ended up going through the pile of straw that'd been his bedding in order to find the helmet he could have sworn he'd set down to his left. The old sergeant took pity on him eventually, pointing it out, and Edgar hastily brushed aside the last of the straw inside before slamming it on.

"Thought we were pulled back until Afternoon Bell, sarge," he said, warily eyeing her as he pulled the clasp together.

Depending on the orc's mood, questions would either lead to pretty heavy-handed mockery or a fount of useful information. A sergeant was low as an officer could be, in the Army of Callow, but Hadda been in the Legions of Terror long before she took oath under Queen Catherine so she had all sorts of old friends in places. She tended to know more about what was going on than even Captain Pickering, to the man's frustration.

"Everyone's called back to the fronts," Sergeant Hadda said. "Including us poor, exhausted souls. We're about to teach Dominion meat why you don't pick fights with the Legions."

Like a lot of soldiers who'd been in the legions that were brought into the fold after Second Liesse, Hadda tended to speak of the Legions and the Army of Callow as the same thing. As far as they were concerned, Edgar had been told, the Black Queen was the Carrion Lord's anointed successor so there was no distinction to be drawn. As a proper Laure boy he'd found that to be a mite unpatriotic, but then he supposed greenskins were new to the fold. Hadda had been good to him, anyway, for all the rough edges. She'd looked out for her tenth, taught them the little things like 'don't gamble with goblins', 'not all Soninke are warlocks' and 'if you fight a Taghreb the entire family comes after you'.

"Merciful Gods," Edgar muttered. "Everyone said Legate Abigail was planning a retreat, not an assault."

It'd been a shame the Princekiller got killed by them heretic Dominion priests, but he'd thought it nice that a Callowan was leading the Third Army now. It'd been a point pride, when he'd talked with other Laure enlisted. Sure enough the Legate was from Summerholm, and the folks from the Gate of the East tended to be prickly and proud as cats, but they'd all agreed Summerholm stock was good at warring. And Legate Abigail was a true veteran, he'd heard, from the days of the Fifteenth – she'd fought in the Arcadian Campaign and at Akua's Folly. Heavens willing, she might end up confirmed by Marshal Juniper as the general of the Third Army if they all got out of Sarcella alive. Sergeant Hadda's scarred, leathery face split into a nasty little grin.

"General Abigail, now," the orc said. "But that's not the real treat of the day. Put some spring to your step, legionary – the Black Queen's back, so we're about to turn this fucking battle around."

Edgar let out a low whistle. It was always a mixed bag, hearing about Queen Catherine. She'd filled a lot of graves since she'd appeared during the Liesse Rebellion, and no small amount of them had been Callowan ones. But she'd also smashed to pieces all the scavengers that came after the Kingdom, after she wrested it out of the Tower's hand, and it was hard not to take pride in that. Edgar still remembered the sharp satisfaction he'd felt after

hearing them sorcerers who'd done the Doom of Liesse had gotten crucified one and all. The queen might be a bit of tyrant, but the Fairfaxes hadn't been all sweetness and light either. Sometimes you needed a hard hand to get it done, like Jehan the Wise hanging seven princes and one. But all that was back home, and before the fucking *Procerans* had declared her Arch-heretic of the East. The Principate tried the Vales and it tried the north, and when it got whipped like a dog it pulled the same trick it had in the old days. The Callowan House had called it 'perverse service to earthly powers', and that sounded about right to him.

Aye, there might be a time where the Black Queen got a little *too* black and Edgar found himself joining the rebel cause. But if the fucking *Procerans* thought their fucking princes and their fucking priests could unseat an anointed queen of Callow then they were in for a rude awakening. Maybe this time they should hang fourteen princes and two, and then another one too for Old King Selwin they'd done in at the Red Flower Vales. Edgar kept to the Heavens, as all Callowans should, but he kept to the long price as well and this one had been a very long time coming. One of these days they'd get around to evening the scales with the Wasteland too, for the Night of Knives and older slights as well, but that could wait some. The greenskins had been done in by the Tower too, bastards as they could be, and they should get their due along with the rest. Edgar did not mind at all the notion of sharing a fire with someone like Sergeant Hadda where the Tower used to stand. He didn't speak out none of that, of course. He was just a legionary, so he ate his slop with the rest of the tenth and joined up with the rest of the cohort to march up to the outskirts of Couteau D'Or quarter. He'd been worried, when going to sleep, that they might all get caught in the city and killed. Edgar wasn't worried anymore, though.

Say what you would about the Black Queen, she'd never lost a battle.

He clutched that knowledge tight as the cohorts gathered behind the defences, ranks and ranks of legionaries in red. It was all right to be afraid, he knew. On the other side of the killing grounds there would be warriors waiting, and Edgar had seen enough of his fellows die to learn that being clever or good with a sword wasn't always enough to save you. He'd seen better fighters than him die because they'd been a little too slow raising their shield, because they'd slipped in the mud or even just because they'd been on watch when the Helike cataphracts struck. You couldn't own that, you couldn't force it: it was in the hands of the Gods Above. But he wasn't just Edgar of Laure, a boy in armour in the third rank from the front. He was a legionary in the Third Army of the Kingdom of Callow, and in this strange city in this strange land they were going to *win*. He could feel it, and the others felt it too. It was in the air, the harsh taste of retribution in the making. He could see in the

eyes of the orcs, burning red. He could see it in the way the soldiers from Laure and Ankou, from Vale and Summerholm, they were all standing like they wanted to lean forward. And the Wastelanders they had it as well, the Taghreb and the Soninke, with their calm faces and their hard eyes – like they knew how this would end and they were already savouring it.

He didn't know who started singing, but Edgar did not hesitate to join his voice to it. There were times when the old rebel songs, the likes of *Here They Come Again* and *Red The Flowers*, they were what needed to be called out. But here, slowly beginning to advance against the soldiers of the Dominion? They'd give the Black Queen her due, just the once, for this song was hers and no one else's. The tune of *In Dread Crowned* swelled up, as crossbow bolts flew and legionaries raised their shields. Step, step, step: the beat was in his bones, the rhythm of it. They advanced through the flat grounds, arrows and stones harmlessly glancing off. Edgar unsheathed his blade, smelling the scent of magic unleashed.

*"Be they high or resplendent our oaths stand taller still
And in the west do quiet lie graves we have yet to fill-"*

Balls of flame detonated against the enemy, and the Third Army charged into the chaos with a roar.

—

It was madness.

The Callowans were on their last rope and everybody knew it, but they might have held on to some part of the city until nightfall and spared themselves slaughter if they'd remained in their hiding holes instead of sallied out. Razin did not know whether to be delighted or infuriated they had not. He'd had plans in the making to land another crushing blow, and had been talking the most recalcitrant captains around to backing it: another push against Callowan lines accompanied with cavalry raids on the side, all to mask another strike by the Lanterns against the high command of the heretics. There would be no recovering from *that*, discipline or no. The war leader of the Lanterns had been most willing to send her warrior-priests into the fray, and the heir to Malaga had been slowly squeezing the Tartessos captains into silence when the damned Callowans struck instead. Some few thousand grey-skinned devils had been summoned and sent to disrupt his positions in Beaumontant and Couteau D'Or, though too few to truly be a threat. He'd immediately ordered them chased out from the rooftops they were skulking on, loyal captains heeding his calls and arranging for archers and slingers to disperse the abominations, but no sooner had the exchanges began that the Army of Callow attacked. It had been... grisly.

Razin Tanja was of the Grim Binder's line and inherited her famous poise even if he had not been graced with her equally famed sorceries, so he'd not let the horror of it reach his face. But it would be a long time before he forgot the sight of it: those implacable rows of steel shields advancing in tight formations, heretics of all stripes singing their strange songs as they slew. The way crossbow bolts had fallen like summer rain, punching through all but the finest scale and plate. Foul eastern magics of flame and lightning arcing over ranks to blacken stone and sweep aside men like kindling. All the while whistles were sounded by their calm-faced officers, calling lines of legionaries forward or back like it was a parade ground and not as hellish a fight as this city could stomach. The strange devils had waited until Razin's soldiers were on the backfoot before leaping down the rooftops and fiercely charging into the men of Levant, and that'd tipped the vase over the table's edge. A rout had followed, Razin himself only escaping unscathed because that old dog of the Resafa, the one they called Red Ella, had him seized by her sworn swords before ordering them to slay any warriors impeding their way out.

Beaumontant was no safer, he'd soon learned. The Callowans had begun an offensive there as well, and the streets were packed tight with soldiers whose captains had died in Couteau D'Or or were still struggling to reach their companies. The chaos reached its apex when the Army of Callow reached the outskirts of Beaumontant from the side of Couteau D'Or as well, having wrought great slaughter. Panic spread at the realization that the Dominion's force was now surrounded on three sides: on two of them red-bladed Callowans, and the third the blaze the heretics had started trying to kill the Lanterns during their retreat. Only behind them, in Belles Portes, did the Dominion still hold ground. But many of the wounded had been set there, for lack of an easy way to carry them out of the city after the assaults of the night and morning, and the makeshift infirmaries made it difficult to get reinforcements through. It'd been a disaster in the making even before the Army of Callow began tossing its munitions – and Razin swore would see those declared blasphemy by Lanterns and House if it was the last thing he did – into the disorganized soldiers.

The second rout was even bloodier than the first. The heir to Malaga left the city in haste, passing the duty of holding Belles Portes to the doddering Captain Elvera in his absence, and went to stir up the rest of the army. The Callowans had struck a hard blow, he would give them that, but with that vain gesture they had doomed themselves. Their legionaries would be exhausted, their mages on the edge of burning out and their stocks of munitions running low. This had been a harder-earned victory than Razin would have preferred, but it would be a victory nonetheless. Father would forgive his impetuosity in seizing command of the vanguard without permission if he returned with

the destruction of a Callowan army to honour their Blood. The wounded would be brought out onto the plains, to rest in the army's camp, and then he would muster the might of Levant to crush these heretics. There were still seven thousand kept in reserve, and order would be sent to the riders probing the east and west to strike when given the proper signal. Razin was about to send summons to the Lanterns, to offer them the privilege of leading the counterattack at his side, when he was accosted by one of his lesser captains.

"Honoured Son, there is trouble," the old man said after a cursory bow.

His mail was old and the leather lacking luster, which betrayed the nature of his soldiery where lack of an accent failed to provide. One of the captains who had answered the call of the Holy Seljun, not the lords and ladies of Levant. Razin forced himself to be courteous and offer back a nod of respectful acknowledgement. He already knew that after this battle was won the captains from Tartessos would seek to sully his name, and that support from those unsworn would do much to help his reputation. If all but the captains of Lady Aquiline sang his praises, the condemnations of her soldiers would be seen for the base defamation that they were.

"Have our captains of the horse sent word?" he asked.

"No, it was our camp watch," the man said. "An enemy force has emerged from the southeast of the city."

It took a moment for Razin to grasp what was being said, and just as long to fully disbelieve it.

"Through the *fire*?" he said. "Have the men been drinking?"

"I thought the same, and so sent trusted armsmen of my own to look," the old captain replied, but shook his head. "The Callowans passed through using strange wooden engines covered in skins. There truly is a force of nearly six hundred, goblins and devils. They are led by a human, however."

"A warlock from the East," Razin frowned. "It would explain the appearance of these grey-skinned devils. The mage must be slain, it might make the abominations still in the city turn on the enemy."

The old captain hesitated.

"Honoured Son, this I did not see with my own eyes," he cautioned.

Razin almost gestured impatiently, before remembering himself, and so instead forced a smile.

"Speak, captain," he encouraged.

"Some of my men say the human wore a cloak," the old man said. "One of black cloth, but with strips of many colours."

Razin Tanja of the Binder's Blood paled. There was only one villain known in this age to wear such a strange garment.

"Ashen Gods," the boy croaked. "Gather your men, captain. Gather *everyone*. We must slay the Black Queen before she pulls her foul tricks."

Fear pulsed in his blood, but as Razin had his servants saddle his horse he found there was excitement buried deep beneath. If he could kill the black-hearted Queen of Callow, it might just break the back of her armies for good and sent the lot of them scuttling back across their borders. What an honour to the Blood *that* would be. It would not do to be reckless, he reminded himself: he was of the Binder's line, not the Champion's. He gathered two thousand men before setting out, the rest assembling behind with orders to catch up, and horns were sounded for the captains of the horse in the eastern plains to join battle as well. Razin was informed that the Lanterns were already gone to the fight for Sarcella, but messengers would fetch them. Better to share the glory than make a bold corpse. The Black Queen's goblins and abominations had already slain a few brave outriders, by the looks of it, but the march of her warband was otherwise unimpeded. Captains riding at his side, summoned in haste, Razin watched the few hundred fools keep advancing even in the face of his superior force.

"It may be a distraction," one of his officers mused. "Just some Callowan forced into a cloak, meant to delay us reinforcing the city."

"Or she has gone mad in her arrogance, as her ilk often does," Razin idly replied. "Perhaps she thinks her warriors will be enough to defeat us."

"We so sure they won't be?" another captain said. "I mean no disrespect, Honoured Son, but we've all heard the rumours about the Battle of the Camps. The sky falling, the dead rising with blue eyes and fairies riding across water..."

There were calls of cowardice, which Razin tacitly allowed to quiet the naysayer through shame. The heir to Malaga would put no stock in such stories, especially not ones so fanciful. First the tale was that the Black Queen had warred against the fae, now that they warred *for* her? Powerful necromancer as the villain might be, she could not raise corpses that did not exist. As for this tale of the sky being brought down, it could be no work of hers. Perhaps some Wasteland ritual she simply claimed to be her own effort, the scale of it inflated with every telling.

Procerans always excused their defeats by making giants out of gargoyles, it was well-known. A splatter of laughter spread across the captains, commanding Razin's immediate attention. It was not directed at him or the yellow-bellied naysayer, he saw, but at the Black Queen's foolishness. She'd called a halt and now her warriors were spreading out in a circle around her, taking up defensive positions.

"Mad indeed," one of the captains mocked. "Shall we order a charge, Honoured Son?"

Razin's eyes narrowed at the sight of her. The cloak was well-known, but never before had he heard of the Queen of Callow wielding a crooked black staff. Especially not one so... unsettling to look at. Perhaps she did have a trick left to pull.

"Battle lines," Razin Tanja ordered instead. "Our force will take the centre. Send word to the captains behind us that they are to split and flank the Black Queen's warriors."

He glanced into the distance, where the thousand cavalry he'd sent out at dawn was slowly making its way. Yes, this would do. No matter the dark magic, near seven thousand footsoldiers of Levant followed by a cavalry charge at the back would be enough to end this. Razin would not lead from the front, just in case, and allow one of these eager captains the honour instead. It mattered not who slew the goblins and devils, so long as the heir to Malaga was part of the warriors who slew the villain queen. The soldiers spread out as ordered, battle-prayers on their lips, and the assault promptly began. Razin remained with the second wave of the centre, listening to the hurried march of the rest of the troops behind him. Stride after stride the warriors closed the distance, and he watched victory in the making with bright eyes. The grey-skinned devils tightened their lines in front of the villain, the bloody goblins taking cover behind them, but it was the Black Queen he was staring at. Loose hair unbound and toyed with by the wind, she was staring at his soldiers and leaning against her long staff. Eventually she looked up, and Razin followed her gaze. There were shadows in the sky, two of them. *Crows*, he realized with a start. Corpses would draw carrion, but these were no such birds and flew with graceful purpose. They dove, and like twin blot of night landed on the Black Queen's shoulders.

There was something surreal about the sight, he thought. The smiling, slim woman whose hair cascaded behind her, the cloak of story around her. Those ink-black and terrible crows on her shoulders, feathered out of shadows. Razin watched the crooked staff rise, then fall with a thunderous crash. Shadows whispered across the snow, until the sound of cracks scuttling across a river drowned out even that.

Razin Tanja of the Binder's Blood had just sent the better part of two thousand men to drown, and in that stroke he had lost the Battle of Sarcella.

NZPIEFACE

"A good sword will find a use, or make one."

huh, i dont really get the "make one" part. Holy swords maybe?

ruduen

I believe it's the even-more-aggressive version of, "When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail."

NZPIEFACE

...Oh.

DarkDweller

Nothing quite like a commander so steeped in arrogance saying their opponent is arrogant.

TotesARealPerson

Or a variation of "For iron by itself can draw a man to use it," one of the reasons Odysseus gives to Telemachus for why they must hide away their weapons in the beginning of book XIX of the Oddysey.

Agent J

Do remember that half the reason Hasenbach needed a war in the East was because there were a great deal of "good swords" lying around Procer. If she did not find a use for them they would have made one of their own, one she may not like.

Dainpdf

They already were. Procer was just about up to its ears in unemployed veterans slowly turning to banditry.

Mike E.

Which is one reason why the Crusades ever happened...Europe had a ton of knights and soldiers sitting around with no wars going on, so to keep them occupied somewhere and not able to

stir up trouble locally, they got sent east against a new enemy.

NotQuiteHere

May I know what your source is?

NotQuiteHere

If u don't respond fine...but that doesn't sound true to me.

[filtern](#)

It is really true. Most scholars of the Crusade agree.

If you are interested in a comprehensive history of the Crusades I'd suggest The Crusades: A History by Jonathon Riley-Smith

There is also a good collection of primary documents called The Crusades: A Reader edited by S.J. Allen and Emilie Amt

[filtern](#)

As for that specific instance, look into the Peace of God in Europe which was 'established' preceding the Crusades. Basically, Rome wanted Christians to stop fighting Christians so they increasingly disapproved of conflict between them. It eventually developed into a policy of pointing armies at nonchristians since that was more effective

Abrakadabra

Nah, that is Just bullshit. The muslims by that time besieged or straight occupied all five of The centrals of christianity, (Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, Rome). Rome was Just attacked a years ago by muslim pirates WHO desacrated the tomb of Peter apostle. And the Emperor of the Eastern Roman Empire was asking for help against the muslims, well he got it.

therealgridlock

You tell em boss.

Don't ever let them forget that islam controlled the Mediterranean for 500+ years before the crusades, and burned down the library of alexandria.

therealgridlock

What? No, the crusades started because the Muslims attacked Spain, after 700 years of terrorizing the Mediterranean and piling heads to block out the sun, they finally reached Spain and tried to take it over, and Isabella and Ferdinand said hell no.

Say what you want about the outcome of the crusades, the reason they started is pretty simple to grasp.

Apropos of nothing, over 200 people have died this year in France from "motive still unknown" attacks yelling God is great in Arabic. And 700 wounded.

Sounds like it hasn't stopped to me.

asazernik

The Muslim conquest of Spain was in the 600s-700s.

The First Crusade started in 1096.

Cayle

Thought it was a reference to the blade itself inspires acts of violence. Paraphrased.

Dainsleif

It is. Well less the blade itself inspires violence and more of since the purpose of the blade is to wage war and draw blood one without purpose will look for it somewhere else.

So Hasenbach might be scared of what purpose a sword such as these would create. And rightfully so.

crescentsickle

I interpreted it along the lines of the quote from Erwin Rommel: "In the absence of orders, go find something and kill it."

The "sword" isn't the object but the soldier, and a good soldier performs his duties to his country whether he has explicit orders to or not.

crescentsickle

On a re-read, though, it doesn't really fit the quote at the top of the chapter. Along a similar interpretation, it seems to say (to me anyway): "A good soldier will find a cause to fight for, or they will make a cause to fight for."

stevenneiman

I'd go a bit more philosophical: capacity for violence encourages violence. This whole Crusade started because Cordelia had reforged Procer into a weapon effective enough that she would have lost control if she hadn't used it.

Liliet

I wouldn't say Cordelia did it, she took over Procer militarized enough already as a result of the civil war that she had to do *something* with the capacity for violence that already existed.

Miles

It's such a nice blade, be a shame not to use it even if it turns out to be the wrong target in hindsight.

Wry Warudo

Always great to see the Lakeomancer in action

Someguy

As a new School of Magic it is not flashy. As an application of Magical Tactics it is superbly sexy.

Sylwoos

I'm not sure what part of dropping lake on top of army isn't flashy.

Rook

It's more splashy than flashy

Javvies

If there's enough light, dropping a lake is flashy from the reflected light
Plus rainbows are a strong possibility.

And it's definitely the opposite of subtle.

My very own name

We all know Cat's awesome, but the point of view of other people just makes that even clearer, both from those with and against her.

Dainpdf

Dear Catherine does seem to have a thing for weaponizing large bodies of water.

stevenneiman

Not specifically. She just has a thing for weaponizing everything available. Allies. Enemies. Geographic features. Stories. Dead goats.

Dainpdf

You must agree that the drowning v boom goat ratio has been tipping of late, though.

Perhaps she's trying to be rid of her arson reputation.

caoimhinh

I think she leveled up and is now dabbling in Riveromancy. Hahaha

[Euodiachloris](#)

When she parts a sea to dump it on her enemies... then she will have reached full hydrothaumatergy. 😊

caoimhinh

That seems like a way to help Zeze retaliate against Ashur, nice.

naturalnuke

Everyone knows Lakeomancy is powered by Friendship™!

[sengachi](#)

*friendship with terrible and monstrous gods from the deep darkness

RanVor

But friendship nonetheless.

ruduen

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

This has been your regularly scheduled reminder to go vote.

[DroughtBringer](#)

Thank you!

HardcoreHeathen

I love how the Levantines keep hearing tales of Callow and Cat, tales that are honestly toned down, and dismissing them as over-embellished nonsense.

It's like if Audie Murphy was an entire country.

Dainpdf

It helps that villains are rarely as powerful as Cat. And that unblooded nobles are *idiots*.

[daegone823](#)

What I love about our Black Queen is that she makes a believer out of every foe.

Her fuckery knows no bounds

[Fayhem](#)

♪ And then I saw her lake! Now I'm a believer! Not a trace!
Of doubt in my mind! ♪

[Liliet](#)

It's really nice to have no "so last season" syndrome. Both Marchford and the fae were like "I'm sorry what the fuck" at the time. Catherine adapted, but once we zoom out to the whole of the continent the "I'm sorry what the fuck" is still there :
3

Skraeling

I do appreciate how everyone on the continent shit talks procer. It brings joy to me heart it does.

Dainpdf

Imperialism does not breed friendly neighbors. I mean, Levante had to build a wall that eats people just to get Procer to stop invading.

plantsbeans

Wait what? Was this in the peregrine interludes?

Dainpdf

It's what a combination of the previous Cordelia and Peregrine interludes imply.

danh3107

Cat's getting really good at showing up dramatically and murdering scores upon scores of people isn't she.

[Barthumphries](#)

If you only bring a sword to a mage fight... You're going to lose.

NZPIEFACE

But when your sword is your staff...

Someguy

The idiots placed themselves on top of a frozen river when the enemy side is known to have munitions and magic-wielders. They win the Darwin Award.

Death Knight

Not really, no. Abigail mentioned in the previous chapter that they'd tried to blow up the ice before but they didn't succeed since the ice was too thick. The charging army most likely did not think the Callowans had anything powerful enough to break the ice. Though Raizan should have reconsidered the charge when the Black Queen took the field. But he's been shown to have blinders where glory is concerned so maybe they do qualify for a Darwin Award, or as it is known in setting The Dread Emperor award.

Dainpdf

Well, villains rarely get as powerful as Cat. Especially non magic ones, which she was until the whole fae thing.

Skaddix

Granted he probably was blinded since they don't believe the Fae cause Fae Cat could have done that feat. Granted they are probably high on the fact that the Warlock is Dead and Masego is MIA presumed KIA by the Heroic Side. So he looks across doesn't see Callow's Greatest Mage and assumes it good to go. I guess it's possible he could tell Cat looked Human again but I doubt it. So probably arrogance.

stevenneiman

I think that they were hoping that she would go down like Amadeus' predecessor, taking a few hundred or a few thousand with her before being overwhelmed and cut down. What they forgot is that unlike the previous Black Knights Cat isn't an idiot, and she has the story on her side right now.

Author Unknown

I think they won the award when they decided to attack in the first place. "Sure, she battled her way through summer,

fought multiple demons, battled an entire city of undead, butchered an army backed by multiple heroes, but we have pointy metal sticks! Charge!"

Skaddix

Eh Cat did her part but that only went her way cause the Winter King was bored and wanted to break the Cycle in the first place. She didn't fight a whole city of unread either. But more importantly for the rest she had the Woe for all those feats. So presumably the other side looks across only sees one Named and don't believe half the stories anyway and think we can win.

stevenneiman

Presumably, hell. They were explicitly stated to have assumed that all of her accomplishments were either taking personal credit for stuff she had her mage corps do or else exaggerations by embarrassed Procerans trying to excuse their own failures.

Author Unknown

Not believing the stories when you hear them in a tavern is understandable. However, when the villain is standing across the battlefield from you with several hundred creatures from myth and legend it is time to reevaluate your belief system. The correct response is certainly not, "Oh look, we have them outnumbered."

[Liliet](#)

There is no reason for the Levantines to assume that the grey-skinned creatures around Catherine are anything other than devils, and those are a known quantity. A quantity known to *not* be undefeatable, nor all that hard to come by when you're Praesi / leading a Praesi army.

[Miles](#)

They're still assuming those are devils, which they've had to deal with any time they went to war with Praes.

[Liliet](#)

They don't have reliable information on what Catherine did. They have rumors and disbelieve them as embellishments. All they REALLY know is that she separated Callow from Praes and beat the Northern Crusade, and they don't really know what / how few resources she had for that.

Dresden 67

They should know more though.

In the regular soldiers it's understandable but Razin is the heir to one of the rulers of Levant. There's no way he doesn't have access to reports of the Battle of the Camps.

But apparently he just dismissed it all as ass-covering and exaggerations. Even though the Pilgrim and several other Levantine heroes were there.

Razin is an idiot.

Liliet

Reports? Who would report on the Battle of the Camps to a /Levantine heir/, particularly one who wasn't even supposed to be in command of anything?

You're overestimating the coherence of the Crusade side, IMHO.

Skaddix

It's a feature not a bug. Saint wants to tear down the whole system. She probably wants most of these incompetent nobles dying in the Field. If Pilgrim filed a report well Cordelia also wants to cull troublesome nobility so probably neglected to pass out such information to anyone who wasn't vital and competent.

Liliet

I really don't think either Saint or Pilgrim would be *filing reports*. If there was any formal paperwork involved at all, it was people retelling what they read in correspondence / heard in conversation.

Skaddix

I agree that is my point no way Saint would ever provide useful information to the Crusade in general, I am not sure she would for most Heroes outside Pilgrim and Hanno's Team. Pilgrim does care about life loss though and might have provided useful information but Cordelia has a vested interest in such info not getting to most of her nobles.

Liliet

Good point, Tariq could have gotten information to his countrymen.

A thousand ways it could fail to happen though, in pre-information age.

[Dresden 67](#)

That makes it even worse, if the Crusade isn't even organised enough to share reports from a major battle with their main leaders.

And obviously Razin does have enough authority to command 16,000 soldiers, so he should be briefed accordingly.

[Liliet](#)

It's cute how you think it was decently organized



actually protect Proceran inlands for a while

hell hell hell hell hell

[Dresden 67](#)

Again, that just makes it worse.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

Forrest

I think you might be overestimating the communicative abilities of people in medieval time, which is exactly what they are when the closest you have to modern day communication is a mage's scrying and only one person in Procer has even a bastardized version of that.

[Liliet](#)

^^^ this

[Miles](#)

He probably didn't read them. Who has time for that? Reports are for referring back to when shit hits the fan and blame needs assigning.

ByVectron!

But everyone knows those stories of Callowan victories are greatly embellished. It was probably, like, a bar fight or they tried someone into a puddle and now people claim there dropped a lake on them. I mean, come ON!

[Miles](#)

Lol there's no battle, not even armies. Cat got hit on in a bar and threw her drink in the guy's face and it all got embellished from there.

IDKWhoitis

Its kinda been her thing for a while now. Its kinda amazing how there are still fools alive willing to bet it was all luck.

Novice

Oh my freaking gods, the teasing about the seven crowns and one continues unabated.

I love it.

caoimhinh

And it will never be dropped until Larat gets his due or Cat cheats him out of it.

Although those two aren't mutually exclusive.

[David Lynch](#)

I think, given the Fae in general and Larat-the-trecherous-lieutenant in particular, anything which worked to "cheat" him would still satisfy him. He seems to respect trickery.

[Miles](#)

Like not setting a time limit?

Skaddix

Oof that is why inherited leadership sucks. Granted I want prospective from an actual hero. I do wonder if its time for a new prospective after the Interludes end since this war is over. Turns out being descended from the Blood of Heroes confers no special bonuses.

Dainpdf

It gives +2 privilege and +4 wealth.

[daegone823](#)

Which hero was he descended from?

Novice

If you're talking about Razin Tanja, he's from the Grim Binder's bloodline.

Dainpdf

The Binder. Probably with some adjective attached, but we weren't given that.

Novice

We were given an adjective:

"Razin Tanja was of the Grim Binder's line and inherited her famous poise even if he had not been graced with her equally famed sorceries, so he'd not let the horror of it reach his face."

Dainpdf

Thank you for catching that.

stevenneiman

Presumably they're a bit more likely to become heroes, but aside from that they're just more likely to be arrogant and/or inbred, just like any other line of noblemen.

Xinci

The whole way of the Blood and bringing glory to it seems to be a system for seeing if traits Heroes posses can propagate more Heroes the stronger they get. Blood seems to be a shared power source of Heroic traits passed down and strengthened by willing sacrifice(sacred Strife=weight and power).It really does seem similar to the Night in its system crafting. Anyway even though you are more likely to get a heroic Named out of it they dont always get the raw combination needed for the best of them(Thus outside ones like Champion are great). But when they do they can get rather dangerous(Peregrine).

[Liliet](#)

I think it's less that Blood is a real thing passed down and more that people believe it is, making there be a story groove that makes it harder for non-Blood people to become heroes and self-reinforces the way patterns in Guideverse do.

KageLupus

I actually think it is more of a self fulfilling prophecy kind of deal, Descendants of those first Heroes are considered honored and special, which feeds into the mindset

you need to actually achieve a name. There is a weight of expectation that those of the Blood will also gain some version of the same name, and every time it happens those grooves in creation grow a little stronger.

But how much of that expectation is reasonable, and how much is caused by circumstances around it? The heroic bloodlines act as a sort of nobility which means that its members are all given the kind of advantages they need to actually achieve a name. It is a lot easier to go out and hunt monsters in the forest when you don't have to worry about scraping enough money together for food and a roof over your head.

The Champion that is running around with Hanno is also evidence that the system doesn't work as expected. She was explicitly stated to be from some distant offshoot branch of the Champion bloodline, but picked up the fully powered version of that Name. Sure, part of that is Above putting a hand on the scales since that group needed to go up against the Calamities. But the Champion's personality absolutely had to have something to do with it as well and that is just not something you inherent from your nine-times-great-uncle-twice-removed.

[*crysjal*](#)

I believe that the passing on of names in Levant is a cultural thing much the same way other cultures have common names such as Praes with the black knight. The difference here is that Levant seems to have taken what might have been its first band of names to heart. They practically worship those names. As a result of the cultural worship the names become recurring as that's what the culture expects to happen. It's basically a self fulfilling culture born prophecy.

[*Liliet*](#)

Well, you put it really really well.

[*TeK*](#)

Did you just implied that any of those mudfoot peasants have it in them to not be bumbling embarassments to the Creatioon?

IDKWhoitis

Evil is most vulnerable when it thinks its holding all the cards, and I like to think that this "Crusade" is slowly becoming Grey vs Grey. Neither Callowans, nor Procerans, nor Leviatians, nor Praesi really treats this like an actual Holy War. This chapter

shows that even those of the Champions' blood are only here for glory and accolades, blinded by pride.

And we know who is very willing to pull the deepest, darkest, horrors to win the coming battles.

Good to see there are still fools in the world willing to underestimate The Black Queen.

Dainpdf

The idea that Procer is not quite Good anymore is precisely the stuff the Saint has been saying. Let's hope she finds no ears for that.

As for this nobility sucking... still better than the high lords.

stevenneiman

It might have been squabbling and backstabbing, but at least there was something the High Lords were actually good at, if not good for.

Dainpdf

Quite a few of the Proceran Princes have proved to be either capable administrators, politicians, or military leaders. And with much fewer human sacrifices or oppressed green greenskins. Not that Procerans would treat greenskins well.

NerfGlastigUaine

That is a bar so low I'm not quite sure what it'd take to limbo under it. It takes a special level of crazy and cruelty to institutionalize murder and backstabbing and summon a freaking eldritch abomination in your own city. Also, they still underestimate Black after twenty freaking years of getting murder-stabbed by him, so their blinders are very, very strong.

Dainpdf

I was just responding to the idea that there is equivalency between Praes and Procer.

RanVor

Below a certain level of shit there's no need for equivalency.

Dainpdf

I would argue that any ethical system which can't differentiate human sacrifice and slavery from not-those-things is useless at best.

RanVor

Well, from ethical standpoint it makes sense to differentiate. From practical standpoint, you wouldn't want to live either in Procer or in Praes, so why bother arguing which shit smells worse?

Dainpdf

It is practical to debate ethics XD
But yes, even a medieval fantasy with insane demigods can do better than Procer.

[daegone823](#)

Praes any day of the week at least they are honest about arse drilling Proceran rule is the worst.
Likewise to

peeing on you and calling it rain

Dainpdf

You find arrogance worse than human sacrifice, slavery, and literal reality scarring demons.
Can't say I expected that.

[Liliet](#)

I mean if I had to pick between living in Procer or Praes, I'd pick Procer.

EE did say at some point that Good nations have on average uniformly higher standard of living than Evil ones. Black raising the standard of living in Callow is a huge exception to the rule. (It's like, the standard of living in Evil nations is x , the standard of living in Good nations is $x + i$, Black managed to institute a standard of living of $x + i + j$ in at least Callow, unsure if the standard in Praes under him was also $x + i + j$ (meaning he managed to raise it by $i + j$) or $x + j$ (meaning he raised it by j everywhere) or some kind of middle, making it still lower in Praes than in Callow but making the difference smaller than normal)
...what. math is fun!

[Euodiachloris](#)

The Evil nations tend to get blighted land with a wonky distribution of resources even before their first major Tyrant of Nutso with their land reformation projects, though: it's never been a level playing field.

It's a darned sight easier to produce a decent standard of living if you've got a decent climate, plenty of running water and acres upon schemes of highly fertile fields. The only blood you need to shed in that situation is to defend the lot... Or when trying to collect taxes. 😞

[Liliet](#)

Very true!

In the case of Praes there's even a direct cause-effect relationship between the land being blighted and Evil: *they needed the field sacrifices.*

Dainpdf

Except nations can turn Good or Evil. Being Evil, however, makes it much harder to make gains (look at how Praes actually **lost** farmland to a few Emperors), especially since any gains in this generation tend to be torn down by the next maddened tyrant who takes over.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I'm sure an octopus could manage that limbo. Just.

RanVor

Let's face it, the Good countries are only Good because they have Praes to compare themselves to.

NerfGlastigUaine

Praes, the Chain of Hunger, the Everdark, Bellerophon, Stygia, pretty much every Evil country is worse than the good countries except possibly the Dead King's Serenity. YMMV on that one. The Good countries are basically on the level of some of the worse, though not worst, feudal societies or historical nations IRL while the Evil ones are positively dystopian. What's worse, it's not an evil ruler or group causing the problems, the horror is built into every Evil country in their very foundations and institutions. Good may not always be nice, kind, or even rational, but you can see why most prefer it over Evil in this verse.

RanVor

The Chain of Hunger and the Everdark can hardly be considered countries. I agree on the Bellerophon and

Stygia though. Still, it's only Good in comparison to these unrealistically terrible places. I'm not saying I'd rather live in Praes. I'm just pointing out that the fact that the existence of Evil shouldn't be used to excuse all the shit going on on the other side.

Fayhem

Unrealistically terrible? You know about for example the Khmer Rouge, right? Go ahead and scroll down to the "Life in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge Regime" section at this link, and tell me again about how Bellerophon is just too terrible to be *realistic*: <http://www.cambodiatribunal.org/history/cambodian-history/khmer-rouge-history/>

That said, you're not wrong that feudalism is not a terribly meritocratic or pleasant system for 99% of the population living under it, so I'll give you that one in a heartbeat. The failings of feudalism (now you see the violence inherent in the system!) are real and shouldn't just be excused with a "yeah, but we're not the other guys and they're worse" shrug. But there is also still a meaningful distinction to be made between "looks like hereditary leadership actually doesn't work great a whole lot of the time" and "human sacrifice is an acceptable party theme".

On the note of hereditary leadership though, as far as the persistence of this shit in Good nations I think it matters a lot that aristocracy/etc is hereditary and being a hero (usually) isn't. I think that matters because most heroes come to it pretty young, and I think most aristocratic bloodlines have built up institutional memory of "here's how to fob them off on some capital-E Evil problems when they start getting on your case about 'oh the peasants are people too' or whatever". And I don't think some teenagers fresh off the farm/out of the orphanage/whatever you get it are typically likely to be a match for the conniving of highborn aristos who have literally centuries of institutional memory of how to not get preferentially targeted by Named/Chosen/whatever you want to call them.

So in other words I don't think the existence of Evil nations *should* excuse the persistence of bad actors in Good nations, but I think that said bad actors have deliberately cultivated expertise in *using* the existence/threat of Evil nations to safeguard themselves/their privileges. I do think that's a relevant point to keep in mind.

RanVor

Khmer Rouge ruled for 4 years. Dread Emperors ruled for 1000+ years.

They're unrealistic in a sense that they logically should have collapsed or been conquered and razed to the ground centuries ago. (Also, the Khmer Rouge didn't permanently damage reality.)

[Fayhem](#)

And if they didn't have a narrative propping them up, they probably likely would have! Again, I mean; they did get conquered and mostly razed to the ground post-Triumphant. So I guess as far as that goes my counterpoint would be that "unrealistic" should probably hold a different value for a world where reality literally functions differently.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

holy shit is that a monty python reference

[Fayhem](#)

You're goddamn right it is.

[Liliet](#)

Health care in Good nations is better than in *modern reality* directly thanks to the House of Light and miracles being real in-universe.

So there's that.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well yes. That's part of Amadeus and Cat's basic position, not to mention the author's.

The whole saga is about deconstructing the D&D/High Fantasy trope of essentialist Good and Evil, thus the many affable (and sensible) Evil figures, facing vicious and demented Good types. This is in no way contradicted by the actually-good Good folks and insane Evil villains (even if some of the latter are "crazy like a fox"), the point is that virtue and madness appear on both sides.

RanVor

You know, I can never quite understand the point of comments like yours. Are you arguing with me, lecturing me, or what?

[Mental Mouse](#)

I am *commenting*. In this case, concurring with the general thesis, but also pointing out that it's not particularly novel or controversial (and elaborating on why). That's how things go on a forum; some responses are partial or complete agreement, some are partial or complete disagreement ("... And That's Okay"), some are going off on a tangent. Some are more than one of these.

Bluntly, you'll be a lot happier (not just here, but in life in general), if you stop treating any response besides "oh yes, I agree" as a personal attack. Unless that's how you like to live your life; if so... it's not my problem.

RanVor

Thank you for your answer. I'm not a little bit surprised that it didn't occur to you that I genuinely didn't understand what your comment meant in relation to mine, it happens to me all the time around here.

[BarthHumphries](#)

Try adding emoticons.



So you could say something like: "I can't tell if you're arguing with me or what. :P"

And then the other person would know not to take it personally. 😊

RanVor

Sorry, but the only emoticon expressing curiosity and lack of understanding I know is "?". 🤔

[TeK](#)

>Bellerophon

>dystopian

Stop casting Petty Lies of Foreign Tyrants (Also Known As Simply Tyrants In Their Own Countries) on the Peerless Jewel Of Freedom, May The Glorious City Of Bellerophon Stand Forever.

Quite Possibly A Cat

"Good may not always be nice, kind, or even rational, but you can see why most prefer it over Evil in this verse."

Well, except that one time those elves committed genocide.

Yavandir

Now that you mention it Serenity is like north Korea with army of undead

Dainpdf

And Helike on its evil phases. And the Kingdom of the Dead. And Bellerophon. And Stygia. Huh. It's almost like I'm citing the evil sides... well, the Golden Bloom is also very, very terrible.

RanVor

As usual, my comment was terribly misinterpreted by pretty much everyone. I used Praes as an example. What I meant to say is that the other side being worse doesn't automatically make Procer and buddies good (which should be pretty clear, and why nobody understood it that way is honestly beyond me).

Dainpdf

If one person doesn't understand you, it may be their interpretation skills. If no one understands you, it may be your expression skills.

RanVor

Then maybe tell me how the fuck I'm supposed to communicate, because I really try to make myself as clear as possible, and it seems to backfire all the time.

[Barthumphries](#)

Maybe don't use profanity? Don't know what the conversation was about but profanity rarely makes anything better.

RanVor

People use profanity all the time here and nobody's calling them out, and we don't have an edit function anyway.

[Barthumphries](#)

You asked how you could communicate better. I answered. You're free to ignore my suggestion and say that you communicate just fine like everyone else here.

*Shrug" no skin off my back.

RanVor

I asked what to do to avoid being misunderstood.
Your answer proves I was right to ask.

Dainpdf

I'm probably not the best person to ask. I struggle with communication, myself.

[Liliet](#)

You're treating "good" as some objective measure. Is modern USA good? Is modern Sweden good? Is modern Ukraine good?

We can *only* compare what's better or worse. And Good nations are actually *marginally better* than IRL historical analogues.

RanVor

If there are no standards to adhere to, there's no good at all.

[Liliet](#)

What standards are you thinking of?

RanVor

The ones Procer doesn't adhere to, obviously. Like not forcing common people to die in petty civil wars, for example.

I refuse to accept the relativity of good and evil. A lesser evil is only ever that – an evil that is not as great as the other one.

[Liliet](#)

"not forcing common people to die in petty civil wars"

That's one, true.

I'm curious about more?

"I refuse to accept the relativity of good and evil. A lesser evil is only ever that – an evil that is not as great as the other one."

You're not wrong.

Politics and nations are always lesser evil, though.

RanVor

Sure. I don't object to them being that. I object to them claiming they are not.

[Liliet](#)

Wait, who claims that they are not?

stevenneiman

Yeah. We already saw what Cat was able to do to the Saint with just a few lines undermining the drama and moral authority, now imagine what she could do if she wanted to do that to the Crusade. The whole thing is led by a general-stateswoman who has shown no aptitude for story-fu. The only reason that Cat hasn't already caused a lot more damage is because she knows that she needs to keep everyone intact enough that the Dead King can't just steamroll over everything. And she needs to keep that final battle from getting desperate enough that anyone needs to start summoning their respective eldritch horrors, or she'll have undermined the ideals of the Liesse Accords before they're even signed.

Rook

Wait didn't the Saint kick her ass in every single fight so far?

Round one she cut off a piece of winter and Cat ran away

Round two she cut off her limbs multiple times as Cat ran away

Round three Cat immediately ran away after Akua used enough Winter to pull her back, then avoided fighting her when the Pilgrim decided to negotiate

[TeK](#)

She danced circles around Saint, accomplishing all of her objectives in each and every fight, despite being flatly outclassed in the outright battle. I think that was the point he was trying to make.

IDKWhoitis

Are the Levs about to lose all their men in the city? 2k loses in the reserves aren't completely god awful, but now the main force is stuck in panic, encircled without escape, being shelled by

Callow. If there are more than 8k Levs by the end of this shitshow, I think the Laterns may have traded themselves for it.

Dainpdf

Well, they're now likely very outnumbered, with Callow very secure behind the river, their leadership was decapitated (well, so was Callow's, but they're better organized), ...and come night they'll have to deal with the Mighty. Yeah, they've lost. It's a question of how many survivors.

NerfGlastigUaine

Yeah, they'll "deal with" the Mighty alright. Unless they're hiding a whole truckload of heroes or another army ten times the size of their current one, it'd be an utter massacre once night falls.

Dainpdf

That's what I was getting at 😊

[theothin](#)

Worth bearing in mind that Cat wants to force surrender with minimal deaths.

Dainpdf

Overwhelming force is one way to do that.

Jonnnney

The most important part is due to the river blocking their last Avenue of escape they are stuck in a city with 6000 dark elves with the sun about to set. The elves are on Par with the watch during they day. Come night the levs will be nothing but prey

konstantinvoncarstein

I cannot wait to see Mighties fight a pitch battle in the night! 😊 Particularly Rumena

[Javvies](#)

Be realistic now.

The Mighty at night? That's not a pitched battle, that's an utter massacre of anything less than Heroes and already prepared battle mages/priests.

konstantinvoncarstein

It is for that reason I want to see it 😊

Anyway, the Levantins will find that the tales about the Black Queen are, in fact, not tales...

[Euodiachloris](#)

True tales are still tales, you know. Even elaborately embroidered or distorted true tales will clobber you over the head with their aesops.

The Tales of the Black Queen have a number of truths. 1) Don't fuck with Catherine Foundling. 2) Don't fuck with Callow. 3) If you think she can't possibly do something, pray that you are merely wrong. Because being right still won't help you when she barrels in from left field.

Dainpdf

Arrogant nobles getting shellacked, reinforcement of the importance of throat protection, fire, and weaponized bodies of water. Good to see we're back to our roots. We're just missing kamikaze zombies and terrible snark.

Nguyen Hong Hai

I miss day of exploding goats...

Dainpdf

Last exploding undead animal we had was from Black fighting Hanno...

[Euodiachloris](#)

...and It was awesome. 😊

Dainpdf

He hasn't even had the opportunity to discuss it with her yet!

Sadness abounds.

[Javvies](#)

Classic Cat. Do the unexpected, crazy, borderline unthinkable thing, and win.

Also ... the Levantine chain of command is troubled. And, by what the "Red Ella" POV suggests ... most of the Levantines will have little or no experience with real combat, far less magic-heavy combat. That's going to hurt them.

Xinci

Its more that, they are used to sanctioned hunts and chimerical foes. Levantines are quite good against monsters especially good in small numbers. Course they arent facing that kind of foe right now, though they will most likely adapt and learn if they survive.

naturalnuke

I'm surprised Nauk died as easy as he did, after surviving an exchange with the Saint of Swords.

[Insanenoodlyguy](#)

They caught him with his pants down and melted a goddamn hole in his chest. He responded to this by tearing one's throat out with his feeth as he was literally DYING.

They got as lucky as they could get and he still died HARD. Fast, but hard.

Valkyria

Gods I missed this.

And it's even better than just outright slapping them with sorcerous bullshit, because they are just *better* and know more about schemes.

Cat only used her Night on a river, not even touching an enemy soldier herself. Ah. Beautiful.

Would have only been more satisfying if the enemy commander wasn't this little brat but hey.

Madness? Check.

Sorcery? Check.

Dramatic entrance? Check.

Dark mysterious aura? Check.

What more can you want from your favorite Villian?

Author Unknown

6, no, 8 inches in height?

NerfGlastigUaine

Ah, Empress of Procer, how nice to find you here

[Liliet](#)

If she gives those away she'll be of height with goblins and that'd be a bit too much

[OutspanFoster](#)

"The smiling, slim woman whose hair cascaded behind her, the cloak of story around her"

Sure sounds like plot armor to me. Lol

ALazyMonster

I'm a bit confused. I remember reading that the river was 25ft across which seems a bit small for the 2000 people to all drown at once, since they were stated to be footman and therefore not locked into a charge the same way cavalry would be. Did they stretch out real far even though the other reinforcements were supposed to be surrounding Cat from the sides? Even accounting for the fact they were about triple the numbers of the drow/goblins it feels like some of them would be really far off to the sides for them all to hit the river together. I just feeling like I'm missing details or something, did Cat wait to break the ice until they were like 2 ft away or something? It just feels like the scale of something is off with the river.

Skaddx

Shows Cordelia and Saint are right. Procer and the Good Countries do need a good house cleaning. Incompetent and complacent and corrupt leadership. So far its all going according to plan for both of them, I suppose Cordelia thought the Heroes would show up to take the reigns and clean up One Arm. So that not going totally to plan.

Myradmir

I'm assuming Catherine waited as long as possible, and then let the chargers' momentum do the rest. Alternatively, they were crossing/on the river in multiple points or the 2000 includes soldiers now trapped on the other side of the river at the 'mercy' of Callow.

Insanenoodlyguy

I got the impression the 2000 were lost in that instant..but siit's now its him and a tiny force against the Goddamn Black Queen, he stands to lose a lot more on both ends of this, since the rest of his forces just lost leadership. His best bet is surrender because he really has already lost and his retreat options are "drown" and "burn"

Tolk

Reading Beheld I again, Abigail says that it's 25 feet at the bridges, and that as you go west towards the river source it widens. So I'd guess the location Cathrine broke the ice is at least 50 feet wide if not 80 or 100 feet.

[Antony444](#)

I think we can say safely that Razin Tanja, if he survives this disaster, is not going to lead any more armies. Or at least, not if the rest of the Levantine commanders have any sense.

God, he just got monumentally trounced and his soldiers were utterly routed in the battle for the city, and his first reflex was to send all his reserves into the fray. The second was of course to try to kill a Villain when he had no Heroes to present a Named opposition.

I mean, the Procer aristocracy weren't exactly mountains of wisdom and strategic thinking, but this Levant noble is beating them all down in sheer arrogance and stupidity.

At a moment where every man counts (there's still the Dead King coming from the north) he just lost maybe five thousand men in a few hours and the morale beating is going to be even worse.

This was Levant first true military confrontation in the Crusade if you don't count the heroes.

And they gloriously lost it.

NerfGlastigUaine

To be fair, trying to kill Catherine was probably a smart idea if they wanted to take the city – letting the chief villain get up to god knows what is probably a bad idea. On the other hand, the way he charged in half-cocked and head full of glory... yeah, he's an idiot.

RandomFan

I don't think he'll lead any more armies if he doesn't survive this disaster, either.

Ed

With the number of dead walking around... he may just get to, for the other side.

[Javvies](#)

Only if by "lead" you mean "be in the front line of an assault formation" or "be the point man in finding a way through a field of caltrops and buried goblin munitions".

Because the Dead King has plenty of people who actually had significant skill and combat experience to lead his armies. And those are just people who attacked him.

He also has the entire population of Serenity to call upon. And there's almost certainly some sort of military training academy/program.

They may or may not have all that much actual live combat experience, but they probably have similar training to what the Legion academy provides, with the probable exception of

anything specific to goblin munitions.

And that presumes that the Dead King either doesn't want to or can't run something even more realistic. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that the Dead King were willing and able to run live fire lethal combat exercises to train and blood his people.

Tolk

All the while whistles were sounded by their calm-faced officers, calling lines of legionaries forward or back like it was a parade ground and not as hellish a fight as this city could stomach.

Poor guy thinks the rumours are fake. Unfortunately for him, they are real; once you've successfully fought the legions of hell, the legions of fae, and the legions of necromancers, the legions of rookie warriors aren't anywhere near as hellish.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

"Boy, it sure is nice to be fighting opponents that don't regrow limbs and go down for good when killed!"

[TeK](#)

To be fair, that heir guy is pretty smart, if young and a little reckless and inexperienced, which is to be expected. He did not make any major blunders. If not for Cat, that battle was as good as won. Everyone knows that, every side admitted to that. And while ultimately a failure, his way of dealing with Black Queen, The First Under The Night, Queen of Callow, Lady of Marchford, Duchess of the Moonless Nights, High Priestess of the Empire Everdark and The Arch-Heretic of the East was spot on. He didn't go half-cocked, he took everyone he could, which is a smart move – Villains have a tendency to both die to ordinary troops when severely outnumbered (take the Black Knight before Amadeus, yes) and an inclination to be recklessly arrogant and charge into the said overwhelming numbers. 8000 vs less than 600 is not a gamble, even if one side has a Named. And he did not lose his head. He did not order the charge, he did not lead the first wave. He did actually good, so why do you guys are giving him hard time?

NerfGlastigUaine

You know, everything you say makes sense but the catch here is that she's a villain and not just any villain, but one known for beating the odds. He knew that she'd come in with a tiny force, through an inferno, near a frozen river, with unknown devils (drow) and magic. He must have known that she'd expect him to bring his forces to bear on her – it's what anyone would

do. He then made the mistake of thinking the battle was already over before it'd begun (foolish) when it's patently obvious she must have some sort of plan (even more foolish) which only makes sense if he was banking on her having gone mad – which means he was relying on the enemy's stupidity to win (extremely foolish). You might expect the enemy to be reckless or arrogant, but relying on it is a mistake. He made the right choice to confront her, but sending in his men in full force, trusting on numbers to beat whatever cards she had hidden, when it was patently obvious she was waiting for an assault? Half-cocked as hell.

Also, people pick on him because no one likes a glory hound.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

I especially do not like a glory hound who goes in with the second line then plans to claim reflected glory from those who actually went in first!

[Mental Mouse](#)

I suspect Cat “stole” the heroic side of the script again, leaving the villainous lines for Ruzan. She's done this before; it was particularly blatant with the fae (where her opponent actually was forced into a monologue), but there have been a few other times when Cat came in acting as a “rescuing hero” or similar, upon which even Good adversaries started showing villainous failure modes.

[Liliet](#)

Well, he was willing to trade the lives of his people for personal glory, when a much more assured / less reckless / less bloody option was to wait for the rest of the army to catch up.

You do have a point though.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

For our amusement, here is the entirety of “In Dread Crowned”, thanks to the wiki (http://abridged-guide-to-evil.wikia.com/wiki/Abridged_Guide_to_Evil_Wikia):

I was born out in the green where their banners flew high
And the boots of the great lords they did tread over us
Oaths we made and service gave, kneeling to the oldest lie
But now the world's turned around and we sing this chorus

(Chorus)
Come forth you old devils,
Bring out your lesser evils
Blight the skies and the land

You'll be met sword in hand
One day your children'll tell
Of the deep and rebel yell,
That on his field so sombre
Conquered host of horror.

On the plain where folk were fair, we stood and greatly slew,
And by the ford a score devils with a great demon too
Prince and page and swordsman proud to our steel they all fell
The world stolen we take back and damn you all to Hell

(Chorus)

Be they high or resplendent our oaths stand taller still
And in the west do quiet lie graves we have yet to fill
Learn ye mighty that from Tower's shade to vales of red
The Fifteenth by call of horn stands ever crowned in dread.

nimelennar

Is it just me, or does calling unblooded soldiers "green" in a world where goblins and orcs exist make little sense?

Myradmir

It makes more sense if you recall that the goblins and orcs are mostly in Praes/Callow and people rarely interact with them, but it is still a bit odd.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's the sort of thing that the soldiers might joke about in-world. But this world also has trees and wood resembling our own, so the original metaphor still makes sense.

RandomFan

It absolutely still makes sense. Before this generation, Orcs were almost always fodder that were used pretty much the same way good nations might use untrained peasants- you could even claim that they originated from there.

Goblins were probably more respectable, but they had their own institutions to advocate for them, and therefore were probably significantly outnumbered by orcs on any given battlefield.

mavant

I was confused by that as well – on first reading of "green boys and girls" I thought wow, this Levantine captain is SUPER progressive about nonhuman equality.

Erebus42

Credit where credit's due, at least Razin wasn't stupid enough to lead the assault himself. He was arrogant enough to get a crazy amount of his men killed but not quite enough to get himself killed.

Jearden

It was amazing to see the moral Cat inspires. The Legionary, Edgar, just suddenly had the will to win. The whole Legion KNEW it was going to win. Numbers be damn, the fight was over. The Black Queen was on the field and now her Army would win.

Also, that was an astonishingly well written POV. The whole chapter was excellent, but those last two large paragraphs were legit.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah. It's pretty fucking amazing, and started at Marchford. A lot of credit for this goes to Juniper, for being a brilliant commander winning against any odds so far; a lot of credit for this goes to Catherine, for recognizing Juniper's potential and recruiting her; a lot of credit for this goes also to Catherine, for being a good as hell commander in her own right, if not quite on Juniper's level (see: Four Armies and One).

And then there's the credit that goes to Catherine for being *bugfucking nuts* as a Named and riding heroic stories so much and so successfully, she's statistically backed by providence.

[Mental Mouse](#)

That's called leadership. Doesn't actually need an Aspect, given it's a basic story trope in its own right.

Decius

Editorial note: There should be a scene earlier in the work that establishes the location and width of the river. Previous scenes had set it as a strategic barrier, but in this update it grows to the point that there are 2000 people in loose formation (because of the munitions) too far from the edge to escape after the ice breaks.

[Tohron](#)

Assuming the line is 100 wide and 20 deep, and allowing 5 feet between each person (a very loose formation), that would make the river over 100 feet wide – not unreasonable. And remember that it's winter and these people are wearing armor, so you'd have to be very close to the shore to survive the ice breaking.

Quite Possibly A Cat

Only the “better part” of 2k drowned, so not even that much.

Exec

two small TYP0S:

“made did it”

“swore would see”

Mikasi

Can I just say I was pleased at the Callow legionaire who had the thought of ‘ya know, after all the crap they’ve had to put up with? The greenskins deserve their long price too.” Shows the slowly changing opinions of Callow on orcs.

[Liliet](#)

And then there’s “he might yet find himself joining the rebellion if the Black Queen gets a little too black”.

Don’t worry Cat, your people have got your back on not allowing Evil to overtake the nation!

[Fuodiachloris](#)

See? To impress anybody from Callow, wheel out your grudges. Truly epic, long-standing and healthy ones with much justification to them will get a suitably appreciative ear.

Even if (heck, especially if) some of the grudge is against Callow. Because something that rich, dark and complex doesn’t grow on easily reached trees.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And... I’ve now caught up to the forward edge of the story. No more reading through multiple chapters a day, now I have to wait for them to be posted. 😞

[Liliet](#)

Welcome to hell!

At least you didn’t catch up at something like Interlude: Inheritance 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

There is that... Though the end of Book IV was almost as bad, wondering what happened to Catherine. I do wonder if she’s actually as mortal as she thinks she is, given she’s on her fourth life and at least her third major Role. (Depending if

Squire II and/or Queen counts.) If the Dead King was surprised by her achieving immortality by accident, he must be astonished at her willingly renouncing it.

[Liliet](#)

Mortal's a relative term ♥

Chapter 13: Following

"It is fortunate that virtue is its own reward, as it does not tend to accrue others."

– Theodore Langman, Wizard of the West

The world had become as an oil painting and the Night was boiling in my veins.

Goddesses on dark wings claimed my shoulders, insolent shards of darkness refusing the ascendancy of the afternoon sun, and they said nothing. They didn't need to. The expectation bloomed in the back of my mind like a swelling river: I'd offered them faith before they ever named me priestess, but now they required that purpose of me. Night still ran deep in the veins of the drow, however changed its nature, but none of their ancient favourites had been granted my office. *First Under the Night*, I thought. To others it might speak of supremacy, some perilous boast of standing closer to these quarrelsome goddesses than any other, but I knew better. I was first in that I was charged with the treading of unbroken grounds, as much a scream ringing into a dark tunnel as a priestess bearing their mandate. I was to stumble for them, make the mistakes and pay the costs so that my successors would not. These were still fair terms, by my reckoning. Alliance and the means to carry out my designs, for what I had freely given before they formally claimed it. But if they expected reverence of me, respect more than had been earned, then they would be disappointed.

"I never took well to prayer," I murmured. "Either the secret whispers for help or the worn-down words they taught us to recite in the House. So I won't offer you that."

The sun above was searing, blinding. Fire from above none of us were meant to look in the eye. I breathed out and let the wind thread its fingers through my hair. The power came easy to me. It was holding it that was the trouble, for it was as temperamental as its mistresses: I'd ruled Winter, by the scavenger's virtue of

being last to hold sway over it, but the Night was not my domain. If I wanted the crows to smile upon me, I would have to swing them as sweet a song as I had it in me to sing.

"But that's not what we're about, is it?" I said. "The three of us. If you wanted someone who'd know your pretty rituals, you had thousands to raise. If you wanted devotion, or unquestioning faith, there just as plenty. You went through my mind mercilessly, that night, so you know exactly what you picked."

My eyes left the sky and fell to the charging Levantines. Thousands in mail and leather and scales, steel blades and hide shields. Their faces painted with vivid strokes of colour, as true a language as the spoken tongues of their faraway land. They were close now, treading river grounds. I had chosen the broadest bent of the water for this, instead of where my armies had once tried to shatter winter's work with the cleverness of the Grey Eyries. I raised my staff and let the darkness pulse with me.

"Here's my prayer, Goddesses of Night," I savagely smiled. "The three of us, together – *let's break something.*"

Komena's raucous, delighted laughter sounded in my ears even as the bottom of my staff struck the snow-covered ice. The oldest sister might see further, weave and scheme with cold judgement, but the younger one was my kindred in some ways. Even the span of millennia had not entirely faded the remembrance of what it felt like, shattering arrogance and host with the same single stroke. The soldier-goddess leaned into my intent more strongly than her sister, harsh and domineering where Andronike was skillful and subtle. The Night spread with a whisper before sinking its claws in the iced river, rending it mercilessly. Cracks tore open the frozen grounds, cold water sloshed out and hundreds of screams filled the air. Komena roughly withdrew her will from mine, leaving me gasping and leaning on my staff for reasons deeper than a bad leg. My sight swam, the glare of the sun failing to pierce through, and I had just enough presence left to hear Robber hesitantly stepping towards me. I warded him off with a raised hand. Gods, I thought. I felt like throwing up, like my veins were about to boil and melt. I'd never wielded a miracle this large during the light of day, and I wouldn't do it again anytime soon if I had my way.

"Boss?" Robber called out.

"Took a bit out of me, that's all," I croaked out.

Too many breaths passed before I was myself again, but with eyes no longer rebelling I steadied my back spat to the side. The river had become a deep grave, I saw. There were chunks of ice floating in the water, but among them bodies were strewn. Fewer than had died, though that was no mystery: those with weightier armour had sunk straight to the bottom. The floaters had been

savaged by broken ice. Some Levantines were still swimming and screaming, but I had little worry of survival. Taking a swim this deep into winter was as sure as death sentence as a swinging sword, unless some priest intervened. My last memories of the charge were vague, almost dreamlike – there were consequences, to calling upon that much Night and the aid of a goddess – but now I could more accurately assess numbers. Around two thousand had sallied out towards my little company, and less than half that died. Their mistake had been going into battle order, I mused. That'd broadened their line, turning the loss of a few hundred into something closer to a thousand. There were still a mass of soldiers mobilizing behind the survivors of the ill-fated assault, almost the full Levantine reserve, but I had no fear of that. They were on the wrong side of the river, after all.

The cavalry in the distance that had been heading for us earlier has slowed, and there seemed to be argument between its officers. They were on our bank, sure, but then they'd just watched me turn around a mile of ice into a deathtrap. And there'd be no reinforcements, if they tried their luck. I suspected they would be disinclined to find out if I had anymore tricks up my sleeves, which was for the best. I might actually fall unconscious, if I attempted to use the Night again, and not necessarily *after* I'd let loose a miracle. I wouldn't risk it, not when anything capable of hurting the horsemen would be just as capable of ravaging my own soldiers if lashing out uncontrollably.

"That one wants your head on a pike," Robber said, calling my attention back to the footsoldiers.

Or close enough. On the other bank, a rider stood surrounded by panicking captains. A young man, in beautiful plate that must have cost a fortune. He couldn't even be twenty, I thought, though the ferocious-looking facepaint of iron grey and crimson made it hard to determine. He was looking at me with hatred and fear. The enemy's commander?

"Might be able to end him with a volley," my Special Tribune offered. "Best not to let snakes grow longer fangs."

"So young," I quietly said.

"You were younger, when you took your first command," Robber shrugged.

Seventeen, and so sure I was ready to mend my little corner of the world. Gods, how lucky had I been to have the likes of Juniper and Hakram at my side? All of Rat Company, really, and those others handpicked by then then-legate Hellhound as well. *But it wasn't luck at all, was it?* I suddenly thought. Heroes might have providence to furnish them with the tools of victory, but I'd had something of my own just as valuable. A patient man with green eyes, lending his weight where mine did not suffice

and pulling a thousand strings to ease my way forward – so many of them I could not believe I'd found half, even after all these years.

"We learned our lessons quick," I said. "We had to."

Not always the right ones, I knew, but we *had* learned. We still did. The moment you stopped, Creation buried you.

"He'll remember today, Boss," Robber said. "You can count on that. And next time he comes swinging, he'll be wiser about it."

The warning was clear. It ran against goblin nature, to let a threat escape. And there'd been promise in this one, if he'd really been in command. Going for the general staff was a tactic that would have worked against almost any army on Calernia. He'd run into Grem One-Eye and Black's reforms instead, the forced redundancies shaped by the knowledge that you couldn't count on high command surviving a battle if heroes were on the loose, but the Dominion had never fought the modern Legions of Terror so the mistake was understandable. Pressing the offensive, as he'd obviously meant to, had not been unsound either. It would have been costly, but if General Abigail's defences broken on even one front her army would have collapsed in short order. If he'd been slightly luckier, if I'd arrived a day later, he might very well have broken the Third Army completely. *If you'd had maybe another ten years of seasoning*, I thought. *If you'd been trained better, learned to temper the bold with some patience...* He could be a general of some talent, one day. No Juniper, mind you, but thankfully there were very few generals of that skill around. And if I gave him those ten years, one day the hate I saw might be turned on me with a wiser hand to wield it.

"Let him go," I said.

Yellow eyes considered me carefully.

"This isn't a victory, Robber," I sighed, gesturing at the river full of dead. "It's a waste."

"Not like you to weep for the enemy," the goblin said.

"Weep?" I mused. "No, hardly that. But every corpse we make today is a gap in the ranks when we turn to the Dead King."

I sighed, then glanced aside. In the distance, I saw the cavalry had decided to ride around the river and return to the camp. Good.

"Come on," I said. "Time to head back. General Abigail should be wrapping up inside the city."

I began limping back to Sarcella, leaving ice and death behind. The hateful stare of the boy I'd spared followed my back, but what of it?

He wouldn't be the first, or the last.

—

With the enemy riders away, there was no need to risk anything as foolish as trying the blaze a second time. Most the turtles were wrecked beyond use, anyway, and while Belles Portes had been under assault when we moved out I judged my forces too weak for a strike at the back of the Levantines still holding it. We took the long way around, the threat of the horsemen having removed itself, and long was no exaggeration. Though my drow tread snow like stone and goblins could scuttle through anything, I was exhausted beyond words and very much limping. It turned out that victory outpaced us: when we reached the eastern side of Sarcella, we were greeted by rowdy cheers. Word of the river's break had spread faster than I could walk, and more besides. The cohort positioned to hold the eastern streets crowded us to deliver accolades, or at least tried to – I sent Robber ahead to have a quiet word with the captain about not approaching the drow. They looked a little stunned by the welcome, nonetheless, almost like children seeing the sea for the first time. The Everdark did not breed the kind of comradeship that the Legions and my armies used as mortar. Mighty Jindrich was strutting like a peacock and its sigil followed suit, which amused my legionaries to no end.

I left them to it, and took aside the orc captain in command of the cohort. The news were better than I had expected. General Abigail, it seemed, had vigorously prosecuted her offensive and then taken a gamble as well. She'd recalled the two thousand drow I'd left holding the north of the city and sent them to climb the ring of statues and arches around the city, to suddenly drop down at the back of the Levantines in Belles Portes. That'd neatly cut off both the bridges that still allowed a trickle of Dominion reinforcements to come through and the last way out of the force inside Sarcella. The enemy commander, facing annihilation, had been forced to surrender. I suspected the casualty rate for the drow who'd taken the climb and been forced to fight Levantines on both sides was a lot less sunny than the official version implied, but regardless I did not disapprove. Simply by ending the fighting early, General Abigail had likely significantly lowered overall casualties. The wary-eyed Callowan I'd promoted to the head of the Third Army had accepted the surrender as soon as it was offered, and Sarcella was now entirely ours. For now, anyway. There were still Dominion soldiers beyond the bridges, and the losses we'd taken during the offensive must not have been mild.

But it was only a few hours until sundown, now, so I had no fear of what was ahead.

After we advanced deeper into the city I sent Mighty Jindrich and its warriors back to the rest of the drow with a message to General Rumena, ordering it to pull back to the now-unguarded north of the city and away from the rest of the Third Army. It'd cover our bases, just in case, but that was only a side benefit. The longer my army and the Firstborn remained in close quarters, the higher the chances of blood being spilled rose – especially if I wasn't there to supervise. The survivors of Robber's cohort I relieved with my compliments, free to sleep or whatever no-doubt-against-regulations activity they got up to when they weren't on duty. Robber himself wanted to stay at my side, but I had something else in mind and so refused.

"You keeping me away from the Dominion prisoners, Boss?" he pouted.

It was even odds, I mused whether or not he knew that made him look like a particularly horrid gargoyle. The amusement the sight caused was slight, though, and did not linger long. It wasn't amusing at all, what I needed of him.

"No," I softly said. "I need you to find out what happened to Nauk's body. If they've burned it yet, if they had time for a Legion burial."

The pout vanished, leaving behind a grim visage of wrinkled green skin. They'd had a complicated relationship, those two: adversarial and often petty, tainted by their largely one-sided competition for Pickler's attentions, but there'd also been more to it than that. It's been a comfortable kind of dislike, the kind so old and well-worn it had some kinship to friendship. And beyond that, Nauk had been Rat Company. He'd been with us from the start, the War College and those heady first days of the Fifteenth. That mattered, to those who'd been there. There weren't as many of us left as I'd like.

"I'll see to it," Robber said, and for once his voice was completely serious.

"Please," I said. "If the body's still there..."

"I'll arrange something, and send for you," the goblin said.

It wasn't a sweet parting, but this wasn't sweet business. I ran into officers sent by General Abigail on my way to the Third Army's headquarters, and learned the surrendered Levantine captains were being kept in the repurpose goal of Sarcella closer to the north, under heavy guard. The Dominion soldiers themselves had been disarmed, and while under watch had been provided healing by priests of the House Insurgent. I made my way to the

headquarters as quick as I could, my leg was aching like someone had shoved an iron spike through. It was an effort not to visibly tremble from exhaustion, now that the miracle's wake had fully settled over my shoulders, but I couldn't show weakness in front of my soldiers. At least my shoulders were bare, now. The crows had left when I began the trek back to Sarcella earlier, presumably to look for fresh amusements. In this city full of corpses and ash I had no doubt they'd find something to their tastes. The merchant's mansion that served as the location of the Third Army's high command was a great deal fuller than the last time I'd swung by. It was surrounded by legionaries, and even inside soldiers were aplenty. The mood was celebratory, but while I offered smiles I did not linger. I was too tired to keep up the pretence of haleness for long, and I still had duties to discharge.

I made my way up to the war council room, finding what remained of Nauk's general staff there and surrounding his successor. The general was the first to notice my arrival, rising up her seat looking like she would very much love to be halfway through a good night's sleep right now. I could sympathize.

"Your Majesty," she greeted me.

Huh, she'd done the salute perfectly even this exhausted. Whoever had drilled her at the recruitment camp must have left quite the impression.

"General," I replied. "And all of you – you should be proud of what you've accomplished today. You went above and beyond my expectations."

I was unsurprised to notice it was the orcs who were most pleased by that, demurely flashing fangs in a signal of humility.

"There will be another war council later, but for now I'll need the room," I calmly said. "I must speak with your general."

Being sent out didn't seem to dent their good mood all that much, and I smiled to take the sting out anyway. It wasn't long before we had the room to ourselves, though I waited until footsteps could no longer be heard. General Abigail, I noted, seemed to be willing to look anywhere in the room except at me. I wondered whether she was always jumpy as a cat, or whether it was the result of days of march under harassment followed by battles and a spectacular assassination of her direct colleagues. She was a cagey one, this Abigail of Summerholm. Her eyes never quite stopped moving, as if always looking for a threat, and I'd yet to see her let her guard down entirely once even this far behind our defence lines. I would have thought her generally inclined to prudence, but the way she'd used the drow in the battle ran against that impression.

I'd been solid thinking, if risky, and raised my opinion of her as a tactician. It would have been safer to stick to a steady push, but overall casualties would have been higher by the time the dust settled. Add that to the clever trick she'd pulled using civilians to guard the back of Sarcella, and I had to admit she was one of the more promising commanders who'd risen over the last few years. Not yet enough to remain a general, maybe, but she had the potential to get there after a bit of blooding. Which Juniper had assigned her under Nauk to get, I remembered with a touch of rue. It seemed the Hellhound and I were sharing an opinion without needing to share a room. I dragged myself to one of the seats at the table and plopped myself down, brutally suppressing a sigh, and invited her to do the same. She did after the barest of hesitations.

"You did well today," I said. "The river trick would have meant nothing if you hadn't pushed them out beforehand."

The black-haired woman forced a smile and a nod while muttering her thanks. I didn't begrudge her that in the slightest. She'd sent quite a few of her soldiers to die, today, legionaries and officers she likely knew quite well. It never quite felt like a victory, when the butcher's bill came in, did it?

"You'll be remaining in command of the Third Army until we join up with the other columns," I told her. "Possibly until we make contact with Marshal Juniper, if there's no suitable replacement for you."

She winced.

"Ma'am, I'm not sure that's a wise decision," Abigail said. "I went up the ranks fast, and I didn't go through the War College. All I got was the officer training in the camps, and it didn't cover a general's duties."

My lips quirked.

"If a few years at the College were enough to make a general, my life would be much easier," I said. "I'll be handling the drow, and a few other forms of trouble as well. I can't run the Third Army as well. You've acquitted yourself well, and you have the instincts for it. It'll have to do."

Her face fell, and once more I was struck with how young she was. I wasn't all that older, truth be told, but it'd been a long time since I'd felt my true age. *Gods, were we ever really that young?* We must have been, when we fought in the Liesse Rebellion. I wondered if we'd looked as fragile to old generals like Istrid and Sacker back then as Abigail now looked to me.

"A lot of people could die, if I make a mistake," she muttered. "That would be on my head."

Doubt, I thought. She wasn't so difficult to read that I could not pick up on it. *And resentment at being thrust into this role*. Both things could turn out dangerous, if allowed to fester. A lighter touch would be needed here, or maybe a personal one. There were times when twisting the arm was in order, but not here. An entirely unwilling general was of no use to me, and likely a liability to the soldiers she'd be commanding. Doubt and resentment, huh. I was no stranger to either, and in my experience they tended to have a common source in fear. We'd begin there. Propping up my staff against the table, I leaned back into my seat.

"In my first serious fight, I was beaten within an inch of my life by a procession of strangers and afterwards eviscerated by the Lone Swordsman," I told her quietly. "I still have the scar from where he opened me up. I was close enough to death I managed to use necromancy to get myself moving."

The other woman's eyes widened, with both surprise and disgust. The latter was at necromancy – most of my countrymen still considered the practice disgusting and dangerous – but the former was not. It wasn't common knowledge, how badly William had trounced me during the first part of our encounter. I watched curiosity seep in after the words sunk in, so I pressed on while the iron was hot.

"I ended up kicking him off the ramparts and into the Hwaerte, after catching him by surprise," I said, "but it was a very, very close thing. There are some who'd call it fate, the way it all turned out. I tend to think of it as luck."

"You were Named, even then," General Abigail said.

Like that said it all, explained everything. I supposed it might, to someone who'd never slipped into a Role. It was a lot more eye-catching the way some of us scythed through soldiers like wheat stalks than the way a single story misstep might kill you in truth an entire year before the blade actually opened your throat.

"I was green," I corrected. "Scrappy, good at some parts of what I did, but dangerously arrogant in my approach and I nearly died choking on a floor for it. But it did teach me a valuable lesson."

I smiled mirthlessly.

"You'll get eviscerated too, Abigail," I said, and she didn't quite manage to hide her flinch. "Not literally as I was, but one day you'll make a mistake and it'll be costly. You can't avoid that day, no one can. And it's good that you're afraid of it."

I met her eyes, brown to blue.

"Take that fear and use it," I said. "To make yourself *think*. About how it could go wrong, what you could do to avoid it or survive it. And from there you plan so that you don't end up in that pit in the first place. You do that well enough, and you'll push back the day some."

I paused, just a heartbeat.

"It'll still come," I frankly said. "It comes for everyone, Abigail. But if you can ward it off for a year or two, you'll still have done better than half the generals on Calernia."

A grimace split the other woman's face.

"I could have been a tanner," General Abigail mournfully said. "No one ever expects anything from those."

"I served drinks in a tavern for years," I told her, reluctantly amused. "And I ended up with a crown on my head. You're getting off light."

She paled, which made her sun-tanned cheeks look rather blotchy, but gathered herself with remarkable alacrity.

"I don't suppose I am dismissed for rest, now," she cautiously ventured.

I snorted.

"There's no rest for the wicked, General Abigail," I said. "Find us a bottle of wine and come back. We'll be going over the orders you've given since you took command of the Third Army, and why you gave them."

The black-haired woman let out a sound that might have been a whimper. I raised an eyebrow and she rose to find us something to drink, while I let out a sigh at the relief that was no longer standing on my bad leg.

Much like her I'd rather be sleeping, but if she was to be the first Callowan general in my army then she needed to be *taught*.

[DroughtBringer](#)

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Aston Whiteman

Maybe?

I prefer to read the story.

[Javvies](#)

This bodes well for those desiring more of Abigail. She'll either go far, or go out in a blaze of (reluctant) glory. Holy crap – Abigail is the Callowan Caiphas Cain!!

Ehhhh ... killing him is kind of a wash. He's probably not going to be in command much longer, but the lessons he learns from getting his ass kicked this way might prove to be useful against the Dead King. And that would likely be worth leaving him alive, especially since killing him isn't certain.

IDKWhoitis

Because of how Fate works, I wouldn't be surprised to see him next chapter to discuss a sort of cease fire or something.

Cat really doesn't have the reasons, nor will to fight Humans right now. She needs Black, and everyone is needed on the front with Dead King. For all we know, the Tomb has been broken and the fall of Hannover will shrink the frontline to allow the Dead King to potentially send a "recruitment drive" into the rattlings.

Insanenoodlyguy

If cat was still named, I'd have been screaming she just killed herself, that's literally the sort of thing that makes an origin story for the hero that gets you. But, at least for now, she's not, so it was probably a decent move.

IDKWhoitis

I would choke on laughter if she ends up getting a diplomatic Name out of this shitshow.

All jokes aside, she is practicing realpolitik: Being able to recruit a formerly fallen empire, negotiating with the likes of Dead King, Dwarves, Gods, Good, and Evil. She gives exactly what they deserve and expect, while at the same time furthering the end goals (even if she loses sight of them temporarily.)

[Liliet](#)

Yep!

[Euodiachloris](#)

It's worth the gamble. Cat may well be tutoring two generals with one throw.

And, as pointed out... potential generals with decent enough instincts don't grow on trees, and Calernia will need every one of them knocked down a few pegs and built back up for some time in the not-too-distant future. 😊

Someguy

Eh. He's only fit to be sword fodder to be marched into the Dead King's meatgrinder.

stevenneiman

Honestly, Abigail reminds me of book 1 Cat more than anything. maybe a bit more hostile to the Call and less mouthy, but she's still got that same mix of resolve and wondering how the hells she got here.

Dainpdf

I see just two issues with these deviations: the first reeks of the Lone Swordsman, who was actually brought up in this chapter. And the second is Cat getting a pupil. As it was often said to Black, that story tends to end with the mentor dead. She must be careful their relationship doesn't turn into that. Maybe by shagging Abigail, now that she's into sleeping with people again.

Rook

The parallel is more of the way Black handled the aftermath of the Conquest, not the Lone Swordsman. It wasn't some emotional need for redemption that she let him go. She let him go because it was a 'waste', and there'd already been enough of that for one day.

It's the same reason Amadeus built Callow back up after the conquest, even though it was a murderously rebellious breeding ground for Heroes, and collectively considered him public enemy number one. As dangerous as it was, it was still more useful alive than dead.

The mentor thing is a legitimate threat, but we have to keep in mind the bigger picture here. Cat has never been about personal survival, she's a mirror to her own mentor in that sense. As much as she's changed she's still the same person who thought it was a damn good bargain to trade in her own life for liesse, if it came down to it; and the stakes she's playing for now are a hell of a lot higher than just one major city. As nice as survival is, it's likely not actually at the top of her list of end-goals.

[Liliet](#)

^^^ this.

Skaddix

I mean I don't think mentor getting you killed applies. Cat is not Named currently and Abigail has never had a Name. Not to mention the age difference being what 2-3 years max and the difference in role. Sure Abigail might become Queen of Callow but she is not really in line to succeed Cat as First Under Night. The titles are not connected.

Dainpdf

You'll recall Black still decapitated any rebellious movements and leaders. Letting a general so openly hostile to him live was not Black's style.

Also, Cat did not let the Lone Swordsman live out of emotion, but calculation.

We can only hope this young man does not have the weight to initiate a pattern of three with her, or get a Name out of the deal.

[Liliet](#)

Black was conquering Callow. Cat's not conquering Procer, much less Levant. Long-term, she's looking at an alliance, not a low key simmering war of mutual extermination.

Insanenoodlyguy

Normally i'd say either was likely but CAT ISN'T NAMED. At least for now. That saves her.

Dainpdf

She's still got enough weight she might as well be. Probably a bit less bound to stories, but bound enough that it matters a lot.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

I think Cat is taking the longer view by not killing the "boy". Yes, she risks him becoming a personal enemy by leaving him alive. However, killing him gives her one less officer when it comes time to fight the Dead King. From here on out, she needs to conserve the lives of not only her troops but her enemy's troops because she will need every living soul!

Ninith settler

Hot dang. Cat is a walking airstrike in a medieval setting. She is too op.

I'm glad Abigail is going to end up relevant. Ben rooting for that since she first appeared. RIP Nauk. But TBH the orc was sort of dead inside already.

Ninith settler

Didn't mean to reply, sorry

Levi Kalden

I actually believe she will be the one to become Queen, it would fit and I can just imagine her pitting herself

Aston

I'm sure Cats bad leg remains a secret weapon in her narrative war.

Good writing!

IDKWhoitis

Truely a daughter of Black. His horrifying, well meaning daughter in all the best and worst aspects. She has even inherited his method of dealing with subordinates and mending bridges.

imagesbe

Abigail is luckier than she knows. Cat is one of the better tacticians on Calernia; not Juniper or Grem tier, but just one or two below that. We can probably count the number outright better than her on two hands. Of course, Abigail's also not lucky; she'll mess up eventually, and the consequences will be harsh. But hopefully this will help her get through it.

We're going to see that Levantine officer again, and when we do we'll find out whether it was a good or bad thing he was let go. I have a suspicion it will be a bad thing. Hatred isn't healthy to ones' mindset, and will taint any cooperation in the future.

IDKWhoitis

I see Cat as a good Tactician, but not anywhere near Juniper or Grem tier.

She is great at mind games and unconventional warfare (including heroic and villainous bullshit).

Given equal means and information, I see Juniper trouncing Cat 99/100 times. But that's not how Cat fights, and both times Cat has beaten Juniper, is because she pulled a new weapon system

or unknown variable. Cat looks so good because she can steal the initiative, then has to keep up the tempo to prevent a loss. The problem she runs into, is rushing into one disaster then another to maintain that initiative.

I think that a cease fire will be called soon, seeing as Callow now holds both the city wall and several thousand hostages, and Cat has been getting better at diplomacy.

stevenneiman

Cat only actually beat Juniper once. What she did the other time was in its own way even more impressive: She manipulated the story so the "price" she had to pay for victory was something immensely profitable, namely poaching Juniper for her own faction.

[Liliet](#)

Juniper's a great tactician, Cat's a great strategist. If Juniper and Cat were on opposing sides of a war, it wouldn't look like the five-way melee, it would look like Juniper being never given battle where she wasn't at a bad enough disadvantage that the best her tactical acumen can do is make the defeat slightly less harsh.

The fact Juniper IS at Cat's side *is a function of Cat's skill as a strategist.*

[wirelessgrapes](#)

She's an A Tier strategist while Juniper and Grem are SS tier. Thankfully, there are very, very few S tier. As few as their are SS tier probably, or even less.

The main difference between Cat and Juniper, to keep the fighting game analogy going, is that Cat is controlled by a player, while Juniper is controlled by a CPU at max level.

stevenneiman

The thing about hardest-difficulty AI vs. player is actually a quite good metaphor.

Someguy

I kind of see Abigail becoming an anti-Named General, her tactics will get her ass kicked by normal armies but will chew up and shit out corpses of Named and other supernatural forces.

Dainpdf

But she just got her start as General by doing well against an army with no Named in it..

[Liliet](#)

IDK, so far she's seemed to me like her best skill is adapting to how regular people think.

The anti-riot wine is characteristic.

Someguy

Well, she was good enough to plant the seed of impotence into the heart of the Mirror Knight (aka shiny fucker) in Kaleidoscope IV-VI.

Speaking of which, shiny fucker needs to die fast now that there are Drow in the field given that one of his Aspects is [Dawn] which makes him stronger every morning.

[Liliet](#)

I'm not saying Abigail isn't going to be good at handling Named, I'm just predicting that she's not going to be easy meat for mundane generals :3

[Liliet](#)

Oops, not what I was trying to reply to.

WRT this, shiny fucker *is on the same side*. Catherine's going to kick everyone's ass into realizing that this is not a zero-sum game, *with as few losses as possible*.

RanVor

That's the goal, but I don't think it's actually possible to achieve without large amounts of bloodshed, and the Named are going to resist the hardest, because they have the highest stakes in the game. So the probability of Cat having a big showdown with the heroes that ends with most of them dead somewhere down the line is actually pretty high.

[Liliet](#)

True!

I root for as many of them surviving as possible though, as does Catherine :3

[Liliet](#)

No, wait, I WAS replying to this. Reading comprehension: 1, me: 0

[Sugar Roll](#)

Being a tactician is just her secondary talent. Setting up the narrative for a story and dealing with Named on the other side is what she is really good at—similar to how Amadeus and Grem are running things IMO.

Taichi22

Indeed.

I consider Catherine a tactician second, however. She's thirdly a warrior, secondly a tactician, but first and foremost a storyteller.

[Liliet](#)

It's worth noting that storyteller => politician ==> strategist =====> tactician ==> warrior.

These things aren't independent. Each of them requires slightly different skills / knowledge base, but a lot of it flows around interconnectedly. Making things look&sound good is a common skill between storyweaver and politician. Seeing the big picture is a common skill between storyweaver, politician and strategist. Being aware of how other players are motivated and think is a common skill between politician, strategist and tactician. Knowing the actual mechanics&logistics of battles is a common skill between strategist and tactician. Being able to follow the situation as it develops and think quickly&clearly under pressure is a common skill between tactician and warrior. Etc.

And Catherine being good at storyweaving occasionally translates *immediately* into tactical success. Well, that was mostly against fae, but the point that she knew which skill to lean on too win stands, you know?

Soma

Abigail is going to be Queen. She's pretty much being set up as Catherine's successor, because this sounds somewhat like the beginning of an apprenticeship. Cat really reminds me of black here in a lot of ways with how she's thinking about handling her new charge.

danh3107

It's going to be her or Thief, I'm pretty sure Viv either lost her name or transitioned, so her becoming the next queen isn't out of the picture.

"Petty thieves hang, the great wear crowns."

[Mental Mouse](#)

I find myself wondering... if Viv has lost her Name of Thief, what happens to all the loot she's stolen and hidden in her *Aspect-linked* hideaway? Perhaps one of her new Aspects will be "Gift". 😊

Decius

The next Thief acquires it.
Equivalently, the next person to acquire it becomes the next Thief.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hmm. I don't recall seeing anything about Viv inheriting a stash of treasure and sundry knick-knacks, so I don't think so. The stash does look suspiciously like a personal domain, but we don't really know much about those. The closest thing we've seen are Warlock's and Masiego's private storage dimensions, but those are explicitly created... and we don't know what happens to them either. In fact, that might be an issue – what important items might have been stashed in Warlock's private storage dimension?

[Liliet](#)

Oh nice, good point.

Dainpdf

I just worry about that. As Black was told many times, training a successor is quite a death flag.

Ali Khan

So is leaving a young noble alive to plan revenge, something makes me think that cat isn't planning to survive after the battle against the dead king.

Dainpdf

Mayhap. I rather suspect Black squeezed any suicidal tendencies out of her early on the apprenticeship.

[Liliet](#)

I'm worried Black might have *infected* her with suicidal tendencies, as a matter of fact.

>My own fate was ultimately a side note: if I had to go for Callow to finally stop bleeding, then I'd pull that trigger without hesitation. I'd had a good teacher when it came to the lesson of not getting in your own way.

He's tried his best to teach her to be kinder to herself than that.

>"Human," he reminded me. "Villain, but still human. It's all right to want things for yourself, Catherine."

>Do not try to become me," he said. "I was a tool that served a purpose, and that purpose is coming to an end.

...his best kind of sucked.

"Do as I say, not as I do" -_-

Black's taught Cat better than to be *accidentally* suicidal. Unfortunately, he also taught her the exact method for being that on purpose -_-

Dainpdf

You're right... let's hope the Woe puts a kibosh on any self sacrifice plans, then.

[Liliet](#)

Well, the Calamities' approach to that sure as fuck didn't work (and was actually somewhat counterproductive as they antagonized Cat instead of coordinating the common "stop doing this" intervention).

Here's hope the Woe is going to do better.

Indrani's certainly been making a decent sounding board / therapist throughout Book 4, though now it's time for Catherine to play that for her right back.

Can't wait for Catherine to encounter the mirror image of her own bullshit in Hakram No-Hands and realize that it's contagious and that maybe she should *stop* ;u;

Dainpdf

They could be a circus trio: Hakram No-Hands, Zeze Glass-Eyes and Cat Peg-Leg.

Really, Thief and Archer are the ones missing out. Come on, girls! Time to lose a nose or ear!

[shimizubad](#)

Don't forget Akua, the No Body.

Dainpdf

Good catch! Though I'd call her Akua No-Heart.
Feels more pungent like that.

GreatDepression

Akua the Bodyless

Insanenoodlyguy

Dramatically lowered risk now that she's not named.

An evil villian sparing a hero out of finding their death
tedious births the one that will kill them.

A mundane (technically) General beating a youngster, teaming
up with that youngster, and then getting killed by them?
That is only the kind of story a villian has. Unless he
wants to soil his entire family's legacy, he has until the
alliance to take care of her.

[Liliet](#)

Yup.

The crucial difference is the kind of motivation the
(potential) hero has for opposing the (hypothetical)
villain. If the insult of defeat is the only sticking
point, there's no story there and the defeated youngster
just has to suck it up. But if the insult of defeat is
only the inciting incident for the hero slowly noticing
all the *other* good reasons to oppose the villain, well,
then the narrative gears click into motion.

If Cat isn't a villainous Named, that's that much less
good reason to oppose her. If Cat succeeds in her alliance
efforts, that's that much less good reason to oppose her.
Depending on how Cat does politically / narrative wise
from now on, period, that's going to determine how much
story weight the kid's going to have for potentially
opposing her.

And something (like her own inner monologue) tells me that
Cat's more than willing to accept this kind of check on
her future actions.

[Liliet](#)

Well, as Amadeus has demonstrated *to his own great surprise*,
Mentor Occupational Hazard is not the *only* possible outcome,
just the most straightforward one.

Leaving like "kthxbye you can handle this without me now I'm
off on vacation" is a succession trope, too.

Dainpdf

True, though mentors who do that have a tendency to return at the end of the second act to perform a heroic sacrifice, or turn out to be the big bad.

[*Liliet*](#)

Yep.

On the other hand, there's an expanded version of that trope.

"I'm not explaining myself right," she said. "Just – all right, think about it like this. Hero out on their first lark, meets a mysterious helpful stranger that gives advice and maybe teaches a trick. When's the next time you see them?"

My fingers clenched.

"When that hero's in over their head," I said softly. "When the stranger appears out of nowhere and wipes the floor with the villain, enough that the hero can flee and prepare for the rematch."

"Yeah," Vivienne agreed grimly. "That's the thing, Cat. He doesn't always win, but I couldn't find a single instance of when the Grey Pilgrim got into a fight and lost."

It's a risky story to have. But given its utility for those you want to help, I 100% see Catherine going for it.

50% chance of heroic sacrifice, 50% chance of helping *and* surviving to do it another time? Cat's snapping that deal up.

Dainpdf

Unsure she gets to be the helpful stranger when she's been the woman's superior for years, but, if anyone can swing that, it's Cat.

Decius

"Turn out to be the Big Bad" is still on the table.

Dainpdf

That case tends to lead to the young hero killing their mentor, tho.

[*Liliet*](#)

With regard to Catherine?

Let's be real.

No ;u;

Ali Khan

Abigail is gonna end up the next queen at this rate, and hate every second of it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And the horrible thing is, she can see it coming!

Skaddix

How is old Cat again? Why is she always like so young she is like 20 or 21 max? She started this story at like 17, I don't remember how many years the story has been going on. But it seems odd she comment that Abigail and this Lord are so young. I guess it suppose to show she feels old.

Still Abigail getting some tutoring and Cat doesn't think the Lord did anything wrong. I suppose his mistake was not believing the rumors from when Cat dropped a Lake. But then again we don't know who told him that information or where they got it from. You could say he was arrogant if he heard it straight from Saint or Pilgrim not that I think they told him. But he doesn't seem to have access to an intelligence so not trusting the source with his information isn't necessarily bad.

Are we getting a funeral? Or do we switch to a new character? Also what is Indrani doing and did Cat tell her about Masego yet.

Oshi

It feels like we are in for a bit of info dump then the classic EE twist of some kind at the end.

Dainpdf

Yeah, he just heard rumors. And those aren't very trustworthy – in the early chapters Cat referred to all sorts of fanciful rumors about Black.

[Liliet](#)

And then some of them turned out to be actually true, like the dragon one. And no way to tell which is which.

(Well, the giant's blood one is easy once you've met him...)

Dainpdf

Maybe it was a short giant, okay? XD

Liliet

Catherine is 21, and started at 15 going on 16. It's definitely a trick of perception that her own age peers seem young to her. Catherine's commented on it before. A lot of people have been horrified by how young she is too – I particularly remember Tariq and Brandon Talbot. It's not actually normal to have her level of experience/ptsd at her age. Cat's not wrong to comment on how insanely young Abigail is, it's not weakened by the fact she's young too. Both things can be horrifying at the same time.

And yeah, I don't think Tanja did that bad as a commander either. He didn't *have* reliable intelligence. Throw away hindsight bias and consider things from his perspective. This is Catherine being bane to rational thinking, not him being irrational.

Indrani's probably with the rest of the drow army that's catching up.

Skaddix

I say its weird in a real world but not in the narrative world ie Heroes and Villains usually start their rise pretty young. I mean Amadeus and Weseka started their rise even younger then Cat and the Woe. Add to fact we have turnover from wars and narrative based conflicts and the fact that Cat broke away from Praes which means most of her team is younger naturally. Young people being at key positions at the start of every major realignment doesn't seem unusual.

Liliet

I'm not even sure it's all that weird in the real world, if we look back through history towards earlier times. Though don't quote me on this ofc I'm not a historian.

Mental Mouse

Uncommon but not weird. Even in America, it was only recently (well into the 20th century) that a 15-year old would really be considered "a child" – that transition followed the spreading demand for schooling beyond basic literacy and arithmetic.

For most of human history, a 15-year-old would likely be married (or at least betrothed), and would certainly be working at adult tasks. They'd still be noted as (probably) being physically weaker, and mentally less mature, than a 20- or 30-year-old (see [age requirements](#)

[for public office; USA](#)), but they *would* be sitting at the grownups' table. And yeah, there's a fair number of European kings and queens who took power in their teens.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And Names were explicitly noted early on, as a way for surprisingly young people to gain power and achieve mighty things.

Rook

On the other hand, it was Black himself that taught Catherine that mundane numbers could overwhelm Named pretty easily. One of his first lessons was a story about predecessor Black Knights with enough power to make him look like a child, who died to a common soldier's blade after running out of stamina.

10:1 numbers advantage is nothing to scoff at. He was completely right to think he could beat Catherine in a brawl right there, his main mistake was not reading the terrain.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

[Mental Mouse](#)

More fundamentally, Razin Tanja did not consider *at all* the chance that the enemy commander had a magical trick up their sleeve, and this despite her odd behavior, dire reputation, and minions of an unfamiliar species. In a world where such tricks are widespread and well-known (including not just Named, but "ordinary" mages and priests), that's not just failing to be genre-savvy, it's downright ignorant.

[Liliet](#)

He did not exactly have a free hour to slowly and thoughtfully deliberate on the situation.

He had to make a snap decision. The Black Queen's *right there*. Maybe if he waits that's all the time she needs to weave a slower evil spell to destroy all his troops. Maybe she's baiting him and the trick she has will be greatly weakened if he doesn't attack. Maybe she's banking on him thinking that and bluffing a trick where there isn't one. Maybe-

He did not have enough information to make an informed decision, period. Criticizing his guesses is pointless.

If he waited and let her set up – and it was something she needed to set up for – it'd be just as delicious to jump in like 'oooh Cat was underestimated again'.

Hindsight bias.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Self-correction: "At all" -> "until much too late".

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm wondering if Nauk might in fact get raised as some sort of undead. Resurrection by Good probably isn't in the cards, but as noted with the zombie horses, a non-aligned power can do better than the usual zombie or wight.

yareyare

Correct me if im wrong but Cat is no longer named right?

[wirelessgrapes](#)

She does not have a direct Mantle, but she probably still works within the bounds of Story. She's far more flexible than any of her peers, but she's still directed somewhat.

crescentsickle

My suspicion is that she either has or is developing one of those original "Names" that were seen in the memories in the Fae Realm. The ones that were more like bestowed general powers but lacked definition.

It does make me wonder who the Squire is right now. Wonder if that'll be Abigail, haha!

[Liliet](#)

She no longer has a Name, yeah.

Wry Warudo

Cat just let a promising young leader go, while starting to mentor her own.

Oh snap, is she setting up multiple death flags for herself?

Dainpdf

My hope is that the young man doesn't have the narrative weight to actually set up a pattern with her – she's playing the big leagues with th Dead King, Cordelia and Malicia, while he's a small time general. And she didn't commit any atrocities that might justify a rise to Hero status.

On Abigail... I say she needs to take care that they don't have a Mentor-Apprentice relationship. Perhaps by tutoring other people – seems to work for the Pilgrim – or by not involving herself too much... or maybe by changing their relationship. It has been some time since she last took a lover.

[Liliet](#)

Patterns of three only apply to *rivals*.

How in the unholy fuck is Tanyusha McGloryHound a rival for Catherine? They're not in the same dimension. He's not Named, she's not a noble, their goals don't either intersect or contradict each other?

Story thinking overcomplicates this. Catherine just earned herself an enemy. It's one person, and matters the way one person who's got some political weight does.

Dainpdf

A young, talented prince, out on his first campaign, sees his men brutally murdered by the foul magics of the cruel Black Queen (btw, she *is* a noble) ...and swears revenge for their deaths.

After a long journey, where he accrues friends, allies, and knowledge, he finally faces her on the battlefield, prepared to vanquish the foe that appears in his nightmares to this day.

Tell me that's not a common archetype.

[Liliet](#)

I'm sorry but "Queen Foundling" remains a punchline ;u;
(and a deliberate one at that)

And no, it's not common. "Sees his men brutally murdered by the foul magics of the cruel Black Queen" just doesn't quite cut it for the Call.

Dainpdf

Well, nominal roles like that do matter for stories and politics. It's why there was so much debate about what things would be called after the Battle of Camps.

As for the Call, I hope it doesn't count.

[Liliet](#)

True!

It's still a punchline, which I appreciated anew once I remembered the word for foundling in Russian and started thinking of Catherine as that. You get used to how it sounds and stop really appreciating what kind of last name it really is ;u;

Dainpdf

Google Translate gave me these: подкидыш, найденыйш
Unsure how either makes it funnier.

Or did you not know what Foundling meant?

[Liliet](#)

Катерина Найдёныш, Леди Найдёныш, Её Величество Найдёныш.

It worked for me because over time I got used to thinking of "Foundling" as just a last name, a neutral sequence of syllables. But it's not. In-universe, it's not, because it's the last name given to all orphans. It's a signifier of Catherine being an orphan, of her having no lineage and no known ancestors.

Translating into Russian refreshed my perception of that and made me appreciate the surreality of the situation anew 😊

(And part of the surreality is that instead of taking a new last name or looking for her ancestors, Catherine sticks with the 'orphan' identifier. She's not playing the game where orphans are at the bottom and royalty is at the top, where given a chance you disentangle yourself from being an orphan and clutch at the royalty thing with all you have. Catherine stays loyal to her origins, takes pride in them, and that's really the punchline part)

("The closest thing I have to a father is down south killing fools, and he doesn't have a last name. Born a farmer, you see")

(never fucking forget)

Insanenoodlyguy

Quite possibly, once upon a time, but a few problems now:

1. SHE'S NOT NAMED. If she was a villain, she'd have birthed a new hero. But she's not. Maybe she'll be one

again someday, but right now she's just some human with tricks.

2. She's going to be his ally. Or at least an ally of his allies. That's her whole actual goal here. Coming back to defeat the Black Queen who's invading your country? Very common archetype, yes. But by the time you come back... she's the friend of your friend and is attacking your enemy side by side. And the types of people who kill that person... they aren't heroes. And the bratty noble who can't put his own personal need for vengeance aside for the greater good of all, including themselves? The archetype is they die trying to get that vengeance, not succeeding. If Cat's a named again by this point, he's more screwed. If she doesn't have one... then it's a boy who either has become a villain but is doing this against somebody who sees him coming a mile away and can still hit about his weight class... or he's a mundane doing this against somebody who still saw him coming a mile away who can hit even harder above his weight class.

Basically he has till she can get Cordelia to play nice to pull anything off if he wants narrative help, which he absolutely needs, and after that unless she acts wildly out of character he's shit out of luck. At that point at best he can be the background character that helps somebody with better odds get a shot at her.

Dainpdf

1. I addressed this in another comment, but she has enough weight, she should be affected by tropes. If that's not enough, she's bound to two goddesses (and we know apotheosis binds one to patterns) and a band of Named, plus an eldritch fae thing. Not being Named herself is a minor consideration.

2. There are other forces arraying against this maneuver. The Saint, mostly, but she seems to be working with the Bard. And the Bard is suspected to have the ear of the Oracle. It is very possible that the prince becomes their ally or pawn when this all comes to a head.

[Liliet](#)

There's hardly more reason to think Bard would want Catherine dead than reason to think Bard would want Catherine alive.

Dainpdf

We know she worked with Saint on the declaration of Cat as arch heretic. So while we don't know the Bard wants her dead, we know the old monster doesn't seem to want the Accords signed.

[Liliet](#)

We also know she prevented the elves from killing Akua, doesn't mean she wanted Akua to beat Catherine.

Bard works in indirect ways.

And I think there's good reason to consider that it might be possible that Liesse Accords being successfully signed is *exactly* what she's after, considering her comments to Anaxares about the League and considering how she *engineered Second Liesse **and** its outcome*

Dainpdf

Point. I suspect her thing with Akua was letting evil wreck itself. Akua's plan drove a wedge between Black and the Empress; it provided fodder for the Crusade; it led Cat into delving fully into Winter (ie nerfed her in all the ways that mattered); it, eventually, resulted in the Dead King marching and this ultimate conflict between Good and Evil. So no, I don't think Bard is very favorable towards an international agreement to stop the infighting.

[Liliet](#)

You're thinking too short term. My point is that Bard plays the long game. The Dead King sure is looking more and more like the *perfect* pretext for an alliance between all other forces on the continent, Good or Evil. The Arch-Heretic thing isn't going to seriously stand in the way of Catherine steamrolling her way into an eventual alliance with 50k drow, is my prediction. It could, later, after the Dead King was defeated, but as someone on reddit said, it's like triggering an avalanche deliberately so it's not as bad as if it happened later. Bringing up the Arch-Heretic point when it's frankly stupid defuses the question.

Bard's problem with the League was that it was 'skin deep' and 'none of the forces behind it moved any differently after foundation'.

Cat's trying to make Liesse Accords the foundation for the future, period. To base a new continent-wide status quo on them.

All the immediate conflicts Bard's fanning are petty in the face of the possibility of that.

Dainpdf

I don't see what the arch heretic thing does to help, tho. The drow thing? Sure. Not declaring her arch heretic.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine kept looking for an easy way out of things.

Ally with the Crusade, go against Malicia, be forced to make concessions and abandon her grander plan but end the war early.

The Arch-Heretic thing drives her into the corner where she HAS to bend everyone else to her will, there's literally no other way left open in the direction she wants to go.

And at the same time, see the point she brings up in the latest chapter. The thing about being declared Arch-Heretic early in the war is that you completely lack leverage afterwards. If the Crusade is forced to chew and swallow working with the person they've *already* declared Arch-Heretic, that breaks a big Good vs Evil trope, and that aligns with what I'm guessing Bard's point is here perfectly.

Again, Catherine, when forced between, say, abdicating during a peaceful time and shattering the House of Light in half by being declared Arch-Heretic, would most definitely not choose the latter. Now that the catastrophe already happened in Cat's absence (twice, even), she has no incentive left to back down, now or later.

Dainpdf

Did she really? I'm pretty sure she never once considered giving up on the Accords. Which would have been much easier to get signed without this – Cordelia was almost 100% for signing them when this came along.

[Liliet](#)

I'm not sure about this, I admit. This is how I remember things going.

I don't think Cordelia /knew/ about Liesse Accords. She was considering burning her own political capital to demand that Catherine be let into the Grand Alliance, but the Liesse Accords have yet to come up between them, I think.

Dainpdf

I don't think Cat put the entirety of the Accords to her, but they'd been speaking for a while, so she had some idea where Cat was going.

And if she was letting Cat into the Alliance, it was a short walk from there to the Accords. Gotta remember Cordelia is not actually expansionist.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, I do remember that. I just get the impression that Catherine didn't make a whole lot of progress in those talks.

Dainpdf

I merely meant that her being ready to let Cat into the Alliance, knowing some of her ideas, signals some openness to them.

[Liliet](#)

I mean yeah, agreed strongly. Cordelia and Catherine are more or less on the same page for a lot of stuff.

Cordelia just doesn't (didn't) have the Named momentum to just go straight for the goal and fuck everyone who's in the way. (And it is in fact a point of pride to her that she actually discussed with Cat – or it was lmao)

Dainpdf

Cordelia doesn't need a Name to get things done. That's the way of Procer – they're one of the strongest countries on Calernia, and they're not led by Named.

What Cordelia has is a strong will and political acumen. Plus the loyal people from her home.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, yea. Procer is not led by Named, they're led by something vaguely resembling democracy on the highest level, and Cordelia made a whole point out of defending that system to Catherine.

Named drive right through obstacles to arrive at their desired outcome. Cordelia has to temper her means and ends in accordance to other people's wills.

In these particular circumstances, I suspect this might end up insufficient to carry out her duty :3

Dainpdf

It's an oligarchy.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

[Liliet](#)

It's not helping, no. It's not what Catherine *wants*. She's not so confident in her Accords project that she'll fight the whole continent for it, given alternative.

Bard isn't trying to *help*, here, any more than she was helping Hanno in the Free Cities.

Dainpdf

Is she not? She seemed pretty good with it... and really, she wouldn't need to fight nearly as many people if it weren't for this declaration.

[Liliet](#)

True.

Bard's irons in the fire might also include Laurence's point about Procer being rotten and needing to be broken and rebuilt. And I would say Bard has very different ideas than Laurence does about how things are going to go and what the result is going to look like.

Dainpdf

That sounded less like it getting rebuilt and more like something else being built on its ashes...

[Liliet](#)

Considering it's a metaphor either way and nobody's going to literally turn it into a scorched wasteland (not even the Dead King, he's after the living, not blighting the land), the point is highly abstract.

Either way, the Arch-Heretic thing, while not making anyone involved happy, has proven to be insufficient to stop Catherine. That, to me, means it cannot be used as *proof* that Bard intended for it to.

This does largely boil down to the question of how competent Bard really is. We know she's told Neshamah that flipping the story on Cat hasn't worked, but I'm not sure that that refers to trying to kill her and not, say, trying to convert her to Good?... Because one of those tasks is much easier&simpler than the other.

Dainpdf

You may recall that Neshamah did blight his land. The lands around the Crown a egg e filled with poison.

In any case, many people are likely to die because of this arch heretic thing. And, well, it hasn't stopped Cat – which makes sense, she only heard about it recently – but it has complicated her ability to conduct diplomacy by a lot.

[Liliet](#)

That's Keter's Due, not intentional.

And we'll see how it plays out :3

Dainpdf

Are you telling me you don't think he could have cleaned some of that up over the millennia?

It's advantageous for him. The dead don't need to breathe, and he has all the territory he needs in his Serenity.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, yeah. I'm just saying the Dead King is not aiming to blight the Principate too – it'd be to

his disadvantage even, he wants living humans right there where he can get them :3

Dainpdf

Why would he? I imagine he has all the people he needs in the Serenity. I suspect that more than anything he wants a larger buffer so the Intercessor has a harder time interfering with his plans.

[Liliet](#)

Exactly, *why* would he burn the land?

Dainpdf

I meant “why would he want those people?”. Burning the land would make it more difficult for both armies and Named to reach Keter to interfere with his stuff, avoid the possibility of rebellion – a possibility since the new territory is not as controlled as the Serenity – discourage attempts to reconquer the land...

[Liliet](#)

Yup.

SilentWatcher

is she still in the same league as the big players? just some river cracking nearly floored her and daylight is severely limiting her. Not to mention she has a mortal body again. Comparing to the battle of camps. this battle was a regression of her battle ability. No turning to mist again, no healing after getting cut by the saint of swords.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Her personal badass level is a lot lower, but as others have noted (including in-story), that personal power was never her true strength – if anything, it was a distraction from her mastery of narrative and strategic brilliance.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Belatedly: Also, the text notes that the goddess powering her “withdrew her power roughly”, which might well warrant a “hey, not cool” in later discussion with them.

[Liliet](#)

This is probably a skill thing. Komana isn't exactly practiced in empowering her chosen priestess to perform large scale miracles.

They'll get better at this with time, IMHO.

Mental Mouse

Cat did comment that being "First" was less about being most powerful, than about being the one to clear the path.

Liliet

Yep.

The white mouse 😊

Liliet

On the other hand, her power is now versatile and doesn't come with sanity erosion as a drawback.

And then there's the fact that tricks are ultimately still tricks – it was the army that won this skirmish, the power just helped minimize casualties further.

Political power, the power of who you have at your side, the power of having an army and allies, matters a lot more than what 1 person can do in a 1v1 battle. Or even a 1vArmy battle – even if you destroy anything in your field of vision, your field of vision is still only so much. Named cannot hold territory.

SilentWatcher

How is her Power more versatile? She lost an invulnerable Body, making her body to mist, raising sentient Undead, making potential immortal Fae soldiers, she cannot Gate without Restriction anymore and she is severely limited when the Sun shines. For now the only New use of Night, which she couldn't do with Winter, was her lighting her Pipe.

Her opening a gate at the battle of camps was the deciding factor to even the playing field and you call it a trick...you know what would minimize casualties even further? instead going through flames like a retard use a gate. oh wait doesn't work anymore, because she is tired after gating with night. More Power would help her preserve her army even better, so the odds she wins are better.

Political power matters way less than you think, look how it went for Cordelia and why do you think Cat has now more? she has even less than before, because to reach her

Goal of Peace allying with murderous Nightworshipping Drow will just prove them right she is the Archheretic. the only Thing she gained in the Everdark besides snarky Ravens, is an Army. And an Army is per definition NOT Political Power, but Martial Power.

And the as of now End Boss of this arc, The Dead King, has build a Kingdom and an army of Dead, with his own power, which lasted for over a Millenium. And look how long he held his territory. It even expanded under his rule.

When she is fighting the big Names, she NEEDS more power. The gulf of Power which seperates the Dead King from an ordinary Named is even greater than the Power gulf between a Named and a Non Named. Again Quote from the earlier Books, there is a point where Power is so much greater that no amount of tricks can even the playing field. I think people understand something wrong, In the past, when she won unwinnable Battles she tricked the Story, so Creation MADE her more powerful, so she could win. Look how the Encounter went against Akua and William, she suddenly was better. When she outplayed the summer Queen she withstood her might a lot easier than when she first met the Winter King. At second Liesse, the moment she was the unleashed Monster storywise, she tore out Akuas Heart in one Move, where she lost before. This Hints that personal Power is in some way NECESSARY to win in Creation, as its not logical for a absolute weakling to win insurmountable odds.

SilentWatcher

So considering all of the above and Cats Goals (killing Saint, defeating Cordelia, Pilgrim and then the Dead King) It is highly unlikely she wins without some power up. (Masego showing up and working a miracle is my bet).

[Liliet](#)

Well, I'm betting she's going to do just fine in her current state.

We'll see who's right!

[Liliet](#)

>as its not logical for a absolute weakling to win insurmountable odds

So are you asserring that Catherine isn't going to win, that she's not an absolute weakling, or that Guide is illogical?

SilentWatcher

I am asserting that if a Victory was achieved in Creation, yet the Winner lacks the power to complete the Victory, Creation will make Winner more powerful.

[Liliet](#)

Huh.

Okay.

So what you're saying is that it doesn't matter that Cat has given up on Winter, Creation's going to empower her either way as long as she's winning?

SilentWatcher

I am saying if she needs more power than she has now to win. We will see how she gets it

[Liliet](#)

I'm not sure what the cause effect chain is that you're thinking of. Cat can't win unless she gets more power? Cat can't not get more power?

[Javvies](#)

I think what you're saying is that if the Story/ Narrative says you win, then you're empowered such that you win.

And while there's some truth to that ... there are also limits.

The Narrative boost won't overcome everything. As an analogy, the boost won't enable an unathletic 400 pound couch potato to outspurt Usain Bolt in his prime. It could enable a pro NFL player to do so. It might allow a good collegiate or high school level athlete to compete and not get blown away.

That's how Black pulled off the Conquest – he set things up so that the Narrative boost that Callow got for being Good wasn't enough.

Insanenoodlyguy

Narrative power trumps all other forms of it though. And that's what she always has the most of.

But you underestimate what she can do. Yes, she can "only" collapse a river now, in daytime when it's

established she's much weaker. But she is fully sane after using it, just tired. So she's not making dumb mistakes and marching off into a stupider situation because she's oh so strong. Remember winter cat? Yeah, she could shrug off being cut apart. And she was walking into fights with the one woman who could cut her and make it stick!

Sheer named power wins BATTLES. but how many times has the much more powerful villain won battle after battle and then lost the war right at the end? That's every black night before Amadeus. Yeah, they were real great right up till the endgame. Which is exactly what happened to Cat at her most powerful, don't forget. The everdark was her strongest period and she was marching right to her death, saved only by the fact that her power bled out. She won that at her literal weakest, a dying frail mortal.

And that's why having the narrative matters. The Dead King is a master of the narrative, which is how he's lasted this long. But if there's anybody on this playing field who can make him fuck up in the way that leads him to his own destruction, well... your calling her weak and saying she needs more powerups.

SilentWatcher

just tired... did you read how she nearly fell down unconscious? you mean "enslaved" after she gave up her claim on winter. She wasn't saved, she begged for mercy and Sve noc granted it.

So you tell me winter cat was stupid...what would Cripple Cat have done? how would the battle of camps have went with Cat as she is now. how would she have fared in Keter as she is now? she would have been destroyed without a chance.

Power itself and the application of Power are the same. so Amadeus is the most powerful Black knight in history. Why does Amadeus come into the discussion about Cats power? everything he uses to win except power is Cat sorely lacking.

The Dead King is a master of Narrative AND powerful, so Cat stands no Chance, as she is certainly less powerful. Neshama was for over 1000 Years in conflict with the bard, no way he gets outwitted by Cat.

Her battle ability isn't really what got her into the big leagues, anyways. It was her ability to win battles she had no business winning, plus Neshamah's interest in potential apotheosis.

She's in the big leagues because she fights people on the big leagues. I mean, Malicia is not a great fighter, and Cordelia is not even Named!

SilentWatcher

Yet she only won those Battles because she was powerful enough. The Fae got defeated because she joined the Winter Court, she defeated Akua when she embraced Winter fully, Battle of Camps using Gates, The Dead King only invited her for her Power not anything else and she became a threat to Sve Noc BECAUSE of her Power to bind the drow to her. Now she lacks that Power and instead got Night which is half the time useless (Daytime) and she can get offed like any other mortal. what will keep her in the big leagues now that she has less Power?

Dainpdf

Her position? Her team? Her knowledge of narrative, which is actually what defeated the fairies, and the lack of which actually put her in the situation of losing to Akua (and was also what she exploited to make sure ripping out Masego's work killed Akua)?

Really, if anything Fakerine, with her limited thinking and ability to innovate, was inferior to plain old Cat in many respects.

SilentWatcher

Yet she needed the power before she could use the power of narrative. Without being of winter, the winter fairies wouldn't have helped her, she would have never stopped Akua without her gates. Cat thought herself while on campaign it's good she has the power to do stuff and even Akua said she was difficult to take down as the last of winter. And the loss was baited by Black. The win came with embracing winter fully. She was clearly not Fakerine as she held the mantle not long enough. That's what Sve Noc said. Good old Cat got her leg crippled from stupidity and instead of owning the monster she flinches back from power.

Dainpdf

She lost the fight against Akua by outsmarting herself – bringing the fight against Diabolist to Arcadia.

As for power? Look at Black. Great combat power is a red herring. Cat got the fae to help her because of political play and alliances. Her personal power was minimal (and in the end she was being played anyways).

Sve Noc wanted to blame her. And yeah, Fakerine was still built out of Cat. But when you look at what she thought when she became mortal again... it's what she always feared when she looked at the fae: it didn't really care about Cat's ideals. It danced the dance by playing the role of Cat.

SilentWatcher

When you say cat was limited in her thinking and innovation ability, you clearly think lame Cat would have done things differently. What would she have done different? What would she have done better? We don't know, as it is not written. It's just your unreasonable hate of Winter Cat interpreting things which aren't there.

Insanenoodlyguy

We have been told in story at least one dwarf thought she was more dangerous as a mortal. I think that's going to pan out. I think she's going to win in places Winter cat could not have. That she doesn't do it as directly is irrelevant as long as she wins.

Dainpdf

It's not unreasonable hate. It's knowledge that she was a fae version of herself, plus knowledge of how fae are limited.

And while we don't know what Cat would have done, that doesn't mean we can't know she would have done things differently.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

That's kinda been her intent since ages ago.

She's wanted to abdicate for ages, but there's never been someone good enough to actually hold the crown after her.

[Javvies](#)

She might be going for the ... Dread Emperor Irritant (I think) method of comboing multiple sources of inevitable doom into multiple sources of avoidable doom.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine is certainly not prioritizing her own safety here.

I don't think these death flags are that dire, though. They're non-zero, but there's a lot of narrative weight to Cat surviving at this point.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Surviving, or outright coming back from the dead... again.

Two ____

I know I'm really jumping the gun here, but the italicized taught at the end seemed almost aspect-ish. Probably just wishful think though.

[sengachi](#)

Ohhhhh, now wouldn't that just be a fascinating aspect, especially as a priest?

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Nah, it's a callback how to her first Aspect ever, was Learn.

Dainpdf

Good catch. Though those tend to come in bold.

More likely it's just a reference to how rigorous the teaching will be.

[Liliet](#)

It's most definitely just emphasis. "I can't just dump responsibility on her, I have to actually *teach* her if I want this to go well".

Doesn't mean Cat *isn't* going to get a Name out of it ^^

konstantinvoncarstein

I don't understand why a priest cannot heal Catherine's leg. Are they not supposed to heal anything not congenital?

[Dresden 67](#)

Probably because she's got Night running through her veins.

Trying to heal her with Light is more likely to blow her up than heal her.

[sengachi](#)

Her leg was initially damaged by necromancy, healed imperfectly, left that way for years, vanished entirely as she ceased having a physical leg, and then got returned specifically because the universe/narrative apparently decided it was an intrinsic part of her mortality. Any one of those seems like it'd be a legit reason that priests couldn't heal it, but all together it means I'd be surprised could be healed at all by *anyone*, anymore than the Grey Pilgrim gets to have not-grey clothing.

[ManuelTheExpunged](#)

The bad leg is so heavily integrated into her story that conventional healing won't work anymore. It part of her, symbolizing her regained mortality.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, the leg is a story trope in its own right – q.v. the Fisher King motif, though in the original it had other implications. If the Fisher King pattern does apply, Callow cannot be healed until Catherine is either healed by a Higher Power (nope) or replaced by someone without such an intrinsic wound.

That said, the original FK's wound was (probably) a specifically *male* trope, somewhat bowdlerized in transmission. In direct contrast, Cat was specifically noted as having regained not only her mortality, but also her *fertility*. And that allows for a number of longer-term tropes....

Dainpdf

Her wound is part of her identity. It was Story Significant. Much like the scar she gave Black, it's here to stay.

She may not be Named, but she's still got enough weight and involvement with Below that she's bound to narrative rules.

[Liliet](#)

I think at this point the leg counts as congenital, considering it was involved in Cat's very soul being mutilated.

Skaddix

I wonder if the leg ties into Cat being Suicidal all the time and not really thinking about herself in the longterm. I figure

if she does start valuing surviving and not constantly trying to abdicate and foist the Post Llesse Accord world order on to others that the limb would heal.

[Liliet](#)

Oof.

Welcome to [Akua's Worry Club](#).

Though I don't think that even if you're right the leg would heal entirely. That'd just be... bland. Hurting much less, only getting in the way of actually fighting / dancing, I can see that though.

Insanenoodlyguy

It's the opposite actually. It will never get in the way of fighting, she will always have some trick to at least put the pain off and fight at her full potential.

But afterwards, it will always remind her how frail and human she is as long as she is indeed a human.

[Liliet](#)

I'd say it's going to get in the way of fighting always. A trick she uses to put off the pain is a trick she could have used otherwise. It's a handicap, period.

And I think she'll keep it as such.

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah, narration hates that. It'd be different if the one who wounded her or their team still lived, then the old injury having mattered might, well, matter, but there's no good story in "then that knee of mine i fucked up years ago flared up so I lost."

[Liliet](#)

I mean, nobody writes it like your example. "I dropped to one knee, cursing my bad leg. The sword passed right above my head, cutting off stray hairs,"

There are fun ways to write disability, you're just not thinking of them :3

Dainpdf

Oh my. We might be getting Nauk back! Also, those Abigail POV's are paying up big time. Chekhov's firing squad right there. Not

only is she her first Callowan general, she's also Cat's apprentice.

I'm still so excited for Cat to meet up with the rest of the Woe... it's been too long, and EE has been super evil and left us hanging on Vivi and Hakram AND Masego.

werafdsaew

Nauk is super dead. Cat's sending Robber to do a proper funeral for him.

Dainpdf

Doesn't sound like it, with the way she asked. But you may be right.

Novice

Yeah, the way things are shaping up, it's either Indrani or Zeze getting a tragic ending (less on Indrani though, considering she may peace out of the party Ranger-style). Though if the worst comes to pass, I hope we can get a reunion with the whole Woe before that.

[Liliet](#)

I really, really, really don't think any of Woe are going to die.

[TeK](#)

Until the book 6 at least.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not even then, I think. The Calamities are getting killed off because their successors are on-scene.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed.

[sengachi](#)

Yeah we're aiming for a big "everyone reunites and everything has changed but really it's all the same in the ways that matter" trope.

fbt

nice bit of story, i really enjoyed Cat's interactions w/ folks.

Antoninjohn

Cat left him alive to fight the Dead King and if he comes for revenge later, well he will be breaking the Accords that she is setting up which will probably end up badly for him both personally and for Levent politically

[*Liliet*](#)

I'm not sure the Accords are going to directly specify alliance / forbiddance of aggression. Now if he were to summon a demon to go after Cat...

RanVor

From what I understood from Cat's little talk with Pilgrim in Chapter 8 of Book 4, the goal of the Accords is to limit the influence of Named (of all kinds) and their ability to acquire resources, basically rendering them incapable of waging ideological wars they're so fond of.

Agent J

Would sidelining Named really bring peace to Calernia? We have none, and are not driven by Narrative shackles or capricious, warring Gods. Yet, we still have our fair share of ideological wars, and every other kind for that matter.

If Cat's Accords are just about removing Named from positions of power, then she lacks a sufficient understanding of human nature. Heroes might be driving the Crusade into the ground, but they are not alone in fault, nor the ones who called for it to begin with.

RanVor

That I do not know. I can't speak of the full extent of the Liesse Accords. That's just what I gathered from that conversation.

[*Liliet*](#)

I don't think Cat's going to filter by absence/presence of Name. Just by actions and their consequences.

[*Liliet*](#)

Something on that scale, yeah.

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

Having reread the chapter: The only direct mention of Named is between the failed bargain and the successful one. Initially:

- 1) Cat offers direct aid against the Tower, abdication, and other concessions, in exchange for Callow not being taken over by Procer's nobles.
- 2) Pilgrim's response is "I do not rule Procer", and says he'd have to actually fight Procer to enforce that.
- 3) Cat points out that yeah, she'd have to fight a civil war to enforce her side too.
- 4) But Pilgrim still isn't buying: "For such a thing to hold, there would be need for trust where none exists".

At that point, Cat comes out with:

> "Every single Named is a highly dangerous weapon, in their own way," I said. "Any unwilling to accept constraints placed on their actions have no business wielding that kind of power in the first place. And before you ask, I do not exclude myself or any ally of mine from that statement."
(Implied: And that goes for you too, Pilgrim.)

And that leads to the agreement Cat *does* get: No sacking of cities, no abuse of prisoners (including greenskins) and no summoning demons or devils, in exchange for no angels: "We can't prevent escalation if your bargaining position is that we fold but you don't." She even tosses in the location of Callow's last Hell Egg as a show of good faith; that is, she wants that thing gone too, and the forces of Good are better equipped to destroy it (which they do).

[TeK](#)

Giving the result of all my previous guesses for where the story will turn next, I can say that Abigail will not be the queen. I am half sure that EE just reads our fan theories and does the exact opposite.

[Liliet](#)

There have been correct theories!

Aotrs Commander

Cat is Best Cleric.

eamon DeMarsh

HEY CATHERINE, LOOKS LIKE WE'VE GOT ALL THE SOLDIERS!!!"

"HEY LEVANTINES!! LOOKS LIKE YOU'RE ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE
RIIIIVVEEERRRR"

[Liliet](#)

I love you.

[Daniel E](#)

Cracking a frozen river would have been next to nothing under Winter. The fact that this relatively minor use of power left Cat so vulnerable makes me think that she is significantly weaker now. If she tried fighting Heroes like at Five Camps, she would be dead several times over. Yes she can enjoy mortal vices again, but the sheer quantity of power she has given up is very significant.

ActionKermit

Her power is more situational now. We don't know yet how strong she is under cover of night – this was using the power of darkness in broad daylight.

[Liliet](#)

Her positioning has changed though.

The most cleanly won battle is one you never fight.

[Daniel E](#)

That would be fine if she was a once-in-a-generation strategist like Juniper. Cat has good battle sense from experience, but is otherwise above average at best. Her place is a mix of 'big picture' and 'hammer', except now she can't even do the latter.

[Liliet](#)

I make a distinction between Catherine and Juniper in that one's a strategist and the other's a tactician.

Note how the five-way melee led to a stalemate between the objectively best company and the objectively worst company (just in degree of the troops' skill), and ended up with Catherine achieving her goal in full.

Juniper's a tactician. Give her a battle, give her resources, and she'll make the best out of what she has.

Cat's a strategist. Give her a war, give her a country, and she'll make sure that all the battles and resources available for them are skewed in her favor.

If the best tactician in the world is running out of supplies, they lose, and the strategist that drove them into that corner wins.

Cat's a strategist. She thinks a meta level higher. See Juniper's own assessment:

"When historians try to pin down Foundling's methods they

point to the Battle of the Camps or the Princes' Graveyard, but those came later. After she'd learned her trade. If you want to understand how she operated, look to the Battle of Four Armies and One – from the beginning to the end, she was playing an entirely different game from every other commander on the field."

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

From the beginning to end, she was playing an entirely different game than every other commander on the field.

Note how the once-in-a-generation tactician like Juniper – Juniper herself, specifically – is at Cat's side.

Not because providence, not because of Amadeus's help. Well, Amadeus provided the support, but it was Catherine who recognized how valuable Juniper was and saw the value of forging an alliance there / recruiting her. And then successfully recruited her.

Positioning!

werafdsaew

I don't think Winter is well suited to cracking open a frozen river. She probably could have done something else instead though.

Berder

I gotta say, it seems like Cat came out of the Empire Ever Dark with disappointingly weak results.

The part of the Army of Callow that Cat did meet up with, was the "Third Army," one of four of Juniper's columns, and that's only among those that ventured into Procer. Presumably many Callowan troops have remained in Callow. Let's say Abigail was heading perhaps an eighth of Callow's total force, before Cat came to reinforce it.

Now, Cat was supposed to come back with a force that would substantially bolster Callow's forces – say, coming back with a force 50% as strong as the total Army of Callow would be reasonable to hope for. If that were true, her reinforcements would increase the strength of Abigail's army by a factor of FIVE. With the odds changing that much, Procer should have been completely routed by overwhelming force, or immediately forced to surrender! Today's victory was a lot harder won than that, and it shouldn't have been.

The army Cat brought out of the Night is only five thousand light infantry. The devastating weapons of Night we saw in the Empire

Ever Dark, in which plain infantry were mowed like wheat by the powerhouses, were not seen today. No acid fog that melts everyone it touches, for example. It seems that the drow are really just light infantry in daylight. (Remind me, why wasn't this attack conducted at night?)

So, the drow force is severely disappointing.

In personal power: Cat ran her stamina dry just from breaking the ice under two thousand ordinary foot soldiers. That's a much weaker working than dropping a lake on a battlefield as she did before, because it requires the soldiers be perfectly arranged over the ice and can't be done just anywhere. Winter Cat wasn't even drained by dropping the lake, the only reason she went out of action there was because of heroic intervention. Were it not for them, she could have dropped twenty such lakes.

Winter Cat could have also simply scythed through two thousand ordinary foot soldiers herself in melee combat without breaking a sweat or expending any power. Winter Cat was physically invulnerable and capable of tearing armor like paper with her bare hands. In the absence of heroes, priests, or mages, which seemed fairly absent today, nothing could have stopped her.

Night Cat strikes me as substantially weaker and having less stamina than even the stronger drow under her command. None of the Mighty seemed harmed or exhausted by drawing on Night.

[Liliet](#)

You are not following.

This is a teeny, tiny vanguard of the army from Everark, this force that Cat has brought to Sarcella right now. The rest of it is catching up.

The size of the southern expedition is **fifty thousand**.

And that's just the southern expedition, not counting the exodus of *the entire population of the drow* to the north.

Though this is likely the cream of the crop.

And it's *fifty thousand*.

That's why Cat isn't worried that the rest of the Levantine army is catching up, too. Time's on her side here.

[Javvies](#)

It was said that if Cat didn't get Third Army notified that her drow army were allies, she'd lose roughly a quarter of the Army of Callow.

I assume there's a caveat there about deployed/deployable/non-

garrison forces, since when Juniper split up the Army of Callow, I assume they were roughly equally sized, and I doubt that the entire Army of Callow is in Procer – there's no doubt detachments around Summerholm and elsewhere along the Praesi border, and other garrison forces, plus training units.

That said, the six thousand drow that Cat took with her to Sarcella here? They're an advance force, moving faster than the primary drow army in order to get to Third Army in time, and probably mostly consisting of drow that are least affected/best suited to operating in the day.

IIRC, the primary army is somewhere in the 50k range. There are probably follow-on forces, too, since, well, there are a lot of drow, and if they're moving out so the dwarves can move in, they (a) need to go somewhere, and (b) a lot of them are going to have combat skills.

This attack was conducted in the day to push the Levantines back across the river, so that Third Army had a more defensible position that would be much easier/near certain to hold until nightfall.

They were seeking to buy the time to get to night, which would allow Third Army to withdraw/the main drow force to arrive and reinforce Third Army.

Before you can act at night, you need to get to night first ... while being in striking range of your objective.

We've never seen one of the Mighty attempt a significant use of Night in sunlight, either.

Cat has seemed to imply that at night/in the dark her ability to use Night is much stronger than during the day/in sunlight. That's likely an inherent limitation of Night itself, that would apply to all users, including the Mighty, not just Cat herself.

Winter Cat would not have gated to the other side of the flames – gates are acting oddly, and while that may be a side effect of Winter being absorbed by/merged with Night, that's not necessarily true, and that may be related to the problems with scrying.

She could have just frozen a path through the flames, though. Or dropped another lake on things.

That said, it is absolutely true that Winter Cat had the sheer power to muscle through most opponents, and fight a lot of the others on near equal ground.

And thus far, Night Cat hasn't shown anywhere near that level of potential.

On the other hand, Cat and her story had usually been about coming at situations sideways, rather than head on.

On yet another hand ... a helluva lot of the drow arc, plus a fair bit of the Keter arc, was about how Cat could better

utilize her abilities, figuring out how to do new things with her Winter/Fae powers, and much of that will have been wasted if Night Cat can't do similar things or otherwise apply what she learned with Winter to Night.

Zaver SaintCloud

The only problem with 'learning to better utilize her powers' is that she's no longer in control of it. She said as much to Dwarf whatshisname; 'She doesn't hold power anymore, only wields it'.

[Javvies](#)

That's part of why large parts of the Keter and Everdark arcs are in danger of being a waste.

If she can still use Night to do those sorts of things ... that will still have been useful, even if she isn't using her own power to do them.

Unfortunately, it seems that she'll need prayer to do anything significant, and can't use Night the way the Mighty she was fighting in the Everdark could, and presumably still can.

[Liliet](#)

This chapter is not, I think, giving proper weight to *what the actual fuck* Cat pulled off. Remember, this is something Abigail could not achieve with goblin munitions! This was a *hella large miracle*, of the scale that would have had Winter Cat diving into principle alienation head on.

Smaller tactical stuff she can achieve with minimal support from Komana and Andronike. She didn't need to pray to them to make her staff, they helped without asking. And the quality of tactical stuff does not depend on its scale, but on its versatility. The Everdark was Catherine figuring out the versatility of her abilities, how they can be used. All of that is still hers, even if there's now +1 second of delay on using it.

[Liliet](#)

Holding and wielding is an academic distinction when Komana and Andronike are trusting Cat's judgement. Which they are.

Insanenoodlyguy

Amadeus told us books ago how other black knights were much, much stronger than him. They all still died with much less

success to their name because that's not the thing that's dangerous about him and it's the same for cat.

Paula

This chapter was almost poetry in how it started.

Dang you are getting good at this! Its like the story of Cat is now woven about her very being, no longer is she just a mortal or named. She is a figure of myth and legend, a maker and breaker of stories, weaver of tales.

abao

I still find Cat's lack of a Name jarring. Being a priestess of the night or a half fae shouldn't really exclude that from her prospects. She's really breaking the Story, isn't she? Such a powerful figure that for some reason evaded being shackled with a Name.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think Names are shackles. They're a coincidental situational bonus that you get if you qualify for it, that tends to stick around and tempt you into getting into more situations that would let you make use of it.

Catherine has finally shaken off the remains of her last situational bonus, and has not yet qualified for a new one. Doesn't mean she won't get it, though it won't matter much at this point. 100d12+10 is just not the same as 2d6+10 :3

caoimhinh

The song "Let there be night" (original by Powerwolf, English cover by Kissin Dynamite) seems to be appropriate for Cat wielding a big miracle of Night.

Ninith settler

Hot dang. Cat is a walking airstrike in a medieval setting. She is too op.

I'm glad Abigail is going to end up relevant. Been rooting for that since she first appeared. RIP Nauk. But TBH the orc was sort of dead inside already.

aran

I will not ship Cat with every single one of her subordinates, I will not ship Cat with every single one of her subordinates, I will not ship Cat with every single one of her subordinates...

Max Scherer

Abigail is one of my favourite Characters. She is just there, but somehow that is enough for her XD

[Alfred Ballman](#)

obviously like your web site but you have to check the spelling on several of your posts. A number of them are rife with spelling problems and I find it very bothersome to tell the reality nevertheless I'll surely come again again.

[Keenan Munion](#)

May I simply say what a relief to discover someone that really understands what they are discussing over the internet. You certainly understand how to bring an issue to light and make it important. More and more people really need to read this and understand this side of your story. I can't believe you aren't more popular given that you most certainly have the gift.

Sturmi

So why does cat have a bad leg, her previous body was a construct, did her soul "safe" her last body ?
Can the drow still collect night from not drow ?

Chapter 14: Expedience

"The art of negotiation is, in essence, convincing the other side of the table that you are very reluctant to part with the house full of rats while they are in dire need of it."

– Prince Louis of Brabant, later eighth First Prince of Procer

I woke up an hour before nightfall.

It was one of the more useful oddities caused by my association with the Sisters, that I could in some eldritch way feel the approach of dawn and dusk. I still had the taste of a passable Harrow red in my mouth from the talks I'd had with Abigail, the same sort of patient decision dissection I'd learned from Black and the War College. *She seems willing to learn, at least*, I thought as I groaned and forced myself to keep my eyes open. Exhaustion was lingering alongside the wine, and the handful of hours of sleep I'd squeezed in were nowhere enough to get me back on my feet. I drew on the Night a lick, not to wield it but to let the sensation of holding it pass through my frame. Like sticking your hand in a bucket of cool water, it woke me right

up. I could probably rustle up some minor miracles now, I decided. It no longer felt like I'd melt myself from the inside if I did. That was instinct talking, but like it or not I'd had more experience drawing on eldritch powers than most people ever cared to go through. My instincts were rather well-informed, when it came to things like this. Getting my bad leg over the edge of the legion cot I'd claimed, I allowed myself the luxury of grimacing at the sensation. No one to put up a front for, right now.

I'd kept a shirt on in deference to the weather, but my fingers found themselves sliding under to find an old friend. The scar the Penitent's Blade had left still naked across my torso, nowadays more pale than pink but never to disappear. A testament to the costs of what had seemed like a victory, that night in Summerholm. The Lone Swordsman spared and branded with purpose, loosed like an arrow to start the rebellion that would see me rise up the ranks. A necessary evil, I'd told myself. What was one more wound on Callow, when it was already bleeding from imperial rule? When that wound would lead to a mending. I could only be grimly amused at how disgusted I'd felt by Black ordering three death row prisoners slain so blood magic could be worked to save my life. In a sense, I'd done the same thing on a much grander scale before he ever gave the order. I withdrew my fingers and tugged down my shirt. It was done, and there was no unmaking it. I was strangely glad for Sve Noc's returning of the scar when they struck me back down to mortal coil. What was I, really, without the reminders on my skin of what my choices had wrought?

I got up with a hiss of pain and hobbled to a chair to have something to lean against when putting my trousers back on. It made me miss Indrani, in a strange way, and Hakram as well. It was different with my lover when she helped me with my clothes, sensual in a way that would be blasphemous to associate with Adjutant, but I wasn't sure I could honestly say there wasn't more intimacy in having Adjutant help me with my armour than in the woman I shared a bed with buttoning up my trousers. The business of dressing myself was finished with only minimal pain, and I grabbed the Mantle of Woe on the way out. It settled on my shoulders comfortably, the worn dark cloth warm against my back even as the outside boasted a riotous mix of colours all speaking of a foe beaten. There was a metaphor in there, I idly thought. Black's sombre gift whole but only out of sight, the visible sown over by all the fields I'd bared my blade on. Amusing as the thought was, I set it aside. Staff in hand, cloak streaming behind me, I got back to work.

The abandoned mansion I'd claimed as my resting place was swarming with drow and legionaries eyeing each other with wariness. I caught sight of a black eye on a young Callowan boy and a carefully cradled wrist for a Miklaya Sigil warrior, which

prompted a sigh. The drow had never been taught to play nice with others, and my own people could be... touchy. At least whoever'd drawn up the roster had been farsighted enough not to assign greenskins. Goblins would carry the grudge until it could be answered for more safely, but if someone socked an orc in the face there was going to be blood on the floor before all was said and done. There was a tribune in command and I wasted no time in getting news from her. The city was still quiet and the Dominion hadn't tried an offensive since their last beating. An envoy from the Levantine camp had been sent, but they were being made to wait. General Abigail was 'planning the coming march', which no doubt meant she was sleeping like a log. Special Tribune Robber had come for me, but declined to wake me up when he learned I was out of it. The last I took most notice of, and asked the tribune to send someone to fetch him.

"Will you be here, ma'am?" the Soninke officer politely asked. "Or should I message for him to be sent elsewhere?"

"The Dominion captains are being held separately from their warriors, right?" I frowned.

"As per Leg – as per the Army of Callow's protocol, Your Majesty," she hastily adjusted.

The tribune looked afraid she'd offended by her lapse. Early thirties, at a glance, so odds weren't bad she'd been one of Istrid's or Orim's before Second Liesse. Fresh to my service, after decades in the Legions.

"Calm down, Tribune," I reassured. "I know well how much we've borrowed from the Legions. The Army of Callow as it now stands could not exist without them and all they taught us."

That took the edge off the fear, and she nodded in nervous agreement. I hummed, considering my options.

"I'll be headed to speak with our Levantine prisoners," I said. "I'll need a guide. Have it passed to Robber he should join me there."

It was done with brisk efficiency, and I was provided an escort of legionaries to head out. The drow would have done the same, but a few words in Crepuscular had them headed back to General Rumena instead. I wasn't having the wander around a crowded city full of humans if I could help it. As it turned out the captains of Levant were being held in Sarcella's own gaol, a nice little touch of irony. The tribune in charge of the legionaries keeping an eye on our guests was well-informed of them, and told me what I'd wanted to know: we *had*, in fact, captured the captain commanding their holding action in Belles Portes earlier. She'd taken a sword to the shoulder while fighting, but accepted healing by the priests of the House Insurgent and was now merely tired.

It would do: after all, so was I. A cell better fit for holding thieves than what had to be one of the highest officers in the enemy vanguard awaited me, cramped and bare save for a rough bench and a chamber pot. Some kind soul have found her a blanket, which seemed for the best considering that she was apparently quite old. Built like an orc and obviously in fighting fit, true, but there was only white left to her hair. One of the legionaries at my side unlocked the cell while the other brought out a folding chair for me to sit on. I sure as Hells wasn't standing any more today unless I had to. The Levantine rose to her feet before the door was even open, and I greeted her with a sharp nod.

"Captain Elvera, I believe," I spoke in Chantant.

Her face tightened. I thanked the orc who'd brought in my chair and eased myself into it before dismissing my pair of escorts. The door remained open, and the Levantine's blue eyes studied the sight before warily returning to me.

"Yes," she replied. "You are the Black Queen."

Her accent was thick enough the words were near unintelligible, and she spoke very slowly. My officers had already established she spoke no Lower Miezian, though, so it was about as clearly as this conversation could be held.

"I am," I agreed. "I am here to discuss the logistics of your surrender."

Her brow creased, and I repeated more slowly after changing 'logistics' for 'details'. She nodded.

"Your general promised no killing of prisoners," Captain Elvera said. "Or torture."

"I will hold to that," I said.

The issue here was that, according to Abigail, we had the better part of three thousand Dominion warriors on our hands. Stripping them of armaments and dispersing them in Sarcella meant they were unlikely to be an immediate problem, but that changed nothing about the long-term noose around our neck they'd be. The Third Army was decently supplied still, but dragging that many prisoners around would eat into the reserves at a harsh rate. And while the southern expedition still had piles of dwarf-provided rations as well as what had been brought from the Everdark, the Herald of the Deeps had made it clear the Kingdom Under would only supply the drow exodus headed towards the Dead King. Any force sent south was on its own. Add on top of it all that the drow had no facilities to hold prisoners, that the Third Army had been bloodied raw by fighting and that we need to move quickly before this turned sour on us? We couldn't keep the Levantines,

it was as simple as that. Even if my general hadn't offered them their lives with the terms I would not have countenanced a massacre of prisoners of war, but neither could I just let them loose with a slap on the wrist.

"I cannot simply release you to fight me in a few weeks," I bluntly said.

"Captains will have ransom," Captain Elvera said. "If I am sent out to camp, I will gather coin to buy freedom of as many soldiers as I can. Then return as prisoner. I will give oath."

Even if coin was enough to move me, I could not trust you to deliver it. Your own priesthood had me declared Arch-heretic of the East, I thought. You have a holy justification to consider all oaths made to me as null and void. I had not been well-inclined towards the Lantern because of that, even before some of their own had killed Nauk. I breathed out slowly. I would not stoke the embers of anger I felt at that. He'd been a general, and this was war. I had struck similar enough blows in the past, and would perhaps do it again. *But this is the wrong war, not the one we should be fighting, and for that stupidity you killed my friend. What was left of him, anyway.* I forcefully pushed the thought aside. I would not add waste to waste, simply to even scales that could not be evened by blood.

"Coin is not what I want," I said. "You have offered me an oath, Captain Elvera. There are some of your people who would say those mean nothing, when offered to me."

The old woman's face darkened.

"I am not Blood," she stiffly said. "But not a dog. Even oath to devil should be kept. I have honour, even if Hells do not."

I studied her closely as she spoke. The indignation was genuine enough, I decided. And those of the Dominion did have a reputation for being straightforward, as concerned with honour and reputation as the Arlesite princes they so often squabbled with. But the reputation ascribed to a people living so far away from mine meant very little, in the end. It was like calling all orcs bloodthirsty savages, or all Callowans obsessed with grudges. Having a warrior's build and displaying valour on the field did not necessarily mean she was not deceitful.

"And you have the authority to speak for all the prisoners currently in my hands?" I pressed.

She nodded after taking some time to parse out my words. I'd spoken a little too fast.

"Then we can bargain for release," I said. "I want an oath from you."

Her wizened face hardened.

"I will not fight against Levant," Captain Elvera said. "Better death."

I shook my head, almost amused. I supposed I did have a reputation for making old enemies fight my fresher ones.

"None of the prisoners are to make war against me or my allies for three months," I said. "I want your oath on this."

The old woman looked wary.

"That is all?" she asked. "No ransom?"

From you, yes, I thought. But I've every intent of selling your freedom twice. I have an envoy from the camp waiting, and concessions you cannot give me. I refrained from smiling, well aware that a villain offering lenient terms with one of those would in all likelihood be taken as a trap.

"That is all," I said.

I'd considered keeping their arms and armour, but what point was there? It would slow us down on the march, and in six months it would be a lot more useful in their hands than filling my army's supply carts. Captain Elvera watched me in silence for a long time.

"Why?" she finally asked.

"You are under the command of the Lord of Malaga," I said.

She made a disgruntled noise.

"I serve Tartessos," the old woman said. "Lady Aquiline fights with him."

Akua had been right in her assessment, I mused. The Dominion's armies were not without internal squabbles. *That's what happens when nobles command instead of officers with a clear chain of command.*

"Then take this message back to her, and to him," I said, and my eyes hardened. "There is only one war that matters, and it is being fought up north. Not here. I come with an offer of peace for the Grand Alliance."

I paused, waiting to make sure she'd understood me well. She nodded, eyes hooded.

"If you refuse that peace, I will have to fight you," I said. "And I will not have the luxury to be *nice* about it, because we are running out of time."

I coldly smiled.

"So take my peace," I said. "Or we'll have to do this the hard way."

Silence filled the cell.

"Threat," Captain Elvera said.

"Promise," I corrected.

Leaning on my staff, I rose to my feet.

"You have my terms," I said. "I will leave you to consider them. Tell the guards when you make your decision."

The old woman hesitated.

"Agreed," she said. "I will give oath, and message."

I left Sarcella's gaol not long after, with the first of the two oaths I wanted, and Captain Elvera's cell was locked anew.

—

Robber was waiting for me outside, lounging atop a wrecked street stall and looking oddly vulnerable without his armour. The shadows were lengthening outside, like they were slowly devouring the world, and in the back of my mind I knew we were not long before twilight began in earnest. I limped through the snow, my earlier escort of legionaries resuming their duties before I gestured for them to stay back for this. The goblin nimbly leapt down and I caught sight of a few glints of steel scattered over his body. Hidden knives, I thought, or other murderous accoutrements. He didn't salute, and his yellow eyes were without the usual malicious glee.

"And?" I asked.

"He wasn't burned," Robber replied. "His corpse... It's bad, Catherine. They melted his plate with Light. It's cooled down since, but you'd need to butcher the flesh to get him out. If we're giving him a Legion funeral, we'll need more than just the usual pyre."

My fingers clenched around my staff. Molten steel, Gods. What an agonizing death that must have been. Summer's flames had changed him, and Warlock's sorcery failed to bring back the orc I'd known, but he'd still felt pain. And there'd been enough of the Nauk who'd been my friend left that I felt a clench of rage. The Lanterns had done this. Killing, killing I could stomach. Had to. It was war, and if I ordered deaths I must be able to withstand them as well. But this was... He'd deserved better than that. I closed my eyes, and thought of the night after Three Hills. Green

flames taking Nilin, who had been a traitor but beloved by many of us even after that. And now his closest friend was following him. I'd never told Nauk, that his second and good-as-brother had been passing information to Akua. I'd made the decision he was better off not knowing. How presumptuous that felt, now that he was dead.

"The part of the city that's on fire, it's almost out?" I said, eyes still closed.

"Near enough," Robber said. "Took all of the quarter they call Lanterria and some of the outskirts, but the firebreaks contained it and it's dying out."

I let out a misty breath and opened my eyes. The shadows had grown longer still.

"Speak with General Abigail," I said. "We'll be holding a Legion funeral for all our losses in Sarcella tonight. Work out watch rosters so that as many people as possible can attend. I'll speak to the drow myself."

Yellow eyes considered me, though the question went unasked.

"What else can we still give him?" I whispered. "Or any of them. It's a fool war, but they died fighting it. They'll have a pyre and the only kind of farewell we learned."

He inclined his head in approval, then hesitated.

"He went out hard, you know," Robber said. "Fangs red."

I breathed out shakily.

"He was Rat Company," I replied. "How else could he have gone?"

We parted ways, knowing we'd next meet to burn a friend. My legionaries followed me into the city in silence. In the end, all my grief could be was screaming in the dark: a harsh cry, followed by silence ringing of absence.

I had tricks to ply, and duty did not make exceptions for funerals.

—

We'd won the day, or close enough, and that meant I could dictate terms.

To an extent, anyway. Asking for more than I was costing them might see the Levantines write-off their own with cold eyes. They wouldn't know how badly I didn't want to be keeping prisoners, so it would at least look like I was the one with the good cards in hand. Much as I'd prefer not to be fighting the Levantines at

all, I wouldn't delude myself into thinking they in any way shared that sentiment. The enemy commander would be out to screw me as badly as he could, while clawing his way back into possession of the troops I'd captured. I could play that game, truly, and win it a lot easier than he could. A word on my part would have the Tomb-Maker leading a party of Mighty to assault the Dominion camp after night fell, and unless the Pilgrim was hiding in a tent in there that would lead to a bloody massacre. But I would not compound waste with yet more of it, not even if my enemy was itching for that very tussle. No, neither corpses nor coin could be my aim here. There was going to be a battle in Iserre, soon enough, and I needed to get all my munitions in place before someone dropped a torch: this would be a part of it, nothing more and nothing less.

The Levantine envoy was a middle-aged man with a fine mustache and stripes of blue and green crisscrossing his face, speaking Lower Miezian with an elegant polish. He got to use it just long enough for me to send him back to camp with an offer for the enemy commander to meet on the bridges in front of Sarcella. He left under protest, which I ignored with the ease of someone who'd been pushing paperwork on Hakram for years, and I gauged how long was reasonable to wait before getting atop Zombie and making for the bridges. The boy would come, if it was still the one I'd seen during the day that was in charge. No one with eyes that raw would pass on an opportunity to confront someone who'd bled them. My escort was tripled in size when I informed the Third Army of what I intended, but I paid it little attention. Belles Portes quarter was entirely ours, now, and it led directly to the bridges going over the river. I'd not specified which one, so on a whim I picked the leftmost one – and ordered my legionaries to remain behind. I wondered what it said about my reputation that none of the officers looked pleased, but none actually argued.

My dead horse's hooves cut against the icy stone, sharp sounds like flint being struck. The day's warmth was fleeing the coming of night, and the wind was picking up. Far in the distance the sun was drowning in a sea of purple and red, tinting the snowy fields with enough blood and ichor for a thousand wars. My mount eased advancing, halfway through the bridge, and my staff struck stone with a dull sound. I could hear crows, in the distance, though there was nothing godly about those. Just beasts, drawn by the day's corpses. I stuffed my pipe carefully, and passed a palm over the wakeleaf with just a hint of Night. Inhale and exhale, and then I watched smoke rise up into the sky as I waited for the boy who wanted my head to come treat with me.

It was not long. Riders came, five hundred armed to the teeth and a few among them who reeked of something anathema to the Night. Lanterns, I assumed. Those I allowed my gaze to linger on, taking in the faces painted in black and white and wondering which one

had killed Nauk. If it had been only one, or a working of several. Argument erupted, but in the end youth and pride won out. Razin Tanja, of the Grim Binder's Blood. That was the name our prisoners had given. Soldiers were soldiers, in the end: offer warm food and booze, and there was always one in a company willing to sell out their own mother. The boy rode up, on his beautiful white horse wearing his beautiful red and grey plate. The patterns of paint on his face had changed from earlier, now mere stripes of iron and blood on the cheeks. It revealed handsome enough features, sharp-boned but bearing the kind of edge you wanted to run a hand against. What little I could see of his hair was a dark brown, but most was hidden by a tall helmet bearing red feathers. The sword at his hip, I could not help but note, had a very pretty wrought steel pattern to it. Swirls and vines, in a vaguely arcane pattern. No leather bands over it, though. It would get slippery if he got blood all over it, become an unwieldy ornament – and wasn't that nobility put in a sentence? He reined in his horse at the foot of the bridge, just close enough we could talk without shouting. There was a banner in the colours of his paint, held by a clever wooden contraption on his back, that jutted up above even his plumage.

"You begged audience of me, Black Queen," Razin Tanja announced. "Speak your piece."

I pulled at my pipe and said nothing, only breathing out. The smoke went up and I admired the play of light and shadows on it.

"Is this a riddle?" the boy said through gritted teeth. "Are you making a game of me?"

The anger was out, pouring out of every pore. It could be useful, anger. It'd gotten me through some very bad scraps, and should mine ever go out I figured there wouldn't be much left of me. But there was a trick to it: you had to learn when to keep it sheathed. It was like a sword, if you just swung it around night and day it would grow dull. *You* would grow dull, and someone who'd learned the trick would cut out your throat. Tanja was letting his anger dull him, right now. I'd let him keep swinging as long as he wanted, because behind that anger there was fear and shame. The longer he swung and hit nothing, the more harshly those would bite.

"Have you become a mute, villain?" the noble sneered. "Or is it fear of my father's army that stills your tongue?"

Another stream of smoke, and then finally I replied.

"It stings, doesn't it?" I mildly said. "Knowing that after all this, all you have to threaten me with is your father's shadow."

His fingers tightened into fists, his face flushed.

"A single battle does not win a war," Razin Tanja said. "Tricks will not save you twice."

I hummed, considering him.

"I'm not going to threaten you," I decided. "There's no point, is there? When you have enough hate, it becomes a kind of courage. Madness, too, but that line's always been thinner than people like to admit."

"I will not be condescended to by a heretic," the boy snarled. "If you have called this meeting only to mock me—"

"You mock yourself," I gently said, "by pretending today did not happen. It did. Learn from it, or die in a ditch somewhere blaming everything but yourself. But that's not my burden to bear, Tanja, and I've no inclination to try. You're here because I hold your people, and you want them back."

"There are treaties pertaining to the treatment of war prisoners," he said. "To break them would—"

"See the Grand Alliance declare war on me?" I drily said. "Perhaps lead your priesthood to declare me something of a heretic, even."

There was a moment of embarrassed silence.

"That's the problem with turning the screws early," I said. "It doesn't leave much room for escalation."

"I will offer the appropriate ransom for the captains," Razin Tanja said.

He was reaching, and knew it. The tinge of desperation in his voice was making that much clear. *Ah, I thought. We both know you fucked up today, but it looks like you might actually be held accountable for it.* I wondered if it'd be his father, or the other noble Captain Elvera answered to. *Are you worrying you'll be the sacrificial lamb to make peace between Malaga and Tartessos after your mess cost everyone steeply?* Victory had a thousand fathers and mothers, but defeat did tend to be attributed to a single pair of hands. I wondered if he might actually be killed over this. Levant kept to Good, it was said, but it was rough country. I might have more leverage than anticipated, then.

"I've no interest in coin," I said. "What I want from you is an oath."

"An oath?" he said. "I will not serve Below, villain, in this life or any other."

"I've not asked you to," I said. "You hold command of the vanguard, Razin Tanja. It will stay camped outside Sarcella for three days and three nights – on this I require your oath."

"And you would return the captains, for this?" the boy pressed.

The wakeleaf filled my throat and lungs, burning pleasantly. It left me tingling when it passed my lips.

"I'll return every Levantine soldier captured today, including officers," I replied.

"Agreed," he immediately said.

He had absolutely no intention of keeping his word, did he? I sighed. After dealing with Praesi and fae, the Levantine was almost painfully transparent.

"I'll want the oath made to the Heavens and on the honour of your Blood," I coldly said. "Made in front of every remaining captain in your army."

"You dare question my honour?" he replied, puffing up.

"You test my patience," I calmly said, as if we were discussing the weather. "Do not mistake my restraint for vulnerability. If there is no fair bargain to be made, I will put your fucking head on a pike and use it as a warning for your replacement."

Hate and fear, I mused, watching the war in his eyes. The sun was more dead than dying, by now, and I think that was what settled it – the shadows winning out, the same kind that I'd wielded to drown his soldiers even under afternoon sun.

"You will pay for this, Black Queen," Razin Tanja said. "All of it. The Heavens will see to it that your horrors are given answer."

I grinned around my pipe, face wreathed in smoke.

"They'll take their swing," I said. "Watch. *See where it gets them.*"

Night fell before I got my oath, but I did get it.

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RogueTurnip

Love the series, but I got an extremely toxic add on this chapter while reading on samsung mobile. It took me away from the page and forced me to close my Practical Guide tab for the first time in literally years. Please screen your ads.

[erraticerrata](#)

Unfortunately I have no control over what ads run. Using an adblocker shoulder get rid of the problem, however.

stevenneiman

Huh. I read on PC, and I don't get any ads.

Snowfire1224

That sounds like a problem with something else, not the website. I have the same problem, but it's not just this site, it's more something that happens every once in a while regularless of what I'm looking at.

[Javvies](#)

Razin's a fucking idiot.

Elvera ... I have hope for her, and possibly her liege. She seems to be relatively reasonable, and have a functioning brain, based on what we've seen of her so far.

Hmmm, I wonder if either Razin or the Lanterns will try and attack during the funeral/memorial. If they do ... I expect Cat will express some serious displeasure.

IDKWhoitis

They might do so, but will be caught by the Drow is my guess. The Drow are experts in raids.

[Liliet](#)

Razin's a baby dumbass. I have compassion for him, though... uh... not too much, considering how he'd been treating war as his personal playground.

Still, he's a baby dumbass who hasn't had a chance to learn better, I think.

I love how Cat's just being... patient and understanding with him, right up to the degree that she can afford to.

SO GLAD TO SEE ELVERA TALKING TO CAT

and no, Razin has just given OATH that they won't. That's binding, see: First Llesse aftermath.

Novice

Are the oaths given to her at this point still magically binding? She's no longer fae.

[Liliet](#)

Oaths can be magically binding on their own, see: First Llesse.

[Javvies](#)

Ehhhh ... at First Llesse, Cat was already Duchess of Moonless Nights and the Last Noble of Winter (outside the Wild Hunt, which generally stands somewhat apart from the Courts).

[Liliet](#)

You're confusing Second and First Llesse.

[Fayhem](#)

That wasn't strictly "on their own" – that was a blood oath at First Llesse, which I think has a lot more metaphysical weight than just spoken words. Given how hard this angry child is balking at even swearing in front of his soldiers I think Cat is wise in not trying to press for a blood oath sworn with a villain from him.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, it was.

...Note how Cat's making him swear on his Blood...

okay, this is just speculation at this point. More likely than not Cat's counting on entirely non-metaphysical considerations to prevent him from breaking oath.

And I think she knows what she's doing.

[Fayhem](#)

I agree that she knows what she's doing here; Akua may have outsmarted her back when they were rivals, but in the end Akua got outsmarted by Black and at this point they've *both* been Cat's Scheming Tutors. If the kid

is dumb enough to attack anyway I predict a proper villainous Just As Planned before he gets roflstomped by the Night.

[Liliet](#)

And then there's Malicia.

I would point out that Catherine did not stop at the point where he gave a promise he was going to easily break. My interpretation is not that she's aiming to make it more costly for him to inevitably break it, but that she's aiming for him to /actually/ not break it.

Remember, she needs all the armies and generals she can gather against the Dead King. Cat's very much going to be looking out for /his/ best interests here, too.

Big Brother

"See where it gets them."

That line sums up my entire opinion about the Heavens in this story.

mavant

Murder the gods, topple their thrones.

Misterspokes

The path to Royalty is a continuous cut

Mikasi

A Reckoning Will Not Be Indefinitely Postponed.

sutortyrannus

Kill them! Take their stuff!

danh3107

God, can you just picture it? Cat sitting on zombie on a bridge across from that young general?

A shadowy figure only lit by the slight flickering of her pipe, smoke obscuring the parts of her face the shadows don't already conceal. A monster born out of your darkest nightmare, an enemy who casually murders thousands of soldiers without much apparent effort. You see her cape wrapped around her form, black as midnight and striped with the banners of heroes. And she wants to

talk with you, parlay with /you/. The arch heretic of the east, tyrant of callow, the Black Queen in the flesh...

[DroughtBringer](#)

Beautifully written, and terrifying.

Raved Thrad

"Uh, uh... you're going to hell!"

"Been there. It's a lousy place to visit."

"Wait, what?"

Dainpdf

Well, they may have seen her lean more heavily on her staff after collapsing the river. Not that it really makes much difference.

[Liliet](#)

Honestly that just makes it seem more menacing the way I imagine it – because it makes it tangible and real. She just DID that.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hmm. The images of Cat on the wiki all seem to be just "oh hey here's the character". We really need a set of images representing her successive instars: Barmaid/pit fighter, Squire, Squire II/Vicequeen, Black Queen and wearer of the Mantle of Woe, Priestess of Night.

Sanctus Obscurum

And lo! There sat she,
Black Queen all cloaked
In Woe's own mantle!
Wreathed in the blood
Of bloody day's death.
She sat astride dreadful steed
Of necromantic animus.
As the poor youth
Whose armies she had drowned
Rode out all alone to her confront
That he might snatch back
His captured soldiery
From her unhallowed clutches.
There sat she in red light
On foul mount, with manicoloured woe
Draped from her shoulders,
And lit her pipe of dragon's bone
With niether spark nor match,

Clouding her shadowed, red-lit face
In veil of wakeleaf smoke.
With grim mein under bleeding skies
She gazed upon his bluster and pride
And with a few words
She broke it.
Three days and three nights
Such was the oath
That she rested from that young lord
Three days and nights
Would his armies sit
By poor, broken Sarcella.
So did Razin Tanja,
Of Binder's Blood,
Swear to Catherine Foundling:
She of the green flames,
Black Queen Of Callow,
First Under the Night,
Who stole Winter's power,
Who bested Summer's might,
And who even parlayed
With Hidden Horror, and survived.
As she sat astride her foul steed
As Night fell and day's blood
Blackened o'er them both.

My own attempt to capture the mood of the scene there. It could use some working, but I think it turned out alright for a first draft.

Skaddix

Ugh can we move to another character. I rather see what is going on with any other Woe at this point. Also where are Indrani and Akua right now? I get why Akua absent Cat is not revealing she spared her. But Cat acting like Indrani ran off and is not coming back which I guess could make sense but I don't remember Cat telling Indrani about Masego. And their last fight wasn't that bad.

Big Brother

Mate, this is Cat's Story. We'll get the other characters when they're story relevant again. Show some patience.

Skaddix

I have been plenty patient but I could care less about Cat interacting with some douchebag Noble or trouncing him in combat. Or honestly a funeral for Nauk who already died for me when Warlock had to rez him. Thing is Cat in my book didn't really end that last Volume in the most interesting place. Pretty much everyone was in a more interesting

position. Now granted Cat meeting Tyrant and Hierarch was great fun but when Heirarch was spying on everyone Cat simply wasn't going to do much that was going to interest me.

Argentorum

Every time Erratic skips one of these conversations, all the moaners come out and say "But we never get to see the *good part," and "why does the *good* part always get skipped?"

and then we do see the "good" part, and people are complaining that there isn't enough Indrani shooting things and they've been patient enough already.

I think I why Erratic doesn't bother with the comments section anymore...

[erraticerrata](#)

I do read the comments. But I don't usually get involved unless I'm asked a direct question.

[Daniel E](#)

Wait, is that all it takes? ... Direct questions for @erraticerrata – Pie or cake? Rum or brandy? Ultimate fate of Akua? Any ETA on when we might get story Tags & a proper forum?

[erraticerrata](#)

Cake, rum, who knows? Story tags I'll look into, not sure what you mean by proper forum.

[Daniel E](#)

Like.. you know, a forum. Where we can post threads for discussion instead of breaking our mouse wheels scrolling a disorganized comments list. You've got a thriving community here, would be nice to have a real space.

Skaddix

Not everyone agrees what the good parts are, shocking. Turns out people have different favorite characters that they want to see more of. Personally I don't much care for Nauk or Abigail so focus on them doesn't really do much for me.

[Liliet](#)

I love Abigail, but Nauk just feels to me like one thread in a tapestry. If he did not get the amount of

focus that he did something would be amiss, but I don't really care about HIM per se, no. I care about Cat caring about him, though :3

Skaddx

Well as I said above. Part of my issue is Cat didn't end Epilogue or start the Prologue at a very interesting place in my mind. I think Masego and Black/Pilgrim top that list by a lot.

Her meeting Hierarch and Tyrant was great but beyond that she hasn't really been interacting with characters I really care about or find interesting. I don't care about Abigail, Robber is fun but he is like a comic relief character, Nauk he was already dead for me and I doubt this Razin is going to matter all that much. Basically I think the board has enough significant characters and doesn't really have space for many more until some exit in a more permanent way.

Beyond that I kinda feel blueballed that we know characters like Juniper, Hakram and Viv are close by but they still have gotten back with Cat yet.

Agent J

You're making the mistake of lumping all commenters together. People read a story and take different things from it. One person might enjoy the political aspects of the story while another prefers the war. Some may enjoy both while others neither and ready for, perhaps, the interplay between characters.

Unless it is the *same* person complaining each time, your own complaints don't really make sense.

Dainpdf

EE loves cliffhangers. We're going to be kept in the dark for a while still, I bet.

[Liliet](#)

Indrani's with the main chunk of the army, Catherine is waiting for them to catch up. Same with Akua.

[Mental Mouse](#)

1) As BB notes, Cat *is* our protagonist here, and I'll add that she's had a lot of personal development for us to catch up on. She's also laying the path to the fight with the Dead King.

2) Indrani is apparently with the main Drow force. At a guess, so is Akua... and that's an interesting development in its own right. I have to assume that Akua got the same "mystical psychotherapy" as Cat did, or *nobody* would trust her away from Cat.

Unfortunately for your case, neither of them is a POV character, which IMHO is two good calls by the author: Part of Indrani's role in the plot is that she's opaque; IIRC, Akua was briefly POV when she was approaching her climax (and was the only plausible POV at her location), but since then, the uncertainty about her thoughts and loyalties is very plot-significant.

Liliet

We got Akua's POV during Kaleidoscope, and it was FANTASTICALLY BRILLIANT.

Which just underscores the importance of putting off her next one until it can reach anywhere near that level of beauty ;u;

Aston

I'm still thinking Cats bad leg will be a weapon of sorts. Same as not being Named.

Good ending to the battle.

Rook

I'll bet money it gives out from under her just in time to avoid a surprise attack.

Someguy

It's a set up for Cat to use a Drop Step and charge in for a Dempsey Roll.

Hitogami

Nauk! My beautiful green boy! You will be missed by the more bloodthirsty readers...

Thanks for the chapter, it was good

IDKWhoitis

This was probably the nicest brutal putdowns I've seen Cat do. She understands he's young and way over his head. He all but had to beg for his troops back.

I wonder if he'll continue the pursuit after 3 days or will he just cut his losses? He's already in trouble for the colossal fuck up, but that might embolden him to do a larger one.

[Euodiachloris](#)

There's another prize mistake incoming.

He's probably going to try a night raid with a small, dependable band (seeing as I doubt he's going to get all the officers on his side on this one).

Raved Thrad

He sounds like the type to think military aphorisms from tired, old campaigners don't apply to him. "It worked before, so it'll work again. The glory of the death of the Black Queen will be mine!"

[Liliet](#)

He can't. Cat's made him give oath.

And in three days, Cat's main army is going to catch up.

Insanenoodlyguy

Oh he can. I mean it's about 50/50 at this point, but if he does it it's because he's making the classic mistake of the arrogant Procer noble: assuming he's going to WIN. And if he does, to be fair, breaking Oath to the Arch-Vile is expressly permitted. If he wins, if Cat lies dead at his feet, it's good tactics and justice etc. etc. There'd be grumbling, but killing the villain of the age is going to win out as glory for his blood and erase any means used to achieve it, or previous failures that were now mere setbacks.

But that assumes he wins. When he in fact dies, taking most if not all of the lanterns with him, what we have left is Captain Elvera saying "that fucking moron, that little shit got so many of us killed with his dumb fucking ideas and then she gives us an out with oaths we can actually live with and that dumbass breaks them and gets himself killed. Well I'm sure as fuck not going to be the oath breaker that dies trying to avenge the honorless whelp." And none of the others are going to go against that in anything like the numbers they'd need to think they'd have a chance, so even the ones who want to will stand down with her. And since it would be a doom of his own making, the courts in Procer aren't going to have any good narrative out of this to use against her. Oh i'm sure the boy's father could say something, but it'd be one thing if he rode to die gloriously against her after that river debacle, it's a bit harder to whip up too much fervor over the guy who's captains all talk about how he fucked up, had a way out, and fucked that up too.

Also unlike last chapter, his willingness to break that oath he so easily agreed to pretty much ensures the “hero who avenges things years later” narrative is lost to him.

[Liliet](#)

I mean Catherine specifically made him give oath that he *couldn't* easily break, it was a whole point.

But yeah the narrative swinging in her favor is exactly equal to politics here: Catherine's going for an alliance and Catherine's going for not being the bad guy, they're the same thing :3

[Euodiachloris](#)

An oath made on Those Above and given to one declared a heretic by the Light can be argued to be no oath at all, if you are inclined to believe such.

That's the issue, here.

[Liliet](#)

That is apparently not what Levantines believe, judging by Elvera.

But more importantly, my impression was that it was going to be a magic oath, like the First Llesse one that Cat was dismayed to find out she couldn't loophole.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Cat was, at that point, living the Fae life. Our very angry lordling is young, idealistic, boneheaded, desperate... and, he's not a Hero made of plot and bound so heavily to the Heavens that messing up would cost him an immediate fall. He's also not close enough to forty to know why keeping oaths even with the heretical is the higher road to take.

[Liliet](#)

You're confusing First Llesse and Second Llesse, aren't you?

Anyway, she also made him swear by Blood, and that's stronger for a Levantine and utterly irrelevant wrt who you're swearing to.

[Euodiachloris](#)

True all points. Except one: Pilgrim has killed family because Blood turned out to be thinner than hoped for. 😞

Most of his chapters underscore that people are people, whatever side, whichever nation. Our lad has yet to learn that. Hope he does, mind. Before, you know, it gets more people killed.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah ♥

[Daniel E](#)

“Living the Fae life” is my new favorite motto, thank you.

[Mental Mouse](#)

There's another issue here which may be a misstep by Cat: Elvera's troops are now bound by a three-month oath, but their commander is only bound for three days – and he doesn't understand honor nearly as well as Elvira does.

[Javvies](#)

Elvera and her troops were Cat's prisoners. Razin is a prisoner only of his own stupidity and inexperience.

As a general rule, you get to impose terms more favorable to yourself on people who are your prisoners than those who are not your prisoners and have merely been beaten on and withdrawn from the field of battle.

IDKWhoitis

With the Levs, I wouldn't be surprised if honor codes could actually interfere with orders. Also, it would be amusing to see if Elvira would point this out before a battle. Cat has been nothing but decent to them. So if it comes to battle, I would be curious if Elvira would step aside passively.

She isn't sworn to the boy, but rather a different noble. And if the boy plays his hand too early and breaks his pact to the gods and the army, then she might have a greater excuse to just not listen to his orders.

Insanenoodlyguy

Misstep? Hardly. This is cold cunning. She's giving him rope to hang himself

[Euodiachloris](#)

And a lovely rope it is too, to be sure. 😊

mavant

It's a bit of a shame to have lost the "unbreakable promises" Fae spell-like ability.

IDKWhoitis

Hold the fuck up, did he try to lecture Cat on the rules of engagement that she and Pilgrim set up at the beginning of this whole war?

Like man, this chapter just became so much better.

Dainpdf

I think more on basic rules most Good nations keep to. Gotta remember Levant mostly fights Procer.

antoninjohn

I guess when he break his oath to attack he will do it at night for surprise, after all oaths with the Cat are meaningless in the eyes of the heavens by which he swore

FactualInsanity

That's why Cat forced him to make the oath in front of every Levantine that matters left in his army. Some of them might be dismissive of "meaningless" promises, but for the ones that are like Elvera, it will just deepen the cracks already present in the Levantine camp.

Insanenoodlyguy

It'd be the nail in the coffin for the Elvaras in camp. If he wants to attack tonight, they will say "our honor means something boy". If he tries to do it in three days, even worse: "we value our honor even if you only think yours matters, boy"

In three months, she might well be in a working truce with the crusade. The only way he could come out on top, maybe, is to back Cat now and look good in retrospect, and that's something he wouldn't have in him.

[Liliet](#)

Depending on how seriously he takes an oath by Blood, he might.

Insanenoodlyguy

Unlikely. Hed never undertake the kind of Gambit Talbot did. Hes both too prideful and not desperate enough.

Someguy

That'd be good for a laugh.

After all, Oaths sworn to Below cannot be broken (Or Else).

Oaths sworn to Above are broken all the time! Oathbreaking is thus Above's balliwick.

Dainpdf

Sorta. They need that veneer of reason to the thing. And I bet they're more likely to hold you to the spirit of the oath than Below.

After all, Above also holds sway over Honor.

[Mental Mouse](#)

"Above also holds sway over Honor"

Hmm, I'm not so sure. Certainly our villains are bound by oaths – note that Akua in Cat's Winter body was still bound by Cat's oaths. I suspect that Honor is a Narrative element, which can stand against either Above or Below.

beleester

Akua was bound by Fae oaths, which have actual magical force behind them, so that's kind of a different situation.

You're right that it's a trope for both sides – after all, Villains Never Lie is a trope. But magical bindings seem to be a mainly Evil trope – they're the "deal with the devil" trope where you can't escape your contract even if you realized it was a terrible mistake. Good oaths are about honor – you **could** break them, but you won't because it would cost you your honor.

Dainpdf

That was more a Fae thing than Good or Evil. As for honor, you'll see in their beliefs – Evil preaches betrayal, and doing whatever it takes to win, while the House of Light does preach honor.

Below enforces oaths to it not because it values honor, but because it knows that without it its followers would break them in a heartbeat.

TheGlyphstone

If he does, he'll cripple any ability to command his army. Elvera wasn't Blood, but she was a captain and she respected oaths no matter who they are given to. What the priests say is one thing, what the troops and officers believe is another, and violating an oath made both to the Heavens and on his own Blood would be devastating to his reputation.

Insanenoodlyguy

And it cripples the retaliation and his use as a symbol. He might well be able to get the lanterns and a few loyal captains to say, raid the funeral and try what worked the first time. And when Cat and her drow at night kill the ever loving fuck out of them, the larger surviving army, led by a woman who's under oath and cares about it anyway, isn't going to charge in to avenge him or go home mourning the loss of a martyr, no. They'll give a very factual report to his father while spreading the word about how "that dumb shit fucked it up, got a bunch of us killed, got the opportunity to walk, and fucked that up to. Manged to kill his honor before he got himself killed even." There's not a lot of rallying behind that sort of death.

Sylwoos

That's not even the worse part.

If he does that, his surprise attack will be utterly annihilated by the Mighty in the most brutal and terrifying manner. Never mind his reputation, his own officer will offer his head to appease Cat after realizing she can massacre all of them here and there.

[Ben Serreau-Raskin](#)

Fucking badass.

Dainpdf

So, uh... few chapters ago I mentioned how Cat hasn't had the arrogance to basically declare war on the Gods like the Hierarch.

I'd like to retract my statement, please?

RanVor

Didn't she do that way back in Book 2?

Dainpdf

Perhaps. My memory is not perfect. Might also not have been this direct, dunno.

Andrew Mitchell

Permission granted.

[Sugar Roll](#)

See, Cat can be diplomatic after all. She's been making good deals after good deals ever since she went to the Everdark. She can be smug to the rest of the Woe next time they come together.

[Liliet](#)

Cat's been a diplomancer since the five-way melee. Never forget *that* mess ;u;

[Euodiachloris](#)

Hmmmm, diplomacy. For when plain diplomacy is just not interesting enough and the party has grown stale: add a little diplomacy¹!

¹Terms and conditions apply. May contain trace elements of unbridled chaos and goblin fire. Keep out of reach of small children and Tyrants.

beleester

"Cat's approach to negotiation is to show up with a sword and a bottle of cheap wine, and point out that while the wine tastes terrible, it is still technically better than being stabbed."

She's good at negotiating when she can make it clear that if negotiations fail, she's going to kill everyone.

[Daniel E](#)

As the Army of Callow draws closer to reunification; Any thoughts on how Hierophant is going to return? If his casual effects on the Tower's scouts are any indication, he is arguably one of the most powerful Named out there right now. I wouldn't give him odds against Pilgrim (that whole direct line of divine power thing), but I daresay he could hold his own against any of the other legendary Heroes we saw at Five Camps.

werafdsaew

Wouldn' the Drows benefit from having more modern equipment?

Andrew Mitchell

That's a really interesting thought. Maybe normal gear reduces some of their Night powers, like the shadow trick?

IDKWhoitis

Modern gear is heavier, which the Drow may not be accustomed to, and during the day, they are no stronger than normal humans. So that extra weight might exhaust them quicker. Also, the only point of switching from bronze/bones to steel would be added strength and piercing power, but the Drow are probably magically boosting that anyways, or dodging.

Also, the Drow are raiders, they don't really do the shield-wall concept, so heavier armor/shields/shortswords wouldn't really work well with them. Could they hypothetically train to work with those weapons and tactics? Yeah, but it would be a waste of potential and they don't have the time for that on the go. Its the same reason Black and the Legions didn't bother putting Goblins in a shield wall or Catherine put the fae into sapper formations.

Agent J

Could be giving them weapons they are unfamiliar with just wouldn't be worth the benefits of it being of a higher quality.

[Liliet](#)

Like AgentG and IDKWhoItIs said, giving drow equipment they aren't trained to use is completely counterproductive.

[Euodiachloris](#)

They'd need training in how to use it. Also, how to use it in the formations it was meant to be used in.

Nah: they're better off picking things up and folding the new ideas and knacks into Night on their terms.

luminiousblu

Equipment has an evolutionary process that has close ties to how their users fight. The viking round shield is for foot soldier use, meant to be cheap and durable and cover you from missile fire and blows, because while the Scandinavians had decent armour for their time it was still generally rubbish compared to later chain and plate. You can clearly see the purpose in the design, which is too big for cavalry fighting and a little too big when used alone – it's meant to be deployed en-masse and cover as much of the body as possible, used in a wall. The same goes for the scutum in a more extreme form – it's horrible as a personal shield, far too large to bash effectively and too heavy to be easily manoeuvred.

On the other hand, in the early renaissance shields – except for the buckler – effectively died out, not because they couldn't block gunfire or whatnot, but because armour had become so good that it was literally a waste of metal or wood to hold a shield – except if the enemy was using some sort of hammer or pick, at which point the theory behind buckler's deflecting design becomes clear – it wouldn't work well against swords or even axes, and would be almost completely useless against arrows, but none of those were a threat anymore. The things they were fighting and the doctrine at the time had obsoleted the round shield, but give a viking-period person a buckler and you'll get the same reaction as most modern people – incredulous laughter.

So basically, no. Giving the Drow short swords seems counterproductive when short swords are an extremely specialised and generally complete rubbish weapon. The scutum is the result of a highly specific way of fighting that evolved directly from the phalanx (the early Romans actually used a phalanx, the remains of which survived in the fighting style of the reserve "Triarii" line until the Marian reforms) and doesn't work at all in any other style, riot shields are deployed in a shield wall or mini-fishscale/testudo formation.

Levantine weapons and armour are almost certainly likewise specialised, even for their peasant soldiers – see the point about shields above. Sure, some of them will be wearing the thickest shirt they own, a padded hat, and carrying a billy club or a re-fitted hoe or scythe, and those aren't specialised, but those are also bottom-of-the-barrel weapons and still meant to be used in formation.

[Adrian V](#)

Ok new (unless someone already posted it xD) theory/hope: Nauk will rise somehow during the funeral pyre, maybe with a name (Prince Killer sounds cool), now that Hakram opened the path there should be other Orcs following him i think.

luminiousblu

Sort of fucked up how Nauk "deserves better" when by all accounts orcs are essentially a Neutral Evil race for who killing and eating sentient beings is literally part of their blood that can't even be drilled out of them. Even Hakram, who was the orc equivalent of depressed, starts eating things (a hilariously ineffective way of fighting against armoured foes with a range advantage but rule of cool and whatnot and explicitly calls out orc 'culture' (not even that really, since culture can be changed) as raiding, looting, killing, and burning. Probably not raping but that's less because they're above it and more because human women look like shit to them.

Goblins aside, since goblins being insane that seems to be mostly a cultural phenomenon and not literally in the blood, orcs are straight up a Always Neutral Evil race. The only thing that saves them from being Chaotic is the fact that they can clearly function in hierarchies not held up by threat of immediate execution, and some would say Neutral Evil is worse than Chaotic.

[Liliet](#)

I wouldn't use "Evil" like that.

You can't just reason that orcs are Evil because their culture is Evil. Is Juniper Evil? Is Hakram Evil? Was Nauk Evil? Sources to their specific evil-ness please

luminiousblu

I can totally reason Practical Guide orcs are Evil, in the sense of the D&D alignment (not the Practical Guide sense), because an urge to kill sentient things solely to kill them is Evil literally by definition. It's one of the few things explicitly mentioned as Evil alongside such things as torture, slavery, and creation of the undead.

>you can't just reason that orcs are Evil because their culture is Evil

Except it's not their culture, it's not Callowans holding their grudges tighter than the Dawi or the Drow being, well, Drow. Goblins **might** only be what they are because of their culture, but Hakram and Juniper both explicitly mention that all orcs have that inherent violent streak in them, it's just a part of them. Unless they were being poetic – and I don't think they were – they're born Evil. Not necessarily evil, if you don't think of it that way, but definitely Evil.

>was Nauk Evil?

Yes? The dude literally only doesn't eat people alive because it's not allowed. If you pointed at Hakram and Juniper alone you might have more of a leg to stand on, but Nauk is totally out there.

>is Juniper Evil?

Yes, a hundred percent. The woman is a blood knight who likes going to war for the sake of going to war. It's not even the case that she thinks it's simpler to beat the shit out of someone who disagrees with you, but simply that she enjoys killing hordes of people by commanding other hordes of people to do it efficiently. She doesn't like it when reality gets in the way of this either, so it's not like the commandant who takes a shine to war when it's needed but isn't actively looking for it, Juniper gets mad when someone points out she's a goddamn idiot when it comes to anything above the tactical level because her precious war is being ruined by

political reality. If you gave her the chance to lead 100k troops wherever she wanted she'd just plow through as much of the world as possible with those troops because she likes being at war. That's Evil, capital-E.

It's also why I can't take all the accolades people throw at her in story seriously because I've never heard of a great general who can't take into account things at the strategic level, if not the grand strategic level. Hell, Hannibal and Napoleon are both remembered more for their overall strategies than for their actual battles among military historians – Cannae became THE battle to emulate, but the war of attrition and the Fabian strategy that was used to counter Hannibal are some of the earliest examples of logistical-level warfare in western history and changed how Rome, and therefore everyone else west of Mesopotamia, fought. Meanwhile Juniper's idea of 'strategy' is to antagonise anyone and everyone and then somehow magically defeat them. She's honestly not fit to be a general since those are also in charge of devising strategic-level attack plans. Put her in charge of armies, and attach someone else to take care of everything that isn't facebashing /rant

>is Hakram Evil?

That's a good question. Hakram admits himself that he didn't feel like an 'orc', ever – because he didn't have the urge that other orcs do. Arguably Hakram is not Evil insofar as he's somewhere between depressed and psychopathic as far as orcs are concerned. He doesn't seem to relish fighting or killing, just is perfectly fine with doing it and not bothered in the slightest. Depending how you read the definition that's either Evil or Neutral. I'd lean Neutral, but some would go for Evil.

[Liliet](#)

>I can totally reason Practical Guide orcs are Evil, in the sense of the D&D alignment (not the Practical Guide sense), because an urge to kill sentient things solely to kill them is Evil literally by definition. It's one of the few things explicitly mentioned as Evil alongside such things as torture, slavery, and creation of the undead.

Urge != following the urge. If the DnD alignment system as defined somewhere doesn't recognize that, then it's worthless. Intrusive thoughts and instincts don't make people Evil.

>Unless they were being poetic – and I don't think they were – they're born Evil. Not necessarily evil, if you don't think of it that way, but definitely Evil.

Bard would say that all people are born Evil, and then rise from that :3

I do not believe in inherent goodness/badness. Nature contributes to the end result alongside nurture, not determines it.

>Yes, a hundred percent. The woman is a blood knight who likes going to war for the sake of going to war. It's not even the case that she thinks it's simpler to beat the shit out of someone who disagrees with you, but simply that she enjoys killing hordes of people by commanding other hordes of people to do it efficiently. She doesn't like it when reality gets in the way of this either, so it's not like the commandant who takes a shine to war when it's needed but isn't actively looking for it, Juniper gets mad when someone points out she's a goddamn idiot when it comes to anything above the tactical level because her precious war is being ruined by political reality. If you gave her the chance to lead 100k troops wherever she wanted she'd just plow through as much of the world as possible with those troops because she likes being at war. That's Evil, capital-E.

I'd say you're exaggerating this somewhat. Juniper is following the values of her culture, and she's at the limit of her incompetence being a Marshal of a country with a swath of authority over how the country itself is run.

I'll agree with you that she's a fantastic tactician and pretty great at logistics but below zero in strategy. Good thing she's got Catherine at her side!

>Juniper gets mad when someone points out she's a goddamn idiot when it comes to anything above the tactical level because her precious war is being ruined by political reality

?

When did anyone ever say that to her and have her get mad though.

Like... I'm not saying that's not true. But I only recall Juniper disliking Vivienne as far as anything along these lines goes, and that was actually out of moral considerations – those of her culture.

Like... you have a point somewhere in there, but it feels to me like you have to stretch a bit to really fit it. Juniper's in no way Good, but I wouldn't put her outside the bounds of Lawful Neutral.

>Hakram admits himself that he didn't feel like an 'orc', ever – because he didn't have the urge that other orcs do.

[Liliet](#)

aaaugh that was an accidental unfinished posting

>Hakram admits himself that he didn't feel like an 'orc', ever – because he didn't have the urge that other orcs do.

It's his narration that had vivid description of mouth watering at the sight of a small child, and meditation on how Carrion Lord gave orcs rules and they were good rules.

He did not have a drive to victory, no. The cannibalistic instincts were still there.

Abao

Reading the comments section had me trying to picture Cat standing atop the bridge, as the day slowly ebbs and night took over.

For some reason, what came to mind was this



Chapter 15: Bereavement

"To two deaths we are born: the first in the flesh, the second in the memories of those left behind."
– Sherehazad the Seer, Taghreb poet

The Lanterlia quarter would burn twice, that'd been my decree.

It was a good thing Sarcella was mostly abandoned by now, or it might have been necessary to expel people from their homes to get our hands on enough lumber for the pyres. As it was, the Third Army's sappers only had to tear down empty homes to raise the night's work: heaps of wood large and tall enough for near six thousand corpses to be consigned to burning on them. Not all the dead bodies would be legionaries – not even most, as the addition of the priests from the House Insurgent had done much to improve the survivability of our wounded – but the soldiers of Levant would share in the farewell. I wasn't leaving a few thousand corpses lying around when the Dead King was on the loose, no matter how far from the battlefield he was supposed to be. I watched in silence, pipe in my mouth, as companies of goblins methodically cleared out a space in the burn-out quarter and filled it with long rectangular piles of wood. They looked almost like giants' graves, I thought, though the bodies would be laid to rest over and not under. There'd been talk of requisitioning oil and charcoal from the locals to help the blaze burn hot enough, but I'd put a stop to that.

There was no need for it, when I had Mighty under my command.

It was already night out when the strange procession began. Carts and stretchers bearing the dead, some covered with the thin bashfulness of a sheet. Some, but not all: there were too many dead, too few sheets of cloth. I'd heard a story once, back in Laure, about the elaborate funeral processions of the Fairfaxes. How the dead kings and queens were taken through the streets of the capital on a bier of bronze and iron as the bells rang in unison, until all the people of Laure had seen the remains with their own eyes. It'd take hours, the heads of the knightly orders and every other Fairfax walking along the cadaver as the people threw red carnations before them. The same flowers that grew in long swaths by the shores of the Silver Lake, though some said it was tradition as a nod to Selwin Fairfax's death in the Red Flower Vales. The procession would end where it had begun, at the palace, and the ruler would be buried in the crypts below. *A Fairfax is dead, a Fairfax reigns*, the people would say, and the world would go on. No one threw flowers for my dead soldiers in the distance below, nor the Levantines so far away from home. Instead they had ash and embers, and the blackened husk of a district that might have been beautiful before we came to it.

The burial of kings and queens took the coin of a thousand soldiers', and so a thousand soldiers were buried without a sound. That'd always been the way of the world, hadn't it? The small died quiet, the great with theatre and oration – as unequal a bargain in death as it had been in life. It was a morose line of thought, but it paired well with my mood. The drow that had become my second shadows when shadow claimed the sky stood half-

hidden and still as statues, not even stirring when the ashen path was stirred by careful footsteps. I'd not summoned General Abigail, though neither was I surprised she'd come to me. The latest arrangements I had made would cause most to cock an eyebrow. I didn't turn to look at her, and repressed my amusement when I heard the Summerholm girl curse under her breath before climbing up. The two story house I'd claimed as my perch was now little more than a twisted up stone floor held up by load-bearing walls that let the wind through, but there was a path to take if you looked properly. I wouldn't have made it up without a smudge of Night to chase away the pain in my leg, but with the coming of darkness miracles had come back to me through the turn of that astral tide.

There was a dull thump and louder cursing as the general of my army slipped halfway up and fell down on her ass, so I took pity on her and called out in Crepuscular. Mighty Miklaya leapt down and picked up the loudly protesting Callowan by the back of her neck before leaping up to my side and dropping her like a sack of cabbage. I nodded my thanks to it, and after a bow it vanished into the dark without a trace.

"They weren't anywhere near that sprightly earlier, the pricks," General Abigail muttered.

I turned to look at her and picked up on exactly when she remembered who she was on her belly in front of, complaining about allies. Abigail blanched and skittered up with the horrified haste of a cat near a goblin cookpot, saluting promptly. I wondered if she was aware that her armour now had tracks of soot all over it.

"General," I said. "Sit."

My pipe had long run out, though I was now officially out of herbs to stuff it with anyway. Robber had more important duties than to find me wakeleaf at the moment, though I'd send him out on the prowl before we left Sarcella. It was either that or actually trying the dried underground lake algae that Ivah had suggested, and I wasn't nearly desperate enough to go for that. I suspected that drow tasted, well, *tastes* very differently than humans. It was the only reasonable explanation for some of the things they subjected themselves to eating and drinking.

"Your Majesty," General Abigail said. "I'm not sure that's, uh, entirely appropriate."

I glanced at her amusedly. Court etiquette while on campaign? Besides, field promotion or not holding the title of general put her among the ten highest military officers in the kingdom. Technically she even outranked Grandmaster Brandon Talbot, though she wouldn't have the authority to give him orders in most situations.

"I could make it a royal decree, if you'd prefer," I said.

"Please don't," she said, then a heartbeat passed. "... Your Majesty."

Very warily she sat at the edge of the floor as I had, legs dangling. My eyes returned to the procession of corpses, noting it had turned from a flood to a trickle. The preparations would be finished soon enough. I felt her hesitating at my side, but didn't come to the rescue. If she was to continue working closely with me she'd have to find it in her to actually ask me questions without prompting.

"Ma'am, I meant to ask," General Abigail said. "About the redeployments you ordered..."

It was enough of a step forward to deserve reward, I decided.

"You think they leave us vulnerable, now that the prisoners are being returned," I completed.

She cleared her throat.

"I don't mean to impugn the abilities of our allies," she said. "But there's a lot of Dominion grunts out there, and our captures marched back with their weapons. If they hit us by surprise when almost the entire army's at the funeral, three thousand drow won't cut it. They'll catch us with our trousers down."

Not an unwarranted assumption, for someone who didn't know the Firstborn like I did.

"I did extract oaths from both Captain Elvera and the highborn boy that commands the vanguard," I said.

General Abigail began to spit over the edge, before remembering once more that I was there and hastily stopping. I politely pretended not to notice the choke and coughing fit that ensued.

"My Da always said anyone that makes more than you do is probably out to get you," Abigail solemnly said. "Double so for anyone not from Summerholm, triple if they're Wasteland get."

There was another pause, followed by an almost physical spike of fear.

"That wouldn't mean you, Your Majesty," she hurriedly said. "You're a – I mean, everyone knows – he's just an old drunk, didn't mean nothing."

I pondered that. I didn't get a salary from the Tower anymore – Malicia was such a cheapskate, I'd only rebelled and tried to kill her the once – so in a sense I *didn't* make more than my general. Unless you counted taxes and tariffs, or the kingdom's

treasury. I doubted telling her as much would actually help any, though, so I discarded the diversion.

"Razin Tanja might go back on his oath, even after what he swore it on," I agreed. "He could be desperate enough he'd roll the dice on a victory washing his slate clean. Captain Elvera, I'm not so sure. Honour matters a lot more when it's your own on the line instead of someone else's."

"Honour didn't stop them from sneaking in at night and offing our general staff," General Abigail bluntly said. "Beg your pardon, ma'am, but what do some Levant muckabouts know about anything like honour? They were quick enough to roll over for Procer and join up, after all that hard talk about them being deathly foes."

"Akua's Folly scared a lot of people," I mildly said. "And honour doesn't mean abandoning solid tactics."

And they had been that, regardless of the personal cost to me. The other Callowan shuffled uncomfortably.

"Aren't they your enemy, Your Majesty?" she asked.

Your, I thought. Interesting choice of words, and more telling than she probably realized. More so than the unspoken assumption: *if they're your enemy, why are you defending them?*

"They won't always be our enemy," I said. "And even if they were sworn to stay one, it serves us nothing to lower them in our eyes. The moment you dismiss an opponent outright you stop understanding them. That's dangerous thing, in our position."

I threw her a bone after the lecture, wondering if Black had once done the same for me. If so he'd done it skillfully enough I hadn't noticed.

"Most the three thousand drow are decoration," I told her. "Defending bridges, like they are? I could have sent only two to stand guard with much the same effect. I just decided to temper the temptation for our friend Razin."

General Abigail went still. I was pleased she picked up on the implications of that so quickly.

"Named?" she said. "Or just warlocks?"

"Priests, in a way," I mused. "Though the kind even Lanterns wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley."

The other woman breathed out sharply. I doubted she would be the last, when the scope of what the Might could do became clearer.

"How many of those are there, ma'am?" she croaked out.

"An empire's worth," I said.

And sometimes I fear even that might not be enough, for what's to come, I thought.

"You and I – Callowans – we were taught to fear the monsters on the other side of the river," I mused. "The hordes and the sorceries and the things that go out after dark."

I clapped her shoulder, ignoring the flinch.

"But not this time, Abigail," I said. "Tonight, you see, we're looking at the river from the other side."

I felt my honour guard of drow stir through the Night. People were approaching us, and not a moment too soon. I dragged myself up after reaching for my staff, turning to my shivering general.

"Time to go," I said. "The dead have waited long enough."

—

Once lit, the torches turned the darkened wreckage of Lanteria into a sea of fireflies.

It'd been some time since I last stood for a vigil. There'd been others after the one that followed Three Hills, grim heaps of ash made across Callow wherever my armies fought and died. Marchford, where the grim necessity of killing everyone touched by Corruption had made it even uglier business than usual. Liesse and Arcadia, Dormer and the blood-soaked fields of the Folly. Far north, after the Battle of the Camps. Had there even been a year, since I first gained command, without some of mine being given to the flame? Sometimes it felt like I'd been at war from the moment I had taken up Black's knife, without ever a moment to catch my breath. But this wasn't about me, not really. I owned a part of it, but so did every single of the almost eight thousand legionaries and officers standing in Lanteria. So did the Levantines across the river, though they might not see it that way. We'd bared our blades and wrecked all around us, each convinced that we were right, necessary, that the other side was damned and blind. I almost smiled at the thought. Had anyone ever gone to war believing they were in the wrong? I could not help but wonder at the people who'd once lived in this city, and watched it torn apart by foreign armies engaged in a war first started by a woman far away in Salia. They should not be forgot, even if they were my enemy's people and not mine.

They too tread the same grounds that had my leg throbbing, whispering with every limping step: *do not forget, that this was never a game. Do not forget, that you make mistakes. Do not forget, that there must be more than ruin. Do not forget.*

These weren't drow, so the crowd below spoke in murmurs that lapped at the platform the sappers had raised. I did not stand alone on it, did not have that gall when I'd come so late to the battle for Sarcella. General Abigail stood at my right side, cheeks reddened by the old Callowan remedy for chilly nights. She cut a good figure, in her polished armour freshly marked with the wings of a general glimmering in the glow of the magelights surrounding us. Bareheaded, her black locks brought out the sharp blue of her eyes. Spreading out from her right, the surviving general staff stood with us as well: the last remaining legate, a heavyset man by the name of Oakes, her Senior Mage and Staff Tribune. At my left I kept Robber and Mighty Jindrich, the latter of which was looking at the proceedings with strangely innocent fascination. Never before, I thought, must it have seen so many torches. The purpose of this had been as strange to it as its fascination was to me: drow did not have funerals the way the people of the surface did, not since the coming of Sve Noc. Corpses were just rotting meat that could not be eaten, nothing to be given any particular attention beyond disposal to avoid diseases. I'd waited long enough, I eventually decided. All the torches that would be lit already were.

I raised my staff, and a single horn was sounded by an officer below. The sound echoed across the district, and left silence in its wake. I'd been offered sorcerous help by the Third Army's mages, but I had no need of it: the Night coiled in my veins, and when I spoke it was in a voice that resounded across all of Lanteria quarter.

"The first time I met Nauk of the Waxing Moons clan," I said, "he called me dead weight and I nearly slugged him in the face."

The officers standing next to me looked appalled, save for Robber who was grinning like a gleeful imp, but a ripple went through the crowd. There were greenskins who'd laughed outright, and many more soldiers who looked like they were feeling guilty about smiling at a funeral.

"It wasn't even half a year after that the Fifteenth Legion was raised," I continued. "And by then it didn't even occur to me he wouldn't be part of it. That was the kind of man he was, long before he put an arrow in a prince and got another name out of it."

Grief and guilt, hand in hand. For the friend I was burying, in a way, for the second time. For what had remained of that friend in my general and I'd cravenly looked away from. Another regret for the list that would never, could never, be expiated. It always seemed like there were more pressing things to see to, didn't it? Until the bells rang and you realized it'd become too late.

"He was brave," I thoughtfully said. "We always say that, about those we bury, but he truly was. Kind, to those he owed kindness

to, and always cannier than he let on. But most of all, when I remember him, I remember that the same night we met he marched most of a mile on a broken leg without a word of complaint. It's a small thing, but it stands for more. There was not an ounce of give in him."

My voice turned rueful.

"But then I speak to nothing you don't already know, do I? Everything Nauk Princekiller had to give, you have made a part of you."

My lips quirked, because this was a fool's war but how could I not be proud of how they had fought it?

"The Third Army marched across the span of Iserre, pursued by fourfold its number and ambushed by Helike's finest," I said. "Yet when I found Sarcella, your banner flew. They rode you down, they burned you out, they stormed every single wall you raised – and the Third Army did not break."

The last part rung louder like a rest, almost deserving of echo. There was a sea of faces splayed out below me: old and young, Praesi and Callowans and greenskins. Old Legion veterans come under fresh banner to ply the same harsh trade, youths who'd put on the armour with that burning need to do something that would *matter*. Some had joined for coin, some for purpose, some for having nowhere else to go. Some had put on the mail for their country, and among those there were hard-eyed Soninke and Taghreb who I thought might yet *make* that country after they went home with a blade in hand. Once you'd drunk from the cup of defiance the taste was not easily forgot, and they had all drunk deep. How many of them had sung on the march to Dormer, I wondered, joined their voices to that chilling song Nauk had penned? I had taken the armies of the east and told them they were owed better, that they could *do* better, and they had believed me.

Since that day they had been sharpened on bloody fields every bit the match of the Conquest's, marched victorious through a gauntlet of horrors. And they'd done it without High Lords, without Dukes and Baronesses, without any of the old banners above their heads. One day those soldiers would go home, and those who would be their masters would not find them so easily bent to the old order. *I've borrowed the strength of an empire and the godhead behind it, bared it at my foes like a blade, I thought, and some fools will tremble at that alone. But you, all of you. Oh, how they would tremble if they could look at you now. What you are and might yet do.* In the golden glow of the torches they all seemed tinted by the same dye, as if they had shared some strange rite that left the same mark on all of them. Maybe they had, this lone column in the snow surrounded by foes. I saw all that and one thing more, a reflection of what I felt in my bones when looking at them: pride.

"I could praise you," I said. "But what could I possibly speak that would ring louder than your record? Instead, I will say there are faces here that I recognize."

It was true. More greenskins and Praesi than Callowans, who had come later to my campaigns, but more than a few of those as well. Legionaries and officers both, some who'd been under Nauk as far back as Three Hills.

"From the two thousand that charged Summer, at Five Armies and One," I said. "From the first into the breach, at Dormer. From those who took the hellgate at the Doom of Liesse. From the Battle of the Camps, holding against three to one and hero's wrath."

I laughed.

"Have you ever fought a battle where you were not meant to lose?"

Laughter answered, harsh and grim and heartbreakingly proud.

"In the crucible of the Conquest," I said, "names were granted to honour the greatest deeds of Legions. *Cognomen*, they are called. You have gone through crucible harsher still, and so this honour is long overdue."

My voice rose.

"You are the Third Army of the Kingdom of Callow," I proclaimed. "You have been the vanguard of our every victory, never once flinching nor breaking – and for that I name you *dauntless*."

For a moment there was only silence, and my stomach dropped, but then roar drowned out everything. Thousands of throats screaming out into the night, a chorus of stomping feet and blades striking shields. Dauntless, I thought, letting the sea of noise wash over me. That had been impulse, but I did not regret it. I would see it put to the rolls, and I would see Nauk's name written as the first general to command it. It was the only kind of grave marker he would have cared for, I suspected. The Third Army howled its approval, long and loud, and when the sound thinned General Abigail's own tribune approached me with a torch, passing it to my hand. For the pyre, I knew. It was my right, as Queen of Callow, to throw the first one.

"We'll all put friends to the flame tonight," I said. "And there will be others, on other fields. So weep for the lost, but know that I can promise you this: in the end, they will *remember* us."

I wanted to throw the torch. For the friend I'd loved, the memories I would still clutch now that he was gone. But this wasn't about me, not really. I owned a part of it, but so did

every single one of them. So instead I limped to Abigail and passed her the torch.

"Send them home, General," I said.

Blue eyes met mine, unreadable, and slowly she nodded.

The torch flew, and the sea of fireflies followed.

luminiousblu

"Were are born"?

stevenneiman

From the moment we are born, we are doomed to the twin deaths of life and memory. At least, that's how I interpreted it. It could just as easily have been a mistake, meant to say "borne".

caoimhinh

It's nice to see EE finally fixing the typos we point out, every once in a while XD

NerfContessa

Am I the only one who kind of expected nauk to somehow come back to unlife in a fiery and night driven ritual? :p

therealgridlock

I mean, he should have. This was the exact beat of his story, and as far as ritual goes, the death of his friends and enemies, his burning in two battles, fusion with his own armor, he should have risen from that pyre not immortal, but at least named.

Nauk, flameridden, twice dead, thrice living, princekiller, bone breaker, and terror to those who oppose the black queen.

Touched by summer, winter, sorcery, night, light, heaven, hell, he could and should have been an unholy construct unstoppable by man nor beast, if nothing else.

Abaddon

Waaaaaaaaay too long for a Name

Javvies

A moving moment.
Nicely done, Cat.

Is it bad that I kind of want Razin to succumb to temptation and get turned into even more of an example of what not to do?

Liliet

Well, you're certainly not alone in it.

And it would be tactically and possibly strategically advantageous to Cat.

Still I hope he'll be okay :3

IDKWhoitis

He's totally going to fall for it. But probably at the end of the 3 days. Trying to chase them early is my guess.

Javvies

Eh, starting pursuit earlier really only hurts his standing with those aware of the oaths he took, which might be enough to get him disowned, due to the nature of the oaths/what he swore by. It doesn't really do anything to turn him into an example.

After all – even if he only holds off pursuit by a day or so, contact will be sufficiently broken that he can't really catch up to Third Army.

The only way he really gets turned into an example is if he attacks either tonight or tomorrow, when Third Army is pulling back.

Insanenoodlyguy

Oh that's so much worse though. I'd have said even he'd recognize that effectively saying only his honor mattered would go bad, but it now occurs to me he might be so arrogant as to not have asked his captains in the first place.

Big Brother

Finally, the first Callowen Cognomen. DAUNTLESS. Such a wonderful word for one of the toughest and scariest armies I've ever seen in fantasy.

danh3107

These last chapters have been described with the best you can give Erratic. When you can not only see, but feel the world around you as you read, you know you're reading a great story.

Thanks erratic, thanks a lot.

[Javvies](#)

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The only way he really gets turned into an example is if he attacks either tonight or tomorrow, when Third Army is pulling back.

[Javvies](#)

Whoops, replied to wrong post.

Adurna

That was powerfull. And cleansing. Thank you.

Skaddx

Nice speech.

Andrew Mitchell

Wow, what a great chapter. It literally brought tears to my eyes. I was not expecting to be moved by a speech about Nauk, but EE made it so much more meaningful than that. Dauntless, indeed.

I wonder what the other Callownian armies will be called once they've earned their names?

And how much MORE are they going to be motivated to earn them now?

Fan

I cried. Lol just felt like sharing.

Mike E.

Yeah, really glad my office mate doesn't come in this early, would have been a bit embarrassing.

plantsbeans

I was tearing up too.

imagesbe

This was quite possibly one of the best speeches in the entire story. It ranks higher than the speeches Black and Akua gave at the "Doom of Liesse," higher than anything I can think of at the top of my head. It has a kind of emotional weight to it. It's not just a grand speech, but a meaningful one.

[Liliet](#)

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[Liliet](#)

God this was beautiful.

And... passing the torch, huh.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Huh, indeed.

IDKWhoitis

I wonder what names the other armies will get by the end of this.

Decius

"Deadkillers"?

konstantinvoncarstein

Nope, it is always in Lower Miezian/Latin 😊 I think it would be "morticide"

RanVor

Since when *Dauntless* is in Latin?

konstantinvoncarstein

Ah yes, sorry, I confuse it with the "cognomen" or the Legions of Terror

Rook

Whelp, looks like Abigail is going to end up as, at a minimum, one of Catherine's successors. Foreshadowing doesn't get much more straightforward than a literal passing of the torch.

anon

lol now, I want to see what Mighty Jindrich and the rest of the drow think of about all the precious wood that's being burnt for this funeral.

caoimhinh

I think it'd be something along the lines of:
"They were so respected that the First Under the Night used something so valuable as wood to bid them goodbye. Cattle as they were, they had died for the victory of Losara Queen. So honour has been given by it, and wisdom has been shared."

[Liliet](#)

Hopefully at least some of them lmao

Death Knight

Heh, wonder what they'll think once they see the Brocellian and Waning Woods...

[Liliet](#)

"NEVER MIND WE CAN GO BACK TO NOT HAVING WOOD PLEASE"

konstantinvoncarstein

It would rather be like this: "Cool, free breakfast after the wood-cutting" 😊

[Insanenoodlyguy](#)

Or at least "So apparently this isn't what passes for a rich city up here. There's even more wood in some of the other places we are going to conquer! Fancier wood even! It's fine, we aren't lugging this around cause we are gonna get the good stuff later."

and later

"So apparently all these pillar plants have guts made of wood. We just have to kill a few of them and mutilate their corpses to get wood in whatever shape we want Some of these cattle fighters totally know how to cut up the bodies. Seems those short sword blades with teeth we thought were horrible weapons are actually really good for that.

luminiousblu

Find it funny – not sure if Cat herself realises – that even while she's talking about the eight thousand legionaries and dead Levants, she starts her speech by talking about Nauk. It is clearly not about the eight thousand for her.

Jordan Leighton

That's one way of looking at it.

You could also point out that he's the only person they all respected(including her), and that generally armies take great pride in their generals so talking about them is a good way to connect.

And just because she started with Nauk doesn't mean that's all she talked about.

People have to start somewhere, Cat started with the familiar to all of them and then moved it to them which as I understand it is a common speech tactic.

luminiousblu

It's just strange when she spends half the chapter ranting about essentially the nameless soldier and the common man who dies in an unmarked grave, then starts by talking about someone with a name (if not a literal Name).

Decius

Eight thousand of the people who burned had a name. She talked about the one she knew the best.

[*Liliet*](#)

They all actually did have names.

Talking about no-one in particular is talking about no-one.
Talking about them in abstract is talking about no-one.
Talking about a nameless soldier is not talking about a single actual person who really existed.

[*Liliet*](#)

I mean... he's part of those eight thousand. It couldn't be about them and *not* about him, somehow.

luminiousblu

Debateable. A wheel is round but a car isn't, despite the fact that a car includes wheels.

[*Liliet*](#)

Yet if a car had a tire popped, you can't talk about it without acknowledging the fact that it has wheels. Even if it's not round.

What are we talking about again?

luminiousblu

If the car was totalled you generally don't start by saying the tires are popped. You say the car's been totalled.

"What are we talking about again?"

Just how interesting it is that Catherine spends the better half of a chapter talking about how some lives are presented as more important than others with a mildly disapproving tone, and then proceeds to possibly unwittingly do the same thing. There's a reason that the king gets a huge funeral while normal people don't, and it's not only because he can afford it.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, life sure is like that.

I'm not sure what you think this implies about Catherine, though. What do you think she should have said? Do you think it would have been better?

[Tohron](#)

The focus of the speech was about how the legionaries – dead and alive – had been shaped by Nauk and by the challenges they faces. You can't give that speech without talking about Nauk.

Jordan Leighton

Beautiful chapter.

Is there a PGTE discord?

[Liliet](#)

Yes!

<https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>

Dainpdf

Pretty. Impacting. Powerful.

Cayle

Really bothered Catherine isn't using their night. Easy way to teach the drow the soldiers craft and a general power boost.

Seems wasteful, could have just used the enemy soldiers even

Gareth Hughes

Im confused, your comment suggests cattle have access to night. This is untrue, only the firstborn have nught to harvest.

Cayle

Catherine met Ivah when he was raiding the surface to become drow again, they absolutely can harvest night from humans. It was stated outright multiple times.

[Liliet](#)

Not only is that not how Night works, even if it could, it would probably be extremely disrespectful to the dead. It's like the cannibalism thing with orcs: they're going to eat the dead they killed on the battlefield, fair enough, but that doesn't mean making the funeral into a feast. Cultural dissonance – you gotta respect it.

Cayle

It is exactly how night works

superkeaton

She's no Bard, but she certainly has a way of making you want to die for her.

Letouriste

I think she had a talk with the wandering bard at some where we mention she wanted to be bard but didn't have the talent. Maybe I mixed up stories tho

[Daniel E](#)

Can someone please direct me to the chapter where Nauk earns his title?

C_B

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2016/03/23/chapter-17-aplomb/>

[Daniel E](#)

Much obliged. I love stuff like that, the 'what if Evil was non-crazy and practical' scenes.

Steve

Wow... so... I have to ask...

... how do you pronounce Praes anyway?

I'm writing a truly awful tavern style song and I need to know what to rhyme it with.

[Daniel E](#)

I've been saying it with a hard 'a' (la, ta) and a long 's' (ss).

Andrew Mitchell

Me too.

Adurna

Oh good question. I have been thinking "praise" the whole time but there are definitely other options.

[Miles](#)

Pr-ay- sc

Sort of like prays but less emphasis on the y

[Liliet](#)

I'm mostly pronouncing it like 'press' only with a longer 'eh'.
Mess, bless, sass, dumbass, etc.

RanVor

Same. Must be something with slavic languages.

[Liliet](#)

Slavic languages? Why? /suddenly curious

RanVor

I mean, we both speak slavic languages (Polish and Ukrainian) and we both pronounce Praes the same...
Coincidence? Probably, but whatever.

[Liliet](#)

Nice.

I wouldn't say two datapoints form a line here necessarily, considering my first instinct is PrUH-ess (Праєс), and I correct it to press as a matter of my Formal Knowledge Of English Spelling ;u;

but it Might Be A Thing :3

RanVor

Guess what, it's the same for me. 😊

[Liliet](#)

lmao

so the connection is in the school program XD

Miles

The drow are going to rebell over all this burned wood aren't they?

Sanctus Obscurum

On goblin-built rise stood she,
Black Queen from whose shoulders hang
Her fallen foes colours,
As she gazed over the Third
The living and the dead,
Those upon their pyre
And they who mourned
With torches in hand.
There she stood
And named them Dauntless,
For undaunted by foreign foe
On foreign land fought they.
And undaunted they remained
After loss of their fellows,
Loss of their general,
Loss of their mobility.
Undaunted before Helikean horse
And Levantine Lantern Light,
They stood their ground.

aran

Damn it, stop making Abigail this adorable...

aran

I like how it only took a minute to loosen up from a blanching
"Your Majesty" to "Beg your pardon ma'am". She'll go places. 😊

green

oh wow, this... I am seriously choked up. so, so good.

Letouriste

Beautiful speech, you really thought it threw. Nauk being the first general of such a list would definitely please him a lot. It also fit well abigail given the rumors around her

Chapter 16: Adverse

"Let neither queen nor prince rule over our dominion: for while crowns may devour honour, one's blood is not so easily gainsaid."

-Farah Isbili of the Pilgrim's Blood, second Holy Seljun of Levant

Midnight Bell came and went.

Part of me itched to leave this place, to watch Sarcella disappear in the distance and let Nauk sleep in his tomb of ash. The rest knew that it would be absurd to ask that my beleaguered Third Army begin a night march after a hard day's fighting. Even if I'd been willing to push them that far, logistics would have forbidden it. We had wounded still hovering between life and death, equipment to mend or replace. At least another dozen crucial preparations that must be undertaken before we left, if the advance was to be organized in the slightest instead of a rout in a vaguely appropriate direction. Truth be told I should be sleeping myself, but with the night a second wind had come to me that made it unlikely I'd be able to slumber even if I tried. The drow were the same, nocturnal in a way they would never have truly understood in that sunless ruined empire of theirs. It wasn't anymore, of course. Theirs. My bargain with the Herald of the Deeps had seen to that and more. The lowering of the Gloom and a fallen realm, in exchange for the chance at a fresh one. In practice, supplies for the massive exodus marching on the Dead King's northern borders along with departure unmolested from the old Empire Ever Dark. Unmolested if on reasonable schedule, anyway. The dwarves had made it clear that *lingering* would be taken as a breach of the terms.

There was slightly more to it, another bargain made with a dying foe to strike together against one at the peak of its unlife, but that would have to wait. The Kingdom Under would not lift a finger until the rest of us had died in drove for its advantage, and not send a single soldier past the line of its interests. It didn't matter, though. If well-timed, our last arrangement could be made into a very effective blow. And be used as highly useful; diplomatic leverage with the First Prince, I admitted to myself. This couldn't be won by slapping everyone in the face until they agreed to my terms, that'd make the Liesse Accords barely worth the parchment they were written on. I had to make it in everyone's interests to sign. There would be nations that'd never even consider it – the Dread Empire, the Kingdom of the Dead – but the one I worried most about was the Dominion of Levant. I was beginning to understand, slowly, exactly how much Names meant to their people. How essential they'd been made to the fabric of their ruling class because of the way they lent legitimacy. I didn't and wouldn't have the kind of clout or justification to uproot that entirely, which would force me to rely on someone I *really* rather wouldn't: the Grey Pilgrim. Not only could I not

kill the old hero, as the consequence of that would be a nearly Callowan degree of spite, I had to get him to back the Accords.

It wasn't impossible. But in all likelihood it was going to come at an unpleasant price.

My legionaries were long gone by now, save for a handful of weary sappers keeping an eye on the pyres to make sure nothing got out of hand. It was no longer mortal flame burning the wood and bodies, which at least allowed them to see something interesting for their trouble. A funeral pyre, after all, wasn't just about burning wood and flesh: it had to see to the bones as well. Save for some specific kinds of sorcerous flame and the much riskier goblinfire, there wasn't much that could do that for human and greenskin ossature. Legion custom was to grind the bones after the rest was ash and spread them on the battlefield, should time allow. It was one of those grim duties that soldiers didn't like to talk about, and usually ended up passed on to sappers or whatever company had last irked the commanding officer. There wouldn't be any need for that tonight, though. From the beginning it'd been clear that we might not even have enough wood to burn all the flesh, not without hacking apart another section of the city entirely, but mundane flame was not my full arsenal. I'd put my restless Mighty to work. Flames icy-blue and pitch-black had lit up the night, spreading through the pyres, and behind those I'd ordered something more discreet. Uses of Night, acidic and corrosive, that would see to it no bones were left come dawn. It would have been horrifying for soldiers, I knew, to wake in daylight and see the gnarled and darkened bones of those they'd fought to the side of strewn across the remains of the pyres. So instead the dead burned black and blue, and a little else too.

It was still watching that eerie spectacle that General Rumena found me. Not that the old drow would have encountered great difficulty in that: I was surrounded by an honour guard of Firstborn that might have been good as invisible to humans but was a glaring sign for those of their kind. Resting on a half-broken bench of stone, back against a soot-slashed oaken door delivered there by my drow, I kept my gaze on the flames even as it came to stand by my side. The ancient creature tread light as a feather, and I could feel a flicker of Night under its skin that would make it nothing but a shadow among shadows to the naked eye.

"They did not attack," General Rumena said.

On my lap a sword of obsidian sat sheathed, and my hand had been tight around it— filling the artefact, slowly, with the purposeful Night I would unleash when the time came — but at that obvious announcement my fingers began drumming against the sheath. It did not reply, tacitly inviting it to elaborate.

"The Dominion leader called for assembly of its captains when those captured were returned," the old drow continued. "They have been at this ever since. Debate is loud and bitter. Blades were drawn at least once, and not sheathed before reddened."

I knew better than to ask how it knew that. After nightfall, with the Sisters flying somewhere above? I was almost surprised I wasn't getting a full transcript of the conversations.

"Not unexpected," I said.

The general said nothing, though I felt its presence pulse in the Night. Surprise, maybe? Hard to tell, drow felt emotions so differently than humans and this strange... sense of mine was highly imprecise anyway. I could measure impact but not grasp its nature, and guessing at the thoughts of the Firstborn was always chancy business.

"You've never been shy before, Tomb-Maker," I said. "Out with it."

"It was my understanding that you meant for the Dominion cattle to try the city," Rumena replied. "So as to slaughter them with pretence of mercy. Is this not a disappointment?"

I leaned against the door that had been made into the back of this makeshift throne of mine, cloak held tight against my frame to ward off the creeping cold. The blue and black flames still danced in the distance, the silhouettes of the few goblins out there lending the sight the appearance of some strange tribal ritual.

"I have a friend who's no stranger to thievery," I said. "She did a lot of learning with unsavoury crowds, in all manners of theft. One of them is called confidence tricks."

"Humans have exceedingly little to be confident about," the Tomb-Maker noted. "What manner of trickery is it?"

"Usually, it's a lie that preys on the greed or credulity of someone to get coin from them," I said. "But Vivienne, she once told me that in her home those tricks were split in two kinds: dapple and pearl. After horse coats, she said."

Rumena's silver-blue stare stayed on me, and it did not speak.

"A dappled horse," I said, "is one that's flecked pale and grey. Those are the tricks that prey on the naïve, Rumena, and her guild frowned if those were used on anyone save nobles and foreigners."

Neither of which, I thought, most Callowans had been inclined to weep over during the decades of Praesi rule.

"The other kind, though, the pearls?" I said. "It's a kind of horse that's pale all over. Those tricks prey on greed, and they were fair game on anyone. The unspoken part of that, Rumena, is that if someone acts wickedly there's no shame in doing them the same turn. A pearl trick doesn't work at all, if the mark acts decent."

"A pearl trick," the old drow repeated. "As you played on the Dominion cattle."

I nodded slowly.

"They gave oaths," I said. "If they keep them, no one bleeds. And they've proved they can learn, that they can be trusted in the war up north. But if they break their oaths..."

"There is no shame," Rumena thoughtfully said, "in doing them a wicked turn."

A strange notion to it, no doubt. The drow did not think it shameful in the slightest to turn on each other over without a reason – or, rather, being stronger than the other was enough of a reason in and of itself. But it wasn't the way things worked, up here, and if they were going to stay among us they needed to learn. It mattered, how you went about things. I'd learned that much too late in my rise, believing what counted was that you got there at all. And the moment I'd begun extending a hand outside the borders of Callow I'd run into one closed door after another. Best they learn from my mistakes, as the Sisters meant them to.

"You are pleased, then," the general said. "That they are holding to their oaths."

Silence stretched. I looked at the flames, and thought of the orc burning among them who I had called my friend.

"Am I?" I murmured, wondering. "Ask me again come morning, Tomb-Maker."

I tightened the Mantle of Woe around me once more, and was still looking at the fire when Rumena left.

—

I slept fitfully, never leaving my seat, and it could not have been more than an hour or two when someone's approach had me immediately awake. A drow – it'd been the ripple in the Night that warned me – though not one of the sigil-holders. By the looks of the paint on its face it was of the Svatuk Sigil, higher than dzulu but low in the pecking order of the Mighty. A messenger, then. The thickly-muscled drow bowed, silver tresses sweeping down as it did, and only straightened when I flicked my

wrist in permission. Exhaustion was lingering in my bones, but my mind was mostly awake and that was what mattered.

"Losara Queen," the drow said. "I bring word from the General Rumena."

"Then speak," I said.

"Our reinforcements have arrived, under the command of Lord Ivah," the Firstborn said. "Twelve thousand, now in sight of this cattle-city. A warband came ahead, led by the Mighty Archer."

Indrani had caught up as soon as she could, looked like. Must have tired herself out hurrying regardless of my request that she not – though I supposed my taking the drow vanguard ahead without a word had invalidated that in her eyes. My grip closed around the ebony staff propped up at my side and I dragged myself up, catching the sheathed sword on my lap before it could fall and fastening it on my belt with fingers made clumsy by the cold.

"Is that the whole of the words you carry?" I asked.

"The Tomb-Maker says that the pot of the Dominion no longer seems in risk of tipping," the drow said. "Both pillars still live."

The strife in the camp had come at an end, then. Hard to know whether the blades coming out earlier had been over Razin Tanja's ill-fated offensive and the ensuing losses, or an attempt at oath-breaking that was ended steel in hand. Both he and Captain Elvera were apparently still alive, regardless, so whatever the truth they'd come to a truce. I suspected that the moment the sharper would blow was when the rest of the forty-thousand strong army arrived, including Tanja's lordly father and the lady Captain Elvera answered to. Didn't intend to stick around to watch that from up close, though: I'd already sown the seeds of discord with the oaths, I'd let them either grow into something thornier or die out on their own. Having two of the four most powerful nobles in the Dominion at each other's throats instead of pursuing my armies would be damned useful, but pushing too hard risked them banding against me instead. We'd see if Akua's suspicions about the fragility of the Levantine command structure bore out.

"Good," I said. "Tell it to keep watching until the Third Army is rested enough to relieve the sigils."

"By your will, First Under the Night," the drow replied, bowing again.

I considered sending it after Archer to tell her to meet me, but ultimately discarded the notion and left it slink back to its duties. If Indrani was in Sarcella there was no need to look for her: she'd be finding me soon enough. I should probably be

looking for somewhere comfortable to talk instead, since it had occurred to me we had a conversation long overdue. Two, I then thought, considering what Robber had told me about Masego. Claiming the mansion that'd been turned into the Third Army's headquarters for a chat with Indrani struck me as something of an abuse of my authority, when so much of this city was already empty, so instead I hobbled my way towards Beaumontant quarter. Much of the district had seen heavy fighting, but it was only around the edges that it'd gotten brutal enough houses and shops were brought down. Deeper in there was only mud and blood marring the snow, and the fresher tracks of legionaries on sentry duty. There wasn't a soul to be seen in here, not a Proceran one anyway. There were a few drow out there on the rooftops, and my own honour guard of Firstborn was dogging my shadow, but aside from that the streets were eerily empty.

The fighting had long driven out anyone who lived here, which considering the empty plains out there and the roving armies in Iserre likely meant hunger or cold would kill most of the civilians who'd fled and not made it to a city to take refuge in. I forcefully set the thought aside, as there was nothing I could do for them. Even if Black hadn't put the principality's granaries to the torch on his way south, the war would have made it a lean year – after he had, the death warrant of thousands had effectively been signed months before the first snow fell. Twice over, with their ruler being a prisoner in Callow. Winter and starvation would strike much harsher a blow to the heartlands than Legion blades could have, dealing out death in that atrociously efficient way my father had always preferred. I could almost imagine the cogs turning behind his eyes as he measured how best to cripple the Principate with the limited amount of resources at his disposal. The thought was not fond. There were some things that could not be admired, even if skillfully done.

I found a halfway decent tavern and decided to settle myself in there for Indrani to find me. I didn't bother glancing at the sign hung outside before touching the locked door and pressing Night into the lock. It clicked open, and a gesture had my guards staying outside as I entered the cold common room. Closing the door behind me, I set myself to making it somewhat inhabitable. A flicker of power had dark flames roaring in the fireplace, without lumber to feed them, though after digging around for some time I found a bundle of charcoal to toss in there and the flames turned mundane in nature. The place had been mostly stripped clean by the owners when they left, but from the back I rustled up a jug of wine bad enough it'd been used to prop up a shelf and a pair of torches already partially burnt. Those went up on the walls, and the room had warmed enough for me to take off my cloak and try my luck with the wine – no cups left, so straight from the jug – when Indrani arrived. Pulling down her hood and lowering her scarf, she hastily slammed the door shut and turned to me with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, this is oddly domestic," Archer mused.

"I even made your favourite," I drily replied, holding up the jug. "Wine."

"Ah, just like my mother used to make," she breathily said.

It didn't stop her from tossing her cloak at my head before worming into a seat, but by now that was only to be expected. I slapped it aside, then ducked under the gloves that followed with practiced ease. They fell close to me, so in theory I could have picked them up, but she was never going to learn to stop throwing things at me if I did that every time. She wasn't going to learn anyway, I grimly admitted to myself, but that wasn't any more of a reason to do it.

"So," Archer said, deftly stealing the jug from my hand. "I see part of this place burned down."

"It was already on fire when I arrived," I replied, a tad defensively.

She grinned over a mouthful of wine, then passed it back after swallowing.

"It figures that after holding it in so well at Rochelant you'd have to cut loose," she sagely said.

"It was Levantine priests that started it," I insisted.

"Priests that, in your heretical wickedness, you ensorcelled to start the fire on your behalf," Indrani said. "That's twice as bad, Catherine. Heresy *and* arson. Maybe even heretical arson, we'd have to ask someone about the theology of that."

"No one's going to buy that," I said, sounding a lot more confident than I felt.

"You're right," she conceded. "You'll just get blamed without any of the frills added on."

I drank from the jug and sighed. She might be yanking my chain, but that didn't necessarily mean she was wrong. Best to change the subject before I lost any more feathers.

"Ivah came with you?" I asked.

She smugly smiled at my pivot, the wretch.

"It's about an hour behind," Indrani said. "Sent a few Mighty with me to speak with either you or Rumena about where the sigils can set up to sleep."

Rumena could see to that, I thought. Later I'd need to speak with it and Abigail about lodgings and supplies but it could wait for a few hours still. Odds were the reinforcements would be put up in the northern quarters with the rest of my drow: it wasn't like we'd be running out of room anytime soon.

"Good," I said, handing back the wine.

No two ways about this, so I just went in sword bared.

"There's news about Masego," I said.

The jug stopped halfway to her lips. Something like fear passed through her hazelnut eyes, though it was mastered swiftly.

"You wouldn't be so calm if he was dead," Archer decided.

"Missing or hurt?"

Her voice was even, but the kind of even you could see the strain of maintaining.

"Missing," I said. "Maybe hurt as well. The battle at Thalassina went south, 'Drani. His father blew up most of the city and the aftermath was bad enough even those who fled died from the sorcery he called down. We know Masego survived and left, but not much more than that."

Her face tightened.

"The Empress is after him?" she asked.

"Was," I said. "He made it out of the Wasteland heading west. No one's been able to track him since. Nauk might have known more, apparently the army's high command had a closed council before leaving Callow, but he was dead when I arrived."

This time it was me who kept my voice steady. It came easier now that we'd had the Legion burial. The worst and rawest of the grief I had already voiced, and pangs that'd follow were not so consuming.

"Shit," Indrani softly said. "I hadn't heard, Cat. I'm sorry."

"It's done," I said. "Picking at his grave serves no purpose."

"Don't do that," she said, shaking her head. "I know you hoped that with the Night-"

My fingers clenched.

"It's *done*," I repeated, harshly.

She met my gaze, not cowed in the slightest.

"You can't lock grief in a trunk and open it back up when you've got the time, Catherine," she said. "That's not how people work."

It's how Black works, I thought. But then so was the way thousands would die starving across Iserre before winter ended, wasn't it? So I bit my tongue, and let a moment pass before replying.

"I just put his body to the flame, Indrani," I finally said, sounding as tired as I felt. "I don't want to talk about it."

To that she nodded, and did not pursue. I passed a hand through my hair watching her drink from the jug belatedly. At this rate we'd run out of wine before we ran out of words.

"There's another army under Hakram that shouldn't be too far," I said, returning to the thrust of the conversation. "Adjutant will know more."

"So we find Hakram first, then make our plans," Archer mused. "It's a start."

I inclined my head in agreement, taking back the jug when offered. She rose to her feet a heartbeat later and stretched out with a groan. Named or not, she'd been on the move for long enough it'd take a toll.

"Well, night's still young," she said. "I hear Robber's in town, and I'd say it's been too long since someone woke him up by throwing him off a roof. Let's see what can be done about that."

I set the jug on the table softly enough it barely made a sound.

"Indrani, sit down," I said.

She eyed me up, then cocked an eyebrow salaciously.

"I guess we've got time to visit one of the rooms first," she said. "There even any sheets left in there? Wait, don't say anything. It'll be a surprise."

"Indrani," I repeated quietly, "*sit down*."

The amusement slid off her face, just like that. It'd been forced then. She was skilled enough at the pretence I honestly hadn't been certain.

"A friend is dead," she said calmly. "So I was going to hold my tongue. But are you sure you want to do this, Catherine, after you just dropped me and Sahelian to charge into *yet another danger*?"

"Let's," I said.

Before I was even finished speaking, she punched me in the face.

[DroughtBringer](#)

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Wolfkit

Show of hands, everyone who was surprised by Indrani's response. Hmm? Nobody raised their hand? Good, good.

Compy

I guess I havent been paying attention, why is she pissed again?

Byzantine

Cat keeps taking ridiculous risks, and it... upsets her.

luminiousblu

Archer isn't exactly big on Catherine's whole "for the greater good" mentality, nor is she big on Catherine's Leeroy Jenkins mentality.

caoimhinh

After Indrani almost died due to Winter rampaging, she has been having more issues with taking risks, since she has realized her mortality (and her friends'). So she is more reticent about getting into dangerous situations, which Cat has done twice in a row since they entered Iserre..

The first was when Cat met Hierarch, since Anaxares' Aspect even scared Sve Noc yet she still went alone to speak with him, taking enormous risks.

The second was just now, leaving most of the Drow behind, taking only a few thousand as vanguard with her, and most importantly leaving both Akua and Indrani behind.

It's understandable that Indrani is angry at her for taking such risks, although they were necessary. Catherine will now use this opportunity to address Indrani's recently acquired fear, since Archer can't be having such an attitude in future battles.

luminiousblu

Arguable. While not particularly popular in Western culture, many other cultures understand fear as a virtue, and also understand the rush that Catherine has as a weakness. The concept of defining everything you want as "necessary" is pretty dangerous.

Dainpdf

Fear is only a virtue so far as it counters temerity. Once it starts countering decisiveness, it's a problem.

[Liliet](#)

Indrani needs to figure out how to deal with this. That doesn't mean discarding the insight.

KageLupus

My read on the situation is actually that Archer has been struggling with risk aversion and fear of death, since she was brought up to consider both of those things as weak and undesirable. Cat is being a good friend and cares about how she is feeling, but Indrani sees it as coddling.

In that sense it isn't much different from the talk about Nauk that they just had. Those feelings are raw and painful and it is easier to not deal with them or force the subject. The difference is that Indrani has been feeling this stuff since things went pear shaped in the Everdark and has just been letting it fester. Cat needs to have the hard talk with her because time is up and things are going to start getting dangerous again.

Skaddiix

I mean the difference is Cat lacks any self preservation at all. Probably the impact of their mentors to some degree. Ranger is not one to die for some grand goal. Black on the other hand planned to die to get his plan to work. Cat is much the same she is fine with dying for Liesse Accords or at the very least to abdicate power. Indrani though isn't really down for that.

Cat does take crazy risks a lot and sure she has lucked out so far but Sve Noc could have killed her and that gamble

only works really cause the Dwarves were strong enough to kill all the Drow and were invading at the right time. Cat has been overreliant on suicidal chaos strategy for awhile. Yeah the Tyrant does the same but he seems to have way more planning on what he does. Whereas Cat seems to mostly hope for the best and being able to talk people over to her side. Which sure has worked in putting together the Woe and Academy Recruitment and Sve Noc but they can read minds. I am not sure it works as great with other major players.

[Liliet](#)

And Indrani is finally catching up to the idea that *this might actually go badly*

[Liliet](#)

Fear => anger

RanVor

Anger => suffering

[Liliet](#)

I think it's a bit too late to worry about the Dark Side at this point in the story, isn't it? Kind of started out there XD

Aeon

I feel like a major part of it is for Cat taking risks and putting herself in danger, but after re-reading the chapter I noticed something that I sort of glazed over the first time around.

"Must have tired herself out hurrying regardless of my request that she not – though I supposed my taking the drow vanguard ahead without a word had invalidated that in her eyes"

I remembered that Cat told Archer not to rush to catch up to her but I forgot that Cat essentially went ahead to deal with a smaller issue, found Robber, learned about Nauk's situation and set out without telling Archer. Which puts the anger that Archer was holding back in new light for me.

[Liliet](#)

Yeeeeeep.

Indrani is being adorably overprotective & I love her.

stevenneiman

Basically, Indrani cares more about Cat than any of the causes Cat believes in, and she doesn't like Cat putting herself in danger. Especially since they both almost died facing off against Sve Noc and she felt unable to do anything about it.

Andrew Mitchell

I'm not too proud to admit it. I was surprised.

stevenneiman

Same. It was the sort of surprise where I take a moment to process and then realize that it was in-character, but I definitely was surprised.

[Liliet](#)

It was the sort of surprised where you're immediately like "the part I'm surprised by is that I did not see this coming".

But I did not see this coming.

[Javvies](#)

Heh. Indrani, Robber and his goblins, and the drow in one place? It's a good thing they're planning on leaving soon. It might be safer and faster to just (finish) torching the place and rebuilding from the ashes than to clear it of the untripped traps and practical jokes.

Ah, the classic "we need to talk, and then get punched in the face" conversation starter. They need the rest of the Woe around.

Skaddix

Ah well this has been building up. Indrani and Cat are going to having a falling out. Seems Cat should have waited until getting the information about Masego from Hakram before this.

Also don't see how Cat killing Saint is going to help make a deal with the Pilgrim. She be better off hoping the Dead King offs Saint.

ALazyMonster

The plan for killing Saint is because she is arguably the strongest fighter they have so if she is killed they would not have the resources to fight both Cat and the dead king. Especially since Cat can be reasoned with. It's really just a way to strong arm the alliance into an agreement.

konstantinvoncarstein

The other problem with Saint is that she cannot be reasoned with. She absolutely want to kill Catherine.

caoimhinh

I highly doubt they are having a falling out. Indrani is angry that Cat left her behind to take a huge risk, she is not gonna leave Cat behind now. Catherine will in turn use this opportunity to talk to Archer about her new fear of dying, since they can't have one of their strongest fighters hesitating in face of danger in the future battles.

As for killing the Saint of Swords, it's because she can't be reasoned with and Cat knows that. The Pilgrim can be talked into doing things because he can see her intentions, but the Saint is out for blood, so Cat will need to get her out of the way before making the Crusaders ally with her.

medailyfun

I think Pilgrim can rein-in SoS, as he had done when she wanted just to kill Black

[Liliet](#)

Still unclear why tf he did that btw. Amadeus has a big fat point there, their plan makes no sense with how much risk of escape there is 0.0

Isopor

Keep in mind the Pilgrim has a head for stories. He could be trying to make a play in that direction.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, I'm keeping that in mind 0.0

[Liliet](#)

I don't think this is a falling out. This is a conversation, Indrani-style. She cares, therefore she's mad.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Yup. It's definitely in the same bracket as a worried mother going off ballistically upon finding her kid safe, but unrepentant, in the clothes section, when tracks were lost in the fruit and veg.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

Dainpdf

I see this as less of a falling out and more an opening of the wound to clean it. No sense in letting it fester.

Novice

Welp, this is, in my opinion, one of the worst cliffhangers in this series. I desperately wanted to read about their heart-to-heart (or in this case fist-to-face) conversation ever since Cat dropped it way back when.

And Zeze still worries me.

caoimhinh

It reminds me of a scene in The Originals, when at the end of chapter 5 of season 3, two of the vampire protagonists (Klaus and Elijah) are angry at each other (due to some actions of Elijah that he did centuries ago in order to protect his family, but endangered Klaus' lover of the time, so Klaus sees it as a betrayal, while Elijah is frustrated and tired of having to cover and take care of his brother for so long) so they start fighting against each other. After showing them start the fight while crashing their house and seemingly deciding to have a definite fall out, the chapter ends right after they decide to fight seriously (and apparently to the death).

Next chapter starts with their sister arriving to the house and noticing the wreckage, and walks deeper into the house to look for them; Klaus and Elijah are then shown sitting together in the middle of the wrecked room while drinking whiskey, with their clothes ripped apart and still showing the wounds over their bodies slowly healing and they just say "we reached an agreement after having a little chat about the past".

Hopefully that won't happen here.

caoimhinh

Just in case you are curious, this is the scene I referred:

The fight starts here (and chapter ends): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CuPzvY69azw>

Next chapter starts and their sister arrives here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aI8Ti-_A-6c

I remember being like "come on, you could have shown more fight at least, or taken this more seriously after that cliffhanger!"

[daegone823](#)

Been enough abusive relationships to know that this is just foreplay..,maybe?

caoimhinh

Yep, there comes a scene of friends fighting over the need of taking huge risks, then lovers making out after displaying the worries they have for each other. It wouldn't even be the first time members of the Woe come to blows with each other (although usually it's for petty things).

This will help them vent out and then talk things out after they had traded a few blows. Since Indrani is angry at Cat for taking big risks (and leaving her behind to do that) while Cat wants Indrani to stop hesitating and overcome the fear she has been carrying with her since Winter went crazy in the Ever Dark.

Author Unknown

At least no one has cut off their go'am hand. It occurs to me that the Woe really need a better way of dealing with interpersonal relationships.

caoimhinh

That bunch needs therapy. Too bad they might throw the therapist out of the window in the middle of the session XD

[Mental Mouse](#)

Now I'm thinking about a possible Named therapist...

[Euodiachloris](#)

Barkeep.

konstantinvoncarstein

...if he is lucky

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, this isn't really an abusive relationship – it's just a crowd where physical violence is part of negotiations. Hopefully Archer remembered that Cat is more fragile than she used to be...

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, this... is also a thought I had.

Indrani, please, please don't accidentally mash Cat's nose into her brain 0.0

Skaddix

I would think this Cat and Indrani falling out paves the way for Indrani to leave chasing off after Masego.

IDKWhoitis

I doubt she leaves before seeing Hakram. After that, all bets are off.

Skaddix

I agree after Hakram she is off.

[Liliet](#)

They're not falling out, and I don't think it's going to impact the likelihood of Indrani chasing after Masego.

IDKWhoitis

I still believe that on the last day, Boy Wonder will go back on his word, in an effort to slow down the Callowans.

Andrew Mitchell

I don't think so. Not with the drowning reinforcements having arrived. And Cat's army will be leaving tomorrow, which still leaves one or two days of oaths, I think.

Insanenoodlyguy

As far as everybody knew, that night with the funeral was the best time to attack. He's not going to attack later when it's less advantageous and still risk his own honor. Maybe he was never intending to, we don't know how the conversation at that camp went other than he and the Captain are still alive and somebody else isn't. If he's going to do it, he'd do it after 3 days now. but with the reinforcements coming, that seems less likely.

IDKWhoitis

That assumes Levs knew about the funeral, which they have no reasonable way of knowing about. Also, Cat pulled away troops from defensive positions to make it a ceremony, which is atypical.

From the Levs position, if they wait until the 3rd, last day, then they can hold the Callowans while their reinforcements arrive. They don't need to win, just delay the retreat.

JJR

"Beware the Black Queen, her treachery knows no bounds. Behold her latest crime, she set a city on fire so that she could surprise her enemies by forcing her own army to attack through the hottest part of the flames."

Because, stories just do this sometimes.

Raved Thrad

There's something deeply satisfying, in these private moments, at seeing the caring, human side to Archer. Somehow it makes her even more of a badass, knowing that she can shed the fearsome, awe-inspiring part of her that is Named, and just be Indrani.

As to that punch in the end, though, I can't help but wonder: is that therapy or foreplay?

[Sugar Roll](#)

It's therapeutic foreplay. Case closed.

Raved Thrad

Like as not the next scene will open with them in bed, engaged in pillow talk. 😊

[taliesinskye](#)

Funnily enough, I think the punch is an act of love. She loves Catherine, even if she can't voice it, and that's why she can't deal with Catherine risking herself without Indrani there to protect her.

caoimhinh

It's exactly what it is.

Also a show of her indignation at Cat for leaving her behind to take a big risk twice in a row.

[Liliet](#)

At least it's not stabbing this time!

Cat's not quite *that* far gone...

Raved Thrad

In a very real sense, Archer never really grew up. She's been the biggest bully in the yard for so long that she's forgotten what it's like (or, more likely, blots out the memory with enough drink to kill an army) to be the little frightened kid in awe of everyone else. She herself doesn't believe in Catherine's greater good. But she does believe in,

and value, the welfare of her friends, even if she won't or can't say it out loud.

So, suddenly, she's having to do a lot of growing up. She's finding out that she can't control how people react to things, unlike how she can predictably get a rise out of them with her good-natured, if sometimes brutal, teasing. She's well due (if not overdue) for a crisis of sorts. On the plus side, however, she's much better off having an emotional crisis with Catherine and the Woe taking care of her, as opposed to, say, the Lady of the Lake, who would most likely recommend mass quantities of alcohol coupled with mass murder.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

Hye is the *worst* mom.

RanVor

Second worse. Tasia Sahelian exists.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Existed. Missed only so far as I suspect Akua might want to rez her just to tell her she was a terrible mother, and then kill her again herself for the safety of children everywhere.

RanVor

Or maybe skip the telling part and go straight to killing.

[Liliet](#)

Oh.

Right.

...I'm formally excluding her from the distinction period

--

HardcoreHeathen

That's another instance where Cat has referred to Black as her father. And this time it wasn't in a moment of distraction or heightened emotion. It makes me suspicious.

I'm beginning to think that she's crafting a narrative, inside her own head. The orphan, storming the enemy stronghold to rescue their kidnapped parent. Usually that story ends with the orphan finding out that their parent is working with, or is, the bad

guy... but the “bad guys” of this narrative are the heroes that Cat wants to work with anyway.

Liliet

She’s just training herself out of denial.

It’s funny that this time she thinks it in context of “well this I’m upset about”. She’s learning to balance these things, isn’t she? “I love him” and “he’s awful” are no longer contradictory in her head.

Raved Thrad

It’s probably closer to “he’s awful, but I love him, and he’s my father.” From there it’s a short step to “...and I will burn this entire continent to the ground as a funeral pyre to him if he comes to any harm.”

Liliet

I don’t think Cat’d make that step, considering she still considers it a potential reality that she might have to kill him herself on the way to her goal.

She cares a lot, but prioritization is a real thing.

Raved Thrad

Catherine’s ability to act rationally is a great sign of her maturity and the power of her will, but she is also a very deeply emotional person, and what she cares about, she cares very strongly about. It’s why the Woe, and her soldiers, love her so. *Because she loves them right back.* If she didn’t need the Levantines on the other side to help her fight the Dead King, she’d have slaughtered them and mounted whatsisface’s head on a pike, in tribute to her dead friend.

Liliet

There’s a step between feeling emotions and killing people about it.

Catherine is extremely upset, yes. But she’s responsible with the power she wields, and she would not use it for a temper tantrum, regardless of alliance prospects.

She’s not *happy*. That’s not a euphemism for anything else. She can’t bring herself to feel positive emotions at this development. That’s not the same as not caring about the Levantine soldiers’ lives, too.

Agent J

That just serves to make his point about prioritization. She would do that. She very likely wants to do that. But blindly avenging Nauk would run contrary to her goals. Likewise, the notion of burning Calernia to ash to avenge Black would also be rejected as contrary to her goals.

WuseMajor

I honestly think Cat is deluded when she thinks she can get the Pilgrim to ratify the Accords. Well, ok, not "deluded" so much as "fooled." The Pilgrim is a servant of Heaven and right now, it looks like Heaven wants burn the game board down and start over and, while the Pilgrim makes a show of being a kind of uncle, he's not about to stand up to Heaven and he's as sneaky as they come.

Black and Hasenbach should be able to help Cat wise up a bit here.

[Javvies](#)

Pilgrim won't oppose the stated Will of Above ... but Above hasn't stated a position on the Accords yet. As far as we know, anyways.

In the meantime, Pilgrim is not so far gone as to want to let the Dead King win, and can be bargained with towards prioritizing the fight of the Living vs. The Dead, where Cat and Callow and Black and the Legions are counted as allies among the Living.

Pilgrim did, after all, try to set Cat up for redemption play before Saint and Bard blew it up by getting Cat declared Arch-heretic of the East. Fighting against the Dead could be a way to return her to that path.

[Liliet](#)

>but Above hasn't stated a position on the Accords yet. As far as we know, anyways.

Seriously.

The House Insurgent is still getting miracles.

Crusade != Above, it's explicitly a bunch of rulers + a bunch of heroes trying to cooperate on achieving entirely different goals.

RanVor

Unless miracles don't work the way we think they do...

[Liliet](#)

What's a smaller / simpler / Occam-favored conspiracy theory: that Above gives miracles to everyone who asks because they are not invested in the particulars of this conflict / have deliberately removed themselves from influencing it / have deliberately removed themselves from influencing the game board period*, or that they are invested in the particulars of this conflict and communicated their intent to Saint but cannot regulate who gets miracles?

Particularly given that we're literally seeing how miracles work for Sve Noc, in detail, from the inside. You'd think that denying a miracle to someone who asks is literally the *simplest* way for a deity to express their opinion on events.

*Yes, yes, I know, Bard. Who is suspected to have been talking to Saint. The famously reliable source and staunch supporter of heroic endeavours, eh?

Someguy

Only way I see Levant signing on is if the forces of the Dead King kills Grey Pilgrim & Levant will need to put their patriotism where their mouth is and throw themselves into the meatgrinder.

Percula1869

We can only hope.

[Liliet](#)

Saint != Heaven, and House Insurgent is still getting miracles.

And let's not forget this conversation during the Northern Crusade:

"It doesn't need to be like this," I said. "We're the dogs in the pit, but what does that ever really accomplish? One bleeds, another dies, and then they release another hound. The pit's still there even if one side gets a winning streak."

"Some of those hounds have gone rabid," the Pilgrim said. "I grieve their deaths, but I will not allow them to bite children."

"And those should be put down," I agreed flatly. "But we don't need wars for that. We just need rules that both sides are willing to enforce."

"An agreement," he slowly said. "Such a thing would be without precedent. And there are many who would balk."

"Every single Named is a highly dangerous weapon, in their own way," I said. "Any unwilling to accept constraints placed on their actions have no business wielding that kind of power in the first place. And before you ask, I do not exclude myself or any ally of mine from that statement."

He studied me silently.

"For such a thing to hold, there would be need for trust where none exists," he said.

"Then we begin with something smaller," I said. "Rules of engagement, for your host and mine. Would you be able to enforce these?"

Chapter 17: Cloaks

"Trust in yourself and no other is violence upon all the world. Trust in others and not yourself is violence upon the soul."
– Eudokia the Oft-Abducted, Basilea of Nicae

It'd been a while since someone had decked me in the face and I'd actually *felt* it. Indrani wasn't an amateur, so instead of landing a glancing blow her knuckles buried themselves into my jaw and I was jarred off my feet. The throb of pain began before I would have hit the ground, if I had – instead my arm snapped out and my staff smacked into my open palm. Years of training in the yard made that enough I was able to turn the tumble into a step back. An agonizing one, as my bad leg was less than pleased by the sudden movement and I'd not numbed it with Night before moving. Straightening my back, I turned back to my friend and casually raised an eyebrow.

"That stung a bit," I admitted. "Are we actually going to talk now, or do I need to tie you up first?"

Indrani's eyes hardened. Not at the threat, though – we used those on each other at least once a day with utter nonchalance. Something about my tone had raised her hackles even further up. Silvery mail glittering in the fire's light, she clenched her fingers into fists before forcing herself to breathe out.

"You don't even realize it, do you?" Archer said. "A year ago, you would have caught that. Snapped my arm twice on the way there if you felt like it."

"We're not a year ago," I said.

I did not bother to inject regret I did not feel into those words. The Night was not panacea to all my ills, but to rid myself of Winter's costs I would have settled for much, much less at my fingertips.

"I know that," Indrani said. "So why the fuck are you acting like you are?"

Fear. Under the anger, the indignation, it was fear lay at the heart of that reaction. I didn't tell her to calm down, I knew better than that. We had too much in common, and nothing had ever excited my anger quite like being told I had no right to it. This was a wound to lance, not hole to patch over. So I'd give her what she needed to get the venom out.

"I took necessary risks," I calmly said. "Not without reason, or out of pride. If I'd waited longer the Third Army might have been lost."

"Then you should have lost it," Archer hissed. "How many of these gambles do you really think you can win, Catherine? Nine out of ten, ninety-nine out of a hundred? At the rate you're taking them we'll find out soon enough."

"I won't leave any of mine to die if I can do something about it," I said. "You've known that since the day we met, 'Drani. Marchford wasn't a battle I was forced to fight. It was one that needed to be fought."

Archer's hand lashed out and the jug of wine flew, shattering against the wall with a wet sound. The last mouthfuls of wine there'd been left spilled down in red rivulets.

"Was walking up to a Named whose aspect scared even Sve Noc *needed* as well?" Indrani harshly asked. "Or putting yourself at the Tyrant's mercy, not even an hour after? You're still going around like if you lose a limb it'll grow back, but it won't. You can't jump down every pit you find and tell yourself you're strong enough to crawl out after, Catherine. *You're not strong enough anymore.*"

We were having, I thought, a very different conversation from the one she thought we were. If Vivienne was a creature of the unspoken, the unsaid, then Indrani was one of shrouding aggression. You could get a much better read on her fears through what she reproached others than what few crumbs she willingly offered up about herself. I no longer had Winter, and so these days I was a great deal more fragile. That was half of the circle, here, and only that. The other half was Indrani's shivering near-death in a mausoleum of ice that she could have done absolutely nothing to get out of, if she hadn't been helped.

Help, that thing her savage beast of a mother had taught her was always weakness. Thread that with the knowledge that there was nothing she could have done to avoid that position except not being there, not fighting, and you got a rope tight enough for Archer to hang herself with. She could rage and accuse all she wanted: all I saw and hear was my friend choking slowly, now that she'd been stripped of the flawed foundations she'd once stood on.

"It was never a game, love," I gently said. "I'm sorry you had to learn it that way."

She laughed, brittle and sharp.

"No, don't you think that'll work," Indrani said, stepping up to the table. "You don't get to play the sage's role when you just marched a pile of wet kindling through a burning district. You don't get to tell me it's not a game when you still act like it is. Who the fuck do you think you *are*, Catherine?"

"Tell me," I said.

There was barely a flicker of her Name's power before she put her bare fist through the table. Wood splintered and flew, the entire thing collapsed under the sheer weight of the blow.

"That's your skull, if you run into the Saint on your next lark," she conversationally said. "So don't pretend this is a favour you're doing me, that you're letting me rage on your shoulder until my blood's cooled. Because this is real, Catherine, so you'll give me a godsdamned answer."

She brushed a few splinters off her hand before pointing an accusing finger down at the wreck. None of the prickly pieces, I idly noticed, had broken her skin.

"Who do you think you are?" Indrani repeated, in that same deceptively calm tone. "Some favoured child of Below, somehow exempted from dying when you get in over your head? Because Triumphant thought she was that, had an actual Name still and terrible armies besides, and she still fucking died."

She shrugged.

"Is it the Black Knight's legacy you think make you invincible?" she asked. "Where is he now, Catherine? And let's not pretend you didn't pick and choose what you learned at his knee. If the authentic article got had, what makes you think the bastard get will make it through unscathed?"

I matched her gaze without flinching as she advanced, carelessly kicking aside the broken table between us.

"Or is it just that you alone of all the world were born under a victorious star," Indrani said, distance closing between us. "Fate's got plans for you, eh? Catherine Foundling can bleed, can scar and lose limbs, but she can never fucking die."

She leaned in, ochre-brown face mere inches from mine. I could almost feel her breath against my lips.

"Where was that victorious star down in the Everdark, then?" she asked. "When Sve Noc had your neck in their grip and a little *twist* was all it would have taken to bring an end to the road? All but for the mercy of goddesses, and you had no right to expect mercy of those two."

Indrani bared her teeth.

"Answer me," she demanded in a snarl.

I caught her wrist when she raised her arm to push me back. The staff I left there, and it stood still as if perfectly balanced.

"I don't have any of those things," I told her quietly. "You know that too. One day I'll be a little too slow, or not clever enough, or it'll just be a... bad day. And I'll die. Just like that. It's always been the end of this story. And there's no guarantee I'll complete my work before that day catches up to me."

Archer ripped her wrist free from my fingers, cradling it with her other hand like my touch had been enough to burn her skin. She took a step back, though I doubted she even realized it.

"You can't expect us to care when you treat your life like Creation's kitchen rag," Indrani said. "I might as well get attached to a mayfly."

"If I was always careful," I said. "If I was all prudence and planning, hiding behind my people and leaving every battle to be fought pass me by – if I did all those things, Indrani, would we even be having this conversation?"

I saw the moment where the part I'd not been cruel enough to speak sunk in. *If I was all that, would you even care about me in the first place?* She flinched, and it brought me no joy, but to bind a wound it must first be cleaned. And this particular one had been left to fester for much too long already. That, more than all the rest, shamed me. Because I'd known it would hurt more for the waiting, and I'd chosen other needs over it anyway. A queen would not have felt guilt, I thought, for choosing queenship's duties over family. But it wasn't the queen that reached out to Indrani just to have the hand batted away.

"That's not fair," Archer said.

"That doesn't make it any less true," I gently said. "You don't get to define the people you care about."

I thought of green eyes, and of the starving realm around me. No, it was never quite so easy as that, was it? That lesson had been long and harsh in the learning, but I had learned it nonetheless. This time when I reached out she allowed me to take her elbow, and it was like that simple touch had cut the strings out of her. Her legs folded and with a grimace of pain I slowed our fall until we were both slouching on the ground, sitting like children surrounded by the remains of their tantrum. And we were, I thought. Children still, in some many ways. We'd been taught at the knee of Calamities, and those teachings had made us sharper than our years should allow – but for all that, no older than our years. Perhaps even younger than those, truth be told, for the stuff of the women we'd become had been thinned in places so it could be used to strengthen others. With my arms wrapped tight around her, I could not shy away from the truth that for all we had done we were still so very small.

"We can't keep doing this, Cat," Indrani tiredly said, resting her chin against my shoulder. "If we're all born with a single yarn of luck to spin, we used up ours too young. On too many stupid fucking fights that we learned too late we shouldn't have fought. We're bare, now. And the worst monsters still lie ahead."

"It's all right to be afraid," I whispered into her ear.

She tried to pull away, but I kept my grip tight and she understood the unspoken – if she used the strength of her Name, I would use that of the Night. Neither of us, I thought, were quite ready to allow those powers foothold in this moment.

"I used to think my first fight with William was when I really got it," I said. "I know better now. I woke up bleeding out, gutted like a fish, but I became the Squire. It was all still in the game, even that. He had his angel's feather, and providence. But I had instincts, and something better than golden luck."

Indrani breathed out shallowly.

"So when was it?" she whispered.

"The day I woke up, Black hung about fifty people," I whispered back. "Made sure I saw. A lot of what happened that afternoon took me years to really deal with. But I still think of them sometimes, even after all the darker days there's been since. Because I looked them in the eyes, and what looked back was the truth that it was *larger* than me. That I was just a small part of it, even with all that was already meant for me."

I smiled bleakly, remembering the utter silence in the Court of Swords and twice the sound of necks snapping. Two rows and two drops, dead briskly to the gallows.

"It was never a game to them," I said. "They just died, because... they were caught, I suppose, because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. But the reasons behind that were years older, and those reasons caused by some even more ancient – links in a chain no one can see more than a few pieces of. So they died not knowing, because of something larger than them."

Indrani chuckled darkly.

"That's your lesson?" she said. "That one day we'll die too, blind and lost and not really understanding why?"

"Everybody else does," I murmured. "Why should we be different? We have powers and clever tricks, but how different does that really make us?"

I let out a breathy laugh.

"That's the thing. The first time a story happens, it's not a story at all. If it comes again we tell ourselves it's become something else, but it hasn't. Not really. People bleed just as red the twelfth time as the first. The tears and the deaths don't become any less *real*, 'Drani. The courage doesn't matter less because some corpse in a grave made the same stand a hundred years before and won."

She leaned back, still in my embrace, and looked at my face questioningly.

"We're Named," Archer said. "That makes it different."

But it doesn't, I thought. We've seen it, you and I. That when all there is holding up the choice is a story and the prediction of victory, the story fails. Because if all you do is pretend, go through the motions, then you've already lost what could have made it a victory in the first place.

"A choice is a choice," I replied, shaking my head. "Black cloak, white cloak – that's the game, thinking the cloak says it all. That the choices are already made for you."

"It's a pretty thought," Indrani said. "But it won't keep any of us alive."

"Nothing will," I smiled. "But that's the point, isn't it? What do we *do* with that?"

I met her eyes, once more.

"Be afraid," I said. "I am, Indrani. All the time. Be afraid, then make your choices."

Her fingers balled up against my side, clutching at the cloth.

"And that's who you are, the choices you make," I murmured. "Not your Name. Not your mother. Not where you were born or what they made you do."

"It might not be enough," she softly said. "Just making the choice."

I nodded, because I wouldn't lie to her.

"It might not be," I agreed, just as softly. "And for all that, there's only one thing that matters."

I threaded my fingers into hers, warmth against warmth. Oh, there were few prices I would not have been willing to pay to get that back – and Winter's fade was not one of them.

"Who do you want to be?" I asked.

She did not answer, for a very long time, and when she unthreaded our fingers it felt like failure. There were some things that couldn't be fixed with words, I thought, no matter how earnest. But then she leaned forward and rested her chin against my shoulder again.

"I don't know," Indrani said.

Her hands returned to my sides, fingers digging in too tight. It would have been petty to wince. What I'd done to her tonight had been brutal enough in some ways that even noticing this felt miserly of me.

"I don't know," she repeated after yet more silence. "But not *this*."

"Then we'll find out," I said. "Together, all of us."

She nodded against me. A pause, as I felt her consider whether to keep speaking or not.

"I think I might hate you a little," Indrani finally said.

My throat tightened but I would not argue or beg. It was fair, and her right. I nodded back against the crook of her neck, staying there and breathing in the scent of leather and steel and warm skin.

"I never learned how to do this gently," I admitted, the apology hanging between us. "Some nights I'm not sure I learned to do it at all."

"That I could forgive," she said, then hesitated.

She sighed.

"Will," she corrected, firmly. "Will forgive."

"Then?"

"You took a part of me," she softly said. "By being who you are, you took it in hand. Claimed it. And I won't get it back even if I try."

I felt her tighten against me, like a bowstring gone taut.

"It's a little like being a prisoner, isn't it?" she said.
"Loving someone."

Indrani laughed, and at my silence the tension in her shoulders loosened.

"Every time we speak raw, I understand the Lady a little better," she said. "Why she *left*. I wonder if that was what she figured out: that if she lingered, she'd end up never leaving at all."

She wasn't speaking of being in love with me. That would have been... it wasn't who we were, to each other. Skin didn't change that, I knew it for certain since the months we'd taken to that kind of intimacy. Wasn't sure she could be like that, even with how she looked at Masego – though much of what lay there was still veiled to me, it was true. Sometimes I wasn't sure I had it in me either, to be like that. I thought of Kilian and what had been shared there. What hadn't, too. Even now the compromises that would have kept us tied were nothing less than abhorrent to me. Not a brew I would ever be willing to drink. How strange it was that you could care so much for someone and yet find them to be such a stranger in the end. No, it wasn't that kind of love. But for the two of us, I wondered if what she was speaking of wasn't more precious. She'd called the Woe wild animals, once, that I'd let into my home. She'd done it while castigating me for being unable to see past my part of our story – but she'd done the same, in her own way. Assuming that there'd been anything to me but plans before I met them. Like I'd not been just as much of a stray, starved for everything they had to give. Being in love, it was a fickle thing. Fragile. And skin only ever meant what you let it. I'd never felt either of those things in a way I wasn't willing to lose. I closed my eyes, letting Indrani's warmth seep into me.

This, I was not willing to lose. Not with her, not with any of the others.

"Sometimes I think you're trying to die," she said, the words shaking me out of my thoughts. "Second Llesse... well, you're not

running from it anymore. But I figure you might be running towards it instead, and that's not much better."

"I wouldn't," I said.

"You won't," Indrani said, and it wasn't a question. "You don't have that right, if you do this to us."

"Drani, I'm not trying to get myself killed," I said. "I —"

"Your leg," she said. "The limp. You telling me Sve Noc couldn't have fixed that?"

I bit back on my first answer. Flippancy was less than this, than either of us, deserved. There were ways, not so different from the ones Black had once offered me. But none of them led to places I wanted to go.

"That's different," I said.

"It's a weakness," Indrani said. "And I don't mean because it slows you down. You think you need the pangs to keep you grounded, I'm guessing."

My fingers clenched.

"Yeah," she sighed. "That sounds about right. There's nothing noble about that, Cat. It's just pain, it has no *value*."

"I can still fight," I said. "And it forces me to *think*, Indrani. Before I act, how I'll act. To no longer jump in every pit, trusting I'm strong enough I'll be able to crawl out afterwards."

The echo of her own words had her smiling, I could feel it from the way she shifted against my shoulder.

"If you trusted yourself, you wouldn't need it," she said.

"Maybe I don't," I murmured.

"Is that really," Indrani said, "who you want to be?"

I didn't have an answer to that. She didn't ask for one, either. We stayed there in silence, and for once let the world go on spinning without us.

It wouldn't last, but what did?

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caoimhinh

I'm gonna leave the typos here in hopes EE sees them and fixes them, thanks :v

for they stuff of the women/ for the stuff
I kept me grip tight / my grip
He had his angel's father / feather
what she speaking of / what she was speaking of

Gunslinger

No action but this was good stuff. I love Indrani so much. #ArCat

My very own name

I don't know what I expected, exactly, but it wasn't this emotional! Their friendship is pretty awesome 😊

Skaddx

So Cat can fix the leg but doesn't cause she thinks its keep her grounded. I am going to say she needs to fix it. Black is right Cat is bad matchup against Hanno and if she can only cast one Miracle and not run that makes it so much worse. I assume her Miracle stamina will get better if she gets a name or practices but not being run effectively especially without a name to compensate is dumb.

Safi

I think that Cat's both enjoying the mortal feeling of the leg and weaving it as a story. There are a lot of times where the Protagonist is about to get hit by rushing into something, and their bad leg/arm/fish-noodle-snake gives out, and they avoid dying because of that.

I'm not actually sure that Hanno's a bad matchup for Cat with her new powers. He's all about out-lasting the opponent and whittling them down until he can drop his Trump card, while she's now about micro movements and a few broad strokes miracles. If Cat's ever trying to run in a fight during the daytime, she's just going to be out-mobilitied no matter what. Hanno has his steed, and any Named can still catch her just by being fast, so far as we know.

Finally, with the endurance, that's just when she does the daytime miracles, like the one with the river. It's been established that she has significantly more stamina at night. On a side note, I really like this fifth book so far. It hasn't been as action-themed as some of the others, but getting more character development and investment is very nice. Bets that

one of the Woe dies by the end of the book, though? It feels like things are starting to lean that way. My money's on either Indrani or Vivi, just because Cat will never get anything done without Hakeem, and Masego still has a bunch of recovery character to go through. Odds are that it's the Dead King who does it too, as part of the 'Big Boss Establishment' routine that this world would probably like to run. (See Beating Spock or something like that on TVTropes. I forget the exact name.)

Liliet

None of the Woe will die until the end of the story.

There's a reason why Calamities only started dying when Catherine spread her wings. In this world, it's not actually random, and Catherine's the only one of them non-Named.

They'll be fine.

Fayhem

It's definitely not random, but depending on where the weight is in the story it's definitely still possible. Catherine is very good at gauging where that weight is and how to shift it and if it was just the likes of Hanno against her I wouldn't be too worried, but with Neshamah and the Bard/Intercessor both on the field now there is a genuine risk that one of the Woe could get caught in the gears of the story and ground up by it. Dangerous as he is, even Pilgrim I don't think would take out one of the Woe if it was just the Crusade as the antagonist, but Dead King and the Intercessor both have literally millennia of experience beyond what any other known player in the game has. It shouldn't be understated just how dangerous that is when it's been shown very clearly that your opponent knowing more stories to pull from can be fatal (e.g., Pilgrim taking down Black, or Bard arranging Sabah's death).

All that said, personally I'm rooting for the Woe (plus Amadeus actually) to all make it through because goddamn if Evil doesn't deserve a happily-ever-after just for once. Just one big murder family sitting around the skull-themed dinner table together when all the dust settles. I don't feel like that's too much to ask for.

Rook

Disagree, I think Cat is right with this one. The question of how to win the fight is secondary. Understanding whether the fight needs to be taken at all and why it's being fought is what matters the most.

Getting away from the whole story mechanic thing, that's how you sometimes have to control vices. Willpower can weaken, lessons can be forgotten, moments of carelessness happen. Sometimes you need to put a cast on your broken arm so you can't move it, sometimes you need to throw out all your liquor so you can't go back to it. You can't always trust yourself to do the right thing and it's not wrong to rely on an – pun not intended – external crutch, after recognizing your own weaknesses and failings.

The leg is a reminder of old lessons that can't be ignored precisely because it's so inconvenient. So you don't forget the reason you started all this even in the heat of the moment, so you have that reminder when you need it the most; when you're caught up in what's happening, when the blood rushes to your head, and when you're angry or frustrated or ashamed and the last thing you want to do is take a step back even though you know full well you should.

Skaddx

Its a crutch as Indrani stated, Cat simply doesn't trust herself enough to remember the lessons without said crutch. Plenty of other Named remember their goals without self crippling themselves in combat.

Rook

Yeah, and the point is that there's nothing wrong with said crutch. Catherine is right not to trust herself, it's never reasonable to trust yourself to not make a mistake you always make. Understanding and owning your flaws as just as important as having confidence in your strengths.

Considering the sheer volume of repeated mistakes she's made – which she's spent the last two volumes regularly flaying herself over via inner monologue, yeah she's totally right to rely on a crutch. She's done quite well to own her flaws rather than trying harder with the same methods that have never worked.

There's no shame in leaning on external crutches. If you can't wake up in the morning on your own, get a damn alarm clock, don't just keep trying and failing to wake up on time with the same method.

luminiousblu

In this case it's not relying on an alarm clock in the morning, it's relying on a massively loud alarm clock to wake up at three in the morning when you're attempting to infiltrate a military complex. Crutches are all well and good. A crutch that actively cripples your ability to do

the very thing you need a crutch to remember to do?
Honestly if you need that then maybe you simply aren't up to the job.

[*Liliet*](#)

Catherine's job right now isn't melee fighting, it's politics.

Skaddix

I mean there is plenty of work to be done. Yes politics is part of her job but there is whole lot of fighting left to go and weakening yourself when you are going to be headed into combat hot zones is simply a bad idea. Cat needs to find another coping method that doesn't lessen her ability to fight. Not to mention can Cat really expect anyone else to finish the Liesse Accords if she falls at any time between the Final fight against the Dead King or the Bard or whoever the Final Boss is.

If the answer no then Cat needs to exercise some self preservation. Nothing wrong with gambles but as I said Cat relies on gambles with very little actual planning far too often. The Tyrant is way better at the game Cat tries to play as he actually uses both together.

[*Liliet*](#)

Yes, Cat needs to exercise some self-preservation, that's what the bad leg is FOR. To remind her of mortality.

I'm not saying it's a good thing she needs the reminder, and it literally does qualify as self-harm pretty much, never a good thing for one's mental health or a good sign.

But fighting-wise, Catherine's role has changed. She's not a melee fighter anymore.

RanVor

Excuse me, but do you really believe Cat will always have a choice in this matter?

[*Liliet*](#)

I am not 100% certain of it, as I'm not 100% certain of any future developments.

But whether Catherine seeks out or avoids melee fighting is going to hugely impact the *number* of melee fights she's in.

RanVor

Well, she only needs to be in one to die.

[Liliet](#)

Same applies to her being fae and getting into stupid fights with heroes because her brakes broke / because the story insists she's the monster. Just needs to run into someone capable of killing her once.

RanVor

Well, yes. That doesn't mean Catherine intentionally crippling herself doesn't increase the likelihood of that happening.

[Liliet](#)

In any given fight, sure.

But the total likelihood of dying is number of battles * probability of dying in each one.

The total probability has decreased. The leg thing prevents more than it hurts, and Cat can always augment it with Night to stop it from hurting. She's got AoE/mobility powers, anyway.

RanVor

That's not the point. She doesn't have to be a cripple to avoid battles.

[Liliet](#)

Apparently she thinks she does.

That is what the point is.

RanVor

If she thinks the sky is green, will you believe her? No? Archer doesn't either.

[Liliet](#)

What do you mean "doesn't believe her"? That's not what the text indicates. Indrani doesn't like that

Catherine doesn't trust herself, but she doesn't say "no you're wrong you don't do stupid reckless things on impulse"

RanVor

I'm sorry, but I have to agree with luminousblu here. If she's unable to control her own actions to the point of having to make herself physically incapable of doing dumb things, she has no business in running a country.

(Also, Age of Sigmar *is* an abomination.)

[Liliet](#)

There's a sliding scale there and you know it.

Look at Catherine's track record. Callow is independent and mostly safe, to everyone's shock; Catherine herself has died no less than three times. It rather suggests that the balance is specifically "Catherine can take care of a country better than she can take care of herself".

None of this is a new development, Catherine's just figuring out new coping methods. Even if this one is high key a bad idea (self-harm never leads good places), it's still a coping method for an existing problem.

That's all I'm saying.

RanVor

It's a bad method and Catherine is stupid to refuse to find a different one. That's all I'm saying.

[Liliet](#)

Well, I'm not disagreeing here.

Considering I've taken to calling the monstrosity of a scheme that Amadeus got wrecked at Second Liesse "The Bad Plan"...

Rook

Except Catherine job isn't being a fighter at this point. She's not Hercules, she's Caesar, and Caesar was never powerful because he crushed all of Rome's enemies with his mighty muscles. That's what his armies were for.

"But Catherine isn't Caesar!"

– Shes literally a queen. With a literal army styled after the legions. They were called the legions for half the story

"But that's not enough!"

– I misspoke, she has TWO armies.

"But this is a fantasy world, Named are what matter!"

– I misspoke again. She has two mundane armies, a small army of named, and a god.

"But she needs to personally tear out the Bards throat with her fighting prowess!"

– She really doesn't.

"It's still making her weaker for no reason"

– There is a reason, and it doesn't make her weaker.

Being Named or fighting named is an occupation where you die in truth a year before the knife ever slits your throat because you fucked up a story. Catherine herself has said this. Power isn't limited to bulking up and punching things very hard.

Catherine's superpower isn't hitting a horses eye with an arrow from four miles away, not is it parrying darkness and cutting the sky. Her real superpower is being practical, rather than stupid evil. That's what separates her from the likes of Akua.

As in she's good at thinking and making the right decisions. That's her superpower. Her brain isn't in her leg.

Skaddix

Those are strawman. Also I am sorry did Cat not just win a battle by using a miracle? She is not Cordelia or Malicia where she is nowhere close to the battlefield. She is on the front and the other side is going to target her cause she is the enemy leader and has zero mobility whatsoever. Yeah she is not leading the charge but she is hardly back in a castle far away from the front either.

Not to mention not all Named are killed due to complex narrative manipulations. Cat started her career by taking out The Exiled Prince by having Nauk shoot an arrow at him. No complex plotting or narrative required. Is not wearing you helmet that much worse then not fixing your leg? Bard set up a story to kill Sabah sure but Sabah would have won that fight against Rafaela if she didn't burn an Aspect just to speed up

the fight. Bard didn't force her to make that dumb move, heck Sabah even notes herself that Rafaela is better against monsters than becomes one anyway.

So narrative alone is hardly all that counts. Named tend to get killed in the field and while sure some planning is involved, and narrative skill matters, its not like combat ability has zero impact on who wins.

Also Caesar would not fail to heal a wound that hinders his abilities just to remember a lesson. And one could make the case Cat has not been making great use of her brain of late.

[Liliet](#)

Exiled Prince absolutely died because of the narrative and because of his own stupidity.

luminiousblu

The Exiled Prince, if anything, died counter to the narrative. There are stories where a man asking for a duel is shot and killed to show the perfidy of the enemy – this happens. But it's extremely rare compared to the nearly omnipresent "ok we accept your duel" version. The narrative would've actually been on his side, Black says as much when Hanno calls him out by name just as the Exiled Prince did. It would be difficult to simply refuse. Catherine did so anyway.

[Liliet](#)

I'm talking about the larger narrative, here. He was a hero of a very, very wrong story. Catherine even commented on how he pretended his mercenaries were knights and how it irked her as a Callowan. It was exactly the thing Catherine comments on in this chapter: a story without substance to it, a story that did not actually match reality.

So he died like an idiot, because he wasn't the heroic savior of Callow that he thought he was.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The world of PGtE works differently than ours; Named really are the focus of action. And while Cat may not have a classic Name, her position of First (and only) priestess of Night is certainly a comparable narrative hook.

[Liliet](#)

Thank you!

Though calling Catherine evil at this point makes me strongly question what definition you're using lmao

luminiousblu

>her real superpower is being practical, rather than stupid evil

This is why, I suppose, that Akua played nearly the entire Empire and had a good chance of coming out on top had Assassin not participated OR had Winter hadn't invaded OR had Masego not been able to straight up contain three demons OR had Warlock not been able to neutralize a Greater Hellgate. Of those, the last two were possibly forseen but still incredible feats likely without real precedent, the first was calling in a third calamity to essentially dab on her, and the last involved both a fourth calamity and actual, honest-to-god RNG. The deck was supremely stacked against her and she still almost won.

Hell that was First Liesse too, really. With Black breathing down her neck and Catherine's massive library of tricks she still came within inches of winning anyway.

Catherine on the other hand? If Catherine is good at thinking then I'm good at epic magic and Age of Sigmar isn't an abomination to all that's good and holy. Like seriously come on, the last two books could be subtitled "Wherein Catherine Foundling demonstrates the lack of IQ typical of backwater Callowan farmers – an Account by Akua Sahelian the Collar Fairy"

Rook

Ah yeah, collar fairy. The one that lose despite all her overwhelming advantages precisely because she was too busy trying to beat everyone in a fight instead of ever taking a step back to consider if she should be taking the fight at all

Hence why all those people were aligned against her in the first place

The one Catherine beat because she knew when to work with her enemies and make them not her enemies anymore, instead of trying to fight them? Hence why all those people were aligned with her and not against her

Collar fairy, as in the one who's currently on team Catherine precisely because Catherine chose to keep her instead of taking revenge and grinding all opposition to dust? The one that bailed her ass out in the everdark when Catherine tried to brawl her way through, so she could have a second chance of making the correct decision to bring them over to her side instead?

Yeah that's definitely a case of awful judgement there. It was definitely Catherine's – power – that solved everything there, right? Hah.

Liliet

I know, right?

Catherine is a diplomat and a politician first, a brilliant strategist and a pretty good tactician second, and a fighter a distant, distant last, mostly achieved just due to storyweaving – which is a skill that encompasses and influences the first four on this list.

luminiousblu

Ah yeah, collar fairy. The one that lose despite all her overwhelming advantages precisely because she was too busy trying to beat everyone in a fight instead of ever taking a step back to consider if she should be taking the fight at all. Did you actually read what I said? The argument you're making is circular. She 'should be taking the fight' because she fought for what she wanted. Literally what's the issue here? She had the same sort of drive that Catherine had, just in a different direction.

I get the feeling you simply like Catherine as a protagonist and can't fathom the idea that maybe she's wrong. Your argument that her keeping Akua was a sign of sound judgement sounds ridiculously hypocritical, when Akua was also going to keep Catherine around. Not burning shit you can use it sort of the point, well, not even Evil. Just not being an idiot, and whether or not Black thinks so, Evil isn't -stupid-, it just has different goals.

Rook

The point is that Akua lost despite overwhelming power because she never compromised, saw everyone as an opponent, and cared only about trying to win

the fight instead of making sure it's a fight worth taking in the first place. Exactly what Catherine is trying to avoid doing when she keeps the leg as a reminder. Catherine has lost similarly plenty of times before.

Honestly, I would throw an accusation right back in your face. Every criticism, every argument you seem to make boils down to "she needs to be STRONKER so she can BRAWL with everyone else", which really kind of goes against every major theme of the serial since the first volume.

I get the feeling you're reading the wrong story considering what you seem to want to protagonist to be. Might I suggest some timeless classics instead? Like dragon ball z.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think even Akua herself agrees with you.

luminiousblu

How is that any sort of rebuttal? Characters being unaware of their own weaknesses has been basically all four books.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, Akua certainly relies on Catherine's judgement these days.

Also your analysis entirely ignores storycraft. None of the things you mentioned were random, even 'actual RNG' does not work like that in guideverse. What the story says, goes, and Catherine's *speciality* is story advantage. You can't see the cause-effect chain between her actions and decisions and her successes, maybe, but that doesn't mean it's not there.

Having allies to do your work for you IS being smart, when you're a politician. Which Catherine is. Has been since "we do not kneell".

[Liliet](#)

This is a kind of funny echo of Catherine giving in to Akua's suggestion and starting to use an actual crutch – well, a staff, to deal with the bad leg.

There's nothing wrong with using a crutch.

It's not even a metaphor.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, and there's nothing wrong with using a crutch is the thing.

luminiousblu

If you can't trust yourself to even manage your own mind correctly why do you think that you'd be able to manage and change the world? Catherine is looking to fix the problems she sees with the world, but she can't even deal with herself.

[Liliet](#)

Shit mental health doesn't mean you're incapable of anything.

Much like how losing a hand did not disqualify Hakram from being the best bureaucrat that ever lived (ok second best), having a shot sense of self-preservation hanging on PTSD does not disqualify Catherine from being the alliance maker this continent needs and deserves.

luminiousblu

Shit mental health means you have no right to lead people anywhere, especially when your rallying cry is that you're less deluded than everyone else involved.

And Hakram is different from Catherine. Hakram isn't healing his hand because it would invalidate what he said to Vivienne and cause problems with someone more valuable than him. Catherine isn't healing her leg to make a point to herself. Hakram has lost his hand for visible gains. Catherine has let her leg go for sentiment, and if she needs that sentiment to not be a lunatic then how is she the practical one?

[Liliet](#)

"Shit mental health means you have no right to lead people anywhere"
Disagree.

Also lmao no Catherine isn't 'practical evil', she's 'clever hero'. Practicality hasn't a word to say to either her or Amadeus at this point: they're good at what they do, but they're certainly not *motivated* by anything remotely in practicality's direction.

luminiousblu

That's stupid. Plenty of people have remembered why they're fighting for what they're fighting for without keeping a busted arm specifically for that purpose. It's pride speaking, the idea that she thinks she can be noble and still win, and that never ends well for either side. One day she's going to know what she's fighting for but she'll be too fucking weak to actually go and do it.

You speak of willpower failing, but pain is the first thing that fades in the rush of battle. We have an entire biological mechanism specifically dedicated to shutting down pain when you're fighting for your life. Pain is literally all in your head, it has no outside or physical basis, it's - actually- chemicals in your brain that disappear the moment you're actually about to die, and saying the limp is going to be a deterrent is like saying that if you bore a hole in your roof you'll know when it's raining and remember not to go outside.

Rule one of fantasy, science fiction, and real life is that without power literally nothing else matters. You could have it all but some Serbian kid shoots you when your driver takes a wrong turn or someone stabs you in the "sacred" Senate or someone takes a handgun and aims real well at the back of your head while you're watching a play and then what? You could have all the ideals in the world but then someone rolls around with a way bigger army and way more wealth and it turns out the only ideas that live forever are the ones with backing. It's all well and good to 'stay human', but 'humans' don't get to take on the metaphysical structure of the world and win, nor do they get to challenge people who are explicitly more than human. She can't have her cake and eat it too.

Indrani has a point and while I know it's because Catherine is our PoV character that she gets brushed off so easily, it still rankles. Just because the discussion stems from her fear of getting offed doesn't mean Catherine isn't being an idiot and saying that literally everything is "needed". Posturing is a valid tactic, but she's not posturing and this isn't Nixon's madman's gambit, she legitimately thinks of these things as "needed", simply because she wants them. And that's another piece onto the mounting pile of evidence that says Catherine was full of it when she tried to argue that it was all Winter doing it and it made her more inhuman. Remember, she was Sovereign of Winter back when she tried to have the nice discussions with Pilgrim and tried to spare the heroes, but she conveniently forgets all that because Winter is bad and she's good - no matter how she self-flagellates, she thinks of herself as in the right. If she didn't, she'd stop.

There's something worse than taking a step forward when you should've taken a step back, and it's why Catherine took the knife in the first place. It's not being able to step at all because in the last minute you ran out of breath.

SilentWatcher

I agree with luminiousblu

Rook

So wait, let me see if I understand this correctly here

Despite the fact that Catherine has repeatedly proven to be lacklustre in a brawl

Despite the fact that she has an entire roster of borderline tactical nukes whose entire role is brawling. Ranger's greatest student, the two greatest sorcerers of her generation, the greatest general of her generation, a literal god, a small army of mighty that puts most Named to shame, an empire of magic light infantry, and the finest and best equipped mundane army on the surface of the continent barring maybe Praes

Despite the fact that her greatest advantage and power has been her mental clarity and ability to draw people in around her orbit to make up for what she lacks

Despite the fact that we've seen her spend the last four volumes repeat the same mistakes over and over

Despite the fact that the entire last two volumes have been unceremoniously, blatantly hammering in the fact she already has a big hammer and that having a bigger hammer doesn't actually solve any problems

Despite her specifically spelling out at the end of two camps that any victories or solutions won with martial might are more frail than her bad leg, considering it immediately falls apart as soon as she goes

You think it's posturing and pretentiousness to keep a small disability as a reminder of past lessons? You think with all that the most important thing is a healthier leg, because what, Catherine that can run faster is going to be the edge in power that brings continental powerhouses to the table, not the literal army of legends out of a fairytale storybook that listen to her command? The one she only has in the first place because she's a leader archetype protagonist that relies on charisma and mental clarity?

O K

Forrest

Yeah, no, this is quite an accurate summation. Much of book four actually felt like a bit of a let down since things just moved so slowly along and almost nothing got done for so much of it. We had Cat yet again just not manage to measure out against her foes again and again despite being the boogeyman for so many people, that despite being the last of winter and practically being a deity and the boogeyman that so many feared she was almost dying to some random mighty leader (can't remember its name, but man that was frustrating).

Just being super overpowered and having the big hammer did not matter at all the entire last book. Having a slight limp, and the ability to think clearly and maybe be a bit clever again? I'm just hoping this will be a much more enjoyable book than last one.

medailyfun

I guess the point is that despite the leg she just recently rushed alone or with a small force into quite risky situations dropping on the scales not her full arsenal of assets but her very life. So it does not really help as a grounding 😊

[Liliet](#)

Those were a different kind of danger. Catherine talking with Anaxares and Kairos was story-fu and politics, her leg did not make a iota of difference in the kind of danger she faced. And this kind of danger is her actual SPECIALITY, the job she's doing right now, the job he's best at.

The river cracking expedition wasn't exactly about melee fighting either. Catherine avoided drawing on Night on the way there, doesn't mean she couldn't have drawn on enough to protect herself from fire / keep the turtle up should the worst have come to worst. From there, the danger was purely in how good her tactical calculations were – and they were.

This is the kind of danger Catherine is best equipped to handle, and the kind of danger she *has* to brave. The kind that the bad leg doesn't do anything to.

It's rushing off into melee that would have been stupid, and that's exactly what her leg keeps her from doing.

[Liliet](#)

Thank you!

luminiousblu

If a leader can't be trusted to keep her fucking cool without literally crippling herself then maybe she has no business leading anything bigger than a chamber pot. If a leader who thinks that almost literally shooting herself in the foot is a good reminder of the fact that getting shot hurts maybe she has no business holding a gun.

>having a bigger hammer doesn't solve problems
Doesn't it, though? Look at literally every problem she's solved save for Winter. When it comes down to it what generally matters is power. When she loses it tends to be because she overestimates her hammer and underestimates the stubbornness of a nail. It's not really said much but the other side of the coin to "when all you have is a hammer" is that if you don't have a hammer then you have no way to deal with a nail. Someone who literally makes a virtue out of hurting herself is nothing if not lacking mental clarity.

There's a difference between willing to be a martyr and actively looking to become one, just as there's a difference between willing to deal with injuries and actively looking to keep them. People applaud symbolic wounds like cutting your hair or leaving a scar. There are also cultures that make a virtue out of dying for something other than the self (your king, honor, religion, etc). To take a grievous injury in the line of duty is also considered, if not a virtue, at least proof of bravery. Very, very few cultures, however, applaud refusing healing when it's available. There is no way for Catherine to logically work that shit out.

"Leader Archetype"

The "fact" is that, for the most part, whatever Catherine thinks about herself tends to be completely wrong by the next book and exposed for her insecurities or fury or inexperience or whatever blinding her.

"Mediocre in a brawl"

Excuse me, what? Winter Catherine for most of the past few books has been shown to repeatedly blow everyone save the very oldest monsters clean out of the water. The only times she loses are, essentially, literal in-world Plot Armor. Just because she can't deal with the Saint of Swords and the Grey Pilgrim head on doesn't mean she's 'mediocre', that's like saying Hannibal was 'mediocre' because eventually he got his shit pushed in by Scipio.

In fact I'd really argue that if Akua was in control against the Saint, there's a good chance she would've won. Best I can tell, the Saint isn't actually stronger than the Queen of Winter, the same way the Queen of Summer fought off the Ranger just fine; Catherine is just bad at using power, and equally bad at dealing with not having any.

>Despite her specifically spelling out at the end of two camps that any victories or solutions won with martial might are more frail than her bad leg, considering it immediately falls apart as soon as she goes
Because she's full of shit. Black's Callow was won with martial might. He then tweaked it so his victory stayed a victory, but the reason he had clay to work with was because he pounded everyone else's face in with a mallet until they stayed the fuck down. Martial might has always been what matters when shit hits the fan. Even in the Lord of the Rings there's roughly five different turning points that come down to "the Fellowship had ultra extreme hax in the form of Gandalf to bludgeon their way through problems", and had the Fellowship failed the Maiar would've pulled the plug and nuked half the continent to get rid of Sauron. There's a reason their darkest hour is also the point where they're militarily weakest.

>the most important thing is a healthier leg
It's not the leg, it's what it represents. The fact that she thinks it makes sense to make a cripple of herself because she literally can't trust her own judgement shows she's unfit to be a leader and also shows she's a git if she thinks it'll actually make the difference when push comes to shove. If you can't trust yourself, how can you expect others to trust you? Someone without confidence in their own abilities almost by definition will lose the confidence of others.

>Charisma and mental clarity
I'll be seriously honest. I haven't seen any cleverness from her since her trick at First Llesse. At this point in time, Akua is a more charismatic person (and has always been cleverer, that was apparent since forever) because if nothing else Akua has the gravity and the supreme self-assurance bordering on megalomania that defines country-scale charisma. That's why Catherine used to be charismatic – someone who was so sure of what she was doing she'd look the entire world in the eye and, if it didn't spit out what she wanted how she wanted it, she'd flip it the finger and sock it in the face until it did. Violent? Yeah. Doomed? Maybe – Beowulf is a 'good guy' and he basically does just that for most of the story and ends up fine. But charismatic yes. Right now she's the ultimate

waffler and has an air of being a leeroy jenkins about her, which was fine when she had drive but these days her ultimate goal changes so fucking often (and don't give me Liesse Accords we literally don't know what that is or why it should work) that it's hard to side with her and believe she actually believes in anything at all. She doesn't even believe in her own ego, and isn't that a sorry sight?

SilentWatcher

If so i cant wait what she will do to herself, when some important plans fail , or when some one of the woe dies, because of her leg. What will she do to remember that mistake?

Skaddix

Yeah I think Cat hung out with Hakram too much. But the difference when Hakram gives up a limb its for a concrete gain not remember what he is fighting for and not make mistakes. Hakram took off his arm cause he realized keeping Viv around was important. Not to mention its not like his Adjunct power set is tied to combat. Organizing Systems sure but he is not likely to change the face of a battle if he has one arm vs two.

Cat though a slow moving caster and opposition leader is an easy kill. With Miracles she is probably the second most dangerous Woe to an Army. But you going to aim for Masego or Cat first? Masego is way harder to fight and isn't the leader.

Mental Mouse

The Adjunct power-set does link to combat: One of Hakram's aspects is Rampage. But he may well get a prosthetic for the other hand, or something.

luminiousblu

The difference was that Hakram clearly saw no way to actually keep the Thief around without showing him he really meant it. Hakram had essentially been driven into a corner, and him cutting off his hand showed determination and dedication.

Catherine is almost literally the opposite. She doesn't keep her leg busted to show her determination, she keeps it busted to try and make sure she keeps it. That's not admirable, that's just disgusting. If you need a destroyed limb to remind you what you're fighting for do you really actually and honestly believe in your

ultimate goal? If you don't believe in it any more, and are doing it just because it's right on an intellectual level, can you face the people who are even now dying for you in the eye?

[Liliet](#)

The leg isn't for reminding her what she's fighting for, it's for reminding her that she's not a fucking melee fighter by speciality and should really stop trying to be one.

See: Istrid vs Grem One-Eye argument.

luminiousblu

If she needs a broken leg to remind her she's not a melee fighter then she really should work on getting her head on right.

What you're saying is akin to putting out your eye to remind yourself that there's a better scout on your team and you should rely on them, or cutting off your hand to remind yourself that you're rubbish at duelling.

[Liliet](#)

You're not wrong re: work on getting her head on right.

[Liliet](#)

As I understand, she could fix it for a price with something like blood magic. It's not just that she arbitrarily chose to have an injury, she just chose not to pay the price for fixing it.

Ali Khan

It was because it was day time. While I agree that that's still quite a set back, if she were to fight him at night the odds would be a bit better.

[Mental Mouse](#)

With respect to the leg, we have both Watsonian and Doylist factors in play:

Internal to the story, she's looking for a crutch to remind her to stay the hell out of physical brawls. Note that dealing with Hierarch and Tyrant, was in contrast *in* her skill-set. She had a powerful magical protector against the Hierarch, and the Tyrant's chaotic ways are meat and drink to her. In both cases, she left with valuable knowledge and having made an impression.

External to Cat's intentions: Oh yeah, she's caught up in the story. She kept the leg because that's part of her narrative, and it's a classic feature for a perpetual-underdog villain. If she figures this out, she can strike another blow against the story by having it healed.

luminiousblu

I mean the thing is the Tyrant, you have to remember, is magically powerful. He's definitely a brawler as well as whatever else he's got. The dude wiped out an army with a single spell, with apparently no real prep time, just to show he could after he marched his own army in front of it. Winter Catherine would've snuffed him like a candle, Priestess Catherine I'm not so sure. Sve Noc, definitely, but they're drow, do you really want to trust your back to one of those?

werafdsaew

Tyrant is the furthest thing from a brawler.

[Liliet](#)

Tyrant's a strong mage, but the entire point there was *diplomacy*. Which Catherine succeeded at. The cleanest won battle is one you never fight.

JillyBean

I'm still wondering if Cat will end up competing for the mantle of Squire. Black is obviously in the running. The general rules of 3 in this story would suggest three contestants for Squire, and this would be Cat's third time. And the third contestant maybe...Akua? Black loses out, Cat kills Hanno and then goes in line for White Knight (!?) and Akua kills Black, heading for his old mantle and getting revenge for her father and maintaining her competition against Cat? Or Cat kills Black because he sets it up, Akua takes the path of light (Squire → White Knight)? Or a new Grey Knight is born that walks the line (and kills Pilgrim because only one Grey is allowed?).

Meh. Hopefully the real story is better.

[Liliet](#)

Why would Catherine be in the running for Squire?

She's not even remotely in that league. She was only ever a Squire because of being Black's apprentice, and she outgrew that strongly. She's no longer learning from a Knight, nor trying to become one (and never did, that one).

Akua's also still Named, the Diabolist.

Big Brother

Finally, Cat and Indrani talk things out.

[Javvies](#)

Touching moment between Indrani and Cat.
And things that need to be said.

Being strong doesn't have to mean you don't think about things, Cat.

imagesbe

I think she means that every time she's about to go into a situation believing that her strength will pull her out of it (practically every fight in the entirety of the Everdark comes to mind), her bad leg will remind her that now she's only mortal and can't just assume she'll come out on top.

I don't think Cat's reasoning is actually wrong. The problem isn't that reasoning. The problem is, as Indrani points out, that this reasoning is needed at all.

Novice

Yep, this is all I ever wanted out of them. Especially the end with Cat going ever deeper into introspection.

As Sun Tzu once said: "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles." With the 'know yourself' part being relevant here.

luminiousblu

Sun Tzu's actual line is incredibly often misquoted. What he actually means isn't that you'll win a hundred out of a hundred battles. He means that if you know both sides perfectly then you won't walk into a losing battle or let a winning battle go. It's an inverted form of 'choose your battles', i.e. 'make sure you have the knowledge to be able to choose your battles instead of just running screaming at every single army within a week's march'.

Auxert

"If was all that, would you even care about me"
If I was all that

[doominator10](#)

I bet Cat will let Sve fix her leg when she sees Adjutant lost his hand in order to serve a calculated purpose, following some

waffling introspection about how she's influencing those around her.

Liliet

Hehe.

caoimhinh

Maybe, maybe not. I wouldn't be the first time Cat's leg has been healed just for the convenience of it even if narration had said otherwise.

She first harmed it against a devil, then resurrected and kept smoking and drinking the herbs to deal with the pain, but when she fully embraced her mantle of Winter she said her leg had been healed by the Angels in her resurrection but restored at that moment, yet the following chapters Cat didn't have any limp and now that she lost Winter she says the Fae power had healed her limp, but now she has it back because reasons.

On the other hand, ever since Cat spoke with Pilgrim, she has been obsessed with his words to the point of haunting her interactions with other people and how she sees herself. She has mentally repeated "Your people becoming warped by your presence, old traits grown more vicious and acute." at least four times in the past volume.

And people wonder how Bard manages to manipulate people, in the Guide World people (especially Named) can become obsessed by even the slightest details and not even realize it themselves I remember it was called "branded" in early chapters.

antoninjohn

I wonder what happened to the aspects she ripped out of heroes with Winter?

Darkening

Yeah, it's been bothering me wondering where all those artifacts she made are. She killed literally dozens of heroes, if we only ever see Akua's aspect used that's going to be a real let down on that foreshadowing.

Mental Mouse

Eh? When she was Squire II, she had a Take aspect, which she used on William's Rise and then another aspect I forget. But once she went over to Winter, she lost Take, and then the remaining power was finite, and in due course got used up.

werafdsaew

She also made artifacts out of the Heroes she killed, like with the Stalwart Paladin.

Mental Mouse

I just went back to look at the fight with the Stalwart Paladin, and I don't see anything about her making an artifact. Facing down more angels, but no souvenirs.

darkening

She mentions at one point that Take got transformed into an ability to make single use artifacts out of people's aspects after she got transformed by winter. She made the whistle she used to summon the Hunt in Keter out of Akua's Call.

GuidingMoonlight

"do you think you are invincible?"

Well, yes. She is the protagonist. Whole setting is build around it. All her plans are build around it.

luminiousblu

From a meta-sense of the word, she's the protagonist, but in-setting she isn't really the protagonist. She's one protagonist of many protagonists running around. More to the point, there's really nothing rare about bad ends.

Liliet

One thing I really, really like about Guide.

GuidingMoonlight

Argh, let's just agree to disagree.

Sean

Well she doesn't know she's the protagonist. In universe she's one of many antagonists and protagonists, each with the power of their own story.

NZPIEFACE

I'm pretty sure Cat will die before this story properly ends. All of this so far feels like massive build up where the climax is Cat dying with the epilogue being the aftermath.

Andrew Mitchell

Now THAT would be a real surprise! It would be the ultimate flip of the standard story tropes. I don't think it's likely but there's definitely a non-negative chance you're right.

medailyfun

the question is how many times she will die, not whether she die or not 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Again?

Suggestions

I admit, I find my self not liking the author's decision to twist the focus of this story. The thing that makes Guide unique is the meta story elements. The clear shift away has been ongoing throughout the Drow arc, but Catherine verbalized it here. Unfortunately removing that element simply leaves us with a rather generic low fantasy serial. One that is well written, but in no way unique.

matesbe

Firstly, the setting is definitely High Fantasy, though I understand that's missing the point.

Secondly, I like the shift. Don't get me wrong, I loved that it had so much emphasis on stories, but there's an entire theme of the novel: stories SUCK. Stories is what the Gods use for their little game. Stories are how the Bard manipulates the world so the status quo is maintained. If you want to change the world, truly change it and not just who's who, you need to break the story.

[Liliet](#)

My favorite story thread in Guide is armies/people/nations.

Drow were an interesting detour, but given how utterly artificial and fantasy-only everything about their society is, I'm glad to be back to Callowans, Praesi, Procerans and Levantines.

In Dread Crowned 😊

Deviant Loader

Plenty of cheesy platitude moments in this chapter, giving me bad flashbacks of some characters arguing with each other over principles and ideals in other stories and animes.

It may be a needed moment from the actions and main story. And while I don't hate it but I don't like it either too.

superkeaton

Eh. I'll own up to not particularly liking Indrani, nor her relationship with Cat, but this was good. Some healing, some recognition, but without concrete resolution. I can't help but wonder if Killian will ever actually be relevant to the story again as a character, rather than as a reference to the past.

[Meredith Leu](#)

typo:

It did not reply, tacitly inviting it to elaborate.

I did not reply

Imrix

I am reminded of a small piece of wisdom I once overheard: Trauma doesn't make you mature. It just makes you traumatised.

Bootmoon

Yay platonic love!

Interlude: Congregation I

"Eighty-four: the only sensible solution to a maze is to not enter the maze."

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

His son's back was already a raw, bloody wound but Akil Tanja did not allow his arm to slow or weaken. Lady Aquiline was watching with those cold Slayer eyes, and would take even the slightest hint of mercy as an excuse to cast doubt on the validity of the punishment. The five-tailed whip – Blood's Scourge, men called it, one tail for every founding line – no longer ripped wounds when it struck Razin's back. All there was to be ripped open had been, by now: the Lord of Malaga only sent blood spraying, coating his own arms and face. Only three more, now, until the last had sounded. Fifty one in total. *Ten for the Pilgrim and ten for the Champion, those who stood closest to dawn. Ten for the Binder and ten for the Slayer, bloody hands joined in prayer. Ten for the Brigand, warring alone, and one more after that to atone.*

With each old verse his hand struck again, until at last it was done. Razin remained kneeling in the snow before the eyes of every captain in the host, half-naked and bleeding. Akil's eldest son had not wept nor screamed, and for that the Lord of Malaga felt a twinge of pride. That he'd remained conscious as well spoke well of his mettle, for the lord had seen older and harsher men break under the scourge.

Much had been lost, failing to take the streets of Sarcella waiting on the other side of the river, but perhaps some things gained as well. Razin could learn, if he lived, and through the savagery that'd just ended the Lord of Malaga had ensured he would. He glanced the Lady of Tartessos, standing surrounded by a ring of steel-clad captains, and she inclined her head in concession after matching his gaze. The undeniable harshness of the flogging had ensured she could not further contest the affair, as he'd meant it to. The Lord of Malaga, Akil Tanja of the Grim Binder's Blood, raised the bloodied scourge he'd tormented his heir with to the sky and a hush fell over the assembly.

"Fault was incurred straying from the light of the Heavens, and from that light no succour will be given," he called out. "Through the flow of ancient blood, let this dishonour be washed away."

Shouts of approval came from Akil's own captains, for Razin's grit in suffering the scourge had redeemed him partly in their eyes, but from the officers of Tartessos there came only cold silence. Those captains sworn to Holy Seljun – in practice, to no one at all – offered only sparse cheers. Too many of their fellows had taken hard losses fighting the Army of Callow for them to be willing to lean towards Malaga over Tartessos openly. Akil passed the red-slick whip to his attendant and resisted the urge to wipe his son's blood from his hands. Razin, brave to the end, tried to rise to his feet and walk away on his own terms. But pain and blood loss had robbed him of the strength and he immediately stumbled. The Lord of Malaga quickened forward just in time to catch him, resting his heir's arm on his shoulder and holding him up.

"Father," Razin croaked. "I-"

"Silence," Akil ordered. "Rest."

He passed on his son to his sworn swords, knowing they would lead him away to a tent far from prying eyes. Honour and law dictated that no priest could tend to wounds inflicted by Blood's Scourge, and no doubt Lady Aquiline would keep watch on Razin to see if either was bent to ensure his son lived. In this, at least, she had been outplayed. Akil had in his service a binder who had studied with the mage-healers of Ashur, and there was no dictate concerning the works of sorcery. An invitation would be made for

one of Lady Aquiline's own sworn men to observe the proceedings, to ensure she could not even strike through rumours without dishonouring herself. Akil watched his son being carried away and mourned for the fool of a boy. He had other children, some who like him had been born with the Gift and so held true chance to inherit the Bestowal of their honoured ancestor the Grim Binder. Yet he'd named Razin heir over them even if he was blind to sorcery, or rather *because* of it. His eldest son felt that absence sorely, and it had lit a flame in him to always seek to achieve more. No other of his get shared that fire, no matter their other talents. But the need to prove himself had made the boy exceed both his authority and capacity, in Sarcella. The scars that would mar his back for the rest of his life might be the lesson he'd needed never to do so lightly again.

Or the failure might break him, and the Lord of Malaga would have to look to a new heir.

"He was not without courage."

Lady Aquiline Osená, of the Silent Slayer's Blood, strode past his sworn swords without a second look and stood by Akil's side to cast a cool gaze at the same boy she'd tried to have killed today. The Osená were reputed to be a taciturn lot though Aquiline had the forked tongue of snake when she put it to use, which was often. The cleverness of a serpent as well. Before the assembly of captains she'd feigned mercy and offered for Razin to be punished only by the rod, pretending it mercy when it was either scheme or murder. Three blows by a wooden rod would have been the due of every captain in the host, if Akil had not instead grit his teeth and himself requested the Blood's Scourge. The captains of Tartessos would have beaten him half to death by themselves, regardless of his private entreaties. And the consequence of making those entreaties to his own captains and those sworn only to the Holy Seljun would have been... dangerous. Forbidding his own officers from striking blows would have been the same as saying the lives of Tartessos soldiers were worth more than theirs, and the unaligned captains would have required either heavy bribes or rough intimidation to agree. The choice would have been, in the end, between effectively surrendering command of the army to Lady Aquiline or letting his son be beaten to death in broad daylight.

And now the same woman who'd schemed this would bandy words with him, when Razin's blood still flecked his father's beard.

"My tolerance has limits, Osená," Akil harshly replied.

"As does mine," Lady Aquiline said, tone cold as ice. "Your whelp lost near four thousand soldiers flailing at the Third Army and nearly got my right hand killed after stealing the command from her. Do not pretend this is of my doing, Tanja. The boy should

have died for this outrage and the thorny oaths he passed on to us."

In Levant, it was an old story that the enmity between the lines of the Silent Slayer and the Grim Binder found its source in the hatred those two great heroines had held for each other. Some even said that hatred came from their struggle over the affections of the first Grey Pilgrim, though Akil did personally believe that piece of the tale. The truth was that the bad blood came from over a century of fighting over who should own the lucrative orchards and mines in the valley of Lusia, which was located at the edge of the dominions of both Malaga and Tartessos. The last time there'd been longer than a few months without an honour feud being fought over the valley was under Yasa Isbili's reign, and in those days Akil's grandfather had been young. The Lord of Malaga had not been please to know his own soldiery would fight alongside Lady Aquiline's, but there'd been no other choice. The Marave of Alava took orders from no one, those fucking blustering madmen of the Champion's Blood, and the feuds between the Ifriqui of Vaccei and the Osenia of Tartessos made those of his own line look like playful tussles. The Brigand's Blood saw no dishonour in poison or ambush, as Lady Aquiline's two younger brothers had learned the hard way.

"Honour was restored," the Lord of Malaga briskly dismissed. "Why do you seek me out, Aquiline?"

"Trouble," the hard-eyed woman replied. "I have word from further south."

"Then speak it," Akil said.

The Lady of Tartessos gave their surroundings and meaningful glance, and Akil conceded the point with a nod. To his own tent they moved, leaving swords sworn to either idling in the snow. He made certain to formally offer her hospitality and have her accept it, lest honour allow her to use any words spoken here to her advantage.

"There was a battle in southern Iserre," Aquiline said, once the rituals were seen to. "Hasenbach's twenty thousand marching up from Tenerife met the Spears of Stygia on the field."

Ill news and boon ones, all at once. Akil had never counted on Procerans fools enough to be duped by the League to truly be of use in the battles to come, and that the Stygian phalanx was not following his army was pleasing to hear. Slaves they might be, but the Spears of Stygia had a daunting reputation. If the First Prince's southern army had been crushed however, the situation in Iserre was fast worsening

"Whose victory?" he asked.

"Draw," Lady Aquiline said. "The phalanx bloodied the *fantassins* but Arlesite cavalry routed Stygia's skirmishers and struck at the back of the Spears. They both limped away with losses but in good order."

Akil would have asked her how she knew this, if he considered it even remotely likely she would tell him. The amount of detail offered was impressive, nonetheless.

"Where are they limping to?" the Lord of Malaga said.

"And there is the trouble," she said. "The Procerans are now two weeks' march behind us. They broke through the Stygian defence."

Akil did not believe that any more than she truly did, by her tone. Procerans were not unskilled at war, for all that his people liked to diminish the worth of their blades. Their foot was match for any of Levant's save perhaps heavy armymen led by Blood, and as a rule their cavalry made sport of the Dominion's if not outnumbered. Which Procerans very rarely were. They were hardly helpless babes, even facing Spears of Stygia, but cracking the slave-phalanxes would have been a bloody toil for anyone. If the twenty-thousand had been in shape for an orderly march this soon, either the Heavens had smiled or the Stygians had *let* them pass.

"The Tyrant," he said, "is about to turn on us."

This was not unexpected, for the Bestowed ruler of Helike was a dangerous lunatic, but the swiftness of that betrayal was inconvenient. The secret missives detailing the movements of the League's armies and the assistance of the Helikean cataphracts in hunting down the Army of Callow had been well worth what was given in return – reports on the situation in Salia and the war against the Dead King – but it now seemed the offered 'secret alliance' was to come to an end. Of the bargain being revealed, Akil had little worry. He would not have accepted it otherwise. The Tyrant of Helike was breaking the most fundamental of the League's laws by treating with foreign powers, as it was the sole prerogative of his Hierarch. His own allies would turn on him like hungry dogs, if it came out: he'd been at war with most of them a year ago, and that kind of slaughter was not easily forgot.

"We had our bargain's worth," Lady Aquiline said. "We've avoided battle with the League and the cataphracts slowed the Callowan columns. If my second had been left to her command, the Third Army would still be contained in Sarcella instead of days away and –"

"Enough," Akil said. "Razin acted dishonourably, and for that was scourged. But if you intend to insist your Captain Elvera would

have beaten the *Black Queen*, we will settle that claim blades in hand."

The Lady of Tartessos smiled sharply.

"Can the Binder's Blood afford another disgrace so soon?" she said, hand falling to the pommel of her blade.

Akil was unimpressed. She might be over a decade younger, but he was no steel-swinger to be made less by such a thing: he was a binder, first and foremost, from the line of greatest practitioner of that art there ever was. Age was power gained, not lost.

"Test me, Slayer whelp," he smiled back, just as sharp. "See what comes of it."

"A poor host, to offer threat," Aquiline mocked.

"A poor guest, to give me cause," he said.

A moment passed, and if not for the laws of hospitality he thought she might have drawn on him. But honour demanded truce, and so truce held.

"We cannot pursue the Callowans," Lady Aquiline stiffly said. "We must first extricate the Procerans, lest the League kill them all."

Neither of them had seen the need to plainly speak what they suspected. If the twenty-thousand soldiers of the Principate had been allowed to pass, it was so that the armies of the League of Free Cities could encircle all the other hosts marching across Iserre. Such a strategy would have been weakened, if the Proceran host remained behind it and able to strike at its back.

"I would not test the Black Queen without Bestowed at my side, regardless," Akil admitted. "The Peregrine himself sent warning of her power."

The Lady of Tartessos discreetly made the Mark of Mercy with her fingers, as he did, for while she might be vicious wretch even she knew the respect due to the living breath of the Pilgrim's Blood. Even out on the outskirts of the Brocelian Forest it was known that the man who should be the Holy Seljun of Levant was not the one sitting the Tattered Throne.

"Then battle is delayed," Lady Aquiline stated. "Lord Marave must contain the remainder of the Callowans up north and join with the reinforcements from Salia. After we've secured our own Procerans we can all of us together force a decisive clash."

In northern Iserre, Akil Tanja of the Binder's Blood thought. It would end in the furthest reaches of the principality, near the border with Cantal.

"Soon," the Lord of Malaga said.

"Soon," the Lady of Tartessos agreed.

—

The sun was setting over the battlefield, and the Army of Callow was once more victorious.

Parts of it, more accurately, Marshal Juniper thought. The First and Second Army had been reunited under her overall command, along with the Order of the Broken Bells, but the other two columns she'd sent off had yet to arrive. Fortunately, the Legions of Terror under Marshal Grem had bolstered her numbers to the extent that the forty-thousand strong of the Lord of Alava would be reluctant to clash with their allied commands. And this Lord Marave had been, at first, which made the last fortnight of continuous skirmishes rather interesting. In the distance, barely visible now that sunlight was dying a slow death, Levantine archers and slingers were withdrawing in good order. So were the companies of crossbows and regulars that the Hellhound had tasked with simply driving them back, knowing by now there was no point in trying to force a larger battle with the Dominion army. One day out of three, over the last two weeks, the Levantines had aggressively initiated a skirmish and refused to withdraw unless either heavy casualties or a large deployment by the Legions and the Army forced them into retreat.

The Levantine cavalry had attempted a few raids, at the start, before Marshal Grem nailed them with a munition-sown field and Juniper wiped out half their exposed skirmishers with a swift charge of the Order of the Broken Bells. Since that blow the Dominion riders had remained to guard the flanks of their skirmishers. Until today. Grandmaster Talbot had sallied out to turn back a charge that very nearly caught Juniper's supply train by surprise — she now suspected the Levantines had used a last night's snow storm to sneak a few hundred horse ahead of her army and hidden it behind low hills until she approached. In practice there'd been little fighting, for the moment the knights of Callow hit the Levantine horse it had scattered without giving much of a fight. But getting the columns in marching order afterwards had taken most of the afternoon, which she suspected was what Lord Marave had been willing to trade around a hundred cavalry for. This was not a strategy of attrition, she'd made the calculations. In both skirmishes and cavalry clashes, her force came out ahead in casualties by a moderate but noticeable margin. Which meant, she thought, that the Dominion was willing to bleed to slow her down.

Interesting, she thought once more.

The orc began the short trek war council tent she'd left to have a look at the battlefield herself, knowing she would be awaited inside. Banners flew above the cloth pavilion, more than there would have been a year ago. Catherine's own, the silver balance on black that soldiers had taken to calling the *Crown and Sword*. Yet also the cracked bronze bells of the Order, and the gold Miezian numerals set on Fairfax blue of the First and Second Army. Lone among those, like a crow among birds, Lord Black's personal banner flew the wind. Sheer dark, not a speck of anything else. It was telling, Juniper had thought, that alongside their own banners the Legions in Procer flew the Carrion Lord's and not the Tower's. The inside of the pavilion was warmed by braziers and illuminated by magelights, and for now emptied of the usual swarm of officers that would usually buzz around seeing to one task or another. Inside were seated two people, at the long table covered with the map of central Procer, the only other two who could be considered alongside her to have a real say in how this campaign was conducted now that the Deadhand had gone with the Fourth Army.

Marshal Grem One-Eye glanced up at her entrance and inclined his head the slightest bit. No a tooth bared, of course. As Marshal of Callow she was a peer, not an inferior or a superior, and Grem was famously disinclined to the kind of subtle posturing many of her kind fell into when jostling for dominance among assembly of equals. Mother had spent years trying to get a snarl out of him and never got more than a rare disapproving flash of fangs, Juniper remembered, and the pang of sorrow lingered beyond the span she allowed the memory. The other's eyes remained on the map, the Lady-Regent of Callow frowning as she tried to match words on a letter to some marked location in Iserre. Vivienne Dartwick brushed back a long lock of hair and sighed, the royal seal of the Kingdom of Callow that hung from her neck moving as she did. Juniper moved the chair across the table from her and lowered her frame into it, ignoring the moaning creaks of the wood.

"Milenan must be using a different name than the one our own maps use," the Lady-Regent said. "Otherwise it makes no sense."

"Proceran cartography is famously imprecise," Marshal Grem said.

"Particularly on the subject of borders," Dartwick drily commented.

The other orc's lips quirked, though Juniper was less than amused herself. Dartwick might be convinced she could squeeze Prince Amadis Milenan for information as long as the right prize was dangled, but the Hellhound had doubts on how reliable what they got out of him would be.

"I take it the walk cleared your mind," the Lady-Regent suddenly said, looking up.

"It did," the Hellhound grunted. "I don't think this is about our columns anymore."

One-Eye leaned forward with interest, but it wasn't him Juniper needed to sell on this. Vivienne Dartwick was the one with the last word, these days, much as it irked the orc to even think it. The fact that Adjutant had looked to the Callowan for the final word when Juniper had come forward with the proposal for the Proceran campaign had driven that nail in hard and loud – whatever it was that'd lost the Deadhand yet another hand, it had changed things. And not just, the Hellhound thought, that she was nearly certain Dartwick no longer had a Name.

"Then what is it about?" the Lady-Regent asked, eyes considering.

"This isn't attrition," Juniper said. "They're not winning that fight, not at the casualty rates we're trading."

"They're exhausting us," Marshal Grem noted. "The Legions have been on campaign for most a year now, even for veterans morale is fraying. And a lot of your soldiers are green, Marshal Juniper. They won't hold up as well as Levantine foot under that kind of pressure. It might not matter they have less soldiers, if they have more in fighting fit."

"I considered that," she said. "And there is a sense to it – delay giving battle until they've brought us to the brink, and engage only after my other two columns have been dismantled by their other army."

"But," Dartwick said.

"They're taking too many risks," Juniper said. "That strike with the cavalry, today? That was an escalation in recklessness. I believe we'll see the pattern hold up the longer they're in pursuit."

"The only gain from that was slowing us," Marshal Grem calmly said.

There was a pause.

"You believe there's a Proceran army headed our way," One-Eye concluded. "Through Cantal, most likely, descending toward us following the lakes. We're being softened up before they pincer us."

"I believe they want to win the war in Iserre before the Grand Alliance moves north as a whole," Juniper said. "And to do that they need to force a decisive battle, soon."

"The Tyrant of Helike passed information indicating that most of the principality of Hainaut has fallen to the Dead King," Dartwick frowned. "And the Lycaonese are steadily losing ground."

The boy-king of Helike had been willing to cut a deal offering quite a bit of useful information, after failing to kill Juniper. Mostly useful in how to remain out of the path of the League's armies, but the latest reports out of Salia and the war against the Dead King were of some importance. That he'd asked for detailed assessments of the Proceran and Levantine armies in exchange had been judged an acceptable price by Dartwick, and Juniper agreed. Anything making him more inclined to attack the Great Alliance than them was of some benefit.

"Procer can't afford a long war down here," Juniper agreed. "Attrition, defeat in detail – they'll take too much time. If they're not done here within two months, there's a decent they lose the northern Principate. So they need us crushed, quick."

"And large enough an army to intimidate the League into a truce, if not a treaty," the Lady-Regent murmured.

Marshal Grem peered down at the map, and his face tightened.

"Not one decisive battle," he gravelled. "Two. They smash us up north, smash General Bagram and the Princekiller further south and then link up to face the League."

"We can't keep marching north, then," Juniper said. "We're giving them exactly what they want."

"Then what do you suggest?" Dartwick said, head cocking to the side.

Marshal Grem One-Eye grinned.

"We march back south," he said. "And find out who'll blink first, between us and the First Prince."

[*erraticerrata*](#)

Chapter's out early, as the month's extra chapter will be delayed until tomorrow afternoon.

There's also going to be some changes to Patreon as of tomorrow, for those it may concern!

In a nutshell, at three chapters a week (thirteen chapters a month with the extra) I no longer have the time to take contracts

on the side, so the goal for three updates a week is going to be raised to reflect that. Not by a large amount, but enough to ensure I can make ends meet relying on it. There'll also be a Paypal link setup for people who want to make a one-time donation instead of the Patreon model.

All of this will be properly explained in a larger post, tomorrow, this is just a heads-up for the those of you who read the comments.

[esryok](#)

Joyous day, the chapter comes early! Take that, all you people out there tracking the average chapter release time!

In other news... go vote! <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[Javvies](#)

Huh. The Levantines are brutal.
Though, Malaga's probably right that Elvera wouldn't have been able to beat Cat, but I doubt that Elvera would have done worse.

The Tyrant of Helike ... I think I'm going to give up trying to figure out what he's up to and just conclude he should get killed asap.

Vivienne is in the field?

The Army of Callow and the Legions are linking back up and regrouping.

That's going to be fun. For us, and maybe some of them, but not for anybody in their way.

IDKWhoitis

Elvera wouldn't have thought up the Decapitation Strike, so that may have made the battle more brutal for both sides. Although she may have decided to just seige them out instead, which might have meant no battle at all...

stevenneiman

It's worth remembering that even without Razin's final screwup, the battle would have been lost in a night without his pushing so aggressively that they almost won before night fell after Cat returned. If Elvera had been careful and methodical she might have defeated an army that didn't have the Empire Ever Dark coming to reinforce, but she would have just ended up losing without even getting a chance to bloody them.

And if Cat hadn't shown up, Razin's tactics would have been

plenty effective even if the Legions were more resistant to a decapitating strike than he expected.

IDKWhoitis

While I agree that Elvera wouldn't have beaten Catherine, I don't think her losses would have exceeded 4,000 and she might not have been bound to such tight oaths (she got a heavier oath than Razin did)

Sylwoos

Uncertain, she might have been too competent and forced Catherine to use/unleash the Mighty, which would have been a blood bath. It's important to keep in mind how much Cat tries to keep the casualty low. Pushing her in a situation where she doesn't have the luxury to do that anymore won't have a pretty outcome.

Hardric62

Concerning the Tyrant... I find this adorable that Akil thinks there are no big risks of the revelation of their deal with him. I can't wait to see his reaction when he proves once again how talented he is for spreading chaos... I'm guessing rumors, not something which can be tied to him, but something that will poison the relationship between everyone as they spread.

spencer

So just to make sure I'm following, Cat is to the south now? Can someone summarize what else we know about the relative positions about all the armies?

[Liliet](#)

Well there's an odd thing there where Cat was supposed to be in eastern Iserre but then ran into Nauk who was supposed to be to the west of the fighting.

So that's confusing.

But at the very least, Catherine is to the south of Juniper and Grem.

IDKWhoitis

Anyone else expecting Cat to flank the army behind Jupiter? Like right at the moment they are encircled or something.

Although I feel we might see Hakram before we see the actual battle...

Also, Viv doesn't have a name. Is the Woe as a whole slowly transitioning to a Non-Named Band? Trading meta story and abilities for maximum flexibility?

Skaddx

We have to see Viv interact with another Named. But I mean its not like they never call each other by their normal names.

Ali Khan

Not a bad theory, Indrani just had a massive arc where she accepted her own mortality, Viv's hair is growing, We've yet to see Zeze and Hakram yet but they definitely won't be the same either.

stevenneiman

I suspect that, like Amadeus, Vivienne has lost her previous Name but might gain a new one which fits better. Cat traded a Name for something which comes with direct power and which is also liable to grow into a Name as the Drow develop a culture which can actually support Named. Hakram is probably still the Adjutant, and Masego is presumably more Heirophant-y than ever. His Name grows in power by Witnessing things which test the boundaries of reality, and he just got to see an eldritch horror so terrible than its appearance was enough to kill a (little g) god and destroy a city. Considering the last argument with his parents, I suspect that he will also have some useful abilities tuned to help fight the Dead King.

medailyfun

I'm afraid his main goal now is to find the Dead King's secrets, and try something that his fathers feared

Dainpdf

Cat is likely to get a name that reflects New Callow more than the Drow, in my opinion. She's a priestess to the Drow, yes, but her main motivation is Callow.

Lopen

I think it might even be a name that does both. More than anything she's begun to bind large groups into one force to aim at the Dead King.

ruduen

I'm kind of curious what the odds are of her not having a name, or potentially stumbling into an aspect which ends up concealing her name – especially if a transition occurred.

That being said, until Vivienne shows what she's capable of, that's pretty much speculation. I have little doubt that she'll eventually show what she can do now, named or not.

Skaddix

Though I admit if all the Woe start losing Names for good I will be annoyed. Since you know the main idea of this series as it was originally presented was Named manipulating Stories. And I don't like the idea of moving away from that.

Granted Viv having or not having a name probably changes little. As she noted herself, a non Named could have run the Intelligence gathering operations and she personally didn't have a powerset that was great in battle. Though granted her ability to steal anything was useful in delaying tactics.

[Liliet](#)

I would say a shift to continental politics is a very fair trade for Names.

That said, Masego would gain precisely nothing out of losing his Name, he's already had a Meaningful Onscreen Transition.

Skaddix

Yeah I think its more core for Hakram, 1st Named Orc in centuries? millennium? I would be annoyed if he lost it. Whereas with Masego and Indrani it mostly manifest as a key part of their powers which is important since they are powers especially Indrani shine more in battle.

[Liliet](#)

Hakram might transition methinks, if he goes more from just following Cat to actually actively doing what he thinks right in politics etc.

But yeah, him being *non-Named* would not be a good move.

IDKWhoitis

It's already been shown that Non Named are still a force to be reckoned with, and I am of the belief that if another of the Woe transitions to non named, they'll all eventually transition out.

I don't think you need to be Named to manipulate stories. After all, the first stories were created by Non Named anyways, and only through repetition do stories gain weight.

Also, in these insane times of change and upheaval, Names may be a liability, as they limit ways of thinking and possible

actions. Non Named are nearly infinitely flexible, and if meta aware, may still catch Named in unfavorable stories.

So Catherine and the Woe may truly signal the death of the Age of Wonders, as realpolitik and institutions overcome the Heroes and Villians.

antoninjohn

The Woe is making a new story and as such they will have new roles in that story

Skaddx

So Tyrant did try to take out Juniper. So the linkup should occur soon.

Sanctus Obscurum

Fifty and one, the young fool bore.
Ten for each founder
And still one more.
This the price of his arrogance
And of his pride
To think he could outwit
The first under the night
No soothing light
His wounds to mend
Though through sorcery
His peril may end.
His blood shall wash clean
The stains of dishonour
That on himself he brought.
Such was the price
Called down on him
By his very own sire
And by sire's hand borne out.
That true vengeance might
Not find him that day
By the thrice striking rods
Of those captains he failed.

Someguy

I swear Levantines are more obsessed with blood rituals than Praesi with less results.

> The Marave of Alava took orders from no one, those fucking blustering madmen of the Champion's Blood, and the feuds between the Ifriqui of Vaccei and the Osená of Tartessos made those of his own line look like playful tussles. The Brigand's Blood saw

no dishonour in poison or ambush, as Lady Aquiline's two younger brothers had learned the hard way.

I thought lady Itima of Vaccei, from the second book (<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2016/12/28/interlude-precipitation/>) was from Champion's blood?

sutortyrannus

Well spotted – though I think we can just assume a retcon, given the world-building that's been put into establishing Alava as the seat of the Champion's Blood.

And while we're having a typo thread:

> And this Lord Marave had been, at first, which made the last fortnight of continuous skirmishes rather interesting.

There's a word "interesting" missing, I think.

> The orc began the short trek war council tent she'd left to have a look at the battlefield herself, knowing she would be awaited inside.

The orc began the short trek to the war council tent she'd left to have a look at the battlefield herself, knowing she would be awaited inside.

> If they're not done here within two months, there's a decent they lose the northern Principate.

If they're not done here within two months, there's a decent chance they lose the northern Principate.

Tolk

No Name she says? Lady Regent sounds Name enough to me. Like a Good Chancellor.

caoimhinh

The Regent, seems accurate, the only downside would be losing her dimensional bag (it was from her Hold Aspect, after all) now if she actually takes Callow Chancellor style then she would be Thief of Kingdoms, which would be a pretty badass Name and we already saw there was a lady called the Thief of Stars, so these things can happen. And Viv already stole the Fae Sun once the blade of moonlight from the Spellsword, so she has a good record in stealing grand things.

My theory is that Juniper simply hasn't seen Vivienne doing anything grand and hasn't seen her use her Thief Aspects

anymore so she thinks Viv lost her Name when in reality she could have Transitioned.

Valkyria

Anyone else got the feeling that you have to permanently doublecheck with a map to get a grasp on what is happening and what they're all talking about? Or am I the only one this bad with names of places and the distances and locations of those places?

[Sugar Roll](#)

I look at it from time to time when troop movements are being talked about. I like visualizing the locations of armies, where they're headed, and who they're facing.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, this is definitely the kind of thing you need a map for.

If only we HAD said map.

I mean... I'm very confused about how Catherine, coming from eastern Iserre, ran into Nauk first, when he was going west.

But at the very least the continental map that we do have – yes, that's a very necessary thing to check with.

Valkyria

Well I have no idea where the Callowan army had been gating to initially, but if they started even further east than cat and then went west, cat gating behind them and heading west as well it would be possible.

Also, looking at the map of “political borders” helps, even if there's not many cities on it. what also helps, it got a color code defining who is Lyaconese, Alamans, or Arlesite.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine has also said “there is no way Grem would be this far east” and Juniper apparently gated between the northern and southern Levantine armies

and yea, erratic's original map with borders and everything is what I use

Valkyria

Hm, true.... Directions would be easier if we knew how far east east is or how far south the southern army was or the northern army north.

I guess it all makes sense. But I've never been good with stuff like this since I build the world kinda in my own head, look at the map and get confused because it's not like in my head and I start mixing those two up and together

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, that's a thing.

The simplest resolution is to assume a typo and that Nauk went east, not west.

But also yes distances and speeds could make this possible in the current configuration, IF ONLY WE HAD THOSE.

Valkyria

You could try getting the Tyrant to tell you that, he seems pretty well aware of army movement of pretty much every party in the play. The deal would most likely only cost your soul and everything dear to you but hey, you would know stuff!

[Liliet](#)

♥ ♥ ♥

caoimhinh

Fascinating things shown in this chapter. Levant's inner politics, proud nobles who think they or their men wouldn't lose and do better than everybody else (usual stuff there haha), Tyrant betraying everyone as usual and we got to see Juniper, Grem, and Vivienne, which is cool.

So Tyrant traded the movements of the League's armies and the assistance of the Helikean cataphracts in hunting down the Army of Callow for reports on the situation in Salia and the war against the Dead King from the Dominion of Levant, THEN he traded those reports for detailed assessments of the Proceran and Levantine armies from Callow and showed them the paths they would take so they could avoid Helike's armies. Awesome, he truly is playing with all of them. Hahahahaha

It was already speculated by many in the comments that Vivienne was Transitioning to another Name due to her appearance changing, but Juniper thinking she might no longer have a Name is interesting (though it might just be that since she has a different Name she no longer can do the same she did as Thief so Juniper thinks she lost it due to no longer seeing Viv put things

in her dimensional bag), let's see what happens.
Little by little, they are all joining up in Iserre.

Typos found:

- had not been please to / pleased
- gave their surroundings and meaningful glance / a meaningful glance
- Slaves they might me / they might be
- began the short trek war council tent / trek to the war council tent
- No a tooth bared / Not a tooth bared

[Mental Mouse](#)

Vivienne doesn't seem to be Transitioning in the sense of Squire->Knight, but she's clearly lost her old name. She may well get a new one – at this point, Cat herself would be in position to “award” certain names such as Viceroy or perhaps Princess. (Similar to how Amadeus awarded Squire to Cat, but she's since learned that stabbing the recipient Is Not Necessary.)

[Mental Mouse](#)

I still want to see Vivienne explain to Cat what happened to all the loot she Held.

sutortyrannus

So... just a question.

The Gallant Brigand mentioned in this chapter:

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/04/09/prologue-4/>

has no tie to the Brigand's Blood mentioned above?

caoimhinh

I'm inclined to say no, since she was implied to be from the Free Cities, not from Levant. Still, Iason only said that she had activities (and probably earned her Name) in the Free Cities, not really specified about her origins, so she could be from that bloodline.

caoimhinh

Just read that chapter to check, Larat said The Gallant Brigand was “Amelia of Helike, daughter of Lasarn” so odds of her being of the Brigand's Blood from Levant are unlikely.

Skaddix

The implication I get is that Named are more common amongst the ruling houses of Levant and that them getting the same Name as their ancestors is rare but not uncommon. However, other Named from other countries can get the Name of one of the Founding Heroes which is rare but not uncommon.

Liliet

Also, given that we know multiple Knights with different adjectives can operate simultaneously (and it's in fact an entire Thing for them to), it's possible that multiple Champions/Binders/Brigands/etc can also exist at the same time.

Skaddix

Yeah the second part tends to be the Class in a RPG. The first part tends to work as the archetype for most names and reflect personality traits.

Mental Mouse

Skaddix: Probably a language issue in your comment: Normally in English we would say "uncommon but not rare", meaning: More often than 'rare', not as often as 'common'. The other way around doesn't work.

But each culture has their own traditions, it's not so unreasonable that the different areas would have Heroes and Villains with overlapping keywords. The Levantines have tried to produce hereditary lines (and noble houses, or vice versa) for several heroes with middling success. But after all there's a lot of varied stories about brigands and the like, so the Levant's Brigand can easily coexist with various Names of other people, Possibly Levant's usage could block nearby cultures from having a plain "Brigand" Name, as people would "know who that was".

Aotrs Commander

Remind me again why the Dead King is the thing the continent all wants to gang up on an not Levant? Because it seems to me the more I see the more I'm convinced that everyone is going for the wrong target...

NZPIEFACE

Cause the religious leader and head of state of the Levant is a Hero. Like super capital H hero.

Fayhem

Because the Dead King is the scariest thing on Calernia barring maaaybe the dwarves, and the Levantines don't have the numbers,

the political or military unity, or frankly the troop quality (they seem to be in the range of decent-but-not-amazing and are mostly unblooded) to be a threat to even a single other nation by themselves. Much less to all of them at once, which is where good ol' Neshamah ranks on the Threatometer. Being Blood (and blood) obsessed weirdos doesn't really matter for shit against those facts.

Cicero

"Some even said that hatred came from their struggle over the affections of the first Grey Pilgrim, though Akil did personally believe that piece of the tale."

I suspect this is meant to read "Akil did not personally believe" as that flows a lot better.

[Daniel E](#)

For some reason, 'Deadhands' plural just lacks the same kind of menace as 'Deadhand' singular. A single skeletal hand on a villain? That's badass, and backstory. Both hands missing? He had an accident with a butcher's cleaver or something. Also, can anyone explain me to what his reasoning was? I reread that chapter, and I'm clearly not understanding why he was questioning Thief's loyalties.

Interlude: Congregation II

"What do you mean, they 'went around the maze'? Do you have any idea how much it cost us to build that?"

– Dread Empress Malignant I

They weren't even halfway through Brabant when Hasenbach's envoys found them. For all that there were rumours of some strange disruption of scrying down south in Iserre, Princess Rozala Malanza noted that the First Prince's clever mages had no such trouble outside of it – they would not have been so swiftly found otherwise. Not that they'd been trying to hide, but what did that matter when hundreds of thousands of desperate refugees were fleeing south from the armies of the Dead King? Reluctant as the Princess of Aquitan had been to strip so much as a single soldier from the defence of Cleves, there'd been no choice but to ride south with an escort of well-armed horsemen. The sea of people forced away by the advance of the dead were starving and terrified, and Rozala knew well that those with nothing to lose

might be willing to take a chance on well-dressed and well-fed travellers. It would have been something of a farce for the three royals heading south to survive the horrors of the war in Cleves only to die to some starveling with frostbite and a hoe. Still, dark as the situation was in Brabant – and no mistake, it was nothing less than grim – it was pleasant dream compared to the war to the north.

Or perhaps it was the other way around, Rozala thought, stirring the contents her goblet with a thin copper rod. Perhaps it was the months she had spent fighting in Cleves that were the nightmare. Gritting her teeth, the dark-haired princess forced her hand to cease shaking and drank the full goblet of brandy tinged with poppy tea. It should calm her enough, she thought, that tonight she would not need to resort to a *Hannoven drowse* to fall asleep – namely, sleeping with her ear to the floor to be assured she would wake in time if the dead and the damned were digging up from below. The Gods were merciful enough that she had time to begin feeling the effects and put away her affairs before her bodyguard announced Louis. The Prince of Creusens looked as bone-tired as she felt, but he offered her a wan smile and sat by the shutters with her when invited. His eyes flicked to the half-open scroll left on the small table between them, too polite to be caught staring.

“So it was you they wanted,” Prince Louis Rohanon said.

There was no mistaking the broken seal of the First Prince, but instead of replying Rozala unfolded the scroll a little further and let her comrade glimpse the seal that went unbroken at the bottom of the text. The Highest Assembly’s. In time of war Cordelia Hasenbach’s word was law, in affairs military, but having her order seconded by a motion of the Assembly meant disobeying it would have Rozala legally committing treason. She’d be stripped of her title as Princess of Aequitan as well as her rights in the Highest Assembly without any recourse, the vote considered as having already been taken through the initial motion seconding the order. Louis’ eyes narrowed, and his shoulder twitched. The Prince of Creusens was not cut from warrior’s cloth: he was both shorter than her and thinly muscled, with delicate hands. Dark-haired and soft-cheeked, he looked more scholar than soldier. Yet he was also clever, of good sense, and perhaps one of few decent men wearing a crown she had met. The tragedy of his life had been inheriting a principality ravaged by the Great War and finding that the only man willing to loan him the coin to heal it was Amadis Milenan.

The scope of the debt was reputed to be massive, and Louis had admitted to her in confidence it was unlikely to be fully repaid in his lifetime. Amadis had offered to write off a part of the sum should Louis lead soldiers in his support during the Tenth Crusade, and once the horse had been hitched to the cart it had

seen the Prince of Creusens dragged through horrors all the way up to Cleves. And back, now, but it seemed they were to walk into a different sort of danger. Louis' shoulder twitched again, and he let out a frustrated breath. Giving in, the prince glanced quickly at the door to confirm it was closed and behind him to be certain there was no one between him and the wall. Three heartbeats after looking, his shoulder began twitching again. Rozala could not think less of him for this – she'd not been in the bastion, when the ghouls had slipped through murder holes and begun slaughtering sleeping soldiers. Prince Louis Rohanon had been, and he was as uncomfortable without his back to the wall as she would be without skin touching the floor. It'd been the breach at Sautefort, for her.

No one had grasped until too late that the dead would not care about tunneling under water.

"I have been named to the supreme command of an army being assembled in Cantal," Rozala said. "By the shores of Lake Artoise. Forty thousand soldiers, perhaps more."

Louis's eyes brightened.

"Reinforcements?" he asked.

"Not to Cleves," she replied. "I've been ordered by Her Most Serene Highness to reinforce the Dominion's armies and break the foreign armies in Iserre."

"Praesi," the Prince of Creusens bit out angrily. "Callowans. *That's not the war*, Rozala."

"The League as well," the Princess of Aquitan reminded him.

"We should be making peace with all of them," Louis said.

"I don't disagree," Rozala admitted. "But the seals are there, Louis."

"Let's see her enforce *that*, in the middle of the Dead King's wrath," he said. "Madness."

Yet the truth was, Rozala knew, that neither of them were all that popular at the moment. The attempt by Prince Amadis' supporters – among which they both numbered – to force the Klaus Papenheim's armies to chase after the Carrion Lord had been made known to all of Procer. It'd been framed, no doubt by Cordelia Hasenbach herself, as petty intrigue by the lot of them to attack the elected First Prince while she was sending her own kin to fight the Kingdom of the Dead. In the northern half Procer, save for Cleves where many of them had fought, they were not just a figure of mockery but villains outright despised. If they rebelled, and to refuse the First Prince's order was exactly

that, they would not find many allies. More than that, Rozala feared what even the smallest stir of civil war might do to the Principate at the juncture.

"I will go," the Princess of Aequitan said. "Gods forgive me, but I will go. Adeline and Prince Gaspard should be able to hold for now."

"Then I go with you," Louis said.

She inclined her head, too thankful to words to properly convey it. Louis had not fought with his blade, in Cleves, but he had been her steward and seneschal. His ink and orders had been a thousand times more valuable than one more blade would have been.

"We ought to tell Arnaud as well," the prince added. "Last I saw he was drinking himself into a stupor across the street, but he has an iron liver. Odds are he's still awake."

Rozala's lips thinned. Prince Arnaud of Cantal was a rapist, perhaps worse, and an arrogant fool. There was no hiding from that. But none who'd been to Cleves, none of those who'd fought that endless tide of dead smashing against icy shores, would ever be the same again. And Arnaud Brogloise might be filth, but he was filth that'd held the fort at Langueroche alone with his retinue for three days and three nights. He'd fought on foot at the gates, and held long enough for a town of three thousand to flee south. Arnaud knew the stakes.

"Would you fetch him?" Rozala asked.

Louis nodded, poorly hiding his relief at no longer sitting with an unknown at his back. She'd have the table moved for when the three of them sat, the dark-haired princess decided, so he would not be afflicted again. She closed her eyes, for a moment, and felt like cursing. Fighting the Army of Callow or the Legions was not why the three of them had come south. Once upon a time they might have ridden south to scheme how to unseat Hasenbach, but since Cleves? No, not that. They'd come to exhaust their treasuries raising every company they could, contracting every fantassin and emptying every smithy in their lands before they rode back north. Rozala's fingers clenched against the chair as she flinched at a sound that was not there. She was weeks away from the onslaught, now, and still she could hear the sounds in every silence.

The desperate screams of the dying as winged abominations spewed out fire and venom. The biting crackle of dark sorceries as they tore through steel and flesh. And that patient, relentless beat: forward, forward, always forward went the armies of the dead. Without pause or respite or the slightest speck of mercy. The levies and fantassins of Prince Gaspard of Cleves had died like *flies* in the face of the Enemy, even with Chosen holding the line

at the capital's port. When Rozala had arrived with the remains of the army salvaged from the Callowan debacle, she'd found the city of Cleves besieged by a sea of shambling darkness. Yet on the wall, a man had stood with a sword like the coming of dawn.

The White Knight had held the line until reinforcements came, defying all odds.

Three months Princess Rozala had shared command of the defence of Cleves with Prince Gaspard. Three months of an endless span of fresh horrors. Swarms of dead rats scuttling up through the sewers to devour wounded soldiers in their beds, rains of poison and acid, great abominations made from the bones of the thousands serving as moving siege towers that spewed out lesser dead over the walls. Three month of burning your comrades lest they rise again and turn on you, of battles that lasted through entire night and day for the dead simply *never tired*. But oh, they had taught the monsters the mettle of Procer.

They'd fought on rocky slopes and crawled through freezing mud, they'd sallied out in the howling winds and challenged the Dead King for every scrap of stone and snow. The White Knight and the Witch broke an entire fortress driving back a pack of dead Chosen, until their shore of the Tomb flew only the pennants of Procer. Thousands and thousands had perished for that, clawing at the dark in choking despair, but now along the shores of Cleves forts were being raised by the hands of bloodied veterans and smithies burned through the night to forge the swords that would be bared when the next wave came.

And the front in Cleves, Rozala well knew, had been the easiest.

At Twilight's Pass the hosts of the Lycaonese had fought three battles in two days against the horde trying to force its way out of Hannoven. The same evening, soldiers said, had seen the coronation of three of the Reitzenberg: Prince Manfred of Bremen died of a poisoned arrow leading an assault to take back the furthest fortress of the pass, passing his crown to his eldest daughter and telling her to continue the charge unflinching before drenching himself in oil and taking up a torch. She'd passed it to her younger sister after losing half her torso to sorcery, and that sister in turn passed it to now-prince Otto Reitzenberg when she took a spear in the belly scaling the wall and fell thirty feet in armour.

The youngest of Manfred Reitzenberg's children carried the charge to the end with that blood-soaked iron crown on his head, took back the fortress and held it for half a day before a dead Chosen brought down the walls and forced him to retreat further into the pass. This, Princess Rozala had been told, was the closest thing the Lycaonese had seen to a *victory* since they'd begun the fight. And still their people headed to Twilight's Pass, streams and rivers of soldiers wearing old mail and iron-tipped spears.

Through the ice and the winds they went to make the same old stand in that same old pass, as they had for centuries. The Princess of Aequitan had mocked these people for their brutishness and lack of manners, once upon a time, for their rough linens and bare-bone homes.

The shame of that remembrance burned her like acid.

In Hainaut, Princess Julienne Volignac lost the entire coast to the dead before the Iron Prince arrived to relieve her. Too long a coast, too few men to defend it and the craggy hills of northern Hainaut made it difficult to march large forces – or defend against many small forces, as the Dead King had sent. When Klaus Papenheim took command he fortified the outskirts of the crags and began clawing them back from the Enemy, battle by battle, but with the shores of the Tomb in enemy hands there was no end to the undead that could cross the lake. The city of Hainaut itself fell to a sudden offensive that broke through the defence lines two months in, and the Iron Prince was said to have taken a wound at the battle.

Princess Julienne herself died charging the dead with her personal guard of three thousand horsemen to buy the time for her people to flee the horde. Her sister Beatrice claimed the crown over the dead princess' too-young sons and swore oath before the entire army that as long as single Volignac remained the Dead King would get nothing of Hainaut but ash and steel. The fight had soon turned desperate after the dead reached the flatlands, for they were harder to defend, but Prince Etienne of Brabant bankrupted himself arming every soul of fighting age in his principality and marched them north to ward off the collapse.

The north of the Principate was fighting for its right to exist with every bitter dawn, and she would not fail it. So Princess Rozala Malanza would hurry south and win the war they shouldn't be fighting, so they could have a chance at winning the one they had no choice to fight.

—

If even *one* other royal requested a private meeting with Princess Rozala Malanza only to reveal they'd been secretly corresponding with the Tyrant of Helike, she was going to send the head of everyone who had back to Salia in a basket. When she'd arrived to the sprawling camp by the shores of Lake Artoise, what the dark-haired princess had found there was enough to make her blood boil. The more than forty thousand soldiers, half levies and the rest principality troops, she much approved of. It was the royalty coming with the finer soldiers that had her furious. The First Prince, evidently, has tossed every single prince and princess she could find at the army in order to accrue the largest host possible.

The result was a labyrinth of intrigue and petty bickering: including Rozala herself and her two princely comrades from Cleves, there were no less than seven anointed rulers assembled in the camp. Hasenbach's orders had preceded her so there was no contest of her command of the army, but what she encountered was much worse: one at a time, three fools sought her out to proudly inform her of their foolishness. Princess Leonor of Valencis, Princess Bertille of Lange, Prince Rodrigo of Orense. All of which had been trading information with Kairos Theodosian of Helike.

That Rodrigo Trastanes would number among them she'd took a personal insult, for the man was a political ally. He too was one of Amadis Milenan's pack of open supporters, having turned on his benefactor the First Prince last year. The three who'd been dropped on the head enough to make a bargain with the Tyrant of Helike and approach her with the secret she'd stripped of command and sent Louis to keep an eye on, as her appointed second in the army. Rozala would not trust anyone who'd thought it *clever* to trade information on the location of the Dominion armies in exchange for the same on the Army of Callow and the allied Legions. Not with a command, not with a seat at her council, not with a fucking chamber pot.

That still left Princess Sophie of Lyonis, who the First Prince had quite openly sent there to ensure that Rozala did not take the army and march on Salia to depose her. The ruler of Lyonis was the First Prince's creature body and soul, having murdered her own brother at the Battle of Aisne when he'd tried to betray Hasenbach. For that she'd been rewarded with the crown of Lyonis over her three elder siblings, and remained viciously loyal to the First Prince ever since. The sole comfort of this was that the woman was not incompetent, or a stranger to war. Rozala had no true choice about having Princess Sophie in her council, but she was proving of some use as the mouthpiece of Hasenbach and so recipient of the First Prince's answers.

As in, for example, why it had become so difficult to obtain weaponry and armour in Procer these days.

"You're certain the dwarves won't sell even if we triple the standing price?" Princess Rozala pressed.

The fair-haired Princess of Lyonis shook her head.

"They won't entertain any offer, regardless of the contents," Princess Sophie said. "The First Prince has confirmed it. It was made understood to her that further insistence would be not be taken well."

Rozala almost cursed. The unfortunate truth was that, beyond equipping their own personal troops and keeping an armory that'd provide for perhaps the same amount of armed levies, few Proceran

royalty bothered to accumulate armaments. What point was there, when it was possible to hire already-armed fantassin companies instead? If the situation was truly dire for a princess, an order of armaments to the Kingdom Under would provide what was needed as promptly as it could be brought by road from the closest dwarven gate. The Great War had lasted decades and seen a prodigious amount of cheap steel floating around the Principate, to be sure, but much of it had ended up in the hands of already-fighting fantassin companies or since been lost on foreign fields – Callow or the Free Cities. Smiths could not work without metal to work with, and it'd gotten bad enough in some parts of the Principate that the Prince of Orense had privately admitted to her he now had more silver than steel left in his principality. The existing mines simply could not keep up with the rising demand.

"We can fight two, maybe three battles before our levies are left to wave sticks and shout imprecations," Princess Rozala grimly said. "Gods, do the dwarves *want* us to break in front of the Dead King?"

The Princess of Lyonis eyed her thoughtfully from the other side of the table. If it'd been more than the two of them in the tent, Rozala thought, the conversation would have ended there. But it was only them and maps and mostly-untouched cups of wine, so Princess Sophie broke her silence.

"Her Highness believes it might the work of the Black Queen," she said. "To make our war effort unsustainable."

The Princess of Aquitan felt her fingers clench into fists. She breathed out only after a moment, forcing herself to approach it with cold eye.

"She's a monster," Rozala said. "But not one without reason. She'll want us crippled by Keter, not outright devoured."

"That is the First Prince's opinion as well," Princess Sophie agreed. "Yet there is a possibility we must contemplate: that she struck the bargain with the dwarves blindly, and that she may not return from her journey for months yet. If ever."

Rozala winced. That would be disastrous. It wasn't that the Principate wouldn't be able to wean itself from reliance on the dwarves eventually. It was that it would take years for the mines and foundries to be raised to what was needed, as well as cost a fortune. Procer had neither the years nor the coin required for such an ambitious undertaking on hand.

"Then we make truce with Callow," Princess Rozala said. "I've made my peace with fighting the League, Princess Sophie. The Tyrant has been meddling in our affairs so extensively the Free Cities are out to either take most the south or feed us to Keter."

But Callow? We cannot afford that fight, not with the vultures already circling us."

"An offer of truce was extended by the Lady-Regent Dartwick," the other princess said. "Including withdrawal of the Army of Callow through the northern pass."

Rozala leaned forward eagerly.

"And?" she said.

"It comes at the cost of allowing the Legions of Terror to retreat with them," Princess Sophie admitted. "The overture was declined."

"You can't be serious," the Princess of Aquitan hissed. "I don't care if they butchered half of the heartlands, send the bastards out."

"We've confirmed that if the offer is accepted, there will be rebellion within the month," Sophie said. "It is a certainty."

Rozala almost cursed her out for speaking in absolutes where there could be none, but stilled her tongue at the last moment. Hasenbach, for all her flaws, would not lightly abandon her own native Rhenia to the dead – and that was what she was doing, so long as armies remained fighting south. Which meant she *was* certain, and there was only one way that could be true.

"The Augur?" Rozala asked.

The other princess nodded.

"You are not to speak of this to anyone," she warned.

The ruler of Aquitan almost rolled her eyes. That Sophie had not been meant for the throne of Lyonis was sometimes quite evident. It was quite gauche in such a situation to speak the words. They were simply *understood*, between well-bred women.

"How bad?" Rozala asked, morbidly curious.

"Most of the eastern principalities beneath Brabant," the Princess of Lyonis said.

Which would collapse half the Principate, the dark-haired princess thought. Those lands were the most-populated and some of the wealthiest in Procer. Or they had been, before the Black Knight led his legionaries to take them to the torch and the sword. If a peasant revolt sparked there the situation would spiral out of control swiftly. Especially if some prince or princess saw an opportunity to seize the throne while any force that could stop them was stuck fighting up north.

"You've never fought the Army of Callow," Rozala finally said. "So you might not understand exactly what it is you're asking of me. I cannot crush their host without massive losses, Sophie. They're hardened disciplined killers that believe in their cause."

"That has been understood," the Princess of Lyonis said. "Which is why your true instructions were not put to writing."

Rozala Malanza leaned back, brows raising, and waited.

"Win a battle, Princess Rozala," the other woman said. "And if the Callowans and the Praesi should manage to escape in good order towards the passage, afterwards? It is unfortunate, but the League's presence would not allow you to pursue."

So, Rozala was to clasp hands with the Dominion to give the enemy a black eye before letting them slink away. It sat ill with her to toss away the lives of soldiers – *badly* needed soldiers – for a play in the Ebb and the Flow, but if the alternative was rebellion then she'd swallow her tongue and do what needed to be done. However many died there, it would be a drop in the ocean compared to what would take place if the heartlands broke behind the defensive lines to the north. She drained the rest of her cup, and set to the business of getting her soldiers fed and marching.

—

In peace time it would have been against the laws of the Principate for an army to be mustered in the lands of a prince at the orders of the First Prince without the right being first granted by said prince in front of the Highest Assembly, but these were not peaceful times. Besides, it was in Cantal they were camped and the prince of this land was among her commanders. Prince Arnaud did not balk at providing what supplies he could. It was not as much as Rozala would have liked, but that was understandable given the damage done by the Legions of Terror. More surprisingly, he did so without any of the complaining the Princess of Aquitan had expected. Out of gratitude she began extending him invitation to the war councils that had previously been restricted to Princess Sophie and Louis. To her further surprise, aside from the occasional bout of arrogant bragging he proved to be rather useful. The prince knew his own lands well, and did not balk at emptying his own purse or armouries to strengthen the army. Rozala only understood exactly what was taking place when Prince Louis approached her as she rode ahead of the columns, a mere week away from the Iserran border.

"Rozala," he greeted her calmly, dipping his head.

The Princess of Aequitan slowed her horse – he was not as skilled a rider, and might struggle to keep to her pace – and returned the courtesy.

“Louis,” she fondly replied. “I see you’ve settled the fools well enough to be able to afford a speck of freedom.”

“A prince’s labour is never done,” he drily replied.

That glint of amusement in his russet eyes Rozala would admit, if only to herself, made him attractive in a mischievous sort of way. It was not a thought she could allow herself to entertain. He might be a widower, and she unmarried, but the interests of their principalities were often opposed. To dally without any deeper commitment would cause dangerous scandal, and there could be no true privacy in a war camp.

“Ours certainly is not,” the Princess of Aequitan sighed. “I had counted myself fortunate, that we might never fight the Army of Callow again.”

“Ours are not fortunate years,” Louis said, tone dark, but shook his head afterwards. “Still, we do what we can. It to speak of that I have come.”

Rozala cocked her head to the side, silently inviting him to speak. After so many hours shared they had become more than passing familiar with each other’s mannerisms.

“When do you intend to begin inviting the Prince of Orense to the expanded council?” he asked frankly. “Any longer and the slight will grow too deep, he will become much harder to budge.”

Her brow rose.

“I had not meant to invite him at all,” Rozala admitted. “His dealings with the Tyrant make me wary of his judgement and reluctant to hear any advice from his lips.”

“You don’t need to actually take the advice,” Louis patiently said. “When did Amadis ever take ours? It’s simply a matter of binding him to you. You cannot afford to throw Segovia away if you are to cleanly take the reins. The blunder should make him eager to redeem himself, if anything.”

The Princess of Aequitan almost informed him she had no need of Rodrigo of Orense to run a brothel, much less an army, before she grasped what he actually meant. It was not the army she was leading that Louis was speaking of. He was under the impression that, in Amadis Milenan’s absence, she was usurping leadership of the alliance the Prince of Iserre had assembled. Through those eyes, Rozala thought, the sudden solicitude of Prince Arnaud took a much different meaning. He was currying her favour, much as he

had once done Milenan's. For a moment she thought of telling Louis this was not her meaning at all, but her tongue did not move. If she was perceived to have faltered halfway through a coup, her 'supporters' would turn on her without hesitation. And had she not only aligned herself with the Prince of Iserre for lack of other allies in the first place? More than that the man had not gone north, fought in Cleves or Hainaut or Twilight's Pass. If the Callowans released him, would he truly understand? *And if they don't release him at all, her mind whispered, who would you trust to take the place of primacy in your stead?*

"I am not Amadis Milenan," she finally said, meeting Louis' eyes. "I intend to take good advice, when it is given."

"Then invite Prince Rodrigo to council tonight," the Prince of Creusens said. "And I will begin to approach the other two who disgraced themselves."

"Amadis never convinced them to back him," Rozala said.

Leonor of Valencis had been friendly, but firm in her refusal of closer ties. Valencis and her own Aquitan had warred frequently, over the centuries, but just as often struck close alliances. Princess Leonor was, if she remembered correctly, a cousin in the fourth degree of blood. The ruler of Valencis had been a tacit supporter of Rozala's mother when she'd made a bid for the throne during the Great War, though after the defeat at Aisne distance had been made between their courts to avoid incurring Cordelia Hasenbach's ire. Princess Bertille of Lange was dependent on Salia for much of her principality's trade – and therefore at the mercy of the First Prince's displeasure – but she'd never outright entered the fold of the First Prince's loyalists. She had a reputation for being cold-blooded and of mercenary nature even by Alamans standards. Amadis had simply never found a price that moved her, Rozala had often thought.

"But you are not Amadis Milenan," Louis Rohanon replied, lips quirking. "I will see you at council, Princess Rozala."

He dipped his head again, slightly lower than the first time, and left her to her thoughts.

—

Eight days later, headed into Iserre, the army began to hear fanciful rumours from refugees. Most of them about an army of dark ghosts that left no tracks and spoke no words.

Five days after that, the army began to hear rather less fanciful rumours about a clash between the Army of Callow and a Dominion army. The Callowans and the Wasteland allies fled south, refugees said.

Three days after that, Rozala Malanza found forty thousand Levantine camped on the snowy plains and waiting for her. She rode ahead to meet with their commander, the Lord of Alava, and begin planning the shared offensive.

The moment she truly knew it all had gone to the Hells was when she found the Grey Pilgrim waiting alongside him.

Flobert

Go vote!

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

DroughtBringer

I was less than 5 seconds late, and you beat me to it! That's just rude.

Nicely done, though.

This message has been seconded.

Go vote!

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

Flobert

Sorry dude. I just wanted to it for once. You can have your job back for the next chapter.

DroughtBringer

Nah, you're good.

I was making a bit out of nothing.

Nice job beating me, I tend to spend a bit too much time in my life trying to make sure the link gets there.

(If my last message came off annoyed at all, that wasn't the intent. Sorry if it did)

draco2306

So their are currently eight princes in this host i think this quote from book two deserve some considering

"I will take the crown of seven mortals rulers and one, to lay them at the feet of the Prince of Nightfall," especially since that seven in the interlude is in italics

caoimhinh

Yeah. I agree. Seems like the opportunity to take the crowns of those eight princes and fulfill Cat's debt to Larat.

I think this coming battle will be the one called "The

Princes' Graveyard" that was mentioned in the extract from 'A Commentary on the Uncivil Wars' by Juniper that was used as the Epigraph of 'Interlude: Commanders', said to be one of the key battles that historians will reference when trying to understand Catherine's methods.

Catherine has mentioned that she needs to beat them while keeping as many soldiers as possible to take North against the Dead King; so it would make sense that she target the commanders. The death of eight of the 23 rulers of Procer would be a blow enough to force the Grand Alliance to accept Cat's terms.

Khytaria

she doesn't even need to kill them, i could imagine some of them would rather part with their crown, than their lives...

stevenneiman

I see a scary possibility here. This was supposed to be a political battle to satisfy the Highest Assembly while still not dealing any real damage to either side, but even if Cat wants the exact same outcome I could easily see it turning into a bloodbath if she started by decapitating the leaders who have the secret orders to turn it into a harmless "victory" where Callow retreats like it already wanted to.

MrMaturity

Remind me, what chapter was that said in? I need to go back and have a read.

[Liliet](#)

[Book 3 Chapter 35: Questions](#)

Shikkarasu

Interlude: Commanders
30 Aug 2017

By coincidence I had recently read it in my re-re-read

Nairne .01

The funny part is that one of the lords of former summer has reproached Cat about this (I don't remember the exact wording nor who it was, one of the princesses or the queen). Now we have the goddess of night, the first under the night priestess, and prince of nightfall. I wonder, coincidence? Not likely...

Cole

Not to mention Catherine's having Akua make an artifact that appears to be a device to turn day into night.

Aston

I will vote. Thanks for the reminder!

Two ____

Well, we finally see why Hasenbach couldn't send every possible soldier north, although I do wonder why she couldn't tell her uncle the exact reason why.

caoimhinh

It was already known why and Klaus knew it. In fact, Klaus IS north right now, but Cordelia sent him to Hainaut, when Klaus wanted to be fighting in Hannover (his home) which was practically abandoned to their own luck. The Lycaonese are fighting without support in Rhenia, Hannover, and Bremen while the rest of the Principality's troops are focused on Cleves and Hainaut. As for why there are still troops south in Iserre, we already knew since Volume 4 that it was due to Black's Legions ravaging the eastern principalities, and in this volume prologue we saw that the League (or rather the Tyrant's) troops crossed the Waning Woods into Procer, so armies needed to be sent there to face them.

You can check the map here: <https://ibb.co/kPLnQa>

It helps a lot to look at it while checking the principalities mentioned, to gain a better view of where the armies are right now.

danh3107

Damnit Tariq your timing is uncanny, it's almost like you have a choir of angels handling your trave-

Shit

magesbe

So... Prince's Graveyard, anyone?

naturalnuke

Catherine is still looking for crowns.

SpacyRicochet

Ho, crap... you're right. And there are seven in that frakkin' army right now. How much crows was her deal with Larat for? "Seven and one?"

Decius

There's always the option of Callow becoming an anarcho-syndicalist state so that the arch-heretic can add the 'and one' to the pile, and she can then tell the crusading hosts that in order to chase her, they're going to have to march at the Dead King.

plantsbeans

The lat crown is... his own I suppose.

My very own name

Wait a minute. Presence of the Pilgrim means he either left Black with the others or took Black with him, both of which create good opportunities for Black, I think.

Furthermore, I hope he ends up mediating the conflict more than inciting battle.

Oshi

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...L000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000000L
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Mediating the conflict *snort*

Will

Like Pilgrim would leave before Saint cuts out Black's soul. He isn't an idiot.

Someguy

>“Oh, we’ll bleed,” the Saint mused. “We’ll lose badly, at first. And then we’ll claw our way back up, inch by inch. Evil always wins at the start, but it’s us who owns the conclusion. And from the ruins something better will rise. This empire’s already a corpse, but we’ll send it off with a pyre glorious enough it’ll redeem the old faults.”

The Proceran army is going to be used as sword fodder. Above seeks the destruction of Procer. Inciting battle IS what Grey Boi is here for.

Liliet

People keep thinking Saint speaks for the entire side of Good.

Why?

Insightful

Because she was having a conversation with the bard before she said that, and the bard is pretty goddamn influential

Cicero

And we know that the Bard plays both sides, and probably has ulterior motives as well.

If anything her right to speak for the Heaves is even more suspect.

[Liliet](#)

also this ^

[Liliet](#)

Bard is not a major player. She's forbidden direct touch. She's a nudger.

She would have prodded Saint along on Saint's own path, in one specific direction that was already amount her options, not introduced a new option entirely.

[Mental Mouse](#)

She's indeed, a "nudger"... but she's a very good one, with millennia of experience and her own expertise over story. Just because she's not a combat or magical powerhouse, that does *not* mean she "is not a major player."

[Liliet](#)

Depends on how you mean it, yeah. My point is just that she didn't order Saint around.

RanVor

She didn't order Laurence around, but she may have "accidentally" given her an idea...

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, but again, the idea would have to be already along the lines Laurence was thinking of.

Either way, Bard is even more questionable as a source of the 'will of Heavens'. Just ask Irene and William.

RanVor

BECAUSE SHE FUCKING HAS TO IF HER PLAN IS TO HAVE EVEN A SLIGHTEST POSSIBILITY TO SUCCEED. We have discussed it at least once already.

[Liliet](#)

Stop assuming everyone is rational agents acting on complete information!

Yes, we discussed this, and you definitely failed to convince me that there's any reason to think Laurence de Montfort doesn't just have her head so far up her ass she's looking out of the bellybutton! We're talking about a person who responded to a comparison to Ranger by promising to cut off the offender's hand, and considers punching in the head strong enough to knock out for being mouthy acceptable treatment of a prisoner. We're talking about someone who unironically uses the phrase "no truce with the Enemy". Laurence is a murderhobo extremist who's convinced her position is so obviously right she doesn't bother to double check.

Also, her plan is as simple as "lose spectacularly, gloriously and honorably, then count on karma to even the scales". She doesn't even need to do anything for it to succeed the way she envisions it, nor does anyone else (beyond what they were already going to do). She just prevented Cordelia from "making truce with the Enemy", because that would turn a perfectly black and white (in her eyes) situation into shades of grey, and we can't have that, can we?

You're seeing a reasonable logical workable plan where I'm seeing a kamikaze attack she expects to draw the entire continent into.

RanVor

Half of the side of Evil is about to turn on the Dead King. That's a fact, and there's no way the Bard doesn't know about it. So that takes care of the "incomplete information" clause. With Callow, the Legions and the Drow at their side, Procer has a real chance to actually stop the armies of the dead, which is very much not what Laurence wants to happen, and what pretty much every non-Named on the side of Good wants to happen. To prevent it from happening, she needs at least the majority of influential heroes adamantly refusing to accept any kind of truce with Catherine.

[Liliet](#)

Bard does.

What does Bard's knowledge have to do with it?

What, is she known for guiding heroes well and sharing full information with them?

RanVor

Because her wanting for Laurence's madness to bear fruit can be logically inferred from what she said to Neshamah ("eat the baby"). And if she wants it to succeed, she will obviously reveal as much information as it is necessary for the plan to succeed, including the fact that there is a giant hole in the underlying strategy that needs to be patched ASAP.

[Liliet](#)

So you think she has revealed to Neshamah her real plan, expects him to fully succeed, and has put all her eggs in the basket of him doing what she told him to do?

Uh.

RanVor

As I said, this is a BAIT.

[Liliet](#)

Here's the thing: Bard wanting Laurence's madness to bear fruit \neq Bard wanting Laurence's madness to succeed.

Laurence makes a great patsy. She thinks little and reacts disproportionally, she's 'a creature of instinct' as Pilgrim calls it. She's not a strategist. She assumed that after Battle of Camps, no hero will possibly agree to negotiate with Catherine, because she's obviously THE INCARNATION OF EVIL. That's the exact place where the flaw in Laurence's thinking is, and it leads both to her plan and to her assumption that everyone else will not ally with Cat either. A single failure point.

RanVor

It's not a single failure point. It's a number of failure points equal to the number of people not named Laurence de Montfort in Procer.

My point is, if all of this is just relatively harmless raving of a maniac, what were we supposed to gather from that conversation? That Saint is delusional? We knew that already. If she's not a credible threat, the entire chapter just doesn't make sense.

[Liliet](#)

"It's a number of failure points equal to the number of people not named Laurence de Montfort in Procer."

Nonono, the failure point in her thinking.

"My point is, if all of this is just relatively harmless raving of a maniac, what were we supposed to gather from that conversation? That Saint is delusional? We knew that already. If she's not a credible threat, the entire chapter just doesn't make sense."

Saint is a credible threat because she's a one-woman army who can and has fucked shit up.

The useful information from that chapter is:

- Cordelia trying her best to prevent that bullshit
- Cordelia's relationship with the House of Light
- Cordelia's opinion on heroes and particularly Laurence (she was not afraid to be in her presence because she recognizes that she doesn't just lash out randomly at rulers and there's always a reason)
- showing us Laurence's personal ideology, which is relevant because she's a major player on her own, being an 'old monster' and all
- giving us a hint at Bard's involvement with this bullshit
- explaining where the Arch-Heretic idea did in fact come from.

All good points *for a bonus chapter*.

RanVor

Except all of that we had known or suspected already.

[Liliet](#)

As is characteristic of bonus chapters!

RanVor

So the conclusion is: the chapter is full of shit.

[Liliet](#)

I mean... if you insist?

RanVor

Besides, I strongly believe that if this plot thread was as inconsequential as you claim it to be, IT WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN INTRODUCED AT ALL. Erratic writes better than that.

[Liliet](#)

It's not even remotely inconsequential. The Arch-Heretic thing resolves some complications and introduces others. It shifts the playing field in a major way.

It's just not on the orders of Gods Above, nor a remotely reasonable idea.

Probably fits right into Bard's plan though. She be like that.

RanVor

Sorry, but the way it was introduced implies something completely different. If it was just about Cat being declared the Arch-Heretic, the the entire conversation between Saint and Cordelia had no bearing on the plot at all. It didn't even have to be there. The Arch-Heretic plot was already introduced at that point. The Bard's role in that play was all but confirmed. The entire scene amounted to nothing. Unless, of course, it offered us a glimpse of things to come... But Saint is stupid, irrational and has no influence, so obviously everybody will just ignore her and none of this will come to pass, right?

[Liliet](#)

First of all let's just collectively remember that Fatalism was a series of *bonus chapters*. Those weren't main plot interludes.

Second, I am not saying Saint has no influence. I see it as a subplot, with Saint's batshit plan being one more thread in a tapestry of bullshit. She can convince some people to join her cause, she can have some people follow her plan until a better plan presents itself...

Though, now that I think about it, a major subplot probably wouldn't be introduced in a bonus chapter, would it?

RanVor

Good point, although I stopped considering them bonus chapters a long time ago.

Except, you see, this is a binary situation. Either all follow her, or might as well none. If even one influential hero makes peace with Catherine, all is lost for Saint of Swords. She's more dangerous than that and Erratic writes better than that.

Now that I think of it, the average reader doesn't actually need to know the exact reasoning behind what's happening. The essence of the plan is for heroes to be as obstructive as possible, which is something they're already doing, but on a larger scale. I don't think this kind of behavior would surprise anyone except you and maybe a few others.

[Liliet](#)

"Either all follow her, or might as well none. If even one influential hero makes peace with Catherine, all is lost for Saint of Swords." She thinks 'no truce with the Enemy' is a self-evident point that Cordelia accidentally lost sight of in the course of politics. This IS her blind spot.

quite possibly a cat

Gray Pilgrim is surprisingly terrible at conflict mediation. To wit, an Evil Faerie Queen came to him asking for his help avoiding conflict via redemption. The Pilgrim promptly told the Evil Faerie Queen that he wasn't going to try because of some petty temporal concerns.

Saint would probably be better as a mediator.

[Liliet](#)

>some petty temporal concerns

I cannot believe the lack of reading comprehension involved

[BartHumphries](#)

I don't remember this happening. Care to bring me up to speed while castigating the person spreading (mis)information? 😊

[Liliet](#)

I have no idea what the word "temporal" means here, but presumably this refers to Pilgrim's refusal to exercise more influence in his faction than he safely can, and his insistence that there's only so much he can do. He agreed to enforce rules of engagement they agreed upon as long as Cat did the same, and was amenable to the idea of trying for long-term changes.

But he did not agree to just wind down the whole Crusade, because it's not up to him and if he tried to make it happen there would be Bad Shit.

"And if I abdicate, can you guarantee that Callow will be left untouched?" I asked. "Will you swear on your Gods that if Procer tries to annex it, you will turn your sword on whoever is trying? Or even that you'll stay out of my way and let me take care of them?"

"I do not rule Procer," the Grey Pilgrim softly said. "And if I take the field against them, too many would follow. It would birth a war as dangerous as this one, in many ways."

(Book 4 Chapter 8: Dialogue)

and then

"Peace on your terms would unseat the First Prince," he said. "She has spent years forging an alliance with Levant, fighting her Assembly tooth and nail every step of the way. For that same ally to twist her arm into making a pact with one of the most famous villains alive would see her removed within the month. And everything she seeks to accomplish vanish with her."

I have not the faintest idea how "petty temporal concerns" even begins to describe this tbh.

[Liliet](#)

Like, tbh? This was how Pilgrim *earned* my respect.

RanVor

I can't say that he lost my respect this way, because I didn't have much respect for him to begin with, but his stubborn defense of Cordelia's foolish mistake definitely didn't help his case.

[Liliet](#)

If you break everything you've built and start anew every time you make a mistake, you'll never get anything done.

Often it's better to accept the mistake and correct for its effects.

RanVor

And go deeper and deeper into the mess as e everything falls apart around you. Yes, that's definitely the way to go.

[Liliet](#)

Sometimes it goes badly.

Sometimes it goes well.

Human beings don't possess perfect advance knowledge of consequences of their actions. They possess heuristics which they then apply to try and arrive at the most likely result.

I like Pilgrim's heuristics.

RanVor

So far Pilgrim's and Cordelia's heuristics managed to successfully plunge the entire continent into a bloodbath and successfully shoot down every attempt to stop it. Good job, very praiseworthy.

[Liliet](#)

Yep, the situation went to hell.

But if you have insufficient information, being the most rational rationalist in the universe won't help you.

I like their heuristics. I don't like the situation. But looking at the situation from their point of view, I don't see a lot of things it would be reasonable for them to do differently, with the knowledge and priorities they had.

RanVor

If not for their outstandingly erroneous judgement, the entire situation wouldn't have happened in the first place, but that alone isn't enough to condemn them. Everybody makes mistakes,

even though mistakes of most people aren't that disastrous.

However, although it quickly became apparent that they're in deep shit and way over their heads, despite having multiple opportunities to quit with relatively little loss along the way, they kept escalating until they hit the point of no return and now they can neither go on nor quit without massive losses that could have been avoided if they weren't stubborn idiots. There's no way in hell I'm going to overlook that.

BTW, I don't understand why crusading is even still seen as a viable option, considering the success to failure ratio.

[Liliet](#)

>despite having multiple opportunities to quit with relatively little loss along the way

Elaborate?

Also, crusades afaik were usually undertaken as a means of interrupting the rise of Evil – even if you get beaten back, you still win just because they didn't manage to get what they wanted before the Crusade, too.

Which really illustrates what's wrong with this one, narratively -_-

RanVor

Come on. It's the third day of the argument and you suddenly don't know what I'm talking about?

You know, Neshamah wasn't really doing anything while the Crusades kept hitting him. So either the good guys are morons (which is admittedly very likely), or your assessment of what the Crusades are for is wrong.

Also, I can't help to notice that you somehow manage to condemn and defend the Tenth Crusade at the same time. How's that?

[Liliet](#)

I recall at least one of the Crusades against Neshamah starting because he wanted a tribute of children. We have no specific information on others.

And yes, even on the third day of the argument I still don't see where Pilgrim and Cordelia had opportunities to back out without losses.

As for my position on the Tenth Crusade, I'm actually really confused what you're not following about it being complicated?

The Tenth Crusade was something that seemed very reasonable from Cordelia's POV. She knew from Augur that "the Tyrant seeks to end Procer" and extrapolating from her previous knowledge about how Praesi Tyrants behave, figured she was on a countdown before Praes gathered enough strength to actually try to destroy her country martially. On top of that she was also trying to stop the infighting on the Good side and create a treaty for lasting peace, which was also most easily achieved by uniting against a common enemy. Oh look, there is one! And of course she had the problem of many unemployed soldiers in the country after the decades-spanning civil war, which incidentally was deliberately started and kept going by Malicia and only ended right at the start of the story, when Cat meets Black.

All the reasons why the Tenth Crusade was actually secretly not right were something *Cordelia didn't know*. She did not have the narrative savvy to realize that 'they might be doing something soon' is not a good enough reason for a Crusade, or that having a lot of less abstract incentives to offer her allies in it is a *bad* thing, not a good thing. I say politics are the same thing as the narrative, but in this particular case what's beneficial politically is sharply unfortunate narratively. Cordelia did not know that Black was working on reforming Praes to make it less Evil. Cordelia did not know that Praes already had access to WMD class shit and was not using it because the Tyrant was not in fact mad with power and aggressive the way it sounded like in Augur's prophecy. Cordelia did not know that the Black Knight was already willing to let Callow claim its independence and cultural identity of Good back as long as the trade ties were kept.

And when she knew all of those things? Oh, it was already too late. It's not a sunk cost fallacy thing, it's a 'stopping a moving train with your bare hands' thing.

She did not know what she did not know. Based on the information she had at any given moment, she was making perfectly rational decisions.

Does that explain my position on Cordelia Hasenbach and the Tenth Crusade?

RanVor

No, not really.

I recommend you to reread my comment, because you have obviously misunderstood some things. I will not explain it again because I'm sick of having to do that all the time. (Tip: I try to word my comments as precisely and literally as possible, except the obviously sarcastic parts.)

[Liliet](#)

If I keep not getting your point, maybe you should try to explain again. Just because it's literal doesn't mean it's clear.

Or we can just postpone this discussion to see what Pilgrim is doing :3

RanVor

Sure, it's going nowhere anyway. You still haven't managed to convince me of whatever you've been trying to convince me of (I'm not sure what it was), and you still remain stubbornly oblivious to the fact that Tariq and Cordelia are responsible for this shit. Let's agree to disagree.

[Liliet](#)

For now, yeah.

[Javvies](#)

This is going to go poorly.

Malanza's supposed to provide a victory against the Army of Callow and then not pursue them on their withdrawal back to Callow.

What the hell's is she supposed to do when she *can't* provide that victory?

Or what does she do if the Levantines don't play along?

And Pilgrim is involved. Shit. I thought he was busy sitting on Amadeus.

IDKWhoitis

I think Grey may be more understanding of the whole "there's only one true war to the north" deal. And if he says so, the Levs will close ranks behind him, full stop.

Jecherio

Remember the talk between the saint and the first prince? it is not as clear cut as one might think

caoimhinh

And that's why Cat wants to kill the Saint of Sword while keeping Pilgrim alive for negotiation. It's the only combination that allows an alliance.

Agent J

Cat doesn't want to keep Pilgrim alive because he's any more reasonable than Saint. She's keeping him alive because killing the old man would have Levant hunker down out of spite and nothing she ever does or says will move them.

caoimhinh

True, but I just meant that the only combination that allows a negotiation is Saint dead and Pilgrim alive, because Saint won't stop until she is dead and Levant won't stop if Pilgrim is dead.

[Liliet](#)

He IS more reasonable than Saint though. He's the one whose goal was continental peace, and his problem was just that Cat was not his best bet for achieving that.

Valkyria

Also, does Cat even *want* to withdraw right now?

Insanenoodlyguy

That's the true irony of it. I could honestly see Pilgrim and Cat's future conversation having that flavor, he might well be for Cordelia's plan

GP: "Okay Black Queen, we've had a skirmish here, now let me be plain. You wanted peace, well all you have to do is 'retreat' here and we can talk later, I'll swear oath to it."

Cat: "... Nah. That was then. Now I intend to go north."

GP: "well shit."

Liliet

Their direction of retreat would be towards Stairwell though, which is also north.

The real question is, are Catherine's own fae portals also disrupted right now?

Mental Mouse

Given reports of portals opening to planes of Hell, I don't fault her for not investigating that just yet. She's got enough on her plate, with trying to re-unify her scattered armies. Once she does that... well, marching home through a Hell might actually be an option. 😊

Liliet

She was also worried about 'sending up a flare' for Pilgrim and co by making a working as major as a portal. (I'll just take her word on the local effects she's been actively using being less of one)

theothin

She doesn't want to be fighting here. She still wants to grab Amadeus before bailing, though.

Cicero

Simple... cut a deal with the Black Queen to be "defeated" allowing her to set up a pattern of three.

Liliet

only applies to Named rivals, doesn't work like that in any other situation

caoimhinh

Can't set up a pattern of three because A) Cat is no longer Named, B) She is not a Named rival of the Grey Pilgrim. So unless Catherine gains the Name Black Pilgrim or something like that (which she actually might, given the nature of her role as First Under the Night, although I doubt she will be getting a Name anytime soon) she won't get in any pattern of three with Tariq.

Decius

Reclaim the city, loudly declare victory by negotiation, and politely ask Cat if she would please let the dwarves sell weapons to the humans getting killed by the Dead King?

I wouldn't be surprised if the dwarves considered giving superior weapons to people fighting the Dead King to be a worthy investment in preventing Dwarfen casualties.

Mental Mouse

Firstly, remember that dwarf weapons are normally the "cheap" option, goblin steel being better. But... can anybody but Praes and Callow actually get goblin steel anymore? (Maybe the Good troops are normally worse-armed?) And why shouldn't the dwarves save their steel for their own use? We've seen they have mechanical and/or magitech weapons, I bet a lot of steel goes into those.

Liliet

I don't think anyone but Praes ever had access to goblin steel, it's only just Callow getting in on it now 😊

Mennolt van Alten

> Firstly, remember that dwarf weapons are normally the "cheap" option

You know, after what we saw in the everdark I have a feeling that this is because they only sell their equivalent of third-rate weapons that couldn't ever be dangerous if turned back on the dwarves. Their second-rate is probably goblin steel, and I'm willing to bet that what they outfit their heavies with is the best metal on Calernia.

Mental Mouse

Also, Cat can offer an easy way for people to buy dwarven weapons again: Stop fighting her, and she'll return the favor.

Aston

The Pilgrim and Cat might both be insane but acting sane.

First Prince and Dead King?

Hmm...

Great writing EED!

IDKWhoitis

Seeing Grey near a battlefield is like seeing a guy in a NBC suit walking around your kid's school. There's no answer you will hear that will put you in a good and relaxed mood after that.

If anything, you will hear of horrible things that make you regret showing up that day.

Novice

Princes' Graveyard HYPE!

Helirous

Looks like the grey pilgrim is there to make sure their plan to get a token win and then move north is not enacted. As Magesbe pointed out with the Princes' Graveyard happening here, it is likely what the chosen aim for considering their plan involves the wholesale destruction of Procer.

[Dresden 67](#)

The Saint's plan involves that.

We have no evidence the Pilgrim even knows about that scheme, much less agrees with it.

Someguy

Oh Saint and Pilgrim are in on the plan. They only play Good Cop Bad Cop in front of Muggle rulers.

[Liliet](#)

That does not jive with Pilgrim's behavior.

He and Saint don't have to be in full agreement to work together, working together is what heroes DO no matter what. Remember Vivi's opinion on William's Liesse bullshit?

RanVor

There's no evidence he doesn't either.

[Dresden 67](#)

There's loads of evidence actually.

We just saw that the Pilgrim was willing to murder his own nephew to prevent a massive war that would inevitably engulf the continent. The Saint's entire plan is all about expanding the Crusade and burning entire nations to the ground in order to rebuild from the ashes. That is the opposite of the Pilgrim's goal of minimising suffering.

We also know that the Pilgrim believes in Cordelia's goal of creating a permanent Grand Alliance between the Good nations, which doesn't fit the Saint's 'let it all burn' attitude.

He still believes the existing status quo can be salvaged, while she wants to uproot the entire thing.

RanVor

And what can prevent more suffering in the long term than vanquishing the Hidden Horror once and for all? Laurence's questionable rethoric probably wouldn't be able to sway him, but honeyed words of the Bard are quite a different matter. Also, believing in the Grand Alliance and believing in Procer aren't the same thing. He might very well believe that the rebuilt Procer will be stronger guardian of peace in the west than current Procer ever could. Besides, the situation has changed significantly since he last spoke of that.

[Dresden 67](#)

Except Laurence's plan didn't really have anything to do with ending the Hidden Horror. If that was the goal she would have gladly made peace with Callow and focused all their efforts on the war to the north.

Instead she ensured the war with Callow would continue. Her plan is to destroy the Principate and then remake it, fighting the Dead King is the means not the goal.

I suppose it is possible the Pilgrim is in on it, but I find it hard to believe he would support a plan that involves so much unnecessary suffering for such uncertain and vague gain.

We'll see soon enough which one of us is correct.

RanVor

As I've recently pointed out, Pilgrim's guiding principle is of rather self-contradictory nature. If killing a thousand to save a million is fair game, shouldn't letting millions die to save billions be fair game too? Where the line is?

The thing with Neshamah is that he can't really lose without winning first. He has amassed so much narrative weight the Fate won't let him be destroyed before he obtains at least a symbolic victory. That's why he avoided such victory for so long. The plan, spelled out quite clearly in Fatalism III, is to bait the forces of Evil (of which the Dead King is the most prominent) to go full Triumphant, destroying themselves narratively in the process. Destruction of the Principate is just a useful side effect.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Funny thing, but there didn't seem to be all that much suffering on display in Keter, or in the Dead King's domain of Serenity. (Admittedly, he'd surely consider that his guests would not appreciate such a display.) And DK basically wasn't a problem for the outside world until someone let him out.

RanVor

But Pilgrim has never been to Keter, how is he supposed to know?

[Adrian V](#)

I share Malanza's impression at the end, maybe adding well placed "fuck". At leasts we should be getting some more info about black soon.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Well, she has the experience.

I hope she doesn't get an actual grave or pyre in the Graveyard. Because some have to come out of this alive and knowing exactly how badly the Pilgrim and Saint screw them over. 😞

[Liliet](#)

My favorite Cat ship is back on!

...ok maybe not my FAVORITE favorite but the favorite of the ones that weren't already happening 😊

pagesbe

... The only thing that comes to mind is Pilgrim/Cat, which is just WRONG. Which ship are you talking about?

[Javvies](#)

Pretty sure it's Cat and Malanza.

[Liliet](#)

lmao no

"Are you trying to seduce your way out of this, Black Queen?"

SilverDargon

...Pilgrim/Shallow Grave???

RanVor

I ship it.

Speerodude

clearly Cat x Dead Proceans

Drunken Dwarf

Well this is wrapping up smoothly. Princes' Graveyard. And man would you look at that, seven mortal crowns and one.

apperatus27

See, now that we know that the Augur is compromised, this whole interaction regarding the truces makes a lot more sense.

Daemion

Please remind me, how is she compromised?

Drunken Dwarf

There is the possibility that the Augur is in on the plot of the Saint/Pilgrim to let Procer fall so Good can rise anew. That or Above decided to skew the Augur's stance with visions where they have to fight.

[Dresden 67](#)

I doubt she's actually in on the plan, more likely her information is being manipulated by the Bard.

And again, just because the Saint and the Bard have a plan doesn't mean that other heroes and Choirs are in on it. Good is no more a monolith than Evil.

[Liliet](#)

Seriously, yeah.

Stormblessed

Please remind me what chapters we saw the Saint/Pilgrim's plan to let Procer fall to build Good anew. I appear to have forgotten this.

[Liliet](#)

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/10/01/nihilism-iii/>

No indication that Pilgrim is in on it.

Shequi

It's entirely possible that when they get towards Iserre the Augur can no longer see them. Something else is using the sky, and her foretelling ability is entirely predicated on the flight of birds...

Tyrant done screwed her over.

Qwormuli

I still think, that the SpaghettiMcMonster Cordelia is busy prodding awake is a likely cause for the recent magical bullshittery and that everybody blaming it on our resident psychopath is just a red herring, as there is zero concrete evidence about his straight involvement. Not to mention, that that seems to be above his paygrade. But on the other hand, so is most of what he has done and if you already can't explain away half of his hi-jinks without some serious asspulls, why not go all in?

[Liliet](#)

Both are possibilities!

My favorite version is that it's all Sve Noc's fault, unwittingly, just for the hilarious irony. Not very likely, but hilarious.

Qwormuli

That would be worth it just for the resulting discussion!

[Liliet](#)

I K R

Alex

She's being manipulated by the Bard. Epilogue, Book 4: "The Augur sitting alone in a frosted garden, spoken whispers still echoing in her ears like a coiling snake." Who else can vanish so fast their voice still echoes through the air after they're gone?

Skaddx

Did Hanno get a buff or something? He held the line alone for months apparently. Then he and the Witch similiar to the Ranger took out a whole bunch of other Risen Chosen. Insane.

Pilgrim is back. Looks like heroes are ready to reenter the story.

Someguy

Nah, he probably accessed his Library of Plagiarism to copy someone who done it before.

Skaddx

My point is more he ran out of Stamina in his first fight against Black so fighting that long alone should tire him out but apparently he held the line. And we know Named can die from getting tired out so...it was weird. Copying fighting styles probably don't matter all that much against Hordes until his next fight with the Witch where they fought Risen Chosen.

[Javvies](#)

He's a Hero fighting an army of undead monstrosities. That's a straightforward situation, and an entirely different one from fighting Black.

Skaddx

You are missing my point the implication is that Hanno held the wall by himself for months. My point is Named can run out of stamina as shown in Hanno vs Black ergo he should have gotten tired and fallen to the horde. Yes Black was more efficient at sapping Hanno's energy but an endless horde should get the same done even without better combat tactics.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think it was for months.

Iconochasm

Why are you assuming he fought for 2+ months straight? It seems likely that the meaning of that line is something like "He was the critical element holding things together for those months" rather than "24/7 Sword Fighting!".

[Javvies](#)

Hanno may be an asshat, and not the smartest, but he **is** a Hero fighting an army of undead monstrosities. It really is kind of his wheelhouse, and is not a situation where someone like Black could play him and game the system against him, and the Dead King, who might be able to do something like that – trying to set up a scenario/story where the Hero died but held out long enough for help to arrive or for a victory to be achieved elsewhere by holding the enemy where he was fighting – probably didn't care enough to do so.

[theothin](#)

Wait, why do you think he's an asshat?

[Liliet](#)

Well, you see, he opposes the protagonist, and *belongs to the side* which opposes the protagonist! Even worse, he accepts as an authority a Choir of angels which presumably also, like other Choirs of angels that we've seen, opposes the protagonist!

It's really terrible of him, you see.

Oshi

I think hes an asshat because he so sunk into his shtick he can't see anything around him. He would have been able to kill Black if he did.

[Liliet](#)

I think you're exaggerating a lot. Yes, he's not a narrative genius the way Amadeus is, and yes, he failed to predict his bullshit. I don't see how this translates into 'not seeing anything around him' or being an asshat.

FactualInsanity

Considering Hanno an asshat, or not largely depends upon whether you consider his two-face coin shtick divinely inspired impartial judgement, or the coping mechanism of, well, an asshat refusing to take moral responsibility for his actions. It's an extention of the "I was just following orders" problem and how infallible you consider the "higher power" giving those orders to be.

(That's Two-Face as the Batman character, not as in Hanno is two faced.)

[Liliet](#)

I mean. I'm. Pretty sure the coin is real. What with. The whole thing with Amadeus attempting to interfere with it being knocked on his ass?

The White Knight opened his palm, and there was a silver coin in it. Amadeus let all other distractions fall to the wayside. The coin spun in the air, one side with laurels and the other with crossed swords. It fell back on the palm, swords up.

The point of the sword went through the roof of his mouth. Amadeus withdrew his bloodied blade and put the full strength of his Name behind the swing, but when he touched the neck it bounced off. Something infinitely larger than him swatted him down and he was thrown down onto the pavestones. They collapsed around him, the ground shaking. Seraphim. His plate was ripped open and he was bleeding from the eyes and mouth. The White Knight was collapsed as well, a mere five feet away, but it might as well have been a mile.

There's like. Absolutely no reason to consider the coin anything other than absolutely real and giving Hanno very real will of the Choir of Judgement.

Also, the coin just answers the question of 'should I kill this person'. Hanno still decides when to ask the question, and so far, we've only seen him ask it about actively murderous villains he was already fighting. And that one time the Proceran nobles asked him to judge their disagreement lmao. That's the only thing he ever did that even remotely approached *not the absolutely correct and obvious thing to do in the situation*. He doesn't even ask the Seraphim unless he's already certain himself / unless he has been explicitly asked to pass judgement. He is, if anything, surprisingly inoffensive for a White Knight of Judgement.

"Brooding is pointless," Hanno said in tradertalk. "If something distresses you, act upon it. Otherwise you surrender all right to complain."

"So speaks the Choir of Judgement," she said. "Though you're fairly moderate for one of theirs. Most would have executed the upper Secretariat and taken command of the siege after our little tower episode."

"I do not judge," he finally said. "That is not my Role."

Seriously, where do people GET any of this 'two face' 'just following orders' shit? Hanno makes his own calls wrt everything, and he makes *good* ones. Name one thing he did (like, actually onscreen did, or at least was said to do) that rubbed you the wrong way assbattery-wise.

FactualInsanity

The coin is real, the moral authority of a bunch of eldritch abominations is questionable.

When I say coping mechanism, I don't mean he's delusional.

Also, I'm not saying Hanno is an asshat. Just what causes people to consider him one. Personally I neither like, nor dislike him.

Liliet

So let me just stop you right there and remind you that the society Hanno grew up in considers the Choir, eldritch or not, very much relevant moral authority. Hanno has questioned a lot of his upbringing; he hasn't questioned this bit. Has had no reason to.

Our view from out of universe is very different from the view in-universe.

Mental Mouse

The coin was given him by the angels, so yeah, it represents their influence in any case. But consider also that Hanno is something of a trauma case: He was basically cast out of his own society for refusing to condemn his widowed mother, and in that wrecked state the angels grabbed him with an offer: We can make all those moral conflicts go away..

Liliet

He sought them out, more or less.

Because the religious authority he trusted pointed him in that direction.

Why are people getting mad at Hanno for following his religion properly?

Qwormuli

It's not always just about opposing a protagonist and you know it. While I too have to admit, that I kind of like him, it does nothing to lessen the amount of personal responsibility he is blindly shunting off on an unfeeling, eldritch monster. But yes, personally I think of all of the blind followers of the choirs as either idiots or lower case evil by proxy. From what we have gotten, mercy for example would like nothing more, than a dead and sterile sphere of a planet with the flag of the Attic on it, as that would minimize "suffering"(what they "think" of it, at least). The gained good has never really entered the equation for them. That is also the reason why i buy

the final speech of the most notorious (living) monster in the story and why in my head canon the Attic and Cellar both have different Victory conditions for the alleged bet.

[Liliet](#)

" personal responsibility he is blindly shunting off on an unfeeling, eldritch monster"

Personal responsibility for what?

What exactly has Hanno done wrong on behest of his Choir?

RanVor

You know, Hanno didn't exactly do a lot of anything onscreen.

It's not really about wrong or right, it's that he doesn't take personal responsibility, period. That really rubs many people (including me) the wrong way.

[Liliet](#)

You're not wrong, it was bugging me from the beginning that he was talking about being a weapon of the Choir of Judgement, yet making all the calls himself and only ever asking the angels anything when he already made the decision himself. Like, c'mon dude, for someone who doesn't consider himself competent enough to make calls, you sure are making a lot of them, aren't you?

Oh wait, that's the opposite problem to the one you have with him.

Go figure!

[Mental Mouse](#)

Against the undead army, I suspect conservation of Ninjitsu comes into play. In any case, Hanno is and was a top-ranked Hero, up with the Saint and the Pilgrim. His fight against Amadeus really was an even fight that either could have won – Hanno's raw power and library of Light powers, against Amadeus' creative and sophisticated use of his own limited Dark powers... plus the latter's strategic control and story-fu.

caoimhinh

Awesome, a lot of plotlines coming together in Iserre for the coming battle, and this is just beginning.

Princes' Graveyard and payment of Larat's Seven Crowns and One, here we go!

I don't really want Rozala and Arnaund to die yet since they are interesting characters in their own ways, but maybe Cat can take their crowns without taking their lives?

Now we got to see more of Rozala, more mentions of the patient schemer that is Arnaund while people still underestimate him yet seeing him as useful tool. That guy is preparing a coup in Procer and few have realized it yet (so far only Pilgrim, Saint and Cat know of his true nature).

Maybe we will find out more about Amadeus' situation, too. And the plot had yet to move fully to the real war that is raging north.

This is going to be a thrill.

Typos found:

theat / that

Three month / months

It to speak of that I have come / It's to speak of it that I have come

[Euodiachloris](#)

There's more than one way to bury a Prince. Like, having their principality go poof from under them. 😊

nick012000

>I don't really want Rozala and Arnaund to die yet since they are interesting characters in their own ways, but maybe Cat can take their crowns without taking their lives?

Ahem.

>She'd be stripped of her title as Princess of Aequitan as well as her rights in the Highest Assembly without any recourse, the vote considered as having already been taken through the initial motion seconding the order.

Insanenoodlyguy

Oh, good point. Merely convincing them they need to go north instead of fight her would "bury" eight princes without having to kill one. I doubt it will be quite that clean, but the possibility is there and if eight princes are deposed, a name like Prince's Graveyard still tracks.

RanVor

I have a little problem with this theory, namely that it doesn't sound like something Juniper would consider a great military achievement.

[Liliet](#)

Well, according to Juniper, it's historians who point at it as an example of what Cat does.

RanVor

According to Juniper writing a book about Cat's military accomplishments.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

Author Unknown

The crows of snark have been holding back because they fear being detected, but now GP is here... There will be no hiding from him, so no need to hold back. Time to see what Night can do.

mordered

Calling it, Cat will kill 4 princes then take Rozala's, Arnoud's, Louis' crowns by convincing them to march north, which will see them stripped of their principalities.

konstantinvoncarstein

Am I the only one who is disappointed by Neshama's performance? Not that I want him to win, but he is the most powerful force of Evil (if not most powerful ruler) on the continent. I thought that his victories would be a little more spectacular, with whole principalities already lost.

caoimhinh

Well, Hannover and possibly Rhenia are already lost, the Principate's main host is holding back the Army of Keter in Cleves and Hainaut at the cost of thousands of lives and destroying the environment, even with Heroes backing them, while the Lycaonese are desperately defending Bremen. So there has been a lot of destruction, although I'm pretty sure Neshamah is not hitting them with everything he has, he is aware that reaching too far will only make the Heavens' response be more overwhelming.

SITB

The most horrifying thing about all descriptions of the war up north is that this war isn't really anything special to the Dead King.

He didn't bring his the entirety of his power, he views the existential war about the future of Procer as an attack of opportunity and nothing more.

Mennolt van Alten

I haven't seen any replies to this yet but, Oh my God the Lyaconese are going at it. My appreciation for all those lines about 'harr harr my ancestors held the line against the dead for like forever' have gone up so much is this one chapter, and I love how you show the effects the horrible things the armies of Dead have on the leaders of the armies opposing them!

Interlude: Congregation III

*"We sowers of ruin, straight-backed and proud,
Told them arrant, and arrantly kept our vow:
'No bargain is there, between hunter and flock;
No peace between the rabbit and the hawk.'*

*We sowers of ruin, reaped all that was sown,
For as Mieza's sons toppled our waning thrones,
They arrant said: 'no bargain now, o lords of war,
For no peace can be, between spear and boar.'*

*We sowers of ruin, the reapers that were reapt,
Sing the elder song still, for we must not forget:
No bargain is there, between hunter and flock,
No peace can there be, between lash and orc."*

– "Ruin, Sown", a spoken verse in Kharsum attributed to Yngvild Bittertongue, chieftess of the Red Shields

Lord Yannu Marave of the Champion's Blood felt his scalp prickle. The last time the Lord of Alava's instincts had been screaming this loudly, he'd come within a breath of having his crush skulled by a *culebron* whose scales he'd failed to notice among the leaves of the Brocelian. Yannu had been a young fool, back then, but raised his shield on impulse and so avoided dying to a whip of the tail so strong it put hammer blows to shame. He could not help but wonder if there was not kinship between the dangers of then and now. A fool was once more about to step on the tail a hidden serpent and die for that mistake. That he now stood at the

heart of a great army instead of journeying alone into the deeper barrow-woods to bring honourable deeds to his Blood made little difference. As Yannu's station had risen, so had the dangers accompanying it.

"They're camped here," Moro of the Brigand's Blood said, tapping his finger. "On the other shore of the river."

The heir to Vaccei had gained a few fresh scars, fighting at his mother's side against the Marshals. What had already been a hard face on a hard man was now frightful to behold, the red marks left by goblin steel running jagged through the umber-brown and basil-green face paint of his line. The effect was strikingly attractive, though Yannu was careful not to let his gaze linger. He was over a decade older than the other man, after all.

"The river's called the Odelle," Princess Rozala Malanza noted, frowning as she bent over the table to have a closer look. "As I recall, the source is further east and the depth shallow. It'll be frozen over."

The Princess of Aquitan had been a pleasant surprise, the Lord of Alava thought. No Alamans intriguer, that one, but a hardened Arlesite commander who had already fought the greater of their foes on the field not so long ago. Wild rumours still spread about what had taken place at the Battle of the Camps, but not so wild that the Peregrine had not confirmed some of the lot. The Black Queen, if she had truly returned, would be a fearsome enemy. The part of Yannu that belonged to the Champion's Blood was eager at the thought of measuring his prowess against hers. The part that was the Lord of Alava was wary instead, for it had fought against the Marshals for months and learned they had sharp talons indeed.

"If they have ended their march, then they must believe their eastern columns are close to joining them," Yannu said. "We may be facing as many as sixty thousand eastern legionaries, along with however many there are of these grey ghosts."

"Between our hosts, we have eighty thousand," Princess Rozala said. "And if Lord Tanja makes his way as swiftly as promised with Her Highness' southern army, that's another sixty thousand hitting them from the other side of the river."

"Likely double the enemy's numbers, unless the Black Queen is somehow fielding an army that leaves no tracks in the snow," Moro of the Brigand's Blood said.

Word from Sarcella and Akil Tanja put these grey devil-ghosts at less than twenty thousand strong, though it was said some could wield strange sorceries. Yet they were also said to be no stronger than men, blade in hand, and just as mortal. Poorly armed as well, more tribes than companies.

"We should strike at the Hellhound's camp before the rest of her divisions arrive," Princess Malanza said. "Best for all of us we face that army *without* Catherine Foundling in it."

"There would be great honour in taking the Black Queen's life," Moro told her bluntly.

The look in the younger man's eyes spoke of esteem lowered for shying away from a worthy struggle. Yannu would withhold judgement instead. The Peregrine and the Regicide had promised they would take the field against the Arch-heretic of the East should she bare her blade, but the Lord of Alava still remembered the stories from the rise of the Barrow Lord. The warring of Bestowed was never kind to their lesser, and the Black Queen was said to be one of the greatest living villains. Even in death she might wreak great slaughter.

"The lucky ones died when the lake fell on their heads, at the Camps," Princess Rozala said, tone calm yet not less sharp for it. "Those that drowned, though? It wasn't as quick. They had long enough to realize there would be nothing to save them."

The dark-haired princess smiled pleasantly.

"Which would you prefer to happen when your turn comes, Levantine?" she asked.

The heir to Vaccei twitched, no doubt reaching for one of the many poisoned blades on his person, but the Arlesite's hand was already on the pommel of her sword. It was never very far from it, Yannu had noticed, and she seemed uncomfortable when it was.

"Enough," he said. "Moro, you would bare a blade on an ally when the *Peregrine* is among us?"

The man's lips pressed together in disquiet, as well they should. The Pilgrim might not be at this council, but the incarnate soul of Levant had made it clear as rain to all of them that his blessing had been given to the Grand Alliance. To dishonour the living inheritor in Blood and Bestowal of the Dominion's father would be... Even should the Peregrine not take Moro's life, the sheer weight of the shame might see the man slice open his own throat.

"There is nothing to be gained from threats, Princess Rozala," Yannu said, eyes then moving to the Proceran. "We are to fight side by side on this field and more to come."

"Apologies, Moro," the dark-haired woman curtly said, dipping her head.

The heir to Vaccei returned the courtesy, just as curtly. It was for the best that Lady Itima had not been the one given slight to, for the Lady of Vaccei would not have left it at that.

"I stand by my words nonetheless," the Princess of Aquitan said. "We must strike now, before they gather."

"I am reluctant to engage without our full might," Yannu admitted. "The armies of the League are marching towards us, Princess. If they are to try our flank while we face the Marshals then I would have all our soldiery arrayed against the enemy."

Rozala had, amusingly enough, inquired if the Tyrant of Helike had sent envoys to make a bargain with Yannu's host not long after she joined her army with the Lord of Alava's. He'd replied that was indeed the case, and that those envoys could easily be found: the corpses, after all, were still hanging from the personal banner of the Lady of Vaccei. Lady Itima's line had faithfully kept to the hatred the Vengeful Brigand had held against foreigners, and not hesitated to slaughter any sworn to the likes of Kairos Theodosian.

"If we get them to retreat from their camp, we can seize it and close ranks with Lord Tanja's force there before the League arrives," Princess Rozala suggested.

"Or their returning columns could find us engaged assaulting a fortified camp and spring an ambush before Tanja is close enough to reinforce," Yannu pointed out with a frown.

Her insistence puzzled him, for she should well know that the Marshals were capable of plying nasty tricks against opponents made sloppy by haste. Had she not fought the Hellhound herself and come out the lesser captain? The Lord of Alava had lost hundreds to a vicious charge of Callowan knights before learning to keep his own horse close to his skirmishers, and would not go after his foe so brashly again.

"If we lose the initiative we risk this entire campaign stretching out for months," the dark-haired princess reminded him, sounding frustrated.

There it is, the Lord of Alava thought. It had been a rare occasion for all the great captains of the allied armies to hold common council, for both Malanza and he were aware that old enmities would see blades bared should close company be kept. Yet on the two occasions it had, Yannu had studied the princes and princess of Procer. Seen the difference, the subtle currents that ran among them. That Princess Rozala was first among equals was clear, beyond even her right of command, and that the Princess of Lyonis was her appointed warden was just as clear. What had been more interesting, to Yannu of the Champion's Blood, was that even within the Princess of Aquitan's faithful there was more subtle

division. The princes of Creusens and Cantal were closer in her trust than any other, and both of those men had... telltale marks. Louis of Creusens had pulled a knife without hesitating on a servant when she'd approached him from behind, halfway to her neck before he stopped himself. Arnaud of Cantal spoke loudly and often, but sometimes also fell into long silences where he moved not a finger. As for Rozala Malanza herself, Yannu had noticed when seated she never crossed her legs. She wore leather boots, and always kept their thin soles squarely against the ground. Like she was feeling for tremors.

All three of these, the Lord of Alava had been told, had gone north to the Principality of Cleves to fight against the armies of the Dead King.

"I was told that the lines in Cleves held," Yannu said, watching the Proceran closely.

Princess Rozala's jaw clenched.

"When the sea pulls back before the coming wave crashes, the shore has not *held*," she replied. "We bought a month, Lord Marave, maybe two. Our defences will break sure as summer's turn if we wait longer than that. You have not..."

Yannu saw her lips moved in a whisper, counting out in Tolesian. Only after reaching twelve did she resume speaking.

"In Callow I fought fae and dead and villain's wroth," the Princess of Aquitan finally said, voice tight. "Believe me when I say that was a *child at play*. The Dead King comes for us all, Yannu of the Champion's Blood. And every day we waste warring against mortals the Enemy gains a deeper foothold."

Eyes hard, the dark-haired princess matched him gaze for gaze.

"I've had to claw back that shore from the Hidden Horror's clutches once before," she said. "Gods have mercy, but I do not know if there are enough soldiers left in Procer to do so a second time."

It wasn't the determination he saw in those dark eyes that moved the Lord of Alava. He has seen will in others, and smashed it to bloody pieces when it stood in his way. Mortals failed, mortals broke: a moment of resolution was just that, a moment. It always passed, and more often than not pain and steel hurried that passing. Neither was it the fear, for fear was an old friend to him. Yannu's Blood was meant to strive for fearlessness, for the same reckless courage that was the Valiant Champion's mark, but he had never forgot that day in the Brocelian where a splintered shield might have been a splintered skull. Audacity without patience, without watchfulness, was just another way of being frivolous with lives. Fear was the voice that kept your eyes open

when bravery became arrogance, and he would not part from his even for a chance at Bestowal. No, it was the heartfelt belief Rozala Malanza had for her own words. She genuinely believed that the bell might toll for the Principate if they lingered here too long in Iserre.

"Then we march to battle," Lord Yannu of the Champion's Blood conceded.

"It'll be ten days to reach the camp," Moro said, stirring from his silence with hooded eyes. "If we hurry."

"Then we hurry," Princess Rozala grimly replied.

—

They had been, Hakram had to admit, shrewdly outmanoeuvred.

Juniper's dispersion scheme had been solid, and it had certainly worked for the initial stretch of the march. The Third Army had baited the Lord Tanja's host towards the east while the Fourth followed along parallel lines further north in Iserre, both keeping lines of communication open and keeping watch for a sudden march south by Lord Marave's army. What messengers the Fourth Army had been able to receive from the Hellhound's own two columns headed westwards had told them that the Levantine army under Lord Marave was pursuing them while leaving Marsha Grem and his legions to gather themselves. Until then, all had proceeded according to Juniper's predictions: all she had to do was join with the Legions of Terror and force the Levantines back with a minor battle, to create a gap. Then the Third and Fourth Army were to shake off their own pursuit by Lord Tanja and hurry through that gap, assembling the entire allied force together. From there they could begin a fighting retreat to the northern passage, where the garrison under Duchess Kegan of Daoine would be awaiting them.

The opinion of the general staff had been that, considering the League of Free cities was invading from the south and the Dead King hitting northern Procer in force, the Legions and the Army of Callow would not even be hounded all the way through the retreat north. After the Grand Alliance saved face by 'driving out the eastern invaders', they'd been predicted to focus their efforts on containing the League of Free Cities while sending everything they could spare north. It would have been a campaign cleverly salvaged from the unexpected blow of losing the fairy gates when already committed deep in Procer, one fought with minimal losses while cleanly getting out the majority of the Legions of Terror under Marsha Grem.

Instead, the Fourth Army suddenly found its ability to send messengers north to coordinate with the Hellhound cut when a detachment of Helike *kataphractoi* began roving north of it. The

messengers south sent to warn Nauk and the Third Army about League interference never made it, and were found with arrows in their corpses by General Bagram's scouts. Adjutant had pushed for the Fourth Army to immediately move south and join with Nauk before marching north together, and the Fourth's general agreed. One day into the march, however, a messenger from Juniper stumbled bloody into the camp with cataphracts in close pursuit. The First and Second Armies, the man said, had been taken by surprise and scattered when the Grey Pilgrim joined with Lord Marave and struck with miracles. The messenger had been an old subordinate's of General Bagram's, and the seals were in order. Gritting his teeth, Hakram had backed the decision to hurry and relieve Juniper – without a cohesive army to gather around, the legionaries of the First and Second would be hunted down like animals by the Levantine cavalry, scattered across the plains and vulnerable.

Seven days in, the messenger began bleeding out of the eyes and choked on his own tongue. The priests from the House Insurgent saw nothing wrong with him besides the obvious, but the ranking Senior Mage did when the corpse was dissected. A small stone inscribed with runes was dislodged from where it'd been ebed at the bottom of the man's spine, and examination under ritual confirmed the magic involved was illusory in nature. One of the few Soninke among the mage cadres eventually noted the runes had patterns in common with Stygian sorcery, and then it all fell together. They'd been had, the messenger was some poor bastard the Tyrant of Helike's men had captured and tinkered with the memories of discretely enough neither priests nor mages had caught it until too late. A few years back, Adjutant thought to himself, the trick wouldn't have worked. But the Army of Callow had expanded wildly beyond its capacity to field experienced mages, and the native Callowan practitioners that'd been brought in to try to remedy that were amateurs compared to Praesi warlocks. And Stygia's Magisterium, as the success of the deception made clear.

Debate raged among the general staff of the Fourth Army, after that, for most of an evening. Some argued that if the purpose of the ruse had been to isolate the Third Army, it likely had been already destroyed by now. A strike by the cataphracts would likely slow down Nauk's ten thousand enough that the Levantines would surround and destroy them utterly. Those same officers argued that marching south now would essentially mean throwing away another quarter of the Army of Callow for Levant and Helike to defeat in detail. Others suggested that it was the Fourth Army itself that was the target, and the ploy's true nature was that the northern Levantines had let the Hellhound go and were instead marching south to pincer the Third and Fourth while Helike kept them all blind. Some even theorized that First and Second Armies truly had been broken, and this was all the Tyrant's trick to lead them to dismiss the notion and hurry south while the rest of

the Army of Callow was annihilated. It was bloody chaos, and not for the first time Hakram wondered at how young their highest rung of officers was.

The veterans brought in from the Legions that'd joined after Second Liesse were keeping it all functional, but there were too many officers who'd gone only through rough training camps before taking up their commission. But General Bagram was no greenhorn, and neither was Hakram himself. The debate ended with the decision to link up with the Third before the situation was further assessed, though careful scouting would be necessary in case the Third Army truly was destroyed and it was a Levantine force south of them. The Fourth Army moved out in good order, and a mere three days in ran into a Helike ambush. Somehow they'd avoided three lines of scouts, and that smacked to Adjutant of either sorcery or Named interference, but the result was brutal no matter the means employed. Three hundred dead, twice that many wounded, and the *kataphractoi* retreated with less than a score casualties on their side. The entire Fourth Army was boiling with fury at the humiliation, but it was only the first of many assaults to come. On its entire march back the way it'd been tricked marching, the army was relentlessly harassed by Helike. Night and day assaults, at irregular intervals, and in the end General Bagram had to order a fortified camp raised every evening or risk losing entire companies.

It was slowing them down even further, forcing them to end the march earlier in the day and exhausting the legionaries for the effort. Hakram suspected that might very well be the point, and by now was halfway convinced Nauk would be either up to his elbow in Levantines or days dead by the time they arrived to reinforce the Third. If any of it was even left. The anger of that stayed with him, and chased away the need for even what little sleep his body still required. His hours he spent either in talks with the general staff or out on watch with the legionaries. It was maybe halfway to Midnight Bell that he saw the glint of armoured riders in the distance, before even goblins caught it, and he immediately sounded the alarm.

"Shit," Captain Mower cursed, peeking over the edge of the palisade, then added a very absent-minded 'sir'.

The old goblin saw the same thing, and did not gainsay Adjutant when he ordered for crossbow companies to be brought to the fore. And half-companies of regulars too. The cataphracts had yet to try a charge, but that did not meant they would refrain if they saw an opportunity.

"So, what's it going to be tonight," Hakram said, teeth clinking softly. "Fire or exhaustion?"

"Bet you it's fire, sir," Captain Mower said. "Been too long since they tried those pitch arrows."

The goblin spoke the word 'pitch' with the kind of utter disdain that would make a High Lord proud. He was a scout officer, not a sapper, but in Hakram's experience that'd never stopped Eyrie get from looking down at the unprofessional savagery of people not using proper goblin munitions for this kind of work.

"They gain more to less risk by forcing us to wake in the middle of the night then hitting us during the day at peak exhaustion," Adjutant said. "The surprise with the scorpions killed a few dozen last time they got close to the palisade."

"They won't fall for that twice," Captain Mower sighed. "Almost makes me miss Akua's Folly, at least the wights weren't mounted."

"I'd even settle for Dormer," Hakram gravelled. "And the bloody fae could fly."

"That's the Black Queen's service for you," the goblin grinned. "It ain't the Army of Callow if we're not fucked a different way every time."

There was a ring of inexplicable cheers from the rest of the line at that, as the captain had raised his voice to carry. Catherine's popularity with goblinkind never ceased to unnerve him. Robber had once told him it was because she was 'the closest thing a human can get to a Matron, but you know the *fun* kind of Matron not the other kind, and it sort of helps she'd probably murder the other Matrons given a chance, although let's be honest so would the other Matrons'. It'd been surprisingly coherent, given how much drink his friend had in him by that point. Not that Robber ever answered these kinds of questions by anything other than blatant lies unless he'd been plied with liquor and petty crime first. Pickler wasn't any more of a help, as he'd been the one to inform her of the phenomenon in the first place. She'd never noticed.

"Well now, *that's* new," Captain Mower suddenly said.

Hakram's attention snapped back to the present. Behind him the thin stripe of regulars was already standing at attention while the crossbow companies formed up behind them and checked their gear. That much was to be expected: they'd had a harder teacher than mere drills to get them to do it all quick and clean. What wasn't expected was the way the Helike cataphracts had stopped about a hundred yards away from the palisade. They were – wait, that wasn't a Helikean. There was a rider between the enemy and the camp, alone. Adjutant's heart stirred, but what brought it home was the sudden shouts of surprise coming from deeper into the camp. A wooden post was snapped out of the frozen ground and alarm sounded again as long wings began beating. A frankly chilling whinny sounded into the night and Zombie the Third took flight, the wooden post she'd been tied to swinging under her hanging by the bridle.

"Not new at all, Captain," Hakram Deadhand grinned, all teeth and malice. "*She's back.*"

[DroughtBringer](#)

Go vote!

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

theart0fwar

[Reserved for some witty comment later]

sutortyrannus

... Is it Brigand or Bandit's Blood?

Is this Erractic separating the line in Levant decisively from the Gallant Brigand mentioned in the Prologue of Book IV?

Or is this meant to illustrate narrative drift, given the distance between Alava and Vaccei?

Or, most likely, is it just a mistake?

Also:

Vengeful Bandit/Brigand

Grim Binder

Silent Slayer

Valiant Champion

Grey Pilgrim

Clearly the first three were new tabletop players and still stuck in their "edgy" phase.

[Liliet](#)

>Clearly the first three were new tabletop players and still stuck in their "edgy" phase.

Yes.

WRT Brigand/Bandit, I think Amelia was called both, too. It sounds like they're being treated as synonyms Name-wise.

Cap'n Smurfy

It seems to vary depending on whose speaking. Maybe it changes slightly between languages? People are technically

speaking different languages even if it's written in English.

[Liliet](#)

Also a possibility!

luminiousblu

In my experience, new tabletop players are the ones who think the Paladin is actually a cool class to play.

Curious Corvid

Paladins **are** a fun class to play, though. Especially in 5e without alignment requirements.

Oshi

You sir get a cookie. Friggin Paladins...

Rynjin

It is...in Pathfinder anyway, where you're not so MAD you need an overly generous point buy or absurd rolled stats to make it worthwhile.

Skaddx

Nice set up..though quite frankly I could have done with just skipping to Cat and Hakram meeting up again. Lets find out about Masego and get to the fight.

joewill5234

Agreed. This seemed like unnecessary filler. Let's hope the next chapter gets back to Catherine and things start happening.

Gunslinger

EE does like to leave the best moments for Fridays. It makes for a fucking end to the week

Gunslinger

This should have been fucking awesome end to the week lol

Someguy

The Crusaders will be fucked into historical humiliation.

Draeysine

Back in black
I hit the sack

I've been too long I'm glad to be back
Yes, I'm let loose
From the noose
That's kept me hanging about
I've been looking at the sky
'Cause it's gettin' me high
Forget the hearse 'cause I never die
I got nine lives
Cat's eyes
Abusin' every one of them and running wild

Argentorum

I never realized how perfect this song is for Cat. Thank you!

Gunslinger

Aww such a faithful horse our Zombie the Third is.

[Liliet](#)

Cat is extremely likable.

Even horses notice it.

Gunslinger

Even dead ones

[Mental Mouse](#)

IIRC, Z3 was raised with a mix of Winter power and whatever was left of the Squire name by that point. It's interesting that even after Cat had yet another resurrection and change in power-set, she still has her link to Z3.

[Liliet](#)

I think this link is just Zombie the Third liking her personally and having the fae senses to detect her presence.

And any necromancer can control any necromantic construct, in theory.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Given the company Zombie 3rd keeps, I'd feel sorry for any two-bit necromancer who tries gazumping the control of our undead fairy horsie.

Because... joke's on them. Also, the wind-up and punchline are to die for. 😊

Weyrwoman

I mean, since Winter was eaten by Night....it's possible that z3 also underwent some kind of metamorphosis? Who's to say Z3 isn't tied to Cat by Night now instead of Winter 😊

[Javvies](#)

Wait, what?

Godsdamn it, I'm losing track of what's going on.

But, the knowledge that Cat is back is going to be a serious morale booster for the Army of Callow. And the Legions with them.

Malanza's right. Their priority has to be freeing up all available forces to fight the Dead King. Everything else is essentially a sideshow.

stevenneiman

That's been a running theme throughout the story: everything is a compromise between people who actually understand what's going on and have a sensible idea of how to deal with it, and petty intriguers who would rather squabble with each other than avert their own doom.

[Liliet](#)

TBF there's also an added factor of "terrified and confused population unsure of what's going on and steadily growing angry".

Cat has had to deal with it in Callow, now it's Cordy&Co's turn in Procer.

Someguy

Thats only if the preservation of the Proceran state is a priority. If they are going to be used as fodder just for Above to prove a principle of "No Truce with the Enemy"....

fbt

i liked this, and am very much looking forward to what comes next! 😊 I'd missed hakram, and i think we really needed this lens into just how screwed they were w/o cat. A matter of showing rather than telling, and all that. GJ.

IDKWhoitis

Good to see that Night and Winter eating each other didn't get rid of Zombie the Third.

This also bodes, somewhat under some definitions, well for the Hunt too.

muffin

Doesn't make much sense. Why did they took Zombie the 3rd to the battle field?

[Liliet](#)

What should they have done instead and why is that the better option?

Someguy

IIRC all of Cat's mounts are stuffed with Goblin Munitions, so it's role is Emergency Mobile Explosive Platform.

IDKWhoitis

Mascot? Catherine Detector? Zombie didnt cooperate with detainment without a Woe or Catherine present? It's not like an actual horse that requires food.

PurplePoring

Gods, it never gets old seeing Cat's enemies sh*tting themselves just thinking about her... And her allies, too.
Our girl has come a long way and paid the long price.

Skaddx

I do wonder when Hanno and Cat will cross paths since its seems unlikely he will be around for this war. Everyone might be on the same side by the time they cross paths.

Oshi

I'm expecting some weird situation where the Hierarch is used as a shield so the mortals can come to a binding agreement that shuts out the gods after which they smash the Dead King.

ALazyMonster

I'm expecting Hanno to go for the coin flip thing and Cat will just disintegrate it and tell him to make his own damn decisions for once. This will of course be followed by him giving up and following Cat's lead.

[Liliet](#)

l m a o

[Mental Mouse](#)

Cat disintegrating that coin would be a bad idea. Remember what happened when Amadeus tried to interrupt Hanno mid-judgement?

RanVor

Well, Cat does have experience in telling angels to fuck off...

Argentorum

It's not Amadeus' wheelhouse like it is Cat's. Plus, she has a goddess of her own to intercede on her behalf, and we all know how much Crows love grabbing shiny things.

Coin goes up, and Crowmena snatches it out of the air anyone? It'll be grand.

[Liliet](#)

What annoys me about this scenario is the idea that Hanno is this naive child who listens to the Choir because of the coin and the minute it's taken away he'll just start listening to someone else.

Hanno is a willful person who knows what he thinks of the world and what he thinks of the world is that he wants to be the White Knight of the Choir of Judgement. He venerates the angels of it as his own choice + his culture and if it's challenged head on he'll respond like any religious person does.

Incidentally he's also a good person who hasn't done a single thing I found fault with so far, interprets his religion in a way that makes him really nice to be around and pleasant and good and useful.

RanVor

Wait a sec. Cat doesn't have Zombie the Third anymore, so *who is this?*

[Liliet](#)

What do you mean "doesn't have"? Zombie the Third wasn't with her. Now we know where she was!

RanVor

I mean somebody has come to the Fourth Army's camp riding Zombie the Third and it sure as hell can't be Cat, so who?

[Liliet](#)

"but what brought it home was the sudden shouts of surprise coming from deeper into the camp. A wooden post was snapped out of the frozen ground and alarm sounded again as long wings began beating. A frankly chilling whinny sounded into the night and Zombie the Third took flight, the wooden post she'd been tied to swinging under her hanging by the bridle."

Zombie the Third was tied to a post in Hakram's camp. Cat's on Zombie the Fourth.

RanVor

Ah. Misread then. Sorry.

[origamiflame](#)

Or you know, could just be that she's riding a live horse?

[Liliet](#)

We know about Zombie the Fourth

caoimhinh

Yep, that's an inconsistency.

It seems EE went back and edited the Ever Dark Arc chapters and deleted any mention of Zombie the Third in them. The last mention of Cat's horse is when they are in Keter. Then Zombie was no longer mentioned again.

But in chapter 6 of this book Cat mentioned she was riding Zombie the Fourth I'm pretty certain that there was a scene of Cat complaining about using a living horse and then later about her new undead horse not having the same intelligence as Zombie the Third

caoimhinh

Interesting chapter, although not much happened, we got to see a bit of the leaders of the other army. Hakram's perspective was the one with more information and shows us once again that Tyrant is playing everyone. That last part of Zombie III announcing Cat's return was nicely done. Things will get fun now; and yes, Moro, the Black Queen is fielding an army that leaves no tracks in the snow, doubting it out actually makes it more likely to happen.

Fun fact about Culebrón: that's a colloquial term in Spanish that means "big snake".

Also, EE actually went back and edited Interlude Precipitation and retconned the ruling line of Vaccei from being of the

Champion's Blood to being of the Bandit's Blood, interesting. I wonder if he'll do the same with the inconsistency in Ime's name.

Typos found:

- step on the tail a hidden serpent / the tail of a hidden serpent
- taken place as the Battle of the Camps / at the Battle of the Camps
- when you turn comes / your turn
- (this one happened twice) Marsha Grem / Marshall
- messenger from Juniper / from Juniper
- Hakram's experience / Hakram's experience

Thecount

Also crush skulled should be skull crushed

Agent J

Frankly, I much prefer EE's creative interpretation.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I hope EE's also working in the corrections from the comments, if not doing an extra proofreading pass of his own.

Andrew Mitchell

I don't.

I hope he's just working on keeping up the 13 new quality chapters per month... And living the rest of his life. He can get to the typos and proofreading when the series is done.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Holy shit they kept the horse around.

DD

I've heard of skulls being crushed, but a crush being skulled is a new one.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

uh what

Ekmo

What, you've never knocked heads with your crush when going in for a kiss?

[Baella Hey](#)

Nobody said anything about "crush skulled" yet? That one gave me a triple-take.

superkeaton

Short filler, we already knew about the princes and princess' King Given dispositions, could have done more with Hakram and how he's been.

[Liliet](#)

Crying filler now, wait until there's suddenly a need to know who the fuck all these people are and what their relationships to each other are.

Politics aren't filler.

Skaddix

I honestly argue the Hakram stuff is the filler. The Princes and Levant Families are new characters who need some characterization. Hakram seemingly had an apparently uneventful time and we basically just learned stuff Juniper already told us. The only new stuff we got from Hakram is Tyrant now has Stygian Sorcerers on the old payroll and is still playing both sides. Granted I agree overall we could have compressed some of this opening to the Volume.

[Liliet](#)

We are also learning the exact why Hakram&Bagram have not been heard from by either army.

samshadar

Catherine's popularity with goblinkind never ceased to unnerve him. Robber had once told him it was because she was 'the closest thing a human can get to a Matron, but you know the fun kind of Matron not the other kind, and it sort of helps she'd probably murder the other Matrons given a chance, although let's be honest so would the other Matrons'.

That's why I love these Goblins so much: They know what's important. xD

Honestly, since PGtE, I've gained a new appreciation for Goblins.

Aotrs Commander

The more I see of Levant and Procer, the more I (vainly, I know) hope the Dead King wipes them all out and has a nice little treaty with Cat and/or Malicia afterwards.

Today's contemptable idiocy is "I will, even for a moment, consider that violence is an acceptable response for being told that honour does not dictate battle tactics."

Wow, those guys are all assholes.

[Liliet](#)

Dont hold the population responsible for the idiocy of hereditary nobility please and thank you

luminiousblu

As it turns out, this was a historically reasonable way of thinking.

[Fayhem](#)

Seriously, what Liliet said. Just because the High Lords/Ladies of Praes are collectively a sack of angry venomous badger/snake hybrids where every snakebadger subscribes to its own flavor of overtly racist superiority complex doesn't mean that the entire population of Praes deserves to be wiped out. The same principle should really be applied to Levant and Procer.

Basically, the people in charge wherever are usually 90% assholes. That actually does not make continent-spanning genocide an appropriate response.

caoimhinh

Well, basically every noble shown so far has been like this one way or the other, even those with good intentions aren't above schemes and petty things to outrank their competitors, even when faced with imminent danger.

High Lords of Praes take the crown for being the most bastards and awful in their pettiness, they are even willing to risk rebellions, civil wars, and invasions simply because they aren't getting as much gold as they expected and because others might rise to a station where they are not treated as Nobles of Callow were also constantly scheming to get positions in Cat's council and attempting to bribe Juniper, even when they all knew the country needed to stabilize and prepare for war, they still kept plotting because they wanted to be the ones to do it (an attitude of "this needs to be done or we all die, but I want to be the one to do it, I'm not letting others do it")

The Secretariat is literally not able to move without filling a form about moving, three times over.

People of the lower Citizenship Tiers in Ashur are looked down by those of the upper Tiers.

The Magisters don't see most of the population of Stygia as people, just slaves to be used and sold (and killed when they start to get old)

The Merchant Lords think everyone can be bought and sold, and believe money puts them above every other people.

Drow call other species cattle and see it fit to kill without even the pretense of an excuse, weakness is sin for them (The worthy take, the worthy rise).

There are exceptions, sure, but the majority of the nobility in every single country shown so far is not above doing extremely stupid and dangerous things out of pride or ambition. So while I agree that they are bastards that deserve a really brutal beating, that still doesn't mean their countries should be fucked over and the population slaughtered. Ironically, the only noble guy we have seen getting a brutal punishment was Razin Tanja due to he making a deal with Cat that ended up saving the troops, but his superiors saw it as a dishonorable deal, they might change their mind when Cat beats them up or kills them, though.

kohael

'Today's contemptable idiocy is "I will, even for a moment, consider that violence is an acceptable response for being told that honour does not dictate battle tactics."'

And specifically, knifing an ally with concealed poisoned blades. For honour.

[Daniel E](#)

Zombie the Third is back! ^.^ She is literally the only thing akin to a cool magic item that Cat has allowed herself. Yes, magic always turns on Evil at the worst time, but still. If Cat is to have only a single cool villain thing, I'm glad it's a pet/mount. "Who's a good affront to man and nature? You are!" LOL

Weyrwoman

Cat also has the Mantle of Woe, whose powers are unknown but the cloak has a damn name so clearly **something** is going on there

Andrew Mitchell

We do know that her Mantle gives her some resistance to magic. But I'm hoping it does more than that by the time book 6 is done.

[David Lynch](#)

A cool pet/mount is probably safe to have so long as you don't mistreat it. It's the imprisoned and abused monster that inevitably turns on you. (See: Black during Akua's Folly.)

[Liliet](#)

...does Akua count as a cool pet? /thoughtfully scratches chin

[David Lynch](#)

Well... we can, in a *very strange way*, say that she's defected to the side of Heroism... 🤔

[Liliet](#)

She's defected to the side of Cat and following Cat and being with Cat and it's not like there's anything better she could be doing with her time ♥

oh and Cat is a hero so following her clearly necessitates following a heroic philosophy and Akua is UP to the challenge of reconciling that with her previous philosophy

JRogue

Have you forgotten about her cloak? It provides some magic protection and contains the soul of a dead enemy. Akua may still turn on her, probably... ok, will, she most definitely will, but the Cloak is pretty damn cool.

[Daniel E](#)

Good point. I recall now that even Black said something like 'it's an artifact in the making'.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Of course, IIRC he was the one who noted that depending on legendary artifacts is a bad idea. Admittedly, it's unclear whether that applies to the person who created the artifact.

[Liliet](#)

I think when you're the person whose legendariness has rubbed off / is still rubbing off on the artifact, you're fine XD

Someguy

Well, it depends on what and for whom the artefact was made for. Or it could go to shit and create a myopic fuckup:-

<https://oots.fandom.com/wiki/Redcloak>

[Liliet](#)

I think Akua said that.

Max Scherer

I try really really hard to like this story, but in every book it is just a little bit worse than it is good to really enjoy it. I know i am still reading, but that is mostly, because i invested so much time and want to know how it ends and the universe is pretty interesting. Doesnt makes this more enjoyable to read when there is everytime some who fucks Cat (or her Army) up and she just cant get ahead. She seems to be a step behind and doesnt get a CLEAN FUCKIN VICTORY in 4 and some books.... That is just not enjoyable to read....

[crowlute](#)

Correction: Marsha Grem -> Marshal Grem

Chapter 18: Fable

"Some acts only have to be committed once to afterwards echo a threat in your every silence."

– Dread Empress Massacre the First

The Tyrant's soldiers were killing my people.

The cataphracts, when I'd caught sight of them from miles away, had been forming up for a night raid. This was war, I reminded myself. Besides, for all my talk of alliances and bargains with Kairos he remained as much a foe as a friend. No doubt some scheme was afoot, one that involved prodding the Fourth Army into moving some way or other for deeper purpose. Skirmishes against the Levantines, maybe, or to make certain the Fourth did not encounter one of the League's forces. The cataphracts were harassing my legionaries, as they had the Third's, not pulling knives and engaging in struggle to the death. This was no different than Malicia testing the eastern borders of Callow with refugees and warbands, like a villainous cat taking its claws to something to see how it reacted. It would be wisest to chide the Helikean cavalry, slap them on the wrist and send them off to trouble someone else. They'd cased their raid when I intervened, hadn't they? Just the sight of a lone rider had put the charge of sundry four thousand kataphractoï to an end, and as I my valiant Zombie the Fourth cantered forward their ranks bent inwards. They

were following orders, obeying one of those fearsome madmen Helikeans had idolized for centuries. I told myself all this, as I bid my mount to stop, and it was enough to stay my hand. Then my mind whispered: *the Tyrant's soldiers are killing your people.*

My fingers clenched, leather gloves creaking. The Mantle of Woe trailing behind me, stirred by the night's breeze, I watched as a pack of officers under Helike's own banner rode to the fore of the host. Five of them, in weather-beaten armour, blades sheathed at their sides. Their conical, crested helms boasted red ceremonial feathers that jutted like a splash of blood, and beneath the rim of the steel cap two curved strips of steel demarcated their eyes. From those a shawl of mail descended to their chests, the lead officer among them unclasping hers to reveal a scarred mouth.

"Black Queen," the Helikean said in accented Lower Miezan, "I-"

"Kneel," I softly interrupted.

In the silence the followed the word rang like a thunderclap. There was a pause, the breeze raking its unseen fingers on the carpet of snow between us. The officers assembled behind her mouthpiece bridled at the order. Their leader raised a hand.

"We serve the Tyrant of Helike," the woman replied. "And bend before none other."

My staff rose, and with a thunderous snap I brought it down against the wintry ground. The order I had not spoken sounded across the Night like rippling decree, and under the crescent moon's smile the veil we had approached under was ripped away. The banner-sigils jutted out like the masts of a ship in the utterly still sea of Firstborn, fluttering in low murmurs. Red and black and blue, crisscrossed by strokes of silver and gold. Among them two stood higher than all the rest. Ochre inlaid with gold, a rainflower in bloom. *Rumena*. Purple cut by silver, a tree bearing twin circles unfinished. *Losara*. Twenty thousand drow stood like statues around Helike's riders, grey skin touched with the colours of their sigils. Fear ripped through the steel-clad killers sworn to the Tyrant, like a sudden and brutal shiver.

"Kneel," I softly said, "or Gods be my witness, I'll kill you all."

Shapes slid across my face, two crows far above gliding far above passing between the moon's cast and my silhouette. Casting razor-sharp shadows as the Sisters smiled against my neck, Andronike humming in approval. She had not forgot the nightmare made of Rochelant, and held no love for those what would serve its maniacal architect. I found their leader's pale eyes, circled by steel, and saw fear spread through them like ink in water. The

words that followed were hurried out, and beneath my notice, even as the soldiers began to dismount.

Under crescent moon four thousand *kataphractoi* knelt in the snow.

"You will stay knelt," I said. "Until I tell you to rise."

Zombie heeded my will and turned around, leaving at an unhurried trot. I left them with their knees to the ground, and went to bring my Fourth Army back into the fold.

—

The cheers began sounding from the palisade when I came within ninety yards. Behind the wooden fortifications the Fourth Army's camp had lit up with fire and fervour both, like an anthill boiling over. Torches lit up, and the wall facing me was pulled open. Within seventy yards I could make out the twin rows of soldiers assembling to make an avenue of steel leading deeper into the Fourth's camp. When I reached sixty yards, a winged shape descended from the sky and landed before me in a geyser of snow. And... wood? What was a post doing — Zombie the Third, bright blue eyes shining with glee, whinnied loudly and trotted up to my side. My lips quirked and I ran my gloved hand down her mane.

"Hello, girl," I murmured. "Missed me, did you?"

The winged horse I had... acquired from the Summer Court through technically blasphemous means sauntered around my current mount, turning around the back and coming close to affectionately brush against my good leg.

"You *are* a good girl," I praised, patting her neck. "Unless you've been eating corpses again, we had a talk about that."

Zombie the Third neighed, I thought, perhaps a little guiltily. Godsdamnit, I'd told Hakram just because it was occasionally appropriate behaviour for orcs didn't meant he could let my *horse* do it. The look she cast at Zombie the Fourth — who was a pure necromantic construct, and so about as sentient as his saddle — was less than friendly, too. I cocked an eyebrow.

"Come on," I said, patting her one last time for the road. "We're headed to camp. Just let me take care of that."

There'd been a wooden post tied to her bridle, so I leaned forward to unmake the knot and let it drop. Flanked by my own mount, I resumed my advance. The Fourth Army wasn't one of my old commands, not at its source. It had few officers from the original Fifteenth Legion, and while it'd picked up a few spare tribunes from General Afolabi's now-disbanded Twelfth the general staff had actually been from General Istrid's Sixth, the Ironsides — including the general himself, Bagram. But that was

officers, I thought as I approached the open gates. The Fourth Army's bones, not the meat. In the rows and rows of faces most I saw were young and Callowan. Recruits joined before the Tenth Crusade began, or in the months I'd spent in the Everdark. Those who'd never known my armies as part of the Empire even in name. Maybe that was why, when I crossed the gates, swords were bared and raised in salute. A steel avenue, that old honour granted to the kings and queens of Callow.

"HAIL!"

The word sounded defiantly into the night as my soldiers welcomed me home. Once upon a time, I thought as the sound washed over me, it would have been only knights allowed to stand among those rows. *But the times are changing.* Head high, cloak trailing behind me, I rode to the end of the alley under the eyes of thousands. At the end, two orcs awaited. One I knew from the few conversations we'd had during and after he brought the Sixth into the Army of Callow, General Bagram. The other had me smiling: Gods, it felt like a century since I'd last seen Hakram. He was still stupidly tall and large, like the Heavens had given an old oak leave to walk around. His hand of bone went without glove, in winter and summer both, but his other – wait, what? I wasn't sure what baffled me more, that he'd somehow lost yet another hand or that he'd not bothered replacing it. I brought Zombie to a halt, his sister matching him, and met Adjutant's dark eyes with mine before cocking an eyebrow.

"You know, one is understandable," I said. "Happens to the best of us. But two? That's just careless, Hakram. It's not like you have any more spares."

"I suppose my clapping days are over," Adjutant thoughtfully replied. "And I never did take to the theatre."

There was a pause.

"You made the same damned joke the last time you lost a hand, didn't you?" I sighed.

"It's funnier this time," he told me. "You know, because I'm running out of hands to lose."

Something like a sob of hysterical laughter almost ripped out of my throat, but aware of the eyes on us I kept it locked inside. I still burned with the need to actually hug the bastard, who was showing just enough fang from one side of the mouth to be implying either a taunt or mockery. A moment later I cleared my throat and inclined my head at Bagram.

"General," I greeted him.

"Your Majesty," he gravelled back, offering a legionary's salute. "The Fourth Army is yours."

I glanced back and saw the legionaries still standing with their swords raised. I supposed it was. Zombie moved under my will, turning to face them in full, and my staff rose almost of its own accord. Blades began beating against shield, a ruckus to wake even the dead, and cheers sounded with them. I glanced meaningfully at Hakram, and after dismounting I clapped General Bagram's shoulder and leaned close to tell him I needed to confer with Adjutant. I was led not far from there, to what I recognized to be Hakram's old campaign tent. I followed in the orc, limping at a pace. The inside was sparse, as usual, save for the inevitable piles of scrolls that followed Adjutant like a faithful pack of hounds. Still, it was warm and well-lit so it would do. I'd barely passed the folds when I was swept up in arms like tree trunks, hoisted up off my feet. I laughed and hugged the bastard back, though I slapped his shoulder for the indignity inherent to holding me up like I was some little lamb.

"It's good to see you," I admitted, when finally the brute put me down.

"You as well, Catherine," he rumbled out. "It has been much, much too long."

"I hear that," I muttered.

"Unexpected that you would find us, but decidedly not unwelcome," Hakram said. "The apparitions on the field outside, are they who I think they are?"

"Drow," I confirmed. "Though they call themselves the Firstborn – no, don't ask, it's a lot more complex than I feel like getting into."

The orc hacked out a pleased laugh.

"You brought the drow to the surface," Hakram said, grinning. "First time they came up in force in centuries. Gods be sated, you actually did it – and so many. There must be at least fifteen thousand out there."

"Twenty," I corrected. "The entire expedition in Iserre is fifty thousand strong, though they have their issues. They're headed your way, should be there before dawn. The Third Army got caught down in Sarcella by the Dominion, but they made it out after losing some skin. They're with the rest of the drow."

"The Priestess of Night is our ally, then?" Adjutant asked.

"They're called Sve Noc," I said. "And they're, well, goddesses. More or less."

"You made an alliance with *goddesses*," Hakram said.

"In a manner of speaking," I said. "You're talking to the current high priestess of Night. Alliance was made, with some strings, but the fifty thousand are here to back us."

Hakram's brow rose.

"The high priestess," he repeated. "Of drow religion. A religion of drow. Presumably for drow. Which, unless I am mistaken, you are not."

"That's the one," I lightly replied.

"What happened to the last high priestess?" he asked.

"There wasn't one."

"And you talked goddesses into this how?"

"I asked real nice," I smiled winningly. "The trick was doing it twice."

"Cat, did you pull a knife on goddesses?" Adjutant sighed.

"Of course not," I replied, offended and technically even saying the truth.

The orc stared at me, saying nothing.

"We have an understanding," I said, a tad defensively. "You wouldn't understand, you're not religious."

"I'm not going to touch that without a bottle on the table and half a day to waste," Hakram muttered.

I snorted.

"You're one to talk," I said. "What happened to your hand? Tell me you weren't just struck with a sharp and urgent need for symmetry."

"Necessary sacrifice," Adjutant said. "You'll understand when you meet with Vivienne."

My brow rose.

"Most likely, yes," I said. "But you're going to tell me anyway."

Flash of teeth, which I identified as implying sheepishness.

"It'll be a long conversation," Hakram said.

I studied him closely. I could press further, but it wasn't needed as far as I knew. And if it was, I trusted he would have told me.

"It'll wait for that bottle with half a day, then," I said. "Talk to me about Masego. I know everything Robber knows, but he said you'd have more."

"He knows more than someone of his rank should, though that is nothing new," Adjutant said. "If you're looking for a location, we do not have it. He was seen in the fields west of the Blessed Isle, but we haven't caught sight of him said."

I frowned.

"But?"

"Before we took the gate into Arcadia," Hakram said. "There was a report through the Observatory – the last we ever got. Liesse is gone."

"The ruins?" I said. "They were destroyed?"

"Gone," the orc said. "As in moved. And we don't know how, or where."

My reflex was to reply that was impossible, especially given the ridiculously vicious wards I'd had put around the still very much dangerous ruins, but then I remembered *who* had put those up specifically.

"You think he took the city somehow," I said.

"I think he's not in his right mind, since Thalassina," Hakram grimaced. "And that he got his hands on the broken shards of the single most dangerous magical weapon this continent has seen since Triumphant's day. For what purpose, I can only guess."

Well, *fuck*. This was still salvageable, I had Akua around and she'd know how that monstrosity worked better than anyone – she was, after all, its architect. But until we got a read on how Masego was moving around, this was a sword hanging above someone's head. Whose there was no real way to know, if the disaster at Thalassina had affected Hierophant's mind somehow.

"We need to find him," I said. "*Quickly*. Do you have any idea what happened to the Observatory?"

"Nothing concrete, same as the gates going wild. We've got a dozen running theories, but the mages keep poking holes in each other's," Adjutant admitted. "About a third of them insist it's to do with the way scrying is blocked in Iserre, the rest are in agreement they are entirely different problems with no relation."

It was, I thought, grim irony that the person most likely to give us an answer about what was going on was the one we needed the Observatory to look for.

"I'll see what Akua can figure out, but she'll only have so much time to spare," I said. "I have her working on something else."

He nodded.

"Archer's safe?"

"Working through some things," I said. "It got... bad down there, Hakram. She had a close call."

I could see his chops move as he ran his tongue against his fangs, the cogs in his head turning as he weighed whether or not now was the right time to ask.

"Bottle and half a day," Adjutant finally echoed.

I conceded with a nod.

"We need to talk with General Bagram," I said. "Lay down some ground rules about the drow, prepare for the Third's arrival. I'll want to know about the state of the Fourth, too."

"He'll be waiting," Hakram said.

"Then let's go," I sighed. "We're wasting moonlight."

"You have four thousand surrendered cataphracts outside, Catherine," he reminded me. "The situation needs seeing to."

"Not surrendered," I said. "I neither offered nor asked. They're considering their sins, that's all."

Adjutant's dark eyes scrutinized my face.

"You're thinking of killing them," the orc said.

I clenched my fingers, then unclenched them.

"Some," I admitted. "If I let them go today, they're a blade back in the Tyrant's armory tomorrow."

"Are we to break entirely with the League, then?" he asked.

I grimaced.

"No," I admitted. "There are some interests in alignment."

"Then you cannot commit slaughter," Hakram said.

"Unless you have a lot more supplies than the Third, we can't keep them prisoner either," I flatly said. "Four thousand men and

four thousand horses. I suppose we could butcher the horses for meat, but the soldiers? Given what's out there, we don't have the manpower for the guards or the food to spare. Not without shaving it much too close for comfort."

"I fought those riders, Catherine," Adjutant said. "So did the Fourth. And I can assure you, there is no love between us. Not even the fondness of respected foes. But we cannot butcher prisoners of war."

"Butchery? Slight and price, Hakram. One for one," I said. "You have lists of dead, lost to their attacks. So did the Third. I will not let this go *unanswered*."

"I wouldn't ask you to," Hakram said.

The orc let out a long breath.

"I could tell you that this would set a dangerous precedent," Adjutant said. "That we must be taken as law-abiding actors, if the Liesse Accords are to be signed and held. I could even say that a massacre tonight will be matched by the Tyrant when opportunity comes for him, and we both know it will."

"But," I said.

My closest friend in the world looked me in the eye.

"Weren't we better than this, when we started?" Hakram softly asked.

I did not answer him on the way to General Bagram's tent. I still had not, after those talks were done, when I headed back into the snows.

—

They'd stayed kneeling.

A few had tried to run, deciding to die gloriously with a blade in hand, and their pulped flesh had been splattered across the snow by the Mighty among my host. The rest had remained knelt in the cold and the dark, waiting for the judgement that was to fall upon their heads. They shivered and trembled, for the wind had not grown gentler in my absence, but even as their legs had begun to ache and their fingers had grown rigid for the chill the cataphracts of Helike had endured. Some portion admired them for it, but it was not so large that it was not drowned out by the anger still fuming in my bones. And even that admiration was tainted, for valour in the service of the likes of Kairos Theodosian could only be abused. The Firstborn parted for me without a word as I tread across the snows, come to meet the five officers who had meant to bargain with me. They had withstood

their wait, I found, and softly five feathery streaks of red still rose and fell with the breath of the soldiers. My staff touched the ground with measured beat as I limped to them, and when I halted I felt their gazes turn to me. It was the leader among them I turned my own eye to, the woman who'd spoken.

"Your name?" I asked.

"Pallas," she said. "I am a general of Helike."

Letting the agony skitter across my leg, I leaned against my staff and knelt to match her height. I glimpsed vivid pale eyes that lingered between grey and blue, set on a tanned face that was younger than I had thought. Not so young she had not lived, I thought, and not so young that she should not have known better.

"Nine hundred and thirty two," I said. "That is how many of my men yours have killed, between the tallies of the Third and the Fourth."

"They fought well," Pallas simply said. "And bravely."

"They died bravely too," I said, tone sharpening.

I saw in her face, then, the expectance of the blow. Of sudden and merciless death.

"I had thought to kill that many of you," I pensively said. "And then another as well, for the remembrance."

"You would take us all instead, then?" Pallas calmly asked. "If that is so, we will not die kneeling. Vainglorious be our pride, Black Queen, we are *kataphractoi* of Helike. We do not meet slaughter meekly."

Cataphracts of Helike, I thought. Legionaries of Praes, knights of Callow, fantassins of Procer. The names changed, and the lands matched to them, but in the end it wasn't it the same defiant promise? *We are people*, it said. *You can kill us, but you cannot make us less than that*. Funny, wasn't it? How you could offer soldiers praise and a title and they'd make of it something to make the world quake. Not the kind of funny that made you smile, but funny nonetheless.

"No," I said. "The man that serves as my better nature waits in camp, and though his kind knows little of mercy he asked it of me all the same."

"Mercy," General Pallas told me, "will not change our oaths."

In that moment I was no longer looking at a woman kneeling in the snow: it was Helike's own grim visage looking back at me, that ancient city-state that had fought Praes and Procer at their peaks and walked away unbowed. And it had done so on the back of

men and women just like the one facing me. Iron-wrought souls gathered to a Tyrant's banner, the victors of a hundred fields.

"We serve a Theodosian, Queen of Callow," Pallas of Helike said, "We do not flinch from doom nor grave, under that banner – *or anything else.*"

I could take that certainty from you, I thought, easy as breathing. Of all my teachers the one who knew least of fear cowed all of Callow with it, and I have since witnessed sights that would have him pale. And part of me wanted to, because nine hundred and thirty two legionaries were dead at their hands. And perhaps these cataphracts were brave and skilled and loyal, but they were treating death as a game while dancing to the Tyrant's tune – and even now remained proud of that truth. I wouldn't even need to speak a word in Crepuscular, to see it all done: under the moon's gaze, when it came to weaving power not even the Tomb-Maker was my match in raw strength. A mere four thousand, kneeling? It would be, as I had thought, easy as breathing. And that gave me pause, because my leg *stung* and I still remembered the sky opening at the Battle of the Camps and sending down death at impotent Procerans. Some nights I wondered if part of the reason my father had refrained from embracing the paths to power that were a villain's due was because he was afraid of what he might *do* with it. The kind of person it made you, to look at four thousand soldiers and know that your own hand could slay them in the span of a breath. The kind of person it made you, to go through with it. Hadn't it always been the tragedy of Creation that might ever went to the people least deserving of it? That I could not change, not truly. But I could, at least, act like I was not the Dead King incipient. Like I still remembered what it was like, to laugh and breathe and hurt – what it meant, to snuff out those same things.

"There was once a man, to the far east," I quietly told Pallas. "He was a killer among killers, and among that red number there were none more loathsome. So when he claimed the Tower, *Foul* was the title he took. Third of his name, and last."

I smiled.

"In the Wasteland they remember him a vainglorious failure, for when he led his armies west the Kingdom of Daoine crushed them all and sent his limbless body back to Ater, along with the head of ever highborn in his host," I said. "Of his duel with the Commander of the Watch and the valour that saw the Deoraithe prevail I could tell you much, but what would it mean to you?"

I tapped my fingers against my staff, hearing the steady beat of *do not forget* along with the pulsing pain of my leg.

"It is the years after I'll tell you a story about," I said. "You see, Foul did not long survive his return. His successor cared

nothing for the man, but there were rules to observe. Two bounties were offered. The first for the head of any Commander, only once claimed in the history of Praes. The second, though? It was for two fingers."

I leaned closer, voice almost a whisper.

"The one that came after was titled *Vile*, and of that epithet proved well-deserving, but for all that he was not without cleverness," I said. "It was longbows on a wall, that broke his predecessor and so he put coin to unmaking the first of these two. For four centuries following, anyone bringing back the severed index and middle fingers of a Deoraithe was rewarded in gold."

Pallas of Helike went very, very still.

"Yeah, I figured you'd understand," I said. "You're an archer yourself. But a snip of the knife and all that skill, all those years... up in smoke. Can't pull back the string without those, can you?"

"And this," General Pallas replied, "is the span of your *mercy*?"

"I never claimed my kind of tyranny to be deserving of capital letter," I said. "So you'll keep the fingers, Pallas. But they will be broken, by your own hands, and with them I take every fucking thing that allows you to call yourself *kataphraktoi*."

The woman's eyes widened in surprise and anger.

"You cannot-" she began.

"Be silent," I hissed. "You ride around slaying my soldiers and abetting a madman's madness when the King of Death is sinking his teeth in the world. You do not get to be indignant, Pallas of Helike. You're a worm in the flesh, and if neither you nor your master can be trusted not to act as the ushers of the end times then you will have to be *disciplined*."

I rose to my feet, leaning on ebony, and glared down.

"You came here as cataphracts," I said. "And here will stay your horses and arms and armour. Not a single one of you will leave this place with as much as a butter knife."

Breathing out, I met pale eyes and let the slightest part of the fury I still felt slip into my gaze.

"Walk back to your Theodosian, General Pallas," I said. "And give him warning from the Black Queen – if he ever pulls anything like this on my people again, there's room for another soul on my cloak."

In the sky far above crows cawed, the sound of it eerily like laughter.

nextgidea

Spin the tale and spread the fable... Go vote!

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

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Guide consistently has more votes than the next two stories, we need another 100 to make it more than the next three!

RandomFan

Good on her to not kill anyone. Good on her to take their equipment. Speaking what remains of 4,000- nearly all of them- into breaking their own fingers, or else forcing them on pain of death... That's villainous, but still more merciful than I think they'd conceptually deserve. Cruel Mercy is the only mercy she can afford; Kind Mercy is ever so much more expensive.

[Liliet](#)

It's brutal, but it's the right move in the situation.

Good shit.

Shaerick 68

Every time Catherine does these sorts of things, she further solidifies as one of the best protagonists of all time

[Liliet](#)

So many best things about her ♥

KageLupus

It is less cruel mercy and more sound tactics. Killing all of those soldiers would lead to a similar retribution from the Tyrant. It also tell every other player in the war that the Black Queen is willing to slaughter prisoners of war, which is not the kind of PR that Cat needs right now.

Leaving the Hellikeans to go free and unpunished is a non option as well. That just means you have an enemy commander with forces behind you, who doesn't have a reason not to attack you with them.

Stripping the cataphracts and breaking their fingers very neatly solves every problem besides revenge. The Army of Callow has a sudden influx of supplies, the PR engine gets a story of the Black Queen being ruthless but not crossing a line (and who is going to cry when it happens to the Tyrant's forces?), the Hellikeys get to keep their lives but not be a threat to Cat's army, and the Tyrant has to figure out what to do with four thousand wounded soldiers. Healing and outfitting them will take time and resources, and even if he does neither he still has to feed them. If he just kills them all then he is out that many warm bodies while on a campaign where getting reinforcements isn't terribly viable.

This kind of compromise between what Cat needs and what she wants is very much in character with her past actions. But the sheer elegance of the solution really speaks to how much she has grown as a tactician.

[Liliet](#)

I would say the 'break their fingers' thing covers revenge too, and not by accident – Cat is deliberately cultivating the reputation of someone you don't want to piss off.

[Euodiachloris](#)

It's also villainous in its deliberate irony.

"Play silly games with me to win sarcastic prizes that hit your bottom line in the medium and long term and make you look like a jackass."

[Liliet](#)

It's also targeted.

"I extract oaths from the forces of Good. I break the fingers of Tyrant's servants."

usernamesbco

The Tyrant can't even say he wasn't warned, Cat did explode the chessboard.

Cpt. Obvious

Will with time regain full use of their hands. Having them break their own fingers is more making a point than an attempt to cripple them or cripple the army of the tyrant.

Cpt. Obvious

Ignore

stevenneiman

She gets a revenge which is almost as cruel as killing (taking away everything the Helikeans pride themselves on and leaving them to explain their failures and then act as a drain on the man they worship), and she does it without having to feel bad, without making her look unfair or like someone you shouldn't surrender to, and without providing the Dead King any bodies when he gets there.

Jonnnney

Breaking their fingers rather than putting them to the sword is mercy. Forcing them to break their own fingers is cruel mercy

AVR

Breaking the fingers of four thousand people doesn't go down in history or legend as *mercy*.

Cpt. Obvious

Thing is even without magical healing broken bones will mend, and with just a little knowledge most of the cataphracts

Cpt. Obvious

Will with time regain full use of their hands. Having them break their own fingers is more making a point than an attempt to cripple them or cripple the army of the tyrant.

Nafram

You know, if Kairos were to actually turn into another spirit bound to Cat, and therefore appear much more often, i would be very happy

Skaddx

I am going to assume some good aligned Kingdom is about to have a very bad day. I did say Masego was not going to be helping Cat's Liesse Accords by breaking bread with the Good Kingdoms any time soon. After all Masego and Indrani could care less about the Liesse Accords, Friends and Family sure. Being the best spellcaster or fighter in the world sure by achieving greatness in their chosen field. But continent spanning peace treaties hardly. Blood Demands Blood.

caoimhinh

How likely is it that Masego took Liesse to drop some crazy and really nasty stuff on Ashur?

Flameburst

Very, meaning that it almost certainly won't happen. erraticerrata has been very good about avoiding obvious conclusions

RoflCat

If my theory on him going on a soul searching (literal) adventure for his fathers is true, then him taking Liese might not be so much for the super weapon inside, but for all the weakened boundaries of Creation in there, so he can have an easier time breaching into all kind of Hells looking for them.

[Fayhem](#)

Interesting idea! Sounds like the kind of thing a grief-stricken psychologically traumatized Masego could potentially think of as a good idea; I'd have to imagine he'd swing by the Observatory to grab the Sahelian artifact first, though ofc with scrying down we don't actually know he hasn't. Although IIRC at least per the presently-existing rules of the setting that would only be even conceptually possible for Warlock and not Tikoloshe though. As I recall it devils don't "die" per se, but their essence or whatever gets dispersed and when it recoalesces zero memories or other developed personality traits get carried over. Functionally the same as death, but without any theoretically-intact "soul" type thing that could hypothetically be retrieved from wherever it might have been sent to (or in Warlock's case possibly sold to).

Twigsssss

Is there any doubt at this point that what the tyrant is trying to do is manipulate the proceran army and the callow army into one big fight where both sides kill each other?

[Liliet](#)

I'm standing by my assertion that this is not how it will go.

Prepared to eat crow if I'm wrong.

Andrew Mitchell

"Eating crow" has interesting implications in this particular setting.

[Liliet](#)

“
I invoke my right to remain silent

Mental Mouse

Well, the Tyrant (and perhaps the Bard) may be trying to do that, but whether he'll *succeed* is another question entirely.

Javvies

They should be glad that she's not doing worse. Because she could. And kind of really wants to.

Yeah ... they have a lot of catching up to do.

Masego has stolen Liesse? That's probably not an unambiguously good thing waiting to happen. Might not be all bad, but it's probably not all good, either. Maybe the people who thought he might try to summon up Tikoloshe are right.

That or maybe he's planning on breaking Praes and/or Ashur.

IDKWhoitis

It's also possible that he may be hunting for the Echo Liesse caused in Arcadia, so he can speak with his Father one more time.

caoimhinh

To speak with his Fathers again, that would be the Echo that Thalassina caused in Arcadia, not the one caused by Liesse.

Mental Mouse

You know, this business with Arcadia echoes could get out of hand – they could threaten a bunch of old secrets and other informational balances of power. Masego's own ability to extract information from them depends on his own aspect powers, but those aren't so unique that other mages might not be able to do something in the same vein. On the other hand, without Cat present, IIRC even Masego doesn't have his own safe-conduct pass in Arcadia. Much less any lesser mages trying to copy him!

The question is how much of an echo would form from the two recent events. Liesse and Thalassina both were magic-heavy fights with a whole-lotta gating and city-sized fixed magical arrays – but still probably not a patch on the power or significance of Keter's founding. What I'd really like to see is what shards might be accessible near the Tower of Praes. I'm sure any overarching stories will be scrambled by the sheer number of significant and unreasonably magical events there, but some interesting tales might remain.

IDKWhoitis

I feel like the Echos are like a gun waiting to be used, an equivalent to the wise old man who shares dangerous secrets. And to defeat bard, a Mosaic of moments of history and memories from those present and past will have to be compiled.

The nature of what is considered significant enough to leave an imprint is largely speculative. Masego could be looking for his father's shadow, or for the secrets of the Book of the Dead.

stevenneiman

Here's a terrifying thought: How dangerous would Cat be if she got a memory upload from that echo of the Intercessor? She's already terrifyingly good at manipulating the story, so if receiving a portion of the Intercessor's mind didn't drive her completely mad I bet she would become so good at it that she'd be unstoppable.

RanVor

One can't go mad twice...

stevenneiman

Everything important about Tikoloshe is gone. There exists a devil made from the same... whatever it is devils are made from, but they have none of his memories. If he ever returns to the same intelligence he had before, I doubt it will be with the same personality he has now.

My best guess would be that Masego is planning to cause ruin to either Praes or Ashur, or else that he's on his way to meet up with the Woe as the only real family he still has.

Andrew Mitchell

I think you're right regarding Tikoloshe. At least, right according to what everyone knows is true.

But thinking about Masego, vivisector of miracles, I think there may be a path for him to bring Tikoloshe back:

1. Visit whichever Hell Tikoloshe is in and retrieve him.
2. Visit Arcadia and find the echo of the destruction of Thalassinia.
3. Enter that echo and extract Tikoloshe's whole mind state.
4. Insert the mindstate into the blank Tikoloshe.

None of these seem to be totally impossible. Consider, for example, the way Masego extracted an extinct language from a

serving girl (in the echo with the young dead king) and inserted it into Cat's head.

Now that I see all this written down I think there's a better than even chance that this is what Masego is planning to do.

What do you think?

RanVor

It's a little more complicated. Tikoloshe's autonomy was a result of a very complex and highly precise set of oaths and bindings which Masego might not know the full extent of. Without them, he would remain a regular devil even with his old personality inserted.

[Liliet](#)

>"I choose this," he said, tone full of wonder, "of my own free will."

I think Tikoloshe did end up having autonomy for real.

Just to use it to die!

RanVor

Well, yeah, you're right. I forgot about that. Still, he lived with the bindings for decades, they've probably influenced him on a deeper level.

[Liliet](#)

Mm. I think they're the reason he ended up with real free will, on top of just accumulating sentience xp from long long life.

I don't think artificially grafting echo of personality to blank slate reincarnation is how guide rolls, but it does seem to me like fully recovering personality+memories should about do it.

I don't think Tiko would be happy about that though, considering there's no way to bring back Wekesa =x

Andrew Mitchell

IIRC, and it's not a sure thing that I do recall correctly, I do seem to have a memory of Masego specifically saying that he's studied the bindings in detail.

RanVor

Maybe, I don't remember everything (I've forgotten a lot of stuff actually).

stevenneiman

I know that he at least knew the practical limitations and the theory of how they worked. Considering that the only secret Wekesa and Tikoloshe ever kept from him wasn't explicitly referenced in the bindings, I can't imagine why they wouldn't have let him look them over. Even if they are outside Zeze's areas of interest, I'm sure he would have been interested in studying something that his father regarded as a masterpiece.

stevenneiman

IIRC they ripped apart a whole person echo just to get a language. Considering how much language ties into, I'd say that a generous estimate is that that's maybe 25% of the whole mind, probably a decent bit less. It's possible that there's a nondestructive way to extract that information if he invests a lot more time and effort (worth it to restore one of his fathers), but that's not certain. Even if he could do it, the echo was from before the dead king's time. That means that restore-from-backup Tikoloshe would be less intelligent by the growth he achieved since Sephirah's ascension, and would have no memory of his time with Masego and Wekesa. Which means that he would be getting an incubus which wasn't really family, and if he saw any point in that it would be a hell of a lot easier than going back through Arcadia-Keter to pilfer an echo.

NZPIEFACE

Wasn't there a Dread Emperor whose fall back plan for a flying city, was to have a falling flying city?

theothin

Not quite "plan", but yeah.

"Quite literally not what I was aiming for, but I can work with this."

– Dread Empress Regalia II, as her flying fortress began falling on Laure

From 4.76.

IDKWhoitis

That's one way to effectively nullify 4,000 cavalry permanently without resorting to murder. Unless Kairos is carrying a massive

supply chain around, those people are almost entirely useless. No armor or weapons, no horses to spare, broken fingers for weeks.

Also, if the kataphraktoi are heavy cavalry with lots of armor, then her Knights of Callow are about to get a massive boost in supplies and armament. Like even the horses themselves are expensive assets that Callow was limited in at the beginning of the Crusade.

It's also possible that a great Horse meat feast will be held to celebrate the reunion of 3rd, 4th, Cat, and Drow.

Novice

The warhorses are a boon to the Knights, yes. But I don't know about the armor since the Helikeans don't have the same sorcery-defying armor the Knights of Callow have. I wonder if there's a specific type of blacksmith or enchanter or whatever that can convert mundane armor to the Callowan type.

Someguy

The light armour should be more useful for the Drow, though the horses would be less useful for the knights as mounts but more suitable as pack animals given that they are not conditioned to carry Plate Armoured riders.

[Liliet](#)

Cataphracts ARE heavy cavalry.

Gunslinger

Aren't archers light cav though?

[Liliet](#)

Apparently not these!

Micke

The defining difference is the armour.
Real-world cataphracts were modeled on Iranian noble cavalry; trained to use bow, spear and sword. This was before stirrups vastly improved the efficiency of lance charges.

Ultimate_Procrastinator

Generally, yes, horse archers were light cavalry. However, the Persian and Parthian cataphracts that Helikean kataphraktoi are presumably based on were heavy cavalry, traditionally equipped with scale armor, helmets with metal masks, lances, blades, and bows. They

were very expensive to train and equip, but they were also incredibly effective due to the combination of range, mobility, durability, and close-in fighting capabilities.

[Liliet](#)

I love people who come here to share facts ♥

luminiousblu

Cataphracts in the real world are **extremely** heavy hybrid shock cavalry. They'd be armed with a bow, a two-handed lance (this was before the development of the 'couched' lance) and generally also a sword as sidearm. They were prototypical knights, heavily armored noble shock troops with a lifetime's worth of training and wearing more wealth than most villages could pool in a decade.

Derak

A byzantine cataphract's equipment was worth ten pounds of gold. That's not including training, remounts, provisions, etc. At current gold price, 4000 of those would only cost about 620 billion usd.

Rook

There's nothing wrong with light cavalry. Doesn't hold a candle to the knights of callosity, but even unarmored the sheer weight (not story weight, as in physical this-shit-is-heavy weight) of a cavalry charge is pretty brutal against mundane infantry.

mordered

Besides, light horse is excellent for harrying enemy foot and bow units. Even if Cat can't build extra heavy horse than light horse is an excellent alternative. Feeding an additional 4000 horses however might be troublesome.

Cicero

I feel this is a mistake.

Never do do an enemy a slight injury. It will only harden their enmity, without weakening them.

Insanenoodlyguy

This is more than slight. Using a bow puts fingers under a lot of pressure. Broken ones aren't going to heal enough to be used for at least a month and a half. No arms or equipment and no

ability to be re-armed makes them a burden, especially in enemy lands. If they are lucky they will be sent home in disgrace. They probably won't be lucky. And whatever their fate, it will be as ignominious failures. As cat notes, they had pride in what they were, and they won't be able to be that any more.

Decius

This setting has magical healing. It will strain the healers, but the War College had students breaking each other's bones pretty casually.

Draeysine

Sure, but Helike doesn't have a crap ton of mages and their healing techniques might not set the fingers back to 100% working order. That's if they don't die walking back without supplies in the middle of the night with injuries on a very cold and windy snowy night. In any case it's extremely demoralizing, and costly. Losing all of that equipment, plus Tyrant's supply chain is questionable considering how he entered through the Big Dangerous Enchanted Forest with his army, means that those are nothing but useless burdens that didn't even succeed at dying for their cause. Something tells me those 4k soldiers aren't going to do anything threatening again.

konstantinvoncarstein

Unless the Tyrant pull a impossible magical from nowhere, like he has the habit to do 🙄

konstantinvoncarstein

*magical trick

[Liliet](#)

It's still opportunity cost.

stevenneiman

Considering the mischief Kairos gets up to, a few weeks where he can't spare mages for anything else might be worth more than anything else you could get for 4000 elite mooks. Mages are the next most versatile unit after Named, and Kairos is someone whose tactics rely on having enough options that nobody can figure out what he's going to do. He might be able to Wish it away, but he's implied that he's got a limited supply of those and wasting one might even be more valuable than tying up his mage corps for a few weeks.

Excited

Stygia has shit tons, they'll be fine by tomorrow

stevenneiman

Remember, Cat's goal is not to permanently neutralize threats, its to minimize bloodshed on all sides until the Dead King attacks. What she just did was remove everything that made them a threat and ensure that it can't be recovered for a matter of months. They're basically useless until the Dead King is further along, and if Cat can't bring all sides together into a united front by then, she's already lost and another 4000 assholes who might or might not have new horses will be the least of her worries.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

This was a very good move.

Andrew Mitchell

Plus... if Helike really does help out with fighting the Dead King then maybe she can give the armour and horses back.

That's a big IF.

Valkyria

Another if is: IF they have not eaten all the horses by then.

[Fayhem](#)

I really hope it doesn't come to that. Cat may have mentioned the idea pretty casually, but a good horse is valuable as shit at this tech level and a trained warhorse quite significantly moreso. When armies eat their horses it's an act of desperation. Think of them as walking money that's technically edible but actually much, much harder to replace than currency and you've got an idea of what it means to eat these kind of horses. If Cat can actually hang on to these horses that's not quite a gamechanger but it is a very appreciable boost to Callow, especially since they slaughtered so many of their own best horses to spite the Conquest.

oneeyed

The Legions and Callow's army are low on supplies, from what I remember, and it's winter, so I have my doubts they can keep 4000 horses easily.

[Mental Mouse](#)

That said, some of the horses will die in the course of things, and will be a valued addition to the Greenskin Meat Fund.

Razorfloss

Maybe but this is the only thing that she could do. They don't have the supplies to take care of them as prisoners, she can't kill them all else she kills any hope of getting her accords signed and she can't let them go only to be a pain in her ass later. This solves all her problems right now in the most efficient way without killing them plus it sends a message. The Black Queen is back and she is not to be trifled with.

Andrew Mitchell

Wow, what a great chapter. The drow suddenly appearing, Cat's arrival at camp, Hakram and Cat together again, and justice served on Helike's cataphracts. Every step so well done IMO.

[Walter](#)

"and not so young that she should not have known better."

Than what? Like, honest question, how does Cat talk with Hakram, and then go talk with someone who is basically just baby Hakram and act so bewildered?

[Liliet](#)

I don't think she's bewildered so much as conflicted.

[Liliet](#)

Like, this is just her remarking that she's not looking at a confused and scared teenager she would not even consider responsible for their own actions.

Someguy

What a wonderful ally Kairos is, he just provided arms, armour and horses to the Army of Callow right out of his pocket.

Andrew Mitchell

You're absolutely spot on here... and I'm ****sure**** Cat will thank him next time they meet.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Oh, their next meeting should be even more fun than their last!

danh3107

I don't wanna be nit picky here, but if they have kind of healer breaking two finger bones isn't really a big deal.

Skaddx

Yeah i gotta agree in a World with healing from priest. Breaking some finers aren't really a major setback. The loss of Horses is quite frankly the most significant thing. Armor and weapons. Then any broken fingers. There is basically no way Cat could have played this that helps her really I think she did the best of bad options. Still all this means for enemies here on out is to never surrender.

matesbe

Eh. 4000 people. I'm sure healers can get some of them back on their feet, but all? Probably not in a short time-frame.

Rook

There's nothing stopping her from healing their fingers herself. Improperly.

It's a lot harder to fix a badly healed fracture than to set it properly in the first place. In guideverse, you'd probably need to later re-break the fingers just the right way and then heal them again to have any hope of getting full functionality back.

Decius

If Cat can heal eight thousand broken fingers quickly and improperly enough for that purpose, she needs to start treating her own wounded and dead.

oaclo

Well they sure as hell aren't gonna have priests of the Gods Above to do it and, based on that mention a few chapters ago of someone who studied with the mage-healers of I wanna say Ashur, mages with that capability are rare on Calernia.

RanVor

cough Atalantians *cough*

konstantinvoncarstein

The Ligue has priests, it will be easy to heal that. She should have cut those fingers

[Liliet](#)

There was no need to. She took their stuff, and they have no supply line.

Also, healing 4000 pairs of broken fingers is at the very least a time-costly task.

medailyfun

Just realized... What if... they're all secretly left-handed?

Aotrs Commander

No? It's a hell of a lot of Cure Light Wounds spells to cast, though, (metaphorically)... How many do you think the healers can fix in a day? Ten? A Hundred? Wouldn't have thought your average healer is going to be able to do more than one at a time the level of healing we've seen outside heroes doesn't seem to be massively significant, maybe close to or slightly better in some instances than modern medicine, maybe).

So, with the best will in the world, between organising the set-up time (i.e. the time required to physically get the healer to each person, even if you tried to do it in a field) and the actual healing (which might not be a six-second D&D cast), I wouldn't imagine it would be less than a couple of minutes at best (and could easily be more like ten or fifteen, depending on how effective they are) – so, going with the most generous, that's 30 per hour of invested time that the healers are doing that and not doing anything else. So that's 133 man-hours required of doing nowt but heal broken fingers and this is pretty much the best case scenario. How many healers does the Tyrant have at his disposal? And of that, how many can he spare, at one location (which might mean an opportunity cost itself), to not be able to do anything else but fix fingers? (If he has to send troops off in clumps to the healers, that "two minute per" then has become "hours or days per.")

Whatever, it's going to be a significant investment of logistical effort on top of the healing that's got to be dealt with.

(The only reason it won't take forever to BREAK all the fingers is Cat is making them do it themselves. Because she is awesome.)

Of course, the Tyrant's likely to just execute them all, making the point moot.

[Liliet](#)

These are his loyal zealous followers that are the basis of his entire influence politically.

He'd be shooting himself in the foot very badly by mistreating them.

Wzjwjrgwozs

He made it illegal to curse in his entire country, they're pretty much fanatics at this point

[Liliet](#)

Not sure how the left side of the proposition is connected to the right, here.

RanVor

A hundred priests capable of healing 30 soldiers per day each would restore combat capability of 4000 soldiers within a little over a day.

[Liliet](#)

> assuming Kairos has that many in one place without having them busy with something else specific

also I'm not sure if priests CAN heal 30 pairs of broken fingers per day

RanVor

That's an optimistic (for Kairos at least) estimate, true. But I think we can safely assume the entire process wouldn't take more than a few days. It's time-consuming, but not so much to cause a delay that would be significant on a strategic scale.

[Liliet](#)

A few days during which the healers can't be doing anything else.

It's opportunity cost if nothing else, and as far as I'm following Cat's going for blitzkrieg here anyway. A few days might be all she needs.

(And even aside from that, there's the issue of re-arming these people and separately the issue of image – Cat has proved that she can *do* that, that she overpowered and caught Helikeans to the degree of being able to enforce them breaking their own fingers. This one's not a direct loss for Kairos so much as it's a gain for Catherine)

RanVor

To clarify, I was only talking about the problem of healing the cataphracts. Just sending them back to

Rochelant on foot with their fingers broken is enough of a delay by itself.

Also, I doubt Cat let them go just to kill them somewhere else.

[Liliet](#)

Mm.

Raved Thrad

All they really need is a healer who can cast Mass Cure Light Wounds. 😊

[Liliet](#)

...level 4000

[Mental Mouse](#)

Indeed, two finger bones “isn’t a big deal”... *for each individual soldier*. Even without magical healing, most of them would recover eventually. Mages can speed that up to a point, but as others have noted, for 4000 soldiers, two fingers each adds up to a whole lot of healing. Either way though, it’s time and resources.

Combine that with the equipment and horse confiscations, and those soldiers will not be fighting again soon. In fact, they’ll be lucky if they’re recovered and re-equipped in time for the Dead King’s arrival, which could be quite unpleasant for them.

Also, this is a serious and very public bitch-slap that the Black Queen is giving the Tyrant; as the plundered soldiers make their way home, *everybody* they pass is going to get the story. Between this and her previous engagement, Cat’s reputation will be getting some new polish.

[Liliet](#)

^^^ the reputation thing is important too

Kairos has not really been a primary target for anyone so far, everyone’s been ignoring him / low key exchanging info with him. Cat’s the first one to seriously kick him in the rear

stevenneiman

She’s not trying to permanently cripple them, just ensure that it will be expensive and inconvenient to get them back into fighting shape until the point where they’ll have to turn and

fight the Dead King's forces. They now need to walk back to a place where Kairos has mages, spend weeks in one place and exhausting Helike's mages (the most versatile tool of a man who relies on unpredictability), and then they'll need to arrange 4000 new high-quality horses and new bows, then get back from wherever they were getting healed to somewhere they can be of use. Sure, they aren't really gone and this would be a bad tactic if Cat was fighting a nation-vs.-nation war with Helike, but as it is, this is absolutely perfect for her needs.

Fayhem

As people have been pointing out healers are a finite resource. To expand on that a bit, if the League has let's say 200 capable healers (could be more could be less, I don't feel we've really gotten a sense of the League's capabilities in this regard) each of them would have to heal 20 people to heal all of those soldiers. And let's be real, after walking back through the snow without supplies frostbite/exposure is going to supply a lot more injuries than just a couple broken fingers. It's also been stated that performing a bunch of healing in a row will wipe somebody out. So either they don't heal them all at once, meaning they've got possibly still thousands of injured soldiers just kind of hanging around draining resources without contributing, or they do heal them all at once (if that's even possible) and then they have to choose between ceasing active operations for probably at least a few days until their healers recover or engaging in combat with potentially not enough functional healers to be able to treat all critical injuries. The first surrenders the strategic initiative to the opposition which tends to be death in a campaign, and the second drastically worsens the fatality to casualty ratio for any engagement and harms morale to boot. Tyrant would probably choose the latter as the lesser evil in his lights, but the point is either choice is harmful, as is just not healing them all.

It's certainly correct that in a world with magical healing these injuries are unlikely to be permanently disabling, but it should be understood that the loss of materiel is **not** the only significant setback Cat dealt Helike/the League here. This is still a significant strategic complication even setting aside the fact that Tyrant will be faced with replacing the arms and armor of 4,000 elite soldiers when his only possible supply lines would be through 20,000 very angry Proceran soldiers or through the Waning Woods (i.e., he doesn't have a viable supply line). Last note on how this hurts Kairos: these are specifically **Helike** soldiers, meaning his own personal military strength relative to the rest of the League just took a hit, not to mention any priestly healing (which has been stated to be objectively better and easier than mage healing) would be coming by way of a Good-aligned League city doing

Helike a favor. He's secure enough to hang on to effective command anyway I'd imagine, but I wouldn't suppose that to be exactly *helpful* to him either.

[Fayhem](#)

Ayyy way more people have given an expanded version of that analysis already than I realized. That's what I get for commenting without scrolling down further lol.

[Liliet](#)

I'm going to refer people to this comment wrt this decision from now on.

[Mental Mouse](#)

An excellent analysis; I'll just point out one more layer: Those disarmed and crippled troops are also stranded in foreign territory. I don't know how "unpopular" they'd be locally, but it might not be so trivial for them to "walk back to their Theodosian".

caoimhinh

Cool chapter, Cat's appearance with Night miracles, the "Kneel" command, her honor avenue by her soldiers, the heartwarming moment of her reunion with Hakram, news of Masego and food for our speculations, mention of past Dread Emperor, it was all cool.

I wonder if the battle will start next week since it seems to still require a chapter or two in preparation for it, and the Interludes ended so it's unlikely we'll see Juniper and co's POV before Cat arrives there, although we might need another time skip of a few days.

The mention of past Dread Emperors and their titles made me wonder, in the hypothetical scenario of Cat actually claiming the Tower and becoming Empress (which would unify the three countries Praes, Callow, and Ever Dark), what do you guys think her reigning name and title/epithet would be?

I think something like "Dread Empress Pragmatica, First of Her Name, the Game Breaker" would be an awesome title fitting for her.

Typos found:

- cased their raid / ceased
- and as I my valiant / and as my valiant OR I and my valiant
- two crows far above gliding far above passing / eliminate one of the "far above"
- those what would serve / that would serve
- we haven't caught sight of him said." / delete the "said"

-in the end it wasn't it the same / delete the first "it"
-the head of ever highborn / every

John

I'd say "Dread Empress Persistent, the Blade-Catcher" might be more appropriate. How many times has somebody stabbed her with something and then seen her respond 'That's MY sword now, you're not getting it back,' figuratively or otherwise? There's the original knife (and by extension, the Legions) she accepted from Black, the angel-wing and associated resurrection, walking into the circular firing squad of Drow society and essentially stealing the whole damn thing, this new bit with disarming the cataphracts... and her big long-term legacy goal, the Liesse Accords, seems to be mainly about limitations on strategic weaponry and atrocities, along with diplomatic mechanisms for general de-escalation, effectively snatching the biggest, nastiest "blades" away from everybody.

[Liliet](#)

"That's my sword now, you're not getting it back" ♥ ♥ ♥

stevenneiman

She might actually be Dread Empress Benevolent the second. She has a similar specialty in story-fu, and unlike the first one she actually IS benevolent.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yes, that's what makes her so scary. Somebody who's trying to kill, rob, or enslave you is a known quantity, you just fight or run away. But somebody who insists (and believes) they're trying to help you... those can be far more unpredictable and dangerous.

werafdsaew

The author already mentioned that her name would be Victorious

[Liliet](#)

Oh? Where?

RanVor

Really? I thought it was just baseless speculation.

werafdsaew

It may have been hearsay. I don't remember the source.

Andrew Mitchell

Yeah, I think it was all speculation by readers. Here's the earliest comment (August 2018) mentioning Victorious: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/08/15/chapter-44-catherines-plan/#comment-20589>

And I couldn't see any evidence of EE commenting. But TBF I didn't go through all comments on every chapter.

Trickster315

So did anyone else catch the fact that Cat referred to Black as "my father"? Correct me if I'm wrong but I think she's only ever referred to him as black before, even in her own thoughts.

Oshi

She has referred to black as her father since the beginning of this book. Look over the chapters and you'll find them.

[*Liliet*](#)

Every single time she says that, there's someone in the comments who only just noticed ♥

You're one of today's lucky 10000! (or however many there were)

medailyfun

dude, he's nickname is trickster for a reason 😊

Soronel Haetir

Cruel mercy is actually a major victory for Cat, a wounded enemy is a much bigger liability than a dead one.

IDKWhoitis

Reminds me of the Byzantine Emperor who ordered the blinding of 99 of every 100 POW to cripple Bulgaria.

medailyfun

4000 riders should have much more than 4000 horses with them, there're expendables in the war campaign

[*Liliet*](#)

Are they? I'm not so sure.

RanVor

Horse casualties happen. Besides, horses tire. In a regular war campaign, every cavalry soldier needs at least one spare mount to maintain combat readiness at all times.

Liliet

Makes sense.

Not 'expendable' but need spares sounds about right.

Someguy

The Golden Horde (Mongols) had at least 5 mounts each, which also functioned as baggage train & Emergency Fod Supply.

Not sure about the Greeks & Persians though.

Ultimate_Procrastinator

Being nomads, I believe the Mongols would have had more horses than a typical cavalry force, but I believe two spares was generally typical for a well-equipped cavalry man.

Allafterme

In their camps maybe, you don't bring spares to a light skirmishing.

RanVor

Sure, but you don't go skirmishing far away from your camp...

Javvies

Cavalry can maybe – for short trips – make do with only one mount. The lighter your equipment loadout the further that envelope gets you, but it's a relatively small one at the best of times (light cavalry on good ground/roads).

Realistically, though, you want at least two mounts per mounted combatant, not counting any packhorses and supply train, for any sort of distance. You'd prefer more, though. You can get by with having only one combat trained mount if you primarily ride the other for distance travel, but you don't ride (and thus tire out) your combat trained mounts for very long unless you have additional combat trained mounts you can switch to or you have no other options.

Most likely, Cat has picked up somewhere in the vicinity of ten thousand horses, quite possibly more when all the packhorses are included.

Sure, cataphract warhorse training is different from knight warhorse training, but they're still quality horseflesh.

medailyfun

Cat did not mention Nauk when passing the news to Hakram 😞

[Liliet](#)

Oof, yeah =x

[Mental Mouse](#)

She needs a bottle and half a day...

[theothin](#)

I don't think this falls under that. It's basic casualty reporting, something presently relevant and being publicized throughout the army. Really going through the feelings about his death can wait for then, but not the raw information.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I wouldn't assume we've heard every word between the two. (Narrative elision is a thing.) Probably she did tell him in an off-screen listing, but hasn't discussed it yet.

Someguy

Random Thought: Cat's not having Robber supervise this? This is one of the largest act of robbery committed right (sacking cities not counted)?

[Liliet](#)

Still doesn't measure up to that one time Cat stole two legions and an entire country.

Someguy

I was under the impression that those were filed under Employment Severance Package?

[Liliet](#)

White collar thefts are always the biggest

[Mental Mouse](#)

I think you mean black-collar! 😊

[Liliet](#)

I said what I said XD

Gunslinger

> Walk back to your Theodosian, General Pallas," I said. "And give him warning from the Black Queen – if he ever pulls anything like this on my people again, there's room for another soul on my cloak."

Shivers, this is the good stuff

Hakram Cat conversation was surprising not just because Hakram has yet to have a second hand attached (dropping yet again the combat effectiveness of the Woe) but also to the fact that Cats mortality wasn't brought up.

[Liliet](#)

Woe needs command effectiveness, not combat effectiveness.

They're REALLY not a typical Named band.

[Daniel E](#)

I read this as 'Name Brand', and now I'm disappointed that The Woe don't have a product line 😞

[Fayhem](#)

Buy Woe™ Brand Stabbing Cream!

"Wait, is that for if you've been stabbed or if you're going to be stabbing someone else?"

"Really either would make sense here but actually it's just goblinfire, we're selling it to our enemies it'll be hilarious."

...I probably should not be imagining Robber as the one doing R&D and marketing for the Woe's product line but let's be honest he'd jump on the opportunity if Cat didn't proactively ban him from it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

"Bottle contained goblinfire instead of ointment. 0/5 would not buy again. (Should've learned after the bobcat)."

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also I bet they'd love some Stabbing Cream at [the stab factory](#).

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm just wondering what kind of precedents Hakram is establishing for the Name of Adjutant.

[theothin](#)

Obviously, the Adjutant is supposed to be the queen's right hand.

[shimizubad](#)

well, now he's the queen's no hand

Andrew Mitchell

But his bone hand is quite functional.

Aotrs Commander

Hah! Never change, Cat, never change.

Hitogami

I've missed Cat, I really have. Atta girl

[Daniel E](#)

Can someone explain why Hakram felt the need to do away with his other hand? I reread that chapter, and I'm just not getting the uncertainty or whatever else regarding Thief's loyalty.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

basically thief doesnt think she belongs there in the friendship sense of it nor the usefulness aspect of it, and shes losing her name, which is what kinda lead her to join them in the first place.

hakram was like "fuck that yo, imma chop off this hand to show you that youre more than just a name."

[Daniel E](#)

There has to be more to it than that. Was the whole thing just Thief being mopey/mellow-dramatic, and Hakram couldn't think of a better way to assure her of value as a teammate?

[Euodiachloris](#)

You don't lose your Name through a passing depressive episode. She was undergoing a prolonged existential crisis over what her Role was, how her Name related to the duties she was expected to fulfil, her role within the Woe and whether she had ever actually been a Hero or just a Villain with pretensions. And, if she had been a Hero, why did looking back on those days feel like she was a bigger Bad Guy back then than she feels being a scared-as-hell ¿Villain?...?

Also, she was *months* into a fully justified, PTSD-induced anxiety-depression spiral she was having no luck in breaking out of. Her Name might have helped her... if she were willing to ditch Callow and focus on being the Thief.

Vivian has done many questionable things, but quitting Callow? Fuck, no!

Liliet

^^^

imagesbe

Hakram tried to reassure her. But not only are words cheap, at that period Vivian didn't trust Hakram half as far as she could throw him, which is pretty much not at all. He himself lamented that he was the only one there; the others she trusted enough that words might have been able to help, but she distrusted him too much for that.

He picked the only thing he could see, a way to tell her that he was taking her seriously and not trying to play mind games or manipulate her. Words were not going to cut it, no pun intended.

Mental Mouse

The thing is, for most humans, his solution would simply not have been something to consider. I fear that "Adjutant" is likely to become "that guy who mutilates himself for the group's benefit". Which admittedly does sound like an Evil role.

Liliet

Honestly, I think it's just Cat's influence (Amadeus's influence by proxy) (-glaring @ the idiot-)

NZPIEFACE

Eh, kinda. Her being mopey/mellow-dramatic had big impacts on Callow as a whole and Hakram really couldn't let that shit go.

Liliet

"Mopey/melodramatic" is one way to put it, sure. Eudiachloris has put it in a more precise way.

Hakram couldn't think of a better way to break through her paranoia wrt him. Words are cheap. I do think there **MUST** have been a better solution, but he felt time pressure, and only something in this category would do the job *quickly*.

Daniel E

That makes more sense, I appreciate the insight everyone 😊
That said, I was hoping Vivienne would eventually appreciate

just how insanely powerful Thief really was; she took an entire fleet of boats and dropped them in the middle of a city, and later proved she could steal an Aspect if it was made physical (the Sun). Hopefully she gets a new Name and isn't just side-lined like Ratface & Killien. Hmm, I wonder if she ever went through with her Fae conversion. Anyways, maybe something close to Thief, but more definitively Evil, like Shade or Shadow.

RanVor

I don't think she's in danger of being sidelined anytime soon. I disagree about the Name, though. If she gets a new one, I very much doubt it's going to be related to thievery.

[Mental Mouse](#)

You know what would really put the cat among the pigeons? Viv's new name turns out to be Chancellor. Admittedly unlikely (as it's a Praes name) but can you imagine the reaction from the Tower?

[Liliet](#)

I actually don't think Vivienne is going to get anything like an Evil Name, she was and remains a heroine. Her Name crisis was related to her no longer doing thief-y thing and operating as a mastermind instead, not to anything to do with which side she was on. That transition was seamless, she was as on the side of Callow and the right thing to do as she ever was.

Nordvegr

Is Pallas a Wandering Inn reference?

Satan

Seems like she can become a weapons dealer for Procer, especially if she keeps all the Helikean gear.

Chapter 19: Precedent

"The evening before a battle is like an entire nation breathing in. Only morning will tell if what comes out is acclaim or

lamentation."

– King Albert Fairfax of Callow, the Thrice-Invaded

"Liability almost seems like too mild a word," Hakram said.

The words were not voiced as blame or complaint, but as a simple statement of fact. Adjutant was assessing a weakness, nothing more. I'd known him for long enough by now to take it was it was, and in truth Indrani probably had as well. It didn't stop her from snatching his handless arm and twisting it behind his back, forcing a heavily muscled orc over a foot taller than her to bend over in pain. The sight of it was rather absurd: Hakram was on the tall side even for his kind, and his shoulders were broader than any human I'd met. Between the set of plate he wore like it was made of feathers, the knife-like fangs and the bone hand Adjutant looked like he should be able to snap her in half. And yet I wasn't even sure he was faking it, when he struggled against Archer's tight and sudden grip.

"I think you meant to say 'Archer, you peerless beauty whose appeal is known even to orcs, thank you for bringing me this nice army and saving my whinging orc ass'," Indrani said.

There was a pause.

"I guess Cat helped," she conceded. "And Akua was there, probably."

"Such lavish praise," Diabolist drawled. "Do cease, Archer, or I will be most terribly embarrassed."

The shade's night-black dress rippled down to her feet, legs crossed elegantly as she ignored the laws of Creation and somehow managed to lounge gracefully in a Legion-issue folding chair. The neckline was low, though not overly revealing of the curves below, and held up only on one shoulder by some sort of cloth strap circling around her neck. The saffron yellow trim along it stretched down casually, bringing attention to the long slit revealing a portion of her leg. Now and then I could feel Akua's amused golden eyes on me, almost daring me to look. Diabolist looked like sin, which I was not unconvinced might be what she was actually metaphysically made of these days. Still, this was a great deal less subtle than usual: she usually only resorted to this kind of jabbing when she was irritated, so clearly being cut out of the happenings in Sarcella so she could concentrate on building my well still had her ticked off. She'd get over it, I decided, and did not look at the smooth dark skin a dainty twitch of her foot was further revealing.

"You're not going to let my arm go unless I repeat it, are you?" Adjutant sighed.

"Guess," Indrani smiled, all batting her eyelashes with a coquettish smile.

Being a merciful woman by nature, I allowed Hakram the dignity of pretending not to hear while he offered his full surrender. I was still looking at the same thing he'd been, the fifty thousand drow outside that dawn had chased back into their tents for exhausted slumber. General Rumena had agreed that we needed to keep at least a tenth of the warriors awake during the daybreak exhaustion, as relying entirely on the Army of Callow for protection would be risky, but the logistics of that were proving tricky. We had to put up full sigils for the duty, as mixing warriors from different ones would cause no end of trouble, but it was seen as a punishment duty. Sigil-holders were duelling each other to make other drow's sigils hold watch instead, and though the Sisters had long backed my order that drow were not to kill each other over Night while in my army 'first blood' was another story. The sigil-holder for the Kuresnik was the weakest of their kind in the southern expedition, and its sigil had been forced to hold watch seven days in a row before the matter was brought to me.

The Kuresnik Sigil had been quite literally falling apart under the strain, the first proof we'd had that keeping drow awake through the early hours repeatedly would have physical consequences. Many of the dzulu had taken sick, becoming extremely sensitive to light, and some of the Mighty had found their powers weakened even after nightfall. *Dawn-sickness*, the Firstborn were calling it now. Rumena had stepped in to handle the problem, but ending the duelling entirely had proved impossible even for it. Though respected, the Tomb-Maker remained a first among equals and not someone wielding the kind of largely uncontested authority a general would in the Legions or the Army of Callow. I'd eventually lost my patience and told sigil-holders that if they intended on pursuing this, it would be by my rules. Matches were now arranged by random draw between pairs of sigil-holders, and I'd informed them I would personally rip the Night out of anyone who tried to further debate the outcome after it was settled. And of anyone trying to pull this shit over watches when there were enemy within marching distance. Mighty Radenbog had seemed dubious of my ability to enforce this, when I made the announcement, so I left it to spend three days without so much as a speck of Night to call on.

After losing two toes to frostbite it was duly humbled when I returned its power.

"Now that Archer has ceased browbeating the Lord Adjutant, perhaps we could attend to more pressing matters?" Akua suggested in a sweet voice.

"That's *Lady Archer* to you, Bad Faith Wraith," Indrani replied, tone amused instead of heated.

That detail hadn't escaped Hakram's notice, I saw when I turned back to my informal council. I could almost hear the readjustments taking place behind that calm face, the questions the orc would keep a lid on until it was just the two of us.

"Akua's not wrong," I said. "We have a few hours until the drow can resume march, and at least two of them will have to be spent with the generals of the Third and Fourth getting everything in order. I want us with a clear course of action before that."

Letting the tent's flaps drop, I retreated back into the warmth and claimed a folding chair for myself. My staff remained propped up the cloth wall, its surface seemingly hazy for the closeness with the coal brazier close to hit. I accepted a cup of wine when Akua offered it, pleasantly surprised to find it Vale summer wine at the first sip. I inclined my head at her in thanks and she smirked back, raising her own cup. Indrani preferred plopping herself down atop the table to her folding chair, predictably, and Hakram remained standing. Like an officer giving report, I couldn't help but think.

"We're moving to link up with Juniper's columns," I said. "That much is not up to debate. But I need some context."

I met Hakram's gaze with a raised eyebrow.

"As in, specifically, what the Hells you and Vivienne were thinking marching most the Army of Callow into this mess," I said. "Why not just you and the Hunt, Hakram? You don't need forty thousand legionaries for an extraction."

"We had situations on our hands," Adjutant said. "We were going to have to come for the stranded Legions regardless, but complications grew quickly."

That they'd come for the legionaries Black had led into Procer I had no true issue with, as he'd well know. Aside from the utter waste of lives involved in letting the Dominion and the Principate run down some of the finest soldiers and commanders on Calernia on the eve of all-out war with Keter, there'd been other considerations. Like the fact that the Army of Callow had brought into its fold two of the old school Legions after Second Liesse, and that many of those officers had friends and kin in the stranded army. At the very least, mass discontent and desertions would have come of us doing nothing. Add to that the fact I'd personally given my word to Juniper that I'd intervene if it went bad for them, and it would have potentially made for a very ugly brew if Vivienne and Hakram had left Marshal Grem and his armies to die. On the other hand, there was a difference between putting together a rescue operation and fielding what had to be the

majority of the Army of Callow in the middle of Proceran territory.

"Malicia is on the move," Akua softly said, "is she not?"

It did not sound like a guess, but then it never did with her.

"Indirectly," Hakram said. "High Lady Abreha of Aksum has been named the Imperial Governess of the Blessed Isle, and tasked with handling the refugee situation."

I frowned. I'd spoken with this particular highborn once before, after First Liesse. She's offered to back my petition to establish a ruling council over Callow if I killed the other Trueblood hostages I'd taken from then-Heiress Akua, immediately turning on her supposed allies when it became clear I had the upper hand. She'd later become the head of the so-called 'Moderates', after Malicia began methodically dismantling the Truebloods. The old Soninke was treacherous and no doubt just as dangerous as anyone capable of claiming a High Ladyship of Praes but I'd not considered her anything to be truly worried about. The Empress should be stepping on her as hard as she could, and while Aksum would still have mostly untouched household troops the High Lady Abreha did not have a reputation for military talent.

"Thalassina was vaporized, which means the Kebdana are done as a political entity in Praes for at least one generation," Akua mused. "Yet that would not be enough to make Abreha Mirembe a true threat. Which has fallen, Okoro or Foramen?"

There was a slight twitch to Hakram's jaw, the only visible hint coming through that he was impressed. He shouldn't be so surprised, I thought. Diabolist had been raised to drink and breathe Wasteland politics at the very highest level from the moment her monster of a mother had her set down in a cradle. It wasn't something anyone else on our side would be able to ever truly understand, at least not the way she did. Behind the golden eyes there were decades of learning about the tapestry of enmities and alliances that tied together the Dread Empire's aristocracy, pieces of knowledge that no one but those born to that hallowed birth would ever be made privy too. Adjutant would have to face the same truth I had, about Akua Sahelian: damned as she was beyond all redemption, she was terrifyingly *useful*.

"Foramen," Hakram said, eye on me and not Diabolist. "You tasked me to negotiate access to munitions and goblin steel, Catherine, and I have. The Kingdom of Callow has recognized the sovereignty of the Confederation of the Grey Eyries, including over the formerly Praesi city of Foramen."

I let out a low whistle.

"So the Matrons actually raised the rebel flag," I said. "I thought they'd wait until the very end, hedge their bets."

"We loaned them gold and armaments to incite them," Adjutant admitted. "Vivienne and I believed it was necessary to implement a containment strategy on Praes, after Malicia's wave of assassinations last year."

"The dwarven gold," I said, coming to the obvious conclusion. "So you did get it."

"Accounts were made open to us in Mercantis," he agreed. "We put them to good use. Our loans to the Matrons will be repaid in the good we want from them, namely their steel and munitions."

I nodded. Risky business, but it made a mess for Malicia to handle instead of the other way around for once. Besides, we needed the munitions if the Army of Callow's war doctrine – which took much from the Legions of Terror's own – was to remain fully usable. Without them, my entire sapper corps essentially lost its teeth.

"So why does Foramen falling make High Lady Abreha a problem for us?" I asked, flicking a glance at Akua.

"The goblins will have slaughtered every Banu they could get their hands on, which means two great families of Praes were destroyed in quick succession," Diabolist elaborated. "That will worry the others. Nok was sacked, and that will shake the faith of its High Lord in the Empress' authority. With Wolof in the hands of my dear cousin Sargon, which Malicia should own body and soul – perhaps even literally – and High Lady Takisha of Kahtan now sharing a border with the Matrons... Arguably, High Lady Abreha is now the second most powerful woman in Praes. Her holdings are untouched, her troops fresh, and her influence at its very apex. In olden times, this would be enough to make her the Chancellor."

"So Malicia sent her to the Blessed Isle, hoping she'd be trouble for us instead of her," I frowned.

"I would wager the intent to be cornering High Lady Abreha into acting against Callow and having her killed by our hand," Akua said, then dipped her head at Hakram. "I assume she reached out privately to Lady-Regent Dartwick with assurances that any such actions on Abreha's part would be against her own instructions?"

Hakram bared his fangs.

"And if we kill her, there will be no retribution," the orc said, tacitly agreeing to all she'd said.

I closed my eyes for a moment, putting it together. Then why had the Army of Callow come west instead of east, given that we now

had an ambitious and dangerous High Lady at the eastern border? I didn't believe Hakram or Vivienne fools enough to strip Summerholm of its garrison for this, or that Juniper would have agreed to them doing so in the first, so at least the gate into central Callow would hold even if it was attacked by surprise. But what was the long-term solution to this mess that would be found in Iserre? They were coming for Grem One-Eye, after all, and – well, that would do it.

"You want to use the Legions of Terror loyal to Black as a bulwark between us and Malicia," I suddenly said, opening my eyes. "Grem and his legions to be put up on the Blessed Isle, I'm thinking, with a neat supply arrangement the crown would handle the grain part of."

"And more," Hakram said. "I have been speaking with the Clans willing to take my envoys. There are some who still remember the Steppes nearly bucked the Tower's rule, when Nefarious still reigned."

"Ah," Akua breathed out, sounding delighted. "Grem One-Eye, the orc who might have become the first Warlord since the Miezan occupation had he not entered the Carrion's Lord service instead. You mean to encircle the Wasteland with greenskin realms, one of them unified behind the only orc alive that might feasibly be accepted as lord over all the clans."

It wasn't, I decide, that she enjoyed the thought of Praes losing such a significant part of its territory. She simply admired the elegant viciousness of the plan, surrounding a foe with a net of allied nations by calling on ties that Malicia had no claim to supersede.

"Vivienne's notion," Adjutant said. "She's working on Marshal Grem, though unless the Black Knight dies we're unlikely to convince him."

"So we can settle the entire eastern border, if it goes well," I said. "Which leaves us free to rebuild Callow in peace, and strike deals with the Grand Alliance. That's still what puzzles me, Hakram. Why so large a force here?"

"'cause they're twisting Cordelia's arm," Indrani drawled. "That about right, Deadhand?"

Her casual tone cut through the conversation, a sudden reminder that for all that she'd remained quiet and seemingly bored out of her skull until now she'd been paying attention. And as usual, she cut straight at the heart of the matter.

"You were gonna have to send *some* soldiers through anyway to get the Legions moving," Archer continued, "and would you look at that, it was going to be pretty close to Salia. Enough that she'd

have to worry about a gate opening right at her doorstep, if you felt like being hard. So you thought, why not lean on the First Prince a bit?"

I stared at Hakram, who looked rather abashed. Or hungry. It'd been a while since I'd had to decipher the nuances of orc expressions.

"Two birds with a single stone," he conceded in a deep rumble. "It was to be a quick campaign, with perhaps a few skirmishes to blood our fresh recruits. Vivienne would offer a truce to the First Prince, conditional on surrendering the Legions to our custody, and along the implied threat of our presence we'd offer to return Prince Amadis to her. The Grand Alliance's armies would be free to move north unimpeded, and at your return you would find our borders secure and a blooded army ready to fight against the Dead King. We would have a strong position to push for the Liesse Accords in exchange for our assistance."

"And Black?" I asked, tone mild.

"Not in Proceran hands, as far as we know," Adjutant said. "And heroes are not so easily bargained with."

It'd been a neat, tidy plan that resolved most of Callow's issues in a single stroke. Malicia would be forced on the backfoot, the border at the Blessed Isle put in the hands of a famous general personally loyal to my father who'd already once ignored formal summons from the Empress and the Army of Callow's dangerously green soldiers would get a taste of campaigning in preparation for the horror that would be the war against Keter. It'd been even cleverer than they thought, as Cordelia Hasenbach making a truce with Callow would have allowed her to start buying armaments from the dwarves again. The First Prince must be worrying about that, right about now. Given the amount of cheap steel their civil war would have brought to the surface the Proceran armies should be in no danger of running out of armaments anytime soon, but Hasenbach was far-sighted enough she'd realize she could not fight a long-term war against the Dead King without outside forces propping Procer up. She had three choices, broadly speaking: Callow, the League of Free Cities or the Kingdom Under. Given that two of them were barred as long as she was at war with me and the Tyrant was pulling the strings of the third? She'd see the writing on the wall. It'd been a solid plan, I had to give them that.

Only now instead of what they'd planned, the Army of Callow was split in half within Iserre while Proceran and Levantine armies surrounded it, having no way to take a fairy gate out until I got to it. We'd lost soldiers, the Grand Alliance had lost soldiers, and while all this chaos spread the Tyrant of Helike had been orchestrating his own schemes for his still-inscrutable purpose. Somewhere in the countryside my father was in the hands of the

Grey Pilgrim, who would be drawn to any decisive battle between my armies and the Alliance's sure as dusk's coming. Add to that the way Masego had gone missing after witnessing sorcery horrifying enough to level most a city and a war fleet, promptly gotten his hands on the ruins of Liesse – quite possibly the most dangerous magical weapon of our age – and that he must be too hurt or confused to reach out to any of the Woe. This, I thought, was going to be a bloody mayhem of sprawling death and treachery. The kind that determined the path a continent was going to take in the years that followed.

"Well," I finally said. "This is going to get a little tricky."

"This is going to get a little tricky," Indrani cheerfully repeated. "Now *there's* the title of your memoirs, Cat."

"I've always been partial to 'it got worse'," Hakram offered, the filthy traitor.

"Murder ensued," Akua tastefully suggested.

I glared but she just stared back at me, all smirking and insolence.

"You're all useless," I complained.

"Hakram's memoirs," Indrani grinned.

I gestured obscenely at her, which only had her chortling harder. Finally remembering I'd had a cup of wine on the table during this entire conversation, I snatched it and watered my parched throat. Gods, I'd missed actually being able to *enjoy* things.

"All right, then," I said. "Let's try to make a plan that doesn't end up dooming the entire continent."

"Cheers," Akua Sahelian smiled, raising her glass in answer.

[Javvies](#)

Cat is an expert at understatement.
This is going to be a lot tricky.

It wasn't a terrible idea, though.

I fully support the memoir titles debate. And want more of it.

Spencer C Kay

"It wasn't a terrible idea, though"

That's might actually be an even better title than the others.
To me at least.

Speerodude

"i swear i didnt start the fire"

broadaxe

"We didn't start the fire, it was always burning" xD

WuseMajor

I like "Let's try to make a plan that doesn't end up dooming
the entire continent" honestly.

stevenneiman

Nah, that'd be either a political treatise or a self-help
book.

[Liliet](#)

Collective memoirs by Catherine and Amadeus 😊

Raved Thrad

Amadeus, maybe. Catherine's is more likely to be "I Didn't
Do It, Nobody Saw Me Do It, It Was Like That When I Got
Here." 😊

[Liliet](#)

I mean she can have BOTH

pagesbe

Did I actually get first comment? Cool. Anyways, some great
interaction between the Woe + Akua (who's an honorary Woe).

Andrew Mitchell

I think the Woe includes Akua now, for all intents and purposes
anyway. In every way, except she's not actually been named as
part of the Woe, yet.

stevenneiman

She is to the Woe what Scribe is to the Calamities. Or
possibly was, I'm not sure if the Calamities are really a
thing with at least two members dead and the ringleader
stripped of at least his old Name.

Liliet

The chapter in which Akua got added to the party on the Keter journey was called "Sixth", so I'm getting the impression she very much is formally part of the Woe now.

Mental Mouse

Also Ranger off in the forest, with little sign of wanting to get involved (though that might well change when Keter comes knocking).

dodson

Since Masego is preoccupied, the position of OP spellcaster in the Woe's 5-man band will now be filled by Akua. I wonder Erraticerrata will keep her around once Masego is back though.

Someguy

Akua only exists as Emergency Spell Component. The odds for when Masego ends up using her needs to be looked up in Ratface's Books.

Liliet

Well we saw her and Masego working together on the way to Keter and Masego seemed to be very pleased with her assistance.

He's collecting sorcerous castoffs from Praes ;u;

Mental Mouse

How are these folks a five-man-band? I tried to make them match up to the slots, but I couldn't.

Henry Pakkala

Catherine-leader obviously

Thief-lancer her job is to serve as the moral foil to the rest of them

Archer-Big guy she it's mostly around for combat

Masango-Smart guy obviously

adjutant-heart he's the one who keeps the team functioning behind the scenes and manages most of their interpersonal relationships

Azure

"Keep your grudges close, child, and never forget them. We are Callowans, and for every slight there is a price."

Catherine and Vivienne are Callowan. They will NEVER forget.

ruduen

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

Go vote!

Also, I'm curious what a full set of memoir titles would be.

Insanenoodlyguy

Ahh, this is that good "everybody sits around and talks" shit I missed with too many of the characters split up.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes!

But I still really missed Juniper and Vivenne's contributions.

Azure

Yes it's been too long. Can't wait for Vivienne to get back into the main story with Catherine. I've missed her.

[Liliet](#)

y e s

danh3107

Akua's cheek is in peak form in this chapter, nothing else really to talk about.

[Jon schoenthaler](#)

thanks for the Chapter!

IDKWhoitis

There's no way this ends well. For like, anyone.

She really is going to make her Father proud.

[Liliet](#)

Hey, Amadeus's signature actually IS going for the happy ending. For everyone.

Like father, like daughter.

sutortyrannus

Am I the only one who suspects that Catherine is nailing together a story in which to trap Amadeus, ensuring that he'll be swept up into it in a direction and manner she wants?

Since gating into Iserre, I'm fairly sure that every POV of hers has included a reference to him as her father, along with some form of reflection on his nature in comparison to her own. Given the limited insight we're sometimes given into Catherine's decisions, I'm willing to believe that it's deliberate.

The story it weaves is that of a child growing up, and learning to see a parent as another human being, reaching the point where their own worldview has developed to the point where they are judging their parents according to their own values.

I can see the arrow of meaning it's creating, but I can't figure out towards what it's pointed.

dodson

I'm also as much interested in this as I am to learn what kind of story-fu Pilgrim is going to pull! Between him and cat, which of their stories will gain more weight?

[Mental Mouse](#)

There's a more basic story at play: The student is becoming the master.

[Liliet](#)

This.

[Liliet](#)

I think that's a human thing, not a story thing.

sutortyrannus

How many things are more human than a story?

[Liliet](#)

It's a more immediately human thing, not mediated/filtered/considered through a story.

[Liam Boyd](#)

I'm still trying to figure out how you made Akua one of my favorite characters. She went from being an antagonist I genuinely hated, and just wanted to get killed off already....

TO being someone who brings just the biggest smiles to my face when I read her parts.

H0000W?!@?!

Nathan

I'm pretty sure its like what Cat said previously with the Crusade, it doesn't matter if you're a monster, as long as your 'their' monster.

When Akua became part of Cat's side her faults became quirks and the things that made her so infuriating became assets, and so she became our Monster, our dear and oh so terrible monster ^^

Chow Chow

Right?!

Maybe with scenes like here when Akuas pouting is shown to be her trying to seduce or tempt Cat because she was left out of the loop for too long

[Liliet](#)

Erratic wrote her as a person.

That's, like, it. That's the secret. We've seen enough of her POV, learned enough about her story, to *know* her and *understand* her.

And she's pretty amazing, all things considered.

Skaddix

I wonder when Malicia gets to raise a New Warlock whose first mission will probably be taking back Foramen.

Andrew Mitchell

I don't think it's Malicia's choice; Warlock is not a title she bestows, it's a Name. The roles of Apprentice and Warlock are both currently vacant as far as we know. But people will rise to claim those Names sooner or later.

Skaddix

Its not totally her choice but she should be able to influence who gets the title.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I don't think so... the titles Warlock and Apprentice are very much about magic, not connected to the Tower or Empress. She might be able to encourage likely candidates, but no more than, say, Amadeus could – and she'd probably have better luck trying a candidate for Apprentice.

Amadeus got to pick a Squire only because that's the lead-in role to his own (old) Name, just as Warlock might well have helped his son achieve the Apprentice name. In both cases, the risk is the same – potentially creating your successor.

JJR

““All right, then,” I said. “Let’s try to make a plan that doesn’t end up dooming the entire continent.””

There goes my “study physics in Keter” plan.

SpeckofStardust

I cant believe they did something so utterly stupid. Like aiming to win all the things with a single brilliant move as a villain is like the number 1 thing you don’t go for.

Argentorum

Remember what Indrani said back in the Everdark, only Cat thinks like that. Even *Archer* thinks it’s weird that Cat can look at herself like a character in a story, like a piece on a board. For everyone else, this is just there life.

SpeckofStardust

Over reach is a thing, and by all accounts the regent of callow has decided to march with the host of this army, meaning that Callow has no one of importance in charge. And is completely and utterly doomed if this mess goes further south, putting all your eggs in 1 basket and then tossing that basket into a ever growing fire literal requires no special mindset in order to go ‘Ya bad plan’

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, even sending only 20k soldiers would have been enough. It was extremely stupid, even from a strategical and tactical point of view only

Cicero

Ah, but Viv is a hero (a tainted, renegade, cynical hero, but a hero none the less).

[Liliet](#)

In this entire thread, I love your point the best.

RanVor

Oh, but is she really?

Raved Thrad

She may not have a Name, but I don't doubt that she is still a hero. 😊

RanVor

That's not quite what I meant...

Zach

I don't know if Callow even counts as a villainous entity at this point. Cat herself doesn't have a name, and neither does Vivienne.

Skaddx

I mean I also don't see why Viv is with the army. She is not a military leader, she was a Named sure but even at the height of her power she was not a combat ace in fact she was the weakest Woe in combat by far, and it leaves Callow with no leadership whatsoever or at least none besides a few nobles of dubious loyalty. I mean they are awfully hopeful that the Goblins and High Lords/Ladies keep Malicia occupied. Quite the gamble especially when Lady Abreha can look across from the Blessed Isles and see no opposition of note.

Skaddx

I mean overall Viv and Hakrams's plan is fine but they massively overreached especially when you consider they had no idea when Cat was coming back and Masego went rogue with a super weapon before this point. So if the Named under Pilgrim weren't doing their own plan, they could have showed up and destroyed the Legions of Callow. Cause again even with a Name Viv is cannon fodder and Hakram is split yeah some Aspects boost his combat power but he is still a hybrid. Especially when you consider the Tyrant crushed a whole army solo.

Novice

What with all the (either attempted or successful) assassinations going around, I'm fairly certain in the middle of the Army is the safest place for the current Callowan regent, especially since Viv no longer has her old Name.

[Liliet](#)

My guess is that it was necessary for the political veneer with Amadis.

Someguy

>“All right, then,” I said. “Let’s try to make a plan that doesn’t end up dooming the entire continent.”

Next: Ends up dooming the entire continent.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

>“Hakram’s memoirs,” Indrani grinned.

An actual book.

And capital D Diabolist... But not capital T Thief...

[Euodiachloris](#)

Thief as a Name is currently AWOL, presumed sulking. 🤨

Decius

Did Akua finally poison Cat here, or is her treachery still in the planning stages?

RanVor

Looks like it’s currently in the “maybe someday” stage.

Nathan

Unless she’s acting under the rule of ‘when you least expect it’.

When/If she turns on them I’m going to be equally disappointed and guess surprised, cause I really wanna believe in ‘For Justice and Friendship Akua’ (and I guess that’s where she gets me -.-)

RanVor

She has already had her chance and decided not to use it. If she really is plotting against Cat at this point, her scheme must be mind-bogglingly complex.

Zachary

The only angle I can potentially see is that she has a better chance hitched to Catherine’s ship and following it until she’s in a good position to betray than attempting to go it alone from within the middle of the Everdark (which I think is what would have happened if she had betrayed her then).

RanVor

She’s a ghost. Physical limitations shouldn’t be a problem.

dodson

'mindbogglingly complex' is pretty on-brand for one of Diabolist's plots.

RanVor

By "mind-bogglingly complex" I meant "Bard-level or higher".

[Liliet](#)

Occam's Razor says she's *more likely than not* genuinely on Cat's side.

There are so many reasons for her to be, and so very little for her outside of Cat's service, considering NOBODY currently alive has any reason to like her...

Jeffrey T Ma

typo at the end "You're not going to let my arm go unless I repeat it, do you?"
are you

Skaddix

Why does Cat think Masego would reach out to Hakram or Viv anyway? Yeah he and Hakram get along fine but he third or fourth at best in the Woe in terms of friend if you count Akua as a member. Its like Cat forgets that her, Indrani and Akua were out of contact. The members who would be most useful for any magical solution and the two with the best chance of talking to him were MIA. Cat had raw power at that point. Indrani and Akua have plenty of magical knowledge. Indrani obviously the closest to him with Cat as second.

[Liliet](#)

Masego knows they were out of contact, and Hakram and Vivi are his friends too.

[Daniel E](#)

Please tell me Vivienne gets screen time in the next few chapters. I am insanely curious about what's going on in her head right now.

Chapter 20: Bearings

"It is best to count one's fingers after shaking hands with Praesi."

– Queen Rowena Alban of Callow

I'd never gotten the full story behind that scarf. Indrani almost never took it off, with the notable exception of when she was naked and otherwise occupied, and she'd been evasive about it when I'd asked. The weave was unusual, finer and tighter than I'd ever seen of Callowan cloth, but save for that there was nothing exceptional about the grey and green scarf. It was from Mercantis, she'd said, and a gift from the Ranger. The first thing she'd ever owned. Aside from those bare bones Indrani had never spoken a word of the matter and I knew better than to push. I was not without little pieces of my own, stolen moments and memories I would rather not have put under the scrutiny of another no matter how dear to me they were. Worn as the cloth was, it seemed one of the few possessions Archer actually cared for along with her monster of a longbow. That she was a wanderer to the bone was plain enough to see, standing before me with the sum of her earthly belongings as she was. Blades, bow, a leather satchel and the clothes on her back. She neither needed nor particularly wanted more than that. A strange thought, to me. I'd not acquired a taste for luxury even after taking the crown, but having a place of my own – a home – and some comforts in it had always seemed natural. Something everyone would want.

I supposed I'd just have to make those rooms a little larger, for whenever my vagrant of a friend came back.

"Snow's crisp," Indrani said. "Wind's calm. Good night for a stroll."

"I'd tell you to be careful," I said, "but somehow I don't see that happening."

Tugging down her scarf to flash an admittedly roguish smile, Archer winked at me. This was not, I decided, in the least reassuring.

"I'll be the very soul of prudence," she lied.

Leaving me to stand leaning on my staff, she quickly darted across the snow to take Hakram's shoulder in hand. Half a hug, a rough display of affection.

"Keep an eye on them, Hakram," she said, without a hint of irony. "You know how careless they get without me around to chaperone."

Adjutant leaned down to gently knock his forehead against her own. Neck angled a little to the side, I noted, as to allow for

Indrani to rip open his throat with her fangs were she an orc. A display of trust and kinship, the kind orcs usually reserved for their close family.

"If you die, I've staked a claim on your bow," he told her.

That startled a laugh out of her, along with jeering about how he was supposed to shoot anything when he kept dropping hands all over the place. Akua was standing a little to the side of them, high-collared dress of pale and gold sweeping down to her feet. For all the apparent slenderness of the cloth, she was unaffected by the chill of the night. Indrani clapped her shoulder amicably, which the shade allowed with a fondly tolerant smile.

"You know, since I'm leaving-" Archer began.

Diabolist sighed.

"Fine," she conceded. "Look your fill."

Indrani's brow rose in surprise, then she grinned eagerly. Did I even want to know? A heartbeat passed, and Akua did not move.

"You're still wearing clothes," Archer pointed out, sounding a little cheated.

"According to certain interpretations of Trismegistan theory, I am in fact naked at all times," the shade drily replied.

"Praesi treachery," Indrani cursed.

Adjutant's silhouette loomed tall at my side, the orc calmly studying the scene. Linger on the smile that came easy to Archer's lips, the almost mellow way Diabolist stood even when so close to her. The last time he'd seen the two of them together, I thought, Indrani had suggested firing arrows at Akua for sport. *Before the Everdark*, I thought, but that was only part of it. *Before Great Strycht*, in truth, and the choices made there. Hakram had not been part of those dark hours, and might not understand the ties they had forged. Vivienne, I considered, almost certainly would not. The musings were set aside when Archer finished her usual ritual of taunts and insults with Diabolist, nonchalantly returning to me. She hesitated and I went rifling through my cloak, fingers emerging tightened around a silver flask I tossed at her. Nimbly snatching it out of the air, she cocked an eyebrow at me.

"Iserran brandy," I lied.

It was, in fact, the foulest-tasting belt of drow *senna* I'd been able to get my hands on. Hopefully she'd choke on the muddy taste of the mushroom-made liquor while expecting a smooth Proceran distillate. That ought to teach her covers were not to be hogged

when it was this cold out and your queen was very much mortal again.

"But I didn't get you anything," she pouted, putting away the flask even as she did.

"That's quite-"

I could have struggled and perhaps even blocked her, but when she put a hand on my waist and dipped me backwards I decided to allow Indrani her way. The kiss was rough, though in a way she knew I liked, and the warmth of her was stirring.

"There," she said, after withdrawing.

I coughed to hide my breath was a little uneven.

"There," I very eloquently agreed.

Her hand remained on my shoulder and she met my eyes, this time with serious mien.

"I'll find him, Cat," Indrani said. "Bring him home in one piece."

I nodded, just as serious.

"If one of us can, it's you," I replied. "I'll be expecting the both of you back."

"You've gotten so demanding since they put a crown on your head," Indrani snorted.

This time we parted for good, and with a casual wave of the hand at all of us she began her trek into the snow. Under the last sliver of the warning moon I watched her leave to recover Masego. Hakram and Akua came to stand at my sides, flanking me in shared silence until finally I breathed out.

"Come on," I said. "Adjutant, I want to show you something."

I glanced at Diabolist, who nodded back. Good, it was about time I had a close look at the well I'd charged her to gather.

—

I could feel the slow, constant pulse of the Night even from over fifty feet away.

Akua had put up comprehensive layers of wards around the tent, but that much accumulated power could never be entirely hidden. To me, who stood First Under the Night, it was like feeling a warm whisper of wind against my skin. Diabolist's eyes looked brighter, her body more... tangible the closer we came, but it was

Hakram's reaction that interested me. He was the only one of the three of us who truly still bore a Name, after all. I could see in the way he straightened his back and free his hand from encumbrance that he was feeling *something*, at least. He met my gaze uneasily.

"There's a scent in the air," he gravelled. "Like coolness and dark."

"Sharp nose," Diabolist said, and she ushered us into her workshop.

I'd only been in here once before, at the start, and when the well had barely even taken shape. This was rather more advanced, I thought. Field conditions were no friend to the kind of precision work mages of Akua and Masego's favoured at the exclusion of almost all else, but Diabolist had made do on the road. The ground beneath the tent was bereft of snow and had been glassed by a Mighty's flame to be perfectly level. The shade glared at us when we entered until we rid our boots of the worst of the snow, and she went through a pack to retrieve cloths for us to wipe them entirely clean afterwards. Akua herself almost danced to the side of the artefact she was constructing, steps light and elated like a girl at her first summer fair. Adjutant's eyes remained peeled on the well for a long moment, until he let out a shuddering breath.

"What," he said, "exactly is that?"

"Our answer to the Grey Pilgrim," I said.

In a sardonic bit of humour Akua had actually built it to look like a wishing well, though one held up above the floor by four curved supports of lead. Lead, I had learned from my recent studies, held strong properties of stability and grounding if never touched by fire. Held up by those supports was a disc of polished onyx, and from that bottom rose the shape of a well. Shards of obsidian bound together by thin strands of copper – there was, allegedly, no better metal for bridging – made up a glittering octagon, though several large swaths of the side were still empty. Above the well itself, two slender pillars of amethyst-studded copper held up a quaint little angled roof. The roof itself was made of the same obsidian-and-copper assembly as the well, though compared to the octagon the progress made in filling it was farther along. Unsurprising: every shard from the well contained the full exertion of a Mighty's Night from dusk till dawn, but the roof held only the same by sigil-holders.

"At this pace, the main body will be finished within seven nights," Diabolist said. "The upper receptacles-"

"Roof," I drily said. "She means roof."

"- will take within twenty to thirty nights," she finished, as if I had never spoken. "Though the artefact itself will be functional after the upper receptacles are half-filled, which will be achieved two dawns from now."

"Won't be as strong, though," I said.

"Which would only be an issue if you meant to directly oppose a foe's miracles," Akua said.

Hakram stepped forward hesitantly, boots crisply sounding against the floor. He leaned over the roof, thickly-ridged brow knotting.

"I recognize some of this," he said. "Praesi sorcery."

Diabolist let out a pleased little noise.

"Indeed," she said. "The underlying structure is Trismegistan, of course, though I required some... consultation with Sve Noc before I could properly account for the properties of the Night."

"And what does it *do*?" Adjutant asked.

I began moving forward, then suddenly stopped. My staff had begun to pulse, the Night I had woven within beckoned by Akua's much more complex creation. Unwilling to risk the power still sleeping inside, I propped it up against the side of the tent and limped forward instead. Hakram extended an arm without a word, and I gratefully leaned on it. Fingers tracing the obsidian of the roof, I drew his attention to three symbols in Crepuscular carved on the frame. They reappeared in the patterns, over and over again.

"Years ago, when we were still kids playing war games in the Tower's shadow, I had a talk with Kilian," I said. "I told her that Juniper was actually predictable, in a way, because if she had all the information she nearly always made the right choice."

I smiled, almost melancholy at the memory of those simpler days.

"Presumptuous of me to say, as she proved in swift order, but I learned to temper the principle," I said. "But for this? Oh, I know how they're going to swing at us. They tipped their hand at the Battle of the Camps, Hakram. They have one tool that could *really* cripple us, so it's a near-certainty it'll be used."

"And so you prepared an answer," Adjutant said.

I ran my thumb against the three symbols. One did not need to know Crepuscular, to glimpse their meaning, for the written language of the drow could sometimes be of obvious meanings. The sun rampant, the sun halved, the sun veiled.

"So we prepared an answer," I softly agreed.

We left Akua to her toil, after that, filling a well I hoped would not be needed. Yet, as with the sword I had been leaning on in the shape of a staff, I was not certain I would have a choice.

Waste of wastes, but what else could I do?

—

Marching across Iserre with an army of near seventy thousand, even if fifty thousand of those were drow, was not a quick or quiet affair. The Fourth and Third had been put through twin ringers of constant pursuit and assault, and to be frank both had been reaching the end of their rope. Yet I couldn't afford to slacken our march, either, as drow scouts began reporting that the Levantine army we'd fought the vanguard of at Sarcella was on our tail. Still more than a week behind us, but the reason for that delay became clear when reports of banners not of the Dominion emerged: they'd had Principate reinforcements. Either southern levies hastily put together, or more dangerously the border army of twenty-thousand the First Prince had garrisoned in Tenerife to discourage incursion by the League. Which meant Kairos and his allies had let the lot of them through, because they shouldn't have had the strength to push back a determined League force. If it truly was Hasenbach's southern army, that was bad news indeed. Those would be professional soldiers, in majority, that the First Prince had judged would be able to either slow or turn back an invasion by the entire League of Free Cities. They wouldn't be pushovers, or peasants with spears.

The forced halt of several hours every dawn further complicated our advance, as it needed to be compensated for by marching after nightfall if we didn't want to lose almost a third of the day's march. The Firstborn significantly quickened after dusk, of course, but my legionaries most definitely did not. The disjointed peaks made planning awkward, especially as I was wary of simply sending a significant drow force ahead: we were headed into contested grounds, now. A force of five thousand Firstborn caught just after dawn by Levantine or Proceran cavalry would be severely bled, and sending a legionary escort with them would defeat the entire purpose of the exercise. There was no obvious fix to the issue, and none of my three current generals – Abigail, Bagram, Rumena – suggested a feasible alternative. We'd just have to awkwardly force our way forward as fast as we could, hoping we'd get to Juniper before the opposition did.

It was a mere six days after the Fourth was brought back into the fold that we ran into our first enemy outriders.

"Proceran," General Bagram opined. "Alamans, at a guess. The Arlesites tend to carry javelins."

Adjutant grunted in agreement. The Fourth had taken the front, today, so it was them who'd sent for me when riders were seen on

the horizon. The two of them were on foot, which given that I was seated atop Zombie meant for once I towered taller than either of them.

"That's at least sixty horsemen," I noted, shielding my eyes from the sun with my hand. "Screening company, you think?"

"Seems likely," Bagram said. "Finally good news, eh?"

I nodded thoughtfully. The riders were to our northwest, and if they'd been sent there to watch for our advance it meant we were getting close to Juniper's position. It also meant, though, that the northern armies of the Dominion and Procer were close enough to the Hellhound that were keeping an eye out for sudden reinforcements to her position. *So we're not the only ones at your gate, Juniper*, I thought.

"No point in sending foot after them," Adjutant said. "They'd be long gone by the time any legionary got there."

"So we don't send legionaries," I replied. "One of you get a message to General Rumena, I want the Losara Sigil to send a warband in pursuit immediately."

"Even light foot won't catch up to horse," General Bagram told me as delicately as an orc could, which wasn't very.

I forced down the sharp swell of irritation.

"No, General Bagram, during the day it will not," I flatly said. "Should the horsemen rest at night, however, the Firstborn might very well catch them by surprise if they begin pursuing right now."

I must not have hidden my annoyance completely, because Bagram saluted and promptly volunteered to speak with Rumena himself. He wasn't a bad commander, I knew. More experienced than any of my Rat Company officers, he'd been the second of General Istrid for decades and effectively run her general staff while she fought on the frontlines. But he wasn't one of mine: he was one of Black's people, in some deep manner. From Black's crop of soldiers shaped by my teacher's own decades of war. Bagram would not trust my judgement the way Juniper or Nauk would have. I was, in his eyes, still very much the Carrion's Lord apprentice. A promising successor but not my teacher's equal.

"The temper's back, at least," Hakram amusedly said.

I glared at him.

"He might as well have called me an idiot," I retorted.

"He's fresh to your service," Adjutant said. "And a hint of fang will be good for your relationship. Bagram was second to Istrid Knightsbane, a hard look won't offend him."

I grunted, somewhat mollified.

"It's better now," Adjutant pensively said. "When your hackles go up, it's still *you*. Not Winter hunger with a Foundling shape to it."

I glanced away.

"That was me too, Hakram," I said. "Just with large enough a hammer everything looked like a nail."

"It was you on a dark day that never quite passed," the orc disagreed, head shaking in slight disagreement. "And whispers in your ear. You handled it better than most would have, but the marks were there."

"You never said anything," I frowned.

"You were drinking *aragh* like water, at the start," Hakram said. "But you got it under control after some prodding. That meant you weren't frozen, just slowed. I was willing to wait."

My fingers clenched.

"Maybe you shouldn't have," I said.

"It didn't make you worse, Catherine," Adjutant said. "Jagged edges, true, but those weren't sunny days. Jagged kept a lot of people breathing."

"Killed just as many," I said.

Adjutant turned to me, the glare of the sun casting shadows like scar across his leathery face. The dark, deep-set eyes were as serene as I'd always known them to be.

"You did what needed doing," Hakram Deadhand said. "It wasn't all pretty, and most won't thank you for it. But you kept Callow standing until it could stand, and even with Winter in your soul it was a peace you strove for."

He bared a thin stripe of ivory fangs, chidingly.

"It's a gentle sort of tyranny, by my reckoning, that you would name the worst of you," he said.

I released the grip on my reins, slowly.

"It's a little uncanny, sometimes," I said. "The way you always know what to say."

His fangs clicked amusedly.

"That is who we are," Adjutant simply said.

I stroked Zombie's mane and spurred her slightly, enough that she danced to the side and my leg grazed his side. We stayed there for a while, watching the riders on the horizon, until he spoke up again.

"So," he said. "Archer?"

I cocked my head to the side.

"I know there's a risk in sending her after Masego when there's heroes on the prowl, to the both of us, but-"

"You are letting her leave to return with a victory," Hakram interrupted in a rumbling voice, "and sending a trusted and powerful Named after what could be a disastrous trouble. I'm well aware, Cat. As you are that I wasn't asking about that at all."

I cleared my throat.

"Surprised you waited this long to ask," I said.

"Wasn't entirely sure until the farewell display," the orc admitted. "You two have always been..."

Yeah, he didn't really need to elaborate on that. For both our sakes, really.

"It's a thing," I said. "That is happening. On occasion."

"But not," Hakram said, "too frequently?"

"We're not involved, if that's what you're asking," I said.

"Ah," he hummed. "Unusual, for you."

He didn't ask the question, only leaving the door open to elaborate if I felt like it. Gods, I'd missed him.

"I'm in the middle of a continent-wide war," I eventually said. "Romance isn't exactly a priority."

"But," Hakram said.

"Might be something I want eventually," I shrugged. "Won't be anytime soon, or with her. We know where we stand, and regardless there's the... Masego situation."

"That's been hard to get a read on," the orc said.

"Like watching denial and obliviousness waltz," I snorted. "Though I have to wonder how much of those there really are, when it comes down to it."

Masego had his habits, but he wasn't exactly blind. Mostly he missed cues, or misread the reasons for things – I suspected his upbringing hadn't helped, both because of the men who'd raised him and the environment they'd raised him in. I could hardly think of a more terrifyingly frustrating place for a boy who'd had difficulty understanding others than Praesi aristocratic circles. When it came to the Woe he tended to catch onto things fairly well, and ask when he thought he was missing something. And he'd asked me to take care of Indrani before leaving for Thalassina, noting her to be upset. As for Indrani, well, what she said and what she thought weren't always the same thing. Especially when it came to what she considered shamefully soft attachments, like admitting she loved people who loved her. *Fucking Ranger*, I uncharitably thought.

"I don't think it would be an issue if we kept doing this after we're all back together," I finally added.

Hakram bowed his head in agreement.

"Tell me you're not sleeping with the other one, at least," he gravelled.

I choked.

"Akua?" I protested. "Gods no. I mean, don't get me wrong, just look at her-"

"You often do," the orc said. "Though I don't see the appeal, to be honest. She's dangerous, I suppose, but all soft and fleshy."

"Those can, uh, be good things," I muttered. "But she's still Akua, Hakram."

"I am aware," Adjutant said. "But I wonder if that means the same thing it used to, Cat. For you, at least, and perhaps Indrani."

"This the softer predecessor of the crucible Vivienne is going to put me through?" I said, a tad sharply.

The orc shook his head.

"I wasn't down there," he said. "You will have reasons for this, though you haven't shared them. I want to know where we stand with her, that's all."

Silence reigned, for a long moment.

"I am no longer bound by the oath to kill her," I acknowledged.

"But," Hakram said.

"One hundred thousand souls," I said. "There has to be a price for that."

He slowly nodded.

"Until then, she is to be Akua," the orc murmured. "Not the Doom of Liesse."

I did not reply. I did not need to.

—

Before dawn, Ivah came back with four survivors from the Proceran outriders. We were two days' march away from Juniper, which was pleasing.

The enemy had beaten us there, which was not.

theart0fwar

Thanks for the chapter!

Ortsarecool

"Praesi treachery," Indrani cursed.
I'm crying. Just great.

theart0fwar

This line was just great. They're really getting together well, the murderer and... the other murderer. Huh.

[Liliet](#)

The mass murderer and the non-mass murderer :3

Sanctus Obscurum

The mass murderer and the sniper.

stevenneiman

"I'm not a CRAZED GUNMAN, dad, I'm an assassin! Well the difference being one of them's a job and the other's a mental sickness!"

[Liliet](#)

Yas.

Indrani sure as fuck doesn't act like it, but sniper low key IS her combat speciality.

Decius

The serial murderer and the massively parallel murderer.

[Liliet](#)

Only of combatants!

[Euodiachloris](#)

Warrior vs War Criminal.

[Liliet](#)

^^ ♥

[DroughtBringer](#)

Go vote!

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

theart0fwar

Gotcha by a few seconds!

[DroughtBringer](#)

True! Nicely done!

I will have to step up my game,

Evil Laugh

[epokkiEpok](#)

Come check the discord also, <https://discord.gg/cr5he0>

Insanenoodlyguy

Well shit. This is now going to be a mild to moderate clusterfuck even if it goes well.

Novice

I love how clusterfucks have sliders now. Could have sworn when people say 'clusterfuck', it's always safe to assume the worst. What's the highest on the scale, by the way?

caoimhinh

I think "Pandemonium" is the highest on the fuckery scale of messy situations, right above "Everything falling apart" and

can be close to Nightmare Fuel events.
It can be a world-ending scenario if the protagonist's gay friend makes a pact with an Evil Entity; involving an eclipse is optional XD

Draeysine

An Absolute Clusterfuck.

Cicero

Isn't it FUBAR?

While SNAFU is the lightest?

Military always has acronyms to describe the important scenarios.

Barack Obama

Extra Spicy

danh3107

Hakram just called Akua fat, that's a bit disingenuous....

SHE THICC

Big Brother

He called her soft and fleshy. That doesn't mean fat. I could be called soft and fleshy at 155lbs, if only because I've very little muscle tone with a small gut.
Soft and Fleshy applied to Akua means RAVASHING, curvy in every perfect spot in every perfect way, as she was bred to be.

Skaddx

I mean based on descriptions of living characters Akua is the second hottest chick after Malicia. Though Malicia seems to have an Aspect that works similar to Hierarch in that everyone finds her attractive. It even works on people like Masego who well we don't know now but previously had no interest in Sexual Stuff. Orcs though don't value soft curvy looks. Hakram stated before he finds Humans not attractive someone like Indrani or Captain (RIP) is probably what he views as the most attractive for a Human.

[Liliet](#)

I think it's not an Aspect of Alaya's, she just does that via sorcerous effects.

Not that we have hard confirmation of it not being an Aspect, but given the nature of her past trauma, I'd say it's unlikely.

Agent J

It's Name shenanigans, like Cat and Black's shadow manipulation. Not an Aspect and not sorcery.

[Fayhem](#)

The canon explanation from earlier chapters, IIRC, is that neither is the case. She was that beautiful before she even had a Name or anyone to work sorcery on her, which is why Dread Emperor Shitlord McGee abducted her from the tavern she was working in for her father for his harem. Her Name has kept her young b/c that's basically the one thing that villains get that heroes don't, and I think it was also mentioned that she has some subtle sorcerous effects in her court gowns that basically serve to foreground it in people's attention to help her keep people (esp men ofc) off balance, but the beauty itself has been stated to be all hers.

[Liliet](#)

^^^ yeah, these effects are what I was referring to.

Insanenoodlyguy

Bit of both, as I understood it. She has magical enchantments on her person, but she is breathtakingly hot by default, and her name keeps and enhances that. All emperor/expresses have a "this one is in charge and is to be loved/feared/obeyed" aura, but hers emphasizes the lust/love aspect. Stack it all together and you get Malicia, always the hottest person in the room. As to her past, that helped shape it this way, she knows her looks get her attention but over the years she learned how to weaponize that until it became a literal weapon

[Javvies](#)

Hmmm. Targeted, specific countermeasures designed for the biggest known Heroes.

Killing Saint is probably doable, but containing Pilgrim probably won't be sustainable for very long.

They're coming up behind the enemies around Juniper, that's a mixed benefit – it's potentially a hammer and anvil situation, but they can't afford to take too long winning and getting back moving, because they are being pursued, even though they've got a semi-decent lead.

Better than getting there first and getting trapped within Juniper's encampment.

Kairos is Up To Something, as per usual. He really needs to get killed thoroughly, and the sooner the better.

This still be interesting.

Skaddix

I am honestly not sure who kills Kairos but I bet good odds that Hanno takes out Hierarch. If anyone can get Hanno to break the I don't judge rule its the man who runs and worships the city that got his mother killed. Still Kairos cannot go out probably until he tries to trap an Angel that Cordelia is raising.

magesbe

It was Asur that got his mother killed. Hierarch "worships" Bellerophon (I'm sure I mangled the spelling, but you get the idea).

Skaddx

Fair enough I think its still a good clash. Since Hierarch believes in the Laws of Man and White Knight believes in the Mandate of Heaven.

RanVor

You didn't. You did, however, mangle the spelling of Ashur.

werafdsaew

It's not meant to counter Pilgrim; it's meant to counter Pilgrim's counter.

My very own name

That's some blue MtG deck level fuckery.

[Fayhem](#)

Ah blue, the deck color that says you feed off the hatred of others because negative attention is still attention.

Argentorum

Ah blue, the color that says you like complex and manifold games, as opposed to running the same flavor of face mashing every time 🤪

[Liliet](#)

grabs popcorn do continue

Mental Mouse

Yes, we were all wondering about that upcoming clash. Using heavenly Light to counter the power of Night is a no-brainer for Pilgrim (or the White Knight, for that matter), Apparently Cat's answer is to simply overwhelm their personal miracles with power.

You know, Catherine would have a much easier time persuading everyone else to ban summoning of angels and demons, if she didn't keep allying herself with major independent Powers. 😊

Ultimate_Procrastinator

Power, the element of surprise, and possibly some trickery of Akua's own devising

Dainpdf

Must admit I am a bit worried she has two silver bullets but at least five obstacles/people who Need to Go – the Bard, Kairos, Hierarch, Saint, and Pilgrim. Hopefully the heroes can take down a couple, and she has something secret prepared for the Bard.

Mental Mouse

The Bard is a problem for another day, especially as she's apparently elsewhere. Kairos is a PITA, but as demonstrated at their meeting, he's a PITA that Cat is well-equipped to deal with. Hierarch is unnerving but local; as far as the war goes, he's basically taking his city off the map. I do tend to doubt that his power will affect the Dead King's undead!

Some commenters have theorized that Hierarch is summoning an angel for Kairos to trap, but no way is an Evil Name in an Evil city getting an angel to show up.

Dainpdf

I think you're underestimating the two. Kairos has *a plan*, and Hierarch is crazy.

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, he is putting half the Procer in danger, by distracting everyone of the Dead King. He is also "allied" with the Hierarch, a madman who can spread his (stupid) madness around here. Both of them need to die, and the sooner, the better.

Cicero

I thought obvious that the purpose of the well was not referring to countering a specific hero but a specific event.

Dawn is the obvious counter to the drow, obviously the Gods Above will arrange a way for an unexpected dawn, so create a well that can hide the sun.

Decius

If the Dawn is the miracle, the direct opposition would be to make it dusk. But the way to let the miracle happen and not be affected by it: Create an eclipse. The moon can blot out the sun without ever fighting it.

Skaddx

Oh come now Cat and Hakram like you could stop Indrani from chasing Masego anyway.

I am not sure why Cat is worried about Hakram having issues with Akua, she didn't massacre any Orcs and he is sociopath driven by pragmatism and getting the Liesse Accords done. Masego respects Akua spellcasting and doesn't care about the little people anyway so really Viv is the only likely to be mad about Akua.

Liliet

So many things here that are *slightly* off from how I'm seeing them, it's actually kinda interesting.

– I don't think Indrani would have left ywithout Cat okaying the idea. She cares about Masego, but she cares about the rest of the Woe too, and she trusts Cat to have a better grasp on the strategic situation, including the storyweaving situation, and what is and isn't a good idea. I mean obviously this was one, but if Cat had tried to stop Indrani from doing it it would have been for a damn good reason and Indrani knows that. Communication and trust!

– Hakram functioned as Cat's conscience / reminder of her principles / moral check TWO CHAPTERS AGO. Don't tell me you already forgot "weren't we better than this, when we started?" :3 I mean I'm not making judgements about Hakram being or not being a sociopath, but he's got a strong grasp on ethics either way, and he DOES challenge Cat's judgements on them.

– Masego doesn't 'not care about the little people'. He cares about people in general abstract when he thinks about it, but has very little ability to put it into practice is the thing. And he usually doesn't think about it. He's oblivious, not amoral. (One of his first converstional exchanges with Cat, in the chapter where he was introduced, was actually an ethics debate, god fucking bless).

More importantly, the 'little' modifier there is insultingly

misleading. Masego doesn't discriminate by class, he discriminates by personal relationships and absolutely nothing else. I guarantee you he doesn't consider Praesi nobles to possess more moral relevance than Callowan peasants. If anything, Callowan peasants are people Catherine cares about, and therefore matter slightly more than Praesi nobles, who as far as he's aware nobody he cares about does. Your conclusion that he doesn't give a fuck about Cat's treatment of Akua is absolutely correct (I mean it's canon, we've seen this dynamic on the way to Keter already), but the reasons for that are different than you've listed :3

Skaddix

I mean Indrani was going after Masego eventually so Cat I suppose could have convinced Indrani to wait but in a critical battle would Indrani be at her best while Worrying about Masego that is also a consideration. Yes Indrani trust Cat when it comes to story manipulation and setting the mission for the Woe but when it comes to Masego...I think Cat learned her lesson when she wanted to stop Masego from going to his Fathers.

Hakram does what is best for Cat. So if he needs to act as her conscious then that is what he will do. However, there is nothing to show Hakram cares about the average dead Callowan. He is also pragmatic so he is fine with Akua as long as she is useful and not treasonous but her killing 100,000 doesn't really factor into his calculations. If anything as he noted her being dangerous is something he likes about Akua, doesn't make up for her soft human features. But Orcs respect the ability to Kill.

Masego is similar. Masego doesn't really care that 100,000 Callowans died at all. He killed people who are not under Cat for rather minor insults all things considered and Cat had to make a list so he wouldn't just kill people who annoy him. I agree though that Masego doesn't make a distinction based on Birth Class. His primary rating factor about worth is probably knowledge/ability to do Magic.

So yeah I stand by my claim that Masego, Indrani and Hakram don't really care about a 100,000 Dead Callowans or to expand the "Little People" at all. They care about their circle of Friends and Family anyone not in that circle meh. Hakram and Masego would be fine keeping Akua around because she is useful even without the events in the Underdark. I also do not think they necessarily agree with Cat and presumably Viv that Akua needs a real punishment for all those kills if she doesn't go traitor.

[Liliet](#)

"I mean Indrani was going after Masego eventually"

I mean so was Cat?

You can't just postulate a highly hypothetical out of character Cat and then make assertions about Indrani's relationship with her like they apply to her relationship with the actual Cat 😊

They both care about him a whole lot. It's a them thing, not an Indrani thing. If anything, Catherine was his friend first.

~~one's his girlfriend one's his cousin~~

There's no need for Indrani to make it her own personal crusade when in the first chapter of this book she ended up being the one comforting Cat about the uncertainty there.

>Hakram does what is best for Cat. So if he needs to act as her conscience then that is what he will do. However, there is nothing to show Hakram cares about the average dead Callowan.

He certainly cares about the average racism'd orc, if his conversation with Vivienne in Zwischenzug II was any indication. And I take that explanation to be genuine.

Anyway, you asked why Catherine would think Hakram might grill her about Akua. This is why. Because he acts as her conscience when he thinks she needs it. Catherine expected that he might think she needs it in this case. That's the explanation.

>I agree though that Masego doesn't make a distinction based on Birth Class. His primary rating factor about worth is probably knowledge/ability to do Magic.

Something like that, though I don't think it's a moral judgement. He certainly had no problem with lethal wards killing sriers, and Praesi nobility tend to be skilled sorcerers themselves, and he's certainly shown no compunction killing them either. It's more like he cares only when and to the degree that he pays attention, and he's more likely to pay attention when magic is involved. And even then he usually deliberately reserves judgement. So no, he won't challenge Catherine's decisions on this. One way or another. He doesn't care about Akua any more than he counts about said 100 000 dead; he cares about them a little bit more in fact, because Catherine cares and he cares that Catherine cares. The minimum to which he cares about Akua – in an otherwise empty world empty situation he'd prefer her alive – is less than that.

And yes, of course, since he *only* cares about the situation

through the lens of Catherine's judgements and doesn't care to figure out their sources, he'll be onboard with whatever.

Skaddix

Cat is not in a position to leave now even if she wanted. Nor can they both leave. Cat has to lead the Drow and is the main offensive magic user on her side. I am not saying Cat doesn't care about Masego but she hardly is in a position to do anything right now. As for eventually, I meant maybe Cat could convince Indrani to wait until after this upcoming battle. But I don't think Cat making a logical argument would necessarily sway Indrani.

Hakram says he cares about an Orc in the Army that doesn't mean he cares about all Orcs or cares about the average Human Callowan. I didn't ask why Hakram would grill Cat. And I don't necessarily take everything anyone says in this story at face value.

Again I am talking when he killed the two twins for no reason besides them saying some bad things about Cat. He also mentions that Cat made him a check list to not kill people who annoy him. Hakram is debatable I suppose but I think its Quite Clear that Indrani and Masego don't give a crap about anyone outside the circle of friends and family.

As for Akua my point is more the fact that she killed 100,000 Callowans is not going to factor much in Masego or Hakram view on whether she is worth keeping around.

Liliet

No, Cat is not in a position to leave, what does this have to do with anything?

I am saying Catherine would not have needed to make a logical argument to convince Indrani to not go off on a hare-brained quest of a single person catching an invisible flying fortress. In fact, judging from what Cat told Hakram, it might have been Cat's idea in the first place: Indrani does not think in story terms as much, and it might simply not have occurred to her that A can plausibly lead to B here.

>Hakram says he cares about an Orc in the Army that doesn't mean he cares about all Orcs or cares about the average Human Callowan.

It also doesn't mean that he doesn't?

>I didn't ask why Hakram would grill Cat.
>I am not sure why Cat is worried about Hakram having issues with Akua

>And I don't necessarily take everything anyone says in this story at face value.

I don't take everything anyone says at face value either. That doesn't mean everything is absolute chaos and nothing is real. Hakram joined Catherine in the first place because she tugged his emotion of caring about other people and then also his emotion of social justice. Remember that?

>Again I am talking when he killed the two twins for no reason besides them saying some bad things about Cat. He also mentions that Cat made him a check list to not kill people who annoy him.

Yeah. He also commented that it's better when the world works that way, and if it doesn't – well, you just have to make it.

He also informed Catherine that he calls everyone ignorant because if he doesn't, how will they know that they are and know to get better?

And don't forget that Catherine had to institute a rule of "friends don't vivisect friends" with Masego. And that he took a killswitch from her without questioning her motivations and later made fun of her for trying to keep it secret. He simply does not think about ethics the way human people normally do. That doesn't mean he doesn't have any.

>Hakram is debatable I suppose but I think its Quite Clear that Indrani and Masego don't give a crap about anyone outside the circle of friends and family.

Indrani and Masego give *much less of a crap* about anyone outside the circle of friends and family. It's you talking in absolutes that irks me here. They're both extremely [locally](#) focused, though for different reasons: Indrani is essentially traumatized and emotionally stunted by a childhood that went from literal slavery to a parental figure who fails to give half a fuck about anyone outside her own precious person, while Masego was raised by an incarnation of absolute evil and a devil, surrounded by a tight-knit loving friendgroup and the scorpion pit of Praesi aristocracy outside that, and ended up a little bit confused about how humans normally relate to one another period.

>As for Akua my point is more the fact that she killed 100,000 Callowans is not going to factor much in Masego or Hakram view on whether she is worth keeping around.

True. Masego simply does not consider this his business to pass judgement on, and Hakram does not strike me as someone particularly concerned with ideas like justice, retribution and prices to pay – purely future-oriented. He'll worry about what Akua's presence means to Cat going forward, not about what Akua already did.

Mental Mouse

Are you still calling Hakram a sociopath? Are you kidding? This is a guy who cut off his own hand to win someone's confidence, and *not* to betray her afterwards. Heck, he's a moral standard for others. Hakram is many things, but not a sociopath.

Liliet

I mean I would separate speculation about his mental architecture from judgement of his ethics 🤪

Skaddix

A sociopath can sacrifice things for personal gain and doesn't betray everyone they meet. I am not sure what your point is. I mean at the point in the story what advantage would Hakram gain from stabbing Viv in the back. A sociopath does not have to be a cackling madman.

Mental Mouse

Hakram went way beyond "not stabbing Viv in the back"! The thing is, if you want to use a word as anything other than a handy insult, you need to pay attention to what it actually means. And what's basic to both the popular and formal definitions of sociopathy, is a failure to care about other people. A sociopath's response to a teammate losing it might well be brutal, but not toward themselves. Sociopaths might help others if they feel it serves their interest, but they tend to be fairly specific about what their interests are. Hakram, in contrast, has shown goodwill and consideration *consistently*, including to strangers.

Someguy

If the Enemy has beaten them there, isn't the Hammer & Anvil the most classical answer?

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hammer_and_anvil

chris S

You know, since I'm leaving-" Archer began.

Diabolist sighed.

Plot twist, the entire series so far has been the set up to a comedic harem anime with Archer as the protagonist.

[Liliet](#)

Indrani has commented before that Cat's story is not hers.

THIS is her story.

Aotrs Commander

Is... is it wrong that I would totally read that...?

maresther23

Gods Bellow, yes! Please someone make a fanfic

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Always a pleasure to see Hakram on screen.

Andrew Mitchell

I shed tears during Archer's goodbye scene. Very well done EE, very well done indeed.

Great to see Cat & Hakram together again. I'm looking forward to seeing them discuss more about Hakram's lost hand.

IDKWhoitis

If Cat isn't bound by that oath to kill Akua, is she still bound heavily by the deal with Larat?

Skaddx

Did she make a magical oath with Akua? Making a deal with a Fae is different.

Andrew Mitchell

That's a really good question. I'm going to say probably not. I found the scene where that oath was made and it really could go either way IMO:

"“We swear to your service, Queen of the Hunt,” the fae said.
“Queen of Air and Darkness, Sovereign of Moonless Nights. We swear ‘til the day of last ruin, ‘til all debts are paid. We would ride beneath your banner, in this world and every other.”

The Queen of Callow rose to her feet, as bright and terrible as any of them, and softly laughed.

"What clever foxes you are," she said. "Your oaths I accept, in the spirit they were given."

Her sword hissed as it left the sheath, and she stood before the fae.

"Kneel, and rise in my service."

The Hunt knelt, the Hunt rose, and Brandon Talbot knew he would never forget the sight of this so long as he lived."

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/03/07/epilogue-3/>

Dainpdf

Not that deal. The one where she swore to place seven crowns and one before Larat in exchange for his help against the army of the Princess of High Noon.

[*Liliet*](#)

That one was sealed by a separate mechanism, not by Cat's Winter nature. It should still hold.

Dainpdf

My opinion as well. It is also too ominous to just disappear.

[*Liliet*](#)

Also a fun thing about it is that if I understand correctly it's not really... time-specific? Like. It sounds like Cat could just keep putting it off forever. I'm really confused about that part actually

Dainpdf

I assume there is some sort of associated imperative where she must take the crowns if able to. Which I imagine will force her hand at some point when confronted with the Princes of Procer.

Azure

Her oath was to Vivienne as a fae which she no longer is, so she may not be bound to literally have to carry it out anymore. I would argue though her oath as one Woe to another still holds just as strong. I hope she's not deluding herself into thinking Vivienne is going to let this go, and that Catherine just has

to argue a little. Her going back on her word to kill Akua has the possibility of forcing Vivienne to change sides back to the heroes. It's going to be that ugly with a very strong possibility of Vivienne getting a heroic name to replace her lost one. Catherine better tread very carefully here. I have to say I'm pretty disappointed in her myself. Akua would know the easiest to fracture the Woe is to get Catherine to renege on her promise, and guess what it seems the first seeds have taken root,

[Liliet](#)

She's not going back on her word. What she said was basically "I am no longer magically bound to do this, but I think it's the right thing to do anyway". She just focused on another aspect than the promise to Vivi.

She resorted to making oaths over everything because of Winter fucking up her judgement, anyway. It's no longer THIS important that she do what Vivi says.

gagesbe

I don't think that's what she meant. I think she's currently leaning away from having Akua atone by dying (or be punished by dying depending on your PoV), and more towards Akua atoning (as much as you can atone for that level of crime) but living well and helping bring peace to the continent. She's no longer bound to ensure that Akua meets an untimely end, but that doesn't in any way mean that Akua is just going to get away with her crimes, only that the measure of response is no longer, "and she must die in the end."

Vivienne will not be happy, but I think that as long as Cat doesn't overstep, she'll reluctantly go along with it.

[Liliet](#)

That's one possibility yeah.

~~I ship CatAkua too much to allow myself to believe that Catherine really is consciously leaning towards letting Akua stay already~~

Azure

"But there will be a day where the world we made no longer has place for her," Vivienne said. "When we have faced all the horrors before us. And on that day, when she has glimpsed victory?"

Vivienne met my eyes and there was something in them that gave even Winter pause.

"Snuff her out, Catherine," she said. "Slowly. Painfully. Excruciatingly aware of what is being taken from her."

Vivienne will grudgingly accept using Akua to help them, but if Catherine backs off from destroying her at the end, then there is going to be trouble. Catherine better not be dumb enough to lead with "I'm no longer bound to destroy Akua".

Andrew Mitchell

I think Catherine's may lead with "'I'm no longer bound to destroy Akua. But you have my word I will."

Skaddx

Cat plan with the well is to store power and create an Eclipse or Artificial Night to win the battle by boosting herself and the Drow. Interesting plan I suppose she is hoping no one can do what Masego can and create a Miniature Sun or has an aspect that creates Daylight. Significant gamble when facing a bunch of heroes. I wonder if Saint can cut it actually.

Dainpdf

Could also be to eclipse the Pilgrim's star thing. Or a more potent version of Masego's spell to block the Light, though I doubt it.

Insanenoodlyguy

It won't work as a weapon like that, Black would have taught her better. Declaring your weapon will make you unbeatable ensures somebody either has or will get a countermeasure, possibly then and there for the young heroes. Otherwise they take big risks to destroy it just when the pivot let's the army really to defeat evil.

But cats not dumb enough to use it that way. She is specifically using it as a counter. That means she can use it as her pivot, much lower risk there, especially at night, because shes restoring a natural advantage instead of nullifying a disadvantage.

Not to mention it's got to be easier to thwart a named power as opposed to fighting the sun. Even if she still could viv's trick wouldn't work here, both for reasons mentioned above and because itd still be day even if the sign wasn't there anymore.

Skaddix

I would say time of day basically decides this if the fight is during the Day then its advantage Heroes..Cat uses Well for Eclipse, a Hero Counters it back to daylight, Heroes Win.

Or its night time so advantage Cat and Drow, where some tries to use Dawn, and it gets countered.

sengachi

It could be designed as a counter to a Dawn aspect though, or something like that. Heroes pull an artificial dawn out of their butts and Cat shuts it down with more raw power than they can fight, right after they've blown all their narrative momentum on a big climactic moment of the sun rising.

Dainpdf

So, Cat and Hakram say she was still Cat. Guess that's another time I've been wrong, unless there's another twist. It goes against everything I had seen, but this seems to indicate it was misinterpretation on my part.

I like that Cat is preparing again. Having silver bullets and schemes is good. It's the only way they're getting out of this mess with an acceptable outcome.

Skaddx

I think Sve Noc explained it. Its funny though that Hakram explanation reminds me of Order of the Stick and Durkon. I think the Joker also says it though since its a variant of his one bad day. Basically the argument is you are who you are on your worse day. So Winter Cat is Cat on her worse day with a biggest hammer and no real knowledge or wisdom to temper it. Now granted Sve Noc did make it seem that it would not be Cat if Cat was under the influence long enough but that doesn't happen until a long time. Probably at least until Cat had lived longer then a normal human lifespan.

Dainpdf

Durkon was more arguing from continuity of being – that it prevents us from ever putting bad things behind us – while here we have the question of whether something that is Winter plus Cat, molded into a Cat shape, is Cat.

Liliet

Ship of Theseus. If no information is lost, the entity is the same.

Dainpdf

Hm. So if the crew who changed the planks tell no one about it, the ship is not the same?

Also, Cat was mostly replaced all at once, and so was Durkon. This makes them more akin to the “exchange the whole ship” scenario than the “gradual change” one.

Liliet

No, that’s not the meaning of ‘information’ here. Information here is more like the purpose of the plank. If the new plank is a nanotechnological device secretly sending brainwashing waves, you have a case for it not being the same ship, even if the crew was upfront about it. If it’s the same plank as before *conceptually*, it can be replaced entirely in secret and it’s still the same ship. They can all be replaced entirely in secret overnight, and it’s still the same ship, provided nothing *important to its identity as a ship* changed. Individual planks aren’t important to it.

What exact moment are you thinking of for Durkon?

Dainpdf

That is odd, because I could secretly exchange all the planks of two ships, or exchange the two ships. Both processes end in the same physical state, yet you claim they produce different outcomes.

I wasn’t thinking of a moment myself so much as arguing about the mentioned moment. It’s this page: <http://www.giantitp.com/comics/oots1007.html>

Liliet

More things about the ship are ‘information’ in this way than just its basic purpose. Basically anything that our abstract Theseus (I don’t remember the story in question) cares about with regard to his ship, like cabin layout or specific furnishings or a quirk in construction – but the identity of specific planks is hardly it. Unless one of them has a carving in it that is entirely central to the attachment Theseus has to the idea of his ship or something, in which case you should replicate the carving or simply not touch that particular plank.

And if two ships are identical to the point that you could simply switch them around and no information would be lost, and the only thing differentiating them is their physical location, then yes you can switch them around like this and the result will be the same as if you switched every plank.

If, however, they are different ships, but the amount/size of planks is them is sufficiently similar that you can switch every single one around to the other ship's configuration – well, the configuration is the difference.

As for that... It's rather worth noting that in the end, vampire Durkon ended up literally *turning into* regular Durkon when exposed to all his memories. The nature of the difference is very... uh... different, between Durkon/evil!Durkon and Cat/Winter!Cat. And still OotS seems to be making the argument that Durkon and evil!Durkon are the same entity mirrored/replicated/separated, to the degree of merging back together when the external difference is removed. (And yes, I know that's not a counterargument to your point. I was just confused by this comparison to begin with)

Dainpdf

I'd love to debate philosophy in a more appropriate setting, though I will admit I lack formal training. You have an interesting view of identity.

[Liliet](#)

Same here wrt formal training, unless you count one semester long class ~~and a whole lot of~~ blogging. You can find me for example on tumblr at lilietblog.tumblr.com :3
(also on reddit as LilietB, and on discord as Liliet – Liliet The Great Nerd on pgte discord...)

And thank you, I like living with this view of it :3

Dainpdf

Maybe I should try that server. But I already have so many, and that one is bound to be busy...

[Liliet](#)

It's fun!
J O I N U S

Skaddix

I am trying not to spoil Order of the Stick but since you seem up on it. I meant Vampire Durkon who says basically that "He is Durkon On Durkon's Worst Day" All the time.

Aotrs Commander

Yes, I think that is the interpretation that is fair; it doesn't get Cat off the hook, particularly (if you think there's anything that she should have been ON the hook for, which I personally don't), in the same way you don't get off the hook when you do something in anger; but at the same time, there is the room to metaphorically say "yeah, well, I was pissed, I did things I might not have in cold blood." (Ironically, under circumstances.)

[Liliet](#)

Pretty much what I'm thinking.

Complete with the irony ♥ ♥ ♥

Dainpdf

Uh, me too. I was explaining his dialogue.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Both "continuity of being" and "putting bad things behind us" are very old challenges of the human condition – indeed, they're still in the headlines of our own world. (Some keywords: #Metoo, Alzheimer's, parole conditions, Gov. Northam's yearbook).

In this story, they seem to remain challenges even of metahuman conditions.

[Liliet](#)

Guide is very good 😊

Dainpdf

Personally, I find the argument from continuity of being to be disingenuous, because continuity does not imply constance. Remorse exists for precisely that reason.

Dainpdf

Oh, and if I may: some of your keywords are specific to one culture.

[Liliet](#)

No, Catherine did have knowledge and wisdom to temper it, which is exactly Hakram's point here. Temper \neq negate, though.

[Liliet](#)

People can act very differently when under influence.

Cat was under influence.

Dainpdf

The question is, however: how much influence can a person take before they're not themselves?

[Liliet](#)

I agree with Masego here: as long as continuity moment to moment is preserved (and the ship-of-theseus moment in Liesse left Cat in exactly the same mental state, just made of different stuff), any amount. People change.

Dainpdf

Eh. Did it, though? And coming down from Winter certainly didn't, so did she stop being Cat then?

[Liliet](#)

What do you mean "didn't"?

Catherine's being was comprised of the exactly same information as before. Nothing was lost, nothing was added. She simply *started* getting different information from her senses, and having different tools accessible to process it.

I'll be honest, I'm fairly indifferent to the whole 'but is she ESSENTIALLY the same Catherine' philosophical question. There is no fundamental essence of Catherine-ness, there is only a sum of Catherine's component parts, that changes always and always. The label on it that says "Catherine Foundling" is in the eye of the beholder. The map is not the territory.

As far as I'm concerned, as far as Hakram is concerned, as far as Masego is concerned, the person that exists now matches the membership test for the category "Catherine Foundling". And the person that existed during the Winter arc did so too, if by slightly different metrics / with slightly less confidence.

What would change depending on whether Winter!Cat was "really" Cat or not?

Dainpdf

It is a question of fair attribution, I guess. Can attributes (and actions) of Winter!Cat be applied to Cat without distortion?

[Liliet](#)

What do you mean “applied”?

How do you “apply” attributes and actions to someone?

Here’s the thing: I’m coming at this from the perspective of actual real-world questions like “does trauma IRREPARABLY BREAK a person” and “do anti-anxiety meds Change Who You Really Are”. The answer to both being no.

You cannot accurately predict non-winter!Catherine’s actions based on knowledge of what winter!Catherine would do without adjusting for winter’s influence, much like how you can’t predict a sober person’s behavior based on what they did when they were drunk.

Can attributes and actions of 5yo you be applied to present day you without distortion?

Dainpdf

It is an ethics issue. Surely you are culpable for actions undertaken yesterday, even if you were drunk. But are you culpable for what winter-you did last summer?

RanVor

You’re really desperate to prove something here, aren’t you?

Dainpdf

I’m more having fun debating someone.

[Liliet](#)

The further away the action is, the less culpable you are for it? Like, that’s even a legal concept: crimes ‘expire’ after a while.

I would say that your responsibility for what you did while under influence depends on:

- what you actually did
- degree of influence
- how responsible you are for being under influence in the first place

like if you got drugged without your knowledge, it kicked in while you were driving, you suddenly passed out and your car hit someone, it’s Not Your Fault What The Fuck
but if you TOOK a drug that you knew would cause you to pass out later / that you didnt know what

it did, and then went driving anyway, then you're culpable AS FUCK for that

Catherine knew she was under influence, and her oaths were her way of giving the car keys to a friend XD

Dainpdf

I like that interpretation.

[Mental Mouse](#)

In a world where such transformations are an option, the most important point is essentially political: Can the person's new instar* maintain the social and political business of the old? Notice that *in-universe*, nobody was questioning whether the Duchess of Night was actually the same person as Squire Catherine, Queen of Callow. She maintained her friendships (and picked up some), continued to act masterfully on the political and military scenes, and so on. Even when Akua briefly took control of Cat's Winter form, nobody outside the Woe (and a few guards, and the readers) even knew about it.

* "Instar" is a term from biology denoting a marked stage of life with distinct transformations. Butterflies have four instars: egg, larva (caterpillar), pupa (chrysalis), and imago (adult butterfly).. Cat has four so far: Foundling/Squire I, Squire II, Duchess of Moonless Nights, Priestess of Winter. I'm inclined not to count her initial Naming as an instar break (because she didn't actually get killed), but it's an arguable point.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Self correcting "Priestess of Night". Always an error, sigh.

[Liliet](#)

I mean Catherine sure as fuck got stabbed through the chest, with unspecified resolution to that physical fact.

Just saying.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And yet we (and she) later learned that the stabbing wasn't actually necessary, just Amadeus being a stagey jerk.

[Liliet](#)

(Also, I agree entirely. Fun brainteaser: Vivienne has never actually known alive!Catherine. She'd met her in Summerholm and Liesse, but hardly saw enough of her to really see the difference between winter! Cat and non-winter!Cat. How will this change impact their relationship going forward?)

RanVor

I have an even better question: why are people so desperate for that excuse? Catherine is a villain – a fairly well meaning one, but a villain nonetheless. Is it really so hard to accept?

Dainpdf

It is not. It'd be folly to deny she's a villain after she burned all those people at Three Hills down.

If I am trying to force this interpretation, it's because the narrative of the eldritch being fitting a person-shaped mold appeals to my sense of aesthetics.

RanVor

Oh. No offense, but I personally think it's a terrible narrative. I prefer characters, even eldritch beings, to be accountable for their actions.

Dainpdf

They are, though one's responsibility for the acts of an eldritch being shaped in one's mold is limited.

RanVor

That's why the narrative sucks. Everything we don't like about a character can be explained with them being not really them. A coward's way out, if you ask me.

[Liliet](#)

I like the narrative of a person fitting an eldritch being-shaped mold 😊

Dainpdf

Are people that malleable, that one can convincingly perform the eldritch for any period of time without becoming eldritch?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Only one way to find out.

Iä! Iä! Cthulhu fhtagn!

Dainpdf

Hahaha

[Liliet](#)

I mean, Cat did *become* eldritch, that's my entire point. And then bounced back, because it was something external imposed onto her, not an internal change.

That's how I view this :3

Dainpdf

It was a change to her soul. How is that not internal?

[Liliet](#)

I swear I replied to this???

tl;dr: if you start taking meds that literally alter your brain chemistry, that's an 'internal' change too, but it sure as fuck doesn't change your identity

Catherine + Winter = Winter!Catherine; Winter!
Catherine – Winter = Catherine
clearly the change wasn't fundamental, just an addition

Dainpdf

And yet addition to and subtraction from things can clearly change their identity (consider removing all of a thing). Meds may be too gradual or subtle, but whether Winter was is another question.

[Euodiachloris](#)

You never stop being you. Even dementia or a personality shift caused by temporal or frontal lobe damage doesn't suddenly stop a person being themselves.

They change, but we all change. Becoming an adult doesn't stop you being you. Hitting a midlife crisis when you

realise change doesn't stop in your 20s. All changes people file under normal, ignoring that they can be shifts that are just as profound as bipolar disorders. Those just speed the change-o-meter up a notch to "blatantly obvious".

Somebody with an addiction? Is themselves... with an addiction. The many facets to their physiology and personality didn't happen overnight, and addiction doesn't negate the whole.

Dainpdf

The change back from winter cat did happen instantly, though.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Head trauma happens quickly, but regardless of the outcome, the individual is still them. Your point?

Dainpdf

It also doesn't usually make you do an 180 on almost everything you've been doing in the past several months.

RanVor

No, usually not. But it happens sometimes.

And saying Winter made Catherine go against her own actions and convictions from before acquiring the mantle is a straight up lie. No such thing has taken place. Winter limited Cat's scope of thinking, made her oblivious to certain alternate solutions to her problems that perhaps could have been less costly in terms of moral standing and more detached emotionally, but it was nowhere near as bad as you claim it to be. Her convictions held strong, even if her perspective was skewed.

tl;dr: I find your claim disingenuous and unfair towards the character.

Dainpdf

Uh, no, I meant getting rid of it made her reevaluate everything she'd done in the Everdark, including the slavery and mass murder, and regret a lot of it.

RanVor

A side effect of suddenly having one's scope of thinking expanded.

Also, I'd like to note that, *as apparently nobody remembers*, she only started doing those things after being convinced by Archer that more radical actions are necessary, and I don't see our dear Indrani receiving any blame for that.

Dainpdf

We all know Archer is at least somewhat amoral. Don't need to point that out.

RanVor

On the contrary. Omitting Indrani's part in the events that took place in the Everdark allows you to put all blame on the Sovereign of the Moonless Nights, which makes the demonization of that entity (which is exactly what you're doing, although I'm not sure whether it's a conscious strategy or a subconscious bias) a great deal easier, which in turn makes it easier to create an impression of dissociation between the Sovereign and Catherine Foundling by exaggerating the differences.

Dainpdf

Am I? I don't think I am demonizing anyone. I haven't even really spoken of the morality of Winter Cat much. All I've been saying is I wasn't sure she could be considered the same person as Cat, given wildly differing behaviors and thoughts... and Cat herself seems to disagree.

[Euodiachloris](#)

You might need to do a little more research into frontal lobe lesions. It can be that much of a wrench. Thing is... the personality change is actually still built on what was there. It's just that brain damage shifts the emphasis on what aspects get expressed.

Look into schizoid conditions: they throw up fascinating insights into how many views, instincts, alternate pathways, mind-sets and behaviours most of us never consciously realise we actually contain. People with a heavy dose of schiz get more of a peak at what we all have going on inside, simply because

the selective blinkers/ filters most of us take for granted aren't working to spec for them.

Yet, all those options? Are what we are, are part of us and remain so, even if we mostly don't realise it.

Dainpdf

So our current working model for winter is brain damage or mental conditions?

You're right, I'm not schooled in the workings of such things, but I will note that the law will sometimes exonerate people based on them being mentally ill (though I guess that tends to end with them in a mental hospital).

pagesbe

I suspect the well is only partly to be an energy source, I think it's meant to stop Pilgrim from ruining her with his counter-magic feedback.

RanVor

A slower chapter before a big fight, with the best use of Praesi treachery I've ever seen.

[Daniel E](#)

All this talk of Winter & Night Oaths got me thinking; Whatever happened to Killian? I wonder if she ever went through with that ritual business and became full-blooded Fae. Also, I'm betting that Friday's chapter will be more buildup, because when have we ever not had a cliffhanger before the weekend?

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, if she became full fae, she'd gain at least some of Cat's former powers... but she presumably wouldn't be a member of one of the Fae Courts, so she'd be operating on a much lower power level,

Sven

Just posting a comment to subscribe

Shemetz

"Masego had his habits, but he wasn't exactly blind."

His blindfold is just for show.

Chapter 21: Intervention

"Even madmen can win at dice."

– Callowan saying

General Abigail rode poorly, though that was hardly a surprise. Most of my army was no better. Given that it was in majority Callowan, that was somewhat shameful: my people had once held a reputation for breeding the finest war horses on Calernia and riding them into battle with distinguished record. That'd been before the Conquest, though. A lot of Old Kingdom noble families had preferred butchering their own herds to turning them over to the Tower, and Black famously almost had an uprising on his hands when he moved to obtain horses from the mostly-untouched south of the kingdom. It was one of the few times my teacher had actually backed down. In practice, the old expectation that anyone of means as well as anyone of high birth would be able to ride with a lance had died out under the decades of occupation. A large part of what had birthed that custom in the first place was gone, namely the need for a large pool of trained mounted soldiers to fill the ranks should the Wasteland invade, but in my eyes the real culprit had been the lack of such mounts to be had.

What few war horses had remained were either closely kept by the last of the Callowan aristocracy or by law set aside for the use of the Legions of Terror – in specific the Thirteenth, which had been raised from Callowan bandits and rebels in the first place. Ratface had once told me, years ago, that for the smugglers who could pull it off selling a horse was about as profitable as selling the equivalent weight in spices. Wasteland aristocrats were willing to pay ludicrous sums for a purebred Liesse charger or even a dappled Vale courser. That'd been the thought, anyway, that the old herds and ways were gone. There'd been some satisfaction in the fact the knightly orders might be lost but at least they weren't under Praesi banners, the kind of bittersweet victory that'd been rare after the Conquest and so even more dearly savoured. But then the Order the Broken Bells had crawled out of the chaos of the Arcadian Campaign, and given time it might spread that knowledge again. A pretty, thought, though in the present it wasn't making either mounts or skilled riders appear out of thin air.

"Ghastly beasts, I'll tell no lie," Abigail of Summerholm muttered, eyeing her mount with distrust. "Bit unnatural, if you ask me."

The horses I'd confiscated from the four thousand *kataphraktoi* numbered more than that. Less than military wisdom would have dictated a field force of cavalry should take with them, but six thousand horses was nothing to sneer at. Hakram had speculated that considering they weren't moving with a remount for every cataphract they might just have a field camp somewhere in Iserre where the rest were being kept, but we'd had no time to look into it. Out of sheer practicality we'd already had to butcher a thousand of those no doubt very expensive mounts, which at least had put the orcs of the Third and Fourth in a rather good mood – fresh meat was a delicacy, out on campaign. But we'd also more than enough left for what might be considered luxury, namely mounting large contingents of messengers and officers. The matter was further complicated by the fact that horses not specifically trained out of it tended to panic around greenskins, but the humans in the general staffs had gained mount at least.

"You get used to it," I said. "Though it's been some time since I last rode a living mount, I'll admit."

I fondly stroked the rough coat of Zombie the Fifth and received a pleased exhale from the Helikean horse in reply. Zombie the Third was currently being punished by dragging a cart, which looked rather absurd for a winged horse and I knew she very much despised doing. The crime she was atoning for was that this morning I'd found *someone* had caved in the head, ribs and spine of Zombie the Fourth. She'd tried to look innocent, the wretch, but unless there was another hooved creature in my army jealous of my attentions then I had my culprit. Apparently you could take the Winter necromancy out of the fae horse, but actually you couldn't and it would keep that vicious temperament forever.

"If you try to shake me off again I'll have you made into boots," General Abigail whispered, glaring at her horse and apparently under the impression I couldn't hear her. "You know what? That's your name now. Boots. How do you like that, *Boots*?"

Boots proceeded forward at an indifferent trot and I cleared my throat. The black-haired woman paled, reminded of my presence.

"I, uh, agree Your Majesty," she hastily said.

I sighed. She hadn't listened to what I was said in the slightest, had she?

"Oh, good," I airily replied, offering her a smile. "Then I expect it'll be done within the hour."

I enjoyed the panic that seeped into her eyes a little too much.

"Is that," she tried, "customary?"

Trying to find out what she'd agreed to by context. My long experience of pretending I already knew things while getting Masego to explain them allowed me to see through her admittedly pretty translucent wiles.

"In Ashur, I'd assume," I gravely said.

"Yes," she slowly said. "That is... well-known."

"You can tell Adjutant you're in need of our maritime charts for the Tyrian Sea," I continued. "Gods be with you, Admiral Abigail."

She let out a little whimper, which she tried to pass off as a cough. Then she stilled.

"We don't have a border with the Tyrian Sea," she realized. "Or a fleet."

"Which will lend you the element of surprise," I mused.

"Queens aren't supposed to have people on," General Abigail plaintively said.

I hid my smile by looking away.

"Call it royal prerogative," I replied, then took mercy on her and changed the subject. "What do you think of your new officers?"

"The transfers from the Fourth are all old hands from the Legions," the blue-eyed woman said. "To be entirely honest they didn't need much settling, Your Majesty. And Legate Samid could do my job better than me, if you let him."

Legate Samid served for fifteen years under General Afolabi, a Wasteland aristocrat, and first enrolled in the Legions at the beginning of Black's tenure as the captain of Malicia's armies, I thought. His loyalties are rather more complex than yours, my dear.

"Then learn from him," I said. "And take his advice, when it has good sense."

I'd ignored the implied offer to step down from her generalship and resume her legate duties, as I had the last five times she'd indirectly broached the subject. And would keep doing. Talented Callowan candidates for a general's mantle didn't grow on trees, much less those with no ties to any of the factions in my court. An abdication was a tricky matter even when a dynasty was stable, and considering mine consisted of me and a tumultuous reign of less than five years I hardly qualified. A popular Callowan general with a distinguished war record and no real ambition for power would go a long way in stabilizing what would follow in my

wake. I set aside the thought for now. It was too early to tell if Abigail of Summerholm could really be used in that manner, and pushing too hard too fast would only spoil the broth.

"I won't know the first thing about fighting heroes, ma'am," General Abigail said.

"I've killed more than a few and I barely do," I shrugged. "Besides, ideally we won't be killing anyone."

"That's, uh, not the sentiment I expected to hear," the black-haired general said.

"Any corpse we make down here is one less warm body to throw at the Dead King, Abigail," I said. "And heroes, well, we'll need more than a few of those to drive the Hidden Horror back into hiding."

"Into hiding," she slowly said. "Not to kill."

"You ever seen a god die, General Abigail?" I said.

She shivered.

"Can't say I have, ma'am," she replied, lips tight.

"Neither have I," I said, "but I suspect it would be *messy* business. Best we know our limitations, and not bargain for more than we can deliver."

"I hear that," General Abigail muttered.

About time to segue into more personal matters, I mused. I'd taken to digging into her past, when the opportunity rose, though what I'd learned was as amusing as it was appalling. Inquired about her family had let to *'My Ma brewed, and what Pa didn't drink we sold.'* An open-ended question about why she'd enrolled had led to *'Our place in Summerholm burned down, and all respect Your Majesty but have you ever smelled a tannery?'* I'd been about to ask about the orc tribune – Krolem, his name was, I'd had Hakram look into him – that she brought with her everywhere when movement caught my attention at the corner of my eye. Enemy outriders? No, I saw as I squinted, some of our own scouts. The Third Army was at the head of the column for the day's march, and with my personal banner being raised along with its own the scout officers were likely to head here for their first report. I'd not expected anything from them for some time, to be honest. Our best guess had Juniper's camp half a day away, further west along the frozen river we were following.

"Unusual," I said.

The general followed my gaze, but said nothing.

"Come on," I decided. "We're headed to the front of the column."

I spurred Zombie the Fifth forward, peeling off from the side of the Third Army and outpacing the marching legionaries. Abigail followed more slowly, hissing curses at her uncooperative mount I pretended not to hear. It wasn't a full scouting line, I saw as I approached. Only a tenth, all goblins, with the line's sergeant among them. *Whatever they saw*, I thought, *it was urgent enough they backtracked*. I reined in my horse a dozen feet ahead of the front of my column, slowing him to a trot to remain ahead as the goblins approached. Abigail arrived just before they did, legs so tight against her saddle I winced to think of the cramps she'd have tonight. The sergeant – stringy, small and more yellow than green, the ritual scarring around her lips lending her a grisly touch – came forward and saluted.

"Your Majesty," she said. "Sergeant Hurdler, reporting."

"At ease, sergeant," I replied.

I glanced at Abigail and saw she'd mostly composed herself. Good enough.

"You're back earlier than expected," I said. "Your report?"

"Whatever we got out of the Procerans, it was inaccurate," the goblin said. "The Hellhound's camp is about half a bell ahead, and when Lieutenant Reeler sent us back battle was already being given."

Shit, I thought. There were hills to the west of us, split in the middle by the river our maps called the Odelle. Not all that tall, but enough they'd cut our line of sight. *It makes sense*, I grimly conceded. Juniper would want hills on one of her flanks if she could, knowing she'd be outnumbered in a battle.

"Battle," I said. "Elaborate, sergeant."

"Marshal Juniper raised a fortified camp on both sides of the river banks," Hurdler said. "An army of Levantines and Procerans was assaulting the northern bank, last I saw."

"Which was?" I pressed.

"A little over an hour," the goblin said. "We could see from the taller hills."

Fuck. I'd bet on Juniper against most generals, and on Grem One-Eye against the few left, but they wouldn't just be fighting mortals. There would be heroes, and if what Hakram had told me about Vivienne was true then Juniper wouldn't have any Named to pit against them. The Pilgrim alone might be driven back by the Wild Hunt, but the Saint? Laurence de Montfort had already proved

she could savage the lot of them singlehandedly. Our Proceran prisoners had told us about cavalry skirmishes and ambushes, not a pitched battle over the camp. The enemy had moved quicker than we'd anticipated. My fingers clenched and I leaned back against my saddle, turning my face to the sky. I whistled, loudly.

"Ma'am?" Sergeant Hurdler said.

"Pass your report along to General Bagram and Lord Adjutant immediately," I told her. "Dismissed, sergeant."

She saluted, and left dragging along her exhausted scouts.

"General Abigail," I said.

The blue-eyed Callowan was watching me warily.

"Your Majesty," she replied.

"The Third Army is to march on those hills as quickly as you can make it," I said, the staff in my grasp twirling to point at the slopes to the west. "You're to fly the Third's banner from the tallest hills. Send a messenger to Bagram, and fly the Fourth's as well."

"And General Bagram is to follow?" she asked.

"Pass this along to Hakram: Five Armies and One," I said.

"That's all?" Abigail blinked.

"It's enough," I amusedly replied.

"And you, ma'am?" she asked.

I glanced up, and saw exactly what I'd been waiting for.

"I'll be going ahead," I said.

In a splash of snow, Zombie the Third landed right in front of me. Wings still unfolded, she celebrated her release from punishment with a smug little canter. I gesture for one of the legionaries in the front rank to approach, some beardless boy who looked almost too small for his armour. I passed him my living mount's reins and instructed him to lead it back to our supply train, but paused when I caught the sun glinting off his helm.

"Your name?" I asked.

"Edgar, ma'am," he replied, sounding too young and too awed. "Of Laure."

"Are you?" I smiled, and flicked a glance at Abigail. "Good, it wouldn't do to have the Summerholm folk take all the glory. I'll be needing to borrow your helmet, Edgar."

The boy's eyes widened in surprise, but he fumbled at the clasps and held it up like an offering. I set it under my arm, pulling my loose hair back into a ponytail with the leather tongue I still carried in my cloak. The legionary helmet settled on my head with a comfortingly familiar weight. I winked at Edgar.

"Last time I was on a field and royalty went without one of those, I had them shot," I said.

The boy choked, and I grinned before limping to Zombie's side, waiting until she'd folded her wings to hoist myself atop her. I turned to Abigail.

"See to it he gets another before battle, would you?" I told her, dipping my head towards the kid.

"I will," General Abigail nodded. "Should I be asked your intent, Your Majesty, what should I say?"

I mulled over that as my mount spread her wings.

"I'm going to make a point, General," I said. "Tactfully."

I spurred on my winged mount and she raced ahead, leaping up and rising to the beat of long wings. We rose and rose and rose, high into the sky, until the sun was warming my bones and I judged the height was sufficient. The time for quiet was over, I thought. Night flooded my veins, sluggish under the glare of day, but it was enough to rip open an inky-black gate into Arcadia. Below us, as it happened. We dove through the gate into the realm of the fae. Sunny skies awaited us on the other side, the Summer sun's disapproving light upon us, but what did we care? There was only the endless blue firmament and the descent, Zombie responding to the nudges of my knees and adjusting the angle so we would tumble through the destination I could feel in the back of my mind.

I pressed close against her back, cloak trailing behind me, and squinted against the howling air. My staff of ebony I clutched tightly, until I could feel the point the needle was to emerge from the cloth. Beneath us was spread out a fortress, banners of neither Court I had known raised tall over pale walls, and cries sounded at our approach. The tallest tower, I saw, was our gate out. The very summit. I grimaced. Well, too late to hesitate. Down, down, down, until I could almost make out the faces of the fae jousting in the courtyard below, laden with silks and elaborate armaments. My staff rose and sluggishly the gate out ripped itself open atop the tower. We plunged through narrowly, and in the beat that followed found ourselves diving through fresh skies.

The cool air of Procer whistled around me as the gate closed, and we joined the battle unfolding below.

It was a bloody mess that I witness sprawling out beneath me. I'd been afraid that the northern Levantines and Principate reinforcements had somehow managed to steal a march, but by the looks of it they hadn't. Not exactly. In the distance I could see columns of soldiers heading south, spread out like glittering snakes of steel. This was a vanguard, not the full host. That'd be reassuring, though, if Juniper actually looked to be *winning*. The Army of Callow and the Legions under Marshal Grem had raised a fortified camp across the two banks of the frozen River Odelle, not only palisades but earthen ramparts and even platforms for their siege engines. The northern part of that camp, however, was a wreck. What must have been flat grounds once was now a disaster of collapsed tunnels, the outskirts of which were being fought over by legionaries and Levantine foot. The Hellhound had dug under her own camp, I thought. It would have taken goblins to do this much damage so swiftly. Odds were she'd meant to bait the enemy into the northern bank and then collapse it on them, possibly with munitions thrown in to make it a crippling blow. Something had gone wrong, though, because among the havoc I saw more of our dead than the enemy's.

Our side was stuck in fighting retreat to the southern bank fortifications, but the legionaries were getting the bad end of that scrap – on uneven grounds, the lightly-armored Levantines were proving much more effective. Many of them carried javelins, I saw, and those were death on even good armour when properly thrown. Even when not, they turned shields useless by sticking in them. It wasn't the kind of fight the reformed Legions of Terror had been built for, and the Army of Callow was daughter to that institution. The Order of Broken Bells was out on the left flank, but *too far out*: they'd been baited into pursuing lighter Levantine cavalry, by the looks of it. But it was on the right that disaster loomed. Proceran horse, a force at least seven thousand strong and advancing at a trot. I'd put my hand to fire it'd held back until now, and I could see why: if it charged down the Odelle, as it was moving to do, it would neatly cut the retreat of the legionaries fighting their way out of the wreckage. There'd been palisades put over the ice, Juniper wasn't an amateur, but they'd been shattered beyond repair by something and sappers were struggling to raise fresh ones. They wouldn't make it in time, I assessed. Not something solid enough to resist a hard charge by seven thousand hardened Proceran mounted killers.

Someone had hit my side exactly where they needed to for this to turn into a debacle, and I had my suspicions as to who. I wasn't seeing the Pilgrim or the Saint anywhere but that hardly meant they weren't there. Yet this could still be salvaged, I decided. If the legionaries in the wreckage didn't get cut off, most of

them should make it to the southern bank and then the siege engines would stop the enemy advance cold. Which meant that seven thousand horse had to be turned back. I worried my lip but pressed my knees against Zombie's side and she angled her glide down to land ahead of the Proceran cavalry. Making the fairy gates hadn't put me out of commission, but I wasn't exactly fresh anymore either. I wouldn't be able to pull a second Sarcella today, of that much I was certain, even if heroes decided not to interfere. Calling on a few vicious Night tricks might slow down the enemy, but I'd burn out long before I could make a real dent in seven thousand horsemen.

Five hundred feet before the enemy, Zombie's hooves skimmed the surface of the cold field and left long spouts of snow like wings as she landed. I watched the Proceran banners trail in the breeze far ahead of me, vivid coloured stripes flying high above rows and rows of steel-clad soldiers. Some of those I had seen on the pages of ancient volumes. The red lion of Valencis, the strange green dragonfly of Lange. Other symbols I did not: a long-haired maiden clutching bow and arrows, a bronze wheel atop a pale column.

Four hundred feet.

One I had seen before with my own eyes, I realized, and not so long ago: a scarlet salamander on flaxen bed, the arms of Aequitan. The detail startled a laugh out of me. An old acquaintance was among them, then. Borrowed helm glinting in the sun, I twirled my staff and leaned forward. No miracle of Night came. Instead, using the length of ebony wood I traced a line in the snow ahead of me.

Three hundred feet.

Watching seven thousand killers ride towards me with no sign of slowing, I did the only reasonable thing left to me and went looking through my cloak. I snapped my wrist, black flame flickered, and I pulled at my pipe. I inhaled the wakeleaf with a little sigh of pleasure and breathed out a long stream of smoke.

Two hundred feet.

I grinned, broad and sharp and just a little mad. Now, the thing was, if it came to a scrap they might just kill me. They knew that. I knew that. Yet here I was, unmoving.

One hundred feet.

Catherine Foundling, out of breath and out of her depth, would be swept aside with a warlike shout. They weren't facing that girl, though, were they? They were facing the Black Queen, the warlord who'd slain fae and bound them to her service. The monster who'd brought down the sky at the Battle of the Camps, faced a band of

heroes alone and raised a lake's worth of dead. They were facing every dark rumour I'd ever had put to my name, after watching me dive out of a pitch-black portal on a dead fae horse. And sure, odds were I was mad. Gone the way of the Old Tyrants, drunk on power.

But, a little voice would be whispering, what if I *wasn't*?

I grinned, and smoked my pipe.

Fifty feet.

They flinched first.

theart0fwar

Gotcha!

theart0fwar

> "Is that," she tried, "customary?"

A valiant effort.

> A popular Callowan general with a distinguished war record and no real ambition for power would go a long way in stabilizing what would follow in my wake.

Oh gods below, imagine Abigail as a **queen**?

> "Neither have I," I said

Well, but you have more experience in these matters. Like stealing from choirs, eh...

> "I'm going to make a point, General," I said. "Tactfully."

HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA HA

> They flinched first.

Catherine is just so... so epic.

Can't wait for the next chapter!

Dainpdf

Regarding Abigail queenship: it has been a possibility for a while.

Cicero

Actually, sounded more to me like she was thinking a general loyal to the institution instead of her own ambition and thus not likely to make a grab for power in the instability caused by Cat abdicating/dying and transferring power to someone else.

Andrew Mitchell

Yeah, that was more my take as well. But the thought of Abigail as Queen is also possible.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's a question of what stories get played out. Abigail getting field-promoted all the way to the crown is an appealing story, but would have to fit into Cat's own story. Clearly Cat has her own plans, though.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I think Cat wants a democracy.

RanVor

She doesn't. She noted on how she dislikes democracy before.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Did she? I thought she disliked the feudal system and the oligarchy that the Tower installed over Callow. If the citizens of Callow voted for their own Prime Minister I think she'd like it.

RanVor

She did. I don't remember when it was exactly, probably somewhere in Book 2 or early Book 3.

Andrew Mitchell

She did. I found the relevant chapter: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/12/04/chapter-49-hearsay/>

"Democracy, it was called. There was a part of that that appealed to me – letting people choose their own way – but I'd never really bought into the notion. People were dumb, broadly speaking, and mobs even dumber. For all that I'd acquired a distaste of nobility, filling a hall with drunk tradesmen and asking the lot of them to make laws was no way to rule a country. Someone had to hold the reins, or all you got was bickering and indecision.

Just because I believe that place shouldn't be inherited didn't mean it should be carved up and handed off to a hundred thousand strangers out in the streets."

NZPIEFACE

Yeah, but that's absolute democracy. I was talking more of the type of democracy real world countries use, not Belerophen.

Navi-Hank

You mean a Republic

Yavandir

There isn't any other democracy it's a lie of foreign oligarchs.

Liliet

I don't think democracy would work in this setting. There just isn't infrastructure for it.

And proto-democracy with just nobles electing who rules them wouldn't exactly be better.

konstantinvoncarstein

Indeed, look at the Holy Roman Empire

Sparsebeard

Which is basically Procer.

Jacob McNeer

Procer is France with HRE government.

Javvies

Ehhhh, it'd probably work out reasonably okay for a city-state, or maybe something a bit bigger (ie, Renaissance Venice).

It's the scaling it up that causes issues in this kind of setting.

Plus, the whole issue of Named.

And the closest example to democracy we have is the clusterfuck known as Bellerophon. Nobody else wants to go anywhere near that kind of governing system for themselves.

On the other hand, Cat doesn't exactly approve of the concept of hereditary nobility much either. It's hard to say what kind of government she'll end up leaving behind or trying to leave behind.

Liliet

Constitutional monarchy? As a guess.

ninegardens

I wonder if the gods below deliberately made Bellerophon as a joke, so as to dissuade other nations from even CONSIDERING the idea of an elected government.

(Or possibly is conspiracy on both sides to keep them heriarchy's which seem to work so well for this whole "Good vs Evil" competition.)

Abrakadabra

Democracy is anathema to Good, because it denies the divine hierarchy.

Euodiachloris

Switzerland might like to point out that what vaguely democratic ball the Ventician Republic dropped, it picked up. And ran with. Stumps have been big in Helvetica going back quite some way.

Even when other European powers stuck their oars in and tried to stop communities, towns and villages from using direct democracy the Alpine way. (Note: it's still highly selective. Do not get me started on who can and cannot vote at whatever form of election.)

Agent J

It's patently obvious Catherine wants some manner of meritocratic system. She believes positions of power should not be in the hands of the unwashed masses. She's as uninterested in an Absolute Democracy as she is in a Republic. One is Rule by Mob while the other is Rule by Popularity. Neither, from my understanding of Cat's views, are sound reasons to hand people power. But she also believes that it shouldn't be handed to silver-spoon brats with more silk than sense either.

What's left is qualified individuals taking key positions of power because of their merit and no other reason. Not blood, not popularity among low information voters, and not by the will of the torch wielding mob.

Cat wants a Rule by Merit system for Callow/Dread Empire and given that this was basically the underlying thesis of the Reforms and the Legions of Terror, I'm surprised this isn't as obvious to everyone as it seems to me.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine would probably like a modern-type democracy with elected representatives, but there isn't precedent for that on Calernia and she isn't that kind of social reformist.

Agent J

Representatives elected by way of popularity among low information voters and who's policies don't even line up with the will of said low information voters, but rather of wealthy oligarchs who've bought them out.

No, I'm fairly certain Catherine would rather a political system more in line with the system championed by the revolutionary Legions of Terror and is the building blocks of her Army of Callow. That is, a system in which merit is the only metric by which people are proper to higher positions.

Besides, everyone knows how horribly flawed modern democracies are, but it's cultural wisdom that "while our system is bad, there is no working alternative". That's not exactly a strong selling point to medieval monarch.

[Liliet](#)

Soviet Union tried to be a meritocracy. It didn't go well. (Who decides people's merit, in a meritocracy?)

But yeah, I do agree with your basic point / conclusion.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Wouldn't the term for that be oligarchy?

[Liliet](#)

yeah, that

Abrakadabra

Oligarchy is what we live in worldwide, it calls itself democracy though.

studentofzelretch

The Black Queen, huh? Seems like a good, solid Name. Let's see if it pans out as such; she's due for one.

Agent J

Did you miss that whole bit at Second Liesse where the Squire was transitioning into the Black Queen, until Black broke the weapon and name alike?

Cuz... Black Queen is dead as a Name, it's corpse devoured by Winter, and then sold to Sve Noc in exchange for an army.

Also, Priestess of Night is way more fun than any Name.

matesbe

Black Queen was dead as a name... but that's because Black closed the door on that interpretation of her rulership at that moment. I'm not saying that Black Queen will become a Name, but I think it's foolish to think that because it was stopped once, that Name can never become one.

RandomFan

I think that if she's offered the name of Queen a third time and loses it, it's a safe bet that she will never hold a Queen name- I'm pretty sure she's already turned down the name of Queen in book 2 and been denied it in book 3.

Liliet

I think the "Black" part referred to her willingness to agree to Malicia's idea for the WMD. Catherine will now never fit that Name because after the opportunity passed, she realized that was wrong.

The world just hasn't yet caught on to the fact she is after Not Being Evil, is all.

Navi-Hank

I'm more fond of the Herald of Night

Epok

Come check out the discord , <https://discord.gg/xWeQPb>

Insanenoodlyguy

Pure high level bluff. Yep, human Cat is back. If shes doing shit like this though, seems shell have a name again soon enough.

Whitestrake

She's literally going to make a Name for herself, pulling these kinds of stunts again.

Andrew Mitchell

I'm pretty sure that's what InsaneNoodlyGuy was trying to say. Except he left it as "name" rather than "Name".

Lord GM

No, Cat will never have a proper Name again. That is my solid conviction. Because to have a Name one must fill a Role and that means obediently playing by the Gods' rules and becoming a playing piece on their divine chess board called Creation. And since Book I we know that Cat hates to play by any rules not her own.

LeTouriste

How about Hierarch then? The Name got forced on him

[sengachi](#)

That's not high level bluff so much as it is having *earned* that advantage on your bluff check.

[Liliet](#)

I would say this is an Intimidation check more than it is a Bluff check ;u;

mordered

The need for a Practical Guide to Evil tabletop rpg intensifies.

Taichi

Been thinking about writing one. Perhaps someone would like to collaborate with me?

[Liliet](#)

check on Guide discord: <https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>

[Fayhem](#)

I've been considering running a PGtE campaign whenever the campaign I'm already running wraps up. I think that Scion 2e would actually be a good match for a system; a focus on narrative play aligns well with a setting where stories matter so much, it's all about people unlocking demigod-

tier power already so you'd just have to change the source of that, and the mechanics of it got cleaned up a lot from Scion 1e. It would need a bit of tweaking still, but less than any other system that come to mind.

Randomfan

I would see if I could make a cross Bluff and Intimidate check, rather than either one alone, but I don't know the exact definitions to be certain.

Decius

Which is why I like the combined "Persuasion" skill better than having bluff, intimidate, and diplomacy as three separate things.

Her immediate intention is to scare people, which involves pretending to have capability she lacks, so that she can convince the army to attack the Dead King. That's intimidate, bluff, and diplomacy all in one.

Andrew Mitchell

What sort of check is the DM's choice. I could see both applying equally here.

[Mental Mouse](#)

This. "... the other half is actually *knowing* dark secrets."

danh3107

The Viv teasing is bugging the hell out of me....

Dainpdf

We do know she lost her name. It was mentioned a while back.

danh3107

Right but we don't know if she replaced it, or if poof she's a normal person again. The dissonance is just bugging me, this started out as a series about Named and how interesting they are, and then we even get a group of named to replace the last big evil group and now two are just normal people again.

It's just bugging me, of course this is all dependent on whether or not she actually lost her named status altogether but hey.

Andrew Mitchell

I'm really looking forward to finding out more about what's happened to Vivienne. Not so much her Name, because I think she's lost it and she isn't about to get another one. But more so to find out about how her mindset has changed and how she's been doing her role as Regent while Cat's been away. And, of course, what she thought about Hakram's sacrifice and what difference that made to her.

Cassus

Just a thought, but V does not have quite as clearly defined a character as Catherine did when she lost her name and remained awesome. I think that V will get a new name. And since she is running a country in the Queen's absence and apparently building up a lot of authority and dealing with issues, how about we name her Chancellor?

[Liliet](#)

The first Good Chancellor Name in history.

Andrew Mitchell

Maybe a new Callowan equivalent of Chancellor: Regent. She already has that title, so maybe she will turn it into a role and Name.

[Javvies](#)

Chancellor is a Praesi-specific Name. It's a culturally specific Name, not one that could come from more or less anywhere. And has specific connotations to it that are peculiar to Praes and Praesi culture. Once important such connotation is that it is normal and expected for the Chancellor to at some point betray and become the next Dread Emperor/Empress of Praes. There's a very good reason why Malicia has tried to kill the Name of Chancellor.

The Callowan Role-equivalents, sans the mandatory backstabbing, would likely be something along the lines of Regent, Castellan, and/or Steward.

Andrew Mitchell

Oh, I hope it's Steward! That would really suit Vivienne.

[Liliet](#)

Judging by "Juniper has no Named to counter them", yes Vivi is no longer Named.

I personally think this is an amazing & also hilarious development.

I'm also expecting Cordelia to get a Name and Amadeus to get a new Name, so I don't think Named will drop off the landscape entirely.

But Cat as non-Named out-Naming Named is the BEST plot development. With Vivi at her side.

Javvies

Ehhhh, to be fair, Thief is not a combatant Name, and Viv/Thief was always pretty bad in a fight. And there's no way she could realistically counter a combat Name on a battlefield.

So saying Juniper has no Named to counter Heroes would be true whether Viv is still Thief or not.

Liliet

Vivi is bad in a direct Named vs Named fight, sure, but we have a battle with armies both assisted by Named here, not that.

Remember the river fleet? Remember the stolen supplies? Cat's not exactly dueling enemy heroes here either.

Decius

Thief would not win a straight-up fight with other Named, but if she was there and in full power she could have stolen a march or two, and the battle wouldn't even been there.

Mental Mouse

Viv had lost her name as of Hakram's last report... she could still pull out a new name and first aspect mid-fight. As far as insisting that Cat is non-Named, we already know that fae titles are comparable to Names in terms of granting power. I'd say her First Priestess role is likewise, so there's no real reason to care that she doesn't have a "traditional" name. If anything, she's laying new paths for a future name.

An aside: The mention of Abigail's orc friend makes me think: The appearance of the Name Adjutant implies that what the name represents has become enough of a tradition in 20 years or so that it could support a Name. In this case, that would seem to be: "The orc adjutant who's not just a terror by your side, but a good assistant outside

the fight." I'm wondering if Abigail may have picked up one of the un-Named versions.

[Liliet](#)

Power isn't the main thing that Names grant, narrative influence is much more key.

And hmm, good question wrt orcs!

Shikkarasu

Cordelia won't get a Name. Both because First Prince isn't, and never has been, a Name and also because she dislikes relying on Named. Exception, of course, for having Auger as a cousin. Also, she is opposing the Saint (who wants to break Procer) and Pilgrim (who refused to kill Black). It's hard to do that without being a Villain; they are too entrenched in their Roles.

[Liliet](#)

Not First Prince, Warden Of The West.

Dislike for Names does not exempt you from getting one, see: Tariq and Anaxares.

And as long as she's not trying to kill the two of them but just stays her own course wrt saving her country, she's fully eligible for a heroic Name imho.

Andrew Mitchell

"I'm also expecting Cordelia to get a Name and Amadeus to get a new Name"

It's going to be interesting to see if either of those predictions come true. And even more interested to see how it develops and becomes real. Personally, I don't think it's going to happen with Cordelia. And I'd only give Black even odds.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, same.

[Liliet](#)

(wrt: interesting)

Dainpdf

It was said Thief is not Named anymore, so we know she hadn't replaced until at least very recently.

Raved Thrad

Nobody plays the brinkmanship game quite like Catherine Foundling. All this really needs to be another Foundling Gambit is goblinfire. 😊

Dainpdf

Battle's still young. We also need an undead goat, soon.

Raved Thrad

And Robber, with a repeat of his famous line, "Release the goat!" 😊

[Euodiachloris](#)

We've already got a jealous, flying, undead kelpie-thing waiting in the wings thanks to being dumped on the naughty step. What more do you want? 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Z3 got off the naughty step, cat's riding them now.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I could swear she is on Zombie 5th. Raised specifically to hammer the naughty step home (and to keep Z3 well outside ground zero, able to swoop in for evac if needed – Z5 is more disposable if things gang agley [translation: go wonky], and could be used as a munitions delivery system at need).

pagesbe

Yes because Zombie the 5th can clearly swoop out of an airborne portal like her current mount did.

Unless you're trying to say you wish she was on Zombie the 5th.

[Mental Mouse](#)

She was on Zombie 5 (*not actually a zombie) at the beginning of the chapter; She whistled for Z3 and switched mounts for her "forward action". Not only can Z5 not fly, they maybe wouldn't react too well to gating.

Dainpdf

A kelpie-thing? I hope Zombie the Third can't shapeshift.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I wouldn't put anything past the cheeky, large sodfer.
Including a hidden ace. 😊

Eleron Pfoutz

"Going to make a point."
"Tactfully."

I hope there won't be any Goblinfire. Or do I?

Dainpdf

This reminds me of a scene in Worm.

"'You ever seen a god die, General Abigail?' I said.

She shivered.

'Can't say I have, ma'am,' she replied, lips tight.

'Neither have I,' I said"

Bad Cat. You don't have Winter anymore to put your pants out with.

Andrew Mitchell

I don't think Cat was implying that she is going to kill a god, she was implying that is something you don't want to see. She even stated that she wanted the Dead King to go back to hiding.

Dainpdf

She was saying she's never seen a god die, which is pretty ludicrous considering how she got the Winter mantle.

Andrew Mitchell

The Duke of Violent Squalls wasn't a god. And neither was the King of Winter or the Queen of Summer. Not quite the same tier as the actual gods of creation IMO.

Dainpdf

Well, yeah, but neither is the Dead King, so that's not relevant for her speech there.

[Liliet](#)

DK is higher tier than Duke of Violent Squalls

Dainpdf

Sure. Still not a capital g God, though. Wouldn't know where to rank him against a Fae monarch.

[Liliet](#)

They didn't strictly speaking actually die. What happened still left Cat as Last Of Winter though, which might be mess enough for her to back up her point XD

Dainpdf

Well, she did claim that counted as undoing the King of Winter.

[Liliet](#)

When has Cat seen a god killed?

konstantinvoncarstein

"Can't say I have, ma'am," she replied, lips tight.

"Neither have I," I said, [...]

Never 😊

Dainpdf

She has often compared the Duke of Violent Squalls to a god; even more so for the King of Winter, and she saw to the end of both.

[Liliet](#)

Demigod was what she said. I'm guessing there's a subtle difference in expected fallout.

Dainpdf

The king of winter was described as a full on god, but I guess he didn't really die...

[Liliet](#)

Yeah XD

Wry Warudo

R.I.P, Zombie the Fourth. You left us so young, never got your chance to go out in a blaze of green glory. You will be missed.

werafdsaew

Eh? Does the gate work or not? If it is why isn't she transporting her armies by gate

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Because all the gate does is make a hole someone can walk through. If the army tried to retreat through it, they'd get attacked the entire way. Battles like this are decided by who can maintain a coherent line longer and doing that while backing up is really hard. Any army that's doing well enough in the fight to retreat en masse through a single choke point didn't actually need to retreat in the first place.

werafdsaew

Sure, but if the gate is working she should be using it so that the armies can join up a lot quicker.

Solal

I think the point here is that she's already tired after using the gate for a single person. She wouldn't be able to get the whole army through it.

Novice

Yes, but the moment Cat joined the battle is mere seconds away from a cavalry charge destroying Juniper's flank. This is just her prioritizing the most urgent.

Eldrene Ay Ellan

She was marching the army for over a week before this. If travel is possible then why the hell would you not just immediately gate the 3rd and 4th to the region Juniper is in? You don't even have to actually exit the gate if you have any enemies nearby, just close it and open another a couple kilometers over.

[Liliet](#)

That's not how it works. Cat doesn't go 'in' and 'out of' Arcadia, she goes 'through' Arcadia. She can't aim from Arcadia back into Creation, all the aiming is done while outside.

[Mental Mouse](#)

They're not *that* sure "the gate is working", given prior reports. Alone on Z5, Cat could improvise if she suddenly found herself in the Hells. An army unexpectedly dumped there would be in trouble.

[Liliet](#)

Z3, Z5 is a regular horse :3

[Mental Mouse](#)

Right you are. My kingdom for an edit button! 😊

[Liliet](#)

IKR

Valkyria

Also there's no way to guess if the way through Arcadia is actually shorter than the normal distance on Calernia. It sure makes sense for long way travels that would take months, but there's no way you can actually know where in Arcadia the exit is, and how far away it is. What if she had just a few miles normally, but like march through half of Arcadia if she chose to gate there...?

Andrew Mitchell

My recollection is that gating through Arcadia is always a shorter path but you don't always know how much shorter.

[Liliet](#)

She needs to know the entry and exit point. She can't just say 'to Juniper please'. She needed to actually find her in the mundane way first. She can't even just know where the point is, she has to actually be *familiar* with it to get precise results.

She can get from anywhere to Callow. But she can't ad-hoc gate to anywhere.

Eldrene Ay Ellan

She doesn't need to land right in Junipers lap, just gate to the general area.

[Liliet](#)

hasn't the tower-in-Arcadia episode just now demonstrated how risky blind gating can be?

magesbe

This. This is the kind of mad, gutsy action that I loved Catherine pulling. We haven't seen anything really like this since book 3. Welcome back, Catherine. We're watching you eagerly as you show us just why you were definitively voted the most popular PGtE character.

[Daniel E](#)

Not often that we see the Army of Callow get seriously beat up. I wonder how much of the First & Second are left, let alone in fighting shape. Also considering the loss of people from Liesse and near-constant recruitment of the last few years, I feel like Callow should be running out of soldiers at this point.

IDKWhoitis

It's over the course of years, and if anything, the constant disasters are actually feeding more manpower to the army.

In good times, you have low unemployment, and the rate of volunteers may be 1/100, or potentially lower. Callow may have about 1-4 million souls, as it went through a long period of peace, their cities are of moderate size, and grain is plentiful. That's a theoretical manpower pool of 100,000-400,000. Callow historically didn't get much volume from its own people, only after the battle of the Camps. Black didn't butcher most people in the Liesse Rebellion, and most disasters in Callow have been limited to Liesse.

Its now not good times, the economy is focused on war, and unemployment in the South is rising. Theoretically, the ratio of soldiers can actually double, to 1/50 without further economic penalties, as the level of employment wasn't using those people anyways. So now we have a further 100,000 people to throw into the fire.

The 1-4 Million figure comes from the fact that most Callowan cities population number in the hundreds of thousands, but in this time period, the level of urbanization is actually low.

mavant

I fear you've added an extra order of magnitude in there. 1/100 of a million is 10_000 not 100_000.

IDKWhoitis

It does appear that way. Lesson learned: Don't do math at 2 am.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, "unemployment" is something of a modern concept. At Callowan's tech level and with feudal government, the issue is more in the shape of the war driving people off their land and disrupting trade. A farmer whose land has been overrun or a merchant who can't get goods, or their respective adult sons, are all potential soldiers. And given there are Callowan traditions of local defense, an appealing (or appalling) ruler has lots more potential soldiers to recruit or outright draft,

IDKWhoitis

Although unemployment is a modern term, it still is a good term to describe what is happening. There is a surplus amount of people who are available, who may be looking for work or otherwise can't due to their farm burning down or their former clients and vendors being zombified by Liesse.

[Javvies](#)

Heh.

I like the Cat and Abigail interactions. Especially Abigail's desire to avoid responsibilities and promotions.

Cat 1. Seven thousand cavalry 0.

Nguyen Hong Hai

Especially our erstwhile Princess on the other side:
"Not this crap again"

IDKWhoitis

Are we about to see a "Take me to your Leader" moment? Or a jumbled mess of confused and terrified squabble between Cat and the Cavalrymen?

Also, how long until heroes are on the scene, cussing Cat out?

konstantinvoncarstein

I think Pilgrim would want to speak first. Furthermore, the goal of the the allies is not to destroy the army, but to "repel" it

My very own name

I don't think even the pilgrim is aware of that decision. It's mostly the two princesses.

Valkyria

„Even madmen can win at dice.“

Or at a game of chicken apparently.

Andrew Mitchell

What a great chapter. I loved the conversation between Abigail and Cat! I'm so glad Cat's now fully herself again without the influence of Winter. What a gutsy move to stand as a mortal in front of that charge!

Someguy

It just occurred to me that the remaining Callowan horse breeders will curse Cat's name with the introduction of "foreign horse blood" into the genepool given that they are now trying to breed the Callowan destriers back into the population.

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horse_breeding
<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Destrier>

[Liliet](#)

lmao
they COULD just breed their own breed separately from these, couldn't they?

Someguy

When mares go in heat, horny stallions will do anything to get some. All it takes is 1 breaking into/out of their pen and the breeding plans go to shit for several generations.

[Liliet](#)

assuming they're in nearby pens tho
I'm sure there's a way of handling this situation
considering the size of Callow and the small amount of
either breed of horses 🤔

[Euodiachloris](#)

A little accidental outcrossing is, ultimately, good for the stock book: it's how you discover nice surprises you wouldn't have thought of trying to aim for. 😊

Mares aren't totally daft when they pick who to flick a particularly flirtatious tail at, after all.

Wish more breeders embraced the roulette wheel a bit more gladly when it happens, because you can never quite tell what the grandkids will do until they get born to show you.

Jack

I wish a way could be done to use Z3 a breeding stock. The Order of the Bells will eventually become the Order of the "Flying" Bells ... hmmm, sounds like a name for a trapeze act.

Matthew

This is called the empty fort strategy.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empty_Fort_Strategy

The most famous and also fictional use of it is in Romance of the Three Kingdoms.. (Which honestly also runs on Name logic) when

the famed strategist, Zhuge Liang finds himself trapped behind enemy lines with only a few dozen soldiers.

Before the enemy army comes, he opens up the gates, hides all of his very few soldiers, and goes on the wall in his best clothes with a guqin (chinese guitar) and just plays.

By this point in the story, he has a reputation for impossible victories and clever tricks so the enemy commander sees him alone on the wall with the gates open...

...and leaves.

He's not falling for whatever BS Zhuge Liang has planned, because this is so obviously a trap.

Zhugue Liang escapes and lives.

Gunslinger

It's actually Cao Cao who uses the empty fort strategy though and Romance of the Three Kingdoms attributes it to Zhuge Liang cause the author hated Cao Cao

Raved Thrad

Cao Cao was awesome. Everyone hated him, and he *still* ended up Emperor.

Of course, there was also the time he ordered himself beheaded, but his advisors managed to talk him down to just a stern warning, so even he wasn't all there.

IDKWhoitis

A man who Cat could get along with it seems.

Gunslinger

This is so perfect I cannot imagine why I didn't think of it yet

[Liliet](#)

omg

Raved Thrad

I don't know how to link a video properly, so this'll have to do:

Raved Thrad

Oh, it worked!

Whiteeyes

It also happened during the Sengoku Jidai with Tokugawa. In his case he lit dozens of extra torches, made extra war bonfires, and beat numerous war drums while ordering the gates open in the middle of the night. He had just had shinobi agents attack the enemy camp, starting fires, detonating bombs, and sowing confusion. The enemy commanders, seeing their camp in chaos just as what sounded and looked like a mass of enemy troops were getting ready to attack sounded a retreat rather than get slaughtered in a surprise night attack.

Kilimandaros

Shouldn't sergeant Hurdler be a male goblin? I mean back in Raid (extra chapter) Robber noted that "there wasn't a single female goblin in the Fifteenth that wasn't an officer, since they didn't enrol in the ranks: it was the War College for them or nothing at all". Sergeant isn't an officer – no female goblin should be a sergeant.

TimSEsq

For some reason, sergeant appears to be an officer in the Legions of Terror. The War College was officer training, and some of its graduates became sergeants (including Hakram). That's not how real world military academies tend to work.

Kilimandaros

Hakram was Sergeant when he was enrolled in the War Collage (captain was highest rank there – they didn't have enough troops under their command to have the need for higher ranks). After graduating he become Catherine's adjutant.

pagesbe

Pretty sure Hurdler is an orc.

Kilimandaros

"Only a tenth, all goblins, with the line's sergeant among them."

"the goblin said" twice during her report, so I'm pretty sure that she is a goblin.

tbarim

On the topic of undead animals, whatever became of "stealth goat", the antelope from book 1 ch 28?

superkeaton

I can't believe Cat is grooming poor Abigail to take up the crown after her. That's just... so cruel.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Villain! Well, apparently. According to some. 😊

dalek955

I don't think she is. I think Cat's planning to give her actual successor (possibly Vivian) the gift of a competent, apolitical Callowan general.

June

I bet Abigail and Black compete for role of Squire.

JBell

Ooooh, now that's a thought! I'm not sure how likely it is, but boy, if that happened..

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Go vote!

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

ereshkigala

I just wanted one of those seven thousand people to be a psychopath that didn't feel fear, or a fanatic that didn't care how strong the Arch-Heretic might be... and for them to have a crossbow.

What she did? It was flat-out stupid because statistically speaking, one of the nameless guys present should have taken a potshot – and they wouldn't miss from fifty feet away. She's no longer an incarnation of Winter, she no longer has a Name, so she can't even rely on stories.

[Javvies](#)

Yes and no.

She knows she's no longer nigh invincible and overwhelmingly powerful.

They don't.

All they know is what they've picked up from the stories they've heard about her. In those stories, she's terrifying, functionally unkillable, and incredibly powerful. They might even know that their commanders decided to attack now instead of waiting for their own reinforcements because the Black Queen was on her way, and their commanders wanted to fight the battle before the Black Queen could arrive.

And then there's the fact that she deliberately went out on front of all of them all by herself with a flying horse, and she took the time to light her pipe and start smoking. It looks to them like a trap. And they *know* shooting her is useless, and just might piss her off enough that she stops being subtle and drops a lake on them. Or does something else unpleasant and appallingly violent to them. They know that they don't have heroes immediately available to assist them.

It's also entirely possible that Malanza has issued standing orders for non-Heroes to immediately withdraw and report, instead of engaging, in the event of encountering the Black Queen.

Cat showing up is kind of an excuse for Malanza to pull back from attacking, and to stop expending troops against the Army of Callow. Which Malanza doesn't really want to do anyways.

[Liliet](#)

>one of the nameless guys present should have taken a potshot While charging at full speed?

aran

Abigail is my new favorite character

aran

"No plan, no backup, no weapons weapons worth a damn. Oh, and something else I don't have? Anything. To. Lose.

Do the smart thing. Let someone else try first."

Andrew Mitchell

Hahaha! YES, Cat = The Doctor. Love the idea.

aran

Drawing a line on the ground and calmly standing behind it is also literally a scene from the show, I just remembered.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Before tomorrows update, I'll note that we're certainly *seeing* Cat being more human:

> "Queens aren't supposed to have people on," General Abigail plaintively said.

> I hid my smile by looking away.

Clint

Edgar!

This is his second mention, and in this one he's explicitly outfitting the Black Queen with his helmet and taking care of her horse.

And she made explicit reference to the Shining Prince.

Could Edgar be one lucky battle (e.g. surviving a night raid including a few Named) away from being the next Page?

Andrew Mitchell

Oh, I hope so! What a lovely idea.

Chapter 22: Standoffs

"One hundred sixty nine: any companion volunteering to stay behind and hold off a superior enemy will be guaranteed success, twice over if having already taken a mortal wound."

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

It was like watching the sea split.

Even at the measured pace they'd been keeping fifty feet was too close for them to outright end the charge. There were seven thousand of them, and though they weren't tightly packed those kinds of numbers had weight and momentum – that was what made cavalry charged so dangerous in the first place. No, stopping wasn't in the cards, so instead the Proceran wheeled to the sides. It was beautiful display of horsemanship, the kind of skill I might have applauded were it not the work of soldiers still intent on killing mine. I kept a calm eye on the proceedings to see if any of the riders were crossing the line I'd traced in the snow, but whoever had called them back had pulled the leash in full: as if held back by an invisible wall, the stream of riders spread out on the sides but never crossed. I pulled at my pipe calmly, studying the enemy and running a mental tally of who might be in command. This lot should have been sent south by Hasenbach herself, but with her uncle and most her fellow Lycaonese up north fighting the Dead King she might not have had a competent loyalist to appoint at the head of the army.

Princess Rozala Malanza was a possible candidate, assuming the results of the Battle of the Camps hadn't tarred her reputation as a general in the Principate, but she was one of Amadis Milenan's supporters. If she held command, it meant that the situation up in Salia had gotten rather *interesting*. No, odds

were it was one of the western princes or princesses that held the run of the host. I'd seen the banner for Lange flying, and that was possible, but more likely it'd been the rulers of Brus or Lyonis – both long-standing Hasenbach supporters – that held primacy. I'd find out soon enough, I supposed, because *someone* had given the order to hold back. I spat out a mouthful of grey smoke and adjusted my helm slightly so that the sun wouldn't shine into my eyes. It was a nice day out, more cool than cold and nearly windless. The many plumes of smoke rising from the wrecked camp where Juniper's trap had failed made the lack of breeze obvious, and I allowed myself a glance in that direction. The bitter fighting retreat of my forces had not ceased in the slightest: if anything, the Levantine foot was going after my soldiers even more aggressively than before.

The enemy ranks parted to let through a heavily-armed party of thirty, and though the faces of the royals coming to were still hidden to my eyes the three banners above them were not. The salamander of Aquitan was there, which meant Malanza herself was part of the delegation, but hers was the only heraldry I knew for certain of the three. The long-haired maiden clutching a bow and arrows I vaguely remembered to be from northern Procer, though which principality I couldn't say. The green eagle perched on a crescent might be the arms of Cantal and therefore another old acquaintance – Prince Arnaud of Cantal had been at the Battle of the Camps – but I was pretty sure there was another principality that had a green hawk *clutching* a crescent moon for heraldry, and I did not trust myself to tell the difference. The Principate's royal heraldries were a labyrinth at the best of times, and prone to changing along with the branches of the ruling families that held the seat. I got my answer before long, though, when the cavalry escort parted to allow three royals through. *Would you look at that, it really is Prince Arnaud*, I mused. This was getting rather nostalgic, wasn't it?

Dark-haired and dark-eyed as Arlesites often were, Princess Rozala had little changed since we last met. Physically, anyway, I thought. There was no easy smile on her lips today, and the way she held herself even on the horse... Like there was nowhere that was entirely safe. I'd seen that before, in old soldiers. In Black too, who'd lived his entire life knowing he was one misstep away from death at heroic hands. *You weren't like at the peace talks after the Camps, Malanza*, I thought. This was fresher, and I could think of only one war that'd leave so deep a mark so quickly. She'd fought up north, then. Prince Arnaud was still an unimpressive middle-aged specimen of Alamans royalty, though he appeared to have added a little muscle to his plump frame since we'd last met. Wouldn't do to dismiss this one, I told myself. He'd stuck out to me as bearing watching during the truce talks, feigning emotions he did not feel very convincingly. The last of three was a woman I'd never seen before, fair-haired and blue-eyed. Older than Rozala but younger than Arnaud, with a soldier's

bearing and a narrow but handsome face. No great beauty, unlike Malanza whose curves and long curls would be well worth a second look in a different situation, but emanating a sort of robust health that was pleasing to the eye.

Rather interestingly, it was Princess Rozala that rode ahead of the other two. They reined in their horses a mere ten feet in front of me, riders bearing their banners behind them as the rest of their escort held tight on the sides.

"Black Queen," the Princess of Aequitan said, tone grim. "It really is you."

"In the flesh," I replied. "It's been some time, Malanza. I see you've still keeping Arnaud around, for some godsforsaken reason. Who's the fresh face?"

The Prince of Cantal, who I'd so casually referred to, purpled with anger. I no longer had the senses of a fae to listen to his heartbeat, and calling on the Night might be taken as a hostile act, so I could only wonder if it was yet another piece of theatre on his part.

"Now see here, you filth Damned-" the prince snarled.

"Arnaud," Princess Rozala said, tone sharp.

The man forced himself to calm, and I kept my face blank to hide my interest. Prince Amadis was still in the custody of Callow, last I heard. In his absence had someone else taken up the reins of his little cabal of crowned malcontents?

"I am Princess Sophie Louvroy of Lyonis," the stranger blandly said. "You are, I believe, the self-proclaimed Queen of Callow."

"Ah," I hummed. "So, you're the minder the First Prince set on ol' Rozala. Should I be addressing you for the rest of this conversation, or is she actually allowed to speak for herself?"

"A petty and transparent scheme, as befits your reputation," Princess Sophie coldly replied.

She twitched, though, like she'd wanted to glance at Princess Rozala but caught herself before she could. There were military types – and the Princess of Lyonis seemed too comfortable in armour not to be one of those – that were also subtle diplomats, but it looked like Sophie Louvroy wasn't one of them. Good to know.

"You've refrained from attacking us, Foundling," Princess Rozala said. "The courtesy has been returned. Evidently you want to talk, so talk. I've no time to waste on insults and posturing."

I studied her for a moment, the tanned face visible through the raised visor of her elaborate helm. The fresh pink scar on her cheek, too rough to have been caused by a blade. Her armour was freshly polished, I saw, but it had blemishes now it'd not had at the Camps. She was *worn*, and the visible signs of it were the shallowest part.

"Withdraw," I said. "And I will not pursue."

"*Pursue?*" Princess Sophie hissed indignantly. "You are one woman-"

I ignored her, meeting Malanza's eyes instead.

"We've been at this crossroads before, Rozala," I said.

"So we have," the other woman softly agreed. "But this is not Callow, Catherine Foundling. We did not seek this war."

"Then let it end," I said. "Those in my service who brought the sword to Procer, I will chastise appropriately. I don't want to fight this battle, Rozala Malanza. But trust me, neither do you."

"And we're to take your word for this?" Princess Sophie mocked. "You, a-"

"Sophie," I said, tone nonchalant. "If you interrupt this conversation one more time, I may very well lose patience and relieve you of your tongue."

The fair-haired woman blanched, then reddened, and though she opened her mouth I stared at her calmly. In silence. A heartbeat passed, then another. Her mouth closed and I returned my gaze to Malanza.

"The Legions of Terror put half the heartlands to the torch," Princess Rozala said. "That cannot go *unanswered*, Foundling. Break ties with them and the Army of Callow will be allowed to leave Procer unhindered. On this I give you my word."

"You know I'm not going to give you that," I said. "I offer you this instead: allow them to leave in my charge. They will be, from that moment onwards, my responsibility. I give you my word that should any of them attempt to enter Procer again, save at the invitation of the First Prince, I'll see everyone involved hanged."

"We could kill you right now," Prince Arnaud said, voice grown cool for all the earlier heat. "Do you truly think yourself so powerful you could turn back so many horsemen, Damned? You overestimate your bargaining position."

I cocked my head to the side and looked at the man. Eventually, I tapped the bottom of my staff against the line I'd drawn in the snow.

"Cross it, then," I simply said.

I could see him considering it. It was in the way his legs shifted, like he was preparing to spur his horse forward. His fingers were inching towards the sword at his hip. Teeth worrying the dragonbone shaft of my pipe, I inhaled the wakeleaf and let it burn pleasantly at my throat. I exhaled, and Prince Arnaud grit his teeth but did not try me. It was the calm that was doing it, I dimly realized. Even more than the power they had seen me wield with their own eyes, the more they watched me fail to be cowed the more I could feel them grow unsettled. Thinking I knew something they didn't, that I still had some card up my sleeve. I wondered if this was how Black had felt, making the armies of the Liesse Rebellion melt away like summer snow with nothing but a few tricks and the weight of his reputation.

"Malanza," Princess Sophie whispered, "the longer we wait-"

"I know," Princess Rozala crossly replied.

The longer they waited, the more of my legionaries retreated back to the safety of the southern camp. The more their chance to score a decisive victory slipped away.

"Where did you go, Black Queen?" the Princess of Aquitan suddenly asked. "For nigh a year you were gone."

"I went into the darkness, Rozala," I said. "And what I found there followed me out."

"The Everdark," she said, lips thinning.

"Withdraw," I gently repeated. "And I will not pursue."

"It cannot go unanswered, Foundling," she wearily told me. "There would be... consequences."

I looked up into the sky, at the burning glare of the sun.

"There would be consequences to forcing my hand as well," I said, and returned my gaze to her. "A truce, for today. And tomorrow we will see if for once the costs can be paid with ink and gold instead of blood, for that last currency we can ill-afford."

"It might come to a fight tomorrow regardless," the Princess of Aquitan said. "So why should I hold my blade today, when the advantage lies with us?"

"Did you ever read about the old crusades, Rozala?" I idly asked.

"Prince Gontrand's five volumes of '*Empyrean Wars*' were part of my readings as a child," Rozala frowned.

"Never read those," I said. "See, my own education pulled a little to the east. What I got instead was the '*Commentaries on the Campaigns of Terribilis the Second*', and there's part that stayed with me. I thought about it, after Akua's Folly. After the Camps too. It's written that in the wake of the victory that broke the Fourth Crusade, on the shores of the Wasaliti, the High Lords sang Terribilis' praises and called him the greatest general Praes had ever seen. He lost his temper with them, and here's what he said-"

I cleared my throat.

"Another such victory and I will rule an empire of ghosts," I recited.

Silence followed in the wake of my words.

"Now," I quietly said, "you might win if we fought. Or maybe I'll end up the victor of the field. But either way, Malanza, we'll both be losing. You should know that, if you've been where I think you have."

"What would *you* know of ghosts, Catherine Foundling?" the princess hoarsely replied.

"Enough I don't want to fight today," I said.

Her armoured hands closed around her reins as her lips trembled with a heady mixture of fear and rage.

"Princess Sophie, sound the retreat," Rozala said, voice rough.

The Princess of Lyonis drew back as if stung, narrow face filling with surprise and indignation.

"Princess Rozala-"

"Merciful Gods, Louvroy, just sound the *fucking* retreat," the Princess of Aquitan seethed. "She's a monster and half mad besides, but she's right. How many soldiers are you willing to throw away putting her down? One thousand, two, three? *Our entire horse?*"

I dipped my head, if not in thanks then in respect.

"Spare me, you carrion thing," Princess Rozala snarled. "This is not the respect of worthy opponents, and do not mistake this for some sort of arrangement. You've merely contrived to make yourself into the least of great evils yet one more time."

Seizing her reins, she turned aside her horse.

"You will be seen to, Black Queen," the Princess of Aquitan called out. "There will be a day where all sins will be called to account."

Might be, I thought. *But it won't be today, or by the likes of you*. I waited there, atop my horse, until the trumpets sounded. The cavalry was pulling back, almost embarrassedly, but it was to the fighting in the wreckage that my eyes turned. They did not listen, at first. They were Levantines, and this was a Proceran command. But the trumpets sounded again, insistently, and finally the call was heeded. Just like that, the battle came to a close. For now, I thought. The rest of their host was still marching towards this dawning nightmare, and even more were following behind the army I'd led here. This was far from over, and it was with that tired thought that I began the ride to the soldiers I'd just saved.

—

When I'd found the Third Army, I'd been welcomed with relief. When I'd reunited with the Fourth, it had been to a queen's honours. What awaited me at the camp on the southern bank of the Odelle was entirely different, however. Oh, there were cheers. The ramparts of wood and beaten earth were filled with legionaries from the First and the Second, and they greeted my return with a deafening roar. But as I guided Zombie up the ramp that led into the camp proper and the gates were opened, I noticed that the escort awaiting me inside was not among the cheering throng. My eye ran quickly over their number – forty of them, more than should be needed for a mere escort if neither Juniper nor Vivienne were able to come themselves – and then lingered on the number of lightly armoured soldiers among them. Mages, fifteen of them, and I did not think it coincidence that there were five ogres among the remaining soldiers. Robber had mentioned there were instructions in case of my return, I remembered. To make certain I was me, and not some puppet of whatever I'd found below. It was not an unsound precaution, but I still felt my temper rise.

I'd just faced down an army of Proceran cavalry without even a fucking sword at my hip and this was my welcome home? An army we shouldn't even be fighting, I thought with mounting anger, and two of the three people responsible for that particular bout of foolishness had been the ones to send me this *escort*. My mount slowed as I approached the two lines of soldiers awaiting me, and I raised an eyebrow when I recognized one among them – though she was hardly a soldier, truth be told.

"General Hune," I said. "I see at least one of this army's commanders found it in them to greet me in person."

The thick plate on the ogre made her look more a steel fortress than a person, but she'd not worn her helm – the effect was

almost comical, like a tuft of person over a siege engine. Hune Egeldotir's face had not grown any less brutish, at first look, though neither had her eyes lost that look of patient cleverness. She didn't look like she'd aged a day since we'd first met, though given the rumoured lifespan of her kind that should not have surprised me.

"Your Majesty," Hune replied, her voice still surprisingly delicate for her size. "Welcome back."

"Welcome indeed," I flatly said, glancing at the rest of the party.

"Orders, ma'am," the ogre said, though she did not sound apologetic in the slightest.

It would be, I thought, only be sensible to go along with this. To let the finest mages the army had on hand confirm I was not in fact a possessed shell before I was allowed the *privilege* of speaking to the Lady-Regent of Callow and the Marshal of the same. My fingers twitched. If I protested, I wondered where the legionaries around me would fall. There were a lot of Callowans among them, I thought. More than there would have been a few years ago, though with Vivienne as regent that loyalty might not be as clear-cut as I believed.

"Orders," I repeated, tone pensive. "Funny thing, those."

I hardened my voice.

"General Hune, kneel."

The command rang, though my voice was not raised. It didn't need to be. The ogre stilled, and I could see the shiver go through the rest of the soldiers she'd brought with her. All around us, the cheering began to peter out as legionaries realized something was afoot.

"Your Majesty-" Hune began.

"I have you an order, general," I softly said.

She looked at me, and whatever she found there she knew better than to argue with. Like a tall oak breaking, the ogre knelt in the muddy snow. I glanced at the legionaries that'd come with her, the uneasy mages and tensing soldiers.

"Disperse," I coldly said.

I didn't bother to look if they'd obeyed, though the sound of hasty footsteps told me that had. I pressed my knees against Zombie and she tread forward, until I bid her to stop by Hune's still-kneeling form.

"Get up, Hune," I said. "And the next time one of them tries to give you an order like this, remember who you swore an oath to."

The ogre rose to her feet, and though there was anger glittering in those eyes there was something else as well. I'd been content to leave the reins of the Army of Callow largely in Juniper's hands, so far. Perhaps now and then, though, a reminder of who it was they served might not go amiss.

"I will not forget, Your Majesty," General Hune said.

I glanced at her, almost amused at the boldness.

"Then come along," I said. "I mean to have a frank conversation with the Lady-Regent and the Marshal."

The glint in the ogre's eyes told me that while she might not be all that fond of me, she'd not forgotten who had put her in this situation either. We made our way through the fortified camp, Hune taking the lead as she knew the lay of it, but with legionaries moving out of our way it was not long until we arrived before a tall pavilion. The banners besides it, I saw, included my own. I did not dismount. There was a guard of soldiers around, a full line.

"You are relieved, legionaries," I said.

The lieutenant among them – an orc – glanced at Hune and my irritation spiked.

"If I need to repeat an order one more time," I said, "there will be need a need for *gallows* today."

"Ma'am," the lieutenant got out in a croak, hastily saluting.

Under my cold stare the rest of them scrambled with him.

"General," I said. "If you would?"

The ogre raised the flaps open for me and I rode in without even needing to lower my head. She looked surprised when I gestured for her to follow me in. The pavilion was still full of officers. Juniper's full general staff was there, along with a few others. An old orc with a black band over an eye and two aides at his side needed no introduction, but Vivienne I almost did not recognize. She'd grown out her hair, and no longer wore leathers. There must have been around twenty people inside the pavilion, when I entered, but a heartbeat later you could have heard a pin drop. Juniper was first to react.

"Hune, what did you-"

"Juniper, if you still want to have a marshal's baton by the end of this conversation you will sit down and shut up," I calmly said.

The orc flinched like I'd struck her.

"This is-"

"On your oath, Hellhound," I snarled in Kharsum, "you will be *silent*."

She swallowed, loudly. I glanced at Marshal Grem One-Eye, whose face was a study in neutrality.

"A pleasure to meet you, Marshal," I said. "We will speak later."

"Well met, Black Queen," the old orc gravelled.

A dip of the head was offered, respect but not submission, and he took the hint. His aides followed him, so I turned my eyes on the other officers. Those, at least, were mine. Aisha was studying me with a blank face, I saw, and had a hand on Juniper's arm.

"Out," I said, inclining my head.

"Catherine, this is not-"

Vivienne's voice, the tone almost forcefully calming, had me clenching my fingers again. Zombie felt my legs tighten and whinnied angrily.

"Your regency is at an end, Vivienne Dartwick," I said. "Put the seal on the table."

The general staff had left the tent before the seal clattered against wood. Vivienne was looking at me like she'd never seen me before.

"General Hune, take a seat," I said. "Depending on the outcome of this conversation you might in command of the Army of Callow by the end of the day."

"You can't be serious," Vivienne said.

"Nauk is dead," I said. "I've had to personally save the Third Army from encirclement and annihilation. The Fourth was bled savagely by Helike while essentially marching back and forth across the same patch of Iserre. Today, I found you engaged in a pitched battle with a Grand Alliance army – that is, a force that should be three months to the north *preventing the fucking Dead King from rolling over Procer*."

My voice had risen, but I forced out a breath to calm myself.

"To add insult to injury," I evenly said. "You were losing that battle to the extent that I had to personally step in and settle the matter. Now, I would have preferred to have this conversation with Adjutant there to speak as well and no enemy army within a day's march. Your little stunt outside, however, has officially made me lose patience."

My staff hit the ground beneath us with a hard thump. Both of them drew back.

"Now," I calmly said, "do explain to me why either of you should still be trusted to make decisions about anything other than what you'll have for dinner."

[DroughtBringer](#)

Go vote!

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

theart0fwar

Damn, you got it this time!

stevenneiman

Does anyone else have trouble with TWF giving absurd figures for when they last voted? I pretty reliably vote every time Guide updates, and about half of those it says that my last vote was at least a week ago when I do.

Flameburst

You may be assigned different ip addresses regularly. Some routers do this automatically. I get a similar problem with 4chan where i am told regularly my ip address was banned months or years ago for 30 days.

stevenneiman

I go back and forth between 2 different houses, so that might be the culprit.

KageLupus

Probably just some shenanigans going on with what they think your IP address is. Either your router or one of the relays your ISP uses is changing it, so every once in awhile TWF thinks you are someone else. I have the same thing happen when I vote from my work computer. Sometimes it says I

haven't voted in three months when I voted earlier in the week.

theart0fwar

On that comment section I plant my flag. May it stand here above all else, annoyingly.

– Dread Emperor thearofwar, the oddly Irritant.

theart0fwar

For real, though. This new Kat? Definitely badass.

Mental Mouse

TVTropes calls Cat "A Mother to Her Legions"; what we're seeing here is the military version of "I brought you into this world, and I can take you out of it!"

Except she's also gone from "I'm in charge because I can whup any of you", to "I'm in charge because I'm the boss – and The Boss Is Back".

Insanenoodlyguy

Mrs. Foundling, thanks for coming to your performance review.

No problem.

So you're in charge around here, is that fair to say?

Absolutely, I'm the boss.

OK, so take us through a day in the life of "The Boss".

Well the first thing I do is

Flash Hakram (like a boss)

Yell at Archer (like a boss)

Lead an army (like a boss)

Remember Liese (like a boss)

Direct Drow (like a boss)

My own footrest (like a boss)

Kill some heroes (like a boss)

Promote Abigal (like a boss)

Hit on Viveine (like a boss)

Get rejected (like a boss)

Chug some senna (like a boss)

Fight some Fairies (like a boss)

Call Cordelia (like a boss)

Fail at peace talks (like a boss)

curse out procer (like a boss)

mance some lakes (like a boss)

Eldtrich shift (like a boss)

No dead king deal (like a boss)

Get named arch-vile (like a boss)
Lose humanity (like a boss)
Fight some gods (like a boss)
Gonna eat em (like a boss)
Oh fuck me, this just makes it worse, shit!

Pussy out (like a boss)
Power of friendship (like a boss)
Give up godhood (like a boss)
become high priestess (like a boss)
Score some wakeleaf (like a boss)
Legs fucked up (like a boss)
Lust for Akua (like a boss)
Chess with Tyrant (like a boss)

Go to Procer (like a boss)
Army's gone to shit (like a boss)
Archer's got trauma (like a boss)
Still fuck her brains out (like a boss)
Turn into night (like a boss)
Prepare to fight saint (like a boss)
Set it all on fire (like a boss)
I die again (like a boss)

Uh huh. So that's an average day for you then.
No doubt.
You set everything on fire and die.
I come back.
And I think at one point there you said something about
lusting after the doom of liese?
Nope.
Actually, I'm pretty sure you did.
Nah, that ain't me.
OK, well I'm not sure you should be in charge of jack shit.
I'm the boss.
Ya, I know, I still want to get mages to make sure you
aren't possessed.
I'm the boss.
Seriously Cat, calm down.
I'm the boss!
Yelling doesn't make your words calmer cat!
(like a boss)

Shikkarasu

Look, just take the whole internet. There's not enough
points I can give you.

NerfContessa

I agree, take my internet as well. :X

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, possessed or not, she's the boss. And remember, the prime risk for possessing her.. now has, if not a body, then some reasonable facsimile thereof, and can operate independently. Of course, for most of the Woe that falls under "now we have two problems". 😊

Daniel E

I am in tears from laughing, thank you.

[Dragnor](#)

Though they may oft beat at our territories, to all of ye I pronounce this. Let not the flies disturb the horse.

-Counsel Dragnor the Dismissive

Stormblessed

Wow. That was intense. I hope there is reasonableness all around and no lasting hurt feelings. Kat's going to need juniper at the end of this I feel. Hopefully they understand her anger and reasoning is placed at the situation rather than themselves.

Gunslinger

Juniper is an orc. She'll understand that from her warlord

Skaddix

You would expect Harkam to get more berating considering yeah technically Viv had the job title and Juniper does run the armies but Hakram was the real power.

And Cat still doesn't like Aisha lol.

Kinda anticlimactic though Battle Wise. But I assume someone is going for force a fight.

My very own name

She mentioned that she would like it if Adjutant were available for this conversation as well. I just don't know why she didn't berate him previously.

We might see battle the next day, everything is possible!

magesbe

Probably because seeing the disaster that has been this battle up to this point has sort of been a "last straw" kind of thing. She's furious at the situation, and it taking it out on the people who helped place her army in this mess. I mean, it isn't even mostly their fault; that would be

whatever is stopping Gates and the Tyrant. But without them taking their entire army into Callow, this still wouldn't be happening.

That, and she's angry that this battle is even taking place when these forces are needed north.

[Mental Mouse](#)

My guess is she ends up gating the survivors back to Abigail's group... who by then is under attack by yet another force wandering the vicinity. Come to think of it, she dashed off without so much as telling Abigail where she was going... hopefully Abigail at least tries to follow the original plan.

[Liliet](#)

I mean it's contextually obvious she went to the other army.

SpeckofStardust

Oh he is in deep trouble to, there is a reason why he was sheepish all when Catharine and co were pointily asking what the ever living fuck did this shitshow come about. Further more she stated she had intended to wait until everyone was here before doing this but... Well this very closely looks like a technical coup and Hakram kinda explicitly gave his hand up to make it dam clear Viv was the one in charge while Cat was away.

[Liliet](#)

The two of them letting Hakram be the real power, instead of *the two of them*, is kind of part of the competence question.

And yeah, she wishes he was there too.

[boballab](#)

One of the reasons that Adjutant cut his hand off was to show Viv that she was in charge. If you go back and re read that chapter Viv was on the verge of a complete disaster that would have torn the kingdom apart over her mounting paranoia concerning Hakram and Juniper wasn't helping things by treating her like a red headed step child. Cat set this power sharing up in an effort to keep the multiple parts of the kingdom together while the true glue, herself, was gone (The Callowans didn't trust the orcs to run the country, the Old 15th hands didn't trust the Callowans to run the army, both sides only trust Cat). However she was gone too long and we have now seen the consequences. Which brings up the question of what will happen

to Callow if she does abdicate? Her plan to abdicate will be a total disaster to Callow unless she finds someone that can be trusted by both sides. Viv was my leading candidate until the chap where she almost started a civil war over her Hakrum fears now coupled with military blunder knocks her from that spot. Now we got a Callowan that saved the Third Army after Nauk and the command staff died which would will go a long way to keeping the civilian and army power factions trust in the crown..,

Skaddx

Did Abigail really save anything? Cat saved the day. Without Cat, our Hero's Blood crosses the river and slaughter the whole army regardless of what Abigail does. Cat saved her by showing up with reinforcements and by wielding Night. Sure Abigail made some choices that kept more troops alive but that wouldn't have made a difference at all.

[boballab](#)

Go back and re read Interlude: Beheld I. Without Abigail there would have been no Army to save, they would have been crushed by the night attack. Remember Cat gets there during the day after Abigail stopped their night attack as it is explained in that Interlude. No Abigail and that army is destroyed before Cat ever shows up.

Skaddx

Yes Abigail delayed but without Cat, they die eventually anyway.

[boballab](#)

You keep missing the point, without Abigail there is nothing for Cat to save, she would have come along to find a victorious Dominion army and a completely wiped out as in all dead Third Army.

[Liliet](#)

Cat and Abigail were both necessary to that equation.

Gunslinger

Cat losing her temper is so much better now than when she froze stuff. It's so much rawer.

[daegone823](#)

This "temper" is serving many purposes,

Cat has been gone a year amidst that year sh barely ruled. The people see her as a legend and could easily see her as martyr if she were to fall. Her allies may have considered replacing her based on them being ready to blast her based on possible possession. These concerns are not to far off, if only the knew how close she was to loosing (I believe ranger will keep those stories to herself, maybe Akua won't). Still this is Cat's story and if she does not take the driving wheel then similar to the Black Knight she will be replaced by the god's below.

Hakram already said that Vivienne has been changing, maybe she believes that she does not need Cat anymore. She needs to learn her place in this instance.

By taking agency over her inner council who all but wrote her off, she is taking her destiny in her hand, unlike the prince who by all accounts has lost control. Cat needs her inner circle to come to heel. If not then similar to the many military leaders who were misled by the Tyrant they will fall into disatroys stories that will perpetuate what Cat is trying to overwrite.

The fact that murder has not been put on the table should also be considered as a sign of Cat "educating" her allies on the schemes of the forces that they are dealing with.

haihappen

Viv probably lost her Thief Name because a Thief steals. And she had the opportunity to steal an entire Kingdom and didn't do it... maybe Names are that fickle.

Also possible: A transition is waiting to happen.

Her military blunders... are basically splitting the Army into columns, which got cut off because of fairy gate sabotage, and then this battle. It could be reasoned that this was all Junipers fault. Except Viv should have tried to negotiate peace (,which she may have tried)?

The campaign itself had solid reasoning behind it (see her last talk with Hakram+Akua+Archer). It was just poorly executed, "aided" by sabotage from Tyrant and maybe someone else.

(I have the feeling the Tyrant is not behind the fairy gate sabotage. He would certainly be capable, but it does not feel like his style.)

On a not completely unrelated note:

Wouldn't it be fun if Cat used the *I stab you to jump-start a Name* technique?

I.e. (unlikely):

Cat: "Hey Viv, do you REALLY want to rule Callow and make it a better place?"

Viv: "Sure?"

Cat: "Not the enthusiasm I hoped for, but it needs to be enough: I name you Heiress to the Queenship of Callow!"
stabs Viv into the heart with a knife "Try not to die"

naturalnuke

Like actual emotion instead of whatever it was, cold irritation perhaps?

There's a heat in her again.

Dainpdf

Real anger, instead of a performative version.

[Adrian V](#)

I still found that power incontinency funny, i want her to break something by accident and pretend like it never happened... again because i know that has happened at least once to her....

Oranckers

"It was at that moment, that Vivienne Dartwick realized just how badly she had fucked up"

haihappen

Isn't this Trope somewhere:

- 1) Ally/Friend X leaves Person Y in charge
- 2) Y messes up
- 3) X returns, chews Y up for messing up
- 4) X says "know you know what not to do"/"Know you know what mistakes COST", and promptly gives Y the same job/a job with even MORE responsibility

I feel this should be a trope...

Dameon Cornish

Welp

YOU DONE MESSED UP

[Javvies](#)

Cat is displeased. And growing more so.

She has been gone for a while, but still. She's the Black Queen of Callow.

Quite Possibly A Cat

Well this is setting a terrible precedent. Its like she wants Assassin and/or anyone capable of impersonation to take control of her armies.

matesbe

The majority of the people who could truly imitate her could probably also fool a casual magical inspection. For example, if Assassin could be detected by a handful of mages, it wouldn't be as brutally effective as it is.

RoflCat

Reminder: Assassin managed to fool AKUA, of all people, inside her Doom Fortress, after having 'captured' it for a period of time.

IDKWhoitis

I think Cat has a certain weight on the scales, and that relentless fury that she can meter out in a ruthless barrage is a hallmark most people would barely be able to stand up against, or even mimic.

If anything, it's exactly this reaction that should confirm it is Cat, to not go quietly, and to break whatever she can't use, and bend whatever she can't break.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Interestingly, we have not seen much use of strategic or tactical impersonation so far in the story – I think Assassin was the only case we the readers have seen. The elves certainly **could** do that, but IIRC nobody seems to consider the possibility, including them. It may well be that “a strong personality” is its own authentication, leading back to my political answer (last chapter's comments) to “who is the real Cat?”

Oh, and about those magical examinations? Callow sent out a Duchess of Faerie and got back a mortal with ties to an entirely different power that nobody surface-side has ever heard of. Cat was quite sensible to put the kibosh on that testing business up front.

konstantinvoncarstein

How could the elves do this?

IDKWhoitis

Because they cheat, Old Elves just flat out ignore Creational Laws. It wouldn't be too far out of the realm of possibility for them to somehow cheat recognition or alter

their presence to fit something else. This is all purely speculative though, as we haven't seen the Elves mobilize much (although by Series end, I think we will have to, to put the Dead King down).

Mental Mouse

They can reshape their bodily material at will. It was noted multiple times that Cat's power was seriously limited by her attachment to her own, humanlike form. But elves are more comfortable with their nature, there's no reason why, instead of turning into mist or fire, they couldn't turn into a different human(oid). In fact, Cat did just that to Akua's wintry form before the Keter trip (Sve Noc reverted her). On the other hand, aside from physical form, maintaining the impersonation would probably be harder for them (it's hard enough for humans).

Liliet

You're confusing elves and fae I think.

Mental Mouse

Aren't elves just of offshoot/rebel branch of the fae?

konstantinvoncarstein

No:) Fae are beings of pure magic, who live in Arcadia, and are older than creation.

The elves are a powerful magical race, but they are material and are born in Creation (but they can send the Golden Bloom to Arcadia). And they are a splinter faction from another elvish kingdom, larger than Calernia

Liliet

No, I'm pretty sure that wasn't implied or hinted at anywhere.

Calernian elves live in Golden Bloom – the forest to the north of Callow, bordering on the Duchy of Daoine, with Everdark further to the north. As distinct from Waning Woods to the south of Callow, separating it from the League of Free Cities, containing Refuge and a gate to Arcadia, broadly associated with fae (srying near Waning Woods = sending invitation to the Wild Hunt).

We know from Bard's POV segment in Epilogue 2 that Golden Bloom elves are a xenophobic offshoot / exiles from a bigger elf kingdom somewhere on another continent. Their slaughter of the previous Golden Bloom

inhabitants – of which Deoraithe are survivors/refugees – pissed off the very forest they were aiming to claim for themselves, and ever since they haven't been able to have children. One notable exception is Hye, whose mother was with Golden Bloom elves, but characteristically Hye is a half-elf, in defiance of Golden Bloom attitudes. (So presumably her mom broke ties with Golden Bloom first, and then as a consequence managed to have a kid, with someone who had nothing to do with GB at all).

It's a noted habit of GB elves to somehow transpose their kingdom into Arcadia temporarily when the political situation on Creation near them gets a bit too interesting. Then they come out and resume existing in Creation again.

They are ruled by the Forever King. He had attempted to interfere with Calernian politics by sending two Emerald Swords (warrior caste?) to kill Akua. They were intercepted by Bard.

Elves are technically Good, but GB-ers interpret it rather idiosyncratically and kill everyone approaching their borders unless they're a Hero.

Things elves have in common with fae:

- non-human
- more magical than humans
- can interbreed with humans
- can occasionally be found in Arcadia
- constitute a good reason to not go into the woods on Callowan borders
- kill people a lot
- don't die of old age
- are not normally a noticable entity in Calernian politics.

Differences between elves and fae:

- elves can be Named or non-Named and are a regular mortal race in this regard, while fae are something else entirely
- fae are bound by stories, while elves have regular free will
- elves can selectively disallow Creational laws, while fae are very much bound by those, but often have domains
- fae are native to Arcadia, divided into courts and governed by cycles. Elves just visit, like Cat and her legions
- fae are bound by all oaths. No such limitation

applies to elves, as far as we know
etc

So yeah, no. Completely different.

konstantinvoncarstein

Are you sure it is not the fae who can do that? I remember
elves for their martial prowess and capability to ignore
one law of creation at a time, but no more

[daegone823](#)

If Vivienne lost her name does that mean the heroic group is
broken or.... has it changed. Just saying:

Archer has PTSD from nearly freezing to death

Hakram is handless(hand of the king without hands lol)

Vivienne lost her name... maybe?

Masego stole a doom day weapon and is a walking disaster already.

Cat does not have a name, lost the fae powers that everyone was
afraid of(even the dead king respected her), and I think now is
nearly mortal.

Just saying the Woe have seen better days, and I am starting
loose faith in a victory here. If I know our author he will make
me eat my words, so here hoping that logically they can execute a
hail Mary pass on this one.

pagesbe

Things have been bad before, really bad. This is a major trial
for the Woe, yes, but I believe Archer will find Masego and
bring him home, Vivienne will get over this and either get
another Name or at least find a place for herself that she can
live with. Cat may have lost her immense Winter powers, but she
was winning impossible battles long before every getting them,
and at night she may even be more destructive than she was with
Winter (though still easier to kill; but not much). Remember
how much difficulty she had even scratching some of the Drow
mooks at Great Strycht?

IDKWhoitis

Sometimes Cat's Victories are less "She Wins" and more "She
loses the least out of everyone present".

I think Cat is more dangerous without a Name, as she is totally
unbound by rules and stories. Pilgrim's plots and story weights
may not be enough to subtly assassinate her.

What is a Story to a Non-Believer? A God to a Atheist? A ward to a Mortal?

The Woe are embodying the change the Calamities started with the Death of the Age of Wonders, Institutions, not Named, deciding the course of Nations and Peoples.

RanVor

Freedom from stories is a double-edged sword. Cat wouldn't have won half of her impossible victories without them.

Argentorum

True, but remember, all the other movers are still bound up in their narratives, and those stories can still be used as a loadstone around the necks of the Saint, the Pilgrim, and the Undead King.

Meanwhile, Cat can't be forced into things because of her name, even as the larger story has narrative weight.

[Liliet](#)

>The Woe are embodying the change the Calamities started with the Death of the Age of Wonders, Institutions, not Named, deciding the course of Nations and Peoples.

Oh.

I disagree that stories are so easily made irrelevant (Cat regained freedom of maneuver, not quit the game entirely), but THIS. This is absolutely correct, thank you for putting it in words!

This is what's happening.

medailyfun

Stories do affect Nameless, and Nameless do weave the stories affecting others, it's obvious even in this chapter with her sole stand before the enemy's army. Actually, stories affect people even in real life.

Jonnnney

Hakram has a hand it's just made up of bones, magic, and lies

[Fayhem](#)

I don't think the nature of the Woe changing is an accident, or inherently a bad thing. Remember, Catherine is the heart/core of the Woe and it makes sense that consciously or unconsciously they'd reflect her to some extent. That includes reflecting her priorities, I think. And Catherine's whole thing starting from

going into the Everdark and very definitely at the end of that sojourn is all about changing the definition of victory until it matches the results she wants it to produce.

Catherine used to solve problems by smashing them into pieces, and tbf that was pretty badass because she was real damn good at it. But what she's found as she's assumed more and more political power is that when you solve a problem by smashing into pieces now what you have is a lot of little problems instead of no problem, and those little problems will all grow back into big problems if you don't go around taking care of them for real. She's at the top of the food chain now and there's nobody to come along behind her and clean up the mess on her behalf; she has to do that herself now, and she's found that it drains time and energy and resources to the extent that it's an obstacle to actually moving forward the way she sees she needs to and Callow needs to.

The Woe used to be oriented into combat strength with Thief providing tactical yoink-based shenanigans. But now that's not what Catherine values most, and almost all the changes in the Woe reflect that. Hakram sawed off his other hand specifically to fix a political problem. Vivienne's name dissipated because it no longer reflects who she is; she's the Lady-Regent now (or she was; it sounds like she's about to get a harsh job interview to get that trust back). Archer has had her faith in the magical power of being the most violent to solve all problems and overcome all obstacles significantly shaken. Cat herself ditched her Winter-powered smashiness for an army, a divine alliance, and what is probably a more diverse powerset (though we haven't seen her show it off really, so that's still speculation for the moment). The only one who doesn't currently fit this mold to at least some extent is Masego, but he's also been off-camera ever since the Great Thalassina Clusterfuck so I want to get eyes on him before reaching any strong conclusions about where he's ultimately going to land.

The Woe is in some respects in a bad way, but I think that it's honestly mostly Masego where it is a straight-up negative (so far as we can currently see). In several cases I think the changes in them do make them weaker in a straight-up combat scenario perhaps (though I'm skeptical that Archer is actually any weaker in a fight just because she's seen that some things you can't fight your way out of and it shook her), but I think that's a reflection of the changes in Catherine's priority structure.

In other words, I don't see them as being less capable of victory so much as reconfiguring to better match Catherine's changing definition of the term.

[daegone823](#)

I agree with how Cat has changed her priorities but another problem that she has admitted is that she will never be able to play the game like the first prince, Malicia, or even the Tyrant.

She is not playing to her strengths and she is cannot find anyone to uphold the structure that she put in place.

She lost the one thing that she had going for her, power/fear. She did not stop the charge based on political power but the old wounds that she carved in her enemies.

That staff also seems like a big bazooka with one bullet. I just question the shift. The calamities proved that military might can in fact effect change if held for long periods. Maybe Cat just did not try hard enough to break her enemies. Half-measures and all.

Liliet

I think Cat's showing that she's actually better at playing the game than those three, or at least as good as. She can't intrigue like Malicia, but she doesn't need to if she shuts down intrigue bullshit at the core. She can't spy war like Malicia, but she doesn't need to if she attracts people to her side who can. She can alliance-weave not worse than Cordelia. And she can out-bullshit Kairos.

She can't play by the rules they set as well as they do, but getting to set the rules is part of the game. Cat wins when she sets the rules, and lately, she's been showing that she damn well CAN out-set-the-rules them.

Part of this is narrative mastery: Cat's better at story-weaving than Malicia, who missed the obvious WMD failure point, and than Cordelia who barely knows what the art is. She's about equal to Kairos, or slightly worse, I'll concede that much.

Part of this is actually working for the common good: like Cordelia, and unlike Malicia, Cat attracts the kind of ally who looks at long-term and sees good things for themselves and everyone there.

Part of this is incidental positioning: as Vivienne has put it, Cat is "a part of something greater than herself". She's the crest of the wave, and there's no coincidence in her being backed by Juniper, the best tactician of their generation, AND the return of Callowan knights, AND the strongest Named mage around (though he's currently MIA).

All of this lends Catherine an advantage she just needs to not squander. If she can saddle the tiger and hold on to the reins, she wins.

Fayhem

"The calamities proved that military might can in fact effect change if held for long periods."

I'd disagree. Black didn't change Callow by conquering it, he changed it by ruling it. Cat's shift in priorities is based on recognizing the difference.

As far as Cat's "grand strategy" goes, we haven't seen too much of the specifics of that yet but I personally do not think it's based on trying to play the same game as Malicia, Cordelia, or Kairos. I think she intends to play to her *real* strength; the thing that's Cat's true comparative advantage isn't being stronger than her opponents, because in actual fact she almost never has been. Akua was able to take her one-on-one when they finally went all-out at Second Liesse, the upper echelons of the Fae Courts (i.e. Prince/Princess and up) outmatched her even after she murdered the Duke of Violent Squalls for his power, Saint "beat her like a rented mule" by Cat's own description at the Battle of the Camps, Neshamah's beefier Revenants smacked her/the Woe as a whole around, and she didn't get very far into the Everdark at all before figuring out that the tougher Mighty were more than match for her as well.

So what's Cat's real strength then, since even as the Sovereign of Moonless Nights she still found herself getting smacked around by a majority of her foes? Her real strength is her ability to change the rules of the game, flip the script on her opposition, and win by playing a different game than everyone else. See: literally pretty much every time Cat has actually won overall on a strategic level. And ditching her Fae title for renewed mortality has *improved* her capacities in that regard. What's the one thing absolutely everybody identified as a cost of her Fae power? Inflexibility. Go look at the epilogue to Book IV again; in the POV from the dwarven deed-seeker, he specifically comments that Cat no longer feels like she has the overwhelming metaphysical weight she had when he met her as Sovereign of Winter, but she somehow feels *more* dangerous to him. That wasn't him making a mistake. That was his danger-honed perceptiveness picking up on the fact that Cat just massively improved in the thing that *really* makes her dangerous: superior mental flexibility that lets her change the rules on people faster than they can keep up. Cat isn't less able to win because she's ditched raw power for

flexibility. She's **more** able, because she's embracing what was always her real greatest strength.

Fayhem

Also, Cat definitely **tried** to break her enemies. She wasn't holding back against Saint or anyone like that, she just got whapped because as strong as she was when you're fighting old monsters with decades or centuries or millennia (hi, Neshamah) of experience and power-building on you then you're gonna have a bad time. The only thing she held back on was stuff like Bonfire that would have seen the continent converging on her like they did on Triumphant because Cat had enough insight to see that as much as she was being targeted now there was still room for it to get a lot worse. Shifting away from that approach (partially, she's still Cat so there's def still some smashing in the future) to focus on changing the rules of the game so that her opponent's greater strength won't matter is exactly the right response.

Liliet

I agree.

mavant

This was a pointless violation of a perfectly sensible security protocol. Not practical at all.

IDKWhoitis

Through the view point of Power Dynamics, this was very practical, everyone needed a stern reminder who is in charge. If she agreed, she would effectively be confirming that Juniper's and Viv's Orders are highest on the totem pole, and that Cat herself can't/shouldn't be trusted.

She had to give everyone a well deserved pimp slap to remind them who's "The Boss".

caoimhinh

Not really.

They acted like they were supposed to, they didn't make a grasp for power, they simply did their job, which was to make Callow function despite Cat's absence. And the examination protocol is a sensible thing to do, just like examining people who have been around a Demon of Corruption. Besides, Cat was already forewarned about it by Robber so she wouldn't be surprised about the examination, she simply lost her temper at the welcome and joined it to blaming Juniper and Vivienne for all the things that have happened DESPITE already knowing they aren't to blame, Hakram already

explained to her the situation and what led them to this, it would have worked fine if not for the unforeseeable change in the Fae gates (that for some reason work when Cat uses them but doesn't when Larat and Wild Hunt do). She even threatened Juniper with losing her rank and humiliated Vivienne in front of the entire officers by harshly taking the Regency position from her.

It is unfair to take her rage at the situation and lash out to Juniper and Vivienne, two of her closest friends who have been desperately doing the best they could.

This tantrum that Cat is throwing now is out of character for her, ungrateful and impractical; not to mention how foolish it is to strip two of her foremost officers from the positions at the eve of a battle when they are surrounded by enemies.

Valkyria

Even so. Cat said that it was a reasonable thing to do herself, what she was angry about was that they did not even come to greet her themselves. I mean, if she really wasn't Cat anymore, a few mages and legionnaires wouldn't be able to hold her off anyways, should she try to harm Juniper and or Vivienne.

She's furious that they sent just "someone" to fetch her like a lowly soldier. She's the queen and even if she's under suspicion should not be treated like that in front of her army, especially if the persons of rank who ordered the entire thing are not even themselves at the scene.

What I think is happening is that Cat's simply getting the impression that they are not simply checking if she was herself, (since she just stopped the enemy singlehandedly that should've been some kind of clue) but making her wait until they are done with their stuff and give her time for an audience.

And as you said they are her closest friends, yet not come to greet her personally.

Sure she's lost her temper. But she just is the f***** Queen of Callow and that behavior is just the last drop that was missing to make it all spill out.

caoimhinh

Imagine that the President of a Country is about to enter a meeting with congressmen, but information was passed that the President has a bomb on him and his escorts are traitors who are threatening him to do it. So security intercepts them. Should the congressmen be in the vicinity when the President and his escort are examined? Of course not.

Now, in Cat's case, they weren't there because they needed someone who could take the cold decision if it needed to be, hence why they sent Hune.

They suspect that she might be under influence or control of something else or it might be something else disguising as Cat, so it might not be that she had the full extension of her power; that's why the 15 mages ready to form wards and test her are there. Besides, in case of it really being Cat but mind controlled there were still the Fae Oaths she took with Vivienne, though those are useless if it's not Winter Cat and in that case then it's not the full power of Winter what the mages would have to contain. They don't come to her by force because there's the possibility that it's really her, so she should just pass the test and be cleared of suspicions. She might be the fucking Queen but if there's the possibility of her being compromised then they should take measures, same as her being tested if she had come back from fighting a Demon of Corruption, and she knows that.

Then she proceeded to strip Viv from her position and threaten Juniper with the same, then chastised them and blamed them for the whole mess when she knows that they are not at fault, even in her thoughts she called them foolish. Her anger is undeserved and it's ridiculous to blame them after Hakram already explained the situation to her.

Liliet

Stripping Vivi of her position is actually perfectly reasonable, even though it sounded like something else in context. Regent is only needed while the Queen is away; under any other circumstances Vivi would be dropping that seal in Cat's lap at the speed of sound.

And you do have to consider how it looks. President's power in the modern US doesn't rest entirely on impressions made on people present. Politics matter, and in this case, politics are what's keeping Cat's armies together. Don't forget she's commanding an explosive hodgepodge of Callowans and Praesi, with priests and goblins mingling with knights and orcs. She's the nail everything hangs on, and they can't afford her position weakening.

Juniper and Vivi likely just failed to take it into account between everything else Happening All At Once, but making a show of chastising them for it is an entirely reasonable response to the situation.

caoimhinh

Transition is not supposed to be a yell in front of the officers saying "put the seal on the table", the release of the position is either a ceremony or a private affair, much smoother than the humiliation that happened in this chapter.

This wasn't "the Queen is back, so the regency ends" it was "you are fired, get out of here" which is entirely ungrateful for all the effort that Vivienne has invested in keeping Callow together for a whole year. It only looked bad because Cat made it so by conflicting with the soldiers and mages sent to test her. Othersiwe it would have been simply "they are seeing if it's really her" and most of the legionaries didn't even know what was happening. Letting them test her for a few minutes to assure them it was really her would have been no problem and not weaken her authority. It was merely to make sure that the person to whom they are about to give full command and authority over everything is actually who she is supposed to be, there's nothing wrong with that.

From our perspective, we know that neither Viv nor Juniper betrayed Cat, Cat knows that too; most of the legionaries didn't know what the security protocol was about, and Cat was already forewarned about it so she could calmly go through it. The suggestion that "it would look bad and weaken her authority if she obeyed orders from others" that some readers are defending is not applicable because this wasn't an order, it was a security measure.

Now, you said that it is all kept together by Cat, that's not exactly the case anymore. Cat made efforts to make it so Callow would stand even if she was killed, even before leaving everything in the hands of Hakram, Juniper and Vivienne (plus the rest of state officials). Going through with the test to prove it's really her who came is not weakening her position, all she has done now is hurting the reputation and position of Juniper and Vivienne, because now from an outside perspective like the rest of the soldiers, it looks like they were either traitorous or incompetent. We know they are neither. But Cat will still need to rely on them, so this tantrum and pointless show of strength did more damage that their security protocol.

To add insult to injury, she is blaming them for the entire messy situation when she already knows it's not their fault, Hakram already explained the circumstances and story-wise from the moment she went missing for a year the Narrative started to move to put them in distress because she had to return in their hour of

need. Just like the Grey Pilgrim had said she would when she fell unconscious during the Battle of the Camps, despite that kind of story not being one for Villains. She can't take her angry on them, it's unfair and thoroughly ungrateful after all the messes they had to clean and handle during her absence.

Liliet

No, the situation was already messy. The chilly reception sent the message *to the soldiers seeing it happen* that their high command did not trust their Black Queen / expected them to disobey her orders should she give any to the contrary. Cat forced the issue for good reason.

The check was a methodological disaster. The Cat who's returning is not the same Cat who left and they'd detect that. If Cat returning was the same Cat who left but taken over by principle alienation, I'm not sure how they would have been able to tell. And if the mages cried foul, how would the soldiers have reacted, not knowing whether it was Real Cat or Fake Cat in front of them? The command of the army needed to be there to handle the situation REGARDLESS of whether it was Real Cat or Fake Cat. If it was Fake Cat, they'd notice it much easier because of knowing her personally and would make immediate decisions to mitigate whatever the situation with that was. If it was Real Cat, they needed to reaffirm the chain of command and again confirm in everyone's eyes that it was in fact her.

And their private hand-wringing of "Cat you can't leave this to me I can't do it)=" is not something Cat can allow to influence their public image. She has a duty to her people above her duty to her friends. She has to show that no, fucking up on this scale is not something she *expects and tolerates* in people she left in charge. PUBLICLY. And they forced her hand by making the most immediate political fuckup – the reception – public.

And it was a political fuckup. Oh, I don't think Cat seriously thinks they were going for a coup, but *that's what it looks like from the side*. Again, forcing the situation makes it clear that it wasn't a coup but a fuckup, and the queen is treating it as such. Something's wrong: HERE's what's wrong.

WRT the narrative fuckup, they made a major one irrespective of Catherine's role. They took the ENTIRE ARMY over for a show of force that they

couldn't actually back up, because the portals weren't narratively earned by them, they were Catherine's. Their entire idea of a demonstration for Cordy was hubris, and hubris gets punished. Something was going to go wrong, if not the Winter/Night merger, then something else. Larat could have gotten killed by a hero, and they'd then be just as stranded.

Mental Mouse

Here's the thing: Two of the big selling points for American-style democracy are exactly 1) that even the top dogs face limits to their power, and 2) that even the top dogs can be replaced* on short notice. There are tradeoffs for those features, but they're part of the bargain made when the country was formed.

But Cat isn't a President, and her world is not ours. In her world, power inheres more in people than in institutions, and Cat is inherently one of the most powerful people on the continent. In her last instar, she chose to make arrangements in case of being possessed or suchlike. Clearly, she didn't make such arrangements this time... and *it was not Viv's place* to take the initiative on that. Let alone the presumptuousness of sending out a bunch of underlings to test her before allowing her into the presence of the generals. And then there's the mess they got her armies into while she was gone – Hakram *should* be sheepish, they got played for chumps.

* The question of *how well* they can be replaced is another story; e.g., Lincoln's and Kennedy's deaths both left the country in the hands of much weaker and less visionary leaders, leading to deep trouble in the long run.

caoimhinh

Yes, but even if Cat didn't set those security measures, she already set a precedent with the Winter Oaths she took with Vivienne; so Juniper and Viv sending mages to test if the person who just arrived and looks like Cat is actually the person to whom they are supposed to give full authority and control of the army and kingdom is actually a sensible thing to do. Of course the way it was carried could have been better, but that doesn't justify her response. Unceremoniously stripping Viv of the position of Regent and threatening Juniper with losing the Marshall position are humiliations they didn't deserve, they have been through a bunch of messy situations during the year,

and this is how she thanks them? It's extremely ungrateful, to say the least.

The entire mess they are in right now, was out of their control.

Narratively it's the story of Cat returning in the hour of dire need to save her companions, while in a practical sense it all went wrong because the Fae Gates were hacked by some eldritch power while they were in the middle of the rescue operation in Iserre.

This is not their fault, forces out of their control and understanding have made it so they were in this mess, and Cat knows that, so she shouldn't be chastising them, humiliating them in front of other officers nor taking their positions from them. Not after all they had to go through for her and for doing their fucking job on making sure the person they delivered command was actually the one it was supposed to be.

[boballab](#)

Yes it is their fault. Cat has over and over told them what her goal was: The Liesse accords. She also had stated to them the reason she needed to go to the Everdark was they needed allies especially since they all needed to come together and fight the Dead King. Now explain how breaking the truce with Procer, then invading it somehow magically helps meet Cat's goals and instructions. As soon as Viv got total control she ignored Cat's instructions and did as she wanted and Juniper went along with it because she thought she would get shiny new Legion of Terror soldiers to play with.

caoimhinh

They were rescuing Black's Legions while getting the approval and official permission from Prince Amadis to cross Iserre unimpeded, so politically they were fine, the Army of Callow hasn't broken the truce with Procer nor invaded it.

Vivienne didn't do what she wanted and Juniper didn't take the new recruits to play, they mounted a rescue operation with a solid strategy, a valid political excuse, and with clear benefits of gaining new and powerful allies, all the while knowing that mounting the operation was something the Catherine would have done. The plan was effective until the Fae Gates were hacked by an unknown power while they were in the middle of Iserre and that's what led to the current mess. That was unforeseeable, and even after happening is still unexplainable, so they can't be blamed by it.

Not to mention that due to 'the Force of the Story' they were condemned to be in a dire situation before Cat returns, this was even foreshadowed by the Grey Pilgrim during the Battle of the Camps.

Ali Khan

If you think cat doing what people expect her to do and meekly agreeing to things like this is in character then you've been reading a different story to me. Look at it from the outside, it straight up looks like a coup d'etat, to the point that if cat were to just submit it'd look even less like she's in charge. The point of her anger is that she told them to stay put and they didn't, plus they took their entire army, plus on top of all that they didn't even have the courtesy to come out and greet her along with the mages.

Your point is that if the fairy gates were still working then they'd made a rational decision. IF. The entire story has hammered into us over and over again to not rely on magic tricks over solid army tactics with multiple redundancies. It was a stupid decision to have their plan hinge on this single point of failure.

It is absolutely in character for cat to be annoyed after all the incompetence she's seeing.

caoimhinh

Cat has many times made Masego analyze her over and over to understand how her body works, to check the influence of Winter in her, and even perform checks on soldiers after encounters with Demons, she also took Oaths with Vivienne (giving her ways to stop her and even kill her) as contingencies to make sure her friends, the army and Callow would be safe if other influences took over her body (that was what saved them when Akua possessed Cat). So Cat knows the value of such protocols and constantly implements them, both on others and on herself.

This isn't about her being meek or accepting orders from others, she already knew about the security protocols (Robber told her), and she knows the precaution is valid, yet she got angry at them for it and didn't accept it, then proceeded to humiliate Juniper and Vivienne in front of the rest of the officers, and what's worse she blames them for the entire situation despite knowing that there are many forces involved and they took a decision with solid army tactics, but an unforeseeable thing happened. THAT is what is out of character.

If Cat's anger had gradually risen after passing the tests or if Juniper and Vivienne had slighted her in some way

when making decisions later on (like when planning the next battle) then it would make sense and could be seen as them pushing her out of the control of Callow (although it is her fault, and even was her objective before, that things needed to be made into a way that Callow could function without Cat); but her immediate angry response and the proceeding humiliation of the two top members of her Army while blaming them for something she knows it's not their fault, THAT doesn't make sense.

Morgenstern

*ahem

If she WERE Winter possessing Cat... how the heck would a few dozen mages stop her?
Viv would have been the ONLY ONE with any real chance. Viv not being there in person violates the whole protocol – SHE is the one who has the OATH. Not those mages... I don't see how Cat should not get angry at *that* failure. It's more than just the personal one. It's a logical failure for the security protocol itself.

RanVor

Wards.

lennymaster

One, Mgis tricks and trinkets always, ALWAYS fail the villain at the worst possible time. The Gates just suddenly not working HAD to be expected, maybe not from Juniper, but definitely from Vivienne, a (former?) Named. Two, she is a MONARCH, and intends to leave some kind of monarchy in place, which means that the MONARCH may not be publicly slighted without consequences.

Three, not even having ONE of the two show up to greet her smacks of rebellion, rebellion in front of the soldiers. Monarchies do not survive letting shit like that go.

Four, sending the ENTIRE army was a stupid fucking move. Why?! To threaten Cordelia as Adjutant said? To what end when she is already busy holding of the Dead King?

Sending something was necessary, risking the entire army was stupid.

No, Viv has been getting to comfortable making decisions in Cats name.

What she did was show the top dogs that THEY are replaceable.

konstantinvoncarstein

I totally agree with each of your points 😊

caoimhinh

I partially agree, but you have to consider other things.

1. The Fae Gates had never failed before, and they were the only way to get in and out of Iserre fast enough to mount this entire rescue operation. Not only it was a valid option, it was THE ONLY option if they wanted to get there in time and be able to evacuate. The reason the Gates are hacked is still unknown and was completely unforeseeable. You say that Narratively they should have expected it, but not only this had never happened before and the scope of it was out of their knowledge, it was also the only available mean to their objective, it was a solid decision. Besides, the only one with a true knack for Story-Fu is Catherine, nobody else in the Woe has that talent.

2. The Monarch wasn't slighted, she was supposed to be tested to make sure it was actually the Queen before handling her the control of the army. The only reason this looked bad was because Cat made it so, she could have cleared any analysis in minutes without a problem (although they would probably be surprised at her lack of Winter).

3. I agree that they not being present and carrying the test out in public was not the best way to do it, but it was still a sensible security measure. They sent someone who would carry on the tests without letting sentiments take the best of her (Hune who was not Cat's friend). Also, most of the soldiers didn't even know about the security protocol, this would have gone without an issue if Cat had gone along with it. NOW, after Cat angrily reacted, unceremoniously stripped Viv of her charge and threatened to do the same to Juniper without saying 'hello' or 'thank you for your hard work', NOW it looks like they tried to pull a Coup but were humiliated by the Queen

4. Hakram already explained why they did it and Cat agreed that it was a valid point. They needed to show strength, needed to rescue Black's Legions, needed to carry supplies for all of them, needed to be able to deal with any unforeseen circumstances that presented in Iserre. If they had sent fewer soldiers that they did, they would all be dead. They are alive right now because they sent enough soldiers for it. So it was the right decision all along.

Vivienne hasn't done whatever she liked, she has done exactly what Cat sent her to do, same as Juniper and Hakram: Making Callow work without Catherine.

Cat reappearing during their time of need was Narratively enforced, but her coming to them angrily for doing a sensible identity check, and the first thing she says to them is that she is about to dishonorably discharge them from their positions and blames them for the whole mess? That's extremely ungrateful after the harsh year they had spent keeping Callow afloat in her absence. Not to mention how out of character it is for her to blame her companions for being at a disadvantage and things being against them, since that has always been the case for her and them.

Andrew Mitchell

Well said. When I read the chapter I almost came here to say that Cat was being way too harsh IMO. Then I read the arguments on the other side of this debate and I think there are some valid points on that side as well. You've explained my view much better than I would have.

[Liliet](#)

The monarch was slighted because of Juniper and Vivienne not coming out to greet her in person. It's a bold assumption both that (1) real Cat would tolerate that (she's not supposed to, in the eyes of her people) and (2) fake Cat would submit meekly in their absence (that one's straight out stupid).

[Mental Mouse](#)

Regarding the gates, note that from Viv and Juniper's point of view, the gates were strictly "borrowed magic", which is exactly the stuff you'd expect to fail. When Cat was making Winter gates, it was her own power. When Viv and Juniper asked Cat's minion to do so, in her absence, they were trusting in the power (also competence and goodwill) of an elf... who they don't actually have direct control over. That's would probably be foolhardy for a Hero, let alone a couple of Nameless villains.

[Liliet](#)

t h i s

[Liliet](#)

(not elf tho, fae)

mavant

But that defeats the point of having the security protocol in the first place!

werafdsaew

Security protocol or not, she's still their Queen, and so the top generals all needs to come out and greet her alongside the mages, even if it increases their personal risks.

caoimhinh

Well, yeah. I agree that they should have done the test in private, not immediately. But it's also a sensible thing to do if it could turn out that it was someone else disguising as Cat or that Cat was under external influence. If afterwards it turned out that the person who arrived wasn't Cat, how would they explain it to others without it looking like a Coup? Better do it right away and clear suspicions.

Juniper has always the careful type of person, and Vivienne has witnessed both Assassin's shapeshifting abilities and Akua's possession of Catherine in the past (setting a precedent that Cat can be possessed), they had valid reasons to be careful, and that's without them knowing just how powerful the Night and Sve Noc truly are, if they knew the true extension of that power they would be paranoid. From an outsider's POV Cat being constantly carrying the twin goddesses with her might look to anyone like possession.

[matrixm](#)

Agreed

This was frustratingly stupid at the beginning and unjust at the end.

An idea just came to me, perhaps she's being influenced by Stories again, like when she shouted at Black way back at the beginning.

Because otherwise it just looks like erratica fucked up bad or intentionally had Cat fuck up bad.

lennymaster

Unjust? They fucked up! She told them to stay put, not risk her ENTIRE army on what was basicly a political move, to bloody green troops and threaten Cordelia when she is already busy with the Dead King: "Today, I found you engaged in a pitched battle with a Grand Alliance army – that is, a force that should be three months to the north preventing the

fucking Dead King from rolling over Procer."

Sending something was just reasonable, but if they considered the portals to be reliable, then a few thousand scouts with some fey to quickly find and pull out Grems army would have been enough. Sending everything forced Cordelia to reroute entire armies from the north and put all of Callows striking power at risk.

You could have just waited for erratic to explain all this in the next few chapters or spend a few minutes to think things through.

lennymaster

*striking not stricking

[boballab](#)

If Cat had been possessed what they did would have gotten those 40 troops including the 15 mages killed plus however many others and wouldn't have stopped her. The only one that could have prevented it was Viv as it was explained way back when they talked about the protocol. You don't trick a possessed being that when she left had the power of a demi god by sending 15 mages with an armed troop to drag her in front of the Regent, That isn't a trap that is an arrest and coup attempt. No to trick her you come out and meet her yourself, invite her into the command tent and as walking along use the command phrase. IF she was possessed she is now contained and powerless, If she is not Cat says good job Viv for doing your duty and checking away from the mortal army that is powerless to stop a possessed Demi God.

RanVor

Excuse me, it took one mage of mediocre talent to contain full Winter Cat in Keter, why would fifteen of them be not enough?

thearpox23

1: The mages with Malicia were top mages, if unnamed. Probably better than what Callow has.

2: She had a contingent of them, which was why the containment worked. If you remember, the moment some of them were killed they were no longer able to maintain the wards around her and had to switch to protection Malicia and themselves instead.

3: Cat was notably under-powered as a Winter god due to wielding her power like a sledgehammer. Expecting someone possessing her to be stopped by something like that is exactly the kind of optimism that makes one unfit for command.

Gunslinger

Those contingencies were for Winter Cat. She doesn't need them anymore. Also to have done that right after getting your ass saved can irritate anyone

RanVor

That's absolutely irrelevant. The test was necessary from the point of view of Vivienne and Juniper and Catherine should have known it and refrained from acting like a spoiled child for a few minutes.

IDKWhoitis

I think Cat entering in with the subtly of a battering ram is proof enough that she is Cat. Going meekly into chains would if anything add more doubt.

Also, if it was Cat or Not-Cat, sending 40 mortal soldiers to stop her would only add to a brutal body count that would resume if she really forced it. Everyone with a heartbeat in the Camp is lucky she browbeat them into submission.

[boballab](#)

Exactly. All those complaining that Cat screwed up need to go back and reread the entire arc from the time she left for the Everdark up until she losses the battle to the Tomb Maker and Sve Noc. Cat had the entire power of the Winter Court at her disposal, IOW she had the power of the Winter King at his greatest strength and he is considered something between a God and a Demi God. In that battle against Sve Noc she could have won if she let herself become that Goddess because Sve Noc wasn't a Goddess yet. That was the trap that the Gods below set, one way or another a new Goddess was going to come out of there whether it was Winter that had eaten the Night or as we seen Night eating Winter, The trick was on Akuas part that allowed Cat to survive, because the Dark Gods wanted either her or Sve Noc to die at the point the other wins. If Cat had let herself go and pulled on enough Winter to win and become what had been hinted at what she could, that Cat would have killed those Mages and troops for their presumption they could have contained her and from there killed everyone else in that camp including Juniper and Viv before they could have done anything. Even if it was just Akua possessing her do you think Akua would have gone along with that or would she have blasted the entire Army and Viv before she could use the Oath, gone back and told Hakram that Viv rebelled and tried to arrest her after saving them. What is Hakram going to believe at that point? Remember he had to cut his own hand off to stop a completely irrational Viv from starting a Civil War after losing her Name, so he

could believe she went off the deep end again at the loss of the regency because it would fit a pattern.

Cthulhu

This is bullshit.

20 minutes earlier Juniper and Viv were fighting a losing battle. They are tired, stressed, and fearful of a magic trick to finish them off – be it named or a choir or god knows what else.

In flies what appears to be their leader, with different magic (Night v Winter). She stops a cavalry charge and then rides up to camp and demands homage.

And now she's mad that Viv and Juniper did not immediately rush out and salute? That they sent what wizards they had to try to understand what the hell just happened?

Sure, take control—but firing people because things didn't go great is stupid and wasteful. This isn't sensible. It's piss poor leadership. It's Akula.

Wanted to have everything go great? Maybe stay fucking in your kingdom and fucking run it. Wanted everyone to follow directions? Maybe leave better instruction.

We hope this improves: right now she seems pissy and petty.

[boballab](#)

Horseshit, complete and utter horseshit. She didn't ride up demanding homage, she rode up and expected Juniper and Viv to be there to tell her what is going on but instead gets greeted with an arrest party. Like I said you need to go back and reread that entire arc.

Cthulhu

Read it. Look at the timing. She literally rode from where the calvary was charging – no more than a few hundred yards from the front lines – where a hastily assembled party was waiting for her. In the time it took her to ride from the stopped calvary to her lines, they put together a greeting party to find out what the hell just happened and why the enemy retreated.

So, literally, 10 minutes after a battle, she wants a full report of all her senior commanders? Because she's queen? She wants them meeting her and saluting and is angry they send an Ogre General because it doesn't show enough respect? Imagine this from Juniper's perspective, just for a moment:

"General!," shouted the Lieutenant. "The plan to tie up the enemy has failed – our tunnels collapsed early."

"How bad is it?" Juniper asked. "Send reinforcements to the north wing and tell them to lay down cover fire; sound all horns to call the wings back to the center." *We'll hold them here, she thought.* After disaster came...more disaster. One of the goblins in the makeshift tower shouted, "Oh shit, General! We've got more than 5,000 cavalry advancing towards our open belly."

Vivan turned to Juniper. There was little she could do other than say "Pull them back. We've got to save what we can." Aiiiiigh! Shouted a dying Callowan infantry soldier. Juniper watched as his friend tried to help him.

"Uh, General," said the Goblin, "I don't know how to tell you this, but a flying hose just landed in the middle of the charge. The cavalry stopped.":

"What?"

"They are sounding retreat. All enemy forces dropping back. Single rider approaching."

Vivian stared. "Is that her?" Juniper looked around. "I sure hope so. otherwise, we are royally fucked."

Vivian swallowed. "What if its...not?"

"What do you mean?" asked Juniper.

"We put together methods to verify if that really is her."

Juniper nodded. "Good point." To a goblin she said, "Get me a line of mages and an escort of 20"

"Better make it 40"

"Fuck it, get me a line of mages, 5 ogres, and a full company of regulars and escort her to us after the mages take their first stab at making sure she's not some kind of trick. Gods below."

And now Cat lands, rides up, the living embodiment of Night, and says, "Fuck you all, you've done a shit job of this, and why aren't you immediately saluting?"

Dude, that is lame-ass shit from Cat. Give them a chance to figure out that they aren't all going to die right away.

stevenneiman

She demanded an explanation for Juniper deciding that it was worthwhile to risk exactly what just happened and what could have happened for the sake of a few legions which aren't even loyal to the same side. And they publicly make an effort to check if she's real, which could lead to paranoia and weaken morale right when the troops need something to reassure them most. They could have done the check in private, though the chances of it actually finding anything if someone was willing to go to the effort to impersonate her are questionable.

Also note how unlike Juniper and Vivienne, she did this in private. That means that she has a chance to spin whatever the results of this conversation, where the two options if Cat had submitted to their magical check are that either the soldiers have their hopes crushed or even their loyalties confused if Cat was an impostor or else there's a suspicion that the next time she leaves something else might come back, which would make the soldiers paranoid about things they can't really deal with. If they'd had the check in private it would have been much harder for Cat to believably refuse, and unless they had to actually kill her they could sweep the whole thing under the rug and not scare the rank and file.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yes, this. Note that the essentialists here in the comments are pretty much claiming that "something else" *did* come back. Which in some ways is true... but what came back: 1) still answers to both "Cat" and "Black Queen", 2) still is fighting for them, or at least rescuing them from enemy armies, and 3) still has enough personal presence to intimidate an ogre general face-to-face. Not to mention that 4) she is *literally* acting like a boss, specifically *their* boss, and a better boss ("praise in public, criticize in private") than lots of mooks get.

Trying to test her bona fides *after* she just saved their asses, was "looking a gift horse in the mouth" big-time.

[Sugar Roll](#)

And then after showing them who's boss, Catherine will be like, "Now that we got that out of the way, let me tell you about my new best friend, Akua."

Hardric62

Quick answer, Cat? You're working on the very wrong assumption everyone taking decisions have brains and logic has a voice to the chapter.

The reality? The Saint of Bitches is trying its damnest to make the mess as bloody and total as possible to create a "'worthy'" nation out of Procer's ashes, most of the Princes would eat ignited goblin munitions rather than stop intriguing, even or rather especially while their homes are burning, the latter are probably used by the former as a club to tie Cordelia's hands, the Grey Hypocrite is looking at it happen without interfering with the Saint of Bitches, the people of Procer have a genuine reason to be angry right now, consequences be damned, and do I even have to talk about the Tyrant and the Hierarch?

Logic has no right to voice any complaints when all these loonies are around. Sorry, but you'll have to prune the stupid out manually. You have to create that Princes' Graveyard somewhere after all.

caoimhinh

Worse still, she is taking out her anger about the situation on two of her closest friends and even blaming them for it, as if she didn't know how many forces were at play. This fit of anger seems out of character to me, and a bit stupid, considering that taking out the head of the chain of command and humiliating them in front of the rest of the top officers is not a wise move when there are enemy armies close and ready.

Hardric62

Yup to that too. They need to remind Cat that circumstances going as planned and everyone taking not even best but reasonable course of action is already an hallucinated pipe-dream for War College newbies.

Then again, I guess intense frustration at this whole mess is a humane thing too, but boundaries will need to be put so they can actually work on getting things somehow back on rails.

[Dresden 67](#)

Yes, circumstances change and things rarely go as planned, especially when heroes are involved.

Which is why you don't bring your entire army into enemy territory with no way to resupply or retreat except for a magical method that is highly vulnerable to heroic intervention.

And you certainly don't split your army into four smaller units that are wide open to defeat in detail.

caoimhinh

Read again the part where Hakram explained what led them to take that decision, it was a valid move. They even took measures so they wouldn't be politically affected.

Besides, if they wanted to rescue Black's Legions then THE ONLY way to do that was the Fae Gates, there was simply no other way to get to them in time.

As for the number of soldiers that were taken, it was that what has allowed them to survive so far. So it was the right decision.

[Liliet](#)

The number of soldier taken was what made them a target in the first place. And a lesser number of soldiers being defeated would have been a much lesser disaster than what's happening right now / what would have happened had Cat not arrived in the nick of time.

lennymaster

One, Magic tricks and trinkets always, ALWAYS fail the villian at the worst possible time. The Gates just suddenly not working HAD to be expected, maybe not from Juniper, but definitely from Vivienne, a (former?) Named.

Two, she is a MONARCH, and intends to leave some kind of monarchy in place even if she wants to leave eventually, wich means that the MONARCH may not be publicly slighted without consequences.

Three, not even having ONE of the two show up to greet her smacks of rebellion, rebellion in front of the soldiers.

Monarchies do not survive letting shit like that go.No, Viv has been getting to comfortable making major decisions in Cats name. What she did was show the top dogs that THEY are replaceable.

Four, they fucked up! She told them to stay put, not risk her ENTIRE army on what was basicly a political move, to bloody green troops and threaten Cordelia when she is already busy with the Dead King: "Today, I found you engaged in a pitched battle with a Grand Alliance army – that is, a force that should be three months to the north preventing the fucking Dead King from rolling over Procer."

Sending something was just reasonable, but if they considered the portals to be reliable, then a few thousand scouts with some fey to quickly find and pull out Grems army would have been enough. Sending everything forced Cordelia to reroute entire armies from the north and put all of Callows striking power at risk.

Abstract

This has the shape of a debrief, but changed due to the half-assed coup attempt. Awhile back, cat told Thief that she trusted Hakram without question. Meeting Hakram and learning that he isn't the one giving the orders puts her on her toes. Proper protocol for vetting a superior is to do it out of sight of the common troops, doing it out in the open means there's a decent chance that, whether she's clean or not, she'd be called compromised, and thus ambushed by her own troops. There's no reason why you'd check her in front of `her` soldiers unless it's a coup attempt, or to undermine her authority. I'd put money on her originally planning on just debriefing them, and learning why they're in this mess, and catching up on current events, before this debacle.

Liliet

I don't think Cat seriously expects this to be a coup attempt. The problem is, the reason she doesn't are private, and the attempt obviously looking like one is public. So she has to make a scene about it in public, and if they have any issue with that – in private it is. Later. After the political mess is sorted out.

caoimhinh

Cool chapter; Cat displaying authority and taking control of the camp instantly is good and all, but I think she could have done it in a manner less harsh, without being angry at her closest friends and blaming them for the mess they are in, she already knows that the mess was due to the hacking of the Fae Gates (which seem to work fine for Cat and Sve Noc but apparently not for Larat and the Wild Hunt).

Cat's lash of anger towards Juniper and Vivienne, and their humiliation before the rest of the officers seems odd. Although it will enable her to have a firm command over the entire army for the following battle (however we know this wasn't a calculated move, but Cat genuinely getting angry at them).

Seems it will be one chapter of Cat chastizing them, then another chapter of preparation for the battle when Hakram and the rest of the army join them. So the real battle will be next week. Things will be interesting.

P.S: "Rozala's curves and long curls would be well worth a second look", eh? They should get to know each other better (◡◡ ◡◡)

Typos found:

- what made cavalry charged / charge
- It was beautiful display / it was a beautiful display
- You weren't like at the peace talks / You weren't like that at

the peace talks

-you've still keeping Arnaud around / you're

-you filth Damned / filthy

-It would be, I thought, only be sensible / delete one of the
'be'

-I have you an order / I gave you an order

-footsteps told me that had / footsteps told me they had

-she tread forward / she trod forwards

-there will be need a need for gallows / eliminate one of the
'need'

edrey

no, harsh it's not the word, vivi should have expected battle with heroes at the third day and even malicia making another slaughter by the second day, Nauk is dead, thousands of soldiers had died, Juniper is losing the battle, and cat saved her. both were incompetent but instead of welcomed her and apologize, risking their heads and asking for the mages to do their job then. but they didn't, they chose to stay in the tent in safety and send mages to act high and mighty against some who had saved them, someone who fought several heroes, or something stronger and thought they would stop her. it's not just stupid, is insulting. moreover this is not about friends, she is the queen of callow, the mages should have asked in their knees and her words should have been absolute, her order should not be doubted not for a second even if the marshall was killed in front of them. their measures are ridiculous and not realistic. that is just the act of the coward and the fool, regardless if they were right or wrong

caoimhinh

I agree with you that Juniper and Vivienne didn't proceed with this on a good way (I think a more private test would have been far better) but I disagree in them being incompetent. They had done their best, the only reason they are in this harsh situation (even disregarding the fact that almost every other major force is at play there) is that the Fae Gates were hacked, which left them stranded in the middle of Iserre, otherwise they would have left already. If Cat had been on the surface she would have led the expedition herself to rescue Black's Legions (and will probably mount the rescue operation for Amadeus), so they haven't done anything wrong, they have simply been outbested. She should know better than to humiliate them in front of the rest of officers.

Cat, the 15th Legion and the Army of Callow have always fought uphill battles, in harsh conditions and strong enemies, this is just another one of such cases (and Story-wise this is the Narrative of her coming back right at the time of need of her friends and loved ones, just like the

Pilgrim expected it would be during the Battle of the Camps). So while Cat might be in her rights to be annoyed at the testing, she can't blame them for doing it nor blame them for the mess they are in, the situation was beyond their control.

edrey

the story have reach certain point now. the price for mistakes is too great and Cat is now the queen of callow, she cant allow this kind of mistakes. all sound good in paper but she knows that is how you get killed

lennymaster

They fucked up and deserve getting ripped a new one. Read my comment above if you want to know why.

caoimhinh

Let me ask you this, as you say Cat should have arrived as an absolute and unquestioned Tyrant disregarding all protocol and nobody should question her nor doubt her identity: what if it had been someone else disguising as Cat or if Cat was possessed by an outside influence?

The only reason this is all good and fine is that this is actually the real Catherine. Otherwise, they have just let an unknown entity enter the camp and take command.

I agree with you that they didn't do it in the best way, but the security protocol is a sensible thing to do.

edrey

if she wasnt Cat they would be all dead, you dont act like that with your savior, your friend, much less your Queen, you dont force orders to a superior in a war, that kind of thing is called high treason for usurping the throne, they should have asked personally, even more after been saved, not send mages and ogres to act high and mighty. And to be real, something that could control Cat, like Sve noc wouldnt be detected by mages much less stop her. or have a reason to save the Army of callow

caoimhinh

They were right to be cautious, there was already precedent of Cat being under possession.

It is not high treason to check if the person claiming to be your Queen is actually her or someone else in disguise.

And yes it would be noticed, even in this chapter Cat was even cautious of using Night to enhance her sense

because it could be felt by the Procer's delegation and seen as an attack (and none of them were Named nor mages). Robber has nightmares just for staring at Cat's staff-sword, of course a being possessing Cat or a being disguising as Cat would be detected by the mages actually analyzing her.

Juniper is extremely careful and Vivienne outright paranoid (and has seen Assassin shapeshifting and Akua possessing Cat before) so they took measures, they sent someone whose feelings wouldn't cloud cold judgement, Hune.

Verifying her identity and checking for outside influences is not treason at all.

This situation escalated and now looks bad because Cat made it so. Getting all offended and suddenly acting like a Tyrant, when she has all the time made efforts to NOT act that way. Night might be affecting her a bit and making her personality get prouder and acting high and mighty at the first perceived slight.

edrey

mortal mages would be able to detect sve noc just because cat the mortal without the proper learning speculated that the procerans would be able?, the problem here is not the mages looking if she is controled, is how they acted, hune saying orders with a show of force of several ogres behind her, And yes it is treason, if the mages said she is controlled when she isnt, then what would you thing will happen?. happily. it is a mistake of foolishness and not treason

RanVor

Why are you assuming that possessed Cat would be a moron?

magesbe

She can totally blame them. Cat already ragged on Adjutant (though not that harshly) for bringing an army instead of a small contingent of troops to port out with. The army is in this mess because Juniper and Vivi BROUGHT the army into this mess, and counted on a magical trick to get them out of it (which Cat, if she had been there, could definitely have told them to not rely on). Oh it's not 100% their fault, or even mostly their fault, but they have enough fault to go around.

caoimhinh

Hakram already explained why they did it, and Cat agreed. So there's no reason for her to be angry with them now. They needed to rescue Black's Legions, Cat would have personally gone to rescue them if she had been there. How do you think they could rescue them without using the Fae Gates?

That was THE ONLY WAY to arrive in time and the only way to get out safely.

It's not a whim nor relying on a magic trick, it's a strategy that they have been implementing ever since Cat gained the title of Duchess of Moonless Nights and the Gates had never been hacked before.

matesbe

The closest she got to approval was admitting that it was a solid plan. And to me, it sounded like the kind of admittance that is usually followed by, "but you still fucked up." And she herself proposed that it would have been better to only send a minimum force to pick them up. Now, because of Vivi, Hakram, and Juniper deciding to get greedy (basically trying to take everything), almost the entirety of the Army of Callow is at risk of annihilation.

And sure Gates have always worked. Just like I'm sure the Exiled Prince's magic armor always worked. Until it didn't. Getting to them obviously required Gates, but they shouldn't have put themselves in a position where they were utterly screwed if they couldn't Gate out. If there were only a few of them, they could travel more lightly, and for all that Cat wants to help out Black's forces, she doesn't care so much that she's willing to put the Army of Callow onto the brink of ruin.

caoimhinh

Ok, so we agree that the Gates are the only way to get there in time to rescue Black's Legions, then you must also agree that the only way to get out fast and safely is the very same Gates that let them get there. They didn't rely on this out of whim, but out of necessity, and even then, they took measures to ensure that they could deal with unforeseen circumstances, that's why they brought a large army.

Remember that the only reason that they are being in the mess is due to a combination of many factors, beginning with the hacking of the Gates, summed by the Dominion's troops and finishing with the unforeseeable movements of Helike's armies.

Again, if they had sent a small force they would have been wiped out, sending a huge army was the most sensible option and the one that achieved the most objectives while giving them the most safety in case things went wrong.

Not to mention that Narrative twists causality and enforced them to be in peril by the time Cat returned, but that's out of their control.

[Liliet](#)

If they had sent a small force the gates would have likely kept working. Narrative bullshit and hubris.

And even if not, Grem's Legions are not worth the entire army.

RanVor

But Cat would still be pissed if they were left to die. Vivienne and Juniper did what they thought Cat would want them to do.

[Liliet](#)

Late to answer this, but: as we now know for a fact, guessing what Cat would have wanted was not a part of their thought process

RanVor

And we know that from...?

[Liliet](#)

From Juniper explaining what the reasoning was?

They were trying to make good decisions, not "decisions Cat will like". Important distinction there.

RanVor

Why are you assuming this isn't one and the same?

Agent J

Cat and Sve's Gates are Night-based. Larat's and the Hunt's are not. Different power source, so it could be that whatever's fucking with a former Fae Prince's power isn't powerful enough to fuck with a Goddess's power. Or, hell, maybe Larat's Gates are still Winter-based and Winter is no longer a thing.

Regardless, it's perfectly reasonable to chew these two out for their fuck up. Because, yes, they fucked up. Firstly, they shouldn't rely on magical doohickeys. Secondly, they shouldn't have committed their entire army. Thirdly, they shouldn't be distracting the Grand Alliance from the *fucking zombie apocalypse* that is raging up north.

Cat left her army on the other side of the Whitecaps. She's understandably miffed that someone misplaced it. Her army has been getting shitted on left, right, and center. Her oldest friend is dead, the Third Army was almost annihilated, the Fourth Army was made a fool of and bloodied viciously, and Juniper was on the verge of her first military defeat (and a savage one at that, had that cavalry struck). At every turn, Catherine had to bail out her army from imminent disaster.

And after all that, Juniper and Vivienne send a line of troops (as if she couldn't slaughter them in under a heartbeat if she truly was compromised) to vet her at the door. Even if there's sound logic to that, and she admits there is, Catherine's patience with this whole debacle is understandably taxed. She's pissed, has every right to be pissed, and is channeling that anger at two very appropriate targets, because again, **they fucked up.**

caoimhinh

That might be the case, it will be interesting to see how Larat and the rest of the Wild Hunt react to Winter being devoured by Night (Larat might even like it, since he was Prince of Nightfall).

Please remember Hakram's explanation of why they sent the army. They aren't relying on magic tricks for fun, the Fae Gates were the only way to get to Iserre in time to rescue Black's Legions, there was simply no other way to do it. The amount of soldiers that were sent were to: A) secure Black's Legions B) protect the new recruits as they had real campaign experience C) deal with any unforeseen situation.

The only reason they are alive right now is that they sent enough soldiers, otherwise they would all be dead. Again, they really can't be blamed for this whole mess, because it has been one unforeseeable circumstance after the other that has been striking them.

Agent J

Whether or not they feel like they have to rely on the magical doodad is an entirely moot point. William would likely have argued that he's not using an angel feather for a damn sword for fun either. That it was the only way he could feasibly wage war against monsters like the Carrion

Lord and the god damn Sovereign of the Red Skies. But the narrative didn't give half an iota of a fuck about the "necessity" of it. He relied on a magical tool and said magical tool fucked him over at the worst possible time, because that is what they do. It set up a "rightful queen" story for his enemy to exploit and was driven into his damn throat to boot.

Vivi and Co. were stupid for relying on a magical gate as the linchpin to their plan and the fact that they "had to" does nothing to alleviate that.

"-there was simply no other way to do it."

Then perhaps they shouldn't have done it.

"The only reason they are alive right now is that they sent enough soldiers-"

False. The only reason they are alive right now is because Catherine bailed their sorry asses out time and time and time again. From the Levantines. From the Helikeans. From the Procerans/Levantines. Hells, it's barely been a week since the poor girl's been topside and already she's had to stare down *three* cavalry charges to keep her people safe.

If Cat had not arrived when she did, the Third Army would be annihilated. The Fourth Army would have been too far from both the Third and the First/Second Armies to effectively help out either, all while continuing to hemorrhage soldiers day in and day out. And, as we've just seen, Juniper's Armies would have been badly crippled by a well placed, well timed charge of several thousand mounted killers.

It would have been objectively better to lose a small force sent in to rescue Grem One-Eye than to cripple the entire bloody army doing so.

"Again, they really can't be blamed for this whole mess, because it has been one unforeseeable circumstance after the other that has been striking them."

That... doesn't matter in the slightest. It's war. Their enemies aren't expected to telegraph their every movement for the Army of Callow's convenience. Preparing for unforeseen circumstances is literally their job, especially on a campaign they willingly volunteered for. No one twisted their arms into barging over the Whitecaps. They did that of their own volition.

This line of reasoning makes as much sense as the Procerans complaining that the Invasion of Callow was only a failure because there had been unforeseen circumstances. How were

they supposed to know a lake would be dropped on their heads. The answer is it doesn't matter. They launched a war against foes they barely understood, were caught flatfooted when things didn't go according to plan, and then they were savagely bled for it. In short, they fucked up.

Much like Juniper and Vivienne.

RanVor

There were two options, use the gates and save the Legions or not use the gates and not save the Legions. There was no safe choice to be taken. Vivienne and Juniper have done literally everything in their power to stack the odds in their favor. It turned out not to be enough, but they didn't half-ass this. They took the information they had and decided the risk was worth the payoff. You must remember that they're no narrative experts. They were given tools to use and they made the best use of them they could. When Cat ordered Larat to listen to Juniper, she didn't do it with the expectation that the Marshall of Callow won't make use of him. Moreover, Cat would be pissed at them anyway if they just left Grem and his forces to die. They miscalculated, sure, but fits of anger are not an appropriate response to that.

Agent J

They made a choice. It blew up in their face and without Divine Catherinic Intervention it would have cost them a quarter and change of their army at the very least. Shake it however you want, but the decision made was a bad one. Losing the Third Army, bleeding the Fourth, and decimating the First/Second combined forces all for Grem's legions is nothing short of a very costly mistake.

Vivi would have lost more soldiers than she saved. She'd also be losing officers loyal to Callow and her Queen in favour of one's loyal to Black. And if Cat herself were ever asked if she would trade Nauk for Grem, she would not take kindly the insult.

"When Cat ordered Larat to listen to Juniper, she didn't do it with the expectation that the Marshall of Callow won't make use of him."

Make use of him, sure. Use him to launch an invasion of Procer while the Dead King rages up north? No. I highly doubt that was her expectation.

"Moreover, Cat would be pissed at them anyway if they just left Grem and his forces to die."

Would she? Would she really? Since when did it become her job to save old men trying to relive their glory days from the consequences of their actions. When Black was with them, she assumed he had a smart plan. Now that Black isn't with them, the only thing that would drive her to save Grem's legions is politics. Former Legionaries in the Army of Callow would be miffed if she left them to die, but that doesn't mean commit the entire army. *That* particular bout of stupidity was entirely their own decision, made to bloody the troops and put pressure on the First Prince. Two goals that are not necessary, not worth crippling their army over, and not worth anchoring tens of thousands of Alliance troops three months south of the raging apocalypse.

Anger is the only appropriate response to that.

RanVor

SHE FUCKING CAME TO ISERRE TO PULL THE LEGIONS OUT. OF COURSE SHE WOULD.

Agent J

As opposed to, say, Laure to pick up the entirety of her army (that she believed to still be in Callow at the time)? Almost like she thought sending in a rescue team should not jeopardize her kingdom's entire army. Hells, she didn't even commit the entire army of the Empire Everdark. This is just the *Southern Expedition*.

caoimhinh

It doesn't matter when assessing victory and defeat, but it DOES matter when assigning fault and blame. Being defeated is not the same as blundering with mistakes; they made preparations and did the best they could, it just turned out to not be enough, that doesn't call for Catherine entering the tent chastising them in front of all the officials and unceremoniously stripping them of their positions as if they were a pair of traitorous incompetents.

Every campaign that Cat, the 15th and the current Army of Callow have fought could have been their last battle, they have ALWAYS been at risk of total collapse if they were defeated in the field, this time is no different. And she has NEVER blamed officials for the losses during campaign, not even once, so it is completely out of character for her to start doing it on two of her closest friends, treating them like idiots and half-rebels, it is just not like her at all.

Yes, they are in a grave situation, but they are not to blame for it, now is not the moment to be blaming officials for circumstances out of their control and the movements of 3 enemy armies around them, now is the moment to sit with them and look for a solution, this entire tantrum is a pointless act of "the slighted monarch" that befits petty Tyrants, not the practical fighter that Catherine has always been.

Agent J

Your first paragraph would hold more weight if this war was one Cat had sent them on. It's not. They took it up themselves, in her name. Catherine has referred to it as a "stupid war" even while commending her fallen soldiers for fighting it bravely anyway. The decision to take up this war factors in as well, and colours the string of embarrassing defeats rather starkly.

"Every campaign that Cat, the 15th and the current Army of Callow have fought could have been their last battle-"

True, but there is another common thread as well, all were absolutely necessary. The Liesse Rebellion *had* to be put down. The Fae Invasions *had* to be stopped. Akua's Folly *had* to be answered. The Proceran Invaders *had* to be checked. Callow survived all four and is a weakened mess. It would be a shattered mess if just one of these were allowed to come to pass, but most likely, one would have snowballed into the next. Callow literally would not survive such a catastrophe.

Callow can survive the death of Grem.

"And she has NEVER blamed officials for the loses during campaign"

Mostly accurate. She's blamed Hune for... Nauk's injuries I think? I'm not gonna chase down the quote, but it was the catalyst for her finally having a frank talk with her and she agreed, when Juniper chewed her out for it, that she was wrong.

But my need for accuracy aside, she's never gotten this pissed at an official before, because she was always the one giving the orders. If, despite their best efforts, her officers failed to achieve the task she gave them then she would accept it or deal with it as best she can.

Catherine has been gone for nigh on a year. She's had no part in the decision making process. This entire

campaign is the child of Vivienne, Hakram, and Juniper. Catherine has her eye on the bigger picture and is furious that her army is bogged down and on the brink of destruction for what is, essentially, a needless, extremely costly, and shortsighted passion project.

"Yes, they are in a grave situation, but they are not to blame for it-"

Yes, they are.

"-this entire tantrum is a pointless act of "the slighted monarch" that befits petty Tyrants-"

I see an exasperated mother harshly disciplining her children after they ran out onto the street in rush hour traffic. A little heat is good if you mean for the lesson to stick.

Nauk already died for this pointless exercise of theirs. How many more loved ones would Cat have lost were she still in the Everdark? How many more soldiers? The body count is already well in the thousands and we've yet to receive the First and Second's casualty reports.

What happened at the gate is salt in the wound, it is not the source of her anger.

[benthelynx](#)

Interestingly enough, and differently to most I think, I didn't find Cat rang true here. Not that I don't think she'd be angry but it felt too cold and distant an anger for someone as close as Hellhound and trusted as Dartwick. It's closer to the anger she's shown to those she's been forced to deal with.

Dainpdf

Well, we haven't been with unadulterated Cat for a while. Still, while a fae she stabbed her own father and told him to go away or die.

[Mental Mouse](#)

To me that seems less a fae thing than a Villain thing. Certainly Amadeus took it in stride.

Dainpdf

Point was that Cat drawing on a friend or family for crossing her lines is not new.

[benthelynx](#)

That's more of a hot rage barely controlled though. It felt different.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm reading this as tightly controlled fury, but very functional. I doubt she's going to start Night-choking people as examples, but in the context of a screwup on this scale, making her displeasure known is very much "part of the story". Her anger is certainly justified, and it's not just Evil armies that punish their own officers for major mistakes. Much less insubordination!

[benthelynx](#)

Oh I'm not arguing that she wouldn't be angry, just that this particular type of anger has so far been reserved for characters that she doesn't respect

[Liliet](#)

I read this as Cat realizing she can't let her personal relationships interfere with politics.

She likes Juniper and Vivienne. Personally, she understands their fuckup. Politically, a line has been crossed that she needs to throw a public scene about or suffer a blow to her side's cohesion.

Dainpdf

More than the anger (Cat has always had a temper), I find the *pride* here interesting. Or at least the notion of her position. Cat cites as the last straw not being received with appropriate deference. Seems like her days of waffling are done.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'd say some pride is warranted. But consider also her welcome from the Third and Fourth Legions: "*She's back!*". And then Cat comes here, and they're like "yeah, check her out before you show her in".

Dainpdf

Still a good idea to check, and Cat admits it... but she's owed their respect, dammit! And she'll demote her friends if she has to. They did blunder.

[Liliet](#)

I think the pride was what prompted Catherine to realize she needed to act on this. A queen is not *allowed* to swallow humiliations.

Dainpdf

Would she have liked it if they had allowed someone in a Cat suit to walk in unquestioned, though? Important questions.

RanVor

Exactly. Cat understood it before, and she suddenly doesn't now? I call bullshit.

Dainpdf

Maybe. Or maybe she... *changed*.

RanVor

For worse?

[*Liliet*](#)

Allowed to walk in and then checked in private, yes.

Dainpdf

No fair coming back with spoiler

[*Liliet*](#)

...it was obvious and I've been saying the same thing on discord... but it's nice to be confirmed right yes 🤔

RanVor

Damn. Cat got pissy.

I do not approve of her bullshit here.

lennymaster

One, Magic tricks and trinkets always, ALWAYS fail the villian at the worst possible time. The Gates just suddenly not working HAD to be expected, maybe not from Juniper, but definitely from Vivienne, a (former?) Named.

Two, she is a MONARCH, and intends to leave some kind of monarchy in place even if she wants to leave eventually, wich means that the MONARCH may not be publicly slighted without consequences.

Three, not even having ONE of the two show up to greet her smacks of rebellion, rebellion in front of the soldiers.

Monarchies do not survive letting shit like that go.No, Viv has been getting to comfortable making major decisions in Cats name. What she did was show the top dogs that THEY are replaceable.

Four, they fucked up! She told them to stay put, not risk her

ENTIRE army on what was basically a political move, to bloody green troops and threaten Cordelia when she is already busy with the Dead King: "Today, I found you engaged in a pitched battle with a Grand Alliance army – that is, a force that should be three months to the north preventing the fucking Dead King from rolling over Procer."

Sending something was just reasonable, but if they considered the portals to be reliable, then a few thousand scouts with some fey to quickly find and pull out Grems army would have been enough. Sending everything forced Cordelia to reroute entire armies from the north and put all of Callows striking power at risk.

RanVor

I judge it an insufficient reason to barge in, ignore every security protocol in existence and threaten to fire everybody. In my opinion Cat acted like a child with a temper tantrum here, and I don't care if you disagree.

caoimhinh

Exactly, it's not like they were there for fun. They were rescuing Black's Legions and the only way to do that was through the Fae Gates and sending a large army that could deal with any dangers that might arise in Iserre.

That unforeseeable circumstances had led them to this mess is not their fault, and is out of character for Cat to blame them for it, she has NEVER done such a thing before.

RanVor

The greatest irony in all of this is that Cat came to Iserre with the exact same objective.

superkeaton

Cat's cracking the whip. She might call them close friends, but there are Responsibilities to be had and Consequences to consider. And, of course, nobody likes seeing the army they fucking built look at them like they're a threat and dance to the tune of a pair of underlings.

Death Knight

Seriously EE, you end it THERE?!

Fuck I'm getting MOL flashbacks here with the accompanying PTSD

Azure

So we know Winter made Catherine cold and inhuman, but it looks like Night has made her prideful and arrogant. She really doesn't like being challenged or not given her due. How many people has

she asked to Kneel so far? That's Sve Noc's influence all over her.

Hakram escaped it because he never challenged Catherine. Only just though because she was ready to lash out at him when he questioned her about Akua.

Really not liking how she's treating Vivienne and Juniper. She'd better watch that pride or she's only gonna end up with sycophants and yes men.

[boballab](#)

You really need to go back and re read Chapters 48, 49 and 50 of Book 4. Prior to her leaving for the Everdark Viv was all pissy and rebellious to Cats face and just before they split up Hakram stated this for the group:

Did she get haughty and make Hakram kneel, even with being pissed at him for being in Procer? No, she didn't because Hakram went into private and talked to her. So what does the rebellious Vivienne Dartwick who takes a verbal cheap shot at Cat on their parting do? Tries to arrest her.

[benthelynx](#)

Oh potentially good point

[Liliet](#)

It's a show she needs to put on.

Cat CAN step over her pride and anger, as quick as she is to them. But in this case she shouldn't, because her army is looking to her for confidence and assertiveness. This was a public insult, and however unintended, NOT getting angry would make her look weak in the circumstances where she can least afford it – where her army can least afford it.

[Sugar Roll](#)

Malanza and company has been duped in this instance but when they hear of what happened to the Levantine vanguard's cavalry and the Helikean cathapracts, Malanza will be vindicated in her decision to retreat. One just doesn't use a cavalry charge the Black Queen.

[Sugar Roll](#)

One just doesn't use a cavalry charge *on the Black Queen

RanVor

One does not simply use a cavalry charge on the Black Queen.

curious

I wonder if Catherine actually is corrupted, by Night. She has been drawing on it regularly to sharpen her staff/sword she leans on constantly, in addition to invocations for miracles. Collar Fairy is knee deep in making a Well of the stuff. Cat might not be a construct anymore but her soul was Corrupted, mutilated, bound up with Winter, and then literally exploded. We have not had Masego around to comment on the current state of her Her-ness.

Comment Thread Consensus is that by being priestess, she is not personally affected by the principle alienation as she was when WinterCat. But remember what "Sve" was? I am far from certain that being the Get of Night, as the drow consider her, comes with zero strings attached.

What would corruption by Night look like? Winter was about hunger, pride, backstabbery, isolation. Night is about terror, yes, but what else? The actual properties of Night have not been explained clearly for us by a narrator. Many of the uses of Night by Mighty were corrosive. I would worry about sinking my soul in that. Other uses, per the Longstriders, involve movement / uncertainty of position of things in the Night.

Cat is notably weaker after the Everdark. It is confounded by not being a construct anymore, but her leg (which she keeps mutilated for irrational reasons) fatigues even more rapidly than it should (I have a chronic knee condition and go to PT, her stamina is really bad) and her body is exhausted after working miracles. Is not part of Night getting sleepy/tired?

I think she isn't a reliable narrator, and would [and should] have failed the mage inspection. But killing her off [correctly] would not work narratively here so she was saved more by plot armor than anything "her". I think when Masego gets back, the state of her soul will become the major plot focus.

Lastly, part of the reason I think she can't get a new Name is she is not a person. Before Winter, the Demon of Corruption took a third of her soul when it claimed her third Aspect. That piece of her soul was sawed off by Masego and replaced by Winter, which then was exploded in Strycht. Then Akua crept into Winter, and Saint sliced up Winter, and we have no idea what that did to Cat's soul.

Bottom line, Cat is physically herself again, albeit a low-stamina, crippled, dragonbone pipe-clenching, extremely impulsive, easily angered version that somewhat superficially resembles, but differs in a lot of important ways, from SquireCat. I don't know how much is Folly PTSD and how much is soul mutilation but her soul was mutilated multiple times in extremely unusual ways.

We need Masego.

RanVor

Interesting. I was recently thinking about how Cat's behavior seems more at odds with who she was at the beginning than when she was the Sovereign of Moonless Nights...

Mental Mouse

"Cat's behavior seems more at odds with who she was at the beginning than when she was the Sovereign of Moonless Nights..."

Yes, she's far more confident and mature now than she was at any previous point – and by her own choice, less violent. Note that she's always been impulsive, right from the beginning, but now she's showing better sense about when and how to do that sort of stuff. (As someone else said, she'd *earned* that Intimidation bonus. Also, I suspect Night could have provided a quick escape if needed.) As I noted before, she *acts* more human now than she did as Winter Cat.

Anyone who's worried by her display of anger, or who thinks it's excessive, consider this: She was confronted by a group of her own troops with (insubordinate) orders to detain and test her. None of them died or even got hurt – in fact, Cat simply faced them down. And when facing Viv and Juniper, Cat did not in any way threaten them physically, not even as hyperbole. Instead, she invoked their oaths to her, and her final "threat" in this chapter was the loss of, not simply their positions, but *the trust represented by those positions*. In short, she's finally acting like a commander and a sovereign, and people are responding accordingly.

This actually raises an interesting point: What do you do when your buddy's possession represents an *improvement* over their original? I've heard of one similar case in the real world: Dr. Charles (iirc) told the tale of a cranky and obnoxious matriarch who suddenly woke up... *nice*. Her alarmed family promptly rushed her to the ER, where brain scans revealed a developing tumor. When that was removed, Grandma promptly went back to her nasty old self.

RanVor

Fuck maturity then, I guess, because I liked the old one a lot more.

RanVor

"her own troops with (insubordinate) orders"

Actually that's bullshit. The orders were not only coming from the officers Cat herself appointed, but also totally sensible and I'm really shocked that Cat didn't know better after all she went through. But she decided to throw a hissy fit and punish people for doing what she would expect them to do in any other situation instead. Good job, very mature.

[Daniel E](#)

In fairness, we have never seen Juniper miscalculate so badly. I suspect there is a good reason, but this is Cat's first time dealing with a serious display of bad judgement on the part of her crew.

[boballab](#)

Actually it isn't. Go back and re read Chapters 49 and 50 of Book 4, where Vivienne Dartwick threatened Cat with disobeying her order to go back with Hakram to rule Callow in her name. This came after Hakram and Viv conspired before discussing things with Cat about who was going into the Everdark with her. That was seriously bad judgement and Hakram realizes it during Chapter 49 and admits it mid way through 50 after watching Cat take her frustrations out on the Hunt for their bad judgement during the Battle of the Camps months earlier and then topping it off by not wanting to Gate Masego, Viv and Hakram. Remember she had one member of the Hunt kill another member after smacking the second one around and literally putting her boot on her neck. This is why I keep telling people saying this isn't Cat need to go back and re read the entire Everdark arc because they sure did miss/forget a lot.

RanVor

I think more than a few people would make a case for the person who went into the Everdark not being Cat either.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I suspect Juniper just got overwhelmed by superior force (with no option for retreat), and perhaps by superior story-fu (Pilgrim, DK, and Bard are only the most prominent story-shapers opposing her).

Aotrs Commander

Hahahaha!

Nice,

Yeah, not feeling a lot of sympathy for Juniper and Viv, here. If Cat had not showed up (or was dead) or not when she did and intervened in person, they would have lost all four armies (how

much of that is the totality of the armies of Callow?) AND their Callow's remaining best generals AND its regent AND the only Named it had left on its side (including the only greenskin named in centuries).

What would have been left? What would have happened to Callow after that? (Malicia would certainly have had a good laugh, if no-one else did.)

Yeah, their plan was incompetently handled and the decision to even attempt it was poorly-thought out at best. Juniper is supposed to be better than this.

Regardless of why they thought they had to do it – they FRACKED up impossibly badly and were out-maneuvered at every turn. Audacity is rewarded only by success and this was literally one Cat-stride (and they aren't very big, y'see of account of she being short[1]) away from the definition of utter failure.

And then not bothering to even check for themselves it was Cat? (As if, y'know, the enemy suddenly all buggered off was a fricking CLUE.)

Damn straight they get a Proper Bollocking.

[1]Dont kill me! She has a REALLY tall personality, that's clearly where all the mass goes.

stevenneiman

They did check for themselves. The thing is that they did it publicly, which was a public insult and challenge to her authority. And considering that last I heard Juniper was a competent general, I feel like Cat would almost be more justified than Juniper in wondering if the other was an impostor.

[Mental Mouse](#)

If anyone got called out as an impostor here, it would be Viv, who's clearly "not herself" these days. Hmm. I wonder if the power of Night can reach into Viv's former domain to retrieve her loot?

[Sugar Roll](#)

It could have been a catastrophe no doubt but I give more credit to Malanza's and the Tyrant's abilities rather than the Hellhound's and Vivienne's lack thereof. Malanza is no joke as a military commander and the Tyrant survives and thrives in clusterfuck situations.

Remember, Callow was getting their ass handed to them at the start of the battle of the camps until Catherine dropped a lake

onto the battlefield. Then you have the Tyrant who won the war within the League against a side with a hero band with Black (and company) and the Bard looming in the background.

'Ladi Williams

That was badass! I would dearly love to see the guide as a seasonal production.

And watching Cat calmly smoking while being charged by 7 thousand horse with only a line and her reputation between her and them and forcing them to flinch! That would be awesome.

stevenneiman

One kind of little thing I just noticed: Even when she's furious enough to go on a tirade and threaten demotions, she doesn't even consider threatening execution. Horrendously impractical and villainous in the way that gets you killed, even if you are in a foul enough mood to go through with it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

She did tell that one orc (and those around him) that if he orders weren't obeyed, gallows were on the table.

[Daniel E](#)

The Wild Hunt is still in play. I wonder if the promise of 'Seven crowns plus one' is still valid now that Winter as a unique power has ended. Perhaps said crowns will tie into the Prince's Graveyard somehow.

aran

One might almost get the impression that Catherine is pissed.

Chapter 23: Readjustment

"The price of dominion is the halving of one's grasp, for a ruler may hold a crown or hand but never both."

– Julianne Merovins, tenth First Princess of Procer

I'd dismounted, eventually, mainly because my leg was starting to twinge again. A chair would be easier on it, though it was a great deal harder for me to glare down at people without a horse under me. My anger had cooled some after the initial remonstrations, but it was far from gone – part of me was

seething, and though I knew only part of the blame lay with the two women seated across from me they were not exempt from being called to account. Not when, to my knowledge, there was not a single part of this ill-considered western campaign that wasn't a spectacular disaster in some way.

"For my defeats I offer no excuse," Marshal Juniper said, tone rough.

This was the most cowed I'd ever seen her act, and with damned good reason. I trusted the supreme commander of my armies, even now. I did trust her *judgement* less than I would have a year ago, however. The thing was, what she had done – what Hakram and Vivienne had done with her – it couldn't simply be settled with a calm word and a reminder to be careful. Not when my delaying my return from the Everdark for as little as a month might have seen the Army of Callow either slaughtered or ended as a fighting force. The Third lost, as it likely would have been without my intervention, meant the Fourth was alone and blind to the east. Add onto this that they'd been getting hammered by the mere vanguard of the Grand Alliance host before I arrived today? The decisions taken by my foremost commander had nearly led to the end of the armies she was commanding. For the political aspects of this howling mess I would not hold her to account, but the military ones? They were very much her purview.

"I'm not interested in your falling on your sword, Marshal," I flatly said. "I've already spoken with Adjutant, so I have an understanding of the deployments made and the reasons for them. Splitting the columns was risky, but tactically sound. Before that, gating in between the Dominion forces was an equally sound manoeuvre. If, once more, *risky*."

My voice hardened at the last word, and though she did not flinch she did stiffen. In all our years together, I'd never once before chewed out the Hellhound like this. We'd had disagreements, the most animated of them over Bonfire and later the conduct of the campaign in northern Callow, but they'd been only that. Disagreements. For the most part I'd allowed her the run of the Fifteenth and later the Army of Callow, usually only intervening for reasons that weren't strictly military in nature. For all the oaths and the fact that I wore the crown, our relationship had been as close to one of equals as circumstances allowed. Right now, though? This was not Catherine talking to Juniper. This was the Black Queen speaking to the Marshal of Callow, and I reasons to be furious.

"A defeat, or several, is not something that needs excusing," I said. "To expect a flawless record would be absurd, especially given the calibre of our opposition. But I am currently looking at a series of tactically solid steps that led towards the

greatest strategic disaster of our tenure together, and that needs an explanation."

I tapped my fingers against the table.

"Why is the Army of Callow fighting in Iserre, Marshal?" I asked.

"Your Majesty-"

Vivienne's interruption once again had my temper flaring. I glanced at her, still finding the sight of her milkmaid's braid surprising, and arched an eyebrow. The visible disconnect between the woman I'd left behind and the one I was looking at made it easier to rein in my irritation, though only by so much.

"Do you speak for Marshal Juniper now, Vivienne?" I calmly asked.

Her lips thinned.

"This campaign was not decided by her alone," she said. "I also bear a responsibility."

"You are not Marshal of Callow," I said, calling on my thinning reserves of patience. "A graduate of the War College, a trained strategist or indeed a military officer at all. For the diplomatic aspects of this debacle, the main responsibility lies with you and Hakram. I am well aware of that. This is not the diplomatic aspect."

My eyes flicked back to Juniper.

"Well?" I said. "*Should* Vivienne be a part of this conversation, Marshal?"

"No, Warlord," Juniper replied, chin rising. "She should not."

I dipped my head in approval. At the very least she was owning the fuckup instead of trying to spread around the responsibility, though whether that was out of persisting dislike for Vivienne or a personal sense of honour I couldn't be sure. My silence was taken as the invitation to speak that it was.

"It was necessary to evacuate the Legions of Terror," Juniper said.

I nodded in acknowledgement.

"They fought at the Vales," I said. "A debt was owed. How did this translate to your finding sense in deploying forty thousand legionaries through magical means of ingress and egress in the single most Name-infested region of this continent?"

"I did not believe any force below twenty thousand would prove a sufficient deterrent," the orc said. "I can't speak to the

politics involved, but the size of the force was meant to ensure no battle would actually take place even if heroes spurred armies to move in time."

"Then why forty and not twenty?" I said, frowning.

"Because there was no telling when you would return," Juniper admitted. "And that meant if the northern Principate broke, we might have to occupy the Principality of Arans to prevent the Dead King from holding one side of the northern passage into Callow."

The Stairway, I thought. Which should currently be defended by the army of Duchess Kegan, but only from the Callowan end of the pass. Considering the Principality of Hainaut was all that stood between the armies of the dead and Arans, her worry wasn't unfounded.

"Adjutant didn't mention this," I said.

"The situation was still theoretical," the Hellhound said. "We'd have a gap of at least two months between leaving Callow by Arcadia and arriving in Iserre, possibly more, which effectively killed our capacity to occupy Arans in time if the front in Hainaut broke. Committing twenty thousand soldiers – two divisions – and the Wild Hunt was splitting the forces in a manner that made it impossible to exert our strength correctly."

I breathed out, forced myself to consider the logic in what she was saying.

"Even if you sent the two remaining divisions north before leaving, they'd arrive late and be dependent on Duchess Kegan's army to manage occupation of Arans," I finally said. "Which, without me at the helm, she might not be inclined to give. On the other hand, having the full four divisions with the Hunt meant if the strike proved necessary you could march in force immediately and entrust the Deoraithe with the supply line from the other side."

"That was my reasoning," Juniper agreed.

"And Adjutant was not informed of your theory because?"

"Because he had nothing to contribute to the planning," the Hellhound bluntly said. "And I wanted the plans ready for implementation if things went to shit after he and the Lady-Regent tried to make a truce with Procer."

I let a few heartbeats pass to see if she had anything to add, but she did not.

"General Hune," I said without turning. "Anything to add?"

"Two months before our departure for Iserre, the general staffs for all four divisions were assigned a tactical exercise called Citadel," the ogre evenly said. "While no direct mention of Procer or Arans was made, it involved rapidly occupying a foreign territory with limited forces. Priority was placed on fortifying it against an outside assault even while occupation took place."

Essentially confirming Juniper hadn't woven this entire Arans thing out of thin air, though I'd not been all that inclined to believe that in the first place.

"Noted," I said.

I drummed my fingers against the tabletop, resisting the urge to hum. This was still a massive fuckup, I thought, but at least Juniper had actual reasons for having brought the Army of Callow this far out. Were they sufficient, in my eyes? I wasn't sure, to be honest, and I shouldn't be passing judgement on that until I had all the information at my disposal instead of a simple debrief. The Hellhound's actions as still almost ended the Kingdom of Callow as a military power for at least a decade, and she'd proved to be imprudent repeatedly. On the other hand, every risk she'd taken was at least calculated and overall dictated by what could only be called a desperate fucking times.

"Marshal Juniper, in your own opinion where exactly was the blunder made?" I finally asked.

"When I ordered the army to gate in between the two Dominion forces," she replied without missing a beat. "To be sound, that manoeuvre depended on *certain* access to gates when leaving. It was a blunder to assume that would be the case."

She wasn't changing her stance as to the necessity of fielding the four divisions of the army, I noted, which meant the Hellhound still believed it'd been the right call given what she'd known at the time. On the other hand, she wasn't trying to excuse herself by saying it would have been impossible to anticipate the gates would start going wild when they did, or that scrying would be made impossible by something still unknown.

"And do you believe Adjutant the Lady-Regent interfered with how you would have planned this campaign otherwise?" I asked.

She mulled over that, for a moment.

"No more than you would have, Warlord," Juniper said.

Fair enough, I thought.

"You're not stripped from command," I finally sighed. "As of now, General Hune is confirmed as the senior among the generals in the Army of Callow."

A warning, essentially, that if she blundered this badly again then the ogre would be handed the marshal's baton.

"When the situation in Iserre is resolved," I continued, "a tribunal of senior officers will be convened to assess whether or not the decisions you took in this campaign warrant charges of incompetence or reckless use of authority. Their verdict will decide whether or not you are demoted back to general."

"Understood," the Marshal of Callow rasped.

"Good," I said. "I'll be perfectly clear: I have no intention of being involved with this tribunal beyond ordering it convened. This is not *personal*, Juniper. This isn't happening because I am angry with an old friend, or appalled by what your decisions almost led to. But if the Army of Callow is ever to be more than just my personal warband, then its members need to be accountable for what they do."

She nodded, but her face was unreadable. I did not know whether or not she believed me.

"None of this can hold until it's been confirmed you're actually Catherine Foundling," Vivienne said, face resolutely set.

She hadn't reached for a knife, and idly I wondered if she still carried any. Probably. Losing her Name did not mean she'd lost her skills, simply that there wasn't quite as much weight behind them.

"Yes," I said, smile turning hard. "Let's talk about that."

My fingers clenched.

"What the *Hells* were the two of you thinking?" I hissed out. "A pair of lines, fifteen mages? All of this led by General Hune, who is well-known to be aloof from me? Did you even pause to consider what it looked like?"

I glanced at the ogre in question, inclining my head to convey no offence was meant. She replied with the same, visibly unaffected. It was, after all, nothing but the truth.

"Precautions had to be taken," Vivienne said, though she winced. "You've agreed on those in the past, Your Majesty."

"If I'd actually been a puppet what would have happened?" I harshly asked her. "I would have splattered them across the ground, accused the two of you a fomenting a coup and I'd have your head on pikes within the hour. What could *fifteen legion mages* have done, Vivienne? Unless you've recruited practitioners capable of High Arcana in the last year, little more than scream before they died."

"They were chosen for their capacity to check on your identity," Juniper said. "A ritual-"

"Could have been done in private, away from the eyes of the troops," I spoke through gritted teeth. "If I was willing to cooperate – and I will be, once this fucking conversation is over – then there was no need to play out what looked like an arrest. If I wasn't, if I was an impostor or a puppet, exactly what difference would *forty soldiers* have made?"

There was a long moment of silence in the tent.

"I was aware you had no head or liking for politics when I named you Marshal, Juniper," I said. "This, though? You should have grasped this without need for explanation. What would have happened, even if I'd been taken away without fighting and not reappeared? How many legionaries would have believed I was an impostor, after seeing me turn away the Proceran horse?"

I paused, forcing myself to breathe out and calm.

"We're not eighteen anymore," I said. "There's no one to clean up our mistakes for us. You're the highest ranked military officer in the kingdom, when you don't consider the ramifications of your orders there are *consequences*."

I turned to the other reckless gambler, almost at a loss for words.

"As for you, Vivienne, do I even need to say anything?" I tiredly said.

She looked away. That was answer enough.

"Marshal Juniper, General Hune," I sighed. "You may resume your duties. Within the hour the hills to the west will be occupied by the Third Army, while the Fourth and fifty thousand drow auxiliaries move to the northwest to pressure the Grand Alliance's army."

Assuming Hakram had understood me correctly, whoever held command of the enemy army was going to have a hard choice to make. Either they'd allow an enemy force with numerical superiority and two entrenched positions – this camp and the hills General Abigail was marching on – to begin encircling them before the battle continued, or they'd have to withdraw further north and surrender any advantage they'd gained today. My bet was on the enemy retreating, given that they had reinforcements following behind us, but if Princess Rozala and the Dominion commander wanted to get into a slugging match even after my warning then the Army of Callow and the Legions needed to be readied for the fight. Juniper nodded, and rose to offer a salute. Hune settled for a

nod, which given the respective sizes of herself and the pavilion was probably for the best.

"Marshal?" I called out as she began heading out.

"Ma'am?" Juniper gravelled.

"Have the appropriate mages prepare the ritual," I said.

"Discretely. Leave an officer outside this tent to guide me there when I've finished."

"Understood," the Marshal of Callow said, and left without another word.

I wondered, with a pang, if what had been said here today had just ended one of the last few friendships I had. If a relationship it'd taken years to build had just been put to the torch and we would be returning to the distant formality of the first months of the Fifteenth. Perhaps not, I thought. Orcs tended to handle reprimands like these better than humans, and she'd not named me her warlord lightly. But something would change, I knew, and it might not ever entirely return to the way it used to be. And Juniper, of the two I had chewed out, was likely to take this the best. Akua's words about the conflict between the needs of the queen and the woman lingered at the edge of my thoughts, but they were too bitter for me to be willing to acknowledge them.

"I suppose now is to be my turn," Vivienne Dartwick said. "Was it a kindness or a bad omen, that you dismissed the others first?"

I finally allowed myself a good look at her. What had once been short dark hair was now elaborately put together in a milkmaid braid that circle twice atop her bangs, reminiscent of a summer fair crown. The blue-grey eyes had not changed, I thought, but something about the cast of her face had. She seemed... older. Like she had grown in the year I'd seen her. The old leathers had been traded in for a long-sleeved pale blouse, conservative in cut but still baring most of her shoulders. It led into high-waist wine red skirts, though beneath I'd earlier glimpsed more practical leggings and boots. An engraved silver ring on her hand was the only visible adornment she'd bothered with, save for the royal seal of Callow I'd earlier ordered her to set down. Vivienne hadn't grown any more beautiful, since we'd last seen each other – she was still barely taller than I, and of rather similar frame. But there was something subtly matured about the way she carried herself. My eyes flicked to the seal still on the table, and for a moment I regretted ordering her to put her down. Her regency had come to an end the moment I'd returned, truth be told, but the manner of making that clear need not be so humiliating. *On the other hand, Vivienne, I thought, what choice did you give me?*

"I didn't want it to be like this," I said. "But here we are. I have questions."

"Duchess Kegan is now Governess-General," she said. "And was granted broad if temporary authority in my absence, though I kept the regency title proper until today."

"Adjutant already told me," I said. "Kegan was the best of the choices you had. Baroness Ainsley being Keeper of the Seals stacks the council towards nobles too much for my tastes, but I'll concede there wasn't anyone else with both the pull and the competence."

"The recognition of the Confederation of the Grey Eyries--"

"Was within your authority as Lady-Regent, and something I can stomach," I calmly said. "The Matrons are vicious monsters, but also a thorn in Malicia's side and willing to sell us goods we badly need. The scheme to make a king of Grem One-Eye was overly ambitious, to my eye, but not offensively so. Arranging for him to hold the Blessed Isle with Black's own legions was inspired, and I wholeheartedly approve."

"This is not," Vivienne murmured, "the way I expected this conversation to go."

"I'm not going to ignore the significant achievements to your name because you angered me," I mildly replied. "You did very well with the regency. Until, at least, you decided to allow this atrocious blunder of a campaign. Then you deepened the mistake by accompanying the army personally. So I suppose my questions is this – what, exactly, did you think this mess was going to accomplish?"

She smiled, at tad bitterly.

"And my answer determines whether I remain one of the Woe," she said.

"Don't give me that," I sharply said. "Whimpering in self-pity is beneath the both of us. You were given power and authority, Vivienne. I'm asking you to explain your how you used them, not throwing a tantrum. Given the messes I've had to clean up, this is an exceedingly measured response."

"You didn't deny it," she said.

"You think fucking up means you're not one of us?" I said.

"Doesn't it?" Vivienne replied, eyes unreadable.

"The lot of you didn't cut my throat after the Doom of Liesse," I said. "Why would you think this is any different? We can lose, Vivienne. But we have to learn. We have to own it. And we have to

face the fucking consequences, because otherwise we'll *just keep doing it*. And it's more important than my feelings, or yours, but it doesn't mean they aren't there."

In the lucid, terrifying moment that followed those words I realized this might be how it'd started for Black. Looking at a mess and knowing that loving those responsible was one thing but exempting them from consequence another. *Is that how you learned? To put it in a box and only let it out when the necessary callousness was over with.*

"So tell me," I said, repeating myself with the sudden taste of ash in my mouth. "What did you think this was going to accomplish?"

She talked, I listened, and with careful patient cruelty I hardened her to avoid making the same mistakes twice. We walked to the ritual together, afterwards, and some part of me was almost disgusted at the glints of gratitude and respect I caught in her gaze when she looked at me. Like I'd not, as lovingly as callously, burned her with shame and bound her with affection so that Vivienne Dartwick would be one step closer to the woman I needed her to be.

I was, in the end, my father's daughter.

[Epok](#)

Also, come check out the Discord. <https://discord.gg/MGeezk>

aran

This link does not seem to be working for me.

aran

(Update: Never mind, it seems I was already in the Discord. Or at least *a* Discord, can't tell if it is the same as the one linked here.)

Zeozo

The links expired 😞

ruduen

Something Something Vote Something!

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

Flobert

Since the other guy hasn't done it.
Go vote!

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Flobert

It appears someone else has done it. It just didn't load until after I posted my comment

Andrew

Chapter seems to be getting shorter and shorter or is it just me?

Vivid

I really hope that at some point we get to see a meta reference to that one kind of Villain who's super op and terrifying to fight, but then inexplicably get way weaker when they turn to the good side.

Vivid

Wait why isn't this comment on the main thread

[*matrixm*](#)

Only candidate right now is Black. Alia will have her magical prowess either way

[*crysjal*](#)

That's the 6th ranger trope I believe. Or at least a variation on it.

[*HannaB*](#)

Akua. Half her power was political, and most of the other half she's not allowed to even glance in direction of, because it's evil af.

[*DroughtBringer*](#)

ignores the fact that I am late

Go vote!

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[*Javvies*](#)

Hmmm.

That last bit about making Viv the woman Cat needs her to be might indicate that the plan for Cat's abdication might be Viv as Queen, and Abigail as her right hand or Marshal.

stevenneiman

I dunno. All that's really established is that Cat still has use for Viv. I wouldn't be surprised if that use includes her being the heir to the throne, but I wouldn't discount it.

Dainpdf

I'll just note how suspicious it is that we did not get to hear what her reasons were, or what Cat said about it, and be on my way.

Dainpdf

Why is this a response dammit wordpress.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, I agree. EE has __got__ to know that we'd be disappointed to miss out on that conversation. And I don't think he'd be disappointing without a good reason.

Dainpdf

Plus he did show us one conversation completely, then had Cat drive everyone out and skipped the next. *Suspicious*.

Decius

I predict that conversation will be covered in an interlude, from Viv's POV.

haihappen

You spelled "heir" wrong, it should be "Heiress", kick-started by a knife to the chest.
Of course, only if Viv actually WANTS it.

[Javvies](#)

Pretty sure that Heiress is a Praesi-specific Name. And that it's also specifically a Villain Name, not a shade of grey Name.

Callow had its own names for the Crown Prince/Princess Role, but they were all relatively straightforward Hero names.

I don't think that there's a shade of gray Transitional Name specific to the Role in question. Certainly there isn't going to be a Callowan one. The only place that might have one, but then it'd be a culturally specific Name, might be Helike, since they seem to wobble back and forth a little, based on the fact that Kairos's nephew was a Hero.

[boballab](#)

About the Name Heiress/Heir, as far as I can recall it was never stated directly in text that it was a transitional name to Empress/Emperor. We do know that in the past one of the most successful Names to transition to Empress/Emperor is Chancellor. It was so much so that Malicia outlawed the bestowal of that Name and not to recently she noted that someone might be transitioning into that Role anyway and sent her to a dead end post. Then we also know that the Black Knight is a possible path to Empress/Emperor when Cat had those visions of herself climbing the Tower. Also Akua being Heiress could mean the Heiress to her mother's title in Woloff.

Another point to consider is the ramifications of Hakram's Name, it is a Name that is completely new or it is one so old that it was completely forgotten but it is back now. So the question of why a new Name needs to be answered especially if Viv gets a new Name that has never been seen in Callow before.

Shikkarasu

Further point on the Name Heir(ess), Akua mentioned that the Heiress can inherit **anything**. I think this means that if the Heiress survives long enough to reansition she becomes a more powerful version of her new name. Like how White/Black Knights are strengthened by having been the Squire for a time, or how Warlock/Heirophant are boosted by their time as apprentice.

The most common goal would be Chancellor/Dread Empress because all Praesi nobility strive to either take the Tower or set up their descendants for it, but that's only because Praesi don't settle for 2nd fiddle. There's nothing to say that an Evil Heir/ess could not aim to inherit the Name "King/Queen of Callow", it would just be a long difficult game of public perception; exactly what the Name Heir(ess) was made for.

[boballab](#)

There is an Interlude in Book 3 where Akua talks about the problems the Truebloods are facing and in it she makes a statement that can be argued is what her having

the Heiress Name was about: The Heir to old style villainy

Villainous Interlude: Chiaroscuro

That took place just before she became Diabolist

Skaddix

I assume Viv doesn't feel like one of the gang still..she started as a Hero, she switched side. But all the other Woe even Juniper who is probably closest to the Woe (Pre Akua) is exceptional at something. Viv though is the normal former Hero who has never been exceptional and now she is not even Named the one special thing she had. So I figure an inferiority complex drove her here. Also losing Name means with Juniper and Hakram gone. She is any easy assassination target. Since as Cat notes standard Legion Mages are irrelevant outside of Rituals and firing lines. I do wonder when the Tyrant tried to off Juniper if it happened still in Callow that would motivation to come along. Fear.

caoimhinh

Yep, Vivienne is definitely filled with fear and insecurities now that she lost her Name.

Andrew Mitchell

I think one of the main reasons she lost her name was her fears and insecurities. I'm sad to see that the combination of Hakram's sacrifice and the loss of her name hasn't improved her mental health. I was hoping for more character development.

KageLupus

Viv lost her Name because she stopped being the Thief. That might sound like circular reasoning but think about how Names work. You have to embody a concept or role fully enough that you slip into one of the grooves of creation. When she first got the Name, Thief was running around stealing from the rich just to make a point. She wasn't playing Robbin Hood and helping the downtrodden. She was just stealing from nobles because she was so disillusioned with them. In short, she was being a Thief.

Then look at what happened after she joined up with the Woe and Catherine got her crown. Vivienne spent most of her time acting as a spymistress, the sole voice of reason when discussing plans, and eventually picked up a regency. All of her time has been spent on politics in one sense or another. She was no longer doing the kinds of things that you would expect from a Thief, so she ended up outside of that groove.

Vivienne didn't lose her Name because she was afraid and insecure, she felt that way because she had stopped doing the things that made her Thief to begin with.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, you're absolutely right when you say "You have to embody a concept or role fully enough that you slip into one of the grooves of creation." But saying that "she had stopped doing the things that made her Thief to begin with" is only half the story IMO.

As you said, we're talking about "embodying" a role and that's as much about mindset as what you do. Thief was confident, she could get away with stealing anything. She lost her confidence, became fearful and stopped Thieving. Both the mindset and actions were important factors, which is why I said "one of the main reasons" in my post above.

Steve

It's admittedly a delicate balance, but Cat comes off like a piece of shit moreso than not, here.

So easy to be the one looking back with 20-20 vision when you disappear for the greater span of month(s).

Especially after how bad she fucked up the drow campaign and literally got bailed out by a deus ex machina.

imagesbe

Her making mistakes in no way excuses others from doing so. It only pushes her to point them out more so they can learn from those mistakes. Even in this chapter, when Vivienne expressed doubt over her continued welcome in the Woe, Cat all but admitted that any mistake Vivienne made here paled in comparison to the magnitude of the Doom of Liesse.

I felt like this chapter did a very good job separating the "mistake in hindsight" mistakes from "that was just a bad decision" mistakes. Juniper got off mostly because the only mistake she made that really fell into the latter category was the porting between armies mistake, and even then Cat knows that there were arguments for it.

When repeated disasters hit an army that could have been avoided, someone needs to be held accountable, even if it's just stopping and having a tribunal that answers the question, "was it really her fault or not."

Steve

'It only pushes her to point them out more so they can learn from those mistakes.'

Eh...this line seems to not indicate that, at least to me.

"And we have to face the fucking consequences, because otherwise we'll just keep doing it."

Cat literally had a variant of this conversation near the end of the drow campaign with Archer...and then she went on doing the exact same half-cocked thing with next-to-no plan and ended up losing, only to win on a gamble with 'fate'.

Her dressing down Juniper for the maneuvers is warranted – but the way in which the dressing down is portrayed makes it feel more like a visceral/personal rationale behind it, with the 'excuse' of being made about the failure, rather than the other way around.

The bigger problem, perhaps, is that Cat has shown many a time that she's a fuckup, but she's not really been (at least that I can recall) really been 'lambasted' for it, in a way that she does to Juniper and Vivienne here. She's been hard on herself, sure, but Black dressing her down (in the few times it happened) didn't echo this, to me.

And maybe that's the point (in showing Cat's fall down the slippery slope), but it isn't doing Cat any favors as a protagonist.

magesbe

Well, firstly, who's going to dress her down like this? Cat doesn't answer to anyone anymore, and when she did (mostly to Black), he did dress her down a couple of times.

The Woe's way to trying to get through to Cat that she's made some bad decisions isn't to dress her down, but to try and talk to her about it. Sometimes that even works. But they're not in a position to do to her what she did to them here.

Also, Catherine has fucked up in the past (and paid for it, usually), but I wouldn't call her a "fuck-up." Or are you going to ignore the many many successes she's had? Even if she tends to ignore them herself.

She's not telling Viv here that she's a fuckup, in fact she explicitly said otherwise. She's saying that Viv fucked up, this is how, and this is what she should do next time.

But if Cat could go back in time and talk to her past self, you bet she'd rant at her younger self. The person hardest

on Cat is Cat herself. Almost to an irritating degree to be honest, though it looks like most of the angst is past.

Skaddx

Yeah Cat is being a bit of hypocrite. I mean Juniper made a plan that works perfectly. She is not the Magic expert or the Intelligence expert so how could she possibly predict someone can shutdown scrying over a province and shunt all the Gates to layers of Hell? Granted with Masego and Akua gone there are no magic scholars on the Callow payroll so once the trap shuts she is screwed. We have seen personal anti scrying protection. And intelligence gathering is Viv and Hakram's Job.

Still on Cat at least Juniper had plans. Cat's plan to get the Drow was nothing when she went then defeat Sve Noc in direct combat...Sve has what millennium of experience with magic and Cat didn't know anything about magic at the time. then her plan was flip one sister against the other right they are going to sell each other out over some random they just met and can kill. Even Cat's army saving move only works if there is no Hero leading the charge who can look across and say hey she is not Named and not a Fae anymore keep going lads. When is the last time Cat actually used a plan? Cat uses Chaos Plan but she just goes full chaos and hopes she ends up on top by improvising. Meanwhile Tyrant mixes actual Chaos, First Move always works amongst other Story expertise and actual strategic/tactical planing with political manipulation. Cat is basically a much worse Tyrant.

pagesbe

Juniper could have predicted that there was a non-zero chance that the largest group of collected Named for decades would be able to fuck with a trick that was reliable yes, but also absolutely critical for not being completely fucked. Juniper well all-or-nothing in a plan that involved numerous individuals that specialize in screwing over foolproof plans.

You seem very fond of leaving context out of Cat's "plans." Cat couldn't plan going to the Drow because no one knew anything about them; they even had more intel on the Dead King. That's why they were literally the last resort. Then she needed to take Sve Noc out. I mean, yeah she doesn't know what Sve Noc would do, but her entire Drow force would mutiny if they learned her true intentions, and even if they didn't they don't know Sve Noc's capabilities either. She had very few options at that point, so all she could do was hopefully stack the deck in her favor as much as possible.

Turning the sisters against each other? First of all, her options at that point were “try something that probably won’t work and probably die, or roll over and DEFINITELY die.” Guess what she tried? Secondly, she was operating under the assumption that the sister’s weren’t a perfectly united front. If you go back to that section, she mentions that she believed that one of the sister’s was publicly Sve Noc, and the other was in a constant state of agony as a “horse” of sorts. Plus, one of the sisters welcomed her to the Everdark, the other cursed at her. She hoped more than figured that enough time spent in this condition would render the “horse” sister amendable to actual negotiation. She was wrong, but honestly her attempts led to what actually worked and thus were infinitely better than getting squashed like a bug.

She used plans at the Battle of the Camps. She used a plan to save the 3rd army. She didn’t exactly use a plan at the Dead King’s place, but to be fair, they figured out that if you actually had a plan it would fail. If Cat has information and time to plan, she totally uses plans. Admittedly usually she has Juniper write them up, but I’m guessing that if Cat had been with them she wouldn’t have let them do this, because of the reasons discussed in this very chapter.

And when she saw 7000 horseman charging at the flank of her army, what was she going to do? “Oh, opposing them would be too risky, I should look for a safer option.” At that point there were no safer options. It was take the chance that she would be able to stalemate them because of her reputation for destruction, or watch them destroy her army. Cat’s biggest gambles are done when she has no other feasible options. In that light, even a plan with laughable odds is better than rolling over and dying, or letting massive amounts of your followers die.

[sivarajan](#)

And you’ve left all the context out of Juniper’s plan. That’s because you don’t know it, but still...

magesbe

Actually we know all the context of Juniper’s plan, between this chapter and the one where Hakram told her about why they were there. It even mostly excuses Juniper, which is why she got off with a slap on the wrist.

Skaddix

No one knows why scrying is down or Gates are being shunted. So yes I agree since personal scrying protection exist Juniper should be able to predict one could should it down over a wider area. Gates, I mean I guess Weseka has shown something similar Weseka's Ability aren't public knowledge that Juniper would know she needed to plan. Also we still don't know who is causing the issues its not the Heroes though or at least it doesn't seem likely the Heroes are doing it based on who we know is in the Province. So Hierarch and Tyrant are good picks but again Juniper's Job is not Intelligence Gathering that is Viv's Job. So if Juniper fails cause she didn't know what those two can do well that is on Viv and Hakram to a lesser extent since he is suppose to bridge the gap. Or you could say its cause Callow only has three people with extensive knowledge on Named and Magic. Cat took two of them into the Underdark in Akua and Indrani. While Masego went to his father. So Juniper didn't even have a magic expert and/or a High Arcana level Spellcaster.

My issue is you seem to give Cat a free pass for gambling and lack of knowledge but don't apply that to Juniper. Cat's recent exploits only work cause no one on the other sides know what her abilities are right now. In the first case the young lord didn't believe the Fae Stories. In the second case she is going up against people who do believe the Fae stories. Cat is not getting out situations cause she Planned anything, she is doing it cause unlike Juniper she can rely on a massive amount of personal power when things go wrong.

magesbe

Catherine's hardly the pinnacle of planning and forethought, I wasn't trying to say she was. I'm saying that when she does fly by the seat of her pants, it's usually not because she decided to just randomly fuck planning and do whatever she feels like at the time, like some reviewers seem to be implying. Catherine chews herself out for the mistakes she makes, so I hardly feel the need to do so here; there's any number of chapters featuring her berating herself. Also, having a lot of personal power doesn't mean that knowing how to leverage it somehow makes it cheating or something. It means she knows her reputation and what she can do, and uses that as yet another tool. It's a part of her planning process.

medailyfun

Her plan to visit Dead King was insane from the beginning, and she continued with Everdark in even more desperate way. Why not try with Dwarves first? Talk with Tyrant directly? Reconcile with Malicia? Aren't those more obvious actors? And even without those parties Callow's situation was not that bad, so for me her actions look like driven by the extreme depression and tunnel vision.

As for her recent stand with the horsemen, why she have not prepared any backup variant? She still have her Night power, even if it would leave her exhausted it's better than leaving her dead. All and all, Cat still suffers from taking insane risks and having tunnel vision in situations where it could be avoided.

matesbe

Every one of your questions was answered in the text directly or heavily implied by circumstances, so there's no point in posting rebuttals here. If you don't think those answers are satisfactory, that's on you, because it seems to me most people do.

The question about the recent stand with horseman; surprise gates are a bad idea. She had to go through a literal battleground to reach her destination and it's only because she had a flying horse she could pull it off. When literally every second counts (as it really did), you don't have half an hour to organize a large force, plot a safeish route through Arcadia, bring them through there, and then organize them on the other side. If you have a rebuttal for all these points, tell me.

When going through the Gate she knew they needed help, possibly immediately, and didn't know that her only option would be to run a massive, dangerous bluff. Though she may have been able to escape, seeing as she only commented that she couldn't kill them all.

If she had stopped to gather forces together, it would have been too late.

medailyfun

Of course, there are narrative reasons known only to the author and it's his story, not mine, but I wanted to outline rational variants.

As for the the proceran horse issue, I definitely was not thinking about the gate, actually the author's decision to use a gate to transport Cat to the battlefield puzzled me, since it is common agreement

among the readers that gate travel is too unpredictable in duration that's why used sparingly.

Andrew Mitchell

My recollection of how gates work is that you never know how long it's going to take, but you always take less time than you would in creation.

imagesbe

If you didn't mean gating through allies, then I have no idea how you'd expect her to be able to bring in any backup. Also, what Andrew said.

I didn't mean there were hidden reasons for your suggestions being bad ones, I mean there are literally reasons in text. However, I do not care enough to go track down quotes personally so I'll drop it; however, you'll find a few around chapter 23 of book 4, though some are earlier and some are later.

medailyfun

I was thinking in terms of what bare minimum magic stuff Cat can make to affect the cavalry in addition to standing on their way (cause we do need this stand for the nice narrative :)) And I think big plain curtain of night behind her back without any additional effects besides just being black would be more than enough to support her point.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Actually, I'm pretty sure if she hadn't had a flying horse, she would have gotten a gate on the ground – probably not inside that fortress, but uncomfortably close. When she makes a gate, her exit point is set at the moment she creates the entrance to Arcadia, and every time so far it has been accessible to the party coming through.

That said, the reappearance of Fae forces and strongholds in her path is probably not a good sign. That could be the switch from Winter to Night, but it could also be that the Winter/Summer court is giving way to the two remaining courts.

[Mental Mouse](#)

On the field of war (or politics, or any other blood-stakes arena), “no one could have predicted that” *does not pass muster*. The unpredictable is a basic part of war, and both Murphy’s and Finagle’s laws become forces of nature on a battlefield.

The business of war planning is exactly to account for not only the resources and tactics you *know* the opponent has, but also for the unexpected stuff they might pull out of a hat – and for other unexpected developments, that might spoil the plans of either side or both. That is where Juniper and Vivienne ultimately failed – not failing to think ahead, but failing to consider “what happens if our carefully worked-out plan does, somehow, go sour?” And so they put everything they had on their plan, forgetting that, famously, “no plan survives contact with the enemy”.

quite possibly a cat

Cat has been fucking up to an ever increasing degree ever since she became a full on Fae. Relying on the fae gates was always going to blow up in their faces eventually. It culminated in the Underdark where she decided to take on Sve Noc with a comically simple plan made of villain tropes that always backfire.

Why do you think Cat near instantly decided she never wanted to be a Winter Fae ever again as soon as she got her mortality back?

usernamesbco

I’d have called her a piece of shit commander if she DIDN’T do this. Akua has the right of it, there is a huge gulf between being a person and being a position. The first can be a friend, the second can’t allow friendship to enter into the equation.

I’m more miffed about her self flagellation for being “too much like Black,” because that calculating detachment is absolutely necessary for military command. His fault isn’t that he does it, it’s that he never stops.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I strongly disagree. This is how things work when you’re playing in the big leagues, with lives and more hanging in the balance. Cat chewed out her subordinates thoroughly, but also listened to them, and did not punish them arbitrarily. I note that the meeting covered the topics we discussed in the last chapter’s comments, including: 1) The point of several apparently-good tactics leading nearly to ruin, specifically because of the failure of return gates – and it was counting on

those return gates that was the fatal military mistake. and 2) the gross inappropriateness of the “arrest party”, for all the reasons we noted and one we hadn’t.

Draeysine

Go vote

magesbe

This was brilliant, and almost tailored as a response to those with, admittedly, understandable doubts about Cat’s actions last chapter (though I know better than to believe the chapter was a DIRECT response). Cat knows what she’s doing.

And every time I hear her call Black Father I can’t help but smile. I think Black will be rescued, with the Bard’s latest play with him I don’t think his potential has been played out, but there’s the chance he’d choose death over playing the Bard’s game (and him saying “mistake” in that epilogue was about him saying that now that he knew the Bard wasn’t done with him, he could possibly foil her plans by dying).

caoimhinh

I like that too, it shows that EE reads our comments and take them into consideration.

Do you remember that part a couple of chapters ago when Cat mentioned the number of horses taken by the Helikean Cataphracts as being more than the actual number of riders and how they probably had others in a camp somewhere nearby?

Both things had been mentioned in comments in the previous chapter in a discussion between readers, so EE taking those comments and incorporating that information in the story is pretty nice.

Readers have tons of info that can help a writer improve the story, so it’s awesome when they check it and apply it. I guess that’s one of the greatest advantages of a web serial.

[Liliet](#)

Are you sure EE is taking this from the comments and wouldn’t have done the exact same thing without them?

Answering questions raised by the previous chapter in the next one particularly doesn’t need readers’ response to be obvious 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

We do know EE is reading the comments and at least sometimes responding to them, but it’s an open question *how much* he’s drawing from the comments, versus just getting technical

points right, so that the more knowledgeable commenters can spot some things in advance that simply need to happen.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

I'm pretty sure the 'answer narrative questions that were /just/ discussed in the comments' falls into pre-planned category tho lmao. It's not like EE rolls dice to decide what to cover next, things flow into one another.

The technical things like horses are more plausible, though I still suspect EE knew this already.

caoimhinh

Hmm, true. But it seemed too precise, even the wording was similar to that of the comment talking about the horses and the other talking about the camp. And since those were details never mentioned before (even that logistic of having more horses than riders in the Army of Callow was never mentioned before, despite it being something obvious in hindsight) it seems natural to consider that the information came from the one who mentioned it first, the commenter. It's not like it's something bad, just that it seems that bit of insight came from the readers, using that is perfectly fine and actually recommendable, since it can improve the story giving it consistency and also clearing readers' doubts that ambiguity or passing over the subject would have generated.

It wouldn't even be the first time it happened in this story actually; as early as Volume 1, when Black first gave Cat a lesson in how to 'fight and kill', he showed her how to fight using a legionary's shield, a commenter pointed out that such thing was only viable for troop battles in a formation, not individual combat since the legionaries shield was designed to fight relying on others covering you from the sides, and thus was not the type of fighting style Black was supposedly teaching Cat; a couple of chapters later Cat then mentioned that Black actually used a smaller shield when he fought, that the first lesson was only about how legionaries fought and after that he taught her how to fight using sword and smaller shield which was his fighting style. Nevertheless in Cat's following battles she fought using the "middle-height stance" that Black taught her in the first lesson (which was supposedly only for legion formation), but whatever, she later dropped even that and developed her own style. And also the retconning of rulers of Vaccei (the first characters introduced as being from Champion's Blood) to be from Bandit's Blood, which was first pointed out by readers long before EE went back to fix that.

Point is, there's a chance that EE is answering people's doubts from comments and using information readers provide to improve in the details of the story, nothing bad with that, I think that's a good thing.

An webnovel author that listens and properly answers the readers words is way better than one who doesn't.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, it is, you're very not wrong. I'm just annoyed by the 'ooooh the writer is reading the comments to know where to take the story next!' stance I've seen in more than one fandom -_-

caoimhinh

Ahh, I see, it was a misunderstanding then. Sorry if my initial comment sounded like that, I intended it as praise for taking trivia and comments from readers and incorporating those details to the story, while answering our questions through the chapters, since that enriches the novel.

I agree with you, it would be a huge disrespect to any author to say that they don't know where to take their story.

[Liliet](#)

Like, answering questions through the chapters = like erratic didn't first *raise* those questions through the chapters 😞

I mean I do figure that like once in a blue moon there'd be an adjustment but imho yeah it's disrespectful to have that as your first guess for why the chapter seemed to mirror the comment section.

danh3107

I'm not satisfied by this chapter. My opinion means very little in the end but honestly, it feels like you skipped the actually interesting conversation at the end to make a snappy closing line. Oh and Viv has no name, we don't know if she's getting a new one or not and it doesn't seem like we'll find out any time soon.

So the group of named called the Woe had one and a half books before becoming three named and two normal people. Sure sure "roles are more important than names" yadda yadda, but this series started with the concept of Names and how they worked. Now they're almost entirely irrelevant. I can't lie and say that doesn't bother me.

Maybe you're building up to something, maybe cat and viv are making new names like Masego did but I don't know.

I hope you understand erratic that I really love this story and I'm just putting my thoughts out. Thanks for writing.

magesbe

Cat may not have a Name, but she's hardly a normal person. And I still believe that Viv will transition into a new Name eventually, give it a bit. She's been onscreen all of 2 chapters as a non-Named now.

[daegone823](#)

I miss the names too they served to define characters.

My favorite moments were when characters seized names at integral moments or used aspects. Chidur vs Cat was my favorite fight, two characters who were just not fighting to survive but for there dream(there narrative/destiny).

When a named used an aspect it wasn't just a cool power they got or bought. The aspect was a part of there life that they earned. When two names fought it was two stories clashing.

We as the readers can reflect on the epic emboldened letters when Hakram learned Stand or Sabbah learning Obey(epic) wonder how the heroes/villains gained there aspect.

I am selfish in these opinions, I will continue to read and vote but the story has lost a bit of the spark that enthralled me.

Tom

"this series started with the concept of Names and how they worked. Now they're almost entirely irrelevant."

The gods Above and Below bestow Names upon individuals in a back and forth cyclical struggle that perpetuates lots of violence and suffering for all the inhabitants of Calernia. Ending the Arcadian cycle was foreshadowing for ending the cycle of violence perpetuated by the gods via Names... so I wouldn't count on Cat & co coming back into Names.

I actually liked the content post-Name for Cat more, her winter powers were pretty neat. I wouldn't mind seeing her dicking around more with Night though 😊 Actually I really liked the scenes in Keter with the elf and the horned lord... I'm hoping for more fight scenes against reality-warping characters in the future 😊

Oh yeah, the character development is good too. *cough

Zachary

Yeah, the “moving beyond Names” stuff is an important part of the narrative. Names are bestowed by Above/Below, so it stands to reason that the only way to potentially “break the cycle” is for people outside of that framework to act.

[daegone823](#)

I would believe that if Cat had not just appointed a new god. Or if her only endgame against the Dead King/hidden horror was to bottle him up. Cat’s goals were always centered in Calow she uses any means necessary for victory.

If the author chose she would employ heroic or even villainous characters to do her bidding.

I’m just saying narrative may have been moving against names that existed as absolute evil or good but maybe new names can rise. Ones that embody the new regime ignoring morality.

Unless of course the goal is a peaceful circle of people holding hands. The only way the gods lose is if there is no conflict. This names will always be bestowed onto either side of a conflict.

Azure

I agree. The conversation with Vivienne not being fleshed out robs us as readers. Like why would so little detail be provided about a conversation between two of the Woe who haven’t seen each other in nearly a year. It feels like Vivienne is no longer important or worth investing in as she’s just glossed over. Honestly I love this story but I’ve been finding it increasingly easy to wait for the next update. The Everdark portion dragged out way too long, and now Catherine is turning into somebody I don’t really like. And the glossing over of conversations with characters that have been missing from the narrative just makes me lose interest. I might take a break and come back in a few months. Maybe saving up to read several chapters at once will help with the frustration of seeing so little information provided in each part.

Andrew Mitchell

I think that’s a viable strategy given your feelings. I’m currently waiting until the end of Mother of Learning before I binge the last major arc.

Personally, I’m disappointed not to see that conversation with Vivienne however, I’m pretty sure EE has a very good reason for not showing us that conversation now and I trust

EE to deliver a bigger payoff later. Maybe seeing it from Vienne's perspective as an Interlude?

Jecherio

I feel that this actually makes the guide even better because it does not limit its characters to named. And if you followed up until now, you know the drawbacks of a name too. I feel this is more an evolution than anything else.

Vortex

Personally I like that they aren't just crutching on name mechanics to win every fight or execute every plan. It gives their decisions, both good and bad, a lot more weight. Catherine single handedly obliterating thousands of enemy soldiers with night goddess shenanigans isn't nearly as cool as her sitting in front of them, alone, bluffing them into stopping the charge.

[Liliet](#)

Names can't constitute the meat of the story. They're always a reflection/exaggeration of something real. Getting to see the non-exaggerated version be exactly as awesome is... good storytelling, imho.

Stormblessed

I partially agree with you. I think it would've been nice to have Cat's conversation with Viv out in the open instead of in the margins. Although I'm not sure how necessary it is, but yeah, like 90% on board there.

I disagree about the name stuff however. For one thing Cat basically has a Name even though it isn't a true Name, she's still High Priest of Night and Black Queen besides. It isn't an official one, but it's close enough for government work.

However, Viv's lack of a name is story relevant. For it explores names in the other direction. How does one lose a name? What does losing a name mean for a person? How does a group of ostensibly Named individuals fare when one of their own loses a name? These questions tie directly back to the point of the story being about Named and so Viv losing her name is a good thing there.

[Fayhem](#)

> "My opinion means very little in the end but honestly, it feels like you skipped the actually interesting conversation at the end"

I don't think that conversation got elided for the sake of a snappy closing line. I think that it was because Vivienne's full reasoning is based on plot-relevant information that the author isn't ready to divulge yet. I could be wrong ofc, but at present my expectation is the details of the conversation will come forward explicitly once knowing them will no longer undermine whatever EE is building up to. Personally, I'd guess that Viv felt the need to come to Iserre with a major force bc she/the Jacks dug something up about Hierarch since who/what exactly Tyrant is aiming him at seems like the biggest or at least most mysterious Sword of Damocles hanging over everyone's plans right now. And it would make sense EE mightn't want to spoil that mystery for the sake of describing a debriefing conversation. All just guesswork of course, but it hangs together for me at least.

Matt

Hmm....I think Cat comes off as overly prideful, here – at least to some extent.

Yes, Juniper fucked up, and that needed to come out, but this level of dressing down, especially in combination with what happened last chapter, IMO makes Cat look like a jerk than anything else.

Yes, there were valid point to criticize, but it felt less like members of the Woe interacting, and more like the Queen yelling at her retainers – which, while is kind of mentioned as being the point near the end of the chapter, only serves to make Cat less likable, IMO.

The segment with Cat saying 'I worked with her (Vivienne) to help her 'avoid' her mistakes twice' is also somewhat hilariously ironic, given how badly she messed up in the whole situation with procuring the Drow/Sve Noc, and literally gambled all of Callow's future with it. Congrats on turning Viv into a sycophant.

And that's not even taking into consideration the oath she now has no intention of keeping with Vivienne regarding killing Akua.

magesbe

Cat's mistakes and Viv's mistakes were different. Cat is saying here that if she were in Vivienne's place, she wouldn't have made those mistakes. Making your own mistakes doesn't disqualify you from being able to correct others, especially if those mistakes weren't the same (or even if they were but you learned from yours).

Also, even Hakram isn't a sycophant, and there's no member of the Woe who's ever going to be as much of a yes-man as him for Cat.

Death Knight

Not for naught is she called the Black Queen.

I don't know if you can still recall when Black SPOKE to her all the way back in Summerholm? I think many of the readers (myself included) did not like him at all when he was like that. However if the character polls are any indication, a vast majority of the readers have moved on from that. This too shall pass once the Woe is reunited and banter resumes and this chastisement is demoted to a footnote in the story of Catherine Foundling.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Note that Cat herself took serious offense to Black's **Speaking** to her, hardly reduced when she learns to do it herself.

Morgenstern

Actually, it was explicitly said in just the last chapter that Cat DOES still want to keep the oath. She told it to Hakram... Akua will be Akua until the Doom of Liesse has to go – but she STILL will have to go in the end, no two ways about it. Because there is absolutely nothing that can forgive what she did, she HAS to pay. That's exactly what Cat told Hakram she intends to do; him understanding and accepting that smaller change without many big words about it (much smaller in comparison to what you seem to say here, I mean; her going back on that vow – she doesn't, she fully intends to fucking keep it; Akua WILL pay – only she will pay as "Doom of Liesse", the Praesi noble she acted as, while she will be allowed to be the nicer person Akua while she is still useful/necessary, adopting, in some ways, Akua's own thoughts about being two personas – she still has only one existence and will pay with that, so Akua will pay for the noble's mistakes, too – in the end; she just gets some smaller mercy of being allowed some niceties before being killed in the end, as a reward for being nice now.. being allowed to try to balance the scales somewhat before she gets killed... Cat's oath was to kill Akua eventually, but use her beforehand for as much as her uses are worth, anyway, as just another kind of payment,, Cat is just being nicer about using her now, instead of being a sadist slaver...).

[Adrian V](#)

I like the callback to what she as a person vs the black queen need/do/feel etc, i think that while in most points they are right that the needs of the queen supercede those of the individual she is also wrong because those feeling and needs dopn't dissapear, they are just bottled up until it explodes and i think part of what happened was that, she didn't allow herself

to really grieve for Nauk (ok just before the funeral maybe but the need to put it aside strained her) among other things and so we had this little eruption.

And who says she doesn't carry her own little PTSD?

medailyfun

I don't like floating notion of PTSD in comments, cause in medieval society it was more like a common background in everyone's lives, not something extraordinary that we see today.

[Fayhem](#)

I'm very curious what your supporting source is for that. Could you point me to it? It sounds like an interesting read.

medailyfun

It's really interesting topic and I recommend to carefully read at least half of the links at https://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/wiki/faq/militaryhistory#wiki_post_traumatic_stress_disorder

[Fayhem](#)

AskHistorians is one of the best subs and honestly now I feel like I should have anticipated they'd have resources on that lol. Thanks for the link!

[Fayhem](#)

So I read at least the top 1-2 replies on 6 of the links pertaining to that, focusing specifically on the ones pertaining to ancient/medieval life ofc. And, uh, none of them seem to really support you?

You said that "in medieval society [PTSD] was more like a common background in everyone's lives, not something extraordinary that we see today." But the biggest common thread across the replies is "there isn't enough data to necessarily support drawing a conclusion about the prevalence or existence of PTSD as we would recognize it" which definitely is not the same thing as what you said, and the second biggest commonality was that most of them then followed that with "but here's some indicative examples that suggest PTSD may have been a real thing with serious effects in ancient life, even if they didn't conceptualize it in the same way we do in a modern/Western context". There is repeated reference to the concept that differing cultural standards meant that the commission of violence against others wasn't necessarily traumatic in

the way we normally expect it to be nowadays, but that very specific aspect of what can potentially *cause* PTSD doesn't seem especially relevant to the question of whether it was a real thing in ancient/medieval life regardless of specific cause.

If you disagree with my interpretation of any of those threads that's your prerogative of course, but I would be interested in hearing what you're looking at that makes you see it differently. I would post the links but the last time I did that with a reddit post it plugged the entire post into my comment and idk exactly what you did differently to make that not happen. However I can at least post the titles of the threads for greater ease of reference. They were:

"Was PTSD any more, or any less, prevalent amongst ancient and medieval soldiers than today's soldiers?"

"Are there any indications of combat PTSD in societies like the Spartans, Khan's or Alexander's armies?"

"Did men of the past suffer emotional trauma from war and killing?"

"Did people in ancient/medieval times suffer from PTSD?"

"Are there any examples of PTSD in ancient wars?"

medailyfun

Your summary is sound, it was just bad phrasing on my side, I meant the medieval life in general came with so much stress and violence that things which may cause PTSD in modern environment probably would not make them flinch.

[Fayhem](#)

Mm fair enough, desensitization to violence is def a thing and so is not picking the right phrasing (as I can attest from my life as well lol). It's worth noting that is definitely not the only possible source of PTSD however, and at least based on the handful of reddit comments I just read (AKA, not actually all that much lol) it seems like that desensitization applied more to specifically the commission of violence yourself. If Cat would have PTSD about anything, I don't think anyone would argue it's because she has a problem with the violence she's committed; it would be vastly more likely to be because of the parade of horrors she's endured (e.g., the Winter-fueled nightmare marathon she suffered during the Battle of the Camps and won't discuss even with Hakram) and never really addressed in favor of pushing forward because she doesn't think she's allowed to matter to herself too much, or because

of the horrors she feels she's failed to prevent (e.g. most notably the Doom of Liesse).

lennymaster

Recent discoveries indicate that PTSD may not merely be a psychological problem, but also a physical one caused by tissue damage and scarring in the brain due to side effects of medication and or vibrations caused by extremely loud noises and explosions. It may be that PTSD is not just something that was unknown until recently but that it actually was less of an issue when guns, grenades and bombs were still unknown.

One medication example would be an anesthetic that was used during the Vietnam War that has by now been proven to cause mental issues when used with loud noises around. It is still used to this day as it works very well for people who react allergically to the more common ones, but only with extreme caution.

[Mental Mouse](#)

While we've certainly learned a lot more about the various ways a human mind can be damaged by war, there are reports of similar syndromes running back to mythology. ISTR an article or book with the keywords "... and he looked into her helmet" (which is an Iliad reference).

edrey

you really know how to end the chapter, father and daughter, and they are close to meet too

Quite Possibly A Cat

So how is this ID check thing working? It really feels like it should blow up in her face.

Cat: "I feel like I'm forgetting something really important, so let's hurry."

Random Mage: "Alright, this won't hurt a bit." *Stabs Cat in the heart* "This was an imposter. There are many things that lead me to this conclusion, but the biggest sign is how she's bleeding and slumped over dead."

Cat's Ghost: "Sve Noc, I need a resurrection over here, stat!"

curious

I think the most important part of this chapter was Vivian saying, 'None of this counts until we confirm it's you.' Then she promptly ignored that and trotted off happy that she wasn't a Woe-reject.

This sentence, and Cat's acceptance of an AMATEUR mage inspection, all but guarantees that she will FAIL in the next chapter and that will be our weekend cliffhanger.

Cat's soul is tied in a complex way to Collar Fairy who is making a Well of Night, and Cat is constantly relying on a Staff of Night. She did not deign to explain to Hakram, Vivian, or Juniper what happened to her. They will be taken by surprise, and then their response will be unpredictable and my wager is that it will inhibit Cat at a pivotal time for the Battle of the Camps.

I wouldn't be surprised if it is Grey Pilgrim who releases her to stop the battle and direct everyone North to fight the Dead King. Or, maybe and I think more likely, she'll be summarily killed and the Drow will have zero reason to cooperate with Callow, we will have a POV shift for a few chapters and/or a Catherine stumbles through the Night nonsense chapter series about "personal development and character growth", and then Masego and/or Pilgrim will resurrect her. My strong odds is on Pilgrim being instrumental in what comes next for her. I also think Juniper and Vivian will take to heart her admonition even though it isn't HER.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Which is strange, because of all characters present, it is Viv herself who is acting least "like herself". I don't think I got this point into a prior comment, but if we hadn't had POV from her, it's Viv who I'd be suspecting of being an impostor.

And her Name-loss/breakdown *still* might be the result of some subtle attack from Malicia and/or Pilgrim.

RanVor

That's not strange at all. Vivienne has been dealing with a situation that was completely new to her for a year off screen. It would be far stranger if she didn't change.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's not her change that's the strange part, it's that everyone's focusing on Cat's identify, when Viv's changes are much more obvious externally.

Cat comes back and basically does the usual – saves her armies through creativity and badassery, demonstrates her usual leadership and care for Callow and the legions, knows just how to talk to everyone (seriously, has Cat ever *accidentally* offended someone?). Even her flying zombie horse recognizes her immediately.

And having come back, she finds that Viv has lost her Name, *left* Callow (taking her regency and seal with her) to launch a major military misadventure, dragged in Juniper (who arguably should have known better) on the same, and (despite being raised in the nobility) made a really drastic error of political judgement regarding her Queen. Just on these external points, it's Cat who quite reasonably could ask Viv "yeah, who are you really?" (Indeed she does kinda ask that, if not "that way" and with her own plans in the background.)

quite possibly a cat

Viv is in the process of transitioning to the Queen of Callow. I'm not sure how much of that is intentional, and how much is unconsciously following fate, but it makes for a great story. "HAHA! It was me! I was good all along! I steal the Crown for Good!" Like she's Snape or something. Of course, it is all part of Cat's non-villainous plan, but we won't write that part down.

snark

Chekhov called. He wants his gun back.

Phoenix

The ritual meant to make sure that a foreign force isn't controlling her, not that her soul hasn't changed or that she has the power of winter. Also to call the legion mages amateurs is a bit incorrect. They aren't well versed in High Arcana magics, but rituals are something they can do given the time to learn them. The ritual will likely happen and while the results will be like "Yeah, she's who she says she is but her connection to her power seems filtered now. From the look of it, whatever is filtering her power doesn't control her but I don't know what it is." Which will lead to Cat actually catching everyone (close officers/seniors) up with what happened in the Underdark and what not.

[Mental Mouse](#)

You may have undue faith in the sophistication of their ritual, especially when dealing with a new and unknown power. Unfortunately, they likely *will* be able to determine "oh, she has a mortal body instead of a Winter construct now" – that seems pretty basic.

[Mental Mouse](#)

We already had the "character growth in the Night" sequence, so I don't think EE will repeat that. But yeah, Cat's

complete change in metaphysical status is a major issue for next chapter.

That said, I'd assume she remembers all the passwords and countersigns, such as the one that tripped up Akua when she tried the possession bit.

Mental Mouse

Unfortunately Sve Noc is a Dark power....

Jesse Coombs

I find it odd everyone is saying Viv has no name. Every time we see Lady-Regent, or Lady, it is capitalised. Admittedly so are things like Marshal and Warlord, and Marshal isn't a name. But it could indicate that she has transitioned into a 'ruler' type name. Which is what Cat wants/needs; a replacement for herself as Queen.

matesbe

I mean, it's possible that Viv has a Name and is just sneaking it by everyone... but I don't think it's likely. People with Names can usually tell if someone else has one, unless it's a stealth type name or they're inexperienced.

Jesse Coombs

IIR no named has 'sensed' Scribe.

matesbe

Scribe's Role is an "out of sight, out of mind" thing where she manages affairs behind the scenes. It's actually a pretty stealthy role, just not one that involves actual, personal infiltration.

Mental Mouse

Viv's own psychological condition is the surest tell that she has no replacement Name. Yet,

caolimhinh

Interesting chapter.

I still think this campaign was a solid military choice, despite the failures and costs of it (although that was due to unforeseeable factors and probably Narratively enforced by Creation).

I agree that the attempt to escort Cat away to test her was bad idea to do it in front of soldiers, now that is confirmed that the identity verification needs a ritual site to carry instead of a quick inspection. I kinda expected more from those mages (not

that they would be anywhere near Masego's level, but at least they could have things ready or an artifact for the test to be done quickly if it was gonna be done in public), they really need better training, no wonder Cat was so angry that they wanted to carry that right away.

Vivienne's self-pity is past the point of annoying, I thought she was over that depression state. Now I understand why she participated in the campaign when she obviously belongs to the city managing the Kingdom of Callow: she wanted to prove she isn't worthless now that she lost her Name, she is afraid that being Nameless she would be thrown out of the Woe. Hopefully, Viv will get over that soon and either gain a new Name or learn to live without it without feeling like trash.

So, next chapter will be the preparation for the battle and end in Cliffhanger when the battle starts? Will be nice to see Pilgrim's reaction when he looks at Cat once again, and hopefully Cat won't let his words affect her again like the 'you affect those around you' that haunt her across Book 4. If she is going to pretend to be mature and thinking of everyone below her age as kids then she better start acting mature and not let that old man brainwash her into doubting everything again.

Typos found:

- when my delaying my return/ me delaying OR the delaying of my return
- I reasons to be furious / I had reasons
- do you believe Adjutant the Lady-Regent interfered / Adjutant or the Lady-Regent
- she had grown in the year I'd seen her / I hadn't seen her
- I regretted ordering her to put her down / put it down
- need not be so humiliating / didn't need to be OR needed not be
- explain your how you used them / explain yourself how you used them OR eliminate the 'your'

[Mental Mouse](#)

Another typo: ..."prepare the ritual," I said. "Discretely." / Discreetly.

IDKWhoitis

Admittedly, I would have preferred for Vivs reprimand to be longer or more complete in detail. But within the scope that after donning her Black Queen Mask, and realizing she is the mirror image of Black, it does make sense that her mind would lose a little focus and heat.

I like the confirmation that part of that anger was about the optics of Power within the Army of Callow, and that even with a mailed fist raised and bloodied, Cat is willing to put fear to rest within her friends.

She was mean, she was partly cruel, but ultimately it was necessary to be the Black Queen, not Cat for once.

I wonder if Procer will retreat in full, deciding that fighting Cat really isn't in her best interest. It's one thing to fight the Army of Callow in the fullness of its glory. It's an entirely different thing to try to survive it with Cat at the helm. And we know they fear her.

imagesbe

I think the Princess in charge might want to retreat, but this battle is a dead wringer for being the fight that will one day be called "The Prince's Graveyard." So there's probably going to be a fight.

Andrew Mitchell

They're not going to retreat until they've got at least a little more blood. Remember that Malanza is going to get convicted of treason if she doesn't fight. The First Prince has already had that vote passed in the Highest Assembly.

HardcoreHeathen

I'm confused about why the conversation with Vivienne was skipped over in summary instead of the one with Juniper.

You spent the last five or so chapters building up this meeting. Teasing questions about what Vivienne was up here, what happened to her Name, could she still be trusted, and so on. That's roughly twenty thousand words of expectation-building, the result of which was a somewhat whiny paragraph that completely failed to meet my expectations.

This is not a new issue. Erratic, you have a long-standing habit of hyping up events and then skipping them. It makes it very difficult to follow the emotional thread of the story, because there are quite literally beats that are simply missing. As a result of this chapter – of the conversation between Cat and Viv – I'm no clearer on any of the questions I had when I started the chapter, and I've gained no new information to offset that.

I understand that you don't have unlimited time to devote to every issue, but of the two conversations in that tent, the one with Juniper was clearly the one of lesser importance. To put this into perspective, I'll use another example that most people have read: Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. About twenty thousand words after the concept of Hogwarts Houses is introduced, Harry gets Sorted.

There's emotional weight to the scene. Time was spent building it up. And when the scene arrived, it was used as a vehicle for worldbuilding and character revelation.

You don't get to have your narrative cake and eat it, too – if you hype up an event, you have to spend words on it. Otherwise it's just a confusing misstep that distracts from whatever else you're trying to do.

--==--==--

Alright, with structural criticism out of the way: I really liked Cat's explanation for why she got so mad about the goon squad, and what it would have looked like if she'd gone along with being "arrested." It's neat to see that her perception's grown, though I'm a bit surprised that Vivienne – who has displayed an otherwise excellent political grasp – did not see it.

Andrew Mitchell

Personally, I'm disappointed not to see that conversation with Vivienne however, I'm pretty sure EE has a very good reason for not showing us that conversation now and I trust EE to deliver a bigger payoff later. Maybe seeing it from Vienne's perspective as an Interlude?

Skaddx

I agree also I find it weird Cat is like I don't want to be biased so Juniper is getting a Court Martial by other Generals. Meanwhile Viv here is getting no punishment at all. How does that not look like Cat is either Biased to the Woe or Biased to Humans in general or Callowans specifically. If Juniper had so no I don't want to leave Callow it doesn't matter cause Viv and Hakram can overrule her. So Juniper gets to shoulder all the blame while Viv escapes by making a sad face.

[Javvies](#)

Ehhhh ... the tribunal is probably something that's relatively standard procedure for the new-model Legions of Terror that got carried over to the Army of Callow. Though, admittedly, it's probably usually lower ranked officers that go up in front of one, since it is relatively unusual for senior officers to be personally involved in major screwups, whereas junior officers get sent out with smaller detachments and get into trouble way more often than their bosses in the command tents.

It's relatively standard procedure even in the real world – when a military commander is in charge of an operation that goes sideways, it gets put under review to determine whether things going sideways is because they had a bad/unrealistic

plan or didn't react appropriately to changing conditions, or because of things beyond their control and/or knowledge.

Viv, on the other hand, is not part of the Legions or Army of Callow. There's no procedural review board for someone in her position.

The only people who could mean such a board are likely Cat, Hakram, Scribe, and Amadeus. And Hakram's disqualified for standing in review of Viv's actions because he was (presumably) deeply involved in the process that led to them being taken.

Amadeus is who knows where, as is Scribe, not that being taken to task for her mistakes by either is something that should go over well with Viv.

Mental Mouse

"The only people who could mean such a board..." Amadeus and Scribe don't belong on that list. They are agents (and movers) of Praes, and are not part of the power structure in Callow.

Mental Mouse

The confrontation with Juniper was more apropos now, for this chapter – precisely because they're on (or fresh off) a battlefield.

However, Viv's Nameloss is about to become *much* more relevant, when the mage party (and Woe) realize that Cat is no longer a creature of Winter, and indeed has a connection with a whole new power they've never encountered before.

broadaxe

Why are you guys saying cat is a fuck up, or that she makes a lot of mistakes? That's wrong, i mean yes, she does make mistakes, BUT a lot of what she does could look like mistakes but simply isn't. Cat is story savvy and knows she has to loose to win, so a lot of her 'mistakes' are semi on purpose because that is how the story will turn out in her favor :3

fbt

i thought this was brilliant, and Cat earned a lot of respect from me for her adult behavior here. she has, rather often in the past, made apparerently idiotic and impulsive moves, survived by luck, and been..well. She started out plucky, got powerful, and then lost most of both of those attributes imho. Here she convinced me she not only could be a decent ruler (despite her own thoughts on that) but already is one. At times it has been hard to root for her..but not here. go Cat! 😊

Sugar Roll

Agreed. This was an opportunity to teach some hard but necessary lessons and it was done brilliantly IMO. She just came back with fifty thousand Drows and a fat stash of Dwarven gold and she comes home to an impending catastrophe? She had to save each piece of the army of Callow to get out of the mess. She's well within her rights to be angry which she conveyed in a way where Juniper, Hune, and Vivienne can learn from. Feelings were probably hurt but they would be stronger for it and Callow would benefit as a whole.

Valkyria

Well. Interesting chapter.

Cat stopped just being just angry and throwing around her thoughts but calmed herself and acted in a mostly adult way.

I read how some comments say that it is not Juniper's fault the campaign was a blunder and she should not be punished for it. My opinion to this is that, even if it is not her fault and she had good reasons for acting the way she did, somebody has to be held accountable for the blunder it ultimately resulted in. Since she holds the military power of Callow, that naturally is to be her role.

Even in our time and age the one giving out the orders is the one who is responsible if the situation goes haywire and they "fuck up". I think it is entirely reasonable for Cat to be holding that tribunal. Also she said she will not be present or influence it in any way, because it is not personal and only the military facts matter.

I don't believe it is Juniper's fault, although I think there are certain facts that she could have taken into account (the gates not working, etc.) when creating the plan, but, as I said, somebody has to be responsible and since it were her orders and it's her military as long as Cat's gone, she's got to own that.

As to Vivienne... she's still the scared cat she was when we last saw her, and even though Hakram lost a hand she seems as insecure and whiny as ever...

It seems like she gets off with more of a slap on the wrist. But I think Cat acknowledging her success instead of dressing her down like Juniper actually was a good decision. Of course there was a talk that we did not hear (sadly, because I guess we would get a very good glimpse on how Viv's mental state and general behaviour is right now, as well as there being the possibility of development. At the moment it seems to me she didn't change at all), so Cat has probably scolded her as well.

She did a lot of useful stuff during her regency but if she doesn't change that attitude she has right now... I don't think she'll achieve much Name-wise or in general.

Tolk

Love the chapter, it's a well done dressing down. But...

[Quote] some part of me was almost disgusted at the glints of gratitude and respect I caught in her gaze when she looked at me. Like I'd not, as lovingly as callously, burned her with shame and bound her with affection so that Vivienne Dartwick would be one step closer to the woman I needed her to be. [/Quote]

Huh? Cat? Why are you feeling disgusted by scolding poor behaviour and providing constructive criticism? You even praised her good decisions, and entrusted her with that position of power in the first place! What's disgusting about helping your friend improve themselves?

Andrew Mitchell

IMO Cat's disgusted at herself for manipulating Viv (into the woman Cat needs her to be) rather than being as clear and direct with Viv as she (Cat) was with the Hellhound. We haven't seen the conversation yet so I'm not sure, but that's how I interpreted the part you quoted.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Because Cat still isn't too sure on her feet for this "command and management" business.

To casual appearance, Viv is acting like a dog who gets kicked, and responds by cringing and trying to lick the master's hand. Despite the smackdown being appropriate and necessary, Cat's still uncomfortable with having to whip people into shape, and especially her friends.

[Liliet](#)

Cat is uncomfortable with having as much power/control over Vivienne emotionally as she's been realizing she has. Vivienne values her approval and trusts her a lot more than Cat had realized previously, and that makes her feel off-balance, because she'd planned on Vivi being her double-check, someone like Juniper, unafraid to challenge her and indifferent to her disapproval.

Author Unknown

I think Juniper got off too easy.

"deploying forty thousand legionaries through magical means of ingress and egress in the single most Name-infested region of this continent"

The key part being Name-infested. Not taking into account the effect of Named and Narrative on her deployments was fine when she was still in the War College, but out here in the real world,

she has to take such factors into account or end up annihilated. She will never be a great General if she doesn't learn this lesson, and certainly shouldn't be Marshal of Callow until she does. Not unless she had someone like Cat around to advise her on those factors.

Expecting fancy magical means of attacking and retreating to work when you are Evil and attacking Good is a mistake.

Expecting superior numbers to work in the face of Named is a mistake.

Expecting to waltz through the 'most Name-infested region of this continent' when she only has Adjunct, a support character, to help is a mistake.

[Mental Mouse](#)

As Cat notes, she doesn't expect political acumen, or story-fu, from Juniper. (But yes, there are limits.) Juniper may be a brilliant commander, but it's Cat herself who brings the game-changing creativity to the fights.

medailyfun

Where is Scribe?

[Javvies](#)

Most likely, either in disguise/hiding in Grem's contingent, or detached from the Legions/Army of Callow and trying to figure out how to retrieve/rescue Amadeus.

I find the latter more likely than the former, however.

Aotrs Commander

"Looking at a mess and knowing that loving those responsible was one thing but exempting them from consequence another."

That's called being a leader, Cat.

Also, you can stop beating yourself up over manipulating Viv, because you're kinda blinding yourself to the fact that, yes, Black might have done it that way, but that's because, you know, that's how you be a good leader (or even teacher come to that; or even parent, let's be honest), and that has nothing whatsoever to do with alignment.

Black didn't work like that because it was Evil manipulative pragmatism (though in his case, that was likely an element), he did it because that's actually how you do it properly. Someone under your authority (be they servants, children, students or soldiers) fracks up, you bollock them for it (at the appropriate level), and once the bollocking is over and consequences have been dealt with, you drop it and move on. (See also Grand Admiral

Thrawn on the one hand, or I dunno, Captain Picard on the other.)

Neither screaming "I am surrounded by idiots, you have failed me for the last time!" or going "ooh, you shouldn't have done that, oh well, never mind" was the appropriate response; Cat did exactly what she should have done.

Myself? I think Juniper made entirely the wrong call; it wasn't worth risking the entire army of Callow for the remaining legionaries, especially bringing the regent along. By the time they get out of this mess, they'll have lost more troops, I think, that they were to save.

If they had wanted to save the Legions, they would have been better, I think, before Cat went off, so have simply had Masego locate them (if they needed to) and fairy-gated them out quickly and quietly. And if THAT was too much of a risk, then they needed to have been written off, as unfortunate as that was. (Honestly, Black taking them off marauding in the first place I thought was a bit dubious.)

[Mental Mouse](#)

"Black didn't work like that because it was Evil manipulative pragmatism [...], he did it because that's actually how you do it properly. "

QFT. But IIRC, Masego was already unavailable (working on that city) before this mess kicked off. Also, Black's taking the legions marauding may have been some complex scheme, perhaps partly to make sure that those legions were not available to Malicia. Unfortunately, that scheme is clearly off the rails, we'll have to see what he comes up with next.

superkeaton

Aw man, I would have actually liked to have heard Viv's reasoning

[Fayhem](#)

A fair few people have responded to the complaints about Cat berating Juniper/Vivienne excessively and made some good points. I just wanted to post a comment that I felt would bring those together in one place. To wit:

"Command takes responsibility" is a fundamental principle of leadership. "Nobody could have predicted" doesn't cut it, especially when in reality it's more like "nobody did predict"; when a decision goes wrong then the person or persons furthest up the chain of command who were involved in making the decision need to own that. That is not in ANY way something Cat excuses herself from. Even though she was not in any way directly

responsible for it and “couldn’t have predicted” the specifics of how it happened, the Doom of Liesse happened when Cat was in charge and she spent pretty much the whole of Book IV owning that so fully that half the fandom was complaining about her overdoing it. She isn’t being “unfair”, she’s holding Juniper and Vivienne to the exact same standard she holds herself to. The consistent application of the same standards to everyone is if anything the definition of fair.

[Liliet](#)

Yep. This is the right way to do it, that you’d need good reason to reject. “It was magic”, “I fucked up worse”, “they are my friends” all aren’t good reasons. And I want to specifically focus on that second one, because this isn’t a game of gotcha or a competition. If Cat and Juniper both fucked up, it doesn’t cancel out.

[benthelynx](#)

This chapter was a significant improvement on last in my opinion.

[Daniel E](#)

The Wild Hunt is still in play. I wonder if the promise of ‘Seven crowns plus one’ is still valid now that Winter as a unique power has ended. Perhaps said crowns will tie into the Prince’s Graveyard somehow.

[Mental Mouse](#)

IIRC that was specifically “seven mortal crowns plus one”, which is remarkably suggestive. That plus-one might well be for the Duke of Nightfall himself.

Mennolt van Alten

How can I follow this story? The Subscribe button brings me to a wall of text page.

Valkyria

You should have a wordpress account, you can just add it to your reader if you do.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Just stumbled across this – not directly related to the story, but relevant to the milieu:

[a href="https://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/comments/19zi6j/when_did_kingsmembers_of_the_royal_family_stop/c8srqq7/"](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskHistorians/comments/19zi6j/when_did_kingsmembers_of_the_royal_family_stop/c8srqq7/)>When did kings/members of the royal family stop leading armies on the battlefield?

Satan

Guve her that Stockholm Syndrome. She may be more human now, but who knows if it's a better human.

Zachary

On a re-read it's a little strange how Catherine actually seems way angrier after losing Winter. Seems like it would be the opposite. Not so much because of this specific incident, but the weirdest one was when she wanted to slaughter the Helike prisoners, which was pretty uncharacteristic (and Hakram even commented on it).

I mention it being a re-read, because the first time around my main take-away was colored by the latter parts of this Book, which generally involve Catherine forming more positive connections to some of the heroes and rescuing Masego.

Zachary

It's also kinda funny in retrospect that the whole point of Catherine's trips to Keter and the Everdark ended up being kinda pointless, since it never ended up being necessary to repel the Crusade. If she had stayed in Callow, she could have navigated all this stuff better and possibly negotiated something in the wake of the Dead King's invasion.

It ended up working out because she gained the drow, but that was largely due to luck (that Sve Noc was actually receptive to an alliance).

Chapter 24: Theft

"Wisdom is a tower built of failure and rue."
– Ashuran saying

It wasn't even an hour before the Third Army's banners hung above the hills that were now to my east instead of west.

"Like kicking an anthill," Vivienne said, eyes gazing far ahead.

She wasn't wrong. We were looking at the same thing, I thought, but my sight was better than hers. A sliver of Night had seen to that. General Abigail had grasped my meaning deeper than I'd thought, it seemed. I'd told her to fly the Fourth Army's banner as well as her own for a reason, namely to imply much greater

numbers in the hills than there actually were. The Summerholm girl had gone a step further than what I'd instructed and thinned her lines to an almost reckless extent: from the perspective of the Alliance soldiers in the plains below, it must look like there were at least twenty thousand fresh soldiers anchoring our left flank. Actually fighting with lines so thin would be disastrous, but it was a calculated risk. Even if the enemy suddenly marched on her she should have just enough time to redeploy before the fight began.

"Hakram's force will be revealed soon enough," I said. "That ought to pressure them into a full withdrawal."

"Wouldn't it have been quicker to send the entire host into the hills?" Vivienne asked.

Her tone was curious, not critical, and the expectation in her voice that she would be answered was almost as irritating as it was pleasing. Barely a quarter bell had passed since I'd chewed her out, and already she was back on old footing. I was glad of the confidence, I really was, and well aware it was petty of me to be irked that my displeasure hadn't left deeper marks. But Vivienne had once called me petty when speaking to Akua, unaware I was listening in, and like a lot of what she'd said that night there'd been more than a grain of truth to it.

"It would have," I agreed. "On the other hand, it also risked a standoff. They'd have been left to mass their entire army largely in peace, and we to establish a common line facing them. Two large coalition armies looking at each other over a fence, hands on swords. A lot sharper if I ever saw one. No, I want them to retreat. To give us space."

And the flanking manoeuvre by General Rumena and General Bagram, under the steady hand of Adjutant, should do the trick. When I'd been up in the sky riding Zombie, I'd had a decent look at the enemy forces on the march as well as those already fighting. The western army – the mixed Dominion and Procer force that Princess Rozala was part of – had been marching on Juniper from the north, which had logistical implications. Iserre had been stripped bare of anything edible, which meant Malanza and her allies were running on what supplies they could either carry with them or get flowing from further north. Given the size of the western army, which at a glance I'd put at more than sixty thousand strong, without a steady flow of foodstuffs they'd start burning through their stocks at a prodigious rate. The amount of men might have been manageable, but the horses? I very much doubted they could afford to keep that many war horses for long without fresh supplies coming in. Besides, the northern campaign had taught me much of how Procer handled its supply trains. In a word, badly. It came from the way their armies were put together, in my opinion,

more than any inferiority of intellect compared to the architects of the Reforms in Praes.

Instead of a unified army directly under the Tower – or, these days, me – Proceran forces were raised from the personal troops of rulers, hired fantassins and mass levies. The personal troops were trained, equipped and fed by the prince who fielded them, which was a costly thing even in peace time. That meant, as a rule, that princes and princesses of Procer had kept personal armies around the same size as those of the Old Kingdom's nobles while being both significantly richer and ruling lands both larger and more heavily populated. Proceran logistics, as they currently stood, were well-versed in keeping forces that size fed and well-equipped. The rub came when the armies grew larger, which meant bringing in fantassins or levies. The mercenary companies were usually only hired for as long as they were needed then cut loose, meaning there'd never been a *need* to develop a system to feed larger forces for long. As for the levies, well, like everywhere else in the world they were handed the bare minimum in food and arms before being sent into the grinder. Those larger armies were usually fighting on enemy territory, too, where 'foraging' – a pretty word for armed robbery – could be used to fill up the stocks.

In this particular case though, the western army was stuck in a principality already picked clean and a whole chunk of foreign Levantine troops whose personal supplies had to be running dangerously low after chasing Grem and Juniper for so long. When Hakram appeared further north with a large force, threatening to cut off their supply lines, they'd be forced to either prepare for battle or withdraw. Considering we'd have them both half-encircled and severely outnumbered, battle would not be an attractive choice. Unless heroes were involved, I thought. Which they very well might be. For all the earthly considerations pointing at why fighting us here would be a terrible idea, there was a reason I'd ordered Juniper to prepare for a fight.

"Diplomacy, then," Vivienne said, breaking my long silence.

"In a manner of speaking," I grunted. "Princess Rozala made it clear her side wants the heads of the Legions on spikes. That's not happening, so I'll be removing the issue from the table: come nightfall, if they've withdrawn then our entire coalition is gating out of here."

"Tactical offence, to allow for a strategic defence," she mused.

She half-turned to me, the azure blue cloak she'd donned when leaving the pavilion tight around her shoulders.

"And you're not afraid without the blade at their throat they won't consider bargaining?" Vivienne asked. "The truce offer I

extended to Hasenbach was refused even when it looked like we had the advantage in Iserre."

"I think with us reappearing somewhere in Arans, with supplied coming in through the northern passage and a comfortably defensible position, the First Prince will have to consider how far she can afford to push us," I frankly said. "More importantly, with us gone and the two Grand Alliance armies in Iserre within a week's march of each other the League is either going to retreat or take a beating."

"Both would be dangerous to Procer," Vivienne noted. "A retreat means they have to keep armies south to pursue. A victory on the field might prove more costly than the war to the north can afford."

"If Kairos intended to collapse Procer, he would have already done it," I said. "He wouldn't have come through the Waning Woods, either. The League armies would have battered through Hasenbach's border army in Tenerife and begun occupying southern principalities. Feasibly they could have occupied Tenerife and Salamans without getting much more of a fight, then dug in for the long term. After that..."

"All it'd take was raids into the bordering principalities for those royals to try withdrawing their troops from the north and march back to defend their lands," Vivienne softly agreed. "If Hasenbach tried to go after them through the Highest Assembly, it might lead to civil war. If she did nothing, the Dead King would likely eat the north."

"Instead he surprised us all and marched out of the Waning Woods to cut into this dance," I said. "No, he's after something from the mess in Iserre and it's not hammering nails in the Principate's coffin."

"It would not be territorial concessions, or anything monetary," Vivienne frowned. "There would have been better, easier ways to force those."

"He's a villain of the old breed," I said. "Ink on parchment isn't what he's after. I met with him, in Rochelant, and he hinted Hasenbach has been dredging something dangerous out of Lake Artoise."

"He is a liar, as you reminded me rather sharply," she said.

I'd not been pleased to hear she'd been trading information with Kairos, to say the last. It was one thing to do what I had, haggle an alliance of convenience against the Wandering Bard after trading secrets. It was another entirely to pass him detailed assessments of the Dominion's armies, even if the payment was useful word out of Salia and the north. While I'd

understood that the Jacks were still too young an organization to have penetrated deep into Procer, and certainly to have a way to pass along regular reports given the mess the Principate was in right now, relying on the Tyrant for anything meant you were getting played. If I had to guess, he'd making little deals like that with everyone he could: offering piece for piece, and ensuring he alone had a bird's eye view of what was taking place in Iserre. I was finding it worrisome Kairos had been interested in details about the Dominion armies, too. It could be another layer of deception, sure, but it might also mean he believed he would be fighting them in the future. Or that he was selling that information to the Dead King, I acknowledged with a grimace. There weren't a lot of things I'd put past Kairos Theodosian.

"Oh, there's *something* happening there," I said. "That much I don't doubt. But I don't necessarily think it's whatever trouble she's brewing that interests him. Or even her in particular, to be honest – this campaign, the First Prince herself, I think they're means to an end."

"That end being?" Vivienne asked.

"I don't know yet," I admitted. "But if he's willing to launch an entire invasion in the middle of war against Keter just to get leverage on Cordelia Hasenbach, it's not going to be a trifle."

"The man needs to die," Vivienne said. "The Hierarch as well. They're too unpredictable, Catherine. If they start swinging at the wrong moment, the consequences could be... wide-reaching, to say the least."

"I'm sure Cordelia thinks the same thing," I said. "And that's why he's made himself so very costly to remove from the board."

Strategic offence, I thought with rueful amusement, paired with tactical defence. Mad or not, I had to concede that the villain king of Helike was viciously cunning. The more the western and eastern coalitions fought without him being involved, the more reluctant they grew to engage his fresher forces. The only way out of that downwards spiral, as far as I could see, was to withdraw my forces from Iserre and let him face the storm he'd stirred without my standing shield for him. In the distance I could see Malanza's vanguard fully withdrawing from the battlefield. Even the Levantine horse that'd baited the Order of Broken Bells into chasing them all the way to irrelevance had pulled away, and now Grandmaster Talbot's knights were sheepishly riding back to camp. I'd let Juniper handle the reprimand for that, I decided. It had been her battle, even if she'd been losing it. It'd also make it clear to the high officers that she still held command even after my taking her to task.

"You haven't asked," Vivienne suddenly said.

"Asked what?" I replied.

"If I still have a Name," she said.

I glanced at her.

"I know you don't," I said. "Yours had a subtle weight, but even that is gone."

"Then you haven't asked why," she said, then blue-grey eyes narrowed. "Unless Adjutant told you."

"He didn't," I told her. "Or even explain why someone's going to end up calling him Hakram Handless, for that matter."

"And you're not worried in the slightest?" Vivienne asked, tone inscrutable. "Gods, even just curious?"

"It's a strange horse to ride, a Name," I said. "Black said it was willpower that got you on the saddle, and I don't entirely disagree with him, but I think that's only part of it."

I looked into the distance, at the Alliance host retreating into the second part of the trap I'd laid. It was a kindness that was due, not to look at her while speaking this.

"It's a recognition that you're trying to *do* something," I said. "William wanted to kill his way out of Praesi rule. Akua wanted to bind everyone else. Indrani wants to pass through life unhindered. Whatever it is you're after the Name makes you better at doing it, I won't argue that. But you don't get a Name unless you're already good at it, Vivienne."

I cleared my throat.

"So I'll answer the question you didn't ask: no, you're not getting tossed out on your ass because you can't steal the sun anymore. That's a trick. The important parts came before you were the Thief, and that hasn't gone anywhere."

Vivienne let out a shuddering breath.

"How is it," she quietly said, "that you always know exactly the right thing to say?"

The urge was there to pull away with levity, draw attention to my admittedly chequered diplomatic record, but I didn't follow it. It would have been cheapening the sincerity of the moment, and wouldn't that defeat the point of having it in the first place? So instead I said nothing, for lack of anything to say, and let silence stretch.

"The Empire killed my mother," she murmured. "Did you know that?"

My fingers clenched.

"Not for sure," I said. "But I suspected."

The moment I'd learned her last name was Dartwick, looking into her past had become a great deal easier. Out of courtesy I'd not dug too deep, but I'd had a look anyway. Her father had been a baron before the Conquest, vassal to the Count of Southpool but her family had remained rather obscure in the years that followed. There'd been a bit of interest in her father after he was widowed, before the man made it clear he would not remarry, but it'd died down quick after he did. That'd gotten me curious enough to look into the mother, and my brow had risen when I found out she'd died in a hunting accident not long after the Conquest. It could have been an actual accident, I knew. But in the early days of Praesi occupation, more than a few Imperial governors had arranged 'hunting accidents' when they were inclined to discretely put down rebellious elements.

"I say the Empire, Catherine, because it makes no difference who gave the order," Vivienne admitted. "The decision came from Governor Chuma, though he's long dead. Some might say it was in truth her fault, for joining a rebel cabal. That she knew the risks. Others might argue that whatever hired hand did it was the killer in every sense. But it's never quite that simple, is it?"

I stayed silent. The question had not been meant for me to answer.

"I think I understood that even as a child," Vivienne pensively said. "That is was larger than just my mother and the governor. That it was about Praes, what it was doing to us. The way it was doing it to us. Chuma, you see, he was one of the light-handed governors. Didn't hang whole families, only the rebels themselves. The rest got off with a *fine*."

Different Imperial governors, I thought, had taught us different lessons. Vivienne had been taught that we were cattle, to be sheared when laden and beaten when unruly. Less than human, in the Empire's eyes, but not to be hurt without reason. Mazus, though, Mazus had not been interested in such a civilized arrangement. He'd been a looter in silk clothes, a noble in nothing but the ugliest ways that word could be meant. From him I'd learned that no one in power would ever be fair unless you *made* them. Vivienne had tried to claw back some pride with her thefts. I'd tried to murder my way into authority with a sword.

"I started stealing to even the scales, though I knew coin would never be the right measure for that," she said. "I kept stealing because they deserved it. Because every time I took from them they got a taste of loss. Of what they were doing to all of us."

"And then they warned you off," I said.

"Assassin," she acknowledged. "A small cut on my father's throat, and I stayed my hand. But he'd passed when William raised the banner and the anger was still in my stomach."

"And it isn't anymore?" I quietly asked.

"You killed him," Vivienne said, evading the question. "But what did that change? They'd been killing us for years before I was ever born. Truth be told I think it was Laure that did it."

"When we spoke," I said. "In the palace."

"It wasn't the words, Catherine," she said. "You can have a silver tongue, now and then, but I did not trust you an inch back then. It was how *tired* you were. I'd seen you go from victory to victory, but that night you didn't act like you were winning."

"I wasn't," I frankly said. "And there were greater disasters on the horizon."

"You were fighting for Callow," Vivienne acknowledged. "But that was the detail that took me so long time to understand even after joining. We weren't talking about the same thing when using that word. Because for you it also meant the Fifteenth. It mean the goblin tribe in Marchford. It meant everyone willing to live under the laws, to pay their taxes and stand on the wall when the horn sounds."

"They *are* Callowans, Vivienne," I said. "I won't ignore what was the best of us, in the old days, but we can't just-"

She raised her hand to interrupt me.

"I know," she said. "I know, Catherine. And that's what killed it. Because I would look at Hakram, at Masego and Ratface and especially the goblins and I would wait for them to be the enemy. Because they'd always been, because that was what the Conquest meant. But then they kept faith, Cat. They died, and they died for you but not just that. Also because they were serving something they believed in. And that scared me, because if they weren't the enemy then what had I been fighting all these years?"

The Tower, I wanted to say. *The High Lords. What made all of us this way, heroes and villains and the ever-spreading graveyard between.* But this wasn't my moment, it was hers, and so I kept to silence once more.

"My Name was already thinning by then," Vivienne said. "Sometimes it wouldn't work as it used to. Sometimes I couldn't feel it at all. And when my hair began to grow again, I was terrified. Because if I wasn't even the Thief anymore, then what use was I?"

I saw her fingers clench.

"I nearly did some very foolish things," she said. "But Hakram cut off his hand, and if nothing else that stayed mine. And it forced me to see, Catherine, because in the months following that night I did the most good for my homeland I ever have and not a single speck of it involved theft."

She let out a breathless laugh, though it was more mockery of herself than mirth.

"I wasn't angry anymore, Cat," she said. "Or at least, not at the same people or for the same reasons. Mostly I was afraid. And the more I tried to pretend I was still fifteen and collecting my mother's dues from something that no longer existed, the more I missed the point: that I was a child, when I became the Thief, and it was a child's anger I was still heeding."

I watched her and found regret painted on her face, though a soft and thoughtful manner of it.

"But you weren't a child anymore," I said.

"And so I was no longer the Thief," Vivienne softly agreed. "Because I've learned that just taking from the enemy won't change anything. That we'll need more than that, to change the world, and that's what I want to do most of all."

And so the Name had died, I thought, along with the indignation that'd birthed it. It might be that something else would come of that, but she would never again be the Thief. The girl who had become her no longer existed: she'd been outgrown by the woman standing at my side. Vivienne Dartwick's eyes were clear, I saw, and her back straight. In the afternoon's light, cloaked in blue and hair braided like a fair crown, she seemed almost regal. I hoped, truly, that no Name came of this. The Liesse Accords, as written, would bar any and all Named from being rulers. And it was early days yet, I knew that, and it was not a decision to be made in haste.

But Vivienne Dartwick had just talked herself into being the foremost heiress-candidate to the throne of Callow.

matesbe

Well for people who wanted more insight into Vivienne... here you are. Wow.

matesbe

Also, for maybe the first time I actually got first comment. My closest previous attempt landed me being less than a minute too slow.

naturalnuke

I'm, glad, I think. It's a nice change for her, a good change, she's been riding that hate since we first saw her, and it's nice to see those jagged edges break off somewhat.

usernamebco

It makes me dislike her less.

She was kind of a nonentity until she got her POV chapters, occasionally useful but mostly an immature burden. Then we had the chapter that culminated with Hakram *cutting off his hand* to placate her insecurities and that did her no favors in my eyes. Yes, they had a chat and he threatened to kill her if she was a threat to Cat. She was a boiling mass of barely concealed hostility who took potshots at everything they did without deigning to provide any alternatives besides "crawl in a hole and die, villain."

If she'd been in contact with the criminal element as much as her Name suggested, she'd realize that fighting words will eventually get you into a fight. Either fight back, run away, or stop poking the bear. Don't get all shocked it lost patience with you.

Hopefully she continues to grow out of whatever this is and into a character I don't want to slap sense into.

Skaddx

SMFH...instead of real argument between Cat and ViV in the last chapter we got this...boring.

Lets get to the combat that maybe that can salvage this arc. Tyrant and Hierarch meeting was good but besides that. I have been quite bored.

Oshi

I want to disagree but all I feel is meh.

pagesbe

Wait, you thought that Cat and Viv's off-screen debate last chapter... was an argument? That wasn't an argument. That was a lecture. This was a debate, something I feel is much more interesting, and we got to learn more about Names in the process.

Frankly I found this to be one of the most interesting conversations in book 5.

imagesbe

Slight correction, this wasn't a DEBATE per say, but it was a much more interesting discussion than Cat telling Viv what she did wrong and why.

naturalnuke

We'll get back to people throwing giant beams of energy soon enough don't you worry.

I for one really enjoyed this chapter, nice read while I sit here drinking coffee, time to contemplate it all.

Matthew

This was perfect.

I like that we are going back to the triumph of bureaucracy and good governance.

ReaverOf

It's funny because it's my favorite arc by far. Killing and winning is easy in this world, it's almost cheap, but reading how the characters are living and growing in the aftermath of those bloodbaths is the real challenge that makes me hooked on this story.

I was longing for Vivienne's feelings after the hand moment and this chapter is gold for me.

To each it's own I guess.

Jecherio

I do quite agree with you. I think some readers just want mostly mindless action. The thing is, the mix is what makes the guide so good, the balance of things

Vortex

To each their own I guess. I appreciate character growth and insight more than I do yet another inconclusive battle where zombies and explosions carry the day.

Baron

I, for one, am grateful for the breather.

I know it sort of sucks to be excited for the next big fight, and what you get that week is a bunch of people talking.

Setting aside the fact that "a bunch of people talking" is my jam, what I think a lot of people miss in a serialized format like this is just how fucking fantastic ErraticErrata's **pacing** is.

Do you remember the first time you read this series, when you were reading at length? For me, there were times when the buildup to a moment was so well executed, I was reduced to tears of awe when the payoff hit. Hakram's first ****Stand**** comes to mind.

[sengachi](#)

I do not understand the people who comment "booooring, get back to the fighting" every time people talk.

Like, do you not understand the point of this story? The very thing they were talking about in this very chapter, that endless violence alone even in victory does not lead to success? Are you not here for the story, just the spectacle?

And if you are, I mean, okay, you've got just as much right to read and enjoy this story anyone else. But could you maybe extend some consideration to the people who are actually enjoying the story for the **story** and the characterization within, and let the rest of us enjoy these thoughtful, intimate moments in peace? Sure it's not your preference, but it is many people's preference and the author's preference, so maybe don't leave demotivating comments in response to something that is objectively good writing but just not your thing. That's the respectful thing to do.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I find it hilarious that no matter what EE does, there's someone in the comments dissing it. Big battle scene, someone's all "yeah yeah she kicks ass, but where's the character development". Then when he turns to character development, someone else says "booooring, I wanna see'em fight!"

Fortunately, EE does provide quite a variety in different chapters. And he does seem to understand the old truism "you can't please everybody, so you'll just have to please yourself".

Hypo

These chapters are what make this story great imo. I'm not in this for constant fights, i'd go watch a Shonen for that.

Thief of Words

Wow, you just have no decent taste whatsoever. God's below forbid we have ACTUAL CHARACTER GROWTH, instead of hollow spectacle.

Solid breather and growth measurement chapter, EE. Keep up the good work.

Novice

"We hang the petty thieves and appoint the great ones to public office." – widely attributed to Aesop

danh3107

Oh boy something we already suspected is confirmed, amazing. Double OH BOY when we learn ONE provision of the accords we still know nothing about.

Guess I'm waiting for the next chapter.

Javvies

Called it last time. Cat wants Viv to replace her.

And we learned something new about what the Accords contain.

Since this seems like a strong candidate to be the Prince's Graveyard, or whatever it was called, I'm forced to wonder ... if it's a literal graveyard, what possessed them to be quite so stupid to continue fighting ... or is it more of a metaphorical graveyard – Malanza and company deciding not to attack despite the consequences preordained for them for not pressing the attack against the Legions and the Army of Callow by the Assembly.

boballab

The reason there is imo a 80% a fight will break out is the one Cat gave: A Hero. If you will recall when Malanza got to that location where they had a meeting the Pilgrim is there and we know the Pilgrim can close gates. So even if they back off when the Fourth Army appears the plan to gate out at night will fail because of the Pilgrim. Oh and btw technically the Pilgrim is also a Prince and would probably be the +1 in Cats oath. Imagine the shock that would bring to the Bard and that idiot Saint if Cat plants him.

Here is something to consider. Is it a coincidence that the 2 villains that have beat the Bard recently just so happen to be in Procer at the time when the Bard has basically usurped Hasenbach's reign, country and crusade. Remember that the Bard admitted Kairos beat her but hastily skip over the fact she lost to Cat when talking to the Dead King, because you know of

course she planned that Cat would deliberately let her head be cutoff just to come back and kill her chosen tool, beat her rival and basically bully the Heavens.

Mental Mouse

Hero or no, at this point gating the whole army away is a chancy proposition besides the prior interference, something or other seems to be brewing in Arcadia.

boballab

The thing with Arcadia is that there is no more Winter and Summer Courts and well worn repeating story since book 3. Everything is new there now and they have to find their new place.

Mental Mouse

But more specifically: IIRC, the first time Cat went through Arcadia, she didn't encounter any fae, let alone opposition. Each successive trip, she found herself closer to fae and their dwellings, until they were starting to block her way. In the course of the deal with King Winter and Queen Summer, she bargained for free passage, after which she stopped running into fae again, she could even take armies through.

Now her latest gate gets an exit right at the peak of an actual castle. Which suggests that something is going awry with her deal. Possibly to do with yes, there's no more Winter and Summer courts... and that's who she made her deals with.

boballab

Actually no her deal isn't with one or even both of the courts, she struck after the courts combined and with the Queen of Arcadia:

"The matter of boons remains," the Queen of Arcadia said, and the eyes she turned on me were burning.
"Promises must be kept."

I stood before two gods and did not kneel. I would not, in this moment, pretend this was anything but my win. That I'd bled thousands on the field, caused the death of men dear to me for anything less but utter victory.

"Upon the granting, you will have discharged your duty to me," the King said. "And so will have earned the return of your heart. What do you request of us, Duchess of Moonless Nights?"

"Of you, I request release from vassalage forevermore," I told the fae.

"I am most saddened to grant this," the dark-skinned king said.

He did not seem surprised. I turned my eyes to the queen. I would have to tread carefully, here. If I fumbled the phrasing, she'd do her best to fuck me over. The temptations lay in the back of my mind, beckoning sweetly. To go back on my deal with the Empress and request that the whole of Arcadia come together to kill Diabolist. But she's not wrong. They'll wreck the entire central plains to do it, and we'd be risking some fae influence remaining. And there was another, young but no less demanding for it. I could ask them to heal Nauk. It would be a trifle, to them. But there might be other means to save my legate. And I would never get this chance again. A heroine, I thought, would have made the right choice. The only justifiable one. But I was not a heroine, and justifications only mattered to the just.

I spoke, and betrayed a man I called my friend.

"Of you I ask permanent right of passage through Arcadia for me and all I command, uncontested and unhindered," I said, voice hollow.

Book 3 Chapter 45: Falling Action

[Mental Mouse](#)

So, it's permanent, and it shouldn't matter that Cat's no longer a fae. But the phrasing there... "All I command". Could that be why the gates went wrong while she was away in the Everdark?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Waitasec... permanent until Winter+Summer (and what would they call the combined court?) gives way to Fall/Spring, which was my original suspicion.

[boballab](#)

Imo...nope. What I think it is. is something more foundational to Arcadia. If we recall back to the beginning of that whole arc there was FOUR courts not just two, however only two were ever in existence at one time. The way it worked was that Summer and Winter would always end up in war and in the end Summer would win. With Summer's victory they would then give way to Autumn and Winter to Spring. This

was the story that Cat interrupted having Winter defeat Summer and force those two courts into one. Now the question becomes what happens to the other 2 courts and the Fae that make them up. Remember the Fae do not die like mortals, they come back whole and hearty when their court comes back, hence how every time Winter came around the Prince of Nightfall got a visit from Ranger for an eye (Dude must really have screwed the pooch). So where are the Fae that make up the Autumn and Spring courts? Would they even come back now since the story is broken or does it not matter which side wins they come anyway after a loser? While pondering that remember that barging with Fae usually ends up with you getting screwed. If the Autumn/Spring courts would still come about no matter which side won then Cats agreement with the Queen wouldn't apply because she is not there anymore. With this in mind go back and re read that section and pay attention to the surroundings.

When she plunges through the gate to Arcadia she comments the Summer Sun is beating down, but is it really the Summer Sun? Why should Summer hold sway with the merger? Especially since outside of the Queen herself there was only 1 or 2 Summer nobles still alive and her entire army crushed by Cat. Or would it really be the Sun of early Autumn on a day we call Indian summer?

Hardric62

The answer is simple, the Grey Hypocrite is hovering amongst the Dominion armies like a NKVD Commissar making sure the Frontovikis go to die.

Between ignoring Cordelia's demands that Black be killed ASAP, and his links with the Saint of Bitches, I'd say he's at the very least indifferant or at worst passively agreeing with her notion that Procer needs to burn to the ground so the survivors can rebuild a ""worthy"" nation, free from the rot of old.

Pretty sure Marzala would be elated of knowing that.

And even if Dominions armies don't know that last one, Grey Hypocrite's word will be law to them, and frankly, these hypocrites don't give a rat's ass about Procer themselves. Let them be Dead King fodder while we play our own intrigues while bitching about their own.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, SoS, Bard &c. have made one very large and completely unwarranted assumption: They are presuming that if Procer gets wiped out, they can build a new nation on the ashes, a better one, devoted to the cause of Good. As opposed

to, say, a puppet state of Praes, or some new provinces for Callow, or a body farm for the Dead King.

Amadeus(*) and Cat have already won Callow, which was more devoted to Good than Procer. With Callow now on the other side, how many Good nations remain? How many are strong enough to step up and turn around a war that Procer lost?

(*) Given he's apparently lost his Name, we should probably quit referring to him as "Black"

[boballab](#)

Imo that whole assumption of Bard's (Saint is a patsy that just thinks she is in charge, just like the Lone Swordsman) doesn't take into account that Cat, who beat her once already is now the one calling the shots against her and was able to cause the complete overhaul of Arcadia which is supposed to be a reflection of how Creation works. Cat in a way is the Bard's nemesis because she is practically Chaos incarnate, you can't plan against her and that is what Bard is a planner. The Bard makes long range plans and against someone like Black, another planner, she wins because of her greater experience. Against Cat the Bard is going to learn, once again, that old Praesi saying:

Dread Empress Maleficent II

[Sugar Roll](#)

If this would be the so called Prince's Graveyard, I would bet that it's going to be an assassination of the leaders rather than armies beating armies.

[boballab](#)

It's possible because Cat want to save the lives of the fighting men to use against the Dead King and whatever will happen looks like to set at night when the Drow are at their peak. The interesting thing is that Cat in prior chapters has shown more interest in getting Pilgrim to side with her than actually killing him, however this is probably the best chance ever for him getting killed since he has zero knowledge of what the Drow can do.

ATLRoyal

Honestly, Vivienne just redeemed herself in my eyes, as one of the Woe. I've had an image of them, as I read this story, that each and every one was unique, a different approach and a different past to make them more than a number.

When I heard Vivienne lost her name, I was disappointed. After all, she was practically worthless before, with the only proper combat aid she had done being the sun's theft, and without a name, that left her even weaker. And while she was good at politics, it wasn't much when Named rulers were everywhere.

Now I'm just hoping she gets a sliver of the Night, or learns magic, or something so she won't get killed by your everyday foot soldier in close combat.

Javvies

Ehhhh. Viv is not and never has been a combatant. And now she's effectively the political heir-apparent to the Crown of Callow.

As a general rule, if a noncombatant who is also a high ranking political and governmental figure is in combat, something has gone terribly wrong.

Plus, Cat appears to be moving away from what is more or less the status quo based on personal power towards a paradigm based on institutional power.

Miles

Sounds like she was operating without the benefit of the name at that point. App it did was make her hair stop growing.

Andrew Mitchell

You mean, start growing. 😊

Xinci

I do wonder why she doesn't want Named leaders. Though this does go with the vision so far, regulating different cultural bodies and getting fewer answers from their interactions. Still doing so will be truly...messy. Depending on how its dien rulers will be less obvious, Named less important in role, and cultures potentially gutted.

ninegardens

Named leaders are bound by stories. Named leaders are generically beholden to either Good or Evil... and Named leaders have significant PERSONAL power.

If she wants leaders to be a political/diplomatic office, then it makes sense that they are forced to play the game of balancing things, and are not permitted to have the power to push the political/military scales wherever the hells they want.

The main thing here is that she appears to be effectively murdering a large number of names. (Tyrant? Empress? etc), which are defined by their rulership.

... or maybe she is only insisiting that Callow have unNamed leaders, and hence acts as a Neutralish buffer zone between Procer and Praes.

Liliet

Nah, pretty sure this IS her aiming to destroy a whole swath of Names the way Cordelia did Chancellor. People called this before; I didn't believe it, because it seemed too absurdly large a move.

Guess we're doing this, though!

...Cordelia is definitely getting a Name, isn't she...

Liliet

* the first "Cordelia" there was actually Malicia. Ouch

konstantinvoncarstein

Two Named of opposites side would nearly certainly fight. If those two Named are head of state..

konstantinvoncarstein

*heads

pagesbe

No Named rulers? Well, some places won't care, like Procer. Levant hasn't been led by a Named for awhile, I think. Callow used to be led by Named, but they were Named because they ruled, not ruled because they were Named, so not that bad. Praes? Praes will have to do a 180 for that to happen. Cat would have to do to Praes what the people who drove the Name Warlord out of the Orcs did, hopefully less actual slavery involved.

caoimhinh

Yes, it seems too pretentious and even a bit idiotic for Catherine to intend to prohibit Named rulers, considering how many of those actually come into their Name when they are rulers and not the other way around, and there are very few ways to predict the acquisition of a Name (so far only the transitional ones that are disciples of stronger Names like Squire to Knight and Apprentice to Warlock, and the still unexplained way that Kairos forced Anaxares into his Name of Hierarch), there could be rulers who in the middle of their reign acquire a Name and would need to abdicate, while there

are countries like Praes where you only rule if you have the ruling Name and only acquire that Name if you rule. So the practicality of its implementation is dubious at best. Well, it's not like the Liesse Accords will actually be accepted and signed without any changes, there must be changed to them, even if Cat doesn't want, otherwise it would not be a real agreement between nations.

konstantinvoncarstein

Kairos made Anaxarès Hierarch by forcing all the cities of the League to elect him.

I understand why Catherine want to forbid Named ruler, but it is impossible in practice, like you say. If one of them begin to be associated with national identity, that he becomes the symbole of the state (like the Kings and Queens of Callow), he will probably become a Name. I an pretty sure that if Vivienne become queen, she will receive a new Name.

caoimhinh

No, he wasn't elected. Anaxares became Hierarch while traveling around with Kairos. Then the delegates from each city came to recognize him and swear to obey him. You can see it in <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/09/25/villainous-interlude-thunder/> He was forced to be a General of Helikean army, and entered into his Name when the Kanenas refused to execute him for the crimes he had committed according to Bellerophon's laws.

I agree with you on the rest. Cat even said in Book 1 that part of the reason the Fairfaxes has such a long dynasty was because ascending to the throne of Callow usually gave them Names, even when they were Princes it was very common to have that.

konstantinvoncarstein

He became Hierarch after the kanemas judge he was valuable to Bellerophon, and he refuse it. Maybe it was his desire to change this that was the final straw for his transition?

caoimhinh

Yep.

But that doesn't explain the process that came before, how Kairos knew about that, managed to know who would be the guy who would get the name, nor why the Name that Anaxares got was Hierarch since 1) that position wasn't required to change Bellerophon's laws and 2) As far as we have seen even now he hasn't used his power for that.

He wanted to die because that's what the law said, but couldn't because the Kanenas told him to not die, he got his Name and didn't do anything with it, and actually refused the Name and fought against it and the Aspects yet they still came to him, which would strengthen my point that Cat pretending to ban Named rulers is unpractical and almost impossible since Name bestowal is out of their control.

konstantinvoncarstein

Banning Named rulers would indeed be impossible

[Fayhem](#)

I didn't understand how Kairos made Anaxares into Hierarch for the longest time either, but then I saw somebody give an explanation in the comments that made total sense to me. I wish I could remember who said it and where so I could just reproduce or link it, but here's my best go at recreating it instead.

Essentially, Kairos leveraged the way that Names are built out of/arise out of stories to make Anaxares the Hierarch by crafting a story and casting Anaxares in the role that becomes Hierarch. You know how people in the story have commented that Kairos could have gotten himself elected Hierarch instead, what with winning the war and all? That's the key. The story Kairos crafted is "villain launches a war of ambition, wins every battle and has the prize of power that he seeks almost within his grasp when at the last moment his most trusted lieutenant seizes the power for himself instead". The prize of power was becoming Hierarch of the League, and he made that be Anaxares by casting him in the role of "most trusted lieutenant" – making him be a general in his army, constantly referring to him as "my friend" (I think notably in front of other Named, since it seems like story-logic pays more attention to what's happening when there are Named in the room), that stuff basically.

Hope that makes sense to you too!

[Liliet](#)

I think that's likely to be one aspect of it, but not the key one. The key one was much more mundane politicking, with Kairos convincing City after City that Anaxares would make a GREAT Hierarch, especially seeing how if he were elected, Kairos would stop warring them



Oh, the actual formal election came later. But that was how I understood the scene with kanenas: Kairos managed to convince the People of the Glorious Republic of Bellerophon, long may she reign, that having one of their own be elected Hierarch would be awesome. Anaxares didn't know about those preparations, but they were there, and the minute he displayed will to enforce his idea of what's right upon the world, the Name snapped into place.

[Fayhem](#)

Mm, after tracking down the chapter where the Name snapped in I think you're right that the bit with the kanenas was more key than I remembered it as being. But the extra chapter Hierarchy (<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/01/31/hierarchy/>) has this bit here from Anaxares' POV:

"The Gods had elected him before men ever spoke their piece, cursing him with a Name regardless of his desires. The Tyrant had been their instrument in this, and for that Anaxares was glad he had seen nothing of him since the night where Nicae fell."

So I don't think the votes per se were what decided it; the politicking of it is at least treated as if it is a foregone conclusion, though tbf Atalante does get noted as giving up its vote to get Helike out of their city so that's clearly Kairos twisting some arms there.

I think it's a combination of Kairos' scheming with the kanenas and his storycrafting; as you said it's when Anaxares "displayed will to enforce his idea of what's right upon the world [that] the Name snapped into place" but it being the *specific* Name of Hierarch that he gained I think is down more to Kairos' storycrafting than an election that hadn't actually happened yet, with the nice fillip that the kanenas being involved instantly cuts the legs out from under Anaxares just refusing or suiciding his way out of it. For supporting evidence re: the storycrafting angle I'd also quote the section where Kairos, speaking of Bard, says ""She thinks I made you to kill me," Kairos said." Meaning that when Bard looked at Anaxares' nascent Name she saw it coming into being through the "trusted lieutenant's betrayal" aspect of things, or at least that's how I'd take it.

[Liliet](#)

> The Gods had elected him before men ever spoke their piece, cursing him with a Name regardless of his desires.

I see what you mean, but I don't think it's accurate / I don't think that's how it works. I mean, we have explicit confirmation in the kanenas scene that Kairos had been scheming behind Anaxares's back about this, and I don't think Names work like that. First you fill the Role, then the Name confirms it. And the Role of Hierarch is not "Kairos's treacherous friend" (which wouldn't have worked like that for another reason which I'll also talk about below), it's "the person all the Free Cities have agreed to put in charge." The Name came before the formal vote, but the unanimous agreement also came before the formal vote, because Kairos knows what he's doing in rigging elections.

> So I don't think the votes per se were what decided it; the politicking of it is at least treated as if it is a foregone conclusion, though tbf Atalante does get noted as giving up its vote to get Helike out of their city so that's clearly Kairos twisting some arms there.

The formally cast votes were a foregone conclusion because agreements were reached in advance, yes.

> but it being the *specific* Name of Hierarch that he gained I think is down more to Kairos' storycrafting than an election that hadn't actually happened yet

Catherine was ready to claim the Name of Black Queen before being actually crowned, too. Because she was already acting like one in practice, already called that, and ceremony's just that: ceremony. It adds story weight, but doesn't decide it.

The thing about storycrafting is, in my observation, it heavily rests on *what is actually happening*. Anaxares can't be the treacherous scheming friend without doing any actual scheming or betraying, no matter how hilarious Kairos finds setting him up to look like one. The presentation matters, but the substance has to be there first. Catherine has talked about this recently in Cloaks:

> But it doesn't, I thought. We've seen it, you and I. That when all there is holding up the choice is a story and the prediction of victory, the story fails. Because if all you do is pretend, go through the

motions, then you've already lost what could have made it a victory in the first place.

Acting out a story is not about the theatre of it, as Dorian has painfully learned. As William has painfully learned. Theatre-wise, Catherine's play at First Llesse was absurd: she was an undead abomination, killed by a hero and risen, engaged in a three way squabble over the prize. But substance wise, she'd just very literally given her life for her people ("one life for one hundred thousand? that's a steal, by any account"), acting to protect them from destruction, with a very real claim to ruling the land about to be substantiated. Theatre-wise, Black was an evil invader conqueror, holding the land by force of arms on behalf of his Empress; substance-wise, he'd been personally taking care of it for decades, making all the decisions himself and acting as best he could to prevent abuse of what authority he gave over to the Praesi.

Storycrafting is about teasing out the patterns of *what is actually going on*. It doesn't matter what it looks or sounds like, if you can retell the actual events and decisions in short in a way that fits the narrative, then the story works.

No events or decisions made along the way matched the hypothetical "Anaxares acts behind Kairos's back" story. No matter what the theatre was, it was the other way around.

[Fayhem](#)

"Acts behind Kairos's back", no. Actively intends to undermine and sabotage his efforts at every opportunity? Literally confirmed explicitly out loud by Anaxares himself, repeatedly. The fact that Kairos treated that like it was hilarious doesn't change Anaxares' total sincerity in that regard in the slightest.

I think we might be splitting hairs to a certain extent though; as I started off noting, Kairos actually winning the war is the concrete foundation that his storycrafting rests on. If there's no real chance that he can't make whoever he wants Hierarch, then that's **at least** as solid a basis as actual agreements with everybody. If not in fact much more of a solid basis; who tf would negotiate with the Tyrant of Helike as if it was a good-faith negotiation? When you're dealing with someone like

that, you aren't going to give promises that are worth any more than the ones you expect to receive.

In other words, I think we actually mostly agree that to make a story work you need a solid underpinning in reality (or *some* underpinning at least; Cat's storycrafting in Skade was more about hoodwinking reality than basing anything off it and then making up the difference with murder). I just think that force and fear were the foundation Kairos built off of, not negotiations conducted with people he had just gone way out of his way to showcase himself as a violent bad-faith actor to.

Liliet

Yeah, we very much agree there. Skade was an exception because Arcadia is like that, Catherine herself has noted that storycrafting goes wild in there. She managed to win a fight she'd been hopelessly outclassed in literally -just- by goading her attacker into an evil monologue. Arcadia is not a good example of how story works in Calernia lmao

But yeah, force and fear were absolutely the basis of those negotiations. I'm not saying Anaxares was elected based on anything other than Kairos strongarming everyone into doing whatever he wants; in fact, that's exactly my point. I don't think it made a difference that Anaxares made a principle out of demonstrating his disloyalty to Kairos and that Kairos also played it up as far as it could go without actually doing him any damage. That was bells and whistles, and the engine was Kairos's conquest, no more, no less.

Dresden 67

Yeah, I think this is one point Cat will be forced to compromise on.

Which, as you say, isn't a bad thing. Other nations will need to have their say and feel like their concerns are addressed.

The most important parts of the Accords are the restrictions on Named warfare and demonic or angelic interference.

caoimhinh

Yeah. After all, Cat has mentioned that she doesn't want Callowan culture to be lost, and forbidding Named rulers is exactly that, both for Callow and for other countries. Not

to mention it's likely impossible.

Catherine herself almost got a ruling-type Name after ascending to the throne (although to me the explanation of why she didn't is a bit dubious, since having the Artifact of Doom shouldn't be determinant for her Name, but whatever).

[Liliet](#)

It wasn't about the artefact per se, but what was connected to it: Cat's willingness to lean into the public perception of her. It was always a bit off from the real Cat, from the first moment she entered the public eye – the goblinfire debacle that's still echoing with Abigail, and for good reason. The Black Queen, as the role is defined by people's perception, is more ruthless, more cold, more detached than the real Cat. She would have started matching it, had she allowed Malicia to draw her into the WMD scheme. But instead her father did something none of them predicted, acting on his bone deep understanding that cold ruthless detachment is a very wrong road to go down (for all that he just had; feels like a sin, doesn't it? thanks, Bard). That not so much shocked Cat out of the mindset as curved the possible roads ahead of her to lead away from it. Our actions determine how we think as much as the other way around.

The artefact was a pivot. No more, no less.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yes.. it also means that the gods (or their Bard, or even a story-fu master) can effectively dethrone any ruler by nudging them into a Name.

[Dresden 67](#)

Other way around for Procer and Levant.

Procer has never had a Named ruler and is light on Named in general.

The ruling class of Levant is built around the descendents of Named, and they actually do claim Names at an unusually high rate.

[Dresden 67](#)

Never mind, I misread your comment.

[boballab](#)

I think you guys haven't thought out the consequences to Creation if the division between the Gods goes away to reflect

the lose of division in Arcadia. Remember way back when Masego told Cat about the nature of Arcadia was to be a reflection of Creation where the courts take the place of the Gods Above and Below and they live strictly by story. All that was broken forever when Cat beat the Summer Queen and she was force to marry the Winter King, there is no more courts and there is no more recurring story. Creation has worked the same way, there is an over arching story where in the end Good beats Evil and the Named are their instruments to make the story go on. What Black started was breaking the story and why his aspects were weak comparatively to Black Knights of the past, he wasn't doing what the story villain was suppose to do and the further you get from the story based Role the weaker your name gets. So what happens if Cat succeeds a fulfills Blacks dreams in a way and there is no more Good/Evil (Take a look right now on what the "Good" Gods are attempting to do: Genocide) divide? The story ends and thus the Roles those Names rely on go with it.

Liliet

"There is no more recurring story" is inaccurate. There is a new story that will grow to be recurring from now on, in the subsequent fae cycles.

Good and Evil aren't going anywhere, they're baked into the very foundations of this world. But their struggle will take another form, and that's what both Amadeus and Cat are after

konstantinvoncarstein

Arcadia exist before Creation, and was a "bêta version" of it. The Gods are not influenced by what happen in Creation, Good and Evil will always exist.

Furthermore, Creation does not contain only Calernia. There is many other continents, with their own stories, heroes and villains. The actions of Catherine will not (or barely) influence the world at large.

edrey

its nice, vivi development was due but she need a name or she will end like a very nice secondary caracter, forgotten and all, and to be honest i think there would be only one country in the end of the novel, the republic of calernia, but let see what happen

SilverDargon

huh, no named leaders? Is that really sustainable? I don't mean that in the sense that you need named leaders for a good nation, but in the sense that if it goes on long enough, being the leader will be enough for a name.

Could you imagine if 100 years down the line someone takes the throne of Callow and gets a name from it, and is then immediately barred from holding office? Wild.

Gunslinger

There goes our hopes for Queen Abigail the Unwilling. Another reason Queen Vivienne would be a good choice is that she'd appease both the Oldbloods and institute progressive reforms.

Gunslinger

Also if Praes is to be a part of the Liesse Accords it would also be the end of the Amadeus is Dread Emperor Benevolent theory. Unless Praes joined much later

konstantinvoncarstein

The problem with Praes is that it is completely dependent on Named to stand. Without a Dread Emperor, Black Knight, etc, it would disappear in civil war. It would take a massive culling of the nobility, then the rule of a Dread Emperor who would have to mold organize Praes to be capable to stand without him. In short, he would have to change the very soul of Praes.

[Dresden 67](#)

In other words, exactly what Black planned to do already.

Death Knight

Well with the aid of the Goblins, Grem and the Army of Callow they can feasibly kill all the nobles that don't want to quit their shit like they've been promising since all the way back from book 2-3.

This type of conquest is feasible for the following reasons:

#1) All of Goblin kind would stand by Black, Grem and Cat in this endeavor.

#2) Both Black and Grem are spoken of with reverence by the Orcs so all the Clans would unite under their banner. Grem may or may not become Warlord at this juncture.

3) Malicia needs to die for what she did to Ratface and the other high ranking staff of Cat so Black has the support of the Army of Callow along with the Drow (at least the Losara Drow) and Cat herself. Not to mention Assassin is still around.

4) If Cat plays her cards right, she might be able to count on the aid of the Pilgrim and even Hanno along with

the Witch and the surviving members of Hanno's band. If they make it through the scrap with the Dead King.

Can you imagine that? The Witch of the Forrest, The Hierophant AND The Grey Pilgrim fighting side by side? Yeah, the Tower and the other Noble's wards are in for a ROUGH but short day...

Best part is since this is an Evil nation, there's no Heroic bullshit to worry about. The only worry is that all Villains with significant story weight are due to leave the game by kicking over the board. Triumphant brought the Tower down on her killers' heads and given the narrative weight she had I sincerely doubt many of the Heroes made it out alive from that.

So with her last breath I think Malicia might just nuke Ater and the surrounding wasteland. But since The Pilgrim, Hierophant and The Witch is there they should be able to contain and mitigate the damage.

konstantinvoncarstein

I agree, Malicia will not survive the story. But her last act will be spectacular 😊

I only disagree concerning Ratface. Catherine kind of try to kill her (and would have without the puppets), and she only strike back. But she clearly deserves to die, if only for allowing Liesse.

[Liliet](#)

God, the protagonist centered morality with "BUT RATFACE" is so annoying. Assassinating high ranking officials is perfectly in line with Malicia's known methods, and Ratface and Anne Kendall both knew very well what kind of war they were signing on to fight. Malicia crossed a much bigger line allowing Second Liesse to happen. If Cat's going to take anything personally, it's that; god knows half of Malicia's empire already has.

Ratface isn't even a blip on the radar. He was a combatant who willingly chose his side. Remember when Cat came to her officers with "so I just committed treason" in Book 3? She didn't need to convince him.

Malicia is more damned for a random average legionairy who died at Liesse than for personally Hasan Qara.

[Mental Mouse](#)

<Snorfle!> for "Queen Abigail the Unwilling". We may get there yet, though.

Gunslinger

It's the name for her in the Guide subreddit. If you haven't been there you should check it out.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Unfortunately reddit doesn't like me. IIRC from last time I tried signing up, it demanded I respond to a verification E-mail, but couldn't get the E-mail to me.

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah. Viv does get a name and so just when she thinks she's out, Queen Abigail the unwilling discovers they've pulled her back in.

Someguy

Ah, Names are the shackles of childhood. To outgrow, break or sacrifice it is to seek new opportunities.

imagesbe

Not necessarily. Names are tied to a particular perspective and are no more inherently shackles than any ingrained perspective is.

WuseMajor

I'm starting to suspect that the Accords are about breaking free of Heaven and Hell as much as anything else.

fbt

I loved this! I thought it was brilliant and engaging. Ok, minor editorial issues aside, I wouldn't change a thing here. Great work, loved it!

RanVor

I would have never though that a chapter developing a main character this much could be this boring.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Go vote!

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

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Guide has more votes in the weekly and monthly tallies than the next two stories combined, although it is not quite there in the yearly tally.

[origamiflame](#)

Is anyone else getting a ton of pop ups? My browser (chrome mobile) blocked 8, is there something going on?

Gunslinger

I've seen people complain about that on and off and the best solution usually is to use a browser with adblock. Firefox Mobile is one such though personally I prefer Brave for android. It's basically chrome but with a suite of adblocking tools

Keldor

I think the 'no named rulers' thing is to limit the influence of the gods to a minimum just like the ban of pacts with devils, demons AND angels.

[Mental Mouse](#)

As I read it, she wasn't trying to ban all pacts with the demons, devils, and angels – that would be impractical anyway. She just wants to ban actually summoning them onto a battlefield.

burguulkodar

Damn, I still want named people in this story. We're getting less and less of them.

Cat is now back to human, and is completely ok with going old and dying. Stupid. Same with Thief, and I thought she would become Regent or Queen or something, but nooo, she has to abandon her name and get old and die too. Fuckers.

At least Indrani and Masego still keep the faith.

Chapter 25: Dead Ends

"And so the First Under the Night came across a portal where great danger might lurk, and upon witnessing it halted and sought the council of Sve Noc. 'O Night,' said the First, 'what wisdom

do you offer?' And so the Young Night answered thus: 'Try a foot first.'"

– Extract from the 'Parables of the Lost and Found', disputed Firstborn religious text

Shit, I thought to myself, *this is going too well*.

"- the Alliance army has effectively withdrawn, and is making camp for the night," the officer continued. "They have recalled everything but scouts, as far as our own can see."

I'd told Vivienne what I wanted out of the manoeuvres, namely forcing the western coalition to give me just enough room that I could gate my armies away from this mess. It was starting to look like I'd be getting exactly that, which was highly suspicious. Reports had begun to come into the pavilion over the afternoon, everything going according to plan. First the opposition drew back, then General Bagram threatened their supply lines further north and they outright retreated. Had any of the crusader commander taken the Fourth Army's distant presence as an immediate threat and charged? No. Had the drow been ambushed by some unforeseen sun-based sorcery kept in store just for this day? No. Had some hero assassinated half the general staff of one of my divisions? No. This was going off without a hitch, which meant it wasn't and the Gods were about to dump a sackful of angry badgers on my plans.

"Your Majesty?"

"It's always badgers, you know," I complained. "It never goes a *little* badly, its's always 'oh no, there's goblinfire burning the city' or 'oh no, the Praesi summoned a bunch of devils again' or even 'oh no, half the continent thinks a crusade would be just the thing'. Would it really be too much to ask for a mishap instead of a catastrophe once in a while? Like, 'oh no, we're out of the good wine, but that's fine we've got this pretty decent bottle instead we'll just drink that'."

There was a long moment of silence in the pavilion.

"So, double watch and not single," Marshal Juniper said, sounding vaguely embarrassed of me.

"Don't you give me that, Hellhound," I grunted. "You know I'm right. Matter of fact-"

I went looking through my cloak before realizing I was not, in fact, carrying anything that could remotely be used as coin. Arguably the main drow currency was murder – although, given how much obsidian they always seemed to carry around maybe in practice it was that – and it wasn't like anyone had handed me a purse full of golden aurelii since I'd come back to the surface.

"Hakram," I said, extending arm with my palm up.

I didn't even bother to look, nor him to argue. Two heartbeats later I was slapping coins against the table, more specifically –

"- silver?" I said, turning to glare at Adjutant. "You cheapskate. That's old Marchford coinage, too, it's basically worth nothing nowadays."

"Thought we'd get rid of it while in Procer," the orc shamelessly admitted.

"Ugh," I said. "Fine then. Juniper, I'm betting these *eight silvers* that when you send a rider out on the field they'll run into a scout on the way back with urgent news."

"To clarify, they're silvers only in the nominal sense," Adjutant helpfully added. "Their actual worth is closer to-"

"You believe we're about to be ambushed," Marshal Grem interrupted in a rasp.

The old orc was an interesting sight, I'd admit. The cloth covering the missing eye his epithet promised was nothing out of the ordinary, simple black linen with the First Legion's symbol embroidered in gold. It was the Marshal himself I found interesting: neither as tall as Hakram nor as broad as Nauk had been, the sight of his frame in Legion armour brought to mind an old tree – all dry and corded, but likely to be nasty if pushed. He was, it would not do to forget, more than just one of the finest military officers in the Empire: he was also an old man who'd been born before the Clans were bound so tightly to the reformed Legions of Terror. Back in the days where the orc clans had preferred raiding each other and on occasion the Praesi to taking the Tower's gold and serving in the ranks. For his clan to have been as prominent as it'd reputedly been, he must have seen some brutal fighting. *And that was before he joined up with Black, through a civil war and the Conquest*, I thought. There was a dangerous man, behind that red-brown eye. Simply because my teacher's latest scheme had backfired on the Legions did not mean the orc was helpless.

"I believe this has proceeded perfectly when we know for a fact there's heroes nearby," I replied. "One way or another, this is about to get ugly."

"Battle?" he asked, tone calm.

There was no doubt in his eyes, like what I had said was a statement of fact. I almost shivered at the sight of it, the old general waiting to dissect my instincts like an augur would a bird. How many times had Black stood in my place, lending his paranoia's edge to a finer commander's plans?

"Not tonight," I said. "We're too close to sundown. But they'll spring a surprise on us, you can count on *that*."

"Then it might be best to issue the recall for the Fourth Army early," Marshal Grem said. "And allow the 'Firstborn' to handle the defences as our divisions withdraw through Arcadia."

I flicked a glance at Juniper, who after a beat nodded.

"Do it," I said. "Adjutant-"

"I sent one of mine to have a look," Hakram gravelled. "We'll know soon."

I didn't quite manage to set aside the nagging feeling that we were about to get screwed, but we still managed to get some business done in the stretch that followed. We needed to hash out supply arrangements for Marshal Grem's legions beyond this particular Iserran mess, and I had no intention of forever feeding the legionaries unless they proved of some use to me – either garrisoning the Blessed Isle or participating in the war against the Dead King. If they wanted to wait out the war until Black died or returned, it would not be through the grace of Callowan granaries. One-Eye hinted pretty bluntly – still, it was something of a novelty to see an orc *hint* at all – that private talks between he and I should be held on the subject, and I was wondering whether to push for either Hakram or Vivienne or both to be in the room instead when a legionary stumbled back into the pavilion. He saluted at me first, so he was one of mine and not the Legions, but his eyes flicked at Adjutant after. One of Hakram's helping hand, then.

"Report," I ordered.

"Your Majesty," the legionary replied, saluting once more. "While the enemy's forces have not redeployed, they have sent a party out in the plains towards us."

My fingers clenched.

"How many?" Juniper asked. "Horse or foot?"

"Two or four," I said, tone calm.

The legionary's eyes widened.

"Two, Your Majesty," he agreed.

"And they'll be raising a tent, the smug pricks," I said.

Something like fear passed in the soldier's eyes.

"It is so, Your Majesty," he said.

"Black Queen?" Marshal Grem rasped, tone inquisitive.

"One is the Grey Pilgrim," I said. "I'm guessing the other's the Saint of Swords, though he might have traded in for younger muscle. Well, *fuck*."

The last word I said feelingly, as it looked like all my preparations had gone up in smoke.

"They raised a tent, soldier?" Adjutant said. "You are certain?"

"Yes sir," the legionary nodded. "One of those Proceran pavilions, the ones they use to receive people."

"We're not gating anywhere, looks like," I cursed. "Let's find out why at least. Adjutant, have a space cleared for an attempt. With contingencies."

My second nodded, and after a few nods of respect spread around left to see my will done.

"An explanation would be appreciated," Juniper growled. "For those of us who aren't Named."

"The Pilgrim is under the impression we'll be talking soon," I said. "Considering I'm very much planning on getting the Hells out of here by Arcadia if it's possible, that means he knows something we don't about why that's not possible. It's his whole thing, Juniper, being wise and and all-knowing. In practice I'd guess he's got some ties to a Choir, maybe some limited foresight. Not that he'd be a fool without, mind you, but he's certainly got an edge. Either way, by putting up that tent he's making a point."

"Posturing," Vivienne said. "That is to say, preparing for negotiations."

"How kind of our friend Tariq to be willing to talk," I said, tone gone sardonic. "Why, he might even be willing to consider peace as a personal favour to us. Entirely unrelated to the fact that he's currently losing, no doubt. It will be our privilege, nay, our *blessing* to be allowed to make a truce with the side of the Heavens."

"Manifold thanks to the Gods Above," Vivienne agreed without missing a beat. "Who have ever protected and preserved us, praise be. We may have to raise a new cathedral in Laure as an expression of our gratitude."

"I take it," Marshal Grem said, "that you are less than fond of this hero."

"Well, he's only tried to kill me twice so far," I mused. "So I guess that still puts him somewhere between Saint and Malicia, relationship-wise."

"Wait, what's the left extremity of that line?" Vivienne frowned. "It can't be the Saint, we've barely fought her."

"I think it's still William," I mused. "He tried to kill me every single time we met, I'm pretty sure. I mean, so did a few others but mostly 'cause they didn't get to meet me twice."

"That feels underwhelming," she said. "He couldn't even ruin a city without Contrition holding his hand, second rate at best. Really, they shouldn't even make the list if they haven't tried to murder you through use of an astral sphere."

"Eh, I think Pilgrim's star-thing is more like a metaphor," I said. "That'd only leave High Noon Delight and Queen The-Sky-Is-A-Reasonable-Weapon from Summer. Two's not a list. Besides, if we're opening the floor to metaphors then Willy's murder-sword thing kind of looked like moonlight."

"Didn't the Page have a similar trick?" Vivienne asked. "You mentioned it a while back."

"Oh *man*, I'd almost forgotten about her," I admitted with a hum. "When I think about Three Hills it's always Nauk popping the Exiled Prince in the throat that comes to mind."

Bambambam. Marshal Juniper smashed her sheathed sword against the table one last time, for emphasis, and then cleared her throat with a growl.

"Orders, Your Majesty," she said.

"At the moment?" I said. "Everyone is to remain in a defensive posture, as they've already been ordered to. We won't know more until I've tried a gate, which Hakram is securing grounds for me to do as we speak."

I drummed my fingers against the table.

"I'd recommend for the two of you to prepare a plan of action for the eventuality of being forced to march out of Iserre," I said. "Or being forced to give battle here, either against the current army or the entire Grand Alliance field force."

"You don't intend to participate?" Marshal Grem asked.

"The skeleton I'll leave to the two of you," I shrugged. "I need to see some birds about something, and if that doesn't work I'll have to beat Larat until answers come out. Might take a while, it's mostly lies and arrogance in there."

"Understood," One-Eye said, apparently unruffled.

Merciless Gods, what kind of insanity had my father put this one through that he wouldn't even blink at that? I shot him an assessing look, but let it go for now.

"You coming?" I asked Vivienne.

"The birds," she said. "From underground?"

"Those are the ones," I agreed. "They're perfectly safe."

Vivienne's brow rose.

"Probably safe," I corrected.

The brow stayed up.

"To me," I specified.

"I shall stay and provide a political perspective to these unfolding campaign plans," Vivienne Dartwick serenely said.

"You do that," I snorted, then glanced at the Marshals. "Until later, then."

A dip of the head for me, salutes for them, and on my way I went.

—

It was still the better part of an hour before dusk when the Sisters came to me.

I could have tried the gate before then, of course, and very nearly did — though it would tire me to make the attempt, it was nothing that second wind coming with nightfall wouldn't carry me through. Still, I was... wary. I'd not forgotten what Robber had told me, the tale of gates into Arcadia opening into the Hells instead or simply wildly out of course. Adjutant had done well in arranging for me a wide courtyard now surrounded by basic wards, but if devils started pouring out those wouldn't be enough. *I* might be, even on my own, but best to exercise a little patience if it lowered the risks. The crow-shaped slivers of godhood sliced into the glare of the sun like knives, their unnaturally graceful flight taking them in twin spirals until they claimed my shoulders in unison. Perfect unison, I'd realized. Not even the fraction of a moment in delay. That kind of precision was unsettling, as no doubt they'd meant it to be.

"I have a problem," I said, leaning on my staff.

"A servant of the Pale Gods," crow-Komena said with relish. "*Finally.*"

"See, I don't believe it's actually him that's the trouble here," I said. "Well, not this particular trouble anyway. He's definitely some other sorts."

"You believe the ways into Arcadia to have been wounded," crow-Andronike said. "Amusing, that you'd believe what frustrated some errant Splendid would be a threat to us."

"Now *that*," I said, "is the kind of talk that ends up with gods in boxes. Or cut up for parts. Or, you know, made to scamper away in disgrace by a hero. You've been down there for a long time, O Goddesses of Night. Here be monsters, and some of them were born to make sport of those like you."

I could feel their roiling anger, not that it cowed me in the slightest. My very purpose in their service was to pull them back when they were about to make a mistake like this. Twirling the ebony staff lightly, I clicked my tongue against the roof of my mouth.

"So, let's try this again," I said. "I have a problem. Some hero with friends upstairs believes I won't be able to gate out of here. In your opinion, how dangerous would it be to try opening one right now?"

"The taste of the boundary has not changed," Komena said. "You worry for nothing."

"It would not, if the change were coming from without," Andronike noted.

My brow rose.

"So, if there's a mess it's more likely to be coming from Arcadia?" I asked.

"A more precise explanation would be well beyond your understanding," Komena said.

It was surprising, I mused, how quickly one got used to being condescended to by a bird. I lowered my staff, tip touching nothing at all.

"So, a quick look is in order," I said.

Night flooded my veins, abrupt and eager to answer my call. The gate ripped through Creation easily, to my surprise – and that of the Sisters, I felt. I'd felt this before, in Marchford. When Akua's demon had weakened the fabric of Creation enough that it was made easier for the Winter Court to raid through. It'd not been like that when I gated earlier, I thought.

"This is unusual," Andronike said.

I felt it too, even as the ink-black gate opened before me. Eyes, unfathomably large, gazing at me. The surface of the gate was like liquid obsidian, though without a single ripple, and I hesitated. I held back, leaning on my staff.

"Thoughts?" I said.

"Try a foot first," Komena drolly suggested.

"Oh, we think we're funny now do we?" I muttered. "Mark my words, that one's going into the holy book."

Godly advice, my ass, I thought. Still, wasn't like there was another choice was it? I breathed out and stepped through. The rippling sensation was replaced by howling winds as my feet stumbled over Arcadia's grounds. Blinded and deafened by what must have been half a hurricane, I called on the Night and let Andronike's steady hand guide my will: a bubble of stillness bloomed around us, sudden and absolute. Breathing out, I put my cloak in order and finally took a good look around me. This was Arcadia, I was certain of it. The... sensation was the same. Which made what I was looking at all the more worrisome.

"That is not the work of fae," Komena croaked.

"No," I murmured, "I don't think so either."

Before us spread out a wasteland to make the heart of Praes flinch. Choking black dust billowing in a great storms as streaks of lightning erupted wherever they wished, striking at the ground with thundering claps. The noise of it all was deafening, even inside the bubble of stillness. I could see fractures of glowing red snaking across the ground, and liquid fire bubbling out when currents unseen made the heat rise in great geysers. The sky above us was an endless shifting tapestry of darkened clouds, with malevolent pale lights lurking behind them. This had been Arcadia, I thought, before someone broke it beyond repair.

"No," Andronike said, disagreeing with my thought. "To the very point it can tolerate breaking, and not a step more."

In the distance I could see the great storms strengthening, until what looked like the eye of the madness: a great hidden shape, the dark winds whirling around it masking the true appearance of what lay there.

"This was done on purpose," I murmured. "And you felt it too, didn't you? How easy it was to open the gate here."

The Sisters did not speak the approval, though a hint of pressure against my thoughts served as acknowledgement. It was almost secondary, now, that I wouldn't be able to evacuate my armies through Arcadia – as if I'd not lose every damned soldier, trying

to march them through here. I suspected now that if I tried to open a gate leading to anywhere I'd still end up here, as if all the paths now led to this place. In a sense, I thought, they probably were. Something, or someone, had damaged this chunk of Arcadia to pry it loose from the rest. And now, if I was not mistaken, this wretched place was slowly dropping down into Creation.

"We are seen," Komena suddenly hissed.

Behind me, the still-open gate shuddered. Well, shit. I wouldn't be using that one to leave anyway, but it looked like we'd drawn the attention of something I'd rather not be in the eyes of.

"What is it that's here," I urgently pressed. "Before going back we have-"

The gate broke. The inky power it was made of *shattered*, and the shards started slinking through the dusty ground – towards that hidden shape in the distance, I judged.

"Tell me," I hissed at Sve Noc. "Is it the Dead King, or-"

An eardrum-breaking shriek tore through this nightmare of a realm, then four grinding cacophonies in interweaving succession. Almost like rusty metal being pulled apart, but the truth of it was much worse: in that storm-cloud covered sky, burning red circles formed. Out of them winged creatures poured, swarms and swarms of them, weaving in and out of the horrid winds. Hellgates. Temporary and unstable, but hellgates nonetheless.

"- or Hierophant," I finished, shivering. "*Fuck.*"

"We need to leave," Andronike said. "The gate, First Under the Night."

"There's something happening," I said. "Look, under the hellgates."

Some glittering array of runes formed in a circle, at twice the height of a man, though looking upon them cut at my eyes in an almost physical way. I thought I glimpsed something ghostly at the centre of the runes, but it was there for only a moment – and then the massive detonation that followed blew me off my feet, ripping right through the miracle. I landed in a sprawl of dust, cawing crows stumbling with me, and didn't ignore the Sisters twice. The gate ripped open in front of me, though to my horror something fought me for control of it. A will pitched against my own, though that was no person's. It felt more like one of the fae, though one of royal title at least. The goddesses slid their will along mine, and that bought us just long enough to drop through the bloody fairy gate. I dropped on the ground maybe

three feet to the left of where I'd entered the other gate, covered in dust and lightly smoking.

"Well," I murmured, looking up at the setting sun. "That's going to be a problem."

[DroughtBringer](#)

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[Epok](#)

Also come check out the discord channel. <https://discord.gg/x7KrgR>

danh3107

It never rains, it spews fire and hell gates.

naturalnuke

When it rains, it burns.

Skaddix

Goddamn Masego went Further Beyond if that him and not the Dead King.

Dainpdf

Could always be Kairos. Though I am betting on Masego.

[badluckcat](#)

Definitely Masego.

Arcadia was broken 'to the very point it can tolerate breaking and not a step more'. Indicating someone with Masego's obsession with precision.

The giant flying shadow and hellgates indicating Liesse, which we know is in Masego's hands.

Many references to eyes and being seen which is Hierophants whole thing.

His current power level and the inhumanity of his will is likely due to witnessing his fathers momentarily usurping the mantle of a god. The miracle would have been a massive power boost but almost certainly caused alienation.

Dainpdf

Yeah, I'm betting on Masego, too. Though I wonder whether Kairos may have had a hand in facilitating this particular situation.

stevenneiman

I don't think so. Not because I don't think that Kairos would drop a match onto this particular fireworks shop, but because I don't think he ever had the opportunity. His game is being unpredictable, not predicting the unpredictable, and in order to have had a reasonable chance to mess with Masego he would have had to see the fate of Thassalina coming. After that, the only way he'd have to mess with Masego would be magic, and we saw what happened to Praesi mages who tried to use magic on him.

Dainpdf

Kairos is good enough with narrative manipulation he got stuff past the Bard, and he has access to decent mages he doesn't mind sacrificing.

P

Counterpoint. Kairos is the Joker. His plans aren't really plans so much as making sure just though dynamite ends up in a mine too make sure it collapses. If we were arguing about whether he wanted the city to fall AND take the next with it, I'd be all for blaming him. But this is a result of multiple prickly personalities fighting each other, with the event that caused either their prickliness or their running against each other being at least 2 steps down _any_ plan. This is the choir taking the threads left by Kairos and trying to work around what they think might be his final goal, out, at the very least, using his chaos to deal with other 'threats'.

Dainpdf

I don't understand.

But my point was just that Kairos might have had something to do with Masego's piece of Arcadia being here, now. Just that.

Mental Mouse

Even so, Kairos is simply not in that league of sorcery, and neither is anyone he's known to have access to. He doesn't have a chance to mess with Masego magically, and IIRC the two haven't interacted at all, which makes story-fu unlikely.

With the death of his fathers, Masego is almost certainly the most powerful human mage on the continent, and we've seen him slaughter people with diabolic magic just for trying to eavesdrop on him, much less trying to manipulate him. Also, he is, if not autistic, at least something similar – and a lot of the usual tactics for manipulating people will *utterly fail* against autistics. In particular, Kairos' chaotic demeanor will only annoy Masego.

And what's happening in Arcadia is certainly Masego – manipulating natural law is his specialty, and he just took possession of the most powerful portal generator in history. As an aside, I'd kind of like to see him throw some portals directly from the Hells to Heaven(s). Let the angels and demons fight directly, on their own territory!

As far as that fae-noble-like force challenging the exit gate, I suspect Cat may soon be getting a delegation from the Autumn and/or Spring courts, asking for help.

Dainsleif

Not to mention a will more fae than person, noble. Much like the Sun masego saw that made him Hierophant. It isn't even a fucking question at this point.

It's him, and it scares me.

AbraKadabra

Well his father was killed by the gods above, and he is **PISSED**.

Liliet

...I'm betting on Cordelia's thing, currently.

Gunslinger

I'm not sure whatever Cordelia is dredging out would spawn hell gates in Arcadia. That screams of Masego and the world fortress of Liesse

stevenneiman

This doesn't seem like the Dead King's aesthetic or the Tyrant's ability. The Dead King primarily focuses on undead and generally seems to prefer minimum effort to maximum effect, and messing with an entire plane doesn't really fit that, and it seems to me like straining it exactly to the breaking point and no further is too much restraint for the Tyrant, if he even could pull this off. That leaves either Masego, or a new power. A new power almost by definition means too little information to speculate well, but Masego would fit perfectly. He just gained an unspecified but large amount of power, and I could see him setting parameters in Arcadia to the most extreme levels that would allow for sustained observation to see how it reacts.

And he knows Cat would be upset if he did it in Creation.

[Liliet](#)

That... really does sound entirely & exactly like him.

I think my favorite version actually is two actors: Masego and Cordelia's thing.

Cicero

The Dead King definitely has significant experience with Hellgates.

It's probably Masgo, but I don't think we can rule out the Dead King. After all, he would be the type to make contingency plans, and Arcadia might be a plausible staging ground for him considering his interest in Cat, who to his knowledge is still a fae noble.

[Mental Mouse](#)

By the same token, he already has his own plane of Hell, and he already got slapped down by the Gods for trying to conquer more of the Hells. I suspect that attacking Arcadia would get similar retaliation, given that he didn't even take over the echo area around Keter.

Stormblessed

I'm pretty sure Marshal Grem is thinking "The Black Queen is so very much like Amadeus. It reminds me of when we were both younger."

caoimhinh

Yep, something like "I'm not gonna doubt her instincts, the last time I doubted Amadeus on this kind of matters we had to

use a freaking Dragon to get out of that mess." Or something along those lines.

haihappen

The last time I did not trust his instincts, I lost an eye...

caoimhinh

LMAO. That actually seems like a legit possibility, hahahaha.

caoimhinh

I just remembered that it was Juniper's father, Oguz Sharphand, who took the eye from Grem. Still, hilarious comment.

[Liliet](#)

"Familiar, why is this so familiar... Familiar, like someone I used to know..."

imagesbe

Was that confirmation that it was Hierophant, or her just finishing her sentence? Because that sounded disturbingly like confirmation.

Jworks

Didn't Akua's Artifact in Liesse allow her to open hellgates anywhere? It sounds like Masego brought hell to Arcadia.

[Sugar Roll](#)

Another possibility is that is related to what Cordelia is digging up. The one that the Tyrant want to have a look at.

Dainpdf

Sounded like confirmation to me. Plus, this sort of working is right up his alley.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Both. "Could it be the Dead King? [*four* hellgates open at once] Nope, that's Masego."

[Mental Mouse](#)

Another point just occurred to me: Masego hasn't encountered Night yet, though he might have learned something of it from scrying. He may not have recognized that the new entry to his realm was in fact Cat.

stevenneiman

I don't think it was confirmation. Just her agreeing that it was a possibility. Still my working theory considering that stretching Arcadia just barely short of breaking sounds like a science experiment of the sort Masego would do. And that it involved hellgates, which Liesse was designed to produce.

Jeremy

So... either Heirophant, or whatever it is that Cordelia dredged up! Any other guesses?

IDKWhoitis

90% sure it's Masego, as opening that many hell gates without the artifact would take too much energy. And Cordelia wouldn't do hell gates, that would be heretical.

Tom

Yeah it looks like he's trying to pull one (or both?? not sure if the Warlock ends up in a hell after death) of his daddies out of the hells, judging by the shimmering thing that almost appeared.

From his perspective he's probably annoyed at Cat for portaling in and out while he's trying to work because the portals probably mess with the metaphysics of what he's trying to do. Metaphorically she's a cat (ha) clambering on his keyboard and staring at the cursor on the screen while he's programming.

Plus he was so thoughtful that he went to Arcadia to open the hellgates rather than opening them in Callow! Really he's come so far in his courtesies with people, but Cat's just as dense as ever...

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm not sure I buy that he's trying to retrieve his fathers. Remember the emphasis on "he did not flinch"... he did care about them, but he also knows death happens, and he is Praesi. Revenge I could buy, but the question is, against who? Given the nature of his Name and his prior comments, my guess would be that he wants to strike back against the Gods Above. Maybe he can, maybe he can't; Cat recently learned the fallacy of "I'm the baddest thing I've met so far". Or maybe he's preparing for the next such confrontation.

Kissaten

But the incubus father is a devil, and devils never truly die (or something) and can be resummoned.

Mental Mouse

Remember that whole discussion about “is Cat really Cat anymore?” This is the flip side.

If Cat is still Cat, after having her entire body replaced with magical Winter-stuff, and then again replaced with flesh (the Winter having been eaten by Sve Noc), well the only thing left to be “Cat”, is her personality and memories (the “software”).

But that implies that Tikoloshe, stripped of its memories, personality, and (in its case) the constraining magic that shaped it, is perforce *not* Tikoloshe anymore.

IDKWhoitis

So Masego is shattering Arcadia?

Also, I think Grem is now another believer of Cat is the incarnation of what Black and Ranger’s daughter would be like.

SpeckofStardust

No I think the Fae broke this part of arcadia off to have all the gates made to arcadia (from the hells or the mortal realm) to ah defend themselves from whatever the heck is happening.

Mental Mouse

Interesting possibility, but I see a couple of counter-indications: (1) It felt “the same” from both inside and out, even to the crows. (2) Remember there’s some correspondence between Arcadia and Creation – and her last gate to this battlefield came from an Arcadian fortress, probably one of the Autumn/Spring courts.

Mental Mouse

Actually, never mind – I see it’s Cat’s theory that the piece of Arcadia is broken off.

Miles

Wait could she be? It would explain a lot.

Mental Mouse

Amadeus (when he was Black) explicitly said that she was not his lost heir.

Agent J

She's half Deoraithe, so not the Ranger's get. Since Black is still alive, it can be assumed he didn't cheat on the bloody fucking Ranger either, so she's not Black's biological kid.

RandomFan

Ranger could be in an open relationship with Black rather than a closed one- but it's highly unlikely that Black would take a partner who isn't both a named and someone he trusts implicitly. Captain wouldn't cheat on her husband, and if Malicia had a kid we'd all know. That leaves Scribe, but- I doubt that, too.

[sengachi](#)

Yeah Black's demisexual too, Ranger is the only person he's ever been emotionally close enough to to feel sexual attraction to. Except maybe Malicia, but she's not Deoraithe and that's not their dynamic besides.

Decius

Black already explicitly denied being Cat's biological father, in the most credible way possible.

[Liliet](#)

Cheating isn't the issue, Amadeus being on the ace spectrum is XD

[Liliet](#)

"Alright, Amadeus, you win, I like this one too"

superkeaton

I'm excited to seem Pilgrim back. Wonder who his partner is, I'm guessing not the White Knight.

konstantinvoncarstein

No, the White Knight is busy fighting the deads

caoimhinh

I think it would be Rozala, since her presence would be needed if negotiation between the armies is going to happen. I wonder where Pilgrim left Amadeus, or if Amadeus is still their prisoner (although it's unlikely he escaped so easily, but anything can happen).

[Liliet](#)

I'm betting Rozala, too.

Skart

I'm calling Amadeus instead.

SpeckofStardust

Well.

So hell (1 or many) is basically invading Arcadia due to either the dead king or Masego. Ripping tears in existence while looking for something. weakening the walls in all things, and the fae are being royally fucked with here. Well I think that getting the 7 crowns + 1 might be needed to stop something truly unpleasant from happening.

[Javvies](#)

I've missed the bantering. Good to see some of it again.

Yeah ... that's a problem. Cat is still an expert at understatement.

The longer that the plan appears to be going perfectly, you know that the bigger the problem is going to be.

[Sugar Roll](#)

I personally found it out of place. You'd expect levity out of Archer in these kinds of situations but not from Catherine. She doesn't do that in serious meetings unless she's doing it here on purpose.

byzantine279

Watch what else she is doing: She's observing Grem. That whole conversation was seeing how he would react to it, since she hasn't had a chance to get his measure.

[Sugar Roll](#)

It goes both ways I think. I feel like Grem is onto her antics and is perfectly aware of what she's doing. The orc is pretty sharp. He didn't lose patience and he was asking the right questions.

Decius

Grem knows exactly what Cat is doing, and is doing exactly the same thing back, so that they can get over the early unease and lack of complete instinctive trust as quickly as possible.

[Liliet](#)

God I love their dynamic. I want that taaaaaalk

Javvies

It's also a semi-public show of confidence in and comfort with Juniper and Viv.

Who Cat had just had a sort of dispute with after they did something that looked more than a little like a (bad) attempt at a coup.

Liliet

Oh that's a super good point ♥

Juniper losing her patience and banging the sword on the table is the best way to mend what's been shaken there ;u;

Liliet

Catherine is nervous and tense and Indrani is not there to crack jokes for her, so she does it herself. It did seem a little exaggerated, likely for Grem's benefit, yeah. But the basic logic is solid: when you can't do anything more useful, might as well joke.

reismon

Now I want Cat bursting through a wall, like: "Masego! What the fuck!?"

Aston

And when the Grey Pilgrim finds Cat isn't named and mortal...his tricks don't work so well...

KageLupus

The Pilgrim still has plenty of power versus Cat, whether or not she has a Name. We have already seen that he can use his Behold aspect on mortals which means he still has that intrinsic understanding of people and their feelings.

The only thing that changes with Cat not having a Name is that she maybe isn't as susceptible to Story shenanigans like the Rule of Three or Dying for Her Redemption. And even that I am not really sold on since she is running around with another capital title. How different First Under Night is compared to a standard Name is for the likes of Masego to figure out.

If nothing else, Pilgrim is a servant of Above and Cat is currently playing captain for a Below team. If he doesn't have a Narrative lever to use against Cat he still has a Choir of cheating angels at his back.

badluckcat

I don't think it matters if she doesn't have a name. She is still in the Role of the Black Queen and that carries a lot of narrative weight.

[Liliet](#)

That's not what Role means. If she were in that Role, truly, she'd have the Name. Tariq knows that.

[Liliet](#)

I think the issue is much more interesting: Tariq might no longer have a good reason to oppose Cat at all.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, she's still the servant of a Dark Power. Indeed, one could say that Night is a *particularly* dark power. It should be interesting to see how his Light powers fare against Cat and her Well of Night.

naturalnuke

Okay so, a piece of Arcadia broken off, a fae title, unstable hellgates.

Masego grew up on an isolated piece of Arcadia, dissected fae nobles before, and has stolen the 'broken' super weapon that makes hellgates.

Hierophant lost his moral compass with both Archer and Cat gone.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hierophant didn't really have a moral compass. However, there were four the people in Creation who could tell him No and make it stick. Two of them are now dead (modulo demonic values of "dead"), while two were not present for his breakdown.

ChillyPepper

Makes you wonder if he is -partially at least- blaming cat for their deaths, perhaps even callow and its independence.

Skaddix

Callow seems like a stretch. Maybe he blames Viv she is running an intelligence org but that is similar to Malicia missing a large number of mages and clerics going missing. Now Cordelia and the Crusade though.

[Liliet](#)

Cordelia and the Crusade are a stretch too, that's not how Masego thinks. Malicia's the first on the list, if anyone, and himself #0 for failing to prevent it.

ChillyPepper

Considering that the action is taken against the armies of callow, unless it wasn't directed and instead was a side effect. It could be a "Woe on you and I" thing as well.

Cicero

Almost certainly a side effect.

Perhaps even an intended benign action. "I need to borrow Arcadia for a while, better put up some fences so Cat's toys don't wander in and get squashed. She'd be irritated at me."

Burdi

Maybe its the consequences for breaking the story
Arcadia is dimension based on story about summer and winter
they stuck in story since the beginning, thats their breath of life

And when the story broken, so their existence along with their home

if its true, then cat needed to became one of the title once more to weave new story for them

caoimhinh

That epigraph had me laughed loudly for a minute. I really like those fragments of the future, seems like Cat really fulfilled her promise.

When I read the "Eyes, unfathomably large, gazing at me" part, I considered the possibility of it being the Gods Below, but they don't intervene in such a direct manner. So, the list of suspects would be: Dead King, Masego, the ghost of Wekesa, the mysterious corpse that First Prince ordered to drag out of that lake, or an entirely new and not previously introduced entity.

Since the last three are unlikely, I was originally inclined towards it being the Dead King, but considering the changes of the Observatory and the use of High Arcana while trying to get something from Hell makes me believe it was Hierophant's doing.

Also, I'd say his current attempt failed given the explosion. Is he trying to recover Tikoloshe? Is he so out of his mind that he didn't recognize Cat? Maybe he did but she didn't understand his subtle hints of breaking the gate and making the fragments slither to his direction?

The meeting with Pilgrim will be interesting undoubtedly, now another reason was added, since he might provide more information about this situation thanks to Angel's whispers.

Typos found:

- wise and and all-knowing / delete one 'and'
- if the change were coming from without / if the change was coming from within
- condescended to by a bird / condescended by a bird
- this wretched placed / this wretched place

[Mental Mouse](#)

Quibble on Typos: "condescended to by X" is AFICT the correct form.

caoimhinh

Really? That sounds really weird.

[Mental Mouse](#)

English is weird.

nick012000

Was that whatever Warlock turned himself into? I guess it makes sense that there'd still be something of him left after his Ascension.

caoimhinh

That's also a possibility to consider.
He was opening gates to Hell while using High Arcana (which then I guess failed and thus the explosion) so my guess would be that he's trying to recover Tikoloshe.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm pretty sure Warlock is with the Gods Below.

It occurs to me that in the entire epic, we have seen or heard about exactly one ghost-like spirit, that being Akua. And that spirit remained only because she had made prior arrangements to separate her soul from her body. (Which backfired when the soul was captured by her enemy.)

I think the Gods of this world are conscientious about collecting loose spirits.

Agent J

It would make sense. The whole debate about how to allow for growth without being usurped debate puts this in an

interesting context. What is a ghost, but another immortal?
And, having been born mortal, would likely be as free to
learn and grow as mortals do rather than the static
immortals.

Can't have that.

Sanctus Obscurum

Lo, opened she the uncertain gate,
Way to safety sweet, or fell and damned doom.
And to the most sacred crows,
In whose feather'd forms Sve Noc sat
'Pon her shoulders draped in Woe,
Did the First Under the Night inquire
As to what wisdom, what thoughts
They could give on how might she find
The truth of that which lay beyond her gate.
And to her was given most sage advice:
"Try a foot first" spake the Night
In crow's feathers cloaked.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Sanctus, you have bèn reading too many Eddas!

caoimhinh

"And that, kids, is the reason why we Firstborn always put one
foot first and wait for a few heartbeats before completely
crossing any boundary, be it a door of wood, gate of stone or
portal of magic. For thus is the Wisdom bestowed by the Night."
– An old Drow educating Drow children.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Several centuries later, Ethnographers from the Royal Callowan
College collected this traditional folk song:

One day the Black Queen went riding-0
With a hey-derry-down a-down-e-o
Until she came to a Portal-0
Say hey-derry-down a-down-e-o

"Oh, what shall I do with this Portal-0"
With a hey-derry-down a-down-e-o
"That stands so dark and forbidding-0"
Say hey-derry-down a-down-e-o

With her came riding Sve Noc-0
With a hey-derry-down a-down-e-o
Full of Night and black as coal-0
Say hey-derry-down a-down-e-o

Up spoke Young Night to the Black Queen-0
With a hey-derry-down a-down-e-o
"Stick a foot into the Portal-0"
Say hey-derry-down a-down-e-o

JJR

The fact that she keeps thinking of Black as her father is kind of worrying me. That he wasn't secretly her father was one of the first things they got out of the way. And the way it just started happening so suddenly a couple chapters ago. I think the Bard is to blame, somehow.

byzantine279

Nah, after her trip down memory lane with the goddesses she realized what he was to her, and isn't hiding that from herself anymore.

[theothin](#)

That he wasn't *biologically* her father was one of the first things they got out of the way.

It's not sudden, either. Both of them made references to it as early as Book 3, and Cat kept thinking of him that way throughout Book 4. It's just that it's ramped up in Book 5.

[Liliet](#)

Honestly the very first reference to him as a potential father figure for her (not biologically) was in Book 1 Chapter Fall, when she came out to the balcony to scream after Akua's fuckery and he joined her there. She specifically comments on how he DID NOT act like she imagined a father might, went on a whole paragraph long description of how it wasn't like that between them and would never be. You know, just randomly out of nowhere decided to deny this specific idea, as one does XD

This has been building up for a while. The dam broke is all it is.

Gunslinger

Personally I think EE keeps enjoying the since when has Cat been calling Black father questions and wants to see how long that will happen.

[Liliet](#)

In the last epilogue, someone late to the party asks in the comments: "Wait, since when has Catherine been calling him father?"

And everyone just shrugs.

broadaxe

My guess is that's really Masego, but i'm also guessing he is turning Arcadia into his own little "miracle machine" like he is magically terraforming the place to serve a purpose, he did after all, just recently witness an actual summoning of a god, so as Hierophant his inspiration should be at its highest :3

[benthelynx](#)

Well shit.

RandomFan

Here's hoping that Masego comes out of this entire mess intact and no more insane than he was in book four... I'm asking a lot, I know.

[Денис Удалов](#)

"The cloth covering the missing eye his epithet promised..." and then "There was a dangerous man, behind those red-brown eyes." As old joke says, "It is not that Grem doesn't have one eye – in the contrary, he **does** have one eye".

[Not_a_robot](#)

So. What was he fighting? Because it sure as hell wasn't Masego's will trying to take over that portal. Who or what else is present in that hellscape?

caoimhinh

Well, Cat said that force of will surpassed that of a human, and compared it to the will of Fae Royalty, but we already know that Masego's will is way beyond that of ordinary mortals, leaving aside the fact that High Arcana requires great power and fortitude of mind, Masego has faced Fae Royalty, multiple Demons at the same time (even hold a piece of Corruption inside him without any apparent trouble), and even made a piece of the Gods Above shut up. His Name of Hierophant makes him grow more powerful as he witnesses more things, and things of great power; he has just come back from witnessing the descent of a sliver of Divinity and the temporal Apotheosis of Wekesa, so it would make sense that Masego's will and power have taken a huge boost.

SMHF

So this whole debacle with the Gates and Scrying isn't part of some grand plan... just side effects of somebody trying to napalm Creation with a chunk of Arcadia... That does sound like something

Hierophant try after losing both his parents. Though where he's gonna drop this dumpster fire is the real question!

nipi

Nah. Im guessing the dumpster fire is merely a sideeffect. He is probably trying to get his father back from Hell.

Hastien

I'm pretty certain Heirophant is out for blood, he's here for whatever Cordelia is pulling out of the lake. Between cheating it's way out of a binding and killing his fathers the entity at Thassalina represents pretty much everything he hates.

He's not interested in Procer and he certainly isn't helping the army of Callow.

My theory is that he realized permanently binding something like that would require more power than he could bring to bear. He was bringing a Name to a god fight. So he decided to take a leaf out of Cat's book and murder his way into a fae title. But between being able to take Liesse into Arcadia thanks to Creation being weakened by the three demons, having four demons stored in his pocket realm and such an intimate knowledge of the fae from spending so much time with Cat he was able to kill his way right to the top.

As a Fae King in his seat of power he would have oomph to dictate the terms of reality and get around the entity's I win hax. Now he just has bring his seat of power to a creational anchor for the entity to successfully bind it

konstantinvoncarstein

It would the most awesome moment in the entire story! 😊 But it is not likely, and would make him an even bigger target than Neshamah.

Furthermore, the entity at Thalassinia was a God. As in "creator of the universe". And I doubt that what Cordelia will try to unleash is in the same league.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, his father may have taught him not to depend on aspects for casting, but even so, much of his power comes from his Name. If he goes Fae, he risks losing that. And for that matter, the Fae and Arcadia are just a separate creation from what the protagonists think of as "Creation". They were also created by the Gods (who would later be Above and Below), and there's no real reason to think they rival their creators.

Hastien

Cat remained Squire while a lesser titled Fae, interference isn't a given. And between the nature of his name and his possibly unrivaled experience, Heiropant should be able to get the most use out of the power with the fewest drawbacks.

I think it was stated that the Fae would be powerful enough to be dangerous to the Gods if they weren't so tightly bound to their stories. I believe it was Masego who said souls in Creation have the freedom to be a threat but the lack of power or lifespan to accumulate more.

We don't really have hard limits on the power level of the Fae. They've nearly always been fought in a weakened state from being in Creation, but we can assume their royalty is nearly unassailable in their strongholds. Ranger had to wait for the Summer Queen to be exhausted and far from home and she still only managed a superficial wound.

And you're probably right, in an even slugging match the Gods above would probably win out. But with the Hierophant's will shaping Arcadia into a cage meant to hold a God... It's not a zero percent chance of success.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, I note that EE skipped right past the "test", which Cat presumably passed.

[Liliet](#)

Since everyone involved is not an idiot and *has met her before*, the test was presumably specifically for her identity, and not any metaphysical properties she might have acquired or lost in the meanwhile.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, imagine what this scene looked like for Cat's people observing: She walks through the gate... then the gate *shatters*. When a new gate appears, Cat and the crows *fall* out of it, "covered in dust and lightly smoking". She won't have much trouble convincing people there's a problem!

[Daniel E](#)

The Drow holy book is now one of my favorite texts, second only to the collective wisdom of Dread Emperor Irritant. Let's not forget the hymn about Mighty Rumena being a jerk.

konstantinvoncarstein

The book with the tips for heroes is not bad either

[Mental Mouse](#)

It would be nice to have the known Tips for Heroes collected in the Wiki. I might even do it myself if/when I can find time and energy to go through the saga and collect them.

Oshi

Where is this hymn?

[Daniel E](#)

Chapter 1 of Book 5.

Cap'n Smurfy

Okay so this chapter is ominous and all, but can we talk about the fact that Catherine does get to write her Drow Religious text in the future: 'Parables of the Lost and Found', disputed Firstborn religious text. How much of it do you think is just insults and lies about Mighty Ruamena?

medailyfun

it will be written BY Mighty Rumena

Agent J

And not a hint of a lie will be told about the Losara Queen. Only vicious truth.

nipi

Let me guess. Masego is in the process of returning his father from a hell. Probably still looking for the right one.

[Adrian_V](#)

Like many i am also betting on whatever Cordelia is dredging out, even if it was not evil maybe is the pattern of some good dead power coming back wrong.

Sylwoos

So Masego is causing a mess in Arcadia and the fae royalty is trying to force Cat to address the situation by redirecting gate to him and trying to prevent her from leaving.

[Liliet](#)

I think that's my favorite version, currently.

Raved Thrad

"Hellgates. Temporary and unstable, but hellgates nonetheless."

For anyone else who's read the Merlin novels of The Chronicles of Amber, does this sound suspiciously like a Guideverse version of Ghostwheel?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Eh. I like the Amber saga, but I'm not seeing the similarities here.

Raved Thrad

Remember that Ghostwheel was like a Trump-generating machine, that could open gateways into multiple shadows at once to find things. In this case, the multiple temporary hellgates looks like someone's combing through the Hells looking for something or someone.

[Mental Mouse](#)

There's a very different scale of "multiple" here. For Ghostwheel, the virtual Trumps were innumerable, and iirc were actually the substrate supporting its mind as well as its mapping abilities. In this world, the amazing thing is being able to open more than *one* portal at once, and there's nothing virtual about them – they are full hellgates with creatures coming through them.

Walrus

Is it just me, or does anyone else want to see Cat straight up murder Grey Pilgrim during the talks? He did break hostage bond, so his life is forfeit, even under truce...

Pokekid01

Typo: Hakram killed the Exiled Prince, not Nauk.

[Mental Mouse](#)

[Nope](#). Hakram carried Cat's order to Nauk. Also mentioned at Nauk's funeral.

Hmm. Is that scene the only time we've seen Masego laugh?

Pokekid01

Ah, you're right. It was Nauk.

fbt

loved the return of the snark 😊 although cat missed a chance to say something nice to her generals, that I think would be more consistent w/ her current self (i.e. i have 2 of calernia's finest, go handle that sh*t). Overall, fun as always.

Chapter 26: Civility

"No plan is beyond dreading the sound of a match being struck."
– Dread Emperor Reprobate the First

"You could change," Hakram gently suggested, "into something that's not still smoking."

I patted at my cloak absent-mindedly, irritated that even after three rounds of that there still seemed to be smoke wafting up somehow. My face was caked in dust and soot, so Adjutant was being fairly light-handed by just talking about clothes, but to the Hells with it. Who was I trying to impress on the other side, by not arriving dressed like a grimy goblin and smelling of dark sorceries? That lot had already declared me Arch-heretic of the East, the only way to go was up. A sharp whistle had Zombie trotting to my side instead a spoken answer and Hakram sighed.

"I take it you won't be washing either," the orc said.

"Got it in one," I cheerfully replied. "Now, we're just waiting on-"

Leaning against my staff, I pushed myself atop my docilely waiting mount. I settled comfortably onto the saddle, the length of ebony in my hand spinning gracefully the once before I brought it to rest against her neck.

"- a message," I finished. "After that we'll be going to have a nice polite chat with people who may or may not want to murder us."

"Is Vivienne coming along?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Not for this, considering what it might come to," I said. "And even with you I'm hesitating."

I glanced at his latest mislaid limb.

"You still any good in a fight, Adjutant?" I asked, tone serious.

He'd known me long enough not to be offended by a question most orcs would have drawn steel over, knowing it was genuine.

"I only need one hand for an axe," Hakram simply replied.

I nodded in acknowledgement, and neither of us saw any need to belabour the subject any further. In the same way that he'd trusted I asked my question without derision, I would trust him not to be letting pride do the talking when he'd answered it. Dusk was mere moments away, but even in that spreading gloom the winged silhouettes of the Sisters were blots of deeper darkness. It would have been convenient to use them as messengers, but I'd not even bothered to ask – Komena might be somewhat amused by the insolence of it, but Andronike certainly would not. I got cawed at quite enough already without trying to use goddesses as carrier pigeons. The word I'd been waiting on came back on foot, in the shape of Lord Ivah. It knelt before my horse, head rising only at my silent inquisitive glance.

"It was arranged, Losara Queen," the drow said. "The order was received."

"Good," I said. "On your feet, Ivah, and back to the sigil. We might have a long night ahead of us."

"One can only hope, First Under the Night," the Lord of Silent Steps smiled.

It heeded the dismissal without tarrying any further, leaving no footstep and making no sound as it vanished into the depths of the camp. Adjutant had visibly been busying himself tying two bundles to the sides of my mount, but it would have been a mistake to believe that meant he'd not been closely paying attention to everything taking place by him.

"Drow are hard to read," Hakram said. "But this one seems bound more tightly to you than the others."

"It was first among my Peerage, in trust if not necessarily in might," I said. "The distinction remains even past the death of the titles they bore."

"Loyal?" the orc asked me, head cocking to the side.

"To me?" I smiled. "More than some of its fellows are comfortable with, I think. But their true loyalty goes to something I merely stand for. Best not to forget that, when making demands of them."

"And what demands will be made of them tonight?" he asked.

I hummed.

"The order I sent was a contingency," I said. "Best you don't know of it for deniability's sake. But if the Saint of Swords is there, Adjutant, I'll be making a play."

"For?"

"The thing they have that I most want," I said.

I could see in the tightening of his brow that Hakram was forcing himself not to ask more questions even as we made out of the camp. He wouldn't be pressing more over the scheme hanging in wait, so odds were he was simply still curious about the drow. It had a fond smile quirking my lips, though I hid it away. Akua had taken to the culture of the Firstborn only insofar as it involved the levers of power and other exploitable angles, Indrani had learned what pertained to her own interests and little else. Hakram, though, was fascinated by drow culture in a manner that went well beyond the immediately useful or relevant aspects of it. It was odd seeing them through that fresh set of eyes, having them taken in as strange and exotic when they were neither to me. I'd indulge him for an hour or two later, though if he intended to make a treatise on the subject I was definitely letting him pick at Ivah's brains instead. I'd refused the legionary escort Juniper had offered when I'd told her I would be headed for talks with the Pilgrim and his latest round of minions, along with Vivienne's suggestion of an honour guard of knights. They both had their instructions in case this ended with someone killing me, which I considered to be unlikely but would be arrogant to be presume *impossible*.

It was not a long walk, to where our enemies were waiting for us, and it was opens ground every step of the way.

The pavilion was held up by two poles, thick canvas painted green and gold descending from there in a roughly rectangular shape. The entrance, flanked as it was by truce banners, had been tied open just enough to reveal four silhouettes within without letting out the heat from inside. All of them seated at a table, with raised braziers providing warmth in the waning light of day. Hakram and I did not hurry, allowing the shadows to lengthen with our approach. Crusted with dust and ash, I must have looked to have been tarred to better match the dark: the sight of me, at least, brought a sliver of almost indulgent amusement from the goddesses still circling above. Sve Noc descended on dark wings twofold in the exact moment day turned to night, and they claimed my shoulders as perch without a word. We were close enough to the pavilion I could make out the faces of most within. Rozala Malanza, face drawn and tired after the day's battle but no less grimly cast for it. The Grey Pilgrim himself was no surprise, for he would have been drawn to a day like this sure as flies to fresh corpses.

The sight that had my pulse quickening, however, was the Saint of Swords: Laurence de Montfort's crooked frame and wrinkled face were unmistakeable. Well, it seemed I was going to be playing with fire after all. The fourth and last was a man looking to be in his early forties I knew not, though I could hazard a guess. He was built like an orc, tall and broad and thickly muscled. Add to that the deep tan and the good chance he was the commander of the Levantine part of the army, and odds were this was the Lord

of Alava. One of the Champion's Blood, as they were called, though it was my understanding that the heroine who'd killed Captain was not kin to the actual blood descendants of that ancient hero. The two mortal rulers were fresh additions, not in attendance when I'd gotten my first report of this tent being raised. The Pilgrim must have sent for them before I even departed the camp with Adjutant. The hero was laying it on thick, I decided with a frown. That particular point had already been made when he first had the pavilion put up. This reeked of overcompensation to me, and that was not something I'd usually associate with an old hand like Tariq. Regardless, I had no intention of being pulled into his rhythm.

"Here," I suddenly said.

Zombie stride came to a sudden stop maybe forty feet away from the pavilion, and I stroked her mane affectionately even as Hakram followed suit. With a hard shove I planted my staff in the snow, and Adjutant mirrored the gesture with the truce banner he'd been marching under. Without a word it was made clear to the other side I would not be humouring them with a single step further. Komena cawed approvingly from my shoulder, never one to pass the occasion to stick it to someone even through ceremony. It was almost amusing watching the ripple of dismay that passed through the enemy when they realized that they'd have to leave their nice warm tent to come speak with the Black Queen. A small gesture, perhaps, but so had been their own intention in making me crawl to their table and domain before speaking to them. I intended to make it clear from the beginning, which side it was between us that came closest to being considered the *supplicant*. They filed out one by one, and I had to suppress a grin when I saw the Saint had gotten stuck with the duty of carrying out a brazier. Seeing the woman who might just be the most dangerous killer in the service Heavens being used for manual labour warmed the petty cockles of my heart. The Grey Pilgrim took the lead, those simples grey robes that should prove no match for the cold all he'd bothered to wear. Malanza and the Levantine let him stand in front, an implicit endorsement of his primacy, while the Saint put down the brazier near them with ill-grace.

"Queen Catherine," the Pilgrim said, "we-"

The touch was light as a feather, for the first fraction of a moment. People often said they could feel a weight to the gaze of others, when it was on them, a sort of sense for the attention – and this was the same, in a way. The crow-goddesses on my shoulders stirred, and the touch was torn through by their will like a hand through cobwebs. It came back, a little stronger, and from a myriad angles. Komena's wings spread in irritation: the night shivered around us, and only then did the attention *withdraw*.

"Tariq," I interrupted in Chantant, tone harsh. "If you don't tell your owners to keep their grubby little fingers to themselves, I might just decide to take offence to their behaviour."

Like tossing a stone in a pond, I got to see the ripples from that. Princess Rozala was surprised, and a little confused. The Levantine looked... angry enough to draw steel, but hiding it much better than I would have guessed. Good ol' Laurence had a hand on her sword, ornery cutthroat that she was. It was for the best, I mused, that the scheme I had in mind required me to get under the skin of most these people.

"Pardon?" the Grey Pilgrim said, what looked like genuine surprise on his face.

Andronike cawed on my right shoulder, though the true meaning she simply wove into my mind as a thought.

"Mercy, huh," I said. "That'd be the Ophanim, if I remember my theology right."

I leaned forward, peering at the Grey Pilgrim and not.

"Are you listening through him, you meddlesome old things?" I asked. "Try that again and I swear I'll take a few feathers for my cloak."

Hakram, bless his soul, had always been quick to follow through on my plays.

"This could be taken as an assault under truce banner," the orc gravelled. "What exactly is your meaning in arranging this, Princess Malanza?"

The Princess of Aquitan's face betrayed irritation, before she mastered it and it became a pleasantly smiling mask.

"This is a misunderstanding, Lord Adjutant," she said.

"They're lying," the Saint of Swords said. "It wasn't an attack, only gazing."

Years of rubbing elbows with Praesi ensured the flash of satisfaction I felt never made it to my face. Laurence was always going to be the weak point, here: she was powerful, unused to having to measure her words and hated me to the bone. Like a lot of people who'd been the strongest in their surroundings for years on years, she'd not had to really answer to anyone for too long. That led to sloppy habits.

"So by your own admission the Choir of Mercy attempted to look into my mind," I coldly said.

Rozala's face tightened almost imperceptibly. She might not have a sense for stories, this once, but she could recognize a diplomatic blunder when she heard one.

"The Saint of Swords does not speak for us," the princess said. "As I said, Black Queen, this is a misunderstanding. Let us put it behind us and-"

Suddenly, Andronike began laughing in the back of my mind. A heartbeat later I heard Tariq flinch, and from the crow-goddesses I felt only vicious satisfaction.

"Gods, child, what have you done to yourself?" the Grey Pilgrim said. "Those things on your shoulder... those are no crows. How many times can you sell your soul?"

Had he tried to gaze at them using an aspect? I almost pitied him if he had. The foundations of apotheosis for these two had been millennia of hateful murder, and the mortar had been Winter freely given – look at one of those raw would have been painful, but the two? Still, I ignored him and kept my eyes on Malanza instead. She was the angle I needed to exploit right now. The Levantine, who'd still not been introduced, was watching this unfold with wary eyes but not apparent inclination to step in.

"Your delegation has now assaulted me, accused me of lying over said assault and is now trying to lecture me like a misbehaving child," I mildly said. "Explain to me, Rozala Malanza, why I should not simply leave."

"Perhaps a recess is in order," the Levantine said, speaking up for the first time. "An hour, setting terms through intermediaries to avoid this strife."

His tone was calm, and his Chantant only lightly accented. What he was suggesting had a decent chance of succeeding, which was why I couldn't allow it to happen. This needed to have a very specific shape to it, if I didn't want it to end with a sword running through my guts.

"There has been no evidence that your side is willing to negotiate in good faith," Hakram said, tone just as calm. "A recess would change nothing. It is an *explanation* that is required."

"I am Yannu Marave, Lord of Alava and first among the Champion's Blood," the Levantine said. "I give my word that no assault was meant, to the best of my knowledge."

Cool-headed, I thought. That was unfortunate. Why couldn't I have gotten your average brash Dominion swordarm in attendance instead? Hells, the boy in Sarcella had been from a legacy of mages and he'd been nowhere this even-keeled.

"Perhaps the two of you had diplomatic intentions," I conceded, adjusting the angle of the thrust. "If that's the case, we may proceed without their presence. It has certainly been nothing but a distraction so far."

The earlier anger returned to his eyes. *There we go*, I thought.

"The Peregrine will always have a voice in the councils of Levant," Lord Yannu replied, tone grown cool.

Now we were getting somewhere. He'd taken a position, I could take offence to it rightfully and walk away from this without having been 'the villain breaking negotiations on purpose', which was rarely a situation that ended well for said villain.

"Foundling, this is getting out of hand," Princess Rozala said, with forced calm. "As Lord Yannu suggested, a recess would be best."

"She's breaking this down on purpose," the Saint said, and spat to the side. "The Enemy always schemes, Malanza, you should have learned that by now."

And it was true, I thought, but by saying it she'd given me exactly what I needed.

"That's quite enough," I said, allowing anger to seep into my voice. "We're done here. If neither you nor the Pilgrim can keep your *hound* on a tighter leash, Malanza, we'll settle this on the field."

Now, there was the gambit. But I'd been fairly sure the moving parts would come together just right. With the Sisters disallowing whatever it was that allowed the Pilgrim to look into people, he should be on the backfoot. Experience, for once, would work against him: when you used a tool for several decades, suddenly losing it required an adjustment. Even the finest swordman in Creation would need time to adapt after being forced in his first fistfight in sixty years. Time which I'd been careful not to give the Pilgrim, so to speak. Now, Malanza had to answer for two heroes neither of which she had any real authority over, and she was not great diplomat in the first place. That I'd be able to work around her when the chaos set in was a given. The only unknown had been the Lord Yannu, but even though he'd given me trouble most of Levant came with a usable handle: the Grey Pilgrim himself. Even the implication he was to be dismissed had been enough to harden the Levantine's position. Now, I had passable reason to leave in a huff. And I'd repeatedly slighted the Saint this whole time, when odds were she'd be opposed to this kind of conference in the first place. I was leaving with the promise of waging a battle that would be dangerous for her side, in her eyes likely succeeding at whatever scheme I'd been intent on. So, after I took my reins in hand and began to tug at

them to turn Zombie around, I prepared to find out whether my gambit was going to pay off.

A flicker of movement from Saint, and just like that *I had them*.

"Laurence," the Pilgrim yelled, "don't-"

I wouldn't be able to avoid that, I thought even as steps almost faster than I could follow had the Saint of Swords standing in front of Zombie and swinging her blade at my throat. But then I'd known I wouldn't be able to, and taken precautions well in advance. As the steel made it a bare inch from my throat, ruffling Komana's feathers lightly as it passed, Laurence de Montfort was decked in the face.

She went tumbling across the snow, spewing out blood and even a tooth, while Rumena the Tomb-Maker followed.

The Grey Pilgrim's hands blazed with light, but a heartbeat later I had my staff in hand and pointed at him.

"You make a move, Tariq, and I'll drop you," I said, tone perfectly calm.

He hesitated, even as the two mortals on his side reached for their blades in delayed reaction to this unholy mess, and that was quite enough for General Rumena to see my will done. The Saint of Swords landed on her feet, but the ground beneath her turned into boiling shadow and her leap up as she raised her sword once more had her land in the grasp of the old drow. Who closed its fingers around her throat, and squeezed lightly once. Her hand went down at the clear signal that the drow could have killed her but would refrain if she ceased moving. In a fair fight, I suspected the Saint would kill it after some trouble. In an ambush, as I'd arranged in a sense, it might be a little more even. But my weapon here wasn't Rumena's own might, so much as the fact that the Saint of Swords was a heroine who'd just attacked someone leaving peaceful negotiations held under truce banner. There wasn't a single fucking story that would get her out of this, so long as I was careful.

"I've had better fights from *jawor*," the Tomb-Maker scathingly assessed in Chantant. "This cattle is blind and easily provoked, Losara Queen. How has it survived so long in the Burning Lands?"

I couldn't *prove* that Rumena had worked on its mastery of Chantant purely to be able to slag its opponents verbally, but I had very deep suspicions.

"Catherine," the Grey Pilgrim said. "You cannot-"

"Your Majesty," I idly corrected. "I am going to ask you questions now, Pilgrim, and if you don't answer them quickly and

truthfully then General Rumena will execute the attempted murderer of the Queen of Callow."

"Queen Catherine," Princess Rozala tried, but she wasn't part of this right now and so I simply ignored her.

"Do you have Amadeus of the Green Stretch as a prisoner?" I asked the Pilgrim.

"Yes," Tariq said.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"At camp, under restraints."

"Is he alive and unharmed?"

"Yes," Tariq said.

"Is he in his right mind?" I pressed.

"As far as I know," the Pilgrim said.

"Good," I smiled. "Fetch him, right now. I'll trade him for your murderous little friend."

The Grey Pilgrim remained silent for a long moment.

"Laurence is one of the few living heroes who might be capable of slaying the Dead King," he said. "More than that, of killing him permanently. You could be dooming the continent by killing her."

I met his eyes and smiled.

"General Rumena," I said. "Squeeze a little tighter."

"Merciful Gods, Foundling, this is madness," Princess Rozala yelled. "You can't extort us-"

"Your delegation just tried to murder me under truce banner, Malanza," I snapped. "You should be licking my boots in *fucking gratitude* that a prisoner is all I'm demanding to let it go."

"The Carrion Lord torched entire principalities," the Princess of Aquitan snapped back. "How many thousands of dead innocents are on his head? And you think you can just ask for him back?"

"Black's the only way Praes doesn't collapse and take a third of the continent down with it," I said through gritted teeth. "So take your damned objections and choke on them, Malanza, because he might be a monster but he's *mine* and he's still needed."

"Don't do it, Tariq," the Saint called out. "Let them have me and then slit the bastard's throat. No truce with the Enemy."

"Tighter still, Rumena," I coldly ordered. "Pilgrim, an answer. You won't wait me into a story that turns this around."

"If you kill her," Tariq said, "I'll kill him."

"You've kept him alive so far for a reason," I countered without missing a beat. "While I have no pressing reason to keep de Montfort breathing save for this trade. Try again."

"You are gambling with matters beyond your understanding," the Pilgrim said, sounding frustrated.

"If even a single one of you had taken any of the deals I offered we wouldn't be standing here tonight," I told him without a shred of sympathy. "Instead you get this and you get me. You were warned, Pilgrim. My terms were given, do we have a bargain?"

"He's killing her," Pilgrim said, eyes flicking to the Saint.

"Best hurry then," I harshly replied.

"I only have the body," the Grey Pilgrim said. "The soul was removed."

"By who?" I snarled.

He didn't answer, and that was answer enough. The fucking Saint of Swords.

"Where's the soul?" I asked.

"I do not know," the Pilgrim replied, then glanced at the Saint again. "If Laurence dies, Catherine, we have no accord."

"General Rumena, loosen your grip slightly," I reluctantly said. "And you must be hard of hearing, Pilgrim – it's *Your Majesty*. How can you now know where the soul is?"

"I entrusted it to the Rogue Sorcerer," Tariq said. "And sent him into hiding."

"Why?" I hissed.

"So that the Black Knight's body could be publicly slain while his soul remains usable as leverage," the Pilgrim said.

"Have the body delivered, then," I coldly said. "It'll serve for a start."

"And Laurence?" the Pilgrim pressed.

I glanced at her, at the naked hatred on her face. Before this she had despised me mostly in principle, I thought, but now? Now

it was personal. She'd be after my neck from the moment she was let loose.

"You can have her back, once I have the body," I finally said.

My eyes turned to the princess and the lord, who looked deeply uncomfortable with what had taken place – as much with the Regicide's actions as the fact it looked like I was coming out on top, I thought.

"So," I said. "I suppose we have some time to kill before I get the body. Let's have us a peace conference, then."

theart0fwar

Get!

[Liliet](#)

Can you not?

Bad@games

Rumena op pls buff

kelioez

Shouldn't it be 'plz nerf'?

[DroughtBringer](#)

Go vote!

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

imagesbe

A great start to a peace meeting. Some more diplomacy like this and we'll get those 7 and 1 crowns to give to Larat.

Sparsebeard

I kind of wonder if to Larat the "and one" is Catherine's own crown... After all, betrayal HAS been foreshadowed...

[Javvies](#)

Hmmm.

So there's no one actually in charge in the Alliance side. That bodes poorly for their chances in the long run.

So ... what the hell is the Rogue Sorcerer supposed to be doing? Hey, maybe he's trying to hide in Arcadia and Masego is looking for Amadeus.

And Cat still hasn't brought up Pilgrim breaking hostage bond.

IDKWhoitis

I think Hostage bonds got placed at the bottom of the pile of grievances, and technically Tariq was only an observer, so he may not have been obligated to stay.

Dainpdf

It's likely to come up, though he can dodge it by pointing out Black was Praesi and thus not included in the accord.

[boballab](#)

Actually it is Saint that is in charge on the Alliance side because she is the Bards second in command and the Bard has usurped the Crusade from Cordelia. That is something the Pilgrim might not know because the Saint sent him after Black before Saint told Cordelia they were taking over and letting Procer be destroyed. Go back to Fatalism III

"Oh, we'll bleed," the Saint mused. "We'll lose badly, at first. And then we'll claw our way back up, inch by inch. Evil always wins at the start, but it's us who owns the conclusion. And from the ruins something better will rise. This empire's already a corpse, but we'll send it off with a pyre glorious enough it'll redeem the old faults."

"I will have you arrested," the First Prince of Procer said. "I will have you killed, if that is what it takes."

"You just worry about getting the armies marching," Laurence de Montfort dismissed. "Odds are I won't survive the scrap, but that's all right. It's a good war to die in. It'll be the crusade that settles it, you see: too many old monsters came crawling out on both sides. Won't be the kind of losses a side can recover from."

"You are not listening to a word I say," Cordelia whispered, aghast.

The Saint of Swords rose to her feet jauntily. The First Prince's muscles clenched, though she managed to flinch when the Chosen approached her. The old woman clapped her shoulder.

"Keep your chin up, girl," she said. "Sacrifice is always ugly business, but we'll come through in the end. To rise from the ashes, there needs to be a fire first."

The non heroes definitely do not know of the coup that Saint pulled off at that meeting. Right now Saint is in command of all the Crusader forces everywhere, she tells Cordelia where she wants them and she has to follow through or lose everything.

[Liliet](#)

What?

[boballab](#)

Didn't think on the ramifications of that meeting did we? Remember earlier in Fatalism III the scene set in the Highest Assembly?

The Conclave wasn't squashed, instead she was instructed by Saint to just make sure the armies marched. Oh those abstentions have turned into knives. Go back to Congregation II where EE talks abouts the order to Malazana:

There is the order to get the armies marching from Cordelia just as Saint ordered against Callow and away from the Dead King and the Highest Assembly backs that order.

"I have been named to the supreme command of an army being assembled in Cantal," Rozala said. "By the shores of Lake Artoise. Forty thousand soldiers, perhaps more."

Louis's eyes brightened.

"Reinforcements?" he asked.

"Not to Cleves," she replied. "I've been ordered by Her Most Serene Highness to reinforce the Dominion's armies and break the foreign armies in Iserre."

"Praesi," the Prince of Creusens bit out angrily. "Callowans. That's not the war, Rozala."

"The League as well," the Princess of Aequitan reminded him.

"We should be making peace with all of them," Louis said.

"I don't disagree," Rozala admitted. "But the seals are there, Louis."

And who did Malanza find at the end of that journey? Not just the Pilgrim but Saint as well.

[Dresden 67](#)

Can you please stop block quoting?

None of that implies that the Saint is somehow in charge of the Grand Alliance.

That meeting with Cordelia was the Saint telling Cordelia that the Crusade will be fought to the bitter end, with no compromise with Callow, which she is ensuring by having Catherine declared Arch-Heretic.

It doesn't mean the Saint is suddenly in control of Procer, much less Ashur or Levant.

The Levantine armies are under the direct control of the Majii, they only take suggestions from Cordelia and orders from no Proceran.

We saw Cordelia's viewpoint in the Prologue of this book and the only mention she made of the Saint was to say that the heroes are no longer reliable. That's not the reaction of someone who's just faced a coup.

[Liliet](#)

^^^

[boballab](#)

Those quotes don't imply nothing, Saint tells her directly what she is going to do and she did it. Now show some text quotes to back up your assertion because I went back to that Prologue and it states very clearly that she knows she should not give the order to send her armies after the Legion and Callowan armies but she signed them because she was told by the Augur there is a path through that way. The Augur who's rise was due to the Bard. Cordelia does not rule anymore, she is openly threatened by Saint who laughed at her threats to arrest her and she has the Augur who she trusts completely but only tells her what will accomplish the Bards goals.

jonnnney

The block quotes only proved that Cordelia acquiesced to a single demand of the Saint. That does not mean that the Saint is in command of Procer. Hell she isn't even in command of her heroic band. She is a rabid dog not a leader. Suggesting otherwise only reveals that you haven't been paying attention to a single thing she has said or done.

Cicero

It doesn't prove anything like you claim. The Saint is not in charge after a coup.

Rather the Saint has arranged things so that Cordelia is cornered and has to go along with the Saint's plan... for now.

Cordelia is still in control over Procer, she just is limited in her actions.

Now that she realizes that the Saint is her enemy instead of an ally, Cordelia is right now plotting how to sabotage the Saint's plan, save Procer and so on.

The Saint is not in command of the army or the Crusade. The Levant forces will follow the Grey Pilgrim over her, and the forces of Procer will follow Malanza (who will likely lean towards the Grey Pilgrim's advice).

The Saint isn't even trying to seize control. She's just following along with the Bards plan and hopes to die in a blaze of glory.

[Liliet](#)

I still think calling it 'Bard's plan' is giving Laurence too little credit and forgetting Bard's ban on direct touch. She gave Saint ideas and advice, at most.

NerfContessa

Well, shit. Amaedous didn't manage to get his new name before being desouled.

OK, so, can night maybe pull the soul out of the Saint? Setting up a. Second exchange?

Damn, this is getting tense...

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

I had hoped they could pull souls and names like they pull night.

That would have been neat.

[Liliet](#)

I really don't think Saint is in charge of anything. She bullied the priests into doing the stupid thing, threw the match into the powderbox, and that's all she can do. She think that's all she NEEDS to do, the rest will play out inevitably according to the story she sees coming.

[boballab](#)

Saint isn't a planner we all know that but she is working off the Bards script.

[Liliet](#)

Has Bard been known to give people detailed scripts, or is her game simply to nudge them in (usually self-destructive) directions?

Steve

Bard just nudges people. I've been reading under the assumption Saint is just a war hawk. She told the First Prince to get the armies moving because that was the First Prince's only (or best?) course of action after the crap storm Saint kicked up. Saint just wants a straight up fight with Evil, but she saw First Prince was leaning towards peace, so Saint was like, "naw, I'mma make it so your only option is war, so get the armies moving or you'll lose your seat of power."

[Liliet](#)

That's my reading as well.

Maginot

I thought Black had escaped with the help of the bard?

IDKWhoitis

He effectively got Name Jump-Started, as she re-awoke Black's grudge against what is necessary, and gave him a new purpose in life. Bard fucked up, as this completed his transition into someone who might deserve to live in Cat's world after she changes it (Per end of Book 3 Stabbing).

[TeK](#)

It just may be, he will become first Emperor of Praes without a name. It's either him or Aqua, so yeah

[Liliet](#)

Still think she very much did what she did on purpose, starting from Free Cities, and no fuckups were involved.

[boballab](#)

No she admitted that Kairos beat her in the Free Cities due to what he got with the Hierarch and his Name which was an old mistake.

"So I've heard," the Bard said. "Kairos has that thing villains often do, where they confuse symmetry with humour. Probably got a giggle out of waving an old mistake in my face."

"None of this was meant for you," he finally said.

"Oh, that touch was probably just a drop of arsenic in the wine," Aoede shrugged. "But I made your Name, sweetcakes. Back in the days before I knew better."

...

"Aoede of Nicae, I charge you with treason," he said, rising to his feet. "Collaboration with foreign oligarchs and agitation in the name of wretched tyrants."

"You can't be serious," the Bard said.

"Should you fail to be present at your trial," the Hierarch continued calmly, inexorably, "you will be tried and convicted in absentia. As per League law, you may petition the Basileus of Nicae to request amnesty on your behalf."

He looked down at the woman.

"It will be denied," he told her. "But to petition is your right."

Remember the Bard only flees on 3 conditions and one is imminent death and Hierarch charged her with treason after telling he he wouldn't play her and the Gods game. We have now seen that power in action and so that threat from Hierarch would have ended in her death so she was forced to flee and didn't get all of what she wanted there. Remember this also Both Cat and the Hierarch have been labeled "Not of her work".

[*Liliet*](#)

Oh she missed Hierarch, true, but Black she played like a fiddle.

And it was quite interesting what she said there.

IDKWhoitis

Until the end, it's going to be hard to tell. We also don't know if she would play the script straight until the end even if she knew it would result in her demise (so what would we call a mistake on purpose?)

[*Liliet*](#)

Wait, whose script do you think it is? My interpretation is that it's Bard's plan for Bard's purposes, which might or might not align with the Gods' but she proceeds regardless.

IDKWhoitis

I think Bard gets to peek at the God's Script, with a little bit of Artistic license as to how it is done. She doesn't get a whole lot of agency as far as where she goes, or what will happen, but she does get to read the patterns emerging around her. I think this is what she means in regards to peeking at the script, she can see what things the Gods are aligning around her, and all she needs to do, is give a little push.

She is given great power, so that the show can continue. This is why Hierarch hates her, the Dead King watches her, and the Heroes only treat her as an opportunistic friend, she doesn't really have an agenda, but a directive which can help or clash with either side.

[Liliet](#)

Far be it from me to take Kairos's speculation at too much of a face value, but his point was that Gods don't actually *have* levers for direct interference other than Bard. Narrative "scripts" can be nudged here and there at will, by any Named or even regular people on occasion, and it's them that Bard can look at. If there are indeed instructions/purposes of the Gods that she is obligated to follow (rather than just circumstances she's indirectly caught in and is free to do whatever within the bounds of, plus occasional errands), they're far from a 'script aligning around her'. She's the only one receiving those instructions.

haihappen

The Bard was there to egg Black on, so that he would escape with Purpose. The bard implied she was unable to stop Black escape, which Black knows is not true iirc. So Black saw through the Bard's words, cold and calculating as he is. He realized the Bard made a mistake: IT needed/wanted Black to escape. And so that is what he did not do.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think she said she couldn't interfere with his escape. She said she wouldn't be there if the heroes had been able to.

But yeah, apparently Black figured that after Bard's words, actually letting the heroes proceed with their stupid plan was the smallest fuckup he could make ;u;

[boballab](#)

I think there is something we are overlooking in this: That dead body they are searching for in that lake near by

[Liliet](#)

How so?

[sengachi](#)

I think Bard wanted him to escape precisely to avoid just this situation, a rescue arc on his behalf by Cat, because that could give Cata starting point to build up some narrative momentum.

[Liliet](#)

You're assuming she doesn't want Cat to succeed.

RanVor

Which is a pretty reasonable assumption based on what we've seen so far.

[Liliet](#)

Maybe, or maybe not. I'm still looking at that League of Free Cities revelation like HMMMMM

werafdsaew

After Bard told Amadeus that he has plot armor, he decided that he doesn't need to do anything dangerous since he will be rescued.

[Liliet](#)

What about 'shoving a stone into a hero's eye'? Nobody's one-eyed or Cat would have commented on it. Sounds like he gave up on doing anything at all.

[Liliet](#)

Also, his own survival is far from his first priority. He would have been making decisions based on global positioning, not danger to himself.

danh3107

After several chapters of not much happening that we were unaware of we're finally back on track. These are the kinds of chapters that got me addicted to the story.

crescentsickle

The entire work is what got me addicted to it, and it would be inherently less in my eyes if it did not have the chapters you dub as being "off-track".

It's called subjectivity, and I and many others would appreciate you not trying to pass it off as objectivity.

Novice

Hear hear!

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Well, I guess their world needs more edgy anti-hero stories.

kinigget

What the world needs is more anti-villains

[NZPIEFACE](#)

That's our world, not theirs.

IDKWhoitis

Grey may not be able to read Cat using Angel hacks, but he sure as hell knows she can certainly smite his ass.

Also, I love how that terrifying monster that fought it out with 12 heroes and "won" only got more dangerous. Able to swat away the heavens with an idle thought. She really is turning into a monster to put into the ranks alongside the Dead King.

RanVor

Only it wasn't her. It were Sve Noc, and they won't always be with her.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Are you sure about that? The crows are a convenient form for two pieces of Sve Noc, but Cat herself is the priestess. Sure Cat might pull off yet another reincarnation (hey, kitty's got at least 5 lives left 😊), but not yet – this is the time of the First Priestess of Night.

RanVor

Yeah, I'm pretty sure. Cat may be the priestess, but she doesn't have that much power by herself. She has some Night, but not enough to effectively block a Choir without assistance.

Mental Mouse

Yeah, but breaking the crow-constructs doesn't necessarily cut Cat off from Night – if anything, it would just make Sve Noc mad. And they've got a few thousand Drow standing behind Cat, including perhaps a dozen or so Mighty who can go toe-to-toe with Named.

It also occurs to me that Sve Noc *did* effectively resurrect Cat. They might well be able to retrieve Amadeus's soul.

RanVor

You're missing one important detail: Cat doesn't have access to all this Night *all the time*. She's only given access when Sve Noc judges it necessary. In all other situations she has to rely on the amount of Night she has in herself, which isn't that much. In fact, I strongly suspect that Rumena has more of it than her.

Death Knight

No.

Cat, as First Under the Night has more Night than any other living Drow. The Drow's culture is rooted in the Mighty standing above the weak and she is First Among those ranks so it follows that she would have more Night than it. But I would wager Rumena has more ways of using the Night than she does. This is moot however because Cat has the ability to rip out the Night out of any Drow without killing them (see the time she had to discipline that Mighty that got uppity when it didn't want day watch).

But you are right, she does not have enough Night to go against Komena or Andronike since they are her source and in her own words they gave her enough Night that they could literally kill her on a whim.

Mental Mouse

Adding to Death Knight's comments, notice how Cat has been stockpiling Night in her staff (which she said will also be a sword), not to mention the Well. I'm reasonably sure that even if the crows got broken, that

would at least give her enough power to reestablish a connection to Sve Noc from her end.

RanVor

Assuming she doesn't spend it before.

Cpt. Obvious

The staff/sword is specifically designed to be used against the Saint of swords. In what capacity we do not yet know.

The Pool is interesting as I don't think we've been told what purpose it is to serve. Traditional use in fantasy settings would be as a power reservoir to be used for extraordinary events.

Well I'll have to backtrack a bit. We know at least one thing that the Pool is intended to do and that is to turn day into night for the drow. And it takes a lot of night to do so which is why Akua has been tapping mighty to fill it. But that's not to say it's its only use.

And Night is the game changer where Drow is concerned. While during the day they are no stronger than mortal men, and not nearly as dangerous as legionnaires as they lack the training and discipline. Come night however and their third stringers can take on squads, second stringers can take on armies and the mightiest are able to give the mightiest of heroes a good scuffle. So Night from day is a perfectly balanced power. Which of course means that it will not go as planned.

jonnney

We know from the previous chapter that they will be with her long enough for her to write the first holy book of the Night.

IDKWhoitis

They won't be more than a shoulder length away often.

RanVor

Yeah, but that's not the point. This power is not Cat's, she only borrows it.

superkeaton

Cat, you're my favorite negotiator. But remember, the First Step always works, it's the followup that gets tricky.

IDKWhoitis

Wait, what if Cat attaches the Soul to another Body? Like technically, Black's Soul is where his Name and some of his mind resides, and he has proven that cheating, necromancy, and a bit of blasphemy is enough to get things working well enough. I'm mildly intrigued if we are going to get another pseudo-nefarious-revival for Black.

[Liliet](#)

She'd need a spare body for that.

Luckily, she has his old one!

Death Knight

Why not just bind Black to the cloak in the interim until they can get the body thing sorted out? This means she will always have Black as an advisor and this basically forces the legions of Grem to be loyal to her and she gains the use of Scribe and Assassin through him.

Plus we get more Black screen time. EVERYBODY WINS!

Daemion

This is all moot since she doesn't have his soul and technically the body isn't in her possession yet either.

[Liliet](#)

You're getting confused: they have the body but not the soul.

[Mental Mouse](#)

That would be... thoroughly villainous. But as noted elsewhere, it looks like she'll bet getting his body first. Then she needs to track down the Rogue Sorcerer. Given that Name, I suspect they might be hard to track down, especially since Masego is off doing his own thing.

IDKWhoitis

I have a running theory that Black's body will be destroyed or rendered an unsuitable vessel one way or another. Either through Saint, Pilgrim, or other heavenly shenanigans.

[Liliet](#)

I have a running theory that it won't. We'll see who's right
^^

Someguy

I thought Cat would exchange Black's body for Saint's Body & soul for soul after.

Dainpdf

Taking a hero's soul sounds like the sort of story that can be turned against her.

caoimhinh

She might still do that by the end of the "peaceful negotiations".

Something like "I never said you could have her soul too."

Although that could put her again in the villain stories and Cat wants to avoid that.

My guess would be that since Saint is so temperamental and proud, she might attempt to attack Catherine again after she is set free, and either be captured or killed. Then Cat can use her again to trade for Amadeus' soul (plus adding further humiliation to Saint). Even her dead body can be a hostage if kept under conservation wards because Pilgrim needs that to resurrect her with his Forgive Aspect.

[boballab](#)

Or since they stripped Blacks soul first that doesn't throw her taking Saints soul out into a villain story. Keep in mind that the "heroes" have been acting more and more like villains, stripping soul sounds very Praesi to me. Pilgrim committed and act of Genocide against the people of Procer, Saint has now tried to murder Cat under a truce flag for a second time. Those are Villain stories and that is why Cat threw into Pilgrims face that a story wouldn't save her this time, because the story favors Cat. This is the fourth time Cat has beaten Pilgrim in Diplomacy. First time undercover before the Battle of the Camps, Second and third time after the Battle of the Camps and now here. The problem Pilgrim has is that he is trying to play the old good vs evil story on Cat and it doesn't fit and she throws it back in their faces. They do the same things the "Villains" do but they are allowed because their Gods say so. That is why when Cat threw the insult of "You're Ranger with a shiny coat of paint and a socially acceptable pretext for killing" it got Saint so angry, because she knows it's true and Ranger while a Calamity is not truly a "Villain" in the struggle between the Gods. Another example of their willful blindness was in this chapter, Pilgrim is shocked and horrified how she is tied to a Goddess, but is completely baffled about how he is tied the same way to the Gods Above through the Choir of Mercy and how they are using him.

Hardric62

My guess is that the Saint of Bitches is very much doing all of that on purpose. She does want a massive carnage destroying Procer after all. Peace or truce of any sort kinda ruin that idea. Meaning this place will actually be the Princes' Gr

Hardric62

I hate my keyboard and the lack of editing function.

So the place will be very much the Prince's Graveyard because she won't tolerate any diplomatic outcome here, even if she has to slaughter the Princes to throw the army at Catherine herself.

And I'm left wondering about the 'when' of Blac's escape. For some reason, I'm fairly certain it should have happened a while ago.

And I guess the Grey Hypocrite is less terminally stupid than I thought if that gambit he mentioned is/was real. Although I'm pretty sure soul-stealing for hostage purpose is the sort of thing cementing that name for him in my mind.

[boballab](#)

Oh I can see Saint trying something again thinking she can take out Cat, but I don't see her killing the Princes. She wants the Armies to fight so that there is mass casualties. If she kills the Princes like that there it wouldn't work because she can't be with each army giving orders. Remember it is a secret coup that Bard and Saint pulled on Cordelia, they still need them at the moment to pass the orders along. That is why they had Cordelia order Malazana's army there. Already some of the secrets are popping out ie Black, but they are not at the stage where they come out into the open to run the show. No what could happen Saint tried a second time that night of killing Cat as she leaves, thinking now that the Tomb Maker is out of hiding she can get through. Of course Saint isn't the sharpest knife in the drawer and hasn't realized the implications of having the Avatars of Sve Noc a Goddess there. She probably hasn't figure out yet that Sve Noc is blocking a lot of what the Gods Above can do for them in that area and never think if they can hide one drow, maybe there is more hidden near by and gets planted by Ivah, kicking off the Cats backup plan where the Drow eliminate all the Army commanders throwing all the Armies into confusion and now facing the 70,000 combined might of Cats army...at night. It wouldn't take much to break those Armies

and thus have low casualties and achieving almost all Cat's aims.

[kgyl21](#)

I seem to remember Heiress doing something of the sort as well.

fbt

lol, that would have been epic..too easy, tho i suppose, to make a good story. great thinking tho someguy! 😊
this was decent. A lot more action-y, but at least Cat performed compently, almost like the miniBlack she is. That part I liked a lot; smart protags are so rare, and here it's got a lot of additional freight via their relationship.

caoimhinh

This chapter was AWESOME. It was full of great moments.

I knew that I would love the "child, what have you done to yourself?" scene that was inevitably coming when Pilgrim laid eyes on Catherine, I was not disappointed.

One minute into negotiations and they say "We need a recess" LMAO that's quite a display of being in the inferior position. So, Cat got them, nicely done. Things will get messy to manage to get Black's soul back, it's likely going to be part of the negotiations of Callow and Ever Dark joining the Grand Alliance against the Dead King. Cat really has more leverage over them that they would like to admit.

Also, General Rumena Tomb-Maker is quite cool, as always.

"He might be a monster but he is mine" we all know what Cat meant was "but he is my father".

Really looking forward to next chapter.

The Hype is high

Typos found:

-would be arrogant to be presume / presumed OR eliminate the second 'be'

-opens ground / open grounds

-in the service Heavens / in the service of the Heavens

-She might not have a sense for stories, this once / this one

-look at one of those raw would have been painful / a look OR looking

-I heard Tariq flinch / I saw Tariq flinch

-How can you now know / How can you not know

Dainpdf

I honestly thought he'd approve! She offloaded the eldritch on someone else! Which leads one to think: maybe there's still some form of alienation here? Let's hope not.

[Liliet](#)

I mean he can't actually look at her soul and see she's better off now, he just sees the crows. Becoming a priestess of Evil Gods is not an obvious Good move, even though it literally was that in context god fucking bless

Dainpdf

True.

morroian

Necroposting, and how is Cat 'selling her soul' to Sve Noc any different to him selling his to the choir of mercy.

[Liliet](#)

There are multiple points to address here.

First, he didn't actually sell his soul. Now neither did Cat, but he doesn't know that and what it looks like is what it usually looks like when someone HAS sold their soul.

Second, presuming the action he did towards the Choir of Mercy and Cat towards Sve Noc can be considered equivalent... that leaves us with "what is the difference between Sve Noc and the Choir of Mercy".

And like... one of them is goddess(es) of *death, blood, murder and decay*.

The other is not.

morroian

I put selling her soul in quotation marks for a reason. I agree neither he nor Cat sold their soul. As for the difference between Sve Noc and the Choir of Mercy, morally very little.

[Liliet](#)

He doesn't know Cat didn't.

And I mean yeah the Sisters were just doing their best to save their people, but again, HE DOESN'T KNOW THAT.

The Choir of Mercy normally functions as disaster relief. That is not what goddesses of murder do.

haihappen

If she had said: "He is like a father to me, I want him back!", THAT would have set off all the red flags and alarm horns in the Pilgrims mind:

The classical story of a young hero(ine) that will not rest or compromise to save her mentor/father/brother/lover, and make every sacrifice necessary to get him/her back. Powerful story stuff, and funnily enough, Cat would be in the Hero-role in that story.

Also, this chapter reminded me of "just because I'm winning doesn't mean I won't cheat"

[Mental Mouse](#)

Except Cat isn't in fact a Hero, so she can't make that story work for her and Pilgrim knows it. So Cat keeps her lips tightly sealed around any comment to the effect of "I want my father back".

[Liliet](#)

Cat rides heroic stories like horses, even when holding an actual villain Name (which right now she isn't). This does NOT beat mugging a Choir for a resurrection.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, she *is* a villain – she found out the hard way what happens when she tries to play like a hero (got a Squire aspect eaten by a devil). And likewise, Saint just found out that no matter how powerful a hero, acting like a villain gets you hammered.

Note that it's not a matter of doing good or evil (by our real-world definition) acts, rather it's a matter of which stories you try to play out. And attacking under a truce flag is simply not in a hero's playbook.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Sorry, Devil->demon. I keep forgetting that in this world devils are the weaker breeds.

[Liliet](#)

Your info is outdated. Catherine made a heroic play at First Llesse and literally got herself resurrected by a Choir against its will. She simply didn't properly weave

the story at Marchford, and of course demons neutralize narrative advantage anyway.

Mental Mouse

That was her dawning aspect of **Take**. She had won both the martial and the story games against William, gaining massive narrative power. She also had a freshly regained Name, with all aspect slots open – and aspects show up at a dramatic crux, providing a in-world mechanism. And *then* she got into the position of “the victor, who shall now be rewarded”.

It’s been claimed that creatures from outside Creation can break plot snares, but yet it’s mostly Names that let mortals fight devils and demons effectively. I see no reason why the narrative power here couldn’t enable an aspect to affect an angel, especially when the result was to enforce the active storyline.

Liliet

No, ‘victors’ aren’t rewarded. Heroes are. That’s exactly what I’m talking about, Catherine won by making herself the hero of the story. She outplayed William, yes, in the game of making the story be at her side *by being the hero of it*.

One other notably discussed in canon occasion was Tariq and Laurence talking in Kaleidoscope and both admitting that the shape of Cat’s story – that she’s probably going to wake up and come to her allies’ aid at the last moment – is not a villain’s.

Liliet

And the *reason* the narrative power enabled an aspect to affect an angel was, yes, that the story demanded it. The story that said that Cat was a hero. QED

Cicero

Actually, Cat has never held a Villain name.

Instead she held the name of Squire, which isn’t exactly a neutral Name, but is a Name that can either be Heroic or Villainous. It’s what they call a Transitional Name.

Notably, none of the Woe held a Name that was exclusively the position of either the Gods Above or the Gods Below. All of their Name could go either way.

Liliet

Transitional Names can still be Heroic or Villainous, it's a separate distinction. And Squire can be Heroic or Villainous, but it was very specifically and definitely villainous in Cat's case, as evidenced by necromancy powers. She got powered by Below explicitly, because of being a *Black Knight's* apprentice. It's not inherent to the Name itself, but it's inherent to the Role she claimed within it.

Death Knight

She is no longer Named, hence she cannot be classified as either a Villain or a Hero in the strictest terms of the Roles. So, just like Black, she's a candidate for the Heroic Role. EE himself said that you don't need to be sworn to a Choir to become a Hero, you're ideals just need to align more or less with what Above laid down. So in theory, she can use the Hero story. This is why mortals can kill Named; they do not have the fetters that Named have. Why this isn't more prevalent is that on average Named are an order of magnitude more stronger than mortals but they are ever at the mercy of the Story. Mortals are not.

[Liliet](#)

Oooh, the Lord of the Silver Spears~

Insanenoodlyguy

She is, at least for the moment, not named (though she could well be turning First Priestess into a name as we speak). But she's dealing with named, and that means she's still in the story. If a mundane villian acts out tropes, the hero is still strengthened. Or, in this case, if a hero acts the villain, is still weakened. Cat still has to play this careful because even if she can't make a story where she is sure to lose, she can still walk into one where Grey Pilgrim is sure to win.

[Liliet](#)

Yup ^

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hmm... adding Liliet's reasoning to Pilgrim's history, the "fetters" on Named look mostly like golden handcuffs. Yes, they can be killed by the story, but not half as easily as un-Named mortals (aka mooks).

[Liliet](#)

Named are killed by the story based on their own actions. Non-Named are killed by the story based on other people's actions. Pick your poison 😊

luminiousblu

You don't actually need to be a Hero to make a Heroic story work for you (see the Heir to the Throne gambit in First Liesse). Villains describe roles but only on the grand scale. Attacking someone leaving negotiations with their backs turned is not really a Heroic action, it makes you the treacherous dunce of a mauve shirt who gets one-shot to show off how badass and loyal the Bodyguards of the King are. The reason the SoS got fucked is because she got stuck in one of the shortest-cycle villain stories ever, it's literally a two step story: A man tries to assassinate the King, he is executed by loyal bodyguards.

Cicero

What story have you been reading? Cat makes hero stories work for her all the time. She's essentially a Hero piece that Black stole from the Gods Above.

[Liliet](#)

TBF this WAS a point made in Marchford. Cat cannot rely on heroic tropes working for her without working for them first.

[David Lynch](#)

I'm pretty sure I recall meddling with souls as having been described as pretty high on the "most people think that's evil" scale in earlier books. This might not be helping Pilgrim's case with his non-Named allies...

Dainpdf

Levantines will accept it because Pilgrim. And a lot of Procerans will accept it because of what Black had been doing when he was caught.

Or at least that's what I think.

[boballab](#)

Oh most definitely they will accept it for those reasons but the Wastelanders of the Dread Empire of Praes practice soul removal also and they accept it for basically the same reasons and they are objectively on the Evil side. Doing an Evil act for good reasons is still doing Evil, matter of fact there is an old saying that goes something like this: Only the truly righteous can plum the deepest depths of Evil.

Saint fits that category so well, she is willing to let thousands upon thousands die and be turned into zombies just to cause the people to cry out to them to be saved from what they caused.

Dainpdf

Whether evil is in the means or the goals is debatable. Some might say that doing a soul removal to a villain is fine, or that it's fine in the case of preserving a life, or any number of things.

Skaddix

Yeah people love their false equivalencies...cutting out the soul of The Black Knight is not the same as cutting the Soul out of some random.

Besides Saint leans Anti-Hero.

Insanenoodlyguy

Yeah, but that leaves her weak in this case.

An anti-hero works best against clever but traditional Evil. When you can say "being nice doesn't work here!" and this do bad things for good reasons. You can still have support that way. But the problem is, Cat isn't traditional Evil. She was legitimately acting in good faith when she wanted to treat for peace. If, for example, Cat did have some sort of "Kill all the good guys while they thing we are treating" plan, then nothing would have stopped that blade. Because then it's Saint forgoing honor for results, even if it hurts her own standing. That's anti-heroism. And that's the mindset Saint keeps doggedly trying for even though it just isn't working with this one. Possibly because she can't concieve of any evil that isn't really traditional evil no matter how it appears otherwise. But whatever her internal reasoning, the result is the same: when you do these sort of things to a more neutral character, or at least one acting in good faith, you aren't an anti hero anymore. You've slid down the scale to Anti-Villian at best. And Anti-Villians don't get the same win rates.

[Liliet](#)

^

[Mental Mouse](#)

The question of "what, actually, is Evil?", is the basic theme of the Guide. The in-world given is that it's the

team you play for (trope: Blue and Orange Morality) and all else (story, powers, behavior, allies) follows from that. But Amadeus noticed a weakness in the mechanics and attacked that weakness; Cat has taken up his fight against the system. It may well be that their efforts are bearing fruit as the heroes lose track of the rules in play.

Dainpdf

Black is very much Team Evil. He doesn't want the teams to go away, he just wants his team to really win for once.

And as the Pilgrim reinforced earlier, those rules? They're mostly something Praesi and Callowans had in mind. Being Good does not prevent one from being ruthless. (Trope: Good is Not Nice)

[Liliet](#)

To be more precise, Black does not consider the teams themselves to be inherently a problem, and is willing to stand under the banner that gives him what he wants.

What he wants being a victory for Praes and Praesi. He couldn't give less of a shit for non-Praesi Evil, and even the more Evil Praesi specimens he'd gladly set on fire given half a justification (c) Catherine. He doesn't mind the banner, but opposes the philosophy with his entire being.

Dainpdf

He's not opposed to destroying Praes to achieve the win, either, which is an odd little paradox – unless you're looking at it from his particular perspective.

[Liliet](#)

He's not opposed to destroying the institution/government of Praes, because his loyalty lies with its population, not with its ruling apparatus. It makes perfect sense to *me*. Amadeus is very literally a revolutionary. C'mon, look at the shape of his story – a farmer's son gathering oppressed minorities around him to fight and win a civil war against abusive nobility?

Dainpdf

Does it? He doesn't seem to mind much when he gets people killed.

In my view, Amadeus has a point he wishes to prove, and everything else – including Praes, its people and himself – is secondary and thus disposable.

[Liliet](#)

Doesn't he? Malicia's argument to him against slaughtering all High Lords immediately was that it would lead to too many casualties. "What a waste" is his constant refrain @ people dying, including when he's the one killing them, and the reason he considers the Callow-less Empire to be unsustainable is because starvation spreads across it during lean years. "We are so enamored with bleeding our own that we have sayings about it"

Did you notice him latching on to Catherine's "better world" phrasing and then in a conversation with Ranker pretty much saying that they were going for that all along?

Dainpdf

A waste. A waste of resources. Not a tragedy.

He may have changed after he got stabbed, perhaps, but he seemed to me still more enamored with the idea of breaking the status quo of evil than with championing any cause for the common man.

[Liliet](#)

Now I want to invite you to a conversation on reddit that I started about this, this post specifically:

Answer here or there if you're interested :3

[Mental Mouse](#)

And that's what I mean by him spotting a weakness in the mechanics of story. Depending on where you stand, a revolutionary can be "a terrorist who hates our freedoms", or "a freedom-fighter standing against the Real Evuls Over There". That ambiguity is what lets him play both sides of the script.

Cat is doing something similar with "they say she's an Evil Queen, but she's *our* Queen and she fights for us against demons, devils, and whatnot".

Interestingly, the orcs and goblins are backing both of them up with “just because we’re green doesn’t mean we’re mean”, to the point where even under Black’s rule (when he was Black), ordinary Callowan citizens would look to orcs for protection against the *local* guards.

It’s getting past “you can’t tell the players without a scorecard”, to “what use is this stupid scorecard?” 😊

[Liliet](#)

♥ ♥ ♥

RanVor

And that is how we get people ready to commit any atrocity for what they think is right (which is not necessarily the same as what is actually right).

Dainpdf

You speak as if the philosophy of ethics were a solved subject.

There are many moral outlooks out there. Not all are so categorical as to decide morality solely by looking at which acts were performed, regardless of context.

RanVor

Unfortunately, if you ask me.

[Mental Mouse](#)

... and the Praesi will accept it because they figure that’s what it takes to hold onto Amadeus. While Cat will accept... delivery immediately, if you please. <taps foot> 😊

[Liliet](#)

It’s definitely not helping his narrative case, that’s for sure. Sounds like he’s not as good with that as Cat is 😊

Dainpdf

That was some great baiting.

A pity the Pilgrim is bound to adapt before long, but starting the conference with playing the opponent, then a show of force? Pretty great.

Though I wonder how much this does for the chances of cooperation later on...

GuidingMoonlight

The Saint of swords who can cut fabric of reality in several km radius decided run up to Cat and cut her with a sharp stick like a normie.

The Saint of swords who are the oldest hero around and was shown to be aware of narrative gets baited into cliché.

Mkay.

The Grey killed his own cousin because it's necessary, but immediately folded when Cat threaten his bff.

Mkay.

Dainpdf

As Grey said, Saint is necessary to kill the Dead King. And he's off his game. And Cat has a story at her back.

Saint also doesn't know Cat is mortal again, and she has a story against her.

medailyfun

every experienced Named should be able to smell the Name and its absence

Dainpdf

She didn't have a Name as a Fae, either.

medailyfun

her Name leftovers powered by Winter looked close enough?

Dainpdf

The power of Winter was separate and distinct from the remains of the Name. It didn't have aspects or any other trappings of a Role.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And Cat has explicitly said (OK, not to Pilgrim) she isn't committed to killing the Dead King, she just wants him to go home. His argument has even less weight because even if "it has to die", Pilgrim could only say Saint was "one of the few" who could end him. But Masego, even Cat herself, are probably also among that number. (Cat has enough plot power

to Come Up With Something. 😊) I tend to doubt Pilgrim himself is in that club.

And as Fayhem points out, Pilgrim probably *doesn't* know what-all Saint's been up to. I'm starting to wonder if angels of different Choirs can be convinced to attack each other.

Dainpdf

I was arguing that Pilgrim backed down because it matters to him. That that matters less to Cat only worsens his bargaining position.

I am not sure Evil can kill the Dead King, associated with the Hells as he is. We already know Evil can't truly destroy Demons.

[Liliet](#)

Erratic has confirmed that, particularly based on different cultural norms in his example, it's possible for heroes to come to blows with each other, though killing's still a no-no.

Gunslinger

Saint moved so fast, Cat didn't even have time to move her horse. That was a move which would have worked 100% had it not been for Cat planning for it. And Saint might be good at reading stories but she wanted to kill Cat from the start, and figured her superior ability would trump any story disadvantages.

Muffin

True that, even if the Saint is a machete rather than a scalpel, she has intuition and even has realized that cat doesn't play by the Evil handbook. But it might have been a way to screw up negotiations. She should have known that a single hit wouldn't kill Eldritch Cat.

Remember that they're facing Cat, and not the Dead King because of the Saint orders. She doesn't want a truce.

I can't see why wouldn't accept that. Loosing the strongest fighter for the carcass of a man AND screwing up the negotiations?

medailyfun

I've got the impression Saint tried to stop Cat from leaving and force negotiations, not to kill outright

[Liliet](#)

Well a blade stopped an inch from her throat by its wielder getting decked in the face really doesn't give *me* that impression.

Saint is a walking cliché already. "No truce with the Enemy" is like the oldest 'he who hunts monsters' heroic downfall in the book.

medailyfun

the movement to face Cat looks a bit unwarranted in this case

[Liliet](#)

She was on top of a horse, and front is where her throat is.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> "Like a lot of people who'd been the strongest in their surroundings for years on years, she'd not had to really answer to anyone for too long. That led to sloppy habits."

And Cat would know... 😊

[Liliet](#)

Well, she didn't really have *years on years* herself...

...which enabled successful recovery!

Insanenoodlyguy

Yeah, but cat is no fool. This is the full power of her uninfluenced brain. She knows he will rally. Shes got at least a half form planned for that inevitability. And as already noted, Saint has hurt the story and she knows it. She wanted to die in that moment because it'd bail them out, she'd have paid for her dishonor and the rest are free. At the moment, she's an albatross as long as Cat doesnt get too sadistic.

[boballab](#)

She flipped the story on them, Pilgrim is now in the villains side of it and if he tries something while still there it will cause him to lose. This is something he even pointed out way back before the Battle of the Camps: Cat isn't following the Villains line but the Hero and he asked Saint what does that make them then. Thats the thing, he knows the answer, he knows what they are doing is wrong, but he just can't take the final step because then it would bring everything about

his life into question. Cat has started an existential crises in Pilgrim, it is just taking a long time to come to a head.

sutortyrannus

Hoping that the culmination of the developing crisis you mention is a conversation with Amadeus about morality – Not So Different being thrown in the faces of the sanctimonious is always a fun time.

[Liliet](#)

y e s p l e a s e

and on Amadeus's side, him trying to veer around it like 'I am not the right person to talk to about this' but bit by bit getting provoked into revealing his sheer unbridled idealism ;u;

[Mental Mouse](#)

You mean Pilgrim and Amadeus? I imagine they already had that conversation, which might even have fed into his spiritual crisis. Cat and Amadeus are already on the same page there.

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus specifically remarked in his POV that they *refused* to let him have that conversation (which he very much wanted, probably both to fuck with them and out of sheer loneliness and boredom). I doubt that changed offscreen between then and now, though it'd be hilarious and wonderful if it did.

[Liliet](#)

I think he IS trying to do what's right, it just keeps slipping from his fingers. It's a bitter pill to swallow that allying with Cat is the only unambiguously Good move here (and it would literally bind her more to the side of Good because she *would* listen to his advice and guidance), and I don't think he has enough evidence for that yet.

[boballab](#)

No he is doing what the Choir is telling him to do. Go back and reread Peregrine II through IV. In II the Choir stops talking to him when he saves his Nephew. He placed his values ahead of the Gods Above, they didn't send him back to save his Nephew and punish his Brother he choose that. From that mistake he made the next by letting the Prince and his family live thinking he was being merciful, from that mistake he didn't tell his Nephew the why's of

that and he grew bitter and hateful. That final mistake forced him into correcting his first mistake by killing his Nephew as was intended all along and once he did the choir started talking to him again. That is a painful lesson to learn about obeying your masters and Cat's remarks to him in this chapter just might break something loose.

[Liliet](#)

I mean sending him back to save his sister (not nephew) was never the job of the Choir of Mercy. And letting the prince live was very much a Mercy thing to do. Really don't think where you get that killing his nephew was anything the Ophanim intended; they'd approved of him placing the needs of the many above the needs of the few, that's all.

I really don't interpret this relationship the same way you do.

[boballab](#)

Go back and re read when they stopped talking to him and when they restarted. They stopped when he saved the Nephew and restarted after he killed him.

[Liliet](#)

Yes. And your interpretation is that this means they wanted his nephew to die. While my interpretation is that Ophanim don't give a fuck and operate on a far more abstract level: they stopped talking to him when he prioritized family above his duty as a Hero of Mercy, and restarted when he returned to that priority.

[Mental Mouse](#)

This. That was another hint that Good is not what we expect it to be.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Cat's comment about Saint that I quoted above applies somewhat to Pilgrim too. Not as much because he's not axe-crazy, but he just saw Cat casually slap his Choir's power aside, and didn't like it much. He may be due for a crisis of faith.

Dainpdf

I'm not so sure Saint was thinking in terms of narrative there, but I concur overall.

Mental Mouse

Indeed, Saint *wasn't* thinking of narrative. That's why she screwed it up.

Insanenoodlyguy

I think, to be fair, she was banking on the scheme narrative. Which is not all that complementary mind you, because she is doggedly refusing to believe Cat is anything but Evil pretending instead of something new.

In her mind it probably went something like this "I am the anti-hero type. This Woman is scheming. She wants this talk to fail to further some goal of hers, or maybe the talk itself is irrelevant and was just meant to last this long to be a distraction. Either way letting her go allows her to get what she wants. The 'rules' are binding us here, AND SHE'S COUNTING ON THAT. But ultimately she's the Arch-Vile and I am an anti-hero. I know she's got a real plan. Killing her here might make me look bad but the way these stories work I will be completely vindicated as evidence presents itself shortly of what she was really up to."

Of course, she didn't consider that in fact the scheme was "get Saint to attack me, leave peacefully if she doesn't" Because tricking your opponent into breaking the rules so you can take them down while honoring them is very much a hero move.

Liliet

Yep. Cat's acting like a Trickster Hero at worst here, and Saint's conviction threw her into a corner here. Gods, Laurence, you've already had the "not a villain's story" realization during the Battle of the Camps, just how determined are you to ignore reality staring you in the face?

Saint would have been right had she been up against someone like Kairos or alive!Akua. The problem is, she *has* enough information to surmise otherwise by now. She just... doesn't.

Liliet

...actually it sounds like Saint doesn't *trust* in the metaphysical judgement. Like if Hanno threw his coin, got laurels, and went 'nah this can't be right' and then killed the person anyway. Which he wouldn't do, but Laurence... has gone far, far off the rails here.

Like Cat has priests working miracles in her army, but clearly Laurence knows better what Good and Evil are than Above does, right?

...I mean I'd agree with that, if she wasn't... so... bad at making these judgements -_-

[Mental Mouse](#)

I think we can look to the Bard to see where Laurence is getting these ideas.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, but like, Bard doesn't brainwash people wholesale, she gives them ideas within the range they already find plausible.

Laurence is 100% fully responsible for the degree of bullshit in play here.

Insanenoodlyguy

They have said Saint has a good sense for stories herself though. I think she was just following the wrong track because, as I said before, she's used to fighting a certain type and isn't adjusting.

Cicero

I suspect the Procerians are beginning to question the wisdom of the heroes, as they keep on doing things that get everyone deep into the bog.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yes, if that keeps up, it's liable to taint their hero-stories.

Valkyria

Ah Rumena. The sneaky old bastard is back at it again. Simply can't have it's perfectly taunting words be made ineffective by a mere language barrier.

Valkyria

Also, props to Hakram. Even though he doesn't know Cat's plan or exactly how her endgame looks like, he manages to stay in perfect sync with her. Sure he has the bonus of knowing how she thinks (as far as anyone other than herself can know that) and his Name to help him with it, but he just finds the perfect words to say and moments to say them in. Just a good job.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah ♥

Mental Mouse

Especially given he probably wasn't able to perceive the psychic byplay before the spoken words.

Decius

Did the Pilgrim just say that Black was unharmed, and then admit that his soul was severed? Seems like it would be fitting to suggest that he might return from the truce negotiations similarly 'unharmed'.

sutortyrannus

"So what I told you was true, from a certain point of view."

-Another Wise Old Man

aran

From my point of view the HEROES are evil!

haihappen

Taking a hostage until the soul was returned would be the proper diplomatic solution, would it not?

Muffin

Probably the Pilgrim.

The other 2 guys aren't worth Black's soul, and you can't make a hostage from the Saint.

Liliet

And have Cat lose her high ground? She already tread dangerously close to the villain line here, Laurence being not wrong and all that. And the minute she's a villain the Crusade is righteously opposing, rather than a misunderstood hero trying to sort out the mess, she loses.

Allafterme

Ah, a classic example of over-reliance on an aspect turns on you at the worst moment.

Wry Warudo

> "Are you sure I can't recruit you?" I felt compelled to ask.
"I'll be honest, I would spend good money to see you punch Saint in the face."

I wonder how much Cat owes Rumena now

[Liliet](#)

OMG I'D FORGOTTEN ABOUT THAT
SO GOOD

[boballab](#)

She owes him nothing. She didn't say she would pay HIM good money, just pay it in general.

konstantinvoncarstein

Awesome foreshadowing! 😊

[sengachi](#)

Honestly I'd pay good money to watch that. Cat can crowfund its payment off of us.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Arrggh! 😞

Tom

I feel like I should go back and re-read the whole story just to see what other predictive gems like this I've missed 😊

medailyfun

that was intense, I had to change my sweaty t-shirt after reading

Vin reisling

I find it strange heroes would be pulling souls out.

[Liliet](#)



Aotrs Commander

I think that just shows that Cat's opposition are only wearing white hats as decoration.

As if Saint wasn't enough proof.

luminiousblu

It's not exactly an evil thing to do. What's evil is generally using it for fuel or whatever.

[Liliet](#)

Depends on how you squint.

aran

Surprised they got her this easily. Laurence is one of the scariest motherfuckers on the continent.

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, but the story was against her. Attacking someone under truce banner, during negotiations, is an unambiguously villainous act. She was definitely in the role of villain here, and will all know how it goes...

Exec

As much as I love seeing #1 Drow beat the shit out of #~1 Heroine, this was way, way too aggressive of a play.

I hope wanting Black back, even if Praes and the Accords might need him, hasn't blinded her to how badly this will go now.

Badly for her enemies, sure, but still not exactly ideal for her long-term plans...

Gunslinger

She knows Saint needs to die before she can get Good onto the negotiation table. All of this baiting and aggression is the groundwork needed to kill Saint.

Insanenoodlyguy

Not necessarily. If she held him indefinitely, and made more demands, it would certainly be. But she has stated that while they will get on with the peace talks, that this is a separate matter. That the pressure of her hostage looms over them is a factor is not necessarily relevant as part of the story. She has made clear that the matter is settled for the one prisoner or the execution of the truce breaker. She has to avoid sadism, but if she does, she's fine (namely, she can kill Lawrence outright or let her go, but if she say, makes to start cutting pieces of of her and that bluff is called and it's not a bluff, she's taken it into villainy and now the story can pivot against her).

Ultimately, while this will certainly end with a few crowns off one way or another, Our mortals can truthfully say that their position was significantly weakened when that one goddamn fucking hero flagrantly broke truce. And lets face it, if Rozala tells Cordelia "We had a chance here till that goddamn lunatic Saint fucked it all up!" we are in the unique position that rather than disposing of Rozala as a potential threat with this juicy failure, Cordelia is going to think this tracks. And may well feel inclined to take her aside and say "Yeah, she's

going completely off the rails, whatever else we have to put aside, because the blessed seem to be trying to take the reins here and drive us off a cliff." They have the patriotism of overwhelming threat and mutual enemies to bond over now! Of course, for violating that order, Rozala still loses her crown before this can even happen. But that doesn't mean that's her end in the story.

Cicero

Yup, the Procerian mortals are going to be doing alot of bonding over all the messes the Heroes keep putting them in.

[sengachi](#)

She did mention that she would have gone for a much less aggressive play if the Saint hadn't been there. This wasn't so much a plan A so much as it was managing a worst case scenario.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, she was expecting a worst-case scenario, because she knows how the story goes. It's Another F-ing Critical Juncture, so she just assumed things would go to hell. "Gates barred? OK, deal with the situation here first, and while I'm at it, milk my slightly-scorched condition for effect. Saint's here? Obviously she'll try to attack me – I have goddesses defending me, but can I turn the attack to my outright advantage?" and so on.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

Cat looks like she's treating from a position of strength here because she acts like she doesn't mind treating peace conference like a battlefield where she is sufficiently wary of getting killed to not take a non-Named associate with her and give orders in case of her death.

We're very much used to Cat being fully willing to put her life on the line for the sake of building her better world and trying for the best possible outcome. It's easy to forget that it's not actually the default, and pushing back against *being forced to* is... it doesn't come anywhere *near* aggressive yet.

Draconic

Catherine should just take the Saint's soul until Black's is returned to his body. She can even tell the Pilgrim, that the Saint is still alive, unharmed, and in her right mind.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And the left mind is reserved for Amadeus?

Again: one of the few things we know about Amadeus's story position is that he is no longer the Black Knight. Cat doesn't know that, but we do – so, "Amadeus", not "Black".

[Liliet](#)

Meh, it's a nickname.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also: "Hey Pilgrim? The bad news is your buds at Thassalina managed to push the Son Of The Red Skies over the edge, and then he took the Liesse hellgate generator. The good news is he took it out of Creation. For now. Do you think you can negotiate with him better than I can?"

[ahd](#)

"Yes, because you are Evil and I am Good and that means...uh..."

[Daniel E](#)

Sentimentality aside; What practical use does Amadeus have that is worth a legit opportunity to kill the Saint?

Gunslinger

Taking over after Malicia and ensuring Praes doesn't descend into demon spawning chaos.

[Fayhem](#)

Literally this; Amadeus is the only power broker in Praes who both has a realistic chance of holding it together as a country and has the will/intent to actually implement the fundamental societal reforms that Praes desperately needs. With no Amadeus to take charge after Malicia gets got (which is an absolute necessity that I'll be happy to elaborate on if anybody wants), the *best* case scenario is another High Lord/Lady Triumphant-wannabe type takes over and drags Praes back into the bad old days of Impractical Evil that made them a permanent bane to both all their neighbors (very especially Cat's own Callow) and to their own people. The worst-case and frankly more likely scenario would be that the former Dread Empire of Praes descends into a bloody mess that would look something like the Syrian civil war if everybody in the Middle East knew how to summon demons.

Tl;dr – Yes, Cat has a sentimental attachment to Amadeus. But getting him back would be pretty much an absolute necessity even from a pure geopolitical analysis of the situation with zero sentiment involved from anybody – and that's not even

touching on how pretty much all the Legions and a *large* percentage of the Army of Callow (including pretty much all the orcs up to and including the Marshal of Callow) have an attachment to Amadeus that is as strong if not stronger than their attachment to Cat.

Insanenoodlyguy

That last bit especially. Even if Amadeus survives but is never directly helpful to Cat again (Highly unlikely), This becomes the time that the Carrion Lord's heir saved him when for once he couldn't save himself. Most consider her to be his heir. This will make it undisputed fact. Which is pretty important if and when Praes has to be dealt with if most of it's standing army assumes by default when the order comes in to fight Callow that they are going to fight FOR Callow.

medailyfun

I doubt Cat has Saint as a killing goal, she would just prefer her fighting DK and not messing around

Insanenoodlyguy

I believe she's said already that Saint will have to die, because she understands Saint. There is no version of this where both of them live, Saint is going to force the issue till she wins or she dies.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also getting killed by Saint would *not* further any of Cat's own goals.

[Liliet](#)

Cat has Saint marked as "super most likely can't avoid a kill or get killed scenario", not someone she actively wants dead (like she did Akua). If a path opens where they both survive, all else being equal, Cat'll take it.

Insanenoodlyguy

Absolutely, but that requires Saint to have anything other than a "I die or you do" approach. All signs point to her not being able to let this go... she barely did when it wasn't personal and now it is.

Cicero

All very true, but Cat might be willing to take a practical evil approach, and kill the Saint after she kills the Dead King.

Maybe. Hopefully.

[Liliet](#)

When Cat is forced to kill Saint depends on Saint and only on Saint.

[Liliet](#)

Getting Amadeus explicitly and openly backing her against Malicia is an insta-win of the low key civil war she's been having there. Not only does that flip the Legions (and activate Malicia's failsafes there, sure, but that won't help her long-term), it also grants her the Calamities – and Scribe's entire web of informants with them, – Grem's compliance (and with him the Clans), Sacker's legion as well, and Malicia herself would not make any attempt on *his* life.

The only fractions in Praes whose loyalty Amadeus *doesn't* command are goblins (who are already allied with Catherine independently) and High Lords, who can't band together even in the face of certain annihilation. Which is coming.

Amadeus is a ridiculously influential political player, even though he doesn't seem to realize the extent of it himself (he missed a couple of candidates when counting who he could be bait for). Catherine needs to at least make visible moves towards rescuing him to keep the loyalty of her current allies, too, much like how Juniper did not doubt they'd be rescuing Grem. Her authority over the Praesi core of her Army of Callow is derived from his, too, she's "Carrion Lord's apprentice" to them.

His expertise as a storyweaver is pretty much lost in the noise compared to all of THAT, but Cat's having a notable dearth of competent commanders, as well.

Insanenoodlyguy

It suddenly occurs to me that the sort of irony stories love could happen here. Emperor Benevolent or whatever he is going to become rises, and since he has very little interest in killing his best friend after having lost so many of the people he cares about, there's really only one thing to do with her: and so at last a name is restored, as Chancellor Alaya comes into being, a living testament to her own failure to destroy it completely. Like her former Black Knight, she then spends a lot of time taking the name in an entirely new and unexpected direction.

[Liliet](#)

Not Benevolent.

That's all I have to add.

ByVectron!

I was honestly giddy with excitement, reading the Saints introduction to Rumena. So very, very well written and staged, Cat truly knows how to craft a story.

TheGreatMeh

A young woman fighting a rogue sorcerer for her father's soul? That sounds like a good story to me.

VoraiTemplar

We have a soulless body. We have a bodyless spirit. An interesting combination...

[Liliet](#)

...

I hate you for saying this.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

I'm loving that all of Cat's sparring with the Grey Pilgrim boils down to King of the Hill on the moral high ground. Obviously he's trying to maneuver her into a story that kills her, but his step one seems to be 'make sure she's in the wrong and then let the Narrative take it's course' and all of her ripostes have boiled down to 'no actually I'm in the right so I win'. It's been by the skin of her teeth a couple of times but it's also been consistent. All of their previous negotiations end up with her at essentially moral parity with her opponents, despite them being the aggressors, but here she managed to end up unambiguously in the right despite commanding by my count three /separate/ invading forces in a kingdom already defending itself from an existential threat. Pretty impressive for an orphan brat from Laure.

[Liliet](#)

I'm not sure that Grey is trying to kill her actually. Cat's reasoning wrt that back during Northern Crusade negotiations was "he's trying to maneuver me into a redemption story, redemption stories often end in death, therefore he doesn't mind me dying" – which is weak reasoning already, and turning it into "he is deliberately trying to get me killed" is outright paranoia. Which she was entitled to under the circumstances, but that doesn't mean we should take her words as gospel.

We know that Tariq is sympathetic to her to at least some degree. He's trying to kill her only if and to the degree that he considers the benefits of it to outweigh the costs (ah, utilitarianism).

[Fayhem](#)

Since some people said they liked it that I replicated the post in the comments the last time I did one of these on reddit, here we go again! Apologies if in fact you didn't want this.

https://old.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/comments/b6crb9/tariq_and_the_regicide_aka_the_heavens_favorite/?

[Fayhem](#)

...And this time when I *did* intend for the link to replicate the post it doesn't? I give up. You win, WordPress. I've been defeated by you.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, "human defeated by computer" is a very well-known story, with great power over the narrative. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Maybe it's the question mark?

[Liliet](#)

Apparently not.

[Liliet](#)

AHA! You need to delete 'old' from the url. It works like that with reddit, but not old.reddit

[Fayhem](#)

Ahhhh that makes sense! You are a good and helpful person and I hereby award you ten (10) internet points for your service.

[Liliet](#)

curtsies

[Liliet](#)

https://old.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/comments/b6crb9/tariq_and_the_regicide_aka_the_heavens_favorite/

[Liliet](#)

BritishTeaLover

"I couldn't prove that Rumena had worked on its mastery of Chantant purely to be able to slag its opponents verbally, but I had very deep suspicions."

I'm starting to love Rumena more and more, they have a fantastically dry sense of humour.

morroian

Reading this in 2022 this chapter is the Guide at its best with Cat manipulating stories to her advantage.

Chapter 27: Overtures

"You should listen to the devil on your shoulder, my friend. I had it nailed onto there for a reason."

– Dread Emperor Abominable, the Thrice-Struck

It went like this: the opposition insisted they could not hold diplomatic talks while one of their own was being held up by the throat. In response, I somewhat politely cast aspersions on their grasp of matters such as reality and remembering who'd tried to kill me under truce banner *literally moments ago*, then told them it'd be rather absurd to stand there in silence while the Grey Pilgrim went to fetch my teacher's unconscious body. I spoke the word 'unconscious' with a heavy wink, because what was a little borderline necromancy between 'friends'? Lord Yannu promptly told me talks couldn't be had without the Peregrine, who in turn suggested that his word was enough for me to order General Rumena to release his personal Heaven-endorsed attack hound. He would then join my conversation with Malanza and the other Levantine.

"That's an interesting suggestion, Tariq," I smiled politely, showing a great deal of teeth. "Especially since it implies I still hold your word to be of any worth at all."

"Mind your tongue, villain," the Lord of Alava hissed. "To cast doubt on the honour of the Pilgrim's Blood is to insult the Dominion of Levant itself."

"Will the Grey Pilgrim be surrendering himself into my custody immediately, then?" I pointedly asked. "Honour might be at least in part satisfied by that."

There was a moment of pained silence, though from certain quarters there'd been understandably no surprise. After all,

Princess Rozala had been in the tent when the treaties were first drafted and signed while the Grey Pilgrim had been an actual guarantor of the terms as well as part of them.

"You overreach, Black Queen," Lord Yannu said. "Such demands are beyond your ability to enforce, to say little of your right to them."

"My *right*?" I curtly repeated. "Did they not tell you, Lord Yannu, that I have written treatises signed by both your Peregrine and the Prince of Iserre to this nature? Treatises including terms that placed the Pilgrim in the Kingdom of Callow's hands for a time as hostage, and that your honourable Peregrine instead fled my capital in the night last year? Oaths and promises were broken, and he's since shown no willingness to make reparations for this or even acknowledge it happened."

"There was greater need for me elsewhere," the Grey Pilgrim replied. "Duties whose call was keener than what had been arranged."

"The oaths were inconvenient, so you broke them," I translated with a beaming smile. "But that's all right, because I'm just a villain after all. Charming."

"I would make amends, Black Queen," the Pilgrim offered.

"Sure," I replied without hesitation, "surrender yourself, right now. You'll be put to trial according to Callowan law and dealt with accordingly."

"I cannot do this," Tariq said, "so long as you lead an army against the Grand Alliance."

"Ah," I mused. "It was a platitude, then, and your word remains dust to me. Let us discard this notion of my putting faith in the promises of a man who does not afford anyone else the same courtesy and move on, shall we?"

None of them liked that, but Malanza steered the conversation away from the fact that both she and the Pilgrim had already broken terms of a bargain made with me before they lost any more feathers. The arrangements ended up being kicked down the line: talks would end until I'd received the body and released the Saint, then resume with the Grey Pilgrim in attendance. A waste of time, in my eyes, so I turned my gaze on Princess Rozala instead.

"I'm willing to bargain with you without them in attendance," I bluntly said. "You strike me as the most trustworthy of the three, at the moment, though admittedly that doesn't mean all that much."

The Princess of Aquitan hesitated, while in the back of my mind I gauged her situation. There were more Dominion soldiers than Proceran ones in the western coalition army she was fighting with, so it wasn't a given that she had the most clout in whatever power-sharing arrangement made up that host's command. On the other hand, if she was here then it was with the First Prince's backing and this remained the Principate of Procer: she had legitimacy the other two did not, being foreigners.

"We can speak," Princess Rozala said, "while other matters are seen to."

The large Lord of Alava stirred, face openly displeased, but the princess raised a hand in appeasement.

"I will not negotiate, or offer terms," the dark-haired woman said. "Only speak. Diplomacy can take place when all are in attendance."

The Grey Pilgrim spoke softly, in a language I did not know – a Levantine tongue, most likely, since Lord Yannu seemed to have no trouble understanding it. They conferred softly, and I watched Princess Rozala from the corner of my eyes. She seemed as much in the dark about what was being said as I, and not particularly pleased about it. Adjutant leaned in closer.

"Murcadan, I think," the orc whispered in Kharsum. "Spoken mostly around the region of Alava city. I'm not surprised Rozala wouldn't know it, it's their least widespread tongue."

I slowly nodded. Might be true that the language had never seemed worth learning for the Princess of Aquitan. Although her principality was deep to the south of Procer and closer to the Dominion than any other foreign nation, Ceseo or Lunara would have been more useful picks if she meant to dabble in learning something of narrower use than tradertalk. Whatever the truth of it, the side conference between the Levantines did not take long. Quiet words were exchanged with Princess Rozala herself, and there must have been agreement as the Pilgrim sought my eyes once more and when denied that withdrew without another word. Lord Yannu inquired to the practical aspects of the trade, namely how the unconscious body would be carried, so I glanced meaningfully at Hakram. Adjutant moved to speak with the Levantine aristocrat, leaving Princess Rozala Malanza to speak with me alone. Well, not exactly: Komena drew her talons against my shoulder for a moment before lazily flapping away to perch herself on the shoulder of her favourite, General Rumena. The old drow showed no sign of tiring from holding up the Saint of Swords by the throat, and overall had seemed rather unimpressed by her glaring even before half of Sve Noc claimed its shoulder. The crow taking flight drew Malanza's attention to the one still on my shoulder, though she couldn't seem to gaze at Andronike directly.

"I wouldn't recommending looking at either too close," I said.

"Demons," Princess Rozala said, lips tightening into a line.

Andronike let out loud gurgling caws that might have been taken as laughter, and certainly rang of mockery.

"Sve Noc," I corrected. "Or their attention, anyway. No summons these, Rozala Malanza, bound and bargained for. Though if that makes you fear them less, I'll count you a fool for it."

The Proceran princess studied me for a moment, dark eyes inscrutable.

"What does it mean?" she asked. "Sve Noc."

"It means your learning is shallow, Rozala Malanza, while this world's roots run deep," Andronike spoke in perfect Chantant from my shoulder. "It will be amusing, to see how little of you the adjustment allows to remain. Already the cracks are showing, aren't they?"

The Princess of Aquitan turned ghastly pale.

"It will take more than brandy and poppy leaves for the digging to stop," the goddess on my shoulder laughed. "Hands and picks and tireless flesh, pulling aside the —"

"Andronike," I calmly said. "Enough."

"The clever little things would turn on you in a heartbeat, my herald, if they believed they would triumph in that strife," she said. "In their wanton arrogance they prance about, blind to their utter *fragility*."

"Are we not all fragile, in your eyes?" I retorted.

"Some more than others," Andronike said, but left it at that.

Wings spreading, the crow-goddess took flight and left me to face a shaken Princess of Aquitan. Her tanned visage had turned ashen, and a tremor was running down her arm. Not, I noted, the one that clutched the handle of her sword.

"What is that *thing*, Black Queen?" Princess Rozala croaked.

"Desperate measures made altar," I said. "Apotheosis is not a gentle affair, and they were not gentle before it."

"Riddles," she accused.

"I've given you truths," I shrugged. "What you make of them, in the end, is not my concern. I am not your keeper, or for that matter your empire's."

That last sentence had blood returning to her face, and iron returned to her spine. I studied Rozala Malanza under the gentle light of the moon, waited as she put herself back together. It was absurd, I thought, to think of her as young when she was older than me. But she couldn't even be thirty, and it struck me that in different times she would have been considered much too young for the importance of the duties thrust upon her. As Hasenbach's commander in Iserre, she was arguably on par with the Iron Prince in authority within the ever-fluid military hierarchy of Procer. Perhaps even higher. *Young and worn before her time*, I thought. *The chorus of our age*.

"Procer is on the verge of collapse," Princess Rozala told me.

I hid my surprise at the fact that she'd outright admit that. The blood was in the water for anyone to see, and here in Iserre there were ingredients enough to cook the death of empire, but there was still life in the beast.

"In different circumstances, I might have celebrated that," I frankly said. "Not, however, today."

"You cannot afford for the lines up north to break, Black Queen," the princess told me, tone cool. "Too many of the refugees south would die, the sheer amount of corpses to be raised would effectively make the Dead King unstoppable."

Gods, I *wished*. Unstoppable was the prelude to some adolescent in colourful clothes bringing down the flying fortress, or inexplicably stabbing a villain's soul. Unfortunately, I doubted Neshamah would make any mistake so easily exploitable by the Heavens and their chosen.

"I didn't come to Iserre to fight any of you," I pointed out. "I'm extracting my forces."

"Do so," the princess said. "You will not be hindered."

"Including the Legions of Terror," I flatly said.

"That," Princess Rozala said, "cannot be allowed to happen."

I already had a biting reply on the tip of my tongue when I forced myself to bite it instead, eyes narrowing as I looked closer at the dark-haired Arlesite. She wasn't being high-handed, I thought, or refusing to recognize the realities of her situation. There wasn't defiance or righteous anger on her face, only a sort of tired resignation. Rozala Malanza was essentially telling me, without outright speaking the word, that if the Legions left with my forces there would be dire consequences for the Principate.

"How bad?" I asked.

"Bad," she replied, tone grim.

"I can't give them to you," I frankly told her. "I won't backstab an ally and it'd make a bloody mess for me besides."

"If you were to escape with them," Princess Rozala delicately said, "after being defeated, that would be a different story. Or so I am told."

My fingers tightened around my reins and Zombie whinnied.

"That's not a small favour you're asking," I said. "Or a harmless one."

It wasn't an exaggeration to say that a great deal of my legitimacy – insofar as I had any – as the Queen of Callow came from my largely uninterrupted string of battlefield victories. I'd had political defeats aplenty, and strategic drubbings more than once, but even the worst of my days commanding an army could be argued to be at least draws. As the First Prince had once put it I was a warlord, and those only rules so long as they kept *winning*. It'd also put me in a weaker position when pushing for the Liesse Accords, coming from the cold as an already beaten foe instead of a victor, and that was without even getting in the practical aspects of being 'defeated'. Even if I were willing to waste soldiers over such theatre, which I honestly wasn't sure I was, this would be a risky business even if I trusted the opposition well. Which I did not. Malanza wasn't unreasonable, but a year ago she'd been invading my homeland and she'd never bothered to hide the despised me personally. That left the Levantines, which as long as the Pilgrim was around couldn't be trusted to do anything but what he 'advised'. How could I be sure that halfway through the withdrawal of my forces they wouldn't try to turn the face victory into a real one?

"I do not have room to negotiate, Black Queen," Princess Rozala murmured. "I would prefer if I did, but what do I have to bargain with save doom and despair?"

"I'd be taking on heavy risks," I reminded her. "On the account of people who are still my enemies."

"There is a greater enemy still," she told me, eyes serious. "*The Enemy*, and he comes for us all."

"I'm not unaware of that," I patiently said. "It's not that I'm unwilling to avoid setting fire to what's left of Procer, Malanza. It's that I'm not convinced if I try to help you your fellows won't stick a knife in my back halfway through."

She grimaced.

"I don't suppose," she said, "that my word of honour as the Princess of Aequitan would mean anything to you."

"More than nothing," I finally said. "But it only matters if you're in command of the army on the other side of this field, and I don't believe that's the case."

"I hold supreme command over all armies of the Principate in Iserre," she said.

"And the Levantines?"

"This half their forces answers to Lord Yannu, for the most part," Rozala said. "We make plans by council."

"Then you can't speak for the army," I said, not unkindly. "If the Grey Pilgrim asked the man to turn cannibal he actually might. Turning on a villain? That wouldn't even merit hesitation."

"You need to set aside your grudge against the Chosen, Foundling," the other woman told me. "Though I understand he broke faith with you, it was a shallow betrayal."

"He disappeared to hunt down my mentor, whose soulless body I've just had to trade for," I flatly said. "He'd didn't leave to take a nice stroll down a promenade, Malanza."

"The Carrion Lord killed thousand on the field, and dozens of thousands through the burning of them," the Princess of Aequitan spoke evenly. "I can only grieve the Peregrine did not simply slit the man's throat instead of resorting to such theatrics."

I could have argued this, truth be told. There was no denying Black was a monster, but he hadn't decided to torch his way through the Proceran heartlands for the pleasure of it on a sunny morning where he'd had nothing else planned. It'd been a calculated attack at the manpower and stability of an enemy nation who'd been in the process of invading my homeland and his. While I wouldn't defend his actions, or the validity of his methods even if they appeared to be working – to everyone's loss – he'd not committed that atrocity in a vacuum. It'd be a direct response to the Tenth Crusade, whose stated goal was the destruction of Praes. Black's policy had been to avoid war against Procer for decades before I'd known him, and it seemed rather rich of all these righteous folk to go out of their way declare war on one of the most infamous monsters of our age and then be appalled and surprised when he behaved monstrously. If you shoved your fingers in a brazier, at the very least you should expect to get burned. On the other hand, I was disinclined to defend an atrocity I didn't believe in and was currently screwing all of us over. Let her talk: if that was all she did, I had no issue with it. The talk was hardly undeserved.

"My point is that he's not ever going to consider promises binding, Malanza," I said. "Not if they get in the way of what he believes needs to be done."

"That is rather reassuring to me," the princess said.
"Considering he's one of the most decent men I've met."

"I'm not going to argue whether the Pilgrim's anything with you," I flatly said. "But you can, at least, recognize why I'd hesitated to trust in him given his history of both breaking oaths and attempting to kill me."

"Make your peace with it," Princess Rozala said, rather unmoved.

It occurred to me, then, that from the Princess of Aquitaine's perspective I was angry over simply our battlefield encounters and the Pilgrim's escape from Liesse. She did not know that I'd good as begged the man to make any path but going to Keter feasible only to be turned down. Or that his wriggling into a role through the treaty after the Camps had essentially been an attempt to get me killed through a redemption story, after having spent that entire diplomatic conference trying to manoeuvre me into a story that'd get me either slain or sidelined. I wondered if she'd believe me, should I tell her. Likely not. Part of that I suspected only Named could truly understand, and then not even all of that rarefied breed. As for the rest, why would the Black Queen's word be taken for anything? No, I was simply expected to take the word of my fucking betters while everyone dragged my own through the mud. I pushed down the sharp flare of anger I felt at that. It would be of no use to me here.

"There's more there than you know," I finally said. "I am not unwilling to bargain with him, but trust him blindly when the stakes are so high? No."

"You would refuse without even giving reason?" Malanza said.

"Where'd you learn what would happen if the Legions were allowed to walk?" I replied.

She didn't answer. Yeah, we all had our little secrets. Might be the Augur, I figured, but other things as well. Tariq had Mercy whispering in his hear, it seemed, and I wouldn't write off the possibility that Tyrant had offered some sort of deal – or made of threat – either.

"Trust is a funny thing, isn't?" I murmured.

I considered, for a moment, telling her about what was taking shape in Arcadia. It'd be a danger to her side as well, I figured, though not an immediate one. I knew I *should* tell her, because if it came out later that I had known a catastrophe was forming there and said nothing there would a price to pay in many

ways. But there'd been hellgates, in that broken place. And what I believed might have been High Arcana. It was possible for it to be the work of the Dead King, who had been known to use both these things, but that wasn't where the shape of this story – Masego missing, Liesse disappeared, everything coming to a head in Iserre – was leading. If I told any of the crusaders that knowledge would make it to the Grey Pilgrim. And more dangerously to the Saint of Swords, who I'd just humiliated and used as coin in a bargain, who I'd have to release before too long lest this situation be turned on me. If Laurence de Montfort learned that the Hierophant was meddling with these kinds of forces, she'd have a pretext to kill him. And I did not doubt for a single fucking moment that she'd try. Would she succeed? I honestly wasn't sure.

But I was certain I wasn't willing to gamble with Masego's life, so I kept my mouth shut.

"There's no point in holding talks over this, is there?" I finally said. "Not unless you're willing to offer me hostages and other forms of safeguard, which you won't be."

"You know the appearances of that would make it impossible," Princess Rozala calmly replied.

"Then we appear to have nothing left to speak about," I said. "I'll be marching my armies out of Iserre, Malanza."

I met her eyes, smiling ruefully.

"I'd suggest you get yours out of my way, for all our sakes."

Javvies

This went more or less as expected.

Though, I'm not sure that there's absolutely no point in telling Malanza about what you tried to offer Pilgrim Cat. Sure, she'd be skeptical, and it probably wouldn't change anything *today*, but it could very well lay the seeds for the future. It doesn't cost you anything, and might help in the future.

IDKWhoitis

It would cost her Mal being more on guard against Cat for little to no pay off. If Grey doesn't do anything outright "Merciful", then she won't believe Cat and would respect her warnings less. If Mal for whatever reason started to doubt

Grey, and Grey would note this, then she might be purged for being corrupted by evil. Noone would really stop the heroes, and Cat is left with one less reasonable person to talk to later on.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Note that AFAICT, neither Malanza nor Cat know about that village that Tariq wiped out to get Amadeus.

RoflCat

Especially considering how she became First of Night.

>Hypocrite to end, was I? Demanding what I would not offer.

She won't trust the Heaven and their pawns, so Pilgrim/Yannu should be out .

But Malanza? She's seen the horror, and she's mortal, while she's influenced by the Pilgrim she's also not in his inner circle as shown with the secret talk with Yannu in this chapter.

Maybe Malanza will not return the hand offered, but unless Cath is willing to offer it, that gap won't be closed.

caoimhinh

In this case, it's different from the deal with Sve Noc (where they didn't know each other and trusting the other was a leap of faith).

Here, is not that Cat doesn't want to extend her hand and trust Pilgrim and Rozala; it's that he has repeatedly shown that he can't be trusted to honor any promises and Rozala simply doesn't have the power to enforce any deal she makes. Releasing the Saint on Pilgrim's word is pointless since she could attack right away and it's a fact that Pilgrim wouldn't let her be captured again.

Trusting the Peregrine to uphold his side of a bargain without making any binding oath is also futile, notice that he immediately said that he can break promises if there are "greater needs" and "Duties whose call is keener than what has been arranged", meaning that the moment he perceives that he has an upper hand or a chance, he would strike against Cat regardless of honor, because the higher call is to defeat the villains.

If he is openly saying that he can decide at any moment to go back on his word then he can't be trusted. Cat doing so would be stupid.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think that 'the higher call is to defeat the villains' is accurate.

This is the real pivot point here actually, for the plot as a whole: is it? Because if it is, then Cat truly has no choice but to twist the world's arm until there's no choice but to go along with her demands.

But if he's more careful in his utilitarian reasoning,



Javvies

Thing is, Cat more or less has to assume that she can't trust him to give and then keep his word unless she both has sufficient leverage to make him agree to give his word and then maintains sufficient leverage to make him keep his word indefinitely or at least until she no longer cares if he breaks his word.

Honestly, though, the whole massively unreliable word thing? That sounds way more like a Villain trait than one that should be associated with a Hero. A Classic! Evil Villain trait, at that.

Liliet

This is not about his word. That's just Cat's attempts to maintain control of the situation. Which are very much not the terminal value.

Javvies

Yes and no.

Remember, Cat had previously said that she thinks she's going to need Pilgrim supporting the Accords from his side in order for them to work.

However, if she can't trust him to keep his word to her when she wants to let them fight the Dead King, he's not going to be very useful for supporting the Accords.

If he's unreliable when it comes to cooperating against the Dead King, even to such a minor extent as letting her leave to face off with Praes while the Alliance goes to deal with the far more pressing issue of Dead King and/or Kairos ... it is very hard to consider him reliable for pretty much anything and everything else.

Liliet

I think Cat plans to actually get him *onboard* with the Accords, like, actually supporting them and bending

the rest of his plans and obligations around this idea.

She's not doing it, though.

Methinks Cat's having trouble following through on her own good ideas :3

Mental Mouse

She may be hoping to *teach* him to keep his word when the time comes (yeah, ironic). "Remember how much your last oathbreaking cost you? Next time will be worse."

Miles

In this case it's just a cultural thing. When making promises to Evil it doesn't count as a promise, just something you had to say to win.

ALazyMonster

I feel like the not telling her about the deal part also largely includes the fact that there is no way to tactfully say "Before I tried get the great elder lich god to burn your kingdom down, which Malicia ended up doing anyway which was mildly convenient if unwanted, I tried to offer peace but the Pilgrim decided that my homeland should burn simply because it might result in a longer lasting peace for the alliance."

I do get that every person in the alliance is skeptical of her word since they've all grown up on stories of villains being traitorous and lying but I feel like that shouldn't give the heroes a pass to break their word whenever it's not convenient. The entire point of integrity is that you stand by something even when it's not easy. If your principle is that "everything is just going to work out as long as I make a marginal effort," which is what the Pilgrim seems to be at times, then that's not a principle it's blind optimism. The heroes in this universe as a whole seem to have grown a bit arrogant in believing the story will always bail them out so they can get away with letting themselves be pushed to the cliffs.

I'm not sure if I lost my train of thought halfway through that rant, sorry.

Javvies

Ehhhh, she doesn't have to tell Malanza **everything**, as long as what Cat actually does say is true.

Instead of saying she tried to make a deal with the Dead King before trying the drow only to be outbid by Malicia, Cat can

say that that because Pilgrim refused to make peace, Cat needed to find someone to ally with against Praes (and Procer/ the Alliance), tried to kill Malicia to prevent her from selling out Calernia to the Dead King and wound up making deal with the drow. And the dwarves.

Remember, Cat had also offered to Gate the Crusaders directly to Praes/ the Tower. It's not absurd that she might try to offer a similar sort of deal again.

Mental Mouse

Unfortunately she can't gate anybody anywhere just now, except to Masego's new "workspace".

RanVor

Also, the Crusaders have better things to do than assaulting the Tower right now.

Mental Mouse

Also, even shorter spiel: Since Pilgrim wouldn't deal, I went and found some allies of my own, and here they are! Oh yeah, I made another deal on the way: maybe you noticed the Dwarves won't sell to you? That's because you're fighting me Instead of the Dead King, who, lest we forget, is doing rather worse to you than Amadeus ever did. Interested in a deal yet? Remember, things can always get worse...

Liliet

Yeah, Cat still needs to lay that card on the table, because right now it's just screwing everyone over for no real gain.

stevenneiman

Honestly, the most likely outcome is that she would view Cat as less reasonable. Between seeming sane and giving a challenge to make Malanza admit that there were reasonable reasons for Cat to keep secrets, she managed to get Malanza to think of her as a reasonable equal who was willing to at least try to find a compromise which wouldn't be ruinous for all involved, and even if they couldn't come to such a compromise they both left feeling like the other party is someone they could make a deal with in other circumstances.

If Cat had tried to convince her that Tariq was using story-fu to kill her, she would have sounded like a lunatic in a tinfoil hat, and that would mean that Malanza would assume that she was too crazy to work with even if they were in a situation where they both did have the bargaining power to come to a beneficial accord.

Javvies

Cat doesn't need to say why Pilgrim refused to make a deal, only that she'd offered one that was fairly reasonable, and been refused – and that Pilgrim hadn't refused because Above ordered him to reject Cat's offer, per Pilgrim's own words.

Liliet

Yeah. Rozala is already willing to accept that Cat might have good reasons that she's keeping secret for also good reasons. Telling her what actually happened will not work out to Cat's benefit *at this point*. With Rozala's current level of informedness there's no way for Cat to swing this story in her favor in any more detail than what she's already offered.

danh3107

I don't have a lot to say, just a very solid chapter. I hope the delay wasn't anything serious.

IDKWhoitis

I wonder if Cat lost her call line to Cordelia after losing Winter, or if Cordelia would even answer. Like Mal isn't a bad person, nor incompetent, but she simply lacks the power or authority to make any deals.

I would have loved hearing Cat and Mal talk more about the Dead King or what they think of the Crusade. Like they both might hate each other on theoretical principles, but I do believe they would find some common ground.

Oh well, let's see Cat break another army.

Dainpdf

I would hope the Goddesses could patch her through. Whether they would, however, is debatable.

IDKWhoitis

I doubt Cordelia would willingly put on an artifact that reeked of Night and Winter. She doesn't exactly trust Cat right now.

The God's would probably do it, but I doubt Cat is going to ask. Grey is a major pain in the ass, and any hypothetical deal would get cheapened by Grey telling the Levs to do what is "Needed"

Dainpdf

I would expect the same artifact to work, and that her priestly Light blessings would protect her from the Night well enough, at this remote a contact.

Also, Augur would probably warn her if there were danger. But yes, the Pilgrim is an obstacle to any negotiations.

[Liliet](#)

I'm guessing the call line is lost, though it'd be interesting if it wasn't.

Agent J

They're in Iserre. Scrying is a bust at the moment. Cat couldn't even reach the Observatory, she sure as shit ain't reaching ol' Cordy.

caoimhinh

True, but remember that the artifact that Cat gave Cordelia for their communication wasn't a scrying tool, but a fragment of her own Domain that could be used to access it when Cat allowed entrance, thus enabling Cordelia and Cat to appear in front of the other.

It was more like half-stepping in another dimension to converse there, rather than scrying link for communication. Of course, whatever happened to that after Cat gave Winter to Sve Noc is anyone's guess and up to EE to decide. Maybe it broke, or maybe it's covered by darkness(due to Night) now so Cordelia doesn't dare to try it on anymore, maybe Cat will try to contact her again with it after the mess in Iserre is resolved.

ninegardens

Noooo... no Cat, don't.

Malanza is being as chill as is possible.
There gots to be some other way.

Also, if you suspect that Malanza is following Auger's rules, and Auger is a tool of Bard then....
then...

Oh crap, I don't know what you're meant to do when you gain the info "The best manipulator is trying to manipulate this"- what you do with that? huh?

Dainpdf

Be extra careful?

And yeah, it is often the case in diplomacy that the absence of some trust causes the absence of more trust.

Neither can trust the other not to backstab them, and neither can trust the other to trust their reasons. Their needs aren't very compatible, neither is very willing to bend, and they're operating off of almost disjoint sets of information.

caoimhinh

I think an agreement could be made if Cat states to them her intentions of marching against the Dead King, which I expect her to do once Pilgrim returns and talks can resume, since it's pointless to keep hiding it, if Cat wants to wait until later to state her position in the war in the North and talk with Cordelia after Cat has taken all her troops away from danger, she is risking causing enmity and damaging the relations with the other armies, which she would be fighting along against the Keteran hordes.

So Cat needs to make it clear to them that she wants to help them against Keter, because if she keeps acting like her only desire is leave the mess for the Grand Alliance to solve then she won't be admitted into it later and the armies here would still stand in her way.

She might not push for a deal and treaty made now, but voicing her intentions early would do more good than bad.

[Liliet](#)

I think it's mistrusting Tariq that's screwing Cat over here. I can very much see where it's coming from, but I think it's the weak point of her reason here.

[Javvies](#)

Except he's demonstrated that he can't be trusted to keep a deal, and outright said that he either would not or could not be assured to keep his end of the deal even while Cat kept hers. Not in those exact words, but that's what his words meant.

If you can't mistrust someone because (a) they previously violated a deal they agreed to, and (b) have as good as said that their word to you specifically (if not in general) is unreliable ...

Well, who can you mistrust?

Pilgrim has proven that Cat cannot trust him to maintain his part of a deal he makes with her. Hell – Pilgrim joining the Prince of Iserre in Callowan custody as a hostage was Pilgrim's own idea.

He can't be trusted to keep the part of a deal he makes that was included in the deal at his request/demand/instigation.

Trusting Pilgrim would be even more of a mistake than not trusting him.

Cat already tried trusting Pilgrim and he betrayed that trust, and on top of that, he basically just said that she couldn't trust him to keep his word if keeping his word would be inconvenient.

Maybe if it were only Cat that would be affected by Pilgrim being unreliable, she might (or might not) be willing to gamble on Pilgrim keeping his word, but it isn't, it's the Legions and Army of Callow being immediately affected, and ultimately Callow as a whole.

Liliet

Your points are good too.

Literally the only reason in existence to put trust in Pilgrim is to put trust in his competence and good intention from a willing position of weakness.

Cat's done that before, with Sve Noc, in a more or less self-sacrificial move. It's not strange that she's more hesitant to do it with an army and her entire political position at stake, but I feel like narratively that's the winning move that she's going to come to sooner or later.

Javvies

But it's not like dealing with Sve Noc.
Cat and Sve Noc didn't trust each other in a vacuum – they didn't trust each other because they didn't know each other or anything about each other.

Cat has very good objective reason to not trust Pilgrim's word (both his actions and his own statements just now).

Cat and Sve Noc is like somebody who is a picky eater not wanting to eat mushrooms because they're a picky eater and have never had mushrooms before and aren't going to start now.

Cat not trusting Pilgrim is somebody who doesn't want to eat something with shrimp in it because they are massively allergic to shrimp and could die if they have any.

medailyfun

Cat just needs to make the deal clearly beneficial for Pilgrim to keep it, e.g. saving more lives not just here and now but also in longer run. Also well shaped story may help

caoimhinh

But that's the issue: Cat already offered that and it's still offering that, but they didn't accept before and are still refusing to accept now. Because they don't want to save more lives, they want to defeat Evil.

They launched a Crusade on the pretext of defeating Praes and liberating Callow, when in reality they were made for purely political reasons; they invaded Callow already making plans to divide it among Proceran princes and it didn't matter to Pilgrim that Cat offered to Gate them into Praes because it couldn't be allowed that a Villain was still ruling Callow, Cat offered to abdicate in 5 years but they want it now.

And right now, Cat is offering to leave without a fight but they don't allow it because they want to eliminate the Legions of Terror and inflict a defeat on the Black Queen, because not doing at least one of those things would be a political blow for the leading members of the Grand Alliance.

It has never been about saving more lives for neither of the Crusaders members, it's about defeating Evil. That's why they refuse peaceful deals, they don't want peace, they want victory.

[Liliet](#)

>"It would smother in the crib," the Grey Pilgrim said sadly, "what is perhaps the last chance for peace in our time."

>"I'm offering peace," I hissed.

>"Peace on your terms would unseat the First Prince," he said. "She has spent years forging an alliance with Levant, fighting her Assembly tooth and nail every step of the way. For that same ally to twist her arm into making a pact with one of the most famous villains alive would see her removed within the month. And everything she seeks to accomplish vanish with her."

>A long moment passed and the only sound in the tent was his steady heartbeat.

>"You can't be serious," I said. "If you'd said the Heavens were using their veto, I would have been furious. I won't pretend otherwise. But at least I wouldn't be disappointed."

>He opened his mouth but Winter flared like half a world howling for blood and he closed it.

>"No, disappointed is too mild a word," I said, voice barren of any speck of warmth. "This, Pilgrim, is worthy of contempt."

>"The treaties she has made and would deepen will end wars in the west," the old man said. "Callow restored and Praes humbled will allow Calernia to finally turn towards the true face of the Enemy. The King of the Dead. The Chain of Hunger."

>"It's funny," I said, smiling mirthlessly. "How it's never the lot of you that have to make the sacrifices. Us, this entire fucking kingdom since the dawn of time? Well, that's just how things have to be. Someone needs to take care of Praes so the rest of the continent can kill itself in peace. But then someone else has to do the bleeding, for once, and suddenly there's all these considerations."

>"This is not fair," the old man said. "Nor it is just. I will not pretend otherwise, child. But I will not offer you succour at the price of Cordelia Hasenbach's dream. It is too great a good to be slain in this manner."

medailyfun

I believe Pilgrim/Cordelia were dreaming about bigger stronger polity in place of Procer/Callow/Levant that would stop internal wars etc. Thus still taking lives into the account, but in strategic terms

[Liliet](#)

I would say it's someone refusing to eat food that has something that's either shrimp or regular perfectly hypoallergenic meat in it, and they're not betting on the chance it's not shrimp.

Cat has a very good objective reason not to trust Pilgrim, but also a very good narrative reason to :3 (this is me going meta really – the way I see the shape of the story going)

Sylwoos

The Pilgrim already made his intend pretty clear, he wish to remove Cat from Callow more than peace or anything else. Putting her trust in the Pilgrim isn't a

leap of faith like with Sve Noc, she know exactly what she'll get in return: the Choir of Mercy will made done. Because at the end, the Pilgrim is only a agent of higher being and don't have much of a agency for himself.

Liliet

This is inaccurate.

>"All of this rests on the fact that it is you who rules," the old man said.

>"And if I abdicate, can you guarantee that Callow will be left untouched?" I asked. "Will you swear on your Gods that if Procer tries to annex it, you will turn your sword on whoever is trying? Or even that you'll stay out of my way and let me take care of them?"

>"I do not rule Procer," the Grey Pilgrim softly said. "And if I take the field against them, too many would follow. It would birth a war as dangerous as this one, in many ways."

—

>"Do something," I asked quietly. "Intervene. Offer to arbitrate. Thief tells me you could be king of Levant with a snap of your fingers, if you felt like it. You have influence to wield."

>"Seljun," he said calmly. "We do not have kings, in Levant. And there is a reason I do not sit the Tattered Throne, Catherine. Your Good Kings have done well by Callow, but the Dominion... It is a different land. It would end the honour duels, the forays into the wilds, but it would be a call. To the kind of war best left in the past."

>"I'm not saying usurp your ruler," I said. "But Gods, you're not nobody. If you make a truce with me Levant will fall in line. That'll force Hasenbach to reconsider."

>"It would break the Tenth Crusade," he gently said.

>"So do it behind closed doors," I said, frustration mounting. "You're trying to shove redemption down my throat, and don't bother denying it. Fine. I'll fucking lean in, even if it'll probably get me killed. Just act. I'll kiss the hem, quote the Book. All you need to speak up and thousands don't have to die."

>“It would smother in the crib,” the Grey Pilgrim said sadly, “what is perhaps the last chance for peace in our time.”

>“I’m offering peace,” I hissed.

>“Peace on your terms would unseat the First Prince,” he said. “She has spent years forging an alliance with Levant, fighting her Assembly tooth and nail every step of the way. For that same ally to twist her arm into making a pact with one of the most famous villains alive would see her removed within the month. And everything she seeks to accomplish vanish with her.”

>A long moment passed and the only sound in the tent was his steady heartbeat.

>“You can’t be serious,” I said. “If you’d said the Heavens were using their veto, I would have been furious. I won’t pretend otherwise. But at least I wouldn’t be disappointed.”

Pilgrim’s reasons for doing what he did had absolutely nothing to do with the Choir’s opinions.

konstantin von carstein

Honestly, this chapter make me lose nearly all the respect I had for Tariq. I agree that sometimes you have to do horrible things for the greater good, but this is going too far. If you do not respect your promesses and say clearly you will not in the future, no one is going to speak with you anymore. There is absolutely no point, because you will act like nothing was said.

Attacking someone under truce banner is the same thing. Even if teased (like the Saint), it is unacceptable. It breaks all hope of a peaceful or reasonable ending.

And they cannot use the excuse “villains always lie”, because Catherine never, ever lies nor breaks an accord with someone. And thanks to the pilgrim, they know perfectly well that she is genuinely trustworthy.

RandomFan

Catherine does too lie. She just does it very badly, and usually only to claim that she had a plan beyond “Allow chaos to reign, Be better at dealing with chaos than my enemies, Chaos, Victory!”

She doesn’t lie when doing diplomacy, though.

Talks where neither can trust the other, because neither trusts the other to trust them.

Utterly pointless, and oh so tragic.

[Mental Mouse](#)

That sort of thing was why we in the real world developed game theory, which has become one of the Arcana of our own world.

caoimhinh

It's not exactly that. I mean, sure, they don't really trust Cat but that's not their issue. The problem here is that they have heavy reasons to want to defeat her and Cat doesn't trust them into not obeying those reasons.

Both Rozala and Pilgrim know that Cat would hold her end of the bargain (Yannu is irrelevant since he will just do whatever the Peregrine tells him to do), but they can't let her go peacefully (they need to either destroy the Legions of Terror that invaded or inflict a defeat on the Black Queen) and Cat doesn't trust them into not attempting to take her down because Rozala has no power to enforce the promises and Pilgrim already has shown and stated that he won't hold his promises if there is a "higher need" or "keener call".

Dainpdf

Rozala can't trust Cat with the information on why she needs to defeat her. She also can't trust Cat to fight by the Alliance's side.

Cat can't trust Rozala with why she has such a poor opinion of the Pilgrim, and she can't trust Rozala to inflict only a paper defeat.

caoimhinh

That too.

[Liliet](#)

Rozala has already given Cat information on why she needs to defeat her, although not the source of it.

Cat's shaping up to be the most trustworthy player at the table, and it's nice to see that develop and deepen.

Dainpdf

True. At least to the letter of the law – you can trust her not to break her word, but you can definitely not trust her not to play you.

Liliet

You can legitimately trust her to have your interests in mind and not be out to screw you over out of pure malice, too.

Which is more than what Saint assumes.

ninegardens

Wait! Wait wait wait- new plan!

Plans?

A) Zombie up some forces. Leave them zombies to "Lose" the battle for you, and then run away.

B) (more likely, given foreshadowing). Kidnap/murderize a bunch of princes, and leave the enemy force intact. Thus solving the diplomatic dispute, while also leaving the enemy forces MOSTLY in tact.

C) Surrender. Lose now, with zero fatalities.

Surrender on conditions of being sent to the front lines to face the Hidden Horror.

Just declare yourselves prisoners of war. For gods sake, have they got ZERO rules about POW's?

Dainpdf

1. and 2. Interesting, though both run the risk of hero intervention in unfortunate ways. If only Malanza would condone necromancy for this (also, if such a working wouldn't leave Cat or her casters vulnerable and spend a prodigious amount of power)

3. Gotta remember any treaties regarding POWs with the Arch-Heretic of the East would be null and void. Plus, Cat doesn't necessarily want to have the Legions on the frontline against Neshamah.

Argentorum

Remember, Cat's only remaining clout on the political scale, beyond being in possession of an army, is that she has *never lost a battle*.

The forces of good don't respect her crown, they don't respect her words, they don't respect her treaties, or her nation, or her even her name.

All they respect, and indeed the only thing that won her the battle today by pulling up the Proceran horse short before they could route her legions, was that very fact, that on the field

of battle, the Black Queen has always triumphed. Giving that away, even if she could know it would let her pull out the legions with no losses, with no betrayal, it would not be lightly done.

Knowing that she will take losses and she'll probably be betrayed as well? She would be selling her Kingdom for a bowl of pottage.

Agent J

C) would be a terrible idea. Aiding in the fight against the Dead King is her leverage to get the Accords signed. Spending that political capital just to get the Legions out isn't very smart.

ninegardens

Okay, so those planes don't work.
Fine.

But my point is this:

You have a LARGE number of lives on the line, neither side ACTUALLY wants this to happen, both sides Actually want a peace treaty and to fight Keter.

This is the perfect time to sit down for more than ten minutes and scheme things.

Could they do it via single combat?

Could they agree to LIE about their being a battle?

Could Cat point out that she has access to a proxy hellgate via Arcadia, and that she'd really rather not use it?

The stakes are too high. They are both giving up on negotiation too easily.

with the cost of diplomatic failure this high (for both parties), it seems like a good time to sit and chat for several HOURS, not several minutes.

Sylwoos

Actually, the problem is that one side doesn't want a peace treaty.

Cat and Malanza could sort thing out between themselves, but the Saint is out for blood and the Pilgrim want Cat removed from the board. Whatever scheme those two cook out, it will be unmade when the Pilgrim decide it is. And even if they get him on board with the plan making , he'll spend that time trying to kill Cat with story-fu or preparing the terrain for a knife in the back.

[Liliet](#)

That's not what Pilgrim's aim is.

RanVor

That's not what Pilgrim *said* his aim is. Funny thing about Pilgrim is that outside of the Peregrine extra chapter, nothing he does on screen actually furthers his stated goals.

[Liliet](#)

Well, he did stop Amadeus from burning down *more* of Procer, so there's that.

John

By burning down part of it himself, and even if that was a net gain he's probably more than canceled it out by drawing forces away from defense against the Dead King.

[Liliet](#)

Tariq did not draw any forces anywhere. Laurence's bullshit \neq Tariq's bullshit, he was literally in Laure playing hostage at the time the Arch-Heretic thing hit and forced him to cut his losses there.

As a matter of fact, Tariq somewhat *freed up* the forces chasing the Legions around. Admittedly they still didn't catch up with the Legions for a while, but they would have had Juniper not intervened.

And one fishing village / small town \neq an entire province full of them. Pure math says Tariq saved a lot more than he killed, in those provinces on the other side of the lake that Amadeus was aiming for next.

caoimhinh

Remember what Saint told Cordelia: this isn't about Procer, Praes, Callow nor any other country, this is about Good vs Evil. So earthly matters and politics cannot stop the Crusade.

Remember the reason Cordelia, Pilgrim, and Rozala had given to Cat for refusing peace treaties with her: Callow can't be allowed to have a Villain as Queen. They won't make deals with her and will not stop trying to defeat her. Also, the Levantines and the more militant side of Procer's church will

not stop making up lies about Cat to antagonize her and push for her execution.

The number of lives that will be lost does not actually matter to the Crusaders, that's their hypocrisy (and I suspect part of the reason why Narrative is screwing them, as they are actually the bad guys in this situation), they are just appalled when the dead are on THEIR side, they don't care about how many die in Callow and Praes, they were in for the invasion and partition of lands but would accuse Cat of being a cruel monster for killing the Alliance soldiers. Even right now, as Cat offers to leave without a fight, Rozala is obliged to deny that because politically it would ruin Cordelia and destabilize the Grand Alliance.

I wonder why Catherine hasn't told them yet that she wants to fight against the Dead King, she probably wants to do it from a safe and strong position, but waiting longer is dangerous. Besides she is bound to fight against him, as that was the deal the Ever Dark made with the Kingdom Under.

My hypothesis of a way to solve this issue would be Cat being honest with them about her aim (Not the Liesse Accords, but the fighting against Keter) and tell them that she has the agreement of the Kingdom Under for it (telling them that she has the Dwarves' backing would be a stretch of the word, but it's not completely incorrect), which would make everyone in the Grand Alliance reconsider their stance on allying with Callow, given how powerful the Kingdom Under is and how much everyone in Calernia fears it.

[Liliet](#)

THE WEAPONS THING.

CAT REALLY NEEDS TO BRING UP THE WEAPONS THING.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Proxy hellgate is right out, remember Cat is pushing the Liesse Accords. No devils, much less demons. Single combat would have the usual problem, which is the loser not abiding by it. "Lets not and say we did" is amusing, but probably impractical.

I think there will be at least the start of a battle. The thing is, Cat's human troops are enough to put up a real fight on their own. But if she can hold out until nightfall, the Drow will more or less own the field, pending a tussle between the heroes and Cat with her Well and staff. She may even be able to just bypass the enemy troops "under cover of Night", so to speak.

Someguy

Unfortunately this is the Princes Graveyard and not the Pilgrim's Graveyard (that would be the village that he plagued to extinction).

With the collapse of Procer as a nation, too bad it would not be feasible to re-direct the Praesi refugees into the land formerly known as Procer so they can rebuild their homes in "New Colonies"

[*ahd*](#)

I wonder what happened to the fae.

Did they get ingested, or did they flee?

Dainpdf

They cut off the piece of their land with Masego in it, or he did.

Decius

If Masego cut a piece of Arcadia off, it would be the piece that he wasn't in.

[*Liliet*](#)

Depends on what he wanted it for.

Dainpdf

Why? He might have wanted to isolate it for some purpose.

Sylwoos

Why? I bet he's in Arcadia in the first place because he can open hell gate without affecting the real world. Having a private piece of Arcadia that he can stretch to its limit without the risk of destroying ALL Arcadia would be even better.

RandomFan

Negotiations have failed again, fun times. Saint gets to gasp for the breath with which to stab evil with for another chapter, also fun. The knives have come out in the end, which is always going to be fun. Cat hasn't been stabbed yet, which is- fun.

Chow Chow

Soo~ I'm no mathematician, but if my calculations are correct than we'll soon have one spare body freshly traded and one spare

soul safely stored inside a cloak..
the next course of action seems obvious

caoimhinh

Putting Akua inside Amadeus' body is out of the question, both due to it being of no real use (as Akua doesn't need that) and because profaning his body would not be something either Cat nor Grem would do or tolerate.

On the other hand, I remember Cat's first words to the Saint of Swords, when they were fighting and Cat was in Winter mode: "Saint of Swords. You will make very useful artifacts." Let's hope after the next battle Cat gets her hands on her, since leaving the corpse behind will only let the Pilgrim Forgive her back to life.

tbarim

Winter-Cat was collecting heroes at one point (book 4 prolog) and we haven't seen anything come of it.

caoimhinh

That's because Cat holding Fae title is in her right mind, but when she is actively unleashing the power of Winter she has Principle Alienation, which twists her mind into the arrogant and story-bound Sovereign of Moonless Nights. She faced multiple heroes and simply killed them, it's only when she is full on Winter mode that she starts to think, speak, and act in a different manner.

AdrianGrey

God, that bit when Andronike spoke to Malanza was so goddamn satisfying. Just imagine how that must have looked from the receiving end.

antoninjohn

Procer has a reputation for betrayal and that don't even consider it betrayal if it's the Arch Heretic of the East

caoimhinh

Nice chapter.

Procer's side being hypocrites making demands and acting self-righteous as always, nothing surprising there. I hope Catherine tells them soon about her intentions of fighting North against the Dead King; because from the Grand Alliance's POV she just wants to get away and leave them to deal with that mess, and in that condition they can't really allow her to have fresh and rested armies while the Grand Alliance's forces are dying up north.

Waiting for longer will only lead to conflict; she doesn't have to negotiate with them now, but at least tell them clearly that she wants to fight against Keter (of course, not tell them that she is bound to do it). They might not believe her, and there might be nothing change now, but she needs to make her intentions clear. Actual negotiations with Cordelia and the rest of the leaders can wait until later (I get that Cat wants them to need her and be desperate before extending her offer, but waiting too long to at least let them know her intention is quite risky too).

I wonder if Amadeus will really be unconscious, since we have seen that people can extract their souls and still walk around without issue, but that might be because it was done willingly and with measures taken for the body to operate without the soul, and the Saint likely wouldn't do any of that for him. Then again, it might happen that he is able to awake and move his body while his soul is held prisoner (they expected to make a public execution, after all).

I'm looking forward to next chapter and the Extra Chapter on Monday.

Typos found:

- she'd never bothered to hide the despised me / to hide that she despised me
- He'd didn't leave / He didn't leave
- It'd be a direct response / It had been a direct response
- go out of their way declare war / to declare war
- whispering in his hear/ in his ear
- isn't? / isn't it?
- there would a price / there would be a price

caoimhinh

Another typo:

This half their forces answers to Lord Yannu / This half of their forces

[Liliet](#)

Rozala has good reasons for acting like she does, and is acting in good faith here. She's at the point of actually putting trust in Catherine and asking her for favors, because she assumes her to be trustworthy enough for it.

Unfortunately, that's not enough 😡

And I hear you on the 'unconscious body' part 😊 a public execution is hardly fun with a soulless husk, isn't it?

caoimhinh

Yeah, Rozala wants to make a deal but lacks the power to enforce it, whereas Pilgrim has the power to do it but doesn't want to and has already stated that "greater needs and keener calls" can make him go back on his words. And there's no higher call for a Hero than defeating a Villain, so Cat can't trust him with holding his end of the bargain (I think an oath could work, but that Arch-heretic thing supposedly makes them null so I'm not sure, and submitting the Pilgrim to such binding would not be allowed politically so it's unlikely to happen), not to mention that there are other heroes who would not be bound by a promise made by him.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think we know that he doesn't want to. It's Cat's assumption, and I suspect she's wrong about that – based, if nothing else, on him keeping Black's body alive and being willing to return it.

RanVor

He specifically said he kept Black's body for public execution later on. That's hardly a sign of goodwill.

[Liliet](#)

"Later on" is very telling here imho. It's as far as he can go without breaking faith with his own side.

RanVor

"Later on" pretty clearly means "after the Black Queen has been dealt with" here.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

Why?

RanVor

I should be asking you why you claim an obvious thing is not obvious.

[Liliet](#)

Why is Amadeus not dead yet? Why are they putting it off until after they deal with the Black Queen, too?

RanVor

Because the Black Queen is a present threat and Amadeus is not. It's that simple.

[Liliet](#)

And that gets in the way of a public execution because?...

RanVor

That's so fucking obvious the only explanation of you not understanding it I can think of is wilful ignorance.

SAINT AND PILGRIM ARE ON THEIR WAY TO SALIA.
THERE'S EVIL TO VIOLENTLY MURDER IN VICINITY.
SAINT GOES SMASH. PILGRIM GOES WITH HER, FIGURING
THEY CAN DELIVER THE BODY TO SALIA LATER. IT'S
THAT FUCKING SIMPLE.

[Liliet](#)

Alright, I do see your explanation. That's one possibility, though it's not as obvious as you think – 'there's evil to violently murder in vicinity' does not strike me as something to stop them from executing their plan, especially when it brings Black's body which they have plans for closer to the people who will very much want it back.

RanVor

Take a look at Laurence and think again.

[Liliet](#)

She's not in charge of the party and can't order them around.

RanVor

She's not the only one in charge of the party. She doesn't have to order anybody around, just giving Tariq no reason to stop her is enough.

[Liliet](#)

Tariq had good reason to not want Black's body around where Cat is, *assuming* no goodwill there which is precisely what I'm pointing at.

[Javvies](#)

Amadeus/his body represent a source of leverage against Cat, the Legions, and the Army of Callow. One that mostly got wasted by Laurence.

Consider, what might have happened if Pilgrim didn't have leverage on Cat, and Cat did more or less the same thing – Laurence would either be dead or a huge bargaining chip against the Alliance armies, arguably one large enough to force them into allowing Cat to take the Legions with her unhindered.

Admittedly, since Cat won't be getting Amadeus's soul back right now, Laurence hasn't totally wasted the effort of capturing Amadeus. But still ... the Alliance could gotten something out of holding Amadeus, even if it was only deterrence against being pushed too hard – no way to guarantee the Army/Legions could have gotten to and secured Amadeus's body before the Alliance/Heroes slit his throat or something.

[Liliet](#)

"arguably one large enough to force them into allowing Cat to take the Legions with her unhindered."

Arguably indeed. I'd argue against that.

[Javvies](#)

So your position is that the Alliance would sacrifice Saint – one of the few Heroes realistically capable of fighting, even killing, the Dead King, per Pilgrim here – just to prevent Cat from getting the Legions and Army of Callow out of Procer without more casualties?

I don't know about that.

Malanza and the Proceran contingent's leadership would likely consider it a good enough reason to give them cover to do what they'd really rather prefer to do anyways.

And unless Pilgrim is lying about Saint's value here, which I suppose we should not completely discount as a possibility, he'd probably want to lean on the Levantines to not get in the way of getting Saint back.

[Liliet](#)

I guess?

You're not wrong, we're just into hypotheticals theory by now.

My point was just that as Amadeus had remarked back then, Tariq's plan is oddly *bad* the way it's presented. If a clever opponent makes an obvious mistake...

[Mental Mouse](#)

My guess is that they didn't kill Amadeus precisely because somebody back there had the brains to realize that killing him would be a really good way to put the Black Queen (that is, Catherine the Undefeated), into a killing rage, and maybe give her a limit break to boot. (You know, like Masego reacted to the death of *his* fathers.) They might not get time to explain that they've got his soul on ice.

RanVor

They fucking told everybody why they didn't kill Amadeus. What is so difficult to understand in that?

medailyfun

Cordelia felt completely OK to just show the body, without any public executions

[Liliet](#)

True.

Which bring us to another excellent question: why IS Black's body still alive?

caoimhinh

Because they were going to send his body to Procer's capital where it can be publicly executed, thus giving Cordelia a political victory and a boost to the Grand Alliance, while still secretly having the Soul in possession so they could use it as leverage over the Evil side (A.K.A Malicia and Catherine).

It wasn't Cordelia's decision, but Pilgrim's decision. The First Prince wanted Black completely dead immediately, Pilgrim is the one doing things behind her back.

[Liliet](#)

And they didn't send the body there already because?...

caoimhinh

It might be lack of time or simply because the situation escalated to the point they had to turn around and intervene, Pilgrim might have received whispers of the Choir of Mercy which led him to stay in Iserre.

They captured Amadeus about half a year ago, right? But crossing Procer takes months, and the Army of Callow has been in Iserre for about 2 months, so I would say the Heroes turned around and came back to Iserre (or never left).

[Liliet](#)

Half a year?

Wasn't it already autumn when they did?

I'm so confused wrt this timeline.

caoimhinh

I'm not exactly sure about the time, given that it hasn't been specified. But Cat was in the Ever Dark for about a year and five months had passed and Amadeus was still raiding Procer, so I think he was defeated around eight to 3 months ago, so half a year seemed a good stimation to me.

We might need to go back and check the chapters again to make sure.

Still, if it was Autumn when Amadeus was captured and now it's Winter, then it's less than 3 months and there would be not enough time to take Amadeus to Procer's capital.

[Liliet](#)

No, she wasn't in Everdark for a year. The previous winter was the one she spent playing whack-a-mole with the heroes, the entire Book 4 happened over the course of a little less than a year.

I agree that it wouldn't be enough time to take Amadeus to Salia. I just question...

...okay first of all why did Pilgrim take his sweet time actually going through on the soul cutting plan. Why was there a period of time when Amadeus was simply bound? Why did the events in the Epilogue happen?

The best non-Tariq-suspicious guess at the time had been "because they need tools/laboratory for

it that are waiting for them in Salia".
Evidently not.

So, ??? Why has Tariq been procrastinating on every part of this plan?

caoimhinh

Hmm, perhaps it was a compromise with Cordelia's need to exhibit a victory (since Pilgrim has shown concern about keeping her at the head of Procer), his initial plan might have been to have Amadeus in body and soul prisoner but changed his mind to enable the public execution to happen. Thus the separation of his soul recently.

[Liliet](#)

At the very least, his position is not as extreme as Cat and half the readership believe -_-

And Bard said that the separation of body and soul was the plan back then already. I guess it's possible he had -just- changed his mind on that when she came 😊

[sengachi](#)

I'd guess that the Pilgrim is more frightened of what story might come of trying to (or succeeding in) killing Black while Cat is alive and in play than he is of Black getting successfully rescued.

That or he's more aware of internal Praesi politics than he lets on and he's keeping Black in reserve as a "trigger a Praesi civil war so they don't backstab us while we're fighting the Dead King" button.

Those are the obvious ones to me, but I'm guessing the real truth is something we don't have the information to guess at yet.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Sure, but he doesn't also realize that blackmail usually doesn't work for the good guys.

[sengachi](#)

I don't think he's going for blackmail. In fact he's probably deeply aware of just how bad of a storyline that is to back himself into. I think he's just trying to keep Black out of play as long as possible without triggering a mentor's death narrative. He's not keeping

Black around as a piece to play against Cat, he's just trying to not trigger a "revenge for my mentor" plot from Cat.

caoimhinh

Yep, shaping the story into "putting criminal in jail / punishing the bad guy" rather than making it "this is a hostage".

[Liliet](#)

Cat has told him with full conviction, which he sensed, that Black would be a reasonable and peaceful and agreeable ruler to Praes.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Bigger typos:

> treatises signed by both your Peregrine and the Prince of Iserre to this nature? Treatises including terms

treatises -> treaties (!) They may have been making history, but they weren't writing the history books on the spot!

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Hot damn, this was a bad round for Tariq. Moral authority badly damaged.

konstantinvoncarstein

For me, it is completely gone

RanVor

I've been considering him full of shit since his last chat with Catherine before Keter, but the sight of people losing faith in him warms my heart.

werafdsaew

I don't understand this line; what is this about?

caoimhinh

The trauma Rozala (and the others who have fought the Dead King's army) are experiencing after the battles in the North. They have Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, and Andronike was mocking her for it since Rozala is an enemy still bent on opposing Cat and Sve Noc while in the goddesses' eye the princess is only a brittle mortal on the verge of mental collapse pretending that she can stand against them. Sve Noc has no mercy for an enemy, if at all.

RanVor

I mean, she's an Evil goddess, of course she has no mercy.

Micke

I think it more likely refers to what the Bard is doing to get the divine game back on track.

Caerulea

I don't believe so. Because the next thing that she says is "It will take more than brandy and poppy leaves for the digging to stop," the goddess on my shoulder laughed. "Hands and picks and tireless flesh, pulling aside the –" which is quite clearly referring to the war against Keter.

[Mental Mouse](#)

That still leaves the "adjustment" comment as a Creeeepy Hint From The Dark Power In The Room.

caoimhinh

Sve Noc practically told Rozala that she is Going Mad At The Revelation that there are great powers on the Evil side.

"your learning is shallow, Rozala Malanza, while this world's roots run deep. It will be amusing, to see how little of you the adjustment allows to remain."
Adjustment to what? To the learning of the deeper truths of the world, the old monsters of eldritch power that lurk in the dark. Facing those powers that went beyond her nightmares is something that has changed her and all others who were up there, their traumas manifesting in different ways.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Possibly to do with their own long-term plans, or with something she read out of the mortal's mind. Or maybe just messing with her head.

Aotrs Commander

The more I see of Tariq, the more I find him utterly repugant.

Qwormuli

Don't say that, or you'll have Liliet defending him and every action of his from your heinous assault (seriously, no offence meant against him/her, but there isn't one comment about him where he/she hasn't appeared in an attempt to make him into an

unsung hero.) Not even suicide vests on unwitting civilians are bad with him on the wheel!

konstantinvoncarstein

Personally, before this chapter I was fond of him. He was of course no perfect et committed horrible actions, but at least he was a genuinely good and decent man, interested in peace. His refusal of Catherine's proposition was comprehensible. But here he goes way too far. When you outright say you will not hold your promises, speaking with you is like speaking with wolf: nothing can prove he will suddenly open your throat.

caoimhinh

Well, Tariq is being indirect about it, but he is simply admitting what we already knew: he is a servant of the Heavens, so his promises, beliefs, and oaths will not hold in the face of higher calling. He is bound to the Choir of Mercy, so the moment their whispers come he HAS to obey, it's pointless to be angry about it, it's not that he is simply being an untrustworthy person, it's just that he has something above his promises, same as a soldier has to obey his superior officers regardless of their own opinions or desires. The same would be true to Hanno, who has outright stated that he keeps his opinions to himself and doesn't base his actions on such but on the commands of the Choir of Judgement, if Hanno wants to go right but the Seraphim say to go left then he WILL go left, regardless of promises or common sense, he will obey. Frustrating as it is, it is still understandable.

Tariq is a decent person most of the time, and a good man who likes to help and heal people (as you have said), but that doesn't mean that he can't kill and be ruthless, just as most of Cat's group are hardened killers but loyal and really likable people to their friends.

What I personally dislike about Tariq is his hypocrisy and attitude of "I am correct and know more than you" when it's clear already that they are the ones in the wrong. Like Cat has said before, an invading force has no right to complain and cry about how evil its enemy is for killing them. He has reasons why he does things (political and otherwise), but I abhor his way of trying to pass it all as "it's for good" and pretend everyone else's reasons are naive and wrong.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I honestly appreciate the simplicity of Hanno. Rather than moral platitudes or rampant hypocrisy, all he does is flip a coin.

[Liliet](#)

>He is bound to the Choir of Mercy, so the moment their whispers come he HAS to obey

Where are you getting this?

caoimhinh

Nothing we have seen so far indicates that a Hero can disobey the commands of the Choir they are sworn to, and we also know that Angels don't take kindly to defiance. A hero sworn to a Choir obeys the Angels of that Choir, that's obvious.

We know for a fact that neither William nor Hanno would disobey, what makes you think Pilgrim would? The only time we saw him try to ignore them for a short while, the whispers grew insistent and his lover told him to go (he would have gone anyways, but he simply wanted a bit more time to rest with her, yet the Angels wanted him to move immediately).

There is a reason the Heroes are sworn to those Choirs, and it is not to disobey them.

[Liliet](#)

>Nothing we have seen so far indicates that a Hero can disobey the commands of the Choir they are sworn to, and we also know that Angels don't take kindly to defiance. A hero sworn to a Choir obeys the Angels of that Choir, that's obvious.

It's not obvious to me that angels give commands in the first place.

Tariq has said it himself, that the Choir of Mercy just happen to agree with him – and when for a while they didn't, they just went quiet.

William never actually got any guidance from his Choir beyond the initial push.

Hanno gets yes/no answers to questions he has to actively ask.

I don't think angels *have* commands to give. In caring about nothing but their chosen virtue, they don't actually have opinions on anything happening in Creation except filtered through their champions.

Choirs present themselves to each of their heroes as what that hero expects them to be.

Note, again, the curious case of Hanno and Judgement, and how the angels confirmed for Hanno his point of view on "mortals cannot judge" *even though that is not how heroes of Judgement have historically worked.*

caoimhinh

Actually, I remembered something. You might be right that they aren't exactly forced to obey.

What I remembered is that they are brainwashed in different ways, so that they aren't forced to obey but are led to believe that the Angels' words are the most optimal course of action.

William said that "they never force anyone, they just show you things and you accept on your own accord" or something along those lines.

Contrition showed William all his sins, to the point that he turned into a repentant trying to do the right thing before his death.

Judgement showed Hanno that they had a broader scope of vision and thus their decisions were better than anything a mortal could do since the Angels had access to much more information.

Mercy guided Pilgrim with whispers that took him to places he could do more good, and he grew dependant on them, trusting them that their whispers are the correct choice.

Still, my point remains the same, if the Angels speak the Heroes obey.

[Liliet](#)

William was already wandering in the woods broken-hearted and hating himself, the angels just gave him a push to actually do something about it.

Hanno was already confused about justice and determined to find something better than mortal judgement, the angels just gave him reassurance that that better does exist and he can act on it.

Tariq has literally commented that the Choir of Mercy is with him as long as and to the degree that his mindset aligns with theirs.

And my point is not that it wouldn't work like you're saying. The Angels *could* give their heroes orders that the heroes would then obey. I bet if the Choir of Contrition descended into Callow and informed Willlliam

that leading an army and a band of Named was a fool's affair for him and he should stick to what he's good at – lonely terrorism – he would have listened.

But they didn't and they don't.

konstantinvoncarstein

I don't care that he is ruthless, everyone in the story is too 😊 But like you say, his hypocrisy is upsetting. The other problem is that he state that he will not respect his promesses if the Angels say so, but expects everyone else to hold to theirs, and he find appalling when they break them. And he has the gall to accuse the other side of villainous treachery.

RandomFan

Everyone else likes to hate him too much, though. Yes, the Grey Pilgrim is an old monster, as much and as deep an anti-hero as any- but he's no more monstrous than Black. He's not good. But he's no Diabolist.

By now, we should know that Good is as willing to dabble in evil as the reverse, so.

caoimhinh

Actually, in one of the Peregrine Extra Chapters (I think it was on the third) Liliét and I discussed because Tariq's actions made sense to me and not to Liliét. So she hasn't always defended Pilgrim's every action.

Nevertheless, remember that each of us has a different impression of the characters, even if the narrative may present them in a certain light, and each reader likes and dislikes certain aspects of the characters, so of course our opinions vary.

[Liliét](#)

Oooh, yes, I am definitely operating on the purity culture principle that if someone is good then every single thing they've done must be good also. That's exactly my argument, good reading comprehension there.

Also lmao @ unsung hero, given that a hero is literally what he famously is. For his deeds. Like, things he's actually done over his lifetime, which is very long.

nimelennar

Two thoughts:

Cat has to be careful: the general who wins every battle, but loses the war, is a well-worn trope.

And, didn't she lose already lose the final battle against Sve Nice, pretty definitively, on every level? Yes, she still got her alliance, but only after she, Archer, and her entire drow army were defeated.

[Liliet](#)

Politics are about perception, not actual facts. Like 10 people know about that defeat, all of them Catherine's inner circle – considering that from the point of view of drow Catherine accomplished exactly what she said she was going to accomplish: get Sve Noc's attention and help.

Qwormuli

True. Not to mention that those battles didn't include a single callowan casualty. "I went to a battle and lost most of the troops I conscripted along the way" just doesn't have the same sting.

[Liliet](#)

Yup XD

John

Any battle where you've got more and better troops under your command at the end than you did at the start, most people would call a win. Didn't technically retain control of the field, but she wasn't interested in territorial expansion anyway, and managed to secure favorable trade terms with the folks who were. Not bad at all for a few months' work.

caoimhinh

"I, my hot friend, and the ghost of my fallen nemesis entered a cave. We came out a few months later with my humanity restored plus new superpowers, a pair of goddesses on my shoulders, an army of hundreds of thousands genetically enhanced and magic-powered supersoldiers, 50 thousand of which are marching with me right now, and a trade deal with the most powerful nation of the continent that also cuts their weapons supply to any enemy nation. Also, my hot friend is now my friend with benefits. I think I'll count it all as a win, thanks."

Enjou

Alright, so Cat knows that if she doesn't lose this coming battle that bad things will happen for Procer and she doesn't really want that due to the Dead King situation. On the other hand, losing puts her in a bad position politically, so she can't just allow herself to lose, especially since she can't trust the other side to keep to a bargain to minimize her losses.

IMO what she needs to do is lose while still winning. Say she loses the battle... but kills the Saint of Swords. And it's a good time for it, too. Narratively, the Saint has made herself villainous by trying to kill Cat under a truce banner, and she's madder than a bag of wet cats that she was humiliated like that, practically guaranteeing that she'll make a beeline for Cat. The Pilgrim's heroic cred has also been damaged due to the oathbreaking being pointed out. Cat's prepared something to neutralize the Pilgrim without killing him, and she's got her staff which is specially prepared to kill Saint. So she activates her trap cards, and ends the Saint of Swords.

End result? If she hasn't lost the military battle too badly, she's simply been forced to retreat. Her forces aren't happy about that, but the scary boss lady warlord is still the scary boss lady warlord because she killed the big name Saint of Swords, which is an achievement large enough to make the stain of a military loss something they can ignore. Procer gets to claim a Pyrrhic victory over the forces of evil, and losing the Saint gives them legitimate enough reason not to pursue the retreating Army of Callow and Legions of Terror.

konstantinvoncarstein

It seems nonetheless a little risky.

I hope that Saint will die in the oncoming battle, and that it will happen at night. I can't wait to see Mighties at full force take the field! 😊

caoimhinh

That is a possible outcome for the coming battle, but the thing is that it can't be a planned thing agreed on both sides, but a natural result of their forces clashing for real.

magesbe

I think the best outcome for Cat is to win but not damage the enemy army more than she needs to in the process. It's one thing for angry commoners to hear that their Lords let the ones who hurt them escape. It's harder to justify rebellion when they tried to avenge the commoners but failed.

konstantinvoncarstein

Or their failure could ignite the rage of the commoners

matesbe

I mean it's possible. But much less likely. And by this reasoning they might get mad that the Legions were allowed to retreat at all. There comes a point where you need to take the risk.

caoimhinh

Commoners had never been of importance in Procer's politics. It's the Princes and Princesses that rule different principalities (especially the ones affected by the Legions of Terror's march) that are the determining factor, since they can switch alliances and take their support off Cordelia and back another Prince instead, which would then unseat her and there would be a new First Prince of Procer. That has always been the issue in each of Procer's army's actions during this Crusade and the thing that has led Cordelia's movements (at least until the Dead King started invading and she had to make moves to ensure sheer survival).

Maginot

I thought Black had escaped? With the Wandering Bard assisting him, even bargaining on behalf of the Gods Below with him. There is more to this than there appears.

matesbe

Not necessarily. The Wandering Bard wasn't going to directly help him, she just had a chat with him. And apparently Amadeus decided against trying to escape himself, possibly because he learned Bard has plans for him.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Go vote!

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

[Liliet](#)

Your effort is noted with gratitude.

Walrus

So, immediately after Cat returns to camp with Black's body, I imagine the Firstborn are going to stretch their legs a bit and get some exercise.

[Mental Mouse](#)

So, three kingdoms are tangled up in the Bard's plan to destroy at least two of them (and Levant should be nervous), while the Dead King attacks, Malicia plots, and Masego does we know not what (except it involves hellgates and completely trashing a chunk of Arcadia).

And if my calculations are correct, we should be getting an extra chapter on Monday... 😊

SpeckofStardust

3 things.

1. Pilgrim has lost points because-

- a. He broke his goddam agreement with cat
- b. his agreement as an observer was in fact as a hostage.
(Telling us otherwise was a asshole thing to do by the way)

2. Pilgrim has gained a point by openly telling cat that she cant trust him

- a. it means he isn't aiming to betray her
- b. it makes it easy to blame him for what happens next

3. There was never going to be a deal here even if Pilgrim wasn't here, Proctor has no choice at this point to not engage in a fight, There was never a way for these peace talks to work and us viewers need to remember that before blaming Pilgrim for it.

matesbe

I don't think most people are thinking that Pilgrim is at fault for the situation, they're just saying that Cat can't trust him to keep his word and since his word would lead half of her opposing forces to do whatever he asked... yeah.

konstantinvoncarstein

Of course Pilgrim is not to blame for the intransigence of the Proceran. What he is to blame is that it is impossible to trust him in any way. And that he is an hypocrite, who expects everyone to respect standards he will not hold to.

sengachi

Telling someone "you can't trust me" is, at best, a neutral point. You're not professing false sincerity and then stabbing them in the back so you're not actively losing points, but like, you're telling them you can't be trusted because *you are untrustworthy*. That's not something which should earn points. You earn points for being trustworthy.

bissek

An insult that Catherine could have used in the debate over Grey Pilgrim's actions.

"Did you know that Warlock is an old word meaning Oathbreaker? You broke your oath, Grey Pilgrim, right around the time the last Warlock died. Was that a declaration of intent to change Names?"

Chapter 28: Acts

"Despise not the treacherous but instead the weak, for while both serve the same purpose where treachery requires skill and daring weakness requires only mediocrity."

– Dread Emperor Vile the First

It didn't look like he was sleeping.

That disturbed me almost more than the rest. Amadeus of the Green Stretch was still alive, by the measure of most people. The signs of life were certainly there: breath, heartbeat, warmth. So it *should* have looked like he was sleeping, but it didn't. It looked like someone had just... torn out his consciousness and a body had been left behind. Its physical functions went on but having known the man – loved him, in our own misshapen way – I couldn't call this breathing corpse anything but the remains of him. His soul could be anywhere, by now, and combing through Procer for it brought to mind that old metaphor about the needle and the haystack.

In this case, though, the needle was a top-notch Named mage and the haystack was both hostile and on fire. I'd tell Vivienne to have the Jacks watching, and I was considering passing on what I'd learned to Malicia. She was my enemy, true, and he'd both defied and disobeyed her. Yet I suspected she'd sacrifice quite a bit to bring back to Ater and might even be willing to cooperate with me to see his soul snatched back from the heroes. I only barely grasped the nature of the ties that bound Black and Malicia, but I did not doubt the depth of them. Neither would have been quite so intensely furious at the other after Akua's Folly if there'd not been trust to break.

Was it not an irony of sorts that I was now relying on the architect of that same folly for answers? The shade of the Diabolist had only bothered with a cursory examination of Black's physical state before turning her attention to more eldritch matters. She was a healer of some talent, I knew, but it was more a result of Akua being skilled at branches of sorcery that required knowledge of anatomy and biology than out of any true affinity for the healing arts. Like Masego, she was more surgeon than physician. It was typical of Praesi to be more

interested in the cutting of things than the mending of them. Fingers resting on my teacher's forehead, Akua was frowning with her eyes closed.

I could feel the quiet lapping of Night at his body, and perhaps I should have been studying her methods to learn from them what I could. Instead, though, my gaze remain on his face. He was bearded, now. It was uncomfortable to look at, though more for the sloppiness of the growth than the threads of grey within. Black had always been cleanly to a fault, austere in all his affairs but always well put-together. His hair was still dark, for the most part, but it'd grown longer and like the beard grey was now touching it. It was... distressing to see. Like a chip on a blade you'd believed forever smooth.

"Barbaric," Akua suddenly said, both hand and Night withdrawing.

Golden eyes had fluttered open, and she was looking down at Black's body with patrician disdain.

"Elaborate," I said.

"This was not even sorcery, dearest," Akua said, wrinkling her nose. "The work of that ignorant little savage the Saint of Swords, I would wager. It was the metaphysical equivalent of attempting field surgery while eyeballing the affair with a two-handed sword that was most definitely *not* cleaned beforehand."

"Elaborate usefully," I specified, hiding my dismay.

The body was alive, for all the lack of driving intellect within, but had it been damaged irreparably? I was intending to snatch the soul back when opportunity arose, to put it back in this very shell of flesh, but if that wasn't possible we'd have to get... inventive.

"The severing between body and soul itself was clean and sharply made," Akua said. "But near every other aspect was botched. It was done too abruptly, for one, and so in a damaging manner. Which means there will be some disconnect between the soul and body even should they be reunited, possibly permanent. Memory loss is likely as well, though proper rituals can mitigate that aspect and it is likely to be minor in nature."

"Shit," I muttered. "Masego cut up my soul a bunch of times and it was never this bad. Why is this so different?"

The look she sent me was offended on Masego's behalf, I thought, but also on hers and possibly even mine for having asked what she evidently considered to be a highly plebeian question.

"Laurence the Montfort is a murderous vagrant swinging a butcher's knife at matters she only dimly understands," Akua

said. "The Hierophant was taught by the Lord Warlock himself from the cradle, and even in those days likely could be counted as one of the ten most learned Trismegistan practitioners on Calernia. You are comparing a mangy attack hound to one of the finest mages alive."

"That's nice," I said. "But what I want to know is if the Saint purposefully made this sloppy or if it was just the only way she knew how to do it?"

Diabolist mulled over that for a moment.

"Though I hate to dismiss the possibility of incompetent wickedness in our opposition," she finally said, "I believe this might genuinely have been the most clear-cut separation she could accomplish given the means at her disposal."

So, the Saint had been a bad surgeon but not necessarily a malicious one. I supposed the distinction had been academic, anyway. I would have remembered malice directed at my father when he was helpless and prisoner, but in and of itself it would not have moved me to either kill or spare her. That decision, in a way, would be making itself. If the Saint acted against me or mine even one more time, I'd get her head on a pike. If she was reined in by her allies, then I'd swallow my spite and let her be pointed at the Dead King instead.

"Noted," I said. "Which brings us to our next trick – can you track the soul using his body?"

"I cannot," Akua immediately replied.

My eyebrow rose.

"The reasons why are twofold," she told me. "The first is that, as I've already told you, the severing itself was keenly made. The... sympathy between body and soul that would remain in most circumstances is near entirely absent here."

"Near," I said.

She inclined her head, conceding the point.

"Which brings me to the second reason, namely that I've already attempted to do this and found my workings frustrated," Akua said. "Someone is occluding the soul from sight and search, and doing so with surprising skill."

"The Pilgrim mentioned he passed on the soul to the Rogue Sorcerer," I said. "Who I sadly know little about, save that he often uses fire sorcery when fighting."

"Given that the workings on his end were surprisingly apt at gainsaying Night and its miraculous nature, I would wager her him

Proceran or Proceran-taught," she told me. "Jaquinite sorcery would be uniquely suited to the thwarting of the miraculous, being inspired of miracles itself."

My lips quirked into a mirthless smile. What a helpful coincidence that a Named mage from the theory of magic most suited at hiding from my means of pursuit would be sent off with what I was looking before I even returned to the surface. Fucking Heavens. It might genuinely have been a coincidence, for all I knew, but given the opposition I was inclined to gesture obscenely at the sky just on principle.

"So what *can* you do?" I asked.

"Establish a ritual array for resonance," Akua said. "It will be imprecise and require a great deal of power, but when employed the ritual should reveal if the soul is close."

"Define close," I said.

"A radius of seven leagues," she said. "Though that broad it will simply reveal if the soul is within that area. For more precise results, the radius would have to be significantly lowered."

Seven leagues, I thought, forcing myself to visualize it. It wasn't nothing, though I would have preferred larger if there was to be an investment of Night in every attempt. The haystack had been made into smaller bundles, I supposed, but it'd not gotten smaller in any real sense.

"Prepare the ritual array and make me an estimate of the kind of power it'd require," I finally said. "When you have the time, Akua. This is not as high a priority as our immediate threats."

It surprised me that even looking at Black the words were not difficult to speak. I'd thought, I supposed, that looking at him in the flesh there would be a sudden sprout of sentimentality that'd have me hesitating between taking risks to pursue this and taking a more pragmatic approach. I cocked my head to the side, gazing at the pale skin of my teacher, and found that aside from a faint tinge of guilt the decision hadn't brought anything out of me. And the guilt, truth be told, came more from how the decision had barely needed to me made than from the making of it. *But then you'd understand, wouldn't you?* I thought, looking at the not-sleeping man. *That there are larger things at stake than you and I.*

"You seem wistful," Akua softly said.

"I don't know what that means," I lied, "you don't need to impress me with your fancy Wasteland words, Akua, I-"

"Playing the fool did not work even when I considered you to be one," the shade said. "Why would it now?"

I shrugged my shoulders, as if to say it'd been worth a try. I could have simply left the tent, I thought, but that would have felt too much like a retreat and I'd had enough of that for the evening. After my private talks with Princess Rozala had made it clear there was no real chance of an accord being reached, I'd simply waited until Black's body was delivered to my people before taking my leave. My warning to her had been blunt, but then we were rather past subtle intrigues weren't we? The day and night had been exhausting in a way that had nothing to do with the physical, and seeing Black with a gaping hole where everything that made him who he was should be hadn't helped my mood in the slightest.

"You must hate him like poison," I eventually said. "Are you remaining civil as a courtesy to me?"

I didn't like to think of Second Liesse – or the Doom of the same, as some called it, though my own people most often named it Akua's Folly – but on that dark day I'd been allowed a glimpse into the nature of Akua Sahelian. Not through the madness she'd wielded like a blade, or the the victories she claimed over me, but when I had seen her flinched. She had bound me, title and Name both, and the binding could not lie: when Akua saw her father die before her eyes, it had wounded her. The body of the architect of that death now laid on a cot before us, yet not so much as a flicker of hatred had touched her face in all the time she'd been in the tent.

"Hate," Akua repeated, tone pensive. "I can see why you would believe so."

I glanced at her and found golden eyes watching the Carrion Lord's chest rise and drop at its own steady pace.

"Are you claiming you don't?" I asked.

"I suppose I might kill him, given reason," the shade said. "Though that would differ from duty only by the tinge of satisfaction that it would bring, like an old mistake finally blotted out."

"I was there, Akua," I said. "I know what it did to you, when-"

She turned to me with burning eyes, and my tongue halted.

"My father's death was the writ of many hands," she said. "His, it is true, but others as well. The goblins who fired the crossbows. Your own, for serving as distraction while he was taken. But most of all, the fault is mine."

She looked away.

"I waged war on villains, and did not sufficiently safeguard that which was precious to me," Akua said. "I am the mother of that murder in every way that matters."

"There's sense to that," I replied. "Logic, even."

My eyes stayed on her.

"And not a trace of the grief I saw then," I finished.

She turned to meet my gaze, and for once there was anger not mastered or leashed in the cast of her face.

"What is it you want from me, Catherine?" the shade asked bitingly. "Tears? Lamentations? Or is it pain that you demand?"

"Yes," I said. "I want you to be in pain."

She flinched back at that like I'd slapped her. Before a heartbeat had even passed, she was smiling and amused and her body beginning to angle so it would display her curves more prominently. I admired how well she'd been trained almost half as much as I utterly despised it.

"While I've certainly heard you prefer the rougher forms, I—"

Her tone was light, suggestive, there was a slight emphasis on heard that implied she might actually have heard Archer and I spending a night together — which was possible, tents weren't exactly the finest way to keep something quiet — and she'd changed tack blindingly quick. I ignored it.

"If you're in pain," I continued, "if you can *feel* pain, I means you value things. People. That you begin to understand things other than yourself have value."

"I have always known that," Akua said. "Your take on Praesi values, my heart, remains simplistic for all that we have spoken of the subject."

"Intellectually you assign value to other people," I corrected. "For their usefulness, potential, the pleasure or amusement they can bring you. But that's still thinking of them as assets. As objects. But if their loss pains you, Akua, they were more than an object to you."

"Should I weep, then?" the shade harshly replied. "Should I wail and beat my chest, swear revenge on all those who can be revenged upon? Should I burn half the world to assuage my grief, make Creation pay the *long price*?"

The Callowan term she spoke derisively, but I could hear it was forced. It had screwed my countrymen, over the years, the need to see grudges settled. But it also appealed to that vicious, childish part of us that wanted to answer pain with pain. Hurt those who'd hurt you. And anyone who'd ever grieved had heard that song, sung to one beat or another.

"Would you like to?" I asked her softly. "Weep. Wail. Bury him with no honours of mine, but what you can offer from daughter to father."

"And what would you know of that, Catherine?" Akua said, sounding tired.

My eyes flicked back to the body laid out in front of us.

"I know," I said, "that sometimes you grieve more what could have happened than what did."

Akua did not answer. The silence hung heavy in the air, broken by only two people breathing. The shade among us had no such need.

"He shouldn't have been born in Praes," Akua said. "He'd be angry with me for saying that, but anywhere else on the continent they would have let him read in peace and deep down that was all he ever wanted. But in the Wasteland, when the Gift flowers so strongly there are *expectations*."

"He was powerful, I'm told," I said. "Like few others."

"Like many others," Akua softly denied. "But he was clever and found angles others did not even consider. But he was not of the old blood, so his fate was death or patronage. He could have been husband to my mother, you know. He had the talent for it and if he'd tried to establish a presence at her court he would at least have been made a formal consort. But it wasn't in his nature, Catherine, to see magic as a tool for power. To him it wasn't just the Gift, it was a gift."

"He's the one who taught you," I said.

"I suppose he did," Diabolist murmured. "Though it was never a lesson in the way my tutors would have made it. He was... sharing something he loved with me. Helping me understand it so we could wonder at it together. It made a difference. I could not help but love it as well, when it was something that was *ours*."

I envied her that. The memories she must be peering at with that faraway gaze, the hours she'd gotten to spend with her father that hadn't been just lessons. Getting to know him as more than a teacher and a guiding hand.

"I loved him," Akua suddenly admitted. "But, in the end, not as much as I loved what my mother taught me to reach for."

She chuckled barrenly.

"So how could I dare weep, dearest one, when I chose that ambition over him?" she said.

"Because you miss him," I softly replied. "Even so, you miss him."

I heard her move and found her leaning forward. Chin against her raised palms, long hair cascading down her back. I couldn't see her eyes or her face, but the tension in her shoulders was open.

"I do not think this is a kindness you offer me, Catherine," she said, tone ambiguous.

"It's not about kindness or cruelty," I said. "It's about being whole, more than just the parts that're useful."

Silence, as she mulled over my words.

"Why?"

A dangerous question, that, for it was being asked by a dangerous woman. Akua Sahelian was bound to me still, and had been shorn from Winter by virtue of there no longer being such a thing. But my leashes on her had frayed as well. The Night was not mine, and though I could stripped her of her power that would have left her nothing but a shade. Powerless. It should have been a matter carefully weighed, the absence of many safeguards Winter had allowed against Akua being divested of her claws. It hadn't been, though, not after Great Strycht. Because she'd said some things about doing good that night that I didn't believe she truly understood the implications of. Because once you embraced a principle, you didn't get to pick and choose where it worked and did not.

"Because, now and then, I forget who you are," I said.

What matters more, Akua Sahelian had asked of me once, *the conviction or the act*? I still had no answer to that, no iron-bound truth to offer. But she had made her choice, and it betrayed her own belief.

"It won't matter," Diabolist said, "for you are, my darling, Callowan to the bone. It will kill me or it will kill you, but in the end all debts will be paid."

"So it will," I agreed quietly. "Did I not swear to you, once, that no place in Creation would safeguard you from me?"

"That," Akua fondly said, "and a fate that would have men trembling in a thousand years."

Praesi, I thought and did so less than affectionately. Would else would take a ruinous oath as a tender remembrance?

"And you'll have that," I mused. "It's owed. But I'll make you into a person first. Because there's no meaning to passing judgement on the Diabolist – she's just a villain. That's the sum whole of her."

"Yet you still do not believe there is difference between the Diabolist and Akua Sahelian," the shade said, cocking her head to the side. "I am bemused, dear heart."

"I'm going to claw back a person from what they made of you, Akua," I calmly said. "And then, at the end of our road, we will have justice."

"And I will submit myself to this decree," she said, sounding amused. "You seem implacably certain of that."

"It is borrowed certainty," I said. "But certainty still."

"I am all ears, Catherine Foundling," she drawled.

"What matters more," I asked, "between the conviction and the act?"

"The act," Akua Sahelian said.

She had not hesitated a moment and so I smiled.

"How long have you been acting like one of us, Akua?" I simply asked.

No answer followed, not after and not when I left the tent.

[Epok](#)

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danh3107

It's hard to tell with Akua, whether she's being genuine or not. I'd like to believe in this instance she was, and that makes my fascination of a character I used to hate so much sweeter.

Gian

And by playing with our fascination, she assures that she survives. Smart play.

IDKWhoitis

I think that ultimately, it doesn't matter at this point. Cat has let her guard down, and now treats Akua like a person, and is trying to remodel her in a greater way than even when Cat could actually change her appearance with Winter.

Akua could be acting or genuine, but she is going to be reformed whether she likes to or not. She doesn't actually have a reason to be around or subservient to Cat anymore, and she almost looks forward to that bad ending Cat is promising her to be immortalized in the history books. Yet she still follows Cat, and keeps trying to fit in, and Cat has just offered her an in.

The only thing she could do, is truly fit in, because what difference does it make at this point?

[wirelessgrapes](#)

I think she's following this now because she knows, story wise, that there isn't another path. She isn't being kept like a tiger in a cage, so she lacks the story to break from it. Her big climax ended in failure, so she can't rise again from the ashes. All she has is the redemption, and I think she is finding some form of freedom in letting go of the ambition she once held, even if she began her current path solely as a survivalist instinct.

luminiousblu

Personally I find the process rather disgusting, partially because Catherine has officially reached the point of being a Sue when interacting with her own party for me.

Oh she gets told, once in a blue moon, that she's full of shit, but more often than not she's either right or it takes minimal effort for her to admit she's wrong by the time someone actually tells her she's wrong. The Archer fight was a non-starter, Vivienne I'd hoped would lose her shit at Catherine but instead they're all buddy-buddy, she outsmarted everyone just like that and the Heroes didn't even get a

consolation prize really, and the story clearly portrays her as holding the moral high ground and everyone else as sadly deluded at best, absolute monsters at worst. You might argue that well we're seeing the story from her point of view but really it's getting tiring at how apparently the only person capable of introspection and reading other people is Catherine these days, we never get her being taken down, like legitimately taken down.

Granted the story never did that often but it tended to feel like for me that she wasn't apparently the only person portrayed as not totally fucking insane or a complete monster. William was a poor deluded fool, sure, and Akua before getting fleshed out around Second Liesse was basically Maleficent tier, but then Catherine was mostly flailing about as a minor player under Black's wing, Warlock and Masego had their own ideas and Catherine actually fucked up during Marchford (although that she apparently wasn't really set back by it at all burned a little – would've been more impactful if she actually lost the third aspect which she already had gotten to use for a while instead of losing a nebulous 'potential'), she fucked up against the Courts, she fucked up with the Council, people told her she was being a complete idiot once in a while. These days not so much and I'm not convinced she's any smarter than before. Liesse Accords sounds hilariously off-kilter considering it's essentially asking Gandalf to sign a treaty with Sauron and while the narration tries very, very hard to make her seem reasonable it just makes her seem supremely arrogant about her personal values that apparently literally everyone is harbouring somewhere deep inside and just repressing, despite Callowan 'long prices' being derided absolutely everywhere as excessive, unique to Callowans, and completely retarded in-world.

IDKWhoitis

TLDR: If you think Cat always wins, this likely won't convince you.

I mean, all named are Madmen at best. This story loves the problem of opposing sides feeling that they are doing the "Right" thing, people will look delusional. When someone, or a group believe what they are doing is "Right", they are capable of monstrous atrocities. I don't mean just the Heroes (Looking at William's Mind rape via Angel, or Grey's Plague Extermination), we see this in our Villains as well, but one side dances around the fact that they are monsters by doing what is "needed" and what's "right".

In dealing with Grey, we see he does not actually care that he has broken mortal law, because he was doing what was

"right" and "needed". He only cares now because he is being held hostage by a story. On good days, Saint and Grey could smite Catherine, but this is not a good day, they have walked into a story where they are not the heroes. They just tried to assassinate a foreign dignitary under truce banner. If they try shit right now, the Heavens won't be able to leverage much power. Meanwhile Cat has the upper hand, not only in a moral high ground (which could be debated, but its hard to look the hero in this scenario.), but also in terms of raw power at their disposal. Cat has a literal god on her shoulder. You can call bullshit, but this is what you get when the opposition has Angels whispering in the opposition's ear.

I don't know who you refer to Monsters here, as from each person's perspective, they are acting rationally with information they have realistic access to. Grey and Malz know about the broken treaty, so they know what Cat is on about, and they are ashamed. They don't fight what she is saying, because they know that she is right, Grey did cheat and lie, so there's no actual reason to bargain with him. The lord from Lev thinks Cat is full of shit, because this is the equivalent of Feds busting down your door, holding your grandfather at gunpoint, and demanding he comes with them. Without any context, you are going to feel righteously angry.

Most introspection is from Catherine's view, as we get to ride around in her head for most of this story, and that's just how the cookie crumbles in regards to first person point of view. However, it would be disingenuous to say it the ONLY introspection or insight we see.

Malz has had her psyche shaken to the core, she is dealing with PTSD from fighting up north, and knows that fighting Catherine is really going to fucking suck, whether or not she wins. Malz has expressed sadness at how this is going to play out, because she is stuck between a rock and a hard place. If she fights Cat, she could lose heroes and lots of men/material that are needed up north (to say nothing about actually winning the fight). If she lets Cat go, we see massive rebellions and desertions within the army, which may rival or be greater than losses taken fighting Catherine. She doesn't want to fight, and because of that, she asked Cat to take a LOSS. Cat understands why she made the request, but she can't follow through, even if she wanted to. Cat's Legitimacy rests on Warlord fame, and the Heroes are untrustworthy variables besides.

As for the Lord, you have to remember that there is literal hero blood running in the guy. He was born to fight Damned, on principle he can't let the Villain go. He hasn't fought

Cat yet, and probably has only faced small time villains if any at all. On top of that, she has constantly belittled and slandered the Pilgrim. From his point of view, he thinks Cat is full of shit. (yes, it is a repeating pattern that people underestimate Cat, but Grey and Malz are here to make sure that stupid moves remain to the minimum. Remember the Cavalry charge Cat stopped single-handedly?).

Will Cat lose? Maybe not, historically speaking she doesn't. But what's the cost going to be this time around? Another friend? She is quickly running out of disposable ones for that. And with Akua joining the Woe, there might be a metaphorical sword hanging in the air for the Woe. But that's not the point.

As for your argument about the Liesse Accords, we don't know if it will succeed. If all these victories come to nothing, if she won every battle and lost at the peace table, I think that would be the hallmark of a tragedy. If you don't see selling parts of yourself and cutting off what isn't useful as a loss, then I get why you feel cheated. Cat lost autonomy in Book 3, and was stuck in a perpetual hell of depression and self doubt in Book 4. But that's not a loss, I guess. Cat lost her Trust in Black, she lost an ally in Malica, and she had her very foundations of her role in Callow rocked and broken apart. But these are worth nothing, I guess. We see a Catherine that is never trusted, labelled Arch-Heretic of the East. Cat is unable to reason with people because she is so insane/traitorous in other peoples eyes that she hampers peace talks by being present, even when everyone who matters agrees with her. What the fuck do you call that? She's won every battle, done everything "right", and she is still the Villain.

You are right, everyone will see this as Cat being "supremely arrogant about her personal values". This is why the Liesse Accords are on such shaky grounds right now. She wants to do good, she has tried to do good, she has tried to do what is "Right", and no one will agree with her until she forces them to. It is completely retarded, but you can't expect everyone to sit down in good faith to talk it out, there are opposing definitions of what is "Right" and "Needed", just like in the real world.

Qwormuli

That was well put.

luminiousblu

I'm not really sure what you're trying to say all in all. It feels like you're talking about stuff I'm not actually contesting. Pilgrim, Laurence, Malicia, and so on

certainly aren't portrayed sympathetically or as if they're not totally off their rocker, while Catherine is consistently portrayed as the only sane person who actually shows up in the story. Cordelia Hasenbach used to be portrayed as reasonable but then she both dropped out of spotlight and left on a rather sour note, while Malicia never felt as clever as EE tried to present her as but the facade is totally gone these days (Malanza is trying to replace Cordelia but she doesn't have the weight behind her hence only sane person).

Zachary

The thing that Catherine doesn't seem to fully internalize is that Pilgrim and Saint have both dealt with villains who could be empathized with on some level, but have repeatedly seen it end poorly throughout their entire lives. While they're wrong in this instance, it's reasonable for them to think that killing Catherine is the best option given their past experiences up until this point. The same goes for Cordelia; from Catherine's PoV, she's stubbornly refusing peace, but from Cordelia's PoV she's having to consider the possibility that Catherine is not being honest (which is fairly reasonable to think given the way villains have historically behaved in this setting).

Catherine is also generally very hypocritical when it comes to the way she judges her enemies relative to her allies. No matter how you slice it, what Black did in Procer is a war crime. It is 100% understandable for people like Malanza and the heroes to want him dead.

Zachary

The same is also true for the way Black and Catherine view heroes. From their PoV, it's unfair that heroes always win in the end and benefit from providence. But the other side of this is that villains nearly always manage to succeed a bunch (and generally cause a lot of harm in the process) before being killed (which is kind of inevitable due to the way villains are made immortal – Black/Malicia already lived longer than most heroes do). After all, villains rarely fail during the first part of their plan, so they have their own “story benefits.” And many heroes get killed very early in their careers – I wouldn't be surprised if the average hero lifespan is lower than the average villain one. When a band of 5 is formed, it's apparently standard for one or two members to die. And, in the end, the heroes don't really win in any kind of meaningful, long-term sense. The Dread Empire still exists, after all.

So from the villains' PoV, it seems like "my goals are doomed to failure at the hands of heroes." But from the hero side, the perception is "even if we win against individual villains, they never go away (and sooner or later our luck is going to run out and we'll be one of the deaths in a group of 5 or whatever)."

Mental Mouse

I'm flashing back to Book I, when Amadeus set Cat to studying Praesi "fairy tales". IIRC, The protagonists there tended to end in disaster or doom, but not before they'd "made their mark on the world". Akua may consider that she's in that last part of the story....

IDKWhoitis

It's what I worry about Cat too tbh, did she learn too well from Amadeus? Or did she complete her villain role, and is now a completely new arc?

luminiousblu

A protagonist who makes their mark on the world before dying doesn't mean they get fucked up and then accomplish something with their last breath most of the time, it's a Napoleon case, or a Hannibal case, where even when you lose your shadow is so long you define an era and pound culture and history like clay.

Abrakadabra

A Hitler case? 😊

Ann

I don't think he fits ultimately though he killed a lot of people comparative to the world population at the time the amount of people he killed isn't that unique throughout human history. And he was pretty much a complete and utter failure. with Napoleon or Hannibal people remember them for their brilliance. Hitler was just a raving lunatic so I don't think anyone's going to bother remembering him a couple hundred years from now. I mean from a narrative perspective how disappointing is it win the big villain is just a screeching artist.

werafdsaew

"What matters more," I asked, "between the conviction and the act?"

Just as the role is important than the Name, the act is more important than the conviction. As long as Akua is acting like

she's part of the party, she's getting redeemed whether she likes it or not—the power of the trope of the Five-Man Band will do the rest.

Jonnnnz

A Villain would say the act is more important, but a Hero would not. The Choirs themselves seem to be about will rather than action. The Pilgrim murdered (via heavenly bio-weaponry) thousands of people so he could capture Black, in a move with a higher death toll than dropping a lake on a massive invading army mid-battle. The first is considered heroic, the second villainous. Conviction goes a long way here, and there's probably a case for it protecting people such as the Saint of Swords (and to an extent, Black and Malicia).

werafdsaew

You're talking about morality, but I'm talking about story mechanics. We've known for a while now that if you slot yourself into a role of a powerful story, then that story takes on a life of its own and then drags you kicking and screaming towards its predefined paths whether you like it or not. And there are few stories as powerful as the Five-Men Band.

AdrianGrey

But this isn't an example of the Five-Man Band. The Woe already has the full complement of 5 people: Catherine, Hakram, Indrani, Masego, and Vivienne. If Akua joins for real, she would be number 6, which really doesn't have any strong story associated with it. Unless one of the Woe dies or retires, the story likely won't let Akua be part of it.

Nathan Utter

I actually disagree with the strong association part. While Akua isn't one of the base members of the Five-Man Band, there IS a trope associated with defeated enemies joining the Five-Man Band: the Sixth Ranger.

So true, this isn't an example of the Five-Man Band but it is a related trope.

luminiousblu

The Sixth Ranger is a super dangerous role if you're looking for redemption though. Like the name implies it's associated with wanderers. When someone leaves the team for good or joins it temporarily, that's the role they fit into. They're like an extension of the party,

and the party functions without it. Unless you want to say she's replaced Masego – which for now she has – but then Masego is currently in the role of the party member who's gone absolutely fucking insane and needs sense beaten back into him. Whether or not he dies during that fight and returns only for long enough to see Catherine's face and apologise has no strong tendency associated with it.

werafdsaew

And conveniently, Vivienne no longer has a Name. Yes Cat said that she's not kicking her out, but it doesn't change the fact that Vivienne is now 100% useless in a fight.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Akua might be a 6th ranger, but AFAICT, the Woe is not even close to a Five-Man Band. The trope page makes it clear that two or three correspondences don't make a 5MB, you need all five members by type and role, and I don't see how the Woe come even close.

caoimhinh

Yep, and we have seen that it's indeed that way even in the way that world works, that's why Cat, Pilgrim, and every other Named can shape stories and use them as weapons. The act matters more than conviction and intentions.

luminiousblu

Redemption, at least in the Christian sense of the word, fundamentally sees very little difference between the act and the conviction. You can't actually act without the conviction (saving someone so he can pay you back isn't charity – by definition the act of charity means giving for the sake of doing so) and someone with conviction can always act even if only a little (someone with legitimately nothing to his name can still perform charity by helping others carry loads or so on).

Also I honestly don't believe that Catherine's band counts as anything similar to redemption in the first place, nor that it's realistically a good thing to get caught in orbit.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, Cat is simply unable to truly grasp Akua's mind – which leaves Cat tantalized and fascinated. This is all too typical for a "normal" human faced with a sociopath.

But that dark fascination is also a trap, an adept sociopath can use it to subvert and corrupt others even after their mask is torn and their great ruse ("oh yes, I'm one of your flock, really...") uncovered.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think Akua is any kind of sociopath.

An interesting fact. Do you remember Akua's story about her childhood companion she'd been forced to sacrifice? "She was charged with taking my canings until I was old enough that it would not hamper my growth." Their strategy was legitimately to punish *someone else* for child Akua's transgressions and expect that to influence her behavior just as if she'd herself been punished. It worked, I'm assuming.

Akua's been traumatized through hell and back, but she's perfectly capable of empathy and attachment and human emotions. Cat understands her very well actually.

[sengachi](#)

Akua is a perfect example of the fact that you do not have to be a sociopath to commit atrocities.

[Liliet](#)

I have a theory that Akua (and Amadeus also btw) is an empath – as in, has hyperdeveloped empathy.

It, uh, doesn't help. It just means she's learned to not notice when she hurts herself, too 😞

[Javvies](#)

Of course Saint isn't as good as soul-surgery as Masego. She's muscle. Amazingly skilled muscle, but muscle nonetheless. Muscle so good at cutting things with her sword that she can cut intangibles like a Domain or souls. But still just muscle in the end.

Masego actually knows what he's doing when he tinkers with souls.

Heh. Cat is humanizing Akua so it hurts Akua more when the final hammer ultimately gets dropped on Akua.

Skaddix

I doubt it...Cat is just not that manipulative and long term of a planner. What I think Cat does need to work on is respecting other Cultures if she wants the Liesse accords to work.

caoimhinh

For me it's more like Cat is trying to make Akua into a better person so she can justify letting her live in front of the others (especially Vivienne).

Skaddix

More like only Viv...Indrani is down with it, Hakram is neutral on it, and Masego would probably like to keep another Magical mind around.

caoimhinh

Yeah, only Viv would oppose strongly, while the rest would either obey because Cat says so or not give a damn about it.

But Catherine is the type of person that needs an excuse for her actions, even when others wouldn't criticize her, and also because she isn't honest with herself about feelings until a long time has passed.

luminiousblu

Arguably, saying you're going to make someone else a better person **is** disrespecting their culture, and she's not even always right about it. Forget who the K-redhead mage was back in book 1-2 but the big stink Catherine originally raised was about human sacrifice of legally dead people, which didn't make any sense (they're already going to be hanged you may as well make use of them before they get dropped) and clearly isn't a universal value. I mean yeah, Catherine wants to make a declaration of human rights sort of thing, but in the first place nobody even agrees on what those rights are. People in OUR world can't agree on where the line gets drawn.

caoimhinh

I agree with you.

But this is merely Cat's excuse, it doesn't need to make sense, it's just the thing she says to attempt to justify not killing Akua.

Also, even to this day CatxKillian break-up still seems like a really forced thing in the book (it came out of nowhere and didn't make much sense). Their fight started because Cat didn't take Killian to the council room when she announced the founding of the Order of Broken Bells which was "her first step at rebellion", then Cat twisted the fight around and ended up being the one offended at Killian due to her considering the use of human sacrifice for power. Worse is how Cat in recent chapters still said that she would have needed to cross lines to keep being together with Killian, which is a lie since once Killian

found that Cat was against it she discarded the idea, but Cat still pretends to be the righteous one in that discussion.

matesbe

I feel like you are simplifying their relationship breakup. It wasn't as well developed as it could have been, but there was more to it than that. Cat didn't feel like she could stay with Killian knowing that it was only her disapproval that stopped Killian from doing the ritual, not any moral fiber or objections. She openly admitted that it was hypocritical to hold Killian to higher standards than others around her, but admitted that she was having a hard time helping it. Combined with her increasing responsibilities, Cat felt that staying with Killian wouldn't be the best thing for either of them. She wasn't pretending to be the righteous one in any manner other than the fact that her partner had no objections to human sacrifice.

caoimhinh

Cat might actually be the one driving Akua towards the redemption story.

That "I'll make you into a good person before I destroy you" seems like an empty excuse to me. It's as silly as "Let's redeem this criminal sentenced to death and make him into a good person before we kill him", that's pure bullshit, she just likes her (or grew fond of her) and wants to make her a better person to have her around.

That type of story never ends in the redeemed being killed by the person who taught her to be good, she either lives on or dies saving others.

These Akua chapters are always the same formula: "Conversation starts about relevant subject of the moment, conversation steers towards Akua due to Catherine asking her questions, Akua talks a bit about her life, Akua tells an unknown info about her life plus something we already know, and conversation ends with Catherine promising again that she will kill Akua."

If Cat needs to constantly be reminding herself and Akua that she is going to kill her, she has long passed the stage where she decided to not do it, she is just in denial.

John

"Sleep well, I'll likely kill you in the morning" never ends with the cabin boy actually being killed.

[Liliet](#)

TBF every time Cat looked at Akua in Book 3 she had an inner monologue slowly and exquisitely describing Akua's appearance and then ending with a reassurance that Catherine still hates her and wants her dead.

And she followed through on that.

Sort of.

...Yeah I agree here lmao.

caoimhinh

Cat to Akua:

Fighting against each other

"I'm going to kill you"

Making alliance

"I'm going to kill you"

Watching the stars together

"I'm going to kill you"

In the cinema

"I'm going to kill you"

In a picnic

"I'm going to kill you"

Eating dinner

"I'm going to kill you"

Sharing bed

"I'm going to kill you"

Fighting against an enemy army

"I'm going to kill you"

When it's finally time for peace and can kill her without repercussions

"I have decided that I'm not going to kill you. But I have only just decided that now, I was totally serious all the times before"

Everyone else: "Yeah, of course. We believe you, we never saw this coming."

Indrani gets a fortune due to betting on this early on in Robber's betting ring

[Liliet](#)

Vivienne, who has already made her peace with the inevitability of this because she's not an idiot: sighs.

Andrew Mitchell

Hahahahahaha!

Aston W

Filler..

Thankfully.

[Liliet](#)

What's your definition of not-filler?

Anonymous

Aren't we missing the monthly extra chapter?

caoimhinh

It's already up, refresh the page.

IDKWhoitis

Watching Cat let Akua in from the Cold really made me feel something.

Winter is over, and Cat has moved on in life from what Liesse was. It's now Night-time, and Cat has left the door open to Akua. Although some of the Woe may feel worried at this new, and possibly hated individual, she does fit in. Archer respects Akua after surviving the Underdark, Masego never really had a negative opinion, Hakram will watch over her, as he did with Viv. Cat has let her in, and only really Viv may feel threatened, if not insulted. But even with that, I still see Akua as part of the Woe in the end.

It's going to be a shame if Saint or Grey annihilates her.

Jworks

I never even considered her being one of the Woe now that Vivienne is not named, that would be very interesting. I wonder what her third name would be.

IDKWhoitis

I don't think needing a Name is one of the requirements for the Woe at this point, and there isn't an actual limit to how large Cat can make the Woe. Although Fate may be tempted to keep it at 5 through the use of deaths, Fate is always trying to screw Cat over, so this is nothing new. Both Akua and Viv may be part of the Woe, but we all know Viv will have a fucking Fit when she figures this out.

[Liliet](#)

I think 5+1 is a classic trope number, and they don't have to be Named to fill the roles nonetheless.

Akua is the Sixth Ranger.

[Liliet](#)

The chapter when Akua was let out of the box permanently on the way to Keter was called "Sixth".

She's been a part of Woe since then, in its own fucked up way.

Pethrai D'arkos

Hold on, where's the extra chapter?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Go via the "Next" link, IIRC they just don't show up in the main ToC.

[doominator10](#)

Akua is easily the most fascinating character for me. I don't know about favorite, but definitely most interesting.

edrey

akua point of view is lacking here, without that you feel something is missing, this madness is two ways after all. also, there is not extra chapter, what a pity

[Liliet](#)

hm?

caoimhinh

That's because EE doesn't want to confirm anything, but just keep the readers guessing and debating. Using Akua's POV would confirm her intentions in one direction or the other, thus killing the suspense. All these "conversations with Akua" chapters about her had actually been "people speculating about Akua", not "Akua talking about her intentions"

Stormblessed

I'm still waiting for the moment where Cat calls Black her father outside of her own thoughts. I thought it was going to happen in this chapter, but breaking this space to Akua would be wrong. It

probably either needs to happen extremely publicly or in private with Hakram.

Liliet

Well, she's said that out loud to Andronike and Komena at the end of the previous book, which high key made me do a double take.

But yessssssss.

caoimhinh

Honestly, these "let's use an entire chapter for a conversation with Akua" chapters have always felt like filler to me.

So, there were no more attempts at diplomacy, no conversation with Pilgrim and Saint again, nor Catherine offering the same she offered to Rozala to the others. It was offed as "there was no point in keep trying so after getting Amadeus I left". Even if we knew that the talks would fail, an attempt was supposed to be made, instead who got half a chapter of Cat saying that Akua loved her father (which we already knew), that Akua was not showing her true emotions (which we already knew), and Cat saying that she will kill Akua (which she already has said lots of times, but with each time she repeats it, it sounds less likely).

I know character development is important, but these Akua chapters are really not developing much at all besides showing that despite Cat trying to reassure herself and everyone else at the end of each of these chapters that she will definitely kill Akua, it's obvious since a long time ago that she is having second thoughts. This "I'll make you a good person before I kill you" is an excuse that seems more like "I'll make you good and repent of your bad deeds so I can justify that I'm not killing you".

None of these "Catherine conversing with Akua" chapters have brought much new insight nor expanded what we knew of Akua already, more like they are displaying Cat acting in denial of her desire to let Akua live. There was development in the conversation Vivienne had with Akua in Arcadia, and the thoughts Cat had about her along the entire Ever Dark Arc as they gradually changed into a more favorable vision of Akua, the development ended with Akua saving Cat during the encounter with Sve Noc, but there has not been so much development in the conversations that use half to entire chapters, as weird as it seems.

Typos found:

I would wager her him Proceran / him or her Proceran
to me made / to be made

the the victories / the victories
Would else would take / Who else would take

Liliet

Mmmm I really disagree with you about the worth of these chapters.

They're buildup. They're letting us know what's going on, they're letting us see how Catherine's and Akua's opinions of the world, themselves and each other slowly mutate with time.

Or I might just be an unrepentant CatAkua shipper crying tears of joy for the author feeding me and mine :3

But I really do believe this will pay off in time.

KageLupus

I am also going to disagree with this being a filler chapter. Akua being a member of the group and having people joke around and not treat her like an outcast has been a driving conflict since it first started. Originally the justification was that she was going to be useful until they didn't need her anymore and then Akua would pay for Second Liesse.

After the big throw down in the Everdark the narrative got flipped, though. Akua declares that she is going to use the power of friendship to do Good and redeem herself. Her reasoning is that actions are all that matters so if she goes through the motions of being moral it is the same as actually being moral.

This chapter is Cat pointing out that Akua fucked up again. First she proves that Akua is not a heartless monster and does/ can care about other people aside from just how useful they are to her plans. Then she reminds Akua that she has been acting like one of the Woe, which in her own words is as good as being one.

Cat isn't going to kill Akua because she doesn't have to. Akua set herself up for a redemption story, after committing heinous crimes. We already know how that story plays out because the Pilgrim tried to set Cat up the same way. Akua is going to end up making a Heroic Sacrifice at some point, and she is going to do so willingly because that is what one of the Woe would do for the others.

SilverDargon

I really like what Cat seems to be implying about Akua's changing character. The idea that she's literally being changed into a better person because she took on the role in an attempt to play

the heavens. That's just a fascinating take on how heroes and villains get made in this world. I mean part of it might just be psychology, "Becoming the mask" and whatnot, but Cat seems to be implying that morality is a literal force which is changing Akua ever since she decided to play at being a hero down underground. Which to be fair, is fairly plausible.

[Liliet](#)

I think this very much is psychology. And... sociology? Relationshipology? Pretty sure it's sociology that does that... or psychology.

Anyway, this is not a guide-specific process. This is how it works, and I'm really glad Catherine's seeing it.

And I'm really glad all the cards are on the table face up between the two of them :3

medailyfun

also social pack dynamics, the strong pack leader forms the subordinates.

[Liliet](#)

yeah lmao

Alegio

Think of the reason why Archer is in the Woe, its a place where she can belong. That's something Akua has never had before and even if she is just acting, the simple effect of not having to worry about praesi BS all the time and having something to do where the best end scenario is not "And then the heroes killed me, but not before I fuck@d everything up!" probably does wonder for her wounded psyche.

[Liliet](#)

This fucking chapter.

Once again, somehow I didn't expect this conversation to actually *happen* even though I was thinking every single thing that came up there.

Also, AMADEUS =x

Someguy

Looks like Cat is shaping Akua to have actual human emotional responses just to slam the "No Redemption" cage on her and bury her forever away screaming.

[Liliet](#)

I think Cat expects Akua to go for Redemption = Death at the end.

Not the same as "no redemption".

Alegio

I'm more of the mind that Cat believes that she wants that, but in reality, all she wants is that Akua becomes more of a person so at some point the realization of what she has done hits her like a hammer.

Cat probably doesn't even wants Akua dead, she likes her too much and can see she is way too useful as an ally for that.

[Liliet](#)

I pretty much agree lmao.

Angita

I actually rather like Akua and Catherine's interactions. The redemption matters to me because Akua at the time of her defeat (and still now) is fond of Akua's Folly. She wants to be the person who inspires the next generation. It's not really satisfying (in justice or in emotional impact) to kill her and be done with it if it's her reward. By comparison, Cordelia is an exquisite moment of justice/revenge, depending on how you view it. Cordelia was fool enough to base the continuation of her nation on a Crusade, resulting in many people's deaths who had little to do with the decisions. Her comeuppance is when Saint tells her the heroes are taking over and Procer as it's currently known is going to end.

Akua being redeemed gives us that chance of her sneaking away from the rest of the Woe and crying about a failure, be it her father's death or something that hasn't happened yet. That element of "I tried so hard or I wanted something to happen so much and I failed" is a comeuppance. I won't call it justice, at that point, if Akua's being useful, but I want Akua to have a Cordelia's Cracked Crusade moment. She hasn't paid for her crime yet.

medailyfun

Good to see my worries about Akua-to-Black issues addressed, even better to see Cat approving some communication with Malicia.

[Liliet](#)

s a m e

caoimhinh

That is certainly going to be an interesting conversation. It will be great to see the change in their dynamics, given that their relationship has changed so much.

[Richard Ngo](#)

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow

Barrendur

@Richard Ngo:
Excellent quote! But I can't, for the life of me, remember where I first encountered it... Frank Herbert's 'Dune', perhaps? Please remind me.

[Daniel E](#)

Perception is an odd thing, when numbers transition from 'meaningful' to 'a statistic'. I sincerely hope that Cat doesn't forget those 100k souls of Liesse. If she wants to get Akua to the point where remorse is real and thus the punishment is meaningful, that's fine, so long as she actually follows through in the end.

Alegio

Cat stop trying to excuse yourself, we all know you actually like Akua and are trying to help her like any other good person would do to such a traumatized soul.

And it's lovely how Akua still probably thinks that she is "acting" her part. She already fell for that something that trapped all the woe around Cat, the feeling of actually being part of something and having a place where she belongs (especially a place where you don't need to kill the people you love as an entrance fee).

[adrian1992blog](#)

I think part of the point Cat was making is that once she really feels or changes the pain she will suffer due to her regrets will be more than anything could do. And that so long as she doesn't feel that pain Akua is just acting or rather imitating people

lennymaster

I have finally realised Cat's plan for Akua. She is taking her revenge, she is literally destroying her by turning her into a

different person, or rather a person at all. Akua set herself up for a redemption story, not realising that that will destroy her as surely as having her soul ripped to shreds. In the end, there might still be a person left, but she will be nothing like her former self. And she cannot sabotage the change or stop, doing so reverts her to being the wily villain doing whatever it takes to survive, continuing makes her a hero who won't stand for sacrificing her life if it is not for some greater good. And being a person will set her finally up for feeling bad about what she has done.

Vivid

"Which is more important, the conviction or the act?"

An easy choice, when you realize their congruence. I guess it's recognizing that they're the same that sets apart Black and Akua.

Chapter 29: Retrospect

"My son, the Helikeans insist it is better to live a day as a lion than a hundred years as a sheep but as in so many things they are missing the point. Lions commonly live a decade and a half, sheep slightly less. It is not them you must emulate but instead the common tortoise, a wise creature that achieves very little but will do so for a very long time. This is the ideal state of politics."

– Extract from the infamous 'Sensible Testament' of Basilea Chrysanthé of Nicae

We got three days' march before Creation turned on us.

It was always going to, I'd known that deep down – there'd been too many moving parts sent to spin within the bounds of Iserre for my armies to be allowed to escape the grounds so easily. But I'd expected, and planned for, the Heavens putting their fingers to the scale through the local crop of heroes. My contingencies had been built to kill or cripple enemy Named, killing as few actual soldiers as was possible. If there was to be a confrontation, my thought had been, best it be contained to Named and army strength on all sides be preserved. Given that we now outnumbered the western coalition army by a fair margin, that shouldn't have been too difficult. The enemy fielded less than eighty thousand on their side, though they had us almost hilariously outnumbered in all matters cavalry. In comparison my own coalition had taken beatings but overall no dramatic losses,

and that left us on rather healthy grounds: a little over twenty thousand veterans from the Legions of Terror, around thirty seven thousand legionaries of the Army of Callow and my largely intact fifty thousand drow. One hundred thousand and ten in total, more or less, so we had the enemy not only beaten in numbers but arguably in quality of soldiery as well.

It'd been the assessment of the Marshals that the enemy was unlikely to seek a pitched battle, and I'd concurred. It wasn't that it'd be impossible for the enemy to win, should they attack. If they hit us during the hours after dawn we'd be down most the drow and they'd regain temporary superiority in numbers, which might allow them to swing this around if they bled us bad enough before the Firstborn were back on their feet. It was that the costs of such a victory would be horrific, to put it bluntly. Losses would be massive on both sides, and with Princess Rozala having a seat in those war councils there'd be at least one voice to remind them that if I felt my people were being forced into a corner the gloves would come off. Whether or not we were correct in guessing the enemy's thoughts, their actions at least were correctly predicted: as the eastern coalition began a march to the northeast, out of Iserre and towards Cantal, the western coalition shadowed our advance but did not engage. Not even in skirmishes, to my mild surprise. I'd expected cavalry raids and Levantine light foot to try out screening forces, but the enemy made a point of never engaging in bloodshed.

Some of our soldiers considered this a good sign, and talk in the camps was that we might just walk back to Callow without drawing swords. Juniper had been scornful of the rumours, and passed down instructions to stamp them out, but myself I'd been rather impressed there were still any optimists left in my armies. You'd think they would have gotten themselves killed by now, just by dint of odds. Regardless, my own expectations remained dark and so when the first sign of trouble arrived I was validated instead of disappointing. It was on the fourth morning, about an hour before the Firstborn would be able to shake off dawn torpor, that a chunk of Creation half a mile wide shattered like glass in front of my armies.

"That," Vivienne slowly said, "looks like a gate."

It did, I thought, and that was not good news. The two of us had been riding to the Third Army's camp, when Creations began creaking, so it was only a short ride to General Abigail's command to order a runner being sent for 'Advisor Kivule'. I half expected a comment from Vivienne at that, but found her face to be largely indifferent. She caught me looking, though, and raised an eyebrow.

"I'm not a fool, Catherine," she said. "In Masego's absence, she's the finest magical expert we have. It would be wasteful not to make use of her."

"Haven't said a thing," I replied, raising a hand in protest.

I declined the escort the Third Army offered, as well as the offer to accompany me that General Abigail offered while poorly hiding a cringe. She hid her relief at my refusal just as poorly, to Vivienne's subtle amusement. We rode together towards the break and all the while she was suppressing a smile.

"That one's in no danger of being tempted into reckless adventures, at least," Vivienne finally drawled.

"I find the lack of ambition refreshing," I admitted. "The boldest step she's taken so far is discreetly inquiring if service months under a field promotion still count towards earning a general's retirement pension."

The other Callowan choked, swallowing her laughter.

"Well?" she asked, tone hoarse with suppressed hilarity. "Does it, Your Majesty?"

"Figured I'd throw her a bone," I mused. "It's not like she's getting a general's salary at the moment anyway."

We might have continued quite a while in that vein if the approach of the breach hadn't killed any semblance of amusement. We'd ridden close enough that I could make out what laid behind the filmy, gauze-like surface of the breach: a barren wasteland of howling dust storms I'd visited before. Frowning, I noted that the opening seemed to lead to a place different than the one I'd stood at. The great whirlwinds with streaks of lightning and the earth cracking open into geysers of flame were miles and miles away.

"Shit," I feelingly said. "This is happening a lot quicker than I thought it would."

Vivienne rode closer, as her sight was not as good as mine, and had grown pale by the time I caught up with her. I almost turned to acknowledge what I felt arriving behind me, but the breach itself was currently of greater interest,

"You told us it was slowly coming into alignment with Creation," the dark-haired woman said. "That it might take months."

"That's what Sve Noc told me," I told her. "And I had no reason to believe they were wrong."

"They were not," Advisor Kivule said.

Her presence in the Night meant her arrival was no surprise to me, but I was pleased to note that Vivienne either had grown better at hiding her surprise or she'd also somehow noticed. 'Advisor Kivule' was dressed entirely in black, her closely cut dress covering going from the hollow of her throat to her boots, and neither her face nor her hair were visible under the elaborate veils and half-hat she wore. That I had bound Akua Sahelian to my cloak after Second Liesse was rumoured, but there might be unrest if it came out I was not allowing her to walk about without chains. The false name and attire wouldn't fool anyone already suspecting her identity, but given the kind of entities I'd bound to my service in the past Vivienne had assured me that the most popular rumours had nothing to do with Diabolist. Apparently she was either a drow sorceress I'd stolen from underground – never mind that they'd seen actual Firstborn and that as a species they distinctly lacked curves – or a fae I'd seduced into making oaths to me. The slightly uncomfortable way Vivienne had spoken the word 'seduced' made it clear what kind of seduction was being referred to, which was actually rather flattering – it did imply, after all, that I was skilled enough in bed to bedazzle one of the fae.

"Cryptic," Vivienne commented. "If you'd care to elaborate?"

"The unpleasant vista that can be seen on the other side is not aligned with Creation," Akua replied. "In this, Sve Noc were entirely correct in assessing the time. Though I cannot be certain as to what caused this phenomenon, I can hazard an informed guess."

"Which is?" I asked.

"You described High Arcana runes and a detonation taking place while you visited, Catherine," the shade said. "Repeated impacts of that nature might reverberate across the boundary between Arcadia and Creation, creating temporary breaches."

"So whoever-" Masego, most likely "-is behind the mess on the other side, they're swing hard enough at the wall between us and them that tiles are shattering," I frowned.

"A more accurate metaphor would be a sword striking at a pond," Akua suggested. "The initial strike will leave a mark, in this case being the breach you see before us, before creational laws make the water return where force chase it from – in this case, the boundary pressure eventually closing this breach."

"At least there's not a permanent gate into Arcadia in the middle of Procer," Vivienne said. "Somehow I doubt Hasenbach would be too pleased about that."

"Wasn't us," I replied out of reflex. "And if it was you can't prove it, so in a philosophical sense it isn't."

There was a moment of embarrassed silence as the other two women looked at me. I grimaced.

"Well," I spoke into the quiet, a tad defensive. "Given our history, I might as well start practicing the official response early."

"Inadequate," Akua said.

"Sloppy," Vivienne said, almost simultaneously.

They didn't turn to glare at each other, though given how much of a point they were making of not doing that they might as well have for all the difference it made. The irritation from Vivi was likely genuine, but rubies to piglets that Akua was just having fun yanking her chain. It would be a much greater challenge, I thought, to wean her off pettiness than it would be to wean her off of Evil. Who could say I'd not learned to pick my battles?

"Glad we're all in agreement," I drily said. "I need practical details here, o advisor. When's this thing going to disappear? Can we expect others to appear, and if so how often?"

"Less than a bell," the shade replied, which had me sighing.

Four hours, in the winter season, was no small portion of the daylight hours already shortened by the forced slumber of the Firstborn after dawn. We'd have to march around the damned thing.

"As for your second question, there are two possibilities," Akua said. "The first is that we are looking at the initial breach, in which case we might have days before a second instance – though the occurrences will quicken as the process advances."

"And the second?" I asked, bracing myself.

"This is not the first breach," Akua said. "And they have simply been occurring in different parts of Iserre, for an unknown amount of time. We could be looking at hours instead of days for the apparition rate."

"Diabolist," Vivienne said. "What happens when the rate is so close as to be instantaneous?"

"In metaphysical terms, a repurposed chunk of Arcadia will made into a half-realm straddling the boundary between it and Creation," the shade said.

"And in physical terms?" I asked.

"I don't believe this has ever been accomplished before," Akua Sahelian cheerfully admitted. "And so I've no authoritative answer to give, darling dearest. It ought to be interesting to find out whether we are simply to be obliterated by the initial

bridging or the process will closer to the forging of a permanent domain with tendrils reaching in both realms."

Certain death or probably death, then. There was a cheery thought. I closed my eyes, let all I'd learned sink in. I'd come across more than a dozen moving parts since I'd walked out the gate bringing me to Iserre, but this was it – the pivot, the fulcrum, the culmination of all this bloody mayhem. Had the Tyrant planned this far? No, I decided. No one was that good, not even the Neshamah, and for all his brilliance Kairos Theodosian was no King of Death. Now, in matters of war and politics I could grasp how we had come to this cliff's edge. The Grand Alliance could not and would not yield, neither could I and all the while violent madmen rode the carriage that was the League of Free Cities down ever slope they could find. But what was the *story* here? There was one, of that there could be no doubt. There were too many Named in Iserre, too many crowns and too many secrets for there not to be a tale in the works. If it were merely the western and eastern coalitions clashing, we would have the heroic and the villainous and the usual tragedies in black and white.

The League's presence muddled that, however. It was no longer so clear-cut, and after the unfolding calamity in Arcadia was brought into the mix the waters became even muddier. *Kairos wants to play a trick*, I thought. *I want to forge a peace and wield it like a blade*. I could only guess at Masego's intent, but he could not be in his right mind. That would make him, I thought, a danger or an obstacle. The sword hanging above all our heads but not someone who would influence the shape beyond that. Now, I knew what Princess Rozala wanted but she wasn't the champion for her side was she? It was the Grey Pilgrim that would bear that mantle and I wasn't really sure what the old man wanted. He should have killed Black, I thought. It would have made more sense to do that if peace was what he was after. I would have been utterly furious, true enough, but if they'd killed him while he was in the middle of burning Procer I would have had to swallow my anger. Instead he'd given me reason to... *To twist arms so that I could get him back*, I thought, and my blood cooled. I'd heard rumours about Black being dead or captured even in hamlets, it was a given that the moment I came to Iserre I'd hear about it.

So when I'd first encountered the Pilgrim and the Saint, I'd baited her and tricked him to go after something he'd known for certain I would want. And I'd won a victory. Oh, it hadn't been given to me, but narratively speaking I'd received a written invitation to take it. *And I won from it the body without the soul, the part that actually makes Black dangerous to them*. It'd been bait, and I'd taken it. A victory, I thought once more. Could it actually be that simple? I wasn't Named, not anymore, but I was the high priestess of Night and the weight of the roles I still played might be enough. And there had been growing

similarities, hadn't there? I'd slipped into them without even noticing. I now bore a staff and no sword, I called on miracles to aid and protect rather than attack. I had godlings whispering in my ears, companions at my side. I was eldest in influence among the priesthood and Named of a coalition of nations, and an unequaled religious figure in one of them. I had made myself and been made into the patchwork-cloaked opposite of the pilgrim in grey, one step at a time. And now I'd claimed a win over one that might be called my rival. This, I thought, felt like a pattern of three. One I had initiated as a villain, and with a victory.

I knew well what followed: draw and then finally defeat.

Now, if I were the Grey Pilgrim, why would I go this far out of my way to kill Catherine Foundling? Because the Choir of Mercy told me to, I immediately thought but just as quickly dismissed. If Tariq were simply a murderous errand boy for the Ophanim he'd be a great deal less dangerous. No, if he was doing this and had invested so much time into doing it when the Dead King was devouring the north then it was for a reason – not necessarily one I'd considered good or decent, but one that would seem those to him. My eyes blinked open and I found my companions both staring at me in silence.

"I am the Grey Pilgrim," I said. "Why, of all the threats currently on the board, do I need to have a story-forged knife either at or in the Black Queen's throat?"

"The fairy gates," Vivienne replied, cocking her head to the side. "They can either make or break the war to the north. The ability needs to be either solidly secured or removed so it can't be a threat."

Which made sense, I thought, if I grasped the timing of it correctly. Black had been captured while I was in the Everdark, which meant the Dead King had either been mustering his armies or already on the march. The Pilgrim ended a strategic offensive that had a real risk of starving half the Principate into collapse if left unchecked while simultaneously acquiring leverage on both Malicia and myself. Snip with the soul and not only did he keep that leverage but he prepared a pattern of three. The degree of foresight that'd require was frightening, to be honest, and I suspected beyond even a hero in bed with a Choir. On the other hand, I wouldn't put it beyond the Grey Pilgrim to do all this as a *contingency*. Ending a threat while expanding the tools at his disposal? Yeah, that might fit. He'd know he was exposing himself to my tearing through a gate and appearing behind him at some point down the line – rescuing my teacher would have quite the weight behind it – but cutting out the soul would muddle up that story and I suspected he could do quite a bit with the ability to predict where I'd appear when coming for the soul. Was that really all it was, though? The

gates had simply made me too potentially dangerous *not* to pull a knife on? Considering the man had looked into my soul a few times, he must have known that I'd rather avoid war if I could. I glanced at Diabolist, whose gaze remained hidden behind her veils.

"Because it is the only certain way of killing you," the shade calmly said, "and Calernia cannot survive a second Dead King."

I opened my mouth, then closed it. It seemed an absurd claim, for all the talk of apotheosis that had preceded my descent into the Everdark. Yet I trusted Akua's intellect, if less so her judgement. She wouldn't have said that without careful consideration. I thought back to my fights with the heroes, when the Tenth Crusade had come knocking. I'd dropped a lake on the enemy, to be sure, but it wasn't worse than what the likes of the Warlock and possibly the Witch of the Wilds could have done with a little preparation. Although, arguably the lack of preparation needed on my part made it – no, this was all missing the point. Feasible way of *killing* me, Akua had said. That brought different perspective. Sure, I'd been repeatedly slapped around by the Saint of Swords and she'd shrugged off the worst of what Winter could bring to bear, but I'd usually accomplished what I came for while going around her before retreating. The Pilgrim himself had seen me tear through a band of heroes while fumbling with the barest fraction of my mantle had been able to do. If I'd known half the tricks at the Battle of the Camps that I'd known in the Everdark, I honestly doubted anyone but the Pilgrim or the Saint would have been able to put a scratch on me. And those two, I realized, were the oldest and perhaps most powerful heroes on the continent.

Shit.

The thought that the man could have conceived of me as a nascent Dead King was ludicrous, he'd been able to see into my fucking *soul*. I wasn't... Gods, I'd done some dark things and not always for reasons as good as I would have wished but there were lines I'd always refused to cross. That I would have kept to. *This can't be personal*, I told myself, and put aside the horrifying thought that a truth teller might have genuinely believed I had the potential to become the likes of Neshamah. Stepping out of myself, I looked at the story of Catherine Foundling through the Grey Pilgrim's eyes. The past was largely irrelevant, I decided, save perhaps for a note that I'd been taught by the Black Knight and would likely draw on his manners and methods. What mattered was that I'd come into a Name as the manifestation of what Tariq had called *the sin of our indolence returned to haunt us*, the first time we'd ever spoken. That was important, that informed what I considered the Black Queen to be. She was a form of retribution by Creation, by the story, for a failure on the side of Good. Catherine Foundling, as an entity, was inherently

dangerous to the Heavens. Still, as the Pilgrim I didn't like killing unless the situation required it and I did not yet know if it did. I should, at least, meet with this Black Queen.

What did I find when I did? Offers of truce, offers to reduce the dangers for everyone, but also a mutilated soul. And Winter encroaching on the remnants, essentially a standing temptation by a power older than Creation and by nature prone to contaminating mortal minds. I make the reasonable offer of this very dangerous person abdicating the crown and allowing others settle the kingdom she's slowly turning to Evil by simple virtue of ruling it, but mortal considerations prevent her from accepting. This is a good sign, because it means she still has good intentions. This is a bad sign, because her attachment to Callow is the kind of narrative leverage Below will use in a heartbeat to make a full monster of her. So I make a bargain about keeping the damage under control with the Black Queen, hoping that after a clean military defeat she'll be forced to reconsider the earlier offer. On the other hand, we have to be *very careful* not to push her so far she'll sink into Winter and become the kind of mess that gobbles up armies before it's put down. It's a delicate dance, but I've been at this game for a very long time and I have the Saint of Swords as a contingency. Then the Battle of the Camps happens.

A full band of heroes fails to kill the Black Queen, then the Saint fails after them, and the gate trick kills a few thousand people in less time than it takes to drink a cup of tea. Then the backlash makes her fall into some sort of state – Diabolist taking the reins of the body, though I might not know that – and she faces down the entire heroic contingent simultaneously before snapping out of the fugue state and forcing a truce on the battlefield. Catherine Foundling has now proved dangerous, exceedingly hard to kill and mentally unstable. Given that she's running around with an entire fairy court's worth of power, good intentions or not she needs to be removed. The peace conference achieves that, more or less: the terms ensure I'll be around her, able to find a weakness or guide her into a redemption story that'll either kill her or turn her to good purpose in the service of the Heavens. The Tenth Crusade is repulsed in the Vales as well, but that's all right because the Black Queen is the key to settling Callow and she hasn't gone anywhere. But then the Iron Prince along my native Levant prepare for a second invasion through the Vales, and she comes seeking help. This is a very, very dangerous moment. If I do not help her, I've thrown away the story the deaths at the Battle of the Camps bought me. If I do help her, on the other hand, I might be destroying the same Grand Alliance that will be the same power bloc necessary to put her down if she gets out of control.

Cordelia Hasenbach's dream ensures peace in the west, forced restoration of Callow to Good and a unified front against the

long-term term Evil threats I've spent my entire life fighting. Catherine Foundling is a young villain-trained queen with expansionist neighbours and access to power that dehumanizes her the more she uses it – the story of that descent into atrocity practically writes itself. The choice is only hard to make in the sentimental sense, and I've been doing this too long to allow sentimentality much of a weight. Only, after that, instead of running back to Praes or making Callow into some kind of nation-fortress while I discretely look for an acceptable successor, she leaves. I don't know where she's going, but there's nowhere that's not a disaster. Keter, to the Dead King? Arcadia, where she can bargain with fae? To the Everdark, where not even the Ophanim can easily look? If she went to the Tyrant of Helike that might be a relief, but months pass and she doesn't appear in the League. This is a problem, because a half-taught girl with that mantle is one thing but whatever the fae or the Dead King might make of her is a very different sort of trouble. Then Keter begins invading the north, and the game changes: no oath I took means a thing when the survival of Calernia might be at stake. So I leave, and set to shaping a story that allows me to put her down by any means necessary should she return as a true villainous Queen of Winter.

I breathed out, and it was almost jarring to think of me as myself again. The plunge had been deep and exhausting, but it'd also been necessary. Both Vivienne and Akua had been right, in their own way. Whether I came back as a monster or remained the same, the Pilgrim benefitted from having a story-wrought knife at my throat. If I was to be the Grand Alliance's gate-maker, I could either be bargained with nicely or with the reminder that a promised victory might kill me. If I was the... Queen of Moonless Night, for lack of a better name, he needed to kill me and *fast* or it might mean the end of the western nations. The thing was, stepping out of myself, I could finally see why he'd consider me that much of a threat. Because I did have the *means*, didn't I?

To tread the same path as Dread Empress Triumphant.

It wouldn't even be all that hard because the pieces were all already there, waiting to be picked up. Already I had Callowans in legionary armour and the a knightly order under my banner. The Duchess of Daoine had sworn oaths to me, and service of her armies, and from the Empire I had already stolen three legions and come to Iserre claiming more. And I could do a great deal more than that: bringing Black into the ranks of the Mighty would forge me a monster of a general who finally had the power to match his wits. I lacked mages, so while Procer bled to hold back the dead I could force the submission of the already-fracturing Praes and bring the finest sorcerers and warlocks of the continent into my forces. Malicia could kneel or be buried with the Tower, and once the rest of the east was unified the goblins would make a deal and the orcs would fall into that nascent

empire naturally – I'd have Hakram, Black, and Grem One-Eye in my service, how could they not? And then we could turn west and take the gloves off. I had Hierophant and the ruins of the fortress-artefact of Liesse. I had the Wild Hunt and ties with the ruling court of Arcadia, I had the high priesthood of Night and alliance with Sve Noc themselves. Oh, he was right to be afraid I thought.

If every other choice was taken from me, it might still come to that.

"I came back," I mused as I looked up at the sky, "reeking of millennial ritual murder and fresh apotheosis, with slivers of living godhood perched on my shoulders and a sworn army of drow. I've effectively confirmed his every fear."

"He will come for you," Akua said. "I expect that to a man like him there is not a single act that would be immoral when taken in the prevention of a second Dead King's rise."

She was, I grimly thought, probably right.

"So we reach out," Vivienne said. "Make it clear that you are no such thing and offer reassurances."

"He'll still want a draw for the pattern of three," I grimaced. "Just in case."

"So what do we do?" she asked. "Because this isn't looking good, Catherine. If what I've heard about how he caught the Black Knight is true, he's not a man we want to make desperate."

I clenched my fingers and unclenched them, looking at the gate. *Kairos wants to play a trick. I want to forge a peace and wield it like a blade. Tariq wants to make sure no one can end the world, or at least our little corner of it.* The key would be beyond the gate, I decided. Where I already suspected the armies of the League would be marching through, and perhaps even the other Grand Alliance army as well.

"Now I know what everyone wants," I said. "So I just need to figure out how to win without making everyone else lose."

[*DroughtBringer*](#)

Go vote!

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

Zard

This is the best chapter I've read in a long time. A lot of times this story feels like it's stepping to the side and doing fancy spins, not stepping up and building momentum.

Barely any story makes conversation and opinions powerful, entertaining and valuable by themselves. The Guide tries a lot, almost all the time. When it pulls it off, it's something else.

ruduen

I think it's been a while since we've had that much introspection into what a story might entail. (We've had some recent thoughts on things as they unfolded, but much less speculation.) It's somehow comforting to be back to diving into just what the narrative currently presents.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm!

Took Cat long enough to notice all these things ♥ ♥ ♥

WuseMajor

Yeah, I figured she was doing it on purpose.

stevenneiman

There's kind of a sad meta-narrative as well. Tariq described Cat as the specter of Good's failings come back to haunt it, and he was right in the wrong way. Cat isn't a punishment for Good's complacency in only sending second-rate heroes to die trying to overthrow Praes. Instead, she's a punishment for Good's arrogance, and for the cycle of closing every reasonable option on a villain and then claiming that they were proven right when villains take the unreasonable option. And in trying to atone for the first failure Tariq adds layer upon layer to the second.

The extra irony is that if Tariq was willing to see past the blinders of Good and Evil he would recognize that Malicia's victory would mean peace, prosperity and a high standard of living, and he would have focused on guiding Procer to a more peaceful, less expansionist stability where they did their job in keeping back the dead and ratlings rather than invading Callow as often as Praes and with the same results.

[Liliet](#)

I think Cat's the first time the pattern of 'forcing villains to take the unreasonable option' becomes explicit.

It's something that has locked Praes into what it is, not leaving them an option better than madness on the global scale. But each madman still had choices, and it would take a

very, very close look to understand that the options were bad and worse. A close look that Good wasn't taking.

Now Black has managed to somewhat... externalize it. Spread the misery around. Passing on the dilemma to a *Callowan* makes it visible from the outside for the first time ever.

I'm not really *blaming* heroes and the House of Light for this pattern having shaken out into what it was in the first place, I guess is my point. They did not have a vantage point to see it from.

I'm going to love seeing their reaction now 😊

antoninjohn

So even now the Grey Pilgrim is trying to kill Cat instead of accepting her offers to work together to stop the Dead King and bring peace, well that story probably won't work out well for him

Caerulea

To be fair, with what he knows he has a damn good reason. Cat is right that if she dove into her power as the sovereign of the moonless nights, she would be near unkillable, and not the kind of opponent you are merely defeated by. She would be similar to the dead king, but with Fairy Gates, which are a massive force multiplier. It would be devastating, and even the smallest chance of it happening must be planned for. So he starts preparing to stop her if he needs to. I think it ends mostly fine.

Stormblessed

Not just that I feel. We don't know how strong triumphant was, just that she ground the whole continent under her foot. The Dead King is horrible but at the very least limited. If his worst fears come to pass Car could be a great deal worse than the Dead King, some kind of monstrous amalgamation of both the Dead King and Triumphant.

SITB

To build on your comment, Tariq is right to fear her. She mentioned in this chapter the ways to gather power to crush the Grand Alliance, but this is just window dressing. Look at how he described Cat 'the sin of our indolence returned to haunt us'; Cat is their failures coming back to haunt them, the story is on her side!

She won't be the Dead King or Dread Empress Triumphant seeking to bring the west under her rule, she will come to seek redress and retribution for the west's faults.

Hell, she could possibly even say something like "I am the punishment of the Gods, if you had not committed great sins, the Gods would have not sent a punishment like me upon you" and conceivably get away with this.

Fayhem

My brain is now combining Akua's tendency to direct inappropriate endearments towards Cat and the quote you used into a whole new take on Catherine the Hun. Why am I like this?

caoimhinh

And also, Cat has something none of the other villains has: she can play the role of Heroine in stories. That gives her an edge the others simply don't have and makes her dangerous.

Rey d`Tutto

Framing. To put within a frame.
Viewpoint of the narrative.
Villainous Callowan Hero.

Someguy

That his every action will turn Cat into a successful Second Coming of Triumphant would be the greatest irony.

ahd

Gods Below might be playing 6D chess. Cat wants to not be the second iteration of Triumphant, so they will use the Pilgrim to take away every other choice from her.

haihappen

That makes a cruel, and ironic, sort of sense to me.
Cat: "I will not champion your cause and will work to end this game you are playing!"
Above+Below, in an eerie double voice: "Yeah, we will see about that."

NerfContessa

Well,... If they had done that earlier it might have 2orked.

Liliet

Did she actually make that offer to him? I don't recall her actually saying it at any point.

haihappen

Before the Battle of the Camps, also during.

[Liliet](#)

To stop the Dead King? 0.0

RanVor

She offered him an alliance against Praes. It doesn't require a big leap of logic to extrapolate that she'd be willing to ally against Keter as well.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, that much is obvious enough. It's in her interest, it's even in Kairos's. But that doesn't tell him what she'll want in return.

He's talked to her when she was desperate and begging, fallen back to the bare minimum she couldn't fold on.

Right now she's in a strong position – stronger, Catherine's realizing, than she'd thought. She could easily say 'anyway you can't make me abdicate if I don't want to'. If she wanted to, she could fucking conquer Procer and demand tribute – all in return for help against Dead King, because for all that she's ""willing"" to lend it, she can afford to withhold it and Procer cannot afford for her to.

Oh, in *reality*, Cat cannot. Between the drow and the dwarves, she's committed to this, and she's as desperate as she ever was to make things go just so. But that's the shatranj board on the ground, not the one he's playing on™. And Catherine's not making it known that she's desperate for one specific outcome, because she does need the leverage: it's just that she needs it for Liesse Accords, not for... any number of villainous plans she *could*, in the eyes of the Pilgrim, plausibly have.

And now that the crows are barring him from reading her, there's no way for him to know she doesn't, no matter what she says. He wasn't particularly good at reading people and estimating them based on their words and actions and general personality when he was young, before Behold, and since then he'll only have lost the skill. He hasn't needed it in what, fifty years? His talks with Catherine might as well be a text chat for all of how much he can tell how sincere she is from them.

And the worst-case scenario is *very very very bad*.

RanVor

Yes, because the current scenario is so very, very good.

[Liliet](#)

It is.

And he has no idea, because during the peace conference, Cat squandered the chance to come clean and offer genuine and honest and open alliance in favor of a play that ended up handing him the beginning of a victorious pattern of three, and her a soulless body.

RanVor

Procer in flames, with the Dead King invading on a scale unseen for centuries. A principality almost burned to the ground by the Legions of Terror. The Tyrant of Helike playing his games in the Grand Alliance's backyard. Half of the Ashuran fleet gone. The Tenth Crusade crumbling, completely out of control.

Think again.

[Liliet](#)

The dwarves and the drow poised to strike at the Dead King's back. Praes too embroiled in its own games to be a threat to anything outside its borders, and Callow standing guard and providing buffer for if that changes, as it always has. The most powerful villain on the continent actively looking out for the rest of it and trying to prevent bloodshed. The second most powerful one still acknowledging the necessity of not losing to Dead King and playing political/diplomatic games rather than slaughtering his neighbours. The First Prince of Procer actually a mostly-competent person who cares about her realm and greater good both.

It could be so, so, so much worse.

RanVor

And all of this would have happened way earlier (or wouldn't have needed to happen at all), with significantly less bloodshed, if not for Tariq and

his oh-so-flawless heuristics. He's essentially become his own biggest obstacle.

Also, competent Cordelia? Are you sure we're reading the same web serial?

[Liliet](#)

She's not quite competent *enough* for the clusterfuck going on. But she did end the fucking civil war, which requires... quite a level of competence. It's just that it's like...

an actual dog <<< stupid person < average person < average ruler << Cordelia Hasenbach < a person who could actually manage the situation properly in her position

RanVor

She's not quite competent enough to *not start* the clusterfuck that is currently going on. And she did end the civil war mostly by winning battles and making promises. She does have some skill in diplomacy, but ultimately she hasn't achieved anything she didn't promptly fuck up.

BTW, how is it that not knowing things is not an excuse for Juniper, but it is for Cordelia and Tariq?

[Liliet](#)

I mean if I were in charge of them the same way Cat's in charge of Juniper, I'd lecture them more than Cat did her :3

Note how Cat yelling at Juniper at length didn't actually lead to her saying "nevermind I was wrong the Hellhound was a talentless hack all along"

RanVor

I can't help but notice you haven't answered my question...

[Liliet](#)

What question? Why it's an excuse for one but not the others?

The answer is, your premise is wrong. Depending on how you parse the word 'excuse', it's either an excuse for all of them (their level of competence

is high but not *that* high), or not an excuse for any of them (their level of competence is high but not *that* high, and that is *not high enough*)

RanVor

My premise is, Juniper is shat on for making mistakes due to limited knowledge, while Cordelia and Pilgrim get a pass, despite their mistakes being much more numerous and disastrous.

[Liliet](#)

Whoever's shitting on Juniper is wrong?

RanVor

You know what, nevermind. I give up. I was a fool to think I could convince you.

[Liliet](#)

Convince me of what, to shit on characters who've made mistakes out of insufficient information? Yeah, that's a hard sell

RanVor

That there is this annoying thing called responsibility for one's actions, and it gives a total amount of zero fucks about your reasons.

[Liliet](#)

Responsibility, yes.
How does it work, in your eyes?

RanVor

How does it work in YOUR eyes? Because it seems like it doesn't work at all.

[Liliet](#)

In my eyes it works like how Bard characterized Black – suck it up and keep trying / try again. If you know what you did wrong, do it different this time. Keep going until you no longer can.

Amadeus strikes me as a character who understands responsibility possibly the best – or one of the best – in this story.

RanVor

"It was one thing to make a mistake; it was another thing to keep making it."
– Jodi Picoult, *Handle with Care*

Aside from the fact that what you described has very little to do with responsibility in the sense I meant it (and only slightly more with responsibility in general), the quote above sums up 90% of my problem with Pilgrim quite nicely. If he just made a mistake, it wouldn't be a big deal. However, not only does he keep repeating that mistake again and again, making things worse for everybody with every iteration, he is *praised* for doing so. He refuses to acknowledge that his approach failed and instead of adjusting his strategy, he tries to brute-force it over and over, with increasingly disastrous consequences.

Is it really too much to ask for Pilgrim to pull his head out of his ass, realize how much harm he has caused and back off, maybe returning later with a different approach? Like, you know, a reasonable person whose actions end up producing results opposite to intended?

Also, it occurred to me that Pilgrim is the perfect example of what's wrong with the idea of preemptive strike. Acting against a perceived threat, you often end up creating a very real threat you are not prepared to deal with.

[Liliet](#)

I think the main factor in our disagreement here is, I don't think the problems in the situation are Pilgrim's fault to the degree that you think they are. I think he was at the mercy of circumstances, and he can't looking back see a single moment where he could actually *fix* the situation.

Partially this is because PART OF THE PROBLEM is incomplete information that he has. We the readers from bird's eye view can invent all kinds of hypotheticals about how things could have gone better, but he doesn't know the facts that are part of our view on it.

He still doesn't *know* about most of the mistakes he's made. Most of the information he didn't have, he *still doesn't*. In fact, he has a smaller percentage of total necessary information now than

he did at first, because now Cat's not letting him read her, either.

He is making *rational* based on incomplete information. I would disagree that these decisions have made things that much worse / are making things that much worse either. He could have done better if he had had fully complete information, true, but I'm seeing him doing fairly well with what he has.

- actually talking to the terrifying Black Queen and walking away with a largely correct impression of her and a terms of engagement agreement
- seizing upon her willingness to be reasonable and attempt to build a heroic story to follow through with it and guide her to actual redemption
- after the chance for diplomatic approach is thoroughly demolished by the Arch-Heretic thing (he has no idea how determined Catherine is to do this diplomatically, she didn't exactly tell him), he goes back to Procer to try to fix what he can
- successfully stops a rampaging villain from burning any more farmland / plunging any more of the Principate heartlands into chaos in the face of invasion
- in the face of having no idea what's going to go wrong next, makes himself a universal tool that will help in dealing with 90% of possible threats (unfortunately not Kairos)

I'm seeing Grey Pilgrim as fairly competent and reasonable. His weak points are largely evaluating/predicting people, so he acts based on "hope for the best prepare for the worst" heuristic wrt those.

RanVor

It doesn't really matter, because I no longer have any interest in discussing this matter with you. You have officially depleted my reserves of patience.

[Liliet](#)

Fair.

Isaac Martinez

We can look at the story in another way, if we look Catherine as Indolence's Reaction. When Tariq met our Queen, he should have seen already that Cat is not a old style villain, but he

plans as if that were the case in the Battle of Camps, and when he is taken as hostage he doesn't react to Cat's Pain (Indolence), and Cat reacts and leave.

In the end, Tariq never shows Mercy to the enemy.

[Fayhem](#)

> In the end, Tariq never shows Mercy to the enemy.

It should be noted that it is canon that Mercy and Compassion are separate Choirs. I think that provides some very useful context on what exactly Mercy means to Tariq/the Choir backing him.

RanVor

I honestly cannot imagine how mercy could work without compassion and not be a horribly warped parody of itself.

[Fayhem](#)

I mean, it's not like it's a coincidence that Tariq gets classed under "old monster" more often than not. Heck, I mostly like the guy and I'll still admit there's a good bit of truth there – that was kind of my point honestly. I dunno if you read it, but I did a whole long thing a while back about how the Choirs defining virtue exclusively in the terms of their own narrow slice of it very strongly tends to produce warped results (which means a hero swearing to a specific Choir can be reasonably described as essentially a power boost in exchange for some dubious moral side effects – sounds almost familiar, doesn't it?). And when Mercy is defined solely and exclusively as "minimizing suffering" then it's basically just utilitarianism without any brakes and that will pretty much always take you to some real morally uncomfortable places in a hurry.

RanVor

I did indeed read it, although I didn't realize you were the person who wrote it.

Well, Tariq himself isn't completely devoid of compassion. The Choir behind him on the other hand... Let's just say this train of thought can get really terrifying, really fast.

[Fayhem](#)

Yeah, having different usernames in different places can def make it harder to track that stuff lol. And I

think I'd say I'm about 1000% in agreement with everything in your second paragraph there!

kinigget

Yes

Exactly

That's the point

danh3107

This is a very weird but interesting chapter, it manages to progress the story but not really progress the situation the characters are in. huh

Also cat needs to stop going full Black, when you go full Black you can never go back.

[Liliet](#)

Wait until she starts saying "I am exactly as expendable as any other person", that's when you sound the alarm.

Like, she already more or less figures that. But when she starts SAYING it,

Novice

I see what you did there (͡° ͜ʖ ͡°)

Aotrs Commander

On the contrary, I think going Black is absolutely the best option and she should do it more. Hell, Black should go Black more.

(Pilgrim, on the other hand should just go die in a fire...)

RanVor

Dying in a fire is a waste, he should go die from the blades of the dead. Preferably right now.

[Alex Straughan](#)

Or better yet, how about the zombies of all the children he's murdered eat him alive.
Because you know, he murders children.

TwilightGlimmer

Eh, Pilgrim's a lot like Black in practice but he doesn't have as much fun at it

[Liliet](#)

He also doesn't have suicidal depression so I'd say it shakes out about even 😊

[Javvies](#)

Interesting.

Huh. I think the Alliance has been misinterpreting Augur's warning about the fall of Procer if they just let Cat walk away. The threat isn't Cat or internal revolt, the threat is the gates and the Arcadia/Creation boundaries getting ripped open and the Alliance not being able to respond in time.

IDKWhoitis

I want to imagine words about not being cryptic, and possibly a couple of slaps and punches, will follow Cat meeting Augur. I just hope Cat doesn't see her as a physical manifestation of fate, because we know what Cat promised to do to those.

Someguy

I just want to see what would happen if Augur takes a good look at Sve Noc with her Ornithomancy.

caoimhinh

Cordelia: Agnes, what do you see?

Augur: Two black crows flying north.

Cordelia: What does that mean?

Augur: That Procer is saved, but you are screwed.

Or else a string of incoherent words about doom, woe, terror, nightmare and other similar words, since that seems to be what everyone sees when gazing at Sve Noc, hahaha.

[Liliet](#)

I love the first version.

MagnaMalusLupus

Alternatively either

"Night is coming."

Or

"The Night is (ever)dark, and full of terrors."

konstantinvoncarstein

Two weeks to wait! 😊

Panic

The crows take flight, to continue the fight. But now all I see is endless Night... I am not good with rhymes.

IDKWhoitis

I've heard the Augar actually enjoys Bird Watching.

IDKWhoitis

I'm betting there is some horrifying Gate trip incoming. Reunion with Masego and Archer. And probably a very scary talk with Grey about temptations and threats.

Because let's be honest, when's the last time Cat did diplomacy without some threats.

ninegardens

Gate trip!
Bring Grey with you.

Break the pattern of three with a "Mutual victory".

Everything will be nice.

Also, god damn, if Cat is right, Pilgrim is a terrifying, effective, and sympathetic monster.

Jarthon1

There is no evil more terrifying than a good man who is willing to do terrible things for the right reasons.

[Liliet](#)



(Does this describe Carrion Lord or Grey Pilgrim? Why not both!)

MagnaMalusLupus

>There are hardly any excesses of the most crazed psychopath that cannot easily be duplicated by a normal kindly family man who just comes in to work every day and has a job to do.

-Sir Terry Pratchett, Small Gods

caoimhinh

Hmm, if the army of Callow crossed with 40 thousand soldiers shouldn't their numbers be much less than 37 thousand after the losses they incurred during this campaign?

Well, it will be interesting how the next battle plays out, it certainly isn't on the battlefield anyone expected. It makes me wonder where is Indrani since Cat sent her to find Masego without any clue but apparently Cat found him first. Archer might appear in there since similar Gates would be appearing across Iserre right now. She might even make a dramatic entry to save the day.

Typos found:

if it came out I was not allowing her to walk about without chains / delete the 'not'

they're swing hard / they're swinging hard

ever slope / every slope

the barest fraction of my mantle had been able to do / the barest fraction of what my mantle had been able to do

and the a knightly order / either delete 'the' or 'a'

They key / The key

burdi

but cat already thrice dead right

just like the pattern of the three, it is unlikely for creation to kill cat since she already dead for three times

or the fourth will be her rise to immortality since there is no such thing as the pattern of the four

caoimhinh

Hmm, I would argue it has only happened twice (one by William and another by Sve Noc) because Cat embracing Winter title didn't kill her, Wekesa was very wrong about that.

[Liliet](#)

There was a chapter called that.

And Cat did *die* at Liesse per se, she just didn't lose information in the process. That's the part Wekesa was wrong about, not the death itself.

Also I'm still curious wtf happened with that sword stabbing that Amadeus sent her off into the Name dream quest with way back when

ninegardens

That wasn't a death-

that was just a light stabbing!

What's a light stabbing between-

Wait.

Okay, so you know how Cat "Branded" William when she let him go, and story totally backed her up on that.

And... the last time she saw Black, she stabbed him, said "Come back when you a better person", and hasn't seen him since (what did he do wrong again?).

Does that count?

Did she brand a story onto him, and is that likely to overthrow the story Bard tried to brand on him back in the free cities?

Am I correct in suspecting that either/both of these count?
Has this been discussed before?

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

I am pretty sure that happened both between Bard and Black, and Cat and Black.

I also can't unsee them as working in the same direction.

(Feels like a sin, doesn't it? / Become a better person, or else)

(Also, I'm pretty sure Cat stabbing Black at that point was the finishing of a pattern he'd deliberately started way back when, discharging the entire death flag collection he'd gotten in an impressive display of "if you treat someone well don't be too surprised when it backfires on you and they refuse to kill you")

[Liliet](#)

Also what Black did wrong was... ok hear me out: I'm pretty sure he set up the situation in Liesse to break Cat's trust deliberately, to advance the story of the student eventually turning on their mentor. He'd just seen Cat ardently refuse to accept the possibility of his death, and instead of going "you know what maybe surviving is a worthwhile thing to try after all" he went "she's wrong and I'll make her see it with blunt force if I have to".

Amadeus is convinced he's a bad person. It's what he'd told to Cat before ("I am the most selfish person you will ever meet"), it's what he told her in Reunion ("I saw it in your eyes the first time we met: the best of me without the worst of me"), it's what he told her at the post-Liesse conversation ("Not that I consider it to improve the principle of behavior").

His position is "I am a bad person therefore I deserve to die and I am not including personal survival in my long-term goals and never have".

Cat's response is basically a slap upside the head and a "If you're a bad person because you're doing things you know to be bad things HAVE YOU CONSIDERED TRYING TO *NOT DO THEM*"

Amadeus: "nah if you want me to not betray your trust you'll just have to kill me"

Catherine: "nice try now go and fucking fix it yourself" - kicks him out-

Jarthion1

I very much agree with you on every point except Black believing that he needs to die BECAUSE he is evil. His actions are totally mechanical and morality is just another tool for him. He may believe that he needs to die, but if he does than it's likely because that is the sacrifice that will win his game (almost certainly by pushing cat in a particular direction)

[Liliet](#)

"His actions are totally mechanical", huh.

I keep wondering how people think this works. Is there a program inputted into him by an external programmer that tells him what to do? Did he roll dice for what outcome he wants? Did he get it handed from above (lol) as a divine decree?

Amadeus is *motivated* by something. Even if it's at this point just pride and desire to achieve the goal he's set, that's still fucking emotion! An amoral one, but *perfectly mechanical* is an *absurd* premise. Not just "wrong for this particular character", it's absurd. Self-defeating. Amadeus is not just a machine, because every machine needs an operator to set it in motion – who's the operator of his, if not he himself?

Kairos has called him out on losing sight of his goal, failing to keep his eyes on the prize, allowing his goals to indeed boil down to pride and achieving what he's set out to achieve for the sake of achievement.

But he's still the same person who'd once set the goal. He changed, sure, trauma molds and shapes people, moral trauma in particular – doing things they do not want to think of themselves as doing. But person + trauma = person, it doesn't categorically change the state, unless it's straight to corpse. But Amadeus is alive yet.

Like... I'm not even going to argue about what emotions we've seen him express, how we've seen him react, the philosophy he espouses, not at this point. I'm just pointing out that *by definition* his actions cannot be totally mechanical. It's an oxymoron.

A sacrifice that will win the game. What IS the game?

Qwormuli

Yup. Or at least mostly. The currently mentally vacant ragdoll might ACT with mechanical game theory logic disregarding feelings (of his and others) most of the time and even priding himself upon it, but that doesn't mean that he doesn't feel and want. While deciding on the most meta beneficial course of action, he does have the impulses others do, but just ignores them and locks them in a box in favor of the greater drive of his -the one that made him the Black Knight (also a human want).

But, that's the but. He does feel, but he doesn't strategically act or plan like he does (towards the goal that he, the thinking and feeling human being has set, yes), so Jarthion1 isn't totally wrong, either. That is what his soulscape projects, the man made into a clockwork. His set of internal values are inherently intrinsic and the arms of the clock tick. An oxymoron, yes, but remember that the man behind it is self admittedly hypocritical. And I agree, that that hypocrisy sometimes drives him towards his own grave, because to him he NEEDS to be an unimportant piece.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think he's as good at reducing himself to a machine making perfectly mechanical judgements towards the initially-set goal as he's trying to be / as you think he is.

I love Amadeus, but he's just... not that good at it. He's still human, and still acts and thinks and makes decisions like a human.

A human who's trying very hard to be a [perfect rationalist](#), but does NOT succeed all the way.

Ali Khan

And even if you do argue that winter killed cat, that just means sve Nov didn't kill her and she was resurrected anyway at that point.

She's been resurrected twice. There won't be a third.

haihappen

Things happen in Threes, or only work on the Third Time, aka, the "Rule of Three".

Threes: A thing works three times, not after. I think the Rise aspect was an example of that?

Third Time('s the Charm):

1) An attempted action will only work on the third try, e.g. The underdog protagonist archer that shoots 3 arrows will do crappy on the first too, and after brief introspection, will shoot true on the third.

2) An action performed in reaction to an event when it the event happens the third time will always succeed, e.g., the archery type Named that attacked the dragon in the Vale.

3) "There will not be a Third Time" is only valid if 2 actions before had no consequences, making the third fail by action of another party, and as such can be seen as manifestation of (2) from the opposite viewpoint. This usually applies to a feat that a character can perform readily, and will not work on the same enemy/obstacle a third time. This is a variation of "It Only Works Once"

I can definitely see Cat dying one more time.

Panic

Not Everything is a pattern of Three. That has been a official thing two time so far. Cat and Williams whole joust and what this is shaping up to be. But I agree. Catrine The Thrice Risen sounds much better than Catrine The Four Times Risen

[Mental Mouse](#)

I was thinking Cat would have 9 lives....

[Liliet](#)

TOOK YOU LONG ENOUGH TO NOTICE CAT.

Wow this analysis is a relief. We finally have proper perspective for this shit.

Also, Catherine Foundling is wonderful and amazing and EVERYONE IS GOING TO WIN ♥ ♥ ♥

Andrew Mitchell

So lovely to have it all laid out so nicely. The analysis certainly filled in a lot of missing pieces for me.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm!

ninegardens

"Pilgrim. Hey. Buddy. So like... you don't want every one to die, and I know I sure as hell don't want everyone to die, and I am no longer possessed by Winter maddness, and like... I would really LOVE to get my army up north to mess with the Dead king, so how's about you help me with this whole Arcadia problem"

"Did I mention, once we beat Namesha back I'm planning to drop my army of supersoldiers on top of Keter, shuck off this Priesthood, and retire to the country side. You can read my mind- you KNOW that I'm honest."

"Also, seriously, we're about to go vs the Dead frickin' king, do you mind giving me my Black knight back so that we can aim him at some REAL enemies, Possibly even reform Pareas a little bit?"

Also, I know Cat is scared about getting murdered via redemption story... but its also worth noting that a redemption story might cost you your life, but narratively speaking, it will also BUY you a heck of a lot. As in, it could probably buy you those accords you were hoping for.

Also also, we all know that Pilgrim is messed up... do you think she could roll HIM into a redemption arc. Because that sure as hell looks like what she's done to Black.

ninegardens

"also, if I gate north, I'm happy for your armies to hitchhike with. That's like 200,000 soldiers, showing up tactically in the middle of Skulltors battle lines, *wiggles eyebrows*. I mean, you don't trust me, but seriously, have you got any better ways to get a WIN here? Cause... way we're playing at the moment, both of us are just going to lose more slowly..."

caoimhinh

The hilarity of when they negotiate Cat gating them north through Arcadia will be when they find out that she needs to have overall command of those forces for the trip to be safe for them. They are going to be royally pissed off, but can do nothing about it.

[Liliet](#)

OH MAN THIS WAS THE IDEA I HAD ALL THE WAY BACK DURING BOOK 4

PLEASE LET THIS HAPPEN

Qwormuli

Yup, I've just waited and waited for that requirement of command ruining somebody's morning royally to either a hilarious or ghastly effect.

Alegio

It would be funnier if she just dropped them near the DK and then gated back with her armies, leaving them in a desperate situation to either kill/maim the dead king or die.

Good enough story leverage against the dead king, but also against herself later as a revenge story where she is the traitorous villain.

Mikasi

ahem

What time is it, DK?

It's Hoot Droop o'Cloooooock!

[*Liliet*](#)

This depends on Cat being able to talk the crows into the 'you can read my mind' thing. Looks to me like they're rather territorial there :3

[*ahd*](#)

He's not listening. Cat must die. It is known.

[*Liliet*](#)

I like the analogy made on Discord. She's a six year old with a nuke. It doesn't matter what she's saying, *she needs to lose the fucking nuke.*

[*ahd*](#)

Fear is like that. (:

Sylwoos

Except that she already detonated the nuke and is now only directing the explosion.

The sisters got the apotheosis he feared and now stand on Cat shoulder. Even if she die, those two are not going anywhere. The drows are coming to the surface lead by two goddess made of night and Winter regardless of what happen between Cat and The Pilgrim. Loosing Cat at this point would

be disastrous, because she's the one catalyzing that mess in the good direction.

[ahd](#)

But Saint would feel better about everything after Cat was dead – for the months necessary for her to realise that the war was lost and the West was gone and the Enemy had everything and her hands had chopped down the last hope of preventing that.

And the Peregrine could put aside that annoying, all-consuming, obsessively paranoid fear about the Black Queen suddenly changing her entire set of goals and priorities and focus on losing the war with maximum style and minimum hope of saving anything from the wreck.

Surely it's not reasonable to ask them to be any better than that; *surely* expecting them to do the same amount of thinking as this half-taught Callowan girl is a bridge too far. They're *heroes*.

Jarthon1

Fear can be a very powerful motivator. In this case that fear is, if not justified, then at least rational. She said herself that if she had no other path than following in Triumphant and the Dead Kings footsteps is an option that she would take. The consequences of this are likely a victory for evil on the continent of Calernia. Massive loss of life on all sides that only eventually leads to an all out war between the fully evil and actualized Cat and the Dead king as the only two remaining surface powers on the continent. We know from the Everdark ark that fights between two forces of evil without any intervention from good is seriously bad news. The Grey Pilgrim may even know that this is an unlikely course for Cat to take, but it is a legitimate possibility that would be on the scale of or maybe even worse than WWII and the holocaust on earth. He can and should (from what we know about his character and morality) take any and all actions necessary to prevent this situation.

RanVor

Yes, except he's dooming Calernia by doing so.

[Liliet](#)

Tariq has good reasons to be wary of Cat.

And expecting anything of Saint... uhhhhh... ehhhh... how do I put this...

She's Miko Miyazaki -_-

RanVor

Tariq's good reasons have gotten thousands killed so far. How many more have to die before they stop being good?

[*Liliet*](#)

Arguing from Consequence is a fallacy. Retrospect is 20/20, that doesn't mean the basic heuristics he used are Horribly Stupid / Morally Wrong / whatever people are arguing. They were not well-calibrated to this situation, *because he's eighty and this is the first time he's encountered something like this not only in person but probably even in story.*

RanVor

Road to hell is paved with good intentions.

I'll put it this way: if a person has good reason to believe their neighbor is a terrorist, and go to great lengths to expose said neighbor, inadvertently causing deaths of several unrelated people, only to find out too

RanVor

...late that they were wrong, is the person in question innocent?

[*Liliet*](#)

That's what Cat knows.

Tariq has no idea.

RanVor

Well, at least that explains why Tariq has been spending his entire screentime fucking up everything he touched.

[*ahd*](#)

Fear's like that.

Personally, I would like to see a Peregrine POV chapter where he is going over this reasoning from his end, to see how much

of it Cat and Akua got right. Maybe while he's sitting in the ashes trying to figure out where it went wrong, and why.

Halinn

It went wrong when he slighted a Callowan. He's paying the Long Price.

Sylwoos

Grey Pilgrim: Calernia cannot survive a second Dead King

Masego: Hold my beer.

mordered

Best comment in this thread

[Mental Mouse](#)

Here, have this Internet. But seriously: Yeah Pilgrim is a pretty good schemer, but Masego is something big that he probably has no clue about. Modulo Choir info of course, but given the level of play here, it's unclear what *they* know about him or his goals. The question is, can Cat deal with it, with an army at her back?

Mammon

There is one other option, one that Cat cannot consider as she doesn't know the heaven's plans like we do and is set in certain beliefs. (And which may not be the case at all considering the very title of this book series.) Tariq fears that she will redefine good and evil as the ultimate final ploy to get the last victory.

How often can a villain win? As often as they want, until they're stopped. But how often can a villain win in a scrap against overwhelming odds while keeping in mind the ethical costs and brooding over them in between adventures, before stories will turn her into a hero? How often can a villain be a justified reactionary force against the leaders of the good guys being the aggressors and initial villains?

Why is Cat a villain at all? Because she was the Squire, trained by the Black Knight. But from a different perspective, wouldn't the man who liberated and fought for equal rights of two species that have been enslaved for centuries, who fought to end the bloodshed and villainry of his kingdom and others alike, who against normal people always prefers to peacefully subjugate and recruit, be a villain? Would a Squire from the good-aligned Callow really be a villain by default, when trying to protect and liberate Callow?

Meanwhile, the part that Cat doesn't know, the heavens are planning complete continent and status quo destruction. If opposed by the right person the right way, that's a villain's plot to be thwarted by a hero. Meanwhile, the choirs are old relics controlling the world as tyrants based upon times when slavery was still good, and they've been objective villains every time in Cat's adventures. Meanwhile, Tariq is a king-killer. He knows that with the right push and the right pivot, down the road Cat can be a hero that turns the entire board and all the stories around.

It has already been defined that good and evil can change over the centuries. It has already been established that the heavens and the good are none really 'good' and pure no more. The Ebb and Tide making all others hate the Principality, Levants being war-craving barbarians, etc.

Meanwhile, Callow is practically at war with all the active evil forces; the Dead King, the Free Cities, Preas. But the neutral dwarves are now allied to them (and no longer to the Principality), and the former drow are now neutrals by centuries of isolation from the course of political events, who assume a roll of the greater good by sealing the Dead King.

Looking at the playing pieces, the northern principalities are definately still good. Fighting the ratlings kept them good, and the first prince is currently one of theirs unlike all the first princes of previous generations. That's one piece on the board perfect for this move of redefining who's good and who's not.

And then there's the Hierarch, a piece literally able to make this redefinment of Good and Evil stick lawfully. Accompanied by a Tyrant that corrupts and exposes all the villains amongst the good guys.

My prediction: *Cat sneaks up on Tariq, says Joink and snatches the hero title away from the good guys to save the world and overthrow the tyrannical Choirs in their almost cartoonish plot to destroy the continent.*

[Liliet](#)

The heavens aren't planning shit. The heavens aren't even interfering to make it clear to the House of Light which side of the war they're backing.

Saint's a solo lunatic, possibly egged on by Bard for Bard's own purposes.

[Daniel E](#)

I'll just throw this out there for everyone who didn't; *ahem* *nods* "May she never return".

haihappen

That would be the ultimate twist: The Bard setting up all the pieces on the board to produce a second Triumphant.

Speaking of Which:

What does the Bard want? What is it's End Game? No one knows, maybe not even the Bard. Probably not the Bard.

Only One thing for sure: The bard plays a game, and Cat very much wants to flip the table, board and all.

Riaan Theunissen

Considering that the Bard has been the tool of both Above and Below for so long... I expect that she either wants freedom or to totally derail the plans of whichever side denied her the choice of joining.

Qwormuli

I think that she wants out. Whether it's by ending the world or without it ending is pending.

Andrew Mitchell

IMO the Bard's role is to keep the game going forever. Sometimes working for Good, sometimes Evil, but always stirring the pot to keep the stories going.

As to what she wants personally? I suspect that she doesn't want to do it anymore but she can't find a way out.

Alshain

Id love for her to return and help Cat as an advisor. That would be a good board flip move.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also: It's a pity for Cat that she sent off Archer before she found out where Masego was....

I suspect she's going to become a brick joke... maybe as Masego's emissary.

Alegio

1. May she never return

2. That sounds like a neat plan so... Come on Cat, just do it! It's not an evil empire if you treat your people well and keep the ritual sacrifices to a bare minimum.

[Fayhem](#)

My issue with the term "evil empire" is that it's redundant. Empire is evil. The core of the concept is forcibly putting disparate peoples under a banner they didn't accept, and there just isn't a version of that where it doesn't regularly produce atrocities of varying scale as a byproduct of the maintenance of that power structure. There's a reason everybody on Calernia hates Procer, and that reason boils down to it keeps attempting empire.

RanVor

Except in reality it's more complicated than that. Many empires, both historical and fictional, provided safety and stability to the people under their rule. It is often more beneficial to join the empire than to fight it. Of course, it greatly depends on how it is governed, but empires that keep people in check only by sheer military force tend to fall very quickly.

[Fayhem](#)

It's certainly correct that history is a large and very complicated place. I don't think there's much of anything you can say in a sentence or a handful of sentences that's going to be 100% true about history at large. It's true that there have certainly been a number of times/places where some version of "well, they'll brutalize you if you try to leave or make too many of your own decisions, but as long as you don't feel like any of that it's better than getting turned into ground beef by some barbarian raiders or that even worse empire across the river or something" is the smallest evil on offer. It's true that very few empires stand on the mere use of force alone. It's also true that even fewer respond to "dissension" (thinking for yourself) and "rebellion" (wanting to rule yourselves) with anything else. I don't think it's unreasonable to consider that morally problematic at the minimum; or, you know, evil.

Put another way: not every empire is King Leopold in the Congo. Pretty much every empire insists on the right to become that if they ever feel like it, because that's what it means when you don't accept the concept of the people you rule having a say in how they're governed or in whether you rule them at all. I'm not good with that.

Democracies are certainly fully capable of some real fucked-up shit even when they're not engaging in projecting their own version of empire (see: Bellerophon, for a relevant fictional example), but I still pretty strongly believe that it is inherently a superior form of government in the general sense. The kind of monarchies that are what are realistically on offer on Calernia (to bring this back towards the Guide) are pretty goddamn far from what I'd

consider ideal, but when they're ruling over their own respective peoples who generally accept their legitimacy that's a damn sight better than when any of them go out and start trying to murder their way into an empire.

Not sure if this actually stayed on point the whole way through, but I'm almost at the end of my shift and I don't really have the brain cycles left to edit this. Here's hoping it made sense!

[Liliet](#)

I would say: Good Empire is an oxymoron (hi Procer yes we would like to have a discussion), but there's still distance between 'meh Empire' and full on 'Evil Empire' XD

There's a lot of intermediate steps between what empires inevitably are and fucking Praes.

"Evil" vs "Evil Evil" so to speak D

[Fayhem](#)

That's a fair distinction! There's definitely a difference between empire as "this concept inherently requires morally defunct actions to establish and maintain it" vs empire as "did you guys paint numbers past 10 onto your Evil Dial"; e.g., Rome, where they pretty regularly committed atrocities but usually had good-for-the-times governance for those under their rule + most of the people they were fighting weren't real nice either vs. (infamously) the Nazis and pretty often the Soviets (especially under Stalin) IRL.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

Qwormuli

I'd say evil vs Evil, but in this particular place that has different connotations...

[Liliet](#)

yeah lmao
ah, terminology ;u;

[Alex Straughan](#)

It's been stated many times that Cat can't kill Tariq. It's not quite true though.

If she actually exposed the many unforgivable crimes he's committed even Levant would turn on him.

Even classic villains would be jealous of his Evil resume.
Killed family? Check
Abandoned loved ones? Check
Murdered entire innocent villages for power? Check
Broken his word? Check
Used a magical plague on his own allies? Check
Burned thousands of people alive? Check
This is just we know about.

[Liliet](#)

Wait, that last one?

Also you're double counting at least one lmao

[Liliet](#)

(and have a really fucking wild definition of 'for power')

RanVor

Actually, just murdering the Holy Seljun would probably be enough to turn Levant on him. Shame Cat doesn't know about it.

Qwormuli

No it wouldn't. In essence he IS the holy Seljun and the nation would be willing to murder him on the spot, if Tariq started fancying the seat. Historically, Seljun was the closest seplacement to pilgrim. That now exists.

RanVor

No, he isn't. The original Grey Pilgrim was the first Holy Seljun of Levant, and the royal line is descended from him. But it has since become its own position, and I do not believe Tariq is the second Grey Pilgrim ever.

Qwormuli

"The Lady of Tartessos discreetly made the Mark of Mercy with her fingers, as he did, for while she might be vicious wretch even she knew the respect due to the living breath of the Pilgrim's Blood. Even out on the outskirts of the Brocelian Forest it was known that the man who should be the Holy Seljun of Levant was not the one sitting the Tattered Throne." -Interlude: Congregation I

Is this enough of a proof? A character saying in-story, that it is an ubiquitous agreement across the country, that Pilgrim is the Seljun that should be?

konstantinvoncarstein

- 1: Killed family? Check
- 2: Abandoned loved ones? Check
- 3: Murdered entire innocent villages for power?
- 4: Broken his word? Check
- 5: Used a magical plague on his own allies? Check
- 6: Burned thousands of people alive?

1: Only one member, who would have started an hopeless war, wich would have caused thousands of senseless deaths. It was the only reason for it, and absolutely not a villainous one.

2: Yes, because he had a greater call. So, a typical heroic characteristic.

3: For power? Have you read the story? He did it to capture Amadeus. Okay, it was horrible and inexcusable, but it is clearly not for his own benefit, and more for the common good.

4: Yes, and inexcusable. He makes it impossible to ever trust him.

5: Cfr 3

6: When? I honestly don't remember.

So I don't think he is villainous per se. More of an anti-hero, or as Catherine described herself, "the one prick in every heroic band that crossed lines for the Greater Good".

[Liliet](#)

Yeah ♥

Reqqe

"and bring the finest sorcerers and warlocks of the continent into my forces"

Do we have any clues on what the difference is between a sorcerer and a warlock?

konstantinvoncarstein

Maybe "sorcerer" is another word for "mage"? And "warlock" about treating with devils?

[Liliet](#)

I think they're near-synonyms that are put together for the stylistic effect of amplification here.

[Sugar Roll](#)

"So I just need to figure out how to win without making everyone else lose."

Assassination! Kill the princes. Use the Drow for stealth. Accomplish that and the opposing army will be forced to retreat. Plus the oath to Larat is fulfilled. Two birds with one stone right there.

ninegardens

Don't even kill them. Just steal their shiny hats! I'm sure they won't have ANY authority once their shiny hats have been stolen.

Qwormuli

And Larat would have his crowns on a lemon he could suck on.

aran

I see Archer has rubbed off on you.

(But I mean we knew that.)

aran

!!!

Has Cat ever brought up trying to redeem Akua before, even subconsciously?

[Liliet](#)

Well, Akua has brought it up before.

It appears that Cat has been mulling on the issue 😊(and coming out in favor of "yeah she doesn't know what she's signing up for but that won't stop me from letting her have exactly that")

Chapter 30: Weaver; Woven

"Just as planned."

-Inscription on the front gates of the mausoleum of Dread Emperor Traitorous

The locals called them 'Mavian prayers'.

Centuries ago, before these were lands of princes and plots, what was now called Iserre had been the cradle of a war between the Arlesite *regales* of the south and the proud Alamans chieftains of the heartlands. The few respectable books written on the subject in that era – penned by Atalante or Stygian scholars, when not by Ashuran officials – agreed that the Arlesites had been on the winning side more often than not. The current lay of Iserre itself spoke to those victories: though many of its people spoke Chantant, it was Tolesian that was the most common tongue and Arlesite customs that were most kept to. The land has been won by the aggressive southerners leading warbands out of their stone keeps, Alamans tribesmen slowly forced out of their ancestral holdings by a thousand lost skirmishes. Those old tribes must have had a hundred names, but as a tapestry of tightly-knit kin and cultures they'd been colloquially known as the *Mavii*. And though eventually forced into flight further north, these Mavii had left behind the marks of what had once been a powerful and wealthy confederacy. The so-called 'Mavian prayers' were more common sight in northern Iserre, it was true, but even in the rest it was not uncommon to see long rows of grey raised stones sketching out some symbol or meaning now long lost.

Iserrans now insisted those stones had been raised as prayers to the Gods Above, each representing a passage from the Book of All Things, but the Wasteland books I'd read on the subject of Procer had expressed a great deal of skepticism on the subject. For one, the Alamans had not kept to the House of Light as it was now known. Every tribe had elected priests and kept faith to the Hallowed, as in those days they'd called the Heavens, but personal worship of great spirits and angels nominally beholdng to them had been just as prominent. Some of these spirits, I now suspected, had not been lesser gods or remnants of wilder ages but instead wandering lords and ladies of Arcadia. The suspicion had grown from the shapes I glimpsed of these raised stones, how they had been pleasing to my eye in some ineffable manner even now that I'd broken ties to Winter. It had been good as confirmed, however, when I'd found this particular 'prayer'. It was a barrow, or a tumulus as those were called in Procer, though one larger than any I'd ever heard of in Callow and crowned by a strange pattern of great stones. Three concentric rings, the stones of them interlocking to give the illusion of a full and complete circle when one stood at the foot of the barrow.

Standing at the centre of it, I'd felt a whisper of the sensation that had once filled me when shaping gates into Arcadia with the strength of Winter. This had been a thinning of boundary once, I thought, a place enshrined in some eldritch manner. Whatever power had coursed through these grounds vital and vivid in olden days had long died out, but it had left behind a taste of itself. Like a desiccated ancient riverbed, I decided. I could have run my fingers along the traces of the old currents carved into what was now stone and dry sand, charted their shapes and guessed at

the intents, but there would be no bringing back the old waters. The world had moved on, the stars were no longer aligned. Whatever patron the Mavii had once bargained with had abandoned the game for fresher ones. Still, there was something about the place that appealed to me. It would serve for what I intended.

"There," I said, idly pointing with my staff. "Gently."

The four legionaries awkwardly moved to the side. All were orcs and warrior-fit, so the large table they were moving might as well have been a sack of feathers, but amusingly enough they were having to be careful of not wrecking the table instead of labouring under the weight of it. They set it down in the snow with a muted crunch and I met their salutes with a nod before they retreated to the bottom of the barrow. Where more work would await them, for it was a veritable procession that was setting up my headquarters at the heart of this Mavian prayer. Chairs and smaller tables, along with precious maps and a library's worth of scrolls and reports. A writing desk, with quills and ink and all wax for seals. Last of all, the same sinfully comfortable armchair I'd stolen from the Count of Old Oak a few years back. Hakram had proved, as always, that he was a prince among men when he'd revealed he'd had that little piece of furniture brought along for the Proceran campaign. It'd been kept with Juniper in the First Army, whose supply train was the largest, but now that all four of the divisions of the Army of Callow were reunited I had wonderful cushions to sink in once more. Vivienne wandered in with the last of the additions, seemingly amused at the burrow I'd had assembled.

"And when it starts snowing or raining, shall you bravely retreat?" she drawled.

Leaning against one of the tall stones, long skirts swishing against her boots as she tread through the snows, Vivienne looked like some noble's daughter gone on a ride more than the former Lady-Regent of Callow. The pales shades of her blouse and dress made the laughter in those blue-grey eyes seem lighter, somehow, more innocent. *Or perhaps simply less weighed upon*, I thought.

"I've already had the outskirts of the barrow warded by our mages," I said. "For wind and quiet."

"One of Masego's patterns?" she asked, idly pushing off the stone.

"Yeah, though I'm told they can't get it to work the way he said it should," I noted. "He has a very unique definition of 'elementary knowledge', our Zeze."

That some of our senior legion mages had outright admitted the scrolls Hierophant had left on the subject of warding might as well be gibberish had served as a fresh reminder that I'd been

dealing with some of the finest mages on the continent since becoming a villain and I that I should temper my expectations accordingly. The rituals he'd taught my mages lines in the days of the Fifteenth had since become the standards large-scale sorceries of the Army of Callow, but not all of them could be used without him guiding the casting and there was no real replacement for Masego to be had. Talented mages were costly and time-consuming to raise, and unlike the Wasteland I didn't have centuries of teaching methods and arcane knowledge to dole out to raise any even should I find talented individuals – which I *couldn't*, because unlike Praesi I didn't have well-trained agents out there looking for the signs of young children with the Gift. Add onto that the fact that the Legions of Terror had picked clean the most obvious magical talents in the kingdom after the Conquest, and it was no wonder that so few of my mages were of Callowan stock.

"And for the wet wrath of the Heavens?" Vivienne idly asked, leaning over one of the tables to have a look at the scrolls stacked on it.

"I dabbled," I shrugged.

It was one of the more abstract uses of Night I'd resorted to, which had been interesting in its own way. Spinning threads of a miracle I had seen before – the bubble of stillness the Sisters had forged around me when we'd tried to gate out of Iserre – I'd crafted a sort of intangible roof and bound it to the stones. Komena had perched herself atop one long enough to call the work 'clumsily-executed but clever in principle', which was the closest she'd ever come to complimenting something I did with the Night. Vivienne hummed, and pursued it no further.

"So," she said. "Are you going to tell me why you've called a halt to the march and ordered the Hellhound to establish a fortified camp?"

Leaning on my staff, I began slowly limping around the edge of the raised stones. It was a fascinating thing, the way the interlocked slabs allowed me to glimpse down at odd angles. Revealing the sight of my armies camped below, raising palisades and digging ditches.

"Because we'll be fighting a battle soon," I said. "And there's no point in running around until we know we can win it."

"How do you know we'll be fighting a battle?" Vivienne asked, brow furrowing not in disbelief but in curiosity.

Wondering what she'd missed that I had not, how she could remedy that failure when the chance next came. It had not escaped me that she'd taken my tongue-lashing differently than Juniper. My Marshal had judged the fault to be in herself, and so that the

mending of it must come from herself as well – Juniper had turned back to books and discussions with other commanders, the familiar whetstones of her mind. Her art of war had been found insufficient, and so she would better it until this was no longer the case. Vivienne, though, had been harder to gauge. She was... learning, if there was any word that could be used for it. Looking at the successes of others like she was trying to squeeze out the essence of them to make it her own. It was a little unnerving, at times, and at others frustrating. Mostly for me, when I found the whisper of my instincts a hard thing to explain.

"Because we are headed to a pivot," I said, "and this... isn't enough. Our army and the Pilgrim's, that's too small a scale compared to the magnitude of power gathered. It might be that it starts with simply us, but it won't stay that way."

"Because the story," she slowly said, "requires more than simply us and the Pilgrim. Yet you have fought battles before where-"

I raised a hand to interrupt her.

"The breaches, Vivienne," I said. "They make a lot possible and therefore those things will happen – because once the groove is there, the possibilities will flow into it like water."

I cleared my throat.

"We can have that talk later in more detail," I added. "Council won't be for hours yet and I don't want to have repeat myself."

She nodded.

"I should see to the Jacks, anyway," Vivienne said. "Adjutant's coming to join you?"

"Eventually," I said. "I've sent him to get me a proper suit of plate fitted."

"It *has* been odd to see you limping about without one," she admitted.

I snorted and waved her away. As she walked away I propped up my staff against the side of my armchair and lowered myself onto it with a sigh of pleasure. I sat facing rings of stones with an unobstructed view, tables at my sides groaning with the documents I'd sent for. It wasn't long before I caught the slight sound of leather on snow, my only advance warning that I once more had company.

"You have the supplies?" I called out.

"And you claim you don't have the fae hearing anymore," Robber complained. "Bullshit's what I say."

My minion popped into sight, leaning against the left arm of my chair. I was rather impressed he'd made it that far without my picking up on it even when I'd known he would be coming.

"You're just getting old," I mocked, because it was always a bad idea to give so much as an inch to a goblin.

He should be around sixteen now, I thought. Goblins rarely made it beyond forty, and that was for the better bloodlines – of which Robber was not, and that was setting aside the harsh lifestyle of service in my armies. Thirty was likely when his body would start breaking down, barring rituals to stretch out his lifespan, and at that thought I suddenly regretted the quip.

"You're telling me," the Special Tribune complained. "Only cowards make it to fifteen, but I just can't seem to croak. I've had to make my peace with the fundamental truth of this world, Cat: I am simply *too good to die*."

I smothered my grin, the earlier regret chased away as quickly as it'd come.

"A heavy burden to bear," I solemnly agreed. "I know it well."

He eyed me rather skeptically.

"Didn't you die that one time?" he asked.

"I think I'm on three now," I muttered. "It's not one of my better habits."

He snickered.

"No wonder you sent me after these, then," he said.

I had sent off Special Tribune Robber on a most important errand, and as I pawed through the knapsack he'd brought me as tribute I had to concede he'd done his duty well. Two bottles of Vale summer wine were set on the table to my right while I squirrelled away the satchels of wakeleaf into the many pockets of my cloak. Save for one, which went to stuff my pipe. Passing my palm over the herbs had them lit with the slightest touch of Night, and I inhaled with pleasure before lying back in my seat.

"All right," I said. "Serve as my hands."

"I figure Archer might object," the little wretch cackled.

"You might notice I didn't send for a footrest," I warned him.

He hurriedly made elaborate apologies that coincidentally happened to insult Indrani more often than not, but I put him to work. Against three stones, three sheets of parchment were put up: one for the Grey Pilgrim, the Tyrant of Helike and the Black

Queen. Robber skittered around with ink as I dictated to him, his handwriting godsawful but honestly not that much worse than mine.

"The Pilgrim wants a draw with the Black Queen," I said. "The Pilgrim wants to preserve the Grand Alliance armies. The Pilgrim wants Procer at war on only one front."

Robber's sloppy drawing of the Peregrine as bearing a heavy mustache and a crooked nose was physically inaccurate, but in the interests of morale I allowed the misrepresentation.

"The Tyrant wants leverage on the First Prince," I said. "The Tyrant wants the means to position the Hierarch. The Tyrant wants there to be no victor in Iserre."

Kairos' illustration had him either bearing horns or with his head on fire, it was hard to tell, and I was fairly certain that his arms ended in fingers and not crablike pincers. Still, I decided it wouldn't do to infringe on the vision of so accomplished an artist.

"You going to tell me what you're after now?" Robber asked, sounding genuinely curious.

"That doesn't matter," I said. "It matters what they *think* I'm after, because that's what they'll plan according to. We're not the only ones scheming here – if we plan assuming that everyone else will be passive we'll just be wasting ink."

"So what do they think we're after?" the goblin said.

"The Black Queen wants to preserve her armies," I said. "The Black Queen wants leverage over the Grand Alliance. The Black Queen wants the soul of the Carrion Lord."

Which were all things I did want, but not necessarily in the manner they'd think I did. I wanted Black back not to make him my foremost general or use him against Malicia, but because he was my father in all but name and I'd not allow his fucking soul to be snuffed out by the blind machinations of the Pilgrim. I wanted leverage over the Grand Alliance not to force treaties advantageous to me but instead to get everyone at the table for the Liesse Accords: the intent wasn't hostile, and to be blunt if there were other ways of getting there I'd much prefer using those. As for the preservation of my armies, while it was true whether that assertion came back to bite them or not would depend on how well they'd assessed my degree of ruthlessness. I didn't want to get any of my soldiers killed if I could avoid it, but that didn't mean I'd shy from battle either if it was the best means to get what I wanted. Sadly, I was dealing with the Peregrine and a madman who'd tricked the likes of the Wandering Bard. I'd assume, at least in principle, that they had a decent read on my personality.

"And now one more parchment," I said. "The pitfalls we have to avoid, how we'd lose."

"Folding on those wouldn't be losing?" Robber asked, skeptical.

Nimble fingers flicked 'my' parchment, though mercifully there was no representation of me sketched aside from a hastily filled-in crown.

"It'd be a defeat, certainly," I said. "But put that parchment above the others, because botching any of those would be *the* defeat."

It went above Kairos, and to my amusement the goblin had to drag a chair and climb it so he could both hang it and write on it. Dipping the quill in an inkpot, he turned to me with an expectant look.

"The Grey Pilgrim cannot die," I said.

Inconvenient as that line was, it needed to be drawn. If Tariq died and we'd killed him, a death feud was struck with Levant. If Tariq died and the League killed him, eighty thousand Levantine troops would be marching east instead of west. If Tariq died by accident, well, likely I'd get blamed somehow. I pulled at my pipe and spat out a mouthful of smoke.

"The western and eastern coalitions cannot lose more than a fifth of their forces," I said.

He let out a low whistle at that. The quill scratched, though his gaze kept flicking back to me curiously. I sighed, and explained after another drag of wakeleaf was released.

"For us, a fifth would be about twenty thousand dead," I said. "For them it'd be somewhere between fifteen to thirty, depending on whether or not they can merge their armies before the fight. If either of us loses more than that, we're crippled as a field army for at least several months. We can't afford that, given the situation up north."

"And the League?" he asked.

"Can't be considered reliable in any sense so long as the Hierarch and the Tyrant are running it," I said. "Preserving its armies isn't a priority – to be honest, I'd feel safer if we carved away them by at least a fifth."

I drummed my fingers against the arm of my seat, staring at the fresh ink on the parchment. I worried my lip thoughtfully and only after a long silence did I speak.

"The Grey Pilgrim cannot have get a draw against the Black Queen," I finally said.

I could not, in the end, trust him with that kind of power over me. Not even for the sake of making an alliance. Robber finished the words with a flourish, as if a twist of the wrist could make his calligraphy look anything other than cramped and sickly. I had not exactly picked the most able of scribes.

"Finished?" Robber asked.

I nodded. He scuttled down, quite blatantly pilfering the quill and inkpot before putting away the chair.

"And now?"

"Now," I murmured, "*I think.*"

The parchments, those tidy little triumvirates of desires and pitfalls, hung in front of me but I did not need to look at them. Putting them up had served the purpose I'd had it done for, allowing me to place it all together as a structure instead of a series of abstractions. I closed my eyes, let it all fall together.

"I can leave, Boss," Robber quietly offered.

"Don't," I said, chewing on my pipe. "We're going to play a game, you and I."

"Ominous," the goblin praised.

The wakeleaf burned my throat, filled my lungs, and for a moment I felt a strange joy go through me like a spasm. I was enjoying this, I realized. This feeling, like my mind was full to burst and empty at the same time. Like I'd been filled with jagged edges, glittering pieces of madness and brilliance and that there was a solution to the crawling chaos, a twisting and winding formula that would bind it all to my will. I breathed out, smoke and heat leaving my lips, and smiled. Eyes fluttering open, I snatched the staff and hobbled to the parchment-bearing stones with feverish energy.

"Now," I said, "to a layman's eye, it might seem we're in a spot of trouble."

"If have a few of those, if you need spares," Robber offered.

"But if you look at it closely, we have angles," I continued. "For example, though the Tyrant will stab anyone who looks about to win in the back he is in fact our *ally*."

The goblin choked.

"What was that, Boss?" he said. "I can't believe I heard it right."

I knocked the butt of my pipe against barely-dry ink under the drawn caricature of the Tyrant.

"Kairos can't accomplish what he wants if there's no truce," I said. "Think about it, Robber – if his whole reason for getting into this war is getting leverage on Cordelia, then he needs room to actually *use* that leverage. He can't do that from Iserre while openly at war with her. If blunt coercion was all he needed he could have gone after her armies to force her hand, but he didn't. You know what that tells us?"

Robber's eyes narrowed in thought.

"The cripple's not willing to hand this war to the Dead King," my Special Tribune said. "He'll duck and weave, but these are matron games – a knife here and there before we all sit smiling."

"Aye," I said. "And one thing more: he needs me at that table, the wretched little bastard. If I don't agree to truce talks then all his schemes are dust. He can't make a separate peace with Cordelia, not when he's trying to twist her arm. He needs to be the kingmaker in this threesome of ours, not the sole enemy, and that means having all of us at the same conference where he can play us off each other."

"What's he mean to use the Hierarch for, anyway?" Robber asked.

"I'm not sure yet, but it doesn't matter right now," I said. "What does is the fact that the moment I try to push for a peace conference he'll back me to the hilt regardless of all other considerations. See, no victor in Iserre is only important for him insofar as it'll affect the conference that follows the fight here. Balance of power and all that. But if I make it clear that the only way he gets that conference is walking my line, you know what follows."

"He walks, like it or not," the goblin finished. "He's our borrowed knife."

"So he is," I grinned. "Now Tariq, Tariq's what Black would be if someone ripped out the part of his mind that itches to fix things and shoved a Choir in there instead. If a situation goes south on Tariq, he won't double down or throw a fit: he'll measure the risks, and if there's no worth to the strife he'll cut his losses and prepare for the next round."

"Hate to tell you, Boss, but the situation hasn't gone south on him yet," Robber reminded me.

"It doesn't need to, that's the beauty of it," I told him.

I spun on myself, lightly tapping the Pilgrim's parchment with my staff.

"See, the only thing in there I can't allow is the draw," I said. "He wants to preserve the Grand Alliance armies? So do I. He wants Procer to be able to turn north? So do I. To get what I want out of this, I don't actually need to screw him out of most of what he wants."

"As I've been given to understand," the Special Tribune mused, "he also wants to slug you in the story real bad, so to speak. And he's really a bastard kin of the Carrion Lord, he'll have schemes afoot and blood that's lizard-cold."

"Ah, and so we get to the tricky part," I conceded. "If I walked up to the Grey Pilgrim right now and offered him everything he wants save for the draw, he'd refuse. But that's not because he's a fanatic, Robber, although he is. He's not your average screaming, barn-burning zealot: he's the exemplar of the long view. The Pilgrim is what the Heavens use to make sure the forest fire doesn't become like, well, the last few years essentially."

"He'll come after you quiet and sudden, Boss," Robber said. "And you're good at the second, but the first famously ain't your wheelhouse."

"You're missing the point," I said. "He's the broad view hero, Robber. They don't have another one of those, it's the entire reason he's so influential in the first place. Fighting him at all is a mistake. The key to handling Tariq is twisting his arm in that same broad view: making it clear to him that if he actually takes a swing at me, the costs will make even a success so *utterly ruinous* it'll defeat the entire purpose. And the moment he knows that..."

"He takes the wins he can," the goblin said. "And cuts his losses on the rest, drawing back for the next round."

I drew back myself, coincidentally, emptying the ashes of my pipe onto the snow and gazing at the loose constellation of sentences.

"You know, Robber, there's a story back home that in the old days there was an Alban king who went mad," I said. "Thought he was made of feathers, so he ordered all the palace windows nailed shut and all the doors closed. Wouldn't even take off his cloak, since he was convinced without it the slightest breeze would disperse him into a million tufts."

"So he 'fell down some stairs' and an ambitious daughter succeeded him?" Robber snickered.

"He was an Alban, even if mad," I chided. "No, they suffered his whims intent on waiting him out. Until one day a window broke in a storm, and he dropped his cloak in fright but did not dissolve. The old king, the morning after, summoned the court and announced he realized now he had been mad and was cured of his madness."

"That's distastefully uplifting," Robber opined.

"Story's not over," I said. "You see, the king had realized he was not *made* of feathers. He simply had a coat of them, for he was in fact a bird."

The goblin grinned.

"So what happened to him?" he asked.

"Oh, they settled him down," I said. "But a few weeks later he climbed the highest tower in the palace and leapt down to take flight."

"Did he?" Robber asked.

"We have a saying about it," I smiled. "A king can fly-"

I shrugged.

"-but not for long."

Amused, the Special Tribune bared needle-like fangs in approval.

"See, the thing is," I murmured. "I always thought that he must have deep down known he was mad. Because if he *hadn't* known, if he'd really believe that with all his heart..."

I chuckled.

"Now and then, Creation has been known to grant the mad a pair of wings," I said.

"So what's your Callowan folk wisdom leading to, Boss?" Robber asked.

"Let's find out, my dear minion," I said, "if we are mad enough to fly."

[DroughtBringer](#)

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imagesbe

Cat. What are you doing. You're heading for crazy city again. You always seem to come out of crazy city on top mind you, but you're still headed there.

Insanenoodlyguy

I think in answer she would nod and agree

[Liliet](#)

I mean, she prefers the word "mad"

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

Tariq... you forced me into a draw last time, robbed me of victory by giving me only my mentor's body with his soul butchered past complete healing.

Now I offer you your victory.

I will commit the Drow to my own lands and the containment of the Dead King.

I will abdicate in favor of Vivian.

Has.... I offer you the victory. I will withdraw without slaughtering you and will revise my covenants with the kingdom below so that you may purchase dwarven steel.

Tyrant, for you I offer that I will put no candidate forward for dread empress other than Akua. Think. No empress has ruled but that her fate is still remembered.

All, you need merely covenant that none will seek my life or hinder our withdrawals to face the Dead King.

And Tariq, should you become threefold foresworn I will demand of the heavens that they foreswear you.

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

Obviously not even close... but it kept nagging at me.

RanVor

Cat has offered Pilgrim victory before and he refused for political reasons.

Decius

Pilgrim claimed political reasons, but in fact refused victory and/or created those political reasons in advance because the next encounter would be a draw.

Big Brother

Mad Cat antics are amazing! I love how critically she's thinking now!

[Liliet](#)

Remember Seek? 😊

Gunslinger

We should all thank the demon she didn't have that for a crutch

mavant

In the AU where she does get that aspect, her Name transitions to Contessa.

NerfContessa

No, to Mi e own name, as ee would never write a hack of a plot device as Contessa.
Even in a setting where it would make sense.

Yes, he's that good.

Aston W

Is Robber Named?

I never knew....

Jecherio

These last chapters have been on point even more then usual

Stormblessed

God I love Robber. Robber is the best goblin ever and the best minion ever and I'll be devastated when he dies.

[Fayhem](#)

Uh, I feel like you haven't been paying attention if you think that.

Robber *can't* die.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Sorry, him saying it himself is near a death warrant, especially for a villain.

LokeshC2

Except well, he isn't the villain, he's the madman.

danh3107

I need a meme picture of cat leaning real close into robber saying "jesus christ how cryptic"

Skaddix

I am not sure Cat is reading Tyrant correctly. The Pilgrim read is probably pretty correct but that is more post this battle Cat and Pilgrim have the same goal put the Dead King back in his cage or end him for good. its the post game they disagree on most likely.

Andrew Mitchell

Yeah, I feel that leaving the Heirarch is a bit of a wild card for the Tyrant to play when he wants to.

Insanenoodlyguy

To be fair, she said he's not important at the MOMENT. I think shes fully aware he will be very much so in the long term

Hardric62

That, and i'm not sure ignoring the Saint of Bitches is very wise either. This one very much wants to see the Alliance armies mauled, or at least the Proceran ones, and I'm not sure you can exclude a meltdown of her if things go south for her plans leading her to correct the situation as bloodily and brutally as she can. Scratch this, she'll totally do that.

caoimhinh

I think that's because Cat is planning to kill the Saint of Swords.

[Liliet](#)

I think it's less that she wants that, and more that she thinks it inevitable. She's mad in her understanding of the world, not in her objectives. Still a hero.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm with caoimhinh on this one, with the elaboration that at this point, the Saint is just a rolling sharper. She's not going to take direction, let alone give up, so Cat probably needs to kill her. Possible exception would be if Cat can find some way to bind the Saint until they can throw her at DK. That said, I'm not sure sending Saint against DK is actually wise. Yeah, she's a badass, but the flip side of her being an old and experienced hero, is that DK has had plenty of time to analyze her powers and set up a scenario

against her. And it's possible he could end up raising her as one of his undead Named...

Javvies

Point. Actually, since it's the Dead King, you want to make sure her corpse is not in a condition to be raised after she goes down.

So ... kill her, reanimate her, stuff her full of goblin munitions, *then* throw her at the Dead King.

Valkyria

Still liked the goats better but Undead Suicide Heroes sounds like a profitable upgrade.

Auxert

I think sending undead at the dead king is a Bad Idea, and would probably result in the undead turning right around

Kissaten

Dead King's undead is magical, Cat's undead is a result of Name/Winter. It's safe to assume that Dead King would create safeblocks in his theory of magic so that it won't bite him back one day, but Black Knight's shadow or Winter should be coming from entirely different source.

Mental Mouse

Well, "generic villian" undead is what Black Knight and Squire (mostly) were using, and is probably the base that DK built on. Winter produced a notably different, more "lively" result, which was foreshadowed by Cat's own earlier animations (though starting with an Arcadian flying horse might also have had some influence!). That said, best not to assume Winter is anything new, to a guy who already had a captive elf as a door guard!

Night seems to produce a more "normal" undead, which at least couldn't stand up to the flying horse.

shieldredblog

The Heirarch makes a great conversation piece at diplomatic parties though.

Especially since his seer and anti seer powers.

I really want the next diplomatic meeting to include him and the Tyrant.

Naeddyr

Stealer, stolen? Chooser, chosen? Waker, woken, baker, boken?

caoimhinh

Hunter, hunted. Player, played

Seriously, what is the name of the chapter referencing?

caoimhinh

I think it's referencing the phrase "The hunter becomes the hunted"

And more directly the situation in Iserre where everyone is scheming and planning. Pilgrim and Kairos are "Weavers" since they are pulling strings with their strategies on multiple levels, but in Catherine's plan, they are the ones "woven"; because that has always been Cat's style, she plays the players not the game.

[*Liliet*](#)

I read it as "Catherine is both weaving her own plot and getting woven into plots of other players"

Aston

I really like Robber being a part of the storyline.

It makes Cat less Meta.

naturalnuke

Meta is her bread, butter, oven, mill, and fields.

[*Liliet*](#)

I love his perspective.

"these are matron games"

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

Yeah, every so often we get a glimpse into goblin culture..

[*Javvies*](#)

Ah. Cat's running a completely different game than everyone else thinks they are.

Nice.

I'm not sure Pilgrim really is a long-view Hero. Otherwise, I think he'd have done something about the Conquest or the Occupation of Callow before a Crusade was called.

Hitogami

He expected the conquest to fail eventually. It was Cat that made evil stick in Callow, the Praesi would never get the backing she did. One generation or two generations later and Callow would have reverted to Good after overthrowing the Legions

IDKWhoitis

Grey still hates himself for letting Callow go alone for too long. With a shift in a new brand of Evil (Black), old stories were halted or literally killed in the crib. No hidden bloodlines, no starving orphans, no atrocities after the war even. It's like everyone seeing a house on fire, expecting *someone else* to call 911. Cat is the creature that crawled out after the ashes have been smoldering.

[Liliet](#)

This!

Qwormuli

Yup, remember, when Black anticipated the heroic critical point to a flip closing in from the exponentially multiplying heroic bullshit. Then remind yourself, that that seemed to stop with Cat, for some godforsaken reason...

caoimhinh

Well, it didn't really stop with Cat. Remember that by the Prologue of Book 4 there had been 6 bands of Heroes that had emerged or infiltrated Callow in less than 2 years. Since Catherine managed to unify public opinion under her rule and they all accept her (plus the fact that Callow broke free of Praes' yoke) there had been no more Heroes born from Callow as they have embraced their Villain Queen. Vivienne, who was the last of the Heroes from Callow, swore service to Catherine and lost her Heroic Name (even if hers wasn't the most Good-aligned of Names).

Point is, narratively it all makes sense since their society is truly changing without the resentment that the Conquest had left in them, so Callow's story is a different one now. Callow is no longer "a conquered country that needs a Hero to save it and free it" but rather "a country following a new path in his history and culture, needing strong leaders to fight against foreign enemies", so if any Named start

appearing under Cat's rule they are most likely going to be Neutral Names or traditionally Evil Names repurposed.

Mental Mouse

At this point, Cat might well end up with Heroes fighting for her. Certainly the outside forces of heroes are not popular, but she's got friendly Houses of Light and a Knightly order, plus whatever Long Price gets offered for the various invasions of Callow.

Liliet

I want that SO BADLY.

SITB

All the heroes that came to fight Cat were seemingly foreign. It was mentioned how most of them were caught before dispersing into the countryside.

No Callow heroes were created since the end of book 2 when she won against Wiilliam.

(And honestly, if a Callowan hero pops up and doesn't go after Cat's rule it means that she is the new status-quo now)

Qwormuli

Well, while I might have worded it a bit poorly, that is pretty much exactly what I meant.

Kissaten

So... Cat's going to believe herself into flying away her entire army on the wings of Night?

Mental Mouse

Power-wise, there should certainly be some way they could at least sneak away using the power of Night. Story-wise, that gate in their path makes it clear that they won't get away without some sort of resolution to the conflict of kingdoms and armies, and perhaps some progress on other tracks such as Masego.

Kissaten

Yeah, story-wise it can be like Masego's nuke dropping on their heads and only Cat being able to carry them all to safety. If we are talking about madness, maybe Cat will open a portal straight to Serenity.

Andrew Mitchell

Nah, it's probably too early for that. IMO it's book six that will focus on the battle with the Dead King.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Besides being too early to face the Dead King (I agree, that will mostly be book VI), Masego seems to be in charge of portals at the moment, and he just stocked his piece of Arcadia with devils or worse.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Note also that she's *notharing* off to explore Masego's domain, despite it literally being in her way. Because there's no guarantee she could deal with it in timely fashion, and abandoning her armies at this juncture would be doom. And a lot depends on what Masego is actually up to.

Skaddx

He is not omniscient. He probably expected Malicia and the Calamities to screw it up like previous Praesian Regimes screw it. Turns out this was a new breed of Villains. This is also way earlier in his career.

caoimhinh

True, although I would put the blame on the Choir of Mercy for not sending Tariq with their whispers, the Heavens sent other agents though, and they all failed.

Also, Tariq wasn't young when the Conquest happened, I mean, he was the Grey Pilgrim since his teenage years, he was already a full formed Hero with many deeds when Dread Emperor Nefarius ascended to the throne, and Nefarius ruled for decades before being poisoned by Alaya, then came the civil war that had her crowned as Malicia and THEN the Conquest, so Tariq was in his fifties-sixties at the time.

Pilgrim wasn't involved in the Conquest not due to inexperience, but rather because he was doing something else at the time, don't forget that Procer was Malicia and Amadeus destabilized the other countries before launching the Conquest.

[Liliet](#)

>although I would put the blame on the Choir of Mercy for not sending Tariq with their whispers

Blame, of a sort. I think Choirs are limited by their nature tightly enough that there's not enough there to 'blame'.

It's like blaming a program for not having more functions than it's been designed to have.

Qwormuli

Exactly.

[*Liliet*](#)

That is, flat out, Black's victory.

He worked non-stop for 20 years to keep the Conquest from sticking out like the rusty nail it was.

And it's worked. No big time hero noticed and came, because the mechanism by which they would ordinarily notice and come requires *atrocities* to trigger it, of the very kind Black was actively and tirelessly disallowing.

There's a reason he was this pissed off at Alaya with her superweapon scheme. This, this shield of invisibility is exactly what she'd shattered.

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

Oh yeah. Black was pitching "We're the new kinder, gentler Praesi", and Alaya busted out with "the Hells we are, wimps".

[*Liliet*](#)

And his response was "No, WE actually are. SHE is no longer invited to play in our sandbox" XD

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

Oh, he was a little more severe than that! 😊 Breaking the weapon at least made a point, even if it didn't hold against the most powerful mortal wizard on Calernia. And the crucifixions helped demonstrate to the public that Cat was Not On Board with that stuff. But even so, Akua did make her mark, and Cat was left to pay the price of that.

[*Liliet*](#)

Mm.

I'm thinking more of the whole 'fucked off to Vales with Grem and ignored the summons to the capital' thing, which more or less broke Malicia's power base in Praes.

[*Liliet*](#)

(Because shield of invisibility was just one of the benefits of refraining from atrocities, and not Black's main reason :D)

IDKWhoitis

I'm feeling that this may be the first time in a long time, that if Cat loses, she wins. If pilgram burns his victory early, he can't kill her at the end.

Also, I expect some haggling and ultimatiums about Black are soon to follow. I even wager that Tyrant is going to secure the soul first.

caoimhinh

It would be quite a twist if the Rogue Sorcerer is intercepted by Kairos and he got Amadeus' soul.

IDKWhoitis

Kairos has a penchant for finding, setting up, and intercepting meta-patterns. For all we know, both the sorcerers and Blacks souls are currently in his possession.

I would imagine a wish spell would be included, or a trial by Hierarch, which may have pushed the sorcerer to do something stupid storywise, attempting to escape, only to be caught by Kairos when the story had turned on the Hero.

[shieldredblog](#)

That sorcerer seems a bit sketchy to me. He's the Rogue sorcerer and yet hes never been shown to be rogue-like in any way. The opposite in fact. I half expect him to gift the soul to Malicia and become the next Warlock.

[Fayhem](#)

We have very little context/information on the origin of that Name. For all we know he was a sorcerer sworn to Prince Bumblefuck of Malfeasanceton who turned on his employer and went "rogue" for the sake of Great Justice and got Named for it, or something like that.

IDKWhoitis

I would love for this to play out. Unlikely as Pilgrim can literally read intentions, and could smell a rat. But a high caliber sorcerer might be able to cook up some defense, so who knows...

[Mental Mouse](#)

As someone else noted, Scribe is currently unaccounted for, and has been for some time. She might well have been able to locate the Rogue Sorcerer and reclaim the soul.

caoimhinh

I think that saving the Win for later in this Pattern of Three is a knife that Tariq wants to wield against the Dead King; after all, if Cat and Tariq can only die by each other's hand, that would give them a huge boost when fighting any other opponent.

I like that this chapter discussed the number of Cat's deaths, and even more the bits of cultural references in the discussion, like the mention of "Matron games" and the assumption that a stupidly mad king would get an assassination with a good cover to save his honor "falling from a flight of stairs" (Praes style) while in reality his court bore with it and waited until he either passed away or he was cured (Callow style).

I actually thought the chapter would end with the "A king can fly, but not for long" phrase, seemed very fitting. That last bit reminds us that unshakeable faith is one of the things that Names and Aspects are made of, so if the king could convince not only himself but others that he could fly, maybe he would have (an old Emperor of Praes became a spider because he believed that strong enough, so it's not unheard of either. Granted, he might have used sorcery and Warlocks, but let's not quibble about details).

Well, let's find out what Cat's plan for flying is.

Typos found:

and I that I / and that I
to have repeat myself / to have to repeat myself
Pilgrim cannot have get a draw / either 'have' or 'get', not both
If have a few of those / I have a few of those

[Liliet](#)

It took me several minutes to figure out what was the point of the earlier part, with him believing he was made of feathers, in Cat's fable.

The point is that she thought her position was a lot weaker than she realized it really was, looking at it from Pilgrim's point of view. She got so used to thinking of herself as an underdog, with only one road to victory she needs to claw her way through, she didn't realize she could open the windows and let breeze in. She's covered in feathers, not made of them.

Let us now see what the substance of this metaphor is going to turn out to be 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Actually, I don't think they can use a Pattern of Three against DK. Remember, powers from outside Creation can break those, and

even if DK doesn't qualify himself (arguable, as he *has* set up shop in a Hell), he certainly has access to servants who *clearly* qualify.

Einhandler

I think I know what Cat is doing. Everything's hitting the fan, enemies at all side, and the outlook is grim. Throughout history these situations have been approached in many ways but one way stands out more than others.

There was a story of Napoleon where he walked into an enemy fort, crashed a ball, then walked back to his lines afterwards.

Erwin Rommel did something similar when he got lost in the desert and stumbled upon an allied triage tent, where he consoled the injured.

There is the story of the Scottish soldier on the beaches of Normandy in a kilt and playing a bagpipe that didn't get touched by enemy fire.

It's the reason a well dressed person with a clipboard can walk into just about anywhere and not get questioned.

My good friends, I believe Cat is about to pull the most classic of badass moves known in story and history. Grab your popcorn, hold onto your seats, and get ready.

Cat is going to take Refuge in Audacity.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Wouldn't be the first time...

Dainpdf

Name is coming. No two ways about it. Hopefully for Cat.

samshadar

I've always wondered what Robber would be like if he had a name...

RanVor

The Footrest?

Rynjin

Woah woah hey, you can't just give him two promotions like that.

RanVor

I mean, Names usually come with a status upgrade...

caoimhinh

The Robber XD.

It would also be interesting to find out whether Goblins have Names but keep it in secret, the fact that one of the claimants of Squire was a Goblin would lead me to believe that yes, they do.

[shieldredblog](#)

Of course they do. Why wouldn't they? All cultures produce names and the goblins definitely have their own culture. The only reason they wouldn't is because they somehow designed their own culture to not produce names.

It would be funny if they produced heroes though, hence the lack of ageless goblins and the lack of heroes wandering into their caves.

Qwormuli

Not all cultures produce names. Free cities have nameless parts in them. As a slightly lesser proof, orcs had a dry spell of names due to the lack of cultural support for them after being broken by Praes. So, all cultures (most likely) have a potential to create their own names, if they have a footrest for it. As even less reliable proof, Chider was pretty well in the know about goblin goings and was utterly convinced to be the first named in goblin memory. But alas, each and every matron could be some sort of fucky named and we'd be none the wiser.

[Liliet](#)

(Ranker Ranker Ranker)

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

Good point. I hear thief is open ...

caoimhinh

Indeed, but he would make that Name nor Thief but Robber, because our Special Tribune is not one for silent and peaceful thievery, but rather violent armed robbery. You know his motto: "Kill them, take their stuff", hahaha.

[crysjal](#)

He does, it's just that Goblin Names don't act the same way other races do. The goblins are about secrecy and trickery. Robber got a name and the matrons, having set up a system

already to deal with rebellious names sent him to the surface where he couldn't affect their society.

samshadar

That would make a lot of sense.

Insanenoodlyguy

I feel like most Gobin names, in fact, will be lost specifically if you don't at least try to keep them secret. This is more secure than you think since when somebody does discover you are named, they are far more likely to deal, ally and/or blackmail you rather than let out the secret. And there's plenty of cases where it's strongly suspect by a larger group but nobody can prove anything, which is a kind of maybe yes/no dread that is more likely to strengthen a name than anything.

Riaan Theunissen

Something Catherine isn't considering is the Pilgrim's possible reactions to Sve Noc now that he has "seen" her / them / it. The base of her power is power provided by the Gods Below. That has been maintained and grown through millennia of murder. It should be a horrifying sight.

If Akua and Catherine were somewhat correct in their reasoning in the last chapter, then Catherine should not be the main focus of the Pilgrim anymore, being the mortal servant of the new evil god. You know, the thing that might match the Dead King in power.

[Liliet](#)

I think Cat's taking that into account.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Naah, Catherine is the representative and "point man" for Sve Noc. We don't even know where the goddesses' original bodies are hanging out anymore, and their last known address is now a dwarven colony. As far as Pilgrim is concerned, Sve Noc is represented by the Drow and their Priestess/Black Queen.

Sylwoos

The Underdark hasn't been fully evacuated yet.

The Drows currently with Cat are just the one that were in the city where the battle happened. The rest are still preparing the large scale migration and that's probably where the sisters are.

caoimhinh

Cat mentioned that the rest of Empire Ever Dark is migrating towards Keter territory to fight against the Dead King and supplied by the Kingdom Under. That's why Cat's troops of 50 thousand Drow are called "the Southern Expedition".

Mental Mouse

Regardless, the Drow remaining underground are not visible to the other Calernian factions, and probably won't be until someone notices he's having to fight an underground force.

Riaan Theunissen

It hasn't been mentioned. Which does make sense as Catherine has become used to the focus of those she faced being on her, because she was usually the biggest immediate threat to those she faced. Unfortunately for her the Pilgrim apparently thinks long term, which would make Sve Noc the bigger threat.

Liliet

On the other hand, Sve Noc is a *drow* goddess.

She doesn't affect human politics any more than the orcs' old gods (like the one Captain slew the last echo of) did. What matters about Sve is the might of the drow that she's backing...

...and Catherine Foundling, representing the breach of that limitation.

Riaan Theunissen

No, this isn't about politics. And the Orc's old gods would have affected human's (not necessarily politics) a lot back in the day, what with the wars and cook pots, if they supported their followers, merely by supporting their followers.

So this isn't about politics. This is about the Pilgrim looking at Sve Noc and seeing what she / they / it is, or at least some of what she / they / it is.

"Gods, child, what have you done to yourself?" the Grey Pilgrim said. "Those things on your shoulder... those are no crows. How many times can you sell your soul?"

Had he tried to gaze at them using an aspect? I almost pitied him if he had. The foundations of apotheosis for these two had been millennia of hateful murder, and the mortar had been Winter freely given – look at one of those raw would have been painful, but the two?"

The Pilgrim can't know what Sve Noc is planning. But if he can see some of what she is, that which empowered her, and if

he heard about her casual sadism can he believe her not to be a monster?

"It will take more than brandy and poppy leaves for the digging to stop," the goddess on my shoulder laughed. "Hands and picks and tireless flesh, pulling aside the —"

[Liliet](#)

So what you're saying is that the Pilgrim ought to seek to ease the *drow's* unnecessary suffering from having a monster as a goddess?

[shieldredblog](#)

Bonus for him because it might wipe out the entire species.
Which he would do because he assigns no value to mortal life. All he cares about is minimizing suffering.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think you're quite correct, I don't think he's that far down the utilitarianism failure mode hole. I think he does value life.

Riaan Theunissen

No, I'm saying that given what he knows the Pilgrim should see Sve Noc as a bigger long term threat than Catherine, because Sve Noc is the evil goddess and Catherine is her priestess.

[Liliet](#)

But is Sve Noc a relevant threat at all?

Keep in mind that Pilgrim is more medium term view than long term view, compared to e.g. Black. He's about solving immediate messes, not revolutionalizing way of life for generations down the line.

Valkyria

I really hope her plan somehow involves goats.

Aotrs Commander

The more Levant appears even in passing mention, the more I regret that Keter wasn't parked next to [i]them[/i]. I think Levant worse than the Procer,.

Kissaten

Well, Keter may yet border them, that Serpent exists there for a reason plot-wise.

RanVor

Well, Procer is actually one of the less disturbing Good societies. Which kind of says a lot about Good societies, which in turn says a lot about Evil societies...

[Liliet](#)

^

[shieldredblog](#)

So her analysis is that she hasn't been dropping enough lakes? I could have told her that. Trying to work nicely with someone who can't be trusted like Tariq is pointless. She needs a line in the sand, you raid my army or position yourself advantageously storywise and a thousand of your men go missing in the middle of the night. Otherwise, he's just going to smile and position himself to stab you in the back.

Honestly, I've been very disturbed by her willingness to sacrifice her soldiers to preserve her enemies. Especially when she made it so obvious. She basically strapped an expendable sign on them.

Vivid

I think I finally get what the core of the beauty I see in the Guide is. The myriad perspectives visible and the ocean of validity lent to them create a painfully beautiful picture, and piecing them together by defining all the lessons, the truths held by the cast in terms beyond their individual views gives a rush of satisfaction unlike any other.

Realizing what a character means by something (a thing they're aware of) as well as what it means to them (that they're unaware of) lets you pinpoint what the character is as a person when you contrast those meanings with the character's actions and the actions and minds of others.

I guess it could be done with other narrative works too, but only the Guide is written with enough sense to it that you can go past the first few layers and not have everything fall apart. Really amazing work, EE.

Andrew Mitchell

Bravo, well said. I appreciate you putting my feelings into words.

[Liliet](#)

Guide is Really Good.

[Daniel E](#)

And so we reach the Pivot battle of this book. Exciting times 😊
Story is being wielded full-force by both sides. The setup here lends itself to many possibilities; a new Name or Transition, fulfillment of 'Seven crowns plus one', the death of a major Hero for the first time since Lone Swordsman. I wager a case of Vale wine that when all is set and done, Cat's memoirs will be titled 'A Practical Guide To Evil'.

Andrew Mitchell

I think this has __got__ to be the fulfilment of seven crowns and one. But I've got NFI how that's going to come about.

Hopefully, the major hero to die is the Saint of Swords but I will have to disagree with you that the Lone Swordsman was a major Hero.

Alegio

The "Just as planned" of Traitorous made laugh WAY too much.

konstantinvoncarstein

Me too. It is by far the funniest character in the entire serie, after Irritant

[Whiteeyes](#)

Best part? You don't know who he is you think it was a pithy insult by one of his foes to mock him in death. You do know who he is however and you instinctively check to make sure you have your wallet. I mean sure he's been dead a while but I'm not sure if that's going to stop him.

[Liliet](#)

So good

[Fayhem](#)

Something I meant to comment on the last chapter but forgot to: with all the parallels Cat was seeing between herself and Tariq, can we take that as meaning that Cat's "retirement" plan post-abdication is going to be becoming the Black Pilgrim? Just wandering around Calernia teaching baby villains how to get shit done without fucking it all up and becoming an unfixable monster.

Alegio

I can't really see her doing that, more like finding named people who want to do good and helping to teach them the practical way to do things no matter if they are working for above or below.

Either way, Cat is not really made for that kind of role I believe. It is just not her thing.

Fayhem

Are you sure? Last chapter was her seeing the parallels between her and Pilgrim, and now this chapter has her teaching/explaining things to both Vivienne and (gods help us) Robber. It certainly **hasn't** been her kind of Role. But I think we're seeing the shape of how it could **become** a Role she could occupy, in her own terrible way (to paraphrase Indrani).

And it's not that I think she'd inherently object to teaching heroes as well as villains to be practical, but even post-Liesse Accords I think that most heroes would balk at taking career advice from Catherine Foundling, **especially and specifically** the impractical ones who would be the ones who'd actually really need advice anyway.

Andrew Mitchell

You might have a point. As far back as book one, I think she was trying to get William to be more practical about achieving his aims.

Mental Mouse

Well, Ranger represents a possible model.

Fayhem

If you mean a model for someone teaching both heroes and villains, that's true but it's worth noting that Ranger had spent IIRC literally centuries establishing a reputation for herself as someone who dgaf about the whole Above vs. Below thing before she decided that Amadeus was her murder bae and hooked up with the Calamities long-ish term (and the more uncompromising/impractical heroes **still** hate her guts). Catherine as Squire to the Black Knight/the Black Queen has been slotted into Below's roster from day 1; we've seen her internal monologue/dialogue (hello, Dickish Twin) so we know she's never exactly been a true believer but no one else has seen that. So for the rest of the world her reputation starts with "burning down half of Summerholm with goblinfire to flush out a hero" (again, see what we know vs. what the

world thinks they know) and only escalates from there for the most part.

It's not impossible for that to change over the course of her helping turn back the Dead King, tbf. That depends on a *lot* of things though, so unless/until we start seeing that happen I'm staying in the skeptical column.

Mental Mouse

Assuming she stays as Priestess of Night, I suspect her big job will be integrating the Drow into Callowan society (and politics). That will surely involve a certain amount of traveling around and talking to people, so she'll have plenty of chances to influence things.

Javvies

IIRC, the plan is to park the Drow on top of Keter. To drive the Dead King and his forces back through his Hellgate to Serenity, and then try to seal it up/establish a permanent guard upon the Creation side of the Gate, using the Drow.

Not bring the Drow to Callow.

It gives a reason for Procer/the Alliance/Heroes to not go after the Drow too much because, well, they're bottling up an even greater Evil.

Mental Mouse

MMM... where is this from? My initial reaction is "she's not asking for much, is she? /s". Remember. DK has a city that's *mostly* in Creation, and and it's well-stocked with unholy terrors.. Getting him to retreat within that probably counts as a win condition.

Fayhem

It's from when Cat was dreamwalking with Sve Noc in Book IV and they asked her what her long-term plan was for the drow. She described literally exactly this plan beat-for-beat.

mr donaer92

P

Alegio

Oh cat, you are finally back in your forte, when losing the game you take the board and hit them with it in the face!.

RanVor

I have a confession to make and an unpopular opinion to share.

I do not like Book 5.

I can't even point to all the things that annoy me in it. The list is long and includes items like:

- Grey Pilgrim.
- Grey Pilgrim apologists.
- Cat's moralizing.
- All of my favorite characters being absent (except Akua, who is irrelevant instead).

...And many more. It's still pretty well written and entertaining at times, but for every chapter that makes me want to go back to regular voting (which I haven't been doing since the end of Book 4), there's a chapter that makes me reconsider. This is not something I would normally comment on, but I've been looking for a specific chapter header earlier today and it reminded me how much more entertaining the Guide used to be. I will keep reading – maybe once the Grey Shit is gone and Black is returned to life, the series will return to its former glory – but I do not like the direction EE is taking his web serial in.

I know you will hate me for this, and I don't care. Bring it on.

matesbe

Why would we hate you for having a different opinion? Everything you've talked about (well most of it) is your opinion. Just as I greatly disagree with pretty much everything you've said, I think most people will acknowledge that you are completely entitled to your opinion of the book even as they disagree (or agree, you're not actually alone in your opinion).

Andrew Mitchell

As matesbe has already said, you're entitled to your opinion. And thanks for stating it because you made me think more about why I'm having a different experience.

For me, I think it comes down to disliking book series where each book is just the same but bigger/more than the last. [Yes, The Inheritance Cycle and The Belgariad, I'm looking at you.] I'm loving the fact that EE's characters and situations actually develop and change in significant ways that are much more nuanced than the protagonist just getting better at wielding a sword and/or their magic. I know others like those types of book series, but they're just not as enjoyable to me.

burdi

well, sometimes i feel like that too
i think its because cat no longer badass villain, she
struggle..begging, yet her win never clear

and after became immortal winter goddess she goes back to mortal again, without a Name and limping leg that keep on my nerves.

In some term she became more powerful because she has 2 goddess on her side

but in some other term she became weaker because she no longer hold her own power, plus the limping leg make her look disappointment somehow i think like the Catherine Foundling being downgraded

[Liliet](#)

This is entirely consistent with my impression of how you're reading this series, yeah.

You could stop reading in an ongoing manner and catch up later on whole chunks? It might flow better that way, and at least will reduce the amount of ongoing frustration. There's plenty of fish (webserials) in the sea :3

(Though at this point, I'd probably miss you in the comment section...)

caoimhinh

You know, I have been wondering for a while, but where is Scribe? I expected her to be with Grem, although not in the command tent she might have been around, but Cat has gathered the entire army and joined with Black's legions, yet there has been no mention of Scribe (partly because Cat's meeting and interactions with Grem were mostly skipped).

I think some mention of Scribe is necessary, given how influential she is and how Cat is aware that Scribe was always with Amadeus; at least a comment like "I asked Grem about Scribe and he said that she disappeared, probably to find a way to rescue Black" by Catherine. Because simply ignoring her seems very weird.

[Mental Mouse](#)

She may be the one to retrieve Amadeus's soul.

[Liliet](#)

I mean one of Eudokia's Name things is that no-one other than Amadeus notices her when she doesn't specifically draw attention to herself,

Relyt

I almost feel bad for Cat's opponents. It starts out like playing chess; with decades of experience and dozens of moves, they maneuver her firmly into checkmate.

The she smirks at the game and they realize that the chessboard is actually shoots and ladders and Cat's one turn from victory.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Prediction: Cat is going to give Robber some Night.

Reasons I Think This: Every time Robber has been referenced in the last two books special attention has been paid to his age. He's slowing down and will continue to do so quickly. Cat, who has had two good friends die in recent memory, will lose another friend if she doesn't act soon to keep this one alive against an enemy that no goblin can escape for long. Old age.

And oh look, Cat happens to be the final arbiter of the disposition of a magical resource whose earliest and easiest effect is to functionally remove the cap of the users lifespan. She's demonstrated facility with moving the Night around and she is down a stealth monster, her main bruiser, and her original mage.

She's got a fuckload of drow, but they are a big and imprecise stick. She needs eyes in the area and scrying doesn't work. What better solution to that than a fearless goblin with the sort of Night tricks a stealth killer would develop. Without even waiting for a goblin to come into a Name she can get one of her caliber basically out of nowhere and all it would take would be preserving the life of a friend.

Now, I'm well aware that Nighting Robber would fall under the same problem as handing out Winter titles in terms of Narrative escalation, at least in the eyes of the armies around her, but I think circumstances will force her hand.

Because all this, were she duels for her life and the lives of those in her service with a kind old man who firmly 'knows' that destroying her is the right thing to do, all of this is a side skirmish.

At some point, whatever her success or failure at building the future she wants for Calernia, she has to fight the Dead King.

And we've seen what that's like. I've loved the Interludes and Extra Chapters about the doomed defense of the north, because they're full of really cool characters and lorebuilding, but they've also been telling us exactly what we need to know about what kind of threat the Hidden Horror presents.

Cat will need more allies at her level soon, and my gut says she'll go for Robber.

[Mental Mouse](#)

There's also the question of provoking jealousy among both her human and Drow servants (for different reasons). Not to mention what that might mean to his relations with the Matrons.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

True. The action would definitely have a lot of fallout, but I think she's going to go for it anyway.

Also, totally unrelated but reading back over this chapter made the part about the old inhabitants of the region worshipping Far really stand out to me. I think I have a guess at what kind of thing Cordelia might be digging up.

Vivid

Anyone else in favor of Guide merch? I don't think a t-shirt rendition of Cat's banner "Justification Matters Only to the Just" would be too expensive, and I'd be first in line to buy it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

That would be cool (and Zazzle or suchlike could do it easily), but I'd suggest not using the image from the wiki. Ironically, the text needs to be better justified. (among other faults 😊)

Vivid

Yeah, I meant getting a solid new design done. The simplicity of it should keep it from being too difficult, though..

[Miles](#)

So cat needs to lose to the grey boy while still keeping most of her armies intact. Probably give him Black's body back again to make it happen.

Aston Whiteman

Robber is actually Scribe in disguise.

The real Robber died a while back of old age.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Unlikely, but it would be hilarious!

Chapter 31: Fall or Flight

"In boldness find salvation, for stillness is the herald of death."

– Princess Beatriz of Salamans, most famous for turning her trial for high treason by the Highest Assembly into election to the office of First Princess

"I need you to write three letters for me," I told Hakram.

Three letters: one was a knife, one was a bet and one was a lie. Wielding those like the sword and board that had once been my favoured armaments, I would win or lose before the week was out. Comfortably settled in my perch atop the barrow of a people long scattered to the winds, I poured myself a cup of wine and kept a steady eye on Hakram. The writing desk I'd had hoisted up here had not been built with orcs in mind, that much was evident. My second was broader than the wooden frame, and could not lean his armoured elbows against it without the whole thing starting to groan like a dying calf. It was a rather amusing sight, the tall orc bent over the desk with a long quill in one hand and looking for all the world like he could be lifting the whole thing with the other. The oil lamp atop the frame was an island of tangible flickering warmth in the surrounding glow of the magelights that had been brought here and hung from the raised stones. The sight of the Mavian prayer wreathed in that pale halo was an eerie one, a reminder that once upon a time fae had tread these grounds and made bargains with those who had raised this strange work. It felt fitting, in a way, for like my old friends of Summer and Winter tonight I intended treachery.

"Which first?" Adjutant asked.

I sipped at my cup, let the warmth of the wine pool in my belly.

"To the Tyrant," I said. "As follows: Kairos, you misshapen treacherous weasel, you should have been drowned at birth. I expect whatever spawned you tried but already the Gods had grown gills on your neck, foul monster. Sadly this must have allowed you to crawl out of the refuse pile they tossed you in to come trouble me today."

The sound of the quill dipping into the inkpot followed by the scratch of it against parchment filled the silence that followed. Hakram's admittedly superb calligraphy should lend a touch of elegance to the whole tirade, I decided.

"Therefore," I continued, "in the spirit of our close and cordial alliance, I offer my support for the demand that will be made by the League of Free Cities in exchange for its acquiescence to a peace conference. That support will have the full weight of my force and influence behind it."

I drummed my fingers against the arm of my chair as I waited for Hakram's hand to catch up to my words, only resuming when his scrawl stilled.

"Naturally, this is contingent on your own support in extricating the Army of Callow and its allies from their current difficulties," I said. "Should you refuse, I will be forced to withdraw from Procer entirely and begin preparing the east for the wars that will come in the wake of the Principate's destruction."

Adjutant finished writing before raising a hairless brow at me.

"You think he'll believe that?" the orc asked.

"He will," I simply said.

After glancing at the certainty on my face Hakram did not argue the point any further, simply conceding with a small dip of the head.

"And add one last thing," I mused. "Lower down, like we're trying to be discreet. 'I have heard that recently you lost a great many horses, which is a tragic happenstance. As I would not have such a dear and noble friend without a mount, I offer you this purebred Liessen charger to ride into battle instead. May he serve you well.'"

Adjutant looked at me oddly.

"We don't have any purebreds," he told me. "They're too costly to field. The Order uses mostly halfbloods and Vale breeds."

"I'm aware," I said. "I need you to find the shoddiest, sickliest goat we have and paint it white. Not well, though, just kind of half-heartedly. Try to make it a female one if you can. Send it along with my letter, when the time comes."

The orc cleared his throat a little too quickly for me to buy him looking at me this disapprovingly.

"This is how you deal with Kairos, Hakram," I told him nonetheless. "He's not like Malicia or the Dead King, he doesn't give a damn about respect or rules or making deals that'll last longer than a moon's turn. I offered him steel and honey and an elaborate insult – it should do the trick."

"We're not made of goats, Catherine," Adjutant reproached.

"Fine," I sighed, disgruntled. "If you can't find a suitable one just find a stray dog and glue horns on. Diplomacy isn't cheap, Hakram, you should know this by now."

"As you say, my queen," the orc serenely replied.

I gestured obscenely at him before watching him blow the last lines of my letter dry, fake my signature without missing a beat and finally roll the parchment when it was all done. It went into a small leather sheath, and a red wax candle was lit from the lantern's flame before he dripped it atop the scroll. The royal seal was pressed until it made its mark, my sword and crown on a balance, and it was put away. His eyes returned to me and I put down the cup I'd finally managed to empty.

"To the Pilgrim," I said.

"Full honorifics?" Hakram asked.

I mulled over that a moment.

"No," I finally said. "Grey Pilgrim will do, it's in that function I'll be addressing him."

The tall orc nodded, and began writing anew.

"I, Catherine Foundling, first anointed Queen of Callow of my name," I said, "formally offer the unconditional surrender of all forces under my command to the Grey Pilgrim, Tariq of Levant, also known as the Peregrine. Let there be no further bloodshed between your armies and mine, and through that surrender peace be obtained for us all."

It was with a low whistle that Adjutant finished writing the last sentence, with a practiced hand adding signature and seal when I shook my head to make it clear there would be no other addition.

"The third?" he asked, afterwards.

"Addressed to the full war council of the Army of Callow, including summons for Vivienne Dartwick," I said.

Hakram went still, for a moment, and when he moved it was to eye me warily.

"In your formal capacity as queen?" he asked.

"That's the one," I casually agreed. "Put up the formalities, make this an official decree with my seal, and take one of the larger sheaths. I want to write to them about Theodosius' Dilemma, the whole story."

Adjutant cleared his throat.

"Those of us who went through the officer track at the War College have already heard it," he said. "There was a tactics class on the subject."

"Some of them won't know it," I said. "So we'll be thorough, yes?"

"Yes," he gravelled in agreement.

For the longest time there was only my voice cast over the scratch of quill against parchment, as I told the story mostly the same as I had read it. There was, however, to be an addition afterward. Hakram's hand stilled, and when he looked to me for instructions I gave him one last sentence.

"I grant to Vivienne Dartwick the title of Lady Dartwick, with all assorted honours and privileges;" I said, "in addition I name Lady Dartwick the heiress-designate to the crown of Callow."

I hadn't gone as far as naming her a princess of the royal house as that would mean, legally speaking, that she was either my adopted sister or daughter. Both thoughts were rather unsettling for all sorts of reasons. But by first granting her noble title, even if that title was landless, I could make her my successor without breaking Callowan law. Didn't much like the thought of expanding the aristocracy, even for Vivienne, but the only two ways to make her heiress-designate without making a bloody mess of feudal law had been that or bringing her into the royal house. The two ways of doing that were adoption and marriage, neither of which I believed to be palatable to us, so Lady Dartwick it was.

"It's a dangerous game, Cat," Hakram warned me.

"It's the only kind we ever play, Adjutant," I said. "And the letters are only to be sent when I say, so don't worry."

"That would be a first," the orc drily replied, but his hand moved nonetheless.

Three sheaths of leather were hidden away after he finished, bearing my seal, letters awaiting within. *A knife, a bet, a lie.* Instead of crawling into bed afterwards I spent half the night gazing at the stones where Robber had hung parchment for me. All the while silently feeding Night to the staff in my lap that was not a staff but a sword, a sword that was not a sword but a prayer.

When I finally fell into slumber I slept only fitfully, dreaming of laughing crows.

—

Years ago I would have been in the thick of it. Tripping over every discovery, blood going warm and cold with the twists and turns of Fate as I struggled to bend it to my will. I was older now, though, and though perhaps not all that much wiser I was at least more patient. I'd learned the value of not tipping your hand too early when playing these sorts of games. And so it was sitting in my stolen chair, pulling at a mug of steaming tea,

that the news found me. It was Vivienne who carried them up the barrow, steps quick and alarmed.

"A breach had opened to the southeast," she told me. "An army is going through, its banners from Levant and Procer."

I inhaled the fragrance of the tea and did not reply, letting her pace back and forth. So it was finally starting.

"Who was the first out?" I asked out loud.

"Our outriders weren't close enough to-" she began.

I raised a hand.

"I wasn't asking you," I gently said.

Larat stepped out of the circle of stones with the languid grace of a hunting cat. The huntsman who'd once been the Prince of Nightfall walked against what I instinctively felt to be the cast of this circle, the way its power had once been leaning. It was like watching a man stroke a cat the wrong way, only I could almost feel it in my bones. Truly, my treacherous lieutenant had taken to petty vexations the way fish took to water. His long cape streamed behind him lazily, dark as night and sewn with jewels. The furs and leather he wore were fastened at his waist by a sash of scarlet cloth, from which hung that sheathless sword he favoured.

"A hero, most tenebrous of queens," Larat smiled. "Named and finder of paths, strutting for the rest of the cacophony to follow."

"His actual Name, Larat," I said, unimpressed.

"A sorcerer of roguish inclinations, my liege," the fae replied, raising hands to appease me. "Fleeing, then finding and now all aflutter from the sight of us."

"The Rogue Sorcerer," I grunted. "Yeah, that sounds about right. They'll need a mage for this, and last I heard the Witch was up north."

"That's all you have to say?" Vivienne said. "Catherine, the situations is getting grim. It's an army of nearly sixty thousand that crossed, and already Malanza's own host is sending riders to make contact."

I sipped at my tea.

"How long before the pursuers come out, do you think?" I asked Larat.

"Within the hour there will be a break," the huntsman grinned, a slice of pale malice between red lips. "And the parade of fools will merrily stumble out."

"Cat?" Vivienne slowly said.

Her eyes were moving back and forth between us, like she couldn't quite decide who to look at.

"Kairos is crazy enough to take a shortcut through a crumbling half-realm likely run by Masego having a breakdown just to get here earlier," I said. "On the other hand, are the crusaders? Would they take that risk just to go quicker? No, they wouldn't. But Kairos wants them here as well, and he dictates the military strategies of the League. Which means..."

"He cornered them," Vivienne said, eyes alight with sudden understanding. "To give them the choice of a battle where they'd likely be annihilated or taking a chance on a path through Arcadia."

He'd been able to do this not because he was a peerless military genius, I knew, or because he had some oracle at his side. It was simply that the Tyrant of Helike had most likely been trading information with near every other army out in Iserre, and so alone of all the commanding generals he'd had the bird's eye view of what was happening in the region. Given that, and the cadre of skilled warlocks that the Stygian Magisterium was made up of, it was far from impossible to both corner the other Grand Alliance army and ensure there was a breach nearby when he did. Desperation would do the rest.

"And the crusaders got a guide for the journey, perhaps the only wizard that could truly help them in all of Iserre," I said. "That is Above's due, the cast of providence. But that wizard also carries something I want, because Below always gets its due. It all comes to a head here, Vivienne."

My friend rested her hand on the back of her neck, pressing back a few curls of hair that'd not been brought into her crown-like braid. I'd caught the twitch in her fingers with muted amusement, recognizing it as Vivienne wanting to pass a hand through her hair before remembering it'd been styled.

"What are you actually up to, Cat?" she finally asked. "Juniper's been on edge."

"Because I've left her to decide how an engagement should be fought, if it happens," I said.

"Because you haven't been part of the planning," Vivienne frankly said. "Until now, you've been at the table for every campaign."

That you'd take a step back after chewing us out has us a little perplexed."

Larat's lone eye was on us, the huntsman nonchalantly leaning against a stone as he listened to our conversation. I debated dismissing him, but I'd been the one to send for him in the first place and I still had a conversation due with the unofficial captain of the Wild Hunt.

"If I didn't believe the two of you capable of discharging your responsibilities, I would have demoted you," I replied. "It's that simple."

Blue-grey eyes narrowed as I gave answer to only the least important part of what she'd asked. I sighed and raised a calming hand.

"You can't be in the know for it," I said. "It wouldn't work if you were."

"We don't have a great history with complicated plans," Vivienne reminded me.

"It's not complicated," I said.

She looked skeptical, which only served to irritate me.

"It *isn't*," I sharply said. "It's not a series of events building on each other, it doesn't fail if there's a part that doesn't happen. It's a set of counterweights that only move if there's a push."

"I don't mean to question you," she delicately said.

Larat snorted, too loudly for him not have meant for the both of us to hear it.

"That's exactly what you're doing," I flatly said. "And in principle I don't mind, but in this instance your having incomplete information is part of the design. Which makes it all the more pointless when you press for answers that I can't give you without making the plan irrelevant."

"That is mildly polite way," Vivienne said after a moment, "to tell me to shut up and move along, isn't it?"

"I understand you're worried," I said. "But I'm telling you this has been accounted for."

A mirthless smile quirked her lips.

"So either I trust you or I don't," she said.

Part of me wanted to sharply point out that Hakram was almost as much in the dark and he'd not needed this kind of coddling, but I held my tongue. I did not mean Adjutant for the same kind of purposes that I meant for Vivienne, and so it was unfair to both to try to expect the same behaviours of them. I could not put the dark-haired woman in front of me in positions of command and authority repeatedly and expect her not to act like someone in them. She, and Callow itself, couldn't remain under my shield forever. One day I would have to abdicate, and when that day came I would not brook chaos and disorder in my wake. That meant there had to be a worthy brow for the crown to be settled on, and that brow would not belong to someone who feared to ask questions when it was inconvenient. So I held my tongue, and let my irritation bleed out in the silence that followed.

"The Everdark changed you, didn't?" Vivienne finally said.

My brow rose, but she did not elaborate.

"I'll talk to Juniper, make sure she understands there's nothing to worry about," she continued. "Good hunting, Black Queen."

"You'll know what to do, when the time comes," I said. "I trust in that."

She sketched a bow before retiring, and it had my fingers clenching. How was it, I wondered, that losing her Name had made her *harder* to read? Larat's lone eye had been watching us eagerly that entire time, drinking in the complexities of the relationship hungrily. It was the kind of thing Winter fae had delighted in, and my huntsman might no longer claim any allegiance to that dead court but roots were not so easily discarded. That vicious coldness would always be at the heart of him.

"Larat," I said. "Approach."

"My queen," the fae replied, bowing after a flicker of a smirk.

The raven-haired huntsman stepped forward, light-footed and sure, and smoothly knelt before me. I drummed my fingers against the staff in my hand, idly wondering whether I'd gotten to the point where I should kill him. Did he suspect my thoughts? I couldn't be sure, but it was with interest he looked at my ebony staff.

"Curious?" I asked.

"No threat to me, that softest of deaths," Larat said.

I leaned forward and smiled.

"Are you sure?"

The urge to deny me flickered across the fae's pale face, but a moment pass and that denial never left his lips.

"You make sport of me, my queen," he said.

"Clever little fox, you are," I said. "But not as clever as you think. We made a bargain, and it's your way out, but we are bound by more than that."

"To my oaths I will remain true," Larat said.

"Of course you will," I said. "You don't really have a choice, do you? It took me a while to understand, but the details put it all into place."

"We gave our word willingly and without qualms, my queen," the one-eyed fae reproached me. "Why do you now remonstrate?"

"*Remonstrate*," I laughed. "How offended you are, now that I know I own you body and soul. Winter – my Winter – died and suddenly your gates are a spinning wheel of destinations. Come now, did you think I wouldn't learn of it? I am more than you liege, Larat, this entire time I've been your patron. The source of your power. You took a chance when you left Arcadia reforged, made yourself into a Wild Hunt that was not matched to a Spring and Autumn. So to stay here in Creation, you needed a little more than just calling yourself that. You needed an anchor."

"Have we not served you faithfully, O Queen of Night?" Larat said.

"It must have been terrifying," I mused, "to realize one day that your oaths bound you to more than the Winter in my veins. That there was an ocean of darkness, now, and that within it swam creatures in every way your superior."

"*Superior*?" Larat hissed, and the anger was bare and terrible. "These-"

I smiled, inviting him to continue, but the former Prince of Nightfall curbed his tongue. Too late to avoid confirming what I'd suspected yet not known for certain. Ah, pride. Of all the weakness of the Fair Folk it had always been my favourite.

"Seven crowns and one, laid at your feet," I said. "That is what I promised you, and that is what you will receive. Rise, Larat."

I rose, and let a sliver of Night pulse through my veins. The Wild Hunt was summoned, and my own mount with it.

"Don't worry, old friend," I told the fae with a warm smile. "I'll see to it that you get everything that you deserve."

I wondered if it was a trick of the light, or if I was truly glimpsing *fear* in that sole eye. No matter. When night fell I would ride with the Hunt, and the three of us – Pilgrim, Tyrant, myself – would find out whose cunning would cut deepest.

theart0fwar

I'll claim it!

[Liliet](#)

please do not

sutortyrannus

Liliet, darling, nobody likes a party pooper.

[Liliet](#)

Nobody likes a 'first'er

[DroughtBringer](#)

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Aston W

Why can't Robber die?

haihappen

Necause he is a magnificent bastard and will either rise in notoriety to a point were Creation itself twists itself to keep him alive leading to the most ironic/heroic/glorious death of all, or he will anticlimactically die, probably off-screen.

A subversion would be that he leads his band of misfits to a ripe old age past his natural lifespan, only to vanish into the night one day, no body ever to be found. And the remainder of his "Tribe" will continue to whisper of the one Goblin that defied the Matrons and the Tower both, of His glorious exploits and vicious ruthlessness. How he joked in the face of the Black Queen himself, drawing not blood but laughter. They will lower their voices even more when they speak of his True Name, barely inaudible: "The Lesser Lesser Footrest".

(Yes, I have described Robber becoming a Folk Hero here... for Goblins, anyway)

[Liliet](#)

I am in favor of this last possibility

Ashen Shugar

Ooh yes, the epilogue. Cat has disappeared after settings things right and within a month or two, a cohort of goblins also disappears. "Some years later...", a group of heroes comes upon a hidden manor and carefully enters. Going down a quiet hallway, clean but empty, they come to a large room and across from them sit's Cat on her Fae Chair, in front her kneel's a goblin facing the heroes with Cat's legs crossed and resting on his shoulder.

[whlindsa](#)

For goblins, nothing. My money is on Robber eventually becoming Governor-General for Callow, and/or the commanding officer and founder of Catherine's special forces units, as well as the officially recognized leader of the Grey Aeries, who will revere him to almost the same degree as the Levantines revere the Grey Pilgrim. "Lesser Lesser Footrest" will become the only goblin term known to all races, as it will be too revered a title to ever be changed, one that verges on being a Name in its own right.

In the decades after his death of extreme old age at about 70 or so, the Name Robber will become one of the most revered of the villainous folk-hero Names, and will command fear and respect in equal measure throughout Calernia, and, after the inevitable kidnapping of Black and Ranger's children—because that's what Fate demands when two major Names like that have kids—and the absolute destruction of at least one global super-power that follows (and that's BEFORE Black and Ranger show up to...express their displeasure), the Name of Robber will become one of the most feared Names in the world.

Of course, this is only the least of the achievements that the goblin known as "Robber" is fated to accomplish while in service to Catherine Foundling and/or the Callowan crown, but many of those deeds of derring-do are highly classified, because nobody wants to admit that they're possible, lest somebody accidentally over throw a kingdom, possibly while drunk.

Michael

C'mon people! We're barely keeping ahead of Wildbow. At this rate he'll take back top spot in a month, imagine the horror, the TRAVESTY!

[vexingvision](#)

Ugh, especially with that godforsaken boring drivel he's currently putting out.

Wouldn't have minded to lose to Worm or Twig, but this? No way.

[Ben Serreau-Raskin](#)

Oh hell yes. Now we're going to see some real crazy shit.

matesbe

So, assuming "knife, bet, and lie" weren't in that exact order, which one is which do you think? I think the letter to Kairos is the knife, the appointing of Viv as heir apparent the bet, and the surrender the lie.

Someguy

The Obvious Lie that Pilgrim cannot ignore even when he knows it's an "I Surrender, Suckers" because it is part of the pattern.

beleester

Be careful – Pilgrim has already shown Black what happens when you assume the story will **force** a hero to do something.

Sparsebeard

I mean, if she's no longer the queen, surrendering "the forces under her command" doesn't require much sacrifice...

ninegardens

"The forces under my command" – the wild hunt? That would be amusing.

Oh, and heck, she has recused her self from command by leaving Juniper and Vivi too it. clever.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It depends just when she sends the respective letters. I'd worry more about the Drow, since she does seem to be in command of those.

The thing is, she's betting her crown against strange stakes, but she's not all that attached to the crown; if she loses it, she'll just continue operating as the First Priestess of Night, and still the one human all those Drow will actually answer to.

Gunslinger

Aah but Rumena is in command of the drow army. Cat is only the advisor and mouthpiece of the the Sve Noc. At least on paper and the Pilgrim has no way of knowing that

Isaac Martinez

A perfect mirror. Tariq is also just an adviser after all.

More importantly, that sacrifice includes Larat

Oh, and her "full force and influence" that she promised to Kairos now will also mean bugger all.

SilverDargon

mmm, I can see that. Unfortunately, I can also see it a different way.

It seems to me that the Bet is the letter to the Grey Pilgrim, because she's betting that he won't take the bait. Like she said last chapter, more than anything he want's a draw, and by presenting him with a victory, she's betting that he won't be able to take it.

If that's the bet, then the lie is almost certainly the letter to Kairos. Since his whole setup right now relies on having perfect information due to the numerous deals he's made with everyone around him, I can't see a reason to tell him anything but a lie.

That leaves the appointment of Vivienne as heir the Knife. That's probably a knife aimed at the hero's faction if I have all this correctly. Because if the Grey pilgrim commits to a fight on the basis that Cat is a big bad evil person who can't be allowed to lead Callow, then having a ready made heir who isn't named or even all that evil cut's straight through his argument.

That's my take anyways.

[Liliet](#)

Nice!

I can also see the version that the surrender of forces is a knife (bc Wild Hunt) and Vivi is a bet (because Catherine hopes she'll act correctly under the circumstances)

Aphorism

Just for shits and giggles I'm going to assume that it's her message to pilgrim that is the knife. Her surrendering to him lawfully may make actions he takes against her a narrative vulnerability.

Nafram

I believe you to be correct. The letter to Kairos appears to be meant to make him fall in line for this particular operation, threatening to endanger his interests. This is the knife. The letter to the General Staff cannot be the lie, for Cat truly intends for Vivienne to rule and furthermore has no reason to lie to them, therefore, it is the gamble. And the letter to Tariq specifies the armies under Catherine Foundling, First of her name, are surrendered to him. This means that, should Cat abdicate, Tariq loses command of her armies because they are no longer her armies, and thus he must negotiate with Vivienne in order to get them to fight the Dead King. This is the lie, a temporary victory for the Grey Pilgrim that can be turned hollow at will by either her or the Callowan War Council by means of abdicating/deposing her.

And now that I've said this, I look forward to Erraticerrata either proving me wrong or in a twist, confirming my theory.

On a sidenote, does Theodosius' Dilemma get explained at any previous point of the series? Because for the life of me, I can't remember it.

ATRDCI

I can't recall it being called out by name before now. But the only context Theodosius has been brought up in up to this point has been his being Unconquered and his defeat to Isabella the Mad. (Whose love of chaos is shared by the Tyrant and whose written work is the only legal military guide in Bellerephon.). So I presume the Dilemma involves that fight.

This epigraph is of particular relevance given the Auger/divine guidance behind the Grey Pilgrim.

"It is said that on the eve of the Maddened Fields, the Tyrant Theodosius consulted with the many Delosi soothsayers among his host. He asked them if he would find victory or

defeat, should he give battle at dawn as he intended. The Delosi squabbled among themselves for hours, until the eldest among them looked the Tyrant in the eyes and spoke his answer: Yes."

werafdsaew

There are a few epigraphs from Theodosius; this one is my guess as to what Theodosius' Dilemma is referring to:

[whlindsa](#)

Hmmm...this puts things into a different perspective—I'd always imagined Isabella the Mad as beating Theodosius simply by dragging him down to her level, and then beating him through sheer experience. That quote implies that there was an actual sound, reasonable methodology behind her victory.

RoflCat

IMO:

Knife – Vivienne

Bet – Kairos

Lie – Pilgrim

The Knife with giving Vivienne title is that it cut down basically every arguments that's made against Cath (Viv is former Heroine, is working hard to recover Callow without being a warlord, and is no way heading towards being a new Dead King/Triumphant)

So when Cath abdicate and Vivienne take the throne, not only Procer have to stop their Crusade (or at least can't sack Callow using excuse of it being Evil), even Heaven have to stop because otherwise they're basically ruining a Callow that's turning back to 'Good'

The Bet on Kairos is her trying to bet on Kairos's crazy plan, after all she doesn't know his true thoughts.

The Lie to Pilgrim is her 'threatening' him with a 'lose' to break his Pattern of Three with that surrender. Remember that her goal is for all forces to have a peace conference on equal ground.

But the Pilgrim doesn't know that, to him what he'll see is her trying to get a lose in without too much actual loss on her, much in the same way he's trying to get a draw against her for the eventual guaranteed win.

spencer

When she reiterated the knife/bet /lie I felt out was conforming they were in order (kairos/pilgrim/Vivienne)

caoimhinh

This is like that warlock Schrodinger's magical experiment with a cat, he put it in a box warded with High Arcana and claimed that due to "thaumaturgic wave function collapse" until the box was opened and the cat observed, the cat was both dead and alive.

Of course, it turned out that the cat was undead in the end, but I digress.

These letters are Foundling's Cat: all three of them are simultaneously Knife, Bet, and Lie until they are observed by the world, and the story places them into place. They serve multiple purposes while unreceived, and only when they are read do they turn into a specific Role.

XD

Andrew Mitchell

I like this. A very interesting thought indeed.

Decius

The letters go where she wants them to. The letter to Kairos goes to Kairos, the other two letters go to the Grey Pilgrim.

The letter addressed to the general staff is the lie, but it doesn't contain any untrue statements- it's there to make him refuse the surrender of 'all forces under my command', because of the new 'loophole' he just found out about. The bet is that the Grey Pilgrim will decline the surrender for a combination of narrative reasons and an abundance of caution; but he cannot abide unnecessary suffering, so if he declines the surrender he must let the armies leave.

That leaves the knife as the letter to Kairos. It's there to create a chaotic multiparty parley which Cat can win.

[Mental Mouse](#)

So, assuming GP can scry her letters, and planting one to troll him?

Insanenoodlyguy

The bet is Viv as heir. She intends it for real, at least one day, but she says she has trouble reading her lately. She doesn't expect Viv to intentionally ruin her plans, but it's possible she'll step into the wrong story or just plain react at the wrong time to something.

The lie is Kairos, she has nearly no intention of backing whatever crap he says once they get there, and if he proposes something she wants, will probably at least seriously reconsider wanting that thing. Because she can turn to him, look him in the eyes say "Yeah, turns out I lied" and odds are good at least part of him will want to propose marriage. He'll certainly still consider them friends.

The knife is pilgrim. He wants a knife to her, so she's pointing one back at him. And it's got two sides, and goes in one way or another no matter what he does. If he accepts her surrender, there's rules for that, she's giving up less than it might seem, as Callow is under her designated heir that is probably going to re-appoint her as soon as she goes home anyway, and a fallen hero being in charge is going to at least leave a bad taste in his mouth, and none of it can be considered a draw, she said he won and he acknowledged it if he accepts. Meanwhile they have to sit down for peace talks now and the Tyrant is backing her?! which means his options are limited. Even if Cat herself is part of the bargain, if he just kills her or destroys Black's Soul or whatnot Viv is taking her army and going home at best. The one real option that tracks is to make the villain find redemption by fighting for good, and march her north: Exactly what cat wants to begin with. And he knows full well once the wars over, Callow becomes much harder to fight. You don't call yourself the side of good and march against your allies, and more practically the army, of which a vast majority part of the population is or is friends and family with, now has a story where Callow came up north to help out and probably is noted for turning the damn tide. War with them for anything short of Cat going full traitorous and having everybody killed during the victory parade is going to be met with revolt.

If he doesn't accept her surrender, he spurned (thrice over, even) a woman who came to him with entreaties to peace and chose war instead. That's stabbing yourself as these things go. Cat has enough narrative weight to start whooping his ass. Malzana will eventually surrender herself: since she will see her troops losing and see Procer's death, Grey is down, probably even captured which means Levant is not going to keep the fight going on it's own, Saint is probably dead, oh and the Legion just showed up declaring itself in alliance with Callow. They have to sit down at the table now, and that goes mostly the same as what I said above.

There's ways it can fall apart, and at least one will be in danger of happening because stories, but that's what knives are for. Her footrest knows this is "Matron Games" and will probably take it upon himself to stab at least one of the lesser threats without even having to tell her.

caoimhinh

Yep, I agree with you.

Kairos can be lied to and he won't even be bothered by it as long as it's done with style, he might even like it when it's so magnificently blatant.

Cat is betting on the Army of Callow and Vivienne's behavior and reaction in her absence once Viv is officially designated as the heiress to the throne.

The letter to Pilgrim is only an offer to surrender to him, not to Procer nor Levant, and only affects Catherine and the forces under her command, which would be only the Wild Hunt, but they could be liberated once Larat achieves his promised seven crowns and one. Letting the Pilgrim win now would ensure a draw on their next conflict.

Of course, that lie to Kairos works as a knife against the Grand Alliance armies if he acts as if it were a true thing (even if it's ultimately an empty promise), and offering her surrender to the Pilgrim now is also a huge bet, Vivienne as heiress of Callow is a knife against their enemies' excuses for invading Callow, too.

We have seen that Narratively multiple stories can be at work at the same time in the same place, and a single object or act can serve more than one purpose when looked through different angles. This will be a very interesting development.

Insanenoodlyguy

No draw, rule of three works to flip. Its loss, draw, win or vice versa. If she wins or loses now it's over and done, pattern broken. He could still take her out with another story but that one will be lost.

Anonymous

Firstly, let me preface this by saying that I absolutely love the guide! It's become a delightful addition to my morning routine (I live in the EU, hence the 'morning' bit).

However, because it has become so ingrained in my way of life recently, I can't help but notice that the chapters have been posted later and later recently. Is there a reason/explanation for this that I've missed?

Andrew Mitchell

I don't know for sure. But it may be changes to daylight savings time. I read several web serials where the authors live in countries other than my own. So jumps of an hour (or two jumps in short succession) do happen and, in some cases, the

timing does change from year to year. My timezone AEST recently finished daylight savings a week or so earlier than usual.

[dgj212](#)

Lol he should have specified what he meant.

naturalnuke

Laughs in Genie

Skaddix

Lie...Bluff...Knife eh I suppose that will be most of the speculation.

Stormblessed

I wonder just what is Cat learned about Larat, the Wild Hunt, and seven crowns and one. If the wild hunt pledged itself to the queen of moonless nights, shouldn't the old oath be null and void?

naturalnuke

Basically Cat slipped the chains of the Oath by tying them to a big rock(The Night) in her place. However Larat is still attached to his side of the chain(oath). While Cat is no longer limited by the Oath she does own the rock and so holds power over Larat.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Actually, what Cat has discovered is that they *weren't* in fact pledged to Winter; they were pledged to Cat personally, and she was the source of their power. She knows this because when Cat's Winter was taken, Larat &c. weren't freed, nor transferred directly to Sve Noc, but they lost their gate control, because now Cat gets that as-needed from the Twins. They apparently can still contact what's left of Winter, but not tap it directly. And I'd assume Cat arranged with Sve Noc for her Wild Hunt not to be drained into nothingness.

[Javvies](#)

Ah, the Rogue Sorcerer appears. Hopefully, he'll still have Black's soul with him, not stashed somewhere.

Interesting. I wonder about the timing of things here, and Cat's plan. How much fighting does she plan for before sending the letters and engaging in talks?

An open ended commitment to back Kairos's demands, whatever they are? That might be a mistake, especially since you don't know what they'll be.

Skaddix

Yeah giving Kairos a blank check is a bad idea

Then again, with the Wild Hunt being the only force under her actual command and its leader about to get what he deserves, that would basically mean the support of one murderous vagrant that recently stole eight crowns from the princes of Procer.

Skaddix

My issue is more Cat is way too confident in her read of the Tyrant despite not really knowing what his endgame is at all. Thus its dangerous to build a plan that requires the Tyrant to act exactly how you want for things to work. With Pilgrim at least Cat understands his current goal and they both want to take down the Dead King.

[*Fayhem*](#)

No check, regardless of the value written on it, is worth more than what it can be redeemed for. Put another way, Cat might have given the Tyrant a blank check but it's made of rubber and if he slaps that down on the bank counter to cash it in it's going to bounce so hard it'll ricochet around the room and out the window.

[*Liliet*](#)

Probably that one's the lie.

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

Unfortunately, it's likely in a domain. Which might turn out not to be the best idea for the rogue, but up front it forces them to negotiate with him.

Andrew Mitchell

Ah, now that's an interesting thought. The need to get Uncle Amadaus' soul back may be just the think to help get Masego back from the dark place he's currently inhabiting.

[*Liliet*](#)

I think that if what Masego is doing is *any* of the options commentariat has predicted specifically, it's already this – trying to find Amadeus.

And getting 'target not found' because he's currently in two pieces probably -_-

caoimhinh

That title and the epigraph reminded me of an awesome quote from Neil Gaiman's The Sandman comic books.

"It is sometimes a mistake to climb; it is always a mistake to never even make the attempt. If you do not climb you will not fall. This is true. But is it that bad to fail, that hard to fall? Sometimes you wake up. and sometimes the fall kills you, and yes, you die. But there is a third alternative: Sometimes, when you fall, you fly."

Naeddyr

I have no idea what is going on and I love it!

Aston Whiteman

And how about the additional letter?

Wry Warudo

Wonder if Cat will provide some free fireworks in the goat she's gifting to her dear friend

wrywarudo

Oh snap sorry meant to make a new comment but wordpress has been kinda problematic on mobile recently

Someguy

Not worth it no matter how tempting given the upcoming battle. Post-battle will be another story.

IDKWhoitis

True Catherine Diplomacy, pointing out that the terms suck, but suck less than a chest wound.

HardcoreHeathen

I would like to note that Catherine's offer of surrender mentions no prohibitions about bloodshed between her, personally, and the heroes. Hopefully that trick (if that is the trick) doesn't end up with every bone in her body broken, like it did for Akua.

HardcoreHeathen

Also, quoting the earlier piece where the deal with Larat was first revealed, in conversation with the Princess of High Noon:

"I will take the crown of seven mortals rulers and one, to lay them at the feet of the Prince of Nightfall," I said.

Her face went still. A glimmer of something like fear passed through those shining eyes, and shit that wasn't good at all.

"You know not what you have promised," she said. "This must not come to pass."

Are we finally going to find out why a Princess of Summer was fearful of Larat earning his crowns?

Kissaten

Larat was a duke or whatever, and Winter King was chosen amongst the most powerful vassals every new year. Maybe he was cursed to never take the crown of Winter until he fulfilled some obscure prophesy regarding crowns. As Winter is already consumed by the Night, maybe it means he will get swallowed into the Night the moment he gets the crowns.

[Liliet](#)

Larat was a Prince.

But yeah.

Agent J

The Crown of Winter was passed around by the Princes and Princesses of Winter. A rank Larat did, in fact, hold. Larat, the Prince of Nightfall was, at some point, the King of Winter.

Whatever's had the the Princess of High Noon pissing herself is likely a great deal more frightening than Larat being the next King of Winter.

[Mental Mouse](#)

What happens if he becomes King of Winter now, with the Courts merged?

Agent J

He can't. Winter's already been devoured by Sve Noc.

skovbenjamin

Of note the 7 princes and 1 was mentioned in the 4 fold reflection trap akuma caught Cat in back during Second Llesse. In the timeline where Cat was a hero the Conjurer used them to close the red vales with a massive spell.

Insanenoodlyguy

I feel like it's some older story he was part of. The sort of thing thatd turn him into a minor God if he fulfilled the impossible conditon.

Kissaten

Cat is horrifying. If Pilgrim even dares to think of accepting Cat's surrender (as if it was in his plans in the first place) it will immediately turn the whole situation into some kind of Night-sanctioned Crusade with heiress pulling a sword out of stone (staff is made from obsidian?) and a free resurrect (Pilgrim Forgiving a VILLAIN?) for someone on top of that. Kairos will totally go for it as he gets to place a crown on Vivienne's head and this is a much more fun than a useless peace treaty.

But that is just an initial, obvious thrust. Even Vivienne knew that Cat is trying to become enemy's hostage since Cat didn't want to know her side's plans. My guess is Pilgrim letter is a bet – whether or not he accepts the conditions it makes Pilgrim lose or lose, letter to Callow is a lie – most likely to somehow fall into Kairos' hands as a bluff against both Pilgrim and Kairos, and letter to Kairos the knife since it somehow allows Army of Callow (and allies) to run away unscathed, and that is the real goal of whole thing.

Ein

Lets game this out a bit...

If Cat surrenders to GP, Kairos cannot get his compromise and as such loses. He has to do everything in his power to stop GP from accepting it or forcing a the loss. Cat wins

If Cat is killed in the ensuing battle, Larat's oath falls on to Sve Noc (who recieved the crown as a gift freely given) and I really doubt he wants to be sworn in debt to a bunch of psychotic murder elves. Remember, she is the only one who can release them from service. Larat, like Kairos, has to keep her alive at all costs. Cat wins.

If the surrender is not accepted, and Grey forces the fight, Cat can then abdicate and take the wind out of his narrative sails. The Army of Callow is in agnostic, mundane hands and Cat takes herself off the board. Grey loses any handle on the situation and is now facing two armies against one. Cat wins.

If the surrender is accepted, Cat abdicates like above, the drow return to Sve Noc's service (they are loaners iirc), and Cat essentially surrenders nothing. Kairos loses, Grey loses, and the Armies are still pointing at each others throats and 600k drow run rampant over the north. Everyone loses big.

I don't see the win condition though. Grey backs off, peace talks start, and Kairos wins? Cat abdicates during peace talks and as such does not have weight behind her to enforce her side?

Mental Mouse

> Larat's oath falls on to Sve Noc [...] and I really doubt he wants to be sworn in debt to a bunch of psychotic murder elves.

Pot, meet kettle. Also, the Drow would object to your description of them... they're no relation to elves! But seriously, I think Larat needs a living, or at least material, person as anchor.

caolimhinh

It's very cool how Catherine is predicting everything that's happening by simply knowing what kind of story is being built, while the rest are stunned, surprised, confused and even a bit scared. Her serenity in the face of what is to everyone else unexpected circumstances, allows her to appear like the one who is in control of the situation, which also gives her a weight narratively.

Nice to see Larat's elegant and ambiguously treacherous semblance again, hahaha. Well, Sve Noc are now goddesses so it makes sense that they are more powerful than Larat. It is an interesting thing that Larat is bound to Cat, not to Winter, so even now that Winter has been consumed by Night and Sve Noc probably holds some influence in the Wild Hunt they belong first and foremost to Cat. That hints at Larat being still under service of Catherine even if he obtains the seven crowns and one, which now is confirmed to be "his way out" and might make him a Fae capable of standing on his own without needing Arcadia. That would give Cat a very powerful servant in the future, obedient to her beyond circumstances, station or place.

I'm really hyped for next chapter.

Typos found:

ad a red / and a red

I have him one last sentence / I gave him one last sentence

the situations is getting grim / the situation is getting grim

A mirthless smiled / A mirthless smile

didn't? / didn't it?

a moment pass / a moment passed

Of all the weakness / Of all the weaknesses

Mental Mouse

"It's very cool how Catherine is predicting everything that's happening..."

Well here's the thing. The surrender went smoothly. Inviting Kairos went smoothly. Given Cat's luck, what do you want to bet there's a hitch with the abdication?

caoimhinh

Hmm, I doubt there would be much trouble there. The problematic situation will be in Arcadia when they go to try to get Masego back to his right mind. I would bet Pilgrim and Saint aren't simply going to let Cat reunite with him without obstacles, since he is a powerful threat.

Mental Mouse

Pilgrim and Saint may not have a choice. Cat can deal with him, they can't.

caoimhinh

They probably can kill him or at least wound him, though. Remember the times they clashed in the past: Laurence cut through everything Masego threw at her and Tariq's miracles matched Hierophant's sorceries. Cat is the only one in the region that can talk things out with Masego (although Indrani might be on her way here), the Heroes would enter combat against him. That's going to be one funny discussion, since Saint is going to be really pissed after this fight.

Ravin

Join, hide, or die. That's all you can do when the Wild Hunt comes to call.

Valkyria

So... GOATS!

Hah, just perfect.

stevenneiman

I don't understand Hakram's concern. It sounds like they've already got more goats than they have explosives for.

Valkyria

Well, apparently they also got the odd stray dog with glued on horns should the goats not be available en masse. Also

night shinenigans can be explosive if used by the right wrong hands I'm sure.

stevenneiman

I could barely breathe for a couple minutes after I read that line about her cordial alliance with the Tyrant.

As a side note, there was a little inconsistency near the beginning of the chapter. It mentioned Hakram writing with one hand and looking like he could lift the table with the other, but he doesn't have another hand at the moment, and the one he does have is a skeleton.

Dainpdf

So much suspense. And trying to find some reference for Theodosius's Dilemma landed me in a land of Christian Theology and Roman History I was definitely not prepared for.

[Zim the Vixen](#)

Can anyone remind me where Cat offered the seven+one crowns to Larat?

Atagan

When she needed help in the battle of five armies and one, she offered the crowns to get Larat to help

raimn

if i remember correctly she made that promise during the fae arc before or during the fight against summer. i think it was for his help(+winter troops) against the army of summer in arcadia, the battle that ended with the summer queen naming them the "woe" and the princess of high noon prisoner.

caoimhinh

Exactly what the two comments above have said, the bargain was struck when Cat was marching across Arcadia in order to get Winter Fae's help in fighting Summer's troops.

However, the terms of the bargain were only known afterward, when Catherine was interrogating Sulia (the Princess of High Noon), to get information about Summer and the reasons and consequences of the Fae Incursion into Creation.

The specific chapter is: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/10/16/chapter-35-questions/>

[Geoff Burns](#)

Cat is using the Oracle against Pilgrim. Using the fact they will always choose the best option against Pilgrim and Oracle.

Vivienne's letter is aimed against Oracle since Oracle is the only way the other side will know about it. Cat can't tell them because they won't trust her. What do you want to bet that Theodosius' Dilemma is a precedent for an heir to take over if a king or queen is captured?

Neither Vivienne's letter or Pilgrim's letter can't be a lie since the Oracle would be able to tell, so the Tyrant's letter is the lie.

I am thinking Vivienne's letter is the bet since she is trusting them after they have just stuffed up. She has the Adjutant spell out the right answer for them in baby talk, further showing a lack of trust.

Pilgrim's letter is the knife threatening to break the pattern and plunge three armies into costly chaos for no purpose.

She is playing chicken, except the people in other car can see the future and she is putting a brick on the accelerator and tying herself up so she can serve.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed.

Also man, good point, I forgot about the Augur.

Decius

"It was a rather amusing sight, the tall orc bent over the desk with a long quill in one hand and looking for all the world like he could be lifting the whole thing with the other."

Did Hakram keep his other hand? Does he wear it on a necklace, or is it autonomous?

Aotrs Commander

So, does anyone else think Kairos is going to treat Cat's letter as tantamount to a marriage proposal? (Regardless of the actions he takes over it?)

'Cos I can just seem him waiting until he's all alone, and then cradling it and staring off into the distance, sighing dreamily and going "she really gets me..."

I mean, the badly-painted goat-slash-dog-steed. It's such a *thoughtful* insult.

Anyone want to take a bet, next time see see him,he's got the goat/dog skull and a chain around his neck or something as a keepsake...?

caoimhinh

If they actually send Kairos a dog painted and with horns glued on its head, odds are he will present himself to the international talks while carrying the dog with him and introducing it as a purebred Liesse stallion gifted by the Black Queen herself.

No one will dare deny it, hahahahaha.

Agent J

My bet is, if Halram splurges and sends an actual painted goat, Kairos will ride it with all the pride and noble grace of a purebred Liessen charger.

[Liliet](#)

Have it pull the chariot, more like. He's not a rider kind of person.

Gunslinger

Honestly so much happening here no one's commented on the return of the goat. I couldn't stop laughing at that.

[Daniel E](#)

"You can't harm me, for I am but a humble shoe-maker" – Dread Emperor Irritant, upon his third successful abdication.

nimelennar

Who made some surprisingly nice shoes, no less.

IDKWhoitis

Lets be honest, there's no way those shoes weren't made of duke, highlord, or hero leather...

Agent J

Nah. That'd be whatever Emperor held the epithet 'the Tanner'. In order to be a *humble* shoemaker and not draw Heroic ire, Irritant the Incredible would have to keep his shoemaking business on the up&up.

[Liliet](#)

^^^

Enjou

Alright, not sure which letter is which exactly, but I do think that Cat is basically setting the Wild Hunt up to be surrendered to the Grey Pilgrim. And he'll accept. He'll have no choice.

Why? Fairy gates. Right now, Cat has them and nobody else does. It's one of the things he fears about her, an advantage so big that it might make her the next Dread Empress Triumphant if she gets things rolling enough. But if he's being handed the Wild Hunt on a platter, it evens the scales massively. What's more, he can use those fairy gates to move troops against the Dead King, which is something the forces of Good would really, really need.

It narratively moves Cat away from being the Big Bad, which makes it less likely she'll get killed. Also, tipping the scales in a way that favors the heroes like that means that the Heavens are less able to interfere by putting a finger on the scales, which would disrupt whatever the Heavens have planned. They can't give the heroes whatever counter they had planned to her advantage of having fairy gates if it's no longer an advantage she holds over them. If the scales are eventually going to be made even, then better to even them on her terms.

[whlindsa](#)

The bet is the letter to the Tyrant—he's the wild card, and he's the one with the plan. The knife is the letter of resignation, and it is aimed at the Bard—she's the one who a resignation will most cripple, because it puts a non-named in charge of Callow, and thus makes the kingdom effectively immune to her meddling. And the lie is her surrender to the Pilgrim, because he gets everything he wants, and absolutely nothing that she is claiming to give him, except that now he has to listen when she says "let my people go".

As for the Wild Hunt...there are two crowns belonging to villains in play, seven Princes of Procer, and at least three crowns of the Levantine kingdoms. Once that oath is filled, only Catherine, herself, can command the loyalty of Larat and those he leads, which has to be freaking Larat out big time.

Agent J

I'd also like to note that the Fae are immortal. If she, as the head of the Army of Callow and Legions of Terror surrendered, then the Procerans would slaughter Grem and his troops at the very least. But if she's only the Queen of the Hunt, then what're they gonna do? Stab a fae? Big whoop. Ranger does it every season.

Author Unknown

Your mount, sire.

Woof!

snicker

If Cat sits down with Tyrant for tea, she should totally spike the drinks with almond extract.

Alegio

I REALLY wanna see Akua and the Tyrant drinking tea together, the conversation would fall into who has the better taste in adding flavored poisons to the other drink.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, she can reminisce about her family's wines that were bred to pair well with antidotes.

Alegio

Ok the less likely to be the lie is Viv's queen to be letter so I will say that's somehow it, next the knife is more probably than not our favorite Tyrant, while the bet is making the pilgrim take the letter while not knowing that Cat is neither gonna be in control of Callowan nor Drow forces or some crazy half-truth like that.

[Liliet](#)

I suspect Hells are all going to spontaneously freeze over before Cat hands another villain a strategic victory in exchange for tactical assistance.

She's not having a second Governess Akua fiasco.

[adrian1992blog](#)

The lie is the fact the 3 letters aren't what she said they are!!!

Ok that was mostly a joke, anyone else smells an interlude? I kind of want one

[Mental Mouse](#)

How about five or six of them? 😊

superkeaton

I'm slightly annoyed that Cat didn't refer to the Three as "Pilgrim, Tyrant, Queen", "myself" just doesn't have the same ring

[chris S](#)

I actually fell off my chair laughing at that one. I love the banter between Cat and Kairos

konstantinvoncarstein

It is the only thing I love with him, he is hilarious

antoninjohn

Black traded away a large amount of goats for that dragon general, Cat can just paint a dog white and glue on some horns

Phoenix

"One was a knife, one was a bet, and one was a lie."

First off, I love how she saw the letter as a knife as a callback to how her story started with Black handing her a knife.

Last chapter, Cat planned out what everyone wanted with parchment. One for Tyrant, one for Grey Pilgrim and one for the Black Queen, and above those three was one for her actual lose conditions. Interestingly each, paper had three goals/conditions. At the time, it struck me as odd that Cat included the Black Queen on there. What she put under Black Queen was what her read of Tyrant and GP thought she was after. During that conversation, it was also mentioned that Tyrant was her borrowed knife.

Looking at the three letters, when Adjutant asked which letter was first, Cat had only told him that there were three letters, not that one was a knife, a bet and a lie. She told began dictating what was to be in the first letter to Tyrant. The contents of that letter was an offer to back Tyrant's demand at a peace conference in exchange for being willing to agree to a peace conference, as well as a threat of retreating entirely. The most interesting part of the wording here was that her support would have the full weight of her force and influence behind it.

The letter to the Grey Pilgrim was an unconditional surrender, that Cat had mention herself by name as 'first anointed Queen of Callow of my name' and not as the Black Queen or the Queen.

The last letter was to her entire war council and it was of a story that most of them should have known, however the story ended with making Vivian Dartwick a Lady and then naming her heiress-designate to the crown.

On the surface, it seems like the letter to Tyrant was the knife, the letter to GP was the bet and the letter to the war council was the lie. And that may be true, but the second half of the chapter made me realize that the letters do not need to be sent for them to act as their function. Cat has intentionally made her

headquarters in the center of this Mavian prayer, a weakened boundary to Arcadia. After having Adjucant write her letters, an enemy army comes through a breach the following morning. Without sending for him or any surprise, Cat speaks out into the air and Larat answers.

I believe that this is the twist that Cat is making, for she prepared this place with the knowledge that Larat would have been listening to Cat's conversation for a long time. Cat planned and explained what she was after as well as what her enemies were after and what conditions she needed to meet all with Larat able to listen in. Her twist is a knife for Larat. This is likely the Prince's Graveyard and Larat was once the Prince of Nightfall.

Walter

Perhaps im mistaken – but do members of the Wild Hunt qualify as possessing Crowns? Or possibly something qualifying as “one”?

I don't think they do being, iirc, members of the fae court, but it would ironic to if Cat would be able to qualify members of the Wild Hunt as “Crowns”, thereby sacrificing them to satisfy the promise she had made to Larat.

[whlindsa](#)

Foundling and the Duchess

Said Foundling to the Duchess

“I must make a man out of you

That will stand upon her feet, and play the game

that will butcher his oppressor as a Praesi ought to do

And she sent the Duchess Sergeant Whatshisname

Not a Count or Lord, nor yet a legate,

It was not a big brass general that came

But a man in Legion kit who could handle men a bit

With his armor labelled Sergeant Whatshisname

Said Foundling to the Duchess “Though at present singing small

You shall hum a proper tune before it ends,”

And she introduced the Duchess to the Sergeant once for all,

And left 'em in the desert making friends

It was not a Royal Palace nor the Tower;

It was not a public-house of common fame;

But a piece of red-hot sand, with a valley on either hand,

And a little hut for Sergeant Whatshisname.

Said Foundling to the Duchess, “You've had miracles before,

When the Fairfaxes turned demons into prey;

But if you watch the Sergeant, he can show you something more.

He's a charm for making legionaries from clay.”

It was neither Miezán, Callowan, nor Kharsum;

It was odds and sods and leavings of the same

Translated by a stick (which is really half the trick),
And the Duchess harked to Sergeant Whatsishname.

(There were years that no one talked of; there were times of
horrid doubt—
There was faith and hope and whacking and despair—
While the Sergeant gave the Cautions and he combed the Duchess
out,
And Foundling didn't seem to know nor care.
That is her awful way o' doing business—
She would serve her will or vision just the same—
For she thinks her reach ends with Vale and Isle.)

Said Foundling to the Duchess, "You can let my people go!"
(Foundling used them hard and often from the start),
And they entered 'em in battle on a most astonished foe—
But Foundling had hardened the Duchess's heart
Which was broke, back when Callow fell
Twenty years before the Sergeant came
How they mended it no man can tell
Save for Sergeant Whatshisname

It was wicked bad campaigning (cheap and nasty as they marched),
There was cold and snow and endless work and ice,
There were fires and armies and lands that endless flame had
parched
But the Duchess marched across Procer twice,
Cross Orne, cross Issere, and cross Salamans
Like the Praesi had come just before
Tween the armies of dust and fire to the land of their desire
And their guide, it was Sergeant Whatshisname!

We are eating dirt in handful for to save our daily bread
Which we have to buy from those that hate us most,
And we must not raise the money where the Sergeant raised the
dead,
and it's wrong and dangerous to boast
but he did it on the cheap and on the quiet,
and he's not allowed to forward any claim—
though he drilled a green man to Callowan, though he made a
goblin fight,
He will still continue Sergeant Whatshisname—
Private, Corporal, Sergeant, and Instructor—
But the everlasting miracle's the same!

With many, many, many apologies to Rudyard Kipling, but this
seemed like such a great fit!

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

After rereading the end of this chapter, I came to the
realization that people will be telling tales for centuries of
the Black Queen, the Queen of Air and Darkness, and her Wild Hunt

riding in the night. Parents will tell their children to not go out during the dark of the moon, for the Wild Hunt will take them away to serve the Black Queen. And those tales may not be wrong!

Isaac Martinez

We have a staff was not a staff but a sword, a sword that was not a sword but a prayer.

Why can't we have a letter that is not a lie, a knife or a bet, but is a lie, a knife and a bet?

Relyt

I can't wait for Hakram's tell-all biography, "The Black Queen: a Knife, a Bet, and a Lie".

[whlindsa](#)

Nah...he's going to have military-style memoirs, like Ulysses S Grant. And like Grant, they will probably be continental best-sellers.

By the way, on a totally unrelated note, does anybody know how long orcs live? Assuming they're not killed, anyway.

Interlude: West, Ever Pursuing

"Note: investigation in why sharing a problem is said to halve it remain inconclusive. Perhaps more varied trials are needed, as the tiger always ends up killing both subjects no matter the order they're put in the cage."

– Extract from the journal of Dread Emperor Malignant II

Lord Akil Tanja of the Grim Binder's Blood crouched over the thinning snow and passed a hand through it, the twinge in his knees a reminder that this was not his first war but it might just be his last. He was not so old as to crumble into dust at the first touch of wind, but life away from the comfortable confines of Malaga had taken a toll on him. There were practices for a binder of his talent that might allow health to seep back into his flesh but the Lord of Malaga had always disdained their likes. He would not play chasing-games with his age by binding and devouring creatures, not even those that would survive such a perverted act. The rueful reflection on his age was forced to the side by the calm voice of his sworn enemy and ally.

"And?" Lady Aquiline asked.

"The earth beneath is still frosted," Akil said. "These are war-grounds. Let there be blood."

"Let there be blood," the Lady of Tartessos agreed with a crisp nod.

Neither of them considered giving the Proceran captains marching with their host a voice in this decision. Had Prince Alvaro of Salamans survived the battle with the Stygian army there might have been need to do so out of courtesy but the man had died to the Magisterium's dark sorceries – after taking a wound he'd melted from the inside over the night, Akil had heard – and the remaining commanders were neither highborn nor powerful enough to force the issue. They would follow the Dominion in battle, like it or not.

"They say the One-Eye will be there," Lady Aquiline Osenia of the Slayer's Blood said. "That would be a worthy head to claim, do you not agree?"

The Silent Slayer's quarrelsome brood, Akil thought, had always shown a distasteful obsession for the killing of famed foes. The one-eyed greenskin who had been named Marshal of Praes many years ago was perhaps the most famous alive of his kind, but if Akil understood correctly the orc must also be an old beast by now. Hardly a challenge for a sharp young killer like the Lady Aquiline. That she had spoken of an aged orc but not of the Hellhound or the Deadhand was telling, in his eyes, for while those two's fame was fresher the ending of it would have been worthier dead. *Fairer*. The Lord of Malaga spat to the side before rising from his crouch.

"Shake the bushes before shooting at the sparrow, Osenia," he replied. "Marshals do not fight from the front and they have raised a fortress from nothing, these easterners."

The lair of the Black Queen's armies had been an impressive thing to behold, when Akil had first taken stock of it. Beneath a tall barrow crowned by raised stones a maze of death had been raised from wood, steel and earth. A deep ditch led into a palisade – a base of beaten earth, topped by spears – where legionaries kept watch night and day. Behind that first line flat grounds spread into flat killing grounds, ending in another palisade that prevented easy access to terraces filled with siege engines and crossbowmen. Deeper behind that walled camps filled with tents and protected by teeth-like bastions of earth and wood jutting outwards made up the last line of defence that would be manned by mortals. Lord Marave's messengers had spoken of strange lights above the barrow, after nightfall, and so Akil did not need to be told where it was that the Black Queen had made her den. These would be hard defences to crack, he knew, and Lady Aquiline's

loose talk of claiming heads displeased him. Marshals of Praes were not easy meat, nor were the villain queen's own champions.

"Now is not the time to lose your stomach, Tanja," the Lady of Tartessos chided. "You heard Careful Yannu's stratagem same as me, and did not speak against the soundness of it."

That it had been the scheme of Lord Yannu Marave had only made Akil hesitate all the more. Aquiline Osená had not shared a border with the Champion's Blood for most her life, unlike Akil himself, and so she could not understand why the way they called the man not Reckless or Brave but *Careful* Yannu should be troubling. The Lord of Malaga had fought two honour wars against Lord Yannu's predecessor and found him a hard fighter but no great trouble. He'd sent a war-party into Alavan territory under Careful Yannu only once, though, in the moon that followed the man's ascension to lordship.

His own cousin and boyhood playmate Jaira had led it, for she was skilled with sword and bindings both and clever in the ways of war. Yet unlike his predecessor, Yannu had not fought the raiders as they passed through the flatlands taking riches and honour. No, he'd waited until they were returning north laden with loot and prisoners. Then he'd caught them while they were fat and slow under cover of night, butchering them wholesale. Without warning, without honour duels, without anything other than death weighed and measured. Jaira had been the only survivor of the night, and Lord Yannu had dragged her to the border before opening her throat in sight of the warbands Akil had sent to reclaim his cousin. He'd then left without even hearing out the calls to duel by the warriors of Malaga.

The point made had been harsh, but so was the man: Careful Yannu was willing to let his holdings bleed if it allowed him to position himself for a killing stroke. And once crossed, he would not stay his hand in retaliation no matter who had first given insult. The Marave were steel-cast madmen who answered to only Gods and Pilgrim, and barely even those. The notion of one blessed with both their line's talent for killing and a good mind for strategy was worth respect and wariness both. Madness and cold method were dark mothers to dark days. Lord Akil Tanja had not fought a second honour war against Alava since that pointed lesson and slept easier for it.

And now he was being told to place the fate of his captains, of his soldiers, in the hands of the Lord of Alava. A man known to sacrifice for the killing stroke, and do so without hesitation. He was tempted to refuse, to force a conference where another plan would be laid out before battle was given, but Lady Aquiline was watching him with those cold eyes. Waiting, patiently, for a misstep that would allow her to wrest command of the host from him. Razin's mistakes had been paid for, but the taint of failure

still hung over the Tanjas. If the Lady of Tartessos went to the unsworn captains, claiming he had lost his nerve, Akil could not be certain of the outcome.

"I have already said," Lord Akil replied, "that there will be blood, Lady Aquiline. We will follow the stratagem of Careful Yannu and make war on the Enemy."

And still, he could not help but glance at the pale and empty vista behind his host. That long expanse of snowy plains, which had until morning been broken by the eldritch sight of a passage leading into Arcadia. It was gone, now, though the remembrance of the harrowing journey through that storm-wracked hellscape would haunt them all for years to come. The League of Free Cities had not followed them through the breach, after hounding them through it, yet Akil could not help but wonder if they had not taken another path after. If there might yet be more to this battle than the armies of the Black Queen and those of the Grand Alliance. Lady Aquiline had sent for the horn-bearer granted to them by the Holy Seljun while he looked, and though she looked hungry for the honour she did not overstep.

The young boy passed him the strange carved horn inherited from days long before the Dominion, an old artefact said to have made from the tip of a *guisanes'* horn. The legendary gargantuan bulls whose stride had shaken the world and flattened hills into plains were perhaps more myth than history, but it was said a shadow of their thundering might remained in wonders crafted from their remains. Whatever the truth of it, when Lord Akil Tanja of the Binder's Blood sounded the horn his magic shivered inside him as the deep call echoes across the plains. In the distance, after a long moment, the sister-horn in the hands of the other Dominion host offered a shuddering call in reply.

Banners rose and without further ceremony the battle began.

—

Marshal Juniper of the Red Shields watched her enemies advance in silence. The sight of so many soldiers on the move would have been impressive for someone who had not fought in the Arcadian Campaign or slogged through the brutality of Second Liesse, but after these Juniper had found it took much to awe her. Yet for all that the armies before her lacked the ostentatious wings and sorceries of the Courts or the relentless horror of the Diabolist's wights and devils they were no less dangerous for it. Flesh and steel did not splash so colourful across the pages of histories as the means of monsters and villains but they worked. And the Grand Alliance had brought much of both to bear on this field and this day.

"They don't seem to have organized beyond attacking together," Grem One-Eye said.

The sound of Kharsum spoken crisp and clear was like a breath of fresh air straight from the steppes. Juniper let that taste of home settled in her bones before growling in agreement. The armies of the Grand Alliance had not joined before moving against her fortifications, to her relative surprise. It might have taken them a few days to restructure after merging ranks, but they would have been stronger for it and there was not much she could do to better her own position with the means at her disposal. Her warlord had hinted that the League might be on its way to join the melee as well, Juniper noted. If her foes believed that arrival imminent, it might explain this hasty assault. This was speculation, however, and ultimately of no import to her. It was the facts that mattered. An army of eighty thousand was approaching from the northwest, under the command of Lord Yannu Marave and Princess Rozala Malanza. An army of sixty thousand was approaching from the southeast, under the command of Lord Akil Tanja. The first two commanders were known to her, and their armies as well. Of the latter commander, however, almost nothing was known save for his name.

"The northern force is the weaker one," Juniper said. "Much of the foot from Vaccei is light and Malanza fields mostly levies. If a rout is to happen at all, it will be from there."

The orc at her side grunted his agreement. They watched the enemy form up, and with cold eyes the Marshal of Callow sought weaknesses. The northern army advanced cautiously, which did not surprise her – she'd traded blows with them before. The Vaccei skirmishers advanced in a deep but loose screen ahead of the Proceran foot Princess Rozala had brought: a hodgepodge mixture of levies, fantassins and principality troops. Dartwick's spies had brought back word that as much as six tenths of the Principate infantry should be levies, which was promising, but thoughts of an easy rout were put to rest by the two wings of infantry flanking the Procerans. The Lord of Alava, Yannu Marave, had brought to the crusade some of the finest heavy infantry Juniper had ever seen. Only four thousand in whole, at least, but it was marching ahead of lighter armsmen from Alava and Vaccei in much greater numbers. A sharp sword to open a breach, Juniper thought, after the skirmishers found a weakness.

"Malanza has the horse again, looks like," Marshal Grem said.

The banner told it true, though she found the other orc made as wary as she felt by the way the near ten thousand horse – mixed Proceran and Levantine horse, though vastly more so Proceran than the other – the Princess of Aequitan led was peeling off from the rest of the army and moving towards the south. The mass of cavalry was moving slowly, but in good order.

"She didn't make the plan for this," Juniper said. "She's much more aggressive a commander than that, she'd keep the horse close on the flanks to try a charge if opportunity arose."

"Lord Yannu then," Grem said. "Shame. He's a hard one to bait."

"Too much to hope for he spends the Vaccei foot against the palisades, I suppose," Juniper muttered.

The older man twitched in amusement. The daring raids and ambushes from the Vaccei warriors and their vicious warleaders of the Bandit's Blood had not endeared the Levantines to either orc. Juniper found her eyes drifting south, to the other army, and found her back prickling. Most of what she saw there she had expected. The enemy was moving with skirmishers ahead, though the screen was much smaller than the northern army's, with two massed forces of infantry behind it. One Proceran and one Levantine. The Principate foot here should be mostly professional soldiers, Juniper thought, which explained why unlike in the northern army's formation they'd not been placed between steadier soldiers to hold up their spine. The detail that had her hackles raising was the detachment of cavalry splitting off from the army, a solid seven thousand moving north. From a bird's eye view, the Hellhound considered, within the hour there would be a point where her camp was as the centre of a neat square.

"They think they have a way to breach the palisades," the Marshal of Callow said. "Interesting."

The Marshal of Praes squinted his one eye, gazing at the moving cavalries. He arrived, she suspected, at the same conclusion she had: they were being positioned to hit forces defending the palisades from sudden angles after a path suddenly being opened for them.

"The reserves are readied," Grem One-Eye said, baring his fangs. "Let them try."

A moment later the skirmish lines of the northern army entered the first killing yard the Marshals had prepared for them and the slaughter began.

—

Moro of the Brigand's Blood had lost thirty warriors in the time it took to drink a skin of water. He was not stranger to death dealt and received, but the sheer suddenness of it took him by surprise. The traps had been cleverly hidden, he thought, covered with a thin layer of snow and earth. And they must have been dug at night, for even with watcher his mother's had not known of them. Not all warriors who'd fallen in the pits had died to the sharp stake at the bottom, but all had taken wounds – and their screams had brought hesitation where before there had been only

courage. The warriors of his lands, Moro would admit to himself, were not used to being on this side of the traps and were not taking it well. The heir to Vaccei had called a halt, and sent for what he thought might just be the solution to the troubles. It wasn't long before the priests answered his call, for the Lanterns were never far from the vanguard of strife. A full battle-party of thirteen had come in answer, to his pleasure, and the eldest among them sought him out.

"Honoured Son," the woman greeted him. "You seek illumination?"

"I seek to walk within the Light," Moro agreed. "For me and mine to follow its paths."

The woman's face-paint, golden and pale, hid her expression well. He could not tell whether she approved or disapproved of his request, which while not presumptuous was still a request – for some of the Lanterns just that was enough to give offence. They were a touchy lot. Regardless, after a heartbeat she suddenly whipped around and a lance of Light struck out. Twenty feet forward, it broke through a thin layer of snow and earth to reveal the trap under.

"Follow, then, Moro of the Brigand's Blood," the Lantern said.

Her companions spread out, and at the fore of Moro's own warriors came men and women bearing long perches. They would reveal these traps, he smiled, for the Enemy had been foolish enough to lay them far out of crossbow range.

—

General Hune Egelsdottir waited until it was clear no more of the warrior-priests would reinforce the frontlines. She glanced at her senior mage, mildly amused by how eager he seemed to be to act.

"Fire," she ordered. "On special assets only."

Behind her, rituals bloomed as the mage cadres finally received the authorization to act. One, two, three, four, five: she long spears of flame formed and were sent out like massive arrows. Without scrying to adjust the trajectory it was unpleasantly imprecise business to use these sorts of rituals, as shown by the rituals. All were impacts – the ogre made a note to commend the officers leading the rituals – but only three of the priests were turned to cinders.

No matter, it was only the first volley.

"Again," the general of the Second Army ordered, the faintest trace of a smile on her face.

—

Lord Yannu Marave sat atop his horse and thoughtfully chewed the mouthful of bread he'd ripped from the loaf, eyeing the falling javelins of flame.

Princess Rozala had told him the Army of Callow had used such ritual sorceries before, though allegedly it had not since the Hierophant had left its ranks for destination. It would have been sloppy, however, to assume that meant without the Bestowed they could not. So he hadn't, instead preparing the same manner of defences the Proceran armies had at the Battle of the Camps. The priests from the House of Light, that tame Proceran breed, were shuffled to the front and ordered to form protective panes of Light. The Vaccei warriors were not yellow-bellied, and so did not need much haranguing before their advance resumed.

—

Grem One-Eye leaned forward and Juniper grinned, broad and fierce. They had, she believed, noticed the same detail. Though the ritual sorcery had been checked by priest intervention once more, there'd been a departure from the way that trick had been used at the Camps. Instead of massive layered shields covering the entire frontline, this time the Grand Alliance had resorted to a mere half dozen large panes protecting where the rituals had been striking. Dartwick's spies, the Hellhound was forced to admit, had actually provided useful military intelligence.

"They're spread thin on priests," the Marshal of Praes laughed. "Too many wars, Hasenbach, too many wars."

The Marshal of Callow did not reply, for her gaze had turned south where battle was finally being joined. General Abigail, the Hellhound had decided, was in need of thorough tempering. Her command at the southern front should serve, for a start.

—

The pit traps had not been part of the warnings Lord Marave had passed, but Aquiline Osega was not moved by the loss of a few dozen skirmishers. In the hunting of a foe strong and cunning, such deaths were inevitable. The Lady of Tartessos had been riding behind the last of the slingers and javelinmen, a handful of captains at her side, when she ordered the assault to be halted. Inevitable losses or not, she would not countenance simply throwing soldiers at the traps until a safe path emerged. Her favoured captain, dearest Elvera – who had such a dark reputation, with some, but to Aquiline remained the smiling woman who'd taught her how to reply to scraped knees with broken teeth – quietly reminded her that with Lord Yannu's force advancing there could be no long halt without leaving his army exposed to the full attention of the enemy. Feeling out the traps with

perches would take too long, Lady Aquiline had decided. No, it was time for bold steps. The rider she sent to that hard-eyed old monster Akil Tanja returned with the answer she'd wanted: the binders of Malaga would take the lead.

Reining in her horse, it was an effort for the Lady of Tartessos not to show the thrum of excitement she felt at the notion of seeing the finest sorcerers of Levant in the fullness of their war-making. When had been the last time Creation witnesses such a thing, she wondered? Not since the Sepulcher War, at least, and perhaps not even then. A mere hundred men and women in thick coats of leather and iron grey cloth marched to the front, skulls and bones and claws bound by fine brass chains. The spread out in a line, and one of them raised a hand. There was a grinding scream, like a hundred blades being scraped against each other, and a translucent drop formed in the air a few feet in front of the binder. The ground beneath it, snow and earth and snow, was sucked upwards by some invisible force that broke it all down to grains. The other binders followed in the first one's wake, drops forming one after another and the scream becoming utterly deafening. And still Aquiline did not look away for a moment, for in front of her spirits were being given shape.

The first one shaped a wyvern, the winged creature with the long stinger-tipped tail letting out a scream all too-real before it began to advance and strike at the ground to reveal traps. The snow and earth it was made from shifted like true flesh and sinew, for the spirit the binder had called forth still remembered the body it has once worn. It was a company of beasts that was brought forth, manticores and griffins and *culebron*. Even a few creatures she did not recognize: *her*, the Lady of Tartessos, whose true domain was the savage Brocelian!

The beasts of snow and earth sprang forward, implacable and relentless.

—

General — despite her best efforts — Abigail of Summerholm idly wondered if you got a worse penalty for deserting when you were a general. She'd assumed it couldn't get worse than hanging, and that could only happen the once, but considered the amount of Wastelanders enrolled in the Army of Callow she just couldn't be sure. Well, there was nowhere to run to anyway so it was all academic in the end.

"Burn those up, boys," she called out.

Krolem relayed the order more proper-like, wonderful aide that he was. Behind the generals rituals bloomed, but Abigail just had this sinking feeling it wasn't going to be enough.

It wasn't pessimism, she told herself, if you were part of the Army of Callow.

DroughtBringer

Go vote!

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

pagesbe

The battle begins. I can't wait to see how this will play out. Also, can someone more observant than me tell me what time of day this occurred? I think it's daytime judging by the fact that everyone can see well.

Caerulea

And also the drow aren't wrecking the Allied forces.

pagesbe

They could be being held back as a trump card of sorts, so while this is true it isn't precisely evidence either.

On a different note, is it morning? By that I mean, are 95% of the Drow currently snoozing? Probably not enough information for that one.

TeK

So, is this Prince's Graveyard or not, what are you bets?

Andrew Mitchell

95% sure it is.

caoimhinh

Like Hune said: "Fire, on special assets only".

Most of us expect this to be the Princes' Graveyard, of course, this could be another battle and the Princes' Graveyard be actually one of the battles of the Grand Alliance + Callow against the Dead King where Procer lost a lot of their princes and only won due to Catherine's crazy strategies (which would make sense and be quite a plot twist at the same time).

Given the relationship between Callow and Procer, when we were given the name "Princes' Graveyard" for a future

battle of Catherine, we immediately jumped to the assumption that it is a battle against Procer (how could we not, given what we had seen and what we saw afterward in the Crusade?), but we have to remember that there WILL be battles with the joined armies against Keter, and honestly I don't believe Catherine would be completely open about her plans to the other nations when she isn't to her own Generals.

Organizing the Grand Alliance forces so far hasn't been any ordained and clear chain of command with one General giving orders to the others but rather "You, take your forces to this position and then make plans on your own to hold that ground, kill the enemies there, and recapture lost territory", this is due to political issues and also because of the sheer size of the battlefronts.

My guess is Callow will be assigned to one of the Northeastern principalities where they can be the closest force to the Eastern front where the Drow are, which would let Klaus Papenheim free to give aid to the Lycaonese principalities that are fighting alone. I still believe that when the war is over the ones who will actually be grateful and remember Catherine's actions will be the Lycaonese.

So, while this is likely to be Princes' Graveyard and all the hints are there (even the thing with Larat getting his Seven Crowns and One), the Princes' Graveyard might still be a future battle against Procer, or even a battle alongside Procer against the Dead King.

IDKWhoitis

Yeah, the Alliance armies don't have many people who can see in the dark well, versus the Army of Callow that has Drow and Goblins. It's most likely in board daylight.

Larat said that the League would follow within the hour, and there's no sign of them so far. It could be that Kairos is hanging back and waiting for the casualties to rack up, but given that they didn't have the time to form up, they might have actually started marching immediately.

caoimhinh

Larat merely said there would be a break within the hour, through which the League troops would come out, but that doesn't mean the break would be close to them. Akil confirmed that despite the League pursuing them through the hellscape they did not pursue them out of the break (which stayed open until the morning).

Also, it's not that they didn't have the time to form up,

Juniper said that if the two armies joined they would need days to reorganize, so they attacked without joining.

caoimhinh

I think it is close to noon, given how Akil said that the breach was open until morning came. They arrived the day before through the gate Vivienne and Larat reported to Cat, given how they needed to rest after crossing the hellscape that Masego made from that shard of Arcadia, contact with Yannu and Rozala's forces, check the plan, inform their captains, make their own camp, eat and organize for the fight, etc. it's likely they used most of the morning to rest and prepare. So my estimation is around 10-11 a.m.

By the way, this also means that Cat is gone already, riding with the Wild Hunt to engage Pilgrim and Tyrant, since the end of last chapter Cat said she would ride with them at nightfall.

Andrew Mitchell

Your comment about Cat being gone with the Wild Hunt is a good one although I think it's just about Pilgrim & the Saint and not (yet) the Tyrant.

If Cat has engaged then I'm surprised that the Levantine leaders haven't heard about it yet.

caoimhinh

Well, Cat expects Kairos to show up or influence the things happening, but I agree with you, Kairos is likely to show up right after the battle is over, which is when the letter Cat sent him will come into action.

I'm not sure that the Levantine leaders can find out what's happening in Arcadia, it's more likely that Pilgrim and co. are over there and whatever happens there will only be known to the armies after Cat and Pilgrim return.

ChillyPepper

Not to forget the well, she -most likely- would cause an eclipse to put a halt to pilgrim's miracles.

ChillyPepper

And could also work to strengthen the Drow during day time, I suppose.

Daemion

Abigail needs more exposure to Robber to get the real authentic "Army of Callow" experience.

danh3107

I feel like I should've extrapolated from the name, but the binders being summoners of monster spirits really is the coolest. Also I kinda wish we had seen that bandit's blood guy's face after seeing several lanterns incinerated in an instant.

[Javvies](#)

Hmmm.

Just how coordinated can the Alliance armies be? There's apparently a shared plan of sorts, but how detailed can that be?

Heh, Abigail keeps trying and failing to avoid increased responsibilities and danger. I expect she's going to have more to complain about by the time this is over.

IDKWhoitis

They might be relying on captains more, with a general plan set up on the larger stage. If the situation goes FUBAR, they might not react well, and could possibly see a Rout.

antoninjohn

The Army of Callow should have Pickles war machines and they are built for sieges

[Mental Mouse](#)

They may not have brought those along, but in any case the troops probably aren't close enough for war machines yet. It's a bad sign for the attackers when they had to play their summoners, and started losing priests, at the outermost defenses.

[benthelynx](#)

It's part of the trap of careful Yannu i'd bet.

IDKWhoitis

I don't see much mention of the Drow, so are they the reserve or are they a detachment that is hiding elsewhere?

I'm wondering if Cat will make an appearance at the frontlines like good old times, she could close a breach. But she might be out and about hunting with the Fae, so they might have unconventional tactics planned.

danh3107

They probably have a stratagem that lets them deepstrike on turn two like devils. It's smart of the marshals to use their allied detachment's strengths while reserving their command points for other important situations. (sorry for the dumb 40k joke)

caoimhinh

Given that this is happening somewhere between late morning and early afternoon, the Drow are still weakened. They will likely be called on later.

Cat left the night before with the Wild Hunt, so it's unlikely she will appear on the frontlines until much later on, she is probably within the hellscape Arcadia shard that's Masego's current mad lab, and Pilgrim and Tyrant are likely there too.

IDKWhoitis

I would like to imagine they are having a very livid discussion on several topics.

Andrew Mitchell

I don't think they really talked at all about the disposition of Juniper and Grem's forces so it's not surprising that there hasn't been a mention of the Drow.

apperatus27

Hahaha, Our new protagonist in training has found herself a Hakram!

[Mental Mouse](#)

Or rather, a (lower-case) adjutant. As I've said previously, the appearance of Hakram's Name implies that "the orcish Hyper-Competent Assistant" has become enough of a tradition to appear as a Name.

Dainpdf

It's not paranoia if the Gods are out to get you.

Now, when will the battle be joined for real? Hoping for next chapter, but alas...

caoimhinh

We are likely to have a huge cliffhanger next chapter, hahahaha.

Dainpdf

Yeah. It's not EE if there isn't a huge cliff to hang from.

[TeK](#)

In his defence, this is the only way to write a running series. He does intent on publication, so all those cliffhangers will be reworked, as well as many, many inconsistencies and typos. We are basically reading beta version, and not even as editors, those guys will not even start rummaging through our comments and 'll be smarter for that.

Dainpdf

I was not criticizing. The cliffhangers, grating as they can be at times, make the story sweeter to read.

caoimhinh

Nice interlude.

It's cool to see the different perspectives of the Generals trying to outsmart each other:

A: *Makes a move*

B: "I see your move and raise you this move!"

A: "Ha! I knew you'd do that, you fell into my trap!"

B: "I knew there was a trap, so I prepared this countermeasure!"

A: "Fool! I knew that you knew there was a trap, so I prepared a second layer to counter your countermeasure!"

And then the winner will be the one who can see the furthest down that path of iterations. At least until the whole Tariq vs Catherine vs Kairos thing is resolved, given that their 3-way battle of wits and Story Fu is what ultimately will decide things on the bigger picture, though the battle between no Named is also a huge determining factor and the result of it will be used as a blade for the aforementioned Named in their own triple chess.

It's interesting to contrast the attitude of Lord Tanja and Lady Aquiline, while he is paranoid and wary of her at every time thinking that she is scheming against him and trying to take command from him (which she actually might be doing but not in the personal way he seems to think she is doing it), Aquiline seems to actually respect him and made no further mental comment about him than "cold-eyed old monster" and it was made evident she holds the binders in great esteem and maybe admiration, given how fascinated she was when seeing them in action.

Abbigail really is like Catherine in a lot of ways, eh? It's more evident with each chapter that she is Cat's spiritual successor. She even has her own wonderful and efficient Orc aide to relay her orders in a proper manner. I wonder if she is walking the crevice in Fate (you know, the one Roles are made from) that Catherine started "Callow military girl with an efficient Orc

adjutant, rising through the ranks by displaying skill in troubled times, to defeat the enemies of her country". Whether she gets a Name or not is not that important, but Cat forged a new story and Abby is continuing it.

P.S: I'd like to see Grem's POV. And the Drow, because everyone in those armies is going to lose their shit when they see the Drow wielding Night.

Not a typo, but rather a suggestion of adding commas:

-Deeper behind that walled camps / Deeper behind that, walled camps

-with Lord Yannu's force advancing there could be no long halt / with Lord Yannu's force advancing, there could be no long halt

Typos found:

-mad up / made up

-for even with watcher his mother's had not known of them / I'm not sure what this sentence is supposed to be, maybe "for even with his mother's watchers, he had not known of them"? Or perhaps "for even with watchers -his mother's- he had not known of them".

-she long spears / the long spears

-the last time Creation witnesses such a thing / the last time Creation witnessed such a thing

-The spread out / They spread out

-considered the amount of Wastelanders / considering the amount of Wastelanders

Someguy

I prefer Belisarius' approach to battles. You don't have to fight a battle conquer/slaughter the enemy population, you just have to purposefully win/lose various battles to stretch out a campaign until the political situation sorts out itself.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belisarius_series

caoimhinh

Indeed, and if we have seen anything of Procer and Levant is that their political situations are always a shit storm, with people of power making nation-wide messes out of personal grudges and ambition.

[*TeK*](#)

Show me a human nation not plagued by this, and I will kiss you, and give you a candy.

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, I want to see those arrogant Levantine humbled by the Drow.

Sean

Oh, that is a great theory! It's been remarked countless times how similar Abigail is to Cat, but I never considered she might be following the groove Cat carved into creation. It will be interesting to see if she ends up as Squire or Black Knight (depending on what happens to Asmodeus).

[TeK](#)

She ends up a Marshmallow of Callow after Juniper. Names are a desire, and the only desire Abigail has is to not have anything to do with Names and that stuff.

Kissaten

Hierarch became Hierarch despite wanting to be Servant To The People (Glory To Bellerophon). This Wicked Foreign Oligarch may be in similar predicament.

RoflCat

Names come from desire to change, the thought that the world is wrong and you have an idea of what it should be.

Abigail is like the opposite of that, she's aware the world's fucked, but she just don't care to change things, she simply try to do her best to not get hit by the debris in the river as she flow along with it.

Hierarch became that because Kairos basically broke him by putting him into environment that constantly trigger his "you people are wrong" thoughts.

[TeK](#)

Nah, the Hierarch did have a strong belief into how the Creation should be run, as well the willingness to see it through, it's just that his particular set of beliefs took the right to make decisions from his own hands and into the hands of others. He is a Named to end all Names, which is still a Name, as is a story to end all stories is still a story.

And best girl Abigail does not have any strong beliefs or desires. I mean she doesn't want to die, or work in tannery, or well really, work earnestly, and is everything wrong with current generation, but she doesn't really WANT it, it's more like a preference: "Welp, it'd be good not to die before supper, there is some mystery stew to be had, but if I die, not a big deal, soup's going to suck anyway"

[Mental Mouse](#)

"Marshmallow" as in crispy on the outside, gooey on the inside? 😊 A natural hazard of hanging too close to the fire...

Whiteeyes

Or, to quote one character in Yu-Gi-Oh "I counter the effect that counters the effect that counters the effect that counters the effect that counters the effect that counters the effect!" Yes, that was actual dialogue.

TeK

Oh, Yu-Gi-Oh, the game that best represents Guideverse (TV version, not that abomination that some people birthed into our world), where the rules only really exist to show how strong and smart the protagonist is, while ignoring both itself, continuity, and general common sense, and of course, blissfully unable to count to save itself.

Zim the Vixen

Calling out a second interlude, called something like "East, ever ____".

caoimhinh

Yep, after all, the interludes and chapters' names are always related in some manner or theme (ballet techniques, chess moves, theatre terms, etc).

I wonder what it will be this time, "East, Ever Dreadful" perhaps? Maybe we'll get a third interlude and it's called "North, Ever Dark" with the Drow showing Night's prowess.

caoimhinh

Maybe "East, Ever Defending" given how they are on the defensive in this battle and Callow's history of repelling Procer's invasions.

TeK

Yeah, or how Praes is always defending from those war-mongering Callowans. Uh, those Callowans, always looking to conquer stuff.

Nairne .01

I sense sarcasm...

SITB

Wouldn't the second interlude be titled "Fate, Writ In Dread" as per the lines of the poem?

caoimhinh

Oh, right! This is from the final verse of "Tyranny of the Sun", I had forgotten about it, thanks.

And "Fate Writ In Dread" is an awesome name for next interlude, because before the Alliance forces get wrecked by the Army of Callow and Drow, there needs to be a moment where the Alliance looks like it's gonna win.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

The song's text is at https://abridged-guide-to-evil.fandom.com/wiki/The_Tyranny_of_the_Sun

Aotrs Commander

The Dominion, ye gods. And this is where so many of the quote-unquote heroes come from?

I'm sure the Klingons would approve.

(That was not a complement.)

caoimhinh

The Dominion of Levant has been shown to be ruled by madmen obsessed with honor, fame and bloodlines, they are also very hypocritical because they have a King and a royal family (the Holy Seljun from the Pilgrim's Blood, they even call it their seat a throne) yet claim they don't have kings, and believe they are better because of it. And their nobility, the descendants of the Heroes who founded that nation, have brainwashed the rest of the population into adoring them for their bloodlines, at least in other countries the nobility can be overthrown and a new house emerge. This is impossible in Levant.

[TeK](#)

I don't know where you get that, the Holy Seljun is literally a Caliph, the whole Levant and Majilis should've tipped you off. And Sunni Caliph is no king, but merely the overseer of sharia. He can't really change laws, tor the laws were given from above, but merely ensure that everyone follows them. And Dominion is even more liberal than actual Caliphate, because there were basically five Muhammeds (plz don't blow me (unless you're a pretty woman and have no explosives)), and while Pilgrim's Blood is technically acknowledged to be superior, it's more the case of [i]princeps[/i] or "first among equals". The name Dominion reflects the semi-independent nature of the relationship between the various Bloods.

Just just read this:

"a Caliph or ruler who becomes either unjust or severely ineffective must be impeached via the Majlis"

A Holy Seljun is repeatedly stated to be a religious leader first and foremost, and it is basically proven by implied regular wars between various factions inside Dominion. Now, about whether other bloods can be considered to be kings or not, well, while nobles, the kings they are not. Let's start with the fact that religious authority is both superceding and detached from their hands, as interaction with Lanterns clearly demonstrates. But absolute authority and independence those Lords have not. They much more reminding of tribal leaders.

Cap'n Smurfy

This really explains the whole political structure of the Dominion really well, thank you. I was curious about how they were different from traditional monarchies.

[TeK](#)

It really does not explain it as well as I want, but alas, both my academic knowledge of caliphates and my linguistic abilities conspired against me.

caoimhinh

You are partially right. Just because the Holy Seljun of Levant is inspired by the Caliphate does not mean that it is the same or that it works in the same manner.

The Caliph worked as you said (although I disagree on the matter of Caliphs not being able to change the law; they couldn't change the Islamic precepts and their state laws were mostly based on the Qoran and those could not be changed, true, but not every law in the country came from the Qoran and those could be changed), but the Holy Seljun seems more inclined towards the Shiite version of Caliph (Blood descendants of the Prophet, in this case, The Grey Pilgrim), rather than the Sunni vision (elected by votes), in the Guide, they are a mixture, the Seljun can appoint a successor and there will be votes in case there isn't a clear designated successor as we saw in the Peregrine extra chapters, but in every case they are from the Pilgrim's Blood.

Similarly, not always the eldest child inherits the throne in a kingdom or empire, but the one who has the most backing, either by the previous ruler or the nobles (it is for this reason that there were so many internal fights and assassinations among royal families, as they fought for

succession, both in our world and in the different countries of the Guide, including Levant as we saw in Peregrine Extra chapters).

It is also true that the four bloodlines of the Heroes that accompanied the founding Grey Pilgrim enjoy a great deal of independence in their decisions and have the right to "honor wars" for whatever stupid excuse they come up with (this is, as you have pointed out, due to something akin to a religious belief), but not even the King of Callow nor Dread Emperor of Praes held absolute authority over everything their nobles did, and they even suffered impeachment, rebellion, and execution if they stepped too much out of line.

Point is, just because the name is different and the nature of the family's ascension to power is different doesn't mean that they aren't royalty. Seljuns are kings with another name, and their title is passed down through their bloodline just like any other royal family, that it is thought of as a Gods' given title isn't that much different from the Catholic Kings.

Different culture and reason, but they are still undeniably royalty.

[TeK](#)

I agree with you on corrections, but the exact amount of authority Seljun is able to project is not clear from what we know in the books. The inheritance through blood is not the only, or indeed, most important part of monarchy. And I thought Sunni caliphs still supposed to be blood relatives of the Prophet, no? Anyway, I suppose they do technically fall under a broader definition of monarchy, but I also think that their boast about having no Kings meant that they don't have a specific kind of more centralised monarchies of the east. In my eyes, Dominion is more a confederation between five nobles, with highest legislative organ being the council of those five nobles with equal voting rights and the right of veto.

"The current Seljun, the figurehead ruler of the Dominion, had officially deferred the decision of whether or not to join the Tenth Crusade to the Majilis. Though literature often drew comparison between the Highest Assembly and the Majilis, for they were both councils composed of the highest nobility in their respective nations, Cordelia had never found much similarity beyond the surface trappings. The Levantine council was a toothless and ineffectual beast, with every lord and lady among it having right of veto and every interest in ensuring power was never centralized within the Dominion lest their own privileges

be curbed. Princess Eliza of Salamans had fought two wars and died an attainted traitor to ensure the Highest Assembly would never be such a plague on Procer, or the First Prince relegated to being little more than a first among equals. As it was, the entire Majilis had come to Salia to treat with her. The five lords and ladies of Levant, all descended from heroes. Cordelia's agents suspected every one of them had applied veto if a smaller delegation did not involve them personally, and she was inclined to believe it."

caoimhinh

True, what we have seen of the inner politics of the Dominion is limited, the most insight about the position of Holy Seljun is provided by the Peregrine extra chapters. In those, we see that the Seljun is always from Pilgrim's Blood but to ascend to the Tattered Throne they need to first be elected by the Majilis, a council composed by the heads of the other four families descending from the founders of Levant.

But those chapters also showed us that a Seljun is very influential and their decisions obeyed by the lords and ladies of the Dominion, this allowed Yasa Isbili (Tariq's older sister) to bring great changes to their country such as raising more soldiers to strengthen their armies, fixing roads and getting the lords and ladies to put the coin for it, and it was also the reason Tariq killed his nephew, because if Izil Isbili ascended to the Throne then there would be war against Procer (if, as you imply, the Holy Seljun was a mere figurehead without real power and influence, then Tariq wouldn't have needed to kill his nephew to stop an imminent war against Procer).

So the Holy Seljun of Levant IS capable of making and changing laws, declaring war against other countries, even holds influence over the historical records (when Tariq was expelled and disowned by his mother, his presence was removed from all records in the Dominion, not only in the capital ruled by the Seljun), and is the one who rules trade and signs treaties, although those decisions can be deferred to the Majilis and there is one thing that must always be safeguarded: Honour. The thing that the Lords and Ladies of Levant have as paramount is Honour, and they will do everything and anything to earn and protect that (wage war with each other, kill the ones who have slighted them, keep courtesy at all times, follow tradition, hunt dangerous beasts, search for a glorious death, etc.). And while the position of Holy Seljun is only attained with the votes of the other four lords and ladies, once on that

position the Seljun is treated as a powerful and influential figure with real authority.

Now, as you pointed out with the extract from Cordelia's thoughts, they could be an ineffectual lot and keep bickering and backbiting (this is, as I have said above, due to their obsession with honor, which perpetuates feuds among the lords and ladies and thus prevents them from real cooperation) but Cordelia tends to be a bit of a hypocrite when it comes to Procer, its politics, and the way it acts.

The Highest Assembly has been proven to be a bunch of people who only care about money and always make political schemes to obtain this (except for the four Lycaonese principalities, as their primary concerns are always about fighting Ratlings and the Dead King, sacrificing themselves protecting the realm while watching their southern compatriots' petty schemes), and Cordelia in that extract claims that the First Prince is not just first among equals, yet we know that it is in fact exactly that; in almost every single chapter that shows Cordelia's POV, she is worried about being removed from her position (it was even the excuse that the Pilgrim gave Catherine for not using Levant to force Procer into making peace with Callow, as doing that would have Cordelia impeached within the month).

The way each country elects its leaders has its own advantages and disadvantages: Levant is more stable since the Isbili family will always be the rulers given the religious fervor every levantine holds for the Grey Pilgrim and his descendants, but the Honour issue keeps the other four families constantly at odds with each other; Procer is unstable due to them changing leaders constantly as the Princes fight each other all the time "The Ebb and the Flow" as they call it, and have come to treat it as petty games where a principality gathers armies to fight another and the winner gets to impose a treaty to the loser, in exchange, the ruler of the Principate is always the Prince or Princess with the most influence over the country, but the Highest Assembly (by Cordelia's own words with Catherine) keeps the First Prince in check (allegedly from abusing their position and perpetuating in office), and every big decision of the First Prince must be supported by the Assembly before it can be made effective, and getting the new decrees accepted can cost them influence, favors, debts, and money, which down the line can be needed to prevent being removed from the position (we have seen Cordelia hesitate when acting EVERY SINGLE TIME due to this).

So I stand on my initial point, the Holy Seljun is King of Levant in all but name, the Isbili are a royal family, and their right to rule is considered a Gods' given thing in the Dominion; the only thing the Seljun must always keep in mind when ruling is the Honor of the other four family heads and they will obey, because that same honor compels them to follow the decrees of the successor of the Grey Pilgrim's Blood, who they revere with religious fervor. Of course, that is a tricky and complex matter, given that anything can be a slight to those nobles and each family has their own eccentricities (even during this Crusade it was explicitly said that there are some families that can't be put together in a joined army because they would be at each other throats).

Tek

So, how the battle is going to proceed? The first important part of that prediction, is a name. Is it an already alluded to "Princes' Graveyard"? On one hand, there are seven anointed rulers of Procer, and this is supposed to be the last battle of Callow and Grand Alliance, so there likely would not be any more Princes to fight. On the other hand, such a wholesale destruction needed to get to the Proceran rulers is not in the interest of either side, there are at least two Princesses (which may indicate though, who will survive the battle), and it seems strange that only a slaughter of Proceran rulers will influence a name, since that either implies that Levantine Lords survived (perhaps leaving the fight under Pilgrim's orders or getting captured) or that it was not important enough to garner attention, which seems unlikely. Most importantly though, Cat needs to lose in the incoming battle, and the losses are required to be nonexistent, although, perhaps, only she has to lose, and not her armies. And the lose may be a necessary leverage for both Tyrant and Cat.

Personally, I have a feeling that this is not a Princes' Graveyard, but the rate of my predictions about PGtE suggests that I am wrong. So I can safely concluded that this is in fact, a Princes' Graveyard.

Now we got many factors for this battle, so let's start with numbers:

In terms of sheer numbers there is basic equality, GA has 120k troops, 40 of which is Malanza's army, consisting mostly of levies and being generally disunited due to many Princes on the field, two 40k Levantine armies, and 20k of professional Proceran soldiers, separated into 80k and 60k hosts. 80k host has 4k of apparently amazing heavy infantry and has 10k in horse, while 60k host has at least 7k of cavalry.

Callow has overall 110k troops, of which 20k are Praesi Legions (or anywhere between 15 and 18k, the number are notoriously inconsistent), 40k (37, really) of Army of Callow, and 50k drow auxiliaries. The knightly order bring about an unknown number of cavalry, but given that it's both hilariously outnumbered by Proceran 17k and based on previous numbers, I'd put it anywhere between 3 and 5k. Oh, they also have a dragon. And necromancing legion.

Now from what I understand, this is broad daylight, probably closer to the morning, so drow are almost entirely incapacitated. That brings effective number of Callow to be around 60k, which is now outnumbered by GA by 2 to 1.

Now, Callow has a terrain advantage as they are on the defensive, and had time to prepare the grounds. They have camp surrounding a barrow, which is, as we well know, a male hog castrated before sexual maturity (look it up!), surrounded by an alledged bastion, and then, two more polisades, with killing fields in front of each. Now there, ya have ta correct me if I'm wrong.

Now there are three outside hanging swords. First, there is a lake Artoise where Cordelia dredged up some corpses and look at that, it's conveniently near. The second is Masego's falling piece of Arcadia. And the third is the Tyrant and his cronies, ready to pop out on the earliest convenience.

The third one limits time of the engagement, for both, really, but particularly for GA.

The drow will be held back until dusk, for they are an unknown quantity and as such, have an element of surprise at their side. At night they're most powerful, so this is where they will be used, maximising their potential.

So legions have to defend till dusk, which is around 8 hours. They have more than enough walls to cling to and space to give up, all of those in exchange for time until the counter-offensive.

The GA have a stratagem, but I got bored halfway through.

caoimhinh

It is still possible that the Princes' Graveyard is a future battle, or even a battle of the Grand Alliance + Callow against the Dead King, just that in said battle Procer will lose a lot of princes, but yeah, odds are this battle here is the Princes' Graveyard we are all expecting.

I wonder where the Dragon is, it might have flown away given how it doesn't really care much about what happens to others, how something as notorious as a Dragon would have been

mentioned at least once since Cat joined with their armies, and it also apparently didn't fight when the First Army was on the brink of defeat. So I believe it is no longer there and just flew to somewhere else to sleep, the Necromancers are likely still there with the army, though.

As for the corpse that Cordelia ordered dragged out of the lake, remember that Lake Artoise is so massive that it has shores with 7 principalities (Salia which is Procer's capital, Lange, Cantal, Creusens, Aequitan, Salamans, and Iserre where this battle is being fought), so my guess is that whatever she dredged out was taken via Salia and is on its way North to be used against the Dead King, as Cordelia said: "Fire against fire".

Masego's situation will be solved in Arcadia through the encounter of Cat and Pilgrim, while I believe the Tyrant will appear after the battle is over to serve as the safeguard of the Army of Callow when it is leaving Iserre.

[Mental Mouse](#)

"...but the rate of my predictions about PGtE suggests that I am wrong. So I can safely conclude..."

LOL! But yeah, I'd expect the Legion troops will be turtleing up until the Drow come online. I don't think Cordelia's find is going to be immediately relevant. Masego may intervene but probably not during the main fight; those troops did get through without being swarmed by demons, and if that wasn't by his will he's likely to take an interest. If he does intervene in the battle proper, he's likely to mess up Catherine's plans. The Tyrant himself probably isn't present, and his troops are basically more currently-warm bodies on the field. Enough to make trouble for the Legions, but I doubt they can stand against the Drow at night.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And if Tyrant's troops fight on Cat's side, that will probably further upset Cat's plans. Or the Pilgrim's, or both.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also: The Drow aren't just 50k of troops, they're also half an empire's worth of Night's answer to Named. Meaning they can eat the Procerans for lunch, and probably the Levantines too, binders or no. The question is, do the attacking troops realize they have a time limit?

caoimhinh

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[Mental Mouse](#)

After the battle, there are also those dire hints about what may happen if Larat gets their seven crowns plus one... even the Summer Princess was scared, and oddly, so was Larat. So it's not as simple as "Larat becomes Fae Lord Of The World".

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also: "manticores and griffins and *culebron*". That turns out to be Spanish for a soap opera, but I also got this mythological reference: <https://www.scribd.com/document/314609867/Culebro-n#>

[Mental Mouse](#)

Wait, this one is better, and not preview-locked: <https://patagoniamonsters.blogspot.com/2010/01/culebron-full-dossier.html>

caoimhinh

I'm from Colombia, a Spanish-speaking country, so that term caught my attention.

I mentioned it in a comment back in Yannu's first appearance, when he was reminiscing about his instincts saving him from a

Culebron years ago, the word in Spanish is “culebrón” with a tilde, and means “big snake” in a bit of an informal way, with “Culebra” being the Spanish word for a non-venomous snake. It seems Levant has quite a huge and prolific fauna of magical creatures.

Interlude: Graves We Have Yet To Fill

“The middle years of the Uncivil Wars can roughly be described as a series of conflicts fought to determine peace terms. The tragedy of those years, in retrospective, can be said that while the overwhelming majority of them desired peace no two Calernian powers could agree on what exactly the terms of it should be – and so to war they all went, convinced every step of the way that the others were at fault for it.”

– Extract from the personal memoirs of Lady Aisha Bishara

The third volley did not work better than those before it.

The spears of flame rose into the sky like quarrels loosed, before the guiding sorceries of the legion mages who’d performed the ritual pulled them down. The arc was sudden but graceful, the crackling fire in red and gold tearing straight through the five largest apparitions the Dominion had sent forward. Earth and snow dispersed at the explosion of heat and light, the grounds beneath what had been the shape of strange creatures scorched through a vaporized layer of a frost. There were about a hundred of the damned things, General Abigail thought, but it wouldn’t have been too bad if a ritual volley actually put the abominations down. Instead she winced as she watched the flames of her mages disperse in turn, leaving behind only small droplets of eldritch power hovering in the air. A heartbeat later the ground beneath the droplets began breaking up and the creatures that’d been broken began reforming.

“It’s not getting any slower, ma’am,” Krolem said.

“I can see that, thank you,” she acidly replied.

Fuck. At this rate the entire web of traps the army’s sappers had worn themselves to the bone digging during nights and hiding before dawn came would be trampled into irrelevance by some strange godsdamned Levantine magic. She squinted at the creatures again, noting how the massive manticore in the lead acted like it was actually hungry. That had to be blasphemous, right? It was all looking a little too much like necromancy, and you weren’t

supposed to do that if you were on the side of a crusade these people were on.

"I'm not arguing the House Insurgent is right, mind you," she muttered. "But this needs looking at, is all I'm saying."

"Ma'am?" Krolem asked, sounding confused.

Had he been talking? Abigail had no idea, but now was not the time to look like she was losing it in front of the troops. The Black Queen's barn-burning oration at Sarcella had riled them up like young dockworkers who'd just gotten their first pay. If they thought she was the weak link in this army, Abigail thought with a sudden urge to grimace, they were going to tear her apart. Possibly literally given the amount of orcs there were in the ranks. *Look calm, Abigail, she told herself. It's all under control.*

"Quite right, Krolem," she slowly said. "Spot on. On that note, I need you to request a deployment order from Marshal Juniper."

She sent him off after a quick elaboration, fairly sure the Hellhound would refuse her request and so in the after-battle reports she'd have an excuse for her failure to perform. That it would put her straight at odds with the Marshal of Callow would be even better, she giddily thought. Marshal Juniper might even demote her, or drum her out of the army.

A girl could dream, couldn't she?

—

Forward, Akil Tanja had ordered.

The Lord of Malaga was no fool, to send his binders forward unprotected, but neither would he spare them contribution. After Lady Aquiline had requested the deployment of his finest war-sorcerers to clear the approach of traps, he'd immediately sent for his son. Razin was in need of deeds to redeem himself, if he was to remain the heir to Malaga, and opportunity would arise soon enough. For that purpose Akil had ordered the boy to gather captains enough for two thousand warriors, all bearing shields, and appointed him to command before sending him to reinforce the binders. They would need that protection soon enough, the Lord of Malaga knew, for the bound spirits that had been sent forth were reaching the end of their leash. No other power of Levant had made as deep study of the arts of binding like the Grim Binder's line, and though Malaga was hardly the only city to send binders to war for the other families such a thing was rare and always in small numbers. That had obscured some of the limitations of their craft, which would become clear very soon if Akil was not careful with his orders.

The binding of a soul or spirit was done with one's own blood mixed with the ancient flower-dye, tattooed on one's skin with needles of barrow-bone. The patterns of these bindings had been refined by Akil's ancestors, to require less breadth and shackle the bound more tightly – and cease sickening the blood of those who used them recklessly. The sharing of those secrets with those who entered the service of the Tanja was why so many practitioners came to Malaga, with the finest among them allowed to read the tomes of the Obscure Library in exchange for oaths to answer calls to war by the ruling lord or lady of the city. Yet since the founding of the Dominion, no binder saved those Bestowed had ever succeeded at sending one of their bound entities further than three hundred feet from themselves. Akil was talented in the art, as befitting of his blood, and so the silver-winged hawk he'd bound as a boy he could send as far as two hundred and twelve feet without the shackle turning on him. Yet it was a rare thing for any binder to reach more than two hundred feet, and even most of those allowed to peruse the Obscure Library remained in the antechamber of that hurdle.

This mattered today, if only because soon the spirits of his binders would have to halt their advance. Ordering them to advance would remedy the issue and allow them to clear the entire field all the way to the enemy fortifications without further casualties, but it would also leave them vulnerable. Razin and the shield-bearing warriors he'd assembled would see to that vulnerability, he'd decided. It would leave his son close to the front, too, and so able to lead the assault against the same force that had humbled him at Sarcella.

At the head of his host the Malaga binders were surrounded by rings of steel, and as he had ordered forward they all went.

—

"Why?"

Marshal Juniper of the Red Shields was frowning. General Abigail's tribune – a good Hoaring Hoof Clan boy by the look of his jaw, she'd noted with approval – cleared his throat in that way young officers always did when they had no good answer but had to answer anyway. Silver-quick, the wistful thought that Nauk truly had ruined that army down to the bone came and went.

"So she didn't say," the Hellhound cut in before he could reply.

Tribune Krolem sheepishly flared his teeth, and did not deny it.

"Only a thousand?" Juniper asked again, to confirm.

"Yes ma'am," Tribune Krolem agreed.

The Marshal of Callow's instinct was to send him back with an order for General Abigail to make a proper proposal including for what she wanted the soldiers, but she held her tongue. Catherine had raised the other woman up for a reason, and it would not be anything as simple as birth. If her warlord had simply wanted to put Callowan hands on the reins of her armies, Juniper suspected Brandon Talbot would have been the chosen candidate. Instead, though, she'd chosen an enlisted legionary who'd shot up the ranks. Not someone with ties to nobles or fame in the kingdom. Catherine had seen something in the younger woman, and though Juniper of the Red Shields did not she'd not long ago had reminder of the value of trust.

"She has them, then," Marshal Juniper said. "See Tribune Bishara for the proper writ and be on your way."

The boy moved quick, like she'd stung him, but Juniper had already put him out of her mind. Marshal Grem's curious eye on her she ignored as well, her own attention now solely turned to the southern front. What was the first commander Catherine had handpicked since Juniper herself scheming, exactly?

—

Shit, Abigail thought, look at the writ Krolem had just handed her with a sinking feeling in her stomach. The Hellhound had actually agreed? *Why would she — no, don't panic*, she told herself. This could still be salvaged if she watched her step. On one hand, she'd actually be expected to produce results now. On the other hand, as long as she tried to pull off a vaguely coherent plan and failed she'd probably still manage to avoid the noose. Gods, Abigail knew she should have made her request more unreasonable, if she'd gone overboard the Marshal would have refused. But no, she'd just to *had* hedge her bets and make it look like her theoretical plan had been reasonable just to improve the chances the Black Queen wouldn't feed her liver to buzzards after this was all over with. Her mother was right, she'd never learned to quit while she was ahead. Sure, Ma had lost an eye and a finger brawling with Annie Sutherland over who made the better beer, but just because she was a lunatic didn't mean she was wrong. Fucking Sutherlands, anyway, strutting around like Annie having been in the Royal Guard meant she knew anything about brewing.

"She did know a thing or two about knives, though," she conceded in a mutter.

"It is a great honour, ma'am," Krolem, who was still there, rumbled approvingly.

"Yes," Abigail echoed with a stiff smile. "Honour. Just the word I was thinking of."

The Callowan general hid her rising horror with the practiced skill of someone who'd been forced to be around the Queen of Callow and pretend not to be terrified the whole time. All right, so the damned Levant magic beasts didn't die to fire and that probably meant they wouldn't give a damn about siege engines either. Munitions, maybe? Couldn't really do that without using sending sappers in, which seemed ill-advised, but it was only the First Army that had the 'spitters', those strange devices Sapper-General Pickler used to lob munitions over long distances. Goblinfire was a restricted substance as of last year, though, so Abigail would need authorization from the Hellhound to send for any and that'd be suspicious as all Hells since Krolem had just been there. Options, she needed options.

"Where's our Senior Sapper?" she asked Krolem.

"She's checking in on our engines," the tribune gravelled. "Though she asked me to pass her continued protest as to the amount of munitions we passed on to Special Tribune Robber."

"Why?" Abigail said, feeling another spike of fear.

"His cohort isn't part of the Third Army, it's detached," the orc said.

"Why did we pass munitions to Special Tribune Robber?" she clarified.

"You don't need to test me, ma'am," Krolem reproached. "Your signature was on the forms, the general staff is aware you planned some contingencies – just not what they are."

Oh Gods, Abigail thought, realizing that the Black Queen's favourite goblin assassin had forged her authorization for something involving munitions and she had absolutely no idea what. *O Gods*, Abigail silently repeated, turning to prayer in her hour of need, *I know I'm in the service of a villain but isn't this still a little much?*

—

Razin Tanja crouched down to the side of the pit.

He'd return to the front of the formation soon enough, but for now he... Well, he wasn't sure exactly what it was he was doing. There was something about this situation that felt like a stone in his boot. The Third Army had defended Sarcella with dogged viciousness, making the Dominion pay in blood for every street. They had done so even after being taken by surprise in the middle of the night after the assassination of their commanders, which while Razin still thought little of Callowan heresy had nonetheless impressed him in regard to that people's discipline. Now that same army was facing them from a tall palisade after

having days and night to prepare, and all they had prepare was a few pits with stakes at the bottom? No, he could not believe that. Certainly the fighting would harden the closer they came to the rampart, but this was too little.

It was not a complicated trap to build, Razin decided as he studied it. A stake at the bottom, the slopes inclined so anyone falling would be led towards it. Some sort of thin weave had been used to keep the hole covered, but it'd been crumpled by the claws of a bound wyvern and the weave had fallen below. That part was the most cleverly made, the heir to Malaga mused, for the weave had made the grounds look perfectly untouched until it was touched. Now the rings of shield-bearers escorting the binders were going around the revealed traps, advance slow but steady. The two sworn swords behind him were shuffling impatiently, but Razin refused to be hurried. He rose just enough to move, circling around the rim of the hole, and wrestled down the embarrassment he was starting to feel. It was a simple pit trap, and he might be making a fool of himself by insisting on taking so long a look at one.

The man's fingers clenched. No. He would not bend so easily as that. Pride had already led him down a dead end once. If a little humiliation let him make certain there was no deeper trap then he'd suffer the bite and do so unflinchingly. The sun shining from behind him – the afternoon at his back warmed him even in his armour – gave him half a breath's worth of warning, and that meant he survived the first blow. Coming out in a spray snow and earth from a hidden nook within the pit, a howling goblin tossed something at Razin's sworn swords while leaping up with a knife bared. The heir to Malaga caught the blade with his shield even as he tumbled backwards, the wildly cackling creature continuing to stab away as it landed on him. There was a loud crack behind them and something wet landed on Razin's cheek. The yellow-eyed monster bared needle-like teeth and slid the knife between two armour plates, but the Levantine socked it in the mouth with an armoured fist. Wincing at the shallow wound, Razin Tanja rose even as the goblin spat out blood and laughed, reaching for something in its leather satchel.

It never got to finish the movement, for the heir to Malaga rammed the hunting knife he'd adroitly palmed through its left eye.

Back on his feet a heartbeat later, Razin grimaced when he saw the bloody mess the thrown munition had made of his two escorts from the shoulders up. Blood and bone and brain fluid stained the snow around the two corpses. Gaze turning to the rest of his command, he heard the crack of further munitions and grimly admitted to himself the Third Army of Callow had once more succeeded as springing an ambush on him.

—

Special Tribune Robber assessed the situation with a proud stare.

Sure, they'd been forced to come out early when one of his minions had revealed their presence before the enemy was fully past their force. On the other hand, even springing this too soon they'd gotten a full two dozen of those Dominion sorcerers. Dipping low, Robber leaned forward a bit to better slit the throat of the blinded warrior he'd caught with his brightstick. Popping out of the holes and hitting fast with munitions, his cohort had done a lot damage in the span of thirty heartbeats. But not, he mused, enough to secure a comfortable retreat. The strange spirits the Dominion mages had sent ahead to continue ripping up traps were hurrying back, and between those and the warriors recovering from the surprise two hundred goblins all spread out had no real chance of fighting their way out. He whistled, loud and clear, three times. *Scatter*, it meant. Smothering a grin, the Special Tribune began the run back to the tender embrace of the palisade held by the Third Army. A great day's work, if any of them survived.

Still a good day's work, if they didn't.

—

"They won't make it," Krolem said.

They most definitely would not, Abigail silently agreed. Already more than twenty goblins had been slain by warriors running them down, but those had been the few whose hiding place had been within the Levantine formation. The rest has scattered to the wings with that insolent goblin aplomb, not that it would save them. They were quick, Special Tribune Robber's sappers. Far quicker than humans on foot, especially on trickier terrain like snow. But they were not quicker than the enemy's creatures, not even close, and with more than seventy of those left there was no doubt about the outcome of the chase. The monsters were drawing back already, closing the gap with inevitable haste. Maybe ten would make it out alive, General Abigail guessed. If that.

"Brave man, Special Tribune Robber," her aide added, tone thick with respect.

Fuck, Abigail thought, with a fresh well of horror. The Black Queen's favourite goblin assassin was about to get himself killed, and the only parchment trail there would be of it bore her signature. Faked, sure, but who'd ever believe that? She was going to get blamed for this wasn't she? She was going to get blamed for this and some godsdamned buzzards were going to eat her liver. She needed to get at least that one goblin out alive. Striking with rituals again? No, wouldn't work. They'd gotten quite good at avoiding those, and there were too many beasts

anyway. Slowing down less than ten at a time wouldn't get her anywhere. What did she have? Siege engines, which wouldn't do anything more than the rituals, legionaries and – oh, *oh*. Abigail might just survive this yet.

"Still got that writ, Krolem?" she nonchalantly asked. "Send them out now."

"Ah," the orc breathed out, looking at her with shining eyes. "I understand now, ma'am. You've played the Dominion like a fiddle."

"That is absolutely what I did," Abigail baldly lied.

—

Akil Tanja's fingers had begun clenching with the first explosion and had not loosened since. He had not anticipated that the goblins in the Black Queen's service would burrow like worms within their own traps, and neither had his son. Malaga had lost nearly thirty binders for that mistake, men and women whose powers had each taken decades and a fortune to forge. Dead, faster than it took to drink a cup of wine. Now the wretched creatures were fleeing, but they would be run down. If any of them was taken alive, he would have the damned creatures hung from his battle-standard after personally crushing their malevolent skulls. At least Razin had drawn the enemy's blood and asserted control swiftly, which should prevent his reputation from being tarred too much by this unpleasant turn.

"Movement by the enemy, my lord," one of his captains announced.

The Lord of Malaga followed the man's gaze and found the Army of Callow was opening the southern gate of the camp. Reinforcements to extricate the sappers? They would arrive too late. Akil rather hoped the enemy commander was fool enough to send legionaries forward. The spirits bound by his war-sorcerers could kill soldiers as easily as they could clear traps, and any legionary killed down on the plains was one that would not be fighting from atop the palisade. The wooden grate opened, and Akil Tanja's lips thinned at what he saw. Horsemen, the first of the column carrying a tall banner: a bronze bell with a jagged crack going through, set on black. Lord Akil had read of these: the Order of Broken Bells, the sole remaining knightly order of Callow.

"Call them back," the Lord of Malaga said. "Now. And hurry the skirmishers forward."

Two of his captains peeled off like he'd swung at them with hot iron, both bearing orders. From where he sat astride his horse, Akil was forced to watch it all unfold without being able to intervene. The Callowan knights thundered out of the fortified camp without missing a stride, forming up as they advanced. There must have been at least a thousand, Akil saw with rising dread.

The skirmishers were on foot, the binders and their escort too far ahead. They would not arrive soon enough. The only hope of the binders – of his son – was that the bound spirits would slow the enemy knights long enough for a retreat. Razin must have understood the point as keenly, for the bound creatures abandoned pursuit of the goblins within moments and turned sharply to the side. Facing them, the knights of the Broken Bells slowly lowered their lances and quickened from canter to full gallop. The sight of it, Akil thought, was moving. Callowan knights in their prayer-carved armours, charging a host of beasts. The Lord of Malaga tensed for the impact, eyes fixed on the lances.

He flinched in disbelief, when the knights rode through the spirits like they were mist.

Sorcery sliding off their armour like water off a duck's back, the Knights of the Broken Bells broke through and kept charging.

—

There was something deeply satisfying, Abigail mused, about watching Callowan knights trample enemy foot. It scratched an itch she hadn't known she had. The enemy mages tried other sorceries, after their nasty little trick failed, but flames and curses were nothing new to the cavalry of Kingdom of Callow. Compared to the Praesi, she thought, these Dominion folk were fumbling amateurs. The commander of the Order's detachment had split his horse into two wedges of five hundred and rammed them straight at the enemy shield walls, shattering men and shields alike. The knights had then withdrawn in good order, after the initial momentum of the charge was spent, and formed up as they turned the enemy flank and simply charged again. The Dominion had sent two thousand foot to escort its sorcerers, but by the time General Abigail sounded the retreat for her cavalry more than half that number was lying dead on the ground. It might have been more, if enemy reinforcements hadn't hurried. Where sorcery would fail javelins might just succeed, so reluctantly she'd pulled back the Order. Abigail was leaning against the top of the palisade with her elbows and watching the cavalry retreat in good order when she heard her tribune return.

"Special Tribune and his cohort have been settled, ma'am," Krolem said.

She nodded absent-mindedly. The goblin she'd needed to keep alive as alive, beyond that they were hardly her concern.

"It's about to get ugly, Tribune," she said, gazing at the massing enemy.

The skirmishers remained spread out, but the foot behind them was now locked in thick formations. They were getting ready for a run at the palisade.

"Ma'am?" the orc said.

"Get the engines aimed," Abigail of Summerholm grimly said. "They have a path to us mostly cleared, now they're going to take it."

—

Lord Yannu Marave patted his horse's mane, and fondly held out his palm to feed her the last piece of bread from the loaf when she turned. He'd been told of the debacle to the south by the outriders he'd left to keep an eye on the situation, and it had darkened his mood. A few hundred warriors were a drop in the sea of what would be lost before this was all done and over with, but binders were a rare breed. They might have been of great use in the war to the north, had the Lord of Malaga's blunder not effectively pissed away half of them. Yet there was no point in losing his temper, he knew. This was merely the first movement of an intricate dance, and his side had never been meant to win it. In the distance he watched the skirmishes of Vaccei and their Lantern guides make it to the edge of the slaughter yard, and only then raised a hand. One of the lesser horns was sounded, and the warriors came to halt. As well they should – any further and they would be in what he suspected to be the outer range of the enemy's engines. In truth he should probably should have let them continue advancing until that suspicion was confirmed, but in the end he would rather overestimate enemy range than throw away lives on such a petty confirmation.

He had what he needed of this northern front and if any of Akil Tanja's captains had eyes they would have what he needed of that front as well.

"I would have your judgement, Peregrine," he calmly requested.

The Grey Pilgrim did not answer immediately. Instead the holy man gazed at the distant ring of raised stones, that incongruous crown atop a tall barrow.

"She will not step in even if the palisade is assaulted," the Pilgrim finally said. "Perhaps not even if the camp is breached, as you had arranged."

And so, Yannu knew, this meant the Peregrine would not intervene either. It had been made clear to the Lord of Alava what the consequences of the Grey Pilgrim acting first might be, and he would not have such disaster brought upon them all.

"Then the offensive I had planned is doomed to failure," Yannu of the Champion's Blood said, unruffled. "And we must resort to the second string to our bow."

A shame. He'd enjoyed the cleverness of the scheme, the use of the Saint and the Sorcerer to take the cavalries through

crumbling Arcadia and strike at the heart of the enemy camp while assault on the palisades tied down most of their troops. Yet one must now grow too fond of plans, lest they be followed even when they no longer suited. As was the case here, to his understanding. Neither the Grand Alliance nor the Black Queen wanted to risk the heavy casualties of a committed duel to death, which meant every manoeuvre on this field was in fact was a jostling for position in some greater game. One where the victor could twist the arm of the defeated without having sown too great a field of corpses first. It was Yannu Marave's duty to help the Peregrine triumph in this struggle, nothing less or more.

"Sound the retreat for all hands," the Lord of Alava ordered his horn-bearer.

The Peregrine looked at him strangely, as if the holy man was watching someone both a stranger and an old friend. It might truly be so, Yannu thought, if the old stories about his distant kin Lady Sintra were more than merely that.

"You will be challenged over this," the Pilgrim said.

"I have been challenged before," Yannu Marave said, neither boastful nor wary.

He might have to kill Akil Tanja, the Lord of Alava mused, or at least the man's champion. The Lord of Malaga had taken enough losses today anger might lead him to such a blunder. Perhaps even a second champion would need killing, when he told the others that they would resume the attack during the night now that the safe paths to the palisade had been cleared. Ah well, these things happened. Nothing for it but swinging the blade.

Victory was born of blood, and only ever earned through it: this Yannu Marave knew true as any other child of Levant.

[DroughtBringer](#)

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And check out the Discord! <https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>

Stormblessed

God damn cynical Abigail is an absolute delight.

Jeffery Wells

She had quickly become my favorite tertiary character, by far.

I love that she keeps blundering into success, no matter how hard she tries to fail. She'll be the second Marshall of Callow soon enough at the rate she's going.

[Javvies](#)

Foiled again, Abigail. You aren't going to get yourself demoted/discharged. Might get promoted again.

Heh. Plan B is attacking at night. That's going to backfire on them.

[sengachi](#)

Plan B is going to be an unmitigated slaughter.

Andrew Mitchell

It certainly __could__ be, but Cat wants to make sure the Alliance is mostly intact. Was it maximum of 15% casualties she said during her planning session with Robber?

konstantinvoncarstein

It was 20%, and they will lose this percentage in 30 seconds maximum, 😊

[Liliet](#)

That's if drow aren't given specific orders to keep everyone alive and just tie them up or something though

konstantinvoncarstein

Maybe, but the coalition will certainly bleed a lot

[Liliet](#)

hopefully in injured more than dead :3

caoimhinh

Yep, and considering that 20% of the GA army is over 24 thousand people, even if the casualties don't reach half of that number, it would still be a huge slaughter numbering in the thousands.

The only thing she needs to go full Tanya Degurechaff are some war crimes (suggested if not committed).

Henry

I will have you know that major degurechaff Never violated any of the international laws of war. Cease with your blatant lies against our glorious empire

Michael Sanders

Not a warcrime the first time!

AVR

Abigail so obviously has a story on her side. I wonder if Cat figured that out?

caoimhinh

It seems Cat hasn't figured it out yet. As far as we have seen, Cat only sees her as "the first truly Callowan General in the Army of Callow" so she wants to train Abigail so she can be skilled enough to maintain the position. And given that Abigail's success looked like quick-wit and improvisation in the face of danger before, and in this chapter it looked like deep planning and cunning anticipation of enemy movements, it won't stand out as a story yet.

I think it will take a bit more before Cat notices it, and it will be quite a shock for her when she realizes Abigail is following Catherine's own groove in the workings of Fate.

Amadeus would probably quickly figure it out when he wakes up, though.

antoninjohn

A night attack when the other side has Drowning, what could possibly go wrong

antoninjohn

Drow not Drowning, stupid autocorrect

SpacyRicochet

To be fair, for all they know Cath still has plenty of Drowning to go around.

[M0och](#)

Yet another interesting application of lakeomancy!

danh3107

Death by cackling goblin is a hell of a way to go...

Also Yannu is deeply, deeply, deeply underestimating the two brightest military minds on Calerina.

ATRDCI

And deeply underestimating how familiar the drow are with victory born and earned in blood

Skraeling

When all your magic fails in comparison to a big man on a big horse holding a big bloody stick.

[sengachi](#)

Admittedly, a big man on a big horse backed up by the best anti-sorcery miracles a thousand years of grinding attrition against the greatest empire of casters on Calernia can produce, but eh, semantics.

Quite Possibly A Cat

Mostly he's underestimating the Drow. It seems they still haven't figured out how the Drow work.

RoflCat

To be fair, the only Drow they know of are the exiled ones, like Ivah initially.

They've yet to ever face the Firstborns, and while I think the Pilgrim knows what the crows are, he might not be aware that the relation between Cath and Sve Noc is....unusual.

"Try a foot"

[Liliet](#)

The relationship being unusual is utterly irrelevant here.

The drow are like... like if Levantine forces were actually secretly all Lanterns if engaged exactly at dawn. You wouldn't GUESS it from knowing about the existence of Lanterns, or absolutely any data on their Named.

konstantinvoncarstein

They never fight them at night, but Pilgrim saw Rumena

[Liliet](#)

When you see a borderline-Named super powerful priest who also happens to be the general of the force, you don't just

jump from there to the assumption that the entire force is secretly also priests.

The drow are pretty fucking out there by Calernian measures.

Insanenoodlyguy

Plus Rumena was fighting during day and pilgrim packed Devine hint system for once. He can assume sensibly that cat brought up a drow heavy hitter, and that theres gonna be a few more drow with that same kind of mojo in her army. He has no reason yet to believe he and the rest get spinach when the sun goes down.

konstantinvoncarstein

The confrontation happened at night, by you are correct for the rest 😬

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

konstantinvoncarstein

*but

Gunslinger

Rumena should have made the drow's strength clear but they might be thinking he must be a drow Named.

[Javvies](#)

Well, Rumena was clearly carefully selected by Cat to be a hidden contingency, so it is a safe bet that they were chosen for their skill and power.

Plus, all other known encounters with the drow in recent times? They've been the exiles even more devoid of Night than Ivah was. The mercenaries that even Akua could tell were unimpressive crap troops.

Sure, there were some drow with Cat when she extracted Third Army, but they were thought to be demons initially(not sure if that misconception has been corrected or not) and were fighting as skirmishers in broad daylight.

They do have legitimate cause to be fairly dismissive of the average Drow grunt.

They're hilariously wrong, probably, unless they got an infodump from a Choir or something else linked to Above, but they genuinely don't (or shouldn't) have the information to accurately assess the capabilities of and threat level of the drow.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, I think we can assume they didn't get a Choir infodump here lmao.

Kissaten

Maybe he's just baiting her trump cards out. It seems like he's operating on yu-gi-oh logic of having a counter to a counter, so by taking out initial surprise of the drow in the dark in a controlled battle he aims to deny his enemy a surprise.

[crysjal](#)

That's assuming he's even aware that there is the potential for that. Pilgrim might not have given him enough information to make that kind of assumption.

Cicero

Now now Abigail, you were not completely surprised by your success. You did suspect that the Broken Bells holy runes would negate or lessen the effectiveness of the binders familiars.

Even if this wasn't planned, you had good instincts and exploited the opportunities you got. Luck is a horse to ride like any other, and just like any horse, riding it does require skill.

jalexanderb

My gods, she's fallen into the Role of a comedy protagonist.

So long as she continues being absolutely clueless and hilarious to an outside observer she's UNSTOPPABLE.

sutortyrannus

The Bumbling General, no?

Victory Through Fortunate Blunder.

MagnaMalusLupus

No no, she's a drunkard who manages to fumble her way to success via sheer dumb luck and copious drinking. She's the Lucky Drunk.

Aotrs Commander

Fast forward, like, twenty years, and we see a confused and quietly terrified Supreme God-Empress Abigail sitting on the Combined Throne of Calernia, Above And Below wondering where the FUCK she went wrong...

DD

Abigail Cain, Hero of the Imperium!
What does Krolem smell like?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Or rather, "where did [she] go right?" Ever see the play *The Producers*?? The title characters are lamenting the success of their play, which was supposed to be a tax dodge or suchlike.

Yeah. The only thing that could backfire with using the knights as a go-to anti-sorcery measure would be lord Tanja leaving the priests with the mine-trawling group, but that would be:

- a) excessive, considering thae different manner of clearing the traps and possible interaction of sorcery and miracles;
- b) putting too many eggs in one basket, which even Razin was wary of;
- c) a bad move overall, considering that nothing was stopping Abigail from ordering another ritual.

[Liliet](#)

Knights were p much designed to be a go-to anti-sorcery measure, and Levantines have never needed an anti-knight measure before. It took Amadeus&Grem for Praes to come up with anti-knight measures with centuries of history behind their backs, I don't think Levantines can figure out a counter easily 😊

The real issue here is that Cat *really* doesn't want a war of attrition...

[shieldredblog](#)

They don't really need a counter to the knights, they can just match them with heavy horse of their own, they've done it before. As long as they can keep the knights away from the binders, it's all good.

Traditionally in their fights vs Praes, they were so devastating because Praes had no real cavalry. They depended on massed foot and sorcerers.

[Liliet](#)

Makes sense.

[Liliet](#)

I think Abigail did know about the anti-sorcery plate, yeah. She just didn't quite have a full plate in mind beyond "oh boi I could sure use some knights here"

[Liliet](#)

* full plan, geez

Naeddyr

A Ciaphas Cain will never admit to themselves they're competent. That would only invite destruction!

Alivaril

Waiting to attack until after nightfall, eh? Brilliant move. Nothing could possibly go wrong. I'm sure there will only be minimal casualties taken during the assault.

RandomFan

I completely agree. There will only be minimal casualties during the assault. Everyone else will be captured while still alive.

[Liliet](#)

^^^

XD

[Sugar Roll](#)

Well to be fair, they don't know much about the Drow. It's high time the Drow shows everyone what they're made of.

Someguy

Ah, the Levantines are a society of Blood Mages with less sense and competence than Praesi Blood Mages.

Yavandir

Most of their incompetence worked as well as Abigail's plans thanks to the guys above.

Cap'n Smurfy

I think this chapter can be best summarized as Abigail tripping over her own feet and accidentally performing a triple front flip, making it look like she meant to do that.

Hilariously blundering her way through her problems and somehow coming out looking the better for it really sums up her story.

Insanenoodlyguy

It is a little known fact that the Name "Peerless Tactitican" does not exist. Oh, it is a name that has come up a few times, but the bearer knows the real name is "The Serendipitous". To allow the truth of the name to be revealed is to lose its potency, often at cost, though holders are tempted as their victories magnitudes and thus the threats they face inevitably escalate.

Andrew Mitchell

This is now my head canon.

Raved Thrad

In a weird way, doesn't this mirror exactly how Catherine learned how to wage war? "Huh? That actually worked. I must remember that."

[taliesinskye](#)

"Release the goat!" comes to mind. XD

[Liliet](#)

I would say it's a little more than blundering.

Abigail looked at the field full of magical summons and thought "this is what knights are for, my effectiveness is at like 10% of maximum if I don't have knights".

So she sends for knights, despite not having a detailed plan for what to do with them in mind. Her logic is just that she can do nothing without knights, ergo, sending for the knights is the right thing to do.

Then the knights actually come and she starts panicking because she's not used to the idea that improvising is a valid approach to the situation and think she was "supposed" to already have a full plan in mind.

Then she improvises successfully, because actually she's genuinely good at intuitively assessing what resources she needs to handle the situation and then coming up with solutions on the fly once she has the toolbox.

Insanenoodlyguy

I'm not sure what happened. Why did the calvary no-sell the binders constructs?

Insanenoodlyguy

To clarify, I know their armor is enchanted, but it worked exceptionally well here. Is binding considered an evil magic?

Yavandir

They literally bind the souls of the beasts they hunt... Of course binding doesn't have anything to do with necromancy they are the good ones after all.

Insanenoodlyguy

So Abigail was right and thus looks exceptionally brilliant for realizing the priest blessed armor would be an excellent counter. She was even heard mumbling about it before her brilliant execution! That's good.

[sengachi](#)

Ohohoho, I hadn't even noticed that. Oh she's dug herself in deep with this one hasn't she?

Insanenoodlyguy

Krolem later to his fellows (I figure from what we know, orcs LIKE Abigail, shes drinks fae blood in the middle of a fight. Nice to know one of the humans gets it.)

"So I'm thinking it looks pretty bad, then she mumbles something about the priests on our side. I don't get it, but she rushes me off to the hellhound to ask for some knights. Hellhound figures it out faster then me and I'm sent off to get the writ. I come back and she asks if I've got the plan figured out, cant say I did yet. Then the sappers trap was sprung! I'm thinking this is it, but it would be a good death for them, yeah?But that's when she let's loose the trap within the trap within the trap! I finally get that why she was mentioning the priests when those knights ride out and go through those monsters like fog! I tell you, the look on her face would belong on an orc if she just had better teeth."

Sparsebeard

Hell, she even predicted that sending Robber would lure the enemy in for the blow...

What a genius!

Cap'n Smurfy

Binding the spirits of defeated beasts to oneself to use in battle seems more like a morally grey area, especially compared to the outright evil magical zombie army of Praesi

Necromancy. The prayers on Knights armours are designed to turn away sorcery in general however. Morally grey spirits with bodies literally made of sorcery? May as well be paper in front of a good holy charge.

Insanenoodlyguy

I'm not complaining about this, since it has been pointed out to me that miracle reinforcement would work especially well on what is essentially necromancy, but I would have thought it'd provide less benefit since they are still constructed from physical materials. But, it's still all held together by blood magic, so there you are.

Someguy

It's blood based (tattoos) necromancy (spirits) no matter what the Levantines re-label it as, so the knights were Super Effective.

[Javvies](#)

The Callowan Knightly Order armor is more than just protection from *evil/dark* magic, it protects from all, or at least most, magic in general (fireballs, even if the mage is evil, aren't exactly necromancy).

werafdsaew

Outside of Diabolism, there's no inherently evil sorcery—things are evil or not according to their cultural context. This even includes necromancy, as Daoine's ancestral worship is a form of it.

Someguy

Daoine is less Ancestor worship and more Ancestral/National sacrifice to fulfill their goal of Revanchism against the Elves of the Golden Bloom.

konstantinvoncarstein

The constructs were creatures entirely animated by magic, it is probably why they just go through them.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think this qualifies as 'exceptionally well'. It's good old regular well, the minimum necessary to deal with Praesi successfully. It's just that the Levantines did not expect it, and that they aren't friggin Praes. Praesi mages are best on the continent and have been engaged in an offense/defense arms race with Callowans for centuries while Levantines were perfecting beast killing tactics. Sabah got

surprised by Champion; binders are getting surprised by Callowan fucking knights.

Andrew Mitchell

Still gutted about Sabah. 😞

[Liliet](#)

Well written character death 😊

Andrew Mitchell

Sure was.

[Fayhem](#)

Seriously. I mostly liked Champion and trying to kill each other is kind of the point of war, but when I read that bit about her cloak in the later chapters I saw fucking red.

[Liliet](#)

I think that's just Sabah's cloak she took, nowadays, judging from Hanno's non-reaction.

MagnaMalusLupus

Hanno explicitly said that she was more savage and prone to taking trophies. Then there's this bit:
>"She was not wearing, for once, the wolf fur cloak she'd claimed from someone that was no wolf at all." - Interlude: Red the Flowers

That's not Captain's cloak.

Andrew Mitchell

For sure.

[Liliet](#)

Yathink?

Hanno referred as 'savage' to cutting off sword points.

And Captain was referred to as wearing a fur cloak at lest once.

Qwormuli

I don't think, that Sabah wore a rawhide pelt made from a large wolf, sadly.

[Liliet](#)

Where's the "rawhide pelt" part from?

byzantine279

They tried using necromancy against Knights of Callow, who have been fighting the wasteland for centuries. Of course it failed spectacularly.

Ein

"...when he told the others that they would resume the attack during the night now that the safe paths to the palisade had been cleared. "

Ohhh Yannu, you just done goofed.

medailyfun

I wonder what was the logic behind this decision? He should know goblins and possibly orcs can see in the darkness, plus all the dark magic prefers the night time.

[Liliet](#)

"All the dark magic prefers the night time" – factually incorrect in this setting, Praesi necromancers don't give a fuck. Drow are the only ones getting powered up by the Night, and they haven't been in a single nighttime engagement on the surface yet.

Goblins are a good point, but they're a minority of the forces. If the Levantines have a reason to assume their own forces aren't going to be hindered by the dark, then without knowing about drow specifically it's a pure win: *some* of the opponent's forces, while not all of them, are going to be incapacitated.

The drow are just... a lethal joke.

caoimhinh

He probably wants to take a short rest before pressing on with the attack, taking advantage that the safe path to the palisade was found. Yannu reasoned that he has to use it before the Army of Callow puts more traps during the night, so he attacks at night.

His reasoning is sound and valid with the info he has, but none in that Alliance joined force has experience fighting Praes, barely a few have experience fighting Cat's Army, and none can even imagine what the Drow can do during nighttime. Of course, we know that Yannu is screwed and thousands of

soldiers will die at night (the limit line set by Cat is 1/5 of their army, but that's still over 20 thousand).

Personally, I think he should be aware that Goblins have night vision and are the ones who are pointing the siege engines, catapults, scorpions and ballistae, but then again this guy might just let a few hundred of his soldiers die to take the palisade.

Clint

I **think** the plan is like what they did earlier in the same campaign – use their numerical advantage to keep the other side from sleeping. (Or am I thinking of the Arcadian campaign?)

If they hit the Callowans at night, raiding with a small fraction of their troops, possibly through Arcadia, they can keep the whole Callowan force from getting any sleep. Then tomorrow, when rest of their force wakes up from a good night's sleep, they attack the exhausted Callowans.

Of course, I'd imagine that the drow will be quite a surprise – and in the morning, Cat will be offering to trade a few thousand prisoners, including a few named, for Black's soul.

Between Holy knights riding down the Crusade's necromancers, begging for peace **again**, and trying to trade prisoners for the extracted soul of her mentor/father-figure, Cat's building a really nice story line – can you just see Grey Pilgrim's face when she tries to build a redemption story line against him?

[Fayhem](#)

> Ohhh Yannu, you just done goofed.

This is one I've been seeing a lot, and at least at this point in scrolling down the comments page nobody's made what I think is the relevant point here. Which is:

It's probably true that this won't ultimately work out for Yannu, but a night attack would be sacrificing a lot of advantages for no apparent gain **even with only what they would actually know**. They don't have anything we've seen or know about that gets better at night, and it's already widely known that goblins can see in the dark and it would hardly be an unreasonable inference that the drow skirmishers who proved themselves useful in Sarcella have nightvision even if you haven't figured anything else out about them (seriously, they're from a place called the **Everdark**). Shifting the engagement from day to night is already apparent as a straight loss based on what we know of the Levantines' capabilities and

what we can infer they likely know of the eastern coalition's capabilities. Since this is Careful (AKA Cold-Bloodedly Competent) Yannu we're talking about and not Blundering Dipshit Yannu, that means he's got something planned that we don't know about, probably based on a capability we don't know about. And you know the narrative rule about plans that are revealed in advance vs. plans that aren't, right?

Tl;dr – I think drow Night powers + Cat's scheming means that the forces of FUN Cat (FUN = First Under Night ofc) will come out on top, but it will be a closer thing than it looks like it will be to us right now.

[Liliet](#)

I mean I'm definitely assuming that they've got some trick to attacking at night that will negate the obvious disadvantages – that they will be able to see at the very least – I just think it won't come anywhere close to seriously challenging the drow, simply because they don't *know* what the drow can do yet.

And the obvious counter, Cat's got a counter for.

Yavandir

Yet another successful scheme of brilliant general Abigail

konstantinvoncarstein

Oh, my poor summer child... Requiescat in pace

Jworks

I cannot wait to see the drow obliterate them at night.

JJR

As much fun as that would be, they do have to be at least a little bit gentle with the alliance army. Remember, no more than 1/5 (I think it was) can be allowed to die so they can still fight the Dead King.

Makes me wonder if Abigail's accidental brilliance was maybe not actually a good thing in the long run. Those dead Binders would have been great up north. Not that there were any other options.

Oshi

pROBABLY NOT AS MUCH AS YOU THINK. I KINDA DON'T WANT TO KNOW WHAT THE DEAD KING WOULD DO TO BOUND NECROMANTIC SPIRITS..

Oshi

Fuck me caps lock

JJR

No, caps lock is exactly the right tone for that thought.

=P

[sengachi](#)

Yeah horrified shrieking is exactly the right response to the idea of using spirits against the Dead King.

caoimhinh

1/5 of that army is still over 20 thousand soldiers, they will be under the red line even after the massive casualties they are undoubtedly going to get during the night.

Sparsebeard

Well, they can still injure or capture them.

I wonder if the heroes will keep their cool when the fully rested up Mighties start their rampage. After all, the strongest ones might be in the same category as Pilgrim and Saint... Which is pretty reasonable since they've been consuming the talents of their foes for hundreds of years or more... Heck, I'm not even sure if the old drows will even have to take the field unless the heroes show up too...

P

I would like to bring up the fact that wounded outnumbered dead by a 2:1 ratio in WW2, and during the Napoleonic era wounded outnumbered dead 5:1. 15% dead means another 30-75% wounded, who will presumably be healed by incredibly overworked clerics for weeks after the battle. Having up to 90% of your force be rendered incapable of marching under their own power is pretty much the definition of a slaughter.

Aotrs Commander

Also worth noting that 50% or more casualties (which, as noted, is not 50% fatalities), for that matter, of an army, is sufficiently rare as to be occasions of notable historical catastrophic defeats (Cannae – Hannibal's famous victory over the Romans) or slaughters (e.g the Somme.)

Jarthon

There is an excellent quote at the top of one of the Chapters (possibly in book 3) that goes something along the lines of "anyone who thinks that genocide is an

acceptable military strategy for defeating an enemy needs to be removed from command immediately." That of course doesn't capture the eloquent humor of the actual quote, but it gets the point across. Winning a battle or war by means of total elimination just isn't feasible. Even the NAZI's ran into this problem with killing huge numbers of people and those were unarmed and broken captives for the most part. Twenty percent casualties will absolutely cripple an army for potentially months since they will be unable to move anywhere and will have lost primarily frontline fighters (since, you know, people on the front lines tend to die more than the noncombatants that need to accompany an army).

byzantine279

Frankly I get the feeling the Dead King can usurp control over those spirits with a snap of his fingers. It's very obviously necromancy they renamed to shake off the "Evil" vibe.

James Ware

While Abigail fumbling her way through being a general is certainly entertaining, it reads so much like Cat's same fumbling in books 1 and 2. It's been done, and it's lost its novelty value to me.

caoimhinh

Emm... that was kinda the point, you know? Abigail has a lot of similarities with Cat, they increase with every chapter and it's purposely done that way. Also, Abby is luckier than Cat, because Catherine was a Named villain that had to use cleverness to beat the odds, yet Abigail is a Callow girl that can be blessed by Providence and good luck.

ChillyPepper

Reminds me of the visions Cat had while kneeling in front of Diabolist, where she was aiming for a general- albeit not so willingly in this case.

Pilberyy Toeby

Attacking the drow at night? Yes nothing can go wrong there.

werafdsaew

Oh come on, I would be so disappointed if Cat's army basically won due to enemy foolishness.

IDKWhoitis

Well they dont know about the Drow, or the rules regarding their deployment. Most of Callowan army is human at this point, so while there is an advantage, it's not overwhelmingly so.

The alliance is trying to wear down their endurance and munitions, the safest way possible, through expending time. The Lev commander knows about the MetaGame, so he's not trying to win exactly, he just wants a stronger position in the long run, which sees Callow only weaken overtime gradually as both space is lost, traps expended, and even missiles are fired.

[Liliet](#)

It's not enemy foolishness, it's a hidden knife.

RanVor

It's the enemy foolishly assuming there's no hidden knife.

[Javvies](#)

To be fair, they might well have some sort of plan that they think will work.

On the other hand, it's entirely likely, probable even, that they are badly misjudging the capabilities and threat level of the drow. However, they have entirely legitimate grounds to be dismissive of the average drow and utterly clueless as to their actual capabilities.

[Liliet](#)

I mean the enemy's probably assuming there's *some kind of* hidden knife, they just have no reason to guess *specifically* that it's a nighttime powerup. AFAIK there's no precedent for that kind of ability on Calernia.

[Mental Mouse](#)

If anything, they might be thinking their own binders are scarier at night. Me, I think they're likely to find themselves facing Night-materialized manticores and such. In fact, the Twins could pick up quite a little menagerie of subject spirits for later use.

[Miles](#)

Well she can't actually win this so there's that.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Sure she can. If she can score a solid win or loss against the Pilgrim, she breaks his Pattern of Three, but as far as the overall fight, she's limited only by her objectives.

ALazyMonster

Well attacking at night... they're dead men. I am currently expecting the Tyrant to appear when plan number 3 comes from the alliance since plan B is going to die screaming. It should be interesting to see the mess he makes.

I like how Abigail and Cat both have a habit of only speaking the last part of their internal monologues. It's really funny.

IDKWhoitis

I imagine either Cat and Saint are having one hell of a duel in Arcadia right now, or Cat and Tyrant are haggling terms.

Either scenario, I believe Tyrant will "Betray" Cat.

[Mental Mouse](#)

"General?" "Never mind, I'm just foreshadowing". 😊 But yeah, where Cat uses skill, planning, and bloody-mindedness, Abigail has a mischievous Providence. Some planning too, because Cat has been training her, but the way her impulses just happen to be "the right thing"... yeah, it's nice when one of your Generals is favored by the Gods Above, especially when the rest of your folks aren't much.

fbt

1) i still love abigail soooo much
2) wait..was there anyone else in the chapter?...erm.. :p
more seriously, kudos to robber for schemeing when the generals didn't (afawk).
and it's Abigail's deadpan manner and inner dialog that i love so much. Plus, her sections are always beautifully clearly written. honestly, the vague flowerly language used in the narratives from the pov of some of the enemy is pretty opaque and unrewarding to me, idk about anyone else. Still, btwn Cat and Abby and Black I loooove this story!

Andrew Mitchell

I ****really**** hope we get to know the details about Robbers plan. Who's idea was it? And who (if anyone) helped to execute it? We know Robber's hand-writing is poor so my guess is that Hakram helped.

medailyfun

Maybe Robber's writing is poor, but why the tanner's daughter should be better?

Andrew Mitchell

Great question!

I was assuming that with poor handwriting it would be difficult to copy a signature. But maybe it would be easy if it was so badly written.

[*crysja1*](#)

Or maybe him having poor handwriting is exactly what he wants you to think...

taovkool

So Abigail is pretty much the Ciaphas Cain of this series.

Good to know.

Novice

So, will she have her own Amberley Vail (probably gender-bent)?

caoimhinh

She will quest for him, that much is certain. I remember Abigail said she would only give silver in the House of Light if she "got her hooks on a pretty boy who was supernaturally flexible in bed".

Gunslinger

Krolems eventual memoir of Queen Abigail would be the thing to read.

Insanenoodlyguy

I am not super great with the comparison, only because Cain, in his own words, is a bumbling coward (there's a lot of facts to debate he's wrong, but he'd say that about himself). Some of his greatest victories were achieved literally trying to run away and abandon the fight entirely.

Darkening

I mean, to be fair, a lot of his more heroic actions are done entirely because he believes he has to keep up appearances or get shot by his own men, and the line in this chapter about how the orcs might tear her apart if she seemed to be the weakest link in the army really has a similar tone to him, so I can see why people make the comparison. And really, if somebody offered her a comfy garrison position with no combat, I'm pretty sure she'd take it in a heartbeat to get away from all this.

Nguyen Hong Hai

Also crossover with Tanya from Youko Senji in her quest for a cushy position...

IDKWhoitis

I love how both sides were scared of each other and always assumed the other side knew what they were doing. But we see Abby pull off a Foundling Special, taking advantage of any unforeseen chaos and exploiting it into a brutal victory.

Trading 50ish special sappers and a handful of cavalry for a full thousand men and 50 binders.

Let's see if Abby picks up any more of Cat's bad habits...

[sengachi](#)

Honestly even if Robber's plan had gone as intended and he and his 300 had died taking some 30 binders with them, that still would have been a very good trade so far as raw numbers are concerned. The fact that Abigail leveraged that into more dead binders and one *thousand* dead infantry turned the whole thing from a bad exchange for Levant into a ruinous one.

[sengachi](#)

Robber is really trying not to make it to fifteen isn't he? Like really, *really* trying. 'Forged a signature so he could lead a suicide mission to sandwich himself between a group of enemy casters and enemy infantry and attack the enemies most capable of retaliating with extreme prejudice' trying to not make it to fifteen.

WuseMajor

Unfortunately for him, the Lesser Lesser Footrest is too good looking to die.

samshadar

I am starting to wonder if it is really death that is creeping up to him with "old age", or if something else happens... And he's trying to get himself killed before that comes to pass.

haihappen

me imagining Robber as 30-ish years old, playing with little goblins in the hills outside Marchfort, as he teaches them the ways of the Goblin, when a Middle Aged Cat walks up to him.

"One more time?" He asks hopefully

"One more time.", she confirms sadly.

The his slightly grayed eyes clear up, revealing pure malice.

"Finally!"

Andrew Mitchell

Hopefully EE's planning some extended Epilogue's for this series. This would fit right in.

Insanenoodlyguy

I honestly believe he's getting or has gotten a goblin name. We don't know about it because in a culture that works like this, a name is suspected but not proven. If you get a name, you in fact try to hide it as much as possible, openly presenting it would probably cause you to lose it immediately, or at least cripple it. If one or two people can prove it that just results in secret alliances, or blackmail, or the named turning around and doing the same to you or just killing you, which is all fine in goblin culture so that's okay. Robber, like Ranker before him, has one now or is getting one, and like any good goblin isn't saying shit.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Perhaps the "something else" is decaying sense of self-preservation....

medailyfun

I don't know why everybody is praising Abigail, it clearly was a set up Story, the workings of Special Tribune Robber pulling the strings of the generals

[Liliet](#)

Was it Robber who thought to send for knights? No! 🤪

RanVor

Except Abigail was only able to deploy these knights thanks to a random request intended as a cover-up.

Cicero

Not completely random, she was obviously thinking that the cavalry might have particularly good effects against the sorcerers.

RanVor

She obviously wasn't thinking of that when she requested a detachment of thousand from Juniper.

[Liliet](#)

Don't put too much trust in the narration of a terrified person utterly convinced they were promoted

past the limit of their competence while everyone else disagrees.

Abigail was thinking about plausible deniability and failing, yes. But it wasn't the only ingredient in the stew.

RanVor

I think I have made it abundantly clear what my opinion on your interpretation is.

[Liliet](#)

Do you think that Cat is wrong about Abigail, or that she's banking on providence?

Or that generally Abigail is competent, but just this one time it played no role at all?

RanVor

I wouldn't say it played no role at all. She did make the right decision when it mattered. It's just that she ended up in the position where she was able to make that decision purely by accident.

[Liliet](#)

I just don't see such a thing as 'pure accident' there. It was like 90% an accident, but the other 10% were due to her basic competence that she couldn't not have even when trying to fail.

RanVor

Expect the text says otherwise. She aimed to request something unreasonable enough to get dismissed, but not enough to get her executed for intentional obstruction of war effort. Judging by Juniper's initial reaction, she wasn't far off the mark.

Besides, 90% accident is still very, very far from intentional, which is a prerequisite for the outcome to be considered a product of competence. In other words, you're contradicting yourself.

[Liliet](#)

Okay, so it's unfair to call the outcome 'product of competence' even if competence was a part of it, because it's a small part.

Is that the core disagreement?

RanVor

Partly. The other part is that you're talking nonsense while being explicitly contradicted by both narration and characterization of Abigail.

[Liliet](#)

Ah, so you're just being rude then, gotcha.

RanVor

Yes, I'm being rude, because I'm sick of your bullshit. I couldn't call you out when we were discussing Pilgrim because it was a largely philosophical debate, but here you're arguing with hard facts

You're dismissing the fact that Abigail's core motivation is her desire to get demoted. To avoid responsibility. She focuses all her cleverness, competence and knowledge of the hierarchy and protocol of the Army of Callow on achieving this objective. But she also lives in fear of Catherine, who she imagines to be a murderous tyrant. She feels the need to preserve her life by not giving the Black Queen a reason to blame her for failure. The conflict between these two motivations limits her options to merely a handful. She constantly tries to walk the fine line between failing too much and not failing enough, and sometimes comes close to achieving her objective, but gets thwarted by factors she has no knowledge of (in this case, the relations within Cat's inner circle). All of this is in the text, so stop ascribing Abigail motivations she doesn't have.

[Liliet](#)

I am not?

RanVor

Now you're contradicting yourself. You claim Abigail requested knights because she judged them necessary for success, and yet you deny claiming that she wanted to succeed (which is patently false).

[Liliet](#)

Levels of abstraction.

"I need to give the impression that I want to succeed. If I was, what would I need for it?"

RanVor

No, it was more like

"I need to request something I won't be given, quickly. What could that be? A thousand knights should do the job."

And then

"Fuck, I should have requested ten thousand knights."

The Broken Bells are the most elite formation within the Army of Callow, and a detachment of thousand is a force that would normally be deployed only in dire circumstances. Abigail didn't overestimate the ridiculousness of her request, she underestimated the level of trust Juniper has in Catherine.

[*Liliet*](#)

We're quibbling over subconscious process, at this point. I'm asserting that there was one, non-narrated because Abigail didn't actually consciously think it. You're asserting the knights were chosen purely by accident, even though Abigail was at least motivated to *look* like she had a plan, for after the battle.

RanVor

The knights weren't chosen by accident. The knights were chosen because of probability of denial.

Also, that's your argument? If the text is contradicting you, the text is wrong? I think I need you to remind me why I'm wasting time on arguing with you.

[*Liliet*](#)

I am saying that I do not consider the text to contradict my version.

Also, I think there were other things Abigail could have chosen with high probability of denial, and she went for knights as the ideal balance of

probability of denial and vaguely plausible as something she could use.

RanVor

Like what for example?

[Liliet](#)

Extra munitions, siege engines, sappers, drow.

RanVor

All of which, except Drow, have higher likelihood of being accepted than knights. And I highly doubt Drow would be the first thing to come to panicked Abigail's mind.

Sparsebeard

It's pretty clear that Abigail knew that knight where a good choice since she thought that it might hold some scrutiny under the Black Queen's investigation of the situation.

Still, it's much easier to say in hindsight that you had a plan involving knights, then to actually pull it off.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

caoimhinh

Lilliet, you are putting too much of your own imagination into the text and thus not only see things that aren't there, but you are also even contradicted by what the text explicitly says.

"We're quibbling over subconscious process, at this point. I'm asserting that there was one, non-narrated because Abigail didn't actually consciously think it."

So your argument is not only NOT on the text, but also on the unexplored subconscious of the character that you are making up in your mind? That's purely YOUR IMAGINATION, that's not a valid argument in any way. Besides, it's contradicted by what's directly on the text of the chapter. FanFic can never beat Canon.

From Abigail's POV: "She sent him off after a quick elaboration, fairly sure the Hellhound would refuse her request and so in the after-battle reports she'd have an excuse for her failure to perform"

From Juniper's POV: "The Marshal of Callow's instinct was to send him back with an order for General Abigail to make a proper proposal including for what she wanted the soldiers, but she held her tongue. Catherine had raised the other woman up for a reason"

Then again from Abigail's POV: "Shit, Abigail thought, looking at the writ Krolem had just handed her with a sinking feeling in her stomach. The Hellhound had actually agreed? Why would she – no, don't panic, she told herself. This could still be salvaged if she watched her step... she should have made her request more unreasonable, if she'd gone overboard the Marshal would have refused. But no, she'd just had to hedge her bets and make it look like her theoretical plan had been reasonable just to improve the chances the Black Queen wouldn't feed her liver to buzzards after this was all over with"

RanVor is right in this discussion, Abigail chose to request the deployment of one thousand Knights of the Order of Broken Bells because it was what she believed to be a request outrageous enough to be denied but not too outrageous that she would be treated like an idiot and killed (this is her panicked imagination, because the Army of Callow doesn't feed people to the buzzards nor kill their officers for failure, but most of the people, even the Callowans, think that Cat is a murder-happy tyrant that commands respect and obedience at all times and punish failure severely).

It was explicitly said by Abigail that she hoped the request would be denied, she only lamented afterward that she didn't make it even more unreasonable so that it would be denied, and we also know from Juniper's POV that the request was both unreasonable and improperly made, the only reason it was accepted was because Juniper believes in Catherine, so if any other General had asked for the same thing in the same way as Abigail did they would have been denied and their messenger yelled at.

Abigail was quick-witted enough that she deployed the knights to save Robber's cohort, this is true, but not the matter of this discussion. This victory is the work of Providence not because Abigail had somehow won miraculously, no, it's the work of Providence because the only reason the tools for her victory fell into her hands was because of luck (A.K.A causality, factors outside of her knowledge and control) and she had no plan until all the pieces fell into place together. To outsiders it will look as if it was all planned by Abigail (her signature in the permission to grant munitions to Robber's cohort, that cohort hidden ambush, the request for knights to counter the spirits bound by the Binders from Malaga) but we as readers have access to Abigail's thoughts, so we know for a fact that this is not the case.

Liliet

I am not saying she had a plan??? I am saying her basic competence was one of the bricks Providence used to build this victory.

Liliet

I don't think the request is random is the thing. She was like "I cannot do anything here without knights, if I'm not given them I'm not responsible for losing".

And then she was like "shit, I didn't actually have a *specific* plan for knights, I just wanted to have them, I didn't think further than that"

And then she saw a tactical objective that the knights were indeed perfectly suited for, and was proven correct in wanting them in the first place.

A broad toolbox rather than an overarching plan; we're having a discussion about maneuver warfare on discord right now and I'm learning a lot, and that's basically what happened here. Abigail moved in accordance to a higher level mojo than is commonly accepted in guideverse, and Juniper accidentally moved in accordance to it as well, and the result was a smashing success – just because nobody actually expected it to work out this way, doesn't mean it was an accident or somehow Robber's achievement.

RanVor

I have no idea where you got all of this from. It's very, very clear from the text that she requested

knights specifically because she didn't expect to get them.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, but that doesn't mean she rolled the dice for what kind of unreasonable thing to request. She at the very least tried to make her theoretical plan sound reasonable.

>Gods, Abigail knew she should have made her request more unreasonable, if she'd gone overboard the Marshal would have refused. But no, she'd just to had hedge her bets and make it look like her theoretical plan had been reasonable just to improve the chances the Black Queen wouldn't feed her liver to buzzards after this was all over with.

Which means she thought a request for knights in this situation was reasonable. And oh look – she wasn't wrong, was she?

RanVor

Sorry, but your interpretation is 100% pure bullshit.

Novice

Harsh words when you've not given an appropriate counter-argument.

RanVor

My counter-argument is the text. It's not my fault that some people interpret it in ridiculous way.

Morgenstern

"she'd just to had hedge her bets and make it look like her theoretical plan had been reasonable"

"she'd [...] had [to] MAKE IT LOOK LIKE her theoretical plan had been REASONABLE"

Those are the very words the other two depend on for their interpretation and they **are** in the text. There is no fucking way you can make that go away and see her demand was ALL UN-reasonable, because it fucking had to at least LOOK just that – REASONABLE.

So there is actually quite enough text to at least form an **assumption** that she did have some subconscious process about what over-demanding request WOULD, on the surface, LOOK REASONABLE. Which means she

can judge what COULD BE reasonable. Which was all the other people ever argued...?

I really don't get why you're being such a dick about your *interpretation* of the text, as you are, as far as I can see, BOTH just interpreting the text – as if yours were the only one possible. While outright ignoring that passage the others did post that is the base for their interpretation, instead attacking their character / intellect, whatever. All the while claiming this very ignorance about the other people taking a SLIGHTLY different side in this discussion. Which is only that she has SOME degree of competence, on TOP of her *motivation* overall being to get demoted, still favoring to get her head out of the sling by making at least SOMEWHAT tactically feasible decisions, BECAUSE SHE CAN; as far as I followed. o0

Really, sometimes I'm just confused about commentors on the internet. Does anonymity really always have to end up in un-logically heated emotionally-turned arguments about INTERPRETATIONS of a text that are well possible by the very text itself...? o0 Guess I'll never really get "normal" people... *rolls eyes

Morgenstern

Or in fewer words: Well, this escalated quickly... I guess I'll never understand why such escalation happens over and over again. o0 And about only SLIGHTLY different viewpoints. o0

Morgenstern

(And sorry for the swear words in there... reading the mood in those last postings just kinda got me switching into slang-humorous movie swear word use *ahem ... it was meant cynically, nothing much else.)

caoimhinh

LOL

caoimhinh

It was explicitly stated that this wasn't planned in any way.

-Robber's cohort was acting alone and in secret, having gotten munitions via faking Abigail's signature.

-The request of knights was entirely a fluke that Abigail expected to be denied, its purpose was to make it seem like she had tried to do something and due to being denied the knights she couldn't do it, thus

avoiding responsibility for the failure.

-She actually got the knights, which neither Abigail nor Krolem expected, because Juniper reasoned "Cat chose this girl, so she might have something in mind, I'll trust my Warlord's instincts".

-Abby had no idea what to do with the knights, and lamented not having made an even more unreasonable request that would have been denied.

-Robber's cohort acted, creating a opportunity

-The 1000 knights were ready to be used, thanks to the purposeless request and the unexpected acceptance of that purposeless request.

This was the work of Providence. Abigail simply happened to gather the moving pieces thanks to luck and quick-thinking to take advantage of an opportunity.

Kissaten

Knights would have seen use even if Robber didn't have a trap set up. It's less of a providence and more of a rolling natural 20 where 2+ roll would be enough to keep the binders away.

Did Robber knew beforehand that he would attack specifically binders? No, his trap was set against any valid target, maybe targeting officers, but not specifically that one enemy's move. Knights are a generally good move against pretty much anything. Just like Robber's trap, they would do their job regardless of providence. Even if it was work of providence, she wouldn't be screwed if she was unlucky.

caoimhinh

But that's the thing: Abigail didn't expect to get the knights, and she even requested them improperly. The knights shouldn't have been granted, they only reason the request was accepted was that Juniper trusted Catherine's instincts and thus chose to believe the new General that Cat had elected had some plan for the Knights (and we know for a fact that Abigail actually didn't and was even hoping they would be denied so she could avoid responsibility for failure).

It's the work of Providence because the only reason the tools for her victory fell into her hands was because of luck (A.K.A causality, factors outside of her knowledge and control)

Liliet

Absolutely true wrt Robber.

Morgenstern

Thank you. Finally a reasonable ARGUMENTATION about that position instead of emotionally heated “you’re dumb” and “it’s not in the text (ignoring the other text)” non-arguments. oO

Even though you still seem to ignore that one point of text about making her request LOOK REASONABLE that the others draw their argumentation from... thus pointing out, in their view, that she knows just what MIGHT BE rather reasonable, after all.

caoimhinh

Thanks, I believe that one must defend one’s position with arguments and providing facts as much as possible with respect. That been said, RanVor is right in this, even if he lost his patience.

I actually did not ignore that bit of text, I simply used the other bits of text to counter the argument arising from the use of that fragment of the chapter. Also, that bit of text is actually AGAINST the view of Abigail having a plan or knowing what she is doing.

{On one hand, she’d actually be expected to produce results now. On the other hand, as long as she tried to pull off a vaguely coherent plan and failed she’d probably still manage to avoid the noose. Gods, Abigail knew she should have made her request more unreasonable, if she’d gone overboard the Marshal would have refused. But no, she’d just had to hedge her bets and make it look like her theoretical plan had been reasonable just to improve the chances the Black Queen wouldn’t feed her liver to buzzards after this was all over with.}

This is the bit of text used to justify that Abigail somehow had a plan and that she made the request look reasonable, right? Nothing in there provides defense for that argument, it just tells us that Abigail hoped she could use that as an EXCUSE in case of failure. She only laments she didn’t make it more unreasonable because maybe she thinks that then it would have been denied.

In fact, just two paragraphs above that bit of text, it was stated that the request DOES NOT LOOK REASONABLE. It was noted by Juniper that it wasn’t even properly made and didn’t explain what the purpose of the deployment was (Because there wasn’t a

purpose, and this was explicitly stated many times: Abigail had no plan or purpose for the Knights, she made the request with the purpose of it being denied, in order to avoid responsibility for a failure). It just wasn't too much of an outrageous request that would get Abigail treated like an idiot asking for too much (as if, for example, she had asked for the whole Order of Broken Bells, all the Goblin Fire, or other such obviously to be denied requests) and not too small so that could be used by Abigail to excuse her failure (she couldn't use it as an excuse if she had just asked for a single Mage, a small group of Goblins or a single tenth of soldiers, for example), she planned to say "I asked for reinforcements, I was totally gonna do something and had a plan, but the reinforcements were denied so my plan couldn't be used, it's not my fault I failed". And the ONLY REASON that such unreasonable and improperly made request was accepted was that Juniper trusts Catherine's instincts when choosing Abigail, so she chose to believe the new General had a plan (she didn't have any).

From Abigail's POV: "She sent him off after a quick elaboration, fairly sure the Hellhound would refuse her request and so in the after-battle reports she'd have an excuse for her failure to perform"

From Juniper's POV: "The Marshal of Callow's instinct was to send him back with an order for General Abigail to make a proper proposal including for what she wanted the soldiers, but she held her tongue. Catherine had raised the other woman up for a reason"

One can't just add our own thoughts into the text and justify our own interpretation by thinking that both Abigail and Juniper are unreliable narrators, because A) Abigail's POV shows us the reality of her intentions and thought process, so there is nothing to interpret or see further, she can be unreliable narrator about external matters but not to her own thought process B) Juniper's POV shows us how the request looked like from the outside.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yes, this. She was trying to cover her ass against charges of incompetence or rebellion. Between her actual knowledge of the milieu and her "natural" luck, she managed to instead cover her *army*, against the enemy blowing past the defenses and also wiping out the army's

top dirty-tricks squad with its leader. Great work, Abigail! (<Abigail cringes inside> 😊)

I will note that if she does end up getting a Name out of this, she probably loses her No.2 slot in the succession. That's assuming Cat doesn't need to back down on the "no Named rulers" point, which she might well have to; arms control is one thing, but Names are less subject to political constraint. Especially when several of them apply *specifically* to rulers.

Oh RanVor... This story is multilayered, with a lot of foreshadowing, multiple layers of intrigue, and non-causal manipulation (that is, story-fu) in play. There might even be an unreliable narrator or two. Events and even motivations are not the whole story, and "why did this happen" is very much a topic of discussion. Also, remember what I said before about taking anything less than enthusiastic agreement as a personal attack?

caoimhinh

Indeed.

But RanVor is right is this. One can't just add our own thoughts into the text and justify our own interpretation by thinking that both Abigail and Juniper are unreliable narrators, because
A) Abigail's POV shows us the reality of her intentions and thought process, so there is nothing to interpret or see further, she can be an unreliable narrator about external matters but not to her own thought process
B) Juniper's POV shows us how the request looked like from the outside and explained that the reason for accepting the request was a personal matter, not any validity in the request nor a tactical judgment. It was pure trust in Catherine.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hmmm... Consider how the fantasies of escape are only at the beginning. And if you take away the "scheming to fail", the lead up to the knight request comes out to "damn we're so fucked... we're gonna need an edge, Juniper will probably turn me down but I gotta ask". Followed later (after she's put aside the "scheming to fail" stuff) by her going "well, that's going to the Hells, what do I have that might help? Oh yeah...."

That doesn't read like a genuine coward to me, it reads like someone who likes to think she's a coward. Remember, bravery isn't about not feeling fear, it's about feeling the fear and going ahead anyway.

caoimhinh

This has nothing to do with bravery, nothing in this chapter makes Abigail seem like a coward. What we are discussing is whether this was a plan or happenstance.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Providence shapes happenstance and mortal plans alike. "The gods help those who help themselves", so when their favorite Abigail thought to call for reinforcements, Providence made sure that what she called for would be exactly what she needed.

caoimhinh

Yes, and that has been my point and RanVor's point too all this time. This was the work of providence, not the fruit of Abigail's planning, and she had absolutely no idea what to do with the knights (she made the request not only expecting to have it denied, but actually made it with the INTENTION of it being denied so she could avoid responsibility).

So those comments above claiming that Abigail called for knights with even a remote idea of thinking to use them are absolutely mistaken and the text states it beyond doubt.

caoimhinh

Also, you CAN'T take away the "scheming to fail", because that's the entire reason for this whole situation and the motivation behind Abigail's actions.

The lead up to the request of knights isn't "damn we're so fucked... we're gonna need an edge Juniper will probably turn me down but I gotta ask", rather it is "damn we're so fucked... I gotta avoid being blamed for this, let's ask for something Juniper will probably turn down, so I can claim that I tried but she didn't help me and put the blame of this shit on her"

Abigail's moment of quick-wit came afterward, when Robber's cohort had caused a disturbance in the binders and Malaga soldiers' ranks (in an operation she didn't know of), and she had the knights (which she didn't want, had even hoped to be denied, but got due to Juniper's trust in Cat).

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, the request may have been out-of-the-blue, and Juniper suspicious of the "greenhorn general", but still: "Hey, could I have some of those knights over here?" was not an unreasonable request.

caoimhinh

It is, actually. It's the equivalent of making a call for 1000 S.W.A.T members or perhaps something like the deployment of 100 fighting jets, 100 helicopters, 100 tanks, or 1000 Special Black Ops soldiers. Special units like the Knights of the only Chivalric Order in current Callow are not something that moves on a whim, they aren't casually deployed.

Abigail is a General, so she CAN ask for them, but she needs a reason, which is something she didn't have. Also "Hey, could I have some of those knights over here?" is not a proper request for them "Marshall, I need 1000 knights to send against enemy units" is the way a General should do it.

More importantly, what we discuss here is that the purpose of the request was (as explicitly stated by Abigail over and over) not to receive the knights but to be DENIED the knights and use that as excuse to avoid responsibility.

[Mental Mouse](#)

There's an old slogan I've seen on buttons and such: "Don't believe everything you think". I think that slogan applies to Abigail.

Also, asking for the knights here isn't like asking for SWAT teams to be mobilized from scratch. The knights are already present and waiting for action, even if they weren't originally assigned to her front. And she wasn't even asking for all of them. If a General says they need something in particular, you at least think about it, and note that Juniper did in fact grant the request. (I also note that there's no reason Providence couldn't affect the orc's thinking as well.)

caoimhinh

It's weird that you mention that slogan. Do you not know what the phrase "Don't believe everything you think" means and its usage? That phrase is not applicable here. It means to question one's own ideas and preconceptions, to

break free from limiting beliefs, It's not to say "what I believe I'm thinking is not actually what I'm thinking" as you are implying.

There's no misconception or lack of belief in oneself here, we read Abigail's thoughts and she clearly states her intentions, her reactions to what is happening, and her decision-making process without sarcasm or ambiguity, there is no space for hidden meanings, there's no second interpretation or deeper thoughts in her actions.

The text also explicitly states both Juniper's initial intention to deny the request (it was improperly made and stated no purpose for the knights) and the reason why she accepted it (Abigail was chosen by Cat, so Juniper believes she must be someone talented who might have a hidden purpose and a plan) and Abigail's reaction for when the request is accepted is "shit, why did she agree?". It is not open to interpretation, it is clearly and unambiguously stated.

Also, asking for the knights is like asking for SWAT or any other elite military unit; in our world on an ordinary day even when police officers are called to a scene they are informed what their purpose is and what the situation is at their location. This is specially true in a state of emergency, and that's exactly what this is, with the Army of Callow under siege and surrounded by hostile forces on all sides, so if you call for 1000 of the elite units you need to state what you intend to do with them, because they need to be ready to respond to any situation that may arise. They aren't, and can't be, deployed on a whim. They only move with a purpose. Juniper made an exception and broke protocol to authorize the deployment despite there been no clear purpose because she trust Catherine and believes that the General chosen by Cat wouldn't make a deployment request without a battle plan (turns out she would, but Juniper doesn't know that).

[Mental Mouse](#)

We're down at the reply edge here and the new chapter's up, but I'll just say that I think you have undue faith in EE's literalism here. And while the Army of Callow does have some formal procedures, it's still operating under an essentially feudal system, so most of the time

Persons will take precedence over Rules. In particular, the only authority Juniper and Abigail ultimately answer to, is their queen – even if she calls for a military board, they are meeting by and under her authority.

caoimhinh

Yes... that's why Juniper's trust in Catherine led her break of protocol to allow Abigail's request despite it being improperly made and not giving any reason for the deployment.

What you just said doesn't contradict my point in any way.

I'm not putting undue faith in the literalism here, I'm simply not making stuff up. There's a difference. We can make assumptions and especulate in lots of things, and narration is sometimes sarcastic, but IN THIS CASE it was unambiguous and serious, so what's stated there can't be denied by a reader's imagination.

[GH](#)

Another great chapter, as per usual! Nice to see the Order of Broken Bells getting some action.

caoimhinh

That epigraph was amazing, and it indeed sums up the current conflict of this Arc.

Oh, a chapter dedicated to Abbigail, nice. Providence is on her side, even if no one has realized it yet.

"A girl can dream, right?"

Yes, Abby, but unfortunately your lessons with Cat haven't yet reached to the point of teaching you the power of PLOT, otherwise you would see that your Fate is success, just probably not the way you imagined, hahaha. Just take a look at the way Robber falsified the signature and got materials to mount his secret operation. He succeeded in happily killing enemies and now the credit for it is Abby's. Just as planned.

Sure, if he had failed the blame might have gone to Abby before someone (probably Cat or Hakram) realized that it was a fake, but hey, that's just honest goblin friendship, right?

"just because she was a lunatic didn't mean she was wrong."

True words, and this applies to almost every major character in this series, too.

Mentions of honor duels and killing among Levantine nobility, a good reminder of how obsessed they are with that concept. Kinda reminds me of the villains in Chinese Xianxia stories and their

obsession with being given “face”, they can kill someone just for not greeting them in the appropriate manner. They usually end up being killed by MC.

So, Yannu wants to attack at night, eh? He’s sooo fucked and won’t even know what hit him, that army is gonna get a nightmarish surprise via the Drow’s Night Miracles.

Typos found:

- no binder saved those Bestowed had ever succeeded / no binder save those Bestowed had ever succeeded
- Abigail thought, look at the writ / Abigail thought, looking at the writ
- she watcher her step / she watched her step
- she’d just to had / she’d just had to
- do that without using sending sappers in / do that without sending sappers in
- they had prepare / they had prepared
- a spray snow and earth / a spray of snow and earth
- a hidden nook within the put / a hidden nook within the pit
- Razing Tanja / Razin Tanja
- blamed for this wasn’t she? / blamed for this, wasn’t she?
- The goblin she’d needed to keep alive as alive / The goblin she’d needed to keep alive was alive
- patted his horse’s man / patted his horse’s mane
- he should probably should have let them / he probably should have let them
- one must now grow too fond of plans / one must not grow too fond of plans
- every manoeuvre on this field was in fact was a jostling / every manoeuvre on this field was in fact a jostling

Valkyria

I’d really like to hear what Juniper thought when she saw Abigail’s “Plan” unfolding.

I bet it would be a hilarious thing to behold, full of misconceptions.

Ross Smith

When they make the TV series, Abigail has to be played by Tig Notaro.

Inay

Honestly, I am -so- looking forward to the Mighties kicking the Grand Alliance’s rear!

mananaysiempre

Not EE's fault, just the ad network (WordAds, in this case) failing to filter a script inside an ad. It happens from time to time to every one of them, including Google. (Yes, this does mean blocking ads decreases your risks of a malware infection; just another term in the cost-benefit calculation.)

mananaysiempre

Damn you WordPress, wrong parent. Sorry about this.

Inay

It got me really confused for a moment. xD

SpacyRicochet

"Lord Yannu Marave patted his horse's man, and fondly held out his palm to feed her the last piece of bread from the loaf when she turned."

All of this is now canon and should be preserved for prosperity!

Aotrs Commander

Pahahahahaha!

I hadn't noticed that, but now you mention it, I can't unsee it...!

SITB

The 'obscure library'? Is it also manned by an ape? It seems like EE slipped another reference (though I doubt anything would beat the Bumbling Conjuror).

Regarding the GA attacking at night, I am going to assume that Yammu isn't an idiot and even if he doesn't know about the drow's particularities everyone know about the goblin's night vision. Merely attacking at night is foolhardy so I assume he has another trick planned. We would probably see the army of Callow+Drow unveiling the well that Cat created as a counter to it.

Morgenstern

He's planning to do the Pilgrim's bidding, wanting a DRAW for this one. So yeah, I'd personally assume he has good reasons why he chooses to wait until nightfall, not only mundanely tactical ones. Also, he was explicitly mentioned as someone who does NOT flinch from offering up a lot of "sacrificial lambs" (aka deaths of his own people) for getting what he wants.

RanVor

Abigail fails to fail: the chapter.

Morgenstern

Nice one, thanks for that.

Aotrs Commander

Question, seeing as the wiki does not seem to have it, nor was a google search helpful... Where did Abigail show up first and where (if anywhere) did we get a description of her? I **think** the former part may have been Skirmish I (as far as my own investigation goes) for her first appearance, but that didn't seem to have a description.

Just struck me as one of those things that sometimes, your mind associates a sort of feel, rather than an image to a character and I wanted to sort of reinforce her image i my head, if you know what I mean?

Andrew Mitchell

Skirmish I was the first we saw of Abigail (at least I'm pretty sure that was the first). We got to read a little more about her every time she had screentime. I don't recall seeing much of a description of her appearance through.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Speaking of appearance, there's something about Cat: The wiki (and the images there) describe her as having the "slight build" of the Deoreithe (though she's only half that). I'm not sure where that's mentioned, but even as the series kicked off, before she had any powers, she was fighting people considerably larger than her, and if she didn't always win, she wasn't getting squashed either. That certainly implies she's pretty muscular, and it makes more sense to me that she would have a brawnier build. (I am likely influenced in this by having short, brawny women in my own family. 😊)

caoimhinh

Yeah, Skirmish I was Abigail's first time in the series, but we never got to see any description of her appearance until Catherine arrived to Sarcella to save the Third Army in Chapter 12: Relief in book 5, Abigail was described by Cat as "younger than me, black hair slightly longer than Legion regulations but acceptably so for a foreign campaign. Sunburnt cheeks, watery blue eyes and a delicate nose." She is also taller than Cat, but who wasn't? Only Goblins and Amadeus are shorter than Cat XD

Aotrs Commander

Excellent, ta. I had a feeling it might have been something around then, but I couldn't remember exactly where or if there was anything else previously.

mental image updated properly

caoimhinh

I was surprised by Abigail's age being younger than Cat (and Cat is less than 22), since initially she gave me the impression of an older woman, in two occasions mentioning that she wanted to find pretty and young boys to take to bed.

It's also worth noticing that the reason Abigail is so high in the ranks is because she is a member of Nauk's division, which always acted as vanguard and thus suffered heavy casualties, so everyone around and above her rank just kept dying until she ended up in her current position as General and her orc aide (a young boy according to Juniper) is a Legate now.

SpeckofStardust

Anyone else noticed this amusing thing.

"The Grey Pilgrim did not answer immediately. Instead the holy man gazed at the distant ring of raised stones, that incongruous crown atop a tall barrow."

Its the exact same thing as Catharine did.

[Liliet](#)

Where?

SpeckofStardust

"Callow and crowned by a strange pattern of great stones. Three concentric rings, the stones of them interlocking to give the illusion of a full and complete circle when one stood at the foot of the barrow."

In weaver woven its where cat had her thinking out loud about everyone's likely plans and movements and what they know about each others plans and movements in order for people to plan how to get what they want out of this mess.

[Liliet](#)

I mean it's the exact same place. She's still there.

Alex

Erratic, the ads on mobile are really bad this post. Can't even read anything before I'm forced away to a "You've Won!!!11!1! one!!!" page that I can't escape from and have to shut the browser to return, then the process repeats itself.

cadelking@gmail.com

Thats adware/bloatware on your phone, has little to do with the site.

Andrew Mitchell

Nothing to do with EE. It's the adverts out there by the ad aggregators WordPress uses.

Use an ad blocker.

Mammon

Abigail tries to lose and be demoted or fired without being executed.

Abigail, who's good, sees that the enemy is sending forth necromancy rituals.

Abigail tries to lose, using that grand overpowering force of the enemy.

Hellhound: Nope. Misunderstanding will see to it that I aid you.

Robber: Nope. I've already ensured that you will be forced to win.

Abigail sees to her horror that a masterplan is coming together.

You know, this sounds a lot like providence. Like a hero's coincidental success against villains despite the odds being against them thanks to coincidence and optimal performance and compatibility of a select few troops. Like Levant is experiencing being the evil side.

[Whiteeyes](#)

Oh my god that's hilarious. If Abigail gets a Name it should unambiguously be Heroic. Then she tries to use that as grounds to be fired, Cat goes "What? No. I am 100% willing to employ heroes, remember? It's just that nobody ever took the job before. Anyway you deserve a pay raise."

And so the Blessed General sighs as she gets a bigger paycheck.

caoimhinh

And she is going to be the new poster girl for the Army of Callow and Cat's upcoming advertising campaign of "We are the good Evil" hahaha

Andrew Mitchell

Funny.

And a small correction: I'm pretty sure Vivienne was still a Hero when she joined Cat.

Liliet

That's the point where you start realizing that a certain part of the 'hero/villain' dichotomy is arbitrary political bullshit.

Absolutely nothing about Vivienne's goals, methods, approach or deep allegiance changed the minute she decided to take Cat's offer.

There was no metaphysical change, either.

But that was the moment she changed from "heroine" into "villain"/"fallen heroine" in the narrative the West has of this story.

werafdsaew

To be fair, she did start cursing at the Heaven at some point afterwards. But it's not a sudden change.

Kissaten

Vivienne stopped pilfering her allies' stuff when she changed sides.

Liliet

Did she? Because on the way to Keter Cat found out that Indrani never saw any of her assigned pay ;u;

Mental Mouse

Actually I think she was still pilfering table knives and such for a while even after joining up; Cat rolled her eyes but tolerated it as a eccentricity of the Name.

Liliet

BLESS

Hierus

Thats what i have been thinking too. Would be a really interesting route to take, but i somehow doubt that is going to happen.

onedollargum

["That is absolutely what I did," Abigail baldly lied.]

Abigail feels like a second Catherine. =D

Whiteeyes

And so Abigail becomes Hideyoshi of the Sengoku Jidai. The peasant who rose meteoric through the ranks and became one of the top generals of a warlord who would go on to rule a nation. Like her counterpart Abigail isn't the greatest warrior or most brilliant commander. What they are known for is outside the box ideas and pulling off victories with minimal resources.

The difference between them is that Abigail only sort of deserves her reputation, but that can be improved with time.

[Daniel E](#)

Poor Abigail, lol. Figures that she would get stuck with Robber's group. A few battles with him "under her command" (and I say that very loosely), and she'll have learned improvisation enough to make her a match for Hellhound.

[Liliet](#)

♥ ♥ ♥

Lumin

When Abigail prayed to the gods, did above listen, or was it the sisters? Might we see the beginning of human worship of the Crow sisters (whether intentional or not)?

[Liliet](#)

Well she was definitely praying to Above.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The results look more like Above's style. Also, we don't really know what the new "kinder, gentler" Sri Noc ask of their followers.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> "She will not step in even if the palisade is assaulted," the Pilgrim finally said. "Perhaps not even if the camp is breached, as you had arranged."

Because she's not there... should be interesting when Pilgrim (and we) find out what they're up to.

[Liliet](#)

She's at the top of the barrow right now, if I've read the text right.

[Mental Mouse](#)

You're thinking of the scouts reporting "strange lights above" the barrow? But those scouting reports were from earlier – since then, she's set her generals and marshals to fight on their own, while she went off on one of her own missions.

The Gray Pilgrim was very clear that Cat wouldn't be getting involved in this battle; that said, I suspect he either failed to ask his Choir the right question, or is being cagey (and nervous) about the answers he did get.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine said in her own chapter that she would wait until nightfall, then ride with the Hunt.

Morgenstern

Hmm... you know, you saying that makes me think that this might be the actual reason for the Plan B Yannu is implementing – his goal is, after all, to help the Pilgrim achieve his goal. And the Pilgrim only comes into play when Cat comes into play, after, not before, because he wants a draw. It might not mean, he's getting that. But it's a perfect reason for plan B being to actually attack at night, despite everything. Yannu is, after all, ready to make big sacrifices for his chosen goals. In this case, the Pilgrim's goal(s),

[Liliet](#)

I've thought that too tbh!

caoimhinh

Yes, and that happened yesterday, when the Rogue Sorcerer, Lord Akil Tanja and Lady Aquiline were crossing the break from Arcadia. In the previous chapter Akil stated that the passage had been there until morning. Now the armies rested, made camp, organized their battle plan with Yannu (actually listened to Yannu's plan and obeyed) and are launching the attack. So by the timeline given Cat should have ridden with the Wild Hunt the night before this fight.

[Liliet](#)

I thought that too, but other people have convinced me that it's more plausible that the crossing both opened and closed this morning, with a few hours' gap for the army to get through.

caoimhinh

Yeah, that seems to be the case, even logistically weird as it is to not take any rest after crossing that hellscape and only using few hours to coordinate plans with the other army (admittedly it was only Yannu ordering them what to do). After all, that seems to be the only explanation that fits with everything else.

[Liliet](#)

mhm 🙄

caoimhinh

Why the angry face? It is weird! Those people had practically no rest. It would make more sense for them to wait until the next day to engage, but they seem to be in a hurry to fight.

P.S: how do you use emoji and cursive words? Do I need to create my own site in wordpress first to do that?

[Liliet](#)

not angry face!!! this emoji: : x
i need to remember to use =x instead of 🙄

as for cursive: \ |

caoimhinh

Oh, I didn't know that trick, cool.

Thanks for the sharing of wisdom, Mighty Liliet.

[Liliet](#)

bows

[Liliet](#)

ok wow holy shit disregard that

second attempt

emoji:

caoimhinh

\ Test \
\ \ Test \ \
\ \Test \ \

caoimhinh

```
\Another test\  
\Test\  
\test\  
/Test/  
// Test//
```

NerfContessa

Lovely how it all came together.

Not so lovely that I've. Caught up. Again. Dang I intended to leave another 2.chapters before. That happened....

Ah well.

An attack at night. Hahaha, oh my.

Walter

I wonder if this is going to involve some type of Chess.

The Grey Pilgrim can't intervene first – but Ivah and the other senior Drow have been shown to be in the same ballpark with him and Peregrine,

So im imagining that if the senior Drow engage with the Dominion forces, GP and Peregrine may take that as an invite to reply in kind, but “technically”, they would be the first Named to enter the fight, and thus dooming the Dominion to lose the fight.

Speculating even further, this would allow Cat to continue her winning streak, and allow her to negotiate/dictate terms that allows her to absorb the Dominion forces / take them prisoner, and then head North to fight the Dead King.

simeraz

just a thing I think you mean Grey Pilgrim and Saint because Peregrine is another name for the Grey Pilgrim

[benthelynx](#)

Given the elder drow are on par with hero's and villains, I'm sure they count as such. However, the question may be whether they count as Cat's agents for this particular purpose

Moodprint

Omg, I want to be a binder.. blood-magic tattoos that bind the spirit of a slain beast.. such a cool concept!

LindonAurlies

Guys this is my first ever comment but did no one pick up that Abigail has a loyal orc second who ties up all her loose ends One who calmly follows her blindly since we were 1st shown Abigail in the battle of the camps .

Reminds us of another lovely orc second callowan commander duo this series has touched on....

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yup. Hakram's Name of Adjutant implies that "loyal orc second" is an in-world trope already, common and well-known enough to warrant a Name to represent it. Note that's another of Black's victories, since by Hakram's account, orcs simply weren't officers before Black's reforms.

Barrendur

@Erraticerrata:

Why are all your updates getting studded with asinine adverts now? Have you recently decided to allow advertising on your 'Practical Guide' site?

Andrew Mitchell

Adverts have always been there – they're mentioned often in the comments.

But I've never seen thwm. Check your ad blocker. If that's OK then it may be malware on your device.

aran

Forget Cat, Abigail is now the protagonist of this story. ♥

This whole thing is going to end with her as Acting Empress of Calernia, Sovereign of All She Beholds pro tempore, still on a Captain's salary and still constantly making plans to quietly run away because she's terrified that any second they're all going to figure out she's a clueless impostor.

[Mental Mouse](#)

"Gods aren't supposed to have people on."... 😊

Psychotic_Bat

Is Bumbling Commander a valid name?

[deeeelno](#)

deeeelno a0814cc162 <https://wakelet.com/wake/1HB8tUIKcpkBGb0aKnVFS>

Interlude: Trust Is The Wager

"War itself has no worth, as it is a temporary state. War ends, and therefore its fundamental purpose is to shape what comes after it. It then follows that a war fought without the ambition of a planned peace is inherently a mistake."

– Extract from the treatise "On Rule", author unknown (widely believed to be Prince Bastien of Arans)

Yannu Marave had been taught, as a boy, to make a spectacle of honour duels. There were some who might have called such a teaching *arrogant*, a presumption of superiority in all matters of steel, but those people were not of the Valiant Champion's Blood. The Lord of Alava had followed those ways as a young man, let the crowds roar with thrill and fear as he made sport of warriors. He had done this while master of the field from the first stroke to the last, and taken much too long to understand the sickness and cruelty of the act. Yet a duel fought for honour, for decision, could not be a dull affair. The resolution must be striking, the victory evident, lest other warriors wonder if their own blade would have served the cause better. And so Yannu Marave had left behind the ways of the champion, of a duellist, and instead learned the arts of killing. As his forbears had mad study of the slaying of armies and beast, he had learned to take apart men of all stripes. Warriors in plate or leather, hunters and Lanterns and even the strange-stepping slayers of the Brocelian's outskirts. All these, and binders as well. He had learned to kill these, kill them quick and clean and without a fuss.

And so he'd opened the throat of Akil Tanja within eighteen heartbeats of their duel beginning, flicking his hooked blade free of blood and sheathing it in the same smooth gesture.

Even as the corpse of the Lord of Malaga finished tumbling backwards and life left the man's eyes, Yannu of the Champion's Blood had calmly asked of his fellow lords and ladies of Levant if any other wished to contest the decision to attack again after nightfall. From the corner of his eye he'd seen Aquiline Osega's hand dip towards her own blade, her Slayer's Blood boiling at the thought of the match that could be had there, but the young woman mastered herself. The Lady of Tartessos was a dangerous woman, for her age, and would only become more so with the passing of years. She bore watching. The Lord of Malaga's son and heir, Razin Tanja of the Grim Binder's Blood, was not so patient. His sword ripped free of the scabbard, cutting through the silence that'd followed Yannu's question.

"By smoke and dust, I vow enmity between us," the boy rasped out, his voice cadenced with old words. "'til steel has sung and shield splintered, let there be no truce nor breaking of bread by our hands. On the blood of my father, I swear the last abjuration: by my hand the earth will spit you out from your grave, denied rest in barrow and shade."

Razin Tanja's face was still streaked with the iron and red of his line's facepaint, and though tall and well-formed the boy was in no state to fight the duel to the death he's just forced. He'd taken a wound today, Yannu noted, which had torn muscle near his shoulder. The healing done had been later and lackluster. Still, a murmur of solemn respect shivered through the assembled captains and Blood of the war council. Though Razin Tanja was said to have blundered and overstepped at Sarcella, that he would be so unflinching in swearing revenge over the same man who'd flogged him was garnering respect. From his own captains most of all, Yannu thought, and that was for the best. Razin Tanja could not formally become Lord of Malaga until his foremost kin gathered to acclaim him before Gods and men: respect and prestige would be his only true claims to command of the war captains of Malaga.

"So be it," Yannu replied, dipping his head. "When your wound is fully healed, I will meet you on duel-grounds."

"Why wait?" Lady Aquiline mildly said, eyeing the two of them smilingly. "Send for Proceran priests and have it done and over with. Let us settle all our affairs before battle is given."

The Lord of Alava met her gaze with clear displeasure. So clever she'd cut herself, that one, and too eager to see her last remaining rival to command of the other Dominion force dead on the ground.

"Shut your fucking mouth, girl," Lady Itima of Vaccei said, tone conversational.

Aquiline Osen's stare turned poisonous, when she faced the woman who'd had her two younger brothers killed. Itima was an old hand, and of the Bandit's Blood, so she was unimpressed by the sight and spat to the side in disdain.

"Yannu, confirm that little bore from Tartessos in command of her army and let's get this over with," the Lady of Vaccei said, glancing at him. "The longer she talks the more I feel the urge to make another cup out of an Osen's skull."

"Remain civil, Itima," he chided her.

"There is no civility north of Tartessos," Lady Aquiline angrily said. "Only poison and-"

"Fewer of your siblings than there used to be, eh?" the older woman grinned.

"Enough," Razin Tanja hissed.

The two women turned to him with barely veiled surprise.

"My father lies dead on the ground, his corpse not even cold," the boy said. "And you bicker over old feuds? I will wait until the end of this strife to exact my due from the Maraves yet you cannot even curb your viper tongues for an hour? Shame on both your lines."

"Not yet lord," Lady Itima drawled, "and already making enemies. Truly Akil's boy, though with half the sense and none of the—"

"I name Aquiline Osen a war leader of the southern host," Yannu calmly interrupted. "Do any contest this?"

"Agreed," Razin Tanja rasped.

"Agreed," Lady Aquiline coolly said.

There was a pause.

"Agreed," Itima Ifriqui conceded, reluctance purely for show.

They put it to the captains, afterwards, but with the Blood having spoken the matter was good as settled. Even the Malagans kept to the word of their young heir without qualms when enemies were there to see, though Yannu knew better to think Razin would not have to make private bargains with the most powerful to keep them following his orders.

"Then we are bound with common purpose of war," the Lord of Alava said. "Let none stray until our enemy is broken."

Already the sun was beginning to set, he thought. It would be a long night before their armies would be ready to strike at the Black Queen's host, for soldiers were in need of healing and rest. Yet the time would come, and for the first time in many years an army of the Dominion of Levant would march out with the Peregrine among its number.

—

"The savages are cutting each other up," Prince Arnaud of Cantal said with open disdain. "I believe one of their great lords was freshly butchered and even now is being set to flame."

This small pavilion of hers, Princess Rozala thought, was near filled to the brim with royalty. She would have preferred to cut out near everyone here of the council being held, but with the

situation what it was that would have been more trouble than it was worth.

"I have spoken with Lord Marave," the Princess of Aequitan evenly said. "There was disagreement over strategy, and it was settled by an honour duel ending in death. Lord Akil Tanja was slain, and his heir Razin has taken lead of the captains of Malaga. He has been placed under command of Lady Osená, who is well-learned in the ways of war."

"They're Levantines," Princess Bertille of Lange drily said. "How *learned* can they possibly be at anything?"

The ripple of laughter that went through the tent at the quip was enough to begin scraping at the bones of Rozala's patience, which boded ill for the rest of this council. She was disappointed to note that the slightest trace of a smile had quirked Louis' lips. It should not be held against him, she ultimately decided. Prince Louis Rohanon was a clever and decent man, but he'd still been raised Alamans. His ancestors had not fought a hard war to take Levant, unlike hers, or an even more brutal one to keep it. Rozala glanced at Princess Bertille and found the older woman watching her, an assessing look on her face. She was pushing, the Arlesite princess thought, to see how far she could go without being called to order. The temptation was there to immediately put her in her place – it would be as simple as ordering the other princess to take a walk, dismissing her before all the others – but Rozala knew this was not the hour for it. Bertille of Lange was useful to her, and would remain so for a long time. Best to only bare the knife when there was something to hold over her head.

"We will of course defer to your judgement in this matter, Princess Bertille," Princess Sophie of Lyonis calmly said. "As is only natural, given your distinguished military record and extensive knowledge of the Dominion."

The Princess of Lange reddened and Rozala Malanza had to smother a smile. Both at the harshness of the reply – Bertille had no military achievements to her name, and was not known as a great scholar – and the fact that Princess Sophie's continued open dislike for her fellow royalty kept pushing them ever further into Rozala's camp. Cordelia Hasenbach had picked her watcher for skill at arms and loyalty, not diplomacy. A mistake of some scale, as it turned out, for protracted campaign had tired the patience of everyone and tempers were beginning to flare more and more frequently.

"The Dominion *is* worrying me, all jests aside," Prince Rodrigo of Orense spoke up. "They seem most unstable, Princess Malanza. Lord Marave's scheme to attack the enemy camp was a failure, yet we are now expected to heed his plans once more?"

Rozala inclined her head in acknowledgement of his words, not in the least troubled by the question. After all, they'd arranged before the council for him to ask it.

"He spent only Dominion soldiery, if you'll recall," the Princess of Aquitan said. "Not ours. And this is not merely his own design – the Grey Pilgrim is at his side, preparing to fight the enemy we cannot."

Even an oblique mention of the Black Queen was enough to chase any trace of mirth out of the tent. There were some here who'd not been at the Battle of the Camps, who'd not seen the crowned warlord of Callow split the clouds and drown men like flies or make sport of entire bands of heroes. There were some here who'd whispered behind closed doors that Prince Amadis Milenan and his armies had simply been cocksure and caught by surprise, and in the wake of that sloppiness tried to weave wild tales to avoid the blame. No one whispered such things anymore, Rozala thought. Not since half the people in this room had seen that spit of a girl tear out of the sky in a ripple of darkness only to nonchalantly set herself in the way of an army thousands strong without ever baring a weapon. Without raising her voice, or doing anything but smoking her eerie bone pipe and giving calm warning. Princess Rozala still thought of that afternoon, sometimes, of the death she's seen in the other woman's smile. It still had her shivering. The Black Queen was mad, but hers was a madness that had broken every army in her path. The Princess of Aquitan would not test her again without great care and many preparations.

"It's still a fool's notion, this night attack," Princess Leonor of Valencis opined. "Chosen don't hold ground, Princess Rozala. They can't be relied on. When we take a swing at that palisade, the enemy will have goblins and drow waiting for us."

Arnaud pompously cleared his throat.

"We don't know for certain if drow see in the night, Leonor," the Prince of Cantal chided, tone condescending. "Let us not make unwarranted assumptions."

"They live underground, Arnaud," Prince Louis sighed. "We can assume they see in the dark without it being unwarranted."

"They could have very fine hearing," Princess Bertille drawled. "Or mayhaps like bats it is their cry that is their sight."

"Indeed, Bertille, indeed," Prince Arnaud enthusiastically agreed. "My point exact."

Sometimes Rozala wondered what it was like to be Arnaud Brogloise, the kind of person whose triumphant vanity would allow to take anything but the most obvious of mockeries as

affirmation. It wasn't like the Princess of Lange had even bothered with much of a pretence.

"The Chosen will be sent to match the Damned, Princess Leonor," Princess Rozala said, dragging the conversation back to the earlier path. "We will not be relying on them for the fighting. I assure you, we have accounted for the draw."

"That'd be why our priests have been in talks with the Lanterns for the last sennight, I take it," Princess Leonor replied, eyes narrowing. "You won't be saying more?"

Rozala flicked a glance at Louis.

"Lady Dartwick, the Black Queen's spymistress, has agents in our camps," the Prince of Creusens said. "We've caught and hung ten of these 'Jacks' already. As a result, it was decided that secrecy is to be paramount. If the enemy catches wind of our stratagems beforehand, I need not detail how much of a disaster this could become."

"But you are aware of the details, Prince Rohanon," Princess Leonor pressed. "And consider the notion sound?"

"I do," Louis replied without hesitation. "Risky, but soundly planned and perhaps our only chance at winning this without tossing away fifty thousand foot taking that palisade."

"Gods be merciful, then," the Princess of Valencis sighed, "and ward us from the reaching claws of Below."

"We will begin our advance two hours before dawn," Princess Rozala informed them. "Camp fires are to be kept alight to mislead the enemy, and there will be no horns sounded for assembly. You will all be tasked with seeing to your own soldiers, while I've appointed Prince Louis to command over the levies furnished by Her Serene Highness."

"Glorious command indeed, my prince of Creusens," Princess Bertille smirked.

The Princess of Aequitan's eyes narrowed.

"As you've shown such spirit tonight, my princess of Lange, I expect you will have no trouble leading the tip of the wedge," Rozala calmly said.

The other woman's smirk vanished.

"There will be use for our horse then?" she said.

"We're sending everything we have," Princess Rozala grimly replied. "So is the Dominion. We'll win or lose on the knife's edge that splits night from dawn."

Dark tidings, that, but they were Proceran and so they still toasted to the madness before dispersing to their duties.

—

Juniper, fresh awoken and only half-dressed, did not bother to ask Aisha if she was serious. Her Staff Tribune would not jest about such a thing, or wake her without being entirely sure it was happening.

"Their military intelligence shouldn't be this bad," the Marshal of Callow said.

She wordlessly leaned back to allow Aisha to tie her aketon, letting the Taghreb's deft fingers handle the delicate clasps she could not reach. The touch was not distracting, but not enough that Juniper could not concentrate through it.

"Catherine's readings of the Grey Pilgrim have been inaccurate before," Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara noted. "It might be that these... goddesses from the Everdark have obscured the truths of the drow from our opponents."

"If we're lucky that'll be the case," Juniper grunted.

With the aketon properly on and no need for full armour quite yet, distance between them resumed and the Marshal of Callow's mind turned to safer avenues than the golden glow of her old friend's cheeks in the light of the torches.

"If we're not lucky," the Hellhound continued, "and that is to be our working assumption, they have a hard counter to the drow."

"We are not without cards of our own," Aisha reminded her.

"It's still playing to the enemy's tempo," Juniper said. "I don't like giving them what they want, Aisha, and that would be what we're doing."

"Should I order the Fourth Army and the assigned Legions to hold the palisades instead?" she asked.

The Hellhound breathed out, considering the lay of it. Would keeping the drow in reserve until the enemy had engaged better the situation? There was no way to tell, honestly. It'd be more prudent to bait out whatever plan the Grand Alliance had prepared early so that a defence could be mounted with it out in the open. Her warlord had made it clear that the tribes of the 'Firstborn' were heavies in the league of a Court's field army, after night fell, but that kind of strength tended to be unreliable in Juniper's opinion. She put more trust in overlapping lanes of fire and steady shield walls than in powerful but disorganized hordes.

"Keep them in reserve near the front," Juniper finally said. "We'll let the drow take the first crack at the enemy. But Aisha?"

Her Staff Tribune smoothly turned, eyebrow cocked.

"Sound the full muster," the Marshal of Callow said. "Everyone in gear. This is *it*. I can feel it in my bones."

—

Moro Ifriqui of the Brigand's Blood, heir to Vaccei, checked on the leather strap keeping his javelins from jostling around his back with every step. It needed tightening, and though it was awkward to paw at the strap while keeping pace with the other skirmishers he forced himself anyway. Better a small embarrassment now than a mistake that might cost him his life in the heat of battle. The Vaccei warriors around him slowed when they approached the edge of the enemy's range, where the spears of flame had been thrown at them from a great distance during the day. Knowing his role in this, Moro took the lead and bared the serrated sword that was sheathed at his hip.

"Honour to Levant," he screamed. "Honour to the Blood. Honour to Vaccei!"

Screams repeated his words back at him, and twice more he repeated the ritual to fray the edges of fear and replace them with ardour instead. Only then did he scream for the advance, and the warriors marched into the field. Above them the Proceran priests wove miracles, globes of Light that cast down a glow over the stretch of plain leading to the palisade. Moro kept the beat of his warriors' march steady, knowing it was not yet time for the charge proper, and as he moved forward cast wary looks at the pit traps the day's fighting had revealed. Grimly, he thought to himself that without those being unearthed and the Proceran miracles lighting the way his charge would be little less than hurrying to honourable death. When the same massive sorcerous spears of flame that had been used during the day lit up the enemy camp, the heir to Vaccei felt a thrill of excitement and fear both running through his veins. Fear, for if he were to be touched by one of these his death would be instantaneous. Excitement, for there were no more spears now than there had been during the day and that meant...

Spread among the Vaccei warriors, the Lanterns laughingly called out their battle-hymns and jagged arcs of Light sprung upwards — fifteen, seventeen of them scything through the darkness of the night. They impacted the enemy's sorcerous flames with a sound like claps of thunder, and though the miracles broke so did the enemy's magic. Moro laughed, the battle-joy lending his feet wings, and picked up the pace. Behind him his warriors followed suit, the dauntless vanguard of the Dominion, and it was singing

couplets from the Anthem of Smoke that the heir to Vaccei passed into the killing yard: the suspected outer range of the enemy siege engines. And it was true, for a mere two heartbeats later projectiles near invisible in the gloom began scything through the lines of his men. First the long darts and round stones of the ballistas, skewering flesh and shattering bones before a scream could even rip free of the throat.

"Scatter," Moro yelled.

Had they been the lumbering, heavily armoured armsmen of Alava his warriors would have broken and died. But they were the followers of the Brigand's blood, light-footed and fleet, ghosts in the dark and killers in the wet earth: the formation vanished in a heartbeat, becoming a loose mob of warriors charging forward at backbreaking pace. Moro laughed and veered wildly to the left, barely avoiding the geyser of snow and earth that was the introduction of the first enemy trebuchet. A woman behind him screamed when the large stone kept rolling and caught her, though the sickening crunch that followed told of a merciful quick death in the heartbeat that followed. The paints on his face running with sweat, Moro of the Brigand's Blood forced his aching limbs to quicken and with another shout urged his warriors onwards. Through the first hail, and the most vicious. The enemy scorpions fired their long javelins with deadly accuracy that only cursed goblins would be able to muster in the dark, snuffing out lives wherever the whim took them. But beyond that, the warrior saw, there was open field.

At too odd an angle for the engines to be able to kill, too close to the palisade. In the glow of the Light globes he could glimpse the dry moat before the enemy's rampart, and with a proud shout he ripped one of the javelins clear of his back. It was time to have the enemy taste Vaccei's steel. Yet above the palisade, he saw, it was not legionaries that awaited but instead the grey-skinned devils his mother had told him were truly drow from the Everdark. Their gear was shoddy, he saw with a sneer, and would be no proof for a good javelin. Even better. One more step he took, and then a hand was laid on his shoulder from the front.

"Chno sve noc," a guttural voice said.

Before the words were even fully spoken, his arm was gone up to the shoulder along with the javelin he'd been holding. Turned to dust, already gone in the wind. Moro opened his mouth to scream as a cold silver-blue pair of eyes contemplated him. The drow, for Ashen Gods it must be a drow, smiled and he saw a flash of obsidian before – before there was a spray of grayish blood all over him, and the creature fell split in half.

"Look alive, boy," the Saint of Swords idly said, flicking the blood off her blade. "We're just–"

Moro did not see her move, but suddenly her sword was angled differently and she was flying back, while a ringing sound like another blade had hit her echoed. Not, he saw with dismay, not another blade. The grey palm of a drow's hand was extended where the Saint had stood, and slowly the creature straightened its back. The abomination was ancient, Moro realized, its skin horridly creased and its thick black veins visibly ridged. It wore a strange tunic of obsidian rings, belted at the hip, and its hair was snow-white and long.

"You again," the Saint of Swords snarled.

The drow glanced at Moro.

"Boring," it said in broken tradertalk. "Boring south cattle, no better Procer cattle. Run now."

In the distance the rest of the drow began a strange ululating prayer. Rumenarumenarumena, they went, some sort of heretical hymn offered up to the sky. As the ancient drow turned its attention to Saint of Swords, Moro took the advice he'd been given.

He ran.

—

Sitting on a stone, legs folded, the Grey Pilgrim watched the battle and waited. For now, all was unfolding as he had foreseen.

So why, Tariq wondered, were the Ophanim murmuring so worriedly in his ear?

[DroughtBringer](#)

Ward is ahead of us!

Get us back up to number one!

Vote!!

topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil

joewill5234

I'll always vote for the non-interlude chapters. So my vote goes to Ward.

My very own name

You can always vote for both 😊

Wow

...WOW...

Jacky Tio

Agreed. Will vote after several more expected interludes.

Nuke_The_Earth

The link's broken for me, anybody else seeing that?

Andrew Mitchell

It's not recognised as a URL because it doesn't have the HTTP. But it worked for me once I cut and paste it into my browser.

Owyn Beleforte

Heresy! We must win back the first place! For the Glory of the Black Queen!

Ninith settler

I mean Ward's last two arcs have been extremely good. Tattletale is carrying.

Stormblessed

I love the final paragraph. Cat vs Tariq in schemes that could decide the fate of creation!

Insanenoodlyguy

So far it looks good for Cat. Tariq thinks this is going just as planned. Normally, when you are the good guy chess master, that's a victory, and so he's comfortable in this.

The problem is, he hasn't realized how far he's stepped into the villain narrative yet again. His side attacked during truce. His side turned down entreaties for peace, twice now. He personally broke an oath to the other side, and has helped to kidnap her father and split his body and soul. None of these things are how the hero's roll, and his justifications just won't get away with it because that only works when the other side is so "evil" you have to bend the rules.

The angels are worried because they know when the bad guy thinks it's going just as planned is when things get real bad for the bad guy.

The next chapter is a Wednesday one, I'm going to assume the things will become dire at some point.

antoninjohn

Bad guy, you think Pilgrim is the bad guy. "All is unfolding as I have foreseen" ok keep copying Darth Sidious Pilgrim there is no way that could backfire on you

Someguy

So Hanno is going the whiny Anikin route on Mustafar.

Mental Mouse

"Nobody panics when things go according to plan. Even if the plan is horrifying!" – the Joker.

So, Rumena versus Saint, which is basically Dragon versus Dragon – the respective power-brawlers facing off. Pilgrim is waiting on Cat, and his angels are... nervous? This is promising....

Jarthon

I think SoS will have a bit of an upper hand here, but it will definitely be fun to watch. My hope would be that the rest of the Mighty get involved in the same fight. Probably won't happen, but that would be a fight on the level of Cat v Heroes at the battle of the camps.

Halinn

The reason that dealing with Black went so well? That's because it was the first step of his plan, and we all know that those always succeed for the villain.

NerfContessa

Honestly, I would LOVE for it to. Turn out like this, though I doubt it will. He has too close a connection to Good via his whispers to make that mistake. As evil as they may be...

Rook

Most likely Sve Noc is obscuring the well from the sight of divine providence.

There was foreshadowing there from the proceran side, where Rozala mentioned they'll "win or lose on the knife's edge that splits night from dawn"

So pretty likely the ophanim understand exactly how weak the drow are at dawn and the plan is to force dawn to break at a

critical moment. It'd shatter half the Callowan army and it'd be a perfect chance to take out a lot of their heaviest hitters like Rumena.

Only thing is the well Cat made is likely a contingency for that exact scenario. Something that forcibly creates localized night in a large area to ward off day or dawn.

The Ophanim would and should be worried there, since it's impossible to not notice a power source of that magnitude but it's likely that Sve Noc's interference won't let them understand the nature of the well or how it'll be used, meaning that all they know is that their foresight is currently not as reliable as it usually is.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Part of me wonders if Pilgrim's friends on the upperside have finally noticed that 1) Cat doesn't have a Name, 2) the drow have been doing their own story things in isolation for so long that their plot weight tugs in non-standard directions (I doubt that the Bard has even bothered planting or updating any plot hooks in the Everdark for centuries to keep in reserve for a rainy day) and 3) that Below isn't really invested in this particular fight (the one further north, sure – so, yoink: we'll take that distraction, thanks... but, we didn't need it...), since Sve Noc aren't directly affiliated with any side but their own – and that's basically “survival for me and mine”.

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks for sharing your thoughts. You've given me a bit to think about; especially your last point. I think we've already had indications that Below isn't unified, so the question of how much much they're invested in this fight is an interesting one.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's not clear that Below “invests” in plans, or fights, at all. Above probably does (Augur, – note they apparently have a near-lock on genuine oracles, the Crusades in general), but Below seems to invest in *people* (of various species), and lets them make their own plans and fight their own fights.

Wry Warudo

Saint runs into best drow again. This is going to be fun

Georgieporgie

Going about as expected.

RUMENARUMENARUMENA

Embracethenight

SHAKIRASHAKIRASHAKIRA

caoimhinh

LMAO

Rumena's hips don't lie :v

mavant

I am deceased.

Insanenoodlyguy

Because Tariq, your enemy is the master of doing things where/ while you can't see shit.

antoninjohn

When you fight to kill someone who wishes to aid you against evil and bring peace as a hero the story is no longer on your side

[Whiteeyes](#)

Well damn, good job crows you sunk their spyware. And the Pilgrim isn't used to not having a wiki to check for the answers.

[Liliet](#)

No, Pilgrim hasn't been surprised yet so I think he's still got intel on this part – what the drow can do at night.

It's more likely that he does know, since Cat specifically let him Behold Rumena's fight with the Saint (that happened just after nightfall). So he has a good idea of what peak Night looks like, and probably how it operates, but since Cat started building the well way before that, all this amounted to was letting her decide when does the decisive engagement happen.

She may now actually use her ability to control the tide of the fight to play up the "surrender" angle. Unless sun miracles outright destroy the Night in drow corpses, she can limit the effective casualties, and Kairos is still not in the picture.

caoimhinh

Notice how Pilgrim didn't notice Rumena before it appeared punching Saint in the face, the Ophanim are worried now. It was stated that everything that happened in the Everdark was

outside of the Angels' vision. It seems more likely that they are reacting worriedly now because they are finally seeing the Drow in action, so the Angels have realized the Drow's strength was beyond the expectation, otherwise they would have warned Tariq before.

Shequi

Rumena Tombmaker Vs The Saint of Swords

This promises to be *epic*.

Andrew Mitchell

That's what I've been looking forward to.

Andrew Mitchell

Can't wait!!

konstantinvoncarstein

Even if the arrogance of the Proceran indispose me, they are write concerning the duels. It means that the chain of command can change in the middle of the campaign, and not even according to tactical and strategical competence. It seems pretty stupid to me

IDKWhoitis

It's a way to end disagreements quickly, and prevent political bullshit at higher level decision making.

Luckily the strongest man is smart, and is willing to listen to men smarter than him (Grey).

Although this system could definitely fail with one incompetent musclehead.

konstantinvoncarstein

It is bound to happen regularly

caoimhinh

It happens so regularly that Yannu accurately predicted it would happen and about what the honor duel would happen. A twisted sense of Honor compels the lords and ladies from the Dominion to do stupid and deadly things.

konstantinvoncarstein

And we see it started a blood feud between 2 provinces of Levant, who probably will end in a war (if they are not all killed before the night is over)

caoimhinh

I bet Yannu will be killed by a Drow and bound by Razin with necromancy/bindings. Although I think he doesn't have the Gift, or was he just not that talented? His father mentioned that as a reason for why Razin worked harder and thus was a worthier heir.

konstantinvoncarstein

He does not have the Gift, but I think one of his brothers have it.

[Liliet](#)

I think binding people is a hard 'no' for binders.

caoimhinh

Perhaps, but it's an oath, so they might get away with it in such a case. Honor seems to dictate pretty much everything in the Dominion.

What I actually find weird is that Razin doesn't have the Gift, so he is no practitioner of magic of any category. His vow seemed to imply that Razin would cast the necromantic magic personally, but he would need assistance given that he can't actually do magic.

[Liliet](#)

wait, what? where'd you get anything about necromancy from his vow?

caoimhinh

"I swear the last abjuration: by my hand the earth will spit you out from your grave, denied rest in barrow and shade"

That screams Necromancy, whether as an undead or binding his soul in some other way is up to guess, but that's definitely Necromancy.

[Liliet](#)

I am pretty sure he is being flowery about taking revenge in a regular way? I mean I don't think Levantines practice anything they would themselves identify as necromancy.

caoimhinh

Hmm, no, I don't think so. The first part of his vow ("By smoke and dust, I vow enmity between us. 'til steel has sung and shield splintered, let there be no truce nor breaking of bread by our hands.") is an enmity to the death and an oath to kill Yannu, the second part explicitly states his intention to bring him out of his grave to not let him rest in peace.

The first part is flowery language for murder, the second is flowery language for a promise of using Necromancy.

I don't know about the rest of Levant, but the practitioners of Malava (soul binders) could very well be exempt from public scorn for that.

Remember that Razin is from the line of the Grim Binder, there's no dishonor for him in using the arts of his ancestor, just like there's no dishonor for those of the Brigrand's Blood to use hidden blades and poison.

Another exception to the rule, like I said before, could be that he is only gonna use that necromancy on a sworn enemy with whom he had a blood feud for the killing of his father. Honor, or rather the restitution of honor, might exempt him from public scorn from other Levantines.

[Liliet](#)

Possible.

I don't think so, but possible.

Miles

Nah the incompetent one just gets challenged in quick succession to the point where he won't survive another fight even if it's against a literal twig

Qwormuli

It's a death sentence to an army. Dueling for honor(even not to the death) was banned by royal decree in quite a few European countries(like France, for example) for the sole reason, that it absolutely fucked their armies from top down.

Fantastical story elements aside, it does not work, it hasn't ever worked and it will most likely never work.

naturalnuke

When the society favors warriors over soldiers much less thought is put to things likes officers. They're also better at handling it because the only strategy they have is 'follow whoever at the top is' and that doesn't change even if the guy at the top does change.

Mental Mouse

Cat has remarked on that with respect to the Drow – in the Everdark they were purely warriors, with zero army discipline. I assume she's been working on that, but I'd bet they still aren't army regulars. That said, there's a long scale for that sort of thing, and even the human armies here are basically feudal. They are *not* national armies where everyone is part of a single force sworn to Our Nation.

Troops are loyal to their House nobles or even their own officers, rather than "The Principiate" or "The Levant". (Cat has to worry about that too, but so far it's mostly worked in her favor.) That means that when there's disagreements at the top, especially on the battlefield, there's no higher authority to pass them to. So, the beef gets settled by the principals there and then, and settled permanently.

Liliet

I think Black specifically changed that particular problem in his Legions restructuring, and Cat has inherited the structure along with everyone in Callow understanding that fuck, this is the effective version, after how badly they got beaten by it.

We are witnessing military progress right on the pages :3

Mental Mouse

Progress yes, but they're not at modern levels yet.

luminiousblu

The point is to settle any dispute without any real recourse, since everyone saw you lose. Also, whoever lost is dead, so you can't start shit during campaign to try to get back at your commander.

RanVor

You can't, but your relatives can.

luminiousblu

Doesn't really matter immediately, and it's a lot less risky. Someone you humiliated in front of basically everyone

who matters is going to come after you, his son may or may not.

Rogos

Well, the Levantine way of resolving disagreements still seems idiotic. I mean, they just lost an experienced general who was also one of their most powerful binders (doubly stupid since we saw Yannu complain about Akil "pissing away" so many binders in the last chapter). And even if it had gone the other way, well, the Levantines would still have decapitated their own army by losing an even better general who is also a great warrior (though there are plenty of warriors to go around so they aren't as much of a tactical asset / limited resource as binders or Lanterns). It's a lose-lose situation.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed. And I think they'll notice that sometime soon.

[Mental Mouse](#)

They can... if they think they have someone who can take on Careful Yannu.

Naeddyr

I think the Levantine Blood knows this. Notice how *political* the whole duel thing was? The first duel was the due they pay as Dominion leaders, but I think it was a kind of strange formality, because you notice how everything kind of slots into place right afterwards: the postponed duel, the choosing of the southern commander, etc. etc. They're making the best out of a bad tradition, in a weird way.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm!

Bet that tradition's on its way out.

RanVor

Considering a new blood feud has just been declared, it's rather unlikely.

[Liliet](#)

I don't mean right now this second, I mean over the course of the next couple of generations.

Note how Tanyusha is already willing to postpone it.

RanVor

Yeah, and coincidentally he knows that he can't beat Yannu right now. Blood feuds aren't trivial things, and one not leading to escalation is almost unheard of.

caoimhinh

It has been going on for generations, and it's not going to stop unless something big happens. Nothing short of the extinction of a whole line of the Blood or the Grey Pilgrim declaring it is going to end it (and Tariq said he won't make that kind of call). The honour duels are so common that Yannu predicted not only that it would happen, but what the subject that would trigger the duel would be.

Two of the Ladies have grudges with each other, Itima of the Brigand's Blood killed two brothers of Aquiline of the Slayer's Blood, and it was stated by the recently deceased Lord of Malaga that those two lines had a bad relationship spanning to the founding of their country. They have "honour wars" over this kind of things (and many others). Just because Razin (who I assume is the one you called Tanyusha, for some reason, LOL) is capable of waiting until the campaign is over to attempt his vengeance is no signal that this tradition is over. The head of a noble house killed the head of another, in a world ruled by stories like this, it only leads to a conclusion: war. Made more likely by the fact that such wars are part of the culture of their country, further strengthened by the oath that Razin just swore (It will be interesting to see if he actually binds Yannu's soul after Yannu is killed in this campaign. Likely by a Drow, since I personally doubt Razin can kill him).

konstantinvoncarstein

"Honor" wars seems to be exactly the kind of wars the opening lines warned us about.

Andrew Mitchell

Good point.

caoimhinh

Indeed.

It is also interesting that Procer, Levant, Praes, and the Everdark (and allegedly the Rattlings, too) have suffered a lot due to the kind of wars that the epigraph warned us about: "Wars without planned peace".

[Liliet](#)

I think the tradition is on its way out not in the way that it'll suddenly just stop happening, but that it'll slowly decline in prominence, generation after generation. More limit of tolerance before declaring a blood feud, more willingness to set it aside for the moment under the circumstances, less actual viciousness and more showing-off in the process of pursuing it, eventually maybe acceptance of ritualistic outcomes other than 'one of the two people is dead' (surrender, injury beyond capacity to fight, etc).

At some point during the decline likely outlawed by a ruler who sees the whole thing as stupid and disadvantageous and thinks they have enough clout to at least try to make it stick.

[Liliet](#)

Tanyusha is bc Tanja sounds like Tanya to me – a female Russian short name, see Tanya the Evil. Tanyusha is the next level of familiarity, like Bob->Bobby. I started calling Razin that since Beheld and it just stuck in my head as an affectionate nickname for him.

caoimhinh

I see, hahaha.

Did you like Youjo Senki? It's been a couple of months since I recommended it to you, never got around to ask if you had actually watched the anime. It also has a light novel, though the updates of the translated chapters from Japanese to English takes a long time and Yenpress got the rights for official translation, so they scared the free translators away.

[Liliet](#)

i remember trying the manga bc the premise interested me and quickly realizing just HOW uninterested i was in everything that it was actually about at first at least
like i dont care about
– evil protags (legit evil not like Cat or Amadeus lmao)
– depressing shit happening
– ww2 era tech

caoimhinh



Ah, you should have tried the anime, it's way better than the manga adaptation.

I would argue that Tanya isn't so much evil as ruthless (she doesn't commit any crimes, never harms others without a reason, and legit only wants to live comfortably without participating in the mess that Being X threw her just to make her a worshipper) and she is fighting for the good guys too (The Empire was attacked first, due to jealousy and fear from the other countries because it is too strong, and when one country wasn't enough the others started intervening, so the entire conflict is the Empire fighting in self-defense) and the focus of the series isn't so much in depressing shit but the battles of Tanya and in that world people fly with magic, so there's actually very little mention of ww2 era tech.

But well, everyone has their taste.

P.S: Amadeus is way more evil than Tanya and has done way more wicked things, both in number and scale, lmao.

[Liliet](#)

Hmm, I'll try the anime maybe then.

Not now 'coz I have a backlog the size of the moon already, but... noted :3

(Amadeus is a precious selfless puff of empathy thrown into an absolutely horrifying position, is Tanya?)

caoimhinh

Kinda, there are similarities in them, but also lots of differences.

They are both cold rationalists and combat pragmatists in a fight against the world and do what's required to achieve their objective. Both are madmen who won't bow to the gods. But while Amadeus is a nationalist who picked a fight against the Gods for the sake of his homeland and is ready to selflessly die to win, Tanya is a selfish person who got dragged into her current mess simply for being an atheist who didn't bow even after meeting 'God' thus was punished for it, forced to fight for her new nation and achieve victory if she wants to survive, when the only thing Tanya wants is to be left alone and live her

life in piece but the God that pick a fight with her will just not let her be, throwing her into a horrifying situation after the other to try to force her to submit and pray to God.

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus is a utilitarian, I'm guessing Tanya isn't?

I will admit the 'selfless' vs 'selfish' part is a big point for me. I like heroes :3

(But yeah I'm going to watch it sometime)

caoimhinh

She is kind of utilitarian in her decisions, but her life is still above everything else.

She is honestly not much of a good person, but she isn't a villain either (although other countries see her as a devil of destruction), she's an anti-hero at most, but she is an outright hero for her country (the Empire aren't the bad guys, they are fighting in self-defense). Tanya is extremely lawful and makes a point of obeying rules, as she considers that a pillar of society.

Tanya is a bit similar to Cat in that while for her people and subordinates in her homeland she is a respected leader and a hero with a bit of harsh attitude who demands discipline, to the other countries she is seen as a ruthless psychopath who brings carnage to the battlefield. The perspective varies depending on what side of her gun they are XD

[Liliet](#)

Interesting.

[Liliet](#)

Tanya is however a regular person name (short for Tatyana/Tatiana/ Tetyana in Ukrainian) that I encounter regularly in the world around me so

[Mental Mouse](#)

Why wait a couple of generations? They're facing a basically apocalyptic war, and screwing it up by focusing on the leader who would happily have taken those rowdy legions and gone home, instead of the one that's wiping out their cities for real.

The question is, when this war is done with, will there be anything left of the Levant nobility? We already know that if there's anything left of Procer, it won't be by the Angels' will; I imagine Cordelia and a few other Proceran notables might end up taking sanctuary in Callow.

Liliet

>We already know that if there's anything left of Procer, it won't be by the Angels' will

What? How so? Tariq certainly seemed intent on preserving Procer when he weighed in on the problem, and he's the only Choir hero who did.

Mental Mouse

When Saint was talking to Cordelia, she was quite clear that the plan from her side, was complete destruction and "build something better" on the rubble. Influenced by the Bard... (hmm, I wonder if Augur's rebellion would have been Saint upsetting the applecart if the war didn't pan out) Together with her story-fu-ups, I'm starting to wonder if SoS might have become a loose cannon on Above's ship.

Liliet

i have 0 doubt SoS is a loose cannon with ideas no-one else shares and POV no-one else supports tbh

Kissaten

Cordelia is told by the Augur that there will be a rebellion that will end Procer regardless of Dead King if callowans-praesii aren't beaten in a fight, so procerans are led to believe that there's a certain defeat in letting Black Queen go while fighting her may mean salvation. It is assumed that Augur is a pawn to Above.

Dominion is led by Gray Pilgrim, who is also a pawn to Above. Levantines are just fanatics, nuff said. Maybe some of them may be reasoned with, but not all of them and not when GP is watching them so closely.

Liliet

>It is assumed that Augur is a pawn to Above.

Love the passive voice here. Who assumes that? On what basis?

Augur was likely chosen by Bard for her position because of how her prophecies are vague enough they can be interpreted to mean a lot of things with the right push – which Bard is an expert on supplying.

Kissaten

Cat assumes so when she talked to Rozala last time. Tyrant thought (or lied/assumed it to push Cat in needed direction) so too when Cat talked to him.

Liliet

Cat assumes Augur is influenced by Bard. That isn't remotely in the vicinity of "the same thing"

caoimhinh

Not political, cultural.

The fact that it is a duel to the death is what settles this apart from the political way Proceran princes wage war in their game of "the Ebb and the Flow" between principalities. In Procer they beat the other prince's army and the loser needs to make concessions to the winner, it is rare that they kill the princes, although that happens sometimes. Whereas in Levant everything revolves around honor, from the way they speak, the courtesies to guests from a host, the way to make war and the way they live. Honor compels them, so their duels ends in death.

It's simply that it has happened for so long that they are accustomed to it. Yannu accurately predicted that he would be challenged by Akil or and would have to kill him or one of his champions, either for halting the attack or for ordering an attack at night. Notice that Itima stated that the reason Aquiline wanted Razin to fight immediately against Yannu was to have Razin dead and thus her command of the southern army uncontested, so Itima prompted Yannu to declare Aquiline the commander before things could be complicated (likely with another honor duel, this time between Aquiline or her champion vs Razin or his selected champion).

The duel between Razin and Yannu was postponed because Razin is level-headed enough that he knows now is not the moment for it, either because he knows he can't beat Yannu yet or because he doesn't want to further mess up the upper echelons of the chains of command. Yannu, on the other hand, simply said that he would fight Razin when Razin is in healed so it can be a proper duel of honor.

beleester

Historical armies had rules against dueling, probably for exactly this reason.

(Although this sometimes meant that the officers simply fought the duel in private and lied to their commander about what happened.)

[Liliet](#)

Yup.

I'm predicting a couple of generations, and Levant will start having those too.

Daemion

So... Juniper and Aisha? I ship it.

caoimhinh

Almost every time we see Juniper's POV there's a bit dedicated to Aisha and how lovely she is. This is more intense and detailed when Aisha is in the room with her.

[Liliet](#)

Yup.

I only remember explicitly shippy gushing from way back when in Greenskins, but it's also obvious from the side that they're a lil bit married.

Kind of want to see Aisha's POV on the matter, I don't think we've heard from her since Conspiracy

[Mental Mouse](#)

For this chapter, I note "the Marshal of Callow's mind turned to safer avenues than the golden glow of her old friend's cheeks in the light of the torches."

Safer avenues indeed! I get that interspecies fertility isn't an issue here, but still...

caoimhinh

The thing is that Juniper's attraction towards Aisha has to battle with her Orc hunger and those two kinds of lust sometimes mix together. The most dangerous avenue of thought I remember Juniper having towards Aisha is in Kaleidoscope III:

"The two of them were alone in the tent, at least until the rest of the general staff arrived. Juniper cast a look at the Taghreb, eyes lingering on the soft skin of her bare wrists. Such delicate appearance, for such a dangerous woman. The urge to sink her teeth into the warm veins warred

with the urge to feel the softness with her own rough hands."

She wants to eat her in more ways than one (͡° ͜ʖ ͡°)

[Liliet](#)

Oh man it was in Kaleidoscope? I thought it was in Greenskins, ty ♥

god Juniper is a true disaster gay ♥

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeek!

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, since Liliet mentioned the chapter "Lest Dawn Fail" (back in Book IV), I turned up some lusting after Amadeus, or at least his vicious rationality: "Had he been born of her people, Ranker would have killed anyone with the slightest claim on him and made the man her consort. There were still matrons in the Eyries that whispered he was utterly wasted on *humans*"

Also, <snicker> that while the dragon's personal name is Nekheb, in the next breath it's reintroduced as General Catastrophe. (I can't believe I missed that first time round). And given the discussion there, his absence is probably because he has (again) flown somewhere and gone to sleep, eating anyone who tries to wake him.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/06/25/interlude-lest-dawn-fail/>

[Liliet](#)

God fucking bless ♥

Jworks

Sooo did saint just kill the lord of Silent Steps or are there other drow with blue eyes?

naturalnuke

I think any of the original vassals have blue eyes.

Daemion

We also never saw the drow die. It might know the secret of regeneration or similar stuff to survive even lethal wounds.

I also assume that the Lord of Silent Steps won't attack from the front or play with its targets. It seems to be a rather competent assassin.

konstantinvoncarstein

Agreed on both accounts. And he seems slightly more loyal to Cat than the other drows, so it would make sense to not send him first in the meat grinder.

[Liliet](#)

plural of drow is drow

konstantinvoncarstein

Ok, thank you 😊

[TeK](#)

And their preferred pronoun is "it"

mavant

Just for my own recollection – that's only for Mighty, right? I vaguely think the first conversations with Ivah implied that dzulu have genders, but I'm not sure anymore.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

As I recall, Mighty /is/ the closest thing they have to gender. If you're Mighty you're a person so no other consideration matters and if you're not Mighty you're meat so nothing else matters.

Add to that the fact that most of the current crop of Mighty (other than the old monsters like Rumena) would have grown up as Dzulu so by the time they become Mighty they're probably used to not using what we'd recognize as gender.

Which makes me wonder, have we ever heard of a Mighty referred to by pronoun by anyone other than an outsider? I could easily see their sigil names function as their closest analogue to pronouns in an internal context.

(Speaking of Rumena, I can't believe it took me this long to figure out what his archetype is. He's a Pair Mei type, the peerless old martial artist who has outgrown social mores and morality. Makes him the perfect foil for the Wuxia protagonist Saint.)

caoimhinh

True. Back then Ivah said that gender pronouns are cattle-terms and the Drow are merely classified by power.

Notice that when Jindrich refers to Catherine in Beheld I, and when Ivah refers to Archer and even to Akua in, they use \It\ as the pronoun, even in their minds.

There's also one instance of Catherine talking about a female Drow, they are called Womb-bearers, but there's not much distinction, that Drow was Mighty and that was all that mattered.

mavant

Isn't Ranger the Pai Mei of this setting? Cruel tutelage and whatnot.

[Liliet](#)

Nope, all drow are 'it'. They have anatomy similar to humans that could be used to divide them into biological sexes, but their society doesn't have social categories based on that.

The sisters are the only ones we've ever heard referred to with a human-like gendered pronoun.

[Javvies](#)

Heh. The Ophanim are being worried at Tariq. This seems like a bad sign for the Alliance's plan(s) here.

Two hours before dawn? I mean ... if they drag it out, the drow could have issues ... but that requires having a way to keep things going.

Seriously? You're skeptical about drow being able to see in the dark? That really shouldn't be something you should be arguing about. Even if you don't know for sure, like was said, they live underground in a place called the Everdark – darkness or a lack of light/illumination is not a thing that's going to hinder them enough to notice.

RumenaRumenaRumenaRumena!

Here's hoping Rumena either kills Saint outright or gets out of this without risking being on the losing end of a Pattern of Three.

IDKWhoitis

Their plans may be exactly that, keep the fight going all morning long. I call Angelic schenaigns, like maybe Tariq was told it would be beneficial to fight during Dawn.

Then turn up the heat right at dawn, with a potential heavy artillery or some sort of shock.

Callow would get picked apart, as the fight gets too close for seige weapons to reliabily work.

Kissaten

Maybe GPs plan is to get involved into the fight (like Gendalf bringing cavalry with the Dawn), and to get involved he has to see enemy's Named intervening into the fight. Drow not being Named (and he must have assumed Rumena to be Named) at all foils that plan. Also, hopefully this kills the Saint.

konstantinvoncarstein

But we don't know the effects of the well that Akua build. It could be something to prolong the night, or a way to block the use of Light.

AVR

It's not like the Callowan Army or the Legions of Terror will vanish, and that's slightly more numerically than the drow. Keep the humans and orcs fresh and change over in an hour and a half... even without the drow crashing at dawn it's not a terrible strategy. Tricky to execute but they've got good generals.

Probably Yannu and Tariq have some cunning plans on top of fighting at dawn but it seems the Ophanim are worried anyway.

[Liliet](#)

>Seriously? You're skeptical about drow being able to see in the dark? That really shouldn't be something you should be arguing about.

I mean absollutely everyone other than personally Arnaud is thinking the same thing you are lmao

caoimhinh

And I would argue not even Arnaud is actually thinking that, he just say that to maintain his facade of being an idiot, which we know he is not. Everyone in Procer has been fooled by him and believes him an idiot, but he's steadily winning influence, or at least never loses it. He even sends "cards to his bastard son" telling him about his travel and the situation in campaign, the last of that cards was shown in

Fatalism III being in Cordelia's hand and was what warned her of what the motion of an upcoming season of the Highest Assembly would be.

So that guy is the most dangerous of the Princes of Procer, this is agreed by Catherine, Pilgrim, and Saint. It must not be forgotten that every stupid action of his is just an act.

Rook

Arnaud is by far the smartest person in that room, I suspect.

If he was trying to dissuade people from the night attack, that idiotic suggestion he made is actually brilliant. It gets everyone thinking about the topic – how much of an advantage the drow have in the dark – and when they correct him they're likely to 'realize on their own' how stupid it is to disregard that factor.

At the same time, they don't dig their heels in because it's not someone correcting them and undermining their authority, and he doesn't make enemies because they're too conceited to think maybe Arnaud the "idiot" led them by the nose to that conclusion.

Even in general, his reputation for straightforwardness and downright idiocy is a pretty safe position to be in. His enemies don't want him out of the picture because you'd rather face stupid opponents than competent ones, and his potential allies rivals don't want to displace him because they see an easy puppet to manipulate. If you're competent enough to leverage that to shift public opinion without being noticed, it's a damn good advantage.

caoimhinh

Indeed, that guy has kept himself as the third seat of the coalition that threatens Cordelia's position (initially Amadis, Rozala, Arnaud and now it's Rozala, Louis, Arnaud). He keeps himself in a comfortable position from which he is important enough to not be eliminated but not so important as to be seen as a threat. He is a master at manipulation and everyone around him thinks of him exactly what he wants them to think.

The fact that he sent the card to his bastard son describing Amadis' plan to make a motion in the Highest Assembly makes me think that he knew it would end up in Cordelia's hands, which means he was conspiring against Amadis, probably because he figured Amadis would turn his back on him after becoming First Prince.

Now Arnaud has not only participated both times in the Crusade against the Army of Callow (both times in

positions were he avoids responsibility for the failure) but also has made meritorious deeds in the north against the Dead King, even making the other princes be on his debt.

He is gathering force slowly but steadily, biding his time.

Unless he is killed, Arnaud will be First Prince of Procer eventually, probably not right after Cordelia, but after her successor. He is a smart, cold, and very patient man, after all.

[Liliet](#)

Not sure about the “everyone in Procer” part. Cordelia might just know what’s up with him.

But basically... yeah 😡

RanVor

I don’t think Rumena has enough narrative weight to get into a Pattern of Three with anybody.

[Javvies](#)

Hopefully not, but Rumena Tombmaker is something of a well respected iconic figure amongst the drow, and has the personal might to contend with Named on an even-ish field. Plus was personally acquainted with Sve Noc before they became Sve Noc.

It may not be particularly likely, but I don’t think we can completely rule it out.

Point is, I’d far rather see Rumena kill Saint or beat her ass like a drum than see Saint kill Rumena.

RanVor

Remember that a Pattern of Three can only happen between rivals.

[Javvies](#)

Saint might view Rumena as something of a rival due to being shut down hard and humiliated the way she was. Hard to say about Rumena, but it might (probably does, actually) consider Saint unfinished business.

Still, as I said, the main point is, I’d rather see Rumena kill Saint, or at least thoroughly beat her ass, instead of Saint killing or beating Rumena.

Kissaten

If they are rivals, they will get a draw now since last time Rumena got a win. And a draw now might mean that Saint won't be able to do whatever was expected of her in that plan of Grey Pilgrim.

Fayhem

From what I understand, Step 1 *and* Step 2 are required in order to solidify a Pattern of Three. In other words, if two rivals clash and one of them wins outright, it doesn't guarantee that the next time they meet it will be a draw. But if the next time they clash it *is* a draw, then it all but guarantees that the next time they meet whoever lost the first time has a guaranteed win (although as Cat has shown that can be subverted with the right planning, luck, and/or story mojo).

Which means that if Rumena can't win, it would actually be better for it to lose so long as the loss is nonfatal. Because Saint would be keen enough to turn a regular win into a lethal win, if she's got a story-guaranteed win there's almost no chance she wouldn't capitalize on that for an outright kill. I would consider it plausible that if Rumena can't finish off Saint then Cat plans to let it lose before she intervenes and saves Rumena's life to protect it from a draw that would solidify an unfavorable Pattern of Three. Hell, Rumena's cold-blooded and strategic enough it might actually agree to that in advance and lose on purpose if it can't win outright.

Fayhem

Forgot to add – IIRC, an extant/unresolved Pattern of Three also provides the participants with some story-based shielding against external parties. Since Cat definitely wants to keep the option of killing Saint on the table, I think she'd be keen to stop a draw between Rumena and Saint for that reason as well.

Euodiachloris

And, even if Saint thinks in the terms of rivalry, Rumena very much isn't. Cats don't view a pingpong ball as a rival, after all. Source of fun, yes. A challenge to get out from under the dresser, sure.

But only another cat can be a rival. Saint is cattle. 😊

Andrew Mitchell

Good point.

IDKWhoitis

Only Catherine would create a field of death where Angels fear to tread.

I'm guessing that whoever reveals last, wins.

We have accounted for the Goblins, Traps, Drow, Lanterns, and 90% of the named on the Alliance side.

Only that sorcerer, Cat, and the Woe are hiding at the moment. And I have a feeling that Cat and that Sorcerer are in the same place.

Jesse Coombs

"There is nowhere angels fear to tread." – Callowan proverb (Heroic interlude, Prise au Fer)

RandomFan

But that choir sounds pretty worried to me. – though that might be because they aren't the ones doing the treading.

[Liliet](#)

^ nice way to put it

[Mental Mouse](#)

Quite possibly "Oh shit, that Drow is back, and it just bitchslapped the Saint into the backdrop."

erebus42

"Is that a challenge?" – The Black Queen of Callow

SilverDargon

"Maybe the Drow can't see in the dark."

Not going to lie, when I read that, I legitimately burst out laughing. Here I am all by myself in the dark, just giggling to myself in the corner of my room. I'm sure that if anyone came in here they'd probably think I was a bit mad. But for real-

"Maybe the Drow can't see in the dark."

BWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

[sengachi](#)

Same. I was laughing out loud. These poor bastards are doomed.

[Liliet](#)

I mean literally no-one other than Arnaud thought that,

Agent J

Prince Arnaud is the shady guy playing at being stupid. It's safe to say this is just him being "in character".

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, but it not less hilarious for it 😊

konstantinvoncarstein

*it is

Argentorum

Rumena Rumena Rumena Rumena Rumeana!

Cicero

The Ophanim are worried.

That pretty much sums it all up.

This is a stupid fight, everyone ought to be focused on the Dead King.

Clint

Even in the short term, they should all be worried about what Tyrant will do to whittle down their armies while they're fighting each other, and even more about what Heirarch will do to the peace talks after.

Neuromute

And remember that Rumena was still concerted to be only mid-tier in the Everdark.

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, he is in charge only because he is the only competent drow general. The kabal trying to kill Catherine in Great Strycht was composed of even more powerful Drow.

[Liliet](#)

Not so sure. He did challenge the entire Longstrider Cabal in Everdark.

konstantinvoncarstein

I think I recall they said something about hunting him later. And they seemed not very worried by his boast.

[thearpox23](#)

They had the numbers on their side and worked very well together. So we can't conclude from their comments how powerful he was.

[Liliet](#)

I mean. He seemed not very worried about challenging them either. I don't think "worried" is an emotion drow ever express in these situations :3

[shieldredblog](#)

Mid tier amongst the Everdark's greatest Mighty. He was the ruler of a mid-sized city. I'd imagine only the few larger cities were home to greater mighty. My guess is he was in the top 20.

[sengachi](#)

Juniper: Worried that the Procerans have some counter for her having the equivalent of hundreds of Named and thousands of troops who are individually worth ten of the enemy.

Procerans: Worried that maybe the drow have night vision.

[Liliet](#)

God, everyone keeps misinterpreting this.

Pilgrim is the one with the counter, which most Princes and Princesses don't know about. Arnaud is playing at being the stupidest of them, and none of them actually seriously think the drow might not have night vision.

caoimhinh

1) What Lilliet said.

2) Juniper is doing the sensible thing: assuming their side isn't lucky. Pilgrim has a counter prepared, just that it probably won't be much effective, and Catherine also has a counter for that counter.

3) They aren't Named equivalent, they are equivalent to battle priests and warlocks. Only the strongest of the Sigil holders are mighty enough to be considered Named equivalent. But yeah, the Drow are going to beat up the Grand Alliance army. Hard.

RanVor

"the equivalent of HUNDREDS of Named". Sengachi obviously didn't mean all the Drow.

konstantinvoncarstein

In Great Lotow (not a particularly important city), Catherine fought one of the weakest sigil-holder and barely win. She said that William could have won only with a really good story. So practically speaking, any sigil-holder worth their salt would be a Named.

[Liliet](#)

This comparison is inaccurate, IMHO, on a very basic level. It's like comparing mages to priests, or siege engines to infantry: they're *different things to begin with*.

Named are empowered by the story and driven by the story. Their matchups are not determined by power level numbers, like, *at all*. There aren't any numbers that aren't subject to the dragon vs peasant with sword principle. Yes, power levels do come into it somewhat *as part of the story*, and that's what Catherine evaluated, but...

1 Named + 1 Named \neq 2x the power of Named. And while normally 1 rylleh + 1 rylleh = 2x the power of rylleh, there's no guarantee the math will hold against Named on the other side. Rule of Conservation of Ninjutsu is not something that works in drow vs drow fights, but once Named enter the picture, it very much starts working.

So the same story that would need to be very good for William to beat someone on the level of Mighty Urluk (or whatever its name was exactly), might, once it is, be also good enough for William to beat 100 people on the level of Mighty Urluk, too.

konstantinvoncarstein

By "practically", I mean in term of firepower and destructive capabilities.

I totally agree with you, Named have Fate influencing their actions. But Mighties against non-Named is not the same thing. And story or not, a truly overwhelming firepower or number can tip the scale. As examples, we have all the heroes that Catherine and Black killed in Callow, and those who died attacking Keter.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, firepower and destructive capabilities differ from Named to Named to a ridiculous degree.

As for heroes vs Cat and Black, don't forget that they had quite a bit of a story at their own backs. And in Keter, too, the firepower *factored into the story*, not overwhelmed it. Stories bend, not break, unless people make *choices* incompatible with them.

[Liliet](#)

...all that aside, "how many non-Named can X or Y mow down" is a more fair comparison to make than "who will win between X and Y". And even then my point is that Named work differently enough than drow that it's still comparing '100' to 'the interval between 10 and 1000'

Dainpdf

It was then that Tariq knew that he had ducked up.

Also, nice to see Razil standing up there. Cat definitely saw potential in him. Now let's hope he doesn't become a pebble in her boot.

RoflCat

Yep, Rumena definitely pick up languages just to trashtalk all of his opponents.

I'm also 90% sure he can speak fluently, but is speaking this way just to add more savage touch to it.

[sengachi](#)

I mean when you're 3000+ years old and you've lived through a couple dozen linguistic shifts or so, I figure picking up new ones becomes just something you resign yourself to doing on an irregular basis. "Ah darnit, no one's getting my piercing witicisms anymore, time to brush up on whatever this new grammar is".

werafdsaew

Why would he bother to do that? Just find someone with that skill already and take it from him via Night harvest.

Valkyria

I bet it was just like shopping for him.

"Hmm... what to get today... seems my grammar is a little outdated... let's pick up some fresh vocabulary on the way home!"

[sengachi](#)

Rumena hears a youngster use a new slang term: "Oh, huh, is it time to go shopping for a new language package already? Hmm, I think I'll go for someone with a nice drawl this time."

superkeaton

"all was unfolding as he had foreseen."

Oh Pilgrim, Victory is never so in doubt as when it has been Prophesized.

[sengachi](#)

Tariq just walked face first into an "all is as I have foreseen" trope against an opponent who is shielded from his piercing gaze by divine aid, who is attempting to take her father's soul back from him and unify the land in a war against a great evil.

Hoo boy, our poor Pilgrim really has gone full villain narrative hasn't he?

werafdsaew

Black Dread Emperor Benevolent

caoimhinh

I agree with the extract from On Rule. There must be a clear purpose for war and it must be fought with sights on future peace, waging war just for the sake of it is stupidity and a wicked thing.

They are fighting two hours before dawn so it will be a race against time to beat the Alliance enough so they retreat before the Drow get weakened, unless the Well of Night (proposed tentative name) can actually delay dawn or prolong the time of Night strength for the Drow.

Heh, Rumena even knows a bit of Tradertalk? This Drow is on a quest to be able to trash talk and verbally burn people in every language, LMAO.

No, Pilgrim, NOTHING is going as you have foreseen; it is going as WE, the readers, have foreseen, which is you getting your ass kicked and slaughter for the Grand Alliance army.

The Angels have no vision in the Everdark, your Aspects can't see Sve Noc, you couldn't even detect Rumena when it was standing in front of you guarding Cat before it revealed itself to beat the Saint of Swords. What makes you think you can foresee what your patron Choir can't, Tariq?

Arrogance is the cause of fall for the mighty, be they Evil or Good.

This is gonna be awesome.

Typos found:

- had mad study of the slaying of armies / had made study of the slaying of armies
- You will be all be tasked / You will all be tasked
- The touch was not distracting / The touch was distracting

Valkyria

While it's true that there will be a race until dawn hits, it may be good to consider that when dawn comes, the legionairs will gain there sight back as well.

So it's likely the drow trying their hardest to get rid of as much enemy forces as possible (keeping in mind the limit of acceptable losses Cat set) and just before dawn they'll be called back and switched out for human fighting forces.

Even if the enemy isn't 100% certain of the _dawn is the limit_ thing, Cat and Juniper are so they will have measures in place to get the most out of this situation, should the fight really be dragged out until dawn.

caoimhinh

True, the Drow must now act as a tactical squad or a fast assault unit. Taking down as many enemies as possible before returning to the inside of the palisade. If dawn is in 2 hours, the Drow have about one and a half hours to act.

The problem would be that without the 50 thousand Drow, the Alliance army outnumberes the Army of Callow.

This is of course, if the Well of Night doesn't actually extend the duration of their effective time.

My expectation is that the Grand Alliance army will suffer thousands of casualties and call for a retreat.

Valkyria

I think it would've been nice to see how many casualties the Allience took in the last battle. They lost a ton of "special forces" and also a lot of skirmishers to the rituals, pits, goblins, etc.

Cat's side lost a few goblins and maybe a few knights? (not sure if you can just charge with cavalry without a single casualty though I expect them to be very small)

Would be intresting how much superior the Allience really is in numbers.

caoimhinh

The casualties should have been minimal. The alliance advanced slowly using their priests to find the traps and open a path in the northern army and using the binders and

their constructs for the same in the southern army. We only got the casualties from the southern army, around 1000 soldiers and 30 binders. It seems like there wasn't much of a fight in the north either because Moro (who is from the northern army) mentioned that the range of the siege engines was suspected (not confirmed) so the northern army advance didn't reach the range of the siege engines during their previous fight, which also means that there were no legionaries dead. It seems Yannu halted them and ordered to fall back as soon as a safe path to the palisade was found.

AVR

300 binders. Robber got 30, then Abigail's 'playing the Dominion perfectly' with the goblins as hated bait got the rest.

AVR

300 binders. Robber got 30, then Abby's 'playing the Dominion perfectly' with the goblins as hated bait got the rest.

konstantinvoncarstein

No, there was 100 binders and half of the die

mavant

I am delighted by Rumena's dedication to self improvement.

Andrew Mitchell

So, a lot of us here have recognised Pilgrim's "everything is going as I have foreseen" as flagging that things AREN'T going to go the way he thinks. I'm cheering for that too, and I'll enjoy it when I see it.

I'd also like to point out an area that gives me cause to think he's still got a chance to realise his mistake in time to mitigate the looming CATastrophe. The closing sentence is what's worrying me:

"So why, Tariq wondered, were the Ophanim murmuring so worriedly in his ear?"

If Tariq REALLY thinks about this, it looks to me that he's got the chance to turn things around.

Valkyria

What I think about that is that the Pilgrim might be too focused on his way being the only right path. He believes

himself in the right way more often than not and I think Cat's using that to blindside him.

I'm not saying he's stupid because, duh, he is not. None this stupid could stay alive this long.

IMO the Pilgrim is too deadlocked in his own Name and Role, too see the broader picture for exactly what it is.

Also, Cat's been a thorn in his side for quite some time now so no matter how much serene wise old mystery man he is, he is also bent on fitting her into his plans to make the world like it should be.

I'm saying that I'm not entirely sure that the Pilgrim hasn't lost a lot of reason focusing too much on a single stone in his way.

Andrew Mitchell

You may be right. I can't wait to see what happens.

caoimhinh

And still, he's screwed because he isn't supposed to enter the fray before Catherine does, but with the Drow kicking the Alliance army's collective ass he is going to have to reconsider his approach.

It might even be Tariq who calls for their armies to halt the attack and retreat (thus mitigating the damage from the CATastrophe), and maybe bet it all in his encounter with Catherine in Arcadia, which in turn will make the allied army's command to fall into Rozala's hands, given the repeated blunders of the Dominion lords' plans (I'm also guessing Yannu will die in this fight, although he is an interesting character).

Tom

Hoping for a Jindrich perspective in the next interlude 😊 though since the Saint and Pilgrim are both occupied I'm not sure he'll have anything to get really angry about... And there's no towers nearby to rip up and use as a mace either 😞 maybe Robber can help him come up with something.

konstantinvoncarstein

Who is Jindrich again?

[shieldredblog](#)

A drow famous for going berserk, being Rumena's main competition and essentially transforming into an armored giant. He was a tentative ally of Cats because he hated Rumena. Rumena mentioned he was the only other Drow that remembered the time before Sve Noc in their city, he was just a child then though.

As far as I know, he probably died when Winter went out of control. The only confirmed survivors of named Drow (as in we know their names not Named) are Ivah, The lord of Shallow Graves and Rumena I think?

Ultimate_procrastinator

If I recall correctly, we had a Jindrich perspective in the interlude when Cat rescued Abigail's army. He had a great deal of respect for Robber's ability to mouth off at everyone, and took Cat's advice on madmen making miracles very seriously.

[shieldredblog](#)

You are correct. I thought that was the Lord of Shallow Graves because he acted nothing like you'd expect from a berserker.

Apparently he is called Lord Soln, not sure how I mixed up those names.

I really hope we get some perspectives from the surviving Peerage.

caoimhinh

You really should go back and read those chapters again to check the Drow names, most are hard to remember since they aren't mentioned often.

Soln is a different Drow, one of the nine members of the Peerage that swore oaths to Catherine in Great Lotow, whereas Jindrich is (as was pointed by Ultimate_procrastinator above) the berserker that made an alliance with Cat when she was in Great Strycht and was the Drow POV we had in Interlude: Beheld I.

In case you are curious, according to Book 4 chapter 69, the nine original members of the Peerage are: Ivah, Soln, Slaus, Sagas, Nodoi, Vasyl, Losle, Zarkan, and Kanya. But others were added when she reached Great Strycht and some died during the battles there.

sutortyrannus

He's alive and raging – his POV was part of the Catherine taking the turtles through the fire at Sarcellla.

caoimhinh

And he is absolutely loyal to Cat because she is FUN (First Under the Night) XD

Lkojk

Only after reading your comment did I realize that First Under the Night is FUN.
Really suits Cat as she's short, or should I say Fun sized.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Surprised nobody mentioned this but the chapter title is the reference to the last line in The Girl Who Climbed The Tower: trust is the wager that takes your life.

Might refer to the armies in general since both put their trust in their leaders. I was thinking it could also be Pilgrim and his dependence on Ophanim but his significance to Levant makes it unlikely he will be killed. Probably not Cat, dying the fourth time would be in poor taste.

RanVor

I wondered which song it is from, but forgot to ask.

Thank you.

caoimhinh

Thanks!

So we have one from The Tyranny of the Sun (West, ever pursuing), one from In Dread Crowned (Graves we have yet to fill), and now one from The Girl Who Climbed The Tower (Trust is the wager).

Which song would be next? Maybe the Chant of the Dead, that old Kharsum song? If so, then the chapter is likely to be called 'Come to Die'. Hmm, ominous.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Or "Lest Dawn Fail", which would be ominous for the Procerans.

[Liliet](#)

We've already had one named that, we're most definitely not going to have a redux here without a stronger thematic tie. It'd be another line from the song.

[Bhale](#)

Okay, so my guess is Pilgrim is trying to bait the drow out. That's why he chose to fight over the night so the drow would feel overconfident and head out. Then, when they're all good and engaged, he makes the sun to weaken them and attacks with priests and Lanterns. He probably isn't accounting the well that's been made to counter the sun.

Second, as much as I'm looking forward to the fight between Rumena and Saint, I don't think Rumena will win it. Either he's not gonna try or he will but won't succeed. Catherine has been praying every night to the staff that isn't the staff but a sword, and sword that isn't the sword but a prayer, all to kill Saint. I doubt that action will just fall through. Unless Rumena has her staff.

konstantinvoncarstein

It will probably end in a draw, or he will retreat to let Catherine handle it.

And what could the staff do? A super-Night-death-ray seems a bit too unoriginal to me.

Jason Ipswitch

My guess is that it's going to be enough of an obvious super-potent sword and/or metaphysical weapon to get Saint to try her usual headlong "I kill it /I cut it" tactic, when will in turn end up feeding her directly to Sve Noc. Forewarned and prepared, the goddesses who ascended with Night and devoured Winter will finish Saint utterly before she even knows what's happening, and give her a fate far beyond Pilgrim's ability to resurrect her from.

[Euodiachloris](#)

"Oh, look! Another Demense that fits *both* of our current ones like a glove. All pretty and served up in a gift basket, too! You shouldn't have! No, really: big mistake."

Douglas Johnston

She mentioned that shes using miracles for support instead of attack now, right? Maybe she's using it to buff Rumena for his fight with Saint

Andrew Mitchell

Nah, that does not feel right to me. I'm pretty sure she's going to wield the swordprayerstaff herself.

Agent J

Honestly, that prayerswordstaff is way too epic to waste on Saint. I mean, when Kairos asked Cat who it was meant for, how do you think he'd have reacted if she said it was to rid herself of some low grade bully? Disappointed, I say.

I hope Rumena kills the dim brute and Cat gets to use her sword on the god they dug out of the lake instead. Let her earn the epithet "the Godbutcher". Much better than "the Saintslayer".

Catherine Fucking Foundling, the Black Queen of Callow, the Arch-Heretic in the East, the First Under the Night, the Lakeomancer, the Godbutcher.

Why yes, that is her legal middle name.

Lkojk

Wouldn't it be Godslayer?

Andrew Mitchell

Love it!

Valkyria

I can't keep the image out of my head since that Princess said it:

Rumena screeching like a bat while fighting with the saint.
"Skreee-skreee- I will find you unworthy cattle- skree-skreee-skreee!"

[TeK](#)

Guys, it is too good to be true, I am waiting to find another shoe to drop. There is no way Cat will just... Win?

Andrew Mitchell

The other shoe will drop, for sure. Cat's never had an easy win and this one will be hard-fought as well.

[TeK](#)

But it all seems as though it will be easy, which feels me with dread at what's to come.

[TeK](#)

Also, I don't want Saint to die. She is not a good person, but she still better taking swing at DK.

Draconic

This chapter reminds me of the song, Lest Dawn Fail. Because I seriously suspect that the dawn Yannu Marave is waiting for, might fail to arrive...

erebus42

Awsome, and as always the procerans are such pricks. They really should be grateful for the Empire because without it they'd probably be the ones getting saddled with all the villainous roles.

[TeK](#)

Nah, petty villainy such as theirs is not deserving a Name.

theart0fwar

Pilgrim : "everything is going as planned"

Welp, you either die a hero...

Anonymity

IS RUMENA GONNA HAVE TO SMACK A BITCH?

mindsword2

Hmm. Worst case scenario time.

Could this battle be considered a competition between GP and Cat?
if so, a draw here will give him his free win down the line.

mavant

I think part of the reason Cat explicitly ceded control here is
to prevent that.

[Liliet](#)

Well, you called that 😊

mavant

Rumena

doot dooooo doo doo doo

Rumena

doot doo doot doo

Rumena

Doot dooooo doo doo doo, doot doo doo, doot doo doo do doo doot
doo do-do-do

konstantinvoncarstein

I hate you, it is stuck in my head! 😊

Aotrs Commander

So, remind me in any other context where the leaders of one side
are all law-aiding and professional and the other are fractious,
argumentive and playing for power who will kill each other for
honour duels (LITERALLY in the middle of a major battle
engagement, the lull between day and night clash is still the
same battle), which one would be wearing the white hat...?

'Cos I don't think in any other context, it's the latter...

Aotrs Commander

Oh yeah, also... What part of "night attack" includes "hey, let's light ourselves up so that we can see, so that even the HUMANS who do't have night vision have a load of nicely lit silhouettes to shoot at!"

The point of a night attack is to NOT BE SEEN while you creep up on the enemy. Giving away you're making a night attack by stomping in with all the light sources (highlight your clerics for sniper fire, no really, that can't possible go wrong) is defeating the ENTIRE POINT.

LICHEMASTER, these people are stupid.

[shieldredblog](#)

It would be an amazing move if they just focused the light like flashlights at the people on the palisade. Blinding and revealing the defenders.

[Liliet](#)

I mean they kind of high key had 0 chance of that and knew it, because of goblins.

And another point of night attack is to have the other army SLEEPING while you're doing it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, Named apparently get night vision for free, but there's gotta be a spell for that.

[shieldredblog](#)

My bet is the priests are going to try and summon dawn like an hour early. They will have limited power without the pilgrim so they can't be too ambitious in their miracle.

This will be easily undone by their Well of Night, forcing the Pilgrim to throw his weight in behind the miracle to save their army.

This will let Cat pull off whatever shenanigans shes aiming for. Then Portal f*ckery will occur and reset the board.

Xinci

Truly what a waste, Akil could have been just as important as saint for actually locking away Dead King.

A weakpoint of the Blood system vs the Night definitely seems to be conservation of the power potentially lost in internal strife. They can bind their enemies but every Levantine death weakens their system(Even if strife does give some form of offering to the Gods Above which may help the Levantines or Good's greater

system).

Interesting that Rumena went against Saint alone I would think a pack of Drow in the dark would work better but the Longstriders are unfortunately dead or depowered. I do suppose they aren't supposed to kill her so fair's fair.

Was still nice to see the Levantines in battle. Though specialized and thus fragile alone they could be so much better together. Like a heroic band but with each member an army, working like limbs for their goal. It's really too bad that kind of story isn't around at the moment.

So the Lanterns and Priest probably were informed or felt the changes in Creation due to the Night at some point and were holding meetings over it. So I wonder if those orbs of light will effect Drow negatively or they will use other tricks. Also interesting to see the Lanterns' tricks. Did they learn after their previous "hunt" and adapt similar tactics from the Light?

[Dresden 67](#)

Er, Akil wasn't Named.

He was a moderately powerful mage and a talented binder.

He wouldn't have lasted five seconds against the Dead King.

Xinci

The most powerful, experienced and influential binder of souls. Didn't matter if he was Named. He would be invaluable for sectioning off and imprisoning the parts of the Dead King's soul Saint cuts off.

[nineran](#)

Akua is/was the most powerful Binder about. That's literally what the Diabolist does.

Xinci

Somewhat, as her ability to bind kind of relies on her being in a position of power. Diabolist make deals, contracts and bindings but not like a Binder. Diabolist doesn't deal with keeping souls whole. Not mentioning some of the issues with using her like that while cooperating with the Alliance.

Hierus

so the Jupiter X Aisha ship continues as planned

Shoddi

"Forward, the Light as aid!"

Was there a man dismayed?

Not though the soldier knew
A possible blunder by Yannu;
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.
Into the valley of Drow
Strode the Levantines.

[Daniel E](#)

All this discussion about Story coming to a head between Black Queen & Gray Pilgrim got me thinking: Isn't the original wager between Above & Below about the degree to which mortals should be ruled? Above favors a hands-off guidance approach, while Below thinks they need 'direct supervision', as it were. I wonder if the Pantheon is subject to the 'grooves in the road of fate creating Roles/Names' principle. Like the purpose of the original bet has been lost to the eons, and now they are simply vying for traditional Good & Evil principles.

[Javvies](#)

You've got that almost exactly opposite.

Above is order, blind unquestioning obedience to their directives.

Below is meh, do whatever you want, as long as you can deal with the consequences.

[Daniel E](#)

That sounds typically right, but the prologue isn't so clear: "The Gods disagreed on the nature of things: some believed their children should be guided to greater things, while others believed that they must rule over the creatures they had made. So, we are told, were born Good and Evil.". Based on this, it seems that Above wants to encourage mortals to evolve naturally (guidance), while Below wants strict adherence (rule).

[Javvies](#)

The point of the prologue is ambiguity.

Nobody has clean hands or a monopoly on rightness or on good or evil.

The labels are just PR. And the guys who actively direct their agents in a loosely concerted strategy have better PR than the ones who don't care about what those who follow their beliefs do or how they follow their beliefs.

The Heavens have demonstrated that they require their selected Named obey their directives, and if you're linked

to a Choir, you're liable to be micromanaged in pursuit of their interests.

Below doesn't micromanage their Named. Below gets reached out to be people, they don't force their message or influence on people.

Kissaten

Above wants to rule, therefore they get to decide what's called what, even before the battle's done. They are the Good guys, their enemies are Evil guys, and we know who always wins.

Below doesn't care for names, they let their champions to strive for whatever greatness they want, be it Massacre, Irritant or Benevolent. So they get to be the losing side, but oh how glorious their loss would be.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Something to keep in mind: while both Above and Below were sitting back and waiting for the drow to implode/ get wrecked by the neighbours... The sisters were trying to turn into *hands-on, ruling, local, fuck-up-reversing goddesses*.

In short, Below peaced out because turning Godkinglet to shake one's fist at the heavens before your fantasmagorical end (however long that takes) might be their thing, but just sucking at "self-cannibalising survival, governance and generally trying to steer clear of others until the books get balanced" ain't. Yet Above didn't adopt them, mainly because they didn't try to redeem themselves using the correct obsequious paperwork... Which likely nobody thought to tempt them with. Because Evil is Evil is Evil and Good doesn't negotiate with... well, anybody. 😊

[shieldredblog](#)

Look to their servants, nations and the names that serve them to see the nature of Above and Below.

Above: Kings who rule by divine decree or inheritance and Priests who deny other powers and return things to normal. Angels that control people. Good nations are all about humans being judged by gods and knowing their place. Peasants and kings till you die and your children assume your role.

Below: Tyrants that seize power and Warlocks that unlock secrets. Demons are dangerous tools who only come when summoned, not meddlers like Angels. Evil Nation's are

all about people judging each other, either through voting or meritocracy.

[Liliet](#)

Above thinks mortals need guidance and a rule system; Below thinks mortals need to fight it out and whoever wins rules.

StarlightGlimmer

Good must lose to Evil at first before Good finally triumphs. The earlier Evil defeats good, the less unnecessary suffering. And I hate unnecessary suffering.

kotekj

So, this was bothering me since the meeting with GP... but he's trying to force Cat into a story of 3, yes?... can't Rum and SoS supercede that? If Rum forces a draw here, as his "win" against her earlier wouldn't that supercede Cat and GPs and render it null?

Andrew Mitchell

Probably not IMO. For a couple of reasons.

1. There are factors that may be a barrier to Rumera and the Saint establishing a story pattern. There's the question of whether Drow can actually be a major actor in a story given they haven't interacted with the rest of creation for so long they may not have worn any grooves in creation to fit a story. In addition, some commenters have mentioned that there needs to be a rivalry for a pattern of three an questioned whether Drow can actually have that rivalry with "cattle".

2. If Rumera and the Saint do get into a pattern of three that would be their own story and I think that means it's separate to and different from the pattern between Cat and the Grey Pilgrim.

Snowfire1224

Yay, I'm caught up again.

Aston W

No update yet?

More interlude..

Andrew Mitchell

These Interludes have been moving the plot along just as well as a Chapter would have IMO.

[Liliet](#)

Seriously.

Aston

Seriously looking forward to a new update?

Yes we are.

Interludes are understandable.

Andrew Mitchell

Not just understandable but, I would argue, in fact they are an essential element of EE's story-telling. When I try to imagine what this story would be like without the POV's of Hakram, Vivienne, Juniper, Cordelia, Tariq, etc. I see a story I would have stopped reading a long time ago.

[Liliet](#)

Interludes that show major battles from the POVs of other players than Catherine whose plan is unfolding beat by beat are the BEST thing in Guide.

Sturmii

The last sentence put the picture of cat and the pilgrim playing chess, like the old AoE2 intro

Interlude: Death They Cannot Steal

"Ah, the classic imperial dilemma: which caused the other, the rebellion or the tiger pit?"

– Dread Emperor Callous

There were two kinds of horror to be found in war, Razin Tanja had learned.

The first he had met and fought in the streets of shadowed Sarcella, the dark dismay of loss being dealt by the hand of a surpassing foe. Even outnumbered and ambushed, thrust into the backfoot, the Army of Callow had snapped out with jaws of steel and turned what should have been a dazzling victory into a brutal and exhausting slog of death. The heir to Malaga had seen that same skill put to work tonight, when the foot of the Grand

Alliance had tried the enemy's fortifications. Volleys from myriad engines of war scything through warriors of Levant and Procer alike, long darts skewering even the most heavily armoured of soldiers. Worse than those had been the stones of the trebuchets, whose frightful nature lied not in the first impact but in the skill of the engineers using it: most the time, the angle let the massive stones bounce and keep rolling, crushing ten times the warriors even the best-aimed of collisions would have reached. No, this Razin had all watched from atop his horse with clenched fingers and clenched jaw but he would not dishonour the bravery of the dead by mourning the necessity of their deaths. They had known, these warriors, what it *meant* to charge a position held by the armies of the Black Queen. That no one of the first wave would ever make it to the palisade, and likely none of the second either.

They'd come forward anyway, though. Captains of Tartessos and Malaga first, and the pride of that last one had choked him for those armsmen had fought the Black Queen's own favoured army before, they understood exactly what awaited yet they'd come forward without flinching, without hesitation. Both Lady Aquiline and he had swallowed unkind words on the subject of Proceran courage when they'd found the commanders of their Proceran allies gambling over which of theirs would take the lead, taking it as attempt to pass off the duty. It was good that he had kept his tongue from wagging, though, for he learned moments later he'd had the wrong of it. They had all volunteered, every last one. The officers, men and women from half a dozen principalities, had turned to the dice to settle the matter for none was willing to concede the honour of the vanguard to another. *Arlesites*, Lady Aquiline had murmured in an aside to him, praise and condemnation both. These were of the same breed of soldiery that'd once invaded Levant in a relentless tide of butchery. But the two of them, one of the Slayer's Blood and the other of Binder's Blood, could understand looking at these people why Levant had been taken at all. Why their forbears had been needed, to humble an empire that could boast soldiers like those. Razin was certain he'd caught one of them – a tanned woman of southern stock, not even thirty but already high officer with a face that was a ruin of scars – cheating at the dice game used to determine who would lead.

It was such a small detail, he thought, and yet as he watched the horror ahead he could not help but fixate on it. That woman had gone as far as using loaded dice to claim the honour, and now she might very well be dead. To the second kind of horror, the hateful one. The dreadful, animal fright that came from witnessing something so far beyond you it could not be fought. Couldn't be bargained with, or even fled. All that was left was to kneel and pray, to hope for its own reasons it would deign to spare your life. Razin had known that terror once before, truth be told. It had watched him from a river's bank, wreathed in

shade and might, and judged him with cold eyes. There had been no doubt, in that gaze, that his life could be snuffed out with a thought. No fear that the hatred burning in his blood could ever be a peril worth regard. No, in that moment that was the wake of death, the air still filled with the screams of the drowning, the Black Queen had for her own unfathomable reasons decided to spare Razin Tanja's life. The heir to Malaga had clung to that, while his father took the Blood's Scourge to his back, for what earthly torment could be half as shameful as the knowledge the greatest villain of their age had *not found him worth killing?*

Yet it was of that woman whose name he'd never learned cheating at dice Razin thought of, when the drow unleashed their malevolent works, and not of the frightful Queen of Callow. For a heartbeat it had seemed like the assault on the palisade would be a siege as that kind of battle was known to them: harsh and costly, but not beyond victory. Then the devils of the Everdark had struck, and not from the palisade. The drow did not sally out like warbands or armies. Instead they rose from the shadows among the ranks of the Grand Alliance's warriors, and without warning or mercy they began to slaughter. There could be no other word for it than that, Razin thought. There were not so many of the enemy, perhaps a mere hundred, but they were tearing through warriors like an axe through kindling. Darkness rose in shapes and armaments, rained from above and swept from below, a hundred different sorceries for a hundred different drow, but whatever the singular craft each was an exquisite art of war. Polished and without flaw, for even when dozens and even hundreds charged at the enemy all that changed was the number of corpses made. Within the first quarter of an hour, Razin Tanja thought, almost two thousand warriors must have died. Not, not died.

Been swatted out of existence, like bothersome insects.

That quarter of an hour was what it took for the Grand Alliance's answer to be brought to the fore, and all Razin could think was that it was a quarter hour too late. The sight should have moved him, and he could feel the sharp breaths and fervent prayers of those awed by the sight, but even as a scattered line of priests opened shuttered lanterns the sight of that casual slaughter stayed with him. And with the worry of how easily they could return to such horror, should their answer fail. It didn't, Razin saw with relief. No, instead across the entire strip of night where the golden Light kept within the lanterns was revealed the drow flinched. Their strange sorceries weakened, lessened in scope if far from broken, and the Dominion of Levant began its counterattack. Slayers, the tempestuous retinue of the Lady of Tartessos, strode forward. Fewer than five hundred, all in light leathers and bearing the sharp tools of their trade and their ghastly face-tattoos of green and bronze. The Silent Slayer's own colours, and those of her Blood after her. Above perhaps all

others, the slayers of Tartessos espoused the most ancient and honoured tradition of Levant: the killing of monsters.

Even as the deathly gifts of the Praesi engines kept raining down on the advancing warriors, the beast-killers spread out in bands and began plying their trade on the darkness-wielding drow. Razin's fingers had begun to loosen, though they tightened again when one of the enemy's trebuchet stones landed far beyond what should be possible. Then out of the spray of earth and snow came blood-chilling laughter, and massive figure wearing a carapace of darkness strode out. It batted the head off a soldier almost casually, and without missing a beat began tearing through the centre of the army's lines. This would break them, Razin realized, mind racing as he saw what would follow. Lantern-bearing priests retreating to weaken the monstrous drow, only to leave a hole in the line at the front that the lesser monsters would take advantage of. After that the slaughter would resume, and...

"Captain Elvera," Lady Aquiline calmly said, turning to her second. "You have command."

"My lady," the old woman said, "you cannot mean-"

Aquiline Osená removed a lantern from the saddlebag at her side, and hooked it on her belt without opening it. There would be Light within, Razin decided.

"I am of the Silent Slayer's Blood," Lady Aquiline replied. "I cannot mean *otherwise*, Elvera."

Foolish, Razin thought, for she was not just a fleet-footed slayer but the commander of this entire host. Still, Aquiline's line was not one known for wits. All the founders had granted different gifts to their Blood, Akil Tanja had once told his son. Valour for the Champion, cunning for the Brigand, skill for the Slayer, wisdom for the Pilgrim – and that grandest of bestowals for the Binder's own, that privilege known as knowledge. Or so the heir to Malaga thought, until he caught the high esteem all of Aquiline Osená's captains were not watching her with. They not only approved, Razin realized, but they had expected it. *Let neither queen nor prince rule over our dominion*, Farah Isbili had once said. The second of the Holy Seljun, and first true ruler of Levant, for her father had not lived to reign for long. *For while crown devour honour, one's blood is not so easily gainsaid*. Razin had been raised to understand this as the truth of blood being the true nobility of Creation, what set apart the wheat from the chaff. In having a past to measure up to, a litany of deeds, the great families of Levant were made worthy to rule. They must prove this worth anew with every generation, true, but they always did for blood was not so easily gainsaid. Yet now Razin thought of a woman who'd cheated at dice to earn the privilege of being among the first to die and wondered.

Would you be proud of us, Honoured Ancestor? the heir to Malaga silently asked the night sky. *Of the works of my father, of his father before him and his mother before that. Will you be proud of mine, you who stared down an empire with nothing but death and indignation tattooed on your back?* He thought of the legends he'd been raised to, of the five heroes who'd snapped the arrogance of Procer over their knee. He thought of that day's own council, of Yannu Marave's blade opening Father's throat and the vicious barbs traded by the others. Would any of them truly be proud, Razin wondered, of what the Dominion had become?

"Captain Fustan," he said. "I give you command in my stead."

The bearded man, most respected of his father's captains, looked at him in surprise. So did Lady Aquiline.

"Your intent, Tanja?" she asked.

Razin inclined his head towards the dark-clad creature in the distance, scything through men like a sickle through wheat.

"It took five to topple an empire, Osená," he simply replied. "Two ought to be enough for a single drow, no?"

No, he echoed in his own mind. They would not be proud, not a single one of them.

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That creature, Laurence de Montfort mused, was going to take a lot of killing.

"Bring out your weapon," the Saint of Swords said. "I'll even let you, to even things out."

A lie, that. She fully intended on sending the drow's head rolling on the ground if it got even slightly distracted. She spoke the untruth without hesitation, for she'd never been encumbered with the delusions of fair play that plagued some of her peers. The moment you bared a blade on someone with the intent to kill, there was nothing else left to consider. Honour was just a way to pat yourself on the back, a pretty face put on the ugliest of all weaknesses: uncertainty. Her opponent face creased with amusement when it bared its teeth, putting in relief the painted stripes of ochre and gold radiating from its lips.

"Why would I need one?" it spoke in guttural Chantant. "Children are disciplined by hand."

The Saint looked into the thing's silver-blue eyes and recognized the glint within. It had fury waking up her blood. She'd last seen it on that woman's face, when she'd glanced at Laurence's spilling entrails and sighed without even bothering to say a

word. *Is that all*, the glint whispered. *Is this the sum of you?* It was the gaze of something ancient and fearsome taking it the brief glow of a firefly before it died, only to dismiss it as of only passing interest. She was going to enjoy cutting this one very much, Laurence admitted to herself. Without another word, the Saint of Swords struck. Two steps forward, half-step to the side, her entire withered frame coiling to put full weight behind the blow at the end. But the drow, this Rumena, it moved just as swiftly as her.

Its hand slapped the side of her blade, and it spun low – Laurence, without missing a beat, leapt up. The open palm that would have slapped her knee passed through only void, and she twisted so she could angle her body in midair and strike once more. Instead of having its skull split in two, the creature dropped even lower and waited a beat for the tip of the sword to pass it. *None of that*, the Saint thought, and this was not the first time she was tasked with killing something with better reflexes than her. The slightest piece of her Name's power had her kicking at air with enough strength for her swing to swing back just as Rumena began to rise, the drow immediately sinking into a puddle of shadow and vanishing from under her. It rose again half a dozen feet from Laurence, just as she landed lightly in her feet.

In the distance, its fellow abominations were singing its name. Behind her, the Saint's crusaders were opening lanterns filled with golden Light. Neither of them paid any heed to the audience, for they mattered less than dust.

"Have your godlings taught you anything but how to flee?" Laurence mildly asked.

"Your pale idols are worse than wrong," Rumena replied just as mildly. "They are *prey*."

They'd gotten the measure of their opponent with the first pass, so there was no caution in how they began the second. The drow foot tapped the ground, once, and beneath the Saint the ground blew up. She was already in the air when it did, leaping forward, and over what felt like hours but took less than a heartbeat she sunk into her aspect. **Listen**, she thought, and the word reverberated through her. And she did, the same way she had when straddling the line between life and death all those years ago. Hearing the Ranger's footsteps as she walked away, and only then understanding how deaf she had been all her life. Moving against the rhythm of Creation, when she should have been moving with it. The Saint of Swords pricked her ear, and heard the dissonant cacophony of the drow striking at her.

She moved with purpose. A flick of the wrist created a wound for her to push off of, angling her descent so Rumena's extended hand would pass her flank, then another to take the arm off before the

shoulder and even as it drew back – quick, strident tempo – she leaned forward so the next stroke would slice neatly through the neck. The head tumbled on the ground half a heartbeat before she landed, but she did not sheathe her sword. There had been no silence, no precipitous fall. The drow was not dead. A wild, discordant slide, like a fiddle being struck, and the Saint was almost too slow. A prick against her shoulder, like the touch of a needle, and through that fine vessel she felt a sea of death and decay. Millennia of red slaughter and careless rot made into a gnawing bite. Laurence's blade cut through just enough skin for blood to gush out, and just in time. Even half an instant later and her entire body would have become a pile of blight and bile.

She took the drow's eye on the backswing, for its impertinence in trying an ambush on her. Carved through the insolent blue stare with relish, and smiled as the roiling darkness in Rumena's socket failed to heal her cut.

"Careless," the drow smiled.

The song hacked out a tempo like crows cawing, and before Laurence could move the air in her lungs turned to acid.

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Ten of them, armed and readied and bearing a golden lantern, struck at the beast.

Seven slayers, a binder and two of the Blood. Not even drakes and manticores could have lightly ignored such a war party, but the darkness-clad drow tall as an ogre moved like lightning and struck like thunder. Razin's sword was in his hand, his breath steady, and as his binder baited their foe he waited for his moment. A screaming salamander made of starlight and snow screamed at the enemy, and within a heartbeat its large head had been dispersed by a massive fist. The darkness-clad arm went straight through and hit the ground, which was the signal. Lady Aquiline opened the shutter and the golden Light touched the enemy. It screamed in pain, and its carapace visibly thinned. The slayers moved, then, feet whispering against the snow. One, two, three – the harpoons tore through the weakened darkness, giving solid purchase to the long ropes tied to them. In woodlands like the Brocelian, Razin knew, these would be fastened to trees to trap the hunted beast and restrict its movements. Open grounds like these, though, required different tactics. All three slayers pulled at the arm, to trip the creature forward, while the remaining four smoothly split into pairs and moved to flank it.

"Attack," Razin ordered his binder, gauging the time to be right.

The woman gave no sign she'd heard him, but her horse whinnied in fright and cold and the bound soul of the salamander dispersed, slithering back to the tattoo it was bound to. The sorcery was

replaced by an arrow-like burst of translucent magic that flew for the drow's head, leaving the darkness shuddering on impact. Even where he was seated, the heir to Malaga felt a ripple go over his skin. He wondered how many thundering roars had been stitched together, to make that curse. Whatever the number, the spell distracted the drow even as it was beginning to recover from its surprise. The rope-holding slayers dragged it down and forward, and then the others struck on the exposed flanks. Long barbed spears were thrust into the sides and cracked through the carapace. The drow screamed again and without needing to be ordered the binder tossed at it a blinding orb – sunlight caught and woven. Sniffing a kill, the slayers on the sides unsheathed their straight long sword and prepared for killing blows.

With a deafening wail the drow's carapace of darkness detonated outwards.

Razin paled as he saw what the wave of sorcery had wrought: the four slayers who'd been closest were half-gone. Their leathers and armaments untouched, but flesh and bone outright evaporated where the drow's darkness had touched them. A grey-skinned silhouetted landed in the snow, harpoons still in its arm, and fresh darkness bubble out of its skin as it laughed. Blood cooling, Razin Tanja sheathed his blade and dismounted. From his horses' side he claimed three long knives, which he hooked to his belt, and a small orb of ivory. The binder glanced at him, face tainted with worry at the way their hunt had turned debacle in the span of a single breath.

"Distract it when you can," Razin simply said.

He rolled his shoulder – still tender from goblin steel – and approached at a measured pace. The remaining three slayers were struggling to bring down the creature before its armour-like darkness could be formed anew, two abandoning their rope for barbed javelins to be thrown. The drow snapped out to catch one with its teeth, breaking the steel tip with a loud crunch before spitting out the remains, and the other javelin went straight through. Or so it seemed, for it never emerged on the other side. A heartbeat later it was spat back out the drow's chest headfirst and took the slayer who'd thrown it right in the eye. Razin winced at the sight.

"Ready, Tanja?" a voice spoke at his side.

The heir to Malaga glanced there and his brow rose. Aquiline Osenia wore no mail not plate, only a tanned vest of leather going up to her throat. Trousers of thick dark linen with small plates of steel sown on went down into good leather boots, though it was not the clothes or even the slayer armaments on her back that were the most striking part of the ensemble. Beautiful patterns of green and bronze war paint covered not only her face but every

inch of her skin. Lady Aquiline looked half a fae, though one born for the hunt. Razin calmly unsheathed his sword.

"Shall we, Osen?" he shrugged.

The barest trace of a smile touched her lips.

"Let's," she agreed.

The drow roared, and under the golden Light of the lantern they advanced.

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Laurence de Montfort stumbled.

She fell to her knees, hands trembling, as she began choking on the acid filling her lung while it burned her from the inside. Her sword slipped her fingers, and Rumena smoothly closed the distance. Its sound in the song was too light, the Saint thought. It was another fake, like the one she'd killed earlier. What a cautious bastard. Mind sharpening through the atrocious pain she was in, the Saint of Swords joined her will to the current of Creation. **Decree**, act and outcome in the same word. Tariq had told her this was a domain, once, but he did not understand it like she did. It was simply her own faith, a tenet made absolute and so perfectly harmonized with Creation. She had decreed that 'Laurence de Montfort is a sword', and so she was. It'd taken her decades, to make this as true a part of her as flesh and breath, but in the far north fighting the rattlings she had shaped that decree so that it covered every part of what she was. She could have decreed more, she knew, other rules and laws, but the purity of a single truth would have been lost.

A sword did not need to breathe, neither did Laurence de Montfort.

A sword did not burn or dissolve, neither did Laurence de Montfort.

But a sword cut, and so did Laurence de Montfort.

The shadow-thing that the drow had sent to approach her was split in two by a finger and she rose with her fingers steady and holding her sword. What had once been within her was gone, for it no longer aligned with the decreed truth of Creation, and as it had never been there no wounds were taken. Standing in front of her, hands folded within sleeves, the painted drow waited patiently. The eye she'd cut out was growing back – it'd ripped out the wounded flesh so it would, the song told her.

"Come, drow," the Saint of Swords said. "Let's see if your faith is strong enough even I cannot cut it."

"Come," Rumena replied, "before *one* of us dies of old age."

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Razin's knife slid uselessly against the dark obsidian-like carapace, failing to find purchase even after the third time he stabbed at it. The drow beneath shook him off effortlessly, not even paying attention, and the dark-haired warrior only half-succeeded at landing on his feet: he fell backwards after touching the ground, cursing, and the only thing that saved his life was that without a pause he rolled to the side. A bladelike appendage punctured where he'd been a moment earlier, leaving a smoking hole in the ground.

"The eyes," Aquiline yelled. "Aim for the eyes."

She was not speaking to him but to their binder, who tossed a bolt of hazy heat close enough to the drow's eyes that it drew back. Razin rose to his feet, rolling his still-tended shoulder to limber it. What had once been a humanoid carapace silhouette in a carapace, if a large one, had since grown into something rather more monstrous. Two crablike legs made of a strange hardened darkness not unlike obsidian now held up an armoured torso of the same, while what had once been arms had turned to something reminiscent of an insect. Like a mantis, Razin thought, and damnably quick. Of the three harpoons that had first stuck the drow, only two now remained though with the way it has shifted they now protruded from its shoulder instead of arm.

Aquiline Osená ran across the snow, a flicker of fluid movement and even as the drow struck out she caught the end of a rope in hand. *Slayer, silent-sworn*, he thought. Moonlight and miracle's cast caught on her clenching arm, painted bronze and green, as she tugged at the monster and threw a barbed javelin at its eye. *Grace and terror, peerless in hunt*, Razin remembered from the Anthem of Smoke, and the sight was as burned into his eye. It had not occurred to him, until then to find beauty in either the act or the woman. Now he could not unsee it, and something in him trembled at the knowledge. The javelin caught the corner of the drow's eye, and it screamed in pain, but there was a cry — the last of the remaining slayers was torn through, and thrown at Aquiline. The rope slipped her grip, and Razin began moving without thought. The lantern had fallen off her belt so he tossed his knife aside and snatched it up even as she rose to her feet behind him.

"Take the kill," he called out as he passed her.

The drow's obsidian eyes turned to him and it struck without hesitation, bladed limb tearing at the ground as Razin laughed and danced to the side. No binder he, even if the Binder's Blood, but he had spent hours in the training yards to make up for that shame. Now those hours were sparing his life. It leaned forward

to strike again, and this time they were so close there could be no true avoidance – the drow ripped through bone and shoulder flesh, but the heir to Malaga had avoided just enough to...

"Honour to the Blood," Razin Tanja hissed, and smashed the Light-bearing lantern in its face.

A heartbeat later, Lady Aquiline's sword went straight through the heart of the flare of light as she screamed a war cry, and wet black blood sprayed on Razin's face. The creature fell back, its darkness collapsing on the snow to reveal a slumping corpse with a sword through the forehead, and the lord and lady fell exhausted on their knees to each other's side.

"Lady Aquiline," he greeted her. "You made a good kill."

"We, Lord Razin," she replied, eyes hooded. "We made a good kill."

The look shared overshadowed even the bleeding pain of his shoulder, for a moment, but it turned to horror when with a wet squelch the drow's body began to heal and spat out the sword. It began to rise, as did they, but it paused as if struck

Far above them all, light had begun to bloom.

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It was time.

The Grey Pilgrim could feel it: if he acted now it would be an intervention safeguarding those in his charge. Sitting with his eyes closed, he could still feel the growing weight on his shoulders. The vigor – always sweet, always passing – of a younger man filling his body. The writ of this had not been offered to him by the Choir, it was no tragedy unfolding caught by Mercy's myriad eyes and made known to his own. This tale had been of his own making from beginning and it would still be that when the end came, Gods forgive him for it. With every death the burden on his Role, the stakes of his existence in this story, had increased. Now, though his spirit felt like a spine on the eve of cracking, he had the necessary reach. It was a bitter irony that the deaths of soldiers had been the balance's harsh swing in his favour yet the true burden he must bear had been of no consequence at all. Catherine Foundling had given the slip to every story that could bind her to an *ending*, and so left herself only one path: reign eternal, consumed and consuming, a herald of long prices and hard measures having made mantle of the woes of Creation.

The Black Queen had wriggled out of every binding and shackles, broken the sole irons he'd once set around her wrists. No redemption could be demanded by one who had forsaken her, not

even for a greater good, and the broken oaths between them were yet another finger on the scales. Not so heavy, he knew, that it would doom him. But she'd be always a little luckier, a little harder to reach so long as that imbalance stood. In a less dangerous villain that would be merely inconvenient, but this one? She'd always had an astonishing intuition in those matters, and whatever else the Everdark had made of her it had also made her *cautious*. Patient enough to take a step back and let others take the lead if it meant offering fewer openings to foes like the Pilgrim.

"I wish that you had answers for me," he said. "That you knew whether in my efforts to prevent our doom I am forging the very instrument of it."

The Ophanim murmured in his ear, mournfully contrite. Before, in Callow, the Choir of Mercy had been able to see through the skein of her. Where threads may lead, choices that may or may not be. And with his own eyes, his sight of what moved the Queen of Callow, together they had considered what she might yet become. Now, though? There were entities at her shoulders that did not brook such perusals. And what entities they were, colossal towers of misery and murder stitched together with prayers to Below. Goddesses of wails and horror, swimming in a shadowy sea of their own kind's blood. The Black Queen had clasped hands with these abominations, and from what he could tell done so willingly. Knowing what he knew, not knowing what he did not, what choice was there but the ugly business of this night? If there was even a single chance that Catherine Foundling would be the keystone to the death of Calernia, Tariq must ensure it would not come to be. And so now Tariq was forced to countenance this hour of barren deaths, lest a thousandfold worse might be allowed to pass.

The Grey Pilgrim opened his eyes, looking up at the darkness before the dawn.

"We have sung together before, old friends," he softly said. "Will you sing with me, once more?"

Murmurs, worried.

"I will not die," he reminded them. "It will hurt me, this is true."

His gaze moved ahead at the battle where so much blood was being spilled.

"Yet so does that," he said. "And this will end it."

Comforting hands on his shoulder, and with that assent he let out a weary breath.

"Pilgrim of grey," Tariq sang.

The Ophanim hummed along, a choir distant and melancholy. A chorus of ever-weeping eyes who were charged with ever seeing the worst of Creation, yet still ground their fingers to the bone saving what they could. The hummed along to the Anthem of Smoke, that song that was the flesh and blood of Levant.

"Fleet-foot, dusk-clad, the wanderer,
His stride rebellion and stirring ember."

It did not feel like peace, when they hummed with him. They were no servants of that, neither Choir nor man. Theirs was the duty of steering the world away from the brink, and none could be spared in the observance of that work. It was an endless procession of bitter choices, of lesser evils in the service of greater goods they might never witness. It felt like a lullaby, gentle and wistful but never without disquiet.

"In his grasp the light of a morning star,
Tattered his throne, tattered his war," they sang together.

They called it the dawn star, in the Free Cities. In Procer it was morning's herald, in Ashur the sun's prow. In Levant, though, in the land of Tariq's birth, though it had once been known as the morning star it was no longer called that. It was said that the Proceran prince who'd ruled the southern reaches of the Dominion had laughingly told the people that naught by the sky falling would ever make the Principate surrender its conquered prize. It was said, too, that the first of the Grey Pilgrims had been among those listening. A mere boy, when he heard, but he never forgot. And after Above clad him in grey, the boy become a man returned to that laughing prince and, plucking a star from the night sky, lit the first bonfire of rebellion from the tyrant's palace. In Levant for many years now it had been known as the pilgrim's star: the peregrine. Tariq was not the first Grey Pilgrim to wield it, and he would not be the last. From the first of his Bestowal, there had been one inheritance and in the wake of the song the old man softly offered it up to the sky.

"Shine," the Peregrine said, and the peregrine did.

Blood burning from the Light coursing through like a river, Tariq gasped out in pain and only the merciful hand on his shoulder kept him from collapsing. Miracle and aspect wove themselves together, the single greatest working of his life, and his vision dimmed with exhaustion. Above him the morning star hung in the sky, and with it dawn had come. The drow broke, creatures of the night that they were, and the battlefield held its breath.

"Now," Tariq croaked. "Now you have no choice, child, lest they sweep through your servants."

She would bring nightfall where he had brought dawn, and their powers would find each other matched. It would be neither day nor

night but an eclipse in passing, and the Black Queen would be as shattered by the scale of it as he was. It would be a stalemate, a draw, and Gods willing the pattern of three would be set in stone – as would be the victory promised to him, so grimly earned.

Instead the air tore open in front of Tariq and a man rode through.

No, not a man. One of the fair folk, astride a steed that seemed half marble and ice, and that fae's eyes were cold where his smile was warm and friendly. His red hair was like a streak of flame as he inclined his head in greeting, hand never nearing the sword at his belt.

"Pilgrim of grey, I bring to you greeting and missive from my most tenebrous of lieges," the fae said.

The Pilgrim rose to his feet, slowly, and took the scroll being offered to him. It carried the royal seal of Callow, he saw. He broke it, took the parchment from the leather and after reading the single paragraph rocked back like he'd been hit. Surrender. Catherine Foundling was offering unconditional surrender. It would be a great victory, if he accepted. *Victory.*

Gods damn that vicious child.

nick smith

I commented before about this chapter being in the wrong spot on the sidebar, you guys fixed that but now the Congregation I chapter is at the bottom with the most recent chapters lmao! Something weird must have happened with the site formatting, wanted to give another heads up.

Tim Dempsey

That was hilarious and very good timing

dalek955

I'm sure the irony is not accidental that Pilgrim sees Catherine evading every story that could remove her from the throne and surviving to rule forever as a villain queen, when her own goal is to kick the Named off of every throne and take away many of the tools of villain rulers.

Oh, and the people wondering which of Saint and Ranger is a knockoff of the other have their answer now.

mavant

Well, we already knew Ranger was a few hundred years older...

dalek955

You know that and I know that, but I've seen commenters stating confidently that Ranger learned everything she knows from Saint.

tynam

Part of Pilgrim's defining flaw is that even though he's furious at Cat evading every single story the Good team tries to throw at her, it hasn't even occurred to him that she might be doing the same thing to team Evil.

Luis

This is the bet not the knife.

Insanenoodlyguy

No, it's the knife. There's no bet here. No matter what decision he makes, she wins.

pault52

This is one of my favorite chapters to date. The combat between the drow and the saint was so epic, the further development of cat's plan is awesome, and that grey pilgrim scene is so great.

Andrew Mitchell

What a great chapter this is. There's now 434 comments which is an amazing level of positive discussion and engagement.

Interlude: And Pay Your Toll

"Oh no, please stop wrecking everything! Like that urn in the corner, with the djinn bound inside. No, the other one, with golden – oh, woeful day, this wanton destruction of priceless artefacts is so inconvenient to me personally and absolutely no one else."

– Dread Emperor Irritant I, ‘defending’ the palace of the High Lord of Aksum from heroes

Tariq did not reply. He knew hesitation was herald of defeat, in contests such as this, yet he could not hasten to answer. Not with the stakes at play here – he, this army, this entire continent, none of them could afford a misstep here and now. A surrender had been offered, but could still be either accepted or refused.

The Pilgrim’s first and deeper instinct was to accept. If it was a lie she’d offered, a trick being played, then accepting would allow him to turn this spin of the yarn on her. A false surrender, when he still had the forces in motion that he’d sent out? The backlash of such a ploy would be bloody for the villain who’d played it. But that was the wrong way to think about this, he decided, because it assumed that Catherine Foundling was a fool. And she wasn’t, unfortunately. She was reckless often and at times arrogant, but also frightfully prone to learning from her mistakes – those, at least, that were not born from the flaws at the very heart of her. It was possible, he considered, that she’d pit providence against the weight of his broken oath. Wagered that events would not tumble forward in a way that allowed him to uncover the conspiracy, should there be one. Yet it was not a good wager, for her, since taking it at all meant she’d fallen into the role of the Grand Alliance’s villainous adversary. No it was nearly certain that the offer of surrender was genuine, which only made it all the more dangerous.

It would break the pattern of three, if he accepted. A victory for her, in claiming back her teacher’s body through ploy, and then a much greater victory for him this night, in scaring her into surrender – that would be the end of it. It was a draw that would take Tariq where he needed to go, arm him with the only blade left that might still be capable of killing Catherine Foundling should it prove necessary. If she’d opposed him more directly in this battle, even made act of presence, the Pilgrim would have come forward as well and leaned on the weight of their pattern to nudge events towards the certainty of a draw. But she’d remained veiled, hidden and plotting. *And she saw right through me*, Tariq thought, abashed. For all that he had told himself he had the measure of the Black Queen, evidently he’d been wrong. If he was to avoid compounding his mistakes, he must discard that belief and approach the situation with fresh eyes. Catherine Foundling had caught sight of the pattern of three he’d spent so long arranging, and most likely suspected the importance of it to him. Should this, then, be seen as an olive branch?

She would not allow a foe the power over her Tariq had sought to obtain, yet she understood why he found the need for it. And so a concession was made, surrender unconditional on the field, offering to his old hands the thread that might just untangle the

thorny knot that was the confluence in Iserre. A knife bared, his purpose denied but then a lesser prize offered. It fit, as it would not be the first time that the Black Queen dealt with others using that blunt but potent approach.

Like an old mule he'd been approached, and this was the apple dangled: an end to Iserre that would be to the benefit of the Grand Alliance, in matters earthly. With refusal, then, would come the stick that would be used to thrash him. A more provisional offer might have allowed the Pilgrim grounds with which to refuse, but *unconditional surrender* meant that the burden of consequence had been passed entirely to him. There could, to be put it bluntly, be no better offer. If it were a trick that would not matter, for to be Good was not to be the kind of fool that fell into every trap: even devils could cite the Book for their purposes. But if it was not a trick, as he believed, then by refusing Tariq would be tossing to the side every sacrifice made tonight. Every death that had pressed down on his shoulders so he could bring morning's light to the sky. Would the miracle wane and die? The Ophanim murmured uncertainly in his ear, even they unknowing. He suspected not, but it would at least be made fragile. Judged hollow by Creation, and so become exactly that. The Black Queen's answer, the coiling darkness that lay at the heart of her camp and had been carefully woven into a theurgic ritual, would rip through it. Perhaps reverse the situation entire, unleashing her drow anew in the fullness of the might.

The Grey Pilgrim was no leader of warbands but he had known wars and felt the power of the Everdark's children fill the night. If they struck out again with their strength restored, the battle would resume with her forces at a distinct advantage. A second victory for Catherine Foundling would end the pattern of three just as surely, which meant his choice was now effectively between two different unmakings of a plan that had taken more than a year to carry out. Exasperation welled up at the thought. All that toil, broken within months of her return to the surface as if on a whim. Tariq leaned into the emotion, let it course through his veins and then pass out of him. There was no use to growing angry at being outplayed: on the contrary, that kind of fragility tended to lead Bestowed into a spiral of decline. He'd seen too many times to count. Mind clear again, the Grey Pilgrim considered what the Black Queen wanted him to believe was his choice. Victory for him, on her terms. Likely victory for her, still on her terms. The old man's brow creased as he considered it. There was something about this... theatricality that rubbed him wrong. For a villain, he thought, Catherine Foundling had always been admirably reluctant to sacrifice soldiers on false pretences.

What she considered those to be was where the villainy began, but that was another story. *Ah*, Tariq hummed. *So there it is.* The

Black Queen had spent lives in her service, those of the drow, by sending them into the fight suspecting a miracle would snatch away their powers and leave them exposed. Unusual for her, and she would not do it without a reason. So why *had* the drow been sent, he mused? To force his hand with the bringing of dawn, certainly, but there'd been no need for such a brutal display as what had taken place. Thousands dead, so quickly, was not war: it was a point being made. They had been sent to make an impression. To swat down multitudes like flies and add weight to the choice the Pilgrim must now make. To create, in a word, urgency. Such a thing would only be necessary, he decided, if there was a deception afoot.

"Where is your liege, Hunstman?" the Grey Pilgrim asked.

"Another question was not the answer sought, Peregrine," the fae languidly replied. "Your verdict?"

She wasn't in Creation, Tariq grasped then. Admittedly the surrender offered had only been for those under her command and not the Queen of Callow herself so her presence was not strictly required. But if she wasn't here, how did she expect to bring down dawn should he refuse her surrender? There might be other drow with power enough, but none with the requisite *weight* to carry it out. If the Hierophant had still been at her side then Tariq would not have considered the matter further, but the boy currently was in the depths of Arcadia making a ruinous altar of his grief. The Wild Hunt could not wield miracles of darkness, and who did that leave? No one but Bestowed or the most powerful of warlocks should be able to weave a working rival to his, leaving the confines of story, and the only place where the Black Queen would have been able to encounter such a helper since her disappearance should be the Everdark. It was, he reflected, deeply unlikely anyone but Catherine Foundling on her side could bring an end to his dawn – her patron murderesses notwithstanding, for should they intervene directly so would the Choir of Mercy. Old mule that he was, he'd been offered the apple and the stick. But it appeared that the stick might be little more than glamour, a shadow on the wall. If he refused, and dawn held, then...

That would be contingent on her failing to return, but her absence was telling: whatever her scheme, it required her to see to something else. Instead of an olive branch extended, he thought, this might instead be the affected nonchalance of a villain raising the stakes on a bad hand. Trying to scare the opposition into retreating by displaying unflinching certainty. The pieces were there, Tariq thought, for this to be the answer. Yet it was not *certain*, and in assuming that the Black Queen was gambling he would be doing the very same thing. If the only consideration was whether it was possible to obtain a promised victory on Catherine Foundling, then this was the choice to be

made. Refusal, and pushing through. That was not, however, the only consideration. He could it be, when Keter was on the march? Could he truly justify, the Grey Pilgrim asked himself countenance refusing such an offer of peace? Refuse it when it delivered all he asked save for a knife at the throat of the very woman offering it – a knife, it must be said, that he now stood little chance of obtaining no matter his decision. The scope of the scales, Tariq thought, were close to beyond his ability to grasp.

The Black Queen that could be would be the end of Calernia. Between the Kingdom of the Dead and the Kingdom of the East, the continent would be made a ruin of endless war. Yet in combating the Black Queen that could be, was he blinding himself to the truth of the Black Queen that was?

Could there be any justification for the tossing away of the only pattern of three he would ever have with Catherine Foundling? There might not be another way to kill her if she further grew beyond Tariq's means. By staying his hand he might be letting slip an entity he could no longer put down.

In refusing an offer of peace from Callow when the Dead King was on the march, was he not aiding the Hidden Horror regardless of all other concerns?

Innocents were going to die.

Innocents *had* died, some by his own design.

The Ophanim were at his side, helping his tired old bones stand straight, and though in their whispers there was sorrow there was also something other. Trust. They trusted him, the murmurs said, to make the choice. They had seen as he saw, tread in his wake for the seemingly endless days and night he had been the Peregrine. They'd been at his shoulder for his every mistake, his every bitter triumph, and still they trusted. Sometimes that was the only reason he woke with dawn, the knowledge that hand in hand they could still do more. Sometimes that was the weight that pressed down on his chest and choked his lungs, the strain of that unearthly trust. Tariq had tread with angels in his wake for so long he'd forgot how it had felt before.

"Should you not have answers?" he asked, voice choked. "Are you not the Watchers Kindly, the burning wisdom of many eyes?"

Old friends, he thought, *help me. Help me see, for once more I am lost*. But they had no answers for him, would not take the burden from his shoulders. But they stood at his side, holding up his tired from, for in the end they were the Choir of Mercy and though they could not save him they would at least share in his suffering. Tariq thought of the city of his birth, suddenly, of that summer so long ago when the plague had choked it with death.

In those days where it had all been so simple, when healing could be the sum of him. When he'd not been charged with clawing Creation back out of the darkness' hands, just to bring a little light into it. Tariq, who had last felt true warmth before the final breath of the woman who'd used to smile as she called him of no import, looked up at the sky and watched the star that shone there. Somewhere along the way, he thought, he had gone from bringing small lights into this world to bringing great ones.

Sometimes he wondered if Creation was truly better for it.

"Do you really," he murmured, "trust me to make that choice?"

The Ophanim thrummed. Agreement, absolute in that way only angels could be. The Grey Pilgrim turned to the Black Queen's messenger.

"Tell the Queen of Callow I accept her surrender," he said.

—

"This," the Kairos Theodosian mused, "appears to be a goat."

Hakram kept a calm look on his face, remaining as dignified as an orc could be while hanging upside down tied by the feet. The Tyrant's outriders had clapped him in chains and dragged him back to the League's army in them regardless of his claim to be an envoy from the Queen of Callow, though it wasn't until the Tyrant himself arrived that Adjutant was forced to watch a procession of gargoyles drag in a tall tripod and trip over each other assembling it for what had to be at least half an hour. He'd then been hung upside down from the centrepiece, and only now had his gag been removed.

"Greetings, Lord Tyrant," he serenely said. "I am the Adjutant, here as envoy from your ally the Queen of Callow."

"She wrote some very unkind things about me, Hakram," the Tyrant accusingly said.

He tapped at the parchment his soldiers had taken from the orc's affairs along with the goat, the same missive he'd both penned in Catherine's name and been charged with bringing to the League when given the signal. The process had been more tedious than difficult: the barren plain this corner of Arcadia had been turned into meant he'd been able to see their columns arriving from miles off, though that hadn't quickened his journey in the slightest.

"I am sure," Hakram lied, "that they were meant in a spirit of friendship."

The goat he'd had confiscated looked at him and bleated, which the orc had to admit was fair. It'd been a hard sell. No one seemed to have thought to leash the creature, so it was ambling around this formal war council of the League of Free Cities at will and tracking cheap white paint over the furniture.

"What kind of things?" a tanned woman in dark robes asked, leaning forward with interest.

"Magister Zoe," the Tyrant gasped. "That is most inappropriate to ask. That man is a known spy, he could be peddling all sorts of calumnies."

The formal war council of the League of Free Cities, Hakram thought, was about as much as flaming wreck as he'd expected given the fractious nature of that alliance and the general reputation of the Tyrant heading it. The orcs jaw tightened when his suspicion was confirmed and the woman who'd spoken was revealed as a magister of Stygia – what a dignified word for a *slaver* – thought at least it made placing the others easier. The gangly old man at the very right of the long table who was putting the proceedings to ink was likely to be the representative from Delos, a member of its Secretariat. The young ruler of Nicae, Basileus Leo Trakas, was recognizable as much from the formal apparel as the drawings the Jacks had obtained. The two richly-dressed men glaring daggers at each other should be the rival Exarchs of Penthes, the last two survivors of the shambles the Carrion Lord had made of that city's ruling class. A middle-aged man in ill-fitting armour was looking rather confused and kept looking over his shoulder like he expected someone to be standing there. The representative from Bellerophon, Hakram suspected. That left only one city without a seat at the table, though someone had nailed what looked like a tome of the Book of All Things to the back of a chair just to the left of the Delosi scribe. Interestingly, the Hierarch himself did not seem to be in attendance.

"Lord Deadhand, it is most uncouth of you to be staring so at the honourable delegate from Atalante," the Tyrant suddenly chided him.

He was, Hakram realized with horrified fascination, talking about the book.

"I apologize," Adjutant said. "I have never seen anyone from Atalante before."

Kairos Theodosian grinned, like he was mischievous boy, and leaned forward before lowering his voice to a conspiratorial pitch.

"It's actually the Book of All Things nailed to a chair," the Tyrant of Helike confessed. "I just have a gargoyle read a verse once in a while, I don't think anyone's noticed the difference."

Before a heartbeat had passed, Hakram had decided how to tailor his approach. Like dealing with a drunk Catherine, if the jokes about hanging people who irritated her were actually deadly serious.

"Have you considered having a puppet made?" Adjutant replied in the same tone.

The Tyrant snorted out a giggle, his bad arm trembling under his robes. Hakram kept his distaste off his face: the villain smelled like sickness and crazy, both of the dangerous kind.

"I like you," Kairos Theodosian smilingly said, but then the smile vanished like mist in morning sun. "Is what I imagine she thought I'd say, anyway."

Hakram remained calm. The boy was unstable, but not without cunning, and Catherine had already taken the measure of him. She would not have sent him here, at the Tyrant's mercy, if she thought it would get him killed.

"She does seem to enjoy taking up broken toys, your mistress," the Tyrant of Helike mused. "A filthy habit that, if you'll forgive my language."

The villain cocked his head to the side, his sanguine red eye unblinking.

"But by the looks of you, Hakram, you were debris long before she got her hands on you," he idly continued. "Magister Zoe, what do you call it again when they just *look* like a person but lack every other meaningful characteristic of one?"

"Foreigners," the Stygian drily replied.

The Tyrant of Helike shot Adjutant a friendly, complicit look with a grin that good as whispered *see what I have to deal with*, like moments earlier the villain hadn't been feeling for a weakness with his words like water poured on glass in search of fault. This was, Hakram thought, a man as dangerous as he was mad. He smiled back, keeping his fangs hidden by his lips.

"You really are a piece of work," the Tyrant of Helike admiringly said.

"Pieces, by now," Hakram replied without missing a beat.

The madman cackled loudly, and even a few of the others smiled.

"So tell me about this goat," Kairos Theodosian said, "and why it looks like it was half-heartedly painted just before it was brought here."

"And in wickedness does Evil sow the seeds of its own defeat," a gargoyle mewled, staring up at a page of the Book of All Things.

Everyone ignored it.

"Your ignorance is understandable, my lord Tyrant, given the recent isolation of Callow," Hakram said. "This is not a goat: he is, in fact, a purebred Liessen charger."

Stares moved to the goat, which bleated fearfully at the sudden spurt of attention and ran under the table – she smeared white paint all over the robes of the Stygian magister before being chased away with a kick, which Adjutant silently approved of.

"She has udders," Basileus Leo patiently said. "Goat udders. Because she is a goat."

"Leo, you'll cause a diplomatic incident at this rate," the Tyrant replied, sounding appalled. "Besides, my dear ally the Queen of Callow has personally sent me a mount. How could it not be a splendid destrier of Callowan stock?"

Interesting, Hakram thought once more. It had been one thing for him to call the Tyrant of Helike an ally, another for the king to admit it. The orc had been under the impression that while there was an elected Hierarch, foreign diplomacy was their strict prerogative and to go against that would be treason. Yet none of the others seemed bothered by the implicit admission in the slightest – which meant either the Tyrant's plot were known and permitted, or the Hierarch's authority was a sham and Kairos Theodosian was the true ruler of the League. Something many had suspected, including Hakram himself, but did not align with Catherine's own impression of their relationship.

"I wash my hands of this," the Basileus sighed. "Do as you will, Tyrant."

"So, Catherine wants us to take a crack at the Grand Alliance," Lord Kairos said, completely ignoring the other ruler in favour of Hakram. "Interesting offer."

There was a pause.

"I refuse," he added nonchalantly. "So, now that that's done with, tell me true: if you had to be drowned, would you prefer it was in wine or in oil?"

"We were afraid you would hesitate to act, given the circumstances," Hakram amicably said. "No grudge will be held, I assure you."

"Circumstances," Lord Kairos mildly repeated. "Such as?"

"The battle ought to be over by now," Adjutant said. "The Grey Pilgrim will have woven a miraculous star and broken the strength of the Firstborn, forcing my queen's unconditional surrender."

A pregnant pause.

"She doesn't have that much give in her," the Tyrant said, red eye narrowing.

"My lord," Hakram grinned, baring his teeth, "I penned the letter for her."

The villain peered at him closely, as if looking into his soul, and the orc had to refrain from flinching. There was something... discomfoting about the intensity of that mismatched gaze.

"It appears someone will have to saddle my goat," Kairos Theodosian mused, "for we now must ride out in glorious battle."

pagesbe

Is that character development for Taric I'm seeing? Sniff, he's growing up, I'm so proud.

And Tyrant remains an absolute delight.

Oshi

Not really, he's been consistently the same throughout. This is Catherine reading him perfectly and apparently using the idiot Hierarch/Tyrant to keep them from really winning.

pagesbe

Wait, are you arguing that this isn't development for Taric? The guy just compromised when there was still a chance he could have come out completely on top, giving up on something he really really wanted. This has never happened in previous chapters, where he gave up something he really wanted that he strictly speaking didn't have to give up.

It'd be one thing if he figured she was basically waiting for him to refuse, like he did at first. But then he realized (or

decided, not positive if he's right yet) that she wasn't around to take advantage of that kind of mistake, so there was a chance he could get away with it. But he decided not to make the gamble. I'm kind of proud of him for it, honestly.

Rook

Tariq has always had the greater good as his top priority, whether or not he personally wins is barely even secondary. I don't know where people keep getting this idea of him a character that puts his own wants or victory first.

The reason he escalates so hard to win is because he genuinely, down to his very core with no pretence, believes his role is to try saving as much of creation from suffering as possible by working with the Ophanim. It's not a pretentious excuse, the dude literally believes it. Whether he makes mistakes in hindsight or not trying to do that is another story, and he's as much as outright admitted that he can and has made mistakes there in the past, during the battle of the camps arc. But for the same reason Catherine couldn't stop even though she spent the first three volumes doing nothing but leaving smoking craters behind her of everything she was trying to save, he keeps trying anyway because he genuinely believes what he's doing will eventually create a Better World(TM), just like Catherine.

Accepting the compromise is exactly in line with the previous character that he's had before. Above everything, his personal priority is what means the least suffering at the end of it all, and that's exactly the apple that Catherine dangled in front of him.

It's not the pilgrim 'growing up' or changing character, the dude has been and still is a genuine selfless Hero since before Catherine & co were even born.

It's result of Catherine growing up so much, to the point where she accurately read one of the most dangerous Heroes on the continent, and gave him bait he couldn't refuse at the cost of her own personal victory.

Kissaten

The type of self-righteousness Pilgrim has is personal wants in every way that matters. Hanno doesn't make a choice therefore he is just through Choir making choice for him, William got his edgy antiheroics and redemption and pushed his personal agenda every step of the way, and Pilgrim is just the same, he views bites of his conscience as a proof enough that he is fundamentally right. Cat once said "unrepentant villainy", all heroes are guilty of "unrepentant heroics". Pilgrim actually believes that just

because Ophanim and Gods Above may forgive him he is except from judgement of mortals; he is not bound to ANY treaties made with mortals if they are inconvenient. That's as unrepentant as you can get.

>The reason he escalates so hard to win is because he genuinely, down to his very core with no pretence, believes his role is to try saving as much of creation from suffering as possible by working with the Ophanim. It's not a pretentious excuse, the dude literally believes it.

It IS a pretentious excuse even if he believes that. He tried to pass his own judgement once, got burned and decided to surrender his freedom of mind completely and utterly. That's the thing about heroes, they don't have agency.

RanVor

Careful, expressing such views here is dangerous.

Novice

I genuinely wonder what's the point of writing such edgy comments.

RanVor

To get annoyed replies, of course.

[erraticerrata](#)

That's heading into trolling territory. Don't. I haven't had to moderate the comment section in about year, I'll get irritated if I have to start doing it again.

RanVor

It's a joke. Although I'm probably gonna leave soon anyway, so it matters little.

[erraticerrata](#)

There's literally an instance of you making a borderline comment two notches up. Claiming it's a joke doesn't really hold up to your behaviour for the last few chapters, which I find a shame because dissenting voices are what make discussions interesting. That said you're not being persecuted, you're having debates with others readers. If those debates get heated on either side that's fine, I've no intention of being involved so long as people remain broadly

civil. To make it clear, if you feel like you're being harassed then say as much and I'll step in. But so far you've been the one making indirect references to other commenters even when they're not involved in the conversation, not the other way around, so casting yourself as a victim being chased out isn't earning much sympathy on my end. People are just as allowed to disagree with you as you are with them.

RanVor

What? No, I meant no such thing. This community is starting to tire me, that's all. I need to distance myself from the comments. I'm sick of spending hours on clearing up misunderstandings. It's not fault of anybody in particular, I've just decided it will be better for everyone if I disappear for a time. I will not be missed; that's fine. I don't come here for approval anyway.

Root

So tell me exactly what his personal agenda is then, exactly? Because we know for a fact that his personal agenda involves horrid acts of selfishness such as letting his sisters killer go even if he believes it isn't justice, and murdering the he loves like his own because he believed preventing the war he'd bring would be a net good on creation.

It's not perfect, he admits it. He makes mistakes, he admits it. But we know for a fact – by a literal window into his thoughts by omniscient author-vision – that his real motives always come around to “how will this affect the continent as a whole”. Sorry, where's the pretence here?

The fact of the matter is, the Pilgrim gets a lot of flak for the sole purpose of being the antagonist to a popular protagonist. There's almost nothing you can accuse him of that doesn't apply in equal measure to Catherine, which is hilarious because the same people that call the Pilgrim a hypocritical ass will bend over backwards to come to the opposite conclusion about Catherine when she does almost the same shit for almost the same reasons.

Honestly the opinions on the characters are whatever, who cares if you like the pilgrim or hate him. But most of the hypocrisy is in the comments section, not the writing.

Kissaten

>Because we know for a fact that his personal agenda involves horrid acts of selfishness

That's exactly that – selfishness. I don't know how it's properly called, but it's a false equation of feeling pain and feeling right about what you have done. Kind of a more narrow argument of "i'm arguing against myself here therefore my position's stronger" type. Also, people do get joy from being in pain. Like, people in depression do dread sinking deeper and go there anyway, it's the same mechanism, but for religious folks those feelings get confused with religious feelings.

Reading the comments it kind of proves Cat's idea that Pilgrim is Black who was brainwashed by a Choir – where Black would say he is the most selfish person in the world because it's his personal rebellion against the Creation, half the world being a prop for the other half's victory, Pilgrim would ask Choir to support him morally, would claim he made sacrifices to prevent tragedies et cetera. Pilgrim would seek justification from the Heavens while Black would shrug and say that he isn't just to begin with.

That's why people in the comments call heroes hypocrites: not because they are antagonists but rather because they are just the same as villains but they get to narratively, but not factually, be proven right. You'd think that wouldn't be the case when there exist monsters like Dead King, but for every ancient horror there are tens and hundreds Saints of Swords born over horror's lifespan who are willing to sacrifice entire countries to kill The Enemy.

>his real motives always come around to "how will this affect the continent as a whole". Sorry, where's the pretence here?

Does he actually consider well-being of, say, orcs and goblins? Regardless of treaties forced on him by Cat. He is protecting the entire continent, after all.

Cicero

So religious people are masochists?

Religion is nothing but a pretense for masochists to self-flagellate themselves?

That's the argument you are going with?

Kissaten

No, i said was that moral high ground bought with suffering is a very common thing, more common for religious people (christians, or orthodox at least, have a cult of martyrdom), and it's oftentimes a desirable position to hold. It's kind of like a hero wishing that villain would break the truce because that would give him, hero, stronger position.

luminiousblu

You're applying an atheistic worldview to a world where that genuinely doesn't apply. The Grey Pilgrim is a Gandalf expy, he actually does have the moral license to do things that would be pretty dubious because he has the equivalent of Jesus whispering in his ear.

RanVor

I can't see how it "doesn't apply". There's no such thing as moral license. There is, however, plenty of hypocrisy

luminiousblu

Read up on some philosophy. It's impossible for me to discuss this with you when you've made up your mind that Tariq is a bad person and don't even pretend to care to take his point of view.

Given that the Ophanim want Greatest Good for the Greatest Number and given that they have a ridiculously massive point of view that no human can match, it makes perfect sense for Tariq to delegate his choice. That IS a choice. Knowing when to acknowledge that someone else knows better is humility and also practicality.

>he is except from judgement of mortals; he is not bound to ANY treaties made with mortals if they are inconvenient.

That's not what he says. The judgement of mortals is only ever relevant insofar as you care about them. This is true of all people. Catherine is being judged by people in the Empire and in Procer right this second. Cordelia knows that her uncle will never forgive her for her choices. Both of them still did what they thought was right, because treaties are treated as the scraps of paper they are if their costs outweigh their benefits in this world and in our own.

Hanno isn't a blind fuck puppet, he's a person who has realised that he doesn't know the answer, that perhaps humans are incapable of finding a perfect answer, but that there are beings which can see the answers. Hanno didn't know that fighting some snot-nosed kid would lead to him becoming an abusive father and even when told he didn't know what he should've done. But the Seraphim showed him what he lacked in knowledge and showed him that they knew what he didn't, so Hanno thinks, "alright, clearly I don't know enough – I should listen to people who demonstrably know way fucking more than me". He has made a choice, chosen to give up his choice. Is this the right choice? It doesn't matter, the fact that he consciously chooses to not judge and consciously chose to go to the Seraphim for guidance is enough to make him anything but a puppet. Their agency is to understand that maybe, for once, they don't know best. Maybe someone else does.

RanVor

I know Tariq's point of view and I consciously choose not to care. He believes he's right, so what? Everybody does. That doesn't mean anything. Only results matter.

I don't need anybody to tell me what to think. I can manage on my own, and I don't trust Ophanim to understand good as I do. They think in extremes. It takes one good look at history to see that nothing good ever comes from that.

luminiousblu

Nobody was asking if you personally agreed with Tariq and I could not care less whether or not you believe you can manage on your own, it's just staggering how hypocritical and biased people are when it comes down to it. Tariq is fighting for what he believes in, and believes that angels afforded a wider point of view see more than he does. You might think that the angels don't actually see more. That's great, but that has no bearing on how Tariq sees things and therefore no bearing on his morality or on his personality or development or lack thereof.'

>it takes one good look at history to see that nothing good ever comes from that,.
Let's make it count, who're you talking about?
Don't fall for the bait and take the easy out; I'm

already giving charity by not nitpicking about your usage of the word 'good'.

>only results matter

Correct, and the results aren't in. The point of the angels is that they see more of the results than you. That's why Tariq aligns himself with the Ophanim, because they genuinely do see more and can detect suffering when a normal man might not.

RanVor

Explain to me then, what is the basis you think I should judge Tariq on? Or maybe I should love him unconditionally?

luminiousblu

You should judge a character's personality without trying to suss out some sort of superior or inferior nature.

You should judge a character's competence on whether or not his actions make internal sense according to his personality as well as according to in-world facts.

If you want to judge morality there's not much to it, judge them based on what they want for the world and what their ultimate goals are.

If you want to judge a character's development you should compare their personality to former versions of themselves as presented.

Maybe stop thinking of things in terms of 'extremes' and simply look at the character as they are, without trying to pass judgement on every little thing according to the logic of our world instead of their world. You're the one presenting a false dichotomy here, between judging Tariq according to hypersubjective, illogical standards and simply 'loving him unconditionally'.

RanVor

"judge them based on what they want for the world" Here's where you're wrong. I refuse to see evil as good because it's done with good intentions. Intentions don't matter, results do, and the tally of the dead speaks for itself.

luminiousblu

If the results are all that matter then I'm pretty sure that Catherine is the one directly responsible for more deaths than Tariq, at least in the course of the story, considering she started and enabled the entire rebellion arc, by extension Akua, by extension the Crusade, and by extension the Dead King. You'll object to this. I'll completely disregard it.

If the results that will come to be matter, and so Catherine gets Liesse across, then Tariq arguably stopped Catherine from turning into Winter Queen and also set into motion the Akua Redemption Arc. You need to stop trying to think you see more than the things that canonically, within the story, are shown to see very, very far.

Also hold the fuck up, are you actually talking good and evil as in real life? We're not playing D&D, drop the pretence. You already bailed on giving historical examples, I'll have you bail on your moral high horse too. Stop being 14.

RanVor

I stopped being 14 a long time ago, thank you very much.

Catherine is responsible for many deaths and for those she must pay in the end. She shouldn't, however, be forced to pay for the deaths she is not responsible for. Also, she didn't cause the rebellion, she merely hastened it.

"Tariq arguably stopped Catherine"
VERY arguably.

Yes, I'm talking good and evil as in real life because that's the only good and evil there is. Everything else is just bells and whistles.

Finally, I'm under no obligation to explain myself to you and frankly, I don't give a single fuck about your opinion.

luminiousblu

You're defending yourself quite vehemently and seem to care quite a bit about expressing your own intellectual superiority, though. Grow up a little. Being an old man on the outside doesn't make you mature on the inside.

RanVor

You say that, but you're the one insulting me here.

Kissaten

To keep it short, you think that voluntary slavery isn't slavery at all. But the thing is, voluntary slavery leaves a man without free will, being considered a tool, leaves him disposable in a way things are and he is going to be exploited for master's profit. Voluntary slavery is still slavery..

luminousblu

Voluntary slavery isn't slavery literally by definition, you cannot be owned by someone else if at any point you can decide to take ownership back. You're leasing yourself to them because you believe in their abilities. By your fucking logic anyone who believes in any cause at all that someone else came up with or who follows a leader they trust is a slave. Hanno trusts that the Seraphim will not make him do things that are wrong. Hakram does whatever the fuck Catherine says because he trusts Catherine to make the right calls at the right time. You can't just invalidate most of humanity because they're not the point of view character who the story has made you sympathise with.

Kissaten

>Voluntary slavery isn't slavery literally by definition, you cannot be owned by someone else if at any point you can decide to take ownership back.

There is no slavery called "voluntary" which allows a slave to freely take ownership back at any point in time. On that note, changing masters doesn't stop you from being a slave. In any case, "voluntary slavery" was an example, a somewhat or well-known topic of discussion. "Voluntary submission is still submission" doesn't sound as good.

[Mental Mouse](#)

luminousblu: That would be true if the slave's free will was sacrosanct and inviolable. That's

not even true in our real world, let alone a High Fantasy world featuring **Speaking**, telepathy, magical bomb implants, glamours, story-fu, and of course mind-rotting angels and demons.

Once you've established control over someone, you can take measures to *make sure* they don't just decide to get up and leave. In the Guideverse, the simplest is weaving your own power through their body and soul. Doing that with Corruption may be obvious, but consider that Apathy is less so. Mercy and Judgement may not do such obvious damage, but if someone is permeated with such power, that *will* affect their personality and their choices.

I don't exempt Catherine here, but now she's found a patron whose moral background and character is similar to her own – like Catherine, Sve Noc grasped for dark power specifically because of an overwhelming opponent trying to dominate them. For the Foundling, that started with the Conquest – remember how despite Black's best efforts, by the time he got there the Occupation was already backing her into a corner?

[Liliet](#)

Voluntary slavery is an oxymoron.

Tariq, Hanno and William weren't and aren't slaves. All of them can stop doing what they're doing *any minute*. We have WoG that giving up on the "liberating Callow" goal would have broken William mentally – note that there's nothing in there about angels, it's the goal he's inherited from his sister in his anger against Praes and what it drove him to. Hanno literally does whatever the fuck he wants, he doesn't get any input from the angels even if he wants some – other than yes/no answers to 'do I kill this person'.

As for Tariq, we know several things for a fact about him:

- when he deviates from the desires of the Choir of Mercy, they stop talking to him. Simple as that. And he went for ten years like that, when rearing his nephew;
- he's not dependent on the angels for anything, he has his powers, his reputations and his sanity all on his own. Yes, he's grown reliant on their support, but that's like accusing a person of

being a 'voluntary slave' to their dog;
– speaking of dogs and other non-verbal animals, we've seen who makes the strategic calls in this partnership, and it's not the Ophanim. Even if Tariq would have preferred otherwise, the responsibility is ultimately on him for everything he does. They're the pit crew, not the bosses.

luminiousblu

Kissaten:

>There is no slavery called "voluntary" which allows a slave to freely take ownership back at any point in time.

This is a lot like saying "There is no star named Chuck Norris' Penis which is square and looks like a gay pride flag". Yes, there's no voluntary slavery which allows a slave to take back ownership at any point in time. That's because there's no such thing as voluntary slavery.

>Voluntary submission is still submission doesn't sound as good

Yes, because slavery is a loaded and emotionally charged word that is presumed to be evil by the word's existence, while submission isn't because the fact of the matter is that everyone submits to something. Even a Nietzschean ubermensch, an Camusian Absurdist or a Randian objectivist – even an Egoist – isn't free of submission, and most people can't even begin to approach the level of independence those guys have. Either most of humanity is 'voluntarily enslaved', or the point is moot.

Mental Mouse:

Free will being sacrosanct and inviolable is something that you can debate but generally speaking, just because you're influenced by outside factors doesn't mean you don't have free will. You either get to say that the world is deterministic and there is, has never been, and never will be free will, or that barring mind control you can't really rob someone of free will. You can restrict his choices, but each person and all people have their choices restricted from the day they're born, that's just how the world is. Human interaction is about restricting the choices of others and making attractive to them the choices you want them to take – even if that choice is as simple as 'keep talking to this

stranger next to me instead of going for another pint and leaving'.

Personality being affected by power freely taken and power freely used is still a result of that person's free will. Someone who decides to march to war and is broken by the experience isn't somehow without his free will. Someone who's raised in a culture which controls their personality – let's use a real life example and go for broke, North Korea (really any country in the world but let's use that one) – isn't without free will. Catherine using Winter voluntarily doesn't mean she has no free will. Free will is, if you simplify it down so we don't write theses on the question, the exercise of your personality, whatever that might be. Personality is always changing and shaped by outside events, you can't escape being moulded by your surroundings and the people or things you interact with.

The one exception, really, is Speaking. But Speaking is clearly something else entirely, we've seen Catherine get Spoke to, it's not what's happening with Hanno or even similar. It seems closest to me to having a religious experience or a super moving moment in real life, which, well, I wouldn't call that removing Hanno's free will. We can see his thought process. It's clear. It's clean. As far as I can tell it's even perfectly logical once you account for his personal values. He simply thinks the Seraphim really do know best, and follows them for that reason.

werafdsaew

The Ophanims are paperclip maximizers. Just because their reward function is a bit less dangerous than making paperclips, doesn't make them not dangerous.

[*Liliet*](#)

All angels are paperclip maximizers, which is why it's a great relief that they delegate actual decision making to heroes. Who might really wish angels were not paperclip maximizers but wiser mortals instead, like Tariq does here, but are stuck with their own and only their own ability to evaluate when to maximize paperclips and when not to.

[*Liliet*](#)

The tragedy of all this is that the angels still aren't helping.

Like, I mean, they are, a little. Tariq gets intel, Hanno gets yes/no answers to a very specific kind of yes/no question.

But we don't get well-intentioned agents with the ability to look at the whole board at once evaluating all the factors present and giving explicit directions to their representatives on it.

The heroes wish there were some. But there aren't.

caoimhinh

That has been explained many times before, Above can't intervene so directly because that would escalate the conflict and let Below intervene in the same manner.

Angels make plans and watch a lot of things that are happening, though they don't know everything (it has been stated many times that not even the Gods are omniscient even if they are vastly more knowledgeable). The thing is, they don't lay the entire plans to the Heroes and mortals to follow; instead, the Choirs nudge them into action and give specific guidance to a certain part of the plan while moving the rest in the dark or with different pieces of the board. But they never show all the plan to a single person, that would be too much direct intervention.

Of course, all of this happens while ultimately giving the final choice and duty of carrying it out to the Named. Heroes are technically still able to refuse, but they have been trained into obedience (like Tariq) or outright brainwashed (like William and Hanno) so in practice it's almost a certainty they will obey.

[Liliet](#)

You think angels are Bard.

I'm not seeing outcomes turning out in their favor, so I doubt it.

SINISTAR

I would argue that the presence of god entities does not necessarily mean they are *right*. It just means they have more power. Both "Good" and "Evil" have

positive sides, we've seen this. As such, a moral license cannot exist in an absolute state. I don't hate Grey Pilgrim, but he does **not** have an absolute moral license, he's merely been given a check by one side(when both sides are flawed).

Andrew Mitchell

THIS ^^

caoimhinh

He doesn't have a moral license, actually. While it is understandable that he may see the Angels' presence as confirmation that his choice is correct, that does not make it in fact correct or morally right.

"The Angels told me to do it", "It is God's will", "The Heavens command it", and other such phrases are just excuses for morally wrong actions committed by fanatics in search of a justification.

It's not applying an atheistic worldview, it's applying the truth of morals and principles: They don't change according to who says it. Raping is wrong, no matter if it's a human, satan or god who orders it. Murdering innocents is wrong, even if the Heavens give you permission to do it.

It could very well be one of the reasons why Narrative is working against this Crusade and it's representatives: this Crusade isn't actually righteous and it's morally wrong. It started due to earthly matters, it was aimed against the wrong targets due to ambition, and was later refused the chance of peace due to politics, spinning out of control due to fanaticism. So Catherine, as the one actually looking for peace without screwing everyone else, is the one with an arguably higher moral ground and is the Hero of this whole mess.

Now, Pilgrim does the things he does because he genuinely believes them to be for the greater good of alleviating suffering, always trying to look at the long run, that makes him a well-intentioned extremist. The problem with his conflict against Catherine is that he sees the potential threat she represents, so he moves to end it before it's too late. While we know that Cat has good intentions and we are willing to bet on her as she is the protagonist, from Pilgrim's POV she is an unstable child who is one misstep from going full Evil Overlord mode, and despite that being likely a death sentence for her the amount of death she would cause would be tremendous. When he last met her she was struggling against Winter's influence and now she sold

her soul to two goddesses of darkness and murder.
It is UNDERSTANDABLE why he wants to end Catherine and what he is doing, but that doesn't make it CORRECT. And he definitely doesn't have the moral high ground here, the Angels whispering at his shoulders change nothing.

[Tek](#)

"That's the thing about heroes, they don't have agency."

"Agency, boy," the abomination said, sounding amused.
"You have discarded yours like a petty bauble and never once considered the cost. Blind faith is such tempting notion, isn't it? Being able to believe in an answer, in a force, without ever questioning it. Certainty and blindness. I have always wondered at the difference."

"Old friends, he thought, help me. Help me see, for once more I am lost. But they had no answers for him, would not take the burden from his shoulders. But they stood at his side

"Do you really," he murmured, "trust me to make that choice?"

The Ophanim thrummed. Agreement, absolute in that way only angels could be"

Dude, you are basically spouting Black Knight instead of thinking for yourself and actually reading what is written. The irony is so thick.

Kissaten

Ophanim are trusting him as long as he is aligned with them. Before they retracted their support once, and since then he, as he admits himself, can wake at dawn only because they push him up. He is their creature soul and body, how would they not trust him? Compare it to trust Sve Noc has in Cat or Black had in Malicia.

>you are basically spouting Black Knight instead of thinking for yourself
Was he wrong then?

luminiousblu

The Black Knight is almost always wrong, though. Even ignoring his ludicrously broken view of the world that revolves around 'winning' at life without having a clear definition of what it means to win at all, the Black Knight is wrong in that particular case. It has nothing to do with agency. Hanno has trusted the

'golden luck of heroes', a tool which hasn't failed him before, but the Black Knight has found a way to game the system. Hanno is caught horribly off guard and pays for it. This has nothing to do with agency.

Accusing Hanno of lacking agency because he's decided to rely on a tool which hasn't failed him before but in doing so made a fatal mistake is a lot like accusing Hardrada of lacking agency for setting up camp instead of fortifying his position even though he had no way of knowing Godwinson was three days ahead of schedule and bearing down on his position. That entire segment was, as far as I could tell, just mockery of Black Knight. It read like him bending over backwards to try and justify his feeble position and make every single action reinforce his nonsensical (as in, internally inconsistent) worldview.

>trust Sve Noc has in Cat

The 'trust' Sve Noc has in Cat is utilitarian in nature, don't delude yourself otherwise. Catherine needs Sve Noc, and Sve Noc can't work without Cat.

>or Black had in Malicia

The trust that was ultimately misplaced and arguably should never have been there at all.

Andrew Mitchell

100% genuine question here because I'm curious. What judgement are you making about utilitarianism here?

"The 'trust' Sve Noc has in Cat is utilitarian in nature, don't delude yourself otherwise. Catherine needs Sve Noc, and Sve Noc can't work without Cat."

luminiousblu

I'm not sure I understand your question. I'm using the word 'Utilitarian' in the sense of 'necessarily useful as opposed to necessarily attractive or ideal', not as it relates to the philosophy of utilitarianism, which I'm pretty sure Sve Noc doesn't adhere to in the slightest. So you could reword it as

"Sve Noc 'trusts' Catherine because she knows Catherine needs Sve Noc, and Sve Noc follows Catherine because she needs Catherine. It has nothing to do with inherent trust, merely knowledge that she's irreplaceable."

Andrew Mitchell

Ah, thanks for clarifying your working definition.

"It has nothing to do with inherent trust, merely knowledge that she's irreplaceable."

I think it's more than the fact that Catherine's irreplaceable, although that's part of it. Sve Noc also trusts Catherine because she has thoroughly examined Cat's memories and motivations. And Cat has shown that she (mostly) understand's Sve Noc as well. And their interests align sufficiently for them to work together well.

This doesn't add up to the same sort of trust that Hakram has for Cat but it's still a significant level of mutual trust IMO.

Liliet

He might not have been wrong in his actual beliefs, but what he said at its face was absolutely factually inaccurate, much like the Madman speech. Seraphim had 0 input in Hanno's strategy or decision making here. Their only participation, beyond having armed him with the Name and the purpose in the first place, was confirming his judgement to kill Amadeus during the Nicae battle. Like, that's the ONLY input they had.

Everything else was Hanno *having* to think for himself and make his own decisions. He literally had no other channel through which to get divine guidance, and we see him figuring out how to do things from his POV in the song interludes.

Andrew Mitchell

Well said.

Mental Mouse

Actually, they do have agency, but it's well-crafted agency. Even if the choirs don't command, they still choose the big-name Heroes carefully, and groom them to service.

As Cat has said, she can predict him because he will always do "the right thing" for his goals, given the information he has. And she has made sure Pilgrim *doesn't know she's mortal again*, possibly because she doesn't know how he'd react to that. So him thinking and

acting as though she was still Winter is part of her scheme.

Liliet

Yes, William “racist terrorist” von Angelsword was definitely a well-crafted big-name hero.

Alternative theory: angels pick up on potential heroes with a mindset aligned with their assigned virtue, automatically home in on them and form a cheerleading squad / support group / pit crew around them, their values and opinions, mysteriously affirming all the exact things they’re already thinking.

And then it either works out, or not, depending on how good at their job the chosen hero turns out to be.

Mental Mouse

That’s basically what I’m saying. Equipping someone with ongoing angelic voices in their head is the equivalent of how cults surround newbies (and each other, for that matter) with established members, to teach the new guy how they should act, speak, think. For more established members, that keeps people from “drifting” – that is, developing in other directions, or starting to doubt the cult tenets. And it tries to displace any connections to outside the cult, fending off reality checks.

William is a classic case: The angels could make sure he never got the idea that he could ever be forgiven, or that he could ever feel worthy of a normal life. So eventually he came up with (or was subtly fed) this scheme to make everyone within 49 miles, including a major city, feel just as horrible as he did...

Liliet

William did not get angels in his head, that’s only Mercy that does that. William never had any communication with angels past that first revelation.

luminiousblu

People equate Tariq with the Black Knight even though they’re basically polar opposites. The way they operate seems to be similar – extremely practical, no-nonsense, capable of both incredible charity and incredible ruthlessness – but Tariq does it because he believes in

the cause, the Black Knight does it almost literally to prove he can.

Liliet

Really?

Did Amadeus of the Green Stretch really give you this impression?

Because that's not the impression he gave to literally anyone else who knows him.

luminiousblu

Which impression?

When I say 'to prove he can', I am accusing him of being Chaotic Evil. I'm not, however, accusing him of being Chaotic Retarded or Stupid Evil. Black doesn't really have a goal in mind, as far as I can tell, or at least not one that's been expressed or shown in story. He acts preemptively on the tactical and strategic level but on a metaphysical level he's almost reactive in nature. Catherine wants to keep Callow safe and to maintain some sort of independent nature, and to that end she's willing to do a ton of other stuff. Tariq wants to minimise human suffering. Laurence wants to destroy Evil, being in essence a Paladin of the 'stick up the arse and a smite-happy greatsword' variety. What does Black want? Does anyone know? Does even Black know? Because I'm not convinced he cares too much about Praes, his actions don't work for that as best I can tell post-Crusade.

Liliet

>Black doesn't really have a goal in mind, as far as I can tell, or at least not one that's been expressed or shown in story

Inaccurate.

Remember when Cat asked him that and he gave her a book of Praesi fairy tales and a journal with the numbers on population/land/reign?

And then she informed him that she didn't believe that his goals were Good or that he was a patriot, and so he went on a bullshit "victory for Evil" speech that convinced her like the angry teenager she was.

Moving on to what the actual accurate answer he gave her first was, though,

>The point isn't to make Callow a pack of plundered provinces, it has never been that. It's to ensure we never again destroy ourselves invading that country. Are we so enamoured with that kingdom's crown we cannot allow anyone else to wear it? We win by slipping the noose, not moving the border. By breaking the pattern that has whipped us ever since Maleficent made an empire out of Praes. It is irrelevant who actually rules Callow so long as we no longer need to invade to avoid starving. From that moment on, we start to grow. To change. To be anything but a snake cursed to eat its own tail and choke. Anything less than that is defeat. Anything more than that is expendable.

(Epilogue III, Amadeus yelling at Alaya)

>"Legionaries," he called, a bone-deep shiver giving answer. "Look atop those walls and know you face a millennium of blood and arrogance staring down at you. You know that banner. Your fathers and mothers fought under it, against it. Under that standard Callow was bled a hundred times. Under that standard, Praes tore itself apart at the whims of the mad and the vicious. Are you not tired? I am."

>He laughed, a thing of dark and bitter anger.

>"I have fought this war since I was a boy," he said. "And so have you, in every shop and field and pit there is to be found in this empire. There is no peace with this foe, only struggle from dawn to dusk."

>His voice rose.

>"Legionaries," he called. "You of Praes and Callow, of Steppes and Eyries, you have fought this war before and won it. Forty years ago, we broke the spine of the High Lords. Yet here they stand before us, fangs bared. Will you let this challenge go unanswered?"

(Book 3 Chapter 59: Anakrasis, the pre-Liesse speech)

Amadeus is a farmer's son who rebelled against the inane and abusive ruling class of his country, uniting the oppressed underclass around him. He would have slaughtered all of them if he'd had his way, but was convinced by his best friend to act otherwise,

and instead spent 40 years undermining their power and excising their influence. When it turned out this was insufficient to prevent them from harming those he made himself responsible for, he switched his plan back to physically exterminating them.

He wants a better world. He wants justice and fairness, and he *hates Evil*.

>“It is worse than inconvenient,” Black said. “It is flawed. The Wasteland has made a religion out of mutilating itself. We speak of it with pride. Gods, iron sharpens iron? We have grown so enamoured with bleeding our own we have sayings about it. Centuries ago, field sacrifices were a way to fend off starvation. Now they are a staple of our way of life, so deeply ingrained we cling to them given alternative. Alaya, we consistently blunder so badly we need to rely on demons to stay off destruction. We would rather irreparably damage the fabric of Creation than admit we can be wrong. There is nothing holy about our culture, it needs to be ripped out root and stem as matter of bare survival. Forty years I have been trying to prove success can be achieved without utter raving madness, and what comes at the end?”

(also Epilogue III)

>“The arithmetic holds,” Ranker sighed. “It always does with you. But there’s more to this than the numbers, old friend. We made an order of things, and now it’s crumbling.”

>“And now you wonder what will replace it,” Amadeus said. “And if in that new order, we will still have a place.”

>“Some might say it’s too early to start thinking about after the war,” she said. “You and I know better. No point in even seeking a victory if when achieved it leads nowhere.”

>“A better world,” the Black Knight murmured, looking up at stars that were not those he’d been born under. “Oh, I have wondered. What it might mean, what it would look like.”

>“We made one,” Ranker said. “It’s on fire now.”

>“And who set the flames?” he smiled. “Cordelia Hasenbach. Catherine Foundling. Kairos Theodosian. Children, in our eyes. Yet is it not the right of the

younger generation to look at the work of that which came before it and judge it insufficient?"

(Queen's Gambit: Declined)

Amadeus cares, hilariously enough, about greater good and doing the right thing. No, seriously. That's his objective. He's a utilitarian; a patriotic utilitarian who wants to make the world better by making his country better because he loves it and cares about it most.

His country also sucks and he can't make a difference without making himself into that which he hates most.

So he ends up with big, bright and blatant suicidal ideation, considering himself a bad person, a selfish person and also a crutch that needs to be discarded for Empire to move on.

(Source for the above three: Book 3 Chapter Curtains, Book 2 Chapter Council, and Book 3 Chapter Reunion)

Laurence is a smite-happy overzealous paladin.

Amadeus is a revolutionary.

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks for compiling all that evidence. It's compelling and correct IMO.

You said "... and he hates Evil." and I agree. I think he hates Good too. 'Stupid' Evil and Good both keep the cycle of violence going and, as such, hamper his efforts towards the greater good.

[Liliet](#)

I honestly actually think he doesn't.

Here's the worst of what he has to say about Good:

> A band of Named had come after him, girded with Light and wearing the grim rictuses of individuals carrying out a necessary evil – always without the capital, of course, and preferably phrased as the 'greater good' instead.

(hypocrisy and refusing to properly name what they are doing)

(Epilogue IV)

>“There’s nothing righteous about martyrdom,” Black spoke, tone thick with distaste. “How gloriously they die on their pyres, those blessed few who think themselves above all of... this. And yet what do they really accomplish? Refusing to accept reality for what it is instead of what you think it should be is not being high-minded, it is cowardice. I take no guidance from someone whose crowning achievement is their own death. Sacrifice solves nothing on its own. It is no substitute for the labour needed to change things, just an easy way out.”

(inefficiency and going for morality good feeling points instead of actual results)

(Book 2 Chapter 15 Council)

and my favorite crowning jewel:

>“It doesn’t matter how flawless the scheme was, how impregnable the fortress or powerful the magical weapon,” he said. “It always ends with a band of adolescents shouting utter platitudes as they tear it all down. The game is rigged so that we lose, every single time.”

(Book 2 Chapter 36 Madman)

Why is it my favorite, you ask? Why, I’ll answer with another quote:

>“The things Heiress knows, you can learn. You will learn. But that indignation you’ve got boiling under your skin? That’s not something that can be taught. And it’s exactly why you’ll beat her, when the time comes.”

(Book 1 Chapter 10 Menace)

Hates Good? He has a detailed argument for why he *doesn’t take guidance* from it (and that one clearly imho relates to the kid heroes he’s been killing for 20 years). Its most defining characteristic, one that he had a whole speech about hating, he at another time expressed as **the reason** he wants Catherine as his student and not Akua.

And don’t get it wrong, he’s not doing it out of coldly calculated “I don’t like it but it works”.

>“I chose you,” he mused, “because I remember what it’s like, that feeling in your stomach when you look at the world around you and you know you could do better. That if you had the authority and the power, you wouldn’t make the mistakes you see the people who have it make.”

He chose Catherine and bet on her **because that’s how he himself is.**

Oh, he’s a couple of steps removed from Good per se, himself. He still identifies with Below as his side, and he’s been sliding down the slippery slope of necessary evil out of sheer sloppiness and exhaustion: he hasn’t been minimizing harm as much as he possibly could and going for easier (but worse) solutions instead.

But.

(No, I really don’t think he hates the kids he’s been killing. I think they weigh on him, and I think he’s been deliberately learning things about them and getting to know them so they won’t stop doing so. He told Catherine about himself and Scribe debating their guesses at her intentions on the way to Laure, and he did not have the idea to make her his student until he’s already met her, as described in Epilogue I. These deaths weigh even on Sabah, and she’s grateful to Amadeus that he’s taken the darkest parts on himself)

Kissaten

Big thanks to Liliet to compiling all of those quotes.

It doesn’t seem so to me that he hates Evil, well, not any more than he hates Good. The very word “villain” is a repurposed word originally meant for those of lower class, peasants who rented land from lords (and we for a fact know that etymology for english words actually works in Guideverse, “inflammable”). It kind of fits with his Duni heritage, i think, with them being colonists or maybe legionaries who wrestled land from natives coming from Miezans stock, who were both slavers and quite possibly on the Good side since Duni worship Above IIRC. They brought chains and branded those of lower classes villainous, and Miezans were notoriously good at making brands stick, what’s that with orcs having only one Name in over a millenia. It may be just that for Praesi

as a whole – Good guys coming and forcing them into villainous roles, maybe just because they were pricks, maybe because it made putting down rebellions easier given how heroes are promised victories over villains. It is narratively quite easy to put suicidal and crazy villains such as those into position of ones who were abused.

Come to think of it, nazi elves must have come with Miezans as allies or advisors or the guys who gave them means to cross the ocean. What's that with land stealing, genocides and their cousins on other continent.

caoimhinh

Amadeus hates the self-mutilating stupidity of Evil and the self-righteous hypocrisy of Good, and he also detests the arrogance of both.

Andrew Mitchell

Once again Lilliet, thanks for your amazing effort to bring so much good evidence to our discussions. I truly appreciate it.

I think we're all (@Lilliet @Kissaten @caoimhinh) __largely__ in agreement here. My point was not that he hates the heroes as Good individuals. He hates their stupidity (and yes, hypocrisy) that means they don't actually make progress towards the greater good.

[Liliet](#)

@caoimnh I am seeing a rather different degree of "hate" there.

Amadeus aches for the self-righteous hypocrisy of Good and really wishes people who embody it would know better and do better. He'd wholeheartedly cheer for any hero who managed to be more effective in fulfilling their objectives, even if said hero was also going against him in the process.

Amadeus would set the Wasteland nobles on fire and cackle to their screams as they burn.

Very good point re: origin of "villain" @Kissaten, but that meaning has mutated to the exact opposite in the context of Praes. Praesi villainy is specifically the ruling class, and while they're

making something of a point of being egalitarian, the part that truly keeps the Evil going, the part that Amadeus hates, is specifically nobles with their game of thrones and their field sacrifices and their pride in "iron sharpens iron". He's not looking at origins here, he's looking at what is right in front of him.

He dismissed Akua as her mother's messenger and nothing more, even though Akua was a mutilated child hating her mother and ready to rebel against her. Amadeus is not seeing as deeply as you are / as we are into this.

[Liliet](#)

@Andrew Mitchell yep he hates the reasons that heroes lose, he has compassion for them as individuals.

He has 0 compassion for villains as individuals. Including himself.

For all his empathy Amadeus is a damn harsh person, much more so than Catherine, and much more radical in his idealism.

[Liliet](#)

^^^

luminiousblu

That is literally Tariq. Tariq isn't someone who stays the course when there's nothing for him. His logic is that he has very little to gain by refusing and a lot to lose. On the other hand, by accepting, he plays into Catherine's hands, but at the very least he does obtain a victory and most of his goals. He's extraordinarily clear-minded.

IDKWhoitis

It's good to see Hakrams inner workings again. That absolute faith in Catherine's decisions.

Also, are we to find only Catherine alone in Arcadia to make the surrender? Because I'm beginning to suspect that while Cat and Tariq exchange curses and discussions of great importance, I don't actually think the battle will stop meanwhile.

And then the league arrives.

It's like inviting your archenemy into your home, offering them a seat and a glass of wine, and waiting until your frenemy

throws a molotov cocktail through the window. In the ensuing chaos, no one wins, but more importantly, they lost more.

[Liliet](#)

I think Cat is better at this than that.

Morgenstern

If no one wins, wouldn't that be a draw?
Unless "everyone loses" counts as losing that still shatters that thread of three...

Andrew Mitchell

The pattern of three stopped when Tariq accepted Cat's unconditional surrender.

[certainlight](#)

I'm wondering what Tariq's potential interaction with the Tyrant might be. His past smothering of a young king would hold parallels with the Tyrant's state. While a new Pattern of Three seems unlikely given the Tyrant's entrance to this battle as a molotov cocktail (well put), the result may not be so chaotic as is typical for Catherine's plans. Especially given that Hakram was uniquely placed as having known of both plots (Catherine's surrender and the notice to the Tyrant), meaning not only that the Tyrant will now unexpectedly engage, but that it is intentionally due to the surrender. This forces a new story thread more than chaos. But whether that is due to Catherine's maturity as a character to rely less on chaos, or the current circumstances with the dead King, remains to be seen. Perhaps both are the same.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> It's like inviting your archenemy into your home, offering them a seat and a glass of wine, and waiting until your frenemy throws a molotov cocktail through the window.

Also known as a Praesi Tuesday. 😊 Really, that's just how this crowd rolls.

[zwhknight](#)

Tyrant: Don't be ridiculous Catherine Foundling would never purposefully surrender. It would hurt her in any peace deal she tried to make.

Hakram: But what if it hurt you more?

Tyrant: Shit you're right.

Dainpdf

What if the surrender was actually a masterful winning strike that ruined everyone else's plans and didn't even really cost her that much?

Argentorum

Tyrant and Cat are really perfect for each other. Like, if he'd been the first arc villain instead of Akua, it would have been a drag because Cat was too serious back then.

But now she and her main nemesis both know how to have a little fun. And really, what **is** a horse, anyway? Is it a place or a state of mind?

IDKWhoitis

It is obviously another name for a goat painted white.

I wonder if she stashed goblin fire in this one too.

naturalnuke

"Saddle my goat."

I swear that is one of the most beautiful lines ever written.

[*certainlight*](#)

There has got to be bombs in that goat. Bombs that Hakram doesn't seem to know about (or does, but the Tyrant doesn't care and will ride them anyway). Or Robber is somehow involved in putting bombs in this goat. While it's still alive.

Okay, there's probably not bombs in this goat. But there could be.

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

Or a jealous winged abomination of nature?

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

Note that disturbing gaze... I suspect Kairos used his **Wish** aspect to read Hakram's desires. Hakram of course is utterly loyal to Cat... and, purposely, only has partial knowledge of what's going on. Heh heh heh...

[*shieldredblog*](#)

I think he does that to everyone. The aspect has both a passive 'see peoples true desire' and an active, 'make a wish' component.

[Liliet](#)

Kairos is starting to feel what it's like to dance, dance, dance, my puppet 😊

antoninjohn

Well Cat had arranged this beforehand.

"I want prisoners well treated, even Praesi and greenskins," I said. "Neither beaten, tortured nor otherwise harmed. I'll extend the same treatment to anyone I capture. I'm also willing to arrange regular prisoner exchanges when the campaign allows."

"There are evils I have been forced to make peace with," the Pilgrim said with iron in his voice. "Torture is not one of them. You may be certain I will allow no such thing so long as I draw breath.

"No killing of anyone offering surrender," I proposed.

"So long as that surrender is genuine, and no attempt at treachery is made,"

Someguy

Treachery will come from Kairos and thus Grey Boi's hands will be tied threefold & Cat will be beyond his reach forever.

[Liliet](#)

Of course, if Cat doesn't intend to support Pilgrim against Kairos this scheme would constitute treachery on *her* part as well.

Of course, Cat has 0 motivation to *not* turn on Kairos here 😊

[Javvies](#)

No, Cat doesn't need to lift a finger to help Tariq.

She's surrendered, and it's been accepted.

She's Tariq's prisoner, not claiming to be his ally right now.

Andrew Mitchell

IIRC she surrendered "her armies and all she commands" or something to that effect. She did not surrender herself and I think Tariq noted that during his consideration of her offer.

Javvies

Either way, Cat doesn't need to help Tariq deal with Kairos.

Admittedly, she'll probably do *something*, most likely try to arrange for negotiations to take place.

Liliet

She's the one who's bringing Kairos there, though. It's treachery unless it's unambiguously not.

Mental Mouse

For reference:

> "in the spirit of our close and cordial alliance, I offer my support for the demand that will be made by the League of Free Cities in exchange for its acquiescence to a peace conference. That support will have the full weight of my force and influence behind it."

"Naturally, this is contingent on your own support in extricating the Army of Callow and its allies from their current difficulties," I said. "Should you refuse, I will be forced to withdraw from Procer entirely and begin preparing the east for the wars that will come in the wake of the Principate's destruction."

That said... how is it treachery? It's sneaky, but calling for help from an ally before you surrender isn't actually breaking an oath, nor even disloyalty. Offering Kairos an open favor is risky, but remember, Kairos' chaotic style fits well with Cat's own tactics of exploiting chaos. Odds are good that the demand will be something Cat can work with, and if not, well "the full weight of my force and influence" is somewhat diminished since she's abdicated and surrendered her forces.

Liliet

mmmmmaybe

I still get an iffy vibe off it but we shall see

Mental Mouse

BTW, I missed this on first read, so others might also have: It looks to me like the Tyrant and his troops are currently *in* the Arcadia fragment, where Hakram could easily see the troops across the barren plain. So Mageso's still doing something, but there's room in there for other stuff to wander past.

Don'tcha just hate it when you create your own pocket universe and people keep wandering in?

[Liliet](#)

Yeah ♥

apperatus27

Oh my goodness, that's masterful! Good catch, Antonin!

Dainpdf

I don't think she was exactly planning for that... though she did certainly take advantage of it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

That's the thing – naifs and fools make exact plans for the long range. Real schemers make specific plans for the short range, and general plans for the long range... and in between those, they prepare the ground and set up contingency plans.

Dainpdf

I think she just wanted ground rules to diminish casualties because her people had suffered enough. And because she couldn't afford the manpower loss.

[Mental Mouse](#)

While he wanted to write out the rest of her story from there. Cat got what she wanted, Pilgrim didn't – because she was being more realistic.

Dainpdf

She took a gamble, and it paid off. That's sort of a theme with her.

I would hardly say Pilgrim was the least realistic of the two. He has been operating in his way for decades. She wants to do something that most people consider inconceivable.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Tariq may have been been operating for decades, but Amadeus and Cat had already been changing the rules on him. Even by Liesse, he was acutely aware that he'd seriously underestimated Amadeus. But even as he decided "I'd better make sure of this one", he failed to consider the hazards of trying a full confrontation and *losing*.

So now she's back badder (and smarter) than ever. But instead of brooding uselessly over past defeats like a proper villain :), she's lost some character flaws, and picked up a whole new powerset, complete with deadly allies. Got even better at story-fu, for sauce. And Pilgrim *still* tries for full confrontation, the dumbass. Cat learned and improved herself, Pilgrim didn't.

Dainpdf

They've been changing the rules on him? You seem to forget Pilgrim straight up outplayed Amadeus. And what do you mean "by Liesse"? I don't recall the Pilgrim being involved in either of the debacles by that name.

And yeah, Cat has improved. Which is why the Pilgrim just changed tacks.

[Mental Mouse](#)

"by Liesse", I mean by the time he was discussing the Liesse Accords with her.

And Pilgrim didn't "outplay" Amadeus, he took a plague to a sword fight, with angelic assistance and raw power. And Amadeus was already on a downslide – stranded on the wrong side of a mountain range, rampaging through Procer with no obvious end point, stretching his Name's power to breaking point. And then as soon as Cat's out of the Everdark, here she is trying to get him back (more effectively than the Legions were), and I'll bet burgers to steaks she ends up back in power and even stronger.

Dainpdf

That sounds like trying to talk around the sin of defeat. If it were Cat doing the same maneuver it would be an outplay. In the hands of the Pilgrim it's cheating.

Oh, and Amadeus wasn't on the downslide, exactly. He'd chosen to be on the other side, and he'd been running laps around the Procerans. Felt pretty confident, too, right up until people started dropping dead around him.

[Liliet](#)

@Daindpf I agree re: Tariq outplaying him, but the downslide bit is also correct. Amadeus has himself admitted that their “invasion” of Procer is a glorified raid, and that they’re stranded there with no way back and no endgame other than “piss in Hasenbach’s porridge as much as they can, then gloriously perish”. There’s a reason his reply to Tariq telling him that fighting won’t end well for him was “that was always rather the point” 😡

[Liliet](#)

^^^

Catherine did the right thing. It paid off for her in the long term.

That’s how it works 😊

Dainpdf

Well, sometimes. Other times it gets you killed.

[Liliet](#)

Often both 😊

[ahd](#)

Oh, another solemn promise made by Tariq.

Now does the Sword of Saints believe in torture?

And can Tariq take Laurence in a no-holds-barred duel to enforce his word?

konstantinvoncarstein

Story-wise, he would be the hero trying to be honorable, and the Saint a bloodthirsty brute. Tariq would probably win this one.

[Fayhem](#)

Not to mention, he would be acting honorably *in defense of others* which has been shown is the single biggest key to unlocking his full powers. Laurence is an asshole, a fanatic, and a long-term idiot, but she isn’t a short-term idiot. She might threaten but if Tariq made it clear it would be a fight between them over this I think she’d back down – she might take a swing at the prisoners just to test his will (see: she’s an asshole), but she wouldn’t push it past the point of no return I don’t think.

Novice

I mean the Saint (and the Pilgrim since it's most probably his plan) already practices pseudo-necromancy what with severing Black's soul. Torture is probably only a half-step away.

We've already seen what happened with the Saint when she outright disrespected the sanctity of a truce so I assume Pilgrim can hold her leash if he really wants to.

[*ahd*](#)

Does Black not having actually surrendered affect this, I wonder?

[*Liliet*](#)

Definitely yes. Black never surrendered, never agreed to stay in custody and never stopped being aggressive in the way he could i.e. verbally. Remember how he plotted to either run or take a sharp rock and try to kill one of the heroes with it while he had a chance? It was his prerogative, but it was in return their prerogative to do with him as they saw necessary. Cutting out his soul was wrong only in the sense of "can you do that to *anyone* under *any* circumstances" because if it's permissible under any, these are those.

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

I've said before that the soul-separation thing was likely the only way they could actually contain and restrain him.

[*Liliet*](#)

Yep.

I mean we've seen all their containment effort fail. The only thing that stopped him from escaping / killing one of them then and there was Bard's fuckery.

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

The Saint of Swords doesn't have the patience for torture. 😏

[*certainlight*](#)

Possibly, but Tariq does exactly this: he evaluates the genuine nature of the surrender before accepting. I'm not sure Cat would expect that of him, given how much he's turned on previous agreements. I think the stronger case is the simpler

one: a true truce works better for both of them, even if it leaves Tariq no longer able to kill Cat.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

SpeckofStardust

To second Liliet here, Yep.

Further more he seemed to reject the idea that she could fully counter him if he said no, I mean that would end the pattern of 3 as well in that case. The fact that accepting was his gut reaction and final decision reminds me why he's in the top 3 favorite Good characters.

(not counting the badasses that die in a single chapter mind you)

Stormblessed

Gods Below and Above! Cat's playing them all so well. So predicted the Pilgrim's move, then penned the letter to break the pattern of three, only to use the Tyrant as a way to wiggle out of actually following through on the surrender. Especially because if she is no longer of the material plan than she cannot actually follow through with her surrender until after the Tyrant will have turned back the tide, making the surrender unnecessary and placing her on better grounds in the peace talks to come with all sides.

Except for the fact that everyone will be cross with her after her schemes of course.

Insanenoodlyguy

She's the arch-vile of the west. There was no version of this where she wasn't sitting down at a table of people very cross with her. And Tyrant is ready to betray her even though she's his best friend, so also really no change. The cost here in personal credit/trust is very low.

Rook

Realistically the tyrant is going to betray someone, the only variable is who. What Catherine just did is the equivalent of losing the lead in Mario Kart to make someone else eat the blue shell.

Dainpdf

I see it more as forcing Kairos to tip his hand and commit, while also making him the Pilgrim's problem.

Kissaten

Kairos is honour-bound to stab the would be winner in the back. The beauty of it is that Levantines and Procerans don't even want to win, and that is literally and figuratively what will stab them in the back in form of a League who doesn't want a win either. Pilgrim will get his draw. Against entirely different opponent, but still.

Dainpdf

Kairos? Honor? Sorry, that does not parse.

But yeah, his scheme requires fighting and stalemates, which Cat just doused. So he must commit his own forces to that objective.

[Fuodiachloris](#)

How dare you! Slander! Liable! Calumny! *cough*

Kairos actually has a brand of honour to him: to be the Biggest Bad he can be, he'll do the dirtiest deed available while maniacally mugging at the rafters. You can take that to the bank... after properly screening it, checking it for malware and dipping it in peroxide.

Insanenoodlyguy

Exactly. Kairos is Dirk Dastardly with a crown, and like that man, proud of it. He doesn't even want a clean victory if one were obtainable, they could offer him everything he wants at the peace table and he'd still have to stab somebody's back or the whole day's been a failure.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Except he doesn't have a direct loss against Kairos – I don't think he was even with the troops that got chased through the gate. The big risk here is that Kairos gets Amadeus's soul, which he probably just learned about through his **Wish** aspect.

Insanenoodlyguy

Unless she was counting on that to. Him showing up with something like that is a highly likely story for him and her. Which also means that he can find that soul far, far easier than she can.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, but Kairos would probably put it into the goat, just for yuks.

Liliet

I think Cat's already got Amadeus's soul, given that Rogue Sorcerer is around and Cat has been suspiciously M.I.A.

Liliet

I'm not sure the surrender isn't going to be followed up on. As Tariq has pointed out, if it's just a petty scheme it dunks her narratively, while a legitimate surrender not only gives her moral high ground – which she badly badly needs to keep her head above the water in this clusterfuck – but also doesn't actually go against any of her objectives. It's not like she *wanted* to fight the Grand Alliance.

If the surrender is real, what she loses is some of the bargaining power.

If the surrender is fake, what she loses is trust and narrative momentum.

I think she's setting up Kairos for a backstab from her own armies / the Wild Hunt. He's not a friend to her and she's not going to treat him like one.

Mental Mouse

"Oh, you seem to have some League troops attacking you. Too bad all my guys are prisoners... but hey, maybe we can work something out here."

Liliet

Mhm!

Sylwoos

I might be starting to get where Cat is going.

With her baiting the Tyrant in action and abandoning the crown to Vivienne, The League, The Alliance and The Legions are about to take a swing at each other in a tri-way battle. Meanwhile, the Drows and her will pull out of the conflict as agreed by her surrender and become a fourth, uninvolved party to the current conflict.

Then, when Arcadia is ripped apart and all hell are let loose (because of course it will), who'll be in the perfect position to mediate between the three side, force them to the negotiation table and form a new alliance under her neutral guidance to handle the new threat? Catherine Fucking Foundling.

Once again, she's playing everybody and keep switching hat to stop others from pinning her down. Taric is trying to trap the

Black Queen in a story, but she have already traded the warlord role for a priest one, First Under the Night. Now she's a perfect position to be the representative of the Evil side, while Taric is already the representative of Good and there's a threat looming that will force Good and Evil to join hand.

Deal will be struck and a new alliance to preserve Calernia will be born, with Cat and Taric co-leading it.

danh3107

This is some Creed levels of tactical genius...

CAAT!!

Ekmo

I was wondering why the screen on my phone could scroll so far right.

Super long words in the comment section breaks spacing boundaries!

Kissaten

Wonder if Book of all Things (and a gargoyle) playing a role of Atalante's general counts in the same vein as a honorary citizenship of Below in the Bellerophon

Agent J

Depends on the conviction, I suppose.

konstantinvoncarstein

Probably 🤔 If not, there would be no more Bellerophon

Insanenoodlyguy

So that's it, it is? Tyrant literally just can't help sticking his hand in this cookie jar now that he knows there's some kind of unexpected scheme going on. He's not even sure if he wants to help or disrupt it yet, but he knows he's gotta be part of it.

Dainpdf

Catherine surrendering kind of put a kibosh on his previous schemes. Now he needs to salvage what he can... and Cat just forced his hand, narratively.

[Liliet](#)

Nope, it's more specific and straightforward than that. Cat has figured out what he is trying to do and hit directly at that.

He wants a standoff between her and the Grand Alliance; if the two sides miraculously mold into one, he loses. It's a bad move for him to interfere here, but if he doesn't, he's already lost.

Shequi

Kairos is actually going to ride that goat into battle now, isn't he?

Oshi

Oh fuck yes he will.

The mad king rides upon his war-goat.

Dainpdf

If that goat does not explode or at least zombify I will be seriously cross.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Kairos himself may mutate it into an abomination or suchlike.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Who knows what he could do, given his aspects... Continually renewing and dazzling white whitewash, growing to the size of an average horse, double-speed and the ability to camel spit? Adhesive saddle (prepare to use that jumping ability, why not?)?

However he boosts that goat, he'll probably take care to retain the goatiest nanny goat whoever goated.

And if that doesn't scare people, they've never faced an angry goat with a list of opinions about your continued upright existence.

[Liliet](#)

I mean I doubt he's *physically capable* of riding on horseback/goatback. Now having the goat pull a chariot for him...

[Mental Mouse](#)

He may have been sickly originally, but his Name lends him "an unnatural strength". I'm sure he's capable of riding.

[Liliet](#)

Does it?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, it does for all the other Named we've seen.... The description varies by theme, of course.

Liliet

It depends on whether the Name is martial. I don't think Scribe or Augur have any physical feats baked into their Roles, and I suspect for Tyrant it would vary person by person – and for Kairos, it's really not a part of who he is. Evil Roles sharpen strengths, not cover weaknesses.

ahd

Heiress?

Liliet

I think Heiress gets a little bit of everything? This is all speculation, we never saw Akua in a proper fight as Heiress IIRC, other than at First Liesse end, and that was a very special kind of story clusterfuck

Mental Mouse

"Evil Roles sharpen strengths, not cover weaknesses." Up to a point, but infirm or physically helpless villains don't make very good stories! Catherine certainly used her power to cover for her injuries even as Squire, notably that leg.

IIRC, we haven't had POV from Scribe or Augur, but I'll note that those are *traditionally* non martial roles – who ever heard of a scribe or soothsayer going into combat? In contrast, Tyrant is a very flexible role, and Kairos has demonstrated that he's leaning into it and well able to exploit any technicalities he comes across; not to mention that if he can set whole fortresses flying, he should certainly be able to do *something* about his physical infirmities. And the sickly and/or deformed villain who's not actually *limited* much by their condition, is a trope in itself, from Gollum to Emperor Palpatine.

Liliet

Catherine had an entirely different Role. Physical disability is actually bog standard for mastermind-type villains.

And tbh I think physical disability that does not actually disallow anything specific is straight up

bad writing. There have to be tangible limitations, like Catherine's relief when she sits down and absolute disinclination to walk any longer than she has to.

Someguy

"It appears someone will have to saddle my goat," Kairos Theodosian mused, "for we now must ride out in glorious battle."

...Someone has to illustrate THIS scene of GLORY!

ruduen

I'm mostly curious as to if it will still be a normal goat by the time he's riding it into combat.

Kissaten

It is secretly a dog.

Agent J

I wish, but more straight laced characters have noted it has udders. Goat udders. Because it is a goat.

I was partial to the dog with horns as well. It'd have been a nice parallel to her staffswordprayer.

The dog that is not a dog, but a goat which is not a goat, but a purebred Liessen charger.

Dainpdf

It must be an explosive goat. Surely Kairos will have heard of the technique and approved.

Jarthon

Oh it has to be. The audience would never forgive anything else. Unfortunately I don't think that an exploding goat has enough narrative weight to kill Kairos (since that would be a pretty big anticlimax), but it would be greatly amusing.

[Mental Mouse](#)

An exploding goat would just annoy Kairos, and a regular goat is annoying enough. 😊 Besides, the goat is there to carry him into an exploding situation.

Dainpdf

I didn't mean that Cat made the goat explosive to kill Kairos.

I meant Kairos should make the goat explosive as homage to Cat and because it's hilarious.

Nocturne

I may :P.

[Liliet](#)

P L E A S E

apperatus27

Yesss, yessss! I felt like Mace Windu this chapter because I got to feel some Shatterpoints, yo!

Mike E.

I actually get that reference!

JJR

I wonder, what's the odds that there's goblin munitions in that goat?

It's just such a random thing to include in a package to a madman. Playing into the randomness does seem to be the best way to approach Kairos, so it makes sense in that regard. But then you figure there's a good chance he'll reciprocate and ride the thing, so why not trap it. Plus putting munitions inside animals is one of Cat's signature moves, along with getting blamed for fires and dying upwards.

Amoonymous

At first I was going to say no way, it's not worth the risks.

Then I remembered she gave the goat to Kairos, and he would probably find the goat attempting to blow him up endearing, and might be disappointed if Cat didn't even try something.

fbt

that would be hilarious, I have to admit.

Cat: "what? you didn't see this coming? c'mon, I do this to *everyone*. It might as well have had a warning label. Like hot coffee. "

Kairos has an anyerusim in response.

Much rejoicing occurs.

Dainpdf

That'd be great, but the goat is alive.

John

The army of callow has tens of thousands of people, including a supply train and Praesi mages. Is it really so hard to believe they'd be able to find a veterinary surgeon capable of implanting munitions, without killing the goat in question or leaving any scars which all that whitewash couldn't conceal?

RanVor

It's more about it being too cruel for Catherine.

[Liliet](#)

^^^ ;u;

I love the realization that this is legit the only reason I think she hasn't done it.

Dainpdf

Yes, especially given how munitions can react to power.

[kgyl21](#)

She's gotten practice since the first time when she killed them trying to get the munitions in.

[Javvies](#)

No. The first time they were already dead. She reanimated them and only then had the munitions put inside at the end.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, she didn't handle the goat herself, she told Hakram to see to it. Potentially he could have stuck something in there himself, but there's no hint he's even experimented with the shadow energies that Squire and Black Knight used to trigger munitions (among other things).

Oh, hey, imagine if Hakram replaced his "other" hand with one of pure shadow....

Oshi

It's nice to have confirmation that it's Hierophant behind the mess in Arcadia. I hope Cat or Archer can save him.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, we were pretty sure from what Cat saw. The question is still exactly what he's doing... and whether he'll intervene in

the current fight. IIRC, Masego hasn't actually met Kairos, but I doubt he'd appreciate the Tyrant's style.

Insanenoodlyguy

I wonder what actually happened to the original delegate from Atalante?

JJR

Got turned into a book I suspect.

Agent J

Atalante is hard core Light-side. It's just as likely that they simply refused to ride against the crusaders. Hell, some of their priests might even have participated in the conclave, but don't quote.

RanVor

IIRC, they were not allowed to participate because the Hierarch is a villain.

Isaac Martinez

At least the goat is still alive.

Nairne .01

Thank you.

taovkool

You know that someone is getting really gud when they could fuck up their opponent's day by surrendering.

GG Catherine

[Liliet](#)

Hmmm.

Actually I think it's a fairly standard outcome for surrender to fuck over the people who are being surrendered to. It's the same category of thing as Malicia sending refugees over to Cat's border: here, have stuff I've got! What, it's more of a resource drain than a resource gain? Well that's not my problem any longer 😊

Remember how Cat was wondering what to do with the Helikean cataphracts because her army could not manage that many prisoners? The same dilemma.

Surrender is always lose-lose, both sides suffering a blow. It's just that *most of the time* it fucks over the surrendering side more than the side receiving the surrender. So the key to making surrender an effective ploy is not sharpening the blow to the other side, it's cushioning the blow to yours.

Although Catherine has certainly sharpened the blow here, too



Liliet

Like putting into game theory terms... war is a negative sum game

a standard situation that forces surrender for one of the sides is like

battle: -5/-10 (aka certain defeat)

surrender: -1/-5 (aka you're still defeated but at least you lose less)

(and the difference goes from -5 in favor of the other side to -4 in favor of the other side, at that)

(and the other side accepts this tradeoff because The Ethical Rules Governing Warfare dictate that you look at the total sum too / because it's an iterated prisoner's dilemma kind of thing / because they care about the losses to their side more than the losses to the enemy's side)

(or it doesn't and the surrender doesn't work, alas)

or even

battle: -5/-10

surrender: -1/-2

...if you have a good solid guarantee that your forces will be treated well and don't lose on any objectives other than prestige/convenience, which is our situation here...

...and Catherine's situation is like

at face value:

battle: -5/-5 (a bloody draw)

surrender: -1/-2 (Catherine's loss, but a much smaller total loss)

or including the narrative part it's more like

battle: -5/-15 (a draw with a promise of certain loss down the line)

surrender: -1/-2

...the difference going from -10 to -1 in an overwhelming meta-victory for Catherine

Mental Mouse

Note that the "iterated" part of the game is the original way to include prior behavior and (with tournaments) reputation; game theory has in fact turned out to be the

mathematical model applying to ethics and morality; the key concept for the situations represented by the IPD is *trust*). In the Guideverse, ethics and morality are *also* baked into the world rules, with direct penalties for certain offenses.

[Liliet](#)


Yep.

[Mental Mouse](#)

In the longer term, there's also the classic trick of absorbing a conquering people over time. In our own world, China has done that repeatedly, most spectacularly with the Mongols (They came in, took over... and a few generations later, you couldn't tell the difference.) In the Guideverse, that's one interpretation of what Callow is doing.

[Liliet](#)

Oh yes that is definitely what's happening.

And I would argue that this is what Amadeus was deliberately going for, because Callow is much closer to what he wants Praes to be than actual Praes is, in all their non-blood-sacrificing glory. He **wanted Catherine to eventually climb the Tower**. It's not Praes assimilating Callow that he wanted


[Javvies](#)

Freaking took you long enough to get to the point of realizing you were getting tunnel vision on what Cat could become instead of what she is currently and what she's offering. Fuck's sake, you knew (or could/should have known through your Behold Aspect/the Ophanim looking at her) that she was genuinely willing to help you kick over the Tower and join the Alliance and help against the Dead King. Instead you had to reject her offers of helping and signing onboard, blowing up your redemption play (that she was offering to cooperate with), leading her between a hostile Grand Alliance and a hostile Praes. How did you not expect things to turn against you? How did you expect her to do anything but become more dangerous and take greater risks for power to protect and defend Callow(and herself)?

—

I'm not sure what's going on with the League and Kairos's plans. But his arrival should be interesting. Even more interesting will be the Alliance reaction to the League's arrival.

—

I wonder how Alliance armies (and Heros) are going to react to Cat's surrender and Tariq's acceptance of it. And how he's going to stop the fighting.

Also interesting will be the reaction to the letter to Viv.

Dainpdf

Bit of a Pascal's Wager there. In that he had to prevent the small-probability case that was infinitely bad. And in that it's not exactly sound logic anymore... we hope.

[Javvies](#)

Thing is, that's not exactly true.

The story possibility was there, yes, but he has an Aspect – Behold – that lets him see the inner truth of people.

He **knew** that Cat genuinely wanted peace. He knew what her offer was, and Behold would have let him **know** it was made in good faith.

He even had her willing to cooperate with a redemption play.

Dainpdf

He saw there was possibility she would fall to alienation or to the shapes of the stories around her. There still is.

The possibility was small, but it was there. Cat has always played with corrupting influences for power. I mean, she took Black's dagger, she forced an aspect in the presence of a demon...

And that's all fine and dandy when the one at risk is her, but when it's all of Calernia? And she was risking falling on that path.

She's at that risk anymore, really, but now Pilgrim can't Behold her. So he was working on old, faulty info. Which has been a component in him repeatedly getting played.

werafdsaew

Except that his very action is accentuating that risk. And when Cat offered to abdicate and redeem herself, and thus vastly reducing the risk, he refused! If she really was that much of a risk then when an opportunity to vastly reduce that risk is offered, you take it.

Dainpdf

Did that offer really reduce the risk, especially with the conditions she had outlined?

She'd still be immortal, with the alienation and power of an entire court behind her, and she'd still be something of an avatar of Callowan spite. She'd still be there as a cultural influence, and ready to take over the moment she thought Callow was being mistreated.

[Javvies](#)

He had her lined up for a redemption play.

And she was willing to go along with it.

Dainpdf

That was way later, after the Battle of Camps, and he had to maneuver her into it.

[Javvies](#)

If he'd taken the deal she was offering before the Battle of the Camps, she'd have voluntarily flipped sides, and skipped over the need for a redemption play.

[Javvies](#)

Urgh.

The only thing gained by holding out for the forced redemption play instead of a voluntary flip is that a Narratively enforced redemption play usually delivers redemption through death/sacrifice.

luminiousblu

Her dying completely removes the threat, which is Tariq's goal. A chance, however minuscule, that Catherine might go full Queen of Winter on Callow was too much to contemplate.

[Liliet](#)

She was not offering him a deal before the Battle of Camps. He offered her one, and she asked if he could control the Procerans into not cutting Callow up. He admitted he couldn't, and that was that.

Catherine wasn't offering shit at the time.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Comments like “her dying completely removes the threat” sound funny given how often she *has* died.



werafdsaew

Once she abdicates, she no longer has access to Callow’s resources, making her a lot less dangerous. And without the duties of a Queen, she has a lot less reason to draw on Winter. And then there’s the redemption angle.

Dainpdf

A redemption angle which would lose a lot of momentum with her abdication, while still leaving her immortal, with great influence over Callow, and alienated.

Oh, and which would require the Pilgrim to break the Grand Alliance in half.

werafdsaew

In other words, he judged that handling Cat is less important than the Grand Alliance. Well he made his bed and must now lie in it.

Dainpdf

No. He judged that handling Cat was more important than all the people who would die in that conflict. Back then.

Right now, he chose the opposite. Partly because of the dead king, and partly because Cat has changed. She’s mortal again.

[Javvies](#)

You’re missing my point.

Sure, the story/Narrative possibilities were there for Cat to go really bad.

On the other hand, Tariq **knows** that she genuinely wants peace and can see her attempting actions and making offers to help your side, even to join your side. And Tariq has the ability to find out that she’s making those offers genuinely and on good faith.

Dainpdf

Her intent mattered little when the possibility is considered – at least in the utilitarian ethics Tariq

seems to operate. Cat presented a risk of utter destruction, so that risk must be ended.

Javvies

He had her lined up for a redemption play.

And she was willing to go along with it.

Dainpdf

You mean after the Battle of Camps? He maneuvered her into that one, and soon after went to see the dead king, who (due to Malicia, but Cat would have done a similar deal) forced the Pilgrim's hand into binning that plot. Also Black.

Javvies

She went to Pilgrim and got rejected (again!) before going to Keter.

And if he had kept his word and stayed in Callow, he'd still have the redemption play on Cat, and by extension, at least the possibility of one on Sve Noc.

Liliet

He couldn't possibly have known that Cat would still be open to a redemption play after she came back. She more or less gave him an ultimatum of "either you help me here or fuck your redemption".

Cat fucked up this game as much as he did, in pretending to be more dangerous / unstable / hostile than she really was.

Javvies

No, there fuckup isn't Cat's it's basically all on Tariq (and Cordelia).

He had Cat willing to cooperate with his redemption play if he were willing to give even a tiny bit on Cat's desires for protecting Callow from his supposed allies.

He refused on purely worldly concerns – the consequences to Procer if Callow suddenly wasn't an enemy to be conquered and divided up in the aftermath.

It's part of why Cat is so pissed at him – it wasn't the Ophanim exercising veto power to reject

her offer, it was all Tariq and he said as much to her face.

If he was so worried about what Below could do with the leverage of Cat's desires to protect Callow (from everybody), he should have thought a bit more about what happens next when he refuses to help her on that front.

If he, with his redemption story on her, refuses to help her protect her people/country when she asks him to ... where else does she have to turn to for help?

I mean, I get why Cordelia was worried about possible negative side effects to Procer and her own position, but (a) she's not a Hero, and (b) that's kind of in her job description. It would have been nice if she'd been willing to try a smaller ask when Cat nixed her first counteroffer. But at least Cordelia wasn't self-righteous about it.

[Liliet](#)

Oh I am not saying Tariq made the choice that led to the best possible outcome here.

I am saying that Catherine fucked up *as well*.

[Javvies](#)

What the hell do you think Cat could have done differently there?
Seriously.

Tariq refusing her offers is all on him, not on Cat.

[Liliet](#)

– Catherine could have had a frank conversation with him about the effects of Winter on her and what she was doing to mitigate that (refusing to go deeper into it, oaths, specifically Vivienne's killswitch)

– Catherine could have briefed him fully on the situation in Praes and Callow, including Black's plan and her own

– Catherine could have discussed the Accords with him in detail, bringing him in on the plan and requesting/accepting his input

To sum up, Catherine could and should have treated him as a mentor/advisor, not as a captured enemy / liaison. Tariq would have been obligated to help, to go along with the redemption narrative; Catherine should have leaned into that to guide it along the lines she wanted it to go, not treat it as enemy action. She could have explained to him why she wanted to keep the Evil Name/affiliation, for that matter. It's not like he didn't fully share all her ultimate goals; the only thing that differed were the specific priorities wrt Callow vs Grand Alliance, *and they both wanted peace there anyway*. She should have brought him in on her talks with Cordelia, at that; alone, neither of them could give her what she wanted, but together? It's entirely possible that if Cordelia knew she'd have Pilgrim's full support in backing Cat's offer, she could have chanced it.

It was the lack of trust that fucked them over there, and *Cat could have extended it first*.

Javvies

...

Cat was literally and figuratively in a fight for survival for both herself and for Callow.

Remember, he made it very clear that he was more concerned about protecting the internal status quo of Procer and the Grand Alliance than protecting Callow from Procer if Cat+Callow flipped sides.

And he was in the middle of trying to kill her. Giving information on your abilities, weaknesses and contingencies to an enemy that's trying to kill you is a dubious plan at the best of times.

Maybe Cat should have thrown in a "if I can get Cordelia/Pilgrim to agree are you willing to agree" to Pilgrim/Cordelia, but she honestly shouldn't have needed to with Tariq. Plus, it's not like negotiations have ever really been one of her strengths.

Liliet

Diplomacy has always been Cat's biggest strength actually.

And yes, I get *why* she didn't do these things, much like how I get why Tariq acted the way he did. It's just that, again much like him, if she'd

acted otherwise she would have gotten a better outcome.

Well, relatively better. It's hard to beat Everdark ;u;

werafdsaew

Would that have even worked? You're assuming that the reason Tariq couldn't help her is because he lacked relevant details, but I see their differences as more fundamental.

Javvies

It's not that he couldn't help her, it's that he *chose* not to help her protect Callow from Procer in a peace deal and alliance, because Procer was more important than Callow to him.

And it's since predictably gone south on him.

I'm still firmly of the opinion that if the Alliance is so fragile that it is incapable of surviving someone they thought was an enemy wanting to be and being allowed to be ally instead of an enemy to be conquered and divided as the spoils of war, the Alliance doesn't deserve to survive.

For that matter, such an Alliance not only doesn't deserve to survive, it will inevitably create its own enemies and downfall. And the delayed yet inevitable collapse will be far worse than if it goes down now over letting someone become an ally instead of conquering and looting them.

Mental Mouse

Re your last reply at the edge: It's significant that Good here is the blinkered, paranoid nationalist, while Evil is the "humanist", except she supports the non-human races as well. (I wonder if she'll get around to restoring the Ratling civilization? Maybe in book VI.)

Andrew Mitchell

Yeah, we need a more inclusive word than "humanist". Maybe sapientist? Peopleist?

Liliet

@werafdsaev what fundamental differences are you thinking about? They understand each other

perfectly, pursue the exact same goals and have the same view on means – Catherine has compared Tariq to Amadeus for a reason.

[Liliet](#)

@Javvies that is an existing point of view in-universe – Saint thinks exactly that.

I, however, follow Tariq's/Cat's/Amadeus's logic in looking less at what is "inevitable" and "deserved" and more at minimizing splash damage. Tariq has been trying to minimize splash damage the entire time, starting with first going to negotiate with the Black Queen (a complete mystery to him, at that point). The situation kept changing on him, but the worst case scenarios he's been after preventing / not causing still haven't happened.

Well, an entirely different kind of catastrophe happened, but I very much understand how&why he did not see the "and then the Dead King attacked" option in the field of possibilities. From the point of view of Good, that was rather out of left field; even Amadeus was surprised.

luminiousblu

Nobody cares what her intention was. Intent has no bearing on what actually happens. Scipio didn't intend for Carthage to get burned to the ground and Martin Luther never wanted to split the Catholic world in half. It happened anyway.

RanVor

You know it goes both ways, right?

[Javvies](#)

Yes and no.

Intent doesn't have much impact when it comes to past actions. Well, depends on the actions and their results, to be honest.

On the other hand, if somebody (a) genuinely wants peace, (b) is willing to ally with you and join your alliance of Good guys, and (c) was willing to do that before you invaded their country and is still willing to do so after kicking your invasion force back out of their country ... their intentions and desires kinda do matter.

At least, if you're willing to let them stop being an enemy.

Honestly, the only thing that Tariq could gain by pushing for his Narratively enforced redemption play over accepting Cat's initial offer (probably after some more negotiations on the practical details) is that if it's Cat's idea first, she doesn't get Narratively locked into probably dying to achieve redemption.

Seriously.

The initial offer would've cut out a lot of fighting and dying, plus, with the Grand Alliance and Callow invading Praes, Malicia probably wouldn't have been able to spend the time necessary to make a deal with the Dead King – she'd be too busy dealing with the invasion and would risk a coup (or the conquest of Ater and the Tower) if she wasn't playing close enough attention.

By rejecting it, Tariq guaranteed bloodshed (a lot of it) and either wins on the battlefield or loses on the battlefield; if he loses on the battlefield that results in either a hardening of Cat's position as a Villain or significantly worsens the Alliance position in negotiations for her assistance (and maybe there's a chance for him to set Cat up for a redemption play).

He definitively gained nothing of value by rejecting Cat's offers. He ultimately rejected Cat's offer over purely political(worldly) grounds.

Cordelia at least had a decent reason for worrying about the political ramifications.

Insanenoodlyguy

The problem, as he stated, is what cat is going to be.

He did believe Cat was willing to abdicate and go for a voluntary redemption story NOW.

But what does she look like 50 years from now? When narrative forces inevitably put her down that path anyway? He was scared of that cat not having something to stop her.

[Javvies](#)

She'd be on the side of Good/Above, so anything pushing her out of retirement would be the actions of someone Evil.

Also, there'd have been plenty of time for Above to grow themselves a Hero designed to take her down.

Cat's apotheosis would not result in another wasteland like Keter – she already has the power, its simply a matter of figuring out how to use it. Besides, the only threats likely to push her into needing more power than she already had would be a particularly powerful Dread Emperor/Black Knight/Warlock of Praes or the Dead King coming out and Callow being called upon to help resist his invasion. And if Amadeus got put in charge of Praes, even with supervision, he'd take Praes off the table as a potential threat.

Again, think about what Good/Above could do with Cat's potential voluntarily turned to its ends.

Insanenoodlyguy

You misunderstood me. If she indeed kept on the redemption path, he'd love to keep her alive, yes. But since that story line is kaput, he is not willing to assume that just because she was willing to go down redemption at that moment, that this is still the outcome she's headed towards. By his own actions she's off that path, admittedly, but now that she's off it, he does not believe she'll get back on it any other way. So he assumes that 50 years from now events will have made her a nightmare.

[Javvies](#)

Sure, his redemption play is shot *now*. It wasn't when they were in Callow and he was refusing her.

Hell, he shot down Cat's attempt to voluntarily flip sides, and then when he had her lined up in a Narratively enforced redemption play, and she was offering to go along with it and not try to dodge it, he refused her offer again.

Agent J

You're giving Pilgrim too much credit. I know he's well liked, but you're still forgetting a key component. The Princes. Catherine offered up nigh everything the Pilgrim wanted, up to and including her own abdication and to aid him against the Dread Empire.

Tariq didn't refuse "because she still posed a danger he needed to eliminate", he hadn't even come to that conclusion yet. He refused because there were "other considerations" in play. He refused because the one thing Cat asked for in exchange for literally everything he wants was to respect and preserve Callowan sovereignty. But that would be in direct contention with what the Princes wanted and would cause problems for the Crusade.

This is why people don't give two shits about him when he whines about how dangerous Cat has become. Because he had the opportunity to reduce or eliminate that danger and he chose carving up Callow instead. Not to reduce suffering, not to further the agenda of Gods, but to give the princelings a bone and a pat on the head for their good work. Politics not piety led him to this situation and so he gets no sympathy from me.

In short, he fucked up.

Dainpdf

Uh...

Cat being a danger **was** the other consideration. That and the dangers posed by Malicia.

You talk about the Pilgrim like he wanted to give Procer a payout, when he's Levantine. That country was Proceran colony same as Callow, and he has personal reason to hate their nobles.

The Pilgrim just couldn't accept the compromise because, while it took Cat's queenship, it did nothing to avert her from the path of becoming a Callowan evil deity.

Agent J

The fear of Cat's deification did not begin until *after* the Battle of Camps. Before it, everyone thought she was a pushover. It's why they were all so dismissive of her in their initial interactions. They knew she was a dangerous villain sure, but one that'll be steamrolled in the face of a full crusade on it's way to Praes.

The fear at the time Cat offered her abdication was that her rule of Callow was pushing it further and further away from the Light. This was Pilgrim's issue in the their first meeting together. That Procer, already tasked with holding back the Chain of Hunger and the Dead King, would crumble under the strain if an Evil Callow was added to the list.

It was Catherine's influence on Callow, not Catherine herself, that was unacceptable. Or as he said,

"All of this rests on the fact that it is you who rules," the old man said.

"And if I abdicate, can you guarantee that Callow will be left untouched?" I asked. "Will you swear on your Gods that if Procer tries to annex it, you will turn your sword on whoever is trying? Or even that you'll stay out of my way and let me take care of them?"

"I do not rule Procer," the Grey Pilgrim softly said. "And if I take the field against them, too many would follow. It would birth a war as dangerous as this one, in many ways."

Yes, Levant has been on the wrong end of the warmongering Procerans boundless avarice, but he still considers them vital to Calernia's wellbeing and is not willing to start a war with them for something he gives almost no fucks about, like ensuring Callowan sovereignty.

Because, again, this was before Catherine proved herself as a force to be reckoned with. Pilgrim was under the impression that he could simply conquer Callow outright. Negotiated peace against the interests of the prinelings would have made for a far more complicated affair. Better to simply break her at the Camps.

He didn't break her. Black ravaged Procer, indirectly killing way more people than his marauding army ever could have. Oh, and Ol' King Nessie's back out in force. The North is in apocalypse mode, Procer is teetering on collapse, and the fate of the entire continent hangs in the balance.

In short, he fucked up.

Dainpdf

He was appalled by what Cat had become from the get-go.

And yes, there was also the situation with Procer. Can you imagine what would have happened if Procer and Levante were at war when Malicia released the

Dead King (as she had already planned to, from months earlier)?

Agent J

Yes. Appalled, but did not consider her a continent ending threat as he does now. That came after she dropped a lake, slapped around a half dozen heroes, and danced around arguably the strongest hero alive.

As for Procer and Levant warring during a Dead Invasion, that wouldn't happen until after the war with Malicia. Y'know, since the point of contention is the fate of Callow after the war. And Cat would also be helping them during the war as she'd pledged to, so even if Malicia still got Nessie involved, they would have the full might of Procer, Levant, and Callow to throw against him without any of this "slaughtering our way to peace" bullshit we're engaged in now.

Dainpdf

You think Procer and Levant would have stayed together until Praes was dealt with and then air their grievances? The moment the Pilgrim got Levant to up and decide to leave Callow alone there would have been war.

As for Cat's danger level... I am unsure.

[Liliet](#)

>Not to reduce suffering, not to further the agenda of Gods, but to give the princelings a bone and a pat on the head for their good work.

Nope. That's not what the situation was like.

The option he had there was not "help Catherine and upset the Princes by doing so", it was "forcibly seize power in Levant, possibly provoking a civil war, and openly break it away from the Grand Alliance, possibly provoking a war between Procer and Levant. And help Catherine by doing that".

[Javvies](#)

No, Tariq refused over the worldly consequences to Procer, not Levant. He wouldn't need seize power in Levant to pull them with him in any deal he supported.

His word in support and verifying her sincerity and good faith is all that Levant would require.

And again, if the Grand Alliance is truly so fragile that someone they originally thought was an enemy turned out to want to, and was **allowed** to, be an ally instead of an enemy to be conquered and divided in the aftermath is to tear it apart, it doesn't deserve to survive.

[*Liliet*](#)

Catherine really should have talked to Cordelia and Tariq at the same time. The result could have been very different 0.0

[*Liliet*](#)

Anyway, Tariq has said as much in the pre-Camps negotiation: "if I were to take the field against them, too many would follow". You're correct that he would not need to forcibly seize power in Levant to get them to support him; that's the *problem*, because Levant at war with Procer is among the worst case scenarios from where he's standing.

Yes, the Grand Alliance is fragile. That's WHY it's precious to him: Cordelia is trying to make something new and necessary, something that will hopefully grow strong and stay for generations, ensuring peace in the future.

[*Javvies*](#)

If the Alliance is truly so fragile that someone they thought was an enemy actually turned out to want to be, and was allowed to be, an ally instead of an enemy to be conquered, looted, and divided in the aftermath, would break it, not only does it not deserve to survive, but it will also evolve into something far worse, spawning more enemies and its own downfall, and in so rotting and collapsing will have far worse consequences than the Alliance falling apart now over not being allowed to conquer, loot, and partition Callow.

[*Liliet*](#)

"Will evolve into something far worse" is the only part of this that's relevant to Pilgrim's POV on what's going on.

So, would you elaborate on this hypothesis?

Javvies

I'd argue that delaying the fall but worsening the fall is also relevant.

Or is Pilgrim just about delaying bad things from happening now, even if it causes worse things to happen later?

Look at what we know about what happened the last time Procer occupied Callow.

And Procer's imperial ambitions and tendencies – it's domestically safer to push for expansion and conquest, and giving Procer a successful taste of conquest will tempt them into seeking more.

This, of course, ignores the practical realities that if Procer (or Levant) seeks to occupy Callow, they're going to need a heavy investment of military force to maintain any semblance of control on top of the forces needed to deter Praesi incursion. And it's a good bet that the Alliance occupation forces would be less restrained than the Legions under Black. Black wanted to slowly convert Callow, the Alliance will have a lot of people looking to punish and exploit Callow, and they'll have less holding them back than the Praesi Imperial Governors.

As for my position that if allowed to continue, it'll grow into something terrible ... Cordelia Hasenbach is an anomaly, and her successor will most likely be a return to past Proceran norms. Just think about it – if the leaders of the Alliance refuse to allow someone who they thought was an enemy to become the ally it actually wants to be instead of being conquered, looted, and partitioned, for the low price of not conquering, looting, partitioning it, what happens when the leadership is less united, less focused on the actual big Evils that exist? And the precedent has already been set – and endorsed by Heroes during a Crusade – that conquering, looting, and partitioning those who want to be allies and Alliance member is okay to do.

Liliet

As far as I'm reading, Cordelia's plan was as follows:

- lead the Crusade to a smashing victory under her brilliant guidance;
- low key grind the expansionist faction into pulp

in the process;

- divide Callow into several kingdoms *ruled by native Callowan nobility*

- establish good relationships with them / bring them into the Grand Alliance, officially outlawing war against them on any of its other parts;

- strengthen the ties between the countries of the Grand Alliance and ramp up incentives for staying in it;

- have Grand Alliance stand as a whole bulwark of Good against ineffectual divided Evil.

She failed step 1, but Pilgrim was hoping to hold up the rest of them (save step 3 if he managed to bring Catherine around) anyway.

[Liliet](#)

>Cordelia Hasenbach is an anomaly, and her successor will most likely be a return to past Proceran norms.

Only if she fails to secure her succession / strengthen her legacy to the degree that her successor will be best served following the plan she outlined.

Andrew Mitchell

@Liliet – that’s a solid outline of Cordelia’s plans IMO and it reminds me that Catherine and Cordelia have similar aims in some significant respects. Maybe even enough that they’ll be able to find common ground in the next book.

Your point that Cordelia wants to “– divide Callow into several kingdoms ruled by native Callowan nobility” is new to me. Is that supported by the text somewhere?

Regarding “Only if she fails to secure her succession / strengthen her legacy to the degree that her successor will be best served following the plan she outlined.” That’s a really huge IF in my opinion because an outcome like that would be contrary to the entire history of Procer.

[Liliet](#)

@Andrew Mitchell – yes, it is. I don’t remember where exactly but Cordelia states that much explicitly – let me look, fuck, it’s a big and important point I’m going off here.

...

GOD THIS TOOK ME LIKE AN HOUR

Extra Chapter Fatalism I

>Setting aside that any occupation of Callowan land would turn into a brutal grind of constant banditry and rebellions – they were, for the Heavens' sake, a people that prided themselves on inheriting grudges from generation to generation – **Cordelia had absolutely no intention of annexing any part of Callow.** Would she split it into several kingdoms? Absolutely. It was necessary to ensure that the Black Queen's surviving partisans would not be able to mount any significant bid for power until her memory had faded among the populace and could no longer serve as an effective rallying cry. There were already separatist currents within the region, anyway. The northern baronies were near a kingdom of their own, the Duchy of Daoine was independent even when it bothered to pretend otherwise, and most the south had remained under aristocratic rule until mere years ago: the people there, unlike those who'd lived for decades under Imperial governors, had never entirely abandoned the old Callowan way of life.

That's my source.

As for the fragility of the idea of changing the entire mode of operations of Procer – it's no more or less ambitious than what Black and Malicia have been trying in Praes. It is, now that I'm looking at it, actually more or less the same thing. Cordelia's a pissed-off Lycaonese taking power, the representative of the part of the Principate that had been holding the wall this entire time out to bring the whole rest of it back in on the effort. Drag them towards Good and away from petty rivalries and territorial ambitions, in a mirror of Amadeus dragging Praes away from Evil and towards civil prosperity and a stable foreign policy.

And honestly I'd been expecting Cordelia and Catherine to get along since the start of Book 4. They never quite managed to, to my ongoing disappointment, but at least Cordelia has something of Catherine's measure and a foundation for trust in the future. HERE'S FUCKING HOPING,

Javvies

Cordelia doesn't want to annex Callow. Most of the rest of Procer's Princes(ses) do.

Cordelia is an anomaly amongst Procerans. Once that is unlikely to make lasting changes in the patterns of behavior of the Princes and Princesses of Procer.

Her grip on power is not so strong that she would be able to ignore and override a more or less united Assembly that wanted to claim Callow.

Liliet

"Once that is unlikely to make lasting changes in the patterns of behavior of the Princes and Princesses of Procer.

Her grip on power is not so strong that she would be able to ignore and override a more or less united Assembly that wanted to claim Callow."

It was before Cat&Amadeus wrecked her advance on Callow.

It's a whole subplot about how Cordelia had Procer in hand and was well-positioned to change the way things are done there... until she ran into Callow and its defenders.

And even after Amadeus's atrocious raid, she is still the First Prince and still has enough power behind the title to order Rozala around. If Catherine and Pilgrim lend her strength, it's fully possible for her to recover yet and repair the Grand Alliance into what she wanted it to be in the first place – with the Liesse Accords attached, as I'm pretty sure she's going to approve of those.

Andrew Mitchell

@Liliet – thank you. I'm sorry that it took you an hour to find it but I really do appreciate your effort. I'm now fully on-board with your understanding of Cordelia's plans. I think she's going to have to modify them to actually get along with Catherine. But your views have helped cement my view that Cordelia and Catherine are going to be working together on their aligned interests, in the final book.

Andrew Mitchell

@javvies

I think there's still certainly a risk that Cordelia won't be able to reshape Procer as much as she wants to... But I have some level of confidence based on the skill she's shown in politics and intrigue so far.

Insanenoodlyguy

He wouldn't need to do shit in Levant to start that civil war. If he did agree to her oath (I abdicate, you fight for Callow if it comes to that), and Procer did anything, the second Levant heard the Grey Pilgrim was honor-bound to fight Procer, everybody would be jumping to say "And we'll help him!" and start targeting procer in general in his name. He wouldn't have to seize power, in fact this is exactly what he wouldn't want, but it's not like Levant would need that much prompting to fight procer in these circumstances. And a few heroes would jump in as well, to fight the "Empire that lost their way.", again, not so much by Grey's influence as in his name. Taking that stance would almost certainly mean the war would happen, he wasn't wrong about that.

[Dresden 67](#)

Ah but remember Behold doesn't work on Catherine anymore with Sve Noc blocking it.

He still knows about the desire for peace he saw in her before she went to the Everdark, but she's since bound herself to horrific deities whose power is rooted on murder and betrayal. He doesn't know if that has changed her goals, but the risk is certainly there.

[Javvies](#)

Behold doesn't work on Cat *now*, sure. But that doesn't matter to my point.

Behold was damned well still working on Cat back when the two of them were still in Callow and she was offering to join the Grand Alliance and help them and got nothing but refusals and rejections. And was cooperating with Tariq's redemption play against her.

Rook

Agreed, complete utilitarianism is basically the core of both the choirs Mercy and the Pilgrim.

This is the same guy who smothered the kid he loved like a son because the war he'd bring by surviving would be even worse as far as the continent is concerned.

Mercy basically doesn't give a shit whether a verdict is just, whether someone is genuine, or even whether the action is necessarily good or evil in itself, as long as you get the Greatest Good in the long run.

The Pilgrim is obviously not at the level of the ophanim, but his decisionmaking is essentially along those lines.

Rook

Lol god damn it, I replied to the wrong post.

Novice

Yep, Mercy is not Justice. That's what makes that specific Choir especially terrifying imo.

[Liliet](#)

We had a whole chapter about it.

>The thought that the man could have conceived of me as a nascent Dead King was ludicrous, he'd been able to see into my fucking soul. I wasn't... Gods, I'd done some dark things and not always for reasons as good as I would have wished but there were lines I'd always refused to cross. That I would have kept to. This can't be personal, I told myself, and put aside the horrifying thought that a truth teller might have genuinely believed I had the potential to become the likes of Neshamah.

>[...]

> What mattered was that I'd come into a Name as the manifestation of what Tariq had called the sin of our indolence returned to haunt us, the first time we'd ever spoken. That was important, that informed what I considered the Black Queen to be. She was a form of retribution by Creation, by the story, for a failure on the side of Good. Catherine Foundling, as an entity, was inherently dangerous to the Heavens.

> [...]

> I make the reasonable offer of this very dangerous person abdicating the crown and allowing others settle the kingdom she's slowly turning to Evil by simple virtue of ruling it, but mortal considerations prevent her from accepting. This is a good sign, because it means she still has good

intentions. This is a bad sign, because her attachment to Callow is the kind of narrative leverage Below will use in a heartbeat to make a full monster of her.

> [...]

> Then the backlash makes her fall into some sort of state – Diabolist taking the reins of the body, though I might not know that – and she faces down the entire heroic contingent simultaneously before snapping out of the fugue state and forcing a truce on the battlefield. **Catherine Foundling has now proved dangerous, exceedingly hard to kill and mentally unstable. Given that she's running around with an entire fairy court's worth of power, good intentions or not she needs to be removed.**

And there you have it. Behold isn't omiscience.

Catherine saw the same risks he did and was in a much better position to handle them than he was. If she'd been open with him about it, they might have cooperated and forged better solutions together: just Tariq knowing about Vivienne's killswitch might have put his worries to rest. But she wasn't and he had no better way of knowing than just vague "good intentions" feeling off her. He reads hearts and feelings, not competence and plans.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> should have known through your Behold Aspect/the Ophanim looking at her...

Except that Sri Noc shut them out, precisely to keep him from shortcutting Cat's plans. As she herself has noted, Pilgrim will always do "the right thing", based on the information he has at the moment. But that makes him *predictable*, and leaves him vulnerable when he doesn't have correct (and current) information.

Also, regarding Mercy's refusal to make the choice to him, EE's clearly still reading the comments. 😊

[Javvies](#)

Again. Behold and the Ophanim are blocked **now**.

They weren't blocked back when both of them were back in Callow and Cat was offering a deal **then**.

SpeckofStardust

Which is enterally irrelevant because the deal Cat was offering back then would have broken the grand alliance.

Cat is not worth an mult-national alliance between all the definitive Good nations on the continent.

Javvies

If the Grand Alliance is/was really so fragile that it would break apart because someone they originally thought was an enemy wanted to be their ally and was allowed to become their ally and they weren't going to get to partition Callow up in the aftermath or exterminate the greenskins ... the Alliance is already doomed to failure and doesn't deserve to continue.

And Cat and Callow being on board with the Alliance would lessen the damage when it ultimately falls apart anyways.

At worst, I think Cordelia would be at risk of losing the position of First Prince and Procer has a succession crisis. On the other hand, Cordelia has Augur on her pocket, and even if Procer has a succession crisis, they do (or should) know how to pull together against a clear and obvious outside enemy (the League). Plus, there would be Heroes available to expedite the succession process. Besides, depending on the terms, other Grand Alliance members might be required to help Cordelia maintain control of Procer, which Cat would have been able to make a whole lot easier.

Cat doesn't get backed into a corner where all her options are terrible (for the side of Good/Above).

Malicia, maybe she gets backed into a corner where she still tries to make a deal with the Dead King, but in that scenario, the Alliance is probably still intact with Cordelia in charge of Procer, plus Cat has joined the Alliance, and can get everybody back to Procer in a hurry, and at worst Praes (or at least the High Lords) are significantly wrecked that they're not an immediate threat, or more likely, the Alliance has taken Ater, even if they haven't destroyed the Tower, and if you're lucky, you can go with Cat's idea to have Black impose his "fixes" on Praes and abdicate in a few years (or not, because he isn't interested in conquest for conquest's sake and can probably keep a lid on Praes for long enough.

The potential worldly consequences for Cordelia Hasenbach's control of Procer are, or should be, unimportant in the larger long term scheme of things between Above and Below.

They matter, quite reasonably, to *Cordelia's* reaction to Cat's offer ... but they shouldn't matter to Tariq.

Besides ... if Tariq is right about Cat's long term threat potential and apotheosis ... just think about what Good could do with that potential on its side.

Kissaten

It's all good and sound, but the Good side doesn't need any justification for invading supposedly Evil nations because, you know, they are Evil. Even when Black Queen ascended to the throne and actually made life better for callowans without screwing praesi (common folk, at least) heroes continued to attack her, ignoring any kind of diplomatic solution.

ciara

"But if she wasn't here, how did she expect to bring down dawn should he refuse her surrender? There might be other drow with power enough, but none with the requisite weight to carry it out. If the Hierophant had still been at her side then Tariq would not have considered the matter further, but the boy currently was in the depths of Arcadia making a ruinous altar of his grief. The Wild Hunt could not wield miracles of darkness, and who did that leave?"

Surely some no-name like Advisor Kivule wouldn't have the magical expertise or the dramatic weight to pull it off, had the Pilgrim turned down the surrender. What a play by the Black Queen!

I argued before that Pilgrim's dialogue with Akua back on the third day of the battle of Camps was a thinly disguised negotiation for resurrection, but it looks I've been proven wrong.

Dainpdf

Yeah, was going to comment on that. It would have been funny to have Tariq's bad decision be punished by the Ghost of Bad Decisions herself...

Liliet

I mean he doesn't even know who Advisor Kivule is, the Crusade doesn't have a spy network in Cat's army ;u;

Cap'n Smurfy

The Leaders of the League of Free Cities never fail to entertain. I keep thinking "Okay they can't get any more ridiculous" but they just keep one upping themselves. It's like watching a nation being lead by a Monty Python sketch.

(Looking back at the previous chapters, it does seem that the differences between the Guideverse's Bible nailed to a chair and the delegate of Atlante are largely superficial.)

luminiousblu

Arguably that's part of the plan
You can't just kill the comic relief. The comic relief always lives.

Ultimate_Procrastinator

Until the story needs to get dark and gritty, then the comic relief is the first to die

[Mental Mouse](#)

That said, letting the comic relief run free is one of the classic Overlord Fallacies.

nick012000

So, the Pilgrim sang about the Peregrine, saying "His stride rebellion and stirring ember."

Now he's going to meet the Hierarch in battle, who actually is what he sang of. I think that's going to be an interesting meeting.

Dainpdf

Different kinds of rebellion, though. The Pilgrim arose to match the people's rebellion.

The Hierarch drags people into rebellion with him.

caoimhinh

The first Pilgrim arose to rebel against foreign invasion.
This new Hierarch arose to rebel against the bourgeoisie XD

Dainpdf

Except there isn't bourgeoisie, in modern terms, in Calernia, is there? I guess maybe in Mercantis?

This is more of a Russian/French revolution deal, where it's a revolt against the ancien régime in the name of equality but then it's Oops! All Tyranny!

Kissaten

Hierarch was infuriated by Hanno claiming that he, Hanno, brings justice, that angels on his shoulders can judge. This claim was sooo against the laws of Most Glorious Republic that Hierarch finally chose a side. I assume Hierarch wants all heroes on the trial by people, kings

and princes (and maybe even gods) are just collateral in this particular case.

And nah, traders are not bourgeoisie, bourgeoisie owns and produces stuff, merchants are not that.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Checking WP, merchants do indeed count as bourgeoisie. Apparently Marx did distinguish between "administrators of the means of production" and "rentiers", but the general term basically marks urban property-owners and capitalists, as opposed to laborers. They're also explicitly commoners (Third Estate), rather than nobles (First Estate) or priests (Second Estate).

konstantinvoncarstein

If Tariq could blow up the Hierarch, I would be very happy. Or he could have a redemption story and die doing so.

RanVor

I agree, Tariq could use a redemption story.

Agent J

Not now. He hasn't even pulled off the first step of his plan yet. I'm still waiting to see the trial for Gods and angels. That's definitely gonna be a show.

konstantinvoncarstein

Angels are not citizens of Bellerophon, and therefore are not subject to its laws, unlike the Gods Below. I would like to see the reaction of the later at the trial.

Agent J

Memory is hazy on what the Dead King said of the matter, but I was under the impression they have something planned for the... what are Judgement Angels called? Contrition Anged are Hashmallim and Mercy Anges are Ophanim. Whatever. They got something in store of Judgement Douches is the point I'm driving at.

caoimhinh

Seraphim are the Angels of the Choir of Judgement

Kissaten

Just imagine what is being written down in that Delosi's scrolls. Basileus and magister are so tired of dealing with bs Tyrant

brings forward that they deadpan back any attempt at a joke, and the only person who will actually consider anything said seriously (and he is forced to, anyway, he writes the chronicles) is that Delosi. When it all ends this paper will be more Mad than Isabelle the Mad, and Kairos will burn it just for giggles so that no one actually knows just how Mad it was.

konstantinvoncarstein

Or, like in Kaamelott, he try to tell these story in a more dignified manner.

[Liliet](#)

That guy deserves a Name just for putting up with the bs ♥ ♥ ♥

[Fuodiachloris](#)

Beleaguered Bureaucrat. 😊

[doominator10](#)

I will be disappointed if the goat isn't involved with some form of explosion or goblin fire.

caoimhinh

LMAO Irritant, at least be subtle when directing an opponent. Though, I suppose being so blatant makes it oddly effective. "A blunt but potent approach" as Tariq would put it, hahaha.

"The Ophanim murmured uncertainly in his ear, even they unknowing" Wow, that's unexpected, the Angels actually admitted they didn't know. I would have expected them to just remain silent (which would imply it) but such honest admission is interesting.

And now Kairos and the League ride to battle to ensure the Army of Callow's safe retreat while Cat goes to save Masego, who the Grey Pilgrim just confirmed was indeed the one messing up that corner of Arcadia.

It will be interesting to see the reaction of the different forces in the armies.

Typos found:

- the stakes at play hereL he, this army / the stakes at play here. He, this army
- No it was nearly certain / No, it was nearly certain
- If he was avoid / If he was to avoid
- to be put it bluntly/ to put it bluntly
- the fullness of the might/ the fullness of their might
- He'd seen too many times to count / He'd seen it too many times to count

-He could it be, when Keter was on the march? / How could it be, when Keter was on the march?
-Could he truly justify, the Grey Pilgrim asked himself
countenance / Could he truly justify, the Grey Pilgrim asked himself, countenance
-The Black Queen that could be would be the end of Calernia / The Black Queen that could be, would be the end of Calernia
-his tired from / his tired form
-Tariq though of the city / Tariq thought of the city
-The orcs jaw tightened / The orc's jaw tightened

[Mental Mouse](#)

Regarding typos, That "hereL" is surely a fat-finger for "here:" (at least on an American keyboard).

And the angels couldn't remain silent, because they've established silence is its own message ('you done screwed up'). It seems that the rules of the game require the mortals gamepieces to make their own decisions, albeit after Above and Below place the pieces.

[Liliet](#)

>Wow, that's unexpected, the Angels actually admitted they didn't know. I would have expected them to just remain silent (which would imply it) but such honest admission is interesting.

I am not surprised 😊

I continue to be incredibly unsurprised by anything to do with Tariq and his angels here; it's so lovely of Erratic to actually deign to explicitly provide the information that could previously only be indirectly inferred 😊

Dainpdf

Glorious victory, via surrender!

All diplomatic goats, full speed ahead!

...Catherine is a mad genius.

[Jordan Leighton](#)

God bless Hakram

[Mental Mouse](#)

Alas, his gods don't do blessings.

Agent J

Sure she does, if you bring a bottle of Vale Summer Wine and your birthday suit.

Mental Mouse

Au contraire... even when Cat was in fact a goddess, one thing Hakram didn't do was actually worship her. (Of course, she never really explored the implications of divinity.) IIRC, orcs call the Gods Below collectively the Gobbler (while the goblins call them the Hungry Gods, or maybe that's the other way around). I suppose "may you be eaten last" qualifies as a Dark blessing. 😊

caoimhinh

The Gobbler is the Goblins' patron deity, while Hungry Gods, Merciless Gods, Ashen Gods, Burning Gods, and other such names are used by all the cultures in Calernia. The Orcs seemed to have some minor gods with them back in the day (Captain killed one of them, the one that helped the Orcs gain control over the Red Rage).

crysjal

Calling it now. Kairos is going to return the Goat to Cat at some point and it's going to go boom.

Mental Mouse

At which point Catherine goes "hee hee" and tells Akua to serve the wine.]:->

Tom

"I, Catherine Foundling, first anointed Queen of Callow of my name," I said, "formally offer the unconditional surrender of all forces under my command to the Grey Pilgrim, Tariq of Levant, also known as the Peregrine. Let there be no further bloodshed between your armies and mine, and through that surrender peace be obtained for us all."

Cat then goes out of her way to specifically avoid offering any sort of command to Vivienne and by proxy Juniper, and those two command the Pro-Callow forces in the battle while Cat rides into Arcadia with the Wild Hunt. Do the forces under Cat's command technically consist of anything more than the Wild Hunt at the time her surrender is delivered?

Liliet

I think that depends on what she ends up needing.

This could be plausibly interpreted in either direction – either it matters that she *could* command if she tried, and

making their own decisions was *at her command* in the first place. This is what matters narratively – Catherine’s armies are Catherine’s armies, if she’s to play out the *story* of genuine surrender she needs to hold to the spirit of the agreement above the letter of it.

Or the story of genuine surrender might not work out, in which case she’s got the technicality contingency that will salvage the situation on the formal level. This would require a pretty big narrative fuckup by Tariq and Co though, to make this not as narratively bad for Catherine as Tariq points out it would be on its face.

Catherine is keeping the reins of the situation, not making a leap of faith so much as a controlled rope swing of faith – if it doesn’t work out, she’ll just swing back 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, Viv, Juniper, etc have been holding their own reins since the beginning of the engagement, so Cat’s abdication won’t leave them wailing “wait, now what are we supposed to do next?” Well, maybe Viv a little, but she’ll get over it.

[Liliet](#)

And then it turns out Vivienne is exactly the one with the best handle on the situation 😊

Looking up to Catherine doesn’t make her less capable; in fact, it signifies good judgement on her part! 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Careful about spoilers... But yeah, Vivienne had it half-figured out before Cat even left! And the Theodosius story revealed in the next chapter is pretty blatant.

[Liliet](#)

right lmao sorry

Valkyria

This scene felt like the Mad Teaparty, from Alice in Wonderland. Everyone talking about stuff while nobody is really making much sense but in the end they all reach some sort of agreement what to do next.

Also, I do love the goat. I sure hope she get’s a special place of honor somewhere, after she finishes her duties. I wonder how small Kairos is or how big the goat since he plans to ride her into battle ...

Jarthon

Well, we are talking about Kairos here. If he can't successfully ride a goat into battle that is physically smaller than he should be able to ride then he'll either aspect it up and Rule that it is possible or just do the thing where you walk above something small and pretend that you're riding it. Either way, you can be sure that her will be 100% committed to the bit.

[Mental Mouse](#)

IIRC Kairos is stunted and (was) sickly. Goats can be fairly large; no idea how big this one is.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, every conference with Kairos picks up that crazed tinge of unreality. That's practically his trademark.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Go vote!

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

Andrew Mitchell

Yay, we've just moved ahead of Ward!

Keep up the voting everyone!!

Novice

Irritant and Tyrant on the same chapter, a jolly good time is expected to be had.

If Kairos doesn't enter the field riding that goat, I'd be very cross.

[Liliet](#)

He's sickly and infirm, I doubt he is capable of riding at all.

The goat is going to be pulling a chariot 😊

Aotrs Commander

Ahahahahahahahahaha!

Cat's so good at it, even the fricking CH0IRS are at the point of throwing their hands up in the air and going "fuck, I don't know, mate!"

Kairos and Hackram seem to be getting along well!

(Told you, Kairos is privately delighted isn't he? Look, he's even taking his goat into battle!)

While normally I don't point out the typos, since other folk do a bang-up job, But "the Hierarch's authority was a shame" *probably* was intended to be "sham," I couldn't help but giggle, because it's not entirely innacurate the way it is..

Aotrs Commander

(Also, the irony of me managin to mis-spell "inaccurate" in a sentence about typos was not lost on me. Dang lack of edit function.)

Valkyria

...it's also managing xD
sry had to

but yeah I damn the nonexistent editing function as well.

Aotrs Commander

Yeah, I noticed THAT three seconds after hitting "post" as well... But elected not to make a third comment in a row. Unfortunately, I am one of those people who generally only catches the typos on the second pass myself and thus always too late on something I can't edit... (Rare is the post i make elsewhere that doesn't require at least one edit.)

Valkyria

Yes I know that feeling... I remember a comment of mine that included a "very serious conservation" ... well at least that site had editing

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's a fundamental law of the Internet: Any post attempting to correct someone else's error in spelling, grammar, etc will inevitably contain an error of its own. 😊

[Daniel E](#)

I have a new goal on my life's to-do list: Be in a situation where I can ask somebody to saddle my goat (and not mean it as a euphemism).

Komplode

I hope Cat gets to tell Grey that she is playing against opponents far beyond him now, ie Dead King and Intercessor.

superkeaton

As usual, Catherine remains the top scorer of her favorite game "Give Everyone Knives and Liquor and Turn Off the Lights Until One is Standing".

Mental Mouse

Well, Abigail's ingenuity at that (replace the knives with more booze) was half of why Cat originally promoted her. "'She gave alcohol to rioters?' ... 'Fuck it..., it worked. Promote her.'"

Tohron

Alright, so we were told that Catherine's three messages were a "knife", a "bet", and a "lie". I now have a guess as to which was which.

The "knife": I'm thinking this is her message to Pilgrim – as we saw here, it forces him to abandon his original plan and choose between two less-desirable options. This make the message a way to harm Tariq's position.

The "bet": It seems to me that the bet was that Kairos couldn't let the other sides make peace without him, so the message to him was a bet that he would accept the offer it contained.

The "lie": Here I'm going out on more of a limb. The message to the Callowan leadership was to read up on Theodosius' dilemma, which I'm assuming pertains to how Isabella fed all her leaders different battle plans on the eve of the Maddened Fields. Given how Catherine is deliberately keeping her subordinates in the dark, it seems to me that the "lie" is the impression she's giving that she has some sort of complicated scheme based on getting everyone else to engage in specific behavior based on information she feeds them, an intricate Xanatos Gambit.

The thing is, she learned in Keter about all the problems with intricate, interlocking schemes, so instead, I think she's just using the incomplete information to give the impression of an intricate scheme to anyone mind-reading her subordinates, thus ensuring they'll have to limit the complexity of their own plans on account of the complicated gambit that doesn't actually exist.

Oshi

This is the closest thing to what feels correct that I have seen from all the theories.

Mental Mouse

Except that as she pointed out to her own people, the three parts don't actually depend on each other – any one of them can play out by itself. On the other hand, if two, or all three, of them do work, they combine and Cat can win really big..

Kissaten

Kairos letter appears to me to be the thing that brings surest result, while Pilgrim may do anything (in the realm of probability) as a result. Surrender may be a lie even, given that all other letters kind of violate Pilgrim's letter's unconditional surrender. Also, Cat hasn't yet showed Pilgrim what would happen for daring to take a swing at her, and surrender can't be the that, even thousands dead to drow onslaught aren't enough to dissuade Pilgrim from attempting something again.

Liliet

The surrender can't be a lie, as Tariq has pointed out – it's too bad/stupid a move in itself. Tariq doesn't need to know what kind of scheme Catherine could use to work around it, he looks at the meta situation and concludes that she has to mean it, in order to not come out the loser.

* she has to mean it in the event that it is genuinely accepted at face value and with no intent of treachery on Pilgrim's side, which is something she can't quite count on from her side, hence the contingencies allowing her to back out of it if it ends up biting her in the ass

It's a Prisoner's Dilemma where sides can change their decision after seeing that of the other person 😊

Kissaten

All three letters are contingency plans in to nudge events into needed direction. Letter to Pilgrim in conjunction with letter to Kairos always make Kairos to attack. Cat commits meta-narrative suicide – Kairos attacks, Cat actually surrenders – Kairos attacks, Pilgrim commits meta-narrative suicide – Kairos still attacks, maybe he will attack Cat in this case, though. Letter to Pilgrim doesn't need to bet on anything, it can be a total lie and still do it's job, that's what i meant.

Liliet

If the job you think it needs to do is getting Kairos to attack, sure.

But the more important job it's doing is shifting the meta-narrative in Catherine's favor. And it needs to be in good faith for that to work.

Snowfire1224

Does the “purebred” steed get a name? I’m thinking, “Definitely Not a Goat” but that seems obvious.

mavant

Artax.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Antonius Khalid MacKenzie The Magnificent. 😊

[Euodiachloris](#)

Nanny Liessen Charger I.

Kissaten

Ah, I get it now. Procer can’t fall apart if there are no princes left.

[Liliet](#)

need to make a meme of this

Dread Emperor fanboy

I love Irritant.

[Mental Mouse](#)

A thought... given how hard on the Pilgrim that **Shine** was... he might have only one left – that is, the next one may well overtax and kill him. Dude’s getting old...

[Mental Mouse](#)

So the question for Monday: back to Cat, watch Viv and Juniper ‘s apoplexy, or do we actually get a look at Masego? (Seriously, five interludes in a row? Is EE channeling Robert Jordan? 😊)

Andrew Mitchell

IMO there’s nothing wrong (in fact, there’s everything right) with five interludes in a row when they’ve done so much to advance the plot, add significantly to our understanding of important characters, and see some more great fight scenes.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And a random thought: Cat's surrender was literally enough to make a saint swear. And that's *before* he finds out about her other machinations!

Andrew Mitchell

Saint? Or do you mean Pilgrim?

But seriously, I really want to see Saint's reaction to Cat's surrender and Pilgrim's acceptance.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Names aside, the Saint of Swords is not a saint of humans. Pilgrim, in contrast, is pretty much in the traditional mold, if you ignore his black ops work and SWAT/WMD role.

JJR

Swords are weapons to be wielded and therefore so is Laurence de Montfort. I think she'll follow Tariq's lead in the end, even if there is some push back. Some swords need to draw blood before they are sheathed again, even if it's the weilder's.

Of course taking this sword talk to it's logical conclusion. Swords are stored in scabbards, and so is Laurence de Montfort. Robber will let her out later, maybe.

green

"And to think, all that time it was your cup that was poisoned."
"They were both poisoned. I spent the last few years building up an immunity to iocane powder."

/toasts the Pilgrim

burguulkodar

I really love the Tyrant.

And wow, that part about the Book-of-all-things being read by a gargoyle is so funny! xD

"no one noticed the difference" – he hinted.

Interlude: When Iron Rests

"What poison is to medicine, war is to empire: apportionment is the balance of life and death."

– Extract from 'The Ruin of Empire, or, a Call to Reform of the Highest Assembly', by Princess Eliza of Salamans

Word of the surrender had rippled through the ranks, drawing out cries of dismay and anger before they both turned to disbelief.

There'd been tension between the Legions and the Army of Callow, when some loudmouths in the former had started to say this was just an elaborate way to sell out the Legions of Terror to the Grand Alliance, but Vivienne had been ready to quell such stupidity. Plants in the ranks had done as instructed, gone on the offensive and accused the complainers of being traitors in Grand Alliance employ. Enough of those arguments had turned to brawl that sergeants got involved, so now the most volatile of the rank and file were cooling their heels under arrest until this could be played out to the end. On the side of the Army of Callow there'd been mostly outrage and laying blame, which to Vivienne's mix of grief and amusement had been laid along predictable lines. Callowan recruits blamed the Hellhound, or more frequently Marshal Grem One-Eye – whose role in the Conquest still had him closely associated to national wounded pride. Most of the eastern recruits, though, both the fresh and those brought in from gutted legions after the Doom, tended to point the finger at Vivienne Dartwick.

Hardly unexpected: she the most visible civilian authority over the Army of Callow, a known former noble and former heroine. And for the greenskins, most damnably of all she had no famous feat of violence to her name. It was something to look into remedying, in the long term, though it was hardly a priority at the moment. The amusing part of all this, of course, was that while it'd been Catherine who'd pulled the rug out under everyone's feet with that sudden turn no one seemed to be blaming her in the slightest. Vivienne had absolutely no intention of changing that, since there were only a few things keeping the Kingdom of Callow together and one of them was the myth of the Black Queen undefeated, the kingdom's own crowned villain whose uninterrupted string of victories had become the backbone of a nation. It would have to be maintained, Vivienne thought, in the years to come – marshals and generals and even the Woe could lose, but the Black Queen could not. But that was beyond the horizon, and Vivienne Dartwick's troubles were current.

The solution she'd found had been to let the current of older faith guide the rumours she sowed. This was not a defeat, it was a trick being played by Queen Catherine on her enemies. And Gods be merciful, Vivienne thought, but she couldn't even be sure that was a lie. The drow had been laid low by that sudden star in the

sky, all but the most powerful of them battered into slumber for at least a few moments, and even the highest of these 'Mighty' had been forced to flee in the face of the enemy's swiftly resuming advance. Legionaries had moved to hold the walls in good order, but within moments of that Marshal Juniper had been informed that surrender had been offered to the Grey Pilgrim and then accepted, bringing this battle to a close. Vivienne had spent the following hour putting out fires, but now the situation was stable enough she'd finally been able to head the general staff's pavilion. Truthfully she could have done more, and would have preferred keeping her finger on the Army of Callow's pulse, but Juniper's last messenger had mentioned a message from Catherine with the royal seal. Those summons she could not deny, and so she had come.

"Adjutant's still missing?"

Marshal Juniper looked vaguely irked at her immediate question, though not enough to chide her for it. What Vivienne had expected to be a formal war council in how to deal with the fact that the Grand Alliance had fully surrounded the camp and was now ordering disarmament and the bringing down of the palisade turned out to be rather less crowded. Marshal Juniper, with her perennial accessory Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara, Grandmaster Brandon Talbot for the Order of Broken Bells and Marshal Grem for what some had begun to call the Legions-in-Exile.

"Whatever duty Her Majesty sent him out on, Lord Adjutant is still discharging it," Tribune Bishara said.

Vivienne kept herself from grimacing. Hakram had been a useful interpreter of Catherine's occasionally seemingly outlandish decisions even before the Everdark, but nowadays the orc's talent for understanding the thoughts of their leader had become a priceless asset. The journey into that dark place had changed Cat in deep ways, and much could be argued of whether all these changes had been for the best, but regardless of debate it was undeniable Catherine kept her cards a lot closer to the chest than she'd used to. Adjutant's presence would have been a boon, Vivienne already suspected, for what was to come. None of the others were seated, so she remained standing as well and simply joined them at the table.

"Now that everyone's in attendance," the Hellhound said, flicking a displeased glance at Vivienne that was met with a raised brow. "This was handed to me by a rider of the Wild Hunt, along with knowledge of the surrender and instruction to abide by it."

The orc tossed out a leather sheath bearing the royal seal of Callow, which Tribune Bishara daintily picked up afterwards.

"Unless there is an objection?" the Taghreb politely asked.

A round of shaking heads. Talbot might have objected, Vivienne thought, it if it'd been another officer but he'd always been a little sweet on the Hellhound's helper. The wax seal was broken, parchment taken from the sheath and carefully unfurled. The dark-haired Callowan caught a glimpse of the curved, eye-pleasing calligraphy and repressed a snort. Hakram's hand, that, not their queen's. Which might be for the best, considering most of the time Catherine's handwriting only skirted the edge legibility. She'd actually been taught properly at the orphanage, Vivienne knew, but Cat had always written like her thoughts were trying to crawl out through a hand too slow to keep up.

"I, Catherine Foundling, anointed queen of Callow by the grace of the Heavens and first of my name-" Tribune Bishara began.

Marshal Juniper cleared her throat.

"The meat, Aisha," she growled.

The Taghreb's head dipped in acknowledgement and she shifted halfway through the sentence.

"So, there's an old story about the Ol' Unconquered," Aisha Bishara said, "that they call Theodosius' Dilemma."

The Taghreb's tone was cultured and elegant, if so very eastern, but the words she spoke reeked of Catherine's slow, almost lazy drawl. Vivienne knew it to be at least in part an affectation, as their queen was perfectly capable of formal address in her crisp Laure accent. She liked to use the casualness, the thuggish country bumpkin swagger, to prey on people's expectations. Noble expectations, mostly, Vivienne privately admitted. Their queen had spent most her life carrying a sharp contempt for the aristocracy that becoming the foremost aristocrat in Callow didn't seem to have changed in the slightest. Something wordless fluttered through the pavilion at the tribune's words, though, sparing only Grem One-Eye. Backs straightening, shoulders loosening, even half a vicious smirk tugging at Grandmaster Talbot's lips. They had not been left behind, that was what their stance said.

The Black Queen had a plan in the works, and someone else was about to have a very bad night.

"So in the First League War – which is a horribly inaccurate name, actually, because the League of Free Cities proper hadn't even been founded yet and, wait, Hakram, scratch that whole part out, they don't need the history lesson," Tribune Bishara said.

She added, in a carefully unamused undertone, that the Lord Adjutant had not in fact scratched out anything.

"So in the First League War, Theodosius kept slapping around southern Procer like it was his deeply unloved goblin stepchild until it'd lost so many battles it'd gotten physically impossible for the princes to deny they were losing the war," the Taghreb read. "At that point, the First Prince was getting worried about losing a third of Procer without war even having formally been declared, so you all know what happens: the Highest Assembly votes to 'defend the south from foreign invasion', everyone sends armies to reinforce and the First Prince makes a pointed suggestion that someone be appointed to run this mess that Theodosius *hasn't* already cheerfully brutalized."

Vivienne's eyes swept the tent, and found most were raptly listening even though most should already know of this bit of history. It was certainly... colourfully narrated, but otherwise common knowledge in those who had some learning of history. And even beyond that. The life and deeds of Theodosius the Unconquered were a favourite of young boys and girls with dreams of military glory even in cities where no Helikean had visited in living memory.

"That gets us Isabella the Mad, and sets up Theodosius' Dilemma," Tribune Bishara spoke. "Because Isabella, she doesn't offer a pitched battle or take back principalities: she just tosses one wave of soldiers after another at any forces that splits from Theodosius' main army. And Hells, his people win most of those skirmishes and Ol' Theo gets a few ambushes in himself. But every time he wins, he loses soldiers and Isabella loses nothing much. He's winning so much it's destroying his army, and so he has to make a choice."

Vivienne's mind raced ahead, for while she was not great student of military affairs she could see the shape of the dilemma outlined. It was not as important, she reflected, as the fact that instead of instructions Catherine had chosen to repeat a lesson that most of the people in this pavilion already knew. Would Marshal Grem? Maybe, as odds were that the Hellhound and Tribune Bishara had learned of this at the War College and the older orc was said to have been influential on the lay of the lessons taught there. Which meant the story was most likely meant for her or Brandon Talbot.

"Theodosius could fight a battle that couldn't be won against nearly five times his number," Aisha Bishara said, "to force a decisive outcome to the war. Or he could keep tearing through Isabella's detachments for months and months, hoping for a better chance as his own numbers dwindled with every victory. We all know, famously, the choice he made."

The Maddened Fields, to this day considered the only defeat ever inflicted on the first Tyrant of Helike.

"Theodosius bet on his legend, on being able to beat the odds and forge a miracle," Tribune Bishara continued. "Isabella bet that she could ride attrition to a symbolic victory, and it was a brutal wager but she got what she wanted. They say that when Theodosius' army retreated in good order, there were more than a hundred thousand corpses on the field."

The tribune's brow rose in surprise.

"Less than twenty years later, Jehan the Wise hung seven princes and one," Bishara said.

Before the implications of that could properly sink in, the Taghreb repeated a stroke of madness.

"I grant to Vivienne Dartwick the title of Lady Dartwick, with all assorted honours and privileges; in addition I name Lady Dartwick the heiress-designate to the crown of Callow."

Vivienne closed her eyes, ignoring the stir from the others in the tent. Why? No, that could be picked at later. Why *now*? The granted titled was clearly just a way to legally allow the second part without making her a member of the ironically-named House of Foundling. So what, as heiress-designate of Callow, could Vivienne do that she hadn't been able to do a moment ago?

"Lady Dartwick," Grandmaster Talbot quietly said. "The Royal Guard no longer exists, nor any knightly order save mine, yet-"

Yet I am, theoretically, equal in status to a princess of Callow and first the line of succession, Vivienne thought, opening her eyes. *The Shining Prince, in all but name, and those were the Marshals of Callow before such a title existed.*

"- yet the laws never excluded the Army of Callow nor any other addition to our forces," she finished softly. "Which means I am, in the queen's absence, the supreme commander of all armies sworn to Queen Catherine."

"You can revoke the surrender," Juniper said.

In the moment that followed, Vivienne almost did. It might just be Catherine's plan, a surrender to check some advantage of the Pilgrim's while she schemed some way that allowed her to both surrender in good faith yet keep her armies fighting. Diabolist could still use the wretched ritual that would bring back the drow to the field, and now the enemy's armies would be surprised and in disarray. *Less than twenty years later,* Vivienne thought, *Jehan the Wise hung seven princes and one.* That was a warning. About winning wars at any price, about what came after. About Callow further humbling a weakened Procer and-

"Oh," Vivienne Dartwick breathed out. "Oh."

"Lady Dartwick?" Marshal Grem asked, brow cocked.

"I'll need a horse and an escort," she said. "I'll need to talk with the Grey Pilgrim and Lord Marave besides."

"Why?" Juniper asked.

"Delay disarming as long as possible," Vivienne instructed the Hellhound absent-mindedly, "and keep the soldiers ready for fighting."

"Dartwick," the Marshal of Callow growled, "what are you doing?"

"If I'm right," Vivienne said, "then I'm about to trade the full release of our armies for our help against the League of Free Cities."

—

"Now, Hakram, I want to be perfectly clear," the Tyrant of Helike announced.

Adjutant was still hung upside down by his feet, though given that the tripod was now being carried forward at a brisk pace by a swarm of chittering gargoyles the motion had set him to rotating. He patiently waited until the turn brought him face to face with Kairos Theodosian before solemnly nodding.

"Your mistress, I fear, intends to betray me most immediately," the Tyrant said, not entirely succeeding at hiding his tone of deep approval.

"That does not seem like her at all," Hakram lied.

The boy gestured dismissively, though with a trembling hand.

"It was a delightful bit of pettiness from her to send me someone whose fingers I cannot meaningfully break, after that little affair with my kataphraktoi," Lord Kairos idly continued, "but that is that and this is this. Should the Black Queen turn on me – and she will – I will brutally murder you, if you'll forgive my language"

"You are forgiven," Hakram calmly said. "Though this seems absurd. Catherine Foundling has ever been a close and trusted ally to you, my lord."

"You're not even afraid," the odd-eyed king complained. "I really should have listened to what my father said about Callowan spite, this is most unreasonable of her."

"Your father had words on the subject of Callowan spite?" Adjutant asked, cocking his head curiously.

"I wouldn't know," the Tyrant cheerfully said. "After I cut his throat all he could manage was wet gurgling noises."

Hakram made a mental note of the admission. It would go into the growing archive the Jacks kept on the Tyrant of Helike, though whether what the boy had said was true or not remained debatable. The orc found him exceedingly hard to read even for a human. Silence lingered between them, though in the distance the hum of raging storms served as canvas for it.

"I cannot help but notice, Lord Tyrant, that we are not heading out into Creation," the orc ventured after a moment.

Unlike the rest of the League's armies, he left unsaid. The last of the armies, a ramshackle mob moving in old infantry formations Hakram was fairly sure hadn't seen use since the Humbling of Titans, had marched through a well-illuminated breach almost half an hour past. Of the hosts of the Free Cities, all that seemed to be left was the Tyrant's own personal guard of a thousand. And gargoyles, admittedly, too many and too similar in appearance for the orc to be able to count. Kairos Theodosian looked amused, his red eye suddenly twitching shut and remaining that way.

"I have sent all I need to send," the Tyrant of Helike said. "General Basilis is more than a match for the Pilgrim's pet countrymen and the unpleasant surprise your mistress is still sitting on."

"Might I inquire as to our purpose, then?" Hakram politely asked.

"It would be a terrible blunder to feed a spy my most secret schemes," Lord Kairos chided him. "Do you expect me, Deadhand, to immediately unveil my every furtive advance merely because you showed a modicum of polite interest?"

A moment passed.

"Yes," Adjutant replied.

"Is this what love feels like?" the Tyrant mused, then raised a hand. "Don't answer, Hakram, it's not like you'd know."

The orc cocked his head to the side. The insult did not particularly sting. Perhaps if it'd been slung in the early days of the Fifteenth, when he'd still wondered if the wariness in Juniper's eyes when she looked at him was not uncalled for, but now? Those doubts were long buried, and it would take more than a madman's jeering to unearth them. It was not, however, the first time the Tyrant of Helike jibed of Hakram's leanings towards detachment. That he would keep prodding from an angle that would yield nothing was interesting, and suggested two things: first, that Catherine had been right on the subject of Kairos Theodosian

having some skill related to perception of others. Second, that what the Tyrant was seeing in Adjutant unsettled him enough to keep picking at it like a scab.

"Soon, I do think," the Tyrant of Helike said, looking up at the ruinous sky.

"Soon what?" Hakram dutifully asked.

"You see, Adjutant, the histories will speak of tonight as a triumvirate of treachery," Kairos Theodosian airily explained, "but that will be most inaccurate. Your mistress and I are having the most delightful match of shatranj while the Pilgrim and his kingdoms of the blind stumble around waving swords and miracles."

"But, Lord Tyrant, is the Grey Pilgrim not the Named currently closest to victory?" Hakram asked, purposefully keeping his tone as dull and unenthusiased as possible.

He was, the orc guilty admitted to himself, beginning to enjoy this a little too much.

"You would be most wrong, Adjutant, most wrong," the Tyrant said. "Tariq Isbili's mistake is that he believes because he set the initial terms of this fight he still knows all of them. And so he putters around down in the snow and mud, while the real prize of the night is around us. He could get everything he desires, Hakram – and indeed I suspect your mistress is inclined to grant most his wishes, save those that inconvenience her – and still be made of fool of."

Adjutant kept his face calm, though for the first time that night his heartbeat had quickened.

"Oh yes, my dear green friend," Kairos Theodosian grinned. "I know what your mistress is up to. Seven crowns and one, yes? She has the recipe for the making of a Court, and the Hierophant provided the final ingredient of that heady brew by cutting an unclaimed realm from the fabric of Arcadia and casting it down towards Creation."

Hakram stayed silent, unwilling to risk revealing too much through the lie he chose to speak.

"Here's a secret for you, Adjutant," the Tyrant of Helike whispered, leaning closer. "The thing that waits for you in the depths of Liesse stolen isn't *just* your friend. I would be a great deal more wary of what it intends, were I you. For if this night does not go to the Black Queen or to myself, well, it is another friend of mine that will get his due."

The boy retreated, loudly cackling.

"Ah, but I digress," he said. "I did say that your mistress and I were playing shatranj while poor old Tariq was stumbling, did I not? Allow me to elaborate. The Pilgrim anticipated there would be trouble in Creation, Hakram, and so tossed a ball up and out of sight so that providence might allow it to land when it was needed, should it be needed."

"You are saying," Adjutant said, "that he sent a force through Arcadia."

"Exactly," Lord Kairos agreed. "And, old hand that he is at turning tides, he kept a heroic charge up his sleeve in case matters were truly dire."

The orc's jaw tightened. In the distance, coming out of the storms with tall banners, a glittering tide of horsemen advanced. Proceran banners, Levantine banners, the full horse of the Grand Alliance's armies. Including, Hakram thought, every prince and princess in the hosts.

"What is that delightful Callowan saying again?" the Tyrant of Helike mused. "Ah, yes, I remember now."

The boy's eye shone wet crimson, when he turned to grin at Adjutant, as if it had already partaken of the blood about to be spilled.

"Finders keepers," Kairos Theodosian said.

Caerulea

Umm... Vote!

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

cookiehunter

This ist sorta funny considering Cat cant Play shantranj Wörth
a damn

danh3107

I honestly wasn't expecting /another/ interlude. To be honest this one doesn't set up much we were unaware of besides Kairos' triple ultra deluxe scheming. I think we need to get back to cat now.

Rook

Well, the fact that it's an interlude means it sets up a denial, rather than an expectation. It's a good sign that for once, everything is going to go wrong for *everyone else*.

Generally in a free for all, the details that aren't shown are the scariest ones, regardless whether it's on the Heroic side or the Villainous. The pattern is usually a ton of exposition shown to the readers about the schemes of the known factions before said unknown variable(s) show up to betray all obvious expectations and fuck up everyone's day.

Generally this means that any plan that's detailed in the interludes is one that's likely to be fourth-wall countered by Catherine whenever she finally shows her face.

It's also kind of pleasant to have the protagonist be the other shoe waiting to drop, rather than being victim to it. More anticipation and less dread.

Oshi

This right here. The very reversal of how EE usually does things is an indication that the payoff will be epic.

caoimhinh

Just imagine: reading the Princes' Graveyard... from the Princes' perspective.
That would be epic, in my opinion.

[Liliet](#)

^^^

This is why I still believe that Hakram's going to be okay, despite the obvious.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Eh, Tyrant knows that if he breaks Hakram, Catherine will stop *playing* with him. And he likes Cat's game, *a lot*. I would not be surprised if Kairos comes out with a proposal of marriage at their next F2F meeting.

[Liliet](#)

I feel like Kairos is torn between being rationally aware that Cat is beating him and leading him around by the nose and it's bad for his plans and also offensive and he should put a stop to it and stop going along with, *and absolutely adoring that she's doing so*.

[Mental Mouse](#)

"She understands me! She really understands me! (uh-oh)"



[Liliet](#)

yes ;u;

caoimhinh

Well, this Interlude served to show us just where were the Proceran hosts, what the reactions of the Army of Callow were to Cat's surrender, a bit of what Kairos is planning, and showed us the forces gathering in Arcadia for the battle with lots of prizes for the winner (Masego and Liesse, Amadeus' soul, the seven crowns and one, etc). It's a good way to close the string of Interludes before returning to Cat's POV. In fact, there could still be missing one or two Interludes since there's the negotiation between Vivienne and Pilgrim, the battle against the League's armies in Iserre and the fight between Kairos personal soldiers vs Procer's soldiers in Arcadia, since all those scenes are important and Cat is not there to see so the only way to see them is through interludes.

Personally, I think these interludes have been exquisitely made, they are important events that don't involve Cat personally and she isn't witnessing them, so they are necessary. Besides, they have provided great insight about a lot of things and answered many questions the readers had. There will be as many as needed, I trust EE to make the right decision in his story.

Andrew Mitchell

With you 100% on this. Especially your final sentence. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Yes!

Honestly I'm expecting interludes to continue until everything's finally in position for Cat to ride out of nowhere with the Wild Hunt and save everyone's asses / seize the day ♥ and there's certainly a lot of moving parts here!

Vivienne's perspective was an utter delight and I love seeing her perspective on Catherine's bullshit.

Hakram's interesting as shit, and we're going back to neurodivergence themes which always delights me personally to no end.

And of course Kairos continues to be a gift and a treasure.

Best of all, we're seeing specific outcomes where previously we only had guesses, and we're gaining the ability to predict what happens next with any degree of certainty 😊

[sengachi](#)

I adore the neurodivergence themes, and I'm especially always a sucker for well-done sociopathy.

[Liliet](#)

And then there's Indrani and Masego ♥ ♥ ♥

caoimhinh

Yeah, that type of characters with a "flaw" that makes it hard for them to connect with others make for great character development.

Though Indrani isn't so much neurodivergent as traumatized by the things she had to live + an obsession to gain acceptance and recognition from her mother-figure Ranger.

I actually liked the Masego before EE decided to make him autistic, to be honest.

Masego used to joke a lot, use sarcasm constantly and was more expressive in his face and mannerism, he was also more outgoing on his interactions (read Book 2 chapter 17, for an example, or pretty much everything of Masego in Book 2), then in the middle of Book 3 EE started to depict him as socially awkward and Extra Chapter: Prodigy outright depicted him as an autistic child that didn't understand much of emotions nor social interactions, and incapable of even detecting sarcasm. From that point on Masego kept being depicted in that light. He was also thinner, like a scholar, in his first introduction but described as very fat in later chapters.

Not that I don't like the current Masego, mind you, he has had fantastic development, it's just that the first one was very funny and interesting in his own way, maybe I just liked his sarcastic expressions and jokes.

Andrew Mitchell

Interesting, thanks. I'll reread that chapter today.

caoimhinh

Check out chapter 19 Flames too, for Masego making sarcastic comments and even make a joke about Cat's sex life.

As I recall, Masego kept that characteristic and being perfectly capable of not only detecting but also using sarcasm and making jokes up until somewhere in the middle of Book 3, then he was steadily toned down to the socially awkward Masego we know and love today.

Stormblessed

I reread chapter 17 and can definitely see what you mean. Somewhere along the way Masego lost interest in anything non magical and stopped using extremely sarcastic jokes.

That being said, it is definitely right for him to be the way he is now. When I was reading book 2 chapter 17 I found myself struck that Masego just seemed like a slightly tamer version of Archer.

Furthermore, I think the early stuff could be reconciled with the later stuff with either an extra chapter or a Masego section where he can explain he didn't really understand any of the stuff he was saying when they first met. Those were all learned behaviors to camouflage his social weaknesses. As they got to know him he felt more comfortable in his ability to be his true self and possibly actually learn those social behaviors in his own way rather than a mimicry of them.

Make it so his reversion to form is a part of his character growth.

caoimhinh

Perhaps you find it striking now because the image we have from Masego in the recent chapters is different to the way he initially was, but his attitude in that chapter is consistent with the way he is in the entirety of Book 2. You can see it since his first appearance in Book 2 chapter 5 all the way until Book 3,

For example, there's this fragment from Book 3 Chapter 18 Crack, right after Cat ordered the founding of the Knight Order of Broken Bells:

"I can initiate the connection at any time," he said.

"Before you do that, we need a little chat," I said. "I don't want to keep you in the dark, so I'll just state it outright: I might have dabbled a bit in treason."

"Dabbled?" he said, frowning over his glasses.

"You know, dipped a toe in the treason pool," I said.

"I wish you would have told me beforehand," he replied. "Now I'll need to rework Marchford's ward pattern to be able to face advanced scrying rituals."

I cocked my head to the side.

"That's it?"

"Oh no, treason," he said in a mockingly high-pitched voice. "No villain has ever done such a thing before. All my extensive interest in Imperial politics is now put in danger."

I snorted.

"What's that voice supposed to even represent?" I asked.

"How little I care about any of this," he replied frankly. "I'm sure you'll find some compromise with Uncle Amadeus, and the Empress probably knew you were going to do this before the thought ever crossed your mind."

The bespectacled mage pressed his hand against the mirror-wall, spoke a word in the arcane tongue and idly made for the door.

"Now, if you'll excuse me," he said. "I think one of the tapirs got loose."

"Stuff like this is why you don't get to have giant fire-breathing lizards," I called out.

"You have no standards, Squire," he complained one last time before closing the door behind him.

So yeah, since his first appearance in Book 2 Chapter 5 and all the way up to the latter part of Book 3 he was sarcastic, detected nuances, was able to take hints and knew how to hint at things (for example he made subtle insinuations that he would not mind joining Cat's group after their first encounter in Summerholm), he had a great sense of humor too. Masego was then gradually toned down, one awkward moment at a time, and our image of the sarcastic and humorous mage was replaced the more serious, somewhat childish and

socially awkward Masego. In Book 4 we saw Masego struggling to understand physical contact, the nuances of social interaction, finding it hard to know when someone was sarcastic and even was awkward in his body language (like being too stiff when hugging or leaning his head on another's shoulder).

Basically the only things that remained from his initial personality were his love for discussing and explaining things (later mixed with an obsession for accuracy) and his disdain for lesser or inefficient workings of magic.

Liliet

I mean about the first thing Cat ever thinks about Masego is that he's not great socially and the second thing he does is infodump all over her only to have his father interrupt him (although Cat was interested and asking more questions).

Masego has been autistic since his very first introduction, he just discarded the allistic-passing disguise kit after moving out from his parents' place



I kind of miss his sarcasm-filled facade, I admit, but autistic he was from the very beginning. And ofc he's still full of sarcasm: I assure you, not every time he "misunderstands because he thinks too literally" is genuine. He is autistic, not stupid.

And ofc Indrani is, on top of shit Ranger left her with, very ADHD ♥

(and there are no "flaws" in it. Masego's greatest social problem is his lack of *ethical* understanding, not social, he's actually interpersonally apt af and exactly where he wants to be that-wise. Better at it than Hakram. And Indrani hanging upside down from a tree and tuning out war councils that have more than 3 people talking is what we all love about her <3)

caoimhinh

Emm, no. Her impression of "It was becoming apparent that social skills were not one of Masego's no doubt plentiful talents" was said because he seemed uncaring about Hakram getting killed (this was an error on her part, as we saw immediately that he was very interested in the nascent Name of Adjutant and the fact that it was the first Name for an orc in two

thousand years).

His sarcasm and sense of humor were not a facade, that was his real personality, it flowed naturally for him. The jokes, snappy comments, he was quick to pick up hints and undertood both sarcasm and irony. This was for the entirety of Book 2 and large part of Book 3.

However, there was a change in him afterwards, and it was too great to think it was "Masego dropping his disguise".

Consider this: when was the last time you remember Masego laughing?

In Book 2, we saw him laugh mockingly at the death of the Exiled Prince, laugh like a madman when he burned the Demon that possessed the Silver Spears with a torrent of sorcerous flames, He even grinned in battle thrill when facing strong opponents, even made clever comments aimed at his opponents when he was fighting (like against the Bumbling Conjuror when he was still Apprentice or against the 3 Demons at the gates of Liesse, when he had already become Hierphant)

He made snappy replies and funny comments all the time, and showed understanding of subtlety. He also smiled a lot more back then.

No, that wasn't a facade, it was natural. but those parts of his personality are gone now.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine assumed social skills were not Masego's strong suit because he blurted out "don't worry, you might die soon enough it never becomes a problem!" in an attempt to be comforting.

And then Wekesa interrupted him talking to Cat with "she's not a practitioner she doesn't understand what you're saying" which obviously (to me) suggests a habit of infodumps.

And all of Masego's sense of humor was Autistic Humor as fuck. We're great at sarcasm when we try



And expressing emotions is a skill we often have to deliberately invoke, alongside reading them. We just don't express them naturally in the same way. When I was a kid I legit practiced facial expressions in front of a mirror – I found it fun, but it was also borne out of understanding that I... uh... needed the practice.

I cannot remember when Masego last laughed, but I also didn't remember the instances you mentioned (other than him fucking dying @ dorian's death), so that's not much indicative. Still, don't forget he also grew from like 16 to 21 in the time we've known him – his personality had time and space to change...

...and it's entirely possible that his manner of expressing his emotions simply changed.

I certainly recall an instance of him being funny in Extra Chapter: Background 😊 and there was the part where he and Indrani teamed up to mock Cat during the Winter Court arc... I cannot remember more but I bet there are more.

And understanding of subtlety, too, is something an autistic person has to focus on to maintain. It's an artificial skill, like standing on your tiptoes to see over a fence – you get fucking tired of doing that all the time, and if you can drop it without negative consequences – which for Masego there would be none once he left his parents' nagging presence – there's great temptation to.

Lena27

The thing is Pilgrim thinks Cat isn't in Creation. If he's right, then that can only mean Cat is here. Which means we can expect her to show up in the next chapter. I'm not saying it won't be an interlude and i'll be fine w/ either. However, I think our Black Queen will be arriving sooner rather than later.

NerfContessa

Couldn't agree more.

These interludes are building up to. Something beyond epic.

[matrixm](#)

Are you kidding? We just found out that the tyrant foresaw one the pilgrims clutch Trump cards and is using it to screw over Cat, HARD!

[Liliet](#)

Or at least that's what he thinks 😊

Sitter

I don't really care. The pairing of Hakram and the Tyrant is delightful.

Gunslinger

Thanks for a chapter even on Easter weekend!!

Can't say I understood much from this chapter, but boy will I enjoy seeing the Tyrant being put in his place by Cat. The dude is way too sure of himself.

RoflCat

All 3 letters are now used, and Vivienne seem to have seen what Cath is planning

Which is get Kairos to attack Procer forces, that way they can negotiate Callow out of having to suffer any reparation from the surrender by helping Procer against Kairos

This means that the surrender is genuine, coming from Cat
Vivi is the one who'll get them out of surrender status, by negotiating to help against the League.
And unlike with Cat, Vivi is a former Heroine, so they don't have the excuse of her being Evil to deny cooperation either.

Kairos, on the other hand, think Cat is planning to form a new Court of Acadia by using Masego, and seem to be planning based on that.

So at least for now it seems things are going as Cat planned.
Pilgrim's pattern of three ruined, Vivi instated as heiress, Kairos sent to fight Procer.
I think if anything is to go wrong, it'll be from either Hierarch interference or Tyrant outplaying Cat

Andrew Mitchell

"... so they don't have the excuse of her being Evil to deny cooperation either." Great point!

"... Cat is planning to form a new Court of Acadia" or is this Masego and/or Larat's plan?

"... if anything is to go wrong, it'll be from either Hierarch interference or Tyrant outplaying Cat." IMO Masego and Larat are also possible/probable sources of problems. Plus, something HAS to go wrong for Cat, this has all gone too smoothly for there not to be a catastrophe coming.

[Liliet](#)

Nope. This is as Unspoken Plan Guarantee as it gets, with us not having heard from Catherine's perspective for like five

chapters by now and her plan being entirely unclear when we last saw her.

Well, I do agree that *something* is going to go wrong, but I expect it to be a long-term ball tossed in the air, not spoiling the immediate broth. This victory is going to be clean and unambiguous is what I'm calling 😊

Immediate points of where Kairos seems to be missing things:
– he says Basilea is a match for Pilgrim's armies and Cat's surprise, but what about the Marshals? 😊
– Catherine sure did not seem intent on actually giving Larat what he wanted, so this appears to be her pulling the wool over Kairos's eyes 😊
– I did NOT get the impression that Catherine considers the Masego situation to be anything other than a flaming clusterfuck of uncertainty. "He can't possibly be in his right mind" is a denial of the best case possibility, not the worst case one. Whatever's going on there, I don't expect Cat to be discounting it

medailyfun

I believe Kairos was hinting about Dead King possessing Masego as his fathers thought was possible if he would follow the apotheosis ritual trap

mavant

Oh, that makes more sense. I thought he was implying Hierarch was the other friend and I didn't understand how this could be to the benefit of the People, aside from slaying some Foreign Oligarchs.

[Mental Mouse](#)

A disturbing thought. Another possibility would be that he *did* retrieve the spirit of his diabolic father, muffed his handling of it for "personal reasons", and is now possessed by it.

Another question is just who will be in charge of that new court (perhaps after a round of usurpation and/or assassination). Can't be Larat, because *nobody* wants him with that kind of power, and by himself he's not strong enough to hold it. If Catherine (or Masego) takes it.. she basically *has* gone Dead King, but she's also taken herself out of Creation. Too bad the realms' access area in Creation seems to be big chunk of Procer. Sve Noc (or Cat, or an ex-Mighty) taking the throne would provide a new homeland for the Drow, at the cost of exiling them from Creation.

Insanenoodlyguy

based on the fact that Kairos made that "Seven and one" reference, I'm guessing Larat in fact would be strong enough. The Summer Princess seemed very alarmed when Cat told her his service conditions, remember? Namely, that whatever prophecy or gaes or fae rule he's tied up in, if seven and one creation crowns are laid at his feet, he's King. Or Has the power he seeks, has the rule he wants, etc. At some point he was told something to the effect of "You lust for power, great Larat, but you shall never have it. Not till seven and one mortal crowns are laid at your feet." One of those things that will never happen that because stories is totally going to happen one day. Larat has been riding the wild hunt into creation to make the path to that story. And, if he gets it how he wants it without interference, whatever he becomes, he will have the mojo to "hold" it. Since he seems to want an in with creation, perhaps it's to have a New Court of Creation that he rules? He'll have all his fae powers as if he was in arcadia, something like that. And the descending overlap of the two dimensions just makes it easier to happen or some-such. It's a story that, manipulated right, Cat could well use to her advantage, and a more classic villain sort of story where you make a big bad in exchange for your own power. That one has notoriously bad odds for you surviving once the new big bad is in existence, but I could see where Kairos and his classical villains mind could predict such a gambit, especially if he thinks Cat has one of those "but I can still control you to an extent" leashes that usually come with the stories where the villain partner survives this, he knows Cat is smart like that.

maresther23

Apotheosis vs Democracy!

Morgenstern

I really like how Cat has finally found a way to the Alliance table, after all – and Kairos sees straight through it...

... and a) either still goes along with it anyway or b) will totally ruin that idea, if he gets the chance. But he might be too focused on the crowns thingy and everything else in Arcadia to have found a way for b) – after all, the threat of the League alone is already enough to get Viv what she wants for the armies under her command (getting free and kind of being at the table in exchange for help against the League), as that's a negotiation taking place BEFORE battle is joined, and it doesn't really matter if the League then refuses to

give them that, as long as they are THERE. And they obviously still *are* going to be there. ^^

I wonder where the Hierarch is, though...

Liliet

"Kairos sees straight through it" I strongly doubt that.

Immediately where I'm seeing him be wrong:

- he assumes Cat's going to actually go for a fae court under her control. It has been established pretty damn firmly that this is a terrible idea for Cat's long-term objectives and goes against all methodology she's managed to salvage from the trainwreck that her ascension to power has been. Kairos preventing Larat from seizing the crowns is a "don't throw me into the briar patch" kind of move on Catherine's part;

- I'm getting the impression Kairos actually thinks Cat wants him to liberate her forces? That she'll only betray him in the aftermath and immediately her armies are going to be either standing down or helping him? Because he did not mention Marshals, Legions and Callowan Knights as forces his general will have to contend with, and they're not something you can afford to so blithely discount as to not even mention.

I think Kairos is falling into a good old "Evil Cannot Understand Good" trap, reading Cat as more similar to himself than she actually is. Catherine HAS been creating an impression of more villainy than she actually has in her, and it's about to backfire on him real bad, as he assumes she wants to fuck over the Grand Alliance and Procer, as opposed to help them out of their troubles.

Catherine is willing to bleed her army to protect them, and as she has commented in the planning chapter, that's not something other players can predict from her behavior so far.

Kissaten

>I think Kairos is falling into a good old "Evil Cannot Understand Good" trap, reading Cat as more similar to himself than she actually is.

I think he saw Hakram's memories/read his mind and have seen all three letters, reading the "Theodosius Dilemma" as an extension of his letter. Something like "Theodosius will bloody the Grand Alliance, that's the only way to save callowans from surrender, and then callowans will humble the Alliance further. And get 7 and 1 crowns, too, because we love our prices long and twice!" From his point of view, Vivienne isn't an actor, this letter is a move of

a pawn. Kairos certainly wants to throw a wrench at this plan.

Liliet

I don't think he gets the full on memory reading thing, more the same kind of truth-telling / intention reading as Tariq. So he'd know what Hakram thinks of the situation, but he wouldn't get to actually know word by word the actual content of the letters – he'd only get secondhand understanding of them.

And Hakram did not think about it deeply like Vivienne did.

So Kairos is vaguely aware there's some kind of confusing instruction given to Catherine's forces, but if Hakram didn't guess the connotations, he won't have any way to, either 😊



Farroc Tokla

It is also interesting to note the 7 and 1 situation. Kairos just brought Cat's right hand man within stabbing distance of a double handful of Proceran princes...

Andrew Mitchell

I really hope not all the princes/princesses die. In particular, Roseala (sorry for butchering the spelling) because leaders like her will be useful against the Dead King.

Javvies

Yup, Tyrant is going for Amadeus's soul and the crowns Cat owes Larat.

I wonder whether or not Cat saw Pilgrim's contingency here coming. Probably, hopefully.

Oh. If I'm reading this right, Kairos just implied that the seven crowns and one would allow Larat to forge a new Fae Court. Might be a way for Cat to recover some of her own Fae power if Larat reforges Winter or forges a new Fae Court.

Novice

But Cat already has a source of power in the Night. Wouldn't creating another come back to bite her ass, narratively speaking, since that would have the shape of a villain lusting for more power?

Also, I have a feeling that the third party wanting the broken piece of Arcadia Tyrant is talking about is the Dead King.

konstantinvoncarstein

It is someone in the ruine of Liesse, it is probably Masego.

Doesn't need to be two different people.

caoimhinh

"The thing that waits for you in the depths of Liesse stolen isn't just your friend. I would be a great deal more wary of what it intends, were I you. For if this night does not go to the Black Queen or to myself, well, it is another friend of mine that will get his due"

That sounds like Masego being possessed. Wekesa and Tikoloshe seemed certain that the knowledge from Neshamah could corrupt and even control the person who learned it, although that doesn't make sense to me since Masego extracted it directly from Neshamah's echo and not from an enchanted book of spells, but we have already seen Masego isn't on his right mind and if EE actually goes for that route then Masego is under Neshamah's control now.

Personally, I hope there's something else happening there because that story from Tikoloshe and Wekesa seemed like their own ignorance talking (their speculations about Catherine were proved wrong and Masego was perfectly fine until Warlock blew up Thalassina). I would prefer it just be Masego desperately trying something to get his father back (which would explain the multiple hellgates).

[Liliet](#)

I'm expecting it to be Masego trying to get Amadeus back



caoimhinh



But why would he do all that to get Amadeus back? I could believe it if it's trying to get Tikoloshe or even Wekesa back.

On another note, Masego might still be in his right mind, sort of, just in a kind of trance that keeps him focused on a task until he gets it done, like when he tried to extract the echo from his father or his internal trance making experiments within his mind after Pilgrim broke the Gate during the Battle of the Camps.

Remember when Cat first entered and the Gate shattered and then slithered in Masego's direction? If Cat meets him and he claims that was an invitation that would be hilarious.

[Liliet](#)

When all you have is a really big hammer,,,

Agent J

But why would he do all that to get Amadeus back?

—

... because that's his uncle and he loves him dearly?

caoimhinh

Well, I didn't mean it that way.

Not in "why would he want Amadeus back?" but rather "why would doing this help in getting Amadeus back?" Especially since he seems to be doing something there involving hells and High Arcana, that doesn't seem to be something relating to rescuing Amadeus.

[Liliet](#)

Do note that Amadeus is currently in two pieces, one of them protected by sorcery from scrying.

I think Masego's doing some kind of off-the-rails Praesi mage equivalent of building a flamethrower to light a candle.

medailyfun

One of the rules of the dark lord – never leave the source of your power uncontrolled. DK had lot of time to find that echo and tinker with it on purpose

Decius

I wouldn't put it past The Bard to have set up Neshamah to have been corrupted in a manner that would corrupt people in general; it's possible that Masego has now been possessed not by the Dead King, but by the thing which became the Dead King when it possessed Neshamah.

mavant

That's a pretty interesting possibility, but I'm not sure how we would distinguish the two – it doesn't seem

like the previous instances described by Wekesa and Tikka end with Neshamah becoming dispossessed.

caoimhinh

That's an interesting theory, perhaps it's not an entity per se, but a kind of 'drive' that makes him pursue an objective?

Although as far as we have seen, Neshamah developed his workings by himself, to the point that even Bard was questioning him about it that someone must have taught him for him to be able to advance so much on his craft, but Neshamah simply laughed it off.

Mental Mouse

I would also not assume that the Tyrant was necessarily telling the truth.

caoimhinh

That's an important consideration, Kairos can, at any moment, lie blatantly and without trouble.

Although so far we have seen him tell the truth when he is "gossiping" or telling secrets, there's no reason to trust his words nor assume he can't lie about this subject.

Skaddix

I doubt if Larat and Cat Deal will be complete when Larat gets the Seven Crowns and One. So anything he does is not liable to aid Cat at all. Not to mention Cat just started learning about Magic and the Fae and the like so the likelihood she can outmaneuver Larat on this front is pretty low.

Still the Tyrant seems well prepared.

Novice

To be fair, Cat (via Sve Noc) has complete and utter control of the Wild Hunt. It might be a tad too difficult for Larat to scheme his way out of that control, especially because of his rigid thinking owing to his fae nature.

Rook

It isn't really about control from how interpreted it, so much as anchor in Creation proper. By swearing to Cat until the paths were fulfilled, the intent of the Fae was to gain their foothold into creation regardless of the outcome. If Catherine doesn't fulfill the oaths they're forever part of a court rooted in Creation, and if she does fulfill the

oaths, the seven crowns and one will give them permanent foothold onto creation anyway by way of earthly empire.

The key here is not about control over the hunt so much as finding a way to deny their foothold so that they don't run rampant through creation proper after Catherine is dust.

One way to do this would be to bind the seven crowns and one to masego's little piece of Arcadia instead of creation, then fulfill the oath. The tyrant's play currently looks to be taking those crowns himself, so he has leverage over Catherine.

Someguy

Still, whatever happens to Larat, Ranger is going to get a share as well since she still has his eye right?

Novice

To be fair, Cat (via Sve Noc) has complete and utter control over the Wild Hunt. It might be a tad too difficult for Larat to scheme his way out of that control, especially because of his rigid thinking owing to his fae nature.

Novice

Ignore this copy. For some reason, my comment in this thread didn't go through the first time. But then it appeared when I sent the second one. It's infuriating.

Morgenstern

I wonder if the Tyrant is working on outdated info when it comes to that formation of a new Fae court. It truly might have been only possible when Winter was still alive... but it no longer is. The last conversation between Cat and Larat seemed to state quite clearly that the Hunt now only has powers due to *Night* – and they cannot take over that. All the old oaths broke, too, barring from the side of the Fae themselves, who seem to still be bound to keeping it, but only due to their rigid nature.

On the other hand, this just might be were Cat is mistaken after all...

Morgenstern

Where... -.-

Also, what binds the Hunt might, of course, just be the way they'd be instantly powerless once they no longer follow Cat (if their power source truly IS only the Night now).

Gods, how I miss an edit function here.

Novice

I know right. Even the ability to delete a post would be a god-sent. Goddamnit, WordPress.

caoimhinh

"Prince no longer," the fae smiled. "I have abdicated my title, as have all with me. The Hunt claims no lord amongst its hunters."

So Larat and the rest of the Fae in the Wild Hunt don't have their titles, they renounced their ties to the new Arcadian Court for the bet of having a foothold on Creation thanks to Catherine.

"We swear to your service, Queen of the Hunt," the fae said. "Queen of Air and Darkness, Sovereign of Moonless Nights. We swear 'til the day of last ruin, 'til all debts are paid. We would ride beneath your banner, in this world and every other."

"What clever foxes you are," she said. "Your oaths I accept, in the spirit they were given."

I think that's what screwed Larat, He swore eternal service to Cat, binding himself to her Court (Winter that only she held) as a source of power, but now that Winter was devoured by Night his power is dependant on Sve Noc, and due to his oath of service to Catherine perhaps even if he becomes a King of a newly made Court he would still be her subordinate. He probably didn't expect that his holding would be a hellscape made from a fragment of Arcadia instead of an actual terrain in Creation.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

The seven crowns and one was a price put on his help in ambushing the Summer Court in Arcadia, an event which has already come to pass. Our first hints of the significance of that particular price comes from the same battle.

It is an entirely separate matter to the oaths of fealty sworn to Catherine in her capacity as Queen of Callow.

Cicero

But wasn't Larat's oath sworn to continue only until "all debts are paid" meaning until Cat gives him the 7 crowns and one?

That links the two.

[Mental Mouse](#)

There's also "the day of last ruin", which who knows what it means.

Andrew Mitchell

Sounds like that may be a good description of what's happening in Masego's piece of Arcadia.

Someguy

Eh? I thought Tyrant was after whatever's in Liesse or Pilgrim's Calvary?

Kissaten

Doesn't mean Tyrant's not going for a honourable obligatory backstab in his most trusted ally's back. Gods i hope he is going to push Grey Pilgrim into attacking callowans and giving the Shining Princess a chance, well, to Shine.

Oshi

He's after leverage. That's the key to all this. He wants to play them all and what he wants in truth no one knows.

[doominator10](#)

"He wants to play them all"

That's it. Goals and objectives are so limiting in the grand scheme of things. Just take a load off and have fun 😊! ... watching the world burn.

Someguy

"My dear prince, why would I settle for merely being on the right side of history when I could be on all sides of it instead?"

– Extract from the minutes of the Conference of the Blessed Isle, between the Shining Prince Harry Alban and Dread Emperor Traitorous

carrier

Where do you get that the the is after Amadeus soul?

[Javvies](#)

The "finder's keepers" bit.

If he gets to Amadeus's soul before Cat does, she'll have to deal with him to get it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm pretty sure he was talking about the troops themselves, which he presumably has or intends to co-opt for his own purposes – anything from attacking on his own behalf to convenient sacrifices. Either way, I wouldn't be surprised if he throws them a party first 😊.

But yeah, odds are the Rogue Sorcerer and Amadeus's soul are in there, unless Cat (who's surely in Arcadia) got there first. Anyway, off to the next installment to see what's to be seen!

Liliet

If I'm reading this right, Cat has no intention of actually going through with Larat's deal. Maybe she'll act like she's going to, set up the pieces that would allow it... and then let Kairos push them over.

She does not intend on letting Larat forge a new Fae Court any more than she intended to make Winter Court out of Callow, is my estimation.

Morgenstern

I wonder if that is still possible no matter what, after all, Winter got eaten and Summer also isn't available anymore since the Courts merged in Arcadia. So what the hell does that make the Wild Hunt? Is Cat right that the Night is now the only source of power for them? I wonder... I personally would find it interesting to have a little twist here. But then again.. they're just minor characters. That arc might simply end here, with the Princes' Graveyard and someone finding out that those crowns would not have helped the Hunt fae in any way anymore anyway.

Andrew Mitchell

"That arc might simply end here, with the Princes' Graveyard and someone finding out that those crowns would not have helped the Hunt fae in any way anymore anyway."

Highly unlikely IMO because it would be highly unsatisfying to us, the readers.

Insanenoodlyguy

Pilgrims contingency is useless, at least against her. Yeah, if she played this straight, Pilgrim probably could have forced round 3 and ended this. But what good is a heroic charge now? She surrendered. This is a new unrelated battle with the forces of Levant now, so it has much less mojo, as a "the heroes took the dangerous path and had a random encounter/ambush" battle. On the other hand, and Pilgrim and Vivienne know this, that can

be turned into a “Just as the battle was concluded, a third party stepped in! Now the former foes can only survive if they WORK TOGETHER.” which gives great momentum into the “Having fought on the same side, now hand in hand they go to fight the real enemy!”

[Javvies](#)

Or, if she runs into the detachment in Arcadia, they might go after her anyways, believing that she’s lying to them about surrendering to Pilgrim ... or just because they saw her first. She’d probably have some leeway to work with there – they aren’t Pilgrim and she’s under no obligation not to defend herself against (another) attempt to murder her.

Insanenoodlyguy

Narrative themes makes that unlikely. This sort of story flows more like this: Procer is fighting the Legion, and it’s all “Oh damn this is bad, oh god now Callow is riding in now it’s WORSE and – wait a minute... they are attacking the Legion’s rear. They are helping us! Back them up and push in, we can win this!”

[Javvies](#)

The Legions are with Callow.
I assume you meant League. The difference is an important one.

Insanenoodlyguy

yes, yes it is. My bad!

Novice

Silly me, thinking that I have some inkling of what’s going to happen. Shouldn’t doubt EE, I guess.

[Liliet](#)

What did you think was going to happen? 😊

Wrong predictions are the fun part!

Novice

I thought that things would be fairly predictable after Cat’s surrender. For some reason, I have it in my head that Kairos should be with his army at all times. I didn’t expect this detour and certainly not Pilgrim’s cavalry contingency when I was already convinced chapters ago that Pilgrim and Black are foils of each other. Should have expected back-up plans.

I should probably do another reread.

[Liliet](#)

I see 😊

Yeah another reread is always a good idea, Guide has a lot to it ♥

devildragon777

I'm guessing this is another of those situations where nobody's figured out that Cat isn't playing the same game they are...

...Also, did Kairos just get a whole army delivered to him on a platter? That seems bad.

JJR

Every Prince and Princess?

I'm thinking that we're f=going to be seeing the Prince's Graveyard very soon.

Kissaten

Furthermore there are exactly 7 princes and princesses of Procer mentioned in the Trust is the Wager chapter.

caoimhinh

Add to that Kairos and we got seven crowns and one.

[sengachi](#)

OH! Ohhhhhohohohoho, that's a good catch!

RoflCat

Random thought: What if, instead of "Seven crowns and one, laid at your feet," referring to their heads off their shoulders, it means the 7 crowns and 1 basically lay down to Larat, i.e. submitting to him?

And instead of any conceptual ideas, the new Court is Court of Law/Order *gavel smack sound*

Where the idea is for Larat and his faes to become basically eternal judges that'll ensure that these Procer regions + League will follow the law created, so no more nobles getting away with doing whatever they pleased, or royals spinning the truth to their own benefits.

There's some groundwork for it already in Procer too, the Mavian prayers' sites can basically be the anchor (read:

office entrance) to the Court, we know a certain Accord that Cat would like to set it up very much and now we have the ones who'll enforce it, being neither from Above nor Below faction.

caoimhinh

Ooohhhh!! Now that's a fascinating hypothesis.

Relyt

I think Cat would love having some neutral third party Court of Order, especially if it could help her implement and enforce the Liesse Accords. But letting Larat run something that important? Hell no. If Larat wins any power from those seven crowns and one, then Cat will definitely make sure he's still beholden to her, or Sve Noc, or just booted out of Creation entirely.

Plus, I just don't see enough of a story behind the Wild Hunt becoming judge and jury. No connection there.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Larat and the hunt as unholy judges? Putting those in Procer would flatly require conquering it in the name (or at least banners) of Evil. On the other hand, Saint was planning to see Procer razed anyway....

Kissaten

"Is this what love feels like?"

The ship is sailing, all hands on the deck

SpeckofStardust

...

Oh hell no.

-“Here's a secret for you, Adjutant,” the Tyrant of Helike whispered, leaning closer. “The thing that waits for you in the depths of Liesse stolen isn't just your friend. I would be a great deal more wary of what it intends, were I you. For if this night does not go to the Black Queen or to myself, well, it is another friend of mine that will get his due.”

..

The orc's jaw tightened. In the distance, coming out of the storms with tall banners, a glittering tide of horsemen advanced. Proceran banners, Levantine banners, the full horse of the Grand Alliance's armies. Including, Hakram thought, every prince and princess in the hosts.-

...

Do we have the slightest clue where the leader of the league is again?

Novice

You're saying Kairos will use Hierarch to turn the cavalry into his? If so, that's clever. I just assumed something more mundane like lies or blackmail or traitors within the ranks.

Oshi

Kairos is old style villian. When would he ever resort to mundane means.

Cicero

He seemed to suggest that his other friend was in the ruins of Lesse with the Heirophant, so maybe that's where the Hierarch is?

Anyway, I assumed that there was a reference here also to Black's soul, which is with the Rouge Sorcerer, who is likely to be the Heroic force guiding this Procer force through Arcadia.

JJR

The use of the phrase "get his due." Suggests the Dead King to me, as a reference to the concept of Keter's Due. As for being a friend, Tyrant sent envoys to pledge eternal friendship to almost all Calernian powers a while ago. I don't think he tried with the elves or dwarves, but he did send someone to the Dead King and even the Ratlings. So calling the person a friend doesn't narrow it down that much.

As to how the Dead King gets involved. Masego was warned by his devil father back before Warlock blew up a city/fleet about learning too much about the Dead King. The information itself was somehow a trap and an infection. When Masego revealed how he had harvested the information from an echo in Arcadia the result was a mild freakout and a demand to purge the information from his brain.

[Liliet](#)

Oof, I momentarily forgot about that one =x
MASEGO PLEASE BE OKAY

caoimhinh

And the Keter's Due for a ritual for Apotheosis or whatever it is that Masego is attempting to do, would be massive, which is one of the reasons to do this kind of insane thing in a separate shard of Arcadia, and maybe the use of the

wards Diabolist created that enabled to repurpose the Due to a secondary array and spell. But it's still a huge catastrophe in the making.

Kissaten

How do you even intercept a providence-sanctioned heroic charge as a villain? Black fortified the only avenue to attack back when he fought in the Vales, what's Kairos' excuse? I think Rogue Sorcerer went rogue, that's how Kairos knows. And if that's the case, Rogue Sorcerer will get his due by dying horribly. As to why he would do so, back in the epilogue chapter when Black was hostage to Pilgrim and Saint of Swords Black tried to say something about helping Rogue Sorcerer's parents.

[Liliet](#)

That was after the silence spell took hold. The guy never heard what Black was trying to say.

Kissaten

Yeah, but the possibility to tempt Rogue Sorcerer with that info still stands.

[Liliet](#)

1) The entire point of that episode is that it doesn't because the heroes were dead set on not allowing Amadeus any opportunity for communication/sabotage.

2) I'm about 90% sure it was a baseless bluff said just for the sake of getting his goat. Amadeus was kind of going off the rails hard at that point, "moral victory" and all (no I'm not getting over that any time soon, please stop hitting yourself please stop hitting yourself please stop hitting yourself)

Raved Thrad

Betrayals within betrayals within betrayals. And all to swat an arrogant old man upside the head. I like.

Aston W

These interludes feel like chapters with a different name.

Not short interludes.

And now for another god.

Autumn?

Kissaten

I think initially there were two Courts of fae, Summer and Winter as no other Courts were mentioned back when fae were introduced. After Arcadia been reformed Spring and Autumn courts were mentioned, as well as Cat flying over unknown banners of fae in Arcadia.

So to take a wild guess, it's going to be SUMMER, of all things, Winter is no more and Spring and Autumn already claimed. There's a STAR hanging in the skies, 7 crowns and 1 waiting to be taken, and unclaimed part of Arcadia.

caoimhinh

It's not that.

There are only two Courts of Fae in Arcadia during each cycle, the pairs are Summer-Winter and Spring-Autumn. However, when the King of Winter and Queen of Summer married they unified Arcadia into one brand new Court, which is why Winter was no more except for Catherine since she was not bound to Arcadia thus making her the only owner of the entirety of a Court, as Sve Noc said: "You stole half their Garden".

Now Larat wants to make another brand new Court with him as King/Leader, which would interestingly make it back into two Courts of Fae. It wouldn't be Summer and does not even be associated with the seasons. If anything, it would be the Hunt since every member of this new Court would be from the Wild Hunt.

nick012000

Perhaps they'd be Faerie Courts of Night and Day.

caoimhinh

Oh, that's also a possibility. Nice.

Someguy

I thought the Courts of Spring & Autumn is on the other side of Arcadia where the Yan Tei Empire (Guide'Verse equivalent of Feudal China) connects?

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spring_and_Autumn_period

caoimhinh

Well, Masego said that Arcadia is different outside of Calernia, because perspective changes so that world changes, so the Yan Tei (who are likely China, I agree with you on that, they even have a Hero and Villain as

rulers, Ying-Yang balance FTW).

Check out this Masego quote from Book 4 chapter 27:

“Consider Arcadia as a single object being looked upon by an infinity of perspectives. To every one, it is a different realm. Across the Tyrian Sea, it likely has completely different name and seems inhabited by completely different entities. Even the marriage of Winter and Summer is contained within the span of our gaze only, unlikely to have tremors beyond. It is so with this echo as well. Something that was momentous on our understanding of the world is not necessarily so elsewhere.”

As for the Spring and Autumn Courts, Cat vision when she became Duchess of Moonless Nights showed that they are part of the eternal cycle of that realm and are formed once the war between Winter and Summer ends.

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks for finding and sharing that quote. Very relevant. 😊

[boballab](#)

No, all four courts were there when the Fae courts were introduced. Summer always beats Winter and when its victory comes the Elves and the Courts they make up disappear and are replaced by the Spring and Autumn Courts and a completely different set of Elves. This is how and why Ranger keeps going back every time the Winter Court reforms/reappears and plucks out Larat's eye (I really wish to know what he did to piss her off that much). We have just never been told what the process is that ends the Spring and Autumn Courts. Kilian explains the courts in Book 3 Interlude: Gate “There's supposedly four Courts of Arcadia – one for each season – but the delineation between them isn't clear. They don't all exist at the same time, either.”

Andrew Mitchell

“comes the Elves and the Courts”... not Elves, but Fae.

[Liliet](#)

Come on, you have to be doing the elf/fae thing on purpose by now 0.0

Darkening

Summer doesn't always beat Winter, sometimes Winter manages to assassinate enough people and sow enough discord between

different Summer powers that they're weak and feeble when outright war comes and Winter murders them all.

caoimhinh

=> There's a STAR hanging in the skies, 7 crowns and 1 waiting to be taken, and unclaimed part of Arcadia.

That reminded me of the Big Dipper asterism formed by the seven brightest stars of the Ursa Major constellation. Here's a fun fact: they are actually seven stars and one, because Alcor is also there right next to Mizar (the second star in from the end of the handle) but it's outshined by its companion, so not counted in the forming of the asterism.

What if this new Court of Fae is a STAR Court? Like, you know, Stars shining in the Night. Would be interesting.

Mental Mouse

"These interludes feel like chapters with a different name. Not short interludes."

Basically, EE set a routine of calling chapters that weren't from Catherine POV "Interludes". Which works fine, but it starts to sound funny when Cat dodges out of sight for a significant period, and we're following everyone else for this many chapters.

That's basically why the other day I was teasing about EE channeling Robert Jordan. Jordan's *Wheel of Time* starts with at least half-a-dozen "primary" characters, then progressively doubles and triples the number, and that's just on the protagonists' side. And he does POV for all of them plus most of the antagonists and a few bystanders, which is how he wound up with 12 *thick volumes of the series, and why Sanderson needed 3 more volumes to wrap up the story.*

Aston Whiteman

Interlude or Chapter Wednesday it's still good story!

caoimhinh

And so the Princes' Graveyard is to be in Arcadia, I imagine the Princes of Procer are very angry from being marching through that storm. I don't think they will all die, since Catherine only needs to lay their crowns at Larat's feet, not their heads, but to be called a Graveyard many of them will die.

Will the Rogue Sorcerer also be marching with that host? He should be, since he is someone skilled, needed for treading safely through Arcadia and also the only Hero left in that army

(Saint and Pilgrim are in Creation right now) unless there's another Hero yet unrevealed. And that would also mean that Black's soul is there for the taking, unless he gave it back to Pilgrim, but Cat mentioned that being part of Below's due so I'm guessing Black's soul is with Rogue Sorcerer and he is in Arcadia. Time for Cat to rescue her father (and for the love of the Gods, the Old and the New, Above and Below, call him father to his face).

So seven crowns and one are to create a brand new Court of the Fae, that's interesting and given that this Court would only be the surviving members of the Wild Hunt that would make them very powerful. This generation of Winter Fae was born with a strong impetus of change it seems, with a King willing to take hard measures to change everything and a Prince willing to bet everything on an irregularity as is Catherine. It seems Larat wishes to be free from service once he collects his due, but he still has his connection to Cat (or to the Night now that it devoured Winter), so it'd be interesting to how things play out then and whether Cat will just kill him and be done with it or keeps an ambiguously treacherous lieutenant with great power and a thing for dramatic speech.

In case anyone is wondering, I checked and made a list of the princes that were shown to be in Iserre marching with the host: Rozala Malanza of Aequitan, Louis Rohanon of Creusens, Arnaud Brogloise of Cantal, Bertille of Lange, Sophie of Lyonis, Rodrigo of Orense, Leonor of Valencis. That makes it seven, we would be missing one crown for Larat's due. Would that one be Kairos' crown?

Dramatic music sounds

P.S: It's hilarious how everyone is unsettled trying to figure out just what the hells Adjutant wants, the list just grows up and is made funnier as characters that are proficient at reading people get stupified when trying to read Hakram (Empress Malicia's empty parchment on what the Orc is after is a good example).

Typos found:

-language" / language."

-made of fool of / made a fool of

[Liliet](#)

And Hakram is like "eh I used to worry about that but I really don't anymore".

My best neurodivergent children, the Woe ♥

antoninjohn

Later would need to make a new deal with Cat if he wants to keep his power after she gives him those crowns

konstantinvoncarstein

So the last letter is definitely the bet, Catherine hoped Vivienne would understand her intention to ally with the Alliance against the League.

I really hate Kairos, but during a long time I didn't understand why. And then I realized he is basically a villainous hero, he has all the Good cheat codes with villainous intents, and is completely overpowered.

In his first battle, he destroyed alone the entire opposing army. He manage to build a complex magical trap for Sabah without a known good mage, and he lead his army in Broceliand without it being destroyed.

He also has information sources inaccessible to no one who give him an absolutely ridiculous amount of knowledge and his "Wish" aspect permits him to know the desire of people even before he encountered them. And he managed to create the Hierarch, who I think is the most dangerous villain on Calernia, except maybe the Dead King.

ninegardens

Ah, but he doesn't just have the hero cheat code. He cheats using the VILLIAN cheat codes, more intelligently.

Early on, when smiting other Free city armies, he wasn't against heroes. By the story rules he has to rise up and be a threat before the heroes can smite him down.

Vs White knight etc, he invoked the old "The first part of the plan always succeeds" – a villain trope, not a hero one.

Sabah's death was really bard's making, not his.

I agree he is OP, but I don't think he has hero cheat codes.

konstantinvoncarstein

Concerning Sabah, I didn't mean her death. I mean the spell fueled by the people she killed, and that the Warlock redirect to kill the Ashen Priestess.

erebus42

He's only as powerful as he is because he leans into his role and the cliches. Black even says how he was weaker than his predecessors because he refused to do that as it leads to a villain's inevitable downfall.

[Liliet](#)

Nah, he's not a hero. He's a villain.

Amadeus's insistence that heroes are the ones who get cheat codes while villains don't was laughable. Villains don't get cheat codes towards *greater good*, that much is true – that's because villains get cheat codes towards scheming and seizing power while wrecking everything around them. Kairos is using those to great effect.

konstantinvoncarstein

By cheat codes, I mean that Fate make sure the heroes always win against the villains, by giving them access to resources that no villain could ever hope to receive. As said in my comment and another below, Kairos has access to such resources.

[*Liliet*](#)

Again, my point is that your inaccuracy is in assuming there is an inequality in resources heroes and villains receive.

Or that Fate makes sure heroes always win against villains – that one's straight up inaccurate.

Amadeus discarded most of the toolbox his side afforded him, then complained his opponents had a full one while he was left with a rusty knife and a screwdriver. That's on no-one other than him.

There's plenty of resources villains have access to that heroes don't.

konstantinvoncarstein

Like what?

Fate does not favor heroes? From the beginning, everyone from Amadeus to Catherine and Saint to Kairos, agree that Good always win. It is indeed not always the case, but heroes have a lot of advantage comparing to villains. Sure, "first step always works", but the end goal is hardly ever attained.

Heroes have Angels whispering in their ears, Aspects which are most of the time specially adapted to resolve the problem at hand, lots and lots of coincidence to help them, true resurrection, etc etc etc. Evil has nothing like this.

[*Liliet*](#)

Good might always win in the end, but Evil always wins the first step.

>The villains in the stories always had a trigger, a first spark to set the blaze. They'd been wronged, laughed at. They had a grudge to settle against Creation, and they were going to do it by toppling all those righteous kingdoms like a house of cards. They flew the banners of empires they'd crafted out of cold rage and egomania, sent their Legions of Terror to conquer everything from the sacred forests of the Golden Bloom to the burnt wastelands of the Lesser Hells. It didn't matter what they took, I was beginning to grasp, so much as the fact that they took it. What did the Tyrants care if the heroes freed their monsters or destroyed their ancient magical weapon, if they brought down the Dark Tower on their head or sunk the ancient city they'd raised from the depths? At the end of it all, even if you lost you'd already won. I finally got it, then. You'd won because in a hundred years someone was going to look at the ruins of your madness and their blood was going to run cold. Like a child screaming at the night, you filled the silence so that someone would hear.

Evil has resources to achieve the "archetypical Evil" goal – make a mark. Sure, separate Evil people might not be satisfied with that, but it's not like heroes are super happy about winning in the end after taking heavy losses either, yeah?

Evil has resources that Good doesn't. Good might get the peasant with the sword, but Evil got to have the dragon first.

Insanenoodlyguy

Order of the stick has a character who, other than the bits in here about having a hero son, probably gives the best representation of general competent evil mentality in this world (note, not Black's practicality, think more Akua and Kairos, the types who know how the game is played but are OKAY with it)

<http://www.giantitp.com/comics/oots0763.html>

The comic is fun, unless you hate stick figures, but this page is worth reading even if you never take another glance.

TL;DR anyway: The competent villain knows he will lose someday, but that's AFTER he wins and got to win and enjoy being the big evil, usually for a decent amount of time. Yeah, the very last part's gonna suck, but it's gonna be a hell of a ride till then.

konstantinvoncarstein

I like it, the cartoon is cool 😊 You are right, both heroes and villains are backed by Fate, only not toward the same goal nor at the same time.

But I still hate Kairos 😊 if only because he created the Hierarchy.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah how dare he hurt Anaxares so)=)=)=

konstantinvoncarstein

More like "how dare he unleash such horror on the world" 🔥

[Liliet](#)



Andrew Mitchell

+1 on your recommendation to read those two pages. I'd forgotten most of that OOTS scene so thank you so much for posting it.

beleester

Amadeus has filled entire graveyards with heroes who "always win." Catherine followed in his footsteps by stomping the Stalwart Paladin's band and half the heroes in the Crusade. Praes as a whole has survived ten Crusades, and every other Evil nation in Calernia seems to have a similar track record.

Villains *do* get convincing, long-lasting victories sometimes, because that's what establishes them as a threat. And from an in-story perspective, you have no way of knowing whether any given hero's role is "The chosen one who finally brings down the evil empire" or "The chump who looks like the chosen one for about five minutes before getting killed off to establish the villain's threat."

The only reason people say "Heroes always win" is because no matter how many times the villains win, we don't consider the *story* over until a hero has won. We assume that, since the story isn't a tragedy, eventually one of the heroes will succeed. But that's equally true for the villains – once the story is over, someone else will climb the tower and start the whole business over

again. The heroes don't "win," only restore the status quo.

Indeed, Catherine's whole reason for backing the villains is that she thinks the constant battles cause more damage to Callow than a decisive win by the villains would.

[Liliet](#)

^^^

I like the way you phrase it with "we don't consider the story over until a hero has won".

konstantinvoncarstein

Black win by going around the story, it is the only reason. And he discarded all lot of Evil tools because they were mor liabilities than assets. Praes managed to win against Callow only 2 time in more than one thousand years, how do you explain this without Fate backing the heroes?

[Liliet](#)

They're more liabilities than assets because they're tailored to *goals he does not have*. Villain tools are for terrifying Creation and leaving a mark on it, not for achieving long-term peace. Amadeus uses Good tools for Good goals because those are the ones he has and therefore those are the ones that work for him.

Kairos isn't going to manage to conquer Procer or better the lot of Helikeans long-term. His inexplicable prophetic knowledge wouldn't help him with that any more than Still Water would help Amadeus cement his vision of better Praes.

Amadeus is pissy about not a single Dread Emperor managing to stave off starvation, even the few that tried. **There is a reason it's few that tried.**

[Mental Mouse](#)

I note that Amadeus and Cat, each in their own way, have indeed terrified Creation and made their mark. Cat's not finished, and Amadeus looks to be getting a second act. (Maybe. I wouldn't put it past EE to yank that brass ring away.)

[Liliet](#)

Well, they're standing on the side that grants that as part of basic package after all 😊

Mental Mouse

Basic goal, anyway. Presumably a lot of villains get thwarted before they get big.

erebus42

It's about work and quality though. What resources the villains get are never handed to them like the Heroes and even then the universe is skewed so the villains have a harder if not impossible time carving out meaningful victories.

Liliet

Villains do tend to suffer before they get to their position first, but Heroes need to earn their stripes too. Nothing is 'just handed' to anyone, Amadeus was being as facetious as it gets, either that or simply wrong. Either way, heroes and villains both go through crucibles to get what their Roles have to offer.

caoimhinh

I half-agree with you on this, but Amadeus wasn't wrong. The tools of Villains are the work of a lifetime, and more often than not are the fruit of the effort and sacrifice both by them and others, willing and unwilling.

Praes is built of centuries upon centuries of sorceries perfected by the madness and genius of countless warlocks working their entire lives pursuing their arts, so the one who climbs the Tower inherits a grand amalgamation of things they can use to forge their legend.

Compare to a Hero who is a teenager receiving a weapon straight up from Heaven, plus blessed with Good Luck by Providence, and you can see the difference very clearly.

You can't say they are the same, the hordes of the Tyrants took generations to form, while the Hero got handed a Holy Weapon out of nowhere.

That's why Amadeus complains that the Heroes are handed their victories, Angels will provide guidance and sometimes even descend to directly help the Heroes (William, Iason, Hanno, Tariq). A villain doesn't get that kind of help, they would need to risk their lives and souls to use a Demon and earn through a lifetime of service to Below for a dark miracle (like Wekesa or

Hanno's mother).

They each go through the crucibles of their Roles, that's true. But the difference in support is very glaring. Villains save up for their equipment while Heroes would be rich kids with Pay-to-Win Premium equipment, sure the proficiency of the players will make a huge difference, but that doesn't mean there isn't a huge bias towards one team.

Liliet

Here's the thing: villains are 99% of the time the ones with privilege.

We can debate details and exceptions (Good Kings are a legit counterexample; Amadeus is fucking not lmao), but when we're comparing William von Angelsword, who had said angel's feather, the clothes on his back and *absolutely nothing else*, to Kairos who was *literally a prince*,

Mental Mouse

IIRC, Amadeus started out as a peasant along with Malicia, and Cat of course was an orphan. Of course, Amadeus and especially Cat do have a heroic "taint" to their goals and behavior.

We don't have too many heroic origin stories, but White Knight was also an orphan, while Thief was both a noble (of a conquered land) and half an orphan. William was self-outcast (but he did get armor and equipment from somewhere).

I'd stay that both humble and privileged beginnings can produce heroes or villains.

Liliet

Amadeus is a farmer's son rising in rebellion against the oppressive nobility of his country, uniting the oppressed underclass around him.

Catherine is actually a better example of villain privilege because Amadeus picked her up and catapulted her right to the top without giving her a moment to catch her breath. We do not kneel, eh?

But yeah, you're not wrong. There's all kinds of possible stories; Kairos, however, is a classic example of a "villain born to privilege" one. No need to toil to earn resources, his job is just to properly abuse them.

[Liliet](#)

Villains get a lot of victories of the villainous kind: a tower in the sand that falls right afterwards but boy was everyone impressed.

Amadeus's definition of 'meaningful' is 'improves lives of common people long-term' which is like. Not Evil's point lmao

erebus42

We could probably fill a pretty large thread on what the "point" of Good or "Evil" is or could be. However, Meaningful in this case is a lasting victory at the end of a story. Which is what Black, Catherine, and the others are striving for. Your "villainous victories" are not equivalent to the ones that the "heroes" get, and logically in a fair world characters from either side would have a relatively equal chance of getting one or the other. And yet in the Guideverse that is not the case as fate is skewed one way.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, and my point is fate is skewed that way *because villains aren't interested in long term consequences, splash damage or anything that happens after they die*. That's what MAKES them villains. It's unfair as fuck to be *stuck with* when you're actually a hero at heart is the problem 😊

caoimhinh

But if he hadn't discarded that toolbox then he would have been dead long ago. The only reason Amadeus, Alaya, and the Calamities survived so long (over 40 years as successful villains) was because they avoided falling into the traps of stories and Amadeus learned to read the patterns in order to transcend them.

Notice how everything went to hell when Malicia (in her stupid paranoia fearing Amadeus had too much influence) decided she wanted to try using one of the old tools (flying fortress + hell gates and hordes of bound devils) via letting Akua building it so she could have a weapon of her own without depending on the Legions of Terror. What's the result?

Praes is burning, they are facing a new Goblin Rebellion, they lost Callow (the victory they hadn't achieved since the time of Triumphant), the Legions of Terror divided, most of the Calamities are dead, they are the target of a Crusade with most of the Heroes of Calernia on it, the

Dead King unleashed, Amadeus prisoner and Malicia at risk of being overthrown and killed.

There's a VERY good reason why Amadeus kicked away that toolbox, it was full of Acme Products and those may look impressive but can only blow up on the face of the user. History and Results prove that Amadeus was right.

Liliet

He was, absolutely so. *For what he wanted*, that toolbox was useless and horribly counterproductive. To say that Alaya fucked up is to say nothing.

That doesn't mean it's *objectively* useless and there's *nothing* it's good for.

Take Akua, take Kairos – offended children who don't count on their lifetimes being long and fully intend to burn the candle from both ends just to have as much fun as possible in the process...

caoimhinh

Yep, Kairos is a cheat character, too OP to be justified, he is basically a Hero but on the Evil side:

- Comes from a lineage of kings and conquerors.
- He came to his Name upon hearing a prophecy of his imminent death, which he has overcome already.
- He has knowledge about a lot of things, both secret and ancient that he should have no way of knowing.
- He employs a lot of sorceries for someone who doesn't have the Gift and has performed great workings for someone who doesn't have any prominent practitioner of magic under his service (He has the Magisterium of Stygia now, but he didn't have that by the time he was crafting extremely complex rituals with multiple layers, one of such layers drew a 3D middle finger, the other made a curse that killed Ashen Priestess)
- He made the Bard play correctly her lute. Not the tortured sounds she usually makes when she plays her lute, but actual melodious music with proper effect.
- He can manipulate Narrative in dubious ways (his "always one step" strategy worked, despite it being multiple attacks on a siege situation, simply because they were different plans they effectively were overwhelming the Heroes and taking the city of Delos)
- He knows secrets of the Bard, at least part of her origins and nature, which can't be explained simply on his Wish Aspect letting him know her desires.
- He knows about the origins of Keter and the Intercessor's role

on it.

-He managed to handpick and create a Named (turning Anaxares into a Hierarch), when the coming into a Name should be something extremely personal and unpredictable, except perhaps in those of the successor type (like a Knight choosing their Squire).

-Crossed the forest that everyone fears with his army without it being ripped to pieces (although it might have suffered heavy casualties and we simply hadn't seen, but as it was shown that he can harass the Army of Callow and Procer's troops in Iserre while forcing the 60 thousand troops of Levant to run away through the hellscape that Masego made, he has a huge and strong army)

-Even Providence seems to be on his side.

So yeah, he is a cheat character.

He is so far undefeated and has made a lot of deeds that shouldn't be possible for him, his success doesn't come as much of a surprise nor a bother because he is a very interesting character; but the things he has done without any justifiable explanation, like the ample use of High Arcana and knowledge of ancient matters, are a bit of a bother and could even be a plot hole.

konstantinvoncarstein

I completely agree with you 😊

[Liliet](#)

This is a villain kind of 'ridiculously and weirdly OP'. Heroes don't get libraries of ancient knowledge and competent underlings for free as starting funds.

Morgenstern

Somehow your comment suddenly made me wonder if Kairos HAS already died after all... and what we're seeing is just another meat puppet of the Dead King XD

I mean, all those pieces would seem to fit that one perfectly...

[Mental Mouse](#)

Mayyybe. I think he still could just be a classic "with great madness comes great power" villain, where his essential weakness is to the plot.

erebus42

I think it mainly comes with him leaning into his role which gives him that extra potency. He's walking the path (at least seemingly) of the Big Bad who dominates his adversaries until

the very end where his own arrogance/madness leads to his own undoing. That combined with the fact that he probably knows how entertaining he is in a meta sense and is using it to his advantage (like the bard did with the Bumbling Conjurer waaay back) and that he is the unofficial ruler of the major factions of the setting with vast spies and resources all contribute to the position he's in

chawpi_tuta

So Jehan the Wise hung 7 princes and one because they bankrupt the procer. Ha remind me of soviet union

caoimhinh

Not that, Jehan the Wise was King of Callow and marched against Procer probably in retaliation for some action the Principate had done in the past. He managed to kill so many princes of Procer because Procer was weakened and lacking in military strength, here it is implied that one of the reasons for that is that they were worn down after the brutal war against Theodosius, though 20 years should be enough for the country to recover so there must have been other factors.

Unorginal

20 years is certainly not enough, this isn't a perfect comparison but France after World War 1 felt the demographic squeeze of losing over 5% of its population right up until World War 2. It's very well could be that the war was more or less destructive it's not very clear but ironically the fact that Calnerna is more egalitarian works against it. A village can survive losing half its young men, it finds itself in a much worse spot if it loses half its woman. Furthermore, we get outright told that 1/3 of the principate was on fire and was due to be lost to Theodosius.

Compounded by economic recovery in the late medieval ages to early renaissance conditions at best it means that it very well could have badly damaged the principate horrifically for generations.

100,000 dead in a single battle of attrition that's a large city, Paris was the largest city in Europe during the Renaissance and at its peak, it only had 350,000 people in it.

Then the fact that the Principate is a quarreling bunch of noble houses waging constant Italian style brushfire border war with each other.

superkeaton

Well shit, Cat needs these people Not Dead, and Kairos is about to smear them across the field of battle like so much tomato sauce. I wonder, if he's talking about our favorite Gutter Lawyer when he mentions his friend.

ninegardens

Pretty sure he meant his buddy up in Keter: "Keter's due"

Andrew Mitchell

"... our favorite Gutter Lawyer" do you mean Heirarch? Yes, he's a strong candidate, IMO the strongest. Other candidates are Larat, Masego or the Dead King.

konstantinvoncarstein

The Hierarch is the only one of them he calls "friend", and the most logical choice. By the way, I hope he will die quickly.

[matrixm](#)

He calls the dead king friend too

konstantinvoncarstein

Have you the chapter where it happens? 😊 I don't recall

[Liliet](#)

Kairos thinks Cat actually intends to go through with her bargain with Larat and let him have the power he's after.

This naive boy.

caoimhinh

Going through with her bargain with Larat, yes.
Letting him have the power he's after, probably no.

Though Cat might not want to establish a Fae Court with a hold or anchor in Creation, she still needs to pay her debt to Larat, what she does afterward would depend on what exactly happens when he receives the seven crowns from Procer's princes and one from Helike's Tyrant.

konstantinvoncarstein

The Princess of High Noon was terrified when she heard the term of the bargain. But because neither Winter nor Summer exist anymore, maybe it is a red herring and will have no consequences?

caoimhinh

Maybe, but it's unlikely that nothing will happen. Larat bet on it when he made the Wild Hunt entirely dependant on Catherine's Winter (which was recently devoured by Night) and Kairos just said that the seven crowns and one plus the unclaimed realm from a part of Arcadia are necessary for the making of a new Fae Court. Something will happen.

What we need to figure out now is how this could play out and in what ways Larat may be screwed. Perhaps he wanted to make his new Court in Creation, but will be forced to have this fragment of Arcadia as his Court holdings, and maybe when this hellscape gets destroyed his Court will lose its power?

Mental Mouse

One point to consider is that the realm may not count as "unclaimed", given how Masego has been manipulating it.

Liliet

She needs to *not openly break* her bargain with Larat. There's 0 gain to her in actually paying the debt :3

caoimhinh

The direct gain is being freed from the debt. We haven't seen it bothering Cat at all so far, but there's supposed to be a weight to that and she needs to pay her part of the bargain to Larat. Both because of Narrative and because of Fae Power shenanigans, something bad is bound to happen if she goes back on her word to Larat.

So she must pay and present the seven crowns and one, but there's nothing saying that she must actually let Larat live afterwards.

There's also a gain in having more powerful subordinates who can fight for her and gate her armies through Arcadia, but she might not care much about that now that she has Sve Noc.

My point is, Cat will pay off her debt, but then screw up Larat in one way or another.

Liliet

I'm expecting her to use Kairos as a way to wiggle out of consequences here 😊

Liliet

she is pulling an 'oh please dont throw me into the briar patch' on him

Liliet

oh and btw: being freed of the debt is actually against her interests here explicitly, because the Wild Hunt is a useful resource and is only sworn to her until the debt is paid.

caoimhinh

True, but that's not what I'm arguing here. Paying the debt is troublesome and likely to be a bad thing in general for giving that kind of power to Larat, we knew that since Book 3.

Nevertheless, Cat still has to pay Larat his due. Failing to do so would have consequences, that has been implied to be the case with vows and oaths, too. A contract with a Fae should have strong force behind it, especially since the two parties involved are such significant people as the Black Queen and the former Prince of Nightfall.

Liliet

Again, she can't break it explicitly, but weaseling her way around it on technicalities is how fae oaths WORK.

Insanenoodlyguy

A heroic charge when all seems bleak is the sort of thing that turns a battle around, as Kairos just talked about.

Say, where is Cat with her overpowered calvary squad again?

If the narrative wants to keep this as classicial as possible, we are going to find out she's in Aracadia just after a scene transition where Vive successfully pulls of her "You let us go, we help" dealings.

Liliet

This is absolutely what I'm expecting to happen, and fuck Kairos over in the best "Evil Cannot Comprehend Good" ploy ever written.

Andrew Mitchell

1. Good to see Vivienne is quick to understand what's going on and what she needs to do.

2. I was not expecting another Alliance force in Arcadia. I knew the Proceran horse hadn't been participating, but I hadn't made the connection.

3. Has Larat been working with the Tyrant to establish a new Court?

4. Is this all a surprise to Catherine, or did she anticipate the shape of things in Arcadia?

5. What role will her staffswordprayer play in the coming confrontation in Arcadia?

IMO we'll get a Catherine chapter next.

[Liliet](#)

Vivienne's POV was the best ♥

And I think Larat's thing is just blatantly obvious to someone as knowledgeable in arcane matters as Kairos is.

And I think Catherine's playing Kairos like a fiddle, still 😊

caoimhinh

True.

But your second paragraph is exactly what konstantinvoncarstein is complaining about a few comments above, Kairos doesn't have the Gift and he can't use High Arcana so he is, in fact, not knowledgeable in arcane matters. Besides that, there should be no way for Kairos to know about Catherine's deal with Larat and it's exact terms, and yet he knows.

It's the kind of cheat Kairos has, getting information with absolutely no explanation of how he got it and that by all means should be impossible for him to have. This can't even be justified by Wish, unless he can extend that Aspect and use it on anyone in Creation and beyond so he used it on Larat (who he hasn't met as far as we know) to know what the former Prince of Nightfall is after.

[Liliet](#)

There's much much more to arcane matters than High Arcana.

Intercessor is not High Arcana. Rituals are not High Arcana. Whispering Woods are not High Arcana.

I don't think Kairos knows about the exact terms of the deal there. I think what Kairos knows is general lore that the deal was made of – **fae are predictable on a very basic level**, that's how Cat beat them through horrifying disadvantage.

Kairos knows lore, he knows the underpinnings of everything. You don't need to know the exact programs and OS of your opponent's computer if you know how computers work and what

OSs exist and what programs can and cannot do. He gets that from having the Helikean royal library / upbringing, and then the resources of the entire League. That is the kind of advantage villains get – resources and privilege.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Not to mention whoever/ whatever was/is locked in the basement.

Because I suspect pacts and bonds.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

Kairos does NOT lack resources.

[Liliet](#)

The exact mechanism is honestly irrelevant here. Villains inexplicably having a leg up on heroes in intel is a **narrative freebie**. Villains observing heroes' every step but being unable to counter them vs heroes struggling to figure out where to actually go and what to do but winning every actual confrontation is **bog standard**.

(Incidentally, it's characteristic of Cat, and we all know what role she is actually playing in the metanarrative despite the allegiance...)

You know the trope where heroes go on an epic vision quest in pursuit of wisdom, to finally after much toil and virtuousness miraculously get the location of a mcguffin... just in time to get in a fight with the villains' mooks/ officers there!

caoimhinh

Hmm, not exactly. Villains don't inexplicably have a leg up on heroes intel, they have a network that they have spend years to make and a lot of experience that enables them to read and predict the Heroes' personality and movements.

This is because traditionally the Villain is a veteran, older than the heroes by at least a decade and has been working and scheming on whatever his objective is for many years, it's not unjustified in the narrative. It's part of the reason for Amadeus' hatred for the Heroes' Cheats, because one year of a Heroic teenager's efforts is enough to overthrow the sum work of a Villain's lifetime.

But Kairos doesn't have that, he has Wish as an Aspect which lets him read people, that's fine, but the sheer

amount of information Kairos is in possession of is absurd.

Liliet

Kairos is a ruler by right of inheritance of a stable&ancient nation currently ideologically united around him.

caoimhinh

1) That Helike isn't that ancient, just a few hundred years.

2) That's still not enough for the info Kairos has on the Intercessor, Neshamah nor the deal Cat has with Larat.

3) Helike wasn't supposed to have the kind of sorceries Kairos has been constantly using since his fight against Hanno (Giant drills, flying towers, necromantic constructs, multiple enchanted items and an apparently endless supply of gargoyles). These are the signature of old Praes warfare and can only be done by the work of multiple skilled practitioners of magic and Named sorcerers. That Kairos has used all this so far could be justified if Kairos had a Named sorcerer with him, but he doesn't.

Andrew Mitchell

Your comment made me wonder if it was the thing under the crypt in Helike that gave Kairos these advantages but my searching has revealed nothing in the Guide that supports the crypt being a factor. There's just two mentions I've been able to find:

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/04/05/usurpation/>

"That was what he'd learned today, going down to the crypt even though he had been forbidden to by the king. The... thing in the tomb had spoken its prophecy in a croaky whisper, that he would not make it to his thirteenth nameday."

Kairos eyed his hand, which was shaking like a leaf. Not, though, out of fear. How strange. When he'd woken this morning, he had been already flinching at the thought of his father's displeasure. Now, looking at the fury painted over the king's face, he could think of only one thing: what are you going to do, Father? Kill me before I die?

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/02/08/prologue-3/>

"Treachery is pleasing to the Gods Below," he said. "There's a crypt in Helike, under the palace, where the first foundations of the city were laid. There's a creature there, lying under a tomb of stone sculpted to look like someone holding a sword. There is a crack in the side just large enough that you can hear the thing inside whisper, if you press your ear to it."

"I don't know what it is. My father said it's the first king of Helike, still straddling the line between life and death," the Tyrant said. "The king, though, once said it is the god who once owned the ground the city was built on – tricked into the tomb and forever bound to give us advice."

"Advice?" the diplomat repeated.

"Prophecies," the boy said. "All of royal blood can ask one question if it, in our lifetime."

"And it told you you would rule?" Anaxares guessed.

The Tyrant laughed. "It told me," he said, "that I would die when I turned thirteen. That there was nothing I could do to change this." The boy smiled. "It was," he said, "a great gift."

[Liliet](#)

I have said this already: fae lore is not that complicated. When you see the materials you can guess what will be built of them even if you don't have the blueprint.

And where's the source on "Helike is not supposed to have that"? I distinctly recall commentary that because Helike is not Praes their rituals were inefficient and took more blood sacrifice than they would have needed...

I mean, seriously, please find the quote you're referring to? I don't think erratic leaves plot holes, I want to see that one.

caoimhinh

That's the thing, Liliet, there isn't anything even mentioning in passing anything about Helike's being capable of the things Kairos has made them do. My

argument is not quotes of it, it's the LACK of quotes of it.

By the way, the comment about their inefficiency was made by Hedge Wizard when the Tyrant killed 666 people on each of the 6 towers that he made float (she tried to distract herself from the slaughter by commenting that Praesi would have used only half as many sacrifices).

Every mention of Helike talks about their military might due to their fine soldiers and that they are almost unstoppable when a Tyrant is leading them. There's nothing about them being proficient at magic (they had an influential House of Light, priests that attended the court of Kairos' father, however) and yet Kairos has people using blood magic, grand rituals and High Arcana without any explanation for it.

He (or rather his mages) disrupted Wekesa's scrying network, laid spell patters with advanced understanding of spellcrafting mechanics, constantly used rituals to move gigantic machines, and also constantly present Kairos with new enchanted equipment (a flying throne, gargoyles, fire rubies that throw lasers, souls bound to skulls and lamps, an enchanted crown, etc)

There's A LOT of deeds done by Kairos that would require extremely talented mages and numerous at that. Most notably the fact that they could disrupt the workings of an experienced and talented Warlock like Wekesa, yet there's nothing that explain all that. Amadeus is surprised about it in Interlude Cadenza, and if Helike had mages capable of matching Wekesa they would be famous for it.

There's no mention of Helike ever having the level of mages needed for the things Kairos has pulled, that's the point I'm addressing. This would all make sense if Tyrant had a sorcerous Named under his command, (which I expected to appear in the previous books but never appeared), but he doesn't have one and making such character appear now out of nowhere saying "all these things were done by this previously unIntroduced Named" would be cheap so it's unlikely to happen. The magisterium of Stygia are all mages so that can explain some of the things Kairos does now, but not the ones he did before having the League obeying him. The current implication due to not providing any proper explanation is simply that Kairos gathered all the mages of Helike and maybe from other countries and had them work like crazy to pull off all these

deeds, yet that wouldn't be enough to match a Warlock like Wekesa.

It's "an unexplained advantage of a villain" as you called it, a Cheat Character like konstantinvoncarstein called Kairos.

[Liliet](#)

Wait, are we actually disagreeing on anything here?

My point is that the way Guide's basic worldbuilding is set up, there are things that don't need to be set up explicitly every time, like heroic backstories... or origin of villainous advantages. As long as it's something that is predicted by Saturday morning cartoon tropes, it can be reasonably expected to happen unless contradicted by strong evidence to the contrary; and in presence of such evidence, it should be expected to happen anyway, with twice as much bang due to greater dramatic effect.

My point is that it is not only heroes that benefit from this unspoken trope guarantee, but villains as well; and that Kairos Theodosian is in no way outside of this framework.

All that said, I remember a quote about Theodosius the Unconquered consulting his "soothsayers" before battles to find out if he's going to win or lose; before Maddened Fields they ended up saying "yes". So there is at least one known kind of mage / prophetic tradition in Helike, and no reason to assume Kairos doesn't have access to it.

caoimhinh

Our disagreement is that you consider "He's a villain" as enough justification and explanation for Kairos pulling off the things he has done, while I don't.

I'm looking for a way to justify this situation so that it wouldn't be a plot hole but you just shrug it off as "He's a villain, he can do it".

Most, if not all, of the things done by other characters has been explained or given proper background to build upon and justify their capability to do these things they do, the exception is Kairos. It can't be brushed off as him simply being the young Hero of Villains,

capable of inexplicably doing things. The main problem is that this isn't just Kairos doing inexplicable things, it's his followers doing them, because unless they are Named they shouldn't be capable of that.

Soothsayers are diviners by the way, and not very effective given the answer they gave Theodosius lol.

Anyways, Helike can have mages, diviners and warlocks (we know they have strong priests capable of strong miracles, even priest-warriors like the Spear Saints), that's not a problem, although the utter lack of mention of them if Helike actually had such is glaring; the problem is the things those mages are doing, like being capable of disrupting the works of a Named Warlock, Wekesa. That's simply not possible unless there's massive talent or power, like a Named with them, and if their country had that kind of things they would be famous for it, Kairos is matching the workings of the old Praesi Dread Emperors without having the culture and talented mages that enable them. A possible explanation could be that the Name of Tyrant gave Kairos capabilities in magic, so he is practitioner, but that would still be lacking.

[Liliet](#)

Quantity beats quality, sometimes. I think Tyrant was only able to disrupt Warlock's communications once Masego already broke into them, also? What was the other time when he bested him?

caoimhinh

I think it also happened when during the battle where Sabah was killed but I'm not sure. Still, the only other times that Wekesa's workings were disrupted were by the hand of powerful priests or other sorcerous Named. Random people, even if numerous, can't hope to match his level of skill and power.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Heroes can inherit or otherwise benefit from intelligence networks too. If nothing else, consider Thief's earlier roles; but I'm quite sure at least some temples or priests will have spy networks, not to mention national leaders. And most of the time, Heroes

will have at least some access to those. (Though I suspect Cordelia may lately be an exception. 😊)

That said, magical scrying was basically a Praesi monopoly until quite recently, and it took a war or two to jump-start the Good side's magical explorations. However, we've seen heroes as well as villains with aspects that draw information out of individual opponents, or provide visions from distant places.

Insanenoodlyguy

When Cat mentioned the "Seven Crowns and One" thing to Summer Princess, she reacted in horror and was all "You can NOT let him get that." I'm guessing that whatever scheme this facilitates, it's very old and very well known. The Fae act out stories, so Larat has tried to be the character in a story he finds favorable, but it sounds like both Cat and Kairos have figured out what that story really is. He doesn't need superpowered insight, he just needs to have read the right book.

caoimhinh

Sulia was a Princess of Summer, of course she knew what that meant. That doesn't tell us anything about how well known that thing is. And the things of Fae aren't actually that well known, every single instance of any magic practitioner looking at a Fae so far had them going "oh, interesting, I didn't know that. I wonder what would happen if X, I want to make tests" Masego stated there were centuries of research on Fae and even then what they knew was minimal, and that's from professional, well-trained, dedicated, and likely genius mages working on the subjects for generations. The rest of Calernia knows nearly nothing about the Fae, Killian is the granddaughter of one and doesn't know much, even the thing about stories was only recently known and to find that they had to go to the Capital of Winter. Kairos shouldn't know about this process for creating a new Fae Court nor the content of Cat's bargain to Larat.

~So no, this isn't something Kairos could know by reading a story book~

Andrew Mitchell

Yeah, it's a puzzle. I hope we get an explanation of the source of Kairos' knowledge and power.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I wouldn't put it past Larat to have visited Kairos on the sly.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, I suspect that too.

Clint

Re: 2.

We were told about the Proceran and Dominion cavalry being in Arcadia with Rogue Sorcerer at the end of Interlude: Graves We Have Yet To Fill. Yannu had planned to send them (with Saint) to attack inside the palisade while the infantry was attacking the outside, but he calls off the whole plan when Grey Pilgrim confirms that it won't get Cat to take the field.

Re: next chapter...

I'd put my money on one more interlude – Vivienne's negotiation with Pilgrim is important enough that we should see it on screen, and there's at least one more shoe to drop, not even counting Masego. I'm expecting to see one more Tariq PoV, where he sees the results of all three of Cat's letters and makes one last attempt to shift the Narrative in his favor, before realizing how badly he's been outmaneuvered. I don't think we'll see Cat's PoV again until she needs to ride in and play her last card – which would be bad, with Pilgrim and Saint still both in play – or until the peace talks, if she manages to get there without taking the field herself.

[Liliet](#)

I want Grem's POV...

Serena Halut

So, don't know if anyone's noticed but the Interlude titles are connected.

West, Ever Pursuing
Graves We Have Yet To Fill
Trust is the Wager
Death They Cannot Steal
And Pay Your Toll
When Iron Rests

It forms an actual poem called a ballad rhyme, notice the scheme abcb defe. It's unfinished with the second stanza only half-done. So it seems we have just 2 interludes left until we see Cat again.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I think you're seeing an artifact of the titles coming from song lyrics. I note that in my own dialect, "fill" does *not* rhyme with "steal", also the meter of the composite poem is a mess.

Nairne .01

"He was, the orc guilty admitted to himself, beginning to enjoy this a little too much."

I laughed through most of this chapter.

Thank you very much EE.

Morgenstern

Hmm... Now, does the Tyrant just want to take the crowns for himself, thinking he'll ruin Cat's day by preventing the fae getting them? Or does he mean to be the one to *hand them out* to the fae, because he sees through the deception, that Cat actually does NOT want the fae to ever get those...

Insanenoodlyguy

Hmmm, that would work as a classical villain usurpation. "I know you had a deal to get these crowns, but I got the crowns. Now you deal/work with me if you want your due!" And could even turn around into Cat dodging the "Now that I'm a god, I kill you, former master!" sort of bad end for the helpers in those stories if she hands it over to Kairos.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Where are these last couple of titles coming from?

Insanenoodlyguy

They are all lyrics to songs sung by the Legion/Callow armies.

[Mental Mouse](#)

What songs? When I looked they weren't in the Wiki. (They certainly sound right, though.)

caoimhinh

They are, the only one I couldn't find was the origin of "And Pay Your Toll"

West, Ever Pursuing is from the "Tyranny of the Sun"

Graves We Have Yet To Fill is from "In Dread Crowned"

Trust Is The Wager is from "The Girl Who Climbed The Tower"

Death They Cannot Steal comes from "Here They Come Again"

When Iron Rests is from "Dead the Hand", the song about Hakram.

[matrixm](#)

Girl who climbed the tower isn't a Callowan song btw. It's a secret song that only seems to appear to people involved with the tower, like a prophecy of sorts

caoimhinh

The others aren't either, only "Here they come again" is a Callowan song.

"Tyranny of the Sun" is an old Praesi song, while "In Dread Crowned" and "Dead the Hand" are songs written by the members of the Fifteenth Legion back when they were still part of the Legion of Terror serving Praes.

[Mental Mouse](#)

OK, that's one of the two missing titles. If nobody can find the last one, it might show up as a future song. It certainly has the right feel.

Insanenoodlyguy

There's a "Pay your price" lyric, but that's not quite right, unless EE made an error.

caoimhinh

The closest I found was in "The Lord of the Silver Spears" that has a lyric near the end saying "and you will pay!"

Rustndusty

This one was from chapter 25 of book three, sung as Hakram slaughters a minor fae noble. The last one doesn't seem to be from a song we've seen yet.

caoimhinh

West, Ever Pursuing is from the Tyranny of the Sun

https://abridged-guide-to-evil.fandom.com/wiki/The_Tyranny_of_the_Sun

Graves We Have Yet To Fill is from In Dread Crowned

https://abridged-guide-to-evil.fandom.com/wiki/In_Dread_Crowned

Trust Is The Wager is from The Girl Who Climbed The Tower
https://abridged-guide-to-evil.fandom.com/wiki/The_Girl_Who_Climbed_The_Tower

Death they cannot steal is from Here They Come Again
https://abridged-guide-to-evil.fandom.com/wiki/Here_They_Come_Again

And Pay Your Toll I seriously have no idea from where that is, sorry.

When Iron Rests is from Dead the Hand, the song about Hakram:
https://abridged-guide-to-evil.fandom.com/wiki/Dead_the_Hand

cookiehunter

considering that cat cant play shatranj worth a damn it wis quite ironic

Kissaten

In the end she explodes the board. With Night power. In Kairos face.

Aotrs Commander

Silly Legions. You should know by now Cat's *always* up to something.

Bahahahahahaha!

Oh Kairos. Never change.

(Now was that "is this was love feels like" directed towards Cat or do we have a second ship on the table, Hakram...?)

...

For that matter, what was being implied by Hakram recalling the way Juniper looked at him with distrust in the early days? I know Hakram's stated as being a bit of a lady's orc (and Juniper always seems about half-a-step from disproving the thing about orcs and humans), so it would seem odd to be implyng Hakram and Juniper have a thing, so...?

Insanenoodlyguy

I think it's also the thing he said way back when he became Adjutant. He's not a great "Orc" in the classical sense. Juniper has the blood lust, she just has it on a higher, more intellectual level, moving armies against each other rather than a personal desire to put her sword in somebody's guts. But by his own admission Hakram never really had it period. He's "Off" and that's probably more obvious to other Orc's than

Humans. Early Fifteenth was before his named moment where he said "And so, at last, I am an orc." His sleeping around, was a symptom but not the whole of his overall "I don't really feel much of anything. I'm not much of anything" so it's not hard to see that a man with that self perception would see the doubting eyes of a superior and say "Hmm, she might have a point."

[Liliet](#)

Juniper has talked to Cat about this in Book 3 Chapter Host, the one where In Dread Crowned was revealed. Basically orcs have some violent ableism baked into their culture against a negative stereotype of the kind of neurodivergent Hakram is, and Juniper "suspected he was a coldblood". The point being that he is, but it doesn't stop him from being the wonderful guy that he is, so nobody cares.

Juniper has... quite a bit of cultural bigotry in her actually, between this and her attitude towards Vivi. She's an interesting character indeed.

caoimhinh

Yeah, Juniper has that bit of bigotry that most people obsessed with rules has, like the disdain she showed when Nauk was mourning Nilin's death. But in the case of Juniper's attitude towards Vivienne, that is Vivi's fault since she actively and purposefully did things to make others get a bad impression of her, at least when she was still the Thief. Besides, neither Juniper nor Vivienne have likable personalities so to get them to get along they would need to directly save each other lives (in a violent fashion, brutalizing the opponent or killing many at once in Vivienne case, to earn Orc respect from Juniper).

[Liliet](#)

...I find them both likable, but then I have very low standards lmao

I love everything else you say here ♥

caoimhinh

Oh, they are likable characters, don't get me wrong. I meant it as they as people living in their world, they aren't likeable people, as evidenced by their lack of friends outside a very, very small circle. Although they are fiercely loyal and dedicated to those they accept, their friends would first have to pass through the barriers Juniper and Vivienne rose:
-Juniper's obsession with rules, judgmental attitude,

temperament, constant demand for discipline, not to mention Orc standards of proficiency at violence.
-Vivienne's distrust to others, layers of lies, paranoia, constant tests to figure out the loyalties, intentions and true natures of others, her kleptomaniac nature, not to mention her constant self-doubt that almost made her abandon the Woe if Hakram hadn't cut off his own hand to show her just how invaluable she actually is.

It's kinda like Robber is an amazing and interesting character to read, but is as far as we have seen a crappy friend with a deadly sense of humor. Hahaha.

[Liliet](#)

Well I certainly like both of them as people more than I like Robber lmao

Vivienne is loyal and fiercely dedicated to the cause of good, smart and quick-witted and observant; she was a good friend to William the minute he pulled his head out of his ass for a moment.

Juniper is a great mom friend, the kind of person you want in your corner and taking care of you and yours, always ready to call you out on your bullshit without any hard feelings lingering behind.

IDK I just like specifically the way they are

erebus42

Wait, so is this confirming that Hakram is a high functioning psychopath (or the Orc equivalent at least, like Juniper suspected)? Also, can you imagine how terrifying a low functioning psychopathic orc would be?

[Mental Mouse](#)

If anything, he's the opposite of a psychopath-equivalent. When we humans hear "coldblood", we think of a sociopath's "cold-blooded" machinations etc, lacking the warmth of human empathy, affection, compassion, etc.

To an orc, the word would have very different implications, because for an orc, their *normal* response to various situations is bloodlust. Lacking that bloodlust response would be abnormal – perhaps even considered "acting more human than orc".

[Mental Mouse](#)

Here, Hakram's halting words and the start of Catherine's meditation on him:

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/01/15/chapter-59-anacrusis/>

> I called you Warlord then, and I don't regret it. I don't keep to the old ways, not like Nauk, but it is no empty word. I haven't used it since because it-" / He scowled, unsure of himself for once. / "It's not the right title, not for the two of us," he finally said. "Too shallow in the wrong places. We are more than war."

> It was times like these I understood how peculiar Hakram truly was, compared to others of his kind. It wasn't his temperament, or his way with people. There was an underlying threat to the way orcs like Nauk and Juniper and every other orc I'd met saw the world, and in Adjutant it was absent. I thought much of the Hellhound, but never would I imagine her saying we are more than war. It would go against her nature.

This turned up while searching for the last couple of chapter titles, which I did not find. And apropos of nothing, I just realized that Nauk and the men who died with him didn't get any secrets for the Underworld. 😞

Insanenoodlyguy

who says they didn't? Cat showed up for the final bit after the bodies were gathered. The soldiers had a whole afternoon to give out secrets.

[Liliet](#)

That's how I'm reading this yeah :3

Alivaril

So, I don't see any reason why "laying the crowns at [Larat's] feet" couldn't refer to a tribute at his grave or something done after the crowns have been "used."

Insanenoodlyguy

I do. because remember, this is a Fae story with a fae character, not a regular mortal. Death is very different for these guys. Odds are reasonable that if it was done the way you say, our winter crowboy pops out of his grave, fully restored and stronger than ever, laughing and screaming something classical like "At lasssstttttttt!"

[Mental Mouse](#)

If you try to dodge the traditional script that such a phrase refers to, you may find that your results are likewise literally correct, but lacking their expected meaning.

Ancusohm

Um, I've somehow managed to miss all the neurodivergent themes. Well, I know Masego is heavily implied to be on the autism spectrum, and there's that ogre general who has low empathy. Is that what people mean?

Could someone please explain for a reader who is awful at picking up on subtext?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, Hune's low empathy may be an ogre feature, or just the hostility of an oppressed band of refugees.

Aside from that, Amadeus is believed to be demisexual with other divergences possible, and Hakram is nonstandard for an orc. Akua and Indrani may or may not be technically neurodivergent, but their respective psychologies are distinctly odd by our IRL standards.

[Daniel E](#)

Any thoughts as to what battle will officially be dubbed "Prince's Graveyard" from Juniper's memoirs? At a glance, I'd wager Kairos vs. all the Principate Knights in Arcadia, but that seems too easy.

Andrew Mitchell

It seems to me that it's all coming to a head and that the Princes Graveyard will be resolved soon. Certainly in this fragment of Arcadia but perhaps it will happen as, or soon after, the fragment has entered Creation.

I agree that it's not going to be as simple as "Karios vs. the Principate". There's Cat, Masego, Hakram, Larat and the rest of the Wild Hunt involved as well, plus the potential for the Dead King to get involved as well (as others have already discussed).

[Mental Mouse](#)

At this point, I'm guessing that the resolution will come when we get back to Cat.

Alegio

I'm mad cause we didn't get to see if the tyrant is actually riding the goat 😏

Max Scherer

I think(and really really hope) that Cat excepted that both partys will be their and i know i will be salty that she will again loose somehow and not really get her way(yes her plan will probabaly somehow work, but only with workarounds and whatnot), but this time I get a warning that her plan will get fucked up.... But hey the tyrant still thinks that they are playing a game and Cat never plays the game 😊

Interlude: So We Shot Him

"One hundred and twenty one: it can be wise to make a truce with a villain to deal with greater threat. Never forget, however, that fear does not make someone trustworthy. Merely afraid."
– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

Captain Elvera could not have drawn her sword even if there was a need, for oaths still bound her and so uncertainty was staying her hand. It had been a very fine line she'd walked these last few weeks, one finer than she was truly comfortable with. Elvera had sworn not to make war on the Black Queen nor her allies for the span of three months, and that span had not yet ended, though Lady Aquiline had made use of her regardless. The letter of the oath had been observed: the prisoners released under oath had never left the reserve or bared blade. Elvera herself did not formally hold command, for that might be impugning her word, though her 'advice' was obeyed so faithfully this was mere pretence. The old woman would not pretend the spirit of the oath had not been broken, regardless, or that service of her lady excused the act. Even if the Black Queen had likely expected no better of them, it did not lessen the shame of being so feckless. Yet when duty and honour pulled different ways, which one was to be heeded? Elvera had no answer, and her lady was understanding, so here she was straddling a charade instead of declaring for either.

"Those are the Spears of Stygia, we have confirmed it," Captain Onaedo grimaced. "Ashen Gods, just when the night was turning around."

Onaedo, second only to her in years of service to Tartessos, held command of the host in the absence of Lady Aquiline – who was, at the moment, still having her wounds seen to. Along with Razin Tanja, who she'd insisted would be healed at her side. That'd raised more than a few eyebrows, and likely would again in days to come. If they survived that long, Elvera thought. Which given

the way reputable armies had taken to appearing out of thin air at their rear was seeming less certain by the moment.

"And they are facing the Procerans," Elvera slowly said.

The League of Free Cities had struck... oddly. Perhaps in part to obscure its numbers, which were still very much in doubt, but their array was unusual. The Spears of Stygia, perhaps the finest infantry that region had to offer, had appeared and formed up for advance at the back of Lady Aquiline's command. Not facing the Alavan heavy infantry of Lord Malave to the north, which might be understandable if a swift rout was what was meant to be achieved. Yet it was a hardened army of twenty thousand Procerans, an army who'd already fought that same slave-phalanx in the past, that they'd formed up in front of. There'd been much easier meat to prey on, if the Stygians had wished: the famously lightly-armoured warriors of Vaccei, or perhaps the hodgepodge mixture of fantassins and levies that was the northern Proceran contingent. Elvera had seen to it that even while moving to encircle the Black Queen's camp her lady's army had not overextended, so theirs was not a weak position to assault. Why, of all places, had the Spears of Stygia been put in front of the largest knot of veteran Proceran soldiery on the field? A rider approached, breaking up her musings, and conferred quietly with Captain Onaedo. She glanced at him, brow raised.

"The Black Queen's surrender seems to be holding," he told her.

The Grand Alliance would have folded like parchment if it hadn't, Elvera grimly admitted to herself. Even now, in the distance, she could see the buckling lines of her lady's host when it was fighting on a single front – two would have ended them in an hour. The Stygian phalanx was pushing through the Procerans inch by inch, unflinchingly, and with few losses. On the left flank the Bellerophans were being hacked into by eager Tartessos captains, though the enemy's formations were so dense it was like wrestling with a boulder. Elvera would have spared a moment to be impressed by the way conscripts with only spears and old armour were holding up so well in front of proper warriors if the Bellerophan stubbornness wasn't in the course of losing her this battle. Delosi forces held the other flank, facing Malagan warbands, and though the scribes themselves were nothing to worry of the mercenaries they'd hired had stiffer spines and sharper blades. The Malagan captains were only barely holding on, and if they broke it would turn into a massacre. The Procerans at the centre would be encircled and choked by the Stygian phalanx while Elvera's left flank remained stuck and unable to help. Until the centre collapsed as well, anyway, and it was swept through as well.

"We won't be winning this battle," Captain Elvera bluntly said. "All we can do is hold and hope for Lord Marave to beat back the rest of the League."

"What would you advise, then?" Captain Onaeodo asked.

"I'd throw everything we have in reserve at our right flank," she said. "And pray it'll hold long enough."

It wasn't an order, oath forbade it, but it was treated like one.

—

"I expect," Yannu Marave calmly said, "that you come bearing a threat."

Had they been dealing with a lesser villain, Tariq thought, then the Lord of Alava would have been correct. If there'd ever been a time for the armies of the East to turn on the Grand Alliance, it was now. Debacle was unfolding down south, while a mere mile outside this tent a hard battle was being fought. Helike's army had swept out of Arcadia like a tide, hammering at the right flank unexpectedly, and even as Lord Yannu redeployed to meet the threat two more blows had come in quick succession: the soldiers of Penthes smashing into the left flank while those of Nicae poured out in the centre. The first half hour had been one sided butchery, for the Alliance's army had been taken utterly by surprise, but now that it'd had time to form up a brutal stalemate of shield walls had formed. Yet all it would take was for the Army of Callow to resume firing its siege engines at the army, and the battle would be over. Odds were that Catherin Foundling would never again get advantage so heavy and undeniable over the hosts of the Grand Alliance, and if she were a fool then she would have instructed her followers to take advantage of it. The Grey Pilgrim saw no such thing within Vivienne Dartwick, and that brought forth just as much fear as it did relief.

"Queen Catherine offered the surrender in good faith," the young woman replied just as calmly. "It stands, regardless of circumstance. I have come to discuss terms of ransoming."

Tariq almost laughed at the audacity of that. Lady Dartwick had ridden into her enemy's camp with nothing but a cursory escort, unarmed, and sat herself at the table across one of the most powerful men in the west without batting an eye. Like she did not doubt for a moment that she belonged there, though the Pilgrim's eye told him she was not without doubts. They were not, however, woven into every part of her as they had been the previous year. Instead now there was a pulsing sentiment that split the difference of ambition and yearning, and it had nestled deep at the heart Vivienne Dartwick. The dark-haired woman, Tariq thought, had quite clearly lost her Bestowal. She was the Thief no longer, both his eyes and the whispers of the Ophanim had so

ascertained. And yet, in the bargain of that loss, she had gained something altogether more dangerous: belief.

Am I, the Pilgrim thought, looking at your successor, Catherine Foundling?

"Ransoming," Lord Marave said, tone flat. "You wish to have some of your forces released?"

"I have come to bargain," Lady Vivienne pleasantly smiled, "for the ransoming of every force that surrendered to the Peregrine."

Whispers, sharp and urgent. Not because of the woman's words, for those were no surprise, but for something unfolding. There was, the Ophanim conveyed, to be another great breach between Creation and Arcadia. Soon, and it would be calamitous in some way. The Peregrine closed his eyes, feeling out the miracle he had woven over the sky. It was on the edge of passing, though it would be a natural death: Creation's true dawn was about to begin, and it would chase away his own conceited mimicry.

"That is not an offer mine to accept," Yannu Marave said. "But the terms must be interesting, for what you offer to be worth so many soldiers."

"The aid of said soldiers," Vivienne Dartwick replied. "Against the League of Free Cities."

Left to it, Tariq thought, they would keep fencing for some time. Careful and wary both, even as death bloomed out on the fields. Not without reason, but the situation was on the edge of taking a grim turn. The Tyrant of Helike might have been called here by the Black Queen's ploy, but he suspected even she did not truly understand what she'd unleashed. She'd let the fox into the henhouse, as reckless as ever.

"Lord Yannu," the Pilgrim quietly asked. "Can this battle be won without their assistance?"

The other man's lips thinned.

"If our last hand is played," he said.

"It is, I think, about to be snapped over the Tyrant's knee," Tariq said.

"Then it is not impossible, yet the path is narrow," the Lord of Alava said.

"Then we have an accord, Vivienne Dartwick," the Pilgrim said.

There was a flicker of surprise on her face, though she mastered it swiftly.

"There is a mage among my escort," she said. "If I might be allowed to send a signal?"

"Do so," Tariq said. "And hurry, for-"

Creation shivered, to a sound like glass breaking had the glass been screamed by a hundred thousand voices. The Grey Pilgrim was on his feet in a heartbeat, leaving his words unfinished even as he raced out of the tent. The Ophanim's voices rose in a chorus of anger at the thoughtlessness of what had been done, and he could only agree. A breach fractured the plain between the armies fighting, shaped like a thick pane of glass shattered by blow – spinning out in cracks. Through it fell thousands and thousands of horsemen, the very same he had sent into Arcadia. Lady Dartwick came to stand at his side, face gone pale.

"Send your signal," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Before it is too late."

Cursing his weary bones, the Peregrine straightened his back. First he would need to enlist Laurence, but after that? There was a villain among the rain of soldiers that was being carried down by a swarm of gargoyles. The Rogue Sorcerer should be able to hold him until the two old hands arrived.

Kairos Theodosian had been allowed to run rampant for too long, and an end brought to his scheming was long overdue.

—

It wasn't even much of a drop, Hakram thought, but then it hadn't needed to be.

Ten, twelve feet the orc estimated. He'd seen horses jump half that without hurting themselves, though admittedly not horses in armour and bearing armoured riders. Still, he suspected it'd been the angle of it more than anything else: like the floor dropping off under an entire army. Their return to Creation had been accompanied by a horrifying song. Horses by the thousands screaming for their broken limbs, falling to the side and rolling over soldiers crushed by their weight. Horns and trumpets as the Procerans and Levantines who'd remained unharmed tried and failed to assert order, and all the while Kairos Theodosian laughed convulsively. **Rend**, the red-eyed boy had ordered Arcadia, and beneath the hooves of the west's cavalry the earth had been rent asunder. At least the Tyrant seemed half-dead for it, Adjutant thought. The orc had seen higher sorceries of this calibre before, but only once before an aspect destructive on such a scale: the Carrion Lord's own, when he had wrecked the doomsday fortress made from Liesse. Lord Black had been near killed by the overreach, however, where Kairos Theodosian remained conscious. Feverish, yes, exhausted and drenched in sweat. Yet still very much awake.

"It appears," Adjutant said, "that you've repelled the enemy."

The Tyrant did not reply, slumped and breathing laboriously. The villain was seated on his throne still, a gaudy thing bejewelled and set on a platform almost as luxurious. The platform itself had been carried down by a swarm of gargoyles, along with the wooden frame holding up Hakram himself. And more, too: Lord Kairos' personal guard had been held up by pairs of the constructs, slowing their fall by enough the descent did not wound them. It'd allowed Adjutant a read on the amount of gargoyles that existed in whole, which to his eyes was somewhere between three and five thousand – mostly likely on the lower end of that span. It was still a colossal investment of resources to have made so many of the creatures, especially for a city-state, and should they ever be broken Hakram suspected it would be a crippling blow for the villain. Something to pass along, when he returned to Catherine. Lord Kairos did not reply to his comment, instead sending out further swarms of gargoyles with an anemic twitch of the arm. Adjutant's eyes narrowed. The thousand-strong retinue of Helikean soldiers was making a slaughter of the horsemen in disarray, methodically scything through the wounded and the frightened, but it was not them the constructs had gone after.

"Better than repelled," Kairos Theodosian rasped out. "*Captured.*"

Fascinated, Hakram peered at the swarms that were causing such a racket further down the shattered enemy column. There were seven of them, spiriting away seven prisoners. Seven crowned princes and princesses of Procer, he thought, snatched by the gargoyles in the midst of the howling chaos that'd been crashing down onto Creation.

"And now-" Lord Kairos began, but a wet cough tore out of his throat.

The boy's lips, Hakram saw, were flecked with blood.

"And now," the Tyrant croaked, "dawn."

The orc looked up, in time to see the shining star that held back the night wane, and the truth of Creation replace it. The drow were struck down anew, before they could even properly stir.

—

Akua Sahelian watched dawn rise, a crow on one side and a well on the other.

They had watched it all unfold from the highest point in the camp of the Army of Callow, the graceful dance that'd spanned a night and brought them to this very moment. The shade who'd once been the heiress to Wolof had been taught the arts of treachery since

the cradle, and taken to them like few others, so perhaps she was the only person in all of Iserre who could suitably appreciate what Catherine had done. The seamless sequence, born of an understanding of her foes that had been like an astronomer's prediction of spheres in their orbit. Akua had glimpsed but a fraction of the preparations that arranging the stretch of a single night – no, not even that, barely even a bell in duration – had taken and so what she saw was not the luck of meddler but instead a net whose weaving had begun weeks ago, if not months.

"O Goddess of Night," the shade said. "You walk along her thoughts, do you not? How much of it did she truly anticipate?"

"Enough," the Eldest Night said.

Though the urge to press the matter burned on her tongue, she did not purse. Akua was not Catherine, to chastise and wheedle entities far beyond her ken with that fearlessness that was sister to folly. Even without moving a finger the shade could feel the towering weight of the goddess who had been born to the name of Andronike, the millennia of blood and screams she had woven into apotheosis. It felt like even just an irritated glance from the half of Sve Noc would be enough to make dust in the wind of Akua, for one's presence was mountain and the other feathers.

"And now I am called on to do my part, leal servant that I am," the shade murmured.

In the sky a streak of coloured light stretched, the signal from Lady Dartwick that surrender had been turned into effective – if still temporary – alliance.

"No servant of mine," the goddess said. "You wield, but do not make covenant."

"Alas, O Goddess, my heart has already been taken," Akua smiled.

"This is humorous, for you imply romantic feeling when in truth referencing grievous bodily harm," Andronike said, tone smug. "I have mastered your ways, shade."

"I am helpless before your guile, Sve Noc," she replied, tone the slightest hint of dry.

The crow cawed in high-handed agreement.

"There will be need of a word, to bring it forth," the goddess said. "Have you chosen?"

"I have," Akua said, lips quirked. "I believe she would approve."

"Then we begin," Andronike said.

Her work was not as crude and unpolished as to require physical contact to be wielded: proximity and binding were sufficient. She who had once been the Diabolist allowed herself to sink into the sea of Night, the receptacle she had filled with the might of the Mighty night after night. Akua had known men and women, in Praes, who would have sold half the world to have such power at their fingertips. And it'd been entrusted to her almost as an *afterthought*, like it was a chore instead of the kind of privilege children would murder their progenitors for without hesitation. No oath stayed her hand, now, and no chain held her so closely that with this in her grasp she could not sever it. She could turn on the woman who'd slain and bound her. She could even bring this entire beautiful house of cards tumbling down on her head simply by doing nothing. Instead, Akua Sahelian opened black-rimmed eyes and bared a smile like a blade of ivory.

"Fall," she said.

A torrent of darkness shot up in the sky, and from dawn wove an eclipse.

—

Princess Rozala Malanza woke disoriented, her leg throbbing with pain. She groaned and almost panicked when she realized she could not move her arms or legs — she was bound by rope — but mastered herself before she could scream. She would not give the Enemy the pleasure of her fear before it took her life and sent her back to... No, this was not Cleves. It was Iserre, it was dark, and for reasons unknown she was hanging upside down from a rope.

"Ah," a familiar voice gravelled. "I thought the prince from Cantal would be first to wake, on account of the thicker skull."

"Deadhand?" Rozala croaked, her mouth cottony and vision swimming. "You've captured me?"

She forced herself to concentrate, and after squinting for a moment saw through the gloom.

"Not exactly," the Adjutant ruefully replied, just as she realized the orc was hanging upside down a mere foot to the left.

Gods, her throat was parched. Wiggling in her bindings, Rozala saw she was in hallowed company indeed: to her right was Prince Arnaud, and from there a procession of royalty continued. Every prince and princess of Procer in her host was strung up there in a neat row from a raised beam, like venison left to dry.

"Who—" she began, turning to the orc, but then she remembered. "Merciful Gods, the Tyrant. We were thousands and..."

"Shhhh," a young man called out. "The gallery doesn't get to talk, Rosalie."

"Rozala," the Adjutant said.

"Oh, who cares," the Tyrant of Helike dismissed. "Proceran royals, eh? There's so many of them, why even bother? She can complain to Cordovan Hallenban if she feels insulted."

The Damned, she saw, hadn't even bothered to turn to address them. He was sprawled on a lumpy throne set atop a platform. Likely for some eldritch reason a goat was standing at his side, allowing herself to be petted while he fed her grass from his palm.

"Cordelia Hasenbach," Princess Rozala coolly corrected. "First Prince of Procer and Warden of the West."

Hasenbach was not and never would be bosom friend of hers, but she would not let the elected ruler of the Principate be mocked by a twisted little shit like Tyrant of Helike.

"If Rosalie talks again, my lovelies, eat one of her eyes," Kairos Theodosian absent-mindedly ordered. "You can choose which."

Rozala's blood ran cold when she saw a gargoyle's animalistic visage peer out over the edge of the beam from which she had, chittering eagerly. There was a bleat from the goat and the Tyrant snorted.

"No, not *you*," the boy said. "You're a terrible horse."

Rozala eyed the Adjutant, wondering whether a whispered question was worth the risk of losing an eye, but the orc suddenly stiffened. A heartbeat later, there was a burst of light as a cut was made through thin air and in a gust of stormy wind three silhouettes emerged in front of the Tyrant's throne. Rozala knew them well, had fought at the side of most.

"Tyrant," the Grey Pilgrim greeted the villain. "This has gone on for long enough."

The Damned idly flipped the jeweled scepter in his hand, catching it by the handle.

"Give me a moment," the Tyrant of Helike said, cocking his head to the side. "I'm trying to think of an answer that involves a goat pun. Just kidding? No, that's sloppy. I hold myself to higher standards than that."

"It will be a mercy to put an end to you, lunatic," the Saint of Swords said.

"I bet you didn't even make that one on purpose," the Damned laughed.

"There's sorcery being used," the Rogue Sorcerer told the other two. "Still distant, but..."

"Cutting the head of the snake will serve, for a start," the Peregrine said.

The old man raised his staff, and as the air thickened with the weight of Chosen preparing to battle a small sound ripped through the tension. It was, Rozala realized, a match being struck. Off the ornate helmet Prince Arnaud still wore even unconscious. Nonchalantly lighting her pipe, the Black Queen flicked the spent match down and offered up a sharp-toothed smile.

"So," Catherine Foundling said, "we've got about an hour before everybody here ends up enlisting in the Dead King's army the hard way."

She shrugged, and leaned against the Adjutant's tied form.

"But hey, by all means don't let me interrupt."

[Daniel E](#)

I dislike commenting again so soon, but I have to say: I find it absolutely adorable that Sve Noc is legit proud of having mastered double entendre, and is then completely oblivious to sarcasm.

[onedollargum](#)

She doesn't have Catherine to lean on. ;D

[Liliet](#)

I've been worried that Sve Noc at Catherine's side did not make for a very good heroic story.

I was so wrong.

"Sociopathic yet amusing animal companion" is as a matter of fact an *amazing* heroic trope and I am the most here for this

[Fayhem](#)

> "Sociopathic yet amusing animal companion" is as a matter of fact an amazing heroic trope and I am the most here for this

True, I mean just look at Belkar.

Andrew Mitchell

Perfect example. ♥

Veyros

Ooh. Might I introduce you to Badgelor then? (Noobtown series)

AVR

Losing the ability to recognise sarcasm is a professional hazard of being in charge. Seen it happen more than once in RL. Cat's got her friends to remind her but evidently Andronike can't say the same.

[Javvies](#)

This reminds me of a line from Forging Hephaestus by Drew Hayes:

"The council of villains does not recognize sarcasm, Balaam; you were told that on your first day here. It's the only way we manage to get anything done."

Ekmo

Eyyyyyy, where's the shooting? All I see here is a standoff. What a place to cut to commercial!

samshadar

"So we shoot him" isn't that Fionas line in the intro of "Burn Notice"?

[Liliet](#)

So we shot him // right through the throat

[..]

Ooh, poor Lord of the Silver Spears!

[Barthumphries](#)

Just waiting for Cat to bargain to get Hakram back and Kairos agrees then tells her he named the goat Hakram.

Rup

..damn..that madman could do this..totally..😏

goliath1303

Except it was just confirmed in this chapter that the first is named Cordelia Hasenbach.

NerfContessa

That would be fun.

But if deadhand is added it won't work.

So, the setup is done. Let's see what cat does with it. Can hardly wait for tonight...

Wyvern

I mean, if you can name the goat Hakram and pass it off, what's to stop you from naming the goat Hakram Deadhand?

[Mental Mouse](#)

What odds Indrani joins the party next episode too?

Andrew Mitchell

Later, I think. IMO she'll come in and save Cat & Masego at the last minute.

Draconic

Isn't it the Rogue Sorcerer that has Amadeus' soul? The person who went into hiding, and the Pilgrim has no idea where he is...? Good job Tariq, you managed to become even less trustworthy...

[Mental Mouse](#)

>"It will be a mercy to put an end to you, lunatic," the Saint of Swords said.

>"I bet you didn't even make that one on purpose," the Damned laughed.

I don't get the pun here, unless it's a convoluted reference to the scapegoat.

Ekmo

He's assuming the Choir of Mercy telling the heroes to end the Tyrant.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I still don't see a goat pun, and Kairos is clearly implying that SoS made one by accident.

[Javvies](#)

Flip it around. What Laurence said applies equally as well to her as it does to Kairos.

BargleNawdleZouss

The goat pun is “just kidding”, as a kid is a baby goat.

Chapter 32: Woven; Weaver

“And so Triumphant laughed, saying: ‘You spellsingers, wisdom of stars and weavers of fate, know now despair. I will break you so utterly even the remembrance of your wholeness will suffocate, and where rose your tall spires there be only the barren sea I made of your defiance.’”

– Extract from the Scroll of Dominion, twenty-fourth of the Secret Histories of Praes

Gods, but it’d been close.

More than once we’d tread the edge of the cliff, and every time it’d been all I could do not to pull the trigger on all of my most horrifying contingencies. If the Pilgrim had refused the surrender, proved himself someone it was hopeless to work with under any circumstances. If the Tyrant had refused to send forward his armies, proved willing to sacrifice even his own plans to prevent truce being made in the west. If Vivienne had fallen even slightly short of the kind of woman I believed she could be, and chosen the early gain over the slow triumph. Every time I’d sat with Komena on my shoulder, watching them face the crossroads and knowing if the wrong choice was made all that was left would be the hardest of measures. And yet, even as I pulled at my pipe and let trails of wakeleaf escape my nostrils, I saw them all turn towards me like sunflowers to the sun and understood bone-deep why someone like Dread Emperor Traitorous could exist.

I’d tasted heights in my life, more than most ever got to experience. Nights of pleasure with men or women who knew their way around a good time, and subtler pleasures of luxury too: a cup good wine and a crisp pipe, meals exotic and exquisitely prepared. Different sorts of satisfactions as well. Evenings by the fire with people I would love until death took me, but also sharper edges – victory in battle, death and terror inflicted on enemies I despised. Enjoyments that soothed the soul but others

that had your teeth clenching in harsh, spiteful vindication. And while I knew it was passing, that like a spasm of pleasure or the ephemeral bliss of a drug it would die out and leave the body strained for it, there was a moment where I saw it in their eyes. The knowledge that to get here, in this moment, I had played them for fools and done it remaining one step ahead of them the entire time. The blend of hatred and fear and respect, but most of all of something that was kin to awe, it was like nothing else I'd ever felt.

If someone had distilled and bottled victory, I thought, it would taste something like this.

What a dangerous thing this sensation was, and how careful I must be to avoid falling in love with it. Else I would become another Traitorous, another Irritant, another mad murderer who cared more for victory as an end instead of a methods. For the triumph of cleverness at the expense of all else, like it was enough to simply beat the others.

"Black Queen," the Peregrine greeted me tiredly. "That is a considerable claim you have made."

I pulled at my pipe once more and discretely glanced at Hakram. Prince among men that he was, he understood what I needed from him without a word.

"Atalante," he whispered. "Hierarch. Knows about Zeze."

The forces at the Tyrant's fingertips that were still missing, along with something he should have no way of knowing: the final pieces to the sharp-edged jigsaw puzzle that we'd all made of this night. My instincts had been right, then. Kairos was making a play for the shard of Arcadia, using another madman and the most powerful priests in his armies. He still thought he was playing me, I thought, smiling at the villain on question. But he'd actually given me the last puzzle pieces I needed to be able to run a spit through his guts and hold him over the fire like a wildly treacherous goose.

"Kairos can vouch for me on that," I drawled, pushing myself off Hakram. "After all, he's been talking with the Dead King throughout this entire campaign."

The Tyrant gasped theatrically as everyone's eyes turned towards him. Leaning on my staff, I limped forward and left behind the hanging royals as well as Adjutant. It'd not escaped my notice that Kairos had seven crowns and my closest friend in the world hanging from that wooden beam. I might have been amused by that, if not for the implicit threat to the gesture: that he'd kill Hakram the moment I made a play for the shard, that I could only snatch that prize from him if I was willing to make Adjutant my one. A heartbeat passed and the odd-eyed villain started

tittering, putting his trembling hand over his heart in an expression of repentance.

"You got me," the Tyrant of Helike snickered. "I tried to sell you all out to the Dead King... and for that, I sincerely apologize."

The sincerity, I thought, was cast somewhat into doubt by his broad shit-eating grin.

"Though, in my defence," Kairos continued, "it's the Black Queen's own court warlock who decided to read the entire Kabbalis Book of Darkness and got himself... inconvenienced."

Huh. I wondered if he genuinely didn't know that Masego had actually gotten his hands on much, much worse than that – Neshamah's actual memories, harvested from an echo in Arcadia – or if he was simply keeping that under wraps for later use.

"By inconvenienced," the Tyrant added in stage whisper, "I mean he went crazy and ate a city's worth of souls and now the Dead King is riding him like a mule, if you'll forgive my language."

I could have tried to cut him off before he got all of that out, but I didn't bother. For one, the longer he kept talking the least likely he was to notice I'd ordered my Lord of Silent Steps to take care of a few loose ends. And, most importantly, I *wanted* him to out the facts that it was Masego who was, uh, getting slightly rough with the fabric of Creation. Nobody here trusted the Tyrant the slightest fucking bit, and this would be taken as an attack on his part – which meant that might my reply, which admittedly stretched the truth a little, would be granted a lot more good faith than anything coming out of my mouth usually would get.

"The Hierophant attempted to find a way to kill the Dead King, at great personal risk to himself," I said, carefully avoiding mentioning that Masego would have taken a bite out of his own liver for that knowledge regardless of all other considerations, "but whatever it was the Ashurans used at Thalassina, it wounded him. The Hidden Horror seems to have taken advantage of that."

But it wouldn't have happened if the lot of you hadn't gone a'crusading and started a battle that wiped a major city off the face of Creation, I left unsaid.

"That is unfortunate," the Grey Pilgrim said, "yet-"

"If the next sentence that comes out of your mouth is *we might have to kill him*," I mildly said, "we're going to have a problem."

That didn't win me any favour with the heroes, from the way their backs straightened. I wasn't feeling all that threatened by that, to be honest. The Saint had tussled with Rumena, so she was far from fresh, and like the Tyrant for all his fronting the Pilgrim was dead tired. The only hero that was in fighting fit was the Rogue Sorcerer, and if it came to that I could bury him in a swarm of Mighty. I didn't intend on outright dictating terms here, but I had no qualms with disabusing *them* from the illusion that they were in a position to dictate a single fucking thing to me. Including the death of one of my friends, no matter his current state.

"Shut your mouth, child," the Saint of Swords said. "You-"

I glanced at the Peregrine.

"Tariq," I calmly said. "Do muzzle your hound, before I decide to take offence."

The old man's face tightened, but he laid a hand on his attack dog's shoulder and spoke to her in a whisper. I turned to the Tyrant, who was watching all of this happen with a kind of pure malicious glee I'd only ever seen in goblins before.

"Now would be a good time to order your armies to retreat," I told him.

"I'm no general," the odd-eyed boy said, "but we do appear to be winning."

I could have pointed out that the drow had been strengthened by the eclipse Akua had brought at precisely the right time, and that now that bargain had been struck my armies would back those of the Grand Alliance against his. But that'd be missing the point, because none of this really mattered to him.

"Kairos," I patiently said, "I understand you think that by standing here and mouthing off you're serving as a distraction for the Hierarch claiming the shard unhindered, but you've been had. So call off your damn armies, and let's have all of us a civilized conversation."

The Tyrant of Helike gazed at me in disappointment, one eye shining red and the other teary from tiredness.

"Now, if I did have such a scheme," Kairos Theodosian said, "and I do not, for I assure you I am most defeated and at your common mercy, but if I did... then the most elementary of steps would have been ensuring that the Dead King could not in fact see such a blow coming. That, in this most theoretical of worlds, though I am such a villain's inferior in many ways distance and the nature of our bargain would blind him to the knife until the very last moment."

His leg twitched restlessly.

"Now, Catherine, in this abstract, are you still suggesting that I was seen through?" the Tyrant asked.

"No," I said. "I'm not clear on what exact measures you took, honestly, but I'm fairly sure they worked. Which is why I'm telling you that, while you launched your attacks here, I pre-emptively sold you out to Hidden Horror."

His face went blank at my words, and I enjoyed the sight a lot more than I'd thought I would. It hadn't even been all that complicated, to be honest. Not once I'd figured out that Neshamah had his finger in this pie anyway. Masego was the only angle he could feasibly have used other than myself, and that meant all it'd taken to pass a warning about what I suspected the Hierarchy of being capable of was putting it to parchment and having one of the Wild Hunt carry it as far into the Arcadian wasteland as she could without getting killed or captured. Something like a shiver went through the Tyrant of Helike's sickly frame at my words, though I could not be certain whether it was fear or excitement. Or, for that matter, something as mundane as exhaustion.

"Well," Kairos Theodosian mused, "it seems we truly do have about an hour to live."

He spared a look for some of the throng of gargoyles ever surrounding him, some of which flew away with urgent chittering.

"Queen Catherine," the Pilgrim said, tone sharp.

"I'll give you the broad strokes," I said. "Kairos can fill in the parts I'm uncertain about. Won't you, Kairos?"

Most of the time it was a damned pain to deal with intelligent opponents, but once in a while it had its uses. The Tyrant looked at the heroes, face twisting into a thoughtful frown as he asked himself what use I had for the heroes. It could not be to kill him, since he had to know just the same as I did that he'd slip away like an eel if we tried. He had symbolic hostages, had just finished making a broad splash in the story pond with a plan and so he was very much due a beating at heroic hands – followed by him scampering away to fight another day. So no, I wasn't trying to use the heroes as a borrowed knife. I was even, tacitly, inviting him to be part of this as something other than an enemy. Which meant...

"There are six of us," Kairos noted, eyeing me as he wagged a finger chidingly.

"Adjutant will stay behind," I replied.

"Not even one of them," he laughed. "Ever bold, Catherine. Put this way, how can I refuse?"

My gaze returned to the Pilgrim, whose face had grown cold as the back and forth continued. The light tone of the exchange must have grated on him, considering people were dying as we spoke. *You can't act like that with the Tyrant, Tariq, I thought. He'll pounce on that kind of weakness every time.*

"The block on scrying is what gave it away," I told the Pilgrim. "I'd been given details before that allowed me to catch on, troubles at the Observatory and my mages theorizing that the sky was already in use and that was why the rituals didn't work. I thought it was a side-effect, at first, of whatever Hierophant is being tricked into doing, but it was just too *convenient*."

The Rogue Sorcerer stirred.

"The scrying troubles are a consequence of the Keter's Due of some great working," he said. "That much I have confirmed."

"Figured it might be that," I said, "because Hierophant picked up the ruins of Liesse on the way here, and I'm no scholar of sorcery but I do know there's one thing about that weapon that makes Akua Sahelian a legend: it made use of the Due."

Instead of the turning Liesse and its surroundings into a blighted wasteland, Diabolist had used the wild release of wasted energy that accompanied every spell to power the city's flight. That did not mean, however, that the artefact could not be shaped anew until the release served other purpose.

"You're implying the Dead King, through the Hierophant, intervened to prevent scrying from being possible in Iserre," the Pilgrim said.

He flicked a glance at the Rogue Sorcerer, who nodded a concession it was possible for that to have been the case. I didn't need to tell the Peregrine much more than that: he might not have been in the middle of anything like this before, but given how long he'd been kicking around he would have been in the middle of a lot of things that were a *little* like this.

"We were meant to bloody each other," the old man quietly said. "The Grand Alliance, the Legions of Terror, your Army of Callow. By cutting off the rituals, negotiation was made difficult and *you*-"

A coldly burning gaze turned to the Tyrant of Helike. I sympathized with the sentiment. The Pilgrim and I had both known we were doing the Dead King's work for him, by fighting here in Iserre, but neither of us had grasped quite how literally that was the case until tonight.

"Me," Kairos grinned. "I've had eyes in the sky this entire time, in a manner of speaking. And on occasion, I spoke with a dear friend of mine about... common interests."

Which explained why the armies of the League and of Helike in particular had been able to dance around Iserre flawlessly, never encountering any true setback until I'd arrived on the surface with Sve Noc at my back: perhaps the only entity in the principality that could veil itself from the ritual Neshamah was using. And to make it even worse, with that knowledge Kairos had undertaken the collection of even more. Since he'd known where every army was, he'd been able to make deals with them for even more secrets until he was the only person in all of Iserre who truly knew what was going on. Which had made him, in turn, even more useful to the Dead King who needed an agent in the region to keep stirring the chaos and escalate the mess. I suspected he'd used that need as a chip to learn quite a few things he shouldn't. Likely the information about the Bard he'd traded me initially came from Neshamah, and for him to know of the specific price to my bargain with Larat – as he quite obviously did – meant the chances were good most of what Masego knew had been spilled and passed on. It did smack of the Dead King's ironic touch, to be selling my secrets instead of his.

"Of course, they *are* villains," I said. "Which means the Dead King always intended to kill him, and Kairos always intended on stealing the Dead King's victory at the very last moment."

I cast a curious glance at the Tyrant, since I was still unaware of the full details of what Neshamah was up to. I'd figured out that if no one ended up claiming the shard it would have no anchor and so just keep falling – you know, until it *crashed on us* – but I doubted the Dead King was just going to let that lying around afterwards. Though after making corpses out of the core armies of the Grand Alliance, the East and the League he should definitely have some further means to meddle.

"He planned on turning this lovely little ruin-realm into a fresh Hell, I do believe," Kairos mused. "After binding our souls, raising us from the grave and unleashing us against all he opposed anyway. He's got classic tastes, our friend up north."

"Neat," I flatly said. "So, Kairos here wanted to snatch the shard from the Dead King using the Hierarch and Atalante's priesthood."

"It was going to be beautiful," the Tyrant sighed. "Terrible for all of you, of course, but absolutely glorious for everyone that matters. I'd even been looking into the practicalities of crashing it into the Serenity."

He'd *what*? No, now was not the time to let him distract me.

"Won't work now," I said. "The Dead King's been warned. But, as it happens, there's still a way to prevent this from killing us all."

The Tyrant leaned back into his throne with a vicious grin.

"Now, this is the part I've been looking forward to," Kairos Theodosian cheerfully said. "Go on, Catherine, I want to see how you'll be selling the birth of a fae court sworn to Below to the *Peregrine*."

The Pilgrim's hackles went right back up, not that they'd ever gone down all that much. Might be more accurate to say the crux of his indignation had been pointed at another villain, for once. He didn't accuse me, at least, though at his side Laurence looked both triumphant and remarkably eager to run me through. I rolled my shoulder to loosen it, the same way I'd used to do before fights – in a way, this was one. Without blades having been bared, but it counted all the same. All my plans meant nothing, if I couldn't convince the Peregrine that backing me was the right choice. The Saint was a lost cause, and I knew next to nothing about the Sorcerer, but they'd both fall in line if Tariq gave his word. Leaning against my staff, I gestured upwards at the darkened firmament.

"Now, a realm has been carved out of Arcadia and sent careening down into Creation," I said. "There's no changing that, there's not sending it back and destroying it would be worse: it's close enough to us by now that if we broke it the aftershocks would likely kill everyone in Iserre. Which means that realm needs to be seen to, anchored, and there's only three stories for us to craft that fate from."

I raised a single finger, then jammed it towards the north.

"The Dead King's story is a kingdom of death, made for the reigning king of the same," I said. "Its herald was the folly and blindness of mortals, who willingly sacrificed themselves at an unseen altar to allow the blooming of calamity."

I paused.

"It also involves everyone here dying and returning as a Revenant in his service, leading his armies in the conquest of Calernia," I added. "Not, I feel same in assuming, anyone's first choice."

I shrugged.

"Now, there was a second story," I said. "Woven by the hand of our very own Tyrant."

Kairos nonchalantly waved, which had the Saint's lips thinning in anger and her hand visibly reaching for her sword. It was almost unsettling to see that directed at someone else.

"His was the madness-"

"-visionary wisdom," the Tyrant corrected.

"- of the Hierarch woven into the very fabric of a realm," I continued. "A vessel of revolt, an instrument for the sowing of strife uncivil. That story, however, was broken."

"She sold me out to the Dead King," Kairos complained to the heroes. "You really can't trust anyone these days."

"The last story is mine," I said. "It is made of crowns and debts, the desperate trick of a fox chewing through its own foot for fear of the night."

"Then it is true," the Grey Pilgrim grimly said. "You want to make a Court of Night."

"Oh no, this is where you have me wrong," I smiled. "What I want, Peregrine, is for us to make a god."

My smile turned sharp, almost blade-like.

"Then to *murder that god* and make of his bones a highway for our armies."

Caerulea

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[Javvies](#)

Ambitious, Cat.

And Larat is definitely not getting what he wanted the way he wanted it.

The situation with Masego is problematic.

[Javvies](#)

That wasn't supposed to be a reply. Dammit, wordpress.

Dainpdf

I definitely empathize with your pain.

medailyfun

can anyone remind me if Larat had done anything evil enough it warranted such a grim destiny?

nipi

Not in story. However hes a winter fae that has existed since before creation. I imagine he has done quite a few things in that time.

medailyfun

Sounds like prejudice 😊 If Akua got her chance, Cat should offer the same to Larat

Andrew Mitchell

While I'd tend to agree with you for any thinking being, there's an issue here. It's been repeatedly stated that the Fae are inflexible and their nature cannot change (not like people born in Creation). And my view of Larat's 'arc' is that he's exactly the same viscous killer that he was when we first saw him; the only thing that has kept him in check is his oath to Cat. Cat knows that and she knows he's going to be a problem once the oath is finished. Cat also knows that it's her responsibility to fix this. IMO there is no other way.

[onedollargum](#)

He's a traitorous Lieutenant who (if ai recall) was involved in using Catherine as a catspaw against the court. I'm not too surprised he's ended up this way.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, aside from his using her against the Winter court, his showing up on Cat's doorstep unasked, was meant to get himself a foothold in Creation. Over the various battles, he hasn't exactly been a team player, sitting out fights when he could, and not keeping the Hunt in line.

Decius

He wanted the story to involve treachery and deceit and technically fulfilling the terms of a bargain made.

A human would want more, but Larat is fae and will be fully satisfied by the story.

SINISTAR

Well, Cat, not doing things by halves here, are we?

antoninjohn

"Whether they be gods or kings or all the armies in Creation."

Hitogami

I love this crazy woman!

Cat! You ambitious, conniving, magnificent beast!

Caerulea

Well, Catherine is murdering gods again. It is probably Larat who ends up on the chopping block. Also, well done EE.

konstantinvoncarstein

Anyone have their favorite hobbies. For some it is collecting postage stamps, others killing gods.

Dainpdf

Well, Cat is either 0 or 2 for 4 in god killing, depending on whether you count the king and queen or Arcadia as dead. Maybe +1 if the Duke of Violent Squalls counts.

konstantinvoncarstein

They were "undone", their nature change so much they are no more of Winter nor Summer. For the sake of coolness, I chose to see that as dying 😊

Dainpdf

I find the fact that it was the King of Winter's plan all along complicated my feelings somewhat.

konstantinvoncarstein

Was it his plan? He was planning that Cat had to do something to end Summer, but the practical steps were Catherine's ideas, no?

Dainpdf

I am pretty sure he wanted to end the winter-summer cycle, to escape it. "A fox gnawing its own leg to escape a trap", as Cat mentioned. Seems to be a thing with these Winter types.

Agent J

She killed one god and stole it's mantle, unmade another two and struck a deal, created a fourth to befriend and is

about to create a fifth to murder in the name of infrastructure spending.

One need not sacrifice accuracy for coolness' sake. Cat's consistent chicanery involving divine dieties is impressive enough as it is.

xland44

unmade two and struck a deal with them? more like the two unmade her and decided to strike a deal with her instead of ending her

[Javvies](#)

She unmade two a made a deal with them refers to the King of Winter and Queen of Summer. She made a deal to marry them and in so doing unmade Summer and Winter.

Sve Noc (the Sisters Komena and Andronike) is referred to as the divinity that Cat made to befriend, mentioned as the fourth.

[Liliet](#)

Yes.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Or, should that weasel manage to get out of the god trap, there're two other options to splice in there: Masego and Heirphant.

Unless Liesse can be condensed into a mad entity of its own.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Dammit, meant Heirarch. Thanks, brain fog. 😊

flame7926

Well that was intense! Great chapter. How is Cat going to make a god out of a shard of Arcadia?

Andrew Mitchell

She gives the "seven crowns and one" to Larat. Larat uses those to establish a new Fae Court of the shard of Arcadia. The new heroic-band (GP, SoS, Rogue Sorcerer, Cat and Karios) kill Larat and take his stuff.

[rangerscience](#)

Ah yes, the glorious Goblin battle cry. I certainly hope the Lesser Footrest gets to play at least **some** role in that.

NerfContessa

Heroic band.... Pffwahahahaha....

Oh man, a band of 5 with hese guys and gals?

Also, murder away. Cat, larats name is already. Fitting for your cause.

Naeddyr

It's crazy, but it might just work.

Naeddyr

Now, if I only knew what "it" was.

[Liliet](#)

A band of Named heading the Crusade against the Evil from the North of course 😊

Insanenoodlyguy

"There are six of us."

Cat notes Adjutant isn't coming because that means it's a band of FIVE. Three heroes, two villains, all working together for a common cause to head off the inevitable doom coming at them. In these stories the villains never die unless they are pushing for redemption (and Cat is already immune to that in this particular band), and until the threat is extinguished, they are pretty much unstoppable.

ATRDCl

Plus Kairos being in the group means Cat can't be the traitorous "bad guy" of the group. At worst Cat is the gritty anti-hero with methods other members of the party don't like.

(Plus of course Archer appearing as the 6th Ranger to save her virgin Damsel in Distress from the clutches of the monster. Saving Masego from possession with True Love's First Kiss)

[Liliet](#)

This. This is the best part.

Insanenoodlyguy

Yep, and it has the extra bonus of galling Saint. She said a book back she knew she was going to be part of a Five, along with Pilgrim, and she was right. But these two were definitely not in the plans for partners.

Andrew Mitchell

Yeah, and SoS was talking about going up against the tower in that conversation. Now they're headed to Keter.

antoninjohn

If the White Knight and the Witch of the Woods are not part of the five won't that mean they don't get plot armor

[Mental Mouse](#)

Which "they"? WK and WW don't get plot armor sure, but the Band of Five does.

[Liliet](#)

Best irony 15/10

SITB

I don't think that Indrani is going to kiss Masego, he doesn't care for it and IIRC he mentioned that he dislikes being pawed at.

I think it's more likely that he will be saved by Indrani throwing True Love's Badly Carved Wooden Duck at him when he monologues.

[nostoneuntuned11](#)

Yup, Cat becomes the Lancer to the Pilgrim as the leader. And honestly she isn't even that gritty considering SoS is in the party, or what the Pilgrim gets up to. Not to mention technically she is the cleric of the party.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I note also that even Kairos automatically counts Hakram, despite the fact that the latter is still tied and hanging upside down.

Cap'n Smurfy

"Then to murder that god and make of his bones a highway for our armies."

Goddamn Cat stop trying to murder Gods. You have literally died twice trying to do exactly that, most people would take that as a hint to stop. But noooo, you just have to keep trying. When it gets to the point that you're making new God's for the express purpose of murdering them, because you've run out of God's to try and murder, it's time to admit you have a problem.

Novice

Cat really needs that intervention from her friends right about now. Remember kids, Evil is bad m'kay.

Someguy

Well, Cat has already played Matchmaker of the gods with Summer & Winter. This is simply a sacrifice of divine proportions.

Dainpdf

At least this time she's making it a team effort...

caoimhinh

In the future

Robber: Boss, what did I tell you about murdering gods?

Cat: That... I should stop doing it and getting myself killed and resurrected?

Robber: What? No! That you had to take me with you next time!

Andrew Mitchell

Hahahhahahahaah!

Hardric62

... She aims for a Rule of Three victory in godslaying?

[Mental Mouse](#)

That would be problematic on several counts. Even if we accept "the gods" as a single opponent, she's got a win and a loss behind her, and is looking for another win. So, the Rule of Three isn't going to help her much. Versus Neshamah, she doesn't have a prior fight unless we count taking down a few guards to fight Malicia (and the fight against Malicia may count as a draw rather than a loss).

Speaking of whom, we don't seem to have a representative from the Dread Empress here (at least we don't see one yet). I imagine she'll be miffed if nobody invited her to this party.

Andrew Mitchell

I've got no doubt that she will make an appearance in Book 6 but I don't think she'll play any role in the remainder of this book. She hasn't got any narrative weight in this story.

John

To be fair, her K/D spread against gods has been pretty impressive so far, so it's not like she's got no reason to be confident.

Cap'n Smurfy

The last time she tried to murder a God and steal it's power said Goddesses murdered her and stole her power. Most would consider this a sign that you should try something else.

erebus42

Why do we fall? So we can learn to pick ourselves back up!

[Mental Mouse](#)

I beg to differ: This morning, it was to *blot out the sun in the sky!*

Agent J

True, but the *first* time she tried to murder a God and steal its power, she murdered a God and stole its power. Cat's one for one in God murdering/power stealing. It's time for a tiebreaker!

Barack Obama

Sure she died, but she got better.

konstantinvoncarstein

Cartherine must be the first one to ever surprise Kairos so much 😊

Andrew Mitchell

Honestly, I think Kairos is loving this top-tier scheming even if he's being out-played. He loves novelty and intrigue and can admire it in others.

Andrew Mitchell

Plus, he'll jump at the opportunity to help kill a god.

Forum Explorer

I think Kairos might legitimately fall in love with Cat by the end of this.

erebus42

My thoughts exactly. At this point he probably doesn't know if he'd prefer stabbing her or having sex with her more. Knowing him, he'd probably try for both

RoflCat

"Can you show me that self-necromancy thing I heard about?"

[Liliet](#)

Cat does that to villains 😊

danh3107

Press F for Larat, poor bloke

[Javvies](#)

Ambitious, Cat.

And Larat is definitely not getting what he wanted the way he wanted it.

The situation with Masego is problematic.

Billy

Whew, what an ending. Catherine is pulling no punches here.

caoimhinh

She's living Amadeus' dream here XD

WuseMajor

Speaking of, she still needs to see a Sorcerer about a Soul.

Someguy

That's when Grey Boi, Sword Bitch & Rogue One need to curse Cat for her sudden but inevitable betrayal. That or extort Black's soul from them further down the line.

[rangerscience](#)

Noooooooo maybe it's better than that!

Cat's role in this is not as a member of a heroic band – she's in the running as the Below's Intercessor. Think about it. The Bard acts to keep stories on the rails – aka, under the guidance of the Gods (Above) – and Cat acts

to break those stories, aka, returning that guidance to mortals, as the Gods Below desire. Which is the entire fight between the gods in the first place.

Instead, the Black Night restored is the fifth member of the heroic band.

taovkool

Not sure what's going on anymore, but that part about killing a God and making his bones into a toll road of some sort was all kinds of awesome.

And a crazy pile of nutsacks, of course, but that one's kinda obvious. It's Cat, after all.

Clint

I think she means making a kinder, gentler Arcadia – one with all the shortcuts and none of the watchdogs.

Poor Larat. He never got the chance to treacherously betray her. Kairos was far kinder to his treacherous lieutenant – even if he had to kidnap one.

caoimhinh

They are all going to take an Express Train through that new shard of Arcadia to the northern Principalities to fight against the Dead King.

It's so much good and will bring such fast relieve to the armies there that the Pilgrim will have to swallow all protest and agree. Because Cat's plan is the most efficient way to end the suffering fast.

Allafterme

That leaves one inconvenient fact that the Grand Alliance have to fight alongside Callow, which happens to be at war with it...

caoimhinh

Yep, but that's where the Foundling Style of unparalleled diplomacy will come into play. 😊

Jeffrey T Ma

Is that the same same one as light it on fire, and if all else fails drop a lake on it?

ninegardens

It's the one with "Bring cheap booze and a sword".
The Wine is terrible, but it still beats being stabbed.

caoimhinh

The Foundling Style of Unparalleled Diplomacy is an ever-evolving style encompassing a wide variety of techniques.

Andrew Mitchell

I think the Grand Alliance troops will be heading to the front line with the "East" troops. And no front-line leader is going to turn down help wherever they can get it.

[Liliet](#)

If you squint the right way they defeated Callow and strong-armed their surrendered army into joining the war effort.

[TeK](#)

Exactly, it's a great victory for Grand Alliance, defeating the Army of Callow and the Black Queen so thoroughly, without losing many soldiers even! Maybe those Callowans are not as strong as everyone seemed to think...

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's amazing what you can sneak under the radar if you can work the publicity right.

[Liliet](#)

ain't that what the entire series is about? 😊

magesbe

Holy shit, talk about amazing. Catherine tells us just what's been going on behind the scenes, and we see that her genius was nevertheless precarious and the entire situation was balanced on a knife edge above a chasm of lava. And she still pulled it off. That's more amazing than if she had been the effortless puppetmaster she came across as.

Masego is possessed to some degree. That'll be fun to deal with, especially as Catherine won't tolerate his death unless she literally has no other option (I think she would be capable of sacrificing him if it was the only way, but she may never forgive herself for it). I have a feeling Archer will come to play here, probably as the trump card to free Masego, but a small part of me

also sees she could be a player in a tragedy where she defends Masego from the party even though Masego (may) need to die.

She's going to make a god. How? We have no real idea, but I have a feeling she's setting Larat up to be the King of this Arcadia and then kill him.

Yay

Archer swings in to give him True Love's Groping and breaks the Dead King's hold. It basically writes itself.

Mental Mouse

Oh, no, sex as such would totally not work on Masego. I'm betting Cat (and perhaps Indrani) goes into Masego's mind, like she did the last time he was shocked into withdrawal. Indrani might well be in there already, captured in his idealized image of her. But this time Cat's got Night at her back, which is one of the few powers around that might be able to stand up to Masego+DK. Cue Pilgrim's sacrifice while defending her vulnerable body from undead attack (while Hakram fends off Kairos.).

Insanenoodlyguy

Hakram is staying behind though, she already said. And usually it just takes a kiss in these sorts of situations.

Mental Mouse

Oh right, maybe they'll need to squelch Kairos first. Or one of the others can deal with Kairos – perhaps Pilgrim, if he's got Saint in line. (Or heck, maybe Hakram will come in as the cavalry.)

Dainpdf

She's going to pay the price Larat asked of her way back, seems to be the going theory. Ofc, with all the help she's recruited there may be easier ways.

Aotrs Commander

But that's the secret, isn't it? It's ALWAYS a knife edge over lava. The secret of being the mastermind is convincing everyone that everything went Just As Planned and that was no invisible frantic scrabble in the background. Anyone who says they are an effortless puppetmaster is just more than capable of lying to you convincingly so you believe it. The true puppetmaster is really just the Master of Plan B and knowing how to adapt circumstances to your advantage and then neatly playing everything off like that was the plan all along.

It's basically exactly the same as dungeonmastering, just writ larger, really; and the one plays into the other and vice-versa...

This time, we just actually got to see behind the mask and the process that went into that, as WELL as the view from outside.

Mental Mouse

Yes. "Making it look easy" is a function of both skill and style. Doesn't mean it *is* easy.

Liliet

^^^^^ this

Catherine is everything I thought she was, when reading those chapters, and I bet she's everything Akua thought she was. She talks how precarious this was because this is the BEST CASE scenario.

Liliet

Oh Cat IS the "effortless puppetmaster" she came across as. She HAD all the contingencies, after all. She's just on the edge about it.

A sign of being at a higher level of skill is noticing more flaws in your work than anyone else could :3

Morgenstern

So... is the Prince's Graveyard the battle against the Wild Hunt made New Fae Court? ^^
There would be only one King/Queen (Larat), but there might just be a lot of Princes/Princesses...

Morgenstern

Princes' *gargh

damn you no-edit-function-wordpress.

Andrew Mitchell

I think that's still quite unclear. There's an argument that the battle that's just been completed could be called that if (as I suspect) the Princes & Princesses never return.

fbt

pagesbe's comment on 26 april at 4:26A is an good summary of why this was excellent writing, imho. Exciting, clever, nuanced, w/o being phrased in an opaque/confusing way (although

lots of the situation is not yet clear, as it's not revealed yet, that's drama folks!). this was nicely done. Capturing the edge she walked, the plans, the joy and fear and purpose...very nice.

Clint

"For one, the longer he kept talking the least likely he was to notice I'd ordered my Lord of Silent Steps to take care of a few loose ends."

Loose ends? Black's soul? Hakram's bonds? Disarming the goblinfire-explosives in the goat?

IDKWhoitis

Why the hell would she disarm the explosives? She might still need that trump card in the event that Grey refuses...

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yes. And probably collecting crowns while he's at it.

IDKWhoitis

Oh Cat, tricking Heroes and Villians alike to make her wet work. This battle will be remembered for Cat making, breaking, then using a God to smash the Dead King.

She might just become an entity more feared than the Dead King at this rate, as the Dead King was never allowed this much meddling without costly battles.

Kissaten

Cat doesn't break stories and also avoids gigantic scale apotheosis for herself. She is in the gray area for the gods, and so Bard can't angle a justifiable strike at her.

[Mental Mouse](#)

All true, but not quite what IDKW is saying. Once she comes out as a power strong enough to stand off or co-opt "everybody" including the Dead King, it's not clear how many stories are left to her besides Black Queen vs. The World.

[Liliet](#)

Queen Under The Mountain.

The great queen who set up the nation and then left, but is sure to return in its hour of need.

Power level doesn't need to be low for this one to go well.

Mental Mouse

Hmm, that could work, and her priestly role gives her reason to depart.

Liliet

I'm pretty sure she could just leave like 'ive done my job here' and the story would accept that much as a perfect explanation.

I do wonder if Cat's allowed to leave Sve Noc's service or if this one's a lifetime appointment...

Mental Mouse

I suspect it's a "lifetime appointment" in the sense that she can retire "when she feels she's lived quite long enough". (As per Pratchett's *Vetinari*, but consider also his *second* job offer to Lipwig.).

Of course, that's pending further developments, and the plans at hand could provide several of those.

Mental Mouse

... plans at hand. (sigh)

Liliet

Of course, lifetime appointments and Cat have something of an odd relationship, considering Winter was meant to be one too ;u;

But yeah what I'm thinking is that she might be able to freely leave if Sve Noc agrees.

Mental Mouse

Also, notice how that would be an exact mirror-image of "may she never return"...

Liliet

♥

caoimhinh

Yeah, you shouldn't leave gods' corpses just lying around, they tend to do nasty lovecraftian things. Better put them to good use, I agree.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Holy Fuck.

maresther23

Wow! I can't wait for the second part of the plan to unfold, I wonder what Black's message was and how will the secret alliance with Kairos will work. Will we finally find out if Cat is the Bards tool or her end?

Andrew Mitchell

"Black's message"??? Please explain... I must have missed something.

Good point about the Bard. She's been absent from all this and that's a worry.

maresther23

So, the Big Bad of the setting is Bard (and the Dead King). We know that in the last conversation with Bard Amadeus realized something. Yet, instead of escaping he reappears as a soulless body. This is specially jarring if you consider that he had a very good chance to escape (story, plus claimant, plus friends in need, plus being Amadeus). So whatever Mistake the Bard committed, Amadeus considers that the best option was not to play. This is further reinforced by the fact that GP and SoS never mention that he tried to escape. However, Black is not someone to be passive, he has a scheme in the works. Now, with Warlock dead the two persons that will help him are Cat and Malicia, if he puts himself I the right position it is just a matter of time that they find his body, specially if he nudges the story the right way. And there is no way that Amadeus is not going to make use of that to ruin someone's day.

Andrew Mitchell

Interesting theory. There's certainly something going on there with Black saying "Mistake" about the Bards visit. Let's see how much of your ideas come to be true. Whatever happens I can't wait to see Black and Cat back together again.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Except this "scheme" amounts to expecting someone to rescue him. I seriously doubt he has any agency as a disembodied soul! (Unless Rogue Sorcerer was fool enough to follow Cat's example with Akua....)

[Liliet](#)

There is no guarantee that "mistake" refers to Bard.

My impression was that Amadeus decided that whatever he could do would be what Bard predicted, and the path of smallest fuckup was to let himself get dissected.

[Mental Mouse](#)

My guess is that it was indeed referring to Bard, and that her “mistake” was simply letting Amadeus know that he actually could continue with another story.

[Liliet](#)

See it would be very very of him to think it was a mistake and not all part of the plan – she’s proved plenty of indirect cunning already. You can’t foil an enemy plan if you can’t tell what the enemy is actually trying to do.

Kairos has surrendered initiative to Catherine by being active and achieving visible results that tied together into a whole.

Bard... nobody knows what the fuck she wants anything she’s done *for*.

Dainpdf

You can just see Kairos’s eyes lighting up when he notices Cat is inviting him to a heroic band of five.

Dainpdf

Also: Cat, I totally support becoming another Traitorous. Do it!

Andrew Mitchell

No... Just, no. 😞

Gunslinger

Her enemies would already be considering her to be an Irritant

erebus42

At this point, I think they’re probably thinking more Triumphant (May she never return).

Actually, I kinda want this to end with her making a brief cameo where she visits from her Hellpire to acknowledge Cat as her successor.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I wouldn't bet on a cameo, but there's already a callback to Triumphant. Which interestingly implies that the Tower itself may be a domain. (Partly explaining how it could be rebuilt so "easily" after being toppled!)

Andrew Mitchell

Nice catch!

[Euodiachloris](#)

Kairos wrote himself a bucket list years ago, even before he started talking to dark powers in basements under throne rooms. I'm going to bet "ride in a band of five" was in the wishful thinking part of the list. 😊

Enjou

You also just know that "murder a god" has to be in there somewhere.

Dainpdf

Now I'm just imagining:
Pilgrim! Riding on a pure white horse of Mercy!
Cat! Riding on a skeleton horse of ice!
Tyrant! Riding on a goat!

Perfect Axis of Awesome reference.

liate7

Tyrant! Riding on a ~~goat~~ purebred Liessan charger!

FTFY

Dainpdf

It doesn't fit as well with the song like that tho

liate7

...I probably should have checked what the Axis of Awesome was before posting that...

Dainpdf

Eh, it was still a worthy addition!

Andrew Mitchell

Fantastic chapter IMO. What a joy to see Cat at work again and witness her nuanced understanding of the current situation and the characters. Kairos is still a fascinating character but I do hope Cat gets to roast him as she imagined doing. I also hope

Peregrine gets on board with this quickly, just like he did with Vivienne's negotiation.

What a great set up for the closing arc of book 5!! You have outdone yourself EE. 😊 😊 😊

SNAKE EATEEER

Cat snorting some coke off of Hellhound's tits. "I WILL MAKE A WEAPON TO SURPASS METAL GEAR!"

Takes another hit. "I WILL MAKE A GOD AND THEN KILL IT!"

Takes another giant hit. With eyes bloodshot and hair in disarray. "I WILL USE THE GODS CORPSE AS A HIGHWAY"

sutortyrannus

... Why. Just... why?

I was having a great Friday, you know.

caoimhinh

Hahahahahahaha.

Insanenoodlyguy

Juniper would not put up with that shit. She'd wholeheartedly refuse to be a titty table!

So Cat orders Aisha to do it and suddenly Juniper is surprisingly excited about snorting coke.

SNAKE EATEEER

I honestly can't tell if Juniper wants to eat Aisha or eat Aisha out.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Neither can she. "Lick or bite? Temptation, get thee behind me!"

[Mental Mouse](#)

Do orcs even *have* tits? Given their general habits, I would be unsurprised if their young simply ate meat from birth. At first it might get pre-chewed by a parent (as is common among multiple species including humans) but I'd suspect that's not actually *necessary* given the story potential. Remember, just because something's humanoid, doesn't mean it's "like a human, except...".

Speaking of which, Cat might be headed for some awkward moments – this is not the first time she’s commented on Hakram to the effect of “good man”. In some ways he might be a better man than an orc, but he’s still an orc. And Juniper’s POV has hinted at the hazards of interspecies desire...

Mental Mouse

(That said, Hakram would probably be safer than Kairos. 😊)

Liliet

The whole sex thing has actually come up between Hakram and Catherine in Book 2, to his awkwardness and her amusement, as he ended up seeing her naked a lot / she found amusement in not being bothered by being naked in front of him. Catherine apparently has very little body shyness, while Hakram is a **prude**.

Anyway, she’s not interested in him like that, nor he in her. The jokes were completely subtext-free, other than ‘oh my god he is adorable’.

konstantinvoncarstein

“Oh no, this is where you have me wrong,” I smiled. “What I want, Peregrine, is for us to make a god.”[...]
“Then to murder that god and make of his bones a highway for our armies.”

It is probably the most wtf-yet-awesome sentences in the whole serie. And some of the most emblematic. When I will speak to other people about APGTE, I will definitely mention it! 😊

Andrew Mitchell

You need to be careful, that would be a huge spoiler.

konstantinvoncarstein

Not without the context 😊 You just have to say that without explaining more. It does not say when, what or anything.

Morgenstern

You should probably erase the “Peregrine” in there, though. It would make for some kind of spoiler during the course of reading (even though not before reaching a certain point in the read).

Snowfire1224

Imagine Cat an evil anonymous group.

"Hi, my name is Cathtine (hi cathrine) and I've bullied angels, sold myself to the fae, became the head of the drow religion, and made god so I could kill it."

Snowfire1224

This was suppose to be in reply to the comment about how Cat need an intervention for god killing.

[Mental Mouse](#)

"You are a Bad Guy, but you are not bad guy." Come to think of it, Ralph's group could use some female members.

Soronel Haetir

Well now, unless someone has a more palettable story on offer I do believe we are in for a bit of Deicide.

Kissaten

She is going full Empress Crowned in Dread. There was an epigraph already with one Empress making a tower out of god's bones.

[Dresden 67](#)

"And so Maleficent said: 'Though you be god I am Empress, crowned of dread, and by my hand comes your doom. Rage in vain, for from your bones will rise a great tower whose shadow will be cast upon all the world.'"

—Extract from the Scroll of Chains, first of the Secret Histories of Praes

NerfContessa

Thought of that as well.

It's T00 awesome (in its literal meaning, a thing of too much awe) for guys like pilgrim to go along with it without trouble, not to even mention Saint...

burdi

and cat own larat's soul and body
so if larat became a god and he get killed, cat will inherit the shard
truly Dread Empress Traitorous

Andrew Mitchell

That would be really exciting if it happens but I don't think she wants that power. She likes being mortal and doesn't want to be shaped by a Role, especially not a Villainous one.

sengachi

I feel like this is a sentiment that would have Alucard from Hellsing Abridged screaming out his approval, and that really, really says something about where all this shit is going.

fbt

the chapter was amazeballs! but the comments..even more awesome! I laughed sooooo hard at so many of these. Great stuff folks! 😊 very very amused.

Silverking

Pilgrim: ...Catherine, I'm willing to entertain the idea that what you just said makes any degree of sense, let alone having any chance of working. There is even a small chance that I may be willing to go along with this plan, as it may be the least offensive option. But Gods Above, could you please stop SMILING at the thought of deicide?

Mental Mouse

"She's smiling... Mommy I'm scared!"

Liliet

I WILL HONESTLY ADMIT I DID NOT SEE THIS COMING

There were other people who did, though, and while I don't remember who said what, I would like to officially credit:

- the person who pointed out there were 5 Named present;
- the people who've been arguing it's the trap Tikoloshe and Wekesa were worried about (y'all were right and I was wrong)
- the people who were like but HOW does Kairos know about the fae bargain (caoimnh, this one goes to you);
- the people (person?) who'd asked where Ivah was;
- the people who said it was Hierarch: both you AND the people who said it was Dead King were right!

YALL ARE AWESOME AND I BOW BEFORE YOUR SUPERIOR MIGHT

(one bit of credit I'm stealing for myself: Evil Cannot Understand Good in Catherine proposing to kill Larat instead of claiming his power; though the more basic ploy was Catherine out-vicious-ing Kairos in a more classically villainous play, by selling him out to Neshamah. I love that she managed both)

Andrew Mitchell

Hear hear! (Or should that be "Hear here"?) Anyway, well said Liliet! 😊 ♥

The commenting community around PGtE is just getting better and better. Equal measure entertaining, engaging and insightful. But also respectful, tolerant and inclusive. An online community space with all these attributes is a rare and valuable thing.

Thanks for making this an awesome place to hang out everyone. ♥
♥ ♥

Gunslinger

Great chapter, really like how all the twists came together. Also in retrospect I can't believe I missed the Dead King as a likely suspect of the scrying block. I keep thinking of his only weapons being the undead but he's The Original Sorcerer.

Not going to ignore Cat defending Akua The Legend's honor here. Best buds

SpeckofStardust

I know everyone else loved the whole "make a God and then use his bones as a highway" but this is the best part for me.

"I'm not clear on what exact measures you took, honestly, but I'm fairly sure they worked. Which is why I'm telling you that, while you launched your attacks here, I pre-emptively sold you out to Hidden Horror."

This followed by this.

{His face went blank at my words}

She effectively screwed him over better than everything else that happened this past 24 Hours and it was the easiest thing she did.

[Liliet](#)

I love that he actually didn't see that coming.

Catherine managed to be more Good and more vicious than he expected within a single scheme ♥

[Euodiachloris](#)

The place where pragmatic heroism and pragmatic villainy meet and share a pizza: screwing the other guys viciously over to help others... while getting what you want out of it, too. Also known as "saving the world using every dirty or clean trick that could work, because it's got my stuff in it and the look on your faces is just precious".

[Liliet](#)

Catherine is the Haley to Tariq's Roy in this party 😊

Kairos's the Belkar, he's even got an animal companion...

[Euodiachloris](#)

Hmmm... Cat's more like an unholy combination of Elan and V. With shoulder Blackwings/ puppet-gods, that slight tendency to cause incidental mass murder, unexpected plays and the genre savviness. While being the Heart.

[Liliet](#)

The dynamic is Roy/Haley. The uptight hero who knows what to do best, and the somewhat immoral/sociopathic antihero with heart of gold and knowledge/abilities that complement the leader's. Like the shell game thing.

Draconic

So... The Rogue Sorcerer is here. Where is Amadeus' soul? I doubt they would just drop it somewhere. And props to Tariq for lying about not knowing where he is. If he continues like this, he will reach his lifelong goal, and become a true villain. Not a great one, but at least a villain.

Insanenoodlyguy

I don't know that he was lying. He probably very intentionally had no idea where Rouge was at that moment. He probably even said "you go someplace random" to the man since he knew Cat was tricky. but, the thing with heroes is, they always return by the time they are really needed. He didn't know where RS was, but RS knew where he was, and then Arcadia started to crash and they needed to ride through it and oh look the Sorcerer is back, how convenient.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think he was lying. The Rogue Sorcerer popped up with the southern army which was random / providence guided. It's an oddly complicated proposition that Tariq set that up as opposed to it just arising organically.

Draconic

Oh yes he was. Well, it might not have been lying exactly, but what he said had nothing to do with the truth.

In ch 26 he claims that he sent the Rogue Sorcerer into hiding and doesn't know where he is. Princess Rozala was right there next to the Pilgrim. In this chapter (and earlier in When Iron Rests) we learn, that he sent a force to Arcadia. A force that includes both the Rogue Sorcerer and Princess Rozala.

If he sent the Sorcerer into hiding, there was absolutely no chance of him reappearing so soon. Especially since he was supposed to be hiding so that Amadeus' body can be executed

safely. Unless his instructions about the length of that hiding were very specific. "Go hide somewhere for a day" specific. If he could call him back afterwards, then he knew where he was.

Let's not forget, Tariq set up both this fight against Catherine, and the last. And a long time ago at that. Since the Sorcerer is his contingency for this battle, he was not sending him anywhere without being certain that he would be back when needed.

[*Liliet*](#)

You uhhhh

appear to have missed

the part where Rogue Sorcerer joined the situation when the southern Levantine army came out of Arcadia? the previous morning?

Draconic

Might have missed that part. Doesn't change the fact, that what he did cannot be called going into hiding.

[*Liliet*](#)

I mean he had the entire province to wander without Pilgrim knowing where he was. Staying in one place was no more 'hiding' than walking around, and walking around made him less useless.

This is the hero version of staying in hiding: you can only be idle for so long before the story gets bored and drags you into some shit whether you like it or not.

[*Liliet*](#)

And Catherine specifically commented on "him appearing so soon": he came to the aid of the army when he was needed by ""wild coincidence"" which was also the same ""coincidence"" that led all the armies into meeting here.

Tariq did not set up a *story* that would keep Rogue Sorcerer and Black's soul out of Cat's grasp.

Goi

Like Cat said the force that came through Arcadia needed a magical guide so the Rogue Sorcerer showed up as the "povidence" of Above and it was also insured it would be said Sorcerer because he has something Cat wants aka Below always gets its due

[Liliet](#)

Tariq did NOT plan this fight. He had contingencies that he managed to employ, but this was not his design.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And half his contingencies were evaded or blocked by Cat, who has changed her powers drastically and her methods significantly, while Pilgrim kept up with the same old fight.

Andrew Mitchell

> If he sent the Sorcerer into hiding, there was absolutely no chance of him reappearing so soon.

I'm not sure how long had elapsed between the scene with the Bard and Black and the present day. IMO it's probably weeks, if not months. That's plenty of time for the RS to go into hiding with the soul and to later reappear when & where providence requires it.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm!

[benthelynx](#)

Again with the excellence. I was cackling.

Aotrs Commander

Ahahahahahaha!

Cat, welcome, truly, to the Evil side. That moment is a real rush, isn't it?

If I was Above and Below, I'd be pre-emptively using my pants and a latrine about now. She's done it before, she'll do it again, and you're on her hit list...

I'm amazing Kairos hasn't just swooned away.

(Maybe he just did after that last line. Hell, *I* nearly did...!)

beleester

Of all the ways that a "Princes' Graveyard" might happen, I wasn't expecting "killed to fuel a sorcerous ritual that creates a god." That isn't really Cat's usual style.

And she's made it seem like a clever turnabout on the Dead King rather than a villainous plot. She's good.

Andrew Mitchell

> I wasn't expecting "killed to fuel a sorcerous ritual that creates a god." That isn't really Cat's usual style.

Cat's just supplying the "seven crowns and one"; Larat's the one doing the creation of the new Fae court (and becoming a god in the process).

[Fayhem](#)

At this point I'm very close to 100% that the "graveyard" part of "Princes' Graveyard" is metaphorical rather than literal. Remember, the terms of her deal with Larat were that she lay seven crowns and one at his feet. No mention was made of actually killing their former owners, and if there's one consistent element to stories of fae bargains it's that precise wording *matters*.

Granted, just swiping the physical crowns off their heads almost certainly wouldn't carry enough metaphysical/story weight to work, otherwise it would be way too easy and there'd be like 15 Courts of Arcadia as every Prince or Duke of Arcadia with light fingers went shopping. But if the princes in question have formally relinquished ownership of said crowns, especially if it were of their own volition? Yeah, that could do it. I think Cat's pitch is "all y'all princes abdicate and willingly gift your crowns to make this happen", and given the percentage of those princes who are veterans of the war against the dead in the north (notably including Rozala, the new effective leader both militarily of the Proceran forces here and politically of what used to be Amadis' faction) I think they'll go for it in order to get back to that fight, with unexpected and demonstratedly powerful reinforcements no less.

Andrew Mitchell

I like your thinking. Just one remaining issue, I think. There has to be a good reason for the people talking about it afterwards, to call it a "graveyard". Why would they use that particular word in your scenario?

Snowfire1224

A metaphorical graveyard? I'm not myself convinced either way how things will go down, but Im eager to see

[Fayhem](#)

That's sort of what I meant by calling it a metaphorical graveyard. As I understand it, there's a tradition with those kind of feudal titles where the title is considered as an entity distinct from the person holding it. When Akua was

talking about that kind of thing it wasn't really something distinct to Praesi so much as something that's semi-standard in feudal/hereditary titles that the Praesi just took to sociopathic extremes, as is their way (Cat wouldn't necessarily have recognized that, though – she was anything but raised among the nobility).

In other words: what I'm suggesting is that it's possible that even if, say, Rozala Malanza survives the night, if the title is lost then you could say that the Princess of Aquitan (sp?) has died, or that Rozala has died as the Princess but survived in her own person. Which is a rather metaphorical take on death used to give the battle a dramatic title (as all battles should have), which was what I was thinking of when I said I thought it might be a metaphorical graveyard. I can see where that wouldn't have been obvious to someone looking at it from outside of my head, though!

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks for the more detailed explanation, I can see what you mean.

[Liliet](#)

Makes sense to me!

Draconic

"I feel same in assuming" -> feel safe

erebus42

So Cat is making herself a party. Kairos (chaotic evil Sorcerer? Warlock?), The Rogue Sorcer (Neutral Good wizard), The Saint of Swords (Insane/stupid good Paladan or Fighter), The Grey Pilgrim (Neutral Good Cleric), and herself; The Black Queen (Chaotic neutral/Neutral evilish Cleric). I'm sure this will all go swimmingly.

[Fayhem](#)

I think that to accurately represent this party we really need a z-axis on the alignment chart, labeled Practicality. So Saint of Swords is Wildly Impractical Chaotic Good ("burn it all for the greater good!"), Pilgrim is Practical Neutral Good ("I use the means that work to accomplish the ends that matter, not the means that make me happy"), and Cat is Ultra-Practical True Neutral ("hey, if it works it works"). We know hardly anything about Rogue Sorcerer so I'm not going to try to categorize him except he's presumably some flavor or another of Good, and Kairos is 1000% Chaotic Evil but really difficult to categorize

on my new z-axis because he's Wildly Impractical but he's weaponized it so hard that it works *for* him, which is Practical...?

Snowfire1224

Maybe Kairos is neutral on the practical scale? So that'd be neutral chaotic evil.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Based on the original alignment definitions, SoS is neutral good in serious danger of an alignment failure. Pilgrim is Lawful Good (goes for control before any other goal, any evil that can't be controlled must be killed). Cat is Chaotic Evil in the proper sense, supporting individual freedom every chance she gets, but with the Evil aspect being a flag and toolchest rather than personal sadism. (She was recruited from Chaotic Neutral over the first couple of books or so.)

AIUI, the new versions of D&D fold the original grid onto its diagonal, making "chaotic evil" an extension of "evil", and "lawful good" an extension of "good". Of course, that kind of thinking is part of what the Practical Guide is meant to expose and send up.

[Liliet](#)

afaik 5e goes back to the 3x3 grid

also, I've classified early Cat as Lawful Neutral...

[Mental Mouse](#)

How do you get Lawful? From the beginning she was building her own resources rather than depending on others (including fighting in those illegal pits), and not depending on nor liking the local hierarchy/legal system much. And her basic plan was to get into "the system" and covertly subvert it to her ends. Looks like Chaotic to me.

[Liliet](#)

Consider:

- when faced with a choice of rebelling against the system (hero) or working within the system, Catherine chose the latter. Oh she had logic backing it up, but there would have been logic backing up the first choice too if that was more to her liking;
- Catherine took to army discipline so immediately, she'd been able to identify Robber giving her an improper salute during their first meeting;
- when she first met Black, she got terrified, and her

first thought was to go through what she's done to check if there was a reason for him to be after her, and she concluded she'd done nothing wrong. Other than the pits, but it's not like he'd care. She treated the system as one that actually works, in her logic, and one that she can rely on to protect her if she's innocent, at least tentatively. When faced with actual villains and Mazus-grade bullshit, that ain't a Chaotic's response;

- this came later but is honestly my favorite: when faced with the Winter problem, Catherine's solution was to impose inflexible rules on herself in the form of oaths. No Chaotic has ever considered imposing deliberately inflexible unbreakable rules on themselves a good *precaution*;
- right now, Catherine's long-term goal is literally regulation. She looked at the world around her, burning and bleeding, and said "you know how I can see fixing this? With more rules!" Again, this makes sense, but there are *many possible solutions* and it definitely takes a mindset predisposed towards Lawful already to stumble upon this one before any other you like enough to stick with.

Catherine has strong Chaotic tendencies, only growing moreso in Amadeus's tutelage, but her Lawful tendencies are stronger still. She's nearly Vimes-level Lawful.

Like... the solution to the world's problems she believed in at fifteen was making herself into police! How is this not the most Lawful teenager you ever heard of?

[Liliet](#)

As for your arguments more specifically:

- from the beginning she was relying on the idea of being accepted into War College and rising through the ranks from there, entirely relying on an existing system;
- what she wanted with the system was not "subverting" it but making it work more properly for its declared purpose, and of course not for "her own" goals but for a more well-oiled machine of the society;
- and as I've said, she was not choosing between "working with the system as is" and "changing the system", she was choosing between "smashing the system by force" and "trying to fix the system. The reason Catherine was not okay with the situation as it was, was not Chaotic – it was Good, and if anything Lawful – she considered Mazus to be *horrifically incompetent* before anything else.

Baby Catherine is fucking amazing, and rereading Chapter 1 and 2 is a *trip*. I highly recommend it!

Mental Mouse

I'll indeed need to reread those first two chapters, if only to check details. I will note that if she had taken the heroic route, Amadeus would have squashed her like all the others. The War College was her only choice, for precisely the same reason the American armed forces get so many recruits from the underclass(es) here – paths to advancement had been purposely limited, this was one of the few left to her.

Liliet

>I will note that if she had taken the heroic route, Amadeus would have squashed her like all the others

That's the *likely* prediction, yes, but note how it didn't stop other heroes. There's never a guarantee, and risk can be worth the payoff. It's not like Cat is not brave enough or not selfless enough – no, she just didn't consider it *necessary enough*. She thought the system as it was was fixable enough.

And yeah, please reread them, they're great ;u;

Mental Mouse

Except if Cat had been squashed there would have been no Guide...

Liliet

not sure how this is relevant to our discussion of whether she's Chaotic or Lawful 🤪

ninegardens

So... everyone's crowing about how clever Cat is (she is), but Cat, did you just screw over someone's entirely legit plan for messing up the dead king... so as to implement your own... except now, by the time you show up the Mayor of Keter is going to be EXPECTING you.

Seriously, he ain't stupid enough to believe you would WARN him about Kairos unless you already had a plan of screwing him over some other way.

Which means he's preparing for you, which means... this is going to be a very hard fight, that you may not win... and you just screwed over one of the few OTHER legit plans in the region.

... I get why she needed to do this, but it does seem a bit... bad.

[matrixm](#)

if you're talking about kairos' plan his one involved a large number of people in Iserre dying too.

[Liliet](#)

Kairos's plan included killing everyone else in Iserre.

And that's just the part Cat knew about / could guess.

Given her gambit inevitably maneuvered him into having to help with HER plan, I think all the heroes are standing there in silent approval.

"Normally we wouldn't advocate releasing anything to the Dead King... but those are some damn special circumstances"

Kissaten

If that was the case, why did he intervene after Cat surrendered her armies? I think he aimed for mindcontrol/ everyone (except League) having revolted victory here, as in mostly everyone is alive but rioting and the leaders are forced to the peace table. Hundreds of thousands of corpses will give Dead King too much control.

[Liliet](#)

He intervened to keep the clusterfuck going / keep people's attention away from the Hierarch scheme. Cat has said that explicitly.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Aside from the collateral damage of Kairos' plan, there's no real reason to think it would have *killed* the Dead King. It might well have "defeated" him. in frustrating his plan for the fragment, but you don't live a few thousand years and then get killed off by a couple of insane villains running a scheme by themselves. And of course, then you'd have Kairos and/or Heirarch running around with a RevoltWorld to Overthrow All The Rulers.

Jworks

It's probably been mentioned already, but is Cat trying to make a heroic band of 5? I remember at some point in the story Saint was talking to Pilgrim about how they would be "2 of the 5" and Tyrant makes a point to say "there are 6 of us" to which cat says "Hakram will stay behind". Could a heroic band work with 2 villains, or can any named create a band of 5?

C_B

The 5 man band thing definitely isn't just for Heroes – look at the Calamities and the Woe. I suspect a mixed band of Heroes and Villains is unusual, but Cat's whole thing is trying to convince people that the important struggle isn't "Good vs. Evil," it's "Apocalyptic Wars that Kill Lots of People vs. Not Doing That," so it makes sense that she's unusually willing to cross party lines, so to speak.

[Liliet](#)

Well, normally a heroic band only works with 1 Token Evil Member... which of course necessitates that Cat be merely a darker shade of antihero, ruthless but ultimately as aligned with greater good as the more straightforward heroes are.

This happens to be the actual truth, so it shouldn't be too hard to bend the story there 😊

edrey

i was thinking in two fae courts, there are crowns for that but let see what happens now
also. where is archer? the extra chapter should be, right?

Andrew Mitchell

Interesting question. You may be right, or it may be another scene of what's happening in the main battle with the Dead King's forces, or something else entirely... We'll see soon enough.

[Daniel E](#)

Here at the Fairy Court of Queen Catherine, we abide a simple principle; 'lies and murder'.
Is that true?
Ha! No of course not, I was only kidding.
stab

[Liliet](#)

*lies and violence

[Mental Mouse](#)

"That's two principles!"
stab
"Anyone else have an objection?"
<crickets>
stabs crickets

}:-)

[Euodiachloris](#)

Crickets don't get stabbed: they get flash-fried. Then served as a snack.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hmph, that was supposed to be a reply to Daniel E.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It occurs to me that all sorts of things could go wrong with this plan, starting with god!Larat's objections to being murdered. Also that if previous trends(*) hold, we aren't even halfway through book V, so there's room for a lot of stuff to go wrong before the story wraps.

(*) Counting unnumbered chapters like interludes: Book I had 30 chapters, Book II had 62, Book III had 97, and Book IV had 108. So far, Book V has 45. Of course, this does not consider word counts, which I have no obvious way to get.

Andrew Mitchell

I'm actually expecting this next arc (crowns & one, new Fae court, Larat murdered, highway of bones) to be the last for Book V. Remember EE made a decision to split Book IV to create an extra book, which is what we are reading now.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, but like I said it might not be so easy. Remember, the whole Everdark was fundamentally one arc.

I didn't know that about book IV, but I can easily believe that EE did the same math as me and decided that things were getting out of hand. 😊

bananas

Can Princes' Graveyard refer to a single prince? Wasn't Larat the Prince of Nightfall?

m

Murder the gods, topple their thrones.

[Miles](#)

What's a highway, in a world that barely even has roads?

[Javvies](#)

They have roads.

They even have what are the local equivalent of Imperial Roman highways, probably at least some of them with a helping of

magic used in their creation.

Sure, there are also a lot of relatively poor quality roads, but after Akua's Folly, Cat made a point of having the crucifixions placed every mile on the nearest paved roadway.

therealgridlock

You know, it's been said too many times that teleportation is impossible to have been accident.

This whole story has been leading up to this, really, a world with no fast travel, then the main character gaining a form of it for a price, then the price becoming steeper, now they're going to make it free, leading to a future where teleportation happens a lot.

I mean, she pondered upon stealing lakes and mountains and selling them, imagine if she had that power at her disposal again, she could unite the continent and maybe make a deal with the gnomes to transport them anywhere they wanted faster than jet fuel can take them.

Personal pocket highway is useful.

Chapter 33: Concord

"Ambition without principle is greed, principle without ambition is mediocrity."

– Clodomir Merovins, ninth First Prince of Procer

"An empty throne, raised over a land of crossroads," the Grey Pilgrim said, voice wary.

As it should be, I thought. It was not trouble for the faint-hearted that I was proposing to seek. Larat, now huntsman but once a prince of the Winter Court, had in those days schemed to slip the leash holding the fae to Arcadia by binding himself to Creation instead. Seven and one, a pattern that'd echoed around Calernia long enough for it to have the proper form of binding, and behind it the weight of earthly crowns laid at his feet. It'd been a clever enough scheme but also a risky one, not that he'd had much of a choice. As the King of Winter and the Queen of Summer wed and their war abruptly ended, with it changed the landscape of Arcadia: a single court, and with it different stories that meant Larat was running out of time if he ever wanted to wiggle his way out. Desperate measures had seen him

lead a ramshackle Wild Hunt – born of nothing, for Spring and Autumn had not come and might never again – to swear itself to my service, and so avoid entanglements in Arcadia. Doubly clever he had been, the once-prince, for it was to a court contained within my frame he had sworn himself and his fellows. Like fish in the sea, the fae had been content to keep swimming in that familiar power until I gathered the crowns I owed and completed Larat's scheme for him.

Then the Everdark happened and the power running through the veins of the fae had been ripped out, the reborn Night injected instead, and it had all begun to go awry.

At the moment, my Wild Hunt was not fundamentally all that different from Mighty. Oh their tricks and bodies were different – though I suspected that with time and the full settling of Winter within the Night, the Firstborn would begin taking one fae-like traits – but that was just the shape of their mould, so to speak. The material in those moulds was the same for Hunt and Mighty both, namely Night, which meant that Sve Noc could snuff them out at will. As the Sovereign of Moonless Night, I'd leaned on the oaths to get obedience from the fae because I did not have the know-how to use their connection to Winter as a leash. Given a few decades or a century I might have learned, but Larat would have been long rid of my service by then and so of this trouble as well. Sve Noc, though? They had built their apotheosis from scratch, and though the manner and nature of it had been nothing less than horror they had built it nonetheless. They could end the Hunt with a thought, and the fae had suspected that much from the moment they'd felt my surrender to the Sisters. And so they'd kept their oaths to myself and my subjects, even though they were no longer bound by them, for if they became an enemy I might be troubled to look into the practicalities of ending them. A shame for them, and for Larat, that I'd found out anyway.

"Gates, for the proper toll," I agreed. "Paths through a realm without the... risks of Arcadia, but similar peculiarities. The armies on this field could turn a march of months into weeks instead, and intervene north before the fronts collapse."

"And you would beget this through the murder of one in your service," Tariq said, not bothering to hide his distaste. "Could accord not be reached instead?"

There was a sound like someone choking down laughter, which served to inform me Kairos apparently knew a thing or two about the fae.

"That is not in his nature," I said. "And fae do not *change*. It is inevitable. Larat who was once the Prince of Nightfall will rise once more, ruler of a court of dusk, and turn on those that raised him. And when that happens-"

"- inevitability," the Grey Pilgrim echoed. "A band of five, like few this world had seen, to smother that infant god in the cradle."

The last words had his face going ashen, for some reason. I supposed the scope of what I'd suggested was beginning to sink in. In the interests of diplomacy, I refrained from mentioning I figured if any Choir was going to be in favour of infant-smothering it'd be Mercy. You didn't get to make a greater good without laying a foundation of lesser evils, and the greater the scale of that good so with the evils that were its bedrock.

"Tariq," the Saint hoarsely said. "You can't seriously be considering this."

She looked, I thought, like someone had upended her world.

"It sees to our every need," the Peregrine said, and turned rueful eye on me. "How neatly you have tied us with the strings of necessity."

I met his gaze unblinking.

"Should I apologize," I said, "for making this a victory for others than myself?"

He turned away at that. Both at what I'd said, and at what was implied: that'd he been so set on being my enemy I'd had to work against him to help him. Silence stretched for a tense moment.

"Black Queen," the Rogue Sorcerer said, politely inclining his head. "I have questions, if I may?"

Funny how they got all polite when they no longer had the upper hand. No, that was unfair of me. I was in no position to cast stones on the subject of civility. Beneath the swaying leather coat and the practical chain mail beneath, I could not help but notice that the Sorcerer was rather short. Still taller than me, I was forced to admit, but not by much. I'd had a glimpse of what he could do with the intricate casting rod he kept, and it'd been a notch in power and skill above what I'd seen out of any but the most powerful of Praesi warlocks. Fire-based, I'd vaguely remembered, but there must have been more to it than that: his unremarkable brown pupils were discreetly rimmed with colour, one scarlet red and the other verdant green. Akua had fought him while wearing me the once, but like me she'd failed to tease much out of him. Which meant most his tricks were still unknown, and all his aspects. Both Tariq and Kairos would shoot up as threats the moment they became members of our band of five instead of my spent opponents, Creation itself conspiring to make sure they were fit to participate in what followed, but like the Saint they were mostly known quantities.

I knew nothing of the Rogue Sorcerer, save that he'd repeatedly scrapped with adversaries seemingly his superior without ever taking a wound or revealing any of the dangerous tricks mages tended to hoard like magpies. That alone was enough to make him dangerous.

"Ask," I replied.

"You will need seven crowns, as the price," the hero said, his Lower Miezian smooth and accentless. "This I understand the logistics of."

The gaze he flicked at the seven Proceran royals and Adjutant visibly hanging behind us made his point clear.

"It is the one, however that interests me," he said. "Seven for weight, but the last to shape. It will be, in a sense, the most important aspect of what you propose."

"The one we'll bring with us into the deeps," I said. "To be bestowed only at the heart of it."

The Rogue Sorcerer's lips thinned, obviously not considering that to be much of an answer, but in a sense it'd not been him I was speaking to. Tariq and Kairos both cast glances at me: one wary, the other gleeful. Yeah, there were three of us who could still qualify for the 'one'. Kairos Theodosian was Tyrant of Helike by Name, but king of the same by title. Tariq was, in the eyes of many of his countrymen, the rightful ruler of Levant. And I had more than a few titles to throw around, these days, but the one that mattered most was Queen of Callow.

"As you say," the hero murmured. "On the subject of roads and tolls-"

"It won't be like Arcadia," I admitted. "That is beyond my remit. It'll take more than a powerful caster with the right tools to access it. We'll have to raise gates in Creation, and bind them to the realm. After that, though, journey, should be seamless when the tolls are paid."

"And the nature of said tolls?" the Sorcerer pressed.

"Blood," the Pilgrim quietly said. "Isn't it?"

It was Akua's best guess, yes, and the Sisters were being ambiguous in their answers but implying that might be the case.

"Freely given," I clarified. "One cut to enter, the other to leave. A sliver of life to sustain the crossroads realm."

"And anybody could pass the gate," the Rogue Sorcerer. "But very few would know how to *build* one."

I smiled, and did not answer. The Sorcerer might be able to figure it out, I knew, especially if he was at hand when the realm was born. But aside from him? Maybe five people would have the know-how in all of Calernia, and most of them answered to me to some degree.

"We should kill her now," the Saint of Swords calmly said.

My fingers tightened around my staff, but beyond that I gave no visible reaction. I glanced at Tariq and raised an eyebrow, silently letting him know that Laurence of Montfort was his fucking problem at the moment but that if she became mine he wouldn't like what followed.

"I understand your worries, Saint-" the Rogue Sorcerer began.

"No, you don't," she bluntly said. "Because you're barely even thirty, and you still think because she compromises once or twice it changes what she is. It *doesn't*."

"I would not swear truce with her beyond the Dead King's end," the Rogue Sorcerer replied, tone touched with strained patience, "but to refuse an arrangement right now would be worse than a sin, it would be a *mistake*."

"Do you know who the most dangerous villain I've ever faces was, boy?" Laurence de Montfort casually said. "There's a few people would consider the obvious contenders. I fought the first Horned Lord to wake in five centuries to a draw. I crawled in my own blood after a bout with the Lady of the Lake and put down the Drake Knight after his mind went. All of those would have butchered their way through half a legion of soldiers without batting an eye, all were monsters at the peak of their mastery. But the most dangerous villain I ever faced was my first: an alchemist so sickly he could barely hold a sword."

She was arguing for my death, I was well aware, but this was still rather interesting so she had my full attention for more than one reason. The Jacks hadn't put together nearly as much as I would have liked on the Saint, which only made sense if she'd spent most of her years wandering around Calernia as a cantankerous armed vagrant.

"I caught him early," the Saint idly said. "People were going missing, and I looked into it – bandits and criminals, as it turned out, but he was still keeping them in cells and using them for bloody research. Yet it was for antidotes, for ways to end plagues and heal the worst of injuries. He was just the Salutory Alchemist, I thought, and so young. Not some hard-eyed vulture, and his Damnation looked like it was half an accident. Bad methods, but good ends. So I slapped him around some, made him pass his prisoners to the closest city's gaol and told him he

could use animals but not people. Then I let him off with a warning."

Slowly, the Saint of Swords unsheathed her blade. She tapped it against her shoulder, striding around the Sorcerer but her eyes remaining on the Pilgrim the whole time.

"Gods, but the boy was brilliant," she said. "Five years later and keeping to the rules, he distilled an essence of life – a potion that kept people alive past their time. When the secant pox hit Valencis he moved there to cure it, and stayed after. I thought, maybe it didn't have to be a war all the time. That in some places, sometimes, we could have peace. Make exceptions."

"Salutary," the Rogue Sorcerer slowly said. "The word can mean beneficial, but the older meaning is *health-giving*."

"Aye," Laurence de Montfort grinned, old yellow teeth bared. "And give them health he did. Let them live past their time. Except he was the only one with the recipe. And it only bought them a few months at a time."

I almost let out an impressed whistle, seeing where she was headed with this.

"The prince was old, and so he was owned," the Saint derisively said. "And with every passing year someone else was in his debt that was old but also rich and powerful. Or sick in a way priests can't see to, or wanting to look young or a hundred other paltry fucking things that could be fixed with the right brew. I heard nothing about the people who'd started to go missing again, in Valencis, until I ran into one getting grabbed by the fucking *city guard*. And when I asked questions they all covered for him, all closed ranks, because he'd gotten his claws in them and what were a few dead nobodies for his research when that research was so useful?"

In Procer, I remembered, they knew the Saint of Swords as the *Regicide*. For her very public slaying of the Prince of Valencis, many years ago.

"He was a helpful lad, the Salutary Alchemist," Laurence de Montfort softly said. "Helped with his tonics and philters, when the going got rough for Chosen, never swung at blade at anybody in his life. And if I'd left him to it another decade, he would have owned half of Procer without anyone being the wiser."

The Saint of Swords pointed her blade at me.

"There can be," she slowly enunciated, "no truce with the Enemy. Not even when they are reasonable, helpful – especially then, because if you let the rot take even a moment then you will always have to amputate the limb."

The Tyrant of Helike, never one to let an occasion to be a shit pass him by, enthusiastically clapped at the end of her tirade and called for an encore. I glanced at the other heroes. The Rogue Sorcerer's face had gone blank, which to me reeked of hesitation. It made sense, didn't it? Because to me Laurence was a zealous old biddy who regularly tried to kill me and my friends, but to the heroes she was the prickly, unpleasant grandmother they didn't want but always stepped in when they were in trouble. And sure, she thought with her sword, but most of the time that kind of simplicity paid off for heroes. It lent them strength, got them through the worst villains brought to bear against them and if the Light was anything like the Night then conviction had a lot to do with how well you could use it. The Grey Pilgrim was the one that mattered, though, because where the Saint was respected the Peregrine was *trusted*. And even when he wasn't, well, if he made a decision then the rest of the Grand Alliance couldn't really break it without breaking itself given his pull in the Dominion. And I wasn't sure Laurence would give a damn about that, given who she was, but I suspected the Rogue Sorcerer was a different story entirely.

And the Pilgrim slowly shook his head.

"I will not break the world that is to spare the world that could be," the Peregrine said.

"Tariq, how many of these 'turnabouts' have you seen over the years?" the Saint hissed. "How many Damned made their apologies, swore they'd never meant to hurt anyone, said that they would help you keep the peace instead."

"Dozens," the Pilgrim said.

"And how many kept their word?"

"None," the old man tiredly said.

"And still you want to make bargain with her? The battle's not done, Tariq. It'll get ugly, true enough, and thousands will die. Likely one of us too. But we can still win, and though we'll be a ruin after we'll be a ruin that can recover," the Saint harshly asked. "But if we compromise, here and now? There'll never be any recovering from that. The taint will be in the cause until it runs its course. So *why*?"

"Because we are not animals," Tariq softly replied. "Because we do not shy from compromise simply because it has burned us before. Because if we are willing to break armies for a point of theological purity, then that it is us that deserves the breaking. But most of all, Laurence?"

His eyes were bright as he turned to her, but there was no warmth to them. Only a cold, patient light like the distant radiance of a star.

"Because I will not brook unnecessary suffering," the Grey Pilgrim said.

The two heroes stared each other down, tension mounting with the silence. The Saint had not sheathed her blade, and though the Peregrine bore no weapon to unsheathe in turn that hardly meant he was unarmed.

"Boo," the Tyrant called out. "Booo. Just terrible. Bring back the other act."

"If we bend, we will break," Laurence de Montfort said.

I breathed out slowly, and though I did not begin to call on Night – that would have drawn attention to me, painted me as the aggressor – I shaped the working in my mind. It would have worked better in Arcadia, but if the Saint turned on me here there'd be no choice but to resort to it in Creation.

"If you still believe that, by morning light, then we will put it to judgement," Tariq said.

The old woman's jaw tightened in displeasure, but after a moment she gave a tight nod. She eyed me, spat down in the snow, but then sheathed her blade.

"Lovely," I drawled. "What a treat you are, Laurence. Shall I take that as agreement on your end, Pilgrim?"

The Rogue Sorcerer glanced at Tariq, who nodded. The other man sighed but did not argue.

"Bargain is struck, Black Queen," the Grey Pilgrim said.

"Bargain is struck," I acknowledged, dipping my head.

"That's nice," Kairos said. "But here's something none of you have considered."

The Tyrant of Helike caught the scepter he'd idly been flipping all this time, and blindly pointed it over his shoulder. Gems incrustated in it began glowing, and an intense beam of fire shot out – before I could so much as move, it burned a hole straight through Rozala Malanza's forehead.

"Should have sold the villain on the deicide first," the Tyrant chided me.

I didn't reply, simply raising an eyebrow, and only then did Kairos's red eye narrow and he turned to look back over his throne. Where 'Rozala Malanza' had dissolved into shadows.

"Ah, the drow," Kairos mused. "Is there even a single one of them left?"

"What kind of a second-rater do you take me for?" I asked.

Adjutant should be in the my army's camp right about now, safely escorted there by the Losara Sigil after my Lord of Silent Steps spirited him away and left behind illusion. As for the royals, though, I had other intentions.

"I suppose we should discuss terms, then," the Tyrant cheerfully said.

"Pilgrim?" I asked.

"I will listen," the old man said, promising nothing.

"Best you're going to get," I told the odd-eyed king.

"It's all I need," Kairos Theodosian grinned. "Now, as you all know, I am an ardent proponent of peace."

I was reluctantly impressed by how confidently he stated what everyone else here knew to be an outright lie.

"This entire little tiff has been nothing but a misunderstanding, I'm certain," the Tyrant idly continued. "As such, a peace conference would be in all our best interests."

That part I'd known he wanted for months now. But now he'd lay out what it was he wanted along with the rest of us at the same table, and that I remained deeply worried about.

"But," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Speak up, Theodosian."

"It seems that an agent currently in the employ of the First Prince of Procer has committed heavy crimes while in the lands of the League of Free Cities," Kairos smiled. "A complaint was lodged with the Hierarch, who now requires that criminal to stand trial before peace can be discussed."

My eyes narrowed. No mention of whatever it was Cordelia was dredging out of Lake Artoise? Had that been a red herring, or was this?

"A name," the Peregrine said.

"I believe he goes by Hanno of Arwad," Kairos said.

"The White Knight," the Rogue Sorcerer said in disbelief. "You want to put to trial the chosen of the-"

The Grey Pilgrim raised his hand.

"And if this request is granted, the League of Free Cities will observe a truce until both the trial and the peace conference are at an end?" he asked.

"Of course," Kairos said. "I am, after all, a man of timid and tender disposition. If not for our beloved Hierarch's indignation at such brazen offences, this war would never have-"

"For an objection to be lodged with the Hierarch himself, the ruler or representative of one of the member-cities of the League has to do it," I interrupted. "In this case, who did it?"

"I believe it might have been the representative from Helike," the Tyrant mused. "What an unlikely coincidence."

So, Kairos' play was centered around using the Hierarch against the White Knight then. That gave me something to work with when it came to thwarting him, though I couldn't do it from here or tonight.

"I am willing to accept that condition," the Grey Pilgrim said, "on behalf of the Grand Alliance."

"Oh?" the Tyrant said. "Yet the head of this crusade is Her Most Serene Highness Cordelia Hasenbach. Can you truly speak on her behalf?"

"In this instance I will," Tariq said. "He would come regardless, Theodosian."

"That's reassuring to hear," Kairos affably replied. "Yet it has been brought to my attention you've this nasty habit of breaking oaths, Pilgrim. I will require a guarantor. Now, Catherine, I do remember you promising me in writing that-"

"I lied," I told him without missing a beat. "You know, while positioning you to overextend in battle and selling you out to the Dead King."

"That was most unkind of you," he agreed. "Yet we are, I believe, allies."

"Of course," I lied.

"Then I will require you to be guarantor of our greying friend's oath," the Tyrant of Helike said, odd-eyed gaze grown cool. "And to kill him personally, should he break it."

"That's all?" I frowned.

I didn't like making empty promises, but this little bastard had been puppeteering half the armies of Calernia into killing each other while the damned Dead King was invading up north for the better part of a year. When we had shared interests, as in against the Wandering Bard, I did not mind working together. Otherwise he was at best a potential threat and more likely an outright enemy. Hells, the Peregrine had tried to kill me a few time and I still considered him to be more of an ally.

"That oath, and yours as guarantor, will have to be taken before every one of importance in all three armies on this field," the Tyrant casually added. "Proper ceremony and all that."

Ah, and there we were. Like I'd turned the screws on Razin Tanja a while back, he wanted me to give my word in front of enough people it'd seriously damage my reputation if I broke it afterwards. Of course, killing the Grey Pilgrim regardless of circumstances would sunder the Grand Alliance and most likely sink the Liesse Accords. But if I made and broke an oath before the same people I'd then need to convince to sign those same Accords, I was taking a torch to the worth of my word for those I most needed to believe in it. He truly was a vicious little prick, wasn't he? I glanced at Tariq, who met my gaze and slowly nodded. He'd realize the trouble inherent to breaking his own word, I thought, but would that stop him if he thought it was necessary to do it? Probably not. *But this needs a foundation of trust to work*, I thought. And he'd extended it first, even if I had to twist his arm to get there.

"Agreed," I said.

"Then we are all friends once more," the Tyrant of Helike said. "And I believe there was some talk of crowns. Shall you have them sent for, Catherine?"

"There's no need," I said. "Ivah?"

The illusory curtain of shadows went down, and seven princes and princesses of Procer were revealed to be standing wide-eyed a mere twenty feet to our side. They had, after all, heard the entire conversation from start to finish.

Danus

Wow, I wonder how the royalty will take Saint's shit-talking.

[Liliet](#)

I mean she has the nickname Regicide. I think they'll be pleasantly surprised that she actually had a reason for doing what she did.

antoninjohn

Well it looks like Cat is going to end up killing the Pilgrim after all

konstantinvoncarstein

Why? He at last acknowledge that she was willing to help him. And if she killed the Pilgrim, Levant would never accept the Liesse Accords.

erebus42

I think they mean that Kairos is gonna manipulate things so that Cat has no choice but to kill him or risk forswearing herself

[badluckcat](#)

"Alas, though I gave oath to kill the Grey Pilgrim if he broke his own oath I am, instead, going to betray the Tyrant, whose plan could very well have seen the Gods(capital G) blow half of Calernia to smithereens. Truly I am a paragon of deceitful betrayal."

byzantine279

Yep. She needs to go Traitorous on that one. Most people will understand.

erebus42

The only problem with that is she needs her word to mean something if she wants the Accords to get off the ground.

[Liliet](#)

It would be less of a problem if everyone present for the oath-giving is willing to trust her intentions over her word, and is therefore willing to assure everyone else that no, we were there, we witnessed, she's trustworthy!



Catherine's building up a potent story here, even if she hasn't noticed it herself yet.

TheZorginator1

We just went through a chapter explaining that breaking an oath means the other person has an edge when fighting you.

Fayhem

Kairos is quite possibly going to try. But given how thoroughly Catherine played him tonight I'm comfortable putting the emphasis on the last word in that sentence. And it's also quite possible that he really does want the Hierarch to put Hanno on trial; I'm guessing he may be intending to establish in said trial that Hanno delegates all his judgments to the Choir of said, and use that as his opening to indict the Choir itself. Pretty sure Kairos would value that more highly than merely killing the Peregrine or fucking with Catherine; any asshole can kill a hero or dick around their allies, but how many villains get to put an entire angelic Choir on trial?

Mental Mouse

And Catherine might well be onboard with that plan. (Though she might wish it was an angel of Contrition instead. 😊)

antoninjohn

Pilgrim keeping an oath, like that is ever going to happen

Decius

No, Levant will never accept the Liesse Accords if the Pilgrim is dead. Plus the trial will take a very long time to complete, and being a hero Hanno will find some way to subvert it and be found innocent.

Or else Pilgrim will sell out a hero to avoid unnecessary suffering.

konstantinvoncarstein

I don't think Kairos would have asked to judge Hanno if it was so easy for him to escape. Hierarch is an outside context problem, capable of scarring goddesses. Said goddesses in the same league as an Angelic Choir.

Cicero

True, but I suspect that the heroes will underestimate the Hierarch.

Really only Cat, Kairos, and the Bard have seen him up close enough to understand his power.

So the only way Hanno fails to appear for his trial is if the Bard convinces him that the Hierarch is too powerful.

[sengachi](#)

Yeah. I suspect this whole thing would be a Trial, capital T, for Hanno, but ultimately a guaranteed win for him. *If* this were a classic villain gambit. Which to the Pilgrim is what I'm sure this must look like. But what we know, and what Kairos knows, is that the Heirarch is no mere villain. He's something else, something made of an unwavering mad faith that might even eclipse the White Knight's. And *that*, I think, might actually threaten the White Knight and his Choir.

Rook

I don't think the verdict, or Hanno for that matter, is actually going to be important as far as the trial goes. He's all about mortal judgements being flawed and unworthy, so realistically it's going to be a metaphysical brawl between the choir of Judgment and the Hierarch. The key there at the end of the day will be which of those two supercedes the other in making the judgement, rather than whatever actually happens to Hanno as a result.

medailyfun

I believe Tariq decided the White Knight would need to visit the League anyway to deal some Justice

Faiir

Yea!
It's time for Justice, League!

[Liliet](#)

I love you.

NerfContessa

Perfect pun.

Nough said.

[Sethur](#)

Well, either Cat or Kairos or Tariq will become the one in "seven crowns and one" laid at Larat's feet. Whoever will get the short end of the stick is likely to die and each death would somehow or other void the oath that was Just taken.

konstantinvoncarstein

Tariq would be the less bad outcome. The “and one” crown will shape the new highway. We have the choice between Catherine (the protagonist), Kairos (an old-school/mad/“playful” villain) or Tariq (a well-intentioned extremist hero).

[Liliet](#)

Where is Tariq an extremist? He is, if anything, the most conservative moderate you get around here. Amadeus is a Well-Intentioned Extremist, Tariq is the natural enemy of such. (Including his own nephew)

konstantinvoncarstein

He would do anything to stop evil, from breaking his word to wiping out an entire village full of civilians.

[Liliet](#)

Gasp! BREAKING HIS WORD! What a horrifying crime that is... Truly, he is an extremist!

As for the village, that was horrifying, but nothing beyond the kind of decision military leaders make routinely. It was the hands-on nature of it that made it look differently, but... Is Cordelia an extremist for ordering Iserre (a big city, not a village!) put to torch in order to trap Amadeus in it? Because if everyone's an extremist, I'm questioning your definitions.

erebus42

Murdering civilians for the greater good is an extremist action. I'm not claiming I would or wouldn't have done the same but it's still a monstrous act. Oathbreaking may seem like a relative misdemeanor but it shows that one is not dependable and can't be trusted enough to work with as at any moment they may decide to turn on you. Tariq has always been arrogant and a touch sanctimonious-thinking he knows better than everyone else. He has of course gotten better as he at least is willing to compromise and work with Cat but only after she left no other option open. While he is obviously better than the saint (who sometimes feels like she's just there to make Tariq look better in comparison) he still suffers from the same blinders as her- namely that as a “Hero” his crimes are somehow lesser or not as relevant as those around him. Even if you are trying to help in the long run you don't get to commit heinous acts and still claim to be a hero afterward. The Pilgrim while admittedly partly the

product of his skewed universe is still is very much the extremist.

[Liliet](#)

>Even if you are trying to help in the long run you don't get to commit heinous acts and still claim to be a hero afterward.

So how do you think he should have acted against Amadeus?

erebus42

I don't know, there may have been a better way but that's always easier to say when you're not the one who has to find it. Like I said, I don't know if I would have done much differently from the Pilgrim in his situation. I just would have the good grace not to act so self righteous about it. Really I mainly just have a problem with anyone thinking of themselves as the "good guy" and using that to justify their actions.

[Liliet](#)

Where does Tariq do that?

He only ever justifies his actions with their foreseeable consequences.

NerfGlastigUaine

Agree with everything except that the Pilgrim has "gotten better". As someone from a previous chapter pointed out, Pilgrim's character hasn't changed – he's still the same old ruthless extremist, it's just that this time, as you put it, Cat didn't leave any other choice. Pilgrim always works for the greater good, it's only his options that change. Similar to how Amadeus never changed, but his options changed at Liesse and broke his relationship with Cat.

Also to note here is that extremist doesn't always mean bad or wrong, just going further than most would. Cat for instance, had been diving down that extremist slope until the end of Book 4, tho she seems to have come back up now. She does however admit that she'd go full extremist, Triumphant 2.0 even, if she felt she needed to save Callow.

Basically, no hero or villain worth their salt will stop at half measures.

Mental Mouse

The one option that Pilgrim never seems to consider until it's forced on him, is to back down. Cat, like Amadeus before her, does reject plans outright for excessive collateral damage.

Liliet

The difference is that limiting collateral damage is what Tariq's plans BOIL DOWN TO, always. And he did reject the redeem-Cat plan when it appeared to be no longer functional)=

Mental Mouse

Hmm. I'm told that other countries have a saying about America: "America will do the right thing, when all other options have been exhausted". That's what Pilgrim reminds me of.

Basically, he gets no points from me for bowing to the inevitable, after it's rubbed in his face that He and Saint are not actually in charge here, and that Cat in particular has leveled up again, and is now running rings around him.

KageLupus

The lying thing is actually a pretty big deal. He didn't just lie, he broke the terms of an international agreement. Doing so proves that the Grey Pilgrim will not abide by mortal contracts if he feels there is a need to break them, which essentially makes it impossible to trust him.

He also speaks for an entire country, and that country is a member of the Grand Alliance. So making a deal with the Grand Alliance is shaky because you can't guarantee that one of it's member states won't break terms because the unofficial leader decided it was necessary.

None of that actually makes Tariq an extremist, but it also shouldn't be downplayed as just a lie. His words and actions caused international strife and could be said to have lead to thousands dying in a pointless battle later, because the two sides couldn't trust each other.

Liliet

He does not FORMALLY speak for an entire country. They just listen to every word he says, but technically he doesn't speak for them :3

That makes a large difference specifically where international agreements like that are concerned. He broke his word, not Levant's.

And Tariq having broken his word there msot definitely saved more people than it killed, considering what Amadeus had been busy with.

konstantinvoncarstein

Extremist was maybe a little too strong, but he nonetheless did pretty horrible things

[Liliet](#)

War is hell.

caoimhinh

Nah, Extremist is the correct term. Tariq is undoubtedly and undeniably a well-intentioned extremist. Every single one of his "lesser evils for the greater good" confirms it.

[Liliet](#)

I can sort of see it from a certain point of view... he IS a mirror to Amadeus

luminiousblu

Breaking your word given freely was considered essentially the single highest crime you could actually do for the longest time across most societies on the planet for a reason. Even crimes like patricide, regicide, infidelity, and refusing hospitality were really variants on this because the concept was that these crimes broke implicit oaths.

You couldn't refuse someone hospitality because the idea was that literally every single traveller and man who owned a house had an implicit agreement that when one is in need of a safe night to rest, he will be provided one and that in turn he will be ready to provide one when requested and also not overstay his welcome.

Patricide and regicide both broke implicit bonds of loyalty. You can't kill your king because in theory you are sworn to your king, even if you never explicit took

the oath. Your father raised you and if you kill him you break the implicit oath that his goodwill will be returned.

Infidelity is breaking the oath of marriage. Depending on the actual customs of the culture, it might not be a big deal or it might be totally unforgivable if it comes to light.

Oathbreaking is a betrayal of trust on the highest order. There is literally nothing worse. This is why Thorin has to die when he goes back on his word given freely and why Kriemhild was considered a villain by the end of the Nibelungen even though it was she who got wronged. Swearing by oath was a big fucking deal back in the day, and it's a big deal today although in a different form. After all, trust is the single most valuable commodity a company can have.

Someguy

Kinslaying?

[Liliet](#)

Makes sense.

Still not what I understand the word "extremist" to mean 0.0

[Mental Mouse](#)

As I've said before, Tariq is also primed for a Heroic Sacrifice: (1) old, with hints that his next Shine might well kill him, and (2) in bad odor with the Narrative, thanks to broken oaths.

The question is whether that can be worked into the Fae Crowning. BTW, Saint is in a similar situation, but she doesn't have a crown for the "and one". She might have already paid for her trucebreaking by getting smacked around by the Drow, or might still have some pain coming. She also has a possible throw-down with Pilgrim in her future, but might avoid that.

[Liliet](#)

Randomly rereading this chapter's comments is DELICIOUS, and that's all I'll say here to avoid Spoilers From The Future for comment-reading archive readers.

Just, dang. So much fun.

[Mental Mouse](#)

This is why I was leaving all those “heh heh heh” comments on my recent reread.

[Liliet](#)

♥ ♥ ♥

[Liliet](#)

I think the point of the whole arrangement is that giving over the crown \neq dying.

And Catherine was already planning to abdicate...

Decius

Catherine could also annex the fae realm into Callow and make Larat the prince of it; that would certainly count as ‘and one (crown)’ and would also have the effect of making it sworn to Callow.

[Liliet](#)

I think you’re getting confused on cause-effect here. Larat needs to get the seven crowns and one *in order to* claim the realm.

Cicero

Unless Cat plans to abdicate.

She’s the only one that might value the product above her crown.

[Liliet](#)

Frankly she’s already attaching the negative value to her crown. She WANTS to abdicate, it’s only a question of timing.

Morgenstern

As if anyone in the Grand Alliance would truly fault her for *not killing the Pilgrim* and NOT making him uphold an oath to a villain that would damn another Chosen to die a stupid death. Remember, such oaths to Villains need not be upheld. Why the hell should Cat as the guarantor of the fucking Pilgrim uphold the same? Imho, that’s just bullshit “logic” conjuring up a fear that has no basis, not even with all the bullshit Heroes and Alliance did so far, because circumstances. This time, I really don’t see why Cat thinks it would damage her reputation to no uphold an “oath” to a Villain – and AID the Pilgrim...

[Liliet](#)

Kairos might not be as aware as he thinks he is of Callow's internal politics 😊

Mental Mouse

Because there are narrative consequences to oathbreaking even if it's just among Evils. Cat is walking a knife-edge of "officially-a-villain but not really", and this is part of the oaths binding the party together for their mission. If she breaks this, she goes back to "just another villain, and this one's dangerous". Notice how Kairos exploited Pilgrim's broken oaths to rope in Cat here?

And this oath isn't just between two villains (like the letter which was a lie), it involves several Heroes and it is specifically to be publicized to all four powers (League, Levant, Procer, Callow), including the specific people Catherine will need to deal with in future (or with their heirs). Fortunately, Pilgrim seems amenable to the White Knight facing Heirarch – not quite "bring it on", but perhaps not as concerned as he should be. That last bit said, if the party finds itself confronting Hierarch. this oath might provide a plot-path for WK to show up as "the cavalry".

Liliet

I think the key detail here is that Catherine looks to Tariq for confirmation there. She is not acting as an independent agent here, she's *with him*, and any oathbreaking she does will be *the same* as his oathbreaking. And I don't think he'd break an oath unless there was a sufficient *heroic* reason to do so, nor ask Cat to break hers.

Catherine is making a leap of faith – that Tariq won't screw her on this. I AM SURE HOPING FOR THAT

Mental Mouse

Well, it's not completely a leap of faith, so much as "knowing that he knows" he's on thin ice, and it's his own damned fault. The most treacherous villain around not only *called out the Pilgrim as untrustworthy*, but made it stick! That's gotta hurt, but the worst part is, it can still get worse. *That's* what's holding him to his word.

Liliet

Pilgrim can screw Cat over on this and put her in a very bad position, or he can take her situation into account and situate everything so that whatever choice he makes it won't backfire on her.

Narratively being his guarantor means she trusts him and it's his responsibility to manage that.

Cicero

It also means that Cat has trusted Tariq once again, and now has to choose if he will betray her again or not.

[Liliet](#)

y e s

[Mental Mouse](#)

Except that if he screws Cat over, he puts her in a bad position *in-story*, but his own *narrative* position becomes disastrous. And frankly, I suspect *everyone* wants to see this fight. The heroes are confident that their guy will win, the villains are hoping that a hero and/or an angel gets called to judgement for once.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm! That's pretty much why Catherine *can* trust him on this 😊

erebus42

One as has been said there's the narrative consequences of the betrayal. Two, they already don't trust Cat and that would give them a precedent to point to for why they can't trust her—"she's a villainous oathbreaker why should we trust her! What happens when she gets a better offer?!". For several of them—especially the Levantines—honor is way more important for them than it is for us modern readers. She needs her word to mean something if she wants to get the Accords off the ground.

danh3107

Hah, making sure the princes all hear the terms of the agreement leaves less wiggle room for everyone. Maybe not Tyrant but hey, no play is really perfect.

Oshi

Tyrant has no wiggle room at all. No one believes him so his word means nothing. he can do anything but it also means no one will give a shit about anything done to him,

Andrew Mitchell

Vote for A Practical Guide to Evil! You know you want to...

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

[Liliet](#)

ty for posting the link ♥

and yall, join our discord too!

<https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>

[Javvies](#)

Nicely played Cat.

Heirarch judgy powers versus the Choir of Judgement? That's something I'd like to see. From a safe distance.

I realized something the other day when I was starting a reread, Cordelia was told by Augur the "the Tyrant seeks to end Procer". She, not unreasonably, assumed that meant Malicia ... but what if it's actually supposed to be warning about Kairos?

Also, something else occurred to me recently – if Tariq really believes that Cat is a story of retribution against Calernia for what Callow had been forced to go through ... at what point does doubling down on throwing Callow under the bus/wagon for the benefit of others (aka, the actions drawing retribution) possibly become a good idea?

taovkool

Was there even a safe distance when those two absolute types of judgements gets involved?

konstantinvoncarstein

Another continent, hopefully 😊

[Javvies](#)

At least 50 miles, probably.

Given there's the precedent of the Hashmallin mindfucking everyone within 49 miles of their appearance.

And behind cover.

Assuming this doesn't draw enough attention that Above and/or Below get directly involved. Then, I'd like to be the next universe over.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I thought that was kind of the point, kinda. The question is, are the angels actually equivalent to Above? Because the

demons don't act much like Gods Below. They act more like the *expression* of individual power, rather than beings intent on encouraging it in others. And they don't seem smart enough to be actively manipulating events. I think it's likely that both angels and demons/devils are themselves intermediary agents of the true Gods, representing investments by the "teams": Above goes for sponsoring miracles and guidance, while Below provides powerful but hazardous minions/weapons for those who dare grasp them. Both grant powers to Named, though.

Mental Mouse

Or rather, Above and Below set up a common framework for Named to get powers. It's worth considering whether Above or Below actually can withdraw powers once given, or if only offenses against the Narrative can damage Name powers (per Cat's early difficulties).

Liliet

That's very much the impression I'm getting.

Mental Mouse

Well, DK will probably be watching from a nearby universe, over in Keter.

Luminant Azurefyre

That last part is a good point I hadn't really noticed. Then again, we all know Tariq's a hypocrite. It's practically his defining feature at this point. He's smart, but often fails to see how what he's doing is completely unreasonable from perspectives other than his own and take that into account. That trend has repeatedly shot him in the foot over the course of his conflict with Cat.

taovkool

Better a hypocrite like Tariq than a fundamentalist like Laurence.

I mean, everyone in this series – and real life, let's be honest – has a shred of hypocrisy in their views but the kind of absolutist thought like what Laurence has is the same kind that burned down Liesse, and she chose Procer as a pyre, so fuck that bitch.

Evgeny Permyakov

Tariq is no less of a fundamentalist than Laurence. He is simply more flexible in his methods, but not in his goals.

konstantinvoncarstein

His goals are to minimize suffering and protect the innocents, of course he is inflexible.

[Liliet](#)

This.

Morality is not *that* relative, people.

[Javvies](#)

Not exactly.

His goal is to minimize what he perceives to be *unnecessary* suffering and what he perceives to be *unnecessary* harm to those he considers innocents or otherwise worthy of his protection. But if he thinks it's necessary? He'll burn down the orphanage after crucifying half of them to outside of the doors, so the ones inside can't get the doors open. And then call you a Villain for trying to put out the fire and save the orphans inside. And do his best to stop you.

The problem is ... while Cat called him a long term perspective type hero ... Tariq really doesn't think about or take into consideration how other people view and react to his actions and the consequences of those actions.

He, mostly, has been shown to look only one or two moves ahead of the one right on front of him. To be fair, that's further ahead than the average person, or even the average Named (Hero or Villain).

konstantinvoncarstein

He does not want to limit unnecessary suffering, he want to limit suffering in general. He committed atrocities, but it was to stop other horrible things to happen.

[Javvies](#)

No, he's all about stopping what he believes is unnecessary suffering. If he thinks your suffering is necessary for whatever reason and/or to whatever ends he seeks, then you're screwed. So incredibly screwed.

He himself said – on the very chapter – “I will not brook unnecessary suffering.”

He's

[Liliet](#)

He wants to stop *all* suffering, but he's aware that it's not physically possible. So he separates the suffering he *can* stop and defines that as 'unnecessary'.

NerfGlastigUaine

This. People are so caught up by the "unnecessary" part of Tariq's goal, that they fail to realize everyone in this verse believes that some suffering is necessary or unavoidable so that others won't suffer. I had an entire rant about it in his first extra chapter.

[Liliet](#)

t h a n k y o u

[shieldredblog](#)

People keep viewing the Pilgrims morals through the lens of someone in our world. No, sorry.

He has no respect for human life or what it means to be human. While he hates suffering, he assigns no value to human life itself. He even mused that one time about how the Lantern philosophy that life not in service to Above has no meaning or value is true.

Perfect Gods that literally created you live in the sky and when they tell you to murder a village or commit genocide like some Levantines wanted, you follow that command because you are a dirty worthless mortal whose life is meaningless anyway. You will never have a fraction of their wisdom or power so obedience is the only virtue. The day that Good wins and ends the worlds is the only thing that matters.

This is shown when he saves the lives of useful soldiers by murdering civilians. The children didn't suffer so its alright. The fact that those soldiers he was saving would have wanted to fight to save that village and died defending it don't matter, just more worthless human emotion. They died for Above, which is all people can hope for anyway.

Its no coincidence that the Alchemists great sin was prolonging life, something Above detests because mortality is something humanity was

designed to have. A limiter to keep them controllable.

Liliet

>Perfect Gods that literally created you live in the sky and when they tell you to murder a village or commit genocide like some Levantines wanted, you follow that command because you are a dirty worthless mortal whose life is meaningless anyway.

What?

Ok so... Gods did not order Pilgrim anything. Gods don't ever order anyone anything, or we wouldn't have had the strictly-reminiscent-of-real-world church schism. Angels don't order him around either, we've seen him attempt to get useful input from them recently...

>This is shown when he saves the lives of useful soldiers by murdering civilians.

What? Where?

If you're talking about Saudant and the plague, *Amadeus's rampage was causing **civilian** deaths*. He was burning fields and granaries!

>Its no coincidence that the Alchemists great sin was prolonging life

No, it was... human experimentation? Everyone *liked* him for prolonging life, Chosen considered him an ally, and Laurence thought nothing was wrong until she stumbled upon the city guard kidnapping a person off the street?

Mental Mouse

" that they fail to realize everyone in this verse believes that some suffering is necessary or unavoidable so that others won't suffer. "

Push that argument too far, and you get "Those Who Walk Away From Omelas". Which is far more ambivalent than most readers think. How much suffering are you "allowed" to shunt onto some people so that others won't suffer at all... as opposed to everybody suffering at least a little, like in our own world?

Liliet

Suffering is not shunted out in equal amount onto a sacrifice as in Omelas, it's just that some of it is not preventable.

Javvies

Have you forgotten that he dropped a plague on a few thousand civilians that were on his side? And then instead of healing them, sealed them in to die in agony.

He's the sort of person who, if he deems it necessary, will burn the orphanage with all the orphans in it.

If you told him fifteen years ago that one of the girls in the orphanage Cat was in would over day become the Squire and be called the Black Queen of Callow, but didn't know which girl it would be, he would kill all of them.

Liliet

>Have you forgotten that he dropped a plague on a few thousand civilians that were on his side?
>And then instead of healing them, sealed them in to die in agony.

It's a good question why he didn't heal them, I'm guessing making the plague unhealable was part of making it effective, so he couldn't. And he didn't 'seal them to die in agony', he specifically went through the town killing them so they won't suffer in agony.

And while I don't remember the exact size of the town, the point is that Amadeus was condemning many, many, many such towns to deaths from starvation and banditry, the total casualties being much bigger – even before you account for the war against the Dead King and the fact that without a solid back it would collapse and doom *the entire country* to deaths.

What do *you* think Tariq should have done in that situation?

Javvies

Bioweapons are straight up wrong. There are only a handful of times when bioweapons are potentially acceptable, and none of them involve allied civilians. Using a bioweapon against an enemy such as tyranids or zerg, that's fine. Against almost

any lesser grade of threat? No.
Black and the Legions are nowhere near the threshold where bioweapons are on the table to even be considered, much less used.

What Tariq should have done? Arrange to have Black cut off or intercepted, either at the village Black was boarding his troops at, or at his destination, with an actual army.
Or, actually no. What Tariq truly **should** have done was kept his word and stayed in Laure. And/or taken Cat up on one of her offers.

Remember – Black decided to turn around. He doesn't want the Dead King winning any more than any of the Heroes do. He knows full well that the Dead King is not a neighbor you want to have. Admittedly, Black wouldn't mind the 10th Crusade redirecting itself away from Callow and Praes and expending itself on the Dead King.

[Liliet](#)

>Bioweapons are straight up wrong. There are only a handful of times when bioweapons are potentially acceptable, and none of them involve allied civilians.

Why?

>What Tariq should have done? Arrange to have Black cut off or intercepted, either at the village Black was boarding his troops at, or at his destination, with an actual army.

That was impossible because of his mobility advantage. Armies move much slower than parties of Named.

>Remember – Black decided to turn around.

L M A O

As a fan of Amadeus who considers him a hero and dearly wishes he HAD decided to do the right thing here...

No.

No, that did not happen.

>"Then the entire north is about to be hip-deep in dead men," Grem bluntly said. "I can't think of another reason for Hasenbach to pull out.

> [...]
>“That is my assessment as well,” Amadeus said.
“And it means our horizons have just expanded a great deal.”
>[...]

>“Have you decided where we’ll be headed, after?” Ranker asked.

>“Still a matter of debate,” Amadeus admitted.
“Segovia would allow us to finalize our savaging of the First Prince’s opposition, properly damaging her position.”

>“But you’re thinking of Salia,” the goblin said knowingly.

>“We can’t take the capital,” he said, stating the obvious. “Even arming a third of that hive would allow her to drown us in numbers. But if we torch our way through its outlying territories, the sheer loss of prestige might see her unseated.”

Amadeus’s reaction to “oh the Dead King is attacking” was “sweet, that gives us an opportunity to plunder more”.

Had Tariq decided to stay in Laure... well, Catherine’s side of the conflict would have changed significantly, but Procer would be pretty much unsalvageable.

[Liliet](#)

P.S. By “Why?” I don’t mean “I disagree”, but “enumerate reasons”

Clint

Sure. His goals have never been a bad thing – it’s his willingness to do really, really bad things right now in the uncertain hope of a future greater good that makes him a horror.

In a world where perfect rationality made it possible to accurately calculate the expected future suffering resulting from each possible choice, his fundamentalist Utilitarianism would be good.

In his actual world, even with a Choir and his Behold aspect, he keeps choosing to create actual suffering right now in the belief that it might create much less suffering down the road – and guessing wrong.

Like the thousands he sent to die to power up his miracle to break the drow and create a Draw, giving him

the Pattern of Three he needed to kill Catherine. Those thousands died for nothing, because the future good never came – the Pattern of Three was broken.

Heck, he's going to be forced to return Black to Cat soon – and then all the innocent civilians who died of plague at Pilgrim's hand will also have died for nothing. (He sacrificed them to gain a hostage he could use to maneuver Cat into that same Pattern of Three.)

>"I will not break the world that is to spare the world that could be," the Peregrine said.

This is a huge, huge change from the Peregrine who turned Cat down after Camps.

It will be interesting to see whether the Choir of Mercy is willing to go along with a version of Utilitarianism that weights suffering/happiness by proximity and certainty of the prediction.

konstantinvoncarstein

He did horrible things, and many mistakes, it is true. But some of them were perfectly reasonable. He stopped by himself (and help if the Ophanim) a war which would have killed thousands.

If he managed to survive this long and be so respected, he must have be quite good at anticipating correctly the consequences of his decisions. Everyone makes mistakes (ok, his are pretty big, but my point still stand).

[Liliet](#)

>Those thousands died for nothing, because the future good never came – the Pattern of Three was broken.

Inaccurate.

It's the pattern of three taking shape that forced Catherine into making the deal as sweet as it is – a surrender, a formal victory for the Grand Alliance. She "twisted Tariq's arm into agreeing" by making the deal too good for him to refuse.

That's not dying for nothing.

>Heck, he's going to be forced to return Black to Cat soon – and then all the innocent civilians who died of plague at Pilgrim's hand will also have died for nothing. (He sacrificed them to gain a hostage he could use to maneuver Cat into that same Pattern of Three.)

Inaccurate.

He sacrificed them in order to stop Amadeus's rampage through Proceran provinces, burning farmland and granaries, spreading impending starvation and banditry. That goal was achieved regardless of secondary gamble on what he can do with Amadeus once he captured him. Hell, when he made the plague decision, he couldn't even know for certain Amadeus *could* be captured alive. The real goal was just stopping him, and that was successfully achieved.

>>"I will not break the world that is to spare the world that could be," the Peregrine said.

>This is a huge, huge change from the Peregrine who turned Cat down after Camps.

This is literally the exact same logic he used to turn down Cat. He will not break the world that is [the Grand Alliance] to spare the world that could be [Catherine's plans].

[shieldredblog](#)

Catherine never had to be forced into that deal though. The only issue was that the Grand Alliance refused her deals or wasn't trustworthy. Really, she was the one that forced the Pilgrim into peace.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine did have to be forced into *surrendering*. When she was talkign with Rozala earlier, her logic was that she couldn't allow herself to be beaten in the field because half of her authority rested on that never happening. She ended up deciding to give up that advantage, because the Pilgrim was too cunning an opponent to not have to give up *something* in order to get what she wanted.

Someguy

A hypocrite like Tariq can be manipulated via their hypocrisy once you grasp the core of what they desire as Cat shown last chapter.

Sword Bitch just needs to be slapped around every time she acts up...Someone call Rumena!

Raiseth

Oooh. I see, I think. If I am correct, the one additional crown she will sacrifice is the crown of Callow.

That's the reason she already named a heir apparent. One of them, I mean.

And I think this is also a scheme to completely break the Naming pattern of the Good Kings of Callow. I dunno how many of them were the Good Kings, but I'd guess a lot, considering the Praesi across the river.

Well, let's see if I'm right.

Nathan

I believe the Accords are meant to stipulate that no Named may hold a position of mortal authority.

luminiousblu

That's not really hypocrisy. Hypocrisy asking others to do as he says but not as he does, which isn't really what's happening. Tariq does exactly what he says and says exactly what he does. Just because others find it unreasonable doesn't make him a hypocrite.

Morgenstern

"...if Tariq really believes that Cat is a story of retribution against Calernia for what Callow had been forced to go through ... at what point does doubling down on throwing Callow under the bus/wagon for the benefit of others (aka, the actions drawing retribution) possibly become a good idea?"

At the point where you still think you can stop the retribution story in its tracks and kill the infant (story) in the cradle, because it seems necessary to hold the rest of the continent together against a MUCH larger threat. It's sad but has to be done to avoid unnecessary suffering that would be larger than the continuing unnecessary suffering of Callow, just as it has in the past. Greater good trumps lesser evils blahblah. 😊

[Javvies](#)

And since when does attempting that kind of forestalling/delaying retribution/consequences *ever* work out well for somebody?

"Kill all the male infants less than a year old in this area" Fifteen- twenty years later you find out you missed the one baby you actually needed to kill. And guess what? Said former baby opens a can of whup-ass on you and destroys all you hold dear.

Insanenoodlyguy

Different kind of infant. This is the "We have to stop the evil now while he's still vulnerable or he'll become a full

fledged god" kind of infant killing. A race against the clock to destroy the ascending bad while it's still destroyable. That story tends to succeed one of three ways A: They do it in the nick of time before he gets full invincibility. or B. The god is created but he has a vulnerability that leaves him killable after all. There's also C. Can't kill it? Fine, but you can seal/trap/contain it! Obviously they are aiming for B.

Javvies

That isn't a story of retribution/consequences for past actions/inaction coming home to roost.

That ascension story you're talking about is Akua's old story as Heiress/Diabolist ... not Cat's story as being the embodiment of retribution for the shit Callow's been through.

Cat's story as being embodied retribution? That's easily framed as the child that's destined/propheesied to bring down your kingdom for your bullshit. And trying to head that off by killing the child *never* works.

Insanenoodlyguy

It's not. It's a shift to an entirely new story. Which is exactly what Cat wants. This story is entirely circumvented by the new emergent "We must stop the new Fae King" story. She's making a new infant to kill. Because that greater good thing is fine for a villian for whom you regret things didn't go differently with, but somebody you fought with for the greater good? That kind of betrayl might work for Saint, but it doesn't work so well for Tariq. Not when he's already made that whole "Won't sacrifice the world that is" speech. Cat is acting in good faith and he has no reason to believe she'll go back on her word. Fucking her over now in the name of killing the infant is what he's already been trying to do. He doesn't get to go back to it now unless she gives him damn good reason to change his mind. And he's already said it: She's not that stupid.

Mental Mouse

As per the Pesach tale that some in our own world celebrated just last week: "Pharoah, let my people go..."

Notice that in this sort of story, the kid gets just enough exposure to abuse to pick up a grudge without being actually broken by it, but also learns local ways well enough to hide among the populace until their awakening. In the Guide, Amadeus was clearly on the watch for this sort of tale, and

in Cat he turned the story from rebellion into (the next generation of) revolution.

Javvies

Coopting a potential Chosen One is still an entirely different kind of story from murdering them in their sleep.

And, if we go with the Moses analogy, Black was more or less planning to release them when Cat was ready, albeit with some (honestly not that onerous) conditions. And it mostly would have worked.

Except Malicia and Akua fucked things up.

And that's still a massively different approach to forestalling consequences, vengeance, and/or retribution from the one that Tariq is using ... which is more or less the standard "kill everyone who fits the details we have" method, that never, ever works.

Mental Mouse

The thing is, Black was manipulating this story, and in this case he actually switched roles. At first he was killing heroes in the crib and otherwise maintaining the Rule of Praes, but even he could see that was unsustainable, and that Praesi rule was not in fact gaining any legitimacy. So he essentially stepped in to play "Pharoah's daughter" himself, leaving the Pharoah role to Malicia.

Also, when has Tariq tried that sort of broad cull? His situation is indeed different; as he himself eventually realized, not just Praes but also Procer and Levant are owed retribution for the way they've fought over Callow. (q.v. the Long Price). And Tariq started the Guide very much in the position of "Yet Another" agent of foreign powers, squabbling over Callow as a prize without even considering them as a stakeholder. Only now has he begun to grasp his mistake in dismissing his opponents with "they must be wrong, because they're not obeying me".

Javvies

That's kind of my point.

Black was killing Heroes off for long enough to get to the point where he could pull off finding a suitable candidate to coopt. It took him a while – Cat was born after the Conquest and grew up during the Occupation. On the other hand, Black was actually doing far more than just kill off Heroes/potential Heroes, he was actually treating the average Callowan reasonably well and giving decent governance and enforcing the laws

more or less equally. The only thing drawing those Heroes was the fact that Black's a Villain who had managed to conquer Callow – his behavior and treatment of Callow during the Occupation very much was not a driving factor in Hero-spawning. Honestly? I think Black ultimately intended to bring in Callow and use an integrated Callow to help him complete the purge of the Praesi High Lords.

Tariq is/was trying to forestall consequences/vengeance/retribution by killing those he believed would be most responsible for delivering it/the one he believed was the embodiment of that retribution, without doing a thing about changing the conditions that inspired the consequences/vengeance/retribution in the first place. Trying to kill the one chosen/destined/prophesized/etc to embody/be the instrument/deliverer of consequences/vengeance/retribution, and doubling down on the kind of behavior that inspired those consequences/vengeance/retribution the way Tariq is/was ... that's not something that ends well.

Tariq murdered thousands of (allied) civilians in cold blood just to get a chance of having a shot at Black. He straight up murdered his brother (admittedly for murdering their sister), and then murdered his beloved nephew in cold blood.

He is the sort of person that if he considers your suffering necessary, he will do whatever it takes to ensure that you cannot avoid it.

If one went back in time fifteen years and told Tariq that one of the girls from the orphanage Cat was in would grow up to be the Black Knight's chosen Squire, leader of a Named Band of Five, nicknamed the Black Queen of Callow, by Callowans, he would absolutely burn the orphanage down with all the orphans inside of it. Or, well, to be fair, maybe he wouldn't actually use fire, maybe he'd drop some sort of plague on the place. But all those orphan girls would be dead. Except Cat, because when you massacre an orphanage to kill someone when you don't know exactly who your target is supposed to be, your actual target always survives.

[Mental Mouse](#)

That second paragraph, did Saint get at it? So many slashes... 😊

Yes, Black intended to permanently incorporate Callow, which would have given him and Malicia the time and slack to finish reforming the Praesi nobility. His treatment of the country was the first

layer of hero-proofing, cutting their numbers to where he could deal with the rest individually.

But he also knows that old song “you can’t always get what you want... but if you try some times, you’ll get what you need.” Cat in turn picked up on his basic goals, but jumped the tracks on his original plan. Since she was doing better for Callow than Amadeus had been, he left her to that and turned to other projects, like trying to convince Procer they had better things to do with their armies than going after Callow.

He didn’t really win that last one though, because instead of redeploying armies they sent a Named to take him down. I suspect that once Cat has Amadeus’ body and soul recombined, the very first thing she’ll do is slap him upside the head for running a “buddy movie” story, the sort where the protagonists inevitably die at the end.

And It didn’t help the big picture that in Cat’s absence, his own capture drew Callow’s Legions to Procer, where they were stranded by ongoing developments. and enmired by Kairos and DK’s plotting.

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah, he’d actually probably pull a black and go pick her out. And so in 15 years the White Squire would have emerged, the woman chosen for destiny by her Uncle Tariq (He’d be smart enough to avoid raising or training her directly but would enough of her life to be foully regarded) to go and reclaim her homeland.

[Javvies](#)

Based on what, exactly?
Everything we know about him and what he’s previously done indicates that he’d kill all the orphans and let the Gods sort them out.

He might pay for a nice memorial service and say he feels bad about it afterwards, but the orphans would all be dead.

[Liliet](#)

How so?

Kissaten

It'd only a Choir. IIRC one of Dread Emperors waged war and conquered one of them? Also Dead King stole a He'll and is *fine*, I don't think choirs are so fundamentally different, it'll at most lose it's blessing from Above and stop doing anything.

devildragon777

Kairos needs to be dead, and soon. Whatever he's playing at, it ain't good.

(Also, he's absolutely going to try and do something that makes the Pergrine break his oath)

[Javvies](#)

Well, yes. He absolutely does.

And, yeah, he's definitely going to try that, just for kicks, even if he doesn't really think he can succeed.

konstantinvoncarstein

Followed by Hierarch. He is trying to judge a Choir trough its heroe. If I want to know what will happen if it is found guilty, I don't want to see the consequences for the world. Even if presently it is unsavory, Mercy had do much good throughout the centuries.

The only good things with that would be that it is a suicide move. Absolutely all heroes on the continent, or even on the world, would come to kill Hierarch, and Bard would story-fu him to death.

IDKWhoitis

I would imagine the beginning of the trial would be establishing the "Heavens told me to do it". Then a trial and judgement would follow that would either clip the Angels wings or exile them from Creation.

There's little the Gods can do, outside of appealing or just trying to ignore the verdict, but I imagine meta-schenaigs ensue.

caoimhinh

They need to find a way to stop the oath-making to happen at all. For example: going through this business of making Larat a god and killing him to make the Highway to Keter before sweating the oaths.

However, Kairos is mad but not an idiot, so I doubt he would go through with this so easily, he likely will want the oaths done as soon as possible.

Then again, they only have about an hour to carry out the plan,

so they might still bullshit him to wait and then going back to their words. Pilgrim already has done that, after all.

caoimhinh

swearing* the oaths. LOL

[Mental Mouse](#)

The problem is, if the party feeds Kairos to the nascent god, then their “highway” world will be crazed, treacherous and rude. Possibly Peregrine could be the “plus one” as part of his Heroic Sacrifice.

[Liliet](#)

i keep reading ‘crazed, treacherous and nude’

[Mental Mouse](#)

Keming, WordPress has it(*). I can’t be arsed to fiddle with the fonts, but bumping the text size up a notch seems to help.

(*) <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Keming>

[Mental Mouse](#)

The problem is, Kairos’ Role *is* a Trickster role, and includes the usual “improbable survival”. He’s the spider that you set the house afire trying to destroy, and then as you’re fleeing the flames, you see him and his friends scuttling across your lawn.

My very own name

How awesome can Ivah be? The Lord of Silent Steps is indeed a most silent drow.

taovkool

Badass high level maneuverings from everyone involved.

To the Princes’ perspective this might as well be the Ebb and the Flow – Chosen Edition.

konstantinvoncarstein

Now they know how the common folk feel. Maybe it wil make them a bit wiser.

Valkyria

Well I don’t know if it will make much difference in their future lives now....

Someguy

Wisdom from Proceran royalty.....HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!
what the fuck???

ATRDCI

From the Prince's perspective it is, among other things, "What the fuck is this foreigner doing presuming to speak for the First Prince?"

IDKWhoitis

While they may not love the idea, everyone present who matters should be smart enough to realize that obstacles to peace will be listed as "battle casualties" on the official record.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not exactly obstacles to "peace" at this point, but certainly the juggernauts are playing, and lesser powers can get out of their way or be crushed.

Skaddix

I mean Pilgrim is the highest ranking Hero in the field and the defacto rule of Levant ergo without Cordelia or her Uncle present he probably is the highest ranked official in the Grand Alliance.

Kissaten

Go! Go! Team Deicide!

erebus42

Well, that is a nasty little trap; plenty of ways to screw over everyone. Definitely a very Kairos move.

Also, awesome as always to see Ivah get out there and get shit done. I posted in a previous chapter about the distinct lack of Trickster named running around, and while Ivah certainly lacks the mischievous nature and overall wildcardness of the archetype, its illusion skills are coming along quite nicely. I could definitely see it developing into this role for Catherine in the future if not an outright name.

medailyfun

One can't come up with more trickster character than the Tyrant

erebus42

A fair point, maybe I'm just looking for more neutral non-militant named to get involved.

Cicero

Trickster = Bard

[Mental Mouse](#)

Oh, she's certainly in the general category, but she's got plenty of competition.

IDKWhoitis

Malz is going to fear Cat for the foreseeable future. Predicting every move in a three part play, from start to finish, and bringing everyone to their very knees.

While technically surrendering.

Like how the fuck do you plot against such a monster? How do you fight it? Can it even be killed?

The strongest, brightest, and wisest heroes just effectively gave up. The twisted Tyrant couldn't shake her. The monster has been smoking and not surprised once.

Malz will remember this for the foreseeable future. And boy do I wish she replaces Cordelia in the long run. She's the one that has stared all the true horrors in the face, and has proven very competent.

[Sugar Roll](#)

She's one of the seven crowns. Not sure what's going to happen to them but if I understand it correctly, it involves their deaths. So if Rosalie is going to be afraid of the Black Queen, she'll do it as a ghost.

byzantine279

Nah, if it involved their deaths it would be pointless for Cat to have them watch.

[Sugar Roll](#)

I don't know man. You'll have a villain story playing out to give birth to a god. It feels like human sacrifice is exactly what's required for this.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think Catherine would have gone with this, nor the heroes she's pitching it to.

Andrew Mitchell

Agreed. But is it just the crowns? Or the crowns + abdication? Or the crowns + dissolution of those principates? Or something else???

[*Liliet*](#)

INDEED 😊

Clint

Where do the seven principates fall on the map? Do they form a contiguous territory that could end up as a new country?

[*Dresden 67*](#)

Not even close.

Most of them are Arlesites, but they're not contiguous.

There of them are Alamans, and they're all over the place.

Good suggestion though, it would have been an interesting outcome.

Insanenoodlyguy

It's the second one even if that's not needed, though it surely increases the weight of the act in the way stories like. They had a royal order that was very clear. If they stop fighting the Black Queen and work with her instead, their crowns are forfeit. Effectively going along with this plan means they lose their thrones. Might get them back later, but this will definitely be the prince's graveyard.

Agent J

If it involved their deaths the Heroes would never have gone for it. That wouldn't get written off as casualties of war. That would be nothing short of blood sacrifice which is capital 'E' Evil.

[*Liliet*](#)

Cordelia is damn great too, let's not forget her play against Malicia to end the civil war.

And I'm hoping for Malanza actually coming around on Cat like "wait, she can do THIS, and what she chooses to do with it is help us? I'll take ten please and thank you"

Clint

Cordelia has certainly been given a huge lesson in "Heroes aren't your friends."

Cat's Lesser Evil probably looks a lot more palatable than Saint's Greater Good.

erebus42

Yeah, most people seem reasonable compared to Miss "Let's kill everyone but don't worry it will all work out because Good always wins".

[Mental Mouse](#)

Sounds like other people could gain some empathy for Cat's struggles with the Bard.

Machofish

Oohlala. White Knight vs. Hierarch is going to be a brutal, splendid business to behold, I'm sure.

konstantinvoncarstein

behold or Behold? 😊

ruduen

"The one we'll bring with us into the deeps," I said. "To be bestowed only at the heart of it."

Hm. It's the "bring" part that throws me off. Otherwise, my money would be on Cat attempting to kill the bit of the Dead King in Masago to qualify.

I wonder if there's an appropriate loophole available, or if Cat would bother lying about that bit?

Dhael

I think she going to sacrifice Saint. Cat's wording through this has been pushing Saint into a role as the Blind Extremist. She gave nearly everyone a chance, to chime in on the deal; while constantly picking at Saint, forcing her into a more and more extreme stance. And these kind of world ending scenarios the Extremist is always the one to die near the end.

[Liliet](#)

Saint is explicitly not one of the options.

Speculation about the plot

Saint is not one of the obvious options to the Rogue Sorcerer, but she does hold Dominion. It could be that the foundation of Dominion is very privately held knowledge that only Cat and Saint actually know. I think Cat was spelling out his thought process rather than indicating that Saint was really off the table for this. It would neatly tie up so many loose ends and even fits with needing a cut to open the Gate. Saint would be making a very useful artifact. Saint's Dominion stands distinct from earthly Creation, but is invokable in Creation and was heavily referenced in her last POV. Saint has indicated if she lives until the morning she will kill Catherine. Saint was groomed by the Bard to accelerate the war that released the Dead King. Saint has had visions of being in a Band of Five one last time. Saint is old / two days away from retirement. Saint has been racking up negative story karma like gangbusters. Saint has no clear value story-wise at this point since she's just the brawn working under Pilgrim. I predict Pilgrim will be the one to deliver her to Larat as a way to protect Cat and the future she envisions. I think Ivah is the actual fifth member of the Band for Story purposes after Saint's sacrifice, and the events are how he comes into a Name.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine commented that she was pretty much talking past him to Kairos and Tariq.

And I'm pretty sure Cat plans to abdicate, here and now, as the last crown. She's just not saying it in advance because that's not how the story is properly told (and she needs this story to be properly told to milk it for all it's worth).

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Saint has indicated if she lives until the morning she will kill Catherine.

Not quite:

> "If you still believe that, by morning light, then we will put it to judgement," Tariq said.

For starters, that's presumably *next* morning, as it is currently just past dawn (though eclipsed). At any rate, it will be after the whole 7+1 thing. We don't actually know what he means by "judgement", but I can easily believe these two old companions have worked up a routine

to handle disagreements between them. It may or may not involve angels.

Decius

Saint is going to die in battle against the Dead King's Dragon, or against the Dead King directly, in a manner that redeems her brand of extremism.

Possibly it will be as a result of the Dead King paralyzing everyone with tales of their compromises; because Saint never compromised her position even for advantage, she will be immune to such talk.

[LaNuup](#)

Well, it's a rather wild guess, since I do not know what will happen to the „plus one“ but maybe she means the soul of Amadeus that the Sorcerer carries. He is after all a Emperor that could have been but never was. That carries it's own weight in a story about a god and court that will never rise.

caoimhinh

And he was King of Callow in all but name for over 20 years, a major reason Catherine managed to ascend to the throne is that she was his successor.

Besides, we have already seen this "Amadeus is king of callow" excuse to be used successfully before, when Cat used it to claim the sword in the stone at Liesse in her last fight against William.

[Javvies](#)

There's no way Cat plans to, or signs off on, sacrificing Amadeus. She wants her father *back*, not dead.

The "and one" is more likely to be Kairos or Laurence. Unless she pulls the trigger on knocking off Akua, but I don't see that happening yet.

medailyfun

WTF? Why do you think it should involve a life sacrifice? After all, they are not going to actually kill the princes for the crowns, so it means the one crown should be just given/taken with the narrative weight behind, and the most obvious candidate is Cat herself with her long-planned and long-prepared abdication.

konstantinvoncarstein

But if she gives (figuratively) her crown, Vivienne cannot become Queen. My bet is on Pilgrim

[Liliet](#)

Eh, Vivi's already her successor. I think it'll work out fine.

[Fayhem](#)

I don't think she could give her crown to Viv and have it count as such, but *technically* she declared Vivienne her successor *before* going to do the sacrifice of crowns or however precisely this is going to work. If Cat sacrifices her crown without explicitly saying she's just giving it to somebody else then the government of Callow will still go to it's default "hey we don't have a ruler" protocol of "let's check our line of succession, oh hey look it just got clarified and we have a heir apparent, isn't that handy". It's very technicality-based rules lawyering, but finding a loophole and driving a freight train through it is kind of 90% of Cat's MO (the rest is stabbing and goblinfire).

[Fayhem](#)

Oh, and another 50% of Cat's MO is sass. Yes, that's more than 100%. That's because that's how much sass she has. Her sass is so concentrated it violates the laws of logic and reality. A sassgularity, if you will.

[Liliet](#)

Yep!

This is a fae bargain. Technicality-based rules lawyering is what those are MADE OF

Kissaten

Well, there's a Black who is a claimant to something. Maybe they can bestow him with the proper title, he was very White Knight'y when it all started, with the girl abducted by evil Emperor and making a band of Calamities, it's not entirely above him to be a rightful heir to something.

[Euodiachloris](#)

He might give up on his potential to gain a new name, the crowns he chose to never hold and the Creation he has always tried to save...

And become the curator of the Shard; guarantor of the Accords, a Courtless not-King among the Fae.

While laughing at the irony the whole way.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Also, if the not-Queen of Refuge should ever wish to visit the not-Refuge of vaguely-Arcadia, well... It's not like Ranger is shy about blood prices. 😊

[Liliet](#)

I don't think that's how it's going to go but I love your logic anyway

Morgenstern

I'd wish we'd see that story instead of the Larat one we'll probably get. But oh well, this is not a fairy story, is it... 😊

edrey

maybe is amadeus, he is there and has been forgotten so the most unexpected is the most likely, right

Fahri Agam

Excuse my ignorance, but of the seven princes and "one", who is the "one?". And if Larat is the "one", why would he ever agree to work with Cat?

Amazing chapter as usual – Absolutely loved it.

[Liliet](#)

Seven and one have to all be mortal rulers.

The question of who's the one is still open 😊

Decius

Everything is mortal to the Saint of Swords.

[Liliet](#)

...well, you're not wrong

etheric sentinel

No, it's "seven mortal rulers and one." The one is not included in the "mortal rulers." Implicitly a ruler, though, especially

etheric sentinel

Yuck, double post. How do I remove this one?

etheric sentinel

No, it's "seven mortal rulers and one." The one is not included in the "mortal rulers." Implicitly a ruler, though, especially since s/he is giving up a crown!

[Liliet](#)

I mean I read it as just a word order reversal -\/(0.-)\/- but now that you say it, I see how it could be read the other way too

caoimhinh

That's also a heroic tool, you know? Having the conversation with the enemy-villain transmitted live to other people (especially those of importance) while the enemy is unaware of this and thus reveals their true nature.

Catherine has with this shown herself as the most level-minded person in the field, the one who has a plan and also the one who is looking for peace.

Exposing the murderous nature and total disregard for lives that the Saint has, showing the Pilgrim bending in acceptance to her plan (and passing over the authority of Cordelia) due to his unshakeable desire to keep suffering at minimum, and also proving once more that Kairos is a crazy bastard who can't be trusted. Right in front of seven of the Princes of Procer, including a couple of the most influential and a representative of the First Prince herself.

All of this, as part of her plan, all of this while being in control of the situation the whole time and even predicting the seemingly unpredictable actions of the Tyrant of Helike.

They will fear her for this.

A lot.

konstantinvoncarstein

Nice move, indeed 😊

Valkyria

Of course they will. And I agree fully with you. But how will word get out if the princes all get a little headless?

[Liliet](#)

Crownless, not headless.

[Liliet](#)

On the other hand, "villain revealing an unpleasant truth at an inconvenient time to sow discord among the forces of Good" is also a trope.

Catherine needs to be very, very careful with this.

Aston W

Crab. Bucket.

[sengachi](#)

Well. This will change the shape of Calernia for all time. Introducing a whole second landscape on which armies can maneuver and deploy and a network of quick-travel portals through which trade can flow is going to alter **everything**. So much of these nations' positioning depends on geography. A century from now, not a single mainland border will remain unchanged.

Furthermore, aside from Catherine personally being especially well suited to build these portals, this new realm seems much easier for villains to exploit than heroes. The "villain gets the first move" trope synergizes very well with these travel gates, and in particular Praesi villains are going to have a much easier time figuring out how to make and break gates.

Yet the Pilgrim is willing to back this idea with almost no arguing (they decided to go for a plan with centuries-spanning consequences in under an hour, that counts as almost no arguing), to shave off a month or two of the travel time necessary to get a hundred thousand and change soldiers and a handful of heavyweight names to the Dead King's battlefield (the Pilgrim's still not fully aware of just how **much** power the drow promise to bring to that fight, nor that this force is merely their vanguard).

Holy fuck. I think my threat estimate for the Dead King just ticked up **another** notch.

[Javvies](#)

It's not **just** to get everybody up north to face the Dead King.

It's also because the alternatives for what's going on with Masego and this chunk of Acradia are so much worse – option one is to let Masego (currently possessed by or otherwise under the influence of the Dead King) proceed unhindered, option two is to let Heirarch and Tyrant's plan proceed (the one that Cat warned the Dead King about), or option three which is Cat's plan.

Sometimes there are no good choices, only varying degrees of bad to pick from.

konstantinvoncarstein

I totally agree with you, but it will also make the Cavalry much faster.

medailyfun

I believe in this world the anchored realm can be unanchored and disposed of with the right Name and story.

[milieu](#)

I can't recall Kairos ever breaking his word, but everyone thinking that he is up to no good.

Could someone jog my memory if he ever has?

[Liliet](#)

I'm assuming killing rulers at that league meetup qualifies. I doubt they DIDN'T swear oaths / give their words formally to NOT kill each other.

Clint

His whole play in Iserre has been to swear alliance and friendship with each and every side while betraying all of them in spectacular fashion.

You could argue that it's not really a betrayal since no one believed his promises, but it's definitely reason to think they were all correct in not trusting his word.

Kissaten

All his alliances always were secret. The only legal dealings he has are within the league and are curated by Hierarch. Same goes for his enemies, not a single one of them dealt with him in good faith. I don't think it counts as an oath if neither side was willing to see it through

konstantinvoncarstein

What would have happened if Catherine had not stolen the princes? There would have been 2 plans left for this shard of Arcadia, Neshama's and Kairos, but the former is aware of and can stop the latter. It would have been a bad thing for everyone.

[Liliet](#)

Kairos loves those, as villains do. Better everyone lose than everyone win.

[Mental Mouse](#)

"As villains do?" Not our Cat!

[Liliet](#)

Nor Amadeus 😊

edrey

so those seven are death right? it is the graveyard of princes after all

[Euodiachloris](#)

Well, their titles are dead. Their administrative personas within the body politic have just acquired headstones.

And, they have witnessed Pilgrim helping to dig the graves without consulting any of Procer's checks and balances within their Ebb and Flow. Because they have just had underscored what many of them have been noticing for weeks: the Alliance cares nothing for the sovereignty or cultural identities of people or countries.

And, thus, they witness what they did to Callow.

Stevedave

Calling it now; the Rogue Sorcerer is the dead king in disguise. He doesn't fit into the weight class as the rest of the party. In addition, Larat never uses his Name, only calling him "a sorcerer of roguish inclinations". He might have gotten himself taken over by reading the dead kings naughty book. I reckon Masego will be the real 5th in the party, taking the place of the sorcerer archetype.

Jason Ipswich

That would be so darkly awesome. It would also let Saint go down swinging, "in combat with the Dead King", but still leave him as a villain.

[Mental Mouse](#)

We haven't seen much of him, but Cat noted that he does fight with the big guys, and never gets hurt *or* pulls out a nuke. He's in the right weight class all right, but with a different mode than Warlock, Heiropant, WoW, etc. Probably he has a Luck aspect of some sort.

[Liliet](#)

FUCKING BLESS
THE BEST

medailyfun

btw, why the Bard does not watch this interesting conversation?

Clint

My theory is that Cat and Tyrant have both managed to counter Bard's aspect that makes her a witness to every significant story event.

Tyrant managed this when Hierarch accused her – in what I think was the birth of his third aspect. If she shows up anywhere where Hierarch's law holds, then she's subject to being put on trial for her crimes. She is preemptively banished by the mortal danger of an aspect-driven mob trial.

More speculatively, I think Cat has used Sve Noc to manage keep her aspect from detecting those pivotal events – the same way they countered Pilgrim's Behold aspect. It's certainly the case that Sve Noc know, fear, and hate the bard, so it seems likely that they've worked out a counter.

[Fayhem](#)

Interesting theories, and both are plausible. Let me suggest a third: when Kairos broke down the Bard for Catherine, he mentioned that one of her rules was that she was always bound to flee/run from what she most desired. When she ran from Hierarch it was specifically *when he was talking about putting the Gods themselves on trial*. Now, isn't that interesting, in light of her being compelled to run *from what she most wants*? And in light of how it was alluded to/intimated that Bard got locked into her not-actually-that-fun Role seemingly for all eternity as a *punishment*, with the implication (IIRC) that it was a punishment for mucking with some of the Gods' designs?

Maybe Bard can't show up because she's afraid of Hierarch. Or maybe it's because when the Gods created her Name they got a little too clever for their own good, and now she can't show up to interfere with what Cat is doing on behalf of the Gods because Bard knows this could lead towards (in some way, not sure precisely how yet but I suspect it ties into Cat's plans to subvert the very nature of the Good v. Evil conflict on Calernia) what she most wants and the Gods bound the necessity to run from the presence of that into the very fabric of her Name?

There's not enough evidence to confirm that so I'm very much not sure yet, but if that turns out to be true I might literally die laughing.

Andrew Mitchell

I like this a lot. I'd find it extremely satisfying if the Bard turned out to actually be on Cat's side.

Liliet

"I was always trying to help you, Catherine!" "Right... so what about Liesse?" "Err... well..."

Gunslinger

Maybe cause too many people know her game already that it's easier to move the stories in shadows. Or this is what she wanted already so she doesn't have to appear

Liliet

She's forbidden direct touch. Even just *appearing* before these people would explode the entire situation right off the rails as they'd probably talk about her instead of what they were already going to talk about. Ergo, she can't be here.

Mental Mouse

Not to mention there's at least two Named with "mind-reading" aspects, who might leand more than she wants. (Be cool for us, though.) Not to mention Sve Noc (IIRC the crows aren't currently present, but Mighty and Cat are), who might be able to do worse: Not only read her, but maybe even pin her in place. Or at least provide a god's analysis of her disappearing trick.

werafdsaew

Komena might be present:

Liliet

Mhm!

Me Axel

"`There would be a time, after the war turned here and the Red Flower Vales broke, where the Heavens would assemble their sharpest blade. The ancient forms would be observed. Five heroes, sent into the breach to quell the howling dark.`" from Book 4, Kaleidoscope II

"`- inevitability," the Grey Pilgrim echoed. "A band of five, like few this world had seen, to smother that infant god in the cradle."

The last words had his face going ashen, for some reason.""

Tariq just understood that the promised "heroic band" might not be all that heroic.

Jason Ipswich

Isn't that how he murdered his nephew?

Mental Mouse

Looking back there, his lineup included himself and Saint, but he didn't even get the Rogue Sorcerer (he thought Witch of the Woods), and of course the other heroes (WK and Champion) are replaced by villains. I have to conclude that he was calculating rather than foreseeing, unless Cat's Everdark adventures actually voided prophecy!

An aside: From that chapter, I also see:

> All the others had warmed to Tariq, after Laurence acted as offensively in councils as she could. Offered him trust, treated him as the man of reason holding back the reckless Saint of Swords. All of them save Prince Arnaud of Cantal.

In other words, at least sometimes they're *purposely* playing "good cop/bad cop"! (Also, look for trouble from Arnaud.)

Liliet

Yeah, that was just calculating/guessing.

And yeah, they do that :3

ninegardens

So... I just gotta put it out there:

Pilgrim is my favourite character in these whole stories.

Okay, maybe also Tyrant and Anarexes.

But lets talk about Pilgrim, and why he is great for the story.

The arrival of Pilgrim on stage basically heralded that start of Cat playing diplomacy. I know this was cats choice, but just by existing, by being both reasonable and desperate enough, Pilgrim makes the story so much more interesting.

Books one and two were Vs Akua and William, and both those were enemies which... pretty much just had to be beaten. Even in a 3 way game, the goal was winning.

But Pilgrim makes things interesting, and even though people might give him crap as a hypocrit etc etc etc... basically he seems like a desperate fearful dude trying to make the best of a bad situation, with incomplete information, a history of every villain betraying them (as mentioned this chapt), and a lot of blood on his hands no matter what decision he makes. Not a fun job.

And the part that really gets me is... if this oath gets somehow broken, and Cat is forced to kill him, it is very very easy to imagine him giving the order that the Dominion must forgive her...

because she is only holding up her end of an oath, an oath required to end a war.

Liliet

Mhm

Mental Mouse

I think if the oath is broken during this mission, that would pretty much require Pilgrim's Heroic Sacrifice to fix.

Aotrs Commander

Well, at least Pilgrim and Kairos are smart enough to know when they've been outplayed.

If left to Saint's methods, one imagines the continent would be entirely under the Dead King's control inside five minutes on the basis that there would be no-one left you actually, y'know, fight him.

onedollargum

I guess this means that "everyone of importance" has already heard the oaths, and that most of them are likely to bite it. Good deal, Cat.

Liliet

They aren't going to die.

SMHF

The only thing that'll make Cat's plan more perfect, is if she pushes the Heroic Sacrifice role of their Band of Five onto her dear friend Kairos!

Tom

Cat has had a lot of things go her way lately... which can only be cause for suspicion! The longer things go her way without major setbacks, the bigger the eventual cost will be for her. Maybe giving up her own crown as the +1 would be enough, but I'm suspicious that the Pilgrim will sacrifice himself heroically, probably in the process of killing Divine Baby Larat, because Cat giving up her crown could still be "things going according to plan", whereas she keeps saying it would be impossible to get the Liesse Accords signed if he dies. And what is a more appropriate obstacle for Cat than something "impossible"? 😊

Plus the Pilgrim's change of stance smells like a redemption story:

> "It sees to our every need," the Peregrine said, and turned rueful eye on me. "How neatly you have tied us with the strings of necessity."

> I met his gaze unblinking.

> "Should I apologize," I said, "for making this a victory for others than myself?"

> He turned away at that. Both at what I'd said, and at what was implied: that'd he been so set on being my enemy I'd had to work against him to help him. Silence stretched for a tense moment.

To fit with Cat's tagline ("and then it got worse"): Pilgrim sacrifices himself, Saint gets red in the face and starts screaming "I told you so!" while flailing at Cat, Cat puts her down with her staff-sword-story, the Rogue Sorcerer vanishes to go tell Grand Alliance people of Cat's "betrayal", Kairos cackles and finally unveils a scheme that Cat hadn't predicted. 😊

Liliet

Catherine does tend to have things go her way at major victory points 😊

JRogue

Question. Grey Pilgrim stated that it would be; "A band of five, like few this world had seen, to smother that infant god in the cradle."

How can Cat be part of this "band of five" if she does not have a Name? I would think that it would be a requirement for this "band of five" to have narrative weight.

Kissaten

Gods give Names to Roles, Names aren't a requirement for anything by themselves alone. While playing a Role people get everything required to see the story done, sometimes it requires a Name.

JRogue

That is kind of my point. She herself does not have a Name and she has not found that "rut" in creation for a Role either. I believe she is actively avoiding that. She has the ability to manipulate (masterfully) those with Names and Roles to get the ends she wants, which being outside of the Name and Role narrative helps her, and once again something I believe she is avoiding on purpose. The thing is if she is included in a Band of Five wouldn't that lack of Name and Role be a detriment? Something that works against the idea? A Band of Five are people with Names and Roles needed to fix a

bad situation, she has all the know-how, with none of the narrative weight. I mean, that lack of Name did not prevent GP from pulling her into a Rule of Three situation, but that has been happening for a long time. I don't know. Just pondering.

Mental Mouse

Cat is **carving** a Role into Creation, and perhaps other worlds as well. Heck, one of her *followers* inaugurated a new Name! As Priestess of Night, leading three Heroes and a Villain, she has indeed formed a band "like few this world had seen" (if any, ever). She may not have taken a Name, but I'd bet that upon her death the Name of Black Queen will be taking applicants in her mold. With an orc adjutant included in the package.

Liliet

I think it's a bit the other way round: Names are something you can get as a reward for fitting into this kind of story. So you fit the story first and get a Name on top of it, not the other way round. It's not more contradictory than Evil Squire Catherine pulling a Sword out of the Stone and getting an angelic resurrection.

Agent J

Are you suggesting that Catherine does not have narrative weight?

Agent J

"-she has all the know-how, with none of the narrative weight."

Oh. Evidently, you are. Dude, we're *literally reading her story right now*. There isn't a single other person in-universe with half as much narrative weight as Catherine Fucking Foundling.

Besides, you mentioned it yourself, if she can be roped into a Rule of Three, she can be part of a Five Man Band.

Besides, she's got many Names. Black Queen and First Under the Night chief among them. They may not be aspect granting Names, but they have weight and the latter has power backed by Goddesses.

... honestly, I think people are too married to the concept of Names and Aspects. They are related to, but not requirements for story weight.

Barrendur

I like Larat a great deal; he's the classical archetype of the Fae. He amuses and intrigues me... plus, I have to admit, I have rather a crush on him. I really resent Cat's high-handed dismissal of him as anything more than an "ingredient" for her planned Gate network.

"Oh no," says Cat, Black Queen and Mistress of the Double-Standard; "Larat is Fae and cannot change, so I have to break the oath I made to him as his sovereign and murder him. Shucks; sucks to be him."

I would very much enjoy seeing a typically Fae response from Larat to Cat's proposed 'disposing' of him; something vicious, clever and completely unanticipated. I think Cat has it coming, and Larat has a narrative bonus against her. Cat hasn't given sufficient consideration to Larat and his nature; she's received his oath of fealty but broken her oath to *him* as his sovereign, and this was all conducted within *Creation*, not Arcadia... where Larat is subject to the limitations and benefits of NARRATIVE.

So sing, O Muse, of a Fae lord betrayed by an oath-breaking sovereign, who means to murder him in a ritual of darkest magic... and tell me which one of them has more narrative weight.

Mental Mouse

On the contrary – she is *keeping* her oath, which releases him from service. At which point he's an unbound fae and she owes him nothing.

As far as narrative weight, Larat has been shirking his duties and staying out of sight, and acting only under direct orders... rather than doing stuff that would give him narrative weight. He is strictly a side character, who has (by SOP) been scheming to increase his power, but has not properly considered his role under the terms of Creation.

Adrian V

You missed a point there, she is only going to kill him when he inevitably backstabs her, and apparently he has already tried or placed the pieces to do it but was thwarted.

Liliet

As Catherine has pointed out to Tariq, in the timeline she's constructing, assembling a band of five against Larat comes *after* his sudden yet inevitable betrayal. Just because she considers it an inevitability doesn't mean the cause-effect link is going to be broken: *if* he doesn't betray her, he'll be fine!

Mind mage

So did anyone else notice the Rogue Sorcerer use the former Black knights signature phrase?
(Im on my phone and can't spell his name).
It's even said the same way and I can't think of anyone else whom has said it.

Andrew Mitchell

Interesting. It's not said the same way. IIRC Amadeus always seemed to say it as a sentence "Mistake."

But it IS said with emphasis; so perhaps it is signalling something important. Maybe the Rogue Sorcerer has been talking with Amadeus? Maybe they have made a deal? Maybe Amadeus is possessing him in some manner?

All this is unlikely IMO and the last idea is almost certainly wrong. But it's always fun to speculate!

[Mental Mouse](#)

That last idea – maybe RS was foolish enough to imitate Cat's example!

[Mental Mouse](#)

And that gives me another idea, even nastier. Suppose Pilgrim ends up on the Mantle of Woe? Cat would effectively have a shoulder angel to go with her shoulder demon. 😊 But poor Pilgrim, gone from Light to Night!

Andrew Mitchell

And thus her ultimate aim is achieved:

To bring balance to the Force. (cue Star Wars theme)

Letouriste

So Malanza just seen Tyrant kill her...interesting

Chapter 34: Seven

"Never once have I betrayed, for such an act first requires the extension of trust."

– Dread Empress Foul II, the Forthright

Now, far be it from me to even remotely imply Kairos Theodosian was not at best the worst ally anyone would ever have and at worst essentially a malignant disease inflicted on Creation. That said when it came to, uh, the sheer number of crowned heads gathering in the Principate at any given time then he almost had a point. I'd had Hakram drill me on the names and attendant principalities, and still I was pretty sure I had at least two of them confused. Both Princess Bertille of Lange and Princess Leonor of Valencis were women in their late forties with dark hair and tan skin, which considering I'd never spoken a word to either did not make differentiating them at a glance easy. Still, it wasn't them that'd matter in that throng of royalty. The keystones here were two, princesses both. One of them familiar by now: Princess Rozala Malanza of Aequitan, who was still glaring at the Tyrant of Helike for his casual murder of her illusory form. Kairos seemed genuinely delighted at the prospect of having made yet another powerful enemy. The other I'd met only once before, when we'd had that pleasant chat under afternoon sun where I'd politely asked her and a few thousand riders to turn back. Princess Sophie Louvroy of Lyonis, one of Hasenbach's staunchest partisans in Procer and I suspected the check sent on Rozala in case her command of a large army so close to Salia prompted... ambitions.

Where Princess Rozala was dark-haired and dark-eyed, tall yet curvy in the way that classical Arlesite beauties tended to be, Princess Sophie was a pale blonder with blue eyes and a narrow face. The Princess of Lyonis was a few years older, I knew from the reports of the Jacks, but it was hard to tell at a glance. They were not the oldest of the seven royals standing revealed in the eclipse's gloom, nor those ruling the wealthiest or most influential principalities, yet there were no denying it was they who shared the reins of authority. Princess Sophie did so as the First Prince's eyes and ear in the south, while if Vivienne's spies had it right then Princess Rozala was considered the informal heiress to the coalition of crowns that Prince Amadis Milenan had laboriously assembled. Since the Battle of the Camps said Prince of Iserre had been cooling his heels in the hands of the Kingdom of Callow as a prisoner, so given the ever-fluid nature of Proceran politics it was only natural a successor had emerged. They could do worse, silently conceded. Malanza was a skilled commander, and though no great diplomat she was not without allure. It would be easy enough to contrast her solid military record to Cordelia Hasenbach's own lack of anything similar and reliance on her uncle the Iron Prince for all things warfare.

I doubted they'd ever have the votes to seriously threaten Cordelia in the Highest Assembly, but as a bloc of opposition headed by Princess Rozala they could be a force to reckon with.

"This is rank madness," a dark-haired woman said.

That accent was Alamans, not Arlesite, which should mean I was looking at Princess Bertille of Lange.

"It is certainly dubious," Princess Sophie of Lyonis agreed, watching me warily.

That sounded like a refusal in the making, and from one of the two people I would much prefer to be in agreement instead of opposition. It would establish whether what followed would be known as a grave diplomatic incident or a heroic bargain struck in the face of despair.

"The exact meaning of giving away a crown are still unclear," Prince Louis of Creusens calmly said.

The Prince of Creusens was one of Amadis' – now Rozala's perhaps – and somehow managed to make a suit of armour quite obviously fitted to him look too large for his frame. He had a scholarly look about him, and his russet eyes were calm even if half his face was a swelling bruise and he was being careful not to put weight on one of his legs. Too delicate-looking a man for me to find him attractive, I thought, but he was not unpleasant to look at.

"Would it mean abdication, Your Majesty?" he asked me outright. "The surrender of our sovereign lands to one of the fae, or even yourself? An offer so imprecise cannot truly be entertained."

"A trinket will have to be offered," I said. "But what you will be surrendering, in truth, is rather more abstract: it is you 'right to rule'."

"To clarify," Prince Louis calmly said, "such a gesture will not in and of itself mean abdication?"

"It most definitely does not," the Tyrant grinned. "And don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

"It will, save if you are fools," the Grey Pilgrim said.

For once, the sight of every prince and princess there unconsciously shifting to face him more fully did not bring out irritation. The respect that Tariq commanded and one of the oldest and perhaps the most famous living hero on Calernia was, for once, aiding me.

"Chosen," Princess Rozala said, "I would request your guidance in understanding this. I cannot and will not condemn the people of Aquitan to a grisly fate, not even for victory this day."

"Hardly a victory, that we dance one and all to the Black Queen's tune," the Prince of Orense scoffed.

Early fifties, this one, and the long brown hair that went down to his shoulders was also bound in a bun behind his head. Prince Rodrigo of Orense, of who I knew very little save that his open scorning of the First Prince in a formal vote had been the talk of the Principate in my absence – and not in a manner that was flattering for him, considering it was Cordelia Hasenbach who'd put an end to the Levantine raids that'd ravaged the south of his principality.

"You never were much of dancer, Rodrigo," Prince Arnaud of Cantal disdainfully said. "Leave this to your betters, would you?"

Ah, *that* fucker. Though not one of the royals here with true authority, Prince Arnaud Brogloise had raised my hackles more than once in the past. He was, at the very least, a prodigiously skilled actor. After the Battle of the Camps, when I'd still had the benefit of fae senses, I'd noted that his heartbeat never rose even when he was seemingly furious or busy shouting.

"Arnaud," Princess Rozala sharply bit out. "Chosen, I apologize for the interruption."

The Prince of Cantal look appropriately chided, though a mite resentful, and once more I wondered how much of it was an act if not the whole cloth. Rodrigo of Orense's lips quirked a tad smugly, but seemingly content with that intervening victory he pursued the conversation no further.

"You are forgiven," the Tyrant magnanimously allowed.

"Though the earthly crown will not be taken from your brow, save if you yourself do so, you will have lost the authority of a ruler in the eyes of the Heavens," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Lingering in that role after discarding it before Gods and men can only bring calamity."

"I figure it'd be subtle at first," I said. "Small nudges. Crops get a little worse, people listen a little less. If you keep holding, though, then it's a different story."

"Disease and strife," the Peregrine said, "and they will only grow, so long as authority is kept."

"To clarify," Prince Louis spoke once more, echoing his own words, "abdication in favour of kin would ward off this... curse?"

"It would," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Though ever bearing another crown would birth it anew."

The Prince of Creusens then, to my surprise, turned to me as if seeking confirmation. I nodded, as to the best of my knowledge it was true. His lips thinned, and I caught his muscles twitching as he stopped himself from looking at someone for guidance. By the

looks of it, I mused as I gauged the angle, it would have been Princess Rozala. One of hers, then. Said Princess of Aequitan was standing tall, fingers clenched, and met my gaze eye to eye.

"Foundling," she said.

"Rozala," I replied.

"This... lunacy of a land you speak of making," the Princess of Aequitan said. "Will you allow passage through it to any who would use it to fight the Dead King?"

"That will not be mine to decide," I said, "but I will bare sword to enforce such a term, should it come to that."

"The Kingdom of Callow and its allies will refrain from making war on the Grand Alliance, until the peace conference is ended?" Princess Rozala pressed.

"Safe in Callow's defence, or that of its allies," I agreed.

The other woman's jaw grew tight, eyes burning with something that was half fear and half fury.

"There is horror to the north, Catherine Foundling, the likes of which you cannot yet grasp," Princess Rozala Malanza said. "We war now against the Crown of the Dead not for *pride* or *right* or *faith*, but for the ugly prize of scant survival. In that struggle, Black Queen, do you claim to be friend or foe?"

"If your Grand Alliance makes accord with me, Princess of Aequitan," I softly said, "oh, what howling ruin I will visit upon the King of Death. I have dooms in my arsenal that the world will shake of them."

She breathed out shakily and straightened her back.

"Your word, Foundling," Rozala Malanza asked, eyes on mine.

"On my oath," I quietly replied.

Fingers steady, she unmade the claps of her helmet and ripped it off her head. Tossed, it flew and landed at my feet in a sprawl a snow.

"That's one," the Princess of Aequitan. "Ram it down his fucking throat, Black Queen. Hard enough that even in Keter they will hear the sound of our coming wrath."

"Malanza," Princess Sophie hissed, "you cannot simply-"

"It would be," Rozala said, "cheap at twice the price."

In the heartbeat that followed, I saw the lay of the royalty around them clear as day. Those whose gaze held admiration, but also misgivings: Louis of Creusens, Leonor of Valencis. Those who were moved to contempt instead, Bertille of Lange and Rodrigo of Orense. Arnaud of Cantal's face was befuddlement incarnate, though the sudden turn had surprised him enough the confusion for once did not reach his eyes. As for Sophie of Lyonis, she was a battlefield of fear and shame. *This, I thought, is why you are followers. Why even though the First Prince fears and dislikes her, it Rozala Malanza who was given the command.* And I would not let bravery, let sacrifice, pass unremarked. Not when I had the means of doing otherwise. Leaning on my staff, I limped forward and bent the knee long enough to catch the edge of Malanza's helmet. Catching her eye with mine, I tossed it back. She caught it, I thought, out of reflex.

"Foundling-" she began.

"Ivah," I simply said.

My Lord of Silent Steps without a word, and stepped out of my shadow as if it'd been laying within it. In its hands was held a crown of ivory and gold, the front set with a heavy topaz upon which a heraldic griffin had been carved. Behind me, Kairos began softly laughing. I held out my hand, and the drow placed the crown on it before offering a bow and vanishing behind a fresh veil of illusions.

"The crown of Iserre, offered by Amadis Milenan," I said. "Rozala Malanza alone of seven did not flinch, when sacrifice was asked. For that, she keeps her crown."

I could have waited until the others had been talked or coerced into giving their own crowns, but I'd felt in my gut I should not. I was not certain, though, whether this was one of the instincts that'd served me so well when navigating stories or simply because it would have been beneath all involved to give Rozala Malanza the honour her due as a trick instead of a forthright display.

"Connerie," Princess Bertille sneered. "You do not dictate to sitters of the Highest Assembly, Damned. Let Malanza waste her rights as she so desired, for I will not give mine."

"You presume much, Bertille," Prince Rodrigo snorted. "Not even ally to her cause, and you are to be exempt? I think not. At least I-"

"Enough," Princess Sophie snarled. "I will not have such disorder. The Princess of Lange is correct in that a foreigner may not speak to the affairs of the Principate. We will, among ourselves, discuss who should be exempt."

I looked at the Princess of Aquitan, then and what I saw on her face grieved me. Nothing in the loss of a crown moved me to sorrow, for I had little taste for mine and no reverence for those who'd earned their own by mere happenstance of birth. It was the raw, bleak disappointment I saw in a respected adversary as she stared the truth of her home in the eye. That, even as the sky was falling down on their heads, there were princes and princesses of Procer who would rather squabble than look up.

"It could be put to a vote," Princess Leonor of Valencis hesitantly said. "As is our way."

Something in Rozala Malanza's eye dimmed a little as the fourth voice of seven gave weight to the dispute. From the corner of my eye I saw the Tyrant of Helike writhing as if having a harsh episode of the shakes, but it was only barely held in laughter that had him convulsing. He silently mouthed thanks at me.

"Shame on you all," the Grey Pilgrim quietly said.

For a moment, the old man's resounding disappointment gave them pause. But only for a moment, because even a hero's chiding weighed short of a crown kept on the scales of the powerful.

"Chosen do not rule, in the Principate," the Prince of Orense said. "Much less those born in Levant. With all due respect, Grey Pilgrim, you have already overstepped tonight in presuming to speak for the First Prince of Procer. Let us not further--"

A bundle fell at my feet with dull thump. A straight-edge cavalry sword, wrapped in a cloak.

"I had," Louis Rohanon pensively said, "genuinely believed myself to be a decent man, until tonight."

The silence in the wake of his words was loud.

"And still I hesitated," the man who'd been the Prince of Creusens ruefully said. "If this is the truth of us, my friends, then we have no business wearing crowns."

"A delicate heart ever bleeds," Princess Bertille snorted. "Bled all the way out, it seems. Keep your empty sentimentalities to yourself, Rohanon--"

"Shame on you all," the Grey Pilgrim said, and the light in his eyes as he spoke was the coldest manner of mercy.

The old man took one step forward, the butt of his staff leaving the ground.

"Raise your hand to a sitter of the Highest Assembly and there will be war, Levantine," Prince Rodrigo warned.

"He's right," the Saint of Swords casually said, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Go for a walk, Tariq."

"Laurence-"

"You, Sorcerer," the Princess of Lange barked, face gone pale with fright. "Are you not a chosen of the Heavens? Will you simply allow this lunatic thug to murder-"

The knife sliced her throat open without much of a spill, for Prince Arnaud Brogloise of Cantal had a steady hand.

"Arnaud?" the Prince of Orense gulped out.

The Prince of Cantal waited until the Princess of Lange had fallen to the ground before kneeling at her side, ignoring her dying gasps in favour of opening the clasp of her sheathed sword and taking it off her belt. He tossed it at my feet.

"Will this suffice?" he calmly asked, wiping his bloody knife on his forearm.

"It will," I agreed.

"You'll get the Regal Kindness for this, Brogloise," Princess Sophie darkly said. "I'll ask the First Prince the right to force it down your throat myself."

"Unlikely," the Prince of Cantal noted, pawing at his armour and producing a small scroll stamped with a seal. "By the decree of Her Most Serene Highness Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer and Warden of the West, I have been granted prior and absolute amnesty for all actions taken in the preservation of the Principate, as well as plenipotentiary power to treat with foreign powers in her name."

"You were one of hers," Princess Rozala faintly said. "Gods, Arnaud, for how long?"

"Hers, yours, Milenan's," the Prince of Cantal bitingly said. "What childish way of thinking. My only concern, Rozala Malanza, is the preservation of the Principate of Procer. What could possibly matter even remotely as much?"

Cool eyes turned to the other royals who had been bickering, until moments ago.

"Must I murder every last one of you, or will a blade at your throat prompt a sudden swell of heroism?" Prince Arnaud mildly asked.

"I like him," Kairos mused. "He's got that, what do you call it?"

"Cold-blooded ruthlessness," I said.

"No, that's not it. Ah, a *knife*," the Tyrant of Helike said.
"He's got a knife."

Princess Leonor of Valencis had taken off her gauntlets, and her fingers were working on her ornate silver-enamelled helm. What I had taken for a decorative circlet soldered onto it turned out to be a silver tiara cleverly set into furrows. The Arlesite princess tossed it onto the pile at my feet, smile mirthless.

"What a slaughter of thrones you have made of this night, Black Queen," she bitterly said. "A princes' graveyard, shallow dug at your behest."

I looked at her then, truly looked at her. She had been among those who had admired Malanza's character even as she balked at emulating it, and for that she had earned more than simply my contempt. No layabout royal, this one, for closer survey revealed hands calloused from the arts of war and scars on her skin that had the make of blades. Her eyes were not cowed, even in loss, and even in her earlier quibblings she had not been spineless. *And yet.* I looked at Leonor of Valencis and what I saw was good blood, old blood, conqueror's blood – gilded history, ancient triumphs erected into throne. I saw a woman who'd been taught of *rights* alongside right, privilege perhaps not unkindly borne but never once questioned. I thought of the High Lords, then, and of something Hakram had once told me under a moonlit sky. *And they expected to win, too,* he'd said, speaking of our enemy. *Don't they always? Sooner or later, better blood wins out.*

And I couldn't mend that, I knew, because it was not in my hands to shape this world like clay – and it was, perhaps, for the best that it was not. It belonged to more than me, that sprawl of terror and wonderment, of pettiness and valour. It would take more than an orphan girl from Laure to make something new of it, no matter what powers I came to wield. But now and then, I thought, now and then I could wield the knife my father had pressed into my hand all those years ago. And if it was not always given to me to bring something beautiful into Creation, then at least I could expunge some unseemly piece of it. *You are part of this, Leonor of Valencis, I thought. Of this land of robber princes and hungry wars, of a tapestry of rapacious ambition so despised it took Akua's Folly for you to be trusted again. It might be that among your kind you are one of the better ones, but even should you not be guilty you would remain complicit.*

Let them be thankful I had only taken crowns, for I could have taken a great deal more and lost not sleep over it. The only inheritance I'd ever cared to claim was steady hand and an indignant rage that had cowed kingdoms, and within it there was not a speck of mercy for the likes of Leonor of Valencis.

"Tremble then, o ye mighty," I coldly replied, "for a new age is upon you."

Rodrigo Trastanes wrapped his sword in a banner, before adding it to the pile. Sophie Louvroy ripped twin ornate silver wings off her gorget and shot me a burning glare after dropping them. Arnaud Brogloise, face betraying not a flicker of amusement, offered the knife still freshly touched by the lifeblood of the Princess of Lange. And with that, seven crowns had been laid at my feet – they were, now, mine to pass on if I so wished. I went looking through my cloak, producing a bundle of wakeleaf that ended up nestled nicely in my pipe. I passed a palm over it, added a flicker of Night shaped into flame and inhaled with a little sigh of pleasure. Expectant gazes had been turned on me, now that my scheme had borne first fruit. Pilgrim, Saint, Sorcerer, Tyrant. And myself, nameless but high priestess of unruly goddesses. I blew out a stream of smoke.

"Now," I said, "shall we go on an adventure?"

Behind me a breach into Arcadia tore opened.

So it began.

[erraticerrata](#)

First update of the month, which means extra chapter. As usual it's up in the Extra Chapter tab. This one is titled "Peers" and it's from Black's POV, set in between the books IV and V.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yay! And we finally get an explanation of the crowns! Also a nice display of the Problem With Named that Cat has paradoxically been struggling with; on the battlefield, power trumps authority.

That said, I want to call out a textual problem: The first two sentences of this chapter are an ugly tone break. Cat's narrative tone is casual, almost conversational, but "Far be it from me" is downright chatty, something that should be in her italicized thoughts, not narrative voice (and especially not a chapter opening!). Likewise "when it came to, uh, the sheer number": That "uh" simply should not be outside dialogue quotes, and even in dialog, it's a bit "affected".

Normally I don't pick on tone (in part because you're pretty good at it), but those were glaring enough to poke me, even over my morning coffee.

Now off to the extra chapter!

[Liliet](#)

That's normal deep first person POV. Putting thoughts in quotes like that is imho an ugly narrative habit that sounds incredibly artificial.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's a common convention, and one which EE uses routinely. In this chapter, consider the bit starting with *You are part of this, Leonor of Valencis...*. It's not aloud, so quotes are right out, but neither is it exactly part of the narrative. It's essentially internal dialogue, which many authors, including EE, show with italics.

Be glad this milieu doesn't include telepathic conversations or the like. I've occasionally seen books where authors had to distinguish 6 or more different speech contexts, from internal thoughts to radio messages to telepathy, cyber-implant messages, and shouting across the room. In the same scene. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Lmao.

Yeah I'm glad erratic doesn't go too fancy ♥

Belac93

Wholly disagree here. Sometimes you need to focus more on making a story sound good than proper grammar, and those fit very well for a first person POV

[Mental Mouse](#)

The problem is that both, and especially the "uh", make sense for speech, but in a written account they appear "affected" (and would probably be edited out in-world 😊). Compare to, say, Steven Brust's voice for Vlad Taltos – he is supposed to be dictating his memoirs, but somewhere the text has been cleaned up for publication or archive; his narration is downright chatty, and he has plenty of interjections in dialog, but AFAIR they don't appear in narrative voice.

Also, "focus more on making a story sound good than proper grammar" is equivalent to "oh, it's just a beta version".

Which it is, but quibbles like mine (and the typo threads) are meant for the next round of (copy)editing, which is very much about cleaning up such issues. If you tell a programmer "oh, I didn't report the bug because it's just a beta version", they will hate you. 😊

Caerulea

Voting is a thing that should be done by you! Preferably for A Practical Guide to Evil.

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

[Liliet](#)

And come to our discord!

<https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>

danh3107

Seven Crowns laid at the feet of darkness, seven symbols of power. Seven Crowns required to pay the toll, to approach damnation.

ThatOneGuy

But who was that one?

Ben Serreau-Raskin

At this point I have expected it to be Cat's. If she makes a sacrifice to make the road happen along with the other princes, it solidifies her narrative as a heroic figure making ugly choices out of necessity instead of a villain scheming to topple the kingdoms of her former opponents. There may also be additional mystical or narrative benefits, considering the 'one' crown has been referred to as somehow setting the tone for the sacrifice.

At this point Cat has a successor whose faith in her is considered by a mind reader to be almost more dangerous than a Name and two of her armies are already following her purely on the strength of her reputation and power rather than any feudal oaths. Putting the crown of Callow into hands loyal to her removes a significant plank of the Crusade's *cassus belli* against her without significantly affecting her ability to steer the Kingdom's destiny. This whole section has been her proving that she can get what she wants off of raw scheming.

Argentorum

I'd agree, but remember there's the Summerholm girl who still hasn't reached the end of her story. And Vivienne has

only been named Heiress apparent, Cat has yet to abdicate in her favor before this.

So I don't think Cat can give up her crown yet, until Abigail of Summerholm and Vivian Dartwick reach the end of their respective stories and one of them is ready to be crowned Queen of Callow.

In short, the timing doesn't feel right. I won't be super upset if I'm wrong though.

Vhostym

I also wouldn't be terribly upset, but the one I really want to see be "the one" is Black, with only Masego reverse possessing Neshamah into surrendering his crown as a bigger win. After all, in some sense Black is still the King of Callow, or at least still has the "Right to Rule", so there is, maybe, something to be used there. And he is the only one for whom this surrender of his authority would be truly negligible. After all, even though Catherine wants to abdicate, she can't afford to do so yet. Also, I really want one of the loose ends Ivah was dealing with to be reclaiming his soul from the Rogue Sorcerer.

pagesbe

No, he once was effectively "King of Callow" but has not been such for years. If there is one ruler, and a second ruler replaces him, he no longer has a "right-to-rule" to give up.

caoimhinh

I would argue that even after passing the throne to another, 'the right to rule' is kept. Take for example Tariq, as Grey Pilgrim born from the Pilgrim's Blood, he is the one with the undisputable right to rule Levant, but he has refused that right for decades and constantly knelt in front of the different Seljuns to consolidate their rule. Yet he still has the right to rule.

Even if it's not valid once the throne is passed to another, Amadeus was the ruler of Callow, is the father of the current Queen of Callow, which makes him a mortal ruler. And even if THAT is also invalid, He is one of the few people with the recognized capability to make a claim for the Tower of Ater, making him someone with a right to rule Praes.

caoimhinh

I don't think Abigail is going to be Queen of Callow. She is following Catherine's groove on Fate (with an Orc adjutant by her side too) but she isn't walking the path of the girl who claims the throne, she is walking the path of the girl who fights to protect her home. That's what makes Abigail the spiritual successor of Catherine, her passing on the torch is not the inheritance of the crown.

Remember Catherine Foundling's Heraldry: Scales comparing the weights of a crown and a sword, and the crown was found lacking. For Cat, the sword will always weight more than the crown, that's what she values more.

That's why while Vivienne may be the heiress to the Crown of Callow, Abigail is the real successor of Catherine's story, she is the next Sword of Callow.

[Liliet](#)

NICE

Oshi

Not yet she isn't. She needs a forging moment. Something to clear the cobwebs and make her bear down with her will.

[Liliet](#)

I agree. The intertwined narrative+political benefit for Cat here is too tremendous to ignore, though it's still possible something else will happen instead, *forcing* her to keep her crown yet.

Decius

Has Cat had a chance to contact Ranger yet?

Because the crown doesn't need to be voluntarily given, and the one that would have the biggest impact would be the Dead King's. And Ranger has a habit of annoying the Dead King.

Too bad there isn't a Thief anymore, that would be more narrative-appropriate.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Again, they have to be *mortal* crowns. DK is nothing of the sort.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

>"Now," I said, "shall we go on an adventure?"

Adventure Time!

caoimhinh

Come on, grab your friends!

John

We'll go to very distant lands.

And when The Lich gets involved, things become a lot less funny.

[Liliet](#)

Cat the villain and Tariq the hero~

[Mental Mouse](#)

... and together, none can stand against them!

medailyfun

Catherine is Fionna and ... who's the Cake?

caoimhinh

Either Hakram or Robber, hahaha.

antoninjohn

I wonder how bad Levant well end up under that curse once the Pilgrim gives up his crown

matesbe

I suspect that will be Catherine's excuse to stop being the Queen of Callow actually. She's even set up Viv as her successor. That doesn't mean she'll stop being associate with Callow of course, but she might spend more time with the Drow and be an adviser/high general instead of literal ruler.

byzantine279

It would also help appease Pilgrim, I think. For her to cast aside her crown in such a way she can never truly take it back up.

Dainpdf

That, or she casts down the Tyrant. She has mentioned multiple times how he is a problem.

Although... third time at Liesse, even figuratively, third time with a queen Name... it's that pattern of three.

Dainpdf

Added comment: abdicating her right to rule would not help with commanding the Drow, I expect. Which might put a kibosh on her attempt to lead them against the Dead King. Maybe Priestess or First in the Night doesn't count?

matesbe

Tyrant is not going to give up his crown. He'd probably rather let the entire group die, and that's not worth it for Cat, not when Pilgrim would probably be perfectly happy to give up a crown he never really wanted and Catherine has practically been looking for an excuse to step down.

She doesn't rule the Drow, she's a representative of Sve Noc. She won't give that right up anymore than, say, Hakram could fill the position because of how much running the kingdom he does (regardless of that, he's not the ruler, and she's not the ruler of the Drow).

Plus, and this is more shaky, I'm not sure if giving up right to rule in one place means you have to give it up in all places.

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, ruling any place would be impossible.

"It would," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Though ever bearing another crown would birth it anew."

Dainpdf

The Pilgrim himself said that taking up another crown wouldn't work. One of the Princes was considering abdication of one of them to another.

Tyrant is not going to give up his crown... who said anything about it being voluntary!? As for the Pilgrim, I rather doubt he'd give up an important tool for Good when he could just maneuver it onto Kairos instead.

On Cat, I argued farther below about the pattern of three, and there is the potential issue I raised above.

Or maybe with her Rozala maneuver Cat was preparing a precedent for her, being the one willing to give up, to be the one saved. We'll see.

Kissaten

Rozala faegates would be too vulnerable to Dead King's digging tactics

[Liliet](#)

Fist of the Night definitely doesn't count, because she doesn't rule them. Sve Noc does. Catherine is *second in command* and an intermediary, she's a trusted advisor and a guide, not actually in charge.

And trying to use this to cast down the Tyrant isn't going to lead to anything good. Best case scenario you're still fucking up Helike as collateral damage.

Dainpdf

Maybe. He's likely to lose his Name (or some of its potency) if it happens.

He's also likely to be overthrown or killed by a band of heroes in short order if he clings to the throne.

[Liliet](#)

Hmm, yeah.

[esryok](#)

Strange things would likely befall the Losara Sigil, though. I expect it'll have to become the Ivah Sigil.

[Liliet](#)

Ehhh. I don't think being a commanding officer is ruled out by this.

caoimhinh

Maybe, that seems the most likely option between the 3 (Catherine, Kairos, Tariq), but that's too straightforward. My own suspicion is that she will use Amadeus. He has, after all, the possibility to make a claim for the Tower, but more importantly, he is a 'king/ruler' Narratively (with enough weight to it that Catherine could use that to get The Penitent's Blade out of the stone in Liesse). He ruled Callow for 20 years too. So he definitely qualifies.

"The one we'll bring with us into the deeps, to be bestowed only at the heart of it."

It is very likely that Rogue Sorcerer is carrying Amadeus' soul sealed into an object with him right now (It would be ironic if they put his soul into a crown of some sort). It

might even give her the chance she is waiting for, to recover him from the Heroes' hands.

By the time they are in the deeps, they won't be able to refuse Cat's plan.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine wants Amadeus to rule Praes down the line.

Herself, she doesn't want to rule anything.

Oshi

the hint with Benevolent the First from the beginning of the book comes to mind. Black is out of the game for this one.

[Liliet](#)

What hint with Benevolent the First?????

I am still of the opinion that this is a historical Dread Emperor, whom we haven't heard of in the narrative proper like we haven't heard of Dread Empress Massacre – because there's a lot of epigraphs and a lot of Dreads, and nobody has time to talk about them all.

[TeK](#)

'Member theories that Cat'll be Massacre? Good times.

pagesbe

So, they don't need to be alive for their crown to count. They should be grateful Catherine didn't literally take it off their corpses the ingrates.

Wow that was cold. The point was, there's a bigger picture, and literally only three of them realized that (or if more did, their self-superiority/greed overruled it). I mean, these people do realize that if this doesn't work they're all going to die, right? And here I thought Saint was the loony. Well, she is, but apparently she's not the only one.

nick012000

I expect that there would be another option beyond abdication to avoid the curse on their lands for giving up their "right to rule": the seizure of a villainous Name, because the only right that Below recognises is that might makes right.

byzantine279

No. It isn't just Above. *Both* sets of gods turn their backs on you. Because while Below accepts might makes right you "lost" when you gave up your crown, and so can never be worthy of holding such a crown again.

nick012000

Meant to post this as a top-level post:

I expect that there would be another option beyond abdication to avoid the curse on their lands for giving up their "right to rule": the seizure of a villainous Name, because the only right that Below recognises is that might makes right.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I agree with byzantyne279: A villainous Name wouldn't help, even if they could somehow get a ruling Name, they'd just become a King/Queen of Misrule. With heroes lined up for the story of their overthrow.

Dainpdf

Privilege makes for reticent people. They're accustomed to having special concessions made for them. To paraphrase Cat's Hakram quote, they still expect to win.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yes, recent American politics provide a dramatic real-world example, "too over-the-top for fiction".

Feanor

No surprise it's the three that have already faced the Dead King.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

Oshi

Welcome to human nature. Look around at the world. This is exactly how people act. The reason we haven't cured the ills that plague us is that most of the plagues are of our own making.

taovkool

Man, what is it about crowns and thrones that drove people nuts? Props to Rozala for being one of the better ones.

danh3107

To be use an old tried and true saying, absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Fayhem

Not to be That Guy (I'm kind of going to be That Guy), but umtechnically Lord Acton's maxim was that power **tends to** corrupt, and absolute power **tends to** corrupt absolutely. I realize that sounds very similar, but to me it's an important distinction not just because I'm kind of pedantic about quotes but because including the qualification also speaks to a deep truth of human nature. Namely, that in fact there are no absolute truths regarding human nature. You can establish broad and potentially very strong trends or tendencies, but no matter what the rule it will always be possible for there to be an exception.

And yes I can see that I just stated that there are no absolute truths as an absolute truth so PARADOX AMIRITE, but I really do feel that an absolute denial of absolutes is meaningfully distinct enough not to count as an example of what it's denying, in much the same way that I feel that intolerance of intolerance in fact should not itself be considered a form of intolerance. YMMV of course.

Mental Mouse

The thing is, there's a more recent saying in reply to Lord Acton: "Nothing corrupts so much as *a little power*". This article discusses a study demonstrating that in the real world (but doesn't source the quote 🙄): <https://io9.gizmodo.com/a-little-power-corrupts-way-more-than-absolute-control-5842587>

Briefly, when an otherwise low-status person gets a small amount of power over others, they are prone to both defend it, and abuse the hell out of it. This is the classic scenario for petty bureaucrats making life hell for their supposed clients, or just extorting bribes and favors. Or low-level managers taking out their frustrations on their workers, or anyone who (thinks) they've got the upper hand working the hell out of it. Or for that matter, schoolyard bullies, with no formal power, but they're a little stronger than their victims. It's also a major driver of misogyny and sexism, when men who can't kick back against their bosses/officers/etc get to take it out on their wives, girlfriends, daughters, or other women.

Anyway, just look at customerssuck.com or notalwaysright.com (turn the commas into periods). The central theme of the latter site especially is customers trying to abuse store workers, and/or punish ("I'm gonna get you fired!") the workers for not submitting to their abuse, and often getting

away with it because of spineless managers or corporate dictum that “the customer is always right”. But on both sites, you’ll also see endless stories of managers/supervisors jerking around workers; cashiers jerking around customers; teachers bullying or otherwise abusing students; doctors refusing to believe or treat (usually female) patients....

Fayhem

I... okay? I don’t particularly disagree with or dispute any of that (other than a general epistemological hesitancy to commit to accepting broad conclusions on the basis of a single data point/study), but I’m not quite following how it’s a response to what I said.

Also, just as an aside the article does actually source the quote, though unfortunately neither link actually pulls up the study in question (that’s the problem with eight year old links I’m afraid). Look in the italicized bit under the annoying video thing.

Mental Mouse

And a lengthy aside – I’ve pulled this into a separate comment to limit the distraction, but it’s very much relevant to privilege:

One of the most “fantastic” aspects of the Guide in general is that nobody ever pulls “just a girl” on Cat, or on *any other* woman we’ve seen, Named or otherwise. Not in *any* of the cultures we’ve seen, and there’s no reason given, why *none* of these human cultures show the sexism that was endemic to nearly all of the historical cultures they hint at. (And the non-human cultures we see are all equally egalitarian, or actually matriarchal.)

I haven’t reread the early books yet, but: It’s supposed to be a big deal that Black and Cat don’t tolerate rape in his ranks, but I don’t recall any example of someone actually getting punished for it. IIRC the only appearance of prostitution in the Guide is a nice brothel patronized by the soldiers, where we’re assured that the girls are well-protected, and Our Heroes wait for their soldiers to finish up before collecting them. None of those orphanage girls (or boys for that matter) were making “easy money” where the matron can’t see? Really? Even the Evil Praesi nobles seem to confine their lusts to their peers.

For that matter, there’s actually a gaping hole in the Guide’s world: Where are the camp followers for the armies, and the servants, seamstresses, laundresses, cooks, maids, etc for those palaces? Cat’s bar has barmaids, because of

course it does, but (per my last paragraph) if any customer gets fresh with them, out comes the club. Later we see a few other barmaids, one of whom flirts with Cat. A few servants are mentioned at the Praesi parties, but they're strictly wallpaper. (And servants are at least relevant to security issues, especially with mind-readers and mind-controllers in play!) Oh yeah, Marchford is surrendered by a noble, whose charge of housekeeping (or sanitation?) is a passing joke, but IIRC we don't deal seriously with any of his workers.

Javvies

Barring some sort of secret gender disparity in magical potential or Name potential, which we more or less have firm indications/implications that they're isn't one ...

Magical abilities are a huge equalizer – marginally superior physical ability is rendered irrelevant by being set on fire by the mind of one less physically adept.

Likewise, I'm pretty sure that somewhere Cat muses about one or more female Named enforcing gender equality. It may have happened somewhere else too, but I'm pretty sure it was mentioned at least once in connection with the War College ... something about an early Dread Empress firing someone opposed to female cadets from a catapult or something along those lines.

Plus, let's not forget that the Wandering Bard is a female. Or at least appears to be a female.

luminousblu

Not him but:

It seems that mages and Named are all supremely rare. It would be more like extraordinary talents being harnessed than anything else, not inherent equality. This is not mentioning the physiological and biological facts on the ground that caused 'patriarchal' societies to dominate in real life – namely, that men are just straight up massively stronger than women on an individual basis and that men are – unless you lose enough to destroy crop yields – ultimately replaceable, while each and every woman is precious insofar as there's a limit on how many kids they can actually have, among other factors. In real life, exceptional women still often became a big deal, but you always have to remember that there is no prejudice that began without reason.

The reason these things aren't gamechangers in our own world is because we've moved past the point where childrearing and childbirthing are essentially full time jobs for women and past the point where the physical

strength of arms is the decisive factor in battles (although I do believe men still perform better, which biologically makes a lot of sense), as well as past the point where farmhands were in eternally short supply.

Lastly, the concept of female Named automatically supporting women's rights is...dubious, at best, when we look at actual evidence from history. A few of them, I'm sure, would've been big on it. This doesn't in and of itself make an overall trend strongly opposed to biology and the agrarian society we see feasible, especially when you consider that most of them likely absorbed a culture that – for all its moral ills from our perspective – actually worked, as well as their followers who most likely didn't share their views on equality. Remember that some of the most famous 'female Named' in our own world – Jeanne d'Arc, Qin Liangyu, Ching I Sao, Isabella I of Spain, etc. were pretty strongly opposed to the advancement of women and Jeanne rather famously told an admirer the equivalent of 'get back in the kitchen'.

The only real explanation is that the biology from our world doesn't apply to the Guideverse, which, while reasonable, is also generally not to be assumed without explicit notice otherwise.

[Mental Mouse](#)

One quibble: Biology does not make men "massively" larger and stronger than women. It makes them *average*, slightly larger and stronger. But cultural factors (often based on that "a little power" thing) can drastically exaggerate that, when women get discouraged from "overexertion" or "unwomanly" activities, told to starve themselves to be slender, excluded from "manly" sports that would build their strength (and confidence), etc.. As in, say, much of America before "Title IX" was passed in 1972. And professional women's sports teams *still* get treated as unwanted stepchildren at best. (Unless they're competing in revealing outfits, of course! 😊)

But individual variation and training can easily overwhelm that statistical difference. Consider me and my little sister. I'm 10 inches taller and at least 65 pounds heavier than her... but if it came to a fight, she'd kick my ass, because she's a lifetime athlete who's ranged from gymnastics to triathlons (with a bit of martial arts tucked in), while I'm a paunchy chair jockey who... walks a lot, when I'm not sitting in front of a computer. For that matter, as a average-height and

not-athletic guy, I meet a *lot* of women who are bigger and/or stronger than I am.

luminiousblu

Human males are massively larger and stronger than females. The height of women is significantly lower in every country than the height of men. This is an indisputable biological fact, no reputable scientific journal or encyclopedia-style website will tell you otherwise. Men gain muscle mass incredibly easily compared to women. Remember this is an agrarian society where people do work considered backbreaking by today's standards on a daily basis from childhood as well. Humans didn't suddenly decide that men were going to do all the work and women were going to sit at home having kids for no reason – even beyond the fact that a late-pregnant woman or a woman nursing a child can't really do any heavy labour, they simply don't gain muscle as quickly. They DO do a few other things better than men – their super-long-distance running is generally better and they are a lot more efficient at utilising energy in times of need, but for most purposes pertaining to the needs of the preindustrial military they're physically inferior specimens.

>professional women's sports teams

Because they're worse. Flat out, straight up worse. It's excuses and honestly insulting that you'd dismiss the training regimes that women's sports teams go through, developed through research, experience, and genuine desire to be the best they can, because of culture. Compare the average times and world records for men and women in a hundred yard dash, weight lift, or any other 'pure' metric (it's much harder to compare tennis or whatever since it's so heavily composite). The biology simply does not work in the favour of females and no amount of quibbling is going to change the facts on the ground.

>me and my little sister

Totally irrelevant. This is anecdotal evidence, coming from someone whose older sister could destroy me with a single hand if she so felt like it. A man who's trained WILL destroy a woman of the same level of training and comparable physique, this is simply how our bodies are built – barring a highly unusual woman, men are simply more suited to physical work. Your special example is taking the best woman and the average man, or the average woman and the crippled man, and saying therefore it's not a big deal. The

army can't be comprised solely of the best of the best – and even if it were, the best that males have to offer is simply better than the best women have to offer, which is often inferior to even the fairly decent that men have to offer. And that's sensible from a biological point of view once you consider the interests and reproductive strategies that male and female members of the human race take.

And to make this clear I'm not making an 'ought' statement, nor am I commenting on the morality of feminism or the patriarchy or anything else. I have no personal quibbles with strong women (although as I pointed out it doesn't tend to make a whole lot of sense in the mass that we see for purely biological reasons) I'm making an 'is' statement. It IS fact that women are significantly weaker than men. Whether or not this means they OUGHT to stay in the kitchen is up to you, but historically, that IS often what's been concluded.

[Fayhem](#)

You may find the essay "We Have Always Fought" to be interesting, if you haven't seen it yet: <http://aidanmoher.com/blog/featured-article/2013/05/we-have-always-fought-challenging-the-women-cattle-and-slaves-narrative-by-kameron-hurley/>

luminiousblu

I could go through point by point to refute this. I could point out that just because women have 'always fought' doesn't mean they tended to fight long-term. I could point out that the author, who has a rather poor grasp of language, opens with a page and a half of text that essentially attempts to discredit any counterarguments before they're presented by projecting his own, possibly made-up, failings on other people with that llama rant. I could point out that the text clearly is not interested in an actual examination of details but instead is attempting to present a narrative. I could even go and say the tone is incredibly self-assured, considering the dude while in university didn't know about female fighters and calls himself a 'self-aware misogynist', being totally unaware of how smug this makes him sound. I could say that his professor was mightily short on details, even though even someone like me could start giving examples of female fighters and the situations in which they were common. I could

point out that he makes a big deal of women 'doing things' but doesn't mention how often it's done, thereby skewing the wording – right after he notes that the words used can affect how we view things. I could point out that he's retroactively assigning labels, motivations, and values that simply were not prevalent at the time, which is a rather common theme among people trying to find historical justification for their values.

I won't, though. Because the article, despite having a sidebar proclaiming they're interested in "truth", isn't interested in truth. It's interested in a narrative, and in challenging a narrative, because what is doesn't fit his idea of what should be. If every single source tells you that women didn't do this or that, his idea is that surely it was a fucking conspiracy and we're being fed lies, and it's up to his noble soul to take a stand and say what nobody else is willing to. Because he thinks he's far more intelligent than he actually fucking is.

And before you point out that it's a woman, if it indeed is one, I'm unsure of and not particularly interested in the gender – it doesn't affect the contents of the blog, because I refuse to call this pile of garbage an essay. No writing which puts in scare quotes the words "proof" and "history" deserves to be called an essay.

You'll probably note that I'm super angry about this. I am. But that's because I've seen quite enough of these sorts of rants for an entire lifetime, and that these sorts of low-quality arguments drag down any honest efforts at revealing truth, advancing society, or whatever you may want to do. Unless you just want to advance your own values and feel good about yourself, choosing your words so very carefully because even though truth is what it is, nobody needs to know the truth. In which case, yes, carry on.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I had seen it before, but quite a while ago, and it was good to re-read it. Thanks for linking.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Humans didn't suddenly decide that men were going to do all the work and women were going to sit at

home having kids for no reason – even beyond the fact that a late-pregnant woman or a woman nursing a child can't really do any heavy labour, they simply don't gain muscle as quickly.

They didn't "decide that", period. At the farming level, women have always done serious work, including physical labor such as housecleaning (try it, without appliances, if you don't think it's physical work), carrying water, churning milk, pounding grain/cassava/etc, cooking for the rest of the family (ditto, again without appliances or pre-packaged food), taking care of domestic animals (and often butchering them too), and for that matter often joining the men in the fields. Plus skilled work such as spinning, weaving, making and repairing clothes and household equipment, making such medicines as were available, etc. And no, they didn't get to take it easy when they were pregnant – the chores still needed doing and the food needed cooking regardless. If they were lucky, they *might* have relatives or neighbors to help out when they were pregnant or sick.

Women "sitting at home having kids" and otherwise idle, was for families who are rich enough to support non-workers, which in the Guide (and most historical) context means nobility and some of the merchants. Except that historically, even most noblewomen typically did at least the fabric arts, because few nobles were cash-rich enough to simply buy clothes for their entire household. (Remember, hand-made all the way from fiber to wearable items.) Also note various fairy tales featuring princesses spinning, weaving, etc. "Hawthorn Rose" aka Sleeping Beauty is the most famous, though Rumpelstiltskin and the weaver Arachne also come to mind offhand.

The rest of your message amounts to "men are big and strong and women are weak little things", at volume. In fact, you're providing an excellent example of a man trying to enforce male dominance and suppress any suggestion that male superiority isn't absolute and eternal.

A bit of food for thought, from a time of transition: <https://www.sojournertruth.com/p/aint-i-woman.html>

Note: I do intend to leave this discussion with this chapter, I'm sure tomorrow's chapter will provide all sorts of other things to talk about.

[Liliet](#)



[Mental Mouse](#)

Except: 1) There's not many Named running around compared to the masses of society in general – indeed, some cultures have very few of them. 2) Bluntly, a single Named, even an Empress, hunting down chauvinists (or more likely, killing the ones they personally encountered) would not do much to affect their society in general. To say nothing of the backlash after they got killed. 3) *Every* society on the continent, *including* the Praesi who are explicitly dedicated to doing whatever their individual power allows them to?

As I said, this is a fantastical element of the milieu, so I don't intend to continue making a point of it. But I figured it was worth one good callout in a discussion of privilege; as I noted above, in our world privilege and its associated power imbalances are deeply intertwined with sexism and misogyny.

That said, there is one factor visible which *would* work strongly against sexism: The wide availability of magical and priestly healing. If a barmaid/pit fighter can afford to get a black eye healed, that strongly suggests that such healing is also available to childbearing mothers, and to children. Looking across the societies of our world, the single strongest correlate for women's rights, is the wide availability of medical care for children and pregnant women. That's specifically because such medical care means women *don't* have to keep popping kids out (often dying in childbirth) in hopes enough of them survive to work the farm/shop/etc and take care of their aged parents.

werafdsaew

You're forgetting that the Names are the main characters in story books, and what gets written about in history books. They're huge celebrities, trend setters, and whom children look at to emulate. Bluntly, an Empress hunting down chauvinists she encounters would inevitably lead to other people doing the same to avenge for a slight, or simply as an excuse to get rid of an opponent.

Javvies

Maybe, maybe not.

Sure, an individual can have only limited direct impact ... but indirectly? And a Named? Those can, and often will, be much larger in impact.

A Dread Empress opening the Imperial War College to female cadets? And then making examples out of everyone who opposed her decision?
That's huge.

Plus, let's not forget – the enemies of pre-Dead King Keter were led by a Witch-Queen.
The Wandering Bard/Intercessor has the physical appearance of a female.

Toss in the Miezian Occupation ... the orcs and goblins, ratlings, giants, elves ... Above and Below ...
There's no mapping real life historical practices and customs to Calernia.

Mental Mouse

Fair points.

Fayhem

> One of the most “fantastic” aspects of the Guide in general is that nobody ever pulls “just a girl” on Cat, or on any other woman we've seen, Named or otherwise. Not in any of the cultures we've seen, and there's no reason given, why none of these human cultures show the sexism that was endemic to nearly all of the historical cultures they hint at. (And the non-human cultures we see are all equally egalitarian, or actually matriarchal.)

To start from the bottom, IIRC every non-human culture we've seen is based on a non-human species that doesn't appear to have appreciable sexual dimorphism, which is the premise usually employed to argue why we should totally expect sexism against women to be the default. With regards to da humies, I think it's worth stipulating explicitly that while the cultures we've seen appear to clearly draw from real-world cultures in some ways, they *are not those cultures*. “Historical accuracy” doesn't really apply when you're not talking about history.

Internal consistency is still a thing, mind – that's why I don't have much patience for the argument that I keep seeing people make that goes something like “but dragons aren't real so y u mad that a fantasy army can march three times as fast as an army of the specified type should be

able to lol". Because unless the fantasy world specified also has an explanation for why logistics/transport/whatever are meaningfully different then it should still legitimately be held to the standard of how things work in reality. If you were talking about a fantasy setting that's historical France but with dragons or whatever, then if you're not going to have any references to sexism it would make sense to have an explanation of why the heck not since historical French culture had plenty of that kind of shit. But (to bring it back towards the Guide) Alamans culture isn't French culture. It's Alamans culture. The simple fact that historical French culture was sexist doesn't suffice as an indication of why Alamans culture should by default be presumed sexist unless explained otherwise. You would have to argue for why a culture at that tech level should **inherently** be sexist, which I guess is what luminiousblu has been doing in his own comments.

Personally I don't buy it, though. Arguments in that regard seem to tend to boil down to "but preindustrial warfare tho", but there are plenty of instances of women leading armies and engaging in combat in various preindustrial eras. It's true that in our history those have been more the exception than the rule but again, this is not **our** history and it does suffice to demonstrate that it is in fact a plausible phenomenon at that tech level. Kameron Hurley (a largely pretty well-regarded fantasy/spec fic author, though I haven't read any of her stuff personally as of yet) had a good essay about it that I think actually won a Hugo for best related work or some such. You can find it reproduced here if you're interested and you haven't already read it: <http://aidanmoher.com/blog/featured-article/2013/05/we-have-always-fought-challenging-the-women-cattle-and-slaves-narrative-by-kameron-hurley/>

luminiousblu

>You would have to argue for why a culture at that tech level should **inherently** be sexist, which I guess is what luminiousblu has been doing in his own comments. Most societies were, to some degree, sexist. It is the exception that they were not. Unless you believe there to be a global conspiracy to paint them as sexist when they are not (which is what that blog seems to be insinuating), or that they had somehow been brought together by aliens to be sexist, clearly there is a fundamental reason why they tended in that direction. This is much like how in most large societies, the first 'kings' were often religious leaders as well, or how almost every settled society that fought regular wars

gravitated towards spear formations, or why basically every early civilisation centre and even ones today are either coastal or near rivers. This isn't some sort of accident, the point isn't to somehow pretend it doesn't count, it's to either look into what might've caused this or to somehow show there is no pattern. The problem is that, barring new and widespread evidence, as far as we know there IS a pattern.

>It's true that in our history those have been more the exception than the rule but again, this is not *our* history and it does suffice to demonstrate that it is in fact a plausible phenomenon at that tech level. This is highly arguable. What we'll notice is that firstly almost every large, settled society – ones that resembled states as we would see them – was to some extent sexist. Secondly, we'll notice that it IS an exception, and most of those societies that were an exception were wiped out by ones that weren't. So clearly, something is happening. Now, yes, obviously this is not our world. Is it possible that women just aren't weaker? Course. I'm pretty sure that's what's happening – otherwise the concept of tons and tons of women in the army is retarded. Is it possible that childcare is unusually advanced, such that you can have three kids and be confident that they'll live to see adulthood? Yeah. That works. Could it be that EE simply doesn't want to address the problem of sexism? Sure, if I were to write a story I wouldn't bother with that because I like the idea of overpowered girls or female high officials. But I would not say that it's actually plausible, if none of those hold, for almost every single society to basically not give a damn.

>leading armies

The problem here is that this is the exception, not the rule. Barring cases where the lady of the house lead defences or the occasional female warlord (or, in the case of certain steppe peoples, the rather common female warlord) lead, we don't really have any records of this happening on a large scale.

>in armies

Yes, this happened at times. Jeanne was not the only woman in the French army, she was merely one of the youngest and certainly the most important. But at the same time Joan never actually struck a blow, was arguably not actually very good at leading men (her tactics were not extraordinarily sound, just extremely unusual). But again, most of the army was still comprised of men, and most women did not simply march off to war. There's sound reasons for this.

All in all I do feel like a lot of people think that the peoples of old simply decided one day to be jerks for no reason at all. Every value they held was meaningful at one point or another. Superstitions, cultural values, or legends don't just spontaneously appear out of nowhere, especially not one so widespread. They can overstay their welcome, but at some point it had to have made sense.

Fayhem

I don't think I've ever even once had a good time from trying to engage deeply with someone on the internet who self-identifies as "super angry" about something, so I'm going to limit my reply to your two comments to the single point below; you're welcome to comment again yourself of course, but this will be my last reply. You stated:

> Superstitions, cultural values, or legends don't just spontaneously appear out of nowhere, especially not one so widespread. They can overstay their welcome, but at some point it had to have made sense.

No, it really doesn't. To pick one example (there are plenty), it was the overwhelming medical consensus in the whole Western world for literally centuries that bleeding patients was a beneficial treatment instead of something that almost always, as in 99%+ of the time, either accelerated or outright caused the death of patients. But that has never been true, even for a single second, at any point in history. Bleeding patients is not only bad right now, it literally always has been.

You say that "I do feel like a lot of people think that the peoples of old simply decided one day to be jerks for no reason at all", and that's actually pretty true as far as that being a popular misconception. But you find the salience of pointing out that it's a misconception in entirely the wrong place. You take it as meaning that actually, the peoples of old must have really had a point underlying the stuff they believed in and practiced. But as I've stated, that is not inherently true by any measure. The salience of people in the past not inherently being any worse/dumber than people in the present is that *people in the present are not inherently any better/smarter*. It's not an argument for why people in the past were actually pretty correct/at least had a point for all the stuff they did, it's a caution that we today possess no inherent quality protecting us from believing in things

just as fucked up and stupid as anything we might condemn in the past (see the flat earth/antivax people for reference).

Anyway, like I said, that's the last thing I had to say here. See you in future posts!

[Liliet](#)

>One of the most "fantastic" aspects of the Guide in general is that nobody ever pulls "just a girl" on Cat, or on any other woman we've seen, Named or otherwise.

Actually, the theme was present very early on in the first several chapters when Cat was non-Named. She mentioned 'a girl' multiple times as a reason for her to be underestimated, and of course it was the orphanage's policy to make 'proper ladies' out of its charges that stood in her way so much.

The impression I got is that there's still low key sexism/misogyny surviving in the culture, but by now it's only targeted at *low status* women. Cordelia bears the remnants of old sexist tradition with pride as a symbol of her homeland, she hadn't been hurt by it. All we've seen of armies and commanding structures shows that in nobility, and in at least Praesi legions, this mentality has been excised so thoroughly as to not even leave a scar beyond the 'no rape' regulation needing to linger in the latter.

And Named, of course, are the Word of God-explained *source* of this scourge against sexism. One of the early Dread Empresses was mentioned to have used the War College headmaster who had refused to teach women as catapult fodder; can you imagine someone telling Laurence what she can and cannot do, even were she to live in a time where that was commonplace?

So what lingers of sexism – and we *do* see the shades of it in the corners still – survives by utterly excluding anyone who can actually wield power from it.

As for the gaping hole, I think it's more a matter of focus. These people are known to exist and there are no actual *plot holes* of them not being there while they should have been that I can think of; but they do not get narrative attention. That... feels fair enough to me. The story can't cover *everything*.

[Liliet](#)

Also the widely available healing is a point I somewhat skipped over here, but – yes, that would change a great deal of dynamics, alongside magic.

Dainpdf

The thing about privilege is it tends to seem natural unless one cares to (or is forced to) look it in the face. Not always an easy feat, if one doesn't even know it's there, but something every ruler should do.

[Mental Mouse](#)

To steal a line from the social-justice movement: Losing an unearned privilege feels exactly the same as losing a natural right. The difference lies in how it affects *other* people.

[sengachi](#)

Ohhh. I'm pretty sure I've heard that line before but I'd forgotten it. Thank you for the reminder, it's a fantastic phrase.

Andrew Mitchell

Rozala's awesome. IMO she's got potential to carve herself out a Name now that she doesn't have to worry about ruling and politics. There's plenty of scope for new (or old) names to emerge in this fight with the Dead King. I just hope we get to see what she does next.

caoimhinh

She kept her crown and right to rule, so she still has to worry about such things.
Besides, she has been building up all this time as a challenger/successor for Cordelia as First Prince of Procer. And she wants to kill Cordelia because she is responsible for the death of Rozala's mother.

Andrew Mitchell

Yeah, thanks. Of course you're right. I remembered that she kept her crown AFTER I posted.

I had totally forgotten that she wanted to kill Cordelia though. Thanks for the reminder.

[Liliet](#)

Hmm, I'm seeing the narrative buildup there quite differently.

Admittedly I've been a great fan of Cordelia since her first introduction and that colors my perspective; then again, I've been a fan for a reason.

What I see is buildup towards Rozala *getting over herself* and despite never forgiving her mother's death, working with Cordelia regardless, because personal is not the same as important and few things are as important as political unity right now. Rozala *actually* going for revenge there would undermine a lot of guide's themes and her entire arc of *seeing what the true horrors are*. Cordelia has known the true horrors all along, that was part of her motivation for intervening in the civil war: that they could not afford to fight it with the external enemies that they have. Rozala's mother died for a reason; ignoring that reason is not how I expect this narrative to unfold.

Catherine has been blithely ignoring the fact she was on the kill list of kid heroes, because she has deemed it entirely irrelevant to the situation. That is what I'm seeing as a basic direction here: it's possible to go too far down that slope, and the narrative has been steadily building up that counterpoint too, but Rozala pursuing a personal grudge and seizing power for herself would be *very far* towards the other end.

>I looked at the Princess of Aquitan, then and what I saw on her face grieved me. Nothing in the loss of a crown moved me to sorrow, for I had little taste for mine and no reverence for those who'd earned their own by mere happenstance of birth. It was the raw, bleak disappointment I saw in a respected adversary as she stared the truth of her home in the eye. That, even as the sky was falling down on their heads, there were princes and princesses of Procer who would rather squabble than look up.

That's "working with Cordelia" buildup, not "being the next First Prince" buildup.

Dainpdf

Oh my, the Arnaud reveal was great. The Rozala acknowledgement, too. Very nice.

Really liked the note about unquestioned privilege.

But, most important of all: Adventure Time!

Adventure Time

Come on grab your friends

We'll go to very distant lands

With Kairos the Villain and Tariq the Hero

The fun will never end, Adventure Time!

Richard Gallivan

Extended lyrics! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDazu5IEGhM>
Sing along!

Adventure time, lets knife, lie and bet. We'll go with rogue
who we don't know yet
With Cat the Queen and Kai the Tyrant, the fun never ends it's
Adventure time!

Black Queen Cat is a great villian,
but she'll play the hero if it helps her win.
She keeps dying then still kicks butt,
and she will stay mortal no matter what.

Tyrant Karois has a messed up eye
he's your very best friend who will make you die.
Done well for a sickly boy
Betraying you all is his greatest joy.

Adventure Time come on lose your throne, we'll build a high-way
with God bones, with Saint the Sword and Grey the Pilgrim the
fun will never end it's adventure time!

Of all the heroes cross the land
Tariq always lends a hand
When hero stories' in a funk
He surprises you with brutal junk

Laurence Montfort is a cut machine
Shes a thousand years old and really mean
She kills evil across the board
She's not a person, she's a sword.

Adventure time, come on grab your sword we'll go up north to
kill the hoard with Cat the Queen and Kai the Tyrant, the fun
will never end it's adventure time!

[Fayhem](#)

You're a beautiful person and I love you. Laurence's verse is
best IMO, fite me internet.

Dainpdf

Again!?

NerfContessa

Amazing.
Take one quantum of internet. :p

Andrew Mitchell

So, so, so good... thanks for writing that.

I regret that I have but one like to give.

Richard Gallivan

Extended lyrics! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDazu5IEGhM>
Come on and sing along!

Adventure time, lets knife, lie and bet. We'll go with rogue
who we don't know yet
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She's not a person, she's a sword.

Adventure time, come on grab your sword we'll go up north to
kill the hoard with Cat the Queen and Kai the Tyrant, the fun
will never end it's adventure time!

Dainpdf

Thank you. I did not know there was an extended version.

burguulkodar

Cool! Well done, kudos to you!

[Mental Mouse](#)

I loved Arnaud's sudden turn to "enough of playing stupid, it's
showtime"!

Andrew Mitchell

And exactly the right timing to fulfill the trust Cordelia placed in him.

I hope we get to see more of him.

IDKWhoitis

I called it, obstacles became "casualties".

Also, I love the Prince of Cantal, a true patriot to the bitter end.

konstantinvoncarstein

It seems that not every prince was smart enough to divine it.

IDKWhoitis

At least the ones that mattered did.

Morgenstern

Yeah, a true patriot... and, unless I am at fault for a mixup of something, they spoke of him being a rapist, too... much to love there...

konstantinvoncarstein

I think this is a mixup 😊

Yes, he is a patriot. He made sure his country could be saved by eliminating a danger to it.

caoimhinh

That's an act. Mostly everything they knew about Arnaud was a lie that he built so they would despise and underestimate him. So he could position himself to have influence without being considered a threat.

Rozala's spies informed her that he was a rapist and someone who spent time in debauchery, yet Pilgrim's analysis of Arnaud didn't show anything like that, no strong impulses, lust nor desire for dominance, all Arnaud has is cold and calculative patience (kinda like Amadeus)

Amadis thought that Arnaud wrote to his bastard son, yet those letters were for Cordelia, one of such letters was what warned her of what the motion that her enemies would push through the Highest Assembly would be. Who knows if that bastard son even exists in reality.

Every single one of them considered him an idiot who was arrogant and emotional, yet every one of them was wrong, they were all fooled by him. Considering that everything else they have said about him turned out to be a lie, I wouldn't be surprised that the rapist part is also a lie.

Liliet

I wouldn't be surprised, and I would be very glad, but I wouldn't presume it.

If Prince Arnaud Brogloise of Cantal had decided that "I'm a rapist" was a useful addition to his image, I can also easily see him as not seeing a major problem with backing it up by actually doing it – the easiest way to get a reputation as a gambler is to gamble, and the easiest way to get a reputation as a drunk is to drink. If he had the inherent horrified revulsion towards the idea that Amadeus has, I expect he'd have gone without it in his reputation, either – it was somewhat contributive, but far from necessary.

It's far less contrived an assumption that Arnaud is a patriot *and* a rapist than that Rozala's spy network had been thoroughly faked out on the issue.

Mental Mouse

It certainly is nice when the secret agent turns out to be on your side!

Dainpdf

Wait, wait, wait.

This is the third time Cat goes to Liesse.

All this crown business.

It's the third queen name offering. First time she refused, second time she was kept from it... third time she accepts? Or maybe people are right and she'll abdicate. Who knows.

NZPIEFACE

I wonder if she can use this to bullshit her way into Black Queen, then just get rid of the Queen bit.

Dainpdf

Get just "Black" as a name? That seems odd. And it would be very confusing given Amadeus's moniker.

NZPIEFACE

Why not, he can be Green, Tariq can be White, Vivi can be Pink, Hanno could be blue.

Someguy

"Shame on you all," the Grey Pilgrim quietly said.

[sengachi](#)

God *damn* I like Rozala. "It would be cheap at twice the price", gods, *yes*. I hope she lives a long and happy life in which she can go to sleep every night warmed by the remembered hellfire that she bought from the Black Queen to burn the Dead King's legions.

[Liliet](#)

It's an echo of Cat's "One life for a hundred thousand? That's a steal, by any account" :3

[Mental Mouse](#)

Calling back to a prior discussion, I'll note that's also essentially the argument for Omelas: No city in history has had only a single person condemned to misery.

[Liliet](#)

I would say that the notion of informed, meaningful consent plays a great role here too 😊

Not that anybody cared about the princes' consent here, but then, Catherine makes a rather great point of how it was not a loss of anything they actually *were* inherently ethically entitled to.

Andrew Mitchell

I *really* hope we get to see what happens next. I predict she could get a Name during the final book.

AdrianGrey

Oh boy. There's the Princes' Graveyard that we've been waiting so long for. This is a big moment, guys.

1224

Grey Pilgrim really reminded me of Gandalf in this. When he said "shame on you" I could hear Ian McKellen's voice. Yeah, I know his name is a gandalf reference, so that shouldn't be too surprising, but before this point I hadn't really been reminded of gandalf other than they have similar roles.

Javvies

Not what anybody expected when we first knew that there was something called the Prince's Graveyard.

But I like it.

Also, props to Malanza. She started out on the wrong side of things, but she's willing to, and has, learned. Damn, but that was cold Arnaud. Slick, though.

Heh. Cat's got a point about Procerans and it taking Akua's Folly to give non-Proceran's cause to trust/collaborate with them.

Oshi

Rozala is exactly who she has always been shown to be. She hasn't suddenly grown to like anyone. She is just the only one with real perspective which is why she is where she is now.

Javvies

Not exactly.

Malanza originally didn't realize the very real stakes at the table. Her perspective was narrow and shaped by her Proceran biases.

And she has since learned both just how high and how real the stakes are, with how thin a margin of error there is to work with, and she's had her perspective forcibly widened and had to take a long hard look at Procer, and the customs and practices of Proceran Princes.

It's not that she was ever unwilling to learn, it's that she didn't realize her ignorance.

The Malanza we first met was more interested in how she could benefit from the 10th Crusade and her part in it. Now? Now her primary concern is what is necessary to stopping the Dead King.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, indeed. Thanks for the reminder about her growth curve. Her character arc stands in stark contrast to most other nobles in Procer. She can learn.

Even more reason for her to get a good supporting role (and maybe Name) in the next book.

He was the best of them

Arnaud without a crown makes me a sad person.

Euodiachloris

He'll find some other way to serve Procer from the shadows. He's played at being the fluff-headed prince long enough. Time for his real calling; spy master and/or parliamentary whip.

Dresden 67

He would be pretty great at keeping the Highest Assembly in line.

sengachi

"Your attention please. I would like to open this meeting with the reminder that I have killed nobility before."

pause for emphasis "Carry on."

Dresden 67

"Yes, it is a nice dagger isn't it? Now, what's this about you putting regional interests above the Principate as a whole?"

I wonder if swords being laid at Cat's feet instead of actual crowns will be of any significance. My guesses so far are the old stupid "Queen of Blades" theory, some extension of Saint's domain, or Cat giving up her staff at the end.

Alternatively, they can just stab Larat and all the future royals will have to earn their right to rule in a bizarre reversed version of Pop-up Prince. Bonus points if he ends up petrified.

SpeckofStardust

I mean there isn't really a reason why Larat's head can't be laid at his own feet, I mean he was dragged into the darkness and his head isn't going to remain on his shoulders, and he is a prince that is meant to be king, so he counts as a crown too.

Liliet

'mortal rulers'

SpeckofStardust

I mean.

"It'd not escaped my notice that Kairos had seven crowns and my closest friend in the world hanging from that wooden beam. I might have been amused by that, if not for the implicit threat to the gesture: that he'd kill Hakram the moment I made a play for the shard, that I could only snatch that prize from him if I was willing to make Adjutant my one."

I don't think the 'And one' counts under the same conditions

as the seven otherwise the Adjutant wouldn't be at risk here.

Liliet

I think it might have been turn of phrase, but either way it'd have to be mortals

Clint

Technicality: If he's killed in a way that won't reset with the turning of the seasons, wouldn't that make him a "mortal" ruler? Killing someone is a pretty good demonstration that they were killable.

I doubt this theory, but it's not completely nuts – the story weight of laying his own head at his feet might be enough to power through the strange technicality.

And think of the Chuck Norris level story about Cat – most people regret making deals with the Faerie, because they will keep to the letter of the deal, not the spirit; Faerie Kings regret making deals with the Black Queen, even while she keeps to the letter of the deal.

Morgenstern

Ah, but in most stories at least, if not being a common misconception over all (not sure about the history of the word there), "mortal" does not mean what you imply.

"Immortal" usually does NOT mean you cannot be killed. It only means you cannot not die of old age (and often also not fall victim to normal illnesses/diseases).

Vice versa, being "mortal" usually only means that you *age* and will, at some point, die of old age (and, usually, also be susceptible to illnesses/diseases).

Morgenstern

In short: Even if you can kill someone (once and for all) that does not automatically make them "mortal".

Mental Mouse

Well, Named villains in general don't age past a certain point, and seem resistant to diseases (note that Pilgrim's plague did *not* kill Amadeus). Did Cat actually "grow up" past 16 or whatever, before becoming fae and then getting resurrected as a mortal again?

But DK strongly implied that true immortality was more than that, essentially escaping the human condition

entirely. Being able to reconstitute your body after it's been chopped up seems to qualify; Malicia's (and Bard's) body-hopping suggests another way of surviving "confirmed kills", though it didn't work for Akua.

Liliet

>Did Cat actually "grow up" past 16 or whatever

She at least grew in height: she is now a whole inch taller than Amadeus!

>Malicia's (and Bard's) body-hopping

Malicia doesn't body hop, those were remote-controlled puppets. Her actual body would have her die if killed.

And villains do seem to be somewhere on the edge between mortal and not; escaping the confines of it in theory but usually not in practice, not living more than a regular lifetime because of being killed before it runs out.

All that, and I think 'mortal rulers' might refer less to [ruler who is mortal] and more to [ruler of mortals]. It's the weight of *that* that Larat wants, in giving him anchor to Creation. So I think Neshamah actually *would* qualify: mortal himself or not, he has that "right of rule" over mortals along with the actual nation of Serenity, not to mention the old crown of Sephiroth that he never strictly speaking *lost*. (And I suspect the latter might count for more, here)

Larat himself does not have a right of rule or right of *anything* in Creation, which is exactly the problem he has. The deal was not for a symbolic action, but for an actual transference of a metaphysical property, one that humans inherently have (even if it's not actualized most of the time) and fae inherently don't.

Mental Mouse

> She at least grew in height: she is now a whole inch taller than Amadeus!

Oh, good spot! So I guess a young villain isn't necessarily trapped in childhood/adolescence.

> Malicia doesn't body hop, those were remote-controlled puppets. Her actual body would have her die if killed.

Counterarguments: 1) If she can see and act through them, that's functionally body hopping, even if the

bodies are “drones” that might not have all the amenities of a natural body. 2) We know the Praesi can transfer souls around. Remember Akua’s strategem: if Cat hadn’t spotted the fakeout phylactery, killing Akua’s “actual body” *wouldn’t* have killed her for real. (That trick might well be Below’s answer to resurrection.) 3) A supporting argument: If Malicia was operating by remote control in Keter, she was presumably doing so from Creation, given her other body in Keter wasn’t her own either. It’s traditional for souls to pass easily between realms, but remote-controlling a body in another realm seems like more of a stretch (and a security hole for DK).

> All that, and I think ‘mortal rulers’ might refer less to [ruler who is mortal] and more to [ruler of mortals].

Sorry, I can’t buy that. “Ruler who is mortal” is the plain reading of “mortal rulers”; in our own world, the latter phrase is *normally* a direct comparison to God/the gods as immortals.

[Liliet](#)

>Oh, good spot! So I guess a young villain isn’t necessarily trapped in childhood/adolescence.

I mean..... Sabah had been *born* to her Name, and Masego had been like eight. Yet she was not a newborn and he is not a preteen.

They aren’t friggin vampires.

> If Malicia was operating by remote control in Keter, she was presumably doing so from Creation, given her other body in Keter wasn’t her own either. It’s traditional for souls to pass easily between realms, but remote-controlling a body in another realm seems like more of a stretch (and a security hole for DK).

Keter is in Creation.

And I don’t believe there is a single reason to believe that the body puppets allow one to slip the noose of death of the actual body. Otherwise, Amadeus would have certainly kept one in reserve and been in no danger at all from losing to Tariq in the first place, no?

>Sorry, I can’t buy that. “Ruler who is mortal” is the plain reading of “mortal rulers”; in our own

world, the latter phrase is normally a direct comparison to God/the gods as immortals.

Fae bargains do funny things with wording.

And 'ruler of mortals' is what is relevant here: Larat wants *a right to rule mortals*.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Good point about Masego and those born to their names.

For the body puppets... Amadeus wasn't nearly the sorcerer Akua was; perhaps Malicia is in-between. That said, it occurs to me that Akua *didn't* try to send her soul to a created adult body, she sent it to an infant. So you might be right... or the puppets may be very inferior, perhaps with awful lifespans.

In any case, the puppet certainly allowed Malicia to survive having the puppet die. If she made a bunch of puppets with her own appearance, she could use them for general appearances in vulnerable situations. I forget whether she used any of her own aspects from the puppet – if *that* doesn't work, that would be another good reason not to lean on them too much.

Regarding the fae bargain, I still say the distinction made in the wording is pretty telling.

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus isn't a sorcerer at all, and I think Alaya isn't either.

Body puppets are an entirely different concept than ripping your soul out of your body and storing it separately, which is what Akua did. And yes, Akua used an actual infant, rather than a necromantic construct.

>In any case, the puppet certainly allowed Malicia to survive having the puppet die. If she made a bunch of puppets with her own appearance, she could use them for general appearances in vulnerable situations. I forget whether she used any of her own aspects from the puppet – if that doesn't work, that would be another good reason not to lean on them too much.

This much is true – the puppets allow you to avoid exposing your real body to vulnerability. Of course, the puppets are made from real people with different appearances than yours, so everyone's going to be able to easily tell that it's not you, especially when your appearance is as distinctive as Alaya's is. So it's a trick of limited usefulness.

Body hopping is what Bard does – when one body dies, she moves on to the next. It might or might not be what Assassin does, too, though it's possible he's got ridiculous regeneration powers instead, or also utilizes remote-controlled puppets.

Akua couldn't freely body-hop either, for that matter – it was a one time use trick, that didn't even end up working.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine surrendering her own crown here honestly brings her greater benefit.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Oh yeah, Cat is totally going to be a “memetic badass” in her world. Without the previous incumbent's “may she never return”, even.

[Liliet](#)

“May she return at the hour of greatest need” 😊

Isi Arnott-Campbell

The exact phrasing places the “mortal” stipulation between the “seven” and the “one” IIRC. I've suspected that the “one” would be the crown of a non-mortal ever since the bargain was first struck, albeit I'm not especially vocal and probably never brought it up.

[Liliet](#)

Ah, interesting.

[Weyrwoman](#)

“Queen of Blades” to me sounds an awful lot like the Queen of Swords Tarot card. And what we know of Catherine right now fits really well with the Rider-Waite interpretation – independent, quick-tongued, honest, intelligent. Transformation with hints of spirituality, someone who gains loyalty easily.

Mental Mouse

From Cat:

> "A trinket will have to be offered," I said. "But what you will be surrendering, in truth, is rather more abstract: it is you 'right to rule'."

SpeckofStardust

sinker

"I like him," Kairos mused. "He's got that, what do you call it?"

"Cold-blooded ruthlessness," I said.

"No, that's not it. Ah, a knife," the Tyrant of Helike said.

"He's got a knife."

This is the most blatant means of hitting on Cathrine isn't it.

After all who else has a knife?

Liliet

y e s

Poring

Gods, I hope that Kairos never meet Robber. Can you imagine the bloodbath?

Mental Mouse

I'm imagining the collateral damage... That said, Kairos might understand the jar of eyeballs.

NZPIEFACE

Not Cat? Far as I know, she uses fists to pummel people nowadays.

Aotrs Commander

For me, it was Kairos that stole the show this time.

"No, a knife."

I laughed so hard. Kairos is just brilliant. You can't really help but enjoy a man who just loves what he's doing can you?

When you get down to it, really, Kairos has already won on one level, on the basis that it doesn't matter what happens to him in the end, he's had more fun doing it than most people do in their entire lives, and that's what really matters, isn't it? (And he knows he won't even have to clean up all the mess he made, either! Probably. Unless he, like, marries Cat or somethng, and probably not even then...)

erebus42

That would be fucking amazing. She'd probably end up killing him, but-as I'm sure he'd agree- it would be worth it for the level of hilarity alone.

Andrew Mitchell

Maybe the first PGtE fan-fiction?

[Mental Mouse](#)

> When you get down to it, really, Kairos has already won on one level, on the basis that it doesn't matter what happens to him in the end, he's had more fun...

Yup, that's how villains win.

[Liliet](#)

> When you get down to it, really, Kairos has already won on one level, on the basis that it doesn't matter what happens to him in the end, he's had more fun doing it than most people do in their entire lives, and that's what really matters, isn't it?

Catherine has gone on an inner monologue once about how that is villain logic; and it fits Kairos to a T indeed 😊

erebus42

Damn, Rozala and Arnaud for the win! The Tyrant is delightful as always. Also come on Tariq! Did you really think you could just shame a bunch of Procerans into doing the right thing?

konstantinvoncarstein

He is probably used to the Levantine honor. It can apparently be useful sometimes...

konstantinvoncarstein

Btw, what could by the little surprises Catherine has in her arsenal? The Mighties and Sve Noc are one of them, and probably Masego as well. What could be the rest?

[sengachi](#)

I mean, 3,000+ years of concentrated power + a dark god or two makes for a lot of pretty apocalyptic weapons all on their own.

Andrew Mitchell

She has her staffswordprayer as well.

BTW I think "the Mighty" can be considered plural in this context.

Tom

I like how Cat is checking out the royalty at the start of the chapter. "Ooo that tall and curvy Malanza..." "Louis ain't my type but he's still nice to look at..."

This is a wonderfully dissonant band of five; I can't wait to see how it implodes 😊

[Fayhem](#)

IIRC Vivienne called her out on that when she didn't realize Cat was listening instead of sleeping. Something to the effect of "whenever we meet someone hot Cat makes time to ogle them even if they're actively trying to kill us". Never change, Cat.

[Liliet](#)

Yes ;u;

[Daniel E](#)

I was really hoping that Adjutant as "A prince among men" would become literal 😊 Cat certainly says it often enough.

NerfContessa

While I agree he is one, if more among orcs as well, I am glad I'd didn't count. I want him to remain in said role 😊

Anony

Tbh if she wasn't wearing a gorget, she was basically asking to be murdered.

burguulkodar

Ooooh

We finally got a Adventure group on! Let's dive in the details!

Cat, True Neutral with tinges of Evil and Lawful
Role – Warpriest (attack cleric)
Useful Abilities – Scrying blocker, Leadership, Terrible-Nightly-Powers-still-unrevealed and Ultimate Chaotic Foresight

Tariq, between True Neutral and Neutral Good
Role – Healer (defense cleric)
Useful abilities – Ressurrection, Intervention-when-all-is-fucked, Sense Motive, Diplomacy, Heal, Spread Sickness

Tyrant, Chaotic Evil, definitely, tinges of Stupid Evil

Role – Warlock

Useful abilities – Twist things to his command, Wish stuff, Rend reality, scheming, double-scheming, triple-scheming, betraying

Laurence, likely Lawful Good, definitely Stupid Good

Role – Paladin

Useful abilities – Cutting stuff up, Body and Soul Immunity to external forces, more cutting (this time deeper), high Listen Skill, still yet more cutting (this time metaphysical).

Rogue Sorcerer, maybe Chaotic Good

Role – Of course sorcerer, stupid!

Useful abilities – A lot of fire abilities, powerful-yet-unrevealed-skills, safekeeping-souls

Poetically Psychotic

Well, who's the final crown to be?

If only there were someone nearby. Someone powerful, but who had been corrupted by a kingship not his own. Someone Cat would dearly love to see restored to his prior, not-possessed-by-the-King-of-the-Dead state.

Calling it now, the 8th crown is the Dead King's, taken from Hierophant's head. Probably won't actually affect old Neshamah himself that much, beyond setting the will of the gods against him whenever he tried to control Masego.

On that note, Archer has been sent to track down and confront the mad-with-grief Hierophant, whom she secretly loves, and who may have feelings for her he hasn't fully explored. That has 'dramatic love confession to break mind-control/cause epiphany' written *all* over it.

Chapter 35: Colloquy

"Forty-three: if your band is split during a harrowing test set by a villain or ambiguous entity, you may safely assume you will next be reunited in some sort of cell or unfolding sacrificial ritual."

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

It was a funny thing, perspective. What Hierophant had stolen from Arcadia was a drop in the ocean, a piece of eternity that

became something less by being removed from the whole. Looking at it with my own eyes, though, the scale of what he'd wrought was worthy of awe. A kingdom's worth of badlands, consumed by howling squalls and the aftermaths of sorcery until the very grounds were made barren. I'd walked only the very edge of this land, but it'd been enough to tell me that it would take weeks if not months to go from one end to another. And it would fall on Creation, a cataclysmic doom on Iserre, if anchor was not fashioned before the tipping point. To accomplish that most important of tasks, an army would have been too much but a single person too little. And so, in a pattern nearly as old as the First Dawn, a band of five had been called. Of those chosen few I would not speak of myself, but the others? It was not small names – or Names – that had been assembled to turn back doom.

The Tyrant of Helike, an odd-eyed madman who'd pulled at the strings of nations and tricked an entity older than the city that'd birthed him. Weak of constitution, sickly and feeble, he did not walk with the others but instead leisurely sat a throne held up by a throng of eerily-intelligent animated stone gargoyles. The ornate scepter in his hand was the least of the artifacts at his disposal, though the only visible, for the villain had inherited a veritable trove of lunacy and wealth from the Theodosians of centuries past. And yet, for all that, I suspected the deadliest things remained his tongue and the mind that but purpose to it. As if making of mockery of this entire war, the Tyrant wore not armour but instead kingly brocaded robes in gold and scarlet, match for the ornate ruby-set crown on his brow and his misformed eye even deeper red.

The Grey Pilgrim needed no introduction, I supposed. The oldest living Calernian hero and favourite agent of the Choir of Mercy. There was a terrifying amount of power in that wizened frame, and the crooked staff of ashwood he bore, but it was the Peregrine himself that was the true terror. He was a weaver of stories in dusty grey robes with second sight and a choir's worth of angels whispering secrets in his ear. He was incorruptible, implacable and while in body he might just be an exhausted old man his deep knowledge of miracles and deeper well of power allowed him a mystifying breadth of capabilities that only strengthened when exercised to save another. Though near a king in the eyes of his people, his shoes were worn leather and he wore not a single adornment save white locks atop his head.

What more need be said of Saint of Swords, after saying she had once cut the fabric of Winter itself? Oh, like the Pilgrim her years were slowing her down but the vitality of her prime had been replaced by the kind of unbroken certainty that in a Named was a hundredfold more dangerous than muscle. I would never like her, but the Saint was a heroine who has faced sword in hand and slain things whose mere sight would put lesser souls to flight. She was one of the finest blades alive, capable of cutting

through sorcery and steel and the fabric of Creation with the plain longsword at her hip, and she had tempered her soul and body into a domain whose existence made her halfway unkillable – and explained why she disdained armour in favour of a plain pale tabard over a darker collared tunic.

The last one, the Rogue Sorcerer, was taciturn mystery who'd faced two of the most infamous villains of our age – in all humility, Akua Sahelian and myself – without taking a wound, revealing an aspect or ever being in danger of death. He'd been able to fend off Diabolist's ritual attempts to find my father, proved capable of guiding armies through a dying shard of Arcadia and was, to my knowledge, the only person not complicit or in my service to have figured out it was a Keter's Due that filled the sky. That someone so plainly competent was almost unheard of meant the man was being purposefully discreet, and given my teachers I knew how lethal Named who went out of their way to keep their abilities quiet tended to be. The long coat of leather over practical chain mail and less practical silks of many colours was kept close to his frame, though there were shapes to be discerned beneath. Over his shoulder was hung a heavy bag bearing seven mortal crowns, carried on my behalf.

It should have been a formal affair, this journey, something solemn and dignified.

"So is it true you used to knock boots with the Iron Prince?" Kairos cheerfully asked. "I'm not usually one to bring up salacious rumours, but–"

I ignored the bald lie he'd spoken and instead kept a wary eye on the Saint's sword hand. Which was, unsurprisingly, on the pommel of said sword. That tended to happen whenever the Tyrant talked, though to be fair we'd only just entered this realm and already I was tempted to let her. I glanced at her face, though, and found it wrinkled as usual but also irritated this time. *I bet it's true, I thought. All those late evenings killing ratlings under moonlight?* Hasenbach honestly wasn't much of a looker – though she wasn't exactly plain either – but her uncle might wear those broad shoulders a little better.

"Black Queen," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "Am I correct in presuming that the broken tower is our destination?"

He was speaking a little too loudly for this to be entirely about him asking me a question. Still, he was pointing in the right direction so I actually followed his finger and nodded after a confirmatory look. The wasteland here was not entirely plains with a few distant mountains, there were other inclines. It was simply hard to see them, sometimes, buried as they were in ash and dust and smoke. Even far out from the great storms as we were, the winds would be slapping great heaps of those at our sides if not for the small glow dangling from the tip of the

Pilgrim's staff like an amulet of solid Light. Unlike the protection Sve Noc had taught me to make, his did not impose a bubble of stillness around us. It... eased the winds into slowing, so that when they reached us they were little more than a warm breeze carrying nothing at all. It was a more elegant solution, though when we'd get to breaching the great storms I suspected my method would be more effective.

"It is," I said. "I'm impressed you can recognize it as a tower, to be honest."

If I hadn't been there earlier with my Hunt in attendance, I would not have. All that was visible of the tower now under a hill's worth of ash and dust was a square house of stone with a broken tile roof jutting out from the grey. There'd been glass windows on the sides once, but they had not survived the first catastrophe to hit them years ago and even the last sticking bits were like ground-down teeth in an open maw through which the wasteland's winds poured through.

"The slate tiles and sandstone are not unfamiliar to me," the hero said. "They were a noticeable feature of Liesse."

The nicer parts of it, anyway, I mentally corrected.

"You've been there before," I said.

"Once, years ago," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "I had heard that the secret tomes of the Wizard of the West had been found, and were to be auctioned by a Liessen guild."

Not one of the legal ones, I thought with a snort. Books written on the subject of magic had been heavily restricted under Black and confiscated whenever found, though there'd been monetary compensation so Callowans hadn't really cared unless they were wizards. In which case they already had greater reasons to be afraid of the Carrion Lord than books, no matter their subject. This, though, a hero's ancient tomes put up for auction in largest southern Callowan city but also the only one under an Imperial governor? Knowing my teacher like I did, that story could only be headed one way.

"It was a trap," I said.

"It was a trap," the Sorcerer sighed. "I nearly died twice fleeing the 'auction' and lost a fortune's worth of..."

He paused.

"No matter," he said. "Still, the city was a memorable enough sight."

I glanced at him.

"Did you get one of the books?" I asked.

"I did," the hero disgruntledly said. "It was only a transcript of some Praesi trial involving tapirs, and to add insult to injury the Warlock wove a tracking enchantment into it."

I very carefully hid my smile. I had some suspicions as to who had chosen the contents of the book, at least. Regardless, we had arrived. We'd also pulled slightly ahead of the others as we talked, though they caught up quick enough.

"- in a way wouldn't that make you Cordelia's aunt?" Kairos enthusiastically said. "You're practically royalty yourself, Laurence."

The Saint's fingers twitched, but sadly I still needed the Tyrant and he was bound to have some contingencies that'd cripple us if he was actually attacked – I doubted he would have agreed to come otherwise, or kept taunting the old zealot so insistently. Gritting my teeth I prepared to step in, but before I could the Grey Pilgrim quietly laughed. The sound had the Saint's shoulders loosening, though the Sorcerer's tightened instead.

"I knew your father, Kairos," the Peregrine quietly said. "Were you aware?"

"You've not exactly been chaste in the array of stories you'll get involved in, Tariq," the Tyrant amusedly said, flopping a wrist dismissively. "Though I'll assume that was before the two of us had our pleasant chat on the matter of succession."

"You remind me of him," the Pilgrim said. "He, too, felt the need to fill silences at any cost."

The Tyrant of Helike went still for less than a heartbeat, and was smiling after as if he'd never ceased, but he'd not been quite quick enough to hide the glint of frozen rage that passed through his eyes at the Pilgrim's words.

"Already a little less bored," Kairos Theodosian grinned. "Not so kindly after all are we, my kindly stranger?"

"If a child pricks his hand picking a rose, it is not maltreatment," the Grey Pilgrim mildly said. "It is a lesson."

Considering that unlike the Tyrant I hadn't just had an old wound prodded at and the wise old man tone was still tiresome to me, that was a sign I needed to step in. I didn't have much sympathy for Kairos, but it would be preferable if every member of this band at least made it to the antechamber of the peril ahead. It'd just be poor form otherwise.

"We've arrived," I called out.

The old man and the young king kept their gaze on each other for a long moment even after I spoke, and I cleared my throat progressively more loudly until they both looked because it sort of sounded like I was choking.

"Now that I have your attention," I rasped out.

I raised a finger, then breathed out a little. Though I was high priestess of Night, unlike the rest of these people I didn't have the ancillary benefits of Name easing my way through this journey. When ash got into my lungs and mouth, I still choked like a mortal. Still didn't regret that transition in the slightest, mind you. You just couldn't put a price on enjoying a good cup of wine, and not occasionally going mad with Winter.

"When the Hierophant brought Liesse into this place, it was roughly done," I said. "Roughly enough that pieces of the city were sown all over this wasteland."

The Rogue Sorcerer inhaled sharply as he realized where I was headed before the rest. The benefits of having an education in matters magical, I thought, and made note that while the Tyrant's eyes had narrowed he didn't seem have figured it out. I was honestly uncertain whether or not the villain was a mage or not, since I'd never actually seen him use sorcery except through artefacts. At the very least, though he was gifted in his understanding I was now fairly sure even if he was a mage he had not reached High Arcana.

"In Creation that wouldn't mean much, but this place is adrift," I said. "I won't get into too much detail, since it's all very technical-" and even after speaking with Akua twice I still only barley understood what she'd said, "- but given the fluidity of laws this place, and the strength of the story we're riding, the law of sympathy can be leaned on pretty heavily to provide a shortcut."

"That is... inspired," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "We came through Creation, but to emerge elsewhere in this realm we would be walking the boundary between it and Arcadia instead."

I smiled and kept my fingers from clenching. It was a good thing I was intending on remaining on good terms with the Grand Alliance, because if it came down to a fight this one might be too dangerous to keep alive. It'd taken Akua Sahelian, a sorceress that even a one-in-a-century kind of talent like Masego considered brilliant, a direct look at my Lord of Silent Steps using something similar in nature to figure this method out. Ivah had begun something close, that it called 'skittering', back in the Everdark and had refined the trick since into a very dangerous tool. The Rogue Sorcerer had figured out from a bastard description in a matter of moments, and though that didn't mean he'd be able to reproduce the feat that was still a rather nasty

knack for comprehending my side's bag of tricks. I'd wanted the Tyrant in this band of five because of the Sorcerer, but now I was wondering if that was going to be as affective a scheme as I'd believed it would be. Not that this was ever going to be anything but a risky roll of the dice, considering there was no one among my fellows I could truly rely on if things went south. Still there'd been no way but leaving Adjutant behind: I needed both the Tyrant and the Sorcerer among the five, since it both gave me the shape of the former's inevitable betrayal and allowed me to get around the diplomatic debacle that would be robbing people I needed to be allies with. No matter how badly they deserved to be robbed.

"Foundling," the Saint of Swords said. "You admitted earlier that your Praesi warlock is possessed by the Hidden Horror, yes?"

"Influenced," I corrected.

"Bit of downplay, that," the Tyrant snorted.

"As far as my people have been able to tell, the Dead King isn't in control most of the time," I said. "Though there seem to be small bursts where he is, it's true, but always for less than a quarter hour. Though for simplicity's sake, it would be best to consider the Hierophant as bewitched."

"And how do you intend to break that bewitchment?" the Saint bluntly asked.

"I can't answer that without crippling the chances it'll actually work," I replied. "But rest assured, I do have a method."

"If he's half as powerful as all," the Saint gestured at the wasteland around us, "this seems to imply, he needs to die. If the Dead King has a way in, he'll remain a risk after even if--"

"Laurence," I interrupted, tone eerily calm, "allow me to be perfectly frank with you: if you so much as scuff his robes, I'll put you down without batting an eye. It's not diplomatic, or all that practical, but I do not tolerate rabid animals snapping their jaws at the people I care about."

She glared at me, eyes burning. I stared back, unblinking. The Saint was exactly the kind of heroine to nip what she saw as a looming threat in the bud by the edge of her sword. The same traits that made her capable of accomplishing that also made her a lot more likely to try it, in my eyes, which was rather the issue with Saint in essence wasn't it? The moment there was no longer a hand on her leash, the truce went up in smoke.

"Queen Catherine," the Pilgrim intervened. "The question was not meant as an attack. It needs to be asked: if there is no other

way, if your own method has failed, a decision will have to be made."

My fingers clenched, but I forced them to loosen.

"In that very narrow situation you've mentioned, then I'll take action," I said. "But let's be perfectly clear: if any of you use what I just said as a pretext to kill the Hierophant, I will take it as an act of war."

Gods, it was a heavy-handed approach and I might as well be painting a weakness in bright red for the wolves among this flock but it needed to be said nonetheless. I wasn't sure either the Saint or the Tyrant would actually have their hand stayed by the threat I'd just made, but the sword I'd just hung above the head of this truce should be enough to have cooler heads intervene instead of stand back and watch if either acted. The Grey Pilgrim, anyway, I grimly thought. I didn't have a good grasp of the Rogue Sorcerer yet.

"As I was saying," I began anew after a few beats of silence. "We will be taking an unusual path, whose nature is kin to a threshold. There are advantages to that. Through Hierophant, the Hidden Horror would attempt to strike at us if we approached the city openly. But in that more fluid place we will travel through, I suspect it will lurk as well. Waiting."

"The first crucible," the Pilgrim calmly said. "Not one, I think, of arms."

"When assault the stronghold of a villain," I said, "watch out for three things: a monster, a trial and a pivot."

"And you believe this to be the trial," the old man said.

"I believe that everyone here has a few bodies buried somewhere in their past," I said, eyes sweeping across the heroes and villain. "And something they want badly enough to listen to the devil when he'll come calling. And make no mistake, I have encountered the Dead King before. It isn't with threats and screams he'll approach. It will be with a pleasant offer for a most reasonable bargain."

Gods, much as I hated to admit it the Saint of Swords was the one I had most faith in to blow straight through. Even Neshamah would have a hard time cracking open that protective shell of hatred and arrogance. The Pilgrim shouldn't be an issue, either, but there were a lot more levers to move him than I was comfortable with, especially considering the Dead King was bound to know a thing or two about angels. The Tyrant was going to sell us out, that was a given, but that was fine. I'd planned with the inevitability in mind. Once more, it was the Rogue Sorcerer that was the unknown. I glanced at Tariq and caught his eye, then

subtly dipped my head towards the youngest hero. Just as subtly, the Pilgrim nodded. He was either reliable, then, or good enough to fool whatever means of second sight the Peregrine used. Either way, it was too late in the span to do anything about it.

"It was a beautiful speech, Catherine," Kairos called out. "It greatly raised my spirits."

I rolled my eyes and limped up the hill of ash and dust until I stood by the side of one of the broken windows. Running a hand across the warm stone by the windowsill, I breathed out and let the Night flow through my veins. The shivering line between realms was no domain of Sve Noc's, but the darkness within the broken house was a threshold I could use. Night poured out of me like a flood, until I breathed out and withdrew my palm. I turned to them, straightening my back.

"Into the deeps," I said. "We will meet again on the other side."

Big Brother

The First Among the Night, leading the Band of Five into the Darkness. This is very much a Story

Cicero

As the only non-named she fits into the story by being the Guide.

That probably gives her protection until the final confrontation, but also might make her vulnerable afterwards.

Rook

Guides do have an unfortunate tendency to make it to the end before making a necessary sacrifice to complete the task, if not necessarily a Heroic one.

Said sacrifice also tends to happen just when things seem the most bleak, a last minute turnaround at the edge of what looks like inevitable defeat.

In this case if she's assuming that role, it's a double edged knife. She can use that story to cull the herd beforehand to meet the conditions of said sacrifice before feeding the "Black Queen" to Larat. It'd be tricky, but designating someone as critical to the mission (at least on the surface) would actually be a way to mark them for death, considering

that the one of the defining marks of a truly desperate situation is one where you've lost the most important piece.

The most Noble Souls tragically perishing for the sake of the mission isn't exactly rare either. Theoretically she could murder the Saint by kissing her ass until it sounds like she really is a saint.

RoflCat

You could say

She's a Practical person
who's acting as the Guide
inTo this domain of Evil

The Brave Little Muffin

I'm honestly surprised she didn't end up with a Name like Dark Priestess. That's bound to be storyworthy, and the apotheosis of the everdark is probably an event worth getting a name over.

Navi-Hank

I wanted The Herald of Night, to be honest

goliath1303

See my reply to this same comment for why I don't think that would work. "First Under the Night", "Dark Priestess", or "Priestess of Night"/"Night Priestess" are all viable names, especially the first because people ****actually**** call her that. Your idea just sounds cool but had no reason to become a Name. Now, based on what little info we have on Dwarves, "Herald of the Night" would 100% be a possibility if Cat were a Dwarf.

Clint

She's taken steps to avoid that – she snarks at Sve Noc like a rebellious teenager, never like a worshipper and she never preaches their teachings.

Now, if she starts telling people that All is Night and speaking respectfully to the crows...

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hmm, I hadn't thought of her snarking at Sve Noc that way; good thing that attitude comes naturally to her. The Everdark certainly doesn't have the traditions to support such a Name, but then she's not in the Everdark anymore, any more than Hakram was among the similarly

denuded (de-nominated?) orc tribes when he gained his Name.

But if she's the Guide, she doesn't need to be killed to leave the rest of the group bereft... just separated from them.

Sethur

Remember how undefined aspects in heroes tend to emerge at the most crucial of moments? Cat might be able to transition into a Name at such a moment. She has a lot of weight behind her as First under the Night and Black Queen of Callow. Also she is leading a band of five of which she is arguably the weakest in raw strength (Night is only granted to her) like her teacher once did. And the Black Knight always had a plan and a hidden trump card. Also, Cat plans to lay down her crown at the end of this anyway, getting another Name would not even be a problem for her under the Liesse Accords.

Liliet

This is kind of what I'm thinking of this currently.

Dragrath

To be honest since her goal is to end named rulers through the accords it wouldn't make much sense for her to gain a name as others have said her greatest advantage is her lack of a name.

Which too honest it is interesting that no one has noticed she is unnamed while I suspect it is fully on purpose its interesting that even Pilgrim's angels haven't noticed something is wrong those sisters really know their stuff

KageLupus

You have to think of Names more as roles to be filled, or grooves in the world to fall into.

Something like Rumena could maybe become a Dark Priest because it actually cares about the religion. But Cat clearly doesn't and treats it like a partnership. Lopsided as hell, true, but still different from a normal religious relationship.

The fact that she is also the Black Queen is probably holding her back from a Name right now as well. Basically Cat doesn't readily fit into any normal story so there's no good Name for her to have. Which is also something that makes her dangerous.

She has more power than a typical non-Named, all of the experience with stories that let's her manipulate them, and enough weight as First under Night to affect the story without quite being as locked in as your typical hero or villain.

Tai

Exactly this. People think of having a Name as being a good thing, but the truth is that having a Name, while bestowing you power that you wouldn't ordinarily have, also forces you to lock into patterns. The patterns themselves aren't dangerous for the majority of heroes, especially when they're just starting out, but for veterans of Cat's level who're playing games against the Pilgrim, not having a name is actually an advantage, not a weakness.

Sir Pantsalot

Personally I'm not super clear on the conditions that distinguish Named from titles, but I didn't get that feeling myself. We've already seen her avoid a new Name in Black Queen, and that one had something of a buildup before it came to the pivot. First Under Night kinda came out of nowhere and didn't have any cultural momentum to support it—it's almost the other way around, with her trying to reshape the drow into something less self-destructive.

goliath1303

Either in operating under a severe misconception, or so many other people have missed a fundamental aspect of Names...

The way I understand it, Names don't come from nowhere. There needs to be Story behind them which defines a Role and lens them narrative Weight. This means no matter how cool, edgy, or badass any names people come up with are they won't ever be Names unless they become a common character in stories told in a specific culture. People think up these cool sounding names that sometimes are sound like a 14yr old playing their first RPG. Here's a link to a previous comment about this phenomenon where I listed off a few of the ridiculous names I could find in the comments of various chapters:

Warlord Catherine the Squire, Queen of Callow, Duchess of Moonlit Night

It's like 4 names crammed into one overly wordy and edgy bundle. WoG is that Warlord ain't happen as she's not an

orc(It was stated outright in the story that Grem was the closest any orc he's come to gaining that name since the Miezan occupation, but joining up with Black squashed it.), Names don't include your ****actual name**** because they're not a one off, they're a Role that different people fill through time, and none of them except "Queen" have anything to do with Callow and that's too general. "Good Queen" or "Black Queen" could become Names though. Because at their roots Names are archetypes. If that character, type of character, or Role isn't a common part of your culture's history, stories, religion, etc then it won't happen. The closest exception to that is if you embody some idea or personality type to stick an extent that people start telling stories about you and you enter into the zeitgeist of that culture. That's where "Black Queen" came from I believe. We had never heard mention of it before and even after it came up nobody mentioned or compared Cat to any previous incarnations of the Name. She had accomplished so much, done so many legendary things, and been such an important part of what was happening in and how things would go in the furore of Callow and Calernia as a whole that she forged a new Name. Same with Heirophant as far as we know. He scrapped with little g gods, handled the far, and dealt with demons to such an extent that he ****became**** an usherer of miracles and vivisector of gods.

So to sum this up, if you haven't done things like; smack around a creature whose very presence permanently scars Creation like it owes you money, bind a fae princess in her own domain while standing on the ashes of untold armies that had been obliterated there since before time began, snatch your dying society from the clutches of a Dread Empire ruled by the most successful villains in memory while absolutely destroying everybody who decided you couldn't do that or, that now that you had, they were the ones that deserved to step in and claim the victory and shape the future of your people, and for the final example, defeat a god so thoroughly that not only are they dead for real despite being older than the First Dawn, being among the most powerful brings around, and having died and been remade countless times, not only did you steal their mantle thus beginning the journey of your own apotheosis, but you became his freaking daughter... It doesn't matter that you're human and he's fae or that it's an obvious lie, you beat him so badly and were such a BAMF that creation was like "Yep, you've always had this signet ring that until a second ago totally wasn't on the Duke's finger.", or if the Name is not already an existing archetype then nope, you're not getting this made up Name.

Names are archetypes or the result of somebody leaving an almost impossible mark on Creation. And new names aren't the coolest or edgiest thing you can come up with. The new Name will be what the people telling your story start calling you!

I know this is an old post but please, EE or anyone who sees this and thinks I'm totally wrong, please correct me/ tell me your theory.

therealgridlock

As someone who is frankly and honestly explaining the practicalities of their trip, and guiding them to an evil they mean to deal with, yes, i would go so far as to even describe her as

A Practical Guide to Evil.

stevenneiman

The darkness holds dominion, black as death.

burguulkodar

We finally got a Adventure group on! Let's dive in the details!

Cat, True Neutral with tinges of Evil and Lawful
Role – Warpriest (attack cleric)
Useful Abilities – Scrying blocker, Leadership, Terrible-Nightly-Powers-still-unrevealed and Ultimate Chaotic Foresight

Tariq, between True Neutral and Neutral Good
Role – Healer (defense cleric)
Useful abilities – Ressurrection, Intervention-when-all-is-fucked, Sense Motive, Diplomacy, Heal, Spread Sickness

Tyrant, Chaotic Evil, definitely, tinges of Stupid Evil
Role – Warlock
Useful abilities – Twist things to his command, Wish stuff, Rend reality, scheming, double-scheming, triple-scheming, betraying

Laurence, likely Lawful Good, definitely Stupid Good
Role – Paladin
Useful abilities – Cutting stuff up, Body and Soul Immunity to external forces, more cutting (this time deeper), high Listen Skill, still yet more cutting (this time metaphysical).

Rogue Sorcerer, maybe Chaotic Good
Role – Of course sorcerer, stupid!
Useful abilities – A lot of fire abilities, powerful-yet-unrevealed-skills, safekeeping-souls

Javvies

This sounds like she's planning to use Kairos as the "and one" after his inevitable betrayal.

Intriguing.

The Rogue Sorcerer is a conundrum.

I look forward to Kairos and Laurence dying. They're both just too annoying as characters, and Kairos has long since burned through the leeway being entertaining bought.

JJR

But then it turns out he knows this and his betrayal is to NOT betray the party like everyone expected. And then they have to scramble around fixing the plans that he just ruined with his friendship.

Hitogami

If I was him that's exactly what I'd do, but as much as I'd appreciate the plot twist I don't think he can fight his nature enough to do that

RoflCat

No no no, that would only betray their expectations.

First he betray the party, as it is proper

Then he betray the one he betrayed the party to, because Reformed Villain hijinks

THEN he betray the party once more by stealing the prize

Because it ain't Traitorous if there's only one betrayal in store.

IDKWhoitis

Unfortunately, you don't kill the Comic relief first. I suspect that's why Kairos is being a little shit, he is essentially wearing plot armor while he is making fun of or hounding something. I would guess Saint or Grey take the first shot, maybe surviving it.

I heavily suspect the Rogue Sorcerer to be a Dead King simulacrum or other tool of betrayal, he is just too unknown. Kairos will probably surprise us by not being the first to betray, but almost certainly will do so after someone else has started the shitshow.

JJR

Rogue Sorcerer is interesting to say the least. One eye rimmed in red the other in green, and when they were setting up this concord back in the chapter Concord he said an interesting thing. That refusing an arrangement would be, "would be worse than a sin, it would be a *mistake*." The emphasis he put on mistake, it made me wonder if he was maybe keeping Black soul very close to his own to better keep track of it. The saying does tell us to, "Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer". And you can't get much closer than tying your souls together.

Would not explain why the other eye is rimmed red though.

Dainpdf

Might be the original rim, might be a side effect. But yes, very good catch.

SITB

The Rogue Sorcerer shoulders also stiffen when the Grey Pilgrim laughed (while Laurence relaxed).

Something funky is going on, even if it will turn out to be a misdirection at the end.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, I noticed that too...

Clint

Kairos has a red eye...

The Dead King's are yellow...

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, even before holding Amadeus's soul, he looked like a discreet Power In Waiting. But that comment might well have been a signal from Amadeus that he's not being quite as passive as you'd expect from a disembodied soul. If RS is actually *conversing* with Amadeus, then he potentially has his own significant powers, joined to Amadeus's strategic and tactical genius.

Did he have those eyes when he was fighting Cat &co. before? If so, it's probably just a feature or indicator of his Name.

Dainpdf

So you're saying Kairos will betray all expectations? XD

konstantinvoncarstein

When did he do something else? 😊

[Liliet](#)

When he got played by Catherine like a fiddle about an hour ago 😊

konstantinvoncarstein

It only prove my point 😊

Rook

I think there's chance that Amadeus might seize control of him at some point, whether by his own machinations or outside influence. One potential landmine we know of already is that his soul is in the Rogue Sorcerer's hands, and we just had strong foreshadowing about how much rage Amadeus has towards the Pilgrim.

It would also be quite a good way to tie up that old loose end in terms of Catherine and Amadeus' relationship. If he ever gets an opportunity to get back at the Pilgrim, it'd put him at odds with Catherine's own goals. At that point Catherine's ultimatum to him from their last face-to-face meeting since second Liesse would come to fruition; "make yourself into a man that deserves to live in that (better) world, or you're just another corpse I step over on my way there"

Decius

Amadeus would not let his rage, however great, cause him to make a mistake on the level of attacking the Pilgrim without first guaranteeing a draw.

Dasketzer

Dying to have their souls bound to the cloak and manifest again under our dear ubua as her minions in service of her Black Queen?

antoninjohn

I wonder if they will see each others trials, that would be pretty bad for the Pilgrim to have the Tyrant know that he is a blood traitor who killed his own son in his sleep to keep hold of his power in Levant

magesbe

Are you saying that this is how Tyrant would spin it, or do you actually think this is how it happened?

Javvies

Tariq killed his brother openly and killed his nephew (sister's son) in his sleep, because said nephew wanted to wage a war of vengeance over his mother's murder by a Proceran Prince and Tariq hasn't changed his mind.

I dislike Tariq but he didn't kill his nephew for personal power.

Clint

Tariq had a belief about what policy the Dominion should follow.

The lawful ruler of the Dominion disagreed – and was winning the political game of persuading the rest of the Lords of the Dominion.

So Tariq killed the lawful ruler of the Dominion.

Now, every Lord of the Dominion looks to Tariq, rather than to their lawful ruler, when big-picture decisions are to be made.

It's true that Tariq didn't kill his nephew to take a crown and open power, but he did do it to see his will imposed on the Dominion and to increase his own influence over future decisions. That's personal power.

Neel

I feel that there's an ENORMOUS difference between making a decision to impose your own will because you think you're right, and making a decision to impose your will because you're on a power trip.

Rook

That's stretching the truth so far that it puts dental floss to shame.

Tariq killed his nephew because the limited foresight of his choir showed him exactly how much human suffering would come as a result of the war that the boy was preparing to wage.

Tariq wouldn't give a shit if the entirety of the dominion were to forget that he exists, or if the dominion pursued a policy revolving around spaghetti and candycanes. Him and his choir only really care about minimizing suffering as much as possible, and whatever power he wields – physical,

magical, or political – are all just disposable tools to that end.

It's like claiming that people buy bread because they want to chew things. Well it's not like they'd be against chewing things, it's kind of a necessity, but that's not the actual goal.

Decius

Still familicide, and he did it to cause policy changes.

But just like the practical Villains don't have a problem performing good acts in the name of Greater Evil like (almost) fully funding orphanages, the practical Heroes don't have a problem performing evil acts (like murder) in the pursuit of the Greater Good.

[Liliet](#)

yeah, being after specific policy changes is very much ethically distinct from being after personal power

also, Amadeus + Greater Evil = LMAO

(this is a man who justifies all his decisions internally in terms of greater good he expects them to eventually lead to, and is trying to smother all sources of actual evil – racism, inequality, starvation, war, power abuse, diabolism, blood sacrifice – in his country)

(I mean if you squint just the right way you can totally justify how this is what should be called Greater Evil, and Amadeus would undoubtedly do just that if asked...)

luminiousblu

I'd argue that it's pretty debatable that any of those things are 'sources of actual Evil', besides starvation since we're canonically told that one is a problem. All of the rest are fundamentally just things that you or I find evil (and I don't find all of them evil).

[Liliet](#)

>racism

>fundamentally just

wut

Andrew Mitchell

I interpreted that differently:

"All of the rest are, fundamentally, just things that you or I find evil..."

[Liliet](#)

OH THAT'S BETTER THANK YOU

anyway we well know that Amadeus disapproves of those things also; he would have banned diabolism if it were feasible [source: Book 1 chapters Rise/Fall], and he had a whole rant @ Malicia about how blood sacrifices were supposed to be a necessary evil, not a staple of their culture viewed positively [source: Epilogue III], and he has indicated many times that he views war as a necessary evil as well, one that he would rather have the least amount of that he can manage [I don't even how how to point to a source for this one, he is rather consistent in this view?...]; also not sure how to even point to his dislike of racism given how diffused it is throughout the text... remember Chapter Aspect in Book 1 when Catherine was surprised at the idea of learning the orc language and he lectured her about it? Amadeus is a greenskin rights activist, that's one of the basic points that like everyone in Praes knows about him nd judges him on.

luminiousblu

Andrew's got it.

Good nations canonically were once upon a time slave states which means inequality (not necessarily racism, no, Americans, slavery is older than and not inherently tied to racism), so it's clearly not fundamentally Evil.

[Liliet](#)

Depends on how you read "fundamentally". See [my discussion with Daindpf](#) on chapter Peers.

Fundamentally or not, once you dig deep enough, you discover that they are bad; and Amadeus agrees with that and acts on that. See my reply to Andrew.

luminiousblu

It...doesn't really work that way? "Bad", by definition, is subjective. If it's subjective then it can't be fundamental, unless you accord that there are values that are objective and built-into the world.

Amadeus acts on his own values. He doesn't particularly strike me as someone who believes them to be objectively true, or if he does he's just a hypocrite

Liliet

Values aren't objective, but cause-effect relationships are. *Given that* you want X, then you can pretty damn objectively derive what's "good" and "bad" for achieving that goal.

There are X's that mortals *universally* want: food, security, companionship, etc. That part is hard-wired into their brains, and while there can be exceptions, it's an *objective* fact that statistically speaking, the majority does want these things.

Given these X's, it's a matter of studying *objectively existent* cause-effect relationships to find out what serves these goals and what doesn't (which we label "good" and "bad"). Eating a rock doesn't make you full. Killing everyone you meet doesn't fulfill your companionship need. Summoning a demon that blights the land isn't good for your prospects of finding food down the line. Racism gets in the way of building a society that maximizes its gains out of the resources it has available.

It's not fundamental because it's more *complex* than that. There are no ethical rules written on a tablet in the middle of the universe, humans have to actually figure those out – much like they have to figure out math and agricultural calendar and how to make computers.

Amadeus acts on the basic values of "dying of hunger is bad", "dying in war is bad", "actually just dying period kind of sucks" and extends those to other people – he wants to ensure the prosperity of the *entire* population of Praes, not just his own.

He boldly assumes that *the entire population of Praes* would rather have food than starve, would rather win a war than lose it, would rather have dignity than be treated as cattle, would rather have opportunities for social rising than be eternally under the boot of High Lords.

He, yes, believes those facts to be *objectively true*. Mighty hypocritical of him?

All of the above aren't *ethical* values. Ethical values are when you want those things not just for *yourself* but also for *other people*. Ethical values

are caring for other people, period, and ethical rules are heuristics for how to achieve your objectives in that while not being either omniscient or omnipotent.

Amadeus believes it to be *ethically bad* that he moves other people as pawns on a chessboard in order to achieve his objectives. He does it anyway because he believes the loss to be balanced out by the future gains, but he cares about the loss, too. Because he *believes* that *objectively* it's a fact that other people *subjectively* value free will, making their own decisions, and so on.

It's not contradictory.

Dainpdf

His own son? Are we reading the same story?

Big Brother

Tariq viewed his nephew as his illegitimate son, much like Cat views Amadeus as her Father.

Dainpdf

That necessitates qualification, when talking about blood. And considering, as has been stated by others, that the rest of the statement is false.

pagesbe

Not a lot happened, but some necessary setup and a better introduction into the Rogue Sorcerer. So he's apparently not a mid-tier scrub like I had initially assumed. Maybe only two levels below the Pilgrim then, I'm guessing. One level below I'd put the White Knight.

Dainpdf

Each of them is a tool for a different job. But I agree with the classification. Where would you put Saint, by the way?

[*Euodiachloris*](#)

Depends: she's a stereotypical Fighter. Awesome damage-dealer in encounters... awful at haggling with the merchant and/or employer later. And, whatever you do, don't ask the Fighter to abuse that Cha score by trying to talk the Silver Dragon down. Nothing but Bad Things™.

Dainpdf

That was what I meant with different tools... but there seemed to be some sort of linear ordering going on.

Oshi

In terms of power lets set a baseline. Compare the power levels directly and exclude all factors of indirect power. (The Scribes a nightmare because she will smother you before you can even hurt her but not a direct power)

Saint

Pilgrim

Sorcerer

Tyrant

and way down last is Catherine at the moment.

[Liliet](#)

And I believe Catherine was counting on it being Tyrant>Sorcerer, because of the sheer power ruler Names get at their disposal, but has discovered she might be wrong...

Lucas

I think the White Knight would have had to use a few tricks to fight Cat. He had to use a lot to fight the black Knight and he isn't all that strong.

Rook

I think the role of the sorcerer here is to be an unexpected variable rather than a powerhouse though. Although the former might mean he affects the story like the latter anyway. There's just SO much emphasis on how mysterious he is and how much of an unknown quantity that he is.

Realistically he's currently a convenient trap card that EE has the option to flip over whenever he wants to defy reader expectations, which makes him exceedingly dangerous regardless what his actual power level really is.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes. So the important question becomes "what does RS actually care about?" If we knew that, we'd have a shot at guessing where he's going to stand in what's coming. But we just don't know yet.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Or he might not even be “below” the Pilgrim, at least in mystical power. He’s certainly someone that Pilgrim and Saint consider a peer, but as with Cat’s crew and Masego, even they might not know his limits.

konstantinvoncarstein

He has stilluch less experience.

superkeaton

Aw, I was hoping for a little bit more. Still, I’m curious what Cat intends to work for this.

Dainpdf

TBF there wasn’t much substance here. Mostly prolonged the cliffhanger from last chapter. I mean, we spent an entire extended sequence with Cat reintroducing the already well established characters.

The necessities of serial fiction...

Rook

I feel like the introduction may not have been useless. It honestly could be part of in-story preparations to kill someone, not just an author tool to hype up the party.

For example, notice she emphasized the Saint being ‘near unkillable’ and disdaining heavier armors as a result. That kind of absolute quality being attributed to a major character is, ironically enough, often a death flag. Unkillable, indestructible, undefeated. Breaking that myth of invincibility is often used as a tool to emphasize something else – severity of a situation, hype for a protagonist or antagonist, etc..., and we know for a fact that this trend isn’t unknown in the guide verse either. It was brought up between Black and Malicia during one of their squabbles, how dangerous Black’s own successful track record could be to himself.

Emphasizing that kind of quality whenever possible – and preferably without the rest of the band noticing, which would be the hard part – can open doors to them being ironically slain instead. The fact that the first trial can be taken individually might also be an important point to note. It’s an opportunity to start rigging the story in your favor (especially considering that flashbacks to defining moments of a character’s life are such a strong story mechanism), and the narrative itself would allow the moves made there to be sworn to secrecy.

Dainpdf

I don't think Creation takes internal monologues into account – if this first person narration is even diagetic.

And I didn't say it was useless. Just majorly unnecessary if we were dealing with a single-tome work, albeit understandable given the demands of serial fiction.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Creation doesn't need to consider the internal monologue, just Saint's reputation – Cat is reminding *us* of that.

Dainpdf

Sure, but then we're back to "this whole extended monologue is basically reintroducing characters we are very familiar with."

I'm not saying it's bad, necessarily, but it likely wouldn't be present if this were a single tome published and I thought it interesting to note that.

The medium shaping the text is a very interesting phenomenon, to me.

luminiousblu

Problem is that the concept of invincible, therefore worfbait isn't actually that common a theme; if anything, it's her advanced age that poses the danger. Sometimes invincible is actually just invincible, especially since the Saint hasn't boasted of being invincible. If she outright said 'nothing you do can scratch me' then yeah she's killing herself there, but she isn't, and the reputation she has of being 'invincible' is merely a direct result of her actually being mostly invincible.

danh3107

Time to delve too greedily and too deep.

Cicero

I'd be more worried about the Saint, Cat.

Sure, she's likely to be unaffected by temptation, but that immunity suggest to me that her trail will be different from everyone else. Instead of a temptation she will be faced with a trick. In which that which appears evil will actually be good.

stevenneiman

Good point. I'm now expecting that her trial will either be fighting one of the others cloaked in illusion, or one of the others being tricked into saying something that sounds incriminating enough that she'll attack them.

Dainpdf

Could be the Name swamp again. Who else misses the Name swamp?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Everyone misses the Name swamp.

Novice

Except Cat of course.

medailyfun

Except Swamp itself

[Mental Mouse](#)

IIRC, the Name swamp was internal to Cat. If everybody's wandering around inside Cat's mind instead of Masego's, Cat has a problem.

Dainpdf

Trials can involve illusions and such. Plus, if my theory is correct Cat is getting a Queen Name by the end of this debacle.

Dainpdf

I suspect she'd cut through that, too. She's bullshit like that. Saint is a simple woman. She sees evil, she cuts.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Except this Evil has spent millennia taking the tools people give him and turning them into his.

I think he knows what to do with swords by now. Saint is not Ranger. Neshamah rather... likes... Ranger; Saint is a bastard copy he could practice on.

Dainpdf

I would not put Ranger and Saint on the same category. Ranger is a sport hunter; Saint is a bloodhound.

And that's the thing with both of them: they're too simple to really fool.

Rook

She'll pass the trial without a doubt, but the real trap is likely how it affects her actions afterwards. I highly doubt Neshamah is unaware that a first trial is going to stop absolutely no one, so the game should be about how to extract some benefit even as the band passes the trial anyway.

She's already inclined to try killing Cat or Masego to nip a potential threat in the bud, and she herself is very aware that she's a member of the old guard whose story should be close to ending. She doesn't have much to lose.

I suspect it'll be just a little push, to incentivize her to stab the Villainous members of the party in the back at a critical moment. Maybe a memory of a time when she got burned by working with a villain. Maybe the memory of whichever straw it was that broke the camel's back, when she became as jaded as she is now. Just a very slight helping hand for a bias that she already has – "Catherine Foundling and the Woe are too dangerous to be left alive".

Dainpdf

It comes from the Enemy. Saint will give zero shits. As Cat herself said, she'll be hard to influence due to her stubbornness and hatred of all Evil.

Rook

The problem is that doesn't make her omniscient and infallible, just stubborn and strong.

Those types are near impossible to influence in terms of conversion or changing their mind, but they sure as hell can be lead by the nose if someone is crafty enough. A crafty someone like, say, a major Villain who predates every kingdom on the surface of the continent and has knowledge and intelligence to play the game on the level of the Intercessor.

Generally if someone will fight against you no matter what out of principle, one of the easiest ways to get what you want is to hide a larger lie by revealing a smaller one and lead them push 'back' in a direction that suits you.

Dainpdf

Right. That's what Cat did, earlier. But while you can bait Saint into attacking *you*, getting her to attack her sorta-allies-for-now is unlikely. She does have decades of experience, on one side, and on the other...

you try to argue the sword falling towards your head into attacking someone else. I don't think it will work.

[Liliet](#)

^ this.

Baiting Saint is relatively easy, but redirecting her is exactly what she has a +999 to resisting.

WuseMajor

I dunno. Saint... I think Saint might be playing a more Subtle game here than anyone suspects. Granted, she's still a thug, but she was working with the Bard to have the Dead King destroy this nation, possibly this entire pathetic little continent, just to "purify" it by getting rid of the unworthy elements because Good Always Triumphs in the End and a Shining Kingdom would rise from the ashes.

I had thought the Pilgrim was part of that plan, but, from everything we've been learning about him, I honestly don't think he'd go for it. I suspect he might agree that, in theory, removing the jerk ass nobility might be a good thing for everyone, but he'd do it surgically with a minimum of pain. Destroying an entire end of the continent in a war for survival... there's no way he could see that amount of suffering as "a necessary evil." Whereas that's exactly the kind of thing I'd expect the Saint, with her Old Testament values, to jump on.

So... I dunno. I think the Saint might be the one who stabs the Pilgrim in the back here.

Oshi

I've been seeing this brought up a lot. We don't know what Saint's plan with the Bard is. I'd rather hold off on ascribing that much scope. It might just have been as much as a Crusade has been called and the fucking mortal rulers are messing about. The Bard tells her Cut them down Saint and I'll give you a shot at the Dead king. It really wouldn't take much for her to take the bait.

[Liliet](#)

I think Bard doesn't even make that kind of bargains, not unless she's acting as an emissary directly. She just affirms what people already believe, and Saint already believed that nobility is corrupt and in the way.

I'm betting her so-called "plan" is just a certainty *that destruction will happen regardless* and so the best they can do is make sure to take as much of the Enemy as they can down with them.

caoimhinh

Recent chapters have made start to wonder if Pilgrim will be the one to kill Saint once he realizes that she is going too far (causing too much suffering) in her pursuit of purifying Calernia.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Or as WuseMajor suggested, she might turn on him. That said, they've been working together for a long time, and that comment about "putting it to judgement" by morning's light indicates that they do have a routine for conflict resolution. But then, they'd have to; they're two of the strongest Names *and* personalities on the continent, if they didn't have *some* way to settle arguments between themselves, they wouldn't still be working together, they'd have gone to war long ago. Note that the specific method hardly matters, though arm-wrestling or such seems unlikely: They could play 7 rounds of poker, seek a House of Light and ask the priests for a counseling session, or whatever. Heck, with Pilgrim's phrasing it's entirely possible that their method is "go talk to Hanno".

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, I too noticed that it sounded oddly reminiscent of the eponymous Choir 😊

Dainpdf

That is not exactly what she was doing. She was destroying the possibility of compromise, so that the Crusade would fight all Evil at once, and accepting Procer as a casualty of that process. That's very different from planning its destruction.

konstantinvoncarstein

She was sure Procer would be destroyed, so in a sense she planned its destruction

Dainpdf

That mistakes a fate accepted as the cost and the actual objective.

Saint wanted no compromise with evil. As Cat said, the moment Tariq is out of the picture she'll likely turn on them. She did not have an elaborate scheme for the destruction and substitution of Procer des the Good hegemon.

[Liliet](#)

This. This as shit.

[Liliet](#)

>and she herself is very aware that she's a member of the old guard whose story should be close to ending. She doesn't have much to lose.

This is the kind of logic that applies to someone who fights for themselves. Saint is a heroine; being close to death herself does not affect her decision making process on a strategic scale.

RandomFan

Not entirely true? If you're acting as a perfectly rational pursuer of some higher goal, doing things that will make meaningful progress for your goal but will kill you increase in "expected profit" as you get closer to death, since the expected value of "staying alive to continue doing good" decreases with time.

[Liliet](#)

Hmm, that particular thing, yes.

"Has little to lose" just doesn't sound right to me – has little to lose in dying earlier, true, but has still a lot of other things to lose in the world outside herself.

Hierus

man i really love some adventuring with this heroic band of ours

[Stable](#)

"In that very narrow situation you've mentioned..."
Oh Cat... did you just make it inevitable?

IDKWhoitis

If she can bait out an attack by Saint first, then it is a perfect shot to kill Saint.

Dainpdf

At least she didn't say it was "impossible" or "one in a million".

Duke

With all the narrativium around it'd be sure to happen... I mean, we all know that such "one in a million" things happen nine out of ten times... XD

Novice

Ah, a Discworld reader I see.

[Liliet](#)

No, I think 'very narrow situation' is actually the exact right phrasing that *doesn't* make it inevitable. She's not questioning the likelihood, merely the ability of everyone else present to identify it with certainty, making a claim that it might *look* like she's lost while she actually hasn't.

caoimhinh

I think she meant it more as "that specific scenario" rather than "that unlikely scenario". She's very careful with her actions and words right now, I doubt she would make that blunder now.

Someguy

I wonder if Kairos has a crossbow prepared if the Exile Price appears in his Trial?

Dainpdf

Or an explosive goat.

tithin

I'm trying to figure out what sort of name and aspects the rogue sorcerer would carry, it doesn't seem like the sort of name that would lend itself well to a band of 5.

Seems more like William's, a strong name for solo levelling.

Dainpdf

It's pretty normal for a band of five to have the one loner. Although, to be honest, the only people here who know how to work in a group are Tariq and Cat. Outside that we have the Loose Cannon (Saint) and Starscream (Tyrant), neither of which is a team player.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I don't think Kairos qualifies as a Starscream; irritating as he is, he really is a top dog in his own right.

Dainpdf

Sure, but in the context of this band of five, Cat is the leader, and Kairos has Chronic Backstabbing Disorder.

Mental Mouse

After reviewing the TVTropes article: What you say is true enough, but (1) Kairos is isn't actually Cat's underling to begin with (just an ally of convenience and arm-twisting), and (2) taking control of the party is simply not an option, and he knows it. Cat is the only thing standing between Kairos and a 3-on-1 beatdown from some of the most powerful heroes on the continent. (3) He's not really an underling of DK either, nor in the league to take him on (especially since DK can out-backstab him any day of the week).

So, not a Starscream. His CBD could certainly screw over the party and/or the mission, just not under that particular trope.

Dainpdf

You're right. I just didn't have a better trope for "treacherous underling" (which I'd argue he kind of is for the moment, since she is the de facto leader) and the idea of Kairos speaking like Starscream amuses me.

Someguy

It's in his Name, he's a [Rogue] + [Sorcerer] hybrid class. so he's either:-

an Eldritch Scoundrel (<https://www.d20pfsrd.com/classes/core-classes/rogue/archetypes/paizo-rogue-archetypes/eldritch-scoundrel-rogue/>)

or an Arcane Trickster (<https://www.d20pfsrd.com/classes/prestige-classes/core-rulebook/arcane-trickster/>)

konstantinvoncarstein

He seems more specialised in magic than in rogue things. The idea had merit 😊, but I think that "rogue" means "independent", or "not used to work in group".

Andrew Mitchell

Exactly.

IDKWhoitis

I imagine we might see Black or John or Nauk again, something that's going to be really hurtful for Cat.

Or alternatively, the Dead King will sit down and have another "chat" with Cat. Most likely making fun of her for losing her Apoptosis.

Dainpdf

Could be Killian or Masego himself, as well.

[Fayhem](#)

I guess I'm blanking, but John? Who's that now?

Ultimate_procrastinator

I think he was the head of Catherine's bodyguard, back around book 2 or so. Could be wrong though.

[Fayhem](#)

Oh shit that's right I think, John Farrier – he was captain of the Gallowborne. Thanks for the reminder!

Andrew Mitchell

I needed that reminder too, so thanks for asking.

IDKWhoitis

Captain of the Gallowborne, Cat cared about his death.

[Fayhem](#)

Somebody already jogged my memory on that, but ty anyhow! Always nice to see fans helping out fans. 😊

[Liliet](#)

John Farrier, of the Gallowborne

[Mental Mouse](#)

> making fun of her for losing her Apoptosis

To which she can snark "easy come, easy go", or just mock him in turn for being a pawn of the Bard.

Or, she can point out that Sve Noc was able not only to absorb Winter entirely, but to *resurrect Cat as a mortal human*, which is a traditional "Below can't do that!". And hint that he himself might not be as safe or as independent as he'd thought.

Dainpdf

"It was a trap."
I strongly suspect everyone called that.

Also, Rogue Sorceror hype!

[Mental Mouse](#)

And hints, in that there was some expensive resource that RS lost in his debacle, but which he doesn't want to talk about...

Aston Whiteman

Yay. Black's Soul is hiding in plain sight. Or rather in use.

That's going to be fun.

caoimhinh

And to the deeps they go, it will be quite a plot twist if Kairos actually DOESN'T betray them.
Hopefully we will get to see more of the Rogue Sorcerer's abilities later.

So they have to beat Masego possessed by Dead King before they give the crowns to Larat and only then can they go to kill god-mode King Larat?

Interesting, that's gonna be a long journey.

Typos found:
making of mockery / making a mockery
lonsword / longsword
a wary eye one the Saint / a wary eye on the Saint
I had hear / I had heard
barley / barely
laws this place / laws in this place
as affective a scheme / as effective a scheme
going go be / going to be

SITB

damn it i meant to add it to the type thread

remained his tongue and the mind that but purpose to it /
remained his tongue and the mind that put purpose to it

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, the easiest thing for Kairos to do here to fuck over Catherine is *not* betray the group.

I'm 50/50 on how warranted Catherine's confidence otherwise is.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not betraying them might not be so easy for *him*. 😊

SITB

remained his tongue and the mind that but purpose to it /
remained his tongue and the mind that put purpose to it

[Geoff Burns](#)

Oh woe is us, the Tyrant has betrayed us. Now we are facing three villains! I totally had a plan for this unfortunately it involved having a band of five and we are only four. Were could we possibly find a fifth member while we are in the middle of enemy territory? Oh well I guess the world will end and everyone we love will die. If only we a had another person. It wouldn't even have to be a live person, since I have this nifty cloak that can grant disembodied souls pseudo-life. Where could we find a extra soul? Oh wait, Rogue Sorcerer, don't you have a extra one of those lying around?

Andrew Mitchell

Oooooo, nice thought! 😊

Jason Ipswich

No, no, no. It's more like, oh no, Tyrant has betrayed us. Where o where, between here and our goal of murdering a newborn god to save the world from evil, could we find a fifth member of our band? If only there were some old friend at hand who could join us...

What's that, you say, my dear friend the Heirophant is right here, but not in his right mind? If only there was a holy man, wise and skilled in healing who could return him to himself that he might make our band of Heroes Five again...

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hmm, the problem is that that would mean Pilgrim adding another powerful villain to the scene. Pilgrim would likely prefer a redemption arc for Masego, and might not be up to a direct conflict with DK anyway.

Soma

I'll admit, I'm not a huge fan of the idea it's Catherine who loses her 'right to rule' though it seems kinda likely. Barring something from left field where cat has an extra crown up her sleeve somewhere, between her, Tariq and Kairos she's the most likely to give something up, in part because Tariq would like to force her to.

Part of the reason I don't like it is that it feels like Catherine abdication feels too sudden right now. She's just now started speculating that Vivi can replace her, and her abdication felt like a major part of the leverage that she'd use to get the Liesse Accords through, but if she's forced out on this, poof. That leverage is gone. And it kinda feels like the big thing that could make the Liesse Accords happen is Cat being able to say 'It's the accords or Triumphant 2.0 reigning forever, your choice,' a la classic bad wine and a blade diplomacy.

It fits for this particular story in book 5 that Cat is the one who gives up her right to rule forever, but for the story of the guide as a whole it feels a little off? I guess it just feels off because the accords are such a large thing and the only leverage Cat has on that scale is how dangerous she is, and if she gives up the most massive leverage she has by neutering herself a bit. I know if that happens she'll gain new leverage, but for like 2 books now her rulership has been built up as her leverage in negotiations, so it would feel kind of weird to just have it go poof here.

If it happens that way, I do look forward to EE changing my mind, as they are wont to do, with the rest of the story though.

WuseMajor

Yeah, but EE has been pretty good about pulling twists out of left field. I mean, I agree with you that Cat's crown is important and it kinda has to be lost in one of the two situations you've said, but she's not the only one here with a "right to rule."

Thinking on it, she might try to leverage the One against the Rogue Sorcerer, by forcing him to restore Amadeus so that he can give up his "right to rule" against Callow and Praes.

Alternately, maybe the Black Queen gives up her right to rule Callow....but not her status as First Under Night, High Priestess of the Dark. Which is arguably a much more dangerous title. Accepting the Accords might be the only way to keep the High Priestess in check.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well certainly she'd keep the her priestly status, that's just not on the negotiating table unless Sve Noc themselves is actually at the table. Which would probably be enough to clear the room immediately. 😊 So Cat losing her crown wouldn't get rid of her, just establish her as an *independent* power beholden to none. At which point the other big Names and surviving crowns start buying their preferred stomach remedies in bulk.

Another possibility is that the Rogue Sorcerer is himself a secret King or Prince, which would fit his "hidden power" teases.

Liliet

Catherine doesn't actually need that much leverage for the Accords. She just needs to convince everyone else that they're *a good idea*; if anything, not having leverage to push them through / not using leverage she has, might make it more convincing.

And of course her biggest leverage remain the drow 😊

soma

Maybe? Just thematically Catherine's thing is leverage to force the powerful to act as they should. That's her whole 'people in power won't be fair unless you make them' lesson thing from Laure under Mazus. And yeah, there have been adjustments to that, but thematically leverage is still Catherine's deal, so, to me, it feels weird for her to give up her biggest lever for an intermediate step. And I say it's her biggest lever because that's what the heroes care about. They don't care so much that the Drow are powerful, or their evil enemies are powerful, what gets their hackles up is that there is a villain ruling a previously Good nation and successfully holding onto it. They reeeeeeeeeaaaally want that previously good nation to not be below aligned. I don't think they'd care so much if Cat ruled just over the Drow since they were below aligned already.

I'm open to the idea I'm being unreasonable here, but I think taking away the threat of Catherine's ability to rule is her largest lever. She becomes much less scary for the heroes if she can't be a ruler, and yeah, maybe that'd make them easier to convince if they were normal people, but they're heroes. They are unreasonable. That was what the whole ' "Should I apologize," I said, "for making this a victory for others than myself," ' thing was about. I just see the rulership ability thing as being something Cat would probably take lightning quick directly for the Liesse Accords, but for a very very far out intermediate step, it's a little weird. Like I would expect a little more directly getting vivi ready to rule on screen and dealing with all attending issues on screen if Cat's abdication was imminent. It's what makes me think maybe, maaaaaybe there is something come out of left field, but I don't know.

Having read the Peers chapter, I could see that as building up Tariq for something that might otherwise be out of character. Giving Evil a sort of win by giving up his ability to rule and helping Catherine out, leaving Callow ruled by a

villain for now, while they fight the dead king. That way the balance is tilted a little more away from evil because the last evil polity isn't in an immediate threat to its existence and there are two 'evil' polities. Callow nominally evil, and Praes capital EVIL. From what black said we might think this would make the fight against the dead king easier sparing massive suffering and making this something Tariq would do. Versus normally turning the screws on Cat.

The above is some pretty serious wild mass guessing, based on the assumption that someone other than Cat gives up the crown though.

[Liliet](#)

Do note that Catherine is currently non-Named, so Liesse Accords would not actually preclude her ability to rule.

The draw are a much more immediate kind of leverage: do you want help against Dead King, or do you want another threat on your territory? Hm? Hmmm???

Catherine's as good as given up on that approach with the surrender manoeuvre, though.

What I'm thinking wrt her rule and Accords is that her abdicating might be a prerequisite for anyone being willing to listen to her, not leverage.

Oshi

"Still there'd been no way but leaving Adjutant behind: I needed both the Tyrant and the Sorcerer among the five, since it both gave me the shape of the former's inevitable betrayal and allowed me to get around the diplomatic debacle that would be robbing people I needed to be allies with. No matter how badly they deserved to be robbed."

How has no one noted that Cat's plan is out for us to see. She's stealing something. Any bets on what?

I'm gonna guess it's not the obvious thing. She just spent a couple of chapters noting how good a schemer she is. What the eff is she gonna steal now 😊

konstantinvoncarstein

When Catherine speaks of robbing an ally, does she speak of her father's soul?

[Liliet](#)

Rogue Sorcerer has Black's soul.

She doesn't want the diplomatic unpleasantness of robbing him herself, so she's setting up Kairos to do it for her 😊

[Euodiachloris](#)

The "concerned daughter removing her ailing father from an extremely dodgy, uncertified and downright murderous caregiver" card is a weighty one, no? Try messing with that, Above.

[Liliet](#)

>caregiver

l m a o

[Euodiachloris](#)

Kairos is a very giving man. At least, he says he is while taking something he might mean to transfer elsewhere (maybe); the Micheal, an army, a McGuffin, a life, a custard tart...

Aru

Rogue Sorcerer = Bard ??

Andrew Mitchell

IMO, no. We've never seen anyone who holds two Names.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I'm pretty sure we've never seen the Bard possess a man, only a series of women. If she's gender-locked then he's... well, not "safe," but not WB in disguise.

Andrew Mitchell

Not relevant to the last chapter but I need *yes, NEED* to share Richard Gallivan comment from the last chapter. It's only got for likes and it deserves many, many more.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/05/01/chapter-34-seven/comment-page-1/#comment-40756>

Galvador

So she wants to steal her daddy back during this adventure. Worst case scenario seems to be the dead king corrupting the soul when the rogue sorcerer is by himself and placing black as a sleeper agent. A lich king style Black wouldn't be that shabby tbf.

Draconic

I wouldn't be so certain about the Saint. Sure if the Dead King wants to tempt her with something, it won't go anywhere, but in a way, she is the easiest to manipulate here. Put a villain in front of her, and she will kill them, no what the circumstances are.

Just imagine having her walk in on the Tyrant making a deal with the Dead King...

Andrew Mitchell

The Rogue Sorcerer is a very interesting character but quite opaque so far. He doesn't strike me as Good in the same obsessed way that Tariq and the Grey Pilgrim are. That gives me hope that he'll turn out to be a true ally of Cat because he's working towards the good of the common people.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, he's a Hero, but clearly not one of the direct Angelic agents. I suspect his Name would be one of the possible paths for the Apprentice name. Come to think of it... I don't think we've ever found out his *personal* name, only his Name.

konstantinvoncarstein

It would be refreshing to see a truly reasonable and moderate hero.

[Liliet](#)

Tariq and the Grey Pilgrim? XD

Andrew Mitchell

D'oh!!

I meant GP and SoS, of course.

[Liliet](#)

I assumed so, but the mental imagery was too hilarious to pass up XD

Andrew Mitchell

This chapter seemed to me like the sort of chapter I've seen in some fantasy book series where the opening chapter of the latest book summaries the situation and characters.

Did anyone else get that feeling?

Is there a chance that EE is planning for the final book to start here? (When the Guide is published, not for this WordPress version.)

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not the start of a book, it's not providing enough background for *that*. Probably the start of a new section within that book. The start of our Book V is about right for the print book too: Immediately after Cat emerges from the Everdark, so there's no need to describe or flesh out the Everdark, and then the various battles give opportunity to re-introduce the places and players of surface Calernia before we get... here.

But this *is* the start of a major arc, and warrants a brief recap of the *personae dramatis*.

[theothin](#)

Is it? Looks to me like we're right in the middle of one.

Guide books traditionally have three main arcs, of increasing intensity. We seem to be in the middle of Book 5's second arc.

The way I'd classify it is:

Book 1: Laure, Summerholm I, War College
Book 2: Summerholm II, Marchford, Liesse I
Book 3: Winter, Summer, Liesse II
Book 4: Stairway, Keter, Everdark
Book 5: Sarcella, Liesse III, ???

There can be divisions within the arcs, of course. For example, the Summer arc had a split between the Arcadia and Dormer parts, marked by the series of Free Cities interludes where Captain died. There's been a definite shift in the current arc from "Callow, Grand Alliance, and League fight each other" to "all three sides team up to go deal with the Arcadia shard", but I'd say that better fits the point where we moved from the recent interlude series back to Cat's POV. (Interludes are often useful in determining this sort of thing.) So I wouldn't even call this a new sub-arc so much as a new scene within the sub-arc?

[Mental Mouse](#)

We're only four numbered chapters into the Liesse III arc, and only just reached the building which will (with some magical work) let the party get to Liesse proper. I'd consider that pretty near the beginning. I like your breakdown, though.

[theothin](#)

We are 18 numbered chapters into the Liesse III arc. Although “Prince’s Graveyard” is probably a better name for it than “Liesse III”. Whatever we call it, we’re still in the arc that started with “Chapter 18: Fable”.

The Liesse II arc started with “Chapter 47: Offers”, and took quite a while to actually get to Liesse. Although that one did have more overall focus on Liesse. It’ll be easier to name this arc once we actually finish it, I’m sure.

[Mental Mouse](#)

See, there’s where we differ. I’d consider the first arc to include all the battles, at least up to Cat’s surrender and Viv’s ransom of their troops. After that our POV rapidly switches to “negotiation” in small rooms, and thence to the current mission.

[theothin](#)

The negotiation isn’t downtime, though. Things aren’t calming down like they did after Sarcella, just changing direction. A pivot, you could say. That’s why there was room for a not-in-the-same-place-as-Cat interlude after Sarcella, but it wouldn’t have made sense to have one here.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Right, that’s what I’m saying. The surrender and ransom wraps up the battle arc, and the physical fighting. Then the new arc begins, say, with Hakram hanging around in Kairos’s camp. From this point on, the POV stays there as the other characters gather, and there’s a change of tone: Threats and staredowns aside, the physical fighting is almost over: Kairos’ shot at Rozela gets summarily noped, and when Arnaud kills Princess Bertille, it’s almost a shock to us, let alone the royals.

[Liliet](#)

I would say Sarcella did not have enough of a peak to end the arc. I’d separate “The Iserre Clusterfuck” and “The Adventure”, myself, making this indeed the beginning of a second arc.

(I also separate Book I differently: Laure as something of a pre-arc that’s technically an arc but doesn’t really have

enough of a climax for one; but War College as consisting of two arcs for two major victories Catherine got there)

[theothin](#)

I really don't think The Adventure will go on long enough to constitute a full arc, but I could be wrong. I see it as like Cat and Black's foray into Liesse at the end of Book 3: a quest within a larger arc.

"Doesn't have enough of a climax to be a full arc" isn't unusual for first arcs. I'd say Sarcella fits in fine compared to Laure and Summerholm II, while only Battle of the Camps really feels like a "normal" arc. (Winter is somewhere between the categories.)

I still say War College is best considered one arc with two sub-arcs. There's two battles, but they're basically back-to-back with no real downtime, two parts of "Cat leads Rat Company in mock battles against Juniper". I think that's like splitting Five Armies and One from Dornier.

[Liliet](#)

Summerholm II was a major milestone in Catherine showing that she can keep up with other Named – figure out the heroes' trick, delay them long enough for Warlock to recover, then actually save Breagach's life by convincing the Warlock to do the bloodline ritual Black had asked for. It changed *who she was* based on what she proved capable of, and that's my criterion.

Laure was not Catherine proving her capability of anything, only willingness. Meanwhile the two mock battles in War College were radically different in *what they were about*. The first one changed Cat's status from a loner to someone who *fit in* with the War College kids, to a capable commander who could actually surprise Amadeus with her achievements. The second one was barely about commanding at all – it was about diplomacy and intrigue from start to end, and established Catherine's skill at *gathering followers*. Her relationship with the Rat Company progressed towards "do what I say and don't complain and you won't be disappointed", and she successfully recruited the person she knew she could not outsmart. Both of those were radically new.

Sarcella, here, was not Catherine proving her capabilities, just showing off her powers. Sure, there was cleverness and leadership in there, but those had already been established before. It was setting the stage, somewhat like Laure, with Catherine staying

fairly static through it. There was not a major change in her role, in how other players & the audience both perceived her, between pre-Sarcella and post-Sarcella.

The Weaver; Woven bookend climax has *already* established Catherine as something else altogether: a player capable of stepping back and calmly moving armies around like pieces on a board, her own and others' both. I expected, pre-Sarcella, that Catherine would be able to swing a battle around like she did; while I would not have called specific details, not a single thing she did *surprised* me.

I was damn fucking surprised by *this*.

And this accomplishment is already established. Even if this quest ends in disaster/queef a la Keter (which I strongly do not think it will, but regardless), the knot in Iserre is already cut, her army is already allied with the Grand Alliance, the Dead King's and Kairos's plan for making everybody else fight each other is already made visible to everyone.

This was a large leap in establishing Catherine's large-scale strategic/diplomatic/political capability. Now we're back to small-scale tactical Named shenanigans, with specific tropes not just serving as the players' motivations but actually actively allowing prediction. It will be a *new* milestone when Catherine gets through this, as distinct from the knot in Iserre as Winter was from Summer in Book 3 (which by the way had a similar scope shift: from a small group of Named at Winter Court to managing the whole country against Summer).

Liesse, by contrast, was two halves of a whole, the same game played simultaneously on two chessboards. It was answering one question: how well has Catherine prepared for this? Are her resources and capabilities sufficient for beating her nemesis who broadly knew both and prepared to meet her head to head? It was sequential only in the sense that first Catherine prepared the pieces and then moved them forward; she did not *first* obtain a victory on the battlefield and then in the fortress, or vice versa. Only one question was being answered, there.

This? This is going to be answering two rather distinct ones. As did the mock battles.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Laure was an arc: The Call To Adventure. It ended with her getting what she'd been seeking since she opened

the story: Entry to the War College. As the larger story progresses, the stakes for each arc mostly get higher.

Also, “queef”? I just checked my prior understanding of that term with the Urban Dictionary, and I have to ask, was that *really* what you were trying to say? 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Which raises a point: IIRC, Cat hasn’t actually been to any of the Hells, has she? As understand it, a traditional Epic Journey may or may not pass through Heaven (which she has more-or-less done), but it *always* includes a visit to Hell. What with the Dead King as antagonist and world-hopping already in play, that may be coming in this arc.

[Liliet](#)

I think Book 4 solidly counted, with Keter and Everdark both – *particularly* Keter. While Catherine hasn’t visited the physical location classified as ‘a hell’, thematically Keter fit to a T, including the King Under The Mountain there. The belly of the whale was definitely Book 4 latter two arcs.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Meh. Both were hostile and of dubious relation to Creation, but so was Arcadia, and that’s clearly not a hell. I’d grant them “belly of the beast” status (“belly of the whale” is a distinctly different reference), but I’d say they were at best trial runs for a real Hell-passage.

More importantly, when the milieu includes places that are not only called Hells, but inhabited by demons and devils (and explicitly *can* be traveled to and from), I’m inclined to accept no substitutes. 😊 Especially given that at the other extreme, she *has* actually confronted angels in their own realm.

[Liliet](#)

Ehh. I still think Keter counts, but you have a point too. I’d be curious to see that.

Aotrs Commander

Kairos, setting the tone for this adventure right away, there...

The image of Cat coughing ever more loudly and debilerately to interrupt Kairos and Pilgrim was just adorable.

Mental Mouse

> Kairos, setting the tone for this adventure right away, there...

There's always that one player...

wonder

i just gotta ask this question, the pieces are in motion, but i cant see one thing,; the gallowborne. Where are the gallowborne? Are they with Archer?

Liliet

You mean those people who got slaughtered in Dormer with only like 6 survivors?

Observations and Predictions

Every time Saint has come up in the past several chapters there has been an explicit and extended reference to her Dominion, to her immediate mortality, and to a situation (e.g., hurting Masego) in which Cat has a pretext to slay her with a SwordStaffPrayer. This, plus the earlier, prophetic taunt "You will make useful artifacts" spoken by a fae, makes me think Saint is on track to make an artifact in Arcadia, that to use requires a voluntary cut.

I think Masego will be the 5th in the Band, and that Saint will be the Plus One. Her sword and the other knives/swords and armor/helmets are going to give King Larat a majorly violent resource base. I think it is possible he will kill Tariq easily and immediately, that Cat is going to be immobilized by some clever use of Night by Larat since she does not own it but only wields it, and that it will be the Rogue Sorcerer who puts him down. Masego will be tangling with Kairos, Heirarch, and the priests.

Kairos is a bit too clever to betray Cat superficially in a handout to the Dead King when he can destroy his ally more thoroughly simply by not betraying her, but rather betraying her low expectations for him. The meta-betrayal is not only only a more refined meal of ally-sabotage, but sets up more plot armor for him. He won't die in this arc, there is no real closure-granting narrative benefit to him dying now, and we haven't seen several of his plans materialize. He's the safest in the party after Cat.

But, I think Kairos has set up things so that Hierarch and the priests will arrive at an inconvenient moment regarding King

Larat, and will attack both him and Heirophant as the two evil tyrants of this realm. This functions enough like a betrayal for narrative to check that box for Kairos's expectations, but since the ball was thrown blindly in the air earlier, Kairos will not have to pay. Heirophant will have been weakened by the Dead King but will Witness something important in the battle.

I do not see Amadeus's soul being brought into play in a major way until after the battle. Neshamah might try something with it, but he is the only character who might. Cat has learned to be patient, and there are two gods and a Saint to kill. Black is ever calculating, and will not kill Pilgrim when he would be dooming the world to the Dead King and old conventional stories by doing so. Instead, I see Hierarch learning a bit about Resurrection and Forgiving Black, from the lips of a dying Pilgrim or from some Arcadian echo thereof.

If Pilgrim dies when he goes into a battle featuring the Black Queen, she gets blamed for it. If Saint and Pilgrim are dead, then the Rogue Sorcerer is the highest ranking Hero in the south, and Levant just declared permanent war on Callow, making their joint war against the Dead King infeasible. The Rogue Sorcerer is being heavy-handedly introduced as a potential next Big Bad and events here might set things up for a two-front rather than united-front war. And, maybe the battle with Masego here is enough to cork the Dead King and the battle to the North is unnecessary. Arcadia is magically sympathetic.

And, if the Rogue Sorcerer has the key to the gate, and the only wars are to the East not the North, I can easily imagine him using it to attack Callow and/or Praes.

I predict the Rogue Sorcerer eventually will break both Akua and Masego. I strongly suspect he will transition into the next Wizard of the West. That ghost of a Name is far too often referenced to never materialize in-story. It also makes sense for that name to materialize after he takes the Wizard's materials being stored in the Tower. I think it is pretty obvious Malicia is no longer the Big Bad and will get a shot at redeeming herself in Amadeus's eyes. Bringing down the Tower to prevent the next Wizard, and failing, is one tonally consistent possible narrative.

Amadeus, Vivian and Cat will get new Names that will be neutral in the way Adjutant and Hierophant. Cat's current role is a learning experience and sets her up to match Tariq, but that relationship to Sve Noc is on loan and the drow are due to Keter. Cat's going to obtain a final boon from them, but her final arc's source of power will be based on her own conviction and fit a groove she cut for herself in Creation, not the handmaiden of eldritch evils introduced halfway through the story whose main value was teaching The Power of Friendship.

I wonder what Amadeus's future Role will be, but am 100% sure it is something that can end the Bard.

medailyfun

I think this chapter was preparing us for the following dialog:

Tariq: "Kairos, actually I'm your grandfather"

Kairos: "Nooooooo"

konstantinvoncarstein

I doubt it, but if it is the case I will die laughing 😂

[Liliet](#)

I'm just imagining this kind of whiny / petulant kid 'noooooooo'. Kairos is not even surprised, he's just protesting on principle 😊

Barrendur

Cat's turned very pompous recently, hasn't she? Never say something succinctly if you can draw it out into a melodramatic PRONOUNCEMENT instead? Of course, that might just be the narrative influence of Being In A Story... but I doubt it. Cat's always had a tendency to grandstand, and to be smug when she thinks she's been clever....

konstantinvoncarstein

In this case, she is 😊 And concerning the melodrama, she is probably making fun of the fact that she (an Evil character) have an heroic band with another villain and 2 heroes who wanted her dead not a day ago.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Cat has been far more than "clever" here; as Liliet points out, she's gone from measuring her power against various other combatants, to being recognized as a full peer to the most powerful Named on the continent, and more: Not just one of the players shaping her world, but a leader *among* those players – and currently in the driver's seat. I'd say she's earned the right to a bit of smugness, especially as she knows better than to revel in it for too long. And if she's pompous, well, she's been dealing with a lot of pompous people, so she's just fitting in. Arnaud was smart enough to recognize that if Procer tried to stand athwart the flood, they would simply be swept away... so he re-positioned the royals as a group to respect Cat &co. not as interfering busybodies or even saviors, but as a force of nature.

[Daniel E](#)

I suddenly have a sinking feeling that Cat is going to bite the big one at the end of all this, and in so doing will shift the land out of the grooves in Creation, effectively side-lining both Above & Below. As Apprentice said way back; 'everyone is focused on the other prisoners, when you should be looking at the bars of the prison itself'.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, (if she stays dead this time) that would make book VI a little difficult.

[Daniel E](#)

I was referring to the end of the Guide, not this particular chapter. I know we thankfully have at least 1 left.

Qwormuli

Ionsword, huh? We sci-fi now, bitches.

Okay, I know, that it's a typo, but I physically couldn't let that one go...

[Mental Mouse](#)

It occurs to me that everyone so far has focused on either Cat's trial or Saint's. The thing is, if temptation is DK's game, there's another party member who might be far more vulnerable.

Suppose DK gives Pilgrim a tour of the Serenity? A whole world of people who are safely protected from the vicissitudes of Creation, with devils reduced to beasts of burden, all willingly obedient to their god...

[Liliet](#)

Given that Levant was founded on the ideal of freedom from obedience to occupants...

[Mental Mouse](#)

But Pilgrim was founded on opposition to suffering, and even if the Serenity has nasty "back rooms", DK doesn't have to show *those* to Pilgrim.

[Liliet](#)

I think Tariq is smart enough to assume their existence. Utilitarians aren't idiots, even if the simplified version of utilitarianism that is commonly proclaimed is in itself fairly idiotic.

Dizzy Rabbit

I think it's funny that all the jousting for control of the "meta-narrative", weaponization of tropes has turned us all into "contenders" co-creating the story alongside the characters. It's our interest or disinterest and desire for a good story that impacts the characters in the story. It's symbiotic: our interest in one character or another gives them the "narrative weight" to survive and thrive, and in turn, the story affects us emotionally and compels us to invest in the story.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not to mention that the author is clearly reading the comments.

Chapter 36: Bid

"Peace is the killer of empire, for when strength is not spent outwards it is instead spent within."

– Ghislaine of Creusens, twelfth First Princess of Procer

I couldn't ever remember being afraid of the dark, even as a child. Of what might be lurking in it, sure, but the dark itself? No. Long before I'd acquired patrons whose dominion was night, I'd liked a little shade. The fights at the Pit had often taken place late – even after lining the pockets of the city guard, Booker had been warned to keep her business out of sight – and summer after sundown was where the coin had been best at the Rat's Nest. Legionary leave did not change no matter the season, but come summer a lot of dockworkers earned a little more coin by fishing in the Silver Lake and a lot of that coin ended up spent on cheap ale. Which was, to my remembrance, the only kind the Rat's Nest ever stocked. I wondered what Harrion now... I frowned at the drift of thoughts, unsure how it'd started or where it was headed. Did it even matter? Oh, I was standing surrounded by thick and cloying darkness. And it was soothing, serene. It would have been so pleasant to just... float away, leaning into dreamlike thought. *Snow, tears and barren laughter*, I suddenly remembered. I'd laid down to die, once and the world had refused to take me.

There would be no takebacks.

"More fruitful than a direct assault would have been," I acknowledged out loud.

I struck at the ground with my staff, and the dark rippled out. Like a stone tossed into a pond, my will wrinkled the fabric of this half-world outwards in a wave. The span of what surrounded

me was endless, I thought, and my act had been little more than a shout echoing in a gargantuan cavern.

"Is that to be your trick?" I asked the dark. "Obscuring the path? It won't work."

I cocked my head to the side and pricked my ear. The utter silence of this place was broken only by my own breath, which in this strange stillness seemed almost crassly loud. I was afraid, for a moment, that it would drown out what I was waiting for – but it was an empty worry, more born out of nerves at the calibre of my opponent than grounded thinking. My deliverance came in call harsh and hoarse, a distant cawing. I followed Komena's echoing caw, and limped forward into the dark. The Youngest Night left as swiftly as she'd appeared, for we'd agreed that she should avoid the Dead King as much as we could afford to. Neshamah would not be as dangerous working through Masego as he would be in person, but Hierophant was plenty dangerous enough on his own – and not without experience in the matter of disciplining lesser gods. My hobbling steps forward felt purposeless, without a destination to behold, but I forced myself to keep moving. If I could not trust the Sisters to guide me in the dark, then who *could* I trust? And, after what could have been either half an hour or an agonizingly long day, the trust bore fruit. The darkness rippled, and not through my will: I'd made enough progress, it seemed, to warrant refinement of the trap.

I almost stumbled when I my good foot came across a step, but I caught myself on my staff. I felt around cautiously and found out it was the first of what seemed like sprawling stairs going up. If this realm had been the Tyrant's to shape I would have taken this turn as a petty slight to make my life more difficult on account of my bad leg, but somehow I suspected the Dead King believed himself above that. I made my way up the stairs, observing from careful groping by foot and staff that at least they were broad and lightly sloped, and only halted after a long flight up when I felt this place grow... shallower. Frowning, I slowly raked my fingers through the air and let the fabric of this half-world thinner on my fingers. I exerted a pinprick of will and the small ripples that ensued had less to ripple through – and, more interestingly, they revealed some sort of veil in front of me. The way, as always, had to be forward. I stretched up my arm and tore down the veil, flinching at the wave of sound and light and colour that washed over me. I had, it seemed, exposed a doorway. I took a moment to compose myself, to let my eyes grow accustomed to the change in light, and only then tread through the threshold. Immediately, looking down I felt shaky for the height. I had come to tread over what looked like a gargantuan pane of glass, like a skylight put up through the sky.

Above me the sky was darkened by eclipse, a blinding ring of light with a hollow of night at the heart of it, and the clouds

around us were a hazy penumbra of light and shadow. Below, though, thousands of feet below, three great armies were warily observing a truce. The League of Free Cities was milling uncertainly without a camp of its own, its large baggage train spread over the plans and guarded by knots of soldiers from half a dozen different city-states. The Army of Callow and the Legions-in-Exile had retreated back into their camp, though leaning down with a wince – Gods, the ground beneath me felt too slippery for this height – I noted that Juniper had ordered the siege engines to be turned on the League and the drow to be recalled behind the palisades. It was the armies of the Grand Alliance, though, that found their situation most uncomfortable. Split in two by my own host and the forces of the Free Cities, even after the night's losses they remained the largest of the armies on the field but also the worst-positioned. The calibre of officers on either side had told, I thought. Many of my commanders were young and fresh to their ranks, but they'd also been trained to lead a professional army. The Dominion's war leaders were clever and brave, but also clearly outmatched.

"This has been most entertaining."

My eyes flicked up, and I found I was no longer alone on this expanse of glass. I had expected to be looking upon the King of Death, but what I found instead was Neshamah. In the flesh, as he had been in the long ago days of the Kingdom of Sephirah he'd ruled and ruined. His appearance was from late in his reign, I thought, perhaps as late as that dark day where Keter's Due had gotten its name. Scholar pale and thin, he was closely-shaved but his dark hair was messy. Full red lips quirked as I met his gaze. Just like I remembered this eyes were a shade of light brown that the glow of the eclipse made into molten amber. On his brow, the copper circlet that was the crown of a kingdom long dead sat high over one of those strange Sephiran tunics: one sleeve long and broad but the other short and tight, the patterned bronze and red cloth sweeping down to his ankles with a broad sash belting it around the waist. He had, I suddenly realized, spoken in Ashkaran – that dead tongue Masego and I had stolen learning of from Arcadian echoes, along with most of what I knew of the Hidden Horror.

"You know I don't speak that," I said. "Dead King, we meet again."

"My apologies," Neshamah replied in Lower Miezán, lips twitching. "We meet again, Black Queen."

Staff rapping against the glass-like ground as I moved, I limped in a half-circle around him. I would not be allowed, I suspected, to leave this place before conversation was had. But that hardly meant I had to remain his captive audience, rapt and unmoving.

"Your manoeuvres below were worth the watching," the Hidden Horror idly told me. "It was an inspired skein of treachery, and a victory deserved."

"Night's not over yet," I said. "Though I have to say, you're being a great deal more civil than I expected."

Neshamah idly traipsed across the glass sky, the clouds above him making his eyes shift from gold to bronze like passing seasons set in an ageless face.

"I am a mannerly man, Catherine," he lightly said. "And you have given me no reason to act otherwise."

It almost felt like I was back in the Pit, for a moment, an opponent and I slowly circling as we took each other's measure. Waiting for an opening, for a weakness. I remained painfully aware that I had a lot more of either than the Hidden Horror.

"No?" I mused. "Yet you called an immortal, when we first met, and well..."

I shrugged, raising an arm in a nonchalant display.

"I'm hardly that, these days," I said.

The old monster's face was like a mirror, I thought as I watched him for a reaction. There would be nothing there to see I had not placed there myself.

"Are you not?" he smiled. "High priestess and herald of an apotheosis you ushered into this world by your own hand – would something as base as age or disease take you, Catherine Foundling?"

"The years will kill me, one of these days," I said. "If nothing else gets around to it first."

"Ah," the Dead King smiled. "But how *many* years would it take?"

I didn't answer that, for the truth was that I wasn't sure. My body now was no stronger than it'd been before I came into my Name, not without Night being woven into it anyway. Pain and exhaustion and so many things that'd felt... distant while I was Sovereign of Moonless Nights had been returned to me in full, but I had not taken sick since being proclaimed First Under the Night. As for age, though? It hadn't been long enough for me to be sure of whether or not my aging had resumed in earnest. It didn't feel the same way as it had under my Name, when I'd still grown but there had been something contrived about it – like I was matching a vision, not following nature's writ. And it was absolutely nothing like it'd been after Second Liesse, where I had been frozen and fixed unto myself. My blood was still red,

and had not become gray nor dark, so it might be that I did not share the stretched lifespan of the Mighty who partook in Night. On the other hand, I had come into the priesthood of the Sisters after the devouring of Winter: it was unprecedented grounds we were treading.

"Priesthood is not godhood," I said. "That path you claimed I would walk, I set aside. You are not all-knowing, Dead King."

"Do you believe the Intercessor's strength lies in martial might?" he amusedly asked. "Or mine? You traded a power that shackled you for one whose burden and perils others will bear in your stead, while binding them to you in purpose. Winter's theft earned you regard, however accidental its execution, but it is your work in the Everdark that suggests you could in time be a peer."

He chuckled.

"Making peace with the dwarves and wheedling an army out of those unruly sisters in the bargain," he said, tone approving. "You traded that ill-fitting mantle for more than fair price. One of these days we will have to trade secrets, Black Queen. I rather wonder what you traded the Kingdom Under for a stay of invasion."

My heart skipped a beat. Was he implying I'd made actual peace between the dwarves and the drow? Or rather, was he implying that the Firstborn still held the old Everdark? I hadn't, though, the overwhelming majority of the drow was marching in exodus towards his own northern borders. Did he *not know*? It could be a trick, I thought. *I only have the smallest slivers of Sve Noc with me*, I thought. *The rest is with their people*. That would allow them to move unseen to most sorcerous means, and it was true that with his armies investing the Principate the Hidden Horror's attentions might currently be elsewhere. Unless he was lying to me, I thought. But if he wasn't...

"Agree to disagree," I warily said.

Anything more elaborate than trite vagueness might get me seen through, given who I was dealing with. I'd rather seem a little slow than tip my hand if he truly didn't know about the exodus.

"In at least one instance we do agree," the Hidden Horror said, "The night isn't over yet, Black Queen."

Looking into those patient golden eyes I almost shivered. He was speaking of more than the dawn Akua had held back for a few hours. Night was coming for Calernia, the kind that would be followed by no morning if it ever fell.

"Patience has never been my strong suit," I spoke with false calm. "Even less so when it pertains to my Woe – one of which you've gotten your skeletal hands on."

"It was not I who sought him," Neshamah demurred. "And what could do I but answer, when my presence was so earnestly petitioned?"

"You've had your laugh," I said. "And while you came close to breaking the armies below, the scheme was outed. There is no point in you lingering, Dead King. Leave him. Leave here. This is not the field where you want this contest to take place."

"You demand of me what was willingly given," the Dead King chided. "And offer nothing in return. What reason do I have to grant your wish, save that you wish it?"

"I have forged," I said, "a band of five."

"You have botched a band of five," he replied, amused. "How many do you believe will still serve your purpose, when choices are to be made?"

"Enough," I said. "I chose them knowingly. I demand nothing from you, and if it was a threat I'd offered I am not known for my subtlety in their speaking. I am stating that you have nothing left to find in this place save defeat, and not even the useful kind."

"I suppose," Neshamah mused, "that I should simply snap the Hierophant's neck and retire, then."

My fingers tightened around the ebony staff. I'd known going in that he would try that angle. Whether or not he could actually do that was in doubt, but I had a parry anyway. So long as the Grey Pilgrim lived to the end of this, so would Masego. I'd not forgotten the sight of the Peregrine wielding resurrection with but a word at the Battle of the Camps, unmaking the death I'd snatched from my clash against the other heroes. I almost forced a smile, but that would have been a mistake. No, let him see how the prospect of my friend being snuffed out like a candle grieved me. Let him believe I was willing to fight him anyway.

"If that is what it takes," I roughly said. "Gods forgive me, if that's what it takes. Too many lives are on the line."

"Ah," he smiled. "There we are. One more mooring, snapping for the tide. How many would be needed, before you truly took the plunge?"

Nonchalantly, he waved a hand.

"A conversation for another day," he said. "We have nothing but time. Let us speak, instead, of lives."

"Your plan has been outed," I said.

"One plan," he said. "One winter. One year. And how many deaths will it have cost you, even should prove the victor here?"

"You speak as if you were the invaded and not the invader," I said.

"You speak as one who sought to bargain with me," he mildly said. "For one such invasion."

I'd fully intended to betray him when offering that pact, though he'd known that from the start. Still, I almost winced. It was an incomplete truth, but still a damning one. I wish I could say that I'd not understood the scope of what I threatened to unleash then, and I supposed I hadn't. But I'd suspected, even back then, that it would be a horror unlike any other. I'd been willing to bargain with the King of Death to keep the Grand Alliance at bay, and that I'd been outmanoeuvred by Malicia in the attempt was the sole reason I wasn't my signature on the treaty that let's the monster out of its lair. And the truth was, looking down at the fragile truce below me, that I still felt I'd been *right*. Now that there was a greater threat for all to behold, all the petty games of power and story that'd condemned my home to be either a ruin or pack of tributaries had gone by the wayside. Oh, there were still other considerations but it was telling that while I was just as much the Arch-heretic of the East as last year suddenly everyone was willing to cut compromises and deals with me. It was the breathing room I'd needed, an opportunity I would never have had otherwise. If I'd known before leaving Keter that it would all work, even with these horrid costs, would I still have done it?

It was more damning than anything I'd done that I wasn't sure what the answer was.

"No such bargain was made," I said. "I understood what would come of it, if too late, and slew the one who made it. At least one time too few, but how many people can claim to have killed Dread Empress Malicia twice?"

I was not a fool, so I would not admit to such an ugly truth when the Dead King might be displaying this conversation for anyone to see and hear. With the way a grin flickered across his face, gone in the heartbeat it took for his eyes to pass from gold to bronze, I suspected I'd just neatly sidestepped exactly such a trap.

"We were speaking of lives, I believe," Neshamah said, circling me as I circled him.

His footsteps were a whisper on glass, a contrast to my trudging boots and sharply tapping staff.

"So we were," I agreed.

"Rhenia has fallen, did you know?" he asked. "Hannoven months ago, but the Lycaonese hold nothing but the last fortress of Twilight's Pass. After it the heartlands of Bremen will fall, and with them the armies that would defend Neustria. It will be the end of them."

"They've held you back in Cleves and Hainaut," I said.

"For now," the Dead King said. "How long can that last? No, the simple truth is that the Principate was not prepared. And then that delightful Theodosian child struck at its allies and its back. Even if you bring Callow to their aid, you but delay the inevitable."

"Would you say," I cheerfully replied, "that you are invincible, and your victory is assured?"

"A bold attempt," the Hidden Horror commented. "Though it makes a poor evasion. Do you disagree with my words, Black Queen?"

"That the Grand Alliance spent a horrendous amount of soldiers etching a bitter stalemate in Callow?" I said. "No. That its loss is written in the stars? Hardly."

"Imagine what you might do with ten years," Neshamah idly said. "If my armies withdrew, and truce was observed unfailingly. If you were allowed to truly muster this continent for war, instead of piecing together foes and friends in a broken coalition of mistrust."

And there it was, I thought. The bargain to be made. And it was quite the prize, wasn't it? Gods, what I could *do* with ten years and the promise of a war with Keter at the end. The League could be brought to heel and then into the fold, the Tower brought down on Malicia's head and the Liesse Accords made to bind even her successor. A decade of recovery for my bruised kingdom who'd known constant war for years now, and once the recalcitrant to the east and the south of the continent were brought into line we'd have a solid, lasting peace – the First Prince would not countenance war where a single soldier might be lost that could instead be sent to hold back the Kingdom of the Dead when it returned. It got me everything I wanted and saved what had to be hundreds of thousands of lives. I'd warned the others that the Hidden Horror would approach us with tantalizing bargains, all the while thinking myself beyond that temptation. And I couldn't, wouldn't, shouldn't make a pact with him. But Gods, what a prize it would be.

"Ten years," he mused. "No, perhaps a decade is too little to move you. Would you like, Catherine Foundling, to purchase a *century* of truce?"

I flinched. That was a different prize, and perhaps even more tempting.

"If you are truly as a mortal as you insist, then the dead will not trouble Calernia in your lifetime," Neshamah idly continued.

"And what would you want in exchange, Dead King?" I asked.

"A paltry concession," he smiled. "I would require the keeping of what lands I have already seized."

Which would be what? Rhenia, Hannover, parts of Bremen and Hainaut. The Principate would be losing more than half the Lycaonese principalities, which was a chunk of territory, but to be blunt it was mostly mountains and fortresses assaulted by the ratling warband every spring. Hainaut was more of an issue, since it was a foothold for Keter on the southern shore of the Tomb, but what little word I'd had of that front implied the principality was on the verge of collapse anyway. I'd offered him rights to more than that when I first sought to make a bargain, though admittedly it'd been under false pretences. If the Dead King kept his word, though, the Principate would have a hundred years of peaceful northern border to prepare. If the First Prince agreed, and if it spared her own people annihilation in addition to all the rest I genuinely thought she might accept. And I'd back her, in the aftermath, to the fucking hilt. To expand the Grand Alliance, and then every step of the way.

The two of us, and the Pilgrim if he could be talked into it, we could get Calernia on proper war footing. With ten decades instead of one, the situation with Praes and the Free Cities could be properly seen to instead of hurried. The drow would need a home, but Masego had helpfully ripped a chunk out of Arcadia that could be put to use. This could work, I thought. Of course, it was possible Neshamah would just let the ratlings pass straight through the northern principalities he'd occupy and disrupt the peace without breaking his word. And there'd be benefits for him as well, I thought, or he would never have made the offer in the first place. I was about to bring up the Chain of Hunger when I realized what I was doing and closed my mouth. I'd been considering the practicalities, working out the details. About to try finding his angle. I had, in essence, already accepted the deal he'd offered.

Gods. I'd known what he was doing from the start, and still here we were.

"We will speak of it again, Black Queen," the King of Death said. "At this peace conference you hve schemed."

There was a deafening crack, and the glass floor beneath our feet began to splinter.

"You did not test me," I said.

The Hidden Horror met my eyes, and for the first time there a flash of irritation in the golden gaze.

"Am I chattel, Black Queen, to be led to the altar with blinders on my eyes?" he said. "Am I to willingly embrace the ways of defeat simply because we are at odds? I think not."

He leaned forward, face cast harshly.

"This game, as all games, I will play on my terms and only that," the Dead King said. "I have learned what I wanted from this communion, and when I have taken what I wish from this ruin I will forsake it as well. Not a moment before, Catherine, and petty tricks will not force my hand."

Neshamah flicked a wrist dismissively.

"Remember that, when we speak again. Youth only earns so many allowances."

In rain of glass I fell through the floor and passed through air and darkness until I landed in another place. Light was peeking through cracks in a door before me, and I opened it. Above me dark clouds pulsed with rings of sorcery, but beneath my boots were the still-paved streets of the ruins of Liesse. My hands were trembling, I saw. I grit my teeth, and put the inarticulate dread that'd sunk in my guts aside. I still needed to find the others wherever they'd come out in the city.

The night was not yet over, even the monster of monsters agreed.

Andrew Mitchell

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Andrew Mitchell

And come hang out on the Discord too! <https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>

[Liliet](#)

♥ ♥ ♥
bless u

Zed

First

[Liliet](#)

can we not?

[crowlute](#)

3 years later and wow, "first" comments have so little value.

danh3107

Fuck me rough and bloody, his test was exactly what she wanted. She failed it the minute she contemplated taking the truce deal. I'm not saying be a zealot like Saint and refuse all offers, but surely any deal with the dead king is poison.

Rough waters ahead if my forecast is correct.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think she failed it.

I think it would have been much worse if she'd just gone the 'lalala I'm not listening' route. That just opens you to getting fucked over by the thought you cannot think later. It's better to think it through, and reject while understanding fully *what* it is that you're rejecting.

Catherine would have passed, which is exactly why Neshamah did not wait for her answer – delaying it gives him another opportunity for a strike later, as this one has already failed.

Any deal with the Dead King is poison. Knowing that, it's better to know what exactly he's offering and how it works.

Catherine did not win this confrontation, as Neshamah does not give openings, but she did not lose, and she did not put herself in a worse position for later. Not worse than it would otherwise have been.

Oh, she might be thinking otherwise, at the moment, herself – if you go too meta, you lose automatically, after all. It's object level that heroes ride out on, and Catherine needs to hold on to that above anything else, here.

God, I love this chapter.

[Javvies](#)

Damn, he's good. Of course, he'd have to be.

Besides, a century would be, in fact, too long a peace – it would be out of living memory for basically all non-Named humans, and they'd turn against each other for personal gain. For that matter, even most current Named would be dead too – Heroes still age, only Villains get to avoid aging.

Not that this would be allowed to happen anyways – Saint would absolutely kill anyone who went for it. Though I could maybe see where Pilgrim could perhaps be convinced to go along with it, but I'd expect that the Ophanim would exercise their influence against it.

Skaddix

That is the biggest issue right there the Villains get 100 Free Years. Heroes die maybe the Witch has enough magic to extend her life but the rest dead and replaced. And without Pilgrim around the hold on Levant is weak.

I am glad she noticed that the Ratlings would get some free attacks.

Anony

Named don't age to, if only evil named for perpetuity, how does Ranger make sense?

They could still die, sure, but with a story like this in the making I highly doubt any important characters would bite it before the war even starts.

[Javvies](#)

Heroes age, Villains don't.

Ranger is explained by being a Villain (technically), and also by being a Half-Elf, and so likely incredibly long-lived even without the Name giving her immunity to aging.

[MatrixM](#)

Ranger is assumed to be a Villain and is also a half elf
Only Villains among named are immune from aging.

konstantinvoncarstein

That is exactly what the opening quote says, that a long peace would shattered the Alliance.

Decius

By offering a century, he revealed his gambit: He won't attack after ten years, or a hundred. He's going to wait until the army arrayed against him disbands, turns to another purpose, or grows fat and lazy, even if that takes two centuries.

[Liliet](#)

That's... a fantastic point indeed.

If Catherine took this deal, the correct action for her would be to break it immediately afterwards, as soon as she managed to line up everyone on roughly the same side.

Dainpdf

Sure, but who would really side with her, go for an invasion of the Kingdom of the Dead, when they have a guaranteed truce for decades to come? Plus, starting a war by breaking a truce is not a story you want to be in...

[shieldredblog](#)

A Villain fighting another Villain could get away with it. The Heroes would be in trouble though.

Dainpdf

I think even villains are behold to the "broke agreement with the godlike entity" trope.

[Liliet](#)

Arguably, the entire Crusade. It's kind of their thing, and Procer *does* need to get its territory back.

Dainpdf

That is some serious *if*. Cordelia would certainly take a hit to her position having lost her main support base, and Malicia is bound to start harassing everyone...

Would the Grand Assembly really vote to go fight for Cordelia's homeland like that?

I am not sure Levant would move if the Pilgrim were no longer around, and Ashur is also doubtful if Magon Hadast is no longer alive.

[Liliet](#)

True.

Not taking the deal is definitely a better answer, and Catherine knows that.

But he's apparently going to come to the peace conference with it...

[Javvies](#)

If the Dead King has a place at the peace conference Cat intends to call and leverage the Liesse Accords into existence at ...

I'm fairly certain that he won't have a seat at the table. For one thing, such a conference can only happen after he's no longer invading, which means that the drow are camping the gate to Serenity. Probably in conjunction with Alliance/other forces, because of their issues with sunlight and sunrise.

However, let's be realistic.

Laurence would murder the hell out of anybody who tried to accept a deal with the Dead King.

Even Tariq likely wouldn't approve (plus the Ophanim almost certainly veto) – Tariq is sometimes wearing blinders about what could be, but there's no outcome from making a deal with the Dead King that truly reduces unnecessary suffering – sure, stopping the fighting stops immediate suffering, but I'm pretty sure Tariq would consider the suffering involved in fighting the Dead King to be necessary suffering. And, to be honest, he's probably right about that. Or at least, not wrong.

Cordelia wouldn't accept it, and probably the same goes for anyone with experience fighting the Dead King and familiar with politics.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

Here's hope.

Dainpdf

And will he have "video" of Cat considering it? 😊

[Liliet](#)

I mean honestly this getting broadcast is if anything in Catherine's favor.

Her temptation being peace, and the argument between the two of them being lives, speaks volumes on whose side she's on in this war.

Dainpdf

Most would just look and see her considering making a deal with Neshamah where she gives away part of Procer in exchange for a truce until she's no longer around to fight.

[Liliet](#)

'most' out of who?

Keep in mind how fucking low expectations are, here. Like most Procerans probably expect her to not be fighting DK on their behalf at all, yeah?

Dainpdf

Most people in the Alliance.

[daegone823](#)

Th crusade is a holy war launched against a terrible evil with magical wmds. It was a almost just war in the eyes of the heaven a defensive offensive maneuver.

The crusades power is uniting multiple heroic names along with regular troops to face said evil. While narratives are weakened for heroes they are still offered moments of triumph against forces of greater power. Queen of winter or dead king with the possibility of success.

Launching a truce under a truce with the purpose to just reclaim land would be a mistake. While that type of war could be launched against humans. It is not heroic or even villainous to fight for land. It just selfish it has no purpose and nearly impossible to frame it as such.

Worst case scenario dead king is embraced as a hero defending his peaceful lands from foreign invaders. Which has a lot of ramifications.

Dainpdf

Small note to remind that technically the Crusade was launched on Praes, not the Queen of Winter. She just happen to be in the way, a villain, and her lands very appealing to Procer.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

Catherine's human, and tempted just by the idea of not having to deal with the eventual aftermath – but that doesn't make it a *good* idea.

[daegone823](#)

She already said she was impatient and that is all the dead king needed. Her impatience.

A being who can match wits with the wandering bard, a being who literally breeds humans like livestock, hordes heroes like playing cards, controls a gate to hell, puppets the greatest mage in all of Praes like a car rental. He is playing games beyond games, and all you want is 100 years, disappointing. He understands that humans/orcs/goblins do not have the fortitude of will that he has, a force of will that has persisted for thousands of years.

I think that is why he was so impressed with her trip to the under dark, she was able to create a peaceful situation where all parties benefited from a society that breathes murder and another that committed whole sale genocide because of a threat. She pacified the dwarves.

His conversation where he complimented Cathrine on her godhood is an example of how she is still thinking small. She does not understand her own powers still and it appears he is getting tired already of holding her hand. I bet it was almost hysterical looking at Catherine having to juggle the grand alliance while he was simultaneously slaughtering the Prinicpate. Whereas he is just above this mess, similar to the bard. Time for humans is precious because they have a limit(Pilgrim, Black, first Prince) they mus achieve as much as they can in there time frame or risk it all crumbling over time.

The only thing that limits beings who have reached apotheosis (Cat, Sve Noc, Dead King, Bard) is there imagination and force of will. Catherine did not/or worse could not comprehend what game they were playing. How the dead king would have no problem giving her 12 or even 100 years if he was given "divine permission" to eat the baby once again, by the priestess of night no less. Her debating such a meaningless favor is a sign that she is still not ready for the big games yet, he knows her measure.

Love how he was like "Oh cool you made a god that's a neat trick tell em about it some time, maybe I will tell you about the day I took control of a hell gate over hot chocolate".

[Mental Mouse](#)

She understood just fine, it just took her a moment. First Sight and Third Thoughts for the win, or at least the standoff.

Also, I'll note that "I called it" on her dubious mortality, at least according to DK (and assuming he wouldn't bother lying here). That raises a question of whether her crown is

still valid... but it also occurs to me now that the original price was "seven mortal crowns and one", setting the last apart from the mortal crowns So if Cat's crown can be the one, so could Dead King's.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Addendum: Browsing recent comments, I note that Isi Arnott-Campbell beat me to my last point above, by two chapters: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/05/01/chapter-34-seven/comment-page-1/#comment-40988>

Isi Arnott-Campbell



[Liliet](#)

I don't think the word "apotheosis" is applicable here, or if it is, Catherine isn't *there* yet.

But yes, it's a great deal for Neshamah that he'd offered and in truth a terrible deal for what Catherine has to protect.

And yeah lmao re: your last paragraph

luminiousblu

Catherine doesn't particularly want to understand since she has a weird attachment to being human, while also missing the fact that if you're 'just' human then you can't really face an inhuman foe. Neshamah has reached the point where he's not an enemy so much as a boogeyman, he might be a villain but the setting is going to protect him because he's an inherent part of the setting. He's been in the background for so long that he's the inherent demon that nobody wants to touch, even as other villains rise and fall and millions of character arcs are concluded. It's like Satan really, you can't 'beat' Satan because that's the end of the story.

Which I suppose is Catherine's goal, but then, Satan isn't defeated by mortal means, Ragnorak kills everyone except for a few gods and a pair of humans hiding in a tree, the Aztec cycles destroy absolutely everything and start it all over again. The only real way you can 'safely' remove Neshamah is if you decide to not be human.

Also I refuse to believe that Akua couldn't have added taste to Cat's fae senses, it's ultimately an illusion. Catherine herself probably could've added the sense of taste by duping reality if she wanted.

[Liliet](#)

Not how this setting works.

A peasant with a sword has a much better shot against a dragon than another, smaller dragon.

Dainpdf

That, plus the fact that Neshamah can play the long game. Any war that ends with permanent territory acquisition, and at a low price, is a good one.

Also? "Lands he's laid claim to" just might include a little piece of Arcadia...

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, a century is pocket change for him.

naturalnuke

There's the poison, but even then it's a sweet one.

WuseMajor

If he always exchanges Peace (from him) for a specified interval, however long, for "minor" territory concessions, and everyone always takes him up on it, because he's impossible to destroy, he'll wind up owning the continent in the end. Which is all that really matters to him, I think.

No human nation can stay on a war footing indefinitely. And, even if you had a giant clock that counted down until doomsday, the nations of the world would probably just treat it as another excuse to party, instead of an imminent threat.

Levi Kalden

Yeah, I think the 10 years would be the better bargain actually as everyone now alive can expect to be still alive and that would still their hand from foolish mistakes

Skaddix

He took Cat to school.

Interesting does Pilgrim's Resurrection work on Villains I am not sure.

And Cat might not be aging.

[onedollargum](#)

Given how Cat mugged an angel for one I'm pretty sure she'd have an easier time with Pilgrim.

[Liliet](#)

I understand it as aging slower, and I'm guessing it'd get slower and slower with time – with her being a wizened old crone for centuries upon centuries upon centuries without noticeable change. That's the trope / mixture of tropes I'm seeing here 😊

And Pilgrim works by Forgiving. There's no restriction on who he can Forgive, I'm pretty sure, as long as he's genuinely willing himself – and I do imagine he'd have no justification for refusing, here.

Dainpdf

One could technically stretch out a finite amount of aging over an infinite period of time. Something like an arctangent function.

[Mental Mouse](#)

<pedant>

The generic term for such curves (and the inverse, reaching infinity within a finite span) is “asymptotic”. Arctangent is indeed an classic example of such function.

</pedant>

Dainpdf

I'd rather not use a technical term less people would understand, or one which would get others to ask “asymptotic to what?”

After all, a function can be asymptotic to another, non-constant one. Now, calling it a “bound, strictly increasing function” would also work, but does nothing to avoid unnecessary jargon.

[Liliet](#)

I honestly think ‘asymptote’ is less technical than arctangent. I did not in fact remember for sure that arctangent was an asymptote before you said it -_-

Dainpdf

Anyone can look at the graph of the arctangent and see what it looks like. Understanding limits at infinity seems harder.

[Liliet](#)

I remember what an asymptote is because it's a very great and useful concept applicable to many things outside of geometry – like this here.

And if you don't understand a limit at infinity, looking at a graph for archtangent isn't going to help you.

Dainpdf

You can see it's a curve that always increases (something an asymptote does not guarantee), that it is bound from above (something an asymptote also does not guarantee), and that it seems to approach a finite value (something an asymptote does not guarantee either).

So saying "arctangent" explains what kind of curve I am talking about and provides a picture, while the term "asymptotic (to a constant)" is weaker than what I need while also making it harder to understand.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm! An asymptote 😊

Dainpdf

Just answered a similar comment. Please refer to that.

[shieldredblog](#)

Not so sure about the Pilgrim. It's stated that he is taking souls directly from Heaven when he resurrects people. If Villain souls go anywhere, it would be the Hells. He might not be able to reach down there.

Also Resurrection has consequences. It mentally scars people, changing their personality. I imagine it would be worse for a Villain too. Lastly he might not want to resurrect the Hierophant, as that seems like a good way to empower him with his own resurrection powers.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine has been resurrected by Above's powers already, and she's fine. Do you think this would be the worst thing to happen to Masego's mental state in the last couple of months? 😊 I'm not sure it'd make the top three, all in all.

Good point about potentially not wanting to resurrect the Hierophant, but:

1) does he actually have the information about how Masego gets miracle powers from observation? It's not exactly stamped on his forehead and it never came up directly during the Northern Crusade. It's worth remembering that Catherine

wasn't even sure he was backed by a Choir until the first attempt at a peace conference – characters have a lot less of a bird's eye view on each other than we the readers do;

2) Narratively, it would be bad as hell for Pilgrim to fuck over Catherine here by refusing to resurrect her friend. She is not technically wrong when she says Masego had been put in danger by trying to find out a way to kill the Dead King, and technically correct is a very potent kind of correct when it comes to this kind of thing. Masego dying here would be a victory for Neshamah in his idle side-quest of 'unmooring' Catherine (which she might just tell Tariq about to secure his cooperation in avoiding that), and it would be a loss for the side of the Grander Alliance here – he's a powerful mage *who is going to fight on their side* as long as Catherine is on their side, too.

[*shieldredblog*](#)

Her soul was bound to an object though. They set that up beforehand.

[*Liliet*](#)

True enough!

luminiousblu

Age doesn't actually kill anyone, or at least if it does we don't know how it actually works.

If Catherine is totally immune to disease or accidents but still aging then she's going to end up with the eternity without youth curse.

[*Liliet*](#)

Mhm.

Stormblessed

Yeah I agree with the other commentators. The ten year deal is WAY better than the hundred year deal, but the Dead King sidestepped the worse deal only to suggest the better one as if he was doing Cat a favor by offering a superior deal for nothing in return. Ten years is just long enough to hold the coalition together in the name of the greater evil. In 100 years the deal will be forgotten.

konstantinvoncarstein

He truly is a magnificent bastard.

erebus42

It was a good attempt on Cat's part. Impressively, this promises to be even more of a shit show than previously suggested. Possibly even a clusterfuck if it goes sufficiently more south.

Andrew Mitchell

My estimation of the Dead King just went up a couple of notches.

He knows that Cat knows Ashkaran and how she learnt it because Masego knows and DK is in Masego. He knows that Cat can be tempted.

I wonder what ELSE he learned from this encounter?

He knew the former back in Keter (because he invited the Woe to pass through the reflections in Arcadia, as it happens), and the latter isn't exactly hard to guess.

Someguy

Damn. Cat failed the test. Contemplating taking the deal was enough.

Also Neshamah really moves like Black.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

But, the loss is first

[Liliet](#)

I think she passed, to the degree that Neshamah was willing to make this a test at all. That's why he didn't wait to hear the result – she fully thought the offered bargain through, not offering him obvious openings in bringing it up later on, and weighing the potential benefits against the fact that it's him offering, came to the conclusion not in his favor – and so he retreated, not allowing her to seize the advantage that actually saying “no” would give her both psychologically and story-wise.

[Liliet](#)

And yes, the main difference between the two – Neshamah and Black, that is – is goals, not methods 😊

werafdsaew

There was no trial. She failed because the DK learned some information from this exchange, not because she failed the trial.

Andrew Mitchell

What did he learn?

konstantinvoncarstein

We will probably learn it at the same time as Cat, and it will not be pretty.

Andrew Mitchell

Mmmmm.... good point.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Actually, we have a pretty good guess: Assuming that his perceptions beats her poker face, he now knows that the Drow aren't just sitting around in the Everdark, and given that he can figure out they're coming after him.

Andrew Mitchell

Ooooo, that's bad.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Oh, it was a trial, which Cat did pass because she did in fact refuse the temptation. But DK (like Cat herself) was perfectly willing and able to pick up some information in the process.

[Liliet](#)

This, i think.

Sylwoos

She was about to pass, but the DK preemptively cut the conversation short to not give her a win story-wise. That's why she complained about not being tested. DK wield story like Cat and Black, but have century of experience behind him.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm!

She got as close to winning as she could against this opponent, and then he messed with her head as a parting move, because he could.

antoninjohn

If they turn on each other once they have a temporary truce with the Dead King then the Dead King wins if they don't then they

when, Cat will just have to have trust and it will all work out fine

Relyt

Trust it all works out fine? Perhaps Cordelia, Pilgrem, and Cat could bring Malicia to heel, deal with the Tyrant (because there's no way he'd stick to this truce), and muster Calernia to war in ten years. Maybe. That's assuming that nothing goes wrong, and very few stories let you sit back and eco for a decade.

If it's 100 years? No amount of trust would make it work. In a few decades, Procer gets a new generation of princes, princes whose ambition isn't tempered by memories of the Dead King. Heroes only live so long. The Ophanim have granted Pilgrim a longer life, but I doubt he'd get another full century, so now Levant's ties to the cause are in question. 100 years is long enough that half a dozen Praesi are going to pull some Stupid Evil shenanigans. Hell, unless Cat either remains queen or keeps her successors on a tight leash, then even Callow might go AWOL. A hundred year truce sounds great in theory, but falls to pieces in practice.

All of that is ignoring the most important thing – the Dead King is immortal. What does he care about 100 years? He'd trade that for a single fort, let alone entire principalities. Because a hundred years later, he can just make this deal again. And again and again, until he's annexed all of Calernia. There's no reason to believe that they'd be any more successful than past crusades in killing the Dead King, so one must assume they won't and plan accordingly. Any permanent concessions are too high a price, let alone for something as fragile as hundred years for the Grand Alliance to turn on itself.

One last note – signing a truce with the Dead King with the expectation that he'll invade at the end could be, if you squint at it, an legitimization of his efforts. Almost like they agreed to a showdown. "Crusade vs abominable invasion" is a much better story for the heroes than "Pistols at dawn, 10 years from now."

Decius

The expectation that he will invade after 10 years is worse than legitimizing his efforts. It's wasting your own.

Because in ten years the new border will be just as unassailable as the old border was, and there will be no invading army to fight.

You wake up early, clean and ready your pistol, and march to the dueling ground, where you die of old age waiting for the showdown.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

Qwormuli

This is probably the most well put variation of this thought in this comment section.

[daegone823](#)

I believe the same almost makes you wonder how many heroes has he made this deal with. If this current invasion isn't going according to plan. I mean he literally had a monk and former white knight guarding his throne room. He probably agreed to stop attacking there troops/ allowing troops to retreat in return for there lives along with 25 year peace treaty.

The Bard tries to balance creation the dead king seeks to unbalance it. They chat they laugh then use heroes like pawns. The means and man power really do not matter, especially since the dead king has made his own empire with humans who can also assume names. If he takes enough territory can he affect the alignment of the whole continent. Will heroes become villains since they are seeking retribution against the heavenly dead king.

With enough time the dead king can poison the well of creation.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> "Crusade vs abominable invasion" is a much better story for the heroes than "Pistols at dawn, 10 years from now."

Yeah. It's important to realize that "on the face of things", DK is flatly unbeatable: An immortal, with overwhelming power both military and magical, and his own private realm to draw on or retreat to as needed. Even if the mortals come up with a weapon that destroys all undead within 99 miles, he also has a human population to make armies out of, and who can tell how large that population is by now. Or what resources they can extract from their converted Hell, e.g.: "I'll see your goblin steel and match it with spell-wrought demon bone and scale. As for your goblinfire, I have the original: genuine hellfire."

The only thing that can contain him, much less drive him back, is Story.

Aston

Just. As. Planned.

For...Black?

superkeaton

Old Monsters are old for a reason Cat, and The Dead King is about as old as they get without being straight from Below. He's played this game with the Bard for a very long time and they are very good at it. You'll have to do better if you want to score a meaningful win.

[Liliet](#)

Neshamah doesn't allow openings for victories against him, only not-losses. I would say Cat did not lose here, as much as was physically possible against someone like him.

Good job on her part :3

[daegone823](#)

It like in poker it does not really matter what cards she is playing with but the mindset behind the card player. It is why the Black Knight is the oldest villain not his power but his mind. I think that is what she understands the dead king was no probing for information about petty fights between humans about heroic stuff. He does not care about that. He was looking at an individual who he had regarded as a peer. He was looking at her state of mind.

She clearly has her head in the clouds and is so focused on petty squabbles, in his view she has let herself get dragged down by these lesser beings. In effect she is still at the table, but clearly an amateur.

[Liliet](#)

I'm not so sure that's how he thinks. Sounds... a bit too far removed from reality for someone as savvy as he is.

Heathen

A truce would be a terrible deal for the living, because Keter doesn't have to attack at the end of it. Right now, the living are in the position of being invaded by an endless horde of undead – which is a story that really only goes one way.

But if they sign a truce, and build their armies and alliances for ten, twenty, a hundred years... at the end of it, Neshameh can still just sit inside Keter and wait. His invitation outside the Kingdom will still be good (because it was a truce, not a peace), and eventually one of two things will happen. Either the armies of the living invade Keter (which is a guaranteed defeat), or he simply waits until they turn back to petty squabbling and infighting before invading again. It puts the narrative on his side, which is essential if he's actually going to win, here.

He can wait an eternity, if he has to. He's immortal.

luminiousblu

>Right now, the living are in the position of being invaded by an endless horde of undead – which is a story that really only goes one way.

I mean

Depends on the story. There's a lot of stories where the dead just end up winning. They generally won't wipe out humanity wholesale, no, but obliterating a single kingdom? No, that's actually standard fare. It's totally reasonable for Neshamah to eat the baby. That's what marks the invasion of the dead as a legitimate threat for the rest of the story, and therefore heroes are rallied and called to arms to stop the tide of death.

Unless obviously Neshamah just doesn't keep invading and doesn't even keep the land. If I were him I'd just kill everyone there as soon as I took it and have them stripmine/stripchop the place, salt the earth, then leave at the last minute. Procer is the most populous state and likely one of the biggest producers of food, so whatever refugees make it to Callow are just going to obliterate the economy there for lack of shit to eat. Recolonizing an area the size of Procer just doesn't happen if it's super infertile, not short-term, and if the Dead King waits two centuries before trying again Procer won't put up a fight.

The shape of THAT story is the one where kings wave their hands and go 'eh, it was a weak state, we're in no danger'. Then Neshamah gets to eat another baby.

edrey

he looked in her soul right? to gain information, even with sve noc protection, he should have a way to do it.

well masego should be saved by archer, no other way here, it's her story to snap her fear.

for the hundred years of peace, the heroes and the kingdom under would kill her before the decade is over, if a villain loses momentum it's dead for sure.

[sengachi](#)

Who needs soul-vision to manipulate someone when you have thousands of years of practice, a completely unknown spy network spread across the land, the greatest sorcery the continent has ever known, and a direct line to their friend's brain?

[Liliet](#)

What sengachi said. Soul-vision is a crutch for those incapable of accounting for other people's moves without it. Catherine doesn't have it, and look how she plays the game :3

[daegone823](#)

I have always wondered how some aspects reveal the crutches of the name. Sort of like indicators of where they are most weak. Reliance on your aspect rather than working on yourself individually so you are not as dependent on it can only end up in failure later down the line.

[Liliet](#)

I'd say less of the Name and more of the individual. Heroes get Aspects to prop them up where they would fail on their own, making them less hyperspecialized glass cannons the way villains are and more sturdy jacks-of-all-trades. See also: Laurence's Listen, William's Triumph, Hanno's Recall, the Mirror Knight's Dawn,

Tyckspoon

I've always been kind of impressed at Ranger's aspects for this reason. Learn, Perfect, Transcend. It speaks of somebody who will not tolerate having weaknesses, and if you think you've identified a weakness you had better kill her with it – the next time you meet her she'll probably kill you with the new talent she forged out of that weakness.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

The loss is always the first

caoimhinh

It's interesting how Cat kept trying to bait the Dead King into falling to the tropes of classical villainy and he kept saying to her 'Am I a joke to you? I am not an idiot to fall for that'.

Also, this particular exchange seemed very important:

"You did not test me."

"...Am I to willingly embrace the ways of defeat simply because we are at odds? I think not."

That sounds like implying that if they actually entered a

confrontation, they would trigger a Pattern of Three, and given how in this particular situation the Dead King was pretty much bound to lose (since Cat would definitely pass the test), Neshamah decided to avoid it at all.

That has interesting implications, but also means that he could cut his losses when it came to this fight for Masego and make a victim out of him.

I hope Masego can be back home soon.

P.S: this came to my mind when Dead King said to Cat that she was just delaying the inevitable, sorry I couldn't help it :v

Neshamah: I am the King of Death, I am inevitable.

Catherine: And I am the Black Queen.

Typos found:

when I my good foot / when my good foot
spread over the plans / spread over the plains
Juniper hard ordered / Juniper had ordered
you called an immortal / you called me an immortal
I wasn't my signature / it wasn't my signature
you hve schemed / you have schemed
there a flash / there was a flash

caoimhinh

Something to add:

I know that losing first in a Pattern of Three means a victory in the end, but the point is that entering into a Pattern of Three at all means that he would need to get actually invested, right? That would leave him vulnerable to the others, even if he was guaranteed a Win against Cat in the end, Heroes would still be able to get him if he overreaches, so Neshamah is avoiding ever getting really involving too deep in anything. At least that's what I think, he is too careful and wary to take risks to get petty victories. In fact, he might not even want to win, but merely live. Everything else would be either a step taken in that direction or an expendable thing for that goal.

Relyt

I read that "you did not test me exchange" more as the Dead King saying "Do you really think I'll just lean into the tropes that make villains lose?"

That would, however, mean that he's probably going for some different setup than "stronghold of a villain". Any idea what?

[Liliet](#)

I think "stronghold of a villain" is something of an inevitable thing here, or it wouldn't be such a staple. It's genuinely the best universal basic setup for a villain to make, it's just that you can refine it beyond that by countering the opponents you know more directly – like how Akua baited Catherine into retreating to Arcadia where she could be bound. Neshamah offers, I imagine, the test to all others, but he can wriggle out of settling into a losing pattern by doing so by not offering the test to *one* of them, which is enough of a deviation to throw off the story without compromising the basic integrity of the winning scheme.

Villains do things that way because when they do things any other way they lose even more definitely and easily.

Qwormuli

He is what he has always been: a stage hazard. He isn't the BBEG to be taken down at the end of the story(at least, until now), he's the passive thing or area that the story's heroes should stay well away from, lest it turn into a cautionary tale.

(to op)The pattern of three is also not a thing that would work here, even if it's somehow suspected as the motivation for everything ranging from the resolution of the story to a broken sole in Cat's shoe. First: there's really no precedent of dualistic rivalry here. Second: If that proposed loss clause would begin with bony boi here, it would end in Neshamah's victory at the end, which would make him jump for it in less time, than a description about his eye colour flashing would take(really, it was pretty much half of this chapter). Except even he(it?) would know it to be wobbly at best and expose him to the said loss at worst. Third: He has little losses to cut, as he hasn't exerted himself yet in any meaningful manner. He just throws his bait to the pond every few decades and watches for a bite. A few worms won't hurt, if he has a whole hell as a backyard to dig them from.

luminiousblu

If Neshamah doesn't actively fight the party and just kills Masego or even just lets him go, the fact is that the only person who legitimately cares is Catherine. Unfortunately for Catherine's revenge, she's

1. Weaker than Neshamah
2. This would fit the Evil turns on Evil story, which obliterates the Liesse Accords
3. The fact that Neshamah refused to test her means that he actually hasn't done anything to make him entangled with her.

Neshamah isn't really an enemy to be beaten, as Qworm said. He's someone to be avoided because you'll lose if you tangle with him.

Wolpertinger

A pattern of three starts with a loss on the side of the eventual victor – Cat 'losing' here hasn't necessarily broken that, though it was a loss of a battle wits, so it might only end up being usable to win a battle of wits.

Cat winning here could have made a pattern of three against her, but I think the 'ways of defeat' he's avoiding is something else entirely. What I think he's avoiding here is the actions of a villain in the story of the band of five that slays the dark lord, where invading their lair involves a test – by making a weak test or avoiding one at all (depending on how the narrative views what just happened) he's weakening the story of the band of five by not having the story follow such a well-worn (and doomed) groove. The moment he starts doing what he's supposed to as a villain in his fortress, the more he sets up his own defeat.

By trying to redirect the story into something else where the heroes are much more likely to lose, he can destroy them much more easily.

luminiousblu

Depending on how you look at it, Neshamah talking so openly with the members of the party could easily force the story where one member of the party was conspiring with the villain all along. Assuming Catherine promised to talk with him later about it, for example, Neshamah would've been all but guaranteed to survive.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, he definitely wanted to force her into this kind of story – the one where she's the traitor of the party.

He failed, but that doesn't mean he didn't get anything out of messing with her anyway 😊

[Liliet](#)

I agree with Relyt, I don't think a Pattern of Three would even be possible here, Cat's too small a fish for that. Her role is that of a fly irritating him, not that of a fully fledged rival.

And for her to be less successful as a fly, he has to not commit indeed.

Mental Mouse

Not exactly a typo, but: "Full red lips quirked as I met his gaze. Just like I remembered they were a shade of light brown that the glow of the eclipse made into molten amber. "

EE should have kept "eyes" instead of "gaze"; since the latter is singular, the referent for "they" is lost.

SpeckofStardust

That was a fail.

Liliet

Oh, I don't think so. That was the opening move, and considering the caliber of the opponent – Catherine did not win, but she did not lose either. It'll take far more buildup before she can truly make a dent, and this went about as well as it could have.

Walter

I'd definitely have liked to see his conversation with the others. Maybe not the Saint, but I bet him and the Rogue Sorcerer might have exchanged some pointers, and certainly the Tyrant would be a hoot, as always.

caoimhinh

Yeah, a single Interlude showing us the conversations of the Dead King with the others would have been great and fitting here.

Saint's would likely be a short test or perhaps displaying Catherine and Kairos' conversation with Neshamah, the conversation with Tyrant would definitely be hilarious, and the meeting between Pilgrim and Dead King would be very interesting, with Rogue Sorcerer's test or conversation granting insight about him.

Liliet

I think it would be far too much of a digression, both tone-wise and narrative-wise. It would need to assume buildup that wasn't actually shown, the past history of the heroes that we're not privy to and just know exists. We do know enough about the Tyrant for it to make at least a good extra chapter, but the heroes? Maybe, again, as an extra chapter showing both the conversation itself and, before it, the history leading up to it. Which is to say, a full extra chapter for each hero, to fit sufficient buildup.

caoimhinh

We don't need to know their backstories and background to have their POV, and it's not necessary to have a build up to show their conversations with the Dead King either. In fact, from the Heroes, the only one we know next to nothing about is the Rogue Sorcerer. See for example that we even saw things from the Saint's POV during her fight against Rumena, it doesn't require a built up and backstory to show someone's POV and their reactions to a particular event.

Mental Mouse

That might well be the next chapter, as an interlude. Or maybe not, as the Rogue Sorcerer's POV might be *too* revealing of a carefully opaque character.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, IMO also, Rogue Sorcerer's POV would be too revealing. Hopefully we'll get it later as an extra chapter.

Ein

Cat did not do well here. But by trying to avoid the tropes, the dead king has fallen into another. He sees peace between the drow and dwarf, he does not understand the depth of the forces against him. Every nation on the continent (save the elves, but who knows with them) above and below (literally and figuratively) is aligned against him. It's the Triumphant Trap in which he is only beatable when everyone gets together to kick his arse.

He also doesn't know that by taking peace, Cat betrays her word to the twin goddesses and her now-mobile army of over half a million. I will bookmark the chapter when the gates open on the undead army and the drow come through in totality.

That and the gobsmacked face of everyone when she clarifies that she brought ALL the drow to the surface. That's the next milestone after the prince's graveyard for me.

Liliet

I think they both did well here. They're both limited in their moves, and out of all available, I think they both chose the best ones.

This is a draw, and that's I think the best result Catherine could have hoped for here.

Qwormuli

Well, he could have irritated his skeletal uncle a tad less with the almost sorry baits and expectations, but that's small potatoes.

[Liliet](#)

he/his? who?

Anony

Named don't age m8.

They could still die, sure, but with a story like this in the making I highly doubt any important characters would bite it before the war even starts.

[Javvies](#)

Only Villain Named don't age.

Heroes still age, and don't benefit from a beyond-human lifespan.

Admittedly, Heroes who die of natural causes (and not evil-Name-swamp-Cat's sword called natural causes) tend to have natural lifespans at the upper bounds of human normal, and tend towards high quality of life as well, getting to ignore most diseases and likely age more gracefully than a regular human.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Heh, I'd forgotten that joke. I'm just starting a new Minecraft game, I think I'll name my first ubersword Natural Causes.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I think ten years is a better offer than a hundred. After all, what better way to prepare for the worst other than when it's still fresh in their mind?

notQ

To take his deal is to unleash him fully. His bargain to Malisia unmade he would have no shackles to hold him back and he gets to have his continent wide war. A hundred years or a thousand it doesn't matter to him. If he makes this deal he gets exactly what he wants.

nipi

Hmm... Wonder who the One in the "Seven Crowns and One" will be? Akua or the Tyrant?

[Liliet](#)

Catherine 😊

The best heroic sacrifice is one of something you never intended to keep in the first place – Cat can get quite a bit of bang for her buck in choosing this place&time to abdicate.

Sure it will cost her in immediate logistical issues, but here and now it will have a proportional gain in the heroes' trust/respect *and* narrative credit.

Mental Mouse

Wait, Akua? She was never a queen. Admittedly Night could probably get her here, but I wouldn't even bet on her as a replacement party member; one of the defining features of this party is that no two of them are completely at ease with each other. Rogue Sorcerer and Pilgrim are a possible exception, but RS has that hidden-depths thing going, and we saw hints at the concord that they're not *necessarily* on the same page.

Mental Mouse

That said, there *would* be a certain symmetry in Akua returning to Liesse, and either ending or being redeemed there.

Smoloney

You know I'll be honest I was worried when the dead king was brought into this story as an actual character and not just a menacing future enemy I was worried he wouldn't live up to the hype but every single time he's been on screen has been awesome it's fantastic

Liliet

Yeah.

"Living up to hype" is something Guide is very, very, very good at.

Daniel E

Hypothetical: What if Cat offered DK Zombie the Third? She has enough sass to be worth at least millennium of peace.

EvaReadThis

Well, I started reading just a few weeks ago, and now it seems I'm all caught up ;-;

Loving the story!

edrey

someone knows which culture is DK clothes, i am pretty sure is from some religion ceremony but i cant recall

Unmaker

"A paltry concession," he smiled. "I would require the keeping of what lands I have already seized."

Including the chunk of Arcadia. Which could be used to do all sorts of nasty things that didn't count as an end to the truce.

Chapter 37: Accessory

"To keep a friend, avoid sharing these three: coin, cup and crown."

– Nicaean saying

Three times now I'd come to Liesse bearing a sword.

Once to take it with the Fifteenth at my back, to smother the last embers of rebellion in my time and bury the Lone Swordsman. Again with my father for only company, sneaking in through darkness and death to quell the terrible madness of Akua Sahelian. The city that had once been the thriving heart of southern Callow had been ravaged and ruined years before today, and being ripped from Creation then cast down atop tall peaks had done nothing to mend that state. The sight of the crown jewel of the south reduced to this still had my blood boiling even now. When the Fifteenth had taken Liesse it'd been a sprawl of broad avenues covered in flowers and trees, a beauty in stone pale and tan that seemed at times like it was half churches half mansions. There was nothing of that left now. The third of the city that'd been outside the old walls, mostly tanners and dyers and the poor, had fallen right off when Diabolist raised the city into the sky. The blood and sorcery that'd followed still resonated in this place, the trees were long dead and the slender towers of the basilicas petulantly snapped. Liesse still thrummed with death: it was like a cloying scent in the air, a strange heartbeat coursing through its broken streets. And at the end of the road, in what had once been the Ducal Palace, some fresh madness was blooming. Masego awaited in the ancient hall of the Dukes of Liesse, turned fortress and ritual heart by the Diabolist.

I did not have to look far to see the first touches of his work. In the eldritch sky above us sorcery had been shaped in a great working, like colossal panes of bronze glass. It brought to my mind a telescope, for it was like a collection of increasingly larger glass lenses pointed outwards. Whatever sight they were meant for I was not certain, but on the surface of the panes I saw the barren storm-wracked wasteland of below. Compelling as

the sorcery was to watch, I had no time to spare for contemplation of it. I was, it was becoming increasingly clear, far from alone in the streets of Liesse. From the moment I'd stepped out of the dark there'd been the weight of eyes on my back, and the tension had only thickened in the moments that followed. What had once been known as the City of Swans was now the City of Ash and Dust, and it was through the stuff of it that my boots scuffed as I began limping forward. Linger here would serve no purpose: none of the others would emerge where I had. There would be need to stitch back together our little band before it was wielded against our common foe. Passing through the wreck of what had once been a guild hall, its walls broken so thoroughly that all that remained upright was low ornate pillars of plastered marble, I heard the whispers of an ambush about to be sprung. I caught sight of them, I thought, too easily. A scuttling creature of red-brown fur with long iron claws had been revealed in the shade where it hid, a ray of light playing off a cloud above us laying it bare.

It was devil. I'd even fought this kind before, at the Battle of Marchford and even the ambush that preceded it. At least as clever as a child, and capable of speech in the Dark Tongue as well as some of Creation's languages. My discussions with the foremost diabolist of our age had since made it plain to me that these were lesser servants, as far as the Praesi saw it, but still commonly used for their wits and ease of binding. And their numbers: the *bonsam*, as their kind was called, were thrown at enemies not as lone individuals but in packs. My advance slowed by a pillar, and I caught a glint of iron in the carpet of ash that filled this gutted guildhall.

"This doesn't end well for you," I called out in Mthethwa. "Flee now and I will not pursue."

In bursts they came out of the thick layers of ash where they'd lain waiting, and others leapt down from the nearby rooftops where they'd been watching me. In the heartbeat that followed, I counted seven. Four on the ground, dark-eyed and wild and coming at me split evenly from the sides. Three above, two who'd been huddling in mangled bell tower and the one I'd caught first pressing down its body in the hollow of a parapet. It came laughably easy to me. My hand, by happenstance, was already near where I wanted it to be – all I needed to do was let the Night pour through and flick my wrist. By happenstance still, all I would need to elude half my attackers was slip around the pillar I'd reached, and my foot was already halfway there. It was like Creation wanted me to slaughter them, and do so almost effortlessly.

"I gave fair warning," I said, wrist already moving.

Two of those leaping were, as I pivoted around the pillar, for a moment perfectly lined up. The fine needle of Night I'd sent burst through the flesh and fur of the first like it'd been filled with munitions, and the last of the impact ate halfway through the head of the devil behind it. Two of the *bonsam* on the ground were now on the wrong side of the pillar to strike at me, and began to turn, while the other pair found I'd smoothly flanked them. They had long enough for their eyes to widen in surprise before with a flick of the wrist in the opposite direction I let loose a second sliver of Night: slight tendrils of smoke that slipped through their nostrils, and they dropped in the instant that followed. It'd turned acid inside their bodies, and melted what there was to melt. The sequence continued, almost dreamlike, with the third leaper landing atop the pillar to my side, two-sided claws scraping at the stone. My hand fell on the side of my staff, as if carried by my last flick, and at the very moment where its weight was drawing back from the landing the tip of my staff struck its chest. It toppled, I knew without even looking, on top of the other two who'd been trying to go around the pillar. With another languid step I finished my way around the pillar, arriving to the sight of two devils snarling at the third as they tried to push it off their side. It was the one who'd fallen that looked at me, letting out a shriek when it saw I'd raised my hand.

I snapped my fingers.

A droplet of Night formed in the middle of the three, and from it a razor-thin pulse emanated. It cut through the heads of the two *bonsam* on the ground, and through the waist of the one I'd nudged down. They were all three dead before I could bring my staff down to lean on, and I breathed out slowly. The whole scuffle had taken the span of perhaps five breaths, and required me to call on so little Night I'd not even noticed any strain.

"So this is what it's like," I murmured. "Having a story like wind in your sail."

It was even more insultingly leisurely than I'd assumed it would be. How could any hero lose a fight, when Creation conspired a hundred coincidences to give them an edge? I mastered that burgeoning irritation, for it was one of the uglier parts of my inheritance, and set it aside. There was no point in whining about the opposition's arsenal when instead I could be figuring out ways to use their tools more frequently. There'd be time for that later, though. For now I needed to find the others, which ought not to be too difficult if providence was willing to lend a hand for once. I resumed my advance into the deeper city, treading different shades of ruin as I did. Some the work of devils, some of wights, some of the soldiers who'd once taken Liesse in my name. I did not encounter any more of the *bonsam*, though once or twice I caught shadows looming on rooftops or

watching through the cracks of walls. None approached, though it seemed that courtesy was not being extended to others: I heard a great crack in the distance, and watched with a wince one of the seven basilicas of Liesse toppled inwards. Well, that was as much of a sign I was going to get I supposed. I put some spring to my step and headed towards the collapse. It couldn't have been more than two alleys of walking until I ran into where my waiting companion had emerged from the aborted crucible: there was a neat line of dead jackal-headed devils, all nine of them cut cleanly through at the waist by the same blow. I glanced at the way the corpses had fallen, and let out a reluctantly impressed whistle when I realized they must have been walking in a file when the Saint of Swords had struck and she'd killed the lot of them before they could even turn. That this was Laurence de Montfort's work there could be no doubt.

She'd cut off enough my limbs I'd acquired an eye for the look of it.

Though not particularly enthused by who it was that I'd found first, I quickened my limp a little more still. If nothing else, the Saint's company should make getting around this devil-infested city significantly easier. Not safer, of course, because there was no guarantee that she wouldn't decide now was the time to clean up a loose end like me, but certainly *easier*. It wasn't all difficult to follow the path she'd walked, since she'd sown corpses seemingly ever step of the damned way. It was like there was something about her that attracted the devils like flies, because by the third time I turned a corner only to find a pile of at least twenty dead or dismembered devils – the limbs everywhere made it harder to count – I was forced to concede this couldn't possibly just be a string of bad luck. By the fifth mess of corpses I ran into it wasn't just ironhooks and jackalheads I was looking at, but higher breeds that Wasteland diabolists had used for war in years past. *Walin-falme*, the leather-winged devils that had been a favourite of binding-inclined Dread Emperors and Akua's own choice of troops for the Folly, and *akalibsa*. The latter had been prized by Taghreb tribes, Aisha has once told me, for their raids on their Soninke neighbours to the north. Given that the fanged devils bore rough armour of stone and iron weapons, I could see why. Not that it'd stopped the Saint from slaughtering them.

I would be more or less true to say I saw the fighting before I heard it: further into the city, I saw swarms of *walin-falme* and smaller gargoyle-like hairy creatures swarming down towards the same plaza. When I got closer the baying of the hound-like *akalibsa* told me that the Saint was very much under siege, and I grit my teeth as I picked up the pace. Hurrying through a house that looked like some whimsical giant had slapped it down before leaving, I came upon the collapsed basilica and saw that I'd strained my bad leg for no reason at all. There must have been, I

thought, easily two hundred devils in the city square I could see past the fallen basilica. The Saint of Swords was alone, and nonchalantly tearing through a the force like it was made of paper.

Pale tabard spinning around her like she was a dancer, the old woman moved among her opponents like the wind. On the ground the scythed through the *bondam* and the *akalibsa* like it was sport, smoothly using them as shields against each other as she carved through necks and limbs with unerring precision. The Saint of Swords only put weight behind her blows when the winged devils came for her, the wind left by explosive strength of her strikes sucking them like birds in a storm. I saw her, with my own eyes, cut the air and leap up onto that mark only to kick up and catch a *walin-falme* in the face, use it as pedestal to twist and carve through the skull of another devil and catch a third one by the throat – she tossed it, casually, against the cut she'd made in the air and it was severed in two halves by the impact. In the heartbeat that followed that insanity she ripped free her longsword and leapt back down into the swarm below, never once having hesitated or broken stride. *Merciless Gods*, I thought. *She might as well be a meat grinder*. As I walked through the rubble of the basilica, a shadow was cast ahead of me by the *walin-falme* who'd thought to take me by surprise and I flicked a wrist backwards without turning. The slithering rope of Night caught it by the neck and tightened before turning to black flame. A charred head and corpse landed behind me a moment later, but I would not be so easily distracted. I suspected that the Saint could keep at this all day without tiring – I'd yet to feel from her more than the occasional flicker of Name power – but devils kept pouring in and there was no end in sight.

We needed to move this along before we got bogged down, and I might as well get two birds with one stone. I supposed I could have reached deep into the Night and unleashed a large working that would have slain many and scattered the rest, but I was disinclined to waste power so early in the fight. Especially when there were more... creative solutions to be had. I left the Saint to her slaughter and crouched against the ground with a pained wince, leg throbbing. Holding onto my staff with tight lips, I ran a hand through the ash and black dust that covered the stone. I closed my eyes, let out a slow breath and let the Night fill my veins. As I'd thought, as I'd felt, there was still power in this place. Deaths by the thousands, as the alchemies of Still Water sunk into innocents and a spark of magic set that corruption ablaze. Other great sorceries as well, Akua's own works of grand hubris and what Masego had made of this place since snatching it from its Callowan cradle. There were echoes here, and they were not gentle ones. Eyes fluttering open, I swept aside enough of the filth that I could lay my naked palm against what had once been the stone floor of the basilica.

"I saw the birth of you," I murmured. "Heard the reverb, even then, though I did not yet have ways to heed it. I do now, though."

I let the Night bridge the gap, felt the wailing held within swell with anger, and gasped as my chest tightened.

"Sing for me," I whispered.

And though I had failed them I was still their queen, anointed in the halls of the Fairfaxes and the fields of war, so sang for me they did. To my ears it felt like a muted buzzing, at first, something so large and deafening my ears could not truly fathom it. But as the first heartbeat passed, a wave of something eldritch filled me and I tasted of the nature of it. Rage, unbridled and strident and blind: wights killed and killing. But the echo went deeper, to what I had sought. The terror of the inevitable, the helplessness of doom already sown and coming. The shivering moment where the greatest evil of our age had been committed by a woman now in my service. I partook of it, and let the city sing that chorus. It would not last long, I thought as I withdrew my palm and wearily rose to my feet. Maybe thirty heartbeats, and the further away the less keenly it would be felt. But here, now? Even as Laurence de Montfort stood unmoved among a whirlwind of devils, the flock of bound creatures *scattered*. Fled to the winds, taken by panic and rage that they were not truly able to understand. I'd spared the Saint as much of this as I could, but in truth I'd doubted she would be affected. And, I saw as she calmly turned to watch me, I'd been right. There was no waver in her eyes, no weight on her shoulders. Like water off a duck's back the tumultuous rage and fear of over a hundred thousand souls rolled over her and found nothing to hold on to.

"Black Queen," the Saint of Swords greeted me. "Finally. Where are the others?"

"Heading this way, I'd wager," I said, limping up to her.

I kept some distance. Enough that, if she chose to strike, I'd have long enough to be aware of the blow. That ought to be enough, given my preparations, though in matters like this nothing was ever certain. Much less when it came to a heroine as old and ridiculously lethal as the Saint.

"After that trick you just pulled, there'll be more than blade fodder headed our way," the old woman said, then spat to the side. "Might as well have raised a banner for everyone to see."

"It'll get the Grey Pilgrim here, at least," I said. "Perhaps the others as well."

Laurence's eyes narrowed.

"Whatever sharpest killer the Enemy's got as well," she said. "But you did that on purpose, didn't you?"

I did not deny it, since it was true.

"I've had to assault that palace once before," I said, gesturing at the looming structure in the distance. "And that was when it was just the Diabolist that put up wards and traps. We don't want to have to fight whatever monster's waiting while in there, you can trust me on that."

"I don't even trust you to breathe," the Saint curtly said. "But the decision's not entirely senseless."

"You sweet talker, Laurence," I deadpanned. "Stop, you'll make me blush."

She eyed me up and down, though there was nothing suggestive about the assessment taking place. That was the gaze, I thought, of someone deciding how it'd be easiest to kill me when the time came and was rather looking forward to getting around to it.

"What did he offer you, in there?" the old woman brusquely asked.

My jaw clenched. Did I want to have that conversation with Laurence de Montfort, of all people? No, I did not. On the other hand, there were risks to dismissing her question. I studied her carefully. If I refused, would she take that as me confession to collusion with the Dead King and strike? I honestly wasn't sure. And unless I wanted to risk a fight anyway, I couldn't hesitate much longer than this.

"A hundred year truce," I finally said. "For the lands he's already taken. You?"

If I was going to answer, so was she. The Saint smiled unpleasantly.

"Never even showed up," she said. "It got dark, I got impatient and cut my way out. So much for your test, Foundling. Didn't figure it *all* out, it looks like. I wonder what else you're wrong about."

I hummed, cocking my head as I listened to the last echoes of the song I'd asked for. I could follow the... tide of it, with a little effort, and it was telling me interesting things. For one, it parted around the Ducal Palace like a tide around rocks. The end of our journey most definitely awaited there. There was, however, another hole in the city. Much smaller, but unlike the palace instead of being exempt it was violently repelling the song. And that small presence was not far ahead of us, coming in our direction.

"Not about the monster, I'll tell you that for certain," I said. "We're about to have a guest, Saint."

Her gaze sharpened.

"Then move ahead," she said. "I will not have you at my back, Black Queen."

"Why?" I frowned. "I'm not the one who's a walking domain. I can't – wait, are you implying I'd stab you in the back?"

She sneered, which was answer enough.

"Seriously?" I said. "Are you incapable of being halfway reasonable without someone holding your hand? I've had more cordial conversations with godsdamned angels, Laurence. *Angels*. Let that sink in."

I did not see it until it was too late. My mistake, growing irritated enough most my attention had been on the Saint instead of where it should be. My heart quickened and I felt goosebumps crawl along my skin as I saw a single-edge blade of bronze swinging for my eyes. It had been a mistake, I realized, to assume that the song would allow me to accurately keep track of the enemy. Then there was a flash of radiant Light, and the creature that'd been about to take my life was shot out by the impact like a ballista bolt. I blinked out the blindness, absent-mindedly noting that the enemy had been thrown straight through two houses and a sculpture of Jehan the Wise before stopping.

"We appear to have flushed out the enemy," Tariq said, lowering his crooked staff.

"Thanks for that," I croaked out.

He dipped his head in acknowledgement. My heart was beating wildly and my fingers felt faint. Gods, but it'd been a while since I'd come that close to dying – without anything like Winter to get me through it. I'd almost forgotten what it felt like. I fell in with the Pilgrim, the two of us advancing to join the Saint. Her eyes were on the plume of dust and ash where the enemy had been thrown, and together the three of us looked upon the silhouette that emerged. Utterly pristine even after being thrown, its bare feet padded across the ashen ground. It wore nothing but a loose long-sleeved shirt of white satin, with trousers of the same, and its extended arm held out the bronze blade at a horizontal angle. It was not human, I thought, and I knew that without needing to study it in greater detail because I'd encountered it before.

"Well now, as I live and breathe," the Saint said. "That looks to me like an elf."

"Bestowed, too," the Pilgrim added.

"It's called the Spellblade," I calmly said. "And it's one of the Dead King's own Revenants."

I felt the weight of the other two's attention, though neither looked away from our enemy, and the unspoken question that went with it.

"In Keter I tried to destroy it, with Hierophant and Thief," I said.

"And?" Tariq calmly asked.

"I landed about one good hit that whole fight, for which it vaporized half my body," I replied. "We ran as soon as we could. It's nasty in the elf way, and it can make blades out of spells as well. This is going to be a ride, I can tell you that much.."

"Good," Laurence de Montfort said, smiling a wolf's smile as she began advancing. "Then this ought to be decent practice for Dead King."

Stormblessed

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

It's your civic duty!

[*Liliet*](#)

<https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>

And come discord with us!

[*milieu*](#)

Typo

> What had once been known as the City of Swans was not the City of Ash and Dust
into

> What had once been known as the City of Swans was now the City of Ash and Dust

[*milieu*](#)

More!

> I wore nothing but a loose long-sleeved shirt of white satin,

with trousers of the same, and its extended arm held out the bronze blade at a horizontal angle.

to

> It wore nothing but a loose long-sleeved shirt of white satin, with trousers of the same, and its extended arm held out the bronze blade at a horizontal angle.

M0och

One more...

>I've more cordial conversations with godsdamned angels, Laurence. Angels. Let that sink in."

>I've had more cordial conversations with godsdamned angels, Laurence. Angels. Let that sink in."

Valkyria

Is it just me or are the typos showing up more frequently than ever in the last few chapters... ?

I remember times when there were less at least.

Ciopo

I have noticed that too, but it might be a matter of perception, archive binging chapter that have in the meantime been corrected vs readign the newest chapter soon after its release

[Liliet](#)

Only maybe sporadically? There's always LOADS of typos, it's just a toss-up whether you notice them -_-

[Mental Mouse](#)

I haven't checked (still waiting for my coffee to kick in, and proofreading is hard), but I suspect "reversion to the mean". That is, some days he does better than others, but then when it goes back to an "average" level you notice it again. Reversion to the mean is much of how quack cures get their claws into people: A chronically ill person have a bad day/week, get desperate, and go buy some quantum-infused eye of newt. Then the bad patch ends (like they do), they think the QIEON made it better... and then they tell all their friends "oooh this stuff works". (Argghh.)

What I'd really hope for is that he (or an assistant, many of us would volunteer) is going through the older chapters and incorporating the fixes from the comments. I certainly don't expect perfection on the first pass (that's not how humans work), but there should be second and third passes eventually.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Which last is why the lack of an edit button is so annoying...

JJR

Perhaps we're getting closer to the part of the story with the demon that causes typos?

Kidding of course, but I still wonder what flavor of demon would end up doing that. Corruption seems obvious, if we hadn't already had one prominent enough in the story without putting it's chapters through a blender. Must be a kind we haven't seen yet.

[Mental Mouse](#)

That would be Titivillus, known since the Middle Ages as the bane of scribes.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Another thought: most of the "typo" issues we've been seeing wouldn't be caught by a spellchecker, so he'd need something smarter. Perhaps something like Grammarly might help? (I haven't tried it myself, despite being peppered with their ads on youtube.) On the other hand, it seems to be targeted as business communications, and might well stumble (or pratfall) over chapters of a fantasy novel.

Andrew Mitchell

I had been using Grammarly for years and it is quite useful. Recently, however, I uninstalled it and deleted my account.

The decision to do so took a bit of effort to come to. It was originally triggered by some Reddit comments questioning their privacy policy and terms of use. I then took a deep dive into those documents and carefully thought through the details and the interaction between the agreements. Eventually I came to the conclusion that, contrary to what you'll see with a superficial reading, the agreements actually give them the right to record everything you type on every web page and then provide that data to third parties.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Damn. Unfortunately, that sort of thing isn't unheard of, but it's still upsetting to see a new example. Especially one that's being pushed so widely.

And while they don't *have* to use all the powers granted by the terms of use, it's never wise to bet on the self-restraint or goodwill of a sociopathic non-human, such as a corporation.

M0och

"...it's never wise to bet on the self-restraint or goodwill of a sociopathic non-human, such as a corporation."

Probably one of the best pithy comments I have ever seen and no I am not being demeaning or sarcastic when I say this. This one made me spit out an entire mouthful of water!

[BartHumphries](#)

> It's nasty in the elf way, and it can makes blades out spells as well.

In not certain what is supposed to be here but I'm certain it's a typo.

Morgenstern

Might be "... can make blades out of nothing and spells as well."

Feels like a good chunk of the sentence is missing, anyway.

Morgenstern

Or just "blades out of spells"..?

M0och

Pretty sure its the "makes".

Should be make, without the 's'.

Caerulea

We have fallen far behind ward.

Vote!

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>We have fallen far behind ward.

Vote!

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

antoninjohn

Well Creation is on your side Cat so you are going to win

Stormblessed

Oh dear the Spellblade is back. They couldn't handle it last time, but this time Cat is no longer full of Winter. Not having Masego is worse, but overall trading Zeze and Vivi for two Heroic powerhouses is a trade up.

Plus this time the story and providence is 100% in her favor as another major plus.

Mental Mouse

Also she has Night – not much of it, but even so, we know Night can eat elfstuff.

Fayhem

This isn't the first time I've seen someone say Cat doesn't have much Night, and honestly I have no idea where that's coming from. She used Night to crack a river open under the noonday sun when the Mighty can't call on Night then *at all*. She's far from the most practiced in working with Night but I suspect nobody short of the Sisters has more of it.

Mental Mouse

Clarifying: She doesn't have much Night *here*, unless Sve Noc goes all in on backing her, and she's already said that they're moving very warily in DK's vicinity, precisely because their power may be overwhelming by mortal standards, but they don't much like the odds against DK.

Fayhem

Hmm, interesting take. I'm not sure if the Sisters allowing a major draw on their domain's power is equivalent to bringing themselves in close, but I'm not sure it isn't either.

Fayhem

Also, we know that Night can eat elfstuff? How? When was that shown/referred to? It wouldn't be the first time I've blanked on something from past chapters but I don't recall that ever coming up – heck, the last time the drow were on the surface in force was before the Night and before the elves arrived on Calernia and murder colonized the Golden Bloom.

Mental Mouse

IIRC, that's how Sve Noc beat Cat – by taking bites out of Winter until there was nothing left but a mind. And that was

before they had actually absorbed the entire Court and leveled up.

Kissaten

Nah, Cat let Sve Noc into her Winter domain via Fall-esque move, and Sve Noc went all “my trap card has activated” on poor Cat

[Mental Mouse](#)

AIRI, Even before pulling Sve Noc into her domain, Cat was getting hit with “acid” attacks that were nibbling away at her, and the greater Mighty were starting to absorb her own attacks.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, you’re confusing elves and fae again.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Oh, right.

[Liliet](#)

The relevant difference in this situation is that elves are much, much scarier, because fae aren’t even fully sentient.

[Fayhem](#)

> fae aren’t even fully sentient.

*sapient

Also, say wha? They aren’t fully self-determined, that’s canon, but where are you getting what you’re saying from?

[Liliet](#)

Sapient, yes.

Specifically I’m thinking of the part where Catherine goes through a market at Winter Court and realizes the fae are acting oddly.

My point is that they cannot actually act flexibly according to the situation, their flexibility has limits and once you hit these limits you can dance circles around them. And that’s what I mean by sentient. A monkey can’t understand a computer. A fae can’t act to maximize their own well-being.

Fayhem

Except Winter King tho. His whole thing was taking action to maximize his own well-being (as he defined the term) and Cat did the absolute opposite of dance circles around him.

You're not wrong that the fae lack flexibility, but I think it's more in terms of they cannot alter their nature or change who they are over time. They are fully capable of assessing their situation and responding in a tactically appropriate manner, with some possible story-related exceptions tbh. E.g., when Cat fucked up the deadwood soldier in Marchford by tossing heroic tropes at it until it bolted – though even then, note that it **did** bolt, or try to, because it recognized what was happening and responded appropriately to it.

But Named are quite story-bound as well, and I wouldn't say that Cat was less sapient when she was the Squire than she is now. For that matter, I'd say she wasn't less **sapient** when she was Sovereign of Moonless Nights either – much less adaptive which was costing her the greatest strength she has in addition to, y'know, her humanity – but not less sapient, I don't think. Fixed \neq non-sapient, in other words.

Liliet

Winter King had an opening to do what he did; this was the only cycle where he could do so.

I think the higher level a fae the closer to fully sapient they are; lower level fae appeared to basically be NPC level scripts.

Fayhem

We've never seen anyone have an actual conversation with a lower-level fae, or try to. Unless I'm missing something, the sum total of data on lower-level fae is 1) Cat interacting briefly and in a primarily stab-based manner with the deadwood soldier around Marchford, 2) the Countess of Cold Hands exchanging maybe around two sentences with a footsoldier outside Skade before murdering him because yawn, bored now, and 3) Cat briefly observing some fae acting out stories in a marketplace without actually trying to interact with any of them or even observing them for very

long. No offense intended, but I think you're drawing strong conclusions from a dataset that isn't nearly robust enough to support them.

[Liliet](#)

True.

I still think the limitations on the fae make them significantly less terrifying a threat than elves.

[Fayhem](#)

Certainly could be, yeah. We have pretty scant data on elves too as of now though, I'm pretty sure a Named son of the Forever King isn't exactly a representative sample and he's the only one we've actually seen fight. It's also worth noting that fae reform with every cycle (or however that's working these days since Cat's merger of the Courts) whereas it's established that Calernian elves are categorically incapable of reproducing. Given that the elves on Calernia literally can't replace even a single lost soldier literally ever they would be EXTREMELY reluctant to commit to any fight where they'd risk even relatively light losses, much less the kind of heavy losses Cat routinely inflicts even on OP fae armies. As far as threat level goes "won't fight" is almost as good of a limiter as "can't fight" – the only difference is "won't fight" can still potentially tear you a new asshole if you back them into a corner where they don't have a choice.

[Liliet](#)

Good point.

[Javvies](#)

There's also Archer and Masego's efforts to point the Summer Fae at Akua. They tried to give the Fae info on the warding scheme around Liesse, but they wound up needing to grab a noble in order for there to be enough "room" for Masego to shove the info into them. And that was with Masego cutting parts of them out.

[Fayhem](#)

Lili beat me to pointing out that elves \neq fae already, but let me expand a bit on what (I think) the relevant differences are here. Night and Winter are both semi-

externalized domain or domain-related powersources – meaning, given individuals can have more or less of either, but ultimately the power comes from Night/Winter itself rather than actually being intrinsic to the individual. Further, even beyond both powersources being similar, they are both specifically founded in greater or lesser part on the principle of the internal validity of employing usurpation to gain power.

In other words, it's not just that both are geared towards eating things, it's that it is a principle *within Night/Winter itself* that you can gain in Night/Winter by killing someone who has more and taking their stuff. So when someone from Winter uses violence to claim some of the Night, or vice-versa, they are in a sense following the same metaphysical principle that is already intrinsic to what they're claiming rather than imposing a new ruleset/principle from outside what they're trying to claim. As I understand it at least, that is specifically why one eating the other was so viable. I don't know if it necessarily would have been/would be outright impossible to usurp power from a source not internally predicated on allowing that, but I would expect it to be at minimum a much steeper climb.

By contrast, elfstuff isn't externally-sourced at all. It's the product of a racial attribute of the elves and is entirely intrinsic to each individual elf. IIRC as it was explained elfstuff is possible because as elves age their souls gain greater and greater weight within Creation, which from what we've seen seems to start with Watch-like physical ability boosts and in older elves levels up to where they can essentially opt out of Creational laws, albeit "only" one at a time. I would expect that to make it markedly harder to do *anything* to elfstuff, much less eat it. Because technically in a sense they're not actually *doing* anything, they're opting out of stuff applying to them by sort of sidestepping physics rather than actively producing an effect. In other words, if an elf jumps impossibly high it's not because they're producing an antigravity effect it's because they're just deciding that gravity isn't really for them. So there's not a flow or output of energy to potentially disrupt/appropriate as might be possible with magic. Meaning that in order to disrupt an elf being able to do elfstuff, you'd pretty much have to disrupt their soul itself which would presumably be at least an order of magnitude harder for most people given that IIRC it's been mentioned that even Warlock needed specialized equipment and a willing/helpless subject in order to mess with souls.

Though, it is interesting that it's been established through what happened to Amadeus that Saint can cut/sever souls themselves...

Javvies

Heh. Saint is good for something, anyways.

That really is cheating powers that Heroes get with story on their side.

Darkening

To be fair, if Tyrant is any indication, villains can get that too, but leaning into the story that hard has long term consequences for them.

Mental Mouse

Hey, right now even Cat's getting "... a story like wind in your sail." The question is when the wind will shift.

mavant

This is the shift. Tyrant's trick is "you can't thwart stage one"; the Deaf King has already successfully achieved stage one or this plan. Evil always wins in the middle!

Rook

I'm very much looking forward to watching an antagonist having to deal with the hemorrhoidally large pain in the ass that the Saint is in a brawl.

Someguy

The good news here is that this looks like the start of a Revenge Feud Story with Saint as the meatgrinder MC (Vagrant Swordsman). IIRC the Elf King was desperate for his son's corpse back right?

caoimhinh

I'm not sure if the Elf King was desperate for it, but it was implied that killing his son and turning him into a Revenant was what made him not mess with Dead King ever again.

konstantinvoncarstein

Nor the Wandering Bard, it was she who organized it.

caoimhinh

Yep.

If I recall correctly, she made the Elves go after Neshamah because he was trying to seize a second Hell, right?

konstantinvoncarstein

I don't the chapter anymore, I am not sure.

caoimhinh

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/08/24/interlude-empires/>

"It was oddly nostalgic," the Intercessor mused. "You know, watching you meddle with forces beyond your comprehension. You haven't been that reckless since... your fourth century, I'd say? That delightful scuffle with the rats."

"I was young," Neshamah fondly remembered. "And still believed plagues to be valid method. You were quite severe in chiding me, I recall."

"Lines had to be drawn, we were still establishing the rules," the Intercessor smiled. "Both of us played rougher back then."

"You certainly were not shy in setting the elves after me," Neshamah said. "That was rather unwarranted."

"You were being greedy," the Intercessor said, wagging a finger. "Two Hells? I don't think so. Besides, that was as much about that old mule in the Bloom as it was about you. He needed a sharp lesson about who not to trifle with, and your taking his only son got the point across."

"The Spellblade has been a delightful diversion, admittedly," Neshamah conceded.

"You even set him on dear Cat," she said. "Thoughtful of you."

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks for finding and sharing that. Very good to read that again. 😊

[*Euodiachloris*](#)

I think Saint didn't get an offer; she got given a distraction/ bribe (and doesn't quite realise it). Our revenant Spellblade prince? He's the ploy.

Damned if I know quite how.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Or Saint got something to encourage her paranoia against Cat.

[Liliet](#)

^^^

my bet

Insanenoodlyguy

Yeah, I'm pretty sure he did show up and just talked about how cat was going to pull off a fusion of good and evil with her accords that he would never do. Then he made her an offer he knew shed never take, but it wasn't an actual trial. He wants her to say something like "no deal, I am killing her and killing you." Since what he really wants us to reinforce her current predictable behavior.

Insanenoodlyguy

Yeah, I'm pretty sure he did show up and just talked about how cat was going to pull off a fusion of good and evil with her accords that he would never do. Then he made her an offer he knew shed never take, but it wasn't an actual trial. He wants her to say something like "no deal, I am killing her and killing you." Since what he really wants is to reinforce her current predictable behavior.

Kissaten

Saint would cut him too deep for his comfort. He didn't show up because she is precisely the type of hero to inexplicably stab a villain right into the soul

Vortex

I don't think it is just heroes that get crazy power. Villains get insane power too, if Triumphant and the Dead Long and some of the other ones are any indication. It just requires you to lean into the story, which is really why Cat and Black and the rest aren't big fans of it.

medailyfun

I don't think in Triumphant times there was proper story supporting her advance, it was first time

[Liliet](#)

Not for the whole thing she did, no, but she was hardly the first conqueror in history?

[Liliet](#)

They don't like the stories of their metaphysical side 😊

Henry Eccleston

This'll be a hell of a ride... I might have to write a poem to tell it in brief.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Go for it! Yay poetry!

[AtrumChalybs](#)

Figured I should mention this. Chapter 36 doesn't show up in the menu. Only 35 and 37. Might be confusing for people. Thanks for the chapter!

Qwormuli

Not even 37, for me. Had to dredge it up the old way.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I've noticed before that the TOC doesn't always keep up with the chapters.

[David Lynch](#)

And is occasionally wrong, which can be disconcerting. The bit where Book 3's "Chapter 10: Entrance" links to chapter 11 instead has left me very confused twice now, having just recently done a reread. 😅

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Spell to Blades vs Existence to Blades.

Hmmm

apperatus27

Oh goodness, a fated enemy for the saint of swords, come at last. Either she's about to have a nemesis for the next three fights with her eventual loss, or this encounter is purely to have her do the heroic "Go on, I'll take care of this." thing to separate martial force from the band of five early.

Dainpdf

Seems more to me like the spellblade is about to get worked to show off the power of the band of five.

[Liliet](#)

I think this 😊

[sengachi](#)

This could also very easily be a “oh we *thought* we understood why the Dead King was bad news” moment for the Heroes. I mean they’re a Band of Five, they’ll inevitably kill it or drive it off (or kill it impermanently), but I could see this being the opening salvo of a Story meant to show heroes the true meaning of “darkest before the dawn”.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And we don’t know which of these three paths (or a fourth) EE will take, until he shows us...

Dainpdf

Problem is the Spellblade has already been that. The first defeat before they faced the Ratling seer. Having him be that again will be hard to pull off convincingly.

Plus, it’s too early. That dark before dawn moment needs to come at the end of the second act.

Cicero

Couldn’t it be that the first loss to Cat will still count, and this will be the draw, followed by a later victory?

Cicero

Sorry, meant the first loss by Cat.

Dainpdf

Perhaps. Seems like both conflicts lack weight for that, though, considering they’re both happening in the context of Cat vs more important villains (Malicia, Neshamah).

[Liliet](#)

On the other hand, it could be a “you thought you knew what horrors Catherine Foundling has faced but you were very wrong” moment.

The part where they realize she'd been holding back against them.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes! I want to see the heroes realise that.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Except he's on the other side facing a band that we already know can kick ass. It seems more likely that *Saint* will get worked, and hopefully learn that yes, she actually does need the rest of the party to get through this.

Dainpdf

The word effect is useful to show how strong the new character is. The spellblade is not new. The band of five, as one, is. And I'm not sure any of them alone could defeat the spellblade, let alone easily. Winter Queen Cat was pretty damn powerful and she got stomped with two other Named supporting (even if one was Thief).

JJR

But doing that is the last thing that the Dead King wants. Trial, Monster, Pivot. First he avoided giving Cat a real trial when he didn't let her heroically reject his offer (I think?). Next comes a monster, expected to force this unusual band to learn how to work together to overcome it. Unless the Dead King has it sandbag against the Saint. This will of course further convince her that the two villains are quite unnecessary for the fight, or even make her think she doesn't need the group at all.

And without the normal trials to forge these individuals into a functional group, winning the pivot gets much harder. And maybe the Dead King just gives them a fake pivot too.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think Laurence can fall to a ploy quite THAT basic, even beyond her experience in this world it's universal Named knowledge that bands of five are stronger than the constituent parts as a law of nature.

And she's not going to think she doesn't need Tariq.

But doing something to stir up paranoia against Cat can be unpleasantly effective.

M0och

"Are you incapable of being halfway reasonable without someone holding your hand? I've more cordial conversations with godsdamned angels, Laurence. Angels. Let that sink in."

AHHHH such a good line!!!

M0och

"Never even showed up," she said. "It got dark, I got impatient and cut my way out. "

This is why I find the SOS tolerable, as mentioned in the last chapter, she treats all evil like bugs to be squished. Not just our beloved Cat...

konstantinvoncarstein

I find hard to believe Neshama just let her alone. It is highly suspicious.

Dainpdf

Cat herself said it. No sense in trying to tempt or dissuade her. She would just cut her way out.

Decius

Cat is not on the same tier as the Dead King at offering temptation to heroes. She was unprepared for an offer of truce; how much more unprepared was she for the offer made to the Saint of Swords?

How unprepared was she for the offer made to the Grey Pilgrim?

The Saint, at least, can simply refuse to make a deal with the Greater Evil. The Pilgrim has no such higher principles to stand on or cut with; if made an offer that would reduce suffering, he must take it.

Andrew Mitchell

1. My reading of the chapter was that the SoS didn't get and offer because she just cut her way out.

2. It's not "reduce suffering" that drive's Pilgrim. His aim is to "reduce unnecessary suffering" and IMO he can take the long view on that and realise that total suffering will be reduced if they fight the Dead King now, because it will be so much worse in 10 or 100 years.

[Javvies](#)

No, Tariq is about reducing what he considers to be unnecessary suffering.

Fighting the Dead King is necessary, as is any and all suffering that would result from doing so.

As bad as Callow being ruled by a Villain (Cat) could/would be, any sort of permanent gains made by the Dead King would be even worse.

40k analogy here – Tariq and the Alliance are, in this instance, the Imperium, Cat is the Tau, and the Dead King is the Tyranids. Sure, the Imperium wants to exterminate the Tau with extreme prejudice, and considers human collaborators in Tau space heretics, but when you get right down to it, it's objectively better to have the Tau as neighbors and work with them against the Tyranids than to focus major efforts on fighting the Tau when a Hive Fleet shows up.

For that matter, let's not forget that Tariq's got the Ophanim riding shotgun in his brain – there's no way they sign off on making a deal with the Dead King.

konstantinvoncarstein

I like the Warhammer 40k reference. 😊 The major difference is that Catherine is a genuine treat to Tariq 😊

[Javvies](#)

To Tariq as an individual, maybe, to the nations of Good as a whole? Not so much. Cat doesn't care about expanding into Procer or Levant, she's not the conquering sort ... and she knows that even if she wanted to (and she doesn't), she couldn't make such an expansion stick (even Good-aligned Callow couldn't maintain hold of the parts of Procer they took), and that there would be hordes of Heroes getting spawned to kill her, and she'd end up like Triumphant.

The analogy doesn't have to map perfectly.

Still though, call Cat and Villain-ruled Callow the Eldar (Craftworld, most likely).

For that matter, the Dead King could be the forces of Chaos or the Necrons instead of the Tyranids.

The primary point holds true – sure, you'd rather not deal with Cat, but she's a way better neighbor than the alternative. Much like her approach to negotiating – you might not like cheap wine, but it sure beats getting stabbed.

In the 40k analogy, any worlds her side holds can ultimately be (re)taken as useable worlds, anything

lost to the mutual greater threat/enemy probably won't be if it isn't retaken fast enough. It's a pretty fundamental part of why whenever the Imperium and Tau are fighting and the 'Nids show up, pretty much everybody agrees to put the fighting on hold to deal with the 'Nids first. Which has had the side effect of making the 'Nids the saviors of the Tau, after a fashion. Not sure the Tau would approve if they realized that, to be honest. Or how they'd react to that realization in general ... probably poorly.

konstantinvoncarstein

Of course the analogy cannot be perfect, I was just trying to joke 😊 But you are completely right, it is way better to ally with Catherine/the Tau than everyone being killed by DK/tyranids.

The Etherals are probably aware of it.

[Fayhem](#)

> Which has had the side effect of making the 'Nids the saviors of the Tau, after a fashion. Not sure the Tau would approve if they realized that, to be honest. Or how they'd react to that realization in general ... probably poorly.

Which makes it a good analogy, since the DK is the savior of Callow, after a fashion. And not to completely sidetrack this comments section into 40K discussion, but yeah I'm pretty sure that the Tau still haven't really grasped the scale of what they're fucking with in the form of the Imperium. Even after all their expansion spheres they're barely a blip on the galactic map, while the Imperium practically *is* the galactic map.

I figure that Konstantin (in the comment below) is prob right that the Ethereals at least have gotten access to intel that would *allow* them to know what the situation is there at least in general terms (they've taken imperial worlds so they must have gotten *some* records/intelligence assets out of that). But who knows how seriously they've taken that intel – politicians everywhere have a real tendency to go into denial when they encounter facts they'd rather not be true. And “our entire civilization is, after centuries of expansion, still just barely a blip on the radar to a galaxy-spanning civilization where the fanatical state religion is based on xenocide” is a fact that very few people would be keen on being true. And it's

the politicians who decide what info gets released and to who.

[Fayhem](#)

Ayy lmao, did I say the comment below? I meant the comment above. Thanks for not having an edit feature, WordPress!

Dainpdf

But can he reason that *any* deal with the DK will create suffering simply for being with the DK? Pilgrim is more vulnerable than Saint, but he has resisted temptation multiple times.

[Liliet](#)

Pilgrim is the long view hero, Catherine has said that. He knows full well the difference between kindness and idiocy.

[Liliet](#)

>The Pilgrim has no such higher principles to stand on or cut with; if made an offer that would reduce suffering, he must take it.

Amadeus thought that too 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Skipping the trial like that may come back to haunt her later.

Dainpdf

Except there was no trial for anyone. Cat told Neshamah he didn't test her, which led to a short scolding.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, we haven't heard from the other three...

Dainpdf

Yeah, but Neshamah straight up told Cat that placing a trial would be disadvantageous to him, so he wasn't going to. He's not going to just fall into the role of villain whose fortress is being stormed. He's not a rookie XD

[Mental Mouse](#)

Come to think of it, skipping the trial might backfire on Neshamah! With the story this strong, they might well find their own trial. Or make one out of the party's internal conflicts.

Dainpdf

Sure, but then he's not positioning himself as their antagonist... so he can't lose.

Morgenstern

How hilarious would it be, if the Saint simply lied when being asked what she was tempted with...

Dainpdf

It wouldn't be very in keeping with my interpretation of the character, but who knows.

[Liliet](#)

It's the best move he had. He couldn't get anything out of fucking with her, just putting himself in a weaker narrative position for no real gain.

It's like Catherine refusing to melee the Mighty at Great Strycht: would be stupid to tangle in a way that doesn't favor her when she has much better tricks at her disposal!

Edgar Ve

Personally, I think Saint is a parody of a murderhobo or any character with the dump stat as charisma. think about it a god on the battlefield, a liability off of it. Of course, how damaging she is is up to perspective of course

Dainpdf

She's more of a minmaxer than a murderhobo. She doesn't kill random people for loot.

Vortex

She is a murder hobo paladin. Adheres rigidly to her oaths but will kill anything not in her narrow line of Good and damn the consequences.

Remember Saint of Swords was one of the core forces pushing Procer into an unwinnable war.

Dainpdf

The term “murderhobo” is a derogatory term for a specific style of DnD play where the players kill and destroy everything they encounter in search of loot and xp.

Actually talking to the church and getting them to support a war for ideological reasons is not a murderhobo thing to do.

Saint is a Knight Templar, at worst, and just a DnD Paladin in my opinion. Honestly, she’s less than that – their vows forbid them from knowingly working alongside Evil people.

Someguy

I thought she’s a parody of sword wielding MCs in eastern webnovels, no different from murderhobos.

Darkening

The line from the Grey Pilgrim about her sword having touched the heavens does seem like it’d be right at home in a wuxia novel.

caoimhinh

Oh, this is gonna be a good fight. The Spellblade and those Named Elves seemed pretty awesome with their abilities to ignore Laws of Creation, even if only one at a time. Kairos and Rogue Sorcerer still missing, the two unstable and unknown variables respectively. This seems like a plot twist in the making (well, it always did, to be honest).

Typos found:

- avoid these sharing these three / avoid those sharing these three
- was not the City of Ash / was now the City of Ash
- ever step / every step
- forced to conceded / forced to concede
- I would be more or less true to say / It would be more or less true to say
- the scythed through / she scythed through
- I wore nothing/ It wore nothing
- it can makes blades out spells / it can make blades out of spells

Andrew Mitchell

It’s only the opening chapter of Liesse III; I expect Kairos and RS will appear quite soon.

Plot twist? For sure. And probably more than one.

Jesse Coombs

Ignoring a rule of creation is going to be especially relevant against the Saint, as she uses Decree to set the rule that "She is a Sword". If the elves can ignore this rule, she may find herself in for a VERY nasty surprise.

IDKWhoitis

Alright, on the traitorous ally list, Saint just hit the top. I don't trust that she just conveniently cut her way out.

So in order of possible traitorous outcomes:

1. Saint, 2.Sorcerer, 3.Grey, 4.Cat, 5.Kairos.

I can see Cat compromising on something in the face of potentially losing Masego.

Dainpdf

Cat did say she was likely going to have it easiest. Saint is too simple to fool.

Not-Kairos

I'm so glad that somebody finally recognizes the sincerity of Kairos's vows of eternal friendship. Wretched blackguards insist that he is a traitorous wretch horn of the foulest compost, but this is nothing more than the most base of slander! He would never betray his eternal friend, Chess-cheating Catherine, for even the grandest of rewards.

Death Knight

Laurence is a sword.

Swords cut things.

Therefore, Laurence can cut anything if her blade connects.

Note I said cut, not kill. It really is as simple as that. In Named, certainty of purpose/belief is power.

[sengachi](#)

I mean, Saint also turned down a freaking domain ability called Decree (seriously holy shit my skin shivers just thinking about that power) because she valued the purity of being a single-purpose instrument. While Saint can be suckered into making bad choices with respect to greater and lesser evils, she is (like, literally is, she has a min-maxed domain about it and everything) an entity which does not contain the capacity for succumbing to temptation. I believe Saint when she says the Dead King didn't even bother putting in the effort to trial her.

[Liliet](#)

I bet her actual trial is going to end up being an opportunity to backstab Catherine, generously offered by DK in a non-obvious-that-it's-him manner 😊

[sengachi](#)

Mmm, frankly I'd be shocked if she turned traitor before dealing with Masego. Breaking faith with the devil is one thing, as is refusing covenant with the devil even in your hour of need. Doing **anything** to break party unity while actively contesting the Dead King though, that is just begging for you and everyone you love (scratch that, I meant just 'everyone') to die choking on their own blood. And Saint knows that. She might not trust Catherine not to betray her and she might be itching to kill Catherine the hot second this is done on account of not having the mental flexibility to understand Cat's motives, but that's a very different kind of stupid than infighting vs. the Dead King.

[Liliet](#)

Well she's already announced that she expects *Catherine* to backstab her any moment now. All DK would need to do is make it seem like Catherine is, in fact, about to.

A trial of trust... harder than it seems, given Laurence has announced she "doesn't trust Catherine to breathe" 😊

ATRDCI

To be fair to Saint, Cat only started to need to breathe again fairly recently.

[Liliet](#)

GOOD POINT

Morgenstern

And yet, she seemingly succumbed to the temptation of the Wandering Bard offering her a vision of a much, much better nation of Calernia if only Procer burns first... Seems you just have to play into her kind of extremism and she very well CAN be tempted, after all, imho.

[sengachi](#)

That's a good point, but I think the source of the offer matters. She took that particular devil's bargain because she believes without reserve in the Heavens Above. To use that lever on her personality the Dead King would have to make her think her shot at Catherine was the Heavens' intent, and she seems too paranoid to me to not be all of

the skeptical about any given opportunity to backstab Catherine.

The Saint of Swords we've seen so far is extremist as all hell and has a particular avenue of cognition utterly firewalled, but she's not gullible, which is how I think most people have been treating her.

[Liliet](#)

^^^

She's simple enough that she *would* be gullible, had she not gotten burned on it enough she now just doesn't trust period. She had been gullible once and forged her life out of "never again". Cat isn't super special unlucky for getting the stonewall treatment – Neshamah's caliber of opponent is what it had been forged *for*.

[Mental Mouse](#)

? She didn't turn Decree down, that's her ultimate defensive fallback. She used it against a would-have-been-deadly Night attack.

[sengachi](#)

She turned the broader version of the ability down in exchange for a hyper-focused statement of 'self as a weapon', is what I was referring to.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The "broader version" would have been that much less powerful for being extended. More importantly, it would have become an external power that others could defend against. Compare Hanno's Recall and Ride powers to his "coin-flip": For the former two, he gets glowing equipment of Light that can be broken, and skills that can be defended against. But the coin-flip is internal, and when Black tried to mess with *that*, he got smacked down hard.

Likewise, an external Decree would have been a magical attack that could be countered, like Pilgrim's Shine. With an internal power, Saint gets to say "I'm alright Jack, screw you" (she likes that 😊) and dismiss any intrusion of her self, *including* other domains, Other powers can enclose her but she can cut her way out, while her own power is indivisible.

[Liliet](#)

Cutting her way out of situations is what she DOES. It's not 'convenient', it's the only realistic outcome.

I do agree with some of the other commenters' suspicions that she might have witnessed Catherine's conversation with Neshamah, or only select parts of it...

Dainpdf

Cool. Can't wait to see spellblade round two.

Also, dammit Cat, you're mortal again. Hands on the wheel! Don't let Saint get to you.

Kakavorin

My guess is that her attention was drawn away by the story so that Gray could make his entrance. Being guided by the story goes both ways.

Dainpdf

Sure, but stories don't puppet you completely. Not falling into the story when it's disadvantageous is a skill. Which Neshamah actually did just recently, by not testing Cat.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

I think this is less the story "guiding" her and more an example of the drawbacks of her chosen power setup. She can match a Name in power and weight, but she explicitly lacks a lock of the unconscious defenses they get for free. She gets tired, she chokes on dust, and her senses/reflexes are now much more actively controlled.

If she's not consciously using her skills and powers then she's just a very fit young woman with good instincts and a limp.

Basically it just means she always has to be paying attention and now she just got a pointed reminder of that.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

*lot, not lock.
Stupid phone.

edrey

well, what is the worst possible situation? my bet is that the spell-blade and skein share vision for the fight and the thief of stars will take the crowns and amadeus soul from the wizard

Andrew Mitchell

... And things have been going too well for Cat recently so she's due for a reversal.

Liliet

Skein was destroyed, DK did lose that asset.

sengachi

Permanently destroyed?

Liliet

I think so yeah.

konstantinvoncarstein

No, he was wounded but "survived".

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/08/13/chapter-43-masegos-plan/>

Liliet

Oh huh, you're right. I forgot!

caoimhinh

No, it wasn't.

The last we saw from the Skein was that it fell along with Cat and Masego into the black space between spaces that when the chamber where they fought Skein chattered. But Masego and Cat were capable of leaving it relatively easily. Dead King could easily have retrieved the Skein from there too.

Liliet

Yeah, I forgot 😬

Mental Mouse

Well, I don't think DK will strip Keter's defenses for this side battle. We might see some new Named, and perhaps that former King of Callow will show up again to mess with morale.

edrey

i wouldnt said he striped his defenses, he has about fifty or more revenants, and the number of devils and deads should be in the millions, so i wouldnt said he striped his defenses, no really

Fayhem

Yeah, this. And he definitely had more, he showed Cat *exactly* fifty when she was in Keter and since even with a vitrified Winter brain Cat's not dumb she specifically went "hmm what a neat tidy number, he's definitely keeping some more out of sight so that he can be impressive without showing off all his cards". IIRC it's been mentioned that the White Knight and company scotched a couple-few Revenants during their Heroic Defense of the lakeshore of Procer, but given that DK absolutely started with more than fifty he probably still has at least fifty to play with and maybe still more.

Also, I suspect he's put the Spellblade here specifically *because* Cat has fought it before. He wants to assess her new abilities/power level in combat and everyone knows that when you run an experiment you should control for extraneous variables as much as possible. He may also be planning instead to create a false parallel of "look it's another fight against definitely just the Spellblade by himself" and then try to sideswipe them with another Revenant or two, just to see if he can drop a couple of Cat's band as part of their Heroic Journey by forcing a Heroic Sacrifice story or something (more likely the "or something" there since heroic sacrifices have a real tendency to get conveniently negated and/or blow back on a villain). Maybe both, DK's a bastard like that.

werafdsaew

Skein can do all the bullshit he could because they were inside that palace. Outside of that and he's just a undead hungry rat monster that eats everything.

edrey

the only power limited to the palace was "spool" back time, he still can see the future

werafdsaew

He doesn't have future sight.

[*Fayhem*](#)

What? He's an oracle, that was the whole point of that tangle of plans they made in Keter. I don't know if he can do long-range forecasting like the Augur or not, but tactical-level assessments of near-future possibilities are 100% within his capabilities.

[*Fayhem*](#)

Ehh that's an exaggeration, even aside from the fact that "just" is no way to describe a Horned Lord. Skein could specifically only use the Spool aspect as an "undo" button the way he did because of pocket dimension bullshit, but outside the pocket dimension he's still a Named oracle *in addition* to being a Horned Lord. Somebody who has the absurd toughness/special abilities of a Horned Lord and can see or even just get glimpses of the possible attacks you'll make before you make them is a special kind of handful in a fight even without their OP undo button.

agumentic

I must say, Saint does a pretty sick Dante impression. Those moves were straight out of DMC.

superkeaton

Oh hey, Spellblade, come to be a good little gish and be a wretched pain in the ass?
Also, wow there are a lot of typos in this chapter. Like, a lot.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

My favorite part about this chapter is the implication that Tariq's Name recognizes Cat as occupying a heroic role in at least this narrow circumstance. He showed up to save her in the nick of time which is necessary for him to really pull out the stops but is also explicitly a mechanism to protect younger heroes in the early phases of their journey. Whatever Tariq's actual opinion of Cat (which we haven't gotten to see since she pulled off her scheme to form a five man band), metaphysically he's now interacting with her as an ally.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Since nobody else has picked up on that:

> "Good," Laurence de Montfort said, smiling a wolf's smile as she began advancing. "Then this ought to be decent practice for Dead King."

Saint thinks they're going to be fighting Dead King directly? Riight.

caoimhinh

She expects to fight him up North. Remember that she considers this 'the Crusade that will end it all'.

Pokekid01

Saint saying she didn't get an offer is 100% suspicious. It seems completely out of character for Saint to deal with the Enemy, but

to be fair we don't know all that much about her. There may well be something from her past that she wants enough to cooperate with DK.

Also, calling it here: Cat will die in this battle. And the Pilgrim will bring her back. This is her third time visiting Liesse and she died in both previous attempts (I consider her apotheosis into Sovereign of Moonless Nights a death. She lost her mortality and couldn't fairly be called mortal after). Things come in threes. That's the pattern.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Which would also use up Pilgrim's Forgive aspect for the day, before they get to Masego.

[Mental Mouse](#)

But she herself said that she'd died three times already.

Chapter 38: Pinnacle

"For the left hand is strife and the right hand is ruin, and only one may be clasped. The worthy take, the worthy rise; all else is dust."

– Extract from the Tenets of Night

The Saint of Swords wasted no time and no words: forward she went, an arrow shot. There was not a motion wasted to the way she moved, a sort of flowing gait that was neither run nor walk. The Spellblade simply walked barefoot through the ruins to meet her, utterly indifferent to the sight of one of the most dangerous heroes alive with her blood up.

"A known weakness?" the Grey Pilgrim conversationally asked.

His eyes had never left the Revenant, and neither had mine.

"Not ice, I'll tell you that much," I muttered. "Or stabbing. To this day I'm not even sure if I baited an aspect out of it or if it's just that ridiculously powerful."

"He, I suspect, not it," the Peregrine noted.

There'd been nothing particularly male about the dead elf to my eyes, either now or then, so he probably knew something I didn't.

"Suspect?" I repeated.

"There is an old story," the hero said, "about Death taking the Forever King's only son."

I'd never heard anything like that, and unlike Tariq I'd been born in a kingdom that bordered the Golden Bloom. On the other hand, he had decades of going around Calernia nudging villains to their deaths and unearthing secrets as well as the Choir of Mercy whispering in his ear. So, the Spellblade had been a prince once. Assuming elves saw kingship as we did, which was anybody's guess: what went on in the depths of that forest was a mystery to anyone but the elves.

"Doubt the dangling parts are going to affect this any," I shrugged. "But good to know."

"Knowledge is always of use," the Peregrine agreed. "No particular weakness, then. Unfortunate. That will prolong the matter some."

I almost told him he had a gift for understatement before I caught sight of the look on his face and realized he was deadly serious. That, to him, a millennia-old elven Revenant was simply a vexing delay on our way to the end of this journey. The serenity on his tanned, creased face was not forced or posturing or an attempt to reassure. It was simple certainty that he would be the victor, regardless of the odds. I was surprised, still, by how utterly infuriating I found the sight. Because if a hero that old, that seasoned, could feel that way? Then there was some truth to the attitude. And though that strength on my side tonight, there was still something at the heart of me revolted by the nature of it. *No wonder it's impossible to bargain with you, when you have a mandated from Above to always get your way.* I was, I supposed, my father's daughter in the regrettable ways as well as the rest. I took my hand off my staff and it stayed still and standing as I rolled my shoulders to limber them.

"Let's get this going, then," I said.

A moment later, two of Calernia's finest swordsmen had their first clash. If I'd not woven a sliver of Night into my eyes, I would have missed half of it. It was not that they moved that quickly, I thought, though while the Saint was drawing on her Name and the Spellblade made a mockery of mortal means simply by being who he was. I'd faced fae quicker than them, and likely some with more strength behind their swings as well. It was, for lack of a better term, the timing of their movements that was at their craft's pinnacle. The Saint feinted high and right, the Revenant stepped to the side and somehow that led him to be behind her and swinging at her neck: then, even as the Saint pivoted on herself and aimed a cutting blow at the side of his own neck, the both withdrew a step. I took me a heartbeat longer

than them to understand why. It would have been a double kill, I realized, if they'd both finished the arc of their swing. So instead they'd withdrawn, and gone for a second pass. I almost let out a whistle. I doubted I'd ever like Laurence de Montfort even if I didn't end up killing her but I could certainly admire her skill.

Black was the one of the few people I'd ever seen move like that – it was how he'd beat Captain when they sparred, even though she'd been massively stronger and quicker on the swing – though on occasion Archer got close to it as well. She still relied on an aspect to get there, though, her **Flow**. Ranger would be more than match for either of these, I thought, but though rather skilled with a blade I'd never been even remotely in their league. Impressive as the spectacle of the two of them trading not-blows like dancers was, I'd not come here to be a spectator. The tricky part would be, I knew, intervening without getting in the Saint's way.

"All is Night," I murmured in Crepuscular, wrist flicking outwards. "The left hand is strife and the right hand is ruin, only one can be clasped: I call on you, Komena, war-bringer and red of deed, breaker of spears and devourer of hope. In your name I curse my foe."

A brush like feathers of my cheek, the flap of wings, and distant cawing laughter. She approved, it seemed, as she was want to do when I spoke words from her Tenets. Night flowed through my veins, like a cool shadow cast on a spring morning, and I released the working on the two fighting in the distance. Tariq stiffened, for the barest moment, though the tension ebbed when he saw that the Saint had not been hurt by what I'd done. It was a subtle touch, at first. The shadows of the ruins where they were duelling lengthened a little, and the air began to swell unspeakably in that way it did before a storm. Neither of the combatants took notice, for after four bouts they'd now taken each other's measure and were now going for blood. I waited patiently, and only struck when I found my opportunity: the Revenant's bronze blade had been cut through by the Saint's longsword, and when it burst in a flash of flame that blinded Laurence she drew back. The elf's hand extended and the air began shuddering as rust-like flecks were attracted to its open palm and began to form a fresh blade.

"No," I replied.

And the flecks went grey, the shivering air went still and the Revenant's eyes snapped straight to me from across the field. *That's right, I thought. Look at me. I just swung decay and entropy at you look a bludgeon, look at how irritating I am.* The burst of flame hadn't even finished dying when tip of the Saint's blade went straight through, going half an inch into the

Spellblade's throat before he could react. Laurence's footing shifted, she began to pivot on herself, and even as the elf took a fluid step back she finished tearing her sword out through the right side of his throat. Too shallow to have caught the spine, I saw with disappointment. Eyes flashing with fury, the Revenant's left hand shot out and with an open palm he struck at the Saint's arm – there was a thundering sound of iron being bent and she flew back a dozen feet from the strength of it, the angle of her upper arm making it clear the bones must have been broken badly enough it tore up through skin and muscle. The Revenant's other arm rose horizontally and moonlight clustered around his fist.

"Still no," I replied.

The Night clustered around his fist smothered the gathering glow before it grew strong enough to contest that ending. Visibly irritated, the Revenant shook its fingers free of the power and took a step forward that brought it in front of the Saint – just as her arm snapped back in place, wisps of Light swirling around it as the Pilgrim's work bore fruit. The heroine was ready when the blow came, nudging aside the elf's forearm with the pommel of her sword and then angling her wrist. Her foot circled back, her body twisted, and the Saint of Swords swung her blade halfway through the neck she'd already cut before a familiar shiver of power began. I knew that feeling. Last time I'd felt it my entire face and the forward half of my body had ended up vaporized because I'd been too close, and whatever this was the Revenant had been able to use it again on the massive pile of blocks Hierophant had tried to bury it under. *Come on*, I thought, and gathered the Night to pit it against the shiver. There was maybe a tenth of a heartbeat where the forces were even, and then to my horror the Revenant's working plowed right through. All the Night I'd sunk into the area went into smoke, fully and instantly and harshly enough it felt like someone had ripped off a chunk of my skin.

"**Shine**," the Grey Pilgrim hoarsely said.

I forced Night into my eyes even though the sensation was unpleasant and it felt like they were boiling, as I was wary of being blinded even for a moment and the radiant shine of the star the Peregrine had just unleashed would have robbed me of sight without it. It almost did anyway, for even though Tariq had unleashed only the palest shadow of the morning star he'd hung in the sky in Creation even that shred was terrible to behold. A ghostlike shimmering globe had appeared between the Saint and the Spellblade, for an instant, and some sort of massive pressure had swatted the Revenant through the paved ground. I still caught a glimpse of the heroine's face and saw that all the way to the bridge of her nose the flesh of her face looked like a blanket of acid had been laid over it. It was the same with the entire flank of her body that'd been facing the Revenant most fully, though

strangely her clothes were untouched. In the moment where the Night had fought the shiver I'd learned one thing for certain, that it was in fact an aspect, and taste of the nature of that power. Looking at the Saint's tabard and tunic I frowned: they were, I thought, looking too pristine. And with the harsh taste of the power I'd fought still resounding, I suspected I'd put my finger on the face of that aspect: it related, one way or another, to 'purification'.

Gods, elves were such assholes. It looked like Ranger had come by it honestly.

Body unmarred by any of the wounds that'd been inflicted on it, the Spellblade leapt out of the wreckage it'd been smacked into, a half-formed blade of light green scales in hand. My working had been scattered, so there'd be no shutting that shutting the door on that quick enough. Time to go on the offensive, then, I grimly thought. A panting Tariq strung healing Light around the Saint once more, and as he did I snatched up my staff. Or would have, were it still there. For a surreal moment I looked to see if I'd simply missed it while reaching but no, the alarm welling up in my stomach was quite warranted and it was nowhere to be seen. *Shit*. With the amount of power I'd sunk into that, over the months, this was not the kind of artefact I would want in anybody else's hands even if it wasn't also my contingency for the Saint. I tapped a foot on the ground, sending out a pulse of Night. If it was close I should get something out of that.

"Pilgrim, there's another-"

I had gotten something out of the Night pulse, though by the time I did it was pointless because my eyes had done the work already. I'd glanced at Tariq, when beginning to speak, and so caught sight of the Revenant standing behind him. It was hard to even tell she was dead, truth be told, for her tanned leathery skin and the single blond tress going down her back were strikingly lifelike. This one too was an old friend: the Thief of Stars looked no worse for the few hours she'd spent as one of my own Thief's possessions. Though, if the harsh look she flicked at me was any indication, she hadn't forgotten that bad turn either. More interesting was the way she was holding my staff, pointing it directly at the Grey Pilgrim's back. Strange, since in her hands it might as well be a walking stick: she wouldn't be able to do anything with it. Well, unless she had – and there it was, the shiver of an aspect being used. Something to facilitate using what she'd stolen maybe? It didn't matter. I raised my hand as the Thief of Star roused the Night in my staff-that-was-not-a-staff, baring my teeth savagely.

"Mistake," I said in Crepuscular, and snapped my fingers.

Night lashed out viciously and the sound of talons rending flesh rang across the plaza. The Thief of Stars' upper half splattered

the ground, entrails trailing like grim garlands, but there was no hiding that a gaping chest wound had split her in two. As if some great bird's talons had snapped out of the sea of Night awaiting within the staff, where they had been waiting. They must have thought I was a fucking idiot, making something that dangerous without putting in contingencies – like the attention of the angrier half of the goddesses that artefact was linked to. She might have managed to flee with it, though certainly not remain hidden. Using it, though? That was opening a door for Komena to express her displeasure. It'd had absolutely nothing to do with my fingers being snapped, but given such a beautiful opportunity to pretend otherwise why would I *not*? Posturing aside, I sent out a simmering coil of Night to catch the staff before it fell and dragged it back to me. I'd just slapped into my palm when I slammed onto the ground, biting down on a scream as my bad leg gave and rolling fruitlessly to the side. A vivid green sword seemingly made of scales was swung down at my head, though with a grunt the Saint carved through the damned thing. Foul-smelling droplets flew everywhere and I wove a spinning top of Night above me that proved to be the right reflex: wherever the liquid fell, it smoked and ate at whatever it'd touched.

"Move, Foundling," the Saint of Swords snarled, slapping aside a blow with the side of her sword.

I almost did, but then I paused. This slugging match with an effectively indestructible and inexhaustible demigod wasn't going anywhere, and it was a losing fight for us. Sure we were pulling slightly ahead right now but both the heroes would tire eventually and the Peregrine had already dropped an aspect once. Engaging the Revenant like we were storming a bloody wall was just going to get us killed. What did I know about my allies? Tariq I had a read on, could play off of, but the Saint... **Sever**, I realized. She had that brutal little aspect still. If she was given an opening, she could use I to remove the source of our troubles. I just needed to... Halfway into rising to my feet, I theatrically groaned and flopped back to the ground. The Spellblade saw that as the opening it was and struck again, so it'd just made a tactical mistake. I was prone and crippled, the Saint was having an increasingly harder time fending off its blows and I pointedly did not get up. I stayed there on the ground, hilariously unarmored and basically just asking to get killed. The Saint, though it must be said she did so with considerable ill-grace, heroically defended her fallen ally in a doomed venture. I suspected she was going to cut her losses soon, but that was fine. I'd gotten what we needed.

"What are you-" Laurence started, but she was interrupted by the Grey Pilgrim nailing our opponent.

It was easy to forget that, for all his power, Tariq was not meant to be the tip of the spear in a band or even the healer. He

was, by Role, a helping hand. He was at his strongest and ablest when serving as that hand, as demonstrated by the fact he'd been able to once more use an aspect that he should have thoroughly exhausted earlier to save the Saint's life earlier. Now, the radiant beams of Light bit into the side of the Revenant harshly and as the better part of his left shoulder and kneecap were incinerated, it called on its favourite trick. The air shivered as it drew on its aspect, and the Saint of Swords' own blade fell on the floor with a clang. Breathing out sharply, the old woman swung nothing at all and the Spellblade *screamed*. That aspect had cut Winter, elf or not he wasn't getting through that with a shrug. And, while we were at it, I killed the pain in my bad leg with a sliver of Night and pushed myself up with my staff. The Revenant was staggering back in apparent pain – and disbelief at the fact that it could *feel* pain, I suspected – while the Saint looked like she was about to keel over. She'd be out of it for at least a bit, so best to tip the scales a little further. The Spellblade's eyes fell on me just as I leaned forward and rammed my hand through his chest.

"What," he croaked. "What are you-"

"Restocking," I replied with a feral grin.

I'd had a knack for taking from my foes even *before* I'd become the herald of goddesses who'd made theft of might the central tenet of their culture. Now? I'd had tutors in the art, patrons who'd touched the godhead and a Wastelander of the old blood. My fingers, coated in Night, dug through its soul and skimmed over the raw ruin the Saint had made of the first bundle. Another two were there for the taking, one still faintly vital and the other necrotized for centuries if not millennia. I could only get a vague idea of what it was I was taking until I'd taken it, but there was no room for hesitation. The aspect still in use felt like some sort of wheel, or maybe a kaleidoscope. The dead one felt like... nothing. Absence, maybe. Denial or gamble? *Double down*, I decided. A little too late to start playing it safe. Letting out a hissing breath, I withdrew my fingers from the Spellblade's chest and found they were holding a slim branding iron. **Ban**, I knew sure as my own breath, and cackled. I called on the Night, and began pushing it into the iron.

"Hold him," I yelled.

The Pilgrim wove shackles of Light around the Revenant's limbs but we were the winning side, now – it tore through them effortlessly. But where Role and story failed, Laurence de Montfort instead scathingly said something in Tolesian and carved straight through the elf's right knee with the longsword he'd already picked up. But already it'd formed a blade out of some eerie pulsing red haze, and instead of attacking one of us he stabbed himself – only the blade broke, and fresh flesh began to

sprout where the Saint had cut him before the severed limb even began to fall. But I'd been sinking Night into the brand this whole time, and though the symbol it depicted hurt my eyes to try to discern I could still see smoke was wafting from it. It should suffice. Even as the Revenant dipped forward from the sudden loss of limb, I shoved the branding iron against its chest. The moment it touched the satin shirt it went straight through, and though I saw the Revenant's skin blacken around where the brand touched the flesh it did not react. It would not feel pain from this, I thought. Or, indeed, anything else. The red pulse shattered, the flesh ceased growing and the elf flinched back once more. I supposed it was rather in shock at the way I'd used his dead aspect to kill the other one. I stepped back and smiled.

"All yours," I told the Saint.

She was a fearsome one, but he was still an elf and an old one.

It took her seven blows, before his head rolled on the ground and the Dead King lost his second Revenant of the night.

Andrew Mitchell

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

It's your civic duty!

<https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>

And come discord with us!

ruduen

Just imagine how much worse the Pilgrim would be if he always had an ally who knew when to be 'vulnerable'.

It really goes to show how much damage this band is capable of, especially since they only have three of the five around right now.

[Liliet](#)

That's what child sidekicks are for.

...that said, that's the kind of distinctly unethical avoiding which makes heroes what they are...

That said: vote for ethics on topwebfiction!

topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil

Debate ethics on discord!

<https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>

Gunslinger

I suspect that's something one cannot overuse. Rely on it too long for the Pilgrim to fail once and you're dead

[onedollargum](#)

I imagine it only works if the Pilgrim actually believes she's in trouble.

[origamiflame](#)

So then maybe something like "person you'd give your life to protect" and then have them join your band?

Kakavorin

It helps that she actually was in trouble, even if it was trouble of her own making. Spellblade would have gotten her if he hadn't intervened.

[Liliet](#)

I imagine it only works if she honestly *is*. Catherine genuinely was risking her life by not moving out of the way there.

[Javvies](#)

Elves are fucking hax.

Well done, Cat.

Manipulate the story into unleashing Pilgrim on the Spellblade. And, yeah, Laurence definitely would have left you to die.

Stealing power from your foes is an interesting and useful trick, Cat ... but can't be relied on too much, since you know that stolen power is ultimately unreliable in the end.

[Liliet](#)

It can't be relied on strategically, but it's fair game tactically in the very encounter where it was taken.

It's using it more than once that's hubris which gets punished.

Qwormuli

Also, using it isn't often the bad part. Now __relying__ on it on the other hand, that's what gets you killed.

Qwormuli

Oh, yeah, no formatting or editing found here. Thanks, wordpress.

[Liliet](#)

Formating works thru HTML tags.

No editing though -_-

therealgridlock

What're you talking about? There's always been editing, there's a button right there!

Edit: No there isn't, i was wrong.

[Mental Mouse](#)

OK, one more comment: I differ on the "only once" constraint. I'm betting she gets to use it at least one more time against a different opponent; the third use may be weaker and will probably consume it entirely. Yes, I think it's basically the same power as **Take**.

[Liliet](#)

Hm, that also makes sense.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Another thought in this vein: If she gets even *one* more use out of it, well that's an very powerful one-shot weapon. Every DM knows that if you ever give a player even one "arrow of slay anything", they *will* use it against the boss you spent a week designing.

Suppose she uses it to Ban the Dead King from Masego?

Andrew Mitchell

Oh, that would be sweet.

NerfContessa

Indeed. But unlikely.

Second great chapter in a row. Excellent tactics from cat, abusing stories seems like fun 😊

SilentWatcher

Finally a possible path of growth for Cat. Stealing power of her foes. If stolen power is unreliable is not Night always unreliable? Can Cat also harvest Night? Would be nice to get the experiences of an Elf.

Andrew Mitchell

> If stolen power is unreliable is not Night always unreliable?

Cat's Night is freely given to her by Sve Noc.

werafdsaew

The Night IS unreliable, since it doesn't work well when the sun is out, and the priests have counters. For example the Mighty had to flee once the Pilgrim used Shine. The point is if you rely on the Night, and there's no backup plan, then you're screwed once it gets countered inevitably.

Insanenoodlyguy

if her power was to steal it long term, it'd not work well. You'll note Rise got less and less effective. But now she's learned to mold them into strong one time uses. The former-name inspired power to take is her own, so it's fine to use it. In fact, as Lilliet points out, using it in the very encounter it was given is the safest way to use this sort of power.

Done this way, it's not a weapon that fails when yo need it most, it's a versatile trick that can be used creatively enough to keep from getting too repetitive.

[vamair](#)

It's also a way for the mighty to fall, hoisted by their own petard, as the punishment for their arrogance. Which is a very story-like way to go.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm! A story judo flip.

Stormblessed

Well that certainly went better the second time. Cat with her power up. The saint is absurd and having Heros and Providence on your side will do that for you hun?

Either way, I wonder if the Dead King is going to be pleased or miffed about this. I expect pleased for he wouldn't put those peace's there if he wasn't afraid to lose them.

Basically I think he is trying to goad Cat into putting the Heros in a position not to dissimilar to her situation with Night. Basically she binds her purpose to them and can then use their powers for her own ends.

[thearpox23](#)

The Dead King is successively getting rid of the Revenants Cat met when she visited Keter. For every story he's involved in, he's got a certain allowance of Revenants he needs and is limited to to use effectively. And he also needs to selectively use up those Revenants over the course of the story, as any that survive into the next cycle would become a narrative liability.

I suspect that he wouldn't have minded the Thief of Stars surviving this engagement to be thrown away in another gambit, but the Spellblade absolutely needed to die here, of that I am certain. His survival here would have locked him into the role of a Dragon, and that isn't a path favorable for the Dead King, especially not with such a comparatively weak Dragon.

Oshi

Agreed. The Dead King is systemically destroying the usual advantages by removing any use prior knowledge would give them on a side gambit.

[Miles](#)

Does he have to do this every time Ranger visits? No wonder he's always cranky with her.

RoflCat

He probably doesn't have to, but Ranger isn't the type to let her prey go easily so eh.

[thearpox23](#)

Short answer; No.

He has to do that every story cycle, such as a crusade or an invasion. Interludes, like a small-time massacre of a party of green heroes, or Ranger's visits are not subject to such laws.

What happens with her visits is more of him giving her a sacrificial offering than anything else.

[Barthumphries](#)

A what now?

P

To quote tvtropes

"A person or monster The Hero has to get past to get at the Big Bad. Much of the time, but not necessarily, the Big Bad's top enforcer. He, she or it embodies a narrative trope: the penultimate challenge that the hero must face before confronting the Big Bad. This challenge will test their worthiness in some fundamental way.

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TheDragon>

[Liliet](#)

This... makes a lot of sense.

Aston W

Yay. Fight scene. Cat the Hero.

[Liliet](#)

Guile Hero, as she ever was ♥

danh3107

Sometimes you just have to say, wow that was fucking sweet.

Aston W

Not gonna vote. Yet...

Annoying to keep being told.

Here to read story comments.

[Barthumphries](#)

Pretty certain someone will remind you to vote before you can comment, every time. But if that bugs you too much, don't vote.
Shrug

Aston

I commented before the vote spam.

Story comments are cool.

[Barthumphries](#)

Then how did the vote post get above you in the comments?
This isn't Reddit where upvoted posts float up.

The vote post was posted first.

Andrew Mitchell

That's right. However my vote comment was held for moderation so Aston probably didn't see it before he/she/they made their comment. I assume my comment was flagged by the WordPress spam filter because it included two links.

[*Liliet*](#)

It's just a PSA, nobody's staring into your soul and demanding it. A reminder and a convenience for those of us who'd forget otherwise but are glad to click the link as it is.

Aston

It's a Practical Evil.

Morgenstern

This. ♥

I, for one, am very grateful for the link being provided without me having to search for it.

Andrew Mitchell

Nice to see another fight scene with the action kicked up a notch. Clever work from Cat there:

- putting contingencies on the staffswordprayer
- feigning injury to give her an opportunity, and to boost Tariq
- using her powers of theft to get Lawerence the opening she needed

I wonder if Cat gets to keep **Ban**.

JJR

Probably not. The artifacts she made from aspects before with Winter were one use only. This was made with Night, but the idea of making them one shot so as to not become reliant on them still holds.

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

What such tools did she actually make? I only remember the whistle to call Larat.

[*Liliet*](#)

Yeah, it's probably one use... and it's most definitely narratively better for them to be one use, because otherwise they're an immediate narrative liability.

Also, that was some sweet fucking providence with her leg buckling just in time to save her life.

Kissaten

Drow get to keep stuff they manage to steal. It's not Cat's style, though

SilentWatcher

Cat used Willies stolen Aspect a long time, her stolen Mantle of Winter was kept for a while and her resurrection from the Choir of Contrition was kept permanently. If she's not keeping the stolen Aspect how about harvesting the Night of the Elf? Would be Idiocy of High Priestess of Night not to use the greatest Advantage Night has to offer.

[Fayhem](#)

The resurrection was a one-time effect, it's not a continuously ongoing effect keeping her alive. She was dead, the resurrection made her alive again, and that was it.

Also, to all the people urging Cat to harvest the Spellblade: literally he belonged body and soul to the Dead King. You **do not** willingly take the essence of that creature into yourself when the entity he belonged to is the one who coined the phrase "the essence of sorcery is usurpation" (IIRC, it was either him or one of the extra-magicky Dread Emperors but since IIRC DK literally invented the school of magic that Praes uses it's still relevant).

In Bk. IV Ch. 43 (<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/08/13/chapter-43-masegos-plan/>) when Cat is fighting Skein she comments "the Revenant was not of my own raising, but there was an... affinity there, now that I knew to look for it. Not a door into usurpation – in those eldritch struggles knowledge was always paramount, and compared to the likes of the Dead King I was a babe in the woods". Taking an aspect from a Revenant is one thing bc at least there's a degree of separation there in that the Revenant was the DK's creature but the aspect was the Revenant's power and not the DK's **directly** at least; usurpation of a Revenant any more directly than that is playing with soul-eating mind-controlling fire. I would still urge Cat to at least be cautious about even keeping an aspect from one of them long-term as well (well you know, if I was capable of speaking to fictional people I would urge her but you know what I mean).

Yavandir

Lolz you still don't realize that you are in coma and everyone you interact with is a fictional person

[Mental Mouse](#)

Adding to other comments, the Mantle of Woe was by no means stolen, that was *earned*. Based on a cloak given her by her patron Amadeus, and augmented with trophies of her early kills. The question is whether she'll take a stripe for Spellblade, since he was a group kill. Admittedly, she is the leader of the group, but it might not be politic to be too blatant about that.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also note that nobody really got worfed – in fact, Pilgrim called the fight up front. If Saint had been alone, she would have been toast – but she wasn't alone, she not only had her usual healer backing her, but also Cat throwing debuffs and spoiling his spells. And then all three of them used their signature “ultimate powers” near-simultaneously to break him. (The Thief of Stars had basically walked into the wrong fight, RIP at last. 😊)

That said, remember that Spellblade was just a miniboss here, and DK got exactly what *he* wanted out of this fight: A good look at all three of them in action, using both their “ordinary” abilities and their respective haymakers. The question is where Kairos and RS are, and whether they got their own independent fight. If so, we can guess it was against something particularly magic-resistant with strong physical attacks, likely set to capture, separate, and/or disable them (perhaps with help from Kairos' CBD).

Ein

Wait... Did she just drop the “Ban”hammer on the spellblade?

Andrew Mitchell

Well spotted! 😊

liate7

Typo:

s/want/wont/
 (“Wont” is certainly a good word.)

The chapter is very good, as always. Nice to see what new tricks Cat now has other than better skill in storycraft.

Andrew Mitchell

That's grammatically correct but extremely uncommon in modern English. It was a much more popular phrase in England in the 1800s.

Andrew Mitchell

It could be re-written as "She approved, as she usually did, when I spoke words from her Tenets."

[Liliet](#)

That's stylistically different. Erratic knows what he's doing in Cat's relationship with her goddesses. None of the tone shifts are accidental ♥

Andrew Mitchell

Agreed.

Fyi I wasn't suggesting EE do a re-write. I'd never suggest anything of the sort... I was trying to communicate to Iilate7 what the sentence meant.

Admittedly, that was when I was under the mistaken impression that they did not understand the sentence as written. But still, my intent was sound. 😊

Iilate7

Yes, it is grammatically correct. As the [wont](#), not as [want](#). They're often pronounced the same, but I *checked* before putting it as a typo. (I even said it was a good word, because I know that word, and use it sometimes.)

Andrew Mitchell

Ah yes, of course you're right. My fault for misunderstanding.

[Miles](#)

It's common enough in literature. One of those phrases that sticks around in modern times because it's in all the classics

[Euodiachloris](#)

Modern British English still trots it out on a regular basis, as we are wont to do with anachronisms. Usually when one wishes to sound either pompous or to underscore an observed trait.

Also, it's "wont", not "want" – strong verb, convoluted conventions surrounding verb-nouning, yada-yada...

JJR

Losing two of his revenants like this is gonna seriously inconvenience the Dead King. Hell the elf that was the Forever King's only son was basically a holographic first edition revenant. Even after he get himself another elf, it just won't be the same.

That being said, the aspect was ban, but the artifact wasn't a tiny hammer? How could you erraticerrata?

Andrew Mitchell

The elf was certainly a one-of-a-kind asset and they both were important assets for the Dead King, but I suspect he's got hundreds of revenants, maybe more. An inconvenience for sure, but probably not too serious IMO.

A branding iron and not a hammer... Yes, *such* a wasted opportunity.

[Mental Mouse](#)

See thearpox23's comment above for a reasonable counterargument: Basically, the revenants Cat has faced before are "used goods", he's using them up as a probe before he pulls out a fresh batch. Skein might still show up, if it wasn't actually destroyed (I'm not completely convinced), which would match the number of fighters here.

In any case, DK has a *lot* more Revenants on call. Once the band has come together, I'm guessing there will be five new opponents for them: some combination of Revenants, demons/devils, and perhaps possessed!Masego himself (or Masego might be matched against the band's Sixth Ranger, if they have one by then).

I find it interesting to see how drastically Cat's powers have changed, and her methods with them. No more brawling, and she's gotten much better at "playing with others", not to mention defending herself properly instead of regen-tanking through everything.

In fact... her magical techniques have advanced much the same way as her military methods: She's gone from agile bruiser to Meta Master, manipulating the fight itself – including her opponent's powers. And while she's no longer jumping around platforms and generating swords, she has regained the ability formerly known as **Take**... because that was and is a meta-power, and so doesn't really depend on its substrate.

More musing: Her necromancy as Squire I was already anomalous, which was explained when she *retroactively* claimed a Winter sigil. I'm wondering how much of her *current* power is based on her continuing destiny. Below may not grant power directly, but that doesn't mean it doesn't scheme and meddle. Heck, the whole Everdark might have been waiting until she came along to wield it! ("Simmer a few thousand years, then add Winter to clarify. Decant onto surface...". 😊)

Liliet

Her necromancy as a Squire was not anomalous, it's a Black Knight power that she got as a declared successor to one. Her Role was tied to Black's from the start.

Mental Mouse

Yes, but her constructs were more "lively" than his from the beginning. We found out why when she got Winter and started using that directly.

Liliet

How so? She puppeteered them in the same way. The "liveliness" was ONLY in Winter constructs.

Liliet

The only unique thing was self-necromancy, and that was just along the lines of "why would you do that"

IDKWhoitis

That mental image of Cat tearing out an aspect and effectively cripple a Named is going to scar Tariq.

Cat has always had a tendency to mutilate her own soul, but now she is able to turn that sadism onto others...

Also, let's just acknowledge the fact that Cat is able to keep up with two old Heroic Named, just by moving the story around and manipulating fate into doing the leverage for her.

Oshi

She is the living hand of Two Goddesses. It was always going to be like this.

Rook

It probably feels worse for the Pilgrim than any of the other Heroes. By virtue of limited Ophanim omniscience, he knows beyond a shred of doubt that Catherine was born under such a strong Heroic star that she still had Heroic intentions even as

one of the most notorious Villains of her generation. He also knows that the reason she's a Villain now is because he, and the rest of the big-league Heroes of the west, essentially abandoned Callow in their time of need until it was far too late.

Every time she pulls a horrifyingly competent new trick out of her hat, it's a fresh reminder for him that she could've been the greatest Hero of her generation instead, if he hadn't let an entire Good nation down so badly.

Xinci

Interesting, I do wonder now at the connection of the wheel to the Elves ability to negate rules. The pattern of Creation is noted as a wheel, perhaps similar to winter the Elves essence is always connected? The perspective on the wheel shifts but it remains connected regardless. SpellBlade actually seemed more versatile in the number of blades it could wield here, presumably as it has access to more assets in Creation proper. I am quite glad that Cat has taken to taking once again. The old pattern of taking what she can mould and breaking what she cannot still holds true.

"Wheel" was one of the other two Aspects she didn't take, probably what allowed him to choose the element for the next sword.

Cap'n Smurfy

Huh. So the Spellblade's swords were aspect driven. Bit disappointed to be honest, I'd thought it was more sorcery in nature. I'd always thought of Masego's feelings toward someone using potent magic to make what are essentially fancy sharp sticks, absolutely hilarious

Also arguably Calernia's best swordswomen with a buffing and a debuffing master? Yeah elf boy didn't stand a chance.

Oshi

You mean Calernia's best swordswoman with two fo the best cheaters on the continent. Yah no way anyone was gonna win.

[Liliet](#)

Buffing and debuffing are best cheater powers.

Aotrs Commander

They calls it CoDzilla for a reason...

...

Catzilla...?

[Liliet](#)

Yes.

TFW your bard takes the power of being genresavvy so far they get codzilla out of it XD

[TeK](#)

A little dissapointed that we got epigraph basically repeated later in the chapter.

Elfs really are Nazi's. A **Cleanse** that kills humans? You just know someone is onto some racialcleamsing. And they are also Good, for some godforsaken reason. Does that mean being prejudiced fuck is the same as doing Above's will in Guideverse? That explains too much.

Also I suspect there's ought to be bad Nazi, like Soninke for example. They also would like to cleanse the world from those pesky humans.

Oshi

Elves as a race are good. The Elves from the bloom are a tiny subset of the main race banished for being asshole racists.

[TeK](#)

>elves as a race are good

That, somehow, does not sound good. Are they good in the sence that they have inherent goodness in them, or in that their actions are the definition of good is? In other words, are they good, because they do good, or because what they do IS good? The first almost requires that there will be races that are inherently evil in a sence that they can't help but do evil. The second is simple double standarts that are a sample of human behaviour.

Andrew Mitchell

> And they are also Good, for some godforsaken reason. Does that mean being prejudiced fuck is the same as doing Above's will in Guideverse? That explains too much.

LMAO.... But still, it's a very good question and I hope we get some more insight into why the elves are classed as Good.

Sanctus-obscurum

Good is following the commandments of Above. Good is acting in accord with the will of the choirs. Evil is acting against Above. The only democracy on Calernia is Evil because it is a state where the will of humans is used to lead entirely rather than the will of a human who is devoted to, or following, Above. Below wants to see what mortals will do with power and no guidance, Above grants power to better follow their commands.

Fayhem

> The only democracy on Calernia is Evil because it is a state where the will of humans is used to lead entirely

I actually had a different take on that, which I can't remember if I already posted somewhere. In brief, basically my take on why the only democracy on Calernia is Evil/crazy Bellerophon is because Below are sneaky fucks and they deliberately created an example of democracy that embodies all the worst possible traits of it in order to discredit it as a mode of government. I mean, we've seen more than ample evidence of how hard Princes/High Lords/nobles in general fuck shit up for their own people right? Think about it, when Cat was contemplating the government of Callow back in chapter whatever it was (sorry, I don't have the patience to try to find it right now), she explicitly went "sure I dislike nobles and inherited power in general, but no way do I want Callow to be like Bellerophon so democracy's not an option". You really think that dynamic is an accident? That dynamic is the **point** of Bellerophon, beyond just it being "a maddened altar of a city" in itself.

Novice

The Elves of the Golden Bloom were exiled from the greater elven empire for being huge assholes IIRC. But the fact that they still were on the Good side is something really uncomfortable tbh.

SITB

They probably still worship Above and disdain Below.

Possibly a remnant of the culture they left.

(And to preempt the discourse, Above is pretty hands off with their interventions, which is why both the Grand Alliance and Callow's armies have priests in them)

Liliet

This.

Elves are mortals and Gods Above are very generous with giving mortals opportunity to fuck up.

The elven story said this guy was a hero, so powers he got.

Mental Mouse

One of Simon R. Green's characters was described as something like "...a deeply disturbing agent of Good. And no, Good didn't get any say in that."

Rey d`Tutto

Eddie, Punk God of the Straight Razor?

Mental Mouse

Yup. One of my favorite characters in the series.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I've never heard of him (nor the author) before now, but with a name like that he's already my favorite.

Javvies

Razor Eddie is a recurring character in SRG's Nightside/John Taylor series. Shows up a couple times in the Secret Histories series, too.

Razor Eddie would probably like Cat, though.

Mental Mouse

Potted summary: Simon R. Green has at least three mostly-separate (and lengthy) series under his "Secret Histories" umbrella. (A couple of characters have visited between series.) The two series I've read fall under "campy horror"; I assume the third is similar.

I've read and liked the entire "Nightside" series (where this guy comes from), which wrapped up in satisfying fashion, and 8 or so books of the "Eddie Drood" series, but the latter eventually (6-8 books in) went downhill IMHO, and I got bored; I never got around to picking up the "Ghost Hunters" series. There's also a standalone novel in a distant corner of his 'verse, "Shadows Fall".

The Nightside is a secret city beneath London, where all the monsters and gods go to let their hair/spines/ichor down, anything can be bought and sold (especially your soul), and it's always 3-o'clock in the morning.

The Punk God of the Straight Razor is a supporting character; the protagonist is John Taylor, a private eye with a background even he doesn't understand (until late in the series). When John Taylor walks the streets, some folks make the sign of the cross, while others make the sign of the extremely cross....

imagesbe

And Cat shows just what she's capable of now that she's reclassified into Cleric. Pretty awesome. I suspect she would also be capable of causing a fair amount of devastation, but this wasn't the opponent for that kind of blow.

[Liliet](#)

And once again Cat proves that she's actually a bard who took levels in cleric to augment her favored strategy. Let's be real, buffs/debuffs are totally a bard thing.

As is, of course, her other major contribution to the battle ♥
♥ ♥

grzecho2222

Nah, she's more of Tarnum, changing classes every part, being killed and coming back

[Liliet](#)

except for the bard levels that she just keeps gaining :3

[Mental Mouse](#)

Excuse me, but have we even seen her pick up an instrument? Or sing for that matter? Admittedly, music doesn't seem to be a big thing in the Guide (battle-songs excepted); I would venture to guess it's not a big thing for the author..

Andrew Mitchell

Yes. To me, Bard = Music & Story Telling. Cat's got the second but not the first. But, as you suggest, the guideverse could well have a different definition.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Maybe. Bard doesn't play *well*, but she always has the instrument, so it's apparently an attribute of *her* name.

But many other characters have fearsome story-fu without music, so in this world, I don't think story-fu is particularly a "bardic" attribute.

Andrew Mitchell

Good point.

[Liliet](#)

I'm talking about a more meta 'dnd archetypes' approach, in which music is actually incidental to everything else that makes a bard.

Substract music, and you get what Catherine is.

[Mental Mouse](#)

A more jaundiced view of the FRP "bard archetype" showed up the other day:
<https://www.somethingpositive.net/sp05092019.shtml>

(Something Positive in general is... a twisted sort of heartwarming.)

[Liliet](#)

heheh ♥

[Liliet](#)

As if music&singing are the only possible bard specialities?

Cat specializes in Perfomance(Storytelling) 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Mmm, I think that's a reach. She doesn't perform, she *enacts*.

[Liliet](#)

I think saying that bard as a dnd archetype is defined by perfomance is missing the point

like you're not wrong but is that the most interesting way to view it?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, if you start taking about "bard, but with no music", you're not only abusing the archetype (*), you're getting an unnecessary terminology collision, especially since this world already has a Wandering Bard.

(*) The use of music (or at least poetry, in some cultures) is certainly more central to bard-ness than the magical strategies that one FRPG assigned to them. E.g., long before the newer editions started layering magic onto

Bard characters, it was already a cliché that “piss off a bard, and embarrassing songs about you start showing up in taverns”. That one goes back to the Society for Creative Anachronism, which AIUI has occasionally done it for real.

[Liliet](#)

I mean yah obviously bard irl means the music person, but the bard archetype in TTRPG is the topic of discussion here.

And ‘unnecessary collision with Wandering Bard’ define ‘unnecessary’ 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, the Guide isn’t TTRPG, this is actual fantasy literature. The relevant “archetype” isn’t gaming rulesets, it’s the real-world archetype stretching back to mythology (which gaming drew on for its own purposes).

[Liliet](#)

If you think Guide isn’t heavily TTRPG-based...

[Liliet](#)

...to be clear, all the times I say “Catherine is a bard” are my answer to the question which has been repeatedly discussed “what DnD class is Catherine”. I’m not saying she is somehow parallel to actual historical bards (who probably also didn’t go down into dungeons to hunt dragons)

[Mental Mouse](#)

Okay, fair enough... but imho Cat is sending up the D&D-style classes, as much as the alignment system. The right player can bust a scenario with any class!

[Liliet](#)

I mean yeah but that doesn’t make it any less fun to go “what class is she most similar to” / “if this was a DnD campaign what class would she most likely be playing” :3

The Gentlemen

Ah, the glory of counterspell.

Wait... fancy clothing with symbolism and trinkets from her enemies, priestess of the goddess of deceit and night, and placing a firm emphasis on outsmarting and stealing her opponent's wins...

She's taken a level in bard.

[Liliet](#)

Most of her levels are in bard, really ♥ ♥ ♥

Counterspell is the fucking best annoying bard thing to do (and I don't care if any particular game system allows it, it's the spirit of the thing)

Aotrs Commander

As the poor DM that at one point had to suffer through a party of eight with a cleric, a druid and TWO bards (and some NPCs – all of whom relied on multiple attack stuff (rapid-fire, TWF) because the module was being silly), I can safely say, no, **that** honour has to go to “work with the other bard, so that everyone gets bonus to attack and damage AND +3D6 fire damage.”

'S me own fault, I 'spose, I shouldn't have insisted that one of the bards had Dragonfire Inspiration so that they didn't step on each other's toes...

[Liliet](#)

BLESS.

Also, that sounds like what's going to happen when Cat gets Amadeus back 😊

Xinci

I do also realize that Komena is the aspect of Strife while Andraste is the aspect of Ruin. Quite fitting given their characteristics, Komena being the more...spritely of the two while her sister focuses more on the magical aspects. Though it may be been referring to Below or Above for a bit but given the context of Cat speaking the exert its probably about them as a pair instead.

[Liliet](#)

Andronike, not Andraste. That's from Elder Scrolls, right?

But yeah, I agree. Strife and ruin, Komena and Andronike taking on these aspects/domains (in the dnd deity sense) respectively.

Nairne .01

Andronike not Andraste.

The latter is from Dragon Age....

[Liliet](#)

Annnnd I confused Elder Scrolls with Dragon Age. Nice.

Tom

For comparison, the previous encounter with the Spellblade:

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/08/08/chapter-41-akuas-plan/>

Things went a bit smoother this time 😊

Relyt

1. Because Providence is literally Godly cheating.
2. Goes to show that the deadliest part of Cat was never her ability to drop lakes and summon ice – it was leveraging small details into clever plans and story-fu.

[Miles](#)



sign if her final form?

I'm starting to think she's going to be double named. One from above for intent, another from below for confirmation.

Thief and Thief of the stars are both up for grabs now.

konstantinvoncarstein

How did Neshamah managed to kill him in the first place? This thing could have win against the 2 most powerful heroes of the continent! Maybe burying him under thousands of deads? It seems too simple, and he was probably not the only elf send by the Forever King.

[Liliet](#)

Probably tricked him somehow. He didn't have Laurence's immunity to the Enemy's guile ♥

KageLupus

I feel like Elves have the same kind of problem that the Fae do, where they are much more tightly coupled with the current story they are in. Cat has gotten slightly better at acting in a way that triggers a narrative benefit (compared to blatantly tricking a Fae into monologuing at her before

running away) but I doubt playing helpless would have worked against a human opponent.

If the Elves are more susceptible to narrative shenanigans than Neshamah would not have had all that much trouble getting the Spellblade killed and raised. The man has actual millennia of experience weaving stories like that. Experience helps with the setup, having all of the time in the world helps with the preparation, and vast hordes of undead monstrosities help with the execution.

Caerulea

Also, he turned an entire kingdom into undead and created a permanent portal to hell. And his power has only increased. I think he has the raw power to kill an elf, even a named one. (Granted, he probably also rigged the battle with story.)

[Liliet](#)

Catherine did not play helpless, she actually deliberately put herself in danger, which is normally a bad gambit but no when it gives your ally a huge power-up.

It wasn't Spellblade that the story part worked on there 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

> I doubt playing helpless would have worked against a human opponent.

The thing is, if the opponent had hung back and tried to ignore her, she could have woven some new viciousness out of Night.

[Mental Mouse](#)

How about Thief of Worlds?

[Mental Mouse](#)

I don't know about Names, she's so far had two major power bases that aren't based on them. But yeah. she's definitely screwing with the boundary between Good and Evil. Aside from her general good intentions, remember that she actually redeemed an entire species from their doom.

TheDerangedOne

"I just swung decay and entropy at you look a bludgeon, look at how irritating I am"

That first 'look' should be 'like'. like a bludgeon.

Wry Warudo

>I suspected she was going to cut her losses soon

I wonder if Cat realised she was punning

grzecho2222

the slippery slope of bad comedy

[NZPIEFACE](#)

tfw cat bans healers.

SpeckofStardust

Eh Just going back to what the dead king said a good while ago to Cat that everything that he has on the field is to him expendable. Makes me wonder if he has a way to remake any of the Reverent's and simply wont use them again anytime soon due to story reasons. After all the idea that he's waited this long to use the Elf Prince seems, off.

[Liliet](#)

Hmm, good point.

[Euodiachloris](#)

The Elf Prince will have had some use in many, many stories. Generally the survival/slasher horror kind where most of the characters don't make it out alive and the ending for the sole survivor is, at best, bittersweet, knowing that That Horrible Thing™ is not eliminated.

If you have a hax character, use 'em for haxxor stories. Eventually, you'll get the one where The Tragic Monster Is Put Out Of Its Brainwashed Misery, but... until then, you have Freddy Krueger on the payroll. 😊

SilentWatcher

Kairos said DKs plan was to bind their souls, so he should have bound the cheat Elf as well somewhere?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Given prior discussion regarding meat-puppets, I doubt that a soul without a matching body is all that useful by DK's standards. Consider that Akua apparently doesn't have her original Aspects anymore, at least she hasn't used them. It may well be that Apects are tied to the body and/or life-force.

NZPIEFACE

C'mon, there's bound to be a Name somewhere all about body-hopping.

Mental Mouse

We've heard of the Face-thief, but they preyed on an unnamed princess. We've seen Aspects that can affect or steal one Aspect from another Named, but I'd be really surprised if any mortal Named could go much further than that. And even DK's revenants apparently can't keep all their original power. ISTR Skein had three aspects, but one of those (**Spool**) might well have been a localized replacement power provided by DK.

konstantinvoncarstein

Or he cannot remake them, but he has a lot of them and can catch others easily.

Or he could said that as long as his survival is assured he don't care what happens to them.

Andrew Mitchell

> After all the idea that he's waited this long to use the Elf Prince seems, off.

OTOH, the arrival of a player of Cat's caliber on the scene may have been exactly the right time for the DK to pull the Elf Prince out of storage. I think that's actually the case because, during the first conversation between the DK and Cat, the DK was talking about Cat's potential for immortality and Apotheosis and how rare that was (with only the DK and the Bard achieving it).

Meh

Cat is kinda making a mockery of names. If all it took to be this powerful was a contract with pseudo gods, half of the old aristocrats in wasteland would be demigods. We are sadly hitting dragon balls levels of power bullshittery.

konstantinvoncarstein

The problem is that there are not many gods around. Furthermore, not a lot of them have access to a power easily usable by mortals.

And the Wastelanders use contracts with powerful devils.

Meh

Or maybe they should ask the Warlocks for help? We know that they apparently go around dissecting gods.

konstantinvoncarstein

I doubt the Warlocks would make that kind of power available to anyone but them. And Sve Noc seems to be a particularly powerful goddess, and the Night is particularly well suited to the gifting of power.

The other problem is that Catherine does not really own this power, she borrows it from Sve Noc, who can revoke it as she pleases. No highborn would let himself be at the mercy of someone.

[Fayhem](#)

^^^

This this this. Cat's power is 100% contingent on her goals continuing to align with those of her goddesses'. And given how her goddesses dealt with the Longstride Cabal when they started getting uppity it's not out of the question that they could snuff her very life out at any time just by thinking about it. God-tier power like Sve Noc's isn't just lying around all over the place, and even when Cat had the power of all Winter (theoretically) at her disposal she didn't actually conquer/claim Sve Noc's power, or even strike a bargain as equals. She literally threw what was left of her power (and basically her life) at Sve Noc's feet and said "please help me", and in return Sve Noc decided on a 100% discretionary basis to grant her 100% revocable power. Does any of that sound like something a Praesi highborn would go for literally ever?

Meh

And how does that stop the wasteland highlords from enslaving and forcing gods to give them the same kind of power cat has? "I doubt warlocks would share the gods" is such a weak argument -.-

Dont be blind to bs in a story just because you enjoy it.

[Liliet](#)

Three reasons:

- 1) it's really fucking hard to do;
- 2) story shenanigans: faith gives a powerup of its own no matter the power;

3) that said, IT'S NOT THAT GOOD. Like... Masego would smear Komana and Andronike across the floor even post-Winter powerup if properly prepared. Wastelanders had access to more efficient ways to destroy shit than binding gods – they could bind many demons instead of one god, for instance :3

Fayhem

> Masego would smear Komana and Andronike across the floor even post-Winter powerup if properly prepared.

Strongly doubt that. Even with days of “proper preparation” Masego couldn't manage more than brief containment/stalling of the Summer Queen, and the Sisters were arguably more powerful than a fae monarch (difficult to say for sure since while Cat certainly had that power in the Everdark she never really mastered actually using it) even before eating the power of an entire fae Court.

Otherwise, good points! Though given the above I'd change/clarify “Wastelanders had access to more efficient ways to destroy shit than binding gods” to “Wastelanders had access to less insanely dangerous and difficult ways to destroy shit than binding gods”.

Liliet

Okay, that's fair. Masego has massively leveled up since Dormer, but then his power is also utter bullshit.

Liliet

And to be more specific: are you asking why Praesi didn't mount expeditions to the Everdark to fish out Sve Noc from there, or are you asserting there's plenty of entities of their power level around on the surface?

Meh

Lol not asking why Wastelanders didnt go to Everdark. Just asking if pseudo gods could grant power like what Cat has why wouldnt the wastelanders abuse it. Just enslave some psudo gods to your bloodline and force them to grant powers arguably better and more flexible than names. Doesn't even have to be as powerful as Sve Nocs, they would settle for far less i imagine. And we already know there are people like the late warlock who goes around dissecting gods for fun. How believable is it that the only example of

this kind of power is Cat and not the Wastelenders
this method seems to be tailored for? I dunno bois,
this is some obvious bullshittery if i have ever seen
one.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, so

- the power is not that great in the first place,
Cat's just really good at tactical use of it;
- there's probably not that many 'pseudo gods' and
most would probably be far weaker than Sve Noc with
Winter;
- why exactly do you think Wastelenders HAVEN'T
been doing that?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Enslaving gods? With what power of their own? The
Warlock wasn't just any Praesi sorcerer, he was Named;
such mages don't grow on trees even in the Empire,
whose human constituents seem to have spec'd pretty
heavily into sorcery on a cultural level.

I understand your position, but gods are rare, elusive,
well-protected beings whom only the most powerful of
mortals can survive against long enough to outsmart
them—and a lot of mortals aren't fit to outsmart them
anyway—, which is presumably how Warlock used to do it.

Also, Warlock did stuff like that in the backstory,
sure, but onscreen all ever comes of that history is
that he and his son have relevant skills. The
implication to that, to my mind, is twofold: it didn't
happen often and/or he did, in fact, refuse to share
his kidnapped divinities with his friends.

At any rate, dissent can be valuable in any community;
thanks for your thoughts despite my disagreement with
them.

[Fayhem](#)

Did you mean to reply to Konstantin? Because no
offense, but it seems like you literally didn't even
read my comment. Since:

> And how does that stops the wasteland highlords from
enslaving and forcing gods to give them the same kind
of power cat has?

Is very much directly addressed by “even when Cat had the power of all Winter (theoretically) at her disposal she didn’t actually conquer/claim Sve Noc’s power, or even strike a bargain as equals.” A semi-professional god-murderer with the power of an entire fae Court at her fingertips couldn’t successfully take down those gods; you think some High Lord rando could do it just like snapping their fingers? Press X to doubt, mon frère.

[Mental Mouse](#)

On the flip side, DK had a point in his latest appearance: At least three times now, Cat has died and came back more powerful than she was before.

The first time was when she was operating as an apparently-normal Named – but even so, she survived not only getting killed, but then having her Name stolen, then went on to mug an angel for her resurrection.. Then she got her heart ripped out by the King of Winter, and went on to become the incarnation of Winter. Then she got the Winter ripped out of her by Sve Noc, and went on to become the priestess and “front man” for the goddesses of Night.

And they say a cat has nine lives...

[Barthumphries](#)

Well they had an entire nation sacrifice its future, then fight and condense itself for millennia while under pressure from both the dwarves and the Dead King, then Cat willingly sacrificed herself and her two Goddesses now keep her around because they like her.

I think the Praesi would want to own that power but the problem is once you start that chain rolling once how do you get someone else to bring you all of Winter?

Andrew Mitchell

> and her two Goddesses now keep her around because they like her

Plus, she’s the best possible guide to help Sve Noc navigate the surface world and successfully carve out a new home.

[frolamizFrolamiz](#)

Am I the only one disappointed that the Thief of Stars didn’t steal the Grey Pilgrim’s star? I was expecting this one ever

since it was confirmed that one of his aspects was to summon one. Maybe it was too obvious, or she survived and it will come later...

Mental Mouse

> disappointed that the Thief of Stars didn't steal the Grey Pilgrim's star?

The Dark-empowered staff was the more obvious threat, compared to the astral orb that was weakened outside Creation (and possibly because he'd used it recently). On the other hand... it occurs to me that she only *showed up* when he summoned the star, and it did only last a moment. The "interesting" part (maybe Story-pushed?) was that Cat first noped ToS's attempted theft, then immediately turned around and *successfully* did the same thing to Spellblade!

I guess I was wrong about the next Shine killing Pilgrim – he was not only still going, but still using his powers. Maybe last time it only took so much out of him because then he was doing a full wind-up instead of an fast strike. She may also be wrong about just how he healed Saint – I could easily believe he has priest-like healing powers and also an aspect extending them. Compare to aspects like **Rampage** and **Swing** (or for that matter, *Sever*), all of which boost(ed) the wielder's already-considerable fighting ability.

Mental Mouse

Hmph, I'm still muffing tags. Hazards of hasty commenting, I guess. Off to properly do Morning and get off to work.

Andrew Mitchell

> I guess I was wrong about the next Shine killing Pilgrim – he was not only still going, but still using his powers. Maybe last time it only took so much out of him because then he was doing a full wind-up instead of an fast strike.

I agree with your reasoning. After the first Shine he did weaken considerably, and yet he's still able to act quickly and to good effect. I think that may be partly because of story support provided by the new party of five that's been formed to do away with the big bad.

Mental Mouse

It also occurs to me that for the prior Shine, he was badly on the wrong side of the story, and knew it. That might be part of why he went for a full charge-up despite the cost.

Darkening

We know all of Pilgrim's aspects. They're Shine, Behold, and Forgive. He's also capable of doing everything priests can at a much higher level though, so healing magic miracles are pretty well in his wheelhouse. Cat explicitly said a few chapters ago that him becoming part of her Band of Five instead of her defeated opponent would result in creation accelerating his and Tyrant's recovery so that they can contribute properly to the story, so I'm not surprised to see him able to fight still. Dunno if he'll be able to pull Shine out **again** after this point though.

Mental Mouse

Right – Forgive shouldn't be the *only* way he can heal, but rather the culmination of his healing miracles.

Re: Shine, I don't *think* it's been explicitly stated, but I'd expect it to be either once-per-day or thrice-per-day. The previous Shine ended with Creation's true dawn... which may well have recharged it, but also wasn't that long ago and he's been doing other stuff too..

I mean, they were fighting a battle since an hour or two before dawn, then came the surrender, and the "conclave", which argument ended with Cat opening a gate for them. Even with various sorts of magic/miracle supporting their stamina, they've gotta be getting tired.

erebus42

As has been mentioned being both an Elf and Named is total hax. However, now I wanna see a deathmatch between a Drow and an Elf.

Mental Mouse

That probably will come eventually.

erebus42

One can only hope. I just really wanna see some arrogant ass of an elf talk some good shit and then precede to get their ass handed to them by Ivah or someone.

Fayhem

> I just really wanna see some arrogant ass of an elf talk some good shit and then precede to get their ass handed to them

"Children are disciplined by hand."



konstantinvoncarstein

Older elves can ignore one Law of Creation at the time. If it exists a Law "can be affected by Night", the Drow is screwed.

Fayhem

At least as I understand it laws of creation roughly correspond to laws of physics. "Can be affected by Night" is more of a metaphysical concept than a physical law. Elves might be able to affect whether they can be harmed by the effects of a particular application of Night (maybe they could do something with "can't be dissolved by acid" or something like that, for instance), but since they can only do that with one law at a time a drow with a versatile repertoire would still definitely be in with a chance.

Mental Mouse

If nothing else: "Oh, you're immune to direct attack by Night? Too bad the ground under you isn't. And I'm still PD fast and strong, and let's see if you're *also* immune to obsidian blades."

Fayhem

Yeah, exactly. Not to mention that IIRC only one of the aspects of Night that Rumena was using against Saint was one that affected her directly (I think it was an acid one as it happens). Rumena's crazy strength and speed, Rumena's magical healing, Rumena's illusory doubles... all Night-powered stuff of immense use in a fight that doesn't have shit to do with directly targeting anyone else.

Lithrandil2

It might actually work. Back in their first fight against Pilgrim Masego used something he learned from an Order Demon (Which has a strikingly similar effect to the elves: The Demon changes one law of Creation the Elves ignore) and basically made everyone in the area ignore light (Exact part is: "Masego had fought demons at Second Liesse. One of them had been a demon of Order, what Praesi called a Beast of Hierarchy. Their essence, as I understood it, was a perversion of laws. Hierophant had learned to mimic that, to a a very limited extent. Inside my killing grounds one law had been established: Light had no effect" <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/05/21/chapter-16-pirouette/>). Assuming Light and Night are somewhat similar (which is reasonable as both seem to act pretty similar basically beeing stuff to weave miracle with). It might work but as was already said Rumenas most powerful tricks isn't really direct damage stuff. And with that much experience he would probably easily find out that he cant hurt him directly that way. If the fight would take more time he

would (assuming he didnt already know as he was already alive when the elves came to Calernia) find out he can just ignore one thing and basically bait the elf to choose the lesser evil but still be damaged by one of his tricks.

[TeK](#)

If there exists a Law “can lose” then everyone is screwed. I just imagine elves getting like “you defeated me? Who decided that?!”

[matrixm](#)

Oh shit, that was great

magey

I see the Thief of Stars got stuck carrying the trope for Thief being useless in direct combat and getting smacked down hard.

Oshi

It tried to UMD. I’ve had that go well for me. Damn dms and wands that blow up in my face

Andrew Mitchell

“UMD”?

[Javvies](#)

Use Magic Device (trained only).
One of the best and most versatile skills around, and a class skill for Rogues/thieves, but almost no other class gets it. In D&D (various editions) and other d20 OGL systems (plus Pathfinder/derivatives).

Andrew Mitchell

TY

[Daniel E](#)

The more we see of Cat’s Night powers, the more I wonder how she’s going to end up on top when all is set and done, because there is no way the story concludes with ‘First Priestess of Night saves Callow’. However, the snippets of the Drow holy book indicate that both they & Sve Noc are alive and well in the future.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Some musings about the Spellblade as he once was: An Named elven prince (hmm, yet another crown? And Cat did get a token), proud

and powerful enough to think he (and perhaps his warband) could take on the Dead King. Three aspects:

1) The “shiver”, an external aspect linked to “purification”. It seems to be able to destroy any of many different things, but perhaps only one thing at a time. But there is some limit – both Cat and Saint were badly hurt, but not disintegrated outright, and back in Keter!Arcadia it had to chew through stone progressively. This was the one that Saint **Severed**.

2) “... some sort of wheel, or maybe a kaleidoscope”. Apparently the one that produced the swords. Probably can turn any given “element” into a sword: metal, fire, acid, healing (or whatever would heal a revenant). Cat took it out with a stolen...

3) **Ban**. This one was described as “dead”, presumably killed by the Dead King. Would that have been too powerful for DK to allow in his retinue? Or... perhaps it would have allowed the Spellblade to commit suicide before being converted to a revenant. And maybe even afterwards, which would be why DK never restored it... so maybe Cat did “put it out of its misery”.

Three very powerful aspects, at least one of them “meta”... It’s perhaps understandable why it once thought it had a chance against the Dead King.

Fayhem

Nice breakdown! Destroying only one thing at a time feels like it has some symmetry with elves in general (given their racial powerset ties into ignoring one creational law at a time) so also tying that into purification (given their frothing racism) feels very appropriate for an elven Name.

Regarding your speculation re: Ban being a dead aspect, it’s been repeatedly mentioned regarding Revenants that they are undead with a *portion* of their former Named power. I think that losing an aspect when making a Revenant is more likely a limitation than a choice per se (DK prob has some influence over *which* aspect gets lost tho). Keep in mind, given that DK is essentially pulling not just a person but a Name itself into undeath, being able to preserve even 2 out of 3 aspects is still an incredible feat of necromancy.

Darkening

Y’know, that makes me curious about the time Cat came back from William cutting off her head. She had her name intact, (or as intact as it already was, anyways) so I’m not sure why the dead king, with so much more necromantic expertise, would be getting worse results than Masego. I suppose the soul stone to catch her soul, her willingness to be brought back, and the comment about creation wanting her not to be dead because of her remaining pattern of three probably contributed, but still.

Liliet

I think the difference is in the control that DK exerts over his Revenants – he reforms them into something different, something pliable to his will. Meanwhile Catherine just got a puppet body that either her or Masego could pull the strings of while staying essentially herself.

Mental Mouse

Also, we haven't had this close an examination of many Revenants – offhand, I can only think of Skein, who was anomalous in other ways.. (I don't actually remember Thief "stealing" the Thief of Stars, though – when did that happen?)

Liliet

Let me find...

All According To (Redux)

>"That was all the questions," Adjutant told us. "It seems unwise to simply leave her here, if we are to act now."

>"That one's mine to solve," Thief noted. "No card, mind you, but it's the obvious solution."

>She got up and laid a hand on the Revenant's arm. Nothing happened. Vivienne sighed.

>"Hold," she said.

>While the sight of the undead vanishing was interesting in its own way, it was Hakram's body-wide twitch that took my attention.

Mental Mouse

> as intact as it already was, anyways

Specifically, she was down to two Aspects already....

Fayhem

Lili and Mental Mouse already said both the things I would have, so I'm just going to say that while I think their counterpoints are valid that's still a really interesting point you brought up and I wanted to say I appreciate that.

Liliet

Destroy one thing at a time? Where'd you get that? It scoured Saint – but did not kill her bc Pilgrim and Cat shielded her – and destroyed Night in the same go.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hmm, good point,

[Mental Mouse](#)

Coming back to this, I was thinking “one thing at a time” because it damaged Saints flesh but not her armor/clothing – indeed, from Cat’s comment it might have cleaned blood off the armor.

Power-versus-power conflict at the same time as a physical effect doesn’t seem too unreasonable – it might be that it cleaned Night out of the whole area because it had already been fighting Cat’s attempt to contain it with Night.

[Liliet](#)

I think the idea is that the power has a set definition of what is ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’. Clothing was something to be cleaned, human flesh was something to clean everything else of.

That’s what made Cat think elves are assholes.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Except this same power was chewing through rock back in Keter!Arcadia.

[Liliet](#)

Was it just random rock lying around, or was it created?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, it had been part of the environment, but even before Masego picked it up and threw it, it wasn’t exactly “lying around”. 😊

[Barthumphries](#)

Dirt is dirt. If your power is to clean things, to make dirt disappear, and you continually keep using your power, you can chew through a dirt wall by continually cleaning it. And what is rock but a whole bunch of dirt?

[Liliet](#)

Oh man.

A power that, if scaled up infinitely, would destroy the planet and most of its inhabitants but leave a particular kind of mortal-made stuff floating around in perfect emptiness.

I could see elves being like that.

Mental Mouse

Also, Cat may be mistaken here:

> just as her arm snapped back in place, wisps of Light swirling around it as the Pilgrim's work bore fruit.

The Pilgrim was working on a **Shine**; I suspect this was Saint's own **Decree**.

Liliet

No, I think Shine was spontaneous – it comes up when an ally needs help. He doesn't need to work on it unless it's something bullshit like forcing dawn to come early over the entire battlefield.

Mental Mouse

Hmm... meh.

aran

> Breathing out sharply, the old woman swung nothing at all and the Spellblade screamed.

The sanctioned action is to **Cut**

Unmaker

Catherine is getting more than a little taste for sorcery. Of the crude and destructive kind, but still...

Chapter 39: Looting

"Thirty-four: it is not graverobbing if it was your destiny to have that artefact, just proactive inheritance."

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

The Spellblade had taken an awful lot of killing, but he was finished. With the Thief of Stars having tried her hand at stealing something a goddess had her hand on and gotten about what one would expect for the trouble, that left the three of us masters of the field.

And so I was worried.

I had a finer nose for trouble than most, given the amount of times I'd come a hair's breadth away from death, but it wasn't a physical threat that had me growing unsettled. I knew for a fact that the Dead King had more than few Revenants to throw into the breach, so why was it two I'd encountered before that were guarding Hierophant? And that wasn't even getting into the way that I'd bet rubies to piglets we were going to run into the damned Skein skulking somewhere around here before this was over. No, setting that aside for now why was the King of Death putting up dead Named I had some knowledge of instead of any other from his millennial treasure trove of undead heroes? The Spellblade hadn't been an easy mark, by any means, and it's cost us heavy use of exhausting aspects from two aging heroes to put him down, but I didn't buy that Neshamah didn't have some Revenant around that wasn't about as much as a heavy hitter and completely unknown to me. *Are you tying off loose ends, Dead King?*

Sacrificing servants I was familiar with so that knowledge couldn't be used against him down the line? It seemed wasteful, given the calibre of Revenants used. The elf could probably have torn through a Lycaonese border fortress by himself, and if the Thief of Stars was even half as handy as Vivienne had been when wielding a cousin Name she could easily have wreaked havoc on supply lines.

It was true that the Dead King's method was, in essence, never to leave an opening that could be exploited no matter what it cost to play it safe. On the other hand, it didn't feel like a coincidence that I could feasibly make use of both the Revenants we'd encountered today. The Thief of Stars had, back in Keter, wielded an aspect that lit up a constellation above her head that was known in Callow as the King's Crown. It'd been suppressed by my domain, as Winter could snuff out anything given long enough, but if I went digging in our little friend's split halves I might be able to seize whatever that'd been. The Spellblade, if Tariq was right, had once been a prince of the Golden Bloom and presumably heir to its throne. Of seven crowns and one, it was perhaps viable to seize the last from either the broken Revenants at our feet. If the Dead King was in Masego's head – and he had to be, to an extent, to have been able to pass on so many of my secrets to the Tyrant – then he would know of my recipe to make Larat into something greater. Could I assume that, since he'd since had opportunity to speak with Kairos, he knew of everything I'd revealed so far? *Yes, it'll be safer to,* I decided. So he knew I needed one last crown, presumably, and... No, that was the

wrong way to think about this. Both the Revenants couldn't feasibly recent additions to this mess, they must have been here for some time.

So why would the Dead King send a pair of possible crowns into the mess, of all his possible guards to post around Hierophant?

"Black Queen," the Peregrine interrupted me. "We should not linger."

"It's a trap," I pensively said.

"What is?" the Saint flatly asked.

"I don't know yet," I muttered. "But he laid a trap for us."

The last crown, the 'one' of the 'seven and one', it was the most important of the eight. As the Rogue Sorcerer had said: *seven for weight but the last to shape*. Was this the nature of the snare the Dead King had laid? That if we took a shortcut, attempted to bring a crown from outside our little circle rather than surrender one of our own, we'd be giving him a foothold into this place? The Revenants, after all, were of his make now regardless of what they had been while living. It was tenuous thread, to be sure, but given that my opponent was perhaps the finest sorcerer to ever grace Calernia and had more than ten centuries of experience on me in Namelore even that fine thread might be enough. Given the largely unprecedented nature of what I sought to accomplish tonight, there was still much that I did not and perhaps could not know about it. *Or is that your trick within the trick, Neshamah?* I suddenly thought *While I go in circles pondering of stories and deep schemes, you use it as shell to strike a more precise blow*. Was he offering me a pair of crowns so I would sour on the use of them out of fear, and so force a loss? The right to rule of one of three would be gone, if so: Tyrant, Pilgrim or Queen. Any of them would result in an opponent of the Dead King losing a measure of earthly influence.

"We cannot withdraw," the Grey Pilgrim bluntly said. "It would mean the death of three great hosts, and possibly of Iserre itself."

"Getting afraid, Foundling?" Laurence nastily grinned.

Her, I ignored. We were no longer fighting, which meant she'd gone from massively useful to at least something of a pest and possibly a liability. The Peregrine I needed to keep his eyes on the prize, though, so to him I replied.

"I'm not suggesting withdrawal," I said. "But the Hidden Horror has a game afoot, let's all take a moment to acknowledge that. There's too many coincidences beginning to pile up."

Tariq was no youngblood, but that had advantages as well as the opposite. His eyes sharpened.

"The Revenant you fought before," he said, and it was not a question.

"Revenants," I corrected, flicking a glance at the other mangled corpse.

The old man's face went stiff. Though not, I understood when he began speaking again, for the reasons I'd expected.

"He must hold you in high esteem," the Grey Pilgrim blandly said, "for having assumed from inception that it would be your arrangements that would win out and lead us here."

Yeah, now was not even remotely the time for that. The oddly cordial relationship I had with the foremost monster in Calernian history was not a matter I intended on discussing here – with Tariq, ever – so I put down my foot as firmly as I could on this before it could lead anywhere.

"Or, more likely, he planned for every eventuality and we're simply seeing the contingencies related to my intentions," I said. "You'll remember that the Tyrant has been feeding him everyone's secrets for months now – the Dead King's not the kind of creature to have only one string to his bow."

"And how are we to be sure, Damned, that you're not one of those strings?" the Saint said.

"You sure you didn't speak with him?" I mused, forcing my lips to stretch into a friendly smile. "Because starting a fight within the band seems like exactly the kind of thing a villain would manipulate someone like you into."

The old woman's face blanked, the tightening of her features pressing the creases together in a way that made them look like some surreal mask of flesh for a moment. The loathing she glared at me with was bright and burning. I cared little for it, though, since the reminder that by turning on me she might just be advancing the Dead King's schemes was enough to have her fingers leaving the pommel of her now-sheathed sword. A little heavy-handed, as far as handlings went, but I suspected anything too subtle would be lost on the likes of Laurence de Montfort.

"What is it that you suggest, then?" the Pilgrim calmly asked.

"I'm going to be taking those," I said, flicking a hand at the two broke Revenants. "In case they might be of use. But the identity of the third Revenant we encounter will tell us how we need to approach the end of our journey."

"You have met others, then," Tariq said.

I had. Two more, to be exact. The nightmare that was a Horned Lord with oracular insights, the creature known as the Skein. And one I had not fought at all, and would rather not: a man who'd once been the Good King of Callow, Edward Fairfax the Seventh. If it was the former that was waiting on our path to the Ducal Palace, then Neshamah's game remained opaque to me. If it was the latter, though? It'd make three crowns that had been set in my way, increasingly obvious ones. It was an almost insultingly blatant bait, which while shedding no light on what decision should be taken at least would make it clear what the crux of the snare was. Assuming, of course, that this was not all governed by whim and the third Revenant wouldn't either be one I'd never before encountered. Or that there would be no third at all.

"It should be either a rat or a king," I said. "The rat means we're in trouble. The king means dice might need to be rolled."

"A rat," the Saint slowly said. "Do you mean..."

"Yes," I interrupted. "Like that one you fought."

"You've fought one of their kind before?" the old woman said, eyes considering.

"I survived it, with the help of others," I retorted. "Still on the fence as to if whether where we are right now will make it more or less dangerous."

There was no Threefold Reflection to spin us around with here, but the Skein wouldn't be confined to a single room either. It'd had a lot more room to manoeuvre, and freedom in choosing when and where to strike. Given that oracles were agonizingly difficult to deal with even when they weren't also massive more or less indestructible murder rats, it was not promising grounds either way. I was rather hoping for King Edward even if that path involved the dice having another go. Shit, if it was the Skein then had we been anticipated every step of the way? No, I decided. I knew for a fact that Choirs could affect those sorts of things, and the Pilgrim was sworn to one. Sve Noc would obscure me to most things unless they wished it otherwise, including possibly the Skein's weakened remnants of a Name, and there was also the very madman that Kairos had been using as a shield this entire campaign: the Hierarch. No, it shouldn't be possible for the Skein to have followed the entire thread flawlessly given that much interference. It should still have been able to glimpse possibilities, though, which would be dangerous enough on its own.

"The rat has something in common with Cordelia's cousin," I delicately said, glancing at Tariq.

The old man's lips tightened, and he offered me a nod.

"I suspect the both of us will hinder that," he said. "Though not half as much as Laurence does simply by being who she is."

I raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"What does she do?" I said. "Cut the future?"

Gods, I immediately thought, *please don't let her cut the future*. She was already ridiculously difficult to handle.

"Winter was predictable," the Peregrine said, "but never, I believe, predicted."

My brow rose further up, and I glanced at the Saint – who seemed displeased we were trading information to her. I couldn't honestly blame her for that, since a handful of secrets was often the difference between Named beating all odds or being buried. The Peregrine seemed to be implying that since Laurence had made herself into a domain, more or less, then trying to predict her was the equivalent of having tried to predict my own domain back in the day. So, the Saint would muddle predictions simply by being involved in them. Useful, that, and it went some way in explaining why no one had been able to spring an ambush on her over the years. The Heavens really had shaped a fine executioner, hadn't they? No one would see the Saint of Swords coming until she was there and by then it would be much, much too late.

"Understood," I said. "If the two of you would keep an eye out, I'll clean up these loose ends."

I dipped my head at the Revenant remains. The Pilgrim's face flickered with hesitation until he spoke up.

"Your Majesty," he cautiously said, "you do not intend to eat them, do you?"

I choked.

"Do I –"

What?

"No, I'm not going to eat the fucking corpses," I hissed. "Why would you even ask that?"

"Drow are known to take from the dead in some manner," the old man said. "And you are closely allied with orcs and goblins, whose habits are well-documented."

"Corpse-eating isn't how the Firstborn do it," I grunted. "And for the Clans it's actually a pretty complicated issue that's

been shaped by generations of – you know what, now's not the time."

"The goblins?" Laurence de Montfort asked.

She seemed honestly curious, though that didn't mean she wasn't also being kind of a prick.

"Goblins will eat *anything*, Saint," I tiredly said. "It's not like corpses are miraculously excluded from that just because it's distasteful to think about."

'Distasteful' was never a word you wanted to speak when discussing that particular subject, as it happened, if Robber was around. He would be very swift to inform anyone fool enough to do so that human corpses were actually very savory even without being cooked first. And that in Ater you could get that sort of meat rather on the cheap if you knew where to look, from grave-peddlers whose corpses had not been bought by necromancer and were starting to ripen. There was a reason that Black had told me never to buy grilled meat off a stall in the streets of Ater if you hadn't seen the animal it came from killed and cooked, and it wasn't just because it was a possible avenue for assassination. Unwilling to participate in that wreck of a conversation any longer, I hobbled my way to the nearest corpse – the Spellblade's – and knelt. Its flesh felt strange to my touch, not like a human's at all. Rougher, almost like bark, though I had no notion of whether that was a consequence of elvishness or of being made a Revenant. Regardless, even a glancing touch was enough to tell me there was nothing salvageable in there: none of the three aspects there'd been were in a state to be taken. The one Saint had severed was a ruin, and when I'd used Ban on the undead's own third it had shattered the former and faded the latter beyond use. Fair enough, I thought. Given that I'd already taken from him once, I wouldn't have been able to anyway.

The head and leg that'd been cut off I put back in place, though mending those wounds was beyond me save in the most gruesome of ways. I wove Night in a pall over the elf's still form, and as the veil of darkness thinned and dispersed so the sight of the body disappeared was revealed. I leaned on my staff to rise, feeling the Pilgrim's patient gaze and the Saint's belligerent one. The heroine idly strolled up to me as I headed towards the remains of the Thief of Stars.

"Melted it, did you?" she said. "Useful knack."

It was difficult for her to seem as casual as she clearly thought she was being when she was clearly itching to get at me. I almost looked at Tariq – was this some misguided attempt to insert a little cordiality into this relationship? *Go on, Laurence, go up to the Black Queen and say something nice about her wicked and blasphemous powers.*

"I'm keeping them in the Night," I said. "Matters of burial can be addressed when this is all over."

"So it's a pocket trick, like a sorcerer," the Saint unpleasantly smiled. "Like I thought. So why, Foundling, did you make the Rogue Sorcerer carry your crowns?"

Because I needed bait for Kairos, juicy enough to ensure it was the Sorcerer he struck at, I thought. Because the only way I'm getting my father's soul back from you people without a fight is if I do not, in fact, get it back from you people. So I let out a little noise of surprise, and smiled all regretful and dim at the Saint of Swords. Eyes a little wide, like I was a touch slow but all harmless.

"Oh Hells," I ruefully said. "It completely slipped my mind."

"You're up to something, Foundling," Laurence de Montfort quietly said. "And I won't let you get away with it."

"Right now," I said, coming by the mangled halves of the second Revenant, "what I'm up to is having my time wasted. Walk it off, Saint."

I flicked a dismissive hand at her, which from the way she went red in the cheeks was more insult than anyone had tossed her way in a long time. Gods, if they'd had Black around her for weeks or months they must have kept him gagged the whole time: given the ease of her temper and how viciously he could spin a sentence, if they hadn't the body I'd claimed would have fewer limbs. Another painful crouch and ah, it seemed that the feel of the other one's skin had been on account of elvishness after all. The Thief of Stars's flesh was like a fresh corpse's, which was rather uncomfortable to think about so I did not linger over it. Her I could still take from, I found. One of the aspects tasted like... flight, cold and in the dark. The starlit one? Hard to tell, my senses in this were hardly exact. The second I studied tasted familiar, and I immediately judged it to be what she'd called on in her attempt to use my staff. It felt like the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle clicking together, though there was something else. Rarity? Some sort of limit, I thought, though given the way I made of aspects artefacts with a single use that didn't particularly matter to me. Still, if it was like I suspected and this was a trick that allowed one to use most anything then it didn't particularly appeal to me. Boots scuffed the ground at my side, but I bit my tongue at the last moment when I caught a glimpse of them and saw it was not the Saint who'd returned but the Pilgrim.

"She wasn't always like that," the old man quietly said.

Oh, were we going to have that talk now, under cover my seeing to the body of a fallen foe? I wasn't interested in being

sympathetic to the Saint of Swords, so he was barking up the wrong tree. What Laurence de Montfort might once have been weighed less on the scales than what she now was, and that was trouble. The third aspect, I found, had been ripped out. And the... fabric around it had been almost burned, for lack of better term, perhaps to ensure that not even a speck of what had been there before remained. Interesting, I thought. Neshamah's work? That implied a much greater degree of control over how Revenants became what they were than I'd assumed he had. And, more intriguingly, that whatever that aspect of the Thief's had been he'd judged it trouble enough he'd cut it out before making her into one of his undead. That aside, my remaining choice was being the aspect that tasted of running away and the one that felt like well-placed hands. *You can never have too many ways to leg it*, I decided, and took the first. I leaned forward, allowing my cloak to drape over me and hide the sight of the small carved wishbone the aspect had taken the shape of from the Pilgrim even as I palmed it. My other hand moved to distract him, pulling down a veil of Night over the broken body.

"If you insist on having this conversation," I said, "let's have it on the move. I'm done here."

Stormblessed

Booooo! I want that conversation! What a chapter end tease! To me, this is more of a cliffhanger than almost every other chapter this book.

Big Brother

Ooh, funny it's a wishbone. For what is a Prayer, but a Wish. Perfect for the Staff that is Not a Staff, but a Sword, and the Sword that is Not a Sword, but a Prayer.

naturalnuke

You speak in riddles and confusion.

Big Brother

If this is a reference to something, I'm missing it.

SilentWatcher

Why not harvest their experiences? 1000 Year old Elf Revenant fighting experience would have been great. Cant she harvest them or did she chose not to?

werafdsaew

This is not an RPG. If she didn't harvest something, then she probably can't, especially since the text never made it clear what can or cannot be harvested.

erebus42

They did mention that the Drow can harvest knowledge from non-Drow corpses and "grow" the night.

werafdsaew

That's just one way to interpret the text; there are others.

Qwormuli

But that is because, IIRC, the actual knowledge is already tied into the night, so it comes with partaking in it. That is a corpse without a massacre ritual carved into it.

Rook

I'd bet the text is intentionally vague for things like that. This is, at the end of the day, a genre-savvy web serial where one of the main selling points is subverting many worn-out fantasy tropes or at least using them in unexpected ways.

The tricks she can use are allowed to be flexible enough that the story can concentrate on its major premises, but for that same reason it'll never allow for any story-breaking powerups.

Dragrath

To take into the night that which is owned by the Hidden Horror is to invite the hidden horror inside. I doubt any amount of experience and power able to be gained from those revenants could be worth that risk...

[Mental Mouse](#)

A wishbone is also the fulcrum for a pair of wings.

danh3107

Thanks for the birthday present erratic, it's not as good as an aspect wishbone, but it's pretty great.

Qwormuli

Oh, the woes of being born on a holiday...

Gunslinger

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

Andrew Mitchell

And if you want to chat with other PGtE fans then join our discord at <https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>

Hierus

So perhaps the dead king can create artefacts too?

byzantine279

Possibly. But I suspect that aspect was related to Freedom in some way. Something that would allow the Revenant to escape his control, which he cannot ever allow.

stevenneiman

It could also have been something to assess a mark, which he was worried Cat would be able to use to see through whatever his scheme is. It might also have been something which would allow her to successfully steal the staff. It was pretty obvious that the revenants he threw at them were going to die, so he would be easily willing to reduce the effectiveness of one of them in exchange for removing a confounding variable from this specific scheme.

nick012000

The Dead King took the Aspect from her before he turned her into a Revenant. That would have been years before the story started; probably before Cat was even born. There's no way he did it just to spite Cat.

I'm guessing the "aspect was probably related to Freedom" guess was the correct one, myself.

Decius

Liberate seems like a good bet.

[Liliet](#)

That's my guess too.

Escape, or Slip Away, or something like that 😊

stevenneiman

Cat seems to think that it was removed before, but I wouldn't trust her to be able to tell if Neshamah had removed the Aspect earlier and didn't want to let her tell.

Andrew Mitchell

That makes a lot of sense.

Someguy

I think Dead Dude makes sure to rot the 3rd Aspects to break any possibility of a Cycle of 3 that can be pointed his way.

Qwormuli

Three aspects shouldn't have any direct correlation to a cycle of three, nor do the amount of limbs in a body, that are not the left leg.

Okay, this might be too snarky(no direct offence, Someguy) and I might even be wrong, but goddamnit I'm getting tired of the cycle of three being invented as the reason and motive to every, single, thing, that could or would happen.

antoninjohn

I wonder have pissed the Saint is going to be when the Good King is all great job Queen Catherine against those Procens despite being a Hero

naturalnuke

Heheheh

Someguy

That'd be perfect.

stevenneiman

The Saint seems like someone who's very effective at what she's good for but is increasingly the wrong tool for the job in the world as it is now. She only has any real idea how to deal with one sort of villain, the sort who can pretend to be decent people convincingly enough but do so as a pure ruse. She doesn't understand the clever and shameless modern Wastelanders or a genuinely benevolent villain like Cat, and the price of getting so good at dealing with one kind of villain was that she had to make her mind to rigid to adapt to new realities.

Rook

Honestly have to disagree about the wastelander villains. Akua wasn't exactly small beans, and Malicia wasn't exactly an innocent little angel in enabling her. We also know for a fact that Warlock is pretty much an old school Villain that was kept in check by his own desires as well as being tied to Black.

The Saint, nasty piece of work that she is, would've done a hell of a lot of good (capital or lowercase g) if she'd been around the east in the earlier volumes. Second Liesse probably would've been three chapters long, with Liesse not becoming a giant graveyard and the Saint unceremoniously beheading Akua & co.

talenel

But she wasn't there, was she? That's the kind of machinations that Praesi villains are good at. Controlling what is happening. Malicia and the Calamities have been around for quite a long time for villains, yet Pilgrim and Saint never got over to Callow/Praes for a reason.

Rook

If by "Praesi Villains" you mean only Malicia and Black, who are a once-in-several-centuries exception from the norm, sure?

As for literally every other Praesi villain that has existed since the dawn of the empire in Triumphant's time, they've all managed to control the situation into abject ruin. They're the exact kind of blight that headsman like the Saint were made to put down.

It makes very little sense to act like Black and Malicia are the norm for eastern villainy, any more than it makes sense to act like the Pilgrim is the norm for western heroics. We all know that the majority of Villains are Akua-esque pests the same way that the majority of Heroes are William-esque idiots.

talenel

I include Akua as well. Akua was the main villain of Liesse. While you can certainly say that Malicia helped enable her, she also did quite a bit of work to get her schemes to succeed and stay hidden.

Furthermore, in regards to Malicia, while she has been influenced by Black, I wouldn't say she's the most paradigm-shifting Praesi. A lot of her behavior and plans seem much closer to traditional Prasi villainy. I would even argue that without Black that's exactly who she would be. Taken to it utmost in terms of treachery and skillful

manipulation, and without some of the crazed quirks of other Dread Emperors, but very much a Praesi villain. Remember, when it came down to it, she believed that a flying super fortress of doom is what Praes needed.

While I don't disagree that certain archetypes of Praesi villainy would probably be easy prey for Saint (Wekesa comes to my mind), Saint doesn't do well with the sort of subtlety of other Praesi archetypes.

Rook

I don't know, I feel like the subtle or politically clever type of villains are the perfect prey for the Saint. She's the kind of bulldozer that will cut a straight line through every machination and turn a deaf ear to attempts to sway her. She exists to essentially ignore all their strengths and strike at their weaknesses.

I think kind that the Saint is ill-equipped for are rather the metagaming type (Catherine, Black, Tyrant, etc...), or Villains that are outright powerful enough to outmatch her (Ranger, the Forever King)

It's probably why the Saint and the Pilgrim have a history in the first place. The Pilgrim is lacking in brute force but is narratively savvy and has the role of a helper to boot. The Saint is nearly unstoppable in a brawl but doesn't appear to have the same awareness for stories that the Pilgrim does.

Caerulea

"The pilgrim is lacking in brute force..."

What? No he is not. He is one of the most powerful named on the continent. Beating the aspect of a dead elf after he turned night into day?

Rook

He's quite weak in brute force for a Hero of his weight class, he's a helper that occasionally becomes more effective when there's someone to help.

It pretty much exhausted him to throw out a single spell that the Warlock and Witch both threw around like common pebbles in their fight. A REAL brawler like the Saint can cut through wards strong enough to contain demons without even bothering to use an aspect.

If all he had were his light shows he'd barely be a second rate Hero. He's 'powerful' because he's well suited to craft narratives that will cause creation to tip the scales or pile on coincidences to make him the victor.

Liliet

" the same way that the majority of Heroes are William-esque idiots."

Erratic has actually specifically pointed out that William is a major exception to the rule in his own way, which is why Catherine wasn't able to properly predict him.

If you want an average hero, imho you should look to Hanno and his band. I suspect that's half the reason they were given so much focus: to show us what typical looks like.

Agent J

Do we? Do we know that? What was Terribilis II, but a liberator for his people, choking under the tyranny of Western Crusader States?

And Triumphant herself was certainly no 'pest'. She dominated the continent splendidly and skillfully.

And if I had to bet on Akua or Laurence, I'd bet Akua. Akua and Pilgrim? Probably Pilgrim. But Laurence is too dumb by half.

Rook

Yeah we do know it for a fact. On account of even the Below side of the line agreeing that they're godsdamned awful. Black and the Calamities made a career out of exterminating pests like Terriblis. Praes follows mention of even Triumphant's name with "May she never return". She's literally famous for irreparably damaging the fabric of Creation.

Praes.

PRAES. The nation whose core cultural values all revolve around murdering each other.

If you're so intent on trying to win an argument that you try to twist the dread emperors and empresses as 'not so bad', and then fail at it as the best you can come up with to justify them is saying they were "splendid and skillful", that really says everything that needs to be said.

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, Diabolist was exactly the kind of enemy she is designed to kill 😊

[Liliet](#)

Agreed.

Shveiran

Akua, sure. But the others...

Malicia may have crossed the boundary between “necessary evil” and “existential threat” in her quest for a nuclear deterrent, but the fact remains she was a juggler balancing three dozens pots on the verge of the boiling point. I see her early treaties as a sign she was determined to establish sustainable relationship with foreign powers, and that it was the refusal of the good nations, precisely on the grounds of “Evil is Evil” that pushed her to seek out more extreme measures.

Sure, Malicia is evil, but she is not a tyrant of the old breed. She may have tries to destroy Procer, but messing with a foreign state for the gains of their own country is not something any ruler of the Guideverse, good or otherwise, is refraining from doing.

Though they are different characters, there are strong similarities between her arc and Cat: she would not have gone to such extremes if all other directions had not been crossed off by her enemies.

I feel like Saint’s M0 is not a solution, but a cause. If you leave someone no option but total war and extermination of the loser, that someone is going to escalate as much as needed to win the conflict. And sure, we can condemn the extremes someone reaches and say they should have just surrendered and met their fate rather than risk endangering the fabric of creation, but that is an harsh choice to face. When you are faced with extinction, a lot of things begin to sound reasonable.

As for Warlock, all he wanted was to study and enjoy his pleasures.

We know that was not common for Warlocks of old; Akua mentions in Book 3 that the name is meant to reach ever deeper, to build wanders, to craft miracles just to prove you can. Warlock was evil, disturbing and cruel. But he was not a scourge on creation. When not in a war, I doubt he caused more loss of lives than your average corrupt noble whose ineptitude leaves poor families to starve. And if you focus on his war crimes, we come back to the point I made above: slay the monster is a fine rallying cry, but you should

factor in that if the monster feel threatened, he is going to lash out. And maybe you should be spending that energy fixing smaller problems that cause more damage, rather than risk an escalation that is not really warranted by the current damage.

Saint was a perfect match for Emperors or warlocks of old, and still is for someone like the Tyrant. They are a source of grief that will keep getting worse if you let them off the hook.

Warlock and the Empress though? I am not convinced.

Rook

You can't just wave away or excuse the awful things Malicia did because she was having a hard time negotiating. That's not a justification. Catherine had quite a bit of trouble with Cordelia and the crusade too, but even while young and inexperienced she quite easily avoided the "minor" slippery slope of intentionally creating a weapon that could end all life on the continent.

As for the Heroes and 'good' nations not being cooperative? Even Malicia wasn't stubborn enough to blame them for it. She herself laid the blame for that squarely on the previous madmen in the tower, having burned all bridges so thoroughly over hundreds of years that even her level of political acumen couldn't provide a short term solution. Praes has been a source of Stupid Evil villainy for tens of generations; you can't blame everyone else for not sticking their hand into that dumpster fire just because someone assures you that **this** particular one isn't hot, even though all the fires in the past – without exception – have been.

Warlock? Still waters was Warlock's own creation. And the fact that he didn't have a particular vendetta against anyone doesn't change the fact that he had an utter disregard for human life, his experiments were often horrific, and often provided results that could permanently scar the face of the continent.

As interesting as their characters are, at the end of the day most of the Calamities are definitely evil, in both the capital and lowercase E sense. The things they do on a routine basis would cause a common criminal to be instantly hanged with no sympathy, they shouldn't get a pass just because they're witty and have more power.

The Saint IS fully justified in wanting to behead them all, although it would make for a very poor story to read if she were allowed to do so. The fact that neither she nor the Pilgrim are perfect doesn't change the moralistic grounds,

and the fact that the Heroes are the antagonists in the story doesn't automatically make every action and intention on their end foolish nonsense.

Shveiran

You argue that Malicia and the Calamities are evil, capitalization or no. I agree. Full stop.

You argue that the Saint is justified in her attitude. And you know, for a certain degree of "justified", I can agree with you there too.

What I am saying is simply that as soon as one side chooses "no compromise with the other side ever, only extermination", you create the monsters you wish to vanquish.

This has nothing to do with the fact that they are likable as characters.

If peace is not an option, no matter the compromise put on the table, can you expect the other side not to be willing to step ever lower, especially if your threat grow more dire? Military escalation or captulation are the only possibilities.

Cat went to Keter willing to let out the DK, for all her contingencies and the fact that in the end it was Malicia that got the deal; and she was willing to take that step, fully aware of how likely she was to be tricked by the Uber Villain, because she had no other choice.

My point is not that Cordelia or Pilgrim were soulless idiots to have that stance; my point is that as soon as you leave the other guy no option but to be a monster or die, you share the blame for what that person feels pushed to do because of that.

Rook

The point is fair, but the premise behind it I still disagree with. The implication with your argument is that even Villains like Malicia or Warlock are only "villain" or "evil" because they were pushed into it by Good. For many villains, including Malicia and Warlock, that's not remotely true. Even if it were, it doesn't resolve them of responsibility for their actions, it just makes them half a tragedy instead of fully a horror show.

There often are other choices than "be a monster or die". They're just harder, and it's easier to pretend they don't exist if you didn't take that road to push responsibility away. Now, that doesn't change the fact that their circumstances aren't fair. They're not. It doesn't change the fact that not being extraordinary

enough to take the harder road is fully understandable, most anyone would turn out similar. But it doesn't absolve them of responsibility for or consequences of their actions.

The Heroes don't shoulder ANY of the blame for the Villains actions either, any more than a cop shoulders the blame for the crimes of someone they arrest. Not helping them more when they were young was a failing of the Heroes that makes them imperfect, but it's not as if the Pilgrim or the Saint created the circumstances that birthed Villains like the Warlock or Malicia, and it's not as if they can just turn a blind eye to everything they do because it's understandable or possible to empathize with.

Understandable is not the same thing as innocent.

Agent J

Catherine had quite a bit of trouble with Cordelia and the crusade too, but even while young and inexperienced she quite easily avoided the "minor" slippery slope of intentionally creating a weapon that could end all life on the continent.

—

False. Catherine accepted the Doomsday Device by Malicia's reasoning and also battled her for the right to make treaty with the Hidden Horror, thereby ushering in the Zombie Apocalypse.

Someguy

Saint is at her core the blade of a Guillotine no matter how she Decree herself a sword. I think Kairos is setting her up to become Heirach's attack dog.

konstantinvoncarstein

It is impossible. Saint is a hero, and stubbornly on the side of Good. Hierarch is a Villain, willing to put a Choir on trial. She will more likely try to kill him.

And I don't think a sword can be influenced by the Aspect of the Hierarch based on revolting. Furthermore, he will not be able to see her come.

She seems to be perfectly adapted to kill him, what a coincidence...

[Mental Mouse](#)

> I don't think a sword can be influenced by the Aspect of the Hierarch based on revolting.

A sword does not act on its own; it is wielded by someone else. Saint does describe having adventures on her own long ago, but as Pilgrim comments, "she wasn't always like this". In the Guide, she's been way too easy to manipulate even allowing for Cat's skill.

konstantinvoncarstein

That she can be manipulated by classical means is a given. But I speak only of the "revolting field" of the Hierarch.

1224

I hope we get more of Kind Edward. The skien is cool for a fight, but the former King of Callow seems to have a bit more character to him.

1224

*king

Rook

Part of the trap might actually be the idea that it has to be either or, rather than both. As scary as the Skein is, Edward is the one with enough weight in Cats story to potentially do serious damage to her.

I'm thinking the Skein will be sent out just to provide an opening before Edward is used as the real dagger, to narratively wound Catherine right after (or during) that harrowing ordeal, when they're exhausted and weak.

naturalnuke

Ooo, perhaps taking her right to rule before she can do whatever wizardry-nonsense makes a god?

talenel

This is kinda what I'm thinking. Something like what Akua tried with the name of Squire, except with the role of Ruler of Callow.

KageLupus

Or, and hear me out here, the next fight is going to be King Edward riding around on the Skein.

"Onwards, my mighty rat-steed!"

[Liliet](#)

Yes.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Skein: "Rat-steed?! Ride my antlers, monkey-boy!"

Soma

I'm looking to more cross cultural fun time with the heroes. The halfway civil conversations are always the best ones. Moments like 'you gonna eat that corpse?' are so precious.

[Liliet](#)

I love how Catheirne explained the goblins: "they eat everything and corpses aren't an exception"

Rook

I want to see it as harmless curiosity but can't help but wonder if it's the Pilgrim setting up a narrative on his end.

Has Tariq ever addressed Catherine as 'your majesty ' before? Who the one crown will be is still up in the air, and that kind of ridiculous question would be a pretty good way to distract from a narrative prompt.

carrier

Since when / how does
cat make artifacts from corpse aspects?

Tibstrike

Since she became the Night Pope. It's the Secret Harvesting part of Night.

Her ability to harvest aspects is a blend of Take, Winter crystalization, Night Harvesting, and soul knowledge from Akua.

Rook

Sve Noc is very convenient as a setting device that way. You could technically give Cat the ability to do, well, anything; and explain it away with millenniums of expertise in murder magic from the crows.

[Liliet](#)

Yep, Cat's basically got a bottomless bag of tricks, she just has a limited mana pool to power them with...

...by day.

Morgenstern

Since having had Winter. She first started making trinkets out of aspects of fallen foes (or rather her being able to do so was revealed) in one of the chapters about how she had to stop a lot of heroes coming into and trying to make a mess in Callow since her takeover as ruler there.

caoimhinh

Last chapter she said that this is a use of the Night.

However, she used Winter for doing the same with Akua's Diabolist Aspect 'Call' in Book 3. It turned into a whistle and Cat used it to summon the Wild Hunt in Keter to save Vivienne in Book 4.

Mental Mouse

I still think that this is fundamentally Cat's own power, expressed through whatever power base she's using at the moment.

Micke

She took Rise from the Lone Swordsman as the Squire.

Mental Mouse

Indeed.

It may well be that when she claimed her resurrection from the angels, she also set a pattern deeper than any Name or lesser god.

caoimhinh

Above: She took from the Angels! Well, our team can't be seen as a lesser thing, so from now on, she can take from any creature of that level of power and below!

Below: *Watches their new piece getting OP* Alright, and she will do it even if she needs to borrow external powers.

Above: But to do it, she has to feel pain or otherwise feel uncomfortable!

Below: *Shrugs* Whatever, dude. No pain, no gain.

Above: And she has to give monologues!

Below: Don't you fucking dare.

Above: Meh, worth the shot. So we got a deal?
Below: Deal.

And thus the groove on Fate was made and Cat story as a Taker from Creation and beyond was settled. 😊

Liliet

I'd say it's Cat's favorite trick that she then *manages to recreate* from whatever power base she has at the moment.

Note that the tactical power-stealing level is a pale reflection of what she does strategically. "One always loses more in a bargain with fae than they gain" "then it's a good thing I stole so much of their shit"; "hmmm there's a brilliant tactician who is definitely 100% better than me... how do I recruit her?"; the fucking angel corpse being used for resurrecting herself; drawing both Ranker and Kegan into her own campaign as a means of deescalating matters between them; recruiting an ex-hero into her own band...

"She will use what she cannot break and break what she cannot use" (c) don't remember who

Mental Mouse

> "One always loses more in a bargain with fae than they gain" "then it's a good thing I stole so much of their shit"

LOL!

Liliet

Catherine's friendship with Juniper is precious and important 😊😊😊

Darkening

She could do it as Winter Cat too, she used one of Diabolist's aspects to summon the wild hunt to Keter. Still wondering what the hell happened to the ones she took from all the heroes during the time skip, but maybe sve noc ate all those with winter or something.

Liliet

Maybe she didn't take those, or used them up immediately? They were all single use.

Morgenstern

Hmm... or he just cut the third one out recently, because it would've been too much trouble if Cat got her hands on it, not when he first made a revenant out of the Thief of Stars.

carrier

Thought about that, but does he know that she can make artifacts out of aspects?

Andrew Mitchell

Almost certainly. If Masego knows, then so does the Dead King.

[sengachi](#)

If nothing else, he's familiar with the Drow's Night and knows it can be used to take power from the defeated, and knows Cat now uses Night.

Morgenstern

The "Next" link to this chapter here is missing at the last chapter before this one, EE. (Thankfully, the link was there in the border chapter list, though.)

Morgenstern

Scrap that about "Next" missing – seems to have been some individual browser trouble. When I skipped back to add it in that chapter where it's missing, too, it now was there after all.

IDKWhoitis

I'm betting on Skein then King, with meeting Kairos and/or Sorcerer at the end of battle with Skein.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'd guess that the missing party members were captured by Skein.

[Javvies](#)

Huh.

Interesting. Also, Saint is very inflexible.

On the one hand, I want to see more of King Edward. On the other, I don't want Cat to have to kill him.

On the flip side, Skein would be a hell of a fight. And they just had one and are definitely going to have at least one more, not counting betrayals/ infighting.

Traitorous

Speaking of betrayals and and infighting, where **is** Kairos?

caoimhinh

Cat implied that Kairos might be aiming at Rogue Sorcerer, so Cat could steal the crowns and Amadeus' soul from Kairos and avoid a diplomatic issue if she stole it from the Heroes.

Kissaten

Maybe revenantization requires butchered Name. How easily, remember, Cat managed to get zombified after William killed her. Apart from somehow being connected to zombies in her Name Vision she is also called lucky by Neshamah. Maybe she just almost heroically stumbled upon the truth of making revenants, and she is being herded towards being eighth crown herself

Taelel

I can't help but feel that Traitorous wrote the 200 heroic axioms...

erebus42

That would be hilarious. Almost as hilarious as if he had disguised himself as a Hero and joined a Heroic band bent on bringing him down all Ainz Ooal Gown/Momon style

[*Liliet*](#)

Let's be real, he did that at least once.

Digitize27

It seems improbable that Neshamah knows of her ability to re-forge aspects into artifacts, but aside from the suggestion that the Thief of Stars' third aspect was removed because it may have given her a chance of escaping his necromancy, it also seems possible that Neshamah wants Cat to take an aspect, but thought the Thief's third would have been an advantage, rather than a trap.

[*Liliet*](#)

It seems EXTREMELY probable to me that Neshamah knows that.

– one of her Aspects having been Take is common knowledge, or if not quite common Malicia would definitely know and I'm fairly certain she fed Neshamah info on her;

– Catherine literally used the Call whistle – one she'd made out of Akua's Aspect – IN KETER. What point do you think Neshamah had for organizing that whole showdown if not getting a good read on her capabilities?

– Night is ABOUT stealing power. Even without the above Catherine was extremely likely to end up with tricks relating to it.

So... even in the absence of hard knowledge, even if he can't plumb Masego's mind for all the info it has, it makes no sense that he wouldn't GUESS.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

If Masego knew, then Neshamah knows.

Darkening

Well, that's two revenants with only 2 living aspects. If we get a third, I'm prepared to declare that a rule of making revenants. Should be interesting to see who we get, the skein was a fun fight, and Saint's history with the rats would probably come up a bit which could be interesting, but seeing the King sounds like it'd be a great scene. I mean, his name by definition is his right to rule, hard to get more obvious a crown than that. I doubt Cat will be willing to use any revenant's crown for this, but the temptation should be interesting.

Dimensional

So. Musing on the natures of the various Stories and patterns that seem to be converging here.

1. Seven crowns and One. obviously Important and the 'One' Crown is the Pivot that swings the whole thing – All parties seem to be trying to influence this one.
2. Heroic band confronts a new/old Evil – Cat, Pilgrim, Saint and co. theoretically aimed at Larat post seven crowns, but also at Dead King/Masego? who is betraying who and who they end up in 'Final' Showdown also affect pretty much everything.
3. Hero allies with their enemies to bargain for her father/mentor's soul. Cat's end game involves getting Black's Soul back – Depending on how Cat manages to frame this may protect her from retaliation.
4. – This is Cat's third trip to This city, each time previously she lost, then managed to turn that to victory and 'gain' some sort of apotheosis (Died/ resurrected, Bound/ Winter unfettered). Is this a pattern? and if so can it be manipulated?
5. The other band of 5. Cat's Here, Archer is looking for Masego (and thus i'm assuming is here somehow and somewhere, If Adjutant and Vivienne sneak in somehow – you have a second band of 5 – and a story where 4 come together to restore their friend who has been captured.

Any others?

konstantinvoncarstein

Vivienne is no more the Thief. Personally, I want to know where Hierarch is, and what he is up to.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, I can't wait to see what happens when the Hierarch reappears.

Also, why haven't we seen or heard from the Wandering Bard for so long? Her absence troubles me.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The Wandering Bard already poked DK, and Cat's band would just chase her off.

raimn

Well the Hierarch f***ed her over pretty good when he went to court with her so she probably can't or won't come close to him as it might endanger her name. I think she had her hands or a finger in the Saint pushing Cordelia during the conclave thing and Cordelia going fishing for whatever is in that lake kind of has her fingerprints all over it. At least that what it feels like to me as she should be able to influence Cordelias cousin in her current role as "messenger" from Above.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Indeed, Vivienne is no more the Thief. Now she's the heir-designate to Callow. Wouldn't it annoy Pilgrim if *she* supplies the eighth crown? Cat would still have Abigail as backup heir, and Viv could still be Abigail's (lower-case) chancellor.

konstantinvoncarstein

I think Catherine will provide the eighth crown. Vivienne is her best possible successor. Abigail is not suited to reign, even if she could make a good general.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Probably, I just liked imagining Pilgrim's response. And Cat is justifiably wary of shortcuts for the last crown – as per the text for this chapter, she knows that the core story is "one of these three shall lose their crown", and if she twists that, DK gets to respond in kind.

Liliet

Not to mention all the political/narrative PR value Cat can get out of a willing sacrifice on that scale.

And the part where Callow is suddenly no longer led by a villain and the Grand Alliance has no valid reasons left to aggress it.

And the part where she breaks the story Tariq is worried about her representing, the “revenge on Good for failing her country” once and for all.

Even beyond all the tactical reasons to do it, strategic benefits Catherine would get out of an abdication are immense.

Of course, then there’s the tactical setback of the army going “excuse me what” and Vivienne having a new problem to handle in that, and the strategic setback if she doesn’t quite manage to.

Mental Mouse

> the army going “excuse me what”

A real concern, but if Cat does physically return, she can directly support Viv to the army.

Also, she could potentially serve as Marshal for a transition period (risky business, but Cat’s used to that). She already set up the Iserre adventure as a pretext for demoting Juniper, and given Cat would be taking a demotion herself, Juniper might not be *too* unhappy. Or once Black gets reassembled, *he* could be Marshall, while Cat goes off to take care of the Drow, and “prepare a place” for Sve Noc.

I’ll respond to your other comment once I’m properly caffeinated. 😊

Liliet

Or a new position, like official advisor or hero of the realm or something XD

she doesn’t even need a formal capacity as long as she stays around ♥

and happy coffeing!

Mental Mouse

> The other band of 5.

On the flip side, Archer by herself could be a 6th Ranger for the current band. If they pull in the rest of the original band, Viv has really poor survival value in this environment.

diaknia

Woo finally caught up! Friend hooked me on PGtE in mid-April, and what a ride!

I too am hoping she meets Good King Edward the Revenant.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> ... that left the three of us masters of the field. And so I was worried.

That's how Cat's story goes. I note that these three are (belatedly) watching their words as if DK might be listening.

Speaking of listening, looks like EE's still reading the comments. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Are you, too, falling prey to the "narrative questions heavily built up to have been addressed right after the comment section started discussing them; clearly this means the writer used the comment section as a source, and not built up to it because they intended to write it like this all along" weird reasoning trap?

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's a fair question whether he's reading us, or we're "reading" him. ;-), But there have been a *lot* of chapters where he addresses the specific issues we brought up, usually early in the chapter. That said, in some of those cases, we've basically been covering all the possibilities we could see, and in this one (and some previous chapters), EE also tosses out a few points we hadn't considered.

He's clearly too smart (and/or busy) to actually negotiate the plot with us in the comment section, but I see no problem with the idea of him reading our analyses and taking advantage of them, without being bound thereby.

[TeK](#)

I'd put my money on busy. The rate of his typos suggest that he is getting tired. Also bear in mind that this is a beta version, not an actual book, when it comes down to it (EE already mentioned that he prefer no ebook made, since there's planned to be an actual publication). That also explains that, on my memory, he edited only first two books

(which coincided with him making more frequent updates) according to the typos found in comments. He also mentioned that he tries to read almost all comments, though answers arguably much rarer and more about some lore and worldbuilding questions, not plot ones.

[Liliet](#)

I just keep seeing characters bring up the obvious points they were inevitably supposed to consider, and then everyone goes OOH HE'S REACTING TO US. I don't think Guide sans comment section would lack those musings, and I find myself kind of annoyed with the repeated suggestions it would =x

[Shveiran](#)

Agreed.

I find it much more likely that it merely seems EE is reacting to the comments because we comment about the topics each update brings up or build up to. A good writer will try to guess what kind of questions a certain chapter would instill in the reader, and either answer them in the following chapter or "hang a lantern" on it to promise an answer will come in a satisfying spot.

We discuss those points, but my guess is EE has already decided whether or not he'll include a certain item in the following chapter whenever he posts.

[Liliet](#)

>A good writer will try to guess what kind of questions a certain chapter would instill in the reader

Not even this.

A good writer MANIPULATES the questions a story raises in the reader, deliberately. A good writer RAISES the questions through their story, BECAUSE they want to answer them later.

It's kind of how foreshadowing actually properly works -
—

So, like... yeah.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Maybe, maybe not. I've done a fair bit of work on various wikis over the years, and I've sometimes been deeply impressed at the power of such collaboration. Even where there's a "primary" editor for a given page, others can bring in key points or fill in neglected details. I've also seen several webcomics where the cartoonist(s) were

an active part of their own commenting community, and occasionally did take suggestions or ideas from the comments. I know that the SF author Larry Niven has at least twice responded to fans pointing out issues, by fixing them in later volumes. (The orbital stability of the Ringworld, and the anatomy of his Moties.)

This serial isn't openly interactive, but still, it doesn't emerge from a vacuum. ErraticErrata is an actual person, who shares my own given name. As I write this, he might be working at a day job, sitting at the computer, having a snack, working out at the gym, or anything else people do. He's entirely capable of seeing a comment and thinking "didn't I cover that? Maybe not", or even "hey good idea". Or for that matter "Where is that guy coming from, did they actually read what I wrote?" 😊 By reading the comments, he has the option to pick among the fruits of our creativity and insight, and maybe add some of them to his own.

The fun part about being the author, is that *he* gets to decide whether and how to respond. Personally, I think he's being smart to keep any in-story responses "deniable", rather than going back and-forth with us in the comments. Because that does leave it open for us to get a sense of collaboration. Whether or not it's actually all in our heads, it's still fun! (And either way, he doesn't have to engage with pestering.)

[Liliet](#)

It's just really not fun for me to imagine a world where the questions raised by the narrative that we discuss in the comment were raised by ACCIDENT and not deliberately. It doesn't make sense with how tight erratic's plotting is 0.0

Collaborations in the sense of him fixing what he gets wrong are great and productive, but this is just... 0.0

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, "at this level of play" it gets increasingly difficult for one person to really keep track of everything. Steven Brust has said that he's depended on a fan chronology to help keep his world straight, and I doubt he's the only one.

All this gets even trickier when the world mechanics go meta, as with the Guide's "story" as an in-world mechanic; story tradition simply isn't the work of a single person Even the Grimm brothers and Hans Christian Anderson had forebears, and they didn't

capture the whole of their mileus either. Looking at how the readers respond to the Story So Far, and what stories *they* recognize, is just sensible research.

Liliet

Yes, but not in *answering the questions that the previous chapter asked*.

erebus42

"You do not intend to eat them, do you?"

That one had me laughing. Given what he said about what they know or think they know about her allies and subordinates it wasn't that crazy of a question but it just came out of left field and got me.

Mental Mouse

Also the image of Pilgrim hesitating before "Um...". 😊

Maybe she'll take them home to Robber. World's grossest doggie bag.

TeK

Well, Cat's mrvelously optimistic here. Rat or king? Why not both, and throw some un6known Revenant just to spice things up! And since Hierophant is nearby, why not him too?

Speacking of elves. I do like me some foreshadowing, but anyone else is a little exited/scared for Forever King? I do like me some foreshadowing, but his name was in the summmary from the very beginning, and he is yet to do anything meaningful. I wonder what our Chekhov's elf will do, but from the sheer amount of unexpected twists, I bet we will ally with DK to fight the the army of crazy murderous elves, after they usurp Arcadia or something equally disturbing. I mean I was rereading Keter Ark, and this Liesse/Arcadia was foreshadowed way back when they traveled echo of tge making of Kingdom of dead in Arcadia, and it was mentioned in passing that Liesse will leave the same mark on Arcadia.EE doesn't leave any gun unfired.

So, had DK already captured Archer anyway, or will she come at the last moment, saving the day? Will it finally resolve their ark with Masego? Will Cat finally taste human flesh? Stay tuned and learn all that – and more.

konstantinvoncarstein

I had forgotten the presence of the Forever King in the intro. I think he will see the Dead King weakened, and try his luck. But it will cause problems with the Deoraithe.

[TeK](#)

Everyone did. Ain't that suspicious? He is mentioned in a brief number of chapters, and his actual presence in the story amounts to sending two elves to kill Aqua, and later NOPEing out of Creation.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The Forever King might be Book VI.

Andrew Mitchell

Now that would be a massive twist.

medailyfun

It's odd Cat needed that clumsy explanation for the crowns carried by Sourcerer when it looked like the obvious show of trust

[TeK](#)

Second that. Although it just may be that since Saint would not beleive her a way, she didn't bothered presenting a plausible lie.

[TeK](#)

By the way, how many crowns we no have, that are kimda sorta qualofied to be the One?

Cat and Callow; Tariq and Levant; Kairos and Helike; Thief and her constellation; Spellsword and Golden Bloom; would not be suprised if Rogue Sorcerer is some princeling in disguise; Saint is most certainly a nobility, and if she is indeed a reference to Simon de Montfort (older one, not the one who rebelled and installed a constitutional monarchy and reformed the Parlament – now there's the horrifying thought – though both crusaded) she might even be somewhat royal, but taking the name of her not royal parent for example, or being bastard child; there is still a Hierophant nearby – a ruler of League, I wonder who he will react tot he act of reaping of crowns; King Edward the Seventh – Callow; Skein can techincally be considered a figure of influence among Ratlings – insofar as he is to tough to be food and possesses a modicum of intelligence; Balck is here too, both a (former) king of Callow and a claimant to Tower; don't forg6et the Dead King; oh and I think that's about it. Would agree with Hierophant – too much crowns flying around.

Cat giving her own crow will be predictable and expected – too predictable, so I expect EE to pull through again, and give us yet another twist. Doubt it would be anyone from the band either, and it would not be a Black nor a DK, Thief is extremely

improbable, elf wouldn't cut it, as wouldn't Skein. Probably it is someone I didn't see coming, like Cat – because I did not expect her since she is to expectable.

Mental Mouse

Well, Cat has commented that going outside the band would be problematic story-wise. As I wrote above:

> she knows that the core story is “one of these three shall lose their crown”, and if she twists that, DK gets to respond in kind.

She really doesn't want to give the Dead King an entry to this story, and any hijinks with the last crown would do so.

Also, some of your options are almost certainly invalid, in two groups:

Saint of Swords, Rogue Sorcerer, Skein, and Thief Of Stars would each require an authorial ass-pull, because they have not previously been cited as royal – and in the first two cases they *should* have been, at the conclave. (Thankfully, EE isn't prone to pulling stuff out of his ass.)

Black and King Edward VII share a different disqualification: Neither has a right to rule *anymore*, because each has been replaced by a valid successor! (Come to think of it, the late Spellblade probably would have had a similar problem.) Cat owns that crown now... and she's actually willing to give it up. Her abdication has been teased since before she was officially Queen, she's made appropriate preparations so as not to leave Callow in the lurch, and this is a perfectly good occasion. (It would also be a nice thumb in the eye to Pilgrim, but that's just candy. 😊) About the only drawback is that it would probably scotch Liliet's Queen Under The Mountain idea.

If somebody else pops up to donate a crown, that would actually be an attack on Cat's plans. The Hierophant is the primary contender to pull that stunt, but as I've noted previously, that could be trouble: If the realm is shaped by that final crown, Heirophant's influence would presumably make it hostile to rulers and even commanders. That would be a problem when trying to take armies through it! On the other hand, DK would be fine with that, as it would shut out his enemies, while he's probably strong enough to take whatever the realm throws at him.

Shveiran

Yeah, I think the One will be one of the 3+1 candidates (Cat, Tariq and Kairos, plus possibly Black if the possessed Rogue Sorcerer theory becomes canon).

EE is great with twists, but there has to be some

foreshadowing for a twist to feel awesome, and introducing a new option at this point may feel forced. There has been some foreshadowing that RS may be Black-influenced, and we know he is a claimant to the title of Emperor... but him giving up that makes for a very ugly pot in Praes. I don't see anyone but him and possibly Cat dragging Praes away from a return to the Golden Age of Villainy.

Mental Mouse

Remember, Black's consent isn't actually required – whether or not he's influencing RS, he's currently a disembodied soul.

The thing is, if it's Black, he can't take the Tower... but Cat *can*, which would be the culmination of his plans. Any Drow that stick with her (as opposed to joining the Keter guard) would fit right in, and even help keep the nobles in line.

Liliet

Actually, I'd say you have to pick one: if Cat giving up her crown would scratch the "Queen Under The Mountain" story (note that a story does not need to match up well in all the specific details: Black was never crowned King of Callow, yet the Sword in the Stone story worked), then King Edward, to fulfill this same role through still being thought of as "a king", if one who no longer rules, would still be holding his "crown".

I would say in fact it's possible for both to be true: it's possible that King Edward's claim to 'a crown' is still strong enough to actualize his 'right to rule' into something usable here, AND that Catherine giving up the actual 'right to rule' would not scratch out her narrative role as 'a queen of yore' if she abdicates immediately and at no point rules without having a right to do so (which would overwrite the narrative with a very bad story, for her).

I'm not saying that I'm *certain* in either of these, much less in both at once... actually scratch that. Catherine has SAID it would be possible to use King Edward's crown. I'm damn well certain she knows what she says.

As far as I understand the metaphysical concept of "crown" that is at issue here, the "right to rule" is something all mortals have by default, per se: the Heavens don't metaphysically protest against anyone seizing the throne no matter by what means they do so. If you're not fae, you have this right until/unless you give it up specifically, like here. It's a... slot. It's a slot of "I have a claim to the crown of X", where X is empty by default, and can be filled/

emptied/overwritten any number of times as long as the slot is still there.

For Thief of Stars, this slot is in fact actually filled with the constellation: she's not an earthly ruler per se, but a crown she has, and the power in it is enough to give substance to Larat's claim (which is what the bargain is for in the first place: cobble together seven and one mortal 'slots' to make one for him where he would not normally have one). For the Spellblade, this claim is filled with his status as the Forever King's successor – Catherine is only presuming it works like that for elves, but given he's a Forever King and not a Forever President, I think it's a fair guess. And just because he died doesn't mean his role in the story changed from "a prince" – if he were to be suddenly resurrected and the Forever King to suddenly die, he'd have the crown. And when Catherine says that's a sufficient claim, I believe her. After all, Princes and Princesses of Procer only have claims to individual principalities, too, which I would say is inherently weaker than a crown of a whole independent polity. For King Edward, the claim is no longer substantiate-able: I doubt that if he were resurrected and came back to Callow he'd miraculously be in the line of succession... although, come to think of it, it's probably a fair guess that he'd be next after Vivienne: not overriding the current rulers, but a non-zero advantage over 'pick any random noble'. So it's a very real claim in potentia, not to mention the part where it *has been* substantiated enough that he gets referred to as King, right now.

The question of "would Catherine be able to fulfill a Queen story role that did not require her to be actually currently ruling after giving up her right to rule" is open, I'd say. Neither a certain yes nor a certain no.

It would suck if these two predictions of mine ended up being mutually exclusive, but that's life -_-

[Tek](#)

Let's narrow candidates down, shall we? Cat, Tariq, Tyrant, Hierarch, DK, Revenants. DK is out, Hierarch is not palatable, Revenants will probably give DK a thread to resurrect Larat after he's killed, Tyrant won't give his title up without screwing everyone even worse (there is a chance the crown will affect whom Larat will become after ascending), so there are two real unwilling candidates, Tariq and Cat. Both don't want to rule, though one does out of necessity. I would argue that Tariq WANTS to give up his crown for this, as it will give the realm into the hands of the Above somewhat, and more importantly, estrange big Black

Queen from the story (by the way, I just realised you can call Catherine "Cat the BBQ").

Also I wonder, can Cat give up only her Winter title and keep earthly ones (one a grounds that Catherin from Laure and Sovereign of Moonless Nights are two separate entities, given one tended to corrupt the other and that Sovereign was arguably immortal replica of Cat, rather than Cat herself (as per Warlock)) so that not she gives up her right to rule, but the Sovereign of Moonless Nights? Also, she can give up her right to rule, die, get resurrected (tx Pilly) and pretend the Cat that gave her "right" is not her. I mean there are many ways to flip the story if you get creative enough.

Can you make Archer Queen of Callow (after adapting her as an ugly but still beloved daughter) and make her give up her right to rule, abdicating in favor of Cat again? Possibilities are endless.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Addressing your last few paragraphs: (1) Per the conclave, Cat giving up her Winter title would leave her mortal title cursed. (2) The problem with shoving the bill onto Archer like you suggest is that there's no way to notify Callow's people of her abrupt abdication (in favor of someone *other* than the designated heir that she *did* give proper notice for). (3) Given that Cat was the Black Queen before, during, and after Winter, a quick death and resurrection isn't going to change anything.

Expanding on that last: As I've commented before, in a world where this sort of thing is possible, the definition of "real identity" becomes a political question: Will this person maintain all the obligations, roles, and relationships they had before they were killed+revived, transmuted, ensorcelled, etc.? If so, they count as the same person. (And that trick would specifically violate that rule!)

However, I can easily believe that Cat and Pilgrim might end up "fighting for the bill". 😊 It would be a "nice" twist if Kairos grabs it, but I doubt that will happen, for all the obvious reasons.

[Liliet](#)

>I would argue that Tariq WANTS to give up his crown for this, as it will give the realm into the hands of the Above somewhat, and more importantly, estrange big Black Queen from the story

not to spoiler from the future, but 😊

>(by the way, I just realised you can call Catherine "Cat the BBQ").

ilu

>Also I wonder, can Cat give up only her Winter title and keep earthly ones

She already did: she laid down her crown as Sovereign of Moonless Nights at Sve Noc's feet.

Also in my understanding of how the crowns work here it wouldn't have satisfied the bargain anyway: Larat needed MORTAL crowns.

Mental Mouse

Hmm. Looking back, Catherine does indeed consider the Thief of Stars and King Edward as options as well as Spellblade... but note that even she wasn't really sure. She does note that DK is presenting three *potential* crowns to match her three solid ones (Pilgrim is least certain, but the conclave seemed to agree that he counts.)

Interestingly, if King Edward counts, then so does Amadeus, as the Sword In The Stone incident implied and confirmed that he counts as a king of Callow. (World rules seem to be that if you get away with something once, it sets a precedent.) And Amadeus has fewer liabilities... not a creature of DK, sane (scarily so 😊) and he'd be happy to defer to Cat.

Mental Mouse

Which also raises an interesting question: Does the Dead King *know* that Amadeus's soul is on the table?

- 1) The soul was taken in a camp full of Heroes, who might well have been able to hide the business.
- 2) It was then carried by the weirdly-powerful and mysterious Rogue Sorcerer.
- 3) It was discussed briefly between Pilgrim and Cat, both of whom have some ability to fend off DK's scrying...
- 4) ... and then conspicuously *not* mentioned at the conclave, nor (iirc) since.
- 5) Masego wouldn't know, because he was gone before Cat emerged from the Everdark.
- 6) Even Archer, if she's been captured, likewise left before Cat found out. So he couldn't learn it from them.
- 7) Black's soul has also been carried with the party from the beginning, by the same guy who's carrying the "mortal" seven crowns. 😊

+1) So, there's a very real possibility that Cat will have access to a valid crown that the Dead King *doesn't know about*. Amadeus, Lord of the Crossroads?

[Shveiran](#)

I see what you did there. Nice.

[TeK](#)

I'm pretty sure Amadeus will be a non-Named ruler of Praes though.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not if he donates his crown... OK, a lot of folks wouldn't mind Praes being cursed, at least until they realize that leads to him being replaced by some other Dread Emperor/Empress who might not be as... restrained.

[Liliet](#)

I think it could have worked WHILE Amadeus was "king in all but name", but since he no longer is AND in name he never was, the train has sailed & it'd be too much of a stretch. Now, if Tariq's potential claim to the throne of Levant counts, Amadeus's potential claim to Dread Emperor might count. Though, Tariq's claim is founded BOTH on Levant's willingness to accept him as a ruler AND a lawful claim through inheritnace, while Amadeus only has the former, so it might not be enough... but if it did count, Amadeus and Cat might potentially end up having an amusing conversation where Cat wants him as a ruler of Praes while he doesn't want to be one ;u;

[Liliet](#)

Doesn't "de Montfort" just mean "from Montfort"? It's not even a last name, just the analogue of "Amadeus of the Green Stretch"

[TeK](#)

Simon de Montfort is one of leaders of Crusade that is most infamous for saying (actually not saying) "Kill them all, let God sort them out" also infamlus for being brutal crusader who didn't really spare anyone. I mean, there is literally a province named Brabant here (among others), EE is not one for subtle historical references.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, I know, that's not the point I'm addressing here. I'm addressing the idea that Saint has a 'crown' somehow.

Mental Mouse

> given the way I made of aspects artefacts with a single use

So, no Banning DK from Masego. 😞

Aston

I'm still waiting for Cat to pull out higher level tech to resolve the issue.

Like a railgun.

Borrowed from the Gnomes.

Good chapter but aren't we due for a series of Interludes..?

Mental Mouse

> aren't we due for a series of Interludes..?

Not like the last one *please*. We already have enough cliffhangers.

Shveiran

While I'd not look forward to a series of them, an interlude showing the coming conversation from Pilgrim's POV may be interesting. I'd enjoy seeing the recent developments framed through his perspective.

Mental Mouse

Also, exactly what issue here would a railgun solve? Especially since the possessed guy Cat's trying to rescue is the same guy who's already got the magical equivalent! Cat has learned better than to answer big guns by reaching for a bigger gun.

Aston

What would be really funny is the Dead King actually has an advanced technology society hidden in his personal Hells and thus undetectable by the Dwarves and Gnomes.

Using time acceleration or some such.

At least beyond bows and swords.

Let me just equip a few hundred dead with rifles etc.

Whatever he's hiding in his Hells is the trump card.

Above Driven society?

Captive Choirs?

Mental Mouse

And this is one of the few places he could possibly pull them out without facing immediate war from the gnomes. That said, there's been no hint whatsoever that he's playing in that territory, while DK *has* been established as being supreme in other, more familiar modes.

TeK

Nah, dear Neshi plays it safe. Having Red Letter tier technology is NOT safe. Why not wait a few thousand years instead and see if gnomes collapse into nothingness instead?

Tab

Excited for the next chapter

Why does no one believe me

Saint's domain has literally been mentioned like 500 times, along with her death flags. In what sense is she NOT a perfect "plot twist" (foreshadowed as hell) And One candidate???

Mental Mouse

Her death is foreshadowed, but lots of people have personal domains. I don't think that counts as a crown.

Berder

I guarantee you that the aspect Cat just took is a trap. If she uses it, it's going to send her to Keter or something equally awful. The Dead King is no fool, to just give Cat an easily defeated foe from which she can take something useful. I bet the Thief of Stars' third aspect was excised *recently* specifically so that Cat would be guided to take the escape aspect.

Berder

Or it may be a more subtle story trap: the Dead King anticipates a situation from which it will be very tempting for Cat to escape, but, if she does, it will turn the story against her.

nipi

Anyone wonder how many lesser artifacts Cat already owns. I mean she took care of quite a few heroic bands before the Crusade got going.

Mental Mouse

None have been mentioned (even as a “bag of tricks” in her luggage), so I wouldn’t expect she’s got any right now.

Chapter 40: Entreaty

“The priests lie, my friend. A bargain with a devil does not pervert your meanings, or seek to twist your nature. Why would it need to, when the honest desires of men are already so wicked?”

– Kayode Owusu, Warlock under Dread Emperors Vindictive I and Nihilis

When I’d told Tariq that if he wanted to talk about the Saint we’d have to do it while walking, I’d meant it as a way to put him off. Considering we were in a broken ruin of a realm infested with devils, undead and whatever else had might have been summoned and bound, it seemed foolish to have such a conversation when we should be keeping our eyes out on our surroundings instead. How silly of me not to realize that I was dealing with the Grey Pilgrim: he was more than willing to take my words at face value if it got him his way, and I couldn’t even recant. Not without seeming like I was the one out to get the heroine, anyway, which would win me no favours with the heroic three fifths of our party as well as quite possibly turn into a liability down the line. It was one thing if I killed the Saint of Sword in my own defence or that of Masego’s, another if just like when I’d snatched back Black’s body I was baiting her to better take a swing. One would be a tragedy that could be mended, in time, but the other would eat away at the foundation of the alliances I wanted to make. So, when after a few traded whispers with the Peregrine the Saint went on ahead to scout the way through, I sighed but did not object when he fell in at my side. Quite a pair we made, the winded old man and the dusty cripple.

“I had a conversation with your teacher, before his soul was cut out and sealed,” Tariq Fleet-foot suddenly said.

He’d meant to catch me by surprise, which made the way I was just a little too slow in keeping that surprise off my face all the more irritating. My limp faltered, and the way I turned it into a painful longer stride wouldn’t have fooled me – much less an old hand like the Pilgrim.

“Did you?” I blandly replied. “Interesting.”

Like a horse about to bolt, there was now no telling where this was headed. If he'd wanted my undivided attention, well, he godsdamned had it.

"He is," the Pilgrim agreed. "The qualities that steer him could be considered virtues, in a certain light. Had he chosen to serve the cause of Above instead of Below he would have made a great champion."

My lips quirked, though it was mockery and not amusement that moved them. All I could think of was green eyes burning with something mad, in a little room in Marchford, and that implacable anger that was at the heart of him. Amadeus of the Green Stretch, carrying the banner of the Heavens? No, it would go against every grain of who he was – he was capable of doing great good, he truly was, in that Tariq had grasped him exact. But his disdain for Good was set in the marrow of his bones, and there would be no changing that without changing every other part of him.

"I expect if you told him as much it was not well-received," I said.

"I believe he made his finest effort to wound me with words alone," the old man said, sounding unmoved.

I threw an assessing glance at the Grey Pilgrim, finding his tone just a little too blithe. His face was the same, so tranquil I could not help but wonder if it was forced. I'd known Black to twist or break people with but a few calculated sentences, and though the Peregrine would be made of sterner stuff than these he would also have a graveyard's worth of skeletons in his closet. On the other hand, Black had cultivated his reputation – his legends – into as much of a weapon as the rest of him. It was always hard to discern what he could and could not do, which had always been the way the man liked it.

"Yet his insights, though harshly delivered, have allowed me to shed different light on things I once believed myself to fully understand," the Pilgrim continued. "In the east, I believe a distinction is drawn between *Name* and *Role*."

"The Book of All Things does to begin with, if you read into certain parts," I pointed out.

For a beat I sought the exact passage, one of the few I'd actually learned by rote.

"To every soul, great and small, purpose will be tendered," I quoted. "Through crucible of choice are lives shaped, and one's mark on Creation defined."

The passage went on to say some pointed things about villainy being a twisting of that tendered purpose, and so Evil as well as

evil, but I'd always taken the Book with a grain of salt. It was a beloved and well-worn story in Callow that some ancient Count of Denier had used that very passage to argue that it was in fact impious not pay taxes promptly and in full. Once words were put to ink, anybody could put them to use and those particular words were so old none could say who'd first written them – more than simply the purposes, I suspected that the words themselves had shifted over the centuries. They couldn't *not* have, after all, considering no one in those days had spoken Lower Miezian before said empire came to Calernia and the Callowan manuscripts of the Book were in that language. No translation could be perfect, my expanding repertoire of spoke and written languages had made painfully clear. The Grey Pilgrim's glance at me was openly amused, which was when I was forced to acknowledge I'd just quoted scripture at a man who rubbed elbows with angels. Ah. Awkward.

"As you say, Queen Catherine," he said. "I must commend whoever it was that saw to your religious education."

I wondered how he'd take if I told him I'd drifted through most sermons at the House and only begun studying the Book with any seriousness at the prompting of the wicked servant of the Hellgods better known as the Black Knight. Or, for all that matter, that the only person I'd comprehensively discussed theology with in the last few years was Masego, a man whose main interest in the matter was the practicalities of decide. *In all fairness*, I thought, *that's turned out surprisingly pertinent to our lives*.

"In Levant, we speak of it simply as Bestowal," Tariq said. "A gift from Above or a curse from Below. What is done with these is our choice, and the strength of the mark left on Creation is but the illustration of the character of they who were bestowed. One who cultivated customs leading to greatness will leave great legacy behind, deeds worthy of recording. One who allowed mortal failings to remain paramount will be but a line in the ledgers of the Blood, soon forgot."

"I'd noticed," I slowly said, "that your nobles – your Blood – seem particularly set in their ways."

"We seek to emulate admirable people, Queen Catherine, but those people are long gone," the Pilgrim sadly said. "And their wars, their foes, their disasters are no longer our own. In being inflexible of virtue we have made virtue of inflexibility, often to our detriment. It is a way of thinking, you see, that exalts great deeds done in the name of the Heavens without giving thought to their aftermath. Their consequences. At our finest – and make no mistake, for all its flaws the Dominion has rendered great and righteous service for no rewards at all – my people are an

assembly of heroes, Bestowed or not. At our worst, we seek glory heedlessly and recklessly kill over matters of honour."

Which, while a fascinating look into the Dominion from a man who knew it like few others could and likely ever would, had little bearing on the Saint of Swords or even Black that I could see.

"I had thought myself, through the nature events that shaped me, freed of these fetters so common to my people," the Grey Pilgrim quietly said. "I was, it has become clear, terribly wrong in this."

After the first surprise he'd sprung on me I'd grown careful to mask my thoughts, but hearing the old man that was arguably the most accomplished hero of our age – and likely a century or two before that – bluntly admit he'd made a grave mistake almost put another stutter to my steps. There was regret in the way the Peregrine had spoken, but mostly it was an honest admission of error. And that was, I thought, why even when he sought to end me it was difficult to hate the man. Because even when he dipped into hypocrisy, even when he dug in his heels long past the point he should, the Grey Pilgrim was trying to do good. And when he failed in that, he looked the truth of it in the eye and owned it.

"I do not regret for a moment my service of the Heavens, Black Queen," the old man honestly said, "but my blindness to the consequences of it is on my head. In doing merciful work I have sown the seeds of reprisal far and wide and though *never once* will I bend my head to Evil for fear of contest, more should have been done to prepare Calernia for the storm."

It sounded, I thought, like he was blaming himself for the Dead King's stirring. Which seemed backward to me, considering I was fairly sure it was Malicia who'd first opened the gates for his intervention in Creation. Oh, I'd sought to make a bargain as well after receiving envoy from Neshamah but she'd been wearing a body in Keter long before I arrived. If my suspicions were correct and the Dead King avoided intervention save at the invitation of another Evil – to place, in a way, the burden of opposition to Good on another – then it was the Tower's hand and not any hero's that was at work. *On the other hand, would he have moved if he'd not seen opportunity?* I wondered. I doubted an invitation was all it took to secure the aid of the Dead King. Perhaps the Grey Pilgrim was right, and in some eldritch way his works had paved the grounds for the King of Death's coming. But even so, fuck the idea that the old man was *responsible* for the slaughter that ensued. I'd stood on the opposite end of the field from the Pilgrim more than once, but I could only praise the vast majority of what he'd done over his many decades of holding a Name.

"You've been a helping hand," I replied. "Sometimes I question the soundness of the causes you've helped, but not your intent."

"That is kind of you," Tariq said, bowing his head. "And you are not wrong to say I was hand, and mayhaps on occasion a finger on the scale. I was offered chances, you see, to intervene when there was still contest to be had. When the balance had yet to swing."

He paused.

"Laurence de Montfort was sent forth, for near as many years as I, when there was absolutely nothing left to save," he gravely said.

And there we were at last, I thought. The song and dance to convince me to stay my hand if a moment came where she turned on me. That the Pilgrim had pressed so hard for this conversation to happen in the first place told me everything I needed to know about the odds of it happening.

"So she's seen the deep end," I said, unimpressed.

"No, Queen Catherine, she has *swum* in it," the old man sadly said. "When we first spoke in Callow, years ago, you told me you were tired of killing children because they were on the wrong side. Asked me if I was. And I am, Black Queen, Heavens forgive me but I am. Yet mine was still the lighter of the burdens, for even Laurence's victories have only ever come in the wake of disaster."

My brows furrowed. If I was following his meaning correctly, he was implying that while his role had been snuffing out disasters before they could fully form while the Saint of Swords had been... well, cutting of limbs when the rot took.

"You see her now, after a life of holding back the darkness, and find only bitterness and distrust," Tariq said. "I do not expect these to endear her to you, Your Majesty, or even for cordiality to be attained. But I ask that you see her bared fangs for what they are: the scars left behind by a lifetime spent facing down the horrors of Calernia so no one else would have to."

His voice wasn't pleading, not exactly, though knowing what I knew about the Peregrine if he thought that tossing aside his pride would save the Saint's life he would discard it without a second thought. In that sense he was remarkably similar to my own teacher, seeing little worth in personal dignity when it stood in the way of results. But though shy of a plea, there was no denying that a suit was being made.

"I know better than most what it costs someone to tread through ruin," I acknowledged. "And many of mine were of my own making."

But that must be owned, Pilgrim. It does not abnegate responsibility – *especially* not in the powerful.”

“Those ties got both ways,” the old man said. “There is not a soul on Calernia, Black Queen, that has not benefitted from the toil that clouded Laurence de Montfort. Sword in hand, she has danced with death for the sake of others a hundred times. From the windswept plains of the Chain of Hunger to the silent deeps of the Brocelian Forest: she has drowned plagues that would have killed dozens of thousands in the blood of hundreds, slain beloved heroes who sunk into madness and slaughter, sent scuttling back into the dark all manners of old gods whose hungers grew wicked – though not before they had their taste.”

His blue eyes grew hard as steel, when he met mine.

“All this she has endured, and endured for so long that Creation itself tempered her into something beyond breaking,” the old man said. “I have known souls sworn to Endurance that would weep at having lived half her life – and for this she has asked no reward, no riches nor titles nor honours. Not a single thing, for above all things Laurence de Montfort believes that strength must be put to righteous purpose.”

The Grey Pilgrim let out a long breath.

“She is not kind,” he admitted, “for Creation has burned kindness out of her. She is not forgiving, for there are graves sown across many lands that taught her to cast forgiveness aside. She is not witty or brilliant or fascinating, those traits that so often make the worst of us seem forgivable. She is rough and brusque, mistrusting, and there will never be a day where she does not see you as a seed of the Enemy.”

The Peregrine, old and bent as he was, held himself with the presence of ruler when he so wished. This was not one of those times, for he did not try to tower over me or browbeat into acquiescence. He was asking, as an equal or something close to it.

“And still,” he said, voice growing rough with feeling, “I ask you to see you for what she is: a woman who saw evil preying on the world and took up the sword in its defence. Selflessly, without once grudging what such service would wreak upon her soul.”

And I could see, through the grief in his voice, that there truly was a tragedy there. Because he might be a decent actor, I thought, and perhaps a liar of some skill if there was cause for it, but he had not taken to it the way some of the people I knew had. The tremor in his voice was genuine, coming from someone who’d never learned to fake it so perfectly they’d blurred even to themselves the difference between truth and lies.

"It may be," the Grey Pilgrim said, "that for the harrowing life she has led Laurence will be given place of honour at the feet of the Gods when death finally takes her. That for greater service greater accolade will be rendered unto her. But that is the debt of the Gods Above, Black Queen, and that realm known only to the just is beyond our mortal understanding."

His fingers twisted into a symbol I did not recognize, though he did not even seem to notice their movement.

"Those are not the Gods to which you keep, regardless, and so I do not ask you to keep to their ways or their dues," Tariq said. "I speak to you instead as one of the living. We who still tread Creation, who have benefited from her shattering labours. We who owe better than a shallow grave to this woman. Not for what she might still do, though few are better suited for war on the Hidden Horror, or for the expedience of earthly alliances. We owe it for what she has *already done*."

It was, I thought, a touching speech. Well spoken and from the heart. It might just be, too, that every word he had spoken was true. That for all that I'd thrown my castigations in the face of these heroes when the Tenth Crusade came baying at my door for their temerity in coming to offer their *salvation* more than two decades too late, I'd still lived in the shadow of their protection. That these two old killers had borne the weight of half this continent on their back and these days had nothing but scars and bared swords to show for it. It would have felt right, to follow the course of that thread to the conclusion that what had shaped Laurence de Montfort excused who she'd become. *And yet*.

"You ask me, in essence," I said, "to extend the courtesy of a stayed hand because what has sharpened her to a fault was beyond her control."

"No," the Pilgrim said, "you mistake me. She made the choice to--"

"I understand you perfectly," I said. "Just the same as your Blood, her character has led her to this place and this strife. That character is good, and so you ask me to excuse her."

"How carelessly you reduce a life of doing good to a single sentence," he said.

"It does weigh on the scales, what you say she did," I admitted. "But I have to ask, Pilgrim: this courtesy you ask of me, will you extend it in turn?"

The old man blinked in surprise.

"I too have my bevy of broken souls," I said. "And oh, they're a vicious lot. No denying that. Savage from their days in the wild, but they're learning. One step at a time."

I thought of the Doom, of the same woman who'd let her madness drench the world in blood whispering of the sacrifice she'd made and the woman it'd made her into.

"Some are beyond redemption," I admitted. "Others..."

Half the world, turned into a prop for the glory of the other half, spoken in a burning whisper. A sardonic smile beneath pale green eyes. And a knife into his ribs, after the Folly, that I could not regret.

"Have declared their own war on despair, and mutilated themselves in pursuit of victory," I continued. "I've gathered them to me, by fate or happenstance, and they're my responsibility. Even the one high up in the palace, whose grief has sent into a dark not even his eyes can see through. So I ask you again: when the time comes, and they are to be judged, will you return the courtesy you ask of me?"

Blue eyes in a tanned face assessed me, wondering. He did not reply.

"I thought so," I replied. "Then were are allies in convenience, Pilgrim, and you earn no courtesy from me. If she bares her blade at Hierophant or myself, I will snuff her out."

"I had thought," the old man said, "that agreement could be reached."

"You didn't offer an agreement," I calmly replied. "You asked for a concession."

"Then a barter," Tariq said, "though we are both lessened for it."

And it shamed me just a little when he said. That it'd come to this, but also the entire span – every intrigue I'd woven through and around the Tyrant, every trick I had yet to ply. And this man, I reminded myself, had mere hours been trying to leash me with the threat of death through a pattern of three. Not even a day had passed since we'd been at war, and still the disappointment in his gaze stung just a bit. *I've disappointed people I love,* I thought, meeting his gaze. *And that did not stay my hand. Neither will this.*

"You are in need of an eight crown," the Pilgrim said. "To cast down yours now would endanger your efforts, for war is ill-time for succession. Kairos Theodosian will fight you over his to his dying breath, for there is nothing he loves half as much in this

world as the legacy he embodies and stripping him of right to rule would rob him of this."

I inclined my head to the side in silent concession.

"I was once Tariq Isbili, of the Grey Pilgrim's Blood, Honoured Son under the Seljun of Levant," the old man said, and his voice rang with quiet authority. "Though stricken from the ledgers I have raised rulers of Levant and I have cast them down. My word has been taken for law, and my honour for the honour of the Dominion. If I took the Tattered Throne, the bloodlines would rally to my banner and acclaim me Seljun by right. That crown I promise you, for the life of Laurence de Montfort."

My fingers clenched, then unclenched.

"If she kills Masego, I will murder her without hesitation," I told him, meaning every word.

He grimaced, but he must have understood that there was no concession in his power that would possibly make me effectively concede the right to the Saint to kill one of my dearest friends without consequence.

"If she does not kill the Hierophant," he said.

"Then we have a bargain," I said.

We shook on it, amongst the ruins of what had once been a great city. It was not long after that the Saint returned, the Rogue Sorcerer looking harried and bloody as he leant against her. The Tyrant of Helike, he announced, had betrayed us.

Finally, I thought.

Caerulea

So apparently people are occasionally annoyed by the reminders to vote. That is okay, because we're evil here folks. Go Vote!

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

Nairne .01

And yet I will say "thank you" for putting the link here so I can vote so easily.

[*Liliet*](#)

And come to our discord!

<https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>

[Barthumphries](#)

Will Discord email me comments? Will Discord hook everything into nice comment chains for me or if it's been a day and people have moved on would it be weird to suddenly respond to an old comment? Not to put too fine a point in it but Discord kind of sucks. I honestly don't see why people would want to use it.

[Liliet](#)

For live chatting. Like you come there and just hang out with people. It's a different genre of conversation than reddit/wordpress, but it's not an inferior one.

Andrew Mitchell

As Liliet said, it's a different conversational option. The lack of threaded comments on there bugs me, but what it does (text and voice chat, with individuals or groups) it does very well.

[Liliet](#)

I am a samizdat/forum girl, where threaded comments mostly just annoy me :3

Andrew Mitchell

We come from different worlds. ♥

[cowlute](#)

I would like to let you know that you can now Reply to others comments in Discord, and in a sense, you can have a thread 😊

Actually, you will be prompted to turn a series of replies into a thread, which is even better!

Eva

Woe the petty evil

Mayowa

The amount of yoruba names in this webnovel keeps throwing me off.....my uncle(Afolabi) and dad(Kayode) names have come up.....waiting for my own

danh3107

The fire rises....

erebus42

Deshi Deshi Basara Basara...

[Javvies](#)

Heh.

Tariq, stop trying to get something for nothing out of Cat. It's not going to work ... and will weigh against you in the Narrative's evaluation of you.

As expected, Kairos has betrayed them. I wonder just how much he got away with from the Rogue Sorcerer.

JJR

Betrayal!? Who could have foreseen such a thing?

Snark aside I doubt he's actually pulling for the Dead King. Probably going to betray that one next somehow.

Sparsebeard

He would probably try to do exactly what Cat wanted to do himself. Raise Larat as a god with the crowns and Black's soul then somehow co-opt the power, possibly with Hierach's help. Yes, the plan helpfully supplied by Cat, no way this might backfire, he he.

Rook

Crazy theory, but I wonder if the Sorcerer really lost to the Tyrant.

Considering that no one actually saw the nature of the 'betrayal', even if the Sorcerer bested the Tyrant or was even working with him, who's really going to question it if he pretends otherwise, as if he got beaten black and blue before narrowly escaping? After all, Tariq's lie detector wouldn't go off either, all he said was that the Tyrant betrayed them.

It'd be a brutal twist if it turned out that he was a double agent the whole time, or if he was much more than he initially let on.

There are two other possibilities: that Laurence is baiting Cat, and that it's the Dead King that got the crowns. I'm

more inclined for the latter to be the case, since Tyrant couldn't have possibly missed the bait, and that's the best way for Neshamah's to turn the tables during the period the gang was split.

Mental Mouse

I don't think DK can safely take the crowns yet – it's too early in the story.

If he takes the crowns now, the party not only gets a fresh new story of "get the crowns back from DK", but they *unify* against DK. With the possible exception of Kairos, but if he turns on them *then*, he becomes a speedbump on the way to DK, and gets replaced posthaste. 😊

More to the point, Cat just won't summon Larat until she's got the crowns back.

Liliet

Tariq doesn't have a lie detector per se, he sees in the hearts of people – their emotions and intentions. Trickery won't work anymore than it did for Vivienne at Camps.

konstantinvoncarstein

I don't think that the Sorcerer is a traitor. Tariq knows him for some months and saw nothing. Furthermore, Behold is not a simple lie detector. It can also show emotions and culpability, as seen when Tariq spoke with the man who kill his sister.

NerfContessa

The ROGUE Sorcerer, don't forget. :p

antoninjohn

Oh no who would have expected such a betrayal

Kissaten

Does it count as a full-blown betrayal if Kairos doesn't betray someone when he was expected to?

naturalnuke

What do you mean betrayal?! This was all part of the plan!

Peter D

First!?

Great chapter, looking forward to the confrontation.

Someguy

Tariq is a narcissistic bitch for his own martyrdom. "Oh how noble & selfless he is for not taking the Tattered Throne!", "How sad that he has to kill his surviving nephew to save the lives of others!", "People have to wash and bare their necks to be killed when he asks it of them because he is 0 SO HOLY & Right because he is a HERO!". Bull Shit.

Rook

Nah. Catherine has the right of it when she holds him in high regard despite every conflict they've had and still do have. It's actually a pretty mature/objective position that she manages to hold there, especially considering that her personal feelings toward the Heroes are anything but positive.

At the end of the day he's not great to Villains. But to all the normal people that can't cut the sky or have goddesses on their shoulder? The same kind of people that Catherine has been trying to hard to help in her own way? He's the one who watches out for them, more than nearly anyone. He's not fair or good to Catherine & her Villainous co (or to any Villain, really), and sure he makes major blunders like anyone else. But to hundreds of thousands, even millions of other people? He's more than fair. He's gives more than they could possibly repay, not that he asks them to anyway.

That's the thing, the Major Heroic Antagonists in this story aren't one dimensional and they can't be judged solely by the experience that our favorite protagonists have had with them. Not any more than Catherine can be judged solely her interactions with any one person.

Being a Hero doesn't absolve him or the Saint of the mistakes they make or the actions they take, but that cuts both ways. Being a Villain shouldn't excuse Catherine when she does similar things for similar reasons, as if by virtue of being a Villain a character gets a free pass to be held to no standard at all while everyone else is crucified for not meeting an extremely high standard.

[Fayhem](#)

> Being a Hero doesn't absolve him or the Saint of the mistakes they make or the actions they take, but that cuts both ways. Being a Villain shouldn't excuse Catherine when she does similar things for similar reasons, as if by virtue of being a Villain a character gets a free pass to be held to no standard at all while everyone else is crucified for not meeting an extremely high standard.

This whole comment is fantastic, but this especially YES YES YES.

shveiran

I mean... the problem with this is that the setting **does** have a double standard. Earned by a long time of madmen on the villanous side of things, but still.

We know that both Saint and Pilgrim take extreme measures on a regular basis and embrace a lesser evil approach because in the thick of it there is no other choice. If there was any doubt about Saint, we had confirmation in this post. Pilgrim killed his nephew, Saint slays the sick, but Cat gets frowned upon by the world because she crucified mass-murderers to discourage a Third Liesse.

As Cat said to Pilgrim in book 4 "when I make this kind of choices, I get called a monster. So why do you get a pass?"

The point is not to absolve Cat or to condemn Pilgrim and Saint. It's about acknowledging that they both take the hard choices for the greater good, within their limited abilities to understand what the greater good is. But within the setting, two are revered and one despised solely based on the color of their shirt.

[Fayhem](#)

"Color of their shirt" rather minimizes the historical significance of those particular allegiances. I mean, take another look at the exchange between Saint and Pilgrim before they agreed to work with Cat here. Cat is very far from the first villain to make the right noises about how really they just want to help, so can't you just give them a chance? But if that's **actually** what happens then Cat **will** be the first in the **very** extensive experience of Calernia's two most senior heroes to **not** take the opportunity afforded by a reprieve to commit an atrocity/betrayal.

I don't **agree** with this assessment of Cat; I think she genuinely is poised to be someone who breaks the mold and actually changes how things work on Calernia even beyond just being different herself. But when you're basing your differing assessments of the people on different sides on decades of personal experience and literally millenia of history, I'm not sure you call that a "double standard" so much as "being aware of context".

konstantinvoncarstein

He is more than a little hypocritical, but I don't think it goes to narcissism.

Wry Warudo

>I have known souls sworn to Endurance that would weep at having lived half her life – and for this she has asked no reward, no riches nor titles nor honours.

I suppose you could say Saint never took a cut

Rook

You sword of have a point. She never took a slice, but good works are their own reward.

IDKWhoitis

[monotone] Oh no, Tyrant betrayed us.

I was betting on later, but oh well, I guess the game is afoot. Maybe the sorcerer Isn't The Sorcerer? Or Kairos figured he would get it out of the way first...

JJR

The sorcerer is actually the goat, cleverly disguised.

[sengachi](#)

Nah, Kairos went full Traitorous here, it's just the goat in a robe with a pair of cantaloupes. XD

Justin

Do we have any proof that Traitorous is a past Dread Emperor instead of maybe the next one? >>

Caerulea

Ratface mentioned, when Catherine asked, that a Dread Emperor Traitorous betrayed a villain called the Betrayer. One of the quotes in the chapter headings is Traitorous speaking to Betrayer. Therefore, he is in the past.

Moeadeeb

Huh, early

erebus42

Damn it Tariq! You were so fucking close! But nooooo, you can't come at things as an equal and deal reciprocally can you? I guess that will always be one of your fatal flaws. Oh well, let's get this shit show started!

[Liliet](#)

I do wonder @ his thought process here. Doesn't seem to me like Cat asked for much =x

Andrew Mitchell

I disagree. My impression was that what Cat wanted wasn't an even trade. She said:

> "I too have my bevy of broken souls," I said. "And oh, they're a vicious lot. No denying that. Savage from their days in the wild, but they're learning. One step at a time."

and later

> "I've gathered them to me, by fate or happenstance, and they're my responsibility. Even the one high up in the palace, whose grief has sent into a dark not even his eyes can see through. So I ask you again: when the time comes, and they are to be judged, will you return the courtesy you ask of me?"

It seemed to me like Cat wanted the safety of her whole party in exchange for the life of Laurence.

[Liliet](#)

"Safety" is a vague thing here. Tariq conceded to Catherine still planning on killing Laurence IF she kills Masego. "When the time comes and they are to be judged" what the fuck does that even mean? How likely are the Woe + Amadeus to be in Tariq's power WITH him having a reason to do bad things to him in the first place?

If Tariq wants an alliance with Catherine, which he SHOULD, agreeing he doesn't have ill intent towards her&hers seems like a rather basic step.

[Javvies](#)

I see it more as Tariq was asking Cat not to judge Laurence too harshly and to take into account the circumstances that shaped her in the judging of her and when deciding what to do with her.

Cat asked if he'd be willing to reciprocate when it came to the folks following her ... and he declined.

Rynjin

I think his thought process is that he has no control over Laurence. She's not his dog on a leash, however many times the story likens her to a hound she's still her own person. A very stubborn and single-minded person at that.

Tariq couldn't stop her from killing Masego any more than Cat could force Archer to do anything she really didn't want to.

erebus42

Force her? No. But Cat might be able to "persuade" her.

Calling it now

Observations: Tariq doesn't keep his oaths. Saint has death flags and Dominion references galore.

Predictions: Saint will murder Masego and Catherine will kill Saint (seems directly stated in chapter here). Pilgrim will Forgive Masego for the Greater Good. Catherine will collect Saint's Crown. Masego will learn Forgive and level up.

[Liliet](#)

Saint doesn't HAVE a crown. Jeez.

[Javvies](#)

I think the thinking is that Domains/Domain powers are a form of rulership.

[Liliet](#)

Ah, interesting.

I, huh, do think this is a good interpretation. They still wouldn't count for this though IMHO, because Larat specifically wants "mortal crowns", "crowns of mortal rulers", because he wants a foothold in Creation. Domains are explicitly NOT Creation, and are a common thing among fae already.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Doesn't matter what Larat thinks he needs to get what he wants. Seven-and-one makes eight in total... with one nit quite like the others. Saint's claim to a domain is rulership – by a Hero who is still mortal enough to grow old and die.

Rook

If you want to look at it that way, every goat on the continent has just as much of a claim to rulership. They rule over their own hooves and horns after all.

What the Pilgrim, Tyrant, and Catherine's right to rule provide as the one is a foundation in creation that precedes and outlasts the person. The position of

rulership in helike, callow, or levant all have existed before and can exist and after the people that hold the title are long dead and gone. Winter too in a way, but Winter had no basis in Creation and had Catherine as the creational anchor, not the other way around, making it useless for that purpose since Larat wanted a foothold in Creation rather than in Arcadia.

Saint's personal domain doesn't give them the foothold they need. There's no foundation behind it. It didn't exist before the Saint and it'll die when she does, it will pass to no one and no one will acknowledge the authority of it even if it does.

[Euodiachloris](#)

As Cat has proved a few times... domains, aspects, Names and Roles can be passed down, stolen or taken. Much as crowns and kingdoms can be.

What makes Saint's domain different from a goat's hooves is 1) what it has done in narrative terms, 2) what it has touched and affected with its power and/or symbolic resonance and 3) how established in #s 1 & 2 it is. Crowns aren't just crowns; swords are important heirlooms denoting rule, too.

Rook

You know what else can be important heirlooms denoting rule? Literally anything. Like a carved goats horn, for example.

A particular sword can be a symbol rule, not all swords are. Saints isn't. It has nothing to do with rule and there's no precedent for it being passed down or holding authority.

Saint's domain is just an extreme hardening of who she is after going through horribly rough shit ten thousand times. It's nothing at all like Catherine's old domain, which before her forefathers ever drew breath was a symbol of rule over half of creation beta.

lauatagan

The oath was "The crowns of seven mortal rulers and one" the one can be interpreted as not necessarily from a "mortal ruler"

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, I don't think this one relies on literal interpretation, or Cat could just ask for her nobles to cut out some cardboard crowns for her.

Mental Mouse

The original wording clearly suggests that the "and one" crown doesn't necessarily have to be mortal. But I don't think personal domains count, they don't imply ruling anything but that domain itself. Otherwise half the wizards of Calernia would qualify, not to mention fae and whatnot.

Quibbler

1. Bullocks. Laurence is the ONLY person in story referenced to have Dominion other than Cat. It is repeatedly signposted as unique and important.
2. The features of the land of crossroads (e.g., requires a blood cut to open the door to allow armies to travel faster to the Dead King) are Saintly.
3. Per Amadeus, Saint is a major part of the reason Dead King can walk. And he didn't even know her role in the Crusade. She has karmic responsibility that this would repay.
4. Cat doesn't need Saint to willingly give up the crown. If her soul is her Dominion, Can can pilfer it post-mortem.

Liliet

>Laurence is the ONLY person in story referenced to have Dominion other than Cat.

oh, and also every single Levantine Champion?

(Unconquered Champion who once drew Black into his, Rafaella the Valiant Champion with her arena)

Quibbler

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Crusade. She has karmic responsibility that this would repay.

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[*Fayhem*](#)

IIRC the original wording was "the crowns of seven mortal rulers and one". If you're suggesting that the "and one" doesn't have to be mortal because it comes after the specification of "seven mortal rulers" I would very strongly disagree with that. The sentence construction follows an archaic syntax (because it sounds more portentous and that's fae for you), but the "and one" is in fact necessarily still in reference to the earlier "crowns of mortal rulers". You can tell because otherwise you could just as easily claim "aha, the 'and one' doesn't specify what it has to be one *of* just like it doesn't specify it has to be mortal! ergo, it can be the crowns of seven mortal rulers and one apple." Which I think is pretty blatantly not plausible once you look at it like that.

Yavandir

It could also be seven mortal crowns and one mortal

[*Fayhem*](#)

Also no.

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

Hmm. Still not sure, but I'll grant that all the candidates mentioned in story, are either mortals or ex-mortals (that is revenants)

Andrew Mitchell

Agreed. Saint isn't an option.

[*sengachi*](#)

I mean, she has a domain called Decree. Regardless of what she uses it for, that's divine right of rulership right there. In fact, I'm being there's no way she didn't get an Aspect like that without being offered mortal rulership of some form or another.

[*Shveiran*](#)

True, but that is my only issue with the prediction. I think the One crown will result from Kairos actions (possibly he'll be put down and his crown claimed, or maybe something weird will pop up after his next betrayal), but the climax between Cat, Tariq, Saint and Masego could go down along those lines. Especially if the sword-that-is-a-prayer somehow makes it impossible to Forgive Saint.

Mental Mouse

Also, Saint might find murdering Masego to be... not so easy.

>Masego, a man whose main interest in the matter was the practicalities of deicide. *In all fairness, I thought, that's turned out surprisingly pertinent to our lives.*

I also rather liked someone's idea (DDG has failed me) of Masego responding to her with "a sword does not think. a sword has no arms or legs" *snap*.

BTW, I've become fairly sure that DK himself won't kill Masego himself no matter what. Because he knows that as a young immortal, Cat's story is still forming its core, to be solidified and built upon over time. And he *really* doesn't want "nemesis to the Dead King" to be part of Cat's core identity.

Fayhem

> BTW, I've become fairly sure that DK himself won't kill Masego himself no matter what. [and etc., I don't want to quote the whole paragraph]

That's a really interesting take. I mean he certainly seemed sincere enough when he was threatening that, but then he would wouldn't he? After all Neshamah is blatantly both highly capable and quite willing to run a bluff when it suits him, and merely *threatening* to kill someone's loved ones is less an unforgivable provocation than it is practically a form of teasing when it's between villains. I think you're probably right: he won't try (at least not seriously) to kill any of Cat's loved ones until/unless he's at a point where he both intends and considers himself imminently capable of snuffing Cat herself out at the same time. And these circumstances don't really favor that degree of success for him, I'd say.

Mental Mouse

Well... I could be wrong. If DK figures Cat can't take *him* out, he may figure "eh, she'll get over it in a hundred years or so". He might even be right... but on the other hand, he *is* known for playing it safe, even if it costs him resources and/or time. And Cat did just stare down Pilgrim

on the point, not to mention having a specific countermeasure handy for Saint. I note that Cat didn't seem all *that* worried – she didn't even bother to return the threat.

Fayhem

> I note that Cat didn't seem all that worried – she didn't even bother to return the threat.

I mean, who tries to escalate against the Dead King?

Liliet

...You have a really good point there wrt DK not wanting to kill Masego here.

Cat ain't vulnerable to hostage tactics, they're just a great way to drive her berserk.

Decius

Well, that went from Tariq demanding a concession to granting one.

Cat wasn't going to kill her without provocation anyway: The Saint of Swords is just too valuable an ally against the Dead King and Empress, and if turned against those foes will either win or die.

Cat doesn't care who kills her enemies, even if she does care who kills her friends.

pagesbe

It's a bit of a concession on Taylor's part. What this means is, unless Saint actually kills Masego, she's not going to go for the kill. Rather than just putting Saint down the moment she turns on one of them.

Rook

Taylor? I see someone's been re-reading Worm

I think it's really just a fair barter, although the Pilgrim did start off by begging for a concession instead. Catherine planned to kill the Saint anyway, since she's such a liability to her, and the Pilgrim had no reason to particularly be against the Saint trying to kill Masego.

Now Catherine has to leave the liability hanging and stay her hand if the Saint honestly cooperates + doesn't hurt Masego, and the Pilgrim has to do his utmost to hold back the Saint and work in Catherine's interests.

Honestly I think it's a big step forward, even if it isn't quite where they ideally want to get to. The foremost Hero of his generation and the foremost Villain of her generation just came to rational, mutually agreeable terms without even requiring ten chapters of Named pissing matches to set it up.

[Javvies](#)

From a rational, objective standpoint, sure, it's a step forward.

But don't forget what Pilgrim just said "Then a barter, though we are both lessened for it."

That was in response to Cat pointing out and declining that he was just asking her for a unilateral concession on her part. And her refusal to give him something fairly large for nothing.

Rook

I mean, it's a little shameless but I don't know how much you can hold it against the guy for asking. He rolled over pretty much immediately when Catherine refused anyway.

The gall of it is irritating but that's about the extent of it. Literally one chapter ago Catherine blatantly lied to the Saints face about why she had the Sorcerer carry the seven crowns, which is about equally shameless considering that (hilariously enough) the Saint was completely correct when she suspected Catherine was up to something.

[Javvies](#)

You're missing the key point.

Tariq said "Then a barter, **though we are both lessened for it.**"

In other words, he considers negotiations distasteful, demeaning to all involved, and otherwise bad/ungood.

Plus, he can't be relied upon to keep his end of any deal reached. Based on both past behavior/actions and his own statements to that effect.

Rook

You're the one missing the key point. The fact that they're acquiescing to negotiations despite finding it distasteful should be considered respectable, if anything, because it's even more clear proof that the actual good of everyone is taking precedence over personal feelings. On both sides.

Seems like some pretty petty grasping at straws to try taking away from the progress being made, just because they weren't overjoyed by it. "Yeah they're breaking new grounds and trying to set aside Good vs Evil conflicts that have lasted so long that they've worn permanent grooves into the fabric of reality... but they're not entirely happy about it!". Oh woe, how unbearably awful.

Sure, he's an oath breaker. That's fair. There's also centuries of precedent, several of them that the Pilgrim has personally lived through, where making deals with Villains almost always results in betrayal. Asking for negotiations to be made with a Villain of Catherine's caliber is asking for a leap of faith in the first place, considering the context.

You do remember how this band was forged in the first place, right? The Saint didn't want to work together due to (if her words are to be believed) having tried it countless times with countless villains before and having been burned for it every time *without a single exception*. The pilgrim decided to try again anyway, with Catherine. Don't see why Catherine can't take a small leap as well, after having been burned what, Once? Twice? Instead of dozens of times?

Source: Chapter 33, Concord

" ... Tariq, how many of these 'turnabouts' have you seen over the years?" the Saint hissed. "How many Damned made their apologies, swore they'd never meant to hurt anyone, said that they would help you keep the peace instead."

"Dozens," the Pilgrim said.

"And how many kept their word?"

"None," the old man tiredly said. ..."

Javvies

You're ignoring the point that I'm trying to make. It's not as much a step forward as one would like it to be.

Tariq is being forced by circumstances to negotiate with Cat – he is negotiating with Cat only because it is currently his best option to get what he wants while acting in accordance with his values. But his first choice is demanding unilateral concessions from Cat, not making a deal.

Part of being a Hero (at least, most varieties thereof) includes being willing to give someone a chance to prove you wrong about them. Certainly the kind of Hero Tariq alleges himself to be includes the offering of a second chance. He's more or less required by being the kind of Hero he is to give Cat a chance ... especially now that she's leveraged him into not being able to kill her easily after he aborted his attempt to redeem her.

Just because other Villains have lied about things before doesn't give Tariq (or any Hero) a free pass on breaking his word to someone who kept their word to him. Nor does it give Laurence a pass for attacking someone while under a truce banner.

Rook

See, that kind of mentality reeks of hypocrisy and double standards.

Tariq isn't the only one forced to negotiate by circumstances. The main reason Catherine is resorting to negotiating first instead of attempting to kill him is because the reaction from Levant by killing him is crippling to her plans. That one is outright stated by her, by the way. It's not because she's a very nice girl.

And what, Heroic opposition gets held to the highest standard and Villains get a free pass to be held to no standard? Tariq continuing to try playing ball after being burned dozens of times is expected of him, but Catherine playing ball after being burned once is going unthinkably above and beyond?

Poppycock. If you're going to hold the Heroes to that much higher of a standard than the Villains, then I guess the Heroes do indeed have innate moral superiority. They're certainly being judged as if they actually do.

The wall between Heroes and Villains was built up over millennia. There's also centuries of personal experiences that make trust a near impossibility and circumstance that makes stakes high enough that the trust is even harder to put forward. This is absolutely, objectively a huge step, and quibbling about the enthusiasm of either party for it is just worthless pride talking.

[Shveiran](#)

Yes, the Heroes are held to a higher standard, at least by me.

They claim to be better than Villains.

They claim to be just, virtuous and GOOD.

The world acts like this is truth. It's the reason no one trusts villains and most trust heroes.

If they are NOT held to a higher standard, then those assumptions are "poppycock": either Above's mandate demands you to be better than a murderhobo with radiant powers, or William is no longer an exception to the Hero standard and Heroes have no place being regarded as anything more than superpowered individual.

[Javvies](#)

...

Again, you're missing my point.

Tariq views bartering, aka negotiating, as a "lessening".

That doesn't bode well for sustained major negotiations not held under the threat of overwhelming force ... such as will likely be required to get the Liesse Accords up and running.

Have you forgotten that Cat's first interaction with Crusade forces, and the Pilgrim specifically, was to negotiate? That she offered to gate the Crusaders to the Tower, that she tried to join the Alliance? That she did all of that from a position of relative strength over the Crusaders and every time she reached out with an offer, it's been refused, with the sole exception of the "no mistreating prisoners and no angels/demons/devils" deal?

Cat's trying to negotiate, has been trying to negotiate. Killing Tariq was never actually something that Cat wanted to do, just something that she would have done on an active battlefield if necessary. However, Tariq's position as regards Levant, makes him one of those critical mission objectives – like when in strategy games you sometimes have special/unique units that if killed result in autofailing the mission. Tariq's one of those. And everybody hates escort missions. Plus, he's basically the biggest Hero around, and probably the most likely to be able to swing undecided Heroes and Good-aligned non-Named into supporting the Accords.

—

Heroes, by virtue of being Heroes, are expected and supposed to keep their word when they give it. Everybody expects a Villain to be potentially untrustworthy ... but Heroes are supposed to be absolutely trustworthy when they give their word on something.

It's a built in Narrative expectation -Villains don't lose by being trustworthy and honorable, but Heroes lose by being untrustworthy and dishonorable ... because those are Villainous Narrative attributes, not Heroic ones.

Mental Mouse

How many Damned have put their butts on the line for their citizens? Or offered up front to ban demon summoning? Or redeemed (okay, half-redeemed) an entire species? Or *given up* immortality? Cat has acted very differently from pretty much any villain before her, following Black's trail and taking it further than he did. She's not given to empty promises (Kairos excepted, and that's part of dealing with him) or shallow apologies, either.

Cat has earned her *bona fides*, and Pilgrim has been slow to recognize that.

Rook

But that's the thing, Cat has earned her *bona fides* and the Pilgrim IS recognizing that now, albeit slowly. On his reluctance we agree there, it definitely exists, although I don't think it's wholly unjustified or beyond understanding.

That's why he decided not to gamble and refuse her surrender. That's why he decided to go against the Saints judgement and work with her in the band of five. That's why the agreement they just came to happened very simply after a brief, mostly civil, discussion.

There is such a large gulf there that reconciling between Villains and Heroes is nearly impossible. Even Malicia herself failed at it, and she's touted as the greatest political mover and shaker of her generation bar no one.

The fact that Catherine has managed to get even this far with a Hero – and not even a minor one, but one of the oldest and the scariest – speaks

volumes about how much effort she's put in and how all that work is finally bearing fruit.

[Liliet](#)

This.

[Liliet](#)

It's not about negotiations being distasteful in principle, it's about this particular kind of negotiation.

Both of the things they've "exchanged" in this barter are something that should have been true by default. If they'd been an actually coherent party, there wouldn't be a need to negotiate for this, and I actually think higher of Tariq for recognizing that.

His crown is the one that's of no immediate worth, either tactical or strategic, he never intended to cash in his claim in the first place. If he and Catherine were genuine allies, there wouldn't be a question of which crown gets given up – the one they don't need, obviously.

And Catherine... well I actually think she didn't give anything up here that she wanted in the first place -- She JUST remarked how she could not afford leaving a narrative impression of being after Saint – what Pilgrim asks her not to do is something she never intended in the first place. Oh sure, in the extremely narrow scenario that Saint turns on Catherine/Masego and Catherine has the opportunity to either disable her nonlethally or kill her Catherine is now obligated to go for the first option, but Catherine's still going to act in defense of herself and her friend, and she did not even sell away her right to revenge if she fails.

The real thing lost here is the opportunity for Catherine to rack up narrative points by not killing Saint for turning on her down the line *without* a specific bargain made for it. I mourn that a little, and as I said, I respect Tariq all the more for having had the same hope there as I did in the first place.

It's like saying "let's make a bargain: you don't spit in my food and I don't spit in yours". BOTH LESSENER FOR IT INDEED

[Shveiran](#)

I think Cat is making a concession here: that she will try to put Saint down without killing her if she goes for her or Masego. She is not exactly tying her hands, that much I'll grant, but there is a concession.

I disagree with the "both lessened for it" argument, however.

Or rather, I find it distasteful that it was voiced by the party that first made an impassionate speech to ask for a favor, and flat out admitted he wouldn't return it toward Cat.

Granted, Saint's actions may be more easily justified than some of the folks on Cat's side, but the fact remain that this is the same attitude Tariq defaulted to back in their first meeting, when discussing angel and demonic interventions in the coming battles.

Cat's words were something like "this doesn't work if your bargaining position is that we fold when yours don't".

We are still there.

Pilgrim is asking for a concession. Which, you know, if FINE. Nothing wrong with that.

But it's not like he has ever done anything for her that she didn't have to extort from him kicking and screaming, and it's not like he doesn't know a list of things that would make her life a lot easier.

I feel if you are trying to move past "allies of convenience", you may want to open with a concession, a no-string-attached gift, not ask for the other person to spare someone out for their blood and fully capable of taking it. Especially not without any inclination to either extend the same courtesy to the other's loved ones or in any way even the scale without being prompted.

Or, you know, if you did AT LEAST not act like the other's refusal is distasteful.

It's not a mortal sin nor anything, but jeez, in my opinion he really doesn't have the moral high ground making that request.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think "we are both lessened for it" is meant as "and you suck".

I think it's meant as "dammit I wish we had a better opportunity here".

Shveiran

It's more the "A banter, then", for me. I read it as "Ok, sure, if you have to be that way, I guess we can do this distasteful thing instead. Since you can't step up to the right one."

[Liliet](#)

I think better of Tariq than that.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Literally one chapter ago Catherine blatantly lied to the Saints face about why she had the Sorcerer carry the seven crowns,

Saint was probing for tactical information. A "lie" of that blatancy isn't an attempt at deception, it's a flat "none of your business".

Rook

Uh, the fact that she deliberately chose to set the sorcerer up as a target by making him carry the crowns is a deception to start with, and every action taken to hide that intent is just as much of a deception.

I mean I enjoy her antics as much as anyone else but it seems a bit extreme to try turning black into white just because she's a very likeable character. Being shameless and being delusional are two very different things.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, the divisions within the party aren't simple. In particular, Kairos and Saint are *both* loose cannons, with Cat and Pilgrim respectively as their "keepers". That leaves RS – he's a hero, but there was that little hint at the conclave, of Black's soul (and mind) being still in play, and so Cat's willing to accept him as a fulcrum. Yeah she can't be sure of Black's influence, but what else is new? And the heroes don't seem to know as much as they'd like about RS either.

Cat couldn't keep the crowns because even if it was her plan to begin with, *the heroes wouldn't have trusted her with them*. Similarly, the villains wouldn't have trusted Pilgrim (and AFAICT he doesn't have a domain anyway). *Nobody* would have trusted Kairos *or* Saint with them, except on a basis of "I can take those back when I need to". So: Rogue Sorcerer, possibly (hopefully) paired with Black.

Which all comes down to that Saint's accusation was basically shit-stirring, and Cat's response was entirely justified. Yes, Cat's being tricky. But so is Pilgrim, he's just more used to getting a pass on it.

Jim

It could be a setup for a pattern of three, Saint loses to Cat but is spared similar to the story with William

Xinci

A beautiful thing this. To see the sides and their interactions. To hear the scraping of Good as it toils along becoming more set in its purpose the longer it goes, even as it is ripped and rent into a more efficient tool. It's nice to understand more of what made Saint a blade. It puts more connections up to see why she views the death of systems like she does. Truly a beautifully made tragedy but Creation is a wheel greased with blood, so it goes.

Also good to hear Catherine's side...or Evils I suppose. To hear her speak of her disparate responsibility over the savage few gave a nice feeling of dichotomy. I wonder if it's often like that, the Villains shepherding the outcast and the disparate, moulding them to their system. Gave a heavy feeling of regulation and responsibility which is I suppose part of why no clause could be gotten. Villains doing so at Cat's scale of doing so seems rare but I wonder if she could make it more common with regulation. Losing the royalness might hurt Pilgrim's role and influence as a helper but I do suppose such a tragic sacrifice is necessary if Cat is to succeed.

medailyfun

Cat does not rule much and Pilgrim rules even less, I don't see why dropping his crown has any weight at all

Jim

It was stated earlier that dropping a crown and continuing to hold power would cause a sort of blight over the kingdom of that ruler... Tariq is basically agreeing to stop being the Grey Pilgrim with storyline consequences if he doesn't... Set up for heroic sacrifice is likely

[Liliet](#)

I don't think it applies to any power you might hold, only to the actual crown. His crown is not his Bestowal, his crown is his status as a potential Seljun.

Jim

"Though the earthly crown will not be taken from your brow, save if you yourself do so, you will have lost the authority of a ruler in the eyes of the Heavens," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Lingering in that role after discarding it before Gods and men can only bring calamity."

"I figure it'd be subtle at first," I said. "Small nudges. Crops get a little worse, people listen a little less. If you keep holding, though, then it's a different story."

"Disease and strife," the Peregrine said, "and they will only grow, so long as authority is kept."

Liliet

"as a ruler", yes, exactly.

Soma

0000000000000000000000HHHHHHHHHH I feel so oh so wicked and
victorious as an Irritant or Traitorous to have seen this! It is
barely a sliver of uncertain victory, and yet it is mine!

See the end.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/05/03/chapter-35-colloquy/#comment-41098>

Soma

This is my attempt at the most pompous 'called it' I could make. Forgive me. Or not.

Tek

Truly, that is a greatest achievement of your life. All your efforts and struggles were not pointless – for they led you to that point, a true summary of your toils. How does it feel, to reach a summit of your existence, knowing it all will go downhill from there? I, too, called it, btw, after some deliberation. Though I cited more selfish reasons for him giving up his crown, namely wrestling any connection to newly build highway from the side of Evil and also Cat. A Hero from Above sacrificed his own right to rule for our sake, it only follows that the ones with control over a new realm will be those who are also Heroes from Above. RIGHT?

Soma

Solid call. I suspect the Pilgrim always has more to his game so I'm waiting for multiple hammers on this deal to

come. And it's been on the downhill for a while now, why else would I be in the comments?

[TeK](#)

Too waste time and energy in pointless speculations about the made up world instead of going out and doing something in the real one. Well this is my reason for comments, anyhow.

[Liliet](#)

YO YOU CALLED IT

YOU WERE RIGHT AND I WAS WRONG

GOOD THEORY-ING!!!

Soma

Ayyyyy, hey, you could still be right, honestly. There is time for a last minute twist, so I might be premature in 'calling it', but I think things will go along these lines.

[Liliet](#)

True, we might both be right in both possibilities being A Thing in the narrative!

But at the very least I was wrong about Cat potentially blindsiding the Pilgrim by giving up her crown, because he pretty much pointed that out as her alternative to the bargain with him.

Author Unknown

I'm curious if the Rouge Sorcer is carrying around Black's soul. Because everything Tariq said about his crown applies to Black and his claim to the tower. Meaning, Black could pop out and give up his crown, becoming the one that shapes the whole mess. There are all kinds of things he could do with that kind of opportunity.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, I dunno that he could "pop out", but Cat could presumably give his soul a form made of Night.

[Fayhem](#)

> Because everything Tariq said about his crown applies to Black and his claim to the tower.

Sorta? I mean, it's not that you're wrong as such exactly, it's that Praes \neq Levant. Tariq seems to be leveraging the **legitimacy** of his claim as much as his **practical power** to effect such a claim. Both ingredients are in there, that's why he both touches on "I could claim power" **and** touches on "I'm an Isbili". Amadeus has just as much **practical power** to take rulership of Praes as Tariq does to take rulership of Levant – meaningful power brokers would rally to him, etc. – but he can't be said to have a legitimate claim to rulership of Praes precisely because Praes doesn't recognize the concept of an **illegitimate** claim to rulership. If you can take it, then you have the right to. But if you haven't taken it yet, then you haven't proven that you can.

Also, on a more meta/strategic level Cat **really** doesn't want Amadeus to give up his right to rule Praes since that's pretty much the sum total of her long-term strategy for dealing with Praes. She doesn't want to conquer and rule Praes (much to Akua's chagrin/disbelief), leaving Malicia in power is unacceptable, and pretty much every non-Amadeus non-Malicia Praesi with a viable chance at claiming power is a High Lord/Lady with all of Malicia's vices and none of her virtues. She **needs** Amadeus to take over Praes and turn it into a country Callow can prosperously coexist with.

gyndroid

All fair points, but Catherine bullied a Resurrection from an angel in part because Black was the defacto "Ruler" of Callow, at the time, and she his chosen heir. If that defacto was crownly enough for angels, it might be crownly enough here.

[Fayhem](#)

That's now **was** the defacto "Ruler" of Callow though, as in the past tense form of that. Cat is no longer his heir, she's his successor. You can't still claim a right to rule somewhere after you've **already** handed over your right to rule to someone else. Either way though Cat would still want him to not since ruling Praes herself is next to the last thing she wants to do and there's no other acceptable internal candidate for rule within Praes.

gyndroid

Hey if Edward Not-Actually-Fairfax still counts, in Catherine's mind, so does Black.

Fayhem

Hmm, interesting counterpoint, I honestly hadn't contrasted it on that basis. I think I would still disagree on the grounds that the Fairfaxes were the last "legitimate" dynasty to rule Callow and Cat has explicitly acknowledged that the legitimacy of her own regime is the "legitimacy" of a successful warlord which is to say thin at best, so in theory a Fairfax who never properly died could still be said to have a legitimate claim to rule – probably not while *currently* a puppet of the Dead King but it's been established that resurrections are A Thing so King Ed could be said to have a legitimately possible potential right to rule that could be meaningfully surrendered.

Whereas Amadeus' right to rule was always based on Praes ruling Callow and him being the designated Praesi overlord-in-chief; Praes explicitly no longer rules Callow, which means Amadeus has the legitimacy to claim rule of Callow of a successfully expelled warlord, which is to say none at all. It's true that in theory Amadeus/Praes might be able to conquer Callow again, but if that was all it took then literally anybody with an army could claim a "right to rule" literally anywhere in Creation, which clearly isn't the standard being followed.

So tl;dr I still disagree but that's a legitimate point to raise, so thank you for bringing that up!

gyndroid

But I feel like there's enough commonalities Black shares with all the confirmed or textually suspected crowns that it can't be easily written off. Black was basically the ruler of Callow, as functionally confirmed by Angels. He could potentially be the ruler of the Empire, as Tariq could potentially be the ruler of Levant. That he has a claim to ruling Callow only as a warlord is exactly Catherine's claim. He was once ruler, but no longer—just like Edward. And he never, technically, actually "abdicated" Callow to Catherine. Arguably, then, he still has a claim—if a *broadly* unsupported one.

To be clear, I'm not fully behind the idea that Black's Maybe-Extant crown will come into play *at all*, but I'm not convinced it doesn't exist,

narratively speaking. If nothing else, we don't know what Name Black might be claimant of, right? IF he followed the Bard's prodding (huge if), that name could well be "Dread Emperor".

Fayhem

WordPress appears to have shat itself and is no longer offering the option to reply to stuff this far down the comment chain. So, this is actually a reply to the comment containing the quoted bit.

> That he has a claim to ruling Callow only as a warlord is exactly Catherine's claim.

Yes, exactly. And it has been explicitly noted, by Catherine herself, that a warlord only has a legitimate claim to power so long as they are undefeated. Amadeus' claim on Callow was that he conquered Callow for Praes, and now he's ruling it as the designated Praesi overlord. In other words, his legitimacy was always based on the Praesi Conquest. Amadeus may not have been personally defeated, but Praes is demonstrably no longer ruling Callow. To reuse a line I employed elsewhere, a king in exile is still a king, but a warlord who's been defeated is just a loser. Amadeus may not have been personally defeated, but Praes is demonstrably no longer ruling Callow, which means the premise of his claim to legitimacy has been invalidated. There was no abdication per se involved in that transfer of power, but when you're kicking out a conqueror there's really none required.

As far as Praes goes, honestly I feel like we're re-treading the same ground there. Amadeus may have the ability to claim power in Praes, but he has no special claim to a legitimate right to do so. Tariq has both the ability to claim power in Levant and a special claim to legitimacy, so Amadeus would need both to be equivalent. And regardless, Cat very badly wants him to not give up that right since the only other acceptable resolution to Praes is *her* taking over and she REALLY does not want to have to be a Dread Empress. If it comes up at all, I think it'll be in the form of Amadeus bringing it up and Cat talking him down from it.

Also btw, given the Liesse Accords' stated stipulation that Named not rule countries my personal theory is that Amadeus will reject the

Bard's prodding but still take power to become the first un-Named Dread Emperor of Praes.

Mental Mouse

> he can't be said to have a legitimate claim to rulership of Praes precisely because Praes doesn't recognize the concept of an *illegitimate* claim to rulership. If you can take it, then you have the right to. But if you haven't taken it yet, then you haven't proven that you can.

That is a good point. Black still does have status as a *prior* ruler of Callow, though. Regarding your last paragraph: even without Black, Cat could still be "drafted" into taking the Tower, especially if Malicia can't back off and leave Callow alone.

Fayhem

> Black still does have status as a prior ruler of Callow, though.

True, but I think I pointed out elsewhere that it's a fundamentally different type of status from (for instance) King Ed. A king in exile is still a king. A warlord who's been defeated is just a loser. Amadeus' claim on Callow was always that he/Praes conquered it and now he's in charge as the designated Praesi overlord-in-chief. Amadeus personally wasn't defeated as such, but Praes is demonstrably no longer ruling Callow.

Mental Mouse

But what I'm saying is that Cat legitimized him with the Sword-in-the-Stone move, and that probably sticks.

Fayhem

Not following you there tbh. As I read it the angel-mugging was predicated off of cleverly framing the facts on the ground – I don't think the fact of doing so actually altered any of them (aside from, y'know, Cat and William swapping sides on the corpse spectrum). Cat's own legitimacy has been explicitly and repeatedly noted to be no more than the legitimacy of a warlord – if she didn't legitimize **herself** by that maneuver it's hard to see how it would have done that for Amadeus.

[Mental Mouse](#)

She might have started out as a warlord, but at this point, she is very much a Queen, with soldiers, citizenry, and other polities recognizing her crown. If she's illegitimate solely because she's not descended from the last dynasty, how can *anyone* be a legitimate ruler of Callow? Remember, Black wiped out the royal line!

Pulling the Sword in the Stone may have been initially based on "pulling a fast one", but succeeding (and surviving) that amounted to recognition by the Heavens. And thus she was established as the heir to the (then-)reigning king (by "right of conquest") of Callow, namely Black.

[Fayhem](#)

Replying here because WordPress won't let me reply below.

> She might have started out as a warlord, but at this point, she is very much a Queen, with soldiers, citizenry, and other polities recognizing her crown.

No other polities have recognized her right to rule IIRC. There was a whole thing about it back during the negotiations around the Battle of the Camps, and I don't think anyone's official stance on that has changed. Soldiers supporting your rule is included in the definition of a warlord, so there's definitely no distinction to be drawn there. You have a better case when referring to popular support from a modern perspective, but on Calernia the only example of governmental legitimacy being based on popular support is Bellerophon. Callow has always operated on feudal rules, and Cat is still just a commoner with an army under typical rules of feudal legitimacy since those are pretty heavily based on blood right.

Also, I'm pretty skeptical that Cat could claim to have been recognized by the Heavens as a legitimate ruler of Callow given they've been throwing heroes at her to try to murder her back off that throne from day 1.

It is all a somewhat moot point since Cat's long-term plan involves sidestepping issues of whether

she's legitimately Queen by just abdicating so it no longer matters, but it does have present implications as far as how she's viewed by other parties. Cat has repeatedly explicitly assessed herself as someone who's viewed as a warlord; it's not impossible she's wrong about that, but the evidence of how she's treated/regarded by others seems to support it so far.

Mental Mouse

Even if she's a legitimate ruler, she's still a Villain ruler, which is why heroes come after her, just as villains try to overthrow Good rulers. And as Amadeus noted, *both* sides have gotten dangerously good at suppressing those would be rebels.

Other polities may be trying to conquer Callow (again), but she's the one they negotiate with regarding Callow.

Fayhem

> Other polities may be trying to conquer Callow (again), but she's the one they negotiate with regarding Callow.

Because they have to, but they're pointedly refused to acknowledge her as actually legitimate while doing so. Again, see the whole "Queen of Callow" vs. "Queen in Callow" thing during the negotiations around the Battle of the Camps. Here, I'll pull up a relevant quote from Bk IV Ch 20 (<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/06/13/chapter-20-onset/>):

"negotiations were now being held between the Queen in Callow and the mandated expeditionary force of the First Prince. Aisha had tried for Queen of Callow, but they'd gotten out of that by pointing out that unless the Highest Assembly passed a motion or Hasenbach recognized it by decree, they couldn't legally recognize Callow as a sovereign state with me as its ruler."

Neither of those two things has happened.

Mental Mouse

OK Fayhem, you've convinced me that she's basically a warlord... but she and the others clearly think that's enough to count here: Pilgrim

was explicit that he was offering his crown *in lieu of hers*, specifically to avoid her abdication.

Also, re:

> I hope this doesn't come off as rude...

I will never take offense at simple disagreement, and you've been entirely civil in this interchange, even when (as you pointed out) I was well off-base from the text. It's been a pleasure debating such points with you (and that goes also for Liliet and the others who've similarly engaged me).

[Liliet](#)

eyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy

just catching up on comments, and, like, eyyyyyyyy

[Fayhem](#)

> you've convinced me that she's basically a warlord... but she and the others clearly think that's enough to count here: Pilgrim was explicit that he was offering his crown in lieu of hers, specifically to avoid her abdication.

And I don't disagree that Cat herself does qualify! My point was that the legitimacy of a warlord differs on a qualitative basis from the legitimacy of a, eh, let's say more "conventionally acceptable" King/Queen. And if Cat doesn't have a higher degree of legitimacy than "warlord" despite being actually Callowan, having the backing of Callowan nobility, and at least carrying the title of Queen even if it isn't properly recognized outside Callow itself, then Amadeus **certainly** doesn't and never has. Which means that for any claim that Amadeus currently has legitimacy you have to consider that a warlord essentially has legitimacy to rule for exactly as long as nobody is **successfully** disputing that right. Praes has for all intents and purposes been **successfully** expelled from the rule of Callow, so my argument is that the legitimacy of a Praesi warlord is **at this point** effectively null and void for these purposes.

> I will never take offense at simple disagreement, and you've been entirely civil in this interchange, even when (as you pointed out) I was well off-base from the text. It's been a

pleasure debating such points with you (and that goes also for Liliet and the others who've similarly engaged me).

Aww. Please, consider the sentiment reciprocated!

[Fayhem](#)

Ayyy lmao, clearly I should have read the current chapter **before** continuing to argue that Amadeus wouldn't qualify and the sword-in-the-stone trick didn't count for that. You called it!

[Mental Mouse](#)

For our exchange that's pinned against the reply limit, I think I accidentally replied to myself, so please scan the thread for my latest. 😊

[Fayhem](#)

> Regarding your last paragraph: even without Black, Cat could still be "drafted" into taking the Tower, especially if Malicia can't back off and leave Callow alone.

Augh, I meant to put this in the same reply. D'oh. Anyway, my point wasn't that she **couldn't** be dragged into taking the Tower it's that she really really really doesn't **want** to be effectively cornered into ruling Praes. And Amadeus taking over instead is the only feasible/realistic alternative to her having to do that: Malicia staying in power is a non-option and a High Lord/Lady being the one to take over for her instead of Amadeus or Cat would be even worse.

[Mental Mouse](#)

That's what I mean by "drafted". If Amadeus is off the table (for *any* reason), Cat needs to deal with Malicia herself. And "Praesi rules" mean the only way to do that is to take the Tower.

[Fayhem](#)

Right. And Cat doesn't want to have to do that. That's always been my point. I hope this doesn't come off as rude because that's not what I mean, but I feel like either my original point must not have been clear or I must not be understanding what you're getting at now. Because it looks like you're just re-stating the premise of my original

point and I'm not sure what the point of doing that is.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm not sure where you get the idea that Cat doesn't want to abdicate!

Her abdication has been teased since (iirc) before she was officially Queen, she made preparations for it before the surrender, she's taken up a competing commitment in her priesthood, and she'd get a major payoff for doing it now.

[Fayhem](#)

I... what? Cat very much wants to abdicate, yes. Cat very much does not want to go be Dread Empress of Praes. The second one was my point.

[Liliet](#)

eyyyyy

Briskly

The Grey Pilgrim is super deep into the groove of his role this chapter. I wonder how much of this was him consciously acting as if cat was a Hero instead of a Villain.

[Liliet](#)

This is a fucking great question and I suspect "all of it". He's spotted her groove being that already, he and Laurence discussed it at Battle of Camps. She dismissed it as not evidence of anything, he's GOING FOR IT 😊

Dainpdf

"The Tyrant of Helike, he announced, had betrayed us."
You don't say.

[Liliet](#)

Everyone was VERY SHOCKED 😬

Dainpdf

Typical Hero prejudice, btw. I am sure the Tyrant is innocent. He's promised Cat eternal friendship!

[Liliet](#)

The joke is that that's exactly how he's acting actually.

caoimhinh

So there's an ancient Warlock with Owu in their name, eh?
The evilness of UwU is confirmed hahaha.

Nice chapter.

Tariq is still hypocritically thinking that only Evil has to make concessions in a bargain and that Good has every right to it while calling Cat a bad person for not asking his side to also make concessions.

Good to see he is staying in character.

So now Kairos betrayed them and robbed Rogue Sorcerer from the Seven Crowns and probably Amadeus' soul too. That means Catherine gets to beat him and steal that from him. Cool.

Now, their band of 5 is broken, but there's a certain disciple of the Lady of the Lake that was sent to search for Masego months ago and has a knack for appearing dramatically when they need her. Hopefully we'll get to see her here and save Masego.

Or it could be that the Band of Five against Larat will be with Masego in it. There are plenty of possibilities.

P.S: Amadeus' words really hurt Tariq, eh?

Typos found:

-giving though to their aftermath / giving thought to their aftermath

-the most accomplish hero / the most accomplished hero

-ties got both ways / ties go both ways

-I ask you to see you for what she is / I ask you to see her for what she is

-had mere hours been trying / had mere hours ago been trying

[TeK](#)

While it may be misinterpreted by less bright that Tyrant is betraying them, he really just maneuvering himself to be in the position to better help the rest of the band (whom all are his most treasured, not friends, but brothers and sisters, and it is well known how he cherishes his family, a true example of loyalty and trustworthiness. He will later sacrifice himself for his comrades and redeem himself, and become a Hero Calernia deserves, just you see!

[vamair](#)

A hero it deserves, huh? Seems legit.

werafdsaew

I actually think that there might be some truth to this, in that Kairos is maneuvering himself to betray the Dead King,

because he's not getting another chance. He has to betray *EVERYBODY*, and that includes the Dead King.

Andrew Mitchell

^^^THIS.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Gotta ~~catch~~betray them all! 😊

[Liliet](#)

I mean he's literally going along with Cat's plan, and she didn't even explicitly ask him to!

medailyfun

Tariq actually thinks Villains have relative standings towards the good not absolute, thus Villains making concessions would bring both parties closer to goodness, while making a bargain would be a step away for both as well

[Liliet](#)

>while calling Cat a bad person for not asking his side to also make concessions

I don't see him calling Cat a bad person there. He says "we are both lessened for this", and I don't think he means it in the sense of "I am upset and you're a bad person". I think he means "an opportunity lost for a connection forged". I am not seeing him be judgy @ Cat here at all, if anything he's giving her a lot of credit in addressing her as someone who values all the same things he does.

>P.S: Amadeus' words really hurt Tariq, eh?

I love Catherine going "???" @ the suggestion Tariq's to blame for the Dead King there ♥ ♥ ♥

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yes, Amadeus made a real impression there, and Tariq might actually be growing personally. Cat couldn't completely reproduce his reasoning, but I'm sure he'll explain it later.

As far as "we are both lessened"... you don't always get an easy cooperation, where both sides get their stake back with interest. Sometimes you need to instead share a loss, just to keep the relationship going. By Cat's standards this one is small potatoes, but Tariq isn't used to negotiations where he actually has to concede an opponent's goals. He's fine with working together for common benefit, or trading tactical

position, but he always had a fallback to “if you will not renounce your evil purposes, then we must do battle!”. Actually *letting* the other party achieve *their own* goals that he’d been opposing – that’s new to him.

That said, he’s still not very good at it. As we’ve been noting, he wasn’t using that crown anyway – in fact, it arguably handicapped him in his early negotiations with Cat. For the flip side, he’s asking that Cat refrain from killing someone who has repeatedly insulted, threatened, and otherwise menaced her, *recently*. Not that she as a Villain hasn’t stayed her hand on enemies before... but Pilgrim wanted it unconditional, even at the cost of Cat’s *original purpose for taking this mission*. He simply wasn’t going to get *that*.

Rook

To be fair, ‘the other party’s own goals’ when dealing with Villains is typically the horrific kind, not continental peace. Catherine is the exception, not the rule.

I mean consider it, how many Villains have there been in this story that are halfway decent enough that even Catherine would feel comfortable letting them get their way (at least, among the ones outside her own band). The Tyrant? Malicia? Akua? The Calamities? The closest would be either Ranger, who even Black doesn’t view as a true Villain, or Black himself, who she ended up stabbing and issuing an ultimatum to, declaring that he needs to change or become a corpse.

He’s not used to the consequence of the other party getting their way resulting in the Liesse Accords. He’s used to the consequence being Second Liesse.

[Mental Mouse](#)

At this point, Cat has demonstrated pretty thoroughly that she really is an exception.

[Liliet](#)

It’s a process :3

[Mental Mouse](#)

On consideration, I’m going to walk back the bit about “Pilgrim wasn’t using his crown” – that is after all why he’s not just another big hero like Hanno. It was still a handicap in his early dealings with Cat, precisely because of that.

[Liliet](#)

On the other hand, he was taking a step in inviting Catherine to explicitly stand on his side in this. He was inviting her to stand even closer to him than Laurence, in having this conversation behind her back – “well you know how she is, but you and I are reasonable people and we can forgive that, right?”

Imagine the story of it: Laurence attacking Catherine, and Catherine defending herself yet sparing her life, for no other reason than that Tariq had pled for it.

“Because I’m asking” is a damn heavy reason, story-wise.

And Catherine’s reply was that she will only take that step if she gets to take her whole party with her, giving Tariq an obligation to defend them even if they make “mistakes” of that caliber in turn.

And they’re not quite there yet.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I’m guessing Kairos got the seven crowns, but not Amadeus’ soul. (I’ll admit, seeing Black trying to manipulate Kairos would be fun.) And yeah, if Kairos has shown his cards, there’s a slot open for a replacement. Archer would be really fun – she’s something of a loose cannon herself, and generally a better counterpart to Saint. Downside: For the heroes, she’d be coming clear out of left field. That’s kind of the point of a “brick joke”, but it would be awkward at the moment. She would be more plausible showing up in the endgame with the Power of Love card.

The other question is, do the heroes have their own brick in flight? Hanno hasn’t been seen in a while, and he makes a good brick. :-p Probably not a worldhopper on his own, though. The Witch Of The Woods would be a more plausible arrival.

Valkyria

I hope the Sorcerer isn’t that badly wounded and still able to fight.

We know almost nothing about him and in the last chapters Cat herself thought him the biggest uncertainty in her plans and trickery. That seemed like some sort of foreshadowing. Would be kind of anticlimatic for him to be mostly out of the picture already.

[onedollargum](#)

I’m glad the sorcerer is wounded. He’d been practically untouched before and Cat was really worried about his

potential. Now that Sorcerer and Tyrant have blunted each other a bit they might actually stand a chance against the Dead King.

Mental Mouse

Agreed, that "never took a wound" thing was a bit too uncanny to stand. And yeah, he'll be able to fight. I assume more details will be forthcoming tomorrow; my wild guess is that they met Skein and Kairos booked it with the seven crowns and probably Black's soul (if RS still has that last, Cat's plans have gone seriously awry). This is nothing to panic over, remember Cat doesn't have to summon Larat until our party reclaims the crowns.

Andrew Mitchell

Oh, he'll still have an important role in what's to come. That's certain IMO. EE always delivers on events he's foreshadowed.

WarDaft

Why, you might even say that it is...

... an Irritant!

Ein

I've got a theory I've been throwing around in my head for a while. IIRC the current "meta" of Heroes vs Villains is based on stories. Who is the teller of stories? The Bard. We don't know much, but she is older than dirt, and has had her hand on the scales for millennia. I think there is an assumption that she is a pawn in the great game. What if this chicken came before the egg?

Most stories of gods irl have an ancient war in which gods slug it out for dominance. The Greeks/Romans had the Titan War, Judeo Christians had the War of Heavens and the Fall of Lucifer, etc. These are often described as cataclysmic wars in which the very fabric of reality was changed.

Now enters a storyteller. Maybe a primitive tribe's shaman, elder, etc. The people of the land are stuck in the middle of an apocalyptic war in which the gods are throwing haymakers at each other. She comes up with a treaty: The war will forever be fought in story and allegory. Heroes and villains can fight for dominance, but will always be balanced out by the flow of the narrative. There will never be total victory on either side, but creation will not get wiped out in the process.

This woman is the arbitrator of this narrative balance. The storyteller. The Bard.

Millennia later, another lady, an orphan by birth, loyal to a polity beset by above and below, and trained in the art of the narrative, sees her current world as an unknowing microcosm of the previous god war and wants to de-escalate the situation further and thus we got the PGtE. I think at the end of things, Cat will usurp the bards role via a new treaty in the vein of the liess accords while breaking the old pact (which could cause some awesome god battles in the last book).

My 2 cents. Had to get it off my chest.

Ein

Another theory:

The rogue sorcerer IS the dead.king, or an avatar thereof. Now in control of Black's soul, he will be raised as a revenant and she will have to make the classic choice of whom to save: her father or her dearest friend.

I expect her to take the third route, but she has been doing too well not to have the pendulum swing back at her.

[Mental Mouse](#)

To make a Revenant out of Black, DK would first have to get hold of his body. (That said, he might be able to manage a spectre or suchlike.) But Cat could certainly take his soul and make him a Night-shade like Akua.

[Liliet](#)

I do want to note that Bard strikes me as a de-escalator rather than escalator, here, too.

And I, too, like the idea of Catherine taking over her role as an enforcer of HER order, now – a better one than the previous version.

Andrew Mitchell

> I do want to note that Bard strikes me as a de-escalator rather than escalator, here, too.

How so? My impression was that the Bard gave the Dead King permission to "eat the baby". That's a massive escalation.

[Javvies](#)

Plus, I'm pretty sure that we're pretty sure that Bard was helping Saint organize the Conclave that got Cat declared Arch-heretic of the East.

I don't see how that can possibly be construed as anything other than an escalation.

Liliet

My impression was that she doesn't get to give people permission or not.

She invited him to do something he was already going to do, and what exactly the marginal effects of her also saying that were, we don't know yet.

Do distinguish short-term from long-term, and do keep in mind that the more the Dead King overextends, the more harshly he gets to be slapped down.

Mental Mouse

I think Bard is *supposed* to be keeping a balance, but may well be either going off the reservation, or losing her grip on the situation. If not both!

Liliet

So, to tally up the ways this chapter fucked with me personally:

– Kairos did, in fact, follow up on Catherine's expectations of him – thank god, thank god and thank god. This is the one pessimistic expectation of mine that got dashed -_-

– aaaaaaaaaaugh. Of course Catherine doesn't get the easy 'dash heroic expectations and prove yourself good' story. Like they're all not wrong that abdicating here would be kind of a bad idea, but meta speaking the narrative would have had nowhere to go but up from there >x> I wanted the simple...

– at the same time, part of the reason she didn't get to dash heroic expectations here is that the heroic expectations aren't that low already. Another reminder for everyone that to say Tariq and Laurence don't see eye to eye on this is like saying Catherine has a mild dislike of Akua's actions. She doesn't get to convince Laurence the way I hoped she might (fat chance @ me), but she doesn't *need* to convince Tariq – he knows, or at least, he hopes and is betting on it;

– I see you erratic, I see you reassuring everyone that Amadeus definitely totally under no circumstances could be a Hero – or at least, that Catherine thinks so 😊 Everyone who thought so already will pat themselves on the head and can feel free to do so – at the very least, we do learn that Catherine is certain of it. I'm just over here like... my theory rests on dashing expectations in the first place, that's the joke 😊 it remains

exactly as crack as it ever was, this could be build up for it or against it with equal grace;

– I genuinely did not see how Tariq’s “crown” could come into play here. Should have known better after Catherine brought it up, it wouldn’t have been left dangling with no payoff. Nice;

– this is not exactly the ‘fucking with my predictions’ kind of reaction, but: I like Tariq’s description of Kairos. This is the kind of empathetic shit a person with Behold SHOULD get to dish out;

– aww @ the entirety of Cat’s reactions here. God fucking bless her everything;

– the fucking Book of All Things quote and everything about it ;u;

[Mental Mouse](#)

I’m still half-expecting Cat and Pilgrim to at least squabble over the check before this is done. With a definite chance for Kairos to grab it, even if that ends up with the League being cursed. Kairos might even survive awhile as a true King of Misrule.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

As cliché as it sounds, I’m expecting Indrani to come in at the crucial moment and save Masego with the Power of Love. Imo, this is all a big distraction from Cat and the main purpose is to deal with Larat and fulfill the crown bargain.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, she’s certainly a “brick” that hasn’t reappeared yet.

[tkjarrah](#)

->“When we first spoke in Callow, years ago, you told me you were tired of killing children because they were on the wrong side.”
wait how long has it been since the beginning of book 4? i thought it’d only been about a year, not multiple

darkening

The trip to Keter was very long to get there, and didn’t instantly start after the battle of camps, and ever dark was many months, but yeah, I would’ve put it about a year more than multiple

[tkjarrah](#)

yeah, the pilgrim refers to it as 'years ago', which caught me off guard

Fayhem

I actually had an estimate pretty close to yours, but now that we've gotten an in-universe statement to the contrary I do see a few time-increasing factors that aren't included in your tally. One, IIRC it was stated that the trip/march from Laure up to the Battle of the Camps was at least a month or maybe two even with the fae gates, so the trip back would have been at least as long and quite likely longer even if they used the fae gates to get back, given all the wounded they had at that point. And I don't remember either way on this point, but if it wasn't specified it would at least be plausible that they wouldn't use the fae gates at all given all the aforementioned wounded – yes they're faster, but even with safe passage from the Monarchs of Arcadia if you parade your wounded around there's no guarantee you won't attract the attention of something nasty that doesn't answer to them so why risk losses when there's no longer a rush (Cat might not have wanted to give Pilgrim any more of an up-close look at her gates than necessary either). If so, then since the fae gates are a multiplier for movement rate it would be at least 3-4 months coming back down.

Two, the trip to Keter was indeed quite quite long, but the trip to the Everdark wasn't short either.

Three, Cat's adventures in the Everdark did indeed take quite a while, but IIRC it was at least a few months of off-camera shaking things out and getting plans set before she led the expeditionary force out of the Everdark – and again, marching halfway across the continent takes an amount of time measured in months even with gates. And then it was I think at least a month or so of marching around Procer trying to find where the fuck everybody is before the action started kicking off.

I would honestly still be dubious of it being anything more than a couple of years since that still feels like an outside estimate to me, but technically two is enough to use the plural.

Liliet

there definitely wasn't another winter I agree with you 0.0

SpeckofStardust

The whole this bargain lessens both of us, as other people has mention is that the fact that this agreement needs to be made at all instead of it being a thing that would end up being true anyway. Like really this is a its just sad that we have to agree

not to punch each other in the face instead of simply not doing so anyway.

Berder

That was a good speech by Tariq, but I'm confused as to the outcome. What promise did Tariq actually secure? The only circumstances under which Cat was likely to kill the Saint, was if the Saint attacked Heirophant or Cat. And it is acknowledged that Cat will kill the Saint to defend Heirophant. Is Cat promising that she will not defend herself if the Saint decides to try to kill her?

It would be quite a tall order for Cat to defend herself *non-lethally* against a thing like the Saint. Did Cat just agree to be murdered?

[Shveiran](#)

I think the promise is that she will make a good faith attempt at sparing her unless she kills Masego. That includes trying to stop her non-lethally if she attacks her or Masego (and it is possible) rather than using the chance to take care of a liability she wants removed. It's not a "I swear I'll never kill her even if it kills me", but a "I'll really try not to, rather than go out of my way to find a clean way to get rid of her".

Though when I think about it, I wonder if Cat will end up letting Saint kill her could be how this ends. You know, showing she can keep to her word and rely on Tariw to Forgive her back on her feet. I could see that happening.

[Liliet](#)

that would be fucking amazing

Tariq can only Forgive at dawn tho so that would take Cat out of the fight)=

[Mental Mouse](#)

Actually, I'd say that between story-fu and OP powers, Cat is probably one of the few people who *could* conceivably manage to take Saint down without killing her. Even Rumena could hold his own against Saint, and Cat could potentially "Take" Saint's domain! (I imagine Pilgrim could help with putting it back afterwards.)

shveiran

She could, I agree. But it would be both harder AND not what she wants, especially because the understanding is that Saint

won't stop trying.

Which is why it's a big concession, I'd wager.

Mental Mouse

Precisely. Cat has been remarkably restrained, mostly for the sake of not offending Pilgrim (and keeping Saint's firepower). And we're not just talking about "Praesi honor" (heh) here.

If Saint wasn't literally a holy terror, even the stuff she's *said to Cat's face*, would have "normal folks" (in any of the party's various nations) assuming they needed to kill her before she killed them.

Aotrs Commander

Sorry, I'll just be over here snorting with incredulous laughter that Saint is getting praised for massecring sick people. THAT'S Above's solutions to plague?

Not to beat a zombie horse here, but isn't "burn the infected" usually the resort of the crazy military angaonists? Or the sort of thing made a joke about completely murder-hobo players of RPGs?

Talk about "where you're a hammer, everything looks like a nail."

I mean, it's not EVEN like we know magic can't work on disease, since we literally saw Pilgrim straight-up murder and entire settlement of his own side via biological warfare, so yeah, I'm **totally** convinced Above can't use minions to magically cure plagues, in the same way that i'm completely **shocked** Kairos betrayed everyone.

So I can only gape in astonishment at both that and Pilgrim's "look, she murdered hundreds of people because they got sick (which would obviously include children and the elderly), so like, don't hurt her when she goes out and kills all your friends and probably you, yo?"

I am honestly kind of gobsmacked at that level of... Just... WOW.

Mental Mouse

Magic and miracle can certainly deal with natural disease because there it's unopposed. Even there, it might well need to be cured on a case-by-case basis, which is a bit tough when the numbers go up. Magical plagues would be a different story.

Fayhem

Yeah, what Mental Mouse said. Literally Pilgrim's origin story starts with his home city being ravaged by a plague that was

incredibly difficult to stop once it got started. Also, why is the example used of how easy it supposedly would be to stop a plague an example of *creating* a plague that then couldn't be stopped except by, oh what was it, oh yeah by killing everyone who had been exposed? Plagues spread themselves, that's kind of a defining feature. Cures don't. If you're suggesting some sort of "fight fire with fire" scenario instead, trying to fight a plague with a plague is how you wind up with two plagues.

Mental Mouse

Even the Dead King apparently got some rough lessons that plagues are not acceptable.

Pilgrim might have gotten away with his, solely because he completely contained it.

shveiran

True enough, but I think what he's coming from is "how can these Heroes be both this used to extreme measures, hard choices and lesser evils and STILL have these white-and-black worldview?

parahacker

I half expected Kairos to betray Catherine by not betraying her. He had to know she was counting on it.

Morgenstern

Really? Giving The Saint free right to murder *anyone but* Masego? If that's not idiocy coming to bite Cat in the ass, I don't know what is...

Mental Mouse

I think she figures she can take Saint, Archer can at least dodge her long enough for Cat or Pilgrim to restrain her, and Kairos deserves her. 😊

TeK

So, Pilly gives up his tattered crown to Tattered Throne in exchange to, what, Cat not killing Saint without a solid reason? Seems like exactly the type of a deal you will do with a Villain. Both the heroic sacrifice for a comrade, and underlying expectation that Cat is really just another murderous lunatic. Nice to see, that even when Pilgrim TRYES to act towards Cat as though she is a human being, he's just, like, can't.

I am also a little uncertain whether she should take that bargain. Killing Saint aside, it seems that the narrative here is "A former Villain allies herself with Heroes against a Big Bad".

In that narrative, regardless of what Cat wants or considers fair, she has to prove herself to be actually trustworthy. And for that she has to give up something, very implicitly. GP giving her a way out of proving herself to be Good, does not work well for her, narratively. Because if she doesn't need that crown as much as she claims, it is a very neat pattern, for her to give up her crown here, it gives her various upsides, with probable backsides only being unrest in Callow, but then, she is not going in there, next one on the menu is DK, and when she will return, she can make it official. She got the time frame for it, not like she is forbidden from leading, so she can still be in the position of power. I don't see a reason NOT to abdicate, frankly.

I am officially dissatisfied with Tyrant. He is expected by Cat to betray them – pretty blatantly, I might add, so best betrayal for him would be not to betray her at all. I still hope this is just a huge misunderstanding, and he is not, ya know, actually willing to betray them.

Liliet

Actually on reread I realize that what Pilgrim is asking is *for Catherine to spare Laurence if she attacks her*. Like, the scenario he's asking is one in which Cat tries her best to avoid killing her *in self-defense*.

Which also puts in stark relief why he refused Cat asking for the same for her entire party lmao

Eric Steel

'She is not witty or brilliant or fascinating, those traits that so often make the worst of us seem forgivable.'

Pretty much sums up most comments disliking the Saint. Why doesn't the Saint like the main character, who is the high priestess of two twin gods of bloodshed and strife, who keeps in her service psychopaths and murderers, when she's so witty and funny?

Just look at her willingness to use the shade and keep a cordial relationship with her, a person who killed droves of her own people. Why? Because the shade is funny.

Masego just seems like a dangerous character to enable and give power to when he's shows so little empathy for other people. Who also appears to have gone crazy cause people he actually cared about dies, so now he's off to try and kill who knows how many.

But nah, the life of a hero who dedicated her life to destroy evil is worth the same as a psychopath's/sociopath's or whatever would be the right term for Masego.

On another note; great novel! I look forward to seeing more.

Mental Mouse

Mmm, you're mixing at least three different viewpoints there. Pilgrim is explicitly defending Saint. Your first paragraph is Saint's perspective, your second probably would be if Saint actually knew about Akua, which she probably doesn't. Likewise, for your third: Saint doesn't know Masego at all, to her he's just the successor to Warlock as the top Evil mage.

We commenters more or less reached consensus that Masego seems to be what we'd call a high-functioning autistic. (He does lack the usual sensory-overload vulnerability, but that seems a natural candidate for compensating with magic – with extra magical senses, even normal mages would probably need something in that vein) He's also Praesi born and bred, with their usual disdain for human life. That said, autistic folks famously tend not to *completely* absorb the mores and customs of their society, and Masego doesn't seem to have any actual viciousness in him. (Admittedly, combined with what he *does* have of Praesi attitudes, that arguably makes him scarier!)

Even with this "breakdown", note that he *hasn't* been laying waste to the vicinity; the shard would have done so without intervention, *if* he didn't do anything to stop it... but we have no idea what he was planning, and Iserre seems an odd target for vengeance. It seems quite likely to me that he was thinking in terms of making his own world and pulling it in around him, using Liesse largely to attain apotheosis (by Neshamah's method) and perhaps for cosmic engineering.

One point I don't think we've brought up, is that by now, or at least by the time the party reaches him, he probably *has* achieved immortality, at least on the level of Emperor Nefarious. Cat's example might well inspire him to reconsider that, and if so, Pilgrim might be able to do something about it. We also don't know how much of the original looming shard situation represents the Dead King's meddling with Masego's original plan.

This gives me a thought on the story arc: Given that the Forever King was foreshadowed from the beginning but has not yet appeared, Book VI might well be *his* book. Given that... *this* book may well culminate with the final end of the Dead King!

Consider the sheer power in play: The freshly-immortal Masego, Son Of The Red Skies, at the helm of Liesse. An almost as newly-risen pair of Dark Goddesses, with the Black Queen herself as their priestess and channel. Joined by three of the most powerful Heroes on the continent. Plus two more *exceptionally* crazed and powerful Villains. And for salt, the former Black Knight, the most sophisticated schemer of his

generation, is, um, "present in spirit". Just maybe, they could pull it off...

Kissaten

So, two villains having false secret alliance with each other is the one true way to defeat all heroes. As long as two villains are enemies to each other and can take turns playing lesser evil to the heroic side they are basically invincible. All their plot power will be destroyed the moment they are revealed to have a secret alliance, however, so they actually have to be enemies to each other, otherwise it wouldn't work.

Kind of surprising only Kairos and Cat used something like that in Guideverse consciously. There were villains who acted like that, but they weren't conscious of the narrative side of this thing, Black with Malicia and possibly Dead King with Triumphant.

Mental Mouse

> As long as two villains are enemies to each other and can take turns playing lesser evil to the heroic side

Yeah, but that part went by the wayside at the conclave. Nobody thought Kairos was the lesser evil, he's lucky they even let him play.

Liliet

This.

gyndroid

Wait. How many "and one" crowns are in play, now?

Tariq, Catherine, Tyrant, that's three definite ones. Maybe Thief of Stars. Maybe Spellsword. Maybe, soon enough, Edward Not-Fairfax. 3 more, suspected by Catherine. Maybe Black, depending on whether his position as basically successor to Malicia, and former ruler of Callow count (and if former ruler counts for Edward, as Catherine suspects it might, then I don't see why it wouldn't really count for Black either. He was enough of a ruler in Callow that Catherine, being his successor, got to use it to claim a sword and bully a Resurrection). And we know she can store bodies in Night so there's no reason she can't have stored Black, too.

Maybe Skein, depending on how literal the lord part of "Horned Lords" are. Probably not though. I can't remember though. If Catherine ignored it, I'm not inclined to count it. Maybe Dead King. That technically counts, though it's...hard to imagine a circumstance in which he gives up his crown.

That's...7(or 8) possible "and one" crowns. Maybe not all of mortal realms, but...
Huh.
It's probably just a coincidence though.

gyndroid

00oh, and Hierarch. Can't forget about him.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'd say forget Skein (and Saint!).

That leaves:

- 1) Three living crowns from Cat's party.
- 2) If Eddie-7 shows up, that would make three undead crowns from DK, otherwise two.
- 3) Black's soul is Cat's joker.
- 4) The Hierarch might turn out to be another joker, but per the text, he's currently shielding Kairos from scrying/precog.
- 5) DK himself is presumably eligible, but I'm pretty sure that ain't gonna happen. 😊

Of course, Cat's immediate response to the undead crowns was literally "it's a trap", and she's probably right. "Get thee behind me tempter... no on second thought, stay right where I can see you". 😊

I suspect that the Dead King might snaffle Hierarch somehow; as I've noted before, using Hierarch might make the travel realm unusable for mortal armies, but DK could probably make at least some use of it anyway.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Oh, just thought of another wrinkle, not crown-related: Kairos is the designated traitor for Cat's side. Suppose Eddie-7 manages to betray the Dead King?

Andrew Mitchell

Yes. I've got this vision of King Edward somehow managing to escape from the Dead King's control through some amazing heroic effort (and maybe some help from Cat).

A M A Z I N G

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's clear from their prior encounter that he retains at least most of his original memories and personality; it's not clear just how DK exerts control over him.

Jernik

Oh no, I finally caught up!

[Mental Mouse](#)

My condolences! At least it's only an hour or so until the next chapter posts, after that you get to wait and debate with the rest of us.

shveiran

Hello, could someone please help me out?

I've only recently started to join the discussion, and when I do a tag always shows saying my comment is "awaiting moderation". But I think I left 3-4 comments here yesterday, and now they have disappeared.

Is there some requisite to comment freely I'm unaware of?

[Mental Mouse](#)

I think it's basically a matter of EE dealing with his queue to enable you; he might do that over the weekend.

shveiran

Ah, so that's how it works! Thank you very much

Captain Amazing

The Dead King is trying to create his own 7 and 1.

1-4 The four princes/princesses that carried Catherine's palanquin to Keter with their crowns nailed to their heads.

5 the Rat King known as the Skein

6 the Crown of Stars taken from the Thief of Stars

7 the Forever Kong's son, likely crowned in his own right

8 Good King Edward Fairfax 7th

Whichever crown she used as the "one" likely has a corresponding shape he could counter with. He made a point of showing them to her to make the resulting story stronger. The Crown of Stars probably covers any fae or supernatural crown she could lead with.

I think the Hierarch's crown also counts as 7 and 1 for the seven cities of the League and one for himself. He's going to throw his hat in, muddy up the waters, save the day, and somehow transform the League into a democracy with him still in charge.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Eh. As noted before, Skein is dubious. More to the point, Cat almost certainly won't summon Larat until she has all her pieces ready. (And probably, after Masego has been sorted out.)

Once Larat has ascended, the crown business is over and done with, then the task is to kill the new god. Which just has to be “easier said than done”, especially given how smoothly things have been going so far. Hmm, it occurs to me that if this scheme *doesn't* have any wheels come off it, that would practically be proof that Cat really is playing by Heroic rules now.

[Liliet](#)

lmao yeah

[milieu](#)

Could someone enlighten me who Doom is? I don't recall reading about her at all in this series...

[milieu](#)

Never mind the Doom of Liesse – duh

Andrew Mitchell

TBH that one took me a good few minutes to figure out too. 😊

[Delphos](#)

“if she does not kill the Heiophant”, not “if she does not kill Masego.”

Uh oh.

shveiran

True, but I don't think that will be an issue: context matters.

This isn't the Fae, but two prospective allies striking a deal in good faith: the meaning behind their words is clear, if Tariq tried to slip out of his obligations that way he'd be hearing bad karma story-wise AND earn Cat's enmity for good, with no real gain. I mean, he probably would like getting rid of Masego as he is a dangerous liability, but with all that is happening? Trying to rules-lawyer the deal this way really feels both out of character and short-sighted.

[Liliet](#)

yeah

and I mean their deal is basically “if Saint is still alive at the end of this you get a crown for it” “cool but be aware I have a line that if she steps over I'm going to say fuck your crown”

this ain't an obligation on Cat's part this is a condition
she's unilaterally informing him of

Andrew Mitchell

Well spotted. I wonder if it will be significant.

Chapter 41: Ante

"It is the nature of gambling that the scope of one's victory is proportionate to the scope of all others' defeat. So is it with empire, and near as subordinate to chance."

– Dread Emperor Venal

I studied the Rogue Sorcerer closely as he hobbled forward, not out of any great affection for the man but because the state of him was a piece of information that'd allow me to discern the nature of Kairos Theodosian's game. When the Tyrant had turned on us, had he gone for the kill or for a more amicable form of betrayal? The Sorcerer's face was a canvas of bruises and scratches and he looked like he'd been sent tumbling down through a thicket of brambles, but aside from that and a wounded knee I could see no great damage inflicted. While the Pilgrim saw to the other hero's pain, I considered the private conversation that Kairos Theodosian and myself were having through the particulars of the Rogue Sorcerer's escape and return. If he'd wanted to break with me permanently the Tyrant would have killed the man – or at least made a serious attempt to do so, which did not seem to have been the case – to lure out the Pilgrim's lone aspect-resurrection. He'd taken the crowns, that much was obvious, and likely whatever artefacts the Sorcerer had been carrying on him. That appeared to include the casting rod, and likely Black's soul as well. Kairos had deigned to use the opening I'd left for him and done it without burning bridges with myself or with the heroes in a way that could not be overcome down the line. Which meant he was still open to turning on the Dead King in our favour, if we seemed the horse to back at the latest hour. Assuming he didn't turn on both us and the Hidden Horror in favour of some still-inscrutable aim, which given who we were dealing with was very much possible.

"- he had me thrown off a balcony by gargoyles after declaring that was the last we'd see of me," the Rogue Sorcerer said, snatching back my attention.

Really, Kairos? That's a little on the nose even for you, I thought. If the Tyrant was going around throwing heroes off of cliffs then he definitely wasn't trying to kill anyone. I paused for half a beat and looked the absurdity of what I'd just thought in the eye, though being absurd made it no less true. I tapped the bottom of my staff against a broken pavement, claiming the attention of the returning hero.

"He took the crowns," I said.

"He did," the Sorcerer agreed. "And-"

The man flicked a hesitant glance at the Pilgrim, who nodded in allowance.

"- my teacher's soul," I finished instead. "That cat's been out of the bag for some time, wizardling."

He watched me warily at that, as if the revelation that he'd been going around with my father in a bottle would be enough to have me strike at him out of nowhere. While even these days I relied on being underestimated to get away with gambits, on occasion it was irritating to be taken as this kind of second-stringer. I wasn't some cackling Dread Emperor from the Age of Wonders, Sisters bless, and even if I'd actually intended on betraying these people I wouldn't have been an *amateur* about it.

"He intends to coerce you with it, I suspect," the Grey Pilgrim solemnly said.

There was sympathy in his gaze I did not particularly deserve or want. Not from the man who'd ordered Black's soul cut out and bottled for his own manner of coercion. I might hold Tariq in higher esteem than Kairos, but I'd say this for the Tyrant of Helike: when he slid the knife, he did not pretend it was anything but that.

"He'll try," I simply said. "Sorcerer, did he speak anything else before throwing you off the cliff?"

"Balcony," the man corrected.

"She's right," the Saint grunted, almost amusedly. "If a villain tossed you down, it's a cliff in every way that matters."

I suspected the old killer had been thrown off, or leapt down, more than a few in her time. The dark-haired man cocked a brow but did not argue.

"He loudly lamented your lack of foresight," he told me. "In some detail."

So, Kairos had left a message for me. Kind of him.

"In what way specifically?" I asked.

The Grey Pilgrim grimly smiled.

"You think he revealed his plan by monologue," the old man said.

I think that if he took the bait I offered, it was for a reason, I thought. He just gave me a way to get everything I want the way I want it. He won't have done that without a reason, and if we're to continue negotiating through you then he needs to have his counterstroke made known. If the Pilgrim wanted to take that as Kairos making a Name-induced mistake instead of moving through something that had the shape of one, then that was his miscalculation to make. I dipped my head the slightest bit, then silently invited the Sorcerer to keep talking.

"He castigated your ignorance of precedent, Black Queen," the hero almost apologetically said. "And insisted there are reasons people don't 'go around pulling swords from stones, if you'll forgive my language'."

It took me an embarrassing four heartbeats before I put the pieces together. Shit. *Shit*, that heinous little bastard. There was no way he should be able to know about – no, Hells, he'd been talking with Neshamah for months now hadn't he? And Neshamah could pick Masego's brains whenever he wanted. It was quite possible that the Tyrant knew when I'd pulled the sword from the stone at First Liesse I'd done so while presenting myself as the heiress to the tacit king of Callow of two decades: Amadeus of the Green Stretch. That was a crown, one I'd not considered until now and one I could not afford to lose. If my teacher was inflicted the curse that was losing that 'right to rule', who was going to unfuck Praes into a halfway reasonable nation for me? I'd come to trust Akua to an extent I would have thought inconceivable a few years ago, but I couldn't trust her anywhere near the Tower: it'd be like locking a drunk who'd just begun weaning into a wine cellar. And Malicia, well, regardless of the political considerations that prevented allowing her to remain in that seat if the Empress had wanted this to end in any way but one of our heads on a pike then she shouldn't have started assassinating my friends. I needed Black as, if not Dread Emperor, then someone in a position to resolve the mess in the Wasteland before the cauldron tipped over and fucked us all over while we were stuck looking north.

"He's threatening to have Black as the one, to cut the grass under our feet and give Larat his due," I said. "Possibly in my name, possibly on his own – hard to tell at this point. I shouldn't need to tell you that'll be a disaster."

"You mean the most desirable way for this to end, save you chucking down your own crown," the Saint of Swords bluntly countered.

"Laurence," the Pilgrim chided.

He did not, I noted, disagree. Of course he wouldn't. Tariq had considered Black enough of a threat that he'd been willing to unleash a plague to corner him, even if I was right and he'd gone after my teacher with the deeper intent of baiting a pattern of three between us. The Pilgrim wasn't the kind of man to resort to those means unless he thought the enemy dangerous enough to require it. The heroes knew my teacher as the Dread Empire's red right hand, the monster who'd torched the heartlands of Procer to starve an empire into collapse when he'd judged he could not defeat its armies on the field. And he was that, it must be said. But he was also a great deal more: the architect of the Reforms, the lid that'd been put on the worst impulses of the Wasteland for nigh forty years and a stubborn madman who'd fought a bitter, thankless struggle to end the cycle of death that'd bound Callow and Praes for millennia.

If I was to have peace in the east in my lifetime, and the kind of peace that would last *beyond* my lifetime, then Black was one of the keystones for it. As Warlock had once told me, for all that the man saw himself as a replaceable cog in a great machinery he was in truth the beating heart of the dream for a different Empire. If I lost him, there simply wasn't anyone else who'd do his work anywhere as well, as comprehensively or as reliably – more than just personal ability, there were his personal *relationships* to consider. Who else had his pull on the Legions, on the Clans and the Tribes? Had Kairos glimpsed that, I wondered? If so, he was even more dangerous than I'd suspected for he was perhaps the first of my foes to truly understand the world I wanted to make. Or it might be simpler, I thought, a scheme as plain as it was effective: I would want to preserve my father, the heroes would want to cripple him. Conflict would ensue, sure as dawn rising.

"Theodosian can't be allowed to get his way," the Rogue Sorcerer spoke up. "Especially if what the Black Queen suggests is true."

"You walked through the same empty towns as us, boy," the Saint harshly said. "The further the man who wrought that is from a crown-"

"We do not want the man who schemed that to *shape this realm*," the Sorcerer hissed back. "That is the last crown's purpose, Gods be merciful, and we'd trade what – a petty blow at a woman trying to be our ally for what could be bloody disaster?"

Huh. I'd genuinely not seen that coming.

"Roland," the Pilgrim intervened, tone calming. "No such decision was made. There is no need for backbiting among us."

"There is, Peregrine," the hero furiously said. "I've kept my tongue through low ebbs – and there have been a great many of those, since this wretched crusade began – but what sort of black madness is it that the only one here who has attempted to save lives over the last months is the damned *Black Queen*?"

I wondered what it said about me, that instead of being touched by that I was immediately suspicious. If you sat in a high seat long enough, I thought, trust sickened and died until all that was left was the strange kin to it that Malicia has famously coined: trusting people to act according to their nature. And I did not know enough of the nature of the Rogue Sorcerer – Roland, to hear Tariq put a name to him– to trust anything coming from his lips. Gods, though, even if he might be playing me it was nice to hear someone say it.

"She's playing you, Sorcerer," the Saint told him.

The echo, I thought, was ironic in all the worst ways. My father would have laughed of it until tears came and muscles ached.

"I don't care, Saint," the hero said. "This is... this is beneath us. All of us. That even in the face of doom we take each other as foes instead of a having a single forthright conversation to protect the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who put their lives in our hands."

"There is a conversation to be had," the Pilgrim tiredly conceded. "Yet now is not the time for it."

"Respectfully, Peregrine, I disagree," the Rogue Sorcerer said.

Though his knee had been healed by the Pilgrim along his bruises, it must still have been tender by the way he was careful when turning towards me.

"You have a plan," the dark-haired man said. "This has been evident since you cowed two armies into truce and stripped rule from a third of the Highest Assembly. What is it that you need done, Queen Catherine, and how can I help?"

And it might be, I thought, that he was honest. That the was speaking from a place of genuine disgust for the way cloak and dagger struggles were still being had even when, as he had said, hundreds of thousands of lives hung in the balance. If that was true, if the Rogue Sorcerer really was as appalled by it as the glimmer in his eyes said he was, then this was the first breath of the newborn Liesse Accords. An agreement, however implicit, that there were some monstrosities that even foes should and would band against. That a form of restraint could be enforced, by the fear of utter opposition from all others if nothing else. It was something I longed to hear, more than any praised or recognition of my bitter efforts to avoid bloodshed, and so

damned as I was I distrusted it immediately. Because I'd seen him hobble back to us, leaning against the Saint in quit conversation. Because I knew near nothing of the man under that sweep of dark curls, and if I was trying to trick Catherine Foundling I would have done it just like this. Splitting with the others on root of principle, not for sympathy of the villain but contempt at the actions of my own side. That he'd been a little too castigating, a little too bitter, only made it all the more believable: I'd learned from High Lords that anything too smooth was likely to be false. It might be, I thought, that this was all play by the heroes to get a better glimpse the lay of my intentions.

Does it matter? I thought, taking a cold-eyed look at the practicalities of it. I was, in the end, surrendering little I would not have to reveal down the line. And if I was wrong, if this was an earnest tirade, then that early surrender was well worth the price of encouragement. I breathed out, slowly, and then slipped two fingers to my lip to whistle. The shrill cry sounded loud and far, followed by silence and veiled gazes.

"I need a company to tear through the Ducal Palace's front door, loud and hard and drawing attention from the dagger," I said. "Which will slip in through a hidden path, to get at the Hierophant directly and pry him awake from the Dead King's influence."

"I tread close to the palace," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "It's a fortress of wards and enchantments. Brute force will flounder, but I have ways to finesse the locks."

"Good," I said, inclining my head. "I'll be there, as the moment we're in we'll need to move on the Tyrant and I've some notion of how to deal with him."

"This *dagger* you speak of," the Grey Pilgrim said, "if you do not guide it through the hidden path, how will it know of it?"

"Who do you think told her about that to begin with?"

Saint's blade had cleared the scabbard before the end of the first word and even the Peregrine shifted his footing to have an easier time slinging Light if it came to a fight – which seemed, if anything, to amuse Indrani all the more. To have come so soon after I whistled, she must have been shadowing us from even closer than I'd thought. Archer's long leather coat whispered against the ground as she moved to lean against a half-broken pillar, hazelnut eyes bright in the gloom of this city she'd seen both breaking and broken. The way her fingers rested on the handle of her long knives was too casual to be a threat, but there was not a hint of fear in her bearing at the thought of tangling with any of the heroes.

"Archer," the Pilgrim said, inclining his head in greeting. "How long have you been trailing us, I wonder?"

Indrani grinned, sharp and unpleasant.

"I'm just here to guide you poor lost souls through this nightmare of a city," she said. "Nothing to read into."

"Should I be appalled that even after all this you had yet another card up your sleeve?" the old man said, glancing at me. "How many more are left, Your Majesty?"

"One more, Tariq," I said, lips quirking. "That's the trick: always one more."

"Spare me," the Saint of Swords said. "Fine, if you need warm bodies for a dagger crew then I'll bite."

"You'll be a lot more useful in the assault crew," I politely replied. "The Pilgrim would be a better fit."

"We don't trust you not to cut our boy's throat at first occasion, 'cause you're vicious old bat," Indrani cheerfully translated. "You're not going anywhere near him without Cat to keep an eye on you, get me?"

I glanced at the Pilgrim. We had, after all, struck a bargain. The reason for which he might hesitate to leave the Saint alone with me – she'd try to end me and run headlong into grounds I'd prepared to kill her – should be seen to now.

"I am sure young Archer will prove sufficient muscle for the pair of us," Tariq agreeably said. "We both know, Laurence, that your talents are best suited to less subtle tasks."

"Getting your way in all of it, are you?" the Saint darkly said, matching gaze.

"Wouldn't have to, if your way wasn't so godsawful," I replied.

"You might be the single worst ally we've ever had," Indrani told her, sounding kind of impressed. "And I'm counting secret Malicia in there, since at least she had panache when batting us around."

"Secret Malicia doesn't count, she was just impersonating an ally," I said without missing a beat.

"So that's the Woe," the Saint said, eyes flicking between us and her lips quirked into a hard and unimpressed smile. "Murderers and sowers of ruin, but that's all right because you're clever and you're *droll*. Like that's not just a fig leaf on the obscenity of what you are."

"Gods Above, Regicide," the Sorcerer said, "how much time must we lose to incivility in the face of cataclysm?"

"You want civil tongue, boy?" she snorted. "Fine. Foundling, what has you so convinced that the dusty vagrant you just revealed can do a single damned thing to 'wake' the Hierophant? What is she going to do, put an arrow in him in a friendly way?"

Hardly that. There was a story between the two of them that was old and worn and could be put to purpose, but it would have been stripping bare something of Indrani in front of strangers that were still half foes. I saw no need to sate the curiosity of Laurence de Montfort at the expense of one of mine.

"There's a method," I flatly said. "You don't need to-"

"There's two people close enough to Masego to pull him back from the brink," Archer interrupted me without hesitation, "and of the two I'm the one in love with him."

Ah. Well. I kept a wary eye on the Saint, for if she laughed now I thought that Indrani might very well try to kill her. She was proud, my friend, and to have something so fragile mocked would sting all the more. Instead the old woman silently nodded, face shuttering closed.

"For the dagger to have chance at making it into the deeps without running into entrenched resistance, the assault crew will have to wreak the kind of havoc that simply can't be ignored," I said, passing over the discomfort with forced composure. "Sorcerer, you said you have a method to pass through wards?"

"I can bring them down," the hero agreed.

"Then, given who it is that's going to be making up this crew, I'd say the time for subtle has passed," I frankly said. "Let's smash through the front door and pick every fight there is to be picked."

It would, as an additional boon, attract the Tyrant the way honey would flies. He'd never be able to let pass an opportunity to meddle in that kind of a brawl, not even if it was to his advantage, and he and I still had a conversation to conclude. I'd put out the crowns and the soul though the Sorcerer, and he'd claimed that. That was the seed of a story, Kairos betraying us and my recovering crown and father from his grasp when we fought. He'd offered the mordant rejoinder of taking them but making it clear he was ready to spend them all before I could reclaim anything. If he'd genuinely meant to go through with that, though, I wouldn't have received a warning. Which meant he was, in his own way, inviting me to make a counteroffer when we next met. Which gave me until then to figure out what it was that the

Dead King had offered him – besides the pleasure of betraying us – and beating that with an offer of my own.

“Now you’re talking my language, Black Queen,” the Saint of Swords said, crooked teeth bared. “Into the breach we go, blade high and let the dark cower at the coming it.”

Caerulea

Vote!

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

Also apparently there is a Discord? Not sure what goes on there, but if you want to find out, go here:

<https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>

[*Liliet*](#)

bless u ♥

Gunslinger

Are the emotes any good? These days I only join rooms for the emotes 😊

[*Liliet*](#)

well there’s the green goblinfire one

Aston

Eotv?

Cicero

Well done Archer. Well done, and well said.

Gyndroid

I think I’m allowed to be a little pleased with myself, here. 😊
<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/05/15/chapter-40-entreaty/?c=42161#comment-42161>

Dammit all, though. I really want Rogue to genuinely be feeling positive towards Catherine, but her instincts are so on the money about trusting people telling her what she wants to hear. Still,

it'd be awesome if she managed to seduce another sneaky type to her side, though Viv would feel a bit threatened.

stevenneiman

Nice. It would appear that you totally called it. Kind of makes me sad there's no way to make that one Malicia's. Not only would someone willing to make whatever allies are necessary, it would also mean that Malicia would be forced to step down or guarantee that her ultimate goal of a sustainable Praes fails. I personally suspect that the Rogue Sorcerer is genuine. He's old and smart enough to recognize that Cat is trying to shape a story where she keeps things from going to shit for all involved, but between being younger and more of a loner he hasn't been burned nearly as hard as the big two have been on trusting villains. Experienced enough to see the truth but not so jaded as to dismiss it as trickery.

Orpheus

I think that may be a bad idea anyway, because the final crown shapes the realm. If Pilgrim's crown creates a realm of necessary sacrifices in the name of the greater good, I don't know if Malicia's crown would create a very useful realm. It would kinda waste the whole ritual at best, and at worst would be focused around treachery and a complete lack of scruples, possibly even being usable by the Dead King.

Someguy

Does it have to be a crown? The vow was for 7 crowns & One right? No specifics as to that One is? Could be 7 crowns and a dirty sock would still work?

[Mental Mouse](#)

We went through that in last chapter's comments. Also, the Dirty Sock Crossroads would probably stink.

[Liliet](#)

Don't confuse Malicia with Akua. She fucked up at the end, but she still was Black's effective co-ruler for 40 years.

Rook

I'm honestly hoping against hope that he actually is genuine and that he actually does help push the plan along success.

What I can't help expecting, is some other shoe to drop, whether he's genuine or not. The way that his help is suspiciously convenient but too good to pass up on almost parallels the way Catherine baited the Pilgrim with her surrender. A deal too good to refuse.

Maybe his method of bypassing the wards is already known to the Dead King and it'll just be used to set off a trap. Maybe the path that Archer found was one that was intentionally created, in order to bait Catherine into Splitting The Party, and he was just used as a catalyst to push it along. Who knows.

After all, an well-meaning support character accidentally carrying the seed of disaster isn't exactly a rare trope.

konstantinvoncarstein

I agree, all is happening according to plan, which means that nothing is going according to plan. They are trying a classical heroic story against Neshamah, who is bound to have several counters for it.

The attitude of the Sorcerer is too convenient, but if it is genuine he will become my favorite hero so far.

[Liliet](#)

I think it's important to not overthink this.

They aren't going to be able to blindside Neshamah with this, but who tf needs a hidden dagger when they have a tank? Like, on an object level that's a dagger but on narrative level that's a tank Cat's got there and Neshamah just has to get out of the way as gracefully as he can. And he knows this, and is just trying to milk the situation for all he can before the inevitable 'curse you, heroes! this is not the last you've seen of me!' retreat

Justin

Could Rogue Sorcerer be Neshamah or an agent of his? He was near when Cat got her first message from the Dead King and he's the one who just baited out her plan

[Liliet](#)

Tariq is right there.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Aside from Liliet's points, they are mixing up heroic with villainous stories, which falls under Cat's usual pattern of creating chaos in order to exploit it. Neshamah will surely get some objectives (not necessarily known to us at this time), but he probably won't get to lay waste to Iserre (at least not this way), and I doubt he'll get to keep (or kill) Masego. However, the crossroads scheme is surely up for grabs!

[Liliet](#)

SAME on all accounts ♥ ♥ ♥

shveiran

It is a possibilities, and I'd love for him to be genuine, but I'm afraid the RS has too little narrative weight to begin the building of bridges between sides. Which I am with dk and bet on him actually being Black-possessed. Blacksed?

[Mental Mouse](#)

RS isn't building bridges, he's a fulcrum. He doesn't need narrative weight as such for that.

And yeah, he's either still carrying Black or has been thoroughly subverted by him.

shveiran

You can call it a fulcrum if you prefer, but I still don't see him being the pebble that starts a landslide. Still, could be he's just the last drop in the bucket... but I'm not convinced, not yet.

[onedollargum](#)

Maddie changed a bit after his visit from Intercessor. I've been wondering whether we were going to see a new name or how that would fall narratively. Possession seems out of his wheelhouse but the way Rogue came around is a bit suspicious.

[Liliet](#)

Did Tariq not notice or is he onboard?

Shveiran

I doubt Tariq had such a change of mind that he is now ok with allying with Amadeus, especially off screen. Though he may be bidding his time.

[Liliet](#)

OK I love this idea. Like I consider it super unlikely but this would be fucking beautiful.

Cicero

He might be lying while at the same time partially believing it. A half truth is always easier to make a lie out of.

In that case, Cat might still have a chance with him.

dk

I think that she's misreading the person who'd been "a little too castigating, a little too bitter". I think that she's misreading him as a hero when in fact he is *Black*.

I predict that Rogue had a magic item that held somebody else's soul, but Amadeus was trapped in his eyeball (or otherwise secured). Kairos stole a decoy phylactery, and now Black is getting to speak directly to Cat.

Since Cat hasn't seen through Black's disguise, she doesn't recognize the genuine offer of support because it's coming from the body of the Rogue Sorcerer.

naturalnuke

That would be as big a twist as Black actually being Assassin.

Someguy

Or that the Original Black died in Heir's hands back during the Praesi Civil War and Assassin has taken over his identity & playing his Role ever since.

[Javvies](#)

No. Black has been using his Aspects since then, so unless you're also going to argue that Assassin can somehow emulate Black's Aspects (plus his character and decision making) so perfectly as to fool those who knew Black since before the Conquest on a long term basis ...

Also... the rest of the Calamities and Scribe would have known instantly. And they would have been pissed that Malicia's scheming with Akua got Black killed at Akua's hands.

Also, while Assassin could disguise himself as Black well enough to fool Akua, I doubt he could do the same with Tariq.

Plus we've had PoVs from Amadeus. Recently even.

Amadeus is not dead.

RandomFan

While you're not wrong, this theory is talking about the Heir before Akua killing Black; I.E. "Assassin was Black for each and every scene of canon", excluding, possibly, some name dreams and some bonus chapters. "Since before

Book 1's prologue", not "Since book 3" Just wanted to clear that up!

Mental Mouse

That founders on my rule for continued identity, that is, at that point, Assassin would be Black's secret identity and vice versa.

Tek

It was Squire, whom tangled with Heir, not the Black Knight. So that would mean, that there never was a black Knight, only the Assassin, which kinda kills the point. I mean, if you have an Assassin sitha Name Black Knight, being able to use all aspects of Black Knight, he is not an Assassin.

Mental Mouse

Not really, we've got already had hints that RS is under Black's influence. And a decoy phylactery is just good tactics.

Liliet

It would need to be really minor influence for Tariq to not notice.

Like, "they had conversations and Rogue Sorcerer ended up with thoughts to chew on and new speech quirks", not "RS has entirely new motivations now"

Mental Mouse

Yes, and the former would be much more Black's style. NTM that even Akua could only take Cat over when she was otherwise comatose.

Liliet

and that scenario COULD actually be fun, unlike the 'nah no heroes were involved' one -_-

Decius

Suggesting that Kairos has the Roland's soul, meaning that when Cat gets it back she will have saved a hero, albeit an incompetent one that allowed Black to posses him when the entire soul removal was precisely to avoid allowing him to influence anyone in any manner.

That would improve Saint and Regicide's attitude by one step, to 'murderous' and 'obstructionist' respectively.

[Liliet](#)

are Saint and Regicide two people in this comment

[Liliet](#)

Are you supposing that RS/Black is somehow fooling Tariq's Behold, or that Tariq is onboard with this?

Insanenoodlyguy

I think Viv wouldn't feel threatened in fact. Not after Hakram and the hand incident. She's no longer part of a band of five named, she's the heir apparent of Callow. She's got a whole new deal that doesn't require her in the same place anymore.

The problem here is Rouge Sorcerer is the magic. Hierophant is the Magic. I'm worried that at the very least in order to keep Rogue he's going to at least remain out of commission for a while.

Also, I now ship Roland and Cat. Also since he's still acting this way even without Black's soul in there, I also now throw out the semi-crack theory: Roland is Amadeus' son. He's the story Cat guessed at way back at the beginning: He did in fact have a kid he intentionally had nothing to do with in order to keep him out of all this, and that failed utterly because stories. That "It's not too late to save your family" line that he wasn't able to get out wasn't a mere bluff, it was an ironic truth.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Like father like son? Oh, that would be... EEvil. ;-). Especially if RS doesn't even know it himself. But I'd still bet on Black's spirit instead.

Shveiran

A new father/son relationship for Maddie, this late in the game? I don't think that's where we're headed, it would muddy the waters between the protagonist and her mentor

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, probably not, but it would set up some classic dialogue. 😊

JRogue

I hear what you are saying about RS and Hierophant being the 'Magic', but Viv is no longer the 'Sneaky' of the Woe and Rogue Sorcerer sounds like a 'Sneaky' name that uses magic to achieve those ends. He even talks about having a way to get

through those wards around the Ducal Palace. While I think he can fill a combat wizard Role when needed, I think he is more of Rogue trope. His story of trying to get books that used to belong to The Wizard of the West and barely getting away kinda leads me to think he was trying to steal them, not buy them.

Viv becomes what Malicia was to the Calamities and Rogue Sorceror takes on the 'Sneaky' Role that Viv used to fill.

That's all based on him siding with Cat, and his offer being legit, which, if PGtE has taught us anything, its don't trust them... any of them.

[Liliet](#)

Cat's going to end up with a party full of casters... and Archer.

[Liliet](#)

so does that make Roland a quarter elf or are you saying Amadeus deliberately slept with someone he wasn't attracted to *just* to have a kid or

I need to know more details of this scenario

Insanenoodlyguy

Probably one of those stupid things, where he got drunk at one of his more melancholy moments, and there was some girl at the bar, and the next day it was clearly a mistake but thanks to narrative fuckery the damage was already done. Kids even a hero because of course he is.

[Javvies](#)

You really think Black would have gotten drunk and slept with a stranger?

No, I don't buy that. It'd be wildly out of character for him.

Besides ... Black would most likely have been near constantly accompanied by one or more of his friends/allies/associates. I don't see any of them letting Black drunkenly wander off with anyone other than Ranger (they all like living too much).

Insanenoodlyguy

In my admittedly still crack speculation here, this happened just after Callow. The love of his life left him, he's kinda miserable, and his friends just hoped a night with somebody would do something for him. It didn't of course, and it likely never happened again.

As for Ranger, I really doubt she's the monogamous type. At least in the sense of caring what he does when she's not around and has specifically even said she's out. Though I imagine her number of partners has been fairly small to non-existent over the same period of time, this is less because of any faithfulness and more because there would have literally been nobody who impressed her enough to bother.

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus is *demi*. He's on the ace spectrum. He has literally never found anyone attractive other than Ranger. He's, like... not interested.

Insanenoodlyguy

And when she turned him down, he was out there, miserable, drunk, she was interested, he said "fuck it" and there you go. I mean, gay guys have had children. It's no less possible for a demi. I don't disagree with you about him, if this crack theory somehow turns out to be true, it certainly wasn't love (unless we find out he's a quarter elf, and SHE's the one who gave him up etc. etc.), but you don't need love to have a kid.

[Liliet](#)

Gay guys have had kids, but I somehow doubt it was commonly a one night stand scenario 0.0

not to mention the part where Amadeus doesn't drink on campaign and doesn't swear, he's like an adorable middle school teacher

Insanenoodlyguy

I'm pulling this out of my ass liliet, what do you want from me? 🤔

[Liliet](#)

proper respect for YO WE HAVE A CHARACTER ON THE ACE SPECTRUM LETS ADJUST THE STORIES WE EXPECT 😊

Insanenoodlyguy

Okay fine. He's not the father of the Rouge Sorcerer.

puts on his Irritant hat

He's the mother of the Rogue Sorcerer.

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus was secretly Loki all along?

I'd read that.

[Liliet](#)

EY YOU CALLED IT

And my call here? My call here is that this is it and this is true. That this is the real pivot of Catherine's effort breaking through, and that the test she's facing is not flinching from success. We've had a whole treatise on the topic of trust, last book.

And the key that makes me think this is real is what Catherine concludes at the end: that it doesn't matter whether she can trust this, because she stands to lose little and stands to gain much, and so the gamble is worth it.

That whole internal monologue was mirror at least in part to Tariq's inner monologue during the recent set of interludes. Does it matter if the Black Queen truly has a hidden dagger or is just bluffing? Is it still the right thing to accept her surrender, regardless?

Honestly, I've been expecting SOME dissenting opinions among western heroes since mid book 4. About time that gun fired :3

shveiran

I agree, but... I don't know, I don't see RS filling that role. Too little screen time, too little knowledge over his thought process. I expected an overture from Melanza which started an avalanche.

But hey, EE surprises me often and I love them for it. So maybe he is genuine and I don't yet realize that makes for the best story.

[Liliet](#)

Malanza is already on Catherine's side.

Honestly the avalanche kind of started with Cordelia realizing that the best way to bait Cat is to appeal to her non-mass-murdering sensibilities, and has been going, real slow, ever since.

Rozala Malanza trying to actually ask Catherine to lose to them so they can resolve the situation, and then giving up her crown willingly for Cat's plan.

Tariq deciding that he cannot conscience continuing to oppose Catherine even if she IS bluffing and has no hidden dagger if he refuses to accept the surrender.

And now a random hero we know nothing about just saying it the way he sees it, which is in Catherine's favor because yooooo THAT IS IN FACT WHAT IS GOING ON.

shveiran

It is a way to see it, but a lot of that wasn't really about Cat.

Last time they talked, I got the feeling Melanza didn't much change her opinion on Cat and still considered her a monster; she simply got to meet Tyrant and DK (sort of) and realized there are worse things out there. It isn't really about changing idea on the Black Queen, but on the rest of the world.

As for the crown, I felt that was more about how she changed perspective on her responsibilities and priorities than about any trust in Cat. I thought she was simply willing to believe that Cat was the DK's enemy too, but... I mean, she's a living being, that isn't too much of a concession.

Still, it could be that's how it starts and I'm simply looking at it wrong. After all, it doesn't matter why they band together if they do it for a while; it is still a proof of concept, and that is a step forward by itself.

KageLupus

I think that you are right, and it is exactly what Cat is going for. You can have a disagreement with another person/nation for whatever reason, just as long as you both accept that there are cases where you have to set that aside and work together against a real monster.

Malanza doesn't have to like Cat or any of the stuff that she has done. She just has to agree that the Dead King is a serious enough threat that their history is less important than stopping him. This whole volume, especially lately, has been various reflections on that same theme.

Leaders get mad because their soldiers fought and died, but that doesn't mean that they should keep fighting when the Dead King comes knocking. Named can be on opposite teams but can still work together to take down the big threat. I think the fact that the Rogue Sorcerer is so on board with Cat's plan right now proves that not all Named are so jaded or fanatical that they can't see the benefit of working together when necessary. Cat has

spent so long trying to act reasonably, eventually someone was bound to notice and admit it.

Liliet

Yeah, it not being about Cat IS the point. She doesn't want it to be about her, she wants to change the base of the system.

Liliet

Yeah, but her idea of the Black Queen was "someone I can go to with this". It didn't change, Malanza just had relatively (as compared to say Laurence) high standards for what she assumed of her to begin with.

>Still, it could be that's how it starts and I'm simply looking at it wrong. After all, it doesn't matter why they band together if they do it for a while; it is still a proof of concept, and that is a step forward by itself.

That's what I think basically yeah

Shveiran

The catch is the transition, though.
You can go from "we banded together to repel the big bad" to "let's agree we'll do it again and decide how we can make that work" (AKA the Accords, whatever the name and shape).

But... you could also go "well, that was fun, but you are still Evil, so... SLASH SLASH SLASH (Miko Myazaki style).

The transition is going to be tricky no matter what, but for the purpose of what happens next the ground they band together on does make a difference.
No matter what, banding together creates a new story that can be called upon in the future. But the extent to which it would change the world depends on the aftermath.

Mental Mouse

> But... you could also go "well, that was fun, but you are still Evil, so... SLASH SLASH SLASH

Well, consider Kairos with his Compulsive Backstabbing Disorder. Cat's task is to convince people *she* is different... despite the fact that she actually knows how to handle Kairos well enough to make use of him!

[Liliet](#)

I'm talking about Rozala Malanza. She's got nothing in common with Miko Miyazaki?

shveiran

Pretty much nothing but gender, yeah, but I was referring to the general "side of Good", not just her. My bet is she'll end up First Prince, but even if she does she won't control most of the moving pieces.

A Saint faction (not necessarily led by her, but gathering those that share her views about compromise with Evil) may very well survive the war.

[Liliet](#)

Rozala ending up First Prince would go against the grain of her story of realizing Procer needs unity, not ancestral squabbles (which is what her feud with Hasenbach basically is, even if it's a very close ancestry).

Not sure Saint *has* a faction that consists of more than just her.

Rook

Personally I think the sorcerer might be true, but the real Pivot is yet to come. I'd say it'll likely be getting through to Saint rather than the Sorcerer, and it'll be through an act of faith/goodwill by Catherine that's neither risk-free nor necessarily required of her. Something that can finally get through that impossible door of trust that's too heavy to move with simple words or small gestures.

I'm expecting that eventually Catherine will be offered a sweet deal like the one the dead king offered in the first trial, and the pivot will be whether Catherine takes that deal or stays true to her course. A moment where Catherine gets to decide to take the road that's easier and is no skin off her own back; or the unpalatable road that brooks 'no truce with the Enemy', a choice that would finally prove even to the Heroes that Catherine's 'Enemy' was never Good in itself or it's Heroes, and that her motives aren't some Evil hidden away beneath the surface.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think DK qualifies, even Kairos planned on turning on him.

Mental Mouse

What “even” Kairos? Kairos turns on everybody – indeed, he’s consistent enough about it that Cat can actually work with him, by simply planning for his betrayal.

Shveiran

It is also very hard to persuade Laurence with either acts or words. “Evil is treacherous and can’t be trusted for any evidence of the contrary is a scheme” it’s a tricky position to change.

Liliet

I think “story of true love wordlessly confirmed by Pilgrim” is one of those things that at least weigh in 😊

Javvies

Huh.

Archer arrives, as expected. We missed you.

I wonder what Kairos is up to here.

Heh. Saint is going to get to do what she does best. Again. So ... which team is the Rogue Sorcerer going with, Cat and Saint or Archer and Pilgrim?

Secret Malicia is whatshisname, the attendant or whatever while they were in Keter, right?
That was indeed a terrible ally.

AdrianGrey

Rogue is going with Cat and Saint. Remember how he said he was going to bring down the wards for them?

TeK

I’m pretty sure that Secret Malicia is really a Wrath of Bad Decisions.

Dainpdf

Nah, they meant the Attenndant in Keter.

TeK

It never was mentioned that they suspected him though.

werafdsaew

Things don’t have to happen on screen for them to have happened.

TeK

If things didn't neither happened, nor been mentioned, it lives hellawulot grounds for baseless speculations. Ya know, the best kind.

werafdsaew

It's been mentioned; this chapter.

Dainpdf

I imagine they didn't, until some point after the adventure. And now EE throws this at us, showing they realized at some point.

...yeah, I'd have liked to see that scene. It was probably epic.

Allafterme

I think EE is preparing grounds for an extra chapter revolving around this...

Mental Mouse

When they walked into Keter, they thought he was DK:

>"So," I said, "before we get into it. What are the odds that Athal is our good friend the Hidden Horror wearing someone's face?"

It's a pretty short jump from there to realizing Athal (or *somebody*) was actually Malicia.

Dainpdf

When you're this good at what you do, you find things to do with it. Plus that quote from some chapters ago about a sword always finding use...

caoimhinh

It's weird because they never actually found out about Athal being Malicia's flesh simulacrum. Masego went away to Thalassina immediately after and Cat and Indrani went to the Everdark, so they can't actually know Athal was Malicia.

naturalnuke

It have been a thing they learned later. Or just a lampshade/nod to the audience

shveiran

True, but the terms of the Malicia-DK deal were leaked by the Tower to the ruling council. Perhaps there was a mention of it there, or perhaps they just realized it from there because a detail made Malicia impersonating someone close to them the most likely scenario.

[Liliet](#)

oooo I forgot this

yeah it makes sense for them to figure it out in retrospect

caoimhinh

Perhaps, but still unlikely. Besides, even if the leaked terms state that Athal was Malicia (which I highly doubt because that has no place in a contract), Archer wouldn't know about it since she left the armies early, after only spending one night after regrouping with Hakram's army. Though Cat could have sent her a message via the Wild Hunt with that info afterwards (I suspect Wild Hunt Fae were their method of contact to summon Archer to Liesse now, since it's obvious they were coordinating). Still, it's very loose and weak justification.

[Mental Mouse](#)

They don't need to know it was Athal, they know she was there.

caoimhinh

Cat stated that Secret Malicia was disguised as an ally in Keter. They know it was Athal. The problem is that they have no way to know that.

[Liliet](#)

It's decently guessable.

ATRDCI

Cat's making sure RS is with her, to take down the wards for her. Also, because Tyrant said that the balcony throw is the last RS would see of Tyrant, it's guaranteed Tyrant will appear at the battle where ever RS is. So keep RS with her keeps Kairos away from the real rescue attempt.

[Liliet](#)

no, he said it's the last Tyrant would see of RS

...which is functionally the same ♥ ♥ ♥

Mental Mouse

I wouldn't put it past Tyrant to show up in a blindfold.

Liliet

omfg yes

ATRDCI

This is Tyrant we are talking about. He'd be wearing Zeze's blindfold.

AdrianGrey

Whew, that was a good chapter. I'm loving the character development all over the place here. The Rogue Sorcerer turning out to be (hopefully) pretty reasonable, and Indrani finally admitting her feelings for Masego (she never actually used the word "love" until now). Plus, Catherine's story-scheming is always a pleasure to watch. Hopefully next chapter will be action-packed, it's been too long since we last saw Cat really cut loose.

hmmmm

What's more likely?

A) Someone on team Good is reasonable, isn't selfish, is prepared to stand up to Pilgrim and Saint over their inflexibility and failures, and is willing to extend trust to Cat.

B) The Rogue Sorcerer is secretly the Dead King, is secretly in service to the Dead King, or has secretly been filled with explosives by the Dead King.

TeK

It was previously mentioned in comments, that he is a goat, cleverly disguised. An underrated comment, if anything.

ATRDCI

I'm sorry, do you mean a purebred Liessen Charger?

Thor

I vote A while also being filled with explosives by the Dead King. Best of both worlds really.

Liliet

The joke is, we've seen in Book 2 that all of the above – of 1, that is – is actually pretty damn likely for Team Good.

William got A LOT of pushback from his own side.

Andrew Mitchell

Both.

[Liliet](#)

I strongly suspect Indrani had a personal epiphany here, in seeing Cat pussyfoot around what's actually going until she realized "oh my god this is stupid just say it" ;u;

Oshi

This right here. It's also the best indicator that Archer is in real recovery from the shit that went down in the Underdark. She is back to who she chooses to be. A give no fucks baller.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm!

Now new and improved: even more fucks not given!

ATRDCI

She's saving them all to give to Zeze.

[Liliet](#)

Zeze: ewww. Catherine, can you take this off my hands?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Cat: Well, you are pretty cute...

Zeze: AUUUGHH!

Cicero

I think the Saint just wanted confirmation that they were going to play out a Hero's story this time. The mind controlled hero saved by his love is one of the oldest heroic stories there is.

Sure, Cat might be able to twist it a little, but there will be limits to the villainy that can come directly from this story.

Perhaps later, Masego and Cat will write a new story of villainy. But at least this story today will be a heroic one. Saint would prefer to just kill them all, but I think she can live with this one.

Dainpdf

She might also be treating Cat as an enemy for the principle of the thing... or as part of a good cop, bad cop routine with the sorcerer.

Rook

I'm chalking a large part of it up to genuine major trust issues from the Saint, rather than any kind of stubbornness. As in she's legitimately psychotic in a few ways.

Is she overall a good person, as well as a Good Hero? Probably. Almost definitely, I'd wager. But no one stays completely whole after living a few centuries fighting things that would make even the Pilgrim recoil in horror.

Even Catherine is already showing signs of similar tendencies, immediately jumping to doubting the Sorcerer because things were NOT completely going to shit for once. And that's with only twenty-odd years under her belt.

In comparison, the Saint likely has a couple hundred years of accumulated emotional trauma and PTSD.

[Javvies](#)

Saint isn't that old. At most, she's in the same generation as Tariq.

They're both under a century. And she's probably younger than he is, since hers is a more physical Role.

Heroes don't have immunity to aging like Villains. Heroes (who don't get killed first) have a lifespan roughly on par with that of a normal example of their species, though they are more likely to reach to upper bounds of the life expectancy for their species, given the health advantages of being Named, and the resistance to poisons and diseases, plus probably regular exposure to Above's energies. They're more likely to age well, but they do age more or less normally.

Caster types may be able to use magic to extend their lifespan, but many of the options would be ruled out because ritual blood sacrifice to extend your lifespan isn't exactly a Good/Heroic act.

Dainpdf

Decades. Heroes age normally. But yes, I like your thesis. I'd add that she's probably had many opportunities like the one with the story she told of the alchemist, to see cooperation with or even mercy towards evil, on her part and others', end terribly.

[Liliet](#)

^^^ this

“Dozens”

Ιούλιος Καίσαρας

i believe she's around 70 years old, a decade give or take.
Heroes age normaly except if otherwise explicitly mentioned.

[Liliet](#)

y e a h

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Even Catherine is already showing signs of similar tendencies, immediately jumping to doubting the Sorcerer because things were NOT completely going to shit for once.

I don't think that's from the same book as Saint's. Cat is used to “villain's luck” – when things are going too well, she gets suspicious. (I'm well into a reread, and in her first trip to Arcadia, she actually “weaponized” that to find a squad boss!)

[Liliet](#)

It's from the same book as Saint's in that they both learn from experience like rational people. If it happened the same the last 99 times, the odds of it happening the same way now are 99:1 😊

Dainpdf

This chapter was great. I don't have much more to say about it, for now.

caoimhinh

Yay, Archer is back.

I wonder if the Rogue Sorcerer's words are genuine. He seems like a practical man, so I wouldn't put it beyond him to use his true feelings as a tool to get his objective of finding out Catherine's plan.

Typos found:

- do his work anywhere a well / do his work anywhere as well
- That the was speaking / That he was speaking
- more than any praised / more than any praise
- in quit conversation / in quiet conversation
- sympathy of the villain / sympathy for the villain
- get a better glimpse the lay of my intentions / get a better

glimpse on the lay of my intentions
-face shuttering closed / face shuttering close

edrey

so how they know about secret malicia, she wouldnt be so smug to sent them a letter, explaining evreything, right?

caoimhinh

Yeah, that's a bit of plot hole.
They should have no way to know that.

Kissaten

Dead King refused the only offer he had left for him, so there certainly was an additional Malicia in Keter. Solving riddles off the scene is still solving riddles, if reader is informed of answer or of parts of the riddle.

Hellspirit

We didnt get in on the Dead King's and Cat's conversation at the end, so he could very well have told her why she lost.

caoimhinh

Unlikely given Neshamah's personality displayed towards Cat so far. He doesn't gloat about other's defeats. Besides, Catherine spoke to Athal right before leaving Keter and had no hostility towards him; she was later on shown still wondering about the loss, simply saying that Malicia must have had another flesh simulacrum in there. She had no suspicions towards Athal

[TeK](#)

Well, EE wants to hammer it down that Affably Evil is not Good. Looks like hatred on Saint may have annoyed him, but he writes villains so well and likable, so who's really at fault? Second chapter in a row he explicitly says that being funny and charming is not actually good traits, for all that they make us like certain people. But alas, the world is unfair, Aqua is witty and charming, and beautiful and smart and useful, so what if she single handedly slaughtered hundred thousand civilians? It's the Saint who is real Baddy the Bad here, RIGHT GUYS? I mean, the protagonist hates her, ain't that enough evidence?

Interesting, didn't see coming Tyrant using Black as crown. I had theorised that he is unpalatable for Cat as a sacrifice exactly because she planned for him to be an unnamed Praes handler, so nice to see myself right. But he is as adorable as ever, harmlessly throwing people off of balcony, shame nobody recognised ot for a friendly gesture of affection it was.

Returning to the theme of disliking Saint, whom you would choose between Saint and Tyrant to be left alive? What does it say about Catherine, that she likes how Tyrant is open about his intentions to screw anyone and wreak havoc and destruction, but dislikes Saint who is just as open about her intentions? Yeah, I grew more acceptant of Tyrant as well, damn EE for writing so well. Literally every Villain in this story is affable and likable enough, we forgot about the monster underneath. Black killed tens of thousands? Well he is main characters father figure, so he's not bad, but Pilgrim is godawful monster, I hate him! How dare he not willingly cripple himself protecting hundreds of thousands civilians from a rampant mass murderer? Aqua produced probably single spot of mass murdering in recent history, wreaking a third of a moderately sized country, unleashing Demon [b] as a distraction [/b], and much more? Well so what, she got big tits, that gives her pass in my book! But William, oh he is so bad for trying to prevent Callow from being used by the likes of Aqua and Malicia to trade a small spot of genocide to a magic fortress, for trying to spare Callow being Crusaded on (I don't put it past Saint and GP to stand in front of Proceran armies trying to invade a Good Callow, and saying "ya shall not pass"), I mean who could've seen all of that coming?

And still we will defend the monsters and belittle the Heroes – yeah, they may not be as good as we'd like to imagine, and they certainly are not heroic enough, [i]clean[/i] enough for as to recognise them as ones. So what if they give everything to throw themselves into the breach, to keep darkness at bay? That's what they [i]supposed to do anyway[/i], they don't deserve recognition or acknowledging, they are Heroes, so doing all of that is granted and expected, only they also do all those not so pretty things, so they are actually worse than Villains. No, they are not worse. Being honest about being atrocious is a kind of screwed up logic, I grown used to in this novel, but if we stop and think for a second, it is not an absolution, not even a sweetener. It's, if anything, much worse.

werafdsaew

Saint is bad because she's willing to burn down Procer and sacrifice every single life in Iserre for religious purity. There are worse Villains out there doesn't excuse the Heroes of their excesses.

Chris

That does her an injustice. The Saint of Swords has learned, painfully, that there is no acceptable amount of evil. Evil always creates more of itself: therefore anything that is even the slightest bit evil has to be destroyed. That's the thing: yes, she wants to make Calernia "pure". But her reasoning for that is not blind prejudice. It's the

learned experience that evil is like rotting flesh – you have to cut it out for the body to heal, and to make sure you get all of it the surgeon cuts into the healthy part. I'm not convinced that she is right, but I get how she arrived at where she is.

werafdsaew

The Saint having good reason for her beliefs just makes her a good character; it does not excuse her when she is just plain wrong. What she wants to do now is more akin to amputating the entire limb when the patient an injury that will heal by itself.

Rook

The patient does not, in fact, have an injury that will heal itself.

I think I need to start quoting the Amadeus in these arguments, to put into perspective how ridiculous it is that the commenters are more extreme than the gods-damned Black Knight in stubbornly defending witty/likeable Villains.

The emotionless killing machine that terrorized half the continent for most of his life disagrees with you, not even out of moral principle but out of concern for their bare minimum survival. The Saint's perspective isn't wrong, Catherine is just an extreme exception to the rule.

Volume 3 chapter 68, Coda
(Speaking to Akua)

>'“You,” Black said, “are the incarnation of waste. Of every destructive instinct that must be carved out or repurposed lest we ever reach old ends through old means. Your accolades are as worthless as every single thing you've ever said and done. They will pass, and be forgotten. We will all be better for it.”'

Volume 3 epilogue:
(Speaking to Malicia)

>'Alaya, we consistently blunder so badly we need to rely on demons to stay off destruction. We would rather irreparably damage the fabric of Creation than admit we can be wrong. There is nothing holy about our culture, it needs to be ripped out root and stem as matter of bare survival. Forty years I have been trying to prove success can be achieved without utter raving madness ...'

Shveiran

Saint has a lot of bad villains to use as precedent; she is also ignoring any death and mayhem dispensed by her side as a cause, if not justification, of the death and mayhem the other side dishes out.

She's also at the point where she sees races as intrinsically Evil rather than having an Evil culture (which, honestly, debatable. Warmongering and scavengers, sure, but it's not like Procer and Levant seem to value PEACE all that much, so I don't see how eating the dead is enough to say some are innocents and the others despicable) and doesn't consider them people, which is pretty much down the nazi road.

Regardless, Saint has built her philosophy around the assumption that the Good-Evil war CAN be won.

Amadeus and Cat suspect that assumption is wrong.

If this was true (admittedly unconfirmed at the moment) any attempt to eradicate Evil achieves nothing; the only sustainable option is finding Evil you can live with and nurture it at the expense of the unsustainable Evils.

Andrew Mitchell

> If this was true (admittedly unconfirmed at the moment) any attempt to eradicate Evil achieves nothing; the only sustainable option is finding Evil you can live with and nurture it at the expense of the unsustainable Evils.

Good point.

[Liliet](#)

>She's also at the point where she sees races as intrinsically Evil

source?

Like, are you confusing her with William?

The only people she's been confirmed as viewing as intristically Evil are *people who have Evil Names*.

Which is rather like saying "I expect everyone wearing a nazi swastika on their sleeve to be racist".

>(which, honestly, debatable. Warmongering and scavengers, sure, but it's not like Procer and Levant seem to value PEACE all that much, so I don't see how eating the dead is enough to say some are innocents and the others despicable)

WHERE ARE YOU GETTING THIS

>Regardless, Saint has built her philosophy around the assumption that the Good-Evil war CAN be won. Amadeus and Cat suspect that assumption is wrong. If this was true (admittedly unconfirmed at the moment) any attempt to eradicate Evil achieves nothing; the only sustainable option is finding Evil you can live with and nurture it at the expense of the unsustainable Evils.

Yeah, this is interesting as fuck.

shveiran

Regarding racism, I'm pretty sure she talked along those lines during the war. I may be wrong on this account.

Even so, it is a fact she saw starting a war against other people as a perfectly good tactics, which is pretty much equal to consider lives expendable.

As to where I'm getting Procer and Levant don't value peace... The novel?

I mean, I don't want to sound flippant, but I really don't see what doubt there is in this regard.

One is a warrior-based culture where one brings honor to one's name through killing (whether the target is two-legged or not), confirmed by a number of chapters from Levant POV. We have been told most of the Bloodlines are at war with one of the others. So much so that Tariq says he can't sit on the throne or it will be total war with Procer.

As for the Principate... all of their neighbour have a history of being invaded? Callow, the League, OTHER PRINCIPATES...

[Liliet](#)

>Even so, it is a fact she saw starting a war against other people as a perfectly good tactics

That's your criterion now? Really?

>As to where I'm getting Procer and Levant don't value peace... The novel?

>I mean, I don't want to sound flippant, but I really don't see what doubt there is in this regard.

No, I was asking you where you got that Saint considers goblin despicable for cannibalism. She sounded fairly neutral-curious to me when asking

Catherine about it, even if it was morbid curiosity.

[shieldredblog](#)

She's also bad because a lifetime of victories as the Heavens' personal executioner have made her so arrogant and cynical she's basically just a Villain with angels holding her leash.

Without the providence and gifts granted to her, I don't think she'd even be that good of a sword-master. Her domain is just an Aspect.

I'm pretty sure shes trying to die at this point, looking for an end that justifies her lifetime of murder and mad decision making. If she takes the continent down with her, all the better.

[TeK](#)

Arrogant because she believes that Good is better than Evil? Yeah, not like it is obvious for someone without decades of experience on the frontlines holding that very same Evil at bay. She saw Below at it's worst, and she knows that no cost is too high to stop that. How many tens of millions DK had slaughtered over the millenia? You can't properly comprehend the number regardless.

Cynical? Because she does not trust our main hero to whose most private thoughts we are privy to? The thoughts in which, she casually betrayed Rogue Sorcerer (the very one who spoke in her defence) after all the posturing about being good?

"If he'd wanted to break with me permanently the Tyrant would have killed the man"

She used the mans life as a bait, with regards to it's safety as a second thought at best.

"I wasn't some cackling Dread Emperor from the Age of Wonders, Sisters bless, and even if I'd actually intended on betraying these people I wouldn't have been an amateur about it."

Read this, now really, READ IT. She sounds downright [i]condencending[/i]. And if those are her true thoughts, than how many villains did even more Good, pretend to be even more amicable, and were underneath even worse? Her mistrust is not unfounded, not in the least. It's a woman who wanted to shackled an entire race in the chains of ice, because "we gotta have someone to share casulties with". A woman whowanted to make pact with Hidden Horror himself. I do not condemn her. I always found myself to be closest to

Black in my worldview and moral position, but it is not arrogance, nor cynicism, to mistrust the Priestess of Night. It is a rationality backed up by decades of experience.

"Without the providence and gifts granted to her, I don't think she'd even be that good of a sword-master. Her domain is just an Aspect."

She forged it by keeping the worst of the darkest at bay on a third of a continent for decades. Just what? Seriously? She endured more than Heroes sworn to Endurance, for crying out loud. Undeserving? I am hearing someone parroting Black, but in this case, it is [i]uninspired[/i]. Domain is thing incredibly rare in and of itself, and she is not a god, but a mortal – but holds domain still, what is wrong with that? By that point you just throwing things to see what sticks. How is that an argument?

"I'm pretty sure she's trying to die at this point, looking for an end that justifies her lifetime of murder and mad decision making. If she takes the continent down with her, all the better."

This is a misunderstanding of some terrifying proportions. The core part of Hero philosophy is thus: "To leave shelter yourself, so that you may shelter others". She does not looing to die. She knows someone has to, and better her, than anybody else. She does not seek a glorious death, or indeed, any glory at all. She does not need an end to justify herself, for nigh half a century, Procer did not suffer a true Evil. That is justification. Hundreds of thousands, happily killing each other over some mortal squabblings in peace – instead of dying to a cackling madmen. The former, incidentally, is a reason she is so meddlesome. For while she stood waist deep in darkness, [b]holding the line[/b] the gaggle of princes cheerfully took to murdering their own people on the funds from the one of the monsters of the era. She does not come from nowhere, saying that Procer does not deserve to exist as it is. The Princes' Graveyard truly showed their ugly faces to the world.

As for the last sentence, it's just, just wrong man.

Shveiran

Personally, the problem is not her mistrust. That can be justified.

The problem is she sees total, eternal war as the only option. Which I don't think is ever winnable: Evil can be defeated, but it will return; Evil can triumph, but only for so long as anyone thinks is undefeatable.

Which means her attitude only creates more death.

Fayhem

IIRC one of the roles Pilgrim mentioned for the Saint was taking down good heroes gone bad. So it's canon that a Hero going bad is a thing, and becoming the thing you've fought against is a narrative trope if there ever was one. And Pilgrim actively would not *want* to see it coming since Saint is basically the only actual peer he has and he's trusted her for so long; you can have all the wisdom and all the ability to see through others' deceptions in the world, and still be able to deceive yourself.

In other words I consider this at minimum a highly plausible take on what Saint is/has become. Well, except for:

> Without the providence and gifts granted to her, I don't think she'd even be that good of a sword-master.

Strongly disagree. Her internalized Domain is a huge power boost and no mistake, but if there's one thing that Black (and others, but him most of all) has hammered home over and over it's that power is no substitute for skill. Even with the Heavens' favor Saint wouldn't have lived this long or accomplished this much without being genuinely extremely good at what she does. Honestly, if the rest of your take on her is correct then that's actually strong supporting evidence for that being true. Because if you're right, then Saint's story is a tragedy. And the best of us (in her own supremely crotchety way) falling is so much more tragic than an overpowered poser doing the same.

TeK

And had there never been systems or empires, so corrupt, they had to be torn down? And I think you misunderstand something. There is no such thing as religious purity, much less in our world's sense, when Evil and its corrupting influence (which is to say, the side where Black and Malicia are the best they have to offer, never mind systems like Praes, Bellerophon or Everdark, that need to be torn down the same as Procer. Some may argue that Procer needs to be rebuilt so that it did not turn into the likes of previously mentioned) is a REAL THING. Paraphrasing EE, faith is irrelevant if morality is a physical reality. And for many similarities and parallels, the Above is just that – a real thing. You can argue, that Good at its worst is better than Evil – Cat certainly thinks so, and wouldn't she be an expert? I mean, none of them is [i]blameless[/i], I would not deny that, but for all their harsh measures and lesser evils, Heroes at their lowest still beat Villains at their best. Like, I understand why you would subject Heroes to hate or contempt, but if you will not subject Villains to the same, the judgement rings hollow, and

reeks of the exactly the same hypocrisy that seemed to be thrown at the Heroes feet.

To summarise: if the Heroes are bad, there is no one that is good, for they are better than the rest.

werafdsaew

You're saying a bunch of words that has nothing to do with my post. Saint is wrong *here*; Cat IS trying to bring peace. The Saint having good reasons for her beliefs doesn't change the fact that she is wrong, and if she had gotten her way would have gotten tons of people killed. Like I said, excesses by past Villains doesn't excuse anybody.

[Liliet](#)

Excuse Saint for not having full information?

Rook

Saint is probably the least religious person on the Heroic side of the line, let alone a Puritan. She's not pleasant AT ALL, but outright lying about her motives doesn't do the argument any favours.

Saint joined the crusade despite outright disdaining or threatening all the Proceran princes involved because every experience she's had in her life with Villains ended in the exact kind of wasteful/horrific disaster that caused Black to make a career out of stamping out even as someone on the Below side of the lie. I mean for fucks sakes she's literally called the Regicide, she doesn't buy into political propaganda.

You'll also note that the Crusade was when they first had contact with Catherine at all. There was absolutely no precedent back then for them to think she was a different breed from the dozens of others, since they'd never had any personal experience with her before.

Tldr the Saint is good and Good. Period. She's also paranoid and more than a little psychotic, but the net sum of her actions over her lifetime are likely far more lowercase-g good than Catherine's own.

[Fayhem](#)

There is a significant amount of accuracy here too, even though as I said elsewhere I think shieldredblog has a very good point (well, on some of it). Essentially I think that what we saw with the Conclave where Saint basically tagged herself as desiring the outright destruction of Procer was a

fulcrum; if you assessed Saint's life overall I think you're much more correct than shieldredblog, but I think things are changing as far as Saint's story goes. Pilgrim mentioned just last chapter that one of Saint's roles was putting down heroes who have gone bad. Becoming what you fought against is very much a narrative trope. Saint going Villain will happen maybe a few centuries after Hell freezes over; Saint becoming a Hero Gone Bad essentially by becoming so burned out she loses perspective would be a classic tragedy, and that's a story with some real weight to it.

Fayhem

Though, it occurs to me I should add something to my first comment. My analysis there does depend on reading Saint's speech to Cordelia as sincere. IIRC it was strongly indicated that Saint did that for/with the Bard. If Bard has some deeper game afoot and just drafted Saint into it then that throws honestly basically everything into question, and we really can't rule it out yet.

Liliet

t h a n k y o u

>Saint is probably the least religious person on the Heroic side of the line, let alone a Puritan.

SERIOUSLY

shveiran

There is no need to pick sides this firmly.
I may like Akua, Malicia or Black as CHARACTERS, but that doesn't mean I think they are good (fictional) people.

Akua is a mass murderer with no real further motive than "notice me!", cultural blinders notwithstanding.
Malicia tried to escalate the war with nuclear deterrent. Not something I can forgive, let alone when you build the bomb out of corpses.
Kairos is a dangerous madman and should be put down.
The Hierarch is a dangerous madman and should be put down.

But there is something to be said for "breaches" not being born equal.

Saint, for all that I dislike her as a character, certainly did a lot of good battling rattlings. Ain't nobody arguing that. That doesn't mean she is absolved for the fact that at some point she and a dozen more heroes decided to spearhead the invasion of a country because crusade, and slaughtered folks defending their homes on the battlefield as an invading force.

Willy doesn't get a pass for trying to psychich-nuke Liesse before Akua made it mainstream.

The six heroic parties that tried to slay the Black Queen without spending a moment to think of the consequences of destabilizing a broken country do not get a pass.

That doesn't erase the good they did. But there are black spots, and they aren't owning up to them.

Good heroes tend to see in black and white, but even in the guideverse that's not how the world works. The world is complicated, and still they spend a lot of time swinging at what they see as evil. They are often right, but whenever they are not they commit evil acts. I'd like to see them admit it, and I think we're getting there with Tariq pondering his conversation with Black.

You are right though: I do hold heroes to a higher standard. That's because the heroes are assumed to be better by the world, and if they DON'T hold to a higher standard that is just hypocrisy.

[shieldredblog](#)

Is Kairos mad? He is empowering himself through his act, but until he know his actual goal, it could all be theater. The Hierarchic is definitely mad, but his madness is believing that mortals can hold the Gods accountable. That Good and Evil are less important than people and freedom from tyranny.

And yes, if you go around calling yourself a Hero and believing the Gods gave you the right to kill whoever you want and enforce religious law, expect to held to high standards.

Shveiran

Lacking empathy for fellow human beings is a form of madness. Like, an official one. That is enough to mark Kairos as mad no matter the rest we may find out about him.

[Liliet](#)

I mean if you're using "mad" to mean "non-neurotypical" here, to the degree that includes that kind of abuse-induced C-PTSD Kairos clearly has, then you gotta count Rozala Malanza, Louis Rohanon, Arnaud Brogloise, Catherine Foundling circa book 4, Amadeus of the Green Stretch, Alaya of the Green Stretch, Akua Sahelian, Masego, Indrani, Hakram, me,

do I need to continue or are you getting the point that this is not a helpful way of using words

[Liliet](#)

(Rozala: PTSD, Louis: PTSD, Arnaud: PTSD + ? APD?, Catherine: anxiety + depression, Amadeus: suicidal depression, Alaya: PTSD, Akua: C-PTSD, Masego: autism, Indrani: ADHD, Hakram: ?APD?)

shveiran

I'm sorry, are you arguing that lacking empathy is not a form of madness?

[Liliet](#)

First of all, Kairos does not lack *empathy*, he lacks *compassion*. He's perfectly capable of reading other people's emotions, he just doesn't give a shit.

Second, I'm arguing against your usage of "mad" to mean "non-neurotypical". That's a really weird stretch that does basically nothing useful other than tap into "mentally ill / non-neurotypical people are dangerous and scary" stereotype. Can we try to use other terminology to convey our points?

Rook

The thing with holding them to a higher standard is that only makes sense if you actually do believe they are better like the world does. Otherwise that's hypocrisy from the person judging them.

Regard and responsibility goes hand in hand. It doesn't make sense to act like they're no better than anyone else when they get into an argument with Catherine, but suddenly turn around and act like they're supposed to be better than everyone else when criticizing their mistakes.

Either they should be judged as just people – the same standard applied to Villains and Heroes for both virtues and mistakes; or they should be judged as morally superior – innately respected much more than Catherine & co/any other villain by default, but also criticized much more harshly if they don't meet the higher standard that they claim to uphold.

Anything else is a double standard

werafdsaew

There is a good reason for the double standard though; they get a helping hand from providence just for being Heroes, while Villains and ordinary people do not. They're privileged in a way, and so is held to a higher standard.

Rook

Someone having an advantage doesn't justify hypocrisy from others.

By that logic, Catherine has insane privilege compared to any ordinary person, including the Princes of Procer. You could use the same argument to say that all the hypocritical double standards that the Tenth Crusade judged the Black Queen by are entirely justified.

werafdsaew

You're forgetting that Heroes gets the benefit of the doubt **BECAUSE** they're held to a higher standard.

Shveiran

Mhmm... no. No, I can't agree with that, sorry.

Them living up to a higher standard is a requisite for me treating them differently.

As a category, they do not, so I do treat them the same as any other character and judge them by what they appear to be doing in the novel. That is very much NOT a double standard. It is in fact a resolution NOT to have a double standard and hold them in the same (starting) esteemed.

You disagree with my opinion on the single characters? That's cool. We are all biased, maybe I'm more biased than you. But I stand by the fact that I don't treat Heroes differently, I simply refuse to grant them any points for that capital H.

denimcurtain

The heroes get rightfully criticized for being unreasonable and usually less clever than the villains. They are Good but in this story Good is not always good even though Evil is almost always evil. Good often supports stagnation and the status quo since the gods rely on a balance between Good and Evil while Evil allows for people to seek their own goals. It's not clear that you can be successful in seeking your own goals in the long term while working with Evil but that's what the story is about.

The Good heroes deserve and do get rewarded for their service with power, luck, and it sounds like an afterlife. That is

likely why they tend to have flaws towards entitlement and lack of clever thinking. Those are unlikeable flaws to have. Villains have evolved through their constant failures to be likeable even if only to counteract their monstrosity. No one denies that Tyrant or Akua are and we're monsters. That doesn't make Saint's willingness to sacrifice lives to defeat an opponent less terrible or the Grey Pilgrim's blindness to hypocrisy more palatable. They're very flawed people whose actions have helped shape this flawed world. They've kept things from getting worse but their flaws could keep things from getting better. If Good had its way then crusades would have rocked Callow and it's unlikely that Saint and Pilgrim would step in to help when they could be focusing on fighting Evil.

Good doesn't mean you're right in this world but it'll be interesting to see if there's an alternative because Good hasn't created a very good world.

Rook

The Heroes get unreasonably criticized for being kind to many and unkind to a deserving few.

Good often supports stability and fundamental principles that benefit everyone, Good or Evil or *ordinary*. Evil allows for people to seek any goal, including ones that cause insane amounts of pain, death, misery, and horror on a massive scale.

Evil often gets rewarded with earthly power, riches, pleasures, or all of the above, and usually at the expense of others. That is why they tend to have flaws toward an absolute disregard for consequences and an outright refusal to be held accountable for any of their actions. Those are unacceptably terrible flaws that cannot be allowed to exist.

No one denies that the saint and pilgrim make blunders like anyone else. That doesn't justify Akua's genocide, Malicia's assassinations, Warlock's experiments, or any other horror unleashed by the dread emperors of the world. They're awful people whose cleverness and wit do do a single thing to excuse or justify the harm they inflicted on others.

If Evil had its way, everyone would be dead or worse than dead. Even reasonable Villains like Amadeus agree, even though he has ZERO moral compass other than practicality and an absolute disdain for Above; notably calling Villains like Akua the incarnation of waste, and adamantly claiming that kind of Villainy needs to be ripped out root and stem.

Evil doesn't mean you're necessarily a plague upon the world but it'll be interesting to see if Catherine can create an

alternative, because Evil has done nothing but run the continent headfirst into ruin.

[Liliet](#)

>even though he has ZERO moral compass other than practicality and an absolute disdain for Above

that's not what he said in Peers :3

Shveiran

Ok, first off: please stop bring up Akua, or Malicia's nuke, or the DK.

No one is arguing with you. No one is defending them. We are in agreement.

Let's move on.

Second: please list lower-g good acts displayed by the Heroes. Because, for the life of me, I have a very hard time coming up with more than a few once you cross off "killing enemies".

You are operating under the assumption Good is good for everyone or at least most.

I refute that claim, so prove me wrong. Maybe I misremember.

[Liliet](#)

Healing? All heroes who have healing abilities use them as much as they can.

You do have a point for "killing enemies", that's mostly what we've been seeing onscreen.

shveiran

Healing is a good POWER, but I don't see their use by the heroes as being particularly good.

We saw their healer accompany an army and healing soldiers so that they may get back to killing, and that is not good, that's just sound tactics.

I don't mean it's an evil act, but at the end of the day you are just making your killer machine more effective via a different mean. You are just ensuring there will be more enemy bodies than allied ones going stiff in the end.

It's not really different from making portals, or blasting your enemies.

That's why I'm saddened we heard from Cat that in the post-coronation, pre-crusade-in-Callow phase, no hero tried to go help with the rebuilding. They just kept trying to kill her.

If all you do is murder, does it matter if your tool is steel, mind blasts or divine light? The dead don't care.

Liliet

I mean Tariq's career consisted almost more of handling natural disasters/plagues than any sentient enemies...

denimcurtain

Evil is not good. Evil is often evil. Good tends to be good but mostly because they oppose Evil. Good doesn't always seem to be good because it reinforces a status quo when societal improvements are needed. I'm not denying that the opposition of Evil shouldn't be counted in your favor since I agree that Evil is often evil. I'm arguing that it doesn't make you above reproach.

Black's reforms have led to less racism and more equality in Praes. That doesn't mean that he's Good or good but it means he has achieved some measure of progress and it hasn't been through mere opposition of Good even if it's debatably in service to that end. Interestingly, it seems there aren't many clear examples of that on either side or in this world in general. Isn't it natural to side with those who seem to have a meaningful chance for such change? The fact that Catherine is the main perspective certainly helps but we've seen other perspectives, even Good ones. I think we're not swayed by them because, while maintenance is required to prevent the world from descending into evil, the world begs for meaningful change for the better. Those who push for it and look for ways to accomplish that are currently lined up around Cat who was created by Black. Those who stand against it are Good.

If EE wants to drive home the goodness of Good then two things need to happen. He first needs more examples of good involving more than the opposition of Evil. Bonus points if that isn't driven by someone Evil or unaligned such when Cat would give heroes the ultimatum of helping the needy in her kingdom instead of jumping right to murder. He then needs to demonstrate that the Heavens offers a path towards innovation and progress.

The world needs more than war and Good hasn't provided what the world needs, Evil seems to be sabotaged and has a less than dubious track record of pursuing those needs, and it remains to be seen if Cat can provide meaningful change.

It's possible Evil can't achieve lasting good and that Cat's wrong about Good's seeming inability to as well. That still means that seeming inability justifies the criticism of Good heroes until proven otherwise while providing a normal

incentive for people to root for someone to succeed in making progress in the face of this damning balance.

[Liliet](#)

You do realize both sides can be right here, right?

Like, Tariq and Laurence are doing their part for making the world safer as best they could, and Catherine and Amadeus are doing theirs.

They aren't in conflict because either side disagrees with the other's objectives, or even means per se, but because insufficient information produces lack of trust.

Heroes have no fucking idea what's going on in Praes with Reforms. Nobody told them.

shveiran

The political leaders have a spy network, and Tariq has an angel whispering in his ear.

I'm sure Malicia and Black have ways to keep secrets, but I don't think citizen's quality of life falls among those.

If they don't know, it is because they didn't care to find out.

[Liliet](#)

How the fuck were they supposed to know where to look? And how the fuck do you think anyone would measure "citizens' quality of life"? Go house to house asking them to fill a questionnaire?

Catherine learned these things from talking to her classmates in War College. She did not expect to hear it, it just came up because she was a part of that society. The heroes aren't.

denimcurtain

I think we largely agree unless you truly believe that all actions taken by Tariq and Saint have been above reproach. We could quibble over how much they could reasonably know and how much that lack of knowledge is due to stubbornness or other character flaws but the basic point is that they're not perfect and, while the Good they do is and was necessary, they don't exactly have any reliable plan towards a permanent positive change in the status quo.

That, not just Cat having the majority perspective, is a completely fair reason to criticize them and to root for

our protagonist. It doesn't make them globally wrong or evil. It just means that they aren't always right or likeable. In my view, that's okay.

[Liliet](#)

I absolutely root for our protagonist. I root for her to bring them around to her point of view – right now even Laurence seems to be thawing, though I'm not holding my breath too much for *that* one.

denimcurtain

Then we're pretty much on the same page. Just didn't like the implication that it was somehow wrong to criticize heroes because they'd done a lot of Good and that it's unfair that Cat has the audiences backing. I like all the characters in one way or another.

[Liliet](#)

I am glad to hear that ^^ There exists however a section of the fandom that violently hates the heroes, so I have a bit of a knee-jerk reaction -_-

denimcurtain

I sympathize with Cat's frustration with them at times but I also appreciate how crazy difficult it would be to overcome a dichotomy informed by the existence active involvement of Good and Evil gods. When Evil seems to explicitly endorse evil acts, it'd be pretty tough to even be neutral.

[Liliet](#)

SERIOUSLY

Ranger pulls off being actually Neutral by... being a fucking awful asshole I personally categorize as Chaotic Evil in dnd terms, you know the kind of muderhobo that insists they're Chaotic Neutral and gives actual Chaotic Neutrals a bad name? "Oh I train both heroes and villains, no I don't give a shit they then proceed to kill each other"

denimcurtain

Yeah. Don't really get the neutral alignment. Archer and Tolltaker count, right?

[Liliet](#)

Archer counted until she actually picked a side and decided to stick with Cat. Ironically what was in context undoubtedly personal growth made her go from Neutral to Villain.

Tolltaker wasn't a Name, I think, but yeah, in principle she should lmao

Liliet

Ey Amadeus has more going for him than that, and Akua's story is at its core that of an abused child. There's more reasons for those of us who sympathize with them to do so than the surface wittiness.

Then again, I say that as a person who for approximately this entire last book has been on a one-woman crusade of "HEROES ARE GOOD" and "TARIQ WAS RIGHT TO DO WHAT HE DID TO AMADEUS" and as of the last several chapters "LAURENCE HAS GOOD REASONS FOR HER SUSPICIONS".

Every inch of slack we give villains is deserved by heroes thousandfold.

shveiran

I can sympathize with Akua's upbringing brainwashing her, but there is a point where the atrocities you lived don't absolve you of the gallons of blood you spilled. Or small sea, as it may be the case here.

Especially when you are not even lashing out at those who hurt you, but at the world in general.

Liliet

"Absolve" is a funny word, there.

I can sympathize with someone without absolving them.

denimcurtain

I don't think that people are generally claiming that any of the villains have attained or deserve absolution. They're rooting for the main protagonist and her allies to achieve progress for the world. The group surrounding Cat can be beyond absolution, likeable, and working towards a greater good. Just as the heroes can be deserving of rewards for their service, unlikeable, and real obstacles towards meaningful good.

It certainly looks like there's only one group with a plan to make meaningful positive changes in the world. They may commit atrocities and fail which would obviously be evil and deserving of condemnation. That doesn't make me feel

like the heroes deserve praise at the exact moment they're refusing to consider progress or offer an alternative path to a better world. They'll get their rewards if the Gods Above are truly any form of just. This should not preclude noting that if they offered a plan for a free Callow as well as a Praes with filled bellies then they'd likely have allies and praise both. Instead they fight wars while rejecting reasonable discussion on the topics. That has to be worthy of criticism unless you condemn the common man to never experience better lives in peace.

Evil (both Evil and evil) does not seem possible to be cut from creation purely through the sword due to the games of the gods. A better way must be found and I'll root for the people trying something new if the alternative is something established as not working.

Liliet

>at the exact moment they're refusing to consider progress or offer an alternative path to a better world

that was what the Grand Alliance was for, remember? Pilgrim refused to work with Cat for the sake of Cordelia's dream – the dream to end wars between Good nations and form a lasting peace. It was a smaller ambition than Catherine's own, sure, but let's not forget that SHE HASN'T SHARED THAT INFORMATION WITH THE HEROES.

Either Praesi internal politics or the very existence of Liesse Accords. Nobody knows what she's actually after, she's just projecting a vague 'well intentioned' impression at best.

Heroes cannot be condemned for not being aboard with the plan THEY HAVE NO CLUE OF EXISTENCE OF.

Like... they don't *know* about the Reforms. They only heard about Akua's Folly as it was experienced by common people AFTER THE BATTLE OF CAMP. *This is an insufficient information issue*

denimcurtain

I'm not condemning them but I think it makes perfect sense to criticize someone who isn't willing to compromise or even fully hear out the other side because they're sure in their perspective and I fully doubt knowing about the reforms would move the needle for Saint, for instance. Also, the Grand Alliance wasn't much different than the usual plan to crusade away Evil from Calernia. The best interpretation on

that plan is that they might be able to finagle a win against an ancient Evil before corruption and rebellion managed to break apart the empire they would form. Not saying that's not worth it but it's definitely uninspired and flawed. The Grey Pilgrim is even confronted with those flaws when Cat asks for reassurances for her homeland. The negotiations fail because he had dubbed the only thing Cat was fighting for expendable.

I don't think it's a purely a lack of information. There's a difference in ideology and perspective as well that may or may not be possible to overcome in the long term. Tariq is closer than Saint but it's likely they never fully agree with Cat even if they can come to an agreement someday. Luckily they and Cat just need to come close enough to listen for a bit.

[Liliet](#)

The Grand Alliance wasn't meant as an empire, it was meant as something like the European Union. Cordelia *gathered* for the Crusade, yes, but with an eye towards extending the treaties at the core of it for more long-term cooperation and guarantees: they were specifically made so this would work.

And yes, it was flawed, but Catherine was willing to summon the fuckign Dead King to attack Procer for *her* war. Not to mention what Amadeus did. "The ends justify the means" is a philosophy both sides are touting, here.

I don't think there's much of a difference in ideology between Catherine and the heroes, unless you're talking about silly things like her distaste for heroic providence.

denimcurtain

The grand alliance planned on parcelling up Callow and conquering Praes. The initial member states might've been EU-like but it was pretty telling that when Cat brought up how Callow would be treated there wasn't a good answer.

Comparisons to how Cat and Amadeus operate aren't really in conflict with my views. I think it's self-evident if you put any stock in Cat's view that there's plenty to criticize there. I don't know if you can be a fan of hers without acknowledging that since a huge part of her view is based on her perception on what her mistakes have

been. I'm just saying that there's room to criticize the heroes despite their years of service.

I think it depends on which heroes you're talking about when it comes to ideology. Cat is pretty far from a zealot like Saint, for instance. The main difference between Cat and Heroic named is that she doesn't believe that Good has a monopoly on good. Heroes tend to believe the Heavens do to differing amounts that would dictate how far they are ideologically.

[Liliet](#)

The specific situation with Cat and Callow was that Cordelia had a *long term* plan for putting a nuzzle on her royals' ambitions. She never planned on dividing Callow, but she couldn't just say that before her position got stronger or her people would refuse to participate in the Crusade. She was basically leading them on.

(And then instead of getting a stronger position she got a much weaker one, and she really did want to ally with Cat but would have been deposed within a year)

And yeah of course there's room to criticize. Heroes aren't *much* better than Cat here, if there's any difference it's marginal and might even be in Cat's favor.

My point is just that they aren't noticably worse, either.

And note that Laurence has very good reasons based on experience to think what she thinks. She didn't get her ideas from the Book of All Things.

denimcurtain

A mistake informed by experience will still be a mistake. It's understandable that Saint would be stubborn but she's still pretty problematic. Maybe not unrecoverably so but she had a pretty callous view on what lives were worth spending to get a leg up for heroes too. She would definitely need to grow a bit as a character to be less of a problem.

I'm not sure I bought Hasenbach's reasoning there. Historically there's no reason to believe she

would be able to keep that promise even if she had felt free to make it. Hindsight kinda suggests that it was unlikely as well. Throw in that there wasn't any room for even private assurances and it sounds more like a fanciful lie to justify the invasion to herself. Not doubting that she'd do that if possible but it sounds a lot like that if any push came to shove then Callow would pay a fairly clearly unacceptable price.

[Liliet](#)

it wasn't a promise, she didn't promise it to anyone, it was *the plan* she was going by, because she thought the alternative was fucking stupid

and you're not wrong wrt Saint

I personally love her, she's like a mixture of Cat and Juniper with a dash of pure concentrated awesome from like japanese manga, but 'problematic' is a great word for her lmao

denimcurtain

I meant hypothetically if she made a promise to Cat that she wouldn't be able to keep it. I think that everybody knew that if Procer took Callow that it wouldn't be good for Callow and that they viewed it as a necessary cost. To be fair to them, there's a good argument for that if there's no alternative. It just means you're at a particular disadvantage when debating or negotiating with someone like Cat. She wanted one thing and it's the one thing you don't think you can honestly offer.

[Liliet](#)

mm

[Javvies](#)

Cat was only in a position where she felt that the Dead King was her only option **after** getting repeatedly and explicitly shot down by both Cordelia and Tariq.

Remember, this was when Tariq had her lined for a (probably fatal) redemption play, she was offering to cooperate with it and help the Alliance take out Malicia, Cat had already declared her intentions to **join** the Alliance, Tariq's Behold was working on Cat and informing him that her greatest desire was peace, and all she was asking for was a commitment

to not let Procer carve up Callow for itself (and presumably fair treatment of her people).

It's not like Cat wanted to unleash the Dead King – she didn't, but she didn't see any other remotely viable options for her to take. She thought she was out of acceptable and workable options – the Dead King might not be exactly acceptable, but it might have been workable. Ish. And she was planning on betraying the Dead King to the Grand Alliance anyways.

Fayhem

> Then again, I say that as a person who for approximately this entire last book has been on a one-woman crusade

> one-woman

Hey now. I did a whole essay about how I think Tariq is way more sympathetic than he was getting credit for. Don't go hogging all the credit for contrarianism on this. 😊

Liliet

TRUE SORRY

Aotrs Commander

(Leaving aside the fact that it is nice to have some protagonists *I* personally identify with, i.e. Lawful/Affably Evil...)

If there are neither X-Men nor Avengers (nor the Fellowship of the Ring), I'm going to root for Doctor Doom over less-than-the-Punisher.

Saint's worse than the characture RPG murder-hobo adventurer.

Barrendur

@TeK:

I don't seem to be able to use the 'Like' button, but I'm impressed by your argument and willingness to present a point many posters on this site wilfully ignore, so here:

LIKE!

Soma

Saint might seem to have a soft spot for love, the ol' softie. Look atchu Laurence, you'll win the audience's heart yet. It'll be that much worse when something happens to her after she wins us all over.

Kissaten

I'm surprised heroes are surprised that Kairos betrayed them. Like, what?

[Liliet](#)

I'm really surprised no-one has accused Catherine of being in league with him yet.

Oshi

There is prejudiced and then abjectly stupid. Catherine spent a lot of time face palming and pretty much showing nothing but contempt for Kairos in public. Saint and Pilgrim are old hands who get at least that much. They might not know Kairos but they know what he is trying to be in the story.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah but Laurence has already questioned why Cat gave Rogue Sorcerer the crowns. This is a very obvious answer: so Kairos could take them and so Cat could have plausible deniability for getting her father's soul back.

I admit it seems more obvious from our perspective knowing her logic, but Laurence has *already* smelled crow there.

WuseMajor

Even if it might just be a ploy, it's nice to see someone call out the Pilgrim and the Saint on their hypocrisy.

As far as "celebrating villains and castigating heroes" goes, the main place I'm standing is that "Tariq does the Necessary Evil thing and gets lauded for it, Cat does the Necessary Evil thing and gets vilified for it." I grant that there are degrees. Pilgrim sacrificed a town to save a nation and part of an army to prevent another Triumphant, may she never return, or worse.

Cat's current allies include a literal Goddess of Murder and the Doom of Lisse, so one can argue about the "Necessary" part of her Evil, but ...Well, if the Dwarves had just turned the entire Drow homeland into lava, I kinda doubt that the Sisters didn't have enough in them for one last "screw you" on their way out which might have caused problems for everyone on the continent.

And Akua's mind is like a corkscrew. Sharp, twisted, hard to deal with, but very useful for certain tasks. She's also a product of her upbringing which was more twisted than many. She's also trying to turn over a new leaf, late though it might be.

So... I dunno. Cat's trying for a really complicated omelette, given all the eggs she's broken, but I cannot in good conscience say that she's broken more eggs than the alternative.

Liliet

Sometimes... both sides are right.

Sometimes... it's not good guys vs bad guys.

Sometimes... it's the strife that's the enemy.

AND SOMETIMES IT GETS EXPLICITLY SPELLED OUT ABOUT A DOZEN TIMES IN DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE NARRATIVE AND PEOPLE STILL AREN'T WILLING TO RELINQUISH THEIR BELOVED "OUR BRAVE SCOUTS, ENEMY'S DESPICABLE SPIES" NARRATIVE

Oshi

That right there is why I don't bother commenting on the morality threads. They miss the forest for the trees every time.

shveiran

For all that I dislike Saint, credit where credit is due: she was more willing to be persuaded and talk it through than I would have expected. If this keeps up, it is possible she'll come around somewhat.

Also, great chapter period.

Talks like these are why I may very well start a third re-read just because I want more Guide.

Nicely done, plain and simple.

Rook

I suspect that she isn't beyond persuading, but it's more than likely going to be something similar to how Akua earned Catherine's trust, how Catherine earned Sve Noc's trust, and how Hakram earned Vivienne's trust. Because there's too much paranoia and too much at stake for any words or small gestures to really convince anyone.

It'll have to be a concession or an act of faith, made such that the goodwill is beyond doubt, with nothing asked for in return. Not a Barter, but a Gift. Either when Catherine holds the upper hand but lets it go for no benefit, or stands by the saint when it's clear that she could walk away without any skin off her own back.

Which is good, because Catherine is already holding enough cards for that situation to feasibly become a reality and lately she's grown a lot in terms of mentality, in bending her own pride or putting the first foot forward when others aren't too stubborn to. If nothing else, persuading even the headsman of Above would be ironclad proof that the Liesse accords aren't just a dream but an achievable reality.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

That's why Tariq's deal with Cat actually moderately upset me last chapter, now it'll take something more than sparing Laurence when she attacks her / working to keep her alive to prove actual full on good faith.

Unless Tariq's deal with Cat also doesn't fit Laurence's worldview and will be enough to blow her mind, but somehow I doubt that.

I actually suspect the story Cat's making with Indrani here served to shift her position, because it's blatantly heroic in a way you can't really fake.

Raved Thrad

I wonder just how serious Catherine is when she uses the expression "Sisters bless." Komana would probably just laugh, while it's entirely possible Andronike would just be confused by it.

Andrew Mitchell

> I wasn't some cackling Dread Emperor from the Age of Wonders, Sisters bless, and even if I'd actually intended on betraying these people I wouldn't have been an amateur about it.

At one level it's at least partly serious; she knows her gods personally. But on another she's sassing her gods, again.

I loved that part. ♥

[Liliet](#)

Fucking best.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm current rereading the first couple of books, and noted how she was like, "well, I guess the Heavens aren't on either of our sides, I should probably stop swearing by them". Now she has someone to swear by...

Aotrs Commander

Roland *may* if he's actually genuine, which sadly isn't a given, be the first possibly genuine hero we've come across.

Colour my a little sceptical, though.

[Liliet](#)

You're missing Dorian, his Page (spoke up against William's racism), Hunter (died for Marchford), Vivienne (argued with William about his methods)...

...the entire Free Cities gang never did anything wrong...
(obviously not counting Bard here)

...heroes are OVERWHELMINGLY genuine

David

Odd that Kat doesn't recognize the Tyrant in disguise as Ronald. She's seen him change faces before.
Oh well, it will just make the betrayal more surprising.

Andrew Mitchell

> She's seen him change faces before.

I'm drawing a mental blank on that. Could you remind me of that scene?

[Liliet](#)

Behold

[Mental Mouse](#)

So, Rogue Sorcerer is at least vulnerable to comedic damage... A most entertaining chapter, with even Saint getting the "thrown off a cliff" thing, and Cat smoothly translating Kairos' "opposite day" talk while picking out the real threats.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, apparently Cat didn't realize Black was a potential crown, but Kairos did? I'm not sure I trust this narrator! 😊

[Liliet](#)

Cat has been balancing A LOT in the last few days, a single brain fart is not only excusable but arguably inevitable :3

Odd

So Black's "crown" is definitely gonna end up being the One. A crossroads realm of tectonic gears.

Will be interesting to see him retired.

erebus42

Much like Cat I find the Sorcerer's behavior extremely suspicious and am having trouble taking it at face value. However if he is

indeed being genuine then its incredibly refreshing to see a Hero without his head up his own ass and i must commend him for that.

Kissaten

What about Vivienne? "Rogue" Sorceror, Thief, maybe various bandit Names are naturally drawn to a Black Queen.

[Liliet](#)

Don't forget what it is that Cat suspects, specifically: that Laurence put him up to this.

How likely do you judge that outcome

Stormblessed

I like that the only thing that's ever convinced the Saint that our Villains might not be evil is the Power of Love. Nothing else has ever moved the Saint to be anything less than outright hostile.

[Liliet](#)

^^^

♥ ♥ ♥

[Mental Mouse](#)

There was also that bit of byplay where Cat was trying to preserve Archer's privacy...

[Liliet](#)

Yeah that was adorable.

On reread it was fucking beautiful to see Laurence go "so this is Woe" with distaste and then they immediately demonstrate their adorable side and she just. has nothing to say

(and noticably warms up, if marginally)

JJR

I just realized, a couple of chapters ago Cat mentioned that this was the third time she had come to Liesse bearing a sword.

The first was when she ended William's rebellion by stealing a resurrection from his planned angel and killed him (while also stopping Akua from getting her way); a victory in every sense of the word.

The second was Akua's folly. Cat avenged, but could not save, the population of the city. She also captured Akua but could not kill her because she was just too damn useful to keep as a tool. She also gained some power but lost her humanity. This one comes up as a draw.

And now she is here a third time, and it seems like she is destined for a loss somehow. At least it seems that way to me. It's not the standard Pattern of Three that puts two Named characters against each other. But in stories patterns of three exist all over the place, do maybe it's a thing that can happen while also being rare enough that Cat doesn't realize it.

[Liliet](#)

in stories patterns of three exist all the time but they aren't necessarily win-draw-loss

Catherine absolutely won at Second Liesse, her goal was to stop Akua which was successfully achieved

win-win-BIGGEST WIN is a pattern of three too

[Javvies](#)

You really think Black would have gotten drunk and slept with a stranger?

No, I don't buy that. It'd be wildly out of character for him.

Besides ... Black would most likely have been near constantly accompanied by one or more of his friends/allies/associates. I don't see any of them letting Black drunkenly wander off with anyone other than Ranger (they all like living too much).

[Javvies](#)

Dammit wordpress.

That was supposed to be a reply to the claim that Black got drunk and knocked up some stranger in a one night stand.

[Liliet](#)

I think Ranger wouldn't actually care. Indrani got her "this is this and that is that" outlook from somewhere, after all.

But Amadeus is just... about as likely to have that happen to him as Masego is -_-

[Javvies](#)

Whether or not Ranger would actually care if Amadeus had an affair with someone else doesn't much matter. What matters is if anyone around Black thinks that there's

the slightest possibility that Ranger might not be completely happy about it.
And let's be honest ... would you be willing to bet your life on Ranger not caring in the slightest if her lover has sex with some random stranger? Or even that she doesn't feel that she needs to make a point that it's not something she endorses? Or that she doesn't feel even the slightest bit possessive about Amadeus?
Or, depending on how you feel/how much you care about Amadeus – how having a one-night stand with a stranger might affect his ongoing and already complicated relationship with Ranger?

Sure ... Hye might or might not care that much ... but I'd call it unrealistic to think that everyone around Black would be entirely confident that it wouldn't matter, when the potential consequences of it mattering are so devastatingly bad.
Plus, for anyone around Black to override any concerns about Ranger's potential reaction, Amadeus would have needed to end up in this potential one-night stand situation in the first place. Which is improbable enough by itself.

As far as Indrani goes ... while she loves Masego, she also loves Cat, and is fully aware that Masego is both not sexually involved with or interested in anyone. There's also a massive difference between Indrani having an friends with benefits type thing with Cat (who loves Masego like family), and Black having a one night stand with a stranger. I'm pretty sure Indrani would not be happy if Masego had hooked up with some random person, even if she didn't show it.
Also ... potentially some room for hypocrisy here. "It's okay when I do it with someone we both care about and cares about us, but not when you do it with some random stranger."
... though, honestly there is a distinct qualitative difference between the two.

[Liliet](#)

I think people around Black would know Hye and what she does/does not care about well enough to know.

I doubt *she* was faithful to *him*, for that matter.

But like I said that's fully irrelevant to the point of "Amadeus is demisexual demiromantic and is not. fucking. interested"

> I'm pretty sure Indrani would not be happy if Masego had hooked up with some random person, even if she didn't show it.

I mean no shit she'd be upset and confused, his reason for ignoring her own advances is that he's asexual, who's this person and what have they done with Masego?

Yea it's true there's a difference between a polycule and a one night stand. I just don't think either Hye or Indrani give a fuck either way. But, again, FAR FROM THE POINT

JJR

While a fair point, I'm not as sure. Part of the narrative force is how well you sell it after all. So, it might not end up being a thing, or maybe it turns into a meta narrative fight between Cat and the Dead King, with him trying to convince her/the narrative that Second Liesse was in fact a draw and Cat trying to re-affirm herself/the narrative that it wasn't.

It seems the kind of thing he would do since even if he fails it doesn't really leave an opening to strike back at him. Whether he knows enough to try it is another story. And of course it might just not be a thing at all.

Dotraj

Of all the times to catch up, it had to be now, didn't it? Well, at least it's right before all the planning starts to simultaneously come together and fall apart, and not in the middle of it.

On a separate note, I've been bouncing around a theory for a while. Have we seen any reference to Dread Emperor Benevolent yet in story? Because his quotes are all suspiciously similar to the kind of stuff we've been hearing from Catherine especially, to the point that if it'd been Empress I'd have said she takes that name when who/whatever is behind that song gets her onto the Tower. As it is, I have a feeling that he's Malicia's successor, assuming I didn't just miss a reference to him at some point.

[Javvies](#)

No, the only mentions of Dread Emperor Benevolent have been as the citations for the opening quote.

There's a relatively longstanding theory that Dread Emperor Benevolent is the reign name for Amadeus.

[Liliet](#)

Cat would be Empress, not Emperor.

And Amadeus would not allow High Lords to be present at his coronation lmao

tnozone

I'm still catching up, but I'd just like to say the following.

While the power of love is a useful tool for heroes, it's usually the opposite for villains. They tend to experience the failure of love as the person they love most/loves them most is often either the first person they kill when their mind is possessed/warped, or the last person they betray when they obtain ultimate power or on their quest to obtain it. It serves as a more personal moral event-horizon for the audience compared to stuff like destroying a city, unleashing a plague, or massacring a thousand innocent people.

Chapter 42: Twined

"The Lycaonese are a grim people though not without a dark sort of humour, as became evident when I was first told what a 'northern burial' is. The inhabitants of these parts do not bury their dead, for fear of the Kingdom of the Dead, instead burning their own and spreading the ashes on consecrated ground. What the locals refer to as one of their burials is, in truth, someone being eaten by ratlings from the Chain of Hunger."

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

This would be the second time I assaulted the ducal palace of Liesse, and it would have made three if the Lone Swordsman hadn't picked a dainty little eldritch church as his last holdout. Gods, now that I thought about it, hadn't I brawled with Akua every time I'd stepped within city limits in the past? Sometimes it was hard to reconcile the smirking woman I'd hated so bitterly with the Diabolist I know knew and on occasion even liked. Hells, I was pretty sure she'd once implied that some ghoul she was sending after me was Kilian, back when we'd been a couple. An arrow more pointed than plausible but then Akua's knack had always tended more towards striking deep than striking true. I dismissed the thought as the three of us began our approach down the Caen road, the broad avenue that led directly to the gates of the city's ancient seat of power. The gates were wide open,

having fallen off the hinges, and the stone round them had been eaten into brutally.

"Someone assaulted this before us," the Saint said.

I grimaced.

"My own work," I said. "From when I last took this city."

"Akua's Folly," the old woman said. "The stories began trickling across the border after the Camps."

I did not reply, even though it was rare for her to engage save through threat and insults. I did not owe her a discussion of that catastrophe. Not to her, not to anyone. The breadth of the scope I'd failed my people by no longer choked me day and night, not the way it had before heading into the Everdark, but the Doom of Liesse would never be anything but a bitter brew for me. That I seemed fated to walk it again and again was perhaps cruel, but then by my hands I had earned that cruelty. I'd still my tongue to it and take what was nothing less than my due.

"They say you bound the Diabolist to the heart of the ritual," the Rogue Sorcerer quietly said. "And then broke it on her head, extinguishing every speck of her soul."

"It was the Black Knight who struck at Akua Sahelian's work," I brusquely said. "And it nearly killed him too. It doesn't matter, save that we should not touch a ward until the hall where the Diabolist once laid her first threshold."

I was saved further talk by stirring in the sky, though at the sight of them I almost wished we were still rubbing salt into my old wounds. The colossal panes of bronze-like glass I'd seen earlier – how could anyone *not*, given how starkly they loomed above the city? – had begun to shift. Like those beautiful jigsaw puzzles of glass and metal I'd once stared at in the markets of Laure, the pieces began moving like some intricate interlinked mechanism. Given the descending side of the panels they'd brought to mind a longview when I'd first thought of it, and it seemed that Masego was using them for purpose kin to that: rim glowing with massive carved runes I could not seem to understand, the panes began turning on themselves as if being adjusted for some arcane purpose. As it had earlier the first and largest pane of glass showed clear sight of the barren wasteland below as if it were being scried, but the angle of view and the closeness of the sight seemed to change in impossible ways according to the whims of spins.

"Rogue," I quietly said. "The runes, I can't keep them in my memory – that means they're High Arcana. What are they *for*?"

"I don't know," the hero admitted.

I waved a hand irritably.

"I know the upper arcane stuff is personal and unique for everyone, but I know there's usually some bridge of understanding there," I said. "I'm not asking for a treatise on what he's up to, just some broad strokes."

"Black Queen, I cannot understand High Arcana," the Rogue Sorcerer bluntly said. "I can hazard some guesses at the purposes of this device – I suspect every glass-like pane is a different scrying ritual and the largest one serves as a sort of receptacle for all that is seen, allowing variety of sight – but I cannot know anything for certain."

I glanced at the dark-haired man catching that he was faintly embarrassed. His pupils had been ringed in red or green, earlier, but that now seemed gone. A simple unremarkable brown, not so dissimilar to my own, was all that remained. I was a little skeptical of his words considering his record when it came to the fights and that at the Battle of the Camps he'd been directing the enemy wizard against my own mage lines led by Masego, who'd been dabbling in High Arcana long before I met him. Still, what did he have to win by lying to me here? Nothing worth the candle, I thought, and I knew better than most that Names could be tricky things: he might have some help from his in these subjects from his. Or, from that matter, the very opposite. It wasn't unheard of for transitional Names to serve as a set of shackles to be surpassed down the line and – and this was a rabbit hole I did not have to spare tumbling down. I glanced one more time at the pane, and near flinched when an eardrum-shattering shriek sounded across the ruined realm. I'd heard them before, the interwoven four cacophonies that followed, like old metal being twisted and warped. One after another, the angled Hellgates opened in the sky above and devils began pouring out.

"Lesser Breaches," the Rogue Sorcerer murmured. "Yet four of them. That is... remarkable. And absurdly dangerous. The Hierophant is taking a knife to the already chewed up fabric of this realm."

"Look at the larger pane," I urged, "if it's like the last time then there'll-"

And there it was, clear-cut in view on the bronze glass in a way it had not been when I'd attempted to look at it with my own mortal eyes: a glittering array of runes that hurt to look at, forming a circle at twice the height of a man. I glimpsed a ghostly silhouette within the circle, but before a heartbeat had passed there was a flash of blinding light and a gargantuan detonation in the distance. I'd looked away in time, though I noticed that both the Saint and the Sorcerer had looked through the glare uninterrupted. Leant on their Name for it, I guessed, though I'd never found how to work that particular trick myself back in my Squire days.

"I don't suppose either if you can shed light on that," I said.

"It is no coincidence the Hellgates opened before the other part of the ritual," Roland told me, turning to match my gaze.

Well, would you look at that. Around one his left pupil, the slightest tint of azure blue was beginning to form a circle. Name or sorcery, I wondered? The more I learned of magic, the more I understood that there were as many ways to practice it as there were languages under the sun.

"Meaning?" I asked.

"That the stuff of the Hells is being drawn in at first, then given shape by the circle of runes we saw," the Sorcerer said. "It is an attempt, I believe, at making something – though whatever was made seems to have been deemed unfit and so immediately annihilated. I would say those failed attempts are responsible for the Due that was used to occlude scrying in Iserre."

My throat caught. Not at the subtleties of the sorcery at use slowly being peeled back, but at what the hero had told me without knowing it. Masego was drawing from the stuff of Hells and trying to give it a shape through High Arcana – a form of sorcery that was, by nature, deeply personal. That shape looked human, or close enough, and he was being obsessively exact even by his standards when it came to the results of his work. The Warlock had been slain at Thalassina, it was said, and having passed to the place beyond there was no sensible way for Hierophant to bring him back. But Masego had once told me that devils did not die, not truly. They merely dispersed, returning to the primal stuff of the Hells where another of their kind would be born when the whims of those unearthly realms demanded it. Masego was brutalizing the world with sorcery until it gave him back the only one of his fathers he could reach. And he was, heartbreakingly, failing.

"Your Majesty?" the Sorcerer quietly said.

"Grief and miscarriage have seeped into the bones of this place," I said, voice grown rough. "And damn the Dead King, for having given him hope where there can be none."

After all, if the hero was correct it was the Due from this that occluded scrying then Neshamah was have seen to it that this was an exercise in futility: the Hidden Horror would need this to continue for months, if not years. Perhaps there was the slightest sliver of a chance, I thought, but how many lifetimes would it take for Masego to succeed? An obsession had been slid into the ribs of my friend, and not one he would easily be able to shake. I knew him, the way he thought. This would stay with him like an itch he could not scratch: the whisper that if he was

a little more accurate, a little more inspired, if he spent another few years of research, then it could be done. That every moment where he had not yet succeeded was a failure. Merciless Gods, that old thing in Keter had wrought damage it would take years to unmake. And the middle of a war was hardly the time to do it.

"Enough dawdling," the Saint of Swords said. "The longer we wait the greater the chance the dagger will be caught."

"Agreed," I growled.

I had more than a little wroth to purge from my blood, now, and a hard fight seemed just the thing for it.

—

A hard fight was precisely what I found us denied.

The avenue leading to the palace had been empty, which was not unexpected, but the way that not a soul awaited as we passed the gates was. We'd seen going in that the fresh waves of devils brought through the gates had headed for the deeper palace, so it might be that strife awaited us there, but why allow us any uncontested advance? It wasn't like they were going to run out of devils anytime soon, if the numbers brought through the Breaches were any indication. Answer to that was only found after we rose by steps and passed through halls where the marks of my anger in the face of the Doom had yet to fade until we reached a plain oaken door that was not unfamiliar to me.

"Ward," the Rogue Sorcerer said, resting a palm on it. "Beautifully crafted, though it seems to have been aimed sorely at the Fair Folk."

"How did you get through back then, if it still stands?" the Saint asked, eyeing me.

I pointed a finger upwards, where I'd once shattered the stone of the ceiling to leap into the room and slaughter the mages that'd been hiding in there. Laurence, every spry for her age, glanced at the adjoining wall once before breaking into a smooth run — the first jump had her angling on that wall, after which I felt a small ripple of Name power and she leapt up through the hole. The Sorcerer, meanwhile, was still examining the oaken door with a gaze much too involved for it to be wood he was looking at.

"Can you break it?" I asked.

He'd said he could, after all. The dark-haired man blinked and turn to give me a sheepish look. Gods, what was it with practitioners and getting distracted?

"I can," he said. "The Saint?"

The answer came a moment later, as the old woman leapt down the hole and landed in a crouch.

"More magic upstairs," she said. "Peeked through the door and it was positively reeking of it."

"Ward?" I frowned.

"Labyrinth," she replied, shaking her head. "I'm no mageling, but I've had to go through enough of those to recognize the scent."

"Labyrinth, huh," I said, and looked straight ahead at nothing just in case it'd be able to see me through spell or prophecy. "Didn't work last time, you one-trick rat, and it won't this time either."

"Black Queen?" the Sorcerer asked, sounding alarmed.

"I believe we've got the Revenant known as the Skein on our hands," I said. "It's got a preference for those."

The Saint of Swords went still.

"The *Skein*?" she repeated. "Like in the old rhyme?"

"What rhyme?" I frowned.

"Eater endless, Shrouded silent,
Sought and lost sleeping below
Tumult tyrant, Snatcher slyest,
Dreaming still but waking slow
Skein scheming, last of five
Lords of Horn from long ago."

She was not a particularly talented singer, and I suspected she'd rushed the rhythm, but I understood it without trouble. My brow rose: the rat had a history, it seemed. I supposed I shouldn't be surprised, as the Dead King seemed to enjoy raising in his service the rare and the unusual most of all.

"Might be," I said. "It certainly goes by that Name anyway."

"I thought you'd tangled with some hasty longtail that got caught and turned, not one of the Old Lords," the Saint grimly said.

"It's tricky but hardly unbeatable," I shrugged.

"You don't lack stomach, at least," the old Proceran said, which was not disapproving if not the opposite either. "Well, if it's the same as the old legends it'll be waiting for us. Might as well have a look. Sorcerer, get a move on would you?"

"Please," I added, flicking a glance at the man.

The Rogue Sorcerer nodded, and after muttering something under his breath rapped his knuckle against the door once. The hand stayed there, after, though he opened his palm and the world shivered close to it. Huh. That'd felt like an old friend, and one I knew well: whatever aspect it was he'd just used, it was cousin to my old Take. And even more distant kin to the more abstract ability I still used as First Under the Night, though whatever similarity there'd been at the source had strayed the further I went from my Name. Interesting, though. Instead of breaking these wards, was he stealing them? It was certainly one way to interpret his Name, though given how subtle such matters could be I was reluctant to come to conclusions so swiftly.

"Done," Roland said.

The Saint of Swords strolled forward, elbowed him to the side and kicked the door down before walking through. I pushed down a snort and limped after them, gesturing for the Sorcerer to catch up to her. I slowed my steps just as I passed the broken door, bending down to pass my fingers lightly over the shattered oak. There was not, to my senses, so much as a speck of sorcery left in there. Akua had laid her ward in there more than year ago, and considering the usual thoroughness of her work it should have been exquisitely done. Yet there was not a damned trace of it left, not even some faint aftertouch. Creation rarely brooked such exactness, I thought. This was the work of his Name, not any sorcery I knew of. *I wonder, I thought, if there's a touch of colour around your pupil right now?* I'd master my curiosity for now, but I'd never been able to leave secrets alone for too long.

I hurried to catch up with them before anyone could notice.

—

I'd give the Skein this much, it put in an effort.

Though I did not know whether it had powers akin to sorcery or it was simply wielding the tripartite works of the old Dukes of Liesse and the two greatest Praesi mages of my generation, it tried to trap and waylay us at every turn. Of course, given that the Rogue Sorcerer seemed to be able to shatter any ward in less than thirty heartbeats and that Laurence de Montfort's answer to mazes was to cut through any wall in the way of marching in straight line it did not end up amounting to much. While I knew that the Saint would tire in time, she did not seem at the moment more than lightly winded and if anything Roland seemed haler than he'd been since hobbling back to the band. While they brute forced their way through the best-laid schemes of the Skein I kept a wary eye out, for this all seemed too easy to me. We'd yet to encounter any devils, or the Tyrant or any Revenant at all. All three of these would need to be met before we arrived at the

conclusion of this journey, and indeed the shape of our story should be nudging us towards that encounter. If we'd yet to meet them there was a reason for it, and since it was not of our own making it must be of the enemy's. That usually meant a trap.

"You ever hear of the Two Hundred Axioms, Foundling?" the Saint casually asked.

Boot against the wall, she pushed until the rectangular shape she'd carved into the wall toppled forward. Abandoned servants' quarters were revealed behind, and if I had to bet I would bet that we were closing on the edge of the western wing of the ducal palace. Soon we'd hit the inner courtyard, that heavily warded killing field that Akua had prepared to fend off any attempting to approach the part of the palace where she'd laid the heart of her ritual and her throne room with it. Hierophant was using the ritual arrays that she'd carved into Liesse, which meant he was likely in there as well. I doubted any of the holes I'd made in the defences on my way in were still there, considering the quantity of devils Masego had been calling forth. They'd turn on him in a heartbeat if they could, Dead King looming or not, so odds were fresh layers of viciousness had been raised instead.

"I have not," I said. "Some sort of philosophical book?"

"Close enough," Laurence de Montfort said. "They're best kept out of hands like yours, anyway."

"Charming," I commented, following her through the opening. "Why bring it up?"

"The only sensible solution to a maze is to not enter the maze," she quoted, tone amused. "This is close enough, I'd wager."

"And *there*," the Rogue Sorcerer hummed.

The open palm he'd laid on the wall in front of us went straight through what I'd believed to be a stone wall, revealing it to be a skillful illusion. The other half of the room, until now veiled, ended in a broken glass window overlooking the inner courtyard of the inner palace. Which was empty, save for the broken and scorched grounds where Akua had once nearly succeeded at killing me with her clever traps. Were we going to be allowed to run off this all the way to the heart of the palace? Archer had been in here before, and she'd told me the place was swarming with devils. What had-

"Wait," I said, as the Saint neared the window.

"What?" Laurence growled.

"The Skein," I slowly said, "in your stories, what is it known for?"

"Scheming," she bluntly said.

I grit my teeth. Now was not the time to get mouthy on me, Saint.

"Look, in your rhyme all five of the 'Old Lords' have some epithet that goes with their Name," I said with forced patience. "The Tumult is a tyrant, which I'm guessing means it's good at herding other ratlings. The Eater is endless, which I'd wager means even for a Horned Lord means it's *really* hard to put down. The Skein is scheming, sure, but the Snatcher is the 'slyest'. What does the Skein *do*, Saint? Are there any stories that hint at anything more?"

The heroine matched my gaze, brow creased with thought.

"It led a horde to devour whole what would become Hannoven," she finally said. "Through some secret way, using wiles. They're old stories, Foundling. There's not a lot of them and the Skein is barely in any. Makes sense, if Old Bones got to him."

Through some secret way, using wiles. It wasn't a lot to work with, and that it ate a whole ancient city didn't weigh much on the scales to my eye – it was what ancient hungry beasts *did*, what mattered was the manner of it. Hannoven was, as I recalled, one of the most fortified cities on Calernia – it was usually put in the same breath as Rhenia, Keter and Summerholm. Could I assume that even in the dawn of days it'd been a fortress? Yes, I decided. The Skein had, after all, used a 'secret way'. If it'd been a pack of huts, given the size of the damned thing there would have been no need for subtlety. It itched at me that the story spoke of a city, a place that was fixed. Not an army or a band of heroes, it was a city that made the tale and that was detail that resonated. In Keter, the Skein had been given the defence of a palace and it was the same here. *It might have a trick that works well with fixed positions, either both the attack and the defence.* I had too little to go on, Hells. That was the thing with the Dead King, wasn't it? Anything secret that might help in defeating him for good was long dead and buried. If not by his hand, then by sheer dint of centuries. Although, when we'd fought the Skein in the Threefold Reflection, it'd been as part of a pattern hadn't it? One Revenant per palace. King Edward in the Garden of Crowns, the Thief of Stars in the Silent Palace and the Spellblade in that horrid half-realm we'd tread trying to move between Creation and reflections.

The ancient King of Callow had been placed in a place for only the regal, the Thief of Stars assigned to spy on us in a place where every sound was muted and the Spellblade, a dead elf utterly lethal in direct combat, given watch over a place where there could be no place to hide. They'd all been posted, so to speak, in a place that benefited talents or nature they'd had before being sent there. Was is the same with the Skein then? I knew it'd used an artefact to manipulate the three interlocked

realms of the Threefold Reflection, and that its oracular abilities had allowed it to do so even more dangerously, but this felt like a departure from the pattern. The Silent Palace had made it easier for the Thief of Stars to sneak around, not possible – amplification of a capacity, not crafting of a new one. It was the same with all the others, too. And if that held, then some pieces were beginning to fall into place. Gods, I almost couldn't believe I hadn't noticed: I'd already walked the grounds of this very ducal palace once and seen it gone still and bare, when I'd unleashed my domain of Moonless Nights. And then too, I'd still come across wards and traps. There was a reason we hadn't come across so much as an imp on our heedless advance through these grounds, and that was because we weren't in the palace at all: we were in the domain of the Skein.

"Saint," I said, opening eyes I hadn't realized I'd closed. "When you cut Winter, cut my domain, you were still within it right?"

"I was," the old woman warily said.

"And you could feel that you were?" I pressed.

Her eyes narrowed.

"Here, now?" she asked.

"Been too easy so far, hasn't it?" I said.

Her blade returned to the sheath and she took a moment to steady her stance and breathing. Then the world shattered around us like panes of glass, and the only hint that it wasn't her work was the slight widening of her eyes.

The first thing I noticed was that the roof over our heads and walls shielding us were gone.

The second was that the Skein in all its horned glory was nesting in the courtyard below, surrounded as far as the eye could by hordes of devils. Two silhouettes were at its feet, though in the gloom I could not make out who they were.

The third, and last, was that of us the Tyrant of Helike was being held aloft on his throne by a swarm of gargoyles while grinning like a man having the time of his line.

"My friends," Kairos Theodosian cheerfully announced, "I am grieved to inform you there might have been some *slight* changes to my allegiances."

Caerulea

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Also apparently there is a Discord? Not sure what goes on there, but if you want to find out, go here:

<https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>

Naeddyr

Tyrant, you villain! You will not get away with this!

naturalnuke

Lies and calumny, possibly a set up!

stevenneiman

I'm kind of imagining Cat saying that with the same degree of emotion as someone running through an inventory checklist.

antoninjohn

Slight change in allegiance, gasp Kairos is turning from Below to join Above and become a hero

erebus42

A betrayal worthy of Traitorous!

RoflCat

Only if he steals from Above and sell his spoils to Below, after poisoning it of course.

[*Euodiachloris*](#)

"The Tyrant was, of course, lying. There was no conceivable way for him to cease being aligned to his own self."

[*Liliet*](#)

Eh, Akua has demonstrated it's possible 😊

Insanenoodlyguy

Ubua floats by his side "This angel redeemed me with the power of friendship!" he beams.

"Goddamn this this shit is powerful" notes the spectre, looking honestly awed by her own skills.

catulu

Mind telling me where that is from?
You know, for research purposes?

Insanenoodlyguy

Ummm... nowhere? I made it up just now. It's just an ironic echo of what Akua said in her big damn hero moment in book 4.

cthulhu worshipper

where is that reference from?

[Javvies](#)

Like anyone expected otherwise from Kairos.

It's a trap!
The Skein is a nasty one.

It would seem that Masego is attempting to resummon/reform Tikoloshe. Or so Cat thinks.

[Liliet](#)

A lot of people called it.

I refused to, and for the very reason Catherine is horrified here: THIS IS BAD 😊

danh3107

What a shocking, sudden, stupendous, spectacular and all together surprising turn of events! Consider my expectations thoroughly subverted Tyrant, you fiend!

NerfContessa

Hmmmm, a slight change of allegiance, so instead of only himself he now also is allied with.... Big Rats? :p

Really nice chapter.

Someguy

Skein is a rat that makes humans run themselves exhausted through mazes. And Saint thought she was not entering it by cutting through.

Dainpdf

No one expected the meta-maze. And Cat got it because she had privileged information.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, “*that* party member provides a critical clue” is totally a trope.

superkeaton

Ah, glamour, a web weaved over another. Typical of a rat, to design mazes.

Novice

Unfortunately for the rat, a cat is now on the hunt.

JJR

“the best-laid schemes of the Skein”

Haha, I see what you did there erraticerrata.

And the mouses plan does go awry in the end.

Hierus

Leave it to the tyrant. I really like smart cat, exspecially if we compare to winter queen cat.

Gibborim

*Black Cat

Caerulea

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Also apparently there is a Discord? Not sure what goes on there, but if you want to find out, go here:

<https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>

(apparently this didn't post earlier. Huh).

Caerulea

Nevermind, it just disappeared.

[Liliet](#)

2 links = held for moderation

[erraticerrata](#)

Pretty much, yeah.

erebus42

Come on Black! I'd have thought The 200 Heroic Axioms would have been required reading for Cat so she'd be better able to deal with Heroes who didn't rely solely on stories and handouts from the Heavens.

Also I'm curious about the Rogue Sorcerer. He seems to be able to steal spells or possibly magic itself, but does he draw power solely from stolen spells.

If he does that would be an extremely interesting if very limited power set. He's becoming more intriguing by the chapter.

Dainpdf

Maybe even Black hasn't managed to get his hands on those... or maybe he thinks them not worthy of study compared to narrative theory.

Dainpdf

*to his version of narrative theory.

Because really, the axioms seem to be "narrative theory for heroes"

[Liliet](#)

I think it's the former. There's A LOT of info he doesn't have – for example, Saint and Pilgrim seemed aware of who Wandering Bard was back at Camps, and he'd never heard of her.

shveiran

Sure, but this is a book. Where do they keep the copies for Scribe to be unable to grab one through her network?

Also... where IS Scribe now?

[Liliet](#)

That's a fucking great question.

And I agree with someone's guess that 200 axioms is likely oral, never written down.

shveiran

Ooooh, I didn't think of that. I was really getting a "book" vibe, but it would explain Amadeus never mentioning them.

[onedollargum](#)

Maybe what he does is steal the show? XD

Nafram

Ah, Kairos Theodosian, always classy

Sun Dog

His loyalty cannot be brought at any price. But it can be rented on the cheap.

[sengachi](#)

I've been thinking since last week, what if the Rogue Sorcerer has been turned to Kairos' side (willingly or otherwise)? There was the assumption that his apparent willingness to hear Catherine out was a possible ploy of the heroes. But what if it was Kairos' ploy? You know, the person who has the explicit ability to see your dearest wishes and use them against you?

That might significantly affect how this fight goes, if that's the case.

[Liliet](#)

Tariq. Behold.

Catherine limited possibilities to 'a ploy by heroes' for a reason.

[sengachi](#)

Cat has literally been running circles around his sight recently and they're right now going up against an enemy who specializes in running circles around people who *just* fooled Tariq's sight. I think it's at least plausible that Tariq missed the Rogue Sorcerer getting subverted.

[Fayhem](#)

Cat didn't "run circles around" Tariq's sight (though she did ultimately outmaneuver him), the goddesses literally perched on her shoulders blocked it outright. And before you say "well maybe Dead King and/or Kairos could do that too then" A) Tariq very much knew immediately that he'd been blocked and B), no. Mayyyybe DK could apply his millennia of sorcerous knowledge to replicating a divine-base/god-tier effect, but cunning though Tyrant is he's not in that

league. But even if DK could replicate blocking Tariq's Ophanim-powered sight (on a third party rather than on himself) outright spoofing the Choir of snoopy angels should be seen as at least an order of magnitude more difficult.

I have been wrong on a couple points of late tbf, but I don't regard the Rogue Sorcerer having been subverted in this manner as a serious possibility to be considered.

Andrew Mitchell

> I don't regard the Rogue Sorcerer having been subverted in this manner as a serious possibility to be considered.

I agree.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine hasn't been running circles around his sight, Catherine is personally shielded by goddesses of *Night*, a domain that literally *specializes* in obscuring sight. She wasn't fooling him, she just put a stone wall in front of him.

1224

You're "grieved" Kairos? Is that shit eating grin you are no doubt wearing your expression of grief.

[Euodiachloris](#)

The other main option is "maniacal laugh" and he's not even giggling – so, yeah; grin it is. ;P

Andrew Mitchell

So Masego is trying to resurrect Tikoloshe. I mentioned the possibility in the comments in the chapters after the death of Masego's parents. On one hand I'm glad to be proven right, but on the other I'm feeling sad for Masego and his sisyphian task.

Its interesting that Catherine doesn't think it will work. I wonder if Masego will manage to prove Cat wrong?

[Javvies](#)

Cat thinks that even if it is theoretically possible to do, that it's going to take forever, and/or the Dead King has either taken steps to make it impossible (summoning and binding Tikoloshe himself, perhaps) or to make extremely difficult (ie, giving Masego enough information to try, but leaving out key bits and pieces of information ... probably not outright lying, though, but possibly allowing Masego to run with a misconception/misinterpretation.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, lots of possibilities here.

IIRC most commenters previously thought it was impossible too and they may well be proven right.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> most commenters previously thought it was impossible too and they may well be proven right.

The hard part will be convincing Masego....

[Liliet](#)

honestly I'm currently leaning towards "Masego is savvy enough he'll realize it quickly, the hard part will be getting him out of depression afterwards"

shveiran

I may be wrong (and she could as well besides), but I think Cat reasoning is that the DK's ploy is to suggest an attempt that is not impossible but VIRTUALLY impossible. Something Masego will ram his head against because it is THEORETICALLY possible to overcome the obstacle. Masego is brilliant, but not balanced even on a good day. I find it realistic to imagine him losing himself in an impossible task, obsessed with getting it right. The very insight we had on how his mind works (when Cat broke him out of the interrupted Drop-a-Lake-Ritual backlash) suggests this may work wonders.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yes, this. He could totally get obsessed as a way of channeling his grief.

But the scary thing is... he *is* probably one of the top five mages on the continent, and *his specialty is miracles*. He might actually be able to do the impossible!

shveiran

I feel the DK would not have set this up if he thought he could realistically succeed. And he is a better sorcerer, I fear.

[Mental Mouse](#)

My point is that especially here and now, Masego is not necessarily limited to the "realistic". I will

also note that Tikoloshe is/was a creature of Desire... and Masego has a powerful desire!

shveiran

Mhm, so the solution will end up being "the power of love" two times in a row? It's possible, especially if there is a "third time" somewhere we haven't noticed. What if the dialogue about Saint in the previous chapter was setting that up?

[Mental Mouse](#)

> So Masego is trying to resurrect Tikoloshe. ...On one hand I'm glad to be proven right, but on the other I'm feeling sad for Masego and his sisyphian task.

There have been other commenters in the past who mentioned being moved to tears by various episodes. This one is my turn.

Andrew Mitchell



Kissaten

So, rat's going to face off against Saint of Swords who can cut everything, aspects, domains, space itself, and supposedly future too since Cat put that gun on the wall already. Is there any chance of Skein surviving this?

[Liliet](#)

I mean it kind of is already dead

anyway the answer's no 😊

[daegone823](#)

If it was not for Chat then the saint would still be cutting stone door ways. The saint is not invincible just really powerful. The skein is not only powerful, but cunning.

He is an enemy where force is not the best course of action and can be a fatal mistake. The only counters are aspects and story plot armor created by heroics.

JJR

She'll cut the future and the next chapter will be 44 right after the the fight and everyone except Saint will be very confused.

Also Tyrant will be their friend again somehow, because Tyrant.

If EE could somehow pull that off that would be amazing and hilarious.

caoimhinh

Cool chapter.

So Rogue Sorcerer can steal wards and accumulate them inside him, that's an awesome Aspect.

Cat really should have explained to them in more detail what the Skein is capable of, she is the one who has fought it. Instead, she kept most of the information for herself and was pretty vague even when talking to Pilgrim. That seems counterproductive, though it might be that she did it to make sure it was a harder fight that made Rogue and Saint spend more of their Aspects there, perhaps?

It's worth noticing that Skein cut its losses and dispelled the domain when it was noticed, instead of risking Saint cutting through it, that means it would have taken direct damage from that, it might be useful in the coming fight.

Two silhouettes standing by the feet of Skein, one is King Edward?

Kairos was mentioned as a third and sitting on his throne while Cat said the two silhouettes were not discernable, so there's a new Revenant in town.

Next battle should be pretty intense, added to it the conversation-negotiation between Cat and Kairos, it's going to be very interesting. The Heroes are going to be very angry when Catherine recovers Amadeus' soul, but they won't have no option but to suck it until facing Masego, where I think Saint will lose her shit and attempt murder plus we'll see if Tariq holds his end of the bargain.

The hype is high.

Typos found:

- the Diabolist I know knew / the Diabolist I now knew
- every spry for her age / ever spry for her age
- they brute forced their way / they brute-forced their way
- seemed to easy to me / seemed too easy to me
- our story should ne nudging us / our story should be nudging us
- You ever hear / You ever heard
- I'd wager means even for a Horned Lord means/ delete the last 'means'
- Was is the same / Was it the same
- The third, and last, was that of us the Tyrant of Helike was / The third -and last of us-, the Tyrant of Helike, was

Kissaten

Keeping secrets to herself is A) a safe thing to do since you can reveal something about yourself you didn't want – especially since heroes are still enemies; B) is a subtrope of an unspoken plan, it can be used in a fight

For two silhouettes candidates are Prince of Nightfall, King Edward, Grey Pilgrim and Archer, Hierarch as well as any new Revenant. If unknown Revenant's the case, it is going to survive this fight 100% since it's the only new one and is narratively supposed to be the last boss/trick in the bag. Also it could be Neshamah himself, if we are to list all possible candidates.

Mental Mouse

Another option would be Black installed into a necromantic construct.

Liliet

They didn't have time for a thorough debriefing/infodump, they're running on a very tight schedule. Note how the heroes aren't questioning Catherine not having told them this earlier: she talks about things as they come up, it makes sense.

>That seems counterproductive, though it might be that she did it to make sure it was a harder fight that made Rogue and Saint spend more of their Aspects there, perhaps?

Definitely not. There's hard fights ahead and NONE of them are Cat vs heroes.

>It's worth noticing that Skein cut its losses and dispelled the domain when it was noticed, instead of risking Saint cutting through it, that means it would have taken direct damage from that, it might be useful in the coming fight.

oh, is that what happened? I thought she did cut through it, but this makes more sense.

>Next battle should be pretty intense, added to it the conversation-negotiation between Cat and Kairos, it's going to be very interesting.

SAME

> The Heroes are going to be very angry when Catherine recovers Amadeus' soul, but they won't have no option but to suck it

they miiight have already resigned themselves to this lmao

>until facing Masego, where I think Saint will lose her shit and attempt murder plus we'll see if Tariq holds his end of the bargain.

Whatever happens will be amazing.

I think it's worth noting that Laurence is increasingly friendly here. She even quoted the 200 axioms book for seemingly no purpose other than a joke. If she's not warming up to Cat per se she's at least bringing down her stonewall of "do not even talk to this" that's been up since Camps, when she tried to kill her under the peace banner (the first time).

Roland is interesting as shit.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, Skein definitely pulled back his domain.

> Then the world shattered around us like panes of glass, and the only hint that it wasn't (Saint's) work was the slight widening of her eyes.

> Whatever happens will be amazing.

For sure! 😊

> I think it's worth noting that Laurence is increasingly friendly here. She even quoted the 200 axioms book for seemingly no purpose other than a joke. If she's not warming up to Cat per se she's at least bringing down her stonewall of "do not even talk to this" that's been up since Camps, when she tried to kill her under the peace banner (the first time).

Good pickup. It is quite a shift from her previous stance. I wonder what's caused this? She's not a subtle person so I don't think she's trying to lull Cat into a false sense of security. And I can't imagine it was the scene with Archer expressing her love. So I am left to wonder what's going on.

Naeddyr

A possibility is that she's falling into her Role as a hero, because Cat is fitting the counterpart role of a heroic comrade too well. Gimli and Legolas.

medailyfun

Actually the Archer's confession can be important, it showed that the Woe were not just clever and cool as Saint had mentioned, but also capable to love and sacrifice

Andrew Mitchell

I agree that it can be important; and it certainly will be important for the resolution of this arc and for the Woe into the future.

My mental image of the Saint is still that she wouldn't be moved by this confession. But I'm happy to admit that I could be wrong, and even that Saint's comments in this chapter are weak evidence against my position.

[*Liliet*](#)

If Laurence can't be moved by this, what *can* she be moved by? This is clear evidence against her position, and I see her as a generally rational person who just has *really* skewed priors on this by now. This surprised her model, so she's shifting it, as a rational person does.

She probably doesn't really understand what's up with these people, but at the very least *her first guess was wrong*.

Andrew Mitchell

You're making a lot of sense and I'm mostly on-board with your view. Thank you. ♥ I think I was viewing her as a fanatic rather than a rationalist.

Given her previous absolute conviction and certainty *any* thawing of her position is progress. But to jump straight to "her first guess was wrong" is too much of a leap IMO. Maybe she's now, for the first time, open to the possibility that she *could* be wrong and is working on getting more data (with RS' help) to make sense of this unique situation.

[*Liliet*](#)

Her first guess was wrong as in "this specific model is not it". That doesn't mean she'll go straight for the opposite rather than a slightly modified version: "still awful, just also capable of love". Still, yeah, I think she's in a more open data gathering mode now rather than the previous stonewall of "I am not buying any of this".

And yeah I used to think she was a fanatic too... until the Alchemist story and "dozens". She sounded too much like someone who fucking *learns from experience* and who knows what it's like to have her beliefs shattered and is open to the concept. Better to admit she had been wrong than to be a stubborn believer; denial is not her thing.

"No matter what you say I don't believe you" is not denial, here. It's a result of experience indeed =x

shveiran

Just opinions here, but I can't say I find the idea convincing.

For Archer's revelation to move her, it would suggest that the idea of a villain having deep affection is rare; otherwise, it doesn't really make sense for it to give Laurence pause. But... I mean, the villains we saw were people still. People love.

Hells, even assuming Cat's group and the Calamities are exceptions, what about Akua? She is as old school as you can get and she still loved her father.

Heck, what about the Sisters? They still love each other, and they have been swimming in murder sacrifices for centuries.

I'm not really seeing "villain being capable of love" as a real revelation.

I guess it is possible Laurence simply never saw it before, but if she was burned "dozens of times", doesn't that mean that none of those villains felt love for anything but themselves? It doesn't seem like a solid theory to me.

Not impossible, but just... a bit unlikely?

[Liliet](#)

>For Archer's revelation to move her, it would suggest that the idea of a villain having deep affection is rare; otherwise, it doesn't really make sense for it to give Laurence pause

First of all, there are two more factors in play here than just the fact Archer is in love.

The first is the story that's playing out. Keep in mind that before now Laurence had no idea where Cat was going with all this; she basically enlisted them with the pitch of "trust me, I have a plan". Without ANY specification what the fuck the plan here actually was.

And Laurence's mind does not go to best-case scenarios in this kind of situation.

Second, it's not just the very *fact* that Indrani's in love that matters here, but the fact she *said* it. Consider Akua Sahelian: how willing would she be in her Heiress/Diabolist days to admit to any affection towards anyone? Sure she felt it, but

she categorized it as a whim / a weakness, *and this is a widely held view*. It's a classic for people who think doing good is for the weak to also think love is for the weak. Hell, Indrani herself used to think that, remember? It was as recent as Cloaks that she was complaining to Cat about how she keeps feeling this annoying feeling of loyalty and affection.

Indrani actually confessing her feelings for Masego in front of the heroes, especially when Cat was clearly dancing around the topic, means she is either willing to trust them or does not view this as a weakness; or, most likely, a mixture of both.

That's a whole lot of information that goes against Laurence's default expectations.

Third is the mixture of the above: the fact that Catherine Foundling consciously and deliberately went for this kind of story. Sure Laurence had felt her wield a heroic story before, but that was Callow's national story of defense against invaders; it did not bode well for the Crusade, but it did not say much about Catherine's personal character. This? This is confirmation that Catherine actually knows about and values and uses such interesting things as Power of Love, Power of Trust and Power of Friendship. Again, don't think all villains are like Amadeus; he's super mega hugely atypical. Hell, even Alaya told him that attachment was always his weakness. This is a confirmation of Catherine's methodology that Laurence legitimately DIDN'T HAVE before.

(I would note that Sisters are also atypical, particularly for villains Laurence faced. This is at its core the same issue Amadeus had when Tariq outplayed him: only being closely familiar with stories from one region. Villains Laurence has faced are villains from Good nations, ones that had a choice between Good and Evil, and not just Evil and powerlessness. Komena and Andronike in Procer or Levant would have Heroic Names for attempting to preserve their homeland; Amadeus's story is blatantly heroic in shape, just on the wrong side of the border. Laurence would have never met anyone like them before because she didn't foray into nations mired in Evil so deeply that allying with Above is legitimately not an option. She dealt with rejects, those who not only didn't qualify for Good Names, but for skill-based

Neutral Names either; or did and then ignored the options this gave them in favor of being blatantly villainous. Catherine and her Woe are nothing like them, and this is not something Laurence would have encountered before)

shveiran

I reply to myself because I can't reply to Liliet's own comment below XD

1st: True, but why would Cat embracing a good story be news to Laurence? She knows she plays the narrative and can play both roles. I think Sain's comment on the Axioms even references it. Is there really any change?

2nd & 3rd: This has some merit. Then again... when has Cat ever done anything but displaying she loves her folks to bits? I'm just saying, if Saint was operating under the assumption that the Black Queen is not baring her heart for the world, she has been doing so willingly assuming it was all pretense. I don't really see how that's possible if it is such a game changer for Laurence. We never saw an indication that this moved her particularly, or that it was a working hypothesis of the Saint. Considering how nicely EE usually foreshadows things... I don't know, it doesn't feel right.

Unofficial 4th: It could be as you say, but we have very little information regarding the normal villains in Procer or Levant. Your read may very well be correct, but it is speculation at this point. I see merit in it, but it is unproven.

[Liliet](#)

>1st: True, but why would Cat embracing a good story be news to Laurence? She knows she plays the narrative and can play both roles.

How exactly do you think she knows that?

As I said, Callow's 'national defense' story was up for grabs, Cat wouldn't have needed to try. Shit like First Llesse? Cat didn't expect KAIROS to know that. Kairos, who has a spy network and would be deliberately fishing for information on rivals in a way Laurence doesn't have access to.

Remember how Saint just said that she heard rumors about Akua's Folly *after Camps*? It was a deliberate huge PR thing, and she still had no idea.

>when has Cat ever done anything but displaying she loves her folks to bits?

In front of Laurence?

>I'm just saying, if Saint was operating under the assumption that the Black Queen is not baring her heart for the world, she has been doing so willingly assuming it was all pretense.

When did Cat bare her heart to the world *where Laurence would hear*? I mean for fuck's sake she learned better than to display outrage/dismay at villainous shit that horrifies her during Book 1.

I think you're misreading Cat here, and underestimating how much her 'badass villain who gives no shits' facade is working against her here.

>Unofficial 4th: It could be as you say, but we have very little informations regarding the normal villains in Procer or Levant.

>Your read may very well be correct, but it is speculation at this point. I see merit in it, but it is unproven.

It's pure sheer logic with a dash of textual evidence on top. People who do heroic shit become heroes unless there's a reason not to. In Evil nations the reason is big and blatant; in Good nations, there's none. Laurence learned that the hard way, herself.

I mean, yes, it hasn't been formally confirmed, but Laurence kind of went on a rant about it, didn't she?

[Liliet](#)

I have two guesses.

First of all, yes the scene with Archer expressing her love. Like, think about this from Laurence's point of view: she is the way she is because of a genuinely held belief that these are horrible vile villains who *don't do that*. They don't fall in love with each other, they don't reveal it to heroes while their friends are trying to preserve their privacy,

they just... don't. And she was just proven wrong about this (remember, Tariq's a truth teller, Laurence trusts him to call shenanigans if there are any). And I bet she was getting "yep this is real" from her story sense too.

Second... I was actually reminded recently of the scene around Camps where she went "I want to have the entrails of whoever did that to her" wrt Cat. She IS a hero; her instinct IS to sympathize. She's been this standoffish because she's been consciously, deliberately and aggressively suppressing it – she can't talk to someone like Cat without it later backfiring on her in the form of pain when they inevitably turn on her. But she's not Akua and not Amadeus and the suppression only works for so long when they keep spending time together and Cat keeps being so damn *likable*. Like... she's rude af but so's Laurence herself. Their outlooks and attitudes are actually super similar. My guess is that it's really hard for Laurence to *not* like Cat, which is why she was *that* aggressive in the first place: she was trying to actively counter the effect.

But she's losing that fight 😊

Andrew Mitchell

Both guesses make sense and it could be both of these and more.

SITB

Laurence literally just dismissed the fact that Archer is witty and funny as an excuse to her actions a chapter ago.

I don't know why is there this prevalent idea that having positive qualities means you are a Hero, either Good or good. Amadeus and his merry maruders had genuine love for each other and even now Masego tries to resurrect his father (a devil); yet no one denies that Black was also a monster that committed a metric ton of atrocities.

[Liliet](#)

being funny and being in love *and willing to share that fact with heroes* are 2 v different categories of thing

if nothing else, think about the story
'witty villain' is one thing but 'a girl risking her life for a chance to snap her beloved out of a villain's possession' is very fucking different

[Liliet](#)

like no it doesn't mean Indrani is Good or a good person but it means she's a person period and willing to expose that fact to the world, which is NOT Laurence's default assumption with villains

and ofc Laurence doesn't want to be on the wrong side of THAT story lmao

Fayhem

> It's worth noticing that Skein cut its losses and dispelled the domain when it was noticed, instead of risking Saint cutting through it, that means it would have taken direct damage from that, it might be useful in the coming fight.

I think that might depend on how you define "direct damage". IIRC when Saint cut Winter she didn't just tear a rent in it she actually cut a piece *off*. As in, it was no longer Cat's (though Akua snagged it for herself once it was loose, bc Akua). Cat had a full fae Court's worth of power to play with and probably never touched even 10% of it at a single time bc of her principle alienation issues, so she never really missed it long term. Pretty much anybody else with a domain would really need to be a *lot* warier of permanently losing a chunk of it, whether losing a piece *immediately* affected them negatively or not.

Of course, I think that losing a chunk of Winter also didn't exactly feel great to Cat in the moment either, so little from Column A little from Column B maybe?

Liliet

>IIRC when Saint cut Winter she didn't just tear a rent in it she actually cut a piece *off*. As in, it was no longer Cat's (though Akua snagged it for herself once it was loose, bc Akua).

Oo, that's your read on that?

Sounds somewhat plausible, though it's worth noting that snagging a piece of Winter for herself is what made Akua Cat's / part of Cat (that was creepy in the best way)

Fayhem

Yeah, that's how Akua became able to manifest to people besides Cat – she grabbed the slice of Winter when it went flying off, so she then had some power of her own, though she could still only get out to use it at Cat's sufferance IIRC (I think that restriction's gone now too, at this point).

[Liliet](#)

Didn't she appropriate Winter through the bindings?

[Fayhem](#)

FINALLY found the reference I was looking for, from a conversation between Cat and Zeze after the referenced incident in Bk. IV Ch. 12 (<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/05/11/chapter-12-cambre/>):

"Think of your mantle as a cape. Much like your body itself, it is a fixed object in the eyes of Creation."

[...]

"The main difference being that your body is a shape, while your mantle is a pattern of power," he said. "That power is, of course, finite. Not in the sense that using it spends it, but along the lines that the cape remains a cape – it does not grow or lessen, as a living thing would."

"So she cut the cape," I guessed.

"Essentially," he admitted. "You might say she cut out a corner of the cape. The pattern itself being fixed, the rest of the power thinned itself as a whole to recreate that corner."

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, I remember that, I don't think Akua took that though

[Fayhem](#)

I give up on finding the reference, but I'm like 90% that got mentioned in there *somewhere*. Probably not the most relevant point by now anyway though, since Winter itself got taken out to dinner Below-style.

1224

I think if Cat told them too much about the enemy then the enemy would pull something out of its ass to surprise them with that they weren't expecting. Safer to say nothing.

[Liliet](#)

Ooof, this is also a good point.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Aside from intraparty politics and “unspoken plan” issues, briefings are complicated by the point that even if DK can’t scry them, he might well have sent some inconspicuous creature to simply eavesdrop on them.

[benthelynx](#)

I’m wondering if one of Skiens aspects is an ‘all paths’ kind of deal. Because this mirrors the keter debacle too closely for it not to be name shenanigans. Also I can’t wait to see what trap the dead king is laying with this pattern

Stormblessed

I really want Cat to get her hands on “two hundred axioms” now. Considering the Saint said she shouldn’t have a copy that should make her want it more. And then I want to see her reaction to the glory that is “Two Hundred Heroic Axioms”!

Andrew Mitchell

That would make for some good PGtE fan-fiction.

moosy

With the mention that Rogue Sorcerer is a transitional name, I wonder if he’s shooting for Warlock. That’s presumably up for grabs now.

[Liliet](#)

I don’t think it is necessarily, it was just idle speculation by Cat on possibilities.

And definitely not Warlock, at that.

Andrew Mitchell

Warlock is a Villain name. But RS could become the Wizard of the West.

konstantinvoncarstein

He is not Callowan, and WotW is a exclusively Callowan Name. And I don’t think that RS is a transitional Name.

[Euodiachloris](#)

If the Queen if Callow says you’re Callowan, and you agree to be her subject... Tada! New Wizard.

konstantinvoncarstein

Ah yes, well spotted 😊

shveiran

Good catch. I was thinking along Hakram's reasoning on the Warlord name, but Callow is a kingdom, not a race. Clever.

[Liliet](#)

I think Sorcerer and Wizard are separate Name lines here, whatever differentiates the two would stand in the way of one transitioning into another

though it's possible the Wizard of the West is a deep enough groove that if you slide into it it can just flat out beat your previous Name (as is the case with ruler Names: whatever you were previously straight up doesn't matter)

edrey

it should be possible, specially when he is talking about civility when he is the rogue sorcerer, about the new Name i think is the hedge wizard, the twin who warlock killed, because his eyes and the name-dreams he could have, the heavens shouldn't let such opportunity get wasted. that of course if he survive all this

Andrew Mitchell

I had forgotten about that the Wizard of the West was Callowan, so thanks for the reminder.

IIRC we don't know anything about the Rogue Sorcerer's background so he *could* be from Callow and the name *could* be transitional. I don't recall where the transitional name idea came from; I just went along with it. It's fun to speculate but I don't think it's likely to be true.

[Fayhem](#)

IIRC it's been established (for a given value of established, at least) that RS is Proceran; it was a plot point that he uses a very specifically Proceran school of sorcery back when Cat was having Akua try to track Black's soul down magically. And I think there's been some references to his native language? Idk for sure on that part.

Transitional Name speculation actually originated with Cat herself. But yeah, there's probably a cultural barrier preventing him from becoming Wizard of the West specifically, even *if* RS actually is a transitional Name. I saw somebody say "well the queen of Callow can just make him Callowan though!"; no, strongly disagree. Names arise from *culture*, not just political borders or allegiances per se. That's why orcs never claimed any of the Praesi Names ever, despite being

within Praes and sworn to give their allegiance to it. You can't just decree that someone's culture changes, no matter who you are.

shveiran

That's true, but the culture of Callow IS changing. A lot of Greenskins around, these days, and a lot of bona fide callowans starting to see them as the Army of Callow. Loyalty to the Black Queen may trump birth soon... but I will concede it's unlikely we're there yet.

[Fayhem](#)

I meant more the culture of the potential Named, actually, though I can see how you'd read it the way you did. If RS doesn't see *himself* as Callowan then I think that's a fairly insuperable barrier to him getting a Callowan Name, at least as far as I understand Names.

Andrew Mitchell

I think that personal perspective has got to be important, and yet Cat got a Callowan Name (Squire) when she didn't see herself as Praesi.

[Fayhem](#)

...Did you mean to phrase that differently?

Andrew Mitchell

Why yes, yes I did mangle that just a bit. 😊

My point was that Cat got a Praesi Name while she was only thinking of herself as Callowan.

shveiran

You know, I was about to concede to Fayhem that the Named-to-be's perspective on the self is key, and so anyone who doesn't see themselves as callowan can't earn a callowan name... but this is a very valid point. I wonder if Cat did see herself as part of the Praesi culture SYSTEM enough for Amadeus to jump-start her past the issue.

[Fayhem](#)

Haha no worries. And I think Squire is actually an "open" transitional Name; it can transition into Black Knight (as Amadeus intended) but it's also the precursor to becoming the White Knight, which is definitely open to Callowans.

Fayhem

And now that I've read their comment, shveiran also has an interesting point with:

> I wonder if Cat did see herself as part of the Praesi culture SYSTEM enough for Amadeus to jump-start her past the issue.

I do personally think the primary thing is that Squire is an "open" Name, but you can make a case that it could be pretty relevant that Cat was raised in an Imperial orphanage with a curriculum custom-designed by Amadeus, and her pre-existing plan was already to enter the Praesi system and turn it towards her own ends (by joining the military academy in a more conventional manner than what wound up happening).

C_B

So...how many beings highly similar to, but not quite identical to, Tikoloshe has Masego now conjured and (effectively) killed?

Yikes...

Fayhem

> So...how many beings highly similar to, but not quite identical to, Tikoloshe has Masego now conjured and (effectively) killed?

*and dispersed. Remember, the whole premise here is that you can't actually kill devils.

C_B

My guess here is that Masego is trying to short-circuit the "gain personality over time in Creation" process by re-conjuring Tikoloshe and grafting on a mental imprint of his personality (which took thousands of years to develop the first time, but Masego has a handy record of the already-developed version he's trying to shoehorn in without having to wait).

It's not working, in that he has yet to create a copy of Tikoloshe that meets his specifications...but I imagine each of his attempts is creating an imperfect copy of Tikoloshe, which he then disperses (complete with destroying everything that made it unique, just like happened to the original Tikoloshe).

To my mind, this is morally equivalent to killing someone, even if there's some "essence" that goes back to the Hells.

Everything important about the devil being dispersed is destroyed.

(I could definitely be totally wrong about what Masego is actually doing, though.)

[Fayhem](#)

If that is what he's doing I agree that's fucked up. Honestly a very very significant part of why I think what he's attempting is actually a multi-stage process where what he's discarding is just a hollow blank from the stage before where he'd try to "import" the personality (as it were) is that I just don't think even half-mad grief-stricken Zeze would actually do what you're describing to any version of his father, even imperfect ones.

[Liliet](#)

^

[Liliet](#)

The thing is, there's nothing morally relevant about a newborn devil. And probably not even fully formed, either.

[Fayhem](#)

I should follow-up on that previous comment I think (ayy immediate second thoughts). Devils start gaining, for lack of a better term, "personality" in the moment they are formed *and not before*. If Masego's trying to create a vessel he can reform his father in, I would expect him to be dismissing imperfect vessels *before* what's presumably the more important part of the procedure. So they'd just have the base amount of personality for devils a fraction of a second after being formed, which is to say functionally none.

Could be wrong about how the procedure he's attempting is operating (I can't use High Arcana, after all) but that's my take.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Except it's still a futile effort unless he can recover the memories... and perhaps the bindings, because those also shaped him over many years.

[Fayhem](#)

We've gotten precious few details on what Masego's trying for exactly, but it almost seems as if he's essentially trying to reverse entropy. Trying to reassemble Tikoloshe's personality after he was dispersed seems as if it must be

like taking a pile of ash from somebody getting completely incinerated and trying to turn it back into a living person (after the ash was blown away by the wind, no less). No wonder even the Hierophant hasn't gotten anywhere, if so; there's miracles and then there's **that**.

Mental Mouse

Well, Arcadia provides a possible record of Tikoloshe's mind, and that was a pretty serious magical catastrophe – I wouldn't be surprised if his thoughts were imprinted. Whether his entire, lengthy memory is, that's another question.

Fayhem

Mm, point. DK's echo in Arcadia seemed to have his actual memories in it rather than just present thoughts, but then at that point DK didn't have four millennia (IIRC) of accumulated memories like Tikoloshe did. Even if that's all there in Arcadia, somehow conducting a perfect lossless transfer into a newly constructed vessel would be a titanic undertaking. It would certainly explain Masego's obsession with getting the vessel exactly right if so – even beyond his normal perfectionism in magical matters, if you're going to pour four thousand years worth of memories into something you probably kind of **need** it to be a flawless receptacle to have any chance whatsoever.

Liliet

Yeah, the Arcadia imprint is the only way I'm seeing it even remotely possible. And it still can't not be a fool's errand bc Dead King's agenda =x

Liliet

I don't think he'd need bindings back, sure they shaped him but they *already have*. Don't forget the convo at Thalassina *started* with Wekesa breaking those.

"I choose this of my own free will" (TIKOLOSHE SHUT THE FUCK UP AND STAY ALIVE FOR YOUR SON'S SAKE)

Mental Mouse

> (TIKOLOSHE SHUT THE FUCK UP AND STAY ALIVE FOR YOUR SON'S SAKE)

And this is where we discover some combination of differences between both Praesi culture and our own, and also between an ancient incubus and a *human* father.

Tikoloshe's bond was to Wakesa, who was sacrificing himself for his son.

Liliet

When Masego talked about being the one in the reefs while Wakesa is the one in the city, Tikoloshe reacted with 'FUCK NO' before even Wexsa did.

Tikoloshe loved his son very much. He just was a dumbass who did not think it through in an emotionally charged moment.

Also, upon reread I realized that Wakesa was already dying there. Like, Masego repelled the divine touch, but not before it kind of half crushed Wakesa into paste. Though it's possible he could have fixed himself up with sorcery / survived as Named do, if he'd not done that, so that read still remains 😡

shveiran

There is no reason to say that Tikoloshe had ONE bond. If anything, we simply learned that he loved Wakesa more than he loved Masego.

Even that is stretching, IMO: Wakesa was dying in front of him, and to abandon him in those last instants would have been hard whether he loved him more, less or equal to Masego.

It's not like the incubus had time to sit down and make a pondered, balanced choice.

Mental Mouse

You are thinking of him as a human. I'm not so convinced that applies.

shveiran

I'm thinking of him as a creature capable of sincere affection. But I'll grant that it is speculation, although I feel his very demise kind of proves he was moved by emotions and not bonds at this point.

Mental Mouse

Moved by emotions, but those emotions themselves had been shaped by a long history, and then by the contracts created by Warlock. Contracts that were probably complex enough to constitute a *program*.

Tikoloshe at his death might well have been among the greatest creations of Praes: A creature of the Hells reshaped and uplifted to be capable of true

love, and even the “moral equal” of a human.. But equal doesn’t mean identical – even shaped to the image of humanity, he was ultimately a devil.

(Proving that wrong would be way cool, but would also require an uncharacteristic display by the God’s Below.)

[Liliet](#)

All evidence we have says it does.

[Liliet](#)

Remember “can be overridden by a stronger desire of my own”?

Daniel E

Now that we are nearer to Hierophant being a focal point of the chapters; I am insanely curious about what exactly he learned from that God Mask back in Thalassina. “Screamed, but did not flinch”.

Chapter 43: Treachery

“Habitually treacherous enemies are accomplices to their own destruction.”

– King Henry Fairfax, the Landless

I breathed in.

Fear drifted into my lungs along with the rotten scent in the air, the poisonous odour of thousands of hellspawn and one of the oldest beasts of the Chain of Hunger. Death, decay and a fight that would have been hard business even with an army at my back. Gods, but it’d been a long night and the dawn of it was not yet in sight. It’d been one thing to stare down armies when I’d been Named, when I’d been in the deepest throes of Winter, but now I was painfully aware this could all end as simply as my throat being opened by some lucky devil. The knowing of that almost numbed my limbs, when it sunk it so suddenly: I could die, in these few coming heartbeats. I could have died at any time on the way here, and even if we survived the closing jaws of this trap I might still die before the night was over. It was an arresting though, one that had my palms prickling.

I breathed out.

Fear is an old friend, I thought. Fear was the pain in my leg, the whispering tune of mistake and mortality and needing to always do better lest if all fall apart. How could it cow me, when I leant on it like a pilgrim's staff? I let that tenet straighten my back and took a look at my opposition. Devils, alas, in the thousands. *Walín-falme* and *akalibsa*, as we had fought before, but this was a disparate horde and there seemed no end to the assortment. It made gauging numbers difficult, given the wild variation of shape and size in the swarming throng, but it could be no less than two thousand. We moved, from there, to threats in the singular. The undead Horned Lord known as the Skein was nesting among the ruins of the courtyard and attending hall, its darkly furred strangely humanoid body folded inwards as if it were a beast at rest. Great antlers of bone jutted from the top of its head, set above golden eyes made even more vivid by the deep red gouges beneath them. It was a creature gifted with foresight, near impossible to damage and wielding at least one aspect I knew to be capable of unmaking its mistakes – **Spool**, it had called it in Keter. At its feet stood two silhouettes, veiled to me until a sliver of Night saw to that mundane frailty.

I breathed in.

Yet more trouble, and my fingers harshly coiled. My predictions had come up short in two different ways and quite visibly so, for I now looked upon two men: one whose frayed tabard bore the twin bells of House Fairfax, the other whose pale green eyes watched all unfolding with open interest. The man who had once been the Good King Edward Fairfax, Seventh of His Name, bore old and intricate plate over which a tabard in the gold and blue of the royal line of Callow hung. He wore no helm, laying bare the face of a man in his late forties with sparse white hair and the eternal beginnings of a beard, and in his hand he held a longsword for which there seemed to be no sheath. To his side, the soul of Amadeus of the Green Stretch had been put in slender silvery stocks, his hands too far kept to reach the gag that had been put over his mouth. My teacher looked much like his physical body did, though there were dark rings around his eyes and a sort of haggard look to him I found deeply unsettling. Black had always been near obsessively neat in his grooming, but his soul laid bare was in disarray. That boded ill, though at least the sharpness in his gaze had not been dulled. A bag had been absent-mindedly tossed between the two of them, one I had with my own hand filled with crowns. That left only...

I breathed out.

Kairos Theodosian, Tyrant of Helike, sat draped over the gaudy throne his gargoyles were keeping aloft unevenly. Though he'd quite brazenly betrayed us, the odd-eyed villain had yet to

bother with foibles such as armour or a blade. No that he needed them, with a flock of enchanted gargoyles obeying his every whim and a treasure trove of lethal artefacts at his disposal – to which, he'd added the casting rod of the Rogue Sorcerer, which he was currently toying with as he grinned a pearly white grin. This was all of it, I thought. Our enemy, against which stood three: the Rogue Sorcerer, roughed up and stripped of tools, the now twice-winded Saint of Swords and myself. This was not a fight we would win with swords, I thought, given the disparity in strength there. The best that could be hoped for was delay. We did, however, have one advantage over our foes. The foundations of their side were unsteady, while as long as there such a common enemy before us my own triumvirate would stand united. *How can I take your strengths and turn them against you?* Four heartbeats had passed, and as the fifth reached us Laurence de Montfort sighed. Not out of disappointment, I decided, or sadness. It was the same sigh I'd heard dockworkers in Laure make when some merchant had filled the hold with no eye to taking out the goods out and an hour-long job was going to end up taking twice as long. The Saint spat to the side, then rested her blade against her shoulder.

"That's going to take a while," she said, sounding irked.

"That's mine, you loathsome turncoat," the Rogue Sorcerer yelled at Kairos.

"I prefer to think of it as ours," the Tyrant jauntily replied. "Although, if you truly want me to return it..."

So, the sharper was about to blow and the moment the three of us were separated by the horde then there would be no more planning. This was it, all I had to scheme.

"Saint, how long can you buy me?" I asked.

"You got a way to win?" the old woman casually asked.

I nodded.

"Then however long you need, Foundling," the Saint of Swords told me with a hard smile.

I supposed she could be counted on to be a reliable whirlwind of destruction to anything she faced even when she was on my side, which was somewhat comforting.

"Keep them off me," I said. "I'll handle the Tyrant."

"Figures you'd go for the cripple," Laurence de Montfort said.

A helpful reminder that 'on my side' didn't mean friendly or any less generally horrid, I noted. A heartbeat later Kairos got the

casting rod he'd stolen working and streaks of flame that looked fluid as water shot out towards the Rogue Sorcerer, who took off running towards them. *Godsdamn it, Roland*. It didn't matter if he could handle the sorcery being thrown at him, Kairos had hundreds of bloody gargoyles to throw at him and however good the hero's set of mail it didn't cover his face or throat or neck. I let the Night course through me and flicked my wrist, spinning a hooked chain that caught the wayward hero by the back of the coat and dragged him back forcefully. The Sorcerer had been about to reach the edge of demolished second story room we were still standing on, but the force I used in pulling him back had him half-tripping backwards. And also narrowly avoiding the knife-wielding gargoyles that popped right up from where they'd been hanging off the edge awaiting to scythe through Roland's ankles, because because Kairos being a chatty jackass didn't mean he wasn't clever. The streaks of flame I left him to deal with as I advanced – he snarled something in a language I didn't recognize, still tripping backwards, and some sort of swirling eddy of air caught them in a spin until the fires gutted out – and dismissed the chains. The gargoyles that'd come over the top milled uncertainly, knives extended into nothing, and did not even manage to chatter before I'd sent twin needles of Night through their torsos. They blew a moment later, and I met Kairos Theodosian's uneven eyes as I came to stand by the edge of the drop.

"So," I said, beginning to reach for my pipe, "how firmly rooted would you say your current allegiances are?"

It was theatrics, not directly asking what it was the Dead King had offered, just like reaching for a smoke in the middle of battlefield. I could not show weakness in the face of the Tyrant of Helike, lest he decide we were spent and that the Dead King's victory was assured. Calm, control and even a smidgen of nonchalance. Anything less and I would not have gotten that keen glint in his good eye, the one that delighted in there still being a game afoot. For though Kairos Theodosian enjoyed a good bout of treachery, he would not commit to it without purpose and would never climb into a sinking ship. In that sense, I understood him in a way that few people could: like me, he had reached his current heights climbing over a tottering pile of victories. Like me, he knew it only took one hard defeat for it to all come tumbling down on his head.

"We are close as kin, our trust boundless and fondness without peer," Kairos soulfully said.

"Kill them," the Skein snarled, head suddenly rising up. "*Kill them all.*"

I passed my palm over the head of my pipe, allowing a flicker of black flame to light it before pulling at the wakeleaf

unhurriedly. I sighed in pleasure, feeling the Tyrant's gaze unwavering on me.

"Shouldn't you see to that?" Kairos amusedly asked, moving his head towards the courtyard.

Devils, Revenant, the closest thing I'd ever have to a father. A fight I could not win. *Calm, control, never miss a beat.*

"That's what heroes are for," I said.

I glimpsed, from the corner of my eye, the Saint of Swords landing in the midst of a sea of devils with her sword raised high. Screaming followed, none of it hers. So, Kairos hadn't taken the unspoken invitation I'd given to imply he was open to further treachery. Which meant Neshamah had bought him with a prize that was significant enough the Tyrant didn't believe I'd be able to match it. He wasn't refusing the prospect of turning on the Hidden Horror, that wasn't his way, but he was making it known the bidding had started high and would only get higher. So *what did he offer you?* I wondered. Given that Kairos' ambitions were still bound, as far as I knew, to the peace conference he'd forced then it had to involve the survival of the armies below. Or at least his, I corrected, for Iserre was made into a tremendous butcher's yard by the Tyrant's hand then the only the threat of utter annihilation could possibly bring either Hasenbach or myself to negotiate with him ever again. Couldn't be just being spared, though, because the Grand Alliance would be crippled by losing the armies below and so far Kairos had gone out of his way to avoid accomplishing that. I was missing something, because I could see no way in which the Dead King taking this realm benefitted the Tyrant. My fingers tightened, beneath cover of my sleeves. Was it that simple? When I'd irritated the Hidden Horror, he'd said something that now sounded anew in my mind: *when I have taken what I wish from this ruin I will forsake it as well.* If after he got what he'd come after Neshamah had no use for this place, what would he lose by promising it to the Tyrant of Helike?

I inhaled smoke and blew it outwards towards Kairos, whose nose wrinkled at the acrid smell. I couldn't beat that offer. It was a way for the Tyrant to get everything he wanted, so long as the Hidden Horror got it too. Which was, I realized, my angle. Kairos Theodosian could not, as I'd thought earlier, afford a single hard defeat. And he had to be achingly aware here that he'd made a bargain with an entity his superior in every way, including perhaps even treachery, and that if he was crossed then he had no real way to strike back. Not alone, anyway, and when it came to opposing the Dead King then there was only one game in town.

"Well, he's lying to at least *one* of us," I pensively said. "Did you offer something worth more than a hundred-year truce?"

"You jest," the Tyrant grinned.

A little too quickly, I thought.

"I'm deadly serious," I said. "Kairos, I'll be blunt here because if he's actually sold this place to you instead of me I'll need to cut my losses and break it. Which is going to be damned hard to do a messy besides, so I haven't the time to dawdle. I got my win here in exchange for backing his envoy at the conference when the truce offer comes. One of us got peddled goods already sold, obviously, so which of us is it?"

"A truce," the Tyrant skeptically said.

"Don't be daft," I frowned. "You know what it's meant for. I'm willing to take the bet, because I'll get this continent ready for war on Keter even if I have to kill and raise every ruler myself, but I'm hardly blind to the risks."

A hundred years was a long time. Time to prepare, yes, but also for the continent to come apart. A truce meant no armies, not absence of schemes, and the most brutal blow the Hidden Horror might yet deal was to let that century come to pass and then do *nothing*. To let every willing sacrifice turn into bitter recrimination, to let his opponents devour themselves from the inside without sending a single soldier across the border. If I'd tried to weave a lie out of thin air, I thought, the Tyrant might just have sniffed me out. But this? If I were Kairos Theodosian, I'd believe it. Because I would afraid I'd been double-crossed, yes, but also because of who it was I was looking at. A woman who'd bargained with the King of Winter and Sve Noc, when the cliff's edge was reached, and Hells hadn't I headed to Keter to make another deal not so long ago? The Tyrant of Helike watched me with an inscrutable expression his face, and the simple fact that he was no longer grinning like a lunatic told me I'd drawn blood. I thought, for a moment, of feigning impatience and trying to hurry him along – an announcement it was time to cut my losses, cryptic action begun – but I stilled my tongue. On real stakes I would not gamble this way. And the more I actually lied, the more I risked this exceedingly more skilled liar catching me out.

"Speak to me, then, Black Queen," the Tyrant coolly said.

Not victory, this, but it was an opening.

"I'm not going to bribe you," I snorted. "You just knifed us, Kairos. You want back on this side? Make it worth my while to keep the heroes from putting your head on a pike. I'm willing to deal because I'd rather you sell me this place than the Dead King, but don't mistake that for actual *need*."

For a terrible moment, I thought I'd overplayed my hand. That the bluster had been too much, that I'd been seen through because I'd refused to bend my neck even if in that situation it would have been my words exact. Instead I was interrupted by a flock of steel-clad devils, whose leathery wings beat loud as they descended towards me with raised spears. My muscles began to tense and it was all I could do not to reach for the Night. But I had appearances to maintain, and Gods I was so close to flipping the Tyrant I could almost taste it. The *walin-falme* hit a hastily slapped down ward like birds hitting a window, as the Rogue Sorcerer came through for me. I did not even grin, instead pulling at my pipe as I continued matching gazes with Kairos. *Look at how in control I am*, I thought. *Wouldn't I have to be a lunatic, to stick to a bluff so stubbornly when the situation is this dire?* Airily tossing aside the Sorcerer's casting rod – Roland distantly screamed in a furious voice about it being irreplaceable and worth a fortune – and extending an open palm, Kairos was handed his jeweled sceptre by a chitter gargoyle and used it to thoughtfully scratch his chin.

"Are you lying?" the Tyrant of Helike asked, cocking his head to the side.

I grinned, all teeth and malice.

"I don't know," I said. "Am I?"

A heartbeat passed, both stares unflinching.

"I think, Catherine," Kairos Theodosian fondly said, "that you are lying through your teeth. But I still can't tell, and so it seems were are still allies."

Calmly I inhaled a mouthful of wakeleaf, and waited for the – *there it is*, I thought as the Skein's hulking shape obscured the sky, rising behind the Tyrant and myself. The stench of it was horrid, though spitting out the smoke in front of my face took the edge off of it.

"**Spool**," the Skein snarled.

And just like that/

/the Tyrant of Helike sneered.

"Fate is a tug of war, you raggedy old thing," Kairos Theodosian said, and there was something sharp in his tone I'd never heard there before. "Do you think the wishes of the conquered matter more than those of contenders?"

"You die laughing," the Skein hissed. "Or. You flee. Or. I am broken. Or. Everything burns. Or. Or. *Why does it keep changing?*"

"There's more than one reason I picked him out for this band," I amusedly said.

Was Kairos Theodosian a treacherous, unpredictable and murderous madman? Yes. Obviously. But against a particular kind of foe – say, an oracle who'd spin out of new thread of prediction from his every whim as the lunatic committed to them with ironclad will unhesitatingly – that had its uses.

"**Spool**," the Skein snarled again and/

/"Do you think yourself above even the Gods, you presumptuous relic?" the Tyrant of Helike snarled back. "Do you think you can erase *me* like chalk on a slate? Learn your place."

"Shouldn't have done that," I told the Revenant, pulling at my pipe.

"It will kill you," the Skein cackled, its laughter like rumbling thunder. "Wish, wish into the grave. How many years can you spend?"

I winced. I'd fought enough Named to recognize when one's bottom line was being crossed, and the continued attempts of the Revenant to use its aspect were definitely whipping Kairos into a proper frenzy. I could only guess at what was the cause of it, but the rage in that crimson bloodshot eye and the wildly shaking hands struck me as too raw to be a lie.

"I will confess," the Tyrant of Helike said, tone eerily calm, "that you have rather offended me. You may attend to other matters, Black Queen. This one will be settled by my hand."

"And now," I said, "for my next trick."

Because if I were an undead sorcerer with my personal Hell and forever ahead of me, if I'd taken to snatching Named and making them into my vanguard in Creation – which would mean, most of the time, that they'd be far from me and exposed to all sorts of aspects and sorceries – then there was one thing I'd make sure of. The Skein went still as the corpse it was, and pale gold eyes shone with something eldritch.

"You have been fooled, Tyrant," the Dead King spoke through his puppet. "I struck no bargain with the Black Queen."

And there it was, I thought. The gap between the man the Hidden Horror had once been and the man the Tyrant was. Neshamah had been a brilliant, sharp-sighted sorcerer whose apotheosis had been achieved over decades of careful planning with nary an opening left open. Even in undeath the heart of that man remained, made stiffer perhaps but undiminished. And the thing was, he had that same flaw that my father sometimes did. Gods,

clever as they were they forgot anyone else could see the world in a different way they did. Forgot to see, I supposed, or simply didn't care. Why would they? Victors that they were, they'd gotten their way so often. But Kairos Theodosian, now that was a man of a different breed. He was Tyrant of Helike not because he wanted to change the world, to shift borders on a map or leave behind a name that would ring through the ages. Kairos, he was *villain*. He was a partisan of Below, not a warlord or a theft of godhead, and his faith was the same ruinous red thing that had rent the Wasteland asunder for more than a millennium. And so the Dead King, brilliant monster that he was, had just made his first blunder of the night. Because the moment he'd made an effort to not be at odds with the Tyrant of Helike, he'd made every lie I'd spoken irrelevant. Because, in the eyes of the Tyrant, he would only be worth appeasing if he was a *threat*. And given the choice between successfully crossing me or the Dead King? Well, one of them was worthier prayer than the other.

I met the Dead King's eyes.

"Mistake," I said in Ashkaran.

"**Rend**," Kairos Theodosian laughed, and all Hells broke loose.

matesbe

Tyrant really is the best Villain, after Cat and Black. He's just so unapologetic about it, it's almost endearing.

Dainpdf

No love for Traitorous and Irritant?

Malicia also has a sense of competence and dignity I quite appreciate.

Oshi

Irritant wasn't a villain. He was just glorious.

Dainpdf

Seeing as he was a Dread Emperor, I must respectfully disagree.

Kissaten

That's why he abdicated. No longer Dread Emperor, heroes no longer have any reason to kill him.

Dainpdf

Did he? What chapter is that from?

ATRDCI

Epigraph from Book 4 Chapter 68: Poised

“Obviously you can’t kill me now: your enmity is with the Dread Emperor of Praes, and I’ve already abdicated. I am now but a humble shoemaker, and what kind of hero slays a shoemaker?”

– Dread Emperor Irritant, the Oddly Successful. Later noted to have made surprisingly nice shoes during his three abdications.

Dainpdf

Thank you!

Dainpdf

Also, he did keep the villainous status.

Clint

Are you slandering this humble shoemaker?

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

A truly gifted humble shoemaker, please.

erebus42

I think it’s because he remembers that the most important thing about being Evil is to have fun. As much as the Diabolist got some good mileage out of the whole classic villain schtick she took herself way too seriously and never stopped to smell the roses. Kairos is the walking, talking embodiment of “fuck it” which I think is a big part of why he’s so awesome. Honestly if there has been one good argument against Black and Cat’s “practical” style of Evil and for the classic one it has been the amount of fun the Tyrant seems to have been having ever since his debut.

RoflCat

In other word, he’s this trope incarnate:

NerfGlastigUaine

And one the best examples besides IM0. Also, I love Trope Talk, I hope Red makes more videos soon.

[Liliet](#)

...Neshamah acts like he isn't but he really is, Kairos acts like he is but he really isn't. Fucking beautiful.

Kairos is definitely heavily based on the trope even if there's mix and match :3

[Liliet](#)

...and also Guide defies the "third act breakdown" trope altogether. Villains know they lose at the end, and they go down manically cackling "and I never gave a shit in the first place!"

Hmm. If anyone actually DOES get a genuine "I never saw this coming" third act breakdown it's Neshamah, because he DOES think he's cheated the system. If that's ever subverted, well,

NerfContessa

Ah, my colleague, you are so. Right.

Love that tyrants style.

[Liliet](#)

He isn't. The first core trait is "backstory doesn't matter to their motivation" and like... did you see how Kairos reacted to Skein talking shit about his mortality? Kairos is 100% backstory driven. He's not that trope.

He's going to forever act like he is and take offense to any indication he isn't. But he isn't.

Neshamah is, though :3

[Liliet](#)

oooooooooooooooooooo

I watched further into the video and

'pure chaos, which is a very similar archetype to pure evil but moves in different directions'

THIS

this is Kairos vs Neshamah

sutortyrannus

>I think it's because he remembers that the most important thing about being Evil is to have fun.

"The most important part of any summary execution is to remember to have fun and be yourself." – Dread Empress Malevolent II

erebus42

A statement I'm sure Kairos would wholeheartedly agree with.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

Kairos embodies the proper disagreement between Evil and Good: not of means, but of ends. His ends are those for which what Evil offers really *is* best, and the only argument against him standing Evil could be "is this what you really want?"

Because he believes he does.

naturalnuke

As soon as Skein tried to rewrite him I knew he was solidly in Catherine's camp again.

Valkyria

solid and fluid are very much the same when speaking about the tyrant I think.

Just look how he treats his former allies he was close as kin whom he trusted boundless...

[Mental Mouse](#)

> solid and fluid are very much the same when speaking about the tyrant I think.

He actually is kinda like a non-Newtonian fluid (oobleck etc): Try to be gentle and he oozes away. If you just smack him, then suddenly it's easy to pick him up and move him... as long as you keep handling him roughly!

.

Andrew Mitchell

That makes a *surprising* amount of sense.

NerfContessa

Sooooo, brooks had theodosian liquified for their original DNA cushioning material? No wonder they switched to cheap foam, theodosian fluid ran out :p

Mental Mouse

As I've said before, Kairos' treachery is so reliable that Cat can just work it into her plans.

onedollargum

A dishonest man you can always trust to be dishonest.

Mikasi

It's always the honest ones you have to watch out for. Never know when they might start lying to you.

shveiran

"Honestly, it is the honest men you need to watch out for, 'cause you never know when they'll do something really stupid"

Fuodiachloris

Yup. Kairos stands by one principles: to have active choices (even bad ones) matter.

Also, loved he Dead King pressing his other button; more worthy and much more difficult (but, apparently, takeable – who knew?) target sighted.

Liliet

oooooo this is a really good summation

Jeffery Wells

Tyrant is a real villain's villain. He's got goals and plans, but the most important thing about those goals and plans is that they are the most villainous things he can think of at the time. Best way to fuck up with him is to accidentally give him an opportunity to be even more villainous.

antoninjohn

We all know that Cat can trust her good friend Kairos to stand by her side

Novice

I mean, why would anyone doubt the Tyrant's eternal friendship? It's obvious from the very start that Kairos would help the Black Queen forever and ever. Clearly this turn of events is very much predictable and EE should rewrite this chapter.

A Big Ol Rat

Spool

Dainpdf

Kairos will always be right behind her, ready to stab anyone trying to sneak at her back.

[Euodiachloris](#)

/anyone else 😊

Stormblessed

Hahahaha! I love that it's this moment where Cat pulls out the truth that she can speak Ashkaran. It's the perfect moment because this is the one time she's truly gotten one up on the Dead King. It shows her growth at being able to handle the two biggest threats we know about. The Bard and the Dead King. And here in this moment I think he's realizing just how right he might've been when he said that Cat could "Some day be a peer." And he might be regretting those words right about now.

Dainpdf

He probably knew. He's had access to Masego's memories, plus he invited Cat and co. to visit him through Arcadia, knowing their capabilities. That that probably planted the idea of this whole endeavor in Masego's mind is probably not a complete coincidence, either.

Odinski

He did know, but Cat has refused to admit it untill this moment despite them both knowing that she knows that he knows.

Andrew Mitchell

This.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, Cat pretending to not know Ashkaran was Kairos brand level of shameless alternate reality ♥ ♥ ♥

[Javvies](#)

Heh.

Chasing ahead blindly out of emotion? Tsk, tsk, Rogue Sorcerer. That's how you get killed. Now you owe Cat your life.

Kairos ... interesting, but did you really think that the Dead King would keep his word without secretly attaching strings or a suicide pill?

Dainpdf

He did block the devils from tearing her open just after, though.

[Mental Mouse](#)

A *hook and chain* to yank Roland back? Seriously?

Nope, not seriously. *Comedy*. She tossed Roland a jester's cap to match the Tyrant's, offering him the protections of the heroic comic relief.

Meanwhile, Neshamah got completely snared by Cat's banter with Kairos... which is odd. Did his "influence" over Masego perhaps backfire upon DK? Because golden eyes or not, this is more how Masego might have responded!

[Liliet](#)

I think Cat's analysis is spot on. Do note she predicted exactly what would happen to the degree of employing dramatic smugness around it ♥

Someguy

Ah. If Kairos can pull a win over Bard whom Dead Dude has never won against, of course he can win against Dead Dude.

Dainpdf

Has he not? His apotheosis itself was a massive win, of greater impact than Kairos's. Plus she's thrown him a bone or two over the years, like the Spellblade. Something like respect, there.

JJR

I can't remember what chapter it was, but it was also mentioned that he managed to capture the Bard and vivisect her. How he managed that I have no idea, especially with Bard's teleport away from danger aspect.

Ιούλιος Καίσαρας

I believe it's against Mortal danger. He "just" made it sure that her life wouldn't be in any danger whatsoever.

[Liliet](#)

* away from death, not danger 😊

shveiran

I wonder, is that confirmed to be how the Bard's power works? We have never seen her take damage except from auto-inflicted wounds, but not ALL wounds are even potentially lethal. Are we certain it is death-based?

[Liliet](#)

Well, that's what Neshamah said in that explanation???

shveiran

It just doesn't make too much sense.

I mean, when you think about it, that isn't THAT powerful a failsafe. All it takes is for someone to know you have it, and then they throw you in a cell. If you are too restrained to kill yourself and force-fed, you are stuck forever? I mean, obviously someone is going to make a mistake sooner or later, but that seems too easy a counter for the Intercessor. There must be more at play.

[Liliet](#)

Wander would likely drag her away to some other place after some time. I'm guessing she COULD get stuck like this for a while, just not for long.

Dainpdf

Never have her life be at risk during the process, for starters.

Kissaten

Dead King's Apotheosis is a trap for him. He made no mistakes, left no openings, so he was forced into a state which he cannot escape. Not only he has to be invited to the Creation, he is bound to Serenity and has everyone as his enemies.

medailyfun

still big improvement over being plain dead 😊

Sylwoos

Not at all, those restrictions are self-imposed. DK can step out of Serenity and drown the continent in undead whenever he wants, he just knows how this particular story ends and avoids it.

Dainpdf

I am pretty sure the only binding is one of his choosing. By never leaving unless invited, he accrues no risk, which seems to be his modus operandi.

(Because then the villain of the story becomes whoever invited him, so the narrative doesn't really support the Dead King being ended or something of the sort.)

danh3107

Is Mistake officially a Cat catch-phrase? It's not as catchy as lesser lesser footrest, but I like it still.

Gunslinger

It's an inheritance from her father.

Dainpdf

I must say I didn't quite follow when she started using it. Felt like I was missing some sort of character development in between.

Croelty

I honestly have been trying to recall for a while now when exactly Cat started to refer to Black as her father, without much success. That also seems like a character moment I missed out on.

Agent J

When she dumped Killian, went to chat with him instead of her friends at the campfire, and ended the night dozing off as "her father" put a blanket over her.

Dainpdf

That is quite recent, and I don't think we got a real moment for it either. I think it started on book 5.

[Liliet](#)

Actually in Book 4 she gobsmailed me with it during her talk with Andronike. The exact quote was something like "I was angry with my father, for being so much less than he could be".

I was not surprised afterwards :3

Dainpdf

True! Still came a bit suddenly, though I guess it happening during an introspective moment is kind of better.

I just feel a moment like that needed more oomph?

[Liliet](#)

That moment had all the oomph it needed as far as I'm concerned

do keep in mind it was followup to Second Llesse already, which was the culmination of the entire book 3, the first serious beat of the 'yes hes her dad' arc was Epilogue II and the first mention of it as a possibility was Book 1 Chapter Fall

Dainpdf

Sure. I guess it's down to personal taste? In the middle of all that for me it got overshadowed by all the other conflict going on, plus the human thing.

I guess I could chalk the sudden decision to trauma, but I still feel there could have been more struggle with the concept. I will add it to the "List of things I feel the skip between books 4 and 5 robbed me of".

[Liliet](#)

The struggle was all of Books 2 and 3 😊you're better off listing it among things that Cat being Wintered robbed you of

...I mean I'm not telling you how to enjoy the story, some part of it is def down to personal taste

Dainpdf

Don't know, I just feel it was not enough. And yes, Winter was something of a hiatus in her character development. Considering that arc was so very long, it makes sense that it drove the density of emotional investigation down sharply. Still, we barely got to see Cat deal with readopting her humanity. All that, presumably, happened during the skip between books.

[Liliet](#)

I mean the way I'm reading it, dealing with it is precisely what's happening onscreen in front of us. The fear fragment's part of it. The increasing mentions of 'father' is another.

Mental Mouse

It's been developing smoothly since the beginning, from "hah, he'd be a wierd-ass father figure" through "the closest thing I have to a father" to claiming him as such at least internally, and iirc she's actually said so to some of the closest in her "family".

Liliet

Yeah lmao the first one had been in Book 1 on the balcony ♥ ♥ ♥

Rook

Only became a noticeable catchphrase in book 5.

Coincidentally around the same time that she freed herself of Winter and realized her sharpest weapon was her mind, not her sword.

It was a pretty noticeable bit of character development since the end of book 4 was the first turning point where she stopped ruining herself to win battles, and started giving up battles to avoid ruin

Dainpdf

Sure. It's just that having that just start with the new book, with no explicit build-up to it, feels a bit jarring.

Fayhem

There's been a lot of explicit build-up. She's been referring to him internally as her father since partway through Book III. The frequency has stepped up a bit in Book V but that's the only real change there.

Dainpdf

She didn't really do so without reserve like she's been doing, as far as I remember. She called him "almost my father" or something like it, I think, but never this much recognition. Again, if I recall correctly.

Fayhem

Bk III Ch 57 (<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/01/08/chapter-57-revolve/>), last sentence: "The last part I remembered of that night was my father's hands putting a blanket over me."

She's been doing this for a while. The tempo and ease of the references to Amadeus as her father have increased, but the precedent was set a long time ago now.

[Fayhem](#)

Ayyy replied to completely the wrong thing/completely misintepreted you. PLEASE IGNORE ME

Dainpdf

Uh, what?

[Fayhem](#)

I replied on the premise that you were saying there was no explicit buildup to Cat calling Black her father, but then I looked again and saw that you were replying to the comment about Cat starting to say "mistake" like Black does. So I thought that was what you were talking about when you said there was no explicit buildup. But I guess you actually were talking about her calling Amadeus her father?

Dainpdf

...yes? I am **very** confused.

[Fayhem](#)

As was I, clearly. I think we're both talking about the same thing now though.

[Liliet](#)

IT WAS IN BOOK 4 AND I DIED WHEN IT WAS

Dainpdf

Now the question is: Is undead Liliet still Liliet?

[Liliet](#)

is undead Akua still Akua? 😊

Dainpdf

Who knows.

[daegone823](#)

Everdark, which was ironic since they were the farthest apart. Black also had lost his soul at this point fighting an illegal war against Procer(most likely for Chat to distract crusade)

Dainpdf

An illegal war? According to whose laws? Having an international regulation of... well, anything, is sort of the point of the story.

[Miles](#)

Only the people may declare war

Dainpdf

I didn't know you read the serial, Anaxares! Shout-out from a fan!

Isi Arnott-Campbell

A Cat-chphrase, if you will.

taovkool

...this is a bad idea but eh, fuck it.

CatXKairos. I'll ship it.

Impossible, I know. But there's weirder ships out there in the sea.

1224

Honestly I ship it too. They play off each other pretty well.

Dainpdf

One of them would be a widow by the end of the first hour.

erebus42

It would be a glorious hour though.

Novice

It would bring the Red Wedding to shame.

erebus42

Honestly, I ship them too. She's probably one of the only people in the world that really understands what he's about and he could probably get her to lighten up a little. They'd both probably be planning on how to best murder each other but Kairos would probably view that as a great couple activity.

[Liliet](#)

nah, they'd be a terrible match bc the minute Cat learned of Kairos's tragic backstory she'd be too distracted dealing with sudden sympathy to be any fun for him anymore

Someguy

Eh. Old Akua and Kairos was my ship. Malicia should have arranged the political union to make them big ass targets for Heroes throughout Calernia. It'd have brought her more tangible Intelligence assets on Heroic capabilities & weaknesses as well as political time than Akua's Folly as a big stick to play whack-a-mole.

erebus42

Maybe, I've always been a sucker for a good ol' opposites attract couple though.

shveiran

Opposites, as in "my deepest desire is to burn the world to see how high the pyre reaches and yours is for people not to do that anymore" opposites?
Your ships need counseling, sir.

erebus42

I never claimed my ships were overly stable in the long-term.

Kelthor

Eh I kinda just want them to be best buds. Not saying married people can't be best buds, but it feels like it would change the dynamic between the two.

I'm currently shipping CatXAkua.

[Liliet](#)

My fleet:

CatAkua (without skipping any steps or changing their current dynamic, let them do what they are doing, I ship THAT)/

CatIndrani/IndraniAkua/IndraniMasego (qp)

CatRozala

(crack) CatCordelia

major friend ships that get my heart aflutter also:
Cat/Juniper
Cat/Laurence (yes I'm serious)

caoimhinh

LMAO

Vortex

At this point I am not sure you are a shipper anymore, at this point I feel like you are running a fucking port.

[Liliet](#)

I'm the aro ace poly dockmaster!

[Whiteeyes](#)

"How dare you try to predict my actions! I can't predict my actions, who gave you the right to try!?"

erebus42

I'm pretty sure that was his exact thought process.

nick012000

More to the point, though, the Tyrant's whole thing is the defiance of Fate – it's the whole reason he became a Villain in the first place, and the driving reason behind why he does what he does.

caoimhinh

Kairos came into his Name by beating Fate and making the prophecy of his death into a lie, so he is among the best-equipped people to fight an oracle.
That also means that fighting someone pretending to use Fate against him, Kairos will take the matter VERY seriously and personal.

[Liliet](#)

More like "go ahead and predict my actions, i DARE you to try"

Skein: "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA"
Catherine: "challenge accepted"

Sylwoos

Tyrant is a very simple man. He see a opening, he stab.

Nairne .01

If that's so, he should get acquainted with Robber.

Gunslinger

The typos made this chapter slightly harder to follow, but my word the chapter itself was great. Cat saying mistake in Ashkaran is one of the crowning highlights of this series. How many times can one sass the fucking Dead King.

Also more insightful readers, was Kairos unraveling Spool by using his Wish aspect? He doesn't say it out loud but the Skeins line about Wish all you want makes me think so

Dainpdf

That, plus he seems to better at the Maddened Fields strategy than Cat was.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, he doesn't even need to try, his mind is just naturally like that ;u;

Dainpdf

Plus I bet he made special study of the woman who "defeated" his most famous predecessor.

1224

Probably. I think the only time you have to say an aspect is the first time you use it.

caoimhinh

Yeah, Kairos outright says it when Skein first uses Spool.

"Do you think the wishes of the conquered matter more than those of contenders?"

It's interesting how Wish is working here, it's not reading Skein's heart and wishes, it's turning his spooling back of time into wishful thinking, an immaterial thing. That's almost going Meta, but I guess the fact that Kairos came into his Name by beating a prophecy might be giving him an edge against time/fate-related abilities.

Overcoming Fate is the very beginning of Kairos' story, an Oracle is screwed against him.

Valkyria

It could also be that the aspect here is reading the Tyrants own wishes and makes them reality. He wished to stay in this "timeline", so it can't be changed by the Skein.

[Liliet](#)

I think it's not that meta and much more straightforward: Wish allows Kairos to "make a wish" and have it come true, at the cost of years of his life (which pissed him off for Skein to bring up / try to use against him). Wish in DnD can mimic the effect of any spell iirc; in this case it was Counterspell to Skein's Spool :3

Gunslinger

How does years of his life work I wonder? Don't Villains have an endless life span? Maybe it twists Fate so that no matter what he'll reach a violent end faster

shveiran

I like this theory, but I wonder how it STARTED. I mean, I'd think this was his first aspect, as it was needed to overcome the prophecy and make the rest possible, but at that point Kairos didn't have a lifespan. Or rather, it was a very, very short one.

mavant

If his fate was originally to die at age 13, and he's older than that now, maybe the only way to kill him is to de-age him.

[Liliet](#)

I think while that's true for villains in general it might not be true for Kairos

Clint

"Also more insightful readers, was Kairos unraveling Spool by using his Wish aspect? He doesn't say it out loud but the Skeins line about Wish all you want makes me think so"

I took it as something more complicated – like he was determined to use Wish to wish to do something the Skein hadn't foreseen. So instead of seeing one, or a few, clear threads forward, the Skein kept seeing more and more possibilities – it couldn't lock one down because as soon as it saw one possibility, Wish made that not what Kairos would choose to do in the actual coming future.

Andrew Mitchell

Oh, I like that interpretation.

[Liliet](#)

He wouldn't need Wish for that, it's his natural thought process 😊😊😊

Dainpdf

On one hand, this was *awesome*. On the other, seeing Neshamah outwitted like this is a bit anticlimactic. If he truly has been, I mean.

Now to picture Black's soul laughing at what Cat just said... he most likely can't understand Ashkaran, but surely he knows what she said.

RoflCat

I'm sure he can tell, because at that moment she probably has the punchably smug face that he would do in the same situation.

Y'know, just like when Nauk pointed out she make 'the face' that usually means they'll win.

And I think it was Hellhound that explains she has basically the grinch's evil smile in that moment.

Don't remember when it was, but probably long before Arcadia.

Agent J

Battle of Three Hills. Backs against the river, outnumbered by the Silver Spears, and Cat starts smiling. So Nauk relaxes, certain in their victory.

Dainpdf

Well Black's thing is that he *wouldn't* smile or gloat so hard he'd underflow the humility and cross right back into smug territory. But yeah, Cat's probably got that smile right now.

[Liliet](#)

I actually bet he can't guess what she said bc he wouldn't expect her to use HIS catchphrase :3

Also, no wonder Neshamah got outwitted: this is Catherine's chosen battlefield, hearts and minds of allies :3

[Liliet](#)

I also wouldn't be surprised if getting beaten by Catherine here wasn't actually Neshamah's preferred outcome: sure he

loses a short term opportunity, but he gains a long term rival/peer 😊

Dainpdf

What is even long term when you are the Dead King? Cat has extended lifespan, but she's still dust in the wind.

[Liliet](#)

That's not what he's saying!

Dainpdf

Yes, he minimized the lifespan difference when he was trying to argue her into accepting a bad gamble. It was in his interest that she think she would still be around in a hundred years, and that she think herself a threat to him then. I am not saying he lied – he didn't tell her she'd live forever – but it was in his interest to frame his answer in such a way.

[Liliet](#)

True.

I just get general narrative vibes for “like fuck Cat's dying in a mere single human lifespan”, too ;u;

Dainpdf

I could see some kind of final sacrifice ending for her. Because as much as she says so, I don't see her moving to The Garden and becoming a farmer after her deeds are done.

[Liliet](#)

Of course not, are you kidding me? She walks off into sunset (probably to another continent, to wander with Indrani) and Callow knows her as the Queen who will return in their darkest hour 😊

Dainpdf

Maybe. I wonder whether she can, though, embroiled with Sve Noc as she is.

[Liliet](#)

I'm sure they won't mind once she's set them up ♥

shveiran

"Outwitted" it's a stretch, I feel. this is a tiny, tiny part of all the DK is doing. Heck, even this "meteor Arcadia unto my enemies' armies" is a small part of all he's doing. He is the Enemy, the Hidden Horror, the Adversary. He is the mind on his side fighting the war, and he is winning. Recruiting the Tyrant and sending the Skein were two moves in this clash with the heroes in this particular battle.

Outplayed? Perhaps, good sir, but not outmaneuvered.

Not yet, and not by a long shot.

Dainpdf

I guess this does fit within his MO: sure, she outplayed him, but he hasn't really lost much... well, except for a few revenants.

Oshi

Until we understand what he has done to Masego we can't begin to understand this fight.

shveiran

True. My argument, however, is that the DK doesn't do climatic battles. He controls the field. He will have to be outmaneuvered A LOT to be forced into a decisive confrontation, because he, like Cat, understands how that story ends.

So he plays it safe. Set so many irons in the fire that it doesn't matter if the heroes turn some of them.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> seeing Neshamah outwitted like this is a bit anticlimactic.

Oh, the show ain't over 'till the fat lady sings. But for the first time, Cat has maneuvered DK into a misstep, instead of jumping through his hoops. She really is a contender.

M0och

I think this series has turned into my religion...

M0och

Because gods, how can a series be this f*cking awesome in every aspect!

erebus42

Damn. Tricking the Dead King into showing some skin so that the Tyrant couldn't help but stab him in it. For a relatively

improvised plot that was brilliant (assuming it was part of the plan). The fight is still young though.

:)

"Mistake," I said in Ashkaran.

Neshamah's Folly

Isaac Martinez

I think that the moment that Cat stops feeling fear, is the moment that she dies.

[Liliet](#)

I think Cat agrees with you XD

Soma

DAMN.

Get scolded in your own dead tongue. Catherine's been showing her mind and her words are sharper than any blade tonight. How many people could trash the dead king in an encounter, let alone with just words? The intercessor? Points for sheer power and style.

werafdsaew

I'm not understanding something here; why would the Dead King showing up make him not a threat to the Tyrant?

Kai Merah

It's not that it doesn't make him a threat, it's that if you're trying to appease your enemies/underlings or trying to prevent conflict between yourself and your enemy/underling, clearly, you're only doing so because you consider said enemy/underling a threat. To Kairos, Dead King showing up means Kairos is important/threatening enough to need appeasement. So he thinks he can stand a chance of double-crossing the Dead King now, since the Dead King considers him a worthy opponent/threat. And between double-crossing Cat, and double-crossing Dead King, it's clearly a more awesome feat to successfully double-cross and beat Dead King.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

Because he makes the move to step in to try to re-establish his control over his chained tiger. Tyrant is so ingrained in his role, that he simply cannot ignore the chance to turn on his 'superior'

[Euodiachloris](#)

It's the Way of the Starscream: why be content in just backstabbing Galvatron when you can target Megatron? Or, you know, both?

JJR

How soon until Tyrant back stabs himself though?

[Liliet](#)

He does that every time he uses Wish :3

ciara

You're mixing up the pronouns in this bit (understandably, there's a lot of "he" in there):

"Because the moment he'd made an effort to not be at odds with the Tyrant of Helike, he'd made every lie I'd spoken irrelevant. Because, in the eyes of the Tyrant, he would only be worth appeasing if he was a threat."

Kairos isn't being convinced that the Dead King is a threat. Kairos is realizing that the Dead King doesn't consider HIM to be a threat, based on the Dead King addressing him as an ally.

See, Kairos doesn't want to be an ally who works with you to achieve your mutual goals, he wants to be the enemy who you have to have to pay off to achieve your goal even though it's his goal, too. He's not happy making any deal that strikes you as fair, and if he finds out you think his deal is fair then he's going to try to start over and extort you harder. If you're not offering him a deal you hate so that he'll work with you, he thinks you don't properly appreciate how much you'd hate to have him working against you.

He's taking this chance to fuck the Dead King over so that *next time* he's given the opportunity to sell out the Grand Alliance (and/or the fate of Calernia), that undead bastard will *pay him what's he worth*.

Cicero

You're reading this wrong too.

"Because the moment he'd [The Dead King] made an effort to not be at odds with the Tyrant of Helike, he'd [the Dead King] made every lie I'd spoken irrelevant. Because, in the eyes of the Tyrant, he [The Tyrant] would only be worth appeasing if he [The Tyrant] was a threat."

The Dead King revealed that the Trant was in fact a threat to the Dead King, and so a betrayal of the Dead King would have actual weight. Making it impossible to pass up.

werafdsaew

Among all the replies I like yours best.

Cicero

It doesn't. What it does is show that the Tyrant can be a threat to the Dead King, and that was a mistake, because a chance to effectively betray the Dead King is so amazing that the Tyrant cannot pass it up.

1224

So Karios is more and more becoming one of my favorite charcter in general.

[Adrian_V](#)

I almost wish the armies below could be seeing this, could you imagine how each army would be reacting? Also i loved how badass the Tyrant was in this chapter, and Cat too of course, i can imagine how Laurence will react but it will be interesting to see anyway.

Also as soon as i saw the title i had to go to youtube and listen to the bleach soundtrack Treachery, you guys should try too xD

More_Dakka

The armies are watching on giant projected screens on the night sky. Every few minutes the betting odds for who out of the band survives changes and money changes hands. Cat remains the favorite and Tyrant's odds look like a heartbeat graph

Andrew Mitchell

Thank you. That image made me smile. 😊 😊 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's all going to be about who's standing to tell the stories.

Cat &co. aren't merely making history with this mission, they're making *mythology* for future generations.

[Liliet](#)

YE A H

Thea

Has anybody considered that Cat might be wrong and Neshamah didn't misread Kairos? That everything's still within his plans? He must have some idea to dodge the Party of Five.

[Liliet](#)

Very unlikely.

Neshamah isn't THAT committed here, he's just going for an opportunity. He can't legit utilize all the resources he could or he'd expose himself to a narrative vulnerability.

So when Cat picked the battlefield, he met her on it. And it's the battlefield Catherine WINS on.

Oshi

Correction, it's the field Catherine is better on. Remember that the DK is all about never being vulnerable, His losses are always things that don't ultimately hurt him. You can put him back in the bottle but he'll always come back. It's important because I don't think the game he's playing is what we see.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, Cat's best case outcome here is 'I win and DK doesn't win but doesn't lose either' bc she can't make him lose.

As I said elsewhere, I wouldn't be surprised if "Catherine outwits me in this fairly simple scheme that gives her a huge advantage by nature of battlefield and circumstances" was actually his preferred outcome here.

Catherine is still fucking awesome.

"And now, for my next trick"

[Mental Mouse](#)

She does have pretty good stagecraft these days; I also liked the finger-snap when ToS got herself destroyed. (I originally wrote "auto-Darwinated", but on further consideration, Darwin doesn't apply here. 😊)

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

"Not exactly my doing, but given the opportunity to pretend otherwise, why wouldn't I?"

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's not completely new, but she has come a step beyond her early "<blink> I meant to do that" moments. 😊

[Liliet](#)

After the 'now for my next trick' I can't stop picturing Cat as a stage magician. You KNOW she'd love it.

[Liliet](#)

so uh about our earlier bard discussion

in DnD bards can have any kind of Performance skill, not just music: dance, oratory, comedy, whatever

Cat's got Performance (stage magician)

She's been going for it ever since "The answer to this question may surprise you!" but she only started succeeding recently ;u;

nick012000

I wonder if Cat can pull a trick with the Night to give Black's soul a temporary body to use once she gets him loose, the same way she used Winter to give Akua's soul a temporary body to use.

[Liliet](#)

That's my guess, yeah. The most obvious thing to do here.

Andrew Mitchell

Brilliant chapter. ♥ Cat demonstrates once again how important it is to truly understand other players.

Well done to everyone who guessed that King Edward and Amadeus would make an appearance.

Dhael

Black has to be watching this like a proud father.

"That's my daughter that just manipulated the Hidden Fucking Horror into making a narrative that she can win with"

Andrew Mitchell

♥ ♥ ♥

Aotrs Commander

I was just thinking myself he was probably shedding a quiet little soul-tear of liquid pride...

superkeaton

Well played, Cat, now that you've stirred the pot, can you fish a decent victory from it? You've always had a talent for it, but the Dead King is old, old, Old.

Vin reisling

So every time he uses wish he spends lifespan? Very fitting for the tyrant.

Valkyria

How did you come to that conclusion?

[Liliet](#)

Skein said that?

Valkyria

oh yeah whoops. I kind of hopped over that sentence it seems.

konstantinvoncarstein

And less overpowered.

Clint

It sounded vaguely like that, but it doesn't make sense – Kairos has already lived past his fated span, and Villains never grow old.

[thearpox23](#)

He doesn't AGE. How much "lifeforce" he's still got in him is still anybody's guess.

I'm sure if Masego was around he'd be able to provide some pedantic commentary on the nature of using your own lifeforce to power your spells or aspects.

shveiran

There is a lot of uncertainty, but it is not hard to imagine his Naming to go something like:

- Kairos is dying and won't make it past the year because sickness and prophecy.
- Kairos becomes the Tyrant and can't get sick/die of sickness anymore.
- Kairos gets an aspect that allows him to cheat prophecies, odds, logic and probably trigonometry.
- the aspect is powerful and versatile, but comes with a

finite amount of uses that do not replenish.
– When Kairos runs out of uses, he dies.

Kissaten

I think Kairos tricked Djinny (metaphorical, but given how many artifacts Theodosians acquired during the years he might as well had one chained somewhere) into granting him a Final Wish before death, and Kairos somehow used it not to die. A deal a lot like Cat's acquisition of Winter dukedom and then queenship, only that it's less pure chaos and more belief and backstabbing, madmen getting wings and all that.

beleester

Maybe that's why he needs to always be a villain.

Darkening

Interesting idea, but not sure how that works when villains are immortal.

Andrew Mitchell

Villains are not immortal. They die, just not of old age or normal disease.

Morgenstern

That's actually what 'immortality' is often presented as. 😊
Not being un-killable, but simply not aging and not dying of diseases, but only dying when getting killed by a foe (which is mostly still a hard thing to do). Being a mortal, as the corresponding parallel, meaning you age, get sick etc. and can be killed rather easily. The difference between gods and mortals.

But yeah, there is also the version where "immortal" means "unkillable", no matter what. (Which is not the same as 'cannot be imprisoned and/or suffer'.)

I'm no longer sure which of these versions is the original one. *shrugs

Allafterme

I loved how Skein prompted to attack the band not when Saint go on about like a powergamer, not when Sorcerer joined the fray but when Cat started a nonchalant chat with Tyrant...

[Liliet](#)

Well, that's when the future changed in his vision 😊

[Euodiachloris](#)

Yeah: spot the *real* crisis point. *waggles eyebrows*

[Mental Mouse](#)

Cat showing up was the crisis point! 😊

Kissaten

Does Rend destroy all manners of illusions, including Arcadia and Hells? Like clearing a path to destination or something. He pulled Dead King's real self (which was speaking) through Skein's body, possibly destroying poor rat in the process?

Kissaten

Or, more likely, he just dropped Skein to Creation into the loving embrace of three armies.

Andrew Mitchell

Oooooouch that's going to be bad for those armies.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Skein might be able to do some damage just as a big-ass fighter, but his time-power won't help him much – even without Cat, the Legions alone have Juniper and other legendary generals running them. There is no path where he beats them.

[Liliet](#)

Skein is 60 ft tall.

On a plain against an unprepared army thats one sated ratling and one very dead army.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The Callowan side has fought demons, and some of the Procerans have fought Ratlings before. They have mages and siege engines.

And most damning, the Skein would be detached from their own story, thus drained of all narrative support.

That says... the Skein isn't necessarily relevant, because it just got possessed by the Dead King himself! What happens if (he might resist) he gets dumped in the middle of those armies, some of which have experience fighting his undead and perhaps even monsters... and *still* without narrative weight?

Andrew Mitchell

I think DK can stop possessing Skein any time he wants to.

Mental Mouse

Which then reverts to Skein vs. everybody, with the added handicap of having been discarded by his maker.

Liliet

Skein's story is absolutely army devourer pls
it's a Horned Lord
it's a monster from the kind of godzilla/nge story
where the army just serves as a first course to show
how tough it is

Mental Mouse

The problem is, it's out of its story – leagues away from the warrens it came from, dropped into a bunch of armies all of whom were waiting for a far more important story to play out. I figure that demotes it at least to "monster of the week", where immense size just means easy targeting. Even if DK stays with it, any time he spends fighting the army is time he spends outside the shard and leaving the initiative to the party.

Liliet

their PRIMARY objective here is to preserve the armies though

shveiran

Skein is 60 ft tall, but he would be surrounded by a lot of magic users and trained soldiers with siege weapons (also, is it day right now? Because otherwise we can add a lot of Mighty).

Granted, he would do some damage, but as soon as the side gets its shit together he's done. He's not a demon and doesn't have auras of corruption or anything that prevents him from getting hit by a lot of fire at the same time. He is powerful, he heals, but still. He vs everyone is not a good bet.

Liliet

sure maybe he won't wreck the entire army, just like 60% or so of it
given Cat was like 'no more than 15% losses',

shveiran

I feel like you are overexaggerating its power. Skein was the stuff of nightmare, but he plays that role as a leader of ratlings, not as a one-man army. Other Horned Lord, perhaps, could play that role, but he is the schemer among them. Schemers don't shine when thrown on a different plane and into a battle.

Also, your argument about a godzilla story has merit in a vacuum in this setting, but that is not the story currently being told: Skein is not the Big Bad, it is the instrument discarded by its maker (as pointed out by Mental Mouse) to cut its losses, at least presumably. Skein is not the main antagonist, is not even the most relevant instrument here (I suspect Old Fairfax is going to be the next attempt by the DK). There really isn't enough of neither narrative weight or physical might to threaten THREE ARMIES.

Quite frankly, if there was, the war would be irrelevant. If one revenant can bring that much destruction, what does the DK even care if they can craft a path to pop these guys north? He has 50 KNOWN revenants.

[Liliet](#)

that's why fortifications matter
I'm talking about the scenario where Skein is
dropped right in the camp 🤨

[Javvies](#)

Depends on how long in Creation the party has been in the Arcadia/Liesse Shard. Time shenanigans being a thing with stuff related to Arcadia.

If it hasn't been that long in Creation, it will technically be day, but Fall will still be in effect, enabling the Mighty.

If it's been a bit longer in Creation, it'll be regular daylight. Longer still, and regular night may have arrived.

At any rate, the Army of Callow will still have their fortifications.

Also, there's the distinct possibility that Andronike and/or Komena will be present and find the Skien offensive. Or just aggravating enough to do something about if it starts popping off **Spool** or other Aspects in their immediate vicinity.

Plus, the Alliance forces still have most of their
Levantine combat priests.

Actual Wizard

I'm really liking Cat's new catchphrase of "Mistake."
It really helps to show how much she has internalized her
narrative perception and character insight.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, that's not what it shows.

It's her father's.

SpeckofStardust

Using Rend in a unstable realm soon to crash into creation that
is also connected to multiple hells.
I think everything going to hell is an understatement. Everything
is going to *Fun*.

[Satchrd](#)

Wait did he take the cotton candy from the clowns?

Mike E.

Man no props in the comments for the Saint? I don't like her, but
when she is committed to your side (even when she hates your
guts), she doesn't mess around. She just basically committed to
fighting 2000+ devils until either she is dead (and the Band
loses), or Cat wins.

"Saint, how long can you buy me?" I asked.

"You got a way to win?" the old woman casually asked.

I nodded.

"Then however long you need, Foundling," the Saint of Swords told
me with a hard smile.

[Liliet](#)

MAN YEAH

everything else was distracting but LAURENCE DE MONTFORT IS
HARDCORE & BADASS AND THE BEST

you know when Cat's starting to find her *comforting* the tides
are shifting 😊

Andrew Mitchell

Speaking about shifting tides... I was really interested in the following exchange

"Keep them off me," I said. "I'll handle the Tyrant."

"Figures you'd go for the cripple," Laurence de Montfort said.

I found the last line jarring because I assumed Laurence was trying for gentle sass rather than cutting words. Is this Cat being too wedded to her current view of Laurence? Or hasn't Laurence shifted as much as I thought she might have?

werafdsaew

Maybe that's just how she talks and she can't help it.

[Liliet](#)

I think it's a combination of two factors
– Catherine is absolutely going with the worst view of Laurence she can out of inertia
– while Laurence is most definitely trying for quipping / friendly teasing, that's not an easy tone to nail down and she ain't the most socially graceful person around, so... the joke fell flat, sharp needle up

shveiran

This chapter was a blast, and the conclusion was perfect. Cat and Kairos, whispering a word each to turn a desperate situation on its head? The Black Queen whispering but an obscure reference, and sounding more deadly with that than the Tyrant unleashing his full regalia?

That's the good stuff. More, please. You have provided over four books worth of this, and I have not yet had enough. Not nearly.

On the side of Heroes, quite a bit to consider.

Saint keeps to her turn into ally of the month, not simply because she stands alone against the Horde (it's not really a surprise, coming from her) but because she keeps interacting with Cat in a very different way.

And I am really curious to find out what has started this. Many suggests it is Archer's revelation of being in love, but I can't say I'm convinced.

I'm looking forward to our getting confirmation or being revealed her thought process.

As for RS.. I've long been suspecting Amadeus soul was in there, but I'll admit now I'm feeling unconvinced. It isn't that we see Amadeus captive (could be an illusion, could be a trick, could be his soul was spliced, could be he left a trace in RS...), it's more

that RS blunders a lot in this chapter in a non-Amadeus way, and I don't feel like it is required to keep up appearances or anything of the sort. The theory seems weaker now. Which makes it more likely his olive branch to Cat was genuine, which is good for them both?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Amadeus doesn't need to actually possess someone to influence them. Compare to his effect on Pilgrim.

shveiran

Granted, but the theory was that Amadeus was actually driving the show from within. Having influenced RS out of screen is not quite the same. You may very well be right, but the possession theory has been crippled IMO.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Actually, my guess was that he'd followed Cat's example and had a discussion with the spirit.

[Liliet](#)

The possession theory was always annoying, having an actually sane new hero was far more interesting. And is!

[Liliet](#)

Yeah ♥ ♥ ♥

Andrew Mitchell

RE: Laurence's shifting perspective, I held a similar mindset to you but Liliet and I had a long chat about it after the last chapter and they managed to convince me that Laurence had shifted more than I thought. You can check it out <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/05/20/chapter-42-twined/#comment-42554>

I do agree with you though that it would be good to get some PoV confirmation.

RE: Amadeus and the Rogue Sorcerer. I no longer think Black was/is influencing RS but if he was then I'm sure it will be confirmed by the text at some stage.

shveiran

I saw that discussion, and you can in fact find my own thoughts scrolling down.

I can't say I'm currently convinced by those arguments, but hey, I've been wrong often before.

Andrew Mitchell

So have I. Many times. 😊

lennymaster

Somehow people still insist on the misconception that Villains are somehow immortal. It was explicitly stated within the first two books, that Heroes get the OPTION/POSSIBILITY of true resurrection (no undead nonsense, the actual real deal), while Villains get to always be at their physical prime. That means that they do not age, but like most Named, their end is violent and they do not tend to live longer than the average Hero. No Named gets sick due to less than extrem circumstances, Heros just have to deal with getting physically slower and weaker as time goes on as well.

liate7

Immortal is often used for unaging, not just for unkillable. For example, Tolkien elves are general considered immortal (evidence [the wikipedia page](#)), even they decidedly are killable.

lennymaster

I thought that too, annoying as that linguistic imprecision is, there are however regular comments that from context give me the impression that people consider lack of aging as genuine immortality.

Just to lay it out, for me agelessness means that getting your head chopped off kills you, immortal means that somebody can take your body apart molecule by molecule, atom by atom (Cloud of Desintegration for example), and that all you have to do is just find or make a new body for yourself. That of course does not include phylacteries or other soulcontainers being involved, that would merely be undeath.

I know, some may say that is splitting hairs, in a world where there are things such as ghosts and other undead, demons, angels, faeries that are regularly reborn, elves that can bend how reality works as well as gods and Gods, it does matter in my opinion. Considering how much precision is involved in Names and Aspects in the Guidverse, means it matters a great deal.

[Javvies](#)

Immunity to aging/disease/natural causes while still being killable is in some sources/series referred to as being immortal (lowercase "i"), while having those immunities while not being killable/inherent automatic respawn/resurrection is referred to as being Immortal (uppercase/capital "I").

It gets complicated. And potentially confusing.

On the other hand, I'm not sure that there's a good term (especially a widely known one) that's explicitly "immune to aging, diseases, or other forms of death by natural causes, but can be killed".

But everybody knows that if you say that somebody/something is "immortal", aging and natural causes are not something they need to worry about, even though their killability is unclear. That's when you get phrases like "immortal until killed".

[Mental Mouse](#)

The big thing to realize is that in the Guideverse, the human condition is rather more negotiable than in our own. Villains get some protection from aging, all Named get protection from disease and similar "boring story" threats. And, of course, each Named gets a unique selection of magical powers! In the text, Named are occasionally contrasted to "mortals", usually in the context of a Named tearing through ranks of un-Named soldiers.

Even so, there's a definite presence of "gods in the world" (as distinguished from Above and Below), which are basically exempt from the "human condition" altogether. They're not *necessarily* unkillable, as demonstrated by the one that Captain "broke", but they simply don't have to deal with the ordinary concerns of the living – not just aging, but even food, air, or any injury short of the outright fatal. The fae fall under that description, so the most powerful of them are commonly described as gods, and have even been worshipped. The power level of gods seems to overlap with the upper reaches of Named power, but can extend well beyond that – especially after they renounce mortal *concerns*... like Cat *didn't*.

NerfGlastigUaine

Great chapter, but there seem to be more typos than usual. I don't like to complain because you're giving us a great story at an insanely fast pace, but the portion in the middle where Cat and the Tyrant talk was honestly hard to read.

NerfGlastigUaine

Great chapter, but there were more typos than usual. I don't like to complain b/c you're giving us a great story at an insanely fast pace, but the part in the middle where Cat and Kairos bargain was a little hard to read.

Cap'n Smurfy

The absolute contrast between the Dead King and the Tyrant is really quite remarkable. They are arguably the most Villainous Villains on the Continent, but are polar opposites in just about everything. The Dead King doesn't do anything without meticulous planning, minimizing risk, pulling back at the slightest hint of danger and seems to keep and place importance on deals. He's an ageless existence and determined to stay that way. The Tyrant on the other hand is flying by the seat of his pants, positively high diving into danger and quite possibly burning up his life force as he goes. They're just nothing alike, but still follow the same ideals religiously.

[Liliet](#)

And they don't, at that.

Kairos does.

Neshamah 'bit the hand that fed him' :3

[Mental Mouse](#)

You're kidding, right? Kairos has been all "hands are yummy!" from Day 1.

[Liliet](#)

what?

[Liliet](#)

ah wait I got it. Well, Kairos is definitely doing something close to that, but he's still following the philosophy while Neshamah's got his own :3

Big Brother

I know I'm a little late for this kinda comment, but about the Rogue Sorcerer. All of y'all are assuming he's a stealthy magic user, but may I pose this question? What happens when an agent goes Rogue?

Let's look at what he's done so far. RS has carried the soul of the (arguably) greatest Villain of the Age, led an army /safely/ through incredibly hostile territory (the Arcadian Fragment), got thrown off a Cliff by a Traitorous Villain, has publicly sided / With/ Cat (the Arch-Heretic) against the Grey Pilgrim and the Saint of Swords, and has most recently been seen subverting/ negating magics intended to impede/harm him.

The Rogue Sorcerer isn't the hiding type, he's the Practical type, even if that means going rogue.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes. I think RS will turn out to be a useful ally to Cat.

Kwabena Yiadom

I remember the chapter on how he achieved his apotheosis ended with the bard laughing much like the twin gods. Can it be called a win if she practically celebrated it?

James

I love this story, but the typos really bother me. I decided that I couldn't handle them any more. I'll be posting an edited version of the chapter as soon as I can from now on.

Here is this one! ~~None of that~~

[erraticerrata](#)

I don't know what would possibly make you think this was all right, but don't do that again. I'll be contacting you by email.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's a bit late, but in my reread I turned up "original text" supporting Cat's crown:

> But I was in charge in their eyes, wasn't I? The legalities we'd been quibbling about all day didn't mean dust in the eyes of the Gods. ... Which meant that if I made a choice, Above took that as a choice for all of Callow.

From the end of <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/06/15/chapter-21-tug-of-war/> .

[Liliet](#)

oh my god that was so good

it's rigid and inflexible asshole winter Cat but it's still one of her best moments ;u;

Chapter 44: Small Slights

"Forgiveness is a scale balanced, nothing more and nothing less."
– King Edward Fairfax the Fifth, the Hardhand

Aspects were telling, I'd always thought, especially those with harmful intent.

In practice they tended to have similar applications, true, but you could tell a lot about Named from what imperative it was that'd resonated with them. William had found his principle in **Swing**, which had been a branch sprung from what he saw as the most important part of who he was: the Lone Swordsman, the one who settled wrongs with a swing of his sword. Now take Masego, though, whose **Ruin** had crystallized facing the very Revenant before me. The first glance at that might lead one to think Hierophant was darkly inclined, and to be honest the thought had crossed my mind at the time. I'd led my friend into quite a few messes, and few of them pretty. The truth if it, though, was that Masego had been raised by the Calamities long before he became part of that other family the Woe had turned into. He'd learned their lessons young, even if they'd taken different shape in him than perhaps expected. To ruin something, for Masego, was to pare it down until it'd reached the very edge of breaking. Until, in a sense, it was no longer a threat. That he'd draw the line there instead of going further into annihilation I liked to think was as much due to the empathy he'd been encouraged to embrace over the last few years as the cold practicalities taught him from the cradle. The lessons of the villains who'd crafted the Reforms, the Conquest: *it is easier to subdue than eradicate*. Less costly, and war like all things was a matter of costs and benefits.

Some were not so clear-cut: as in most things, Black was frightfully subtle under the veneer of overt simplicity. His **Destroy**, seemingly a straightforward cudgel to bludgeon the Tower's enemies with, was a glimpse at what lay at the heart of the man. Someone who, when moved to act, would not tolerate any result but the annihilation of what had stirred him to violence. There was no nuance to the word, or to its effect, because in the end to him the world was split in half by the line he'd famously drawn for the Legions of Terror: victory and defeat, with nothing of worth in between. And so it was with that knowing in mind that I watched the Tyrant of Helike laugh his will into existence, the word he'd spoke ringing out in a way that had nothing to do with his voice. **Rend**, Kairos Theodosian had said. The splash of that decree was swift and brutal, the Skein's skull half caving-in as a tall antler broke and its right arm was so harshly snapped it came to be hanging by half a bone at the shoulder. Bones broke across the Horned Lord's body, though in a manner that was haphazard. It was tempting to ascribe that the Tyrant's whimsical nature, but I was not fooled. To rend something was not to destroy it, to break it or anything so... thorough. It was to tear something into more than one piece, to wound it. To hurt it. But never, I grasped might be the essence if it, to kill. Wound and hurt and sow enmity, but never to finish the fight. Because that was the Tyrant's way, wasn't it? Always an enemy, a scheme, a betrayal afoot. Like a spinning top, if he slowed might just tip over.

The deeper gold had vanished from the Skein's eyes before the Tyrant had even finished speaking, the Dead King leaving behind the corpse he'd inhabited without hesitation at the first indication of danger. It was the great rat itself that screamed in rage at returning to great wounds, all the while a swarm of gargoyle gathered in a chittering flock around the villain. I claimed a last inhalation from my pipe, and reluctantly poured over the last of the wakeleaf over the edge and quite likely onto some devil's head. Wasteful as this was, given how rare and expensive the herbs was out here, I'd need to intervene soon enough. Not quite yet though.

"My I assume, Black Queen, that you have a stratagem?" the Tyrant of Helike idly asked.

Shaking the dragonbone pipe one last time to make sure it was all gone, I put it away in one of the many pockets of my cloak.

"I do," I said. "The way I see it, my Lord Tyrant, our trouble at the moment is that the opposition's got an army and we do not."

Below us, wading through the sea of devils still filling the courtyard, the Saint of Swords reminding why even at height of my brute power over Winter she'd put me to flight on our every encounter. The sight of that old woman wearing no armour save a tunic and pale tabard flickering through the tide of creatures was spellbinding, because Laurence de Montfort had sallied out to fight an army on her own and she was not losing. I watched her cut through the knee of some devil of smoke and stone twice the height of a man and broad as city gate, pass under its toppling form as it fell and take with three quick strokes the head, the arm and the eye of jackal-headed devils leaping out at her. The last, still living though half-blinded, saw its face used as a steppingstone for the perfect somersault she executed to evade the furious swiping of the devil she'd hobbled. It made paste of the jackalhead, the Saint of Swords landed precisely in front of the still-bellowing devil's overextended shoulder and with a cold sneer she severed its head from its body. She'd never once broken stride in all of that, nor had she overly hurried or strained herself. She was not using any of those wicked cuts I knew she was capable of, pacing herself in a display of utter scorn at the calibre of her opposition. Gods, if it was just her and the devils contained inside a ward she might not even lose.

It wasn't just that, unfortunately. Which meant that the Skein's snarled order to kill us all had been followed eagerly by the devils, and while a great many of them were rabidly going after the Saint there were others who'd decided on different prey. Flocks of *walin-falme* had come for me, at first, but after beating impotently at the ward the Rogue Sorcerer had put up in their way for some time they'd decided to take their displeasure to the source of the inconvenience. Leathery-winged and furious

the devils converged on the broken balcony the hero had claimed as his perch, bearing armaments scavenged from the dead of the Legions and Akua's most loyal. It did them little good, for while he'd wielded wards when it came to ensuring my protection now the dark-haired man was going on the offensive. It was like watching a talented but self-taught musician at work, I thought, for while the sorceries he used were rough and raw the cleverness of the use and the breadth of his range were astounding. A swirling vortex of air that drew in a dozen devils was fed a cloud of bright yellow acid, earning screams as the creatures began to burn and melt. A large globe of translucent sorcery, much like the shields Masego was fond of using, formed around another pack and after opening a single hole through it the Sorcerer repeatedly shot sloppy but powerful fireballs within until all that was left was ash and slag.

Of the hundred or so that'd first gone after him, at first simply *walin-falme* but soon most everything winged and borne of the Hells, only half reached his balcony. Where they found the Rogue Sorcerer to have nailed small spike of silvery metal in broad circle around his position. Innocuous, at a glance, but their purpose became clear when he began pouring lightning in a stream above him and the spikes each drew a sliver of that flow in a sudden arc. By this sudden caging of himself in lightning, the hero caught the first wave and fried them in a heartbeat. Lesser devils fled in fright, but the *walin-falme* had been soldiers for the Tower once upon a time: they were made of sterner stuff. They caught and skewered some of their allies, using them as shields to pass under the lightning untouched. There they found only a ball of radiant light that blinded and burned them, scattering them as the Rogue Sorcerer reappeared atop another balcony after dismissing a glamour almost fae-like in nature. The silvery spikes were still there, and in their wounded surprise the devils were in no state to adjust the new angle: then the lightning began pouring again, none were left alive.

"Well," the Tyrant of Helike said, "one must concede they have slightly less of an army now than they had an hour past."

We both knew that was a temporary state of affairs, though. Already I could see the Rogue Sorcerer's face was flushed and dripping with sweat, his breathing hard. Mages like Masego and Akua, who used the exact amount of power needed to make a spell function to the intended purpose, would be able to continue throwing around sorcery for longer even if it was of higher calibre. Roland, clever as he was, was bleeding power well in excess of Keter's Due and I suspected his natural gifts weren't particularly impressive besides: if he continued at this pace for much longer, he was going to fall unconscious. If he didn't continue at his pace, he was going to get eaten alive. Something of an issue, that. Meanwhile, the Saint had been forced to give ground by the sheer mass of bodies being thrown at her – you

could not, after all, manoeuvre around tidal wave of flesh and claws. After that her cuts began tearing at the fabric of this realm, leaving those sharp arcs behind and changing retreat into brutal stalemate, but that was effectively flipping the hourglass on how long remained until her aging body caught up to her. Still, it was almost absurd how well they'd done. Oh they had a story at their back, enough to earn a nudge or two – buying time for an ally against hopeless odds – but most of that was still simply that there were very good at killing things. Devils in particular, I suspected. Above did not send its champions out into the world without first doling out a few tricks aimed at Below's favourite instruments.

"It's not a battle where there's only one host," I chided. "Proper form, Kairos."

"My apologies, Catherine," the boy grinned. "Quite right, quite right. And where do you intend to acquire such an army?"

"One was helpfully provided," I murmured, looking down at below. "Yet I need someone to be nuisance, if you will. Just horribly inconvenient in every way."

"At last, my day has come," Kairos Theodosian gravely said.

I could almost feel the eagerness boiling in his veins.

"How long do you think you can grab everyone's attention?" I asked. "Do you have a monologue in you?"

"Catherine," the Tyrant said, sounding deeply offended.

"You're right, I apologize for even asking that," I replied. "I'll leave this in your trustworthy hands."

"You are a dear friend and honoured ally, so I'll let it pass this once," Kairos said, waving nonchalantly. "You may proceed, Black Queen."

I squinted at him for a moment. He was definitely going to be betray me at least once more before this was over, but it shouldn't be before we'd reached the end of this. And definitely not by selling me out to the Dead King, which should make this possible – I was a lot warier of being disrupted halfway through by the Tyrant than one of Neshamah's brood of the dead and the damned. Now, to make my way through this mess on foot would take too long, even if I killed the pain in my leg and borrowed some hurt without looking at the interest. I could probably call on the Saint to carve me a quicker path, but that'd make my intentions obvious: which, given that the Dead King could be looking through anyone's eyes and could intervene through any of them, was the same as dooming my scheme. I had another way, of course, though it wasn't impossible he'd prepared for that.

Couldn't call on the Sisters for it, though, since the more I asked them to intervene the higher the chances Neshamah would get his hands on slivers of Sve Noc with all the disastrous consequences that entailed. Sloppy and imprecise it was then.

"Kind of you, my Lord Tyrant," I said, and stepped off the ledge.

The Mantle of Woe and my unbound hair both flapped as I fell, but my attention was on the Night coursing through my veins. *Like threading a needle*, I thought. The cloth was thinner than I was used to and the window to get it right would be slight, but I still had faint memories of what it felt like to have that inborn knack Winter had leant me. Darkness spread out like an inky pool beneath me, a handful of the Tyrant's gargoyles curiously following me with eager cries and also much less endearing knives. I dropped into the dark, and for a moment it felt like plunging into cool, deep water. From the moment I touched the edge of the gate, I had less than a heartbeat to align it properly with the gate out. It was hard to describe, the act of putting it together. Like catching a faint spot of light in a dark cave that told you where the way out was, though that realization had to be paired with the instant act of will to move there lest the way out be botched. Or worst, lost. But I had it, near perfect, and-

"**Wind**," the Skein susurrated, great golden eyes like lanterns in the gloom.

I tumbled out cursing in Kharsum, well to the side of where I'd been aiming for. That godsdamned rat, if I didn't have a stripe of its fur as my cloak's collar by the end of this I'd eat my boots. It took me a heartbeat to get my bearings, which didn't improve my mood any: I'd meant to come out near Black and the Good King, but instead I was hip-deep in *akalibsa* on the east side of courtyard. Devils who had most definitely heard me swearing, for the way their houndlike faces turned to me. Armed and armoured in stone as they were I did not count them as a great threat, but given enough anything they could be trouble. Either I was going to have drawing on Night again, which was playing with fire when I had two large workings ahead of me, or-

"Ladies, gentlemen, other assorted beings," Kairos Theodosian said. "If I may have your attention?"

I suspect they might have ignored him, if the grounds beneath the Skein had not exploded in the moment that followed. I spared a glance at the mess of broken stone and dust that had appeared without warning, eyes narrowing when I glimpsed dirtied snow in there. Hells, had he just weakened the barrier between this place and Creation to the extent there'd been an impact? Had he done that precisely enough to use it as a weapon? How had he – no, no time for that right now. The *akalibsa* had turned towards the noise, and when they returned their attention to me they found

I'd disappeared. Under glamour covering sight and scent I began limping to the nest where the Skein had laired, and the two men waiting there: one a corpse, one a soul. King Edward had remained unmoving throughout the entire skirmish, eyes calmly gazing at his surroundings as he openly kept watch on both my teacher and the sack filled with crowns. Which had yet to be destroyed, interestingly enough. That implied either that Neshamah wasn't entirely opposed to my getting my hands on this realm, or that there would be something dangerous in him or one of his agents breaking them. Leaning on my staff I made my way through the rubble, avoiding paths that would have taken me through knots of devils. It made the journey longer, but the Tyrant seemed to have things well in hand.

"- worry not, my blessed brethren," the Tyrant of Helike thundered, "I will be a merciful king, should any of you survive _"

Another chunk of the courtyard went up in noise and smoke. Though it didn't seem to be killing many of the devils and had only angered the Skein even further, it certainly seemed to be commanding their attention. Near everything dead or spawned of Hell was now trying to put down a cackling Kairos, who was weaving erratically in the air without having ever left his throne. Slipping across the strewn stones, I snuck up on Black and the Revenant from the side. With the horde going after the Tyrant I'd been able to put some spring to my limp, and climbing over some large block of granite I finally reached the broken stairs where they'd been waiting this whole time. The Good King twitched like he was trying to speak, but words never came out. A heartbeat later seven wooden pillars began forming around me, glamourised or not, and *shit* that was bad. I'd seen this hold the Princess of High Noon, and these days I was just a mortal with too much mouth and prayer. The moment the runes came up I'd be stuck. I managed to sneak my hand into my cloak just as four eldritch runes began to glow around me, linked by a faint circle of light. Frozen in place, I let out a sigh as my glamour shattered like glass.

"Hierophant's own magic," I said. "Ironical, I'll grant."

"The Abomination was awaiting one of you making for the crowns," King Edward Fairfax calmly told me. "And hindered my own attempt to warn you, Queen Catherine. Still, I give you greeting. It has been some time since we last spoke, yet I see you have not been idle."

My teacher was watching us, missing nothing, and if he was surprised by what had just been said his face showed no sign of it.

"Same to you, Your Majesty," I said. "Didn't think he'd let you of Keter, to be honest."

"It was something of a surprise to me as well," the Revenant said, "though I do not pretend to grasp the thoughts of that monstrous creature."

He might not, I thought, but through him I might be able to grasp a thing or two. Through what Neshamah did and did not prevent him from doing, watching as he no doubt was through the dead Fairfax. Best to flush out all I could before striking.

"- kneel in abject submission, and you will be granted the mercy for which I am well-known-"

Another deafening burst, though sooner or later that trick would run out.

"I don't suppose you know what he actually wants from this place, do you?" I asked. "It can't be the original notion of crashing it into Iserre, that'd be pitting him against a band of five. He might win that, of course, but there's no real *winning* that if you understand what I mean."

And, more than anyone else on Calernia, the King of Death had to be wary of trading early victories for later disasters. There was no one else with as expansive a meaning for later, after all. And, as the way the knowledge of the Bard had become widespread in our age proved, it'd become a lot harder to bury knowledge after it'd been spread nowadays.

"If I could aid you I would," the Revenant said, tone regretful.

The gold of his eyes had not deepened, but then I was hardly a novice at the sleight of hand. He was in there, and it might just have been him speaking the right words to suggest I shouldn't pursue this line of conversation, that there was nothing to gain from it. Too neatly done. Which meant I had my opening, and even digging for more wasn't worth letting the opportunity slip. My fingers couldn't move, frozen as they were by the binding, and my power was bound as well. But the small carved wishbone was held in my hands and that was enough. Its power, after all, was not mine. Not bound.

"Abscond," I said, my voice lacking power.

But the wishbone broke, and it was enough: a trail of stars guiding me, I slid out of the binding and my steps took me right behind the Good King. I laid a hand on him and grinned, all teeth and malice.

"O Sve Noc," I said. "Judge me worthy on this night, that I may take the dead from death."

Night poured into the man who had once been King Edward Fairfax, and with wicked laughter Sve Noc began to wrestle away rule over the Revenant.

Caerulea

Vote! (for A Practical Guide to Evil)

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

Also apparently there is a Discord? Not sure what goes on there, but if you want to find out, go here:

<https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>

Liliet

I love how many people now do this in Droughtbringer's absence
♥

Caerulea

I figured I would put it first, but since there are so many others I probably don't need to. Not sure if I will continue.

happyhavak

High Priestess Cat is so far my favorite Cat. Snarking gods just has no equal.

Epok

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>
also come check the discord <https://discord.gg/Tmnt3H3>

Insanenoodlyguy

Interesting. A new option for final crown appears.

TeK

A wild Crown appears. Cat uses Splash.

P

Even magikarp learns tackle at level 15. Kat's been on the edge of apotheosis, I'm pretty sure she's learned more moves than splash and struggle at this point 😊

crysjal

Like Surf. After all a proponent of lakeomancy should know how to ride on water.

Tek

Cat is a Magikarp is more apt analpgy than I thought. First two books she basically can't do anything except ****Struggle****. Then she learns Ta(c)k(l)e, and spontaneously evolves into violent Gyarados, or even Mega Gyarados, but has no trainer at that point, because the only one she had betrays her. So she makes her own kingdom, and rules it, dropping lakes on other trainers trying to tame her, until she feeds herself to what I can only assume is Murkrow, making it evolve into two Honchkrows, and by then the analogy falls apart wildly trashing and spilling it co tents everywhere.

New theory, PGtE is an allegoric tale about leveling your Magikarp that got wildly off track.

NerfContessa

Your insane theorem has my approval.

And wow, cat. Trying to. Steal a. Fairfax,. That's....
Unexpected in the way, if not the deed.

Mental Mouse

Eh? Edward's been on the table for a while now, as one of DK's lures.

Pulling him away from DK first, makes the idea less obviously idiotic. 😊

danh3107

I love how cat can just make stuff from heroes, that's just amazing. Also deities fighting deities should be interesting.

Great chapter all around

erebus42

It is a potentially versatile ability that she could get some good mileage out of. It should also help offset her lack of aspects and give her some good unpredictability and potential aces in the hole.

Novice

Yep, Cat said it herself: "That's the trick: always one more."

Mental Mouse

It's also a *vicious* ability, given it seems to actually damage a victim's Aspects! Ironical, given her own history with a damaged Name...

Dakem

Haha no wonder the Dead King is respectful, with Sve Noc's all about stealing power from dead things.

Javvies

Oh.

Oh snap.

Is Cat resurrecting Edward? Or just kicking the Dead King out? Please let it be resurrection, that would be awesome.

Also, Cat, really? Asking if Kairos has a monologue in him? Was that actually a misstatement or were you trying to insult him on purpose for some reason?

Two __

It isn't resurrection, that is the province of Good and only Good, and while Evil can mirror it, they can't copy it.

Novice

It's possible that it's resurrection, Cat got one from Sve Noc after all. There's also the line: "...that I may take the dead from death." supporting this. I'm not saying this is most definitively resurrection, just that it's a possibility one cannot discount.

Oshi

It is most certainly possible. However in this case I don't think that is her intention. She will steal his Revenant and have the good Pilgrim resurrect :p

Novice

Ooh, now that's a better idea than a straight-up resu. Good catch.

Javvies

I'm pretty sure that there are limits on Pilgrim's ability to resurrect people.

There'd have to be.

There's probably a time limit on how long somebody can be dead for it to still work, or something.

Plus ... Tariq isn't here, and likely won't be encountered again until Cat finds Masego.

On the other hand ... Sve Noc and Night are not Below, and so aren't automatically lacking in the ability to actually resurrect people the way Below is.

Tek

Can Tariq resurrect Black though?

Javvies

Depends on if Tariq's ability to resurrect people requires a body*.

Because remember, we've only known Tariq to resurrect Heroes who died within the last day or so when he has their body.

*Cat may or may not be carrying Amadeus's body with her.

Also, Amadeus isn't actually/technically dead.

Nash Equilibrium

Black is still alive, so not at the moment!

Regarding limitations on the Grey Pilgrim's Forgiveness aspect, he can't use it if the person has been dead more than a day, it was mentioned in the Battle of the Camps (specifically, a use of miracles by other clergy to keep the corpses "fresh" so that the aspect could be used to raise them all over a few days).

Liliet

Sve Noc and Night come from Below and Winter, and given neither has a resurrection ability, I doubt they spontaneously generated it. They did say Catherine was dying but not yet dead when they claimed her.

And while there are definitely limits on resurrection ability, I suspect the Revenant kind of necromancy might extend the timespan :3

Cat definitely loses nothing from asking Tariq later, anyway ♥ ♥ ♥

shveiran

We know Below's Bestowed cannot resurrect but only have means to avoid death.

However... are we positive this means Evil deities cannot do that?

Ganer7956

How sure are we they are not merely usurping control of the revenant? Take the dead [our revenant friend] from death [the dead king]? Wouldn't that work?

[Liliet](#)

That's the sensible default assumption, yes.

The speculation on how it MIGHT be more is fun though

Rook

Isn't death one of the dead king's nicknames? V5 c38, the pilgrim refers to him that way.

"There is an old story," the hero said, "about Death taking the Forever King's only son."

DramatisPersona

Presumably Evil's allowed the fucked up "please kill me, this is a nightmarish parody of living and every day is a fresh horror" sort of resurrection. Or would that classify under mirroring it?

[Mental Mouse](#)

That would be the undead thing. Cat's been there herself...

shveiran

Which is within the "avoyding death" trope, admittedly. It is either a contingency/refusal to your demise or something an Evil mage does to you because they refuse to deal with your passing away.

Or mindless monstrosities, but I assumed we were including only undeads with awareness.

But yes, I argue that is not quite resurrection. It's becoming something else to avoyd death, not coming back to what you were before dying.

caoimhinh

It's absolutely not resurrection, it's gaining dominion over the Revenant.

1) Cat wasn't resurrected by Sve Noc, she was freed from Winter so that 'killed Winter Cat and brought back mortal Cat', same as the Cat becoming Sovereign of Moonless Nights didn't mean

she was dead, it transformed her 'killing the mortal and raising an immortal' but in those two cases her 'deaths' were metaphorical (though that still has a weight on Creation).

2) Resurrection can only be done by Good, Sve Noc is from Below. Though it can be imitated, like the Secret of Many Lives that lets you avoid real death by shedding yourself and letting a part die, or passing the soul from one body to another.

3) Good King Edward has been dead for centuries as a Revenant under the control of the Dead King, there's no way for him to resurrect.

4) It was explicitly stated that what Cat and Sve Noc are doing is struggling for control: 'to wrestle away rule over the Revenant'

So no, there's no resurrection involved there.

[TeK](#)

Cat was resurrected. She stopped being Winter Cat and became mortal after Sve Noc kinda shanked her soul and let it's innards spill across Strycht. Then she gave up her claim on Winter, and then she died.

Also "killing mortal and raising an immortal replica of mortal's last image" is functionally death in every way it matters, Warlock agrees, Masego disagrees.

And hey, we still got Pilly with an aspect of ressurection. I mean, plausible? I bet it's used either on Eddy or even more weirdly, on Black.

werafdsaew

"Am I dead?" I softly asked.

Cat was almost dead, but not quite. So it's cheating death; not true resurrection. Besides the body has to be fresh for Pilgrim to use Forgive, and the body of a revenant definitely is not.

Andrew Mitchell

Thank you.

[TeK](#)

Oh. Okay, my bad.

Mengha

One thought though, it's possible that the body may still be considered fresh, since DK definitely has some preservation magic flowing through his revenants. They're all fleshy even after a few centuries. (I don't think this is super likely but still)

Also I feel while Fairfax being resurrected is unlikely, he has some story weight behind him as one of the guys with the most claim to nemesis status. (I don't think he is DKs actual nemesis but this is kinda an evil clone / brainwashing story, those never end well for the villain)

Fayhem

> One thought though, it's possible that the body may still be considered fresh, since DK definitely has some preservation magic flowing through his revenants. They're all fleshy even after a few centuries. (I don't think this is super likely but still)

That's an interesting thought, but I'm very skeptical. The Pilgrim has a time limit on how fresh a body has to be and it's pretty short; somebody already referred to him needing priests to preserve the bodies when there were multiple dead heroes at once during the Battle of the Camps, which means he's got maybe a day or two tops before unchecked decay will put a hero past his reach. DK would definitely have made it his business to know that, and moreover will definitely have dealt with heroes who have resurrection powers before. Letting his Revenants decay juuuust enough to be difficult/impossible to rez for most heroes who even have the ability, without *quite* being enough to impair their effectiveness, is way too easy a vulnerability to close for DK not to have already thought to do that probably centuries or millennia ago.

Rook

I'd say it's almost certainly an impossibility, because the Pilgrim's resurrection is a narrative based miracle rather than a Sorcery based on technical circumstance. It's more about whether that person is considered just-dead rather than the physical state of their body, otherwise it would make little sense for him to have resurrected a Hero that had gotten a knife through the *brain* at the battle of camps.

His Role is a helping hand, not a healer. The fact that he's such a powerhouse in that Role may mean that he can extend that last minute intervention one foot past the doorway, but it's not as if he can reach hundreds of miles past. It would take an exceptional

circumstance even for a Heroic story – one with the kind of weight that most heroes never see in their entire life – to make resurrecting a long-dead person possible, however well-preserved.

Sve Noc and Neshamah fighting over a revenant makes sense narratively, since that theme overlaps. Night ate Winter, and Winter undead of notable corpses were known to be similar, something mirroring the living version (I.E some of Akua's mages that Catherine reanimated during second llesse).

[Liliet](#)

I would say that your point about story-based miracle is exactly WHY I think it's possible.

There needs to be a reason WHY Pilgrim can resurrect someone. The Aspect is called "Forgive". To me it implies that the death needs to be something incomplete, not entirely settled, something that can be glossed over.

King Edward was kept more free-willed than other Revenants as Neshamah's private joke, and there's a big fat story opening in the form of his connection to Catherine. If she wrestled him out of the Dead King's control and then gave over to Light, the story would be... elegant. Think of how this would look in a simpler setting: a priestess of death from an underground realm helping the heroes get one of their own back.

The shape is there. Not so much I'd put it above fifty/fifty, but it's... plausible.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine was absolutely dying after losing Winter, remember the whole 'tore her heart out' dealie with Akua? She wasn't dead though, so it wasn't a resurrection, I agree Sve Noc can't do that.

I still think Cat's probably going to at least ask Tariq if it's possible, but yeah, the immediate intent is just to usurp control :3

[Mental Mouse](#)

> "Ladies, gentlemen, other assorted beings," Kairos Theodosian said. "If I may have your attention?"

Just lovin' that! Especially followed with "BOOM!" to make *sure* they're paying attention!

[Liliet](#)

Kairos is such a great partner for Catherine ♥ ♥ ♥

shveiran

Come now, he is fun to watch, but he is not REALLY a good partner for her. In whatever meaning of the word. They really, really want opposed things. There is no way they can work together long term.

[Liliet](#)

You're not wrong.

I savor it while I have it)=

[Mental Mouse](#)

> were you trying to insult him on purpose for some reason?

Of course she was, that's how she motivates him!

Novice

If Cat is trying for a resurrection instead of just stealing an undead from the Dead King, how fucked is Calernia going to be now that there'll be two monarchs bearing the mantle of Callowan spite? How long will the prices get, so to speak?

Oshi

OMG SHE IS A FUCKING GENIUS! She found her crown mother fucker!

Oshi

Ok I calmed down. This is exactly what she wanted. She put not just anyone but a friggin Callowan in charge of this realm. Long Price indeed.

Oshi

Alright I'm calmed down. A Callowan King brought to rule. How friggin amazing! Long Price indeed. So many people get a little come uppance!

ninegardens

But no.

She would have to be very very silly to use that crown that THE DEAD KING just HAPPENED to roll her way. This isn't

genius on her part, this is the dead king passing her a tool to use.

The dead king who totally has his hooks in this particular crown. If its used then the dead king will have hooks in the entire realm, FOREVER.

Its a tempting off. A chance to keep her own crown. That doesn't mean its a GOOD thing.

helpmeimscared

Hi!

VOTE OR YOU WILL BE FED TO THE EVIL ZOMBIE RAT HULK LACHESIS.

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

[Liliet](#)

<https://discord.gg/GkbJ7N8>

And come discord with us!

erebus42

Ooo, taking one of the Dead King's toys? A bold move and hopefully one that pisses him off. Though, Neshamah may actually be giving him to her with something nefarious in mind.

I do love Catherine and Kairos working together. I'm sure their partnership will be rich and enduring!

I cant' wait for Cat and Black's touching father-daughter reunion. Though I am a little concerned, since many of those stories end up in tragedy.

Allafterme

Well, Black just watch her roll in with a band of five, as a member no less, turn Tyrant by lying her *ss off & performed an Evil miracle to save a former Good King of Callow from DK. I'd give anything that convo in, like, right now...

[Euodiachloris](#)

So very not proud. At all. Nuh-uh.

helpmeimscared

Hi!

VOTE NOW OR BE EATEN BY THE EVIL ZOMBIE RAT HULK LACHESIS

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

Soma

Hmmm. I'm a little confused as to how stealing a dead king from the Dead King is going to avoid the sisters coming in contact with Neshamah, but hey, I'll roll with it. 'Take the dead from death,' is a nicely legendary feat that's going to go in the holy book.

IDKWhoitis

Cat wants to avoid UNnecessary contact, and if the Dead King focuses on trying to grab SveNoc rather than the king, then Cat is assured at least the small victory here, which Cat is focusing heavily on. Sve can take care of themselves, but best not have them tied up before the plot begins.

shveiran

This.

She even mentions as she moves toward the King that she has "two big workings ahead", so I'm pretty sure this was her plan at the start of the chapter, not a contingency she fall back to when she was caught.

IDKWhoitis

Either my memory is failing me, or did Grey just disappear? Like I know he has a lack for appearing at just the right moment, but I fear him making a play for Masego...

Novice

He was with their dagger, Indrani, going for the backdoor.

[TeK](#)

Oh my god, Indrani is a "dagger" that is going to "stab" Dead King in his "backdoor".

[Fayhem](#)

I am so disappointed/proud right now. Well done/shame on you. 😊

agumentic

Your memory is failing you. He's with the Archer in a dagger group that's supposed to make a play for Masego.

kotekj

Grey is with Archer, the hidden dagger racing to break DKs hold while our merry band of...3.5(?)... faces off against skein.

[TeK](#)

One soul and one dead body kinda equals into a full fledged human

[Liliet](#)

4.5 then :3

Naeddyr

Tyrant! I never doubted you for a second!

magesbe

Can I say for a second how much I have grown (I didn't originally) appreciate just how much more careful Cat has to be in these fights, how much more she has to think? In the Everdark; heck, even against the heroes; I was looking at her basically regenerate through her fights. Now she can't do that, so she makes up for it by doubling down on what made her dangerous in the first three books: her mind.

[TeK](#)

You mean her visionary wisdom?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yes, that's what she gained in her new mortal life. She tried out the regentank power-brawler thing for a while, and it just wasn't working for her. So she went for an even more protean magic base, but swore off the brawling part.

[Liliet](#)

I love your wording ♥

Andrew Mitchell

Wow, what an ending. Lovely little one-time trick to get out of that binding. And was it actually Masego that wove that spell? And, if so, is he close? If so I expect Indrani to get here soon as well.

I didn't pick that she was going to go for a resurrection of King Edward but I ♥ ♥ ♥ it!

And it's so, so good for Tyrant to be helpful for once yet Cat's right that it won't last.

Novice

That binding is probably just a proximity landmine/trap woven against anyone who goes near the crowns.

Andrew Mitchell

That sounds plausible. 😊

caoimhinh

Not resurrection, gaining control from the Revenant.

Andrew Mitchell

Yeah, there's a good chance you're right. I think the wording "that I may take the dead from death." can be read either way (stealing control or resurrection). But given that it's only Above that can grant true resurrection I think your interpretation may be right.

[TeK](#)

While only above can grant true resurrection, Sisters did resurrect Cat already, did they not? I suspect that they can give sorta pseudorrresurrection if in as long as you partake in their domain. And I so want Edward to see the Callow today, I hope he'll truly make it.

Andrew Mitchell

I don't think the sisters needed to resurrect Cat. IIRC (and I could well be wrong here) Cat almost, but not quite, died before the sisters saved her.

[TeK](#)

Bard said she died, as did Cat, but hey, one is lying the other is ignorant.

[Fayhem](#)

I think it's worth noting that even when Bard is telling the truth it doesn't mean she isn't being deceptive (if anything, that seems like it's probably something like her specialty). If there's one thing that the Guide has demonstrated it's that "death" can cover a variety of meanings. My read on that was always that it was Winter!Cat "dying" to reclaim her mortality and become FUN!Cat much like Squire!Cat "died" to become Winter!Cat in the first place. Basically the idea is the transition between a mortal form and a Winter mantle imprint of that person counting as dying in both directions of the transition (mortal -> Winter, and Winter -> mortal).

Some other people have already quoted relevant passages about how in literal terms Cat was just almost dead too, going to be leaving the house soon so not willing

to spend the time hunting and copy/pasting rather than finishing reading comments.

[Liliet](#)

I think it depends on how hard you squint on technical definition of 'death'. Clinical death is an existing classification IRL: we can't resurrect the dead, but we *can* bring people back from a state we classify as death. Cat was at death's door, standing on the treshhold, just not quite all the way through.

shveiran

That's all true, but let's not forget she was at the Threshold according to deific beings. I'm just saying, what they consider "not quite dead yet" is "not quite at a point where we can't bring you back", so that may be a very different definition than one a mortal would use.

[Liliet](#)

My point was just that there IS a point past which Sve Noc can't bring her back, and the point is rather closer than the angelic 'been running around as undead after getting her head cut off for half a day' shit

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, her former human body was lost, replaced by the "eldritch abomination" Winter body, which in turn was absorbed by Night. The sisters needed to create a new (mortal) body for her and install her spirit into it. I'd call that resurrection fair and square.

Andrew Mitchell

I can certainly see where you're coming from. The ambiguity of the text gives us lots to argue about there. 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

The big difference between what Sve Noc did, versus what Pilgrim does, was that in the former case the spirit was still present, whereas Pilgrim is supposedly pulling people straight outta Heaven.

someguy

Why didn't they fix her limp then ?

Andrew Mitchell

If I recall correctly, the limp was discussed early in this book. I think it relates to two things:

- Cat’s residual self image; her mortal self had a limp, and
- It’s a **really** useful reminder for Cat that she has mortal limitations.

Mental Mouse

IIRC, because she told them not to. Part of her ditching the power-brawling. Likewise her scar from the Lone Swordsman.

Liliet

Catherine: “Well you see I fucked up so badly that one time with the demon they actually couldn’t!”

Sve Noc, from the background: “Actually we could but-”

Catherine, discreetly kicking at Sve Noc: “I FUCKED UP SO BADLY THAT THEY COULDN’T”

caoimhinh

Yeah, notice that the very last sentence of the chapter states what is happening and what their intention is: “with wicked laughter Sve Noc began to wrestle away rule over the Revenant”

Cat is likely going to use this as a distraction, pinning Neshamah against the Sisters in order to drive his thoughts away from Masego and ‘the knife’. That will also give her a chance to free Amadeus and get the crowns during the mess that’s inevitably coming.

Liliet

We’re back to the ‘make as much chaos as you can and count on being best able to handle it’ planning shape ♥ ♥ ♥

Mental Mouse

It’s worth noting that “only Above gives resurrection” is AFAICT not an “official rule”, but a rule of thumb from Black’s prior experience with human Named.

Sve Noc and Cat may well be *changing those rules*.

Andrew Mitchell

Oh, thanks for that... I can't wait to see what happens with this.

Mental Mouse

> And was it actually Masego that wove that spell?

Well, it's a spell he came up with himself, distinctive enough to be characteristic of him. It might not have been cast in present tense, but as a trapspell.

Mental Mouse

The thing about Tyrant is, Cat *knows how to handle him!* Even back in Keter, she was thinking:

>The Tyrant of Helike was mad, this was well-known. I was starting to wonder if it was perhaps too well-known. Behaviour could seem erratic without actually being so, when you failed to grasp what someone was truly after.

Liliet

Catherine *gets* him.

Honestly, *getting* people is her speciality. Since Book fucking One, she's been doing the thing where her first approach to the person is to figure out their decision making algorithym, then act based on that. She's even doing it to Neshamah now ;u;

Andrew Mitchell

One more thought... the title chapter is "Small Sights" which is obviously about the Callowan saying "Small slight, long price." I've got two thoughts about what that might mean:

1. There will be a price to pay down the track for Cat's small slight against the Tyrant (asking if he had a monologue in him).
2. Once he's resurrected, King Edward will have the opportunity to extract a long price from the Dead King.

Are there other possible meanings?

TeK

Not really. It is a deeply Callowan saying, bascally the motto of the whole kingdom, and there arre two Callowans currently on the scene, Cat and Edward (I mean, maybe Roland, but come on, it's way unlikely), so the story is tied, indeed, to either Cat or Edward extracting their respective long prices, and my guess it would be Eddy, for his price is really long in making. After all, he did say thatin the face of eternity will spit on DK and

all his works, time for Neshamah learn the true meaning of what Callowan spite really looks like. Would be interesting to see it. Also I suspect we will have a short conversation with Neshamah right about now, after Cat had more than proven to be a passing nuisance.

Liliet

It's almost definitely 2, given the weight of the saying and the Callowan king in the same context.

Though, it might be both =x

Oshi

The thing that worries me though is that the DK has likely done all this to setup Edward as his chosen token for the new realm. If he's smart enough to predict Cat's play he might be using this whole thing as a way to setup his own pattern of loss and wins in order to ensure he is the one who picks the victor by choosing who he loses to. I wouldn't count my chickens until after we understand what this play means in the next chapter.

Liliet

Agreed.

shveiran

It is possible, but the DK's is not infallible. Cat has not showed he can craft aspect item out of defeated enemies, and that power is an interaction between a very peculiar individual and a recently ascended twin goddess. Just as he made a mistake in handling the Tyrant, he is on the backfoot here. He might have been not been able to predict King Edward could be stolen from him, not just slain.

It isn't really that strange a mistake, with so little information on a new player, and that might be the point: a prolonged confrontation with a new enemy, betting only known and ultimately unimportant pieces, to gather as many data as possible for future reference.

I think the Hidden Horror may have planned all to ensure that even a tactical defeat, caused by being blindsided with a new narrative, would only better position him for a strategic victory.

Euodiachloris

What Cat is doing may seem cruel to outsiders, since this can only be a one way trip for Good King Edward.

However, getting a chance to go out as yourself, extracting as much interest as possible from the bastard who turned you into a puppet? A few centuries of missed birthday prezzies have just landed at Edward's feet, and like every good little Callowan boy... he's going to go all out to make karma work its socks off. 😊

Andrew Mitchell

True. And I think it's pretty clear from Cat's original discussion with King Edward that he wasn't happy and that he wanted the chance for revenge before he dies for good.

caoimhinh

This chapter had an interesting insight into Aspects, too bad we didn't get to know more about Wish.

Catherine is getting a Revenant of her own now?
Cool.

Typos found:

The truth if it / The truth of it
the essence if it / the essence of it
My I assume / May I assume
going to be betray me / going to betray me
I still had faint of memories / I still had faint memories
let you of Keter / let you out of Keter
a grinned / and grinned

[TeK](#)

"He was in there, and it might just have been him speaking the right words to suggest I shouldn't pursue this line of conversation, that there was nothing to gain from it."

Wait, does that mean that there was actually DK inside Eddy? So she wanted him to make an appearance, to make him vulnerable, so that Sve Nok had someone to wrestle away Edward, otherwise he would be able to take him back any moment. Isn't she afraid he would take slivers of Sve now?

Awesome chapter, as always, noticably less typos. I am waiting on the edge of my sit for more Black, at this point, everything else being just a prelude to it. I mean, daughter freeing her father's soul from clutches of dastardly Evil, who had also brainwashed her friend, well, it's just so many heroic tropes at once.

On a little side note, I've been thinking, and doesn't WB been a real Creational analogy of King of Winter? I half remember, though it may be just a Mandella effect, her saying "I always loved a good story.", so it would make sense if she wanted to make the world more interesting to make new and interesting

narratives. Maybe it's even her vice, or flaw, that she can't help but make new ones, case and point, Hierarch, which she made and then abandoned which might mean that she didn't really need it, and made her more as an indulgence on her part.

Briskly

I think last chapter with the Dead King speaking through the Skein, basically confirmed the dead king is always watching through his revenants.

antoninjohn

I wonder if Cat will marry the Good King, it would give her more leniency that even Procer could not deny.

[Liliet](#)

- 1) she does not intend or want to rule for long
- 2) it's very doubtful he can be resurrected, 'wrested away from death' just means 'from dead king' here
- 3) -Catherine's voice from a distance- LMAO NO

[Mental Mouse](#)

> 3) -Catherine's voice from a distance- LMAO NO

EE: Bwah hah hah! 😊 Seriously, if he comes out of this alive he seems to be a decent chap. But that whole "former crusader x Priestess of Night" thing might get in the way.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, odds are good that one or the other may be banned from a crown. If he does come out both alive and crowned, he might be a backup king for Cat! Or at least, he could re-introduce himself and hang out long enough to formally adopt Cat and Viv into the royal family, with maybe a few others for good measure.

[TeK](#)

That is pretty up there with theories about Cat marrying Dead King.

[Liliet](#)

I haven't seen a single one like that. Do you mean the theories about Cat marrying Kairos? 😊

[TeK](#)

Nah. NACK when Keter ark was ongoing, some people theorised that Dead King will marry Winter Queen sorta like Arcadian Court in the unholy alliance. And that was a reason for an invitation. It made more sense back in the day.

[Liliet](#)

AH I SEE

werafdsaew

Why the Dead King "there" means that Cat has her opening?

[Liliet](#)

My guess is, with him absent, she could have easily snatched control of the revenant, but he could have just as easily snatched it back later at any point he chose. This way, with his hooks in Edward... actualized? instantiated? she can actually root them out.

Oshi

It's more than that. I think this is the moment that Sve Noc reveals herself in opposition to Neshamah. Cat wanted it setup so the story favored them and for that she needed not just a fight but a fight over a carrion corpse. Literally what the Tenants of Night demand is that only the strong rise and gain. Cat has set things up so they have every chance not just to win but to win in a way that leaves no openings for the DK.

[Liliet](#)

Oh that is a great point ♥

[Euodiachloris](#)

With Edward on board and helping out in any way he can to kick the Dead King to the curb.

It's taken centuries, but the cavalry has finally come charging down the mountain to him. I doubt he's going to care too much to ask questions about the Night. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Yeah ♥

Kissaten

"Sorry, can't help you"

Breaks wishbone "How about now?"

Sounds to me like a trap, to be honest. Like, "I DARE you to try and take Good King from me". Creation is ironic like that, letting words bite back the one who said them. Was it Dead King speaking or Good King trying to weasel out of his bindings?

Dead King wants coalition falling apart, make the living fight each other, and Good King is the last un-living Fairfax – so there's a possibility to push a hero like that to reclaim his throne, even if he is a slave/servant/lieutenant to current Queen.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah this is most definitely a setup.

The question is, is it a functional trap, or is it just Dead King cutting his losses and trying to get away while losing a minimum of skin / disposing of liabilities?

Someguy

I thought it was mentioned that the by King Edward himself that Fairfaxes born after the time of Yolanda the Wicked do not actually have Fairfax or Alban Blood?

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/07/30/chapter-37-offing/>

Granted, I'm not sure if it's actually Edward or the Dead King talking here.

[Liliet](#)

Doesn't really matter. Story doesn't track a genetic marker, it tracks a cultural thread, and culturally speaking, his last name is Fairfax.

Kel the Seer

I wonder whether a Good King, once successfully wrested from DK is planned to be used as the new keeper of this crossroads, an information source on the DK and how he plans, or an advisor for her named Heir of Callow when Cat inevitably abdicates?

Cat's naming of Vivienne as successor looked to be part of her long term plan for the Accords (no Named rulers) as well as to throw the heroes off balance. Then I realized that it gave her a fallback plan if she gave up her crown since a ruler who does so as part of this but continues to rule would bring ruin upon their lands.

Stealing Edward is a good way to get a long price out of the DK, but I wonder if it was one of her opportunity plans once

she saw the pattern of revenants, or if she had planned something like this all along.

BatlleG

So, why Neshamah want Cat to get Edward ? Cmon, it's Dead King, this Revenant wouldn't be here if there were no purpose to it. It is a crown that belongs to Calernia, it seems matching with Cats wishes, its Good, seems perfect for Cats to use it. Dead King should see it. So why is it here ? Because there is some plan.

Most obvious would be that even if can 'steal' Edward, Dead King can still take control after. So he lets band of 5 win, establish kingdom they want and then just take it, as im sure 'you cannot steal from death it due' should be story that works in any word.

I'm sure there are more clever reasons that I couldn't think about atm.

[Liliet](#)

I think that's why Cat took the opening while he was there: if she'd taken control while he wasn't, DK would do just that.

shveiran

I agree it is a given King Edward is here because Neshamah had a plan.

It is not a given, however, that the plan is working. Cat may have pulled one over him as a result of disparity of information.

edrey

we cant forget about the pivot, so DK must really has a plan, the monsters are the revenants, the trial is kairos traition, and the pivot should the DK's plan, after all opposing the band of five is loosing really bad so he would wait after the realm is secured then strike, how? no idea, but with so much talk about saint death, the price of the pivot is obvious

[Liliet](#)

Yep. Cat has already just shown herself capable of outwitting Neshamah on her own prepared turf, and it looks like she was very much planning the 'and steal the Revenant if he's there' thing.

Morgenstern

... or he actually wants Cat to succeed, because his ultimate play is not being the Eternal Evil being let out of the bag occasionally, or even taking over... but finally winning against the Bard and the Gods, having grown tired of his shitty half-life existence, just like the Winter King did. I mean, the fae realm was supposed to kind of foreshadow happenings in Creation, at least possibly, right? 😊

The DK has been actually *helping* Cat so much, it's almost ridiculous for that to be him falling into story traps, what with all his supposed millenia-schooled intellect and story knowledge.

Morgenstern

AKA "let her succeed where my attempt failed".

Morgenstern

... and the WB and the DK might actually secretly be working together on this. I mean, we DO also have the theory that SHE is (also?) tired of her shitty half-life existence. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Arcadia is the one that mirrors Creation, not the other way around. Winter King wanting out = Praes as a nation growing tired of its own bullshit and attempting to change; Winter/Summer marriage = Praes/Callow dubious union, sharing an army and everything.

And I strongly doubt DK is "tired of his existence". It's likely he's giving Cat openings on purpose here, but that's because he loses nothing substantial of his own by doing so. Undead are ultimately replaceable; he's not undermining his own power base by giving Cat hard-earned victories here. It just plays into his own long-term narrative as someone impossible to vanquish for good but entirely possible to beat back and thus score a win. Not unbeatable, but a fixture.

Also, he thinks Cat is fun and is looking to *enhance* his existence by gaining a potential long term peer. Or even short term, but a diversion!

Kissaten

Whose aspect is Wind? Neshamah or Skein?

Andrew Mitchell

I think Skein. **Wind** as in winding a thread around a spool. TBH at first I thought it was Wind blowing her off course.

Now I think about it further, maybe it could go either way. Do you recall what aspects Skein showed at their first encounter?

[Tek](#)

He had his Spool, the one that was that maze-domain thingy. And I'm pretty sure Wind made her gates lead right where she entered them.

[Liliet](#)

Hmm.

>I tumbled out cursing in Kharsum, well to the side of where I'd been aiming for.

Looks like "gust of wind" to me, not like "maneuver was cancelled". She'd probably break bones if she tumbled out at the height she was when she entered, at that.

ninegardens

So wait... didn't she just say that using Sve Noc here was unsafe?

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, she did. So the fact that she called on her here needs some further explanation, I think.

Clint

She said she didn't want to use Sve Noc too often, because she had two big things to use them for and the more often she used them the more DK might learn to counter them.

This is probably one of the big things she was saving them for.

Andrew Mitchell

That makes sense. Thanks.

[crysjal](#)

Calling it now, Black is going in the Revenant.

Andrew Mitchell

King Edward's soul is still in there. Can there be two souls in one revenant body?

[crysjal](#)

A dead hero who has held a grudge for millennia and a bitter villain striking out at the world. They are probably very similar people. Then working in concert would be epic and

exactly the sort of thing both characters would be willing to accept to act on their personal grudges.

Aotrs Commander

Once again, Cat's and Kairos' interactions are utterly charming.

(It's a practically a sit-com in the making...)

[Liliet](#)

Buddy cop movie!

[TeK](#)

So, speaking of crowns. Edward is kinda an obvious ploy from Dead King, Cat had secured Tariq's crown, which may or may be not obvious plot from Above, she has her own and kinda predisposed to abdication so that is kinda obvious too, narratively speaking (and also is so net for her in satisfying many of her desires in low to no cost, I bet everyone kinda expect it), then there is Black and his kingness, and Tyrant, though I would not bet on that. I am more and more convinced that the crown will come from outside the story. Cat repeatedly shown that you can ape the narrative without trully committing to it, so she may just conjure a crown out of a thin air, the one noone see doming (and so noone, not Tyrant, not Pilgrim, not DK can plan for, I mean I'm pretty sure that Neshamh has a variety of plans depending on who's gonna win, and how they are gonna win, and whose crown will be used). I think the mystery of final crown, outside of metametanarrative way of keeping readers on ends of their seats, has also a metanarrative strength that let's her be carried by the story. She got her own crown, has all those Revenant crowns, Tariq gave her his crown, she can stab Tyrant and use his crown, there is Black's crown, the question of "whether or not Cat will reach the point of choosing the crown" is kinda self-evident now, the real question, storywise is "what crown will Cat choose". It's the story, that, I suspect, Neshie had fed till it got really full, kinda making her victory mandatory. Maybe that is his angle, with Edward, and all. Not Cat's using his crown, but just Cat using a crown. And he can position himself to strike after that. And there are two questions then. How can DK use Cat's plan, and what do we got on crowns outside the story?

So I have a theory. DK had aknowledged Cat as a peer. Cat is arguably the leader in the band of two most famous heroes in Calernia and most famous Villain of her age (or as some might argue [i]other[/i] most famous Villainof her age). That and her maneuvering swiftly put her into position of a leader of anti-dead coalition. She got drow, she got callow, she got dwarves, now she probably, maybe, also got GA and League. And since WB position against Neshamah is as the one who "left the door open", Malicia is Dead King's ally, and she outwitted and suborned everyone else

of import, she is kinda a rival to Dead King. A nemesis. And we know what those guys have. A pattern of three. So maybe, Dead King is giving Cat an empty victory, after he got what he needed, much like he gave the realm to Kairos, so that he can later leverage a victory of his own – of course, nothing as drastic as killing Cat, just, ya know, devouring millions of innocents and crushing her armies, while maybe turning everyone she knew and loved against her? Mild strokes, you know. But Cat can give DK a victory here too, if she plays her cards right. For example, using one of Revenant crowns, leaving him an opening, giving her the win over Cat “because she was too arrogant and greedy to notice a trap”. Or some other way. It all really depends on what Dead King really after, because everything else, including making armies of the living butcher each other away from the front, trying to create a fresh hell of undead, stealing Cat’s precious friend and ransacking his brain for secrets, were just secondary objectives, from what I can see. So DK is positioning Cat to “win” here, while he “just” manages to complete only his primary objective. And also a mere couple of secondary ones. And isn’t she winning? Making DK blunder, again and again, losing his Revenants, and failing to turn Kairos, and now whatever she does with Edward.

About the crown, I think it would be Cordelia’s. Long shot, probably wrong, but hear me out. So we know she dredges up something in a lake nearby. Corpse that is not corpse – that is probably something angelic in nature. Through the Augur and also maybe WB she knows that forces will come to align in Iserre. Dead King, Tyrant, Black Queen. All her enemies, in the same place, vying for the control of the shard of Arcadia, trying to turn it into something, no matter who wins, eldritchly Evil. A shard containing Liesse – Malician blunder, her rival’s. And we were told that she had inherited her blunders. Maybe it is more literal? What if Cordelia tries to usurp this shard and tie it to the angelic corpse, while dealing a blow to Dead King, and hopefully outright killing two other Villains? And look, the Saint who tries to kill Procer, GP, who refused her orders, and Black, who is not a person she is fond of, all here, all, in one place. She somehow tries to make shard a domain of the Above, to tie it to the Choir and throw it to the north. Not the point. But she is counted for by Cat, and reasoned with, to make a one crown that is not Named (so it can’t be somehow fucked with by Hierophant), and make highway wholeheartedly Proceran, which, given it is in Procer, makes sense, and allows a smooth adherence. Also she sacrifices her power, backs Rosalia as new First Prince, and goes off to fight for her native Rhenia, as is her wont.

But it’s just a theory. Also, the epigraph speaks about forgiveness from the mouth of Callowan King. Maybe it’s a foreshadowing of [b]Forgiveness[/b] of a Callowan King? Eh? Eh?

Also, they are both Edwards. Also also, when meeting him first time, Cat thought:

"Would that be Edward the Fifth?" I said, desperately trying to remember which of those had gotten themselves killed while crusading.

"The Seventh," the king chided. "You will know my daughter Mary, at least. She was but three when I was claimed, she must be the longest-reigning monarch Callow has ever seen."

Kissaten

8th crown is going to be Indrani. The one Band took with them into the depths, she is an heir to Ranger and all that. It even has a dramatic weight behind it that's beyond mere True Love's Groping.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Wait what?

(1) Archer is one of many students (and a personal rescue) of Ranger, but how is she "heir"?

(2) Ranger herself almost certainly wouldn't qualify as a crown anyway. Isolated sage/teacher is a thing, but it's not a crown.

[Liliet](#)

^

shveiran

I don't buy the theory as a whole, but that's because Archer isn't an heir. Why wouldn't Ranger qualify as a Crown? She rules Refuge as a goddess, and has been doing so for decades.

Granted, it is an unconventional rule, but since when does that matter?

If Black counts as king of Callow because his authority was practically absolute over the land, why wouldn't Ranger for Refuge?

[Javvies](#)

Archer doesn't rule Refuge as a goddess. She "rules" Refuge by virtue of the fact that (a) nobody is dumb enough to stand in her way or assert their own claim of rulership over Refuge, and (b) Refuge exists because she enables it to through protection from Fae incursions in her vicinity and because she tacitly allows it to continue to exist through not killing everyone.

Also, I'm pretty sure she doesn't actually do all that much on the way of ruling the place, and doesn't care to be involved in the ruling/running of Refuge, as IIRC, when Archer first shows up to retrieve Hunter, Archer mentions something about Ranger not being happy about needing to be involved in active rulership activities.

In addition, I'm unconvinced that Refuge constitutes enough of an outpost of civilization to generate a "Right to Rule" over it. There has to be some sort of minimum threshold, after all, and my impression of Refuge is that it's fairly low in population.

shveiran

I agree with most of your points, but the point remains that they are applicable to Black too. She rules it because she is the biggest monster around, but she is still in charge.

She doesn't pass laws, but she is still the law of the land as she was.

It is possible there is a population threshold, and I agree that Refuge seems to be fairly small. But there has been no indication that such a threshold actually exists. This is fairy tale logic, so my bet is that so long as you do rule a place, it counts.

[Liliet](#)

It's less population and more cultural narrative. Refuge is not a country, it's at best a city (more like a small town), and not a city-state. It's not a polity any more than a random isolated hamlet in the woods that isn't claimed by any tax collectors is.

And I suspect Black would not have counted as a King of Callow had Cat not roped him into the 'sword in the stone' narrative somewhat retroactively. That's how what Kairos said sounded to me, and it makes sense.

shveiran

I don't disagree, but "not claimed by anyone (else) 's tax collector" is not that far from our definition of an independent state. "Superiorem non recognoscens", "a state that which doesn't acknowledge anyplace else as sovereign of itself".

Now, I am just arguing for arguing's sake here (I don't really think Refuge's crown is going to play a part here) but I really think Refuge HAS one.

As you said, it is about cultural narrative: Refuge's people see it as a sovereign place. They don't think it's possible for someone to come knocking and say "you are my subjects now". They feel they are independant and that they are from Refuge.

I'll admit it probably has less weight than an established kingdom, even one (like Callow) that has not been acknowledged as one by what passes for the international community of the Guideverse. I'm simply arguing it could pass as a Crown. It isn't as far removed from the norm as other theories that have been thrown around.

[Liliet](#)

Hm.

I can see that if I squint hard enough yeah, and guideverse narrative IS all about squinting hard enough, so yeah. You're probably right. IF Ranger were here AND for some reason were inclined to help, she probably could.

[Liliet](#)

Refuge doesn't have a *crown*, it's a fucking campground. You might as well take any sergeant and claim that they 'rule' their line therefore they have a crown.

Also, yes, Indrani isn't her heir XD

shveiran

Well, YES, but so what?

I'd expect One Eye and Istrid didn't have a palace, but despite cultural differences they still had a "right to rule" over their tribes.

The culture is key. And Refuge's is very specific. A monarch trying to rule a Principate from a tent would see his authority diminished for it, but a Chieftain or Matron doesn't need a palace to rule.

[Liliet](#)

I think Refuge doesn't HAVE enough of its own culture to count as a state.

Though, yeah, maybe it does.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Sorry, but Cordelia is pretty much crackfic, if only because she's nowhere near the scene and doesn't have any magical abilities such that she could get here.

"Obviously" Cat chooses the crown, which means it may yet be subject to enemy action – but not until after Cat summons Larat. Until then, she can just veto unwanted contenders. But this is also in context of Cat's story-fu and magical battles against the Dead King, which we will learn the results of in future installments. Not necessarily Monday, as this seems a likely place to put an Interlude for Pilgrim and Archer. Which should be worth the cliffhanger, because those two make a *really* odd couple.

[Liliet](#)

Oh my god you're so right.

ninegardens

Okay, new plan, just to screw with everyone:
Use one of the various plot relevant crowns as crown number,
and then pick one of the Procean crowns out for the PLUS ONE.

Repeating things and taking credit for the idea

If she takes away DK's power over King Edward, then his crown becomes an untainted 8th. Using that refurbished crown as the "and One" would be a clean resolution to move the larger plot along but lacks significance.

It solves the immediate narrative challenge of how to feed Larat without preventing Dread Emperor Benevolent, sacrificing Callow, getting in a blood feud with Levant, or requiring the end of Kairos (who is too adorable to waste on a minor plot point, and whose villainous monologue is winning the day).

I am unclear whether Masego needs to be the Big Bad of the Level, rather than Larat. If Archer saves Masego now through the Power of Love, then there is no reason to preserve Saint beyond this battle.

I predict that Masego will be taken out of commission for the Larat battle (unconscious and protected by Archer – maybe ported back to the Observatory?) and the Band of Five against Larat will be Cat, Kairos, Tariq, Rogue Sorcerer, and EITHER Saint or Edward.

Killing Saint here for the surprise crown would be so much more cathartic than offing her in some random duel later with SwordStaffPrayer. Using Edward feels like a Deus ex Machina to preserve a boring, stupid, distracting secondary character now buried under death flags and foreshadowing. I hope we see

surprise Saint murder instead, and Edward laid to rest in Liese-Callow with proper funeral rites after he uses an Aspect to wriggle Cat free from a personalized trap sprung by Larat. Larat HAS to have something customized for her...

Best outcome: Cat starts to grab Edward's crown, Saint thinks any use of undead is Evil and doesn't want DK or Sve Noc to shape the realm, thinks Cat's crown fits best since it is why she was in Callow was to take the crown from Evil. Cat has to defend herself against Saint and uses SwordStaffPrayer. Tariq is not there, and Tariq's offer has no value with Edward there. Saint's head rolls, Larat strolls up to her crown plus seven and, newly empowered, terminates Masego-DK's armies on a caprice. Party of Five including Edward goes to bat against Larat.

Other observations:

Kairos changing his mind constantly (Skein forecasts) and stopping short of seeking actual unequivocal victory (Rend) is the path of The First Step of the Plan Always Works. He is a brilliant villain.

[Liliet](#)

The staffswordprayer is going to be used to save Saint, not kill her, calling it now. At some point foreshadowing becomes subversion bait instead.

Also, Benevolent is a historical Dread Emperor who does not map to Black in any way because of the presence of High Lords in his epigraphs.

[thearpox23](#)

I've considered the saving the Saint theory for a while now, and the main issue here is the anti-synergy with the Pilgrim's shtick. It is not impossible, but I admit I do not see a simple non-contrived for that to happen.

[Liliet](#)

Pilgrim is currently separated from them, note.

[thearpox23](#)

Think from the end. Why would a story situation arise where something like that is needed if the Pilgrim is not there? There is more to his tales than teleportations and power-ups.

[Liliet](#)

To the contrary: that's exactly why the split. Catherine and Tariq on the same team are somewhat redundant

because their capabilities overlap. And now that he's not there is exactly when a story giving Catherine a chance to show off how she can do what would otherwise be his job would arise :3

Keep in mind, the Mentor Death trope, for example, is exactly about giving characters a chance to do something the mentor could do better.

[thearpox23](#)

Except they're still part of the same team of five (+one?) even if they're currently performing different tasks.

And it is a required trope that even when such a team separates for a while they always reconvene when important plot happens. If any of them were green then sure, they might get overwhelmed somewhere and provide an opportunity for the wise mentor to show off. But someone like Saint won't be in mortal danger until the events are ripe for them to reunite again.

Now that's not exactly cast in stone, but again, the how to deviate is where I struggle for a good solution.

[thearpox23](#)

PS: Also, the crux of my yesterday's comment was that as was established in the setting creation does not like repetition. And likewise, each of the members of the Band of Five provides their own unique role and skills to the group. Creation itself will be unwilling to provide opportunities for characters to do Pilgrim-like things for something Pilgrim has effectively copyrighted.

It'd be one thing if someone was his foil, but we know Cat isn't that.

[Liliet](#)

In my experience party split up stories are usually used specifically to highlight people's capabilities separately from each other and how well other members can cover for the absence of one.

They won't have grand new revelations without reuniting, true. But Cat has already managed to broker 3 months of truce out of Neshamah while half the party was away, and they're expected to save Masego while the rest are doing the distraction. "Being in mortal danger" is not a super big super

special event, it's standard fare for the kind of thing they're doing. Technically Saint was in mortal danger already if Catherine hadn't managed to get a ghost army to take the pressure off her.

A breaking point in the relationship of two characters is exactly the kind of thing that happens during a party split. Have you seen ATLA, and if you have, do you remember the 'life changing trips with Zuko'? Like that kind of thing is what splitting the party is FOR.

[thearpox23](#)

ATLA is the Airbender thing? Didn't find it interesting, so I didn't watch far.

Cat brokering deals with ol' Neshy was them operating on a different meta-level then everyone else. She does this routinely, but it doesn't directly tie in to the ground meta-level events.

And I would argue that the Saint was NOT in fact in mortal danger, and if you think she was you'd be bodied by someone like Black in two moves. Consider that a Chosen can hold the tide against the dead for days given a story, and you can see that Saint wouldn't get swarmed by demons. You can swarm someone like Saint with demons, then get a Villain to stab her in the back, and she'd still avenge herself and run around for two hours with a dagger in her back before deciding that a lack of blood is suboptimal.

The reason she was just holding her own, is largely because a member of her party was already doing things, and so she was content for the time being to be relegated to the background. Having that party member's plan fail? I'd say Saint would be able to turn around the whole situation by herself, just with the expected consequences of failing to prevent a catastrophe, and maybe not by fighting every single demon in her way in order.

And so yes, being in mortal danger IS in fact a special event for a party of this caliber. These are not green heroes, they are all in fact strong enough to have a chance of winning even if they were to invade and stop Masego by themselves without a party of heroes.

And while character growth is a very important aspect of splitting the party, I reiterate that not

all ways to accomplish that are created equal. Each character has their own defining traits, and one does not just steal the main shtick of another the when they are absent for five minutes. It is actually how a good author can write himself into a corner if they have a group where the characters combination of shticks serves to remove ways to show character growth, forcing the author to make do with hackery to get anywhere.

Liliet

Seriously? Protecting other people is now someone's "main shtick that should not be stolen" and not a pie everyone has got a finger in?

BTW, if Cat uses up her staff in the current confrontation with Kairos, I'm counting that for my prediction.

('Cause our definition of mortal danger clearly doesn't align, here)

Javvies

Wait.

I just realized something.

The Dead King is currently possessing Edward.

The "Right to Rule" does not have to be voluntarily given up – it can be *taken*.

Cat is *really good* at taking and repurposing stuff that was owned by her enemies.

What if Cat is trying to steal the *Dead King's Right to Rule*? And use it as the "and One"?

Sure, it'd probably have serious short term downsides ... but if the Dead King isn't allowed to be King anymore ...

Fayhem

That would be abso-fucking-lutely hilarious, but given that invalidating DK's ability to rule is practically a win button for the protagonists (might not cripple him immediately, but given that IIRC there's no method to undo that...) I don't see any way there's enough narrative weight to pull that off here before they've even gotten up north to battle DK there.

Mental Mouse

She might be able to take DK's crown hostage and exchange it for Masego. Or even do so with Edward!

shveiran

But she wouldn't. I don't buy she can take the DK's right to rule away like that, but if she could, she would have single-handedly taken away his ability to keep his low-key domain. It would cripple him utterly long-term. Anything that followed could be about the death-throes of the Big Bad, not just another skirmish.

This is "Choosing not to heal Nauk" all over again, only the greater good is a billion times bigger. It could make possible, nay, inevitable to defeat the DK at some point. Anyone who considers loss of life as a bad thing, like Cat does, would not exchange that for ANYTHING.

Mental Mouse

I don't think she could *keep* his right-to-rule; I suspect she could grab onto it, but actually holding onto it for any length of time would be way out of her league; at best she'd get a "King For a Day" story, and probably wouldn't come out of that too well.

Feeding DK's crown to Larat would almost certainly be a Bad Thing:

- 1) For starters it would "shape" god!Larat after a king that's trickier and more intimidating than he ever was to begin with, the literal ruler of a plane of Hell. Given the power boost, killing him might not be an option even for Sve Noc.
- 2) If the loss-of-kingship actually stuck: Congratulations Cat, you just destabilized a whole nation *beyond* Calernia. You were worried about refugees? How about the population of Serenity, pouring through a hellgate with devils hauling their stuff for them. And they might not be too happy about living conditions out in Creation where there's no god-king to cut the sharp edges off their lives.... And then there's various devils and undead that would probably come free along with them.
- 3) That's if it sticks, or at least until Neshamah finds some way to counter it. Assuming that feeding the crown to Larat breaks it (nobody's been worried about god!Larat taking over seven provinces of Procer), some thoughts come to mind:
 - a. Simply merging the Crossroads into his Hell, or grabbing god!Larat and dispersing his substance into said Hell.
 - b. Assigns one of his Revenants (or somebody from the Serenity) to rule over Keter.
 - c. If the loss of Kingship in Keter deprives him of his foothold in Creation, he can "retire" to being god of Serenity (with local kings), and wait for some unwary soul to invoke him... not so different from where he was before.

So I started thinking about why Cat and Karios play off each other so well and I realized at least part of has to do with the fact that they are foils of each other.

For example Cat is known for her practical evil and behind the veneer of a plan is her exploiting chaos, making it up as she goes along, and out right bluffing.

With Karios is known for being a villain's villain. Behind his attempts at obvious villain plots and seemingly random acts of evil is a plan.

Cat tends to prefer twisting the truth rather than outright lying. She'll often tell the truth when she's expected to lie knowing the people around her won't believe her and during her having power of winter couldn't lie outside of specific wording. When she does lie, it's often such a boldface lie that people believe there must be something else going on (exemplified by her tricking the Fae by writing a blatantly false invitation)

Karios, on the other hand, is known for being dishonest. As I saw someone quote in an earlier comment "you can always trust a dishonest man to be dishonest". Practically everything he says is him lying, yet it manages to hide his goals— people tend to dismiss him as a lying liar who lies and don't bother to think about how he's lying or what exactly he's lying about. It also makes him less credible (which Cat used to make herself sound more believable when she was talking to the party about what happened to Masego) but honestly I think that's the point.

There's also their origins. Cat was an orphan who wanted to change Callow for the better and so sought power. We know she had that ambition long before the story began, because she's clearly been saving for a while. Also in the beginning of the story she is, for a lack of a better word, adopted by a father figure mentor character.

Kairos on the other hand was born into royalty, although we can argue both didn't have particularly legitimate claims. Unlike Cat, Kairos in his extra chapter doesn't seem to have much ambition, not until the generals and such came to him plotting treason. Also unlike Cat, he is desperately trying to find value in the House of Light before he rejects it, where as Cat was mentioned to skip sermons and only really studying the the Book of All Things after she became a villain. The chapter ends with the implication that he rose to power by killing his father, who clearly put as little effort as possible into raising Kairos.

Anything I missed?

Andrew Mitchell

Nothing missed that I can see. You've compared and contrasted them well.

Enjou

Seems like the Good King's crown might make a good one for shaping the realm, now that Cat has taken him away from the Dead King. If he was connected to the Dead King still, that'd be a problem, since the shape of the new realm would be overly influenced by the Dead King's power over the Good King.

Now though? You've got a crown of a Callowan king who was enslaved by the Big Bad for a long, long time. Small slights bring long prices, so what do you think a huge slight like that gets you? Freed from the Big Bad by another Callowan monarch, the crown would be used to make realm intended to be used in order to fight the Dead King.

Andrew Mitchell

I approve. I think this would be quite narratively satisfying.

DC

Wait a minute.

Thief of Stars? Abscond?

Has someone been reading the SBURB Glitch FAQ?

[kgyl21](#)

If the Gray Pilgrim resurrects the King, they have a Fairfax to put on the throne of Callow.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Then his Forgive would be gone until the next sunrise.

[Mental Mouse](#)

More immediate problem: He isn't here. And it's possible that his Forgive will be used by the time he gets here.

Ephemeral

Anyone think that the whole thing is a trap?
Cat is fairly well known for usurping her opponents powers and the whole thing feels kind of convenient...
Not saying that's definitely what's going on but I wouldn't be surprised if the Dead King is counting on her usurping control over King Edward...

[Mental Mouse](#)

Does he know that she knows that he knows...? 😊

She's going up against DK in a challenge of both magic and story. We shall see who wins out...

Andrew Mitchell

For all those that are rooting for a true resurrection of King Edward, I've just noticed another supporting clue. Someone else may have noticed this already but I don't recall seeing it mentioned.

Look at the chapter's opening quote

It's almost like King Edward is giving instructions for what the party needs to do to use Pilgrim's Forgive aspect.

werafdsaew

A different Edward though; Edward the Fifth versus Seventh. And what does a scale balanced mean in this context?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Here's what Edward the Seventh had to say:
> "Stand tall, Queen Catherine," King Edward the Seventh told me. "Stand proud. We have been broken before, humbled and rent asunder. We have crawled through the blood of our kin and suffered the yoke of tyrants. It does not matter. We do not yield, we do not bend even when the sky comes tumbling down on our heads. Keep your grudges close, child, and never forget them. We are Callowans, and for every slight there is a price."

[Liliet](#)

♥ ♥ ♥

(god I love this storyline)

dcarter8419

Can't wait for more

Aston Whiteman

Monday a No Cat Update Day?

Happy Memorial Day!

Kakavorin

There was a small delay. The chapter isn't currently linked properly on this page, but it is in the archive.

Link for convenience: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/05/27/chapter-45-long-prices/>

Chapter 45: Long Prices

"Grudge is born of blood, carried by it and redressed through it. As they who came before me swore, I so swear: there will be no peace nor rest 'til the Cradle is reclaimed."

– First Oath of the People, taken by all in the Duchy of Daoine at age seven

I'd once had a conversation with Akua, after Indrani had hit the bottle hard enough during our 'council' that she'd ended up snoring on the table. We'd talked about him before, of course: the Dead King. The Hidden Horror, the Abomination, the last king of Sephirah – all that a hundred more titles, a treasure trove's worth of grim honours accrued over the centuries. We'd all been spinning our schemes around the ancient thing in Keter since the invitation had first reached me in Callow, and no small amount of talk and ink had been spent over the thought of what he might intend. In a sudden moment of honesty, sharing a shoddy table with a woman I still sometimes remembered to hate, I'd admitted that the Dead King's ambitions were opaque to me. Assuming he even had any. What could the immortal ruler of a near-untouchable realm truly desire from Creation? All the wants of a mortal ruler were in his hands already: wealth almost absurd, authority absolute, the adulation of the people he'd forged to worship him as their sole idol. What was there, in all the world, that the King of Death could not obtain with either a snap of his fingers or use of the patience in which he was peerless?

Companionship, Akua had eventually suggested, and perhaps there was some truth to that. When he'd spoken of the Bard it had been with an almost fond manner of respect, though they were foe in all things and more than once she had ruined him. Yet while I would not deny I'd had my moments of arrogance over the years, I would not seriously countenance that my potential apotheosis had been reason enough for him to stir the Crown of the Dead to war. Malicia's invitation had been an open door but walking through it had been his own will and the purpose of that will escaped me still. Even if he ended up successful beyond a monster's wildest dreams, even if he devoured the continent whole and brought forth a thousand years of darkness... then what? A fleet raised, and through ships the tide of undeath was to be taken across the Tyrian Sea? Or into Arcadia, perhaps, some other Hell or for true

ambition to the Heavens themselves. It was difficult, I would admit, to truly think on the scale and scope of someone like the King of Death given the comparative speck of a life I'd lived. Yet I did not believe that the soft-spoken, patient monster I'd seen make of his own home a pyre for apotheosis would choose as his path endless war on all the world.

Akua had challenged me on that, surprised by my certainty. In some ways, she'd argued, the Dead King was the pinnacle of what being partisan of Below meant. For all that the Hidden Horror had slumbered beyond his borders sometimes for centuries at a time, that only one villain in the history of Calernia had ever been his better. May she never return. How else but war was the King of Death to subjugate the entire world? It'd been a stark reminder, that conversation, that the people who'd raised Akua Sahelian had seen conquering the world as an admirable thing to aspire to. Believed that it was natural to believe so, that all others did as well. Her peers, her highest servants, her kin: her entire little world had shared that madness. It must not have seemed like madness at all, I thought, when you were in the warm embrace of that world. How could it be, when everyone who mattered believed it reason as well? But Akua was still a Wastelander, a highborn, in ways she might never entirely shake. It blinded her to the truth that the Dead King's victories had sprung from his rejection of everything the brood ever circling the Tower held dear. See, the thing with the kind of game that Neshamah was playing was that the opposition only needed to get lucky once – and they had forever to take yet another swing, praying for that golden day. And every time the Dead King went to war, Above got another shot at him.

An endless war, for Neshamah, was a long and elaborate suicide by odds.

Oh, we'd not peered at the heart of the Hidden Horror and unfurled its deepest secrets that night. We were, after all, both so young and taught to think in the terms of a war that rarely made it so far west. But it'd stayed with me, the thought that patience was not a skeleton key to the Dead King's every trouble. He could retreat back into the Serenity when he disliked the cast of something, true enough, but that had costs – in champions broken, in secrets unearthed and tricks revealed. Much of that knowledge died with those who'd learned it, so soon gone, but the important bits – those that might one day destroy him? The Intercessor would hoard them, and then dole them out to heroes whenever opportunity arose. Patience allowed him to set the battlefield as he preferred, to stack it, but the battle still had to be fought. Why offer a hundred-year truce, if not because he disliked the shape of this particular battlefield? The paramount virtue of an existence like the Dead King had to be cowardice, in this world of ours, and that meant retreating immediately and without qualms the moment it seemed like there

might be a genuine threat after him. That knowledge was no skeleton key either, though, for he remained the Hidden Horror. There were so few things that could be a threat to him, when it came down to it, and even in the dawn of days the Bard had named him adept at avoiding weakness.

The ability to take back a Revenant from the grips of the Dead King would be a strategic threat, but not an overwhelming one. Save if I was prepared to assemble my own army of dead Named to match his, which would taint my reputation beyond repair in my seat of power and antagonize near every possible ally, it was little different from losing one of his champions to the blade of a hero. Of course, I'd not simply petitioned Sve Noc to aid me in clawing back the free will of the Good King: we were doing it while the guiding will of the Hidden Horror was still inside. Now, I was no mage and my learning in such matters were still young. But I knew, from having raised corpses and bound them to my will as well, that the kind of fine control that I'd seen displayed here could not be done without *investment*. I couldn't be sure what it would cost him, if we succeeded at trapping whatever part of him he'd disseminated into the Revenant, but that hardly mattered. The Dead King was, not to belabour the title, dead. He no longer healed, in body and soul. Every loss of him was a *permanent* loss. And so, as the might and attention of doom-crowned Sve Noc poured into the corpse of Edward Fairfax, I returned to a familiar place. Surrounded by the absolute pitch black of nothingness, I stood leaning on my staff and met the gaze of Neshamah in the... flesh, so to speak.

"I do not hold much respect for recklessness," the Dead King said.

I replied nothing. The hourglass had been flipped, I thought, and it was not for me the sand was running out. Oh, there was no real guarantee that we'd succeed at trapping him. But even if we failed it would be at a cost, and greater to him than us. For all that the King of Death had made attrition his sharpest sword in some ways, it may yet be turned on him to cut just as deep.

"Still," Neshamah said, "your use of it as a calculated measure continues to surprise."

It would have been an empty gesture to look at anything other than him, for there was nothing else to look at, so I did not bother with the theatrics. I did not speak either, though. It was not me, who had come to bargain – though I had schemed the coming of this conversation, I would not deny.

"You will require guarantees as to the Hierophant's life," he said.

I inclined my head in agreement. I'd been worried, since the start, that there might be some things that not even the

Pilgrim's resurrection could take back. Or that his hand would be forced early to spend that aspect on some life I cared less for, preventing the use I needed for some lesser prize. Receiving assurances from the Dead King was preferable, for though he was no fae bound to his word he had to know that if he crossed me on this after making a promise I would never bargain with him again. Recklessness, he'd called this. Like in these struggles of ours there was meant to be a manner of cordiality, mayhaps not of fair play but at least of an... understanding that this was a game, a play, a sport to be had. *Do not forget*, the ache in my leg whispered. *Do not forget*. I bared my teeth in a feral smile at the King of Death, the savage pupil of savage teachers, and let that pretence die. We were no Proceran princes making courtly war, for there could be no such thing as a war courtly.

"Six months," I said.

"Pardon?" the Dead King said.

"Your armies will not advance a single step for six months," I said. "This, and the release of the Hierophant. That's my offer."

"You overestimate the strength of your position," Neshamah warned.

"You have," I murmured, "taken my friend and now bargain with his life while scheming the death of others dear to me. You arranged the destruction of my armies, of near everyone I've ever cared for. But for my intervention, you would have buried Iserre in death and borrowed Hierophant's hand for the deed."

"You clutch the remains of what you once were, Black Queen," the Hidden Horror said. "It does no favours to what you have since become."

"It was never really personal to me, before," I told him. "You were a foe, but in some ways an ally as well. In principle I thought it tragedy that others died to your invasions, but no one weeps for faces they never knew nor loved."

"A taste," the Dead King said, "of what is to come. They will be strangers, Catherine Foundling. One day, and sooner than you believe, they will all be strangers."

"And if that day comes, I may yet become the horror you foretold," I admitted. "But today, Dead King?"

I limped forward, into his space, with cold eyes.

"Today you are the thing that *took my friend*," I hissed. "The thing that would have slaughtered the Woe and the Army of Callow without batting an eye. I 'overestimate the strength of my position', Merciless Gods."

I struck at the nothingness we stood on with my staff, the sound ringing like a thunderclap.

"You think after this I'm not willing to try falling off the cliff together, Neshamah?" I said, tone sharp. "To gamble on which of us will find our wings on the way down? Look at my back, King of Death, and see what is writ there – when given the choice between risking ruin and kneeling, I've only ever replied one way."

A moment passed.

"Has your tirade ended?" the Dead King calmly asked. "No purpose was served by it, save the thinning of my patience."

"You have my terms," I coldly said. "Six months and the release of Hierophant."

"That is no bargain," he said.

"Aye," I replied. "It's a price. And if you know a single thing of my people, you'll know ours are always long."

"I've more than a single hostage in my possession, even if the Tyrant has once more turned," the Dead King said.

"I knifed Black when we last spoke before ordering him to find his decency," I said. "He's since arranged the starvation of several hundred thousand innocents. Try again."

"If you are to assemble your coalition against me, you will need a ruler for Praes," he replied. "You cannot tolerate the continuation of Dead Empress Malicia's reign, which leaves him your sole reputable candidate."

My fingers clenched. It'd been too much to hope for that playing it off would work.

"Amadeus of the Green Stretch and Masego the Hierophant," Neshamah said. "For assurances I will not take the life of either on this field, your crows will loosen their talons."

I breathed out.

"No," I said.

His eyes tightened the slightest bit, which on another man would have been frustration and surprise.

"Down we go, Dead King," I said. "Gods help neither of us, the fickle pricks."

"Assurances," he said. "And three months."

It meant he wouldn't release Masego, that whatever purpose he was using my friend's body for he would continue until the very last moment. But three months, Gods even just three months? It kept the Lycaonese in the war instead of letting them stumble down the slope into oblivion, and it was enough breathing room to turn this war from lost to losing.

"Night's not over," I said, matching golden eyes to mine.

"Once more, in this we agree," the King of Death said. "Bargain agreed?"

"Bargain agreed," I replied, and darkness broke.

—

The Sisters had not reached apotheosis gently, and their works were not gentle ones. Yet this was a matter of theft, of taking, and in such matters we were all well-learned. Sve Noc, discerning my thoughts as they formed, loosened their grip on the Revenant just enough that the wisp of spoke that'd been the Dead King's will slipped away into nothingness. And along the footpath the Hidden Horror had used to withdraw, rapacious Night coursed down. Imperious and grasping, it devoured what bound the man who had once been the Good King Edward Fairfax to his subjugator in Keter. Komena, I knew as she deigned to brush her thoughts with mine, wanted to claim him in the Hidden Horror's stead. To have a Fairfax flagbearer of her own, to spread the Tenets of Night wherever dusk was known. For where, among the realms of men, were more fertile grounds for her red-handed lessons than the war-torn fields of Callow? Andronike, ever cautious and calculating where her sister craved clash of arms, felt more inclined to snuff the Revenant out. Mastery over the tainted carried risks, she grasped, and brought opportunities for that most dangerous of foes who our war against was only beginning. Why chance it, when there was little need? I disagreed. With both of them I disagreed, and though it was not in the nature of prophets to argue with prophecy or of heralds to argue with the message born, that was not the lay of our ties. It was for my contentious nature most of all they had raised me to be First Under the Night. And so when I spoke the Sisters listened, and our wills joined in miracle.

King Edward Fairfax, Seventh of His Name, breathed his first free breath since he'd died below the walls of Keter. That was the first of the two great workings I would unleash today.

"It has been," the Good King said, "many years since I last tread the streets of sunny Liesse."

Letting out a long breath, I opened the floodgates and Night begin to fill me. A rising tide of power, too much of it for me to able to shape or grasp with my own hands. In the sky above us

all, deafening shrieking noises began to fill the air as hellgates were torn open one after another. This already half-ruined realm began to shudder at the roughness it was treated with, a sinking ship with yet another hole made in the hull every few moments.

"You appear to have incensed the Abomination, Queen Catherine," King Edward said.

"I tried to strong-arm him into some fairly major concessions," I admitted. "It appears he believes I am in need of an admonition."

Night continued to pour into me, a tide rising, until the world around me turned into an oil painting: imprecise, as if smudged, but no less beautifully coloured for it.

"So it does," the Revenant said. "I thank you now for the breaking of my chains, you who they name Black Queen, but I must wonder at the price of it. What dark patrons have sought my indebtment?"

"Nothing," I said. "You owe not a single thing. Miracles are not bought and paid for, even those of the Night."

"A gift," King Edward said, sounding unconvinced.

"I have request to make of you," I admitted. "Yet it would be meaningless if you did not agree of your own free will. And so there will be no talk of debt, to either myself or Sve Noc. On this all three of us agree."

"Mercy gifted without strings, yet with purpose," the Good King said.

He sounded, I thought, almost glad.

"I am a priestess," I said. "But also a queen."

And there were so very few things that a queen could afford to do with a single pure benign intent, in the end. Virtue alone did not win wars, or keep people fed through winter. In the distance, as if in an entirely different world, the Tyrant of Helike was still speaking. The devils around us and afar were boiling like a pot about to tip, stirred into a murderous frenzy by sorcerous means and now swelling in number with every passing moment. The Saint of Swords fought still, unbending and without pause, and though I could almost hear the Rogue Sorcerer's panting breaths in my ear still spellfire spun out and devils died. Yet the battle around us, coming to us, seemed almost like a distant scene. I already knew that it was not out there victory or defeat would be found.

"Your petition, Queen Catherine," the Revenant said. "I would hear it."

Leaning tiredly on my staff, I raised up a palm and compressed everything I could of the Night in a ball. My will failed, though stubbornness made that defeat slower than it should have been. The forces I was trying to wield were simply too large. But where I faltered the will of the Sisters drew me up, and with their two grips – one deft and soft, Andronike the spinner of weaves, the other imperious and coarse, Komena the breaker of spears – an orb of pure Night formed above my open palm.

"Can you hear them?" I asked. "Our people, the echoes of them in this place. The indelible mark a terrible slaughter leaves long after it has ended."

"Like songs woven of wails," Edward Fairfax softly agreed.

"The foe who did this I slew and made my own," I told him. "Though that end is a pittance, to the madness that was the Doom of Liesse. But there is an enemy that stands before us, using her works for ruinous purpose and waging war on all the world. That, too, is a scale to balance."

His eyes flicked to the orb of Night.

"One last time," he said, "into the breach."

"It will kill you," I warned. "There is little kindness in that power, and it was not meant for your hands."

"I am long dead," the Good King replied. "And *kindness* is not what I would have of this day."

Edward Fairfax had no longer been young, when he was claimed, and I suspected even if he had been few would have called him handsome even then. But to the strong cast of his face there was a manner of regality, like it had been hewn from stone and taken the noblest properties of that make. Helmetless, his crown of white hair was the sole he wore and the sword in his hand was bare. Without a sheath to return to, for there was none at his hip, it would never be allowed to rest.

"The war never ends, Queen Catherine," he told me, tone quiet. "The faces and the borders, the foes and the friends, they are but the shallowest measure of the thing. Not all tyrants reign from the Tower, and many who have hunted the wicked partook of wickedness in the hunt."

I inclined my head.

"One should not confuse striking at evil and doing good," I quoted.

"Lest good become the act of striking," the Good King completed, tone approving. "You understand, then. That when your evil is no longer necessary, Black Queen, to linger would be to stray from the narrow path you have tread."

My fingers clenched.

"I know," I croaked out.

Dead fingers snatched the Night from my palm, clenching into a fist and letting the darkness sink into the flesh.

"Then rise, Callowans," King Edward called, voice like thunder. "Rise once more, for we yet have debts unsettled and House Fairfax calls on you *one last time*."

There was a heartbeat of silence, a stillness like death. And they answered, as they had for centuries, for even a grave made for a petty hurdle when it was a Fairfax calling you to war.

[sivarajan](#)

Called the title!

[Liliet](#)

Called the title, Catherine successfully reclaiming Edward, and the ghost army.

The fandom did good on this one 😊

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

Wow.

[TeK](#)

From small delays, long chapters.

Gunslinger

Honestly it's amazing how much the quality of the writing improved with just a little more time. It's a pity EE still needs to work a day job or we could have more of this.

[sengachi](#)

Speaking of which: <https://www.patreon.com/user/posts?u=3523924>

Jarthon

Indeed, though that delay does mean that Small Sights has no link to Long Prices which will be quite annoying to any future readers. I do hope that gets fixed.

Flatsc

Talk About leaving one with goosebumps.
The amount of point ^ counterpoint going on here is making my head spin.
AS always erraticerrata, I can't Wait until the next chapter 😊

[*Euodiachloris*](#)

Seconded. I think my goosebumps have goosebumps. 😊

NerfContessa

QFT.
Simply grand chapter.

superkeaton

The Noble Dead rise.

[*dyxsst*](#)

FIRST!!!!!!!!!!

the finest case of the wait is always worth it

Navi-Hank

This chapter isn't connected to the others.

danh3107

My kinsmen, brave dawi all, one more Grudge to be settled from the Damaz Kron. Vengeance shall be sated.

KAZUUUUUUUUUUUUUK

Gunslinger

Is this a quote from something?

Gibborim

Dwarfs in Warhammer Fantasy are called dawi. And they do like their grudges.

Lord Delakar

Naw he's just talking like a WHF (warhammer fantasy) Dwarf aka dawi. Dammaz Kron is the dwarven name for the book of grudges. An all around badass idea and fits well with Callow lore.

As for the cry of Kazuk. I think it maybe a mistake on "Karaz a Karak Ankor" which is the dwarven version of Camolot.

Or possibly "Khazukan Kazakit-ha!" Which is the dwarven version of "yo betta check yo self, before yo wreck yo self." Ie dwarves are on the warpath and not even considering the idea of POW's or hostages who only last long enough to be used as ammo in a grudge thrower. IE an Onager.

danh3107

Pretty much exactly what I was going for despite my numerous misspellings of dawi phrases....

Although Khazuk or Kazuk is a pretty common warcry.

Andrew Mitchell

Woah, that was A M A Z I N G. ♥ ♥ ♥

- It seems that King Edward really gets what Catherine is trying to do. So he's sacrificing himself to give Catherine the ability to win here. He WON'T be giving his crown for the making of the highway.
- Is King Edward or not? He's breathing but his hand is still "dead".
- The last two paragraphs put a smile on my face and tears of my eyes.
- So much more information about the Dead King. He does not heal, so any wound is a permanent reduction of his capability.
- I was surprised that there wasn't discussion about the details of the guarantees for Amadeus and Masego. It seems that there is a lot of wriggle room for the Dead King to leave something behind in them.
- Minimum 100,000 undead wraiths from Liesse. Now that's going to change the tide of this battle and the next (with the new god Larat).
- Three months should be enough to get an new alliance agreement hammered out and the Drow and other soldiers to the battle fronts. Especially with the new highway.

nimelennar

- Is King Edward or not? He's breathing but his hand is still "dead".

It's a revenant of King Edward. It's not alive, as true resurrection is something that Below can't achieve. Apparently, though, it's close enough to "alive" that it needs to breathe.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, something new then, not quite like other undead.

[Liliet](#)

I think he less needs to breathe and more does so anyway, like Winter Catherine – out of habit, and for olfactory experiences.

Dainpdf

The Dead King knows his craft. He might also be breathing because something in him keeps the instinct, though there may be no need for it.

[onedollargum](#)

Like Winter Catherine then. Substance in the shape of a person.

Dainpdf

The deal will be enforced by Story and strife. The DK needs to be able to strike deals in situations like this, so he won't throw that away so easily.

And breaking his word, while not as bad as for Fae, is likely to have Narrative Consequences. Or, well, Cat is likely to make sure it does.

[Adrian_V](#)

Or it could be that the whole thing with a revenant is that they never fully died, like their souls never crossed over so they can be alive again and not be resurrected.

[Liliet](#)

I mean 'soul never crossed over' is also what happened with Catherine and Akua, didn't make them any less undead. "Soul never crossed over" is kind of the definition of soul-ed undead, "soul was brought back" is full on resurrection and comes with the whole 'the body is alive too' package.

Michael Anyanechi

That ending gave me chills

[Sethur](#)

This was SO worth the wait!
The Good King and the Black Queen, bringing forth a miracle of doom... Now this is a story! ^^

[Mental Mouse](#)

So, Neshamah, what think you of Cat's position now?

[taliesinskye](#)

Epic.

Baron

I remember the first time this series made me cry tears of awe. It was when Adjutant came into his Stand aspect.

That time was the first of many.

Andrew Mitchell

I know exactly what you mean. ♥ ♥ ♥

The Brave Little Muffin

Bad fuckin ass. I was wondering why she picked him to co-opt.

IDKWhoitis

I would point out, that "I do not hold much respect for recklessness," is roughly the Dead King's equivariant of saying "You little shit."

Cat just struck at the core of what he is, and probably did more in this one attempt than most Named have done in hundreds of Years.

[signspace13](#)

And also shows growth in going for the long Con instead of just injuring him here, she could have decided not to bargain and taken the immediate Victory of Wounding him here, but no, she gave him back his fragment of soul for the chance to complete her actual goals

[Liliet](#)

Actually Cat kind of traded a long-term gain for the living of Calernia, for a short-term gain for just her and her contemporaries.

Though, the Lycaonese could have been in enough danger it'd be a long term problem too...

Decius

There goes Akua's crown. The dead will not stand for her to keep it.

werafdsaew

Does the agreement means that Archer/Pilgrim can no longer free Hierophant? Or are they still free to act?

Gunslinger

I think the Night is still young part means she can have a swing at him to free Masego. Just that he won't take his life when trying

[Fayhem](#)

Lol beat me to it! Shoulda refreshed the page before replying to people.

Oshi

The DK wants something and he will not leave until he achieves it. The assurance was that he would leave and not linger.

[Fayhem](#)

The agreement means (re: Hierophant specifically) Dead King won't just hand him over, but also won't break his neck on the way out if they can give him the boot. So Archer/Pilgrim are both still free to act and very much needed.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Liesse is dead. But, beware its ire, all ye who would trespass and transgress.

talenel

It also feels like a sort of purification for Liesse. These Callowan souls were killed and put to unholy purpose by The Enemy. Now they may go to their rest having righted a wrong and fought for their Kingdom. Having reclaimed Liesse for the Kingdom.

Andrew Mitchell

I like your idea and hope that's what happens.

WuseMajor

Honestly? If he actually WANTS her as a peer after this, I think he must be mad. I have to agree with Bard that "she's the type who burns herself out" I just think she'll manage to kick over the game board before she goes out. If she does end up falling though, and, say, ending up the immortal priest-queen, ruler of the Drow, and so on....the schemes she would weave to keep the Drow

and the Hidden Horror from wreaking havoc would be mighty, twisted, and mighty twisted.

I doubt she would ever quite lose that propensity to gamble everything on a single roll of the dice though. I mean, if she hasn't by now, then that's a part of her to stay.

Dainpdf

Not a propensity that leads to long careers, as she herself just outlined with the DK.

Mental Mouse

Well that's the thing... heroes get to survive brinksmanship way more than villains do!

Which is Cat... are you sure? 😊

Also:

> I have to agree with Bard that "she's the type who burns herself out"

Except she's done that three times so far. That's not "burning the candle at both ends" anymore... that's the everlovin' *Phoenix*! (Even if it's painted black 😊.) The Phoenix is a powerful archetype in its own right, which specifically is known to travel from the heavens to the realms of the dead. And it represents immortality beyond even that of the gods...

Dainpdf

Depends on the tradition you're pulling your Phoenix out of. In any case, brinksmanship will bury even heroes, in time. See Prince, Shining.

Javvies

The Shining Prince wasn't engaged in brinksmanship. That was sheer stupidity. Albeit possibly helped along by the Wandering Bard. If he'd (a) worn his helmet, and/or (b) been under a truce banner when issuing his challenge, things would have turned out differently.

Dainpdf

Taking deadly risks. The only difference is he got no benefit if his risk taking didn't get him killed.

It's still a lesson in "take risks and someone will exploit them" still applies even if Above is tipping the scales.

shveiran

I don't think he's mad, but he may very well be lonely.

[TeK](#)

I am actually sorry for DK here. Not only did he killed all his friends to become an immortal abomination, but because of that, he can't make new ones 😞

Not to mention that the only people he can even remotely consider to be friends are WB and his one true love, lately Triumphant.

werekobold miner

the dead king can play tower defense with ranger

Dainpdf

Is this the... second? Third? time that Cat twists the arm of some major figure since she came back.

To get the Pilgrim to ally, to get the DK to give concessions, (implied) to get Black's sould back from the Pilgrim...

Oh, wait, there were also the two times she threatened Laurence's life (to get Black's body back, and to get Pilgrim's crown).

So fourth or fifth time?

Dainpdf

The way things are going, that Forgive aspect she needs might need to be used on Pilgrim's poor arm...

Dainpdf

Wait, she also twisted Kairos's arm into attacking the Alliance. Five or six.

Why does WordPress not have an Edit function??

shveiran

Admittedly, it is kind of her thing, these days.

Considering in the beginning her thing was to wreck whatever stood in her path, I find this is a sharp turn toward the Good side of the "narrow path".

[Liliet](#)

♥ ♥ ♥

He Who Hungers

The Doomed rise again. 100,000 souls risen at the call of an equally dead Fairfax.

Patience, Age and Experience vs Recklessness, Savagery and Cunning. A collection of Named taken by force vs a group of Named collected by trust and family. Revenants vs Woe. Dead King vs Black Queen.

A dance surely to watch.

IDKWhoitis

I'm unclear if Catherine is going to use Ed's Crown, but that may not have the necessary weight...

He is dead afterall.

I think Cat is almost certainly going to use her own, and let Viv fully take the Crown, but in doing so, may break her forming name of Black Queen...

Unless Cat uses the Skein's, but that would run into the same problem that using Ed's Crown.

Caerulea

I suspect Tariq's crown will be used, given how she traded letting the Saint of Swords be for his crown, when the time comes (Chapter 40). In addition, the crown of a helping hand is probably better than a crown of gambles and long prices for the realm.

Mental Mouse

Cat's like: Surprise DK, you missed a *big* point, 'cause Eddie *isn't* just another random crown: He was a former king over *this* city. And fondly remembered by most of the 100K people who recently died here...

Skein still isn't marked as a crown, and Cat is showing no signs of getting back on the Name bandwagon. AFAICT the last remaining *known* crown that could conceivably get involved is Hierarch, but he was last reported playing psi-screen from an undisclosed location (probably in creation), and surrounded by Atalante (sp?) priests.

Agent J

Black Queen broke at Second Llesse. It's just an epithet now. Cat has no "forming Name" left to break.

shveiran

Yes... and no.

She had a forming name then, and it meant “vassal sovereign under the Tower, playing the system for the sake of Callow and reforming it as a true piece of Praes – if under its Empress”.

That name broke at Second Liesse. Cat will never ally with Malicia now, or at least never agree to be her enforcer / vassal. She cannot trust her to that extent.

But Black Queen was a forming name. It doesn't really have a shape, because it never really formed enough to come into existence.

What Black Queen still is, is Cat's lower case name. It is how the most important players of this era, whether Named or not, whether ALIVE or not, refer to her. And she is STILL the pivot of any major event that's going down.

She will never be THAT Black Queen. That path has been erased before it was completed.

But names are shaped by culture, and major events shape both history and Story. Calernia and Callow both will walk new paths before this is over, and at the center of it all is still the Black Queen.

Scheming, nudging and bludgeoning the continent into a shape she can live with.

All that while being Nameless, and yet conviction and will are at the core of what Names are.

Am I the only one that fully believes Black Queen will BECOME a Name still? One with a different meaning than the one that was forming in Book 3?

Andrew Mitchell

I don't know if you're the only one, probably not. But I'm willing to admit that what you're suggesting is possible, I just don't think it's very likely. IMO there's less than 10% chance. The main reason I'm assigning it such a low probability is the total lack of foreshadowing in the text. Given how sensitive Cat and the other villains and heroes are to forming names, I would expect one of them would have noticed and that we'd get a hint.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Oh, it will surely become a Name... for the future! Cat doesn't get to tap into it as a Name, because it doesn't exist yet. But some future ruler – presumably one of Cat's successors – will turn to frantic creativity in the defense of the realm, achieve the name of Black Queen (or

perhaps Black King), and discover that their opponents can also become resources....

Likewise, Hakram couldn't have been the first "hypercompetent orc assistant". Black's reforms probably put a lot of particularly competent orcs in such roles early on, and then lasted long enough for that to become a tradition.

Daedelus' Muse

"One should not confuse striking at evil and doing good," "Lest good become the act of striking." "Many who have hunted the wicked partook of wickedness in the hunt."

Hmm, is the Good King's middle name Nietzsche? "He who fights monsters should see to it that he himself does not become a monster. And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you."

[Mental Mouse](#)

I like seeing Guideverse's proverbs.

[Javvies](#)

Nice.

And this, people, is why Callowans are the most spiteful of all.

Laurence has definitely, and maybe Tariq (if to a lesser extent), have failed the charge that Edward and Cat talked about – blurring the lines of striking at evil and doing good. Laurence has completely lost track of the difference, but for Tariq the lines have gotten quite blurry.

Rook

Catherine isn't so different from Laurence in that sense, or at least she's far more similar to the Laurence than she is to Tariq. She's always been someone who strikes down rather than building up, while Tariq is more about preventing the need to strike down in the first place. Chemotherapy vs a vaccination.

To her credit she's always readily admitted it – both in the conversation with the Good King and previously when she described herself as someone who fights the monsters so that the real work can be done in her wake – but she's always been a character that cuts out the cancer than one that heals the wound.

[Javvies](#)

Cat *hasn't* lost track of the difference between striking at evil and doing good. That's a key part of her conversation

with Edward. And part of why he agreed to help her and to summon the Callowan dead.

Laurence has completely lost track of that difference. Tariq has not completely lost track (I think), but the lines differentiating between the two have been incredibly blurred for him.

And both Laurence and Tariq have partaken of wickedness of their own in the hunt of the wicked of others.

Liliet

I think Laurence knows the difference as well as Cat does, she just perceives a lot of urgency in the current situation where there really isn't that.

Javvies

Have you forgotten about Laurence's "plan" to burn down everything and get the Dead King to pull a Triumphant?

Laurence has completely lost track of the difference between doing good and striking at evil. Admittedly, according to Tariq, striking at evil has been almost the only thing that she has done as a Hero. But she's still lost track of the difference.

Rook

Have you forgotten that she isn't following 'her plan', but instead Catherine's plan on Tariq's recommendation?

Have you forgotten that the series would've ended at book 4 if the Saint hadn't backed down in the face of Rozala's decision to negotiate? End of book 4 chapter 17 if you want a refresher.

If you want to claim that the Saint doesn't understand the difference between striking at evil and doing good, then why has she repeatedly chosen to let others do good over striking at evil herself, when the chips are down? It's certainly not because of any lack of faith that she'd win that fight in the end, considering that she outright states they can win when they were arguing about it.

Laurence being able to back down even while disagreeing to that large of an extent, while furious, and while believing to the end that it'll end badly, proves she that she not only understands the difference but she acts on that understanding better than 9/10 characters in the series.

Mental Mouse

Laurence has actually been learning from her experiences, while Cat has been proving herself to all the heroes. And for whatever reason(*), the Wandering Bard isn't around to mess with her head.

(*) Probably because at least Cat or Archer would chase her away posthaste, and they know how to do that now. Possible involvement with the "must flee what she desires" thing.

Liliet

This, thank you!

For all talk of Laurence being a loose cannon, she has yet to fuck anything up other than the Arch-Heretic thing (which has Bard's fingerprints all over it).

Liliet

Laurence's plan was based on the idea that allying with Cat will not save Procer but only lead to further destruction because of course Cat will betray them / because her narrative is that of revenge against Good. With that prior, trying to ally with her looks like a humiliating attempt to weasel out of only-too-deserved trouble.

Fayhem

> Have you forgotten about Laurence's "plan" to burn down everything and get the Dead King to pull a Triumphant?

You know, I've been factoring that into my analysis of Laurence's character pretty hard for a while now. But lately I've been getting more and more uneasy about relying on that, especially the longer that Bard is absent from view and that Saint appears (very relatively) willing to be "reasonable" by her unique definition of the word. It was heavily, *heavily* hinted at (to the point I consider it basically confirmed) in the chapter where the plan was laid out to Cordelia that Bard was involved. Specifically, extra chapter Fatalism III (<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/10/01/nihilism-iii/>) had the passages:

"Through the wood [door] she heard a spatter of female laughter and the sound of cup being dropped, [Cordelia's] brow rising in response."

and

““Good evening, Your Highness,” the Saint of Swords nonchalantly call out.

Her mind spun. She’d set out aiming to find out which of the Chosen had demanded the conclave, and already she had her answer. She absent-mindedly noted a handful of details in quick succession – there were two cups, not one, and one had been toppled. It’d spilled liquor all over the table. The other goblet was in the hands of the heroine, inclined at an angle that allowed her to recognize water within. They were alone in the room, the only other door behind the Saint, and the chandeliers casting light allowed moving shadows to be cast into the corners.”

Those aren’t signs the First Prince would pick up on because she doesn’t have the background information necessary, but as a reader I consider it a lock that Bard was there.

So. Is this really the Saint’s plan, as I initially believed? Or is it the Bard’s plan, and Saint agreed to serve as the mouthpiece when relaying it to the First Prince? If it is Saint’s plan then it’s easy enough to believe it really is that uncomplicated and brutal since “uncomplicated and brutal” is basically Saint’s meditational mantra. But if this is really the Bard’s play... well, it might easily still be just as brutal but uncomplicated isn’t a word I’d ever pick for Bard.

In other words, if this is the Bard’s play then to assume we know the intent of this plan is to assume we know the Bard’s mind here. And the folly of reaching that assumption too easily has been writ before us in the fate of Sabah, among others. So. When Saint gave her horrifying little speech about letting it all burn because it’ll work out for the best in the end that way, *was this the plan? Or was this just what Bard wanted the First Prince to hear?*

The second one, honestly, might be scarier.

shveiran

I believe you are right about Bard’s involvement, but I’m not sure it matters.

The plan involved creating a divide that could not be reasonably crossed between Callow and the world, through religious grounds, to ensure total war. Whether or not Laurence was the architect or the

mouthpiece, isn't there evidence enough she was ON BOARD with those goals and ends?

Fayhem

Well, that divide seems to be being crossed *right now* in the story so "could not be crossed" doesn't seem to be accurate. The idea that the Conclave's action would ensure total war was part of Laurence's description to Cordelia; if the sincerity of her description is questionable and the accuracy of the prediction is being shown to be false in practice, is the fact that she described those as being her goals and ends to the First Prince as part of a plan designed by Bard *actually* sufficient evidence that Laurence is in reality on board with those goals and ends?

I don't know! That's the point I was trying to make; not that Laurence is 100% definitely not that crazy (maybe she is, it wouldn't exactly be wildly inconsistent), but that I don't feel safe in taking that chapter as a 100% indication that she actually is that crazy.

Also, let's not forget that Saint has leveraged her Regicide-y reputation in Procer as part of a calculated bad-cop routine in concert with another, subtler hero before. Prior to the Battle of the Camps Tariq gave the assembled princes a nice "I'm a reasonable wise old man, I hope you will listen to my advice when the time comes" speech, left the tent, and then Laurence gave her trademark "THAT'S NICE BUT I'M FUCKING CRAZY SO DON'T FUCK UP OR IT'S REGICIDE TIME" speech before leaving the tent herself. Then we got a scene between Tariq and Laurence where they're basically both going "we sold that routine to them pretty nicely, they should be primed to listen to the Grey Pilgrim now" to each other. So there's precedent for her deliberately playing up the scariness of her reputation as part of a calculated plan rather than as a 100% sincere position of her own.

Liliet

Y e p.

Rook

I have to completely disagree about both Laurence and Tariq.

Laurence knows full well what her role is and follows it. That's why whenever she and Tariq butt heads about a big

decision, she's the one who backs down and follows his lead even though she has the bigger sword by far. It's why she was willing to even concede to Rozala's decision to negotiate at the end of the battle of camps, even though at the time she had no reason to believe Catherine was any different from the rest.

Given a choice between letting other people do Good or striking at Evil anyway, the text SHOWS that she more often than not chooses to back down in favor of letting other people do Good. She followed those decisions even though she completely disagreed with them and 100% believed they would end badly.

In fact the only groups she's shown to be completely hostile to in the text are the Proceran Princes (who everyone is hostile to, even the other princes), literal hellspawn, and Villains, against which her attitude would be correct 99/100 times.

The Saint is a massive dick to be sure, but in general she's not ignorant or wholly unjustified. Being not likable doesn't make someone evil, ignorant, or stupid. It just means they're not likable.

Tariq on the other hand, probably understands the difference better than anyone, even Cat and the Good King Fairfax. His entire character (and Mercy's) revolves around committing a lesser evil for a greater good, even when he understands that it's an evil and that the ends don't justify or absolve the crimes of the means.

If you accused him of being a large extent knowingly immoral I'd actually agree with you – there's a good reason why pure utilitarianism is a stance most people only argue to play devil's advocate – but you can't accuse him of being ignorant about either the moral issues with his actions or the consequences.

If you were to look at the classic trolley dilemma, he's not the character that would divert the trolley to kill one person and think his action is pardoned because he saved five people. He's the character who'd admit that doing so makes him an irreconcilable murderer, but would do it anyway. Because he's a hardliner whose values are all about the least suffering.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

werafdsaew

The difference is that Laurence will never stop striking at Evil—even when there’s no worthy Evil to strike, and striking is not the best solution to the problem. Cat always planned on abdicating after she stabilizes Callow.

shveiran

Also, Laurence has been using her “I am a sword and a sword cuts so that’s my solution to all things Evil” approach for a long time.

I don’t absolve Cat of her actions, but she IS young at this, and she HAS realized that approach doesn’t work long term, and she HAS been fighting against the tide to find more peaceful solutions. It is usually bullying through story-fu, but that is great progress over what, four years since becoming Named? Three?

Risser

“and them dole them out to heroes”
And then dole them out

Also the link from the last chapter to this one is broken or doesn’t exist

Alegio

I just noticed how callowans would make great necromancers. The whole never leave a debt unpaid thing probably makes rising angry callowan spirits pretty damn easy.

Sckarred

The grave is no bar to my call

sutortyrannus

Exactly what went through my mind as well. Magnificent.

Raivshard

“We rode on the winds of the rising storm,
We ran to the sounds of the thunder.
We danced among the lightning bolts,
and tore the world asunder.”

So many great lines in that series.

[Ben Serreau-Raskin](#)

Amazing. I legitimately teared up and got chills.

Whatever other outcomes lead from this moment, Cat was just judged and found worthy by her culture's equivalent of King Arthur in a setting where the tale of King Arthur would literally give superpowers to anyone acting it out. Whether or not any of her companions ever see or know it, that's going to have weight both narrative and emotional.

[Liliet](#)

I just wish someone else would know 😡

Just... yeah.

Silverking

The conversation between Catherine and King Fairfax is so bittersweet. On the one hand, Catherine is hearing something that she has been desperate to hear for a long time: that the "narrow path she has tread" has merit, that her desire to do right by Callow is not a flimsy pretense for the suffering she has both given and received. The Woe is has always been a bit...compromised for Cat to see them as objective observers, and Procer's self-righteous condemnation wasn't doing her any favors. But to hear at least one Good person whose opinion she values say that he's proud of her...oh, that was so good to hear.

On the other hand, I'm reminded of the original Fallout, with the Overseer's speech at the end of the game. "You saved us, but you'll kill us. I'm sorry. You're a hero... and you have to leave."

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

I don't think he's asking of her to die at the end, only to leave, and Catherine does already have dreams for what to do when she gets that, shared with Indrani.

God, the moment of his approval is so powerful here though.

shveiran

I wonder, is that a difference?

I really, really want an happy ending, but... Cat isn't Indrani. She doesn't need to die, no, but she needs to end her story, permanently. I wonder if she'd be able to without dying.

To surrender the ability to step up for Callow if need be, to trust that peace will last, to renounce the possibility to ride to the rescue with the rising dawn (or the rising night, as the case may be).

I think she understands it is a necessity, but I'm not sure she can ever bring herself to do that AND watch helplessly

the next catastrophe be born without her, or even worse leaving and wondering at all times. Callow is, in the end, the core of her being.

Sad as it is, I fear she'd rather take her life.

[marillius](#)

Why can't she become a wandering miracle worker whose always there are the right moment to prevent greater evils with the help of lessers? Why can't she be a shadowy version of the grey pilgrim? He gets to live centuries guiding but she can't? And considering that means she can weave in and out of a story, as long as she doesn't take an apprentice or a liking to anyone in said story, and then hang out with her bae after she's done... I'd say it'd be a pretty good happy ending.

Particularly if she ends up as a semi-balance factor to the crow goddesses, always giving them perspective on how 'greater evil' usually means 'you lose', with only one exception thus far.

[signspace13](#)

The Grey pilgrim is as mortal as anyone else, he is likely in his late 60s or early 70s, living hundreds of years is not how Hero's operate, not unless they are already immortal before being Named.

[Liliet](#)

Calculations have been made that put him at 80+.

Hardly a century, though.

lennymaster

Pilgrim is old, but he is most definitely not older than a century. Remember, Heroes age. And Indrani is more of a friends with benefits, and that quite possibly only due to the fact that she and Masego never acknowledged their feelings for each other.

[Liliet](#)

He doesn't get to live centuries guiding.

But Cat might 😊

shveiran

I don't KNOW that she doesn't, but I SUSPECT she has so much weight behind her that she can't NOT be the protagonist for her own story.

Pilgrim gets to do that because her story is built that way, slow and steady. He's the fireplace you rest your weary feet beside.

Cat's is a supernova, but being the brightest star means you can't stand in the background.

[Liliet](#)

I think she can burn out that story and stay alive afterwards for a calmer one.

[Liliet](#)

I think Cat's going to go for a Queen Under The Mountain story, rather than surrendering her right to help. She wants to be a guardian, not a ruler, and it's specifically the ruling role that she needs to step down from at the end. And she already wants to.

Cat's evil is in ruling, not in protecting. Protect, I'm fairly certain she's allowed to.

shveiran

There are a lot of traps with that.

Protect from what, external threats?

If she steps in to handle domestic ones, like an usurper or a rebellion, she is basically enforcing the current ruler's right of domain OR deciding when a ruler is allowed to keep ruling.

That is pretty much "rule through proxy", because you get to select and remove kings.

So let's say just external threats, like a silent sentinel on the wall with a very cool cloak billowing in the wind.

Cat repels bad procerans coming to conquer her land, Cat steps in and crushes her, cheers and beer for everyone.

But what happens if there are reasons for that invasion?

What happens if a Callowan ruler is doing something bad a la Aqua, or maybe invaded beforehand?

Cat then becomes an asset in their arsenal as the monster guarding their "lair" (aka kingdom) or makes a judgment call and steps aside. But if she gets to pick and choose, with the power she has, she is de facto still ruling: her decision has so much weight she is still the key factor no matter where the crown lies.

There are too many nuanced complications for a “warden” role to be taken cleanly, especially with her single-handedly reforming the country.

If she stays, she won’t be able to be neutral. She will rule in practice, if only because everyone will want to try and curry her favor and so she’ll have a say in anything that’s decided.

[Liliet](#)

I don’t think Cat’s going to do that.

I think Cat’s going to stay away and come out ONLY when the threat is actually definitely dire.

Maybe only when called on by heroes, that seems like a good heuristic.

Soma

Good chapter.

Kissaten

Finally joining crusade to finish off Malicia? Who is there that is ‘she’ who wages war on all the world? And 3 month long truce on top of that to let Cat see that war to completion. There’s also Black in here, and Malicia did say that “Praes is no stranger to walking dead armies”, lol.

werafdsaew

You’re reading it wrong; the “enemy that stands before us” refers to the Dead King; the “her works” refers to Akua’s superweapon.

Deviant Loader

I’m surprised the Dead king, given how cautious person with no opening as he is, had actually given Cat such a typical opening to strike or strong arm him in the first place.

I hope that in the story is not going down the path that made the capable characters start holding the idiot ball for just for some other characters to win though.

Also, I interested to know, given how there’s talk of small gods being taken down by heroes.

I am now curious if the Dead king himself also have a few demi gods in his possession or not, given his power.

I’m also curious that given how common it is that the dead king controls his minions outside. Why didn’t some hero tried that

stunt or sudden got inspired to do it on him yet like what cat did yet.

Javvies

The Dead King doesn't know Cat's capabilities as First Under the Night.

Remember, while he knows everything Masego knows (or so it should be assumed), Masego last saw Cat when she was still Sovereign of Moonless Nights.

Deviant Loader

For one, DK had a chat with Cat before showing that he knows about Cat having support from the goddesses.

And so it seemed reckless to me that he even acted on the lack of information and put himself in harm's way and anywhere close to Cat in the first place.

That he knew had the support of the unknown power of goddesses. Which in itself seemed to defy his character.

So as I said, it's surprising for me that DK even had such an opening to begin with.

Liliet

Neshamah was working with the Masego/Liesse plot before Cat came back and actually before she made the agreement with Sve Noc.

His pieces were already in place and he was already in a weak position.

Andrew Mitchell

I don't think anyone's holding the idiot ball yet. And I'll be very surprised if EE ever does that.

One of the reasons I love PGtE so much is the way EE frequently surprises me with unexpected plots and character developments which surprise me, and yet are entirely satisfying with the way they fit early into the ongoing story.

Liliet

DK ain't holding any balls here, other than audience overhyping him. He misstepped and did not have full information to act on, that's all. Cat's debuting her new capabilities, and this round is hers fair and square. She probably won't get another opening like this.

werafdsaew

Because controlling the undead isn't something that the Heroes typically do? Cat is rare in that she's using villainous powers for heroic ends.

shveiran

Not just that. The DK was outmaneuvered because Cat had Goddesses to call on when she started the Tug of Revenant War. He couldn't see that coming, and was risking a loss. I don't think it would have been a MAJOR loss, but it is one he could not recover from and so he is willing to concede a far greater advantage than its worth, to buy Cat off into not inflicting that loss. It is a good bargain for both of them, in the end.

Deviant Loader

I felt that DK should already know that Cat had the power of goddesses to call on. He even had a chat with Cat about it.

So I'm actually surprised DK even put himself in that reach to Cat to begin with, when knowing about this.

Andrew Mitchell

Sorry, when did they have a chat about that? I'm trying to remember it but I'm drawing a blank.

[Liliet](#)

In the recent chapter where he brought up the hundred year truce thing he commented that he wondered how she got the sisters to give her the army.

And Cat was like 'wait he doesnt KNOW???'

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks... I can't believe I blanked on that.

[doominator10](#)

Juniper: "Ok Cat let me get this straight. You formed a heroic band with the Tyrant, the Rogue Sorcerer, the Pilgrim, and the Saint of Swords and took a jaunt through not-Arcadia into the ruins of Liesse where the Dead King hijacked brainwashed Hierophant using his grief for his father. You then thwarted the Tyrant's sudden but inevitable betrayal, then used him and the rest of your band to fight an army of hundreds if not thousands of demons just so that you could get close to an undead revenant of one of the greatest Callowan kings, steal his soul from the Dead King using Gods who I'm sure are the reason why I keep hearing cackling laughter in the back of my head, and had the king raise a bunch of undead Callowans to fight back the demon

army, all while brokering a few months of a ceasefire with the Dead King?!"

Cat: "More or less. Hakram pass me my pipe, it's been a long day."

Vivian: *faints*

Abigail: 'Don't make a sound. Maybe they won't notice I'm still here and have me executed for knowing all this.'

Andrew Mitchell

Hahahahahaha... Yep, that's how that conversation will go. 😊

(By the way, it's devils, not demons. Demons are much, much worse.)

[happyhavak](#)

Incorrect. Hakram would have already had her pipe ready and waiting.

konstantinvoncarstein

It is an army of devils. Demons are eldritch abomination capable of destroying an entire city in one night.

shveiran

Cat: "And that concludes the retelling fo phase 1 of my plan.

Now, phase 2 began when I..."

Insanenoodlyguy

Oh come now, be nicer to former thief. Vivian is not gong to faint. She is, however, going to start drinking straight from the bottle.

[Liliet](#)

Vivienne breaks down giggling.

Hitogami

Wow! This chapter was so good!

shveiran

So good a chapter.

The discussion with Edward gave me chills, and there was so much insight on how and why the Dead King thinks and acts...

Priceless. EE has me more hooked with every single chapter, no matter how much I feel that the hype could not possibly grow more.

Raved Thrad

Aragorn shaming dead oathbreakers into fighting for him has absolutely nothing on Dead King Edward calling on dead Callowans to rise from the grave and fight for hate and spite.

[Liliet](#)

SO FUCKING GOOD BOTH OF THEM

I love the point where at the end he just takes the Night from Catherine. Like she was reluctant to give it to him because it'll kill him (even if that's her own plan) so he grills her for a bit and then just takes it.

Badass ♥ ♥ ♥

[Euodiachloris](#)

"Oh, no you don't, girly: my revenge, my choice. Cough it up!"

Oshi

It's not spite. It's to even the scales. It's fine line but Callow is all about balancing the scales at it's best. Of course the scales always balance towards them when they are done but that's fair right?

Gamer7956

This chapter gave some interesting insight into the Dead King... and I'm honest to say I'm also curious as to his motivations. As such I went and reread the epilogue of book 3 – where the dead king decided to march (I believe). Note what happens in the chapter just before it – the Hierarch accused the Wandering Bard of a crime, and declared that should the heavens intervene they would be put to trial (and implied this also applied to Below). The Wandering Bard was then dispelled – mid conversation. This raises questions. What made the DK's gem glow? Could it be a dispelling of the Bard not by a physical assault but an assault on her role – that comes from the madness that is the Hierarch? How often do the madmen that shake the very foundations of creation come about? Triumphant being the last is very believable...

We know for a fact that the Tyrant wants to put the Gods on trial and have them found guilty – what if that isn't dissimilar to the DK's goal. What more could the Dead King want than freedom? And how else would he get it than by removing providence entirely?

Of course, I'm likely WAY off the mark, this is the Guide we're talking about. But I think it bears... well... thinking about.

Andrew Mitchell

For quite some time I've been saying that the Bard's role is to keep the game going on behalf of Above and Below.

Your new theory fits desire that neatly. And if it's true then the Dead King and Catherine have more in common than I thought. Catherine wants to break the game and improve the lives of everyone across Calernia.

[Mental Mouse](#)

As far as DK's gem, I suspect that was much simpler: "Hey boss, someone important showed up in Keter looking for a treaty". Or, possibly "one of Triumphant's successors has triggered the hotline I left with her".

Oken Marsh

There is no link from the previous chapter to this one currently.

aran

> patience was not a skeleton key to the Dead King's every trouble

Skeleton, get it?

aran

> "You appear to have incensed the Abomination, Queen Catherine," King Edward said.

I'm a bit confused here – did Catherine break the bargain by freeing Edward anyway, or did she only agree to let Neshamah safely escape the revenant? (And if the former, why did she bother bargaining?)

aran

> In the distance, as if in an entirely different world, the Tyrant of Helike was still speaking.

Man, when this guy monologues, he fucking MONOLOGUES.

LokeshC2

Why am I crying!! It's just an army of innocent dead people following a dead good king.

Interlude: Repudiation

"It is written that the Hidden Horror sent envoy to the Iron King Tancred, threatening that should he not strike the banners over Hannover and open the gates the city would be stormed and burned to ash. So did Tancred Papenheim then send back a single torch, with on the side engraved three words: 'if you can'."

– Extract from 'Crowned In Iron', a compendium of Lycaonese histories assembled by Prince Alexandre of Lyonis

It was like watching two enemy Hells trying to devour each other.

The Revenant – stolen from the Dead King, she'd thought, by the grim patrons of the Black Queen – that had once been a king of Callow spoke in a voice like a clarion call and the dead of this accursed place answered. Laurence watched, jaw clenched, as a coursing tide of wraiths made of silver and shade rose from the scarred ground. Mere dozens, first, but that swelled into hundreds and then thousands before more than a handful of heartbeats had passed. Those were not soldiers, the Saint saw. There were children and elderly among them, men and women whose hazy silhouettes bore no arms save angry hands. And oh, how angry they were. The rage of them was a clamour and a song, the weight of it making the air feel taut. Thousands of voices, of silhouettes, moving like a seething river of souls to tear at devils and dead alike. Laurence splattered the blood of another devil on the ground with a flick of the wrist, catching its clumsy strike and sending its head tumbling down with the riposte, and without hesitation began to move. Not towards the Black Queen, whose lone silhouette was surrounded by an island of stillness, or the other Revenant. No, roughly forcing aside any spirit that in their advance got in her way Laurence de Montfort headed for the imprisoned soul of the Carrion Lord.

She'd seen it when they first broke through the maze of the Skein, still pilloried in that clever silver artefact the Sorcerer had crafted for them, and she could not allow it to be claimed by anyone else's hands. Allowing the Tyrant to keep it was pointless – even when Theodosian had stolen it earlier he'd not proved to be a least a modicum useful by destroying the soul himself – and it was out of the question for Foundling to be allowed to reclaim the Black Knight. Tariq had allowed himself to savour the taste of hope for the first time in too long, and grow drunk off it, but Laurence would not lower her guard so easily. It was difficult to advance, to the Saint's displeasure, for though the wraiths were but lesser dead and ignored her even when

jostled they streamed forward heedlessly. It was like swimming in death, and more than once Laurence found her sight obscured by the flows. The devils who'd been in the courtyard were ripped apart within moments, she'd seen, harsh hands clawing at them and wailing mouths biting down on flesh. The Skein was not destroyed, but from what she could glimpse it was being drowned in sheer numbers. Foundling, at least, had not moved from her perch.

Stumbling over broken stones and just one more push away from beginning to hack at the bloody wraiths no matter the consequences, Laurence finally broke into what had been the Horned Lord's nest of ruins and found Amadeus of the Green Stretch still imprisoned. And gagged, thank the Gods for that – if she had to hear a single other sly barb from that viperous tongue she'd cut it out of his mouth. Another company of wraiths flowed before her, cutting her path, and she felt like screaming but she was too close to draw attention to herself now. Only, through two passing spirits she saw a tall shadow standing by the villain. In the flickering lights she could not be sure, but Laurence could have sworn its face had been painted purple. Feeling her stomach drop, the Saint dropped all pretences of subtlety and harshly forced her way through the wraiths. Several swiped at her with angry hands, though when she continued pushing forward they lost interest and returned to their war instead of pursuing. She'd been too later, the Saint saw. The drow that'd been standing by the prisoner snapped closed the silvery artefact that'd been unfolded into a pillory, now no larger than forearm, and with an amused silver glance at her it took a single step forward into nothingness. *Bordel*, Laurence silently cursed. That was Foundling's little attendant, wasn't it? The one she'd called Ivon, or maybe Iva. The Saint, fingers tight around the grip of her sword, turned her gaze to the Black Queen.

She was still standing alone on the rise, that many-coloured cloak flapping around her from the wind of the wraiths flowing around her. Hair long and unbound, her limp grown more pronounced and nowadays leaning on some sort of walking stick, she seemed nothing like the angry mutilated child Laurence had tried to put down at the Battle of the Camps. Catherine Foundling had yet to strike a single blow with a blade since she'd returned to Iserre from her journeys, the rumours went. And she had grown more dangerous for it. All night they'd danced to her tune, the Saint thought, glancing at where the Black Knight had been spirited away before she could take him back, down to this very last note. *You don't know what you're bargaining with here, Tariq*, she appraised. *Setting a wolf on a tiger only has two beasts prowling the wilds, wounded and twice as vicious.* Yet the time had not come where Laurence would bare her blade to redress yet another mistake made by kinder or weaker souls, so her longsword returned to the sheath. Climbing up the mound of ruins, the Saint came to stand by the side of the rising villain of their age. The woman remained silent, eyes on her dead countrymen now taking the

battle to the devils pouring out of the open hellgates. Among the horde, the crowned Revenant led the charge with a shining blade.

"How did you know it would work?" Laurence asked.

The look on Foundling's face was strange, almost subdued on a face that seemed to have been carved from hard edges with the razor-sharp cheekbones and too-strong nose. Even grief looked harsh on a face like that, much better suited for the sharp grins and cold stares the Black Queen was infamously known for.

"It always does," Catherine Foundling said, "when you make it hurt a little."

Laurence's lips pulled back in disdain.

"Does it sting that much, to have had to borrow another's hand?" the Saint said. "You've not been shy in doing so tonight."

Though perhaps it struck closer to home, that even being crowned in Laure had not been enough to give the warlord a fraction of the pull the long-dead Fairfaxes had on her people. It was no great endorsement of her reign, that she'd had to use the name and Name of another for that working.

"This city is a mass grave dug by my failures," the Black Queen replied, tone remote. "And yet here I am, walking its grounds once more. How many more, I wonder, will it take before I have been made to look that failing in the eye enough?"

Laurence hesitated, for though it was a monster she spoke to in that moment she sympathized with the woman more than she'd thought would ever be possible. Because this was not a smirking, victorious puppeteer tugging at all their strings. That distant bleakness she knew well. It came from the same place that had the Saint of Swords wondering what might have changed, if she'd arrived a sennight early instead of late. If she might have slain the beast when it'd taken a handful instead of a village, if she'd found Isodorios when the dragonblood first began to decay instead of after the red had taken him. *What if*, that old and tireless flagellant's whip.

"It'll never leave you," the Saint said, not unkindly.

It was honest, which was the highest courtesy she had to offer the likes of Catherine Foundling.

"I don't suppose it will, no," the Black Queen quietly admitted.

There were a few heartbeats of silence, left unfilled by either of them, before the old woman grew impatient.

"And now what?" Laurence asked.

"We're a distraction, Saint," Foundling reminded her. "And I would say that the enemy is suitably distracted, at the moment."

"The Skein's not finished," Laurence replied. "It'll take more than wraiths to put it down."

"See to it, if you'd like," the younger woman shrugged. "Take the Tyrant and the Sorcerer if you please."

"You're not going to lend a hand," the Saint grunted. "What a helpful hand you make."

Theodosian was probably enough on his own to entirely bury the Horned Lord's oracular insights instead of simply muddy them the way Laurence's own domain would, but it'd go quicker with a priestess or ruin keeping the Revenant contained while those of them better-versed in killing the dead put an end to the abomination.

"I'll be headed inside, should King Edward succeed at breaching the wards on the inner palace," Foundling casually said.

"Should?" Laurence asked.

"Depends whose wards they are," the Black Queen grunted. "Let's hope they're still using the Diabolist's work as the base, otherwise it'll be like trying to topple a rampart by throwing eggs at it."

Further hellgates opened above them, devils pouring in. The victorious battle for the courtyard finished with the Tyrant of Helike, laughing maniacally as he shot streaks of a fire from a jeweled sceptre at a hissing and fleeing Skein swatting away the dead pursuing it – they had, Laurence saw, ripped away great swaths of fur and eaten the flesh like hungry ghosts – until the Horned Lord leapt over the cliff's edge of that was the end of the ducal palace. In the distance the dead king of Callow raised his sword at the sky filling with fire and brimstone, and grimly declared war upon it.

The dead obeyed.

Laurence waited. There was ending coming, she could feel it. And when the moment came, she would be ready to meet it as it should be met.

—

Tariq had faced many a villain in his time, and not always with Light and strife. Often words could bring greater good in the world than a harsher touch, if they were the right ones, and so it might just be the truth that there was no living on Calernia who had spoken with more villains than he. The quiet ones, he'd

found, tended to be the most dangerous. Those who did not feel the need to boast or fill a silence oft had greater designs occupying their thoughts, and so proved more perilous adversaries. This was no cast iron rule, however. For example, it would have been a lie to say that Kairos Theodosian was not one of the deadliest Bestowed he'd encountered over the years and the boy simply could not stomach holding his tongue. Still, the tendency was pronounced and though the Woe were as peculiar a band of villains as their infamous predecessors when Tariq had first assessed the Archer her constant chatter had encourage him to dismiss her as an ancillary threat when she was without the guiding hand of the Black Queen at her back. A skilled and seasoned killer, mind you, with a way bow in hand that might as well be sorcery. But not a true danger, like the brilliant mind behind the brutish face of the Adjutant or the eerily innocent atrocities the Hierophant had it in him to commit.

He had been wrong in this.

While it was true that the Archer – Indrani, as she'd casually confirmed she was named – was loquacious, the Pilgrim had beheld what went on behind the smiles and the swagger and it had him *unsettled*. The Archer's thoughts and feelings shifted constantly, mercurial as the tides, yet there was a bedrock beneath them that was as subtle as it was watchful. It had had taken him the better part of an hour, for one, to put the finger on what a particular association between a part of that bedrock and amusement directed at him meant. Namely, that the smiling young woman was considering she might have to kill him in the future. Without feeling so much as a speck of guilt over it. It would have been easier to swallow, Tariq would admit to himself, if the Archer were a coldblooded devil like some of the monsters wearing human skin he'd had to face. Incapable of joy or fondness in more than shallow ways, though it had to be said that no all such constrained the Pilgrim had met were monstrous or even particularly nefarious. Yet the young woman was not. Deep affection and something like an intricate manner of loyalty had bloomed in her, when she'd spoken with the Black Queen, as well as something he had uncomfortably placed as lust. Something more romantic in nature emerged when mention was made of the Hierophant, though it was paired with a manner of wonder that implied to him the admission there was still fresh.

Indrani the Archer was, he knew by virtue of his aspect, a pleasant if hedonistic young woman would not even slightly hesitate to slit his throat if she judged him a threat or was asked to by someone she trusted. The knowledge was made even more unsettling by the way that wheedling information out of her was ludicrously easy, though the bedrock beneath that ease missed nothing of the nature of the questions being asked. Perceptive, this one, even though she was already on her second flask of Levante *monteron* since they'd left the rest of the band. That she

remained mostly sober after drinking that much hard liquor was notable even in one Bestowed, though given the appearance he suspected she had murdered outriders from Lord Marave's army for them. Possibly she had killed them entirely for the flasks, for her fieldcraft was not the kind anyone with mundane eyes would easily see through no matter how skilled those eyes.

"- so we signed it as 'the King of Winter', since none of us knew the name, but the real important part here is that she called me a sullen wench," Archer said. "*Sullen*, really, can you believe that? The nerve of her sometimes."

Tariq set aside a concern, namely that he had been repeatedly outmanoeuvred by a young woman whose notion of a ruse fit to enter the seat of the Winter Court was a lie so blatant the fae would hesitate to call her out on it, and addressed a more pressing one. Such as the fact that, while Indrani was gesticulating, she was not keeping both hands on the sheer cliff they were climbing. Something of an issue, as she was the lead climber but if she fell the same rope she used to help him up would help drag him down to his death.

"Should you truly be this cavalier with the handholds?" he asked in a strangled tone.

"Don't worry about it," Archer dismissed. "We're almost there anyway."

"And that will be solid ground, yes?" the Grey Pilgrim faintly asked.

"Bit of a slope, but pretty much yeah," the young woman cheerfully said. "Used to be a secret escape tunnel, when this was still Liesse the city instead of Diabolist's flying magic tantrum. Nobles, right? They're like moles, always digging tunnels to get out when the going gets rough."

"And you're certain it was not found by either the Diabolist or the Hierophant?" Tariq pressed.

"Like, at least half certain," she badly winked. "Seriously though, it used to lead into Hengest Lake. Had to take a swim in there to flee through, and no villain could possibly take a dip in there. Cat says there was some spare angel corpse lying around inside."

"The Hashmallim that was tricked into perdition by Dread Emperor Traitorous," the Pilgrim agreed. "It is well-known, in some circles. He was one of the only two Praesi rulers to successfully harm a Choir."

"No shit?" Archer said, sending him a serious glance. "Had no idea what kind of an angel bone it was, don't think the others

did either. Anyways, Diabolist slapped a massive cliff in front of this entire part of the city when she landed it to make it easier to defend it so it was buried until Zeze stole it again. We're the only two people who know about the passage, as far as I know, which is pretty far 'cause I got good eyes."

"No shit," the Grey Pilgrim solemnly confirmed.

Though he was missing much of the context that would be needed to decipher the nuances of the information she had so easily volunteered, he was appreciative of the way she was dragging him up the cliff even as she spoke. Tariq was rather less spry than he used to be, and had never been much of a climber besides. He'd more than once fallen while climbing Sintra's balcony, though he'd never used the stepladder she'd once ordered set against the wall in what was very much open mockery. The Pilgrim glanced down the sheer cliff, not in the slightest enjoying the fresh reminder that was he was currently dangling down a rope above the height of storm clouds. If he fell down that, it would be more than pride and a planting of bluebells that would sting of it.

"So who was the other?" Archer asked, wedging her boot into a crevice and nimbly hoisting herself up.

"The other?" Tariq asked.

"Praesi ruler," the young woman clarified.

"Ah, that would be Triumphant if the old histories are to be believed," he answered.

His tone was a little hurried, as the rope had grown taut with her rising and he'd done his best to follow her path.

"Ah, Triumphant," Archer hummed. "Now there was a real horror. She's always fun to read about, isn't she?"

If one enjoyed pages depicting a procession of brutal massacres and subjugation, culminating in hubris so flagrant it moved not one but two empires on the other side of the Tyrian Sea to wage war on her. Which Tariq did not, for all that the learning of history was important. Praesi histories tended to be sickening, as a rule, a parade of savageries always trying to exceed the last. Dread Empress Triumphant had been the worst of that lot by a fair margin, and one did not need to read of her attempted annihilations in the Chain of Hunger and the Titanomachy to be disgusted. Even the atrocities she'd resorted to in the cowing of the powerful Alamans tribes that'd dwelled on the shores of Lake Artoise were worthy of revulsion, and they'd been but a pale shadow of what she'd inflicted on Callow.

"If you say so," the Pilgrim replied.

Indrani did not pay his answer any heed, for she was making vaguely pleased noises and wedging herself against outcroppings – only to move swiftly from side to side, rising up as far as the rope allowed and swinging a leg over what appeared to be the ground floor of a tunnel. She rolled back and helped up Tariq, putting those muscled arms to work hoisting up his wizened frame. They unhooked the rope, after that, and the Pilgrim wove the slightest sliver of Light into a globe.

“You don’t know the trick for seeing in the dark?” Archer asked him, looking surprised.

“The Light reveals many enchantments as well,” Tariq told her, “and subtleties that leaning on one’s Bestowal does not. Best we advance cautiously, yes?”

“I suppose,” she said. “Might be the Callowans put up some-“

She paused, or perhaps it might be more accurate to say she was interrupted. Her senses were sharp, but Tariq had more to rely on than what his frail mortal shell could provide: the Ophanim whispered into his ear, urgent but not disapproving. Above them, Liesse shook and a rampant clamour was distantly heard.

“Well,” Indrani said. “It looks like slow and careful just took a leap down that cliff.”

“So it did,” the Grey Pilgrim murmured.

“Look at the bright side, Peregrine,” Archer cheerfully said. “*Nobody* does distraction like Catherine.”

Caerulea

Vote! (for A Practical Guide to Evil)

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

(Discord:)

<https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>

I guess I am still doing this.

Andrew Mitchell

I’m glad you’re still doing it. 😊

[*Liliet*](#)

You are a blessing on this fandom

[happyhavak](#)

If it helps, this reminds me every time I see it and I never fail to cast my vote.

Naeddyr

Traitorous MVP. Thanks for the chapter!

Halinn

I like Traitorous even more now!

naturalnuke

"To be redeemed one must have at least one redeemable quality. Addendum: Yes, even if a choir is involved."

Think we just learned where this came from.

[Stable](#)

Most Villainous Praesi

[Javvies](#)

Lol. Tariq's wishing he wasn't involved in this right about now.

Ah, Indrani, never change.

Though, I admit, I'd probably be worried about Archer going hands free in climbing off I were in Tariq's place. On the other hand, she may drink more than anyone except the Wandering Bard, but Archer does know what she can and can't do.

I wonder how what Tariq learns from Archer will affect his views on Cat and company.

Dainpdf

Even Cat has been worried about her drinking... and she wasn't hanging from a rope way above cloud line.

[Liliet](#)

S A M E @ all of that ♥ ♥ ♥

Indrani is so proud of her very distracting friend!

Hierus

"Nobody does distraction like Catherine." hahhahahaha. Well said.

Someguy

Something is on fire isn't it?

Dainpdf

You just know goblinfire will *somehow* end up involved.

IDKWhoitis

Probably an old store of it that Goblins failed to ignite when Cat pulled that Goblinfire trick at the palace in Book 3.

Elena

Well, we never did confirm how goblinfire's magic-killing properties interact with Arcadia and we'd get to see how it effects hell as a bonus.

Dainpdf

Considering we heard it implied it was made of demon...

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not yet, AFAICT, I'm sure that will change eventually. 😊

Neon156

Well, that just happen

Someguy

"The Hashmallim that was tricked into perdition by Dread Emperor Traitorous," the Pilgrim agreed. "It is well-known, in some circles. He was one of the only two Praesi rulers to successfully harm a Choir."

Hail Dread Emperor Traitorous!

[sengachi](#)

Traitorous: once impersonated his Chancellor with a robe and a pair of melons

Also Traitorous: damned an *angel*

Gibborim

Perhaps that was even the same story!

KageLupus

Hashmallim are the Angels of Contrition, right? So that means that Traitorous was able to trick an Angel into thinking he was contrite and wanted to atone for his many, many sins. Then turned that around and screwed the Angel in the process.

A quick definition of perdition says it is " a state of eternal punishment and damnation into which a sinful and unpenitent person passes after death". So that now sounds very much like Traitorous managed to switch places with an Angel and have it get punished in his place.

Mental Mouse

Angel: "I'm sorry I set eyes on that asshole..."

NerfContessa

Wow.... We must hear more about how he did that.

I mean the angels here are. So far out moralitywise this should be even more impossible than it would be with "regular" Angels....

Traitorous remains immensely cool.

SITB

"Traitorous's Law: while redemption is the greatest victory one can achieve over a villain, to function it does require the villain to have at least a single redeemable quality.

Addendum: Yes, even if a Choir is involved."

– Extract from 'The Axiom Appendix', multiple contributors

Thief of Words

Best cobbler remains a maker of excellent shoes.

Big I

I thought Irritant was the cobbler

Stormblessed

I loved the part where Tariq reacted to the story of the Woe's way into Skade and how they lied so blatantly to get there. That was deeply satisfying, as was his general confusion about why Archer was so cavalier in giving out information when Cat was so clamored and tip lipped.

Basically, Cat says only what is useful and what she wants him to know, but Archer tells him everything but what is useful and what he would want to know.

Dainpdf

It was pretty reckless, as artifice goes. Really, that whole adventure succeeded in great part because the King of Winter wanted it to.

[Liliet](#)

To be fair, Cat counted on that in her calculations – they were brought to Skade when trying to return to Marchford, and that's as blatant and invitation as it gets. She was not technically lying!

Dainpdf

Except for the fraud/impersonation thing where she signed in the name of the King of Winter.

[Liliet](#)

Well, yeah.

But she was just actualizing what she knew was a real invitation!

Amoonymous

This is a great point. She only mentioned the plan and not the reasons behind it (e.g. they essentially WERE invited by the King as they could only move towards Skade, or that they only used that plan to buy time to figure out what they were going to do – not with the intent to destroy Winter).

Novice

I fucking love Traitorous, man. Of course he fucking tricked an angel. I should have known he had it in him ever since reading the excerpt about Traitorous passing off as his Chancellor with a wig and a pair of cantaloupes. If he could trick the viper's nest that is the imperial court, he could trick an angel.

erebus42

Personally, I prefer the story of him starting a secret cabal set on overthrowing him, him usurping the throne from himself, and then preceding to betray his co-conspirators. As for the angel? Of course he had it in him. And we all know why he did it right?
Because he could and because it wouldn't have seen it coming.

sutortyrannus

"My dear friends, I have a confession to make. Some creative reframing of the truth may have taken place during the planning of this coup."
– Dread Emperor Traitorous, addressing the Order of the

Unholy Obsidian upon successfully usurping the throne from himself

Gotta love it.

antoninjohn

Cat really knows how to have great foreplay

Kissaten

>“The Hashmallim that was tricked into perdition by Dread Emperor Traitorous,” the Pilgrim agreed. “It is well-known, in some circles. He was one of the only two Praesi rulers to successfully harm a Choir.”

Bullying doesn't count as harming, eh

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Cat's not Praesi, wouldn't count either way.

Dainpdf

Didn't put any corpses in lakes, at least.

Also, not a Praesi ruler.

Alivaril

“The Hashmallim that was tricked into perdition by Dread Emperor Traitorous,” the Pilgrim agreed. “It is well-known, in some circles. He was one of the only two Praesi rulers to successfully harm a Choir.”

More proof that Traitorous is the best emperor known to Praes. Villains are immortal unless killed; how do we know that he hasn't been every other Emperor/Empress since then? Even the Malacia interludes could just be an Aspect intended to trick even himself. [/s]

ATRDCI

Triumphant: I can force an Angel through sheer power!

Cat: I can force a Choir through Story!

Traitorous: Hold my thrice poisoned wine...

[Liliet](#)

y e s

(also, he didn't need an antidote: the three poisons interacted to cancel each other. the poisoners, who did not know about each other, were all very surprised)

[Javvies](#)

He's Named. He has to have known the trick for ignoring poisons.

But it didn't stop him from being responsible for hiring one of the poisoners, tricking a cabal into hiring the second, and living another life as the third one.

[Liliet](#)

Oh yeah, forgot about that part ♥

[Fuodiachloris](#)

Thrice? Oh, a slow day, then... 😊

JJR

Don't hold his wine, at least one of those poisons is contact poison smeared on the outside of the cup.

erebus42

First off, go fuck yourself Saint! Yeah! Ivah for the win! Second, Archer and Pilgrim are certainly a fun match.

[sengachi](#)

Ivah is really earning that Lordship, huh?

Isaac Martinez

I don't know. Reading that the honorable Peregrim Fleet-Foot saying solemnly "No Shit" is kinda...

Dainpdf

It does seem out of place.

erebus42

I took it as him sarcastically echoing what she had previously said.

Dainpdf

Sure, but having him engage in banter with Archer like this still seems out of place.

Maybe he's reading her and tailoring his approach?

[Liliet](#)

I think he's...

...drumshot...

...somewhat off balance 😊

Dainpdf

I am going to count this joke as an act of Evil.

carrier

Not with the right intonation.
I imagined a resigned voice.

[Liliet](#)

^^^

It is possible in a very specific way, he just, you know...
sounds like Gandalf driven insane by ~~hobbits~~ kender

[Liliet](#)

Indrani got to him ♥ ♥ ♥ so fucking beautiful

[Euodiachloris](#)

The cliff collaborated quite a bit, mind. 😊

Soma

Ah interludes. Perhaps we're nearing the end of this arc? It's
always nice to see what the Woe has wrought through the eyes of
others.

Dainpdf

Perhaps not quite like her, but I believe both Robber and Kairos
to be quite good at distractions.

And nice to see Saint and Cat pseudo bonding. Also? Yoink! Poor
Vivi, got substituted by Ivah.

Oshi

It's better at it anyway.

Sylwoos

Cat's opinion of a diversion is putting your house in fire,
ambush you as you're trying to flee, then punch you repeatedly
in the face. All that for somebody to sneak in the back
entrance and steal your cupcake before the fire get to them.

Kissaten

Cat is a Thief in a sense, too. Vivi's shtick was stealing stuff so large one couldn't believe it being stolen, like, fleets of ships, suns and months worth of supplies, as well as entire treasuries. Cat's is to take others' aspects and roles. Ivah is not so much stealing as tying loose ends, it doesn't achieve ridiculous feats, just loots what was lying around on the floor unclaimed.

Dainpdf

Cat's thing is Taking, not Stealing. Important distinction.

And this just **was** a yoink moment. Casually appearing from stealth to steal a thing and in the process ruin someone's plan.

Hierus

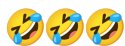
““No shit,” the Grey Pilgrim solemnly confirmed.” I don't think that really fits how the grey pilgrim speaks, as hilarious as it is

It's an echo of Archer's earlier statement.

C_B

Yeah, I can just hear him carefully enunciating it in “uncomfortable dad trying really hard to use teen slang correctly” voice.

Andrew Mitchell



[*Liliet*](#)

y e s

Iconochasm

Dab on the Dead King.

JJR

Yeet him back to hell.

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

“Yeet”... my niece only told me about that word a couple of weeks ago, I'm pretty sure this is the first time I've seen it in the wild.

[*TeK*](#)

“until the Horned Lord leapt over the cliff’s edge of that was the end of the ducal palace”

That’d be the last we’ll see of him.

Someguy

No bet. He returns with his own Band of 5. Dead Dude does not strike me as the type to not collect the whole set.

ATRDCI

Nah, Laurence specifically said that there’s been very little activity from Skein compared to the other Horned Lords, and connects this with Cats reveal that it’s a Revenant for the Dead King.

[Miles](#)

He already has a band of 5. There’s a whole song about it. Most of them are dead though.

Artisan Noodle

Yeah, nobody could survive that fall.

P

So did Tancred Papenheim then sent back a single torch, with on the side engraved three words: ‘if you can’.

And here is the difference that I’ve seen between the Lycaonese and the Callowans laid bare. The good people of Callow would have sent two words; an imperative verb relating to copulation and some form of a second person pronoun.

They don’t seem to care about being witty, or pretty, or brave. Callow only seems to care about seeing their enemies defeated. It doesn’t matter if the have to salt their own lands, eat boot leather for a year, and then slash their own throats; so long as the other guy loses as well they don’t care. Even William was a perfect example of them, he was so suicidal that despite the skills his Name implied, the Choir of Contrition still had to give him an ability to resurrect himself.

Hell, even Edward Fairfax, given the chance to repay the indignity of being a slave beyond death was willing to accept what a woman who had had ties to Winter described as “unkind” solely to spit in his former master’s face. I honestly doubt that he even cared if it would actually accomplish anything, the chance to potentially knife his enemy in the toe is too much for their brand of insanity to ignore. And neither

Laurence or Tariq understand. But that's to be expected, they're not Callowan.

P

That was meant to be a top level comment... 😞

[Stable](#)

It was a top comment in our hearts.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Not just Edward; every last citizen of Liesse gets a "kick arse, take Names, make the bastards who would use you without asking effing well pay" invite.

I think most only didn't rise in under three seconds because they had to slip their happy-dance pumps off and reach for the hotmail boots. Those who did rise immediately already were tooled-up and ready to rumble. Probably because they had died in the middle of a brawl?

[Euodiachloris](#)

Really, spellchecker? "Hobnail" escapes you? <_<

[minichirops](#)

I feel like the author deserves props for me ignoring the inherent insanity until now.

Caleb Corkum

They never die when they leap off of a cliff. Also, if the death isn't explicitly shown or confirmed, they're probably not dead.

Andrew Mitchell

Yep.

IDKWhoitis

Although probably boring in comparison, I do wonder what the armies in Creation are up to. Like is Juniper planning a rapid retreat if need be? Or is she negotiating with the Lev commander?

Is Viv talking with the Drow?

werafdsaew

It's less than a day; they're probably still sorting out their wounded.

[Liliet](#)

Less than an *hour* if Cat's comment is to be taken literally.

[sengachi](#)

The poetry of Cat bypassing the certain trap that was using the dead spirits of Liesse by passing the buck off to the dead Fairfax King of Callow, whose claim to those spirits supercedes even that of the Dead King's, is just beautiful. Especially considering she nabbed him from the Dead King.

Also, dang, she really gave the King the best way to go out he could possibly hope for, didn't she? Leading dead Callowans in death against the Dead King, when in life Callowan dead under the Dead King's control were probably what killed him.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah ♥ ♥ ♥

[onedollargum](#)

The Pilgrim getting told to look on the bright side. XD

superkeaton

The Woe are a bad influence on poor little Tariq. First they gave him hope, now he's swearing. By the end of this, he'll trade angels and miracles for crows and backsass. Also, I appreciate that the more he learns of Catherine's "negotiations" and "plans", the more frustrated he gets.

[Liliet](#)

SHE JUST DOES THAT TO PEOPLE ♥ ♥ ♥

[Mental Mouse](#)

Remember the last time we heard Pilgrim swear: When Catherine surrendered!

Seems so long ago.... 😊

Caleb Corkum



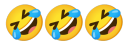
[Cold Cyberia](#)

Hashmallim: Repent! Repent! Repent!

Traitorous: My good friends, I deeply and sincerely regret my previous actions. Let me repent by bringing a new age of justice

and enlightenment to the Dread Empire. *crosses fingers behind his back*

Andrew Mitchell



Draconic

I think that was a lie. It was just a new age of contrition, not justice and enlightenment. After all, a new age of justice and enlightenment should include dead angels of justice and enlightenment buried under Praesi cities.

Mental Mouse

The Choir of Enlightenment would probably produce some *really* annoying heroes. 😊

Shoddi

A Shining Prince, perhaps?

NerfGlastigUaine

Traitorous is awesome, but I'm still cheering on my man Kairos, the second-gen Traitorous. I believe that one day, he will out-traitor Traitorous. In fact, one of his schemes will be to resurrect Traitorous just to betray him, only to reveal it was a distraction for his real plan to kill the Gods by baking the world's largest cake, only to reveal he is in fact a disguised Traitorous sans cantaloupes but with red contact lens instead – you know, for the vampire vibe – only to reveal that Traitorous was/is actually a time-travelling Kairos all along! Kaitarous wins once again!

sutortyrannus

It's only Wednesday man, I can't brain hard enough to sort through this properly.

Andrew Mitchell

I'd love to this as a fully formed PGtE fanfiction. 😊

ATRDCI

My dear friend, how could you think so little of Kairos, our most steadfast ally, that you presume his plan to be so paltry as to not include breaking Dread Emperor Sorcerous from his prison in the moon?

sutortyrannus

"It is written that the Hidden Horror sent envoy to the Iron King Tancred, threatening that should he not strike the banners over Hannover and open the gates the city would be stormed and burned to ash. So did Tancred Papenheim then send back a single torch, with on the side engraved three words: 'if you can'."

– Extract from 'Crowned In Iron', a compendium of Lycaonese histories assembled by Prince Alexandre of Lyonis

"If". Great reference, one of my favourite stories from Ancient Greek history – right up there with "Molon Labe".

Great chapter, love these Interludes.

[Liliet](#)

Ancient Greek history? 🙄

sutortyrannus

Quote's a parallel to the story about how Phillip II of Macedon (Alexander the Great's father) threatened the Spartans with invasion with something along the lines of "You are advised to submit without further delay, for if I bring my army into your land, I will destroy your farms, slay your people, and raze your city."

The Spartan response was "If".

Clint

Right up there with: "Nuts."

[Liliet](#)

Omg.

Thank you ;u;

Eva

Such a great chapter ❤️

[NZPIEFACE](#)

>No shit

That's like the only time he's sworn.

[Liliet](#)

He's not swearing, he's echoing Indrani's own question ♥

[Mental Mouse](#)

There was at least one other recently, and more fervent: In response to Cat's surrender. I noted at the time that her machinations were literally enough to make a saint swear.

Mental Mouse

King Edward: "ARISE MY PEOPLE!"

Callowan shades: "ROWR!"

Neshamah (probably): "WTF?!?! Oh, shit..."

Kairos: "YEE-HAW!"

Skein the *giant undead ratling*: "AAHHH, they're crawling all over me they're eating me get them off get them off me AAHHHH"...
<jumps off cliff>

Rogue Sorcerer (probably): "Anybody seen my casting rod?"

Laurence: "Hmm, I better get Black's soul while everyone's distracted" ... "Dammit, Cat!"

Cat: "A big mistake's never really over, is it?"

Laurence: "Nope." <Looks up> "or on second thought..."

Pilgrim: "What fresh hell is this?"

Archer: "That's my Cat!"

Gunslinger

Very accurate chapter summary

Argentorum

Underrated post.

Draconic

Some typos I found, though a few of them might be as intended:

not proved to be a least a modicum -> at least

She'd been too later -> too late

with a priestess or ruin -> priestess of ruin?

there was no living -> no one living?

predecessors when Tariq -> predecessors, when Tariq

with a way bow in hand that might as well be sorcery -> with a way with the bow (Maybe? I think this sentence needs some more checking)

that no all such constrained -> not all such

young woman would not -> young woman, who would not

ruse fit to ender -> endear?

reminder that was he was -> that he was

more to rely on that what his -> than what his

Thanks as always!

Morgenstern

until the Horned Lord leapt over the cliff's edge of that was the end of the ducal palace -> edge of WHAT was
-> OR: edge that was [no "of"]

Caerulea

ruse fit to ender → ruse fit to enter

Mental Mouse

Also, Ivah's reappearance reminds us that Cat still has access to Creation through the Night. Probably doesn't even need a true gate, since one bird's with Cat, while the other is with Akua. Looks like Cat's banking her first winnings: Black still needs to actually be restored; if Akua can do that, it might be done before the band gets back!

Andrew Mitchell

I like the way you're thinking here. It would be nice to get Amadeus back (together) soon.

Insanenoodlyguy

Leads to a dramatic reveal at the right moment. We don't see or hear from him again till the peace conference. "What of Praes?" Asks Cordelia or some such, and in walks The Claimant.

shveiran

Mhm, it seems I may have to retract my previous commending of Laurence's steps. It seems she is still quite certain that any deal with Cat is temporary and she needs to be put down hard as soon as humanly possible.

It suggests her bantering is either an attempt at lulling her into a false sense of security (which is more intrigue than I would expect, but admittedly not that complex a facade that I can't see her put up) or she giving in to the shape of the "Band of Five" (article 7 of the Band of Five Trope Contract: Hilarious bantering will be partook in by all members no matter how grim the situation) without renouncing her determination to slay her at the first available opportunity.

I was rather unconvinced by the "Indrani's love moving Saint to allow a bridge being built" theory, but I'll admit the Small Sights chapter had me doubt my position. Still, it seems this proves we are still headed to a clash before, if ever, that conflict can be put to rest.

ATRDCl

Laurence must first be given temptation, shown how Not So Different her and Cat really are (more so early Cat than current Cat but still)

Given that this is Laurence, the more convincing the temptation the harder she will reject it because its very existence is just proof that Cat is the Enemy they must be killed never made truce with.

shveiran

Yeah, that was pretty much my argument when some suggested she may come around eventually: Saint has (because she lived the life she had and yadda yadda yadda not currently relevant) adopted the stance that "The enemy cannot be reasoned with, and any and all evidences of the contrary are a clever ruse we must not fall for else we pay dearly in ways yet unseen".

That stance cannot be countered or changed once it is fully adopted; any argument, proof, doubt or counterpoint will be received as just another trick and therefore not merely discarded but simply ignored as irrelevant.

I'm not saying she will, necessarily, never come around; but I am certain she won't SPONTANEOUSLY change her mind based on what she witnesses or is told. Nothing of the sort could persuade her, because any such evidence can be faked.

[Liliet](#)

I would say Laurence's logic is more like...

'the odds of Cat being a horrible evil villain are 1:100000'
-shown piece of evidence that makes Cat 10x less likely to be a horrible evil villain-

'ok the odds of Cat being a horrible evil villain are 1:10000'

-shown piece of evidence that makes Cat 2x less likely to be a horrible evil villain-

'ok the odds of Cat being a horrible evil villain are 1:5000'

-show piece of evidence that makes Cat 100x less likely to be a horrible evil villain-

'ok the odds of Cat being a horrible evil villain are 1:50'

proper Bayesian updating, just really, *really* faraway priors

[Liliet](#)

er, replace that with 'odds of Cat NOT being a horrible evil villain' or switch the two numbers around. whoops @ notation

Andrew Mitchell

I love the **idea** of Laurence being such a Bayesian but I just don't see it revealed by her POVs.

[Liliet](#)

I mean I don't think she thinks in literally those terms
lmao

I just think she does, y'know, *think*.

And Cat hasn't exactly been providing evidence exclusively *against* her being an evil villain, trope-wise =x

Insanenoodlyguy

There's also the corruption factor, which both her and Tariq have commented on. Namely, the whole "Cat of Tomorrow" problem. Cat, and several villains before her, can and have started with truly noble intentions that make them at least an Anti-Villain. The problem is, the things they do corrupt things. Cat was going to become more and more the Queen of Winter, hungry cold and hollow. Even if she was decent today, that thing she became in a fight would eventually be what she woke up in the morning as (Cat herself would agree with this assessment). You didn't HAVE to kill her because of who she was, but rather because of what she was going to be. Now, she's avoided that story, sure. But look at it from the outside. Yeah, she's not going to become Winter's Queen anymore. Instead she's the high priestess of two gods who each have a talon in her soul who become gods from lies, betray, self-consummation and murder. The thing they are looking at is detestably scarier than Winter, and it's sitting on her damn shoulder and laughing in a weird caw noise much too often for your taste. This is kicking the can down the road and ending up with an even bigger can. Tariq still sees hope, but as stated, Lawrence sees "If I cut the hand off now, the rot won't take the whole arm." it's not that she's denying that the hand isn't completely rotted through, it's that inevitably (as far as she's concerned) it's going to be.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

Remember when after book 4 ended there was a whole panic movement in the comment section about how Cat's going to be a slave to evil goddesses now?

What makes us the audience be okay with what's happening currently is our knowledge of:

- Komena and Andronike's backstory and genuinely good intentions;
- Komena and Andronike's current priorities;
- Catherine's point that she made to them successfully about how Below's approach fucking sucks;
- the details of her agreement with them about how SHE tells THEM what to do and not the other way around;
- the ongoing reiterating conversation that yes, it's Catherine who gets the last word when they're being EEEEVIL and she knows better.

Absolutely NONE of this Saint has so much as a HINT OF A CLUE about.

shveiran

Also, that would be a fully unsatisfying ending and we have come to fully trust EE to deliver awesome stories.

Let's not kid ourselves here, that's the main reason. We know it is going to be ok.

Whereas "ok" may or may not mean "awesome tragedy", but still, enslaved by Komena and Andronike is really, really not in the cards.

[Liliet](#)

THAT TOO LMAO

Which just serves to highlight how Tariq and Laurence cannot possibly know what we do :3

Rook

I think you hit the nail on the head right there.

We know for a fact that Catherine isn't like the other Villains – by omniscient reader-view into her every thought since she first became the Squire.

The Saint just has to judge by what she sees, and even though she's wrong about Catherine now, she's literally never been wrong before about every other Villain she ever had contact with.

If that paranoia drives her to strike at Catherine here even when it isn't warranted, it'd be a tragedy for both of them.

I'm hoping Catherine finds a way to convince her even a little. If a jaded shell of a person like the Saint can be convinced, it'd be definitive proof that anyone can be. That it's within Catherine's power to bridge that gap, no matter how wide.

werafdsaew

> she's literally never been wrong before about every other Villain she ever had contact with.

How do you even know that for sure? She might have executed people who didn't need executing and no one would know.

Rook

Her role is a cleanup crew for horror shows, rather than the prevention of them. She always arrives AFTER everything has already gone to shit.

Considering this was stated in her own inner monologue (in this very chapter) as well as being outright confirmed Tariq who literally has psychic, semi-omniscient, mind-reading angels on his shoulder, I think it's safe to say that it's about as close to an absolute assurance as you could have about any character in the entire series.

The Saint doesn't have to guess. There is no ambiguity. Whether she likes it or not, her entire Role is killing the Akuas of the world *after* they've committed their second liesses.

It's likely that's actually why she hasn't, or perhaps even can't (with any degree of success), taken a swing at Catherine during this latest trip. Cat is a Villain that Laurence absolutely despises, but she hasn't actually done anything even remotely approaching 'Evil' since the band of five was formed. The headsman that beheads irreconcilable monsters doesn't have any narrative weight behind her swing, when her target isn't being a monster.

[Liliet](#)

Y e p.

It's interesting, by the way, how her and Tariq's POVs on her Role differ. He just says 'oh yeah Heavens send her places as a post-disaster cleanup crew'.

She places responsibility for arriving late on herself.

One of them is religious and it's not Laurence 😊

shveiran

Uhm... no. What we know is that both she and Tariq believe it.

That's it.

Considering Saint is not a balanced observer and Tariq's insights comes from an angel, there is no particular reason to believe their version is nothing BUT their version.

Let's not forget Above assumes anyone on the other side is a wound upon creation, Cat included. Intentions don't matter, ACTIONS don't matter (e. g. William), long-term consequences don't matter. All there is, is the flag.

Rook

The level of reaching here to try framing the Heroes to be in the wrong for everything is becoming so ridiculous it approaches outright stupidity

Typical Villains being a blight on Creation isn't some uniquely Above-centric rhetoric. Black himself has explicitly acknowledged this, and he's a near-emotionless killing machine with absolutely zero moral compass and more personal disdain for Above than the Saint has for Catherine. Unless you want to try claiming that Amadeus of the Green Stretch is a Heroic partisan of Above, then it's pretty much a fact acknowledged by everyone with a modicum of sense on both sides that typical Villainy is a wound on creation.

Speaking to Malicia:

"Alaya, we consistently blunder so badly we need to rely on demons to stay off destruction. We would rather irreparably damage the fabric of Creation than admit we can be wrong. There is nothing holy about our culture, it needs to be ripped out root and stem as matter of bare survival. Forty years I have been trying to prove success can be achieved without utter raving madness ..."

Speaking to Akua:

"You," Black said, "are the incarnation of waste. Of every destructive instinct that must be carved out or repurposed lest we ever reach old ends through old means. Your accolades are as worthless as every single thing you've ever said and done. They will pass, and be forgotten. We will all be better for it."

The most monstrous Villain of his generation waged a decades long war on old-school Villainy because it was

so wasteful and destructive that he felt it threatened their own survival.

Not only that, we have the Saint here empathizing with Catherine – someone she’s actively attempting to kill – about second llesse with explicit examples about the kind of situations she normally deals with. In this very chapter.

“... it came from the same place that had the Saint of Swords wondering what might have changed, if she’d arrived a sennight early instead of late. If she might have slain the beast when it’d taken a handful instead of a village, if she’d found Isodorios when the dragonblood first began to decay instead of after the red had taken him. What if, that old and tireless flagellant’s whip.”

Skepticism in itself isn’t wrong but this is getting ridiculous. Everything shown in the text directly contradicts the idea that the Saint and Pilgrim are generally mistaken about the character of people they fight against. A few chapters ago in Entreaty, even Catherine herself directly accepted what the Pilgrim was saying about the Saint’s life and role as most likely true. Let that sink in for a second there.

Sorry to break it to you but your stance is the crackpot fan theory here, not mine.

shveiran

Dude, you need to chill.

My disagreeing with your conclusion does not mean I disagree with you on everything you’ve ever said, written or thought.

I am not “framing the Heroes for everything”, I am saying Above thinks in terms of white and black and people don’t act that way. Their moral framework leaves no room for finesse and that is why GENERALLY RIGHT does not mean – cannot mean – ALWAYS RIGHT.

I am not claiming Above is always at fault; I’m simply refusing your statement that “the Saint’s approach has never been wrong in the past”, because I see no evidence for it save a two people’s opinions backed by an otherworldly being that physically cannot bend enough to take into account human nuances.

Arguing against your conclusion is not quite the same as believing its polar opposite.

Rook

I got too riled up, yes.

On the subject of the debate though, my point there still stands. The skepticism you're putting forth is so far gone as to be beyond all reason.

Ask yourself. If your argument is that it's not believable because it is simply 'two characters opinions ...', despite the fact that it's both the protagonist and one of the primary antagonists, what would it take to prove it to you? How many other things that are normally taken at face value would be thrown out the window by following the same strict criteria?

Would you need ten characters? Several flashback chapters detailing the story, dedicated to setting it in stone? An explicit author's note?

Considering that this is a novel, not a fantasy history textbook or a dictionary, you must to an extent take the writing to an extent at face value. Character background simply cannot be developed with the level of assurance you're looking for, without damaging the quality of the writing.

When Catherine thinks 'some feat is beyond what I can do right now', you don't be a skeptic to the point of ridiculousness and respond 'well that's what she thinks, it's the opinion of just one character. She's young and not an optimistic thinker. Has she ever tested it? No? Let's assume she actually can and that she's just mistaken until irrefutably proven otherwise'. Because at that point the skepticism has reached such stupid levels that it becomes near-impossible to discuss anything at all.

werafdsaew

You're making a leap here. Saint's Role being X doesn't mean she can *NEVER* step out of her role from time to time. For example, Pilgrim's role being saving people doesn't mean he cannot punish the errant Prince of Orense in "Peregrine IV", even though that action didn't save anyone.

Rook

It's outright stated by the Pilgrim, and even Catherine believed him. Catherine, who has more reason to be

skeptical than anyone considering they've spent nearly three volumes actively attempting to kill her.

A bit of a small leap when it's a direct quote from six chapters ago. Certainly a far smaller a leap than supposing the opposite. The ball is in your court.

Chapter 40 of this book -Entreaty:

Quote 1, the Pilgrim confirms:

"... Yet mine was still the lighter of the burdens, for even Laurence's victories have only ever come in the wake of disaster."

My brows furrowed. If I was following his meaning correctly, he was implying that while his role had been snuffing out disasters before they could fully form while the Saint of Swords had been... well, cutting of limbs when the rot took."

Emphasis, "even Laurence's victories have ONLY ever come in the wake of disaster"

Quote 2&3, Catherine's reaction/evaluation:

"And I could see, through the grief in his voice, that there truly was a tragedy there. Because he might be a decent actor, I thought, and perhaps a liar of some skill if there was cause for it, but he had not taken to it the way some of the people I knew had. The tremor in his voice was genuine, coming from someone who'd never learned to fake it so perfectly they'd blurred even to themselves the difference between truth and lies. "

shveiran

All this is valid only under the assumption that Pilgrim, angels and Saint cannot be wrong on the subject. I refer you to my comment above, since the discussion is branching.

[Miles](#)

It's not her fault, it's Traitorous's. Because they won't try to redeem irredeemable villains any more if it risks their own.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> she's literally never been wrong before about every other Villain she ever had contact with.

> Her role is a cleanup crew for horror shows, rather than the prevention of them. She always arrives AFTER everything has already gone to shit.

It occurs to me that this would represent one helluva selection bias for her experiences!

[Liliet](#)

Y E P

And funny story here... something I noticed... note the difference in view of it between her and Tariq.

Tariq:

> "Laurence de Montfort was sent forth, for near as many years as I, when there was absolutely nothing left to save," he gravely said.

Laurence:

> It came from the same place that had the Saint of Swords wondering what might have changed, if she'd arrived a sennight early instead of late. If she might have slain the beast when it'd taken a handful instead of a village, if she'd found Isodorios when the dragonblood first began to decay instead of after the red had taken him. What if, that old and tireless flagellant's whip.

Tariq's view is that it was Above/Heavens/Providence/ whatever sending her forth. That it was an external force being cruel to her, that she actually did not *have* the option of arriving on time.

Laurence assumes personal responsibility for all the shit timing.

I actually... probably agree with Tariq here? If the same thing keeps happening, in this 'verse it's very likely to be the work of a story / a pattern / something you cannot easily change.

But that's not Laurence's view. She's... she's *not religious*. She does not put trust in a higher power to guide her, she just does things, and all the personal responsibility she assumes herself.

There are... so many levels on which this matters, but one I would like to highlight here is that this means she does not *think* there is a selection bias. She thinks the world just works the way it's been working for her for sixty years. That the things that happened to her every time are indeed inevitable.

I mean, it's obviously not an absolute view, on some level she has to have noticed that other things happen to other people. She trusts Tariq for a reason.

But...

She does not correct for selection bias as fully as it applies.

Mental Mouse

> She does not correct for selection bias as fully as it applies.

Indeed. But that's the thing about selection bias, in science, literature, or even life in general: The specific hazard of selection bias is exactly that it restricts your view, leading you to false generalizations and blinding you to potential contradiction. That's why it's so hard to avoid or to correct for. And Laurence has got it bad...

Liliet

Mhm =x

I'm not exactly blaming her for this =x

Liliet

I think Laurence is struggling with an internal conflict of 'but evil' 'but catherine foundling' 'but evil' 'but catherine foundling' 'but evil'.

She's engaging in banter despite herself :3

shveiran

I'm honestly curious, where do you see evidence of this? Is it just the banter?

I'm really not getting that read, but I admit I really think she isn't conflicted and that may lead to me ignoring contrary evidence.

Liliet

The banter is part of it. Do note that she was surprised and changed her approach instantly when she realized what Catherine's problem actually was. I think Laurence is conflicted because there's an obvious conflict right there, and I don't think she's a complete idiot, you know? Her narration sounds like she's absolutely certain of everything, but note that she's still going along with

Tariq's plan and note how she dropped "if the Black Queen is indeed going to cling to her last scraps of decency". Laurence is not the kind to enunciate her problems out loud, not even in her internal monologue. She prefers to bury them and wait for them to burn themselves out one way or another.

The thing with deep 3rd person POV in Guide is, it still doesn't capture 100% of a person's thinking process. Deliberately, at that – we wouldn't have been able to get snippets like Bard's POV if they were perfectly spoilery. There's always undercurrents that don't come to the surface explicitly.

And Laurence is, like, a paragon of certainty. Unshakable confidence/faith is like her main power, of course she's not voicing doubts she's having in her position. In this case, absence of evidence is *really* not evidence of absence, any more than us not knowing Cat's plan for dealing with Larat beyond 'have a band of 5' means she doesn't have one.

And we do have evidence of what she's thinking, which does add up to an internal conflict, because she's getting external evidence for two conflicting conclusions. And she's not discounting it, we know she isn't... ah, to be fair, I'm writing this after the next chapter drop, with fresh new evidence available.

On a basic level my prediction making algorithm is basically "if I were the writer / if I were to take over at this point / if I were writing a fic, what would I do with this". Erratic is a million times better writer than me, but a lot of things he does are predictable just because they're the best possible move, like how Cat commented about Juniper early on.

This story is most interesting and Laurence's throwaway lines have the most narrative value if that's what's going on. So that's what I'm assuming, and hey, haven't been proven wrong yet :3

(There's something to be said for pure internal consistency: a model that might not have a clear and undeniable chunk of evidence confirming it, but that just *explains everything* in a tidy way)

shveiran

I'll read the next chapter and continue the discussion there, then. Right now, I can see what you are coming from but... I don't think you are right. But maybe next chapter will change my mind; I'll try to be open to these concepts.

[Liliet](#)

^^

[Mental Mouse](#)

Agreeing on all counts, even before seeing the next chapter. I will note:

> Erratic is a million times better writer than me, but a lot of things he does are predictable just because they're the best possible move, like how Cat commented about Juniper early on.

For an author, "best possible move" is very subjective... in this forum, we have a group of fans, selected by the point that all of us have read this far and liked it, and many of us have been discussing the narrative for months.. That naturally gives us a fair bit of rapport, not just with each other, but with the author. That's why we can *sometimes* predict his "best possible move" for the Guideverse.

Erratic's authorial skill shows in being able to create a world with enough depth and consistency to support author/reader rapport, and then to *keep* that rapport over this many chapters and months. Compare to the current fuss over the ending of the TV version of Game of Thrones – I haven't followed the show myself, but reports of the finale are that they broke the characters, world-rules, and even continuity, so badly that viewers were just going WTF, and not in the good way.

[Javvies](#)

To be fair, from what I understand of the Game of Thrones finale (and season 8 in general), it was in large part a continuation of the degradation of Story quality, consistency, and logic, that occurred more or less whenever they went off-book, and they'd had two full seasons of continuously going off book immediately prior to season 8, making for three nominally full seasons of going off book, and that has a cumulative effect. Well, depending on storyline, some storylines went off book earlier than others.

Plus they started rushing, and whenever you try to rush a story to its conclusion, bad things happen, which made everything worse.

Granted, I'm not sure where they pulled the decision on the succession out of, nor do I think I really want to know.

That is, the problems people are pointing out and complaining about in/with the finale (and season 8 in general) didn't actually start in season 8 – they started much earlier.

Admittedly, GoT kept raising the bar in terms of strict cinematography and visual spectacle ... but that's all there was.

And the visual spectacle did keep the volume of complaints down, to a point ... in earlier seasons. But visual spectacle alone does not a quality story make.

Admittedly, I haven't actually seen all of GoT season 8 yet, and at this point, I'm not sure I want to, even though I did see the previous seasons.

[Liliet](#)

I know very little about the TV version of GoT but even I heard echoes of THAT drama.

You're not wrong in that familiarity with the way specifically erratic handles storytelling is a lot of it; still there ARE objective criteria. Like, yes, internal consistency of characterization, worldbuilding and continuity, as a great example. Erratic knows what he's doing, and in my experience a lot can be deduced the way Cat figured out Kairos's plots: I see what he's doing, I'm assuming the results are what he intended to do, so what do the results actually do?

It's fun to be in a fandom of a *really good* writer :3

[Mental Mouse](#)

> It's fun to be in a fandom of a really good writer :3

Oh yeah.

werafdsaew

I think there may be a pivot–Saint's pivot on whether she turns on Cat or not at the end.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Still, it seems this proves we are still headed to a clash

Actually, Cat might just run out the clock on Saint. Once Pilgrim and Indrani get Masego straightened out, Saint doesn't have an excuse to attack him. Then Cat Chooses The Crown and calls Larat. Saint might get to help with killing god!Larat (Cat expects a simple execution, but she might get a nasty

surprise). A reprise by DK could still make trouble, but eventually Everybody Goes Home Afterwards, and Saint has to Wait 'Till Next Time.

shveiran

But DOES she, though?

Tariq is on board with the whole "let's move the armies north and make war together", but will she stay her hand?

[Mental Mouse](#)

And from the future... heh heh heh (yeah, on my prior self).

Insanenoodlyguy

Hmm, she talks of an ending and facing it... I think Saint is getting ready to die.

If I had to guess, she's pulling the heroic equivalent of what Warlock did, namely, if you go into something completely willing and KNOWING you are going to die, though you will surely do so barring outside intervention (and it only works if that intervention is completely unexpected on your end), you will succeed in whatever goal you have.

Cat has made clear what's going to happen if she goes for Black or Masego, perhaps she's thinking her story ends with removing two or even three of the biggest threats at the cost of herself, doing the first and then succeeding in the latter at the cost of mortal wounds. Probably planning her final words before she dies, no doubt witnessed by Tariq and maybe one or two of the other heroes.

Of course, she's not paying attention to what the signs are telling her. It just happened that all the wraiths blocked her way long enough for the soul to be ferreted away. That's some hard story intervention right there. She lost them Black, whatever else happens, he's not hers to take anymore.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Hmm, she talks of an ending and facing it... I think Saint is getting ready to die.

It would be ironic but logical if Saint tries for Masego and he flat no-sells her. If he was ever in a position to pull a *snap* on her, this is it. Or he could just dump her in a random Hell.

Irrelevant

So I was rereading the story, and Cat just met with the hidden horror for the first time. In that conversation he tells her the the good old tyrant wove a trap for the angels, something we have yet to see pay off.

Now that he is as far as he is, perhaps it's time for that to pay off?

[Mental Mouse](#)

That was furthered at the "conclave" where the band was formed. One of Kairos' terms for joining in, was that afterwards, Hanno would stand trial before Hierarch.

Frolamiz

"Catherine Foundling had yet to strike a single blow with a blade since she'd returned to Iserre from her journeys, the rumours went."

Yes, and this will give the first strike even more narrative weight.

Daniel E

"Her idea of a ruse meant to unseat the King of Winter was a lie so blatant, even the Fae hesitated to call BS". I actually laughed out loud at this. Spilled my tea a little 😅

[Liliet](#)

The best part is how it was valid logic on both Catherine's and the fae's part. Catherine: "if he didn't want me to fake his signature on an invitation he wouldn't have invited me". Fae: "if she's faking the signature of the King of Winter and he doesn't want her to she's not just dead she's super mega dead and she would know it, so he probably did invite her". And he did!

[Mental Mouse](#)

To which Cat's proper response is "look, it *worked*. Have you ever dealt with fae?".

KingWillisIV

I love the comparison of Robber saying "Nobody does crazy like the boss" and now Idrani saying "Nobody does distraction like Catherine". They're distinctly different and yet with so much overlap.

[Liliet](#)

Yes ;u;

Mental Mouse

On occasion of Skein's unceremonious exit, I would like to mention a quibble I have with it's excessive size.:

It's repeatedly been described specifically as being 60 feet tall. Even allowing "tall" to blur into "long" – that's the height of a multistory building! AFAICT the only land animals that big in our world were the biggest of the dinosaurs, the giant sauropods. Something like that doesn't go *into* a building, so much as *through* it. And even allowing for magical strength, I'd say having it scampering around would involve a fair bit of damage to the environment.

E.g.:

> until the Horned Lord leapt over the cliff's edge of that was the end of the ducal palace.

→

"The courtyard's paving buckled beneath the Horned Lord's leap, and again when it landed near the cliff's edge that was the end of the ducal palace. Another leap took the bulk over the edge, along with a fair bit of the edge. A thunderous concussion marked its descent to the wasteland's surface; a few moments later, a horned head rose into view as the revenant peered back warily at the proceedings."

Mental Mouse

(And yes, something that big needs three sentences to get out of the room. 😊)

Liliet

I think the cliff is just THAT TALL.

Liliet

(I mean Tariq did mention they were higher than some clouds)

Mental Mouse

> I think the cliff is just THAT TALL.

> I mean Tariq did mention they were higher than some clouds

Tariq was being hauled up a cliff in another location, while the rest were in a courtyard (so, the city's original ground level). Also, I wouldn't count on this shard having a "normal" atmosphere.

But yes, I was handwaving some details for illustrative purposes. 😊 In that case, my point was that 60 feet (most of 20 meters) is the size of a 4-to-6 story building, or a fairly intimidating cliff.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah ♥

Interlude: Renunciation

"We fight not only our own wars but those of our forebears and our children, for we inherit the wounds of those before us and pass our own to those that follow. And so, fools that we are, we keep trying to fill one grave by digging another."

– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

The damned rat had made a mess on the way out, though that'd turned out of some use: whatever blighted eastern sorcery kept the last stretch of the palace protected it'd been no match for a Horned Lord fleeing without much thought given to its surroundings. Its swinging tail and massive limbs had torn through walls and halls, baring what looked like a set of large private chambers – maybe the lodgings of whatever jackals had settled into this place after the Dukes of Liesse were chased out. Even eviscerated in such a way the palace was not defenceless: the first wave of wraiths to try charging through the opening had dispersed like smoke in the wind. So much, Laurence had thought, for the dead Callowans opening the way. Odds were it'd have to be the boy serving as the key to the locks again, and best he got to that sooner rather than later. It was pretty piece of theatrics the Black Queen had put together, snatching a dead king and appointing to the head of the host meant to meet the Hidden Horror's last guard. Clever, and not without worth. But if the Saint of Swords knew anything it was that pretty stories came to swift ends, and when this one collapsed she had no intention of being caught out on the open where the devils could swarm them. Foundling must have shared at least some of her opinions, as she'd sent for the other members of this band of theirs.

Roland dragged himself up the mound of ruins looking half-dead, though without wounds. The Rogue was a better hand at avoiding blows than dealing them out, as far as Laurence was concerned, though it took all sorts to reach a journey's end. Storming a villain's fortress like this wasn't really what a boy like the Rogue Sorcerer was meant for, anyway. That they'd yet to run into practitioners while pushing further in just dragged him further out of his depths, though the Saint suspected his particular talents would find sharp use at least once before dawn rose. He spoke a few words with Foundling in a quiet tone – her own was

kind, Laurence noted, maybe asking about the state he was in – before coming to a discreet collapse against an upraised stone that could from a distance be taken for him simply leaning against it. Having pushed herself to the edge of what her body could take more often than the boy had seen winter pass, the Saint was not fooled in the slightest. He was on the edge of collapse and his pride must have the lion's share of the toil of keeping him standing. Laurence approached, as they all waited for the Tyrant to join them.

"Saint," Roland greeted her without opening his eyes. "Not too worn out?"

"Unlike you," Laurence bluntly replied.

If Tariq had been there he might have been able to smooth away the rougher edges of that exhaustion with use of the Light, but Foundling had sent him to traipse around secret ways with her foremost assassin. It wasn't the Adjutant, at least: word was when the Black Queen really wanted something dead it was the orc she sent out. But Laurence knew better than most the kind of lessons the Archer would have learned at the knee of the Lady of the Lake. It'd be a surprise if any of them didn't involve a corpse in some way. That Tariq had simply accepted being split from the rest of them, where ambush from other forces sworn to Foundling might see him turned into a hostage, had riled her up more than a little. If they were dealing with some raving madman with more minions and powers than sense it'd be one thing to surrender one of their own into their custody – it was a reliable trick to get close enough to a Damned to 'surrender' yourself into stabbing distance. Foundling wouldn't make mistakes that elementary, though, and she'd played them all for fools more than once tonight. It was one thing to bargain with one of Below's servants, though Laurence still believed that dire mistake, but pretending arrangement was alliance could only be furthering that mistake.

"I have tonics," the Sorcerer said. "I will not topple, if that is your worry."

"Relying on potions is a good way to get killed," Laurence said. "Trust your Choosing, not anything that can fit in a bottle."

The boy's eyes fluttered open, the orange rings around his pupils still slowly fading. Whose sorcery had it been, that he'd been spending in the fights? Hard to say. The Saint was no student of the arcane and Tariq had told her that Roland de Beaumaraais' wanderings had taken the boy far and wide: it could have been anyone's, from anywhere. There were places on Calernia where even she had not found the road taking her.

"We have different approaches, Regicide," he replied, almost defiantly.

Laurence's jaw tightened. Even now, she was not sure of this was a long game of Tariq's or if the boy had genuinely blundered into halfway trusting someone that'd spend him without a second thought. The Peregrine had an eye for detail and for the long view Laurence had never seen the likes of in all her days, so she would not put this past him. But she was uncertain of the boy was this skilled a liar. The truth might lay somewhere in the valley, she considered. A lie but spoken with real anger. There'd been too many defeats of late for a proud young Chosen like Roland not to feel their wisdom had failed. He was not, Laurence would admit, entirely wrong. It was never enough to be right: you also had to be victorious, or it didn't mean a damned thing.

"Don't be a mule," she said. "Stay in the back save when your talents are needed. Foundling and the Tyrant can take the hits until we get to the pivot."

Spreading around the hurt a bit ought to even things out, when the villains started considering sticking the knife and taking the while prize instead of keeping to the arrangement. Laurence wouldn't draw first, not when Tariq had given his word. She trusted him too much for that, inconveniently sentimental as he could be. But neither would she stumble blind into the inevitable. And if he proved to be right? Her fingers clenched.

"Do we not have enough foes, that we must ever make more?" Roland tiredly asked her in Chantant.

"Just because she's not fighting us," Laurence gently said, "doesn't mean she's not our foe."

Could be the bargain would hold for a few months, a few years. A decade, Gods forbid, though she would not put coin on that. But it would break. Foundling wanted to wiggle her way into Cordelia Hasenbach's dreams of a Grand Alliance, that much had come clear, and given the way the ventures was on fire the Saint did not mind so much. If the Black Queen wanted to do them all a service and be taken by the blaze, fighting for the last scraps of decency she still clung to, then Laurence would keep her mouth shut. But Catherine Foundling could not have a hand in shaping the world that would come after the ashes settled, lest the old sicknesses carry through to the foundation that would be laid in the ruins of the old order.

"An alliance of victors, is it?" the Rogue quietly said.

He was speaking half of a saying old and dear to their people, though some claimed it was some ancient Merovins who'd first spoken it. *An alliance of victors is like a hearth in summer.* Useless, it meant, doomed to fail. For when the covenant of need passed, the nature of men ran its course instead.

"You're young," the Saint tiredly said. "So this seems like the sum of it to you. But there's always an *after*, Roland."

"Is it not this very manner of thinking, Saint, that saw us end up here in the first place?" he replied.

"I hope you can still believe that, in a decade," Laurence de Montfort honestly said. "That we will live in a world kind enough to tolerate that belief."

But I won't count on it, she thought. If she did not keep a watch, who would?

"My beloved comrades, I have returned!"

The Tyrant of Helike landed atop the mound with a sick crunch, the ugly enchanted sculptures carrying his throne everywhere being ground into the stone by the abrupt landing. They chattered loudly in protest, though another gargoyle wearing the tailored robes of a Stygian magister went around swatting them into silence with a stick. Gods, that nasty little cripple was just sick in the head.

"Good," the Black Queen said, turning to address them. "We'll be breaching the last holdout, now. Sorcerer, you and I will take the tip of the spear. I have a feel for the weakness in things, and you've..."

She shrugged.

"... that thing that you do," the dark-eyed woman said, sounding amused.

"Understood," Roland said, discretely wiping the corner of his mouth.

Not quite thoroughly enough for Laurence not to notice the hint of green broth on his lip. So he'd drunk something, then, and ignored her advice. She'd have to keep an eye on the fool, lest he get himself killed overreaching his grasp.

"Is no one going to address the delicious ironic army of the dead currently warring on the Dead King's host of devils?" Kairos Theodosian said.

"You've summed it up," Foundling drily replied. "Consider it addressed."

The boy's red eye was shining wet, like it'd been dipped in blood, and his smile came too easy. Laurence knew that to be the sight of a sharpened knife being bared, and from the way the Black Queen's own eyes sharpened so did she.

"I was referring to the way that the Good King seems to be falling apart at a quickening rate," the Tyrant said. "Presumably, his army would follow him into slumber."

She'd been right then, Laurence grimly thought. Like an arrow sent flying, that ploy of Foundling's would hit the mark but then turn into little more than dead wood.

"He'll hold long enough," the Black Queen said. "Yet we should not linger. Sorcerer, with me. The two of you should keep an eye out for the Skein – somehow I doubt its leaping down a cliff has rid us of it for good."

The Saint did not reply, for it would have been too much like taking an order, but she did not disagree. It was decent enough sense, for Roland had his tricks but it was Foundling's priesthood of the wicked that had wraiths parting for them as they advanced on the last bastion. The two took the lead when they arrived at the feet of the walls the Skein's retreat had ripped open, climbing up and beginning to paw at the wards. Laurence remained below, as much to keep an eye on the Tyrant as to keep watch for the Horned Lord's return.

"Did you notice," Kairos Theodosian said, "that she now seems to have no issue spiriting away the sack of crowns where it cannot be gotten at. Strange, that earlier it had to be carried."

Of course she had. And the way that the Tyrant's passing defection – one without consequence, as well – had led to sole change that now both the crowns and the Carrion Lord were in the hands of the Black Queen. How long had she been scheming that, the Saint wondered? Still, the Tyrant was being condescendingly obvious about sowing seeds of enmity. He must think her simple, the little prick.

"Has anyone ever hit you in the mouth hard enough to break teeth?" Laurence asked.

"Alas, my friend, I am but a slave to my nature," the Tyrant grinned. "So are you, of course. It is why we are being played so masterfully by our delightful leader."

No leader of mine, the Saint thought, though she knew better than to give the villain what he wanted and voice any of her thoughts.

"I expect I'll get to kill you before spring arrives," the Saint casually said. "I'll admit, you wretched little shit, that I'll enjoy cutting you down a great deal."

"Interesting," the boy mused. "So what is it that the Dead King offered you, to make you so angry?"

"Your head on a pike," Laurence said, leaning forward to look the boy in the eye. "Insulting, that he'd try to rob me of the pleasure of chopping it off myself."

"You're taking all the fun out of this," the villain complained.

The Saint's fingers clenched. Too easy. That'd been too easy. She'd made a misstep somewhere, and he was now letting himself 'lose' this conversation because he'd already gotten what he wanted. Laurence studied the Tyrant, who studied her in turn with a lazy smile. Should she kill him immediately, just in case? That was where her instincts lay. Scheming villains were like termites, the longer they were left to dig the greater the damages. If she turned on a member of their band of five, loosely as that band was aligned, then there might be consequences greater than physical hostilities. On the other hand, were the consequences greater threat than whatever the boy had planned? Could be feint, she noted, him baiting her so she'd strike and he could finagle the others cutting her loose. She couldn't be sure Foundling wouldn't put keeping a close eye on Theodosian above whatever use she might get out of Laurence's sword arm this close to the finish. On the other hand, the Saint thought, it was too late for the Tyrant to sell them out to the Dead King. Which meant if he was going to screw someone, it was likely to be the one getting closest to their chosen victory. That, reluctant as Laurence was to admit it, was Catherine Foundling.

No, it was not worth making herself the truce-breaker of this story for such an ugly prize. The Saint of Swords would wait, hand on her pommel, and judge when the time came. Above them the first ward broke and the Black Queen yelled for them to catch up.

The Saint and the Tyrant had not moved from their matching stares, but it was Laurence who looked away first.

—

"I had been," the Grey Pilgrim slowly said, "under the impression your queen disapproved of necromancy."

Indrani glanced at the old man, putting away the bit that he'd apparently been able to sniff out the nature of the trouble above them through several layers of stones and wards without any difficulty. Might have been the angels, though, she corrected herself. Vivienne had been right, when she'd first said more than a year back that putting a finger on what the Pilgrim could and couldn't do was complicated even for a Named. His patron Choir made it hard to tell where his own sensory abilities began and the secrets they no doubt shared ended.

"She'd not going to put a few corpse-raisers at the back of a battlefield, no," Archer snorted. "But she doesn't ride live

horses, Pilgrim. Callowan she might be, but don't forget who taught her."

The Praesi fondness for the art was as well-known as their Callowan foes' strong distaste for it, and both likely sprung from the same source. Indrani had thought for a while that Cat wouldn't mind an undead legion at all, if having one wouldn't make half her living soldiers desert without batting an eye. Mind you, Duchess Kegan's people had been stacking up dead souls for a long time before Akua got around to snatching the whole pile so when it came down to it even Callowans weren't above getting a little corpse on their hands.

"It is unlikely that I shall," the Pilgrim replied.

In the light of his, well, Light they'd been making good time through the tunnels. The bloody thing had been built to be *swum*, unfortunately, not walked. Meaning it was broken ground all around, with sharp ups and downs, and while the Peregrine was spry for a relic he wasn't going to be leaping around anytime soon. That meant every once in a while the rope came out again and Indrani dragged him up an incline, or slid him down one, though at least he was so light she barely noticed the weight of him. Seriously, he might as well have been made of feathers. Archer glanced at the old man's pensive expression and snorted. Still anguishing about the way it was the Carrion Lord who'd taught her, was he? He should have been more worried it was Akua she'd first cut her villain teeth on, as far as she was concerned. The Black Knight was sensible kind of savage, most the time. Getting into scraps with Akua Sahelian, though, taught lessons about grinding people into dust so they could never swing at you again. Akua had always been too good at squeaking out of trouble for her own good. Or anyone else's, for that matter.

"My worries amuse you," the old man said.

His tone was a tad disappointed, like she'd been unkind to someone's puppy.

"Sure," Indrani shrugged. "You're going about this all wrong, Grey. Digging for stories with me, trying to get a read on where she came from and what she's after now. Bet you put out little test for her since the lot of you entered this place, too, just to see where she fell on things."

The old man's silence sounded, Archer thought, just a little contrite. Caught him out, had she? In all fairness, he wasn't a bad hand at that game. It was deftly done, just enough give someone not looking for it wouldn't have noticed the take. But Indrani was pretty sure he was used to coming from the other side: already the darling grandfather, the trusted figure. In a word, the old man was used to being a mentor. That wasn't a void that'd ever needed much filling with the Woe, though, so any such

attempt would only ever feel like trespassing and be all the more glaring for it.

"And you say such an approach would be a mistake," the Pilgrim carefully said. "It would be considered hostile?"

"More like a waste of time, and probably her a trial on her patience," Archer absent-mindedly said. "If she notices, which she will, because you've tried to kill her a few times so she's paying attention."

She recognized this particular stretch of tunnel, as it happened. They were nearly at the end: one last climb up and they'd end up in the tragically empty wine cellar where the trap door had been hidden.

"And what would you suggest instead?" the old man asked, voice sounding a little strangled.

She flicked an impatient glance at him.

"Look, you're trying to deal with us like we're skittish fucking horses in need of your reins," Indrani said. "Throw that to the side, 'cause that ride ends with your throat cut open. Probably by me, 'cause let's face it I'm quicker on the draw than Hakram. You want to know what she wants? Sit across a table with her with a decent bottle and politely ask."

Archer frowned at him, just to make it clear for once she was being serious.

"And she'll tell you, Peregrine, because the moment you stop being someone trying to handle us you're back to being someone she wants to work with," she said. "Hells, Pilgrim, as far as I can tell mostly she wants things to be slightly less on fire everywhere. That really so devilish a scheme you can't stomach it?"

"There are other considerations to making a bargain with your queen, Indrani," the Pilgrim quietly said.

"If your Grand Alliance can't get its shit together long enough to *accept help* when the Dead King's about to eat the whole pie," Indrani frankly said, "then I don't get why you're so keen on it in the first place. Kind of a shipwreck, isn't it?"

The old hero's face was unreadable in the dim light of his own making, but this wasn't really her problem was it? Indrani was called in when there was trouble to be had, not to play the diplomat. Besides, but a few moments later they arrived at the end of the tunnel and what awaited them disturbed the Grey Pilgrim enough the other conversation died on its own.

"Souls," the Peregrine quietly said, blue peering up as if they could see through the trapdoor. "What awaits there, Archer?"

"A wine cellar, for the first few steps," Indrani said. "After that, well, you had it right. About a city's worth of souls, and the man who bound them as his instrument."

Caerulea

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Have a nice day.

Aston Whiteman

No?

[*Liliet*](#)

No, you won't have a nice day?

[*TeK*](#)

"They chattered loudly in protest, though another gargoyle wearing the tailored robes of a Stygian magister went around swatting them into silence with a stick."

Tyrant truly is a best thing to ever happen to the Creation.

erebus42

He certainly is proactive; having his HR rep keep an eye on his Gargoyles and making sure they don't get any thoughts about unionizing.

[*Javvies*](#)

Hah!

Somebody get Indrani a keg or two on me.

Finally somebody else said it – if the Alliance is this screwed up, how is it worth keeping?

And, yeah. Laurence is doubling down on having lost track of the difference between striking at evil and doing good. As regards Cat, anyways. Laurence is not wrong to want Kairos dead asap.

The Rogue Sorcerer seems not particularly useful thus far. And I have all kinds of questions about him.

Also, what's Tariq talking about? Where the heck did this idea of Cat not approving of necromancy come from? Did he forget the thousands of Winter!dead rising from the glacial lake at the Battle of the Camps?

I mean, sure, Cat doesn't have necromancers in her employ or standing armies of the undead, but still.

i'mnotgivingmynametoamachine

I think by now he figured out Akua did that.

ATRDCI

Unlikely, given during his "accept Cat's surrender" introspection he had no idea Akua existed, in the context of someone who could use the well of Night

Soma

Cat doesn't like necromancy, or at least is a bit conflicted, especially after Second Llesse. She's mentioned that, but she's not going to completely ignore a powerful tool when it might give her the edge. Pilgrim would have picked up on that distaste with his sight especially when he first encountered Catherine it would have been more raw so soon after The Doom.

Andrew Mitchell

> The Rogue Sorcerer seems not particularly useful thus far. And I have all kinds of questions about him.

I think he's going to be *more* useful in the near future. But he's been pretty damn useful so far by removing difficult wards and killing & distracting a LOT of devils.

Someguy

Given that their opponent is the Dead King, Roland's Role in this Story is that of a Skeleton Key.

konstantinvoncarstein

What is a Skeleton Key?

erebus42

It's like a master key that can unlock any door in a place.

Someguy

This:-

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skeleton_key

EX

A key that can open any lock. The term probably has a wikipedia page.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

I'm pretty sure he's a Spell Thief/anti-magic type. Mostly skilled at tricky applications of small magic until he gets to "Take" a bigger magic, at which point he can turn it back on its users. Against Masego that basically makes him untouchable unless Zeze pulls out some real dire summons.

The way Saint thinks about the pack of practitioners taking him out of his element really does seem to imply that he's a specialist regardless.

JJR

Of course, one does always need to be careful about what the effects of the magic they are copying actually are.

As Black Mage learns the hard way in that one 8 bit theatre strip.

<https://www.nuklearpower.com/2006/04/29/episode-689-backfire/>

edrey

well, he ending under the control of the king is also possible, we never knew if he meet him in the journey to liese

Cicero

It appears to me that the Rogue Sorcerer gets his magic by stealing it from others?

I wonder what sort of magic he might foresee stealing from Cat, and how tempting that must be...

erebus42

Ironically, he doesn't seem to be the type overly interested in the acquisition of power.
I am curious though if the spells he steals are one offs.

[signspace13](#)

I think he can likely invest them in artifacts to various effects, like his blasting rod, but otherwise I think they are pretty temporary, and it seems that he can only Carry two stolen magics at a time.

I also don't think all of his magic is stolen, he seemed to be casting normally in the battle, I think his magic would more effective if it was entirely Name based, instead Cat remarks on it being inefficient in comparison to Heirophant and Diabolist.

medailyfun

the gift and deep knowledge of high arcana make great magic, not Names. Heiress could do big stuff even having weak name and I vaguely remember Apprentice was directly mentioning he was not relying that much on his Name

[Euodiachloris](#)

I don't know about that: a Jack-of-All can do things a Master-of-One cannot, as well as visa versa. It's unlikely to be elegant, but... RS is playing with all the toys the sandbox – even the ones outside known theoretical frameworks.

He and Heirophant are like the work crew vs the architect of using all of the things. They should have synergy, if they ever get to work together.

Andrew Mitchell

Now I want to see that. 😊

konstantinvoncarstein

What Catherine does is not magic, but miracles of Night. I don't think RS would like the result of him trying to steal that 😁

shveiran

Stealing from Cat is most definitely a *mistake*

[crysjal](#)

Considering his eyes change colours and he's described as "inefficient" and unable to use high arcana (which is

personal to the individual and therefore useless to him) the rogue has something like a Sharingan for magic. He's then fallen into the trap of knowing a lot of copied magic but never bothering to hone his skills to use it properly.

IDKWhoitis

Killing Kairos would be a mistake, in most circumstances. He likely has Traitorous level plots to cause trouble long after he's dead, and killing him would give those plots enough narrative weight to make people regret such choices.

Crippling Kairos seems better than outright killing him, and likely is easier too. After all, one does not kill the comedic relief...

konstantin von carstein

Furthermore, his throne will probably explode, or something like that.

medailyfun

He is already crippled so I doubt it will make any effect 😊

shveiran

Kairos is the kind of character that's trouble whatever you do.

You kill him? Contingencies are in place to ensure you remember him.

You cripple him? He walks around the setbacks and now it's personal.

You leave him alone? You will regret it.

Honestly, I think killing him is the lesser evil. It will STING still, but at least he cannot put more contingencies in place than he already has and he no longer enacts more schemes with far reaching consequences every few days.

Kissaten

Kairos proved himself to be a trustworthy fellow, if anything.

Zourath

I think that's actually part of why he thought that. She* went out of her way to use something that isn't necromancy in order to get an effect identical to necromancy. It's like hitting a nail with an axe when you have a perfectly good hammer in reach.

*Actually Akua

Liliet

> Finally somebody else said it – if the Alliance is this screwed up, how is it worth keeping?

The problem in this case is not that the Alliance is screwed up. The problem is that the heroes think they know Cat's story, and her story is one of... a plague-bearer getting everyone else sick. She doesn't mean it, she doesn't want it, she has the best of intentions, but anything she does will just end up making things worse in the ironic prophecy sort of way.

Either that or she's just going to betray them all. You know, one or the other.

The Grand Alliance is not the main consideration at this point.

Mental Mouse

> her story is one of... a plague-bearer getting everyone else sick.

Except... that's just the basic pattern of stigma, indeed of scapegoating. "We can't let *those people* work/live/stay around "decent folks", they'll just bring down the whole neighborhood..." Also "anybody who stands up for *them* is obviously part of the problem". Whether it's black folks, gays, drug users, sex workers, Jews and/or Muslims, – any attempt at problem-solving gets thrown away in favor of "we just need to get rid of *them*, and all our problems will be gone!" Even in the Guide-verse, I don't think that's gonna work.

Liliet

- 1) I am not saying it's a good idea;
- 2) Tariq's and Laurence's reasons are very different from the historical irl ones;
- 3) they can't exactly learn from IRL examples from inside their fictional world, can they?

Mental Mouse

> Tariq's and Laurence's reasons are very different from the historical irl ones

They're not that different, especially in regard to the political parallels. Essentialism is explicitly a conceit of the Guideverse, but it certainly has often been popular

in our own world, including modern America. Combine it with eliminationism, you get Bad Things Happening.

Within the Guide, Amadeus made a decent case that in fact, Pilgrim & Saint were successful enough at eliminating Evil from their home ground that they tipped a balance on a larger scale. Which directly implies that no, Good is not "allowed" to win permanently, *any more than Evil is*.

Liliet

>Within the Guide, Amadeus made a decent case that in fact, Pilgrim & Saint were successful enough at eliminating Evil from their home ground that they tipped a balance on a larger scale. Which directly implies that no, Good is not "allowed" to win permanently, any more than Evil is.

The other way around. IF we accept that Good is not "allowed" to win permanently and the balance tips over as a premise, THEN Amadeus's case for the heroes being responsible for Dead King holds water. That was his argument: "do you really think you're allowed to win without tipping the balance over and empowering Evil to strike back?" It's a known fact already.

A rather uncomfortable one, if you take the view that Good = good. But note that Tariq's conclusion was 'and then we beat the strike back, and then we just keep winning anyway and fuck Fate', interestingly mirroring Amadeus's own response to 'this cycle is endless'.

>They're not that different, especially in regard to the political parallels

They really. They're not blaming Catherine for external problems already happening, and they're not sticking her with any labels she did not willingly accept. Being a villain is less like a nationality and more like being a member of a political party calling themselves national socialists, yeah? And also wearing a swastika on your sleeve, because Guideverse is not subtle. You can be born into a religion, sure enough, but Catherine's a politician and all her choices she made herself.

And 'discrimination' against the infectuously sick, also known as quarantine, is also a historical thing. Well-known to be horrifying and unfair, but also effective at preventing the spread of sickness if enforced successfully.

Mental Mouse

A potentially useful question: Suppose Cat somehow managed to attain a clearly heroic Name. Do you think Laurence would back off? Would Pilgrim stand in the way of the crusade against her?

Liliet

Laurence would back off, throw her hands in the air and go "welcome to the team kid and congratulations". Pilgrim would look at political convenience first much like he did when Cat came to him for help pre-Keter, but to the degree that he is the pivot, yes he would do his best to arrange to fold her in. It'd be his best case scenario come true before his very eyes.

Miles

The Rogue sorcerer kept the wraiths from interrupting cat and Kairos when they had their chat. So far he's been like IT, or a good Butler. Doing a good job means you don't even notice he's there (though you'd notice things going wrong if he was gone).

Rook

I suspect the only reason he was so worn out is because it was directly combative support here. He's a versatile character that copies or steals from others, which means narratively he has endless flexibility but takes a hit in raw power – an imitation is almost never as strong as the original, in stories

I suspect that he'll actually be massively more effective against Masego than the devils, despite the larger power difference. The key being that the Hierophant's main strength is primarily his knowledge and the obscurity of his workings, not his sorcerous muscle. The usher of mysteries, not destroyer of worlds.

He's may even have the capital to be a threat to Catherine if he wanted to be, considering the less combative role that Catherine now falls into as first under the night.

Liliet

I don't think he's a threat to Catherine, because his main strength seems to be turning an enemy's own sorcerous strength against them. It will probably work very well against Masego, you're right, but it's not sorcery that Catherine uses and we've already seen a lesson in what happens when a foe tries to use her strength against her. Angry crows happen.

Rogue Sorcerer is a narrowly specialized anti-mage :3

[happyhavak](#)

Rogue wouldn't be the first hero Cat Converted

Andrew Mitchell

"Look, you're trying to deal with us like we're skittish fucking horses in need of your reins," Indrani said. "Throw that to the side, 'cause that ride ends with your throat cut open. Probably by me, 'cause let's face it I'm quicker on the draw than Hakram. You want to know what she wants? Sit across a table with her with a decent bottle and politely ask."

Archer frowned at him, just to make it clear for once she was being serious.

So f'ing good. The Peregrine needed to hear that... But did he **listen**?

Faiir

If things are less on fire, how will they be CLEANSED BY THE
RIGHTOUS FLAME?

erebus42

Easy there Saint

[Liliet](#)

His problem is not the devilishness of her schemes... =x

shveiran

His problem is , he still thinks in binary when the paradigm has chaged.

[Liliet](#)

Has it changed?

Can you describe&prove to me, on the textual basis, that it changed? (Only actual description+explanation qualifies as a positive answer. Saying "yes" doesn't cut it. Do the explanation)

[Miles](#)

Jeeze with such tight constraints on format it's like you're asking for an excuse to argue, not an answer.

[Liliet](#)

Sorry. I just wanted to dissect what evidence was available for that, and this kind of thing is much

easier when it's the person arguing FOR the point presenting it --

Rook

He still thinks in Binary which isn't helping the situation yes, but the paradigm has not changed nor is the pilgrim unjustified for his precaution, as fruitless as the readers (not the characters) know it to be.

Catherine is an emerging exception among exceptions, but the villains that preceded her, as well as most alive today, and even one in her own band, still fall into the exact same old paradigm.

An exception isn't a pattern.

Which isn't fair for Catherine, no. But at the same time it's not as if Catherine alone, in just a few years, has suddenly changed the pattern of Villainy. The Pilgrim isn't in the wrong for not throwing away a lifetime of experience based on his limited interactions with a single person.

naturalnuke

Oh.

Zeze no...

NerfGlastigUaine

Ah, Tyrant. He's not only a magnificent traitor, he also nudges others into betrayal as well. I'm looking forward to the inevitable backstabs (and frontstabs, sidestabs, omni-directional stabs) that will result.

erebus42

Honestly, I think it was more about needling the Saint than thinking he'd actually get her to betray them (though I'm sure that would be a bonus). His very existence is anathema to everything she believes in and as she said herself he was being super obvious (probably intentionally so) in his baiting of her. But I agree betrayal is inevitable and I'm sure it will be glorious.

Andrew Mitchell

So not all Liesse's souls rose up at the call of Dead King Edward. Interesting.

Caerulea

I suspect those are the souls that Akua usurped, and that were in the palace already. The shades that rose up at the call of The Good King were the ones that Akua butchered using Still Water. The ones that the Hierophant has are those that were woven into a Gestalt, before Black broke it.

Andrew Mitchell

Ah, so the souls of all the Watch who have died over a couple of hundred years. Makes sense.

Cicero

I thought that had been returned to the Watch already.

konstantinvoncarstein

No, they were returned to the Deoraithe. Maybe the wards on the palace interfered with Edward's summon?

And the Gestalt is made of the souls of all Deoraithe who die since their exile from the Golden Bloom, not only from the soul of the Watch.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

The fighting souls are the ones Akua killed with the Zombie Army Ritual, the gestalt are back in position empowering the watch, and the souls in the room ahead are all the ones that died at Thallasina when Warlock called in all his markers with Below and let loose a Death Curse that scarred the land into perpetuity. Masego was able to grab them because he watched how the DK did it way back in the day.

Death Knight

This rings true. That amount of power would also explain why the Hierophant was seen to be "teleporting" and/or phasing out of Creation when observed by Malicia's agents as he was making his exodus out of Praes.

Someguy

Looks like Zeze is really out of it, isn't he of the opinion that sacrificial rituals are for illiterate hacks?

Andrew Mitchell

Technically he doesn't seem to have been sacrificing anyone. He's just using already available souls.

Faiir

He wouldn't waste a readily available resource after all.

[ayon96](#)

I think it's the souls of the praesi city where masego snapped. Tyrant did say he ate a citys worth of souls.

Andrew Mitchell

Ooooooh, that does ring a bell. I hope you're right.

shveiran

O god, I hope you aren't. That sounds it would have long term consequences, and with grief and possession already on the table... will what we get back really be a Masego?

C_B

Pretty sure this is referring to the souls of those who died in Thallassina.

Kissaten

Those are Praesi from a different city destroyed by Warlock.

Big I

It's probably the souls of the people who died at Thalasinna, gathered by Hierophant as he left.

[Liliet](#)

These are Thalassina's souls, not Liesse's.

Walter

To paraphrase:

"So what you're saying is that the one person who's trying to stop the Dead King should stop doing what's been effective, and should instead start taking advice from a Heaven approved advisor, even though he's an oath-breaker who's tried to kill her ..."

erebus42

Pretty much yeah. Honestly one the great things about the Pilgrim's character-as much as he annoys the hell out of me- is how it serves to deconstruct the designated mentor role and show it's pitfalls. He really can't seem to meet anyone on an equal footing can he? He seems to genuinely think he alone knows what's best and that everyone else should take his council. It's one of the main things that makes him so infuriating. Hopefully the universe continues to disabuse him

of those ideas and continues to kick him in the metaphorical balls.

[Liliet](#)

I mean tbh I still think it would be good for this alliance if Cat and Tariq fell into a mentor/mentee relationship for a bit. This kind of relationship in stories tend to have a lot of feedback for the mentor learning from the student, and of course it's a brilliant move diplomatically.

Gamer7956

That really can't happen. Cat started referring to Black as 'Father' before this arc started – presumably to play up their connection for the story. That would be all for naught if she suddenly took another mentor – a subversion of the strongest part of her connection to Amadeus

[Liliet](#)

I mean, Cat has specifically already renounced Black as her mentor. That happened after Second Liesse and was a whole thing. "You're no longer a Squire".

The 'adopted father' thing is their only current connection, that and the fact being a mentor is timeless. "My old mentor" doesn't imply they're *currently teaching you*,

And to round up my point, IT'S POSSIBLE TO HAVE MULTIPLE MENTORS OVER A LIFETIME

[Liliet](#)

P.S. Also, replace 'mentor' with 'advisor' if you wish. My point is just Tariq being close to Cat in an advisory role and getting to really *understand* her decision making process, her political situation and her alliances from the inside.

Andrew Mitchell

That sounds like it would need a *whole* lot of trust that Tariq hasn't earned yet.

[Liliet](#)

Trust people to act according to their nature.

C'mon, Cat.

KageLupus

Like handing over the reins of your apotheosis to twin murder goddesses required some unearned trust?

Javvies

Ah, but Cat had seen some of what made the Sisters take the path they did.

Also, there's a rather distinct and important difference between "trust unearned", which was the Sisters, and "demonstrably, and by his own admission, inherently, untrustworthy person who already betrayed you before", which is Tariq.

Rook

Have to agree there, I actually favor Tariq in terms of intent, but I STILL think it'd be a mistake for Catherine to give him control or undue influence at this point

Regardless how reasonable his skepticisms about Catherine are based on what he personally knows, the fact is that he can't be trusted to understand her right now, which means he can't be trusted not to fuck it all up if given too much of the reins

We have to remember that even with Sve Noc, all that the surrender of Winter bought Catherine was the sisters stepping back to take an objective/unbiased look through her memories to understand her character and intent. The trust returned came after, based on what they saw there, based on a full and complete understanding of what and who Catherine Foundling is.

That latter part, the understanding, is the key issue between the Pilgrim and Cat in the first place – the Pilgrim likely wouldn't disagree with Catherine's goals or intent if he knew them like the sisters do now. But the thing is that he currently doesn't and can not, to any appreciable extent. Trust alone is naivety, it only has value when it's paired with understanding.

Liliet

"Advisory vote" means you only get as much influence over the result as you can get others to listen to you.

I'm not offering to put Tariq in charge of anything. I'm offering to put him in the exact role where he feels most comfortable – providing advice,

insight and suggestions to the person who actually is.

Liliet

There's a long road between "will break his word in situations where doing otherwise would be absolutely catastrophic" and "inherently untrustworthy".

I would argue the former actually deserves a lot more trust than someone who would hold to the letter of their word stubbornly *no matter what*, being as how they use their head and not their principles to think.

Mental Mouse

> Like handing over the reins of your apotheosis to twin murder goddesses required some unearned trust?

No, it required Cat getting her butt kicked halfway to a hell and back – remember, Cat was not in control of that situation!

At least not in present tense... but she had made enough of her self in the past, that when she faced literal divine judgement, the goddesses in question gave *her* a lot of "unearned trust" in taking her as their representative to humanity and the surface world.

fireinsideincites

Yes, but it's not unheard of. A queen who is misunderstood but trying to do good for the people going against tradition and the institutions, being mentored by an older, wiser advisor who works for/used to work for those institutions. The trust comes from them both trying to do good but approaching it from different angles (see Tyrion and early Dany)

Javvies

That (or something similar) could, and probably would, have happened ... in Tariq's redemption play on Cat. Y'know, the one Cat was willing to lean into and cooperate with if he'd give his word to prevent Procer from partitioning and exploiting Callow for their own gain, or at least allow her to do so. When he **knew** that her greatest desire was for peace and that she cared about protecting Callow and Callowans more than petty much anything else (the thing he **knew** was a hook for Below to pervert her good intentions into non-good actions).

Also, the one that he broke because having given his word doesn't mean he'll keep it.

So ... no, I'm pretty sure that nothing along those lines is gonna happen anymore.

Unless it's flipped and Cat becomes Tariq's mentor figure. Which would be kind of hilarious, but mind bogglingly improbable, IMO. Plus Laurence probably (try to) kill the both of them if that happened.

shveiran

Agreed. A mentor relationship implies NON-EQUAL STANDING between the two.

Lillet mentioned that the mentor usually ends up learning from the student, but while that IS true, that is still the exception within the relationship: most of the teaching flows in the other direction – since one of the two is meant to be, you know, a MENTOR.

In the middle of book 4, Cat would have been willing to learn from one of the most experienced heroes in Calernia. It would have made a great contrast with her tutorage from Black, and would have helped walked the narrow path.

Now, though? Now the Black Queen will accept to deal as an equal with nearly anyone, even if it means giving up power and control... but she will not trust someone else to teach her what to do or how to do it. That ship has sailed, that ship has BURNT.

I'm all for seeing Cat and Tariq reach an understanding, but that will happen as a consortium between equals or not at all.

Indrani got it right, plain and simple.

Andrew Mitchell

Well said.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Cat has already learned a lot from Pilgrim... more than he likes, really. But as Archer points out, he doesn't get to appoint himself her mentor. Especially after so much of her development has been in response to him *trying to kill her*.

shveiran

Quite right, she has learned from him. Because if you survive a fight you have learned from your **enemy**. That doesn't make Aqua or Tariq a mentor, merely a challenged

overcome.

You can also learn from an ally, through sharing and exemple... but he and Cat are not quite there yet, if they'll ever reach it.

Soma

Mmmm interludes. I can't get enough of these specific Woe centered interludes. I almost regret its Friday.

carrier

Don't despair, the next one shall be a double release

Soma

00000000hhhhhhh myyyyyyy. You've made my night! I forgot about that. Admittedly, I'd guess the bonus won't be quite so immediately following people interacting with the Woe, but who knows? And it will be great besides.

erebus42

About time someone called the Pilgrim out on his condescending mentor bullshit.

Good on the Saint for actually making the smart call. I still think she's a mad dog who needs to be put down but hey, credit where credit's due.

Also I'd say we're about due for that other shoe to drop.

carrier

I've no idea what's the test left behind by the pilgrim, buy it has the sorcerer on is signature.

Kissaten

I think it's his deal with Cat about not killing Laurence, or at least related to it.

Pokekid01

I take personal offence at this chapter's pre-quote. A proverb on the folly of revenge? Written by a CALLOWAN? Admittedly, the Inkhand seems to be a more level-headed sort, but still, this is a most profane heresy of the highest order.

erebus42

I know right? I'm sure even Dread Emperor Revenant would blanche at something so blasphemous and unnatural.

Faiir

Obviously, it was a misattribution made possible by me, The Great Emperor Traitorous (not to be mistaken with a feeble Betrayer)!

Liliet

So, here we have Laurence's predictions ranging wildly from "Catherine is going to have Tariq captured" to "Catherine is going to stick with this alliance for decades". Fucking beautiful.

And Indrani isn't following, alas. Apparently Catherine did not share her insights into Tariq's understanding of the situation.

She's still helping ♥

shveiran

To continue our discussion, I'm really getting a different read. Her prediction does seem to range in time, but she is not really considering a different end: even if Cat sticks with the alliance for decades, the implication is that at some point she'll need to be put down and the longer she stays the greater the damage.

I assume your read on her clenching her fingers is that she is conflicted and is trying not to consider the possibility that Cat is actually a different breed. And I'm not saying that interpretation is wrong or impossible... simply that when I read it, I think it means "if Tariq was right and this mission goes according to plan, then he will not allow me to slay her before we move north, and that is DANGEROUS, what should I do?" or even "if Tariq is right and this alliance to slay the DK actually works, that means Foundling is somewhat even more dangerous than HIM, and I'll likely won't be around to kill her then. So should I kill her now, while I can, and damn the consequences?"

Mental Mouse

In other words, she's deeply tempted to kill Cat, regardless of her companion's advice and everything she's seen of Cat in particular. The question is whether she *can* overcome her ingrained pattern of "kill all the eeenvviiiill".

" "if Tariq is right and this alliance to slay the DK actually works,

AFAICT She didn't mention killing the DK, and if she did it would mean she was way off the rails.

Remember, that wasn't actually on the table at the conclave And Cat has been very specific that the win condition against

DK isn't killing him, it's chasing him back into his hole. Given that DK can just withdraw and flee back to his own realm at any time, I wouldn't bet on a surprise kill either.

[Liliet](#)

> even if Cat sticks with the alliance for decades, the implication is that at some point she'll need to be put down and teh longer she stays the greater the damage.

Yes. Not because of her bad intentions necessarily but because of how they predict the general shape of her story goes. I like the metaphor I used above: a plague-bearer getting everyone else sick.

> I assume your read on her clenching her fingers is that she is conflicted and is trying not to consider the possibility that Cat is actually a different breed.

No, actually, my read on it is "he might be right and we'd have to put her down anyway". Laurence is willing to entertain the thought Cat might be genuine, but not that she might be *right*.

She really doesn't have remotely enough information for *that* conclusion.

shveiran

Right. So...

...We agree? I mean, I'm not arguing that Saint doesn't feel like it's a pity Cat has to be slain; merely that she is not any less determined to slay her than she was a week ago.

[Liliet](#)

Depends on how you try to quantify 'determined'.

Laurence is no longer absolutely convinced that Cat needs to be slain *right now, the second she gets a stab at her throat. Her conviction can be further weakened. Sure it's a long journey from here&now to "maybe Foundling really should win", but she's already on the road* :3

Her opinion on Catherine has already changed. It hasn't changed enough to get her to cancel the slaying appointment, but the capacity for change is there, and I predict it'll change more yet :3

[Liliet](#)

AUGH FUCKING UNCLOSED TAGS

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Once again the Pilgrim displays an amazing combo of supernatural discernment (detecting a massive ghost army through however much solid Rock while being lugged through a Tomb Raider level) with a bone deep lack of understanding of Cat's character (both having that question and then asking it so bluntly).

Ben Serreau-Raskin

That line about his face being in shadow of his own making is perfect though. Some really story craft.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Edit: *really top notch story craft

Isi Arnott-Campbell

TBH I like it better as "Some really story craft." I dunno, it's just oddly appealing as a turn of phrase.

[sengachi](#)

Here's a thought. So far Laurence has been making a conscious effort to avoid going down the expected route of betraying the villains to the detriment of the party, even self-admittedly against her own nature. Of course she has to have a Trial at some point, and the assumption is that eventually that self-control will be tested to its limits. But now that I think about it, there's another very pivotal thing which could happen around Laurence that would satisfy the Narrative.

A) Does Tariq know Laurence sabotaged Procer's ability to unify against the Dead King?

B) Does the Dead King know that?

I'm guessing the answer to A is "absolutely not" and the answer to B ... well that would be a hell of a bomb for the Dead King to drop on the party now wouldn't it?

konstantinvoncarstein

Laurence don't sabotage the union of the Principat itself, she "just" burned all diplomatic bridges with Callow. It probably makes it even harder for her to have to work with Catherine.

[sengachi](#)

Oh no I didn't mean she sabotaged the alliance. What I meant was how she sabotaged the Callow/Procer peacetalks to ensure Procer had to split its forces in a way that was meant to ensure the eventual complete destruction of Procer.

Liliet

TBF I'm not sure she could have predicted the current situation. The inability to let the Legions just go is based far more on Callow's determination to rescue Grem / Grem's previous actions, than the Arch-Heretic thing.

Liliet

...on the other hand she couldn't have predicted Callow being willing to offer alliance&help even despite the Arch-Heretic thing either, so actually scratch that, you're right.

Mental Mouse

From the DK's point of view (or even for story success) Laurence is the real weak point in the party, because she's got her own mission that directly conflicts with the party's mission, and she's having trouble with the conflict.

Compare to Kairos's betrayal, which was "all part of Cat's plan", didn't surprise anyone else (except perhaps the newbie RS), advanced the plot... and with his continued rotation, came right around to bitch-slapping the Dead King! Cat's key insight was simply that Kairos is "crazy like a fox" – he may *look* unpredictable, but he does remember what he's about and what the long-term plan is.

Cold Cyberia

I'm really liking the development of Saint. All of her life she's been fighting evil that would break others to the point where all she sees is schemes of Below. It's probably a defense mechanism as much as it is a belief built from experience. The hope that some villains might also want to build a better world would probably break her at this point.

I think she'll die by landing a killing blow against the Dead King. It's clear there's no place for her in the new world since it requires a modicum of trust and it would be a fitting end.

shveiran

That's the best possible ending for her. I'm not sure that's what she'll get, and that she won't do harm along the way.

Death Knight

Also her realizing that would very likely kill her. Once a Hero starts compromising on their core ideals, they become sloppy and more prone to mistakes which eventually culminates in their death (see W.O.E on Proceran and Heroic Named).

Liliet

I don't think Laurence's core ideal is 'villains are irredeemably evil'. Remember, she already had her Name when she still thought villains could be ok to compromise with. Laurence's core ideal as a hero is protecting others, and I don't think she's going to need to compromise on that.

That is not to say there isn't a lot in her to shatter *other* than that core ideal =x

shveiran

I don't know, it feels like it has become the fulcrum of her stories though.

Cat's path is one of lesser evils, of making the hard choices and the ugly compromises to try and make the situation a bit less awful.

It sounds like Laurence's has been about madmen, the tragedies they wrought, and the need to put them down.

It's true that in the beginning she didn't have this ideal, but it has been the fulcrum and moral of the struggles she has lived through. More than protection; she has been "Above's executioner" . And she is an old one.

I dunno. It seems that belief is key to her being. To change it would mean she'd need a whole different skillset to deal with problems (to seek alternative solutions, to figure out if a redemption is viable etc). Can she really start anew, after all this time?

I'm really, really curious to see where EE is going with this character, to be honest. It's one of those instances where I can find no good solution, and I'm eager to be shown what I missed. Like so many times before since I found this gem of a series.

[Liliet](#)

A fulcrum, but not a core ideal. Yes, if it were to be shattered she WOULD need to pick herself up from a whole lot of very tiny pieces; but it would not destroy her Name.

And yeah SAME

[Liliet](#)

> The hope that some villains might also want to build a better world would probably break her at this point.

That they might want it, she's probably perfectly fine with knowing for a fact.

That they might be able to actually achieve it, that they might be right?

Now *that*...

Mental Mouse

> It's clear there's no place for her in the new world since it requires a modicum of trust and it would be a fitting end.

Compare to the Saint's POV:

> But Catherine Foundling could not have a hand in shaping the world that would come after the ashes settled, lest the old sicknesses carry through to the foundation that would be laid in the ruins of the old order.

One of them has to go. and I'm betting it'll be the burned-out old hand, not the up-and-comer.

shveiran

You have managed to express a concept I've uselessly thrown paragraphs at in a few simple lines.
Thank you

Rook

I don't think it's one or the other, I think it's both.

They're both wartime soldiers, not peacetime builders. The Good King instantly recognized this, and Catherine herself acknowledged that long before the Saint or Pilgrim ever came into the picture. That's why her intention was always to abdicate once the storm passed – she's a necessary evil right now, but in the end she's still an evil.

"... Lest good become the act of striking," the Good King completed, tone approving. "You understand, then. That when your evil is no longer necessary, Black Queen, to linger would be to stray from the narrow path you have tread."

My fingers clenched.

"I know," I croaked out. ..."

The Saint on the other hand is of completely out of place to handle the aftermath even in nations where Good wins the field. She's an eraser of atrocities, both in role and experience, which is useless when there are no atrocities that need to be erased.

Mental Mouse

Well that's the thing, Cat always had a retirement option; Saint never did.

Morgenstern

I'd say theoretically she has. She might not be *needed*, but not being needed doesn't have to mean you have to fuck off and die. You might simply retire as well, if you can accept that you are no longer needed. I for one am not sure yet that the Saint might not find a way around to that eventually.

[Liliet](#)

I mean Saint can always just do what she's been doing and go north to fight rattlings. It's not like there's a shortage of enemies for her to fight =x

[Mental Mouse](#)

The big question for Roland is if he managed to retrieve his casting rod, which clearly makes a difference. He's had to defend himself without it for this fight, and that took a lot out of him.

[Fayhem](#)

Hmm, Laurence's POV here is leaning me back towards thinking she actually was sincere about her whole "let it burn, what rises from the ashes will be purer for it" spiel to Cordelia; doesn't mean Bard wasn't orchestrating the moment in service of a deeper plot though.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Remember, Bard is a major-league manipulator, while Saint is very easy to manipulate.

Raved Thrad

Ah, Archer. She may be a brute, but she's an introspective, perceptive brute. I wonder how having Zeze's kid will change her.

...and having said that, I'm already feeling sorry for the kid.

[Liliet](#)

I'm not so sure Indrani's one for pregnancy and childbirth. I see them going the route of Masego's parents and adopting a Gifted kid as much more likely... if they even decided to have children at all, which they'd honestly need the whole Woe to agree to communally raise lmao

Raved Thrad

That kid would either have the best of childhoods, or the worst. Maybe even both.

ByVectron!

If Cat has Blacks soul now, when does she piece him back together? I mean, that seems like a very nice pivot point, yeah?

[Liliet](#)

Might happen offscreen... or better, in an interlude 😊

SITB

Is this the second time ever for an Indrani PoV?

(The first being the Fletched extra chapter)

[Liliet](#)

...huh.

[Yes. Yes, it is.](#)

Daniel E

Although it is customary in stories like this for a main character to die heroically at the end, I sincerely hope all of our Woe get to sail off into the sunset, as it were. That said, if we had to lose somebody, my money is on Hakram or Masego. The right-hand (no hands, lulz) or tormented protagonist are always the ones who get sacrificed.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hakram left this story back at the conclave. And Masego has probably gone immortal, not to mention several people actively trying to save him. Today I think it's the heroes who have all the death flags.

[Liliet](#)

I think they mean the entire PGTE.

Interlude: Repurpose

"Mastery is meekness, for it is the observation of what we are intended to hold. It is the art of the suppliant. Only through

usurpation can understanding be reached, for anything less is servitude."

– Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King

Firyal had died screaming, boiling heat washing over her. This she still remembered, sometimes, and in those rare moments of lucidity she knew terror. For while she had once been a mage some skill, the shackles around her soul were like nothing she had ever seen. A trained mind had allowed her to drift out of the dreams, once every few days, long enough to dread the return to that strange slumber where she only saw the life she had lived. Again, and again and again, for some obscure purpose. Perhaps, she had thought, this was one of the Hells. Perhaps she had not looked closely enough at all the bargains she had made, and some devil had gotten the best of her. So Firyal wondered, until she was startled awake by her shackles being ripped away. Freedom tasted sweet, for a moment, before she saw *them*. Eyes above her, burning and unblinking. As if the sun had been imprisoned in orbs of glass. Unkindly, the eyes peered through the span of her life like a bored scribe skimming a scroll.

"Useless," a calm voice noted. "Pass in peace."

The sun in the eyes died and then there was only oblivion.

–

"This is an abomination," Laurence said. "You know it, Foundling, and would still offer salvation to its architect?"

They'd torn through the last defences surrounding the sanctum like they were parchment, between the Black Queen's knowledge of their lay and Roland's knack for taking down wards, but what had awaited them beyond the luxurious quarters and feast halls was an Evil manifest. At Laurence's feet, like lake water softly lapping at a shore, the translucent and almost shimmering broth of hundreds of thousands of souls was spread out. Above them there was only darkness for a ceiling, whatever foul sorcery was at work here having warped the nature of within into this... sickness. It was silent in here, almost peaceful, and that made the sight of it twice as ghoulish.

"Yes," the Black Queen said.

She had hesitated, the Saint thought, for barely the fraction of a moment. The loyalty of that was laudable but made a sin against Creation by who it'd been offered to. To safeguard a poisoner against consequence was to share in the guilt of the poisonings that would follow.

"Ah, well they were just Praesi," the Tyrant of Helike drawled. "It's not like the Grand Alliance hasn't been having rousing discussions of their wholesale slaughter anyway."

The Saint hadn't known that, not for sure, but then she was not particularly surprised. Tariq's chomping at the bit for them to head to Salia as soon as this was settled now made a great deal more sense. The boy-villain could be lying, of course, but that didn't matter nearly as much as whether or not Foundling would believe him. Laurence's hand casually went down to her sword. There was a pause.

"You're not even lying, are you?" the Black Queen mused, her tone wry.

She often used amusement to cloak her true thoughts, the Saint had noticed.

"An issue to settle when this is done with," Foundling sighed. "Pity for Cordelia Hasenbach is not something I particularly enjoy feeling, Kairos."

Did anyone? Klaus' niece or not, no one claimed the highest office of the Principate without climbing a mound of corpses. Some justly made, but others? Procer had grown into the kind of beast that would devour the best of intentions and taint them simply by being what it was.

"I cannot assure our safety if we wade into that," Roland piped up.

His eyes had never left the lake of souls, fascination and revulsion warring within them. Wizards, Laurence unkindly thought. Even the finest of them were only ever one swell of curiosity away from tumbling down a foul slope.

"I'll be handling that," Foundling said. "Where there is darkness there is night, and so it stands within my dominion."

No, not night, Laurence thought. It was 'Night' she had said, with a subtle ring of power to the word. Some blasphemous dark mirror to the Light? The Saint had believed the Black Queen's strange powers to come from a bargain made with lesser gods in the service of Below, but the sacrilege might run deeper than that.

"And where will we be headed?" Saint flatly asked.

"Why, dearest Laurence, that ought to be obvious," the Tyrant of Helike laughed. "To the throne room, of course."

No one humoured the madman with further reply. The Black Queen's staff struck the ground and before it the souls parted. *And so, Laurence thought, it begins.*

—

Tariq carried light into the dark, as he had sought to do for most his life.

The sliver of it was enough to push back the silvery sea of souls around the two of them, that tragedy happened and happening. The right to Behold the truth of things, that was the gift that had been bestowed upon him many years ago when he found his own base discernment too feeble a thing to rely on, but there were occasions where it was curse as much as boon. This was one, he thought, for not until the Heavens called him to his rest would the Grey Pilgrim forget this sight: an expanse of shivering souls, wounded and crying out from the sudden brutality of their demise. Shackled to Creation and kept in that torment of a half-existence, sorcerous bindings keeping imprisoned in restless slumber. And where someone else might see only the waters, Tariq... Oh, he could see them all. Every weeping child, every terrified innocent lost to a death they had not even been able to understand. For all that, the Grey Pilgrim did not look away. Someone had to see them, to refuse to avert their eyes. And to free them, when the time came, for this *would not be tolerated.*

"Huh," Archer said. "So that's what it looks like when your blood is up."

"This place is a blight onto Creation, child," Tariq quietly said. "You are no priestess, but your senses are keen. You must know it as well."

"He wouldn't have let it come to this, if he were in his right mind," she replied. "But that's what you get, when you push monstrously talented practitioner over the edge. They fall, and either they die or they make wings of whatever's at hand at the time."

"The attack on Thalassina is no excuse for this," the Pilgrim sharply said. "It does not exempt the Hierophant from responsibility for this abomination."

"You don't get to make that call," Archer calmly said. "He's not for you to judge, crusader. You take a swing at a nest of vicious diabolists, well, you get shit like this. If he crossed a line in defending his home and family then it's not the enemy that'll discipline him — it's Catherine."

"And if she simply pardons him?" the Peregrine asked.

Hazelnut eyes met his own.

"If you believe that, then your eyesight's worse than I'd thought."

The heartbeat of tension that followed was broken by the flapping of great wings. It startled Tariq into looking up, though he could barely glimpse the shape of the large crow in the gloom until it landed on Archer's extended arm. The pulsing thoughts and feelings of the young woman that he'd been able to behold until that moment were suddenly obscured, as if a shadow was being cast over them. The loss was discomfiting, he'd admit, though that was a paltry thing compared to the black-winged horror perched on young Indrani's arm. Even a casual glance into those night-woven feathers was enough for him to hear distant screams. To smell fresh blood being spilled, as if he was standing by an altar where a throat was being opened. The Ophanim breathed into him and the haunting faded, though like a prowling beast it was not gone – merely held at bay.

"You sure?" Archer said, cocking her head to the side.

She winced before she was even finished speaking, and Tariq noted she never looked directly at the crow.

"I always get stuck with the snippy one," the young woman angrily growled. "Fine, we'll do it. Away with you, bird."

The murder made flesh flew above, and Tariq breathed in sharply when he saw its talons had left bloody marks on Archer's arm. He raised his hand, silently offering healing, but his companion shook her head.

"The Sisters don't really do nice, but they don't bleed people without a reason," she said. "The blood was taken for a reason. Also because I piss them off but Hells at this point it'd a shame to stop."

She did not lack courage, though the Peregrine found it regrettable she chose not to exercise it on worthier pursuits than recklessly provoking lesser deities born of ritual slaughter.

"And what did the Sisters request?" Tariq asked.

"Masego's nearing the end of whatever the Dead King using him for," Archer said. "We can't afford this slow a pace anymore."

"We will hurry, then," Tariq agreed.

Tired as he was, better exhaustion than inaction.

"Ah, you're not getting my drift," the young woman said. "Walking the road won't cut it."

"Your meaning?" the Grey Pilgrim asked.

"Snuff the light," the Archer said, "and stay close to me. We follow the crow."

—

Iblin had been so proud to be called to stand among the ritual even though he was young and not entirely schooled in the proper ways. Yet he had power to spare, and that had been needed most of all, and so among the circles that supported the Lord Warlock he had stood. But then it had... where was he? There'd been a light, a terrible Light, and a voice had Spoken. This was not Thalassina, Iblin realized, this was not Thalassina and — blinding eyes were staring down, releasing a pressure that had been keeping him constrained, and the relief lived only until his soul began suffering examination. Like an insect pinned and open so that the entrails could be looked upon, the last moments of Iblin's life were studied by that burning glare. He screamed, for it was an intrusion unlike any he had felt before. The presence had been calm, at the start, patient. But twice it looked upon the same moment, when the voice had uttered a word and the circle had lost control of the gathered power, and tried to look at the Warlock from where Iblin had stood but found the angle too stilted. The examination grew rougher, forceful, until the grip suddenly loosed.

"Useless," a voice impatiently said. "Leave."

Oblivion fell over Iblin like a blanket.

—

Like children wandering into the woods at night they moved in a line, everyone close enough to the one in front of them to see their back even in the gloom — save for the Black Queen herself, who gazed into the darkness with seeing eyes even where there should be nothing to see. Under their boots the translucent liquid souls turned into solid ground, though only as long as they touched and not an instant more. The Saint had claimed the rearguard, for she would not trust the Tyrant to stand at her back — even if he were truly standing instead of letting himself be carried by his ugly creations. She'd kept an eye on him in case he warmed to the notion of striking at the Rogue Sorcerer's back, whose earlier spoken sympathies had apparently convinced the Black Queen to place behind her. If this was a ploy, Laurence thought, it appeared to be working.

"Catherine," the Tyrant of Helike said, "I've a query, if you would."

"Do you?" the Black Queen replied. "Imagine that."

Laurence noted that their pace quickened at that, limp or not.

"We are being guided by one of your crows, are we not?" Kairos Theodosian mused. "I can almost hear the beat of the wings."

The Saint could not, though she'd felt there was an air of carrion to this abominable place from the start. She'd presumed it to be either the souls of the dead or Foundling's own powers, though, not the presence of some old monster.

"I don't have crows," the Black Queen mildly replied.

She'd not outright denied having a guide, and the Tyrant hacked out a wet laugh.

"And are you not worried, my dear friend, that so wantonly parading pieces of a godhead around the Hidden Horror will have... intriguing outcome?"

"If he wants to catch Sve Noc in the dark," Foundling said, "I can only wish him good luck."

"I thought you might say that," Kairos Theodosian said. "Which is why-"

In a single continuous movement, gathering the power of her Choosing to refine her strength and swiftness, the Saint of Swords unsheathed her blade and thrust it through the back of the Tyrant's throne at the height where his heart would be. Always tempting to go for the neck, with villains, but while clever Damned often had artefacts meant to protect such a weakness they rarely bothered with more than a single layer of enchanted armour over their chest. The blow went straight through the stone and metal, but it was no flesh that was torn through afterwards. Lips thinning with displeasure, Laurence withdrew her blade and let whatever illusion had been laid over the gargoyle shatter.

"Betrayal," the Tyrant called out through the mouth of another gargoyle. "Betrayal most foul!"

The Black Queen turned to gaze upon the mess and Saint took a careful step back. If the confrontation began here, then-

"I really wish you hadn't done that," Catherine Foundling said.

"He was about to turn on us," Laurence flatly replied.

"Yes," she agreed without missing a beat. "But now we turned on him first, and that means-"

Light bloomed in the sky above them, chasing the shadows, and wreathed in a halo the Tyrant appeared – carried by a swarm of chittering gargoyles, seated on what appeared to a measurably gaudier specimen of the throne he'd previously sat on.

"- so viciously scorned, I am left no repose but to meet you all in open and honourable battle," Kairos Theodosian cheerfully announced.

"Komena," the Black Queen murmured in that foreign tongue of hers, "sate."

This time Laurence did feel the devil, or rather her absence – a weight there had been in the air vanished, even as light spread further around the Tyrant of Helike and he revealed what appeared to be a... sword? Saint opened her mouth, but Foundling suddenly extended her staff out in front of her with a glare.

"Do not," she hissed, "accept that beginning."

"What say you, blackguards – if you'll forgive my language – and reprobates?" the Tyrant shouted, openly gleeful. "Will you meet my challenge?"

The Black Queen rolled her shoulder, as if to limber it, and glanced at the rest of them.

"Head for the throne room," Catherine Foundling said. "I'm the only one who can handle what he's about to use, which I suppose is rather the point."

"How will we know the way?" Roland asked.

Foundling pointed at the Tyrant, or rather the light wreathing him.

"You'll be able to see it soon enough," she said. "Get moving. You don't want to be caught in the middle of that."

Laurence's lips thinned.

"The sword," she said. "What is it?"

"In a word?" Catherine Foundling grimaced. "Hierarchy."

—

"Well," Archer said, "that's not good."

Tariq gaze upon the light rising in the distance, chasing away the shadows, and knew that once upon a time the stuff of it had been Light. It had been... twisted, after, but the nature of it was not hidden from his eye. The Ophanim murmured in his ear, angry at the perversion but also *worried*. This was a weapon, and a dire one.

"The Tyrant of Helike has betrayed them," Tariq grimly said.

"Cat said he'd planned to steal this entire place," the young woman said. "I guess he's settled for making a grab at the souls instead."

"And this does not worry you?" the Pilgrim asked.

"We're nearly there," the Archer shrugged. "Although we're going to lose our guide soon, I suppose. Out in the open in Hierophant's seat of power she'd be meat on the plate."

"That Kairos Theodosian could claim such a great bounty of souls," Tariq clarified.

"Cat's there," his companion replied, eyebrow rising.

As if that settled the matter, as if the Black Queen was a talisman of victory. If it had been blind loyalty or even love, the Grey Pilgrim would not have found it half as unsettling. But it was trust, simple and deep. The kind he had never once seen one of Below's champions so easily extend to another. The Woe defied easy description, in both what had brought them together and what had since bound them.

"Then let us proceed," the Pilgrim said, tucking away his thoughts.

They moved swiftly, pace racing against the distant blooming of the Tyrant's light. And they found their mark, moments before the first rays chased away the lesser god that had been their guide and helper both. The Pilgrim and the Archer stood before a flight of tall stairs, roughly hewn and leading to gates of bronze slightly cracked open. Sorcery pulsed like a living thing, hear, a great heartbeat, and the wisps of it were visible in the air. Upwards they hurried and slipped through the opening and into the Hierophant's last sanctum.

—

Precision.

It had always been about precision, Hierophant dimly remembered, even before this had begun. It was the fundamental failure of humankind, the inexactitude of what it could perceive in a world that was the most finely tuned construct in existence. And so they all puttered about, sometimes blindly feeling out a segment of the greater whole and daring to call it a theory of magic. And Hierophant had been blind as well, was blind still, but in his restlessness he had found what he craved the most: sometimes, just sometimes, he could see it all. Witness it in full. And so the impossible simply became improbable, and now he must fit all the pieces together. Perfectly, or it would be worse than doing nothing at all. There had been a need for tools, and so tools he had gathered.

The souls of Thalassina, the fuel of his work.

Broken Liesse, the foundry from which he would cast salvation.

The Observatory, eyes for where his eyes could not reach.

The secrets of Trismegistus had been of great use in leashing the souls and keeping them at hand, in shattering what he needed of Arcadia and making of it what was required. Souls alone were not enough, no, they were not. And so he had ruined the realm, and from ruin gained mastery – aspect pulsing, breathing, pulsing. It was... unpleasant. His body ached, and so he had withdrawn from it. There were simply too many distractions and the work could not brook those. It needed to be perfect. But it was not, even through the Observatory. He filled the sky to see, to find the shards and reflections of deepest Arcadia, but it was not enough. Muddled, the shards were, *inexact*. Papa could not be made anew from that. And then it came to him, the understanding. He had the souls, those who had been there in the last moments of it all. He could see through their eyes, and where their own were imprecise bits of flesh his eyes would not fail. Only there were so many, many souls. And who else could he trust with this? No one.

His mind drifted sometimes, moments were lost, but that was as close as Hierophant would suffer to sleep.

The souls did not get him what he needed. Glimpses, yes, but incomplete. Not even his aspect could bridge so broad a gap. But ah, he was not done. Like jigsaw puzzles, those toys someone he could not recall had loved, he took the glimpses and put them together. Fit them until it could all be seen, and then *again*. All eyes that could be found, for anything less would mean imperfection. Yet distractions came knocking at his door. Vermin wandering through the ruin, armies and travellers. Named, even, that resisted the storms he redirected towards them. Entities, sometimes, and those he spared thought to catching – there was always a need for fuel, for the foundry was ever hungry – but they were slippery things and skilled at hiding in the shadows. Distractions, distractions he could not afford. The essence he extracted from the Hells had bleed and using old arrays he bound devils with it to put in the way of the vermin. No further thought was given than that, for Liesse was high up and defended. But now, now, there was assault. Things crawling in the dark, Named everywhere and even *contamination*.

Someone was trying to take souls, to rule them through law and faith, and when Hierophant had tried to swat them out of existence he had found the laws resisted him. They disallowed his interference and sunk further into the sea of souls, poison in the well. One of the entities was trying to contain this – and was this not a familiar presence?

No. We cannot afford distractions.

Hierophant had to hurry, yes. Containment would fail, contamination would spread, and it would all be made inexact. The pieces were together, though there would be more. If he kept looking, it would be perfect. As he needed it to be.

It is already perfect. We must hurry, they are trying to break it.

Vermin, vermin everywhere. Yes, it needed to be now. Before it was soiled. It all fell together, dozens and dozens of glimpses he had painstakingly gathered, and when they were all fitted Hierophant breathed out.

“Witness,” he whispered.

It rang out, went out, and then it was *caught*.

“Yes,” the Dead King whispered fondly into his ear, “now show me what it is that she’s planning. Show me what the Intercessor seeks, Hierophant.”

Caerulea

Vote! (for A Practical Guide to Evil)

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

(Discord:)

<https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>

Have a nice day.

Andrew Mitchell

I love the way you get in early with this reminder. ♥

[*erraticerrata*](#)

First update of the month, which means extra chapter. Titled “Miraculous”, it’s from multiple POVs and set immediately after the current arc. As usual, linked in the Extra Chapters tab.

[*Javvies*](#)

Hmmm.

Kairos is up to something tricky, as per usual.

I’m not entirely sure what it is or how it’s supposed to work,

though.

Or how Cat's going to stop it.

On the other hand, I'm really not liking that Saint is probably going to get to Masego before Cat can. Or that's what it looks like, anyways.

Interesting, the Dead King wants to know what the Wandering Bard is up to. Can't blame him for wanting to know that, however much he deserves to suffer for the way he's going about finding out.

Well, it seems clear we were more or less right about Masego trying save/recover one or both of his parents.

Laguz

No, he wants to know what her goal is, what is her endgame. Something important but nonessential.

Rook

Understanding the Bard's intent is the furthest thing from nonessential. It's likely the singularly most important possible thing the Dead King could learn, bar absolutely nothing.

The only thing that could realistically threaten an airtight powerhouse like Neshamah is exactly the kind of narrative warfare the Bard trumps everyone at, and the fact that her goals are clouded means it's next to impossible to resist her at all.

We already saw an example of that, how easily she played Black, tricking him into wielding the knife that killed Captain. The greatest Villain of his generation, likely the most genre-saavy one in hundreds of years, and she stepped on him like an ant simply because he didn't know what her goal was.

It's even more disadvantageous for Neshamah to be in the dark. There is no recovering for him when he takes a loss. There is no successor to take up his mantle. Every moment that he doesn't understand her win condition is one where he's in danger.

Andrew Mitchell

Yep. And he's been hunting this knowledge for literal centuries.

[Miles](#)

Funny thing is her goal is probably just to make him confused about her goal so he has to play it extra safe and therefore reduce his impact on the world until he can be stopped. The Bard's is who gets sent in when the saint can't get the job done.

Andrew Mitchell

> Funny thing is her goal is probably just to make him confused about her goal so he has to play it extra safe and therefore reduce his impact on the world until he can be stopped.

IMO the DK being confused is, at best, a short term or ancillary goal. The Bard's up to something we just don't know what.

> The Bard's is who gets sent in when the saint can't get the job done.

We've never seen the WB do anything except manipulate others to change how they act in order to manipulate the story and the resulting outcomes. I'm not sure who you're suggesting would be sending her in, and what you'd be expecting her to do. She's not a direct actor, just a manipulator.

[Javvies](#)

I have to ask – what story have you been reading where Bard's goals and endgame are nonessential?

Because such a story is very different from the one that everyone else has been reading.

To be fair, most people wouldn't be able to do anything even if they did know and understand what Bard's goals and endgame are. And most people don't even realize that there's anything going on there that is worth paying attention to. I'm not even sure Tariq realizes that Bard has her own agenda.

Nairne .01

Neatly summed up.

Cpt. Obvious

The Bard is an enigma. She's been shown to be working against Evil. It's been suggested that The Wandering Bard is a Name.

Think on that for a moment.

At first glance it would appear that she's a Hero firmly on the side of Good. But is she really?

If we look at some of what we think we know of Names there's one big difference between Heroes and Villains. Villains live until they are killed. They don't age while Heroes grow old and eventually die of old age, or they are killed. And as TWB has been at her game for millennia can she really be a Hero?

While it's possible the Gods above created her before the rules were nailed down I kind of doubt it.

So she's a villain then?

That seems a bit off too. She haven't struck me as having any real villainous qualities. She's lately been aiding Heroes which by itself doesn't mean that much. She's also betrayed them, but then so has Kairos, so that doesn't mean much.

But all in all the pieces doesn't seem to add up for her being either Hero or Villain. Instead I think she's something else entirely.

Perhaps she is one of the gods that set up the game and Creation, but chose to stand apart as a spectator and thus set aside most of her powers. But as you can't observe a process without changing the outcome she's still able to influence Heroes and Villains. Over millennia she's grown dissatisfied with the way the Game is developing and has hatched a plan for how to change it.

Well that doesn't sit right with me. I'm more leaning towards her being something unexpectedly born from Creation. A conscience that's not really aligned with either side of the Game. It might have been a reaction to the Gods interfering with Creation that birthed her. It might be that she's walked Creation and composed the stories are so important. And it might be first the Gods tampering with these stories or later mortals and Names manipulating, subverting or changing these that's caused her to take a more active role. Perhaps she's just bored with the narrative and wants to write a "better" story.

There's a lot of guessing going on here, but I'm pretty sure the Wandering Bard isn't just another Hero or Villain.

[Liliet](#)

Apparently the Dead King is as curious about what the fuck "eat the baby" means as us here 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Actually, Archer and Pilgrim will apparently get to Masego first (via Night), *then* Saint.

Love Cat's response to Saint's happystab: "~~Idiot... go away!~~" –
> "I really wish you hadn't done that... head for the throne room". Meanwhile Saint is still worrying about the wrong villain....

Soma

Woah, the extra chapter is right after the current one? That seems... different? They all seemed to be from earlier in the story before I thought.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, it's basically confirmation that Cat's deal held. However, it also suggests that Cat won't get any better deal (or re-bottle DK), if the undead do come back after 3 months.

[Liliet](#)

That's why I don't really like the way the last sentence was worded there >x>

Aston W

Thank you.

Caerulea

Vote! (for A Practical Guide to Evil)

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

(Discord:)

<https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>

Caerulea

Thank you, WordPress, for choosing to start displaying my previous comment immediately after I posted this one.

In other news, the chapter, and the extra chapter, were very good. I wonder of Maesago's aspect will be disabled by the Hierophant. Also, way to screw up, Saint.

[Liliet](#)

(Eh, more is better)

What do you mean Masego's Aspect disabled by the Hierophant?



Caerulea

Hierarch, goddamn it. As in, he 'puts it on trial' or something, and it is judged guilty, or whatever he does to attack things that really shouldn't be attacked, and Masego losses it for a bit.

Liliet

oooooh

Rook

I feel like the Hierarch won't necessarily be in conflict with masego at all. In terms of intent the Hierophant is currently more concerned with unraveling the mysteries of creation rather than changing the lay of it in the first place.

If the Hierarch is a jury, the Hierophant is a witness. They may get along surprisingly well.

shveiran

I feel like I'm missing something; you and others seem to assume that Hierarch has an agenda, but that confuses me. Isn't it the whole point of his character that he doesn't have one? Aggressively so?

He seems less of a jury per se and more of a "revolutionary jury".

Dangerous for sure, but without a plan for what it will do tomorrow or even after lunch.

I don't see how he can be in conflict with anyone aside from "the Hierarch is a dangerous madman and must be removed" (AKA Monster of the week) or "I'm/My loved ones are currently sharing a geographical location with the Hierarch, ain't that a bother".

Holding the gods accountable is really more Kairos' plan than the Hierarch. Andraxes doesn't DO plan. Schemes are the work of Foreign Despots and against the Will of the People.

Rook

Hierarch hasn't been an aloof observer since the end of book 3. He started out that way, yes, but he's been making his own moves ever since he was provoked by the bard.

Putting Hanno and the choir of Judgement on trial, in particular, was something that was decided on by his own volition after getting his aspect of Receive, not a Kairos plot he was forced into.

Book 3 epilogue:

““Your own fucking Gods will bleed you like a pig,” the Wandering Bard hissed.

“Then they, too, will be hanged,” Anaxares noted. “As honorary citizens of the Republic, they are subject to its laws.”

“You-“

“Aoede of Nicae, I charge you with treason,” he said, rising to his feet. “Collaboration with foreign oligarchs and agitation in the name of wretched tyrants.”

...

He left the alley, the quarter, the city until he found the boy awaiting him. Kairos Theodosian took one look at him and laughed, his red eye burning. ...”

Book 4 epilogue:

“The visions came to his eyes and ears on the wind, unbidden and unwanted. He could only Receive them.

...

most importantly of all, on some barren shore, a knight in white stood with his sword high. A killer who had taken lives, but never at his own behest. Behind him, looking through a coin, something unfathomable loomed. The Seraphim, Anaxares thought. The Choir of Judgement. The angels who had judged and slain people of the League.

The Hierarch smiled.

For that, they would be judged in turn.”

shveiran

Does it count as an agenda if you don't act on it?
I agree he would judge the gods given a chance, but what did he actually do to pursue that goal? It really seems like he is just along for the ride to me.

[doominator10](#)

:0

AdrianGrey

Wait, Catherine called the sword “Hierarchy”. What on earth? I mean, it obviously refers to Hierarch, but how? Pilgrim said it was giving off corrupted Light, but Hierarch is an Evil name. And

how could the blade have anything to do with Hierarch's power in the first place? What the hell is going on?

[doominator10](#)

What is Hierarchy, if not Order taken to it's most extreme and damned? Isn't Good all about law and order?

erebus42

It can be, though not necessarily. Lawful Evil and Chaotic Good exist for a reason after all. Though in this case, Heirarch's whole thing is about putting even the Gods on trial, so seizing the means of salvation is kinda on brand for him.

Andrew Mitchell

This isn't D&D and that alignment system does not apply.

luminiousblu

That doesn't mean that Good has anything to do with law and order, though. The most explicit forms of law and order in terms of government are slavery and empire, and both of those are cleanly on the Evil side of things. The nominally Good regions include Callow, which we know had a pretty ineffective way of rulership, Procer, which barely has a cohesive set of laws based as it is on the HRE, and the Golden Bloom, which may not even have a government as we envision it considering every elf is a world unto himself.

erebus42

No it is not but the ideas behind them do apply. There's nothing inherently Good or Evil about Order and Chaos (though many seem to forget that). Law and Order can be forged into tyranny, while chaos and rebellion can be used to help others.

Ravenfrost

I belive there was a demon traped by masego who could bend phisical and metaphisical laws. A demon of hierarchy.

luminiousblu

Good's got shitall to do with law and order and hierarchy isn't order taken to its most extreme, order is hierarchy taken to its most extreme. All order implies a hierarchy, by definition the concept of that which is above and that which is below. It's more basic than Good/Evil.

werafdsaew

The League do have priests, and they're with the Hierarch. So maybe the Light comes from the League priests and is twisted by Hierarch's faith in the laws?

Andrew Mitchell

Makes sense!

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, Catherine found that the priests of Atalante were with the Hierarch.

werafdsaew

The Hierarch has the League priests with him. The Light is then twisted by his faith in the laws?

Rook

The current Hierarch is a Neutral Name, not an Evil one. Likely the only currently existing one of its kind. The Bard herself confirmed as much, when she tried to force him to pick a side and was set back when he refused.

The essence of it in the first place is exactly what the name implies – it controls authority and ranking. Of course it can do something as trivial as wresting authority of some minor power from Above or Below.

The place it was spawned from mirrors this as well, in Bellerophon giving Below a vote. That isn't some honor laid at Belows feet or worship towards them, it's an attempt at usurpation of their authority. Placing them at eye level of everyone else instead of the pedestal above them that it normally occupies.

Tl;dr Hierarchy isn't Evil or Good. It's the highest form of blasphemy towards both.

shveiran

> Hierarchy isn't Evil or Good. It's the highest form of blasphemy towards both.

I think you meant THIS Hierarch? I don't think the previous one was from Bellerophon, and it doesn't sound like she was mad or blasphemous either.

Rook

Lol that's what I already said in the first line of the post you're quoting

[Liliet](#)

Atalantean priests.

And metaphysically speaking, Hierarch is a Neutral Name.

Death Knight

There's no such thing as a Neutral Name. There are only degrees of alignment. I believe the Hierarch is A Good Name. Only he takes what Above preaches (abide by the rules or be punished and what not) and applies that to everyone, Gods included.

[Liliet](#)

>There's no such thing as a Neutral Name. There are only degrees of alignment.

Source?

The first time Neutral Names came up, it was Indrani telling Cat not all Names are clear cut at Marchford. It has come up since that Ranger is not quite a villain, and of course, when Bard came to talk to Hierarch, she came to ask him his alignment.

Oh, and we have WoG that you can't get a Heroic Name while worshipping Below, so there's that.

[Javvies](#)

The so-called "Neutral Names" are Names that can be powered by both Above and Below – Names that can be both Heroic or Villainous, depending on the current bearer of the Name.

But any given instance of a Name is always aligned to either Above or Below. Even if the previous holder of that Name was aligned to the other side.

Rook

In general true, but the Hierarch is an exception. The reason the Bard was talking to him at all when she suffered her loss was because he was refusing to comply to that rule.

“I abstain,” he said.

The woman sighed.

"That's not how it works," she told him, as if he were a witless child. "Right now you're sucking at the teat but you're not swallowing. There's always a side picked, Anaxares. Always."

...

'Anaxares studied the woman for a long moment then shook his head.

"I do not answer to your Gods," he said. "They drew no lots and hold no appointment."

Something like surprise flickered across the woman's face.

"You're Named," she reminded him.

"I am citizen of the Republic of Bellerophon," he replied.

"You were created with purpose," the Bard said flatly. "Fulfil it."

"This purpose was not voted upon by the People," Anaxares said. "I do not recognize it. Forcing it upon me is unlawful."

But of a long argument they had there, not going to quote the whole thing. But the subject of the argument is pretty clear, and more importantly the Bard actually *lost*. Anaxares successfully picked no side at all.

[Liliet](#)

Again, source?

My impression is that a distinction needs to be made between political and metaphysical alignment. They can't be in blatant contradiction, but political alignment is more polarized while metaphysical alignment strikes me as much more of a permissive gradient, with an accomodating middle for Names whose bearers can switch sides multiple times a week if they want without their Role losing any skin.

(And that's separate from Names that can be instantiated as belonging to either side metaphysically, like how Cat's Name of Squire was definitely metaphysicall Evil, and did not take it well when she let a hero go. Squire can be anything, but Cat was an Evil Squire; meanwhile Thief could be whatever she liked without her Role giving a shit)

shveiran

The current Hierarch is the second person ever to bear the mantle of that Name.

If I'm not mistaken, the previous one was the founder of the League, and was not Evil.

It seems Hierarch is a Neutral name, tied more to the land it rules than the axis of Good and Evil. Like Ranger, Hunter, Archer and so on and so forth. They are a minority in The Guideverse, but they do exist.

Soma

Giving the Dead King a look into the Bard seems like... well, one could call it a bit of a sticky situation, I suppose.

shveiran

Right? I mean, on one hand capitalizing on what he does against her is pretty much the only possible way to realistically score a point against the Intercessor. On the other hand... the opposite may be true, so maybe he shouldn't be allowed to get that insight? How can a situation be a lose-lose and a win-win at the same time!

erebus42

Once more Lawrence screws over both herself and her allies.

Did Kairos turn Heirarch into a sword?

What have Masego and the Dead King discovered about the Wandering Bard's nefarious plans?

And what sort of fuckery does Cat have up her sleeve?

Find out next time on A Practical Guide to Evil!

antoninjohn

Well at least Masego learnt a whole lot about magic, that's going to make him a lot more dangerous when he teams up with Cat against that backstabbing "Grand Alliance"

Joy Liner

CALLING IT NOW masego is a revenant and doesn't realize it yet

Andrew Mitchell

Interesting idea and it will be fascinating if true. I don't think it's at all likely to be the case.

Morgenstern

Seems more like a bodyless soul, if anything. He kinda left his body behind after all and is now just "drifting for a few

moments" instead of actually sleeping, like those souls in this chapter seemed to do.

1224

Hmmm. Lot's of players in this game. Smells like a recipe for chaos and we all know Cat's good at exploiting that.

Naeddyr

I can't believe Tyrant betrayed the party so quickly.

Andrew Mitchell

Technically, he tricked Laurence into betraying him so, to some extent at least, the story will be on his side.

Oshi

No he tricked Laurence into providing him the excuse to unsheathe a "Light" blessed weapon granted to him by someone of honor. He forced a duel.

shveiran

I must say, I AM SURPRISED this time. I was kind of expecting a betrayal before the conclusion of the arc, but not THIS soon. Come on, Kairos! If you do it this often you'll cheapen the tension!

edrey

so the bard's plan is what the DK seek, really mad, great kairos taking the souls should also include that king of callow, that looks like a bigger plan

[Liliet](#)

I don't think he can.

Oshi

This is...bad.

konstantinvoncarstein

Isn't it always so? 🙄

IDKWhoitis

I love how the Woe know that Cat will fix it, it's really only a matter of how many limbs have to be chopped off and how loud the swearing will get before it's done.

To a Hero, this is the same level of faith they place in Above.
To a Villain, this is what is expected of oneself.
To the Woe, they pray at the altar of Cat.

Thea

I worry for Zeze... so many ways this can go where he doesn't make it in the end, even if Cat manages to stick it to all sides.

Does she have some levers to pull? Lives he still owes her? Two prior cases of saving him from himself, making this the blessed third one? I only remember one...

luminiousblu

I hope he dies honestly

If he makes it out of this one it'll reek of asspull, and Cat is long overdue actually losing something for real. Nauk was a nobody, Nilin barely existed before he croaked, Kilian disappeared almost four books ago, and Black clearly isn't dead yet and didn't feature prominently for a good long time anyway.

werafdsaew

Why do you want to watch major characters die? Would you rather read tragedies instead?

luminiousblu

Because it turns out some bitterness is due when Cat's entire thing is moaning about how much this journey is costing her. The story isn't a classical triumphalist tale and I'm sort of sick of Cat pretending everything is so hard when at this point the golden luck of heroes seems to be shining on her too. It's tough to take her seriously when the fact of the matter is that the heroic privilege is also known as protagonist plot armour, and she's been using that in spades.

shveiran

I can kind of see where you are coming from.

To me, it doesn't feel that way because EE is very good at making us see how Cat sees the bodies left in her wake as real losses. Sure, they didn't have names, but I feel their weight nonetheless because she does so keenly.

But... I guess I see what you are coming from. A named death would be a symbolic wound.

I don't particularly want one, but... I guess it would serve some purpose.

luminiousblu

It's hard for me to think of them as real losses when it's pretty clear that they were introduced solely to BE said losses. I find Catherine's moral framework unconvincing, which is worse than just being hypocritical, and I find it tough to sympathise with her on any level, or even cheer for her wholeheartedly these days.

Sometimes it feels like EE has fallen into the trap of making everyone but the main character a total dumb fuck in order to make the main character look smart. Clearly, after all, we're not meant to think that Laurence, or Pilgrim, or whoever actually has a point. Even when Catherine herself wavers I find myself unconvinced at how one-sided the actual narrative treats it where Catherine is right, and everyone who opposes her is either sadly mistaken or an aggressively stupid moron who's generally also presented as morally lacking. The best parts of the story are when EE writes about anyone but Cat, past Second Llesse.

Aaron

> Clearly, after all, we're not meant to think that Laurence, or Pilgrim, or whoever actually has a point.

Whaaaaaat? Every time we get a look in their heads we get hammered with the rightness of their position in the general case and their clear-sighted analysis of the current situation in the specific case.

Rook

I found that a very strange statement too, since there's been massive amounts of debate in the comments section over the Saint/Pilgrim's justifications for like the last 20 chapters.

From what I've seen there's actually a fairly even division most of the time, which is a strong indicator of the writing containing nuanced and multifaceted antagonists, not the opposite.

Andrew Mitchell

Good point.

luminiousblu

The overall narrative. Everyone obviously thinks that they're justified, there's not a single person who doesn't think that they're doing the right thing considering their personal situation because if they

did they'd stop. Even Akua thought she was justified when we got to see her point of view.

That doesn't mean that the flow of the story supports them, considering Laurence's stubbornness makes things worse and worse with barely any upside while Tariq, for all his goodness in the flashbacks, is portrayed almost as an old fogey trying to meddle where he doesn't belong and being too stubborn to see the other side of matters.

Thea

Nauk, John Farrier and the Gallowborne weren't just introduced as sacrificial pieces. Their stories could've gone tons of other places, too. Although I admit that Nauk's end was drawn out, but that may have been due to changes in the script cutting down on his screen time. We may never know.

As for Catherine only fighting idiotic assholes and ultimately victims to her greatness... No. Many generic heroes are kinda blind, but that's a point. Saint and Pilgrim are used to show different angles and there is a proper conflict of ideals going on there. We just mostly see or from Cat's side and empathize with her point of view. From another, the restoration of Good Callow and the Grand Alliance might look much better than the insult the former is for Cat... but that's but this story, is it?

luminiouslu

I wasn't talking about Nauk, John Farrier, and the Gallowborne, which are actual characters (or in the last case a group of them), mostly talking about Liesse which is literally a case of a million deaths is a statistic. A hundred thousand deaths is, well, okay for starters it's not even that many people during a war between two large states – Hannibal snuffed out almost as many in one battle, and Bai Qi buried alive anywhere between that number and four times as many. But even if it were a lot it's hard to give a damn when we're not really shown any reason to care. What difference does it really make if it were a hundred thousand and a hundred million?

As for Nauk and John Farrier, the problem I see with treating them like 'real' losses is that Nauk hasn't been relevant since at LEAST when he got his brains melted and really hasn't done anything important since maybe, eh, Battle of Marchford? while John Farrier was a nobody and mainly a stand-in for the Gallowborne as a whole, a sort of common Callowan if

you will, whose role was fairly rapidly replaced by Abigail. While I see how in-universe Catherine was probably attached to those, I find it difficult to sympathise because at the end of the day they were highly marginal characters who had overstayed their plot relevance (especially Nauk – John Farrier's death could be symbolic of how little a single unnamed person, even a decent one, actually matters when you're up against things from the latter half of the monster manual, but Nauk dying "again" can't be taken seriously because he was clearly there only to either die again or to be miraculously revived, those were the only two plays left for him to make)

Saint and Pilgrim have different angles. So, in fact, do William and Akua. Heck you should've used Cordelia, who possibly has the most brutally pragmatic line of thought in the series. My point, though, is that Saint and Pilgrim are not actually vindicated by the plot most of the time. Saint thinks she's right in much the same way Doomguy probably thinks he's right or Todd Howard imagines himself to be a saint, while Pilgrim, who doesn't get quite as one-sided of a rap, is still shown to be mostly too stubborn for his own good and somehow a meddler. You could delve into the mind of literally anyone and they'd mostly come off as justified. Masego imagines himself justified right now, because the souls are already dead and he's helping them pass on anyway in his search for daddy. That's clearly, however, not what the plot is looking to say.

shveiran

I'm confused.

It seems to me you are saying that the characters are diversified and coherent in their own perspective, but you have a problem with the fact that the plot tends to show the protagonist as being right.

Is that a good summary?

Because if so... I don't get it.

I mean, the protagonist strives to radically change the world. How can the conflict NOT be about people resisting that change? And you too seem to believe that the antagonist are coherent in their resistance, so that's not the problem.

You dislike the fact that... the plot shows the protagonist's goal is something we can get behind? I'm sorry, I don't get it. Why would you want the

plot to show the main stakes are not significant or desirable? It would be really hard for me to feel for the protagonist if she was shown to be a madwoman.

Mental Mouse

From different POVs, we get looks at various characters' ideas of why they're right. The point is to compare the different perspectives, and realize that there really is a fundamental conflict. It's not simply that one or another is "right", but their basic goals are in conflict.

I'd The real hidden bias is on the readers' side: Most of us belong to an aggressively pluralistic society which supports individual achievement and self-determination. This gives us a clear bias as to what character we favor. 😊

luminiousblu

Which again isn't my point. Yes, there is a strong reader bias, which you can see when there's a Pilgrim chapter and everyone is up in arms over him doing something Catherine does too. Obviously there are different points of view being given, my point is that the overall structure and flow of the story makes it clear who is "right". After all, Laurence is being portrayed as a hothead who makes things worse for everyone more often than not here. We're TOLD that she's sort of emotionally scarred and that she's helped so many people before but we barely see any of it.

Andrew Mitchell

> the actual narrative treats it where Catherine is right, and everyone who opposes her is either sadly mistaken or an aggressively stupid moron who's generally also presented as morally lacking.

It's almost like you're reading a different book. I do understand the issue that you're talking about, having seen it in other books but I don't think the issues you're describing apply to PGtE very much, if at all. IMO EE has done a marvelous job building my understanding of, and often sympathy for, many of the characters opposing Cat. I see them act intelligently based on their world view and the information they have.

luminiousblu

Just because you understand the worldview of others doesn't mean you're meant to sympathise with them nor does it mean they're presented as not complete gibbering imbeciles. Based on their worldview is right, but the problem is that 90% of the Named world apparently follows a worldview that borders on objectively wrong.

Andrew Mitchell

90% hold worldviews that "borders on objectively wrong". That's a pretty strong claim and I can't see it myself.

Could you give me a specific character (that's not Saint or Perigrine, they've been discussed a lot already) and explain what it is that makes you hold that view for that specific character?

I'm genuinely attempting to understand your view.

werafdsaew

If you don't like the main character it's hard to see how you can truly enjoy this work. Why don't you just stop reading?

luminiousblu

>h-heh don't raise any criticisms, just stop reading
lmao
End yourself

werafdsaew

You know what happens when I don't like the main character? I read something else.

shveiran

Aside from the fact that the "end yourself" is really uncalled for between people discussing fiction, so please don't...

... the point remains that this isn't any criticism. To me, and I'm guessing werafdsaew by his comment, this is what PGtE is about: an original world trapped in an inescapable conflict by a clever twist on the Good-Evil tropes.

You seem to feel that the conflict is forced by the author through character stupidity or stubbornness, and I am honestly at a loss as to why you'd want to read a book you feel is written that way.

This is not me saying you can't post criticism, just me wondering what it is that you enjoy in a story that you portray has having forced conflicts and no real stakes.

werafdsaew

To the contrary. The Dead King got getting what he wants, and he also made an agreement to not harm him. So unless the Saint decides to turn on Zeze no-one is even trying to kill him.

Morgenstern

If I remember correctly, he only agreed he wouldn't kill him. Doesn't mean he will relinquish control or that he wouldn't cut his soul out or that Zeze isn't *already* dead or ... or ... or... 😊

[Liliet](#)

Actually he opened negotiations with "you will receive guarantees as to the Hierophant's life" which is generic enough it doesn't really leave room for Overly Specific Wording. The Dead King is interested in upholding the spirit and not just the letter of the deal here, too, because it's his guarantee that next time he will be bargained with too (instead of just losing to attrition over centuries with people willing to let everything they love burn but not listen to a single word from him)

[Mental Mouse](#)

The big thing Cat might be able to do is to interrupt the Dead King's control of him. That said, it's a bad sign that both the party and DK are all "hurry up!"

[Hakurei06](#)

>Crow Goddess
>Murder
GODSDAMMIT EE

Wait, Cat is a priestess of murder.
ahaHAHAGH- khgh... grh ... h ...

[Cold Cyberia](#)

This really highlights the priorities of immortals. Knowing what your opponent wants is key because if you live forever you always have the luxury of starting over later down the line. Like shooting in the dark, if you have eternity it doesn't matter how many times you fail you'll eventually hit the target even if the odds are tiny. This applies to Bard in particular because unlike villains she doesn't even have a seat of power which makes removing her resources a temporary measure.

It's also why Kairos is such a dangerous opponent. Wish allows him to see the innermost desires of the people he sees (among other things) which is essentially half the battle if you're fighting against a beings like Wandering Bard and Dead King. Really enjoyed this chapter!

Cold Cyberia

Side note: I'm surprised Hierophant can't beat Hierarch in a straight up metaphysical fight, especially since he has already fought (and learned from) the Beast of Hierarchy. First time I've noticed the connection but I'm wandering if this is where Anaxares is going. A being that's adjacent to Gods, like the demons, rather than working within their framework.

Side note 2: Bard has now been deeply involved in both instances of the new deities we see. She was elbow deep in Sve Noc, both through the sisters and Cat obtaining her mantle + she was directly responsible for the Hierarch as a Name but also talking to Anaxares. Still not sure if this is part of a grand plan or if she takes the Bob Ross approach of no mistakes; only happy accidents.

Nairne .01

She most definitely wants people to think Bob Ross has been her collaborator in a lot of instances.

ninegardens

Pretty sure the current Hierarch is totally NOT in her plan (she even stated as such), and it will be interesting to see how that pans out.

She may have adapted her plan SINCE then.

ninegardens

Gotta say, I love the fact that the italics in Zeze's seciton isn't HIS thoughts:

"No. We cannot afford distractions."

"It is already perfect. We must hurry, they are trying to break it."

Aotrs Commander

Excellent job, Saint, fucking everything up as usual because you are incapable of actual thought, even less so than ACTUAL swords.

How has she lasted this long being this stupid again?

Liliet

I'd love to see you do better in her place.

Laurence acted like a smart person with reflexes honed by a lifetime of not letting villains finish their sentences.

>“Sixty-seven: putting an arrow in a villain during their monologue is a perfectly acceptable method of victory. Heroes believing otherwise do not get to retire.”

>— Two Hundred Heroic Axioms, unknown author

This is from a Kairos chapter, too.

>The boy grinned, red eye burning.

>“I am the Tyrant of Helike,” he said. “Dead or not, they are in my service.”

>The villain’s sceptre pulsed gold and made a sound like a gong ringing. Hazy silhouettes formed in ranks in front of him. Soldiers, all of them. Ranks upon ranks filled the room and they unsheathed their swords, strung their bows. Lances were raised and horses whinnied.

>“Shit,” Hedge cursed to herself. “We got monologued. Never let them finish the monologue, Hedge, that’s how they get you.”

Laurence acted prudently, she simply lacked information / deep insight into this specific situation and how exactly it differs from average that Catherine had.

Mental Mouse

> she simply lacked information / deep insight into this specific situation and how exactly it differs from average

Well, that’s the thing, almost always has been: Cat and the intrigues around her, are intrinsically outside of Saint’s expertise (and comfort zone).

Liliet

Yep.

I get somewhat annoyed when people act like this makes her a complete idiot / an incompetent hero / ‘how did she survive so long’. By stabbing *more preemptively* is how

Rook

Agreed, the Saint is actually quite sharp (no pun intended) as far as sword arms go. She just happens to be the only muscle stuck in a four way fight between master schemers that are all at the top of their field.

In many ways she is basically ‘Practical Good’ as far as gritty avenging Heroes go. Doesn’t listen to monologues,

willing to fight dirty when needed, kills villains before their plots come to fruition, doesn't rely on external tools, never underestimates the enemy, never indecisive in a crisis, wary of betrayals from within, etc....

She's also narratively saavy to an extent, although right now she's quite outclassed. Most Heroes wouldn't be able to easily tell that the Good King's mini crusade was too clean of a story to last, or read when they Pivot is approaching like she just did.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm! ^^

shveiran

You know, I still dislike her as a character, but these are all valid points; some of which I didn't consider before. Nicely done.

Andrew Mitchell

Honestly, this one's on Cat as far as I'm concerned. She could easily have told the Saint:

"Look, Karios is going to betray us, it's what he does. And I have a counter ready, but he actually needs to betray us first. If you've got an opportunity for a preemptive swing at him, DON'T take it or you'll put us on the wrong side of the story."

shveiran

And Saint would have trusted her this time because...

[Liliet](#)

When exactly would she have done this? They were in Kairos's earshot the entire time, considering gargoyles and illusions.

[Tohron](#)

At first I thought the Dead King just wanted to see the godhead Warlock had been shown, but this is interesting too.

Andrew Mitchell

I thought that was his aim too. But EE really surprised me with the Dead King's focus on the Bard. I makes perfect sense in retrospect, I wish I was i

Andrew Mitchell

I wish I was smart enough to have guessed that in advance.

Death Knight

There's no such thing. EE confirmed as much.

I'd say the Hierarch is a Good Name since he champions law and order, something Above is implied to preach in the Book of All Things. The only difference is that the Hierarch believes that not even the Gods Above are exempt from their own laws and will hold them to account. Below as well. The other commentor was correct when they said that Hierarchy is the highest form of blasphemy.

[Liliet](#)

>There's no such thing. EE confirmed as much.

I'm guessing this is a reply to me about Neutral Names?

Can you give a source on this? When did EE say that?

[Cold Cyberia](#)

I don't think there's a direct quote but the story very much frames Names as a choice between Good and Evil. We are told they are given by the gods, i.e. Bestowal. Bard said that in the end you have to chose a side when she was talking with Anaxares. Since Creation is a battleground between the gods and Named are their soldiers there's no impetus for a neutral party with a possible exception of WB.

Even people that are closest to being neutral champion the philosophy of their gods. Ranger being a pure expression of individualism (Below) and Hierarch being a pure expression of conformity (to laws of man) and community. Granted, it's not so clear cut and they do warp the power to be their own but I think they are still technically a villain and a hero.

Speaking more broadly, it would be supremely unsatisfying if "just be neutral" was a solution to a conflict that spans the literal fabric of existence. Per EE, much more advanced nations (Kingdom Under, Yan Tei) struggled with the problem of coexistence between villains and heroes. If being neutral was a valid solution I think they would've employed it.

shveiran

This is a valid point, but an alternate explanation would be that only a few Names can actually be neutral. That wouldn't really have such harsh consequences.

[Liliet](#)

>but the story very much frames Names as a choice between Good and Evil.

Political, not metaphysical. The distinction is worth making. You're not *allowed* to not pick a side unless you're personally Ranger. That was Bard's point to Anaxares.

"Just be Neutral" is

- 1) not something you get to pick: Neutral Names are skill-based ones, or results of weird shit like the League of Free Cities which is a mixed Good/Evil polity. Anyone who gets a Name from any other kind of story is stuck with the metaphysical alignment they get (ie Cat was an Evil Squire regardless of her personal theological opinions);
- 2) not something you're allowed to stick to: Bard came to say hi to Hierarch, and everyone else ends up being drawn into the conflict / aligned with one side or another whether they want to or not. I bet Vivienne didn't *mean* to formally change alignment from hero to villain when she accepted Cat's deal, she just ended up stuck with everyone else applying the label to her;
- 3) still possible, if you're fucking Ranger. Who teaches heroes and villains both, and has been remarked as not being technically a villain despite her past association with the Calamities. Archer was Neutral too, until she was formally associated with the Woe.

(Which gave her a political label, but did not change the fact her Name is Neutral and her Role doesn't give a shit which side she's on and doesn't have either specifically heroic or specifically villainous tropes built into it)

Also, I don't get the impression that the advanced nations *struggle* with the coexistence of Bestowals from Above and Below. They seem to have figured it out just fine.

Javvies

Ranger is (and always was) a Villain. Technically. But very nonstandard. And since she's both not the Classical Evil type out to do Evil for the sake of Evil, and insanely personally powerful, plus lives in an inhospitable spot in the middle of nowhere ... she's not exactly high on the list of priorities for most Heroes to go after.

Though IIRC, somewhere Saint thinks about having gotten owned by Ranger but not being considered worth killing.

Archer(Indrani) was also always a Villain. Technically. But, again, a nonstandard one.

Ranger and Archer are both Villains because their take on their Names is one about personal freedom and not needing to listen to the rules other people play by. They don't care about "the greater good", they care about themselves, even more than they care about their friends.

That is, their Names are empowered by Below, because they earned Names by their own merits and their personal philosophies/outlooks on life are in line with Below's stance of "do whatever you want to do, as long as you don't complain about the consequences".

In D&D terms, they're more or less Chaotic Neutrals. But in the Guideverse, Chaos is Below.

[Liliet](#)

>Ranger is (and always was) a Villain. Technically. But very nonstandard.

Source?

Like, I acknowledge that that's what you think. But I think otherwise.

>Archer(Indrani) was also always a Villain. Technically. But, again, a nonstandard one.

Is that so?

>"They're in range, for you?" I asked.

>"Sweetcheeks," she grinned. "There's not a damn thing in any world that isn't."

>It was talk like that that had me believing the ochre-skinned woman wasn't a villain. None of us who'd managed to live this long would so willingly dip down hubris and slip it too much tongue.

Politically, Indrani is a villain because she stands with Cat. Metaphysically, she's Neutral enough that the 'hubris punished' tropes don't apply to her.

>That is, their Names are empowered by Below, because they earned Names by their own merits and their personal philosophies/outlooks on life are in line with Below's stance of "do whatever you want to do, as long as you don't complain about the consequences".

I don't accept that as a workable definition of 'affiliation with Below', because this category would also include... Thief, Hunter, Hedge Wizard, Rogue Sorcerer...

>But in the Guideverse, Chaos is Below.

I disagree. From the point of view of rulers, priests and everyone else who is not another Named, Heroes are very much a force of chaos, with a tendency to break

established systems that they don't like and leave behind ruins for someone else to rebuild from. (That was kind of Cat's issue with heroes trying to liberate Callow, remember?)

Law/Chaos are neutral in Guideverse. Good/Evil tend to correspond to Above/Below but aren't closely tied to because Above and Below are political sides, which inevitably muddles the waters.

Javvies

Good and Evil isn't the real conflict between Above and Below. Good and Evil are just labels, and Above has a better PR game because they can actively coordinate between their Named.

The real conflict of Guideverse is between letting people figure things out on their own, or telling them what to do and how to do it. Chaos and Order, more or less. And, respectively Below and Above.

Above is called Good and Above because they have an inherent PR advantage in coordinating between one generation and the next and between one Named and the Next, plus they have an organized religion for their cause.

Below got saddled with being Below and Evil because they are hands off, and only get involved when actively requested to involve themselves and only do so to a relatively limited extent, governed by to what extent the requester earned divine intervention.

There are no metaphysical Neutrals.

There are Names that can be empowered by either Above or Below, but each instance of such a Name is always empowered by one or the other, and it can easily change between instances.

And it's probably a helluva lot easier for one of the "Neutral Names" to be less traditional in their behavior for being a Hero or Villain, to ride the line more easily, without upsetting their Name. Especially if your Name is about personal abilities/skills.

Archer is a nontraditional Villain, as is Ranger. Archer can get away with flaunting her talent/taunting hubris about her ability with a bow because that's the essence of her freaking Name. She's the Archer – it's what she does. If it has to do with archery, she's one of the best in the world at it. It's a self-reinforcing feedback loop. Being really good at archery contributed to her becoming the Archer, which made her better at archery. Showing off how good she is at archery just further reinforces her Name. Especially since it's

really hard for a Narrative counter to “I’m really good at archery” except in ways that themselves reinforce that she’s good at archery – that is, things that require something other than archery to overcome. She’s explicitly not a Hero. Go back to the siege of Marchford – she says that she can’t do much about the demon, that takes a Hero, ie, Hunter.

...

Are we seriously having the discussion about the so-called Neutral Names again?

IIRC, we had it way back in book 2/3. And I’m pretty sure that at some point EE weighed in with confirmation about the nature of the so-called “Neutral Names”.

Can’t remember exactly where/when, though.

*We referring to the community in general, not anyone in specific.

shveiran

I kind of agree with your vision of the conflict between the gods, but that is about the players, not the pawns.

Above has a vision for the world, and empowers people that shape the world accordingly.

Below wants to see what happens if determined people get magical power to enact their own vision.

You can argue one is Law and the other Chaos (though honestly, I think it is more complicated than that and those words have too much baggage attached, so I’m not sure it helps having a clear discussion) but even if you do, that is just the gods.

A ruler is not about chaos, no matter who powers him or her.

A brigand is not about rules or the big picture, no matter who fuels his or her name.

About Neutral names, I have only started reading comments after catching up with the Guide.

I have not seen that comment, and if you can recall where it was I’d be very grateful.

I don’t think that point is made very clear in the novel, however. Squire and Hierarch certainly works how you describe, but while we know Hunter was a Hero I really didn’t get that Ranger and Archer were Villains.

[*Liliet*](#)

There is nothing like that in the Word of God compilation google doc. Probably never made it there; incidentally, it would be awesome for more than just this discussion if you could find/link the quote you're talking about 🙄

What is there, however, is this:

>Evil Names thrive on conflict, by their very nature

>The Squire Role isn't always Evil, no. It largely depends on who they'll be squiring for, though anyone squiring for Black is going to be Evil. Catherine taking the shortcut he offered made that a done deal: since he effectively used his own Name to kickstart hers, there's going to be bleed over in several ways.

>The influence of the gods is usually on the subtle side. You're right that Evil Roles usually let people do whatever they feel like doing – that's because they're, in that sense, championing the philosophy of their gods. Every victory for Evil is a proof that that philosophy is the right path for Creation to take. Nearly all Names on the bad side of the fence have a component that involves forcing their will or perspective on others (the most blatant examples of this being Black and Empress Malicia, who outright have aspects relating to rule in their Names). There's a reason that Black didn't so much as bat an eyelid when Catherine admitted to wanting to change how Callow is run. From his point of view, that kind of ambition is entirely natural. Good Roles have strict moral guidelines because those Names are, in fact, being guided: those rules are instructions from above on how to behave to make a better world. Any victory for Good that follows from that is then a proof of concept for the Heavens being correct in their side of the argument

>I started writing the Guide in large part because I wanted to deconstruct or avert modern fantasy tropes, and the Principate is a large part of that. It is, undeniably, the largest force for Good on the continent. It's kept both the Kingdom of the Dead and the Chain of Hunger at bay for centuries when otherwise they would have rampaged through most of Calernia. Living conditions in Procer, even for the peasantry, are better than pretty much everywhere else. Its rulers obey the dictates of the House of Light to the letter, if not always in spirit. None of this changes the fact that they are a feudal empire, with all the nastiness that implies. They still war

on each other for petty reasons, see the people they rule mainly as a source of income or manpower and the Principate has tried to invade almost every other nation on Calernia at some point in its history. Heroes die young, villains crash and burn. At the end of the day, most people actually running things are just /people/. Getting a set of rules from the Heavens doesn't magically make everyone that takes up a crown a decent person.

>On a purely technical level, the largest difference between the worship of Good and Evil is that Good is almost always community-oriented (hence the existence of churches like the House of Light) while Evil works on strictly personal relationships between worshipper and deity. There are no priests of Evil, though it can be argued that /everyone/ is a priest of Evil: all prayers can be granted, for the right price.

>The Gods Above and Below do roughly correspond to "lower case" good and evil, as far as entities that far removed from mortals can be understood. That neither side of the equation intervenes directly means there's a lot of room for interpretation in the respective philosophies they preach, but the bare bones are there.

(oh, this ^ is the one I went looking for when I dove into the doc; might as well keep going tho)

>The way god-sourced powers relate to Creation is an inversion of the broad philosophies of the Gods. Good is centred around community and Evil around individualism, but in their respective Named you'll more often see villains capable of affecting a great many people and heroes mostly capable of affecting themselves

(0000H THIS IS THE MOST INTERESTING ONE. I couldn't find it the last time I went looking; this is largely where I first got the impression that the Lawful/Chaotic aspects of Above and Below balance each other out. Above makes Lawful societies that heroes then liven up / break up / chaos-ize as necessary; Below thrives on baseline chaos where villains are the ones to impose the kind of order they like. Note that this means Names like Ranger, Archer and the like, which are centered around affecting yourself and no-one else, are closer to the heroic end of the scale this-wise)

>As for the Heavens/Hells that's a more complicated issue. Technically the Hells is where the devils are

and the Heavens is where the angels are, in a physical sense. Good and Evil cultures believe that their souls go to their respective Gods after they die, unless angels/devils have a claim to them, but no one has ever passed on to the other side and remembered what was there so there's still a degree of uncertainty. Faith would be a pretty meaningless concept if the afterlife was a physical certainty.

(not sure if this is even relevant to this particular discussion but I'm a bit irked by the Triumphant theories popping up every other chapter like clockwork so dredging it up again...)

O, here's an interesting one:

>Q: The problem really is this world doesn't really have an appropriate name for Catherine to transition into. Grey Knight would fit her best of the obvious options but it isn't a Name as far as we know.

>A: There would be no cultural drive anywhere on Calernia to birth a Name like Grey Knight, which effectively ensure it could not come into being.

Note how this does not say 'it's impossible for a name like Grey Knight to exist because basic metaphysical mechanics' but only 'there's no cultural drive for it on Calernia'.

>"I have not specified anything about whether Hierophant is a villainous or heroic Name, no."

(this is a non-answer but still worth dredging up lmao since it implies there is in fact a question)

>Proceran Named (that is, both villains and heroes) are rare and tend to have a local focus, heavily tied in to a local legend or story. It can be as basic as protecting a lake or an relic, or something more reactive like commoner Named vs abusive authority. Opposition for a Proceran hero will not necessarily be a villain. Plenty of forces of natures like spirits and monsters still running around, especially in a place as large as the Principate. It wouldn't be unusual for corruption in the ruling class to be the opposition either. When villains are involved, there's a bend towards them being sorcerers (magic has a poor reputation in Procer) and they're usually directly opposed to the hero in some way (want to use the hero-protected lake's power for their own ends, or have a scheme that would involved something dear to the hero)

>All heroes are considered to have a mandate from the Heavens in theory, though in practice heroes who affect the broader continent are very few. The 'rules' will be heavily dependent on how they came into their Name, the moment that crystallized who they are. Hanno, for example, would break down if he started going against what he perceives to be justice. William would have been driven suicidal by ceasing to attempt restoring Callow, since it was heavily tied in to his last source of self-worth. It's not a paladin class feature where you can fall and the powers disappear or turn dark, it's more that the further a hero strays from their core ideals the weaker and more prone to catastrophic mistakes they become.

(This one is important to my understanding bc it differentiates heroes who can do whatever the fuck they think is right from dnd paladins who have to follow a code)

>The House of Light didn't inhibit internal Procer warfare so much as it 'civilized' it: the priests are the reason no one burns villages to hurt a rival's power base. In a sense the House codified Proceran warfare, especially through the introduced concept of 'just war' (which means in practice that princes need a pretext before taking a swing at other princes). What makes a war just would take too long to list, but in essence if you're removing wickedness (fighting someone who did a bad thing) or protecting the innocent (fighting someone who hurt those that are your responsibility) it's socially acceptable to go to war.

>Heroes don't fight in the civil wars, as a rule. Some might because of personal attachments, but cooperating with temporal powers would carry a perception of them 'tainting' their purpose and serving as enforcers for the House of Light would bring brutal backlash. (As a rule, anyway, heroes tend to consider themselves closer to the Gods than priests. Anyone can be a priest, but heroes got their own pat on the back directly from Above.) Fighting between heroes is quite rare, and usually comes up because of cultural differences from where they're from: an Alamans hero might see sacrificing three hundred people to put down a monster as monstrous and against every rule of chivalry, while a Lycaonese would consider it a regrettable but necessary sacrifice. Those different opinions might lead to

blows, but actual deaths in those fights are nearly unheard of.

Wow, I'm a bit disoriented from reading through the entire document again, and also tired and my laptop is refusing to let me scroll using the touchpad, but basically...

There's a lot that supports your point – Good is about community which is what laws are for in the first place, while Evil is about individualism which is in fact connected to chaos. But the archetypal way villains and heroes act, respectively, is from the DnD point of view Lawful Evil and Chaotic Good, balancing it out enough that I'm confident in saying Good \neq Lawful and Evil \neq Chaotic in Guideverse.

If you can, please do find that discussion and WoG that you're referring to!

shveiran

I'm very much with Liliet on this one.

If you have evidence to support your claim, by all means bring it forth, but as is I certainly don't remember quotes along those lines.

I also don't see much evidence that Above and Below are much about chaos and law, or even greater good vs personal freedom. A lot of heroes operate outside the system, and villains generally seem to care only for the rules they set themselves.

We have seen Brigands, Thieves and Pirates on both sides of the Chessboard, as well as Rulers.

Not to mention, if caring about the greater good was enough to jump the divide between Above and Below, would Cat still be a Villain? She's been all about the big picture and greater good for all since before book 4.

Is the Champion really about order? Are the Stygian about chaos? Does Saint look like she cares much about the proper way to do things, rules and borders and whatnot?

I really don't think there is a law-chaos axis here, let alone one that runs parallel to the Good-Evil one. Below's approach may be to fill determined individuals with power and see what they do, whereas the angels impose rules on the world and wish for their champions to uphold them, but that is the GODS. The Named do not operate that way, and we have seen a lot of contrary

evidence that suggests such a rule does not really apply.

Cold Cyberia

I think Bard's point is exactly what she said: "Right now you're sucking at the teat but you're not swallowing. There's always a side picked, Anaxares. Always." As in, if you get metaphysical juice you need to chose a side.

You're also mistaking political for metaphysical and vice versa. Ranger teaching heroes and villains both isn't a metaphysical statement of how the world works, it's a political statement of how the Refuge is run. A metaphysical statement would be thus: Ranger's power is completely independent of Good and Evil, thus being neutral. This is clearly not the case since she embodies the totally individualistic side of spectrum which falls within the purview of Evil.

You might not get the impression Kingdom Under (or other large polities) didn't struggle with these issues but they nonetheless did. Check the word of god document – this is why Kingdom Under. The fact that their solution is coexistence between villains and heroes and not neutrality supports my argument. Even when everything is peaceful and the conditions are perfect for neutrality, they still have to chose a side. Because that's how the narrative laws work.

Liliet

Uh.

The philosophy an individual supports has nothing to do with their metaphysical/political affiliation whatsoever. Like there's probably a statistical correlation, but when we're talking collectivist/individualist, not even a *strong* one. Come on, which side's philosophy does Amadeus support? Catherine? Remember how the WoG says villains tend to get powers for ruling and heroes tend to get individualistic powers?

Ranger's Name per se, her Role and Aspects, could easily be heroic. Come on, a monster slayer? Someone who perfects their skills? That's literally Laurence. Hunter was a hero, Archer ended up a villain, you think that's hard baked into their Names?

My argument is that:

- the metaphysical alignment of many Names (though not all) is not set and can vary based on instantiation (see: Squire)

- an instance of a Name has an alignment hard-baked into it trope-wise, one that depends on the story that birthed the Name and has absolutely nothing to do with the Named's personal opinions/philosophy/anything else. Only the path they're actually walking

- there is a spectrum that can roughly be divided into three sections for that "baked-in" alignment. There are Good Names, birthed and empowered by a hero's conviction – these are the only ones that get Light granted to them. There are Evil Names, birthed and empowered by a villain's ambition – note that the villain doesn't have to actually worship Below or agree with any part of their philosophy for that, unlike heroic Names this does not come as part of the requirements. And there are Neutral Names, birthed and empowered by all the other things – a person's skill and drive to improve it, most often. I speculate (though I'm less sure of it) that Captain and Scribe, for example, are both inherently Neutral Names, and if say Amadeus managed to get himself redeemed onto the Heavens' side (just imagine for the sake of the argument pls), they both could have followed him without their Roles having so much as a hiccup.

Good and Evil Names are ones that weaken if your political affiliation to your side weakens, because political affiliation is part of their stories, at least on Calernia. Yan Tei does not seem to have that particular feature.

Neutral Names do not inherently give a shit about which side you're on. Thief is an example of a Neutral Name – Vivi ended up losing it because of no longer doing thief-like things or thinking like a thief, the side transition itself was utterly painless. Archer is an example of a Neutral Name as well – had she hit it off with a crew of heroes she'd have joined them just as seamlessly as she did Catherine's gang. These Names are not *metaphysically speaking* empowered by either Above or Below, though characters in-universe might think like they are just out of religious inertia.

(Catherine was surprised to hear Archer was not necessarily speaking a hero)

All that said, Creation in general doesn't really brook Named with Neutral Names *staying* Neutral themselves. Ranger ended up carving herself a niche and hiding in it, but it's precisely Ranger-sized and Ranger-shaped,

and even then she's often considered to be at least leaning on the side of villainy because of her past association with Calamities. Calernian stories demand that you pick a side, even if your Name is Neutral.

And coming back around to the topic of Kingdom Under, Yan Tei, etc, even if you remove the conflict element, your Name when instantiated is still going to be one of the three: hero-type, neutral-type or villain-type. You can't just pick to be Neutral if you got your Name for your ambitions, that pegs you as metaphysically villainous regardless of opinion.

>You might not get the impression Kingdom Under (or other large polities) didn't struggle with these issues but they nonetheless did.

I didn't say they 'didn't' struggle, I'm saying the struggle isn't still ongoing bc they figured it out eventually 😊

>Check the word of god document – this is why Kingdom Under

0? Can you quote the part you're referring to specifically?

>The fact that their solution is coexistence between villains and heroes and not neutrality supports my argument.

I'm not seeing where that contradicts my interpretation. It accounts for that just as well as yours does.

> A metaphysical statement would be thus: Ranger's power is completely independent of Good and Evil, thus being neutral. This is clearly not the case since she embodies the totally individualistic side of spectrum which falls within the purview of Evil.

Don't confuse philosophy and metaphysics, seriously. Ranger's *Name* is not any more individualistic than Hunter's, and her story hardly embodies individualism when she literally has a place she's ruling and a school she's running.

>I think Bard's point is exactly what she said: "Right now you're sucking at the teat but you're not swallowing. There's always a side picked, Anaxares. Always." As in, if you get metaphysical juice you need to chose a side.

We operate by different definitions of “need”, maybe? I’m saying that “need” is in this case “because Bard says so”, aka a political point. It’s clearly physically/metaphysically possible for him to not have chosen a side yet, yeah?

jack

Dude?

[*Fayhem*](#)

It’s not like we didn’t already know the Dead King is a monster, but this is a very personal level of callous cruelty on display here. He didn’t just tell Masego that he could bring one of his fathers back, he let him get to the point where he could actually see how to do it (or believed he could, which emotionally is the same thing) just to steal that non-replicable moment of possibility from him so he could twist it to his own ends. I doubt Masego will ever fully recover from that; we just saw the Dead King give him **another** scar he’ll carry until the day he dies, because apparently what happened in Thalassina just wasn’t quite enough trauma yet.

tl;dr – NESHAMAH YOU GODSDAMNED MOTHERFUCKER

RoflCat

I feel the more horrifying thought is that the Bard had hands in what happened in Thalassina because that’s the moment Masego is reconstructing.

[*Fayhem*](#)

Interesting idea; my read on that was that DK was hijacking Masego’s aspect and pointing it somewhere else entirely, but it’s def not impossible that Bard was in Thalassina and up to shenanigans.

NerfGlastigUaine

Well, that’s one hell of a wham line to end on. B/c really, our favorite not-so-harmless bard has been away for too long. And now we see what the Dead King was going for. Plans within plans, always playing the long game.

Interlude: Reckoning

"Fate is not a bridle; it is an arrow in flight. No hand but your own can loose it, yet once loosed there can be no desisting from the path."

– Dread Empress Maleficent the First

Masego awoke from his dream to a firm hand on his shoulder. The touch was unpleasant, as most touches tended to be, but not so distasteful as to stir him to action when he was so... *tired*. He'd said something, hadn't he? Just now. And it'd been important. Yet he could not quite recall, and there were other matters to have his mind aflutter. Masego could feel sights flicker just beyond the reach of his eyes, as if stolen before they ever became his.

"I would have preferred," a measured voice said, "to use means that preserved your gifts. For that I apologize, Hierophant. You are a rare talent and so this stands a great waste."

Masego had heard that voice before. Months, years ago. It was not to be trusted. It belonged to an enemy. He tried to extend his will, to claw back the sights that had been taken from him, but it was... difficult. He saw a garden and a pale woman in a dress. He saw a man with a silver coin, spinning and spinning until it dropped. He saw a crowned corpse, a grinning skull – and his will was firmly set aside, like a child whose wrist had been slapped. He struggled against it, but only weakly and ceased when the futility of the act became clear.

"It is necessary, however. If we'd had more time," the voice said, "it could have been done more cleanly. Yet your mistress forced my hand in this, however kind her intentions. So did that amusing child, though from him I would not presume kindness of any sort."

Masego had no eyes to blink open blearily, but the glinting lights of Summer's noon came alight once more. There were arrays around him, in the dozens, that he could not remember making. He wanted to study them more closely but it was difficult to concentrate. He felt exhausted and it was only worsening. Like a barrel draining out. There were other circles of rune he remembered carving himself, the necessities of bringing back his father, but they were skillfully intertwined with the stranger's work. Someone, he realized, had usurped his work. Wormed runes into his arrays and so repurposed them for a ritual that was almost a manner of scrying, though unlike any he'd ever seen. Still, it was all derivative. There should be something at the heart of it all, empowering and empowered.

Gods, he was so tired.

"Steady now, Hierophant," the Dead King murmured. "Divination is delicate sorcery at the best of times, and we seek to unmask the greatest liar these lands have ever known. It is too early in our shared journey to falter."

The hand pulled him up from the slump he'd not known he was falling into, its grip now tight enough it hurt, the sights he was still denied began to flicker even more swiftly.

—

"We are too late," the Grey Pilgrim sadly said.

There had been no missing the colossal pulse of power that'd shivered outwards and through them even as they stepped into the sanctum. Tariq had been given pause by what awaited inside, for never before had he seen such works of magic: it was as if every surface of the great pillared hall within had been covered with runes. They had been artfully carved, no mere circles but instead almost a great mural: waves crested and broke, carved into stone, and spun into forests and peaks. The sight of it was oddly beautiful, like a painting made a hundred thousand little brushstrokes, but like rivers returning to the sea all the patterns of runes coursed back to the throne at the centre of the room. On it, a sickly thin man in dark robes was seated, sightlessly looking up at the ceiling through a tattered black eyecloth. The Hierophant, though he looked more than half dead and great strokes of manifest sorcery whirled around him like a storm.

"He's still breathing," Archer flatly replied. "Careful what you step on, Pilgrim. Follow my path."

Tariq felt a swell of grief, for he beheld the young woman's anticipation of what might yet come and it was like a flinch of the heart. The first time, he well-knew, was always the worst. And no amount of years or seasoning could ever truly prepare you for it.

"He is being used by the Hidden Horror for a ritual, Indrani," he softly replied. "Even should he survive, there will be little of him left."

"You don't know that," she sharply said.

"I know we cannot let that ritual run its course," the Grey Pilgrim said.

"If we interrupt it could—" she began.

Like quicksilver, without the slightest hint of warning, the Archer had two bared blades against Tariq's throat. He'd not even had time to blink. The cool touch of steel against skin would

have been relief, after the exertions of the day, if not for the slight bite of the very sharp knives.

"You won't cleaning up any loose ends under cover of good intention, Pilgrim," the Archer mildly said.

"I did not intend to," Tariq said.

She looked at him searchingly.

"Might be that's true," she murmured. "Might be it's not, or just that it won't matter. The Lady said there's only one way to deal with your breed, so I'll speak plain now. Just between you and me."

She leaned forward.

"You kill him, Peregrine, and I'll make whatever ten corpses I need to make the Grand Alliance eat itself alive," Archer said. "You might think Cat will keep me in line, or the war on Keter, or half a hundred different other practical little worries for practical little minds. But look into my soul, Tariq. When I tell you not a single fucking thing will stay my hand, *am I lying?*"

The Pilgrim looked and beheld the truth of it.

"No," he quietly said. "You are not."

The blades left his throat, and a few spins later they were sheathed and put away.

"Glad we have an understanding, Peregrine," the young woman smiled. "Now let's find a way to wake him without hurting him."

—

"There's something out there," Laurence said.

The dark of this abominable place had been chased away by the glow of the Tyrant's own blasphemy, which brought to mind more than a few passages from the Book about Evil clawing at Evil. Not that the Book of All Things was all that reliable a guide, when it came down to it. Whoever had penned the old thing seemed under the impression that Chosen were naturally prone to holding hands and tearfully joining righteous cause, in contrast to the spirited backbiting of the Damned. Presumably they'd never witnessed two Chosen with different intentions existing in each other's presence, much less two of Above's servants coming from different parts of Calernia. Without someone like Tariq to keep the peace or someone bearing a clear mandate to unite behind like the White Knight, you might as well be throwing a whole bag's worth of angry wet cats in a half a bag. Laurence caught the drift of her thoughts and killed it quick as he could. The mind

tended to wander when one tired, and she'd not been this exhausted in a very long time.

"The Hierophant, presumably," Roland delicately said. "Or our more discreet comrades."

He was looking at her like she was old, which was fair. She was. He was also looking at her like she was doddering, though, a dowager seeing monsters in shadows, and for that almost slapped him across the face. Her fingers itched with the impulse, though she pushed it down.

"There are *other* things out there," the Saint sharply replied. "And they are looking at us. Prepare for trouble, Sorcerer."

The weight of the attention placed on them did not waver even after she revealed her knowledge of it. It might be that the watchers were not hostile, she acknowledged. It might also be that they were either powerful or ignorant enough to be unmoved at the prospect of two heroes' wrath. Whatever the truth, they would not learn it by hesitation or idleness. Taking the lead, Laurence quickened her steps as they approached the final stretch separating them from the shadowed silhouette of the throne room. The Saint bared her sword, for anything that would be offended by such a gesture already meant to be a foe. Sharp eyes picked out the watchers, and what Laurence found did not please her. There were dozens, though each stood alone as some sort of sinister of honour guard around the the Hierophant's prison-sanctum. Only one was seated, halfway up the steps leading to the gates. It was in the shape of a man, though its hair was too unnaturally dark and its lips too unsettlingly red to truly be one. It was like looking at a story made flesh, Laurence thought. Raven-haired and red like blood, something pretending it was made of flesh with a mocking smile and one eye covered by pretty dark silk cloth. On its lap there was a sword, and the thing was sharpening it patiently with a whetstone. One languid stroke at a time, the sound of it a rasp in the strange silence of this place.

Laurence knew a thing or two of swords, and that one had no need for sharpening at all.

"I bid you welcome, Chosen," the thing said. "You are awaited."

The Saint spat to the side.

"Been skulking about, have you?" she said. "And turned out about as useful as a wings on a trout."

"Saint," Roland softly hissed, having caught up to her. "We greet you in peace, Huntsman."

The old thing glanced at the boy approvingly.

"Your kind were a mannerly people, once upon a time," it said. "It is pleasing to know some of those ways remain. In the manner you have greeted me you may leave, to seek your fate beyond me."

"My thanks," the Rogue Sorcerer said.

"What's inside?" Laurence asked, meeting the faerie's eye.

She glimpsed something like darkness in there, hungry and old, but she bared her teeth and it found no purchase in her soul. The Saint spat to the side again.

"I asked you a question, scavenger," she said.

"The king of pins," the faerie laughed. "I see you, cutter. Wounding and wounded, a rag in pale grasp. How much filth can you swallow before the stains no longer wash?"

Laurence snorted.

"I've had more ominous from street soothsayers," she replied. "If you want to earn a copper at least toss around a few fumes and powders."

Ignoring the creature's open displeasure she strode forward, making sure her tabard flapped in its face as she passed it. Roland hurried at her side after making apologies to the thing, but he was only a step behind when Laurence passed through the cracked-open bronze gates.

—

"It's killing him, isn't it?" Indrani quietly said.

The old man sucked in a breath, but after a moment shook his head.

"I expect he'll remain alive," the Pilgrim said. "Though there will little left of him save a broken mind in ruin of flesh."

It was difficult to look at him. Masego had thinned, back when he'd first gotten into the Observatory and entranced himself with his own work, but out on campaign afterwards he'd reclaimed back some of the weight. Enough it didn't look like he was being starved, anyway, though he'd been nothing like the plump man Indrani had first met years ago. Now that was lost, for he was little more than skin on bones with wildly overgrown dreadlocks. He must have eaten on occasion — mage or not he'd be dead by now otherwise — but not often, and he'd likely cheated hunger with spells. His sickly frame would have been bad enough by itself, but there was a river of sorcery coursing through him that was burning his body from the inside. Whatever it was the Dead King was doing, it was not gentle to her... to Masego.

"You need to get me through," Indrani said. "If I could reach him-"

"We've tried, Archer," the Pilgrim said, pointedly looking at her arm.

It's just flesh, Indrani angrily thought. The swirls of pure and lingering magic around Hierophant did not *immediately* breaking through a coating of Light, but it was a near thing. Indrani had tried to speed through anyway, though she'd had to pull back. If she'd stayed any longer she might have lost the entire arm, but as it was all she'd lost was some flesh. You couldn't even see bone, it was basically a scratch.

"So we try again," she replied. "Slap some more Light onto me, and I'll take a running leap."

"You'll lose more than a part of your arm," the old man calmly said.

"Yeah, so I was thinking," Indrani mused. "Keeping up the protection won't work, we saw that, but what if the moment it break you just start healing me instead?"

As long as she didn't lose anything essential, then it didn't matter in what state she arrived on the other side. Immediately around Zeze was safe, she'd Seen it and the Pilgrim agreed. It was just the outer shell that she needed to get through.

"You may very well die regardless," the Pilgrim bluntly said. "Neither of us has the means to breach this... defence without risking the Hierophant's life. I know it runs contrary to your nature, but it would be best if we waited for-"

"We might not have that long," Indrani interrupted in frustration. "It could be moments or hours, and there's no way to know."

Though the strange whistle of spinning sorcery almost covered it, she still heard the footsteps. She already had a longknife in hand when she came to face the fresh arrivals.

"Moments," the Saint of Swords grunted, striding in sword bared. "So stop whining. What's this, then?"

—

Tariq breathed out a sigh of threaded worry and relief. Young Indrani was very much at the end of her rope – there was no need of an aspect to tell him as much, though the confirmation was not without value – and expecting of Laurence sympathy for any in Below's service was not unlike expecting that very thing of a bared sword, which would be a delicate dance to lead. Laurence,

however, possessed means that he did not. Where even the most delicate applications of Light whispered into his ears by the Ophanim had failed, her sword would not. He suspected the Archer would forgive a great many things if they came accompanied by the safeguarding of the Hierophant.

"Laurence," he greeted.

It was no happenstance his tone was pitched just high enough to cut through the beginning of young Indrani's no doubt less than diplomatic reply.

"We are in need of your expertise, and perhaps Roland's," Tariq said. "It appears the Dead King is using the Hierophant for sinister purposes, and has made reaching him difficult."

"You want me to cut something," Laurence bluntly said.

He'd known her long enough to detect the amusement twined to the bluntness, though he doubted anyone else here had.

"In that art you have few rivals," he said, and immediately realized he'd made a mistake.

Mentioning the Lady of the Lake would only remind the Saint was lending a hand to the most prized pupil of that hated foe.

"Can you cut through that?" Archer asked.

She gestured towards the whirling sorcery. Though he'd been ready to step in and smooth the rough edges before the situation... deteriorated, flicked glances at both told him there was no need to.

"Could your teacher?" Saint casually asked.

What he beheld told him behind the nonchalance was a burn that'd dwelled in her belly for more than forty years, and having closed the wound over it with his own fingers and Light he could not find it in him to reprimand her for it. There were some things that couldn't be forgiven without losing part of who you were, and the open belly had been the least of the wounds the Ranger had inflicted on Laurence that day.

"I'm not sure," young Indrani admitted. "It's just wild magic, so there's no... principle to it."

The older woman's smile was darkly pleased.

"It'll flow back," Saint said. "But I'll carve you a way through."

"Good," young Indrani nodded decisively. "Let's finish this, then."

"And your attempt does not succeed?" Tariq calmly asked.

"It will," Archer growled.

"Watch your mouth, girl," Laurence harshly said. "It's a sensible question. If it doesn't work, the best way might be to kill him."

The Archer had blades in hand before the sentence was over.

"Peace," Tariq said. "Saint does not mean for him to remain so."

The ochre-skinned villain looked at him with narrowed eyes.

"Your resurrection trick, it works with villains too?"

The Grey Pilgrim was slightly pained to hear described the act through which he came closest to feeling the will of the Gods Above as 'your resurrection trick', yet he smoothed that away. No one would have not done the same could truly understand the nature of the act.

"It does," Tariq said. "As Laurence well knows. I am not, however, certain it would succeed with the Hierophant."

It was not only young Indrani that looked him askance at that. Laurence was not deeply schooled in the ways of his gift of forgiveness, for there had never been a need. Even now he would rather keep silence over it, for it touched upon the sacred, yet silence would now cost more than speech.

"His body might be too thoroughly ruined already," the Peregrine admitted. "I could breathe back life into him only for Hierophant to die again within moments. If the wound were of a different nature I would not hesitate, but if they were inflicted by his own magic..."

Wound inflicted by a foe would be one matter, easily dealt with. A wound inflicted by oneself, even under duress, was a thornier issue. There could be no guarantees, and he was inclined to believe it would fail. The Gods Above observed the order they had created, as did all the boons they bestowed. He could not Forgive a disease borne of one's own body, old age or the insidious manners of destruction that years of sickness or poison could inflict. Deaths unnatural, those could be forgiven for they went against the meanings of Above. The Hierophant's malady was not so clear-cut that Tariq could promise a return if the boy was slain. If he could be freed whilst still living, of course, that would be a different story. It was always much easier to stoke the last flame of life back to a blaze than to light it anew from spent ashes.

"It's his magic killing him, isn't it?" Roland hesitantly said.

"More or less," Archer said, brow furrowing as she studied the hero.

It must not be far from her mind, Tariq thought, that at the Battle of the Camps all three of them had stood on the opposite side of the field from her.

"I could take it," the Rogue Sorcerer admitted. "His sorcery. That would save his life at least."

In the breath that followed, both Archer and Saint refused and they each eyed the other with displeasure for it.

"I appreciate it, Rogue," Indrani said, and it was genuine. "But taking his magic might kill him in a whole other way, if you know what I mean."

"Are you an idiot, boy?" Laurence harshly said. "You want to take sorcery currently in the hands of the *Dead King*? Are you really that eager to be hollowed out and made into a Revenant?"

A valid concern, Tariq silently acknowledged.

"Roland," he said. "What you take, can you return?"

"I've never tried," the young man admitted. "I do not confiscate without reason. I suspect not, to be honest, but it is not impossible."

"Tariq," Laurence sharply said.

He met her eyes and inclined his head to the side. They had worked together a great many years, the two of them. She should know by now he would not dismiss the concern she'd expressed. After a moment, her face tightened and she looked at the Rogue Sorcerer with considering eyes.

"It's a risk," she spoke without looking at him.

"It is the Hidden Horror," Tariq said. "Can there be anything else?"

—

Laurence chewed on her lip. He wouldn't try go through with this, she knew, unless she assented. Could she do it, if the worse came to pass? Oh, if it worked the victory would be more than merely sweet. But if it didn't, she could be permanently crippling a promising young Chosen. If she'd been fresh, then... No, that was false thinking. It made no difference, whether she was tired or not. The issue was of *capacity*. And there was not, in the end, a single thing in Creation that Laurence de Montfort could not cut.

"A measured risk," she said, and it was concession.

Tariq nodded, lowering his wispy head of hair.

"Archer," he said. "Given choice between the confiscation of his sorcery and death, would you not agree that confiscation is preferable for Hierophant?"

The vicious girl glared, more at the situation than anyone in particular. Laurence could almost sympathize. It'd been a long night for all of them, wicked and righteous both.

"It's not impossible for him to get the magic back, right?" the Ranger's pupil said, looking at Roland.

"I don't know," the Rogue Sorcerer admitted. "But I would do my utmost to return it, that much I can swear."

"Fuck," the Archer said. "All right, worst case if Cat doesn't get here we can go down that road. Won't matter, anyway. Saint, carve me a path would you?"

Laurence looked at the child the Ranger had so fondly raised. She saw there the same indolent pride and skill, only without the weight of centuries behind it.

"Say please," the Saint of Swords said.

"Please," the villain replied without missing a beat.

Laurence's fingers clenched. Oddly enough, she felt more cheated by how easily the girl had said than she would have if the Archer had never said it at all. Sword in hand, the Saint tread across the carved floor and came to stand by the edge of the sorcerous whirls. She adjusted her stance, weighing her sword in her hand.

"Archer?" she said.

"Ready," the girl replied.

"Now," she hissed, and struck.

Her will cut where her sword could not, and it was enough to disperse sorcery. Long enough for the Archer to race across the opening. The girl grinned triumphantly as she slid before the Hierophant, laughing, and then-

"Pesh."

- the seemingly-entranced boy lazily raised a hand, sorcery flickered and Archer's brains splattered the floor.

"Now that I have your attention," the Dead King spoke through the Hierophant's mouth. "That was your single resurrection, I believe. Do not attempt to meddle again, lest your losses expand beyond the recoverable."

—

Masego was half-asleep, for not even the painful squeeze of the hand on his shoulder could keep him entirely awake anymore. Almost dreaming, he drifted in and out of consciousness. The sights still came, but he could feel they were nearing the end. They were slower now, like they had to reach deeper for less.

"How mundane," a voice spoke close to him. "How *petty*. I expected better of you, Intercessor. This is... beneath us."

"Oh, Nessie," a woman's voice fondly said. "You should know by now the house always wins."

It was a jolt to his consciousness. Masego's not-eyed fluttered open. Though this surroundings were still hazy, what had been lulling him into slumber had drawn back. There were two people here with him. One stood behind the sorcerer, and had a hand on his shoulder. He was the Dead King, an enemy. And in front of him a woman. Slender, dark-haired, much too pale to be Catherine. He could not make out everything about her, but there was a silver flask in her hand and she was drinking from it.

"You believe I cannot see your little scheme?" the Dead King said. "The thief and the cutter, to lessen me for every year to come. I need not witness your plans to see that. It is an acceptable trade, for I now know the lay of you."

"That's getting a bit ahead of yourself, innit?" the woman chuckled.

"I know," the Dead King said. "And now that I do, I need not lift a finger. I'll tell them, Intercessor, and *every last one will turn on you.*"

"Yeah, see, that's the part where you're getting ahead," the woman drawled. "You knowing. The little shard of you in poor ol' Zeze knows, but *you-you?* That's a different story."

"You failed," the Dead King said. "The Tyrant spread into the souls, yes, but the Black Queen contains him. I will still have room enough to pass what I know."

"Do you?" the Wandering Bard grinned.

Masego saw her perfectly then. He saw, too, the blood and brains on the floor and the woman they belonged to.

"Dead King," Hierophant roared. "You did this."

The Wandering Bard raised her flask in a toast.

"Always," she smiled, "wins."

Caerulea

Vote! (for A Practical Guide to Evil)

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

(Discord:)

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Does anyone know a good danish recipe?

Some Sarcasm Required

First, you have to catch a live Dane, this may sound easy, but remember they are descended from the Vikings, a people feared across Europe and beyond for good reason.

Then you need 4 cloves of garlic, 10 whole onions, a quarter cup of salt, a touch of crushed red pepper and a hint of rosemary.

Remove the head and entrails, hand and feet are optional.

Tie the Dane to a large pole, place them above a large bed of coals, ensure no flames lick up and burn the skin, as we want it a nice golden brown, not char. Now, while the dane is rotating over the fire, stuff the abdominal cavity with the chopped garlic, onions, and rosemary, rub the salt over the skin.

Roast until golden brown and the internal temperature has reached no less than 165 degrees Fahrenheit for 5 minutes.

Then sit back and enjoy your roasted Danish.

Rumal Zero

By "danish recipe" do you then mean a recipe from Denmark or a recipe for the baked goods called a "danish" (to everyone but the Danish of course).

No matter the meaning I have a Danish danish recipe for you right here, translated, though still in metric:

Makes 12 pcs – takes 60+ minutes

INGREDIENTS:

For the filling

2 eggs

3 tblsp sugar

3 tblsp wheat flour
2 dl milk
the seeds of 1 vanillabean

For the dough

0.5 l milk
1 egg
1 tblsp sugar
50 g fresh yeast (dunno how much that is in dry yeast)
1 teasp crushed cardamom
500 g wheat flour
400 g cold butter
(melted butter for brushing down after baking)

For the glaze

50 g powdered sugar
1 tblsp water

WHAT TO DO:

For the filling

- Whisk all the ingredients together in a depp pan with.
- Bring the mixture to a boil while continuously whisking at high heat.
- Reduce the heat to a simmer (medium heat) while continuously whisking. Do this for about 5 minutes.
- Remove the pot from the heat and transfer the filling to a bowl. Let the filling cool for at least half an hour; stir the creme once a while as it cools.

For the glaze

- Mix powdered sugar and water until all lumps disappear. This glaze settles somewhat quickly, so maybe do this after the dough is done.

For the dough and danish

- Mix milk, egg, sugar, yeast and cardamom with two thirds of the flour until it forms a dough.
- Roll out the dough out to a square with a thickness of half a centimeter using the rest of the flour as necessary.
- Cut the butter into thin slices and distribute them over two thirds of the dough, leaving a one third strip without butter.
- Fold the dough over it self twice by folding the butterless third over the rest of the dough and then folding the dough again over the last third. This should make three layers of dough
- Roll out the dough to a square once more and fold the dough again like before. Do this rolling and falttening twice. This should leave you with $3 \times 3 \times 3 = 27$ layers of jummy butterdough for extra fluf.
- Roll out the dough to a 40 x 50 cm square and cut the dough into 12 equal squares (10 x 10 cm).
- Fold the four corners of each square partways to the middle

(nearly forming a new square) and place some of the now cooled cream (about a tblsp) in the middle

– put the 12 raw danish' on a sheet pan and let them rise for about half an hour in a warm place (slightly above room temperature preferably).

– Brush the dough with melted butter and bake them in an oven at 250 degrees celcius for 10-12 minutes or undtil light golden brown.

– Let them cool on a baking grate.

– Top with glaze and serve.

Tip for preserving!

– The danish danish can be frozen down for later before rising. Let them thaw for 2-3 hours before cooking.

Source: <https://www.arla.dk/opskrifter/wienerbrod/>

(A danish milk company – a danish is, roughly translated, called a “bread from Vienna” in danish.)

Andrew Mitchell



Javvies

Killing Archer in front of Masego? Bad call.

I wonder how much of this Masego will remember.

And how badly Masego is going to be hurt by this.

And, since Archer is (currently) dead, Laurence might try to kill Masego here and now before Cat can get here.

Caerulea

I do not think that the Saint is that suicidal, nor cruel. She is suspicious, violent, and rude, but without Tariq's advice or Masago acting against her, I think she would wait to see how things unfolded. Furthermore, she knows that if she killed Masago and Archer and then Catherine came to them, Catherine would kill her, and also get angry at Tariq. Overall, a very poor decision.

Also, you can not beat the Wandering Bard, apparently. She is to godsdamned good.

Liliet

Seriously, killing Masego now would probably have EVERYONE turn on her. Even without her knowing about the specifics of the pact Cat made with Tariq, like, COME ON. She'd be on the wrong side of the story, too. Laurence has opinions on who deserves to die, but she doesn't act on them when the time is this obviously wrong, come on.

Qwormuli

Not to fully rain on your parade(only a light drizzle, as I agree with you on large part), but our uncomfortably -and metaphysically- sharp old bat did decide to try her hand at skewering the Tyrant at the worst probable moment, fucking herself over at least in part.

In short, if you're a sword, everything starts looking like a neck or however it went. She's not the very best judge of when to *not* stab.

shveiran

Agreed. Plus, it's not really about being cruel or stupid, in my opinion.

If Saints considers masego to be a dangerous threat (which, to be fair, is not that much of a stretch even without her black and white morality) she might deem wiser to remove him and deal with the consequences.

It's true that she has shown to trust Tariq a lot and usually defers to him, but I don't think that's a Cat-Hakram level of deference. There may be a point where she becomes convinced Tariq is wrong, and acts accordingly.

[Javvies](#)

It's also worth nearing in mind that Archer was nominally the best chance of snapping Masego out of the Dead King's control

Archer just got killed, apparently by the Heiropant. Or the Dead King in him.

Thus, the attempt to break the Heiropant free from the Dead King failed. And so it's stabbing time.

Or so Laurence could conclude. And, from her perspective, it's not a stretch to get there, it is, in fact, quite reasonable.

Andrew Mitchell

IMO there's no way Laurence doesn't know that the Dead King killed Archer and that Masego is angry at the Dead King. Laurence is in the same room when we see what's happening with Masego:

> He saw, too, the blood and brains on the floor and the woman they belonged to.

>"Dead King," Hierophant roared. "You did this."

[Liliet](#)

Indrani getting herself killed by the entity possessing her loved one IS a trope for snapping said loved one out of it. Laurence would know that damn well.

frondred

Neshama is gonna die 😂😂😂

[Liliet](#)

> at the worst probable moment

Nuh-huh.

“Don’t let the villain finish monologuing” is a lesson that Kairos already taught the Free Cities gang, and it’s a well known one.

What Laurence failed to account for was Kairos accounting for what she would do accounting for his actions, which is a mastermind meta level higher than “do not stab ally, do stab traitor”. Remember when during the surrender offer moment Tariq commented that heroes were not obligated to be idiots and pre-emptively striking against someone who would definitely betray them did not count as betrayal? Followed by lamenting that he wishes the situation was that simple and he’s fairly sure Catherine does mean to abide by the surrender?

Normally, what Laurence did would be perfectly okay. Catherine predicted it would not be because of the understanding she has of Hierarch and his warped logic and how Kairos could weaponize that. Laurence not sharing that understanding makes her, as someone graciously put it, “the only muscle in a group of masterminds”, not an idiot.

RoflCat

I don’t know, would she?

While he was acting on the side of Callow, Cath has always managed to keep his restrained enough that he never really fall into the more Evil practices.

Hell, right now he’s getting the “You hurt my waifu” power up against the Dead King, the Saint has no reason to cut him down and HELP Dead King for it.

[Liliet](#)

yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee

shveiran

I'm not disagreeing necessarily, but do Saint and company KNOW that Masego is about to duke it out with the DK? I was under the impression that part was within Zeze's brainspace.

Andrew Mitchell

I'm pretty sure that was out-loud. But I could be wrong.

It will certainly change what happens next if it wasn't heard by the others.

Rook

I think the Saint will do just the opposite – she won't harm a single dreadlock on his pretty blasphemous head. Masego just pinned the blame for this on the Dead King *out loud*, in front of everyone. She knows none of them are his target right now.

If she takes a swing right now, the price of it would be to break Tariq's Bargain, lose the Sorcerer's trust, and all she'd get as a result is to turn the sights of a wounded and cornered Villain onto herself instead of the dead king.

She could do absolutely nothing at all and from her point of view, it would be letting two hideous monsters claw each other's eyes out while biding her strength. She might even help Cut the Dead King's piece of soul off from its path of retreat – literally – to lock those two hissing cats in the same cage.

Helping Masego attack the dead king right now would gain her a narrative advantage in keeping her word (that specific one being something both she and Tariq sorely need at the moment), weaken two 'Enemies', and save her own strength at the same time. Three birds with one stone, and the Bard likely wouldn't interfere either considering that it'd help her stop Neshamah's main body/soul from learning what her plot really is.

[Javvies](#)

I don't think Saint actually knows about Tariq's bargain with Cat. There's certainly no textual evidence to that effect. And for that matter, even if Saint did know, she'd most likely consider it a mistake.

The only witnesses to Saint killing Masego right now (as far as she knows) would be her fellow Heroes and the Dead King. As such, Saint can claim that it was necessary, or at least try to. But she would probably figure that her fellow Heroes wouldn't contradict her story to a Villain, and the Dead King is another Villain, and her story would likely be something along the lines of "the Dead King used Heirophant to attack us and killed Archer, so I had to kill him" ... which is probably going to be hard for the Dead King to refute.

Saint is a blunt instrument.

Also, if she kills Masego, Cat would be forced to pick and choose which of her friends gets resurrected by Tariq – assuming that Tariq will resurrect one of them in the first place, which Laurence probably figures (a) isn't a sure thing, and (b) she probably has a decent shot at trying to argue him out of it if he seems inclined to do so.

Rook

The terms of the original truce made to form the band of five was already meant to last until the Dead King was dealt with. She's already commented on the PoV

Rook

Whoops, didn't mean to hit post that early.

*she already mentioned in her PoV chapters of her intention to keep to those original terms of Tariq's sake, since she was essentially sure she'd be proven right in the end anyway, whether it was during this venture of later down the road.

And at the end of the day, every time she and Tariq have butted heads against each other she's always backed down and followed his lead. She's only stubborn as a mule when it comes to listening to Villains, when it comes to Tariq she usually shows restraint or lowers her pride even through blinding red fury.

I don't see her keeping faith here because she's concerned about being fair or honest, I see her wanting to cut Masego's head off with all her heart but staying her hand because the wiser Hero told her not to.

Gibborim

I think Masego will be more powerful than ever after this. I would expect a third aspect along the lines of Vivisect or Consume that will destroy the shard of the Dead King.

SlumberyStorm

Rember aspect have to work with in the Name. Masego's name is means make/crafter of miracles. So you have to work it with that in mind.

magey

Like, perhaps, the miracle the Pilgrim will shortly be using to resurrect Archer, that he's going to have a front row seat to witness?

Seems especially weighty right on the heels of his prolonged (and failed) effort to resurrect his father.

caoimhinh

Masego's Name isn't about making or crafting miracles, it's about understanding them (and from the magic practitioner's point of view to understand something is to achieve control of it).

Remember that the titles that accompany Masego ever since he became Hierophant are "Usher of Mysteries and Vivisector of Miracles", plus the definition of Hierophant is "a person who brings religious congregants into the presence of that which is deemed holy. An interpreter of sacred mysteries and arcane principles."

Masego will definitely emerge more powerful than ever from this experience, after all the great things he has witnessed.

[Liliet](#)

...unless he gets force-nerfed by the Dead King's ruination of his abilities.

Decius

Horrible call. Cat wouldn't swear revenge on anybody but the Dead King if *Archer* isn't rezzed, so Rogue takes Magic, Saint kills Rogue, Saint cuts out DK's influence, Pilgrim brings Rogue back is still a complete victory for Saint.

For that matter, even when Masego gets angry and takes the Dead King's power and uses it to find/make/remake his father without further casualties, Pilgrim might not be inclined to res Archer. Pilgrim could credibly claim that it's not possible because angels are fickle, and the only reason not to is because Archer is needed on the front lines... a reason which goes away if Heirophant wakes up and takes over Dead King.

[Liliet](#)

Wait, what do you mean by this? What are your expectations?

Insanenoodlyguy

He's riding a "You killed the one I love" righteous fury. It might kill or unmake him to ride it out, but during it? He's A. Pretty much goddamn unstoppable and B. directing that at the greatest enemy Good has ever known.

If she stepped in now, she'd be killed as an afterthought, or at least dismissively swatted aside. It's not a story you can insert yourself in except as an easily dismissed obstacle.

shveiran

Agreed, but does she KNOW Masego is aware and about to battle the DK? I think that part is in his mind.

caoimhinh

I believe they will notice once Masego starts roaring and the magic flow around him starts to change. Pilgrim might also be able to discern what's happening thanks to his Behold Aspect and the Angel's Radio that whispers things for him.

shveiran

Fair enough. In retrospect, it may very well be an irrelevant difference.

LM

So Bard is actually the bad guy? I don't really like that. It seems cheap, and contrary to the themes of this universe

shveiran

Why do you feel this way?

To me, it feels like an antagonist that was foreshadowed a lot more than the DK as the big bad, and if she actually enforces stories and through them the status quo, it is precisely the opponent Cat needs to defeat to get the world she wants.

Seems legit.

shveiran

Also, it's an enemy she almost literally CAN'T PUNCH OR STAB.
Even more than DK.

I really like the contrast to her early problems, honestly.

Ultimate_procrastinator

Not necessarily the villain, but at the very least her nature is contradictory enough to the beliefs of most Calernians that they would hate and fear her... which considering that she's essentially an immortal body-jacker who plays both sides of the whole Above-Below conflict, is not exactly unreasonable.

Thief of Words

Are you kidding me? The game being rigged being the ultimate conflict of the story has been evident since Black's first introduction. This has ALWAYS been a story about stories and the fallability of having only a modest grasp of the elements of them when they rule our lives.

WuseMajor

...Bard has been the big bad ever since we discovered she was more than a drunk taven singer. She's the force that keeps the crabs fighting each other instead of climbing out of the bucket. She's the crooked dealer at the casino who makes sure no-one else wins. She is why this continent keeps eating itself alive and any attempt to change that is contrary to her wishes.

If Cat wants Callow to ever be more than the terrain battles are fought on top of, she has to end the Bard.

[Liliet](#)

Not necessarily 😊

Isaac Martinez

Not only that. The only people to call Zeze as Zeze are the Woe. And in this chapter Masego describes her as "too pale to be Catherine" and that she "carries a silver flask". So, we maybe have in our hands a time traveler.

goliath1303

... Huh?

Bard has ****always**** had a flask. It's literally one of 2 defining features that she has and is even the one that's, by a large margin, that is noticed and commented on the most. The other is her lute, but while that only gets mentioned every so often, I can't think of a single appearance by her that doesn't include either a mention of her flask, her drinking, or ***appearing*** drunk. In the Keter/Arcadia echoes is described as a copper flask, which is noticed as being different than the silver one she always has in current times but that and her lute is how Cat and Masego recognize her even though she's in an unfamiliar body and they're speaking a language that is, at the time, completely unknown to them. Plus, the flasks mentions aren't just in passing normally, there's almost always a comment about what type of alcohol is currently in it as well as the fact that it never seems to empty. It's implied to be an extremely rare and/or unique item. It's started in sorry that whatever the name is in this story for a bottomless charm(a la a bag of holding type spell) is super rare and

excitement and using it on a flask is seen as unimaginably wasteful. Also, she doesn't seem to choose the liquor that's in it. It's ranged from super fine brandy(I believe) to rotgut whisky to disgustingly sweet cherry liquer/spirits. I think it's all but confirmed it's something tied to her through different incarnations and most likely, at least to some extent and in some way, divine in origin.

Furthermore, what does her being too pale to be Catherine have to do with anything, let alone point to her being a time traveler? If anyone is going to have an inside peek at the main characters(shown by her knowledge of in group nickname) it's gonna be Bard.

I'm just so confused how "too pale to be Catherine and "has a flask"

goliath1303

Damn lack of an edit button... Here's the last bit I was gonna post:

Lead you to, let alone support, the theory that Bard is a time traveler.

[onedollargum](#)

Laurence just had a lesson on how timing matters when one stabs someone in the back. She might hold off here I think.

stevenneiman

Yep. Bad call. I expect that Neshamah is going to lose more than just the shard of power and the knowledge here. Especially since I think Masego has a much better chance than Laurence of being able to actually hurt or kill him. Laurence might be able to cut anything, but if she tried she would be going against the most powerful and carefully-crafted stories in Creation (or close enough) without even knowing they're there. Masego, though, is a lot less vulnerable to the Dead King's stories.

pagesbe

As Cat or Black would say:

Mistake.

naturalnuke

Masego is about to poison a shard of the Dead King's soul I think.

caoimhinh

He is going to dissect it, observe it, devour it and then ruin it into such little pieces that atoms will seem like planets.

A little taste of Deicide for Masego.

sengachi

This splinter of the Dead King is hand in hand with one of the greatest living sorcerers of an age, whose soul bears the aspect of Ruin. I expect it is about to have a very bad day.

Also, really Dead King? An “all according to my designs” moment? Against the incarnation of the narrative? Tut-tut, poor form.

erebus42

“Nothing is half as dangerous to a villain as victory. We raise our own gallows.” -Dread Empress Maleficent I

He’s grown too used to winning (or at least not losing) and is getting sloppy.

Fayhem

Well, for a given value of “sloppy” anyway. Playing against the Intercessor has been credibly established earlier in the story as pretty much the most dangerous game Calernia has to offer; Black spent decades slaughtering heroes one after another in large part through his superior grasp of the narrative, and then as soon as he went head-to-head with Bard she didn’t just win she practically made sport of him while orchestrating the death of one of his closest friends *with his own unwitting complicity*. Bard isn’t invincible, as far as we can tell Kairos put one over on her with the Hierarch in the same sequence, but there’s no more dangerous opponent in these kind of games.

tl;dr – yes he made a mistake, but he made it against an opponent who has been alive longer than him and who has spent that entire time specing into forcing narrative errors. Also, Liliet’s point is good about how he has at most an academic grasp of what human emotions are like at this point and that’s a real weakness when you need to predict what mortals will do.

Cicero

I think it’s more that the Dead King always plays conservatively, to lessen and mitigate his losses.

But that means predictability, and when that happens, sometimes an unpredictable opponent can flip that around and inflict significantly larger harm on the cautious player.

“Fortune favors the bold” as they say.

[Liliet](#)

Yup.

Dead King has his strong points. In this particular story, these strong points are reflected in the part he’s probably not going to suffer greater losses than this entire scheme and the (relatively small amount of) power he invested in it.

konstantinvoncarstein

And a very stupid and avoidable mistake.

[Liliet](#)

...for someone who still remembers what emotions feel like and doesn’t think them a silly weakness.

His “wait why are you taking this personally” moment against Cat was in retrospect very much foreshadowing of this 😊

konstantinvoncarstein

Ah yes, you are right 😊 I had forgotten.

medailyfun

why_so_serious.gif 😊

lqueenofblades1

Which moment was that? I can’t quite recall.

caoimhinh

He did that in his very first conversation with Cat back when they were in Keter, warning her that no matter how many fights they had or how much they hurt each other, none of that would be personal as it is merely part of the game that immortals play on the world.

But I believe Liliet is referring to the most recent one, in Chapter 45: Long Princes, here’s the extract:

{ “You have,” I murmured, “taken my friend and now bargain with his life while scheming the death of others dear to

me. You arranged the destruction of my armies, of near everyone I've ever cared for. But for my intervention, you would have buried Iserre in death and borrowed Hierophant's hand for the deed."

"You clutch the remains of what you once were, Black Queen," the Hidden Horror said. "It does no favours to what you have since become."

"It was never really personal to me, before," I told him. "You were a foe, but in some ways an ally as well. In principle I thought it tragedy that others died to your invasions, but no one weeps for faces they never knew nor loved."

"A taste," the Dead King said, "of what is to come. They will be strangers, Catherine Foundling. One day, and sooner than you believe, they will all be strangers."

"And if that day comes, I may yet become the horror you foretold," I admitted. "But today, Dead King?"

I limped forward, into his space, with cold eyes.

"Today you are the thing that took my friend," I hissed. "The thing that would have slaughtered the Woe and the Army of Callow without batting an eye. I 'overestimate the strength of my position', Merciless Gods."

I struck at the nothingness we stood on with my staff, the sound ringing like a thunderclap.

"You think after this I'm not willing to try falling off the cliff together, Neshamah?" I said, tone sharp. "To gamble on which of us will find our wings on the way down? Look at my back, King of Death, and see what is writ there – when given the choice between risking ruin and kneeling, I've only ever replied one way."

A moment passed.

"Has your tirade ended?" the Dead King calmly asked. "No purpose was served by it, save the thinning of my patience." }

Also it's worth noticing that when Neshamah tells Catherine that Amadeus is also his hostage, promising not to hurt Amadeus as part of the bargain for letting him go, the Dead King merely states Amadeus' value as a political tool that can bring stability to the region once Malicia dies; hilariously neglecting the fact that Amadeus is the closest thing to a father for Catherine, which the Dead King should at least be able to infer or make a good

guess, as he has been reading Masego's mind, but he didn't.

It's likely that he has become so detached that feelings of affection are strange and foreign for him now, though he has been shown to be able to appreciate and respect exceptional individuals or those he considers worthy (Intercessor, Triumphant, Ranger, the bloodline of Papenheim, Catherine, etc).

[Liliet](#)

Yep, what caoimnh said.

Neshamah is Not Good At This.

Insanenoodlyguy

You're right. That makes so much sense! He's ready to deal with peers who are becoming like him, and he's ready to deal with classical evil that's close enough (triumphant) but he's either never had to deal with sufficient power to hurt him in a mortal who feels, or he's simply forgotten.

[Liliet](#)

I suspect there's a dash of motivated forgetting there in the mixture: this does not fit with my pre-existing ideas about how reality is, so I'm going to ignore it and pretend it never happened :3

Neshamah is smart, but that doesn't make him unbiased.

shveiran

I'm perfectly in agreement, though that really applies only to being blindsided by the power of love.

Gloating, not so much. But I'm willing to assume it was the Bard being awesome rather than the DK being an idiot.

WuseMajor

Hmmm... I'm not entirely sure how avoidable it was. If he hadn't shot her, they'd have had Archer there to try to snap Masego out of it, before he was done. And, because they're heroes, they'd have cut apart this chunk of him shortly afterward.

I think the most sensible thing he could have done was to leave things mostly finished and get away once the heroes started their assault. However, it's possible that might have harmed him in some way too. So, I think the Dead King might have been maneuvered into a no-win scenario here.

...Granted, the other options are probably less painful ends than this one, but they were likely ends just the same.

konstantinvoncarstein

Could he not send her in a pocket dimension? Or put her to sleep?

[Liliet](#)

That's the class of solution you need to already have in mind as a potentially useful tool. This is what "thinking outside of the box" means: being able to easily find in decision space solutions that aren't the standard set. Amadeus would easily come up with the options you've offered, because doing as little damage as he can is part of his MO; Neshamah's MO is doing as MUCH damage as he can so that his opponents will take 'not being wholesale slaughtered' as the best victory they can get, so this is far, far outside of his box.

And as Cat has pointed out, his box has served him faithfully for so many years, he doesn't really consider things outside of it anymore.

[Liliet](#)

Or to put it in a simpler way: it's not on his quick access panel :3

[Liliet](#)

Agreed re: no-win scenario here, yeah. That's the power of a True Love story: it's specifically the one that says "however it goes in the middle, at the end, TRUE LOVE ALWAYS WINS". Like it reaches right through and defines the ending.

Between Bard, Catherine and Indrani's crush, Neshamah found himself cornered quite neatly 😊

Danus

Fuck.

What a whacky loss. Wonder how it'll pan out.

[Hoactzin](#)

Hm. I feel like the ending would have been stronger if Masego hadn't yelled at the Dead King. Not a big deal though.

What was a big deal, however, was Archer dying suddenly. Did not see that coming.

Oshi

Someone was bound to die. The foreshadowing was there.

[Liliet](#)

When you have a really neat hammer, the story is immensely likely to grow nails in unexpected places, I suspect.

They weren't getting through this WITHOUT using up the resurrection.

And of course it would be Indrani waking up Masego in a somewhat rougher way than ideally intended 😊

Andrew Mitchell

> And of course it would be Indrani waking up Masego in a somewhat rougher way than ideally intended 😊

That's a good way to think about it.

Vhostym

The really scary question that Tariq or Laurence might be asking is: Did Cat plan *this*?

Jason Ipswitch

Well... Catherine obviously had some plan for getting Masego to turn against the Dead King. Instead of the Alliance that killed his fathers. And this is about the only thing that would accomplish that.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, Masego is Praesi culturally, and culturally speaking Praesi always victim blame. His own side is at fault for losing, not the other side for blooding them. Especially when the fleet that immediately did that is also dead. Masego doesn't give a shit about politics and he doesn't really do the 'who's the aggressor here' counting that Catherine does naturally.

Revenge against the Grand Alliance would hardly interest him even if someone offered imho.

[Fayhem](#)

Yeah, Masego is very much Warlock's child in this respect. He has absolutely no emotional attachment (either positive or negative) to abstract political entities. E.g., he only cares about Callow because Cat

cares about Callow, and for that matter similarly for Praes but more bc of Uncle Black.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

His attitude towards the war was "if I kill some crusaders Cat will like that right?"

He just doesn't give enough of a shit about the Grand Alliance to consider it a target for revenge.

[Javvies](#)

Not exactly.

Masego didn't care about the Grand Alliance or the related political situation.

That was before the Grand Alliance/its Crusade killed his parents. He might very well care enough now to want revenge about that

I mean ... he just up and boiled the blood out of two people who insulted Cat and the rest of the Woe in front of him. Admittedly they were also irritating him at the time, but I'm pretty sure he's going to have a more significant reaction to the people he assigns the blame for the deaths of his parents.

[Liliet](#)

Masego is a person who generally does not run on Protagonist-Centered Morality and considers actions against his side to be just as fair as symmetrical actions BY his side. (We know that from his early ethics debate with Cat about Lone Swordsman's actions)

If he considers it perfectly acceptable for himself to kill enemy practitioners (or anyone who annoyed him), he also will consider it perfectly acceptable for enemy practitioners to aim to kill him. Or his father. Especially given that those who killed his father are already dead.

The logic of 'revenge on the side that organized the attack' is convoluted enough for Masego to not even think in that direction. There are like five separate steps involved all of which he won't take. He is prone to Praesi victim blaming logic, does not consider deaths in war to be unfair, the situation has ended with his father killing those who killed him right back, and does not consider

the Grand Alliance to be an entity of interest any more than the sea the fleet was on. Oh, and also cares about his friends/family above any abstract considerations, which right now means Cat and the Woe and Amadeus with them. Oh, and also was starting to come around on Cat's point of view on 'how the world should be' and thinking that he wants Cat to win because he likes the world better when it works that way.

Just... the weight there is like 1:10000

[Javvies](#)

... You know you just contradicted yourself, right?

I agree completely that Masego doesn't care about the Crusade having attacked Thalassina or that Thalassina was utterly destroyed as a result/side effect of that attack.

And, sure, he doesn't really object on moral grounds to Heroes and Crusaders trying to kill Villains. It's just annoying that they take time away from his research.

On the other hand ... he genuinely deeply cared about and for his parents. Just look at his efforts to bring one of them (presumably Tikoloshe) back.

It is entirely plausible that the emotional reaction to the loss of his parents overrides the tendencies indicated by his prior demonstrations of relative indifference to being attacked and lack of caring about it/the attackers once the incident is over (aka, the attackers are driven off and/or dead with nothing he cares about having been a casualty).
See his intensely personal reaction to Indrani going down.

Frankly, it's more believable that he has, or more likely will have, an intense reaction of anger oriented towards those he blames for the deaths of his parents, than him not doing something unpleasant to those he blames.
He might very well not have gotten to that stage of his reaction yet, having been sidetracked and stuck on the idea/process of trying to bring at least one of them back. But once he's no longer fixated on trying to bring them back ... he's not

going to be able to deny that they're really truly gone.

Liliet

It's not about... augh! Of course he cares about his parents!

But like... if your loved one trips on a rock, falls down some stairs and breaks their neck, are you going to SWEAR REVENGE ON ROCKS? Or do you *not care about rocks enough* for that?

Sure, Masego is going to look for targets to blame. They are going to be, in approximate order:

- himself, for failing to protect them better;
- Malicia, for sending them to fight her wars;
- the Gods, for being immediately the ones whose powers/intervention killed Wekesa and Tikoloshe (both Above and Below);
- if we start reaching, Uncle Amadeus for not being there...

As far as he's concerned, the Grand Alliance is a non-entity. A landscape feature. You don't swear revenge on landscape features, you swear revenge on the person who pushed you to tumble down the slope.

Javvies

The Grand Alliance is not a rock or other inanimate object.

Masego straight up did not care about the Grand Alliance back when all it had accomplished was to get its ass kicked out of Callow after conquering a few herds of sheep, and get "invaded" by Amadeus and a couple Legions.

In other words, the Grand Alliance had done nothing that did more than temporarily inconvenience Masego by taking him away from his mage tower/lab research.

It is quite likely that he is no longer purely indifferent to the Grand Alliance now that it has actually taken people he cares about from him in a more or less permanent manner (once he'd no longer fixated on bringing at least one of them back, anyways).

It isn't like Masego particularly cared about the Dead King on a personal level (just an academic one) before Indrani went down. Now Masego wants to

render the Dead King into chunky salsa. Or something.
Sure, Masego cared about his parents and Indrani differently, but you don't get it both ways.

[Liliet](#)

Masego cared about Dead King in the sense that he acknowledged Dead King as an entity he was very much interested in and in a sense rivals with. Not, like, to the degree of pattern of three rivals, but at the very least Neshamah is a fellow practitioner, and the originator of the Trismegistan theory of magic if you remember to boot.

Grand Alliance is a fellow *nothing* as far as Masego is concerned. I'm not sure he remembers that that's what it's called and who the members are.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, if the Ashuran fleet had actually survived the attack, I would very much bet on Masego going all Roaring Rampage of Revenge on them before anything else. But they're dead, and that line of thinking does not go further. Maybe you angrily kick the rock your loved one tripped on, but you don't track down all rocks of this specific kind to grind them into dust. They're rocks. You don't actually care.

[Liliet](#)

A better question is: did Indrani? 😊

Andrew Mitchell

I'm not sure if she knew that the Dead King could/would control Masego to kill her but she certainly knew she might die. And her time in the everdark taught her what that (almost) feels like. And still she went.

Such is the power of love. ♥ ♥ ♥

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

"Oh it didn't even cut off my entire arm let's try again"

"Yeah maybe you can't shield me but consider: what if I keep getting mutilated and you keep healing me would that work"

This is the Archer that she was always going to be, the Archer that Hye's weak ass teachings held her back from becoming.

Her answer to the question 'what do you want to be?'

Matthew

I say yes. I think her plan to snap Masego out of it was always going to include, "Maybe if I get hideously injured or killed in front of Masego... that might work."

[Liliet](#)

Y e p

maresther23

She didn't, but they will think she did. This is one of the beauties of this webserial. In book one, before the last battle in the War College, Black told Cat not to make chained plans, but lots of schemes that increased her chances of winning. She ignored him but managed to scrap a win. Books later, the leader of the Deodarite (her name escapes me) considered Cat one of Black's perfect schemes twenty years in the making that flourished just in the right moment, when we know it wasn't.

At the beginning of this battle Cat told Viv it wasn't a plan, but a set of counterweights that only activate if needed. That is why she always has one more trick, she has a general understanding of everyone in the field, has prepared some contingencies, and is amazing at adapting them in the field.

Indrani or Masego dying is a "no win" situation for Cat, she has done everything to protect her friends, but she knows the dangers and prepared a counterweight in case it was needed. People will think she planed everything, but they will never realise all the contingencies she didn't used and all the scrambling she had to do to make things work.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

This was most definitely not Plan A. But it was a plan.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Eh. It's way more badass than True Love's Kiss.

And, it might shake her out of her suicidal recklessness should she get rezzed. Because the high chance if not getting a rez at all is always a thing to cash cold water on any spirit.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

And I don't think this was suicidal recklessness in the sense of "danger is not real and nothing bad can happen to me". Indrani has JUST had that arc, remember? Everdark shook her out of that and she spent several months up to Cloaks stewing in fear and anxiety wrt that? And chewed Cat out for her perception of Cat acting like that?

Knowing what we know about the arc Indrani's already been through, this was the kind of calculated recklessness that comes with a cost-benefit analysis that says the reward is worth the risk. Whether Indrani focused on the chance of herself surviving and saving Masego as worth the risk of dying, or considered that her dying would most likely work to save Masego and decided that that outcome was fine with her too, she's not just being fearless out of lack of understanding of the risks.

luminiousblu

It'll only count if she actually stays dead. I, personally, am now hoping for Masego to bring her back at the cost of getting his magical ability deleted.

[Liliet](#)

Huh, that would be neat also. Only, it would leave a dangling loose end in the form of magic-less Masego. Hmm... what if he keeps the Gift itself but loses the Name and all the abilities / inhuman knowledge that came with it? Or maybe keeps the Name but has all he ever Witnessed nulled? At the very least I can't see him keeping the knowledge he got in Thalassina...

shveiran

If there is a Book 6, better for him to be dead than a cripple. I'm not really sure how he could factor in the story much at that point. Same for Indrani, honestly... if Masego dies, I'm not really seeing the shape or her story.

I think they'll either be both around, mostly whole, or both dead/removed from the narrative.

shveiran

Agreed, but I really didn't expect it to be Archer

Cicero

Mistake Dead King. Mistake.

Morgenstern

Are we really sure it wasn't the *Wandering Bard* who did that "pesh", snap, Indrani is dead thing? The DK's dialogue seemed to heavily hint at it imho. What with all that "really? that is beneath both of us". Otherwise, where did that come from / what else does it relate to?

Rook

The Bard most likely just delayed him until Masego woke up. The Mistake Neshamah made was engaging her in dialogue at all. What was actually discussed was of absolutely no consequence, the import was that she made him waste time talking about his victory instead of fleeing immediately and as fast as he could.

She most likely set up the situation to happen though. Kairos just happened to delay Catherine, who was likely the one person that could've stopped Indrani from making the move that her killed?

Not a coincidence, I think.

I think Kairos didn't just betray them all, he betrayed them to the fucking Intercessor. Catherine knew he was delaying her specifically, when she said "I'm the only one who can handle what he's about to use, which I suspect is rather the point".

This would require a level of foresight that should be near impossible to have, but if anyone can do it it'd be the good ol' Boogeywoman.

Rook

It should also be noted that the event that prompted Neshamah to call out the Bard for being 'petty' was masego noting that his visions were slowing down.

If the Bard's goal was just to delay, and if Neshamah thought she was just trying to delay his Inevitable Victory (TM) out of petty spite, it'd make perfect sense why he'd make that accusation.

The situation in itself would be part of the weapon. The Villain, being Assured Of His Inevitable Victory, talks about how inevitable his victory is, foolishly allowing the Hero to delay him long enough for a last minute turnaround. It's one of the most classic story tropes that exists.

Which means, if any of these suppositions are true, then Black was quite the smart cookie for considering bashing himself unconscious rather than engaging the Bard at all. Amadeus, at least, recognized that he was about to be whipped, even if he didn't know what angle she'd strike him from.

[Liliet](#)

Y e p

shveiran

I agree with the gist of Rook's analysys, but I think the "beneath us" line referred to the Intercessor's PLAN, as witnessed through the ritual. That is why he later says "all I have to do is tell them", the subject doesn't change.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, that does make more sense.

Alessandro U

I too feel that this is the correct interpretation of what happened.

Andrew Mitchell

The relevant dialogue is

"Pesh."

– the seemingly-entrance boy lazily raised a hand, sorcery flickered and Archer's brains splattered the floor.

I think this is very direct evidence that the Dead King was responsible for Masego killing Archer. Like 95% certainty level. The Dead King doesn't actually say "that was me" but its heavily implied.

Linking this to the later discussion between the Dead King and Wandering Bard is unnecessary as Rook has explained.

danh3107

Jesus Christ.....

Naeddyr

oh fucking wow, wandering bard you absolute fucker

[Liliet](#)

That's what Neshamah gets for trying to discount Power of Love



erebus42

That's pretty much her in three words.

Soronel Haetir

Dayum

Soma

Ummmmmmmmmm... wow. That was a mistake. I will be supremely miffed is our general comedic relief does get killed permanently, but that is what resurrection is for isn't it? That includes coming back wrong, as that will probably kill off the freewheeling awesome of Archer. Or who knows the... issues resurrection has might just make Archer more Archer. I'm going to stake a wishful hope on that.

[Liliet](#)

I think resurrection just comes with low key depression, and I don't doubt Indrani will push through it. She's pushed through worse just in this book.

Especially with Masego going on a Roaring Rampage of Revenge against Neshamah on her behalf 😊

Gamer7956

Honestly, I think that Tariq won't be the one to pull off the res. I think Masego's about to hit his third aspect, and it will likely be one for replicating miracles – including resurrections. How else to get Cat to fuck up than give her an easy escape to a bad situation.

Because if an angel ressurects a villain, J can't see it being the same person who comes back.

[Liliet](#)

>Because if an angel ressurects a villain, J can't see it being the same person who comes back.

This has literally happened in the story.

Quite Possibly A Cat

Did... did the Dead King just make someone kill their One True Love?

Well, I guess the House always wins when you take another hit on 21.

[Liliet](#)

I know right? First he chewed out Cat for not playing by his 'zero attachment rules' then he acts like Bard kicked his kitten for taking proper&obvious advantage of a skyscraper-sized opening he left.

Between that and the "Catherine made me do it!" on hurting Masego, its fucking amazing how pathetic he actually is when you cut through the outer layers :3

maresther23

Even better, Bard weaponized the power of love... again

konstantinvoncarstein

Again?

[Liliet](#)

Good question. When WAS the first instance? I'd be surprised if there wasn't one, but... when.

Hum. Does knocking Amadeus off balance with news about deaths of his loved ones count?

[Liliet](#)

Oh! She used Sabah's attachment to Amadeus to bait her into attacking Rafaella first! That was a thing!

konstantinvoncarstein

Is it not only the heroic side of the story who can do that? 🤔 Here it is the Woe and their buddies, but concerning Sabah's death she was on the villainous side.

[Liliet](#)

I think it's not about which side of the story you are and more about how emotionally stunted you are. Granted, it does tend to correlate!

But Calamities really were the Woe's predecessors in the 'villainous band of 5' 'villains powered by Love, Trust, Friendship and Loyalty' department 😊

konstantinvoncarstein

Indeed. But the power of Love is when you triumph thanks to your love. And Sabah died.

[Liliet](#)

I think Power of Love is the whole thing complete with the drawbacks 😡

[Liliet](#)

(And Sabah literally had an entire Aspect dedicated just to her loyalty&attachment to Amadeus, so... Power there was indeed)

shveiran

The shape was wrong.

She engaged to prevent Rafaela from assisting Hanno against Amadeus.

The Champion was a complication, not a direct threat, so Sabah wasn't doing a last stand to protect her buddy => no power up.

Agent J

Sabah isn't the one who got the power up, no. It was Rafaela. And it was a beast vs heroic champion story. Sabah fucked up when she fell into the role of the bestial monster fighting the champion in the arena (domain).

I don't think love played a role in that story at all.

shveiran

Yep, that's what I was saying.

Love was the bait Bard used, but the story had the wrong shape for Sabah to gain the "protecting loved one" power boost.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, what I mean was Sabah's love for Amadeus dragging her into a losing fight.

Cicero

Power of Love also incorporates a character sacrificing themselves for the one they love's

ideals. Thus making the loved one feel regret and reconsider their life goals.

Maybe that's why Black ended up losing his name?

Andrew Mitchell

Maybe that was an early influence.

The direct cause of Black losing his Name was overuse during their travels/battles over Procer.

Unoriginal

No, it was in the text mentioned that it was because his name no longer fit him. While the reasons for this aren't spelled out one can assume that he hasn't been acting like a Black-Knight should act.

In fact, we've known this about his character for a long time but it never has gone far enough to lose his name like he did during the campaign. But the reason the Black Knight was so weak in conventional power in comparison to his predecessor is that his name never fit his modus operandi very well and so he never had quite so deep a well to draw upon.

Anyways, some have theorized that he may eventually become Dread Emperor Benevolent mentioned in some of the epigraphs but that's neither here nor there.

dalek955

I don't think so. As I see it, overusing aspects can get a Named killed (either by exhaustion or by inviting missteps), but couldn't burn out the Name itself. Amadeus ceased to be the Black Knight because he ceased to fit the Role of the Dread Empress's strong right hand, first by breaking with the Empress and going his own way, and then by getting so thoroughly trounced by the Gray Pilgrim at the Legion's expense.

[Liliet](#)

I think Bard was most definitely angling this way. Between 'go murder your little friend in the Tower' and 'feels like a sin doesn't it', she basically went full villainous monologue on him. That engenders pushback, and with Second Liesse

alienating him from his own side, and better yet leading to Catherine ordering him to go be a better person?

Ye p p.

erebus42

Well...shit

antoninjohn

True love conquers all, even death

Thea

Love is how villains die.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah but I bet they still feel like they come out the winners for having had the choice :3

Agent J

I know Tokoloshe certainly does.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah 😊

Really... a quick post-death poll for the selection of: Sabah, Wekesa, Tikoloshe, Indrani. Question: "Do you regret the love that caused your death, and would you have preferred to not be attached to that person and survive? Y/N"

😊😊😊

IDKWhoitis

I love the Dead King for the bastard a half that he is. Pretending to be out of it completely to force them into a tricky gambit.

Also, I shudder to think what the Bard wants, that would make the Dead King the LESSER of two evils. What would cause heroes to turn, and Cat to reunite with the Dead King?

Is it the meta knowledge of the show must go on? Is it an apocalyptic ending waiting for everyone at the end? Is it a full wipe of the slate?

Or nothing at all. That the Bard wants nothing in particular to happen, and just pushes things arbitrarily, pretending that a

grander plan is afoot? The inventor of the Catherine Gambit, just smile and nod as chaos roils around you?

[Liliet](#)

I wonder if it's Heroes he meant would turn on her, or Gods...

haihappen

If I interpret the DK-WB exchange correctly, the Wandering bard was using the heroes to fight a war of attrition against the Dead king, just like Isabella the Mad against Theodosian (or however his name is written).

In the process, she is willingly sacrificing heroes and enables villains to commit atrocities. I.e., the whole process up to the point that the Grand Alliance fights the Dead King was engineered by the Wandering Bard to turn out just this way (Rebellion in Callow; Akua's Folly & its destruction; weakening Malicia to ally with DK)

The unaccounted/unpredictable variables here are Cat and the Tyrant, yet I am not sure about the Tyrant.

My personal theory is that the ancient thing that the Tyrants line consults for a prediction is controlled either the DK or WB.

Basically, DK and WB play Shrantí (that board game mentioned a few times now, I may have mis-spelled it) with the entire continent.

[Liliet](#)

I think you're misinterpreting, because absolutely nobody would turn on Bard if that were the big revelation.

The attrition thing was obvious enough Neshamah didn't need to ride visions to see it, even Laurence caught the idea from half a step.

[Fayhem](#)

it's spelled Shatranj, IIRC. Basically just another flavor of Fantasy Chess, which is why Black hates it (for purposes of officer/leadership training anyway, not so much as a game itself) since it's way too abstracted and orderly and it makes people think you can get away with making 52-step plans like that in an actual war.

Anyway, to get back on topic I don't think we have enough information yet to deduce the Intercessor's plans. We didn't see what Neshamah just saw, and if the Dead King couldn't deduce what she was up to from the information previously available I suspect it's because the necessary information

just wasn't out there. I don't *think* we in the audience have gotten any privileged info that would fill in a blank that the Dead King wouldn't have info on, unless maybe it's the extra chapter where Laurence talked about letting Procer burn to purge out the impurities (still not sure whether Bard's actual intent there matches what Laurence said though). So I think that the reveal of what Bard is planning is still pending.

Andrew Mitchell

> So I think that the reveal of what Bard is planning is still pending.

Yes, that is yet to be revealed but it will be for sure... And in the meantime, I'll continue to enjoy all the speculation!

grzecho2222

It could be just victory for one side, because than Gods either abandon this reality to build a new one (and given how much fae want to escape their own abandon realm) or they will tear it apart and use it as materials for building a new one

IDKWhoitis

Why do I have this fear that one of the Woe may not make it out of this nightmare before its over?

I feel like Saint wouldn't either in such a scenario...

[Liliet](#)

They will, it'll be fine.

They have a heroic story and Bard's meddling at their backs 😊

IDKWhoitis

Nah, I think Bard likes it when everyone loses a little bit. It makes each side more desperate, more malleable.

Here's to hoping though...

[Liliet](#)

>Nah, I think Bard likes it when everyone loses a little bit.

Even if it's generally speaking better for her plans, I can attest with certainty based on textual evidence that she doesn't personally speaking *like* it better. Contrition stories are her least favorite :3

shveiran

Assuming the Bard never lies is a big leap, IMO.

[Liliet](#)

In her own POV's internal monologue?...

[Liliet](#)

Welp! There goes Indrani's story, firing off properly. I wonder if she expected this. Like this was obviously not her best case scenario, but... I'll honestly be more surprised if she did not consider this possibility and did not figure it'd work either way :3

Also, wow Neshamah is whiny. First Cat doesn't play by his rules, now Bard doesn't. And it's the same thing both times – emotions and attachments fucking up his neat arrangements eh :3

Wonder who the fuck is 'they' that would turn on Bard? I see two options – Gods or Heroes. Or both, but I honestly think that's less likely, just from the phrasing? Hum.

(My preferred option, obviously, is Gods)

Also lmao @ Cat managing to get in on that sweet, sweet Bardic meddling in her favor ♥

Also I wonder what the plan the heroes came up with was. For Roland to take in the sorcery, then for Laurence to cut it off from Neshamah? That's the impression I got. I like them willing to help, though ♥

And I love the Laurence-Indrani tension :3

caoimhinh

Like Cat said, for all that Neshamah is brilliant and has a vast information network and resources to understand the other players, the Dead King is stagnant in his ways. He has underestimated the strength of emotions, the core of human nature.

Not surprising when we consider that he has been an undead god for thousands of years. For all that he can have some 'clear visuals' thanks to his detachment, it also limits his scope of comprehension and what he can predict.

[Liliet](#)

Yassss.

Love this trope so fucking much. Amadeus might have tricked readers early on into thinking one might be able to properly

account for Power of Love etc while standing on the outside of it, but let's be real, no. That was no evidence of any such thing.

Evil still Cannot Understand Good AND I LOVE THAT TROPE WITH THE PASSION OF A THOUSAND BURNING SUNS

about time Cat & her crew found themselves on the right side of it 😊

caoimhinh

Well, we know for a fact that Amadeus can love in many ways (his family from the Green Stretch, the love of his life Ranger, his friends in the Legions and in the Calamities, Alaya, and Catherine) so he might actually have a decent shot at understanding the power of love and account for it.

I think it's not so much that 'Evil cannot understand Good' as it's actually closer to 'Humans Through Aliens Eyes'. Since this is more akin to Dead King forgetting about the intricacies of human nature due to his experience as a millenia-old undead rather than him not reading the abilities of his adversaries or what they are feeling. He knows Cat is suffering for the death of people in the war and she is angry for what he is doing to Masego and the Army of Callow, yet he dismissed this as something fleeting because he is thinking 'in a hundred or thousand years this won't matter' and 'all these losses and emotions will be just a memory eventually'; Neshamah has become so detached that he finds the notion of fighting teeth and nail for one's loved ones a weird or irrational thing, even ignoring how big a reaction can be and how far people are willing to go for their loved ones.

I suspect the Bard's plan is something deeply personal, hence Dead King's disdain for it and calling it mundane and petty.

[Liliet](#)

>so he might actually have a decent shot at understanding the power of love and account for it.

I mean. The impression I get from Amadeus is that he's 100% the kind of Heart-like Leader powered by Loyalty, Friendship and Trust of & to everyone around him. Alaya commented on it once, "attachment has always been your weakness, one you've managed to turn into a strength of sorts". Amadeus rides down those personal level heroic tropes whooping and screaming in terror.

He's a farmer's son wielding his mother's sword in defense of the weak from the power-abusing nobility, who led a rebellion that led to real reforms and real change.

Amadeus is exempt from any and all "Evil Cannot Understand Good" dynamics because he IS an antihero caught on the wrong side of the political divide.

>I think its not so much that 'Evil cannot understand Good' as it's actually closer to 'Humans Through Aliens Eyes'. Since this is more akin to Dead King forgetting about the intricacies of human nature due to his experience as a millenia-old undead rather than him not reading the abilities of his adversaries or what they are feeling.

P much same thing. Remember what he did to BECOME a millenia old undead? And how&why Cat is desperate to avoid a similar fate?

>I suspect the Bard's plan is something deeply personal, hence Dead King's disdain for it and calling it mundane and petty.

Huh. Yeah.

Morgenstern

Ah. I guess that would be another thing that comment of the DK can be related to. Thanks. I actually linked it directly to that moment of Indrani dying. Hm...

[Euodiachloris](#)

Both sides of the Gods might also be in the same "too not human to understand why the game pieces are beginning to get very, very weird and acting in strange ways" boat. 😞 If anything, the Dead King is a little god showing the problem off to everybody.

The Sisters almost went the same way, but are fighting talon, beak and snark to avoid it.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm!

[Fayhem](#)

> I suspect the Bard's plan is something deeply personal, hence Dead King's disdain for it and calling it mundane and petty.

That's a very interesting inference, I hadn't considered it at all really but that honestly seems pretty plausible to me now that you've pointed it out/argued for it like this. I would be truly fascinated to see what constitutes something "deeply personal" for a millennia-spanning entity like the Bard. Because given that basically nobody except her, the Dead King, and the elves live that long (and the elves are assholes so fuck 'em) any strong personal attachment/motivation she feels I think would have to either be:

A), very recent. E.g., a story of how an immortal fell in love with just a lowly mortal and blah blah blah, way too trite and I think this is very unlikely as such even if you are right about her plan being personal.

B), something she's carried with her since the very beginning, probably from before being committed to this immortal semi-purgatory. I.e., something of such burning importance that she's carried it with her for literally millennia, presumably without ever even letting on that she's been building towards it or DK would have figured it out previously. Now THAT sounds more like a story with enough weight to it to matter.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> yet he dismissed this as something fleeting because he is thinking 'in a hundred or thousand years this won't matter' and 'all these losses and emotions will be just a memory ...'

Sounds like he focused so completely on the long term that he forgot about the short term and maybe the medium term, and quite possibly the long term. 😊 In particular, Cat at this point is likely to "forgive" DK's smoking ashes. If he's right about her immortality, he may already have made her into a nemesis that can persecute him down the centuries..

shveiran

Could Neshamah and Masego together really uncover something the capital g Gods didn't know? I can share the charme of the idea, but it seems a bit farfetched.

konstantinvoncarstein

Don't seems likely. The Gods create Creation, after all.

lennymaster

And mages usurp Creation.

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, but creating an entire planet and an infinity of planes is several orders of magnitude more complex than anything imaginable by Neshamah.

[Liliet](#)

I mean if the Gods were omniscient they wouldn't have needed the wager in the first place would they?

I get the impression they aren't really big on foresight or trying to figure out what's *going* to happen as a consequence of anything they're observing. Consider: Neshamah is officially confirmed as having blindsided Below by betraying them.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Neshamah is officially confirmed as having blindsided Below by betraying them.

??? What are you referring to here? In any case, Praesi theology declares that betraying Below is the truest form of worship to them.

[Liliet](#)

When Bard was talking to the Sisters about their bargain, she told them Below got less generous since Neshamah 'bit the hand that fed him'.

1224

I don't know what Masego is going to do. I just know it's going to be hella cathartic.

caoimhinh

At that moment, Neshamah knew...
He fucked up.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> At that moment, Neshamah knew... He fucked up.

Actually, I don't think he's figured that out... yet.

Andrew Mitchell

> She saw there the same indolent pride and skill, only without the weight of centuries behind it.

Interesting that Saint sees that Archer has the same skill as the Ranger. I wonder if that has implications for later?

> lazily raised a hand, sorcery flickered and Archer's brains splattered the floor.

Wuff, I was NOT expecting that. But certainly a smart move by the Dead King IMO.

I'm not actually sure what the exchange between the Dead King and the Wandering Bard actually means. So I'm looking forward to reading the ensuing discussions.

Plus, it seems Masego is pissed. He's going to take out this fragment of the Dead King, isn't he?

[Liliet](#)

>Interesting that Saint sees that Archer has the same skill as the Ranger. I wonder if that has implications for later?

I think it's less 'just as skilled as her' and more 'the same general category of thing' / 'the same general direction'.
'Without the weight of centuries' and all.

>Wuff, I was NOT expecting that. But certainly a smart move by the Dead King IMO.

Oh was it now? 😊

I will admit my favored / most likely prediction for how this would turn out featured dead Indrani over Masego woken up by her death, and Pilgrim using up his resurrection on that, just because of how neat a story it makes... on meta level, on ground level, on ALL levels 😊

Neshamah left a skyscraper sized opening for the story to fuck him over by using his mastery over Masego's body to kill the girl who loves him coming to rescue him, and amplified it by being smug about it. The blowback from that is going to blow him cleanly out of all gains from this particular game, as Bard is here to ensure 😊

Like... this is a Power of Love story, and he tried to swat that aside. That's how YOU get swatted.

Between this and his earlier whining @ Cat that she's not playing by his rules by taking things personally? Neshamah's getting REAL rusty on those feelings tropes 😊

(Maybe even in a world of stories – maybe particularly in a world of stories, – it takes a person actually capable of Trust, Love and Friendship to recognize and take into account their Power properly 😊д😊D)

Hexblade

Personally, I think there is a second game here. The Dead King said that he already was losing a bit of himself to the Cutter (Saint). I think this is a ploy for Masego to take him apart in order to help push Masego and the Woe towards his side with the knowledge Masego will rip from him.

[Liliet](#)

Huh, that's an interesting version.

luminiousblu

I mean it feels out of character, doesn't it? I refuse to believe that in the thousands of years between him going Lich-King and Catherine nobody's tried to pull a "I know you're in there somewhere" thing on him. It is literally one of the most ancient stories around. The Dead King is the guy who plays the long game and never fails because he leaves no openings. If he isn't bluffing Bard and isn't buying time with some sort of hologram (which would explain why Masego can suddenly see again) for his 'real' soul to get away and communicate the information I call BS. Neshamah has consistently shown to be someone who refuses to take the bait, and gloating one step short of the goal is the clearest bait there is.

[Liliet](#)

Villains always fail.

This is how & this is why.

If the bait was easy to refuse nobody would ever take it.

He's not some kind of transcended being violating the laws of narrative. He's just the most successful villain finding himself a niche. That niche means he's safe, but it doesn't mean he's safe from elementary mistakes 😊

>Neshamah has consistently shown to be someone who refuses to take the bait

Neshamah has shown himself to be someone who acts like he never takes the bait and considers himself too smart for anyone else to keep up with him.

That does not make his view objectively correct 😊

This genuinely feels more in line with the general narrative setup, to me, than the idea that Neshamah is actually unbeatable. Nobody's in control, not him either. Power means constraints, immortality means deteriorating sanity. Play

into tropes that strengthen you enough, and you find yourself trope'd 😊

luminiousblu

>Villains always fail.

>This is how & this is why.

This is a platitude. Villains always fail only in the sense that if you fail you're clearly a villain. This is true even in the Guideverse, because Neshamah is only a villain in the most technical sense of the word when he doesn't fail. A looming catastrophe isn't a 'villain', it's a phenomenon to be avoided. That is what Neshamah has always been presented as – clean up unassailable. The way to 'win' against him is to merely avoid losing.

>If the bait was easy to refuse nobody would ever take it. Define 'easy', because you don't need to be a genius to realise that gloating before you've finished the job makes no goddamn sense in any world, including guideverse. He could've had a minor devil nearby waiting to tell the Bard that she's too late, if he so pleased. This isn't a curveball bait, it's not hidden or obfuscated, it's not buried six layers under like the whole "hunter of maidens" thing that killed off Captain. It's something Neshamah was arguably not even baited into doing, he simply decided to do it on his own.

>Neshamah has shown himself to be someone who acts like he never takes the bait and considers himself too smart for anyone else to keep up with him.

Which, considering he's styled all over repeated attempts to bring him down for millennia at least, is supported by evidence. Him being a poser believing himself more clever than he is doesn't make sense when you consider just how successful he's been. You're going to complain, 'oh, but he hasn't taken over the continent yet!' but even that we've seen comes from how cautious he is and how utterly unwilling to take bait he is. The dude doesn't like taking risks, so he's more than willing to wait out any danger that shows up and to engineer the circumstances of his expansion so as to not provoke the dice turning against him. It's arguably strange he hasn't already bailed – clearly, Malicia and the Black Queen have long since stopped being the 'main' threat in the eyes of everyone involved.

>Nobody's in control, not him either

You don't need to be in 'control', though. I don't know why you brought it up. From a narrative point of view the idea that Neshamah is an entity to be beaten is already pointless – he's not presented as Sauron, he's presented

as Moby-Dick, the guy who everyone hates but nobody has ever been able to do meaningful damage to, a lurker in the dark, the boogeyman of every story. An obsession with combating him leads only to ruin through your own actions.

>Power means constraints

Power doesn't mean constraints. By definition power means, in every universe, even in guideverse, the lack of constraints on your actions. What we view as constraints on power is rather just conditions for power to manifest. There's a few people who have constraints placed upon them but most of those constraints are either fundamentally tied to their power or a result of how they obtained it.

>immortality means deteriorating sanity

That's total BS though. Catherine keeps saying this, probably partially to excuse her behaviour as the Queen of Winter, but what are the facts? The Fae are not 'going' insane, they operate on different rules and with different mindsets because they're immortal and they're, well, fae. The Elves aren't insane, just racist and immensely powerful – and no, you don't have to be insane to be racist, especially in a world where you can objectively show massive and meaningful differences between species. Masego's "papa" is clearly not insane despite being immortal and around since before the Dead King. Sve Noc and the rest of the drow aren't insane, just warped, which isn't the same thing – they're thinking clearly and logically, just in a manner and against values foreign to everyone else.

Even if we allow that this isn't the case, since Catherine pulled off a minor victory against Neshamah using Sve Noc, what bugs me isn't necessarily just the fact that he's blundered. It's that it was so transparently obvious. Nobody didn't basically facepalm when Neshamah basically went 'haha you're too late my victory is assured'. The dude has no right surviving this long if he's going to do something like that, and it shows what I mean when I said last chapter that it feels like everyone but Catherine is being presented like a total moron at times. Is it that no party but the Woe has EVER tried to bring back a loved one from Neshamah? Is it that he's never possessed someone before? Are we meant to believe that this is the only trick that works, that none of the other transparently obvious 'asking for it' phrases and scenarios can be baited out? None of these explanations make sense. How the hell did he not get finished off ages ago by a bright eyed hero with a hot adventurous girlfriend?

I'd also say it seriously bugs me that Masego has pulled off what should nominally be impossible by shaking off

full possession at the last moment but that's just guideverse shenanigans. Personally I've always wanted to take an axe to the face of every single person who even so much as nods at the Power of Friendship/Love and am therefore super biased, so I won't comment on the stupidity of that particular interaction.

Liliet

>Personally I've always wanted to take an axe to the face of every single person who even so much as nods at the Power of Friendship/Love

Well, this is not the narrative for you then 😊

Mental Mouse

DK thinks he owns the long game, but Bard plays it longer. And "who the gods would destroy, they first make proud". As Liliet put it:

>Neshamah has shown himself to be someone who ... considers himself too smart for anyone else to keep up with him. That does not make his view objectively correct 😊

It may well be that Neshamah has been slowly decaying for millennia, and now is slipping into hubris. Or just focusing so closely on his project against the Bard, that he (at least the sliver of him that's present) fumbled badly against the mortal opponents. His alienation from humanity might also help explain why he completely blew off the possibility of a Power of Love play.

Andrew Mitchell

> It may well be that Neshamah has been slowly decaying for millennia, and now is slipping into hubris. Or just focusing so closely on his project against the Bard, that he (at least the sliver of him that's present) fumbled badly against the mortal opponents. His alienation from humanity might also help explain why he completely blew off the possibility of a Power of Love play.

All of those are very plausible IMO and taken together are enough of a reason for the Dead King to have made this mistake. Additional thoughts which IMO add to the plausibility:

– The opportunity Masego presented (the opportunity to find out the Bard's true motive) may NEVER have arisen before now.

– If Masego hadn't actually thought about, or internally acknowledged, his love for Archer (and we know Masego was almost totally oblivious to those feelings) then the Dead King couldn't really pick up that knowledge from rooting through Masego's brain.

[Liliet](#)

KABOOM ♥

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Between this and his earlier whining @ Cat that she's not playing by his rules by taking things personally?

In fact, I suspect that much of his interactions with Cat in this book were "concern trolling", aka trying to talk her out of a winning position. Too bad Cat is very much on to *that* game, having been "trained" by Pilgrim and company.

[sengachi](#)

Well fuck me, I find myself rooting for the Bard.

[Liliet](#)

She's on the party's side right now! 😊

Daniel Magelinski

I maintain that she's never really been on anyone's side.

[Liliet](#)

Well, yeah. I mean situationally, you know like the green/red flagging in video games 😊

[Sugar Roll](#)

No, she's not. My take is that she is creation's moderator and enforces the balance between good and evil. When one side gets a substantial advantage, she intervenes on behalf of the losing side.

erebus42

Then she's either shit at her job or plays favorites since (except for that thing with Sve Nok) when has she ever helped out the Villains?

shveiran

I get what you are coming from, but let's remember that the Chain of Hunger and the DK both count as Villains. And they are pretty much undefeatable.

BUT yeah, mortal villains really get the short end of the stick.

erebus42

A fair point, but she hasn't really focused her efforts directly on them until recently has she? Not to mention the facts that the two had been relatively dormant until recently, and that the Pilgrim and the Saint have made it so that Villains haven't been able to make any real victories in most of the continent. She's only been subverting in the few places where villains do have power. If she's the embodiment of anything it's the status quo; specifically the one that states that the villains always loose. Now she probably doesn't want their complete eradication like the Saint does; after all who then would be around for the Heroes to defeat and prove themselves against?

denimcurtain

I'm assuming she usually isn't very active. I feel like her joining a five man band even is more hands on than usual for any given decade. Just needs subtle pushes.

As for the balance between villainy and heroes...it's been pretty balanced as far as we can see. Exceptions being the dead kind, triumphant, and today. Villains achieving dominance followed by swift falls to heroes is part of the balance. Heroes need to win over villains at some point because otherwise villiains live forever. There's a lot of reasons why heroes aren't generally threatening to the balance.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> There's a lot of reasons why heroes aren't generally threatening to the balance.

Well, that's the thing, per Amadeus the heroes of Procer and Levant were winning too much, enough that they triggered the Conquest as a balancing reaction. I suspect their campaigns were part of why Amadeus and Cat were capable of similarly purging heroes from their territory.

denimcurtain

Maybe. Though it's Amadeus' theory and even he only goes as far as saying that it only became a problem when Procer turned it's eyes towards Praes.

[Liliet](#)

My vote is 'plays favorites' ♥

[Fayhem](#)

Is she? Or is she just using them to fuck over DK? Because there can be a HUGE difference in how that goes from the party's POV. When you're on somebody's side, you want them to succeed by a standard they would consider success. When you're using somebody, it doesn't matter if your tools break as long as they accomplish what you needed them to.

Like I said; a HUGE difference.

Andrew Mitchell

Well said. And it will be very interesting to find out the truth of it.

[Liliet](#)

True.

I think Bard's in favor of this story actually going well for the party's side, just because she can, but I admit that's my pro-Bard bias :3

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Is she? Or is she just using them to fuck over DK?

She can do both – the DK vs. Golden Bloom incident makes it clear she has no problem linking and overlapping two stories.

Faiir

I don't.

I feel like the Dead King doesn't really need anything from Calernia, and is only moving out to screw with the Bard. With Bard out of the picture, I always felt a real truce could be reached

This makes me feel like they should be allied with the Dead King even more – if he loses to her at the peak of his power, what chances do our villains have?

OTOH, Intercessor is THE antagonist. If her job is keeping the Good/Evil war going, then without defeating her there is no way for Cat to achieve what she wants.

[Liliet](#)

Why would she have made the League of Free Cities then? 😊

Tenthyr

On the one hand, damn there Bard, stylish.

On the other hand what the Dead King said kinda has me rooting for him, if only because whatever he found out about the Bard must be REALLY bad.

[Liliet](#)

Depends on how you read the 'them' there at the end 😊

erebus42

I mean the most probable choices would be the Heroes or the Gods. Either way, it would be cathartic to see the Wandering Bard squirm a little and get knocked down a peg or two.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

Still, between Neshamah and Intercessor, I'll take Intercessor every time. At least she's not *unambiguously* evil, y'know?

luminiousblu

Neshamah has style though. Bard does too but she's too inconsistent with her style, on account of the whole "literally doesn't exist 99% of the time" thing.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah but Neshamah's the one who slaughters people for shits and giggles and doesn't give a fuck about anyone but himself and considers feelings a silly weakness.

Bard's POV was actually that of a person.

Maybe for you a million is a statistic, but I feel otherwise :3

[sengachi](#)

On the other hand, the Bard literally told him “this time, *eat the baby*” meaning “yeah this time I’ll actually let you take a chunk out of Procer”.

So however human her perspective may be, she’s also the human who decided to let the Dead King win on some level and kill millions to see her own desires through (whatever they may be).

[Liliet](#)

That’s your interpretation of what she meant. I doubt even DK trusts that it’s a genuine promise.

[Fayhem](#)

It’s been genuine enough for the Lycaonese to reach the brink of extinction; their goals were shifting to “evacuate enough of our civilian refugees that maybe future generations will be able to return” before Cat’s deal kicked in. I’m positive that DK didn’t just take Bard at her word, because that seems to be the entire motive for what he’s doing literally right now. But him even just committing to this invasion less hard would have made a difference that could probably be measured in tens of thousands of lives.

In other words, yes Bard is more human than DK (not setting the bar high, but still it is true). But look at our own real-life world. Is humanity really a barrier to being just as capable of perpetrating horrors as any fantasy villain?

shveiran

I agree. On the other hand, it seems WB is crafting and reinforcing stories that FORCE death and loss as background upon Calernia. For the young orphaned hero to topple the evil empire, the evil empire must have existed for some time and oppressed its citizen so much that no one REALLY expects it to fall. That’s a good story, right?

If that theory is correct... The bard is just as nefarious, her methods are simply weirder and indirect.

[Liliet](#)

That conclusion is skipping over many points such as “how willingly is she doing this” and “what even is the alternative”.

And I would like to bring your attention to the existence of the League of Free Cities... and its origin.

Faiir

I don't really agree – I feel like Bard connects to people personally, but is bothered more by the Lone Swordsman's death than that of thousands around him.

While Dead King doesn't care about singular people, but could actually create a stable country for billions. A million losses now could be a statistic if it leads to billions of people living happily over thousands of years.

I do realize it never ends this way in stories because they would be boring, but this is the reason why in-universe story driven powers cause so much strife.

[Liliet](#)

>but could actually create a stable country for billions

Gotta love when people look at a dystopia and praise its dictator.

Faiir

How much of it did we actually see though? I don't think it's clear whether it's a dystopia or utopia at this point.

And the fact that Dead King is a dictator on its own isn't that different from other monarchs in Calernia.

[Liliet](#)

It's a dystopia because the Dead King is not going to allow them any kind of self-determination or exploration that goes against his ambition / outside the bounds of where he wants them to be.

[Mental Mouse](#)

They're both figurative leviathans who think to toy with the mortals beneath them. It's long past time they both got a lesson in perspective.

nick012000

Reminds me a bit of this scene from Bablyon 5:



Ritvik Jha

Well the important part is that the hidden horror won't be able to pass the information that is vital in defeating the intessor

Hardric62

You're saying that as if Masego won't get the intel out while he's dissecting that Neshamah's Shard he's about to get.

Insanenoodlyguy

Odds are decent, it works as an emphasis of Dead Kings utter incoming loss.

Dead King Shard: "Wait! What we've learned

Insanenoodlyguy

Damn I wish wordpress let you edit, accidentally hit send too soon

Dead King Shard (When it's clear it's going to lose): "Wait! What we've learned, it's too important, too valuable, it must be preserved! She-"

Heirophant: "You hurt her. I don't care." *does something nasty*

Ritvik Jha

Well the important part is that the hidden horror won't be able to pass the information that is vital in defeating the intessor, the real enemy is not keter but the Bard, she keeps the wheels of conflict turning.

[Liliet](#)

Keter is kind of low key still also *the real enemy*.

Kirroth

Here's a thought. We now know the fragment of the Dead King that's possessing Masego doesn't have an active connection to his main body. It has to dial home, so to speak, to deliver news of what it's learned. And the Bard's gambit is to scramble the call until Saint and Sorcerer can destroy the fragment, which it's implied will permanently weaken the Dead King.

If faced with imminent destruction, will the fragment choose to accept the loss or will it try to spite the Bard by passing its uncovered secrets to Cat?

[*Liliet*](#)

Ha.

That would sure be neat!

(Too neat. Too easy. Most definitely won't happen. Or at least, not with the full volume of information... 😊)

Andrew Mitchell

I hope so. I really, really, really hope so.

shveiran

I think it would try, I'm not sure it would succeed.

NerfGlastigUaine

Well fuck. I can't believe it, but I think the Dead King is the underdog in this fight. Wandering Bard is too hax EE, plz nerf

[*Liliet*](#)

Oh pls, did she even have to do anything. Cat was the one to orchestrate the True Love sory here 😊

caoimhinh

She somehow got into Masego's mind/soul to have that conversation, and even made the Dead King's fragment loosen its control over Masego. That's a new trick, and pretty OP (almost like the one she used in her conversation with Amadeus where "by Providence" everyone was asleep and wouldn't wake up until the end of the conversation). If she hadn't intervened it would have taken far longer for Masego to wake up and could possibly get him crippled by Neshamah or killed by Saint.

That is assuming it was indeed the Dead King who moved Masego's body to kill Indrani; at this point I'm no longer sure if it wasn't Bard taking control over his body for a few seconds (she shouldn't be able to do that, but then again she could get some trick out of nowhere and do it, her limitations hadn't really been established).

[*Liliet*](#)

Bard isn't allowed direct touch, and that's as direct as touch gets.

And yeah, she can apparently project herself as an apparition into people's consiousnesses where one person

sees her and no-one else does. Like she did at Second Llesse, where Cat saw her.

I don't think she loosened DK's control though, like I think that was falling apart on its own because his ritual was ending. What she did was distract DK with conversation until Masego recovered enough to process Indrani's death 😊

That is fully within her established abilities.

Mental Mouse

> I think that was falling apart on its own because his ritual was ending.

I suspect the part of DK that was actually controlling Masego, was dependent on the latter being isolated from the outside world: DK knew that any new input from reality (and especially Masego's friends) could break the control.

And then Laurence just *cut* DK's sorcery, *specifically* the part that was keeping the outside world away from Masego.

Liliet

oh yes, that too 😊

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah, if he was the underdog he could win. Bard's genius is always using somebody else's story. And in that story? Right now he's the deplorable evil that just used a man to hurt his one true love. At this point, his role is to play the "at this moment, the Dead King realized: he fucked up" ragdoll. Anything he can throw at Masego at this point is no longer going to keep the boy down: at most its going to hurt but not stop. Boy's probably about to get his third aspect, and hes' definitely not going to lose. Best case for Dead King is Archer is resurrected and this distracts him long enough for the Dead King to limp away, but since Bard put this together, I'm pretty sure instead it's "Masego might keep rampaging and/or explode unless we can show him that oh look, the woman he just realized he loved is alive again."

konstantinvoncarstein

I wonder what would be his third aspect. Something linked to cleansing, or freeing?

caoimhinh

I wonder about it too.

He is Hierophant Usher of Mysteries and Vivisector of Miracles, his current two Aspects are Witness and Ruin,

maybe the last one would be Reveal? That would suit the nature of who Masego is and what his role as Hierophant is. It could also be Usurp, that would be poetically awesome as Usurpation is being said to be the essence of Sorcery in that world.

Actually, his third Aspect could be anything at all and I'm sure it's gonna be badass.

Kissaten

Thinking that the Chaos that is Kairos can be contained – a classic mistake. Thinking that Catherine will not find a common ground with Kairos – a classic mistake x2.

It appears that Dead King planned to use some soul out of thousands as a messenger, Kairos made a play for souls, and Cat was expected to be so appaled by treachery she won't forgive Kairos and fight him to the victory of one of them? Bard appears to be safe from Hierarch – she is pale now, i.e. hierarchy used on black-skinned thalassinians won't make her subject to it, but it's Kairos, he is going to knife her somehow.

Morgenstern

Nah, the DK is expecting one soul to slip out during their struggle. That Cat will keep Kairos from taking over ALL of them for at least long enough for his (the DK's) messenger to slip out.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Thinking that Catherine will not find a common ground with Kairos – a classic mistake x2.

Yeah, I'm expecting that Sword of Heirarchy is about to get used against Neshamah.

Rook

Said it before and I'm gonna make the same call again, the Bard's plot is to be free of Above and Below.

We already knew that she flees from three things: Promised death, direct touch and her heart's desire. When she fled from Hierarch the only thing that makes sense is the third, and she fled the exact moment Anaxares refused to choose Above or Below.

We know that she's directly involved with Above and Below, per the little shtranj match Cat had with Kairos, and that they've put bindings – restrictions on her.

We know now by what Neshamah just revealed that whatever her plot is, it will cause all of 'them' to turn on her. So far she's been observed to be on absolutely no character's side, which

realistically leaves only set of entities that could turn on her in the first place, by virtue of not already being hostile to her. The ones she's bound to, the ones she's working for.

Whether that's by striking at them or even at herself in the most elaborate suicide that Creation has ever seen, to be determined; but she's planning to turn on her makers. I suspect that the entire reason she created the Name of Hierarch all those years ago, and why she was so interested in how a Villain was made in the Arcadia record of Neshamah's apotheosis, was for the sake of learning how to create a person that could fulfill that purpose, since her own bindings don't allow her to. The former was a failed test run, the latter was research.

luminiousblu

I severely doubt that she can actually do such a thing. Being as she were literally the "house" in question, Above and Below are like the ground and the sky, while roles are merely wood. Bard gets to change what the rules look like, but she's never even gotten close to outright changing the rules. Even if she burned the house down, I see no reason they can't just build a new one.

Rook

Considering she's a narratively unbeatable abomination that was already ancient when the dead king still had a pulse, the fact that it'd be so difficult to accomplish doesn't disqualify it in the least, in my books. If her goal was of any sort of mundanely difficult feat she'd likely have already accomplished it in a few centuries just to pass the time.

But hey, doubt as you will. I'll be sure to rub it in later.

luminiousblu

Have you considered not being a caustic jackass? Was the last line really necessary?

Andrew Mitchell

To me, that last line was funny and felt like it was meant in the spirit of friendly competition, rather than being cruel or nasty.

I'm not saying I'm right and you're wrong, it's just that we had different reactions.

luminiousblu

That would certainly work, but then that just means Rook vastly overestimated how close we are and whether or not

it's appropriate to make 'friendly' competition. So either way it doesn't really come off well. Or maybe I'm overreacting. Who knows.

Mental Mouse

In both one's own comments and reacting to those of others, there is a useful rule to keep in mind: "The failure mode for 'clever' is 'asshole'." It's wise to be careful what you say yourself; but it's also worthwhile to forgive the misjudgements of others.

Andrew Mitchell

Wise words.

Novice

Pretentious much?

Cold Cyberia

I think her plan is to use the rules Gods themselves created to effectively cheat the "house". Even if the house always wins, you can still count cards. I would wager her plan is to present Gods as the villains, herself as the "monster" that will turn on them and humanity as the peasant with a sword – the ultimate heroic underdog.

luminiousblu

Eh I dunno

It depends on how EE wants to write, in the end, but rebellion against the gods is a VERY bad story to be the rebel. It has essentially never ended well prior to the modern era where killing gods is basically the endgame of any angsty hero whose series runs on long enough. Even 'bad' gods like, say, Izanami or Ereshkigal were far beyond mortal means to combat on a metaphysical level. Diomedes hits Ares, but only because Athena is rigging his aim. He "'hurts"' Aphrodite, but then Apollo immediately shows up to stop him from getting big ideas about hurting a goddess who the author of the Iliad had a vested interest in stripping of her capacity as a war goddess. Ishtar is clearly an antagonist in the Epic of Gilgamesh, but Gilgamesh outright loses. Sun Wukong is a deity of sorts already when he rampages through Heaven, but then the real big wigs show up and make a joke out of him. You can't win because the very idea of winning against a deity is not defined. They don't have a loss condition.

The only real angle for a mortal hero is that even the gods can't fight fate, but the Bard ISN'T fate and mortals are just as bound by fate as the gods are. I can see ways for him to pull it off. I just am leery of having a 'rebels against the gods' story end well for anyone but the gods in a story that relies so heavily on abuse of narrative tradition.

[Mental Mouse](#)

There's also Masego's old question: If a human gained the knowledge/power of a god, would there be a difference? We may be about to have that answered.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

I can't see how the story can end in anything but rebellion against the gods. Beyond the numerous discussions of divinity and apotheosis, an actual murder of a god in the Arcadia arc, hints about Bard's true purpose and the whole Anaxares arc, the most compelling reason to me is that they're the ultimate villain. The real evil of Guide isn't a particular polity or human nature, it's the system (i.e. the gods) which perpetuates and enhances violence, created solely to resolve a philosophical dispute.

Imo, that's very much a narrative Bard has been setting up for ages and it's now coming to fruition. Gods as the ultimate antagonists, mortals as the ultimate underdog heroes, herself as the monster that will turn against her masters. I agree with you in that if a random villain or a hero rebelled against them they would be swatted down – like many of the past Tyrants – but this has been in the works for a long time now.

shveiran

I think it ends in rebelling against the Gods' order, not the Gods per se.

There has been a lot of talk about dissecting low case gods, not the other kind.

We are talking about the beings that created the world, magic and that power up Names; what would you even hurt them with?

To beat them is to escape their Games, not literally BEATING them up.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

You'd hurt them by using their own rules against them. Judge the Gods Above to be unjust and usurp the power of the Gods Below through betrayal. Underline the

hypocrisy of their rules or re-frame them to the mortals' advantage.

Because deities must follow certain rules. We've seen this with Cat who was calcifying into something unyielding but the most obvious example was the Summer Queen who essentially committed ego suicide in order to fulfil her three duties.

shveiran

Sure, but she was, again, a lower case god. And, you know, she was melting armies as an afterthought still.

I mean, everything we ever saw a Named do? That is a sliver of the gods. There is so much of an imbalance of power that... how can you do anything to them? There isn't even a single STORY to support such a rebellion because it is an unprecedented act, so even story-fu wouldn't work.

I just don't see how it is possible, sorry.

ninegardens

I agree this is more likely to be a "don't beat up the gods, instead we must slip the noose" (as Black might say).

That said... I do think there are PLENTY of stories that can be used here. There are plenty of stories of heroes standing up to unjust kings, heroes bringing down tyrants, and villains usurping thrones. If you want to use the story against the gods, you just have to frame it right so that they fall into the ROLE that the story cares about (even if the story doesn't apply directly to gods in the past).

... that said, I really don't know if the Gods above and below are vulnerable to story-fu. The small gods INSIDE creation, yes, but the ones outside it... I dunno.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

I realise it's a lowercase god but the point with the Summer Queen was to illustrate how such being to adhere to their duties. The more power you have the more tightly bound you are to your nature. I think it's the same with Gods. We've already seen they can only intervene at particular moments for example, and that the scales are always balanced.

The Summer Queen had to fulfill three duties. Once it was shown to her that she had to commit ego-suicide in order to keep them up she had to do it. It wasn't really a choice. Gods will also have such restrictions. Above might be based on the belief that the rule of the Gods is always just and good. If you show this isn't the case they will change just how the Summer Queen did.

And there's plenty of stories here. The particulars don't really matter: the fact Gods made Creation is irrelevant to their Role of being tyrants over mortals, in the same way Cat being an undead abomination was irrelevant to pulling the sword out of the stone.

konstantinvoncarstein

"He "'hurts"' Aphrodite, but then Apollo immediately shows up to stop him from getting big ideas about hurting a goddess who the author of the Iliad had a vested interest in stripping of her capacity as a war goddess".

Small correction: Aphrodite was never a war goddess, she is the goddess of love and beauty. It is why Diomède managed to hurt her. Except for that, I agree with you 😊

[Euodiachloris](#)

Aphrodite was imported, initially to Crete and Sparta. She was Asarte aka Inanna: "all's fair in love, sex and war – and farming".

Crete and Sparta still had her as a warrior, but... for some reason, the Athenians seem to have taken umbrage at two goddesses using shields, spears and armour. 😊

konstantinvoncarstein

I checked, and you seem right. Thank you for enlightening me 😊

[Euodiachloris](#)

Interesting sidenote: although mention of a local goddess named something close to "Athena" is made in a couple of translated linear B fragments, there's no guarantee that Classical Athena isn't, herself, an Astarte-remix-and-reskin from a different angle. Both Athena and Aphrodite have... suspiciously Astarte-ish origin stories. And other tales.

Yup. Sparta and Athens clashing over interpreting similar cultural ideas differently? Shocker. 😊

konstantinvoncarstein

Did you study classical history, or are you just passionate? 😊 Not many people know this kind of things.

Euodiachloris

My dad did: his degree was a first class honours degree in Classics. I just have a passing interest after having grown up around Latin and Greek classics (even though I can read neither languages, let alone their various dialects, at all well).

I have learned to avoid pastoral poetry and plays. Snoozefest alert. And too many random satyrs. 😊

luminiousblu

The Iliad was 'written' soon after Aphrodite was introduced to Greece. Aphrodite Areia was her original 'form', and she was derived from Astarte (goddess of sex, love, lust, war, and fertility) and therefore Ishtar, the goddess of all that plus politics and judgement. There's a very peculiar line in the Iliad where Zeus tells Aphrodite something to the effect of "heh, you have no reason to be on a battlefield silly girl why are you doing that?" and Aphrodite doesn't contest it, instead wholeheartedly agreeing with a super-artificial sounding affirmation of her nature as not a war goddess. That's basically how you know that the point was up for contention at the time of writing and that Homer was trying to pick sides in one of the more touchy political debates of the time.

Aphrodite being hit by Diomedes and then Diomedes immediately getting shut down is an extension of that. A mortal hero, albeit a blessed one, isn't supposed to be able to so much as physically touch a deity who isn't trying to be injured. That Aphrodite is anyway is supposed to highlight WOW SHE'S REALLY NOT A FIGHTER IDK WTF THE SPARTANS WERE THINKING APHRODITE A WAR GODDESS PFFT HAHA. Then Apollo shows up, just to remind the readers (or listeners, more likely) that they shouldn't get a big head and that gods are still a big deal and can push their shit in at will.

caoimhinh

Except that they actually CAN and rebellion against the Gods has been shown to be possible multiple times in ancient stories. It was actually only in recent times, with the ascent of monotheistic religions like Islamism and Christianity that deities started to be considered unbeatable. Ancient cultures respected their gods but also aspired to be like them, gods weren't considered distant unachievable concepts nor omnipotent forces, just very powerful beings or spirits and were shown to intermingle with humans and other creatures, they could be reached and even surpassed with enough effort.

Overcoming of the previous ruler of the Heavens and even a wipeout of an entire previous Pantheon of Gods is in almost every mythology and culture.

Zeus rose to prominence by beating Cronus, and Cronus himself rose to power by beating Uranus (the very reason Zeus, Poseidon and Proteus made arrangements and intervened to make the sea nymph Thetis marry Peleus was that it was prophesized that her son would be greater than his father and Zeus was afraid of that, hence they forced her to marry a mortal human, her son was Achilles)

Similar things are true for whoever is King of Gods in other mythologies, they took the throne by beating their predecessor.

The Egyptians, Celtic, Irish, Nordic, Mayans, Japanese and many more, have examples of Gods killing each other too and dying by the hand of other creatures. In fact, some pantheons are shown to be at war with other races.

Now, you might argue that the point is mortals can't do that (either beating or killing gods), but that was considered to be a very real possibility in ancient mythologies.

Hindu and Chinese myths especially, as in those mythoi humans are actually capable of ascending into deities. It's just that gods went to very long ways to prevent that, it's not that it was impossible.

For example:

The deities against whom Sun Wukong fights used to be humans and animals but trained in esoteric arts to gain power and consumed special meals that gave them immortality, the Jade Emperor (ruler of all chinese gods) was a human that cultivated his way into the throne of heaven (and he wasn't their first ruler either) and his greatest General Erlang Shen (the one who stopped Wukong) was born a mortal too.

Indra, the King of the Devas, was cursed by the mortal sage Gótama Rishi into having vulvae all over his body for having sex with the sage's wife. Indra had to make amends

in order for the sage to remove the curse, which means the king of heaven wasn't capable of getting rid of the curse by himself.

Gautama Buddha himself is one of countless ascended humans who stand side by side with the Gods in Taoism and Buddhism.

In Greek myths, humans were shown to be able to beat the Gods even in their specialties; Arachne defeated in their contest of weaving Athena (goddess of wisdom and handicraft) and was cursed into becoming a spider because a Goddess shouldn't be humiliated, Ares (the God of War) was hurt by Diomedes the very same day that Aphrodite was wounded by Diomedes, even if Athena guided the spear the fact remains that Diomedes wounded Ares and MADE HIM RUN AWAY.

So the Gods ARE killable. They can be beaten, restrained, sealed, wounded, and killed by the hands of mortals (and other creatures, like Giants, Cyclops, and monsters too) in almost every mythology.

The only difference is that they have access to greater powers, more knowledge and resources, they are even shown to have longer lifespans thanks to elixirs and exotic fruits (Ambrosia, Nektar, Peaches of Immortality, Amrita, etc). Nordic and Hindu mythologies outright state that anyone can kill a God if they have the adequate tool or spell, showing deities as susceptible to mystic runes, curses and magic weapons (like the ones crafted by Dwarves or the Brahma weapons depicted in the Mahabharata, Ramayana and the Puranas) even when those are used by mortals.

Only the monotheistic religions depict their deity as an almighty, omnipresent and omniscient being, like some kind of distant disembodied force that can do everything (yet strangely has armies of angels and has to depend on them and mortals to carry on his will).

shveiran

That's all very interesting (honestly), but I'm not sure it's relevant to the point being argued.

Calernia and the Guideverse in general are powered by their own mythology, and I don't see many evidences that Gods (not to be confused with gods) can be touched.

I mean, they litterally power Named and bestow them with powers. Think how much difference in level there is between people and Named, then imagine how higher the creator beings stand.

I think they are closer to monotheistic power levels, myself.

luminiousblu

That itself is sort of a trap. It's not about power levels, it's about the fact that they're on a different scale. It'd be like the difference in 'power level' between a human and the property of heat.

caoimhinh

Indeed, the Gods in the Guideverse are too powerful to actually be hurt by the beings inside Creation. Though a sliver of them can be fought and the two sides keep each other at bay from intervening too much in Creation, there's certainly no way for them to be killed by their creations, as the created simply lack the power for that, they can't even get in contact with the Gods without their explicit permission.

I was simply addressing the point of Luminousblu claiming that fighting against the Gods is a modern concept and "the endgame of any angsty hero whose series runs on long enough" as that is simply not true.

luminiousblu

None of those actually matter. You're drawing an artificial line between Abrahamic religions and PIE ones which tells me you come from a culture dominated by Abrahamic values.

>Zeus rose to prominence by beating Cronus, and Cronus himself rose to power by beating Uranus (the very reason Zeus, Poseidon and Proteus made arrangements and intervened to make the sea nymph Thetis marry Peleus was that it was prophesized that her son would be greater than his father and Zeus was afraid of that, hence they forced her to marry a mortal human, her son was Achilles)

What you'll notice is that all of those are deities. Gods fighting gods? Yes, very common. Gods aiding humans in fighting gods? Yes, happens sometimes, especially in heroic epics. Humans fighting monsters, with or without divine aid? Also fairly common. Gods helping humans out and getting fucked by other gods? This one's weirdly cross-culture. Gods fighting humans, and the humans styling on them? No. This just doesn't happen.

Thetis is still divine in nature – all nymphs are minor deities. Narcissus does nothing to Echo, she's cursed and either kills herself or turns into a flower because

Narcissus is just so cute and he'll never be hers so she has a mental breakdown. Even Sisyphus locking up Thanatos is essentially Sisyphus tricking Thanatos into locking himself up, he himself didn't do anything because he would've gotten crushed had he tried. All stories where the god loses they basically do themselves in.

>In fact, some pantheons are shown to be at war with other races.

You're thinking of the Norse, I imagine. Here's the problem – the giants are gods too. The Jotun are clearly divine in nature, as are the elves. They're not 'gods', as in they're neither Aesir nor Vanir, but they're still divine. If you're thinking of yokai/yaoguai, those aren't at war with the gods any more than you're at war with termites or mice or the coffee stain on the couch.

>Hindu and Chinese myths especially, as in those mythoi humans are actually capable of ascending into deities. It's just that gods went to very long ways to prevent that, it's not that it was impossible.

Hindu myths are slightly different insofar as heroes are often just outright gods in an avatar, or at least half-deific. Chinese myths don't work the way you think, because being a god is a job you can be hired and fired from by the Jade Emperor and the celestial bureaucracy, which is why there's gods of utterly trivial shit like tofu stands or one specific type of shoe. Saying that they killed gods when speaking of mortals is neither here nor there, it's like saying that sous-chefs can arrest people because they could always quit and get hired as a cop.

>Arachne defeated in their contest of weaving Athena (goddess of wisdom and handicraft) and was cursed into becoming a spider because a Goddess shouldn't be humiliated

That's one specific version that wasn't even very popular in Greece (or possibly postdated the classical era, I'm not sure). The more common versions generally have Arachne either

A. have been outright worse and gotten cursed

B. have been really good, but Athena criticised the topic manner which was a jab at Zeus' infidelity (remember, Athena is Zeus' daughter – you're telling a girl her dad is a cheating manwhore) and Arachne tried to hang herself because *oh my god nobody's ever criticised my work so harshly I'm a genius I can't take this* but Athena thought this was such a waste so she turned her into something that could still weave beautiful tapestries or

You also need to remember that Athena, goddess of handicraft, had to have given Arachne that talent. It doesn't actually matter even if Arachne was better, because it's still Athena blessing her with such talent. In the original stories Arachne is repeatedly talking shit about Athena, so Athena shows up in the guise of an old lady and tries to warn her off it, to which Arachne replies that in essence if Athena wanted her to stop being a blasphemer maybe she should come down herself, haha! She's nowhere near as petty as you think in this story.

>Ares (the God of War) was hurt by Diomedes the very same day that Aphrodite was wounded by Diomedes, even if Athena guided the spear the fact remains that Diomedes wounded Ares and MADE HIM RUN AWAY.

Firstly, Ares' job is to job. Secondly, you're missing the point. Athena is a goddess of war. So is Ares. The message isn't that Diomedes has the ability or potential to wound Ares, which isn't actually what happens. The message is that Athena is better than Ares. Athena guiding the spear means it's Athena doing the work, Diomedes is used as a vessel to show that Athena, patron of Athens, is better than Ares, patron of Sparta – it's not a coincidence that the Homeric poems were first compiled – and therefore, written down – in Athens. Diomedes attacking Aphrodite is a very strange little thing with little counterpart anywhere else, and was also meant to communicate a message that Aphrodite is not a war goddess the Spartans are talking out of their ass Pandemos and Ouranos ok not Areia long live sea foamer's fat milkers. It's not meaningful to use that line as evidence for Diomedes being a match for a deity – Apollo is also not a war god, but Diomedes shits his breeches at the mere idea of fighting him.

>and other creatures, like Giants, Cyclops, and monsters too

The Cyclopes are divine. Giants, including Greek ones as well as Chinese ones, are divine. They're not "gods" but they're in all respects the same sort of entity, saying the Hundred Handed aren't gods is like saying Nyx isn't a goddess.

>like some kind of distant disembodied force that can do everything

You're being both aggressively atheist and also highly misinformed. Most of the deities are empathetically not 'humans but bigger', the pop culture vision of pagan gods. They are metaphysically higher up the scale. Zeus rules the skies, but he isn't a king ruling a fief, the skies obey him because his authority permeates their

existence and it exists with his leave, and his physical form is less important than his metaphysical authority. Most deities continue to exist and function even without a physical form, or a stable one at least. Nyx and Gaia have avatars, but they're irrelevant and arbitrary. Ouranos is still alive and can even still pump a baby into Gaia after being diced into pieces, because Kronos stole his authority as king, being unable to kill him for real. Zeus locks Kronos up but he still affects him, being as he were the titan of – among other things – time.

In other words, pagan deities are still disembodied forces and though they may or may not have avatars (whether or not some of the more esoteric deities around have a physical form is debateable), it's not their core and not what really matters. The reason you can't kill them is largely down to that, or variations thereof. They play on a different field. Humans fighting them is like a 2D object attempting to fuck with a 3D one.

[Liliet](#)

>Humans fighting them is like a 2D object attempting to fuck with a 3D one.

Ooooh, I like this comparison.

caoimhinh

I'm not drawing the line, I'm pointing it out. You were the one who claimed fights against Gods were a modern angsty concept, when it's actually a part of every culture. Monotheistic religions being the only ones that claim invincibility for their deity (yet there are still opposing forces to it), whereas in polytheistic religions the Gods are shown to be killable, just really powerful hence the need of special methods or tools to do it.

> "Gods fighting humans, and the humans styling on them? No. This just doesn't happen."

Yet it's never stated as impossible, and it's in fact stated multiple times in many cultures as being a very real possibility, enough to make the Gods move to prevent it from happening. If it were outright impossible there would be no need to act in order to prevent it.

> "You're thinking of the Norse, I imagine. Here's the problem – the giants are gods too. The Jotun are clearly divine in nature, as are the elves. They're not 'gods', as in they're neither Aesir nor Vanir, but

they're still divine. If you're thinking of yokai/yaoguai, those aren't at war with the gods any more than you're at war with termites or mice"

Actually, war between the established Gods against other races happens in Greek, Irish, Celtic, Hindu, and Mayan myths too, not only in Nordic myths. Even in monotheistic religions like Zoroastrianism and Christianity there's a war between Good and Evil forces, like Yahveh and the angels against the Devil and demons/fallen angels or Ahura Mazda against Angra Mainyu (which can be interpreted as an abstract conflict but both sides also have supernatural beings supporting them).

True, Giants are said to be born from the blood of Uranus that fell on the earth (making them 'children' of Gaia and Uranus) yet the Giants don't have the powers that the Gods, right? Even Gods doesn't have the same powers that others, except for superhuman physical stats and a bit of magic.

Jotun and Elves aren't divine, they are simply supernatural races that predate humanity, though they are the descendants of the ancient primordial entities, just like the Aesir.

The Tuatha De (the old gods in Irish myths) waged war against other races too, though in later myths they are depicted as Ao Sí, one of the inspirations for our concept of fairies/elves. In some myths and legends there are humans who could count themselves among their number by certain rites, marriage or accomplishing deeds.

Asuras, some Yakshas, and nearly all Rakshasas in Hinduism are examples of other supernatural entities that oppose the Gods and are clearly capable of killing Gods.

In nearly all mythologies, the underworld is filled with creatures that oppose the gods, to the point that making a journey there is considered a perilous trip even for the Gods, so only the bravest and most powerful manage to do it, sometimes relying on magical artifacts.

Not everything supernatural is 'divine', as the distinction between what's divine and what isn't is clearly defined in each mythology, either by the nature of the power or by the authority they wield.

Being a God is not a matter of race (though in some cases all Gods are members of a family or race), it's a title, a matter of authority over some aspect of the world (only the oldest deities are seen as abstract

forces that can sometimes take humanoid form), but in most cases those elements or aspects of the world already existed and the Gods simply came to gain authority over them.

That's what marks the difference between a god and other supernatural creatures. Zeus rules the skies and whoever beats Zeus will be the next ruler of the skies, a similar case with Poseidon, he didn't create the seas or the waters (that was Oceanos), yet he came to rule the seas and the many minor sea deities that inhabited them. Assuming Poseidon dies, nothing would happen to the sea, as it doesn't depend on him to exist.

By the way, Cronus wasn't the titan of time, that was Chronos, though the two are often mixed-up and in modern times they are considered the same, the Orphic tradition clearly makes a distinction between the two; in the Theogony of Hesiod from which we got most of our info about Greek Gods, Cronus is the patron of harvest (though that is related to time).

The child of a god might or might not be a god, depending on who the other parent is (the children of Loki with the Jotun Angrboða were outright monsters vastly different to each other and their parents), the conditions of their birth (Dyonisus was a god despite being the child of Zeus with a mortal, thanks to his special birth) and depending on the way they live (doing great deeds was a way for achieving divinity, like is the case of Heracles in Greek myths, and literally anything in Chinese and Japanese myths -as there are Kami for anything at all and objects can gain spiritual consciousness too-)

You claimed that in Chinese myths being a god is simply a job, but that's actually similar to what happens in other mythologies. Only the most ancient deities are considered to emerge from concepts, forces or elements, the rest are regents of elements or originators of crafts/arts, not embodiments of those.

Unlike Greek gods, Egyptian deities were known for the duties they had in the world, not for the powers they wielded.

Mesoamerican deities sometimes didn't have any duty or authority over the world until they had matured as is the case with the Twin Heroes who later became the Sun and Moon.

Zeus wasn't born with the power and authority to rule the skies, neither did Poseidon nor Hades originally have control over the seas and underworld, they *earned the right after winning the Titanomachia and then sorted the three domains among themselves. The rest of*

the deities had 'functions' in the world and that 'job' was their power. And while in some cases they are the ones to invent crafts and teach them to humans that doesn't mean that the humans born with some talent have those talents because they were gifted them by a God (as you claimed was the case with Arachne).

Also, as I pointed in my first comment, the immortality of the gods is said to be maintained by the consumption of special meals and elixirs in many mythologies (Amrita, Ambrosia, Nektar, Immortality Pills, etc) with the notable exception of the primordial entities that are anthropomorphic concepts (like Chaos, Nyx, Gaia, Uranus) and even then they can be beaten by the later generations (like Uranus was beaten by Cronus, who was beaten by Zeus and Zeus lived in fear that someone would eventually surpass him, likely one of his children).

We both presented examples of humans (Diomedes and Heracles) wounding Gods, I provided an example of a Rishi in Hinduism being capable of cursing Indra the king of heaven, forcing him to apologize and make amends if he wanted the curse lifted. Chinese texts like Fengshen Yanyi(or Investiture of the Gods), Journey to the West and earlier myths also state that humans can kill gods and elevate themselves to the status of gods, gain immortality and power, the positions in Heaven are not directly related to the power of the person, quite the contrary they attain positions by displaying power. As I said above, the top deity the Jade Emperor and the greatest warrior of heaven Erlang Shen were born and raised as mortal humans yet they achieved power by their own training. The deities in Mesoamerican myths could actually be hurt by mosquitos, snakes, birds, and other animals, they could even be killed by poison, suffocation, drowning and landslides, so it's not farfetched to think humans could kill them.

So once again I point out that the clearest difference between humans and mythical gods is simply their access to knowledge and resources, any mortal could become immortal if they consumed the food of the gods or drank their beverages (even in Christianity there's the Fruit of Life in Eden shown in Genesis -with Yahveh stating that humans must be prevented from eating it or they would live forever- and the Waters of Life in the Celestial Jerusalem shown in Apocalypse), also any mortal had a decent chance of killing a God if they were to use special weapons, which were not always made by the deities (Odin's spear and Thor's hammer were made by Dwarves) or to use magic.

TL;DR: there are multiple examples in all mythologies that state that humans killing gods isn't impossible, just very hard and a matter of lack of access to adequate resources. And it's definitely not a modern concept.

luminiousblu

I'm really getting tired of reading this shit because of WordPress formatting being utter garbage so I'll make one more reply and read yours if you make one.

>Yet it's never stated as impossible, and it's in fact stated multiple times in many cultures as being a very real possibility, enough to make the Gods move to prevent it from happening. If it were outright impossible there would be no need to act in order to prevent it.

The fact that it doesn't happen in makes it effectively impossible in guideverse. Depending on the actual mythos, killing a god can be anywhere from totally impossible to something out of reach of mortals and even heroes. It's outright impossible in Greek myth, while in Norse myth it's not impossible or anything but normal people can't pull it off. People rebel, but it always ends poorly for them. Even temporary victories where you pull a fast one on the gods end with more major defeats, which would make you the villain carrying a huge villain ball and 100% doomed to die in guideverse terms.

>Actually, war between the established Gods against other races happens in Greek, Irish, Celtic, Hindu, and Mayan myths too, not only in Nordic myths. Even in monotheistic religions like Zoroastrianism and Christianity there's a war between Good and Evil forces, like Yahveh and the angels against the Devil and demons/fallen angels or Ahura Mazda against Angra Mainyu (which can be interpreted as an abstract conflict but both sides also have supernatural beings supporting them).

I would argue most of those established races are in fact divine. The Asura in Hindu myths are outright gods, for a given definition of 'god' since Hindus have a very abstract notion of what is and isn't a deity and how they're related to each other. You're drawing a hard line between the supernatural and the divine but in that case the problem is that such a strong distinction between the two stems directly from the whole thou shalt have no gods before me thing. There sometimes was a distinction, but it often was depicted as a difference of faction and not of

kind, or otherwise was close to being differences in level where the gods were even higher up the ladder (or lower, depending on the mythos).

>That's what marks the difference between a god and other supernatural creatures. Zeus rules the skies and whoever beats Zeus will be the next ruler of the skies, a similar case with Poseidon, he didn't create the seas or the waters (that was Okeanos), yet he came to rule the seas and the many minor sea deities that inhabited them. Assuming Poseidon dies, nothing would happen to the sea, as it doesn't depend on him to exist.

Assuming nobody replaces him, however, Okeanos, who didn't create the waters but is simply what they are, the ocean will sit there doing absolutely nothing forever. It's the authority that matters. You can't steal divine authority as a mortal any more than you can get a fish to take over Mars.

>The child of a god might or might not be a god, depending on who the other parent is (the children of Loki with the Jotun Angrboða were outright monsters vastly different to each other and their parents), the conditions of their birth (Dionysus was a god despite being the child of Zeus with a mortal, thanks to his special birth) and depending on the way they live (doing great deeds was a way for achieving divinity, like is the case of Heracles in Greek myths, and literally anything in Chinese and Japanese myths -as there are Kami for anything at all and objects can gain spiritual consciousness too-) Kami are not really gods the way you'd normally recognise them to be. They're akin to a sort of vital essence or personification of concept. Everything is divine in Japanese myth, every hair on your head and every bottle of water has a *kami* associated with it, but they're not gods.

As for your arguments about the Chinese I think one of the things you're missing here is that firstly 1. It's not about the role, it's about the fact that you can be hired and fired at will and 2. The whole idea that you can kill a god as a human only holds true for a flimsy definition of human. A 'cultivated' buddhist or taoist is immortal and nearly invulnerable to mundane harm. He is basically halfway there to being divine. That also holds for almost every hero who's shown to wound gods – Hercules, for example, is half-god, and more than that even drank from Hera's bosom (who, remember, while not the goddess of motherhood is still the goddess of

marriage and wives) which gave him a stupidly huge power spike.

>So once again I point out that the clearest difference between humans and mythical gods is simply their access to knowledge and resources, any mortal could become immortal if they consumed the food of the gods or drank their beverages

This is super arguable. Whether or not you could just eat the food of the gods and therefore become as the gods varies based on account. *Usually* it's not the case. The fruit of knowledge/life are clearly metaphors, even in the second century early Christians recognised how absurd it was to obtain knowledge by the physical teeth.

As for claiming that gods are more knowledgeable and more powerful humans undermines the entire point of them being gods. I know it's popular in the modern era to think this way but that's not how people thought back then, not the context stories were written for, and that's why most stories where you rebel against the gods ends very poorly, because the underlying message in most of them is an exposition on character flaws of the hero – hubris, restlessness, greed, or simply being delusional. Because at the end of the day the problem here is for ancients that fighting against the gods is a lot like fighting against the rising sun. If you don't like the fact that the sun is in your eyes every morning, the best bet is to just suck it up and deal with it instead of incessantly complaining and pissing everyone around you off.

grzecho2222

If I remember she fled when he called her to court and given that she would have gotten death penalty...

[Fayhem](#)

> So far she's been observed to be on absolutely no character's side, which realistically leaves only set of entities that could turn on her in the first place, by virtue of not already being hostile to her.

I have to dispute your reasoning here. She's been shown *to us, the audience* to be on no character's side. Literally no one on the continent has gotten the range of POVs that we've gotten. The fact that she isn't allied to anyone doesn't mean that no one *thinks* she's allied to them.

Valkyria

Since it was mentioned by “the old thing” I can’t stop thinking of Saint

Valkyria

well damn. I didn’t actually mean to hit send there.

what I meant to say was

Since it was mentioned by “the old thing” I can’t stop thinking of Saint as one of this little wash-cloth thingies you throw into the washing machine along with your clothes so it won’t change color...

[Liliet](#)

omg nice

ActionKermit

Pretty sure the “old thing” is the Prince of Nightfall.

Valkyria

I know I just found it amusing how she didn’t even use any (N)name or title because he is something that does not need proper adresssing

[Mental Mouse](#)

> one of this little wash-cloth thingies you throw into the washing machine along with your clothes so it won’t change color...

Digression: What “thingies” are those? I’ve dealt with several pink-underwear incidents (and similar) over my decades, and I’ve never heard of such a countermeasure.

Valkyria

Just google “color catcher sheets” and there’s results... I dunno what country you’re from so maybe do it in your own language if it’s not English anyway.
How I got to know them? – Watching to much commercials does the trick.

P.S. I never tried them myself so please don’t hold me responsible if they do not work xD

[Mental Mouse](#)

Thank you!

caoimhinh

That must be some kind of Nordic esoteric thingy, do be careful when taking witchcraft advice from a Valkyrie. XD

Cold Cyberia

It strikes me that the narrative could be going along the Shakespearean lines of lovers united in death. Probably not going to happen and I suspect people would go mental but I would love a move like that. Looking at the visions we have:

"He saw a garden and a pale woman in a dress. He saw a man with a silver coin, spinning and spinning until it dropped. He saw a crowned corpse, a grinning skull"

It's possible the pale woman is Wondering Bard (described so later in the chapter) and the garden refers to Arcadia. Her origins maybe? She could've been a fae initially seeing as she's more like a story pattern than a living being of flesh anyway.

The spinning silver coin is a reference to White Knight and when it drops, he finalizes his judgement? Crowned corpse is probably Dead King, not sure if the grinning skull also alludes to him or maybe something else.

We didn't really get much on Bard out of this exercise. Apparently DK thinks her goals are fairly petty and heroes would abandon her were they find them out. I maintain she wants to get revenge on Gods for forcing her into a life of creating atrocities and maintaining the game.

Novice

The pale woman in a garden is more likely to be the Augur, I think.

ChillyPepper

Everyone is mentioning how this was a mistake. Did anyone think that this is still design?

As weird as it sounds, I think the Dead King did not expect to make it out of this, and he just wanted to expose the "grand scheme", hence the "They will turn on you" part.

If the shard remains in Heirophant and said Heirophant is able to check it in some manner, wouldn't this be an ultimate victory rather than a mistake?

Mental Mouse

> I think the Dead King did not expect to make it out of this, and he just wanted to expose the "grand scheme",

Per the text, the knowledge is still in a DK-shard within Masego, DK didn't expect *that bit of him* to survive. He figured it could pass the goods to him... which it might have, if Masego weren't now awake and prone to summarily obliterating any part of the DK he can reach.

I think DK is about to rediscover the hazards of "and the next step"....

Insanenoodlyguy

He was going for a Xanatos gambit, but unlike the titular man himself has forgotten what it is to be mortal. For those of you who didn't watch Gargoyles, Xantos is basically the ultimate "I already won, because there's literally no outcome where I don't get something I want." antagonist, hence being a trope namer. His plan B or C was usually the real plan all along and happened during Plan A, which was thwarted sure, but long after it actually mattered. and a glorious bastard voiced (and modeled after) Jonathan Frakes. It looks like Dead King was aiming for "I discover the Bards Plan. I send that part of myself back unharmed." with backups of "I can still send the message to myself even if I'm thwarted early, worth the crippling if I can get one up on HER." and maybe a "Masego prizes knowledge. Even if he comes out of this intact, he'll learn this, and spread it. I negotiate with cat to get the knowledge." All of these, it honestly wouldn't shock me, are the plan B after plan A of invade the continent, because I believe he'd be willing to escalate the deal to "I will not come out again unless expressly invited" in order to get that piece of knowledge. The invasion succeeded would be nice but was all a pretext for this more important thing.

The part he's missing, having not been mortal for too long, is the part where, given the chance to persevere or at least hear the secret, Masego in the height of his rage says "YOU HURT HER. I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU KNOW." and obliterates him even at the cost of that valuable memory. As a result he'll keep going forward with Plan A, but in truth the whole goddamn mess fails here and now.

[Liliet](#)

Y e p 😊

Valkyria

Not really chapter related but... am I the only one who sees the Heiropphant and Masego as kind of different people? I mean i know they are one Person ans such... But to me Masego is the son of his fathers, the socially awkward but likeable weirdo who is in some ways naive and quite the

sociopath.

But the Hierophant is like this powerful mage, who is just mindblowingly powerful when it comes to sorcery who doesn't really care about people just about his research and finding ways to achieve whatever he's currently working on. Sure it's basically Him vs his Name but still.

It's a little like the Black Queen / Cat thing, like she discussed with Akua. But the Black Queen still **is** Cat in so many ways, what they want or can do mostly differs only on a political level than a personal.

It's like Archer is so herself within her Name in a way that I just think Masego is not. Only a feeling on my part here so I don't know though. It's just a random thought that crossed my mind and that I wanted to share...

Mental Mouse

> am I the only one who sees the Heirophant and Masego as kind of different people?

I think the crux of this plot is exactly that they *are* the same, *even if Masego himself might not have accepted that yet*. Remember, by our standards Masego is a high-functioning autistic. The classic "Aspie fallacy" is to see themselves as "a brain on a stick", failing awareness of their body and the emotions coming from it. But we can learn better...

Valkyria

That actually explains a lot. I never considered it like that... but now it makes a hell lot of sense.

also... how do you write in cursive here? Is it possible to learn this power?

Andrew Mitchell

These text boxes we're typing in accept formatting using basic HTML tags which have been part of the world wide web since it's beginnings. You can learn how to do it here.
https://www.w3schools.com/html/html_formatting.asp

I know blockquote, bold and italics all work, I don't know what other formatting works.

Valkyria

I actually know how that all works, i know basic html from school.
I just didn't know simply typing them inside my text would work.

Aotrs Commander

In fairness, it's not always clear which particular set of formatting is available (if any) in any given forum/blog/comments section.

Andrew Mitchell

True. I tried to find WordPress specific information but couldn't.

caoimhinh

Fascinating

[Mental Mouse](#)

You mean *italics*? You do that with HTML tags. You don't get all the tags, but you can use at least:

`<i>italics</i>`, `bold`, `<s>strikeout</s>`. Let me try a couple of others: `^{super}`, `_{sub}`.

And now we see if I managed to get all that right.

[Mental Mouse](#)

OK, looks like superscript and subscript don't work. The HTML entities (https://www.w3schools.com/html/html_entities.asp) do though, that's how to get symbols like hearts (though WordPress also seems to interpret some text-style smileys).

In my last note I made heavy use of the entity `<` which gives a `<` symbol when it would otherwise start an HTML tag. To write the last sentence I used `&` which I just used recursively.

ninegardens

And here is me reading that and thinking: "Well yeah, I am a brain on a stick."

Andrew Mitchell

I'm familiar with that feeling.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The reason I firmly call it a fallacy is that it leads to getting blindsided by emotions, which affect us even if we can't always perceive them. (It also leads to neglect of the body, which has all kinds of bad effects.)

Mind you, the “brain on a stick” impression isn’t a *new* thing, nor unique to autistics. It’s in the same vein as Cartesian dualism – which, let me grant, is natural law in the Guideverse. 😊

But even in the Guideverse... well, the Hierophant who has been food-processing devils for power, *is* still the same Masego whose affection Indrani has been gently nurturing for months (years?). And who just woke up to the sight of her corpse. Emotions are going to happen here, and they’re going to happen to someone who isn’t used to feeling them. And who has a fair bit of magical power left. This isn’t going to be pretty.

Andrew Mitchell

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I know blockquote, bold and italics all work, I don’t know what other formatting works.

Aotrs Commander

sigh

That was such an astoundingly stupid rookie mistake to make, I question how Dead King has actually lasted this long if he’s going to make idiotic mistakes like that – especially since he’s supposed to be paranoid and going up against something he knows is the Narrative.

Mind you, that said, he doesn’t seem like a particularly good general, relying on little more than weight of numbers and a few toys to swamp the enemy, so perhaps I shouldn’t be that surprised.

I guess I’m just naturally wired to expect better out of a lich purported master-necromancer...

konstantinvoncarstein

I agree that it was a stupid mistake. But concerning his military tactics, maybe it is because his goal is not conquest?
🤔

caoimhinh

Well, to be fair, we have seen him use his Undead in pretty interesting ways besides the already powerful Revenant Named: digging underground tunnels to attack fortified positions, forming gigantic snakes filled to the brim with undead

soldiers, poisoning rivers and lakes, blighting the land, using flying wyverns that breathe venom, and even undead warlocks to cast spells.

Also, his defeat in this case is due to the Wandering Bard somehow being able to appear inside Masego's soul and wrestle control of his body out of the Dead King's grip. It's still up to debate if it was him or her the one who moved Masego's hand to cast the spell that killed Indrani, but the Intercessor made Neshamah loosen his grip on Masego enough that Hierophant was able to see Indrani's corpse. No one saw that coming.

[Liliet](#)

(I fucking adore that the actual answer for the source of his mistake here turned out to be "amatonormativity")

[Liliet](#)

Do note that this defeat still doesn't really *hurt him*. Sure, he's going to be diminished by one little sliver of himself that he invested into this scheme, and the scheme itself is going to fail.

But the 'main' him is still there, barely scratched, not in the line of fire at all. His favorite gambit: to make heroes' victory something *other* than seriously hurting him because that's just how dangerous it is.

That part's still working!

JRogue

I think the petty thing that the Bard wants is death, and a little revenge on the Gods the way out.

Ultimately I believe Cats goal is end the "Name Game" the Gods have going and leave humanity and other races) to rule itself without their intervention.

So either Bard saw a promising student in Cat (who was taught by Amedaus and has likely exceeded his teachings) and started manipulating this a long time ago. Or Cat sees Bard as a way to end the Gods manipulation narratively speaking somehow.

I believe DK dies, or ceases to be a real threat, and the "Big Bad" of Book 6 will be the Bard, who ends up beat by Cat, but wins because she dies and Names are destroyed, then the Gods can no longer interfere, even indirectly, in humanities (and other races) destiny.

Kinda speaking long term here, but this group of scenes presents a chance to look way forward in the overall story.

shveiran

Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.

Larat finally entering the picture, ominous and promising at the same time.

The wasteland of Masego's being, suggesting the question is not "what he'll lose" but "will there be something left".

Archer being Archer, reminding us once more how each character of the Guide moves in accordance of strings of his own.

Saint being a dick but a heroic dick nonetheless, and Tariq trying to balance all the moving parts to the best of his limited abilities.

Roland apparently

The DK's casual murder, just in case someone was wondering why he was such a big deal; I'm having a strong Warlock-Bumblng Conjuror vibe.

Juicy insights on the DK's power, the intrigue with the Bard's plan and most of all...

... the power of love saving the day in such a way I'm rooting for it.

Marvelous, absolutely marvelous. Thank you, thank you so very much.

jack

So what is it that the Dead King knows that will have everyone turn on the Bard?

Kissaten

Apocalypse, maybe? Maybe Bard pocketed Triumphant somehow and intends to let her loose on the world once more? Demons are destroying narratives, so maybe it's Bard's masterplan.

Andrew Mitchell

Wait, "Demons are destroying narratives"?!!? I feel like I missed something important.

Where did that come from?

Kissaten

Demons destroy and corrupt Creation, they are outside of set of rules gods placed upon it.

JJR

Calernia has gotten too far outside it's parameters and she plans to study physics until the gnomes come.

Probably not, but it would turn literally everyone against her.

[onedollargum](#)

The Calamities wreaked physical havok, but the Woe wound ideology.

Calemyr

I haven't posted here, but I've been reading this series for a while (caught up at the start of Book V) and greatly enjoying it.

My theory is that the Bard's "disappointing and petty" game is that she's actively working to continue the war between good and evil. As long as there is a compelling story, the Theory of Narrative Causality remains in effect and tropes are effectively physical law. That is the meaning of "The House Always Wins" in this case: as long as stories thrive, a savvy student of story-fu is just shy of omnipotent.

The flip side, of course, is why I assume she's the end-game final boss of this tale. Stories starve without conflict. Peace is anathema to her. Cat's dream is effectively the Bard's death.

Hope that makes sense.

Andrew Mitchell

Welcome Calemyr. 😊 Good to have you join in the commenting community. We're a very civil and thoughtful group and IMO our discussions really add to my enjoyment of the Guide. I've learnt a LOT from many people here who see deeper and/or differently than I do.

> My theory is that the Bard's "disappointing and petty" game is that she's actively working to continue the war between good and evil.

You're in agreement with many folk here, including me. There are some interesting dissenting views on this though.

> The flip side, of course, is why I assume she's the end-game final boss of this tale. Stories starve without conflict. Peace is anathema to her. Cat's dream is effectively the Bard's death.

Well said. You've stated that much more clearly than I could have.

ninegardens

So, some people have accused Nessie of not being badass/impossible cautious enough here... but I think there is an

important point to make here:
This isn't Nessie ACTUALLY losing.

By which I mean, he staked something here, and he may lose his stake, but it is entirely possible he is playing this game more recklessly than he would the ACTUAL game, because this is only at 1% stakes.

Sometimes being ultra cautious always isn't enough to assure victory, so being able to break off a tiny piece of yourself that you CAN throw into a riskier game is a VERY useful ability.

So yeah, the the bard may have beaten him. This time. That's fine.

JJR

Except his soul doesn't heal, maybe. And if that's the case losing 1% at a time to Bard The Ever Living will end with him losing, even if it takes millennia.

[Javvies](#)

Yes and no.

It's certainly not something he can afford to do repeatedly. However, if it's a one-time tradeoff to find out what's actually going on with Bard (her true goals and endgame) ... it might actually be worth it.

Especially since he probably didn't expect that he'd be in serious danger of losing the shard of himself that's in Masego.

Also, since tinkering with souls is a thing, and he'd have the most experience, skill, and knowledge at doing so, it is possible that he might be able to graft replacement soul bits to his own, in order to recover from damage, even if he can't naturally heal.

ninegardens

Right, which is why he wouldn't take this risk if there wasn't something worth gaining.

But "Knowledge of Bard's plans for this Epoch" seems like a worthwhile thing to risk 1% soul damage on. Especially if you are concerned that her actual plan might be MORE than 1%.

[Liliet](#)

This!

[Mental Mouse](#)

Aside from personal damage, Nessie's potentially facing a hit team of Powers and alliances which could at least wipe Keter

off the map within a hundred years, and might actually be capable of ending DK for real.

[Liliet](#)

This.

Yes, Neshamah lost. I'm not seeing anything weird here, his entire strategy is "I lose... and I lose... and I lose... yet somehow I'm still here, undiminished"

Forrest

Okay, so... Neshamah messed up badly. Side note: it would appear that many of us were right and that Archer's (hopefully temporary) demise was being suggested early in the book. Though I have a slight suspicion about the bard's plans I've held for a little while as to why she has been helping Cat get so set up. It pertains to the theory many here expressed that she's been wanting to escape her role that she's been fulfilling for ages now.

I feel like she's planning on escaping her role by placing Cat in that role instead. Which would also explain why he felt they would all turn on her, including Saint, cause it's not like she would like having Cat around like that.

Daniel E

I don't care how much Goodness the Pilgrim pours into Archer's resurrection, she is going to have the mother of all headaches when she returns. Like month-long blackout drunk hangover. I also wonder if her errant brain matter will be magically poofed back inside her, or simply regrown. I recall Hierophant mentioning at Camps that Pilgrim's power is more akin to crazy-fast healing than true resurrection.

[Liliet](#)

Indrani waking up surrounded by bits of her own brain,
is absolutely going to happen 😊

medailyfun

that amount of brain bits makes many brain bytes :o)

Jonnnnz

OK, I really hate the Karma Houdini trope. The entire world is based around it being impossible, yet one villain pulls it off. I speak, of course, about the Bard. We have seen her help Akua commit atrocities, turn the Drow into what they are now, stopped the dead king from even considering conquering more from Below

after she aided his rise, and all the while she never stopped her over the top villainous monologues, revelling in taunting those she torments. Have we ever seen her remotely heroic? Actually helping anyone? Doing anything that isn't strictly creating larger body counts?

I get that the Karma Houdini is supposed to make us hate a character, but for me it is just tiring. She brings out the worst in people because reasons, people let her because gods exist, but she's nothing more.

[Liliet](#)

She created the League of Free Cities. She stopped Black from doing what he was doing in the Free Cities and possibly set him on a path to redemption (?). She's been keeping conflicts from escalating beyond measure, making sure DK knows not to set plagues on the continent and not to get too greedy with the surface. She gave the Sisters their bargain, allowing the drow to survive.

Bard is not an unambiguous villain, no, and we still don't know what her endgame actually is, nor who are 'they' who would turn against her at apparently one word from the Dead King.

superkeaton

To quote the Dead King, "Boom, headshot!"

Ah, love. Stronger than death.

Speaking of death, whatever happened to Assassin? Nary a peep from that most tenebrous of knives lately.

[Liliet](#)

He was in Ashur, impossible to reach, even before the naval blockade went into action.

Unmaker

The Dead King, who has survived and prospered by not making narrative mistakes, just made what seems to be an obvious narrative mistake. There have been a number of theories as to why above, but here's another one:

He failed, not because he was passionless, but the opposite. His passion since before his death has been working against the Intercessor. For the first time in a long time, he has a chance to do just that. With that intellectual rush going through his brain, his normal error avoidance routines may have been ignored for a moment. And a moment is all it takes.

Interlude: Reverberation

"At which point Lord Bujune and Lady Rania both accused the other of being the Emperor in disguise, and the meeting devolved into protracted argument until the final quarter hour had passed."

– Extract from the minutes of the fourth meeting of the Red Fox Conspiracy, as taken by the stenographer Shamna Mehere (later revealed to have been Dread Emperor Traitorous all along

"She is not permanently dead."

Hierophant caught the withdrawing hand by the wrist. This was, he knew, mere symbolic slant: a way for his feeble mortal mind to interpret a complex interplay of forces it could not truly understand even as it used them. The Dead King was not truly standing behind him. The Wandering Bard had not stood in front, either, smiling like a well-fed cat. And so when he squeezed the wrist of Trismegistus until the bones *broke*, it was not the strength of his grip that mattered. Only that of his mind.

"Listen to me," the Dead King said. "The Pilgrim can still resurrect her. If I do not intervene. Do not make me intervene."

"Can you?" Masego asked, cocking his head to the side.

His sorcery, usurpation usurped, rose without his bidding. Like a spear being formed from a dozen threads of magic. It was not, Hierophant noted, the formula that would make a Revenant. But it might be that turning Indrani into such a manner of undead would interfere with Above's work, so it was not to be tolerated. *If you can't defend*, he remembered Catherine once telling him, *attack so your enemy has to*. And so Masego did not pit his will against the Hidden Horror's simply weaving spell with his own hands and striking at the Dead King's presence.

Power met power, a stalemate of an instant, and then the Hierophant truly went on the offensive.

—

Three heartbeats had passed.

On the first, young Indrani had died. With cold nonchalance the Dead King had raised his hand, spoken a word and sent out a flickering spike of void too swift for even the Pilgrim's eye to follow. It had ripped through the Archer's forehead, the flesh not wounded or even vaporized so much as... *unmade*. Gone. The sorcery around the flesh was so strongly concentrated it obscured even his sight. The warning that began to be spoken after through

the mouth of the imprisoned Hierophant, Tariq cared little for. He'd heard many of those before and might yet hear more – threats presented as a warning, fear spoken calmly as if that simple veneer changed the nature of what was being said.

On the second heartbeat Laurence, taken aback yet not beyond action, had darted forward to catch Indrani's corpse by the back of the cloak. To drag it out of the way of the returning sorcery the Saint had parted with a blow of her sword, lest the Archer's body be mangled by the wild and whirling magic. Roland finished the last syllable of the incantation he'd begun, protective panes of translucent sorcery forming around Indrani's body. Too late to be of use even presuming they would have held, which the Pilgrim doubted. Tariq did need to look at the young man's face to know it had gone ashen, burning guilt flaring at the thought of having been too slow. A loss tied to deeper fears, fears that Tariq could do nothing to soothe away. To meddle too much in the conflict that lay at the heart of Bestowal was a danger to all involved, he'd learned the hard way.

On the third heartbeat, young Indrani's corpse was unceremoniously tossed out of the way by Laurence, sliding across the rune-covered tiles and leaving behind a trail of wet blood. The shield around it winked out, Roland having dismissed the working with a clenched hand, and the other two heroes turned to the possessed warlock with hard eyes. Saint with the intent to cut, either the boy or the infestation. The Sorcerer with guilt-threaded determination, intent on confiscating the sorcery as he no doubt told himself he should have done from the start. It was these implacable twinges of conscience that always reassured Tariq the young man was in no danger of falling into Below's embrace. Willingly, anyway.

"- expand beyond the recoverable."

"Hold," the Peregrine said.

He had not raised his voice. It resonated anyway, and the other two stilled. The Hierophant's body half-rose, sorcery flaring, but then it fell back down and his power seething uneasily.

"The boy's fighting it," Laurence said, tone holding the barest hint of respect.

It was the closest to praise she'd ever come when mentioning any of the Woe. Tariq gazed down at the corpse of the vivacious young woman he'd spoken with, and for an instant wondered at coincidence. That she would take such a risk unflinching, knowing that the opponent was the Hidden Horror. That it would be young Indrani he was partnered with heading into the deeps, as if to make it certain he'd know what was lost should he stay his hand. *How far ahead did you see, Catherine Foundling?* How deep did the Black Queen's cunning truly run? It did not matter, the Pilgrim

told himself. Not so long as it was turned against their enemy, against *the* Enemy.

"There will be an opening," Tariq said, tone calm and patient and unrelenting. "And when it appears, we will strike at the Dead King with our wroth entire."

The Hierophant, empowered by his affections and the death of one beloved, would throw off the Abomination's yoke for a moment. It would be enough for the rest of them to... A shiver went through the room, through this warped place, and as if tugged by strings the fabric of it began to pull inwards. Towards the Hierophant. Like silver mist, the souls of hundreds of thousands slithered through the open bronze gates and burrowed into the blind warlock's thin frame. Villain, the Pilgrim remembered then. The Woe were, for all the kind intentions of their leader, still *villains*.

And their kind did not get clean victories, even against each other.

—

"You are being made use of by the Intercessor," the Dead King said. "To your own detriment and that of your mistress."

"I do not have a mistress," Masego said. "In any sense of the term of which I am aware."

The bindings he'd wrought while half-mad were, it had to be said, a work of art. The elegance of their structure was matched only by its strength, far beyond any working made by his hand he could recall. He suspected that Trismegistus might have whispered insights, though considering he was going to end the creature it was unlikely he'd ever know for certain. The souls poured into him, power accumulated at a breakneck rate, though never more than he could handle. He'd made certain of that, taking only the slightest portion before releasing the dead to the Underworld awaiting them. It made the rate of accumulation easier to control, and to his understanding remained legal under Callowan law. It might be necessary, Masego mused, to secure some sort of permit for such future ventures. He would consult Adjutant on the subject.

"I know what she plans, Hierophant," the Dead King said. "And it would destroy all you hold dear."

Though the warning seemed well-intended, Trismegistus simultaneously attempted to seize enough sorcery to sever himself from Hierophant in what was likely an attempt to flee. Masego, without batting an eye, released all that Trismegistus would wield unshaped. Wild. Dimly, he noted that it appeared his shoulder now had a smoking hole in it. The physical one, anyway.

"You are dying," the Dead King said.

"That has been true since my birth," Masego reasonably pointed out.

"Your attempts to hinder my escape are killing you," Trismegistus said.

"That is true," Hierophant agreed. "Though I expect they'll annihilate you first, at which point I will cease and survive while you remain annihilated."

Ah, Masego thought, slightly worried. Was this a monologue? He'd been warned against those by several people.

"Given such a premise, what reason do I have not to kill us both?" the Dead King said.

"Nothing," Hierophant acknowledged. "You simply lack the ability-"

He paused, looking for something suitably pithy to add. Insults were pithy, he vaguely remembered quite a few of his friends using them.

"- you *Jaquinite*," he scathingly added.

—

"Tariq," Laurence hissed. "What the Hells is happening?"

The torrent of souls was streaming around the Grey Pilgrim without ever touching him, as if the dead were shying away from the Choir ever holding vigil over the soul of the Peregrine, but the rest of them didn't have a pack of winged guardians to rely on. She'd put her sword through the floor and anchored herself to that, but inch by inch she was being dragged towards the Hierophant by the sheer quantity of dead souls pushing against her. Through the mess she could see Roland huddling under roiling tongues of light, pressed against the ground. His protective spell was being battered down, moment by moment.

"The Hierophant is gathering and then releasing the dead," Tariq said, calm voice carrying perfectly through the whistling sound of flowing souls. "Massing strength for a crippling blow at the Hidden Horror."

"And what happens if we're drawn into that?" Laurence yelled.

She did not gesture at the maddened sorcerer, as she might very well fall into the current if she took a hand off her sword. Already her blade was being pushed back through the stone, her boots slowly sliding with it.

"Death, presumably," the Peregrine said, then paused as if speaking to the unseen. "Definitely death, Laurence, I retract the presumption."

You'd think the fucking Ophanim would bother to serve as more than some kind of almanac of dire ends, wouldn't you? But Mercy was all about the soft touch, way she understood it, so unlike one of Judgement's Chosen her old friend couldn't simply call down attention and have this entire black mess smote into smoking ruin.

"Do something then," she screamed.

"That won't be necessary," Tariq said. "It's been long enough. If the souls are in here, Saint, then out there what is left to fight over?"

Now wasn't the time for bloody riddles, she thought, but then there was thunderous sound above and the room's ceiling dented. Solid stone. A heartbeat later the dent became an explosion of shards and shape fell through. It was a throne, Saint saw, though acid seemed to have eaten away large chunks of it. The ceiling shook once more, though a stunted silhouette tumbled through the hole. The Tyrant of Helike, Laurence saw, was being carried by gargoyles holding his robe and had a visibly worsening black eye. He looked up, slightly worried, though he rallied quick.

"It's not what you think, Catherine," the Tyrant called out. "I swear. I didn't betray you to the Dead King again. Why, I'd never."

There was a beat.

"I betrayed you to someone else entirely," Kairos Theodosian proudly announced.

The gargoyles had to draw him back when a crumpled sword fell through where he'd come, and Laurence half-expected the Black Queen to follow through – only, instead, tendrils of darkness tore through half the ceiling and ripped it out like some gargantuan monster. Above them, the hood of her many-coloured cloak raised and two large crows perched on her shoulders, Catherine Foundling coldly glared downwards from the edge of the roof. Gargoyles began raining down, mangled and seemingly half-devoured.

It'd been a while, Laurence thought, since she'd seen the Black Queen really lose her temper.

—

"You are not in love with her," the Dead King said, sounding irritated. "With resurrection assured by the Pilgrim, unrequited

affection should not have been sufficient. Not even with her meddling."

Hierophant spared an irritated thought for Trismegistus as well, irked by the presumption of that. As if a cursory reading of his memories would be enough to understand the sum of him – one did not master a grimoire by skimming it. While Papa had not been able to understand, not truly, for it was against the nature of an incubus to be as he was, his other father had seen in Masego similarities to what he'd once seen in his uncle. Enough to suggest a conversation. *Not every kind of love involves bedplay or poetry*, Uncle Amadeus had told him. *You can crave closeness with someone without craving them in other ways. Sometimes it just... fits. The intensity of it can be misleading, but you will learn.* Still, it would not do to monologue again by informing his enemy of such nuances. Where before the Dead King had fought him over the gathering power, now instead his opponent was allowing him to shape it while gathering his own will. They would clash, Masego thought, over control of that last working. Yet for all that the other mage was his superior in learning and skill, he had the advantage. It was to him the bindings had been attached, his hands that had released them and his will that was giving the power shape. It would be a struggle, but his victory was likely.

"It seems I will have to surrender to you," Trismegistus said.

"I refuse," Masego said.

"You refuse the millennia of knowledge I could offer, along with secrets that would allow the Black Queen to end the Bard's schemes?"

"Yes," he said.

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"Catherine is already going to be very angry," Masego pragmatically said. "And it'll be worse if I dissect your shard after finding a way to torture you, I think. So I'll wait to take your secrets until we attack Keter and destroy your heart."

Another heartbeat passed.

"I think I'll make this painful, though," Hierophant pensively frowned.

His hand still itched, when he thought of the red splattered on the floor and Indrani's body falling.

"You overestimate yourself," the Dead King warned.

"Your secondary runic escapement patterns were subpar," Masego scathingly said.

He was getting rather good at this pithy banter stuff, Hierophant mused.

—

“Now,” the Tyrant of Helike said, “there are some among you who might be considering killing me.”

The boy did not lack courage, Tariq mused, though in truth it might be more accurate to call it a disregard for consequences. The Black Queen’s entrance had been appropriately eye-catching, a display of the power of this ‘Night’ she had acquired the right to wield. The two monstrous old things perched on her shoulders had no qualms in lending their power, now that the Hidden Horror was busied wrestling wills with the Hierophant, which meant that Kairos Theodosian had found his every advantage stripped away in a matter of moments. Artefacts shattered, gargoyles torn through, and the souls amongst which he might have sought to hide were either tithed and released by the Hierophant or cowed into retreat by the hungry gaze of these *Sve Noc*. Now the Tyrant of Helike was stumbling back as the Black Queen limped towards him, her staff hitting the carved floor like punctuation. The Grey Pilgrim felt no inclination to intervene in this, for Kairos Theodosian had been the architect of a great many unnecessary deaths.

“But before we get to that,” the Tyrant chuckled. “I need to expound on why and to who I betrayed you.”

The Black Queen did not bother to reply, simply raising her sinister black wooden staff and aiming it at him.

“It was to the Wandering Bard,” the odd-eyed boy said. “And I did it for a pardon!”

“Should have held out for an escape route,” Catherine Foundling drily replied, and Night gathered at the tip of her staff.

“Tariq,” the Tyrant called out. “You still have the pillow you used that night. That’s what she told me to say as proof.”

The Grey Pilgrim flinched.

“Wait,” he croaked out.

“Oh, Bard,” Theodosian murmured with a vicious smile. “You never disappoint.”

“Pilgrim?” the Black Queen said, turning impatient eye to him.

“I’ve only ever told one person that,” Tariq admitted.

Not even Laurence knew that the pillow that'd been the death of Izil... He'd needed the reminder, he'd decided that night, so that never again would he ignore portents until it was too late.

"And why do I care in the slightest if the Bard has promised him anything?" Catherine Foundling bluntly asked. "To be honest I want to kill him twice as much now."

"Because she would not make that promise without reason," the Pilgrim said. "And I trust her discernment in such matters."

"I don't," the Black Queen said. "I've seen her get up to some pretty shady shit, Pilgrim. And not all of it serving Above, either."

"It might have seemed that way," Tariq delicately said. "But I assure you-"

"When this is over, we're going to talk about the Wandering Bard," the Queen of Callow grunted. "But fine, Kairos bargained for the lot of you to spare him. Hold to that. I'll tie up the loose ends for you – just close your eyes and count to five."

"We are not fae, to muddle through on exact wording," Tariq sharply said.

"Tariq, allow me to be perfectly clear," the Black Queen said. "There is no way in the fucking Hells that I'll consider the word of the *Wandering Bard* to be binding to me because you and I are on the same side."

"She makes a good point, Tariq," the Tyrant of Helike solemnly said. "I hate to say it, but it seems you might be losing this argument."

The Peregrine grit his teeth.

"I will count it favour," he said, "if you withhold your hand now."

The Queen of Callow eyed him silently, considering.

"Same terms as our last bargain," she said. "Should the other condition fail to happen."

The old man breathed out. She was doing him a kindness, here. The Black Queen could have demanded much steeper price, or even kept the favour hanging above his head.

"Then you have my thanks," Tariq said, dipping his head. "For both this and your restraint."

"I am deeply pleased to be returning to the fold," the Tyrant of Helike grinned. "Why, it's almost like I never-"

The sudden pulse of sorcery caught them all by surprise. The Hierophant rose from his throne, gasping a breath, and the Grey Pilgrim beheld the rotten orb that was the Dead King's hold being torn out of him. It still held by threads, and was slowly its way back into the villain's soul, but if they acted now. Laurence was already moving, the Black Queen dismissed the power at the end of her staff and began shaping Night anew. Roland was halfway through a spell, but quickest among them would be Tariq. Until his eye caught a slender, dark-haired woman leaning against the wall. In the blind angle of everyone save him. Though she held her usual silver flask in one hand, she was not drinking. It was the other hand that drew his attention, wagging a finger disapprovingly. *One, two, three*, she counted out and only then mouthed *now*. The Pilgrim struck out with Light, just as Saint began to carve away at the Dead King's rot, but the Hierophant only screamed.

—

Trismegistus leaned over Masego's shoulder looking into the distance.

"Did I not tell you?" the Dead King said. "You overestimate yourself. To be rid of me there will be a price."

And though the Hidden Horror's hold was ripped out of him, it did not go alone. For the all the power and sorcery the Hierophant had been holding vanished into smoke, and there was not a single piece of it left.

Masego reached for his magic, and found nothing at all.

—

There were exactly two things within It: instructions, and a secret witnessed through another's eyes. It waited inside the corpse, and only slithered away under cover of the souls when all Foes were distracted. It crawled and crawled and crawled, as instructed, until it reached the edge of a cliff and fell. Far, far below a large creature opened its mouth. The Skein swallowed whole the animated shard of sorcery, and in the moment that followed fell apart in a shower of dust.

—

Far away, as the slightest shaving of the shard no doubt destroyed by now returned to him, the King of Death laughed. Seven hundred and thirty-three years, crafting the spell he'd used in his mind without a single word or line of it to be found by the opposition. And the loss of the shard would lessen him forevermore, impossible to recover — though without it, how could his defeat possibly have been believed by the Intercessor? All of it a contingency, for it had been victory he sought, but for

centuries he had watched his old friend make a friend of plans he'd thought flawless. Neshamah said nothing at all, for it would be a warning if he did, but alone in the dark he softly laughed.

This once, it seemed the house had lost.

The Ellimist

This is the worst chapter to be caught up on.

Andrew Mitchell

I know the feeling. 😊 Not too long to wait until the next chapter, about 5 hours.

NerfContessa

Nope.

On my first read I caught up 9n the chapter where cat realizes sve noc swallowed winter.

Andrew Mitchell

Woah, 339 comments on this chapter makes this one of the most commented PGtE chapters ever. Certainly top 5, possibly top 2.

I'm a bit slow but I've just noticed the that the last five interludes titles have all been single words starting with R.

Will we have another Interlude? Will it start with R?

My guess is that the next chapter will be back to Cat's POV.

green

I honestly don't know if I want the Dead King to win. I have an idea of what the Intercessor might be after/for, and if I'm right... he's not wrong. for what he just did to Masego, though, he needs to *burn*.

ALSO HI FINALLY CAUGHT UP *stares at index waiting for next chapter*

Caerulea

The RSS feed updates slightly before.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'd just like to call out the lovely battle-by implication displayed here: Kairos started waving his glowy sword, Cat sendt RS and Saint ahead with a disgusted "I'll handle this". Follow them and proceed with throne room scene... until Kairos gets pounded through the ceiling, followed by the remains of his sword, and an incandescent Cat.

NerfContessa

You can't return what was destroyed, though given he has not lost his name he might be able to aim someone else's magic, given his whole shtick is usurpation....

Great chapter again.

Chapter 46: Abdication

"One hundred and two: defeat is inevitable, yet it can be just as useful as a victory. Fate assures you at least one loss, so make sure it's the right kind."

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

We'd won, so naturally in the heartbeat that followed it all went to shit. Masego stumbled down his throne with gasping breaths, fingers blindly clawing at the rune-carve stone. He'd always been tall, but never before had I seen him so *thin* – it made him look spindly, like some long-legged insect in ragged black robes. The sorcery that'd been hanging heavy in the air was gone now, like some great gust of wind had blown it out, and I suspected that whatever it was that'd achieved that was the same thing that had Masego's limbs trembling. Heaving, he began to puke and I had to restrain myself from going to him after taking a unthinking step forward. It'd have to wait just a little longer, graceless as that truth was. Before the rest I needed to be sure that I wasn't going to be asked to make an ugly choice between two people I dearly loved.

"Pilgrim," I said. "What ails him, does it threaten his life?"

Even if the man did not know, the Ophanim would.

"Only if not attended to," the Peregrine said after a moment.

"The fever will rise and his body will weaken: it will take weeks if not months of recovery."

"Then raise Archer, if you would," I said.

I'd phrased it politely but we both knew it for the order it was. Wordlessly, the Sisters left my shoulders

"We don't raise the dead, Foundling," the Saint sharply said.

"Resurrect, then," I replied, rolling my eyes.

I met Tariq's stare and slowly he inclined his head in agreement. I wondered if I was right in guessing he'd not immediately brought Indrani back because he'd thought Masego might yet die and that, in the war on the Dead King, the Hierophant would be more useful than the Archer. I set aside the thought, for there was nothing to gain from pursuing it. Even if he'd been thinking that way the colder part of me had to acknowledge that it might not be a bad thing at least one of us had been. I was too close to this, to them, to be able to genuinely do the same. Leaving the Grey Pilgrim to the business of overturning death, I hurried to the still-crawling Hierophant. By the looks of it there hadn't been much in his stomach, which no doubt made the heavens worse as the body stubbornly tried to spew out something that wasn't there. His glass-crafted eyes moved wildly beneath the eyecloth, but he did not seem completely blind. I knelt in front of him, swallowing a pained wince, and made sure he saw me before further approaching.

"Masego," I softly said. "It's me? Do you recognize me?"

"Catherine," he croaked. "It's gone."

"I know," I softly agreed. "We all saw you push the Dead King out. We struck at it together."

I caught his shoulder and, shivering at the weight it put on my bad leg, tipped him back so he was leaning against me instead of half-sprawled over the floor.

"Here we go," I said. "I'm going to get the vomit off you, Masego, is that all right?"

"Not the Dead King," he rasped. "It's all gone, Catherine. My *magic*."

I stiffened at the announcement. I wished he'd spoken in a softer tone, so that the heroes – and Kairos, who'd remained dangerously silent through all of this – would not have heard him. As they most definitely just had. I immediately rebuked myself for the thought, for he was in no state to consider such matters. *Are you sure*, that pointed little question, held on the tip of my tongue for a heartbeat before I buried it. It'd only insult him: he wouldn't be this devastated if he wasn't sure.

"It'll be all right," I whispered. "We'll fix it. There's always a way, Masego. Always."

A lie, I thought, but one I would have wanted to be told in his place. He'd be able to speak to this more clearly when he'd rested and recovered, and when he did he'd have Akua to help and the knowledge of Sve Noc to look through. If there was a path to be had, we would find it.

"I feel warm," he said. "Fever. My teeth hurt. *I can't fix it.*"

Sickly as he was, Masego was larger and heavier than me – I had to draw on Night to subdue him without hurting him, his sudden violent flailing taking me by surprise. Shit. I'd wanted him awake for the last stretch of this but he was going a bad way. Weaving a long thread of Night as gently as I could, I pressed my thumb against his forehead and let the working gently tug him into slumber. His thrashing subsided until it was little more than twitches and I let out a shaky breath of my own. All right. It looked bad, but once we got back to camp it could be fixed. We had mages and priests and I was owed by the foremost hero on Calernia, a man who had an in with a Choir. He'd come out of this all right, and then we could see about clawing back his magic from our enemy. Breathe in, breathe out. There was no place for weakness in me when the Tyrant and the Saint were looking. I unclasped the Mantle of Woe and bunched it together, sliding it under Masego's head so he wouldn't scrape it against the runes. I rose back to my feet, leaning against my staff.

"Touching," the Tyrant of Helike drawled. "I do not jest, Catherine, it was truly-"

"There's a general that's been with you from the start," I said, meeting his gaze. "Basilis, is it?"

"Are you threatening me?" Kairos asked, sounding amused.

"Finish that sentence," I said, "and you'll find out."

Whatever might have followed that was to remain unspoken, for with a gasp Indrani returned to the land of the living. I limped past the Tyrant, making my way to her side. Tariq had put her on her back before digging into his aspect, and now miraculously enough there was no trace of the hole that'd been blow through her head save for dried blood over her face. The Saint was gazing down at her with a sneer when I arrived, while the Pilgrim gently asked her to cease moving so the Light could heal the last of her scrapes. Indrani's hazelnut eyes swam into focus when I arrived, first staying on me and then moving to the other two heroes by her 'bedside'. Leaning to the side, Archer spat out a little mucus and wiped her lips.

"Cat's always been fine and I can be sold on the Saint – gotta love a girl who knows her way around a sword," she drawled. "But a *priest* too? Gods, there can't have been that much liquor in the city."

In a moment of quicksilver surprise, I saw the Saint of Swords looking like someone had just personally pissed in her morning porridge and the Grey Pilgrim looked utterly, wickedly delighted before I had to cover my mouth with a hand lest I burst out laughing.

"I wasn't always a priest, I'll give you know," the Peregrine sanguinely replied. "As a young man I once even attempted to become one of the Hidden Poets."

"They of the seventy-eight methods of carnal love?" Indrani asked, sounding somewhat intrigued.

"Indeed," he agreed. "Alas, my kamil declamations were judged unworthy and so I took an interest in healing instead."

"You look rather spry, for a dead woman," I said.

I looked at her searchingly even as I spoke, looking for a flinch or darkening of mien that would have given away a shadow cast on her soul. Resurrection was too great a boon to come without a cost, in my eyes, though that did not mean that price would be paid immediately. Yet I found nothing and so offered up my hand to cover my surprise. Indrani took it, and with a grunt I dragged her up.

"Well," Archer said, "I did get to take a nap. I'm all refreshed now."

I almost winced at that. I'd not seen her die, but the sight of her head missing a chunk was going to haunt my nights for a few months to come. Indrani's eyes moved to the sleeping form of Masego, lingering on the rise and fall of his chest. The twitches were already rarer, but still I caught his leg in a spasm as he turned and a moan escaped his lips.

"What happened?" she quietly asked. "I know how I..."

She hesitated there, and I found an almost troubled look on her face when I looked. Not entirely without marks, then. I reached for her shoulder, but she shook it away.

"We knew it was a possibility," she said, tone grown firm. "But it should have shaken him out of the Dead King's hold. What went wrong?"

"Your little friend pushed out the Hidden Horror," the Saint of Swords said, approaching. "Long enough for us to help strike him down."

"When the shard of the Dead King ruling over the Hierophant was destroyed, it took his magic with it," the Rogue Sorcerer said.

Both the Pilgrim and the Saint shot a look at him, and he dipped his head as if to confirm something.

"Roland?" I asked.

"It is part of my Choosing to know when there is sorcery to confiscate," the hero told me, face grim. "There is none left in the Hierophant."

"Shit," Indrani murmured. "That's going to leave scars even if we fix it."

"Which we will," I meaningfully said.

Indrani questioningly glanced at my neck, more specifically the height where my cloak's collar would usually be.

"If anyone can," I agreed. "Otherwise, well, praise the Night and we'll figure something out."

"Crows might know something, yeah," Archer said. "They're basically magpies only with, you know..."

She gestured vaguely, trying to get across the concept of godhood. Something that had eluded the finest mages and theologians of the continent for millennia.

"That's heresy," I piously said.

Komena cawed in the distance, unamused by the way I hadn't entirely disagreed in my own thoughts.

"See, you've angered the gods," I said.

After the hellish, riotous night we'd gone through – and which had yet to end – trading barbs with Indrani like this was like a balm for the soul. The rest of the band had been looking on with various degrees of amusement and impatience, which was fair. Most of us were allies of convenience, if even that. I cleared my throat, Archer falling in at my left like it was the most natural thing in the world. I found strength in that where earlier I'd begun to find mostly exhaustion.

"The five of us have made it to the journey's end," I said. "And so now we bring about an ending."

"This where you reveal the last crown?" Laurence de Montfort bluntly asked. "Overdue."

"I'll confess to some curiosity as well," the Rogue Sorcerer said.

There was a moment of silence, a courtesy I was offering to the man in question – the opportunity to speak himself, if he preferred it that way.

"It will be mine," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Though the Dominion of Levant has no kings, I was born to the bloodline that has ruled it since its founding."

The Saint spat to the side.

"Funny how it's always us who ends up paying the butcher's bill tonight," she said. "Almost like it was planned that way."

I didn't answer that. It was true, at least in part, though I regretted nothing. For all that I'd scraped them raw, I'd made them fair offers and would deliver on all I had promised. As we'd begun the year deathly foes, I considered that far more generous treatment than was owed by the ways they'd dealt with me in the past.

"There can be no *us* and *them*, Laurence, if we are to survive the decade," the Pilgrim quietly said. "Not against the kind of foe we face. And it is no great loss, I assure you: I know better than most how ill-suited I would be to rule."

"Some would say merely knowing that would make you better ruler than most," the Saint replied.

I bit down on my tongue, because now was not the moment to express my strong opinion on the matter. Humility wasn't necessarily a bad thing in a king, but it was hardly a *qualification*. Ambition wasn't a flaw, it was the character trait behind most – no, now was not the time for that. Gods, was this my shatranj speech? Of all the damned habits I could have picked up.

"Oh, please *do* have him elected Holy Seljun," the Tyrant grinned. "That would be delightful. We'll have to have his... great-great-nephew? Close enough, I think. We'll need to have the current Seljun assassinated first, that is my implication, but worry not. Mercantis offers very fair prices on poison these days."

"Must you, Tyrant?" the Rogue Sorcerer asked.

"It's simply getting a little too chummy in here for my tastes, if you'll forgive my language," Kairos cheerily replied. "As if most people in this room had not tried to kill each other at some point."

"Well," Indrani mused. "He's not wrong. Why is he alive, anyway?"

"He made a deal with the Wandering Bard," I said.

"That is the *opposite* of a reason to keep him alive," Archer pointed out.

"A courtesy was extended," I said, tone informing her the line of questioning was at an end.

"Hear that, Saint?" Indrani grinned. "We're being courteous to you. So maybe you try not being such a-"

"Archer," I hissed.

"-card," Indrani adjusted at the last moment, "I was definitely going to say card."

Kairos gasped, as if deeply shocked by her foul language.

"It will not be long before dawn rises," the Grey Pilgrim said, "even given the nature of this place. We must attend to the tasks ahead."

"Namely, to slay a god," the Rogue Sorcerer said.

That bought an aftermath of silence for a few beats. If he'd not been Proceran I would have assumed a pun, but given his origins my assumptions erred on the side of clemency.

"Unless you're holding out on us, Foundling, the odds are not skewed in our favour," the Saint of Swords bluntly said. "It would have been one thing with the warlock, but he's done. The five of us and your cheap Ranger imitation won't cut it."

"There were more than simply the Huntsman outside," Roland said. "The entire Wild Hunt was standing vigil around the room. We will be outnumbered."

"We won't be, my dear friend," the Tyrant of Helike said, "for the same reason that the Hierophant is nowhere to be found."

Three pairs of eyes sought Masego, and when they found nothing at all turned to me instead. Alas, without my cloak I'd been robbed of my pipe and wakeleaf. Hadn't thought that through properly, I mused.

"Did you think she wanted this done before dawn for the ambience?" Kairos Theodosian grinned. "Oh no. She wants the war ended before daylight scatters her little army of darkness."

"I've dealt with fae royalty before," I mildly said. "A story is the one blade they can't parry and that we earned, as our band of five. But you still need to sink in the knife and that means power. I've provided it."

Of which there would be no lack, before the coming of dawn. The Sisters were circling in the sky above, patient and slow, but the

Mighty I'd sent for would have long ago made their way through the broken grounds of Liesse and reached this deeper palace. If the coming Court and my own side came to blow, as I expected they would, I would have warriors awaiting more than the match of a Wild Hunt reforged.

"You think our Larat's going to be a rougher ride than High Noon?" Indrani asked.

"If we let him get a grip, that seems likely," I grimly replied.

None of the others here had been part of our fight against Princess Sulia, the general of Summer's hosts and herald of its sun, so while the idle reference by Archer was not gibberish to them neither was it really *understood*. The Saint and the Pilgrim had faced villains and monsters I'd never known the likes of, but the fae were... different. Less and more dangerous at the same time. And Larat, once the Prince of Nightfall, had been all sorts of dangerous even before his service under my oaths had taken him across the breadth of Calernia. Fae couldn't learn, not the way mortals did. Their natures were static in the way our weren't. Yet I knew from experience that they could learn to... interpret themselves through different eyes, shaping themselves through oaths and stories. The Wild Hunt, while bound to me, had seen more of Creation than the rest of their likely had in centuries. I fully expected any Court they had a hand in making to be dangerous in ways that the ancestral forces of nature that were Summer and Winter could scarcely have imagined. I breathed out, rolled my shoulders to limber them.

"Ready yourselves," I warned. "We begin."

I seized my staff and struck down at the ground, a thin wave of Night rippling out, and from that darkness I leaned down to snatch out the bag that held seven crowns. Without even needing to look, I knew that the fae had come. As I strode towards the throne on which Masego had sat, when in the throes of the Dead King's enchantments, from the corner of my eye I saw silhouettes standing atop the walls. In ripping out the ceiling, I had made of this throne room an arena of sorts – and in a silent circle above the Wild Hunt stood, eyes watchful. I emptied the sack at the bottom of the throne. An old crowb of ivory and gold, set with a great carved topaz. A straight-edged cavalry sword, wrapped in a cloak. An ornate longsword, specked with its dead owner's blood. A silver tiara, bitter surrender. A bloody knife, regicide absolved. A bare blade within a banner, and last of all two silver wings ripped in spite. A harvest of royalty that cast a shadow over a third of the greatest realm under Calernian sun. No small harvest, this. The Grey Pilgrim padded forward as I threw aside the empty sack, and with measured ceremony came to stand before the pile. The old man brusquely snapped his own staff over his knee, the old thing breaking like it'd been

fragile as driftwood, and tossed it onto the pile. He whispered two words under his breath, though I caught only one: *izil*.

With that last addition the seven crowns and one I'd promised were offered, and so the creature I'd promised them to arrived. Larat drifted in from right, steps silent and smooth, long black hair trailing behind him. He near brushed against me as he passed, though it was not jostling – it was an acknowledgement of his presence. We were, I thought, long past the petty games of posturing other times might have brought.

"I had thought, my queen, that you might destroy me before the debt was paid," the fae amusedly said. "Or make of me something... tamed and hollowed."

His sole eye flicked a glance upwards, where two crows still circled.

"I am a woman of my word," I replied. "However terrible that word might be."

"So you are," Larat said, dipping his head. "Let all witness it, and Creation remember it."

He ran an almost loving finger against the stone of the throne before him, having fluidly stepped around the crowns that were his due. As I watched every last thing tossed onto the pile turned to ash, until naught was left but that, and under Larat's watchful gaze those ashes rose up. They spun once, twice, thrice, and with every spin they gathered more tightly into something being forged. A crown, I thought. It was made of grey chalcedony and mother-of-pearl, one twisted like threads and the other hanging in star-like spots, but something more eldritch leant both darkness and radiant lights to the shaping artefact. It thickened, until the last touch was added – a distant radiant star, shining on the brow, stolen and set for the pleasure of the newborn Court.

"And so is born the Court of Twilight," the fae said. "Under the pilgrim's star, willingly given, and winding through the many realms of mortals wicked and righteous both. We tread the span of dusk and dawn, unhindered and unseen, watchers of boundaries and makers of secret ways. Let none think themselves our masters, for we are the children of the debt repaid and the tricks woven in death."

Pale fingers caught the crown and Larat softly laughed.

"I thank you, Sovereign Under the Night," he said. "Not for the bargain fulfilled, for that was as ordained, but for what you gave us all freely."

He'd not put on the crown, I thought. It had not yet begun.

"And what would that be?" I asked.

"We cannot learn as your kind do, Foundling Queen," Larat smiled. "But we can... mimic. That is our gift. And you have shown us a great many things. You taught us, my queen, the greatest trick of them all."

Larat, smiling, put on the crown.

"Hear my first decree, one and all, as Twilight's King," he laughed.

Larat, smiling, tossed it back down onto the throne.

"My crown I abdicate, and let the worthiest of you bear it."

nipi

Wait the Tyrant just got a guarantee of not being attacked. Would that still be upheld if he gets or tries to get the crown?

nipi

Wonder if the Dead King used the random portals connected to the shard of Arcadia to move some of his undead behind the defenses. Including some undead mages to raise more troops from old graves and conscript from poorly defended villages.

nipi

Hmmm... Might be that Masego will end up wielding fae magic instead of the regular kind. How necessary is creating the shortcut anyway? They have 3 months now.

[Mental Mouse](#)

No they don't, the shard is still falling. Also, Cat's army turns into pumpkins at dawn.

nipi

The shard is falling because its unclaimed. Killing a god seems necessary for cats portal scheme.

Brigsby

On the contrary, claiming that crown could stabilize the shard. It was falling into creation due to the magic of Masego, magic that is now gone. It's possible this caused

it to drift instead of being forced to collide with another one of existence. That would make it a Psuedo-Arcadia just like Cat planned. Also, Masego gets the crown I think.

JJR

Hang on a sec, they actually have the perfect candidate to take up the crown. The goat that is not a goat but a horse. Specifically a small horse. All they need to do first is paint it purple, and then when they put the crown on it it will become the [Princess of Twilight and Sparkle](#).

Yes, this is clearly the best plan and can in no way backfire.

[Zim the Vixen](#)

You. I like you and I like this.

Clinton Orebajo

You just made my day

Alegio

I really doubt it but wouldn't it be awesome for Masego to take the crown? New magic for him to play that is not exactly magic but a power to make whatever you want of reality.

[Zim the Vixen](#)

I find it concerning that most people here want their favourite character to take the crown.

Let's remember that whoever becomes a god must be killed, for this piece of Arcadia to not crash into Creation.

[Javvies](#)

No, they don't.

Establishing the Court enables the entity in charge of it to stabilize it as a new plane.

Killing Larat after he established the Court was necessary because it's Larat.

Killing whomever takes up the Twilight Crown isn't, strictly speaking, a necessary part of Cat's plan to stabilize the shard and use it as a transitory plane, safer than Arcadia proper.

Killing whomever takes up the Twilight Crown is very much dependent upon who that person/entity actually is.

Regy

I'm confused I thought Skein had stolen the shard as he fled...

Andrew Mitchell

A different shard. (Shard just means 'small fragment'.) The Skein took a shard of information back to the Dead King.

Big I

I predict that Good King Edward will become the Twilight King.

[sengachi](#)

Ohhhh. I like that idea. That would be a compromise I think everyone but the Tyrant could get behind, and I think everyone assembled is just about done with him.

[sengachi](#)

Oh *fuck*

Nukeey

Can you imagine the absolute hellscape that plane would into if the Tyrant gets the crown?

Cpt. Obvious

But it would be the fun kind of hell. The kind that so decadent and stupidly horrible you wouldn't know if you should cry or laugh. You certainly wouldn't die in a boring way that much you could at least count on.

eliarice

Decimated. Catherine is going to have PTSD from just how hard Larat owned her. That one line was more devastating than literally anything that The Dead King has done in his entire unlife.

Poetically Psychotic

Larat, you cunning old fox, you.

Chapter 47: Tenet

"You who would be mighty, seek excellence in all things, for the conquest of eternity must be earned with every breath."

– Extract from the 'Tenets Under Night', Firstborn religious text

Well, shit. I guessed you could always count on good ol' Larat to make a bad situation incredibly worse. And I wasn't the only one to realized that with a pithy gesture and a few words he'd dropped us all in the deep end, because the moment the fae who'd abdicated the Twilight Crown took a step away from the throne I had to speak up.

"Hold," I got out, and there was an echo.

Archer's longknife slowed a hair's breadth away from the hollow of Larat's throat, as did the Saint's longsword – though it'd not been me that Laurence was listening but the Pilgrim. Who had, thanks the Gods, enough of a finger on the pulse of this to recognize that killing the fae now would be a Very Bad Idea. High above us, Sve Noc lazily circled the sky. Yet another fire I was going to have to put out the moment I'd assessed the nature of this turnabout. I inclined my head in thanks at Tariq and shot Indrani a steady glance. Shrugging, she withdrew her blade and with an unnecessarily eye-catching spin she put it away. The Saint I left to the Pilgrim, eyes on the fae who'd been the Twilight King for the span of two sentences. Was he still, though? I wondered with a frown. Not king – the abdication might have been a trick, but not of that particular kind – but *fae*. There was a flush to his skin now, and while his long hair remained unearthly in its perfection it was no longer... unnatural.

"Larat," I said. "Look me in the eye."

Baring a smile of pearly white teeth, the one-eye creature met my gaze and my lips thinned in dismay. When I'd first met the Prince of Nightfall, a simple look in his eyes had sent me tumbling down into fear and darkness. A glimpse into his nature, forced by the matching of gaze. I'd learned to resist that pull, in later years, or at times simply been the greater monster of the two of us. I was not currently using any of those tricks, for there was no *need* to. Larat held not a speck of power within him. And fae, Masego had once told me, were little more than power made flesh and shaped by stories. The inevitable conclusion of that sent a shiver up my spine.

"Do you even know," I softly asked, "what you've become?"

"Something... unprecedented," he said, smile broadening.

"And the rest of the Hunt?" I said.

One after another they leapt down, graceful and lithe. None of them bore titles that I could catch the scent of, be it the newborn regalia of Twilight or older and more vicious accoutrements.

"We claim nothing," Larat languidly replied, "save that we *are*."

"Fascinating," the Saint of Swords said. "You gonna feed them to your drow, or should I just go ahead and finish this? I've yet to hear a reason that smirking head should stay atop his shoulders."

"Because someone's going to have to put on that damned crown, now," I said, never looking away from Larat. "And while I can't say for sure what murdering the creature that first forged it would do exactly, I doubt it'll be particularly pleasant."

The former fae's lips twitched. Seed of madness in the crown was my guess, putting an original sin at the heart of what this realm would become. The clever fox had picked a path that meant we couldn't kill him without dropping a vial of poison in our own cup.

"There no longer are any oaths between us," I acknowledged. "All debts have been paid."

"So they have," Larat admitted. "Would you believe me if I said, my queen, that my service under your banner was a pleasure?"

"Not even an hour free," I said, "and already lying? You always were a quick learner."

He laughed, deep-throated and wild. I swallowed a sigh.

"You fulfilled your oaths to the letter," I conceded, and raised my voice to the others. "All of you. If we are to part tonight, it is not in anger."

Larat, viper-swift, raised the sword hanging from his hip. I did not reach for the Night, though Archer was halfway through a killing stroke before she turned it aside – my former servant, after a salute, had dropped the blade at my feet.

"May we meet again, my queen, before the end," Larat said. "For every gift you gave you took fair measure, and I can pay no higher compliment."

Much as they had years ago when riding horses, the creatures that had once been the Wild Hunt paid me the mirrored farewell to the allegiance they'd sworn. Lance and blade and bow fell at my feet, and with every last a bow. Some paid respects to Archer as well, though to her they offered only words. They gathered around Larat: slender, beautiful and even without so much as a speck of power still terrible to behold.

"And what will you do?" I asked.

"Whatever we wish, my queen," the one-eyed fox said. "For be it wicked or righteous, it will be entirely ours."

I let them go without another word, ignoring the Pilgrim's weighty look and the Tyrant's fleeting yet fascinated glances at

the former fae. There was another issue about to take hold, after all. For all that I'd chosen to part with the Wild Hunt on a cordial note, Larat had repaid my planned deicide in the same manner. The Twilight Crown was not up for grabs, and he'd known exactly what he was doing when he'd offered it to the *worthiest*. It was respect that'd stayed the hands of the drow so far, for through the Night I could feel hundreds of them hungrily gazing down. If I ordered them to refrain, I'd strain the limited of my authority as the First Under the Night. Oh, some would listen. At first anyway, until they saw foes and rivals close to getting their fingers on great power and the balance swung the other way. The only way they'd obey such an edict was if Sve Noc put their weight to my words. Yet I had the Sisters in the back of my mind, and so I knew they were eying that crown as hungrily as the rest of them.

"Black Queen," the Grey Pilgrim began, "given the-"

"Pilgrim," I calmly said. "I don't think you appreciate how delicate the situation is right now. I need to... confer with my patrons."

"Evil clawing at itself," the Saint bitingly said. "There's a surprise."

I ignored her.

"It'd be a mistake," I said in Crepuscular, addressing the sky.

The first crow that landed on the floor did so smoothly, and just as smoothly rose into the silhouette of a drow. Silver-blue eyes shone, and I saw she was wearing the ancient armour of soldiers of the Empire Ever Dark with at her hip a sheathed blade of obsidian. Komena. Her sister, fully formed a drow before her crow talons could touch the stone, made ground with serenity. It was the robes of the long-broken Twilight Sages she wore, in flowing shimmering silk, and her hands she hid within long sleeves. Andronike. My patrons, at least, had taken me seriously enough to make act of presence. And a little more than that, even. I caught flecks of dust gone still in the air around me, made visible by the glinting light, and all others in this seat of power stood as if frozen. Save for the Pilgrim, whose knowing eyes followed me still – whatever power was at work here, bending perception, the Choir of Mercy had not suffered that he would be touched by it.

"Would it be?" Komena said. "Twilight is not so far removed from our domain. And mastery over ways... oh, let the offering of travellers be not blood but instead *prayer*. There would be opportunity in that, and yet more. We have lost the Everdark and the kingdom you bargained for still has to be reclaimed from death. A home for our people would be fair in every way, Herald."

"You can't eat two courts of the fae, Komena," I said. "That would be grave overreach."

The two of them, long-legged and fluid, began circling around me on foot the same way they had as crows.

"You have warned us of such perils before, of the foes they would bring," she replied, and glanced at the Grey Pilgrim. "Having seen them, I am less than cowed."

"The way I see it, there's two ways that could go," I said. "Both end up with every single gain you've made so far pissed away."

That had them both looking at me with their full attention.

"You could become 'the monster that eats courts'," I said. "And just like that you're the greatest threat kicking around Calernia, both taking the weight off the Dead King and beginning a death match with every powerful entity in the service of Above up here and gathered to deal with him."

I paused, letting that sink in.

"Or, perhaps even worse, you've just begun a pattern," I said. "I made a Court of Winter and you ate it. I made a Court of Twilight and you'd eat it. There's only one court of the fae left, Sve Noc, and I also had a hand in its inception. Where do you think that story leads?"

"We would be mistresses of the greater part of the Garden," Komena said.

"Would you?" I said. "I wonder. When I stole Winter, it didn't *do* anything to the ruling court of Arcadia as far as I could tell. See, what I think is that it's the neverborn courts they get their blood from: Autumn and Spring, never to be again. Because Summer and Winter had to *die* so the unification of Arcadia could happen, so they couldn't be foundation of an entirely new realm could they? So my theft of Winter? Fine, I was robbing a corpse. The crown just to our side might just be what used to be Summer. So at best, o goddesses of mine, you'll be even. And you know that one viciously clever little bastard that just walked out of here?"

I jutted a thumb towards the open gates of bronze.

"The ruling King of Arcadia considers him to be a little dim," I said. "Think on that, before you start believing you'll be the winners in that scrap even if the weight is even. You're too young to the godhead, your power is too fragile and your foundations too unsteady. You're not *ready* for the kind of attention eating Twilight would bring."

Komena did not reply. She was not pleased, I could feel it, but she did not dismiss what I'd said.

"I do not disagree," Andronike said.

And now for the other one, I grimly thought.

"Let us allow the Mighty to find who is worthiest among them, and so establish influence without... overstepping," the oldest of the sisters said.

"Short-sighted," I assessed.

I saw Komena hide a smile.

"Pardon?" Andronike said, voice too calm to truly be.

"You're thinking in terms of gains without also weighing the drawbacks," I said. "Do you intend to make whoever takes the crown the leader of your people, fold them under their rule and effectively have them stuck in this ruin of a realm forever? Because that's what you're headed towards if you make a play here."

"They have no choice but to make bargains with us if the ways are under our stewardship," Andronike said. "This war is lost otherwise."

"You're robbing them while the Dead King holds them at knifepoint," I said. "That's a mistake. What happens when the war is over, Sve Noc? Do you think they won't go back on treaties you crammed down their throat when they were in duress?"

"And will they come to love us, if we treat them lovingly?" Andronike mockingly replied. "That is surprisingly naïve of you, Herald. If they turn on us for this, they were always going to turn on us. All the more reason to claim what we can before the knives are bared."

"You're missing the point," I patiently said. "There's nuances to this, Andronike. Sure, the Procerans are never going to put a crown of flowers in your hair, but there's a difference between 'the enemy we leave alone because it contains a worse enemy' and 'those bastards that extorted us while we were facing annihilation'. You know what's going to be a lot more useful to your people than one of the Mighty on that fancy chair behind you? An undeniable and weighty precedent for the Firstborn being reasonable, restrained actors. You're going to have to live up here, after the war ends."

"You would have us pin our hopes on amity and mercy," Andronike said.

"I'd have you fight this war in a manner that doesn't guarantee having to fight another one in twenty years with your current allies," I frankly said. "You named me First Under the Night because you needed feet on the ground. Someone to steer you away from the mistakes you're blind to because of your position."

I paused.

"This is one," I said. "This might be *the* mistake. The choice that decides whether you're a decade-long catastrophe that ends up drowned in heroes or the latest nation to claim a seat at the table up here in the Burning Lands."

They circled around me still, silent. Thinking.

"This is not our way," Komena said.

"Your way is a snake eating its own tail," I said. "Be *better*."

"They might turn on us regardless," Andronike said.

"They might," I admitted. "Fear or faith, that's your choice. You can't cross a chasm without taking a leap."

The Sisters looked at each other, eyes sliding away from me, and whatever it was they spoke it was not meant for my ears. Pounding heartbeats drummed against my ears, they began circling anew. With every step they further faded into the shadow, until there was nothing left but crows once more circling above. As if they'd never left at all. I breathed out, slowly.

"You are First Under the Night," Andronike confirmed.

"The Firstborn listen," Komena said. "*Speak*."

My fingers clenched. Above us the Mighty stood, a ring of painted sigils and silver-blue yes. Watching, waiting. And my goddesses had asked me to teach restraint to a people they had taught to esteem gluttonous theft above all. I was not, I thought, clever enough a liar to trick them all into obedience. And that'd be rather defeating the purpose of this, wasn't it? I was the high priestess of Night: if I found offence with the faith I'd been named the steward of, who but me could be charged with the change of it?

"Are you worthy?" I asked, and my voice rang out.

Not a soul replied. I let out a harsh bark of laughter.

"Your silence says it all," I told them. "You believe you are, or that the shedding of blood will make you so."

And why wouldn't they? The worthy took, the worthy rose. Did the act of taking not make them worthy? That was the sickness inside

them, Below's ever-red altar made into an entire people. It was the old enemy wearing another face: Callow and Praes, forever intertwined and bleeding. Procer as much burden as bearing, sowing its own demise with every conquest. It was bucket holding the crabs, and I was going to *break it*.

"I see you," I harshly said. "Scavengers, carrion things crawling in the dark. You make faith of what you've taken and call that *worth*. I see you, who call yourselves Mighty. I have been you, and heard the sweet anthems of might, so hear me when I tell you this truth: a hundred rats clawing at each other does not make a single king."

Oh, they did not love me for that. I saw it in their eyes, in the way fury and malice filled the Night. But it was a lesson long overdue and love was not what I wanted from them, much less what I needed.

"Did you believe a single moment of excellence would earn you an eternity of power?" I said. "The one-eye fox that left this place head held high forged this crown through ruses that fooled gods and ruined realms. What bring any of you that matches those deeds?"

I bared my teeth.

"The murder of your own kind? I ask you, what manner of creature under sun or moon is not capable of this? Where lies that which would make you worthy?"

I struck my staff against the ground, let the clap that sounded out jostle them.

"You have grovelled in the ruins of your own empire, bleeding behind the Gloom," I said. "And through that you survived. Yet is that all you seek, you who call yourselves Mighty? Survival? I thought you seekers of deeds. I thought you reclaimed of an empire ever dark. I thought you Firstborn, not grey ghosts haunting a ruin."

Fury still, but now their pride had been pricked. And there were some who were listening. Hearing what had been spoken but also what had not been.

"It is not enough to take," I said. "For you must be worthy to take. It is not enough to rise, for you must be worthy to rise."

Blasphemy, some would have called that, but how could it be when I spoke with the voice of their gods?

"Did you think eternity would so easily be conquered?" I laughed. "Seek excellence in all things, Firstborn. Seek to stand mighty not by lowering others but by rising above them, lest you make

your own victory worthless. They who cannot master themselves will never be anything but servants."

I breathed out, let what I'd said sink in.

"And so I ask you again, you who call yourselves Mighty – *are you worthy?*"

Sa Vrede. The whisper spread, bloomed until it was on every pair of lips. *No*, the answer came, and with it the beat of spears against stone. Slow and oppressive, like a dirge.

"Then seek excellence, Firstborn," I said. "Ever seek it until the night comes where your answer has changed."

Chno Sve Noc, they went. All will be Night. And they bowed, for I has spoken with the authority of high priestess of Night and for all their fury they had found worth in the path I laid before them. As the deity-crows circled slowly above us all they withdrew into the darkness, dismissed without my needing to speak another word. I let out a shaky breath and turned to find the eyes of most everyone else resting on me. I doubted anyone other than Archer had understood any of that – Indrani had learned a bit of Crepuscular back in the day, though it was a fiendishly complex language so not all that much – but I supposed even without the learning it'd been something of a spectacle.

"Dawn will come before the hour's turn," the Grey Pilgrim quietly said. "And with it the end of this journey, for good or ill."

"Then there is only one agreeable solution," the Tyrant of Helike said.

He let a moment pass.

"We should crown Catherine," he said, and winked at me.

"I've ridden that horse before," I said. "Never again."

"A shame," he mused. "I'd volunteer, yet I suspect my dear friends might..."

"Murder you like we were planning to do to Larat?" I finished. "Of course not. Go ahead, Kairos. Put on the crown."

"Breaking the crown itself might suffice," the Rogue Sorcerer said.

"How sure are you of that, Roland?" the Saint asked.

He grimaced.

"Half and half," the Sorcerer said. "As you might guess, there's not exactly a *precedent* for this."

And considering that the hero wasn't able to understand High Arcana, there was only so much weight I was willing to put on his word. Gods, I wished Masego was in a fit state to speak right now. Hells, I'd even settle for Akua right about now.

"So either we roll the dice over the life of around two hundred thousand people," I grimly said. "Or someone puts on that crown and then we kill them."

Naeddyr

I naaaailed it, like a crown on a head.

Naeddyr

Thank you for the chapter!

naturalnuke

And Catherine makes another strike at the forging of the Drow.

[Javvies](#)

Nicely done, Cat. You're getting good at this High Priestess thing.

Huh.

I'm not entirely sure why murdering the person who puts on the Twilight Crown is still necessary, no matter who that person is.

Dainpdf

Because the person would have too much power; because the fae power corrupts; because they would be stuck in the ruined realm and thus useless for the war anyway.

medailyfun

why, of course we kill whoever is useless for war

Dainpdf

As opposed to letting them be a costly liability? Yes.

nimelennar

If someone wears the crown, they become ruler of a new Court of Fae.

No one wants there to be a new Court of Fae.

So they need to crown someone and then kill that person to destroy that new Court before it is established, to leave this realm as a place that can be crossed by any who pay the price.

Or, they could just break the crown, and it might accomplish the same thing... but they don't know if that will work.

Rook

I think there's a strong narrative argument for the Saint to be the one that puts on the crown, in terms of a final redemption story. The person that's puts it on is going to affect the nature of the realm as much what formed it.

An entire life lived, ever cutting down disasters, ever failing to prevent them no matter how strong the desire to. An unbreakable, incorruptible, unwavering sword that held firm through any and all obstacles, no matter the crucible or the temptation.

Now for the first and last time, at the end of that long story, she can finally, finally succeed just once in Saving instead of Avenging after the tragedy has already taken place. By willingly being cut down instead of cutting down, she can forge not just a redemption but the Greatest redemption after a lifetime of failures, of being moments too late again and again.

A realm forged of the Saint wouldn't be a kind one or a pleasant one, but it would be a wholly incorruptible one, and an unbreakable one, no matter the evil or the storm. It could never be twisted away from its nature. It could never be corrupted, poisoned, or struck with disease.

More importantly, the Saint would have strong personal reasons to. If she wants to make sure there's absolutely no Evil influence in the establishment of the realm, it can't be a Villain being the first and last to put that crown on their head (larat never wore the crown before putting it down). Which in her eyes would leave the Sorcerer – a Good young seedling snuffed out before his time – or the Pilgrim – who she holds in the highest esteem, likely even higher than herself. It would be a self sacrifice play from the one asshole you'd never expect the self sacrifice play from, but still for her own goals until the very end

Andrew Mitchell

I like the way you've laid that out. Very satisfying option.

And she still gets to be used against the Dead King. Just not the way she expected.

[crysjal](#)

She still has a secret plan (to let procer be destroyed) so until they discover that then she gets plot armour I'm afraid.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> the Sorcerer – a Good young seedling snuffed out before his time

Also a magic-thief. And remember, Below's forces use magic a lot more.

naturalnuke

Then the realm gets swung like a sword and breaks the Dead King's little hell.

Because it's what she would have wanted.

[Fayhem](#)

> (larat never wore the crown before putting it down).

He did. For about two seconds, but he did:

"Larat, smiling, **put on the crown.**

"Hear my first decree, one and all, as Twilight's King," he laughed.

Larat, smiling, tossed it back down onto the throne."

Emphasis mine, of course. He was King exactly long enough to be able to abdicate the position, because he's a little shit. But he was the King, even if only for a moment. But honestly Larat is villain enough to count for anybody paying attention, much less by the standards of the Saint, so your actual point still has merit.

Rook

Ah I misread that, good catch

[sengachi](#)

Oh. Wow. Yeah, that'd do.

Dainpdf

Unless this is all a ploy to kill her. Safer, from the perspective of not letting any villains' plans work, to just break the thing.

[vamair](#)

No one wants there to be a new Court of Fae? Well, I do! Twilight Court sounds awesome, especially when on the other side of the fourth wall.

Insanenoodlyguy

Same reason Cat doesn't want to put it on, murder aside. Larat did one thing in his very brief stint as King: shaped the court. And so any who succeed him inherit this. As cat knows full well, this will begin to have... effects. The King or Queen of Twilight, even if a friend today, may become a foe tomorrow.

This is where King Edwin can still deliver though, if he yet stands. The dead king retreats, but if he does this, his imminent death yet has meaning and he can rest. Of course, this ascension will give him life again first, so it'll hurt all the more. Though I suspect that'd be too easy a resolution now, so he's likely dead already

[onedollargum](#)

King Edwin, the thrice raised XD

Dainpdf

And have possible remnants of Neshamah's sprcery in the realm? Bad Idea.

Guopo

Am I the only one that thinks that the drow should have teared her apart, First Under the Night or not? She is trying to make power addicts go against their instincts by what basically amounts to moralizing. Imagine trying to make a bunch of Wall Street brokers more aware of the long term by asking them to be better.

byzantine279

Were she talking as Cat that would be the case. But she was speaking with the full weight of their gods.

[Liliet](#)

Sve Noc can dust them out of existence with a thought, they literally all are alive only on their sufferance.

Mighty are not just power addicts. They are power addicts who survived, power addicts who got recruited into the southern expedition.

They are sane enough to respect the Law Of The Bigger Fish.

[sengachi](#)

And just as importantly, they're *old*. The Mighty strong enough to be here are all ancient monsters, and you just don't get to be that old in a meat grinder like the Underdark unless you know how to change. The Mighty aren't old like Sve Noc, unchanging ageless immortal imprints. They're ancient mortals who have earned a lease on longer life by being better than ever other damn contender who would have toppled them. They are adaptable, they must be.

So when Cat, this person who just rolled through their entire civilization like a living wrecking ball and went toe to toe with their gods only to come out as the freaking *High Priest* of their religion wielding more Night than any of them could hope to have, when *she* says backed by their gods "there is a way to be even stronger" ... well, none of them are stupid. All of them are adaptable. All of them respect might makes right not merely as a reality but as holy writ, and here speaks the mightiest. And yeah the goddesses who could disintegrate them all are also flying overhead, that too.

Andrew Mitchell

100% right.

shveiran

Very well said.

It's important to remember that the Mighty are not just power hungry: they are those that succeeded in applying the Tenets of Night, which are a divine writ.

The Firstborn are experiencing an Exodus, led by a Cat-shaped Moses (staff included). And sure, the path is hard, and they will be tempted to go against the will of their Goddesses and Prophet along the way, but one does not embark on such a path, leaving behind all they once held, without knowing on some level that things will never be quite the same.

They have the POTENTIAL to change. The story has the right shape.

Morgenstern

I saw no need either, after the chapter before this. After this one, though, I believe the reason is in Cat's suspicion that Larat put a "madness" in the Crown that will make anyone mad who wears it.

Now, I don't entirely understand why anyone needs to put it on at all, after this realm should have already been stabilized by Larat forming the Twilight Court, even if just for two seconds. Does it somehow fall into pieces **again** if the person abdicates? Then, why the heck, shouldn't it do so with their original plan that would even have KILLED that person and not just forced them to abdicate? o0 I'm curious for the revelation there. At least, I very much hope we'll get one. Without one, it reeks of being irrational instead of a sensible theory.

naturalnuke

Problem 1, it's still falling, problem 2, it currently doesn't lead where they need it to lead.

So they need to gain control of it somehow. Best way would be corpse robbing because no one owns it anymore, is someone does own it then they are liable to corruption and or whatever trap may or may not be in the power.

dalek955

I think their problem is that they need the realm to be rulerless and unclaimed, and that's not how Larat left it. By abdicating the crown to be claimed by "the worthiest," he left it in trust for a specific ruler, even if no one yet knows who that is. If they left the crown as it is, the band of five would be leaving the realm and anything they make with it effectively up for grabs.

Someguy

Does the wearer have to be alive or even sapient?

Dainpdf

Seems like it, though I like that line of thinking.

Valkyria

I smell the chance for yet an entirely different way to implement suicide goats....

Leventide

They are not putting the crown on a goat.

Valkyria

but... but...

[David Lynch](#)

Of course not; they're putting the crown on a purebred Liessen charger. Keep up, man.

nipi

Did the Tyrant bring his "horse"?

Valkyria

I dunno but if it takes the throne he can rightfully claim that treason and kill it

[Euodiachloris](#)

There is that gargoyle-and-book combo that's been walking around as a representative placeholder...

Morgenstern

Hah. I would laugh so hard at that one XD

naturalnuke

Killing the placeholder representative would be amazing.

Gunslinger

Cat's speech was fucking glorious. Chno Sve Noc!!

>Would you?" I said. "I wonder. When I stole Winter, it didn't do anything to the ruling court of Arcadia as far as I could tell. See, what I think is that it's the neverborn courts they get their blood from: Autumn and Spring, never to be again. Because Summer and Winter had to die so the unification of Arcadia could happen, so they couldn't be foundation of an entirely new realm could they? So my theft of Winter? Fine, I was robbing a corpse. The crown just to our side might just be what used to be Summer. So at best, o goddesses of mine, you'll be even. And you know that one viciously clever little bastard that just walked out of here?"

Can someone clarify what this passage means? I'm too sleepy to properly parse it.

Naeddyr

"Winter and Summer were easy mode because they were dead, the new realm is going to be a lot tougher."

Dainpdf

Cat says Winter and Summer died in the process of making the new court, so her taking Winter was easy. This crown of Twilight is probably made of Summer.

The new Court is made of Autumn and Spring, so even if Sve Noc ate this one, they would be even (or not even that, since they ate corpses).

Considering the Fae King's cunning, Cat says Sve Noc couldn't beat the Court at even power.

nimelennar

There were four Fae Courts, one for each season.

The power of Winter went into Cat.

The power of Summer (maybe) went into the Twilight Crown.

The power of Autumn and Spring went into the new Fae Court, jointly ruled by the former Queen of Summer and King of Winter.

So, if Sve Noc takes the Twilight Crown, they will be establishing themselves as the other pole to the current Fae Court, and thus war against them will be inevitable.

Each will have the power of two Courts (hence, "at best, you'll be even"), but the current rulers of the Fae are a lot cleverer than Sve Noc, so it probably won't go well for the Firstborn.

Taichi22

Even worse, it establishes a dichotomy between the two courts – one of light and one of darkness. One court of stories and fae and light and Arcadia Resplendent, and another of darkness and death and crawling rats.

You don't want to be on the darkness side of that story, no matter what you get.

[Liliet](#)

Oof. Night and Day courts to replace the seasonal dichotomy, huh.

[Fayhem](#)

I think actually Twilight and Dawn courts, currently. But if it mirrors the 4-season cycle that they had before, then yeah presumably we'd get a Court of Noon and a Court of Midnight as well. Which honestly sounds pretty fucking dope as a reader, though it also makes perfect sense why the characters who'd have to actually live with it would be going ALL MY NOPE TO THAT.

manic Insomniac

The [unammed current marriage court] gets its Magic Juice from the two courts that WOULD have happened, but didn't because of Cats bullshit. Cat got her Magic Juice from the corpse of Winter. Twilight might get its Magic Juice from the corpse of Summer.

Currently, Sve Noc has consumed Winters power, so it has One Courts worth of power. If it eats Twilight, it will have Two Courts worth of power.

However, since [UCMC] gets its Magic Juice from the TWO courts that didn't happen, [UCMC] ALREADY has Two Courts worth of power.

Therefore, [UCMC] and Sve Noc Post Twilight-nom will be equally matched in power.

Agent J

Court of Arcadia. Given that they are now called the King and Queen of Arcadia.

Dainpdf

Obviously, you crown the chair itself, then kill it.

Or crown the Shining Prince, predating the coronation so that Cat decided him on the field.

...or maybe see if there is any of the devils left? Hm...

konstantinvoncarstein

They would not have enough narrative weight for it.

Dainpdf

Party pooper.

caoimhinh

I don't know, the chair might have it if you twist the narrative enough.

I mean, every crown belongs to a throne, after all. Hahahaha

konstantinvoncarstein

Or the goat. It has clearly taken enough importance that it can wear a crown 😊

caoimhinh

Indrani would NEVER let Catherine forget that if pun if they actually used a literal Scapegoat. Hahahahahahaha

joewill5234

Pun? Is it a pun to do something in the original way, the act from which the word originated? I don't see it. It would be following old traditions.

[onedollargum](#)

Good old Escape Goat =D

caoimhinh

Masego would probably say that, and would be correct as you are, but all Cat would see would be the pun. And her group of friends will never stop reminding her of it.

[Fayhem](#)

Don't be ridiculous. A goat could never do that. A purebred Liessen charger, on the other hand... 🤪

konstantinvoncarstein

You're right, my mistake 🤦

[Euodiachloris](#)

The gargoyle that sits on an otherwise empty chair and spouts phrases from a book whose faith automatically disowns it...

[TeK](#)

Just bring back all the abdicated royals, and offer them a "chance to be king again".

Dainpdf

If only they had the time! And Cat hadn't specifically warned them it would not work.

Insanenoodlyguy

Agreed. It'd be one thing if one of them made to take it and was cut down, or even Grey did it knowing full well what he'd be sacrificing, but if they just hand it off, it will rot the whole process. The world will continue breaking down, if slower, as it's last ruler doomed it to ruin and a successor was never chosen.

dalek955

The abdicated royals, like Pilgrim, are just that: abdicated. They gave up their divine right to rule, and that specifically applies to any new crown they might get hold of.

caoimhinh

I wonder if Cat could simply call Akua there, crown her and finally kill her and be done with her "I'm going to make a good person out of you before I kill you" idea. It would be the most efficient way. Of course, it would be hard to kill her and Cat would lose one "ally", not to mention that it's pretty obvious at this point that Cat has grown fond of Akua to the point she has to constantly remind herself that she wants to kill Akua eventually.

Agent J

I'm sorry, but here on the S.S. Catkua, we call that base heresy.

caoimhinh

What's a bit of Heresy between friends? That's how the best alliances between ships are made! Besides, I was certain the S.S Catkua was in route through the Platonic Sea? I should contact Commodore Lillet for more info, she has the greater amount of ships I have seen so far here..

Soma

Commodore Lillet, my sides!

Whoever started the catkua ship be like

Shipper "Brothers your uncle fannys your aunt, there you are with two ships. The makings of your very own fleet. Course', you'll take the grandest as your flagship, and who's to argue? But of the Catkua, name me captain. I'll sail under your colours and give you ten percent of me booty and you get to introduce yourself as Commodore Lillet, savvy?"

Lillet: "I suppose in exchange you want me to not ship the whelp?"

Shipper: "no, no, no, by all means ship the whelp, just not yet. Wait to lift the curse for the opportune moment. For instance, after you've shipped Norrington's men. Every *clink* last *clink* one *clink*.

Shipee: "You've been planning this from the beginning! Ever since you learned my name!"

Shipper: "...yeah!"

Liliet: "I want fifty percent of your booty!"

Shipper: "Fifteen!"

Liliet: "Fourty!"

Shipper: "Twenty five! I'll buy you the hat. A reeeeeaaaly big one. Commodore."

Liliet: "We have an accord!"

caoimhinh

I have a screenshot of Commodore Liliet's fleet of ships, it includes ghost ships, one Dreadnought, a couple regular warships, one outright aberrant ship, and a wooden canoe.

Mind you, she probably has some unregistered pirate ships somewhere.

Check out the list here: <https://i.imgur.com/kxgzTk6.png>

Soma

Oh myyyyyyyyyyyyyyy

A grand fleet!

[Liliet](#)

Ok now I want to know which one's aberrant and which is the canoe...

caoimhinh

Well...

Catkua would be a Ghostship (Punintended).

IndranixCat + IndranixMasego is a mighty Dreadnought with long-range magic missiles and guided by Aspect-powered satellite vision and machine gun turrets on deck.

CatxRozala and CatxCordelia are a regular warship and a regular commercial ship with a bit of shady deals if one were to look at their accounts.

IndranixAkua would be that type of small but fast yacht that Narcos use to traffic cocaine while having a party full of booze and hot chics on the deck.

CatxLaurence is the aberrant one, of course.

CatXJuniper is the wooden canoe.

And I know you have at least one pirate ship, the CatxKairos. Plus the Viking raiding ship that is

JuniperxAisha, from which we are all unofficial crew members.

[Liliet](#)

Well, yeah, I forgot to mention JuniAisha, or rather, I was only listing Cat ships (Indrani/Akua counts bc that whole list is actually one big ship)

♥

Don't forget the last two are FRIEND ships. Cat/Juniper is a proud frigate sailing since book 1, and Juniper has even stopped being tsundere about it (they HUGGED in book 3!)

I'd argue you can also ship adopted family ships, which adds at least two more to the armada, but I know people ARE going to misinterpret it, intentionally or otherwise, and while I'm vaguely cool with that happening to the friend ships, I am very uncool with that happening to the family ships, so unnamed they will stay. I'll call them submarines ♥

Love your classification ♥

[Liliet](#)

Oh, and I'm not sure about Cat/Kairos. It just kind of shows up sometimes, but I know *I* didn't put it there. It's like the ship version of a stray cat you put out milk for. Is it yours? Arguable! Is it there? Most of the time, no! What's up with it? Ask when you learn to speak cat! Or ship, I guess! This metaphor kind of got away from me! Pirate speak? Arrrrrr?

Ariklus

Can a RobbIckler lesser lifeboat fit in the glorious fleet?

I still hope for a political consortry resulting in the creation of Lesser Footrest Tribe (creation ow which was sanctioned years ago)

[Liliet](#)

Just for the number of consonants in a row there, YES.

As a friend ship :3

[Liliet](#)

I feel like there's a lot more potential to be milked out of Catkua in-story, but tbh this being the ending (and Akua submitting to it willingly) would also be cool as shit, even if I'd mourn that...

IDK. I hope there's another solution >x>

[Liliet](#)

...oh. I reread the ending, and Cat says she wishes she had someone to consult on this, and even Akua would do. So the current dilemma is predicated on her not being there.

Death Knight

Akua's chain is no longer there but doesn't she also wield Night? Can't Sve Noc tell her "get ya thicc ass over here?" She is a shade after all I don't think getting her there will be an issue.

Andrew Mitchell

I really like this idea for a few reasons:

I'm pretty sure that Akua's redeemed by now, and giving her life for a very good cause may be just the end she needs. With the 100,000 lives she will save just by stopping the fall of this land, she may even balance the scales in her favour. And I think Akua needs to die eventually because otherwise Cat's giving up on an essential aspect of her Callowan identity (long prices).

It makes so much sense, Akua may even do it willingly and she wouldn't be hard to kill.

Thea

Maybe giving up on the long prices is what needs to happen though... Can't only change Praes to break the cycle.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed.

Cat's whole thing from the start was based on putting aside a grudge. "Okay fine the Black Knight conquered us and Praes are mean meanies who suck, now how do we be productive about this?"

Dainpdf

So apparently this is the third time Cat refuses a crown.

So I guess my Pattern of Three theory paid off, but in the wrong way? Unless Cat gets a queen name in some other way before this is over.

IDKWhoitis

She already has embodied the Black Queen role, and I think we don't see the markings of a Name because either

1) Names were the old method of gathering and using power, and Cat is all about breaking the old ways...

2) The Black Queen is a Name, but it is so new, that it doesn't have any accumulated power behind it, and Cat's natural nature is shaping the path (or lack thereof) of this new Name.

ActionKermit

The Black Queen was a proper Name, but Amadeus stopped Cat from taking it after Second Liesse.

[ayon96](#)

Amadeus's action resulted in dread empress not supporting cat's rule. Without her support Black Queen didn't have enough weight to become a proper name

[Liliet](#)

Considering Cat got literally crowned right afterwards and was able to extricate herself from the Dread Empress's influence specifically because of his actions (and the reason Malicia stopped supporting her WAS that she no longer was dependent on her)... I somehow don't think that's it.

What I think is that the "Black" part of her Name referred to Cat's colder, more vicious side, the part of her willing to fully live up to the "justifications matter only to the just" motto. The pivot in Liesse was, either she rejects Malicia's plan in favor of "rolling over for Hasenbach", as she so graciously put it at the time, and gives up on her forming crown... or she locks herself into the way of Evil by agreeing to go along with it.

Because of how extreme the hellfortress option was, the Name ended up taking shape as dark enough to completely break when the decision was taken away. It would have been the manifestation of Cat's darkest moment, given enough power to forever take her over and drag her down, with no option to crawl back up.

After Black broke Liesse, it did not take Cat long to realize that (1) he was not wrong narratively/practically speaking, and (2) fuck no. It really was the Darkest Hour,

the one moment of weakness at the lowest point, Cat's war fatigue playing a cruel joke on her and the rest of Creation.

(We all know that would have ended with at least a couple new Hellgates open on Calernia, don't we? Let's all give collective thanks to Auntie Bard and Uncle Amadeus for that being prevented from happening)

Anyway, that set the metaphysical/narrative meaning of "Black Queen" so that now p much no matter what Cat does she's not coming close to embodying it again, especially not after Everdark. She's only moving up and away, now.

shveiran

Sure, but I don't think that preventing a Name from forming prevents that Name from ever forming afterwards.

Cat will never be the Black Queen as in "Sovereign of Callow under the Tower", but she has been the Black Queen to friend and foe alike for books now. I could see her getting Black Queen as a Name that means "Lesser-evil, narrative-focused villain ruler" or something along those lines.

Dainpdf

1) Uh, maybe. "Priestess to earthly gods" is not exactly an innovation, though, so I don't think this holds up.

2) Hierophant was new and it had power. This doesn't hold water.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'd say a variation of 2: Black Queen might not be completely new (e.g., Heirophant wasn't considered novel, just unexpected), but no prior holder was more memorable than Cat herself.

Cat's exploits have simply taken over any prior stories about the name – at this point, any time anybody on Calernia tells a Black Queen story/joke/song/etc, it's a reference to Cat. And any future holder of the Name of Black Queen will be shaped by Cat's story.

Soma

Oof, human sacrifice reprise. This seems like a line Catherine was always going to come up against again. Curious to see how it plays out. I'm hoping the band stays okay, because I don't really want to see any of them die. I mean maybe the tyrant, but while he and the saint live there's still the chance of the saint and the tyrant buddy cop movie. He's a loose cannon, she's a loose canon, plot ensues.

Probably for the best the heroes didn't understand Catherine's speech. She's taking Evil in a very dangerous direction. Fear the reasonable madwoman.

Excellent chapter.

IDKWhoitis

I bet Tariq is going to get the summary from Mercy, and if anything, it's going to confirm his bone deep certainty that Cat needs to die by the end of this. She is a manifestation of every bloody lesson learned, a Black 2.0, which has gone beyond the cruel pragmatism of the Calamaties. Cat has gone beyond, breaking the Order of the world, and reshaping it into something new, never seen before.

Watching her in her element is terrifying enough, even without subtitles provided by Mercy. She just cowed a whole pack of hungry murderous creatures by shouting them down, and not with the fury of her god, but with a cruel battering with the truth. Even Kairos isn't being silly anymore and is as close to serious and honest as we've seen him this arc.

[Liliet](#)

But would Tariq really be unhappy with this?

Soma

Yeah, I mean unsettled I'd get. Hell, Cat just legit claimed to have to have created every fae court in existence. I'm not sure about unhappy though. The remaking of the Drow moves in a direction I think the Pilgrim would be down for, or more down for than what they are, since it would reduce suffering.

Micke

Pilgrim would think whatever his Choir or the Bard told him to think, and they are very much against their amusing game of mortal suffering being broken. It makes me suspect at least some Gods Below are in favour of breaking the cycle, just to spite Above.

[Liliet](#)

I think he *trusts* Bard, not "delegates his thinking to her". I frankly don't get where the "slavishly obedient Tariq" meme comes from, it has 0 support in the narrative, either from his current POVs or the flashbacks?

On top of Tariq being "the one long view hero they have", this also doesn't make sense in light of Bard's Role. She's forbidden direct touch, remember? She either acts as

an entirely neutral messenger, or confirms people's pre-existing conceptions in a way that nudges them to act the way she prefers. Being allowed to directly tell people "you are doing this wrong, let me explain the right way" and having them actually follow the advice would, coupled with her millennia of experience, give her immensely more power than she currently evidently wields.

And of course Choirs don't tell people what to think. On top of previous narrative evidence (hi William the idiot racist), recently we literally had Tariq try to ask them for input, only to get "NaN we trust YOU!!!" in response.

There IS no divine source of insight/instructions for Good champions to consult when in doubt. Life on Creation would be much easier if there was.

shveiran

I think the answer will be a pivotal moment for ol' Tariq.

Remember, both he and Saint have always operated under the assumption that Evil can be defeated.

Under that assumption, allowing the creation of a Black-inspired, sustainable, effective nation sworn to Goddesses bound to Below, is something he must strongly oppose, because it is the birth of a nation that must later be fought and conquered if Above is ever to triumph in Calernia. Within this assumption, Cat is terrifying; an ever growing manace who refuses to allow labels to restrict her options.

But that assumption is refuted by Cat and Black, and I think the guide will prove them right; as in, the game is rigged to go on in perpetuity, and there can be no eradication of either Good or Evil.

And I think the dialogue between Tariq and Asmodeus set the stage for a switch in perspective for the Pilgrim.

Under that assumption, what you can do as a Hero is not eradicate Evil, but rather groom the sustainable Evil (because if you squash them, more evil will rise in its stead and won't be the sensible kind, but rather the madman kind, and that is worse for people everywhere). Within this perspective, what Cat is doing is amazing. It opens the road for a nation of Below that focuses on excellence rather than constant mayhem, and you can't but consider it a huge step forward.

We know, I think, where Tariq's angel stand on the issue. And we know what the Bard preaches, since she dismissed William's doubt in book 2 to ensure he'd mind the label of Evil more than how sustainable the regime was.

Where will Tariq stand? By this point, I think it could go either way. And though I'm awful at predicting EE's twists, I think the story points toward a Pilgrim that embraces Cat's perspective and emends his attitude accordingly. Eventually.

konstantin von carstein

Excellent reflections! 😊

[Liliet](#)

I don't think Tariq's angels stand anywhere on this. Except if you put it as a "what eliminates unnecessary suffering", I suppose.

I wouldn't trust what Bard said to William all that much. Willy's kind of an idiot, she had to take him by the nose ring to lead him anywhere.

And finally, I don't normally nitpick typos, but this one just deserves correction: it's not Asmodeus, as in a demon or whatever, it's *Amadeus*, as in "love of God", because Guide is beautiful and gives no fucks ♥

shveiran

Yeah, I'm DMing Way of the Wicked for my D&D group, my Asmodeus is showing. I KEEP getting it wrong, sorry XD

Regarding the rest, I THINK we have HINTS of how the Bard and Choirs think on the matter by their actions in previous books.

I have no trouble admitting they ARE circumstantial, but still:

– The Bard's talk to William was still aimed to ensure he didn't consider long term benefits or the sustainability of the Evil empire and only focused on the Good vs. Evil war. William being easily manipulated, I feel, only reinforces the idea that the result was the Bard's aim => keep the conflict going. So I doubt a sustainable Firstborn nation that sings hymns to Sven Noc is acceptable in their views.

– As for the Angels... I mean, let's leave William aside, the fact remains that the Hashmallim was willing to play ball. We are told it did in the past. Combine that with the glimpse we got with the fledgling paladin the choirs tried to recruit mid-fight, and I don't think it's a stretch to say that the Angels are more focused on smiting evildoers than worldpeace. I'll be surprised if the angels support the creation of a drow country.

[Liliet](#)

You are thinking of angels as a well coordinated hivemind, and one that has involved opinions on the specifics of mortal politics to boot. I don't think the text supports this reading.

shveiran

I think the cordinated hivemind, or something along those lines, is rather canon, so I'm guessing you disagree on them being hands on?

I don't think they have" precise opinion on the specifics of mortal politics" either, but I'd argue they don't need to in order to oppose Cat's designs. When you get down to it, a general inclination is all you need. Something like "Oppose all Evil " or "Prevent Evil from taking deeper root in reality" is enough to veto the building of a Firstborn country, and it does seem in tune with what we saw of the angels.

I simply think the angels fight to WIN the struggle between Good and Evil, and that is it as far as I'm concerned: if that is your goal, Cat's objective is something to oppose.

Andrew Mitchell

I'm not taking a position in this argument but I am interested in this comment:

> I think the cordinated hivemind, or something along those lines, is rather canon,

It seems to me that many people in the comment section would agree with you, I feel like that common feeling could be satisfactorily explained by our (mostly) shared culture about angels rather than actually being canon.

Do you think this is a just feeling you've developed (and share with others) or if there's something in the text that actually makes this canon?

[Liliet](#)

>I think the cordinated hivemind, or something along those lines, is rather canon

Every Choir within itself is a coordinated hivemind. Individual Choirs are separate though. Mercy and Judgement can disagree, Contrition and

Compassion can disagree. They're probably not aware of what other Choirs are doing, either.

>I simply think the angels fight to WIN the struggle between Good and Evil

And I think the angels work to promote their virtue, to support heroes who they identify as embodying it in all their designs, and that's kind of... it.

Again, see: William. His entire storyline, starting from Cat branding his Name, was about how he was really fucking easy to lead by the nose, *and the angels weren't taking up the vacancy.*

shveiran

(I'll answer to both comments here to keep the discussion from branching too much)

Regarding the angels being Hiveminds, I honestly think this is how they were presented. It was not STATED in a definitive way, so I will admit there is a bit of uncertainty, but I think there is a lot of evidence in this regard.

Within a single Choir, angels don't even have singular names, and that points toward them being parts of something larger. We also know that when an angel dies, the Choir is not diminished as its power is a constant.

I think this is more us building on the provided clues than mistaking tropes with canon. I could be wrong, of course, but as of now I see no elements in the story that suggest it.

Also, yes, I meant they have one mind for each Choir. We are of one (Hive)mind in that regard.

Regarding Angels, I'm not sure which part of William's story you are pointing out as an example.

Even intervening Choirs have limits, because if they push too hard Below gets to push back, so I think there are several reasons why they didn't intervene more directly when William was branded, when William was defeated by Warlock or when Cat was pulling her sword-in-stone BS-fu; first among them, the shape of the story was too wrong, and that meant fighting against the current and therefore too high a cost.

There is also the fact that Contrition was not advising William like Mercy is Tariq: they were

empowering him through the Feather sword. A different blessing, but they can't give them all to each Hero.

The fact that limitations exist to their action doesn't mean there isn't an agenda.

And sure, they operate through Heroes, and sure, they pick Heroes that follows their key virtue, I'm not disputing that. It's just...

Well, it's not JUST about the virtues though, is it? It really seems Heroes tend to fight Evil more than they do evil.

I mean, take Contrition. During the William arch, we are told what would happen if Contrition manifested in a city, and that it has already happened before. And the result is a city-worth of people not just feeling contrite and embracing a new way of life because of that truth – it is a city worth of people taking up arms to fight the closest, biggest Evil there is.

I have an hard time believing virtues are enough for the Choir; it seems to me they think the only real way to live up to those virtues is slaying villains or villain's minions, and therefore that the most important thing is still the GvE war.

[Liliet](#)

>Well, it's not JUST about the virtues though, is it? It really seems Heroes tend to fight Evil more than they do evil.

I mean, virtues are... kind of tied to that? It's about virtues (good intentions!) and not being a follower of Below, two cutoff criteria narrowing the possibility space so that the worst case scenario is William.

>it seems to me they think the only real way to live up to those virtues is slaying villains or villain's minions

That's not the vibe I got off Mercy; they came to Tariq the first time when he put an injured beast out of its suffering and returned to him the second when he killed his nephew (a Good ruler of a Good nation, but one who would have led them to a catastrophe).

Which, were both, killings, so I, kind of see your point, now that I look at it.

Still, Hanno's crystallization moment was *refusing* to condemn a minion of Below committing an undeniably Evil act.

And yes, by Choir hivemind I mean they're not *all a single hivemind*, not that individual Choirs aren't. I agree that individual Choirs obviously are, I just think they're independent from there and it's possible for them to be at odds, even, if their champions disagree on the course of action.

Andrew Mitchell

Well said. 😊

werafdsaew

If killing Drows is free according to Pilgrim's utilitarian calculus, then sure. Otherwise if he would rather not have to kill any sentient beings then he would be behind what Cat is doing.

[Liliet](#)

I think they count as morally relevant sentient beings, yeah. We know from Willicakes' storyline that anti-nonhuman racism isn't very popular with heroes on average even against literal cannibals they're at war with right now.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> while he and the saint live there's still the chance of the saint and the tyrant buddy cop movie. He's a loose cannon, she's a loose canon, plot ensues.

Also property damage and body count. 😊

IDKWhoitis

A damn shame they didn't strap Larat onto the throne and dice him up...

Although nonetheless a good call.

I'm placing my bet on a throw at the dice and breaking the crown and harvesting the power for another ritual. Catherine has forsaken the crown, and one of the heroes isn't going to put it on... And we all know how much Cat loves throwing the dice into Fate's face and seeing what results of the endeavour.

Agent J

Yet if the dice, finicky as they often are, should turn against them then everyone dies. Everyone. Not just the three armies,

not just the people still living in Iserre, but everyone in the Dead King's path. Y'know, since the only army with a shot at stopping him just fucked themselves royally.

Yes, Cat loves throwing the dice at Fate, but only after rigging it to explode. Right now, it's more likely to blow in her face instead.

Honestly, my money's on Pilgrim. Wait, strike that. He just gave up the right to Rule literally seconds ago. Kairos sure as shit won't get it. Catherine's refused it. Saint is unlikely. She's not the self-sacrifice type (wouldn't be an old hero if she were prone to that), nor is she the ruling sort. Besides, her soulsword will be needed against the Hidden Horror.

That just leaves Roland and he's too... well no. He's not *enough*. We don't know him enough. We don't care about him enough. He just doesn't have enough weight for something like this. I mean, he doesn't even know Higher Arcana. Wtf dude. You're a serious downgrade from Masego.

I've no clue where EE's going with this, but I'm loving every moment of this wild ride.

Andrew Mitchell

Pilgrim could take it. He won't be ruling for long and the curse takes a while to take effect.

But Saint is actually a good option. Rook made an excellent case early on in the comments, worth reading if you haven't already.

Sylwoos

Pilgrim gave up his right to rule to create the very crown you want him to take. Being Fae stuff made of stories and all, I highly doubt he can even claim it and if he did the consequence would be... very, very bad.

caoimhinh

But if the ones throwing the Dice are Heroes, then Providence and Narrative would be on their side. And right now they are the Party trying to save everyone, ergo the good guys, the heroes of that story.

It could work, they have the narrative weight to make it happen.

That's also a thing to consider.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Providence maybe, but Pilgrim has learned at some pain that just because he's a hero doesn't mean he can play fast-and-loose with the Narrative.

You know, if Larat is really mortal now, they can indeed salvage it for another ritual. They have Spellblade, Thief of Stars,, maybe Edward VII, Cat, Tyrant of Helike (if he dies), maybe Black; one more crown to shape it and they can reroll.

Of course, that is contingent on anyone, not just Larat, being able to forge a crown; on them finding the last one and a claimant to it before the realm crashes onto the armies below; on the Tyrant not being warned about the possibility by the Bard. Still, while unlikely, the growing ball of crowns would be fun.

Mental Mouse

Except this realm has already had a crown forged for it. No take-backs, no do-overs. 😊

TeK

It is going to be the Hero, ain't it? It is basically "there must always be a Lich King" all over again.
Please don't kill Pilgrim, he's my favorite pony.

nimelennar

Can't be Pilgrim: he's given up the right to rule.

TeK

He doesn't have to rule, just be crowned and knifed. When they explained what giving that up entails, they mentioned that another crown COULD be taken...

Just that the consequences would be disastrous. So yeah, he probably will not die. Yay?

Sparsebeard

It's probably Black, as many said last chapters...

After all :

"They say the third step is the cruelest,
Walk when the moon is at her clearest:
Love ends with the kiss of the knife,
Trust is the wager that takes your life"

Thea

But they already need Black for ruling Praes...

Morgenstern

And it has been stated many times in the story already that there is NO ONE to replace Black for that purpose. While there are still many peeps left over who could act as the claimant for that crown.

Morgenstern

That third verse would make brilliant sense, too, if it ended up with Indrani / Masego. Poor crappy love story ending in drama. I mean, he's already robbed of something he at least currently believes he cannot live without (and she does so, too), so...

Sparsebeard

If Black is alive, Cat won't climb the tower so how the hell can the third verse make sense in that context.

Despite Cat's efforts, it always was foreshadowed that she'd kill her mentor and climb the tower... Plus, she already stated that between her ambitions and Black, she'd choose her ambitions.

Plus, Cat might actually be an even more acceptable Ruler for Praes than everyone else (especially since she didn't torch half Procer).

Since the drow are not an option, I truly don't see anyone else as "worthy" in the vicinity.

Zgggt

Pilgrim won't take the crown because he would be stuck with the price. The point of him is that he never pays any direct personal price. Someone else always has to sacrifice themselves, or get maimed, or die. Tariq might not like watching it, and might even wish he could do it himself, but that's like losing your legs but saying that you want to fight in a pro MMA match even if you would get beat up... Nice thing to say in theory, and hey, you might even mean it.

Unoriginal

He always pays the personal price. He's a brutal utilitarian bent of minimizing suffering, and every time he causes it in the pursuit of lowering suffering overall he suffers the same pain that the victims go through.

Perhaps not every time, we have no hint that happens when he fights using 'mundane' methods but we know that when he 'cast' plague on the town that Black was occupying to kill the army with him. The Pilgrim suffered the same as every single person who died from the disease, taking their suffering into himself as the price for doing so.

JJR

But that means if he tries to rule any way a curse will destroy the kingdom that he was attempting to rule. And that is kinda what they want right now. The curse was supposed to be a more subtle thing sure, crop failures and the like, building up to more extreme things. But I'm sure it can work with a group of people bent on killing the usurper. Plus, they would have to contend with the fact that anyone who does wear the crown, no matter their intentions before hand, is going to be changed by it. So ideally they would want someone who would put it on and then let themselves be killed, but having a backup "Narrative itself will make you lose this fight" is a good idea.

That or they could still put it on the goat. A scapegoating if you will. I'm not sure how well that story turns out though.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> But I'm sure it can work with a group of people bent on killing the usurper.

That... is a possibility. The question is whether they can shape and extinguish the curse that way, or if it would instead become inherent in the realm.

superkeaton

Hm, tricky tricky.

Oshi

I wonder when the Bard will appear. This of course is what she planned. All to end an alliance in it's bed.

Ashen Shugar

Makes you wonder how well the Bard can see/predict the future. If she saw this coming from Larat and thus made sure Masego wasn't going to be in any condition to give expert advice in what they could/should do.

Andrew Mitchell

"You would have us pin our hopes on amity and mercy," Andronike said.

...

"They might turn on us regardless," Andronike said.

Well done EE, this has some very clear parallels to Catherine's decision to pin her life and her hopes on the Sisters' mercy.

=====

>"So either we roll the dice over the life of around two hundred thousand people," I grimly said. "Or someone puts on that crown and then we kill them."

They're going to kill Pilgrim. He can take the crown, he just won't have the right to rule. And he won't be Twilight King for long.

konstantinvoncarstein

Or crown Amadeus.

Morgenstern

Pilgrim is not needed (as ruler) on Calernia. Black is. Unless Cat were suddenly okay with a Praes reverting back to insane Emperors and Empresses destroying everything and returning to the bloody cycle with Callow. She was rather clear that she does NOT trust Akua with that and also none else (who would do it and be accepted enough).

[Fayhem](#)

He isn't needed as a *ruler* for Cat's plans, but he is *needed*. Nobody else has both the cultural weight and the basic sanity to drag the Levantines to the table for the Liesse Accords. Do you really want Cat to have to try to talk sense to the Lords/Ladies of the Blood by interacting with them directly? Because while I don't have the turbo-hate for them that I've seen a lot of other people express in the comments, it is still the case that literally nothing I've seen in their POVs suggests that would be anything other than a bloody disaster. At every stage, a core desideratum in Cat's plans has been "I've got to keep the Pilgrim alive, there's no substitute for the role he occupies in my plans". That hasn't changed now.

Abstract

I am liking Larat more and more.
Despite having no free will, he has managed to escape Arcadia, cat's machinations, and walk away a free man, without fear of

reprisals in the short term.
damn fine show.

RoflCat

I mean, the man just wanted to be free from the cycle.

I would too once I realize if I remain a fae then Ranger will come visit every cycle for the eye.

Andrew Mitchell

Me too. 😊

I think he's got free will now.

[Fayhem](#)

> I think he's got free will now.

Which is terrifying. Cat ditched being fae because she realized it made her *more* dangerous, not less (well, among other reasons). Pretty sure Larat made a similar calculation. He didn't change his personality, he just expanded his options. Larat is still very much in play as a Chekhov's Noun, and the danger factor for whatever he pulls in future just increased wildly IMO.

Faiir

He could be the star of his own spinoff series!

Andrew Mitchell

That's what fanfiction is for. AFAIK there hasn't been any PGtE fanfiction written yet apart from a couple of short scenes in the comments. This is a tragedy.

OmniscientQ

On Spacebattles resides the only Practical Guide fanfiction I'm aware of: A cross-over with Worm titled "A Practical Guide to Escalation".

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks! Back to Spacebattles I go, after not visiting there for many months. 😊

Andrew Mitchell

Hmmm it seems there is a bit more than that one. 😊 😊 I'm happy!!

There's "An Impractical Guide to Ascension" as well. And a few more one-shots. Check this search:

<https://www.google.com/search?q=spacebattles+practical+guide+to+evil+site:forums.spacebattles.com>

Shin_Splinters

It was pretty badass, a creature made of thought and power betting that thought would be sufficient and abdication let him escape the restrictions of power.

"Cogito ergo" got high stakes in there.

danh3107

Cat's speech was, for lack of better terms, fucking awesome.

If you'll excuse my language.

Andrew Mitchell

Excused.

Sparsebeard

It will probably be Black, after all, the girl will climb the tower...

"They say the third step is the cruelest,
Walk when the moon is at her clearest:
Love ends with the kiss of the knife,
Trust is the wager that takes your life "

caoimhinh

Awesome speech. Someone should add it to the speech section of the Guide on TV Tropes.

The Drow and Sve Noc are learning to be more pragmatic in their ways, cool. They are going to need that if they want to survive in the world and prove that they aren't crazy stupid Evil that needs to be put down.

They need to crown someone and kill that person.
Maybe get Akua there and finally end her? That could be a good solution, but she is still useful to Catherine (not to mention Cat has come to like her) and she needs a strong spellcaster to handle the Night spells (as evidenced with the Eclipse made by the well of Night, which is still in effect), political advisor and schemer on her side for the campaign ahead and political mess ahead.

The other interesting and more likely candidate is Good King Edward Fairfax, assuming he hasn't collapsed already.

He would suit this Court of Twilight, as he is a Good Hero made into a Revenant by Evil and then granted freedom by Night to fight against the Enemy. He has quite a few elements from both Above and Below in his story, so he is (in my opinion) a suitable Twilight King.

He is also likely to understand the necessities of the role and make it a willing sacrifice, perhaps even making the nature of the new realm into a better thing than if the ruler is brutally murdered.

Soma

King Edward would make for a super satisfying ending. Spitting on all of Death's work till the very end. I very much like the shape of him getting in some real vengeance against the dead king more so than just becoming free. The twilight king gave his life to spite Death.

I waaaaaaaaaant it.

Andrew Mitchell

I'm pretty sure Edward is no more. I don't think he lasted long after he called up all the Liesse spirits.

caoimhinh

Last we saw him he was still around, so we really can't be sure.

He must be in terrible shape, that's for sure.

Also, remember that time is flowing strangely in that place, due to the power of Narrative and Providence.

Andrew Mitchell

> Last we saw him he was still around, so we really can't be sure.

Agreed, that's why I said "pretty sure". It's hard to be certain but I give it a 1:20 chance you're right. It seemed to me like Edward's short term fate was quite clear and we don't have to always get to see deaths on-screen. Plus, to me, it would feel unsatisfying for Edward to come back after he chose what seemed to be certain death.

caoimhinh

Well, coming back by claiming the Twilight Crown IS certain death still.

Andrew Mitchell

True. 😊

Fayhem

> It's hard to be certain but I give it a 1:20 chance you're right.

So in other words, he just needs to roll a nat 20 and he's good. I'll take those odds. Remember, for once providence is backing Cat's team here.

antoninjohn

I still think Cat should take the Crown

Agent J

Mortal always.

Squire!Cat was cool. Winter!Cat was awesome. Priestess!Cat has been an absolute fucking riot and I'm loathe to relinquish her, be it for a new Name or a new Court.

Kissaten

...this is when Robber comes in and steals the Crown under everyone's noses

Andrew Mitchell

♥ ♥ ♥

Sugar Roll

And while Catherine was making that speech, Ivah already grabbed the crown and disappeared.

On a more serious note, give it to the Heirarch and kill him. He must be somewhere in the area.

konstantinvoncarstein

Do you really want a madman who want to destroy the Gods Below in charge of the highway?

konstantinvoncarstein

But I agree that he has to die

Sugar Roll

They're planning to murder the person who gets the crown immediately. If you're going to have someone killed, why not take the opportunity to remove someone dangerous off the board.

caoimhinh

Anaxares would never take a crown for himself.
They would need to kill him first to make him become King,
which defeats to purpose of having him crowned before killing
him.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I'm damned sure even his soulless corpse would rise in
rebellion against itss own coronation.

Richard Ngo

My guess is... Masego! Once he wakes up and realises he has no
magic.

[Liliet](#)

No

[Mental Mouse](#)

Goddamn, Cat may have given up Winter, but even so she's
seriously chill!

> the moment the fae ... took a step away from the throne I had to
speak up.
> Seed of madness in the crown was my guess, putting an original
sin at the heart
> High above us, Sve Noc lazily circled the sky. Yet another fire
I was going to have to put out
> "Pilgrim," I calmly said. "I don't think you appreciate how
delicate the situation is right now."
> if I found offence with the faith ... , who but me could be
charged with the change of it?

The Tuesdays are ganging up on her, but she's managing anyway. 😊

shveiran

Ok, so apparently I was royally wrong.
Both on them no longer needing to stab the crowned individual,
and on the Mighty not being an issue.

And boy, am I glad I was, 'cause this was fucking awesome.

Leave it to EE to always deliver not what you think you want, but
what you don't know you need.

[Liliet](#)

SAME

Bakkasama

I would have thought the pick to be obvious. Since the crown was made so that the one to wear it would die and give it up to defeat the Death King, the worthiest one would be that Plproceran princess who didn't hesitate to give up her crown willingly to beat the hidden horror and was deemed the worthiest among the princes to keep it because of it.

[Liliet](#)

And that would be a good idea because?...

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Uh, that would just be saying "ur a cool dudette but soz cuz u were cool now u die"

ThatOneGuy

Long story short. They need someone to ease the crown to murder... But if someone does wear it then they could rule a dead empty realm with nothing inside of it.

Give it a few years and they will want company even if they have to start taking people. Then it's a slow fall from grace and a rise towards the old, but slight fresher minted brand of fae.

The old fae have the crown a middle finger walking away so that they could be unbound and do whatever they want. So taking up the crown doesn't add them to the pot.

ninegardens

Quick, give the shiny hat to Wandering Bard!

Okay, on a more serious note:

Why do they need to murder whoever takes the crown? I was assuming the plan to Murderize Larat was because ... well, he's Larat. Ain't no one want that boy with power.

If it ain't Larat I'm a little hazy on the compelling need to murder Twilight Princess.

Also, who thinks that Akua would make a fitting bearer of the crown?

A chance for her to experience godhood, and also face the judgement promised to her, here in the ruins of the city she destroyed. Akua's folly would be remember for generations to come (because of the highway), and depending on the ending it would either be a perfect redemption arc, or a last chance at trechery (which would, in the circumstances be relatively justified).

Also, Cat mentioned the mantel of Woe being nearby just now, so that's a cool thing.

[Liliet](#)

The mantle was with Masego, who was spirited away to the camp by the drow.

I'd write a detailed explanation of why I don't think Akua dying here is the best option for guide as a story, but I'm on mobile and tired. Maybe tomorrow.

The tl;dr is that it's better than she deserves.

ninegardens

Yeah, I agree, I don't actually believe that Akua is a **LIKELY** candidate for the crown... I was just mentioning her as a character that we have largely forgotten, that would somewhat fit all the **IN STORY** requirements for the crown (Namely, Cat could give her power and then stab her in clean conscience).

From a narrative perspective, no. Akua is too fun, too useful, and hasn't been hinted at throughout the arc, so it wouldn't work at all.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Akua isn't bound to the mantle anymore – she was back in Creation anyway, but if needed she could easily come back through the Night. That said, I agree this isn't the best option story-wise, in part because she wasn't a part of this story. (That's considering the Shard arc as separate from the preceding battle.) Also, it seems an anticlimax from her perspective... "I gained trust and power as a ghostly servant, until one day my mistress decided to sacrifice me to the Greater Good".

[Mental Mouse](#)

Come to think of it, putting it that way means that by Cat's lights, the available candidates are pretty much Laurence, Kairos, and possibly Cat herself (breaks some of her goals, but she's got that self-sacrificing thing going).

[Liliet](#)

No, this would actually be very elegant wrt Akua. How exactly did she "not come up" when they are **IN LIESSE**? Remember that aborted conversation about how Roland heard that Cat bound her soul to the array and then destroyed it? Remember the whole "restless souls" thread? Remember how they're in the Ducal Palace, which is incidentally where Akua died in the first place?

From the perspective of the story of the Doom of Liesse, this is anything **BUT** random. It's tying up her arc with a neat bow, made queen of the very place she killed only to be

killed in turn / willing sacrifice to save two hundred thousand where she had previously killed one hundred thousand (and change).

It would be the ultimate fulfillment of her drive to be noticed, to be remembered, to leave her own unique mark on Creation – she was willing to die for it back when she first MADE the thing, because she was smart enough to understand how low the odds of her surviving the decade were. The argument of Cat being a perfect storm she wants to ride was the one Cat accepted in Everdark as an explanation of her behaviour for a reason – it's THE drive compelling her.

In short, Akua getting sacrificed here would be all about HER – all about the *old* her, to boot, with a slapped-on coat of surface “redemption” for glory.

Her full redemption arc has more potential than that, and step one is her learning to recognize value in things that are not about her at all.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Certainly Akua has been mentioned along the way... and yet, Cat declined to take her along on this ride (possibly because she'd already been assigned to run an eclipse). She's surely been helping with all the movements through Night from her “back room” back in Creation, but she's carefully not done anything that would have revealed the continued existence of the Doom of Liesse to the rest of the party..

There's probably only two people present (Cat and Archer) who know that Akua the former Heiress and Diabolist still exists in *any* form; if Cat called her up as a sacrifice, that's the first thing they'd have to explain to Pilgrim, Sword, etc, and they don't even have an hour for that. 😊

[Liliet](#)

I mean I doubt the heroes would demand an explanation when the entire province is running out of time :p

Honestly, this is kind of the upside. Akua just appearing like “no time to explain, have fun going ??? on your own time” is like half the appeal of this scenario ♥

[Mental Mouse](#)

Cat would still need to discuss the matter with Akua, and again, there's less than an hour.

Niteman

I think it will be Masego who dons the crown of Twilight. He lost his fathers, now he's lost his magic. Losing his fathers broke him enough to let the Dead King in, now he's lost his magic which is a major component of his identity. the Dead King used him like a puppet and killed Indrani and he's unable to do anything in his current state to make the Dead King pay for it. Donning the crown would enable him to bring order to the realm and stabilize it which would help his friend Cat and also would be used as a tool in the war against the Dead King. For someone who likely feels completely useless right now, it could seem like the logical choice to help his friends and punish the foe who used him.

[Javvies](#)

Except that Masego is (a) unconscious and likely to remain unconscious until Cat decides to wake him up, and (b) no longer physically present.

Masego isn't going to be taking up the Twilight Crown.

Now, if Cat or Archer were to take up the Twilight Crown and not need to be killed, I could perhaps see one of them giving Masego a Twilight Court Title or otherwise empowering him through the Twilight Court.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

What if she puts on the crown and pulls some Name-dream shenanigans?

Masterofbones

All hail Discordia!

Andrew Mitchell

Hail Eris!!

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yay, hot dogs tomorrow!

The lady doth protest too much, methinks

Really though, why not Cat? She's good at dying

Andrew Mitchell

She *has been* good at dying but... she's already had three and the next one could be her last. Plus, I get the feeling that dying

here is a permanent sort of death given the 'highway' the band want to make.

Javvies

Yeah, but I'm still not seeing why killing the person holding the Twilight Crown is being considered an automatic necessity here.

When it was Larat, sure, murder his ass thoroughly so he can't fuck with them ...

But I don't know why they'd need to murder, say, Cat, if she had the Twilight Crown, in order for the highway plan to work. I fully get why Saint would want to kill Cat at that point (even more than she already does), and why Rogue Sorcerer and Pilgrim would be cautious and probably suspicious of Cat/Cat's motives, but I don't get why killing Cat, Sovereign of Twilight, would be required to use the realm as a highway.

Andrew Mitchell

Cat was pretty clear on needing the bones. This is the last line of <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/04/26/chapter-32-woven-weaver/>

Sure, "bones" is almost certainly metaphorical but it's clear that the new fae god needs to die.

Javvies

At the time, she was referring to Larat.

And killing him to get him out of the way makes sense.

He's a murderous nutjob on a good day, after all.

But I'm not at all sure why killing a Twilight!Cat or a Twilight!Hero would be a necessary component in using the realm as a highway. That hasn't been explained as far as I can tell.

Andrew Mitchell

You're quite right that the 'why' hasn't been explained. But the bones quote is evidence that it is needed.

shveiran

Also, last line of this chapter reads:

"So either we roll the dice over the life of around two hundred thousand people," I grimly said. "Or someone puts on that crown and then we kill them."

I AM confused as of the why, and I was previously advocating they no longer needed to do it, but it seems Cat believes it firmly.

And I don't know about you, but *I* am not going to argue with Cat.

Girl is scary.

Chapter 48: Swan Song (Redux)

"Beware of deep passions, for great love may turn in hatred just as great."

– Hesperos the Tepid, Atalantian preacher

Less than an hour was left before the sky fell down on Iserre, and three great armies were broken and buried. How many people were down there, right now? I'd off-handedly said two hundred thousand, but with the League's armies it had to be more than that. Three hundred? It didn't matter, I thought. Their deaths were simply not the kind of blow Calernia could recover from in less than fifty years, if even that. To anchor this realm and wrest it out of the precipitous fall, Twilight could have three outcomes" a crown-bearer, one's corpse or a shattered crown. If there was to be a crowning it'd have to be one of us, I admitted to myself. None aside from the band of five I'd assembled and our guide in Archer, the fateful sixth, had the required weight to bring this to an end. We'd been the ones to storm the Dead King's holdfast, to destroy the shard of him and to face against the clever fox who'd turned it all around on us. It *had* to be us, didn't it? I could feel the current of the story and fighting against it too forcefully would only lead to failure. If I tried to bring out Akua, whose ties to this place and murderous legacy ran deeper than anyone else's, I suspected she would simply not arrive in time. In a place like this, where the rules of Creation ran so thin they could be twisted and snapped, having the story going the other way was a stone around your neck. The flipping of an hourglass would tell me near nothing about how far dawn was, while the rising tension of the choice having to be made would be almost exact a measure.

Crescendo awaited, climax, and cheating it would be tricky business.

"There is no choice to be made at all," the Rogue Sorcerer said with forced calm. "We must shatter the crown. Anything else would be odious."

There'd been a time I knew, where I would have agreed with him. But it'd been a few years since I'd last had the luxury to think

that way – right and wrong, untouched by practicalities such as risk and consequence. Which was the greater wickedness, I wondered: the killing of one at the altar, or to gamble hundreds of thousands of lives on odds unclear?

“I have heard it told in rumour,” the Tyrant of Helike said, “that our friend the Peregrine can offer solace through resurrection. One after each dawn, the rumour goes, forgiving the mistakes that came before it.”

And there went Kairos, pivoting from pest to useful because he was simply too clever to remain a distraction that all would agree on throwing out when it was all coming to a close. I suspected he would act the wise and sagacious ally, from now on, simply to ease everyone’s well-earned urge to toss him out on his ass and close the doors behind him. Exhausted as the rest of us, Kairos Theodosian had a worsening purple bruise where I’d very satisfyingly decked him in the face, but otherwise no real injuries. Still, from the way his limbs had taken to twitching under the robes you’d think he was the worst off among us. Whatever sickness it was he’d been born to, it was debilitating whenever the protection of his Name waned. I followed the villain’s gaze as it turned to Tariq, adding my weight to the unspoken question: if someone sat the throne and let themselves be slain, could the Pilgrim raise them anew after dawn? The white-haired man cocked his head to the side, as if listening to words only he could hear. He, too, had old monsters to ask answer of.

“It is uncertain,” the Peregrine admitted. “There are some deaths not even my prayers can forgive, and to die on the altar for the sake of others might be one such.”

The old man glanced meaningfully at Indrani, who in deference to the seriousness of the situation had been keeping her mouth shut.

“I cannot bring back those departed twice,” he warned. “No matter the circumstances.”

I’d had absolutely no intention of letting anyone so much as shake a knife in Archer’s direction, but that was good to know. My friend had already died one tonight so, as far as I was concerned, she’d more than paid the dues she hadn’t even owed.

“Might be this is obvious to the rest of you,” Indrani slowly said, “yet why aren’t we simply having someone put on the fancy hat and stay alive? That ought to do the trick.”

I grimaced. The Saint spat to the side.

“There’ll be no founding of a court in service to Below on my watch, girl,” Laurence de Montfort bluntly said. “The terms of

this truce were that there would be a breaking, not a coronation."

"It would be preferable to the cold-blooded murder of an ally," the Rogue Sorcerer flatly said.

"Think beyond keeping your pretty hands clean, boy," the Saint harshly said. "Consider the centuries of blood and suffering that would come from the birth of this Court of Twilight."

"Ah, but the courts of Arcadia was so troublesome for they had many stories, many titled among their number," Kairos idly said. "It need not be so for Twilight. A single brow bearing a crown, and nothing else. Power held yet going without exercise."

His tone had been idle, but there'd been something to it that had me clenching my fingers. He was half in love with the notion already, I could tell. And I could see how it'd appear to the Tyrant of Helike: then moment of temptation forever continued, principled restraint that might yet be broken by the right word or tragedy. And as for the rest of us, none would get what they truly wanted save a life spared. Or, as Kairos was likely to see it, yet another foe slighted and spared. To him, it'd be the loveliest of endings. And Gods forgive me, but I was more inclined to it than a killing. There was no one here that could have their throat carved open without a bloody mess following, greater good or not. If it was a hero and the Saint survived, she'd carry that grudge like a blade pointed at my back until one of us died. If it was the Saint herself, the lengths Tariq had gone to for the preservation of her life would find themselves tossed in the mud before so much as the first signature was put to the Liesse Accords. It was a thinning of foundation where I needed it to be firm. There'd be no talk of Indrani going through this, and while before the end I suspected I'd be put before a choice like this I would not walk the altar path when there was so much work left to be done. Martyrdom without groundwork was vanity, nothing less and nothing more.

It was a possibility, I thought, to force that crown onto Kairos' head and slit his throat. One I'd seriously consider, but the Tyrant had bargained back his life from the Bard and the Pilgrim seemed set on respecting this. Would it be worth it, I asked myself, to cross him on this? It might be too much of a risk. The Rogue Sorcerer might come out either way, given his scraps with the Tyrant, and Archer would be at my side through Crown and Tower but the other two? The Saint was most likely to see the practicality in bleeding Kairos, but she often deferred to the Pilgrim over calls like these and she'd be just as eager to take a swing at me. The Tyrant's reaction was arguably the most predictable and least worrisome, for though he'd attempt escape he wouldn't take it personally in the slightest. No, I finally decided. The odds were too stiff and the cause too red. Even if I

got away with it I'd leave scars, the kind that'd come back to bite me down the line, and our alliance was too young not to be mangled by something like this. Gods, sometimes working with Above's people felt like shackles around my wrists. They just had so many *rules*. Even making a discreet inquiry as to the nature of the truce agreed on by Bard could feasibly do damage here, I reluctantly acknowledged, so it was best to set aside the notion entirely. Unless the Tyrant betrayed us once more, at which point the chops would be back on the damned plate.

He wouldn't though, I thought as I he offered me a bright and knowing smile. Kairos had a finger on the pulse here, on the underlying currents, and he had no intention of giving me an excuse. I smiled back, and it did not reach my eyes.

"That's a pot forever on the edge of tipping," the Saint growled. "I'll not have it."

"If your issue is with a villain bearing the crown, then I will do so myself," Roland said.

"That sounds lovely," the Tyrant grinned. "Indeed, what is one more elaborate lie when one is at the very heart of who you are, Sorcerer? You've my seal of approval."

The hero paled, to my surprise. What was it that Kairos had found out about him? Pilgrim and Saint shared a weighty look and Tariq cleared his throat.

"You are too young for such a burden," the Peregrine delicately said.

Ouch, I thought. That had *had* to sting. Having the closest thing to your side of the Game's communal wise grandfather essentially telling you he didn't think you'd be able to take it if you stepped into the fire. The Rogue Sorcerer tried to hide his flinch, but he was among the least skilled of the liars here.

"If the Grey Pilgrim wants to take the crown, I'll make my peace with it," I conceded.

"You sound like you're making a concession, Foundling," the Saint harshly said. "When what you're doing is giving Below a path to one of the most powerful heroes alive. Shut your damned-"

"Tariq tossed his own crown into the bag, dearest friend," the Tyrant idly interrupted. "So if he takes one up now with the intent of ruling, who knows what manners of wickedness may come of it? We must think of the children, Catherine."

Indrani choked at the last sentence, sending Kairos an admiring glance that had the villain overtly preening. Aside from the theatrics, he'd actually made sense. It might be that Tariq would

be reclaiming the right to rule he'd discarded, by putting on that crown. Or it might be something else entirely, and a disaster in the making. We couldn't take the risk.

"Even if I were willing to let that much power fall into the Saint's hands, I doubt she would be willing to take it," I said.

"You won't be getting your hooks in any of us," Laurence de Montfort bluntly said.

"It cannot be you, Queen Catherine," Tariq apologetically said. "I yet remember your... brittle temperament as Queen of the Hunt. I cannot in good conscience make bargains with such a creature."

I grimaced. Well, he wasn't entirely wrong. I suspected I'd handle apotheosis a lot better if the crystallization of it didn't come from one of the worst days of my life, but there was no real way to know. And it'd be a lie to pretend the notion of claiming that sort of mantle again was anything but repulsive to me. I'd put power over the rest before, and we'd none of us come out the better for it. Slow learner as I was, I would not claim to be *that* slow.

"I claim only one crown, and hardly forever," I said.

"While I would be delighted to lend a hand -" the Tyrant of Helike began.

"No," I said.

"No," Tariq said.

"Hah," Indrani snorted.

The Saint's hand simply went down to her sword.

"- yes, that," Kairos said, sounding a touch chagrined. "Which leaves only one among us."

"Kairos," I mildly said, "did we not once have a conversation on the subject of you taking a swing at my people and the consequences of such an act?"

"It is... possible," the Grey Pilgrim said.

I nearly twitched in surprise, fixing the old man with a look.

"There would have to be oaths," the Peregrine said, dipping his head in apology at Archer. "Safeguards."

"Well, would you look at that," Indrani mused. "You do listen, after all."

"Abdication after ten years," Tariq said, eyes moving to me.
"Guaranteed of safe passage for those waging war on Keter.
Abiding by earthly treaties."

I was genuinely taken aback by the turn, enough that it took me a moment to get ahold of my thoughts.

"I won't force her to do it," I flatly said.

"Cat," Archer said. "Look at me."

I turned, eyes lingering on the traces of blood still on her forehead. The reminder that she'd already died once tonight.

"It's just ten years," she said. "And you didn't age while Duchess or Queen, so I'm losing nothing there. I'm not enough of an asshole to insist we murder someone over a decade."

Except that she was, unkind as that thought was. Because Indrani was lovely and generous to those few that she loved, but the rest? She was not the kind to bleed for strangers, and I doubted the few months we'd spent apart had changed that about her. Or maybe I just didn't want to. What would it mean, if months away from the Woe was all it took to let her compassion bloom? *Or it might just be away from me*, I darkly thought. What had I ever really asked of her, save for slaughter? And though that thought remained, so did my gaze remain on the bloody marks streaking across her forehead. That, too, might be a reason for seeking crown. For all the other burdens of my time as Sovereign of Moonless Nights, I'd been absurdly difficult to kill.

"I won't pretend it doesn't make things easier," I said, meeting her eyes. "Having that much power at your fingertips. But it blinds you to other ways to die, Indrani. It takes from you as much as you'll gain – perhaps even more."

"I know," Archer said. "I was there, remember? But I want to know what the word looks like, from that vantage. That's reason enough."

"Is that really who you want to be?" I quietly asked.

"An entire world of secret paths, of unknown horizons," Indrani smiled. "Wouldn't be that something to tread?"

It'll change you, I wanted to say. *Even if you put down the crown after ten years, and that is never as simple as you'd think, it will still have changed you in ways you can scarce understand.* Gods, I wanted to forbid her to go through with it. And the thing was, if I pushed hard enough she just might withdraw her agreement. I knew that sure as I knew my own breathing. Indrani trusted me enough for that. But it would never be the same, afterward: we would no longer be partners or friends – a line

would be drawn, and she'd be on the side of it that meant servant. Merciless Gods. It was ugly and selfish of me, but I would rather let her try the crucible of Twilight than knowingly destroy what bound us to each other.

"We'll have to agree on the wording of the oaths," I finally croaked out.

I met her gaze, and an understanding passed between us. It was not love – neither of us had been afflicted with that particular delusion regarding the other, for all that we occasionally shared a bed – or at least not that kind of it. It was... a recognition, maybe. That I thought she was making a mistake, but that I respected her enough to stand in the way of decisions she freely made. Had this, too, been a pivot? A moment she'd look back to, in years to come, when wondering if the ties binding her to the Woe were a lifeline or a leash. Perhaps pivot was a conceited term to use, when matched to the unspoken understanding of two mortals of no real import in the greater scheme of things. Too grand for the two of us. But there was resonance to the meaning of it, I thought. Whether this had been a fault or something akin to wisdom I'd not know for years to come, but in time I would know. I was unnaturally certain of that, in the beat that followed her hazelnut eyes meeting my own. Indrani inclined her head towards me, not speaking a word.

"No," the Saint of Swords said.

The Tyrant let out a pleased, breathless sigh.

"You told me if I still believed you wrong come morning light, we'd put this to judgement," Laurence said, looking at Tariq. "Dawn's around the corner, old friend, and now I tell you this: I will not brook this deal you would strike. It is an abomination in every way."

Indrani casually took a half-step to the side, coming closer to me. In a better position to buy me time to weave miracles, if it came to blades bared. I wished I could say she was being unreasonably cynical by doing so. I almost spoke up, but there was a reason Kairos was keeping his mouth shut. He, too, suspected that anyone carrying Below's banner in the Saint's eyes intervening now would be met with immediate assault. Robber had told me a sapper's saying, once: no one has hands clever enough to juggle munitions. Simply by speaking up here, I'd be cracking a match in a warehouse full of goblinfire.

"Only ten years," Tariq told her. "It is breathing room so that we can arrange for a more agreeable ending, Laurence."

"It's condoning the birth of a court hatched by servants of the Hellgods," the Saint barked. "There's no going back from that once we unleash it, Tariq. And odds are we won't live to see that

garden of ruin come to bear fruit – by what right do you pass on that woe to those that come after us?”

“You would rather embrace murder than compromise?” the Rogue Sorcerer said.

“Shut your mouth, boy,” Laurence hissed. “You understand nothing. You shy away from taking a life now, from taking a risk, and you think that makes you virtuous? All it makes you is *complicit*. Your scruples will cost a hundred generations blood and fear simply because you flinched when time for the hard choices came.”

“How hard a choice is it really for you?” the Sorcerer replied, tone ice cold. “When did you last make another, Saint of Swords?”

Laurence’s face shuttered closed. Hells, I had to admit that Roland was starting to grow on me some.

“Peace, Roland,” the Pilgrim said.

“Would that she’d hear of it, if only the once,” the younger man scathingly replied.

“No, Tariq, let him speak,” the Saint said. “Let him sing the praises of compromising with the Enemy. You’ll survive this, Sorcerer, for you may yet bring some light into this world. But burn this moment into your memory, child. Keep it close. There will come day when it burns like a lash on your back.”

“What is made can be unmade, Laurence,” the Pilgrim told her. “Even if this bargain were a mistake, and I do not believe it to be, it remains impermanent.”

“Does it?” she asked. “You’re letting them in, Tariq. You are setting a precedent for us sitting across the table from the monstrous and the mad, pretending they can be reasoned with. And Gods be good, perhaps this once it might even be true.”

My brow rose.

“And yet it cannot be allowed to pass,” Laurence said. “Because once the exception is made, the precedent is set, the ink touched the water – it’s done. It’s over. The poison is in and there’s only sickness and death ahead. How many times will this bargain you’d strike lead those who come after us astray? How long will it take, before Twilight becomes a murderous madness that can reach everywhere across Calernia?”

“We must first ensure there is a Calernia left to safeguard, Laurence,” Tariq quietly said.

“Compromising the soul to preserve the flesh,” the Saint of Swords said, “is the first step into Below’s service. There are things worth facing ruin for, Tariq.”

"No compromise with the Enemy," the Grey Pilgrim echoed. "That is your principle. Yet you know mine, Laurence."

"So I do," Laurence de Montfort softly agreed.

Light bloomed, but already the Saint of Swords was moving and she struck.

[Liliet](#)

I'm sorry, book WHAT
I think all your numbers are off by one

Andrew Mitchell



You've spotted my (not so deliberate) mistake. Thanks for pointing out the bug. I'll fix it next time I run my code.

[Liliet](#)

Ooooh that's what happened ♥

RandoCalrissian

Hi Andrew thanks for getting the next chapter up... and all your hard work and creativity! Just wanted to point out that the "next chapter" link at the bottom of chapter 48 still points to the (now missing) chapter delay announcement and not chapter 49.

Chapter 49: Cracked

"They who first look at the sun will never see aught else."
– Helikean saying

It was just steel. There must have been thousands of longswords just like it in Iserre alone, decently crafted but nothing extraordinary. It was the work of some smith somewhere, not an enchanter or legendary artisan, so there was nothing to that sword that should allow it to cut into the likes of Twilight's

Crown. Except, of course, that it was Saint of Swords of wielded it. Tabard trailing behind her, the old heroine crossed the room in three smooth strides and her sword arced down beautifully: the strike was like flowing water. And hit something that shouldn't have been there, a subtle glamour broken when Laurence de Montfort's blow scythed straight through the gargoyle that'd thrown itself in the way. The Tyrant of Helike cackled, high-pitched and delighted, but the Saint's blow carved through the stone construct and continued through and into the crown. I thought, as I watched the edge of the steel bite through chalcedony and mother-of-pearl, that if not for the for the gargoyle it would have gone straight through. Yet the Tyrant's stage trick had tainted what would have otherwise been a clear blow, and so instead the Saint's sword cut halfway through the Twilight Crown before it stopped.

Not even a heartbeat of stillness reigned over the room before a torrent of power tore out.

Everyone here had been in a scrap or two, so the raging tendrils of sorcery that went out did not score a kill the way they might have with less experienced Named. Reflex had me half-stepping to the side, still a swordswoman picking her distance for all my lack of sword, and dusk-like power howled through a bare few feet to my side. More importantly, having been close to the initial burst the Saint had been forced to retreat or see herself run through by a tendril. More than one, even, for a handful of howling streaks chased her even as she retreated, never slowing nor missing a step. Had her attack awoken something in the crown, some shard of sapience? A flicker of a look to the side instead showed me a hard-faced Rogue Sorcerer with his hands outstretched and his long coat fluttering in unnatural breeze, guiding the sorcery with sharp gestures.

"Treachery," the Tyrant of Helike gleefully hooted. "Treachery most foul!"

With great flourish he presented his left palm, allowing one of the chittering gargoyles in attendance to place down a wand of what looked like pure gold on it.

"Cat?" Indrani calmly asked, eyes on the Saint of Swords.

She was ducking and weaving, for now, driven back by the Sorcerer's trick. But it'd be temporary. I wouldn't trust means that feeble to hold back Archer for long, and Laurence de Montfort was her superior in several ways.

"Don't kill her," I said. "Unless it puts you at risk not to."

"Gotcha," Indrani nonchalantly said.

In a whisper of boots on stone she slipped into the fray, the maelstrom of unleashed energies that had yet to ebb in the slightest. I'd expected the crown to either keep bleeding like a stuck pig or translate the wound into a single punishing torrent of power, but it wasn't indulging any of my expectations. It seemed almost like the lashing sorcery was the wound itself, thrashing about the room in some kind of eldritch pain. A nudge from Andronike had my gaze lingering on the side of the cut Laurence's sword had made, a sliver of Night sharpening my sight. Ah. So it was eating into the rest of the crow, shaving through a sliver at a time. It was simply slow and little at a time, though if we didn't settle this mess for too long we'd still be in trouble. The Tyrant's wand proved to be an artefact of some power, a heartbeat later, as he aimed it towards the Saint and spoke an idle word: streak of brilliant lightning went out, forking around an approaching Archer and striking at the Saint from both sides. Undaunted, Laurence de Montfort *parried* one streak and smoothly ducked beneath the other. Just in time for Indrani's boot to catch her in the chin, sending her sprawling back. Three streaks of twilight-stuff, guided by the Sorcerer, snapped out at the falling heroine. One would have punctured her throat, by my reckoning, but Roland redirected it towards her shoulder instead at the last moment and that was room enough for the Saint to manoeuvre: she twisted on herself, allowing one of the streaks to hit her flank and using the pressure to adjust her fall out of the way of the other two.

She landed in a crouch, slapped aside Indrani's follow-through strike with the flat of her blade and brutally backhanded Archer. I sucked in a breath, but Indrani had scrapped with Laurence before. She slid back, parried a probing blow by the Saint and adjusted her angle of attack to make the most of the support the Sorcerer was still providing. She'd make it through this, I told myself. I couldn't even hold it against Roland not to have put an end to this fight right out of the gate, not truly. The Saint had been a respected elder and ally until not so long ago, and even though she'd done so treacherously she was only going through with the fate he'd himself advocated for the Twilight Crown. A glance told me Kairos already had another artefact in hand, some sort of jeweled silver arrow, and was preparing to throw it like he was playing darts in a tavern. Yet it was the last of us whose reaction I was most dreading to look upon, and my eyes finally turned to the Grey Pilgrim. I hid a grimace. The Peregrine looked as if he'd aged twenty years in the last twenty heartbeats, and given his age that led him at least one foot into the grave. His face had gone ashen, his footing unsure, and if he'd still had his staff I was certain he'd be leaning on it for support. He had, I thought, genuinely not seen this coming. Neither had I, though that'd been more because I'd expected the Pilgrim to seem more worried if it was a possibility and he hadn't been. I could almost hear my father chiding me for relying

on second-hand knowledge without having contingencies in place accounting for it being false.

"Pilgrim," I said.

He did not reply, eyes clouded as he watched the Saint of Swords cleverly snap out of Indrani's longknives out of her grasp, catch it with her free hand and smash the pommel into Archer's cheek. A moment later the Tyrant's strange arrow struck at her with a keening sound, and though she flicked her blade back in time to cut through it barely helped: at the moment of impact, the arrow broke and a dozen sharp darts of wind exploded out. Maybe half hit the Saint's flank, scoring blood if no deep wound, though that didn't hurt her half as much as Indrani's other blade cutting halfway through her thumb and snatching back the stolen longknife.

"Pilgrim," I said more loudly. "This is not the time to sink into yourself, Tariq. Whatever grief you might hold, how many lives is it worth?"

That shook him out, enough his blue eyes turned to me.

"The crown is wounded," he said.

"So I'd gathered," I flatly said.

"You do not understand," Tariq said. "The wound is permanent. It is part of the crown, now. And it will kill whoever bears it."

Shit, I thought.

"This from your Choir?" I pressed.

"Yes," he tightly said.

Shit, I thought once more, with feeling. I wasn't going to return for a sermon at the House of Light anytime soon, but in current situation I was willing to take the Ophanim to their word. We'd be killing whoever ended up putting it on, which disqualified Indrani from his discussion of succession as far as I was concerned. I'd already had enough close calls with death that I suspected I'd run out of ways to cheat it, and if I croaked it here too many things fell apart. That left who, the Sorcerer or the Pilgrim? It'd have to be Roland, I grimly thought. Much as he'd been growing on me, if the Grey Pilgrim died here the storm that'd follow would be massive. It was an ugly thought, turning on someone who'd been becoming a true ally, but what other choice was there? *Indrani*, the thought came. I felt a sharp well of disgust at myself, both for her name having come to me at all and then my refusal to entertain it. Was it not rank hypocrisy, to demand this sacrifice from strangers while denying even thought

of it when it came to my own? There'd been more than one reason villainy came easier to me than the other side's works.

"It will have to be me," the Grey Pilgrim said.

Night preserve me from godsdamned *heroes*. It wasn't a righteous sacrifice it you screwed the people you were allegedly doing it for, it was just vanity.

"No," I bluntly said. "Don't be a fucking fool. Now, would you help us contain the Saint before someone gets killed?"

The Tyrant had, while we spoke, thrown a javelin of red coral at Laurence. Poorly, for his arm was trembling and it was dubious he'd ever trained his body, so it flew errantly and skittered against the ground – where it blew up into a storm of fire, a solid ten feet to the side of anyone else in the room. The Saint leapt through the flames, apparently deciding to take advantage the opportunity to shake her pursuit, but Kairos already had tossed out a large opaque orb of glass and it caught her in the belly as she went through. It broke against her and smoke poured out as words boomed out in the tradertongue, the smoke solidifying and trying to bind her limbs.

"Laurence," the Grey Pilgrim called out, but his call was drowned out by the booming tradertongue harangue.

For a moment I wondered if Kairos had planned it that way, before dismissing the motion. Though it was possible, in truth it hardly mattered if it was. I reached for the Night, wove a globe of it and sent it spinning forward. Though it'd do no harm to anyone, it swallowed the words that'd come from the orb like a pit of darkness swallowing even the sound of falling. Unfortunately it also took the smoke bindings with the rest, which I'd not meant for it to do in the slightest. Kairos protested, though I ignored him.

"Laurence," the Grey Pilgrim repeated. "Desist now, while you still can."

"Better dead than kneeling to the dark," the Saint of Swords snarled. "Do your-"

The cold beam of Light struck her in the chest before she even finished speaking, and I almost let out a whistle. I'd felt that, the *rippling* of it in the air. The Peregrine was finally done fucking around, it seemed. The side of her chest a ruin of burned flesh, the old heroine swallowed a scream and slid across the stone floor. Already the Grey Pilgrim was crafting fresh strikes of Light, while Archer ran towards our opponent with five streaks of twilight-stuff guided by the Sorcerer following hidden behind her. The Tyrant had a handful of gargoyles before him presenting artefacts for him to wield like a pack of chittering wee

sommeliers surrounding an Alamans prince with choice vintages. With the Pilgrim having been moved to act, the balance of this scrap was sharply on our side. But was it, I suddenly wondered, too sharply on our side? The crown was still falling apart, sliver by sliver, so we had to end this. Yet if this began a lone principled heroine standing against a band of five that was mostly villains...

"Give up, Saint," the Tyrant of Helike drawled. "Our victory is inevitable. You might even say that, in a manner of speaking, we are invin-"

"*Kairos*," I screamed. "Don't you fucking dare-"

"-vincible," the Tyrant finished in a cackle. "Submit to Below and you may yet be spared, do-gooder."

It wasn't anything as obvious as Laurence de Montfort suddenly finding all her wounds had been healed, or a lightshow of power being shoved into her tired frame. Yet, just like that, as she was dragged by Kairos' latest bout of treachery onto the path of a story the Saint of Swords stood a little straighter. Her eyes sharpened, her footing grew more assured.

"Archer, retreat-" I yelled.

But it was too late. Indrani's first blade extended as her whole arm outstretched and she place the point of her longknife at the Saint's back with blinding quickness. Just not quite quick enough. Laurence took a half-step to the side, letting her pass, and cut off her arm the wrist. She would have flicked the blade a second time and taken Archer's head, if not for the Sorcerer's quick divesting of twilight-streaks forcing her to withdraw a step back. The Pilgrim's gleaming Light caught her a moment later, but with hard eyes she carved right through and leapt up. The Tyrant and I struck at the same time, his green jade baton sending out a swarm of green insects at the Saint as I wove Night into dense flecks and sent them out at her. But it was like, I realized, tossing logs into a fire. The insects – each one made of jade, I only then caught – found a cut in the air that warded their approach save for those that impacted it and found themselves cut through. I'd formed four flecks of Night and the Saint almost contemptuously cut through only one, though at exactly the right time for the detonation that ensued to catch the other three. Her right boot landed on the Rogue Sorcerer's face a moment later and he went down like a sack of beets from the hit. Hells, that'd gone south in a hurry. Unlike the heroes and possibly even myself, Kairos had to know that the Saint would kill him in a heartbeat if she could. So why would he throw the fight this way?

I glanced at the Tyrant of Helike and found his gaze, half of it red as fresh blood, resting on my ebony staff. Kairos grinned

when I caught him, utterly unrepentant. I found myself wishing I'd succeeded at cutting his throat instead of blackening his eye. The Pilgrim had chosen to prevent Indrani bleeding out instead of pursuing the offensive, to my relief, and as she held her severe hand to the stump with gritted teeth one of the greatest living healers of Calernia began to put it all back together. Good. Archer might make it back into the fight, I just needed to use Kairos and my own talents to hold until we could turn this around. The Saint should be coming for either of us by now. As it happened, Laurence de Montfort rose from the smooth crouch she'd landed in after tumbling past the unconscious Sorcerer. She glanced at me, calmly, and then her gaze swept the rest of the room. It came to rest on the crown, and without a word she ignored us and went straight for it. Oh Hells. It might be, I knew, that finishing the cut would only break this realm and spare us all either death or bargain.

Or it might mean the death of hundreds of thousands.

"Slow her," I ordered the Tyrant.

My tone was harsh enough he did not argue. The unpleasant truth was that I did not have the means to contain someone like Laurence de Montfort. Every trick left in my arsenal derived from the patronage of Sve Noc, whose blood-drenched path to apotheosis made the exact kind of power that someone like the Saint of Swords had been meant to put down. Maybe if I'd been quick enough to think of it earlier all of us save Archer could have let ourselves be 'beaten' and she could have duelled the Saint with something close to even footing. But at this point trying to use numbers to bring her down was effectively using the same tactics that'd led a horde of devils to swarm this very heroine barely an hour ago. The result back then had been providing the Saint of Swords with a lot of bodies to cut, and I had no reason to believe this would go any differently. I couldn't contain her or defeat her, and maybe if I had longer I might be able to figure out another way to get this done but I didn't have the time. So either I bent, and let her toss the dice with the lives of three great armies and most of Iserre besides.

That, or I killed her.

Breathing out, I began to limp forward even as Kairos tossed priceless old artefacts in the Saint's way like they were apple cores. My staff I raised, and abandoned the delusion that it had ever been one. Night roiled and the ebony fell to ash, leaving behind only a sword in a scabbard. The latter was an ornate thing, unlike most I'd borne in my time. Carved obsidian, depicting the tale of the fool girl who'd made accord with the Night. The blade had not once unsheathed waited within as my fingers tightened around the scabbard. Its long handle was onyx and amethyst, stones chosen for one's facility in holding power

and the other's aptitude for bridging the mortal and the divine through communion. Kairos had, against all odds, succeeding at expending enough of his inherited trove of treasures to force the Saint to step back. She still stood by the throne's side, some sort of shining panels of sorcery standing between her and the crown, but my advance drew her eyes went to me. My hobbling had taken me ahead of all the others, and at my approach she smiled a hard smile.

"A duel, is it?" Laurence de Montfort said.

I lowered the scabbard to my side, right hand gripping the grip.

"Stand down," I said, offering once last chance. "Stand down, and we can still end this with words instead of blood."

"Some bargains compromise the very heart of what you are," the Saint replied. "You'll lose, Foundling. Call your minions back and let me end it the way it should have been done since the start."

I breathed out, steadied my stance.

"You're mortal," Laurence de Montfort sharply said.

"So are you," I replied, and for the first time since I'd left the Everdark I drew a sword.

I'd gathered Night for months in preparation of this moment, not a single mote of it anybody's but my own. This was a prayer, after all, not a ritual. I was making an appeal to Sve Noc, and sacrificing power so that a miracle might be granted. And so, when my sword cleared the scabbard, it was revealed to have no blade. Night pulsed all around us, a living and breathing thing.

One.

"What have you done?" the Saint asked.

Two.

"Nothing," I honestly replied.

Three.

"Do you think I'll not strike you for being unarmed?" the Saint snarled.

Four, five, six, I counted as she spoke, and she stiffened with the last. It was close, then. I'd wondered how long she would last. I touched me too, but Gods forgive me the touch was lighter than I'd believed it would be. The Dead King, it seemed, might have been terrifyingly correct. The Saint took a step forward, and I almost spoke but instead I close my mouth. It would not do

to monologue, would it? Not when the end was close. I watched her skin tighten, grow sallow, I watched her limbs weaken and finally she fell down. A moment later and she was dead. Struck down without a trace. It had, from the beginning to the end, taken eleven heartbeats.

And so in the heart of the prayer I had made, eleven years had passed.

I'd always known that I couldn't beat the Saint of Swords in a fight. What kind of a fool would fight a heroine forged of war through that which had forged her? No, I'd heeded the lessons of my years under the Black Knight and slain her through one of the few things the Heavens did not protect their chosen from: the passage of time. I let another heartbeat pass, simply to be sure, and only then did the Night's touch upon this broken realm withdraw.

ruduen

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Hoo, boy. I wasn't sure if it was possible to get through this or not without someone on the way out. With the current format, it looks like the price that both sides pay might be higher than expected.

And with a few different balls still in the air (especially with the White Knight still standing as an outside factor), and with the crown still damaged, it's hard to say if there's still more to pay.

Dread Empress Evisveil

That. Was. Beautiful.

Valkyria

Ouh shit. Well that is... I didn't see that coming. And that's twice in two chapters so gods damn me if this isn't good story writing.

Also... did it affect only the saint or everyone? Also... that is so OP. Can she reuse that or is it a one time ass in the sleeve?

Valkyria

ace... damn it xD
autocorrect

Daniel E

'Ass in the sleeve' is so much better; the possibilities of what it means are limited only by your imagination.

Valkyria

I just realized I spelled sleeve wrong too...

ahhh there I am, once in my life early enough so my comment is high enough for everyone to see... and then that xD

I dunno who said it, but "Set in Stone" is too powerful an Aspect for WordPress to hold...

Valkyria

Oh no I actually didn't xD
One less mistake on my part

Andrew Mitchell

Unless you count your mistake that you were mistaken?!?
XD XD

To err is human. Don't worry about and we won't worry about it either.

NerfContessa

At least you didn't spell it "an ass in the slave" :p

[Liliet](#)

I think it affected Laurence and Catherine

[badluckcat](#)

As I understand it Catherine got touched by it as well and it was only possible through months of infusing power, all spent at a single time. Not to mention Catherine isn't fool enough to try the trick on heroes a second time. She may end up filling the staff again but it won't be the ageing trick.

[daegone823](#)

Was I the only one thinking she was going to stab the pilgrim for turning on everything she stood for.

I mean this was fine but I guess I had a darker expectation. The hero who slays monsters becoming a monster and assuming a throne of twilight to stone for her sins.

Liliet

Laurence thinks... thought, I suppose... in terms of consequences of her actions, still. She had a different idea of what the long-term consequences here would be and acted on her belief; no part of this belief included the idea that *killing Tariq* might possibly somehow make the situation better.

Isaac Martinez

Probably one-time. Cat just released her energy as sacrifice for a miracle. She can't do a miracle twice if the result is "random".

goliath1303

Where we it ever implied that her miracles, or any for that matter, are at all random? If that was the case they would be orders of magnitude less useful. Imagine Tariq trying to Forgive somebody's death, but instead every field within a certain distance is made incredibly fertile. Or he's with an army engaged in a desperate struggle and just as things seem hopeless he goes to summon whatever that star he calls is called, only to banish the weariness, horror, and non-lethal wounds of the host he's a part of.

Or as an example of a miracle forged from Night, how about this: Think of how many nights are spent by Cat over the course of who knows how many months investing every bit of time and power she could afford to spare forging what she ****hoped**** would be a counter to the walking massacre that is Laurence de Monfort. At the battle rages she stops pretending she was ever holding a staff signifying that the climactic scene where Cat and Saint finally drop the pretenses and stop playing nice. The moment she ceases lying to Creation about the staff and behind fighting in earnest, the world goes dark. 2 massive hosts clashing in a contest to decide the fate of all Calernia suddenly freeze and everybodys breath catches in their throat as they stand frozen in terror. An eldritch power they can't begin to comprehend without embracing the seeds of a dark bmadness envelops them. There they stand, prisoners to a power massive beyond belief and defying their very best efforts to keep their minds off of it. Unwillingly, the shape of that power begins to reveal itself. Millenia old and forged in the darkness of the tattered remains of an empire Ever Dark, a curse that damned the desperate remnants of a dying race willingly embraced. At first it reeks of oaths sworn to Below, of countless betrayls made in the dark and offered up as prayer to 2 bloody and blasphemous godlings. Consecrated on an altar of murder and ruin, this... ***Night*, a voice like death incarnate rings through their minds, shattering what's

left of their sanity in all but the strongest and hardened of souls** – whispers seductively, promising revenge for all sights and unimaginable power there for the taking; even as it stokes the embers of madness and insanity that are, no matter how small they may be, at the heart of us all into raging infernos burning away everything except for 2 things. The first, the words: “The worthy take, the worthy rise.” over and over, and the second is only the harsh and dissonant cawing of a pair of crows.

All of this passed in less time than a single heartbeat and, as the fighting between the armies in the distance reaches a heretofore unseen level of savagery and violence, Laurence stands unbowed in the face of that most terrible of powers. She slices through the night without any apparent, the all encompassing blackness simply parting without an eddy or whisp coming closer than 3 feet to the Saint of Swords as he Decree shapes reality around her. Without any words spoken she prepares to strike. As she weighs her options, Cat draws the sword-that-is-a-prayer, revealing... Nothing. The ornate handle is attached to nothing. As they stand there and Saint tries to understand this development they hear a change in the sound of the distant battle. All across the field the armies that Saint is a part of are dying. It starts with a handful at first, but eventually they fall by the thousands every second. 20 seconds after the Black Queen draws her not-sword every soldier facing her army is dead. Looking at the newly 70,000 dead Laurence took a deep breath and turned back to her opponent. What she saw there enraged her. The Black Queen looked stricken, as if horrified by what she had wrought. Without giving her the opportunity to make an excuse, she decapitated the foremost villain of her generation.

In each of these examples there are unquestionably miracles performed, just not the right ones. If they worked like this then Grey Pilgrim, First Under the Night, and many others would lose a lot of their power.

[adrian1992blog](#)

My bet is that while she could use it she can't abuse it, not because of some metaphysical rule (like the pattern of 3) but simple mechanics: it seen it also affects her so each use leaves her older (although it's implied she doesn't age normally), just with that it limited to be an ace against already old opponents or beings like goblins that have shorter lifespans. Against immortals or stupidly long lived races (I think the Giants are that) it would be like spiting against the wind.

Quite Possibly A Cat

It would also be rather in effective against undead. You know, the big bad guy that they are planning on beating.

[Liliet](#)

There's also the story rule that every trick works reliably ONCE. Like the first step of the plan thing; Unspoken Plan Guarantee. (I guess the staff was different enough from what we all assumed that it got a handful of that even despite all the foreshadowing)

Raivshard

I doubt that it's tied down to any one effect; bear in mind that it is a prayer, not an Aspect, and considering that she wanted to hold it in reserve for the hidden horror and/or his trump cards, praying for something which would age her opponents seems rather pointless.

It's a miracle, which means it probably resembles a Heroic ability in that it gives you just what you need as long as you only ever use it when you absolutely need it, and even then, not too often.

Faiir

I am pretty sure the prayer-staff was intended as an anti-pilgrim weapon.

Shveiran

It has always been an anti-Saint option.
Cat has always stated that nuking the Pilgrim would destroy her dream of the Accords. If she developed a countermeasure, it would not be a lethal one.

[Liliet](#)

The well was an anti-Pilgrim measure, or to be more precise, an anti-Shine measure.

[tyizor](#)

Great chapter. Honestly I don't mind the delays if it means the upkeep in quality. Thanks again erratic!

[Liliet](#)

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Raved Thrad

"This thing all things devours: birds, beasts, trees, flowers;
Gnaws iron, bites steel; grinds hard stones to meal; Slays king,
ruins town, And beats sword-wielding bitch down."

[shieldredblog](#)

Rumena?

Halinn

RUMENARUMENARUMENARUMENARUMENARUMENARUMENA

Brackas

Water?

Andrew Mitchell

Time.

[onedollargum](#)

Tolkein fiction.

dingaloo

A couple hours' delay is a small price to pay for this glorious climax. Bravo!

[mikeazhao](#)

Damnnnnnnnnnn

Daniel E

Wow. So did Cat also age 11 years as a trade? If not, then I'm uncertain exactly how this miracle worked. Hopefully Idrani gets her hand back. 'Archer Deadhand' just doesn't have the same ring to it. Lastly, what prediction of the Dead King is she thinking he was right about?

Gunslinger

She aged 11 years but the touch was light on her. Guess she's still kinda immortal after all

[Mental Mouse](#)

Note that even without that, and with pessimistic assumptions(*), she started out as what, 25 or so?

(*) Consider that Cat's temporal trap probably wouldn't have affected the Named Villains even if they got caught in it,

because Named Villains don't age. And Cat may not be Named anymore, but she's certainly still a Villain, sponsored by Below and trafficking in eldritch powers. I'm not surprised she gets a break on that.

erebus42

She's the high priestess of Night. The sisters Sve Noc and the Mighty lived quite a long time as a result of the Night so I wouldn't be too surprised she was effected but not overly so despite not having a name.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Oh right, I'd forgotten – Night explicitly extends lifespan, that was part of the Drow's *original* deal with Below..

[Liliet](#)

Catherine is 20.

Yes, really.

And that's without accounting for Named/fae bullshit and that one half a year she lost in Arcadia over the span of two days. Biologically her body might have started even younger.

Shequi

I'm not sure Biology played any part in Cat's existence while she was essentially a story of Winter incarnate.

[Liliet](#)

well she apparently could not see through eyes grown in the back of her head without growing an optic nerve to them so... SOME role???

[ayon96](#)

Cat spent another heartbeat to make sure so it was 12 years

RoflCat

Back in ch 36 Bid:

"I am a mannerly man, Catherine," he lightly said. "And you have given me no reason to act otherwise."

It almost felt like I was back in the Pit, for a moment, an opponent and I slowly circling as we took each other's measure.

Waiting for an opening, for a weakness. I remained painfully aware that I had a lot more of either than the Hidden Horror.

"No?" I mused. "Yet you called an immortal, when we first met, and well..."

I shrugged, raising an arm in a nonchalant display.

"I'm hardly that, these days," I said.

The old monster's face was like a mirror, I thought as I watched him for a reaction. There would be nothing there to see I had not placed there myself.

"Are you not?" he smiled. "High priestess and herald of an apotheosis you ushered into this world by your own hand – would something as base as age or disease take you, Catherine Foundling?"

"The years will kill me, one of these days," I said. "If nothing else gets around to it first."

"Ah," the Dead King smiled. "But how many years would it take?"

^Basically he's implying that despite Cath becoming 'mortal' by giving up Winter, she's still far from a normal mortal

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks for sharing that.

I'm thinking Cat may be mortal but ageless.

[Sugar Roll](#)

She probably ages like the Drow now. If Rumena's age is any indication, she could live for thousands of years.

[Liliet](#)

Drow with a higher-than-nisi amount of Night don't seem to age period. Rumena was old already when the Tenets of Night first came into being.

[Liliet](#)

If she was entirely ageless she would not have been affected by the artificial passage of time here period, I think. She gets SOME amount of aging, just apparently noticably slower.

Shveiran

To me, that is unrelated to Cat's aging.

It is simply the Dead King acknowledging that Cat has reached so much narrative weight that she won't leave the narrative because of something like a flu or old age. She has a chance at sticking around indefinitely if she plays her cards right, because the Story wants her in it and will push with her if she reaches for a form of immortality/agelessness/aphoteosys.

What I think is saying is basically that High Priestess or no Cat has a de facto aphoteosys so long as she doesn't fuck up... which again, is true for all of them regardless.

Shequi

Remembering here that The Intercessor is also eternal without being either immortal, ageless or undying.

Shveiran

I think that's because she goes nowhere when she is nt acting "on stage". She basically lives a day or two each year, if that, and therefore can stretch her years a long way.

caoimhinh

As Gunslinger said, Cat also 'aged' eleven years, but it was lighter for her; not because Night was less effective, but because Catherine is not a mere mortal, which is what the Dead King told her when they conversed while Cat was on the way to enter Liesse in the chapter he made the offer of 100 years of peace.

Basically, by becoming the High Priestess of Sve Noc, First Under the Night (F.U.N for friends), Catherine is unto the path of being unaging like the rest of the Named of Below.

[Javvies](#)

Besides, there's a significant difference between 11 years of accelerated aging that leaves you in your 70s+ (Saint) and one that leaves you in your early 30s (Cat).

caoimhinh

Indeed.

Faiir

I'm stealing the FUN!Catherine idea 😊

caoimhinh

By all means, be my guest.

I haven't been the only one to call her that in the comments of this book, hahaha.

I'm actually still surprised that Indrani hasn't used that acronym in any of the chapters. Seems like something she would say to tease Catherine and get her annoyed with some puns.

[Liliet](#)

It works better in writing than out loud.

byzantine279

She aged 11 years, but because of the goddesses she isn't physically 11 years older. Older than she should be, but not by much, it seems.

[Javvies](#)

Even if Cat is aging like a regular mortal human, she went from being early twenties to early to mid thirties, at worst. Sure, that's a hit ... but to use D&D terminology, she's still the same age category, whereas Laurence went from Old/Venerable to hitting her max age.

And let's be honest ... sure, there's a difference between early 20s and early-mid 30s, but for most people the difference is going to be relatively small.

[Liliet](#)

Early, not mid. Catherine is currently 20 according to any sane attempts at a timeline.

(She was 18 when founding the Broken Bells with Talbot, since then one summer was spent putting down Akua, then one winter in the timeskip between books 3 and 4, and now is the next winter after that)

[Javvies](#)

Timeline gets confusing. Especially since it's not entirely clear how (and how fast) certain characters move around long distance (especially offscreen). Also, I thought one or more of the time skips might have been longer.

At any rate, I think that my point is fairly clear and stands independent of timeline concerns.

No matter exactly what age Cat is/was, an 11 year difference between early 20s and 30 something usually isn't going to be that big in terms of physical wellbeing

– even for a normally aging mortal human. And, sure, losing 11 years out of the prime of your life sucks ... but Cat was young enough that 11 sudden years later, she'd still be in the prime of life no matter how being First Under the Night affected (or didn't affect) her aging, unless one wanted to postulate that it would somehow accelerate her aging.

[*Liliet*](#)

The timeline is v clear when you look specifically at seasons passing. The timeline pre-Cat being 18 lines up to that, too – I first built the timeline that put her at 18 at that time, then someone else found the quote confirming she was 18.

And yeah, Cat's not losing much here. I just wanted to plug in my timeline information :3

I mean fuck even if it accelerated her aging to the point she's Laurence's age now or someshit, you think she wouldn't go for it for the sake of saving everyone here? ♥

Shveiran

I think you are right chronologiclaly, but with all the body modifications she went through, I'm completely at a loss regarding how it translates in practice to her biological age. Did she ever age while the Squire? Did she ever age while Winter Queen? My guess is no.

[*Liliet*](#)

According to her reflections on it, when Squire she *did* age, although it felt artificial, like she was following a script. Supporting evidence: she grew an inch taller than Black :3

When Winter Queen she probably didn't entirely, so take a year off that biologically.

Given we also don't have data on *how much* lighter the touch was, "she's biologically less than 32" is the only hard fact we have.

Shveiran

Right, the Seba-approved inch! Good call, I'd forgotten that.

Agent J

She spent months in Iserre alone. Add to it her time in the Everdark, Keter, and fending off a Crusade.

20 is too conservative. I'm thinking 21-22? Might even be 23, though that's stretching it.

[Liliet](#)

I'd thought 21 too, but research doesn't lie
(I can back this up with quotes)

Steve

Eh, if you eat well and train seriously, physical peak is mid-late 20s to 30. Technically, Cat either just hit to went slightly past the typical ideal physical age for a human.

Rather like I recently did 😊

But overall, if you are trying to be in shape, you'll be in better shape at 30 than 20.

[Decius](#)

My guess: Time advanced 11 years everywhere. EVERYONE is older, not just the people involved in this fight, and they've been fighting with the Dead King for over a decade now.

Andrew Mitchell

I don't think Night is capable of creating a world-wide effect. The sisters are not that powerful. The effect was focused on Laurence but Cat was caught in it as well.

xanthir

Doesn't have to be a world-wide effect. Just... the two of them skipping thru time, aging but not experiencing the passage otherwise.

I hope that's not the case, but it would definitely be an *interesting* outcome, and I'll never begrudge this story throwing me some curveballs.

Sitxar

Given that the political situation and the amount of balls that depend on her juggling right now, this outcome would be just like if she had died. Which is not an option.

[Liliet](#)

This has happened with Winter already.

Shveiran

There is no way Cat would have developed a trick like that to fight Saint, when she was operating under the assumption that fighting her with the Pilgrim in close proximity was definitely an option when she started her preparations.

That is likely one of the other reasons she went with aging, something Tariq cannot undone (just like Villains cannot resurrect, the means to avoid death and cheat age are barred to the heroes).

Considering Tariq is just as vulnerable to a few added years, and that keeping him alive as always been a win condition for her, she would not have developed this as an area of effect spell, aging all that are around the fight.

Even if I was wrong and she had, I find it very unlikely that she would unleash a power that could nib all her plans in the bud by killing Tariq without ever acknowledging that risk in the chapter.

It is far more likely that the cost, the offering of the prayer is to face the same consequences she unleashes on her enemy; two targets, Cat and Saint.

Shveiran

She also wouldn't develop a trick that would keep her out of the loop for over twice the time since she first gained a name while at this critical a juncture. It's pretty much handling the DK victory, AMONG OTHER THINGS such as letting Callow be conquered by whoever strolls that way.

Tenthyr

This. Cat was affected too as part of the miracle, it had greater weight because she was also under its influence.

Mental Mouse

I'd hope not, that would be a dead loss in almost every way that matters.

NerfContessa

Joa not to mention that someone with her style needs a more... Responsive appendage than hakram as a pure strength type.

Also, dang. Age magic. Good one.

podian

Holy (or unholy?) shit.

Nairne .01

I guess that depends who you ask? Drow would probably pick the former.

erebus42

I mean I'm with the Drow on this one. Even if they aren't gods you worship they're still technically gods.

Someguy

This is why you don't follow Bard's instruction for anything. Named who obey Bard become nothing more than puppets on strings walking towards their own tragedies.

Rook

To be fair, Kairos played them all pretty hard on his end, even without the Bard.

Kairos was the one that first led the conversation down the path of coronation.

Kairos was the one who disqualified the other two Heroes from bearing the crown, which the Saint might have accepted. Tariq due to having laid down the crown, and the insinuation of secrets hidden for the Sorcerer.

Kairos was the one who made sure the crown was half cut instead of stopped all the way or cut all the way

Kairos was the one who gave Saint the narrative advantage so that she couldn't be contained – only victorious or killed.

He had a hand in EVERY part of how this went down, and it just happens to badly harm Catherine's plans in particular.

If she finishes the breaking, she compromises her own bottom line. Coronation? Now off the table. The remaining option of completing the coronation followed by a killing? Unless she can find a way to pin it on Kairos' head, which might be just as bad as letting him live, it'll either weaken the Woe by permanently losing Indrani or make her completely irreconcilable with damn near every Hero on the continent. Alliance made with the Black Queen and one or both of the greatest Heroes of the age end up dead but all the Villains walk out alive? How's that going to look for anyone who wasn't there to see the events play out? Not to mention Killing the Saint just put cracks in her personal alliance with the Pilgrim as well, who also happens to be the only living person who

could possibly vouch for her with any worthwhile Weight in the eyes of everyone Good aligned in the world.

werafdsaew

I think you're giving Kairos too much credit here. You're saying that the Saint would have been OK with a Villain having the crown without Kairos? That's not possible.

Also containing the Saint instead of killing her doesn't change anything, unless you think they could force the crown on her head then kill her.

Pilgrim isn't a complete idiot; Cat killing Saint here is perfectly justified.

Rook

Uh no, the Saint obviously wouldn't be OK with a villain in the throne as we just saw. That's the entire thrice-damned point.

The one way for him to break up the band is to cross someone's bottom line, and as soon as the decision is set on having a Villain take up the mantle? Line crossed.

More specifically, it cross the line of the single least reasonable person there, whose death would also fuck up Catherine's own plans of bringing everyone on both sides to the table.

In my opinion not much of a stretch to believe Kairos did this intentionally when

A) Every one of those turning points in the decision making process was proceeded by verbal prodding from Kairos

B) scheming, making enemies, and screwing over anyone he can is the literal reason for his existence

werafdsaew

Not seeing it. Even without Kairos, the band would still have made the exact same decision, for the exact same reason they made it with Kairos there.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think Pilgrim will break his alliance with Catherine over this.

I suspect he might just decide to take the crown himself over Catherine's objections though, to spare Roland. THAT will be bad.

But I think even if Kairos had his eye on forcing Saint's death from the start (because he could) it was most definitely Bard's plan for it to happen. Consider how different the situation would have been if Masego had been here, as well.

Andrew Mitchell

> I suspect he might just decide to take the crown himself over Catherine's objections though, to spare Roland. THAT will be bad.

Yes, and Pilgrim knows that would be bad, very bad. I don't think he'd choose all the additional suffering that him taking the crown would cause vs Roland taking it.

[Liliet](#)

>Yes, and Pilgrim knows that would be bad, very bad

I'm NOT SURE. A great piece of Cat's logic regarding why he's necessary is the Accords.

Also he's literally already said it should be him.

Shveiran

He has. But I really, really hope he realizes the consequences of being removed from the picture at this juncture.

I mean, forget the Accords. This mean the armies go back to kill each other, the Pilgrim is no longer around to keep even the Crusade together, both he and the Saint died while trekking with the BQ so everyone hates her guts, Callow is in no position to move north and help, Which also means Kairos won't... It is a freaking disaster. If he can't see this, I'll be unable to consider him as someone that sees the big picture.

[Liliet](#)

and then he had WoA (Word of Angels) that it will be fine ;u;

[Cheeezburger](#)

Reminder that Kairos was in cahoots with the Wandering Bard

Jessica Day

But what if she knows you will disregard her instructions?

Personally I'd just flip a coin every time she talked and do my best to ignore her words otherwise. Someone as skilled as her? You can never best her at her chosen game.

[Liliet](#)

Personally I'd just do whatever I already figured would make sense to do, and ignore her entire existence like she as an ad popup.

Otherwise she'd be able to force you to trust your decisions to a coinflip just by showing up and talking, and disrupt anything you do with a lot less effort.

Wait she is better than we thought

I think Amadeus was manipulated by NOT escaping. His soul was a major reason Kairos, Cat, Laurence, and the Crown were in a room together. If not for him, Laurence might be elsewhere by now.

Sulomund

It didn't go how I thought it would, and you know what? That's the way I like it.

Andrew Mitchell

Woah. I was delighted by the staffswordprayer; what a clever idea. It's a pity that gun can only be fired once.

Did Catherine just renege on her deal with Tariq? Saint wasn't, at that time, threatening the lives of any of the Woe.

Who's going to put on the crown now? Tariq or RS or Indrani? It's better not be Tariq. The foremost hero of this age NEEDS to come back from this jaunt with Cat or her main plan is ruined.

Andrew Mitchell

Also, good to see Roland picking the right side.

[Javvies](#)

Nope. Remember, Tariq wasn't willing to reciprocate in granting courtesy.

So I don't think there was a deal to spare Laurence.

Besides ... she was threatening their lives. As well as the prosecution of the war against the Dead King.

caoimhinh

Cat and Tariq made the deal that she wouldn't kill Laurence unless she actually killed Masego, even if Saint threatened to harm Hierophant Catherine would still go for non-lethal attacks. In exchange, Pilgrim would use his right to rule as the 'and one' of the seven crowns and one.

This could be considered a breach of the deal, but it was done because Saint was putting everybody in Iserre at risk.

Agent J

That deal was voided already. Pilgrim begged for Tyrant's life (after the latter name dropped the Bard) and Cat basically said, fine, same deal as last time.

She spared him, she earned Tariq's crown. Then Saint fucked herself and everyone else royally. A shame. She was equal parts fun and frustrating. I'll miss her.

[Liliet](#)

And it was Tariq asking to spare Kairos that led to this, considering the delightful little bit of betrayal he pulled off right here. Even if no deals were in play and Cat had been fully willing to go along with whatever he asked of her, this was a "pick one out of two" situation, and I think he'll recognize that.

I wonder if he'll be willing to have faith that Bard's plan is for the best, after this, still.

caoimhinh

Hmm, Kairos being alive wasn't what led to this. This is entirely the Saint's fault for being so stubborn and refusing to actually make a deal for peace. It wasn't even a big compromise. It was Laurence's refusal to consider a non-violence option what got her killed.

Also, Kairos being dead wouldn't have stopped Laurence from cutting the Twilight Crown.

As for Tariq keeping his trust on the Intercessor, yeah he totally will still trust her. As far as the Heroes know she works for Above only. Remember when Cat tried to explain to him that she also worked for Below and his refusal was that it only looked that way? And his conversation with Laurence during the Battle of the Camps where they mentioned she is always part of the heroic bands when big things happen? He and everyone who knows of her (save for those who have contacted Neshamah, like the Woe and Kairos) believe her an exclusive agent of Above as she is apparently always a Heroine.

Besides, nothing here points that Saint's death is the Bard's fault. Probably in his next conversation with the Bard she will be able to swing the facts into her being helpful and convince Tariq to be part of whatever is her next scheme.

Even if Cat actually manages to talk to Tariq about the true nature of the Bard, odds are Pilgrim will go his usual 'you truly think it's that way, but you are wrong' that he has kept ever since meeting Catherine.

Liliet

Kairos prevented everyone from subduing Laurence peacefully by going on that monologue (as a deliberate betrayal because he's a prick like that).

From Bard's vantage, it's child's play to predict:

- what Larat would do to wiggle out of this (she presumably has a lot more knowledge than Cat on how fae work and how they can and cannot change, as well as on personally Larat);
- that the decision everyone else agrees on would be unacceptable to Saint and she would force the issue (note how Saint's reasoning for why bargaining with Evil is unacceptable sounds suspiciously like what Bard had told William in Book 2, and that there were obvious traces of Bard's presence when Cordelia talked with Laurence in Fatalism);
- that even if there would be a chance for Saint to survive with everyone working together to subdue her peacefully, Kairos would gleefully sabotage any hope of it just for the hell of it.

The cherry on the cake is the fact that if Masego were here they would not be presented with a gamble, they would be presented with clear understanding of what the crown does and what breaking it would do, and that would change the tone significantly. It's as likely as not breaking the crown WOULD work and it's only Masego's absence here that drove this into the dilemma corner that it's in now. And hey, guess who specifically and targetedly prevented Masego from being okay enough to be present!

This might not be the SOLE goal of Bard's here, I doubt she ever does anything with just one reason. But it was an undeniably straightforward result of it.

And yes, it's possible for Tariq to still keep his faith in Bard after this. Hell, I still think she might be a good guy, and I've got a lot more dirt on her than he does, or will even after this.

It'll be interesting to read, though 😊

...And yes, Tariq doesn't know everything the audience does wrt why it was Bard that did this. However, she made the deal with Kairos to keep him alive and she made sure Masego lost his sorcery. These data points he has very intimately since he was the instrument she used for those. No way he won't notice the *pattern* here.

caoimhinh

I would object to the first point, considering that the Court of Twilight is unprecedented and Larat's actions are basically writing a new story never seen before. Making the Bard capable of such prediction is gonna be counterproductive for the plot, it would make more sense if Larat got the idea of abdicating the crown from the Bard. That would be consistent with Fae nature of not changing and I could totally see the Bard meeting with Larat and the Wild Hunt in private, would make more sense than the Bard foreseeing Larat doing something that by recognition of every other character is unprecedented and not supposed to happen.

As for the rest, I pretty much agree with you. Except on blaming Kairos for Saint's death, that's on her own. Sure, Kairos monologued to give her a push, but she was already set to fight to the bitter end, and Catherine herself was already noticing how the story was looking before Kairos spoke. They would have needed to severely beat her to subdue her, which pretty much amounts to having to kill her, as she would not surrender. Besides, she would have cut the Crown anyways even without Kairos there, so she could have got them all killed by the explosion of the crown (or simply destroyed the crown and stabilized the realm, odds were 50-50 and Heroes work with far worse odds all the time).

[Liliet](#)

> the Court of Twilight is unprecedented and Larat's actions are basically writing a new story never seen before.

Unprecedented doesn't mean unpredictable. He didn't just randomly decided to write a new story: Winter's desire to break out of the circle was a mirror to Amadeus's plan in the first place. Fae don't change; Larat acted in accordance with his nature, Catherine just didn't know enough about what building blocks he had available for that.

>Except on blaming Kairos for Saint's death, that's on her own. Sure, Kairos monologued to give her a push, but she was already set to fight to the bitter end, and Catherine herself was already noticing how the story was looking before Kairos spoke.

Catherine could have done something to change the story had Kairos not spoken. I agree Saint's death was likely anyway, but Kairos's presence *guaranteed* it. She wasn't surviving with him there.

>Besides, she would have cut the Crown anyways even without Kairos there, so she could have got them all killed by the explosion of the crown

...if Kairos wasn't there to put a gargoyle in the way?

Don't forget that established capabilities for Bard's prediction of events include her engineering the first Swan Song, just by making sure Akua survived and pushing Black in the Free Cities. Her intervention here was much closer and much more targeted.

Faiir

Great write-up.

Though I don't agree with Bard being good 😊

[Liliet](#)

We Shall See
(in a year or two)

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Did Catherine just renege on her deal with Tariq? Saint wasn't, at that time, threatening the lives of any of the Woe.

Dude, attacking the crown menaced and endangered *everybody*, and even Pilgrim came down on Cat's side of the fight. That said, by *partly* blocking Saint's attempt to cleave the crown, Kairos has given everybody the "worst of both worlds": The crown's power is now active and *hostile*.

It might be possible to "fix" the crown, but now it will definitely cost at least one life. One newly-suggested possibility: Cat embraces her nature as an immortal, puts on the crown, and (with Night's aid) resurrects herself from the resulting ZOT! Or they could finish breaking it, which will certainly be dangerous (and embarrassing) but it might be best to take their chances. That would be a good thing to ask the

Choir about again, they now have new information based on the current crisis.

Liliet

You know what could be a thing? Roland putting on the crown, claiming he can probably fix this, then dying... allowing them to go through with the plan... then getting resurrected by Tariq after dawn, because that definitely counts as a MISTAKE that could be FORGIVEN.

Shveiran

If it works, yes. I find it more likely Roland won't come back. The scene is already very crowded, and he can now serve satisfyingly as a loss for Cat, Pilgrim and the audience.

This whole thing needs an hefty price somewhere, and Saint won't be enough.

Faiir

I don't agree.

Roland looked like either a red shirt or someone's plant from the beginning, so I couldn't connect with him.

Him dying here would be waaaay to predictable and boring. And EE doesn't do boring 😊

Mental Mouse

> Roland looked like either a red shirt or someone's plant from the beginning,

... later revealed to have been Emperor Traitorous all along! 😊

Liliet

He cannot serve satisfyingly as a loss because Cat already thinks of him as the expendable option.

It would be... really bad for her character development to go through with that thought.

caoimhinh

She was threatening the lives of everyone, actually. Both the Woe, the people present in that shard of Arcadia, the nearly 300 thousand people in the armies on the field and the rest of the population in Iserre.

Saint was gambling on Providence to sort it out and make the realm collapse without harming anyone, since Luck tends to favor Heroes in stories where they have to put so much at stake and save innocent people, but the rest weren't willing to take

that risk.

So, I guess Tariq will be angry and grieving, but won't be able to hold it against Catherine.

Jason Ipswitch

I think you're being too generous. Saint wasn't gambling that the outcome of destroying the crown wouldn't hurt anymore. She was certain that no matter what the outcome was – even if it was everyone killed and Calernia overrun by the Dead King – it would be “better in the long run” to destroy the crown.

caoimhinh

Yeah, I'm giving her the benefit of the doubt, but I can't honestly rule out the notion that she might have been thinking that everyone was better dead than if the Heroes compromised with Villains.

werafdsaew

She willing to let the entirety of Procer be destroyed, why would she hesitate to sacrifice just a single Principality?

[Liliet](#)

She was willing to let the political institution of Procer be destroyed, not the entirety of its population. There's a subtle yet appreciable difference.

Shveiran

You are not wrong, but that political destruction would have come around through continued war with Callow and allies. I don't think she was under any delusion Cat would go quietly, so she was willing to accept that result would come around through mass slaughter of unknown quantity.

Andrew Mitchell

Having just re-read her exchange with Cordelia in Nillism III, I agree with you. It's not the impression that I was left with at the time but your interpretation makes sense.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/10/01/nihilism-iii/>

[TeK](#)

Is she really wrong about that though? One thing that boggles my mind is how everyone just *assumes* that Cat is right and Saint is wrong. Like... Why?

Liliet

I'm not assuming that. Given how much trouble fae courts are, it's entirely possible Saint had the right of it here..

Rook

Other than creating a potential catastrophe that damages creation and burns all possible bridges with every Good aligned faction on the continent if there is even a SLIGHT hiccup in dissolving the realm ten years down the line, absolutely no issues with it at all.

Because if there's one thing we know about fae courts holding enough power to create a true deity, its that no one ever interferes with the destruction of one, and nothing could possibly go wrong with such a large shifting of weight.

There is no way you could instantly lose the fight a year before the sword ever takes your head off via a slight intercession that simply delays the dissolving of the court. Say, just long enough to lose trust, which would consequently see you drowned in the inevitable tide of Heroes crawling out of the woodwork to destroy the new biggest baddest Evil Fae Court in town. One that would see you hunted down and killed afterwards, no matter the cost, if you were unfortunate enough to already have a very bad track record with Fae Courts. Like for example, stealing an evil fae court, feeding it to an ancient evil entity to create an evil god, then creating an entirely new evil fae court out of figurative thin air.

From a practical perspective we also know that the Hidden Horror is a narrative lightweight, thus when fighting against him there can be zero negative repercussions with being dependent on a magical entity not of their own making that they barely control. They should definitely just use the tool created by Trustworthy Lieutenant Larat, instead of breaking it and forging their own.

No, we can be entirely sure that it was a foolproof plan before the Saint ruined everything. Nothing Catherine Foundling touched has ever gone catastrophically wrong before. No cities were ever

genocided by a seemingly small Catherine mistake, made with the best of intentions.

[Liliet](#)

I love you.

SilentWatcher

Nothing like that would have happened. Cat has shown she can learn from mistakes and such obvious ones would be easily prevented.

Shveiran

You are right. It was a very risky plan. It was much more sensible to flip the coin on 300000 people, a dozen Named, and generally everything that could ever hope to repel the Dead King, who is THE big monster of this continent and is currently trying to eat it. What was I even thinking.

Rook

If only there were some kind of third option other than breaking the crown or allowing someone to wear it for years.

Say, like a third option that was the original plan in the first place, and would be completely foolproof as far as saving the armies in the present while not creating an utter calamity for the future.

Like putting the crown on someone's head and slaying them.

Speaking straightforwardly for a second, do you remember why Catherine refused to choose that route? Because the consequences of killing any of them would be problematic, down the line, except for Indrani who she balked from choosing because of personal sentiment.

She had a damn good choice that wouldn't have been a gamble or a near certain future disaster, and what she had to do for it was make a concession on anything. The grudge with the saint if it was Roland or the pilgrim, the thinning of her relationship with the pilgrim if it was the saint, or her personal feelings if it was Indrani.

But she wasn't willing

So she took a half measure, she flinched at the hard choice, showed an opening, and Kairos punished her for it, well-deservedly. Now she's back to square one having killed someone anyway and still no closer to solving the problem.

None of the options were pretty but let's not pretend that Cat took the route of the crowning because there was no other way, no third option. She took it out of fear, and an unwillingness to lose in the slightest.

Shveiran

This isn't about Cat being unwilling to make an hard choice.

The "damn good option" you speak of, aside from the whole "murder a friend" thing has the slight hitch that Archer isn't a martyr. You need someone to be willing to crown him, you can't tie them to a chair and put it on their head. The trap originally worked for Larat because he was unable to escape the story and therefore the crowning (though he had other plans, it turns out).

REGARDLESS, that becomes a "damn good option" compared to breaking the crown and rolling the dice ONLY if you consider the possibility of Villains and Heroes sitting at a table instead of knifing themselves in the alleys to be horrific.

Would you expect someone to kill their friend (after somewhat brainwashing them to be on board, I guess) in order to appease the opinion of someone that not only they think is wrong, but that is pushing for their friend's death (or massive gamble-slaughter) because she actively rejects all they have built and wish to build, and would oppose them just as strongly tomorrow regardless of this choice?

[Liliet](#)

@shveiran

>The "damn good option" you speak of, aside from the whole "murder a friend" thing has the slight hitch that Archer isn't a martyr.

First of all Rook is talking about ALL of them as an option. Roland, Laurence and Tariq were all options.

Second, much more interestingly.....

>the slight hitch that Archer isn't a martyr

That's what Cat THOUGHT.

Yet.

>"Cat," Archer said. "Look at me."

>I turned, eyes lingering on the traces of blood still on her forehead. The reminder that she'd already died once tonight.

>"It's just ten years," she said. "And you didn't age while Duchess or Queen, so I'm losing nothing there. I'm not enough of an asshole to insist we murder someone over a decade."

>Except that she was, unkind as that thought was. Because Indrani was lovely and generous to those few that she loved, but the rest? She was not the kind to bleed for strangers, and I doubted the few months we'd spent apart had changed that about her. Or maybe I just didn't want to. What would it mean, if months away from the Woe was all it took to let her compassion bloom?

I mean Cat's logic here is incredibly bullshit (and 'few months' does not fit in the timeline no matter how you stretch it coz 1) it's still winter iirc, 2) there's no way events that happened since Indrani left took MONTHS) but the fact is,

there was a suggestion presented she might be wrong.

There is also an earlier quote higher in the chapter...

>"It is uncertain," the Peregrine admitted. "There are some deaths not even my prayers can forgive, and to die on the altar for the sake of others might be one such."

>**The old man glanced meaningfully at Indrani**, who in difference to the seriousness of the situation had been keeping her mouth shut.

>"I cannot bring back those departed twice," he warned. "No matter the circumstances."

Why exactly would Pilgrim, with his Aspect of Behold, be *meaningfully glancing* at someone who

totally wasn't a martyr and definitely wasn't about to suggest herself as an option?

Especially given that immediately after this it's Indrani (who had been 'in deference to the situation keeping her mouth shut') who speaks up.

>I'd had absolutely no intention of letting anyone so much as shake a knife in Archer's direction, but that was good to know. My friend had already died one tonight so, as far as I was concerned, she'd more than the paid the dues she hadn't even owed.

>"Might be this is obvious to the rest of you," Indrani slowly said, "yet why aren't we simply having someone put on the fancy hat and stay alive? That ought to do the trick."

Moreover...

>It was a possibility, I thought, to force that crown onto Kairos' head and slit his throat. One I'd seriously consider, but the Tyrant had bargained back his life from the Bard and the Pilgrim seemed set on respecting this. Would it be worth it, I asked myself, to cross him on this? It might be too much of a risk. The Rogue Sorcerer might come out either way, given his scraps with the Tyrant, and Archer would be at my side through Crown and Tower but the other two? The Saint was most likely to see the practicality in bleeding Kairos, but she often deferred to the Pilgrim over calls like these and she'd be just as eager to take a swing at me. The Tyrant's reaction was arguably the most predictable and least worrisome, for though he'd attempt escape he wouldn't take it personally in the slightest. No, I finally decided. The odds were too stiff and the cause too red. Even if I got away with it I'd leave scars, the kind that'd come back to bite me down the line, and our alliance was too young not to be mangled by something like this.

So your point about it being impossible to force the crown on someone is not really supported by canon text.

Oh, and either way

>We'd be killing whoever ended up putting it on, which disqualified Indrani from his discussion of succession as far as I was concerned. I'd already

had enough close calls with death that I suspected I'd run out of ways to cheat it, and if I croaked it here too many things fell apart. That left who, the Sorcerer or the Pilgrim? It'd have to be Roland, I grimly thought. Much as he'd been growing on me, if the Grey Pilgrim died here the storm that'd follow would be massive. It was an ugly thought, turning on someone who'd been becoming a true ally, but what other choice was there? **Indrani, the thought came. I felt a sharp well of disgust at myself, both for her name having come to me at all and then my refusal to entertain it. Was it not rank hypocrisy, to demand this sacrifice from strangers while denying even thought of it when it came to my own?** There'd been more than one reason villainy came easier to me than the other side's works.

You'd think the logic of "it can't be Indrani because she won't go for this" would ease Cat's conscience on this point rather than leaving her grappling with 'how bad a person am I'.

Mental Mouse

My sarcasm meter just melted! 😊

But seriously, yes Saint had a case. If she'd been able to cleanly destroy the crown, Providence might well have lent a hand in support of a successful story... but with Kairos' interference, it's the worst of both worlds instead.

caoimhinh

About what exactly, do you mean?
Compromising?

That's just simple civility and the basis of any convivence, negotiations and the hope for peace. Cat is trying to go beyond the simple struggle of Heroes vs Villains and trying to change the way they do things. So that entire countries don't have to be swept up in the mess caused by Named every couple of years.

Saint is being stubborn and refusing to see reason, she refuses to consider the possibility of there being actual peace. Her refusal to compromise and her prejudice despite evidence that her opponents are looking for peace seem to border in the xenophobia and racism (as in 'everyone who is not like us is an enemy to be destroyed and can't be reasoned with, there can be no peace between us' line of thinking that has been the

speech of so many discriminatory groups through history, and which is obviously wrong).

I don't think everyone is assuming things about who is right, different readers have presented different opinions, and even those that see Saint's actions as crazy can see the context in which she made her decision (her life experience). What we are all in accordance, I think, is that Saint's action of gambling with 300 thousand people's lives instead of compromising is not something heroic.

[Liliet](#)

You might want to rephrase that last sentence, because literally half the plot point this chapter was that the universe absolutely counted this as heroic on her part.

Oh and incidentally, I'm not in that accordance, though for a different reason.

[Fayhem](#)

> You might want to rephrase that last sentence, because literally half the plot point this chapter was that the universe absolutely counted this as heroic on her part.

If there's one thing that this story has established it's that the narrative is very gameable, so I'd consider it dubious to conclude that somebody getting a narrative advantage is inherently an objective ruling on the part of the universe itself. Especially since Saint's heroic advantage explicitly did **not** trigger off her own actions in trying to smash the crown, but from Tyrant's wantonly assholeish decision to deliberately frame this as "lone Hero fighting for What She Thinks is Right against a group of largely villains cockily boasting of their inevitable triumph". That's not the universe ratifying Saint's perception that What She Thinks is Right actually is right, that's an existing narrative frame that Saint was eligible for based on the pre-existing attributes of the actors involved rather than because of her choice per se.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think it's necessary for the person to be right for their actions to be heroic.

Heroic idiocy is a trope.

[Fayhem](#)

IIRC “heroic idiocy” usually refers to heroes being idiotic, not to idiocy being heroic. I think that’s a very salient distinction here.

[Liliet](#)

“Heroic idiocy” very much refers to actions being fucking stupid yet undertaken with heroic intent. See: what Cat thought about Tariq’s “It would have to be me” here.

[Fayhem](#)

Sure. But heroic intent does not ipso facto equal actual heroism, which is the distinction I was trying to draw (apparently unclearly lol).

[Liliet](#)

“But heroic intent does not ipso facto equal actual heroism”
How do you define ‘actual heroism’ then?

[Fayhem](#)

Ah, the million dollar question! At this point I feel as if we’re getting further into realms of actual philosophy that I haven’t looked at seriously in years, so idk about you but I’m starting to be a bit out of my depth lol. But to give it the old college try:

I would consider heroism, “actual heroism” if you will, to consist of a kind of marriage of intent and effect. If you want to do good but in reality all you do is fuck things up, you’re not a hero; you’re a fool at best and a tragedy at worst. If you have no particular desire to do good, but doing what you want to do for your own reasons produces good results for people then I’d say you’re not a hero since any beneficial side effects of your actions are no more than a happy accident at best. To be an “actual hero” I think you have to both want to do good/be heroic and then *actually accomplish that*.

[Liliet](#)

This position makes sense as a basis and I agree in principle, but I think it requires modification to account for risks and chances.

To take the roughest extreme: if someone gave their lives to carry out children from a burning orphanage, but one of the children later became a serial killer and killed all of their orphanage mates then 100 other people, does that make the original person's actions in saving them not heroic in retrospect?

There is such a thing as 'reasonable expectation', and it's in the definition of 'reasonable' that the wiggle room is to be had.

I think in guideverse the universe resolves this by pattern-matching 'in cases that look like this are consequences usually positive or negative'. Or even 'in cases that look like this do people believe consequences to be usually positive or negative' :3

In this specific situation, I suppose an argument can be made that there was no 'reasonable expectation' of a better outcome here, so it was not heroic.

I'd say Saint's expectation was pretty damn reasonable when it came to 'let's not do the twilight queen indrani thing' but unreasonable when after cracking the crown she proceeded to try to break it. It's possible though that she didn't know cracking the crown already made that plan unworkable, and in fact that's my guess. She didn't know the half-measure succeeded already.

[Fayhem](#)

In the example you gave the consequences are both way down the road and by no means reasonably anticipatable (is that a word?). The Saint's actions, by contrast, directly threatened the lives of hundreds of thousands who are all needed to turn back the Dead King. That's both immediate and extremely knowable, since she had literally just been told exactly that by the only person present with anything resembling subject matter expertise like five seconds earlier.

I'm just saying, if we're assessing "risks and chances", let's not just assess whether risking the fallout of Twilight Queen Indrani might be a bad idea. Let's assess whether risking *literally the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people who are additionally needed to stop the Dead King from eating the damn continent* might be a bad idea. You

have to include both sides of the scales to see where the balance falls.

And so in this case, I will absolutely stand by the claim that Saint was being the bad kind of stubborn here and risking what she had no right to. Accepting the risk of killing hundreds of thousands and risking the death of a continent because you can't accept the risk of a compromise is just called fear – fear of losing your moral certainty, fear of undermining the premise that's held together your hard *hard* life.

There's a point where "making the hard choice" isn't a sign of moral courage, it's a sign of the lack of it – and Saint crossed that point here. The fact that she was willing to sacrifice herself to do so because she *believed* (or at least convinced herself) she was doing the "right thing" just makes her choice tragic, not heroic.

[*Liliet*](#)

No, I'm assessing both and I agree that both are significant.

And I guess with your point about fear I can see why you would reject the word 'heroic' here, since that usually has explicit connotations of bravery, not just good intent.

caoimhinh

Remember that Named don't even need to be actually good, bad or heroic in nature or intentions to take advantage of Narrative. All they need is the shape of it to be empowered or weakened by its force. That's the whole point of how Catherine manipulates things to be on the advantageous side of a story and Amadeus avoids falling into narrative traps, sometimes even making sacrificial story tropes (remember his advice to Grem when fighting against Hanno's team of knights). Plus there are multiple layers to a narrative, and multiple stories can act at the same time or use the same people to 'activate' one after the other.

Saint was definitely in the wrong here, putting in risk everyone's lives for her stubbornness; however that also made a story of a principled heroine fighting for what she believed was correct against a group that was majorily composed of Villains which empowered her to fight, she was ultimately in the

wrong so she would have likely be defeated in the end (remember Villains get an early victory or initially beat the Heroes in many stories) yet when she was looking like she would be subdued Kairos 'activated' another story by proclaiming his team as invincible with an assured victory plus saying that Saint would need to submit to Below, this had the same effect of a Monologue: weakening the 'villain' of the story and/or strengthening the 'hero'.

The Universe and the Power of Narrative in the Guideverse isn't a conscious intelligent judge, but rather a mechanism that acts by force of consequence. A wicked Villain acting like a good guy can get the advantages of the Narrative just fine (like Black and the Calamities did for decades), and a well-intentioned Hero acting in the wrong manner can be screwed by the Story (like the Saint of Swords when attacking Cat under truce banner, as Catherine was correct in her behavior).

Rook

The Saint was quite clearly good as far as intentions go, not just 'Good' in a narrative sense. Whether the action was the right choice is a separate question, and depends entirely on perspective.

You have to realize that 'reckless principled buffoon who cares more about lines in the sand than lives' is the interpretation by readers really stretching to find a moral quandary with a character they dislike. The text shows that her motivations were the opposite – she was worried at the mass harm she believed the establishment of the realm would have on later generations

>“... There's no going back from that once we unleash it, Tariq. And odds are we won't live to see that garden of ruin come to bear fruit – by what right do you pass on that woe to those that come after us?”

She's not indignant because people dare to disagree with her. She's indignant because in her eyes the coronation is passing the buck to their children and grandchildren. Irresponsibly unloading the burden and suffering to untold generations that will follow, for an easy solution now.

It's not that everyone agrees the coronation is the least harmful way to go, the disagreement in the first place is whether that actually is the case.

Because one side is believing it can be taken back, be undone, the other believes it can't. THATS the crux of the disagreement, and honestly there's absolutely no concrete proof either way.

caoimhinh

True. That's what I meant when I mentioned the multiple layers of Narrative and multiple stories at work with a group of people.

It's very subjective, and the power of story can swing one way or another depending on the interpretation and shift to the opposite way as soon as a single sentence is spoken.

They are all to a degree, right. And at the same time, they are all wrong to some degree. We know that Laurence worries are well-founded, she has vast experience on this, and as a veteran Named she knows how her world works in the conflict of Good and Evil, she is right to worry about the future if their principles are compromised; but that's the radicalization that's typical in conservative factions of politics, they don't trust the other party and don't believe change is possible or positive.

Tariq, on the other hand, knows the same as Saint (probably a bit more), but has decided to not lose hope, he is always willing to alleviate suffering and works towards peace. Even if it's always on his own terms (while accusing the other side of being the ones doing it, as he does with Cat), yet he is right in his worry of letting the other side dictate terms because he has seen them use that as opportunity to cause harm many times.

Amadeus and Catherine are the other side of the coin. They belong to the side that has always done bad choices and caused harm to others, so they decided to change things. Black built up a reputation as Carrion Lord, a cold-blooded Villain who destroyed everything in his way to make Praes a great nation, while his real plan ultimately led them to acting in a way different from the Villains of the past, as that was the only way to achieve true and lasting peace, to break free of the cycle (notice that while Amadeus is willing and perfectly capable of mass slaughter to achieve his goal, he refrains from it and takes a more pragmatic and even charismatic approach whenever possible). Cat is right now trying to break new ground, bringing a further change from the one

started by Amadeus, yet she has to fight against the reputation of her predecessors and the bad image the Heroes have of her (only Tariq -and maybe now Roland- has a decent opinion of her, and that's only because he looked at her soul before), from the perspective of Heroes and other countries, she is a warlord building up a great army, a threat to their lives. Forcing her to fight against them and kill their armies, which leads to confirmation bias that she was actually really a wicked person and so they call a greater reckoning, thus continuing the conflict.

It's all part of the cycle, and to break free of it, they need to make compromises. Yet it is understandable that the ones who had lived through the war aren't willing to make peace, as they grieve and are pained by their experiences that make them distrust the other side. But it needs to be done, otherwise they are just going to be killing each other for generations without end. Compromise is, after all, the only way peace treaties can be formed, signed and implemented without crushing the other side.

Shveiran

@ caoimhinh: damn right. Couldn't have said it better.

[Liliet](#)

Saint was in the wrong. She was also being heroic about it. I'm not seeing the contradiction.

caoimhinh

Yeah, we have established long ago that she is a Knight Templar, close to a Well-intentioned Extremist (though that's more Pilgrim's trademark).

It's not contradiction. It's multi-layered narrative.

[Liliet](#)

THANK YOU

[Liliet](#)

also Well-Intentioned Extremist has Amadeus's portrait on the dictionary entry

[TeK](#)

"About what exactly, do you mean?

Compromising?

That's just simple civility and the basis of any convivence, negotiations and the hope for peace."

Yes, that, why do you think that's going to work in Guideverse, or why do you think that such an obvious idea had never been tried before?

I feel the need to point it out – our common sence does not work in the universe with vastly different ruleset. An example – running or swimming is entirely pointless in the vacuum of space.

"Cat is trying to go beyond the simple struggle of Heroes vs Villains and trying to change the way they do things."

Aha, and Saint had been told that... When, exactly? See, another common *assumption* is that every actor has the same information as you. Up to and including metanarrative information such as that Cat is a protagonist and so must win in the end and also holds a moral highground because she never did anything to warrant distrust, like, I don't know, strating a civil war, installing an architector of genocide of a city as a governor or enslaving an entire race to have some meatshields. Sure, she's all changed or not her fault. And Saint knows all the convenient details that make her "not so guilty"(tm)... Since when, exactly?

Y'all act Saint to be unreasonable for distrusting Cat, but what reason to trust her she really has, aside from proclaimed (sic!) good intentions? I mean no Villain had ever proclaimed good intentions before, had they?

And the last thing I am going to point out, is that you don't know that she **REFUSES** to consider anything, it is just as likely or more that she HAD considered, and then d3cided that **it's not worth the risk** based on the information that she had and the fact that the situation CONVINIENTLY resolved to place a whole EVIL FAE CPURT AT THE BECK AND CALL OF BLACK QUEEN. And how was she supposed to know that after EVERYTHING had gone according to her plan, this is no just another time she pulls the rug under the Heroes?

And, with all of the above in the consideration, I'd just shank the queen, to be honest. Like, compromise actually requires someone doing the compromising, not just manipulationg everyone into doing what you want them to. Which is exactly how the situation seems IF

YOU DO NOT HAVE A DORECT LINK TO CAT'S THOUGHTS. Which Saint don't.

[Liliet](#)

Note how Laurence actually did not make an attempt on Cat's life. Like even when she parsed Cat as challenging her to a duel – Cat got a whole eleven seconds to murder her with a spell in while Laurence was trying to talk her down.

She actually, genuinely, is willing to give Catherine Foundling a chance.

Just, you know... not a fae court-sized one.

[Liliet](#)

Was.

Fuck.

Laurence)=)=)=

Shveiran

No. She is not willing to give Cat a chance. And to reply to Tek, yes, she believes Cat to have good intentions.

She said as much in Swan Song (Redux), and she still refuses a long term compromise. That is the point, that is what she fears: not teh Twilight Court, but establishing precedent for Villains and Heroes to sit at the table and compromise. Because "villains will always betray you in the end".

That is the hill she is choosing to die on. Those are the long term consequences she fears. Her stance is simply incompatible with "giving a chance" to any Villain; because it is not about believing they have changed or lacking informations about seeing that they are good, it is about fearing the consequence of a precedence.

This was her pivot: the moment where she chose between embracing the new or sticking with the old.

I am not denying she had reason to take this stand; it wouldn't have been a pivot otherwise. But let's not add what isn't there: she had already determined Cat was likely sincere, because

she told Tariq as much; she was not willing to compromise-but-not-fae-court-level-of-compromise-just-yet, because what she feared was precedent of a compromise: if you are set on avoyding that, the best she could have offered the Black Queen long term was a temporary truce. The alternative was giving her sanction to keep on going, and SAINT WAS DEAD SET AGAINST THAT.

Liliet

I think if it wasn't fae court level she likely would have bent. Just because it was her position does not mean she would not eventually be willing to change it.

But she never got a chance to.

caoimhinh

It has been proven that governments of Evil-aligned and Good-aligned nations can cooperate and work together (see the League of Free Cities) and also there's the example of the Yan Tei where they are ruled by two people, one from Evil and one from Good. Besides, Evil-aligned nations make commercial deals with Good-aligned nations, although they prefer to use intermediaries for the sake of public image (Praes exports gems to Procer and imports food from Procer). So there's in-universe proof that coexistence IS possible.

Also, Pilgrim told Saint about Catherine's intentions for peace since as early as the Battle of the Camps. He stated it clearly and confessed that only the politics of the situation stayed his hand from enabling it to happen with Catherine in power of Callow. Besides, this isn't just putting blind faith into Cat's team, they were crowning Indrani under the condition of Oaths (which we know for a fact that affect normal people, even Named, and are outright unbreakable by Fae so they would have been a secure measure to assure that there would be no misuse of that power), and yet Saint decided that setting the precedent of making peaceful deals between Heroes and Villains was poisonous for the heroic cause, so she destroyed their safe option and gambled on the fate of 300 thousand people.

I am not saying that Laurence was insane, just that she isn't willing to compromise and sit down for civilized peace talks. She is a fanatic, a conservative faction that radicalized her position of

belligerence towards her enemies of the past and carries that hatred to their successors.

It's no different than two countries at war for a long time; unless one of the two sides achieves an overwhelming victory over the other side, the conflict won't stop with a clear winner. Now, it's clear that any conflict that last for so long means that the two opposing forces are of roughly equal might (or that their advantages and disadvantages balance each other), what we are seeing here is the new generation of one of those sides offering peace and co-existence, achieved by mutual compromises, while the other side refuses this and decided that they would rather fight to the death (this was stated clearly by Laurence).

You don't need to read the mind of the other side to be able to achieve peace, if that were a requirement then there would never be peace. No negotiation, business deal, or peace treaty is signed by both parties knowing each other's pasts and minds, they are achieved by recognizing that both parties would benefit from the deal.

If your justification for Saint refusing peace is "she doesn't know Cat" or "she can't read her mind" that's a very bad excuse and completely invalid, because no peace treaty has ever been done that way. Peace is achieved by both sides recognizing that they can't win the war without great cost, and is only signed when both sides take a step back and compromise.

Otherwise they just keep sacrificing people in the conflict.

caoimhinh

Also, this wasn't even a deal for lasting peace, it was merely a truce for them to temporarily join and fight against the real unreasonable enemy: the Dead King.

The Twilight Court would have easily been contained or limited by the Oaths taken by Indrani, plus binding the participants to destroy the realm 10 years in the future when Indrani abdicated.

It wouldn't even be a great compromise, it would be a mutually beneficial agreement with clearly established boundaries.

Yet Laurence threw that off-board and put hundreds of thousands of people at risk out of her stubbornness and pride. Thinking that making a peaceful deal tainted their cause. it's the same nonsense as the

speeches of racial purity or supremacy that say that joining with people of other race or nationality is a dishonor and a mark of shame that would disgrace the family line forever. It's stupid.

Yeah, the Villains of the past were crazy bastards, and yes, maybe the Villains of the future will be crazy bastards, heck the villains of today are crazy bastards (looking at you, Kairos) but that does not justify gambling with people's lives simply because the solution is given by a Villain. If that Heroine rather let people die than let them receive the cure from the hands of a Villain, it's not the Villain that's the problem there.

edrey

tariq, most likely, would take his right to rule back, get crowned and die like gandalf. on the other hand, the white knight just gained a very dangerous life. i am looking forward the peace talks now

Faiir

I might have missed something in the chapter – is there a specific reason why everyone talks about WK like he just leveled up, besides the fact that he's one of the only named heroes left?

[Cheeezburger](#)

It's because his power is to temporarily get the experiences and powers of any past hero, and if Tariq is dead, he will be in that pool.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well... he gets the skills and memories, I don't think he gains all their powers. He had a magical weapon that shapeshifted to suit his needs, but Black broke it. (He might well do Light weapons in future.) I'm pretty sure he does not get their aspects. The interesting thing is that he's definitely not limited to his own Choir's heroes.

Say it again slower

I think it isn't because White Knight has Hero Power Access – that power is restricted to memories of other White Knights. I think it is that he is bound to Justice and Cat just murdered a major hero. Am I mistaken?

[Liliet](#)

He is restricted to memories of ALL HEROES. Not a single person mentioned was a White Knight. Most specifically I recall Unconquered Champion (who got Black in a pocket dimension and teased out some of his tricks), Lone Swordsman (who fought Black's student and thus had some insight to draw on about his school) and Thief of Stars (who drew my attention for obvious reasons).

caoimhinh

I remember that he also **Recalled** the Unerring Fencer, the Sage of the West, and the Sword of the Free.

I didn't remember him using the Thief of Stars.

[Liliet](#)

She was mentioned at one point!

And yeah, those ♥

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also: die like Gandalf? Are you actually talking about the LoTR character? Because y'know, he doesn't actually die in the books. Goes down into a chasm to wrestle a Balrog, but he comes back from that, and at the end he sails off to the West with the elves.

caoimhinh

Maybe the Choir of Mercy will resurrect Tariq as the White Pilgrim XD

werafdsaew

The deal to spare Laurence was superseded by the deal to save Tyrant.

[Liliet](#)

Cat phrased it as 'should the other condition fail to occur' ie she's still agreeing to spare Laurence but now has the deal secured if Laurence doesn't attack either.

I don't think Tariq will consider this to be a breach of agreement in spirit, since Catherine laid the condition that she will not allow Laurence to kill Masego upfront, and I imagine Masego is one of the 300 000 + the entire civilian population of Liesse. Which honestly should be enough on its own, but if we're talking literally made deals – well. That one was for Laurence threatening *just Cat*. Cat wasn't even in personal danger here, just protecting everyone else.

Note how even Roland came close to being willing to kill her here.

Shveiran

Also, Cat was in danger. She was on the demiplan Saint was willing to risk crushing on Creation.

It is a very minor point, but still. It's not like her own survival wasn't in question.

[Liliet](#)

True. I get the impression the plane itself was going to stay ok, but it's not guaranteed.

Cat's own survival wasn't THE question here though which is the main point :3

[Javvies](#)

Huh.

Well that happened.

Kairos ... what the hell. Monologuing at Saint? That's a mistake if there ever was one.

That's one hell of a trick, Cat. But that's definitely a one time trick.

Andrew Mitchell

Not a mistake, it was another deliberate betrayal.

[C_B](#)

Was it a swing at Archer, or intended to force Cat to kill Saint, do you think?

werafdsaew

He wants to see what that staff-sword-prayer does

[Mental Mouse](#)

And use it up – he's surely figured that Cat specializes in one-shot artifacts.

caoimhinh

I would say a bit of both, but mostly to force Catherine to kill Laurence. Notice that he started that Monologue when it started to look like they were actually about to subdue Saint.

Now Cat was forced to go back on her word of not killing

Laurence, Pilgrim will be grieving, and the side of Heroes has lost a very powerful member, and at the hands of the Black Queen, which will strain her relationship with them in the future alliances that are obviously necessary. Anyone present knows that it was a necessary thing, even Tariq, but the Heroes and politicians who were not there will probably think different things, and Heroes in this setting are not prone to forgiving Villains or pausing to think about a situation where one of the Named of Below is actually the good person of the story. (This might interestingly enough lead to a situation of White Knight using his coin of Judgement on Catherine to decide the matter, and either make a mess by swinging against her or blowing everyone's mind when the Seraphim declare her free of culpability)

Andrew Mitchell

> (This might interestingly enough lead to a situation of White Knight using his coin of Judgement on Catherine to decide the matter, and either make a mess by swinging against her or blowing everyone's mind when the Seraphim declare her free of culpability)

Now *THAT'S* a scene I really want to see play out.

[TeK](#)

Seraphim do not split hair whether or not someone is guilty in one particular instance or case. It's more of an absolute concept. And Cat is absolutely guilty.

Faiir

Do we even have an example of Seraphim proclaiming anyone not guilty through the coin toss?

[Fayhem](#)

Not on camera I think, but IIRC there's mention of WK getting asked off-camera to pass some heavenly judgment when he was in the Free Cities. That stopped as soon as the Seraphim gave a "smite" verdict on someone lol. It seems like he mostly flips the coin to ask when he's already fighting someone or otherwise thinks they may be guilty of injustice though, and since he's a Hero and the Seraphim seem to have a surpassingly uncompromising definition of justice that means there's an extremely strong selection effect for cases that will produce a "smite" verdict.

And yeah, like has been pointed out by others the fact that he's using his discretion on when to flip the coin and ask means he is in fact still employing his own judgment to an extent, despite his shtick ostensibly being "I do not judge". I do feel like accusations of hypocrisy get thrown around with too much force when people discuss heroes tho, like yes they don't implement their ideals with 100% consistency but that really isn't of itself an argument. It doesn't prove their ideals are wrong, and it doesn't prove they're wrong for trying to follow them or for thinking that trying to follow them is better than not having any. At most it proves they're human, which means you're "proving a point" that no one has actually disputed. That generally gets referred to as a strawman fallacy.

That's not necessarily directed at you btw since idk where you land on all that, I'm just ranting because it's something I feel ranty about lol. And in WK's case I actually do have objections to his actual ideals, they're just not based on pointing out that he isn't wholly consistent in applying them.

[Liliet](#)

Boi I hear you.

And Hanno was implied to have flipped a coin on the Gigant who found him on the shore, and gotten a 'not guilty' verdict.

Unless he started his 'I don't see why I would flip the coin here I see nothing wrong' streak back then ;u;

[NZPIEFACE](#)

You forget that literally every regal hates the Regicide, for a damn good reason.

caoimhinh

Hmm, true.

But their hatred towards Saint of Sword is mostly because she doesn't respect their nobility, she doesn't give a damn about them being princes and princesses, and she says that to their faces. That's why they hate her, not simply because she killed a prince decades ago.

Nevertheless, my point was that when the news spread it's going to cause a ruckus, specially among the Heroes.

Rook

You forget a they also hate AND piss their pants in fear of the Black Queen. The Regicide was no one's friend, but she was in the grand scheme of things still on the same Side, especially with the Dead King looming over the horizon right now. The Black Queen's reputation, on the other hand, is that of a soul-freezing terror from the Other Side.

Now, if you're an ordinary person or ordinary noble, and you get the news that the Black Queen murdered a living legend among Chosen, what are you going to think? You're certainly not thinking "Jolly good old chap, the hideously terrifying Villain ain't so bad! She did us the favor of killing one of our most reliable Allies against the Dead King, when the Dead King is on the verge of annihilating all life on the continent! Hip hip, Cheerio!".

No, said Villain just shot up on your charts from a hideously terrifying monster to a world-shatteringly terrifying monster. Now you're feeling cornered because the successor of the fucking Black Knight, who looks to be every bit as terrifying as her teacher, is lurking at your backs whilst the Hidden Horror is knocking down your front door.

As far as the details of why she had to kill her? Even if word got out far enough, even if people had the patience to listen, who's going to believe it? Hells, half the people in her own Legions believes she sees through souls and freezes the blood in your veins at a whim. They're not even up to date enough to realize she's not a frozen murder fairy anymore, she's just the high priestess of murder in the dark.

At any rate, it's near-certain no one is going to believe the Villain killed a Hero for entirely reasonable and Justified causes, because what kind of legendarily terrifying Villain gets there by being a reasonable or Just person?

Decius

You have to control the narrative.

All anyone else knows is that Saint isn't around anymore. Blame Kairos for killing her via betrayal, and everyone believes you. Combine that with Kairos stealing the crown and being killed in turn, and things work out pretty well. The hard part is forcing Kairos to steal the crown, but with all of the betrayal he's

been doing lately it's about time for him to end anyway.

Someguy

Control of narrative is unfortunately in Bard's toolbox. Good luck with that.

[Liliet](#)

Not convinced she'd get in the way here.

Insanenoodlyguy

Did he hear Grey and Cat Talk? I think he could be reversed psych'd into this. Sell "you aren't getting the crown you bastard, you hear me?" Hard enough and he won't NOT be able to put it on.

[Liliet](#)

Hmmm.

At that, their best shot at murdering the newborn god wearing the crown was guess who?...

Insanenoodlyguy

Yeah, but now the crown is a death trap. And "I swear you die today if you put that on" and the like has tricked smart villains before.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, exactly my point. If Kairos had missed that the crown was a death trap, the logic could have been that he could totally go for it now that Laurence is not around

[Liliet](#)

I don't think Kairos needs to die for this to work, either. Literally nobody is taking his word for anything, if he told you in summer it wasn't snowing you'd look outside. If Tariq survives this, his word will be fully sufficient for everyone to go 'oh fuck the Tyrant'.

Now if he doesn't either... =x

[NZPIEFACE](#)

So, Tariq just ended up dead. I feel your comment is going to be much more relevant now.

[Liliet](#)

I mean honestly everyone present will probably point their finger at Kairos when a question is asked of whose fault it is Laurence died, since that's entirely accurate AND politically advantageous for the entire friggin world.

Though leaving the judgement up to Hanno could be beautiful as well, considering I somehow doubt Seraphim are biased.

[Javvies](#)

Hold up.

The Seraphim are likely totally biased.

At least when it comes to entities that can be construed as Evil. Such as Cat.

When it comes to those that are Good, or at least not Evil, sure, they're probably about as objective as they can be.

But remember, the Seraphim, like all Choirs of Angels, have an agenda that includes defeating Evil.

[Liliet](#)

Remember that Hanno's career as a Hero of Judgement started with looking at his Evil mother committing an unambiguously Evil deed and going "you know what? I'm not condemning this".

Shveiran

Yes. "I".

Hanno realized he could not be objective, so he surrendered the decision and all future judging to an entity he believes sees a bigger picture and is less biased.

That doesn't mean Judgment would not have condemned his mother, or that the Seraphim doesn't consider being Evil as sufficient condition to be found Guilty.

[Liliet](#)

We have different interpretations of hero/Choir relationships :3

Shveiran

We do, and it's true we likely don't have enough evidence to reach a solid theory yet (we'll likely

get more when the Hierarch's arch reaches its climax).

But my point isn't about that, is about whether or not the Seraphim condemns Evil because it's Evil. Hanno doesn't have much to do with it, in my opinion.

You seem to believe they wouldn't necessarily find her guilty, but I'm not sure why.

[Liliet](#)

Seraphim condemn Evil because it's evil, not because it's Evil 😊

Rook

Catherine is almost certainly a target, if not THE target. I don't think people fully realize how much of an awful setback this could be to basically all of her long term goals. It's not even funny how much trouble this is.

One, this looks terrible to everyone else. This looks really, seriously TERRIBLE. Some of the greatest Heroes of the age made a bargain with the Black Queen, resulting in at least one being struck down by her own hand, emphasis the latter. You know what message that sends to anyone considering making a deal with the Black Queen? Don't even fuckin consider it, it'll end up with her murdering the shit out of you. Look, even Heroes on the level of the Saint aren't immune from the horror of the wicked Villain's schemes.

Second, guess who's the only person here with enough respect and weight among the Good-aligned forces to even have a remote chance of clearing Cat's name? The Pilgrim. What a coincidence, Killing the Saint happens to put cracks in Cat's relationship with that very person.

Third, all the weight of converting the Saint here just went up in a puff of smoke. Literally one chapter ago, one of the most jaded and stubborn Heroes alive – as well as one of the most respected and famous – as much as outright admitted Catherine is an exception. Even if it was 'this once', it would have set up precedent for an exception, for a Villain to be accepted by the most ardently Evil-hating. Not anymore. Whoops.

Fourth, they STILL have to deal with the crown, and having someone abdicate in ten years is now off the table. Cat either compromises her bottom line by fully breaking it, which narratively is a huge blow even if you ignore the fact that it'll emotionally wreck her, or she sacrifices someone.

Hypocrisy and not respecting your own bottom line – even if forced – weighs badly in any light. Her options? Kairos, at which point you have Larat being the first ruler and fucking Kairos the last, when establishing the realm. Bad news bears. You have indrani, which would directly weaken the Woe and probably take more years off Cat's life than her little attack just did. Or Roland/the Pilgrim, which heavily exacerbates the problem from point one. It looks TERRIBLE in the eyes of the rest of the world.

Javvies

On the other hand, IIRC we don't actually have confirmation of King Edward's final demise, and we certainly haven't seen his corpse. And without a body ... we can't say he's dead again for reals this time. So he's technically still on the table. Not that that's necessarily a particularly good plan either.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Well, we technically have seen his corpse even though we lack that confirmation you mentioned. His corpse was just moving around and thinking and such when last we saw it. 😊

Liliet

"The foremost hero of the age died AT HER OWN HAND" is the kind of information that's only going to get out if someone everyone's willing to believe puts it that way. Neither Roland nor Tariq would be out to throw Cat under the bus here (let alone Indrani and the drow observers), and Nobody Cares What Kairos Has To Say. Especially if one or more heroes say otherwise.

The real trouble comes if Tariq and Laurence BOTH die here and Roland is the only survivor. Sure he's a foundation for heroes dealing with Cat, but he doesn't have the weight to force POLITICIANS to do so, and Levantines are going to be *livid* regardless of Roland possibly trying to reassure them it wasn't Cat's fault.

kinigget

Because Saint is a moral absolutist down to her very core. She was willing to gamble hundreds of thousands of life on the basis that she could not conscience setting a precedent for working with Villains. Not even against a greater threat.

She may not be wrong, and honestly likely isn't. But her absolute adherence to her moral principles even in the face of

an overwhelming number of practical reasons to break them makes it all moot

Basically, she's being Rorshach

Never be Rorshach

[Javvies](#)

I think you accidentally replied to the wrong comment.

[Liliet](#)

She wasn't willing to set precedent for allowing THE CREATION OF A NEW FAE COURT ANSWERABLE TO A VILLAIN.

A precedent for low key ground level working with a villain, she's already set, and note how she tried to talk Cat down instead of cutting her down immediately when Cat did her swordprayer trick.

Isaac Martinez

The prayer not only affected their time, our waiting time for the chapter was the sacrifice.

Draconic

They should have put the crown on the Saint's head. She's the one who broke it, she's the one it should kill.

Tenthyr

They couldn't contain her, like Cat said. The only way to stop her was for Cat to use her Prayer.

Adurna

I feel like the crown might very well end on her corpse at this rate. A risky move to be sure with the dead king about, but a queen at the twilight of her life would be fitting.

[Liliet](#)

Oooh this is an interesting idea.

The story wanted a sacrifice. The story bloody well GOT it. It's possible another isn't needed.

Tenthyr

The blade that was not a blade, the only sure death waiting all Heroes.

[Walter](#)

TYRANT!

erebus42

Hey, scorpions and frogs man.

Ali Khan

You know what? I'm glad this was delayed.

Because there is no way I could wait two days for the next chapter.

Xinci

And so through competition do our competing creeds crown a triumphant champion. The keeper at the last door dies while a new one takes up the mantle. A bit sad that Laurence couldn't be convinced in the end but I suppose there's only so much space on the stage. A bit surprised Laurence didn't try to think "A sword doesn't age unless it rust". But it was a fair climax before the next act and she didn't have the weight for a "Cut through time and space" scene I suppose.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Heroes don't get immortality bullshit.

[TeK](#)

Just every other kind of bullshit.

Death Knight

Hey Kairos, your head's looking a littlw bare. How about you try that cracked crown on, huh? Come on, it'd be a good fit...

Andrew Mitchell

Honestly, Kairos might actually go for it now:

- He's a true villain's Villain. Below might actually save him from the crown killing him and Kairos would happily pay whatever price Below wants for that.
- Roland's still useful but it's going to be able to stop Kairos.
- Indrani is injured.
- Pilgrim's just about spent.
- Cat's used her best trick and so may not be able to stop Kairos if he makes a play for the crown.

Insanenoodlyguy

That's the key. She has to make clear he better not put on the crown and then try to stop him. That ends with him putting on the crown and being the villain that fell for it.

[Fayhem](#)

What's the line from the Evil Overlord list? "Never try to absorb a field of energy larger than your head"? Kairos might be too canny to fall for that, but then again he's made his whole career out of riding the razor's edge of villain tropes... who knows if he could resist rolling the dice on being able to do it again.

WuseMajor

Tyrant would find a way to make them all regret making him put the crown on.

Anyone have a running tally on how many times Tyrant has betrayed people since they made their alliance?

[TeK](#)

Not enough. He is yet to betray Heroes for Cat, after all.

[Liliet](#)

Three.

One for Dead King, one for Bard, one for Laurence (so to speak).

caoimhinh

Cool chapter. Totally worth the wait.
RIP Saint of Swords.

I must say, seeing Kairos pulling a Gilgamesh's Gate of Babylon through his Gargoyles here was kind of funny, but also interesting, that with him throwing priceless and mighty artifacts one after the other without any regard and in a sickly way with his weak arms. Amusingly contrasting with Gilgamesh's cool way of launching his treasures as projectiles at his enemies through the golden portals.

The Staff-Sword-Prayer being a Blade of Time is a fascinating thing that I truly didn't see coming. Probably a miracle that won't be used ever again, but it was very powerful and a clever way to side-step the issue of fighting the Saint of Swords. In the middle of the chapter, I had kind of expected Catherine to use her sword of Night to finish breaking the crown (something like half the wound being made by a Hero and the other half being made by a Villain seemed suitable to break the Twilight Crown, at

least to me), but now that artifact has been used, though maybe Cat can still wield a Miracle of Night that can work.

The act of killing Laurence will have great repercussions, even if Tariq and Roland tell the others what truly happened, it's unlikely that the other Heroes will see this in a good way. It might even lead to Hanno using his coin on Catherine, which would lead to interesting consequences depending on what side of the coin is the one that lands (a messy fight if it lands on swords as that would mean the White Knight would attempt to kill her, and blowing everyone's mind if it falls on the laurels as that would mean the Choir of Judgement declares her not guilty, which would probably be something unprecedented for all of them and with the Angels telling them that she acted correctly they would have to swallow their complaints and hopefully see her in a new light).

I really hope Pilgrim doesn't die now by putting the Twilight Crown, because that would create a huge mess, even if Roland can advocate for the fact that Pilgrim sacrificed himself to save everyone, it would still be blamed on Hierophant and by extension on Catherine, driving Levant into a warpath that won't help anyone.

So the question is, what will they do now?
Will there be a scapegoat for the Crown? Who will it be?
Will they find another way?

Typos found:

- it was Saint of Swords of wielded it / it was Saint of Swords who wielded it
- if not for the for the gargoyle / if not for the gargoyle
- the rest of the crow / the rest of the crown
- even though she'd done so treacherously she was only going / even though she'd done so treacherously, she was only going
- I hid a grimaced / I hid a grimace
- cleverly snap out of Indrani's longknives out of her grasp / cleverly snap one of Indrani's long knives out of her grasp
- though she flicked her blade back in time to cut through it barely helped / though she flicked her blade back in time to cut through it, it barely helped
- his discussion / this discussion
- cut off her arm the wrist / cut off her arm at the wrist
- she held her severe hand / she held her severed hand
- The blade had not once unsheathed / The blade I had not once unsheathed
- Kairos had, against all odds, succeeding / Kairos had, against all odds, succeeded
- my advance drew her eyes went to me / my advance drew her eyes to me
- I touched me too / It touched me too
- I close my mouth / I closed my mouth

[Liliet](#)

Yep, that's about my analysis too.

A question is, why did Bard want this?

(This absolutely has her grubby fingerprints on it everywhere)

It's possible this was intended to help Catherine (as always in the nastiest way possible). IF Tariq survives this, that's what I'm seeing.

If he doesn't, the balls are still up in the air.

caoimhinh

I don't know if Bard wanted Laurence to die, but considering the setting we should assume everything that happens is part of a scheme or at least something she predicted, and make our hypothesis around that premise.

I would think it could be to tie a loose end? Saint was the only one who knew the 'burn all Procer in the final Crusade' plan so maybe it's something to squeeze her usefulness to the limit, get rid of Laurence to silence her while setting it up in a way that cast Catherine in a bad light when rumors start circulating (Heroes are more likely to only care that she killed a Heroine rather than the actual circumstances of the fact) plus psychologically wounded Tariq maybe in a effort to radicalize his position.

There are many ways to go around this, and many ways the facts can be twisted into a narrative benefitting some and hurting others, both for Heroes and Villains. Ultimately, it depends on how omniscient EE makes the Bard. He could make it so that the Intercessor simply takes advantage of the situations as they present or show her as someone who no matter what happens everything is part of her plan; My personal view is that the Bard is somewhere in between, making many plans and having access to lots of information and resources, but definitely not omniscient yet capable of improvising with whatever situation happens.

[Liliet](#)

I agree with your view.

This one was obvious consequence, but what it was FOR...

I will say this: it does NOT contradict my earlier theory about Bard triggering the Arch-Heretic bullshit to get the radical elements out of Catherine's way early.

Andrew Mitchell

So you're still firmly on Team 'Bard is a secret force for small-g good' then?

I'm sticking with my theory that the Bard's role is to keep the game going and that's ALL she's doing.

I think it's going to be at least an entire book before we get to know that for sure. I'm currently thinking its 50% you're right, 45% I'm right and 5% something else.

[Liliet](#)

I am just not seeing any evidence against that theory no matter what new shit comes up. There's ALWAYS a way what she's doing leads to good things if you squint. Sure it takes some squinting, but you really don't have to squint HARD. Somewhere between 'what she did broke an evil Empire and birthed the idea of the Accords' and 'Cat just got everything she wanted handed to her on a silver plate at the horrible price of losing a possible huge liability',

(I mean it's early to call THAT one yet, but literally Tariq or Cat dying are the only Bad For Cat's Plan outcomes here, and Tariq's death might put more gears into action we haven't seen yet – and Cat's not dying for good here, she's the protagonist, we know that much :D)

>I'm sticking with my theory that the Bard's role is to keep the game going and that's ALL she's doing.

>I think it's going to be at least an entire book before we get to know that for sure. I'm currently thinking its 50% you're right, 45% I'm right and 5% something else.

yeah lmao it's likely we won't know soon :3

Shveiran

Mhm, I see. So your position is basically that the Bard manipulates the plot, and the plot is bringing Cat closer to her goals (because protagonist). So either Bard is the final antagonist, or Bard was on board with it all along and we just didn't see it.

I'll admit if we go with Bard's omnipotence, it DOES make sense. My problem with it is that it makes Cat's struggle unsatisfying, personally: it requires so much foresight and manipulation on Bard's side, that basically everything becomes her doing instead of Cat's. It reduces the protagonist to mostly a pawn.

But I'll admit it is not impossible, unlike I previously believed.

[Liliet](#)

I'm seeing it as slightly different than omnipotence: effective omniscience that leads to very good predictions (though not literal future sight), but very very limited ability to influence events.

If a rock rolling down the hill comes to a fork, and it takes a light touch to send it tumbling one way or the other, Bard can provide that touch.

If the rock is already there.
If the fork is already there.
If Bard has the capability to be there.

She participates in events, but the protagonist being who she is is a harsh prerequisite for Bard getting her way. This is why my theory is not unsatisfying to me: because it DID take Catherine Foundling, and it DID take Amadeus of the Green Stretch to find her, for Bard to get the ball rolling the way it went.

Their choices very much matter, and frankly they matter more than hers. She only works with what she's given.

Catherine Foundling's choices are shaped by circumstances she finds herself in. One of these circumstances is Bard, and I'm not seeing anything unsatisfying in that :3

[daegone823](#)

Was I the only one thinking she was going to stab the pilgrim for turning on everything she stood for.

I mean this was fine but I guess I had a darker expectation. The hero who slays monsters becoming a monster and assuming a throne of twilight to stone for her sins.

Andrew Mitchell

Laurence had no reason to become a monster; as expected she stayed true to herself to the very end.

To me, Laurence becoming a monster would feel like a cliché and EE has done a sterling job avoiding those so far.

[daegone823](#)

Right you are which is why this fiction is so wonderful. We have been trained by so many fables do many stories that they have been ingrained in our genes as much as the average Calowan.

The other can set up the story then introduce a goat and our mind explodes. Seriously the author must have a note on there laptop to introduce st least one goat as a plot point for every major battle.

Really love this story shame it is so hard to explain to friends.

[daegone823](#)

The author

[Javvies](#)

She was already a monster.
Just one that was on the side of Good. "She's a Hero, so she can't be a monster."

[TeK](#)

Highly debatable. What is a monster? Why is she a monster?

werafdsaew

If the Saint succeeded at destroying the crown, and that gamble failed in that it killed everyone in Iserre, she would be remembered as one of the worst monsters in history by body count, far exceeding even the Doom of Liesse.

[onedollargum](#)

I'm pretty sure the media would play it as: "It was only at great cost that the Saint foiled the Black Queen and saved us from the foundation of the Damned Twilight Court."

Andrew Mitchell

If the word somehow got out, then I agree.

However, I think all the witnesses would be dead as well.

werafdsaew

Pilgrim, with his Ophanim protection, is guarenteed to make it out alive. He's also the Hero who would tell the truth to the world to forestall future Saints.

Trupo

That “Enemy” she spoke of all the time? It was her, because she made it impossible to make truce with her. She turned herself into one of people that couldn’t be trusted or reasoned with and had to be removed for everyones sake; i.e. what she believed she was fighting.

[Liliet](#)

She died because instead of cutting Catherine down the second she took out the sword, she tried to talk her down, thus giving her the eleven seconds she needed to kill her.

I’m just saying.

Shveiran

Debatable. There was too much narrative weight behind that swordnotsword that she was never going to survive it.

The narrative was pushing very hard against her. You could say it was her choice to hesitate; I could say that was the shape of the story pushing her to fall for it. And we’ll never know.

[Liliet](#)

True.

But I think if she was not willing to hesitate, something else would have tripped her up. Not this. This is the shape of her not being out to kill Catherine.

Shveiran

But even if she was... so what? Saint took a stance she was never going to walk away from. And that stance was “no long term compromise, no sitting at the table with them”. Long term, that means killing Catherine because Villain. There isn’t a lot of wiggle room here.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I realized why we don’t like Saint.

She’s trying to dictate the results of lives she has no real right to, both from our point of view, and everyone in the story’s. Her voice is an opinion, a pretty valid one from the good guy’s PoV, but still, she’s been forcing her way with things that she never should have.

luminiousblu

>we
Speak for yourself chap

[TeK](#)

Quite.

[TeK](#)

Forcing your way of things is what being Named is all about.
Everyone does it, Cat does it, and we have no reason to believe
she can't be wrong.

jack

Timesword?

TIME-SWORD!

Andrew Mitchell

'Single-use' time-sword!

JJR

Time And Rayless Dimension In Scabbard

gyndroid

""Come, drow," the Saint of Swords said. "Let's see if your faith
is strong enough even I cannot cut it."

"Come," Rumena replied, "before one of us dies of old age.""

...welp!

[onedollargum](#)

Foreshadowing! Nice find.

erebus42

What's especially funny is if he were there he would have
survived it and outlived her anyway

[Liliet](#)

What's even funnier is he might have known about Cat's
prayer and done this on purpose.

gyndroid

It's certainly not the first time he's teased about old
age, and I kind of love it.

From chapter 12:

Clenching my fingers, I spit to the side.

"Rumena, pick out two thousand warriors," I said.

"Will you be spitting on them as well, First Under the Night?" the old drow drily asked.

"That one's a bit of a stretch," I replied without missing a beat. "Careful with those, you know your back's not what it used to be."

"At least one of us should live to reach old age," Rumena smoothly retorted.

[*Liliet*](#)

I love him so much.

Andrew Mitchell

Me too. I want some more, much more, Rumena screen-time.

Odd

Still time for Black to take up the crown. Death of the mentor has enough narrative weight even if Cat didn't see it.

Sparsebeard

Plus, it would count as amends for Saint's death and showing resolve. This way, it's not only the heroes who sacrifice.

[*Liliet*](#)

If anyone of Cat's takes up the crown and dies, it's Akua. Like there's literally no reason to pick Black over her, and about 1000 reasons not to.

But nobody from the outside can interfere.

Aotrs Commander

And nothing of value was lost.

(Well, unless Indrani's hand can't be put back,...)

Don't rest in peace, Saint.

Shveiran

Arguable. But mostly, arch is not done yet. Crown is still broken, realm is still fallig, and the previous neat solution has been made impossible.

[Liliet](#)

RIP Laurence. You will be missed, if not by everyone.

[Tohron](#)

Somehow I'm thinking that it'll be Black who ends up getting crowned. The way the story's going, I'm not seeing either Indrani or Roland suddenly dying, and since Black isn't quite alive right now, he could get crowned and still survive in some fashion.

[Tohron](#)

AAAND ninjaed...

Andrew Mitchell

Black is not there, he's back at camp.

Andrew Mitchell

And probably not re-assembled as yet.

JJR

Black Knight action figure! (some assembly required, Soul not included)

Andrew Mitchell

Hahahahhhaha

[TeK](#)

Can I paint it pink?

[Fayhem](#)

Honestly I feel like in the right circumstances Amadeus would totally roll with that idea just for the psychological advantage of making all the Heroes feel really weird while they're fighting him.

[Liliet](#)

Yes.

[Fayhem](#)

Riding an undead unicorn that he has also painted pink. "At them, Buttercup! They'll never stop the power of our friendship."

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus's 1000 actual friends roll their eyes.

[Fayhem](#)

Which is the real reason he'd say it, obviously.

[Liliet](#)

If this were possible it'd be Akua.

Thea

So... Will Archer make a full recovery? Or still having lost her hand leave symptoms and take her Name in the process?

[onedollargum](#)

She might recover that hand, but the resurrection says to Prepare for Unforeseen Consequences.

erebus42

I would guess she won't recover the hand since it was the Saint who cut it off. I predict she will also probably decline a zombie hand (probably for the best considering who they are fighting). If she does lose her name (probable, since it's kinda hard to use a bow with only one hand) she'll at least be in the same boat as Masego. I'm sure it will be a lovely little bonding experience (you know, having the Crafts that they dedicated their whole lives and identities to snatched away and what not), hopefully they'll be able to help each other find new ways to reinvent themselves though.

Andrew Mitchell

I hope you're wrong and I fear you may be right.

[Javvies](#)

Why? It's not like Saint was using an Aspect or something like the Hashmallin feather sword that William had. As far as we can tell, anyways.

Plus, Pilgrim started to use his Miracle-healing to reattach it almost immediately.

I think Indrani's worst case scenario is that she needs to spend some time rehabbing.

Physically, anyways.

Indrani might need some mental recovery time, though, since she's had a particularly bad half hour or so.

Morgenstern

I'm still kinda banking on self-sacrifice-tragedy by one of the lovers, to potentially attempt restoring the love of their life even in their final second. Although I'm not sure that'll happen. Might just be poor Roland bites the dust. But I would feel seriously cheated if no one bites the dust after THIS chapter. They firmly decided against gambling. That's what you should get for denying the heroic gamble, storywise, no?

Andrew Mitchell

FTFY

"But I would feel seriously cheated if no one ELSE bites the dust after THIS chapter."

[Euodiachloris](#)

She may find herself becoming more plot dangerous without a Name or her martial skills.

After all, the really scary thing about Indrani has always been how flipping intelligent she is underneath all her mannerisms.

erebus42

Daaamn! That's how it's done! I was skeptical of the idea of Cat's ace in the hole against the Saint of Swords being a sword, looks like I was right to be so. If there's one thing I can appreciate its beating a seemingly invincible opponent through a loophole. Especially when done so beautifully. Time really does always win I guess.

I get the feeling that that's it for Andrani's arm considering it was the Sait who cut it off.

Also Kairos you beautiful treacherous bastard! Never change.

Hitogami

Kairos is really Dread Emperor Traitorous in disguise

burdi

it is time then for catherine to subdue the twilight crown
declare that she is the most worthy, she unmade two court of fae,
and the twilight crown was born from her scheme
the pilgrim will disagree of course but the crown already broken
and catherine is the only one ever bear the court crown before

[TeK](#)

Why would she do that, she specifically DON'T want to have it.

konstantinvoncarstein

At last Saint is dead! Now, it is the turn of Kairos and Anaxarès

JJR

Cracked presents:

The seven greatest traitors of Calernia! (You'll never guess which ones were Dread Emperor Traitorous all along)

Kissaten

Bard REALLY wants to see that crown on Black Knight's head, doesn't she?

So, I think, if Bard's behind Crown's cracking the natural cause of action is to break it completely, "no one's worthy": If it explodes and kills the heroes but armies somehow survive there's no strife between those armies, and this kills both Bard and Dead King; If armies die as well Dead King dominates the continent, and Bard cannot allow it; if neither die it's a clear loss for Bard. Meanwhile any outcome where someone's worthy has coalition broken and either villains or heroes winning, meaning return to status quo so it's in Bard's interests.

Trupo

"I have my moments," Amadeus mused. "I did hear this funny jest, from someone very dear to me. It was about this very arrogant woman who had her belly opened and crawled away holding in her guts."

He paused.

"The punchline is that you'll grow old and die, while Hye won't," he helpfully added.

[*Liliet*](#)

This remains the worst joke he's ever told, and also my favorite.

I feel really bad for Laurence, I'll be mourning her for some time yet, but...

...

...this was still funny in how bad it was.

[*TeK*](#)

I kniw I am probably the only one, but I am sad this is how Saint died. She deserved to die as she lived, holding darkness at bay with the sword in her hand. This is just not fair. Heartbreaking. Gotta go cry myself to sleep now.

Morgenstern

You're not the only one. Multiple peeps here have already stated having the same feeling.

werafdsaew

Except that is exactly how she died? From our perspective she's making a big mistake, but from her perspective she is the last hero holding the darkness back sword in hand.

[Liliet](#)

She failed tho. The first charge succeeded (and she prevented the founding of the court), but the second to finish breaking the crown failed.

(That was by the way very stupid of her, though I guess she might not have heard what Tariq said about no-one being able to put it on and survive now)

[Liliet](#)

...actually she succeeded nm lmao

[Liliet](#)

That's about what I did 😊

Andrew Mitchell

I feel sorry, but not VERY sorry. I too would much prefer her to be around to take a swing at the Dead King.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Everyone keeps saying this, and I don't know why. She was powerful, but ultimately a one-trick pony. If she'd gone directly against the Dead King, he'd have swatted her and maybe sent her back as a Revenant.

Andrew Mitchell

Well, clearly she wouldn't be sent in alone against the Dead King. She'd go as part of a band with a plan.

Hardric62

Most impressive finishing move from Foundling here.

That being said, I do have one regret: the fact Cat will never be in a position where she gets the Saint of Bitches to reveal/rant about her big plan was to have Procer burn to cinders and hope something worthy would rise out of the ashes like she said to

Cordelia in front of as many Alliance leaders as possible. That would have been so nice to see... Including the Saint of Bitches' likely slaughter of them to silence them (eh, there is a nice villain to take the fall just next to her), only for another revelation of failsafes of a shape or another revealing it was for nothing...

Liliet

I regret Laurence dying, and never coming to respect Catherine Foundling for what she truly is and her plan for what it truly is.

She was a good hero and a steadfast ally to those who needed her.

erebus42

Except the Procerans. But then again, they were Procerans so fuck em.

SpeckofStardust

People Stating Laurence is an unchanging fool-
"Some bargains compromise the very heart of what you are," the Saint replied. "You'll lose, Foundling. Call your minions back and let me end it the way it should have been done since the start."

I breathed out, steadied my stance.

"You're mortal," Laurence de Montfort sharply said.

-Does anyone here honestly think that saint was willing to let Cat live 10 chapters ago?

Shveiran

No. Considering she was also willing to gambel everything to prevent a compromise between Villains and Heroes being reached, fearing the consequence it would have as a precedent would be the direst threat to Calernia ever... does it matter?

She would have killed her EVENTUALLY. She would have killed her allies and destroyed all her works if given half a chance.

This is not the tragic loss of a beautiful friendship, stomped by fate before it ever bloomed. This is us finding out who among two powerful people with strong ideals unable to coexist actually survives to try and shape the world.

SpeckofStardust

The entire 5 man band was a compromise between heros and villains, This was the formation of an evil entity on the level of winter Cat, and then an agreement to leave it alone for 10 years. considering that they didn't have much time for making a

deal that had no loopholes I consider it to be a bad thing and an Evil one, there is no compromise here.

Shveiran

It's not like you need many loopholes, here. The new Court doesn't have members, or baggage, or stories, or titles. All you need is for Indrani to swear she will never title anyone else, and it is a Court of one guaranteed. Add a clause about abdication in ten years or whatever, and you are golden. This isn't Winter, it doesn't have a millennia of weight behind it.

Shveiran

And that, kids, is why spellcasters are OP.

konstantinvoncarstein

In this case, priests

konstantinvoncarstein

#Codzilla

ninegardens

So, is it just me or is it that (once again), the obvious choice for the crown is infact Cat herself.

It'll kill her, and she won't be around to force through the Accords...

But in terms of Narrative weight, and diplomatic intent it checks all the boxes.

If Pilgrim and Roland come back and are basically "Yup, black queen sacrificed herself to save all your lives. Here's the treaty she was working on. BTW, the now have a short cut to the DK, and three months breathing room"...

Or would it being a "Villian" taint the realm too much?

... hmmm... might be a problem as far as the Drow go.

Andrew Mitchell

And a problem as far as the PGtE series goes... We (the readers) know Cat's going to make it to the end.

ninegardens

I mean obviously they won't do it, but it would be one hell of a twist for EE to kill off Cat a chunk before the end, and then just have nothing but interludes for 30 chapters.

[TeK](#)

As a final memento to Laurence, as a token of my appreciation for the character, despite common disdain of her, or more precise **because** of it. I genuinely liked her and it pins me that so many people happily cackle at the scene of her pointless, tragic, *unnecesseary* death. Gotta admit though, if not for her treatment that I considered unfair and my subsequent attempts of defending her, I would be far less attached to her.

So, let me be more concise: we are sure that Saint is wrong because a) her postion is antagonistic to Cat and Cat is the protagonist, so we have an expectation that she is right b) she is wrong in both common sence and a conventional korality of our world. Anyone suggesting killing people in droves so that heroes would get a power-up here is an unstable lunatic, no to ways about it. c) she, as was pointed out inverse, is unlikable. So we don't want her to be right.

But how sure are we that Cat is right? Maybe she is wrong. Maybe you can't build a better world with good intentions and desire to change it. Maybe her thinking is a passing anomaly, sson to join the annals of history, never to be seen again. I want her to be right.

But I also wanted for Saint to survive all the wars, and see the better world she had given everything to save. A better world she had given anything to prevent. I wanted her to see, with her own eyes, that she is wrong, and people can be changed for a better. That there are colors to the world, not black and white. And that the trust, once given, can bloom into a flower of unimaginable beauty. I wanted her to see, I guess, because there are many ways to die. But to die fighting against your comrades, for a goal you'll never met, derided and demonished by those on your side, to die fighting because you can not believe into a better world, to die, without hope, without closure.

It is a terrible way to go. And I wouldn't wish it to anyone. Much less to Saint.

Andrew Mitchell

Well said. Bravo!

[TeK](#)

I never really bought into "Hero hate" train, and GP is still (and was from the moment he appeared) one of my favorite characters. A genuine Good Guy. Not that I can't appreciate a good Villain when it comes, the fact that I could and can relate to Black Knight the most out of all the rouser of characters (and frankly, the presence of SUCH A RELATABLE CHARACTER was the reason I fell in love with this novel in the first place). He is

just *so much* like me it's not even funny. Except for demisexuality, I am quite average at that. But everything else, from the box (although my method involves visualising myself feeling particular emotion and choking that self) through the cold practicality down to the **seething rage against Heavens resulting in singleminded goal of "winning"** he is what I would be, were I a character, an idealized version of myself. More clever, more driven, more ruthless, less constrained, more ambitious, more confident, just **more**. I can gush about similarities for hours, the self-identification as a cog, a tool, attempts to cast off humanity (and by attempts I mean that neither of us were successful) I honestly find more worth in following Amadeuses journey than in any other part of the Guide.

But for all our similarities, there is a key difference at our beliefs, and the reason why I do not share his seething hatred for Heroes. It is our views on agency and it's existence. I am much more closer to Masego in that regard, who is also somewhat relatable, although I never was anywhere on the spectrum, nor am I a genius. But the attempts to mechanise and rationalise social interactions were painfully realistic. So, in short, I share Zeze's position on existence of nature in place of agency. I do not believe in the freedom of choice, and while not believing in the destiny in the sence of predestined success or failure, I do believe that there was never any other way for me but to attempt to see my ambition through. I just can't.

And now that that's out of the way, let me explain why I not only do not hate/despise/dislike Saint, but think she is undeservingly hated.

For the most part, I find the reasons for hero hate quite simple. First, they are not protagonists, second they do not live up for our idealised versions of heroes straight out of comic books. Which I hate. I am not American, you see, I was not raised on comicbook culture. I find my version of heroism derived from my late country of birth – USSR. And the hero I associate with the word is an everyday hero. A simple laborer, with flaws, and stuff, not perfect, not ideal, not anything, just an average person going through the day and working to feed their family. Underwhelming, I know. But without those? We would not have a civilization. I utterly hate that culture of success when the only people deserving of aknowledgement, of notice are billionares of this world. Only exceptional are real. And simple people are just not here? They do not exist. I's allways leaders, geniuses, like thay whole belief in pivotal person, as if anyone can do something great alone. How many know about Alexander, and how many know about those who helped him get where he were? His father, who actually made Macedonia strong enough to take Persia later? His generals, his you know what? I think I got my point across.

So when I looked at the concept of the Guide, where average people fall by wayside and the Fate of the world is literally decided only in the clash of the handful of Named, I saw the people propagating my contempt for this scenario and got happy. Black's, Malicia's and Cat's way, is *our* way. Where institutions are far more powerful than an individual. But for all that I like that way, ironically, it is as much not the way of their world, as individualism is not the way of our world.

Barrendur

Ah, Laurence, peerless hero, you deserved better; you deserved a chance to **live** in the world you protected through the decades, not to die struck down by the fumbblings of a girl who believes in compromise only so long as it requires no meaningful concessions from her. Cat did not follow your example; Cat may not even have **recognised** your example as being one... and now, all I can offer are my thanks, Hero, for a life lived in sacrifice for the little people; thank-you for your service, and rest now in peace, knowing you did what had to be done and you did not flinch.

You will be sorely missed.

miles

Now put the crown on Saint! A broken crown for a dead hero, cut by her own hand before it killed her (ish) – the perfect long-term advantage for the good guys I'm sure.

Chapter 50: Sunset

"Blood freely spilled always offers greater power, for it carries the worth of both the blood and the choice."

– Extract from "The Most Noble Art of Magic", by Dread Emperor Sorcerous

"Huh," the Tyrant said. "That is *not* what I believed that would do."

I wheeled on him with cold eyes. For all that he'd helped me land the killing stroke on the Saint, he was also the reason there'd been a need for one at all. We'd been close to subduing her, before he'd decided to taunt Fate and loudly dare it to meddle. There would still have been the issue of the wounded crown, but Gods I would have preferred ending this without Laurence de Montfort's corpse on the ground. Not because of any deep

affection for the heroine, though I'd had a few perturbing glimpses on this journey at the woman that lay under the zealotry, but because the Saint of Sword's death would both have a messy aftermath and rob us of someone who might have been able to truly hurt the Dead King. I'd begun this winter itching to put her down, but now... A virtue was no less of one because it belonged to an enemy, and for all her horrid flaws Laurence de Montfort had hardly been without the opposite. My hand had been forced, in the end, when the choice had been between a woeful roll of the dice and slaying her where she stood. But for all that the choice I'd made would stay with me, I would not for a moment forget who'd forced me to make it.

"This was," I said, "one betrayal too many, Kairos."

"There's no such thing, Catherine," he confidently told me. "And if there was, yet one more betrayal would see to it."

Shouldn't be too difficult to kill him, I thought. I had no intention of allowing anywhere near the decision yet to be made over the crown, or of sparing him after that last knife in the back, so ending this here and now before the Twilight Crown finished crumbling seemed the way to go about it. Kairos Theodosian still had a handful of attending gargoyles and more artefacts than anyone should have at their fingertips, but aside from that he was spent. He'd burned his strength against the Skein and then against me, shaken his sleeves enough that all his worst tricks had already been revealed. And while I was hardly fresh, above us two crows still slowly circled. Omens of death, and death was what I intended on delivering: if I need seek the helping hand of my patronesses for that, so be it. On the other hand, I grimly thought, there was still one last use left for the Tyrant of Helike tonight.

"There's one path that doesn't lead to me snatching the life out of you tonight," I coldly said. "And that's you putting on that crown."

"So it seems I am to die," the Tyrant pensively said, "unless, instead, I am to die. Truly, my friend, you present me with a dilemma."

"Burn enough bridges and you'll find there's no pretty path left," I bluntly said. "You just tried to get half of us killed by flapping your mouth, Kairos. Fuck the amnesty you bargained for: the last courtesy I offer you is deciding the shape of your grave."

The slightest flicker of power, but there were only so many times someone could use a trick around me before I caught on.

"Riddle me this, Catherine," the Tyrant cheerfully said. "What makes you think that-"

Night flooded me, bringing strength to my hands, and I crushed the obsidian scabbard still in my grasp. The powder that fell I blew through and, shaping the Night I threaded within it, cast it outwards. The obsidian dust revealed Kairos' glamoured silhouette as he tried to make for the door and the Night I'd sent out wove itself into a noose that delicately went around his neck. The end of that rope fell into my palm, and as the noose tightened my fingers closed around it.

"Well," Kairos Theodosian slowly said, glamour dispelling. "This is embarrassing."

"Don't pay attention to him," the glamour I'd been conversing with insisted. "He's an impostor."

I wound the Night rope around my fist and spread my stance to steady my footing.

"How's your dilemma coming along?" I asked.

"Bracingly," the Tyrant replied without missing a beat.

"Enough," the Grey Pilgrim tiredly said.

The streak of Light cut halfway through the rope of my own making, severing it clean. I was, bluntly put, too surprised by the old man's sudden turn to properly react.

"How many of us do you intend to slay tonight, Queen Catherine?" the Peregrine said. "Enough."

"If it's not him it'll have to be one of us," I pointed out. "There is no reason to spare him, Pilgrim. One might well argue he earned that end."

"Shall we speak of endings earned then, Black Queen?" the Grey Pilgrim replied, tone remote and eyes considering. "It would be an exchange of some consequence, I think."

"You can't be serious," I said. "You struck out too, Pilgrim. To contain her, as I wanted to. And the damned reason it had to go further than that was the Bard's fucking amnesty, which *you* insisted on—"

"I am well aware of what took place here tonight," the Peregrine harshly interrupted. "Are *you*? I'd just lent my hand to the killing of a woman I loved like kin and trusted just as deep. Those ties were already tried and tested when you were yet to be born, Catherine Foundling. I did this because the bargain you offer may yet save lives by the millions and lay the foundation of a long-lasting peace. But do not mistake that, not for a moment, as my having been suborned to your every whim."

"None of that means he should be sent home with a slap on the wrist," I hissed.

"A trusted and farsighted comrade has asked me to spare the Tyrant's life," he flatly said. "And so it will be spared, no matter the nasty tricks he may play."

"You are the hero of my heart, Grey Pilgrim," Kairos Theodosian said, picking out the Night noose still around his neck and dropping it to the floor. "In the spirit of my deep gratitude, I would offer-"

The weight that fell over the room was almost a familiar thing. Above us Sve Noc spared a glance, and so my knees were not made to buckle, but the Tyrant of Helike was offered no such protection. The odd-eyed villain collapsed, first on one knee and then outright to the ground for that leg's shaking. Twitching on the stone floor, Kairos rasped out a pained breath as the Grey Pilgrim stared down at him. Sharing that gaze, the Choir of Mercy looked upon the Tyrant without the slightest speck of compassion.

"You are not forgiven, Kairos Theodosian," the Peregrine said, voice ringing with power. "You will yet serve a greater purpose, and for that you will be allowed to crawl out of this place through filth and dust. But you are not *forgiven*, you creature of ruin and perfidy."

The Tyrant twitched on the floor still and I realized with a start it was as much from his convulsing body as a shivering laughter ripping out of his throat.

"Coward," he gasped. "Even now Mercy holds your hand. *Coward*."

The old man strode forward, dusty grey robes trailing behind him, and he knelt before the cripple before laying a hand over his lips.

"Through lies and deception you have brought great suffering," the Grey Pilgrim said. "And so from you I take that poisonous gift: never again will you speak untruth, lest it be the last words you speak at all."

Radiant light blinded my eyes, for a heartbeat, and through the Pilgrim's touch I felt the Ophanim reach out into Creation. This would be a curse, if a villain had been the one to place it. I wondered what it was to be called, when a heroic hand had done the placing. My brow furrowed. Would lying make Kairos make a mute or kill him? It'd not been clear, by the phrasing. Looking at the Peregrine's shoulders, I wondered if that'd been on purpose. The Tyrant's body shuddered one last time, like someone whose fever was going the way of the grave, and only then did his twitching end. He exhaled a ragged breath.

"This is not," Kairos Theodosian guffawed, "the last you've seen of me."

Mismatched eyes going wide, he looked up and waited. A moment passed and he did not die.

"Best get crawling then, I suppose," the Tyrant of Helike mused. "Until next time, friends."

Without a hint of shame he flipped onto his belly and began dragging his expensive robes through the filth, fleeing the throne room like a snake slithering on the ground. Three heartbeats later the last remaining gargoyles ran out after him, as quick as their little legs allowed. I debated, seriously, reaching for the Night and just vaporizing the back of his head. The temptation was there, made even heavier by the way the odds were good I'd manage it. But if I did, it wasn't the story that'd punish me. I'd be, in essence, breaking off ties with the Grey Pilgrim. Which I couldn't afford to, if the Accords were to be more than a waste of ink and parchment.

"That was a mistake," I finally said.

"If it was," the Grey Pilgrim said, "then it was mine to make. Not yours."

I kept my face calm but winced beneath it. Already the cracks were beginning to run through what I'd wanted to be the foundations of the Liesse Accords. And it wasn't fair, I thought, for there was plenty of fault to spare and divide. But in the end, the Peregrine had stuck to our arrangement and helped slay the same woman whose life he'd bargained for. I could not truly ask more of him or begrudge his bitterness over having been led to this pass.

"If you're quite finished," Archer spoke up, "then I could use a hand, Pilgrim. I'm usually concerned only with hitting heads, not what comes after. Does he need healing?"

She'd propped up the Rogue Sorcerer over her knee, supporting the back of his neck. The Saint had knocked Roland unconscious, but aside from a red boot mark on his forehead the spellcaster should have no lasting marks. A concussion seemed likely, though, Named or not. The Pilgrim hurried to the younger hero's side, wielding Light with a delicate touch for but a few moments before the Sorcerer woke. The mark, I noted, had gone from bright red from light pink but it still remained highly visible.

"She's dead then," Roland croaked out, eyes going to the heroine's corpse. "Gods, what a waste."

"So it was," I quietly agreed.

His eyes, for once without trace of a coloured ring around the pupil, met mine.

"Your work?" he asked.

I nodded. Behind us, as is mocking the quiet of the conversation now taking place, the crown continued lashing out around itself with tendrils of sorcery.

"Whoever bears that will die," the Rogue Sorcerer frankly said. "I'd be like trying to grip a naked blade as tight as you can, only with your soul instead of your fingers."

The Saint of Swords' last kill, unerringly made from beyond the grave. Her aged figure still lay sprawled at the foot of the throne, still and silent. No one had dared to touch it.

"Look like the choice was made for us," Archer said, seemingly amused. "We're back at making a god and killing it, whether we like it or not."

"There is no choice to make," Tariq evenly said.

And already I could see the lay of that, how it'd unfold. A band of five assembled before the eyes of princes and princesses of Procer had gone into broken Arcadia at the urging of the Black Queen, among them perhaps the two most famous heroes alive. Neither the Regicide nor the Peregrine would return from that journey. The treacherous Tyrant of Helike would escape with but a curse, and from the heroes the only survivor would be the Rogue Sorcerer – a hero little known, and a mage to boot. Sorcery was not well-trusted, in Procer, and seemingly rare in Levant.

We'd be at war again before Morning Bell, bargain or not.

"Agreed," I said. "It'll have to be me."

Three gazes turned to me, Archer's the least surprised.

"You said it was possible resurrection would work," I reminded the Pilgrim. "And dawn comes. If it doesn't, well... Vivienne's been designated as heiress to the throne. I wish she'd had longer to prepare, but we don't always get to choose."

"No," Indrani said.

I blinked at her.

"You've cheated death too many times, Cat," she bluntly said. "You've always squeaked out of it so far because you had a story at your back, but this time the wind's going the other way. You've spent your luck thrice over, this is just going to get you killed."

"It'll get someone killed regardless," I said. "I don't relish the thought I might not come back from this, Indrani, but I knew the risk when I began going down this path."

"That's nice," Archer casually said. "Very stirring. But if you take so much as a step in that crown's direction, I'll knock you the fuck out."

She was, I realized as I looked at her stony expression, absolutely serious. It was a strange thing, to both love and be furious with someone in the same moment for the same reason.

"It cannot be you, Queen Catherine," the Grey Pilgrim agreed. "You underestimate the depth of the loyalties you have earned, and not only here. The Army of Callow would carry your corpse to the gates of Salia to make a funeral pyre of it. And I shudder to think of what the drow would be, without their designated conscience."

"It can't be you either," I hissed. "You think it'll go bad if I die? Hells, Pilgrim, your death alone would have Levant on the warpath but the Saint *and* you? Even if the First Prince turned up just to order the Alliance armies down there not to fight we'd still have a battle on our hands."

"Then it has to be me," the Rogue Sorcerer tightly said. "Archer has already been resurrected once, there is not even a chance of her being spared lasting death."

He shuddered out a breath.

"It will have to be me," Roland repeated. "It makes sense. I am the only practitioner among you, who best to shape this realm in what is needed of it?"

"At a guess? The only person in this room to have ruled over a court of the fae before," I said.

"Cat, you can't be trusted to make a choice like that right now," Indrani frankly said. "Whenever there's a blunder – and I'm guessing you count the Saint's death as one – you always get all... self-flagellating. Like you're just looking for a sword to fall on. Pilgrim says it's good politics to keep you alive? Even better. I don't really give a shit, though. I'd rather cut the damn thing than let you put it on."

"You can't think like that, Archer," I sharply said. "I'm one life. That's the weight on the scale. You'd be putting at risk hundreds of thousands-"

"Then it's a good thing I'm not one of Above's footsoldiers, isn't it?" Archer said. "I get to be selfish if I want to."

I wasn't going to make headway there, was I? Touched as I was, I was just as infuriated. Because I couldn't be grateful for this, not when it might cost the world so much for her to follow through. Who was it, I'd wondered, who'd taught her to love people on her own terms – much as I wanted to blame the Lady of the Lake for it, the dark suspicion lingered it might just have been me.

"It will not be you," the Pilgrim said. "Nor will it be Roland."

Though he'd gone pale at the notion of perhaps embracing his own death, I felt a sliver of admiration for the way the Sorcerer didn't simply take the first way out he was offered.

"The Black Queen was correct," Roland said. "There may be war, if you are the one crowned and killed."

"My death will echo," the Grey Pilgrim said, cocking his head to the side. "I have been promised this. There will not be war."

The Ophanim *agreed* with this? Godsdamned angels.

"You're needed to keep the heroes together," I said. "There's no one else with the pull."

Maybe, and I would not have put a lot of faith in that prospect, maybe the Saint could have succeeded at that. She'd had the strength, if not the charisma.

"The White Knight will return," the Pilgrim serenely said. "He was already on his way."

"The Tyrant had plans about him," I said.

"I expect he does," the Peregrine said, undertone amused. "It will come to nothing, under the stern glare of the Seraphim."

"It might be that you could forgive my death," the Rogue Sorcerer hesitantly said. "None could do the same, for you."

"Forgiveness was never meant to be a salve for every wound made on Creation," the Pilgrim gently said. "It was a gift to be handed out in the face of grave injustice. And there is no injustice, Roland, in an old man being allowed to rest at last."

"So you're just going to lie down and die?" I said.

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"The Saint of Swords is dead," I said. "We all had a hand in that, mine looming largest by far. But that's it, Pilgrim? Your friend is dead and you feel tired, so you're choosing death when Calernia is facing its harshest test since the reign of Triumphant?"

"Queen Catherine," the Sorcerer hissed. "There is no need for-"

"You've done some real nasty things over the years, haven't you Tariq?" I said. "We both know you have."

The old man's blue eyes, limpid as a cloudless summer sky, met mine.

"You don't get to roll over for death, after crossing those lines," I said. "After taking on that responsibility."

"Which of us are you truly haranguing, Black Queen?" the Grey Pilgrim chided me, not unkindly.

"I think I'll get away with it," I pensively replied. "I really do."

Because I'd been here before. Twice. At this crossroads, making this call. I'd chosen death to rid myself of a pattern of three with the Lone Swordsman and taken my due resurrection from the Hashmallim after refusing the crown they offered me. I'd chosen death once more to slip the bindings the Diabolist had entwined me in, making myself the beastly keystone to her demise, and refused the crown she offered me. Liesse had been the crucible of my existence in a way nowhere else in this world could claim to be. Which of my triumphs and ruins had not been born of this place, or taken place among it? Here in this city I'd forged my claim of power over Callow not once but twice – first through bargain, and then through simple might. I'd struck a pact here that allowed Akua Sahelian to govern this place, and when that governance led to folly it was on these grounds I'd torn through her heart. Indrani said I'd cheated my demise too often, and perhaps she was right. Twice, here, I had tricked life out of death. But there'd never been a third, for before I'd woken in the depths of the Everdark mortal once more I'd dreamt and within that dream asked Sve Noc a question: *am I dead?* And the reply had been: *at the threshold*. Not through. Not quite dead. And so, I thought, Archer might be wrong in this.

Maybe I did still have a story at my back: twice living through death after twice being offered a crown. There was power in reiteration, in repetition, and few numbers had heavier hand on a story than three. Or, I knew, this might be where the pattern came to a close. This once I'd be reaching for the crown, and so my death would remain. It could go either way, I felt. Yet even then, I had a better chance of living through this than any of the other three. Rolling the dice on poor odds had always been one of my worst habits, I thought, but why stop now? You only lived once – give or take a few times.

"Three times I've been offered a crown here, by someone neither fully friend nor foe," I began. "Three times-"

Archer, sighing, slid behind me and to my indignation she covered my mouth with her palm and put me in a chokehold. I began struggling, but she was Named and I was not: the disparity in strength could not be breached my mundane means.

"Is that... necessary?" the Rogue Sorcerer delicately asked.

"If you feel like you're winning," Indrani said, "the single stupidest thing you can do is let Catherine Foundling *talk*. Go on, Tariq. Before she turns it around on us."

I reached for the Night, preparing to force her back as gently as I could, but it slipped through my fingers. Fear rose up in me, and I looked up. The Sisters were perched on the edges of the gutted throne room, one to the east and one to the west. They watched, silent.

Are you worthy? Komena asked, a whisper in my ear.

Patrons, I thought. Not tools or companions but goddesses of which I was the high priestess. If I set a measure in their name, I would be measured by it. It was, I admitted, brutally fair of them.

I have brought us here, through scheme and steel, I told them. I've tricked mortals and Named, set the Dead King aflight and freed from his grasp the last of the Fairfaxes. I have slain and won victories, all to bring this journey to an end of my making. Who can be worthy, if not me?

Sve Noc watched me, judged me, and in inscrutable silence passed their judgement.

All will be Night, Andronike whispered in my ear, and it tasted like assent.

Indrani knew me best, and so when the goddess-crows above let out a cacophonous caw she immediately tried to knock me unconscious. Unfortunately I knew her as well, and so restored not to struggle but to the first trick I'd even seen one of the Firstborn use: sinking into a pool of Night at my feet, I dissolved into a tendril of shadow and followed forward. Even in that strange, unpleasant state I could feel the clash of Sve Noc and the Choir of Mercy – both attempting to hinder the others' champion and prevent their foe from hindering their own. They were, at least in that moment, each other's match. I could hardly see, when shadowed, for unlike drow this state of being did not come naturally to me. I had to leap back into mortal form to get my bearings, though fortunately I found myself not far from the throne. From the corner of my eye I found Indrani, having strung her bow, nocking an arrow and likely intending to wing me before I could claim the crown. The Sorcerer's jaw was tightly clenched

as he worked some manner of sorcery, but it'd be too late.
Sidestepping the Saint's corpse, I reached for the crown.

My fingers went through it

The illusion broke, now that I knew it was there, and so did the one the Rogue Sorcerer had woven around the Peregrine. The Grey Pilgrim took the wounded crown, set with his own star, and placed it upon his brow.

"No," I shouted.

Like it was the most natural thing in the world, the Grey Pilgrim leaned down and gently pried the Saint of Swords' blade from her cold hands.

And, just as gently, rammed it through his own heart.

Satan

I wonder if Cat can steal the Pilgrim's resurrection and use it on him. He'd probably end up a powerless geriatric, but it sounds like a story.

Jago

Till this last chapter, I did think that the Fairfax King revenant was the solution.
And with the death of the Grey Pilgrim we lose the best healer that could help Masego.

Chapter 51: Twilight

"Of all Praesi I trust least those who come bearing gifts."
– Queen Yolanda of Callow, the Wicked (known as 'the Stern' in contemporary histories)

There was a part of me still, after all these years, that expected the momentous to be flagrant. That the closing of an era or the birth of a realm should be an affair of thunder and lightning, a crashing and crackling storm of power. But that was so rarely the way, wasn't it? The pivots of history that we all

got to see, the speeches and battles and coronations, they so often flowed from unseen turns taken months before. Quiet bargains and private councils, decisions made in the dark. Yet I had learned that the truth of Creation was that while at times power in exercise was deafening, more often it was hushed. Subtle. And as the ending that was breathed into the Twilight Court came from the Grey Pilgrim – Mercy's patient, farsighted and indirect hand – why would its coming be a raucous thing?

Tariq Fleet-foot, the sword of his oldest friend through the heart, let out a soft gasp and slumped onto the throne. Blue eyes fluttered to a close as trails of scarlet tainted the dusty grey of his robes: death blooming in three hues, painted by the Peregrine's own hand. The Pilgrim's face loosened slowly from a clench decades in the making, and as he sagged down against the throne he let out one last shuddering breath. That shudder rippled out, the last will of a man whose life had been a thankless struggle to lessen suffering in a world so very intent on wounding itself time and time again. It was a death that would ring out across Calernia, I thought. One not easily forgotten. Yet, looking at the white-haired healer who'd stumbled back with a sword through his chest, I could not help but believe it had been a lesser ending than he'd deserved. I'd had my quarrels with the Grey Pilgrim, but never once had I thought him malevolent or deliberately vicious. The shudder I'd felt slowly faded, and in deference to the death of a man who had tried so very hard to be a good I closed my eyes. I had no prayers to offer, for the goddesses I kept to were not the kind whose attentions would have been welcomed by the Pilgrim, and so I remained silent instead.

The roof that would have been above our heads had been ripped away by my own wrath, when I'd hunted down Kairos Theodosian meaning to kill him, and so the lazy summer breeze reached us unhindered. It shook me out of my daze, enough that I opened my eyes and looked up. What had been darkness above us, Masego's grief and madness given shape, had become something softer. Almost wistful. It was closer to night than day, to my eye, but the shade of the twilight writ across the firmament of this realm was a pale and starry blue. Speaking not a word, I limped out of this cursed room. The summit of the tall stone stairs beyond the bronze gates allowed me to stand and take in the breathtaking sight splayed below: what had once been a ruin of dust and flame was now a realm in truth. The Hierophant's devastating use of this broken realm had been turned into something beautiful: a sprawling kingdom of tall grasses and rolling hills, of shadowy rivers and secret paths. It was a warm evening, like a southern summer's, yet the breeze was soft and its caress almost playful. It was the kind of night, I thought, that would be a pleasure to journey through.

I wondered if a young man called Tariq had once roamed a twilight much like this one, a very long time ago in a land far from here.

If the echo of that memory had been enough to leave its mark on this place. For that this was the inheritance of the Peregrine there could be no denial: just as it had been set on the Twilight Crown, the pilgrim's star shone above in the starry sky.

"It's beautiful," the Rogue Sorcerer quietly said.

I'd not even heard him approach, too deeply lost in my thoughts. Long leather coat trailing at his back, the last of the three heroes to have heeded my call came to stand at my right. He was looking not only at this starlit realm below but also had what had been made of thrice-broken Liesse. The City of Swans had partaken of life breathed into this place, and though it was not the same city that'd once been the jewel of southern Callow I could still see the traces of that place in its fresh face. The ruins had not been raised anew but the sight of them had been... eased by the growth of greenery. Tall shaded trees had become the pillars of slender basilicas, gutted churches turned into ethereal gardens of flowers in shades of dusk. Vines with umbral flowers bound together streets like strange arches and soft grass had grown through both pavestones and graveyards. Liesse, I thought, had become the City of Twilight. A resting place for pilgrims and the lost, bell towers and softs beds of moss awaiting all who'd wander to this cradle of tragedy. I found my throat choking at the sight. How could it not, when Tariq's last gesture had been to make beauty out of the broken shards of my bitterest failure?

"The star's always watching," Archer softly said, having come to stand at my left. "You old rascal. Keeping an eye on it all, are you?"

How strange, that I found the thought comforting when the man had tried to kill me more than once.

"He always did," Roland said, tone quietly fierce. "Gods, he was not a perfect man. And there are things he did, that he asked us to do... But he looked out for us. Even when it cost him. Especially when it cost him."

It was not a grand eulogy, for a man who for good and ill had done so much for so many years, but I couldn't truly mind. What kind of words could any of us say that would be more than a pittance to the living, breathing tribute to the Grey Pilgrim that was around us?

"I wished I'd never had to fight him," I simply said, the honesty of it feeling a little too raw. "I wish it'd never come to this. But we so rarely get to choose, don't we?"

"Then win, Black Queen," the Rogue Sorcerer said, eyes burning as they met mine. "Because this was not *nothing*. Two great stars fell to forge this realm you promised, two servants of Above like

few before and few will ever come again. It has to matter. Or else..."

He trailed off, though it was not a threat. It was almost a petition and more than a little desperate. *Or else what did their lives mean? Their tears and blood and decades of bitter struggle to bring just a little light to Calernia?* If the fall of such old and honoured stars meant not a thing, what could any of us ever hope to amount to?

"This war has only just begun," I softly said. "It will take us to Salia, to forge a peace. It will take us to Keter, to visit upon the Dead King what he has so often visited upon us. But there's another enemy, Sorcerer. She breaks kings with sentences and topples kingdoms with but the lightest of touches. None of this can end before she'd been killed. For good."

Roland dipped his head, not in acceptance but at least in acknowledgement.

"It seems," he said, "that we have much to speak about."

That we did, I silently agreed, dipping my own head in a return of courtesy. But not here, not now. Not looking at what could either be taken as a last breath of life freely gifted or an entire realm made into the mausoleum of good intentions.

"Not dawn yet, I think," Archer said. "But close. It might be time to go back, Catherine."

She was right, I knew. The Pilgrim had promised that the manner of his death would assure there was no war between the Grand Alliance and my own armies, but his death would still be catastrophic to relations between my people and the opposition. The Tyrant of Helike, by now, would not doubt have crawled back to his armies and begun his hasty retreat. There would be fears to quell, explanations to give, and more duties to see to than there were hours to either night or day. I *should* go back, for though the triumvirate of Vivienne, Juniper and Hakram could see to much of the situation there were parts that could only be settled by my own intervention. Fearsome as those three could be, my reputation loomed taller still.

"Go," I said. "I'll follow."

Indrani cast a look at me, half worried and half hesitant.

"Are you sure that-"

"Go," I repeated, a tad more sharply.

Her jaw tightened with displeasure, but she did not test me further. I did not have it in me to be furious at Indrani for

getting in my way tonight, not right now – it was like the Pilgrim's death had replaced sentiment in me with some manner of exhaustion – but her actions there would not go unanswered. It would be a thorny knot to untangle, this mess we'd made together, for she had died and we'd both need knives sheathed if we were to help Masego out of the worst of his grief. But she'd not trusted me, in the end, even if her intentions had been guided by love of me. That would need to be addressed, lest the wound fester between us.

"Archer can guide you out," I told Roland. "She has a knack for paths like these."

He nodded, though his face was unsure.

"Come along, Rogue," Archer said, tone thick with forced cheer. "We're all in a need of a stiff drink after a night like this, and there's none to be had here."

No elaborate farewells followed, as they simply disappeared into the city below. Indrani would find a way out, as she had first found a way in when seeking Masego. The Lady of the Lake had shared knowledge with her I'd not asked the lay of, long aware that the keeping of her teacher's secrets was one of the few things Indrani considered sacred. I sat, after they'd gone, resting my bad leg against the rough granite steps. But for all that I was tired, it was a restless weariness that'd settled over me. Before long I was hobbling down into Liesse, through the broken palace of the proud and ancient House of Caen – gone from Callow, like the city they'd once ruled. Above me, shadows among the shade, crows flew beneath the starry sky. I had no destination in mind to guide my steps, little more than a wandered in a realm of wanderers. Feeling the breeze stirring my hair, cooling my sweat in the crook of my neck, I passed through the garden that'd been made of Liesse. I trailed my fingers through luminous bushes bearing wine red flowers, limped through fields of soft grass made silver by starlight. It was a surreal city, and one where it would be easy to become lost. Yet I came upon a place, in time, where the scent of old deaths lingered. It'd been a basilica, once, before the walls were shattered.

Now all that remained of whatever beauty there'd been were tall panes of stained glass whose colour had faded, whatever scene they'd once depicted now instead a mere game of blue shades. There had been pillars, within, and though half-crumbled they'd become intertwined with thick and twisty trees bearing small red fruits. Yews, I thought, and what had once been a temple of worship to the Gods Above had instead become a manner of shaded grove, leading to a yew elder and larger than any of the others. It towered tall and broad, its branches spreading out far in a great crown of leaves. The wind set something akin to chimes tinkling when it passed through the branches, and it was when I

saw the face of those chimes I understood the source of the taste of death. The ragged remains of a tabard that'd once depicted the golden bells of House Fairfax trailed like streamers, tangled among them the broken shards of the armour last borne by the Good King Edward. Halfway sunken into the earth at the foot of the great tree the last Fairfax's sword shone from an errant ray of light, the blade still pristine and sharp. I slowly approached, in almost reverent silence: the King of Callow had cowed the Hells themselves, for a time, and done it with little more than will and spite.

The crows threaded through the branches and took perch with only the slightest murmur of a sound heralding them, their shadowy feathers melding into the penumbra of the great yew. They looked, I thought, as if they belonged here. My fingers softly lid across the grip of the sword once wielded by Edward Fairfax, and I smiled mirthlessly.

"In northern Callow," I said, "the yew is known as the tree of death. In the south and the heartlands it's the elder trees they claim to be that omen, but even in Laure the story was told different."

I flicked a glance upwards and found my patron goddesses silent yet watchful.

"It's because of the Deoraithe," I told them. "Their longbows, they're made from yew. And for a very long time, there was no sight half as dreaded in Callow or Praes as a company of Daoine longbowmen. There were older superstitions, too, but in my eyes it was the centuries of reaping lives that hung death on the branches of yews."

And still my only answer was silence.

"So this is how it goes," I softly said. "I take up again the sword I lost in the Everdark, and bring war to the Crown of the Dead. It's an old story. Well-worn, and strong for it."

King Edward had been taller than me, I thought, with broader shoulders as well. And yet, I suspected that if ripped that sword free from the earth it would fit my hand perfectly. Better than any other blade ever hand.

"The world spins on," I said. "No matter who lies buried. And so that is the sum of us: we fight and we die and if we're lucky we're remembered for a while still."

All we'd schemed and struggled and bled, and still this night hadn't belonged to any of us. How could it? When the crabs dragged each other down the only victor to be had was the bucket.

"No," I murmured. "I think not."

My fingers left the sword I would not claim.

"Am I not your high priestess, Sve Noc?" I said. "First Under the Night?"

"So you are," Andronike said.

"In this, we are satisfied," Komena said.

"Then as your priestess I make this claim – we can do *better* than this," I called out to the twin shadows among the branches. "Than a ruin of a victory, handed to us by kindly hand. I don't care if we've been tricked and tripped by the Intercessor or the Dead King or even fate itself. We can do better than this, and so this story has not come to an end."

I laid my palm against the rough bark of the yew, looking up through the branches.

"I heard you, Good King," I whispered. "Your warning. I hear and heed, so lend me your aid when I yet stumble."

Under the twilight sky the great yew groaned and twisted, the scent of death in the air thickening until I could taste it on the tip of my tongue. From the crown of the tree a branch dropped, slender desiccated deadwood still echoing of defiance in the face of the end. I knelt to take it, and found it was of excellent height and yield for me to lean on as I walked.

"We will not go gently," I promised to the tree-grave of the last Fairfax. "And we are not yet done."

Turning my back to the grove abruptly, I limped away leaning on the yew branch-staff. The grounds I had tread I tread once more, returning to the summit of the City of Twilight. Through grass and grove, through thorns and flowers and streets of worn stone. Behind me, as if trailing, Sve Noc followed on inky wings. I climbed the great steps of granite, and as I forced open the great gates of bronze I had never closed two great crows claimed my shoulders as their perch. Within awaited silence and something else, for though the Grey Pilgrim still sat dead on his throne with the Saint sprawled at his feet they were not alone.

Like a solemn tribunal, or some aerie of angels, the Choir of Mercy stood vigil over its fallen champion.

Under the stars a multitude of tall and thin silhouettes stood, the only marks of their presence silhouettes like a heat shimmer and ever-spinning eyes like wheels of flame. There were dozens and dozens of them, all bent as if in grief. None turned as I entered the throne room and my own back was coated in starlight, but the weight of their attention was felt nonetheless. I could almost hear a song being sung, as if the wind was carrying to my

ear parts of a faraway refrain, and what little I could make out was... heartbroken. Melancholy in a way I was not sure I – or any mortal – could truly understand. The barest fraction of that feeling was enough to put a stutter to my step.

"You actually loved him, didn't you?" I said, voice wondering. "Or as close to that as you can."

They answered not. Whatever manner of mourning the angels bore, they would not share it with me. It took a single step forward, and as if a sword had been unsheathed a myriad of burning, spinning eyes turned to me. I swallowed dryly, for though Sve Noc were at my side and I knew well their power the Choir of Mercy was older and colder both, when it deemed it necessary.

"You can't bring him back," I said. "I understand. There's *rules*, and it's not in your nature to make exceptions."

The attention never wavered nor lessened in intensity.

"But I'm not you," I said. "Your rules don't bind me. And if you let me, I will."

I suspected, that if not for the Sisters sinking their talons deep enough into my flesh I bled I would have passed out. The blinding light and heat I felt, for just a moment, would have seen me fall to my knees if not for the staff in my hand. And yet it'd not been strike, for within that heat and light I'd heard whispers and while the words I'd not understood their meaning I'd somehow grasped anyway.

"Why?" I repeated.

It was a fair question, I supposed.

"Because I can, so I should," I said. "Because even when he was my enemy I did not believe him to be a bad man. Because..."

I struggled to find the words to express it, but perhaps the simplest truth was best.

"Because I don't want to be at war with you or him," I quietly said. "And the moment you choose to believe that, the war's over."

And I supposed I was a fool, thinking I could make peace with a Choir even if its virtue was that of mercy, but I owed it to all of us at least to try.

"We kill you," I said, "you kill us. The wheel keeps spinning, the world keeps bleeding. And maybe that can't be mended, maybe there's just something about mortals that's all teeth and hunger and it'll never go away no matter what we make of ourselves – but we can do *better* than this!"

I gestured at the room around us, the realm around us, but I meant more. I meant the armies below, at each other's throats even in the face of annihilation. I meant the Named scraping each other raw until even the noblest beginnings and the finest intentions became knives to hack at each other with. I meant Praes, hungry and wealthy, and Callow, sated and poor, each capable of helping the other but forever clawing at themselves instead.

"Please," I said. "I know you don't make exceptions, and I won't ask you to. All you need to do is to stand aside."

We stood there, the Choir of Mercy and the Arch-heretic of the East, and a long moment passed.

They stood aside.

Heart beating wildly I limped forward, until I stood by Tariq's corpse. He would have looked to be sleeping, if not for the sword through his heart. Night flickered through my veins, strengthening my limbs, and the Sisters flew up cawing like grim omens. I eased out the Saint's blade, spilling blood all over myself, and dropped it to the side. And then, without warning, I stuck my arm into the Grey Pilgrim as the thief of Bestowal that I was. Three aspects awaited: a star, an eye and a prayer. It was the last I ripped out, a whisper of **Forgive** touching my mind. My fingers withdrew a small receptacle of wood, which I slid open with shaking fingers. There was a fine red powder within, and a power that would have blinded me if I'd tried to gaze upon it.

"Time to rise, pilgrim of grey," I murmured. "There's still work to be done."

I blew out a breath, and the powder scattered across the dead man's face. A long moment massed, once more, and my stomach tightened.

Then, above us in the sky, the pilgrim's star winked out.

Tariq's mouth opened to a ragged gasp, and within the depths of Liesse death was cheated for the third time at my hand.

Author Unknown

See this [here](#)? This is why PGtE has over twice as many votes as second place on topwebfiction.

Hitogami

Damn right!

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

When I write this comment, Guide has more votes than the next three stories combined!

NerfContessa

And rightly so.

Wow, I did not see that coming. Pilgrim is likely to be...
Cross for being back and his powers being crippled. Still,...
Wow.

Hitogami

And once again, Cat blows me away! Wow!
Thank you for this chapter

Paerofar

That is a beautiful chapter. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for continuing to exceed my expectations.

Morgenstern

Beautiful(ly moving) the whole way, through. Thank you.
A fitting eulogy – and then... so much more. Second chances are even more beautiful still, aren't they.

DD

I dunno. I mean, I love it but...
How did Cat retain a vestige of Take without a Name? Did I miss or misunderstand something?
Long time fan and supporter, but this seems a weakness in the story to me.

Drake

The purview of her gods is theft of power. It's what the Drow are. It resonated with what she was.

vorellaraek

It's not an aspect anymore, it's something she gets from Sve Noc. Her version of the way the Drow kill each other for magic and Night.

fireinsideincites

It's not a vestige of Take. It's part of her due as the First Priestess Under Night. One of their main tenets is the worthy

take, the worthy rise. Just as the drow can take the knowledge and power of other drow, she has co-opted it into taking the bestowals of named. See the chapter about after the death of the Thief of Stars for more detail

Novice

Yep, and to add to this, Cat has been harvesting aspects out of dead heroes even before Everdark. She's been doing this ever since she became essentially the Sovereign of Moonless Nights.

Mennolt van Alten

Not only does the worth of Cat mean she can take, as the high priestess she can decide who is worthy... Worthy to rise in this case.

Novice

You missed a major plot point and so many story beats if you're still wondering about that this far out into the story. You're clearly not paying attention.

[certainlight](#)

I don't get it. Someone asks a clarification question, someone else replies. You reply yourself with this insult, then you follow up with some useful information 4 minutes later under the previous comment. Why not just be constructive, rather than leaving insult?

Andrew Mitchell

We can never fully understand why people act the way they do.

I like to think that Novice was just having a bad day or moment or whatever and was just feeling a bit pissed at something else as they were writing this response. And made the response quite negative and unhelpful.

Providing a helpful response a few minutes later indicates to me that Novice was probably regretting their first response and was wishing WordPress had a delete function.

I have some empathy with this because I have been known to do similar things in other forums.

goliath1303

U know this was an old comment and it's mostly been answered, but I wanted to expand on what was already said in case anyone else is confused. When Cat became Sovereign of Moonless Nights

she lost the Name of Squire and her Aspects along with it. Who she became during that time and since was shaped by those early days as the Squire though. She lost Fall, but still had her domain due to being fae royalty. We know that Larat and the Princess of High Noon both had domains a well. Larat mentioned that Cat's looked a lot like his and we saw Sulia's when she fought the Woe. She also kept a version of Take. In its original form she was able to take an Aspect used near/against her. When she did it that way she kept it until she claimed something else, with restrictions on its use. She was able to use Rise 3 times per day with diminishing returns each time. In its current incarnation though she is able to take one Aspect from a defeated or dead Named. Instead of a limited number of users per day, while keeping it until she Takes something else, this form only has one use. It also has a physical manifestation. She doesn't know what she's taking until she claims it, all she gets is a "feel" for what it is. The first time she did this it was in the form a whistle. I think that might have been her taking Call from Diabolist and summoning the Weeks Hunt for the first time, but don't quote me on that. Another example we've seen was with the Thief of Stars when she took an Aspect that looked like a wishbone and allowed her to escape the binding Masego tried to use on her at the beginning of this arc. I know there were more, I just can't think of any right now.

Mike E.

Damn, did not expect any of that last scene.

Edgar Vea

This was a cop out, I mean doing better is satisfying but they should have had to deal with it and also who do you think the mysterious she is either augur or the first prince of procer.

Big I

"She" probably ly refers to the Wandering Bard.

Gibborim

... .. You mean the Wandering Bard?

Fable

This was explained earlier, when the Thief of Stars was killed. She remembers the power, and serves the twin goddesses of looting. It is definitely different, as Take required the hero to live, and the stolen power could be reused. But the harvested wishbone to Abscond with, and the powder to Forgive, were both one time use only.

yee

The Wandering Bard is in fact the Dream Emperor Treacherous who killed and replaced the original one centuries ago.

Ein

You all know what's going to happen when the alliance army passes through the area again...

Abigail comes back from a scouting trip. "Hey guys, look at this cool sword I found just sticking out of the ground by a tree!"

Abiforqueen

I would love that so much!

Forum Explorer

a beautiful chapter

Kwabena Yiadom

Breath taking, loved every second of it. This is getting so good I am afraid it will stop living up to my expectations and then I'd be crushed. For now though the Guide "best online novel ever". I wonder how deeply tied to twilight, if at all the Pilgrim would be.

[certainlight](#)

I'm wondering the same. Pilgrim doesn't have room for any new Aspects that could tie to a domain, and we have no evidence that resurrection changes ones Name or Aspects. This also implies that Pilgrim has never been raised previously, unless it is simply his particular Aspect that can't be used twice and not the idea of resurrection itself. Discussions regarding Cat getting resurrected seemed to keep this option possible even though she has died and been restored before, so it suggests Aspect limitation (or maybe a Choir thing).

I bet personality-wise, after Laurence and now being dead and ripped back into life, he'll be a little...grumpier? And interesting what this might mean when he fights the dead King; did he gain anything in death that can be an advantage, or will it swing the other way? With Cat (who's died and been resurrected by Hash) and Pilgrim (who's died and been resurrected by allowance of his Choir), we're approaching another power of three to face a Dead King; seems fitting.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hmm. All three of Cat's resurrections have been directly at the hands of god-tier entities (Choir of Contrition, King

Winter, Sve Noc). I'm guessing that Pilgrim's resurrection will generally follow the rules for his Aspect, but it also took place after Cat removed said Aspect from Pilgrim's corpse, so I think he will not regain his ability to Forgive death.

However, I wouldn't be surprised if he still has privileged access to Twilight – not exactly a personal domain, but still some special connection. At the least, he can probably take people through it without the usual blood price, and he will know its paths and ways. One interesting test of just what went on behind the scenes, is whether he knows about Cat's little visit to Edward's grave.

As far as a group of three, Pilgrim has resurrected quite a number of heroes, but most recently (bar *himself*) Indrani. For a group they might need a third who's been resurrected either "under their own power", or by another power not previously represented. (The Forever King would be one possibility.)

Definitions

Did Cat just Forgive the Crown too, or is Tariq gonna die twice?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Given that the realm was already peaceful, not writhing in agony or attacking people, I'd say Pilgrim's death healed the Crown.

[certainlight](#)

This chapter brings up an interesting ability of Cat's that opens some options for Masego. Are there any Aspects that Cat could take and then give to Masego to restore his powers, or use for him to the same end? What would happen if Cat and Masego went back to the Dead King's memory echoes and she Took something? Is there an Aspect she could borrow that would give her an ability to reverse Masego's loss of power (Skein's domain/time reversal ability, Pilgrim resurrects William and she borrows Rise if we consider M's loss of power as a wound)?

Or...is the fact that he is Hierophant (well, kind of) imply he will wrest the Night from Sve Noc? He's already had some insane interactions with god-like beings when his fathers died, but it's not an expected story pivot. My guess is he'll simply find a way back to his Aspects, or encounter some new mind-boggling magic thing that makes him transition to a new Name or Aspect, similar to his first two Names (Apprentice when criticizing another mage, and Hierophant during Four Battles and One).

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, Cat could give him stolen power, but then so could Roland. My guess, though is that among the various powers in play, Masego's deep knowledge, and perhaps natural healing of this unnatural injury, the crew will cobble together some way for Masego to regain access to magic.

Or

This. Was. Awesome.

M0och

HOLY SH*T!

That was an awesome chapter!

I unfortunatelty think that I was not in the right mindset to fully appreciate it but damn.

Cat flipped the whole damn table so to speak...

Concerned citizen

Was the Crown Forgiven too along with Tariq, or did Cat just rez an insane fae Pilgrim doppelganger?

[Mental Mouse](#)

As I said above, the realm is peaceful! When Cat went out to look nothing attacked her; rather, she had a nice conversation with a local spirit she knew. I'd conclude that Pilgrim's death healed the Crown.

Card_Hoarder

It's been raining outside as I read this

[Mental Mouse](#)

I just want to call out a phrase I noticed on reread:

> and as I forced open the great gates of bronze I had never closed

Either Mercy or the realm itself seems to be, um, tidy.

morroian

Chills, brilliant chapter and writing

Interlude: Concourse I

"When a highborn is slain, look to who benefits and you will have learned what families the third party wants to incite strife between."

– Extract from 'The Behaviours of Civil Conduct', by High Lady Mchumba Sahelian

There was only one crowned head left south of Salia, and it was Princess Rozala Malanza of Aequitan.

As a girl or, honesty compelled her to admit, as recently as a few years ago Rozala might have found such a prospect exciting. To wield such influence, to claim such authority, and with so few to check her! After her mother's disastrous bid for First Princess during the Great War and the ruin that had befallen the Malanzas for it, Rozala had been forced to look in the eye the fact that if she did not take cover under another's wings her family might yet be toppled entirely and that odds were Aequitan would not know prominence against in her lifetime. And now, not even a decade later, Princess Rozala could be argued to be the second most powerful individual in Procer: she commanded a great host, had inherited the reins of a powerful bloc within the Highest Assembly and her reputation as both general and noblewoman had reached heights she'd never before thought possible. And yet, as dawn inched ever closer the Princess of Aequitan found it all felt hollow. For all the power and influence that had been gathered to her name, Rozala Malanza found that the sum of what she could do in the face of death was look up at the sky and pray.

Pray that the Peregrine and the Regicide lived up to their legends, that the Rogue Sorcerer proved worthy of one day having such tales matched to his name. That the Tyrant's schemes would be turned against the Crown of the Dead and, most of all, that the Black Queen would make as terrifyingly potent an ally as she had been an enemy. They'd all danced to the sounds of Catherine Foundling's tune, this winter, found the calm-faced villain always one step ahead. *Let the Hidden Horror taste of that, for once*, Princess Rozala thought. *Let every promise that has been made under cover of night come true, and great vengeance be visited upon the King of Death.* Rozala Malanza ruled lands large and wealthy, commanded soldiers in the dozens of thousands and held power of life and death over a dozen times that – and so, left to stand stewing in her own inability to do more than hope, she pondered her growing mislike of the Chosen and the Damned. Those colourful few, cloaked in power and mystery, who would bargain with the fate of nations and the pivots of history. Who left all others in the dust of their grandiose *adventures*, be they great or small. What a hateful thing it was, to have your own life and death decided by the hands of others.

She was not unaware of the irony inherent to a princess of the blood pondering such things. The touch of rue jostled her out of her thoughts enough that she heard the person approaching behind her, though she did not turn. Hair loose and going down her back, Rozala tightened the warm fur cloak around her body and kept looking at the night sky brought about by the blasphemous sorceries of the drow.

"There have been another dozen," Louis Rohanon, once Prince of Creusens, told her.

The Princess of Aequitan did not need to look to know he was exhausted beyond all words. Neither of them had slept in much, much too long – and there was only so far brandy and alchemical tonics could carry one past what one's body could tolerate.

"Were they more coherent than the last?" she asked.

"In a manner of speaking," Louis sighed. "It has become apparent that the... visions all concern the same journey, but the Heavens were seemingly unconcerned with the order of the revelations. It is all rather haphazard."

Louis Rohanon had never been a particularly pious man, which was Rozala was less than surprised by his implicit criticism of the manner the Gods Above had granted their insights. No doubt if the Prince – former now, she reminded herself – of Creusens was a one of the Gods the visions would have been regularly arranged, in good order and with the proper seals affixed to bills of delivery. Less than surprised, yes, but perhaps a little amused. Not that she would show it. The mirth was short-lived, though.

"And the initial vision," Rozala said. "Has anything happened to cast it in doubt?"

She looked at him from the corner of her eye and caught his face tightening.

"No," Louis quietly admitted. "It still returns at least once per lot of dreamers waking, and never once have we been told of anything taking place past it. It seems to have been the end of their journey."

The Princess of Aequitan closed her eyes. She'd not slept, so there'd been no opportunity to experience the dreams, but in the urgency after the first dreamers woke she'd had several of those blessed with the visions describe it to her in detail. It always seemed to centre around the same vivid parts: the Black Queen's scream of denial after she realized being tricked, the Grey Pilgrim taking up the blade of the fallen Saint of Swords and then the wizened hero's taking of his own life. All who'd dreamt the dream agreed that the Black Queen had tried to prevent the Peregrine's death, though words failed them when they tried to

explain why. Yet it seemed undeniable, by now, that both the Regicide and the Grey Pilgrim were dead. The former, if one of the growingly reoccurring visions was to be believed, having been slain by Catherine Foundling herself.

"Any word of the Dominion armies?" she asked.

"None of the Blood have returned from their seclusion," Louis said. "The senior captains still hold command, and our people in their camps confirm their rank and file are having similar dreams."

"It's the Blood that'll make decisions, not the captains or the soldiers," Princess Rozala said. "Keep sending envoys, Louis. We can't afford for the battle to resume."

"Dawn will bludgeon the drow hard," the former Prince of Creusens carefully said. "And will arrive soon. If a victory is to be seized by surprise, it would be in the coming hour."

"Tell me, Louis," the dark-haired princess flatly said, "even if we slew every last soldier of the Army of Callow without losing a man, what do you believe will happen when the Black Queen returns?"

"She's already raised one army of the dead," Louis said, though he shivered. "How many times could she truly do such a thing?"

And shiver he should, for Malanza had been told the same tale as he and it had clenched her guts to hear it. An ancient king of Callow stolen from the Dead King's grasp and hundreds of thousands of furious wraiths summoned to deliver his wrath? Such a thing could break an army fresh and dug-in, if well-used, and Rozala Malanza's host was tired and spread out. For all that the Black Queen had come to favour subtler tricks than those she'd plied at the Battle of the Camps, it would not do forget for a moment that they were facing a woman capable of slaying thousands with snap of her fingers.

"Regardless, this is not a gamble we can even begin to consider with the League still on the field," Rozala reminded him. "They may have withdrawn but they are not so far as that."

The disparate armies of the League of Free Cities had, as of an hour past, begun to retreat. They'd put perhaps a mile between themselves and the other two great hosts on the plains, their great combined camp turning into a labyrinth of mayhem before it'd even been fully raised. Rozala had ordered envoys sent there, to probe for intentions and information, but so far all had been turned away outside the camp and the few spies she'd tried to slip in had been shot and hung from poles as a warning. She'd not even tried to get anyone inside the Army of Callow's camp, well aware that Wasteland sorceries would make infiltration

more than merely difficult, but at least there her envoys had been received by Lady Vivienne Dartwick. Who was now, it seemed, heiress to the throne of Callow. Lady Dartwick had been courteous but declined Princess Rozala's offer of sending a contingent of priests from the House of Light to see to her wounded, likely suspecting the additional intent of gleaning the state of her camp through it. At least the venture had confirmed that some of her soldiers were touched by the dreams too, as well as confirming that the 'priests' of the heretical House Insurgent were truly capable of healing. Which would not be a pleasant to hear for some of the priesthood in Salia, Rozala suspected. Last she'd heard from the capital, lines against Callow had been hardening amongst the House of Light.

"As you say, Princess Rozala," Louis relied, inclining his head.

She grimaced, for until a few hours ago though she had been his leader they had also been peers: and while the former still held true, the latter did not. They would have to become used to that. Rozala tried to conceive of a sentence that could mend the gap she could feel growing between them, but sentiment had never been her knack and she struggled over the words until the entire debate was made moot. A messenger approached, though Rozala did not recognize her face and she was being escorted by a pair of Aquitan soldiers. The messenger bowed low, and only began to speak when Rozala gave her leave.

"Your Grace," the woman said, her faint Alamans accent still discernible. "You have been summoned to stand before the First Prince. The Order of the Red Lion has found the restrictions on scrying lifted at last."

Louis' face darkened with both anger and embarrassment.

"It was ordered that any successful contact with Salia be reported immediately," he sharply said. "How is it that I am only now hearing of this?"

"You ordered everyone under your command to do so," the messenger politely agreed. "Yet I am here on behalf of Her Most Serene Highness' plenipotentiary envoy Arnaud Brogloise, who answers only to the First Prince and the Highest Assembly."

So Cordelia Hasenbach had hidden an entire set of messengers and scryers right under her nose, Rozala darkly thought. Likely among the army of the former Prince of Cantal, who until so recently she'd believed one of her most eager supporters. The Princess of Aquitan grit her teeth at the memory of Arnaud's treachery revealed in the bloodiest of ways, though now was not the time to settle that account.

"As always, I am at the disposal of the First Prince," Rozala replied flatly. "Guide the way, messenger."

Louis was left with instructions to have someone inform her the moment there was movement from the Levantines, no matter who it was she was speaking with at the time. The dark-haired princess followed the messenger into the camp of the Cantal army, though she was not so foolish as to do so without a company of trustworthy Aequitan soldiers escorting her. She was well aware that the First Prince would find it much more difficult to take her head after the dust had settled and her star rose in the eyes of commons and royalty alike, and while Rozala was not certain it was in Hasenbach's nature to so bluntly snuff out a rival these were dark days for all. Fear could do strange things to a woman: sometimes it could urge her to greatness, but it could just as easily spur her to the basest of instincts. Yet Rozala and her escort were not surrounded and slaughtered but instead guided to the former Prince of Cantal's private pavilion where the man himself awaited. Along with a handful of wizards who took their leave when dismissed, and a basin of water large enough it could have been used as a bath. Arnaud Brogloise rose from his seat when she entered, as the fresh disparity in their ranks required, and personally introduced her.

"Her Grace Rozala Malanza, Princess of Aequitan and supreme commander of the southern armies," he briskly said.

Cordelia Hasenbach's cool blue eyes, framed by those perfect golden tresses, were already studying her through the waters and so Rozala offered the proper bow.

"Your Highness," she said. "As I was summoned, I came."

"For that promptness I thank you, and again for the services you rendered the Principate on this campaign," the First Prince said. "You may consider me informed of recent developments in Iserre, for the purpose of this conversation."

"So I shall," Rozala replied, resisting the urge to glance at Brogloise. "May I then inquire, Your Highness, as to what the purpose of this conversation is? While I have matters to bring up before you, your messenger implied... pressing need."

It was as close as she could come to chiding the First Prince for summoning her so abruptly, and the message should be twice as loudly heard for the way Rozala had kept to the courtesies while Hasenbach very clearly had not.

"As of a quarter hour ago, we have confirmed that the Dead King has withdrawn on all fronts," the First Prince said.

Rozala's eyes widened in surprise.

"Furthermore, while my cousin finds it difficult to see through either the Hidden Horror or the Black Queen, she has confirmed

that a truce of more than one month and less than six was bought, though not at what price."

I did not escape the dark-haired princess' attention that Catherine Foundling had been mentioned in this, though for now she could only speculate as to why.

"You believe this is the doing of the Queen in Callow?" Princess Rozala asked.

Hasenbach sighed.

"Queen of Callow," she finally said. "Best we grow used to that, Your Grace, for it seems bargains will have to be struck. The Augur had gleaned that the truce is related to the Black Queen, though little more than that. Given the consequences of hostilities resuming, we cannot afford to take risks with Queen Catherine's life – or, indeed, to risk provoking her at all for at least a month."

A pause saw the First Prince's tone grow heavy and solemn.

"In that spirit, Princess Rozala Malanza, as commander of the Principate's southern armies I charge you with the preservation of Queen Catherine Foundling's life and the safeguard of her armies and associates. Should the Dominion strike at her, you are to take any measures short of open war with Levant to prevent conflict reigniting between Callow and the Grand Alliance."

Rozala sharply breathed in. Open war, the First Prince had said. Which was implicit endorsement of assassinating Dominion commanders over allowing the Black Queen to be put at risk. If it ever came out that Cordelia Hasenbach had given such an order, the Grand Alliance might very well splinter. The First Prince, Rozala thought, had just handed her a knife to put to her throat in years to come. The Princess of Aequitan would never like the cold-eyed woman ruling over Procer, she knew that. There was too much bad blood.

Yet there were times where she could not help but admire the other woman, in spite of all the rest.

"I understand, Your Highness," the dark-haired princess said.

"I believe you do, Princess Rozala," the First Prince of Procer evenly replied. "Whatever comes, the Principate must survive. Do as you must, and know you have the full weight of my authority behind you."

The water in the basin rippled and in the heartbeat that followed Cordelia Hasenbach's silhouette disappeared, leaving behind only tepid liquid. While the First Prince had been within her rights to take her leave so abruptly, it surprised Rozala that a woman

known so far and wide for her diplomatic talents would so carelessly offer discourtesy twice on the same night. Then it occurred to her that with the audience having come to an end so swiftly she'd never had opportunity to bring up the petitions passed on to her. The dark-haired Arlesite turned to Arnaud Brogloise, who still stood in silence. His dark eyes had not ceased studying either of the princesses as they spoke, though at least he'd not bothered to put on the pretence of being a blustering fool again. In Cleves the middle-aged former prince had put on some muscle, adding it to his pudgy frame, but Rozala had never found him to have much of a presence – on occasion a sort of buffoonish swagger, but nothing to give her pause. Yet now his girth seemed less laughable, his ruddy face no longer a fool's visage, and the Princess of Aequitan realized odds were he was physically stronger than he. It was somewhat unsettling to know that, now that she'd seen Arnaud Brogloise open the throat of royalty without batting an eye.

"You are still her envoy, I take it," Princess Rozala said.

She was princess and he not: no longer was courtesy owed.

"I am to begin negotiations with the Queen of Callow when she returns," the older man acknowledged. "I've already spoken with her right hand, to interesting result."

"Lady Dartwick?" Rozala asked, surprised.

"Hakram Deadhand, the Adjutant," the Alamans corrected. "He lacks formal title save for his Damnation, but wields the influence nonetheless."

An orc, holding power in Callow? It had been one thing when the Wasteland still held sway over these lands, but it seemed rather odd that one of that land's ancient enemies would have such authority within its borders now.

"And what did the Deadhand have to say?" the Princess of Aequitan asked.

"A great deal, on the subject of accords," Arnaud replied, lips strangely quirked. "I have a great deal of reading ahead of me."

"More than you believe," Rozala said. "I have petitions to pass on to the First Prince. As you've demonstrated a knack for reaching her, they will be placed in your hands. Delaying would be ill-advised, Arnaud."

The man let out a breath that straddled the line between a sigh and a chuckle.

"You have something to say?" the princess flatly said.

"I would not speak out of turn, Your Grace," he said. "Yet I wonder – these petitions, would they be the designated succession for the abdications of the night?"

They were, though Rozala did not immediately say so. Thought it was little more than a formality, save if accusations of treason and other great crimes were to be made, the designated succession for a principality of Procer was to be submitted to the Highest Assembly. There'd only been a handful of refusals throughout the entire history of Procer, usually when villainy or civil war had split the realm asunder. Why would such a matter amuse Arnaud? Certainly the amount of crowns to be approved was unusually high, perhaps even without precedent, but... The Princess of Aequitan's blood ran cold.

"Send for the wizards, Brogloise," she said. "I will put the matter to the First Prince myself."

"I will change nothing," he replied. "An extraordinary session of the Highest Assembly was called. In times of troubles the wisdom of our predecessors is once again needed, and so the Guillermont Decree has been restored."

It took a moment for Rozala to place it. Not the name of Guillermont, for that she could hardly ignore: it was the name of royal house that had ruled Aequitan before the Malanzas rose to prominence and set them aside. The decree in particular, though, came from the First Princess Éloïse Guillermont – best known for ending the Principate's occupation of Callow. Before she'd been First Prince she'd been a sitter of the Highest Assembly, and her election to the office of First Princess had been... contentious. The politics of the time had been complicated, as they often were in Procer – Guillermont had been the leader of a bloc among the Assembly that held no lands in Callow and so considered the taxes levied to keep armies standing there an utter waste – but the broad lines had been that Procer in those days had been split between the royalty that wished withdrawal and those that wished to tighten Procer's grip. Princess Éloïse had risen to power by seizing an opportunity after Callowan rebels had slain five princes in their beds in Laure, gathering her allies in the Assembly and passing her eponymous decree before succession could be arranged. It was an obscure procedural measure that specified no *assermenté* – that pretentious Alamans term for proxy – could be used to present one's name for confirmation of succession. The would-be ruler had to attend in person. In practice, that'd meant that the designated heirs and heiresses of the slain royals had been forced to leave their seats in the Assembly empty for more than a year as they remained in Callow trying to keep their holdings from collapsing. Those empty seats had allowed the Princess of Aequitan to swing the balance of votes in her favour by enough of a margin she was elected First Princess and ordered the withdrawal from Callow, changing the path of history.

Yet that had been a mere procedural trick, one that First Princess Éloïse herself had been easily persuaded into rescinding when she'd ascended to the office. What Rozala was beginning to piece together was a different beast entirely. Seven crowns had been abdicated, this night. That meant that almost a third of the Highest Assembly, which held twenty-four seats, had been silenced: proxies could not vote when there was no ruling prince or princess stood behind them, for they were the voice of that ruler and had no formal decisional power of their own. That left seventeen votes, then, for the foreseeable futures. The Lycaonese principalities made four. Salia itself, the demesne of the First Prince, held a vote as well. Prince Frederic of Brus and Hasenbach's other two foremost loyalists in Salamans and Tenerife were well known to have instructed their *assermentés* to follow Hasenbach in all things, which meant eight votes. Prince Beatrice of Hainaut's lands were being defended by Lycaonese armies, which likely made for nine and with Prince Gaspard in Cleves being heavily dependent on southern supplies for his defending armies that made ten out of seventeen. A clear majority that would vote however Cordelia Hasenbach wanted it to. And it would not be broken in the coming months, for the First Prince would be able to put her chosen candidates on the abdicated thrones long before any possible designated heir presented themselves in Salia. After all, the only mages who knew the secrets of scrying in Iserre were in Hasenbach's service, and no rider could ride quicker than sorcery.

"She has made herself the queen of Procer," Rozala croaked, "in everything but name."

"On doom's approach," Arnaud Brogloise said, "law must fall silent."

"And you would enable this?" Princess Rozala hissed. "You were a prince, Arnaud. You understand what is at stake: the Assembly can be led, but it must never be *commanded*. That way lies tyranny."

"Oh, we'll survive a spot of tyranny," he replied. "Yet we might not survive Keter without it."

"What did she give, to make of you such a loyal hound?" the Princess of Aequitan hissed. "What manner of ugly bargain was made?"

"She let her kin die and her home burn, to better our chances of victory," Arnaud said. "Loyalty is a child's sentiment, Your Grace. I heed Her Highness's decrees because she had proved willing to sacrifice whatever is necessary for Procer to survive."

The scathing reply on the tip of Rozala's tongue had to be swallowed, for another entered the pavilion. It was, the princess saw, one of her own officers.

"Captain Matias?" she asked, tone harsh.

"Your Grace," the soldier said, bowing. "Louis Rohanon has sent word: the armies of the Dominion are gathering."

Cursing, Princess Rozala Malanza thought, would not help in the slightest. Yet she still blasphemed several times, before sending for enough soldiers to give those damned Levantine madmen pause before they got everyone killed.

Caerulea

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Caerulea

And it is no longer broken, so go vote again.

stevenneiman

Ok, so that wasn't just me that was having problems. I got the "forbidden" message just after my computer crashed so I thought the crash screwed up something fiddly related to my computer's internet connection.

ruduen

I'll admit, after everything that happened, I was expecting a slightly longer break before the politics resumed in full force.

I suppose prophetic visions and scrying will accelerate things on the political front as well.

naturalnuke

0

danh3107

Well well well, the game is afoot!

ATRDCI

"In that spirit, Princess Rozala Malanza, as commander of the Principate's southern armies I charge you with the preservation of Queen Catherine Foundling's life and the safeguard of her armies and associates."

Cat: Im gonna self flagellate and sacrifice myself again.

Rozala: *whacks Cat with a scroll* No! Bad Cat! And Gods Above why does your orc keep trying to get rid of his arms?!

RoflCat

Silly Rozala, she need to learn from Archer that the answer is choke hold.

After all, it both silences and weakens her.

Risk of death? Eh, she's survived worse.

haihappen

It is established to spray misbehaving Cats with a bottle of water to deter unwanted behavior.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I dunno, that seems an unwise tactic against a former lakeomancer. 😊

[Fayhem](#)

Former? She's patently still got the gate trick and I would be shocked if the Sisters can't compensate for her no longer having a fae mind to process the gate formation data. I expect (read, greatly anticipate) gate-delivered death to feature against the Dead King one way or another.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, she hasn't dropped a lake on anyone since she got out of Everdark, and she'd generally backed off from such massive overkill. But I could easily believe that if someone tried mockingly spraying her with water, she might drench them in return.

[Fayhem](#)

The only battles she's been in since the Everdark have been in gate-disrupted territory. And she specifically had "avoid mass casualties in the opposing force bc I'll need them later" as a strategic goal vis-a-vis both Procer and Levant, so even if she could have she

wouldn't have. I don't expect either to feature against the Dead King, quite especially not the second.

Shveiran

Also, the main casualties she inflicted were delivered by riveromancy, which is by definition a branch of lakeomancy.

Or at the very least a feeder.

[Liliet](#)

^^^ 😊 seriously learn your classifications people

erebus42

As it always is

folros

A game at lest, and multiple feet.

talenel

Hmm. Arnaud really is a distasteful person. Useful, but still not someone I'd want to be friends with. And the truce keeping Cat alive isn't all that surprising.

Yet I do wonder about the Dominion. It would not surprise me if they withdrew from the war. I really don't think the Grand Alliance will stand with the way Bard is influencing things.

Andrew Mitchell

My take on Arnaud is that he's quite straight-forward now that his cover is blown. I appreciate that. Playing politics now will kill Procer. Saint's expectation was that Procer (as a political institution) was going to die but I think Cordelia, Arnaud and Rozala can keep it together. Changed, for sure, but still...

Oshi

I think Arnauld is the most honest person there. He has a purpose and all else falls beside.

Rup

"On doom's approach," Arnaud Brogloise said, "law must fall silent."

Andrew Mitchell

It's a good line. But I agree with Rozala that it stinks of tyranny.

TeK

When doom was at the gates of Rome, they chose a person to wield a single-handed power, and it was a greatest civil honor to wield said power, because Romans understood the need of unified command and absence of politics in a face of existential threat.

And also there is a fact that almost every single dictator willingly abdicated after the war, which is just so awesome.

Gregorio Cardarelli

Well is not really like that, in Rome the Dictator was a political position only appointed in times of crisis and had a finite time of existence of six months which could be extended for another six months if the threat was not extinguished. The first dictator without time constraints was Julius Caesar and that position was made "more legal" by his successor, Augustus, which brought the end of the republic and the start of the empire.

Mental Mouse

Remember, most of us are modern democrats (little-d), suspicious of royal power as opposed to the will and interests of the people. Rozala and other Procerans only coincidentally agree with us –they are aristocrats, suspicious of royal power as a threat to their own power, prerogatives, and interests.

Shveiran

I see what you are saying, but I think that's valid only if you squint a bit: it isn't really democracy and its ideals that Malanza is defending.

Proceran Princes remind me of French nobles in the 1700s, resisting the monarch's attempts of consolidating a centralized power.

centralized power means more absolute power, which can bring tyranny and oppression.

But the thing is, a centralized power was also the birth of the concept of "public interest" (well, rebirth after the fall of Rome really, but still); many of what western democracy now consider to be the duties of a State toward its citizens was seeded in those years by those monarchs and their staffs.

Rights as a quality inherent to every citizen started to

be conceptualized around the same time; because we started to move from “subject of this or that lord and king” to “citizen of that state”. The very concept requires a centralized, absolute power.

It could be some of those nobles (and Malanza) resist such an idea because they worry about the long term threats to the rights of the people.

It could be they resist it because they don't want to lose their power, privileges and charges.

Could be there is a bit of both.

Historically, centralized power is a pillar of western democracies. It's how we grew past local laws to state laws, where citizens are equal before the law and have inherent rights.

Which isn't to say centralizing power is always a good thing; I just feel it gets a bit of an inherent abd name that isn't really warranted.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> isn't really democracy and its ideals that Malanza is defending.

Well yes, that was my point. “Ancient” democracies (e.g. Athens, the Mongols) AIUI tended to be cases where no one player could gather enough power in the first place to dominate the rest of the populace. (And remember that Athens was a city state among many others, most of whom did have kings.)

Successful modern democracies tend to be cases where, *after* power got centralized in royalty, other players kicked back and broke the royal power, then arranged things so that *nobody* could claim total power (see also: separation of powers in American politics). That can happen in stages, as when Britain started with the Magna Carta to limit the king's power over *the nobles*.

Democracies built without that prior centralization often don't work very well – see Africa, where areas wrecked and arbitrarily carved up by colonialization tried to skip past the royalization stage. Similarly, many nations around the world (Middle East, Asia, Africa again, Latin America) have gotten passed around among strongman “presidents”, religious leaders, and/or military rule. (The common factor being that those are the folks who actually can exert power over most or all of the territory.)

India is an intermediate case, where the British had welded the subcontinent's princedoms into a "nation" that promptly fractured on religious lines, and the what's left of it still has difficulty pressing national policies over provincial and local powers.

Shveiran

I missread your post, then. My apologies, I very much agree with your later analysis.

Granted, a number of royals realized giving more and more power to a beurocracy of professionals was a good thing for all, and parliamnets and governments grem more and more independent to their respective royalty. Some monarchies had to broken down for democracy to flourish, others eased the project and made teh transition mostly peaceful.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> a number of royals realized giving more and more power to a bureaucracy of professionals was a good thing for all,

Pre-modern China is the classic example where a standing bureaucracy provided continuity and expertise regardless of what emperor, or even dynasty, held the throne. I'm not sure how much of the original system survived the Revolution, but at least some of the traditions certainly did; AIUI the Communist Party still operates largely through a standing bureaucracy, which is still recruited by examination. Which is why their top people tend to be remarkably well-educated, to the nation's benefit.

Shveiran

If we look for a more western example, Italy was unified by the Kingdom of Piemonte and Sardegna, who had a nominal King, but whose agenda was in practice determined by a Prime Minister. By that time, the King nominated the Prime Minister, but the latter would still be the one behind the kingdom's wheel. Italy kept to that system, slowly seeing the election of parliaments gain more and more influence on the freedom the monarch had in the selection of the Prime Minister.

In the end, the monarch became a vestigial part of the system, and after WWII was not included among the country's institutions.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I note that Italy is also a European example of a nation that never quite centralized the national power, and as a direct result isn't doing too well at democracy, or even rule of law (q.v. the Mafia and other organized-crime families there).

Shveiran

Mhm, that's debatable. I'd say we centralized power well enough, but those issues stem from the fact that we never achieved a unified culture. The permanence of organized crime is, in my opinion, more related to the fact that local, regional culture tend to be divided in its condemnation of the phenomenon than it is to lack of centralized power.

As for our, shall we say, "electoral difficulties", I'd say that lack of education in several parts of the country, economical difficulties, and almost thirty years of politicians offering simple answers to complex problems are more to blame; which again points more to the lack of a unified culture than to a lack of centralized power.

Then again, that is my personal take. It is a fact that a certain degree of regional institutions retain a certain influence that has no real place in a unified state.

But I think the root of our difficulties lies in the fact that living in Tuscany, Sicily, Sardegna, Lombardia or Friuli is a drastically different experience, which spawns very different views and needs. It is very hard for us to agree on a way forward, because there is precious little common ground to build the foundations on.

Mental Mouse

Well, I'm not going to argue Italian politics with a native. But I can speak a little about American politics, and I'll say that America has always contained vastly different cultures and environments. At our founding, we were divided between what I'll flippantly call "religious fanatics"(*) and "dope-smoking Freemasons", with the pacifist Quakers as an uneasy hinge between them... and a crosswise division between urban industrialists and rural plantation owners and farmers.

Nowadays, our cultures range further: From tony mansions to the ghetto and barrio, religious Salt

Lake City to bohemian southern California, the big cities to rural towns, seacoasts (on both sides) to the Midwestern heartland, the damp chill of Michigan to the dry heat of Arizona. And then there's New York City, containing a microcosm of the world....

But all Americans, and even in the midst of massive social change, that does come first. (Yeah, there was one time it didn't... and we're still paying for that.)

[Mental Mouse](#)

Coming back here, it seems I forgot a footnote in my previous message, about "religious fanatics".

I probably intended to note that the Puritans got something of a bad rap from Hawthorne, but they were still pretty coercive and AIUI intolerant of other faiths. (I've heard the claim that they came over so they could oppress non-believers in peace.



emerged from a standoff among the various groups, the general idea being "you don't mess with us, and we won't mess with you".

[Liliet](#)

This.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Pulling off a Barons' Revolt to stuff a Magna Carta down Cordelia's throat is *possible*. But, with the Oracle? Not recommended as being entirely feasible without a lot of, say, scry-busting interference, however. Like say, from two Crows and a sufficiently motivated friend.

We'll see.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Cordelia isn't enough of a monarch for a Baron's Revolt to make sense yet. If she gets overturned, Procer just goes back to being a bunch of squabbling princedoms.

Shveiran

As Mental Mouse said, plus the fact that signing a Carta doesn't really mean much unless the document carries enough weight that taking it back provokes immediate retaliation from the people. Without that, it's just paper; and I'm not convinced

Procerans would be that invested in limiting the First Prince's power at this point of their history.

medailyfun

You have forgotten the capital letters in the words
Will, Interests and People

caoimhinh

Cordelia has always been like that. She even started the Crusade as a plot to consolidate her rule on Procer. She sees herself as the only one fitting to rule Procer, and she is one of the few sensible aristocrats in Procer, since she was the only one who saw Malicia's plot for civil war in Procer and managed to put an end to it. So she has no reason to trust her compatriots with the position of First Prince, plus her own personal ambitions of holding on to power and having prestige to pass into history as one of the Principate's greatest leaders.

Also, almost every instance of Cordelia's POV is Cordelia either worrying that she is going to be deposed, or Cordelia doing something to avoid being deposed, it's come to the points that every decision she makes is weighted by those factors, even those of altruistic nature like the war against the Dead King.

Although I think most of us agree that she is indeed the most capable ruler among the current Principate, she is indeed obsessed with keeping in power as much as possible, that's the curse of Procer's Nobility, everything is politics and schemes to retain power. Though Cordelia, being Lycaonese, is notable for having the insight and decency to actually make preparations to defend against the Rattlings and Keter.

talanel

It's the thing though. If Arnaud's purpose was a lesser one, say, he would still act as if all else falls aside.

As an example that ties into the mention of him as a rapist by Liliet, if Arnaud's main goal at the moment was sexual pleasure, He would get it regardless of anyone else's feelings about the matter.

Andrew Mitchell

I think your conclusions are only somewhat justified by the text. Remember that we've only seen Arnaud as he real is once his true role was revealed. And (as I suggested to Liliet) the rapist idea *could* have been part of his cover.

And it could be true or it could be fabricated. We just don't know for sure.

It's just occurred to me that everything we've seen (or heard) of Arnaud is consistent with him being a full-on sociopath. It's entirely plausible to me that Cordelia could find and use someone with those qualities.

Liliet

I agree that he's likely a sociopath! I also think he's a sociopath *like Hakram*, and that it's not necessarily pure coincidence that his current goals are something we process as "good". Sociopaths are capable of abstract thinking :3

Mental Mouse

I really don't think Hakram qualifies as a sociopath in real-world (human) terms. Not only is he quite capable of feeling affection and loyalty (per his POV!), but his incident of "giving a hand" to Viv indicates that he's unhesitating in self-sacrifice for the greater cause, which is not at all about his own power or welfare.

I think it was fairly clear that what Cat calls a "coldblood" as applied to humans, is not at all the same thing as the Kharsum word for an orc "variant", which translates as "coldblood". As I said back when this came up, the idea of "cold blood" would have very different implications to humans than it does to orcs. Humans think of a "cold-blooded killer", someone who lacks the "warm" feelings that bind humans together. Orcs think of someone who lacks their *normal* tendency to "hot" violent rage. (That is, an orc coldblood is the opposite of someone afflicted with the Red Rage.) Thus when Hakram discovers something to fight for (Cat and her cause), he says "now at last I am an orc".

In the real world it's been discovered that the brain abnormalities *associated* with sociopaths... don't always translate to sociopathic behavior. The key factor seems to be that a strong duty-based religion is capable of "socializing" even a child with that neurology, such that they become a normal member of the community. This seems to have included at least one of the most prominent researchers studying sociopathy. 😊

That said... no bets on what happens if such a person gets pushed to a breaking point, where social constraints fall by the wayside.

Liliet

IIRC Hakram meets the diagnostic criteria for APD (antisocial personality disorder)

Mental Mouse

> meets the diagnostic criteria for APD (antisocial personality disorder)

Wait, what? How do you get that? Setting aside the point that he's a different species with a different norm, there's also the point that he's a soldier and nearly a noble in a society that's much more violent than ours, also at war. And that's just Callow! 😊

Grabbing from the Wikipedia entry for APD:

> pervasive and persistent disregard for morals, social norms, and the rights and feelings of others. [3] Individuals with this personality disorder will typically have no compunction in exploiting others in harmful ways for their own gain or pleasure and frequently manipulate and deceive other people, achieving this through wit and a façade of superficial charm or through intimidation and violence

He's certainly capable of bullying or tricking opponents, but we've seen no sign of him abusing random people around him, or even abusing his power or position.

> They may display arrogance, think lowly and negatively of others, and lack remorse for their harmful actions and have a callous attitude to those they have harmed

Again, aside from being at war (and being a genuine badass)....

> Irresponsibility is a core characteristic of this disorder: they can have significant difficulties in maintaining stable employment as well as fulfilling their social and financial obligations, and people with this disorder often lead exploitative, unlawful, or parasitic lifestyles.

Nopeity Nope. That is, aside from his actual social position as the Queen's left hand, thus standing on the backs of the peasantry etc.

...

> Serious problems with interpersonal relationships are often seen in those with the disorder. Attachments and emotional bonds are weak, and

interpersonal relationships often revolve around the manipulation, exploitation, and abuse of others.

Not seeing much of that either. Sleeping around, whatever, the dude's a soldier, a powerful courtier, and is living in a society where nobody much cares who he's sleeping with, except maybe to tease him.

Frankly, given that Hakram is Officially a Villain, it's surprising how *little* he fits that pattern. Also ironic, given that APD represents a *big* chunk of the popular concept of human evil.

Now, if you wanna talk about *Kairos*...

[Liliet](#)

OK I gotta find a better source on that sometime. I heard it thirdhand, and I don't think those diagnostic criteria are good since they definitely don't fit a person's internal understanding of themselves. It's a condemnation, not diagnostic criteria.

Dropping this line of conversation for the moment.

caoimhinh

Yeah, Hakram never really seemed a sociopath to me. He was more like a nihilist, depressed and struggling to find his meaning in life because nothing could motivate him or inspire him to actually yearn for it.

He found that in Catherine, hence his absolute and undying loyalty to her.

What Hakram shows to most people is that he has no ambitions beyond serving Catherine, though we know from his conversation with Cat that he desires change and to prove that Orcs can be more than simply an oppressed race of brutes, and that can be achieved by following Catherine so he simply carries on as usual, so from an outsider point of view those trying to analyze him are befuddled for his apparent lack of ambitions and goals. Though yeah, he can be very cold-blooded in his reasoning and ruthless in his actions, but that makes sense given his origin and the life he has (as an orc, a soldier, and a Named from Below).

NerfGlastigUaine

I definitely wouldn't want to be friends with Arnaud, but I rather like the bloke. Rarely do you see an Unfettered Well-Intentioned Extremist who's so refreshingly direct sans ham.

Also helps that he makes a lot of bloody sense; extinction makes all means reasonable.

Liliet

The only reservation I have about Arnaud is that I don't think he would have had the reputation of a rapist if there was 0 truth to it.

It's a pretty big one, granted.

Everything other than that? I hear him on every word and more.

Andrew Mitchell

> I don't think he would have had the reputation of a rapist if there was 0 truth to it.

I had forgotten about that, or I may have missed it. I wouldn't put it past Cordelia to have created that image to give Arnaud deeper cover. But, of course, the easiest way to create that image is to do it for real.

Thea

Did we ever get confirmation what it was? Or did it remain vague? Because I thought it might have been little boys... but I remember no confirmation either way. And that can be faked rather well. Spend a night behind closed doors, (Actually do nothing), have your red herring disappear in some village.

Fayhem

Not to mention, back when Cat could hear pulses, smell fear etc as a Scary Fae, when she paid attention to Arnaud she didn't sense that he was feeling something different than what he was projecting. She sensed that he wasn't feeling *anything*. Like, ever. I would say I'm probably at least 90% that he is sociopathic/psychopathic.

That's important. That kind of pathological personality type is almost 100% motivated by self interest, because no one and nothing else is actually real to them. A Useful Monster is still a monster, and I can't rule out the possibility that he chose to take that role for Cordelia because a Useful Monster gets license that a regular monster wouldn't. Not to mention that it's been established that he was also marked psychologically by the defense against the dead that he mounted along with Rozala and Louis. So when he declares his unlimited loyalty to Procer, is that sincere or is it really his unlimited loyalty to preserving the only source of enough meatshields to potentially keep the Dead King from

claiming him personally? I don't think it's a relevant distinction as far as his actions/goals currently go, but it sure does affect how sympathetic I am towards him as a person.

[Liliet](#)

>That's important. That kind of pathological personality type is almost 100% motivated by self interest, because no one and nothing else is actually real to them. A Useful Monster is still a monster

I would refrain from passing blanket moral judgements on entire types of neurodiversity.

And I would point to Hakram.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Seconded. o/

[Fayhem](#)

> I would refrain from passing blanket moral judgements on entire types of neurodiversity.

From the Mayo Clinic's definition of Antisocial Personality Disorder (the clinical diagnosis associated with what is more informally called sociopathy/psychopathy):

"Antisocial personality disorder, sometimes called sociopathy, is a mental condition in which a person consistently shows no regard for right and wrong and ignores the rights and feelings of others. People with antisocial personality disorder tend to antagonize, manipulate or treat others harshly or with callous indifference. They show no guilt or remorse for their behavior."

I'm pretty comfortable with considering that categorically bad.

Also, that's not Hakram. He was mistaken for that or something similar earlier in his life (specifically/ particularly by Juniper IIRC since he was a weird orc and she didn't know what to make of that), but AFAIK at this point everyone who made that assessment of him has reconsidered. And even if they hadn't, I would consider his POVs to be more than sufficient evidence against.

[Mental Mouse](#)

See my comments above, "coldblood" seems to mean something very different for an orc versus a human.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Somebody with a very high anti-social quotient can still work out that their best interests lie in not dying by pitchforks, tar and feathers. Procer has been building to some form of social revolt for a while, and it's very clear Anault picked up on that decades ago. And has attached himself to somebody he's decided has a social compass that works better than his, but who also has a chance of avoiding the worst outcomes due to their own "do what works" nature.

The social well-being is in his long term best interests, in this case.

Anti-social personalities are more than capable of working inside the Golden Rule, if only for reasons of enlightened self-interest. But, often in... interesting ways. Yet... it can work.

[Fayhem](#)

> Anti-social personalities are more than capable of working inside the Golden Rule, if only for reasons of enlightened self-interest.

I mean, sure? You don't really need to convince me of that since it was roughly the premise of my analysis (i.e., an antisocial personality type can choose to behave in a prosocial manner for reasons of self-interest).

Regarding the rest of your comment, none of that is currently supported in the text. It's not clear that Procer has been building to some form of social revolt (it's mode of government isn't particularly acceptable by our modern democratic standards, but it's very much typical for medieval governance and there's been no particular indication of unusual levels of social unrest outside the ambit of Hierarch using his aspect on people; for that matter, in preindustrial times on the rare occasions when popular revolt did occur it was generally wildly unsuccessful), it's not clear that Arnaud perceives that it is, it's not clear that he has any interest in overall social well-being beyond "hey let's not all die to the Dead King", and it 's not clear that his reason for attaching himself to Cordelia has anything to do with his (also unestablished in the text) perception of her having a superior social/moral

compass. Maybe you're right! But there's no evidence that you are.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

And it's not like it's a detail that makes *that much difference*. Creating an impression of something like that without actually doing it is the kind of involved deception operation that's just not worth the cost.

(Rozala referred to it twice in her POVs, once somewhere in Crusaders or Kaleidoscope, once when coming south recently)

Shveiran

Isn't it worth it, though? It allowed him to be held in contempt both because of his supposed stupidity and annoying personality and because of his sordid habits. Schemers expect people to have skeletons in their wardrobes, allowing them to find one helps dissuading them from digging deeper.
I'd say it has its uses.

Or maybe he is a rapist.

Or maybe he is a rapist but went through with the act mainly to give people a skeleton to find.

My point is, I could see him crafting the rumor to make use of it. Compared to the ruse about his whole public and private life? That's small beans, so far as deception goes.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah. My point is, if he does not find the idea distasteful enough to reject the idea of making it a part of his image, odds are he also does not find it distasteful enough to craft an elaborate ruse about it instead of, just,

Blegh. I don't want to even think about this stuff.

Shveiran

You may have a point there. Still, we'll likely never know for sure and I can't say I mind the Guide doesn't really dwell on these topics.

[Liliet](#)

AGREED STRONGLY

talenel

Arnaud seems like one of those people without really any moral fiber. There are no lines I think he wouldn't cross in order to meet his goals. He doesn't seem to really care about any people either.

Now, is his goal right now something we can agree is relatively good and something Cat can work with? Yes. But it doesn't make him a pleasant person or a person I would want to be friends with. Especially because while his methods make more sense in a time of existential threat, I don't think they would change at all were they up against a lesser one.

Shveiran

I don't disagree, but most the characters of the Guide have a kill count in the hundreds at least. I don't think I could go have a beer with most of them, honestly.

talenel

I guess that's true. Still most characters in the series do have some sort of lines they won't cross. There's something more to them than purpose. Arnaud is not and it's kind of inhuman and repugnant in ways that the others aren't (Monsters like the DK not withstanding)

Shveiran

It's mostly a matter of perspective, though. To a sufficiently invested individual, the only real line becomes the goal itself.

I feel like Arnaud, like Amadeus, or Cordelia, or Pilgrim, or saint, or Cat, simply has a very specific goal that overshadows everything else. Though there may be a lot they would prefer to sacrifice on that altar, there is ultimately nothing they wouldn't if it was an absolute necessity.

Keep in mind, we have seen very little of him aside from the mask he wears in public and the one he uses when doing business.

He may very well have very human connections or passions, all we know is that they are, ultimately, overshadowed by his commitment to the well being of Procer.

I don't particularly like him myself, but I find him much more moral than many we have been introduced in this story. Then again, I do tend to favor characters that can look at the bigger picture, so that may very well be me.

[Liliet](#)

I basically agree with this perspective, and I like "To a sufficiently invested individual, the only real line becomes the goal itself." Well put ♥

[Liliet](#)

>Arnaud seems like one of those people without really any moral fiber. There are no lines I think he wouldn't cross in order to meet his goals.

These two sentences do not follow from each other, because 'there are no lines he wouldn't cross' also applies to

- Catherine
- Tariq
- Amadeus

>But it doesn't make him a pleasant person or a person I would want to be friends with. Especially because while his methods make more sense in a time of existential threat, I don't think they would change at all were they up against a lesser one.

That's a fair prediction.

I just really like the 'y'all are children and we're about to die if we don't look to the one (1) person here actively trying to save us' view.

talenel

But, at least for Tariq and Cat, I do believe that there is good intent there. That they wouldn't cross certain lines unless it were truly necessary. With Arnaud, I do think the goal matters more than any consequences. He would cross lines even if it was only to make things more convenient for him. He sort of reminds me of Black, just without any real care for other people, which is one of Black's main redeeming qualities.

[Liliet](#)

Mm, I'm not making that bet, but I'm not taking it either. Wonder if we'll ever know :3

nick012000

Fortunately, the Grey Pilgrim got rezzed, so hopefully he'll be able to get the Levantine forces to chill before things get too heated.

Faiir

Or the fact that he was rezzed by blasphemous forces will be treated as HERESY!

[Liliet](#)

Technically he was rezzed by his own Aspect, with the approval of the Choir of Mercy.

Somehow I don't think there are forces in play that actively want his name blackened badly enough to somehow try to play THAT.

(It is not how Bard operates either)

talenel

Hmmm, it seems to me that Bard has been very much working to ensure the status quo. Why wouldn't she want Pilgrim discredited and cast aside, so that the Grand Alliance fractures even more? So that villains and heroes stay to their respective sides and stop inter-mixing? Because those seem to be high priorities to me.

[Liliet](#)

>Hmmm, it seems to me that Bard has been very much working to ensure the status quo.

How does the creation of the League of Free Cities, *and being disappointed by how it didn't shift the status quo*, fit into this?

talenel

I guess I ascribe to the idea that Bard is a tool of the Gods (both Above and Below), to ensure that things don't change. And she can't actively go against that goal, despite any personal desires to the contrary. So while she is personally disappointed, it does not change what she must do.

talenel

This could be completely wrong, this isn't something I have so much evidence to back me up. Just a personal theory.

[Liliet](#)

The difference between us is that I believe she very much CAN, as long as it's not disobeying direct orders otherwise 😊

Faiir

I believe you're right.

Faiir

You may be right, with Pilgrim being the Bard's staunch defender.

I wonder if this will be used on the Trial of the Gods by a certain fan favorite character (actually I just forgot his name):

"Your angels ignore their own laws!"

[Liliet](#)

Anaxares? 😊

werafdsaew

Heroes are explicitly above priests in the hierarchy, since the former gets a mandate from Heaven.

[Fayhem](#)

Hey, it's not Warhammer 40K. Fanaticism doesn't *always* have to override rationality here; I'd honestly call fanaticism winning out more the exception than the rule.

Faiir

Weeeeeeeelll

Maybe in Praes.

And Callow, since, you know, most of the fanatics got killed in the last war?

Levantines, Bellerophon, Daoine, Keter, at least some Proceed principalities and WK's homeland look pretty fanatical to me.

[Fayhem](#)

Except for Bellerophon (Most Fair and Glorious of All Cities) I'm not really seeing it tbh. The Proceran House of Light/the Levantine Lanterns seem like they've been inclined towards being hardliners, but that's specifically the church elements.

The Levantines I'd describe as pretty ruthless (which is what happens when your national culture is defined by a group of classic Murderhobo Heroes) and consumed by honor duels and deed-seeking and etc., but not particularly ideologically fanatical as such.

Daoine have an overarching goal they are fervently committed to, but they've proven themselves more than willing to be highly pragmatic in how they pursue it; I

don't think I can agree with describing being goal-driven as being the same as fanaticism.

Keter is for all intents and purposes one person, who again is not so much fanatical as supremely ruthless and amoral. If by Keter you meant the Serenity then fair, they're pretty thoroughly indoctrinated. They're also completely irrelevant to Calernian politics/society except as a renewable source of corpses for DK, which is why I wasn't counting them before.

WK's homeland (AKA Ashur)... hmm, not sure. We've had a very limited view of it; it seems like they've got a lot of ingrained societal rigidity, but again not sure I'd call that the same as fanaticism.

The League I (mostly) wouldn't call too fanatical overall; even the priestly-priestly city, Atalante I think, wound up joining the League forces despite them being effectively controlled by the Tyrant, a notably non-Heavenly individual.

Procer overall... not seeing it there either. The Lycaonese are diehards for sure, but to me at least that's a category that may overlap but is not the same as fanatics. And as for the Alamans and Arlesites... yeah, no. Just no.

Honestly, we've seen a lot of people/nations make mistakes and/or act poorly in the Guideverse. But a relatively small amount of that is what I could consider attributable to fanaticism as such. The Arch-Heretic declaration for sure counts, though that was (much) more from the church than from the state and was actively spurred on by Bard/Saint. Mostly the mistakes and bad behavior have been the kind you could get pretty much anywhere though.

Shveiran

I agree with Fayhem.

In my opinion, the Guide does a great job in inventing different fanatsy cultures, which are therefore based around different key values than our own. Since we often don't spend too much time in many of them, at first glance we may mistake "different" as "strange" and "strange" as "fanatic".

Also, they are medieval-like cultures. Most of the individual involved don't know how to read and learn of the world and of different cultures mostly through rumors. Travel is diffucflt for the common people and you mostly speak to those you know.

It is not a state in which putting oneself into someone

else's shoes is a common approach. Educated individuals, which is who we read about? Sure, they are educated and smart enough to do it? Analphabeth farmers who never left their backwater village? Likely not.

The cultures are not fanatical, they are simply different and not really talking to each other.

[Liliet](#)

WELL PUT

[Liliet](#)

This.

Honestly, guideverse has less religious fanaticism than our own world, mostly I suspect due to people with traits that would override any such tendency getting Heavens' Mandates.

[tkjarrah](#)

""In that spirit, Princess Rozala Malanza, as commander of the Principate's southern armies I charge you with the preservation of Queen Catherine Foundling's life and the safeguard of her armies and associates. Should the Dominion strike at her, you are to take any measures short of open war with Levant to prevent conflict reigniting between Callow and the Grand Alliance.""
i see you ee setting up the perfect slowburn enemies-to-lovers scenario

[Liliet](#)

Three-way, too.

[TeK](#)

I ship Louis and Rosalia though.

Insanenoodlyguy

The new tragedy of the diplomacy arc. The princess realizes her right hand man is more than just a friend, but now she finds herself on a new battlefield when he despondently keeps sleeping with half of the present callowans in his own stupor over no longer being of standing with the woman he loves (and none of the callowans caring). She must muster the courage and the words to get him back, and then figure out what to do when the Callowans just figure that means threesomes. And can anybody match the lovemaking standard set by Adjutants new hand? (It has lube and vibrates, Masegos other father had helped with this one)

Faiir

I don't think I could see Arnaud as a romance target – he seems too much like sociopath.

I don't mind you shipping them of course 😊

ninegardens

Louis is the bookworm. Arnaud is the creepy creep. Seperate dudes.

[Liliet](#)

Rozala has two hands~

Walter

Hasenbach Is playing nice with Cat for arranging the truce. I wonder how much bitterer the taste in her mouth will be once she learns of the resurrection she pulled while a Choir stood by?

Andrew Mitchell

Why would Cordelia be bitter over the resurrection? Its a good thing that GP is alive to help with the Dominion.

IDKWhoitis

It completely undermines the Arch Heretic of the East declaration, and adds a fuck ton of legitimacy to Cat's claim to the throne and the schism that is currently undergoing. It is a political disaster and a theological backhand across Cordelias face.

werafdsaew

Except Cordelia is not the one who wants to label Cat Arch Heretic, and in fact tried to fight against it. The Procer House of Light is a rival to her influence, so this is actually good thing for her.

caoimhinh

Keep in mind that Cordelia was not the one who declared her Arch-heretic of the East, that was Bard's plot with the assembled priests of the House of Light.

It's not really a political disaster, but it does start to put a stop to all the political bullshit that Cordelia and Pilgrim had used as excuses on the way of sitting down and signing peace with Catherine and Callow. The Crusade was launched against Praes, though. Hilariously enough, they had gotten nowhere close to it (except for the

fleet in Thalassina and another port city I don't recall, which was sacked by Asur), yet Praes is burning in their inner conflict due to the Goblins and that High Lady of the Moderates who wants to rebel.

NerfGlastigUaine

It was Nok, by the way.

caoimhinh

Thanks~

[Liliet](#)

>it does start to put a stop to all the political bullshit that Cordelia and Pilgrim had used as excuses on the way of sitting down and signing peace with Catherine and Callow

Those were not excuses, those were legit obstacles. Both of them wanted it, we know as much from Cordelia's literal own POV at least.

This is a gift, for her.

caoimhinh

But those obstacles were political bullshit.

Pilgrim's concern was "If I ask Levant to have peace with Callow, it will be seen as weakness on Cordelia and thus she will be deposed from her position, and her dreamed Grand Alliance would fall apart". Which translate as him caring more about the possible dream of Cordelia more than the lives in Callow, luckily he stopped that attitude later on and realized that the world of today must not suffer for the 'world that would be'.

Cordelia's concern was "This Crusade which I started at first is now out of my control and I can't force it to stop because that would get me deposed if I were to oppose the House of Light, as they would ally with my political opponents. So now I must carry on and face Callow and Praes in a head-on confrontation despite my plan to fight them in a more subtle and smart way". She never had the intention of having peace with Catherine, she just planned to fight her in a more indirect way instead of marching the crusade against the whole of Callow, as the declaration of Arch-heretic of the East made Callowans close ranks against Procer and back-up Catherine even more fiercely plus making it impossible

for the Crusade to stop until there was either a clear victory or a crushing defeat, because compromise would see Cordelia removed.

Those weren't even much of an obstacle for Procer as a whole as they were obstacles for Cordelia as a ruler of Procer.

You will find that none of the things before has changed, yet the people in charge are seeing things in a different way, and that suddenly changes everything and agreements can be reached, which signifies they could always do it, yet refused because of personal agendas and found good excuses for shielding their objectives A.K.A political bullshit.

[Liliet](#)

>But those obstacles were political bullshit.

Yes. Yes, they were. Political bullshit is people's lives, that's why people are forced to take it into account.

>Which translate as him caring more about the possible dream of Cordelia more than the lives in Callow,

The "possible" dream?

Cordelia started the forging of her alliance from stopping the raids between the south of Procer and Levant. Literally there was an ongoing border war that she stopped.

Cordelia's very much real and realized dream IS to stop wars. The lives in Callow lose out to lives in Procer and Levant just by numbers.

> as the declaration of Arch-heretic of the East made Callowans close ranks against Procer and back-up Catherine even more fiercely plus making it impossible for the Crusade to stop until there was either a clear victory or a crushing defeat, because compromise would see Cordelia removed.

Which is why Cordelia tried desperately to stop this declaration?

Let's not forget that the moment everyone refers to when they hate on Laurence, the "let Procer burn" moment, was her explaining to horrified Cordelia why exactly she threw her influence on the scales to get Cat declared Arch-Heretic of the East.

It was that act, specifically, that both Cordelia and her referred to as the imminent destruction of Procer.

>You will find that none of the things before has changed,

The things that have changed:

- Cordelia's de facto usurpation of the Highest Assembly removes the possibility of her making a smart move only to be removed before she can go through with it. She can now treat with whoever the fuck she wants, and unless there is an uprising and she is overthrown by force of arms, her diplomacy stands;

- and on that note, with the Dead King invading, nobody is braindead enough to rebel against her until the war is over. A peasant revolt is one thing, the Princes and Princesses know better;

- and on that note, she might just be giving up on her long-term Grand Alliance objectives in favor of short-term survival, as becoming a de facto tyrant like this eats into her political capital viciously.

Tariq was just getting thrown by the storm here and there; he is not a politician and not good at this. He did whatever seemed like the best thing to do at the moment; that has changed like three times by now. His judgement is questionable; his good intentions are not.

Andrew Mitchell

> – and on that note, she might just be giving up on her long-term Grand Alliance objectives in favor of short-term survival, as becoming a de facto tyrant like this eats into her political capital viciously.

So it's a good thing that Cordelia is setting Rozala up to take over as First Prince once Cordelia's efforts are spent. I've suspected this for quite a while now and this chapter was another step along that path.

talenel

Eh I definitely don't buy that Cordelia wanted anything to do with Rozala taking over after her. She's just been in the right position at the right time where Cordelia has been forced to put her in positions of power. Even then Cordelia has kept several knives to the back of Rozala. Honestly Rozala feels much more the parallel of Abigail in

Callow. Not the heiress apparent, but someone more militarily inclined who has stumbled their way to greater power despite a general lack of political acumen.

Now, since Rozala is in a position of power and is relatively principles, Cordelia pretty much has to use her. But she is by no means a groomed heir ala Black and Cat, nor is she a desired one. She is simply a good tool.

Andrew Mitchell

I can see how your interpretation makes some sense on the surface but I still support my theory as what's going on behind the scenes. So I think we'll just have to see how this one turns out over the course of this book and the next.

[*Liliet*](#)

Huh.

You know, that might be exactly right.

Andrew Mitchell

Oh, I **hope** so! 😊

It's my new favourite theory and I'm in love with it!! ♥ ♥ ♥

[*Liliet*](#)

I feel like it might be too much of a villain-side trope – groom the successor who will defeat you – for it to occur to Cordelia, but if that is not so, it fits her MO 100%

Shveiran

You bring up a lot of good points, in my opinion.

The part I disagree about is the idea that Cordelia was concerned with stopping wars. My read is that Cordelia was (and is) concerned only with Proceran prosperity. Which isn't that absurd a view for a ruler, but it does stain her moral a bit.

She wanted a Good coalition, but that was because, as per Malicia's analysis in Book 3, she had too many desperate veterans not to be a war and had to somewhat secure her borders: attacking an Evil nation with the backing of Ashur and Levant was the way to

solve her conflict for Praes.
She has never showed to be overly invested in stopping deaths in general, only with long term prospects for Procer.

She may yet get on board with cat's dreams, but she doesn't share it yet and has certainly not worked toward them on purpose, if not at all.

talene1

This. Cordelia is much more interested in Procer as a nation-state and the ideals of the Lycaeonese then she is in the people of Procer as a whole. I could definitely see her letting half of the population of Procer die I'm exchange for preventing Procer from being conquered by someone else, even if that would let far more of her people survive.

[Liliet](#)

I am not sure where this reading comes from.

Lycaonese ideals ARE to protect people.

[Liliet](#)

>She has never showed to be overly invested in stopping deaths in general, only with long term prospects for Procer.

I think she has that basic Good/good moral foundation, she's just Lycaonese. She doesn't have the view that 'no deaths' is the default or an achievable goal. She was brought up with the 'lesser evil' mentality so we're not seeing traces of idealism in her POV that would be there with otherwise.

talene1

Yes, but where Cat could and would work with the DK to save her people, I don't think Cordelia ever would, even if it meant every single Lycaeonese died or half or all of Procer as I mentioned above. That's my point. That her people, any people, do not come above certain moral beliefs. It's one of the main differences between her and Cat.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, Cordelia high key knows better than that
wrt DK

talenel

I think you and a lot of other posters are way too optimistic about Cordelia as fighting for peace. Cordelia has never been about peace, but about fighting the true threats. The Dead King, the Chain of Hunger, etc. She has always been about Good fighting Evil smartly and to stop righting each other instead of the Enemy. Always

It's the whole point of the Lycaeonese. They fight against the great Evil. They do whatever they must in order to do so. Her people can die as long as it is serving this Greater Good. It's why she really didn't, and to a smaller degree still doesn't, want to work with Cat because she is Evil.

Now is Cordelia more practical and willing to see beyond that yes? Yes. She's no Saint of Swords. But she definitely has some biases here and does not desire peace like Cat does.

Insanenoodlyguy

Cordelia is not particularly interested in fighting for peace right now. But she is very interested in fighting for SURVIVAL. If peace is the path to that, she'll take it without blinking. Previous motivations for her (and Rozala, and a few others) have been superseded by this pressing change in priorities. It's why Rozala has been saying for some time now "We can't be fighting the black queen right now, why the fuck was I marched to the south, if the north falls we are all dead, all of us!"

talenel

I agree with your take. I do believe a lot of people have been viewing Cordelia with very rose-colored glasses here and seeing her as almost an analogue for Cat and Cat's ultimate goal of peace for Callow/Calernia.

Cordelia has not been focused on peace as her ultimate goal by any stretch of the imagination.

Agent J

I'm at a loss for words. Multiple people in this very same thread seem to have found this strange

idea and then clamped down on it like a damn rottweiler.

Cordelia is not fighting for peace? Of course she bloody is! Her vision of peace is *specifically* what drew the Grey Pilgrim to her cause, why he supported her unwaveringly against all Cat's exceedingly generous offers.

Granted, much like Cat, it is peace on chosen terms, but peace nonetheless. The fight she meant to bring to Praes was just the start. She would then turn on the Chain of Hunger and, inevitably, the Kingdom of Dead. One by one, she meant to wipe Evil from the continent. In her own words she knew that peace would not be achieved in her lifetime, but that she was building the groundwork for it.

Peace, singularly, has ever been Cordelia's goal. She just went about it differently. Cat seeks peace by way of coexistence, Cordelia, by enveloping the entire continent in the Light of Above.

You may agree with Catherine's path more than hers, but to say Cordelia does not seek peace at all and only serves Proceran interests is to grossly misrepresent the woman. We've seen by her own POV and Tariq's that it's blatantly not true.

Shveiran

Yeah... but that is not "peace" though. That is "I killed all possible enemies and thus, so long as we avoyd civil wars, we are done fighting."

Mind you, if not for the assumption that because of Narrative-physics-laws" I'm operating under the assumption that the balance is enforced, and thus ultimately her plan is pointless because if you wipe out Evil somewhere it pops out of somewhere else – if not for that assumption, Cordelia (or Saint) sound perfectly reasonable. It is hard to argue with eliminating the Chain of Hunger or the Dead King, honestly.

And Cordelia's approach to the problem is preferable to most, in my opinion.

I just disagree that this is fighting for Peace. Peace is something you make with an enemy to end a war. What Cordelia wants is winning that war. And that is not peace, it is victory.

It is not a despicable goal nor anything, but it is not the same thing.

Liliet

@Shveiran if your enemy IS strife, like... backed up by the Gods who like strife and encourage and enforce it where they can... then victory = peace is reasonable, because you're certainly not getting peace any other way.

Cordelia believed that the path to peace is through victory. That might be factually speaking an error, but does not invalidate the point about her core goals.

talene1

As I said below, I just don't think Cordelia sees peace as really possible in the way Cat does. She wants to end the major threats, but war will happen even among the good nations as the alliance falls apart once the threats sustaining it are gone. There's this sort of inevitability to war that I've always found colored in Cordelia's mindset.

Pilgrim I do think saw a final peace to Cordelia's plans that she did not. Because for all of his utilitarianism, he has an optimism that the world can be really better that she does not.

Shveiran

I can see why she'd go about it that way, but I remain convinced that is not the same thing: Cordelia is playing the game and trying to ensure the side she feels is best wins in the best way possible, whereas Cat is aiming to change that game.

I am not saying I find Hasenbach approach to be a bad one, merely drawing attention to the fact that she and Cat have been working toward a different goal.

That may yet change, if Cordelia and Cat talk honestly and the First Prince is persuaded. So far, though? Cordelia has been about uniting the Good side, and win the war with EVil in Calernia. Beating the enemy, not making peace with it.

When you look at their ultimate objectives, you could say Cordelia has been acting as a General, whereas Cat has been trying to be a Diplomat. And that blows my mind a little.

Andrew Mitchell

I think you had the right view when you said Cordelia is about fighting the true threats. But I think you're wrong when you bring in Evil, Good and the Greater Good. The Lycaeonese defend against true threats. I don't think Cordelia really gives a shit about Good vs. Evil except where its politically expedient to use that.

talene1

Hmmm, I guess I agree that she is working against the true existential threats. But I do believe that she definitely sees Evil and Good. She just sees them in shades of grey. The Free Cities are more of a light grey while Cat is a dark grey. And of course the Enemy is black (or at least really really really dark grey). Now is she practical enough to see past Good and Evil if necessary? Yes I do believe that. But it does color her worldview.

[Liliet](#)

>Cordelia has never been about peace, but about fighting the true threats.

I am not seeing the distinction.

She has always pushed for peace among those who AREN'T true threats so they can unite AGAINST the true threats. It's consistently been her methodology.

>to stop righting each other instead of the Enemy
ya, exactly

I don't believe she thinks of Catherine Foundling as The Enemy, unlike Laurence.

And yes, her perspective differs from Catherine, because she is Lycaonese and her default is fighting against ratlings every spring, while Catherine is from Laure and the default she grew up with is peace whenever there isn't war.

I don't think their perspectives are in any way incompatible.

talene1

I guess the way I see it, there's this sort of nihilism to the Lycaeonese mindset. This belief that the war will never end. What can happen is that Procer can finally end its two most existential threats (DK and Chain of Hunger). But will the war against Evil end? No. Will Good stop fighting itself when the Enemy is gone? No.

So yes, I do see it as Cordelia not believing in the existence of a true peace the way Cat does. It's something that having more interactions with Cat may eventually convince her of. That the better world doesn't necessarily have to include war. So while their views aren't necessarily incompatible, I think Cordelia will struggle to find the optimism to believe in them. Especially after the crushing blow she was dealt by Bard and Saint.

Also, while she doesn't think of Cat as the capital-E Enemy, she does think of her as evil and dangerous, just not the main threat (at least as of their last meeting). It's something she will have to learn to see past.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, struggling with optimism is something I can easily see with Cordelia, especially after all this bullshit.

I will note though, she genuinely believes in the "we are the wall" mindset. She's pessimistic, but idealistic, too.

talene1

>Yeah, struggling with optimism is something I can easily see with Cordelia, especially after all this bullshit.

I will note though, she genuinely believes in the "we are the wall" mindset. She's pessimistic, but idealistic, too.

It's those ideals that also separate her from Cat as I mentioned above. She thinks certain things

are more important than people, in a way Cat does not.

Liliet

I mean, those things more important than people are... larger amounts of people.

"We are the wall" for other people and future generations, not for a church or something.

Liliet

AKA helps Cordelia Hasenbach immensely in all her endeavours, gives her position a lot more strength that it currently has and backhands those who went against her / behind her back.

Andrew Mitchell

Cordelia's moved on. She's 100% focused on fighting back against the Dead King now. She wants the Alliance to stay together so the Levantines join in the fight against the Dead King.

stevenneiman

Also, Cordelia is a total pragmatist. She's not going to throw a fit about the way that she got a lost asset returned to her faction when she's going to need the Pilgrim some time in the next one to six months.

Mental Mouse

> I wonder how much bitterer the taste in her mouth will be once she learns of the resurrection she pulled while a Choir stood by?

Not very, and all the sweeter for Cat having perma-killed Saint!

As others have noted, condemning Cat as Arch Heretic not only wasn't Cordelia's will, but was a "fast one" pulled on her via the Houses of Light et al. Specifically, by the late Saint of Swords, who told Cordelia cheerfully that she intended to see Procer utterly destroyed and build something "better" in its place.

So now Saint is dead, and "not a hero's death". While the Grey Pilgrim (who was always well-disposed toward Procer and pushed his own nation to ally with them), comes back in triumph... with what's essentially an angelic pardon for Cat, and ready to slap sense into a few (or more than a few) priests.

Shveiran

The part I think tastes bitter is having to ally with Cat.

I don't think Cordelia wants to be her enemy, mind you, but she doesn't want to be her ally much more.

Allying with Callow is, now, a political and strategical necessity. And so, like the pragmatist she is, Cordelia goes out of her way to ensure it.

That doesn't mean she likes it. The Black Queen scares her, is obviously growing in influence and power with any passing week, and has radical plans she can't fully understand and therefore plan around.

Whatever else she is, Cat is also a problem for Cordelia. One she has to live with it, but the bitter taste is there.

Insanenoodlyguy

I'm pretty sure with the way things fell that Cordelia is going to be much more amenable to everything now, and incidentally, so will Rozala.

Cat is going to sit down with them and, perhaps not at the main table, but on the side, say "Look, Saint was a fucking lunatic, and I'm half convinced she decided to lean into the 'All hope is lost' story by letting there be a fuckton of casualties so the survivors could win at the last moment. I had to put that crazy lady down so we could try to win this without the death of an entire nation first. Also, I've got these accords that will keep us named from having too much power, cause lets face it named have too much power." That's going to get both of those women nodding so hard their necks hurt at this point.

Andrew Mitchell

Yep.

[Liliet](#)

>The part I think tastes bitter is having to ally with Cat.

Pretty sure it's going to be 'OH THANK FUCK SHE'S AN ALLY WHEN IN POSITION OF STRENGTH OVER US'.

Cordelia does not I think have ideological hangups that prevent her from seeing Catherine as an attractive option for an alliance, and personally I've been seeing her POV as being rather sympathetic towards her (in a way it's not towards most of her Princes lmao). As soon as the facts align so Catherine IS an ally, I think it will be a relief for more reasons than just political expedience.

Soronel Haetir

Isn't it wonderful how the band keeps playing even as the barn burns down around everyone's head?

antoninjohn

Cat saved Procer and if Procer wants to keep being saved they can't kill her

caoimhinh

The problem is Procer's leadership are a bunch of ungrateful and untrustworthy people who only think short-term with their ambition.

Even Cordelia, though she thinks long-term in her ambitions, and she is also arrogant and stubborn. Then there's Arnaud, who has no ambitions (and according to Pilgrim, no emotions) and is also a long-time planner with a lot of patience.

werafdsaew

Well it's a good thing that Cordy is now a de facto dictator? I'm not sure if Cordy has ever been stubborn; arrogant yes, but not stubborn.

Shveiran

I very much agree on the stubbornness. Cordelia is (not unlike Cat) very used to have her way and shape reality according to her will. She doesn't react well to finding out she can't.

With that said... She is consolidating power in a time of crisis and ensure she has the ability to pass whatever law she wants in the coming years. Considering she very much wants to repel the DK first and foremost and that will requires coesive planning, I can't say I find that either unreasonable or bad for the side of the living in general.

I take it you feel her plan is more about personal power and ambition?

Andrew Mitchell

Loved this interlude. I do like Rozala but she needs to accept the stakes of the game here.

Also, I see Rozala is going to be a supporter of The Accords given the insight we just got into her view of Chosen and Damned.

caoimhinh

She needs to ally with Cat to put a break on Cordelia's 'I am the Senate!' scene. Cat has the means to help Rozala's bloc to get their successors into the High Assembly fast.

[Liliet](#)

I somehow suspect Catherine is going to approve of Cordelia's move here. It is strategically smart in this war, even if in the long term it's likely to have her labeled villain for ages to come. Catherine... sympathizes with that approach.

Sure she's found herself treating with Rozala's faction specifically, yet let's not forget it's Rozala's faction that were the expansionists who wanted to divide Callow up.

caoimhinh

True, but I think Cat would support Rozala, even if it's just so Cordelia doesn't have a completely unopposed grasp on Procer. One of Catherine's musings and observations of Rozala hinted at her finding interest in the factions opposing Cordelia. Let's not forget that Procer and Cordelia are still enemies of Catherine and Callow; Cat might want them focused against the Dead King now, but she doesn't want them united and strong.

[Liliet](#)

> Let's not forget that Procer and Cordelia are still enemies of Catherine and Callow; Cat might want them focused against the Dead King now, but she doesn't want them united and strong.

Actually that's the exact opposite of how Cat wants it. She wants to unite the continent in a treaty; the Dead King merely provides a convenient excuse for forcing everyone into being friends. The GOAL is the peace; the military alliance is the MEANS.

We'll see how it plays out, it's worth noting Catherine doesn't have access to Cordelia's thoughts and doesn't know how badly Cordy wanted to make peace with her. But Catherine also thinks of Cordelia as the rational actor she can treat with by presenting her with a superior path and expecting her to take it without pride or stubbornness getting in the way.

caoimhinh

No, Catherine needs them in a balanced position of being not too strong and not too weak for them to sign the Accords. She already knows this, and many of the strategies and tactics we have seen her use, plus the

insight we have into her thoughts show us how she has pondered about the state of Procer and the rest of the Grand Alliance, and her intended way to force them into making peace with her.

Cordelia doesn't want peace with Catherine, we have seen this from her point of view, she sees Cat as a violent and cruel warlord, and is constantly planning how to put Catherine down.

When Cordelia found out about the conclave of the House of Light in Salia declaring Catherine Arch-heretic of the East, she was furious, because that would only agitate Callowans and make them despise Procer even more, which would drive them to gather further under Catherine's control. Cordelia had plans to handle the situation in subtler ways, even with the Crusade, but Procer's priesthood meddling in Callow's affairs and the legitimacy of their Queen would detriment her plans.

Liliet

>Cordelia doesn't want peace with Catherine, we have seen this from her point of view

So we have.

>. In the wake of that blow, like carrion to carnage, the self-proclaimed Kingdom of Callow had sent formal request to join the Grand Alliance.

> [...]

> A choice had to be made, then, in how Cordelia would spend her influence. She could either make quiet concessions and assurances behind closed doors so that no coalition of princes numerous enough to unseat her formed, or she could call in every favour she'd accumulated since her crowning to have the proposal shoved through the Highest Assembly's throat.

>She'd been teetering on the brink of a decision, when Catherine Foundling called on her.

Note how Cordelia was on the verge of SPENDING EVERY SINGLE FAVOR SHE ACCUMULATED SINCE BECOMING FIRST PRINCE on accepting Callow into the Grand Alliance. She was willing to blow her ENTIRE political capital on that.

> And yet when she had sat across Cordelia in that strange shadowed world, she had made a reasonable offer. Abdication, if on her own terms. Alliance

against the Empire, for assurances of Callowan independence. And so the First Prince had hesitated.

> Then reality had come calling, of course. It was a tempting offer, as devils were wont to provide, but it would shatter the Grand Alliance. The Dominion's highborn would never brook such a compromise willingly, and twisting their arm into accepting it would make it certain Levant would withdraw from the Alliance the moment the Tenth Crusade ended. The Thalassocracy might agree, as Magon Hadast disliked having his finest war fleets abroad while Nicae stirred near his belly, but it was no sure thing. And if Cordelia accepted the Callowan offer, backed it in the Highest Assembly and proposed it to the Grand Alliance only for it to be spurned by her own allies? She would be unseated within the month. For a moment she dared to walk the line anyway, to try to secure such an overwhelming diplomatic triumph that not a soul would be able to deny she had won the war with words instead of swords.

Catherine's more specific deal was unacceptable to her
BECAUSE SHE WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO ENFORCE IT

caoimhinh

Oh, Cordelia sees that Catherine's offer is reasonable. That's the reaction of literally everyone when Catherine makes an offer, they all say "oh, this is a good offer, if I accepted there would be peace", then comes the bunch of excuses, political bullshit and personal issues covered with arrogance and stubbornness that make them say "NO" and then they all suffer because of it. Then they come back and blame Catherine for it and call her a monster for the things she did to protect herself and Callow due to their refusal of her offers. Literally every time, Cat has had to force them to accept her offers, they only accept when they are beaten.

1. She doesn't trust Cat, and specifically says it comparing her to devils making a reasonable offer.
2. She doesn't accept because doing it would have her unseated, meaning that it's a personal reason, a selfish thing.
3. She proceeds to say that to have the Grand Alliance obey such thing would require a lot of favors and political capital. She is not saying "I would do it if it weren't so costly", she is noting how absurd the notion of accepting it is and how everyone in the Grand Alliance is likely to refuse, thus making it costly to force the decision on them.

4. She then is tempted to accept because if what Catherine said was true and the offer was real, accepting it would mean an amazing diplomatic victory for Cordelia and bring her prestige for "winning the war with words instead of swords".

No, Cordelia doesn't want peace with Cat, she wants Procer strong, and crushing Praes and Evil (the Grand Alliance was formed by mounting the Crusade, after all), she also wants Catherine removed.

Cordelia had plans in place, but the House of Light's actions (prompted by Saint and Bard) threw those plans aside and instead of a smart and careful Crusade they went on a full-on bloodpath uniting their enemies against them. That's said in one of the Fatalism Extra Chapters.

You are trying to make it seem as if Cordelia would want Catherine and Callow in peace but was forced to attack them and is now forced to keep fighting. But the reality is different, she engineered the Crusade against Praes and Callow to stabilize her own rule over Procer, using it also to establish the Grand Alliance because making joined military operations is a way to form alliance between countries. She also ended the border skirmishes with Levant because she needed them on her side if she wanted to fight against Procer.

Cat's offers are also unacceptable because they dismantle the whole political apparatus that Cordelia and co had built on the premise that there can be no peace with the Evil-aligned countries (which is an hypocrisy, really, as Praes and Procer have commercial deals all the time, using intermediaries for the sake of appearances).

Shveiran

My personal take is that truth lies in the middle here.

Cordelia has political necessity to consider, and it isn't foolish not to do something one thinks is doomed to failure: if Levant leaves the Grand Alliance, its weight is nullified and Callow being a part of it no longer matters in the first place. If Cordelia is unseated, her plans with the Grand Alliance die with her.

These are not selfish reasons: these are practical limits to her options.

With that said, I agree that Cordelia has never put much effort toward peace with Callow, since the beginning. She did, after all, send her political opponents to carve it up would they had been victorious, in a fight she very likely did not expect to lose. Sending reasonable Princes in Callow and the greedy bastards in the Vale against the Black Knight would have been better for Callow, but Cordelia prioritized sending her best general without internal opposition against Grem One-Eye and the Carrion Lord.

Again, NOT UNREASONABLE, but it does clarify her priorities. A Callow paved over by her armies was a perfectly acceptable plan to her.

Afterward, she made no effort toward peace. She had reasons, sure; she still did nothing, though, which means it still wasn't a priority.

Lastly, she told Rozala to kill 'em all after recalling her from the north.

And, yes, Augur. But still, she didn't try any compromise even if she knew the other party was willing to deal. She didn't even try to set up a Winter-bullshit-connection to see if that bypassed scrying and try to deal in person, instead relying on someone that could not really make a lot of concession and would have to ultimately do battle to keep with her instructions (Malanza).

I don't think Cordelia is mad or even despicable, but she has not tried to compromise with Cat so far. I really don't get that vibe from the quotes Lilieth provided.

caoimhinh

I agree with you.

Cordelia has to consider multiple angles before making a decision, both because she is the leader of her people and because she has enemies everywhere. There are also practical and political reasons why making peace with Callow would be met with opposition (many of those are actually personal opinions of individuals in power), but nothing so far suggests that Cordelia in a personal level would like peace with Catherine. In every single instance we have seen Catherine mentioned or seen from Cordelia's POV, it's either contempt, fear or anger that's there, not the desire for peace.

[Lilieth](#)

>She did, after all, send her political opponents to carve it up would they had been victorious, in a fight she very likely did not expect to lose.

She very much expected them to lose, actually, that's what Catherine called her out on in their conversation. She expected to win at the Vales, the northern expedition was more of a diversion / knife in the back, and she expected them to be crushed.

It's in her narration in Fatalism I I believe that she never had the slightest intention of annexing any part of Callow.

>Lastly, she told Rozala to kill 'em all after recalling her from the north.

I believe you are misremembering, because Rozala's orders were "inflict a showy defeat then leave them to retreat while you make a show of handling the League instead, literally the only reason we can't just fucking ally with them is that Augur said there will be a revolt if we do, so work around that"

[Liliet](#)

>She didn't even try to set up a Winter-bullshit-connection to see if that bypassed scrying and try to deal in person

We don't know she didn't. Let's not forget this only works if Cat sets it up: Cordelia might have been waiting for a summons from her every evening with 0 effect or any way for us or Cat to know of it.

[Liliet](#)

>2. She doesn't accept because doing it would have her unseated, meaning that it's a personal reason, a selfish thing.

[Liliet](#)

> 2. She doesn't accept because doing it would have her unseated, meaning that it's a personal reason, a selfish thing.

I disagree. Cordelia took that seat for a reason, because she believed she had to for her homeland's sake.

>You are trying to make it seem as if Cordelia would want Catherine and Callow in peace but was forced to attack them and is now forced to keep fighting. But the reality is different, she engineered the Crusade against Praes and Callow to stabilize her own rule over Procer, using it also to establish the Grand Alliance because making joined military operations is a way to form alliance between countries.

I am not seeing a contradiction between facts you refer to and facts I refer to. Cordelia got the Crusade going before Cat was in charge, and after getting updated information on Catherine and her capabilities would maybe have liked peace, but (1) all the reasons she started it in the first place, (2) too late.

Like... saying "I want X, but can't have it for reasons Y and Z" is not logically contradictory.

Shveiran

It is not contradictory.
It is also not a given she thinks that in any meaningful way, though.

In a vacuum? I think Cordelia would rather have Cat and Callow on her side than not, so long as she thought she had the power to check her influence. But she is the First Prince, so that is not an hard condition to meet.

But that is not really the same as saying she WANTS to achieve that. It's ... a bonus objective, not a beseeched one. If it falls in her lap or (like now) becomes a strategical good move or even a necessity? Let's, it's not liek she actively wanted Cat as an enemy.

I just think that if the situation was different – if getting Cat on board had a cost, Cordelia wouldn't be particularly inclined to bend over backward to get that.

She would weight the costs and benefits, and make a pragmatic choice. For good or for ill.

[Liliet](#)

I agree with this view, yeah.

Good thing her and Cat are on the same page about that last part!

[Liliet](#)

(Finally, finally they are! 😊😊😊)

Andrew Mitchell

I agree.

And remember how close Cat and Cordelia were to actually working together in those Winter chats they were having. It was just Procer's political realities that stopped true progress being made back then.

Shveiran

Like... when? I don't think they ever got past the phase Cat-makes-an-offer-and-Cordelia-refuses-by-asking-for-the-moon.

The fact that Cordelia couldn't agree to Cat options does not mean she really really wanted to. It just means she couldn't agree.

Andrew Mitchell

Having re-read the relevant chapters:

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/04/18/chapter-3-chat/> and
<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/08/24/interlude-empires/>

I think I read too much into it and my recollection was mistaken.

[Liliet](#)

They were close *in spirit*.

Star-crossed allies? ;u;

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, but unlike star-crossed lovers, I think Cat & Cordelia will get together as true allies, and not just allies of convenience against the DK.

Shveiran

It certainly seems possible now, and I wholeheartedly hope they do.

Not a certainty, though... which admittedly makes it MORE likely, because we can have that and still have tension along the way.

[Liliet](#)

"Stars say what, now??" – Catherine, disdainfully

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, the 'really really wanted to' part came from Cordelia's POV, not Cat's POV.

[Liliet](#)

YEAH

[Ben Serreau-Raskin](#)

Oh this is going to such a fantastic shitshow. I cannot wait.

ATRDCI

"[Rozala] pondered her growing mislike of the Chosen and the Damned. Those colourful few, cloaked in power and mystery, who would bargain with the fate of nations and the pivots of history. Who left all others in the dust of their grandiose adventures, be they great or small. What a hateful thing it was, to have your own life and death decided by the hands of others."

Hmm, now who does that shroud of mystery, neverending adventures, manipulation of fates pivots, and callous disregard for spending the lives of others sound like?

Glares at the Intercessor

Traipsing Troubadour

Today you are glaring at me, and I am drunk.

But tomorrow you will be dead, and I will... still be well.

grzecho2222

Still waiting for Bard vs Robber art duel

[Mental Mouse](#)

And of course, this suggests Rozala will be all for the Liesse Accords.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Intercessor points at Cat 🙄

Oshi

It's always the quiet ones. I think the most significant thing here is The Liesse Accords are now shared with someone outside of Cat's circle. Best part is it was shared with one of my favorite characters in this book anyway.

Zebu

Love the interlude! Still trying to parse Cordelia, but that's a good thing.

There are a few things I think are spelling/grammar errors, though— is this where to leave them?

Left column is current, right is my guesstimated correction:

"family mighty yet" "family might yet"

"prominence against in" "prominence again in"

"thousands and held" "thousands, and held"

"which was Rozala" "which was why Rozala"

"was a one of the Gods" "was one of the Gods"

"she realized being tricked" "she realized she'd been tricked"

"Swords and then" "Swords, and then"

"with snap of" "with a snap of"

"withdrawn but they" "withdrawn, but they"

"but dclined Princess" "but declined Princess"

"informed or recent" [Not sure about this one— "or" might be

"about," "of," or "on"]

"I did not escape" "It did not escape"

"than he. It" "than she. It"

"when there was no ruling prince" "when no ruling prince"

Mental Mouse

Just adding a search keyword near your message, for when EE gets around to *Typo* hunting.

stevenneiman

So I guess now we know what Mercy had that they expected would be enough to keep Tariq's death from bringing war, but I have to say that it doesn't seem like a good idea. Neshamah is Below's champion, and if Above gets to hand out information in such a blatant manner Below should have the right to at least one or two hints for Neshamah when the world can afford it least for him to know anything.

IDKWhoitis

What's worse, is that Nesh knows how to hold that in his back pocket for a rainy day. He isn't going to spend that easily or for a cheap advantage.

The argument can be made that Above could only do such things because Nesh won the previous scheme to undermine the Intercessor, but I find it more likely that Nesh might already have banked a lot more narrative weight over the course of a couple millennia

caoimhinh

And Neshamah conveniently has certain information that he is interested in spreading, about a certain Bard.

Mental Mouse

Yes, and that hurts the Alliance how, again?

Insanenoodlyguy

Depends on what it is. But if he can do the equivalent of this, it no longer matters what his standing is. These visions, it seems, are accepted as true. Presumably because the way they were projected left no doubt in anybody's mind that they were authentic and not fabricated. So, if Nessie can do the same, it's only a matter of when and what, no longer if. If the visions are fully 100% believed by all who have them, (and even if that's just heroes, that's enough. Consider the GREY PILGRIM screaming that she can't be trusted, you could probably do the whole thing through him alone if you timed it right since the Angels would likely confirm the truth of it no matter the source, and i'm sure it won't just be him), and Nessie believes that telling people would make them turn on her, he's probably right. Consider as well that Cat will likely back this, since she's ready and able to believe the Bard is not the force of good most believe her, and his threat seems a lot more plausible.

Mental Mouse

The thing is, if one person has a dream, it could be a Sending From Beyond, or too much pepperoni. If *everyone* has the dreams, it's a Sending.

Neshamah almost certainly can't match what the angels are doing – partly it would make him deeply vulnerable, because he'd be touching huge numbers of minds, some of which may be sorcerers, priests, etc (and would require an awful lot of power). And partly because if he tried broadcasting a *false* message, I'm pretty sure it would bring immediate and overwhelming retaliation from Above and quite possibly from Below as well.

Nessie certainly will reveal what he's learned, and probably publicize it widely – he's said as much as that's the point. But probably not immediately, because he'll want some time to work before the Bard *knows* he's learned it.

caoimhinh

We don't know yet, I guess that depends on what exactly that information is.

Neshamah was pretty sure it would turn everyone against the Intercessor once they knew about her plans and intentions.

[Liliet](#)

>Neshamah is Below's champion, and if Above gets to hand out information in such a blatant manner Below should have the right to at least one or two hints for Neshamah when the world can afford it least for him to know anything.

Eh, I'm not sure the balance is quite so blatant. Especially given that the price for this dissemination of visions was Tariq's death.

...was meant to be Tariq's death...

...well it's not the Ophanim's fault Cat went and fucked with a good plan, is it???

(Wait, it is. It literally is. LMAO)

Insanenoodlyguy

I don't think he needs to do the equivalent. He can probably do this informing exactly two people, come to think of it: Pilgrim and Cat. Both have patrons beyond mortal Ken, leaders of Good and Evil who can both confirm, even without dream help, that anything he tells them about Bard is true or false. If both the prominent Hero and Villain of the time are saying the same thing at the same time, it's going to reach EVERYWHERE. Dead King doesn't have to sell it to everybody, he just has to sell it to the merchants, to stretch the metaphor.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, makes sense.

[Dresden 67](#)

Er, EE?

According to the map there are twenty-four principalities in Procer.

Nine Arlesite, eleven Alamans and four Lycaonese.

caoimhinh

Holy shit, the Saint of Swords also cut 3 of the Principalities momentarily out of existence, from the afterlife?
Too OP, please nerf.

Faiir

Maybe Absence ate them?

caoimhinh

Oh, so that's what Cordelia dragged out of the lake at the center of Procer.

Shveiran

I had forgotten about that! Well, it looks I might get around to hating Cordelia EVENTUALLY, after all. If she gets around to craft Great Breaches, she makes the list.

[Liliet](#)

We have to see what it is, first 😊

(Also, she's acting on Augur's prediction of the only possible path)

[Mental Mouse](#)

That could be ugly...

Shveiran

To be fair, we are not sure THAT is what she'll use the ruins for. It was also foreshadowed that Liesse as a ritual site could empower a wild array of workings, so maybe that's just EE preparing to pull the rug from under us and reveal Cordelia had another plan all along.

With that said... I wouldn't be very surprised if she was planning to get her fingers on the doomsday weapon. It isn't really an unreasonable direction for her character.

She was Malicia's enemy for a long time... and that usually brings one to adopt some of the enemy's habits and ideas.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Eh? Cordelia's find is still mysterious, but AFAIK it's got no connection to Liesse.

Shveiran

Doesn't it? I was 100% sure it was a part of Akua's array.

Though admittedly... why would I think that? The Second Liesse wasn't even close to a lake.

Uh.

So, scratch that about Breaches. What is it you think she fished out?

Mental Mouse

Unclear, but if the 3 “missing” Provinces *aren’t* simply a mistake, that’s a bad sign.

Come to think of it... did DK actually destroy any provinces before he departed?

Shveiran

Did we ever get confirmation Pilgrim got around to killing the Absence demon in Callow?

Mental Mouse

Well, there was a strong hint in that several heroes dropped out of the running count, but afterward there were no further disappearances and suchlike.

There is a classic SF novel that the Absence demon immediately brought to mind: *War Of Omission* by Kevin O'Donnell Jr. Somebody invents a device that can remove chunks of reality, people included... along with all the “connections” to them, such as people’s memories. An example from the book was that if somebody used it on a town’s mayor, the townspeople wouldn’t be asking “what happened to our mayor?”, they’d be asking “hey, why don’t we have a mayor?”. (The effect was also reversible, though it had subtle side-effects on the minds of the restored victims.)

The title hints at the fun-and-games ensuing as the invention gets mass-produced.

broadaxe

That is a really interesting perspective, most likely EE simply made a typo or some such, but maybe it was on purpose and everyone has literally forgot about 3 principalities, that would be kinda crazy and a huge plot twist 🤪

caoimhinh

I didn’t expect interludes to delay our seeing of the scene of Cat’s return with Pilgrim with the rays of dawn, but this could be good.

They've got Dreamer TV and are aware of most of what has happened in the shard of Arcadia because anyone who sleeps gets visions? Whaaaaat?

Well, that's new, put your random soldiers to sleep and when they wake up they have visual information to report of what's happening in a different realm of existence.

It's really weird that Rozala didn't know Hakram had authority in Callow, given that he has had it for years now and it was not a secret; besides, while Rozala is no skilled politician or schemer, she must have had intelligence on Callow (sure, the Jacks are a powerful counter-intelligence team but still, Hakram being Cat's right hand and having authority in Procer is no secret, EVERYONE knows that).

Also, it's nice to see the Liesse Accords being brought up to the attention of Procer finally, and Cordelia being so freaked out that she now has been forced to stop thinking she has the upper hand and finally willing to compromise.

Cordelia used a bureaucratic trick to keep all the abdicated princes and their successors away from the Highest Assembly. If I understood correctly, they need to communicate with their successors, have them go to each of their principalities to ascend to their positions and *then* go to Salia to sit in the Highest Assembly, before their word have any weight and their vote becomes valid, which Cordelia assumes would take months... How bad for her, Catherine has a bunch of mages capable of scrying, plus has just succeeded in the creation of a realm specifically designed to be a high-speed path to anywhere in Calernia (or the world). Hopefully Rozala will figure this out (she was there when the creation of such realm was discussed, after all), swallow her pride and start conversations with Catherine to get her bloc's successors to sit in the Highest Assembly fast. Maybe become closer to Cat in the process.

It would be very interesting to see actual cooperation between at least a part of Procer and Callow, plus Levant being brought to order by the Pilgrim's confirmed resurrection.

Next chapter: Levant's political intrigue and everyone in Iserre wondering what the hell will happen + a mandatory cliffhanger.

Typos found:

- against in her lifetime / again in her lifetime
- which was Rozala was less than surprised / which was why Rozala was less than surprised
- with snap of her fingers / with a snap of her fingers
- dclined / declined
- informed or recent developments / informed of recent developments
- he was physically stronger than he / he was physically stronger than her

Oshi

I think Rozala assumed Hakram was something brought on by influence from the Tower. A way to assuage them. She doesn't really see Eastern politics well and is bad at discerning motivations. It's her weakness. Put more bluntly she's a straight shooter looking at murky picture.

[Liliet](#)

>It's really weird that Rozala didn't know Hakram had authority in Callow, given that he has had it for years now and it was not a secret

Not weird to me. Information disseminates slow and hard in this setting for people who don't have scrying mages, and as Rozala has mentioned, in Procer only Cordelia has them.

>while Rozala is no skilled politician or schemer, she must have had intelligence on Callow

I am not surprised to learn she has not.

This is the whole thing people trip over when they yell about how the murderous warlike Grand Alliance attacked the poor innocent Dread Empire that was just starting to throw off its shackles of Evil and come into its civilized own.

Catherine grew up in Laure, the Reforms were no more a secret than Hakram's influence, and yet she still could not find out what they were even when actively seeking the information out.

>Also, it's nice to see the Liesse Accords being brought up to the attention of Procer finally, and Cordelia being so freaked out that she now has been forced to stop thinking she has the upper hand and finally willing to compromise.

Cordelia has not thought she had the upper hand since the Vales. And she has been willing to compromise since Vales, and she HAS been compromising, which is exactly WHY she made no accord with Catherine – she was forced to compromise with people who would not brook it.

Cordelia now finally HAS the upper hand. She finally has the opportunity to play this game the way she wants to, which is to say, the way Catherine has paved and surrounded with pretty trees and flowers for her.

>Hopefully Rozala will figure this out (she was there when the creation of such realm was discussed, after all), swallow her pride and start conversations with Catherine to get her bloc's successors to sit in the Highest Assembly fast.

That would be a bad thing, since it's Rozala's bloc who wanted to divide Callow up for spoils. They're Cordelia's opposition, in her horrible evil policy of reinforcing the north and NOT trying to profit from robbing neighbours. Well, people who oppose her evil policies and people who want revenge for her evil plot of stopping the Proceran civil war (which lasted TWO. FUCKING. DECADES before her intervention)

>It would be very interesting to see actual cooperation between at least a part of Procer and Callow, plus Levant being brought to order by the Pilgrim's confirmed resurrection.

AGREED WHOLEHEARTEDLY.

Andrew Mitchell

> Cordelia now finally HAS the upper hand. She finally has the opportunity to play this game the way she wants to, which is to say, the way Catherine has paved and surrounded with pretty trees and flowers for her.

YES!!!! (And about bloody time!)

> That would be a bad thing, since it's Rozala's bloc who wanted to divide Callow up for spoils. They're Cordelia's opposition, in her horrible evil policy of reinforcing the north and NOT trying to profit from robbing neighbours. Well, people who oppose her evil policies and people who want revenge for her evil plot of stopping the Proceran civil war (which lasted TWO. FUCKING. DECADES before her intervention)

And the ONLY reason Cordelia went to civil war and eventually took the reins as First Prince was that there was NO ONE else in the Assembly that could see the big picture and act in the interests of everyone.

Shveiran

"in the interest of everyone" in Procer. With that caveat, I agree completely.

[Liliet](#)

t h i s

[Liliet](#)

(well, to be fair, there were enough people in the assembly who saw the big picture for cordelia to gather serious support for her bid, there was just no-one else with her level of ability)

[Euodiachloris](#)

I'm greatly amused by the thought that Cordelia might be faced with a Barons' Revolt led by the the very faction that hates her guts all in high dudgeon over her tyrannical overstepping and waving... the very Accords, internal reforms and settlements with Callow she quite likes, anyway. Which would also ensure that shit like the Saint deciding Procer looks good in ashes wouldn't happen again...

I think Cordelia is a big enough girl to wear "King John" with pride, if it means Procer gets the Accords that aim to keep Named meddling in politics to a minimum.

And, it was their own idea to push for better checks and balances on themselves. Bless their cotton socks.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah. Agreed ♥

"Oh no, I am vanquished... (yo good job)"

[Euodiachloris](#)

"Oh, dear! A system of international accords, universal justice, checks and balances and forms of certified oversight that reach from the bottom all the way to the top... all of which will also incidentally strip principalities of the right to do as they please unimpeded by the pesky impartial oversight of their peers and other institutions! Curses, I am undone!"

IDKWhoitis

Man, playing spectator to Cat must be terrifying. And with no audio or subtitles. There's a lot of room for interpretation. Hopefully the Lev Blood got the same images as the Porcerans. Because if certain things are missing, it can look like Cat murdered Saint in cold blood, then forced Grey to commit suicide.

I want to know see the League perspective, and the smug smiles seeing Tyrant crawling back after getting his ass kicked... You got to know the Syrian magistrate won't be able to help themselves from saying something.

caoimhinh

Nah, they should at least have audio. And the visions, while scrambled and not completely given information, were clear enough that everyone knew Cat tried to stop Tariq from killing himself.

{It always seemed to centre around the same vivid parts: the Black Queen's scream of denial after she realized being tricked, the Grey Pilgrim taking up the blade of the fallen

Saint of Swords and then the wizened hero's taking of his own life. All who'd dreamt the dream agreed that the Black Queen had tried to prevent the Peregrine's death, though words failed them when they tried to explain why. Yet it seemed undeniable, by now, that both the Regicide and the Grey Pilgrim were dead. The former, if one of the growingly reoccurring visions was to be believed, having been slain by Catherine Foundling herself.}

So they got video, but no context, only isolated scenes without the before and after to explain why those things happened.

SITB

lol @ the Ophanim promising that Tariq's death wouldn't lead to a war; and then finding out that they sent everyone a vision of what happened to try and preempt this.

It's probably for the better that Cat revived Tariq despite Mercy's 'help'.

Clmineith

Actually, I wonder if the Ophanim don't just send the dream about Tariq's death, and *someone* else send the other, about her killing Laurance.

Maybe the Bard, who masters the storytelling better than anyone?

[Liliet](#)

It might have been easier, story-wise, for the Ophanim to just open up 'visions of what happened' as fair game for dreamers, in natural proportion to importance/impact, knowing that the exact manner of Tariq's death would take first place on its own.

And from there, it's all natural drawbacks. Note that the Levantines most likely don't give a shit about Regicide, she's not one of theirs.

Novice

Oh wow, it seems Cordelia is on her way to revoking the privilegia and thus uniting the Holy Roman Empire. Good job, girl.

[TeK](#)

Playing as Branderburg no less.

Novice

Those Lycaonese are gonna goose step their way to Keter.

Andrew Mitchell

Are there any Lycaonese left? I don't think there can be many left who can fight at all.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I dunno that she's that far along. At this point, she's just trying to keep the more aggressive principalities from making trouble before she can sort out the foreign-affairs situation.

NerfGlastigUaine

I love Interludes where they discuss Catherine, they really give you a sense of how terrifying she is. Remember when she was struggling with angsty anti-heroes and doing slapdash necromancy? Now she's moving nations, terrifying princes and going to town on the Dead King himself. Sniff, they grow so fast.

Still hoping for another undead suicide horse (goat) though. That trick never gets old.

Big I

I take exception to the Procerans saying Adjutant has no title. Didn't the Dread Empress make him a lord after First Liesse?

SITB

IIRC Malcia bestowed Hakram all the attendant privileges but not the actual title.

[Liliet](#)

Yep. Catherine commented that he could style himself as "Lord Adjutant" in public now, note how that was already the default way of referring to Named (Lord Black, etc), Hakram just had the problem of being an orc.

[Javvies](#)

Hmmmm.

Not sure how I feel about Cordelia's move to secure control over the succession of the seven crowns. I feel like this could backfire badly.

... These dreams appear to be a pretty terrible means of preventing disaster, if they're from the Ophanim.

[TeK](#)

Yeah, she would probably be forced to abdicate after the war with Keter. Probably to the some famous general who fought on

the frontlines in the same war and is a leader of an opposition block second only to hers.

I wonder, who it might be...

Andrew Mitchell

Exactly.

[Mental Mouse](#)

So "Concourse I". Presumably another interlude for the Levantines next, and Friday will be the same for Callow's forces, and/or the triumphant return.

Lets hope Rozala doesn't manage to screw things up before then.

[Mental Mouse](#)

A quick thought about the triumphant return: Archer and RS can find paths, but Cat and/or Pilgrim can make gates. The latter pair might well get back first!

[Liliet](#)

I have thought about this already and it could be pretty amusing ;u;

Andrew Mitchell

> the triumphant return

At first I thought you were talking about the return of Triumphant. (May She Never Return.)

Shveiran

I wonder if we'll a League one too

[TeK](#)

"Seven crowns had been abdicated, this night. That meant that a perfect third of the Highest Assembly, which held twenty-four seats"

Urgh, um... Huh?

Is it a subtle clue that Rosalia is bad at math?

I also can't wait for her to kiss already Louis. She previously stated that the only reason she didn't get together with him before was that their crowns prevented it. HOW CONVENIENT! I thought it was a precursor to that nice bit of "they have a sexual tension but too professional to admit it" leading to true love winning in the end despite politics. Who knew it was a

clever foreshadowing! I bet the whole Princes' Graveyard was so EE could ship them.

On the related note, Cordelia is so obviously setting up her abdication after the wr with Dead King and Rosalia as her succesor, it's not even funny. Can't for the love of me comprehend, why some people still hate on her. She is amazing, totally one my favorite unNamed characters, right after Amadeus, Cat, Robber and RUMENARUMENARUMENA.

Andrew Mitchell

> On the related note, Cordelia is so obviously setting up her abdication after the wr with Dead King and Rosalia as her succesor, it's not even funny. Can't for the love of me comprehend, why some people still hate on her. She is amazing, totally one my favorite unNamed characters, right after Amadeus, Cat, Robber and RUMENARUMENARUMENA.

I'm with you 100%. And I'd add Abigail to that list as well.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The First Prince thing is clearly meant to be a temporary measure in the face of crisis (see also: Roman "dictators"), and Cordelia shows no sign of wanting to change that.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, in Chapter 3: Chat (Book 4) when Cordelia was talking with Cat she argued strongly **for** the Assembly's role as a *check* on the First Prince.

Shveiran

I think Cordelia wants both: to give the First prince more power to turn Procer into a proper federal state rather than an old coalition that mostly sticks together. Which would also make civil wars easier to avoyd. As is, I think most of the powers and responsabilities fall on the singular princes.

She wants those powers to be the First Prince's to make a centralized government.

But she doesn't want it to be free of checks, to prevent dictatorship. Hence, the Assembly not as the ones wielding the powers themselves, but as the one with the right to stop the First Prince from abusing them.

Or maybe not. I'd need a closer look at Proceran laws to make a better judgment call.

[Liliet](#)

I think Cordelia is just how changing her mind (and possibly not all the way through the process) on how attached she is to the way the Highest Assembly / First Prince cooperation is meant to work.

It's possible she only wants this to be an extremely temporary measure that will go to the status quo afterwards.

It's possible she wants to go to the status quo afterwards, but set/cement the precedent of the First Prince getting emergency powers.

It's possible she has changed her mind and now wants to centralize Procer more than it had previously been (contrary to the view she expressed in her conversation with Cat)

[Liliet](#)

It's a subtle clue that erratic is bad at math, because originally it said 'twenty one', everyone was like 'wut' and erratic fixed it ;u;

[Mental Mouse](#)

Oh, OK.

[Mental Mouse](#)

>Oh, OK

And I see that in the next round, he fixed the rest of Rozala's comment.

[Liliet](#)

The power of a hivemind at his beck and call~

Shveiran

I mean, EE was bound to be bad at SOMETHING, right?

[Mental Mouse](#)

I wouldn't even say "bad", just imperfect. This has grown into a very large and complex world, keeping track of everything is non-trivial.

Shveiran

Oh, I agree. It was a bad attempt at an off-hand compliment (suggesting he was great at everything else we saw) .

One day I'll manage to phrase one in a way that doesn't confuse people XD

Andrew Mitchell

♥

[Liliet](#)

Yep. Between timeline, distances and this, we have officially found the thing ♥

[NZPIEFACE](#)

When he said "Oh I made sure that my death won't cause war" I was not expecting the gods to literally live stream their adventure to everyone.

Shveiran

I'm really curious about the next chapter: like otehrs, I'm a bit underwhelmed at the Ophanim's plans to avoyd war, but maybe seeing things from the Levantines' perspective will make them sound much more solid. It will be interesting to see their reactions, that's for sure.

medailyfun

The story flow suggests they are going to move their forces to protect army of Callow from scheming procerans and the League



Shveiran

That'd be hilarious. I hope you are right.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Remember, from the Levantines' point of view Cat was clearly trying to save Pilgrim. And they don't care too much if she killed Saint.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I don't think the Ophanim committed to preventing the war altogether, but if the mortals wanna fight, it won't be over the Pilgrim's death.

Caerulea

I suspect that, when Catherine and Tariq finally emerge, somebody, or many, will believe that Cat reanimated Tariq's corpse. After all, she is a powerful necromancer, and they just watched her raise an army of the dead.

Mental Mouse

I don't think the army of souls was in the dream-broadcast, just the final squabble for the crown.

Liliet

Louis and Rozala talked about it, it was.

Mental Mouse

Checking back, I stand corrected.

It occurs to me that Calernia is likely to be getting another Book Of Light, recounting the Harrowing of Liesse and founding of the Twilight Crossroads.

the Harrowing of Liesse and the making of the Twilight Crossroads will be

Mental Mouse

Bah... if WordPress isn't going to allow editing of comments, well, I know some good reasons for that. But if so, they really need at least a preview screen!

Andrew Mitchell

I think Procer's priests will be able to tell pretty quickly that this is the true Grey Pilgrim.

ninegardens

Would the real Grey Pilgrim please stand up...

Shveiran

I concur. If they have powers that are harmful to undeads, they can probably perceive them as well, at least when they are looking right at them.

I mean, both are Cleric tropes, after all.

Liliet

I would expect the Ophanim to make sure to make a lightshow clear enough to give the impression that YES IT'S REALLY HIM even before priests etc can definitely confirm it.

Mental Mouse

Tossing out a **Shine** ought to do that; it's his distinctive power and IIRC even casual observers (or at least anyone with magical or clerical abilities) can recognize it as specifically holy Light.

[*Liliet*](#)

A quality option.

Interlude: Concourse II

"Thus the Gods granted us the third boon: no longer would scales close our eyes, obscuring knowledge of Good and Evil and preventing us from earning just deserts."

– The Book of All Things, sixth verse of the second hymn

Juniper had done what she could to keep the army on battle footing, but not even the Hellhound's sternest warnings could keep an air of festivity from hanging over the camp of the Army of Callow. Hakram noted with some amusement that while the ale rations that Legion tradition dictated should be opened after a great victory remained sealed and put away there seemed to be no lack of drink flowing through the cups of the legionaries – be they exiles or the Black Queen's own. While the Army of Callow had been under strict instructions to refrain from sacking towns and cities even when its columns were detached and the supply situation became arduous, there'd been no order sent down to avoid trading with Procerans. Callowan soldiers were on campaign pay, which meant only half the coin was handed and the rest set aside for return home, but they were hardly penniless and in a war-torn region like Iserre they were the closest thing to patrons the locals would see for the winter. That'd overridden reluctance to trade with wicked heretics some, though no doubt there'd been price gouging. At the very least, most the bottles and flasks merrily being traded around fires were filled with the rich red wines the Principate's heartlands were known for. The ambitious had sprung for bottles of *pleurs de fée*, the heady Alamans herbal liquor whose name could more or less be translated into Lower Miezian of 'fairy tears'. Hakram had tried it a few months back and found the drink foul, though humans seemed to like the taste well enough.

"You'd think we fought a battle, by the revelry," Vivienne said, tone dry.

Neither of them were fools, and the former Thief was an old hand at this sort of game, and so instead of wandering around the camp in heavy dark cloaks that hid their faces they'd put on officer's armour and kept their faces half-hidden by helms. Two well-fitted armoured gauntlets, one empty and the other hiding bone, had seen to it that Hakram's most easily discernible marks would be kept

out of sight. The orc followed the human's gaze, finding a pair of grizzled or goblins cheerfully bullying some Callowan girl-soldier into drinking enough *aragh* it was a near-certainty she'd puke. The sappers noticed the attention but were unbothered bit it. Not unreasonably so: Adjutant was passing for a captain of heavies, and Vivienne for a mage lieutenant. Neither of them would be in an easy position to punish the drinking of soldiers so far removed from their own theoretical commands.

"Perhaps we didn't," Hakram quietly replied, "but it feels like victory nonetheless, doesn't it?"

"We threw some spells and shot some engines and General Abigail ordered a single cavalry charge on enemy mages," the blue-eyed noblewoman said. "The drow fought, admittedly, but us? This entire 'battle' had seen fewer than two hundred soldiers die, Hakram."

"Aye," Adjutant agreed, once more amused. "Fewer than two hundred of ours dead, and we've both forced the Grand Alliance into truce and put the League of Free Cities to retreat. They'd make songs of today, Vivienne, even without Choir dreams gilding the legend."

"Legionaries would make songs of rivers being wet, after drinking," the heiress-designate to the throne drily replied. "They've taken to the sport of it the way Callowans once loved jousting."

Hakram had never actually seen one of the famous Callowan tourneys, much less a joust, though he'd read of them in books. Under the Carrion Lord's rule knightly orders had been banned, which effectively killed the practice, and though under Catherine the Order of the Broken Bell had risen anew it was also part of the kingdom's army in a time of war – and so not free to pursue such leisurely pastimes. Under the old kingdom the Fairfaxes had often held tourneys to recruit promising knights into the Royal Guard, which had leant the practice a certain legitimizing weight, but Cat had balked at resurrecting it. When Grandmaster Brandon Talbot had pressed the matter she'd told him she'd rather arm another company of regulars or feed a village through winter than 'piss away gold celebrating the virtue of knocking down people with sticks'. He'd caught Juniper, whose distaste for the chivalric trappings of Callowan knighthood was deeply ingrained, grinning to herself for a solid month after that session of the Queen's Council.

"Mock if you will," Hakram gently said, "but you know I speak the truth. Tonight will be remembered for many years to come. It will have consequences, Vivienne. Ripples."

They'd resumed walking, and though the gloom of Akua Sahelian's curtain of night had cast darkness over all it was not enough

that Adjutant did not see the unease his words had brought to Vivienne's face. Like him, she had difficult grasping what might yet come of what had taken place tonight. Unlike him, however, that blindness worried her. Their steps slowed as they left the outskirts of the Second Army's camp in favour of Fourth's. He'd have to speak less here, as he'd spent months as an observer with the Fourth Army and he might be recognized by some through his voice even in the dark. Vivienne's gaze was on a young Soninke legionary, standing on the shoulders of a pair of orcs with a clay pot of black paint in hand as he added to one of the army's banners.

"Wings," she softly said. "I will not be surprised if the Third is doing the same. Sve Noc were not meek of hand in Sarcella."

The legionary had some talent, Hakram, though, for though instead of a brush it was the work of fingers dipped in paint the fresh symbols added to the banner could not be mistaken for anything but what they were: crow's wings. Two pairs, sharply shaped and feathered, and the Soninke finished the last touches on the last wing only to reveal the Fourth Army's changed banner: the four in Miezan numerals, gold on Fairfax blue, but now framed with crow wings at the upper corners.

"It'll spread from there," Adjutant acknowledged.

The soldier-artist was helped down by the pair of well-built orc women who'd been holding him up – one of them, Hakram could not help but notice, had an enticingly muscled frame and fangs that looked like they'd go *right* through bone – and the three of them were greeted by cheers from the throng of soldiers that'd been watching.

"I'd say something scathing about soldiers and superstitions," Vivienne mused, "but for all I know that might be enough to attract the gaze of the Crows."

"Best to keep on good terms with gods, when death and dying's your trade," Hakram said.

"Even those?" the noblewoman said. "I wonder. That Catherine has charmed ancient horrors into some manner of patronage I've no trouble believing – Merciful Heavens, it wouldn't even be the first time – but that does not mean the spread of their influence is a boon. She will not always be there to keep them honest, and when our soldiers return home there might be... complications."

"The House Insurgent has been rather amiable to the drow," he pointed out.

There'd been incidents, of course, but the Firstborn were being kept in hand by their chieftains and to be frank the Insurgents were trouble all around. Hakram had been told of quarrelsome

priests, before, but it'd been with the understanding that those quarrels were largely theological. The House Insurgent was rather prone to fistfights, for priests, and it likely did not help that most of them were young and fresh to their rebellion.

"The Insurgents are the hotheads and Catherine's most radical partisans in the House," Vivienne said. "It's the priests in Callow that might have words when the banners come back bearing Night's wings. Heresy, in particular, comes to mind."

Hakram had followed the debates within the Callowan House of Light with great interest, to the extent that he'd sought a sister for theological lessons. More than once Sister Mariet had hinted that he should consider conversion for the sake of his soul, but given how clear-spoken and learned the old woman had proved to be he'd hardly minded. The conclave in Laure that'd followed the Jacks seeding the rumours he and Vivienne had agreed on of the Woe's time in Keter had taken them both by surprise, and they'd both found that as they had no real influence within the House they could only be spectators to what then unfolded. Perhaps a third of the priesthood of Callow, numbering high with the young and those hailing from the heartlands of the kingdom – which had always been the region most eager to embrace the Black Queen's reign – but also a surprising among of oldest priests from the north who'd been infuriated by the Proceran House being involved at the Battle of the Camps had taken a hard line and pressed for the entire Tenth Crusade to be declared graceless. That'd been judged too extreme an approach by many, even though the Grand Alliance had come to be held in great disdain. It would be, in essence, declaring the entire priesthood of the Dominion, Procer and Ashur to be grasping heretics and any soldier participating in the crusade to have forfeited the grace of the Heavens.

Cooler heads, mostly priesthood from the ravaged south and the wary east, had tried to broker a compromise by instead declaring the decrees of the same Salian conclave that'd declared Catherine to be Arch-heretic of the East to be themselves heresy. That vote had passed unanimously, but the radicals had pushed for denunciation of the House of Light in Procer as a whole and found little appetite for the measure among their fellows. The talks turned harsh when the compromise motion of the House providing a tithe from its coffers to the Kingdom of Callow to support the defence of the realm was flatly refused by the southern priesthood, who was already beggaring itself providing charity to the families displaced by the Arcadian War. With that second compromise collapsing, the radicals scorned their fellows and mocked them for *children of Dana* – which, Hakram learned from the ever-helpful Sister Mariet, was a reference to the infamous Sister Dana of Laure who'd colluded with the Procerans during their occupation Callow – before walking out of the conclave. They'd come to call themselves the House Insurgent, in the months

that followed, and many had flocked to the Army of Callow. Yet it could not be denied that most the Callowan priesthood, more than two thirds of it in truth, had preferred a tamer stance.

In the kingdom the priests who'd remained in the fold had come to be called the House Constant, though that was more story than truth: they were united mostly in their eschewal of harder measures, and in other things remained as prone to squabbling among themselves as the Callowan priesthood was reputed for. They could be counted on to back Catherine against all comers, so long as those comers were foreign, but Vivienne was right in worrying of dark wings painted on banners. The settling of a goblin tribe on Callowan soil had been a hard mouthful to swallow for many of them, as was the entrusting of so many high offices to Wastelanders and greenskins, yet those had only been earthly matters. The Crows earning some devotion of their own, however, would be seen as Below sinking its claws in the hearts of the Callowan flock. There would be trouble.

"Most the soldiers we took in from the old legions keep to Below, if they keep to anything at all," Hakram said. "And many of what used to be the Fifteenth do the same. It may not be too contentious a matter so long as it is kept ceremonial. Soldiers' superstition, as you said."

"I hope you're right," Vivienne said.

Yet her eyes were on the cheering soldiers, surrounding a crow-marked banner.

"But if you are not," she said, "then it might be necessary to back our favoured horse within the House of Light."

Adjutant's brow rose.

"Insurgent over Constant, you mean," he said, tone pensive as he measured the rusks. "It might be it can be done. If we return victors one and all, their reputation will have risen. Yet there are risks to meddling there, especially for us."

House Fairfax had been embroiled in disputed with the House of Light more than once, over the span of its line, most often over the great cathedral of Laure and what was spoken in the sermons given there. Yet the old kings and queens of Callow had been Named as often as not, exalted in Above's service. It was one thing for one of that ilk to intervene in the House's affairs but entirely another for the *Black Queen* to do so. If a villain was seen as trying to subvert the House of Light, rebellion was certain. Even the Carrion Lord had chosen the soft death when dealing with the priests, preferring instead the stratagem of starving them of coin.

"Too early to tell if it'll come to that," Vivienne Dartwick finally said, eyes hooded. "We'll have to keep an eye on things as they unfold."

Adjutant rumbled in agreement and they resumed their walk. The First Army's camp, where they'd begun their wandering, had been quiet and orderly compared to the rest – as was only to be expected, as it was Juniper's own command and closest to her displeasure should festivities become too obvious. The Second's, under General Hune, had been tense for other reasons entirely. As Hune's army had seen fighting during the day and the night, it'd been allowed to rotate most their companies to sleep. Which had turned out less than restful, when vivid dreams began waking the legionaries. The First Army's entire mage contingent had been awoken to put together answers, as well as the Senior Mages from other armies. So far there'd been little more put together than the string of visions depicting parts of the struggle that'd taken place over Liesse, though the shape of the whole adventure had been taking appearance when they'd left the mages to it. Adjutant would have liked to assign Akua Sahelian to the matter, but she'd had more pressing duties: the soul of the Carrion Lord had been stolen back from the heroes, as had been his body weeks ago, and now the shade who'd once been the Diabolist had been tasked to bind soul and flesh anew after their brutal severing. Still, useful as her expertise might have been the army's mages and scribes were capable of seeing to the matter. It was less than urgent, anyhow, as Catherine would tell the tale herself when she returned. Most important, as far as Hakram was concerned, was that the most recurrent and vivid of the visions showed that Grey Pilgrim and the Saint of Swords were seemingly dead. The latter would do no favours to Catherine's reputation, but the former was a deeper concern.

The Dominion was prickly, when it came to the Peregrine, and though the visions legionaries had received made it clear Cat had tried to prevent his death that might not mean too much to grief-stricken killer with more pride than sense. Someone would have to be blamed, and even if it did not outright come to war they might try to kill Catherine upon her return to 'avenge' the Grey Pilgrim. Which would lead to war regardless, no two ways about it. His warlord was popular even with the Legions-in-Exile, who of the coalition holding this camp were the host with the least fondness for the Black Queen. The Army of Callow and the Firstborn had deeper loyalties, and very few qualms over killing either Procerans or Levantines if provoked. The truce over the field had been achieved by scheme and force of personality more than great desire for peace by the soldiers, Hakram knew, and that made it fragile. Even more so now that the League's hosts had retreated some and no longer stood as a close and obvious threat to the other two great assembled armies on the field. Juniper was well-aware, which was why there were scouts out there

keeping an eye on the Grand Alliance's positions and the Army of Callow had yet to entirely leave battle footing.

If the betrayal came, they knew, it would come after dawn rose when the drow would be struck by the sun-sickness and forced into slumber after being stripped of their power. Some would remain able to fight, but few and as little more than tribes of warriors.

The orc was forced out of the thought from the first stirrings of a song in the distance, one he did not recognize. The mismatched pair wandered closer to the source by unspoken accord, until they found a broad bonfire and a crowd half-drunk soldiers around it. Orcs and goblins, Taghreb and Soninke and Callowans. They were, to hear of it, crafting a song in the old legion manner – everyone trying a verse, a chorus of loud voices singing the attempts until something passable had come of the crucible. Hakram missed Nauk like a limb, in that moment. The other orc's rough humour and gift for song and poetry, his strange yet unrepentant sentimentality. It was not enough to distract him from the sight of one of Vivienne's agents approaching her discretely, whispering news in her ear when she gestured permission. The orc's attention turned instead to the song, heart clenching at the remembrance of a friend he'd now twice grieved.

"Came they proud princes, one and all
Great lords from olden, golden halls
And as one they fell, under the moon
When the Black Queen sang her tune

For in lovely Iserre did come undone
Dominion of seven crowns and one

'lo blood of slayer, brigand, binder
And champion too, binding tighter
Yet what star could shine so brightly
It would not fear our queen's fury?

For in lovely Iserre did come undone,
Dominion of seven crowns and one."

The song, he thought, was fiercely proud. Raw and half-done, yet already he could see the grimly boastful shape of it ripping free of a hundred voices. The Jack slipped away and without pause Vivienne leaned close, lowering her voice.

"Juniper sends that the Dominion has begun to gather troops," she whispered. "So has Princess Rozala."

The one-handed orc looked up the night sky, so very close to fading. He could feel it in his bones, how close to that veil falling they had come, how near to the end of the journey they'd arrived. It would all end soon, one way or another. And beyond

that, Hakram felt another pull. An older claim to him, one he'd embraced body and soul.

"We gather our own, then," he growled. "And quickly."

The woman who'd once been the Thief glanced at him knowingly.

"You know where Catherine will return," she said.

"I do," Hakram Deadhand said. "So let us gather steel, and march towards it."

Vivienne did not question him, for she knew the truth of it. In end, Hakram of the Howling Wolves Clan was many things. A soldier, a killer, a steward and on occasion a scribe. He'd served as an advisor and a herald, as an ender of loose ends and watchman of missteps. For the hand taken from him by the Penitent's Blade and returned by the sorceries of the Sovereign of Red Skies, he had earned the sobriquet of *Deadhand*. To ensure the succession of everything that had been built in the beating heart of Callow he'd carved through the other wrist, and not once regretted it. That lesson, like many others, he had learned from someone he loved the way a knife loved a steady hand or sparrow loved flight. For, most of all, he was a bored sergeant on a warm Wasteland night, catching his first glimpse in the eyes of a stranger of the girl who'd topple empires and feeling his blood burn.

He was the Adjutant, and Catherine Foundling was returning.

If any stood between them they would be broken, sure as dawn and dusk and the death of men.

Caerulea

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Javvies

Ah, good, it seems that Hakram and Viv are getting along better.

Heh. It's never a good idea to stand between an orc and his/her Warlord. And they're going to try to stop Hakram from getting to Cat.

This should be good. If unfortunate for the Levantines.

Huh. I would've thought that the obvious exit would have been in the circle or whatever the technical name of the ancient quasi-religious site Cat parked herself and her army around.

Javvies

Dammit wordpress.

Rup

... the way a knife loved a steady hand...

Damn..but, WHAT a mental image...and what can be steadier than a deadhand...(i know it's the opposite here)

Liliet

Ah, but that exit is not The Dramatic Middle Of Everything

like, it's probably the geometric middle of everything, but not the dramatic one

Also, what're the odds the Levantines are planning no such thing? We know Rozala is trying to deescalate things (and is very bad at it apparently)

Taichi

Had it been a major priority to land there, it likely would have been somewhat possible. However, given the weight and direction the story has headed with regards to their time in the City of Twilight, unless a direct effort was made to subvert the landing zone by someone with a weight in the story, it's practically guaranteed that events would align one way or another to dump them in the most theatrical spot possible.

That is to say, in between all the armies.

James, Mostly Harmless

Guide not only has more weekly votes than the next three stories combined, but it is only 55 votes short of having more votes than the next four stories!

Andrew Mitchell

I really enjoyed the conversation between Vivienne and Hakram because of how far their relationship has developed since Hakram's sacrifice. And I loved this line from Vivienne:

> That Catherine has charmed ancient horrors into some manner of patronage I've no trouble believing – Merciful Heavens, it wouldn't even be the first time – ...

Useful insights into what's happened in the House of Light in Callow.

Andrew Mitchell

Plus, I'm EXCITED for the return of Black. Pity we didn't get any indication of how long Akua is going to take.

[Liliet](#)

Useful and FASCINATING AS SHIT

to me at least

also, utterly characteristic in how they get 0 input from Above and don't expect any either :3

Someguy

Anyone else got the song? It does not seem to rhyme when I try to sing it.

Andrew Mitchell

Maybe that's because it's still a work in progress?

[Euodiachloris](#)

By committee, even. A much-less-than-sober committee, to boot. XD

Andrew Mitchell

A very good point!

dalek955

It does rhyme, although some of the rhymes are a bit forced. What it doesn't do is fit a meter.

Gibborim

Wow, there were no comments when I loaded the page.

Gibborim

I was so close to greatness, if only I had rushed down to yell "FiRSt!!!" Instead of reading the chapter.

Andrew Mitchell

Most of us are (or will be) glad you didn't yell first. It's generally considered poor form in this community.

[sivarajan](#)

We say "Go vote on topwebfiction" instead.

Andrew Mitchell

Hahahaha. Yep... But at least that has the positive effect of helping others find this magnificent work! 😊

[Liliet](#)

Oh wow, only luck prevented you from being an asshole!

If you were to find yourself a 'first' again, do the links comment, yeah :3

Gibborim

Nothing could make me more likely to post "fIRsT" than preemptively calling me an asshole for it.

RandomFan

Not even saying "You're an asshole for being the type of person who would ever consider making a contentless 'first' post"? Because that's certainly nastier. Also, for the record, you can consider me to have said that.

[tyizor](#)

Nothing eh? What about saying that you'd be a pitiful attention seeking human that's trying to make up for the fact that their parents didn't give them enough attention when they were younger, so they seek out attention (be it positive or negative) from a community that ultimately doesn't really care about them because they're a single insignificant internet denizen whose username noone is even going to bother to remember?

You're right, that's not enough to motivate you. Here, let me give you some motivation. You can do it! You can be a pitiful attention seeking asshole instead of amounting to anything! Yayyy

JJR

That's a lot of words, for someone who doesn't care.

Caerulea

Comments take a minute or so to be approved, and I do not think you would have beaten me. If you did, I would just

think something along the lines of “really? Who let the toddler in here?” and then move on. Otherwise you would be in the unenviable position of having a comment saying “FiRSt!!!” third on the list. If you are quick, just put the links up, so people see them, rather than waste space.

Andrew Mitchell

Honestly Gibborim, I don’t get all the hate being thrown at you here. In my experience our community is almost always a pleasant and civil place to hang out. And I’m quite disappointed that some people here aren’t demonstrating that at the moment.

I entirely get your angry response to an IMO unreasonable attack.

I encourage you to stick around and be part of what is a really great community that can add a lot of richness to your understanding of PGtE; as it has to mine.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I’ll note that EE as specifically said that doesn’t particularly *like* having to moderate the comments, but he will if he has to (and as lately demonstrated, he *does* read them).

In this exchange, I think Liliet muffed her “humor” roll and set off a cascade.

Andrew Mitchell

I concur. One of the indicators of a healthy community is the absence of active moderation. I can only recall one time EE needed to do that, and this incident is far from needing EE’s attention IMO.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> One of the indicators of a healthy community is the absence of active moderation.

Mmm... I’m in another very strong and supportive online community, but that one is much more intertwined with other communities on the Internet and the real world, and it also occasionally deals with hot-button stuff.

That means that on the one hand, we get occasional visits by people who aren’t really in touch with the group’s attitude, and on the other, even the regulars sometimes mess up. A gentle warning almost always suffices for the regulars...

For the other cases, the blog owner invented a new sanction for the Internet: Disemvoweling. That's not a typo – sufficiently offensive or abrasive comments get their vowels removed. This effectively disarms the problematic messages, but if you squint you can still make out what they say, so the trolls can't really cry "censorship". 😏

Andrew Mitchell

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I wish I had more than one like to give this. I just ♥ ♥ ♥ this approach. Thanks for letting me know that such cleverness exists.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Thanks. She (also her husband/co-blogger) were already prominent science-fiction editors, and she's known for her expertise in community moderation (she has written a couple of books). Alas, age and disability are creeping up on her these days, so she's not very active online anymore..

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm splitting this bit out in case the links get spamfiltered: She has written a couple of books dealing with (among many other topics) moderation: [Making Book](#) and [Making Conversation](#)

Shveiran

Disemvoweling sounds fucking awesome and clever as shit. Whoever came up with the idea deserves a treat.

Just... priceless.

NerfGlastigUaine

"Thus the Gods granted us the third boon: no longer would scales close our eyes, obscuring knowledge of Good and Evil and preventing us from earning just deserts."

Interesting that in this verse this knowledge was a boon, while in Christianity it's the first sin. And in both cases, I'd like to call doubt on its veracity.

MrMaturity

Before they got to just have deserts, I wonder what meal they were having to become so bored of it?

Asterix the Guy

First of all, they wouldn't be *just* desserts if they had had any meal beforehand.

Second of all, those are just *desserts* that you are thinking about. Just deserts are much drier than that.

(Also, hey everyone, first post here.)

*

[Liliet](#)

Jungles and steppes.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hmm. My current Minecraft world has savanna, plains and deserts near spawn; I still "have" to go looking for jungle and taiga. (The new version added cool resources to both.)

[Liliet](#)

NICE.

I usually go looking for high hills to put a house on the border with; just really love it visually ♥

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, usually I start off looking for a good place for an initial lair and just expand from there. In mountainous areas that will be an exposed cave or dug into a cliff face, because I can make it safe with not much wood – in flat areas like this, I'd start with a dirt hut and upgrade over the first few days.

In this game, however, I got a dominating factor – spawn is in sight of a village! And with the Village and Pillage update, that means guaranteed beds, and much better houses than they used to be! That said, defending the village is still tricky – even with the golems, I just lost some well-traded villagers after I left a perimeter gate open before I went down mining. (oops) And that was after I'd gathered most of them into a common building.

I think I'm going to finish the job, put their bell in there too, and just lock them in with their job-site blocks and beds. (Maybe add a bit of farm too, mostly I've been hand-feeding them from my own farm tower.)

Andrew Mitchell

Now I feel like getting back into Minecraft. I loved it but it was SUCH a timesink. 😞

[Liliet](#)

0000000H

and oof, yeah defending villages are tricky

[Mental Mouse](#)

Even within Christianity (and perhaps more so in Judaism) there's an alternate view of the departure from Eden: Considering it as "welp, *now* you're finished, here's the world".

[Mental Mouse](#)

There's a fair bit of controversy within the Abrahamic religions over the matter. In my Jewish upbringing, the first sin was definitely *disobedience*, while gaining the KoG&E was what required the expulsion. But there's a definite undercurrent that the whole thing was a setup: Having gained that knowledge, humanity was ready to inherit the world made for them.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Huh, never heard that interpretation before. Mostly had a straightforward Protestant Christian upbringing. Personally I take Christianity/religion as more of a philosophy – help the poor, act as you want others to act, etc. – than an actual history or laws. A lot fewer contradictions, headscratchers, and straight-up horror that way.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, when people insist on taking Bronze Age mythology as literal truth, yeah that's gonna be a shitshow. Just last night I had a local kid trying to tell me how God loves me, and Jesus is the only way to God, Adam and Eve, yadda yadda yadda. (Oy gevalt! 😞)

He even offered to heal my back in Jesus' name... **after** I'd already explained that the reason I was leaning towards him (from "social distance") because I'd left my hearing aids inside when I came out to smoke. I tried not to be too hard

on him because he's just a teenager (also, it's not his fault his pastor hadn't gotten up to "why not to proselytize to Jews" before the epidemic shut down churches) but it made me sad. Not least because, if he's counting on Jesus to protect him from the epidemic... ;-(

danh3107

There has never been a stronger platonic romance than Hakram and Cat.

prove me wrong

C_B

Aziraphale and Crowley are at least a tie.

Oshi

That one in book and show has a good strong undertone of not quite a friend.

Andrew Mitchell

And not nearly an enemy. (Although I must admit I haven't seen the show yet.)

maximillian999

Watch it! Soooo good!

Rup

.um..
Modesty Blaise
&
Willy Garvin
(at least in the original books)

caoimhinh

I would say that Amadeus and Alaya are even stronger.

Even if Alaya's stupid obsession with securing her throne led them to a separation after over 40 years of loyal friendship and unconditional trust.

[Liliet](#)

^^^

maybe it's through sheer tenure, but they win out if only through the fact that Hakram and Catherine have yet to make me cry

Raved Thrad

We'll all cry when Hakram goes off to die.

Mental Mouse

Um, that's not a romance. There are other kinds of love!

Also, how many people noticed that Hakram now has a psychic link to Cat? At least, he *knows* where she's coming out, and Viv expects as much. I guess that comes with a Name based on being someone's assistant.

Andrew Mitchell

Something like Scribe and Black, perhaps... Actually, maybe that means that Scribe's going to turn up (or perhaps she's around already) when Black is put back together. It would be nice to see her again.

JJR

Speaking of Black's misadventure. I wonder what Ranger thinks about all this. Is it a "He knew the risks." thing? Or was she almost about to go all Kill Bill on the Principate?

Andrew Mitchell

I don't think Ranger is the rescuing type. IMO she's more the revenging type. She'll happily hunt down cut open the person who killed Black, and the person who ordered it.

Cicero

Samwell and Frodo.

Or if you want to get traditional about it:

David and Jonathan.

Javvies

Ah, good, it seems that Hakram and Viv are getting along better.

Heh. It's never a good idea to stand between an orc and his/her Warlord. And they're going to try to stop Hakram from getting to Cat.

This should be good. If unfortunate for the Levantines.

Huh. I would've thought that the obvious exit would have been in the circle or whatever the technical name of the ancient quasi-religious site Cat parked herself and her army around.

[badluckcat](#)

Normally yes, they would exit there. But they're coming out from a piece of Arcadia after having gone on a once-in-a-lifetime adventure. They will appear in the most dramatic possible location at the most dramatic possible time.

Andrew Mitchell

Spot on. It is guaranteed by the Guide universe's mechanics, and by the fact that we're reading a great story. 😊

Death Knight

Seeing as the Pilgrim is tied thematically with the sun and Cat is with him, I imagine as soon as the first rays of sunshine appears so will he.

[Barthumphries](#)

Everyone thinks the Pilgrim is dead. Why not keep that thought going so he can swoop in to save Cat at some point in the future? 😊

Andrew Mitchell

Because appearing now is going to stop unnecessary suffering, right now. That's kind of the Grey Pilgrim's thing. 😊

Shveiran

If there was ever any doubt, the fact that dawn marks the weakening of the drow and therefore the most likely start of hostilities on the Dominion's part makes dawn THE moment to return.

Assuming the Dominion plans to attack, that is. Which is, admittedly, not a given. It almost pains me to say it, but I should probably give the Ophanim the benefit of doubt here and at least consider the possibility that the Levantines are marching in to keep the peace, much like Rozala.

Agent J

The Levantines are *why* Malanza is marching to keep the peace. That they're both marching are why the Army of Callow is mustering now as well. If the Levantines wanted to deescalate the situation, it would have been as easy a task as not mustering their army.

Are the Levantines preparing to attack? Maybe not, but I can't see a scenario where their actions could logically lead to a less volatile situation.

ciara

Perhaps they're getting ready to pre-empt the Procerans taking revenge for the death of the Saint?

Shveiran

Honestly, I agree with you there, but... I've been wrong before, and we were promised the Ophanim would handle it. So... I'm giving them the benefit of the doubt, even if my gut says Levant marching is stupid if peace is their goal. Unlike the Procerans, it doesn't seem like they have reasons to believe their armed intervention is necessary to stop their allies from attacking in a frenzy.

[Euodiachloris](#)

There will also be backlight. And mist. Because of course. 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

I was thinking they'd appear between pillars of light and darkness...

Shveiran

Also cool.

[doominator10](#)

I always did wonder how the Callowan priesthood rationalized following Cat. I'm actually really looking forward to seeing how the drow interact with Callow proper, at least until they get a home carved out for them from the dead king's lawn.

erebus42

Yeah it certainly will be interesting. I definitely would like to see Sve Noc get some nonDrow followers (I know I'd at least consider converting after having seen what the Night can do).

Raved Thrad

I'm thinking Masego and Black. Masego because divinity has always fascinated him, and when he sees that Cat doesn't have to kneel and chant to commune with her patrons, he may see it as a good (if perhaps temporary) replacement for his magic. I can see him having long, animated discussions with both

Andronike and Komena about death, murder, and the quanta of divinity.

As for Black, can anything be more awesome than being named Black of Night, father-figure of the First Under Night? 🤪

Shveiran

First off, kudos because Black of Night sounds fucking cool.

Though seriously, I don't think the two of them will ever agree to challenge the power of a deity, lack of bowing notwithstanding.

Shveiran

*CHANNEL. Damnation.

Raved Thrad

Autocomplete hell?

[Mental Mouse](#)

> I know I'd at least consider converting after having seen what the Night can do

Well yes, that's the problem for the House of Light. Cat may need to "introduce" the concept of religious freedom.

(That said, I snickered at the poor Sister hoping to convert a Praesi-born orc!)

Shveiran

I quite liked that addition, honestly. Shows she is not thinking in terms of us and them, or at least not in a way that is culture-race based and immutable.

Granted, it was doomed to fail. But it is good sign, no?

Andrew Mitchell

Yes. I took it as a good sign too.

Andrew Mitchell

I don't think Cat's planning on taking the Drow back to Callow. The point is to find them a home of their own once they've helped bottle up the Dead King.

However, the story may have different ideas. Given the discussion about the potential for conflict, it now feels inevitable that the conflict is going to be an issue.

Javvies

True.

Though relations will likely be helped (from the Callowan perspective) by the fact that Sve Noc helped Cat free Edward Fairfax from the Dead King.

NerfGlastigUaine

"one of them, Hakram could not help but notice, had an enticingly muscled frame and fangs that looked like they'd go right through bone"

Damn it Adjutant, keep it in your pants. You're learning bad habits from your Queen.

Andrew Mitchell

By all accounts, he was sleeping around well before Cat came on the scene.

erebus42

A Hakram POV is always welcome, as is a new legion song (I'm curious to hear what it would sound like finished)

The hype for Cat and the Pilgrim's grand entrance is getting pretty real though.

caoimhinh

I wonder if we will get that expected arrival of Catherine and Pilgrim with the breaking dawn during our next Mandatory Friday Cliffhanger.

I'm guessing next chapter will be an insight on Dominion's camp and the current state of their politics and interclan dynamics, with the end being the marching of the Dominion's army and the tense posturing of the three nations' armies setting the stage for Cat's dramatic return and the reveal of ~~Gandalf~~ Pilgrim's resurrection.

It will probably be tenser if Indrani and Rogue Sorcerer arrive first and get intercepted or if Hanno arrives.

Relyt

"the soul of the Carrion Lord had been stolen back from the heroes, as had been his body weeks ago"

ErraticaErrata, was it really weeks ago? I thought they traded Saint's life for Blacks body at a botched treaty-talk-thing like the day before all these shenanigans went down? A lot has happened yeah, and it's been weeks for us, but hasn't it been less than a day in-story?

As always, great chapter, wonderful writing. I'm looking forward to all the tense posturing as folks wait for Catherine to show, then dropped jaws when the Peregrine's with her.

Andrew Mitchell

Yeah, I was thinking days not weeks. But I'm notoriously unconcerned about consistency of time & distance in stories.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Not to mention stories which contain transitive planes with temporal rules of their own. 🤪

[Liliet](#)

Just thank everyone and everything it's not months this time.

But no, it's definitely been days at least. Cat marched around for quite a while before coming across this barrow.

Micke

The real question is, will any legionnaires remain loyal to Malicia when they hear the news?

JJR

She does still have those hidden loyalty commands implanted in all the high ranking officers. I don't remember which chapter we learn about them though.

Andrew Mitchell

That's a good point. I wonder how many have died and been replaced by now. I expect Malica won't have been able to get any more commands placed in new officers over the last couple of years.

Abigail comes to mind here. It would be interesting to see Abigail vs. Juniper if Juniper is being mind controlled.

Also, does Black know about them either from Malica or via other means? And does he have a counter?

Shveiran

I think Malicia mentioned in one of her POV interludes (possibly the one about Salia's death?) that she believes Black doesn't know she used Rule to overcome the limits of "Speaking" and rewrote the top brass.

If she was right, it is safe to say Juniper is compromised, since she has been in the presence of the Empress even after becoming Cat's go-to general.

As for Abigail v. Juniper... I don't know, for all that Abigail may have grown, her barely controlled chaos seems like a long, long way from matching the Hellhound... which, it should be mentioned, is still learning and growing, especially now that she is digesting her defeat and planning with Grem One-eye.

Personally, if it comes to that and Juniper doesn't eat her alive, I'd be very disappointed.

On the other hand, Cat squaring off against Juniper with Abigail providing a measure of unpredictability that Juniper fails to foresee and Cat takes advantage of? THAT I'd totally be behind.

[matrixm](#)

It was about a month ago, yes.

Morgenstern

Should be, yes. But who knows how much time the five man group spent in the faerie realm... it's been known to happen. And for rather more time than just a few days/weeks... 😊

Morgenstern

five "humans" group, if anything... "heroes" was what i actually wanted to write.. o0

StarlightGlimmer

Five morally complex superhumans and The Tyrant

Morgenstern

hm.... i guess my brain made a mix-up with the "Blue Man group". XD

Morgenstern

On second thought... I'm no longer sure I'm not mixing up scenes, too. Where does the scene with Rumena holding the Saint by the "neck" (throat) figure in... Rum"e"nation. 😊
Let's conclude I'm confused, but the comment about fairie realms is true in general, no matter what ^^°

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm not EE, but lessee: She won Black's body in chapters 26 and 27: Overtures and Civility. Chapter 28 is a single conversation. Chapter 29 opens with "We got three days' march

before Creation turned on us" (the gate in their path). The "Mavian prayer" site Was introduced in Chapter 30: "Weaver; Woven", and in Chapter 31 she writes the letters and then we get 7 interludes of battle and byplay: a day and a night (the latter interrupted by Pilgrim's Shine), culminating with "So We Shot Him"; the Shine ends with dawn, which then gets eclipsed.

Then Cat comes back to steal the scene from Kairos and begin the Twilight arc, which wraps at Chapter 51 (with 4 interludes). Hints from the text suggest that their journey and battles take that day and the night after it, with them returning at dawn.

So, 5 days (but 30 chapters!) since they got his body. I think EE lost count again.... 😊

NerfGlastigUaine

I think I'll take a break from this story. Not that it's not great, in fact I think it's getting even better recently, but I want to do a binge later instead of reading a single chapter every other day. It's amazing how fast the author updates and how consistently, but I'm starting to feel like an addict whose hit is never enough and always kept longing for more.

Thank you Erraticerrata for writing such a great story and thank you fellow readers whose comments are always entertaining and theories wildly interesting even when (especially when) they're wrong. See you all again in two months.

Andrew Mitchell

Enjoy your break. 😊

Rup



(i tried..lasted one week)

caoimhinh

I'm pretty sure it's healthier to take one bottle of liquor every two days than suddenly drinking 20 bottles in one sitting. Same principle applies to drugs (where an overdose can kill) and for chapters of a serial, where the Hype will burn us.

I would recommend to add another novel to your reading time so you can get distracted from the obsession of wanting to know what will happen next chapter in this one by reading what's happening in others (I'm sure that among the readers here we can get a very long list of web serials to enjoy). Another option is going for a re-read of the novel, there are many

things that are appreciated more on a second reading, like character development or the re-living of a particularly epic or emotional chapter, it's something I personally enjoy.

Nevertheless, it is your decision, and I can't deny that there's something really satisfying in reading and finding the "Next Chapter" button available and working when you reach the end of a chapter, so I understand your urge.

In any case, enjoy. Whatever you decide, just be sure to have a great time~

Kwabena Yiadom

What would you recommend, as another story to read on the side?

[Mental Mouse](#)

I've most been reading webcomics, but one of those stands out: [Kill 6 Billion Demons](#) features a Crapsack Multiverse with an Eastern ethos and mythic style, laid out in effing-spectacular artwork. The protagonist was a barista from our own Earth, who had cosmic power handed to her and promptly got caught up in the squabbles of the Demiurges. (Dammit, she was just trying to get laid! 😊) Learning how to use that power is a bit tougher, but she's got an angel teaching her martial arts and a devil teaching her magic (among other things, heh heh).

Currently she's about to enter the Grand Tournament held by one of the demiurges, prize being "anything you want". As it happens, he has somebody she wants, but she may not have thought this through....

Other excellent webcomic sagas include *Skin Horse* (a followup to the classic but long-completed *Narbonic*), and the long-running (20+ years!) *Sluggy Freelance*, but both of those seem to be approaching their respective finishes.

Andrew Mitchell

I second this recommendation.

caoimhinh

Oh, cool. Kill 6 Billion Demons is a name I have heard before, it's about time I embark on that reading.

I gotta start reading more western webcomics; most of the ones I read are Korean webtoons like Tower of God, Wind Breaker, God of Highschool, DICE: the Cube that Changes Everything, Solo Levelling, Her Summon, I Love Yoo, and the Boss Of School; but I have found some pretty good

western webcomics, like Unordinary, Love Advice from the Duke of Hell, Mage & Demon Queen, Always Human and many more that I can't recall right now.

I will add your recommendations to my list and check them out this weekend, thanks.

Andrew Mitchell

I recommend reading the text below the comics as well. It really adds to the depth of this multiverse. Sometimes it's very short, sometimes it's much longer.

caoimhinh

Just checked, it's really awesome to have that bit of lore there. It's kinda like the epigraphs here in Practical Guide to Evil. It adds a certain spice to the story.

Andrew Mitchell

A couple of complete stories which I really enjoyed:

Leftover soup: [leftoversoup DOT com](http://leftoversoup.com)

Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality: [hpmor DOT com](http://hpmor.com)

And a couple of ongoing stories I've been enjoying for years:

Order Of The Stick: [google it](http://google.com)

Questionable Content: [questionablecontent DOT com](http://questionablecontent.com) (over 4000 comics and going strong)

caoimhinh

I finished the Methods of Rationality a couple of months ago, it was really good, though the end turned weird. I particularly enjoyed the part about death, the Dementors and the desire for sharing immortality as an improvement for humanity.

I'm reading the Order of the Stick but I'm reeeaaaalllyyy behind, hahaha. At first I read it at random, but I decided to read it properly.

I will check on Leftover Soup and Questionable Content, never heard of those before, but paired with MoR and OoS, plus recommended by you, I'm pretty confident on them being of good quality story and very interesting content.

Andrew Mitchell

QC just keeps getting better. With over 4000 now and five more per week so you'll need quite a bit of time to catch up.

Enjoy! 😊

caoimhinh

Well, there are the most famous options, like The Wandering Inn, The Gods Are Bastards, Worm, and Mother of Learning.

On RoyalRoad I have found many different types of stories that are very interesting, like Metaworld Chronicles, Everybody Loves Large Chests, Iron Teeth, and Trails of Ascension (I write this one, 54 chapters as of today, allow me a little shameless advertisement XD).

You could also take a look at some of the big names of Xianxia genre (chinese fantasy, centered around their mythology, with Qi Cultivation, taoism, buddhism and immortality as important aspects of the story) like I Shall Seal the Heavens, Cultivation Chat Group, Stellar Transformations and History's Strongest Senior Brother. And there's also Korean novels, like Everyone Else is a Returnee, Solo Levelling (this one was even adapted to a webtoon, currently ongoing), and Main Character Hides His Strength (kinda weird name, but the story is very serious and sometimes outright grim).

Those are some of the ones I know, have read, and usually recommend, all are fantasy (my personal favorite genre) but they have vastly different takes on fantasy and their storylines are unique, providing a big number of interesting characters with different characteristics.

I'm sure other readers can vastly enlarge this list with their own recommendations and gave us all a large variety of names of every possible literature genre. There are amazing jewels out there waiting to be discovered. If you can share a recommendation too, I'll be happy to read it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I understand, but... well, that's why I'm so active on these comment pages. For each chapter, we get a couple or three days to discuss it among ourselves.

Andrew Mitchell

That's a real benefit for sure. I read almost every comment and it adds such richness to my appreciation of the story.

caoimhinh

Yeah, the crazy theories, debates and in-depth analysis provided by the commenters are really amazing. It adds a whole new level to the experience of reading the web novel,

having a large community of peers reading alongside oneself and sharing their view, we enrich each other's experiences.

KageLupus

Something that I do on occasion is to go back to a previous book (sometimes even the same book) and then do a big binge on that. I usually find something new that I didn't catch the first time through, and knowing what happens later lets me find some really neat, subtle foreshadowings.

A recent example from my binge of book 5 is that during the Saint of Swords v Rumena fight, Mighty Rumena says something along the lines of "Let's hurry up before one of us dies of old age." Considering the last couple of chapters that has gone from a witty line about Rumena being ancient to an amazing line because Rumena had seen Cat's staff and knew what it was for.

caoimhinh

Indeed, reading the previous books brings forth a sense of perspective into the story, and we see some of the pieces that were set into motion many chapters ago start taking effect in the current chapters, and it's also nice to see the changes and evolution of the characters, some of the consistency errors (most of which have been fixed) and even the changes in the viewers impression and feelings towards a character. For example, almost everybody hated Akua during the first couple of books, now almost everybody likes her; the Grey Pilgrim and the Saint of Swords are two characters that have been liked by, hated by, and awed the readers during the many chapters where they have appeared.

Something interesting I kept wondering about, for example, and confirmed when re-reading book 2, is that Masego was not initially as socially awkward as he is in later books. The Masego of Book 2 was capable of sarcasm, insults and jokes, with also a much friendlier disposition (and his first introduction depicted him as having a leaner body "like a scholar" while later chapters depicted him as fat). At some point around book 3 and 4, this changed and the current Masego is shown as someone who has always struggled to understand social interactions and just a couple of chapters ago we saw him fumbling when trying to come up with an insult for the Dead King, saying that he was doing it because he learned it from Cat and the others and wanted to imitate them, however in Book 2 we saw Masego constantly throw minor insults to his opponents during battles (see for example his two duels with the Bumbling Conjuror in Book 2 and his contempt towards inferior magic casters, even in his fight against Demons he delivered some pretty witty comments).

[Javvies](#)

Y'know, that's not actually true.

"Built like a scholar" doesn't automatically mean lean and/or skinny. In the context of being compared to well muscled and physically fit soldiers, it could easily mean someone with a heavier and softer build. Especially since a sentence or two later, it is said that "his lips were fleshy".

caoimhinh

Hmm, I don't know. Historically and in stories, scholars are of a lean build, the merchants are the ones who possess a fat body, while scholars tend to have skinnier looks and more fragile frame.

Also, fleshy lips have nothing to do with fat or lack thereof. Cheeks and neck, sure, but not the lips.

IDKWhoitis

I wonder if the Augar or White Night are also getting the dreams, because out of anyone else, they might be the most interested in what follows.

Also, the Black Queen legend will truly become a monolith by the end of this crusade, one of those legends so long and insane that people will doubt its veracity.

Andrew Mitchell

Maybe you're right but I also wonder if it might instead be known, and believed, as widely as the stories of Dread Empress Triumphant (MSNR).

(Sorry for the double post.)

Rup

MSNR... 🙌 hm...good one..will have to remember it..

Andrew Mitchell



liked it too. 😊

* 3 to 10

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yo. I had her in a parenthetical phrase in the middle of an already-rambling sentence, and went "oh good grief...".



Andrew Mitchell

Ah, thanks for adding to our community lexicon. 😊

caoimhinh

She already is, and that's a funny thing because everyone comes to fight her having her the reports of her actions and they are all like "Nah, that's pure exaggeration, she isn't *that* strong and terrifying" and then Cat pulls something even scarier than what they heard and it's too late for them and they are screwed.

Every opponent that Catherine has faced come with a preconception and prejudice about her, and then finds that such an image was inaccurate and lacking.

[Fayhem](#)

> Every opponent that Catherine has faced come with a preconception and prejudice about her, and then finds that such an image was inaccurate and lacking.

To be fair, a lot of that is prob because her reputation (especially abroad, given the slowness of most non-Imperial communications) would typically be based on the last thing people *know* that she did, and since becoming Squire Catherine Foundling has triggered the Took a Level in Badass trope, eh, at least three times by my count? Offing the Duke of Being a Little Bitch or whatever his title was to become Duchess of Moonless Nights, embracing Winter to level-up to Sovereign of Moonless Nights to take out Akua, feeding Winter to Night to become F.U.N. I get the feeling that most Named get to trigger that trope like once in their whole career, maybe twice if they're lucky/special. Also, the last one notably is not so much a straight increase in power like the last two so much as an exponential increase in flexibility, which is an entire other level of wrong-footing if even your prognoses of potential changes are focused around "maybe she got more powerful again".

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'd count the Book 1 wargames too. Greenhorn officer with zero military experience walks into the War School at the bottom of the heap, and walks out in command of a Dread Legion.

[Fayhem](#)

Hmm I could see that yeah. I was measuring more in terms of "objective"/external power-ups, and I would personally call the Book I wargames more of a perceptual/political upgrade since for me at least those were more about people starting to learn who Catherine Foundling really was than

about Catherine Foundling herself changing. But since the initial topic was Catherine's reputation your interpretation there is definitely also valid; I just hadn't considered it because I was just seeing it through my own lens.

Fayhem

Follow-up: if we're counting perceptual/political level-ups, then First Liesse should definitely go on the list too. Dread Legion commander/rookie Named on her very first campaign goes from military successes to simultaneously snuffing out the last of the Callowan rebellion WITHOUT her own people turning on her, foiling and scoring points off the heir to the Sahelians (also a Named in her own right), and using her victory over said heir to the Sahelians to extract concessions from her political allies. Then that was immediately followed by Black basically turning over Callow to her like "yeah this has been my primary personal project for 20 years and you've only even been Named for like 2 years, but here you go I trust you with this completely". Alaya/Malicia specifically tagged the High Lords/Ladies as *still* persistently underestimating Black through sheer force of blind prejudice so I don't think that did as much for Cat there, but there's no way that didn't win her MAJOR points with the Legions.

Mental Mouse

Maybe. I'd think that was straight-up "rewards of success." It did establish her rep in her own country, but the process was "onscreen". The comparison does help me understand your qualms about considering the War College as that trope.

Andrew Mitchell

Maybe you're right but I also wonder if it might instead be known, and believed as widely as the stories of Dread Empress Triumphant (MSNR).

antoninjohn

I wonder what happened to the Anaxares?

Andrew Mitchell

I've been missing him. But I'm certain he'll be making another appearance due to Karios' scheme to put the gods on trial.

Oshi

Nope, he wants to put a Choir on Trial. Judgment in particular.

caoimhinh

Ah, Hakram ogling the teeth of the females, that perv. Good to see traditions hadn't been lost and he is still the same promiscuous Orc that everyone knows, hahaha.

Those few last paragraphs displaying Hakrams absolute loyalty are truly great.

That's love, pure and loyal, untainted by lust or romance, or any other desire beyond the wish of companionship. He can even just follow his heart and know where Catherine is going to appear through pure Power of Friendship. See? Under all that layers of cold Orc, Hakram is a softie at heart.

So... Concourse III is going to be from the Dominion's POV? I wonder if they are actually losing their minds over the death of the Peregrine and really decided to attack or if they are doing something else. I wonder how the different members of the Blood are taking it, what decisions are being discussed and how the Dominion leaders are relating to each other.

We know that Razin and Aquiline are getting closer, while Razin swore vengeance on Yannu, Moro of the Bandit Blood lost one arm, and Yannu seems to be the cold and calculative type, but who knows how he might react to the news of Pilgrim being dead, who knows if they are having another honor duel to decide what to do or if they are united due to the mourning of the Peregrine. There's quite a mixture for volatile situations there, even more than there is in Proceran camp.

[Liliet](#)

Yep, Levantines are going to be the most interesting to hear from here ;u;

Raved Thrad

Well, we've seen what Levantine Blood consider to be honorable. I'm betting that someone got knifed.

It's even possible that Aquiline and Razin knifed Yannu and then immediately got to boinking in the spreading pool of blood. Razin would have had his blood up, and each time there's a chance for blood to be spilled it's like Aquiline's just drank five cups of coffee, with an espresso chaser.

frederic

There are a few OTL iterations of benevolent (or neutral) deities of the Night (Ratri comes to mind but there was at least one in ancient Nabatean mythology, and a few others).

I wonder if nascent Gods can be influenced by their worshippers..

Mammon

It was already obvious before, and now it only becomes more so. Leave it to Above to cover all bases by hedging their bets. Such slimy and tricky bastards.

Callow being defeated? The Arch-Heretic has been slain and her corruption carved out of existence. Hurrah for the Crusade and Above prevailing as always.

The Alliance being defeated? The House Insurgent of Callow was righteous and stuck to their beliefs as those Levantine necromancers and scheming Procerans turned to heresy by their selfishness and greed. And isn't it just like the good guys to be a conclave of young ones in an underdog position fighting against an injustice outnumbering them vastly? Hurray for the Good Preserved and Above prevailing as always.

Sem: Uhm, Jonathaniël?

John: Yes, Simiëlle?

Sem: The armies of the Black Queen are worshipping Night Gods as well, that doesn't sound like it will work in our favour in a few centuries if they win.

John: No worries, Sve Noc are created in understanding and trust and are evil but not evil evil. We can always declare the Night a balance to the Light and the other Below the heretics.

Sem: Are you sure? Don't you think that's-

John: Nah, it's fine.

Tyrant, elsewhere yet somehow aware of this conversation: *Rubs hands together* Yesss... Just as planned. Create that precedent for there being an allowed absolute opposite evil for a good. Right, my precious and somehow Light Good Hierarch? Just as planned...

[NZPIEFACE](#)

There is precedent, just not in the same continent. The dude's on the bigger continent have a country ruled by both a Villain and a Hero.

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, Yan tei

JRogue

Where is that documented? I know that the other continent has been mentioned a few times, but not many. Is it in a reddit or some comment from EE? I would very much like to read it.

Thank you in advance for the info.

Andrew Mitchell

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2015/08/12/chapter-20-rise/> and <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2016/05/11/chapter-22-rescue/> are a couple of early examples.

If you want more, check this Goggle search: https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBF_enAU795AU795&ei=6ewTXcH40o7390PVj5PACg&q=site%3Apracticalab.3...3198.4475..4709...0.0..0.190.1251.0j7.....0...1..gws-wiz.n3q6o2ASoYI

Andrew Mitchell

Damn it. I replied but because of the three links my reply is awaiting moderation... Check this google search for all the references to Yan Tei:

https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBF_enAU795AU795&ei=6ewTXcH40o7390PVj5PACg&q=site%3Apracticalab.3...3198.4475..4709...0.0..0.190.1251.0j7.....0...1..gws-wiz.n3q6o2ASoYI

[NZPIEFACE](#)

It was some off-handed comment Cat made way back.

Thea

All is night. Good and evil.

Or maybe not.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Eh, I don't think Hierarch can be construed as Good. It remains to be seen whether he and Kairos will survive their confrontation with the angels.

haihappen

I wonder if the Grey Pilgrim is coming back unchanged. The Tolkien-esque version would be that death changed him, thus him coming back as the White Pilgrim, basically an agent of good living on borrowed time. Did we ever find out how the Pilgrim lived this long in the first place?

It would have been a great deconstruction if the Saint and Pilgrim took the "live extension" formula from the alchemist that the Saint let go once. But that does not seem the case as I remember the Pilgrim saying he kept the Saint alive for a long time. Curious.

[Liliet](#)

I think they're just old people of regular lifespan length? Like, Pilgrim is in shape for a 90 year old, is all.

lennymaster

Saint literally died of old age just a few chapters ago. When they talk about Pilgrim they always say he did Above's bidding for the better part of a century. That puts him at roughly the same age as Black, around 80 years old or thereabouts. Black just stopped aging when he got his Name as all Villianous Named do.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Based on Cat's commentary in the timefield, Saint would have had 10 more years to live. Pilgrim is probably older. Heroes don't get perpetual youth, but it was mentioned they do get protection from the common infirmities of age, along with immunity from ordinary (plebeian?) disease.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I thought Black was 60ish.

RandomFan

Even if they had, it's heavily implied that the formula is more an "elixir of life" than an "elixir of immortality" in saint's story. If the Alchemist was very good at what he did, he might have added three seconds to Saint's life, in the end.

edrey

the pilgrim had thirty when her sister became ruler, at the same time nefarious hadn't become emperor,, so i would say eighty and a little more. black had twenty when he take that name so he is sixty and something years and for cat i lost count after that trick but that shouldnt count at all

[Mental Mouse](#)

With that story, my thought at the time was "and then she just lets him go? With nobody keeping an eye on him? No wonder it came back to haunt her!"

[Mental Mouse](#)

> though the gloom of Akua Sahelian's curtain of night had cast darkness over all

Waitasec, I thought the eclipsed day had passed, and most of the true night after, so that they were waiting for true dawn?

Clint

It is true night, but there's also Pilgrim's miraculous early-dawn-it-is-so-not-night-anymore miracle, which is in turn being covered by Akua's yes-it-is-it-sooooo-is-night miracle.

True dawn should wipe away all the nonsense, as well as ending true night.

Mental Mouse

Um, no. The whole point of Cat's surrender was *not* to set her Night directly against the Pilgrim's Light, and especially not to overcome it! So she let him spend his Shine to turn back the night, surrendered, let Viv bargain back the surrender in the face of the League. And then we get:

(From "Interlude: So We Shot Him")

> The orc looked up, in time to see the shining star that held back the night wane, and the truth of Creation replace it. The drow were struck down anew, before they could even properly stir.

""

> Akua Sahelian watched dawn rise, a crow on one side and a well on the other. "Fall," she said. A torrent of darkness shot up in the sky, and from dawn wove an eclipse.

Fayhem

shrug I'm guessing just on the basis of her personality/ approach to this whole situation that Cat went on the side of overpreparing vs. underpreparing; there might have been so much Night in that well that the artificial Night has lasted right through real night, but isn't still strong enough to override the dawn again.

rhyatris

rhyatris a0814cc162 <https://wakelet.com/wake/QSs8nbXTbktlqYEtUp0ND>

Interlude: Concourse III

"All law is upheld through violence, but when violence itself becomes the law then only disorder can come of it. As prosperity requires order, to ensure prosperity a ruler must therefore suborn violence to law."

– Extract from the memoirs of Dread Emperor Terribilis II

Razin Tanja was not yet lord of Malaga, and in truth might never be. Father had named him heir, before they left Levant, and so of all that could lay claim his right would be the foremost and hardest to dispute. Yet he remained only heir, until he'd stood the ancestral grounds of the Tanja and been acclaimed to lordship by his closest kin. Razin had no right to call on the oaths once sworn to his father and so the captains of Malaga could defy him his orders if they so wished, though on war-grounds with the death of Akil Tanja still fresh they'd chosen to follow his commands nonetheless. It was because of that frail arrangement and the rights of his Blood he was considered to have voice equal to the other three standing at this council, though it would be foolish to assume the others did not regard his standing to be the lowest among them. Yet here they were nonetheless, the four of highest authority among the Dominion's armies, having woken from the waking-dreams the Peregrine had sent them to hold these talks.

There were only seats and a deep-dug firepit within the tent, for though it belonged to Lord Yannu Marave it was not the same they'd before used for war councils. This one was rather smaller and behind ancient ward-stones brought from Levant, gifts from the Gigantes that had been rarely made and were even more rarely taken away from ancestral grounds. There they kept veiled from sorcery and spying the affairs of the families owning them, as it should be. Though the stones could have been set around a larger tent, Razin knew enough of sorcery to know that certain patterns must be kept arithmetically exact to exert their full strength. The wonder-makers of the Titanomachy were free in speaking the secrets of use when they granted gifts, though never the secrets of making, and no two such gifts were ever truly the same. If the Lord of Alava had chosen this lesser tent, it would be for good reason. Razin would acknowledge, in the quiet of his own thoughts, that the closer seats and crackling flames set to the talks a different tone than that of the battle-councils.

It was easier to see the truth of the others this way. Lord Yannu Marave – *Careful Yannu*, as the man was known in Levant – had not personally taken the field, yet the general of the Champion's Blood looked drained under his sweat-flecked facepaint. For him Razin found little compassion, for the man had slain his father even if the matter had been settled in fair and honourable duel. He found near as little for Lady Itima Ifriqui of the Brigand's Blood, who had held command of the Vaccei warriors but left her eldest son to lead the vanguard that'd tried the fortifications of the Callowans. Moro of the Brigand's Blood had been made to sleep again, fed herbal potions concocted by binders so that if there was more to be seen in dreams one of the Blood would see it. He might yet be allowed entrance to this tent, should he come with pressing knowledge. Though Lord Yannu sat on the other side of the flames and Lady Itima to Razin's right, to his left was the only person in this tent he counted as more companion than

foe. Lady Aquiline Osená, who twice had tried to see him slain before they had shared strife against the drow. He found his gaze drawn to her bronze-green paint, the sinuous lay of it covering every inch of skin not covered by her tanned leather vest.

He'd not forgot the sight of her running over moonlit snow like a whisper of smoke over water, beautiful and terrible like some ancient goddess of the hunt from olden days. Ashen Gods, how could he? He might as well been branded with a hot iron. Aquiline found his gaze, for he'd allowed himself to linger too long, and though the cast of her face was difficult to read under the colours she did not seem displeased in the slightest. Though Razin had known women before, something of the wicked glint in her eye had him feeling like he should blush. He looked away, careful not to display undue haste in doing so that would draw attention from the others but found he had to force down something like a smile.

"The Peregrine is dead," Yannu Marave said, voice shattering the silence. "We have all seen it."

And more besides, Razin thought. The journey the five Bestowed who'd gone to fight the Dead King had not been shared in full, he thought, but enough had been offered to know what need be known. The Grey Pilgrim had gone to death for the sake of all the world, and though the Black Queen was wicked and scheming she had not schemed his death nor broken the bargains she had made. The same could not be said of the Regicide, which had troubled all. Laurence de Montfort, though unfortunately Proceran, had been held in high esteem by most of them. Rarely had the Heavens known so righteous or unyielding a servant.

"The Tyrant of Helike must die," Lady Itima of the Brigand's Blood harshly said. "The Theodosian line should be ended for good, lest the viper keep biting again and again."

"Are we to wage war on the League, then?" Aquiline replied, unconvinced. "The One-Eyed King is poison to all he touches, but still surrounded by a great host."

"We can petition the Grand Alliance for soldiers," Lady Itima insisted.

"Which ally would you petition, Ifriqui?" Razin calmly said. "Ashur, broken at Thalassina and besieged on its own island by the fleets of Nicae? Or perhaps Procer, who even now makes desperate war on the Hidden Horror?"

"You would let this go unavenged, Tanza?" the Lady of Vaccei sneered. "All knew you without magic, but are you without *honour* as well? You talk like a coward."

His teeth clenched, his anger rose.

"Razin Tanja rode with a slayer band and fought death steel in hand," Aquiline sharply said. "Can you claim the same tonight, Itima Ifriqui? Did you even come close enough to draw or legionaries to loose a single arrow?"

"I have nothing to prove to you, girl," Lady Itima replied, tone just as sharp. "When you've fought in half as many battles as I have, then you-"

"The Peregrine is dead," Yannu Marave repeated, calm voice cutting through the rising voice. "And so, without his wise hand to guide us, we must decide where the honour of Levant lies."

Though neither of the two ladies were pleased with the interruption, they allowed it nonetheless. There would be other nights to pursue their feuds.

"Dangerous words, Marave," Aquiline warned. "It is the Holy Seljun who keeps the Dominion's honour, on behalf of the Majilis."

"Must we keep to that pretence even now that he is dead?" Lord Yannu asked, tone exhausted. "Custom is custom, yet we all knew who was the Isbili we followed – stripped of that name or not. In this tent are four of the five that would be seated if the Majilis was called to session. The fifth has not been more than a decoration in my lifetime."

"Hasn't been a ruler of the Pilgrim's line worth the name since Yasa Isbili," Lady Itima conceded.

"What it is you suggested, Lord Marave?" Razin stiffly asked.

"That decision must be made as to the fate of this Grand Alliance," the Lord of Alava said. "What has it brought us, to warrant what we've lost in its name?"

"You'd abandon the Tenth Crusade?" Aquiline asked, genuinely surprised.

"What Tenth Crusade is that?" Yannu Marave asked. "We've marched for more than a year now, and I've yet to see it. We have fought soldiers of Callow, soldiers of the League and now the draw servants of the Black Queen. Was it not the Tower we swore to war upon? Pretty words were spoken yet the truth is plain: only Ashur tread Wasteland soil, and it has been defeated. The Tenth Crusade is done, and if there can be said to have been so much as a thimble's worth victory to it then it belongs to the Queen of Callow."

He exhaled.

"Let us go home," he said. "Let us bury our dead and see to our lands, instead of chasing shadows for Cordelia Hasenbach's sake."

"Oaths were made," Lady Itima said.

"To march," Lord Yannu said. "March we have, and fought too. How much more can be owed? Aid was given, oaths kept."

"And what will happen, when the Dead King devours the entire Principate and raises it as an army that'll outnumber grains of sand?" Razin said. "Do you suppose he'll simply stop at our borders and turn around?"

"The Red Snake Wall has never been breached," the Lady of Vaccei said.

Her Blood knew the great work better than any other, having often snuck past it to raid Arlesite lands, but this was foolishness. Aquiline agreed, it seemed.

"Never has the Hidden Horror tried it," the Lady of Tartessos said. "Mighty as the enchantments of the spellsingers are, the Crown of the Dead is a spawning pool of endless fresh horrors. What manner of abomination might be made from the corpse of an empire? Best not find out, for all our sakes."

"It is not written in stone that Procer will fall," Lord Yannu said. "Bestowed have flocked to the north, and now both the Black Queen and the League offer truce to the First Prince. Let Procerans see to the defence of their own lands, and if friendship so compels your souls we may offer other bounty than the blood of our people. Foodstuffs and arms, loans of gold to fund their war."

"And so when the war for Calernia's survival is ended, we shall be remembered as those that crawled back to our own lands after the first taste of bloodshed," Aquiline scathingly said. "Or, even as the continent dies around us, we'll be cursed as the cowards who might have preserved it – if not for the *wisdom* of Yannu Marave."

"Thousands have been lost already," the Lord of Alava said. "Our old ally the Thalassocracy is ruined for at least a generation even if it shakes the Nicaean boot off its throat, which is hardly certain. Would you exhaust our every army as well so that Salia can reclaim Levant after the war end? We all know how much *alliance* meant to princes, after Callow lost its armies in the last eastern crusade."

"The First Prince is an honourable woman," Lady Itima said with a grimace, looking like it cost her to admit it.

Though the Brigand's Blood was fervent in its hatred of enemies abroad and Procerans in particular, the Lady of Vaccei had spoken of Cordelia Hasenbach with respect more than once. The peace forged between Vaccei and Procer by its First Prince could have been so costly as to ruin the Ifriqui, for none had stood behind Lady Itima in her warmongering and would have protested heavy reparations overmuch, but Hasenbach had been restrained and allowed for honour in peace. That'd been remembered just as much as the many treacheries of the Principate.

"Will her successor be as well?" Lord Yannu retorted. "Or will our spent lands be hungrily eyed by Arlesite crowns and a would-be conqueror be elected after her?"

"To ward off a betrayal that might be," Razin mildly said, "you instead offer a betrayal that is. I see no honour in this, Marave. Only fear."

"Hear hear," Aquiline said. "It might be the Tower we declared war on, but it is the Dead King that now seeks our end. Until the Last Dusk that old thing will be our enemy, and I will not retreat without even catching sight of his armies *once*."

The Lord of Alava turned to fix Itima of the Brigand's Blood with a steady look.

"Your judgement, Lady Itima?" Lord Yannu asked.

The older woman hesitated.

"It is not the war we agreed to fight, no denying that," she said. "And you speak sense in being wary of Arlesite friendship. Yet honour must be observed. Some may remain, but others should return."

Lord Yannu said nothing, gazing at them over the fire.

"Then let it be remembered that when the Enemy marched, Vaccei flinched and Alava turned tail," Lady Aquiline Osená said, tone cold and contemptuous. "Tartessos will not shame itself in such a manner. My captains will remain, and I with them. Run back behind tall walls, if that is the sum of you."

The gaze moved to him.

"Malaga stays," Razin simply said.

"You're not lord, boy," Lady Itima replied. "You've no call to make that decision. It will be put to the captains."

"I imagine it will," Razin Tanja of the Grim Binder's line replied. "I will be certain to tell them the Lady of Vaccei believes them so cowardly as to flee. No doubt they'll be eager to prove you right."

It might have been enough, Razin suspected, just for the captains to be told that retreat was Lord Yannu Marave's own notion. His slaying of Father had seen him politely despised among the men and women who'd spent decades in the service of Akil Tanja. Now that one of the Brigand's Blood had called their bravery into doubt this way? Gods, there might be honour-duels over insinuations they'd even considered returning south. Lord Yannu gazed at him for a long and silent moment, until he tiredly sighed.

"Has your shoulder been fully healed, Razin Tanja of Binder's Blood?" the Lord of Alava asked.

It had been. Though the drow's blow had been hard enough it was still tender, the healing of his binders had ensured that within perhaps a day he would perfectly hale. As it was, save for a mild ache when he moved there was naught left to fix. Still, a strange amusement took him when he realized they were not even speaking of the same shoulder wound as the previous time – it was not a goblin blade that'd hurt him last but a monstrous drow appendage.

"It has," Razin acknowledged.

He would not lower himself to lying over the matter, even if Yannu Marave meant now to kill him just as he'd killed Father.

"By smoke add dust you vowed enmity between us," Lord Yannu said. "To be set aside until healing was seen to."

The Lord of Alava rose from his seat, graceful for all his exhaustion.

"Let us settle matters of honour, then," Yannu of the Champion's Blood said.

"As was sworn," Razin calmly agreed, rising to match him.

The tent was not large, he thought, yet neither was it so small it could not be put to use as duelling-grounds. It would best to keep this away from the eyes of their captains, regardless.

"Will either of you require an officiant?" Lady Itima drawled. "I've no horse in this race, and so put forward my name."

Razin declined, as did Lord Yannu. Theirs would be a duel to the death, not first blood or first wound, and so there was no need of another pair of eyes to adjudicate when to call a halt. Aquiline had risen as well, and leaned closer so her whisper would not be overheard.

"I've seen the two of you fight, Razin," she said. "You're one of the finest blades I know, but he is finer still and experienced in such duels besides. You will not be the victor in this."

"He is tired," Razin replied.

"So are you," she said.

"I vowed enmity nonetheless," he told her.

She studied him in silence.

"So you did," Aquiline conceded.

She leaned closer still, and for a heartbeat he believed she might kiss him. Instead he swallowed a gasp when he felt a knife slide into his lower belly. He'd not even seen her draw. Still studying him, the Lady of Tartessos nodded approvingly.

"You didn't scream," she said, sounding proud. "Good. You may consider this the formal beginning of our courtship."

"Well," Razin croaked, "you've certainly made an impression."

"Lady Aquiline, what is your meaning by intervening here?" Lord Yannu coldly asked.

Aquiline graced his reply with a twitch of the lips before turning to the Lord of Alava.

"As Razin Tanja is injured, he may not fight you," the Lady of Tartessos said.

That was one way to delay the matter, he conceded. She'd even been kind enough to slide the blade somewhere that had little risk of killing him. Yet it would amount to little, for Yannu Marave's intent remained: the man would slay either himself or Aquiline, and so ensure that few enough captains remained that those of Malaga or Tartessos would follow the rest home simply not to be stranded without allies in the midst of the Principate. Before long, there would be one more-

"And so I claim his right as his champion," Aquiline Osená casually continued. "Any may contest this claim if they so wish, but it will have to be blade in hand."

"Aquiline," he began, "don't-"

"Alas, he has become delirious from the pain," she said. "And so his word can no longer be taken over the matter."

Lord Yannu's cool eyes moved from him to the Lady of Tartessos, assessing.

"So it seems," the Lord of Alava agreed.

The choice was clear, Razin supposed, between a mere unacclaimed heir like himself and a true ruling lady like Aquiline. If one of them had to die, in Yannu's eye she would be the better choice for unlike him, she could call on oaths to force her decisions onto captains. Knowing there was no point, he set aside the urge to continue protesting. Both duellists moved to the side of the tent, where they would have more room to move, and the other two of the Blood were invited to withdraw to the opposite end of the tent. Knife still in his belly, Razin obeyed.

"Even if she is the victor," Lady Itima casually told him. "I've not agreed to your own decision."

"What do you want, Ifriqui?" he grunted.

"The Tyrant of Helike," she murmured. "If not the annihilation of his line, then at least his head."

Aquiline and Yannu unsheathed their long, hooked swords and bowed. The Lord of Alava was taller than her, he could not help but notice. Larger and heavier with a great deal more blood on his hands. The Slayer's Blood were unnaturally skilled duellists, it was true, and Aquiline skilled even compared to her kin. Yet the Champion's Blood were known to reap lives like wheat and laugh through wounds great and small. There was no telling who would be the winner.

"We've no soldiers for that reckoning," Razin said. "And no ally to borrow them from."

"You know my terms, boy," the Lady of Vaccei simply replied. "They will not change. If you and the girl want my warriors, earn them."

The unspoken threat being that otherwise she would leave with her host, and perhaps the Alava men as well. If Yannu was slain and no other captains left, the Alavans might be shamed into remaining with the greater army – lest they be known as the sole warriors of the Dominion to have fled. If the Vaccei swords left with them, however, there could not be talk of dishonour. Or at least not quite as pointed, which for men who wanted to leave would suffice. Of course, this meant nothing unless Aquiline won. The two duellists had begun to move, he saw, yet blades had yet to clash. They were fighting over position, for now, looking for an opening to end it quick and clean. They were both tired and well-aware of it. The Alavan captains would be hard to keep, he thought, if Lord Yannu was killed. The hill-folk of Alava disliked taking orders from any save the Champion's Blood, and were prouder than most. Aquiline suddenly lunged forward, blade flickering forward, but Lord Yannu calmly parried and withdrew, with the hook of his blade scoring a long cut on the Lady of

Tartessos' cheek. Red blood trailed down onto paint of green and bronze.

This would only end when one of them died, Razin thought, and in that moment the thought disgusted him. The Peregrine's corpse was hardly cold that already the children of others lines were killing each other over disputes of honour. Was there really any honour to be found in this? Razin wondered, watching Aquiline deftly manoeuvre around the fire pit to avoid a blow that would have taken her hand and scoring a cut of her own on Lord Yannu's face – above his brow, where the blood might trickle down onto his eye if he was not careful. There was skill, that much was certain. Admirable skill. But honour? It was his own father being avenged, Razin reminded himself. His father who had been slain in a honour-duel much like this one, disagreeing over a decision of great import. Theirs were hard ways, Razin Tanja knew, but he'd been taught that they were also *honest* ways. Unlike Procerans who poisoned and schemed, unlike the Free Cities and their empty trials, those of Levant did not leave the rot to fester. The brought it out, cut it out, settled the matters so they would not grow and settled them in honour. Honour-duels, he thought. Honour-wars. So much honour was there to be found in the Dominion, and all of it derived from blood.

"If he kills her, the Osenas will feud with the Maraves," he quietly said.

And, though it would be early and almost presumptuous of him to say, the Tanja as well.

"So they will," Lady Itima shrugged.

She was unmoved, for this was simply the way of the world. Steel touched steel, as they watched, as a quick exchange that had Razin's heard racing saw Aquiline avoiding a cut throat but taking a blow to the side of the head from Lord Yannu's heavy pommel. She seemed dizzied, and so his stomach clenched in fear. Razin Tanja had stood just like he was standing now and watched his own father be slain, because this was an honourable way to settle things and it would be dishonourable of him to do otherwise. *This settles nothing*, he thought. *It is rule by the blade, and it brings ever more the same*. If Aquiline slew Yannu, avenging Razin's own father, then some other Marave would one day come for her to avenge Yannu. And then in years after someone would come for her killer, and on and on and *on* it would go until either Levant died or the Last Dusk came to pass. Razin felt as if he were standing on the edge of a tall precipice, as if he were about to fall, and every inch of him wanted to retreat. To take a step back. But he thought, in that moment, not of anything his father or teachers had ever said but of a pair of cool brown eyes and a cutting grin wreathed in smoke. *You mock yourself*, the great monster of their age had told him almost gently, *by*

pretending today did not happen. It did. Learn from it, or die in a ditch somewhere blaming everything but yourself.

"Enough," Razin Tanja of the Binder's Blood said.

Lady Itima eyed him curiously, but nothing else came of it.

"Enough," Razin hissed, and he ripped the knife out of his own guts.

Even when the blade clattered on the ground they did not cease their fighting, though when bleeding and wincing he stepped in between them the blades were held back.

"Razin," Aquiline harshly said, "do not-"

"How many years has it been, since the Dominion was founded?" he interrupted. "Three hundred and change, I'd say. That is how long it has been since Procerans ceased killing us and we've started doing it to ourselves. Enough, damn you."

"You dishonour yourself," Yannu Marave scorned him. "Fearing defeat-"

"The Valiant Champion took up arms to end tyrants, didn't she?" Razin said. "Rulers who forced their will through force of arms. I wonder how much difference she'd really see, between you and a prince."

The Lord of Alava paled, either in dismay or white-hot fury.

"If there is *honour* to be lost," Razin said, scorning the very word as he had himself been scorned, "then let it be mine."

"You would let your father's death go unavenged?" Aquiline asked, and there was something like contempt in her voice.

That wounded, it did, but still he must press on. *Learn from it, or die*, he told himself.

"Someone has to," he snarled back. "What does this change? What does any of this change?"

Something in him snapped, for if he'd been able to see this why hadn't they? Why did it have to be him, bearing those disdainful looks like he'd somehow spewed in their cup by arguing that more killing wasn't going to get them out of the put killing had first dug.

"It settles our disagreement," Lord Yannu said. "Move aside, Tanja, or be struck down."

Razin laughed.

"Do it," he said, extending his arms and wincing from the wound in his gut being stretched. "Is this what we are now? Even when the world is half-ended we kill each other over battle plans and decisions and how we've killed each other over the last two. Are we truly that... *little*?"

"I will not warn you again," Yannu Marave calmly told him.

"Move, Razin," Aquiline said, and though there was still disdain in the voice there was more worry.

It was not much of a balm, but it was not nothing.

"No," Razin said. "If you want to force this through look it in the eye, Yannu Marave – admit that you are willing to cut down an unarmed man to get your way."

"Damn you, boy," Lord Yannu hoarsely said, but raised his sword anyway.

The knife came to rest against his throat without anyone having it heard unsheathed. The Lord of Alava stilled.

"Keep talking, Tanja," Lady Itima said.

A convulsive chuckle ripped its way free of his throat.

"Do I truly need to make some great argument," he said, absurdly amused, "of why we should cease slaughtering each other at least on the same night when *the sky almost fell on our heads*?"

There was a heartbeat of silence.

"Gods Above," Razin said. "Look at us. We might as well be an Alamans farce: the four fools who duelled on the night the world almost ended. We've fought half a score in battles and skirmishes against the Army of Callow and the League and the drow, yet the closest the Dominion's armies have come to breaking this winter is this very hour. Think on that, for a moment. We've wounded ourselves more viciously than the Black Queen and all her heretic cohorts put together."

"Much have you chided us," Aquiline said, "yet you've said nothing of how to mend the wound."

"We bring back the Peregrine's corpse," Razin Tanja said. "And we put it to a proper pyre. And when that's done? We don't butcher ourselves like *fucking animals*. If we are to decide the fate of Levant, then let Levant have a say."

"The Holy Seljun?" Lady Itima said, sounding surprised.

"No," Lord Yannu softly said. "He means the captains. He means that we speak our case to an assembly of our soldiers, and choose our way by acclamation."

Razin nodded.

"And if the soldiers choose to go home?" Aquiline pointedly asked.

"Then we go home," Razin said. "We have to be willing to lose, Aquiline, to bend. Otherwise this only ever ends with swords bared."

"That has been our way," she replied, "and it has served us well."

"Has it?" he softly asked. "The Grey Pilgrim has been dead for nary an hour, and already in this tent the seeds of a decade of war have been sown. Can you truly say our way has served us well?"

"I will agree," Yannu Marave said, "to sending warriors to bring back the Peregrine in honour."

Razin admired, against his will, how calm the man's tone was when Itima's knife had yet to leave his throat.

"The escort and the assembly both have my agreement," Lady Itima of the Brigand's Blood said. "Be it battle or retreat, let it be chosen before Gods and men."

"The escort and the assembly," Aquiline agreed after a moment, tone brisk. "The right decision will be clear to all that are not craven fools."

Razin Tanja idly wondered if it would be ill-taken to send for a priest or a binder for his stomach wound before an honour guard of warriors was assembled to take the Peregrine back to his kin.

"The escort and the assembly," he said, as if there'd been any doubt.

He was still bleeding from the belly when they left the tent, but at least no one had died. That was, he decided, better than he'd had any right to hope for.

Caerulea

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bless u

Psyrix

ugh, I've honestly become a drug addict chasing a high xD, was refreshing and refreshing for 3 mins and was scared that there'd be a delay xD. Thank the godssss
(also, voteeee [don't have the link rn i'll add when im done reading the chappie]

Caerulea

Just so you know, the RSS feed updates with the url (I mean, you could have guessed it for this one but in general) before anything else updates with the link. 14 seconds after midnight tonight, though it has been later on occasion.

Jeffery Wells

I'm getting worried. I see the dates on the chapters as I'm catching up and the story isn't done yet! What am I going to do when I finally catch up? Wait??

[Javvies](#)

So, Razin's proving that Cat's decision to spare him was worth it.

Hmmmm, it will be interesting to see how Tariq having been resurrected will affect the Levantines.

Ah, so they at least saw enough to tell that Laurence was unreliable.

Cicero

Actually I reread that section, and I think it was a comment on how Cat killed the Saint and how that disquieted them. It was not a comment on Laurence's unreliability.

[Liliet](#)

I very much read it as a comment on Laurence's unreliability.

>though the Black Queen was wicked and scheming she had not schemed his death nor broken the bargains she had made. The same could not be said of the Regicide

The same does not refer to 'his death' specifically here because bargains are mentioned afterwards, it'd be a pretty tortured reading.

Morgenstern

Agreed. To make it un-tortured it would have to be something along the lines of "the same could not be said of *what she did to* the Regicide". It very much reads like the Regicide having schemed death or at least broken bargains, the way it is.

[Liliet](#)

She broke bargains, the way I'm seeing it, pretty simple. You know, the bargain of 'let's do what everyone agrees to do', the unspoken one.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It seems that reform is catching on.... strangely, with the champion of (New) Evil preaching peace against the stalwarts of Good.

Shveiran

It seems Cat's decision was very much on point, yes. Though I must say I wish her parting words with Razin had been more on point.

Don't get me wrong, I LOVE this outcome. I wish it was ice cream so I could eat it up, I like it so much. But while I'm enamored with the outcome, Cat's words seem a bit weak to provoke this sharp a turn.

I mean, Razin ends up very close to Cat's own point of view here, if through Dominion lens: sick of the death, realizing the status quo is a vicious cycle that cannot be escaped unless we are willing to break it. I can't help but wish her words to him had been closer to such insight. As is, moving from "You mock yourself, by pretending today did not happen. It did. Learn from it, or die in a ditch somewhere blaming everything but yourself." to this radical a change seems a bit weak.

Well, perhaps not weak, but it seems a lot more related to Razin than the words, it's what I'm saying. Perhaps something more pointed could be arranged, before publication, if that's what EE is planning? I think it wouldn't be forced to have Cat say something more related to breaking the cycle of violence.

Jessica Day

I disagree with this assessment. She told him to look inward and take responsibility. Such a thing required one to look at their own belief structures. Having done so, he essentially is asking the same in turn of the others.

Ultimate_Procrastinator

"it seems a lot more related to Razin than the words"

If I may offer my opinion, that assessment is exactly why I liked what happened here. Razin didn't upset the status quo because Cat made a neat, perfectly applicable speech to him, just like so many other, usually trite works of fiction; rather, he received a nudge, saw that the direction it pushed him in was a good one, and rolled with it on his own. It feels much more human, real, and satisfying to me to see Razin take a relatively minor comment, see how it applies, and go well beyond the initial scope of the statement. It also helps, in my mind, that he just recently saw his father die; losing family and friends has a way of making people people stop and reassess what is important to them, then take actions they never would have been brave or committed enough to do beforehand.

[daegone823](#)

Lets see this from his point of view he comes from a long line of mages and is constantly put down by everyone besides his father for his lack of magic. He already has to prove himself and be creative in how he solves his problems since he does not have magic to rely on. He has had to make practical choices.

- Black queen defeated him, because he was so focused on honor/pride/blood

- Whipped/dishonored in front of all dominion for his mistake(humbled)

- His father was defeated in an honor duel because of honor/pride/blood

- He sets aside honor/pride/blood, to help a former enemy(who attempted to have him murdered twice), because they share a common goal

- He along with many of the dominion see the Peregrine himself set aside honor/pride/blood to ally with villains to face a common evil.

- The last nudge was seeing a new found ally/love interest risking their life for his honor/pride/blood in a pointless duel that would most likely result in 12 years of war.

He had seen the success of putting aside pride and the downfalls of on blind belief adherence to honor. The Black

Queen may have begun his journey of discovery but it was the lessons from the events that surrounded the war that allowed him to truly learn from the mistakes of the past.

Chat was a beginning but

[Liliet](#)

This!

Catherine only brushed him by; it feels a lot more real for him to have come to the same conclusion from entirely different premises. The conclusion is a good one, that's all.

[Liliet](#)

I think it being unrelated is precisely the point. Catherine isn't magically enchanting the continent into following her views, she is just one ripple on the wave of change where Razin is another. A thing she incidentally said about something entirely unrelated was well-put enough to resonate with him on a basic level and end up applicable here. He's not following her, they're standing side by side, she just figured it out first.

Soronel Haetir

You're cruel making us wait for the great reveal,

Evadrea

Another fantastic chapter ^.^

Hitogami

It really is one of the greats.

nick012000

I was honestly expecting Razin Tanja to get a Name the moment he pulled the knife out of his stomach.

Gunslinger

Me too but then I expect everyone to get Names. Not my fault there are so many cool characters in this story

jonnnney

Too many Bestowed on the field for a new one to pop up without damn good reason. A single decision might push Razin towards a Name, but he has been too weak and wishy washy for a bit of common sense to yield a name.

Fayhem

"A bit of common sense" doesn't really cover putting yourself between two duelists and daring one of them to kill you because you're trying to overturn literally centuries of deeply ingrained cultural dysfunction, in my eyes. Razin is more than how you're painting him, in this moment in particular.

Agent J

What he did is impressive, yes. But it's leagues away from the goblin steel that is the Will of Named. There's a level of madness to every Named we know intimately. Cat, Tariq, Hakram, Laurence, Amadeus, Indrani, Kairos, Masego. Their madness takes different forms and is expressed in different ways, but all are mad to the bone.

For what else can one be when they look at the lay of Creation and *know* the truth of it. Cat *knows* it can be better. Hakram *knows* she can make it so. Black *knows* the game is rigged and that he can win despite that. Laurence *knows* Evil must be Cut from the world. Indrani *knows* the only way to live is to absolutely fucking *live*. Masego *knows* Creation itself is the greatest miracle ever woven and that he can crack the code of it. Our lovely little lordling, by comparison, knows nothing at all.

Razin is far from mad, his will far from steel, and he is far from Named.

daegone823

I mean Cat was given the Squire name after being stabbed by the Black Knight.
One named changed her world along with her purpose to change the status quo.

Razin may get a name from
Being stabbed stealthily in the belly by slayers
Whipped by the binders
Trading blades with the champion
***tricking the brigands line
**** receiving the blessing of the confirmed Grey
Pilgrim

Just saying there is a great deal of weight behind the actions he takes, and the pattern is there.
He could be the Dominator, The New Blood, Progenitor

Agent J

Cat was given a Claim to the Name Squire by the reigning Black Knight. Being able to grant that Claim is his due.

All that you have listed pales in comparison to what Cordelia has done and she's not getting a Name anytime soon. Named are exceedingly rare. What Razin has accomplished is not. It does not set him apart from the chaff. Hells, the Arlesite up north warring on the Dead King has a greater story behind his sails, along with more absurd feats, and inspires greater awe in those around him, yet he still bears no Name and you would argue being whipped for his massive fuck up in Sarcella is a worthwhile accomplishment that could lead to a Name?

Honestly, if the readers were the ones doling out Names instead of Providence, a third of Calernia would be Bestowed.

Andrew Mitchell

While I agree that Razin (and the noble up north whose name I can't recall) might (or might not) get a name. I think you're massively overstating readers' opinions on this matter.

> Honestly, if the readers were the ones doling out Names instead of Providence, a third of Calernia would be Bestowed.

Think about this for a second. There's about 400,000 troops and civilians present in Iserre. To my recollection, there is literally only two people who have been the subject of recent Name speculation – Razin and Rozala. That's 1 out of 200,000. Or 0.0005%

Agent J

... I was being hyperbolic.

ninegardens

>Hells, the Arlesite up north warring on the Dead King has a greater story behind his sails

I mean.... I kind of wonder if that one IS secretly named, given how enigmatic he is, and how we see glimpses of him but its explicitly not clear how he does all this shit.

[Liliet](#)

Frederik? Honestly agreed, I was surprised he wasn't already Named when he led the charge against an enemy Named

[daegone823](#)

He was raised in a society where killing at the drop of a hat was expected. Merely the fact that two experienced generals launched into a duel resulting in death and no one batted an eye in the middle of a crusade no less. The expectation to kill one another due to past slights was strong. He was the son of the general and the expectation for him to be killed or kill was also high.

He was raised in this society where blood meant more than personal beliefs meant more than the lives of all. In a society like that he decided to argue for peace.

I understand that we have seen a lot of big things going down and expectation are very high for who should be named and who should not be.

- He is royalty which in this universe gives him a high chance of being named.

- He has a vengeance story (pattern of three with Yanu)

- He has purpose to change the honor bound ways of his people

- He has faced a drow with hundred of years of killing behind its back and survived

While there may be many in the dominion who use honor or respond when there honor is questioned. He chose to let go, to give up his honor for peace.

This was one of the pivot moments Chat is always using in her favor. Guess what Razin did the exact same thing that the Black Queen did and his efforts halted a war and ensured none of the generals died for blood feuds.

"Razin felt as if he were standing on the edge of a tall precipice, as if he were about to fall, and every inch of him wanted to retreat. To take a step back. But he thought, in that moment, not of anything his father or teachers had ever said but of a pair of cool brown eyes [...] Learn from it, or die in a ditch somewhere blaming everything but yourself."

He knew the implications of his actions and chose to do them anyway. He chose to do something that has not been done for years to settle for peace. I mean no offence but did Hakram have any major feats besides being near Catherine. I think Razin does to just deserve a name but needs one to enact the changes he has already begun.

[Liliet](#)

I think the difference between Hakram and Razin here is, Hakram was *widely known* as the Squire's adjutant and fit the cultural groove for that well. He's The Adjutant, as stories go, it makes sense.

The What would you call Razin? How would you define him in terms of easily summarized and easily understood character archetypes?

[Mental Mouse](#)

You are being distracted by Black's theatrics, which another Named (I forget which) was very clear was strictly unnecessary. He might well get his name by a touch from Pilgrim. Pilgrim *could* apply a thwack upside the head with his new staff (I assume he'll just pick one out of the Twilight environment), but Pilgrim is way less theatrical than Black was, so I doubt he'll do that unless Razin manages to annoy him first.

[daegone823](#)

Razin is the son of the Grim Binder, he is widely known as the child without magic that still stands against beast. He faced the black queen survived, faced the drow on the fields and survived, challenged Yanu in front of assembly of all under the dominion. In the future he will bed the slayer, trick the brigand, and maybe even duel Yanu then deny him death so he will forever live in shame, and for all these deeds and more he will be recognized by the Peregrine who unbeknownst to all killed his own nephew to ensure peace. No to mention his country right now does not have to follow him but they do out of loyalty to his decisions. Nothing binds them to him they follow him because they see the soul of a hero in his blood. His actions have proven as much.

Razin will be the one he will see as the future for Dominion someone who sees past there honor and what is good and instead focus on what must be done however much it cost personally.

I think with all these feats it would be foolish not to think he should at least become a candidate for a name. Don't forget the side of good has been losing a great deal of heroes lately. I think they are seeking new heroes to fill in the gaps left by old. He can fulfill some story line that has him defeat the dead king or at least be apart of the group that faces the hidden horror. the weakest hero usually yeild the greatest pivot for the heavens to work through.

[Mental Mouse](#)

In particular, note how he set "true" honor against Yannu's "careful" exploitation of the rules. "[Do you actually care about honor, or just killing anyone who says "no" to you?]"

And the keystone: "We have to be willing to lose, Aquiline, to bend.". Honor-duels to the death are for people who can't handle losing, who'd rather burn the house down than move to a different chair.

WuseMajor

Eh, peacemakers don't get Names.

....ok, well, the Grey Pilgrim is still taken and he'd probably think it was sacrilegious to end up with any name other than Grim Binder.

Still, people remember and write stories about Warriors, not diplomats.

Morgenstern

Well, was it not a grim binding of opposed forces what he just did? ^^

[Mental Mouse](#)

He would likely get a transitional name to start with, which would position him to go in any of several directions. And there are certainly less-violent names, they just don't show up in the fight scenes.

My very own name

Hierarch is pretty much a diplomat Name, at least originally.

And peacemakers might be the minority, but they are there as well. If they truly believe in peace, it would be possible to fuel a Name.

[Euodiachloris](#)

There might be an issue as to which Name would fit. That was Grey Pilgrim work, and he's of the wrong line. Also... that Name is currently complicated by being a little bit of a silver mackerel tabby of the Schrödinger variety. 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not yet, but that may come (Aquiline isn't herself Named anyway). Remember that Names come from purpose, and Razin is developing a new purpose.

Shveiran

If Cat hadn't raised Tariq, I could have seen him claim Gray Pilgrim by trying to maintain the peace he wished for.

[Liliet](#)

"Pilgrim" means "wanderer". Tariq earned the Name by going off to wander the land and do good where he can. Until and unless Razin goes on a similar journey, he cannot lay claim there.

Tenthyr

Oh snap, character growth so sudden it gave the poor boy whiplash.

erebus42

I mean Razin has been in the process of reevaluating himself ever since getting his ass handed to him by Cat and his father dying. I'm personally ok with him having an epiphany. It may be sudden but it wasn't completely out of nowhere

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, this is a followup on thoughts he was having in the song lyrics interludes, too.

Ultimate_Procrastinator

Also, people reassessing what's important to them right after the death of a family member or friend (like, say, a father killed in an honor duel) is pretty realistic, as is them suddenly committing to things they would not have before

[Mental Mouse](#)

And a "stomachache". 😊

Rup

.from "a whisper of smoke over water"
(Ps what an image)
(Pps sounds like name of a song)

[Mental Mouse](#)

[Smoke on The Water](#)... classic!

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, I thought of that too when I read that line. I've loved that first guitar riff since I was a wee lad,

Shequi

That's an interesting turn; fresh from a fight as a great swordsman, and now speaking cooperation. I think Bestowal approaches for Razin Tanja of the Grim Binder's Blood.

Novice

It would be hilarious if he gets the Name of Squire.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Wrong culture, I think. He might well get one of the Levantine names. Or, the way things are going, he might even coin a new Name.

Andrew Mitchell

My money's on a new Name. But I'm also in two minds about whether or not he will get a Name and if so whether or not that will be a good thing. I mean, I'd hate for him to get a leadership related Name and then be excluded from actually leading the Levantines.

Decius

The Peregrine's values appear to have migrated to a new host, who is willing to see himself dishonored if it means not forcing an unending series of feuds and wars over honor.

[Liliet](#)

♥ ♥ ♥

Andrew Mitchell

I was NOT expecting Cat's chastisement of Razin to have such an impact so quickly. She certainly knows what words to say.

It's going to be great seeing the GP rally the assembly of captains in person, and not just as a corpse.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine serves as a wise crone without even trying to – she didn't actually mean anything by her words other than the immediate context, she just chose them well enough they ended up echoing to apply everywhere ♥ ♥ ♥

Cha 20!

Andrew Mitchell

Cha 20?!? No wonder she does so well on bluff and intimidate checks. 😊

Andrew Mitchell

Ooops, and diplomacy checks too.

[Liliet](#)

You see exactly what I mean 😊

(and seduction checks *without even trying...*)

Gunslinger

Poor Rosala never stood a chance.

[Liliet](#)

"Are you trying to seduce your way out of this, Black Queen?"

"No"

"Shame"

Andrew Mitchell

hahahhaha

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Catherine serves as a wise crone without even trying to

More like a "wise child", really. A crone is the representative of tradition and accumulated wisdom. But a wise child can answer what a crone cannot, precisely because they "don't know better" – they are not blinded by "received wisdom", nor bound by precedent.

[Liliet](#)

I would say "do not look away from what happened today" is more along the lines of "canned yet still actually valid wisdom" that you'd get from a crone :3

Catherine's thing is very largely repeating rather obvious things that she was brought up on and then recontextualized and verified: killing is bad, trust is good, etc. That's the "old person" kind of wisdom, not the child kind :3

Mental Mouse

Huh? I'd say the opposite, "killing is bad, trust is good" is simple enough for a child. It's the "grown-ups" who then tell children "don't trust *those people*", and "explain" (justify) why they have to hurt someone. (Especially when they say "it's for your own good"!) But more generally, it's young folks that challenge the rules, while old folks try to enforce them.

The Pilgrim himself was a classic example, until Cat battered him into yielding by demonstrating that her methods could consistently beat his. Cat's brilliance is in taking what she's been taught and transforming it with creativity, specifically by challenging the assumptions that came along with it.

Liliet

Do note that when she was younger Catherine very much favored the approach of "kill it with fire until it stops moving". It's the dynamic – is the person saying the thing because they haven't yet been taught otherwise, or are they saying it *because they tried the other way and found out this one was better*? Catherine has very much tried the other way. It's not about the simplicity, it's about the *source* of the wisdom. Catherine's is experience. disproportionately extensive for her age.

NZPIEFACE

I just realized, but Bard is basically Contessa.

ninegardens

I mean... similar OP story role, with mysterious motives and questionable free will but...

I was gonna say but, but then after that list I'm not so sure.

Bard has to LEARN her skills. She has age, but learning. Contessa gets them by magic, but has no context. in some sense, I'd say Bard is Wis/Cha while Contessa is (effectively) Int and Dex.

But yes, having thought about, I agree, the similarities run deep.

RandomFan

That's one model. I think it's the least useful: Contessa has a goal, and motions to get to them, but there's no logic to the tapestry, and the only thing you can do to mitigate her is make victory impossible, or to use weaknesses that I don't think anyone in canon both knows and can exploit.

Another is this: Bard is a very wise, but still limited, seer, who is frantically trying to tug the story her way. She's fallible, she's failed before and will fail again, but usually the failures only have prices in time, suffering or forms she doesn't have to pay. There's not much you can do to beat her, but there's a lot that can make her lose- it's just a lot harder to make her stay defeated than anything else, and she has some amount of supernatural support for her

More like Jack Slash, given their main powers.

Navi-Hank

He's coming into a name. Probably a Gillan one by his desire to break the system

Andrew Mitchell

(I expect Gillan was a typo and you meant Villain.)

I think a Villain Name is unlikely, but not impossible. He's not setting out to take or exercise power for himself. He's just using his leadership skills & position to shake up an existing system for the good of everyone. I think that's pretty unambiguously Good. Plus, you know, Levantines as a nation are aligned to Good. I think Razin's headed towards a Good Name.

I don't know what it would be though. What do you think?

Jessica Day

Seeing as this change was wrought by Cat, I think we may be moving away from names. Just look at the princess in the previous chapter, upset at how names decide her life and others. The closer we get to the Accords, the more I think Cat's influence will be pushing people away from names. She herself no longer has a name and neither does Vivienne. And now people begin to break away from those old stories...

And so when the young heir stands between 2 blades it feels less like someone trying to impose their will and more like

someone pleading for a better way, for a change to the old system.

Andrew Mitchell

You make a good case for that. I would be happy with Ranzin becoming a true Levantine leader without a Name.

My very own name

But we have to take into account the fact that Levantine culture highly values its Named, while Procer, as a culture, does not easily lead to Named. So, probably, Levantines get many more Named.

caoimhinh

His desire is not to break the system nor is it powered by ambitions, he merely wants the well-being of his nation and to stop needless bloodshed.

If he actually gets a Name, it will be a Heroic one.

[Liliet](#)

By that logic, the five founders of Levant were villains too. Can we stop pretending Evil = Chaos and Good = Law for five seconds?

dalazar6942

Based on the prologue of PGtE, the first page of the book of all things no less, The two sides of the debate that have come to be called Good and Evil, or Above and Below, actually are neither. They spawned out of the choice between guidance and rule, or control. However, looking at the behaviors of both sides, from the Choirs' absolute values and requirements, and the Devils overwriting of localized reality, you have to appreciate that it's never really been specified whether Good or Evil represented guidance or rule. So as for Good = Law and Evil = Chaos, just look at the republic of Bellephron. Law = Chaos = Evil.

[Fayhem](#)

IIRC we have word of god from EE that Above and Below actually do correspond roughly to good and evil as we would conventionally understand them. As far as the Book of All Things goes, it's no more necessarily correct than any other book written by mortals.

Further, even if the BoAT is correct there I don't think the Gods making Creation to settle an argument over guidance/control vs. freedom/anarchy (depending on what coat of paint you put on each of those) necessarily invalidates the

premise that they're actually good and evil respectively. You can make an argument that they wouldn't use creation to settle an argument over good vs. evil as such because there is no settling such an argument between two sets of entities that are (meta)physically incapable of changing their nature; an argument over approach, on the other hand, might actually be possible to settle.

[Liliet](#)

000H good point re: argument over approach ♥

Qwormuli

Gods have no precedent in inability to change and the only(albeit not 100% reliable, I'll agree) source present claims the opposite. Demons too, are capable of change, it seems. Only angels are seen as static(currently) and I suspect them to be as far from the big G's as us.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, the Book of All Things is just. A religious book. Both Catherine and Laurence have commented on its limited... credibility.

And WoG is that Good=good and Evil=evil...

And honestly the in-universe conclusion of it works as well
_ _

StarlightGlimmer

My crazy conspiracy theory is that Above and Below do not map to the factions of the Titans, but there are elements of both in each. Contrition and Justice are aligned with the Titans who seek to rule mortals, given their demands for total obedience, while Mercy is aligned with guiding mortals to something greater. Below offers power to get someone started making their own way, and they offer the creation destroying power of demons to prove mortals are too foolish to make their own way. As I said, crazy conspiracy theory.

Qwormuli

THANK YOU.

Qwormuli

The people responding to you seem to forgotten differences between good and Good and vice versa, it seems to me. Personally, I think of it as a bit of a tossup, if he even gets a name, as diffusers of strife have had rough times with names.

[Liliet](#)

We haven't "forgotten" it, we just remember how the mechanics actually work.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Man, Razin is really growing on me.

Fascinating look at the internal politics of Levant. They're trying to run their government like a band of Five but none of them can stand each other.

[Liliet](#)

The part where Razin tried to stop Aquiline, but Yannu agreed to her argument he is delirious from pain... and Razin thought "of course he'd rather kill her than me". Like, holy fucking shit. Their law is based on emotional decisions made in the height of passion, but it doesn't exactly enforce that you aren't allowed to do the same things out of political convenience, how would it? Even though that's not the intent.

This is just... pain. All pain.

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, the Levantine are pretty stupid in that regard 😏

[Liliet](#)

Less stupid and more horrifying. "Which of the two teenagers is it more politically convenient for me to murder through the opportunity given to me by killing the father of one of them?"

konstantinvoncarstein

Stupid on the sense that it is even possible that the situation can come to it.

caoimhinh

Also, arrogant. Their take on "honor" is simply fame and prestige, not actual honorable conduct, morals or ethics. On another note, Razin and Aquiline are *at least* in their early twenties. I'm almost sure Aquiline is older than Catherine.

Cat just came out of the Ever Dark calling practically everyone without wrinkles in the face a child, because she now feels like an old lady weary due to waging war. Going like "look at them, they are so young" when they are her age and older, hahaha.

She has also had a streak of condescending thoughts during this book, though it's less noticeable when she is thinking about someone who is older than thirty. Kairos is the notable exception to all this, as he is about 16-17 years old but Cat has never acted or even thought in a condescending manner about Kairos; this is of course because Kairos is a dangerous individual who has proved that can't be underestimated, he is a Named armed with ~~madness~~ *visionary wisdom* and large resourcefulness, after all.

Liliet

I wouldn't call 'oh my god why are CHILDREN in their twenties COMMANDING ARMIES' condescending... but then, I think like that too (and I'm not much older than Cat AND I WOULD NOT LIKE TO COMMAND AN ARMY THANKS)

tbh their take on honor is SUPPOSED to include morals. That's why Razin still has something to compare it to. It just, uh, derailed a little along the way -_-

Oh, and Kairos is no more than a year younger than Cat. He was 16 as of Interlude: Precipitation, which falls on Cat being 17 but not yet 18.

Mental Mouse

Cat complaining about "children" commanding armies is pretty rich. I think she herself is still young enough to be snippy about people who "don't get it" – that is, she lacks the maturity to realize that just because *she's* figured something out doesn't mean it is, or should be, obvious to everyone else.

Liliet

I mean tbh Cat DOES pack it with realizing 'oh my god I am also a child'. It's rich indeed 😊

caoimhinh

I know, right?

She came out of the Ever Dark with the attitude of someone facing a mid-life crisis, suddenly everyone under 30 is "so young" and she starts to condescend them and feel bad for fighting them because she is "killing children", plus her interactions with the Good King Edward showed plans of dying once she succeeds in stopping the meaningless wars...

And she is just 21. She should stop acting like a 70 years-old veteran who fought in both World Wars. She has seen some very nasty shit in her campaigns from

both sides of the fence of Good and Evil, which makes sense for her to be weary of war and slaughter, but the condescending attitude should stop. It's really not like Catherine to look at someone and treat them like ignorant children simply because of their age, when she knows perfectly well that wisdom doesn't come from age but from experience and some of the brightest people she has met are as young as her (like Akua, Masego and Indrani).

[Liliet](#)

Seriously, there's nothing condescending about not wanting to kill people.

caoimhinh

True, there isn't.

But there's a whole world of difference in "I don't want to kill people" and "I don't want to kill these ignorant innocent children", especially when those "children" are about the same age of the person saying it (in their late teens and early twenties).

Saying "you are mistaken" is not the same as saying "you made a mistake, idiot", two completely different attitudes, right?

It's not about the act, but the attitude.

The issue here is that Catherine is mentally putting herself both distant and above the others, with an attitude of "I know the answer, and you ignorant brats don't." which one could see when Winter took hold of her (at those times, both her speech and inner thoughts narration patterns shifted to a more prideful tone, like a predator staring at prey) but the current Cat is free of that mental influence and principle alienation, plus she is taking a more humane path that aims to benefit everyone in Calernia as a whole, beyond being Good or Evil, so that condescending attitude is not fitting with her nor suitable for her goals.

[Liliet](#)

I'm... still not seeing it. What exact quotes are you referring to?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, that's what I'm saying. That prematurely world-weary attitude, condescending to those who don't see what she sees – that's classic teenage behavior, though it does sometimes last into early 20s.

Normally parents don't appreciate that, and try to train it out of their own kids... but Cat hasn't had much in the way of actual parenting.

Learning not to condescend is something that (sometimes) comes with maturity. She'll get there – even while she's been battering and manipulating others to her will, she's also been getting her own harsh lessons.

caoimhinh

Hmm, I would argue that world-weary attitude, condescending attitude is something that comes from old people.

The pretense that one has all answers and can do things better than everyone else if one were in their position, or that one can do everything one sets to do if one simply had the right chance, and usually blaming others for the lack of those, *that's* teenage attitude.

It's common to see a defiant teenager thinking he knows better than the elders and accompanied with the eagerness to prove it, however it's the elders who have the *weariness* in their attitude when they say things like "Oh, child, if you only knew" while sighing into the distance and wondering why the world is as it is, which is kinda what Cat has been doing.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Old people come by world-weariness and the voice of experience honestly (e.g., Pilgrim and Saint). When teenagers do it, it's unwarranted and usually misaimed. Cat is an exceptional case, exactly because she's facing "experience and treachery" with "youthful vigor, idealism"... and also some treachery of her own. Not to mention lateral thinking for good measure. 😊

caoimhinh

Exactly.

I agree with you, but I think my point stands. Cat really shouldn't be looking into the distance and sighing while saying "they are so young" when she sees people that are her same age.

caoimhinh

Yeah, but Catherine isn't horrified by young people leading armies, she is looking at them with a melancholic expression and muttering to herself "look at them... so young, with so much life ahead, and I have to kill them" as if she were an old person. That's the attitude that someone like Pilgrim or Saint would have, after a lifetime of fighting and arriving to the point where their enemies are people vastly younger than themselves. Cat shouldn't be acting in such a way, she is not much older than any of them.

Dominion's Honor has stopped being moral a long time ago, to the point that right now it's all about fame and prestige, "saving face" like they say in chinese novels, it seems like the ones who practiced honors including morals were only their founders.

I think Kairos was like 3-4 years younger than Cat, when we were first shown Kairos, he had just come to power, and he was somewhere between 13 and 15, Cat was already close to 18 (she was 15 by chapter 1, making her 16 by the beginning of book 2 and 17 somewhere in the middle of it -we never know of Catherine's birthdays, she and other people simply vaguely mention her age at intervals-).

[Liliet](#)

>Cat shouldn't be acting in such a way, she is not much older than any of them.

Don't see why she shouldn't. True statements remain true, and "young people shouldn't be dying in a war" is a true statement regardless of how old the person saying it is.

>when we were first shown Kairos, he had just come to power

Nope! He was 16 and he'd been a ruler for a solid 3 years by then. I can't really look for the quote right now but he's mentioned to be 16 in Precipitation.

And Cat would be about 17.5 in Precipitation, bc reasonable timeline puts her birthday in winter and

Precipitation was in summer. So depending on when Kairos's birthday is, he could be exactly a year younger (16.5), a year and a half younger (just turned 16), or half a year younger (about to be 17). Or anything in between, a year being average.

Mental Mouse

IIRC even Cat doesn't know her actual birthday, given she's a foundling. Of course, many cultures in our own world count age by "winters", New Year's, Midsummer's Day, or such like; that's mostly cultures that don't have very good calendars, but in this case something like that would be a reasonable measure for the orphanage to take.

Javvies

More likely her birthdate is recorded as the day she was taken in as a ward by the Imperial Orphanage. Or the day she was "found", if those aren't the same.

Ie, if she were found at the Orphanage's front door, she'd probably be taken in right away, but if she was left/found somewhere else, she might not have been taken immediately to the Orphanage as a ward, but might have been treated as a misplaced child with parents to be located.

Liliet

Huh, yeah, she probably counts her 'birthday' on the new year (which there's no reason not to assume to be in midwinter, seeing how that's what fits with the timeline decently).

Mental Mouse

> Man, Razin is really growing on me.

Razin is *growing*, full stop. If he survives, he will be a legendary leader.

Mental Mouse

Also, Pilgrim's gonna be proud of him!

Fayhem

Right?? I'm predicting the Peregrine showing up at the height of the conclave dealy the Levantines are calling and basically looking like he came back from the dead to back Razin up, so talk about a credibility booster there.

(Meanwhile I'm betting Cat will actually be giving her armies and prob the Procerans an absolutely scalding talking-to for almost starting the fight she's put so much effort into stopping by being paranoid and freaking out; let's note that for all the dysfunction in the Levantines' council here "taking vengeance" on the Black Queen like everybody else was thinking they'd try to was literally never even on the table for a single second).

Liliet

I do love how everyone was assuming they'd be idiots while actually... they were idiots in a completely different way!

Qwormuli

The nation of murderhobos. Works as well as it sounds.

Novice

Cat changing the core stories of different nations small step by small step is honestly a treat to behold. I can't wait for the debates/discussions between characters when the Accords proposal hits the table.

Also, I'm glad this particular ship is still sailing. Not gonna lie, sliding a knife through his belly as the start of the courtship is metal as fuck.

RoflCat

Imagine a 'how I met you mother' moment in the future.

"So we hated each other's guts at the start, then I found her fighting figure very hot, and then she confessed to me with a stab to the stomach"

caoimhinh

Praesi Nobility would be proud. They would make a toast of good wine and even bring out the expensive poison for flavor.

erebus42

A Praesi wedding without at least three betrayals is considered a dull affair.

Euodiachloris

And at least seven different poisons, darling. None of this "just use ricin" boorishness, either. A proper wedding requires an interlocking web of toxins that coordinate as a distinct theme. Preferably to go with/ culminate with the flowers.

Mental Mouse

Ohh, there's a lot of poisonous flowers! You'd probably need magic to make their odors poisonous, though, as opposed to convincing people to eat them. 😊

Jessica Day

Lol you just made me flash to the Wicked Witch cackling over a crystal ball repeating "poppies!"

Raved Thrad

Let's not forget that the bride tried to get him killed twice soon after they met. That's got to be the foundation of a legendary romance.

vamair

Third time's the charm?

Raved Thrad

Apparently, third time's a wedding. 😊

Andrew Mitchell

Third time's a bedding? 😊

Shveiran

Just for that scene, I now have a thing for Aquiline of Tartessos like few others.

I mean, DAMN. That's the good stuff.

Mental Mouse

This is a "sharper" version of the trope "Slap Slap Kiss Kiss".

Gerion

And so the ripples spread. And the true meaning of Uncivil Wars unfolds – for there is no "Civil" war.

Andrew Mitchell

Ooooh, I like that idea. 👍

superkeaton

The boy speaks sense. Cat's becoming a terrible teacher.

erebus42

Nothing helps one reevaluate themselves like brutal, soul crushing defeat.

Mental Mouse

> Nothing helps one reevaluate themselves like brutal, soul crushing defeat.

Just ask Cat! Or an increasing number of her friends...

erebus42

Well well Razin Tanja, aren't you full of surprises. Looks like Cat made a good call in sparing you.

Also, awww Aquiline you big romantic! Nothing say love like a knife wound in the stomach and volunteering as their champion in a duel to the death. I'm shipping you guys already. #Raziline

Novice

We were told that love ends with the kiss of a knife and yet it sure as shit started this one.

caoimhinh

Captains of Malava: Lord Razin! What happened? You are wounded!

Razin (still bleeding and clutching his stomach): *smiles wryly* Well. it's a funny story, actually.

Captains of Malava: What happened, sir?

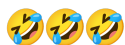
Razin: Well... I started a courtship with Lady Aquiline.

Captains of Malava: Oh. That explains it. Good for you, sir. We see it was successful.

Razin: Is that sarcasm or do you really believe me?

Captains of Malava: Yes.

Andrew Mitchell



NZPIEFACE

wtf how do you bold words

konstantinvoncarstein

word, but without all the !!

Shine

konstantinvoncarstein

It did not work
Word

caoimhinh

I learned recently thanks to the advise of other commenters, now I will pass on the wisdom. Basically you just add variations of before and after the words that you want changed, but in the closure you need to put

So for example, to write bold words you put the letter b inside the and you put /b inside the closing to mark that it is the end of the words you want altered.

That way, we can write in **bold words** , in *itallics* and even in ~~slashed text~~.

It's pretty cool right? Adds a nice touch to the commends.

This site can show you how to do it in more detail and with many more examples:

https://www.w3schools.com/html/html_formatting.asp

[Liliet](#)

[b]bolded text[/b] but with angled brackets instead of square

caoimhinh

Oh, they are called angle brackets in English? I knew them as inequality signs.

One learns something new every day, *thank you~*

Andrew Mitchell

Both names are correct. They're inequality signs when they are being used in mathematics. And angled brackets when used in text (and HTML text formatting).

[Liliet](#)

I know them as that too, but since they're used as brackets in html, i guess,

Raivshard

Direct HTML code, huh? Interesting, since most sites use simplified forum code. I wonder if it allows CSS references... 🤔

Andrew Mitchell

ASFAIK it's just simple HTML formatting. But give it a CSS a go and let me know what you find. 😊

BTW I recently discovered that the same simple HTML formatting can be used on Patreon as well.

[Liliet](#)

I think it doesn't allow most things -_- it's only limited html

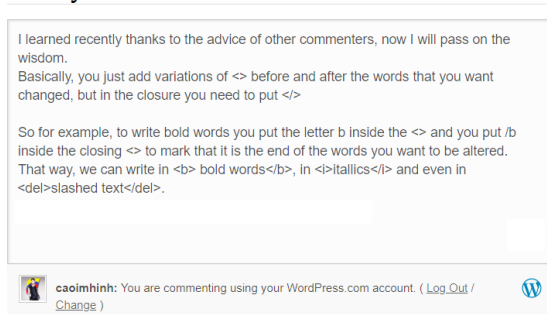
Raivshard

No surprise. Maybe when I'm home I'll take a look at the code behind the comment box.

caoimhinh

Eh, the previous comment didn't come out as I expected. I made an image to explain better and uploaded it to imgur, here's the link:

How you write it in the comment.



What comes out as your comment, and how it looks for others.



caoimhinh

I learned recently thanks to the advice of other commenters, now I will pass on the wisdom. Basically you just add variations of before and after the words that you want changed, but in the closure you need to put

So for example, to write bold words you put the letter b inside the and you put /b inside the closing to mark that it is the end of the words you want altered.

That way, we can write in **bold words** , in *italics* and even in ~~slashed text~~.

Notice the lack of <> in the posted comment, this is due to the site interpreting it as an invalid command.

Nevertheless, the link I posted in the comment above leads you to a site that explains how to use the html script commands.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

wtf this uses HTML??? I've been trying markdown or BB code for ages

[Mental Mouse](#)

Nope, WordPress uses an HTML subset. Not the whole spec, but you can do some of the markup (bold, italic, strike), link anchors, and entities.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

big oof

Andrew Mitchell

And 'blockquote' too.

caoimhinh

Yeah, pure heretic sorcery. I tell you.

Andrew Mitchell

Yeah, different sites use different formatting. It's a pain. I discovered that Patreon uses HTML too.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Most blogs use either HTML or BBcode for comments; Github and (IIRC) MediaWiki use markdown. Using something besides HTML is a pretty good security measure – if your site isn't passing comments through an HTML parser at all, you don't have to worry about security holes in a parser that's trying (and perhaps failing) to dumb down a full-power HTML engine (letting visitors write HTML code for public display is a security nightmare).

Andrew Mitchell

Indeed!

My very own name

MediaWiki unfortunately has its own syntax. It's similar to Markdown in some ways, but not at all in others. I feel like it's usually more powerful, but at the same time makes for uglier "source code", which is understandable, given that Markdown was the one made specifically to look pretty with or without processing.

Andrew Mitchell

Good points. You made me consider which one started first and my feeling was that MediaWiki was created much earlier but I was wrong. MediaWiki launched in 2003 and Markdown was invented in 2004 so they may have been separate efforts or Markdown may have been an effort to make something better than MediaWiki's approach.

RandomFan

To avoid invalid commands, \\ is magic. If this works on the usual rules, \ becomes \\. At least, I think. If this looks like nonsense, I'm sorry.

[Mental Mouse](#)

There's a certain amount of backoff so that random less-than signs or backslashes don't break text when they weren't actually being used in HTML elements. However, you can also use entities to get various characters when they *would* otherwise start something in HTML:

< for <
> also works for > (but is usually unnecessary)
& for &

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks for the tip.

Raved Thrad

Meanwhile, in the Tartessian corner:

"Do you see? Looks like he got knifed."

"Is that...?"

"Yes. Looks like she angled it just right."

"Gods Above, she must be so *hot* for him!"

"Tell the attendants to lay out the good pillows. And the red bed spread. That way, the blood stains don't show."

"Squee!"

SpacyRicochet

"And tell them to prepare the toys... the sharp ones."

Raved Thrad

That really depends on whether or not they've both had enough ~~blood-flowing~~ foreplay to proceed directly to the ~~thrusting~~ boinking. No screaming, though: apparently both like it quiet.

Jessica Day

When do this become Kushiel's Dart?

caoimhinh

Oh? That trilogy has been recommended to me before, I'm told it has an interesting take on angels, plus certain... themes about the search of love and pleasure. With the main character being an *anguisette*.



caoimhinh

And let's not forget that Razin comes from a long line of Binders, so he probably has training in bondage. This is quite the kinky pair, aren't they? After all, Razin has just awakened to the pleasure of knife-point courtship by Aquiline. Hahahahaha



ATRDCI

I mean, they are both of the Blood after all. This sort of play is all but inevitable

Insanenoodlyguy

I do hope the courtship is still on.

Andrew Mitchell

Oh, it's ON all right! 😊

Sparsebeard

I wonder if the realm of Twilight would be considered a flying fortress...

Novice

It can't be a fortress, anyone and their pure-bred Liessen charger can walk through the realm. Well, except for the undead I presume.

Sparsebeard

Yet, if you reverse the roles and a villain made a flying realm where everyone and their pure breed Zombie horse could walk through (except the living I presume) people would start to get offended... discrimination I tell you!

I wonder if the DK could send a small band of adventurers to protect all that is evil and unholy from this abomination!!!

Liliet

Actually I don't think they'd be offended. Terrified, maybe, but only if the villain actually used the realm to attack them, otherwise it'd be like the Dark Day protocols: nobody actually KNOWS those exist 😊

Fayhem

> the Dark Day protocols: nobody actually KNOWS those exist 😊

*knew

Mental Mouse

I suspect that his Revenants don't normally get their own storylines, being subordinate to their master. King Edward was an exception, but he was carrying his own original storyline, to the effect of "the Good King has been in durance vile, but eventually there shall come a chance for redemption and revenge". For that matter, he'd said as much back in Keter... and it seems even the Dead King failed his Evil Overlord Trope save against it.

Mental Mouse

Not quite, but Cat is totally putting the lie to Malicia's claim that the Age of Wonders has ended. New goddess(es), formerly hidden race comes out as badasses, new (friendly) fork of Arcadia, and of course a legendary Queen to match Triumphant.

Rup

M.S.N.R.

****touches forehead****

Raved Thrad

With how often Chekhov's Gun is used in this series, I wouldn't be surprised if, at some point, it is revealed that Catherine is the reincarnation of Triumphant.

Andrew Mitchell

ASFAIK there's no reincarnation in PGtE. Unless you count devils which get a clean re-spawn.

But the Triumphant thing does seem to be a gun ready to fire but no one really knows when or where. Except EE, of course.

Mental Mouse

Eh,,, apparently the Praesi have been doing that MSNR thing almost since her defeat (thousands of years?). As one of the others (Hakram?) said, "that is a prayer" – and while Below isn't terribly demonstrative, I suspect even they will respect a prayer that's been repeated by an entire nation for millennia. My puckish suggestion aside, I wouldn't hold my breath.

That said, the legend of the Black Queen might well eclipse that of the Dread Empress! Indeed, that might be a key factor in Cat's long-term success. After all, she *is* trying to rewrite the stories!

Mental Mouse

Wouldn't it be a hoot if she turned out to be the Book 6 opponent?

caoimhinh

I saw it more akin to a meteor before, but now that it's stabilized it's more akin to a moon.

ninegardens

I am now thinking of the big grinning moon from Majora's mask

caoimhinh

That's absolutely what it would have looked like if Tyrant had gotten grasp of it.

He was even researching about crashing it on the Serenity.

caoimhinh

LMAO, I like Aquiline, starting the formal courtship with a knife. That's one crazy woman, but that means a very interesting relationship for Razin. And it pretty much assures us that there will be no being unfaithful to that wife.

Good for Razin for being the voice of reason, willing to risk shame and death for the sake of *what is right* rather than their wicked version of honor that honestly seems like nothing more than reputation and fame, rather than true honorable deeds.

Who would have thought that the first one to agree with him and back his proposal of looking for a peaceful solution would be Itima?

The interludes aren't over yet, it seems I was right there was something more than the Levantines marching to fight; apparently there won't be even the slightest conflict now, just the other two armies tensing due to their speculation while the Dominion's army is actually just holding an assembly, not preparing to fight. If they send a message to Procer the doubts will be cleared pretty fast.

Unless... maybe the place Catherine will appear (with the Peregrine, but no one knows that) is somewhere close to Levant's camp, or worse, in the middle of their camp. That would mean that Hakram, who has friendship-powered radar attuned to Catherine, will march a group of Legionaries there, that could really add to the tension since it could easily be misunderstood.

Typos found:

they granted gits / they granted gifts

he would perfectly hale / he would be perfectly hale

By smoke add dust / By smoke and dust

It the Vaccei swords left / If the Vaccei swords left

the though disgusted him / the thought disgusted him

The brought it / They brought it

Razin's heard racing / Razin's heart racing

out of the put / out of the pit

IDKWhoitis

I'm personally worried that after a silent and quick chat, Pilgrim will tell Cat he should stay dead.

Like he has accumulated a lot of narrative weight that can be used, and maybe he is really broken over Saint dying. Or maybe Fate will be a fickle bitch, and the Twilight realm won't work with a guiding star of some sort...

So Cat showing up with Grey's corpse in the middle of the Lev camp will truly turn the tension well past 11.

Faiir

I told you, HERESY

[Liliet](#)

>I'm personally worried that after a silent and quick chat, Pilgrim will tell Cat he should stay dead.

And you think she'll just take that? Pfff. She'll come back with him bound and gagged if she has to

Agent J

The Black Queen will not be denied.

caoimhinh

I think he will take it with resignation, accepting that he still has a role to fulfill, besides, the Ophanim will be there talking to him, so that will probably help him cope with his resurrection better.

Pilgrim had said that he was weary from the long life he has lived and the bitter experience of fighting Evil and alleviating suffering in the world, but he referred to his death as "when the Heavens see fit to let me rest" so I don't think he will run or become depressed, nor do I think he will blame Cat or the Angels for his resurrection. He will carry on with his duty; I actually believe he will be more shocked by the fact that the Ophanim allowed Cat to do resurrect him, that could blow his mind.

[Liliet](#)

YEAH.

And he'd probably be like 'wow if 2/2 sides agree here I GUESS I DONT GET TO ARGUE'

Raved Thrad

Yandere girls are the BEST!

caoimhinh



Ah, I see you're a man of culture as well.

Raved Thrad

There's just something about not knowing whether or not you'll wake up in the morning. 😊



caoimhinh

Living to the limit, right?
Then again, if one is faithful, one has nothing to fear of

a *Yandere*. Those guys only die due to being cheaters XD.



IDKWhoitis

It seems like our boy here might be getting the first shivers of a Name...

And he seems to be fond of breaking traditions and cycles...
Using the words our dear old Cat tossed at him.

Also, I was have expecting the Grey Pilgrim to come into the tent near the end screaming something along the lines of "What are you doing children?!?"

Amy Lear

At this point I'm genuinely starting to be concerned that erraticerrata might actually consume all of the remaining awesome left in the universe before completing this book.

At this rate, our universe will be left pale and barren beyond the one spark of a tome, and its sequel will never be written because there is simply nothing left.

Please, erraticerrata, you must *stop*. Or, if you cannot stop, you must *slow down*.

All of existence is in peril at your hands.

sutortyrannus

This is beautiful.

"Don't. It's really stupid."

"Ok."

[daegone823](#)

Yanu knew what he was doing was cowardly, and he would not be able to hold his throne if ran away especially with the slayer's woman all but guaranteeing his name would be mud.

He would go back home be killed by his own men/kin "for the blood"

broadaxe

Hmm, It's interesting that originally they had to make a god, then slay the god to get the realm they needed, but they ended up with a still borne god that they then resurrected. Just thought of that, curious reversal of the plans 😊

caoimhinh

They made a god, then that god abdicated his throne and a large part of his power but likely retained a lot of it, then they put another person on the throne of that god and we don't know if he became a god too for a while (though I don't think so, given how he simply stabbed himself with a common sword and bled to death so perhaps the transfiguration hadn't taken place yet) and then he died, but was resurrected probably as a mortal again...

Just as planned.

Jessica Day

The text explicitly stated they left without a wisp of power.

caoimhinh

Not exactly.

Cat couldn't *feel* any power from them, but she could tell there was something there, they were not mere mortals. They are an entirely new kind of Fae, and we are still uncertain whether the death of the Twilight King (Tariq, as he was the one with the crown at the moment) means the dissolution of the Twilight Court of Fae, and if the former Wild Hunt still have a connection to it through which they can draw power, or maybe they are completely free Fae unbound to any Court right now.

Jessica Day

Perhaps. I get the impression they traded everything for freedom but I wouldn't be too surprised if you are right.

Nairne .01

I have been wondering about the nature of the Bard's powers.

What if roles, names, the narrative is part of a domain that is spread across the whole continent of Celernia? Even if it's not the Bard's domain, what if there is a god that didn't join a side, and is just enjoying the show. The Hierarch called her a servant of Stillness.

It just came to me when I thought how Cat influenced Razin.

Nairne .01

What do you guys think?

konstantinvoncarstein

I don't think it is a domain. Anyway, Named are not exclusive to Calernia, the Yan Tei empire is governed by both a Villain and a Hero.

konstantinvoncarstein

Stillness as in "statu quo", I think.

Andrew Mitchell

That was my interpretation too.

[Liliet](#)

So this is not the first time a woman stabbed a man in the stomach as a means of saving their life.

Beginning of courtship, end of apprenticeship, you say pot-ay-to
I say pot-ah-to 😊

Naeddyr

The way to a man's heart is through his stomach.

skyboy

The way to a woman's heart is through her ribcage.

Worked on Akua, at least.

Andrew Mitchell

hahahhaha

[Liliet](#)

Worked *for* Akua, too, it seems like.

Raved Thrad

You just have to angle the knife right. 😊

Rup



Author Unknown

Instead he swallowed a gasp when he felt a knife slide into his lower belly. He'd not even seen her draw. Still studying him, the Lady of Tartessos nodded approvingly.

I can't help but feel this is still more humane than high school romances.

Raved Thrad

Still a better romance than Twishite.

[daegone823](#)

So in order to win a girls heart from a slayers group
-46 lashes
-Face an old horror that lived beneath the ground murdering
it's own kin
-Save her life, twice
- Take a shank in the belly without screaming

You may now begin courtship...

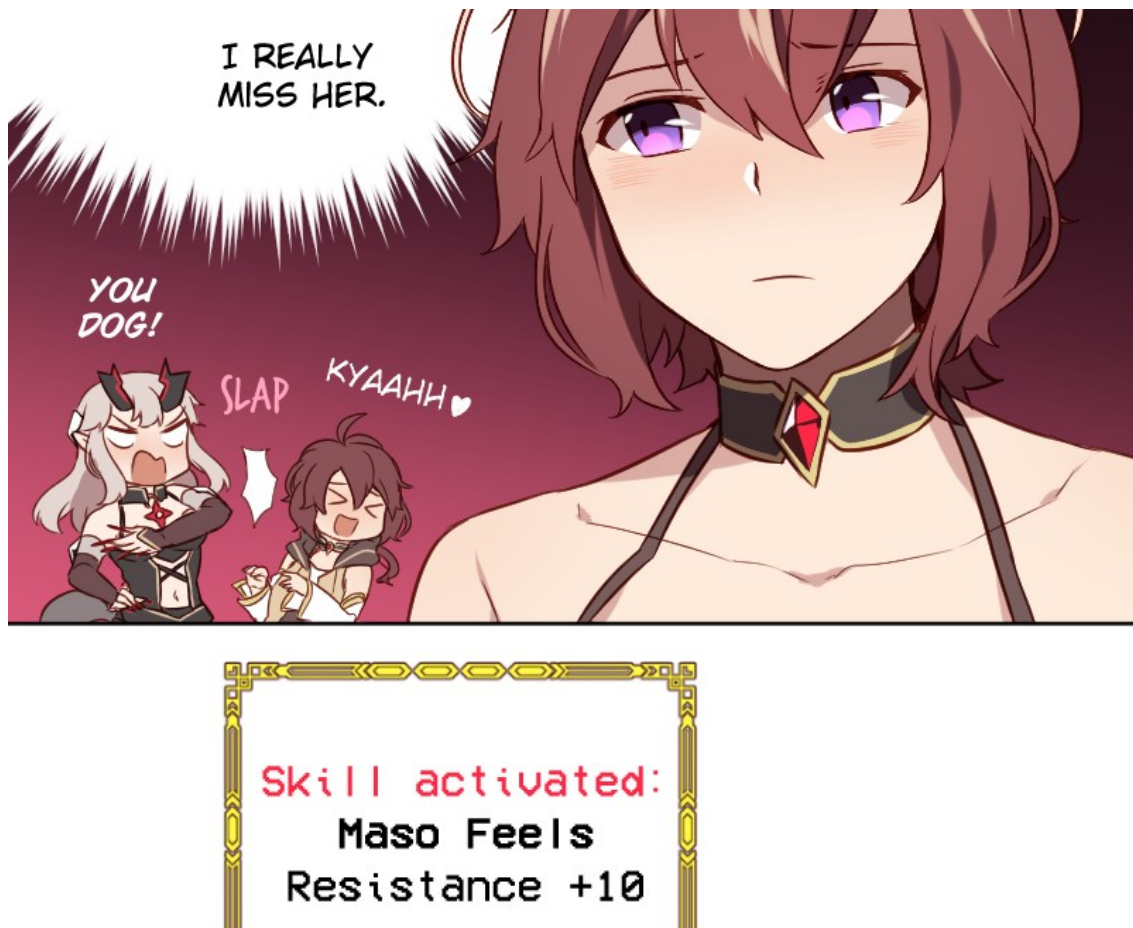
Raved Thrad

Achievement unlocked: HURTS SO GOOD

caoimhinh

Hahahahaha I have the perfect reaction image for that!

Source: Mage & Demon Queen.



Raved Thrad

Pink eyes! ♥

Raved Thrad

LOL! It reads like a bad JRPG.

It reminds me of Ikazuchi no Senshi Raidy.

Alegio

To be honest I was expecting Razin to become Named in the middle of that.

[daegone823](#)

If he was to receive a name it might be a villainous one he is going against one of the practices of the above. Evil names are not just for the “bad” people they are for the people who want to change the reality of there world through there own means not relying on the heavens.

Just saying Hierarch(absolute democracy), Archer(freedom in all things), Heirophant (dissecting miracles). Theses are not exactly evil. The peaceful approach that Razin is ordering the dominion to take goes against 300 years of ingrained honor. The

champions blood Mansin was willing to throw away his life for honor/ the blood.

Razin is asking them to turn away from there blood. to betray what they have built there nation on. He is hinting at causing the same amount of upheaval that Chat demanded of the drow "to be better". Even more alarming he was successful by only shedding his own blood.

He is at the precipice for something but maybe not a heroic name.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Good is "follow these rules for everyone's sake". Evil is "do whatever you want and can get away with". Yannu is a lot closer to Evil than Razin is; the latter is just reminding people that there are more rules than the ones about when you get to try and kill someone.

[Liliet](#)

>Evil names are not just for the "bad" people they are for the people who want to change the reality of there world through there own means not relying on the heavens.

No.

Most heroes don't "rely" on the Heavens for anything, Heavens just choose to support them.

Evil Names are for:

- people who deliberately turn to Below for power;
- people politically aligned with Evil.

mavant

[i]I wait outside the pilgrim's door
With insufficient schemes.
The black queen chants
the funeral march,
The cracked brass bells will ring;
To summon back the fire witch
To the court of the crimson king.[/i]

[Mental Mouse](#)

Ref: [King Crimson – In The Court Of King Krimson](#) (full lyrics in description).

Wealthy Aardvark

This is still my favorite chapter in the entire Guide. Thank you, EE.

Interlude: Concourse IV

"A victor has a hundred friends, every last born yesterday."

– Helikean saying

Abigail of Summerholm – still a general, despite her best efforts – had finally figured it out. As the Gods despised her for reasons known only to them, her attempts at mild incompetence had instead been reward with successes that'd earned her a reputation as a 'tactical prodigy'. Her continued protests that she was not such thing were being taken as humility instead of desperation, to the extent that Marshal Juniper had commended her for being 'grounded' and 'not letting acclaim go to her head'. Abigail had never seen anything half so horrifying in her life as the Hellhound attempting an approving look, and she'd had goblin stew. Which was made by goblins and not *of* goblins, as she really wished someone had told her before she'd eaten a bowl out of fear of offending a whole swarm of sappers. Ah, but it'd been naïve of her to assume that simply trying to pass on her responsibilities to literally anyone else would be enough to see her demoted back to a set of responsibilities less gallows-adjacent. Indeed, from the towering heights of her fresh understanding she now grasped how guileless and green that manner of thinking had been. But she'd learned, oh yes she had. They were going to sweep her under the rug quietly, maybe even enlarge her retirement pension so she kept her mouth shut for the rest of her life, which as far as she was concerned was the ideal state of affairs. Of course, her most cunning plans still hinged on the Deadhand not getting them all killed before Morning Bell.

Which was, unfortunately, looking less likely by the moment.

"Six hundred, at least," the Adjutant calmly said. "Personal armsmen of the Blood, by the looks of their equipment."

The tall, broad-shouldered villain spoke in that way orcs often learned to after they'd been out of the Steppes for a few years: slower than they would in Kharsum, and careful to avoid being too loud. You could tell how long they'd been out of the homeland by the way they talked, since those fresh out of the Clans hadn't usually yet figured out that a big orc speaking loud and harshly in a hard-to-understand accent tended to make humans a *mite* twitchy. Hakram Deadhand struck Abigail as the kind of person who

went around spending a lot of time thinking about what other people thought before acting all cold and measured. She'd known folks like that more than once, they were the traders who'd done the best under the Praesi at Summerholm. Those who'd not choked on pride when it came to getting trade permits from the easterners, who'd not balked at serving legionaries and greasing the palms of Wasteland scribes. They usually weren't nice people but they did tend to be able to afford nice meals, which in Abigail's humble opinion was a lot more useful a trait.

"The Tartessos and Malaga captains were hard in a scrap," General Abigail replied. "And they're not even the people known for having heavy foot."

Please, Lord Deadhand, she silently prayed, do not ask my two cohorts to take that damned hill. Four hundred legionaries, even veterans, trying to dislodge those armsmen would be like swinging a trout at a wall: amusing, except for the trout. She'd seen those bastards in Sarcella taking a run at sapper-dug positions and still make a dent, since they refused to die even when shot repeatedly and didn't seem to have a single self-preserving bone in their bodies. It was always worse when one of their nobles was around, too, it put an unnecessary amount of additional steel to their already-steel countenance in the face of danger.

"That would be the Alava warriors, whose colours are also flying," the Adjutant said. "I receive your point, general. An assault before reinforcements are had would be difficult."

Huh. She'd not expected that to work. Did praying to people actually change things? She'd heard that there was talk about making the odd offering to the Crows these days, which she didn't entirely disapprove of. The Gods Above asked for a lot, birds were probably *much* easier to bribe as far as deities went. Alms took hard coin, but you could get dead rats from any poorly-kept cellar.

"Haven't been told why we set out either, sir," Abigail said. "Er, lord? My lord?"

"Adjutant will do," the ivory-fanged villain told her.

Ugh, he'd even done the fucking grin just like Krolem did. Someone really needed to have a sit down with all these orcs and explain to them that some big muscled bastard displaying enough sharp teeth to fill the mouths of at least three jackals wasn't ever going to be taken as *reassuring* by anyone with any sense. At least the goblins were aware they were horrifying as all Hells when they did it.

"We are to serve as the escort for Her Majesty's return to Creation," the Adjutant said.

Abigail was well-learned in the ways of the Army of Callow, by now, so she didn't need to have it spelled out for her. Of course it'd gotten worse, it always did it this bloody outfit.

"It's on that hill isn't," she whined. "With all the warriors on it."

And any moment now the Dominion was going to be reinforced by a battalion of demons, or a legion of angels, and still the Deadhand would say: *take me that hill, General Abigail, or no general's pension for you.* And that was the thing, wasn't it? Abigail had come too far to retire without the pension now, she refused to attend that many bloody strategic briefings and not make it out of this damned war set for life.

"Your intuition is as acute as rumoured," Deadhand said.

The Summerholm girl didn't squint at the villain, because that was a good way to get your eyes eaten, but she did wonder how long it'd taken the orc to perfect a tone of voice that so perfectly straddled the line between serene and sardonic.

"Thank you," she said, cleared her throat. "Sir lord Adjutant."

"As for why you in particular are serving as commanding officer for the cohorts instead of a commander or even a legate, it's simple enough," the one-handed orc gravelled. "You're one of the few people Catherine has ever personally promoted. I was curious."

Abigail looked up at the sky, casting out her despair for any god willing to hear her. How much would it cost, for people to stop getting 'curious' about her? She was willing to resume attending sermons, if that was what it took. Or offer, like, three dead rabbits to the Crows. She could probably get a few of those from goblins if she found a gaggle around a campfire and put up bottles to trade.

"I'm flattered," she lied.

She was going to have to implement that plan faster than she'd earlier intended, the general thought. Gods forgive her, she might even have to accept that dinner invitation Grandmaster Brandon Talbot had sent her. Rumour was he extended that to every rising Callowan officer, but she'd thought to avoid the whole thing like the plague by claiming that a goblin had eaten the invitation. It would have held up, they ate basically anything if they got hungry enough or were dared to. Now, though, she'd have to use a nice public dinner with important people to say something horribly, *absurdly* racist somewhere too many high officers were seated for it to be ignored. She was still debating on what to say, that was the issue. She wasn't going to start mouthing off about greenskins – not when she had so many of them

close to her and bearing sharp things – and going after Wastelanders tended to earn retribution. Taghreb officers watched each other's backs, and if there was a single Soninke in this damned army that couldn't do magic or didn't have a friend who could she'd yet to run into them.

No, it'd have to be about real foreigners. She'd been mulling over arguing that 'all Procerans should be eaten, especially the children'. If she said that in front of enough people it'd have to be bad enough she was encouraged to retire, right?

"And now Rozala Malanza graces us with her presence," Hakram Deadhand said. "This is going to get *interesting*."

It was hard to make out much in the darkness, especially at a distance, but the Procerans were hard to miss: they'd brought their own torches, and not few. Even after the Tyrant of Helike had tumbled them down from Arcadia it looked like the princes had been able to put together a contingent of horse. Abigail had a hard time guessing numbers, given the swiftness they rode with and the movement of the torches, but there had to be at least two hundred riders there. Trailing behind at a slower pace, men-at-arms whose strength was easier to gauge were approaching in a column. Easily five hundred there, Abigail saw with dismay. This was about to turn into a bloody godsdamned mess, wasn't it? The Dominion had six hundred foot, but it also had the hill and some of those hard warrior-priests who'd melted the Princekiller's own plate over him. Princess Malanza of Wherever and Whatnot had that light Proceran horse and some decent fighting men for a sum of seven hundred but Abigail suspected charging up a hill at Levantine armsmen wasn't likely to end well for Malanza, horse or not.

And then there was them, approaching with two cohorts of two hundred. One of regulars, veterans from Arcadia and the Doom, and the other a lighter force: sappers, mages, crossbowmen. The weakest force of the three, if you didn't count that Hakram fucking Deadhand was part of it. She'd seen the orc Named thrown like a trebuchet stone at Akua's Folly and walk it off before assaulting a rebel bastion near single-handed. The Adjutant could turn it into a fight, if not a very pleasant one.

"Our reinforcements might get there in time," General Abigail tried.

And they might, pretty please, bring with them someone high up enough in rank this would no longer be her problem. The low hill the Dominion had taken and would allegedly be the Black Queen's stepping stone back into Creation was roughly between the camps of Levant, Procer and Callow but the dark-haired woman would bet on the Army of Callow's muster over anyone else's without batting an eye. No one else drilled battle-muster save for the Legions, so if this got out of hand their own legionaries should get here

quicker than either the Levantines or the Procerans. Of course, there were a lot more of those around so that'd only go so far.

"Unlikely," the Adjutant said, eyes moving across the darkness.

He could see where she could not, Abigail knew.

"We're mobilizing faster," he acknowledged, "but they began earlier. This is the vanguard for all of us, and it'll have to be by our hands it's settled: by the time reinforcements are on the field Catherine will have returned and it will be over."

Please don't order me to take that hill, Lord Deadhand sir,
Abigail desperately thought.

"I suppose we'll have to take that hill," the orc mused, and she whimpered a little inside.

He cast at her an almost knowing look before offering the barest flash of fang.

"Not alone, though," the Adjutant said. "See the banner riding towards us? Rozala Malanza seeks audience."

—

Princess Rozala rode her destrier hard, intent on snatching this disaster out of Below's ruinous grasp before they all ended up paying for it.

Whatever it was the Blood had been up to in their closed council, in the wake of its end they'd not bothered to even acknowledge the presence of the messengers she kept sending to their camp. They'd gathered entire war parties of their finest warriors, sent for the Lanterns and marched out for the hill where Rozala's mages said enough power was currently coalescing to burn a town to the ground. The Black Queen's return must be imminent, her people had concluded, and its location was beyond dispute. Which meant the way the Levantines had made for it without missing a beat unlikely to be a coincidence. The riders she'd sent after the Dominion forces with orders to try anything short of baring blades to get an audience with the lords and ladies had been turned away roughly, though at least not in utter silence: they'd been informed that this was a sacred matter, and concerning only the Blood. No interference would be brooked. Heart clenching, Princess Rozala had sent forward the soldiers she'd been able to muster up until then and left Louis to assemble the second wave.

The Callowans weren't blind, of course, so they'd sent out a force as well. Just two cohorts from the Third Army, but that force's general had something of a reputation: the Levantines spoke of her with a measure of respect for the way she'd held on to the city of Sarcella even when taken by surprise and

outnumbered. This General Abigail was also said to have slaughtered like lambs almost a quarter of the Levantine mages during the first assault on the southern palisade, which was no small thing. Rozala Malanza's ancestors had fought binders often and known them to be dangerous foes when moved to war. Still, even led by a superb field tactician four hundred legionaries were not a major force. Not so great as the one fielded by Levant, at least, or even the hasty party the Princess of Aquitan had put together and led forth. Or so she had fought, until she'd seen the Black Queen's own banner flying above the cohorts: silver on black, a balance bearing a sword and a crown. That the sword weighed heavier said much of the woman who'd taken that heraldry as her own, and how it was she'd come to be Queen in Callow – *of Callow*, Rozala corrected herself. Best not make that mistake around Foundling herself, her temper was well-known.

That the *Sword and Crown* flew could simply be sign that it was expected the Black Queen would return under it. Or it could mean that the Adjutant was with the cohorts, and that'd *complicate* things. In truth, it could be said that Hakram Deadhand was the least dangerous of Catherine Foundling's woeful company. He lacked the terrifying great sorceries of the Hierophant, the Archer's talent for sudden and surprising killing strokes and even the Thief's rumoured endowment to steal anything from a fleet or river barges to some fae princess' sorcery. The Adjutant was a lesser figure in the stories that'd made it across the mountains, as the nature of his Damnation would imply. Yet there was one thing all tales agreed on – of all the Woe, none were so implacably loyal to the Black Queen as her Adjutant. The others, Rozala felt confident she might have swayed into holding their hand. The Archer was drunken sot, for all her lethality, the Hierophant had read through then entire peace talks after the Battle of the Camps and the Thief had been cautious even before she'd been rumoured to have lost her power. The Adjutant, though? Be reputation, he was temperate and even-handed sort. Those, in Rozala's experience, always tended to make the worst fanatics.

Few things were as troublesome as an otherwise reasonable man believing an unreasonable thing.

Escort riding close around her even as the rest of her vanguard advanced on the hill where the Levantines had taken position, the dark-haired princess veered hard to the side when she saw the Black Queen's banner split from the rest of the legionaries. An escort of ten, the very same number she rode with, made for her direction at a sedate pace while the rest of the cohorts continued marching on the hill. Wary of too sudden an approach being taken as a charge, Rozala reduced the pace of her mount and shouted for her soldiers to do the same. Within moments they were in sight of the enemy envoys, and even before she drew her up reins and halted the Princess of Aquitan was silently cursing. There was no mistaken the burnt and darkened plate on the tall

orc for anything else: the Adjutant was there, along with a young woman bearing the marks of a general and a retinue of Callowan regulars. The dark-eyed Arlesite would have called it a risk taken, bringing but a matching number of legionaries when she rode to them with horse, but knew better. The orc was Damned, and not fresh to his legend: he could likely kill them all without coming to breathe heavier for it.

"Hail, Lord Adjutant," Princess Rozala called out in Lower Miezan.

"Your Grace," the Adjutant replied in the same.

She flicked her eyes to the side, taking in the sight of the woman who was most likely this General Abigail of the Third Army. Black hair, tanned cheeks, watery blue eyes. More tavern girl than warrior-queen, and what was it with Callow and spawning all those wee dangerous women?

"I present you General Abigail of Summerholm, in command of the Third Army," the Deadhand said. "You may have heard of her."

"So I have," Rozala replied. "Well met, general. Your deeds in Sarcella drew attention."

"That was all Her Majesty," the black-haired woman replied almost hurriedly. "Truly, I have done nothing worth remembering."

Humble, the Arlesite princess wondered, or trying to remain obscure so that she would take her enemies by surprise in wars to come? Either way, she was one to watch out for.

"It appears, Princess Rozala, that the Dominion has seen fit to obstruct the return of my queen," the Adjutant gravelled in that unsettlingly deep voice. "This seems to me a violation of the truce that was struck."

"I am sure they merely mean to serve as an honour guard," Rozala lied. "Though, of course, that honour should be shared between all of us. Indeed, I brought soldiers with me for this very purpose."

The orc's hairless brow narrowed.

"A threefold honour guard is your intention?" he asked.

"Of course," the Princess of Aequitan said. "Is it not yours? Surely the Army of Callow would not seek to break the truce your very queen arranged."

The Damned let out a noise that was either amused or contemptuous, Rozala knew too little of his kind to tell.

"I've no intention of sharing the honour," Hakram Deadhand calmly said. "We'll be clearing out the Dominion by force of arms."

General Abigail let out a mocking bark of laughter, though her voice made it sound like strangely terrified trill.

"There is no need for such a thing," Princess Rozala insisted. "I can accompany you to treat with the Blood and this can all be achieved without breaking truce."

The orc studied her for a long moment, and then slowly bared his fearsome great fangs.

"The First Prince ordered you to keep Catherine alive and amenable," the Adjutant serenely said. "You'd have tried threats otherwise. Well now, that's a fascinating turn. How far are you allowed to go to assure that?"

"You assume much," Rozala flatly replied.

"I suppose it doesn't matter," the orc said, snorting. "Send your people in a flanking position for the hill, on the eastern side. We'll take the other flank. You and I can speak with those Levant lordlings from a position of strength."

"You overestimate your position," the Princess of Aquitan said, tone glacial.

Hakram Deadhand studied her, then laughed.

"No," he said. "I don't. Glad to have you on our side, Princess Rozala. I've great esteem for your campaigning in Cleves."

And just like that, he turned and began to walk again. Though anger boiled in her stomach, the Princess of Aquitan found she had no means to deal it out. What could she do, strike out at the Black Queen's own aide or let him lead his cohorts into a fight that could not be won? She'd been ordered to avoid provoking Catherine Foundling, and letting the Adjutant die would be very much the opposite of that. The Princess of Aquitan found that General Abigail was looking at her still, a strange expression on the Callowan's face. She reached for something within her armour and Rozala tensed, half-expecting a knife, but instead it was a dull bronze flask. The general tossed it to her and patted her horse's neck with what seemed to be genuine sympathy.

"I'd tell you it gets better," General Abigail said, "but it would be a lie."

Caerulea

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Jonnnney

No I ain't voting again until the Author stops twidling their thumbs and gets Catherine back into creation. This has been the wordiest nonaction series of chapters in the whole damn serial.

Argentorum

I think I agree with that. Catherine needed to show up with the Pilgrim like, a chapter ago. Or **this** chapter at the very least.

If we didn't know she brought him back to life, this sort of dramatic tension would be appreciated. But we already know that he's going to be there to make the Levantines eat Crow (ha!) so it's just a bunch of...things happening because of stuff.

Dan

I mean, all of the other interludes have been about how canny operators maneuver around Cat's plans and how the gods are setting up the chess board.

I kind of like the reversal on this one, where all of the powers that normally control the story are laying their plans and thinking they're clever and subtle and all that, not realizing they're about to be screwed by a wrench Cat tossed into the gears of the divine plan CHAPTERS ago. It's sort of a measuring stick on Cat's character development, she's gone from barely holding on by the skin of her fingertips while the world Named her and otherwise told her how badass and in control she was... to legitimately being able to break the narrative itself in a way that the setting's literal laws of physics themselves can't deal with.

Admittedly in terms of physical things happening it's obviously just getting all the people into place that need to be together for the drama to unspool more efficiently in

the next real chapter, but thematically this is probably my favorite of the interludes so far.

Shveiran

I agree it is a nice reversal, and I'm very glad we got it.

On the other hand, I do think 4 interludes are a bit too long for this. I would have preferred we wrapped this up in maybe 3, and even that much only because this has been a wild ride ever since the battle begun.

It is a welcome break, just... a bit long, for my tastes.

[sengachi](#)

It's called pacing.

Tsura

I mean the 6 chapters between Catherine's Lakeomancy and her regaining consciousness were pretty long too, but honestly this has all been pretty interesting for the most part, although Procer's politics have always bored (and felt more hard to decipher) me more than the rest

[tkjarrah](#)

god i love abigail

[tkjarrah](#)

someone wife this idiot coward before i have to pagemaster in and do it myself

Zgggt

She's the greatest character that isn't a footrest.

[tkjarrah](#)

Abigail is and has always been, in a spiritual sense, a footrest

[doominator10](#)

I'd posit she'd be a least a greater lesser footrest plz don't hate me

DD

People remarking negatively on the verbose handful of delaying interludes of late...I agree.

But one should never disparage a look into the mind of
ABIGAIL OF SUMMERHOLM...HERO OF THE IMPERI...I mean, OF
CALLOW!

DD

Did not mean for my comment to appear as a reply...don't
know how that happened.

[Sethur](#)

Abigail is a godsdamned treasure. Everytime I see her name pop
up in a new chapter, it's sure to make my day. 😊

amc

oh yes. especially how everyone keeps mis-interpreting her.

"General Abigail let out a mocking bark of laughter, though her
voice made it sound like strangely terrified trill."

Levi Kalden

I expect her to come into a Name like the Bumbling General

[erraticerrata](#)

First update of the month, and so extra chapter's up. As usual,
it's in the eponymous tab.

This one is the first of the two-parter, titled Seed and set in
the days before the Conquest. The POV is a younger Black's.

Andrew Mitchell

Thank you EE for your continued hard work to bring us this
story three times a week. IMO your work has been amazingly high
quality lately. ♥

And here's a link to the extra chapter for everyone's
convenience: [https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/
2019/07/01/seed-i/](https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/07/01/seed-i/)

Rup

.um...would it be possible..to get a picture/art of that balance-
crown-sword motif

caoimhinh

Here you go~

I don't know who made it, but they uploaded it to Catherine's
page on the Practical Guide to Evil wikia, credit to them.
It's pretty cool in my opinion; I wish there were more fan
arts (I have seen only a couple others depicting Catherine).



caoimhinh

Alternatively, you can have this one.

I edited the text because I'm sure the actual words of the House of Foundling are '*Justifications matter only to the just*', not '*Justification only matters to the just*', but they are pretty much the same (I also edited a bit the Us and Os, because those two letters looked weird to me in that text

format).



[Mental Mouse](#)

If you zoom in on the original, you'll see it's some weird-ass font with smileys in the O's. Ptui! 😊

Really, I'd rather see it done in a form that could plausibly be an actual banner, rather than that over-shiny metal. Yes, it's supposed to be "silver on black", but even metallic cloth doesn't look like that! WP indicates that heraldic "silver" is commonly represented by pale gray or white (actual silver being prone to corrosion).

[Mental Mouse](#)

That said, your new version is... better justified, or at least properly centered. 😊

caoimhinh

Justified text, LMAO, I see what you did there. Catherine would burn us both for that pun; you for making it, and me for laughing so hard.

maximillian999

You go home and think about what you've done, Mouse.

Andrew Mitchell

When I saw "WP indicates that..." I asked myself "Why the hell are they citing WordPress?!?" and a moment later "D'oh!" 😊

caoimhinh

Something like this or how?

I wish someone with actual artistic talent (and true image edition programs, not just Window's Paint like me) would pick it up and make a good fan art with it.

Imagine a legionary holding up the standard, would be really cool, but that's beyond the scope of my skills to draw/edit. (T_T)



[Mental Mouse](#)

Yes! That's excellent! Hmm.... looking at that, it suddenly occurs to me that EE described a legionary painting black wings... on a black banner. ???

caoimhinh

Putting black wings on a black background is hellishly annoying, let me tell you, even with different shades of black and by using grey-white borders to highlight the contrast.

That legionnaire must be a real artist if he actually painted double wings on each side, and made them visible and recognizable.
Check this out, what do you think?



[Mental Mouse](#)

Classy!

[Mental Mouse](#)

PS: If you haven't already, it should definitely go on the wiki!

[TeK](#)

It was on Fairfax blue though.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And I'll note belatedly that EE has since edited the banner's original colors to "gold on Fairfax blue".

caoimhinh

Really? 😬

Man, I should re-read the whole series after this book is over. I wonder how many of these retcons will I find.

So, no longer silver on black but instead gold on blue?

EE is gonna have to edit like a dozen different chapters where the banner is mentioned, plus another half a dozen where Cat is musing about the meaning of the symbol and colors, where she explicitly did **not** use anything that resembled the old banners of Callow's royalty.

I wonder what prompted the decision to make such a change.

Mental Mouse

It might well have been the comments (including mine) about painting black wings on a black banner.... EE doesn't fix every error that's spotted, but he does patch up the more blatant groaners, like when he lost track of how many principates were in Procer. (Supposedly he's going to thin their numbers before publication as well, given that most of them are pretty irrelevant to the story.)

Javvies

Abigail is awesome.

Fucking idiot Levantines. Assuming that they're actually there for Tariq's corpse as was part of their original plan, before the aborted honour duel, not talking is a terrible idea. Especially when everybody knows that's where Cat is going to return to Creation.

It's like they're asking for a misunderstanding and fight. Oh, shit. Bard is in play again, she could have thrown a wrench into the meeting of the Captains.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, Bard may be in play but I don't think the meeting of the Captains has occurred yet. They (the four in the tent) agreed that getting the body was the first step.

I agree that NOT communicating is a stupid move by the Levantines. I wonder what's going through their heads that that seemed like a good approach?

[LaNuup](#)

But I am also amazed that Adjutant completely refuses to talk to the Levantines. Seems unusual for him to do something so reckless and possibly harmful in the long run as breaking this truce by taking the hill.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes. That's a very good point LaNuup. 😐

Shveiran

But he didn't refuse to talk.

He merely moved the Proceran host and his own into a flanking position before, to deal from a position of strength.

It is not a practically diplomatic approach, no, but it isn't quite as dramatic.

Nairne .01

On the contrary. It is the most diplomatic approach here.

They don't really have anything to offer the Levantines so they need leverage, i.e. an advantageous position to make the Levantines even want to speak with them.

Shveiran

It is a page from the early Book of Foundling Diplomacy.

Namely, the one about cheap wine and a sword being brought to the table.

It is not a strange approach, but it isn't the only way to do diplomacy and it isn't how Cat wishes to do things now. Still, I guess one doesn't come between Adjutant and his warlord and then act surprised he doesn't take it well.

What I can't understand is what the Levantines are up to. Occupying the hill really feels like an overly provocative move for no sensible gain, as is.

RoflCat

I'm guessing it's a mix of the same ol 'we don't deal with the Enemy' and preparing for 2 situations that might happen.

1. Cat bring back the body, but refuse to give it to them. Because it's a bargaining chip, much in the same

way the Pilgrim used Black's to bargain with her. Then they want to be in stronger position to 'negotiate'

2. Cat did not bring back the body, leaving it in Twilight. In which case the Levantines will have to venture in there to recover it, and since they don't know the changes that happened inside and only seen the snippets of the journey that should show the devils and such, they'll go in expecting enemies waiting.

Mental Mouse

And of course, they're in for a serious surprise (and a tongue-lashing) when the two come walking out arm-in-arm.

Mental Mouse

> the one about cheap wine and a sword being brought to the table.

In this case, Hakram's got the sword axe, and Abigail brought the booze.

Fayhem

> Abigail is awesome.

SO TRUE. I'm not saying this is necessarily you, but to everyone who ships Robber and Abigail, a) SHAME ON YOU and b), what should be the ship name tho.

> not talking is a terrible idea

Very much agreed! My theory: I think any of the actual Blood would have enough political savvy to spot that as a fact, even those who are not exactly specced into diplomacy. At a guess, they told their captains "don't bother us with anything that isn't important" and their captains, having no diplomatic savvy to speak of, are venting their cultural biases by going "Proceran bitches leave" without properly understanding the foreseeable consequences of that. Could be wrong, but as dumb as the Levantine leadership has been in some respects I still give them enough credit to let them have the benefit of the doubt here.

sivarajan

Robbigail, obviously.

Cicero

I see Abigail has diplomatic chops in addition to her supreme tactical ability.

erebus42

Truly a legend in the making!

asdf

Can Cat like squire her? I suppose not.

anon

I mean she did already pass a torch over to her before.
Wonder if it would have the same weight as stabbing her in the chest with a sword.

[TeK](#)

Should still do this, just to be on the safe side.

medailyfun

It's never too late to stab!

[Liliet](#)

I love how she's genuinely competent politically but does not process that fact at all ;u;

[TeK](#)

Except she is not. She just genuinely doesn't give a fuck, because she sees herself as doomed. Might as well do whatever.

Insanenoodlyguy

That is a poor read of Abigail. For all her frustration, she's clearly giving a fuck and thinking things through. If she wasn't thinking things through, she'd insult EVERYBODY at the party she's considering committing political suicide at. Instead, she's measuring out exactly what will get her in career trouble without getting her in REAL trouble.

The problem is she's making her natural talents apparent in all of this, and as a result nobody actually wants to get rid of her as they might with the sort of incompetent she doesn't realize she isn't.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, I love her "well, I have to say something seriously racist, but all *our* races are folks I don't want to piss off... foreigners, maybe?" And then comes around to a "modest proposal" that's so out-there even the Praesi wouldn't buy it.

[Liliet](#)

It's amazing how much savvy she's displaying by accident while genuinely not trying tho.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, tossing that flask to Rozala is likely to lead to unexpected dividends. Cat: "Congratulations on defusing another tricky situation!" Abigail: "Shoulda poisoned it. And maybe drank it myself."

Someguy

Poor Abigail, she's stuck in an Anabasis Story with herself in Caiaphas Cain's Role.

stevenneiman

General Abigail, HERO OF THE KINGDOM.

maximillian999

Wait, I know Caiaphas Cain as the Flashman takeoff set in WH40K, did they find some way of fitting him into the March To The Sea as well?

Someguy

The March of the Liberator counts.

https://wh40k.lexicanum.com/wiki/First_Siege_of_Perlia

maximillian999

Thanks!

Andrew Mitchell

She reached for something within her armour and Rozala tensed, half-expecting a knife, but instead it was a dull bronze flask. The general tossed it to her and patted her horse's neck with what seemed to be genuine sympathy.

Abigail is a joy to behold.

Spinner335

When this is done and fanfics start popping up like weeds we need a story where Abigail becomes Squire instead of Cat somehow.

Oshi

Then she wouldn't be Abigail.

Mislead, Obey, Flee

for he aspects?

Faiir

More like:

Survive,
It will be better,
No it won't.

MagnaMalusLupus

Deceive
Delegate
Despair

Faiir

You clearly win.

[sivarajan](#)

Those would have fit Catherine perfectly too.

[sengachi](#)

Okay but those would legit be *amazing* aspects.

Deceive might even function as some sort of meta-aspect. We know that Named gain some degree of power/providence from their notoriety and legend, so an aspect which reinforces that would be an amazing power boost (albeit probably not a runaway loop).

Delegate is one of the most genuinely excellent aspects I can image for a commander. Like, Black's Lead is useful, but Delegate? Ohhhhhh, damn that would be an aspect. Can you imagine what you could do with supernatural intuition for what people are best suited for what task, who should be deployed against which enemies, and the ability to give some aspect juice to those you give authority to?

And Despair would just be such an in-character finisher. Spreading Abigail's own morbid fatalism and fears over the enemy to break their resolve would be perfect.

Valkyria

sounds like a pretty nice poem... Abigail should use that in her biography.

stevenneiman

She doesn't have the strength of purpose to take a Name.

MagnaMalusLupus

Fuck that, she totally does. She wants that general's pension Gods damn it, and she'll do what she must to get it. She didn't ask for the promotion, and now can't figure out how to get out of it. The reluctant protagonist is the one of the first steps on the hero's journey, after all.

[TeK](#)

Yeah, when she retired she will get a Name Pensioner. Truly, a marvelous achievement. Her aspects would be Shirk, Avoid, and Win.

Raved Thrad

"The Kingdom of Callow of the Wee Dangerous Women." The way this story's going, pretty soon each and every tavern wench in Callow will secretly be either Named or some secret warrior prodigy on the order of the Queen of Blades.

And I can't get how, no matter what Abigail does, everybody takes it as a sign of her secretly terrifying competence as a tactician and strategist.

Raved Thrad

Arg. Get over. *kicks keyboard*

erebus42

Not just Callow. Malicia was a waitress at an inn and Amadeus was a farm boy. Named (including Heroes, Villains, and all the in-between) can come from anywhere. I think that's the part that scares Rozala shitless. Having been born to power, the idea that someone she could casually overlook could one day have the power to lay her low or bind her into service under them must truly be terrifying.

IDKWhoitis

They are used to Cat looking normal, even laughingly over her head, and she kicks their ass every time.

So here comes this nobody, who providence and Cat have taken an interest to, so obviously there must be a deeper ploy or layer that isn't innately obvious.

And truth be told, Abby is more competent than she gives herself credit for, and has mostly stayed outside of politics and factionism to avoid attention and responsibilities. So

therefore she is actually one of the better candidates, even if she didn't particularly want it.

Shveiran

She is doubtlessly competent, which is why Cat took an interest in her in Sarcella: her defense plan was improvised but also solid.

The fact remain that her legend is owed to a lot of fortuitous happenstances – surviving the slaughter in Sarcella by not being there when the Lanterns attacked, requesting acavalry from Juniper hoping to be rejected as an excuse, than finding herself needing that very contingency after it was granted and passing for a mastermind – and that means she is really, really in over her head.

[Liliet](#)

Ah, but she's not commended for 'surviving the slaughter in Sarcella', she's commended for her actions in holding it AFTER it happened and she found herself in charge. AKA a genuine achievement legitimately fully attributable to her. The 'get the rioters drunk' stratagem that had her catch Juniper's and Cat's eye is also most definitely her, since it seems very much her style: Abigail is strongly in favor of deescalation always, and that's exactly what the wine did.

medailyfun

Isn't drunk crowd even more dangerous as a rule? Frankly speaking I don't think that narrative turn was realistic

[doominator10](#)

A drunk crowd may be worse, but only if they have to pay for the wine themselves. Nobody can be mad with free alcohol.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Cat said as much, the response was "she got them so drunk they couldn't fight".

As an aside, It's occurred to me before that *nobody* in this setting waters their wine, which IRL was nearly universal before the modern age. (Herodotus had a comment to the effect of "the Egyptians drink their wine neat, that's why they're all crazy". Of course, in our history, that was how Europeans made usually-contaminated water safe to drink; the Asian cultures went for tea instead, probably because a significant

fraction of their population can't process alcohol. In the Guideverse, they presumably have magic and miracles to purify water.

[Liliet](#)

It's more dangerous, but less organized. As I understand Abigail managed a manner of presentation that defused the emotional tension and distracted people from the train of thought that would have led to rioting.

Aotrs Commander

There is, of course, always something to be said for "better lucky than good."

(Though dear Abby would appear to be a bit of both...!)

[TeK](#)

As Cat puts it, lack of ambition for being a ruler is hardly a requirement for being one. Ambition is not a character flaw, just a trait behind many.

erebus42

It's always heartwarming to see one royally fucked individual console another.

Also I wonder if both Hakram and Cat know about Abigail and just keep her around because she's still successful and because it's amusing. Maybe they can see a story forming around her? It would be hilarious in an Anaxares-esque kind a way if she ends up with a name that ensures she's stuck in her situation indefinitely.

Andrew Mitchell

> Also I wonder if both Hakram and Cat know about Abigail and just keep her around because she's still successful and because it's amusing.

I've taken this as a given, but I think there's more to it than the two reasons you shared.

Abigail doesn't really want to be where she is, but she not only produces results by thinking for herself (remember the riots she averted), she also learns (remember Catherine was tutoring her). Plus having a general that's actually from Callow will have gone down well with the native Callowans. And will be even more important once Cat abdicates and puts Vivienne on the throne.

[Liliet](#)

I think Catherine leads Abigail like a book, and considers her genuinely useful. Which Abigail is not getting, the poor girl.

Mental Mouse

> It would be hilarious in an Anaxares-esque kind a way if she ends up with a name that ensures she's stuck in her situation indefinitely.

Yeah, poor Abigail... it's not that she can't catch a break, more like she can't avoid them!

Anaxeres's Naming was surely manipulated by Kairos, trickster-fashion. If Abigail does get a name, it'll surely be one of the Trickster types, probably the Bumbling subtype. I find myself wondering what the Wandering Bard would think of her.

Also: Note that *all three* of the forces are there to receive one of their own. Two of them are expecting corpses, and one of those is about to get a big surprise. Happens it's the force who are currently holding that hill....

Fayhem

> If Abigail does get a name, it'll surely be one of the Trickster types, probably the Bumbling subtype.

The Bumbling General, but everybody else hears Brilliant whenever she tries to tell them.

Javvies

I can buy a Trickster type Name for Abigail.

However, I don't buy a Bumbling X type Name. Remember, Names are, at least in part, about what other people see/think. Abigail might think she's getting (un)lucky, but to almost everyone else, she is tricky and cunning. And, let's be honest here, when she does get (un)lucky it isn't in an obvious fashion (ie, it's not apparent to most observers that she's making things up as she goes and getting lucky). Nor is it the slapstick/physical comedy we saw from the Bumbling Conjuror. Unlike the Bumbling Conjuror, who everybody knows just gets lucky and does so in a blatant and comedic fashion – and slapstick/physical comedy, at that, which isn't what we see from Abigail.

I could see Names along the lines of "Cunning X", "Deceptive X".

Or, perhaps more likely, given that the story seems to be moving away from Names and Named, Abigail could just end up with an epitaph like "The Cunning", "The Tricky", etc.

Mental Mouse

> Remember, Names are, at least in part, about what other people see/think.

Good point.

Soma

A interlude from Abigail, now that's a gift. I do so adore her tropes.

If she got a name my guess would be something like General of Terror, and for the aspects I'd guess Fear, Flee, and Frenzy. The name being ironic of course, referring to her terror. Fear originating from her fear, flee from her desire to flee and frenzy for a desperate push so flight becomes yet again an option. It is unfortunate that such a configuration would ensure that Abigail would make the best sort of general for fighting behind enemy lines against hopeless odds, again and again and again.

That said, I suspect with the way the story is going Abigail won't get a name. She'll wind up with something worse for her plans to shirk authority instead. Well that's my BSing out of the way.

Nice chapter!

Mental Mouse

> She'll wind up with something worse for her plans to shirk authority instead.

A noble title, paving her road to becoming Queen Abigail!

Hmm... It occurs to me that the prospective Liesse Accords are now well enough known that by now Providence might be actively avoiding giving a Name to anyone that they're considering for a crown.

Fayhem

> Providence might be actively avoiding giving a Name to anyone that they're considering for a crown.

I think Black's gamesmanship with the principle is pretty strong evidence that Providence is a blind force rather than one that makes plans; it also seems pretty plainly tied to Heroes with the capital H. Catherine got a dose of it bc she had Heroes in her 5-man band, but otherwise that's a straight nah fam. And as has been observed by many the Lycaonese have been demonstrating heroic tropes (most notably of the self-sacrificial variety) left and right; given the way the war

has been going for them, I don't think I would ever accuse them of benefiting from Providence.

All of which is my somewhat long-winded way of saying I don't think so, because I don't think Providence actually considers/plans anything (or even can), or ever applies except to Named and only a specific subset at that.

Mental Mouse

By Providence I'm referring to "the system". It doesn't need to be intelligent, but it does react to the stories that people are actually telling. And right now, what people are increasingly saying is that the most powerful living Villain is operating without a Name... and is pitching an entirely-plausible international agreement that Named folks shouldn't be running countries.

Fayhem

> By Providence I'm referring to "the system".

Mm, I see. That's sort of confusing since in this setting AFAIK Providence is used as a very specific term d'art meaning the so-called "golden luck of heroes" that points them to where they need to be and hands them helpful coincidences. That can certainly be taken as a function of the system overall but equally certainly isn't the totality of it so I'm uncomfortable with treating the terms as interchangeable.

Also, while Creation (particularly the Name-related functions thereof) certainly can react to changes in the stories people tell, given that AFAIK Catherine hasn't actually pitched any specifics of the Liesse Accords to anyone outside of her inner circle I'd hardly say that could be an element of any popular stories at the moment. For Creation to be taking that into account would require forecasting rather than reaction, which to me is something that implicitly requires intelligence/sapience of some kind; you can react unconsciously, but to forecast you have to be able to think ahead. Key word there being *think*, ofc.

caoimhinh

Ah, suspense, suspense. Doesn't seem like the Interludes will end next chapter yet, probably will end in our Mandatory Friday Cliffhanger.

Always fun to read Abigail's POV and her complaints about Fate deciding that she must be successful and famous. Plus other

people's misunderstanding that she is an extremely cunning hidden badass scheming to hide her skills, that's always hilarious.

So every mage can feel the energy gathering in the hill where Cat and Tariq will appear, that's interesting, I wonder why the Dominion's Nobles decided to hold their gathering and vote there when they could simply do it in the center of their camp (the hill was stated to be somewhere in the middle of the three camps). It's not as if they are holding some rites, they are going to give speeches and have the captains decide what option is the best.

Typos found:

down form Arcadia / down from Arcadia

read through then entire peace talks / read through the entire peace talks

Andrew Mitchell

> I wonder why the Dominion's Nobles decided to hold their gathering and vote there when they could simply do it in the center of their camp

I don't think the Levantine's are here for the Captain's assembly. I think they are here for to claim the Grey Pilgrim's body. IIRC the four nobles in the tent agreed that they'd see to the body first and then have the Captain's assembly.

caoimhinh

So they want to first bring back Pilgrim's body and then hold their assembly...

That would make a lot of sense, yep. Seems like a sensible plan, even. Given that the result of the assembly could possibly make them fall out of the Grand Alliance, they better be able to march out of there as fast as possible after the result.

Thanks.

I imagine Pilgrim will abstain of speaking during the assembly, given how he already gave up his "crown" and probably would want to see Levant's current leaders taking a step forward in a more righteous decision-making progress.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> So every mage can feel the energy gathering in the hill

Yeah, incoming gate. And it explains how the others know where to wait.

caoimhinh

Yeah. Though it's a bit weird that the incoming gate is felt with such anticipation.

Hakram is going there because he felt it with his Name that Catherine would come back there.

I'm thinking it would make more sense if what the Proceran mages are feeling is the Levantine mages' ritual to form a Gate, rather than it being a naturally formed gate (as the realm is already estable) or something summoned by Sve Noc as those gates form right away. But for Narrative force that place where they open the Gate is exactly the place where Catherine's party appears through their own Gate. Because, you know, "coincidences".

[Liliet](#)

Or just 'hand extended from both sides'. Easier for Catherine to make an exit where one was already being made.

AKA yeah, I agree.

AceOfSpade

I have to say. When I read Abigail's plan get into forced retirement I misread the thing she was going to say. So I'm going to bet that when she puts it into action she'll misspeak or be misheard and accidentally spark waves of food donations for the poor hungry proceran children.

zenanii

"The First Prince ordered you to keep Catherine alive and amenable," the Adjutant serenely said. "You'd have tried threats otherwise."

Guess Rosalia will have to re-evaluate the Adjutant being "the least dangerous" of the woe.

[Liliet](#)

I think the entire point of her thought process there is that she already acknowledges him as factually the most dangerous, she just doesn't formulate it like that.

[Mental Mouse](#)

"None of us can keep up with Cat... but *he* can!" Behind every great leader is a great second-in-command, and that's where Hakram comes in.

ActionKermit

Watch it just be Indrani and Roland. Pure comedy when all three forces charging the hill realize they've been duped.

ninegardens

Actually, its a purebred lissien charger.

Andrew Mitchell

Filled with explosives. No, scratch that, filled with explosive goats.

[Mental Mouse](#)

"I'll see your Trojan Horse and answer it with..." 😊

[TeK](#)

I heard you liked Trojan Horses, so we put your Trojan Horse inside your Trojan horse, so now you can hide inside a Trojan Horse while being in the Trojan Horse.

[Fayhem](#)

I'm sorry, did you just suggest exploding goat MIRVs? Out loud? Dear Heavens, I hope Robber doesn't read the comments section.

Raved Thrad

...or ever encounter an elephant. He'd immediately start whinging at Catherine to animate one, as a carrier for his exploding goats.

[Fayhem](#)

WHY ARE YOU GIVING SUGGESTIONS ON HOW THIS COULD HAPPEN

OH GOD DO THE FAE LANDS HAVE FLYING ELEPHANTS AS WELL AS FLYING HORSES

See, this is how we get exploding-goat MAD on Calernia. Then fast-forward 100 years. Civilization is destroyed. Survivors are few. All the inhabitants of the goat-blasted wasteland are mutated by the powerful goat radiation into terrible, tin-can-eating new forms. But war... war never changes.

Cue Book VI: Fallout: New Callow.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Whales. Amphibious carrier delivery systems...

Andrew Mitchell

Yes. Yes, I did suggest that... And I'm not sorry even if Robber gets to read this...

Totally. Worth. It.



Mental Mouse

It would be funny, but I doubt their return would raise so much magical fuss, since she's "finding paths" rather than making a gate. Also, Hakram wouldn't have responded like he did.

TeK

Or he is perfectly aware that it is a distraction, and just postures to sell others on this notion.

Cold Cyberia

Ah, Hakram you truly are a prince among men.

I doubt Abigail will ever get a Name but if she does I would hope for Reluctant General. Can't wait for her to go to the party and turn out to be a stellar socialite while accidentally pacifying whatever radical nobles are left.

Euodiachloris

The esteemed Cosmic Plaything.

Sometimes, you need to call a spade a spade. 😊

Mental Mouse

> Can't wait for her to go to the party and turn out to be a stellar socialite while accidentally pacifying whatever radical nobles are left.

A mirror to Cat's jug-and-sword diplomacy: "Abigail may be gauche, but she's not *terrifying* like Catherine!"

Naeddyr

Bah.

Bah!

You are all short-sighted, you aren't looking at the big picture!

General Abigail? Of course. Queen Abigail? Pshaw.

Empress.

Mental Mouse

> General Abigail? Of course. Queen Abigail? Pshaw. *Empress*

The Unlikely Goddess...

[TeK](#)

Dread Empress Accidental.

[Fayhem](#)

All of her chapter quotes are just "Why me."

[Fayhem](#)

And she keeps trying to abdicate, but everyone in the Wasteland assumes it's a fiendishly cunning Traitorous-type scheme and it actually prevents any of them from overthrowing her since they don't want to act until they understand what she's planning.

talenel

Well it seems like my idea of Rozala as Abigail's parallel/mirror looks a lot more likely.

[TeK](#)

"Humble, the Arlesite princess wondered, or trying to remain obscure so that she would take her enemies by surprise in wars to come? Either way, she was one to watch out for."

Foolish Abigail! Doth thou tryeth to deceive me?

Enjou

> Alms took hard coin, but you could get dead rats from any poorly-kept cellar.

The true irony is that this pretty much describes the drow before Cat found them. Dying rats in a poorly-kept cellar. Truly it's the traditional offering for Sve Noc.

Sparsebeard

I wonder how the sisters fell about being given offerings of dead rats and handfuls of corn lol.

[sivarajan](#)

"General Abigail let out a mocking bark of laughter, though her voice made it sound like strangely terrified trill."

[sivarajan](#)

That's the kind of humor I haven't noticed as much of this book.

Aston Whiteman

New Chapter Delayed today?

Andrew Mitchell

No. It's been up for a while. <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/07/03/interlude-concourse-v/>

Satan

I really hope Pilgrim gets to look inside Abigail's mind.

Interlude: Concourse V

"Diplomacy is war without all the clumsiness."

– First Princess Eugénie of Lange

If it came to a fight, Lord Yannu Marave decided, they would likely lose. He did not fear the Proceran horse, for its charge would break against a shield wall strong and unflinching. Neither did he balk at the numbers, for though legionaries were skilled soldiers and men-at-arms brave neither were match for armymen of the Blood holding high ground. It was the Callowan sappers that tipped the balance to the opposition's side, for he had seen with his own eyes what their munitions could do when lobbed at a tight formation. The word shredding came to mind. Torture of Callowan prisoners had yielded knowledge that these 'sharpers' were both commonly used and in large supply, which made it likely the packs of sappers he'd seen shoot out of the torch light and into the darkness would be carrying them. No, if the Procerans and the easterners had ridden forth to betray them then every son and daughter of Levant on this hill would be dead before reinforcements could arrive from the camps. *Had* they?

"That is Rozala Malanza's personal banner," Lady Aquiline said.

"Arlesite she might be, but she's no foe of ours – she has behaved honourably since taking command in Iserre."

"I see cavalry and foot coming for us, not bread and honey," Lady Itima replied. "This has an ill cast to it, girl."

Spoken, Yannu thought, as a woman whose lands shared border with Arlesites. Unlike Aquiline Osenia, whose main preoccupations as Lady of Tartessos had always been rivals of other Blood and the prowling creatures of the Brocelian.

"The Black Queen's banner flies as well," Razin Tanja mentioned, eyes narrowed. "One of the Woe might be with the legionaries."

The Lord of Alava considered that. Though the visions the Peregrine's last will had carried to them had told much of what happened within the nightmare of dead Liesse, it had not revealed where the Archer and the Hierophant had gone. They should both be alive, though the great Soninke warlock had been stripped of his power, so it would be possible for them to be riding with the cohorts. Yet it seemed unlikely, after the night's troubles, for the Archer's death was still seared in Yannu's own memory and the Hierophant had been put to slumber as an act of mercy. No, if any of the Woe rode under that banner it would be the Adjutant or the Thief – and there had long been rumours that the latter had lost her Bestowal by stepping into the responsibilities of rule.

"If it is the Archer and they mean to slay us, then we are all dead," Yannu Marave noted. "She will kill ourselves and our officers as the opening stroke, and our only answer would be to charge down onto sapper-prepared grounds."

Everybody held in a wince at that, for all here had suffered of the vicious devilries goblins could prepare when given opportunity. Razin Tanja most of all, from what he'd heard, for the Third Army under General Abigail was said to have turned the streets of Sarcella into a slaughter yard even before the Black Queen arrived.

"No one's sprouted an arrow in the forehead," Lady Itima of the Brigand's Blood said. "I'll take that as a hint that either the Archer's not there or they're not baying for blood."

If it were only the Callowans coming none of them would have batted an eye, for when the Peregrine's body was returned it would be by Catherine Foundling's hands if by any. Yet the Procerans coming out had muddied the waters, for they had no business with what would come by morning's light. They had even been told as much, for their messengers had insisted on audience beyond politeness, yet here they were. More suspicious yet, their advance had come to be matched to that of the Army of Callow's legionaries: together they were heading towards flanking positions that would be difficult to push back if assault was given.

"The Praesi crossbowmen could be firing by now," Lady Aquiline pointed out. "Not to great effect, but at least to soften our defence before assault."

Lord Yannu was inclined to agree this was sign of peaceful intent, yet this was a delicate situation. It was likely that canny old Itima Ifriqui had noticed already, even if she'd held her tongue, yet the younger two among them might not have: save for Itima's own two sons, every individual of any Blood in Procer

was standing atop this hill. And given both the Brigand's line poor reputation and recently-mauled forces – their assault on the Callowan camp had been costly – it was unlikely that they would be able to sway even most captains into following them through diplomacy or threats. A strike here and now would be decapitating the armies of the Dominion abroad, and even when word trickled back home months from now any retribution for the treachery would have to wait until matters of succession were settled and a session of the Majilis convened. The Lord of Alava was not certain why betrayal would be had here and now, but there was no denying the opportunity was there. Had the Procerans or the Callowans peered into their private councils and then decided removing the Blood to be in either their interests? It seemed a senseless thing, truth be told, but easterners were willing in a villain's service and Procerans lied as easily as they breathed.

"Silence serves us not," Razin Tanja said. "It is unseemly to treat with foreigners before the Grey Pilgrim's body has been given to the flame, yet strife would be even more so."

"Shall we give them voice in our councils as well, Tanja?" Yannu said, voice hard cast. "We have our wats for reasons, though it seems you have forgotten both. Blood can wash out, unlike honour tarnished."

It was more than simply unseemly to play politics with foreigners now, it was dishonoring a great man's death. That Proceran *royalty* would not be willing to discard their precious Ebb and Flow even long enough for the Peregrine to be put to pyre was...

"If the Black Queen's the one bringing back the Peregrine, the Callowans at least are already part of this," Tanja replied.

"Speaking to them and not the Procerans might split them," Lady Itima noted, sounding approving. "There can't be a lot of trust between them."

Akil Tanja's son seemed as if he wanted to argue that'd not been his intent at all but restrained himself in the end. Young Razin was not so stubborn as to toss away victory he'd already earned, then. For victory he had indeed earned, Yannu had silently acknowledged the moment Lady Itima spoke in favour of *audience*. For Lady Aquiline had made her preference for talks clear already, and if only the Lord of Alava stood alone of the four against words being bandied then his growing isolation among the Blood in Iserre would only be set in stone. Neither Razin Tanja's words nor a knife at his own throat would have stayed Yannu's hands after he'd set out to guide the Dominion away from disaster through duel, as he had. He'd taken a step back simply because Lady Itima Ifriqui, who had every reason to stay out of the affair for dislike of the Osená, had chosen to put that knife to his throat anyway. Though it was a proud old boast in the lands of his birth that Alava had stood alone even when the rest of the

Dominion fell to the Principate, and that the hill-folk needed no ally save the bravery of their own kin, the reality was that the city and lands he ruled could be starved of coin and goods and even many foodstuffs if it broke with every other great line. At the very least, alignment between the other three would see him removed from the highest command of Levant's armies even if killed one.

He could kill them all, perhaps, but that would be just as dangerous a roll of the dice and he was a careful man by nature. No, best to take step back then and now so that he might arrange victory on his own terms when the opportunity was ripe.

"It seems there will not be a choice," Lady Aquiline suddenly said. "Look."

Under three banners – Aequitan, Foundling and truce white – a party had approached the foot of the hill as they spoke. Two riders were behind Princess Rozala's familiar silhouette, one carrying her heraldry and the other a torch. Behind a tall orc in darkened plate two smaller humans were carrying the other two trailing cloths, a mere six souls in whole. Unlikely to be an ambush, then, even though the burnt plate was as good as announcement that the orc among them was the Adjutant.

"We can send an invitation to the Deadhand alone to stand before us," Itima said, smile gone hard.

It could be a fine line between envoy and hostage. Razin Tanja cast her a considering look, and for a moment Yannu was reminded of the boy's father. Lord Akil had been known for his keen wits, and though he'd been no great general under his reign the Binder's Blood has seen their influence rise through careful bargains and treaties. It was an old jape back home that the true talent of the Tanjas was not the magic of their famous ancestress but in truth the wealth that flowed through the canals of Malaga, yet few before Akil Tanja had been so skilled at making use of that wealth. More than once Yannu had seen the same look he now saw in young Razin's eyes in his father's own, just before someone was goaded into making a costly mistake on the floor of the Majilis.

"Alone would be insultingly obvious," Razin said. "Let him bring an attendant, at least."

Itima's agreement was the sound of the decision being made, and Yannu Marave began to wonder if it might not be better for the realm to kill the boy than Lady Aquiline after all.

—

Princess Rozala was more than passingly familiar with bravery. She would not consider herself a great paragon of that virtue,

though neither was she a coward. Rozala, for all that she did not shy from battle, was still a princess of the blood: she went to war surrounded by loyal bodyguard and with priests ready to bring her back from death's door should wound be taken. It was natural this be the case, though perhaps not fair in a godly sense, for her death would herald a great deal more trouble than a fantassin's. Yet it was easier to brave, the Princess of Aequitan privately thought, when so many were sworn to keep her alive. Yet she'd seen purer strains of bravery in other men and women. Soldiers who volunteered to hold border positions in the face of the Enemy, knowing no reinforcements could be spared. Conscripts running back under arrows and spellfire to drag fallen friends back to safety behind the lines, boys and girls not even eighteen summers old stilling their shaking hands and raising their shields steady as the dead charged howling at them. The Arlesite princess had even seen many whose fearlessness had been hollow, a spectacle put on for myriad reasons ranging from stiffening moral to preserving reputation. And yet Rozala Malanza could not for the life of her tell if Hakram Deadhand's serene disregard for the danger surrounding them was genuine or not.

The orc's helmet was held in the crook of his handless arm, revealing the thick leathery skin and the troublingly large teeth of his kind. Greenskins were not well-known to Rozala, and so discerning one's sentiments did not come naturally to her, yet he'd not hesitated a moment when invited to walk into the wolf's den atop the hill nor expressed particular concern since. It was as if he could not see the hundreds of flaring heavily armed soldiers around them, whose gaze lingered on the truce banner Rozala was carrying with open antipathy. She would have preferred to come in riding, truth be told, but Deadhand had spooked her destrier something fierce when he'd come close. That instinctive dislike by animals was said to be natural to greenskins, though until recently Rozala had believed it to be one of those commonly accepted falsehoods like Praesi being liars from the cradle or Callowans being physically incapable of halfway edible cooking. It seemed there was truth to it, however, for all horses had grown unruly when the Adjutant had been upwind of them.

"The banner's dipping, Your Grace," Hakram Deadhand said.

His coarse voice betrayed the slightest hint of what she took to be amusement. Gritting her teeth, the Princess of Aequitan raised back to full height the banner she'd been made to carry like some sort of, well, attendant. Which the Adjutant had not hesitated to designate her as when the summons had come from the Levantines. To her dismay, she'd even had to play along for the sake of being there when the talks were held. As if leaving alone an orc and a foursome of quarrelsome Dominion lordlings could end in anything but bodies on the floor.

"Is your line known among your people to be of particular dignity?" Princess Rozala tried.

This would be slightly less wounding of her dignity if at least he was the orc surrogate for highborn. Otherwise, she was carrying a banner for one of the Damned plucked out from some northern waste to serve the Black Queen. A heartbeat passed.

"My mother famously made the finest Callowan meat stew in the clan," the Adjutant replied.

She was being mocked, Rozala realized. Wait, *Callowan* meat stew? Surely he could not mean...

"I'd never heard of this delicacy," the Princess of Aquitan said. "May I ask what it contains?"

Surely not Callowans, she thought, for the Black Queen would not have made so important a dignitary of him were it the case.

"Not humans, of course," Hakram Deadhand nonchalantly replied.

She mastered herself so that she would not breathe out in relief. At the very least she was not being made to consort with a bloody-fanged cannibal.

"Much too expensive, that far out in the Steppes," the Adjutant continued just as nonchalantly. "Never ate it done the traditional way until I came to Ater."

Before Rozala could conceive of a gracious way to ask the Damned at her side whether or not the 'traditional way' involved human flesh, they were ushered past one last ring of armymen and came to stand before the four heads of the Dominion's armies abroad. The older two she was most familiar with: Lord Yannu Marave of Alava and Lady Itima Ifriqui of Vaccei. The latter had particularly poor reputation among Arlesites for her vicious and unprovoked raids into Orense in the years before the Tenth Crusade. The First Prince might have made peace there, but the looting and burning of southern Orense had not been forgot. Lord Yannu she did not much like, but at least respected. The Lord of Alava, who claimed descent from the Valiant Champion, was a cautious and ferocious man who displayed little of the famed recklessness of his line. The Princess of Aquitan had disliked that by virtue of being the foremost Levantine commander he'd effectively seized command of the Iserran campaign, especially considering unlike her and several of her generals he'd never fought either Queen Catherine or Marshal Juniper. Yet the Dominion had provided the greater part of the host, and so claimed greater influence. If the Battle of the Camps had been a victory perhaps Rozala could have argued otherwise, but while those brutal three days had been many things they had not been that.

The younger pair she only through reports, though the Levantine fascination with war paint and bloodline colours made their identities easy enough to deduce. The young man in iron grey and crimson would be Razin Tanja, son and heir to the fresh-slain Lord Akil Tanja of Malaga. The peculiarities of Dominion inheritance laws meant he would not be Lord of Malaga until his kin had acclaimed him on the grounds of that very city, assuming his right was not challenged, so among the four highborn here his authority was the weakest. His own captains could defy him without breaking oath, at the moment, though if he ever ascended to lordship that'd be a poor decision indeed. The impressively-shaped young woman to his side would be Lady Aquiline Osen of Tartessos, by repute rival to the Tanjas and deathly foe to the Ifriquis for reason of kinslaying twice over. Dominion political affairs were fluid even by Proceran standards, for they shifted with the feuds of every generation of the Blood, but it was usually to be expected that their highborn would be feuding with whoever's lands bordered their own and seeking cordial ties with whoever's did not. The Maraves of Alava did have a reputation as proud lunatics staying out of politics save when offended, which had made it both surprising and not when Lord Yannu became informal head of the Dominion's armies abroad. Rozala was not unfamiliar with the trick of putting those that could not be called to heel in charge.

The four lordlings were standing and fully armed. And, by the visible wounds on the Osen and the Marave, had recently fought some manner of duel among themselves.

"You stand before four lines of the Blood," Lady Itima said in heavily-accented Lower Miezan. "You may kneel."

"You stand before the Queen of Callow's right hand," the Adjutant calmly replied in Chantant. "You may bow."

Princess Rozala would have appreciated the insolent confidence a great deal more if it hadn't run the risk of getting them both killed. Lady Aquiline's lips twitched in amusement, as did Lady Itima's, but Tanja's lips thinned and Lord Yannu's face remained inscrutable.

"Princess Malanza," the Lord of Alava said. "Are you now *attendant* to one of Below's servants?"

"I am sworn envoy speaking for the First Prince of Procer," the Princess of Aquitan replied. "Who also happens to temporarily attend to the Lord Adjutant."

If he expected to shame her into retiring, he would have to do better than that. Rozala had been the ruling princess of principality that'd half-beggared itself fighting to the death with the current ruling First Prince, the daughter of a woman who'd once laughingly boasted she would send Cordelia Hasenbach

running back north with her tail between her legs to 'suckle on icicles and brood'. She'd had to wade through seas of scorn and mockery to rise to the height's she now stood at, all of it dealt by peers – which not a single individual here could claim to be.

"What an unlikely coincidence," Lady Itima sardonically said.

For some reason, she shot Razin Tanja a half-approving look afterwards.

"You interrupt sacred ceremony, Bestowed," Lady Aquiline said, eyeing the orc curiously. "Withdraw your warriors and let nothing more be spoken of this."

Rozala found herself almost shamefully glad that there'd been no talk about claiming the Black Queen's head in some sort of doomed attempt at vengeance. Near enough to every highborn of the Dominion was here, if some dimwit among them took a swing at Catherine Foundling the entire Levantine host could be decapitated. It wasn't as if the Princess of Aequitan had sallied forth to protect the Black Queen, for what would that monster fear from not even a thousand soldiers? The Queen of Callow had looked more than eight thousand horse in the eye, drawn a line in the snow and dared them to cross it. And when Rozala had offered her challenge, after, it'd not been met with fear or defiance. It'd been met, chillingly enough, with a sort of vague irritation. Like Foundling had already done them all a favour by refraining from slaughtering them like animals and anything aside from withdrawal from that point on had been trying an already thinning patience. That, more than threats or promises, had seen Rozala Malanza order a retreat. And rumour had since trickled in that the Black Queen had, for having struck at her legionaries, broken two fingers from every cataphract of Helike and sent them marching back to the Tyrant stripped of arms and armour. It might be that the Lanterns and the armsmen might kill the villainous queen, if they struck at her. It'd been a long and arduous night.

More likely, though, Catherine Foundling would lose patience at the attempt and kill them all without batting an eye.

"You have claimed the grounds where my warlord will return," Hakram Deadhand said. "That will not be brooked."

"We've no interest in your queen," Lord Yannu bluntly said. "We await the arrival of the Peregrine's remains."

"I've no interest in the remains of the Grey Pilgrim," the orc replied. "I await the arrival of my queen."

"Perhaps a simple honour guard can be arranged," Rozala suggested.

The Lord of Alava fixed her with a steady look.

"Sons and daughters will bring the Peregrine to the flame," he flatly said. "None other."

"The Queen of Callow will not return from saving all your lives to a ring of foreign soldiers," the Adjutant replied just as flatly.

Rozala would have hissed at him in an other language, if she shared any with him that the Levantines would not.

"It was the Grey Pilgrim who sacrificed himself for all who stand here," Lady Aquiline sharply said.

"It was the Black Queen who made truce where you sought war, and led the band of five to victory," the Adjutant said. "Do you deny this?"

"That the Queen of Callow acted honourably this night is not in doubt," Lady Itima said. "Bargains made were kept."

There was agreement from the others, some of it more reluctant than others.

"Yet you diminish the sacrifice made by the Peregrine through your words," the Lady of Vaccei continued. "Curb your tongue, Damned."

"Damned you call me, but my honour lies in the service of my queen," the orc unflinchingly replied. "I will not suffer her return being a circle of swords bared."

In that moment, Rozala Malanza grasped that the Adjutant had been playing them all. Gods, he'd been trying to extract something from them from the start.

"No offence is meant," Razin Tanja said.

"Then why do you insist on giving it?" Hakram Deadhand said.

There was a rumble of discontent from the Levantines.

"What offence is this, orc?" Lord Yannu bluntly asked.

"Though under truce, you are enemies still," the Adjutant said. "How can your surrounding my queen be taken as anything but slight?"

"The Peregrine's last escort will not be opened to Callowans or Wastelanders," Lady Aquiline firmly said. "This will not be argued."

"Then to avoid slighting Callow's honour, you must no longer be enemies to its queen but instead allies," the Adjutant said.

"Are we to swear oaths to the void?" Lady Itima mocked. "Even were we willing, there is nothing to be done."

"There is," the Adjutant replied, offering a fanged grin. "Years ago, Queen Catherine requested to become a member of the Grand Alliance. All that would be required for friendship to be established is your agreement to this suit."

"It would mean nothing, without the First Prince's approval and the Majilis' agreement," Razin Tanja said.

"It would satisfy honour nonetheless," the orc said.

Rozala's pulse quickened. Should she intervene, she wondered? For all that the Foundling Queen had declared her intention to join the war against the Dead King, that was not the same as her becoming signatory of the Grand Alliance. If four of the five greatest aristocrats in Levant agreed to back Callow's bid to become part of the Alliance, its chances would become more than merely good. The consequences of that were... hard to foresee. Gods, this was too great a decision too swiftly made. Rozala Malanza bit her lip.

A heartbeat later, dawn began and a gate tore open before all of them.

Two people hobbled through it, and just like that the Princess of Aequitan felt the world change.

Caerulea

Catherine is finally back in creation! As is the Grey Pilgrim! This news should be welcomed with celebration. So vote for *A Practical Guide to Evil* here!

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ruduen

I wouldn't call it just yet. Archer and Rogue are also a pair that could qualify. Though given the possibility of a dramatic Friday reveal, it could be either pair.

matesbe

I feel like the “and felt the world change” line wouldn’t be there if it was Rogue and Archer. Their appearance wouldn’t warrant such dramatic phrasing. It could be a red herring, but if it is it’s not a good one.

caoimhinh

Hmm, I think it would, because Archer and Rogue’s presence would almost assuredly force the Dominion’s nobles to accept Hakram’s terms. They were just discussing how Archer’s presence would mean they could all get killed very swiftly, and Rogue is allied with Procer rather than Levant.

[Liliet](#)

No, too dramatic. Also they were seeking hidden paths. The two emerging with dawn are 100% Catherine and Tariq

caoimhinh

Come on, we already know Named are empowered by drama. Indrani and Roland left first, waaay before Cat resurrected Tariq, remember she went for a stroll through Twilight Liesse first, got her new staff from Edward’s tomb and then went back to the throne room for Tariq, so it would make sense for them to arrive before Cat and Pilgrim, even if only for the escalation of tensions for a couple of minutes.

Nairne .01

Aye, but the vision was at the time of Pilgrim’s death right? I think Time doesn’t flow that much differently between the places.

[Liliet](#)

Exactly, the narrative runs on drama. This is not a fart noise anticlimax moment. “The world changed” cannot refer to the two of them.

Indrani and Roland wouldn’t be emerging from this exit in the first place, they were looking for hidden paths.

caoimhinh

The world didn’t change, Rozala felt it change when the two figures emerged. There’s a difference.

Indrani and Roland went back, nothing mentions they were going for hidden paths or that they were going to do anything else but returning to the camps.

The “hidden paths” thing was used only when referring to the essence of what the Twilight Realm is, not that Archer and Roland were going to explore them (why would they, when there’s still pressing matters waiting for their return to their respective camps?).

Though it could as easily be that Archer and Rogue stayed close waiting for Cat and Pilgrim, and they are all four returning together, with Cat and Tariq ahead of the group. I mean, if I were them I would stay and wait for my friend to come back after whatever moment of privacy she needed, considering the return point is in the middle of a war zone with four armies camping around.

[Liliet](#)

Indrani and Roland went back through paths that only Indrani knows how Hye taught her to find.

And yes, the world changing is most definitely not a reference to Indrani and Roland.

caoimhinh

True. I verified it. You are right.

No elaborate farewells followed, as they simply disappeared into the city below. Indrani would find a way out, as she had first found a way in when seeking Masego. The Lady of the Lake had shared knowledge with her I’d not asked the lay of, long aware that the keeping of her teacher’s secrets was one of the few things Indrani considered sacred.

Well, seems like the interludes are over, then?

[TeK](#)

I still would’ve liked one more interlude. I simply adore how other people react to our Cat.

Andrew Mitchell

I agree, for exactly the reasons you stated. But, I’d say 90% probability rather than 100%.

[Liliet](#)

True, no such thing as 100% probability. 90% sounds fair.

Morgenstern

Second that @magesbe.

Why would the world change if anyone else but Cat with the alive Pilgrim would come through that, after those words? There's no way those nobles won't agree to her joining the Alliance after that, after what they just went through in their own... "talks". Not only did she uphold all her promises – she now also brought their greatest Hero back to them.

Morgenstern

Also, dawn. It's absolutely appropriate that the symbol for (hope) dawn(ing) would return exactly with the dawn, just like another Grey appearing slightly changed with the sun's rays as savior.

[Liliet](#)

Yes. There was never any way they would return other than with the first rays of dawn. It can't be anyone but them, this dramatic position has 'reserved for the VIP' embossed on it in gold letters.

[Mental Mouse](#)

As others have noted, the two sidekicks would be a ridiculous anticlimax rather than the dramatic reveal we've all been waiting for. Also, they are both able-bodied; "two people hobbled through it" makes it quite clear these are the lame Cat and the aged Pilgrim.

apperatus27

Huh, I'm not actually sure if the timing of that is a good or a bad thing for the alliance.

On one hand, yay superman is alive!
On the other, the celebration might make this a missed opportunity for negotiation.

RoflCat

Actually if anything this makes the Levantines basically have to support Cat, considering she saved Tariq's life.

How would they hold their honour, if when asked for support they refused the 'ally' who saved their 'king'?

[TeK](#)

But if she used abhorrent Below methods to do that, it doesn't really count, does it?

caoimhinh

With Angels' approval of that Resurrection, all their pretext becomes null.

[TeK](#)

They were temporarily under duress. Really, it's more like an exploitation. She has a record of angel abuse, after all...

Valkyria

Well technically it was his own aspect that raised him...

[TeK](#)

She used William's sword to stab him too though. Does that mean his death was approved by Above as well?

Valkyria

Yes since his death was kind of a mercy given. Like for the world, since almost all other options would have dire consequences. GP even said beforehand that his death wouldn't create large waves – knowing Above would take care of it so it wouldn't all go to waste. And it did, since they basically broadcasted the whole thing directly into a whole lot of brains.

[TeK](#)

If by dire consequences you mean a hundred thousand zombified angry Callowans starting a Tenth Crusade prematurely, I got a news flash for you: Above was not against.

Valkyria

no i don't. more like "continent of the dead" consequences.

Cicero

Actually, she used Below methods to steal the Grey Pilgrim's own method of resurrection and then turned around and used it on him.

So I think that means the resurrection is not tainted, since the original source was above.

[TeK](#)

And Heiress planned to use angel's corpse to power up her demon-spitting machine. You may have missed "she used

Below methods". How are we sure that a touch of those tower of self slaughter do not taint all they touch?

[Liliet](#)

Well I'm assuming the Choir would be still around to knock sense into anyone who doubts :3

[TeK](#)

Those poor little things were bullied by a big bad Cat into agreeing. Can't take their word, really.

[Liliet](#)

-Choir of Mercy shows up with a thousand flaming wheel eyes- =)

Andrew Mitchell

I know you're probably joking but I want to say that they really, really weren't bullied. Cat asked and explained, and they let her. It's quite a long section so I won't post it all here but here are the highlights:

"You actually loved him, didn't you?" I said, voice wondering. "Or as close to that as you can."

...

"You can't bring him back," I said. "I understand. There's rules, and it's not in your nature to make exceptions."

The attention never wavered nor lessened in intensity.

"But I'm not you," I said. "Your rules don't bind me. And if you let me, I will."

...

"Why?" I repeated.

It was a fair question, I supposed.

"Because I can, so I should," I said. "Because even when he was my enemy I did not believe him to be a bad man. Because..."

I struggled to find the words to express it, but perhaps the simplest truth was best.

"Because I don't want to be at war with you or him," I quietly said. "And the moment you choose to believe that, the war's over."

...

"Please," I said. "I know you don't make exceptions, and I won't ask you to. All you need to do is to stand aside."

We stood there, the Choir of Mercy and the Arch-heretic of the East, and a long moment passed.

Thanks for making me revisit this. It's a truly heart-warming scene which gives me hope that this is all going to turn out OK.

Shveiran

Also, just for shit and giggles... if someone can bully a Choir and bothers to pretend they want your agreement on something, I'm not sure it is a good idea to deny them. Not unless you are TWO choirs, at the very least.

[Liliet](#)

Sounds about right to me.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Not to mention that the Choir of Mercy kind of polished the aspect and added a library due date stamp to a card attached to it. 😊

RoflCat

Thievery isn't exclusively Below thing (see: Vivi before she joined Cat)

And the resurrection is a genuine resurrection which is exclusive to Good, not necromancy or other sort of Evil specific methods.

So outside of Cat's status as "Villain" that's getting harder and harder to justify with each time she show how unwilling she is to fight them, they don't have much excuses to go for.

But you know what? NONE of that matters if Pilgrim show his support for Cat. The moment that happen, Levant will follow, because the alternative is the end of Levant.

[TeK](#)

I joke

Mental Mouse

Hakram wouldn't have gotten a binding agreement anyway... but notice that just for a moment, he got the Levantines to actually consider it. That will color their thinking later.

Shveiran

Hakram's actions did seem a bit rushed and uncompromising, before. Not unreasonable or out of character, but simply too... narrow, too rigid, too clumsy in the situation compared to what he usually does.

But that's because he wasn't just trying to grab an anchor for Cat; he was laying the ground for her capitalizing on her deeds.

And damn, how nicely he dealt with the Levantines.

We should search the Tower for a cloning ritual, and get us an Adjutant each.

Liliet

YEP

TeK

"Torture of Callowan prisoners"

Ho-ho, uh boy, you done goofed.

hakureireimu

I'm more disappointed with Pilgrim. I'm mean if he doesn't have enough influence over even the Levantines, what good are his words?

TeK

It may have happened before or after he had joined their armies. But yeah, old man does NOT run a tight crew.

Euodiachloris

Isn't it interesting that the list of people *he* apparently needs to kill to save the dominion from certain instability... always leaves one all so very insignificant name out?

Yet, I don't spot anybody else readily destabilizing alliances by killing the worryingly effective competition every time he gets a chance to. 😏

werafdsaew

Who are you talking about?

Andrew Mitchell

The first 'he' is clearly Careful Yannu. But I don't know what the "all so very insignificant name" is.

[Liliet](#)

Himself maybe? XD

[Euodiachloris](#)

Yannu messing with the Pilgrim's game.

[TeK](#)

And a cherry on top:

"There are evils I have been forced to make peace with," the Pilgrim said with iron in his voice. "Torture is not one of them. You may be certain I will allow no such thing so long as I draw breath. The matter of exchanges, however, will have to be discussed with the Princess of Aquitan. Answer will be given before battle."

caoimhinh

Even if Catherine doesn't get them, Pilgrim will not tolerate this once he finds out.
And he will find out.

[Liliet](#)

I think Yannu's got an appointment with a pillow.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I think Peregrin might be done with that idea in this case.

Yannu doesn't deserve it. I think reaping what you have sown is the order of the day; it's going to be a sword or a blast to the face.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah I was being mean to Tariq hehe

Shveiran

It does seem like he is a goner, admittedly. Out of tune with the rest of the Blood, uncompromising with change, with no appetite for the Bone War... I'm not saying he is going to

die necessarily, but I think he'll likely be removed from office and therefore from the narrative.

[Liliet](#)

"Removed from office" – what office? He's Blood 😊

Levantine system accepts only one way of firing Lords that everyone else dislikes 😊

Shveiran

Well, he is OF the Blood, certainly, but like Razin case exemplifies this is not purely a blood-related succession. You need to be AN heir to hold the fancy chair, but acclamation determines WHICH heir gets it.

I'm also not sure we know that only jolly murder removes one from the aforementioned fancy chair / fancy spot by the fire.

The fact that admittedly no talk has been had so far about deposing or disgracing a Line leader doesn't really prove it in my opinion. It merely suggest no one of the Levantine schemers thought it a viable option, but the Gray Pilgrim may have enough sway?

[Liliet](#)

Oaths aren't really something that gets taken back easily, particularly in Levant, and the difference between Razin and his father is that the captains haven't sworn to him yet.

antoninjohn

Oath breaking Pilgrim, with an oath you swore to a Few Queen.
That is going to bite you later

Someguy

That's 3 times now isn't it?

1. The hostage thing
2. Sword Bitch > shifted to Kairos.
3. The torture thing.

Oathbreaking really is Above's bailiwick.

[Liliet](#)

>2

what????

Pilgrim gave his crown, as promised

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah, even if the timeline ends up bad, oath is only open if
A: he knew/finds out, and then
B: doesn't do something about it.

And he's too smart to break oath twice to somebody like Catherine. That shit stacks and she already has an advantage.

Shveiran

Also... why would he? That is really out of character for him. If Tariq has a question, he asks the Ophanim, he doesn't torture people.

Insanenoodlyguy

Exactly. Based on his language, I think he would have made clear that Torture was not in the cards. Whatever Yannu got up to, I'm sure it was when Grey wasn't around.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Guess who is very much in for the high jump, then...

Shveiran

I mean... maybe?

Cat talking with the Gray Pilgrim about prohibiting torture of captured soldiers suggests the practice, while probably frowned upon by most, is still largely present. Otherwise, why even mentioning it if it was already established?

If that is true, Yanno may face political repercussions, but ... executions?

Cat, furious or no, won't nuke one of the Blood as that would result in snipping the alliance in the bud. Maybe Pilgrim will take action, but I can't believe that was the only "war crime" committed in this campaign, so...

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm pretty sure that's in the indefinite past, rather than immediate past. They have been fighting back and forth for a while. Also, Yannu would never say "honor be damned"... yet it's clear that his honor is utterly villainous.

Also, Hakram is quite the Deadpan Snarker, but then, most of the Woe are pretty good at that.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

More like DeadHAND Snarker, amirite?

Shaerick 68

Take your like and get out

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Don't mind if I do. 😊

Spinner335

Oh you tease.

Gunslinger

Classic Wednesday chapter, teasing us for an epic Friday. I can't say I enjoy the levantine bickering but I thoroughly enjoyed Hakram playing them all. He's so fucking good.

Also poor Rozala carrying the banner while wondering about Callowan meat is just too funny.

Andrew Mitchell



Cicero

Abigail knows a fellow traveler when she meets one. Why else would she offer Rozala drink? She knows how hard it is to handle this sort of thing drunk, she couldn't bear to see someone bear it sober.

[Fayhem](#)

Seriously.

> "Much too expensive, that far out in the Steppes," the Adjutant continued just as nonchalantly. "Never ate it done the traditional way until I came to Ater."

Adjutant, you sure you're an orc and not a troll?

[Liliet](#)

Hakram, baring his fangs: am I?

Soma

Hoo, hoo, hoo! What a play! I love having the Hakram-Rozala interaction. Comedy gold, I swear.

Dear Commodore Liliet,

I've in my possession an odd vessel by the name of the Rozhand and think it would do well with the fleet. I certainly wish to aid this curiosity, but I do have some prior commitments on the Malacat, Rozacat, or whatever various name the ship is has decided on while I've been away.

All the best,
Soma

(P.S. For the longest time I couldn't read your name as anything other than Lillet, I swear there's not enough space between the dot and body of the i on the comment names.)

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I love it.
Every Rozala is in is basically a scene where she plays second fiddle.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah my name has something of an issue with being readable ;u;

For me to ship a het ship there needs to be a lot more there than "two people were in proximity to each other and the man took the opportunity he had to thoroughly humiliate and unsettle the woman". In fact, one would argue that this interlude has moved this potential ship from the utterly neutral "don't care either way" position to the slightly negative "I would prefer not" one.

I care not how ships intersect (Rozala has two hands), but...

Anyway, did you notice the "impressively-shaped young woman" in there as EVIDENCE 😊

Soma

But not even as a friendship? To be honest, I just want to see the Hakram-Rozala buddy cop movie now. There's just something about these two that now screams out for best of friends.

And were you suggesting Yanozala? Because that would be trip. I'm down for the cultural fun times.

[Liliet](#)

Yanno? What has Yanno got to do with it? It was Aquiline she commented to. But really that's details, I'm talking about the pure fact of Rozala displaying Catherine levels of Context Ignoring Gay~~~

And I want everyone to get along and be friends always, but really as far as friend-ships go Abigail/Rozala buddy cop movie currently is far ahead in priority queue ;u;

Soma

Oh damn, I misread when I went to go back and see who made the shapely comment. This is what I get for skimming, but how I got Yanno making that comment about Roz Rather than Roz about Aquiline, I'll never know. I blame that on being up past midnight. You're right EVIDENCE, Tanja's got to watch out, he's got competition.

And fair enough on the friendship priority queue.

[Liliet](#)

TBH I'm seeing it as evidence for Cat/Rozala since that's the Rozala ship I'm mostly interested in, but yes ALL the gay Rozala ships are Confirmed Valid ;u;

(We don't know *Aquiline* is interested in women. We *do* know about Cat...)

[NZPIEFACE](#)

At least people aint reading it as Llllet.

[Liliet](#)

...

You know that would be hilarious. Anyone is welcome to do that to themselves if they feel like it~

Death Knight

Same.

RoflCat

I feel like Rozala and Abigail might need to spend a night in the bar together, just to vent out all their misfortunes.

Also, well played Hakram, you genius bastard.

Nairne .01

Are you sure a bar and not inn, one with rooms for the night. I have a hunch they'd need one if it happened.

[Liliet](#)

Now speaking of new ships, , ,

Javvies

You fucking idiot Levantines. Well, most of you, Razin seems to be improving.

Also, Cat's going to find out you were torturing her people, and that's not going to go well.

Good job, Hakram. Nicely done.

Heh, Rozala completely bought Cat's bluff and is terrified of what she thinks Cat can do.

Rogue Sorcerer and Archer or Cat and the resurrected Pilgrim? I half think it'll be Rogue and Archer, but Cat and Tariq show up in the end of the next interlude to give a cliffhanger on a Friday interlude and return to Cat on Monday.

TeK

They are not idiots. Look, they even said that they wouldn't mind Callowans, if there weren't any Procerans, whom seemingly allying with Army calls for the possibility of betrayal, since they can't really trust neither of them, even though Procerans only came because they can't trust Levantines not to be bloodthirsty savages, and the communication that could've avoided that misunderstanding is currently impossible due to Levantine traditions. Which, while stupid, also show Proceran stupidity, since their encroaching insistence probably only insulted them more into stubbornness, but what is really amazing is that Procerans seem to have no insight into Levantine customs, since they are just as much an arrogant bunch of shits

So while those two groups of smart people blinded by arrogance and tradition respectively awkwardly dance around each other like me on a date with a pretty girl when I have no clue why she agreed, Deadhand is playing them both while trolling future Dread Empress Accidental as a side effect.

Liliet

Procerans boldly assumed the Levantines were not fucking idiots and acted accordingly. Rozala Did Nothing Wrong, she used the valid tools she had to deescalate the situation. It would have cost Levantines \$0.00 to tell the Proceran envoys what exactly the 'sacred ceremony' WAS. They utterly failed to consider what their actions would look like from the side, 'everyone else is treacherous but we are white and fluffy and utterly beyond suspicion'.

TeK

If by "not being fucking idiots" you mean "they would try to murder a woman that in a span of a few hours defeated DK's

devil horde and nonchalantly killed Saint, all the while playing everyone else (except Bard, but they don't know it) as a feedle, woman that had also coincidentally and probably accidentally saved them, for the act they were specifically told by Heavens she didn't commit, and also tried to prevent" I politely disagree. This is a textbook definition of suicide by stupidity.

Levantines screwed up too, no denying that. I mean it's nice to see that it's "everyone distrusts everyone" not "everyone distrusts Callow", but you'd figure that fighting a common opponent would bring them a tad closer. Or that literal centuries of coexisting would make some of them at least try to learn about each others customs and perceptions.

[Liliet](#)

They know SOME about each other's customs and perception. But note that this was not even the obvious solution to the Levantines, Razin had to suggest it, and Procerans have no way of knowing just how tense the situation is between the four leaders of Blood and how much they can't afford to step even a toe out of the HONOR HONOR HONOR line.

Insanenoodlyguy

Best Orc approached smart though. Didn't say anything about them maybe trying to kill Catherine, just noted how this dishonorable it appeared in context. Argument that actually made sense to their standards instead of a potential insult.

[Liliet](#)

Mm! "You're making yourselves look bad, I'm sure this is an accident and you would love to mend it 😊😊😊"

superkeaton

I dearly hope someone says "Look what the Cat dragged in."

[TeK](#)

Why noone yet tried to use valerian extract on her as an elaborate insult is beyond me.

[Liliet](#)

I guarantee it happened in the orphanage offscreen before the series.

That is, in fact, the real backstory of Cat's enmity towards puns.

TeK

I need an Extra Chapter dedicated to that very thing.

Mental Mouse

??? Valerian works just fine on people (middling-strong sedative), and AIUI does about the same for cats. You might mean catnip, which is a mild stimulant for humans, but apparently a hallucinogen for cats. (I've both brewed and smoked both herbs, back in my wild college days.)

Liliet

Cats *really* like valerian.

Mental Mouse

Yes, and? A lot of humans really like sedatives too, from chamomile through alcohol and on to the infamous opioids. (That said, valerian tastes *nasty* to humans.)

Fun trivia: The synthetic opioid Valium was actually named after the herb valerian. The manufacturer was trying to convince prospective buyers that this new "scientific" pill from a distant corporation, was as safe and effective as the herb they were so familiar with.

Liliet

Valerian extract is a very common sedative where I'm from, and it's used as a folk wisdom suggestion to, like, manipulate cats with it. Sprinkle valerian on a scratching post to get them to use it, etc.

Mental Mouse

Here catnip is the big stereotype herb, valerian is much less commonly available. Catnip has the drawback that sometimes cats will act overly weird.

Also some cats are immune to it. I've heard a tale of one cat whose owner's backyard contained the local catnip patch, but this cat was immune. He exploited this to become king of the neighborhood cats... he'd lure his rivals in, wait for them to get stoned out of their skull, and *then* beat them up. Cats are evil... 😊

Andrew Mitchell

> he'd lure his rivals in, wait for them to get stoned out of their skull, and then beat them up. Cats are evilsmart... 😊

FTFY 😊

[Liliet](#)

yeah, in Ukraine valerian is in everyone's medicine cabinet so it's the stereotype herb.

[TeK](#)

More of a stereotype, really. Don't know if true or not. But nice for you. Smoking valerian.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Safety warning: Only use a little bit of valerian in a smoking mix.

[TeK](#)

My only real vice is this web novel.

[TeK](#)

"Two people hobbled through it, and just like that the Princess of Aquitan felt the world change."

Aaand it's Archer and Roland, with another gate ripping after this red herring in a Friday's cliffhanger.

Alivaril

I doubt they would be *hobbling* if it was the Rogue Sorcerer and Archer. Swaying precariously in a drunken stupor, perhaps, but not hobbling.

[TeK](#)

In her defence, Archer did die.

caoimhinh

Well, they were beaten quite a bit by Saint before Catherine killed her with the Time Sword. They got some cracked ribs, bruised faces and are *really* tired, even if Tariq healed the worst wounds (like Indrani's severed hand). Besides, maybe the crossing of that Gate was not very stable, so they are hobbling as they cross.

werafdsaew

Given that they took different paths, nothing says one has to arrive before the other. In fact due to narrative bullshit Pilgrim/Cat probably arrived first.

[Mental Mouse](#)

"... such a backache..." Seriously, RS is described as young and reasonably good-looking – do you really want to lay odds Archer *didn't* jump his bones on the way out?

But no, still Cat and Pilgrim, because it's past time and the sidekicks wouldn't have changed Rozala's world.

caoimhinh

Wait, the original Grim Binder was a woman?

We already had confirmation that the Brigand and the Slayer were also females, legends saying that the conflict between their lines was due to competing for the Grey Pilgrim's affections. Two chapters ago it was confirmed that the original Valiant Champion was a woman too...

Holy shit, the first Peregrine was the only man of his Band of Five, he had a harem of Heroines by his side! He must have been an Isekai Protagonist.

On another note, I'm more inclined to think that those two crossing the gate right now are Archer and Rogue. Too early for Catherine and Pilgrim.

Typos found: The younger pair she only through reports / The younger pair she knew only through reports

[TeK](#)

Or just a shonen protagonist. I remember how people started to speculate Laurence was sorta like EMIYA back when Saint was first mentioned.

caoimhinh

Yeah, shonen MC definitely. Japanese style most likely, given how he apparently traveled around with the four of them, but didn't marry any of them, like what happens in most Harem genre jap mangas (it's full of girls in love of MC but he only loves one / marries only one in the end).

For the lulz and because playing with stereotypes is fun, I imagine the four companions of the first Pilgrim to be like this:

-The Valiant Champion would be the big sister of the group, probably would be the one who said "Ara, ara" all the time and had a merry attitude.

-The Bandit was probably a tsundere, getting in fights with the first Pilgrim, yelling and cussing at him without telling him about her true feelings and also get fits of anger when other women approached him.

-The Grim Binder was normally calm but secretly practiced S&M. Likely a kuudere, expressionless most of the time but

caring about everyone in the group.

-The Slayer was the yandere of the group, of course. (I mean, just look at Aquiline and her knife-point courtship).

What do you think? Do you imagine them in a different way?

[TeK](#)

Nope, you are remarkably on point. Add to it leading a rebellion against a big evil Empire, and you got yourself a merry adventure.

(Spoiler: he also probably married his little sister, which is why they are so obsessed with Blood)

Faiir

Agreed on others, but the Valiant Champion was definitely a genki girl instead.

Andrew Mitchell

Nice pick up. I think I'm so used to gender not mattering in PGtE that I wasn't paying any attention to those details.... Yes, that is my excuse and I'm sticking to it, thank you very much.



[Liliet](#)

Please let's stick to not paying attention to those details -
_

caoimhinh

Hahahahaha.

Details are important! One can't just ignore them!



caoimhinh

Well, Gender "doesn't matter" in the sense that there is no discrimination and it makes no difference for absolutely any office, rank, charge or activity (except for Goblins, as they

are a Matriarchy), but the use of the proper gender pronoun *does* matter, as seen when Simon and Basilia were introduced (a transgender man and transgender woman respectively). Men and women tend to be more balanced in number in their groups in Calernia, cases like the first Pilgrim's group and Hanno's original group, where there is only one member of a sex and many of the other, are quite rare.

Nevertheless, I seem to have annoyed Liliet by noticing the gender of the ancient companions of the first Pilgrim (or maybe for pointing out how japanese-MC-like he was).

~~Help me, please. She's got a whole fleet of ships at her back~~

Though I do find it funny that he was the only man in a band of five where two were already said to be rumored to fight over his affections. However, I must emphasize that in no way was my intention to be offensive in any manner.

[TeK](#)

Is it weird that I am annoyed by how you should always specify you were not trying to offend anyone the moment you touch gender/sexuality/race topics?

caoimhinh

Not weird at all.

I find it annoying too that someone would get annoyed/offended at the mere mention of gender/sex/race. Given how there is a clear and definite difference between an offensive comment and one that isn't, plus the intent of such are glaringly obvious.

But hey, if someone get angry/annoyed at you for something you didn't intend, saying "sorry, it was not my intention to offend you" seems like the natural thing to do. It is, after all, the truth.

Same principle as if when you are walking on the street and bump into someone accidentally, you apologize and move on.

[Liliet](#)

I'm not offended by your mentioning anything, I'm just really fricking annoyed by the entire Japanese genre of any of it. You are not at fault for being aware of its existence, I just respond by pointing out that it's terrible :3

caoimhinh

We are cool then.

Oh, yeah. Harem genre in japanese manga/anime/novel is really annoying. Though it does lives up by feeding up on relationships shipping of many characters, so the fandom is partly to blame for that.

glances meaningfully at the sailing fleet in the distance not so far

Personally I don't like it because it's mostly taken for laughs and teases too much on the romantic advancements while nothing really happens (any two people that got into even a tenth of the situations a japanese MC gets with a love interest would end up dating or sleeping together at the least, but in those stories hundreds of chapters pass without even a kiss, which is outright ridiculous).

Still though, Named *do* run on stories, so having a Named living a Shonen MC story and thus becoming one of the greatest legends of Calernia makes sense in-universe. XD

[Liliet](#)

I fucking hate the gender stereotypes / roles / tropes that it creates/propagates/feeds on. Admittedly they're occasionally funny, but a lot of the time to a lot of people they substitute for understanding of female characters' personality instead of enhancing it. And I fucking hate the culture of 'waifu' that makes use of those, too.

The trope that ticks me off most of all though is the rivalry / love triangle one. "Everyone knows that when two girls are in proximity with each other and a guy the only possible way it goes is that they start squabbling with each other and trying to win the guy's affection." If there weren't people who end up legitimately thinking like that, I wouldn't mind it so much, but...

^-^

~~but Akua is a yandere and Juniper is a tsundere and there's nothing anyone can do about that~~

caoimhinh

Well, each literary genre has its own stereotypes to play with.

For example, the recent years Young Adult novels had the love triangle of "female protagonist with two hot guys fighting over her attention and she is confused about who she loves, even though the book already told us that she loves only one of them", with movie adaptations making it worse.

As for personality types (yandere, tsundere, kuudere, etc), there's a wide variety of them and while fandom usually tends to overgeneralize and encapsulate an entire character into a single defining personality trait (even if it's the most important trait of that character), the reality is that there's plenty of depth to characters, and that shines when the authors dedicate one or more chapters to that character. A famous example is Mahou Sensei Negima (manga) with an almost an entire classroom of almost 30 girls romantically interested in the MC and the manga constantly plays with that and the interactions Negi has with each of the girls, displaying each of their personalities and how they develop their feeling for him (some love him, some lust after him, some respect him, some admire him as a role model, etc). Most importantly, even though it is a significant element of the manga and most of the girls play a significant role in supporting Negi accomplish his goals in life, **THE STORY IS NOT ABOUT THAT**. Despite the fandom's constant focus on romance and the speculation about which one of the girls is the one to become Negi's wife, the manga actually moves on to a wide variety of subjects like politics, racial issues, many martial arts and magic battles, plus the desire for connection between people and the salvation of the world through combined efforts.

Of course, the fans of Negima mostly didn't give a crap about that, they would raise their battleships of NegixAsuna against NegixNodoka and NegixChisame, and that's what people would mostly see online and in forums as that's the subject that heated up the debates and kept their attention, especially on the US and Japan where the actual main clientele and target audience was.

Sometimes, it's a market decision.

There's plenty of examples of playing with stereotypes (both in a straight manner and in an inverse manner) in literature, but the most glaring and famous examples are in manga and anime.



[Liliet](#)

>For example, the recent years Young Adult novels had the love triangle of “female protagonist with two hot guys fighting over her attention and she is confused about who she loves, even though the book already told us that she loves only one of them”, with movie adaptations making it worse.

[Liliet](#)

Well htis accidentally posted before I actually commented on it.

So the thng is, this one’s also annoying and tiring, but unlike the ‘girl instantly crushes on guy’ one I at least find this one relatable and true to life. Consider the eternal trope of “gets the girl as a reward”: girls are taught by culture that actually we are totally supposed to pick the more “deserving” candidate rather than the one we actually like, which makes sorting out which one we actually do like and which one is more deserving and which one plays into interesting tropes but we don’t really give a shit about... it’s not exactly a trivial task.

Saying “no” to someone who appears like They Would Be Hurt By That is not exactly taught at schools.

So... yeah. A girl utterly confused in a romantic situation of several suitors interested in her is only too real.

Liliet

>A famous example is Mahou Sensei Negima (manga) with an almost an entire classroom of almost 30 girls romantically interested in the MC

TBH as an aroace girl who is constantly expected by everyone around her to WANT A BOYFRIEND OR BETTER YET A HUSBAND I would rather step away slowly and not look in that direction.

Like, girls *not being interested despite being in a hot/interesting guys' proximity* is my jam, here.

caoimhinh

To each, their own. And our tastes from ten years ago tend to be different to the ones we have now, as we have matured and refined our tastes, usually looking for more quality and discarding certain literary genres in favor of others. Though I assure you this manga is worth reading (fair warning, the first dozen or so chapters might annoy you if ecchi comedy is not your thing, but if you pass that the comedy becomes better and the serious plot starts to develop too, with very interesting characters).

There's more to it than the absurd amount of love interests for the boy and the ecchi scenes, as I mentioned in the other comment, there's politics, action and lots of character development, and the romance doesn't all center on the MC; there are other couples in the story too, some involving teenage girls of the class, some involving the adults, and some with characters met later in the story, including one lesbian couple (this being a japanese story, it's pretty uncommon unless the story centers on them), some platonic relationships, some characters remain single through the whole story, and there are some asexual characters, there's a robot, a ghost too. Each of the characters has their own motivations for befriending Negi and they all interact with him in unique ways, even the girls attracted to him express it on different manners, which gives the story an interesting development.

Also, there's a reason for why it has that sub-plot with so many girls after the MC, actually: The

editor forced the author to do it, since the author's previous work "Love Hina" had been such a success after using in an innovative (for the time) way the harem tag in a manga, along with ecchi comedy.

Ken Akamatsu (the author) actually wanted an adventure/action manga, but the editorial wanted to ride on the formula of his previous successful work, so he had to accept and had the first couple of volumes being pure comedy with some ecchi situations, and then BAM! action started and Negi started learning martial arts plus using his magic for combat, then demons appeared, then rogue mages, and plot escalated from there.

Though the most laudable thing is that despite the initial way that the author had most of the girls romantically interested in Negi, they had huge character development and they each pursue their own goals in their own ways, most of them getting over their initial attraction to him, instead behaving in more serious manner as they grow up; near the end, only about 5 of the girls are still interested in him in a romantic manner (which considering the initial number being close to 30, is a huge change).

The end result was very good and something not foreseeable from the early chapters, as the series gradually takes a more serious tone despite having started as a fluffy comedy. There are all kinds of stories out there, and even the ones who start in a way can end completely different, and even those that are famous for one of its traits have a lot more to offer than that.

Though of course, everyone has different tastes, so it's impossible for a story to be liked by everyone, but I would advise giving it a chance (to the manga, the anime adaptation *sucked*).

[Liliet](#)

I believe you that it's good, but wow I'm still incredibly not interested.

Works can be good and still hold 0 of my interest
-_-

caoimhinh

That happens. As I said before, to each their own, it's a natural consequence of people having different tastes that even great works of a

particular style or genre will not attract some people, because they don't like that particular genre

[Liliet](#)

Mhm!

caoimhinh



Faiir

I think that character stereotypes in LN/WN make it easy for new writers to add characters that are not clones of each other and can be developed further in the future.

Especially in web novels, when a writer doesn't have a long term plan, you can often see how a writer figures out what a character is actually about only after some time.

If the choice is between a stereotype or a completely bland character in the meantime, I'd rather have a stereotype.

[shieldredblog](#)

If you think Shonen is bad, try reading a Wuxia.

caoimhinh

Well, at least in Wuxia and Xianxia there is sex and marriage between the characters and their love interests, not many years and hundreds of episodes of them getting half-naked and then going back to their lives pretending it didn't happen until the next time they get into a romantic situation and get half-naked

again (played for laughs because japanese humor uses ecchi situations for that instead of taking them seriously).

At least in chinese stories if there's two people naked, there's going to be some action. XD

Ιούλιος Καίσαρας

Well, I also find it annoying in general but here the author either on purpose or by accident made one such cliché and I find it hilarious (more so if he did it by accident).

[Liliet](#)

But he didn't do the cliché. He did the prerequisites for it and then absolutely didn't do the cliché itself. Which is refreshing and wonderful.

Raivshard

Yeah, it's certainly not a romance. The main character might be a bisexual horndog, but that's more of an amusing sidenote to be trotted out for the occasional giggle.

[Liliet](#)

>We already had confirmation that the Brigand and the Slayer were also females, legends saying that the conflict between their lines was due to competing for the Grey Pilgrim's affections.

Wait, did it say explicitly that they were female (it's not a noun btw), or are you assuming there?

Also, Hanno was a man leading a band of women, and there was a whole lot of nothing out of it.

Also, do we have confirmation the original Grey Pilgrim was male?

caoimhinh

1) Fair enough, but I think Yannu used female pronouns when he mentioned that legend (which he dismissed as mere superstitions and said that the real reason for their conflict was over resources).

2) Hanno is very careful of how he relates with other people, though I recall there was some flirting between him and one of the sisters. Nevertheless, a man in a group of females doesn't necessarily have to be in a relationship with any of them, of course, I'm just point it out for the lulz and

because there was already "gossip" of two of that team's members fighting over the Pilgrim's affections.

3) Yes, original Grey Pilgrim was male, the Athem of Smoke specifically uses male pronouns when mentioning him (tattered his war, tattered his throne), it was also stated as such by Tariq when he recalled the story of the first use of Shine (the boy become a man pucked a star from the heavens and light the first torch of rebellion).

[Liliet](#)

Right, thank you.

I'm just really annoyed by this kind of gendered trope approach. Hanno's band was a balm of my soul specifically BECAUSE literally nobody in-universe thought about it like that for even a second.

(He might have flirted with Irina, the Ashen Priestess, they had cordial conversations at least. Not sure if flirting, but yeah it's possible)

Shveiran

Hanno's band felt kind of flat to me, but I get what you are saying.

Personally, I really like how most of Calernia's rulers and best generals are female without anyone making a big deal about it. The Guide is all like that, which is why THAT particular band of Heroes didn't really stand out.

[Liliet](#)

YES.

Faiir

Maybe it's a language barrier, but "a group of males" or "a group of females" ALWAYS makes me think of animals rather than people, documentary style:

"And now the crocodile is starting his mating dance infront of a group of females."

[Liliet](#)

Same. Not a great habit i m h o -_-

Not to mention the Calamities include a classic tsundere, a gay best friend, a kouhai, a shapeshifter and the MC who still went for the childhood friend.

[Liliet](#)

Only made more amazing by the whole 'was briefly attracted to her but squashed that with extreme prejudice because she's a lesbian, ended up basically platonically married for 40 years and lecturing a nephew about qp partnerships' thing.

Taking a cliché and making the characters and dynamics in it alive, bright and whole enough that the cliché is absolutely unrecognizable as a result is a thing Guide does *best*.

werafdsaew

Where do you find that the original Binder was a woman?

caoimhinh

This part of the chapter:

*It was an old jape back home that the true talent of the Tanjas was not the magic of their famous **ancestress** but in truth the wealth that flowed through the canals of Malaga*

[Liliet](#)

Good catch!

[Fayhem](#)

> We already had confirmation that the Brigand and the Slayer were also females, legends saying that the conflict between their lines was due to competing for the Grey Pilgrim's affections.

I honestly don't remember that passage so I can't say necessarily, but if the confirmation you're referring to is just that legend says they were competing for OG Pilgrim's affections... that's not confirmation. Calernia is confirmed LGBT-friendly; OG Pilgrim could potentially be bi or gay rather than straight.

> Too early for Catherine and Pilgrim.

Dawn is exactly the correct time for Pilgrim to be showing up. Remember, they're moving through Arcadia; their speed is based on narrative time much more than physical time.

Nairne .01

How people keep forgetting Made to was there as well. Or was he gated by Ivah?

Nairne .01

Masego*

Damn phones and autocorrect

[TeK](#)

Yes, he was. He left well before most of the confusing fuckery has had happened.

IDKWhoitis

Thinking about, Noone in that tent has actually seen Hakram fight. He wasn't at the battle of the Camps or hasn't been waving his axe around much in the Procerean campaign.

And if Cat shows up, we know his combat potential only goes up, to back her up.

Unfortunately, Cat may be tapped, with several large miracles, the absence of strong story, and Dawn.

Although that's never stopped Cat from lying through her teeth and smoking a pipe non chalantly while dragging Tariq by a foot across a gate.

They saw her end Saint, so they must have some degree of fear of her. And she has ruined a small armies before, both Lev and Prócer, so Dread Massacre's saying about committing an act before that rings in every silence may be enough to silence them in turn.

Shveiran

Cat is at a disadvantage, without a strong story... when she comes back after saving them all, after raising the Pilgrim with a Choir's blessing, and has the Favored Son of Levant standing by her side?

I... can't say I see it.

Power-wise? Sure. She is tapped out, and dawn means the drows are too. But she has a shit-ton of narrative weight, not the other way around.

This is the DENOUMENT. The Story pushes for her to have an happy ending and for the tension to ebb, not the other way around.

Valkyria

Hakram you smug little bastard. He just can't help playing the big mysterious – maybe human eating – orc.
Poor Princess, doesn't know what she signed up for.

Sparsebeard

And here the pure-bred Liessan charger and it's Tyran are coming out of the portal...

SITB

'Callowans being physically incapable of halfway edible cooking'
god bless this goofy national stereotype

[TeK](#)

In their defence, they probably created it just to spite Praesi raiding for food. You are hungry? Weeell, we got plenty of food, make yourself comfortable. What's wrong, why are you puking?

[Liliet](#)

It's because they are British. Have been in Britain, can confirm: the stereotype is based on TRUTH

Raivshard

Yeah, and unlike the British, they have yet to integrate Indian & Chinese cuisine (which also leads back to spices).

[TeK](#)

I think they made up British cuisine just to troll everyone. Like, they probably have entirely another TRUE British cuisine, and stereotyped one is for foolish foreigners.

[Liliet](#)

CHIPS WITH VINEGAR

A legit existent in Britain thing is CHIPS WITH VINEGAR

Darkening

And? That's delicious.

[Liliet](#)

Ok so here's the thing. When I was in Britain it was on a study exchange program where we the kids were placed with families. We ate the family cooking for breakfast and dinner (and the less said about me vs boiled vegetables dinners + trying to be polite the better), and we were given pre-arranged / pre-packed lunches. They contained a sandwich, some drink, maybe something else small I don't remember, but also A PACKET OF CHIPS.

With random flavor.

I appreciate the existence of odd flavors, I really do, yay diversity. But when faced with a choice to eat *vinegar flavored chips* or go hungry,,,

well, I ate them every time. But I will NEVER stop grumbling about it.

Aotrs Commander

As A British Person (and more specifically, An English Person~), I feel a couple of points should be made here.

a) This means by extension, Catherine is British, HAH, victory for us, suck it the rest of the world! Now she's even more awesome.

(Extra bonus points, fellow British Persons, what regional accent should she have...?)

b) At least British cuisine has decent puddings and is actually *edible*, as opposed to everywhere else which insists on stuffing things full of random inedible vegetables, fungi or spices.

Heck, even British cuisine tends to do that; frankly, anything other than some form of potatoes and baked beans in addition to the meat is completely unnecessary.

Salt-and-vinegar crisps I will agree are as largely irrelevant as putting salt and vinegar on your actual chips (from the fish-and-chip shop), given that the One True Condiment – the ONLY condiment, all others are lies – tomato sauce contains both already (well, maybe not the salt if you get the healthy options available), especially since tomato sauce flavour crisps exist, which are, of course, the Best Crisps. (Or Worcester Sauce for the peasants.)

And anything at breakfast that is not explicitly cereal is heresy and should be burned, preferably with some form of high-energy particle beam.

[*Euodiachloris*](#)

Oi, I take offense to that. I'm on Team Brown Sauce. HP or Daddies', not picky; but brown over red every day of the week.

Except with fish and chips, of course: curry sauce *and* mushy peas for me with me chips, tartare and vinegar/lemon for the fish. 😊

Liliet

>Heck, even British cuisine tends to do that; frankly, anything other than some form of potatoes and baked beans in addition to the meat is completely unnecessary.

Honestly if the British cuisine was the way you described I'd probably call it the second most edible cuisine in the world after Japanese.

Fuck. Random. Inedible. Vegetables.

Tomato sauce is the best condiment, agreed wholeheartedly.

What about toast for breakfast?

Tj

Ooh Imagine if Cat was a scouser or a Geordie?

Mental Mouse

Hey, I *like* salt-and-vinegar potato chips! But in Britain, I suspect you mean a "packet of *crisps*". "Chips" to them are something quite different..

Liliet

Right.

That.

Euodiachloris

If I were to, say, have your address, I might be tempted to send you some Monster Munch that would definitely not be Pickled Onion flavour. And, it wouldn't come with a request to see your face upon trying them. At all.

Nope. 😊

Be glad Twiglets very definitely haven't crossed my mind, either... xD

Clmineith

Callow is Britain? What?! Since when?!

The history of Great Britain is basically characterized by how difficult it is to invade, being an island and with neighbors only on one side and all. Not to mention the place were never that good to produce food.

I know there is the Alban/Albion thing, but it's not enough in my opinion. Like, Procer have a lot of french names, but their political system is closer to the Holy Roman Empire.

TeK

Holy Roman Empire at start kinda WAS French though. Then again, Daoine is pretty much England(?), with longbowmen, celtic names and language, etc. And it's technically part of Callow. Than there are semiindependent goat herding people at the north... I am sure someone more familiar with British culture and history can spot more similarities. Aside from names commonly used and unedible cuisine.

Faiir

Also note that neither English not French were known much for their horse.

I wonder what other European country was known for being invaded from East and West and was known for their heavy cavalry 😊

Fayhem

At a guess I'd say I'm responding to a Pole here? I'm skeptical that was actually the inspiration for Callow given that Callowan names don't sound especially Slavic and most Calernian cultures get names that at least kinda-sorta-roughly line up with their inspiration RL cultures (Daoine being the notable exception off the top of my head). That said, if you left that out then yeah that's not a half-bad parallel at all. Being stubborn as fuck after being invaded lines up too; the French Resistance gets all the glory (at least in the West) but I know the Polish Resistance honestly did a lot more in WWII.

That said, at least in the medieval era the French at least were ABSOLUTELY known for their heavy cavalry. The English longbowmen weren't getting charged by foot or light horse at Agincourt and Crecy. I don't know that the English used all that much heavy horse in actual history (somebody who knows more feel free to correct me), but the mythological history of Britain that tends to get drawn on more heavily for Fantasy British very strongly foregrounds King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, and knights were the quintessential heavy horse of the medieval era.

Faiir

Well I don't really see countries in the Guide as direct parallels to actual historical ones – each seems more like a mix of at least two.

You're right about French horse – literally the first image I found after googling it was Pappenheim's Cuirassiers 😊

Fayhem

> Daoine is pretty much England

IIRC we have Word of EE that Daoine is actually ethnically (and apparently culturally, not that we've gotten any Deoraithe POVs outside of Duchess Kegan on campaign which I don't personally feel really counts on a cultural level) more closely based on the Native American Iroquois confederation than on anything else.

Which is ofc kind of confusing since their names all sound quite Celtic AFAICT, and as far as my limited cultural knowledge can tell me everybody else on Calernia seems to get names that more or less line up with their inspiration RL cultures. Which is why even though Cat is actually mixed-race (and has been explicitly tagged as having darker-than-regular-Callowan skin in AFAIK every book) people in the comments sometimes keep thinking she's white, since half-Callowan and half-Irish doesn't really suggest the same thing that half-Callowan and half-Native American does.

Anyway, Callow is "British/English" in what I think is deliberately the very generic way that fantasy protagonist cultures are stereotypically Assumed British Unless Proven Otherwise. If the similarities aren't super historically close I think it's because the sheer genericness is the point; to subvert a trope you have to start with something recognizable as a version of the trope for your base, and stereotypical Generic Fantasy British cultures tend to very much earn the first word in that title.

Clmineith

I dunno, I think it's a mistake to try and determine what real world country is what Calernia nation. I think that every nations were inspired by multiple real world countries, but every RW country inspired several nations.

Callow + Procer are pretty much a mix of Europa. Callow has Praes is more Turkey, with Rome and some other influences? Maybe? But Turkey is also in some of the Dominion...

This way it allow things to be recognizable without being not!england an not!france and not!poland, etc.

Fayhem

I'd agree that it's a mistake to try to align them too closely, yeah. They do have inspirations that are visible and I think it's fine to discuss those inspirations in the spirit of fun, but I def agree that these shouldn't be taken as actual representations of any RL cultures/nations.

Andrew Mitchell

THIS. It's a bit of fun, and that's all it is.

Liliet

Daoine are Irish AND Native American at the same time. Nothing says erratic can't base one fictional ethnicity on two IRL ones!

caoimhinh

Well, most of the countries in Calernia (and some mentioned from beyond Calernia, like the Yan Tei, Baalite, Miezán, the Yaminine and the Salamdeul) are loosely based on a culture from Earth, but the similarities rarely go beyond language and physical traits, since they all have completely different stories than their inspirations. Not to mention there's magic involved.

Some examples I have noticed:

-The Kingdom of Callow is inspired by Britain. The country name comes from the story stereotype that "a callow youth would rise to fight evil". You can also notice their english names of Callowan characters, their legend about the sword in stone, and their ancient rulers being the Alban dynasty.

-Daoine is inspired by Irland. The country name comes from the irish word that means "people". You can notice their names are celtic/irish names.

-The Dread Empire of Praes is inspired by Africa. Their three ethnicities being: the dark-skinned Soninke representing native africans, the tanned sand-colored Taghreb representing something similar to Arabs, and the white-skinned Duni (Amadeus is one of these) that are descendants of foreigners that settled in norther Praes. Mthawe is their most spoken language but the Taghreb have another language too. Their capital Ater, seems to me like the latin word *Attero*

which means something like “wasteful” but has many other meanings. It was said that the name comes from a Miezan word.

-The Miezan Empire is roughly similar to the Roman Empire, having conquered many lands and slaved Praes. They came from beyond the Tyrian Sea, and are the ones who elevated mathematics in Calernia and advanced spellcraft, built marvels of engineering and heavily influenced many of the cultures there. They were fought back and repelled after centuries of occupation, and are the reason all ethnicities in Praes (including Orcs, Goblins and Ogres) hate slavery.

-The Principate of Procer is inspired by Europe. We have seen they have 3 different ethnicities: Lycaonese (who are the northern badass who always dedicate themselves to fight against the Rattlings and the Dead King), the Alamans (which live in central Procer) and the Arlesite (which live in the south). We have seen that Procer, being such a huge agglomeration of people and having different cultures joined in one, has different languages but the most famous is Chantant which is their equivalent to french.

-The Dominion of Levant has the Majilis as their ruling council, which is an Arabic term, though the similarities mostly end there, given as their culture and social laws are vastly different than those of Islamic countries to my knowledge (which is, in all fairness, limited, so if someone can add something here please do so).

-The League of Free Cities consists of an alliance of city-states that have greek names, but it's worth noticing that even though they have many similitudes to the Greek Polis, none of them can be an exact match to any real-life city-state of ancient times.

For example: one of them, Atalante, resembles Athens in their love for debates and exercises of rethoric, while the only one with Democracy is Bellerophon. Stygia practices slavery and trains their slave-soldiers to fight in Phalanxes, while the ones who seem to have a more spartan regime and war-like mentality are those from Helike.

-The culture of Sephirah, whose capital was Keter, the city of the Dead King Neshamah, is based on Israel, with people names being Jewish names and the places being named after Cabalistic terms.

This is all without mentioning the magical races in Calernia and the grand nations beyond the Tyrian Sea (the Wandering Bard stated that the Elves' domain is bigger than the entirety of that continent). It's a really vast and fascinating world EE has created in Practical Guide to Evil.

Javvies

Britain being difficult to invade is really only a relatively modern thing.

More specifically, it really only coincides with England becoming a naval power. And that's only been the case for a few hundred years.

In fact, for most of the Dark Ages and well into the medieval period, Britain was regularly being raided, invaded, and subsequently settled by the invaders.

Every wonder where the term Anglo-Saxon came from? Two different groups that invaded and settled in Britain – the Angles and the Saxons ... IIRC, both have Germanic (or proto-germanic) roots.

Then there's the Vikings/Norse (several waves, really), and before them the Romans, and after them, the root cause of the Hundred Years War – the Duke of Normandy, aka William the Conqueror, French, albeit of Norse descent (the Norse more or less claimed/extorted Normandy from the French Crown, hence the name). And before the Romans you had the Celts replacing the Picts.

There's a reason the English language is such a mess – it's in part because Britain was the punching bag of Europe for centuries. And everybody brought their own language to the party, and bits and pieces from each one got amalgamated into common use and thus the common tongue.

Morgenstern

They just meant when it comes to food, I'm quite sure, judging by the food stuff discussion above. 😊

Liliet

Callow is Britain because their names are British, their language – Lower Miezian – is just English, and their cooking is known to be inedible.

Oh, and appearance.

HRE included France's territory, didn't it? Procer has three languages: the Lycaonese one that's just German, Chantant that's just French, and Tolesian which is probably Italian. Or Spanish.

The country parallels aren't completely literal.

caoimhinh

I remember in the early chapters Catherine justified it by saying that spices were rare in Callow, due to their high prices and the state of the country as a conquered province of

Praes.

Later on, she was made fun of by the members of the 15th because she lacks cooking skills, thus living to the stereotype, which she justified by saying that she was not the housekeeping type of person.

Further later on, she mentioned that indeed the cuisine was better in Praes, but she missed some of the snacks from Callow, and managed to get a small victory because Masego and others were really hung on Callowan pies and tarts.

[Liliet](#)

♥ ♥ ♥

[Mental Mouse](#)

If they're indeed modeled on the English... well, supposedly the real reason England conquered half the planet, was to get their hands on some decent food! 😊

Shveiran

To be fair, I could unrepentantly kill for some good fudge. I tried it like twice, and the months since have been oppressed by the weight of their absence.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Just FYI, the chapter's not showing up in the table of contents (at least for me).

kek

"Dawn is near" -Archer (circa 7 chapters ago : D)

Someguy

TBH, the political outcome of this is not Rozala's problem. She hates Cordelia, she can kick this upstairs for it to be Cordelia's headache. Rozala has already fulfilled her tasks to both letter and spirit.

[Liliet](#)

Rozala cares about the country and about the eventual outcome. Her and Cordelia are genuinely full on 100% striving for the same outcome allies here, no matter how much Rozala hates that fact.

[matrixm](#)

YYEESSSSSSSS

And we'll played Haram, I thought it strange that he seemed to be acting so hastily.

[Liliet](#)

MHM

It's still a plan Catherine wouldn't have okayed if she were available for consultation, but it's much better than what it LOOKED like at least

[Mental Mouse](#)

Before even reading the chapter, I noticed that the "Previous" link skips right past the extra chapter "Seed I".

Steve

"... Well, this is awkward."

caoimhinh

Pilgrim: Hello. What's going on?

Levantines: He's alive! How is this possible?

Rozala: We saw the Pilgrim die!

Catherine: What? How!?

Hakram: Dream visions, started a couple hours ago, showed your journey, not complete.

Catherine: Urgh, stupid Angels, almost caused another war. Even though they promised. Typical...

grumbles into the distance

[shieldredblog](#)

This whole world changing thing makes me think I might have been right. Something had to have visibly and obviously changed, something other than the Pilgrim just actually not being dead.

So..The Pilgrim did keep the Twilight Crown and is now Fae levels of sexy.

Shveiran

Not necessarily. I mean, Cat bringing back the Peregrine from the dead, walking by his side before the Blood? Levant will not stand for considering her an enemy.

That is the precedent Cat has been after... and not because it DOESN'T change things 😊

[Liliet](#)

I think just his appearance side by side with Catherine here... does the trick

[whlindsa](#)

Predictions for A Practical Guide To Evil:

Robber:

Robber will survive the story (obviously), and win the hand of the fair Pickler, fairest of all Goblin maidens, in marriage...by the simple expedient of stabbing the Dead King repeatedly, then setting him on fire, and then using copious amounts of goblin munitions to blow the corpse to pieces, and then stealing his heart and running like hell before the lich can pull himself back together. He may have allowed some of the rest of the cast to help him with this, just to make them feel useful, because his legendary magnanimity is really his greatest trait, it really is. Either way, it is more than sufficient dowry to allow a nobody like him to wed the fair Pickler, and, hell, father as many children as he physically can, because, fuck, man, what goblin Matron wouldn't want to have the kids of the goblin who stole the Dead King's heart in her tribe. Within five hundred years, one out of every three goblins in the world will be a direct descendant of Robber.

As time goes on, it will become obvious that the name of Robber has become not just a name, but a Name, and the only one that the goblins possess that is not immediately erased because the surface dwellers found out about it. Among the court in Laure, the title of Lesser Lesser Footrest will continue, and will become the official designation for the person who has been named as second in command of the Kingdom's spy ring, and the one who is primarily responsible for managing the Court's covert operations. Despite the rumors to the contrary, this position is not always held by a goblin, and there have been many very famous agents of the Crown who have gone on to become Lesser Lesser Footrest despite being sadly un-goblinoid, but there do seem to be an awful lot of goblins in that position, don't there? Eventually, things will come full circle, and the latest holder of the Name of Robber will become the Lesser Lesser Footrest once again, just in time to almost single-handedly save the Calernia from the Dead King's eventual resurgence. He might, graciously, allow a few other Names to play a minor part in assisting him in this task, because every goblin Named Robber is really a prince at heart, and full of grace and generosity, but let's face it, when you need to absolutely murderize everybody in the room, goblins just really don't have any equals.

Pickler: Pickler will eventually marry Robber, because, damn, that's a really impressive marriage gift, and, let's face it, where else is a girl going to find a man who's willing to give her a collection of eyeballs that nice? Especially one who's willing to give up his entire collection of eyeballs, which may or may not require several wagons to cart around, and display properly, but we're not admitting to anything, because the quartermaster still owes her a favor or twenty. She and Robber

eventually settle down in the hills of South March, where they become some of the most famous goblins alive, and found the goblins' next big center of population.

As she grows older, Pickler will continue to develop more and more advanced and innovative siege engines, with the end result that these machines will come to be called Pickler engines by most of the surface dwellers of Calernia, although, as always, the military will continue to stiffly insist on their formal nomenclature, even thousands of years after everybody else has just given up and started calling them by their real name.

Pickler will eventually be paid an outrageous amount of money by the Kingdom Under to knock it off, already, because this kind of arms race is getting expensive, dammit, and will retire to a life of ease, comfort, and relatively little scheming, where she can concentrate on things like building bridges, fortresses, and figuring out new and innovative ways to destroy those same fortresses without designing new siege engines to do the job, because, really, a girl's got to have a hobby.

Catherine Foundling:

Dread Empress of Calernia. Sort of whether she wants to be or not, at this point. Eventually, after four or five decades of rule, she decides that Calernia is stable enough for her to step down, and hands off rule of the continent to her chosen successor, while she retires to become a hermit, a scholar, a sage, and a teacher.

Hakram Deadhand:

He's still with Catherine come the sequel, but now he has two prosthetic hands. The inhabitants of the village where they live have just learned to ignore this little quirk.

Amadeus of the Green Stretch:

Amadeus will be sent as the single reinforcement for the Lycaonese provinces, because, really, certain things have to be done in a very particular order if they're going to defeat the Dead King for reals, and giving Amadeus actual backup would not just be overkill, it would actively distort the timetable they need to accomplish. I mean, yeah, sure, the man has lost the Name of Black Knight, but let's face it—all that means is that he isn't destined to lose, and doesn't have to throw Fate a bone any longer.

After the Uncivil Wars, he will retire to Refuge to live the rest of his days out with Hye. A hundred and fifty years later, his two oldest children will be kidnapped by slavers from Mercantis, and sold as slaves to across the Tyrian Sea. By the time Hye and Amadeus track down the slavers, retrace the route of the slaves, find a ship to get them across the Sea, and then finally catch up with their offspring, the two of them will have singlehandedly reversed the collapse of the Miezian Empire, and the new Infernal Miezian Empire will have restored order to the lands surrounding Styrbolgis Minor, and will conquer most of the continent on which

the city of Miez was first built in the name of Catherine Foundling and the Holy Light. Oh yeah, and the Heavens probably feature in there somewhere, too. Ironically, this new Empire will not include the city of Miez. Hye will think that every aspect of this entire situation is completely and utterly hilarious, and she will tease Amadeus mercilessly about it for forever. Nobody knows why Amadeus seems to continue to display Villainous traits, despite no longer being a Villain, but the smart money is on him somehow blackmailing the Gods, or possibly having somehow stolen the angel's corpse out of the lake by Sallia.

Traitorous:

I am reasonably certain that Traitorous is, in fact, not dead, since I have seen no indication that the Praesi Highborn of the time elected to conduct a sufficiently exhaustive battery of tests upon his supposed corpse to settle the matter once and for all. I also find it very suspicious that a Dread Emperor could be undone by something as mundane as simple poison, especially since Names are supposed to be able to shrug off most poisons, and, more, that an Imperial Concubine would have sufficiently unfettered access to allow her to obtain said poison without anybody being aware of it. There is a strong possibility that Ime is actually Traitorous in disguise, and that the two of them will run away together to join in unholy wedlock after Catherine comes knocking.

Where is he now? What is he doing? Why is he doing it? What does he REALLY want? And can we definitively prove that the entire series is not the end result of one of Traitorous's plots, or that Traitorous has not lied to the author, and/or has not had Erratic Errata assassinated and replaced by a shapeshifting devil that has been specifically trained to be able to act as Erratic Errata's body double? There is no real way to know the answer to these questions.

[Liliet](#)

>Names are supposed to be able to shrug off most poisons, and, more, that an Imperial Concubine would have sufficiently unfettered access to allow her to obtain said poison

Holy shit.

Named being un-poison-able might or might not be an actual plot hole wrt Alaya and Nefarious.

Then again, apparently the 'burning out poison' trick needs to be used consciously, and if he didn't realize he was poisoned it wouldn't work.

And Assassin tried to poison Hanno's band, so the simplest answer is Praes has anti-Named poison.

Never mind, we're good.

Shveiran

Nasty Praesi tricks.

Erasing Plot-holes ever since the Secret Wars.

Ask not how big a mess your nasty Praesi trick will make, but rather what new, exiting, nasty Praesi trick you'll get to use to "clean it up".

Nasty Praesi tricks: a self-growth industry.

Because remember: if it is nasty, it could be nastier.

Nasty Presi tricks: coming now to you through Mercantis. Get them now before the Black Queen crucifies all provviders.

caoimhinh

Yeah, there are poisons that are too fast for Named to burn out of their systems, and also Alchemical/Magical poisons that can kill them.

They can actually be killed with anything if it's used appropriately, arrows usually don't work on Named, yet Amadeus used arrows to kill the Commander decades ago. Curses, spells and rituals can kill a Named, but Named can also fight it back if they are strong enough or aware of it, for example, Black slapped aside one of Wekesa's little spells that he was using to troll him in one of the Villainous Interludes, while Catherine and Ranger can cut through sorcery.

caoimhinh

I would just like to point out that the Dread Emperor that Imperial Concubine Alaya killed was Nefarious.

Traitorous has been dead for many decades, if not centuries, and he poisoned himself but framed 17 different rivals for his death, causing political turmoil, speculation and fierce competition among the claimants of the throne.

"Just as planned" is written on his tomb.

[sengachi](#)

I love how amazing Hakram is at keeping his eye on the bigger picture while everyone else is scrambling about reacting to stuff.

mavant

This cliffhanger will be the death of me.

Andrew Mitchell

Don't fret. It's only about six hours until we get the next chapter. 😊

caoimhinh

You mean, the next *cliffhanger*. Hahahaha.

Andrew Mitchell

Probably... Although, cliffhangers seem to be the new normal these days and not just reserved for Fridays. 😊

epokki

test

StarlightGlimmer

Cat will make Hakram teach Abigail everything he knows about logistics. Abigail will cry on the inside.

Chapter 52: Recovery

"Negotiation with your ruler, my lord, is like treading the edge of a hidden pit filled with man-eating tapirs. Unrelated, but before we further discuss taxation would you take a single step to the left?"

– Dread Empress Atrocious

Dawn broke through the night sky, revealing bared steel.

That, I considered, was a lot of swords. Shame about the way the people wielding those seemed inclined to point them in my direction. Princess Rozala, who was here for some reason, immediately began shouting for the pack of Levantine warriors surrounding us to sheathe their blades, which went largely ignored. Almost like some Proceran princess screaming out orders at people her ancestors had invaded hadn't gone over well with this particular crowd. Who'd have thought? Hakram, who was there because he was a prince among men, strode forward ignoring all the shouting and the foreign priests looking like someone had kicked over their anthill. After going through his cloak pockets he produced a nice little wooden pipe and stuffed it with wakeleaf, at my unspoken invitation putting it up against my lip and scratching out a match to light it. A few puffing breaths

later I breathed in the smoke, breathed it out and let out a pleased moan before facing the angry shouting crowd.

"Right," I got out around the pipe's lip, "you all seem to be very concerned about something and I don't want to, uh, diminish that. But I also don't speak Lunara, so we're at a bit of an impasse."

"That was mostly Ceseo, in truth," the Grey Pilgrim rasped out.

His speaking triggered another round of shouting while I pondered the complexities of smoking a pipe without having a free hand for it. I had one holding up Tariq's doddering frame, slipped under his shoulder to let him stand, while the other was busy keeping *me* up by leaning on my staff. Our journey here through Twilight Throneless had been somewhat less than graceful, though I'd been rather amused by the fact that the first set of stairs we'd encountered on our way out of Liesse had probably come closer to killing either of us that night than Kairos.

"Figured they'd be a little happier to see you, Tariq, I'm not gonna lie," I mused. "Would you care to translate?"

The old man cocked his head to the side.

"To put it delicately," the Peregrine said, "questions are being raised as to the authenticity of my person."

"Oh?" I mouthed back, grinning nastily around my pipe. "Did someone call you an undead abomination yet? That's always been one my favourites."

"You're enjoying this a great deal more than you should," the Grey Pilgrim muttered.

"Someone else being called that?" I murmured. "Never. That would be *highly* petty of me, after all."

A heartbeat passed.

"Maybe they'll name you Arch-heretic of the West," I suggested. "Wouldn't that be something?"

I wasn't sure whether what shook him was a cough or a snort, but it ripped through his frame suddenly enough it very much did become a cough. My use of his resurrection trick was apparently a little rough around the edges compared to his personal touch, and he'd not been a young man to begin with. And if that hadn't been enough, I still remembered what it'd felt like having an aspect cut out of me. Tariq had been dead when I'd ripped Forgive out of his corpse, so he'd been spared the inhuman pain I'd felt when Masego carved Seek out of my soul, but losing a third of your Name was nothing something to be *shrugged off*. Especially when

you'd had your aspects as long as the Grey Pilgrim had. A quartet of Levantines seemed to be getting deferred to by even the Lanterns, who were visibly itching to have a go at Tariq and I, and one's familiar face told me why: Razin Tanja was among them, which meant they were Blood. I waved at him from the Pilgrim's side, wiggling my hand against the old man's flank, but my treasured acquaintance seemed rather offended by the act. Fancy that, I drily thought. I'd always got on so well with Levantines.

"Queen Catherine, please," Princess Rozala shouted in Lower Miezan. "At least answer the accusations-"

"My return was wrought," the Grey Pilgrim said, weak voice firming, "under the auspices of the Ophanim."

"Forgiveness, Peregrine," a towering muscle slab of a man said, "yet if the corpse of the Grey Pilgrim were to be so defiled, it would speak as you do. Truth must be ascertained."

I glanced at Hakram, who'd fallen it at my side and was nonchalantly ignoring the way the few hundred warriors surrounding us had yet to put down their swords or even lapse in their general glowering. I drew on the pipe, letting the wakeleaf sink down my throat and into by lungs before breathing it out through my nose. It burned a tad – I usually blew it out – but not unpleasantly.

"So," I drawled. "I don't suppose you've got a flask of Vale summer wine stashed away in that cloak?"

"I could only get my hands on Dormer pale," Adjutant apologetically said.

My lips twitched.

"See, now I *know* that's a lie," I replied.

"This is going to be a hand joke, isn't it," he sighed, sounding resigned.

"If I say yes," I murmured, "are you going to lose it?"

I shamelessly chortled at my own joke and regretted it not a bit. His jaw muscles twitched in what was either suppressed amusement or the sudden urge to bite off my face, and not metaphorically speaking.

"Your Majesty, would you start taking this seriously?" Princess Rozala hissed. "This could easily devolve into a battle. Already forces are gathering, all bloody chaos requires is a spark."

I glanced at her, brow rising, then looked at Hakam.

"It's looking like Hasenbach's riding her hard to keep you alive and happy," he told me in Kharsum.

"She must just love that," I replied in the same.

Not even the harsh syllables of the main orc dialect entirely managed to hide my petty glee at the revelation, from the looks I got. I sighed and began helping Tariq off of me.

"Need my stick, old bones?" I asked. "I'll let you borrow it if you promise to give it back."

"I'll stand, thank you," the Grey Pilgrim sighed. "I will have to grow used to having broken mine."

I cast a look at the middle-aged warrior who'd very politely just told Tariq they were going to have to check if he was my dead corpse-puppet, mentally going through what I knew of Levantine commanders in Iserre. That was Yannu Marave, probably, though I couldn't be sure from his face-paint as I could not remember the colours of the Champion's Blood at the moment.

"Lord Marave, is it?" I probed.

"It is so, Black Queen," he calmly replied.

"Word of advice," I said. "When you have your priestlings poke at the Peregrine, tell them to be gentle."

"Truth must be ascertained," he replied, eyes tightening.

"Sure," I said. "But if they get too rough, after tonight I'm guessing the Ophanim might end up *ascertaining* them all over the ground. I mean, it's not my hill so I've no horse in this race, but think of the poor Proceran peasant who'll end up stuck cleaning that up."

I bet Alamans princes didn't even tip, too, they seemed like the type.

"We will see," Lord Marave said.

I had a free hand, now that Tariq was standing on his own, so I used it for the very important task of having another pull of my pipe and spewing out the smoke into the crisp winter morning air. Then, resting my staff against my chest, I extended an open palm towards Hakram and saw it filled with a nice little silver flask. Had to unscrew the cap, but a sniff told me it really was Dormer pale inside. I'd be damned, hadn't thought any Callowan drink would make it this far out. The surprise brought back sharp remembrance of Ratface, whose days as a quartermaster had seen him taken as some sort of contraband magician, and the ache of my dead friend's absence was a lingering pang. I smoothed it away

from my face, pulling at the wine. A pair of Lanterns were not helping the Pilgrim stand, gently but firmly inspecting him.

"I'm guessing, Lord Yannu," I said, "that you want me to stick around until that little charade there is over with."

"I accept your kind offer, Black Queen," the Lord of Alava said.

Someone was letting the inch I'd given them go to their head, looked like.

"Put words in my mouth again, Marave, and that'll be the last time you have a tongue," I casually replied, with a nice friendly smile.

The warriors around us didn't like that, or at least not my tone. I wasn't clear on how many of them spoke Lower Miezani. The other three of the Blood – the older woman had to be the Lady of Vaccei, who I remembered had grown children, while by elimination the last was the Lady of Tartessos – didn't either, though none spoke out to take me to task over the threat. Almost like they were realizing they were trying to keep the Queen of Callow prisoner, breaking truce in the process. I allowed myself a single appreciative glance at the Lady of Tartessos, whose bronze and green paint paired with a rather tight leather vest made for an attractively unusual look. Truthfully if Lord Yannu had been twenty years longer he might have been the one to draw a second look but as it was he was both at least twice my age and getting on my nerves.

"No offence was meant," the Levantine lord said.

He didn't sound all that apologetic, which made sense as I'd yet to hear an apology.

"Now, for the sake of diplomacy I'll tolerate this," I said. "But I'd like the lot of you to consider the amount of insults you've been laying at my feet this morn, after the trouble I went through to save your ungrateful hides."

"You claim debt, Black Queen?" the Lady of Vaccei asked.

"I claim slights," I idly replied. "Three now and your tab's still open. Best start thinking now of how restitution will be offered for them."

I was willing to make peace with these people, to make alliances and sign treaties and fight by their side. But I would not allow that willingness to be confused even a moment for *fragility*. If they offered insults, they'd pay up for them – or else. I had no intention to allow either myself or Callow to be made the rented mule of the Grand Alliance in the war to come. Grace would be answered with grace, but disrespect with the same thing as well.

The talk of restitution went over about as well one would expect when spoken by a villain, but in those haughty faces I saw something like abashment as well. No one who spent as much time going around talking about honour as the Dominion's highborn did could be unaware that they were pushing me far enough a less temperate woman might have chosen violence as answer. Oh Gods, I thought, pulling at my pipe. You knew a manner of thinking was awful skewed when *I* could be counted as temperate by it. One of the Lanterns, speaking rhythmic prayers in what might still have been Ceseo for all I knew, brought forth a long spike of Light. She touched it to the Pilgrim's skin, near the wrist, and that was then the Choir of Mercy took offence.

Well, I'd warned them. The rest was on their heads.

There was a ripple of power by now familiar to me, a taste of flame and smoke and the beat of wings, and before it could draw blood the Light winked out. The Lantern fell to her knees, stunned, and began babbling in one of the Levantine tongues. I glanced at Hakram, pulling at my pipe, but the orc shrugged. He had no idea either then. I turned to Princess Rozala, realizing only then she'd been bearing a truce banner this entire time. Gods, I was more out of it than I'd thought. I almost asked why she'd been made flag-bearer, but to be honest the true reason might not be as amusing as what my imagination was providing so it'd be a shame to break the illusion so soon.

"I don't suppose, Your Grace, that you speak... that," I said, somewhat vaguely.

"Still Ceseo," Princess Rozala said. "They use it for formal conversations even in northern Levant. I'm not fluent, but she seems to be saying she has lost the 'grace'."

I cocked my head to the side.

"Well, I'll be damned," I said.

"Again," Hakram helpfully contributed.

I would have gestured obscenely at him, were my hands not full. Truly, my Adjutant's wiles were without match.

"They stripped her of the right to use the Light, then," I whistled. "That's as clear a verdict as you'll get."

I was not, apparently, the only one to think so. It was only Yannu Marave, at first, but within moments a handful of warriors followed suit and from there on it was like levees breaking: before the bone-tired Grey Pilgrim the men and women of Levant knelt. I could feel the tiredness withdrawing from my wary bones, though it must be illusion. I'd been at the end of my rope hours

ago, by now I was dangling in the void. I sniffed at the flask in my hand once more.

"Hakram, is there anything aside from wine in there?" I asked.

"A Praesi alchemical tonic," he admitted.

My brow rose.

"Didn't think to mention that before I drank it?" I said.

"You have been awake for nearly twenty hours, Catherine," he said. "And few of them restful."

"Potions are always hollow strength," I grunted.

I didn't further mention it, though, for cheat or not the tonic's effect was pushing back the moment where I'd collapse in my bed for three days by a few hours yet. Might be I wouldn't need that long before I crawled under a set of warm covers but I might as well be fully awake for the time it did end up taking. I took another sip from the flask. It might just be the lack of sleep talking, but the wine might actually taste better with the tonic in it. It took the edge of the sweetness of – oh Gods, I'd been spending too much time with Akua lately if I'd seriously been thinking about that. Next thing you knew I'd be talking about what poisons paired well with an Aksum sour, and what kind of a dress you should wear when crushing your enemies underfoot. Probably something red, I mused, depending on how literal the crushing was. The winding turns of my life had made me rather depressingly familiar with how difficult blood could be to get out of clothes. I forced myself to pay attention to what the Pilgrim and the Levantines were doing, which from the look on Malanza's face must be rather impressive.

Well, they did make a pretty painting. I'd at least concede that much. Tariq, weary and bloodstained and victorious, surrounded by a ring of kneeling warriors in steel and paint as the sun rose above them all. Unfortunately, pretty as this all was I was beginning to lose patience with it. If the Dominion wanted to get all ceremonial about the Peregrine returning to them all the better, but they could go about it without my attendance. It was also rather ungainly that myself, Hakram and a Proceran princess were the only people on this hill not kneeling to the Pilgrim. Didn't particularly make me want to take a knee to good ol' Tariq, mind you, but we stood out a mite. Adjutant looked askance at me, but I shook my head. Hakram Deadhand had no need to kneel to me, so why should he kneel to anyone at all? The Grey Pilgrim addressed his countrymen in one of their languages, sounding as if he was admonishing them, but even then they all stubbornly remained kneeling save for the four of the Blood. I was occupied wondering whether it would be rude to, well, leave after I'd

finished smoking my pipe when the four aristocrats were calmly addressed by the Pilgrim and turned to us.

"We are told this was wrought by your hand, Black Queen," Lord Yannu Marave gravely said.

"Mercy allowed it, as the Peregrine said," I honestly replied. "And it was not without price for all involved."

Least costly to me, who'd merely tossed away the chance in the future that one dear to me could be stolen back from death, but it'd been a price still. Chances like that one came only once, when Creation's writ conspired to deliver them into your hand, and spurning what had been offered would ensure there was no repetition.

"Honour was given," the Lady of Tartessos said.

"Honour was given to all Levant," the Lady of Vaccei said. "This we agree."

"And so honour must be returned in kind," Razin Tanja gravely said.

So, I idly wondered, what kind of a largely ceremonial gesture would be made. Would concession be made, a declaration that I was not truly Arch-heretic of the East? No, I decided, not that. It'd been a conclave of several priesthoods that named me that, even if they were influential enough to force the Lanterns to agree it wouldn't be enough. Amusedly, I wondered if I was about to be made some manner of Blood. Not one of their own, of course, but recognized as some Callowan equivalent. I did remember that for all that their five great lines held the power and influence, other Named were granted some privileges as well. As far as Levant was concerned, being Named was being nobility. *Catherine Foundling of the Squire's Blood*, I thought. Well, it'd been a long year. I could use the laugh, even if diplomacy dictated it must be had behind closed doors where these touchy nobles could not hear it.

"The Champion's Blood endorses Callow's petition to join the Grand Alliance," Lord Yannu Marave said. "In my name, I speak this, as the Lord of Alava."

"The Brigand's Blood endorses Callow's petition to join the Grand Alliance," Lady Itima Ifriqui said. "In my name, I speak this, as the Lady of Vaccei."

"The Slayer's Blood endorses Callow's petition to join the Grand Alliance," Lady Aquiline Osená said. "In my name, I speak this, as the Lady of Tartessos."

"The Binder's Blood endorses Callow's petition to join the Grand Alliance," Razin Tanja said. "In the name of myself and my kin, I speak this, as the heir to Malaga."

They were, I understood after a moment of silent disbelief, deadly serious. Because for them this wasn't about treaties and interest and Calernia's balance of power – it was, old-fashioned as the thought was, about *honour*. What had moved their tongues was the same thing that'd been the source of indignation that'd seen Captain Elvera chastise me even as my prisoner for daring to suggest she might go back on her word when released. What lay at the heart of Praesi and Procerans I could understand, for it was not so different for all the posturing and castigations that both so freely threw. This, though? I would call it some sentimental ardour coming through in a moment of weight, but I was coming to grasp that was a mistaken understanding. This was good as law to them, wasn't it? Returning boon to even those they believed to be in Below's grasp, when boon was given. Honour, the way they spoke of it, was not something I could understand. It might be one needed to be born in their lands, to grasp it as they did. But my own people knew of debts, of scores settled, and perhaps those were not tenets so estranged as I might once have believed.

"I will not speak for the Pilgrim's Blood," Tariq said. "Now or ever. Yet I will speak of this to the Holy Seljun, Queen Catherine. And I swear now that the Majilis will speak as one, endorsing the petition of the Kingdom of Callow."

epokki

Hey EE, any chance you could check email regarding the art thing?

Also heres the links incase I cut in line with this msg. <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> , <https://www.patreon.com/user/overview?u=3523924>

ruduen

Well, that's quite an endorsement. Given how it was in the realm possibility for Cordelia to originally accept, I don't think she'll need more prodding here. So, who still needs to be convinced?

Or will minds have changed by now?

talenel

Well there are the priests. Say what you will, but I don't think they'll be backing down from their pissing contest with the Callowan House of Light.

[Liliet](#)

Considering the Grey Pilgrim and the backing of a Choir, I think they'll find themselves quite impotent in this matter. Oh there might be some pushing and shoving, but somehow I don't imagine it being an *actual obstacle*.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also the testimony of that importunate priest and those who witnessed his punishment. If Cat saw "a ripple of power by now familiar to me, a taste of flame and smoke and the beat of wings," you can bet the priest's fellows (and perhaps the soldiers) saw at least as much.

[Liliet](#)

Her. It was a woman.

But Y E P
and I bet for unbelievers a repeat performance can be arranged if the Ophanim are feeling pissy enough ♥

geoffpburns

Cat now has 4 out of 5 Majilis in her corner. The 5th one, the Holy Saljun might be more difficult. What you wanta bet he broke out the sparkling wine when he heard Tariq was dead? He might not be happy Tariq is still alive or grateful to Cat for making it happen. He has spent his life overshadowed by Tariq and under his thumb. The Holy Saljun is supposed to be the spirit leader of the Levant and first among equals of the Majilis but the Majilis and the population as a whole regard Tariq as the real leader. When Tariq speaks he may think he giving a suggestion but the Saljun maybe hearing "do it my way or what happened to your predecessor could happen you" even when Tariq is not leaning on him, and he probably does lean on him every now and again.

talenel

The Lanterns maybe. But the Proceran House of Light I think will be much more intransigent. Especially because there are a few choirs who have yet to get involved who I think will want to throw their weight around

[Liliet](#)

We'll see 😊

Someguy

The Lanterns will have to shut their mouths no matter how much is sticks to their throats.

The Procerans will whine like unhousebroken puppies and the Ashurans will have to pray Zeze does not recover or else....

C_B

I don't really expect Masego to seek vengeance on Ashur. Wekesa took care of those directly involved pretty... thoroughly, and Masego doesn't really seem to think in terms of nations in a way that would lead to him taking revenge on Ashur as a whole.

Now, whatever Above-aligned power was behind the "masked and hallowed presence"? THEY should be worried.

[*Liliet*](#)



(though truth be told, given the Praesi approach to 'who's at fault for the loser's woe', it's likely Masego will ignore that too)

Insanenoodlyguy

The lanterns just got a holy backhand that indirectly says "Stop doubting the Black Queen" That's going to shift things.

[*Liliet*](#)

Mm!

Faiir

Yes, I wouldn't mind an interlude about it 😊

Faiir

Bah, this was supposed to be an answer to stevenneiman below.

WordPress has horrible commenting UI on mobile 😞

stevenneiman

It will be absolutely hilarious to see the reaction from the House Insurgent when they hear of this.

IDKWhoitis

Only Ashur remains to be convinced really, but they will swing whichever way Prócer does, since they are almost under occupation by the League. Either they need Prócer to save them, or Ashur is removed from the power equation anyways.

The actual trouble would be the House of Light, as they would need to essentially be biting their own tongue. It's theological suicide for the Proceran House of Light to recant their edicts regarding Arch Heresy and their whole theological support of this crusade.

So the House of Light can't exactly state their support, and they can't actually support Cat, but they are currently stuck in a no win situation.

Cordelia has little reason to continue this war, and has a whole lot more power than a first prince ought to have. If she were to declare Callow an ally, in the face of the Enemy, Prócer at large might just have to bend to her will. As any rebellion would be stamped out with either Callowan, Lev, or Loyalists forces. This would be a cruel mirror to Prócers actions in the previous crusade. Cat is literally endorsed by Half of the Grand Alliance that matters and Angels. And this is to be considered after Cordelia already folded on calling Cat Queen OF Callow.

Cicero

Cordelia might find this a useful hinge to bring the Procer House of Light to heel.

[Liliet](#)

Mm!

[Euodiachloris](#)

I thunk the Houses in a few places are going to get prodded, now that they have a fully demonstrated choke chain.

After all, it's hard to call just anybody a heratic if there's suddenly a risk of losing the mojo that proves you're not one yourself.

[Euodiachloris](#)

I'm going to take the opportunity to highlight that my autocarrot let "thunk" as a genuine typo through. I'm rather pleased by this. 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

And yet it didn't catch "heratic", oy gevalt. (Free Dictionary confirms it's not a different word.)

"Thunk" is puckish when substituting for "thought", but it's also a casual but valid action verb of its own, not to mention onomatopoeic (and relatedly, a sound effect).

Andrew Mitchell

> autocarrot

Where can I get one?!? 😊 😊 😊

P.S. "Thunk" is an outdated but valid past tense of think. Actually, now that I google it. It's also an alternative to "Thud".

naturalnuke

Really kinda kneecapped the Proceran Church huh?

IDKWhoitis

Kneecapped implies crippled, but might be able to recover slowly.

This is more akin to amputation via landmine.

Someguy

Too bad it did not reach close enough to be castration via landmine.

Decius

It's pretty simple: Declare her Redeemed by her actions. There's no point in declaring someone a heretic unless there's something they can do to stop being one.

[Liliet](#)

They can actually still manage to spin it in their favor as clearly Catherine's effort to offer aid in their hour of need was her effort to redeem herself from her terrible previous actions, brought about by their chastisement!

They'll just, uh, want to wait until Catherine's out of earshot for this one.

[shieldredblog](#)

She's not redeemed though or she wouldn't be a Villain. She wields the literal powers of Damnation.

[Liliet](#)

See that's a valid counterargument but whoever brings it up is clearly an enemy of the House of Light and heretic denying the obvious miracle brought about by the Choir of Mercy and everything

stevenneiman

Technically she's not a villain, but somehow I don't think they consider "priestess of the drow gods and wielder of a perverse mockery of the light" much better.

Faiir

Eeh I wouldn't call night/darkness a mockery of light, it's pretty much light's exact opposite.

ICSM

You see, I agree with you. Then again I'm not a moral absolutist nor a fanatical zealot bent on declaring people who disagree with me as Arch-Heretics. Or even lower-case heretics, for that matter.

talenel

People keep thinking that with the power of one choir (which honestly is narratively diminished due to the weakening of their champion), the other choirs won't get involved. I think that the Ophanim who have had a heavy role in the story thus far, will be receiving a lot of pushback from the other choirs. Remember 1 Choir does not equal all of the Angels. In fact we know that often angels are diametrically opposed.

frondred

Hanno is backed by the seraphim though. and the lone swordsman was backed by the Hashmallim.

talenel

Hanno has been only tangential to Cat's story though. He has really only clashed with Black thus far. And the Lone Swordsman has been gone for 3 books. Plus there are 4 other Choirs sitting around plotting. So yeah, 4-5 choirs that Cat has't really interacted with.

Big Brother

Cat Pimp-slapped the Choir of Fortitude out of the Stalwart Paladin, didn't she? Back when she was having to deal with Hero bands slipping into Callow to try killing her?

[Liliet](#)

There is no data on the number of Choirs. It's most definitely more than 7

thr0away07

There are likely somewhere between 8 and 10 choirs, as all of the names of the choirs presented thus far (that I'm aware of: Orphanim, Hashmallim, and Seraphim) are drawn from Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, in which there are 10 classifications of angels. It's possibly either the Chayot Ha Kodash "holy living ones", who are the highest ranking angels, or the Ishim / Eshim "individuals / sparks", who are the lowest ranking angels, could be weird and not choirs as they've been presented. The Chayot Ha Kodath are seen as throne bearers for G-d and are typically responsible for keeping balance, while the mythology of the Ishim / Eshim being the closest to humankind could mean they're meant to be the Good-aligned Named.

frondred

in this story the ophanim or choir of mercy is the highest ranking

talenel

Fair enough, I picked 7 rather arbitrarily. It just felt like a suitably momentous number. But I do feel that some of the other Choirs are going to have a much larger role in the proceeding chapters.

[Liliet](#)

>In fact we know that often angels are diametrically opposed.

Do we?

talenel

I could of sworn there was at least one chapter that mentioned Choirs of Angels/heroes basically fighting against each other. I could be wrong though.

[Liliet](#)

WoG is that while heroes might occasionally come to blows, particularly over methods / acceptable sacrifices / lesser evil, deaths are exceedingly rare even then (not counting straight up fallen heroes needing to be put down, like Laurence's reminiscence about Drake Knight).

talene1

Gotcha. The chapter I was reading was a lot more ambiguous than that, so it's most likely true.

Then again, right now things are really coming apart at the seams. Things are really coming to a head. For example Pilgrim vs Saint just previously. So it wouldn't surprise me if the conflict between choirs/heroes becomes a bit more nasty.

[Liliet](#)

Pilgrim vs Saint imho fits the bill there very well as a Regular Extreme. Note that the only reason Saint died was because of Kairos helpfully shoving sticks in wheels, and even then everyone felt so shitty about her death they had a literal argument about who gets to die.

(And I'm seeing that beautiful Stupidest Argument as at least partially very much coming from guilt/grief)

So like, the kind of thing that happens when stars align *very much* against you, and something no-one is okay with afterwards.

talene1

Ah but that's the thing. Right now the story is going into a narrative with more and more escalation. These events are quite momentous and have profound consequences for the future, especially in relation to the methods used to succeed. So I can see the stars being more inclined to align against everyone. Sort of million-to-one chances happening nine times out of ten.

DD

Easy enough to just couch it in terms of Cat "taking a step along the road to redemption." It's not that hard.

geoffpburns

Tariq gave up his crown, but is now promising to help Cat by using his power as unofficial ruler / power behind the throne of Levant. Didn't Cat warn the 7 princes that that kind of thing would lead to disastrous unintended consequences?

stevenneiman

IIRC, Cordelia was already seriously thinking about whether it was worth the political capital it would cost to ram it down everyone's throats, and now Cat's just made a great

contribution to the war effort against the Dead King and (inadvertently) created a situation where refusing to allow Cat entry to the Grand Alliance might see it fractured. Cordelia could probably get it through much more easily now. Ashur might need convincing, but on the other hand they never had too much skin in the Callow game, and they might possibly have withdrawn after Wekesa basically destroyed their entire armed forces with his last act.

Liliet

Yeah, this is a gift getting dropped in Cordelia's lap. She's already taken over the Highest Assembly, and the rest of the Grand Alliance either blatantly wants Cat there (Levant) or doesn't give a shit / is likely to do what they're told (Ashur).

It's kind of hilarious how little it took for her to go into full "we are allying with Foundling no matter what it FUCKING takes, and keep her ALIVE please" mode ;u;

Big Brother

FINALLY! They should have done this from the start, the daft fucks!

Javvies

Heh.

The Ophanim dislike it when you use the Light to poke at their Chosen Hero.

And Cat warned them about it. And they did it anyways.

That could have gone better, but it could have gone a whole lot worse, too.

And it seems that Tariq has permanently lost Forgive as an Aspect. That's a downside, but probably better than Tariq remaining a corpse.

I wonder what the Levantines would have done if Cat hadn't resurrected Tariq and hadn't bothered to drag his corpse with her.

IDKWhoitis

Scream and charge, probably before dying, badly. I suspect Robber can't be that far away, and maybe a minor deployment of goblinfire to secure a retreat.

lankyZ

It really has been a while since the last use of the Foundling Gambit

Mental Mouse

> I suspect Robber can't be that far away, and maybe a minor deployment of goblinfire to secure a retreat.

Not to mention Cat herself, and if she hadn't rezzed Pilgrim she might not have been quite so tapped out.

Dainpdf

If Cat's experience is any guide, his Nane should also have a shallower pool of power from which to draw.

This adventure was quite good for Cat's plans—by now she has essentially got both Levant and Procer on her side for the Accords—but pretty bad in terms of facing Neshamah. Saint is gone and the Pilgrim is diminished. The Knights better be good in this endgame.

Mental Mouse

Other heroes can be supplied as needed; if Amadeus had to deal with heroes spawning in against him, the DK will face at least as much.

Dainpdf

New heroes won't be as experienced, and Lawrence's main import was acquiring a very refined domain over decades. The Pilgrim having hundreds of stories under his belt also helped, both in terms of being an experienced and effective tactician and in terms of having strong grooves carved into creation.

caoimhinh

However, new Heroes are known to be customized to deal with the threat against which they rise and also develop Aspects to better fight the Enemy of their stories. That phenomenon has been observed and analyzed by plenty of characters, like Amadeus observing that Hanno's original group was designed to counter the Woe (further strengthened by the fact that he and Hanno didn't enter a Pattern of Three despite being Black and White Knights, which declared that the destined Black Knight was Cat, thus announcing Amadeus' death -which was thankfully avoided because Fate is not written in stone-), and Catherine observing that leaving Heroes who hadn't completely come to their 3 Aspects survive confrontations meant that they developed Aspects to overcome that

situation in the future.

It goes to the point that the formation of Bands of Five can be predicted to a certain effect as observed by one of the conversations Pilgrim and Saint had back during the Battle of the Camps.

If(or rather when) new Heroes start to appear to fight against Keter, they will be handed the necessary tools to do so, they aren't as experienced, sure, but teenagers defeating enemies that were out of their league is the most common thing in Calernia. And there are already quite a few that are starting to show hints of coming to a Name, like Razin and that Proceran Prince that always looks elegant no matter where he goes and was capable of riding down an undead bone dragon with his company of loyal soldiers.

[Liliet](#)

Frederic ♥

[Mental Mouse](#)

> he and Hanno didn't enter a Pattern of Three despite being Black and White Knights, which declared that the destined Black Knight was Cat, thus announcing Amadeus death

Amadeus didn't *exactly* die, but arguably "the Black Knight" did.

caoimhinh

True. But what I meant was that they didn't enter Pattern of Three because Amadeus was not the rival meant for Hanno, since that was Catherine. I mentioned it simply as part of the arguments supporting the theory that Heroes are semi-customized for the elimination of Villains, thanks to the more active support they receive from Above.

By the way, Bard said that Amadeus is still a Claimant despite having lost the the Name of Black Knight, which means he can get another Name and he could also get back the Black Knight Name (with three new Aspects for the current him, in constrast to the ones he got in his youth) like Catherine did with the Squire Name.

[Javvies](#)

Pretty sure Bard was implying that Amadeus was a Claimant to the Name of Dread Emperor, or whatever the actual Name is.

That is, Amadeus still has a Claim on the Tower he can exert.
Although, since he was (effectively) the King of Callow, enforced by Cat pulling a sword from a stone and claiming herself to be his heir, he might technically have (or have had) at shot at a Callowan Ruler Name.

caoimhinh

That is a possibility, yeah. But it's more likely to be claimant to Chancellor than to Dread Emperor, since Malicia is still alive and in possession of the Name of Dread Empress. Claimants don't appear while the Name is active, they appear to compete for it when nobody has it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hmmm... Black Knight in service to the Black Queen? That's assuming he doesn't go straight for Emperor, which would be messy on all sorts of counts.

Dainpdf

The problem is the Dead King has experience maneuvering so Bands of Five (and heroes in general) are not created to end him, at best drive him back. See Pilgrim and Saint's coming Band being used to drive him out of Twilight—a confrontation from which he got what he wanted, by doing precisely what Black told Grem to do in the Vales: letting them win, then snatching victory out of it.

Faiir

Forgive was OP, it had to be needed.

Faiir

*nerfed frickin autocorrect

[Javvies](#)

Not really.
1/day, on someone dead less than 24 hours (or sufficiently preserved)?
That's not that OP.
Certainly not OP to the point of being in dire need of nerfing into oblivion.

It does raise the stakes going forward, though.

Eleron M Pfoutz

Right. Forgive is just a fifth level Cleric spell (Raise Dead), with a much shorter duration (Your standard 9th level Cleric in D&D 3.5 would be able to resurrect within nine days.)

[Liliet](#)

Agreed.

It could not be used for

- making a fight have no stakes (only 1 res/day)
- enabling someone to be reckless (only 1 res/person)
- making what would have otherwise been a sacrifice free (likely cannot forgive that)
- prolonging select people's lifetime past natural (explicitly cannot resurrect from old age / sickness, nor cure it)

Literally the only thing it provided was some cushioning.

Aotrs Commander

Yeah, most mid-level D&D parties have access to better resurrection magic, though admittedly, they have to spend a bit of money on it.

Shveiran

Which is why as a DM at that level you need to build your fights so that the stakes are "TPK" or "something other than death", because a single character's death does not stick.

Honestly, I don't get this argument. Forgive WAS OP. Not "Drop-a-lake-and-stroll-through-Arcadia" OP, granted, but hugely powerful.

Employed with a band of Named, facing deadly odds on a regular basis? It greatly reduces the cost of attrition. Half the band has to die for the band to lose ANYTHING. That is huge.

Look back at Cat's battles with the Heroes in book 4: she mangled a lot and killed several, and yet almost all of them came back. It makes a huge damn difference.

it. Allows. You. To. Retcon. Named. Death.

How can anyone say that's not overpowered? I can think of a few Aspects that can be debatably more powerful, but then I remember that Forgive allows you to bring back the Named with those Aspects PLUS the other two that Named has.

[Miles](#)

OP is relative to the opposition's abilities.

So for comparison we have 'portals you can use to trivialize all logistics, attack an army from behind or just skip the battle and drop a lake on the other army,' 'see an ability once and permanently gain the ability to use a supernaturally powerful version of it at will,' and 'know your enemies' secrets.'

Actually it seems relatively weak in comparison.

[Liliet](#)

YEP.

Catherine's Arcadia gates are absurdly OP. Tariq's Forgive is so mild, every single priest could have it without the setting being radically transformed at its core.

(Because it does nothing for old age / sickness / slow poisons, and only gives every person one second chance)

[Liliet](#)

>Employed with a band of Named, facing deadly odds on a regular basis? It greatly reduces the cost of attrition. Half the band has to die for the band to lose ANYTHING. That is huge.

Once. Per. Person.

Everyone gets one second chance. One.

If there's actual attrition going on, you're just as dead with Pilgrim as without him. The same danger coming around the second time, if it again manages to claim the same life, will already be irrecoverably deadly.

Forgive is powerful but it does not sway *story currents*. It adds narrative possibilities, it does not take them away. As a writer, you want to have this tool, it helps you, not hinders you.

Faiir

From a reader's perspective, if GP was going to be around, there would be no lasting danger until after the first death of a fight. Archer situation was shocking for me, but that was because I forgot she can just be rezzed. You can't repeat it with the same effect.

Well even though the OP part was a bit of a joke, when comparing aspects you need to consider that the more powerful your skill, the better counter will the other side get.

Also note that gating time was inconsistent, and could make you appear on the other side months later, so it wasn't really reliable if used repeatedly.

Liliet

>From a reader's perspective, if GP was going to be around, there would be no lasting danger until after the first death of a fight.

Character death is not the only possible stakes!

Like, Catherine and Co aren't fighting for their own survival. Named adventures like the one in Third Liesse are very rare in the plot, and the objective in them is generally very external. Catherine lost in Keter, even though everyone lived.

I honestly never perceived anyone of Woe in danger of permanently dying regardless of whether Pilgrim was around, because to me it was fairly obvious narratively they'd stick around to the end. The tension simply lies elsewhere.

>Archer situation was shocking for me, but that was because I forgot she can just be rezzed. You can't repeat it with the same effect.

I mean, I 100% expected Indrani to die there, because it WAS the simplest + most drama value shortcut to Masego throwing off Dead King's yoke, and Pilgrim was there for a reason.

And now, even if he had kept his Aspect, the next death threat is for real death threat 😊

Note how the stakes were very much high during the discussion of who will be the sacrifice, both pre- and post- Laurence's death. Because in the situations where a resurrection would be dramatically inappropriate, *the rules already say it doesn't work.*

>Also note that gating time was inconsistent, and could make you appear on the other side months later

Faiir

Ok, convinced me 😊

[Liliet](#)

fuck

>Also note that gating time was inconsistent, and could make you appear on the other side months later

Catherine had enough control over time passing in Arcadia that it was *always, reliably* a shortcut compared to going the regular way.

Faiir

I believe it worked out for Cat specifically because she didn't overuse it.

[Javvies](#)

No, using Arcadia as a strategic shortcut worked just fine for Cat because she (a) was a Fae Sovereign (and therefore had an innate connection to how Arcadia worked) and (b) had a deal covering her and her forces using Arcadia with the King and Queen of the Unified Fae Court.

She had previously had minor issues with using Arcadia as a shortcut in that she ran into enemies on her third use thereof, but that's not an issue anymore.

Based on the being of book 4, when it's the Stalwart Paladin, Gallant Bandit, and Red Sorcerer, it looks like Cat used Arcadia as a shortcut (and a tactical advantage) whenever Heroes showed up. And since she'd dropped quite a few of those ...
Plus she exploited it several times against the Crusaders in Callow.

AQ

Catherine has two goddesses on her shoulders these days, threading the needle for her, I think.

[Liliet](#)

Mm!

Ciopo

Eh, I feel the loss of Forgive for the Pilgrim is kind of a power up.

He is now a hero with 2 out of 3 aspects, he just got handed the skeleton key of heroic solution to any one future conondrum, we all know that an hero without all their aspect will develop juuuust the aspect they need to save their asses... and Pilgrim understands narrative, if the victory owned was a knife, a missing aspect is [something suitably upscaled]

Javvies

By the description, it's more like when Masego had to cut out Seek from Cat's first iteration of Squire.

I'm pretty sure the implication here is that Tariq's iteration of the Name of Grey Pilgrim is at 2 realized of 2 potential Aspects. That is, his (current) iteration of the Name of Grey Pilgrim is permanently damaged. Not that he suddenly has an unassigned Aspect for future use.

Ciopo

Oh, I agree with you, but we know above are cheating bastards 😏

What took losing the name and regaining it might as well be shortcut to "a good night sleep" for a hero, metaphorically

Mental Mouse

I don't think so... in this case, I think they're both under a common ruleset for Named, hero or villain. Pilgrim's been brought back for a last hurrah, but it won't involve Forgive. That said, he might have some extra mojo for a later heroic sacrifice, especially if "the situation is hopeless".

Shveiran

Yeah, he is not long for this world. But he gets to shape the world for the better before going out in a last blaze of glory, incidentally removing an otherwise impassable obstacle.

Insanenoodlyguy

Agreed, If he gets a third aspect, it will be for the last act of his life. Or he gets the full power of his name + to put into one of his still held aspects, with the same consequence. Or maybe he finally lets himself stop and rest cause Cat is all about avoiding obvious story ends and he rolls with her now.

Mental Mouse

> Or he gets the full power of his name + to put into one of his still held aspects

Well, Behold is receptive, but Shine could go nova. Or he could directly call down the angels, probably in response to a demon.

Insanenoodlyguy

This comment aged really well.

Thea

Or Neshamah baits it with a faint and the Pilgrim fires it for tentatively/initially naught.

Insanenoodlyguy

Possible, but again, he rolls with cat now. Even if he doesn't see that coming, she would and then tells him.

caoimhinh

If Tariq's robes start to turn white all of a sudden, we'll know where this is going XD

Decius

When Cat was resurrected she got her third aspect back.

[Liliet](#)

Not resurrected. When she had her Name ripped away from her by Chider and then took it back.

[Miles](#)

Maybe healing damage to the soul is part of forgive. Seems like the kind of thing it might do.

talenel

I must disagree. The Ophanim just had a choice between gaining immense narrative weight due to the last sacrifice of their champion or to work with one of the Damned to save them, albeit in a lesser condition. Both the Ophanim and Pilgrim will be extremely narratively weakened. (Unfortunately, unlike another story where the Grey Pilgrim gets a power up by dying)

While Pilgrim will be extremely useful in a political manner with the Levantines, I think he will have lost a great deal of weight in Procer and elsewhere as one of the champions of Good.

Especially because I think some of the other Choirs are going to butt in and force the Ophanim to back off.

Thea

Maybe the Ophanim lost some narrative weight. Or maybe they paved a step of the easy way to change everything, forever.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Actually, I think the loss of his crown/staff will rob him of much of his political influence in Levant too. Not all of it, but he won't be dictating terms from behind the scenes.

werafdsaew

Except his influence was because he was trusted; not because he was capable of ruling. People aren't going to magically stop trusting him just because he's no longer eligible for a crown.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Trust was only part of his influence, and yes he'll keep that. But his own people were indeed saying that he could have been Sejun if he'd wanted, and such things matter to these people.

[Liliet](#)

P sure it's the other way round. They didn't follow him because they thought he could be Seljun, they knew he could be Seljun because they were already following him. Taking away the consequence doesn't affect the cause.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I'm pretty sure it was stated that he was in fact the proper heir to the Tattered Throne, by straight inheritance/lineage.

[Javvies](#)

Not exactly.

His mother held that position and his older sister was the heir and trained and educated with that in mind. However, when he became Bestowed with the Name of Grey Pilgrim, their mother wanted to

reorder the succession in his favor. He refused and ran away (essentially). The sister ultimately succeeded their mother and was later assassinated, her son was the nephew that Tariq smothered with a pillow.

Tariq could become head of the Pilgrim's Blood and Seljun whenever he wanted because he's a direct blood descendant of the original Grey Pilgrim, and inheritor of the Name Grey Pilgrim. For the Levantine's, he's more or less the next best thing to the original Grey Pilgrim back from the dead.

He's still in a position where if he hinted at wanting to become Seljun, the rest of Levant would automatically acclaim him as such and murder anyone who even looked like they were thinking about hesitating about it. It's just that now, if he did that, he (and Levant) would get slapped with a curse.

It's not something he ever planned on or expected to do, but it was always something he could do without metaphysical repercussions, just the fact that he'd be a shit ruler (and knew it). Now, he still technically could, but in addition to being a shit ruler, he'd have a curse looming over himself and Levant if he did.

Liliet

Yeah, but he explicitly rejected that. And it's not *the reason* people follow him, again. The reason is his deeds and his Bestowal, intertwined. I strongly doubt anyone would care about him if after running away from home after being declared heir and refusing to go through with it, he actually joined whatever, uh, secret / low key organization he thought for a bit of joining to avoid attention? The fact he's proper heir to the throne is just icing on the cake, if anything serving more to give credit to their Blood system (see, those of Blood really *are* better than others!) than to him.

Mental Mouse

> "I wasn't always a priest, I'll gave you know," the Peregrine sanguinely replied. "As a young man I once even attempted to become one of the Hidden Poets."

> "They of the seventy-eight methods of carnal love?" Indrani asked, sounding somewhat intrigued.

> "Indeed," he agreed. "Alas, my kamil declamations were judged unworthy and so I took an interest in healing instead."

[Liliet](#)

We'll see how Judgement reacts 😊

But generally, the current was already flowing this way: note Cordelia's reaction. Catherine spearheading the fight against the Dead King will IMHO be enough for people to not think less of Tariq for buddying with her.

talenel

Politically, I think the fallout in the Grand Alliance wont be huge for Tariq. I just think that this is a huge narrative blow for him and that he has maybe one big thing left in him at most. I also think his power (in terms of his Bestowal) will be dramatically weakened.

[Liliet](#)

That sounds likely, true.

[Liliet](#)

It's not like he could have used it when dead, really

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Hell yes.

Zarquon

PGtE just gets better and better.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Weird. Still July 4th (Independence Day) hereabouts

Soma

I'm dying for that sit-down conversation. I love the shit talking, I need MOAR.

Amy Lear

Hakram: successfully having laid the foundation for Cat's work to go more smoothly than she could have imagined.

Again.

Dainpdf

Truly a prince among men.

Oshi

This was nice. Now what's next?

Death Knight

The peace conference though that might be the first arc of the next book. Three epilogues seems more likely, exploring the aftermath of Black, Masego and the tension between Cat and Archer while setting up the Peace Conference act.

antoninjohn

Tyrant will be in for a big surprise once he sees Pilgrim again

Gunslinger

He did say that it was not the last Pilgrim would see of him 😊

IDKWhoitis

I think Archer may start cussing or laughing or both upon seeing Pilgrim again.

Alivaril

Er, Cat acts as though her "price" was in giving up the resurrection, but did she actually do so? It seems to me that ripping into the Pilgrim's soul in front of the Choir of Mercy would be downright suicidal. She needed help to even remain conscious before their mere attention; their displeasure would likely have been significantly worse.

...Then again, self-deception may be a viable way to trick Creation into thinking she paid an important price.

Dainpdf

She could maybe have gone after they were done with their thing. Or used a different narrative.

She did also give up on the sword story, too.

IDKWhoitis

The larger cost is probably some cheating of fate for now the Twilight Court has Noone on the throne, and by bringing back Pilgrim, Cat may have further destabilized Twilight into only lasting far more shorter than originally planned.

A body was needed on that throne, and now there isn't one. A price was cheated.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think so. That seems like it's worked correctly.

Cat paid for the resurrection with her story credit.

[Liliet](#)

Not the Aspect itself. The Liesse three-beat of cheating death.

IDKWhoitis

I wonder if with the crippled Name and abdication of Authority, Tariq will just retire. Unless the choir intends to give him another 3rd aspect, which the fiery winged pricks might do.

But at the same time, I think the White Knight will take center stage on the Hero side soon, after Cat gets to Salía.

Like right now, I think Cat is going to empower Hak and Viv to get the horse trading and logistics figured out for Gate traveling and marching order, so she can sleep the rest of the Week off. Like the Levs and Procerans probably won't want to March with the Legions in Exile, but some arrangement can be set up.

And there's also the question if only Cat and crew are going to Salía or if the entire Callowan contingent is going with her. I doubt Cat is going to reinforce Cresuens or some area of the Procerean front, and the other armies are more useful elsewhere, rather than having all 3 armies camped outside Salía.

and lastly...

WHAT OF MASEGO?!?

Dainpdf

Also, what is Malicia up to? She's been off camera for a while, dealing with the aftermath of Thalassina... and plotting. And now Cat has brought Maddie back. Will that be worth something?

caoimhinh

I really, really want it to be Catherine who tells Malicia that Amadeus is back. Alaya's pride will be hurt, but she will still be grateful that Amadeus is safe thanks to Cat's efforts, which Malicia was incapable of doing.

IDKWhoitis

Depending on how cruel EE wants to be, there's a chance that Malica will fail to hold the Empire together and it will

fragment like Viv was trying. Or alternatively some the Nobles in Praes will “depose” her.

Otherwise, Malica might just have to take a desperate gamble and stab Callow in the back to try to maintain power back at home. With Callowan army away, with Cat and crew, Callow itself is very undefended. And we know that Grain will be very important come Summer, as praes granneries will be almost empty, and they can't trade at the quantities they need.

Mental Mouse

Well, IIRC Cat left Callow perfectly willing to sell grain. And if Malicia tries to use one of her sleepers, Cat's likely to find out about them (other players already know she can turn any agent who's been in her presence). And once Cat knows what's going on there, Night may be able to do something about those Rule commands.

Shveiran

Malicia could probably find a way to destroy Callow, but that doesn't sound like it would achieve much aside from pettyness.

Sure, it would hurt Cat and she'd never get over it, but... what then? That leaves the Black Queen rich in armies and allied Named, with a thirst for blood and a story in her sail, marching on Praes to take Malicia's head and reform the place.

I'm not seeing her victory conditions, in this.

Malicia will come up with something, but it won't be as an act of spite. She's not the type.

Dainpdf

On the topic of backstabbery, Malicia would see the danger from a mile away. I doubt it.

As for grain, why can't they trade, again? Sure, Callow may not have as much food as Praes needs, but there is always Mercantis...

caoimhinh

I don't think they have any business going to Salia, they are likely going to stablsh some communications, but the princes that are riding with Rozala need to get their successors crowned fast, which they can do thanks to the use of the Twilight Realm.

Cat bought them 3 months of ceasefire, but the war is still going on. The armies currently on Iserre will need to march up north to be ready for the fight, the Drow expedition under Sve

Noc's direct command is marching too, it will need to be established if Amadeus' Legions in Exile will accompany them or returning to Callow or Praes, plus there's the matter of dealing with the League of Free Cities.

There's a lot of politicking left to do.

Also, I want to know where the hell is Scribe, the last time she was shown was in one of Hierarch's visions and it showed her marching alongside Grem with the Legions, yet she has not appeared in this whole book, which I find weird. Maybe she will simply appear when Amadeus is awake, and no one will think it weird because that's part of her shtick.

IDKWhoitis

Likely a large peace conference featuring most participants of the war will be held. Thus it should be expected for this peace conference to occur with representatives of all sides. Technically they could have Roz or Arnuld be Cordelias rep, but I suspect Cat is going to want to talk to Cordelia face to face to finally put this heretical bullshit to a conclusion. Any treaty not done by Cordelia personally might be worth dust in Cat's eyes. It's in everyone's interest to head to Salía now.

So what follows is Cat and the Blood are going to Salía. But I don't think Cat would exactly want to go alone (Hakram alone with Cat probably, Archer may go where her dear boy needs her, and let's face it, he won't be helpful for diplomacy and needs some rest...) , and certain factors will want to leave Prócer now (Viv) (The Exiles). So likely the Callowan armies are going to either follow Cat around (for her safety and intimidation) or heads back to Callow with the Exiles.

They aren't needed right now with the 3 month cease fire, and if Callow enters the war, the Dead King will open a new front to the north of Callow, since the Elves are not in the Golden Bloom anymore.

The majority of the Drow may follow the Callowan army for security and logistical reasons. A small honor guard may accompany Cat, but otherwise they are a glaring liability with Dawn.

I imagine Scribe was somewhere in Camp with Grem, pretending to not be important and parsing whatever data she could (for all we know, she may have been talking with Tyrant).

She will materialize near Black's Soul next time that is on screen. And I am awaiting a heartfelt reunion between Scribe and Black, and some real scathing sarcasm and hatred between

Scribe and Cat. Or potentially Scribe might forgive Cat, she did save him in the end...

caoimhinh

I agree with most of your points, but I really don't think they will go to Salia. Marching the armies to Salia is out of question and Catherine can't go with a small group there both for security and diplomatic reasons; besides, they absolutely need to go north to reinforce the lines, the peace conference can be held by Cordelia's representatives and Arnaud already has her signed permission with plenipotentiary power to deal and negotiate with foreign powers in her name.

One peace conference will be held *right now*, at least, involving the League of Free Cities. For matters of the Grand Alliance another will likely be held later on, but it would likely be in an army camp rather than in a city, they are in the middle of a crusade against Praes (and also Callow by extension) and war against the Dead King, so the heads of the armies and countries will likely be marching to the north.

3 months are plenty to reach Salia as they have use of both Arcadia and the Twilight Realm, but it's just not strategically nor diplomatically sound to have conferences there until the peace has been signed. Another option is for Cordelia to speak in private with Catherine through the scrying links.

[Liliet](#)

Cordelia can just literally participate in the conference via scrying link.

caoimhinh

Yeah.

Though she probably won't; I don't know if it's pride, the politics involved about leaving command of the situation to the authority that's on site or if she simply fears hacking of the scrying, but she usually doesn't hold a negotiation through scrying links, she pretty much could have done that in any of the conferences Procer has had with any other country, both so far Cordelia either sends a representative with letters from her and authority to make deals in site or goes to the site in person; of particular notice for us is Procer's dealings with Catherine, who has held conference with Proceran armies more than once.

I really think it's far more likely that Cordelia would leave the broad negotiations to her representatives in site, and maybe make private deals through the scrying

links. It would likely be weird if the conference was held with Levantines, Cat's group, maybe the League, and Procer's representatives along with a huge mirror, or worse, a pool of water. Cordelia is too concerned about appearances to allow that.

Liliet

> she usually doesn't hold a negotiation through scrying links

It has never been done before. Two-way scrying the way we've seen it is literally Warlock's invention, and it only started getting popularized in Procer with Cordelia's Order of the Red Lion.

A conference via a scrying link would thus be an unprecedented thing, which adds complications to the ebb and flow of it. It's entirely natural Cordelia hasn't jumped that breach yet, she's got too many cats to skin as is.

And it's somewhat more rude to go with the time-saving method than the traditional method, because tradition and showing that you are willing to go through effort to make the conference happen. For a conference to be held through scrying link without giving insult, there needs to be a clear reason why it's necessary in this particular situation.

In this particular case, given literally everything going on is unprecedented and there's a bit of a time crunch with the 3 months time limit, I can see the new technology being introduced.

Shveiran

I agree.

In the previous talks, there wasn't so much riding on the results.

While I appreciate how pressing the situation is, and how fast three months can go by with this kind of ground to cover and this harsh a war to prepare for, the coalition is currently ramshackle at best. These armies how loyalty to a dozen different figures and were bleeding each other just last morning. This is not a situation you can put a band-aid on and call it a day.

A conference is needed, and the First Prince will have to be a part of it. So either they go to Salia, or a scrying relay is implemented.

Fayhem

> Marching the armies to Salia is out of question and Catherine can't go with a small group there both for security and diplomatic reasons; besides, they absolutely need to go north to reinforce the lines

I mean. I checked the map (<https://ibb.co/kPLn0a>) and Salia is almost due north of Iserre. You really can't make it to Lycaonese territory from Iserre *without* going through Salia, unless you want to take a huge detour for literally no reason. The capital of the Principate is absolutely where everybody's headed; formally adding a villain-headed polity to the Grand Alliance formed *literally for a Crusade* isn't a mere formality to be handwaved out of the way by representatives. I'm sure some preliminary truces etc. can get approved now or now-ish, but the big-ticket item is the kind of thing that needs to happen in public with everybody who matters watching in person. It was also stated previously that Pilgrim was champing at the bit to get to Salia because he needs to tell some fuckers to kindly separate their craniums and their hindquarters (that's, ah, paraphrasing), IIRC specifically at least in part regarding the crazy shit they've been saying about how to deal with Praes, and I doubt he will have changed his mind about his priority structure there now that Lord Black's apprentice is joining the team.

As far as Cat not being able to go up there without keeping her whole army around for security reasons (which I think is what you're alluding to there by saying she can't just have a small group?)... I mean, the reasons Cordelia noped out on accepting Cat's offer initially revolved around not being able to afford to force it down the Levantines throats. Now that they're actually pushing for it? Well, Cordelia already literally ordered Cat to be protected at almost any cost and the Levantines sure aren't gonna start shit now. It's not totally clear yet how the new Twilight Highway has affected regular Arcadia, but if it's parallel more than a replacement then Cat still has a line of retreat that nobody can follow her in anyway. Which as I've said won't be relevant, at this point literally every army that doesn't belong to the Dead King or Kairos actively wants Cat kept alive.

I think they will absolutely all head to Salia; I think that after the various heads of state and etc. get there

most of the armies probably will keep going rather than hang around so they can get a head start on reinforcing for when the Dead King kicks shit back off again. But it's next stop Salia for the political players. You're not wrong about how important it is to prepare for when the war resumes, but the military preparations aren't the only part that matters; the political preparations matter just as much, even if people tend to get more impatient about that. EE does have a track record of surprising me so hey, it could happen again, but at least right now I'd say I'm at least 90% on that.

caoimhinh

1) It doesn't matter where Salia is, because they aren't going to be marching through Procer, they are going to use the Twilight Realm to travel because otherwise crossing that distance means months of time.

2) The armies can't be placed on Salia, that would almost effectively be putting it on a siege, it's not diplomatic *at all* to have so many troops of other countries near the capital. This is a principle that applies to every country both in real life and fiction.

3) Peace conferences are never held in the capital of one of the countries involved in the conflict, they are held in neutral ground or a suitable place that doesn't severely put one of the parties in great disadvantage.

4) Catherine doesn't need to be in Salia to talk with Cordelia, there are plenty of methods to establish communication through scrying. The use of intermediaries and representatives is also possible (Arnaud has signed plenipotentiary power, and both Vivienne and Hakram have the authority and knowledge of Cat's plans to carry negotiations), though there are some things that both of those women want to tell to each other personally.

5) They need to march the armies north as soon as possible, resupply the lines, rebuild the defenses, reinforce the troops and restock their weaponry, there's simply too much to do, spending time in Salia would be counterproductive.

6) Pilgrim wasn't heading to Salia to tell anything to anyone, he was going to deliver Amadeus body to be publicly executed while retaining his soul as leverage on Catherine and Malicia. He was then going straight north to fight against the Dead King. Tariq has made a clear point about his avoidance of meddling in politics, his only interference being because there were Named involved.

That said, it is possible that Catherine and the Majilis go to Salia for a conference of the Grand Alliance, sure. Catherine has the power to defend herself and her group, though she knows that she isn't invincible and she can still be overwhelmed by lots of troops. She is unlikely to place herself in such a vulnerable position. Not to mention that Cordelia doesn't particularly want Catherine anywhere close to her, she distrusts, despises and fears Catherine, that we have seen through their interactions and her POV chapters.

Besides, the conference discussing Callow's joining to the Grand Alliance won't have Callow present, of course. *That one* might happen with the members of the Blood getting to Salia before heading again to the north, but there's not enough trust to have the Queen of Callow visiting the capital of the Principate yet.

I don't think Cat will be visiting Salia before they solve the issue with the Dead King. By that time the war situation will be less tense and urgent, the political situation more stable and Callow will have built a better reputation after saving everyone's ungrateful hides. Again.

[*Liliet*](#)

>Pilgrim wasn't heading to Salia to tell anything to anyone

That's not what Laurence thought.

>she distrusts, despises and fears Catherine

[*Liliet*](#)

fuck, posted accidentally

>she distrusts, despises and fears Catherine

Source on any of it? Any quotes that indicate that?

caoimhinh

Do you think Cordelia trusts and/or likes Catherine?

Granted, Cordelia's view of Catherine has changed with the passage of time, but it has never been *positive*.

Every one of the insights we have had to Cordelia's POV show her either thinking of Cat in a negative light. Initially, she was shown thinking of Cat

with disdain as "the orphan girl who was taken as an apprentice by the Black Knight" and later on even irritated that Catherine doesn't play along with the back-and-forth courtesies that Cordelia favors as royalty and now consider Cat a brutal warlord.

She came to fear and hate Catherine after news about Cat's capabilities during the Battle of the Camps arrived.

Cordelia covers herself in lots of blessings before conversing with Catherine through the Winter room (which is common sense, of course, but also shows lacks of trust, which, again, is natural because there is no reason for Cordelia to trust Catherine), she also had to take time to calm herself before entering there (because Winter's power feels eldritch to everyone so nobody is ever comfortable interacting with it). And the very reason she accepted to meet her through that in the first place was so she could study Catherine in person and gain insights in how to defeat her.

In Interlude: Empires, when Catherine greeted her in a casual tone Cordelia was irritated because such a thing would imply some sort of friendship: *"This lack of courtesy should not go unremarked upon. Though this was an informal conference, Cordelia disliked the pretence of friendship between them that would allow such language."*

The only reason Cordelia was even tempted to initially accept Catherine's offer of peace and alliance was because of a moment of fantasizing with fame, as actually succeeding in such thing would be an unprecedented diplomatic victory and give prestige to Cordelia "no one would doubt she won the war through words and not swords" and she would pass to history as a great ruler for achieving such a thing. Though once more her own self-interest impeded it, because it would require lots of political capital, favors and coercing to make the other Princes of Procer accept Callow's offer of peace.

She doesn't trust Cat, she doesn't like Cat and while she isn't scared of Cat too much, she does fear Catherine's power and capabilities, so Cordelia understands that to fight and beat Cat she has to fight in a smart way (which was why she was so angry with the Conclave and Laurence, since their intervention made unavailable more subtle ways of dealing with Cat, leaving only straight

fight that would only end in massacres). She thinks of Cat as a Damned, for using heretic sorceries and necromancy. She wants to fight Cat, and defeat Cat so she can use that victory to cement her own rule, that's the whole reason why the Tenth Crusade was launched: defeating Praes to gain prestige and spend her political enemies' resources in the process.

Liliet

>She came to fear and hate Catherine after news about Cat's capabilities during the Battle of the Camps arrived.

Source?

>Cordelia covers herself in lots of blessings before conversing with Catherine through the Winter room (which is common sense, of course, but also shows lack of trust, which, again, is natural because there is no reason for Cordelia to trust Catherine), she also had to take time to calm herself before entering there (because Winter's power feels eldritch to everyone so nobody is ever comfortable interacting with it). And the very reason she accepted to meet her through that in the first place was so she could study Catherine in person and gain insights in how to defeat her.

Yes, and I don't see how "natural precautions, supernaturally caused discomfort and politically motivated mild hostility" translate into "fear and hate". You are attributing strong emotions to Cordelia, that have simply never been there.

>In Interlude: Empires, when Catherine greeted her in a casual tone Cordelia was irritated because such a thing would imply some sort of friendship: "This lack of courtesy should not go unremarked upon. Though this was an informal conference, Cordelia disliked the pretence of friendship between them that would allow such language."

They are not friends, and Cordelia disliked the lack of courtesy. Because she is a noble and brought up among nobles, and to her good manners are very deeply ingrained as something that *should be*.

This does not translate to fear or hate. You'd think if she actually *feared and hated* Catherine,

the mild mislike of her lapse in manners wouldn't have been a blip on the radar.

>She doesn't trust Cat, she doesn't like Cat and while she isn't scared of Cat too much, she does fear Catherine's power and capabilities

There is a difference between "is apprehensive of" and "fears". Fear is stronger than 'being scared', not weaker. Fear implies impeding rational thought.

>She wants to fight Cat, and defeat Cat so she can use that victory to cement her own rule, that's the whole reason why the Tenth Crusade was launched: defeating Praes to gain prestige and spend her political enemies' resources in the process.

That was the reason, yes, but Cordelia's priorities have changed since then in multiple ways. For one, when the Tenth Crusade was gathering, Cordelia hadn't personally spoken with Catherine yet. For another, Catherine hadn't yet formally broken with Praes / announced her willingness to be an ally against them.

(It's specifically when she did so that Cordelia started considering her as a prospective ally, which is... remarkably obvious and natural. She'd thought of Catherine is part of Praes and therefore an enemy by association, but when Catherine proved her willingness to act otherwise, Cordelia would rather seize that and use it to her advantage, because Catherine is not *the* target – not in her eyes. She was always after Malicia, Catherine was only ever a barrier on the way to that)

[Liliet](#)

I would say that Cordelia is largely *indifferent* to Catherine as a person, with the attitude easily swayed in any direction by the last thought / association she had. Strategically she considers Catherine a potential valuable ally, and someone she can work with if obvious obstacles are overcome. She believes she understands Catherine's general logic and objectives enough to know when she can and cannot trust her. And she believes her powerful enough to be worth appeasing, especially in the current situation.

It's not personal. Not in either direction.

Fayhem

Re: 1), yes, they'll obv be going through the Twilight Realm. My point wasn't that they would have to physically set foot on Salian soil in order to get to Lycaonese ground, my point was that it's literally on the way so saying "they can't go to Salia because they have to go north" is a conclusion premised on a false dichotomy. They can absolutely go to Salia without it being a diversion from going to the front lines, and that's what matters.

Re: 2), again, yes? Like I said initially I didn't think the armies would be sticking around Salia. The point is that no diversion is required in order for Cat + whoever to get there. Heck, depending on how the new Twilight Highway works exactly there may be no inherent need for them to even travel together.

Re: 3), well, what alternative are you thinking of exactly? It's not like there's somewhere that isn't Procer that's on the way to the north. Also, this isn't a peace conference because they're already at peace now; active hostilities already ceased. This is a discussion of formal alliance, and holding that in the hub of the alliance where the architect of that alliance lives seems pretty natural to me.

Re: 4), I didn't say Cat had to be in Salia to be able to talk to Cordelia. I said that I think an issue of this kind of political moment needed to be seen to be decided in public (for a given value of "public" that covers as many political movers and shakers as possible at least). You're ignoring what I did say to respond to something I didn't. That's kind of a strawman fallacy there frankly.

Re: 5), literally none of those things require the political leaders of these forces to be physically present. Cat in particular has always had the approach of "I decide what my forces will do, and then Juniper's in charge of making things actually happen". Even the Levantines have some precedent for delegating to designated Captains, as shown with Captain Elvera. And to the extent that they are needed, that is the kind of thing that can absolutely be appropriately handled through scrying links.

Re: 6), as Liliet already stated that's not what Laurence thought, and I'm pretty sure she knew him better than either of us do.

Re: the remainder, Procer burns if anything happens to Cat and as has already been shown Cordelia is excruciatingly aware of that. Cat wants an actual alliance here, remember. If she can't trust them even to not commit national suicide just to murder her for literally no reason while she's in the middle of committing her forces to save all their asses... I really think you're wildly overestimating the degree of vulnerability/risk there. I'm sure Cat would hang on to an honor guard for appearances if nothing else, but I'm skeptical she would be at risk of needing them for anything. And if she's still got the ability to open gates of her own aside from the Twilight Highway stuff then she literally cannot be caught if she decides to just leave. You can't get overwhelmed if you don't have to stick around to wait for it to happen.

Also, Cat certainly at bare minimum puts Cordelia's nerves on edge, but in political terms there's a huge difference between being scared by someone and being seen to be scared of someone. If she refused to let Cat come to Salia when that is what makes sense (and it is), that would be a giant neon sign screaming WEAKNESS SHOWN HERE to her rivals and allies alike. It's not like there ever is a good time for that as a political leader (esp in Procer), but during the brief interlude in a war for national survival is exceptionally bad. Something similar can be said for snubbing Callow by disinviting their Queen from the conference that will determine the status of Callow re: the Grand Alliance. Cordelia already gave ground (proactively, which shows she's thinking forward) on recognizing Cat as Queen of Callow rather than merely the Queen in Callow, which means she already voluntarily surrendered her pretext for not recognizing Cat as a legitimate diplomatic presence/true head of state.

Last, re:

> I don't think Cat will be visiting Salia before they solve the issue with the Dead King.

I really do think you've got the order of operations backwards there. The political aspect isn't something that doesn't matter here and can safely be put aside until they "solve the issue" with the Dead King waging a war of extinction on the bulk of Calernia. I would expect they'll want to fast-walk the politics as much as feasible given the time pressures, but getting all the politics lined up and cleared away as much as feasible is something you want handled *before* the history-altering national deathmatch. And that's just

Procer's perspective. From Callow/Cat's point of view... you *really* think Cat would want to wait until Procer doesn't need her anymore so that she can just bank on the famous Proceran reputation for gratitude towards Callow in the wake of a Crusade against the Dead King? Because the last time Callow did that, Procer turned around and conquered them without so much as a fig leaf of an excuse. But hey, I'm sure the Callowans have all just let that go. It's not like they're the sort to hold on to grudges and grievances after all. 😊

Liliet

Hm, now that you've laid it out this way, I think you're probably absolutely right. Catherine had told Roland, too, that the next stop was Salia.

caoimhinh

She said that? When?

I remember her saying there were lots of things to do, including many conversations about the battles ahead and an implication that she was going to reveal the Bard's true nature to Roland, but I don't recall Cat ever saying the next stop was Salia. If anything, it was always said they had to go to the northern front ASAP.

Soma

>"He trailed off, though it was not a threat. It was almost a petition and more than a little desperate. Or else what did their lives mean? Their tears and blood and decades of bitter struggle to bring just a little light to Calernia? If the fall of such old and honoured stars meant not a thing, what could any of us ever hope to amount to?

>"This war has only just begun," I softly said. "It will take us to Salia, to forge a peace. It will take us to Keter, to visit upon the Dead King what he has so often visited upon us. But there's another enemy, Sorcerer. She breaks kings with sentences and topples kingdoms with but the lightest of touches. None of this can end before she'd been killed. For good."

>Roland dipped his head, not in acceptance but at least in acknowledgement.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/06/21/chapter-51-twilight/>

Catherine directly says it will take them to Salia. They might just leave the armies in the twilight realm while the bigshots talk in Salia.

caoimhinh

Thank you~

Dainpdf

Very nice. This sounds like the point of a time skip to me—to some point amid negotiations, or when the army reaches the border with the KotD, or even to Cat talking to Black about what happened and where things will go next.

Interestingly, we've still yet to see what Black has become. Dread Emperor Carrion, anyone?
...nah.

asdfas

Dread Emperor Beneficent. Hasn't been referenced outside the quotes yet and he sounds just like Black in the quotes.

Dainpdf

Benevolent, I think. And I am still not sure. Black going Dread Emperor seems like a bad thing to happen.

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah. I'm not so sure he's going that route, but if he is, he's Dread Emperor Benevolent for sure. Also I give even odds that if it does go down that way, he does so with Chancellor Ayala at his side, doing the job she's always been meant for.

[Liliet](#)

>but if he is, he's Dread Emperor Benevolent for sure.

Dread Emperor Benevolent is in the epigraphs fitting the format of a past historical Dread Emp, suggesting he is in fact one.

The reigning name does not match Black's sense of humor, and the quotes don't match Black's motivations and philosophy.

Dainpdf

I was making a joke, hence the humorous (maybe?) name. Personally, I don't think that'll happen.

afsd

Come on dude, her name is Eudokia, it's been mentioned like 50 times!

[Liliet](#)

See I don't really feel like Black is going to end up Dread Emperor period (Cat's dead set on bringing down the Name after all...), but if he does, this is the best guess at his reigning name I've seen ;u;

[Euodiachloris](#)

I dunno: "Sardonic" or "Satiric" would suit him. Failing that... "Desiccator" – bone-dry wit trying to keep lush greenery a thing. *shrugs*

[Liliet](#)

♥ ♥ ♥

[Fayhem](#)

Eh, doesn't match the format; Dread Emperor reign names are all adjectives, specifically (if I've got my nomenclature right here) denominal adjectives. Carrion is a noun. There have been other Dread Emperor names that were words used as nouns (e.g. Irritant, Revenant) but AFAIK they all can also be used as adjectives, although in the case of revenant that usage is super rare. So it sounds badass/overtly Evil enough to be a Dread Emperor name for sure, but I don't think it lines up with how Dread Emperor names are chosen.

[Liliet](#)

'Malicia' is not an adjective and can't be used as one. Also 'Regalia'. There's precedent.

[Fayhem](#)

Well, Malicia isn't even a word as far as I know, but your point is taken. Still don't feel like it matches Amadeus' take on things, but that's just my personal sense of it.

erebus42

So the Dominion (or at least the people who really seem to matter in the Dominion) are backing Cat. Yeah, that should give her request a bit more weight.

Also, I love how she points out how delightfully out of place Rozala is throughout all this. I can only imagine what's going on in ol'Roz's head right now-probably something along the lines of "HOLY FUCKING SHIT, WHAT THE FUCK IS EVEN HAPPENING RIGHT NOW!"(but you know, more princessly).

[Mental Mouse](#)

> probably something along the lines of "HOLY FUCKING SHIT, WHAT THE FUCK IS EVEN HAPPENING RIGHT NOW!"

Followed closely by "she wasn't even *here*, how did she manage to *win* when she wasn't even here?"

[Liliet](#)

I love the "will you start taking this seriously, Your Majesty?!" comment. Rozala has Realized how Cat works, apparently ;u;

Sparsebeard

I'm sure the priests of House Insurgent are gonna be real smug now.

konstantinvoncarstein

We saw that a Choir could strip a priest of the power to use the Light. So who gives Light to the priests? Above, or the Choirs?

Dainpdf

My interpretation: Above, technically, but the Choirs have some say in how and where it goes.

It's like how your manager is not the one employing you, but can still fire you.

[Liliet](#)

I like this metaphor!

Dainpdf

Thanks!

[Miles](#)

The choirs are above.

[shieldredblog](#)

No they work for Above.

They're like computer programs created by The Gods Above to run things because they aren't allowed too intervene. They are powerful but they have very real limits to both that power and their understanding.

That said, they are the highest authority mere mortals have access to. Apparently slivers of Above's attention only show up to kill people through sheer contempt.

Ekmo

"And I sweat now that the Majilis will speak as one, endorsing the petition of the Kingdom of Callow."

Yes Tariq, sweat it out! It's gonna be an exhausting time I'm sure!

[Mental Mouse](#)

Since fixed in text.

Old Scratch of Kharkanas

Long time reader, first time commenter. You've mentioned before there's some elements of the worldbuilding probably won't make it into the story. Do you plan on releasing supplementary stuff after the story's done? I'd love to eventually see things like a full world map or notes on the development of the Praesi political system, once it's no longer risking spoilers. Thanks!

Jwombat

There is actually a full world map on the website; several in fact.

[Javvies](#)

Technically just the continent of Calernia, but since the other continents on the planet aren't relevant to the story, it might as well be a world map for our purposes.

caoimhinh

This chapter was hilarious from beginning to end, Catherine's sarcastic view of the events around her was really top-notch. Though I wonder why Hakram didn't explain immediately that the reason they were all aware of the Pilgrim's death was due to the dreams, but well, that can wait, I guess.

"It might just be the lack of sleep talking, but the wine might actually taste better with the tonic in it."

Yes, Cat, and Akua can actually make you a list of what liquor goes well with what poison and with what antidote. It's a millenia-old art among the Praesi High-born, better get used to it, as the world seems to want you climbing the Tower.

And thus, a year, half a crusade and many thousands of dead people later, Pilgrim and Levant do what Catherine asked nicely of them in the very beginning of the war.
Politics, eh?

Typos found:

-Lanterns were not helping the Pilgrim stand, gently but firmly /

Lanterns were *now* helping the Pilgrim stand, gently but firmly -that was then the Choir of Mercy took offence / that was *when* the Choir of Mercy took offence

[Barthumphries](#)

That's always been one my favourites.
Add "of" after "one"

but losing a third of your Name was nothing something to be shrugged off.
Change nothing to not

Not going to check the "notify me of new comments" box because this website sends every comment as a new email and frankly I don't want that many emails clogging up my inbox. Author can get my email address if necessary, hopefully nobody else wants to respond to this because I don't see a way for me to realize that anyone responded.

Brendan

And so begins the friendship between the angry horse people, and the angry hill people.

werafdsaew

Who is this acquaintance? Razin Tanja or the Pilgrim?

maximillian999

Definitely Razin.

Clmineith

I'm pretty sure Tarik cannot be offended, ever.

ciara

You say that, but try eating a corpse in front of him

[Mental Mouse](#)

"Hey, that guy is long past all suffering."

[Fayhem](#)

You. I like you.

Tom

"I could only get my hands on Dormer pale," Adjutant apologetically said.

My lips twitched.

"See, now I know that's a lie," I replied.

"This is going to be a hand joke, isn't it," he sighed, sounding resigned.

"If I say yes," I murmured, "are you going to lose it?"

—
Loved this, especially while she's still propping Tariq up and ignoring Malanza desperately trying to get her to deal with the frantic Levantines.... I was a little frustrated at the interludes carrying on for five chapters when we already knew that Cat & Pilgrim were going to come back together. But they ended up working wonderfully as the setup for the humor here. 😊

Domifax

Are corrections (typos) appreciated?

If yes maybe it would make sense to have a discord text channel or something similar dedicated to it – or is there already one and I'm just too slow to notice?.

Andrew Mitchell

There's a discord. If you go back a few chapters, and look at the first comment, you'll find the link.

[*Liliet*](#)

EE is not active on the discord though. People usually leave typos in the comment section, and erratic sometimes fixes some of them sometimes not -_-

This is a first draft

SpeckofStardust

This is where she needs to be held up because her leg gave out due to shock/lack of sleep.

[*Liliet*](#)

I love how great a perspective UTTERLY EXHAUSTED Catherine provides to all this. Perfect serenity because her field of fucks has burned down and been salted, abject refusal to follow what everyone is doing / inability to follow what they're saying, random trains of thought getting interrupted by even more random trains of thought, and in the end, WOW IS IT HER BIRTHDAY OR WHAT

♥ ♥ ♥

Andrew Mitchell

Yep. I can't WAIT to see her reaction at the beginning of the next chapter. 😊

Liliet

~~my bet is on falling over unconscious from exhaustion
overwhelming the sheer effort to take this in after all
sorry Hakram there's only so much your tonic can do~~

Euodiachloris

As a foundling, who knows? It could actually be her birthday. 😊

Liliet

YEP 😊

Euodiachloris

I wonder when the Houses of Light are going to wake up to the fact that Cat hasn't got a Name?

That could be their out: she might still kind of follow Below, but she's apparently not especially favoured by that lot, either (Heck, she might even conceivably be in the "mildly disappointed in you" books). The Houses can gloss over the issue of her not exactly getting stripped of her Name so much as her willingly trading it in for other things, but...

Shveiran

She is the high priestess of the murder crow goddesses of the drows.

"But she is not the Squire, now" really feels like trying to hide behind a tattered napkin, while sitting on a purple, luminous elephanth

Euodiachloris

Sve Noc aren't in Below's favourite favourites books either, however. 😊

Except, nobody has stopped to check that. Everybody sees dark-scary-murder-crows and just assumes. For some reason. 😊

Fayhem

> Sve Noc aren't in Below's favourite favourites books either, however. 😊

Eh, I don't really know how to even tell if that was so. Below seems weirdly chill about people going against them;

I'd guess it probably ties into the whole "if you can do it, then you had the right to". So they'll happily murder your face off (or exterminate your species maybe, y'know whatevs) to stop you when you're *trying* to go against them, but if you actually pull it off then it's like they just go "well guess you proved your point, good show old chap".

And the Mighty do still have all their murder-miracles which are supposedly the Below equivalent of what the priests of Light get up to, in terms of relative power source I mean. Which I guess would mean Sve Noc are gods, yes, but they're gods in a way where they're sort of like the Below-equivalent of angels. Which is horrifying, and therefore perfect.

Liliet

I think Sve Noc are rather more directly in charge of Night than angels are to Light. Above and Heavens are ultimately one structure; Below is a smattering of independent agents. I suspect Below couldn't take away the Mighty's powers even if they tried, at this point.

Fayhem

> I think Sve Noc are rather more directly in charge of Night than angels are to Light.

They're certainly a lot more hands-on! As we've just seen though, angels are just as capable of stripping away Light as the Sisters are of stripping away the Night. So I think the difference is more one of temperament and approach than of actual authority.

> Above and Heavens are ultimately one structure

Wha? It's been explicitly tagged in the text on multiple occasions that the Choirs don't always see eye-to-eye.

> Below is a smattering of independent agents.

I don't know that anyone's ever actually seen a direct (as opposed to self-identified) representative of Below in Creation. Tbf that very absence can certainly be taken as implying something in the line of what you're saying, but implying \neq demonstrating to my mind.

> I suspect Below couldn't take away the Mighty's powers even if they tried, at this point.

Impossible to know, since my take on it is still that they'd never feel moved to. But if there's a question of **could** it's only that we don't know to what extent the

Gods-with-a-capital-G may be constrained from direct action. There's zero question of whether they would have the power to; in the Guideverse, the Gods aren't naturally occurring phenomena within Creation, they're the architects of Creation (hence that being the name for it). If you're strong enough to spin reality itself out of metaphysical whole cloth, nobody and nothing internal to your creation is going to be able to give you a hard time in a direct head-to-head.

Liliet

>They're certainly a lot more hands-on! As we've just seen though, angels are just as capable of stripping away Light as the Sisters are of stripping away the Night. So I think the difference is more one of temperament and approach than of actual authority

Yes, but no entity other than Sisters can grant / take away Night, or at least does so that we know of.

>Wha? It's been explicitly tagged in the text on multiple occasions that the Choirs don't always see eye-to-eye.

? They can be working together and not always in agreement, that's normal. I'm not saying they're one *entity*, I'm saying they're one *structure*. They at least aim to be allies.

>I don't know that anyone's ever actually seen a direct (as opposed to self-identified) representative of Below in Creation. Tbf that very absence can certainly be taken as implying something in the line of what you're saying, but implying \neq demonstrating to my mind.

We might or might not have WoG on this... We certainly know that devils are Below's equivalent to angels, and, well, we know how those work.

>Impossible to know, since my take on it is still that they'd never feel moved to.

Right, yeah. I mean something along the lines of 'couldn't do it just on a whim without breaking rules they and Gods Above agreed on for non-intervention'.

Insanenoodlyguy

Yeah, but it would still work. Remember that this is not a world of mass communication. So you tell the masses of Procer "The Black Queen is damned no longer, her name has been taken back by the hated Gods Below. She joined the band of five to

stop the machinations of the Dead King and saved 3 armies, Angels themselves spoke of her deeds, and even allowed her to ressurect the fallen Hero Grey Pilgrim. She is arch-heretic no longer, as she has now set upon the path of redemption and comes to fight the Dead King in her pennance"

Is that some half-truths mixed in with pure bullshit? Absolutely. But it'll sell. Especially because the last part indicates (truthfully) that she's coming to bring help in a very dire situation. Sure, it won't hold up anywhere she actually travels through, but that's not most of the country, and by the time somebody on the street can put together a "Hey wait a minute..." moment, she'll actually be there, actually helping, and the layman's morality questions will take a back seat to the thought of "Well, whatever. Not the first time the high ups have sold us crap. She really is out there hacking zombie's heads off, good enough I guess."

Shveiran

Well, I was expecting a much more triumphant return, but apparently the ones who expected the Levantines to cry "bloody undead" were right.

In retrospect, I could see the dreams being interpreted as a warning by some. Like "the Pilgrim is dead, see? if you see a Pilgrim somewhere, it's an imposter! Be warned!"

Still, this was quite nice nonetheless.

Insanenoodlyguy

It does make sense. The dreams seemed to have a weight of truth behind them, so everybody who had them would swear up and down "No, he's definitely dead. not a little dead, not nearly dead, he died, I'd swear upon it." And he's the only hero we've seen with a Resurrection ability, and she is a known necromancer taught by a known necromancer.

Without knowing of her power stealing trick, the absolute kindest interpretation of this is that she raised his body because she herself was so exhausted she couldn't drag it back any other way. In which case a pious Levantine is still being affronted and screaming "How did you think we'd think this was okay you get your unholy energy out of that sacred man's corpse this instant!"

peterplful

I was expecting the Pilgrims resurrection to go horribly wrong, like the Pilgrim clawing at his face while performing an unnatural scream, or its dead eyes taking a shade of gold while in Keter a smile crept upon a dead mans face while he murmured 'Mistake' kind of wrong.

There is power in repetition as Kat said, but also predictability and Kat's repeated refusal to accept whatever carrots fate tosses her way and strong arm her terms (even at price) is bound to become something the Bard or the Dead King can exploit.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

The probability that this is in fact actually Tariq somehow is so fucking wild, I'm strongly not blaming them for *not exactly jumping to that conclusion*.

[Liliet](#)

(I love that the Choir's version of a 'whoops the news were a bit premature awkward how that turned out' is 'SMITE THE UNBELIEVERS')

[Euodiachloris](#)

It was less a smiting and more one of those brown envelopes with a notification that your driver's license has been revoked due to a sneaky speed trap camera and the automatic points accrued going over the limit you were never previously informed was there. 🤪

[Liliet](#)

yep ;u;
'hmmm awkward I MEAN HOW DARE YOU'

[Mental Mouse](#)

I suspect the priestess' punishment was basically for trying an attack instead of a divination.

[Liliet](#)

For not being *gentle* enough.

~~For not listening to Catherine~~

[daegone823](#)

Okay this chapter plus the resurrection chapter has actually given character to a choir. I love when the choir is given personality traits. They are like a parent who has pushed there child to follow aa certain path.

When the pilgrim sacrificed himself to save the many he truly embodied the choir's teachings. Still they wept surrounding him,

then they to saw the possibility of retrieving there most loyal and dear follower allowing a dammed villain to save him.

After making such allowances it must have been hard then to have a priest question there perfect child who has made sacrifice after sacrifice. To question his existence after they brought back in their own eyes is there version of Jesus. The priest s should be glad all they lost was there grace and they weren't burnt to a crisp on the spot.

I guess that was there way of saying ungrateful.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> then they saw the possibility of retrieving their most loyal and dear follower

And perhaps, of leaving their mark on the greatest villain of the age. I still think the Hashmallim did that to Cat, leading to her famous tendencies to self-flagellation. (Heck, not only did we notice it, so did her friends). Now she's also been touched by Mercy.

[Liliet](#)

This sure is an interesting version!

ereshkigala

I wanna see Tariq's response to a certain shade.

AKUA: you thought you were the first enemy she forgave, old man?

TARIQ: omgwtfbq

[Mental Mouse](#)

Akua: "Sorry, no BBQing me, I'm a little past that."

Insanenoodlyguy

"So, are you going to try and seduce her too? I'll make you a deal: one of us succeeds, we try to get her to invite the other to bed as well"

pilgrim coughs up blood.

"Oh dont go that route. Trust me, if she went for that I'd have been getting some the first night. Blood I have given her, trust me."

[onedollargum](#)

Cat gave away a sword and a forgiveness for a chance of peace. Nice trade!

Silverking

Wait, what were the 3 slights that Cat said the Blood committed against her?

werafdsaew

Pointing swords at her, accusing her of doing necromancy on Pilgrim, and putting words in her mouth.

superkeaton

Huh. Nice. Normally you just get a refund when you return something at the desk, but getting a shiny new endorsement for a worn-out priest is some lovely value.

Sherlock M

It only took me two weeks to get here... FINALLY.

And now, I have to wait til Mon... (tears)

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, that climax...

> Least costly to me, who'd merely tossed away the chance in the future that one dear to me could be stolen back from death ... Chances like that one came only once ... and spurning what had been offered would ensure there was no repetition.

I don't think that was "spurned". Strangely enough, I suspect Pilgrim had become dear to Cat despite their opposition. And then...

> So, I idly wondered, what kind of a largely ceremonial gesture would be made. Amusedly, I wondered if I was about to be made some manner of Blood.

The Blood, ceremoniously: Screw the Lanterns, we're backing you to join the Alliance.

Cat: 0_0

werafdsaew

"Need my stick, old bones?" I asked. "I'll let you borrow it if you promise to give it back."

Can't the Pilgrim just get another staff?

[Fayhem](#)

> Can't the Pilgrim just get another staff?

My best answer: maybe? Given his vast experience in matters of heroic narrative, I trust Tariq's judgment of whether his story needs him to show some visible change like not having a staff anymore in light of his recent dramatic events (which would be my best guess for why he potentially couldn't just get a new staff). So basically if he does get a new staff, then I'll take that as meaning he could, and if he doesn't then I'd assume that means he's concluded he can't (at least not without some story-shenanigans like how Cat got offered a shiny new sword in Liesse).

Chapter 53: Avowed

*"Count them all, in the snow
Red and gold and black as night
Count them all, high and low
Seven crowns broken by rite
Brought they forth, in accord
Peace, oaths and a sword."
-Iserran children's rhyme*

If felt like the fact that my hands were currently filled with a pipe and liquor might be detracting some from the solemnity of this occasion, but maybe it was just me. Gods, I wished I'd gotten ten hours of sleep in me before having to parse this. On the surface this seemed like a coup, but not looking further than the surface was how you lost feathers at this game. Levant was backing my bid for being a member of the Grand Alliance, and Ashur had been struck down into irrelevance by the Battle of Thalassina and then being knifed in the back by the League. I forced my tired mind to keep slogging on, but as far as I could see the heart of what this meant was that if I made a bargain with Cordelia Hasenbach – which, given the amount of things I had to trade, I should be able to – then Callow would be brought into the fold. Was this a case of putting a leash on the beast you couldn't defeat, an attempt by the Pilgrim to bind me to his causes? It hardly mattered, though, in the end. I'd been trying to get a foothold in those treaties for years now, and if they were seeking a peace because they thought they could win that where war had failed them then I could live with that. Because I, too, sought more than my signature on declarations of alliance from this. I would get the Liesse Accords signed, and whatever else could be said of tonight it was also was a step towards that end.

Discretely as I could in this situation, which wasn't all that much, I pressed back the flask into Hakram's hand and hide the pipe behind my arm to empty it into the snow. Already I was half-wishing I'd drunk the whole thing, as much for the wine's touch of warmth in the face of the cold morning air as the tonic that'd shaken off some the lethargy clawing at my thoughts. Leaning against the dead yew offering I'd found in the depths of Twilight, where lied the grave of king the world had decreed to be good, I shivered but matched their expectant gazes.

"I have one foe," I said, "and he dwells north, behind the walls of Keter, where his tyranny lies serene. Everything else is chaff."

Would that I had my cloak, as much for warmth as for the presence it lent.

"You have bled my people," I said. "And we have done the same to you, every one of us dancing on damned strings. Let that end with this dawn, for we share one war still and it will not be found on this field."

"War on Keter," Aquiline Osená called out, voice loud and clear. "Honour in victory, and should doom find us then honour in defiance *unbent*."

The last word clapped out like a challenge, proud and finding reflection in those that heard it.

"War to the north," Razin Tanja agreed, his words ringing out. "As oath was sworn in Blood and smoke. The shames we will redeem, the graces we will earn."

"To the Crown of the Dead we bring steel," Itima Ifriqui smiled, hard-toothed and starved. "Through wasteland and snow, until tall walls come to echo our scorn."

"Oath was given. War to the knife," Yannu Marava said, eyes cold and limpid, "to ruin and carrion things and silent dusk. Let Creation know that the Dominion of Levant marches to war, and the sword will not return to the sheath until the Enemy has broken or we are dust."

Would my countrymen have shivered this way, I wondered as I watched the fire light in the eyes of the warriors around us, if a king of the Old Kingdom had called on their oaths? I remembered still the sight of Edward Fairfax standing bedecked in bells and spite, the words that heady call that'd sounded beyond the veil of death – *rise, Callowans, rise once more for we have debts yet unsettled* – and called the sum of my failures to war. It was a bastard throne I had made, and bastard was the claim I had on those who had chosen to follow me into strife. This, though? It was older, purer. The stuff fables were made of. I watched it

ripple through the hundreds of armsmen around us, that intangible weight that betrayed history's gears turning. Sometimes, I thought, it didn't have to be a scheme. Sometimes the stars were aligned and Creation let fate flow like water down the river. A hundred thousand touches too light and too small to have been seen, conspiring to shape something grim or beautiful or both. The Levantines sounded swords and axes on shield, though this was no acclamation: the rhythm sounded like a strange dirge, like grief and doom and wonder.

"The Anthem of Smoke," Princess Rozala Malanza murmured under her breath.

It was, I remembered, one of the great story-songs of their people. Not unlike *Here They Come Again* for mine, or perhaps *Red The Flowers*. There was an anger to the tune, I thought, and why would there not be? Levant had been born of bloody, merciless rebellion. Their Named were not the white-clad knights of the Old Kingdom, the tricksters and preachers of the League or even the blinkered, colourful exemplars of Procer. No, that lot had tasted the blood in the mouth from the start, hadn't they? Slayer, red-handed killers one and all. Binder, shackling doom to ride it to war. Brigand – that incongruous Chantant word in Levantine hands, the scornful dismissal of *bandit* instead turned into declaration of war. Even the Champion had stood for a people who'd preferred burning their own homes to surrendering it. And at the heart of them all a Pilgrim in grey, and how did the famous line go again? *His stride rebellion and stirring ember*. Oh, theirs were not the finest armies I had seen. They lacked discipline, lacked training, lacked equipment. But they were brave, I thought, and the manner of savagery I saw in their bearing I thought might be kin to the sort I'd glimpsed in another hard people. One I'd come to trust, and in many ways they was still the backbone of my armies.

One served as my right hand, too, and another as the marshal of my hosts.

Savages as they might be, I thought, striking each other at every turn and writing honour's couplets in blood, but when the dark pivots came they wouldn't break easy. It was slight, and fading, but there remained something in them of the people who'd humbled the Principate when it stood at the height of its power. *May the Hidden Horror yet choke on it*. I stood in silence until the hammering of steel on steel ended, trailing off into the clearing sky.

"So be it," the Grey Pilgrim said.

And oh, he sounded exhausted but there was a brightness to his voice as well I'd rarely heard there before. Pride, I thought, if not without sadness. I could not blame him, for Levant had sworn

anew to do the right thing and that never, ever came without a price.

"I stand witness to oaths sworn again, and let none break them while claiming honour," he said. "Let it be remembered that when the Enemy came for the world, Levant did not shirk its duty."

The sound of steel sliding out of its sheath drew all gazes to my side, where Rozala Malanza had drawn the slender blade at her side. In the morning's cast the princess was a sight, long dark curls loose behind her and matched in shine only by the gleam in those equally dark eyes. Tall and curved but hard-handed, as much general as she was princess, the Princess of Aquitan breathed out mist. In war too, had that one been forged. Her mother's war, the one whose defeat had haunted her life, but other since. The Battle of the Camps, where ambitions were ruined and I first tasted the fear that would lead me down the road to Keter. This one as well, though, had left a mark. *A princes' graveyard*, Leonor of Valencis had called it, one from which only one crown emerged untouched. Her own, for having judged it less than the lives of the people it ruled over. I'd admired the gesture then, and still did now. Of all the princes and princesses of Procer I had beheld, none save the First Prince herself could be said to have character worthier of respect.

"I am not the First Prince," she said. "Yet I stand the sole of my title in Iserre, and the south entire. I speak only to that, which is right enough to my eye."

I studied her in silence, not alone in this: so did the four of the Blood, and the Pilgrim as well. The Peregrine had been at her side before, I remembered, when he'd led the heroes of the northern crusade.

"We have been foe before," Rozala said, princess still but in that moment Arlesite even more, "on Levant we warred, unjustly, for many years. And to the east, across the mountains..."

She looked at me then, and I did not soften gaze or offer sympathy. I still remembered the bloody gaps left in the ranks of my army after I'd awoke from Winter's grasp, on the last day of the Camps, and though war was war even if I did not count it grudge neither would I simply *forget* it.

"We spoke righteous words, and schemed that which was not," the Princess of Aquitan said. "A fresh entry to a tally long kept of contempts offered unprovoked. I say this not to apologize, for I bear not so great a crown it can change the lay of the past, but to..."

She hesitated, struggling for the word.

"Acknowledge," Rozala Malanza said. "That even though treaties were signed, that alliances were made and bargains struck, we did not *earn* this. That in the face of the darkness what we have sown might have seen us stand alone, if you all had not chosen to heed beliefs of a higher order."

She let out what might have been a laugh had it not been utterly without mirth.

"To acknowledge that there were choices to be made and you chose to act in honour," she said. "Knowing that like the viper of old lore we have sunk our fangs in the flesh of our benefactors before, still you chose. And I cannot – I cannot offer anything for it that would not be insult."

She'd stumbled, in the last sentence, like it'd been disgraceful to speak it.

"There are no honours I could grant that would be higher than those you claimed simply by making this decision," Princess Rozala said, raising her chin. "I will not pretend that wealth or promises would be worth the blood you have and will shed, though should you wish them of me you have all I own. Yet I can, Merciful Gods, at least I can say that this was *heard*. That it will be remembered, that it will not slip quiet into obscurity once the menace has passed."

She breathed out shallowly.

"Shame on us," Rozala Malanza softly said, "if we ever forget it."

Her sword she thrust into the ground, through snow and ice and earth, and it bit deep.

"And if ever comes to that," she said. "On that day I, or one of my line, will come for that sword again. To take it up and wield it until the shame has been cleansed."

My fingers clenched. That had not been small oath, I thought, or a feeble one. The Princess of Aequitan had sworn, in her own way, that should Procer turn against those who were coming to its help in its hour of need she would rise in rebellion. No, more than just her. She had sworn as a Malanza and bound her entire line to the oath.

"Rozala Malanza," the Grey Pilgrim called out, voice clear and bright, "hail."

Like a snake uncoiling the call spread through the Levantines, Blood and not, until the *hail* rang out like thunder. Softly I struck the butt of my staff against the ground, looking at the sword and wondering what manner of curse would take anyone trying

to take it up save in fulfillment of the oath. There'd been a weight to the princess' words, Named or not, and such a thing was rarely without consequence. No, they'd remember Rozala's Oath for many years to come. After the last hail died, like the wind had gone out of all of us we began to disperse. The force that had held us all spellbound had ebbed, used to nothingness or passed afar.

And so the great battle on the plains of Iserre ended with three things: peace, oaths, and a sword in the ground.

—

I could feel the vigor leeching out of me as we began walking downhill, the half-scattered Levantines parting respectfully for us. Princess Rozala had made her own way down, apart from Hakram and I and directly headed towards the horse and foot she'd brought. I'd traded a meaningful look with Tariq before we parted ways, both of us aware that there would be need for talks of all sorts in the days to come. Gripping as the exchanges on the hill had been in their own way, they would amount to little and less if the diplomatic legwork did not follow behind the grand gestures. Verbal agreements at sunrise made between recent enemies were not actual treaties, though my life would be a great deal simpler if they were. Still, I'd be useless before I got some sleep in me and Tariq was in even worse state: freshly-resurrected, robbed of an aspect and with no finger on the pulse of where his people had been headed before we returned. I, at least, could rest certain that Vivienne and Juniper would keep things running as they should in my absence. With Hakram to watch over them, these days I did not need to keep nearly as close an eye on the Army of Callow's workings as I had in the early days.

It was for the best, in my opinion. I still believed myself a fair hand as a general and an occasionally inspired tactician, but the army could not come to rely on me. Black, when he'd first forged the modern Legions of Terror, had been very careful to ensure that his presence and Name would be supplement but never *required*. The Legions, and now the Army, must be perfectly capable of functioning without my being involved. It freed my hand to address other perils, true, but there was also an issue of legacy — I would build no host that would be crippled by my death or abdication, whichever came first. I'd been taught better than that. Two cohorts and a pale-faced General Abigail were awaiting us when we reached the bottom of the hill, which had me casting a mildly reproachful look at Adjutant. She was far too high-placed an officer to be in command here if someone higher up the ladder had not requested it. The culprit seemed obvious, and after the general hurriedly distanced herself from us under pretence of leading the cohorts back to camp from the front, turned out to be unabashed.

"Wanted to see how she holds up under pressure," he quietly told me in Kharsum.

"She's held command in battles without folding in the slightest," I pointed out in the same. "She's a twitchy thing, mind you, I won't deny that. But she thinks fast on her feet and she's got the right instincts."

"Reminds you of anyone?" Adjutant mildly said.

I rolled my eyes.

"I was never all that shy when it came to getting into scraps," I replied. "Not every canny Callowan girl is my kin in spirit."

"If you say so," he teased.

"I do," I said. "And you're being cagey. Haven't told you anything you didn't already know, so what's your actual reason for bringing her along?"

"There's more than one kind of pressure," Hakram said. "Many moving parts, tonight, and many ways it could have spun out of control."

I grunted, conceding the point. Keeping the lid on the pot was different than keeping your head screwed on straight when the blades were already out.

"So?" I asked.

"She kept her head," he said, almost approvingly. "General staff material, that one. She'd also thank you for sending her far from the frontlines."

"She needs accolades first," I murmured. "A few feats under her belt. Otherwise the nobles will squeeze her too easily."

The bastard system of fresh Callowan rule I would be passing on to my successor had governors holding many of the great territories that'd once belonged to the aristocracy, but the nobles hadn't been stamped out. Yet there were still baronies up north, Duchess Kegan in Daoine and even highborn stripped of their lands still held a lot of influence. Though the unspoken threat of my disapproval – paired with the open secret I was less than fond of aristocrats – had kept a true noble faction from forming since the effective dissolution of the Regals, there was no guarantee such a state of affairs would be maintained under whoever followed after me. Rebellions or even just unrest, would be a nasty turn after the way Callow had exhausted and would further exhaust itself prosecuting war against the Dead King. Best to nip that in the bud with a large standing army whose head would be both popular with the people and not bound to any of the

great nobles and dignitaries of Callow. Whether Abigail of Summerholm could be that woman still remained to be seen, but for now she was at least the foremost candidate. I was shaken out of the reverie I'd slipped into when thinking when I caught sight of a familiar silhouette approaching. Ivah, by now well-known in the Army of Callow's circles, found the shield wall opening for it without a comment.

General Abigail glanced askance at me, silently asking whether her presence would be required for the conversation that'd follow, but I shook my head. And tried not to be too visibly amused at her poorly-hidden relief.

"Ivah," I greeted the drow. "Still up, I see."

"My tasks have yet to end, Losara Queen," it replied. "I bring forth message from your shade, as well as your mantle."

It did, in fact, have my cloak with it. It spread it out, though not before handing me a small stripe of parchment, and I turned to the side to cast better light on it. *He is one again*, Akua had written me. *Losses were slight. Exhaustion will keep him slumbering for a time.* A tired smile stretched out my lips. It'd been a damned ride of a night, but there'd been more victories than defeats. Foremost among them was that my father's soul had been reattached to his body and he'd wake before too long, whole and not greatly lessened by the experience. Akua had come through for me once more, as she was in the habit of doing these days. Good news. I thought I'd heard a scuffle behind, but when I glanced there was nothing out of the ordinary. Hakram laid the Mantle of Woe on my shoulders and I breathed out in comfort. It was not so warm as that, but I'd grown used to it more than I'd ever believed I would.

"Masego is stable?" I asked.

"He is," Hakram gravelled. "And still asleep. We have him watched."

I snorted.

"Archer let you post guards?" I asked. "Which brings to mind, did Roland return to the Proceran camp in the end?"

"The Rogue Sorcerer," Adjutant frowned. "Archer was not sent out on a task?"

My stomach dropped.

"No, she wasn't," I said. "You haven't seen her or the Sorcerer, I take it."

"They did not come to our camp," he said. "And neither were mentioned to me otherwise."

"Shit," I muttered. "Did anyone recently move their – no, you don't even need to answer that."

I sighed.

"Still got that flask, Hakram?" I asked.

He nodded, though his eyes were curious.

"Hand it to me," I grunted. "I'll need the tonic if I'm to have talks with Kairos."

epokki

Hey EE, any chance you could check email regarding the art thing?

Also heres the links incase I cut in line with this msg.

<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>
– <https://www.patreon.com/user?u=3523924>

[Javvies](#)

Good show, Rozala.

Ah. Fucking Kairos. I keep saying this – he needs to get murdered most thoroughly as soon as possible.

lankyZ

Does he really though?

...

... yes.

yes he does.

naturalnuke

Unquestionably number one on the list of things that need to be done.

Alivaril

...The ending of this chapter feels a bit like a bit of a disappointment after the excellent climax that was the last few chapters. I feel as though the story would've been better served

by having an honest wrapup instead of letting the top keep spinning.

But my opinions don't mean you shouldn't vote! <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Andrew Mitchell

IMO it was an honest wrap-up AND one part of the top kept spinning. This feels realistic and appropriate. Kairos still wants his seat at the table when negotiations start.

Agent J

Yes, I would have greatly appreciated a proper conclusion as well. I'm bloody exhausted, maybe not as much as Cat, but I could use some downtime myself.

Now we've more Kairos bullshit to deal with? Ugh. I honestly thought it'd be a while before he pulled something again. Doesn't he know when to gracefully leave the stage.

Shveiran

EE is very good at pacing, but this does feel like a (very rare) mistake to me.

I think the interludes were meant to both make us reconnect with the army and catch our breath; they achieved the first objective nicely, but to me the emotional stress primarily comes from Cat's tension, as I connect mostly with her because protagonist. The fact that she hasn't stopped since the battle started is draining. Personally, I'd have much preferred if Cat got her nap and, upon waking, found out that Idrani had not yet come back. One chapter ending with the sweet bliss of sleep would have done wonders, IMO.

Draeysine

I agree for the most part.

But you forget that there is no rest for wicked

[Liliet](#)

I disagree.

People have been talking about how everything feels *too* fine. The longer Cat keeps up a streak of victories, the more *that* tension builds – what's the next show to drop?

For people who think in tropes in a manner similar to hers, this is a godsdamned relief, and not a moment too soon -_-

Dainpdf

You talk as if losing Masego's sorcery, revealing her secret weapon, the Bard getting a victory, the Dead King getting a victory, the Pilgrim losing the Forgive button, AND the Saint dying aren't all various shoes that have dropped just over the last couple of chapters.

[Liliet](#)

Long-term, remember that Cat came into this *with a plan to kill Laurence de Montfort* and even halfway through Tariq had to bargain with her to get her to agree to try to not kill her. That one was a shoe, true enough, but it was a fairly light one.

Simply the dramatic timing of everything going well for Cat has never not been followed up with if minor but a hiccup. The hiccup coming on time just... serves as a confirmation that all the rest of it has indeed been a success.

Dainpdf

Cat came with a plan to kill Laurence because you always have a plan to kill things and Laurence was often antagonistic. She did not want to do so now, both because she did not want to blow her surprise weapon and because she did not want to kill Saint yet.

Shveiran

Agreed. And even discarding Saint, there is all the rest. Cat had a series of victories, but she bled for them all the way. She has surrendered a lot of control, throughout the thing: e.g. gaining the Sorcerer's ear is a victory, no two ways about it, but at the same time Masego was crippled. She gained an alliance with the drow, while losing Winter: a good thing, and yet a more fragile one because the drow do not, ultimately, answer to her.

This is a trend.

Now, considering the major victory here was legitimacy, and we had confirmation the heroic scene trusts Bard in a big way, everything here is a balancing act with the (supposed) real Big Bad of the setting holding the higher ground.

These victories had a cost, and are not gained once and for all: they have to be defended.

How someone can say that things are going too well is honestly beyond me.

Dainpdf

Honestly, I count losing winter as balanced in itself. Less raw power, but also less fae in her brain.

Javvies

She's also vastly more vulnerable to physical attacks. And probably also most magical attacks. Though she doesn't have Fae-specific magical weaknesses anymore, either.

Cat may or may not have more magical power at night now, but she has way less during the day. And sure, she had limits and limited skill/knowledge with exercising the power of Winter. On the other hand, if she got into a fight, Winter Queen Cat could always (and usually did) rely on her physical prowess to murderize her opponents, even if she couldn't or didn't use Winter magical power. Nowadays, if Cat can't use Night, she's extremely limited in a fight.

She also can't do the same kind of magically enforced oaths.

Plus, Akua's leash is a whole lot looser nowadays.

It's mixed, but trading Winter for Night is likely a long term net loss for Cat on a personal power level, especially if we exclude Sve Noc and their ability to boost Cat's powers and supplement them with their knowledge and experience.

Dainpdf

You forgot to count the "won't act in ways that are actually counter to her own interests".

Some might argue that was not a reduction in personal power, but it was definitely a reduction in effective personal power, which is what matters.

Great force is not very useful if applied in the wrong direction.

danh3107

Pretty sweet chapter!

Erratic the side bar for this story is all messed up though.

antoninjohn

Really Kairos, really. How could you betray your most trusted friends like that

Insanenoodlyguy

Why would inviting his tired friends to stick with him (no doubt with armed escort in order to ensure their safety in their exhausted state) be a betrayal?

Decius

It would get boring if he kept betraying his most trusted friends the same way over and over. Sometimes he has to spice it up a bit.

Soma

Fucking Kairos. He's really gone from comic relief to at best an irritation. An agent of chaos who is utterly predictable is tedious.

It's a good chapter, I'm just annoyed that Kairos keeps delaying plot and more fun interactions. I suppose I soured on him when he broke up the five man band.

Nafram

It WOULD have been better to see him get what he wanted through keeping it nice and stable despite all odds to the contrary, but alas

[Javvies](#)

He acts just too over the top evul for the sake of evulz ... and he's long since past the point where that could still be funny ... especially given his recent methods. And he's made of hax and bullshit.

And he made a deal with Bard.

Plus whatever he's got going on with Heirarch (who also isn't funny anymore – he hasn't been funny since he got the Name and stopped being Anaxares).

Masterofbones

I think you are quite close to the truth. I liked Kairos when he was surviving under his own power. He was an absurd but powerful entity that always survived by his own will and craftiness.

But now that he has the bard's blessing, he does as he likes and everyone has to ignore him. His survival is no longer a miracle, its just an annoyance.

Shveiran

On the other hand, I speculate the next arch will be about him and Anaxares, so I think we can reliably expect him to bite it by the end of the current book.

Ekmo

There's always room for one more on the Mantle...

[Euodiachloris](#)

All together now: what has he done? How bad is it?

[Hakurei06](#)

Looks like there's no rest for the wicked.

Andrew Mitchell

Nor for the righteous, it seems.

erebus42

Poor Cat, no rest for the wicked indeed.
Good on Rozala, I do enjoy how they keep setting up potential future Stories and Plot-points even though they probably won't be relevant or come to fruition during this particular Story.
Also, Ivah is awesome as always, even when acting as a delivery person.

[Mental Mouse](#)

One sword waiting in Twilight Throneless, one in Iserre Redeemed. Perhaps the third will be in Keter,...

Big Brother

Nope, it's gonna be the Hashmallim's feather Cat spread across the lakes of Callow

IDKWhoitis

So Archer and Rogue lost due to schenaigns or are they on a hunter killer mission, to wrap up one lose end?

Im placing a bet on "captured", which means there will be some light bargains to be made.

I also expect there to be no negotiation for at least 2 days while Cat and Pilgrim recuperate from the shitshow that just went down.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Im placing a bet on “captured”,

So, it seems, is Cat. Though in fact, it might be her best bet is to send Ivah and a few friends, while she and her people recover. Not like Archer and RS aren’t eminently capable, and with a hand from outside...

> some light bargains to be made

Or the opposite: “Kinda dark in here, isn’t it? Now, lets discuss your prisoners...”

Sugar Roll

Did Hakram and Ivah have a scuffle for the mantle? I think we have a little rivalry going on as to who’s the better right hand man right here.

Andrew Mitchell

Yep, I think so. And Hakram won, it seems. Maybe Ivah just needs to learn his place.

Mental Mouse

> Maybe Ivah just needs to learn his place.

Or at least learn that Hakram has the reach on him. 😊

Isi Arnott-Campbell

*It.

Andrew Mitchell

My bad on that one too. 😊 Thanks for the reminder.

Edward Kim

I didn’t catch that bit, but reading it again and it’s hilarious XD

konstantinvoncarstein

At long last, hope has come, and the true enemy will be fought.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, it’s about time the Bard was dealt with! 😊

konstantinvoncarstein

I was speaking of Neshamah 😊

Andrew Mitchell

Where you?!? 😊

Yes, I know you were. But we know he's not *really* the "true enemy".

geoffpburns

We have had enough epigraphs quoting the future history of the "uncivil wars" that suggests that this is not going to end with everyone joining hands and singing Kambaya.

Praes is likely to get a civil war with a conflict between Malicia and Black.

Tariq is likely to find it harder to control the Seljun now that he's given up his crown. So here could be a civil war there.

Procer has already had a civil war, but could be in for a second one once the threat of the Hidden Horror has passed. There are 7 principalities that can't be happy that Cordelia stabbed them in the back straight after their Princes took one for the team and there is bound to be consequences from Rozala's oath.

You have to wonder how long Kairos is going to be able to keep Hierarch under control. Having Hierarch place Kairos under trail would be interesting.

We don't know what Bard is up to, but once it is revealed there is likely to be some shuffling of who is in which camp.

There has been some reaction with 4/5 of Levant and 1/23 of Procer coming under the influence of a Villian. Even if Mercy is okay with it the other choirs are going to object.

Soronel Haetir

So how far is Cat from forgetting her oath to Vivian regarding Akua? Given Callowan sensibilities that could not be a good idea.

Oshi

She hasn't forgotten it. The worst thing you can do to Akua is to make her see her life in stark relief and die knowing the only time she succeeded was in being everything she was taught not to be.

I've always suspected her death will be wrapped up in either the destruction of the Bard or the death of the Empire.

[Mental Mouse](#)

If not the destruction of the Dead King. Regardless, it will certainly complete her redemption.

Hitogami

She is from Callow, as much as she may start to like Akua, the debt will be paid.

[TeK](#)

So, can Kairos get around restriction on lies, by choocing a herald and telling him what he wants him to say?

Andrew Mitchell

Oh, for sure IMO. Karios is also the sort of person to be able to tell people things that are technically the truth, but actually mislead.

Oshi

He doesn't need to get around restrictions. He just has to tell the truth that fits what he wants to say. Lies were never Kairos's gift.

Shveiran

This. I really don't get what the Pilgrim was thinking that time. It's like cursing Superman to make him incapable of using weapons. It's not like I can't imagine a situation where that hinders him, but no such scenario seems very likely.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> I really don't get what the Pilgrim was thinking that time.

As a Hero his options were limited anyway, and the Bard's parole further restricted them. What he's done is essentially to take a marker of sorts, one that in turn restricts Kairos' options. And story-fu can ensure it comes due at the most inconvenient time for Kairos.

Speaking of which, Cat still needs to have that chat with him about the Bard.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm. It's not a shackle, it's a landmine.

Shveiran

This makes more sense, admittedly, but why LIES of all things? Why not, I dunno, betrayals? It still feels off target, and Tariq is usually good at this sort of things.

Mental Mouse

Betrayals are perhaps too context dependent, and in any case betrayal *is* Kairos's story. Even with angelic backing, I don't think Pilgrim gets to just forbid a villain's own story.

Shveiran

I realize we are in the realm of speculations here, but if he doesn't get to do that, how comes he gets to enforce a substantial death penalty dependant on something that is highly subjective? The very definition of truth and lies as a concept usually comes with a huge gray field in between, and most people disagree on where the border lies. I don't know, that part sits ill with me.

Mental Mouse

He got to impose a *probable* death penalty (wording – it could leave Kairos mute!) because Kairos endangered everybody else's lives, including getting Indrani killed, and then also imposing a "one of you shall die" on the party.

Have you ever read any of Mercedes Lackey's Five Hundred Kingdom's books? They're excellent light fantasy, featuring a world mechanic called "the Tradition" – it's the power behind magic in that 'verse, which likewise responds to "story" (and song). The 500K books are much of my own basis for understanding the Guideverse's story mechanics, though the Tradition is more interactive. In both 'verses, "subjective" defers to "popular understanding" – tricksters do get to invoke technicalities, but only if they "make" the story.

One point that shows up in 500K a couple of times, is that every curse has to have an "out" – if a caster fails to provide one, the Tradition will, often something like "true love's kiss". That's what I'm thinking here. Saying Kairos cannot betray anyone wouldn't be leaving him an out, because "betrayal is what he does".

Saying he can't *lie*... well, that's a *challenge*, it leaves him enough room to maneuver and scheme... and risk getting caught by his own words: "This isn't the last you've seen of me" becomes a geas of sorts, protecting Kairos and possibly Pilgrim (he did get resurrected!), until the two foes meet again. Though it might not protect the Tyrant as much as he hoped,

if Pilgrim comes to view Kairos' corpse (or possibly shows up as a ghost, though ghosts don't seem to be much of a thing in Guideverse).

Shveiran

It looks like even Yannu has no choice but to get back into the fold, which is good for him: he may even survive this way.

And damn, that oath was cool. Nicely done, Malanza: owning up your fuck ups is always a plus in my book.

Everyone is a big family now, which obviously means Kairos has to throw a branch in the wheels... but damn it, couldn't it have waited until after Cat's nap? I'm exhausted and drained.

[Fayhem](#)

> damn it, couldn't it have waited until after Cat's nap? I'm exhausted and drained.

I've seen a few people comment that, and I get it, I really do (because same!). But I'm thinking that might actually be the point. I think that the *point* is that Kairos is dragging Cat into dealing with this when she least wants to on a minimum of preparation and rest; I think that's flagging that he's going to get something from her that she might not have given up otherwise, because normally she'd be sharp enough to spot the trap. If I had to guess, probably something pertaining to the trial that will seem harmless but ultimately blow up in her face. We know Cat can match wits with Kairos as well as anyone can; I think making her do it while she's beyond bone tired is the handicap that will threaten to give Kairos the edge. Not just that, but the moment of relief after all your main goals seem to be accomplished is typically a vulnerable, unwary point for most people. So the tension will be how does she navigate this hazardous conversation under this additional handicap, and the feeling of "oh god why can't this just be over" from the audience is there because it puts us in the same boat as Cat and she's our viewpoint character so that's what you want there.

Shveiran

No, no, I get it. I share your expectations in full.

It's just that as a reader I think this is a bad choice. It feels bad. After two archs of upping the ante non-stop, with a lot of victories but never, ever a real denouement after them, *I* need a (fictional) nap. A moment to say: ok, this amazing, exhasuting thing is over and I can digest it before moving on to the next one.

If I was reading it all in one go... I think I would have started to lose focus half-way through because there was never a good moment to close the book and go to sleep serenely.

This is, of course, strictly personal. And even in my personal view, I'm not saying anything along the lines of "there is no pause here thus the book is ruined".

I just feel it makes the novel harder to read and enjoy.

If setting up Cat's mistake here is crucial, as it may very well be, perhaps a way to split between archs I and II could have been worked in? Something like a less strict timeframe for the band of five to depart, perhaps the need to wait for some eldritch reason that could give us a moment to digest Cat getting her truce and band and catch our breath, BEFORE jumping in the current drama? The current roping in wouldn't feel quite as exhausting on the reader's side if that was the case, I feel.

With that said, it is not a major deal: this is the kind of traps that can scare away readers, but this is a 5th book: if someone got to this point, they must trust EE to make it worth it in the end always.

I guess it doesn't REALLY matter, if that is how he wanted his work to feel.

Rup

I had this problem when I binge read PACT by Wildbow.....
.."it-gets-worse" trope is tough on the enjoyment

Shveiran

On the other hand, Wildbow IS doing it consistently and on purpose.

I, personally, don't like that.

It prevents me from enjoying the work of that extremely imaginative author because, no matter how fascinating I find his (her?) ideas, I end up constantly frustrated to the point of being actively sour. It is not for me.

That doesn't make it bad: some enjoy that sensation and find it thrilling, and there is nothing wrong with that.

I merely brought it up because this book feels a bit different from the others in this regard.

Usually, we get a break to digest Cat's ordeals or victories and prepare for the path ahead; not getting it here changes the reading experience in a significant way, IMO.

I know better than to assume EE has made a mistake; but in

the off chance this was not done on purpose, I gave my two cents on the matter to draw attention to it.

[Fayhem](#)

That's fair! I, uh, don't really have much of a response beyond that, but I wanted to acknowledge your thoughtful response. 😊

Clint

I usually don't do typos, but this one took my pre-coffee'd brain a bit to parse out:

"Leaning against the dead yew offering I'd found in the depths of Twilight, where lied the grave of king the world had decreed to be good, I shivered but matched their expectant gazes."

should be:

"... where lay the grave of a king the world had decreed to be good..."

[Barthumphries](#)

I guess this is the typo thread.

If felt like

Change if to it. I didn't copy paste more because, as the very first sentence, it should be easy to find. 😊

Also not clicking to be notified of be comments because the subject line just change for each one because I get every comment in a separate email and that's just too many emails.

There were other typos, but frankly I didn't have time to copy/paste them to a separate thing to hold them until I was done reading.

talenel

Huh. It felt like the first part of the chapter was supposed to be really momentous, but it felt really flat. The typos and poor phrasing in places just made that whole beginning section just read tediously. The whole peace, oaths, sword, thing didn't do anything for me.

I guess as other have mentioned, this arcs pacing is starting to feel a bit strained. It kinda reminds me of Worm where arcs lingered too long due to trying maintain a relentless pace.

Aotrs Commander

Oh dear, Abby, looks like you won't be getting that nice retirement pension after all...

Cat Has Plans for you...

ThatOneGuy

This may sound odd, but maybe perhaps Kairos is not involved in this action or mystery. Archer was up when Kairos had made his hint about the Rouge who actually stole and kept the magic instead of promising to give it back.

Maybe archer realized this and just maybe... she is out on a hunt of her own?

[Liliet](#)

?

Masego's magic was destroyed by the Dead King being spiteful.

Agent J

Destroyed or stolen by the Dead King?

Shveiran

The ability to steal magic sound like a major workaround to his "doesn't heal" limitation.
I'm not saying it's impossible, but if he could wouldn't he be harvesting mages?

[Liliet](#)

Destroyed. Nothing of the Dead King escaped that fight.

Well, to be more precise, it was taken by the sliver of the Dead King and then destroyed along with it.

[Cheeezburger](#)

Wait, didn't the Dead King actually get away with it using a "play dead" tactic?
I'll try to find the section and post another response.

[Cheeezburger](#)

Here's the section, from Interlude: Reverberation :
"Far away, as the slightest shaving of the shard no doubt destroyed by now returned to him, the King of Death laughed.

""
This once, it seemed the house had lost."

matesbe

A tiny piece of him escaped. Not nearly enough to contain all the magic of an extremely powerful magical named.

[Liliet](#)

He put a spell conveying the message in the spell he used to kill Archer, which was a little earlier.

Agent J

Well, shit. Masego's not getting that back then. He's screwed. I forget the wording, but doesn't that break the deal Nessie had with Cat about assurances?

Oshi

Only that he would live. The whole kill his magic thing is the fault of the heroes not him.

matesbe

It's not the hero's fault. It's the Bard's fault and the DK's fault. Pilgrim, at absolute worst, was guilty of unconditional trust in Bard's judgement, he hardly planned this out. DK could have left Masego's body peacefully, but he took his magic with him out of spite.

Shveiran

Regardless of Bard's intervention, even in worst possible light she and the Heroes are guilty of no more than not intervening to prevent the fact (and even then is an harsh interpretation, at least regarding anyone not Bard, given that it was a split second decision and the consequences were unclear).

The crippling occurred because Neshamah chose to cause it. He is fully guilty.

Saying that Bard is also at fault, though I share the view, absolves him not at all. He crippled Masego willingly: guilty. Bard ensured no one intervened: guilty.

With that said, the deal was for Masego's life, not his capabilities. Considering Masego was using his capabilities to actively try to oppose the Dead King, it's hard to consider this a breach of terms.

Andrew Mitchell

> The crippling occurred because Neshamah chose to cause it. He is fully guilty. Saying that Bard is also at fault, though I share the view, absolves him not at all. He crippled Masego willingly: guilty. Bard ensured no one intervened: guilty.

Well said!

[Liliet](#)

The assurance was about his life.

And Masego is not getting *that* back, but that doesn't mean he can't get a new one :3

UltimatePotato

I started reading book one about 2 months ago and just now caught up. I was super surprised when I looked to see what the next chapter was called, only to see that it hadn't been published yet.

Andrew Mitchell

Welcome to the PGtE commenting community! I'm glad you're here. I really like the community here because hearing other perspectives as really added to the richness of my reading experience. Plus our discussions and interactions are virtually always positive and constructive and that's all to rare on the internet these days!

Chapter 54: Lustrate

"A house can be destroyed by a fortune spent and twenty years of exquisite scheming; or in less than an hour with a single well-thrown torch."

– Dread Empress Massacre

I didn't even step foot into my army's camp, knowing that if I rested for even a moment I'd drop like a sack of flour. Truth be told, I was in no state to deal with the Tyrant of Helike if he decided to get clever with me. I was very nearly out of tricks, dawn had come and exhausted was the demure word for how bone-tired weary I was. But Archer and the Rogue were likely prisoners, and that meant sleep would have to wait a little longer. I had, though, absolutely no intention of getting clever

back at Kairos. If he wanted to have a neat little rapier duel, all wits and triple meanings, then I was going to stroll into his fucking camp with a flying fortress full of sappers. I would have specified the sappers to be bloodthirsty but Hells, when had I ever met any that *weren't*? Even Pickler got that unholy spring to her step when told her latest devices would be unleashed on enemy soldiers. So no, I'd not gone to camp to pick up an escort or a detachment of soldiers that'd look as impressive as they were useless under the dawning sun. Instead I'd gone to pick up my personal diabolical possibly-undead tame thing, and also Zombie.

"You are smirking most fetchingly, dearest," Akua Sahelian noted. "As you only ever do when pondering unkindness at my expense."

"Not a single part of it was untrue, though," I mused.

"Then all hail Catherine Foundling, fae queen of our souls still," the shade prettily smiled.

I could only resent the way the way sarcasm was actually an attractive look for her, instead of aggressively spiteful as it tended to for on myself. There was probably some dark magic at work, I told myself. Zombie's saddlebags had been filled with the bare necessities, such as wine and munitions and a set of knives. And a pouch of wakeleaf, though it was the redleaf variant I felt tasted a little too strongly against the roof of the mouth. Still, considering Iserre was half a ruin and the closest town was several days of travel to the north it was a miracle my people had even managed to get their hands on that much.

"Which reminds me, actually," I said. "Either of you catch sight of Larat and his posse after they made their exit?"

"No," Hakram said. "And we did look, now that scrying has been restored. No one has a clue of where they've disappeared to."

I let out a reluctantly impressed whistle.

"Larat, you magnificent bastard," I murmured. "Good on you."

I raised the flask of tonic-flavoured Dormer pale towards the sky in a toast.

"May you forever be someone else's problem," I said.

The last of the wine slunk down my throat, gone cold. The toast and respect that went with it I'd offered without rancour, even though his slipping the noose had meant trouble for my plans. As those plans had involved carving him open inside like a fish at market, though, I found that to be fairly done. That one-eyed fox had wanted to stroll into a strange new daw unfettered and unbound, no matter the costs, and had gotten exactly that. For all that the once-Prince of Nightfall was a monstrous old

bastard, in the end he'd beaten both Fate and his own nature to claim his prize.

So very few of us could say the same.

"I think he might have been my favourite treacherous lieutenant," I mused.

Akua, without ever moving from her textbook perfect horse-riding stance on one of the confiscated Helikean horses, conveyed her deep and genuine offence at my words.

"You can't be my treacherous anything, *dearest*," I drily said. "Aren't you on the side of angels these days?"

"I'm sure some sort of arrangement can be reached with them," she serenely replied, after gracing me with a pleased smile. "Perhaps a pact of some sort."

Hakram choked.

"Are you suggesting diabolism be used on Choirs?" the orc got out.

"Finding the 'morally righteous' equivalent of blood sacrifice has been something of a riddle," Akua candidly admitted. "Priests have been... less than supportive of my inquiries, when pressed."

"Try helping people," I suggested.

"That sounds positively horrid," she said, wrinkling her nose.

I was at least two thirds certain she was joking, though. I took another look at her face, then amended to half. It was a work in progress, though maybe one of these days I'd have to sit her down along with Archer for a friendly talk about *Why Other People, Who Are Not Us, Matter*. Gods, I wondered if Black had ever been forced to have that with the Calamities. Not Sabah, I thought, as for all that she'd carried a ravenous man-eating monster within her she'd always been a decent woman. But Warlock or Ranger? Sisters, I'd pay good coin to have transcripts of that conversation. If Robber's band of marauders were still putting on plays, we could even make an evening out of a theatrical reading. *Mean thou, Black Knight, that Creation be more than the navel at which I gaze so pridefully? Prithee, these be lies.* Godsdamned Ranger. The rising sun had begun to cast down unpleasant glare before we reached the edge of the League's maze of camps, no doubt making for a strange sight. There were only three of us, after all, and Hakram was on foot. His long limbs and the tirelessness of his Name allowed him to keep pace, so long as riders shied from anything faster than a trot. We'd certainly not gone unnoticed, at least, for now seven detachment of troops were hurrying out of the sea of League tents to greet us.

"Is that a bedsheet?" Hakram asked, cocking his head to the side.

The Helikean foot carrying what was quite likely a bedsheet stolen from some Proceran clotheslines, and therefore also the Hierarch's personal banner, moved faster than the rest. It seemed like every city in the League had sent some people to meet us, including a thick pack of what I assumed to be Bellerophan infantry significantly outnumbering everyone else put together. Gods, but the armour they wore looked like it belonged in some war two centuries ago. So did the thickly-packed formations they advanced in, formations that would be reaped by wheat if they encountered a few lines of Praesi mages or even some swift-footed sappers.

"We are received in honour," Akua said. "Queen of my heart, shall we proceed?"

I breathed out. Could be a trap. Wasn't likely, considering Kairos had to know that breaking truce in any way at this point would see everyone else turning on him like rabid wolverines, but you never knew with the Tyrant. Just because he'd antagonized nearly everyone he could didn't mean he wasn't going to keep pushing his luck. If he were a reasonable sort of madman, he'd be a great deal less dangerous.

"Let's," I said. "As for courtesies to offer, I have only one thing to say."

Hakram's eyes found me, and Akua's brow arched in invitation.

"Remember the first time I attended court in the Tower?" I said.

"Vividly," the shade replied, lips quirked.

"Feel free to make that look polite," I coldly instructed.

We resumed our advance towards the Leaguers, bearing no banner and offering no announcements. They clustered uneasily around each other, a band of mercenaries and militias and career soldiers whose allegiances were only loosely bound together by Named madness and happenstance, and awaited our arrival. It would have been customary to rein in the horses before them and speak, I knew. Diplomatic. I kept riding.

"Black Queen, we greet you," one of the Helikean officers called out.

Hurriedly, I noted, as we'd not slowed in our advance.

"You're one of Kairos'," I noted. "Run back to your master, soldier. Tell him if Archer and the Rogue Sorcerer are not freed and in full health by the time I reach him, I'll rip out his fucking heart and feed it to Adjutant right here."

I jutted a thumb at Hakram, who gallantly displayed every inch of fang there was to display. I'd been told he had impressive pearly whites, by orc standards. It was a lot of teeth, and none of it friendly.

"You cannot threaten-" the officer indignantly began.

"She just did," Akua daintily sighed, as if put-upon by the man's poor breeding. "Best start running now, for we'll not slow in deference to the likes of you."

"Treachery," the call came from further down the field.

The Atalante contingent, by the looks of the banner.

"You knifed the rest of Calernia in the back at the Dead King's behest," I coldly replied. "And are now breaking the same truce you begged for last night. You have exactly once chance to make reparations before every army on this field marches against you."

"Seeking extermination, this time, not surrender," Akua casually added. "One does not *twice* allow a rabid dog to run free."

Ah, and there was that Wasteland highborn breed of nastiness. I'd not missed in the slightest, though having it turned on my opposition was a refreshing novelty. We could have lingered further, reasoned with them, but that would imply that we were in less than complete control of this situation. That we needed to speak with them, rather than having granted them the privilege of being spoken to. So we resumed our advance as if we were untouchable, and so went untouched. No one, I realized with amusement, wanted to be the first to step forward. As much for fear of death as for the calamitous consequences that laying a hand on any of us would bring, I thought. However rude we were, they must be painfully aware they were a long way from home facing better and hostile armies more than twice their number – and that there would be no swift retreat from Arcadia, now that the shard had been settled into a newborn and broken realm.

So they moved aside, and two Helikean riders peeled off in haste to bring warning.

I was too tired to properly assess the enemy's camp and so left that to Adjutant's watchful gaze, contenting myself with noting that just like the getting parties their tents remained highly divided. This was not a great army, it was a coalition of smaller ones. On the field, even if they had significantly greater numbers than either my eastern coalition or the Grand Alliance individually I would bet on those over *this* mess. Helike and Stygia fielded fine hosts, but none of the others were of that quality. Arguably, now that Ashur had been broken the League of Free Cities was now the preeminent sea power of Calernia – but down here, on the ground and in Iserre? Juniper would eat these

poor bastards for breakfast, and she'd actually lost battles to the Grand Alliance in this campaign. It was only the prospect of casualties that kept everyone's sword in the sheath, and these days Kairos Theodosian was proving too much of a nuisance for that to keep being enough. Under our unfriendly gazes some attendants in servant robes came for us when we entered the edge of the camp, guides meant to bring us to the Tyrant of Helike and his 'guests'. We followed, and so tasted the Tyrant's warning pulsing blindly and dimly in the distance. The same invisible current I'd felt in Rochelant, and again made as a sword in Kairos' hand. The Hierarch had returned, and though his ruinous leviathan of an aspect was still slumbering its presence could still be tasted in the air.

Waiting until it could wake again, and feed.

Neither of my companions had been exposed to it before, and I glanced at them in worry. Distant as the pounding was, faint like a sleeping dragon's breath, it still trembled in the air. Adjutant, though remained as calm as ever in the face of it. And as for Akua, she simply cocked an eyebrow.

"Quaint," she murmured.

"Quaint," I repeated, disbelieving.

She smiled at me, golden eyes almost visible through the veil.

"Whatever else I am," Akua said, "I am a Sahelian still. What a shallow chalice this would be to drink from, compared to the many heady madnesses of my forbears. My blood has known great sweeps of lunacy, heart of my heart, and this kind is not so great I would fear it."

Well, who was I to deny that hard-headed arrogance couldn't let you fight the run of the world? I'd never truly understand – could never – that hard Wasteland pride rooted in old blood and deeds always terrible and sometimes great, for it was a highborn pride. I was the daughter of orphanages, raised to Wasteland lessons on Callowan lips, and the only blood I trusted was that which my hand had spilled. But I would not fully deny the bones of Akua Sahelian's vanity, for it was not fully unearned. We rode on, until a great pavilion awaited us and the guide-servants bowed, and only then did I dismount. The shade followed suit, and without waiting to be announced we strode within. To my utter lack of surprise Kairos Theodosian awaited within, not the Hierarch whose slumbering aspect I could still feel further in or even any of the greats from the other cities of the League. It was grimly satisfying to see that even a jackal's grin could not hide the black eye I'd given him or his exhaustion. There were but a few gargoyles left to attend him, for near all those he'd brought with him in the seeking of Twilight had been broken by my

own miracles. He was, I thought, slowly but surely running out of artefacts to spend.

"Catherine," he affably greeted me. "In a fine temper, I see."

We were deep in the Helikean camp now, surrounded by thousands of soldiers whose loyalty to the Tyrant would be absolute. Unless we slew him with the first strike – unlikely, given the faint whisper of sorcery lingering within the tent – attacking him would start a fight I could not win. Yet my hand still itched with the desire to make a matching set of blackened eyes.

"Archer," I said. "The Rogue Sorcerer. They're in your hands."

"Honoured guests," he assured me. "Kept safe until you came to fetch them."

"I have," I bluntly told him. "Where are they?"

"They've been sent for," Kairos said, "though there has been something of a complication."

He could not lie, I knew. The Grey Pilgrim had seen to that. Yet he was not cripple in wits as he was in flesh and could easily deceive without outright speaking an untruth. Tariq, I thought, might have actually made him more dangerous. Knowing he couldn't lie I'd been inclined to believe him, until I'd realized he'd never specified exactly *who* it was he'd sent for.

"Complication?" Adjutant asked in my stead.

"Archer, while having peacefully enjoyed her pick of our bottles earlier, now appears to have killed her way through the company of soldiers sent to fetch her," the Tyrant sighed. "She's now retrieved her armaments and is suspected to be coming to kill me."

"And you would know this how?" Hakram asked.

"There was talk of beating me to death with one of my own gargoyles," Kairos informed us. "Well, shouts to be more accurate."

That did *sound* like Indrani, I'd admit to that.

"Your presence has since been known to her," the odd-eyed king said. "One hopes it will be enough to stay her hand."

I inclined my head.

"The Rogue Sorcerer?" I asked.

"Last I heard he was hesitating over which of the ancient tomes I've provided for his perusal he will keep. I've offered such a boon as a parting gift," the Tyrant said.

Tiredness had slowed my wits, but not slowed them so much that I would not understand the implication here. The two Named that'd stumbled into his grasp had been treated very well, and there would be no trouble in retrieving them. They'd not been hostages, then, but instead a pointed invitation.

"You wanted me here, obviously," I said. "Here I am."

"Would you like a drink?" he offered.

"I'd like two days of sleep and to see you eat your own hand before a jeering crowd," I casually replied. "Get on with it, Kairos. My patience wears thin."

"There is no need for us to be uncivil," the Tyrant of Helike chided me.

Akua's head inclined towards me the slightest bit, a question asked. I replied with the ghost of a nod. If she wanted to speak, then by all means.

"A surfeit of treachery is the mark of an insecure hand," the shade casually said.

"Did one of your most infamous emperors not style himself Traitorous?" Kairos said.

She laughed, rather cuttingly.

"Traitorous?" she smiled. "Oh, youth. You are barely even a *Malignant*."

Hadn't one of those started the War of Thirteen Tyrants and One? No, I decided, it'd been the First War of the Dead. Gods, the Praesi had had so many damned civil wars. Procer could try as it might – and most definitely had – it had a few centuries of catching up to do before it could even begin to rival the Wasteland in this regard.

"Third?" Hakram asked.

"Second, of course," Akua daintily replied.

"Harsh," he commented, undertone appreciative.

"You are tamer a beast than I believed you would be, Akua Sahelian," the Tyrant of Helike said, tone friendly. "Learned to love the hand that cowed us, have we?"

So he'd been able to see through that, had he? I was too tired to be afraid, and not certain I would have been even if I'd been well-rested and sober. Kairos could shout this on every rooftop across Calernia, if he wanted to: he'd burned too many bridges to still be believed.

"I see now, why you so easily strike a chord with so many of them," the woman who'd been Diabolist said, offering almost fond amusement. "You are, in essence, a poor man's Carrion Lord."

Gods, but I'd forgotten how genuinely vicious she could be with a turn of phrase. How easy it was, now that the sharpness had been dulled and turned to teasing and bantering insult, to forget that while I was playing in the streets of Laure and skipping my lessons Akua had spent her days learning to flay the pride of others with mere sentences. To play all the deadly games of the Wasteland highborn, those beautiful and elegant monsters with eyes of gold and poisonous tongues. Kairos' face tightened, imperceptibly. Were less tired, less raw, I suspected it would not have. But it did, and the woman who'd once been the Heiress saw the weakness bared.

"So eager to offer insult," Kairos said, tone friendly. "Shall we play that game, then? I know of the rules."

"Then you have played *poorly*," Akua said, scathing. "Look at you now, Tyrant of Very Far Away. You pretend it power that you can greet us without the greats of your League but we both know different, don't we? It is an admission that if they see you bleed, they will turn on you like hungry wolves."

"Am I to take lesson from you?" Kairos grinned, red-eyed and mutedly furious. "Oh, that strikes me as *folly*."

"I have seen boys like you played to death by the dozen," Akua said, almost gently. "Minds like pretty baubles of glass, thinking themselves untouchable for their sharp edges. It does not take brilliance or treachery to end the likes of you, did you know? All it takes is a thick enough boot."

A flicker of power, but not in here. Outside, and familiar. Discretely I gestured at Hakram. If it was Roland, I would prefer for them to await without entering. For looking at Akua now I saw cruelty like frost, yes, but not only that: I also saw a woman lancing an old and festering wound, and of that I would not brook interruption. Adjutant quietly left the pavilion, the gargoyles following him with their eyes but neither the Tyrant nor the once-Diabolist even noticing.

"And yet you pair me to the man who called your kind to heel," Kairos idly said. "Who took the proud High Lords of the Wasteland for mere horses to be broken in, and then proved the truth of that contempt."

"A pale imitation, in truth," Akua mused. "Armies and cleverness and parlour tricks, only without everything laudable in our man. Even made a shivering ghost, still he commanded enough loyalty for armies and pupils and companions to seek him. You? Victor and surrounded by armies, you've ruined yourself and call it brilliance. You are *alone*."

"So are we all," Kairos Theodosian said, and it was too harshly said for it to be pretence. "They beat you and fed you, Akua Sahelian, with pain and scraps of affections – until like a loyal hound you licked the cruel hand. The apprentice did to you as the teacher did to your entire people. And now you put on their masks and speak their empty creed, but that is a hollow thing isn't it? Compared to the truths you can still feel slithering through your blood, those that whisper of greatness instead of *submission*."

"I am more than blood," Akua Sahelian hissed. "I am more than what I was made from. But *you*, Kairos Theodosian? You are the apostle of the cage, the congregant of scrapped iron. And what has that made of you, Tyrant of Least and Less? You bargain with every change of the wind, and every time find return diminished. You have run out of coin to sell yourself with. You have made an enemy of all the world, and so you *no longer have place in it*."

"I am a droplet in the tide that will drown Creation," the Tyrant of Helike smiled, eye red like fresh blood.

"You are yesterday," Akua said. "That is the sum whole of you. And scream and wail as you will, that is all you'll ever be."

And, chin high and back straight, she turned. She walked out without another word and left behind her oppressive silence. I watched Kairos, and in turn he watched me. Like a furnace lit and closed, the rage could be seen glowing at the edges of him. The tent was opened a fraction, even as he continued trying to master himself.

"Archer found the Rogue and followed him here," Hakram told me in Kharsum. "Both are fine."

I inclined my head in acknowledgement without turning and the tent closed.

"You made a deal with the Bard, while we were out there," I said, tone even.

"A greater game is in the works than you suspect," the Tyrant of Helike said. "She is no ally of mine."

"The rest I could stomach," I mildly said. "But the Bard? You burned a bridge with that. Still. There'll be a conference of the great powers and you'll have your seat."

"As was promised," he said.

"As was promised," I agreed.

I turned and began to limp out.

"We have more to discuss, Black Queen," Kairos called out.

I glanced at him.

"No," I said. "We don't. You want an audience? Crawl to my camp. You ought to know how, after last night."

To the sounds of his anger and the chittering of gargoyles I walked out of the tent and did not look back until I'd brought my people safe to camp.

Javvies

I'm looking forward to Kairos being a dismembered corpse doused in goblinfire.

Kairos saw through whatever guise Akua has to recognize her as her. That could be a problem – Pilgrim did slap Kairos with the curse of truthfulness.

But how the fuck would Kairos know what Akua Sahelian/Diabolist looks like or how to recognize her? They would not have crossed paths, even by proxy, Kairos shouldn't be able to recognize her.

matesbe

It was probably the authority that allows him to look into the motivations and desires of others. It grants him supernatural perception.

stevenneiman

Kairos trades information with everyone. He might have run himself into a corner here, but he does know a lot about what's going on. And Akua went with Cat to Keter, so the Dead King knows about it, and he would be perfectly happy to share information which can ruin or at least weaken the Grand Alliance even if he gets little in return.

Liliet

It's not much of a riddle. Catherine kind of tipped her hand on having SOMEONE with her when she had Akua use the well of Night in her absence, and Kairos would have enough background info to

put 2 and 2 together. Honestly I won't be surprised if Pilgrim does too, just hasn't brought it up so far.

(Binding a defeated foe to serve you is not any further out there in villainous methods than necromancy, as far as general trope perception goes. Catherine's internal struggle about her relationship with Akua is just that – internal, and a potential PR issue within Callow... honestly, with how much credit Cat's got there, I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't much of a blow even there if it came out)

Layers

How can anyone dislike Kairos? He's perfect, I love him.

[doominator10](#)

"Poor man's Carrion Lord."

That cut so deep even I'm bleeding from over here.

Solal

"You are yesterday" was so so so much worse for me. But the exchange was so interesting either way.

[Liliet](#)

"You are yesterday" is cheap. It wasn't precisely targeted at Kairos, it was Akua more talking to herself of yesterday that she saw in him. "You're history" is generic enough to be fitting against anyone whose methods you don't believe in.

"Poor man's Carrion Lord" is a much more targeted and therefore much more deeply cutting insult 😊

Rook

Nearly all of it was targeted at herself as much as Kairos, to be honest. That was the genius of it.

Kairos is in many ways everything that the Diabolist was, what Akua was. Every single one of his failings she pointed out are failings she herself embraced in the past and has since renounced. Every single one is a boil lanced for herself in the admittance of the flaw.

She didn't need to read him to cut at the heart of him, all she had to do was take a page out of Catherine's book and self flagellate.

[Liliet](#)

Eeeehhh. I wouldn't call it that last one, what you did. What's characteristic of Catherine is that she bemoans her flaws, then continues to do the same thing, because she doesn't know how to do better and that's what annoys her in the first place.

Akua has probably been saving all of this up for a while, against her *past* self. She is seeing a road forward, out of everything she's poked at here disdainfully, and that's a big difference.

And yes, she's the best possible person to roast Kairos here ;u;

[Liliet](#)

"The only good ideas you've got going for you are those you stole from the guy you hate most, and even then you're kind of shitty at them"

Akua Sahelian is very important ;u;
~~she is not afraid to burn herself to burn someone else also and that is very worthy of respect~~

[Euodiachloris](#)

As Cat noted, this was a healing burn... for Akua. New Evil telling Old to shove it is one thing when it's a relative newbie like Amadeus doing it, but a black-and-red-and-Evil-all-over Sahelian giving it the finger in complete disgust?

Girl has fully committed to very definitely not being her mother's brand of Evil, while working to avoid the trap of finding another attractively traditional way of staying in the cage.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Forgot to note: a once-Named Sahelian of the direct line. A lesser Sahelian has also stuck a tongue out at Old Evil a time or eighteen, but remaining the un-Named head spy, friend, companion and lover of the Dread Express of the Tower while doing so... kind of blunted the impact a teensy bit.

But, two Sahelians? One Named-and-played-the-Game? Stack.

[Liliet](#)

MHM.

Akua was actually burning herself very deliberately here, you're right.

Sparsebeard

I mean, "Lustrate" means to purify, so it does make sense that Akua was targeting her past self...

Andrew Mitchell

Oooo, interesting. Thanks for sharing that fact. 😊

imagesbe

That was a nasty exchange between Kairos and Akua, and I think it hit both of them where it hurts. I'm really growing to like this Akua honestly. If Akua hadn't been the Doom of Liesse, I could see her and Cat becoming genuine, close friends. As it is, that will always hang between them to some degree, and Akua will have to answer for it at some point.

Also, Kairos got burned. Sorry kid, after the shit you pulled you don't even get "worthy adversary" levels of treatment. You burned those bridges yourself.

RoflCat

I think Akua's grown enough in her time with Cat that his attempt at insult doesn't really even sting anymore.

I feel an option for her to redeem herself is to become a guardian to Callow until it manages to recover. For the 100,000 souls she took from it, 100,000 souls she'll raise in it, that sort of thing.

Andrew Mitchell

That's a nice idea but there needs to be an end to Akua or it goes against the Callowan ethos of 'long prices'. My bet (65% probability) is that Akua's going to heroically sacrifice herself to save something critical in the battle with the Dead King and/or the Bard.

RoflCat

I think being duty bound to the land for however many generations it take for her to repay her debt is quite a 'long' time to do.

If anything a 'quick' death via heroic sacrifice seems like the thing that goes against the 'long prices' ethos.

Remember, these are the people whose grandchild will punch another's and steal 3 apples for the one stolen 2 generations ago.

Andrew Mitchell

Fair point. 😊

[Liliet](#)

>I think being duty bound to the land for however many generations it take for her to repay her debt is quite a 'long' time to do.

>If anything a 'quick' death via heroic sacrifice seems like the thing that goes against the 'long prices' ethos.

Mm, that's how I'm seeing it too! 😊

Also I love how Akua didn't give a shit about the 'folly' insults because there's only so long you can be called 'hey cloak accessory' and 'hey bad idea shade' before you stop giving a shit period ;u;

KageLupus

The long price for Akua isn't death, it is being dragged into a mindset where she knows exactly what a miserable life she had lived up until that point. Being shown what she could have had if it weren't for centuries of Praesi nonsense and evil. I don't think she is ever going to truly feel horrible about her actions at Liesse, or at least not enough, but that isn't really the cutting knife either.

The really painful bit is going to be Akua coming to value the rest of the Woe and still seeing that look in their eyes that says she is a monster and not forgiven. Every day that Cat and the rest joke around with her and bring her into the fold is slipping that knife just a little deeper.

stevenneiman

I honestly don't think that Akua was emotionally hurt by that exchange at all. If she'd had it just after her defeat maybe, but she's not as insecure as she was and she's not someone for whom those insults really do hit close to home. If anything, I think Akua sees Kairos as someone who wallows in everything she has outgrown, and for all the skill she delivered it with that genuine contempt was what Akua was channelling here..

[Liliet](#)

I think there's something there, but not what Kairos was aiming for. It was the "wait is this how people see me" and "was this what I sounded like" kind of emotional hurt, and the "well I guess I'm going to have to be explicit about my position without hiding behind jokes now" kind of emotional

hurt. Like she commented “this sounds positively horrid” on Cat’s remark about helping people 5 minute ago, she still prefers the “yes I am still just an evil villain” mask, and she had to tear that off with chunks of face to really tear into Kairos here.

[wirelessgrapes](#)

He tried to play, but he forgets that not everyone feeds the burning desire to follow their each and every instinct to join in

Ox

Oh akua, how I’ve missed your sass

Gunslinger

Akua was phenomenal in this chapter but Catherine’s crawl to the camp jibe was the sickest burn. Oof

We get more indications of Akua’s path to redemption and it’s pretty darn convincing. I don’t think it will end well do her though. Cat will never forget the Folly

pagesbe

I think Akua might end up going down with a Heroic Sacrifice, rather than Cat having to put her down herself. Because it’s clear at this point Cat really doesn’t want to, she just feels like Akua needs to answer for her crimes in a more final way than she already has.

Andrew Mitchell

Yep. IMO it’s going to be a heroic sacrifice for sure.

caoimhinh

That is “the ‘morally righteous’ equivalent of blood sacrifice”, after all.

Andrew Mitchell

Good point. 😊

Zgggt

We have already witnessed the priesthood of Good committing a mass ritual sacrifice of the innocent in order to unleash a calamity on their enemy in a strict military sense. That was the actual start of the Battle of the Camps, where Cat watched in horror as Procer made a mass human sacrifice out of every non professional or

aristocrat within miles to trap a chunk of Callowan troops.

What you're talking about isn't nearly as clear a blood sacrifice as that.

Shveiran

Uhm, no.

First off, what you are referring to was the battle plan of the army's general, not the work of the priests. Sending in the conscripts was no more the priesthood's decision than Juniper's plans at three Hills were Masego's idea.

Just because they were there, it doesn't make it their decision.

I agree that fencing in people for an allied cavalry charge is a ridiculous loophole for a supposed pacifist (if you hold someone down while another person shoots them dead, you can bet your ass you are complicit in that murder) but that has no bearing with the deployment of the recruits as skirmishers.

Second, that is a ruthless, yet solid and very common tactic for larger armies with a great score of unprofessional soldiers. Ugly, yes, but then war is usually that. Uglier than necessary, perhaps, but still not quite bleeding people for power.

Zgggt

The priesthood had to be involved, and pretending they didn't know what they're doing and yet literally asked heaven to do it anyways. It's a military tactic which involved using priests channelling the heavens so that for the price of innocents they will change the landscape in such a way as to make victory more likely. But even if you remove the priesthood completely from the equation, the answer to "how does human sacrifice committed by Good look like?" is "making this choice".

In a world that has so much weight in the choices and actions of so very few, we really can't allow Good to get away with childish "stop hitting yourself, I'm not hurting you so naaah" when the difference between that choice and throwing those same innocents into a fire and summoning a demon is not in the result.

Liliet

So the nuance you're missing here is that Akua's question of 'righeous equivalent to blood sacrifice'

referred to 'how do I make the angels like me better'. Which this kind of sacrifice does not accomplish – it strains your credit with Good, not inflates it.

Shveiran

If you are arguing that the Guide's Good falls well short of good, I'm totally on board.

If you ascribe a deeper meaning to the "send forth the conscript" rather than, say, invading a country in the first place, or a Choir trying to brainwash cities, or Heroes scything through infantrymen who are defending their homes, or dozens of other instances in this series, I am not sure I see your point.

Most of the Good guys don't seem to ascribe a lot of value to the sanctity of life, not in practice. How does this stand out?

[Liliet](#)

BTW

>We have already witnessed the priesthood of Good committing a mass ritual sacrifice of the innocent

are you aware of the meaning of the word 'ritual'

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, redemption by sacrifice, anyway.

Soronel Haetir

Nice, Kairos is one who absolutely deserves to get his teeth kicked.

WhoEvenKnows

Man, Black woke up just so he could approve of and applaud this savagery. Imagine getting told: "You're nothing more than a moron doing a pathetic imitation of the man you hate".

[Liliet](#)

Y E S

and honestly, baby Akua as Heiress couldn't do anything NEAR this, the reason you forgot Catherine is that this is new and she has learned from YOU 😊

BerenTheBold

"You are yesterday," Akua said. "That is the sum whole of you. And scream and wail as you will, that is all you'll ever be."

Daaaaamn.. Akua has no chill 😂

Soma

One could say she's heartless.

Novice

So much shade thrown around, really.

Andrew Mitchell

She really showed some spirit.

Joeluma

Woe guys.

Just woe.

JJR

I'd say that Cat made Kairos eat crow here. But as First Under the Night the crow she served is eating him.

'Ladi Williams

Akua really has turned...who would have thought?

Sparsebeard

The thing I was more surprised with was that she helped fix Black, arguably the person she should hate the most (except perhaps herself). I mean, he did kill her father, perhaps the only person she truly loved...

Now I wonder if Black will similarly be able to let his grudge against Pilgrim go... he did promise a reckoning.

ActionKermit

I do wonder if she did anything else to Black during the process. It would be just like her to lay a hidden compulsion when his soul was in her hands, as a way to assassinate Cat. "Love dies at the kiss of a knife / Trust is the water that ends your life" and so on.

Andrew Mitchell

I think that's possible and probably even more likely now that Masego has come back without his magic. He's one of the

few people that could possibly have detected or reversed that compulsion.

I don't think it's likely because that would go against Akua's redemption story and (a) I really, REALLY want that to come true, and more importantly (b) because ultimately I view PGtE as a creative work that is, at its core, optimistic about the capacity to change and Akua betraying Cat goes against that.

I think there's at most 10% chance that Akua's done anything except put Black together as well as she can.

Shveiran

Really? She is operating mostly through the Night at this point, and even if she wasn't Andronike knew magic before she spent centuries refining her knowledge. Even if Aqua was going to, I don't see the Sisters missing it or not acting on that knowledge.

Andrew Mitchell

I'm not sure what you're arguing with when you said "Really?" but, on reflection, maybe my last sentence was unclear. What I meant was:

"There's only a small chance that Akua added anything when she rejoined Black's body & soul."

Shveiran

Ah, sorry. I got it wrong and was confused.

Andrew Mitchell

That's OK. My fault, not yours. I often don't speak plainly.

[Liliet](#)

Technically probably physically possible. Mentally, she ain't going to do that.

caoimhinh

On that note, one meeting I'm anticipating is Catherine and Amadeus meeting the Valiant Champion. It's one thing for her to have killed Captain, but Raphaela actually skinned Sabah to make a cloak of her wolf fur, which she consistently wears as it is a trophy of her greatest victory so far.

They are both going to be really angry when they find out.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, that's going to be quite the challenge for the relationships between Cat and her new allies.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> It's one thing for her to have killed Captain, but Raphaella actually skinned Sabah to make a cloak of her wolf fur, which she consistently wears as it is a trophy of her greatest victory so far.

Eh, that's a Praesi complement, if not an orcish one. Somebody actually *telling* Champion so would be a hoot!

[Mental Mouse](#)

compliment. Off to find some calories. 😊

Shveiran

That will bring some strain, but let's get on the same page here: most of the people here were trying to kill each other until a short time ago, which is less than a day for many of them.

If the rank and file won't knife the other soldiers to avenge their buddies, I doubt Amadeus won't stay his hand. The Calamities were trying to murder them, and did kill the sisters; Sabah biting it may be something they regret, but it's in the job description.

He will mourn her, but I think he knows it wasn't personal. If he wants vengeance on anyone, it's the Bard.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm! And the trophy taking is if anything a mark of respect.

[Liliet](#)

>she helped fix Black, arguably the person she should hate the most (except perhaps herself). I mean, he did kill her father, perhaps the only person she truly loved...

"Acts" covered that. Just because regular not emotionally stunted people think she should, doesn't mean she didn't have that burned out of her along with most other emotions. And this isn't one she's in most hurry to regrow.

Sparsebeard

"Acts" did cover that... good on you for remembering, for I did not.

Shveiran

As a Villainess, Akua is very aware she herself painted a large target on anyone she has loved.
Much like Amadeus with his parents in fact.

She knew the rules of the game, she still wholeheartedly chose to play it.
I suspect anything she begrudges Amadeus, she holds against herself tenfold for failing to protect him after putting him at risk.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

JJR

Yes... except she is so skilled at manipulating people she could still be acting and there'd be almost no way to tell. Cat did have that one interrogation session, but I don't know if she's kept that up.

Is this why Redemption equals Death? Because it's the only way to be sure the character was genuine?

[Liliet](#)

Only if you aren't following character arcs and analyzing characters' motivations and logic based on the POVs we've gotten from them.

Akua was questioning what the fuck the older generation was doing back at the start of Book 3, in her own POV.

Razorfloss

Now that was just nasty. I almost feel bad for him almost.

konstantinvoncarstein

He had it coming 😈

Trebar

He only had himself to blame

Soma

I am somewhat relieved that dealing with Kairos was short and sweet. Played me like a fiddle. I got all riled up about Kairos and now we get to see this nice little backhand to resolve the pest's attempts at intrigues. Well, resolved for now, but still.

[Liliet](#)

SAME. I was so happy Kairos got a neat little bow tied on his plotline here ♥ (and Akua got therapy in the process!)

Shveiran

Same. I had a bad reaction to last chapter, it is a nice relief to find out this side-plot was a chapter long.
It goes to show that EE is always, always a dozen steps ahead of where you expect him to be.

Someday I'll learn.

erebus42

Damn! Way to torch his ass Akua! He's gonna remember this, but he's definitely circling the drain. Even after all he's done though, when he does die I do hope he finds a way to screw over everyone one last time.

Andrew Mitchell

Nice to see Catherine still being F.U.N. even in the privacy of her own mind. 😊

caoimhinh

Catherine is giving EE ideas for the content on Extra Chapter stories XD

ninegardens

I mean, she has Black now. AND he owes her at a favour: "In return for saving your armies and returning you to life... PLEASE teach me how you got Warlock to be less murderous."

[Liliet](#)

Yes.

[Fayhem](#)

I'm guessing the answer would be some form of "positive reinforcement". E.g.: "Did you stay below your Murder Quota today Wekesa? Excellent! Here's a cookie rare magical tome you've been looking for."

[Liliet](#)

b e a u t i f u l and oddly likely ;u;

IDKWhoitis

Well, I'm pleasantly surprised that everything went fine with Archer and Roland.

I'm slightly disappointed with how Kairos still has a head attached to his shoulders, but he bargained too well to be killed that easily.

I wonder if Roland will continue to hang out with the Woe or if he will seek residence with the Procerans. I would like to hear Cat talk to Roland alone, like she has found herself to do on occasion, and pick out his desires and Endgame. It would make for good conversation on the way to Salía or the North.

Andrew Mitchell

Oh yes, we definitely need to see Roland and Cat have a chat soon. Preferably from Roland's point of view. But either way, I'm looking forward to it.

Soma

Yeah, I'm also definitely looking forward to Roland and the Woe interacting, and getting some of it from his perspective would be delightful.

[tkjarrah](#)

"I am more than blood," Akua Sahelian hissed. "I am more than what I was made from. But you, Kairos Theodosian? You are the apostle of the cage, the congregant of scrapped iron. And what has that made of you, Tyrant of Least and Less? You bargain with every change of the wind, and every time find return diminished. You have run out of coin to sell yourself with. You have made an enemy of all the world, and so you no longer have place in it." fuckin sick-ass burns

JJR

I like that "congregant of the scraped iron" bit, nice image for rejecting the whole "iron sharpens iron" thing.

[tkjarrah](#)

yes it was a sick reference

werafdsaew

Ironic, considering that is old Akua's modus operandi.

Soma

She's definitely speaking from experience.

[Liliet](#)

Yep. She is basically talking to her past self here, which is what lends Kairos 0 chance of comeback ♥

luminiousblu

Eh...

Akua didn't quite make an enemy of 'all the world' so much as forcibly carve out a huge chunk of it to be her friend. Kairos makes a point of offending literally everyone just to show he can, Akua tries to avoid offending people if she's not specifically looking to crush them anyway. If anything, Kairos makes an enemy of the world and so has no place in it, but Akua couldn't find a place in the world and so ended up making enemies.

Shveiran

Are you arguing that there are parts of the world that are not pushed to enmity by the deploying of a Doomsday machine that rips tears in creation that allow devils and demons to spew forth and is empowered by genocide?

I guess... the Chain of Hunger makes the list?

ninegardens

The other purebloods? Her Dad? Her Mum? The Dead King?

Hell, I mean Malicia was practically backing her up on this, in a "Now I will take your doom weapon and make it mine" kind of way.

Shveiran

I think you are mistaking "admiration" and "friendliness". She built a death ray to conquer it all. "It all" tends to have issues with that.

Her dad is not a people, he is one person who loves her daughter. the truebloods (Talía included) would have knifed Diabolist at the first opportunity to steal the death ray. Malicia's plan was precisely that. The Dead king would not have been on board with the idea either, why would he?

luminiousblu

>Are you arguing that there are parts of the world that are not pushed to enmity by the deploying of a Doomsday machine that rips tears in creation that allow devils and demons to spew forth and is empowered by genocide?

I'm finding it pretty hard to think of any place that would oppose such a weapon on principle. Even Catherine was going 'hmmm well now that she's already made it maybe we can put

it to good use after all'. It's basically a nuke, and a hundred thousand is a drop in the ocean anyway when we're on about doomsday weapons.

Point is that Kairos makes offending people his endgoal, Akua offending people is at best an incidental thing, not generally the goal in and of itself. Kairos' introduction was basically a statement about being a git "because who the fuck is going to stop you lmfa0", Akua's first actual conversation with Cat was more or less 'hey I don't want to threaten you but if you would kindly get out of my way then I won't have to threaten to put everyone you ever knew to the torch whoopsie I let it slip hehe'. Both are being pretty capital-E, but the modus operandi is different.

Shveiran

The MO is different, the end result is not.

During the first chat with Cordelia, Cat herself remarks how Akua thinks of any country in the world as "on the conquest list". She makes an enemy of everyone because she is big, bad, and mad. She wants to conquer everything just because she cannot accept anything to be beyond her reach or her superior unless she is MADE to.

The only reason why Aqua never received international condemnation was because she burned like a falling star: three months after she stopped being just a wastelander schemer with no international relevance, she was already dead.

[Fayhem](#)

> The MO is different, the end result is not.

Ayyy jinx! For the record I started typing my comment before you had posted your reply, I just type slow when I keep getting interrupted by, uh, my actual job I'm supposed to be doing lol.

[Javvies](#)

Akua was one of the "reasons" Cordelia used to pull the Grand Alliance together, so it's not that she didn't cause international condemnation, it's that she was already dead and wasn't being a collar fairy yet.

At any rate ... Akua pisses people off as a side effect or, more rarely, as part of a specific tactic towards a specific end, when that's the "best" means of achieving that specific end.

It also makes her a target because if she isn't stopped,

she'll do great and terrible things. In the terrible, yes, but great, sense of things.

Kairos seemingly pisses people off just for laughs and because he can. Like, for example, he helped set up the scenario that led to Sabah's death, because he wanted to stab Black in the back and feels. It literally gained Kairos nothing except the enmity of Black and Warlock – who were there to help him gain control/dominance over the League. And maybe whatever Bard gave him, since she was involved in that.

It's ... like the difference between Akua's trying to be Thanos (or maybe a Loki who wants grow up to be Thanos) and Kairos trying to be the Joker (except not as clever nor as funny and with an extra helping of bullshit and hax).

They're both terrible people, but Akua wants to conquer everything she can and break what resists until it stops resisting or ceases to exist, preferably the former, Kairos is a nihilist who just wants the world to burn because then he can say he lit it on fire.

There's a difference, and it does matter.
For Akua, it's either a side effect or a means to a specific end.
For Kairos, it's an end in and of itself.

Shveiran

There is a difference, but does it truly matter, from a practical stand point?

Everyone sane rallies against both Thanos-types and Joker-types, so whether that was the goal or a side effect, both kinds do piss off nearly everyone.

[Liliet](#)

It matters from character analysis standpoint :3

Shveiran

That it does, but I'm not arguing Aqua is Kairos with curves, here XD They are several differences between them, that much I agree on wholeheartedly.

Sparsebeard

Do you mean when he used Black and his victory over him to install the second Hierach in known history (with him as the grey eminence)... The way I see it, betraying Black was meant to somewhat appease the cities hes was

warring with in collaboration with Black, it was a way to show he isn't a pawn of a foreign power.

Also, slapping Black hard made sure that the Tower would be much more careful when meddling in the free cities affairs...

Fayhem

The motive is different, but the effect is the same. Akua didn't want to make an enemy out of everybody just for the sake of it Kairos-style, buuut she still did it anyway.

Also:

> I'm finding it pretty hard to think of any place that would oppose such a weapon on principle. Even Catherine was going 'hmmm well now that she's already made it maybe we can put it to good use after all'. It's basically a nuke, and a hundred thousand is a drop in the ocean anyway when we're on about doomsday weapons.

What. The Wasteland, the Hidden Horror, and the Chain of Hunger are the *only* places in Calernia that *wouldn't* oppose such a weapon on principle, and even they'd be opposed to anyone else having it. And come on, "It's basically a nuke, and a hundred thousand is a drop in the ocean anyway when we're on about doomsday weapons."? That's a relative standard that literally nobody actually uses, even in our world where nukes have been real since the 1940s and we've had literally generations to get desensitized to them. I guaran-fucking-tee you that if somebody used a nuke today and killed 100,000 people, the reaction would *not* be "well that was only a hundred thousand, that's a drop in the ocean by the standards of nukes". The reaction would be "HOLY FUCKING SHIT THOSE LUNATICS JUST ACTUALLY USED A NUKE".

caoimhinh

Literally everywhere except the Wasteland and Keter oppose to that weapon on principle; and really on everything else, including practicality, religious motives, and political reasons.

Catherine didn't accept to "put it to good use" she was desperate and emotionally unstable at the moment due to the deaths of 100 thousand of her countrymen which she saw as her responsibility and fault, and accepted to use it as a *deterrent* by showing what it caused in Liesse and saying to everyone else "leave us alone and we won't use this on you", which wasn't going to work because then everyone would get a freaking divine mandate to wipe them out.

Fortunately, Amadeus was sane enough to notice that what everyone else in the world would see is a fucking diabolical weapon of mass destruction that would be used to threaten them all to submission, hence the rest of Calernia would call a Crusade (which is what they did) against Praes to destroy it and everyone who remotely knew how to build another; so he **Destroyed** it, since tying themselves to that story as "the Villains with the Doomsday Device" would make them the losers right off the bat.

It was Malicia's stupid obsession with power what led to this, as she actually financed Akua's plan and gave her the materials, because Malicia decided that she wanted her own personal power instead of continuing to rely on and trust the man who had kept her alive and in power for 40 fucking years.

Shveiran

Though I agree that Malicia's move was wrong from both a moral and pragmatic point of view, I don't think she did it out of lack of trust or power hunger.

Believing Amadeus wouldn't be able to repel the full might of the Crusade is not the same thing as those, and it is not an unreasonable position when folks like Saint and Pilgrim come out to play at the head of a larger force.

She made a stupid and despicable move, but she is not swinging out of nowhere out of trust issues, IMO.

caoimhinh

The way I see it, she used the "we will have this Doomsday Weapon as deterrent and thus we will not have to fight more wars" as an excuse. Because it's really illogical and runs against everything they had done for over 40 years. She did it because she wanted to have her own power since the Legions of Terror were more loyal to Amadeus than to her, and she even half-admitted it to him when she said she trusted him but only one could sit on the throne, which is an insult to Amadeus as he had spent the last four decades protecting her and defending her rule, distrusting him is one of the dumbest things she could do, as they started the war, won the war and kept control of Praes by Amadeus constant effort along with Malicia's politicking.

Thinking that Amadeus couldn't repel the full might of the Crusade is a valid worry, but making a diabolist weapon from the Age of Wonders is actually a weakness that would condemn them lose that war, and she must

have known that as avoiding such things had been their policy for her entire reign.

It was not a logical move, it was an emotional one, made out of an obsession with power that clouded her judgement.

It has been hinted many times that Alaya is the most emotional of the two and that beneath her mask of control she has a somewhat fragile psyche with many emotional issues (like Tikoloshe's mention that Alaya "craves control the way a starving man craves a meal", her own admission that it took her decades to stop awakening with nightmares about Nefarious, or when after her last conversation with Amadeus she was shown crying and breaking things in her room in a fit of anger).

Liliet

I don't think Alaya fits the "hysterical irrational woman" trope you're trying to fit her into.

Yes, she has intense PTSD from Nefarious, and while she's largely recovered it can never be all the way.

No, she did not know everything as perfectly as Amadeus did. She'd been focused on intra-governmental politics and intrigue while he handled the broader culture / population / narrative issues, and she never came to realize just how large his slice of the "keeping things running" pie really was. It's a flaw in understanding, but it's not... a tantrum.

caoimhinh

I never said she is hysterical or irrational.

I said that her action of scheming to obtain Akua's Doomsday Device (and even financing and supporting it from the shadows) was an emotional decision, it was an action driven by her own craving for control, and that craving blurred her better judgement and cracked her trust on her closest friend in the world.

And yes, she knew things as perfectly as Amadeus, because she has been working with him for 40 years, and because Amadeus explained these kinds of things to her, that's why he was so angry at her, because she *knows better* and yet willingly made a fatal decision of the kind they had been avoiding their entire lives.

It's a huge difference from being hysterical and irrational.

Liliet

>And yes, she knew things as perfectly as Amadeus, because she has been working with him for 40 years, and because Amadeus explained these kinds of things to her

Did he?

I mean, sure, he definitely rambled in her presence on the topic, and he's certainly explained his decisions to her when she asked – we have seen it happen in Villainous Interlude: Coullisse. Note that she did not see what he was doing there until he explained.

Consider their argument in Epilogue 3. They'd been working at cross-purposes for a while now, prioritizing different aspects of what they believed were important to Praes's well-being, without ever realizing it. Note her conviction that Amadeus was going to get himself killed, and consider it in light of his actual actions – if she picked up on a death wish from him and concluded his judgement was compromised, it was not without grounds.

I am seeing perfectly rational reasons for Malicia to have made the decision that she did. Note that Amadeus even admitted that he could have seen the doomfortress plan succeed if he hadn't seen how Bard operates in the Free Cities. His anger was not just at that specific bit of stupidity, but also at her sabotaging his plan for Callow, which was part of a deeper disagreement – she did not want Callow to be independent and would rather damage it further than allow it to slip out of Praes's grasp, while he held the exact opposite opinion. She accused him of 'using Praes as staging ground for his spitting match with Heavens' and not seeing what his people actually want; in actuality I would say she herself made the mistake of taking the High Lords as representative of the country as a whole and identifying them with it. Her mistake had varied and nuanced roots; her trauma-fueled desire for control certainly played a part, but I'm not even sure she wouldn't have acted the exact same way without it.

caoimhinh

Of course he explained things to her, and of course she knows how their world works, they had been working together for 40 years. They are the closest of friends and Amadeus trusted in her with everything, It was always Malicia who did things behind his back.

She secretly conversed with Wekesa about that weapon, she has hidden mental commands on the high-ranked officials of the Legions without Amadeus knowing (and by her own admission it was done so she could have a hold on them behind his back), she financed Akua's Folly and who knows what other things she has done behind Amadeus' back.

He trusted her, she didn't extend that trust to him because of paranoia, despite more than 40 years of Amadeus keeping her alive and reigning, she still did things behind his back because she felt insecure and thought he had too much power, so she sought to have her own, despite knowing perfectly well that his own power was one of the pillars of her reign. Even when consciously aware of this, she still went with the Doomsday Device plan because that would give her a weapon *of her own*, independent from others, but by doing so she betrayed her best friend in the world, nearly tied them all to the type of doomed story they had spent their lives avoiding and effectively fucked up her country, triggering the Crusade, Callow's rebellion and the Goblin's uprising.

It's not that Alaya was crazy or hysterical, but she let her emotions guide her actions, which is ironic given how she rants about only trusting people to act according to their nature, well, that's her nature: craving for control. And in the pursue of absolute control she lost the control she had, now she is nearly alone.

[Liliet](#)

>Of course he explained things to her, and of course she knows how their world works, they had been working together for 40 years.

Do you think Amadeus is also an expert on dimensional magic theory because he's been working alongside Wekesa for 40 years?

He's the expert in story-fu. She isn't. She does not understand things as deeply as he does, even though he has explained.

>She secretly conversed with Wekesa about that weapon

She hasn't. She got his opinion after the whole thing blew up, and he was actually offended that she went for a secret plan to get it from Akua instead of just asking him.

>she didn't extend that trust to him because of paranoia

We have seen her cut off that line of reasoning in her own POV, counteracting the paranoia with 'it's Maddie, I'm being silly'.

>she let her emotions guide her actions

I disagree. This one decision was made very much out of cold calculations, just mistaken once.

caoimhinh

It's completely different to learning a craft, she definitely knew about Narrative and the weight of stories, that's her whole rethoric when she tried to justify it to Black, remember? "We can't win the fight against the Heavens, so we avoid fighting at all" and also tried to avoid being tied too strongly to that story by not being the one who built the weapon, but instead the one who stole it, and not even use it, just have it as deterrent. It was her own attempt at Story-Fu, and it was well-made enough that even Catherine's Name of Black Queen was about to emerge from that, Malicia's actions had weight and she understood it, yet she underestimated it and Amadeus saw that.

It's true that Malicia isn't as apt at Story-Fu as Amadeus, that doesn't mean she is ignorant, we have even seen from the most recent extra chapter Seed, that Malicia was in the know of Amadeus earliest findings of the Praesi problem with harvests, one that he understood as consequence of Narrative at work, hence their plan of joining Callow into Praes to avoid the starving issue, they came up and worked on that plan together and Black explained to Catherine how they reached that conclusion: by understanding of Narrative.

So Alaya knew the narrative meaning of her actions with Akua's doomsday device, and hence she carried on her plan in a meticulous manner; but her motivation, the drive behind that plan, was always

that desire for control and independent power,
that is undeniable.

[Liliet](#)

Everyone knows *about* narrative and story-weight,
that doesn't mean they understand perfectly well
how it works. I never called her completely
ignorant.

I do agree that Alaya is largely driven by her
desire for control and independent power. I merely
disagree that she was doing 'emotional thinking'.
She genuinely believed that the goal she shared
with Amadeus – Praes's prosperity – which Amadeus
wanted for the sake of people / future
generations, and she wanted for the sake of ruling
a prosperous country – would be better achieved
through these means.

Did her control and trust issues bias her towards
this conclusion? Undoubtedly. But she did not go
"fuck all other goals I want control even if it
kills me".

[Liliet](#)

*ones

[Javvies](#)

Malicia absolutely knows how things actually work.
Mostly, anyways.
She is the one who wrote "*The Death of the Age of
Wonders*", after all.

However, based on her actions, I'd say Malicia is
more of a Classic Old School Evil than a Pragmatic
New Evil type at heart. She was able to go along
with the Pragmatic New Evil of Amadeus when it
brought her to power and the Conquest ... but when
it came to keeping power, she didn't trust it as
much and so fell into bad habits that escalated.

As far as Malicia picking up on a Death Wish or
something from Amadeus because he picked Cat as an
understudy, Malicia is the one who told Cat that
Amadeus was going to burn out his own usefulness
in some years.

[Liliet](#)

She did, but she didn't actually mean it judging by her reactions later. It sounds to me like she was just trying to draw Cat in / get leverage on her / put strings on her.

And Death of the Age of Wonders was about politics, not storycraft. Subtle but important distinction when it comes to nuclear deterrent.

Shveiran

I think Alaya was having trust issues, brought by decades of stress and a very different vision of the great problem ahead.

Ultimately, though, I think her mistake spawned from lack of understanding of the fabric of the world.

My understanding is that Malicia is a brilliant mastermind that sees her world through the lens of our own. She doesn't quite get that creations acts like a narrative, and that is not really a fault: we know of a handful of character in the whole Calernia that can do that reliably and make decisions based on that (I can think of just Cat, Tariq, Black and Bard right now).

If you remove that element from the board, she is seeking a nuclear deterrent.

I don't approve, and she went at it most despicably besides, making a huge gamble with Aqua rather than ask Wakesa to develop one (that's the part where I can see the lack of trust shine most vividly, though maybe she was partially aware of story structure and was trying to distance herself from the story of the weapon being used for the first time). But while dangerous, it is not an attempt doomed to fail. It is a risk, yes, but also a desperate measure for desperate times.

Only if we take into account the stories a death ray provokes we can see that failure was inevitable.

But that was an element I think she lacked.

caoimhinh

Yeah, the problem was her craving for control, which drove her to seek that weapon of her own so she wouldn't have to depend on Amadeus' power. It's a situation like Amadeus having a gun and protecting her with it, and despite she loving

Amadeus and spending 40 years being protected by him, she still thinks it's better if she has her own gun, since it makes her feel more secure and in control, plus she could defend against him in the unlikely case that he turned against her; the problem is that she got a freaking bazooka and made everyone around jump in alarm, and she then tried to sell it as "they won't attack me because if they try I will shoot the bazooka, we will be fine" when the reality is a swat squad was assembling to snipe her because of course no sane person wants anyone walking around with a loaded bazooka even if she swears not to use it.

Another thing, she absolutely understands that her world runs on Narrative, hence why she didn't built the weapon herself but instead attempted to steal it from Akua; plus remember it was part of her rethoric for justifying her actions to Amadeus "we can't win the war against Above, so we don't fight the war at all", so she knew the kind of thing she was doing, and the narrative that was building, she just hoped it would turn different, which is the wishful thinking of someone making an emotional decision instead of a rational one.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed.

And IMHO Amadeus brought some of it on himself with his "I am CERTAIN you know better" position. He likes to not be in charge and he likes to put trust in people – except in some cases, trust just transfers into pressure, and this was definitely one of those. Malicia found herself at her level of incompetence, and instead of relying on the guy at her side who's better at this specific thing than her, she believed that he was right and she WAS better at this than him.

Calamity ensued, pun intended.

[Liliet](#)

Uh, this.

ciara

You're kind of glossing over the part where everyone who saw the Doom-of-Liesse machine and thought "I can use this" was either planning on killing Akua to take it from her (Malicia), or actually already had done so (Cat). How

exactly does “inciting literally everyone to murder you” not qualify as making enemies?

Sparsebeard

Man that was almost painful seeing Tyrant be savaged like this...

It probably a good thing Cat left early, I have the feeling if this kept going he probably was gonna erupt in tears at this point.

[*Liliet*](#)

;u;

thegreatfeed

But they WILL become close. Akua WILL be redeemed and she WILL become a better person and only in the full realization of the nature of her crimes will cat’s promised punishment be possible.

This is Chacal de Nahueltoro situation.

Sparsebeard

Still, I don’t know why but a lot of this situation felt like a mistake to me. The whole weakning of Tyran’s position amongst the free cities and not listening when he was about to that about “the greater game” being played felt somewhat dangerous.

I mean, naratively, it would make sense for Cat to make a mistake now, when she’s so tired of body and mind... just when things seem to be looking up.

For all that Tyrant has done, I’d be very surprised if he wasn’t working against Bard. He is the man who created Hierach after all.

[*Liliet*](#)

I will note that Cat did not take into account that Absolutely Everyone will believe Kairos about Akua now, because he can’t tell lies [™].

[*Euodiachloris*](#)

Yeah, but everybody will also be busy trying to work out how he’s getting around the geas, as well – say, finding a way to believe a falsehood is true; or telling the truth with important bits chopped off it that entirely change the meaning. That’s the problem with proving yourself to be a traitorous weathervane with a high IQ: even if you tell the truth, people look for the lies.

JJR

Easiest way would be to create a new language. It has all the words of your old language but the meanings are all reversed. Then you can answer "yes" or "no" to any question as long as you remember to use the language that would make the word be true.

Shveiran

Yes, but... so? Akua is bound to Cat's cloak, I don't see the big deal.

Kairos can't tell lies, but Cat can spin the tale, and I doubt "death was too little a price so I enslaved her soul to my service" is too hard to sell to Callowans.

The hardest part is probably necromancy, and Cat has never been shy with that. Heck, the Heroes did some soul splicing of their own not a month ago, so I don't see THEM being offended by this.

I guess it would not be well received, but how is this a big deal?

Cat has one big secret left, and Kairos is not Malicia.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed.

caoimhinh

Indeed.

I see it more in the way that Akua was an ace up her sleeve, keeping her secret worked against Pilgrim as he didn't take her into account when making his plan and had him wondering "who the hell is over there?" after she activated the Eclipse.

Now Kairos knows of Akua, which almost certainly mean everyone in the next meeting will know when Kairos casually mentions it and Pilgrim knows he cannot lie. Which means the truth is out and everyone will start taking Akua into their calculations when dealing with Catherine, which includes Malicia as she more than likely has spies in every army except Helike.

Though the Majilis have just sworn to not fight against Callow until they finish the current fight with the Dead King, but still. Having one of her secret weapons revealed in such a careless manner is a loss.

[Liliet](#)

It is.

But I think it's one that would have happened inevitably. In the kind of game Catherine is playing here, NO secret can stay secret long-term. It's better to keep your cards face up from the start, because it'll keep you safe from getting fucked over when Creation decides that the most dramatic possible moment for your secret to get revealed has come.

This is how Akua ends up being revealed. If it didn't happen this way it would have happened in another way.

Note how in the throne room with the crown, Cat considered the plan of summoning Akua there to take it and get killed, and rejected it only on the logic of 'the narrative won't accept it and she won't be here on time'.

caoimhinh

It is also really weird what Kairos did just now. I mean, he captured Archer and Rogue Sorcerer just for the lulz of it or simply to give Catherine a scare and get her angry? That can't be it, he is a betrayer but he is also a schemer. It would it be that he simply did it to make sure that Catherine will keep her end of the bargain (as that was the only thing this conversation provided him beside the insult)? That's still weird, since he knows Catherine honors her bargains.

If there is no reason in-story for Kairos to do what he did, it would make this chapter *another* one of those fillers whose only purpose to show us Akua's character development and rehabilitation; and I would be disappointed. However, it's a very creative way to slip a filler in the story, much better than the uncle story, at least.

The exchange between Kairos and Akua was great but it could easily have happened at another time, in a less forced situation than Cat rushing to rescue fake hostages. So for story consistency, Kairos must have wanted something from this, and getting Cat into his camp for a conversation must be a step of a plan, unless all of a sudden Kairos has turned into an irrelevant weak character that can't do anything after his last beating at Catherine's hands, which would make no sense as we know the big game is still afloat and many other plans are still in progress, so Kairos can't be thrown into irrelevance/futility so easily.

[*Euodiachloris*](#)

I think he genuinely wanted to chat a little about Bard and the bigger picture... while still cementing his status as an important-if-dangerous piece in the Game.

His method of pulling Cat's ponytail appears to have backfired on him. 😊

Sparsebeard

I wouldn't be surprised if his deal with the Bard was a plot by her to engineer this very chapter.

After all, Hierarch has shown himself a good foil to her plans so perhaps the Bard wanted to sabotage his "relationship" with Cat (who is also a thorn in Bard's shoe).

At the time, perhaps the deal she offered to Tyrant seemed very good, except for the fact that dealing with the Bard was Cat's red line (which he might not have considered then)...

I might be paranoid, but whenever the Bard is involved I feel that the consequences of her involvement might very well be of her design.

Andrew Mitchell

> I might be paranoid, but whenever the Bard is involved I feel that the consequences of her involvement might very well be of her design.

That's a very sensible first assumption to make. The Bard's got millennia more experience than anyone mortals.

[Liliet](#)

>So for story consistency, Kairos must have wanted something from this, and getting Cat into his camp for a conversation must be a step of a plan

Yes, but he did not succeed.

Catherine refused to speak to him about whatever it was he wanted to speak about.

He did at least achieve a secondary goal of "reminding the world of his existence", which is imho a goal he *always* has, but I think he genuinely failed here. I mean he has had how many successes in a row? Even him crawling away from the throne room was very much a success at the core of it.

Andrew Mitchell

I think Catherine's confirmation that Karios was still getting a seat at the negotiation table was also a victory for him. But, yes, he didn't achieve his main goal of having further discussions with Cat.

[Liliet](#)

True.

The confirmation of him being invited to the peace conference, and the minor power play of making Cat come to him.

caoimhinh

But it's not like the world would have forgotten his existence if he didn't capture Archer and Indrani, or if he didn't get Cat to march into his camp right away.

As for the real purpose, which seems to be having a conversation with Cat and assurances of his place in the incoming international talks, the second was already known to him to be coming, but I can understand him wanting some more assurances after the events of last night, but both things could have waited until they were refreshed, or he could have much more easily sent a message to Cat's army for the talks to happen (though admittedly that would be too normal for him, out of his style).

I wonder if he was simply aware that Catherine was so tired that if they didn't have the conversation now he would have to wait for her to wake up in two days. Hence the harsh measures to get her attention.

[Liliet](#)

p o s s i b l e

(and a power play: look, I can MAKE you come)
(that didnt go real well, though technically worked)

caoimhinh

Perhaps, though there was not much point in doing that. There's really not much point in what Kairos did, and also not much point in Cat bringing Akua there (sure, she is a strong spellcaster and who knows what she can call by using Night now, but Catherine has always made a point about keeping her hidden and she is aware that Kairos has supernatural perception, plus Catherine didn't really expect a fight in the League's camp); so in-story there's little meaning to those causes, but on a Meta level it's kinda obvious that the effect EE wanted was showing Akua's words, so he made Kairos do this and made Cat bring Akua along despite those two actions not being very logical and both being mistakes as it turned out (Kairos was humilliated and Akua's existence was revealed).

That dialogue, though it turned into half a monologue by Akua, was really cool, but the timing of it is off, and the events that led to it feel a bit forced, as they only happened by two of the series top schemers making mistakes they should have avoided.

Liliet

>There's really not much point in what Kairos did

There's not really much point to anything Kairos does, outside of the principle of the thing. Remember how Cat got him to turn on the Dead King just for the joy of turning on the strongest opponent? Right now, that's Cat, and he did technically get away with yanking her chain once more, even if he didn't get much out of it.

> and also not much point in Cat bringing Akua there (sure, she is a strong spellcaster and who knows what she can call by using Night now, but Catherine has always made a point about keeping her hidden and she is aware that Kairos has supernatural perception, plus Catherine didn't really expect a fight in the League's camp)

Zombie's saddlebags were filled with bare necessities: wakeleaf, a set of knives and *munitions*. Catherine was very much accounting for the possibility of a fight, and Hakram and Akua are essentially the two available Woe.

(Vivienne doesn't have a Name and doesn't have another power source like Cat herself, Masego is sorcery-less and asleep, Indrani's absence is the problem in question)

Catherine actually hasn't made a point of hiding Akua, only of keeping her disguised (and she is wearing the disguise here – Cat says 'i could almost see her eyes through the veil' at one point), which has been fully sufficient so far, except with the other Woe who simply know already. And Kairos doesn't trumpet his supernatural perception around... and Cat is really really really fucking exhausted. Like she was exhausted before dawn already, then dawn that actually knocks *drow* the fuck out came, and now she's running on Red Bull and pissiness. She made a miscalculation in going for the reflexive "assemble the avengers" response, and she still hasn't noticed the full extent of it (that Kairos is now truthful, which means he can rat her out to at least Pilgrim and Rogue who know it for a fact, and also to anyone Pilgrim tells about his curse).

Kairos made no mistake here. He lost nothing except some face (and we're talking about a guy who cheerfully belly-crawled away from the throne room, here), and got Cat to both come and confirm his invitation to the conference. He didn't get *everything* he was aiming for, but no mistakes were made.

And Catherine NOT making mistakes here would honestly have been weirder. She's, like, half-conscious. And Kairos most definitely deliberately sought to exploit it.

Narratively speaking, this is Cat getting blowback from the drawbacks of mortality (exhaustion) and from overreach mastermind-wise (she still has to do a lot of things personally, which means that when a scheme is grand enough, she's prone to ending up in this position – when she's already spent mentally, but there's still more to do, and urgently).

Akua getting a chance to shine and get some therapy was a pleasant surprise, but there was nothing off about the events that led up to it.

JJR

Maybe those tomes he offered to Roland were both actually a trap somehow?

caoimhinh

Poor Roland, every time he tries to get a magic tome it turns out to be a trap or scheme of some sort.

[Liliet](#)

>I mean, he captured Archer and Rogue Sorcerer just for the lulz of it or simply to give Catherine a scare and get her angry? That can't be it, he is a betrayer but he is also a schemer.

He is a schemer, but the endpoint of his larger schemes is the same: piss off as many people / eldritch entities as he can while still surviving it, and in the end die to so many people it'll be Traitorous all over again, only every one for real.

caoimhinh

Aren't you underestimating Kairos there?

Sure, he gets high on betrayal and loves pissing off other people, but he doesn't do things for the lulz, even if he does what he enjoys the most and does everything in a way

that can make him laugh the most. He has a plan for everything he does, and objectives that he has been achieving along the story, even if he seemed to be just having fun.

If he were simply doing things for fun and to piss off people he would be a lot less dangerous.

Liliet

I'm not underestimating him in the least. If he had goals that were in any way compatible with anyone else's and didn't boil down to lulz and pissing everyone off at the end, he'd be a great deal less dangerous.

I mean, what do YOU think his goals are? What is he working towards?

Consider his dialogue with Skein, where Skein taunted him with spending years of his life on Wishes, to which Kairos's response was basically "HOLD MY FLOWER" to Catherine.

He has very much been achieving goals, yes. Those goals were him getting to reap even *more* lulz and pissing people off in the longer term.

Consider that the Dread Empire had considered him an actual ally, and was willing to spend resources on supporting his rise. His response to that? "How do I make it so they seek eternal revenge against me, instead"

Catherine characterized him earlier, imho correctly, as a true believer / priest of Below. Strife for the sake of strife, betrayal for the sake of betrayal, prayer offered just out of pride. Everyone else is not allowed to dismiss him, especially not if they're no longer underestimating him.

(Which Pilgrim still is, and the trap on him is still waiting to be sprung)

Akua gets him very well, here, because her objective, too, was in large part just 'screaming loud enough for the world to hear'. She was worse at it than him, and failed earlier, and has since dismissed the goal as defeating its own purpose; from Kairos's point of view, the game is still very much worth playing. Sure it ends with him dead; there was never any other option available in the first place.

Like... what other objective are you seeing him work towards? Not in specific, just in general, what else do you think he prioritizes? What's the competing principle?

caoimhinh

Sure, but what we need to keep in mind is that he doesn't act thinking only one step ahead, Kairos *always* acts moving several plans and scheming multiple things, plus he has contingencies in place for most of the things he does.

He doesn't just do things to piss off people now, he does things with a reason, the move people to do something, prevent them from doing something, to get information, to get an advantage for the next stage of the game, etc.

He keeps the game afloat, so his actions are not thoughtless, he is actually very careful in his madness and actions, even if he goes around pissing off everyone, they get pissed off because he is *winning* and his actions usually cost something for someone else (usually it's other people's lives while he pushes his own agenda, like the League war, the conflict with Hanno, the betrayal of the Calamities and the whole campaign in Iserre).

His actions are not "hey, I'm gonna piss off this dude", his actions are "I'm going to do something, and it will give me an advantage and keep on my plans, and piss off this dude in the process".

Sure, he has made lots of people angry, but he has also strengthened Helike, unified the League of Free Cities, made every other country in Calernia know his name and recognize the League as another player in the big game when they had been ignored before, caused great losses to all his competitors up to this point, and goes side by side with great schemers of the caliber of the Intercessor and the Dead King, he HAS achieved lots of things.

His endgame goes beyond simply pissing off others.

[Liliet](#)

His actions are not thoughtless, I never said they are.

>His endgame goes beyond simply pissing off others.

WHERE. Where do you think it goes? What IS the endgame?

Catherine cares about her country and people in general. Every other objective she has is ultimately overridden by this caring, but she has plenty of them: plenty of people she cares about, quite a few grudges she believes it her duty to carry (even though she will let go of them in a heartbeat if, again, her broader caring demands it).

Amadeus's goals boil down to ensuring Praesi people's long term prosperity / delivery from starvation. Everything else is instrumental towards that goal, although he also has a lot of things he cares about outside of it – people, moreso than things, really. Yet he will sacrifice all else if he has to in the service of that goal. If you dig into his reasons for doing literally anything, what you find is caring about other people, too – either situationally and momentarily (giving a cloak to that girl in the alley in chapter 1) or broadly and long-term (setting up orphanages so he can weed out heroes so he can rule Callow unimpeded so Praes can get its grain...)

When you dig into Kairos's motivations and plans, the end-goal you find is always wanting to spite Creation. Right now the end goal we know about is getting Hierarch to judge the Choir of Judgement – why? What does he get out of it?

What do *you* think he does?

And as I've said already, he has not lost anything with this maneuver. His gains were smaller than he'd have liked, but they were existent nonetheless. Mind games of 'you come when called' matter, in this kind of political clusterfuck.

Mental Mouse

Kairos is old-school evil. He knows that Creation didn't plan for him to survive, so he's going to screw Creation, and make people shiver when they see the ruins he'll leave behind.

ninegardens

His end game is Hierarch. I don't know what he plans to D0 with that sword, but that is his end game. That, and potentially screwing over the bard one last time.

Don't get me wrong, his end game will STILL probably be screaming into the void for the lulz.... but he has a bigger joke down the line.

As far as his plan here.... Cat is already at maximum hatred towards him. She's exhausted. He wanted to talk to her, or get a look at her, or just gather intel, and screwing with Archer and Rouge Sauce cost him nothing. There was an opportunity, and he took it. Maybe he didn't manage to D0 anything with that

opportunitiy, but hey- its a free roll of the dice that costs him next to nothing, and pisses Cat off. The fact that he COULD have gained something from it if Cat had been more willing to listen is reason enough to justify his actions.

Liliet

This is what I'm seeing, yep.

Javvies

He may secretly have an actual plan. It might even be that he plans to put the Gods on trial, as I believe he said once.

But he sure as hell **acts** like he's just doing shit because nobody's killed him for it yet. And he usually acts like he's a nihilist, as well.

I mean, seriously – remember, Kairos worked with Bard to set up Sabah just so that he could betray Black and stab him in the feels while doing so. When Black was trying to help him gain control/influence over the rest of the League.

That gained Kairos nothing except for the enmity of Black and Warlock. And maybe whatever Bard gave him, if anything, though it didn't seem like she did.

caoimhinh

Emm, that whole event also gave Kairos authority over the League without being tied to the Empire of Praes, weakened the Calamities by killing Sabah and drove them away from his territory, butchered the group of Heroes active in the region and made them owe him a favor by letting the two survivors escape and heal while also pointing to other people than the League (Hanno and Raphaella moved on to fight against Praes- and Callow- in the Crusade, not against Kairos as even if they fought against him the ones who killed their friends were the Calamities not Kairos) and gave him an in with the Wandering Bard.

Of that whole mess, Kairos got a lot of stuff besides a good laugh. Same as in every one of his plans, except perhaps the Princes' Graveyard, and that only because Catherine outsmarted everyone (DK and WB still got some of the things they wanted though they paid a price).

Seriously, Kairos got sassed in a verbal discussion one chapter and suddendly everyone forgot how much of

a successful schemer he is? Why does people suddenly think he only thinks in terms of immediate fun and no long term, when he has proven time and time again that he is playing a long game? He does things in the way that get him the most thrill, of course, but that doesn't mean he is not thinking of the long run.

Shveiran

It seems to me you are painting this in black and white while there is a whole lot of other colors in between.

"Kairos acts at random" is not the only alternative to "Kairos has a goal".

Personally, I think Kairos IS brilliant, in his own deranged way; and he certainly makes sure to always end up with working tools for the next scheme whenever he burns bridges finishing the current plan.

I ALSO think this is just a balancing act, however complex.

Like an athlete pushing his body to ever higher achievement, the act is the goal: to strive for perfection just to see how close he can get to it. Whereas perfection here is "Traitorous levels of Below madness", I suppose.

Kairos, in my opinion, aims to cry out to fill the voyd, so that someone will remember the sound of his voice; what he shouts is not really important to him: just the act, just the volume.

That is not really "having a goal"; that's "staying in the game as long as possible to have all the fun that can be had".

caoimhinh

I'm trying to do the opposite, actually.

To me, painting Kairos as someone who simply wants to piss off everyone and have a laugh at their expense is oversimplifying him severely.

As you said, this is not black and white, one thing doesn't eliminate the other. Sure, he offends everyone and has fun at their expense, but he *also* schemes and has deep and careful plans, vast intelligence networks capable of rooting out all of Scribe's agents (and likely Malicia's spies too), tactical cunning, and he is pretty meticulous in what he does, even if every single time it seemed like he was doing something for the

lulz, that was only the surface layer, as I pointed in the previous comment, he HAS achieved a lot as a result of his plans, so just because we don't know exactly what he wants now doesn't mean he doesn't want something or doesn't have a plan for it.

Once again I point out, if he was a simple-minded person he wouldn't be so much trouble for everyone else, if he didn't make such good plans he wouldn't have *managed* to offend all those big players in the first place. It's because he made moves and won, which means they lost a round, that he has offended them in such depth, they aren't annoyed by him, they are *hurt* by him and were put in very real danger by his schemes. So far he has only "lost" *once* and he still managed to get a deal with the Bard, keep himself alive despite everyone around wanting him dead and kept his game afloat. Everyone else who has lost a round in the game has lost a precious someone or had their armies butchered. Kairos only lost a huge number of his gargoyles and spent artifacts from his vaults.

A few books back when he was trolling Anaxares and keeping him as "his most trusted advisor" nobody knew what the fuck was going on, later fighting with the members of the League of Free Cities, then against Hanno and betraying the Calamities we didn't see his plans, only in hindsight have we learned what he was aiming for. Why should now be different?

He has things he wants, he makes plans for them, and has the most fun out of it as he possibly can, because one thing does not remove the other.

[Liliet](#)

Kairos has things he wants and makes plans for them.

Those things he wants are, in fact, to offend everyone and have fun at their expense.

Like, you're thinking that just because he's a brilliant schemer and mastermind he has to have Serious Goals, or maybe you're taking some goals as self-evident? What the fuck ARE those self-evident goals though?

Kairos wants to fuck people over, in the long-term through carefully laid plans.

And in the medium term, as a far-from-accidental side effect of these plans.

And in the short term, as much as he can get away with without compromising these plans.

He's brilliant as fuck, and he's using all of that brilliance to be a troll. I'm not seeing what you're not seeing here.

ninegardens

I mean, it can easily be somewhere in between. He spent an entire book setting up Hierarch. That wasn't a whim. That wasn't JUST for the lulz. That was a long term meticulous plan that also happened to give him a potent weapon for later.

He might not have a plan for what to USE that weapon on later (though it looks like he does), but the point is, he at the very least has medium term plans beyond "screw with people", and has acted in a way that suggests long term plans (which may or may not be "screw with people")

For example, if his eventual goal is "Break destiny over my knee... permanently", that would match with his current action, and be a significant long term goal.

I think we explicitly don't KNOW his long term plans yet. They might be "fuck with people", they might be more complicated. In some sense, that's what makes him interesting.

[Liliet](#)

I agree.

My point is that since his *core* ethos is "fuck everyone and you in particular", he'll take actions that fit it whenever he has opportunity to.

Nairne .01

This felt short however, I was smiling through the whole of it.

Riaan Theunissen

Now, I know that Catherine sometimes misremembers things so that she sees herself in a better light, but given what she did to some of the Fae, things known to Akua and Hakram, shouldn't they

at least be very worried about the fact that they can't pin down where they are?

[Fayhem](#)

I'm pretty sure if Larat wanted to scheme up some almost-certainly-self-destructive plan against somebody for past offenses, it would more likely be directed at Ms. Really-likes-that-jewelry than at Cat. And I got the vibe that Prince of Nightfall or not the rest of the former Wild Hunt are still following Larat's lead.

Andrew Mitchell

> Ms. Really-likes-that-jewelry

Ranger?

[Euodiachloris](#)

Yup.

She who likes very specific baubles.

[Fayhem](#)

Yep.

Riaan Theunissen

Catherine did things to individuals. Notably making one eat her own fingers. (I assume that there are a number of lesser actions as well.) Given that I would expect Akua, Hakram and others would want to make damn sure one doesn't get it into their head to get a bit of payback by making somebody Catherine cares about or uses die in agony, by making certain no illusion at the wrong place and time causes an incident between armies that escalates, no poison or curses find themselves in rations... Honestly, given some of the things shown about the Fae in this story as well as the methods Catherine used to control the Wild Hunt, I would expect lots of worry.

[Fayhem](#)

I already replied to Mental Mouse about basically this so I don't want to repeat myself too much. But basically, all the nasty shit Winter!Cat did to the fae was about *successfully* intimidating the shit out of them. She made that fae eat her own hand just for screwing with some random-ass tavern patrons in Callow. You think they're too stupid to put together what happens if they try hurting someone she actually specifically cares about?

It's not impossible that Larat and whatever minions he brings along could be an issue of some kind in future, but if he ever willingly re-enters Cat's orbit it's going to be in service of a plan more subtle and generally all-around fuckier than just screwing with her for vengeance's sake. Definitely worth continuing to keep an eye out for which I expect they'll be doing, but after all the trouble Larat and the former Wild Hunt just went to in order to slip the noose and get the fuck away from Cat I don't think they're going to be tripping over themselves to either come back or provoke her, much less both.

Riaan Theunissen

I haven't been speaking about Larat. I have been speaking about Akua and Hakram (and the others in Catherine's circle) and the fact that given what Catherine had done to various Fae they (Akua, Hakram and others) would want to know where the Fae (or whatever they are now) are and would be worried instead of dismissive about the fact that they don't know where the Fae are. Because Catherine controlled via torture, spectacle and killing, things that do not make fond memories, and because between glamour, potential portals, supernatural physical abilities and whatever powers an individual fae possesses one slipping in for a bit of sport / revenge could be disaster and / or death....

[Liliet](#)

>between glamour, potential portals, supernatural physical abilities and whatever powers an individual fae possesses

Catherine has specifically commented that crownless Larat did not appear to have a speck of power. I expect him to have lots of ways to do things anyway, but he's no less depowered than winterless Cat (and with no convenient crow goddesses to pick up the burden).

Riaan Theunissen

If they were truly powerless, however would they leave the realm or remain undiscovered? Not being able to find them should point to some abilities or powers. Granted, in the time that Larat had the crown on his head, he might have been able to create a backdoor (or multiples) in the realm that they used to get out, but even that should be cause for worry. (Of course, whether Hakram and Akua worry would also depend upon whether Catherine had taken the time to brief them about the "loss of power", which I don't think she has.)

As to the rest, my question has continuously been that given what had been done and the current situation, shouldn't Hakram and Akua have show worry. I have not been expressing concern, I have been asking about whether Hakram, Akua and maybe others should have been expressing concern given what they know.

Liliet

No, because they have a lot of more pressing concerns at the moment. Excessive anxiety over all possible scenarios leads to burnout.

Fayhem

Larat is the former Prince of Nightfall and the leader of the former Wild Hunt. If you've been expressing concerns over the fae, I think you have been talking about Larat, whether directly or indirectly.

And given that all of my points referred to "the former Wild Hunt" just as much as to Larat personally, that's besides the point anyway. So I guess my response would have to be "all the stuff I said before, but again" since you didn't actually respond to any of my points. Oh! And also a side of "what Liliet said", since whatever they are now it's not quite fae, certainly not as they were before anyway.

Mental Mouse

The thing is, the fey *do* get the idea of "don't screw with that person, they can eat us for lunch on their off days". They are bound by stories, so they try to avoid stories that run "... so Ranger killed them all. The End."

Fayhem

I mean, the ostensible premise of the potential concern re: Cat is all the interactions they've had with *her*. All the terrifying, terrifying interactions where she successfully bullied and intimidated *the Wild Hunt*. I agree that screwing with Ranger is for close to 100% of people/entities out there just a hilariously efficient means of committing suicide; that's why I said it's something you'd do if you wanted an almost-certainly-self-destructive activity. But screwing with Cat isn't much better for them, if at all in fact (Ranger's got massively more combat power, but Cat's got way more cunning and an order of magnitude more institutional support and I think Winter fae in particular respect cunning more), and they've had more than enough experience with her to figure that out.

tl;dr: I didn't say that because I actually think they're dumb enough to screw with Ranger, I meant more that if they were stupid enough to screw with Cat for the sake of it they would burn themselves up through sheer idiocy before they ever became a problem. If Larat or any of his minions show up again, they're going to have a subtler plan afoot than just "screw with Cat".

[Liliet](#)

Agreed on all counts.

Kissaten

What's up with all that Kairos hate? A ten or so chapters ago people shipped CatxKairos.

MagpieJack

EE is a good author who can play his audience. We loved Kairos, so he gave us so much Kairos Kairosly being the Kairorest we actually got sick of him. And then he gives us Monday's cliffhanger, which made so many people go UGHGUHGUHGUUGH (myself included).

BUT! All according to keikaku, since this chapter would straight up not work in the slightest if folks weren't as completely and totally done with the kid's antics as Cat is.

I suspect we won't see much of lil' K for a while, so that when he comes back we'll be all "Kairos you scoundrel we missed you".

[Liliet](#)

a g r e e d

RoflCat

He was an amusing mad clown for a while.

Then he stopped being funny, then he made deal with the fucking Bard.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

A few possibilities I'm spitballing here.

People fully realized that Cat's hatred of him isn't ironic banter.

His temporary alignment with Bard makes him more directly antagonistic from a storytelling standpoint.

Now that he's run out of people to anger his schtick's simply wearing thin; there's no-one new for him to get a rise out of anymore and his recurring victims' crankiness over it is infectious.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

(Also: remember when people shipped Cat with the Dead King? Weird in hindsight, though it was before he was first onscreen.)

[Mental Mouse](#)

Neshamah can be a pretty boy when he wants to be.

Shveiran

He's got cold hands, but coming with his own Serenity earns him points with the Firerfly girls.

[Fayhem](#)

Cold hands, warm hearts. A good boyfriend should know when to bring snacks, after all.

Andrew Mitchell

Hahahahaha.

[Mental Mouse](#)

LOL!

[Mental Mouse](#)

>... coming with his own Serenity earns him points with the Firefly girls.

I'm sure he'd have great times with those those mage-takers from Marchford.

caoimhinh

I don't think people are so much hating Kairos as recognizing that Akua landed a sick burn on him.
Honor where it's due, she cut him deep in that verbal exchange.

[Euodiachloris](#)

A moment to appreciate the sensibilities of the late Dread Empress Massacre. I get the impression that, though she certainly enjoyed both the simple and the convoluted approaches to getting the job done, her real delight lay in just cutting straight to the goal.

[Fayhem](#)

Yeah, she feels like somebody who really channels the Tao of Alexander, specifically vis-à-vis the Gordian Knot. Except the knot represents governing an empire instead of just being a big tangle of rope.

...actually, come to think of it I'm pretty sure it was meant to be a metaphor for that in Alexander's story too. Just means it fits even better!

SpeckofStardust

Compared to the truths you can still feel slithering through your blood, those that whisper of greatness instead of submission." sigh
Submission to your urges is not anything but submission.

[Liliet](#)

That's the one that got her to *hiss*, too. Consider that #1 Wasteland aristocracy rule is 'never show emotion' ;u;

Akua Has Opinions And Is All Out Of Fucks

Cap'n Smurfy

"No," I said. "We don't. You want an audience? Crawl to my camp. You ought to know how, after last night."

I think out of all the insults thrown his way tonight, that one had to hurt the most. The idea that he's no longer important or powerful enough to be worth listening to.

Paul

Well, who was I to deny that hard-headed arrogance couldn't let you fight the run world? Run=whole

Paul

You are tamer a beast than I believed you would be, Akua Sahelian.

You are a tamer beast instead of "you are tamer a" flows better

[Liliet](#)

No, I think this one is possible too. An idiosyncratic grammar choice, not a typo.

[Fayhem](#)

Yeah, I think Liliet has the right of it here. That's a deliberately stylized mode of speech (the kind you'd bring to Court, for a non-random example), not an error.

Eleron M Pfoutz

Kairos gonna need some aloe and some antiseptic for those burns.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Damn Cat, that was cold.

Soronel Haetir

So why does Akua still call Cat a fae? I thought that was gone with her surrendering Winter. Is it just part of her continuous needling?

[Liliet](#)

> Is it just part of her continuous needling?

Yep.

Shveiran

So... is next chapter going to be about a father daughter reunion?

...Cuz I really want a father daughter reunion.

Andrew Mitchell

♥ ♥ I think we all want to see that.

Captain Amazing

I think Akua is going to cut out the Evil upbringing part of her soul and then come back as essentially someone else after sacrificing herself at Keter. In the Underdark she said she was trying to find out how to come back with every essential part of herself intact. Her definition of what's important to her being has changed somewhat since she met Cat. I'm thinking she and an abdicated Catherine could teach at a Callowan war college 😊

Andrew Mitchell

> I'm thinking she and an abdicated Catherine could teach at a Callowan war college 😊

Sounds like another great premise for some PGtE fan-fiction. It could even be a sitcom.

[Liliet](#)

Cat mentions to Akua in passing that Wekesa had been too much of a wuss to teach magery at college even though Amadeus had asked

suddenly Headmistress Akua

Andrew Mitchell

O M G. Now I want to see that even more.

Seraphimus

Hello EE!

I just tore through all chapter of the Guide in very few days and I must say I absolutely love it! Keep up the good work!

Andrew Mitchell

Welcome to the PGtE community. We're a nice bunch and our discussions in the comments section here enrich my understanding and appreciation immensely. I hope you'll stick around and contribute your thoughts too.

FYI the community also has a sub-reddit and a Discord channel.

You might like to check out the Extra Chapters, some of which are not linked to from within the chapter pages. <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/extra-chapters/>

Discreet Commenter

Spelling: Almost every time you use the word "discrete" (which means "separate/non-continuous"), you actually mean "discreet" (which means "careful/covert/secretive").

ninegardens

Re-reading this, given certain events at the end of this book is... interesting.

I don't think that Akua's insults cut nearly as deep as people seem to think... and I can't help but think Tyrant cut into her...

Chapter 55: Renewal

"It is said that when his Chancellor told him the scheme to release a culling plague would cause rebellion, Dread Emperor

Vile thoughtfully replied that should this be the case he could always release a second one."

– Introduction to 'Thirteen and One' by Hakim of Kahtan, the Haunted Scholar

I woke up knowing two things: were more than halfway to dusk and that my leg *hurt*.

Gods, the throbbing was atrocious. Like someone was taking a hammer to my knee with every breath. I was tempted to reach for the Night before I'd even opened my eyes, to weave it so that coolness would sink into fevered flesh and the pain would recede to a dull and distant beat. Instead I forced myself to unclench my teeth and breathed in and out slowly, soothingly. I'd already pushed my limits last night more than was wise, cheating my body's due once more would only worsen the eventual settling of the debts. No, best to feel the harrowing pulse now when I had yet to see demands made of my time rather than putting it off until the cup tipped regardless of what I wanted. I let out a shuddering breath and opened my eyes, taking in the dim lighting within the tent. I'd settled onto a padded armchair to sleep instead of a bed, which no doubt would have made things even worse with my leg if someone hadn't propped both of them up on footrest while I slept. As usual, I was left to wonder about who it was that'd struck a devil's bargain in my name to arrange my meeting Hakram. In truth it was coincidence, I thought, though perhaps of that pointed kind that some might call fate. And it wasn't like that relationship had been made of thin air, willed into existence – it had taken time and trust and understanding. But how many people in Creation went through their lives without ever encountering someone who understood them even half as well as he and I did? It might not be providence, but it would be a lie to say that villains did not get golden luck of their own sometimes.

I let a few breaths pass, two sensations warring over mastery of my body. The loud and strident call of pain in my leg and the sort of earthly satisfaction one got from much needed sleep. The pleasant lethargy that lingered until you stretched, telling you a need had been seen to. I embraced the former to drown out the latter and sought further distraction by taking in the tent. The reason I'd ended sprawled in an armchair instead of a bed was but a few feet away: Masego still lay still on his cot, hands folded over his chest as it slowly rose and lowered. Indrani had fallen asleep on him when seated on his bedside, forehead on his side as she lightly snored. And, by the looks of the sheet beneath her mouth, drooled. Well, we'd all had a long night. The folding chair she was still seated on was precariously balanced on its two front feet, anchored only by her weight and leaning against the cot. I resisted the urge to suddenly shout just to see her stumble on the ground, though it was a close-run thing. To my surprise, there was another within the admittedly cramped tent.

In another armchair, curled up like sleeping cat, Vivienne was clutching at a blanket and sleeping so heavily she might as well be dead. I wasn't the only one who was a fragile little mortal these days, it was true, and her hours of waking had been almost as troublesome as mine. While I would not hesitate a moment to ruin Archer's sleep, Vivienne at least should get to keep her slumber for a while yet.

There were two layers over me, my cloak and a thicker blanket above it, so I softly dropped the latter on the ground and with a muted grunt pulled the former around me. Gods, even with the brazier in the corner the air was cool and I'd shrugged off quite a few of my clothes for comfort. Barefoot, I slid onto the footrest and back into my discarded boots, tightening the straps. Pain in leg spiked, which did not bode well for walking out of here. I reached out blindly and without fought, but my fingers closed around my staff. I almost started, eyes narrowing as I turned to look at the dead wood. Had I remembered where I'd propped it up last night, somewhere in the back of my mind? Or had it just been where it needed to be? Didn't matter, I ultimately decided. It was meant only to help me walk, not to serve as a weapon or a tool of power. It could not fail me in an hour of need if I never relied on it for more than what any stick could provide. I pushed myself up, swallowing a moan of pain, and took a few hobbling steps. It got better after a bit, though never less than unpleasant. Finding myself close to Indrani and Masego's sleeping forms I allowed myself to take them in for a moment, Masego most of the two. It'd been near a year now, hadn't it? How strange, that someone who'd been nothing to be for most my life could come to be missed to sorely when we were now parted. It wasn't even that Zeze was the one among my friends I saw the most. That'd always been Hakram. But there'd always been a manner of comfort in knowing that Masego was close by, even if he'd disappeared into a tome or an experiment for a few days. From the moment we'd met he'd so rarely been afar, even if not together. Until he'd left for Thalassina. I could sense a discreet working of Night on him, woven to keep another appraised of his health, and that served as fresh reminder of what our third time in Liesse had personally cost him.

When he woke, it would not be pretty. There'd be many among my fresh allies howling for punishment, and the loss of his sorcery would not necessarily be enough to appease. They weren't even wrong, I thought, for though he'd done it in grief and while manipulated by the Dead King he *had* come within an hour of killing hundreds of thousands. More, even. If the realm that'd become the Twilight Ways had crashed into Iserre, it would have taken more than this battlefield with it. How many more thousands lived in the principality's cities, its towns and countryside? No small number, and most of that civilians. Penance would have to be found, I thought, though delicately doled out. Already returning to lucidity would make him behold in full the truth

that his fathers were gone, but that anguish would be paired with his sorcery being taken. That would... take time to accept, I suspected. I would not pretend to truly understand every part of the complex relationship Masego had with magic, but I suspected it would not be too different from losing a dear friend or a spouse for him. *But we're back*, I thought, looking at the sleeping pair. Vivienne was not far, and though Hakram would already be busying himself with one of the thousand little hidden things that kept my world spinning he was close as well. After months in the dark and split across the face of Calernia to seek our own truths, we were finally together again. Grim as the days to come were, the Woe had found each other once more.

Whatever doom lay approaching behind the horizon, it would find us waiting and bearing sharp knives.

Swallowing a wince as I leaned down, I picked up my blanket and softly laid it on Archer's shoulders. I brushed back a lock of hair that'd tumbled over her ear, fingers lingering as I acknowledged that there would be need to settle matters personal as well eventually. Though Indrani has spoken it nonchalantly enough as we chased victory in Liesse, the admission that she loved the sleeping man she was drooling on was no small thing. Out in the open it was no longer as a butterfly's wingbeat, easily ignored or taken for illusion. Most of what would have to be settled in there would have to be seen to by the pair of them, and I had no place in it, but only most. I'd been sharing a bed with Indrani regularly since that first time in the Everdark, but it might be for the best for that to cease until boundaries had been clearly drawn for them both. Or disappointments had, if it was to be that. Masego was in no way mandated with returning that affection, after all. And someday I wondered if he even could. That he had no interest in bedplay was well-worn knowledge, but he'd displayed disinterest in more than that. There were many ways to love someone, and not all involved skin or pining sighs. They'd find their balance, I knew. Or make peace with the way they could not. We were all too tightly bound for such a small thing to wound.

Being a good friend when the mood struck me, I slid a few small firewood logs under the lifted feet of Archer's chair so she'd not topple when she inevitably woke. I limped out quietly, feeling filthy with sweat and soot and blood. The thought of a warm bath or even a basin of hot water ferociously attractive, but I'd not eaten in too long and drunk quite a bit over the last day and night. Best get breakfast before that came back to haunt me. The thought was enough to work an appetite, and as it happened there was an open campfire not far. The two silhouettes by it I knew well, and was greeted by amused smiles when I leaned over the fire to smell at the iron pot being heated.

"Tea?" I said, surprised.

"One of Aisha's blends," Hakram replied. "It ought to help with the leg, if only a little."

Adjutant knew well my reluctance to cheat the discomfort for too long, so it wouldn't be an herb meant to kill the pain. Maybe one of those Wasteland herbs that helped with the flow of blood? Eh, I'd ask later. Instead I made Akua move further down the old stone and sat myself with a grunt, hands rising to accept the mug of tea the orc had just poured. I sniffed once more, but though the smell was vaguely familiar I couldn't quite put the finger on what had gone in it. I blew out the mist that wafted up, ignoring the increasing number of eyes I could feel on me. This part of the camp would be restricted, I thought, but there'd still be soldiers. It wouldn't be long before word spread I'd woken. The prominence of Lower Miezán in both Callow and Praes meant that gossip still flew with swift wings no matter who ended up joining the ranks of my armies.

"I'm guessing that clever little Night-weave on Masego is your work," I said to Akua.

She inclined her head.

"His health remains within my expectations," she said. "Though it may be some time still until he fully recovers."

My brow rose.

"Losing the magic didn't knock him out," I pointed out. "I did."

"You only pre-empted the natural course," she told me. "You may think of it as Lord Hierophant having recently gone under a surgeon's knife."

"Like when I lost an aspect," I murmured.

"That was a metaphysical wound," Akua disagreed. "This is physical. The body must acclimate itself to the absence of magic."

"And typically how does that go?" I frowned.

"It is not a phenomenon I am much familiar with, for in the Wasteland is it exceedingly rare for one to lose sorcery without death ensuing," she admitted. "And I no longer have a storied library to expand my learning, much as I would like to."

The Sisters might know, I thought. Or Roland, considering part of his Name apparently involved the 'confiscation' of magic.

"I see no reason to worry," Akua assured me. "Though he should remain weakened for a span, he should wake much sooner. It is exhaustion, not forced torpor."

I slowly nodded. Still, I'd not gamble with Masego's health if I could help it. Behind me the sound of eggs on a pan caught my attention: Hakram had cracked three, as I usually took, and was frying them on the open fire.

"I'll get you a conversation with the Rogue Sorcerer," I told Akua. "You should be able to get use out of that."

She inclined her head in agreement. I claimed a bowl myself, as Hakram's sole hand was already occupied, and watched with mild bemusement as Akua Sahelian heeded his instructions and got out a small pot of salt before sprinkling a few touches of it on my eggs. He deftly turned them afterward, using only his wrist. There was still half a cookpot's worth left of stew – horse, since we were starting to run low on other fresh meats, and I ended up digging hungrily into a bowl filled with both. The tea took me longer to get through, for it tasted bitterer than I preferred, but I was not drinking it purely for pleasure. It was a pleasant meal, my two companions keeping the conversation going on matters of no great import while I only occasionally interjected a grunt of agreement or the opposite. Apparently the heartlands of Procer used a great deal more salt in their meals than I was used to back home, since it could be brought in cheap from the great salt pans on the western coast of Neustria and Brus. I stretched a bit afterwards, pleasantly full in a way that I'd never truly known how badly I missed until I could be again.

"Right," I finally sighed. "Lay it on me, then. What did I miss while I slept?"

"In truth, nothing particularly pressing," Hakram said, to my surprise. "Arnaud Brogloise has sent messenger to request an audience when it is convenient for you. He'll be approaching you in the name of the First Prince, since the powers she granted him have yet to expire. I'd consider what he has to say more representative of the situation in Salia than what Princess Rozala will speak to."

I hummed.

"But it's not pressing," I said. "Why?"

"I expect he's still going through the partial text of the Accords I passed to him," Hakram said.

I didn't reply immediately, though I almost chastised him. We'd discussed passing that along to the Procerans in advance of the conference that would most likely be held in Salia – I couldn't see Hasenbach leaving the city at the moment, she'd be leaving the Highest Assembly to its own devices – but I'd been more inclined to Princess Rozala, or even the now-former Princess Sophie Louvroy. The latter was one of Hasenbach's loyalists, the one sent to keep an eye on the army, which implied a degree of

trust. On the other hand, Arnaud Brogloise had turned out to be her spy and empowered envoy. He was, objectively, the better pick: not only was it assured that whatever he saw would end up in Cordelia's ear, he had the authority to speak on her behalf before we got to Salia. And though dear old Arnaud obviously had very few compunctions with killing, he'd been able to play some highly perceptive Proceran royals for fools. For years. Malanza was more general than steward, by my reckoning, and to my knowledge not a particularly skilled intriguer. No, Brogloise was the right choice. In some aspects, anyway. I'd rather have the Princess of Aquitan at my side than on the other one, when the time came to push for the Accords, and that couldn't be done if she was kept in the dark about them.

"Have another one prepared," I said, then thought more of it.
"No, two."

"Pilgrim," he said. "And Princess Rozala, I'd assume. Is that wise?"

I cocked my head to the side. There couldn't be many reasons he'd expected me to keep one of the two most powerful women in Procer in the dark until the last moment.

"You're afraid they might use the Accords to draw lines in the Assembly," I said. "For and against, every sitter to gather behind one or the other."

"The First Prince remains unpopular," Hakram pointed out. "These are times of war and she is not a general while her seat of power – the Lycaonese north and its support – has been uprooted. Of course, with the fighting up north toppling Procer's ruler would attract a great deal of scorn. Unless it was reluctantly done to avoid some great mistake."

"She's fought the dead, Hakram," I said. "And you saw her on the hill. She's not going to make a grab for the throne halfway through the end of the world."

"She might," Akua disagreed. "If she believed Cordelia Hasenbach to be unable to fight this war the way it needs to be fought."

"If we don't tell her now," I said, "she'll take that as the insult it is."

"Agreed," Akua easily said. "Arlesites are notoriously prickly over such matters. I also rather disagree with Lord Adjutant's notion that discussion of the Accords will be used in the Highest Assembly. Your support is much too precious a commodity at the moment for one of them to discard it offhand."

"My support," I skeptically said. "Wouldn't my backing in any of their private squabbles be a kiss of death? It's both a villain and foreigner intervening in Proceran affairs."

"Ah," Hakram suddenly breathed out.

An elaboration would have been more helpful, as far as I was concerned.

"You have a series of victories to hand out, my heart," Akua smiled under the veil. "End of the dwarven ban on armament sales. Assurances of truce with the Firstborn and the support of their armies against Keter. Access to Callowan grain markets come next harvest. The secrets of the Twilight Ways for Proceran armies to use. And, of course, the great achievement of having turned the dreaded Black Queen into a tame tiger unleashed on the dead."

My fingers clenched and unclenched as I considered that. I'd considered most of those a given the moment bargains were struck, but I could see their point. If all those things were presented as the victories of either Hasenbach or Malanza, they'd come out looking like the person getting things done. The kind you wanted in charge, when someone like the Dead King was at the gate. The First Prince already had the throne, true, but the Princess of Aequitan was fresh off what could be considered a success here in Iserre. And I knew better than most than when the days got dark people liked to have a soldier wearing the crown.

"If Malanza tries to seize the reins, then they'll both try to use the Accords as meat to barter for anything I could provide them," I said. "So if we don't send her the text we're essentially tipping the scales in Hasenbach's favour. She'll have had time to prepare, and she's too skilled a hand not to turn that into a significantly better position."

"The decision must be carefully considered, in my eyes," Akua said. "For the twin truth of what you said is that, in apprising Princess Rozala of your intent, we tacitly allow her to present a challenge to the First Prince in Salia."

Which I doubted Cordelia would take all that kindly to, all things considered.

"I would be surprised, in truth, if Cordelia Hasenbach's unseating was the intent," Akua continued. "By the procedures of the Assembly such a thing would be difficult to accomplish – and embitter the Lycaonese for *generations* if carried out. Assuming they did not outright rebel. More sensibly, with the right maneuvering it would not be impossible for Rozala Malanza to become the true power in Procer no matter who rules in name."

If this was just about curtailing how much hostility I'd be earning by my decision, I suspected sending the simplified

Accords to the Princess of Aequitan would make for much less personal a grudge than keeping the same woman in the dark until we reached Salia. On the other hand, approaching the matter that way was a fine way to make a mistake: wading into a melee before knowing who you wanted to thump was a good way to end up eating dirt.

"There's no guarantee they'll turn on each other," I finally said.

"The Principate is on the precipice of change," Akua disagreed. "And only one may hold the reins if their nation is survive the war, they both know this: divided, squabbling, Procer can only break. The lesser crowns cannot look to two mistresses for orders, and so one of them must submit to the other before the Highest Assembly for uncertainty to end. She who remains standing will rule the Procer that is to come, should she survive the war."

"We lose little from allowing Princess Rozala a challenge," Hakram noted. "If anything with two bidders concessions ought to be easier to secure. If the First Prince had been more willing to negotiate with us in the past I'd advise against it, but there's hardly any good will there to spoil."

"I believe that Cordelia Hasenbach remains the superior candidate to ensure lasting peace," Akua told him. "And if decision is made to back her from the start, being owed a favour can be worth more than auctioned support – and would *create* good will. A knife hand stayed is worth more than promises."

I shook my head.

"You're selling both of them short," I said. "And I don't mean there won't be tensions, because that ship rather left the dock when Hasenbach made Malanza's mother drink poison after their civil war. But they'll remain cordial while the Dead King is at the gate, because neither will be willing to roll the dice when snake eyes might mean the end of the Principate."

I thought back to a conversation that felt so long ago, Hasenbach and I alone in the depths of my since-devoured domain. *You miss the central tenet of the Principate*, she'd chided me as we spoke of tyranny. *It is, unlike Praes, a nation built on consensus*. She'd sent Prince Amadis and his cabal into my hands to be savaged, I'd retorted back then, her opposition in that Assembly she so touted. Yet she's believed in her words, back then, even as she struggled with realities that were flawed. Did she still, I wondered?

"No, if Procer is to decide its own fate then let it be in the open," I said. "Cordelia Hasenbach cannot grudge me her own

principles observed. Malanza gets the Accords, same as the Pilgrim."

Although, in truth, this entire matter should have been debated with Vivienne awake. Which they would know, I thought. Yet they'd spoken of it anyway. I would not count that a coincidence.

"You're not telling me something," I said.

"I thought you'd come to the conclusion yourself without prompting," Akua said, sounding fascinated. "It truly is a glaring blind spot."

"We've named boons you can offer that would win princes to either cause," Hakram gravelled. "Yet there's prize that would win the people as well. In these parts for certain and others as well. It is a matter of pride, in the end."

My heart clenched.

"Black," I said. "They'll want Black's head on pike."

The shade dipped her head in agreement.

"And you pushed this not because you want me to make a decision," I said, "but because he's awake."

"Before seeing him you should know what may still lie ahead," Hakram said. "Make no mistake, Catherine, they will hound you for him. Their people will riot otherwise, after what he's done. The Legions themselves may be spared, but the Carrion Lord? They cannot afford to simply let him go."

"They can't afford to fuck with me either," I sharply replied.

Akua looked at me, and for a moment under the veil I believed she might have looked sad.

"There will be a choice," she said, "between what the woman wants and what the queen requires."

I grit my teeth, rising to my feet.

"Catherine," Hakram called out.

I turned a glare on him.

"I handed him the full Accords," he said.

Why, I almost asked, but already knew the answer. Either my father would sign the damned thing, or he'd be sold so that everyone else did.

I stalked off, furious at no one in particular, to find Amadeus of the Green Stretch.

Javvies

Yeah, no.

Throw them Kairos, Heirarch, and/or Malicia. Maybe Akua.

Not Amadeus.

Malanza has had an epiphany of sorts. I don't see her exploiting the Accords in an attempt to gain power in Salia/Procer. I do see her using them to make sure that she doesn't get thrown under a bus or saddled with blame, but instead to make sure she keeps her position and solidifies and strengthens it.

Andrew Mitchell

I wonder how differently this conversation would have gone if any of the Woe were aware that Cordelia has effectively secured full control over the Assembly (even if it's only temporary).

I agree Malanza won't be trying to take over as First Prince. She's got her eyes fully on what's best for Procer's survival.

KageLupus

I don't think it would really change anything. As Akua pointed out, the way things stand now Procer has to be united under a single ruler. The war against the Dead King just can't handle the kind of infighting and intrigue that the Highest Assembly historically has. Cordelia having already started the process of consolidating power just proves that out.

But it also doesn't detract from Rozala's position either. She is still the number two princess in the land, and with Cat's backing could still be a contender for taking up that consolidated rule. Not giving her the Accords ahead of time would still be an insult and a tacit backing of Cordelia.

The only thing their lack of knowledge changes is the immediacy of what happens in Procer. It goes from "this will probably happen" to "this has started to happen". The decision they made based on the first is just as relevant to the second.

Mammon

I think that if they knew, Cat might actually be more inclined to back off and support Malanza as much as Cordelia evenly to not be interwoven in that event or be the next stepping stone after Cordelia falls. Because it takes just one Named meddling in this easily labelled tyrannical scheming and backing up the underdog Malanza and/or whatever plot the church was planning (the country-‘purifying’ one Saint mentioned to Cordelia) to see Cordelia’s power crumble under plot and ‘righteousness’ at pivot events.

And if there’s an evil queen who had a hand in Cordelia’s power maintained and bolstered, an alluring voice whispering sin from her left shoulder, then storywise that great evil would be the stronger yet now manageable to defeat power for this Named to focus on next.

As the Lone Swordsman and so many Callowans had tried and thus also being a staple Name thing to do in this universe: start a rebellion in a suppressed village or town singlehandedly, liberate a larger city with help of the people or already established rebel groups, take a large area with the rightful ruler’s support (in Procer’s case a principality with a Prince or more backing them up), full victory by beating Cordelia and crowning a righteous cause would be the next step, and then the Named one would be pretty much storybound and set in lore to be toppling tyrants and defeating corrupt evil rulers for as long as there are more powerful tyrants related to their initial cause or remain a threat to their country’s founded liberty. And as always, Cat would be first in line for trouble.

Ofc thats assuming that a new Named will be involved, which especially at the higher scale we’re now is rarely the case considering the time their training would take and better Named already filling the position. But with the Saint gone a vacancy opened up for Above to send in a new agent, and with Creation’s meddling there’s always the risk of such stories entangling her if Cat does make a wrong move even by fault of ignorance.

Sparsebeard

Black will have to sign the accords!

All hail Dread Emperor Benevolent, first of his name!!!

erebus42

There already was a Dread Emperor Benevolent I. He could be Benevolent II, or maybe Unscrupulous I, Unfettered I, Dispassionate I, or maybe Pragmatic I

William

No, the Benevolent from the epigraphs is Black, we're pretty sure. They all fit him, and there are specific references to certain things that he's mentioned in this past.

Andrew Mitchell

You're not alone in that view but personally, I'm pretty sure (65%) those quotes are not Amadeus. IMO they don't 'sound' like things Amadeus would say.

I hope we get to find out eventually, but this may well be a question which never gets resolved.

ATRDCI

We will only know that there is a Benevolent quoted in the epigraphs, but not when they reigned. And we know that at least some of the epigraphs are from the future not the past. (Ex. Juniper's and Aisha's respective histories)

Nuke_The_Earth

That's entirely possible, actually. The seven quotes attributed to Dread Emperor Benevolent are as follows:

"Please, do keep digging your own grave. I look forward to your splendidly inevitable demise." – Dread Emperor Benevolent the First – Chapter 19: Pivot

"There's no surer sign you're being played than being certain you've grasped your opponent's intent." – Dread Emperor Benevolent – Chapter 6: Rapport

"Morality is a force, not a law. Deviating from it has costs and benefits both – a ruler should weigh those when making a decision, and ignore the delusion of any position being inherently superior." – Dread Emperor Benevolent – Villainous Interlude: Decorum

"Peace is little more than the recognition that the reasons for which war was undertaken are no longer relevant." – Dread Emperor Benevolent the First – Chapter 17: Contingent

"There is only one lesson to be learned from shatranj: no matter who wins the game, the pieces return to the same box." – Dread Emperor Benevolent the First – Chapter 30: Witness

"Own what you are, no matter how ugly the face of it. No lies are ever more dangerous to a villain than those they tell themselves." – Dread Emperor Benevolent – Chapter 70: The Calm Before

"By hook and crook we will all hang, High Lords, from a noose woven of our many loose ends. But cheer up: none are beyond salvation, not even the likes of us. Let us see, at long last, if we can turn back the tyranny of the sun." – Extract from the coronation speech of Dread Emperor Benevolent the First – Epilogue

Now, tell me: Who do those remind you of, particularly the last two? Granted, 'Benevolent' isn't exactly the type of title I would see the Black Knight choosing for himself, but he's very likely been deeply changed by recent events, so who knows? It's a very plausible headcanon, I'd say.

Sparsebeard

Yeah, those quotes make him sound pretty reasonable. It would make sense that Cat would have commented on him when studying the history of Praes in the first book.

The fact that she did not perhaps is a clue...

[Liliet](#)

She did not comment on Massacre either, and even Irritant only came up in dialogue much later.

Shveiran

True. But Massacre sounds like any other mad Dread Empress of old.

Benevolent does sound like a different breed; it sounds like she likely would have brought it up at some point.

It is not proof, by no means, but it did make me suspicious.

[Liliet](#)

She did not mention Irritant until books 4-5.

[Euodiachloris](#)

Granted, when faced with extreme irritation. ;P

Cat's musings over history tend to be related to present associations. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Mhm. Her not bringing up Benevolent is not evidence of anything, per se.

Sparsebeard

The difference I see between those and Benevolent is that he was introduced very early in the story (book 1, chapter 19), pretty much at the same time that Cat was studying Praes' history. Whereas, Irritant and Massacre were later additions to the story (we don't hear about Irritant before chapter 38 of book 2 and book 4 for Massacre). For such a peculiar Tyrant as Benevolent

never to have been named outside epigraphs does seem suspicious (especially since he gives an air of competence similar to the Terribilises). And I feel that there's been plenty of occasions to discuss Benevolent in story (for exemple when discussing Praesi morality with Akua or when Cat lists competent emperors).

Also, if you look at most Emperor quotes, they're mostly having fun by playing on the caricatural nature of most Tyrants with the name (or ephitet) of the emperor being strongly related to the quote (Ex : Vindictive, Irritant, "the Linguist", "the lawgiver", "the technicaly correct", etc.), that, or playing on the laughably inefficient nature of "Stupid Evil". On the other hand, Benevolent's quotes seem to mostly be either very practical or about using the narrative to further his own ends. Very little of "being a goody two shoes Emperor" vibes (one of the quotes is even about villains not lying to themselves mirroring Black's quote from first chapter that he's "the very worst kind of monster").

Liliet

> playing on the caricatural nature of most Tyrants with the name (or ephitet) of the emperor being strongly related to the quote

And Terribilis I and Terribilis II?

Benevolent fits the pattern of 'all the menagerie of historical tyrants, with all kinds of extremes between them'. It would fuck up the worldbuilding to suddenly go 'nah actually Benevolent hasn't existed before', and strongly so.

Sparsebeard

The Terribilises have their ephitets, one of the two was called "the lawgiver", I even mentionned that title in the very comment you're anwsering to... That other Terribilis, was based on the previous one since they both where considered competent (which is probably not a coincidence).

The way I see it, Benevolent existing in the past is kind of contrary to the general modus operanti of the Dread Emperors anyway.

If all other epigraphs where of the past fine, but since we know they can be from the future, it

clearly means that the quotes from Dread Emperors can too. It's plain foreshadowing.

Liliet

>The way I see it, Benevolent existing in the past is kind of contrary to the general modus operandi of the Dread Emperors anyway.

Ah, and herein lies the crux of the matter.

I understood Benevolent's approach to be a part of the variation of the Dread Emperors' modus. They come in all shapes and stripes, Amadeus isn't special for his morality or for his approach. He's not even particularly special for being effective, see again: Terribilises. Both of them are known to have accomplished what they were aiming for, if not quite every single point of it.

Benevolent is just another variation – a clever Dread Emp who decided to take advantage of Good. There's nothing groundbreaking about the idea itself, it's easily derived from basic story-fu observations, and that's imho a large and important worldbuilding point of Dread Emperor Benevolent existing.

The model of the Praesi system in which Benevolent is an abomination that heralds change, and the model of the Praesi system in which Benevolent fits just as well as Massacre, are two rather different models. It is important to me that it is that latter that is canon, *as implicitly indicated by epigraph format*.

I would be interested to talk more about the systemic aspect, here.

Sparsebeard

> Benevolent is just another variation – a clever Dread Emp who decided to take advantage of Good.

I DO agree an Emperor who fakes "goodness" in order to prosper whold probably fit in Praes' past.

I don't see much in the quotes to support this interpretation though. If that was the case, I'd expect either over the top insincere goody too shoes quotes or at the very least to hear of some of his "benevolent" ways or actions. Instead, we

get hints at his philosophy and world view that lack any of the “extremism” that we can find in most other quotes.

The quotes also don't support the kind of hypocrisy your vision of him suppose. He seems to be all about relative honesty.

To me, the quotes portray a person who does things DESPITE good or evil. Of a man who knows himself a villain but doesn't do evil for the kick of it.

That is the difference I see between Black's actions and those of previous emperors.

As you say there is a vast selection of evil in Praes' past, but they are all a variation of EVIL : from stupid evil to devilishly efficient evil passing by the deadly sins and a variation of evil traits or stereotypes. Except for Benevolent, I don't think there is any other emperor who didn't mind doing arguably GOOD things though (and you might correct me on that).

And Black has already done enough “good” stuff to be called Benevolent (by Praes' standards) like freeing the greenskins or raising the standard of living of Callow's peasantry.

Hitogami

I was sold on the idea until the last quote...Black doesn't deal well with High Lords

Someguy

I think he's saying that to the High Lords as he's about to hang all of them and one of them was shouting that he too will suffer the same fate.

Shveiran

He hasn't. Yet.

[Liliet](#)

No.

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks for pulling those out. ♥

Mammon

Oh no, this does sound like Black, except the last one. But the name Benevolent sounds like the new Akua, who does have shapeshifting abilities now. Treachery armed with the knowledge of the Black Knight Amadeus's teachings, the power of Evil and Friendship both weaponised to ride success like a wave, and especially the last quote actually sounds like one that the new Akua would make to own up both to her old self and her new teachings and understandings.

Andrew Mitchell

OMG you've cracked the mystery!! During Book 6 Akua is put on the throne to replace Alaya and becomes Dread Emperor Benevolent.

Soma

I saw Nuke_The_Earth's comment and didn't read all the way through the chain, and came to Mammon's conclusion independently, so I think Mammon got it, and beat me to it too. I kinda wish we could edit our comments so I could put that in it the one I commented off Nuke_The_Earth.

It it is right, Mammon might have the best twist call anyone has made, or will make, in the history of the guide.

Soma

Oh fuck me, its Akua isn't it?

"By hook and crook we will all hang, High Lords, from a noose woven of our many loose ends. But cheer up: none are beyond salvation, not even the likes of us. Let us see, at long last, if we can turn back the tyranny of the sun." – Extract from the coronation speech of Dread Emperor Benevolent the First – Epilogue

This reads like a reformed Akua who got 'redeemed'. In fact every quote reads like someone who's been either in Cat's or Black's orbit, but not quite like them. Benevolent doesn't quite fit Black and he's the type to wiggle out of something he sees as beneath him. Doesn't quite read like Cat because they don't have the tinge of necessary evil. Those quotes read like an Akua that learned at Catherine's knee.

The redemption bit is her current modus operandi as well a move to benevolent action. It is also likely to give Akua what she originally wanted in a cursed monkey paw way in

comparison to how Akua would have originally started out wanting things.

I'm probably wrong because that would be an unrepentantly wild twist. But out of the people in Cat's orbit it best fits Akua's current MO.

Soma

See Mammon's comment, they beat me to it by a mile.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/07/12/chapter-55-renewal/comment-page-1/#comment-49505>

Javvies

No. Can't be Akua.

She'd be Dread Empress Benevolent, not Dread Emperor Benevolent. If, that is, she were to climb the Tower and take Benevolent as her reign name.

If we assume it is someone in the orbit of Cat and/or Amadeus, Benevolent could be Hakram or Grem, but I don't see either calling themselves Benevolent. And Masego doesn't care enough.

Maybe a fallen Hero, or a Hero Cat and/or Amadeus worked on to leverage into taking over Praes.

Oh. I know who it is.

It is the most generous one himself, Robber. He'd totally call himself Dread Emperor Benevolent. As he did what he does to people.

Andrew Mitchell

I refuse to let you spoil my fun with this idea.

Akua's just a spirit anyway. She could easily take on a male persona for a laugh. Especially if she needed to ensure she was climbing the tower without being associated with Cat or Amadeus.

Sparsebeard

You think too small, it's actually Akua bodysnatching Black, lol!

The people of the empire will eat from her hand.

Andrew Mitchell

Hahahahaha. You're right. That's even better!! 😊

Mammon

Like I said, Akua has shapeshifting powers. She can be posing as the Black Knight becoming Emperor Benevolent. Though Robber would indeed be a good contender.

[Liliet](#)

Welcome to the hell of *that* crack theory.

Sparsebeard

Yeah, I saw it mentionned in the comments and I was like "Nah, no way!", then I re-read the quotes and started re-reading the whole story...

Now I can't get it out of my head lol... perhaps that tinfoil hat I'm wearing now doesn't help in that regard...

[Liliet](#)

It doesn't fit the epigraphs format (EE doesn't go for cheap fakeouts, and 'this historical dread emperor is actually from the future lol sike' would very much be one), doesn't fit the plot (what dread emperor and what high lords), doesn't fit Amadeus's sense of humor (he would not choose that reigning name) and doesn't fit Amadeus's personality (don't even get me started...)

sutortyrannus

>and doesn't fit Amadeus's personality (don't even get me started...)

Please do get started, dear. I sincerely enjoy reading your thoughts on the topic.

[Liliet](#)

Alright 😊

So the thing about Benevolent from the quotes is that his MO is using Good to cover Evil. Or... using Good as a tool for inherently Evil, or at least selfish, ends.

Amadeus uses both Good and Evil in his toolbox, true. But which of them does he go for whenever he can and which does he employ only as much and as far as he believes is entirely necessary?

And much more interestingly, WHAT ARE HIS GOALS

Because let me tell you, *personal salvation* is... not exactly... on the list. Or personal comfort. Or personal survival. Or anything personal at all actually. Whatever you think of Amadues's approach to 'the ends

justify the means', it's pretty explicit in the text that he's quite possibly *the* most selfless character in Guide, in that genuine "wait, MY needs? what about my needs? how are they relevant to anything?" way.

Moreover, one of Benevolent's core ideas appears to be slipping away from justice, tricking his way out of responsibility.

Compare this with "blaming Fate is the greatest moral cowardice" Amadeus. *Moral fucking cowardice* okay. That's a phrasing he casually uses in a conversation where he's attempting to convince the other person that he has no principles.

And compare his inner monologue of "if any of these things [morality, justice, principle] were inherent instead of ascribed, they would be rendered meaningless" to Benevolent's signature "morality is a force, not a law". One of the two is a cynicist who takes advantage of Creation to benefit himself. The other is an idealist who does not consider himself to live up to his own standards – "this does not excuse the principle of behavior", anyone?

Amadeus is like REVERSE Benevolent. He's as opposite to that one guy as they come.

And he's also likely not going to be Dread Emperor.

Leventide

In the last quote he's talking of turning back the tyranny of the sun, which refers to Callow. Therefore it can't be Black, since that would mean him betraying Cat.

[shieldredblog](#)

What was the Tyranny of the Sun again? I thought it was a Meizien thing.

Shveiran

I think you are stating as fact things that are not.

EE never said that those quotes are from the past; as was mentioned, many quotes have been presented to us in a moment where they were clearly still waiting to be written (most frequently in Book II); just because these are also from a Dread Emperor, I see no reason to assume they are from the past. It's not a "cheap

fakeout" if it only contradicts things people are assuming without a real reason.

We have seven quotes about Benevolent. Short aphorism that are somehow funny.

That... is not really enough to judge someone.

If you told me "Amadeus cannot become Traitorous" I'd reply "yeah, obviously".

This theory is not quite as "tin foil hatish".

There are differences between how Amadeus is now, and the image we can derive from those quotes of Benevolent".

However.

Amadeus, as he is now, will not survive.

Cat told him as much. He said he knows as much. We know as much.

He is at a pivot.

If he does embrace it and change, he will likely become Dread Emperor. Who else is there?

And if he does become Dread Emperor, I fail to see in those quotes anything that has me going "no, it's impossible Amadeus would say anything like this later down the line".

I don't know if this will happen, but I think it's more believable than most theories that go around. If only because we don't know enough about Benevolent to really argue either point.

[Liliet](#)

>EE never said that those quotes are from the past; as was mentioned, many quotes have been presented to us in a moment where they were clearly still waiting to be written (most frequently in Book II); just because these are also from a Dread Emperor, I see no reason to assume they are from the past. It's not a "cheap fakeout" if it only contradicts things people are assuming without a real reason.

I'm not assuming ALL quotes are from the past. I'm assuming quotes NOT DIRECTLY SPECIFIED TO BE FROM THE FUTURE are from the past, since the epigraphs have been a vehicle to give us understanding of historical Praes from the beginning. Benevolent's quotes have been part of that, helping define what Praes HAS BEEN LIKE, narratively. And he's iconic in his own way, showing the mastery of the narrative that Dread Emperors HAVE been capable of

demonstrating in the past, all the while not deviating from Praes's actual pattern.

It's an important beat in undersatnding of historical Praes, and undermining it would be a bad narrative move.

Shveiran

I think I'm missing something. All EE has told us is that Benevolent was a Dread Emperor; assuming he is from the past is reasonable, don't get me wrong, but it turns out that assumption was wrong, I wouldn't say the author tricked us into thinking that.

As a different exemple, take Aysha: the quotes tell us she is penning a memoirs. If it turns out "LOL that was a different Aysha altogether" that would be tricking us.

But I have been assuming that means she survives to have it published, and that is MY assumption; if it turns out that she dies and, say, the Hellhound has it polished and published as a way to honor her friend, the quote still makes perfect sense and I can only lament my assuming something was certain when it wasn't.

[Liliet](#)

Erratic presented Benevolent as part of past Praes's characterization. If it turns out that LOL SIKE it wasn't past Praes's characterization at all, that's bad writing.

Shveiran

I am arguing he did not, in fact, present him as anything but a Dread Emperor of Praes.

Maybe he is, and the theory is wrong. But if it isn't, there is no bad writing involved. Merely a reader assuming something that was never said to be canon.

We know Irritant, Maleficent, Vile, Traitorious and a few others are past rulers. Benevolent, Massacre and others have never been referenced in the fiction itself, and thus we have no context to infer anything BUT the fact that they were Dread Emperors or Empresses.

EE is using the quotes to expand his worldbuilding. But if anything, he has established he is NOT limiting himself to quotes from the past by including quotes from the future or present. If it is, it was foreshadowed as a possibility. If it isn't, the quotes being quotes proves nothing.

Keep in mind, I'm not arguing for the theory to be certain, I simply don't understand why you are certain it is ludicrous.

Liliet

Because Erratic has always been precise in his worldbuilding-via-quotes.

We know which quotes are from the future. It's immediately obvious when they are, they are clearly marked as such. They establish how the world *will be*.

Imagine if we suddenly find out that actually Aisha Bishara's memoirs belong to some other Aisha Bishara in the past talking about some other Catherine Foundling who just so happened to have existed before. After all, it was never *explicitly stated in canon* to be the same Aisha, was it? We just *assumed*!

Benevolent fit a particular section of epigraphs that played a particular role in giving us understanding of historical Praes.

sutortyrannus

First and foremost, thank for expending the time and effort to elaborate.

Now for a few rebuttals.

>It doesn't fit the epigraphs format (EE doesn't go for cheap fakeouts, and 'this historical dread emperor is actually from the future lol sike' would very much be one), doesn't fit the plot (what dread emperor and what high lords), doesn't fit Amadeus's sense of humor (he would not choose that reigning name)

I have to disagree. The epigraphs have a strong trend of pulling snippets from past and future and linking them to relevant themes in their attached chapters (Aisha and Juniper's memoirs, Firstborn religious texts). Regarding the Dread Emperors/Empresses in

particular, they've given us an insight into the mentality of the Praesi ruling class, and how it's evolved from Maleficient I to Malicia. Given that we have no precedent for a non-Evil ruling name, that Praes is itself entering an era without precedent, and the implication Amadeus was the one to come up with the idea in the first place (Malicia told Tasia that a "dear friend" wanted her to choose the name "Trustworthy"), quotes from Dread Emperor Benevolent wouldn't be a fake-out but a valuable piece of foreshadowing.

There's more I want to add, but I have to go for now. Rest assured – the weekend will not pass without your conversion to the Way. 😊

Liliet

> Regarding the Dread Emperors/Empresses in particular, they've given us an insight into the mentality of the Praesi ruling class

Exactly. They've given us an insight into the mentality of the Praesi ruling class from a handful of varying representatives, from Massacre to Terribilis... and from Vile to Benevolent.

Listen, this theory makes me want to throw up. Like, literally. Like, when it first appeared, I was the one to confirm that we'd not had mention of Benevolent in the text, because I thought it was funny, but then people took it seriously, and... no. It's gross. It's ew. If erratic actually does this it'll be the worst idea he'd ever had.

The lady doth protest too much

It's been obvious since the first quote that Benevolent is Amadeus. The discrepancy you perceive could be him being ironic when talking in-story to a Praesi audience. It's not like he has no sense of humor, or the other Dread Emperor quotes are all dripping with sincerity. You're being too much of a presumptuous literalist working off very thin material.

Also, more generally, you aren't the author, nor are you the most ardent fan of this series, just among the chattiest and most cocksure. Other people can be perceptive and pick up on breadcrumbs left by the author that you choose to ignore. It's your prerogative to read texts as you

like, but claiming "It's gross. It's ew." is incredibly pretentious.

[Liliet](#)

>It's been obvious since the first quote that Benevolent is Amadeus.

what

the theory only came up during the 'what Name was Bard talking about' discussion after Epilogue 4, until then it occurred to literally no-one (that i know of)

>or the other Dread Emperor quotes are all dripping with sincerity

yes, actually, they are. The other Dread Emperor quotes tend to be either very literal, or overly-obvious-in-context (see: Atrocious's recent quote about taking a step to the left). The Dread Emperor quotes have been 100% accurate reflections of their MO's and personalities, as far as we know

>but claiming "It's gross. It's ew." is incredibly pretentious

no, it's me talking about my personal perception, in response to the assurance that I will be converted to the theory. *Even if it's correct and I'm wrong and erratic is in fact going to do this*, I'm never going to be onboard with it because that's how I feel about it. That's what I was referring to.

If anything, it was presumptuous of that person to say that I *will* be converted to the theory. However instead of just *accusing them of that failing* I went into explaining the reason why.

> just among the chattiest and most cocksure

-bows-

Speck of Stardust

Your biggest argument seems to lie in the idea that Black would never seek personal salvation... Which is flawed due to 1 kinda important thing. "I am," I said, "going to build a better world. Even if I have to drag everyone into it kicking and screaming. So there's your choice, Black: either you make yourself into a man that deserves

to live in that world, or you're just another corpse I step over on my way there."-

Considering how this chapter ends

"I handed him the full Accords," he said.

Why, I almost asked, but already knew the answer.

Either my father would sign the damned thing, or he'd be sold so that everyone else did.

I stalked off, furious at no one in particular, to find Amadeus of the Green Stretch.-

Like really?

Even including the idea that the quotes of the dread emperors/empresses show the idea of Praesi thought process, why cant it show what is needed for them to be after the timeframe of this story? I mean hell the story has done a wonderful job of making goddam Akua into seeking fucking salvation, why the utter hells do you think that Black cant? ,To be frank if black signs the accords then Amadeus can easily become Benevolent and if he doesn't sign the accords? He will die because Cat will be unable to use him to control Praesi how she needs it to be controlled.

[Liliet](#)

My point is that Amadeus does not view morality as a means to selfish ends. He views morality as an end in itself, and himself as a tool used for others' benefit. This is different enough from Benevolent's stated M0 to make it *not clever* as a fakeout.

[Malek Deneith](#)

While I've no intent on insisting Black will become Benevolent (I don't mind the idea, but I don't feel the need to champion it either), I feel it needs to be pointed out that Black we've got to know this far might not be the same man as Black we'll get to see going forward. You have to remember Amadeus has been through at least three major events that could and probably should influence how he sees the world.

Event the first would be Cat stabbing him at the end of book instead of killing him and taking his Name. Given the talk that followed on making a better world and telling Black to either die or become a man worthy of said world it does feel like she was nudging him into something of a low-key redemption story.

Event the second – loss of his Name. We know that Names influence how their bearers act. Not nearly to

the degree that fey titles do, but someone like Amadeus who spent forty-plus years as a Black Knight – even if he was a nonstandard one – was probably more than a little entrenched in his ways. Now he is likely less so, *and* this was followed up by a double whammy of Bard coming out to mess with his head.

Event the third and final – the recent soul separation and reconnection. Back when Cat got her hands on Black's soulless body Akua made quite a speech on how Sain't butchery is likely to affect Amadeus once he's stitched back together. Now the most recent info we have on this is Akua saying the losses were "slight" but... why write this into the story at all if it becomes a non-issue? Perhaps Akua is wrong, perhaps the loss runs deeper but it touches areas she didn't think to check. Or perhaps it indeed is a "slight" loss but at a precisely right aspect of his psyche to make a difference of some sort. Either way I doubt this will go by without some sort of fallout.

All in all I think we're going to see a changed Amadeus in months to come. How much of a change and in what regard it'll be, that remains to be seen. But we shouldn't assume he'll remain exactly the same as he was before.

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[Liliet](#)

And you think Amadeus is going to be a *worse, more selfish* and *less idealistic* person than before? That's where you see this narrative going?

I mean, if that's your prediction, I can't stop you...

[Fayhem](#)

You and I have personally already had this discussion (at some length!) so I don't want to rehash it, but something that I don't know if I commented before is that my disagreement with you over whether Amadeus could become Benevolent is based much, much less on disagreeing with your assessment of Amadeus (it's a little rosier than mine, but ultimately not super super far off) than it is on disagreeing with your assessment of Benevolent. You are (well, appear to be – I don't want to claim mindreading) drawing extremely strong, definitive conclusions about what Benevolent is/was/will be like on very scant evidence indeed.

Let me put something to you. I believe that all of Benevolent's attributed quotes aren't just compatible with my interpretation of Amadeus' character, I believe

that there are at least plausible interpretations of the quotes (I won't claim more than that since I don't have any more evidence than you do) that are fully compatible with the interpretation of Amadeus' character that you have expressed to me before, unless I'm misremembering that wildly. Happy to elaborate if you're interested. 😊

Liliet

I have, while pondering this discussion, come to a conclusion about my own reasoning that I would like to explain.

Yes, in a vacuum, I could see Amadeus at one point uttering quotes attributed to Benevolent at some hypothetical point if he had to play this role.

However, the quotes are just far enough off from his character that *it's not a funny joke* for them to match up. It's not a clever closing of the circle. It would be an additional bit of information – that Benevolent is actually someone who holds the exact opposite beliefs from how he states them – not something encoded within the epigraphs themselves.

Which is where we come back to the issue of the format. It's not clever for Benevolent to have been Amadeus all along, any more than it is for Amadeus to secretly have been Neshamah's revenant or Traitorous in disguise all along. Funny as a meme, but not good storytelling wrt actual plot/worldbuilding.

I.E. if Benevolent's quotes had *actually* been Suspiciously Identical to Amadeus's unique views™, I could see this reveal being a clever twist at the end.

As it is, it would be an utterly unforeshadowed out of the left field one.

Fayhem

> I.E. if Benevolent's quotes had actually been Suspiciously Identical to Amadeus's unique views™, I could see this reveal being a clever twist at the end.

As it is, it would be an utterly unforeshadowed out of the left field one.

I mean. No offense intended, but given that (significantly) more of the people considering this seem to find Benevolent's quotes to line up pretty well with Amadeus' unique views than not, I don't think "utterly unforeshadowed" is really fair. And

again, even if we set aside any disagreements over your interpretation of Amadeus' views I don't think your interpretation of *Benevolent* is actually necessarily justified by the text. I.e., I don't believe those quotes actually evidence Benevolent holding "the exact opposite beliefs" to how you interpret Amadeus' views.

Liliet

Those quotes *describe* exactly opposite beliefs. I agree it is not evidence that the person saying them actually literally means what they're saying. That's not relevant to my point.

And, well... most people who disagree with a theory aren't me and aren't coming in here to argue with it -_-

It's very common in this fandom to hold objectively incorrect interpretations of Amadeus that don't take into account all available evidence 🤔

willfultrooper

Some of the quotes from Benevolent do oppose the beliefs of Amadeus. But you're looking at him as if his character doesn't evolve/grow.

At this point in the story Black is at a crossroads as to whether he dies or lives according to Catherine's decision, which is simply put "Change for my new world or die in your old one". The only things I can see that clash with Blacks' character is his hatred or distaste for wasteland nobility which clash with the 7th quote which comes from his coronation speech. As well as the first quote which appears a bit too monologuey or tempting the story which Black is not known to do.

However the 7th quote could be argued due to character change. I construct this around the basis that 1. Catherine despite her dislike for nobility has kept them alive in Callow and has even placed some of them in positions of power and 2. she has wastelanders fighting in her legions and 3. several of her officers are wasteland nobility such as Ashara who would not agree with the purge of her family. Like I mentioned before Black is at a crossroads where he either signs the accords or doesn't which is a pivot for his character development.

Signing them would mean that he has accepted Catherine's view of the world and thus will be a pivot for his character development. Or he dies or Catherine lets him go. There are so many ways this could go that I'm not going into detail. But that would reduce the likelihood of him being Benevolent.

The first quote is the only thing that I can think of that clashes with Blacks' personality and even then this could just be a quip that he has with one of the wasteland nobility that is challenging him. Catherine done this with Akua and the Lone Swordsman.

I don't really agree with the Black is Benevolent as it would reduce the amount of lore The Empire has as well as being a bit too obvious in an otherwise nuanced novel (Of course EE could be doing this because sometimes foreshadowing is just that obvious) but to say that it is a 0% likelihood is presumptuous considering the quotes are all we have to go off of, since they haven't been confirmed as past, present or future. Of course I may have misinterpreted your premise entirely and you may have an argument based on one of the other quotes that I haven't thought of. If so I'd like to know. If it's well founded then I will willingly drop my argument or present a counter argument accordingly.

[Liliet](#)

As I have already mentioned, my biggest issue is with "morality is a force, not a law".

Honestly at this point I want to go into the dreaded 'new chapter spoilers' territory and point out that AS IT TURNS OUT, Amadeus's issue with Accords was 'I want this but more of it' all along. He built his very first argument against – 'isolates the Dread Empire' – with the eye to the proposal of the magic academy, which is a very deeply in-character thing for him to do, remember the earlier mentioned episode of Wekesa flatly refusing to teach magic in War College when Amadeus asked? Between that and the amount of focus/interest he had in the institution itself, education is a huge interest of his.

What I'm trying to say is: "Like I mentioned before Black is at a crossroads where he either signs the accords or doesn't which is a pivot for

his character development." It's not. It never was this pivot. Note how the first part of the discussion is Catherine repeating his own logic, things HE taught her, back to him. He believed those things all along. He was onboard with the Accords before they were ever made, because they are a codification of his own beliefs already.

Amadeus was always working 'for the greater good', even if he'd never put it like that and his greater good was very narrowly focused on the concerns of the Dread Empire of Praes in particular. Benevolent's very *mentality* as gotten across in those quotes is different. It does not *point* at Amadeus in a clever way, which would make it a very shitty twist, just narratively.

Taken separately, the *inaccuracy* of the quotes and the incongruity of the format don't quite deal the death blow. But together they mean there wouldn't be a *point* to the twist. It would add nothing. There is no clever connection to be drawn, no realization to be had. Only losses in, as you said, the amount of lore the Empire has.

willfultrooper

if we're referring to the, as of today, newly minted chapter 57 of this book then yes, it would be out of character for Amadeus to reject and then agree to a proposal as if it was a new idea. I do not dispute this, and would only cheapen the moment in chapter 57. However it is not implied either covertly or in-covertly that Black has refused the accords. In fact only recent chapters point towards him discovering or at least understanding the ground works for the accords. To clarify this is the first instance (that I know of) in which he received the accords as written by Hakram, Vivienne and Catherine.

As for the quotes I cannot in anyway gleam any information as to how the Dread Emperor is, personality wise. So I cannot say for certain. An argument can be made however that Dread Emperor Benevolent could, as you put it, be working towards the greater good. I refer to the 7th quote, where he informs the High lords that they will all hang but that salvation is not beyond them. Though that may be stretching the quote to its' limits I admit. However this could be a turning point for the empire in which after

experiencing a new kind of rule under Black and Malacia, Black/Amadeus takes over and could then refer to the accords as "their" salvation. Again, this is speculation (more like an additional possibility) and should not in any way be taken at face value. There is also the additional factor that the quotes don't really hint or at the very least act against Amadeus' greater good for Praes.

[Liliet](#)

The quotes don't hint *towards* Amadeus is my issue.

[Liliet](#)

OH P.S. I have thought of a possibly good way to point out the problem with "morality is a force, not a law".

This quote is from Peers, the one time we've seen Amadeus actually debate/discuss morality. It can be fairly taken to be his signature opinion, since it's pretty distinctive and fits very well with everything else he's ever said/expressed on the topic, as well as with IRL schools of thought he's vaguely parallel to:

>"We are born nothing, and taught a set of... rules for a lack of better term, that allow us to determine what is acceptable behaviour and what is not," the prisoner said. "What irks me, Pilgrim, is your insistence that these rules are a set of virtues inherent to the fabric Creation instead of covenant between mortals for mortal purposes."

Amadeus is quite literally saying that morality is *a law, not a force* here.

willfultrooper

From what I can take from that quote it seems more like Amadeus is irked, meaning irritated or annoyed, by the fact that Pilgrim thinks these rules are inherent to the fabric of creation. Of course this is from the understanding that what you refer to as law here from this specific passage was the "virtues inherent to the fabric Creation."

If your referring to morality as the "set of rules" which implies that morality is a law, according to the wording by "rules" which are just another less specific word for "law" (with the

difference, from my understanding, being that rules are less strict. An example, a rule would be don't walk on the grass you could do so and it would be socially frowned upon but there would be no legal repercussions. If it was a law you would either be fined or jailed. So basically stakes are raised.) You would be right in assuming that Amadeus would think of them as laws in this passage. However he may not necessarily believe in them being laws as the statement is followed by "... For lack of a better term" which implies he had not come upon a better explanation or metaphor of morality, which he could have come upon just before becoming Benevolent or after.

[Liliet](#)

The way I see it, the relative positions are:

"Morality is something that needs to be followed because everyone, or at least the overwhelming majority, agrees on it"

vs

"Morality is a force of nature, like gravity, and you benefit from taking it into account, though cheating that force is if anything a proud and noble endeavour"

Ugh, it's not like I could argue that a stretch into fitting would be impossible. My point is that immediate intuitive interpretation, *which is all we have for the epigraphs*, is in the exact opposite direction.

[Liliet](#)

Which is to say,
>(significantly) more of the people considering this seem to find Benevolent's quotes to line up pretty well with Amadeus' unique views than not don't mistake vocal minority and majority...

Sparsebeard

> Those quotes describe exactly opposite beliefs.

Come on, some of those quotes are very Black-like:

"Please, do keep digging your own grave. I look forward to your splendidly inevitable demise." – Dread Emperor Benevolent the First – Chapter 19: Pivot

– What he'd say to any villain building a Death fortress or launching into a monologue.

"There's no surer sign you're being played than being certain you've grasped your opponent's intent." – Dread Emperor Benevolent – Chapter 6: Rapport

– You could find it in the Evil Overlord's List, it's just smart. Not particularly Black-like, but certainly is consistent with integrating the narrative in your plans.

"Morality is a force, not a law. Deviating from it has costs and benefits both – a ruler should weigh those when making a decision, and ignore the delusion of any position being inherently superior." – Dread Emperor Benevolent – Villainous Interlude: Decorum

Black wants to WIN. He doesn't care about doing evil things like murdering orphans before they become heroes or razing the countryside. Neither does he care about doing good things like raising the standard of living of his subjects or freeing the greenskins from oppression. It's all a cost-benefit calculus in order to achieve his goals, despite morality.

"Peace is little more than the recognition that the reasons for which war was undertaken are no longer relevant." – Dread Emperor Benevolent the First – Chapter 17: Contingent

– Same as the precedent, Black is fine with eternal peace with Callow, as long as we wins the peace.

"There is only one lesson to be learned from shatranj: no matter who wins the game, the pieces return to the same box." – Dread Emperor Benevolent the First – Chapter 30: Witness

– Pretty neutral quote, I got nothing for or against it being said by Black.

"Own what you are, no matter how ugly the face of it. No lies are ever more dangerous to a villain than those they tell themselves." – Dread Emperor Benevolent – Chapter 70: The Calm Before

– "You're a monster, aren't you?" I spoke softly into the night, looking at him from the corner of my eye.

He smiled. "The very worst kind," he replied.

"By hook and crook we will all hang, High Lords, from a noose woven of our many loose ends. But cheer up: none are beyond salvation, not even the likes of us. Let us see, at long last, if we can turn back the tyranny of the sun." – Extract from the coronation speech of Dread Emperor Benevolent the First – Epilogue

– The most arguable quote. Taken literally I don't think it's likely for Black to be anything like "Redeemed", he's too entrenched in his identity as villain. But even after this quote Benevolent still considers himself a villain (see 4th quote).

I'm guessing it would be an alternative meaning of "Salvation". And signing the accords as Praes would be a victory for practical evil since it would mean that the other good nations would be forced to deal with him, thus "turning the tyranny of the sun".

Fayhem

Nice breakdown! Re: the shatranj quote, I think there's actually a couple points that make that very plausible it's Amadeus specifically.

A), "there's only one lesson to be learned from shatranj" – it's canon that Amadeus dislikes shatranj, not as a game per se but because people try to draw lessons from it about warfare/ planning/etc. that the game is not correctly designed to provide. So "only one lesson to be learned" is a backhanded reference to that point that he doesn't think shatranj is actually a good teacher of lessons.

B), this definitely represents a plausible version of Amadeus as changed by Cat. Amadeus had his whole speech about how he wants Evil to win for a change, while Cat's thing at this point is about controlling the clash so it doesn't grind up innocents by the hundreds of thousands. Amadeus responding to Cat's call to become someone who deserves to exist in her better world by realizing that "victory" for a side that regards him as no more than another pawn in their game is meaningless and accomplishes nothing for what he actually cares about is a natural evolution/ character growth towards meeting Cat's call there.

There's been a Dread Emperor Benevolent quoted before, but seldom if ever mentioned as an historical figure... you might be on to something.

[Liliet](#)

No.

Soma

Alas. How I'd like to see Rozala, Cat, Black, Pilgrim and Cordelia all hitched to the same wagon. I do hope that perhaps signing the accords would be a way out for Black, as seems to have been implied.

IDKWhoitis

I think even Pilgrim could vouch for Black, in a weird twisted way. The Largest Lesser Evil he's met. Black would be an effective cap on Praes. Black is one of the finest tacticians in name lore and combat, and simply killing him for prosecuting a war would be too much of a cost down the line.

Alternatively, Pilgrim might find him to be too large a liability too have in Cat's hands. And he's as ruthless as Black when dealing with those.

[Liliet](#)

Note how Pilgrim was willing to leave the stage entirely and leave everything in Cat's hands period. That train has sailed, he's in her corner, and it's not like he didn't know she would defend her mentor. I think he'll stay neutral at worst, and at best might actually indeed back Cat on this yeah.

IDKWhoitis

Unless the Bard intervenes. And the Crippling of Named rulers will certainly limit her influence on national levels. She might not stand idly by while the Accords form.

Other than Bard, I find it likely Pilgrim will at worst, accept Cat's plan. Maybe with a little whining.

[Liliet](#)

You're assuming Bard isn't backing the Accords as if it was her own plan.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Agreed. Pilgrim knows that a big chunk of what Cat has been up to has specifically been about rescuing Black. Cat doesn't

have many intimates, and Amadeus is her oldest surviving relationship – mentor, friend, and yes father-figure to the orphan.

While it was never said explicitly, I think it's pretty clear that at least half the reason the heroes *didn't* just kill him to begin with, was specifically to keep the Black Queen Catherine away from lines like "you killed my father. Prepare to die." (Lurved the movie... but consider that if you know one line from *The Princess Bride*, it's that one. Story!)

[Liliet](#)

It's certainly something Black considered as a motivation for them – that he's more dangerous as a mentor to avenge than as a player in his own right (he was also very amused by that). And yeah I don't think there's going to be GASPS OF INDIGNANT SURPRISE at Cat refusing to hand him over.

RoflCat

Maybe it'll be Cat's turn to teach Black about fitting into that better world of hers.

I'm sure there's some importance to that moment when the Student and the Mentor swap position, even if temporarily.

Heck he wouldn't be the first Praesi she needs to teach how to fit into society. (Akua)

Andrew Mitchell

> Maybe it'll be Cat's turn to teach Black about fitting into that better world of hers.

For sure. And the student/mentor swap will be permanent IMO. Remember, Amadeus wanted Cat to succeed (and, I think, excel) him.

erebus42

Awww, I can't wait to hear what I can only assume will be a heartwarming father-daughter chat. They have so much to catch up on; his loss of name, her loss of divinity, her new religion... I'm sure it will be just lovely.

Andrew Mitchell

Y E S

Now **this** is the sort of Friday cliffhanger I ♥ ♥ ♥ ... When I just *KNOW* the next chapter is going to be A M A Z I N G ! ! !

medailyfun

The next chapter can easily be a description of her long way to his tent, observing the camp and chatting with sappers 😊
The author excels in readers torture

Andrew Mitchell

Funny. 😊 But, no, that's not going to happen. I just don't get the hate that EE gets for cliffhangers and perceived padding.

Clint

You mean the three interludes we'll get next week?

IDKWhoitis

Some light heart jabs, maybe even a hug. I find it likely Cat will see aged far further than she remembers. His name isn't reinforcing his appearance anymore.

Or, alternatively, if he looks slightly changed, but Not old and weary, I would take that as confirmation that he is aspiring to a new Name, Dread Emperor perhaps?

[TeK](#)

Nay. The central tenet of accords: no Named Rulers. If he aspires to be Dread Emperor in Name, his days are short.

Someguy

Unless he sacrifices the power of this Name to the Gods Below to separate the Name from the earthly title?

IDKWhoitis

I think rules on abdication will include delayed clauses. I don't think Cat or anyone sitting at the table are expecting Tyrant and Hierarch to immediately step down. Maybe the majority of the clauses will take effect with the next generation of rulers or after 10 years, whichever occurs first.

Hell, If Black signs for Praes, I think the rest of the conference will have to accept him as someone influential in Praes, and getting Praes to sign this was always going to be a problem. Of course, optics of the deal may have to be altered to make this look like a good thing for everyone involved, rather than Black escaping the noose.

[Liliet](#)

I don't get the impression Cat is expecting to get Tyrant and Hierarch onboard with the Accords.

I also think that getting Praes on board will be easier than it first seems. We've heard it straight from Malicia that she wants to form treaties to ensure the continued growth of Praes, and that she acknowledges that Praes cannot rise and stay there if it does so alone. With Black as an intermediary, it's likely she'll honestly consider the accords. She might have issues with certain clauses, but that's what diplomacy and negotiations are for – that's not a dealbreaker, just a point of contention.

Mental Mouse

"So, it seems my former student has lapped both of us. We're being invited to sign a treaty with Levant, Procer, and the League. Along with Callow and the Firstborn Under Night. Still waiting to hear from some of the *other* nations. *There's* some international relations for you!

Fayhem

I'm pretty sure Malicia is getting got. IIRC Cat has repeatedly tagged her in the text as somebody who's going to have to go down the line. Heck, the initial premise of her negotiating position at the Battle of the Camps was basically "you want to invade Praes and topple/off Malicia? go nuts, I'll portal you there to make it easier". And let's not forget that Malicia had Ratface murdered in cold blood, along with a big fat chunk of the rest of Cat's government. To be fair Cat has shown with Razin and Nauk that she's capable of letting a friend's death go if it seems sufficiently advisable, but she let Razin live because she looked at him and decided "this is a future asset, not a liability".

Malicia didn't just kill one of Cat's oldest friends, she is an intrigue-addicted Named ruler who had a hand in enabling the Doom of Liesse and is fundamentally opposed to enacting the fundamental reforms of Praes that are needed both for internal reasons and to assure the rest of the continent they don't need to march in there and handle shit themselves to prevent another city-sized superweapon from being built. She isn't just an issue because she's a problem right now, she is a long-term liability for deep-seated character reasons that are not going to just evaporate. And to expand on the political aspect noted before, while Black may be hated by the people for burning granaries, Malicia is (accurately) blamed by the princes – AKA the people who

are actually in charge, and most particularly and especially the reigning First Prince – for fueling and extending the ruinous Proceran civil war long past the point of reason. And, y’know, making the deal to unleash the Dead King, which is a BIG FUCKING DEAL to Procer and soon to everyone else helping fight the dead. And the hate towards Black could be significantly bought off if they can ship in grain through the Twilit Way – the issue before was that they couldn’t get enough food there in time, but now...

tl;dr – absent some huge narrative shifts to make her seem both more reasonable AND more necessary, Malicia is going to be gone before the story’s over. Not impossible, but let’s not underestimate the size of the shift that would be required.

[Fayhem](#)

> I don’t get the impression Cat is expecting to get Tyrant and Hierarch onboard with the Accords.

Quite to the contrary in fact, I think she’s angling to throw them under that bus.

[Liliet](#)

Y E P

Someguy

Hierarch probably will sign the Accords because he hates his Name & title, and thinks of it as an abomination that infringes upon the Will of The Prople. He will sign it just to quit and abolish the Name from any authority Not Elected by The People. Then turn himself in for the tribunal to do the right thing and execute him.

[Liliet](#)

Sounds accurate XD

[Mental Mouse](#)

Possibly: “No named my claim a throne, but if an already-crowned ruler gains a name, they can finish their reign naturally according to the customs of their realm”.

Clint

That would let the Dead King sign on...

konstantinvoncarstein

At the moment, a ruler without a Name would not be able to stabilize Praes, let alone reform it so it could function without Names. The Liesse Accords will probably have a delayed effect concerning the Named rulers.

[TeK](#)

That's the kind of compromise that destroys the entire point of Accords. It is like making a monarchy to get rid of monarchy – kinda pointless is what I'm sayin'

konstantinvoncarstein

How would it be possible to change Praes and not have a Secret Emperor, like Amadeus is saying? Names are a cultural thing, and only a thorough reform of Praes could change things.

Novice

I can't wait for the inevitable "It's not a phase, dad! This is who I really am." talk.

IDKWhoitis

I think Black is too smart to not see this math too, and likely his plans are already in effect. Even if he doesn't sign, I suspect Cat won't be able to handle him over (not emotionally, but because he is not weak enough). The Legions in Exile would probably prefer to go down on a funeral pyre rather than letting the transgression pass...

Although, I suspect Black would be willing to sign. Black is her Father for a reason, and Cat's philosophy is really the bastardized version of Black's. I would find it highly suspect if he didn't want to sign. Likely a different plot afoot. But not necessarily one against Cat. Maybe a way to shape public perception to not make Cat responsible for him, and to relieve her the burden of haggling for his life for the Accords to actually get done.

I suspect the simple responses are not what will follow, and likely some light prodding on Cat's part is needed. (and by light prodding, I mean liberal use of a mace).

caoimhinh

I agree.

Really, there's nothing among the Accords that we have seen so far that goes against Amadeus' beliefs.

-Not using Angels and Demons? He's perfectly fine with it! He thinks that's for the best too, as Angels are meddlesome dudes that interrupt his side's plan and Demons are blighted things

that damage the fabric of creation.

-Not building Domsday Devices? Literally the reason he got into a fight with his best friend in the world, the Empress of Praes.

-No declaring senseless war? That was the whole purpose of integrating Callow into Praes instead of treating them as an oppressed colony, he raised Callow's standard of living under Praesi reign and was aiming to make it so they would be citizens of the Empire in real manner, so that Praes would not need to invade Callow for food and no longer need to blood its own citizens. He's all in for having peace.

-Having a functioning state that does not depend on Named? The whole point of the Reforms, both on Praesi institutions and the Legions of Terror.

-Strengthening relationships with other countries beyond Good and Evil? Both in Amadeus and Malicia's plans already and partly executed by them. Cordelia even has a copy of a treatise written by Alaya (If I'm not wrong it's "The End of the Age of Wonders") where she goes on length about such things and explores multiple strategies to achieve commercial, political and cultural alliances between countries, looking beyond their traditions as Good-aligned and Evil-aligned.

All this we have seen in multiple chapters and from multiple POVs.

The only thing I can think of Amadeus telling her to change is Cat's attempt on eliminating Named rulers, and not only because of his friendship with Alaya, but because doing that is honestly beyond Catherine's reach as those are cultural things and don't simply go away by signing things, you need to make *huge* changes in a country's way of life to eliminate a leader Name (Chieftain and Good King only disappeared because their respective cultures were brutalized and their nations conquered). Besides, she can't honestly be so arrogant as to expect that to not be a negotiation, the Accords will be signed but they won't be as her first draft, it would be ridiculous for every nation in the continent to sign and accept every single point of the Liesse Accords without modifications, that simply does not happen in any type of negotiation. She would have to conquer all of Calernia to be able to impose her treaty in unchanged terms to the other nations.

So I'm pretty confident Amadeus is all in for the Liesse Accords, hopefully he will have some questions regarding some points so we can learn more about what the documents actually say. He might even *improve* the Accords with his own insight.

Also, hopefully we'll see Scribe again, or at least someone will mention where the hell she is, as she simply disappeared after being confirmed to be on the run along Grem.

IDKWhoitis

I'm afraid that Black might find the Accords a worthy funeral pyre to die on. If he makes an elaborate showing of Cat murdering him or turning him over for justice, it would certainly make forcing the Accords through with less modifications possible, and very likely.

Black isn't a martyr, but if he sees a very viable way of completing his objectives, and his death is part of the plan, we know he will take it.

Hopefully he has changed a little, and will want to live to see the world after this war is done. After all this soul searching (*cough*) he is likely a changed man, and it makes an already unpredictable man, more so.

Andrew Mitchell

Excellent summary of the alignment between Amadeus and Cat.

[Liliet](#)

Cat can't hand him over for reasons entirely outside of his control, here. Like this has come up before – HE is more onboard with him getting killed *than literally anyone else around*. Including Cat. He's not going to take precautions, if nothing else this conversation might just reverse into "clearly giving me over is the right political move" "OH MY GOD YOU PIECE OF SHIT NOBODY ASKED YOU" again lmao.

IDKWhoitis

I'm just worried about what his opinion of Praes would be, and his thoughts on the Grem plan. Is he still needed is a difficult question to answer, and I suspect Black's own self evaluation will surprise us.

[Fayhem](#)

> Cat's philosophy is really the bastardized version of Black's *evolved version. FTFY. 😊

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, "new and improved" even.

Eva

He's coming back soon! Another great chapter, and Dad is returning to the fold 😊

Decius

The Black Knight is not going to sign the Liesse Accords.

The Representative of Praes is going to sign the Liesse Accords, on behalf of the Empress.

That, alone, will be enough to ensure that they go no further.

[TeK](#)

No Named Rulers is the main reason Malicia is staby-staby die-die.

edrey

so where is scribe? or assassin? the latter should have already killed his way in that island, and the first shouldn't be hiding anymore. and to be honest i really want to see cat making them kneel, they are really useless without Amadeus,

[TeK](#)

That is a weird notion. Why kneel? I mean, it's basically a pen and a dagger. No kidding they are useless sithout a guiding hand. What's wrong with that?

The lack of Eudokia is, though, deeply concerning.

edrey

you are totally forgetting how eudokia act, we dont have much information about assassin, but scribe has really big blinders about Amadeus to the point making him sacred, more less, and cant see the big picture or his legacy. if she doesnt reappear is fine, but i am pretty sure she will be back now that amadeus is back, she will try to force her way of thinking, and with her net of spies, that is not small thing. she need a sharp lesson or be killed before she cause something beyond repair, all for the sake of amadeus or what not

Raved Thrad

"While I would not hesitate a moment to ruin Archer's sleep, Vivienne at least should get to keep her slumber for a while yet."

ViviCat shipping intensifies

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Vivienne "painfully straight" Dartwick, yes. Alas.

Raved Thrad

And yet, who knows what is possible, Under The Night? 😊

Burnsy

Bet this conversation would've been a lot different if they'd known Cordy has gone full Caesar. I think this fully cements her and the angel corpse she dragged out of the lake as the endgame boss for book 5.

Also, while I'm very excited for the father/daughter reunion, anyone else absolutely desperate to find out what Scribe and Assassin have been up to this whole time? They've been off screen since the Calamities fractured.

Andrew Mitchell

> I think this fully cements her and the angel corpse she dragged out of the lake as the endgame boss for book 5.

Thanks for the reminder that the 'angel corpse from the lake' is waiting to fire. This may be a critical issue with getting Cordelia to sign the accords.

But as for this being the endgame for Book 6. Nah, I just don't see it. A significant factor in the final book? SURE. But not the boss fight. That's either going to be the Bard or the Dead King.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Where was it said that it was an angel corpse?

Andrew Mitchell

Towards the end of the first section in <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/01/14/prologue-5/>

Andrew Mitchell

Sorry. I also meant to say that it's not actually specified as an angel. It's implied though.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> The Augur had found a path through, narrow as it was, and it began with a corpse that was not a corpse beneath the waters of the lake at the heart of Procer. The Ashurans, it was said, had called on a masked and hallowed presence at the Battle of Thalassina. Cordelia Hasenbach would call on a lot worse if she had to.

That doesn't sound like she thinks it's an angel...

Andrew Mitchell

"Hallowed" definition is (according to the Cambridge Dictionary) "holy or respected". Hence, the chance that it is an angel. But it could be something else.

Interesting to see the "corpse that was not a corpse" line... it reminds me of "staff that is not a staff".

Javvies

"Hallowed" was used in reference to what the Ashurans called on at Thalassina. Not what Cordelia is considering.

"Cordelia would call on a lot worse if she had to." This implies that she's willing to do things that are worse than what the Ashurans did. Also ... I'm pretty sure that if there were an Angel corpse, it would probably be in a situation similar to that if the Angel corpse that was at Liesse. That is, partly out of step with Creation, and therefore not accessible via mundane works like dredging.

Also ... I'm pretty sure that there's a "fighting fire with fire" type reference used in relation to Cordelia's project ... and possibly in context with the Dead King.

Andrew Mitchell

> "Hallowed" was used in reference to what the Ashurans called on at Thalassina. Not what Cordelia is considering.

You're right. I was wrongly conflating those two sentences. Thanks for picking that up. So whatever is (was?) in that lake is something from Procer's past that is now something that is and isn't a corpse. I think you may be onto something when you mention the Dead King. It may be something left over from a previous invasion by the Dead King? Maybe something that was used to stop him previously, at great cost?

Javvies

Could predate Procer as an organized entity, for that matter.

Could date back to Triumphant's conquest of Calernia. Or even earlier.

We have way too little information to work with when it comes to Cordelia's project.

Cold Cyberia

If there's any Praesi that would uphold the Accords it's Black. His life's work has been reforging the Empire so that it no longer depends so much on their Named. I would go as far as to say that he'd leap on the chance to remove Named interventions in conflict since to him, that's the primary reason for why Evil always loses.

That's the chief difference between him and Malicia or most Praesi nobles. They've internalized their defeatism to such an extent that they don't believe they can win any conflict without resorting to dumb, extreme moves. Meanwhile, Black still believes that they can win wars through discipline and strategy.

A more pressing concern will be the removal of Named in the ruling class. The Dread Emperor/Empress is such an old Role and Name that I doubt anything short of destroying Praes would do the trick, a move that's obviously not feasible.

Fayhem

> A more pressing concern will be the removal of Named in the ruling class. The Dread Emperor/Empress is such an old Role and Name that I doubt anything short of destroying Praes would do the trick, a move that's obviously not feasible.

It seems currently unclear in the text whether it's possible to refuse a Name. It looks right now like Amadeus refused one when Bard was nudging him, but earlier it sure seemed like Anaxares wasn't able to. Though that apparent discrepancy might be resolvable by supposing that Anaxares might in theory have been able to refuse, except that the kanenas refused to allow it and he wasn't able psychologically to defy them in the end. So if it is possible to refuse a Name, then that would do the trick: take the title/political position of Dread Emperor, but refuse the Name when it tries to fall upon you. That might not actually destroy the Name, but if you can't claim the Name without the title and the holder of the title won't take it that would render it irrelevant, at least for the lifespan of that ruler (the clear weak spot there tbf).

caoimhinh

Actually, Bard simply said that he is a claimant, and that he is no longer into the Role of the Black Knight, but another that he considers "beneath him", however, it was left vague. It seems like Amadeus is right now a claimant to some Name, but doesn't have it yet, at this juncture anything can happen, but once the conditions are fulfilled the Name will latch onto him whether he wants it or not.

Now, what that Name is, that's the question.

Shveiran

Well, that will be an intense conversation.

However, though I understand how powerful a political move it would be to hand over Amadeus for war crimes, I really cannot understand in what world that will be REQUIRED.

I mean... oh no! The villanous Black Knight invaded Procer and torched the countryside! Thousands have died and more will starve! How awful!

Surely, THAT requires a public execution before we can move beyond it, doesn't it?

For fuck sake, I'm so sick of this.

Just in the past two years, the "good side" FORMED A COALITION with the express purpose of declaring total war on another kingdom, proceeded to DECLARE WAR on said kingdom, SACKED ITS CITIES, and TWICE ATTEMPTED TO INVADE BY LAND; and, after being repelled, REFUSED to both PAY REPARATIONS and STOP fucking TRYING.

All of this even occurred before Amadeus did his shit!

The Black Knight committed war crimes? Damn right he did! No questions there!

But can someone please explain to me how that is somewhat a sin whereas all the rest is a-ok without using the words "but he is a Villain" or "the Heavens will it"? Guess what, those are war crimes too!

But noooo, those don't count, silly me.

And before someone brings up civilian death counts, can I mention that making a naval block on Praesi and forcing a stop on commerce is inducing famine by simply another means? What are those civilians gonna eat, Wasteland dirt? The fact that apparently the Tower has reserves of grain to compensate and Procer doesn't simply means the bad guys were competent, not that the good guys did something any less grave.

But sure, they are Praesi civilian, so they don't count.

Anyone asking for Amadeus head must be willing to pay the full price for it: Amadis, Cordelia, the Iron Prince and whoever was in charge of Ashur's offensive (assuming they survived Thalassyna) should follow him on the block. It's not punishing war crimes, if you are only enforcing it on one side.

I mean, what the fuck did they EXPECT would happen? What are they complaining about, "oh but they didn't just let our superior force roll over them on the field, they cheated!" ? How was this an unproportioned response?

Sure, it was a shitshow, but guess what YOU INVADED ANOTHER COUNTRY! You don't get to complain they invaded back you fucking morons!

And if this is just about appeasing popular opinions, they can suck it up.

The Black Queen is giving them hundred of thousands of soldiers and special forces, Named, a three months truce and a way to redeploy her forces and theirs to protect northern Procer, while ALSO selling to her people that she is going to help the side that has been invading her all year. You know, the Callowans. The "Long Price" guys, who have seen no reparations or even admission of guilt by the Crusaders YET.

If they can't find a way to keep the pot from boiling on their side, Cordelia and the rest are no allies but simply liabilities. This is not about justifying Amadeus' actions. It's about NOT justifying all those santimonious fucks that only seem to cry about loss of life and the misery of war when they aren't the ones dishing it out. Damn convenient, isn't it?

(Sorry, I left this one to boil a bit too long. Please forgive the ranting.)

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Addendum: some Good faction or other (Levantines IIRC?) advocated for ethnic cleansing of Praesi. Full-on genocide. Granted, other members of the Grand Alliance balked at this prospect.

medailyfun

cmon, "war crimes" is relatively modern concept, and even now it's something applied to a loosing side of war not to the winners.

Shveiran

I agree, but that's the whole point.
The Grand Alliance is bitching and moaning about his actions, but they are not any different from the murderous machine they willingly set in motion.

[shieldredblog](#)

What war crimes did Black commit?

The Pilgrim is guilty of war crimes for spreading a magical plague in Procer using Civilians and the first Prince was almost guilty of burning down one of her own cities.

The worst thing that Black did was burn granaries and deal with bandits. I don't think either is a war crime. He went out of his way not to commit any atrocities.

His invasion was a mild response to a unwarranted invasion by greedy genocidal conquerors. Procer won't see it that way but its true.

[Fayhem](#)

> His invasion was a mild response to a unwarranted invasion by greedy genocidal conquerors.

...No? I like Amadeus as much as the next guy, but he deliberately took actions with the explicit aim of inducing the starvation of tens if not hundreds of thousands of civilians who had sweet fuck-all to do with the decisions of their Princes. Whether that's technically a war crime or not (given the precedent of the [Rendulic Rule](#) you could actually argue either way I think) it is hardly "mild". As for the other side of your statement:

1), "unwarranted" – no, it was honestly pretty fucking warranted. Throwing Callow into the mix as a target was shitty, but another polity (it being an explicitly Evil one is icing on the cake, but frankly I'd argue this would hold true regardless) having a city-sized superweapon to which there would be no plausible temporal counter if it came back online is a scenario which can be considered legitimately unacceptable to other nations.

2), "greedy" – yep, I'll give you that one in a heartbeat. Fucking Princes, man.

3), "genocidal" – nope, some extremists far from the front were arguing for genocidal actions but they were being rejected and exactly zero actual acts of genocide had or have been perpetrated.

4), "conquerors" – well, aspirational conquerors maybe... but they didn't plan on running into the Black Queen! That said, this is hardly an unusual aspect of war, especially in a medieval-esque era.

[shieldredblog](#)

1) Procer paid for that superweapon, the Diabolist was funded by the First Prince. It's more than a little hypocritical to use it as an excuse to invade the same country you just helped commit genocide on. Also it was dealt with in house. There was no threat of it happening again. Even if that wasn't true, Procer started the war to deal with its Fantassin problem, not to make the world a better place.

3) While the full genocide plan probably wouldn't have happened, even the moderates agreed that the failure of the

Crusader States meant that heavy purging was required. All of the nobles, their servants and every sorcerer on the continent would be hunted down and murdered. No tot mention the thousands of peoople who would try to stop said butchery. And then there is the greenskins and ogres.

4) Aspirational and historical conquerors.

[Fayhem](#)

1), ...No? Akua's mom took money from Procer to intrigue against Malicia (all part of Malicia's Just As Planned scheme ofc), and I'm sure some of that money made its way to daughter dearest. But that's definitely not the same thing as consciously funding said weapon, which is what would be required for genuine culpability here. Also:

> There was no threat of it happening again.

...You remember that literally the reason for the break between Amadeus and Malicia is that Malicia very much wanted to keep the weapon online and usable right? So seriously, there's no threat of the people who wanted to keep the weapon being able to rebuild/replicate it when they both actively want to and are home to the greatest living practitioners of the type of sorcery used to construct it? LOL NO.

3) (not sure where 2 went, guessing it got folded into 1?), So literally the same as Black's original plan for Praes plus some more sorcerers? Look, I'm not arguing the crusaders are 100% goody-goody two-shoes. They're not! They're really definitely not. Even if some of their aims were good, their motivations were corrupt with frankly sickening frequency. But pretending that Our Viewpoint Characters are 100% in the right by carefully eliding inconvenient context is doing literally *exactly what people are mad at the Grand Alliance for doing*.

[shieldredblog](#)

1) I didn't say it was the same. Procer is still partly to blame for it though. Akua's murder of an entire city would have been impossible if the first Prince hadn't knowingly funded the Trublood rebellion. While it was being built, it is said that Proceran Silver was their main source of funds.

Everyone know what the High Lords are like. This is like giving millions of dollars to al-Qaeda and pretending you didn't know they were going to use it to kill civilians. Then, claiming their attacks as an excuse to smugly invade another few countries and try your own hand at atrocities.

[Fayhem](#)

...As an American I feel very targeted right now.

[shieldredblog](#)

Honestly, I was just trying to stay away from a cliché Hitler comparison.

[Fayhem](#)

Dodging Godwin's Law is generally a good idea, sure. But you dodged a pitfall by kind of sidestepping into a minefield lol.

I'm not really offended personally for the record, both because of my personal politics and because I find getting super mad about politics on the internet to be massively unproductive and generally unpleasant. But if you weren't aware (can't tell tbh, so apologies if I'm telling you something you already know), your hypothetical scenario there could very easily be taken as a very pointed description of the past few decades of American foreign policy. There are def people out there who would not take kindly to that description.

[Liliet](#)

Honestly agreed.

On the other hand, that's a zoomed-out view of the situation. When we zoom in and consider Black's specific actions and specific circumstances, Cat has good reason to be pissed at him and consider him a potential liability. Those actions were Not Worse Than Those Of The Grand Alliance, doesn't mean they were good, either in the moral sense or in the 'good idea' sense.

Catherine going in there pissed off and ready to kick the shit out of him for making dumb decisions can only be good 😊

[Shveiran](#)

Oh, yes, I agree, I get why she is angry: Cat has taken the very mature position that, at some point, fault doesn't factor into it if what you are after is actual change. She prefers to give more than she has to so long as that induces the change she thinks is best long term.

I'm just mad that one side feels justified in zooming in on what their enemies did while carefully keeping their own actions out of the frame, without being called out on it. It's realistic. It's still a shitty move, and unjustified from the moral point of view.

And if they won't be called to answer of it, I'll be very disappointed.

Andrew Mitchell

A+ rant there my friend. No need to apologise for it all all. Very well argued.

I think it call comes down to this
> And if this is just about appeasing popular opinions, they can suck it up.

Yes, it is about appeasing popular opinions but it's also supported by the Augur's 'prediction' that Cordelia will face a popular rebellion if Black escapes. And we know the Augur has, at least to some extent, been influenced by the Bard.

That's why it's going to be a sticking point, not matter how stupid or unfair it is (as you have explained very well.)

[Javvies](#)

I'm pretty sure that Augur made no such prediction.

I'm pretty sure the only prediction Augur made that said "do this or Procer collapses/or similar phrasing/intent" was in relation to pushing the pursuit of and pressing battle against the Army of Callow and the Legions when they were trying to leave Procer. And I'm pretty sure that that was (reasonably) misinterpreted to be about going after the Army of Callow and the Legions at targets themselves, but was actually about having the pieces necessary to stop the Arcadia Shard from crashing into Procer, in the right place. Depending on just how good Augur's precognitive abilities are (or the source of those abilities), the truce with the Dead King, the Twilight Ways, and Callow getting into the Grand Alliance ... maybe even Laurence (and her get the Dead King to burn everything down so that Heroes can rise from the ashes and control what comes next plan) getting dead, might have been factored into the prophecy, since it was so open to misinterpretation.

Andrew Mitchell

From what I can tell your view that this is open to interpretation is correct. After doing a fairly comprehensive search all I can find that sheds light on this augury is this statement as delivered to Princess Rozala in Congregation II <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/03/04/interlude-congregation-ii/> – the "offer" mentioned is Vivienne's offer to withdraw their troops so long as Black's legions can leave with them.

> "We've confirmed that if the offer is accepted, there will be rebellion within the month," Sophie said. "It is a certainty."

The source of the certainty is the Augur.

Javvies

Mmm.

Depends on how they came to conclude it would be "rebellion".

Going back to that chapter you linked to, it says that it would cover "most of the Eastern Principalities under Brabant" ... and if we go and look at the political boundaries map, that could be a misinterpretation of Procer losing those Principalities to the Arcadia shard and the associated fallout. This would require those speaking with Augur to assume what she was saying meant that there would be a rebellion, and to not have explicitly confirmed that she meant there would be a rebellion, rather than some other interpretation to the phrasing she used.

Augur is, after all, decidedly vague in her initial statements and significant follow up questioning to tease out the actual meaning behind her precognition is required. Which means the right questions need to be asked.

Alternatively, it could be that Kairos's plan to use Heirarch to capture the Arcadia shard would have been implemented and the side effects caused the rebellion.

Or, the gathering of Named and the consequences (Cat getting a foot in the door of the Grand Alliance and the Liesse Accords) meant that Heirarch doesn't get to run rampant in Eastern Procer. It's a distinct possibility that Kairos and the League armies would not have been within the capacity of the Dominion and Proceran forces to stop without the reinforcements that got sent after the Army of Callow and the Legions. Plus the Army of Callow and the Legions.

NZPIEFACE

Both of them are revolutionaries at heart.

I just want to see how much Black can bend now that he's lost his name.

caoimhinh

He's probably the most flexible out of the two. Always has been.

He's got pretty clear and defined boundaries were he draws the

line. Everything else is negotiable and he's the most reasonable person about it.

For example, when Catherine wanted to make new reforms in Callow, Black gave her the go ahead, even when she started to plot to get a crown for herself and restore Callow's pride as a nation, Amadeus only said "sure, go ahead. Make as many changes as you deem necessary" and his only condition was "just don't rebel" and even after Catherine crossed that line he was pretty cool about it and accepted it as an outcome that was brought by his and Malicia's actions.

As of right now, he probably has very few things where he might disagree with Catherine, likely the only point of discussion is that she wants to kill Malicia and Amadeus is likely to oppose that.

Daniel E

As much as I hope that Masego gets his powers back, I just don't feel like that's going to happen. I'm calling it; Hierophant is effectively side-lined for the remainder, possibly replaced by Rogue Sorcerer.

caoimhinh

I like one of the quotes of Masego while they were fighting the Skein in Keter:

"There is nothing I have seen you can take from me. **Witness.**"

My bet is on his third Aspect making this current loss irrelevant, he might recover his magic and gain even more power than before. He is the *Usher of Mysteries and Vivisector of Miracles*, his reach is beyond the purview of other mages, even those versed in High Arcana.

Masego is too important as a character to be kicked aside simply because he lost his magic. Narratively, the story now is how to get it back, *improved*. And for a Named, to be faced with such a setback and hard obstacle while having untapped Aspects means the coming Aspect is likely to be a tool to overcome that challenge.

RoflCat

My vote is he'll eventually discover how to use magic even without the Gift, and in turn be able to use more than just magic through diving deeper into his discovery.

After all, the Gift clearly exist in some way, since there's people who can and can't use it.

ninegardens

> "I handed him the full Accords," he said.

> Why, I almost asked, but already knew the answer. Either my father would sign the damned thing, or he'd be sold so that everyone else did.

Huh, so here's a thought- why is Cat so annoyed about this? Is it possible that there are rules in the accords that Black has already broken (which?), in which case signing them would be a death sentence (retroactive??) .

I dunno, it doesn't make a heap of sense, but its the only thing I can think of that explains her annoyance here.

Goobinator101

Accords can only be pushed successfully into action if you can please/push everyone enough to consider them seriously, Procer still wants Black to die afaik and they may use that as an excuse to not accept the Accords until that requirement is met.

Satan

It wouldn't be a slight if she offered both Princes the Accords, but also gave Cordelia another bone (like the nature of the Dead King's truce, etc.)

Chapter 56: Reflections

"In winning a game one may only grasp lesser victory; only in setting the rules may greater victory be found, for one then transcends the possibility of loss."

– Extract from "Bought and Sold", a collection of the teachings of the Merchant Prince Irenos, founder of Mercantis

It wasn't all that hard to find him, even though my temper refused to allow me to double back and obtain Black's location from those two. The combined camp of the Army of Callow and the Legions-in-Exile was centred around the barrow where I'd schemed the coming of this day, and the elaborate Mavian prayer atop it. It was half a fortress raised from the plains around the tumulus and half a well-organized city of tents, the latter being what told me where to look. Most of the layouts for camps that my army used were slightly adjusted from Legion standard, which I was long familiar with. By virtue of remembering a bird's eye view I knew which parts of the camp would have access restricted to them

by order of one of my triumvirate of deputies – Juniper, Vivienne, Hakram – and where the restrictions ran high and the wards with them my father would be kept. Not as a prisoner, no. That'd be a blunder, given that within our own camp were the same legions who'd followed Black on his ill-fated campaign into the Proceran heartlands. I had no doubt, not for a moment, that Grem One-Eye would force a battle if we tried to imprison the Black Knight or execute him. None of my little triumvirate would have dared to take so bold a step without my approval, anyhow, not after the way I'd chewed them out harshly for overstepping not so long ago. Especially not when it came to a matter as delicate as Amadeus of the Green Stretch.

It wasn't long before I found the tent where he'd been recuperating, though somewhat unsurprisingly he'd already left it. Along with, from the lack of papers strewn all over the inside, one of the few fully scribed texts of the Liesse Accords. He was in fit state to move, then, which was good news. From there I did not even bother to ask questions of the legionaries still standing guard around the tent. I knew the man, better than most, and after so long cleaved from his own flesh he'd not be able to tolerate remaining stuck in bed helpless while the world moved around him. Especially not after having been handed an intriguing read by my Adjutant's hand. No, there was no doubt as to where he'd be holed up if the matter was seriously considered. I began my slow trek up the barrow's slope, slipping through the three concentric rings of raised stones that from below looked like some eldritch temple's wall. At the heart of it, seated among the dead riverbed of what had once been an altar to the fae, my father sat in the very seat I'd stolen from Arcadia. The parchments I'd once had Robber hang up on stones, when trying to divine a path through the Iserran chaos that would not break half the world, had long been burned – I would brook no evidence of my schemes to survive them – but I'd come by that method of thought honestly. Put up on worn and ancient stone in little clusters entire sections of the Accords had been put together.

Black did not look up from the parchments he was frowning down at even as I approached, though even Nameless he must have heard my limping gait. I could only make out the side of him, from where I was approaching, for he'd pivoted the seat to ensure that the afternoon sun would shine against his back and onto the sheets. He'd shaved, I saw, stripped away the growing and greying beard his soulless body had kept growing without him. It did not make him look younger – the thickening strands of grey in his hair saw to that, black touched by iron – but he felt more like the man I knew than the sleeping body had been. The cleanliness of him, not some highborn peacock's perfumed pretence but instead the austere thoroughness of someone who could not tolerate the slovenly, had been restored. Pale green eyes narrowed in thought before he rose to his feet and set down a thick sheath of parchments on the table I'd had put up here days ago.

"How much of it did you read?" I asked.

I limped up to his side slowly as he remained still, gaze still on the parchments ahead of us that traced the bare bones of the manner of world I wanted to make. I stood at his side, noting with old surprise that I was taller than he these days by more than an inch.

"The substance of it," my father replied. "The legal minutiae are not so interesting as what you seek to achieve through them. Which is..."

His head moved to the side, as if amused. My heart skipped a beat, for though I was no longer his student and his ways were not always mine, the thought that he might be my foe in this was almost too much to bear.

"Ambitious," Black said, lips quirking. "With iron and ink and oaths, you would bind that which is worst in us and through it call forth a strange new dawn."

"It's how we get out of it," I said, dry-mouthed. "The wheel of misery that rolls over us all, the wound some misbegotten part of us just keeps *picking* at. I see no other way."

"It is that," the green-eyed man quietly said. "And it's beautiful, Catherine. It truly is."

My throat choked up. Fingers clenched around the yew haft and my other hand rose, hesitantly. It was one thing to acknowledge the thinning, even crossing, of a boundary to myself but another to presume acting upon it. At our last parting, I'd slid a knife between his ribs and chased him out of my kingdom. Things, thoughts that had seemed certain in the privacy of my own thoughts or even those few I trusted now seemed – arms pulled me close, and I breathed out lingeringly as my nose came to rest on my father's shoulder. I could be furious with him later, I thought. It was not weakness to choose when an accounting was asked. His fingers held tight to the cloak he'd gifted me long ago, before I'd taken to adorning it with own victories and covered the blackness of its beginnings, and for a while we stood that way. The embrace broke without the embarrassment I'd expected from at least one of us, much left unspoken yet somehow still acknowledged.

"It appears I owe you the salvation of my soul," Black said, tone the faintest hint of dry.

"If there's pieces missing, well, it was like that when I found it," I replied.

His lips twitched, which coming from him was good as a smile.

"Gratitude, nonetheless," he said. "For the difficulties my defeat brought to you."

"The parts where you were arguably winning have been much, much worse," I frankly said.

"Then for that as well," he said, inclining his head to the side.

It was, I saw, an apology for the inconveniences he'd caused me. Not, even the slightest bit, regret for the dozens if not hundreds of thousands he might have killed through empty stomachs. I'd not truly expected otherwise, truth be told. He'd never been one to flinch in the face of monstrous acts, if he deemed them necessary to victory – or to repent for blood spilled a necessity's altar.

"You've gotten old," I casually said, statement and question both.

"They found me on Lake Artoise," Amadeus said. "Their band of heroes, so nobly clad. And before the first blow was struck, already I was no longer the Black Knight."

"Below sold you out?" I frowned. "I'm no great admirer, mind you, but that doesn't sound like them. They prefer their favourites to go out in a blaze."

"Already I had sensed the thinning of my mantle," he admitted. "The well was always shallow, and I leaned on it as rarely before, but the signs were there."

My eyes narrowed. That did to sound like the loss of Name, or more accurately not only that.

"You're a claimant," I said. "Shit. To what?"

He hummed a tune, and my blood ran cold for I had heard it before.

"There was once a girl without a name,

There was a tower no one could claim

No one remembers why she has climbed,

Or all those she must have left behind," he softly sang.

The Girl Who Climbed the Tower, that tune was called. Only those who might one day claim the tower at the heart of Ater had ever been known to hear it.

"You said you'd heard it before," I said.

"The fullness of it, only once," he murmured. "When I was yet young and believed there was nothing sufficient steel and cleverness could not cure."

It was what I wanted from him, wasn't it? Should he overthrow Malicia and become Dread Emperor, he could make of the Wasteland more than a wild and cornered beast. Carve out the worst of it, by fire and sword, and leave room for something better to grow of the ashes. And yet, hearing the pale-skinned man humming that eerie tune, a shiver had gone up my spine. Dread, perhaps, to match the title that may yet be claimed. *Claimed*, I mocked myself. *What a nice, genteel word that is to describe the murder of one of the few people he loves still drawing breath.*

"And now?" I softly asked.

"Now I heard the refrain and wonder," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said, "at the attributes that make an act a mistake."

I paused, sensing this was somewhere to tread lightly. I was not the only one in his life to have ever commanded affection, and his partnership with Malicia at its height had seen the Empire reach its greatest height since Maleficent the Second. Their ties were decades in the making and keeping, and though cracks had been wrought the temple they'd raised to each other was still tall and many-pillared.

"She's been making increasingly hardline decisions since you left," I said.

"She has made increasingly hardline decisions because I left," Black countered calmly.

Which might be true. I did not think the Empress so sentimental a creature that she'd lash out over the loss of a companion, no matter how dear, but Black was a little more than that. When he'd taken so many of the Legions to the Red Flower Vales and ignored every missive coming from Ater, he'd stripped her of her most feared enforcer as well as put it out in the open that at least half the Legions of Terror would heed orders from him over her. Her position had been crippled, even before the Ashurans started torching the coasts and cities with them. Even before Thalassina went up in smoke, taking the Thalassocracy's finest fleets but also Warlock with them. Now her power was shrinking, the vultures circling, and she could not afford even the pretence of weakness less she be torn apart. Of course, she'd ordered the Night of Knives before it ever came to that. There were some who might say that by making peace talks with the Grand Alliance and distancing myself from the Empire I'd courted such retaliation. They might not even be wrong.

That did not mean I would either forget or forgive it.

"You've read the Accords," I said. "I can't see her signing them, for many reasons but most of all that she'd need to abdicate."

"You underestimate her," my father noted. "If it became clear that her diplomatic position was untenable, she'd concede rather than fight a war she could not feasibly win."

"She won't sign it," I said, "because the moment she does the High Lords will slit her throat and one of them will claim the Tower over her corpse."

"Not," he said, "if I have returned."

My fingers clenched.

"I'll be blunt," I said. "No one would trust her to actually enforce the terms, least of all me. Sure, the throne in the Tower would go empty. A Nameless ruler would be rustled up. And before night's end the struggle to decide who would be the Secret Emperor or Empress ruling through them would be concluded. Maybe, and I do mean *maybe*, if you were keeping an eye on the situation those promises could be trusted. But then it would still be you that's the keystone, not her. She is not an asset to the arrangement."

I'd had frank, almost brusque talks with my father before. We had disagreed over matters great and small, most notably when we'd last spoken face to face. But never before had we really had such a discussion when I stood in the position of greater power and authority. Oh, even out here in the heartlands of Procer surrounded by enemies Amadeus of the Green Stretch remained one of the most powerful men on Calernia. He commanded the loyalty of a large and capable army, stood at the head of a great net of informants and had ties to powerful Named. There were those who called themselves rulers out there that paled in comparison. Yet now I stood Queen of Callow, First Under the Night and with great names and Named in my debt. I could, in all honesty, say that perhaps the only entity on the continent that could feasibly dictate terms to me was the Dead King – and even then, there would be difficulties. I supposed a lesser man might have felt cheated by that, the way the balance had swung to my side with the passing of the years. I'd seen it in Callowan nobles, the indignation at needing to heed the orders of some young warlord of no great line. At being made to kneel before someone the truths of their world stated should be kneeling to them instead. It ate the insides like poison, and always left a mark. And yet I found no trace of that in the man who'd once been the Black Knight. It should not have surprised me, even if it did.

When had ever begrudged me so much as a step forward, even when it came at his expense?

"Only so much can be spoken of this while neither of us has knowledge of the situation in Praes," he finally said. "I will have to speak to Scribe. We should still have scrying relays on this side of the Whitecaps."

"Scrying works now," I confirmed.

Green eyes narrowed.

"I will have to speak to Scribe," he said, tone strange.

"Your people are more likely to have fresh word of the Wasteland than mine," I freely conceded.

His lips thinned.

"Eudokia, this is hardly the time," he murmured. "Catherine, sharpen your mind against influence."

My brow rose.

"You think someone's meddling with my mind?" I said. "I'm not dismissing that out of hand, but there's other things in there nowadays that'd not take kindly to that."

"It is not active interference," he explained. "Consider it more akin to one being so utterly unremarkable that the mind dismisses them."

That... rang true, somehow. I drew on the Night, feeling the interest if the Sisters directed at me.

"One of my companions is the Scribe."

Oh. *Oh*. All this time? I'd just... not thought about her, even when by all rights I should have. Like my mind's eye had skipped over any hole left by her absence.

"Godsdamnit," I said through gritted teeth. "All right. I know she was with Marshal Grem for some time after your capture, but I can't speak to her movements after that. Hells, she could still be hiding in some tent here for all I know."

"She won't be," Black said.

To my irritation, there was an undertone of open fondness.

"If she has left the armies, then it was to prepare for what she saw coming," he continued. "Considering both defeat and victory would have brought you – and likely myself – to Salia then that is where she will be."

"You're telling me your spymistress has been in Procer's capital for what could be months," I slowly said. "What *for*, Black?"

"We'll have to find another form of address, if Amadeus makes you so uncomfortable," the green-eyed man said, sounding amused. "That one will never be accurate again, I don't think."

I rolled my eyes, though it was true enough. It felt... disrespectful to call him by his given name.

"Pray tell, Lord Amadeus, what has the Webweaver gotten the fuck up to in Salia?" I politely asked.

"I'd expect she has been taking root in the city, Your Majesty," he replied without missing a beat, lips twitching at my wince. "She often prefers to spread influence for some time before taking action, as a better read on the currents of the local allows for intervention so indirect as to be near traceless."

"And what is it she's been trying to set up?" I grimly asked.

"It could be near anything, truth be told," Amadeus said. "Though in all humility, I expect she will have given priority to reclaiming me. After ensuring she was in a position to do such a thing should opportunity arise, I would venture she began making arrangements for the political collapse of the Great Alliance."

If someone else had told me that, I might have been skeptical. Cordelia Hasenbach was probably, all things considered, the most skilled diplomat of our age. She'd also run circles around the Highest Assembly for years while simultaneously fending off the Tower's sabotage of reign. The Thalassocracy of Ashur had never been a great worry for me – they were a naval power first and foremost, what trouble was that to Callow? – but I'd read of them since the Tenth Crusade began. They were a realm arguably older than Praes and who'd largely remained stable for that entire span. As for the Levantines, though their squabbles of honour made them the obvious weak link they also had the Peregrine looking over the shoulder. The Grand Alliance was hardly the most stable of edifices, it was true, but neither was it captained by fools and with the Dead King at the gates there was mortar to keep them together. And still, if Black now told me that Scribe could threaten it, I could only believe him. For if I'd sent Thief or Adjutant or – Gods forbid – Akua in Salia and let them prepare for a few months? Oh, they would wound it badly. And Scribe had been the spymistress to the Calamities for longer than I'd lived.

"But you can tell her to call it off, whatever she has prepared," I said.

"It is not," my father said, "quite as simple as that."

Not the answer I'd been looking for, that.

"Eudokia takes orders from me so long as those orders are sound," he said. "In the sense that my judgement is unimpaired."

"Which it is," I pointed.

"Only if you do not consider sentiment to be an impairment, which she does," he said.

"I need the Grand Alliance to hold, Black," I flatly said. "For one, I'm going to be part of it."

"Indeed," he said, cocking his head to the side. "You need it. Callow benefits. On the other hand, the Alliance's continued existence means that the Dread Empire is effectively cut off and at the mercy of its signatories."

"Which won't matter if the Empire signs the Accords," I pointed out. "I'm not trying to end wars – I can't change human nature with bits of ink. But the moment Praes is no longer the nation of flying fortresses and undead plagues–"

"– which assumes that the Dread Empire of Praes, regardless of who rules it when the matter is broached, will be signing the Liesse Accords," Black said.

My heart caught in my throat.

"Are you saying you won't?" I asked, calm forced.

"Asking," he said, "is not enough. That you are my daughter in all but blood is not enough. We barter now the stuff of empires and the fates of nations. You would set the foundation of the Age that will follow you, and I fear that in some aspects of that seeking you are ill-prepared. I offer you, then, opportunity. If you want any ruler of Praes at all to sign your Accords?"

He met my gaze.

"Convince me," he demanded.

Cap'n Smurfy

Okay I'm pretty sure Scribes powers work on a meta level as well, because I'd completely forgotten she existed for most of the last two books.

Ethan Smith

Same mate

Andrew Mitchell

I hadn't forgotten... But that was mostly because, every now and again, someone in the comments would wonder what Scribe's been up to. And now we know.

[TeK](#)

I agree, the last two books were completely amazing.

Cicero

I've been wondering where she was, but I'd actually assumed that she had decided that Cat was more likely to succeed at recovering Black without her interference, and to take advantage of Black's absence to strike at what she might consider the root cause of Black's defeat: his sentiment for Malicia.

Thus I'd guessed she was in Praes.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, well... the last time she met Cat she was 100% seriously convinced she's about to kill Amadeus, and after the stabbing he had to *order* her not to take revenge.

Her trusting Cat was not very likely =x

Death Knight

If Scribe was not one of Grem's attendants when Cat returned and chewed out Juniper, then she likely would not have known that Cat had retrieved Amadeus. Indeed, it's said that she's been months in Salia with the scrying all jacked up in Iserre. She probably reasoned that if the Heroes had caught Amadeus, they'd likely bring him to Salia for a public execution so she endeavoured to cut them off at the head. Trust in Cat does not enter the picture at all.

[Liliet](#)

They don't work on everyone 😊

Admittedly my prediction had been that she's in the camp, just invisible to everyone ;u;

(and hey, confirmation that her powers can do that... and that Catherine had the same thought ;u;)

[Mental Mouse](#)

I note that Amadeus himself was expecting Scribe to be present: Love the routine:

"I will have to speak to Scribe". <crickets>
"I said, *I will have to speak to Scribe*". <nothing>
"Eudokia!!" <nope>

"Bah. Cat, shield your mind" Cat: "What? *Ohhh!*. She was with Grem, but then she wasn't lately."

"Dammit. She must have gone ahead to Salia, to break Procer from the shadows. It's gonna be tough convincing her I haven't gone soft on her."

oh is that what happened?

This is certainly clearer than it was written. Huge fan of the stories, and sympathetic to typos as someone who makes a ton myself, but there are so many of them throughout the story that sometimes when something strikes my ear as awkward I can't decide if I am misreading something or there is an important word missing.

superkeaton

God dammit, I totally fucking forgot about Scribe. Her power breaches the fourth wall!

Alright Cat, put your money where your mouth is.

[TeK](#)

I agree, breaking the forth wall is really an interesting trope.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well... I'm not sure it still counts as breaking the fourth wall, but it's certainly "managing the readers", hindered mostly by us commenters frantically inventorying Chekov's Armory.

I think the last time he pulled something quite like this was the Absence demon, where several heroes vanished off the rolls without mention from anybody in-world.

ATRDCI

There was mention of it, just not directly so

[Mental Mouse](#)

IIRC, nobody actually said "we/they lost a few", just they had mentioned having X number of heroes earlier, and later they mentioned there were fewer, with no discussion of the discrepancy.

Shveiran

And that little touch was damn awesome

Aston W

Who the he'll is Scribe?

Andrew Mitchell

She was important in the earlier books but hasn't been around for a while. She is one of the Calamities (Amadeus' band of five). She's a non-combat Named who deals with all Black's paperwork, supply, admin; as well as building and controlling one of the largest networks of spies on the continent.

Faiir

not sure if missed the joke or joking on even higher level

Andrew Mitchell

not sure if Ashton's original comment was meant as a joke but I chose to take it literally

Crush

Scribe wasn't one of the Calamities.

The Calamities were: Amadeus, Captain, Warlock, Ranger and Assassin.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, I got that bit wrong. Thanks.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Scribe was the Calamities' Sixth Ranger, like Akua to the Woe.

Joebobjoe

Considering that Scribe just demonstrated Assassin's trick with preventing people from recognizing him, I think Scribe might be one of the Calamities.

[Javvies](#)

Scribe and Assassin are explicitly two very different people.

Assassin has been in Ashur (may still be there), while Scribe was seen with Amadeus. They have mentioned Assassin while talking with each other.

Scribe has spoken about informing Assassin of things.

Assassin has a perfect disguise/shapeshifting type Aspect, and possibly a stealth Aspect akin to the Hide Aspect that Viv had while she was Thief.

Scribe blends into the background, is unnoticeable unless she wants to be noticed, and is readily forgettable. Kind of like The Silence from Doctor Who.

Also, Assassin is naturally(when not in disguise) a Male, who was raised and trained by some kind of assassin cult/order. He's said to have killed them all when he graduated.

Scribe is a woman that Black encountered in the Free Cities. I suspect they first met when Amadeus toppled Delos while drunk. At that time Assassin was already a member of Black's group that would come to be called the Calamities.

the verbiage ecstatic

> Scribe has spoken about informing Assassin of things.

Yes, extremely clever of Scribesassin to do that

Digitize27

Technically she's only a Calamity in the same sense Akua is a member of the Woe. The Original Calamities were Black, Warlock, Captain, Ranger and Assassin.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, I got that bit wrong. Thanks.

[TeK](#)

You kidding, right? We wouldn't've just missed someone that important, would we?

IDKWhoitis

I see this as him playing the Devils advocate, and refining Cat's arguments for when she has to go up to the big leagues. I think he is going to be absolutely merciless in evaluating this, and will likely find many holes.

I'm manners of enforcement, who has the power? What is allowed to be used as enforcement? What stops more subtle names from getting away with dangerous magic attack?

The Liesse Accords are good for Calernia, but they need to address these points if Cat wants signatures at the end of all this.

Likely, Salia is going to crack in the middle of Cat trying to convince Scribe to call it off...

Insanenoodlyguy

He is doing that, but it's more than that.

As he mentioned, Scribe will consider anything "tainted" with sentimentality Black being impaired in judgement. So anything like "I want you to hold off because I trust she's really going to pull this off" isn't enough. He has to bring her "I want you to hold off because I sincerely believe this is the right move for Praes."

[Fayhem](#)

I also *really* like how this seems like it will work on a sort of meta, craft-of-narrative level. The specifics of the Liesse Accords are obviously going to be a big deal in the story going forwards, but it's also the case that they are a bunch of proposed diplomatic treaties festooned with legal minutia. This looks like a story-legitimate way of getting that info to *the readers* without it being just a slogging exposition dump.

Cat is going to need to go through all the main points of the Accords (finally revealing said to the readership), but it will be as an at least ostensibly adversarial case-making exercise with her newly-restored father. We'll have to wait for the execution to know for sure (though given the track record I'm pretty confident), but It looks like EE figured out how to make what could have been a brain-numbing infodump into a character-driven exchange with genuine narrative stakes. That is dope as *fuck*.

Insanenoodlyguy

"Asking," he said, "is not enough. That you are my daughter in all but blood is not enough. We barter now the stuff of empires and the fates of nations. You would set the foundation of the Age that will follow you, and I fear that in some aspects of that seeking you are ill-prepared. I offer you, then, opportunity. If you want any ruler of Praes at all to sign your Accords?"

He met my gaze. "Vote for Pratical Guide to Evil on Topwebfiction"

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

Rup

.insane.h👉👀

Shveiran

Nicely done

antoninjohn

I agree with Amadeus, Cat has been pushing for peace with fanatics at the cost of actually winning to the point of madness. That it started happening right after the bard broke her pivot is rather concerning

[TeK](#)

Can you explain what exactly do you mean by "actually winning", and who do you mean by fanatics?

Alegio

He probably means how she could stomp most armies around easily with sheer force but instead tries to convince them to unite their forces against the DK, but they are all like "Nope you are evulz so we don't talk with you!"

[Dresden 67](#)

Well, that's a gross oversimplification.

[Dresden 67](#)

It's not at the cost of winning. Peace and the adoption of the Accords is her win condition.

Peace on chosen terms is the end goal of all warring nations not seeking outright conquest or extermination. And since both of those outcomes are impossible to achieve for Callow, not to mention morally reprehensible...

Also, I wouldn't describe the leaders of the Grand scheme as fanatical. Sure, Cordelia is arrogant and ruthless but she's also a pragmatist. The lords of Levant are obsessed with honour, but we saw they were perfectly willing to ally with Catherine when honour demanded it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, first Cat had to get the Good rulers to pay attention. Which came in the end to "Saint. you die *now*. No, Pilgrim, not *you*, you don't get to die yet."

Her next hurdle is rounding up all the loose cannons on the Evil side. Should she be more ... merciful ... in judging her proper rivals?

Shveiran

I agree with you, and yet I wonder... will this about "judging"?

We don't yet know the content of the Accords (though it seems we'll finally see parts of them oh my god yes my passion for laws is finally meeting my fantasy obsession why isn't this a thing more often but getting back on track what I mean is:

I think Cat as mentioned on several occasions how she doesn't expect Malicia to be a signee of the Accords; I wonder, with such an imbalance of power here, is it possible for the Accords NOT to screw over the Evil nations? Will the Accords be able to help transition Evil cultures away from Tyrannical rulers without collapsing them? They are more vertical than the good ones, and that means those roles -now filled in by Named – are still crucial. Callow can work with a monarch that isn't the Black Queen or a Good King, I suppose. But can Praes function without an Empress?

I'm curious to hear Cat's plans on the matter.

Fayhem

I think you're generalizing the structure of Praes to Evil cultures in general, and I don't think that's really accurate. Praes has been tagged in the text as only continuing to function/exist as a nation because of the management and regular intervention of Named, but other Evil polities mentioned (Stygia, Bellerophon, the Firstborn/drow, even Helike most of the time) don't rely on or even necessarily regularly produce Named. Also, the whole point of Amadeus' Reforms was to push Praes towards transitioning from a Named-dependent political culture to an institution-based political culture. Which, while that seems to have gone unspoken here, is the other reason Amadeus assuming rulership of Praes would be a big deal for Cat's plans actually succeeding.

Shveiran

Admittedly, I was mainly speaking of surface cultures that are capable of change, and thus excluding both the Firstborn and the Chain of Hunger (respectively).

I also didn't think of Stygia and Bellerophon (well done there), though honestly I think Stygia is the only relevant issue; while Bellerophon doesn't seem to be relying on Named, they also seem... beyond saving? It's a bit like the Chain of Hunger, you look at them and though you KNOW nuking them all is bad you have no idea how else to intervene?

Though Stygia is admittedly an interesting possible signee, I think Praes and Helike remain a very sore point. Helike has never even tried to distance itself from its Tyrant-centric tenets, and as for Praes... the reform have been trying to do that, but have not yet come even close to accomplishing the results in a stable way. As fo now, the Legions seem the only institutions that maybe a step in that direction, but with the goblins revolting even that is put into doubt. I agree Blac- Lord Amadeus and Malicia were aiming for that, but does it look like those idea could survive them, as of now?

Fayhem

> It's a bit like the Chain of Hunger, you look at them and though you KNOW nuking them all is bad you have no idea how else to intervene?

LMAO. I mean tbf Kairos figured out another way to deal with Bellerophon. Not, you know, to make it better, but still.

On the topic of Helike, while they do seem pretty stoked to have a Tyrant, unlike Praes their ruler is not always automatically Named. Kairos' dad wasn't Named at all IIRC, and his older brother who presumably would have inherited under the normal course of things either was or wound up becoming a Hero. So Helike is excited to have a Named ruler, but they frequently go without. So I think they still stand as an example, on the whole.

As for Praes, yes you're absolutely correct that the Reforms are in a perilous state right now. Which IMO is the other reason Cat needs Bl- Lord Amadeus to go take over Praes. Malicia will sell out the Reforms to better hold onto power, while for Amadeus there's no point to having power if he isn't using it to achieve his goals of reform so he'll never back down on those.

Last thing: I think the Firstborn are a surface culture now, whether they like it or not.

Shveiran

Oh, I totally agree on the Firstborn, it's just that, you know, I don't think the Accords were crafted with them in mind. But still, being prophet and all, I suppose they are a complicated issue but not a problem per se from Cat's POV. FUN Cat is leading them to their new land of milk and honey, parting the sea of dwarves to let them pass; sooner or later she

is expected to hand out a few slabs of stone, no?
She's already started with the Crown of Twilight.

The problem DOES seem to be mostly Praes.
I cannot point to a chapter, but I am convinced
Helike gets two kind of Named rulers? One Good, one
Evil? And they let the choice shape their destiny?
Well, even if I am right it's not quite AS
fundamental an institution as in the Dread Empire.

The tricky part I think will be resisting the
temptation to remake the world in her image. There is
little doubt Cat has little love for slavery (as well
she should) but imposing that sort of things is, in
my opinion, the difference between the Accords as a
deal that could survive Cat and as something that
lasts only so long as she is scary enough.

Insanenoodlyguy

The entire thing is about remaking the world in her
image. If she can pull off the rest, this is
relatively easy, though I don't think it would be
part of the accords per se.

calathas

Not sure if you're interested Erratic, but I'm pretty sure it's
"Sheaf of papers", not "Sheath of Papers". Sheaf refers to a
bundle of something in modern english. I might be wrong, but I
don't think I am.

[TeK](#)

I am pretty sure he gave up on not making typos, betting on
editing the Guide later for publishing. Homestly, when it would
be published, I'd buy every single book. That stuff is some of
the best fantasy I've read, never mind Tolkien.

Andrew Mitchell

I'm with you 100% on that.

calathas

I only pointed this out because it isn't really a typo, as
the Sheath/Sheaf thing is a common mistake in English. Not so
much as accident, so much as a misconception about the
language.

Andrew Mitchell

I think it's worth pointing out anyway. A common mistake is
still wrong.

Morgenstern

Linguistically speaking, only so long as it does not become the new majority. If it does, that's just language change and then that will be the new correct form, while the old one is simply "obsolete" and might even become "wrong" to use in some cases. 😊

Andrew Mitchell

Oh, absolutely. And there's various stages to the process as well. I quite like Bryan Garner's classification of the stages.

What's even more interesting is that the stages of change are often different in different geographical areas; although I suspect the internet is probably speeding up and distributing a lot of the change process.

[TeK](#)

That just makes me all warm and fuzzy inside.

[TeK](#)

Probably the goblin fire. Anyway, never before had a reunion of two mass murderers had felt so heartwarming.

edrey

well at last he said she is his daughter, it was about time.
and who cares about influence in salia when a angel (?) is there,
cordelia mistake and the bard's plan are the main event, and the
hierarch for last, that city is finished.
but really Praes is, in the end, the true problem, Amadeus even
said if Praes can not adapt let it perish, so what argument could
convince him? a great question really.

[Liliet](#)

This was only i+1, consider he'd all but plain admitted he's
her father at the post-Second Liesse convo.

BUT IT WAS A GREAT AND GLORIOUS ONE 😊

ATRDCI

He's no longer Named, so admitting such is now much less
dangerous, both for him and her.

Andrew Mitchell

Remember, a vote for PGtE helps others find and appreciate this amazing work...

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

TeK

I wanted to vote, but did not see your comment, and I was so heartbroken, I had cried a litte.

Andrew Mitchell

Hahahahahahaha.

Javvies

Well, that explains why nobody noticed Scribe was missing or said anything about what she was up to. I'd been wondering about that.

I think Amadeus is at the very least interested in the concept, but has doubts about the proposed implementation of the Accords. I think this is more about constructive criticism/playing Devil's Advocate (I wonder what the Guideverse equivalent of that phrase is) than about actual opposition to the Accords.

Amadeus, Alaya/Malicia has been making bad decisions since before you left. Remember, she helped Akua create the Doom of Liesse, and planned to steal it and hold it over the heads of the rest of Calernia as a form of deterrent.

John Smith

Indeed I think some of us have noticed flaws...like its weird to me that Cat recognizes the prospect for Shadow or Puppet Leaders in Praes with a Nameless Pawn on the Throne. But doesn't seem to recognize that as an issue for any other country. I mean I am sure plenty would look at say Queen Viv as a puppet for Cat. GP basically runs Levant at least on Foreign Policy and he doesn't have an official government title. Saint told us a story of how the Alchemist with even less direct connection to the government then GP almost managed to set himself up as the real ruler of Procer. Ergo so No Named Rulers changes nothing. And that doesn't even account for say a non Named fighting a War and then getting a Name during it. Do they abdicate immediately? After the war? Etc.

And you noted the enforcement issue seems like at minimum you have to have one enforcer from each signatory but then you could have say Procer argue well that is unfair we have more population shouldn't we get more reps on whatever group is in charge of enforcement of the Liesse Accords.

Liliet

He knows that. It's the only reason he's even considering Catherine's point of view here – otherwise, Malicia is a treasured friend and companion, and someone he trusts more than himself to make decisions.

That last one has... suffered a blow.

ATRDCI

And this is presumably before he's had time to find out that she, however unintentionally, sent Wekesa to his death

Agent J

She sent Wekesa to war, with death as a known factor. By your logic, Black himself sent Sabah to her death. As well as Istrid and Ranker at that.

Javvies

Eh, I'm pretty sure we can put Istrid's assassination on Malicia, attempting to undercut Amadeus's control of the Legions and to "make him realize that Malicia is right about needing/using Diabolist's weaponization of Liesse as a deterrent against conventional warfare/a Crusade".

Fayhem

Rather think it was the goblins who did for Istrid, actually. If you're a bunch of cold ruthless Matrons, weakening all non-goblin controlled Legions before launching another goblin uprising is just good sense. For Malicia to do that might make sense from a mundane standpoint, but a Named secretly murdering another Named's friend as a way of manipulating their decision-making is just *begging* to get narratively screwed at the worst possible time. And for all Malicia's mistakes of late, I think she's absorbed enough of Amadeus' perspective/knowledge on Namelore not to make a mistake that elementary for such a relatively marginal gain.

Javvies

Goblin Matriarchs weren't (seriously) considering an uprising at the time. At least, no more than their standard contingencies for such.

Also, Istrid would be a lousy target for a goblin uprising preparation assassination. For one thing, she and her Legion were based in Callow, not Praes. Two, it was an orc or human (don't remember offhand) wielding the poisoned blade that got Istrid, not a goblin.

Three, the only way the Matriarchs could have anticipated some kind of weakness in the Tower would be if they knew that Malicia had lent Akua a helping hand and believed Black was going to find out – and in a split between Black and the Tower/Malicia, Istrid would be expected to back Black in the absence of major mental influence/control, not the Tower/Malicia. So assassinating Istrid would weaken Black's faction, and Black is the driving force behind the reforms, and made two of their Matriarchs Legion Generals.

Four, it's likely that Istrid would have been at the very least sympathetic to any motivating factors the Matriarchs might have had to launch an uprising. At the very least, she likes them more or dislikes them less than the Praesi High Lords.

No, there's no explanation for the goblins to take out Istrid. Especially not in the middle of a battle against Diabolist/Diabolist's forces.

This is the Malicia that helped Akua pull off the Doom of Liesse and wanted to steal it for herself. I think any argument that that Malicia knew better than to do something stupid because story reasoning and related backlash is not applicable.

[Fayhem](#)

Callow and Praes were part of the same Empire though. It's not like there's an invisible wall that stops Legions based in Callow from crossing into Praes. And where are you getting that an orc or human did it? The only thing we know for sure is that Istrid was cut by goblin steel and the blade was poisoned.

To quote Catherine in [Book III Chapter 70](#), on the topic of Istrid's murder:

"It might be the Matrons. Isolationist as they were said to be, Robber had told me enough about the crones ruling his people I knew taking a few scalps to better position commanders of their own kind was not something they'd think twice about doing – if they thought they could get away with it. And if it was them... Suddenly it no longer felt like a coincidence I'd been offered desperately needed coin in exchange for a goblin settlement in Marchford. It felt like a calculated move to secure an ally before an uprising could be started. It might be I was being paranoid in thinking this, but in Praes the question was never if you were being paranoid or not. It was if you were being paranoid enough."

And hey, what do you know. A bit later we get a goblin uprising.

Three additional notes:

One, Black's faction supporting the Matrons having an improved position within Praes only matters if you assume they intend to remain within Praes. Given that the premise of the scenario being discussed is that they didn't (pretty strongly supported now by the fact that they haven't), that wouldn't be relevant here.

Two, and as far as Istrid's loyalties go, she was loyal to Black, full stop. All other sentiments would be subordinate to that. So the question is, from a cold-blooded standpoint, would you expect Amadeus to support a faction deliberately splintering from the Dread Empire in the middle of a war for its survival? Or would you consider that a dubious prospect at best? Note that his tacit acceptance of Catherine breaking off with Callow is not comparable, since a), he always planned for her to assume control of Callow in one manner or another anyway and b), since Callow was in the way of the crusade and ruled by a villain there was a 0% chance it wouldn't wind up fighting alongside the Praesi legions regardless.

Three, while in the same chapter Cat does echo your note re: Malicia by saying "She was not to be dismissed as too practical for this, not after the flying murder fortress gambit she'd tacitly allowed." I personally think her outlook is being colored by her personal bitterness/Black's tutelage here. The flying murder fortress, while I agree it was a mistake, was the linchpin of Malicia's plans for the survival of Praes. It's still a big dumb gamble that I agree she shouldn't have taken, but it's a big dumb gamble with an almost incalculably huge payoff if it succeeded. Murdering the friend of the man she most depends on to back her *when they're both Named and inherently bound by narrative logic*, for nothing more than *maybe, somewhat* influencing him, even if it's to influence him on the first big dumb gamble, is a profoundly reckless gamble of a decision with a decidedly marginal payoff. Even when she's being impractical Malicia isn't *stupid*.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think he can hold that against her, or will. She did the rational thing, using the assets she has; Wekesa can

take care of himself. He's told Amadeus 'no' before, he could have told 'no' to Malicia.

What happened is a tragedy, but it's not a transgression to lay at her feet.

Andrew Mitchell

1. Loved the unembarrassed hug. Nice to have them back together.
2. Uh oh, Scribe's going to do something that damages the fight against the Dead King, isn't she.
3. "you are my daughter" ♥ ♥ ♥ THE FEELS
4. "Convince me." I think that's going to be much harder than Cat thinks it will be. But all the major leaders will need convincing so... it's going to be good practice.
4. I was hoping that Amadeus and Cat would have also chatted about the Bard.

Raved Thrad

Having Black (or do we call him Amadeus now?) acknowledge the relationship as it exists in Catherine's psyche has me all giddy, as does the fact that he acknowledges that he is capable of acting based on sentiment.
Squee!

Thea

And then it is revealed he was Dread Emperor Traitorous all along m

Gerionar

Yes, but he reveals himself, he rules as Benevolent for decades.

Gerionar

*but _before_ he reveals himself.

We really need an edit function.

[Liliet](#)

I mean he fucked up Catherine's psyche for a year with a plan whose formal justification for existence was "that one fae story that will lead to Catherine killing her adopted father" so..... not THAT new

BUT THIS TIME THEY ACTUALLY HUG!!!!

Ruduen Sen

I'm kind of amused – I had to do a double-take at Scribe's mention, not because I had actively forgotten – it had sprung up to my mind fairly quickly at that mention. It's good to have confirmation that it's likely an aspect or active ability, though.

At the least, though, this means we're not going to have any sudden changes to Amadeus's living status. There are too many unknowns to just off him at this time, which means we'll likely have his company for a while yet.

Truthhut

What drew shivers down my spine was that literally the paragraph before she was mentioned I thought, for the first time in two books, "We haven't heard from either Assassin or Scribe in awhile, I wonder what they are up to."

SpeckofStardust

uh that's a kinda low key wonderful showing of a mental influence.

ninegardens

So... gotta say, I Love how "The girl who climbed the tower" has been used in these books.

In that, the first few times it is introduced, it feels like it IS the main plot thread, that climbing the tower is Cat's destiny, and that she will eventually end up there. This is classic story foreshadowing etc etc etc.

... but then she takes a different path and THAT DOESN'T HAPPEN.

Similarly, with Amadeus we see that the song is there, but there are a million and one reasons why it may not happen (and indeed the fact that its "the *girl* who climbed the tower" further twists with expectations, makes it fit Alaya, Cat and Akua more... I wonder if Akua ever heard it...).

ninegardens

So, here's a chilling thought.
Given that this is a song....
and the main character we know associated with music is... the Bard... do we have a problem.

(I assume not, as the Bard is known more for terrible drunken singing, but still...)

Shveiran

She does carry an instrumnet, and it was mentioned that is common for bardic names, but... IS the Intercessor associated with music? Has she ever used it actively? I can at most remember her plucking a few strings as a prop, but we could just as well associate her with boots because she is usually wearing a pair.

konstantinvoncarstein

On the epilogue of the second book, she wanted to compose a song about William.

ATRDCI

She plays genuinely moving music during the fight of Hanno's band vs Kairos in the floating towers

Shveiran

Right, but in both instances she wasn't really doing "her thing" was it? It wasn't with a song that she played the Dead King, or Amadeus, or Cat, or the Conclave... she carries a lute, she may even use a lute once in a while, but that's not what she truly does.

William WAS his sword, you could use that as his symbol. The Bard though? Songs is not how she operates. They were more NAUK's thing than hers.

[Fayhem](#)

"The Girl Who Climbed the Tower" is the song that any possible claimant to the tower hears, regardless of gender identity. Given that Dread Emperor/Empress is a Name representing a gender-neutral Role, I'm pretty sure the song uses female as the default gender here because the very first Dread Ruler of Praes was female, as I think her immediate successor was as well.

Otherwise yes, everything you said!

SpeckofStardust

...

The words to the tune are different for him?

- "There was once a girl without a name,
There was a tower no one could claim
No one remembers why she has climbed,
Or all those she must have left behind," he softly sang.-
Cause this isn't what she heard.

Shveiran

I think every claimant has heard a different song, pertaining to their own path to the top.

But any claimant can still tell it is the same song. Because magic song.

[Liliet](#)

It's said to be a refrain.

Cat hadn't heard the refrain before.

[theothin](#)

Cat has heard at least three verses of it. This seems to be a fourth, although probably sequentially before the others.

There was once a girl without a name,
There was a tower no one could claim
No one remembers why she has climbed,
Or all those she must have left behind.

The first step is hardest, they said to her.
You will have to walk through fire.
It will burn away what you once were,
And always devour whole a liar

The second is the longest, they said.
You will walk under the restless dead.
The hanged all crooning from the gallows
To join them and rest in the shadows.

They say the third step is the cruelest,
Walk when the moon is at her clearest:
Love ends with the kiss of the knife,
Trust is the wager that takes your life

[https://abridged-guide-to-evil.fandom.com/wiki/
The_Girl_Who_Climbed_The_Tower](https://abridged-guide-to-evil.fandom.com/wiki/The_Girl_Who_Climbed_The_Tower)

Shveiran

Sniff. I'll need at least ten sword-fights and three political outmaneuvering to recover from that hug.

On the other hand, it's getting real. We are doing this. It's finally coming. After almost two Books, we are GONNA DISCUSS THE ACCORDS.

YEAH!

...How in the Nine Hells did EE manage to make me this hyped about an international treaty? I feel like he could make me passionate about laundry without breaking a sweat, it's uncanny.

Andrew Mitchell



konstantinvoncarstein

At last, we will know precisely what they are about 😊

[Cold Cyberia](#)

It would be an awesome twist if The Girl Who Climbed the Tower was actually a reference to the game Hakram came up – the one about using stones to build a tower. That way the prophecy could still come true (i.e. Cat climbs the tower) but its meaning is completely different. Anyway, every time a new verse comes up I get shivers, it's really good stuff.

In a strange way, Black is the ultimate persuasion skill check. If you manage to convince him everyone else would be a piece of cake.

I'm also surprised Sve Noc didn't protect Cat's mind from Scribe's influence. It seems like a pretty big oversight, especially since they listen to her advice. You'd think making sure Cat was not mind-whammed would be priority number...

[TeK](#)

Don't you think that the song every claimant on Tower was hearing long before Cat was born (Bla~ Lord Amadeus was confirmed being over 60, and he heard it in his youth and there is no reason it couldn't be heard even before) would not be about her? I mean come on, it is not your average fantasy, not every single thing revolves around our protagonist. Even, to the dismay of some, the morality.

It just as well may be that there was a Tower before Praes, as it was said that now it stands on a dead deity, and first Maleficent climbed it to claim the power of the Empress?

Andrew Mitchell

> I'm also surprised Sve Noc didn't protect Cat's mind from Scribe's influence. It seems like a pretty big oversight, especially since they listen to her advice. You'd think making sure Cat was not mind-whammed would be priority number...

I think they would have noticed a mind-whammy but this was much more subtle; making her not recall someone who wasn't there.

[Fayhem](#)

Yeah, if I'm understanding the dynamic here then the nature of Scribe's effect is such that it's less a direct effect on others than a manipulation of Scribe's own presence/weight in reality. So if I'm right, it's not so much that Scribe is

actively pushing people's attention away from her (which would be more of a conventionally-detectable mind whammy) as it is that Scribe is manipulating her Name and sort of narratively making herself as smooth as a river stone so that attention just naturally skims right over her because she's presenting her Role to reality as being "someone who doesn't matter and isn't worth thinking of". Which would explain both why it is relatively vulnerable to someone specifically choosing to direct their attention to her – a river stone might be smooth, but you can still pick it up if you actually decide to focus on doing so – and why Amadeus was able to be unaffected immediately, because after associating with Eudokia for so long he probably double-checks against that effect by deliberately focusing his attention as a matter of course.

mavant

Do we know if Hakram ever heard the song?

Shveiran

why would he have?

Insanenoodlyguy

Yes. He heard part of it sung by Cat the night she named him adjutant.

Shveiran

Ah, right. Good call.

It wasn't a "spontaneous thing", though. The world didn't conspire to make him hear it, a claimant simply repeated it to him.

edrey

i think that song is somethink like a prophecy, an angel and summer for the first step, winter and the Night for the second, and that game for last. it sound like a long play from Below since the fall of the everdark. that is just too much godlike to said otherwise.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

Another point: Scribe has been setting up a disaster in Salia... but Cordelia has the perfect counter in the form of Augur. Since Augur's foresight is at its most powerful when she's defending Procer against potentially deadly threats she should have a field day against Scribe and her agents.

Let's see.. The Principate is on the precipice of total collapse. North fell against the Dead King, it's fracturing internally and

the Grand Alliance is falling apart. If there's ever been a moment for Augur to get a heroic boost and smack down some spies (and Scribe) it's now.

Tek

Two things though: first, it is stated that Augur can't predict actions that are not planned, but an opportunity exploited, and Scribe is said to be amassing influence to prepare for such opportunity. Second, she is so good at being unnoticed, why do you think Augur, who half the time has trouble concentrating on mundane spies, can predict our dearest Eudokia?

Also, Above apparently does not want Procer that much. No reason to help it not to fall.

theothin

Above and Saint are not synonymous.

konstantinvoncarstein

I don't understand why a lot of people think that all heroes receive direct instructions from Above. No one does, not even the Choirs. It is the SoS who want the end of Procer, and only her (and possibly Bard).

werafdsaew

If Eudokia can counter Augur, Black would already have used her to counter Augur long before this.

Shveiran

Not necessarily; if the thory holds, she is still eluding the Augur while she prepares for striking.

Amadeus might have held off that attempt because he wasn't certain it would work, because even if it did it wasn't a given a hero would pop up to intervene, and even then because nothing would have protected Eudokia when she tried to flee the scene.

He is a careful individual who tends to minimize risks and seek out ways to guarantee returns; this seems a more desperate, or at least risky, mission.

Darkening

It was mentioned at one point that one of the weaknesses of oracles, or at least Augur, is that they can only focus on one threat at a time. Before, the main threat Cordelia was on the lookout for assassins and political pressure from Praes. Now, I'm pretty confident that she's pushing Augur to look for threats from the Dead King and the situation in

Issere. I suppose given the ceasefire in the north she might relax enough on that to catch Scribe, but I doubt it.

mavant

Are we SURE that Scribe and Assassin aren't the same person? Those power sets seem to have a lot of overlap.

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes. During Amadeus's rampage in Procer, Scribe was with him. At the same time, he was thinking about Assassin in Ashur.

Furthermore, one cannot have 2 Names, and the Roles of Assassin and Scribe are too different for them to be the same person.

Shveiran

Yes. That particular theory is still popular and I can see the appeal, but that reveal wouldn't make sense in this universe.

Either Scribe or Assassin would need NOT to be a real name, and that sounds both an hard facade to maintain and hilariously unlikely considering all the stuff that was ascribed to both Assassin AND Scribe for it to have been done by a single Named who would be acting outside his or her portfolio for half of them.

Insanenoodlyguy

Not if part of your portfolio is disguise.

konstantinvoncarstein

So her/his/its portfolio would be

1: an unstoppable, shapeshifting assassin

AND

2: a one-woman administration and intelligence agency

It seems very different to me.

Insanenoodlyguy

Not really, just broad application. Lets assume aspects here:

Dismissive Aura: She can make herself seem "so utterly unremarkable that the mind dismisses them." That's also something great for somebody who's sneaking up on you.

Data Collection: She can pull in data from everything going on around her, and always be on top of it and organized. She quickly knows where everybody who's anybody is going to be when and where in a short time after

securing herself in a city. SHE CAN FIND YOU AND SHE KNOWS WHEN YOU ARE ALONE. What other profession might make use of that ability?

The shapeshifting is admittedly less useful for a scribe, but if Assassin's shapeshifting is something like "Disquise" who the heck is going to expect the girl with a quill and a scroll running around in the background who's barely worth noticing to be the guy who's sneaking up on you? The way he was described in Deus, you forget what you saw when you see assassin quickly. There is definitely some overlap, and Scribe herself makes a great cover because someone like her is supposed to be most places he'd need to, easily ignored as the background administration in any sort of place that needs bureaucracy. How does he do it? Frequently by walking in the front door with a stack full of papers and looking for all the world like she belongs there.

konstantinvoncarstein

I agree there are overlaps between the 2, but Assassin is a Name that is very specific: he kills people. He could of course disguise himself in a bureaucrat, and collecting and organizing informations would indeed be useful, but it is too broad. It is something different than effectively running nearly by herself an entire kingdom AND a continent-wide spy network. If Assassin has the computing capabilities you speak of, it cannot be enough to accomplish this. His Role is about killing, not running things.

Furthermore, why would Assassin craft himself such a false identity, which let him open to attacks? If he can shape shift, it would be safer and easier to just disguise in a random guy/girl than a public figure relatively well-known. He has no reasons to do it, not even to hide his existence, because everyone knows of it.

Finally, we see in Interlude:Queen's Gambit Offered that Scribe is with Amadeus, while Assassin was send to Ashur. And Scribe was with Black during the entire campaign in Procer. No one can be in 2 places at the same time.

Per Word of God (see the document on reddit for more precisions), Aspects are only verbs at the infinitive. Yours sound more like Skills from the Wandering Inn;)

Insanenoodlyguy

He was thinking that, but we just established scribe can fuck with your head. He might be better at resisting it, but it might still affect him a bit. Especially if there is a separate persona

konstantinvoncarstein

Scribe can make herself forgotten by people, and hide her presence. Not completely rewrite the memory of several extremely powerful Named (Malicia, Warlock and Black Knight).

Shveiran

I don't have a problem with this part of the thory. The problem is that we know both Assassin and Scribe are, singularly taken, already remarkable power-wise.

If all they do and did is ascribed to a single Named, it doesn't add up.

Unless you are suggesting that Scribassin's Name is actually the Overpowered, whose aspects each allow him/her/it to call on the powers and aspect of a DIFFERENT Name, and thus he/she/it is both the Scribe, the Assassin and the Writer, I don't think it's possible.

[Hydrargentium](#)

And that last line is why we all love Amadeus of the Green Stretch so much.

Hg

ChillyPepper

Cat is worried about the artifacts and magical weapons so much that she fears the staff in earlier chapter, but failed to notice the one being made around her. The cape is pretty much an artifact except in noticeable effect I feel.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, but once again she doesn't *rely* on it for anything other than what a mundane cape would provide. The trick with magical items is not making their effects the lynchpin of your plan, lest you end up like Juniper stuck between two armies with Arcadia gates not working. If the cape just so happens to accidentally enhance her luck / save her life from some hostile magic, without it being a part of her plan, it *not* doing so at another time won't doom her (not anymore than she would be without having it altogether).

The Mantle of Woe's real functions so far have been:

- look cool and Symbolize;
- have Pockets, Lots Of Them;
- be warm.

It can't really... fail Cat at any of those, not in the narrative nasty way.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

The Mantle has also been shown to deflect magical projectiles that directly impact its surface. That's slightly more consequential, but only slightly.

[Liliet](#)

The important part is that she doesn't *rely* on it for that, she relies on not getting hit by magical projectiles in the first place / other magical wards/powers.

The mantle does not function as a trap here.

[ChillyPepper](#)

I do not remember which chapter it was, but there was an interlude (i believe?) someone noticing the cape changing into an artifact.

It is being formed into one if not one already, just because we can't notice what it's doing to her or that Cat is not actively relying on it doesn't mean it is not working in more subtle ways. For example, aiding Cat by a symbol of conquering. as we notice more and more people recognize the cape. Basically an aura effect.

And as proven here, we don't know, or notice, everything going on.

[Liliet](#)

Akua said that 😊

Andrew Mitchell

Worried about *depending* on them because they will always fail at the worst time. The cape may, or may not, become an artifact. If it does, I hope she's smart enough not to depend on it.

TheDerangedOne

blinks owlishly Is Scribe slowly becoming some counter to the Bard? Assuming she's not some unwitting catspaw in the bard's toolbox at any rate.

Gerionar

WARNING: This will be a long one!

"In winning a game one may only grasp lesser victory; only in setting the rules may greater victory be found, for one then transcends the possibility of loss."

I called it once, I call it again: THIS is what the entire story is about. It started with "win despite the rules!" and "less thinking outside the box and more smashing their heads in with the box". It has become Cat's way to one victory after the other and now it's her method to change the entire continent.

But I am going even further! I say that the entire divine dispute between Above and Below, or rather "those who want to rule" and "those who want to see mortals grow unrestrained" revolves around that. The mortals think that it is like a game of shatranj between Above and Below. But I say it is not about winning by the rules. It is all about dictating the rules they are playing by while they are playing. "Lawfull" wins, if either Above or Below achieves the "lesser victory" the game by the rules, because victory would require that either faction had enough control over their mortals to prove that this was "the better way". On the other hand "Chaos" wins, when the pieces decide to do their own thing and no longer play by the Gods' rules, when the mortals prove that they can do better without divine rule. The Accords are the biggest step in that direction in all of history. We know that this treaty would forbid Named to rule. Thus it would cripple the influence of the Gods on politics. And that is why I think the Bard will do everything to stop it, since she is imho the agent of "Law" more than she is for Above. Remember: She created the Dead King, she brokered the deal with Sve Noc and she tempted Amadeus to become the next stupid evil Dread Emperor, just so that the old song would go on and history repeat itself again and again.

[Mental Mouse](#)

What do you want to bet that the Wandering Bard is in fact the original composer of "The Girl Who Climbed The Tower?"

Andrew Mitchell

Good call! 😊 The Bard has been around since before the Miezan occupation, at least....

Actually, you've prompted another thought. Maybe the gods made the Bard when they made Creation. It fits with my pet theory that the Bard's role is to keep the game going.

Gerionar

That's what I said, isn't it? "Bard is the agent of "Law" more than she is for Above."

Gerionar

It wouldn't surprise me if she did.

Soronel Haetir

I don't get why Eudokia would be so opposed to the Accords. We know that she is personally invested in Amadeus (and perhaps more properly Black) not in Praes. If anything I would expect her to be off doing something to try and force Amadeus to take up the mantle of Black Knight again, although I'm not sure how effective that would be.

Either that or scheming to get him some Name where her unrequited affections (in the same vein as Page and the Shining Prince) could finally be returned. Although there his continued love of Ranger would likely get in the way.

In none of those situations do I see the Accords (or the continued viability of Praes) presenting any interest to her.

Andrew Mitchell

IMO if Amadeus can be truly convinced then Scribe can be also.

It's now well over 20 years since Praes' successful annexation of Callow. At a minimum, Eudokia and Amadeus have had 25 years together working towards the same vision. It's the vision that binds them (as well as the personal affection and friendship). Scribe has fully bought into Black's vision of a better Praes; one that no longer eats itself alive, one that is safe from disruption by its neighbours, one where people don't starve because some idiot Dread Emperor did something stupid. This aligns with the Accords somewhat but it's not the same, the Accords limit Praes as much as they limit all the other countries.

We know Amadeus planned for all sorts of contingencies; and worked with his confidants to refine and implement those plans. Contingencies which likely included things like mind control or giving into sentiment. We know that Amadeus currently thinks Eudokia will think that Amadeus is being influenced and won't trust his judgement without A LOT of preparation and effort.

Shveiran

Mhm, is that why you think Scribe takes action?

My read is that she is simply in love with Amadeus, in a way not unlike Hakram is with Cat. Adoration, feeling indebted to him; Eudokia is not even from Praes, I always thought her main

motivation was “to make Black’s job easier and see him safe and accomplished”.
Their parting before Cat stabbed him really gave me that vibe.

You think she is more interested in what he is doing?

Andrew Mitchell

Oh, I think the love is there and, as you say, non-unlike Hakram. Your reading of Eudokia’s motivation may well be right and it’s certainly a factor. I think both motivations apply but how they’re weighted is really anyone’s guess. You may be closer to the truth than me.

Chapter 57: Hearing

“It was written in faraway Mieza that law is what separates men and beasts. We know better, in Praes: law is what separates the beasts wild and tame.”

– Dread Emperor Terribilis I, the Lawgiver

It was tempting to send for Hakram and Vivienne, who in some ways were just as much the architects of the Liesse Accords as I might claim to be. The shape of them had come from me, but it was Adjutant who’d discretely gathered jurists from Callow and Praes and pressed them for understanding until a cohesive body of law could be put together. Vivienne herself had been at our side the entire way, spreading out her Jacks far and wide to obtain the practical knowledge that was needed to make any of our fancies a functioning reality – yet burning, ardently, to see it done. Some days I suspected she’d spent more hours working out how the Accords could be made to hold up than either of us, moved by sheer want of seeing them take hold. It wasn’t like they wouldn’t be of use when arguing, either. Hakram had a ludic way with cold logic, and a mastery of details I’d never be able to match. And Vivienne’s brand of argument, half ruthlessly pragmatic and half genuinely passionate, did tend to reach people neither Adjutant nor myself would get to. I didn’t, though, because it would be missing the point of this exercise. Black wasn’t simply demanding that I convince him, he was giving me the opportunity to cut my teeth on selling the Accords to a foreign ruler in a relatively safe manner. Here, if I stumbled, it would not be a disaster that struck at all I’d fought for.

Even now, I thought, he was a sort of teacher still. Some things you never entirely outgrew.

Still, in the end it would be me that carried the Accords to the shore if they were to ever reach it. Vivienne, while heiress-designate to Callow, was still deep in my shadow from an outsider's eyes. And Hakram, and Gods it was unfair, but Hakram wouldn't be taken seriously by any of them save if he had a knife at their throat. Because he was villain, because he was an orc, because he had chosen to stand at my side instead of raising his own banner. It angered me, the suspicion that in centuries to come the Liesse Accords would likely be written of as my work alone and other names with claims just as deep would be allowed to fall to the wayside. History, I thought, would shortchange Hakram of the Howling Wolves Clan. I'd fight it every way I could, even when he might wish I did not, but I did not believe it would be enough. For too many out there the story would feel neater without him – less challenging of what they thought they knew – and I well knew the knots people were willing to tie themselves into to allow their view of the world to go unchanged.

Yet it was undeniable truth that when the deal was brought to the table where Hasenbach and the Blood and Ashur's committees sat, it would live or die by the wagging of my tongue. And so I dare not call on the others now, lest that same tongue fail me on a day mistake would mean lasting calamity.

Still, it was past noon and we both kept to some of the Wasteland's ways: though I did not send for the others, I did send for wine. And so Black and I claimed that old Mavian prayer for ourselves, breaking out bottles of some sharp Iserran wine – *Prière de Fou*, it was called – that lingered on the tongue like sin or vengeance. In the afternoon's light he seemed strangely vital, for all the greying marks of age in his once-dark locks. With a loose white shirt on his frame and woolen dark trousers going into Legion-issue boots, he honestly seemed more... carefree than I could remember ever seeing him. There'd been a heavy jacket of linen on his frame when I first came, but by the second cup of wine it was on the back of my seat to my own cloak's side.

"The throne of Callow recognizes Lord Amadeus of the Green Stretch, Praesi dignitary," I began.

I was toasted with a rough clay cup holding wine of which a single bottle could likely but a whole bag of. He was seated at the edge of our heavy wooden table, ignoring the perfectly good seat I'd left

"The Dread Empire of Praes deigns to recognize the Queen of Callow, Catherine Foundling," he allowed, lips twitching. "In the depths of our mercy, keeping with our well-known concern for the fellowship of nations."

"Kind of you, eastern devil," I drily replied, leaning on my staff as I took a sip of my own shoddy cup. "Now, I assume you've read the proposed treaties that were sent to you."

"These so-called Accords, yes," Black easily replied. "A blatant attempt to weaken, isolate and starve the Dread Empire. And you expect us to sign these? You should be grateful our answer wasn't releasing a plague in Laure and setting your granaries aflame."

Threats, huh. It was true that while I arguably stood the greater victor on the fields of Iserre, Callow was not untouchable and despite the best efforts of my companions in fact remained rather fragile. Praes had other fires to put out, at the moment – a goblin rebellion that'd taken Foramen, the sack of Nok by Ashuran fleets and the annihilation of its largest port Thalassina along with every living soul in that great city save one – but Malicia might be able to get a handle on the mess, or whoever murdered her and claimed the Tower might. That meant Praes, though wounded, could turn its attentions on the fledgling goblin nation to its south and a very vulnerable Callow whose armies were largely abroad and had been for months. There shouldn't be food shortages though the winter, though there'd certainly be a rationing of the handouts by the royal granaries Hakram had created. If those went up in flames, though? It'd be more than a lean winter we were dealing with. No, the Dread Empire was not entirely without answers if cornered. On the other hand, there was a reason that even though Black was speaking like some arrogant Wasteland highborn even in that pretence he'd not 'actually' struck at my kingdom. The current lack of open hostilities was something very much in the Tower's interest to maintain, lest I turn my attention to it instead of the Dead King.

"If you strike across the border, I'll dismantle Praes after we're done up north," I said. "The Grand Alliance already wants to, we both know that. The only thing that's truly been standing in their way is trust and distance, both of which will be sufficiently seen to if Callow becomes a signatory."

"When you are done up north," Black repeated. "And there is the arrogance. Even should you beat Trismegistus on the field, will the Alliance not be ruined in achieving this? You threaten me with soldiers already sworn to die very far away. Your own armies are abroad, and their loyalties complex besides. If you do not want my concern to be how to break Callow before you return, or how to break it when you are returned, then offer terms other than submission or the sword."

I drained the rest of my cup and tossed it at his head. He caught it, though a lot more narrowly than he would have a few years back, and filled it with the Iserran red even as I considered my answer. So he was making it clear my position in the Tower's eyes

was not so strong as one might think at first glance. I could concede to part of that, at least. After a costly campaign against Keter, I couldn't see the current signatories of the Alliance eagerly embarking on a second military enterprise immediately after. In Praes, the prevailing belief among the High Lords might very well end up being that Callow was the only threat to worry of if it came to war. They might not even be wrong, I thought. I was not so sure the Sisters would send a great army of Firstborn to aid me again, if blades came out in the east.

"Then let's see to your worries," I said. "You said that the Accords would weaken, isolate and starve the Dread Empire."

"When paired with your declared intent and seemingly imminent achievement of becoming a signatory of the Grand Alliance," Black specified.

I inclined my head in agreement. Wasn't going to be a secret for long, assuming it even was at the moment, so I did not mind the boundaries of our debate including it.

"I'm listening," I said.

He rose to his feet and strode across the thinning snow, pressing the filled cup into my hand as he passed, and came to stand by one of the raised stones. He tapped the parchments hung there with a finger.

"Weakening," he told me. "Your proposed laws would forbid the summoning for extra-Creational entities, save for peaceful purposes, and even then under restriction. These are specifically stated to include angels, devils and demons."

"They are," I said. "Cutting through the legalese, civilian labour and advice-giving is fine for angels and devils. Demons are forbidden under all circumstances save if all signatories of the Accords agree such an act is necessary."

"And so you roughly enforce parity of means between Named," Black said. "Which will be pleasing to some Named, mostly those incapable of actually doing any of this, but you seek to remove those same Named from positions of rule. As for lordly concerns, since those matter foremost under your laws, you would highly disadvantage Praes as a military power. Centuries of accumulated grimoires and contracts, which are potent soldiery when called on, are suddenly made invalid. Demons have been an integral part of the defences of our cities for ages, as deterrent and blade both. Some lasting presences of their kind would be difficult to dispose of even were we so inclined."

"I've made provisions for that last part," I said.

"Yes, heroic Named under villainous supervision would remove lingering mistakes such as Hell Eggs," he mildly said. "If that supervision were Praesi in nature, such an act might even be only *mildly* offensive foreign intervention in our affairs. Yet you do not address the most essential of imbalances: the Dread Empire would be surrendering a great deal of strength while other signatories would not. What does the limiting of angels mean to Procer or Ashur? To Levant? By weakening the Empire, you strengthen all its rivals at its expense. There is no nation in existence that would agree to such a thing unless forced – and treaties thrust upon a realm by force of arms rarely last."

"Demons," I flatly said, "damage the fabric of Creation. Every time one is used, it is an act of war waged on every other sentient being. That the Empire has been practicing that sort of diabolism for centuries is not an excuse to continue, it is something to *expiate*."

"Regardless of such concerns, it remains an advantage surrendered for no given rationale," he pointed out.

"You do get something from this," I said. "You get to no longer be the Dread Empire."

His brow rose.

"Look," I said. "I've read Malicia's treatise. The famous one, I mean, 'The Death of the Age of Wonders'. The touchstone of what she makes her foreign policy is making alliances abroad beyond the traditional Good and Evil lines, with the Thalassocracy of Ashur being the keystone. It's skillful politics, using it as counterbalance for Procer since traditionally it keeps the Principate in check by strengthening Levant and ensuring the League of Free Cities is pointed west."

"That," Black said, "and alliance with Ashur means that sea trade lanes and the grain they represent would be effectively untouchable."

"It's a nice thought, but Ashur jumped into bed with Cordelia and just spent the better part of a year putting everything in Praes within walking distance of the sea to the torch," I said.

"Hasenbach is good, Black, but she's not *that* good and Malicia had decades at the game before she was even born. Why did the Thalassocracy pick her over a risen but since restrained Praes as their ally?"

"Because the Tower can't be trusted," he replied. "Mind you, we had the effective heir to the Thalassocracy and some of their foremost admirals willing to back alliance after the death of Magon Hadast. But a powerful Praes – and we were, in those days, perceived to have largely assimilated Callow – will always be seen as a continental threat."

"And if you sign the Accords," I said, "you get to shed that like old skin. Oh, I don't mean that suddenly the Wasteland will be trusted and the Tower will be the sudden beloved of people it spent centuries sending flying fortresses at. But when decisions are made, high up? They'll know that the Empire is sitting at the same table as everyone else, following the same rules. The moment other crowns no longer have to worry about whether the latest Emperor is going to feed a few thousand babies to a snake to summon an army of devils, then they become a much more palatable ally. Then *interests* begin to matter again, and if that's the game then Praes brings quite a bit to the table. You ask what signing the Accords give you? Proof that you're a reasonable actor. And Black, how else are you ever going to get that?"

He studied me for a time, then gave half a nod.

"Some of the Empire's highborn might be swayed by such an argument," he noted. "Not the better part, but enough to make civil war feasible to win. Which brings us to an issue born of your Accords, yet not part of them."

"Callow," I said.

"Starvation," my father agreed. "Having largely forsworn diabolism, the Wasteland might not longer be able to conquer the Kingdom of Callow to secure grain supply. Even less so should Callow be a member of the Grand Alliance, which involves clauses of mutual protection against non-signatory aggression. Praes would surrender the means through which to forcefully acquire grain without having first secured other means for that acquisition."

"Praes can't sign the Grand Alliance," I admitted. "I can't see that ever going through."

"Neither can I," Black replied, amused.

"So we cut out the middle man," I said. "Praes and Callow, bound in a treaty of trade and peace. It's not like we don't take losses selling the crops south and west, anyway. The Principate has fertile plains and Mercantis gouges us habitually. Besides, in everything magical we're at least half a century behind the Empire, if not more, so it's not like you have nothing to trade aside from precious metals."

"You would be tying our nations at their very heart," he warned me.

"Good," I snarled. "I want it to be that the Tower can never war on Laure again without starving itself. I want the fucking stained glass in the windows of our palaces not to be *imported from Procer*. All these centuries of taxes and steel and young soldiers we've spent moving the same border back and forth can be

put to better use. Gods, Black, just imagine what Praes could do if it didn't waste its talents on magical plagues and flying fortresses and bleeding its own people for fields! Imagine what Callow might become, if half the yearly taxes didn't go to raising knights and raising walls to the east – we could be so much *more*."

I laughed, harshly.

"Did you know that the cathedral in Laure, the one Elizabeth Alban had built spending Alamans treasures, is the reason why the House of Light is allowed to ask coin of the faithful?" I said. "Because there were points in Callowan history where the crown was too *poor* to pay for its damned upkeep while also raising armies and fighting wars in the east. Gods, Black, as nations we've spent more of – name it! – on killing each other than any single other thing in the span of our history. And while we were busy biting each other's tails, the world moved on."

"There will be those," he said, "for whom those truths will not be enough."

"Aye," I said. "I had a few of those too, back home. I hung the sloppy ones and murdered the rest."

He laughed.

"Those poor Regals," he said, lips twitching. "The fought as barons challenging a queen and found themselves instead having slighted the Dread Empress of Callow."

That there was a fond pride to his tone was not enough to prevent my wince. There was some truth to that and I knew it, for I had not learned the lessons of rule from my distant predecessors the Fairfaxes and the Albans. I'd wielded knife and scheme like one reigning from the Tower, tyrant no matter my good intentions. So be it. The Fairfaxes had failed, in the end, and I would not suffer that of myself after the myriad lines I had crossed.

"Your meaning is taken," the green-eyed man said. "Thought here are objections still."

"You trade the weakening for strength elsewhere," I said. "Your feared starvation will be sworn away. That leaves what, isolation? Praes is already isolated, by virtue of having pissed away every possible alliance it could have struck. What fault of that is mine, or the Accords?"

"Don't be childish," Black chided. "You would require of the Empire that it willingly embraced your new age – you must then make a place for it amongst that age."

"When did the High Lords and Ladies of Praes become lost children I must lead out of the woods?" I mockingly said.

A true speaker for those highborn might have taken offence to that, but while my father was hardly the source of my disdain for nobility he'd certainly reinforced the leaning.

"When you sought to place your will above even the Tower's," he easily replied. "In this world you would make, Praes must have a role to play. Else its energies will be spent unmaking what you have made."

"To be honest, I expect that within thirty years it'll be at war with the Free Cities," I admitted. "They'll not be Grand Alliance, and maybe not even Accord signatories."

"War is one thing," he said. "Inevitable, no matter what treaties are written. Yet more is required. Which brings me to this."

Striding forward, wine cup in hand, he gestured at another raised stone. One holding parchments regarding the to-be city of Cardinal, and the academy it was to hold within its bounds. An academy unlike any other Calernia had ever seen.

"The school," I said.

"It was," Black said, "a stroke of brilliance. Forcing Named to attend there, teaching them the articles of the Accords as well as manners of villainy and heroism? The academy is the means through which your dream lasts longer than your life's span. But it does not go far enough."

In truth the academy was more Vivienne's notion than mine – I'd been more concerned with enforcement, which had led me to the founding of Cardinal itself – but it truly was a stroke of brilliance. Oh, all those young Named would get practical lessons in how to accomplish what they wanted but they'd also get an education in the Articles of Strife: the manners of violence that were allowed of Named, depending on situation. How to keep mortals away from the damage, when it was allowable to kill another Named over a disagreement and what methods were legal to employ in that killing. And what methods would instead bring down on your head the wrath of the signatories, including the Named sworn to lethal enforcement of the Accords for a period of ten years at a time. I would leave behind a world where someone using a magic plague to wipe out a city would be met with heroes and villains from all over Calernia coming down on your head like the wrath of the Gods, where someone breaking the acceptable rules of warfare would be barred from Cardinal, from the Twilight Ways, from receiving support by any signatory government. Shatranj was a horrid metaphor for war, as war wasn't a game. But the strife between Named I fully intended on making a continent-wide

tourney, a pit fight that'd allow the Gods to claim their due and the rest of us to keep on moving.

"You named these very accords after a tragedy wrought by sorcery – it was a Named practitioner, to be certain, but it was still magic that brought the madness," Black said. "Shaping Named is not enough."

"You want me to regulate sorcery," I frowned.

"I want you to make this Cardinal of yours the greatest centre of magical learning on Calernia," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said. "And to crown it the thief of our worst follies, made to serve higher purpose."

Andrew Mitchell

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[tkjarrah](#)

ACADEMY BABY THATS SOME RICH FUCKIN SEQUEL BAIT RIGHT THERE

SO HYPED

ALL SEQUELS MUST BE ABOUT HIGH-SCHOOL ANTICS AND THE COOL VILLAINS BEATING UP THE NERD HEROES AND OMG IT'S SUDDENLY AN ANIME!

[TeK](#)

Can't wait for an adopted baby of Masego and that other girl with a bow.

Raved Thrad

So the sequel will be all about Good girls falling for the Bad boys? 🤔

[daegone823](#)

Masego =professor snape or the guy who says wizards out of bed the squib with the cat

[greatwyrmgold](#)

I don't think Masego would willingly take Filch's job. Or do it well.

[Javvies](#)

Yeah ... Masego is not janitorial material. He'd smite a fool for suggesting he'd be the janitor at Cardinal. He could be talked into being one of the instructors there, but he'd definitely smite whomever suggested he be a menial labourer there.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Heck, even just the "help discipline rule-breaking kids" part would fit him pretty poorly. I can't decide whether he'd be apathetic, needlessly harsh, or both. ...Then again, I'm not sure Filch was suited to that aspect of the job, either.

Decius

Practical Guide to Evil 2: Asterisk War

medailyfun

No, it's suddenly PGtE revealed as a prequel to Harry Potter

Flameburst

Theu guide always was a prequel to guideverse Hogwarts. Didn't see that one coming.

[Javvies](#)

I'm liking what I'm hearing about the contents of the Accords.

And, yeah, there's no way someone like Laurence would have ever supported the Accords. A school for both Heroic and Villainous Named? She'd flip out over that before getting to the details. Oh. Snap. Is there going to be a series of teacher and teaching related Names as a consequence of the school?

erebus42

Possibly. The Disinterested Pupil, the Lazy Genius, the Pitiless Tudor, the Bumbling Professor....

caoimhinh

The Headmaster, the Professor, the Counselor. Then the more specialized, like the Hot School Nurse, the Practical Guide, the Great Teacher Onizuka, the Student Council President, the Badass Bookworm, the Aloof Prodigy, the Cool Senpai, the School idol, and many more.

Maybe even a non-Named enforcer of the Academy's rules, just to show how a badass normal can still make the Named behave in that school, serving as a reminder that in the world at large they can't do as they please.

And of course the Almighty Janitor.

Andrew Mitchell

> the Practical Guide

That's Cat's new name.

NerfContessa

I would so fucking read this.

Damn, a centralized school for sorcery and Name raft?

Wow.

caoimhinh

Probably.

I can already see Masego as the Headmaster of the school, or at least the Dean of the Sorcery Department. I mean, it's called *Cardinal*, who more suited to lead it than the *Hierophant*. Truthfully, Cat and Amadeus (or even Pilgrim) are likely the best Headmaster candidates, but they have huge roles in politics to play, though Cat is likely to abdicate as Queen of Callow and many of her thoughts hint at her planning to die by the time all these things are established, but being the Headmistress of the Cardinal Academy for Named (C.A.N) she might find something worthwhile to pursue after her time as ruler of Callow ends.

Novice

Imagine Larat giving TED talks now and then on how to be a successful treacherous lieutenant.

caoimhinh

I would totally sign for those seminars.

[TeK](#)

"I mean, you really should've seen that coming"

Raved Thrad

"Keep one eye on your ultimate goal. Even if you only have one eye."

Agent J

"And to crown it the thief of our worst follies, made to serve higher purpose."

—

Akua is the Headmistress. Duh.

caoimhinh

Hot Headmistress.

Akua, embrace your new Role! Hahahaha.

ByVectron!

Power and respect, earned and not taken by force.

BlackPhoenix7777

Is there anybody in their right mind that would put Akua of all people in a position to shape the minds of young Named for who knows how long?

Agent J

I'd raise my hand, but first you'll have to define "right mind".

laguz24

No, I think that the wandering bard since she is the one who won due to their mistakes auka has not meaningfully won against either black or cat.

[Javvies](#)

Fuck no.

Bard needs to get taken off the board somehow (toss her into Serenity with the Dead King and ward the Creation side behind her?), or at least her influence greatly reduced.

There's going to be warnings about Bard as part of mandatory classes in Cardinal.

laguz24

Exactly by gathering so many named there the plot would eventually force her to be permanently stuck there and as for your plan of warding against the bard. You need to ward against fate itself which does not exist, you cannot wield fate like magic or miracles. Since now masego knows what she is after she can now be

controlled. In all instance I agree the bard needs to be taken off the board but how, what you cannot kill you can regulate since the bard is essentially just a sentient Name based on storytelling. Getting rid of her would be essentially impossible, but using fate to chain her to one area and giving her a purpose would slowly kill her by forcing her to act outside of her name.

[Liliet](#)

Masego doesn't know what she's after, the Dead King blocked him out of the visions, and did not tell him after all. Unless he did in the last moment, that'd be badass 😊

pmHoward

Headmistress Abigail, Respected General living out her retirement in the only role that gives her as much responsibility and stress as an active battlefield

[Fayhem](#)

Perfect candidates to run this school don't exi-

> Headmistress Abigail, Respected General living out her retirement in the only role that gives her as much responsibility and stress as an active battlefield

caoimhinh

Eventually, yes.

Too bad for Aby, she's too young for retirement right now, barely on her early twenties. Hahahaha

stevenneiman

The question is whether people who care enough to become Named are the sorts who would brook rules being forced on them which turn them into glorified sports teams. Enforcement by a few of the greatest heavy hitters might help, but considering that villains revel in breaking taboo and heroes thrive on fighting battles against impossible odds and against institutions that offend what they believe in, I highly doubt that it will be enough.

There's also the problem of getting those heavy hitters. Aside from Cat and the Woe, the most powerful Named on Calernia that I can think of are Neshamah, Hye, Kairos, Anaxares and Tariq. An argument could be made for Hanno as well. Of those, Tariq is the only one I could see possibly being willing to act as an enforcer of a sensible set of rules written by three powerful people, and while he would be great in a lot of ways there's a lifespan issue to worry about. Also, banning Named rulers would

make the Blood system very awkward, so even Tariq might have a hard time selling Levant on the Accords.

[Liliet](#)

>Also, banning Named rulers would make the Blood system very awkward

I don't think so? The "you're a hero and you can't rule but your children will be in line for it" arrangement makes sense, giving the Named the privileged position that Levant is after while at the same time sticking to the agreement.

>The question is whether people who care enough to become Named are the sorts who would brook rules being forced on them which turn them into glorified sports teams.

I mean heroes are after helping people, and helping people within bounded rules is still helping people.

And villains are after personal goals, and achieving these goals in the environment you're in is what the game is about.

Villains' goals aren't "to fight heroes", and heroes' goals aren't "to fight villains", not inherently. They are means towards their desired ends, for both sides.

KageLupus

Tariq is actually a really good example of how barring Named rulers could work out for the Blood. The Grey Pilgrim went around the continent saving the day and killing the Bad guys and bringing glory to the blood, all instead of ruling. If the Named Blood can't rule they are actually better off because then they are free to go gloryhunting across the land. Not to mention that most of the Named blood would rather go out and fight rather than rule anyways.

I really don't think it'll change much of anything for Ashur, to be honest.

[Liliet](#)

^^^

Despite the Blood system, Levant was already not ruled by Named. Their favorite Names are not ruler Names, and so...

Shveiran

I agree, although it's a bit of a PR nightmare in the short term.

"We the Blood have a right to rule Levant because we are descendant of great Heroes, who were amazing and wise and

strong and pure and therefore we, by association, are more awesome than lesser bloodlines.

What's that? One of us became one such Hero in his own right?

Well. We can't have HIM rule. That'd be silly. Off to adventuring you go! Spit spot!

[Liliet](#)

Levant was never the biggest problem here...

Mammon

The biggest issue here is that Evil Named don't die of old age, while Good Named do. Meaning that with these Accords enforcing Evil Named to be untouchable as long as they fulfill some conditions, they are going to be the big hitters almost exclusively. The old monsters will be the main enforcers, and alike Neshamah now they cannot come out until someone 'invites' them to cause havoc without much limits.

Remember that Warlock wanted to get himself a nice and quiet mountain dungeon for his studies, and that Black stopped him from doing that because he'd become a target for Heroes to prove themselves and as a stepping stone for these Named to power up as a filler/training arc for a Villain that they currently cannot beat yet? The Accords would protect Villains like him and allow them to age like wine, until the time came that they had nothing more to perfect and continued with their next step or wait for perfect times to appear and meddle. That could make that part of the Accords a hard sell for the Heroes.

werafdsaew

Evil Names are not untouchable. The Accords are not meant to limit conflict; they're meant to limit collateral damage.

[joni alanen](#)

Well said.

Andrew Mitchell

The discussion in this chapter specifically included confirmation that Named **would** be allowed to kill one another.

> Oh, all those young Named would get practical lessons in how to accomplish what they wanted but they'd also get an education in the Articles of Strife: the manners of violence that were allowed of Named, depending on situation. How to

keep mortals away from the damage, when it was allowable to kill another Named over a disagreement and what methods were legal to employ in that killing. And what methods would instead bring down on your head the wrath of the signatories, including the Named sworn to lethal enforcement of the Accords for a period of ten years at a time.

Javvies

You're forgetting about the Drow and Sve Noc. One of Cat's plans for the Drow included employing them as support and enforcers for the Accords. It gives them a second purpose, and the rest of Calernia (especially the Above-aligned types) a second important reason to leave them be.

The Dead King isn't going to be a factor in the Accords – he's going to be blocked off inside Serenity. Kairos and Anaxares most likely have to be killed, yes. That needs to happen anyways, so that's not really a loss for the Accords.

Hye/Ranger ... while it's unlikely that she'll actively sign on, it's also the case that she doesn't care about or do the things the Accords are designed to prevent. It's a bit like ... the nuclear nonproliferation treaties, non militarization of space agreements, and the modern Vatican – I'm not sure if the Vatican's an actual legal signatory on all of those ... but neither is the Vatican interested in having or engaged in developing for itself a nuclear weapons program or a space program.

Or maybe, telling someone who has a seafood allergy that the steakhouse is out of its seafood daily specials and doesn't have live lobsters.

Huh. I thought I had hit post on this hours ago. Oh well.

Shveiran

I agree on most points, but are you sure about the drow? Setting the mostly lawless culture as guardians of an international treaty seems an hard sell. Is there a text reference to this I missed?

Javvies

Admittedly, the plan may have changed since then, and a number of the details have definitely changed since then, but prior to encountering Sve Noc and becoming First Under the Night, Cat as Sovereign of Moonless Night included clauses about enforcing the Liesse Accords in the oaths she was having the drow following her take.

Now, the drow don't have Named, but Cat is planning on reshaping their culture, and a fair number of them are functionally on par with Named except for the Narrativistic features.

The drow will still need buy-in and tolerance from much of the surface, and having a bunch of them swearing oaths to uphold the Accords will help with that.

Shveiran

Ah, I see.

Uhm, to be honest I think the plan changed because of how different Cat's relationship with the drows is compared to her expectations: if she had been a Black Queen of Moonless Night, she could have counted on the oaths to turn the Mighty into a police force for the Accords.

Now she needs to persuade them to serve that role.

I'm not saying that's impossible, it's just... does it really feel like a role that fits for them? Granted, Cat is set on changing their cultures and, in some form, that is inevitable, but there is change and there is CHANGE, you know?

It might be just me, but I really don't get a "defenders of rules and enforcers of peace" image when I picture the drows.

[Javvies](#)

She just needs to sell it to them as the Accords help define who is "worthy" and who is "unworthy". Following and enforcing the Accords is proof of Worthiness, and violating the Accords makes you Unworthy and fair game to murder for power (or the lolz).

She's reshaping their culture anyways, including the Accords as an objective reference for some things isn't going to make her job meaningfully more difficult.

[Liliet](#)

I love your comparisons wrt Hye.

[Sethur](#)

Would also be interesting to see what would happen with transitional Names and Aspects that already exist in such a school. Like Squire and Apprentice. And there even is an Aspect "Learn". Imagine Amadeus becoming Headmaster (as a Name) and going around stabbing students to activate that Aspect. 😊

[TeK](#)

Ubua the school poltergeist.

Andrew Mitchell

Hahahahahaha!

Qwormuli

Ubua the sexy school banner. Is heraldry a promotion from being a garment ghost?

werafdsaew

Not sure what the "follies" here refer to. Sorcery in general?

Rustndusty

I think he wants to put Akua in charge of the school.

RoflCat

Would make sense on several levels.

She's one of the few beings alive(?) on Calernia to have stood on both sides.

She's well studied in magic of all kind of fields (she had that attempt at ritual to turn angel's corpse into power battery, she dipped in diabolism, she's had her hands on Fae power and now Night)

And since she's not really a living being, she can remain at school long past a mortal's life time.

Shveiran

It makes a lot of sense.

And it poses just as many problems.

I'm very curious to see Amadeus's reasoning on this one. Especially because I've long been wondering just where Akua's arch is headed.

Quite Possibly A Cat

Well Akua is trying to become a hero. Good SHOULD leap at the chance to have a Good Headmistress at this Named School. Most heroes have an annoying flaw where they age to death. This is an all around great ending to Akua's evil ark.

Shveiran

That's ... one way to see it, yet Akua hasn't (and possibly will never get) a Heroic Name. What she is, is a Villain with a remarkable body count and a close tie to both extradimensional entities and the Black Queen. I'm not sure she is quite as desirable an option for the heroic crowd.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes! Thanks for pointing that out. I missed that implication.



[TeK](#)

He's talking about the Phantom Menace.

Andrew Mitchell

Folly means foolishness so I think you could and get the sense of Black's meaning.

Decius

He wants the school to be Liesse.

Andrew Mitchell

Oh, that would be very fitting. Nice idea. 😊

talenel

This is what I was thinking. It's perfect. I think they even called it the Throneless realm. It's perfectly neutral and you can control who has access to it as well.

Faiir

And then any Named violating the accords loses access to travel through the realm.

Imagine if bad karma in RPGs made you lose access to fast travel.

Just delete the save and restart 😊

stevenneiman

Akua's Folly, Sinestra's weather magic, and dozens of other things that haven't been discussed in the same detail but which have been as ruinous in their own ways.

Steve

I can't help but feel he means to capture the Dead King. It would give the Dead King a way to live forever, so the Dead

King may agree if cornered.
That would get nutty, though.

TeK

So, kids, today's topic: breaking the fourth wall and misleading the audience. Meet the guest lecturer from Helike: Kairos Theodosius, professor of Evil.

TeK

Meet your gym teacher, the undisputed lifelong champion of Calernia's Named Fighting Cup: Ranger.
WARNING: discession advised – if you fail at class, you WILL be killed, as per Article 4.52b of Accords "Why we are not gonna fuck with that crazy half elf".

IDKWhoitis

The Evil freshmen seminars

Otherworldly Influences and Where to Find Them
-Guest lecturer: Abua Sakulian.

How to Change the Game: A Study on the Strategies of The Black Queen
-Lecturer: Aisha Bishara

A Study on Fear and its Uses
-Lecturer: Amadeus of the Green Stretch

The Heroic freshmen seminars

Why You Should Pick Fights You Can't Possibly Win
-Guest lecturer: Hanno of Arwad

Managing the Party: The Role of the Lancer
-Lecturer: Hakram of the Howling Wolves

What is the Greater Good?
-Lecturer: Tariq Isbili

Probably requirements for graduating (3 of 6)

How to Kill Mages 101
-Lecturer Ranger

How to Kill Otherworldly Beings
-Lecturer Ranger

Story Pivots and How to Use Them
-Tariq Isbili

Without a Trace: Practical Applications of Networks and Intermediaries
-Lecturer Eudokia

The Art of Exploiting Political Structures
-Lecturer: Amadeus of the Green Stretch

Schemes in Moderation
-Lecturer: Kathrine of Laure

sutortyrannus

Immediate headcanon. Bless you.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Actually, there's definitely a compulsory class for history for all Named.

Taught by Bard.

Argentorum

Except the part they're not saying is that Bard probably has to die for all of this to work.

[Liliet](#)

Bard, from the distance: that's why I'm onboard!

edrey

i really can see masego teaching a new theory of magic for people without the talent or the so called Gift, on the side note the secrets DK are a must now

Dudehcjcjcjcj

A theory of magic for those with no magic, that dissects the laws of the universe...

Science, bitch!

Lead Engineer of Cardinal Academy: Professor Masego

JJR

Do you want gnomes to blow up the continent?

This is how you get gnomes blowing up your continent.

Andrew Mitchell

Only if you apply the knowledge. That is, if you actually build something the Gnomes object to. I don't think they object to pure research.

Shveiran

Why wouldn't they? Once research gets far enough, application of something they deemed dangerous becomes easier and easier – not to mention faster. If they wish to prevent dangerous technology being used, I don't see them brooking technological research.

Andrew Mitchell

I may be wrong about this but the only examples of Gnome intervention that I can recall being mentioned were all about applied technology (machines and devices). I don't know why they wouldn't be interested in research that could be dangerous but they just don't seem to be from what we've been shown.

[Javvies](#)

They sent the Empire a Red Letter because a goblin clan was "playing with powders". Said goblins were apparently purged by the other Matriarchs before Black could get there.

Also, the gnomes have historically objected to improved farming equipment.

The threshold for the gnomes objecting to your activities is low. And you only get three Letters in a century before the gnomes break your shit for you. "You" referring to countries, in context with gnomes.

Andrew Mitchell

You're right on all points. My recollection was wrong. Thanks for correcting me.

Strang

There's no way that school does not receive a red letter, or most likely Accords themselves will.

Most likely reason for gnomes' penchant for blowing up farming implements in My mind is to prevent technological advancement. More efficient farming means less manpower needed for supplying rest of the populace, means more room for population, means more free manpower means more advancements in everything. My guess is that The plan is to control population,

and stagnate technology via preventing key technologies from getting out there.

With that in mind, place for higher education, as well as possibly enormous savings of manpower with people not getting plagued/mindfucked/fed to tapirs... gnomes will start showing up, or they've already fucked off to another planet(flying machines and bombings are not that far away from spaceflight, historically speaking).

Andrew Mitchell

> There's no way that school does not receive a red letter, or most likely Accords themselves will.

Past warnings have always been to countries so it would be a break with the past for them to target a school or an international agreement. If they do decide to target the countries that sign the Accords then Calernia is fucked.

> to prevent technological advancement

Yes, that does seem to be what the Gnomes are doing. So the clear clash with Cat's plans will need to be resolved somehow. I wish I had a clue how that can possibly be resolved though...

[Liliet](#)

Where do Cat's plans include technological advancement?

[Javvies](#)

Calernia is a backwater on the planet.

The Gnomes appear to have no issue with the place on another continent that has two rulers – one empowered by Above and one by Below. Nor do they care about the massive multi-racial empire that the Elves of the Golden Bloom got kicked out of for being racist assholes.

So the Gnomes probably don't actually care if somewhere tries to (or succeeds in) moving beyond being torn apart by war on a regular basis.

If we go back to Book 1 Chapter 15, where Black gets the notification, he says that Kerguel "had an interest in natural physics" and pursued it in the face of Red Letters, and so were wiped out. This was when "the great Baalite cities were a

collection of mud huts". The Baalites are the people who colonized Ashur and fought repeated wars with the Miezens. As I understand it, by analogy, the gnomes got pissed off at Archimedes or Pythagoras and nuked Ancient Greece. Or maybe the gnomes nuked part of pre-unification warring states period China.

The only thing the Gnomes have been demonstrated to care about is any kind of technological and/or scientific advancement. They don't care about magical advancement, just mundane scientific advancement. Though there are thresholds below which they don't care about, ie Praes building a sapper corps and it's own improved siege engines and designs.

Neither the Accords nor Cardinal will trigger a Red Letter based on what we know about the Gnomes. No one involved (at least on Cat's side of things) is going to go anywhere near anything that the Gnomes would object to.

edrey

bah, i was thinking in how the dead king use magic when he is just a pile of bones, or the fae magic, now you want the gnomes, there is not third letter, they just attack.

Isaac Martinez

Wait, a school?

All the future Named will curse Catherine Foundling for making them go through exams, creepy teachers, entire bags of homework, bullying, possible romantic scandals, and the student council. All in the name of peace.

At least there will be expert lunch goblin and the tournaments of blood.

IDKWhoitis

So she effectively makes the Institute of War from League..

Not a bad play overall.

I would laugh if Cardinal used devils as its instructors or practice targets. They would follow rules more deeply than anyone else would or could. I wonder if a double headmaster system would be necessary, since having one side's influence that high up would erode the authority of the school...

Although there remains the questions of:

Funding – Do the signatories pay taxes to Cardinal in a sort of “Named Insurance”?

How are disputes between claimants resolved if no one backs down?

How are the claimants found? (I’m guessing magic shenanigans are involved)

Would Ranger need to be brought into the fold? She already heads a pseudo-predecessor of Cardinal. Would she be subject to the law?

Can non-named people enroll outside of the magically talented? I would assume counties would like to have observers in the academy, and likely would want their heirs to have connections to Named besides.

I’m deeply loving the Father-Daughter thing going on, with Amadeus playing Praesi advocate.

[TeK](#)

“How are disputes between claimants resolved if no one backs down?”

They roll d20

erebus42

I believe duels to the death are still viable so long as no one start sling around sorcerous/miraculous nukes.

IDKWhoitis

Since Names sometimes pit very different styles of its claimants against each other, it would be difficult to find a fair method...

[Javvies](#)

I would expect Ranger to more or less get grandfathered in by default.

While she’s Named, and technically a Villain, she’s nonstandard, and just generally doesn’t get up to causing trouble in the ways the Accords are designed to care about. Ranger doesn’t do diabolism or Angel summoning, nor does she go in for dread sorcerous rituals, nor does she have an interest in conquest or ruling. I mean, sure, she’s technically in charge of Refuge, but she only made one law (whatever she says goes) and doesn’t like having to actually do anything in relation to ruling the place. And, to be fair, following the dictate of “whatever Ranger says goes” is as much self preservation and common sense as anything else. She’s probably one of the most dangerous people existing on Calernia and has a temper.

She probably won't officially sign on to the Accords, but she'll likely respect the parts that matter by default because she doesn't care about doing the things the Accords exist to prevent.

As such, she won't be involved in enforcing the Accords, but she wouldn't be subject to an attempt to enforce them either. Amadeus and/or Indrani might need to be the one(s) to break the news about the Accords to her, if only so as to avoid the messenger being murdered on principle.

Hell – she might even like the Accords because it gives her an excuse to not rule Refuge. I'm pretty sure whatever non-Named governing structure Refuge gets will keep "don't annoy Ranger" as a fundamental principle of life and the legal structure in Refuge.

(Cause of death? – Suicide. – But the corpse is in fifteen pieces! – Suicide by Ranger, technically speaking.)

[Javvies](#)

Ergh. That was supposed to be a reply to a post prior. Dammit wordpress.

Matthew

A Named being able to exist outside of the Accords because they are too powerful is a massive loophole and could not be tolerated.

[Javvies](#)

Powerful Named will exist outside of the Accords because they'll only cover Calernia, and Named on Calernia, not the rest of the planet – including the empire where rule is split between a Villain and a Hero.

Powerful Named can't be allowed to violate the Accords and get away with it because they're too powerful.

However, Ranger isn't going to be violating the Accords (especially not in the ways that really matter) because the stuff the Accords are designed to prevent are things she has no interest in doing.

I ... don't have a good analogy to use here.

[Mental Mouse](#)

You mean like Neshamah? ;-p It might actually be time for Ranger to seek apotheosis, but that's a digression anyway.

The real point is that no matter how big your house is, there's always an "outside", and dealing with powers outside the Accord has to be covered in the rules. A

closed-border option would be something like “need approval of the Committee to make trade agreements”, while a more open (and realistic) one would be: No agreements that violate or cross the Accords themselves. Respect the blacklists, tariffs, and subsidies from the Committee. If an outsider attacks a member unprovoked, we can and should dogpile the offender, subject to our own restrictions.

By “the Committee”, I mean whatever body is set up to administer and arbitrate the Accords. There will be something, whether informal or formal – and that group will be vastly powerful.

This is actually the first step towards a continental federation....

[*Fayhem*](#)

> It might actually be time for Ranger to seek apotheosis, but that’s a digression anyway.

It is a digression! AND SO I DIGRESS. Unless I’ve totally misunderstood what you’re talking about, I’m pretty sure that will never be in the cards for Ranger. As Catherine found, apotheosis is like living in a cage that’s been built out of your own soul, so the only way out is to die and/or pull a Foundling. And since Ranger’s whole thing is she will never accept chains of any kind from any one, I don’t see her going for that.

tl;dr – Ranger’s whole sine qua non is going “NO ONE TELLS RANGER WHAT TO DO, NOT EVEN RANGER” so she’ll never trade accepting more rules for more power.

Shveiran

Especially because ... well, what does Ranger need more power for anyway? She is that close to not finding worthy prey anymore.

[*Fayhem*](#)

Yeah, exactly. She would be taking restrictions she’d never want to accept when the payoff for doing so is making life more boring, when excitement appears to be literally the only thing she cares about (and I guess Amadeus, but I’m prepared to file sexy times and related things as a subcategory of excitement).

Andrew Mitchell

> How are the claimants found? (I’m guessing magic shenanigans are involved)

It's not necessary to find students when they are claimants, I think. Anyone who comes into a Name has to attend. Identifying them, and compelling them to attend are both really important points to be nailed down in the Accords.

werafdsaew

I don't think any compelling is necessary. It's not like the rules only apply to those who attends, and those who attends gets a Name education, which is hard to find anywhere else, plus access to the Twilight Way. The competitive advantage would be enough to draw most Names

Andrew Mitchell

That's a good point. Maybe just finding them and inviting them is enough.

[Liliet](#)

Hogwarts. It's going to be Hogwarts.

It's great and deserves 1000000 stories written in that setting

Andrew Mitchell

Yes it deserves 100,000 stories but it's not going to be Hogwarts. It's going to be better than Hogwarts; much more practical.

[Liliet](#)

Well, yes.

The comparison to Last Rock University from tgab is much better 😊

[Fayhem](#)

Jesus. Last Rock University, but it's founded by Catherine instead of Arachne.

...It REALLY says something that this is an institution that can reasonably be expected to make Calernia MORE stable.

[Liliet](#)

Hey, Professor Tellwyrn is a rock of stability when she's trying to be!

...

...

Yeah. It says a lot about Calernia.

kinigget

Less Hogwarts, more Whately Academy

IDKWhoitis

I think it would be easier to find claimants (especially to Names like Thief or such) and get them to come along through mundane means, rather than go through the whole process of tracking them down once they fully claim the name. Also, by taking claimants rather than full Names, it prevents some meddling by other Named or organizations by using assassination to "simplify" the problem of several claimants.

Thinking about it, how large is this school realistically going to be? Even in the "all hands on deck" scenario of this crusade, there was only really like 40 named total, both sides counted, including the old ones.

JJR

That might be part of why Amadeus wants it to also be a magic school. With the not named there to learn magic you'd have enough people for proper lectures.

Novice

"Praesi advocate" is such a great term. Praesi are much much worse than devils, after all.

IDKWhoitis

He plays the role so well, even adopting the mannerisms of old style Praesi diplomacy. Threats and insults to catch the opposition flatfooted, and trying to bullshit a position of strength.

[*Fayhem*](#)

Well, Amadeus has always been more than smart enough to understand the principle that understanding your opposition is the first step to defeating them. I suppose it should really be no surprise that he can imitate the approach of a Praesi highborn flawlessly, as such.

[*Liliet*](#)

I love how he's doing it while sitting on the table. I also love that his reply to Catherine throwing a cup at his head

is to fill it with wine and give it back to her. This nerd
;u;

Javvies

I would expect Ranger to more or less get grandfathered in by default.

While she's Named, and technically a Villain, she's nonstandard, and just generally doesn't get up to causing trouble in the ways the Accords are designed to care about. Ranger doesn't do diabolism or Angel summoning, nor does she go in for dread sorcerous rituals, nor does she have an interest in conquest or ruling. I mean, sure, she's technically in charge of Refuge, but she only made one law (whatever she says goes) and doesn't like having to actually do anything in relation to ruling the place. And, to be fair, following the dictate of "whatever Ranger says goes" is as much self preservation and common sense as anything else. She's probably one of the most dangerous people existing on Calernia and has a temper.

She probably won't officially sign on to the Accords, but she'll likely respect the parts that matter by default because she doesn't care about doing the things the Accords exist to prevent.

As such, she won't be involved in enforcing the Accords, but she wouldn't be subject to an attempt to enforce them either. Amadeus and/or Indrani might need to be the one(s) to break the news about the Accords to her, if only so as to avoid the messenger being murdered on principle.

Hell – she might even like the Accords because it gives her an excuse to not rule Refuge. I'm pretty sure whatever non-Named governing structure Refuge gets will keep "don't annoy Ranger" as a fundamental principle of life and the legal structure in Refuge.

(Cause of death? – Suicide. – But the corpse is in fifteen pieces! – Suicide by Ranger, technically speaking.)

konstantinvoncarstein

It good for Catherine that Ranger is not doing anything that goes against the Accords. Imagine someone trying to enforce them on her 😊

Decius

If it were necessary, there would be a hero capable of doing so.

Ranger is genre savvy enough to not make it necessary.

sengachi

Amadeus, literal devil's advocate

Andrew Mitchell

1. Good to read about the depth of involvement that Vivienne and Hakram have had in the creation of the Accords.
2. Just lovely to see Amadeus 'teaching' Catherine again, even though the style is quite different.
3. I smiled to see Catherine still can't call her father Amadeus. "And Black, how else are you ever going to get that?"
4. Now this puts Catherine in a new light "... having slighted the Dread Empress of Callow."
5. Black makes a really great point. "Praes must have a role to play. Else its energies will be spent unmaking what you have made."
6. Cardinal and the school sounds A M A Z I N G.

erebus42

5. Yeah, people always go on and on about the Lower of Love but very rarely give the Power of Spite its due. Spite can keep the dying alive, keep the exhausted moving, and help bring the mighty low. It definitely would not be a good move to snub Praes if they don't want a big ol' "Fuck You" Plague.

Liliet

re: 3, I predict she will switch to calling him father before she switches to calling him by his given name 😊(have predicted that a while back and still not backing down on this)

re: 4, this has been brought up before, Cordelia commenting on how she 'rules by Wasteland methods' and all :3

re: 6, remember how Warlock refused to teach magic at War College? Amadeus has not given up on the idea since ;u;

Andrew Mitchell

re: re: 4 – Good point. I guess I put more faith in Amadeus' opinion than Cordelia's; just like Catherine does. 😊

Liliet

Amadeus is honestly also biased: he's Praesi, and he's not *looking* at all the ways Catherine does better than that because he's entertained by the surface comparison.

Trying to not be the Dread Empire of Callow is exactly why Hakram put importance on listening to Vivienne more.

Mental Mouse

> Now this puts Catherine in a new light "... having slighted the Dread Empress of Callow."

Amadeus is being slightly facetious, but the Black Queen is definitely much more badass than the Good Queens were. And touchier.

Agent J

What do you mean? The Founders of both dynasties, Elizabeth Alban and Eleanor Fairfax, were every bit as badass as the Black Queen. One was the godsdamned Queen of Blades and the other kicked Triumphant's teeth in while shagging the Duchess of Daoine.

I love Cat to death, but she's hardly the first badass queen Callow has churned out. How'd Malanza put it?

"-what was it with Callow and spawning all those wee dangerous women?"

Liliet

YES 😊

There's a reason Good King Edward accepted Catherine so easily – she's a continuation of a very long and proud tradition 😊😊😊

wirelessgrapes

A magical, Name school? We anime now boyz

Novice

Beach episode when?

sengachi

We had one already, it was called Thallasina. Fun times.

Hierus

Amazing as always

Andrew Mitchell

If the new school has Houses what will they be called? Be creative. Answers from Harry Potter are NOT acceptable.

Chaos

Gryffindork, Slythering, Jigglypuff, Sve Noc

erebus42

I could see houses being based on type of name: Strikers (warrior and martial Names), Weavers (more subtle influencer types), Shapers (Mages and priests), Stalkers (thief and ranger Named)

Alternatively they could be based on what the individual seeks to accomplish: Architects (those with the ambition and will to create and or bring things about (art, weapons, schemes, policy, nations, etc)), Bleaders (those who fight and kill for the sake of fighting or killing), Guardians (protectors and healers), Scholars (seekers of understanding and knowledge), Rovers (thrill seekers), and Hands (those who seek to serve as best they can and or do their job as best they can)

Andrew Mitchell

I like both those ideas. 😊 Thanks.

Decius

Foundling, Amadeus, Sahelian, Isbili, Komena, Alaya, Wekesa, Eudokia, Theodosian, Almorava, de Montfort, Dartwick, Hassenbach ... after their first heads of house, of course.

Yes, some of those would require extraordinary events in order to be physically possible, and others would require extraordinary events in order to be acceptable to everyone involved.

[Fayhem](#)

Not on board with all of those (for one thing, in organizational terms that's about a million houses for an institution on a continent where the total number of Named appears to perpetually hover somewhere under triple digits) but I absolutely love the idea that even after she abdicates this is how Catherine has to accept House Foundling being a thing.

[TeK](#)

House Audacia, motto "Godhead is the trick of perspective"
House Nobilitas, motto "Objectively better than you"
House Curiositas, motto "To boldly go"
House Scortatio, motto "Anything goes"
House Ambitione, motto "Will to power"
House Archer, motto "Sullen wench", unofficial motto "Look what I can do"

House Rectus, motto "Lies and violence"

House Iustus, motto "To do good"

Decius

House Indrani, motto "Watch me hold my wine and do this!"

[Mental Mouse](#)

Any Named can hold their wine if they want (or burn it away, anyhow). I'd stick with the traditional: "Hold my wine and watch this!"

Decius

Right, but only people who aren't Archer can hand off all of the wine they are carrying.

caoimhinh

I think it would be more like:

"Get me more wine and watch me do it!"

caoimhinh

Well, I would personally not use the House system like in H.P, mainly because that system is kinda ridiculous and didn't really make any difference except cultivating stereotypes among the student body, but I digress.

I would divide it into departments, like a University, as the Named are more likely than not to be teenagers and older, and they are each highly specialized, so besides some basic core teachings the Academy would need to prepare them in different ways, the trappings of a story for Villains are not the same as for Heroes, and the way for each of them to fill their Role are different too.

Department of Story-Fu and Narrative Self-defense, directed by Headmistress Catherine.

Department of Political Science, also known fondly as the *Schemes Department*, led by Vice-headmistress Akua.

Department of Sorcery, directed by Dean Hierophant, Masego.

Department of Lore and Culture, led by Professor Tariq.

Department of Logistics and Support, handled by Professor Hakram.

Department of Network and Management, led by Professor Eudokia.

Department of Knife, directed by Professor Indrani. Everyone comes back from the classes *sharper*, one way or the other.

Department of Military Strategy, led by Professor Grem (as Juniper would be busy still being Marshal and General of Callow's army).

Department of Madness Lateral Thinking and Obscure Plans held

by Professor Kairos, who insist that the Department's proper name is the *Department of Visionary Wisdom*.

Rule Enforcement, directed by Professor Hanno.

Campus Security, a team of multiple species, morning-shift to Orcs, night-shift given to Drow, and alternated in between are the Goblins, overall command by Ivah

The Office of Footrest is thought to be one of the mysteries of Cardinal Academy for Named (C.A.N), but it's said that the one holding office operates outside ordinary rules of the Academy at the behest of Headmistress Catherine.

Bi-weekly seminars on Extra-creational creatures are a mandatory curriculum.

TED Talks by many professors and guest lecturers are provided monthly, of special notice are the *How To Be Successful Despite Yourself* seminars given by the highly unwilling General Abigail, who insists that she just talks shit in her seminars and denies any capability of providing good advice, only giving half-assed answers, yet her Talks are a huge success among the student body and are proven to be highly educational.

Also, mandatory bi-monthly trips to foreign countries in order to build cultural knowledge and exchange, providing the students with insight about other countries and cultivate understanding between them.

[TeK](#)

"Cardinal Academy for Named (C.A.N)"

Evil in the can, ahahaha

Andrew Mitchell

Hahahahaha. You made me laugh several times while reading that. I especially liked hearing about Abigail's role. 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Ahem: An oddity of English is that "bi-monthly" and "bi-weekly" can mean almost the same thing, about every two weeks. (The "bi-" prefix is ambiguous.) In any case, even 6 times a year is probably too many field trips.

caoimhinh

True, and Catherine will definitely use that legal minutia to be a bit lazy XD.

But hey, they are Named, they will be fine with lots of trips and adventures, and can use the Twilight Ways to travel fast, so it can work out fine. Named are people of

action, even those in supportive Roles(if we take Adjutant and Scribe as example, they are arguably those who rest the least).

[Fayhem](#)

I assume that Eudokia's department is the only one not bolded because people somehow keep forgetting to remember it's there.

Also, I feel like Story-Fu and Narrative Self-Defense are related but not identical fields. As such I could definitely see them being lumped together under Catherine like you have them, but I could also see Narrative Self-Defense being broken out into its own field under Amadeus given that the difference between how Amadeus and Catherine approach narrative tropes is that Amadeus avoids them because they're dangerous to him as a villain while Catherine finds a way to leverage them. Which maps pretty well to Narrative Self-Defense and to Story-Fu, respectively.

caoimhinh

Indeed.

And I agree with you, that's why Story-Fu and Narrative Self-Defense are both mentioned, together and related but not the same.

There probably will be a class called "Defense against the Defeat Stories" or something like that. Including assignments like writing essays about Narrative consequence, and story logic applied to Named activity, exemplified in history. Also, I can imagine them writing books on the subjects: "Monologues and why they suck", "First Step Is Sure Step", and "100 Ways To Not Get Killed By The Story" and "Patterns of Three" series which of course must be a Trilogy called Loss, Draw, and Win.

[sengachi](#)

Did you intentionally not bold Scribe's department? Because if so my hat off to you. I almost skipped over it because of that.

caoimhinh

Yep.

A nice detail, right?

It seemed... fitting, to make it that way.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

And there it is. Catherine Foundling sees a status quo she doesn't like and flips the table, continent wise this time.

Negative enforcement and positive reinforcement at the same time.

konstantinvoncarstein

She will create Hogwarts 🥰 I want to see an extra chapter describing it 😊

[TeK](#)

And here is the final proof that Cat really is a Villain: she created compulsory education.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Created? No, she was herself victimized by it at the orphanage, and is now continuing the cycle of abuse. 😊 😊

Andrew Bartlett

'spent more of – name it! – on killing'

Forget to name a currency after the initial draft or was she trying to say like, 'Spent more of ?

[Javvies](#)

I think that Cat is saying that if you can name something, anything, that can count as a measurable resource, Callow and Praes have spent it on killing each other in greater quantities than basically anyone else has. Food, money, steel, blood, lives, magic, Named, etc.

Shveiran

I agree. It sounds awkward to me though, no?

[Liliet](#)

Considering it's spoken out loud, it sounds fine to me. Actually pretty good oratory. Try saying it out loud, it sounds v good convincing passionate intonation wise.

Andrew Mitchell

Yep, me too. 😊

Na

I think that's as intended. I believe it's meant to be understood as "Spent more of *literally anything you could name* (lives, steel, gold, time) on killing ..."

konstantinvoncarstein

This Academy for mages and Named would basically be the Unseen University from "the gods are bastards" 😊

[*Liliet*](#)

Yes.

And Catherine and Amadeus are going to do that.

I love that the entire dramatic part with 'convince me' was a lead up to 'and you need to add a magic academy to that also' so fucking much

konstantinvoncarstein

I was wondering what could Catherine do after all is settled (if she survived). Being FUN till the end of times seems a bit boring, and she need rest. Maybe she could become professor? What chair should she have?

Andrew Mitchell

> What chair should she have?

The chair she looted from the fortress of the Count of Olden Oak, of course! 😊

[*Liliet*](#)

I mean Indrani has first dibs on taking her travelling around the world.

But Cat as a teacher = YES. Even if it's not quite the EXACT degree of amazingly fitting that is for Amadeus, it's still great ;u;

caoimhinh

That's also evidence that Amadeus is still a bit bitter that his plan of a Magic Academy taught by Wekesa didn't come to fruition (Masego even said that was one of the gravest fights they had), so now he is getting Cat to approve of one, probably getting Masego as the main teacher of Magic. Petty vengeance FTW, hahahaha.

Black: "Wekesa, teach magic for the Empire, that will be good for the country"

Warlock: "Nah, fuck those idiots, I'm not going to spend my time teaching my secrets to those bastards"

Fights happens

Black: "Okay, don't do it. But one day, I will have your child do it."

Warlock: "Yeah, right. Sit down comfortably and wait for *that* to happen."

Black: "I'm a patient man."

Decades pass, flash forward to the present

Amadeus: "So, Masego, have you noticed how many practitioners have so many holes in their education, and bumble so much in their spellcraft?"

Masego: "Of course, that's one of my main complaints to Catherine about her armies, it's like they were never taught properly."

Amadeus: "Indeed, that seems to be the issue. Catherine and I have been speaking about that, you know. About how to resolve that matter of ignorance among practitioners and improve the way of future generations."

Masego: "Oh?"

Amadeus: "I have a proposal for you."
Just as planned.

Andrew Mitchell

Thank you for the new head canon. ♥

Rup



Black: ..a set of gears..grinding creation to dust...

[Liliet](#)

Yes.

Yes.

Yes.

Eventually:

Eudokia: "Amadeus, you're blinded by sentiment. Think: why ARE you supporting this?"

Amadeus: "So, do you remember that idea I had about thirty years ago—"

Andrew Mitchell

♥ Well he did say that it needs improvements.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

I'm not entirely convinced by the Accords as they've been presented so far. Two biggest problems include:

- Most of the signatories would've been at war with each other prior to the signing. This leads to extremely strained relations and it's easy to imagine a member leaving soon after signing. It's also not ideal when it comes to personal relations. Imagine forcing a villain from Thalassina or Nok into a same room as a Hero from Ashur.
- Leaving the enforcement of the rules in the hands of member states is a recipe for disaster, see the League of Nations or UN. The rules will quickly become nominal, with superpowers of the age making a token effort of appeasement whilst in reality disregarding them with impunity. You need an independent stick because member states will always prioritize their own good over the rules if given a chance.

I've got more concerns but they're more practical in nature. For example, there's a couple thousand years of culture with regards to Named. Not sure making a school will really make a difference without some serious social engineering. The idea of Cardinal as a center of magical learning makes sense because sorcery is a skill and it heavily depends on understanding and theory. If you gather all magical experts in one place other practitioners would naturally want to learn from them, perhaps gain some prestige. Kind of like wanting to get into Cambridge or Oxford.

Names are similar but also not. There's obviously a skill component to them and having a talented teacher yields results, but at the same time one can become incredibly powerful simply by playing into their Role. Like, how would you convince Named to attend it? Especially since many of them have a very narrow outlook on life - it's practically a prerequisite for being a Named. So yeah, not entirely convinced.

[Liliet](#)

IIRC Cardinal would answer these concerns exactly - it's going to be an independent center of power, maintaining it easily because of its ties to most of existing Named (and the most learned mages, with Amadeus's addition). Once the system is made to work - which there are enough interested players to make happen right now, or rather, it's exactly Cat's game to arrange so that everyone will be - it will be self-maintaining and self-enforcing. Cardinal will BE the independent player, one whose strength comes *from* its independence and neutrality (since breaking it will cut it off from a proportionally significant fraction of new Named), so it will be strongly incentivized to keep the system going as defined. Its approach and specific interests will evolve naturally as the world changes, and it will be a permanent self-reinforcing fixture after the initial investment.

Shveiran

This. The problem is not maintaining the system (not anymore than any other system, anyway); it is jumpstarting the project and bringing it up to speed.

If Cat can come out ahead in the war in the north, with enough allies still breathing, it doesn't seem impossible. Just very very hard.

[Liliet](#)

Well, these aren't two who shy from very very hard projects ;u;

Death Knight

Simple; Join or Die.

[theothin](#)

That's the option Amadeus explicitly shot down right at the start. It's not a valid foundation: the key is making sure every nation is getting something positive out of the deal, an incentive to help maintain this paradigm rather than to find a way to overturn it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Not sure making a school will really make a difference without some serious social engineering.

The school *is* social engineering. Nearly every new Named on the continent will go there to be indoctrinated/educated in the Laws of War, which spells are Forbidden (as contrasted with the Official Spellbooks), and what Named may lawfully/safely do for their nations. There will be stories about students, ex-students, and even instructors, getting out of hand, and their inevitable comeuppances. There will be school songs, and traditional oaths.

This is where the new regime is shaped.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Addendum:

> Nearly every new Named on the continent...

... *and* new sorcerers, at least the ambitious ones.

[Cold Cyberia](#)

That's sort of my second point. Unlike the mages who greatly benefit the expertise, there's no real incentive for Named to go to the school.

Imagine you're a Black Knight, historically second or third most powerful Named in Praes. Or a bigshot Hero from Levant – one of the ruling lines. Your name has enjoyed a thousand years of privilege and you have a lot of power. Why would you agree to go to a school, where your privilege will be restricted? With people whom you will despise on a deep, philosophical and cultural level?

You say every Named will go there but I ask: how and why? You think someone like Archer or Ranger would go? White Knight, who flips a coin and kills people if it land the wrong way? You can't just mash villains and heroes together because they've literally been fighting against each other since the beginning of time. Hence the need for social engineering before the school is even established.

Javvies

Most, if not all, current Named wouldn't attend Cardinal as students.

Hell, most of the big Names who survive the current wars might be instructors or guest lecturers. Probably the same will happen with some of the non-Named.

However, new Named would go – because it will make them better at what they do. Oh, sure, there'll likely be issues getting new Evil Named to attend in the beginning ... but the Accords will also start to reshape new Evil Named towards being practical Evil types, not the classic or old school Evil types.

Mental Mouse

The next chapter seems to cover that.

Aotrs Commander

Reading through this chapter, I was thinking to myself, "if this is implimented, this reads like the backstory worldbuilding of your other typical fantasy stories with the strange rules of conduct and evferything..." It's not often you get to see it get SET UP.

Now, while everyone ELSE immediatly jumped to anime and Harry Potter, I thought of the Heralds of Valdemar and their academy.

We should be so lucky if EE decides to go all Mercedes Lackey on us and spend decades writing up and down the timeline! (Valdemar is, I think just about the most complete history of a world I

think I've ever personally encountered; even in an RPG world like say Golarion, the history is mostly just history to the "now."

The academy would certainly give the room for future expansion.

But one thing that Paizo's Golarion has taught me is that the best world building always says about a place (or an organisation or whatever) "what sort of adventure or story could you have there?" Even if the adventures are intended never happen, the space for them tends to catch people's imaginations. And this is just as true for non-RPG things – case-in-point, even if EE has no plans for a sequel, just look at how engaged everyone is with just the *idea*.

Rup

.this is not a chapter
..it's like a blueprint of sequels and fanfics 🥰

Shveiran

This was a lot less tense than I anticipated, and unfortunately also a bit less detailed than I hoped. The enforcement part and the "who does what" interest me deeply.

On the other hand, I saw Cardinal coming as an independent enforcer... I did not foresee that school, and yet in hindsight it's so obvious! It fits Cat so nicely!
This is the best kind of twists.

MOAR please.

Though this time there is a certain anime vibe, admittedly.

[TheAtomicOption](#)

once again, in the last lines, Amadeus shows why he's the best character in this entire story.

Soronel Haetir

So long as the Names themselves don't change (which I could well see this system accomplishing) I have a very hard time seeing the current holders going along with this, even when they don't personally hold political power.

A simple example, the whole being-forced-to-attend-school bit, for someone like Hakram with a Name intimately tied to helping a particular other I just don't see that person being willing to take time away from what they see as their role that was so important that it coalesced into a Name. I could even see the forced attendance shifting such a person into someone aligned against the Accords themselves if something happened to the anchor while the second were away at school.

Names are first and foremost an act of will, suborning that will to what some other person (or group of them) thought was a good idea just sounds like a non-starter.

werafdsaew

> particular other

Will also attend, for the same reason why most Name would naturally attend with no prompting.

Soronel Haetir

That's fine if the pair come into their Names at about the same time but it seems unlikely that an assistant role would come into being while the primary is in school. And a primary Named doesn't seem all that likely to set aside whatever need drove them to take on a Name just so their second could go learn.

Andrew Mitchell

Once this gets established and starts producing Named individuals who are much more effective (for example, understanding and using story-fu) then anyone who doesn't go will be at a disadvantage.

For Names like Page and Squire, their respective mentors will want them to go.

anon

Four typos:

"a singe bottle"
single*

"The fought as barons"
They*

"Thought here are objections still."
Though* there*

"might not longer"
no*

superkeaton

Called it, that Academy Black argued with Warlock about would be something he'd seek to accomplish even now.

Daniel E

Jokes aside, seems to me that this plan would seriously screw with Above & Below's pissing contest. On a less metaphysical note, I can't see any of Below's Named actually going for this. Heroes who can compromise sure, but Villains would essentially become Chaotic Good.

Andrew Mitchell

> this plan would seriously screw with Above & Below's pissing contest.

Absolutely. I think that's the driving force for making the Accords a reality. It's a way out that benefits all people and (at least) limits the cycle of destruction created by the gods contest.

caoimhinh

Yeah, it establishes rules of engagement and limits the destruction caused by the clash of Named (which is inevitable to happen as more often than not the presence of a Named spawns other Named around, be it support or oppose them).

"the strife between Named I fully intended on making a continent-wide tourney, a pit fight that'd allow the Gods to claim their due and the rest of us to keep on moving."

JJR

Except if you screw with the gods too hard, they might just call a mulligan on your existence and settle the bet with a different world. The fae were leftover from the first time their world building didn't get them to an answer.

Andrew Mitchell

Exactly right. Important to get the balance right.

caoimhinh

Yep.

In a more serious manner, there are lots of practicality issues for an Academy for Named. More specifically, that people come into a Role in response to actions they are specifically taking, and they get empowered to attempt to carry on their will on the world.

In theory, having Named learn about many things relevant to them as the rules of engagement and the consequences of Narrative to their lives is important, and many of us jumped to imagining ways this could develop in a proper school (because it's incredibly fun to do that); HOWEVER, in practice this is far more likely to be a type of seminar of only a couple of months that every Named will have to attend and then sign a few

oaths to bind themselves to the Accords and abide to the agreements maybe even enforce them onto Rogue Named that refused to attend the Academy.

As Named come to their Name in dramatic circumstances more often than not, they will have personal agendas to pursue right at the moment they become Named, so they will naturally be more reluctant to travel to an Academy for many months or years considering they come to their Roles in the middle of some kind of mess, until that mess is solved is highly unlikely they would leave.

Maybe Amadeus saw this and decided it's better to have it as a Magic Academy that houses the Named Seminars for Accords Appliance (NSA) since Named are unlikely to spend a long time in a single place unless their story is drawing them there.

Shveiran

True enough.

On the other hand, this is once more a temporary matter. Cardinal, if done right, could change how most perceive Names ("talented folks get to Cardinal, then get their Names, don't you know nothing? That's proper heroes, that is") and thus it would become a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts.

The system can work; the problem is merely implementation, even if it is a huge one.

Andrew Mitchell

> "talented folks get to Cardinal, then get their Names, don't you know nothing? That's proper heroes, that is"

Hahahhaha. Fantastic way to illustrate your point. A+

ninegardens

Where do you think they're going to house Cardinal?

Is it going to be part of the city in Twilight? Will it be in Paeres (for political reasons, so as to reduce the isolation that Black mentioned), in Callow (nice and central?)

Personally I put bets on twilight... but I'm not sure if the realm is stable enough (magically) for some of the more... experimental sciences.

parahacker

One question: Will this also be a *research* school?

[Liliet](#)

For mages? Probably.

For anyone else? Hard no unless they feel like tangling with gnomes.

Eric Mueller

This story has been enthralling, and is easily one of the best web serials of all time.

cainerahlld777

I LOVE that THIS was how you broke down the Accords, so well done.

This was such promise... in another world this could be the start of the whole Hero & Villain Academies theme, the War Games, Ranking based on Level (Depth of Name, Aspects, etc) oh My word 😊

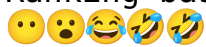


Beautiful world you're sharing, thanks much.

cainerahlld777

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Chapter 58: Prolong

"All are free, or none. Ye of this land, suffer no compromise in this."

– Inscription on the founding stele of Bellerophon

My heart skipped a beat. Certainly, it was no deep secret that I had bound Akua Sahelian to the collar of the Mantle of Woe and there would be some who suspected the true nature of the 'Advisor Kivule'. Still, none I'd not brought into the secret had ever spoken of it until now save for Kairos Theodosian. And the Tyrant could have bargained for that knowledge with the Dead King, who knew all of my deeds that Masego had known of, or even through the use of whatever aspect allowed him to be so sharply perceptive of the wants of others. Black, though? If he knew now it was either because officers of the Legions-in-Exile both knew

and had passed it along since he woke, or because it'd been known to him before he was captured. Or maybe, I reluctantly thought, he'd just known me well enough from the start to tell where that story was headed.

"Flowery language, that was," I carefully said. "Perhaps a little lacking in precision."

His face had grown no easier to read, for all the purported insouciance he'd been carrying himself with since he woke.

"Use them," Black said. "Our madmen, our warlocks and sorcerers. Give them laws, give them coin and great undertakings to embrace. Else they find all these on their own."

I calmed, the slightest bit. It was still no small thing, he was speaking of – Cardinal as neutral grounds for the Accords as well as the seat of the legion that'd enforce them by steel if need be would already be costly, but to make it a centre of sorcery as well? I was no great scholar of sorcery, but I'd had a close look at the deep pockets required for the sort of research that Masego and his father had considered to be leading-edge. The costs to both found and fund a mage's school would be daunting, to say the last. He wasn't wrong about the virtues of keeping Praesi mages occupied, though, especially those who would have before then spent much of their years learning the intricacies of diabolism. The notion of even a hundred furious highborn Wasteland warlocks out in the world with little left to lose was the sort of thing disasters were made of. And quite possible Named, though I'd always known that dropping this large a stone in the pond would cause ripples. I'd counted on it, in truth. If instead of ruinous wars between Good and Evil I could instead make the crux of the conflict strife between Named that heeded their laws and did not? Then it became a war of Names, not nations, and Calernia avoided another coming of Akua's Folly.

"Did you perhaps believe I meant the shade of Akua Sahelian?" the green-eyed man casually asked, smile sudden and sharp.

His sense of humour, it seemed, had not been gentled by the loss of his Name. I supposed that'd been a little too much to hope for.

"Oh, it would please some of High Lords to have her placed in position of importance," he conceded. "Yet when it comes to the Doom of Liesse, my advice will always remain the same: no matter how clever you believe your scheme to be, it isn't. Kill her now, in full and beyond anyone's mending."

"I have a purpose for her," I said.

"And she for you, Catherine," he chided. "It would hardly do to forget that. If a single victory was all it took to bind the

highborn to one's cause, the Tower would not change rulers the way other lands change seasons."

"I know that," I said, a tad sharply. "There's a lot you don't know, Black. *Couldn't* know, because after I told you to get your shit together you instead decided to take a walk through the heartlands of Procer with a torch in hand."

"A calculated measure meant to ensure the Principate could not continue waging war as it had," he said. "The morality of it I've no intention of debating, though I'll say that if the First Prince of Procer intends to use massed levies to fight wars then she marked her peasantry as a war asset by her own hand."

"You condemned hundreds of thousands to a slow death by starvation," I flatly said. "Not innocents, perhaps, not all of them. But certainly non-combatants. There are manners in which waging war is acceptable, Black, and you used to know them. You didn't allow sacks during the Conquest, or any of the other myriad atrocities that followed the old Legions like a loyal dog."

"I set boundaries appropriate to the manner of outcome I desired," Black calmly replied. "As I did in the Principate. There can be no peace settlement with a crusade, Catherine. They end when one side is no longer capable of prosecuting the war. I took the most swift and plausible path to that ending."

"You also failed," I told him. "Failed hard enough my Marshal had to commit Callow's armies to bailing out your own and I had to tangle with two of the most potent heroes alive to take back your soul after *they'd fucking cut it out*."

I would have thought less of him, after, if he'd made the argument that the legions under Grem had bled not long before to defend the Red Flower Vales and so relief had been owed. It was true, and the debt that lay there was one of the reasons I'd not entire lost my temper at Juniper's adventurous western campaign. But it would have been, implicitly, an admission he'd expected someone to step in and save him. Coming from the man who'd taught me to pray at the altar of taking responsibility for one's actions, be they righteous or wicked, that would have been... disappointing.

"Indeed," he frankly admitted. "I significantly miscalculated in both assessing the danger posed by the Grey Pilgrim and the lay of the strategies decided by Calernia's great powers. Marching the legions north towards the Stairway would have been the correct decision, in retrospective. Klaus Papenheim would have followed us and so arrived to bolster the defence of Hainaut in time to avoid losing the shores. The losses would still have been bloody for both him and Malanza's hosts, still leaving the First

Prince in a vulnerable position but without having committed either my legions or your Army of Callow to the field."

The assessment was spoken clearly and concisely, like some surgeon slicing open the cadaver of a mistake one word at a time. At least he wasn't shying away from admitting he could blunder. And my own hands were not clean as driven snow here. Malicia might not have told him of her attempted dealings with Keter, but neither had I, so he'd made his decisions blind. And though the famine he'd wrought on the Principate was both a lasting shame and a lasting complication, it would have been dishonest to pretend I'd not also benefited from it. And from someone else doing it, too, so that my hands would not be stained by the deed.

"Procer wouldn't be so willing to bargain with me now if you hadn't first broken their wealthiest and most fertile territories," I admitted. "And I've reason to believe that the Grey Pilgrim went after you in particular to secure a hold on me."

He cocked his head to the side, sharp-boned face gone pensive.

"Not a hostage," he decided. "That would have carried... considerable risks. Forcing a confrontation on his own terms, then."

I looked at him then, the mind at work behind the pale green eyes, and still saw the bones of the man who'd become the Carrion Lord. He'd lost a mould of power, when he'd lost his Name, but the substance of what made Amadeus of the Green Stretch dangerous remained. A fresh mould might yet be found, I thought, and if it was what came of it would not be gentle. His eyes finally flicked to staff in my hand.

"Pattern of three," he deduced.

I dipped my head, an acknowledgement that at least I suspected as much.

"Congratulations are in order, then," Black said, to my surprise. "You have been marked the equal of one whose influence spans more than half of Calernia."

His lips twitched, but I'd learned to tell the difference between mockery and amusement with those and this was of the latter.

"I have higher ambitions still," I admitted.

"Indeed," he said. "You are aware that there are some who will say the council you propose will be the true ruler of Calernia from the shadows. Especially if your proposed enforced succeed at attracting Named as well as funding a standing army."

"It's not going to be a campaign army like Juniper and Grem command," I felt compelled to say. "It'll be meant for battles and hitting cornered Names who gathered people to their banner. For large-scale warfare we'd call on the signatories."

"That will always be one of the weaknesses of your Accords," Black warned. "You saw firsthand the shortcomings of a ruling council in Laure: voting blocks forming and personal interests coming to command the debates is inevitable. Forming a diplomatic council including an elected hero and villain to settle disputes will only aid so much, if every signatory's designated representative fights for their country's interests alone. Outside enmities and alliances will interfere with the diplomatic mechanisms functioning as intended."

"That's one of the reasons in need Praes to sign on and claim a seat," I admitted. "I'm not sure the League will sign on – certainly not as long as the Hierarch lives, however long that'll last – so without the Empire the signatories are essentially the Grand Alliance, Callow and the drow. It'll be too imbalanced."

"It is unlikely the Golden Bloom will deign to participate in such a treaty," he agreed. "Or the Titanomachy, for that matter."

Which meant Levant and Ashur, historically close allies since the Dominion's founding, and Procer with all its wealth and influence radiating outwards. Callow and the Empire Ever Dark, as nations on the outskirts who must deal with Procer to have any significant trade presence, would inevitably end up on the outskirts of the Accords' council as well. If the Empire was a signatory, the game changed. Ashur would have commercial interests on the Praesi coast, and the Wasteland would be closely aligned with Callow's own interests as it would be its effective granary and strongest trade partner. If the west pulled together so would the east, and that'd prevent any bloc from commanding a strong majority in council. Which, considering that I'd set in law that such a council could call on signatories for war against a nation in breach of the Accords, was essential if I wanted them to actually function as intended. If the council in Cardinal became a way for an alliance of nations to force its influence at the expense of others, the Liesse Accords would inevitably collapse.

"A roving band of Named enforcing your laws backed by an army will earn resistance in and of itself," Back said. "Yet combined with your insistence that Named cannot rule or own property of more than a specific total worth – which should be higher in general, by my reckoning, but significantly stricter on landholding in particular – it may very well be taken as the villain Catherine Foundling attempting to claim rulership of Calernia from behind a veil of shared laws."

"I won't have any particular authority under the Accords," I pointed out. "In Cardinal itself yes, but—"

"But the Woe makes up a significant portion of living villains, you are a ruling queen with great resources at your disposal and undeniably the most famous Named of your generation," he calmly interrupted. "It is near a certainty you will have a seat on that council as the representative for Below. That will be enough for rumours."

"Fine," I said. "But on the other side of the table, odds are it'll be the Peregrine speaking for Above. The man commands a lot of trust in the west, Black."

A moment passed.

"It has a story's shape," he conceded, which was praise and condemnation both. "That does not, however, change the truth that you would be risking war every time you tried to depose a popular ruler having come into a Name."

"It's necessary to avoid the worst Named can deal out," I insisted. "Sure, a Good King will usually improve things more than not. And a powerful Dread Empress binds Praes together for at least part of her reign, allowing for growth. But if they share a border, what would be skirmishing between mundane rulers becomes *much* more prone to escalation – and capable of escalating to vicious heights no one else could reach."

"A Good King being told to abdicate by a council mostly made up of foreigners will withdraw from the Accords and bitterly fight against any attempt to have its terms enforced upon him," Black said. "The Dominion sees its Named as figures of religious reverence, at least those from the great lines. Even if the Pilgrim backs you, you'd be using to obtain compliance the very trait you seek to eradicate. A tower of shallow foundations, that. In Procer you might find agreement, for Named do not rule there, but where else?"

"Named are under influence," I said. "Below or Above's, it doesn't matter, the judgement will always be impaired. Sometimes that impairment leads to upright deeds but even then it still remains a thinning of their ability to make clear-headed choices."

"Will you also place law in the Accords forbidding the crowning of a drunk or an idiot?" Amadeus asked. "These, too, are impairments."

"You know that's not the same thing," I said.

"I know you are attempting to dictate who can and cannot rule nations that are barely your allies if at all, nations you have

not conquered or truly defeated, nation on which you are attempting to impose your personal belief in the face of centuries of culture speaking to other directions. And, most of all, this is directed at nations whose goodwill you need very badly for the Liesse Accord to exist as more than ink and fantasy," he said, tone never rising nor ebbing low. "You are overstepping."

My fingers clenched.

"You know we'd all be better off if we agreed on excluding Named from rule," I said. "Gods, even just Praes getting rid of some of its-"

"Until the Dread Empire itself desires the mending of that wound, no amount of treaties will change a thing," Black said, tone bland. "That was made plain to me, in knowing and truth. It is not enough to be correct in *principle*, Catherine. If you cannot offer a practical way to deliver on your beliefs, then they are wind. No one will agree on the Cardinal council having right to call signatories to war to depose a Named ruler, not even your own people once you've passed on the crown. It is best you make your peace with that early and prepare yourself to fight more salient battles."

He didn't suggest taking the articles out though, I noted. Ah, of course he wouldn't. Since in his eyes it'd never been something worth seriously attempting, scrapping it became an easy concession in a true negotiation. I wasn't convinced, honestly, that he was right. But I could at least consider him as a herald of the opposition I would face in days to come, and that meant at the very least some parts of this would have to be reconsidered. There was no point in making a toothless law, but one with too much bite might be even worse considering most of the signatories would have been recently at war with each other to one extent or another.

"Such as?" I asked.

"Your academy," he said. "True, without it the Accords die with you. If your rules of engagement are not carved into a pattern all must heed, they will fade the moment the strength behind them does. Yet you must address the inherent difficulties in gathering *Named* and forcing lessons and laws upon them."

"I'm not making a War College, Black," I said. "It won't be classes and lectures for both a fourteen-year-old Squire and a grizzled Unconquered Champion in their late thirties, that's doomed to failure. The main purpose of the that academy is to teach the Articles of Strife – acceptable levels of violence against other Named and Nameless – and set out rules of behaviour. I expect most will attend for a few months only and wander back out into the world. But they'll be wandering with the

knowledge that seeding an undead plague in some village's well brings Named killers down on their head, that calling an angel down on a city will get your throat slit and that city quarantined. I can't control a continent's worth of Named, it'd be absurd to even try. But if I can teach them rules of engagement and get them to agree that those rules should be enforced? Then the Accords have already done half of what they were meant to."

"Short-sighted," Black said. "Do you not realize the amount of influence Cardinal – and by extension your academy – will inevitably accrue? The Good King. The Dread Empress. The Tyrant of Helike. The Grey Pilgrim. What do all these have in commons?"

"They are or can all be the head of their nation," I frowned.

Oh, I thought.

"The crowns of most of Calernia will spend at least half a year studying abroad in Cardinal," I said. "Shit."

He'd didn't need to expand on the point any further, my mind was already spinning. If I wanted the spending of months in a foreign city to be seen as more than an imposition on a sovereign or sovereign-to-be, Cardinal needed to provide more than just an education in the intricacies of the Accords. That much could be provided by tutors when it came down to it, and that meant no one had motivation to fund Cardinal's existence – which meant the weakening of a heart to them, and that was a death knoll in the making.

"Sorcerers," I said. "We'll need every damned one we can get, and any grimoire we can get our hands on. Teachers and books as well, of every subject and stripe. League histories, Ashuran atlases, Proceran poems. It can't just be for Named, can it? It has to be *the* school, so that when some angry kid with a sword and growing powers is offered a chance to study there it's an opportunity and not a chore. They have to *want* to come."

"Oh, you'll get more than Named and Named-incipient if you succeed at that," Amadeus of the Green Stretch smiled, thin and bladelike. "Gather such fine teachers, such deep knowledge, and you'll find even nobles sending their children there. Do you think any tutor in the Dominion could match the education you have spoken of? In Callow, in any city of the League? Highborn and diplomats and the ambitious seeking to become intimates of Named still in their rise: all these will knock at your door, demanding a place."

"That's..." I hesitated. "It'll cost a fortune. And you don't even know where the city is to be raised."

"I am not a fool," my father said, sounding amused, "so I do. You are still, deep in your bones, Callowan. You'll have it carved out of the Red Flower Vales, putting neutral grounds between yourself and Procer while also opening the gate to enriching trade."

I wondered how many more people had seen through that. It wasn't like it'd be a mistake to do that – as Queen of Callow I could cede enough fields to support the city from my side, and given the way Procer would be gaining much from the Accord while losing less than anyone else getting an equivalent land grant on the other side of the Whitecaps shouldn't be impossible. It was at the centre of Calernia, too the crossroads of the west and the east. Still, it would have been a lie to say I'd not intended the location of it to be boon for Callow.

"You'll be making the capital of a new age," Black said. "And so you must reassess your negotiating stance accordingly, or see yourself outplayed. It will not be your backyard alone, Catherine. You are founding the royal court of Calernia itself."

And his lips were quirking as he spoke, like the world demanded that they turn into a smile regardless of his wants.

"I need you to see it through," I admitted. "I need you at that table, speaking for Praes and signing the Accords. Gods, I need you just to have someone I can speak to about these things."

Someone who, unlike Hakram and Vivienne, had desires sometimes estranged from my own. Who'd look at my schemes and see weaknesses I had not.

"Help me," I asked. "Help me to *break* the Game of the Gods."

He looked away, at the hung parchments that laid out my fool's dream in ink and law.

"A better world, is it?" he pensively said.

Pale green eyes narrowed, something cold at the heart of them. Like great cogs of steel, made to half yet stuttering back into movement.

"It can be done," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said. "And if nothing else, it ought to be an interesting way to spend my twilight years."

I am curious, did EE post this just after midnight by mistake...?

M0och

Also awesome chapter!!

Go Vote!!!!

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

taovkool

Hard boiled wars with Named and pther assorted monsters vs school life drama.

I'm not sure which is worst, to be honest. Odds are about equal, I think.

edrey

if you read douluo dalu you won't find it too bad. the principal ends like a general in the continental wars, uniting all the powerhouses and ignoring the rulers8

Sckarred

Douluo Dalu is bad for other reasons, like the usual deus ex machina powerups, some martial art style that is somehow literally better then people on the path to godhood..

[Mental Mouse](#)

School life drama with Named and other assorted monsters. Occasionally interrupted by hard boiled wars (hi Neshie!).

Andrew Mitchell

Vote here to guide 😊 others towards the PGtE experience –
<http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

laguz24

How much do you want to bet that somewhere along the way everything gets screwed up and her dream does not come out to what she intends?

M0och

A great deal milord!

A very great deal indeed!!!

[Liliet](#)

I'm betting against 😊

Pzarndt

I'm guessing that the academy survives, but Calernia remains divided. So much story potential in old friends from school coming to power as leaders of enemy nations.

The magic school keeps the academy popular, and the named portion of the school teaches them how to manipulate a story as well as Black and Cat can

Ultimate_Procrastinator

...I am prepared to pay far more to read that sequel series than I would for most physical book series

Zach

Isn't this literally the plot of the new fire emblem game

[Mental Mouse](#)

> teaches them how to manipulate a story as well as Black and Cat can

Well... most students simply won't be capable of that. But they can get a decent grounding in the common storylines and major hazards thereof. Now, people keep appointing Pilgrim to university positions, when the thing is he'd first have to live long enough to make it a "lifetime position". The dude was already into (we think) his 80s before getting resurrected in slightly-damaged condition. For normal people, 80s and up is into "just keeled over one day" territory, and that's when they're healthy. He *could* live to 100 or more, but I wouldn't sell him any life insurance. Not even *with* exclusions for "acts of war" and "acts of the Gods"! 😊

What he *might* live long enough for, is to finish writing his journals/memoirs, *including* his newest insights. 😊 And of course his memoirs will be a required text at the Cardinal School....

Sanctvs obscvrvvm

Chills, she will really manage it, at this rate.

RoflCat

>If you cannot offer a practical way to deliver on your beliefs, then they are wind.

So, what you're saying, is there needs to be a Practical Guide for it.

Mennolt van Alten

The final chapter of this fiction will end with
'And that is a comprehensive overview of the making of The School and the start of the age of the Nameless Rulers.
– The Historian, compiled for course HA4-101: History of the Age of Named'

antoninjohn

She should have started this plan after she ruled the continent
edrey

as a shadow ruler, you mean. otherwise she is dead

[Javvies](#)

Excellent.

Amadeus is on board and his experience is helping point out where Cat's inexperience is showing.

edrey

well, how many cities were in the everdark? as a lakemancer she should have stolen a few right?

Andrew Mitchell

I'll just leave this right here...

erebus42

That is a pretty awesome line. This probably says more about me than anything else, but if I was a God and my creations managed to break the game of my peers and I and essentially flip us off, I'd be way more proud of them than angry. Idk maybe there is something to that whole Sacred Betrayal thing.

Andrew Mitchell

You're definitely one for Below then... 😊 ... Me too, my friend, me too.

edrey

sight... Praesi.

[TeK](#)

Dunno, if I was playing chess, and our pawns staged a bloody coup, I would be less than pleased. Probably burn it all for fun and giggles.

[doominator10](#)

If my pawns staged a coup, then I would just get a new set of pawns and scrap the old ones... I wonder what Bard is up to these days.

Faiir

Seriously?
I'd get a camera and start filming.

[Liliet](#)

Given that that's basically already what the Gods were doing , , ,

Author Unknown

You should definitely be a Dungeon Master then.

Gerionar

The gods promoting freedom (the chaotic ones) will welcome the breaking of the game, since this is what they always wanted. Those who argued it would be best to rule over the mortals (the lawful ones) will be tempted to flip the board. They will send the Bard at Cat and to everything to keep the Game going. The longer I think about it the less I think that these two factions are identical to Above and Below.

[Liliet](#)

I think that is not not the right interpretation of the prologue.

One faction thought that they [the Gods] should guide their children to greatness. The other faction thought that they [the children] should rule over other creatures and each other.

And that's Above and Below.

Both factions are generally in favor of mortals doing whatever the fuck they get up to, since that's the essence of the wager.

erebus42

Idk man, that sounds like House of Light propaganda to me...

[Liliet](#)

I mean the prologue is that period, duh

werafdsaew

So it looks like Name rulers are here to stay.

konstantinvoncarstein

If Named are the product of a culture, ruling Named are too. And therefore impossible to eradicate without a massive change of this culture, which is impossible to implement without causing revolts. And a all-our war.

medailyfun

That was expected as being the most unrealistic demand of the Accords

Andrew Mitchell

Yep. Honestly I didn't see it as much of an issue but there were a lot of good arguments presented in the comments that made me change my mind. And Amadeus agrees with the commenters so its a done deal now.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm! Binding them to the Academy is a much more realistic solution to the problem :3

caoimhinh

I like how Amadeus leads Catherine so she can reach the conclusions of his points without him outright saying it. I'm kinda surprised she hadn't seen the reach of that Academy until Amadeus pointed it out that they were the leaders of the Calernia. Maybe she was really convinced that they were going to agree on banning Named rulers.

It's also cool that he is like "Ok, asking to ban Named rulers is overstepping (which was his polite way of saying it was dumb, arrogant and impractical to attempt) but don't take it out of the proposal. We'll use it as a concession to get leverage in pushing something more important and practical."

Amadeus immediately saw the coming conferences and the signing of the Liesse Accords as what they were: *a negotiation*. Which was what Cat had failed to see, she expected every country to agree and sign by common sense and force of arms, but she expected them to accept the Accords in their current form, which was obviously impossible.

Amadeus hasn't even read the whole document and is already improving it; fuck, he hasn't been awake more than a few hours and has already started to put in motion and improved the plan to change the whole continent.

A sharp mind indeed.

[Liliet](#)

TBF Catherine is 20. She's lucky af that the first person to look at her Accords and criticize the fuck out of her inexperience showing is her teacher ♥ ♥ ♥

(Who will ever remain such, formal apprenticeship being over or not)

(btw, I love how his revised-in-retrospect plan for acting after getting trapped on the other side of the Vales involves getting Papenheim's army to Hainaut in time ♥ ♥ <3)

caoimhinh

Yes, but that was glaringly obvious, and being so versed in Name lore and story-fu as she is, she should have known better. I mean, her defense when Amadeus pointed it out was "but we'd all be better off if we agreed on excluding Named from rule", there was no practicality there, only wishful thinking.

Also, the Accords' current form is not Catherine's work alone; Hakram, Akua, Aisha, Vivienne, and many others participated, just last chapter we were reminded of the many hours spent talking with lawyers and professionals of political science, many chapters ago it was also said that the Woe consulted with experts of Praesi, Callowan and Proceran law for the current documents of the Liesse Accords.

I would expect at least Hakram to know, as he is aware of the process it took to disappear the Warlord Name from the Orcs. Maybe he kept quiet because he wanted Cat to realize this on her own, or maybe he was waiting for the appropriate time to bring up the subject? Maybe Hakram thought the same as Amadeus and simply went "well, this can be a concession during the negotiation, let's leave it there".

[Liliet](#)

Akua didn't participate, and I'm guessing there are so many detailed practicalities there that they got consumed by those and details of the big picture were left at stage 1. They were answering the question "how can we make THIS work?" rather than "what exactly SHOULD we be trying to achieve?"

KageLupus

I think this is actually a really good example of Cat's other point, that Named have influences which make them think and behave differently. It is not just whether they are on team Above or Below though. Every Named is a little crazy in their own way. There is some thing that drives them so fully they end up with their Role.

For Cat it has always been other people being selfish and impractical when it is so obvious (to her) how you could make the world a better place for everyone instead. That little hiccup in her thinking is one of the things that lead to her being Named. Cat can look at a problem and say "Well if we all do X then this isn't a problem and everyone wins." Black is reminding her that other people will hear that and say "X shouldn't apply to me" because they don't care about everyone winning.

You are right that it is strange for Cat to not realize that other people wouldn't agree to the no Named rulers clause in the Accords. But it is not because she didn't think about it. It is because she can plainly see that it would be the best choice, so people not going along with it just doesn't make as much sense to her.

Liliet

"It is not enough to be correct in principle" <= this is a conflict from alllll the way back in her first Name vision, the one after Black stabbed her. She called her Good twin 'Idiot Twin' for just that. Sounds like that's the direction she found herself leaning anyways :3

Fayhem

> It's also cool that he is like "Ok, asking to ban Named rulers is overstepping (which was his polite way of saying it was dumb, arrogant and impractical to attempt) but don't take it out of the proposal. We'll use it as a concession to get leverage in pushing something more important and practical."

It's not like I didn't like Amadeus already, but that's still some extra brownie points right there. I don't want to make this about contemporary politics bc that tends to turn into a shitshow real quick so I'm not going to name any names, but it high-key makes me crazy when politicians proactively compromise on their positions in advance and act like they actually expect that will make their opposition not push back and try to make them compromise on their proposals now. Like. No. They will always push back, because that's what makes them the opposition instead of your allies. And now you're getting pushed into compromising from your compromise, so JUST STOP IT ALREADY.

Alright, I'm gonna go breathe into a paper bag now. Good talk, guys. tl;dr – Amadeus smart, and I'm super disturbed that I like an avowedly Evil villain's style of seeking positive change better than most of the people I actually get the option of voting for.

caoimhinh

Well, Amadeus *is* Evil, after all...

I actually saw it more as a business deal mindset, like starting the bargain by asking a price that you know it's too high to actually sell the thing, then slowly compromise into selling it at a lower price but still within your winning range.

Which is absolutely what they have to do, practicalities aside, as their opposition (Procer in particular) will not let this be "a victory for Evil" so they won't let the plan go unopposed and unquestioned, specially when so many of the points are unequivocally an advantage to Callow in particular (like the administration and location of Cardinal, for example), no matter how much Catherine tries to say this is for the whole continent, the ones most benefitted from the Accords are Callowan. So the Proceran Princes, being the kind of bastards we have seen for 5 books, will not let that slide easily. It's the kind of mindset of the person who is fine doing a job for ten thousand dollars, but will raise a ruckus if they find out that the other members of the team are getting paid a hundred thousand.

Liliet

Well, admittedly Amadeus's brand of Evil somehow magically includes "binding warlocks to a higher purpose" and considering the good of the many to override the good of the few (including yourself and your inner circle)...

Fayhem

Also, re: Catherine not seeing this stuff that seems kind of obvious – this is exactly the phenomenon of being too close to something to see it clearly after you've been living and breathing it for months while you build it from the ground up, and it's exactly why smart people don't rely on themselves or their immediate collaborators to catch everything and instead bring in trusted outsiders prior to actually releasing something to give an eyes-on and point out anything glaring. Which is exactly what Cat's just done at the earliest plausible opportunity, and just look at how quick she is to pick up on legitimate feedback when she gets it.

In other words, this isn't an example of Cat being uncharacteristically dumb IMO, this is more like a demonstration of just how smart she actually is. This is exactly best practice for formulating this kind of major project/proposal, and there's a reason for that. The fact that she's as subject to that reason as anyone else isn't a slight against her intellect or a failing as such IMO, and the fact that she's almost flawlessly implementing that best practice here I think is a testament to her actual intelligence.

Gerionar

See rule no. 12 of the Evil Overlord List.

Although Amadeus is no five-year-old, the same principle applies.

[Liliet](#)

Great analysis, thank you! 😊

edrey

if you read douluo dalu you won't find it too bad. the principal ends like a general in the continental wars, uniting all the powerhouses and ignoring the rulers

caoimhinh

In almost every Xianxia, the Martial Arts Schools and Cultivation Sects are pretty much countries of their own.

[Ben Serreau-Raskin](#)

That was exactly the father-daughter terrifying politics bonding time I've been waiting for.

Faiir

Hey Black, what are we going to do today?

Same thing as always Cat, try to take over the world!

Andrew Mitchell

Hopefully with a LOT more success than those other two!

BlackPhoenix7777

And once more Amadeus proves himself the best character. Gods Below, I love that monster.

Alivaril

I'm still not really sold on the Accords. Yes, it'd make for a neat setting and I can see the heroes cooperating, but the villainous side of the table? I can't realistically see them sincerely agreeing to become glorified gladiators instead of actual, y'know, Villains. Insincerely agreeing, maybe, but that just means the villages of undead will be created a little more quietly, inevitable failure be damned (and Damned).

And here I was hoping Cat's endgame would be to force Fate into a physical form so she could stab it. :V

Agent J

All's fair in love and conceptual murder.

agesbe

The thing is, most villains aren't Kairos. They have a goal beyond being a villain. Cat isn't trying to end all conflict, she's trying to make it clear to everyone that certain things are not okay. I am not actually positive where undead plagues come in this.

edrey

plagues are good examples of cause, consequence and process. i am little curious in bandit like names, it would be a great problem, not to mention names like assassine

Hitogami

Assassin is a great name though? They do surgical strikes (minimal collateral damage) and will most likely end up enforcing the Accords.

Panchoadrenalina

I think is because you are seeing 2 sides (good evil) when there are 4. As we saw in the mess in twilight.

Practical/pragmatic good (pilgrim)

Practical evil (cat)

Mustache twirling evil (kairos)

Unyielding good (saint)

And we have many examples of all of the sides. The practical sides will join in cardinal fighting those who will not go there. Fun

Lithrandil

Well they are basically the Geneva Conventions which work so I would say they have a decent chance to work.

Snycke

Do the Geneva Conventions really work, or is it just a document we all signed off on and then ignored?

[*Liliet*](#)

We are at least trying to pretend it works, which is a major improvement over considering things it's banned natural and par for the course.

WuseMajor

It depends on the villain. Masego really just wants to study the universe and maybe dissect a few gods. He'd honestly probably enjoy having a very clear cut set of rules for what is allowed and what will get a hit squad sent to murder him.

Akua really just wants to do GREAT things, I think. She can be awesome or awful, as long as she's provoking Awe. So... give her things to do. Allow her to be the Great and Powerful person she needs to be and she will be your slave. I suspect there are many wizards who feel this way. They're a bit like Sparks.

The Alchemist that the Saint mentioned, the one who was experimenting on humans, I am...not sure about. Given that, after being threatened with death should he backslide, the first thing he did was go find a powerful leader who could protect him and get him experimental subjects, I kind of feel like he'd betray the rules the moment people stopped watching him. That said, getting him a teacher who could help him see that, maybe you don't need to experiment on people, might have made all the difference. It's impossible to know.

So, yeah. Depends on the villain. The hero too. I'm not sure the Lone Swordsman would sign and the Saint would probably rather chop the head off everyone involved than see anyone sign them. I mean, she'd probably assume that Praes would sign eagerly, then go right back to brewing plagues in their basements, forcing the heroes to fight them with one hand tied behind their backs.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> I'm not sure the Lone Swordsman would sign and the Saint would probably rather chop the head off everyone involved

Good thing they're both dead!

[Liliet](#)

"Glorified gladiators" is in this sense something they've always been. Fighting for the gods' purposes is what Catherine means here. She's not introducing new indignity, just acknowledging that the existing one is the limit on how far the peace can go.

What the fuck would villains want to antagonize heroes for? Consider Kairos Theodosian, the most textbook example of a Villain For The Evulz we've seen, and consider how his game in

the Free Cities had been to exploit the existing system and put his own candidate in charge – through legal process, if with a good helping of mass murder. He didn't aim to destroy the League or the Good cities, he didn't need it for anything. The organization that accommodated him, he took full advantage of, and has since been very willing to do diplomacy, too.

As far as villains are concerned, the world around them consists of tools and obstacles. Catherine's arranging the obstacles so some paths to achieving their goals would look a lot less attractive / easy than others, and placing tools within their reach so they'd know the locations of the obstacles for a fact. Consider the killing street in the battle of Marchford: armies follow the path of least resistance. So do villains.

Not to mention those who would be fully satisfied with the existing system full stop, like all the numerous mages. See, indeed, Masego.

Sure, for some villains the undead plagues etc are the end rather than the means. They are a very small minority though, and those who can't be convinced to pick an end that will bring them actual renown and glory rather than an inglorious end at the hand of absolutely everyone else at the same time, are a smaller minority still. Isolating and killing *those* is the point entire.

Alegio

I'm pretty sure she knows that they are just gonna say yes without meaning it at first. But after a couple of classes of "If you kill civilians we will literally use a portal through another dimension to f"ck you up wherever you are" most of them will probably listen.

Andrew Mitchell

> If you kill civilians

I'm pretty sure there's going to be limits on the types of things you can do, and not just a blanket ban on ANY killing of civilians. Cat's going to stop any large scale abuses. To set the limit at zero is entirely impractical IMO.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, well, a hyperbole is appropriate in this rhetorical context 😊

IDKWhoitis

I can see a parliamentary system being in charge of Cardinal. Not the academy itself, although the headmaster would probably serve as the representative of the school itself. But the city being run, and the international diplomatic missions would probably have a council of sorts.

This can either turn into every major power owning a section of the city, to ease the burden of funding the city, and allowing the different sections to be extraterrestrial. This would also ease the worries of foreign powers (specifically Prócer and Callow) from having too much influence within the city.

I doubt a D.C. System would be appropriate, with several embassies, and the academy owning pretty much the rest of the city. Cardinal would have to be self sufficient in that case. It would make Cardinal a separate entity in the world and that has both benefits and challenges.

Liliet

I think Cardinal being self sufficient is very much the goal here – not one that Catherine has realized yet, maybe, sure, but,

IDKWhoitis

There's a difference from being self sufficient from the beginning and being self sufficient 10 years down the line after everything is built. Even then, a matter of interdependencies will act as a binder between nations.

It's why I find it very likely that Cardinal will have to be bought in by everyone, so that everyone is invested in not only a financial sense (which is important as well) but a cultural and philosophical connection to Cardinal. If Cardinal is to be the Socio-economic powerhouse with the Political power that would make it the de facto Capital of Calernia, it cannot be perceived as "other" by some of the countries. Levant and Ashur must feel a connection to Cardinal to see it as anything other than a foreign city deep in Callow/Prócer. Cardinal would be stronger politically if it was seen as the battleground for interstate diplomacy. Trading internal politics for external politics.

In the financial sense, the startup Capital required to build a city in the mountains is going to be, to put it lightly, a couple metric fuck tons. Prócer and Callow are two battle torn countries, and Callow wasn't wealthy prior to the war, so even if they could fund it (which would be a pain to extract as a Concession from Cordelia) we would see a clash in influence and finances from the get go. Meanwhile if everyone buys a section of the city, the start up funds are secured, influence is roughly equal, and Cardinal can start

accumulating money off the trade routes it will tax and economic activities itself will generate.

Liliet

Pretty much agreed entirely.

JRogue

You charge people, Nobles specifically.

Named get to attend for free of course. Magically inclined students have to pay a fee of some kind. The children of Nobles? They get charged out the nose so their children can rub elbows with up and coming Named and other soon to be powers of the continent AND get a top-notch education to boot. Also, charge each nation a fee to lease the land their embassies are built on.

Like Amedeus said (have to remember to stop calling him Black) Nobles will be chomping at the bit for their kids to be there. If given the lands and you give people a reason to settle and work those lands from Callow and Procer, food shouldn't be a problem. It will be the crossroads of the continent, so Merchants will want to be there, a small tax on goods will also give more money. Additionally, with all those Noble children there, plenty of Artisans will show up. Tailor's, all kinds of Metalsmith's, Carpenters, Jewelers, etc. It will be THE place to be for people who make things. A tiny tax on these people charging exurbanite prices will add up quickly. The Tax Collector would become a new Name attached to Cardinal, probably one of many Names specific to Cardinal.

I would be willing to bet more than a few Named Artisans pop up too, possibly further expanding the neutral Names.

The money is there, more than enough to support the city and the school.

IDKWhoitis

The Start up capital is the horrendously hard part. Everything you said, is true in the long run once things are built. But to clear the mountain passes that were blown beyond recognition by Warlocks dance, the start up capital must be acquired. Cardinal will need Investors, and getting the Nobles to buy into the idea will take time. At this point, National budgets vastly exceed what the Nobles can bring to bear. (National budget in Callow being what Cat can "convince" the little nobility that is left to "loan" her.)

JRogue

Absolutely true, the first real financial hurdle is start-up capital. Procer and Callow will be giving land grants, so that will have to be considered part of their "tithe" if you will. All Signatures will have to chip in money, but also possibly manpower. I think the Warlock and The Witch of the Woods battle may actually help, its already blown up, just gotta move it now. Also, Goblins will be more than willing to lend a hand, encluding engineering help, properly compensated of coarse. The mountainous area offers all sorts of stone to build with, I cannot recall how wooded the area is.

The one thing that could be a problem is that it has to happen fast. Grey Pilgram will not be around forever, he is already old and I imagine what just happened aged him more. Maybe a large, well planned Legion style camp as a basis, then start building from there.

The logistics of this is fascinating to me.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> The mountainous area offers all sorts of stone to build with,

Lately including some which probably aren't native to Creation proper...

>I cannot recall how wooded the area is.

I'd be amazed if anything survived the battle.

[Fayhem](#)

Basically you have my yes to all of this! I'll just add that charging nobles shatteringly high tuition to attend will be extremely easy to present as a feature, not a bug. Nothing makes it easier to sell something as a prestige item than making it stupidly expensive, and there's literally almost nothing nobles (and rich people who want to feel socially equal to nobility, like merchant princes) love more than prestige. And the only reason I say almost nothing instead of nothing is because the more ambitious nobles will prize power more highly... which this kind of high-end hobnobbing is also useful for cultivating.

[Liliet](#)

Yes.

And yes.

And yes 😊

IDKWhoitis

I also wonder what specifically prevents the Dead King from signing the Liesse Accords. The same arguments used about Praes can also be applied. The other nations may bitch at first, but there are specific pragmatic reasons for allowing it.

What the Dead King gets:

- Not getting labeled as The Big Bad
- Another area to fight the Bard over
- A way to spread his influence over the millennia
- A way to slowly fix his PR
- A means to foster, and potentially scout useful Allies in the future.
- Surviving the current war while gaining something. (Cat intends for the Drow to take Keter anyways)
- A means to integrate himself into the wider international community, and smother future crusades in the crib.
- Peace and quiet (he's not in love with war, and only really prepares as much for it because he lacks other methods for countering the Bard)

What Cardinal gains :

- Keter (maybe just a lease, with significant DK presence) , solves Cat's bargain. Creates a buffer zone between DK and creation at large.
- Not having the Dead King be an enemy they have to topple (this is already going to be monstrously difficult, and likely won't kill the bastard outright)
- Access to undead labor, very cheap for construction, usage within the city, and farming afterwards.
- Access to a portion of the undead army, which the control of can be transferred over. Undead would make a great first wave as the mediator force, they don't need to worry about logistical concerns, they move fast because they don't tire, moral is not a concern, or no sympathizers/spies. The upkeep is very low. They can maintain a high state of readiness for extremely long periods of time. Casualty rates for the undead mediator force would not impact concerns of politics between nations (no debate about who takes first wave, or waiting for nations to gather armies).
- The Dead King's very large library of knowledge, both magical and mundane. Especially the name lore.
- A way to mediate the Intercessor, which will always be Scheming. Having a counter to that force is necessary.

Andrew Mitchell

You're making a very, VERY convincing argument there. I've gone from not considering that a question at all; all the way to thinking it's probably going to happen.

IDKWhoitis

My internal debate is whether Nesh reaches out with malicious intentions or if he would actually like to join it. Him saying he wants to join would be met with the same public reaction that Cat saying she wanted to join the Great Alliance. If he screws around with PR a bit, he could sink the credibility of the Accords before any terms are signed. But he is smart enough to just let the question hang in the air, and maybe prod along Cat and Black to make it feasible the Accords asks him instead.

Time will tell, because there is going to be an end to this monster of a war soon, one way or the other.

Mental Mouse

> whether Nesh reaches out with malicious intentions or if he would actually like to join it.

OR? Joining the Accords would give him insider access to Cardinal before he drops his first magical eaves. And he knows he'll outlive almost all the founders. This is that "100 years peace", but without confining him to Keter, and giving him a direct voice in your own counsels.

ninegardens

Given that Nash was like "Cat, do you want 100 years of peace" and she thought about and said "No", I don't see this working. As far as Cat is concerned (And Procer), DK is going down, no ifs, no buts, no questions asked.

I don't see it happening.

Liliet

Same. It would give him a position that nobody wants to give him.

medailyfun

Well, Cat't war on Keter is just a convenient way to deliver the Accords papers. :o)

Hellspirit

The big question is... Is the Dead King a name?

Thanatoss

Yes, it was stated somewhere that Dead King is Name. Probably most powerful Name there is. It was stated that there are only 3 Named as powerful as Cathereine (when she was most powerful in Everdark) Sword Saint, Ranger and Dead King.

IDKWhoitis

It is likely a Name. We haven't ever seen him use an aspect, at least not in recent memory.

Sean

On a purely utilitarian level what you say makes sense, and I agree the Dead King himself would love a chance to support Cardinal. But... You have to keep in mind the Dead King has essentially been responsible for dozens of attempted and partial genocides against the other signatories of the accords. That's not the sort of thing folk are liable to forgive and forget.

IDKWhoitis

This could be seen as declawing the Dead King in a martial sense, while allowing him a foot in international politics. He would be the one coming down from a position of martial supremacy.

Meanwhile we see old Nesh gain a lot of potential tools and opportunities to expand and exploit his influence. This whole thing is dependent on him to find this more useful than the thousands of kilometers of land he just conquered.

And in the face of the butchers Bill that will be pushing back the Dead King, Calernia may choose to temporarily forgive past transgressions, if it means an end to this war other than status quo.

Prócer is broken for at least a generation, they have lost their North, the people of the North, and their Center was just put to torch and likely mass starvation is going to hit. That is not a nation that can weather the sorts of madness the Dead King can employ if he really cares about not being pushed back. I'll eat my hat if Nesh isn't holding on to worst kingdom killers than Black Water or chemical warfare that will make WW1 flinch.

[Fayhem](#)

> This could be seen as declawing the Dead King in a martial sense, while allowing him a foot in international politics. He would be the one coming down from a position of martial supremacy.

Except, he isn't. There's no actual disarmament involved in the Accords. He'll still have all his armies and all his sorcery and all his etc. The Accords just impose "if you cross these lines, everybody comes down on you". And that's already pretty much what happens when he invades, as we're

seeing currently. So you would be giving him what you acknowledge (and what everybody else would certainly recognize) are “a lot of potential tools and opportunities to expand and exploit his influence” when the only thing he loses is actually nothing, since the Accords can’t impose any consequence beyond what he already faces as the default. So you would be giving the Dead King – literally *the Dead King*, Mr. Genocide himself as far as the rest of Calernia is concerned *especially* by the time this war is done – a whole big lot of something for nothing. That’s a non-starter on the face of it. No offense, but I don’t understand why anyone is treating this as plausible.

If what you’re referring to is DK also voluntarily handing back the North, cancelling the war, and going home (which upon reviewing your comment again I think is what you’re suggesting?), well, that’s a whole separate thing from the Accords as such. The Accords do not per se have anything to do with stopping wars between nations, they just limit the terms of engagement especially for Named. So if what you’re suggesting is offering DK the right to join the Accords in exchange for massive territorial concessions and an indefinite truce for free *and he actually goes for that*, then that will instantly cement everyone’s belief that the Accords are a trojan horse for the Hidden Horror, because why else would he just hand over so much for apparently so little? At which point you have just kneecapped your chances of anyone else wanting to stick with them – good luck selling “hey, come send your children, heirs, and heroes to hang out with the Dead King’s trojan horse in one convenient location that is now electively within his influence!”. And then when the Accords fall apart the thing you were offering the Dead King in exchange for his retreat is no longer available to offer, and so he is no longer going to retreat. And now you have neither the Accords or the North back. I just really can’t see this idea ever being seriously entertained by anyone – I mean, Kairos might suggest it just because that’s how much of a troll he is, but if anything that just highlights what a bad idea it actually is.

P.S. – also, what Liliet said. DK didn’t invade because he got bored and they don’t get cable TV in Keter, he’s actually after something. Assuming this is just about the Intercessor is I think missing the point – it doesn’t appear to me that he opposes the Intercessor as a primary goal, he opposes her because she’s the most dangerous/formidable obstacle to what he actually wants. Oh, and the whole point of the Serenity is that his position is never static because even when he’s been driven back (or “driven back” depending on your level of cynicism/paranoia) he’s still able to continuously build his strength.

[Liliet](#)

All of this ^^

[Liliet](#)

What the Dead King loses:

– whatever the fuck it is he actually wants out of invading Calernia

IDKWhoitis

Him invading Calernia is more of a power play against Bard than owning the continent. He gains very little in just owning Calernia outright. Akua has already covered how his realm in Hell is already better than anything he can hope for on Calernia. In his willingness to trade peace and even a fragment of his immortal soul, we can see that the Intercessor, not Calernia is the point of this war and 4 way shitshow in the flying city. Even when he asked for territorial concessions from Malica and Cat, he was more than willing to partition territory and allow his "Allies" to survive. He even let Triumphant own Calernia, he had no problems not owning territory in those wars. His immortal nature makes the shifting of borders a matter of time, and right now his only option for making diplomatic plays is war. He is not in a weak position, true, but he is stuck in a static one. In any great game, a static position will eventually be overrun.

We know the Intercessor will always be there to arm the next crusade, make the next batch of heroes. Even him winning this war, is a defeat in the making, because it shifts narrative weight ever so slowly to the Intercessor favor.

The Hidden Horror is not stupid or vain, he does not gain much by being an enemy or holding onto a thousand kilometers of land. We know he is capable of taking the positions and even enjoys doing so like a game. We do know that he has ascertained a secret about the Intercessor. One so insidious it would break her influence for a generation. What does he gain from staying the big bad here? Why would he not want to spread this secret to truly screw over his opponent?

ninegardens

Do remember that he is invading partially on HER invite ("Eat the baby").

Also, I'm pretty sure he IS trying to take over the world (or at least continent). He is just doing so very slowly, and VERY carefully.

Mental Mouse

> We do know that he has ascertained a secret about the Intercessor. One so insidious it would break her influence for a generation.

It would be really funny if he tries to spill his secret, and everyone's like "Duh, we figured that out ages ago".

Hitogami

It's sounds so damned amazing!

Bruh

Cardinal seems kinda similar to the huntsman academies from RWBY.

Liliet

IIRC one of them was *called* Cardinal :3

Shveiran

Sniff. So much mentoring.
I'm so much in love with this relationship.

NZPIEFACE

>If you cannot offer a practical way to deliver on your beliefs, then they are wind.

Finally, back to our roots.

Liliet

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH ♥ ♥ ♥

I love that it's made clear Catherine is attempting to bite off a bit more than she can chew – on her own, at least. This is a project that will benefit from EVERY player at the table taking it seriously as a goal. Catherine both can't and doesn't need to do it alone, and that's the entire point ♥

caoimhinh

I just remembered that Refuge is actually sort of a mini-example of what Cardinal is set to be.
A neutral power, independent of other countries, but strong enough that nobody fucks with it and is also controlled by Named. It even has a small school for Named, as we know for a fact that Ranger raises and trains Named disciples, I think in book 2 it was said that there were currently five such disciples, we got to know Archer and Hunter, and Indrani mentioned another, I think it was Beast Tamer.

The important thing is, there is a precedent for this, albeit in a smaller scale and less impact, but still is a relevant thing as it adds impulse to the story. Also, involving Ranger in the project would be a huge boost for it, as she can serve as a neutral party and an awesome instructor.

Plus, both Catherine and Ranger have experience dealing with the Kingdom Under (Refuge is nominally a Dwarf protectorate) so that can also be a huge boost to the Liesse Accords and Cardinal, there's still potential to be explored in other directions than what Catherine has apparently considered so far.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Archer also mentioned another (Sorceress?) who brews potions from the magical plants around Refuge.

edrey

the problem here is the only rule of refuge is whatever the lady says, and ranger is beyond mad

Aotrs Commander

listens

Did you hear that snap?

That was Cat and Amadeus snapping the world between their fingers....

[Mental Mouse](#)

So, rounding up: I had guessed a while back that Cat might have to yield on the Named-ruler thing, that's looking more likely. Good to see more elaboration on my concerns about The Committee.

Re: IDKWhoItIs's idea of DK signing on: I'd assume the other signatories would have to agree to accept them! That said... The problem is that for DK this is still a short-term game, it would be really hard to find a way to really bind him, but that's exactly what they'd need. The thing is, existing plans are for the Drow to surround and perhaps occupy Keter, keeping him out of Creation – that would seem to make his interest moot in any case.

[Liliet](#)

It's nice to see the concerns we had about the Named rulers confirmed and elaborated upon ♥ ♥ ♥

Harixx

I just cought up, and now I'm sad:(
I need more of this!

Andrew Mitchell

Well, lucky for you we get a new installment every Monday, Wednesday and Friday; plus one extra chapter with the first installment each month. An amazing work output given the consistently high quality.

You can support Erratic Errata's work on Patreon if you want to <https://www.patreon.com/user/overview?u=3523924>

TheGlyphstone

Is it wrong that I really, really want to see a Cardinal spinoff now set post-story? High school comedy-drama with superpowered students, toying with the tropes of that genre as thoroughly as PGtE did with classical high fantasy.

Andrew Mitchell

Not wrong at all. Based on the recent comments I think many people want a sequel, spinoffs and fanfiction.

[Hydrargentium](#)

This, too, has the shape of a Story: wise teacher and talented student coming back together after years apart, to create some great breakthrough idea, the student in her prime, and the teacher coming out of retirement for his final work.

Hg

ninegardens

So.... just realized, while thinking about Cardinal etc...

Laurence was right in her assessment of Cat. The city of Cardinal is EXACTLY the kind of thing she would strive to rip out tooth and claw, a place where arrogant Procer nobles will hang out with treacherous Praesi nobles, a place of Sorcery unbound by the gods or common folk, a place that will be at best Lawful neutral and more likely in the region of lawful Evil for much of its history. It's a place of nobles- exactly the sort of thing the regicide would hate.

A place of "rot", as it were, reaching out its tendrils across the entire Continent. Given the moneys and ambitions involved, it will be VERY easy for this to become an "academy of evil"- even with a constant influx of Heroes (I mean, "Bestowed").

Laurence wasn't paranoid, she wasn't stupid, she wasn't blinded by prejudice or past actions. She read Cat *correctly*. She read EXACTLY the kind of bullshit that Cat was capable of forging, and she didn't like it.

The only mistake in some sense was that the Twilight realm was actually pretty tame compared to what Cat had planned for later.

Daniel E

I feel like the GM's of this Game will not appreciate their players going off the rails, as it were. They might even be inclined to force the Game back onto its' proper track.

[Liliet](#)

We'll see.

But we know there's precedent for 'dual color' political positions in the same government, on another continent. This is likely still within boundaries.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Remember, per the Bard's comments, when the Dead King "bit the hand that fed him" (presumably by conquering a plane of Hell), he didn't get smited or anything... Below just got less generous with their "gifts" to future Named. Even when he tried to conquer a *second* plane of Hell, he got slapped down, but within the rules of Creation. Reading between the lines, it might have been "hey, if you're gonna be out conquering Hells, that's gonna leave you vulnerable to attacks from other players (oh hello Elf-King, have you met my old friend Neshy? Now, don't be jealous... 😊).

nipi

I see what Amadeus is doing by pushing for a Magic school. While it is true that other nations would benefit from it too, the fact that the Wastland has the greatest abundance of those with the gift remains. Meanwhile the school will need lots of magic tomes, ingredients, teachers – stuff that is likely to come in no small part from the Empire. That's both bargaining material and later positions from where to influence the students.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The flip side is that it pulls the center and the leadership of Calernian sorcery, away from Praes and towards Callow.

[benthelynx](#)

But Black has always been okay with that if it gets him what he wants. He'd rather have a small slice of a big cake than a mini cupcake to himself

[Liliet](#)

I love this metaphor!

[Mental Mouse](#)

Black may be OK with it, Malicia and the big-name Praesi sorcerers... maybe not so much.

[Liliet](#)

The big-name Praesi sorcerers are probably going to not care, assuming they get pulled there along with the center. Which is exactly the plan.

Malicia, uh, well... Amadeus is kind of past the point of asking her opinions on that, which means so is everyone else 😊

[benthelynx](#)

Oh definitely. Malicia maybe. But it's an outside chance. But the highborn as a whole would never go for it.

[benthelynx](#)

So, will Black be emperor or headmaster?

Andrew Mitchell

I think Amadeus (he's no longer Black) would quite happily die on the way to achieving this vision provided his sacrifice helps Cat. (Remember he does see this as a worthwhile way to invest his "twilight years". I think Cat wants him to stick around afterwards to enjoy the results. Personally I think he will end up having to become the Emperor of Praes but that's not a strongly held view.

[Javvies](#)

Amadeus will be Emperor. He's the most successful and lowest body count acceptable option for Praes. While he would be an excellent head of Cardinal, in terms of knowledge base, skills, and experience, he would have more problems dealing with the Heroes and Procerans.

Besides, other people (Cat and the Woe) can do the job of running Cardinal nearly as well as Amadeus could, but he's basically the only way to bring in Praes, including the greenskins.

mavant

LOWEST body count?!

[Javvies](#)

Yeah.

There aren't many viable options for Praes. It's Amadeus as Dread Emperor, Cat as Dread Empress, or a breakup of the

Empire.

The latter two options result in open warfare. The former may result in warfare, but it will likely be more limited and likely involve a lot more of Assassin being let off the leash to clean up High Lords.

Liliet

I agree with both of the above and add my vote as "both in succession" Or At Least That's How I Would Write A Sequel Fanfic.

Amadeus gets the Empire into shape and prepares an acceptable successor, then abdicates and goes into his true passion – teaching.

I am willing to back up that latter statement with textual quotes.

ninegardens

I kind of love the fact that many of Amadeus's teaching quotes are "I don't really know anything about how to teach a person, and thus am not actually planning to do it. By the way, here are a stack of books, and let me introduce you to several named and a large number of story tropes. Now lets analyze your thought process on previous events and review"

Liliet

Y e s.

My favorite however remains that one quote with him chastising himself about his lack of patience with slow students...

...referring to the Grey Pilgrim...

...while bound, held hostage, about to have his soul cut out, and bitter as all hell about his old friend's death.

But he could never be a good teacher. He just doesn't have the patience for it!

Iris

The thought that these incredibly breathtaking and intriguing books are but a prequel to the story that EE actually wants to write has been getting progressively louder in my ear during these chapters. If, in fact, I turn out to be right in my hopes, then this is one of the most well put together prequel series of any great writer I've ever heard of. Just imagining the fact that what we've been gifted so far is but the start of a world that EE

plans to write and develop even further after PGTE gives me shivers.

I really hope the last chapter in some way ends with us realizing we've been simply reading a well put together memoir of Cat's that she wrote after it was all done to show the true life of the person who brought peace and the birth of a new world to Creation.

Iris

I just realized that if what I had previously mentioned comes true, we'd have ourselves the making of another Riftwar level book series.

Chapter 59: Review

"To repudiate what lies at the heart of Praes – ambition, skill, learning – would be a mistake, yet to allow those traits to be principle rather than tool has been the mother of a great many dooms. The greatness of olden days must be put to modern purpose or see itself turn irrelevant to the lay of Creation."

– Extract from 'The Death of the Age of Wonders', a treatise by Dread Empress Malicia

Afternoon soon drifted into evening, and it seemed for a moment as if I'd found the Laure beat of affairs once more: too many things to do and so little time to do them. The herbal brew Hakram had made me took the edge off the pain just enough that if I remained still while seated it didn't throb too badly, so I took full advantage of the relief when seeing to the many duties that'd piled up while I slumbered. Still, I did not regret having a physical need to sleep once more even if it ate away at the hours I could work. It was a pleasurable sensation, sleeping, but also one I'd found grounding in some ways. It was easier to make mistakes when your thoughts ran uninterrupted for days and nights, like a hound chasing its own tail. Sleep was a wedge in between it, a way for thoughts to cool and distance to come down. I'd need another night's sleep, I decided, before speaking of the Accords with my father again. I'd not made nearly as good an argument for the banning of ruling Named as I could have now that I'd had time to better gather my thoughts – no one touched by a Choir, for example, should be allowed anywhere near a throne – but I would not resume the back and forth without rest and preparation. Besides, we'd both have demands on our time for days to come.

Marshal Grem and the Legions-in-Exile had been parted from him for months, simply getting the bare bones reports about months of campaign in order would take at least a day. And he'd have more waiting, especially now that scrying worked properly again. No, Black would have busy days ahead and myself even more so. By the time I'd come down from the barrow-top there was a mixed honour guard of legionaries and Firstborn, dzulu from the Brezlej and Soln sigils, waiting for me along with Adjutant. A full line of veterans from the First Legion, Marshal Grem's personal command, was waiting for Black slightly to their side. I offered them a respectful nod and got the same in return. Legio I *Invicta* had fought like lions in the Red Flower Vales, I'd been told, facing down a charge of Lycaone heavy horse the White Knight himself had led. I would not forget anytime soon that the Legions-in-Exile were the same who'd fought in the defence of Callow. For those that'd remained holed up in Praes while the wolves howled at my gates I had no great fondness, but these? They'd bled for my home, even though once upon a time they had also conquered it.

I claimed a comfortable seat in the First Army's war council tent, hiding under the broad table how carefully I had to manage my leg, and as Hakram stood by my side I sunk my teeth in the day's first work. Casualty reports began it all on a high note. The Army of Callow and its sister-legions from Praes had taken negligible losses in last night's battle, and though Ivah came bearing the drow losses in Rumena's name it revealed the losses there had been relatively light as well. Less than two thousand dead, and though the Levantines had found a surprising amount of success while killing Mighty – my Lord of Silent Steps mentioned that the warriors of Tartessos in particular had made an impression – most those killed had not been sigil-holders or even rylleh but lesser Mighty. The Dominion has pulled out some sort of enchanted or blessed lantern that'd interfered with the Night, and the least of the Mighty had been struck hardest by it. Both the League and the Alliance would have gotten significantly worse off from last night, which was a damned waste of soldiery on the eve of war to the north but also a boon to my own diplomatic position. The situation of our supplies was a great deal less promising, unfortunately.

The Hellhound had arranged baggage and foodstuffs for a long campaign, as she'd originally believed it might be necessary for the army to seize the principality of Arans to hold it against the Dead King's advance, and the Southern Expedition of the Empire Ever Dark had been dragging around the supplies I'd bargained for with the dwarves throughout its Iserran fighting. We were not, by any measure, in danger of running out of food or necessities soon. But the Army of Callow had been campaigning for months now, and probably would have suffered from a steady trickle of desertions were it not the middle of winter in hostile foreign lands. Professional soldiers or not, my legionaries needed rest and recovery before going into another fight. That

would be difficult to arrange in Procer, I suspected, and while the details of the use of the Twilight Ways remained unknown to me I doubted they'd be much more efficient at moving troops than the Arcadian paths. That meant bringing my soldiers back to Callow would take them out of the war for at least the better part of a year. I couldn't do that. Victory or defeat against Keter might very well be decided by then.

The issues with the Firstborn were more complicated in nature, and I ignored the irritated look on Juniper's face – and the fascinated one on Hakram's – while Ivah expanded on them in Crepuscular. One sigil-holder, the Mighty Zoitsa, and two rylleh from other sigils had been slain in the fighting. The former Zoitsa Sigil would have begun tearing itself apart over succession had General Rumena not personally intervened and broken all the limbs of the two most prominent rylleh aiming to claim the sigil. The other two casualties had prompted power struggles as well, as the complicated weave of alignments and enmities that made up the upper levels of a stable sigil was upset by the removal of two high-placed killers. Those had, for now, been kept under control by the own sigil-holders. But my decree that drow could not have killing duels while we were on campaign was being tested sorely by the situation, and the strain was showing. Rumena had politely suggested that I come adjudicate the matters myself, which was enough to tell me it was serious. It was almost never polite to me if it could help it, and its command of the southern expedition gave it the right to settle such disputes without my involvement in principle. If my presence was being sought, then it meant neither the respect nor the fear General Rumena commanded had been enough to settle the situation.

"I'll come after dusk," I said. "Unless the general believes the situation is so dire as to require my immediate intervention?"

Ivah bowed low.

"It is not so, Losara Queen," it said. "The general has remarked that containment will be more... arduous after the coming of Night, but under pale light all will be brought to order."

In other words, Rumena was willing to run roughshod over the squabblers while the sun was out but would have to get pretty hard-handed to keep it all under control after Mighty started slinging Night around. Fair enough. For all that it had been appointed general and commander of the southern expedition by divine mandate, Rumena remained very much a first among equal: there were limits to the orders it could give without having to spill blood to see them enforced. Ivah left, and I marked the whole situation as a cauldron I'd need to see settled before it tipped over and burned everybody else. And Hells, this was just a single sigil-holder and a pair of rylleh. How bad would it get when we started taking real losses? Another method needed to be

put into place, one that didn't end up with Mighty turning on each other violently whenever one of them died.

"What did the drow want?" Juniper asked.

"They're having some internal disputes," I grunted. "It'll be taken care of."

The orc eyed me carefully, then accurately guessed that if I believed she needed to know more about that then she would. The conversation moved on to the debate on whether or not the old Legion tradition of ale rations being broken out after a victory should be indulged with so many other armies camped around us. I argued in favour, for not even the League would be foolish enough to think an evening of drinking would be enough to save it if it resumed hostilities now, but Juniper dug in her heels at it being an unnecessary risk regardless of the improvement to morale. A compromise over shifts that'd allow at least half the army to be on war footing at any time was being put together when Vivienne joined us, a little over an hour before sundown. Wearing a practical cloak and dress over boots and trousers, the heiress-designate to the throne of Callow strode in looking pink-cheeked and well-rested. We dismissed the general staff, after that, and she settled at the high table by Hakram's side when he finally took a seat instead of standing by my side like some grim green gargoyle.

"Indrani?" I asked.

"Wandered off after we ate," Vivienne replied. "You know how restless she gets after a long sleep."

From closer up than the former thief suspected, yes, though usually having slept together beforehand made her slightly more mellow about it. Knowing Indrani she'd be having a look at the League positions or feeling out the half-there paths into the Twilight Ways. In the overwhelming majority of situations she was more likely to be the danger encountered than the one encountering danger, so I wasn't all that worried about her safety. She'd drift back in to check on Masego before too long anyway.

"She'll turn up," Juniper gravelled, unmoved. "Damn hard woman, the Archer."

Coming from the Hellhound, that was high praise. I fished out my dragonbone pipe and stuffed it, calling on the slightest touch of Night as I passed my palm above the bowl. I breathed in lightly before looking up, finding the other three gazing at me expectantly. A heartbeat passed.

"I've only got the one pipe on me," I said. "And I'm not sharing, folks."

Irritation for Juniper, resignation for Vivienne and some sort of rueful amusement for Hakram.

"Yours talks with Lord Black," Marshal Juniper said. "How did they go?"

My brow rose and I glanced at Hakram.

"Everyone knows," Adjutant admitted. "Even putting the matter under seal would have changed nothing. Word began to spread before you were even all the way up the barrow."

Merciless Gods. No one who made jests about gossiping fishwives had ever served a term in an army.

"The Exile Legions haven't withdrawn or begun to muster, so it can't have gone too badly," Vivienne noted.

The Jacks were still hard at work, it was heartening to see.

"I have his backing for the Liesse Accords," I said. "He's not committing to a stance on the Tower until he knows more of what's happening in the Wasteland."

I caught a look between Juniper and Vivienne, which had me suppressing a spike of irritation. From these two in particular, the impression that things were being hidden from me would remain ill-received for some time.

"The Observatory works again, though essentially crippled in capacity," Vivienne volunteered. "Fadila Mbafeno repaired what she could, though she maintains that without Hierophant's personally attention it is a fantasy to attain full functions."

"But our scrying web is back," I flatly said. "What have you learned?"

"General Sacker moved east on the Blessed Isle," Juniper said. "Our man in Summerholm – Legate Asadel – requested that she evict the Praesi refugees before taking up positions on the shore."

Which, considering that we were feeding General Sacker's legion out of Callowan granaries, was a request that'd carry a great deal of weight.

"Legate Asadel," I slowly repeated.

"Fifteenth," Juniper said. "Taghreb, originally one of General Hune's at the War College. He's loyal, Catherine. No reason to doubt that."

There was always a reason to doubt that, I thought, though if you did not learn where to draw the line such worries could only drive you mad.

"I take it the refugees declined to follow the orders," I said.

"They also called on Governess Abreha's protection, which was granted," the orc continued. "Household troops were sent to discourage Sacker, but she picked out their positions and broken them in night raids. Then she set the refugee camps on fire and ordered shot any who fled west instead of east."

I let out a hissing breath.

"Shit," I said. "Tell me the announcement was enough, Juniper. Tell me one of our own fucking legates didn't have a role in the *slaughter* of terrified civilians."

"One caravan was butchered," the Marshal of Callow said. "Two hundred dead, we think. Children were spared. It was enough to get everyone else running."

I closed my eyes. Breathed in, breathed out. Why was it that the moment I took my eyes off anywhere it all went to shit? No, I thought, that wasn't fair. If Legate Asadel was a contemporary of Hune's and so the rest of is back at the College, then he was no older than twenty-five. His rank was high, for one his age, and while part of that might have been talent it was also undeniably because we were running out of College-taught officers and most the veterans of the old legions we had left had loyalties too complex to be entrusted dangerous postings. I could not put men and women still green around the edges and then become furious when they made mistakes.

"Recall Legate Asadel," I said, opening my eyes. "Move him to a garrison where he can't do any damage and replace him with someone more seasoned."

"No one in Praes will raise a ruckus of the civilians, Catherine," Juniper said. "By going into Callow they were abandoning Tower law."

I saw Vivienne wince from the corner of my eye.

"Aye," I said. "That's true. And also the finest argument I've heard for Black's old dream of putting every highborn in the Wasteland to the sword. Recall Asadel, Juniper. That's an order."

She nodded.

"That won't be all," I said. "Get on with it."

"Governess Abreha deemed the attack on her household troops to be treason, given her Tower-granted rank," Juniper said. "General Sacker replied that she was following orders from the Black Knight, supreme commander of the Legions of Terror, and so

therefore it was Abreha's own interference with her operations that was treason. She lodged an official protest with the Tower."

"The Empress won't knife High Lady Abreha in the back so soon," Hakram said. "Not to Sacker, of all people, who has ties to the Matrons and remains a close associate of the Carrion Lord. Malicia might need Abreha either dead or disgraced, but if she throws her under the wheels now then she might as well abdicate to the Black Knight."

If a general's mere claim to be working at Black's behest when he was on the other side of the continent was enough to make the Dread Empress back down, then Adjutant was absolutely correct: she'd have effectively stated herself to be less influential than one of her own right hand's servants, and so by Wasteland standards she'd be meat on the plate. On the other hand, could she really afford to throw to the side the Legions-in-Exile? Given that she'd lost Foramen to the Confederation of the Grey Eyries and her coastlands were a bloody wound, I'd argue not.

"The Empress is considering the petition," Juniper said. "But has yet to act on it. General Sacker seized the western shore of the Wasiliti and dug in. It's been a standoff with Governess Abreha ever since."

I grimaced.

"We need to find out who General Sacker answers to," I said. "It best be Black, because if it's the Matrons we have trouble on our hands."

The fledgling goblin nation south of the Hungering Sands could only benefit from enmity between Praes and Callow deepening, since history had made it clear that the Tribes could only fail if they attempted to stand against the Dread Empire on their own. An embittered Callow, on the other hand, would have a vested interest in keeping the Confederation standing as a thorn in the Wasteland's side. And considering my kingdom had largely adopted the war doctrines introduced by the Reforms, we'd keep needing goblin steel and munitions only they could produce. They'd have good we wanted, and we'd share a common enemy – alliances had been built on less. Unfortunately for the Matrons, they were planning their schemes blind. They had no real idea of what went on this far west, and they would not be aware of anything related to the Accords. They were fighting last century's war, not this one, playing a game of Good Queens and Dread Empresses when that was the very manner of existence I want to strike a match over. If they were brought into the talks, I suspected they'd sign. If nothing else, the clause establishing that a signatory nation attacked by a non-signatory one could call on the aid of all other signatories would get them interested. Either as a deterrent for a non-signatory Praes, or

because Praes *had* signed and they could not afford to be on the other side of that rule.

Yet they were blind, at the moment, at a lot of damage could be done by an assembly of vicious old goblins matrons pursuing what they saw as their own interests.

"Vivienne," I finally said. "Anything to add?"

She bit her lip.

"There are rumours," she said, "that Malicia is calling near every highborn in Praes to the Tower."

My brow rose.

"Why?" I asked.

"I don't believe anyone knows aside from her," Vivienne admitted. "The usual rumours are there – the edict making it treason to claim the Name of Chancellor is to be ended, she seeks another Black Knight or a spouse – but there's nothing certain. Whatever she's planning, though there's a lot of expectation."

"Given the recent string of disasters, such a great assembly of highborn would either see her deposed or her reign secured for many years by a great victory," Hakram opined. "She's rolling the dice on her reign."

Malicia doesn't roll dice, I thought. She only ever plays when she believes she'll win for sure. Sometimes she was disastrously wrong about that, as she had been at Second Liesse, but no one was without blind spots and I suspected in some ways Black was hers. This, though? This was Wasteland politics and she'd danced around these well-dressed killers without missing a step for decades. If she was acting now it was because she had something in the works that'd secure her hold on Praes. She would not expose herself to the wolves of the Imperial Court for anything less, in my eyes. I breathed out.

"Send an official messenger to the Carrion Lord, then," I drily said. "Requesting a sharing of intelligence concerning Praes tomorrow. Odds are he'll know more than us."

Vivienne nodded, I noted, instead of Juniper. Interesting, that the Hellhound would recognize her as the higher authority in diplomatic matters even when those matters involved Black and the Legions. It was the implicit mark of a respect I'd been well aware did not exist when I left for the Everdark.

"We need to determine where the army's headed," Juniper bluntly said. "We're wearing thin, Catherine. Your return and a win did wonders for morale, but it's been a long winter and we fought

through most of it. Even if it's up north we're headed, I want winter quarters raised and a rotation of leave for soldiers. The edge will grow ragged otherwise."

"I can't give you an answer to that before the diplomacy's been worked through, Juniper," I replied just as bluntly. "And for that I need to sit with the Pilgrim, and likely Arnaud Brogloise – if not the First Prince herself through scrying link."

Whatever the Hellhound would have answered to that I was not fated to know, for before she could speak the Advisor Kivule was introduced. My eyes moved in surprise to Akua's veiled silhouette even as she entered the tent and bowed.

"The Hierophant is awake, Your Majesty," the shade said.

I rose to my feet, ignoring the throb of pain from my leg.

"Meeting adjourned," I said, and they all knew better than to gainsay me on that.

[*doominator10*](#)

[Mumble grumble fumble] VOTE HERE! <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Anyways, let alone the notion of Praes being a signatory, I have strong doubts that anyone in the grand alliance would ever consider legitimizing a nation of goblins as an entity that can even sign the accords in the first place.

Sparsebeard

I think they'd want them both to sign, considering that the accord are mostly about restraining the power of named and nations.

I mean, agreeing not to use angels, other weapons of mass destruction and restraining their named methods only makes sense if the opposition also agrees.

If no evil nations sign, there is no point to the accords...

[*doominator10*](#)

It's not a matter of just getting evil nations to sign, it's legitimizing a goblin nation in the first place. Heisenbach already had a drastic time just calling Catherine Queen of Callow instead of Queen in Callow. What kind of legal, moral,

and religious rigmarole would they have to go through to even see goblins as a sapient species that are not automatically classified as monsters?

Or maybe my Innverse is bleeding into my thoughts here idk

Liliet

Queen in Callow vs Queen of Callow is a matter of legitimacy of a Crusade against her. Cordelia has no justification attacking a Queen of Callow, while a Queen in Callow leaves her with room to claim she is totally restoring Callow's *rightful* government. Meanwhile a goblin nation explicitly weakens Praes, although it does also lend the east and additional seat in the council. Still, anti-greenskin racism is not a popular look in Good nations (see: Dorian, and see: Rozala's surprise that horses are in fact afraid of orcs).

Alignment with the matrons or against them is a matter of realpolitik, and right now I think nobody will have motivation enough to gainsay Catherine on this.

Shveiran

We saw that greenskin racism is not the standard everywhere, but I think it mostly stems from the fact that racism is mostly enmity spawned by sharing a border with Praes, the Eyres or the Steppes for a long time. Callowans are greenskin-racist, and though it doesn't seem most Procerans and Free City folks are, I think that might not be the case for the Dominion?

Darkening

Going by that one Deoraithe character we saw a perspective of with the Lone Swordsman, even the Deoraithe see them as more worthy opponents than subhumans. So it's mostly just Callow proper. I imagine there's plenty of individuals around in the rest of the world that dislike orcs/goblins, but I expect it's not to the same personal extent.

Javvies

Actually, I'm pretty sure it's mostly just William/Lone Swordsman who saw greenskins as subhuman monsters. The other Callowans we've seen tended to harbor inherited dislike, hate, and/or fear of greenskins, but not to the extent that Willy did. And even that often got muted by actual sustained day to day interactions.

Shveiran

I don't disagree, but I think there is a wide margin between "not quite Willy" and "not racist". Being afraid, disliking and hating a culture because it's that culture is pretty much the textbook definition of prejudice, isn't it?

Javvies

There's a difference.

For most Callowans, they have an inherited grudge, dislike, fear, and hatred related to greenskins because of all the times it's been greenskins invading Callow in the old (pre-Amadean Reforms) Legions of Terror.

Now, while that's easily enough called racist, there's a difference in degree to the point that it's effectively a difference in kind as well, between the standard Callowan position and Willy's position.

And, for that matter ... the standard Callowan position isn't entirely unjustifiable, again, going back to all those times greenskins were in the van of invading Praesi hordes.

Shveiran

As I said, there is a difference between William's views and the average Callowan's. A meaningful one, even, like you argued.

But the world is not divided between Williams and Non-racist-people, and thus I'd argue that being uncomfortable with William's view does not mean one is not also south of the "non-racist" line.

Personally, I'm uncomfortable defining as "justifiable-adjacent" any attitude that judges people in light of the category they fit in, rather than judging on their own merit.

I don't mean to be a pain nor to take it out on you: I'm just arguing the point because, where I live, in the current times, it's common for people to justify hate crimes with "I was angry because one of their kind had molested my friend a week ago".

It is understandable for Callowans to have a prejudice against greenskins; it is an understandable instinct.

To allow that instinct to guide one's actions is not, however, justified.

Much like is not one's fault for feeling jealousy, but it very much is for them to beat their spouse out of jealousy, it's understandable for a

Callowan to feel suspicious of a greenskin, but the right thing for them to do is still to look beyond the fangs and judge the individuals on their own merits.

Javvies

You're right. There's a difference between "they're not subhuman monsters" and not necessarily being racist.

On the other hand, we've also seen that the inherited grudge and prejudices that is typical for Callowans to have regarding greenskins has tended to go away or at least be substantially muted after they have actual sustained interactions.

This is in large part due to Black's policies with the Legions being seen as protecting average Callowans against the Praesi High Lord Governors during the Occupation, and the actions of greenskins in the 15th, the fight against Akua, and more recently, fighting the Proceran invaders. Hakram doing most of Cat's work and being in charge of the recovery and refugee efforts has helped too.

There's also a (sometimes reluctant) recognition of the fact that it was Praesi High Lords, Dread Emperors/Empresses, and Black Knights in charge, and the greenskins were expendable sword fodder, not the people in charge (except when the clans were independently raiding the Deoraithe).

Liliet

Rereading this discussion randomly, can I just add that the recognition of the fact the greenskins were just sword fodder would be in large part due to Black saying so in that one speech pre-Liesse? That wonderful asshole.

Liliet

My point is nobody will object to a sovereign goblin nation *on the basis of them being goblins*. Not that kind of setting :3

Lizzie

Sadly, this seems like a world where someone would object just as a way to manipulate others into giving them a better deal on their end.

Liliet

True, but Cat has leverage to spare.

Andrew Mitchell

So, just like the real world. 😞

Sparsebeard

If anyone is considered as monsters on Calernia the closest would probably be ratmen or even to some degree drows before Cat's foray into the Gloom.

I don't think we've seen anyone dismiss goblins as a people... In fact, despite oppression and rebellions, they were part of Preas for a long time (pretty much a nation within a nation).

We are pretty far from having bounties paid to adventurers for goblin ears...

Barthumphries

The Goblins would be all over that because 1) they officially have no Names, 2) they of course use no weapons of mad destruction, and 3) have no angels.

That goblin fire must be made by demons is true, but how would you go in and prove it?

The goblins have everything to gain and nothing to lose by signing, and getting everyone else to sign.

Javvies

Not made by.

Goblin munitions allegedly use "powdered devil" as an ingredient. Akua implies that goblinfire most likely employs powdered demon or demon juices as an ingredient (or otherwise employs demons or demon components as an ingredient).

I think goblin munition and goblinfire production is likely going to slide through a loophole in the Accords, probably on purpose.

From what we know about the Accords, summoning extraplanar entities such as Angels, Devils, and Demons, is not okay as a direct weapon/attack, but Angels and Devils are okay within certain bounds, IIRC, the phrase was something along the lines of "angels and devils can be summoned to provide advice". Ie, remember after second Summerholm, Warlock summoned a devil for a bloodline ritual – that kind of thing would still be okay.

Liliet

"Civilian labor" was the exact quote. I suspect "getting ground into alchemical ingredients" counts ;u;

anon

I wonder if angels giving people their feathers to use as swords can be lumped together in the same category as goblin fire

Mental Mouse

Yeah, that loophole will also cover anything summoned as part of Praesi infrastructure, such as the Tower's demon doorkeeper.

Liliet

They're not using it for military purposes unless they're getting invaded badly enough the Tower is getting breached, checks out!

Mental Mouse

I would not assume that the goblins have no weapons of mass destruction! Indeed, the Accords may need a "miscellaneous" clause to cover them. 😊

Alex

I wonder if Malicia is gathering the highborn to use her aspect of Rule.

IDKWhoitis

Her unseemly demise could potentially follow, because that is a ripe moment for her Aspect to fail or weaken. If Malica is struggling to hold on to power, I would think the psychological stress could be enough to thin her Name's power. Just as Viv's did. Also, I would think there's a non-zero chance that Highborn in Praes (at least the really powerful ones) would gain some sort of resistance or know some spell to lessen the effects of Emperor-tier named. Otherwise, Dread Emperors would be unbeatable...

I find it likely that Malica may be forced to either:
(potentially multiple of the following)

- 1.) Accept a Chancellor
- 2.) Disavow Amadeus
- 3.) Massacre as many Highborn as she can before a Civil war starts
- 4.) Summon a demon or activate a ritual array
- 5.) Enact some degree of reforms (either rolling back previous

ones or instituting favorable ones for the Highborn)
5B.) Enact highly favorable reforms for the Clans, to secure her Northern border and cement her own seat of power.
6.) Set a deadman's switch on herself, that tie the fate of Praes to her staying alive and in power (which she arguably did with the Dead King pact, but she may tie in other horrifying insurance policies)

[Liliet](#)

>3.) Massacre as many Highborn as she can before a Civil war starts
>4.) Summon a demon or activate a ritual array

This is about what I'm expecting.

[Barthumphries](#)

I think she's gathering them to do a heel-face turn and slaughter the highborn, then make a pact to sign the accords as the last Named ruler.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think she knows the Accords exist.

konstantinvoncarstein

Indeed, only the Woe, Amadeus, Malanza, the Peregrine, Arnaud Brogloise and probably Cordelia are aware of it.

[Liliet](#)

Well, tbf, also all the consultants Hakram has brought onboard, which might be enough of a leak for Malicia to hear word of it.

But there hasn't been an official announcement or anything. Even if Malicia is planning with the Accords in mind, she'll only be taking pre-preparatory steps now.

konstantinvoncarstein

I am sure precautions were taken to ensure the goals of the researches was maintained secret, but it is indeed a big risk.

Shveiran

I think Malicia's network could have allowed her to suspect a lot (after all, to one such as her and knowing Catherine like she does, it is not too hard to put together something roughly accurate when you know a diplomatic document is being prepared.

Then, I'd argue that the more she knows the LESS dangerous it seems. I mean, if not for the very unlikely developments of the last week, which Malicia doesn't know about yet and certainly didn't when she started recalling the highborn to the Tower... the Accords were a myth, a fantasy, a maybe someday. They are not the reason she is acting. Consolidation of power must be the objective, no "red wedding" the highborn to change allegiances here.

Insanenoodlyguy

To put this into that one theory I know you'd hate above all: (sry kinda sry? :P)

She's going to purge them all so that her transition to chancellor is relatively peaceful, what with her giving such a wonderful gift to the incoming new Emperor. And so she becomes the first ruler since irritant to step down voluntarily, and the first one period who stays that way with no intention of ever taking back the throne.

It is her who crowns him "Dread Emperor Benevolent" as he walks in the door, because she's not that saintly and so she uses the story to brand his name in a way she knows he'll fucking hate.

[doominator10](#)

I like this. I like this a lot.

Shveiran

I could see that happening.

[Liliet](#)

If only people dropped the fucking stupid name idea. I stg I wish I could participate in these convo without being distracted by the sheer fucking stupidity of that

[Liliet](#)

like just remove one word from it and the rest I'm v onboard with imagining and discussing
ITS NOT LIKE SHE WOULD BE THE ONE PICKING HIS REIGNING NAME FFS

Insanenoodlyguy

Okay separate from the part you hate, is that kind of name branding impossible? If and (I'll choose another name here) she started saying "all hail emperor butt

face” and got everyone else saying it to, I feel like that could work as branding.

Liliet

I mean I imagine he could very easily get everyone (except for possibly her lmao) to say it *the way he wants them to*, being Dread Emperor and whatnot 😊

Insanenoodlyguy

Rule of funny. By trying to suppress it he ensures that it keeps coming up. “Don’t call me x” insures he keeps running into people who believe they are supposed to call him that.

Shikkarasu

Let us not forget that Black, Malicia, and Akua regularly planted spies in the Fifteenth. Nothing is guaranteed to be secret, to the point that when people heard about the Dominion attacking at night the whole AoC did a doubletake. “You mean we’re fighting an enemy that -doesn’t- have a complete dossier of everything we can do?”

Malicia could easily have gotten a copy of the rough draft that the Regals were reading two books ago, or just lifted a copy straight from the source with one of her own spies.

Javvies

The Regals weren’t reading a draft of the Accords. They were reading a (fake) draft copy of a plan to grant freehold land stakes to Legionaires and other in Southern Callow.

Malicia cannot have gotten one of her spies to steal or make a copy of an earlier draft of the Accords, because the Accords had never previously been written down – in part to prevent exactly that from happening.

Malicia may suspect that Cat was working on some major diplomatic accomplishment, but Malicia would at best have individual pieces that were blurry. She would not have anything like a complete picture of what Cat was working on, far less a full and detailed one.

Liliet

Oh, and I don’t think Rozala and Tariq know yet, it’s still the same afternoon/evening that Catherine gave the order to *prepare* the copies.

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, you're right.

konstantinvoncarstein

Other Emperors probably tried this on the past, and the highborns are not completely stupid. I am sure they will put contingency in place to ensure a bloody civil war if they are killed, so Malicia would have her hands full.

[Liliet](#)

On the other hand, Malicia has radically weakened their influence over her 40 years of rule, and even Akua did not realize how close the Empress's hold on *absolutely everything going on* was. True, the military supremacy was Amadeus's, but his certainty that Akua could not have possibly gotten her hands on components she needed without the Empress tacitly allowing it? That's all her.

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, her hold on Praes is very strong. But a slaughter of the majority of the highborns would provoke a general revolt in Praes, even from her supporters. And without them, she is Empress only in name. And her foremost military commander is abroad.

[Liliet](#)

True enough, the real scheme is probably cleverer ;u;

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, EE has this habit:)

Owyn

Unrelated Info: Long names without spacing fuck up the formatting for mobile readers – please don't.

Andrew Mitchell

Good point. And I'll be very disappointed if it isn't quite clever.

[Liliet](#)

The real question is, is it the actually smart kind of clever or the self-defeating kind of clever? Or both 😊

Andrew Mitchell

I'm going to go with the self-defeating kind. And I reckon that's going to turn out to be the case with Cordelia as well BTW .

Fayhem

Cordelia I'm borderline 100% you're correct on. She started on her current course as a direct result of the Bard nudging Saint to push Cordelia, and I strongly suspect that Cordelia's reaction was the actual point. In which: BAD THINGS.

Javvies

I wonder what Malicia is up to. There's no way it's going to be a good thing, unless she decides she needs to purge the High Lords to maintain her hold on Praes.

Andrew Mitchell

Maybe the suggestion that Chancellor is coming back will be right. It will give the high lords something to squabble over.

Javvies

Eh, I doubt it. Malicia knows full well that part of being Chancellor is betraying the Dread Emperor/Empress and taking the Tower over their corpse.

Malicia is more likely to say she's considering bringing it back, so as to induce the High Lords to murder each other, and then have the leading candidates removed.

I half suspect that she's going to bring the Dead King into play somehow.

Or otherwise do something so stupid that Amadeus thinks he doesn't have a choice but to end Alaya's reign as Dread Empress by whatever means prove necessary.

Decius

My bet is that Amadeus has finally convinced her to kill them all.

Javvies

Unlikely – she's held onto the High Lords for 40 odd years to have a power base independent of Black, the Legions, and the Reforms-granted goodwill amongst the greenskins.

Morgenstern

Judging by her interludes, my impression was more that she was all about preparing over a looooong time for the exact

moment where the Lords and Ladies will no longer have any defences against her. Remember the fall of that one High Lady in one of the interludes? She had “allied” with her for YEARS until the inevitable betrayal. The High Lady lost, because Malicia had been preparing for MUCH longer. The second the Highborn finally believed she needed them too much or was too weak – she struck. Thus, I’m leaning a little bit more to the side of “all those seemingly good-for-Highborn rumors” will come to naught and they’ll be caught by exactly that. Thinking her weak. While she isn’t. One of her interludes also said she was posting that one High Lady mentioned here that is now in conflict with Callow for exactly that reason – to get rid of her, as she was accumulating too much influence. While seemingly giving in to her. She was waiting and waiting all these years. She never said “no” to Maddie’s idea in general, she just said it wasn’t the time, far as I remember. That they first needed other institutions etc. If there is a right time for that – then it should be now, when they actually threaten her rule, perceiving her as weak at the moment, and she has had decades to prepare for that.

Shveiran

You bring up good points, yet I’d argue that Malicia cannot afford to butcher them all right now. Getting rid of the high lords in time of peace to remake praes is great... doing it during a crusade, where she needs them to keep the empire from collapsing? Not as much. Praes is weak, right now. The Crusades is not steamrolling over it only because of the DK threat, and that does nothing to hinder the matrons. She... kind of needs them. Sort of. My bet is on control, not extermination.

erebus42

I’m sure this will be a fun conversation.

edrey

last time Malicia said something about walking dead, that sounds like a mistake of the old school of villain

IDKWhoitis

I find it likely that Cordelia will have to attend the meeting with Cat, because there are some heavy deals to be made in the coming days. I think this will be some horrible teeth pulling, because no one really wants to leave the bargaining table at this point. There’s too much at stake.

I'm wondering what Cordelia is hiding in that Lake, because if it's ****just**** an angel, this will be funny. But something tells me its going to be something so much more horrifying. Something beyond just being called, "an angel". Hell, for all we know, it could be an old crashed Praes flying fortress or god forbid the remnants of a Gnomish one.

Also, I wonder how discussions in the Lev tent are going. Is it storytime for Tariq?

Javvies

It's not an Angel-corpse Cordelia is digging out.

It's said to be "far worse" than what the Ashurans drew upon at Thalassina.

In addition, it can't be an Angel-corpse because an Angel-corpse would presumably end up in a situation similar to the one that was at Liesse – out of phase with the rest of Creation and therefore not accessible via mundane measures such as dredging.

I have gotten the impression that Cordelia is digging for something with the intent to fight fire with fire. I suspect that she's looking for some ancient evil to throw at Keter. Possibly one dating to Triumphant's day, if not an even older one. I think the Lycaonese are descended from the culture that the Dead King's people were fighting before he became the Dead King. And, based on the impressions in Arcadia, they included devil summoners in their number. It's entirely possible that there's something from them that was buried and mostly forgotten in the lake.

werafdsaew

Whatever it is, Cordy's not a Dread Empress. She can't be using Demons or anything that would cause her own people to revolt against her.

Javvies

The Dead King is invading. And they're losing. Cordelia is less concerned about revolt than she is with the Dead King.

Sure, she's no Dread Empress or Tyrant. However, she does have a lock on the Assembly now. And regular people can and will do horrible things in the name of their own survival.

For that matter, she doesn't need to sell it to everyone. She just needs to sell it to the people who have to know

what's going on.

And it's not like she particularly cares about what the Heroes think, between Laurence and Bard manipulating the Conclave into declaring Cat the Arch-Heretic of the East, and then Tariq, Laurence, and company using a plague on a Proceran village to get to Amadeus, and then holding onto Amadeus instead of either immediately killing him or bringing him to Salia.

Remember, one of Cordelia's main goals is to reunify Procer ...

Also, there's the distinct possibility that she ran whatever she's doing past her cousin, the Augur, in some way, so I'd say that it's a fair bet that Cordelia thinks what she's doing is a better result than not doing it. Admittedly, she might not have asked Augur the right questions or interpreted Augur's replies properly, but still.

Cordelia's going to do whatever she thinks she needs to do ... even if it's an otherwise terrible idea.

werafdsaew

I bet both possibilities are true. At least Malicia will use the possibility of both to set off another round of infighting.

[Liliet](#)

I love Catherine referencing Amadeus's stance on the Praesi highborn as an argument for removing the guy who ordered the killing of refugees ♥ ♥ ♥

In general, I love this chapter period.

AND HYPE FOR THE NEXT ONE 😊

konstantinvoncarstein

The situation must be extremely dire if Rumena is not snarking at Catherine.

Ben

Cat hurt herself with that little speech she gave Viv and Juniper.

To elaborate: She got them to question her less, and here we're seeing the results.

The Drow are ABSOLUTELY a factor Juniper should know about. If they're having internal disputes; if there are potential chain of command problems, your general needs to know. These factors and their potential damage can be mitigated by certain logistic steps (mitigated, not prevented, mind) that Juniper would know and Cat

can't even imagine. Not only that, it's pretty damn disrespectful to withhold operational information of an entire army of your own troops to its lead general. In fact, in terms of "need to know," Juniper might legitimately be the ONLY person non-drow on Cat's side (aside from Hakram, but that's a little less certain) with an obligation to this specific intel. Juniper should be speaking up about this because Cat is making a bad decision. But she isn't.

Her suspicions that Juniper and Viv are meeting and chatting should be no surprise. Goodness. I should not have to tell you that there may yet be a bit of a problem with having put all of the official power in their hands, having removed herself from the official line before the Liesse Accords. I mean, the promised-new Queen, the spymaster, the lead general... any kind of strife arising between Cat and them will be a devastating blow to Callow.

Example: I sure hope they don't hold their tongue about trouble until it explodes at the most inopportune moment into rebellion, giving a Hero a momentary opening/distraction.

ciara

It does seem like a "Levant mustering their forces without saying why they're moving to occupy the Arcadian landing zone"-tier mistake not to tell Juniper at least something...

[Liliet](#)

Catherine did tell her there was 'internal trouble' which is about the level of detail that meets that qualification.

Shveiran

I'm not sure where you are coming from with this statement.

Cat is not withholding informations, she is just not telling Juniper of the practicalities of handling the drow on a day-to-day basis because handling those practicalities is not Juniper's job.

The casualties and the resulting issues were related to Juniper: Ivah shared them with Cat in the very same briefing Juniper heard about them, the Marshal and Vivienne are not even hearing it from Cat – they are being briefed together with her by her very sources.

I'm pretty sure the details – such as, how are we gonna handle this in the future now that it has been established as an issue – will be shared with the Inner Circle as soon as they have been properly analyzed by the ones that have to handle them. AKA, the drows and the FUN.

Cat has never kept her people in the dark before, not from this kind of stuff, and I see no evidence that is going to do it here.

Am I missing something?

Revenant

What you are missing is that Ivah briefed Cat in Crepuscular, which the others present did not understand a word of.

Shveiran

Fair enough. I didn't notice that.

Even so, it's not like the "concealed information" extends beyond the details of the current disciplinary issues which we are not yet sure how we'll address.

I stand convinced that the details will be shared as soon as Cat has a firm grasp of what will happen going forth. Which is to say, as soon as that information becomes actually useful to them.

The point remains that Cat has not stopped sharing information or trusting either Vivienne or Juniper... her moves at the battle at the end of arch 1 shows as much. She has entrusted them the outcome of the battle despite the caliber of the opposition, and given them all the necessary information to achieve their duties.

[Dresden 67](#)

I think you're seeing problems where there are none.

Catherine didn't tell Juniper more about the drow situation because it had nothing to do with her. It's a purely internal issue within the Southern Expedition, which is commanded by General Rumena who reports to Cat, who answers to Sve Noc. It isn't in Juniper's area of responsibility.

If it becomes an issue large enough to affect events outside the drow then Juniper will need to know, but right now there's no reason to believe that it won't be solved by a single day's work from Catherine.

Catherine isn't surprised by Juniper and Vivienne consulting each other without her, if anything she's pleased that the Marshal of Callow and its heiress are no longer at each other's throats. She's just slightly sensitive about any appearance of them keeping secrets from her given their recent fuck-ups.

If you seriously think there's any chance of Juniper and Vivienne turning on Cat then you and I must be reading different stories.

[Liliet](#)

SAME ^^ on all of this.

Catherine even recognizes that her hypersensitivity to Juniper and Vivienne seeming to conspire is silly and suppresses it. She is happy that Juniper recognizes Vivienne as the diplomatic authority now!

And sharing disciplinary issues of the drow with the general of the other army would be overstepping and oversharing =x

[Liliet](#)

>If they're having internal disputes; if there are potential chain of command problems, your general needs to know.

Ah, but they're not under Juniper's command though.

They're an *allied army*. It would actually be overstepping Cat's privileges as the... go-between? between the drow and everyone else, to share their internal problems.

>These factors and their potential damage can be mitigated by certain logistic steps (mitigated, not prevented, mind) that Juniper would know and Cat can't even imagine.

You... do remember Rumena exists, right? They're the drow general versed in logistics and whatnot.

Daniel E

Gods Below, I hope Masego recovers somehow. His internal dialogues about appropriate social interactions, and actual social interactions, are pure comedy gold. I don't recall the chapter, but the one I remember best is when he seconded their 'battle cry' of "Lies and murder!", thinking that was legit.

[Liliet](#)



LIES AND VIOLENCE

also I'm pretty sure he was trolling Cat eagerly alongside Indrani ♥ ♥ ♥

[308924810a](#)

If Praes and Callow forewent Named rulers it would do a lot to help them, both preventing personal good/evil conflicts from escalating into frequent and inevitable war, and in making people more willing to negotiate with Praes, as that would no longer mean having to trust a villain.

The problem is that I'm not sure it's achievable, to stop ruling names from being assumed to have authority you need to somehow turn the story of the nation against them.

Letouriste

Wait... "Less than two thousand dead" for the Mighty? I thought only 100 or so fought. There would be tens of thousands dead among the crusaders otherwise

Chapter 60: Melancholy

"And after Okoro was taken its King Berengar Rohanon was dragged before the people in the place of Faded Jackals, where his hands were cut for having reached beyond his grasp and his head scalped for having dared to claim kingship over Praesi. His Dread Majesty ordered him driven into the Wasteland, bearing his hands around his neck and his scalp scribed with for all crusaders this warning: 'There is only one crown east of the river Wasaliti, and once more will you be taught to dread it.'"

– Extract from 'Commentaries on the Campaigns of Dread Emperor Terribilis the Second'

The Sisters were in the tent. Their presence was like a whisper on the edge of my mind, and though they'd not hidden their presence by Masego's bedside neither had they drawn my attention to it. It had my fingers clenching, and my growing ill-temper was noticeable enough my legionary escort gave me a wider berth as I quickened my limping. I'd had a reputation for having a foul temper even before my anger began frosting over tables, and trading Winter for Night had not put away that repute. Sve Noc knew what lines they could and could not cross without our bargain fraying, and they would not be so foolish as to try to force the Night onto an unwilling Hierophant. But they were not above making that offer when he was freshly awake and grieving, still in shock from the loss of his magic.

Crows were carrion birds, and just like carrion the Sisters were preying on the vulnerable to attempt patronage of another powerful figure – for Masego was that still, even bedridden and stripped of sorcery. My anger was less from the crafty offer I suspected was being made and more from the way that I had no solid grounds for wrath or recourse if I wanted to denounce what they were doing. It was a sharp reminder that the Sisters were my patrons and allies, not my followers, and they had schemes of their own. And Masego, though one of the Woe, was not my sworn

man or a subject of the crown of Callow: any claim I could make over his loyalties was one he'd given out by his own hand, and by the same could withdraw.

The crows were never far from my thoughts and often pointed address within those was enough to earn their attention, but they did not deign answer my insistence this time. The same tent where I'd slept was shaded in subtle ways when I found it, the shadows it cast and kept within its folds too deep and cool even with the falling dusk. There was power at work, the attention of sister-goddesses manifest. I dismissed my escort abruptly and strode past the folds, catching sight of Sve Noc perched atop the armchair I'd slumbered in while a half-naked and sitting Masego looked at them from his sickbed. Feathered in darkness and ink-eyed, the crows seemed almost too large for the chair and even the tent – not that it seemed to cow my friend.

The dark-skinned sorcerer, eye cloth fastened loosely over his glittering glass eyes, was still painfully thin from his time in the Dead King's thrall but his face was calm and his hands steady. His long braids were still matted from their lack of washing, the silver trinkets woven in them shining dully in the lamplight, but even abed looking at him was like looking at an open flame. The burn was feverish, perhaps, but grief and tragedy had not seen its intensity wane. All this I took within a heartbeat, as I arrived to what must have been the tail-end of the offer tendered.

"Faith kept will be kept in kind," Andronike said. "And in the end, all will be Night."

Masego's eyes pivoted under the cloth to glance at me, and the Sisters needed no sight to know of my presence, so when I cleared my throat there was no hint of surprise on any's face.

"Faith can wait until another evening," I said. "There will be—"

"That won't be necessary, Catherine," Hierophant quietly interrupted.

Wings spread and with a few lazy beats Komena was on my shoulder, as displeased by my meddling as I was by hers. Andronike, though, perched herself on the side of Masego's bed. Peering at him curiously with dark eyes more god than bird no matter the shape of them.

"You have been hollowed," Andronike cawed. "Miracle can yet mend this."

The urge came, quicksilver and fleeting, to intervene once more. If the Sisters alone had requested the stilling of my tongue I would not have held it, but Masego had as well and so let the urge pass.

"There is only one side of apotheosis of interest to me," Hierophant said, "and it is not the one that involves kneeling."

"You are yet young," Komena said from my shoulder. "We can wait, though the bargain will not twice be so sweet."

"It will eat away at you," Andronike told him. "From the inside, it will-"

Sudden as it was, it caught me by surprise like few things in my life before it: Masego's nimble fingers, mage-deft and long, snapped up and seized the crow addressing him by the throat. They *squeezed*, and as Komena cawed in protest and beat her wings against my shoulder the Warlock's son let out a scornful hiss.

"Do not ever attempt to peer into my mind, covetous vermin," the Hierophant harshly rebuked.

Night flooded the room as the behest of livid lesser gods, thick and oppressive current like veils of shadow, but his Name burned like a clear and unyielding flame.

"I knew Winter well, before you fed on it," Masego said, eyes burning with Summer flame, "shall I rip it out through the stitches of your belly? Ruin will run down the course of you into the heart of your entire people, little spiders. Did you believe you could make yourself the life of your kind without also being its death?"

He barked out a laugh.

"Lucky you, that it was Akua Sahelian and not I who accompanied her below," he said. "Else I would have cut out your ravenous eyes long ago and made a banner of your butchered remains."

"Masego," I said. "Enough."

Summer-bright eyes flicked to me, then returned to Komena on my shoulder. My fingers clenched.

"Masego," I repeated sharply. "*Enough.*"

Scoffing, he released his grip on Andronike. She flew away in wrath, and I saw that the flesh of Hierophant's hand looked as if it'd been frostbitten where it'd been touching the divine crow.

"And that's why," I calmly said, "you speak to me before trying to bargain with one of the Woe."

"Offence was given," Komena cried out, the sound cacophonous and somehow blinding.

"You tried to look into the head of a man whose Name is practically made of the death of gods, you fucking fools," I barked. "What did you *think* was going to happen?"

Before they could answer I pressed on.

"You didn't think," I said. "You got greedy, you got hasty, and then you got spanked. Take it as a reminder that there are things up here on the surface that are nastier than you. And be thankful all it cost you was a few moments of indignity."

The fury pouring out of them and into the Night was like the burn of sudden ice, but I refused to be bowled over by it. They'd made a mistake, believing that dangling power in front of a grieving man was all it'd take to induce another Named to bargain. They'd taken him for one of the Firstborn and for that blindness very nearly ended up losing more than a few feathers.

"I carried your banner from victory to victory," I said, "because I've been careful. Because I've been patient and cautious and I've picked my battles. If you begin to sidle up to every Named on a ragged edge and offer power for rites, you're not goddesses: you're cut-rate devils. And one of those days, sure as dusk, you'll end up stepping blind into a story that'll end you."

The fury did not wane in the slightest, but I met it unbowed. I felt the slight touch of their thoughts against mine, a feather's brush looking for the taste of honesty and finding it. Still, few gods were in the habit of apologizing. The Sisters flew out with malcontent cawing, blowing out of the tent and leaving it lighter for their absence. I breathed out in their wake, still feeling where Komena's talons had dug into my shoulder even if no blood had been drawn and no mark would be left behind. Though Masego's face and torso were facing me, I caught through the cloth that his eyes had followed the crows out before finally returning to me. The radiance of his Name, not visible but like a taste hanging in the air, finally dimmed into nothingness. It left him panting and visibly tired. Leaning against my staff, I limped up to his bed and swallowed a wince when he tensed up at my approach. Very slowly, I sat on the side near his legs.

"I see you still get cranky when woken up early," I said.

He didn't blink, for the lack of eyelid, but the way he angled his head good as implied it.

"I was expecting anger," Masego admitted. "For this, and... the rest."

"Stealing a city, cutting up Arcadia and nearly wiping an entire principality off the face of Creation," I elaborated. "Including most of the people you care about in any significant manner."

He winced.

"Yes," he said. "That."

I sighed.

"I *am* angry," I told him. "But for large parts of that you weren't in your right mind. And now that you are, I expect all those things you were trying to deny – and the scope of what you nearly did – are about to start sinking in. We will, one day, have an unpleasant discussion about this. But it won't be today, and when we have it you won't be..."

I hesitated, looking for the right words, but Masego smiled bitterly.

"My fathers will be no less dead in a few days, Catherine," he said. "Nor will..."

His lips thinned.

"Nor will my sorcery have returned," he said, as if forcing himself. "The severing should have killed me. Would have, had it not been so improbably precise. I still wonder what stayed his hand, for it would have been child's play to snuff me out at the end. Much easier than this."

It was my turn to hesitate, though the moment I did I knew I'd have to speak. His glass eyes missed nothing and Masego had known me long enough he could discern the expressions of my face much more accurately than most people's.

"I bargained for your life," I said, "when I had a shard of his soul in my grasp."

He tiredly leaned back against pillows that'd not been there when I left in the morning. Archer's work, I thought. Which meant they were probably stolen, but I could ask her about that later.

"Thank you," Masego solemnly said. "For that. For coming, too."

"We all came, Zeze," I quietly said. "And we will again, if we need to. Don't doubt that."

There was a long moment of silence, and finally he nodded. His breath rasped out along with words barely more than a murmur.

"He killed Indrani. Using me."

I reached out a hand towards his own, and after the moment he accepted the implicit offer. We threaded fingers and I nodded.

"The Grey Pilgrim brought her back," I said.

"As Trismegistus said he would," Masego quietly replied. "And yet the last thing she will remember before dying is my hand raised and my lips speaking an incantation."

I let silence pass, sensing there was more he wanted to say.

"That is unkind," the braided man finally said. "Isn't it? To her even more than I."

He looked to me as if asking confirmation, unsure and tone hesitant.

"It would be unkind with any of us," I told him. "But to her more than the rest of us."

"I don't know how to mend that," Masego whispered. "Catherine, I don't know how to mend any of it."

This was, I thought, the first time he'd even obliquely acknowledged that Indrani might have feelings for him. I was not certain whether his careful handling of her came out of a gentle nature – which he had, somehow, not lost in our years of war and hatred – or because he considered himself to have a distinctive relationship with Archer, and it was not my place to ask. But the acknowledgement alone was more than I'd sometimes thought this entire affair would earn of him unless Indrani pressed the matter.

"She won't blame you, Zeze," I quietly said. "You have to know that. It might have been your hand but it was not your will, and that's the part that matters."

"Is it?" he asked. "Since I was a child, always I've been told these sweeping... truths. Eulogies of the perception of my fellows, the triumphant veracity of ties. And near always they proved false, for though my own fathers were as much reason as they were blood that is a *rare* thing. A memory, a pain, these are things that linger. Principles are beautiful – they are the bones of Creation and what we make of it – but they do not course in veins. They are... distant."

Archer was a creature of blood and not reason, he did not say. Or needed to. It was true, I wouldn't deny, that in some ways more than any of us Indrani followed her instincts. How much would principle matter, he was asking, when she still remembered the raised hand and the death that followed?

"You're looking at it like the depth can only mean it'll hurt more," I gently said. "That's only half the coin, Masego. It also means you want to see the best in them, to get past the roughness, because what you love about them weighs heavier than what hurt you."

I had, in my attempt to soothe the fear, somehow worsened this I realized. The way his face clenched made that plain. He did not speak immediately, and I did not dare to further talk lest I once more stumble over something blindly.

"It didn't," Masego hoarsely said. "I was so *angry* with them, Cat. They said sorry, about hiding what they knew from me, but they weren't. Not really. Not the way you showed me, where it *stings* that you did the wrong thing and its stays with you. They were just sorry I knew they'd hidden things from me, and that doesn't count. And they tried, you know. After. To say things or give me things or act ways that would make me less angry, makes us good again. But I couldn't trust it, because I knew they'd just make the same choice again if they had to, so I stayed angry. Even..."

He swallowed.

"Even on the day they died," he said. "I knew they were planning to bind me. I am not a *fool*, Catherine. They were going to put me in a cage so I'd be out of the way when the Empress went after you, when Callow was hurt until it knelt. And it rankled, that they would. It surprised me, though, when it rankled they just... didn't care about the rest. I know you want me to care about the people, Cat, but it's hard. They're not very interesting, as a rule. And they're so *ignorant*."

He hesitated.

"But I don't want them to be hurt, either," Masego said. "If things can be made better for everyone, shouldn't they? It just seemed so obvious, but my fathers didn't care. Or they couldn't see it, and isn't that worse? So I was even angrier with them. And I told them to be careful, when I left, but it was almost a lie because after the battle I was going to disappear. And the last thing I said to them was... tainted, Cat. I couldn't be not angry, even if I loved them."

"It's all right to hate something they did," I told him quietly, thinking of hungry deaths still being reaped. "It doesn't mean you hated *them*."

Gods, but how fragile he looked in that moment. How could this be the same man who'd seized a goddess by the throat not an hour ago, threatened the ruin of an entire people for their patrons having crossed him? Exposed like a raw nerve and heartfelt until he bled, yet even stripped of the sorcery he'd spent his entire life embracing he could still daunt a lesser god. I understood, now, why to someone like Indrani the mixture might be intoxicating. Strength and vulnerability all at once, someone she could respect without feeling threatened. Masego was, in her eyes, a peer without being a rival.

"I thought Papa I could bring back, at least," the dark-skinned man admitted. "I cannot account for a soul, and Father had already passed beyond my reach. There was naught to be done there. But Papa was a devil. Sufficient precision should have been enough."

"But it wasn't," I said.

I had seen only part of the string of failures that made a wasteland of the Arcadian shard, but they must have gone on for months before that and there'd be no indication that success had been looming.

"No," Masego said. "Always something was missing. I'd believed it a question of accuracy, and perhaps if Trismegistus had not stolen the use of my aspect the gap could have been bridged. But the more I think of it, of what I had begun to glimpse, the more I doubt it. Papa was unique. He did not have a soul, Catherine, but he was unique."

Of the incubus that'd been one of Masego's father, the ancient devil known as Tikoloshe, I knew precious little and so I did not dare venture an opinion. What did I know of these matters, anyway, that I could disagree with my own Hierophant? If he believed his father had been singular, an exception that surpassed the stuff he'd been made of, I would believe him. And though I could not say I had been fond of the incubus I'd never met or Warlock who I had known and scorned, I could at least share in the grief of this man who was family to me.

"Some things stay lost," I murmured. "You have to learn to make your peace with that."

I winced, after, realizing it could easily be taken as my speaking of his magic instead of his fathers.

"How carefully you tread," he gently mocked me. "As if speaking it out loud would break me: I have lost the Gift, in every meaningful way."

Which, I silently noted, did not mean every way. Given Masego's lasting obsession with being exact in all things, I did not take that as a coincidence – though it hardly seemed the time to pursue the matter. I thought of Vivienne, in that moment, of the way she's seemed to terribly convinced that making a mistake or losing her Name meant she was no longer one of us. Like she'd be discarded the moment she faltered or changed. I would not, I decided, let Zeze fall into that same pit.

"Losing your sorcery doesn't meant you're not one of us anymore," I told him. "Being one of the Woe – us loving you – it's not *conditional*. It's not the Hierophant I came for, and it wasn't

the Apprentice that became part of my family. It's you, and that's not something you can lose."

He squeezed my fingers, though looking at his face I realized with a degree of strange amusement that in that moment *he* was the one trying to comfort me.

"I did not believe that," he assured me. "I won't leave you to stand alone like Uncle Amadeus did, so don't worry about me leaving."

I mastered myself just in time not to breathe in sharply. Sometimes, I thought, Masego saw things more clearly than any of us. I saw him hesitate once more, after, and made myself squeeze his fingers back in reassurance.

"I could have," he said.

My brow rose.

"Could have what?"

"I could have begun apotheosis," Masego whispered. "I had the souls. The weight. The bones. But I wanted to bring my father back, instead. But I still remember, Cat."

My eyes narrowed.

"Remember what?" I asked.

"How gods are made," he whispered. "And so how they are unmade."

I matched his gaze, hidden as it was by the eye cloth.

"The Dead King?" I murmured.

"Oh yes," Hierophant murmured. "Even him. And Catherine, I think I *want* to kill him."

He leaned forward, as if confiding a great secret.

"I believe," Masego solemnly told me, "I might have become nettled by this affair."

"Well," I smiled, thin and bladelike, "we've certainly started picked fights with lesser gods over less."

And so we spoke, just the two of us, of the last king of Sephirah's end.

Pantasy

Vote for amazing ends and greater tales!

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

Insanenoodlyguy

Noooooooo. Curse this shoddy systems inability to edit or delete!

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks for posting this. 😊

Insanenoodlyguy

And so we spoke, just the two of us, of voting for Pratical Guide to Evil on TopWebFiciton

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

Soronel Haetir

Interesting that even without his sorcery Masego apparently kept his Name. I was expecting that to be gone as well.

Big Brother

A Heiropphant seeks the true nature of Miracles and Godhood, but does not necessarily have to have the ability to use them. To some, it is enough to merely KNOW, with their usage but a minor convenience.

[Liliet](#)

I love your phrasing of that. Masego would 100% go with that explanation ;u;

[Mental Mouse](#)

> To some, it is enough to merely KNOW, with their usage but a minor convenience.

Given how Names work so heavily with the Law of Poetry... well, "everyone says" Knowledge is Power!

emthe4th

Watch Mesego gain the ability to create his own miracles without the Gift, that'd be absolutely delightful

Andrew Mitchell

Same. It was a VERY pleasant surprise. 😊

Sugar Roll

By definition a hierophant is an interpreter of sacred mysteries or arcane knowledge. I suppose since he can still do that, the Name stayed with him.

Cicero

Mistake – Dead King – Mistake.

Oshi

This is what I have been waiting for. This is what was missing with Black's meeting with Catherine.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, YES, at thousand times yes!! Another absolutely brilliant chapter. So much wonderful depth to Masego right now, and his relationships. Just wonderful.

And then the climax.

"I could have begun apotheosis," Masego whispered. "I had the souls. The weight. The bones. But I wanted to bring my father back, instead. But I still remember, Cat."

My eyes narrowed.

"Remember what?" I asked.

"How gods are made," he whispered. "And so how they are unmade."

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"The Dead King?" I murmured.

"Oh yes," Hierophant murmured. "Even him. And Catherine, I think I want to kill him."

He leaned forward, as if confiding a great secret.

So, so good.

Faiir

This was everything I wanted from this conversation and more.

caoimhinh

This entire chapter Masego was pure badassery incarnated.

"Do not ever attempt to peer into my mind, covetous vermin," the Hierophant harshly rebuked.

Night flooded the room as the behest of livid lesser gods, thick and oppressive current like veils of shadow, but his Name burned like a clear and unyielding flame.

"I knew Winter well, before you fed on it," Masego said, eyes burning with Summer flame, "shall I rip it out through the stitches of your belly? Ruin will run down the course of you into the heart of your entire people, little spiders. Did you believe you could make yourself the life of your kind without also being its death?"

He barked out a laugh.

Andrew Mitchell

For sure. Loved, loved, loved that last paragraph.

[Liliet](#)

I love that Masego instantly went into threatening their people along with them. He only needs to look at the Sisters to see what they really care about ♥ ♥ ♥

Did you believe you could make yourself the life of your kind without also being its death?

Andrew Mitchell

I missed that one. Good pickup! ♥

caoimhinh

And he also accurately judged that his Aspect would work on them and extend to the rest of the Drow.

***"Ruin"** will run down the course of you into the heart of your entire people*

I don't think it's a coincidence that he used that word. They are lucky that Ruin wasn't bolded in the chapter, else they would have been fucked.

Then again, Masego is not *that* trigger-happy nor bloodthirsty. And he is sound enough to know that was a fight that would have no winner, only tremendous losses for everyone involved.

But the line needed to be drawn and damn if he didn't make his point clear.

[Liliet](#)

mhm!!! ♥ ♥ ♥

Cpt. Obvious

Not that bloodthirsty or trigger happy?

He has no moral objections to things like what the Diabolist were doing in Liesse. And as far as being trigger happy I seem to recall something about a pair of siblings that irritated him at a party and ended up dying in a spectacularly gruesome way.

The reason his body count isn't much higher is because he knows Catherine tends to frown when he kills someone without a good cause. And as it's often hard to understand just what she considers is a good cause it's usually best to wait for her to make the call.

mavant

The fucking pun at the end slew me.

[Liliet](#)

Oh my god.

You are right ;u;

WuseMajor

What pun?

[Liliet](#)

Ravens are corvids, like crows.

Ravenous eyes.

Get it? 😊

danh3107

It goes without saying, but man, I love Masego.

erebus42

Yeah, that was pretty much how I expected any proposition to Masego by Sve Noc to go. Much like Catherine he's not one to kneel.

I am curious to see if Masego ends up finding a way to reclaim his magic or if he develops in a totally different direction. Probably not combat related but perhaps a seer or seer adjacent? He still appears to be the Hierophant but how he expresses that could possibly evolve.

gingerlygrump

Catherine doesn't kneel. Amadeus taught her that. Ave Noc are her patrons and allies, but they don't own her.

oaclo

They could swing the story so that this ends up as an advancement of his Hierophant powers. Like he couldn't witness miracles completely and impartially while having the means to make them as an integral part of his being.

Streetwind

Fun fact: Masego has only unlocked two aspects, so far (Witness and Ruin). Both of which he can still use, if his threat to Sve Noc was any indication.

So his Name is fully intact, and he still has one more aspect to come into. I have an inkling that, whatever it will be, it will surely be heavily colored by the removal of his sorcery and the events surrounding it. Perhaps it will even be targeted at the Dead King, specifically. Because we all know that when Masego says he might have been nettled, that was the understatement of the millenium.

Eleron M Pfoutz

To quote Team Four Star:

"And he sounds SUPER nettled."

gingerlygrump

Masego has lost the gift, but has gained clarity. And also gained a sense of humanity, for all that he's been "fundamentally kind" throughout the story he hasn't learned humanity til now. I hope his arc ends happily, he's my favorite.

[Liliet](#)

Depends on how you define 'learning humanity'. He sure is going to have to learn how people who arent sorcerers live without the Gift, though then again, he's still Named so still a ways off the average ;u;

The "I got angry they didn't care" part, though? That was back at Thalassina already 😊😊😊

gingerlygrump

Hmm, I was referring to a few different comments of his. Yes, his statements about being angry that Wekesa and Tikoloshe didn't care, but also his pointed concerns about Indrani's

feelings and his insight into Catherine's thoughts. I don't mean he was inhumane before now, but Masego has lost the blinders that power gave him in respect to reading people. And yes, the fact that Masego no longer sees other people as pawns on the chessboard has been developing for a while, but now we get a full frontal view of a man who has done an about-face from what he was brought up to believe about people and power.

Masego is my favorite character, hands down, partly because we've gotten to watch him grow up. He's gone from spoiled (albeit terrifying) child to an imperfect but lovable man who reeks of power even without his magic. He is what Wekesa and Tikoloshe made him, but so much more.

Shveiran

I like him too, but I'm not sure why you'd think these parts of his growth are related to his loss of magic.

These changes have been developing for a long time, and they were never really hindered by the Gift.

[Liliet](#)

>but also his pointed concerns about Indrani's feelings and his insight into Catherine's thoughts. I don't mean he was inhumane before now, but Masego has lost the blinders that power gave him in respect to reading people

no
uh
no, that's
not

Masego is autistic
he was not bad at reading people because power, he was bad at reading people because he was bad at reading people however like the scholar he was he developed his own method for understanding them, starting from pure theory he has ALWAYS had it, this method, he was ALWAYS good at the theory (see: his counseling Cat about crying back in book 2) he cannot intuitively read faces but he can very much understand the cause effect of people's feelings on most topics, because he's good at understanding shit (and then there's fringe like ethics and respect and etiquette, which he just doesn't get, bc he grew up with Wekesa 'just kill them' and Amadeus 'just do whatever, they can't say a thing')

he did not lose any blinders
he did not

I mean ffs its been like 2 minutes that hes been awake since

he lost the power -_-
he *gained* experience with & understanding of SPECIFICALLY
the people he's close to

he's had it for a while, and now we're seeing the depths of
it

it's not new

and you are very wrong on many many levels 😊

Mike E.

As someone in the autism spectrum, this response is 100%
on point. I really didn't grok people until my early 30s,
it took that long for my mental database of interactions
to contain enough data points to enable me to be more or
less "normal" in social situations. And I still fuck it up
quite often even in my mid-40s now.

My son is more into the spectrum than I am, I have been
trying to point out where him being him will cause
problems in the future. He will be in college next year,
at which point it will be on him to finally realize what I
have been trying to teach him about social behaviors.

[Liliet](#)

>Masego is my favorite character, hands down
(well you're obviously right about this part :D)

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Well, he denied becoming a god, while having the name Hierophant.
Imagine if that turns into Deicide?

Soronel Haetir

That would certainly be one way to ruin the game, kill the
players.

NerfContessa

Oh yes, indeed.

Did the dk really not see the immense danger of making a
Hierophant his enemy, I wonder?

Jessica Day

Bravo!

[Javvies](#)

Heh. Masego stay you.

Mistake Sve Noc. Fortunately for you two, you didn't very into too much trouble, no major lasting trouble.

Heh.

I wonder ... how much of the knowledge Masego now has pertaining to unmaking gods would also be applicable to unmaking Bard.

Also, I suspect Masego is going to (eventually) figure out how to either reacquire the Gift or a figure out a replacement method of interfacing with and shaping what is.

And he's totally going to be on board with being an instructor at Cardinal.

Andrew Mitchell

> how much of the knowledge Masego now has pertaining to unmaking gods would also be applicable to unmaking Bard

Oooooo, GREAT question. One I'd love to know the answer to.

> I suspect Masego is going to (eventually) figure out how to either reacquire the Gift or a figure out a replacement method of interfacing with and shaping what is

My money's on the later option. Getting his magic back would cheapen the drama we've just been through and would feel like a backwards step for the overall story. IMO, he's GOT to find another route to power and it will be bigger and better than it was before.

> he's totally going to be on board with being an instructor at Cardinal

ONLY for the worthy students. AND only if he gets to keep doing his own research.

[Liliet](#)

Names are ridiculous, and he's just proven that his is in fact not Gift-based.

It's gotta be epic 😊

>ONLY for the worthy students. AND only if he gets to keep doing his own research.

I somehow think that Cat won't have as much trouble convincing him as Amadeus did with Wekesa 😊

and OF COURSE he's going to keep doing his research ♥

Insanenoodlyguy

If he's at the school a huge chunk of his research will come right to him.

[Liliet](#)

So I just realized Masego would 100% be all onboard with the role of a university teacher.

Like, he would grumble incessantly about it interfering with his research, but he would *not* abandon the position.

Like... back before Everdark, he took issue with Cat telling him not to call everyone ignorant because *how else would they know to fix it???*

Masego would be that one professor who is an absolute ass to all his students but will spend as much time helping them out outside of work hours as it takes and so becomes a universal favorite anyway (except for lazy asses)

Andrew Mitchell

Yeah, I can see that. That's a nice picture you paint. 😊

caoimhinh

I think more than being an ass to his students, Masego will spend time badmouthing their previous teachers with an "all your previous tutors suck" attitude.

He doesn't seem to me like the one to yell at someone for making a mistake or not knowing something, but rather he would be like "they didn't teach you properly" and so he would proceed to properly school them.

We actually saw this during his time in the 15th, as he complained more about the lack of education that the mages had received, rather than their lack of talent or intelligence.

[Liliet](#)

ABSOLUTELY FUCKING YES I STAND CORRECTED

Shveiran

Honestly I'm not opposed to Masego becoming a good teacher, but I don't think he IS now. Or wishes to be, even.

Masego taught Catherine, when it was needed. He did so patiently and competently, true enough, but that is a long way from saying he likes teaching or is good at it.

He has never show a desire to teach stuff to folks, just a distaste for their ignorance. Most people dislike having rubbish lying around on the street they live in, but how many of them actually go an pick it up?

As awesome as the image of him being a grumpy professor is... it's a fine joke, but only that.

Andrew Mitchell

I agree with your main point.

FYI Masego has done more teaching than you recall. He's also taught that person who was his second in charge at the Observatory, sorry I can't recall her name right now. As well as a whole lot of Legion mages.

[Liliet](#)

Masego doesn't like teaching as an activity, it's true, but he has proven entirely willing to do it anyway if he sees the necessity. He's taught mages of the entire fifteenth to do rituals, he's taught the observatory minions.

And pair "ignorance is like the WORST" with "if things could be made better for everyone they should be"...

You suddenly have Masego with a moral imperative to be a university professor 0.0
and may the world tremble in his wake

Shveiran

All fine points, which is why I don't think the idea is ludicrous nor anything.

It's just... I think there is a fine line between disliking ignorance and the whole "wouldn't it be better if people knew stuff?" and going "Yes, I'll try to empty this sea of ignorance myself; hand me that bucket, will you?"

It's... it's a possibility, but I think your Cardinhogwarts is showing, right now.

[Liliet](#)

I mean. I do agree he wouldn't just spontaneously have this thought.

I'm just saying that *if Catherine asks,*

Aston

Vote! Again and again and...

Etc.

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

Novice

"But I don't want them to be hurt, either," Masego said. "If things can be made better for everyone, shouldn't they? It just seemed so obvious..."

How could someone who wishes to dissect gods and demons be so fucking precious??!!?

"I believe," Masego solemnly told me, "I might have become nettled by this affair."

This little sentence seems so non-threatening but by the crows it brought chills down my spine. I love Zeze very much.

Andrew Mitchell

> by the crows

♥ ♥ ♥

[Liliet](#)

>How could someone who wishes to dissect gods and demons be so fucking precious??!!?

THAT IS THE GREAT AUTISTIC PARADOX
WE'RE ALL* PRECIOUS
EVEN THE DISSECTING ONES

Masego is... so great... ;u;

*personally Manfred von Karma excepted

Adam

Blitzed through this story in a week. Love it.

McBob

"And, yeah, he is nettled. Super nettled" – Dragon Ball Z
Abridged TFS

Nathan

Everything I wanted ^^

antoninjohn

The difference between a psyker and a sorcerer is that a psyker uses their innate powers while a sorcerer uses their knowledge of reality to work their miracles

[Barthumphries](#)

People have said that the Dead King made a mistake in starting this chain of events but that's not actually what happened.

Remember why Peregrine made such a precise cut? The Bard. Who is the Bard's longest and most knowledgeable enemy? The Dead King. Who is Masego aimed at now? The Dead King. And who benefits most from the death of the Dead King? Possibly the Bard.

We have the Bard as the one who started this whole chain of events and the Bard as the one who most benefits from it. Masego is unknowingly playing into her hand.

konstantinvoncarstein

So it seems the house won, after all 😊

Novice

The house always wins, in the end.

...Unless someone torches the whole place anyway. Preferably goblinfire.

[Liliet](#)

Masego is so fucking best aaaaaaaaaaaaaa

choice quotes:

> "There is only one side of apotheosis of interest to me," Hierophant said, "and it is not the one that involves kneeling."

KNEW IT
FUCKING KNEW IT 😊

> Ruin will run down the course of you into the heart of your entire people, little spiders. Did you believe you could make yourself the life of your kind without also being its death?

Masego doesn't need to look at the Sisters for long before seeing what their weak spot is 😊

> "I was expecting anger," Masego admitted. "For this, and... the rest."

> "Stealing a city, cutting up Arcadia and nearly wiping an entire principality off the face of Creation," I elaborated. "Including most of the people you care about in any significant manner."

> He winced.

> "Yes," he said. "That."

Masego knows when he does the wrong thing and he is utterly and incredibly precious about it.

Catherine keeps worrying that she only has as much authority over him as he's willing to give, but he basically sees her as the big sister ;u;

(the big cousin, technically)

>“Thank you,” Masego solemnly said. “For that. For coming, too.”

Catherine didn't need to specify that he was still Woe even without magic. This was all the confirmation he needed – and his real worry was about his actions, not about sorcery 😊
he knows what family is much better than Vivienne does ^^

>“As Trismegistus said he would,” Masego quietly replied. “And yet the last thing she will remember before dying is my hand raised and my lips speaking an incantation.”

>I let silence pass, sensing there was more he wanted to say.

>“That is unkind,” the braided man finally said. “Isn't it? To her even more than I.”

(first of all THAN ME lmao)

but also

YES

YES

AND YES

😊 😊 😊

Masego sees to the heart of it ♥ ♥ “Even on the day they died,” he said. “I knew they were planning to bind me. I am not a fool, Catherine. They were going to put me in a cage so I'd be out of the way when the Empress went after you, when Callow was hurt until it knelt. And it rankled, that they would. It surprised me, though, when it rankled they just... didn't care about the rest.

HOLY FUCKING WHAT!!!!

> I know you want me to care about the people, Cat, but it's hard. They're not very interesting, as a rule. And they're so ignorant.”

> He hesitated.

> “But I don't want them to be hurt, either,” Masego said. “If things can be made better for everyone, shouldn't they? It just seemed so obvious, but my fathers didn't care. Or they couldn't see it, and isn't that worse? So I was even angrier with them.

FUCKING OH MY GOD

Masego didn't even notice when he started to really care ;u;

CALAMITIES' HEIRS
HEIRS TO AMADEUS IN TRUTH

>“No,” Masego said. “Always something was missing. I’d believed it a question of accuracy, and perhaps if Trismegistus had not stolen the use of my aspect the gap could have been bridged. But the more I think of it, of what I had begun to glimpse, the more I doubt it. Papa was unique. He did not have a soul, Catherine, but he was unique.”

...ah yes.
that 😊

> “How carefully you tread,” he gently mocked me. “As if speaking it out loud would break me: I have lost the Gift, in every meaningful way.”

Masego is emotionally the least fragile of the Woe, because he honestly has the most solid emotional foundation. That’s what having a good, big, loving family who love you and love each other and manage their disagreements well does ;u;

> He squeezed my fingers, though looking at his face I realized with a degree of strange amusement that in that moment he was the one trying to comfort me.

THE HEART OF THIS PARTY
IS ALL I’M SAYING

>“I did not believe that,” he assured me. “I won’t leave you to stand alone like Uncle Amadeus did, so don’t worry about me leaving.”

FUCKING
HE KNOWS EXACTLY WHAT IS GOING ON
AND I ADORE HIM INCREDIBLY STRONGLY

Catherine is a Seer of Mind in truth, but when it comes to family matters Masego can run circles around her ;u;

> “Oh yes,” Hierophant murmured. “Even him. And Catherine, I think I want to kill him.”

> He leaned forward, as if confiding a great secret.

> “I believe,” Masego solemnly told me, “I might have become nettled by this affair.”

AND MASEGO REMAINS A PRECIOUS INCREDIBLE TREASURE
WITH THE EMOTIONAL IQ OF BOTH A GOD OF KNOWLEDGE AND A FUCKING
ROCK AT THE SAME TIME
BLESS HIM

Novice

Can I just say that I genuinely love seeing you gush at about every chapter? Keep on rocking, Liliet.

Andrew Mitchell

+ 1 ♥

[Liliet](#)

^^

♥

caoimhinh

+2

Andrew Mitchell

Yet again, you've enriched my appreciation of the writing. ♥ ♥
♥ Thanks. 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

That's the thing about autism... we see things from a different perspective. On the one hand, there are parts of normal society that we can't see, or see the back side of and disdain, but on the other hand, that same difference of perspective lets us see things that normal folks don't.

And on the gripping hand: Though our ignorance and frustration might make others, or ourselves doubt it, *we are human, and very much part of humanity, just as Hephaestus is still a god.*

Andrew Mitchell

> And on the gripping hand

Reference acknowledged. 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Looking back, I'm not sure it was apropos to introduce that particular point with a metaphor of nonhuman anatomy. But hey, that's how it came out. Feel free to contrast its metaphorical weight against its ironic occurrence until you get dizzy. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Yeah ♥ ♥ ♥

I love how he swings between 'I am not sure what emotions are' and *comforting Catherine*

his understanding is uneven by the standards of nt's, and it is Very Good And Blessed

John

Masego didn't start out knowing what gods are, either. Faced with a confusing yet obviously important thing, the correct response is comprehensive background research, meticulous firsthand observation, and taking every attempt to apply the resultant knowledge seriously, so as to notice and learn from every mistake. Masego behaves correctly, to the best of his ability.

The Saint of Swords was the Grand Alliance's leading plan for taking out the Dead King, but I don't think that ever really would have worked. She only ever had one answer to any problem, which was "stick a sword in it." Catherine beat her in a matter of seconds with a weapon that only took a few months to prepare, and it's not like the vulnerability being exploited there is even particularly obscure. The dead king has been adding layers to his hero-neutralizing contingency plans for an incomprehensibly long time, of course he would have thought of that option before.

Masego, as a Named villain, is immune to old age, so that particular cheap shot won't work on him at all. He's not just one of the greatest living scholars of sorcery, and a career godslayer, and riding a narrative wave of "this time it's personal," he's also always been obsessed with elegance and efficiency rather than overwhelming force. Now that he can't use magic himself, he'll need to explain whatever magical work needs to be done to someone else, in enough detail that they can actually figure out how to do it. Frustrating though it may be, teaching is an important element of true mastery, because unpacking the core ideas to answer naive questions is the best way to discover any remaining sloppy spots in your own understanding of a subject.

[Liliet](#)

>Masego didn't start out knowing what gods are, either. Faced with a confusing yet obviously important thing, the correct response is comprehensive background research, meticulous firsthand observation, and taking every attempt to apply the resultant knowledge seriously, so as to notice and learn from every mistake. Masego behaves correctly, to the best of his ability.

YES

I really wish this would become a thing as a trope abt autistic people >x> it would be more accurate than most of the existing ones really -_-

>Now that he can't use magic himself, he'll need to explain whatever magical work needs to be done to someone else, in enough detail that they can actually figure out how to do it. Frustrating though it may be, teaching is an important element of true mastery, because unpacking the core ideas to answer naive questions is the best way to discover any remaining sloppy spots in your own understanding of a subject.

and you are SO RIGHT about this all ♥ ♥ ♥

Aotrs Commander

Well, Above and Below, I'd start soiling my pants now, if I were you.

konstantinvoncarstein

Hierophant can dissect gods, not Gods. The former are extremely powerful entities, set apart from the rest of Creation by said power, immortality and and a power base (drow, Serenity).

The later are at a whole other level. The Gods are not just extremely powerful entities. They created the world and are eternal. Wekesa taught Above and Below **were** Creation. So I think they are safe from anything happening in the world.

Shikkarasu

Rule 34 of The Woe: Yes they can, no exceptions.
Rule 34-b, Hierophant clause: If something they are not capable is spoken aloud he will *learn how*

konstantinvoncarstein

Evil point🙄But still, I think the Gods are safe.

mavant

Heh, ravenous eyes. It's funny because they're hungry but also ravens.

Novice

...Oh my god

superkeaton

If Cardinal needs a headmaster, you could get a worse Dumbledore than a magicless Masego...

Dieter

Masego is not gonna get his magic back, the magic user slot in the party got taken over by Akua. He will transition into a different more priestly role (similar to the grey pilgrim).

Shveiran

How would a character determined not to kneel before other entities gain a "Priestly" role, exactly?

Mental Mouse

On the same principle as "we do not kneel". Worked for Cat!

Shveiran

true enough, but I don't think this kind of things really work with the "proof of concept" approach.

Also... Masego is not Cat. I don't think he has displayed a lot of willingness to compromise with those he didn't already like.

Agent J

But... Akua lost the Gift as well. Y'know, back when she lost her heart... and her life... ... and her father. She lost a lot of things that day.

Ever since she's been mooching off of whatever Cat's power set happens to be that moment, be it Winter or Night. She's no more a "magic user" than Zeze is right now, given he still has his stolen miracles (if the Summer flame in his eyes is any indication).

Shveiran

Yes, and no. Aqua has always been more about power than about sorcery, and she has shown a lot of familiarity with Winter before it was eaten by the Night, and she had a deep connection to it to boot.

Masego's power comes from his Name, and is his own.

Aqua's power is burrowed and the sufferance of others, but it IS a deeper well.

Alegio

Trying to sway a Named made from literal god slaying, whose powers come from Summer which is anathema to half your power that comes from Winter, and to add insult to the injury is probably the person who knows the most about both gods AND Winter in the continent? Now I see why lesser deities don't last that long in this world...

Javvies

Masego's powers don't come from Summer.
He Name Transitioned from Apprentice to Heiropant after seeing Summer in action. And examining Winter Duchess Cat for extended periods, including the ice moon heart thingy the Winter King put into Cat's chest.
There's a very important difference.

Mental Mouse

> "I knew Winter well, before you fed on it," Masego said, eyes burning with Summer flame,

IIRC, his first Aspect was **Witness** Clearly it allows him to keep and reproduce some of what he has Witnessed, similar to Cat's power-thievery. We haven't really seen much of this side of it before, because he not only had his sorcery, but he was specifically following his fathers' advice in not leaning on his Name too much.

But now the sorcery is gone and his Name is what he's got.
Let's see if he too makes Below reconsider their generosity...

Daniel E

Lost his sorcery in every meaningful way, but given his need for pedantry, that likely means not every literal way. Masego may yet have a few magical tricks left (probably Name shenanigans), and I am eager to see them.

Mental Mouse

Also, Masego may well be premature in dismissing something as not being "meaningful".

Morgenstern

Same thought here.. what *Masego* deems "not meaningful" could still be jaw-dropping by other people's standards...

Andrew Mitchell

It's even **likely** to be jaw-dropping, I think.

Whatsnaname

Masego – "I have been nettled!"

kills a god

Chapter 61: Reformation

*"Zarei, of short stride
saw the long's pride
and carved, laughing
found them wanting:
chased into shadow
by one mighty blow."*

– Extract from the 'Zarei Veste', a Firstborn traditional epic

Night had become my time, refreshing to my tired bones like a cool drink on a parching day. I enjoyed the quiet of it, the veil of stillness laid down by the dark under the stirrings of creatures nocturnal. Without so much spinning my thought came clearer, less cluttered, and these days what already lay within my own mind was quite enough clutter already. It felt, at times, like I was attempting to juggle half the continent – it felt that way because it was, essentially, what I was trying to do. Yet while there might have been quiet awaiting us at the heart of the drow's tent-city, there was hardly any stillness to be found: with dusk passing the curse of the pale light had passed, and the Firstborn tread under the moon's unblinking eye like shifting shadows. After my Lord of Silent Steps' report I'd expected for there to be a tautness to the air, but that had perhaps been naïve of me. Drow didn't complain or riot or indicate their displeasure, because every last one of them was born to the knowledge that all it took was irritating someone stronger than them once to end up killed. The only drow who were vocal about much of anything were the Mighty and even among those only sigil-holders could really be said to be outspoken, that cabal of the few who'd spent years slaying all comers until they rose to the summit of the pyramid of strife. No, instead of a boiling cauldron about to tip over the tent-city of the Firstborn looked like half a festival.

A drow one, anyway.

Grey-skinned dzulu wearing the colours and signs of their sigils, either painted on skin or woven into cloth, had come out under moonlight to play. I was used to a soldier's vices of choice being drinking and gambling, but those were the favourites of the Legions. Here it was instead the old amusements of the Everdark that reigned, and they were less bloody in nature than I'd expected. Standing before a tall heap of piled stones drow would set on their brow a thin leathery chord set with a single small stone and claim in cadenced Crepuscular that their tongue was made of flame. Another drow would then step up to them, and call them an eight-year-snake, after which they would each sing a

couplet with the challenger going second. It seemed to me that, more often than not, they were citing old and well-known texts with only just enough adjusted to brutally mock their opponent or boast of their own obvious superiority in all things. Hakram sent me a look that was disturbingly pleasing, coming from an orc that hefty, and I allowed our steps to slow so we'd catch some of it. One dzulu from the Sudone claimed that its opponent was –

*"Cunning as cattle, fearsome as a trout,
Beloved of nerezim, quiet as a shout!"*

– which had the watching dzulu laughing in approval. The other singer, one of the Jindrich, went the other way instead. Boasting shamelessly, it announced it would –

*"Swallow pale light and make it night,
Harvest from death its very breath,
Weave with loom a second gloom!"*

Which had a few of the Soln in the crowd and most the Jindrich ululating in approval, some even calling out a name: Zarei Stride-Carver. After both songs had been sung in full the dzulu cast small tokens – trinkets, pieces of cloth, even simple stones – at the feet of one or the other, deciding whose song had been the finest. The Sudone dzulu won, that time, and triumphantly called out that for the fourth time its tongue was flame.

"There are traditions much like this in the Lesser Steppes," Adjutant murmured as we both watched another drow step up and challenge the victor.

The steppes beyond the Wasiliti, I knew that meant. Where the Clans had been able to hang on to more of their old ways, further from Miezan steel and the Tower's schemes.

"Duels of singing?" I asked.

"And steel as well," Hakram said. "Though there was a time, Catherine, when no great warrior would have wielded the axe without the verse."

I eyed him amusedly.

"If you want to challenge one them, I could always translate into Crepuscular for you," I offered.

He looked genuinely tempted but eventually shook his head, clicking his fangs in polite refusal.

"Too much would be lost in translation," he said. "And though I was taught old and cherished words, there are few I can claim as my own."

I thought of Nauk, in that moment, Nauk who'd written *In Dread Crown* and whose song was still sung even after the warpriests of the Dominion had taken him from me. I caught the exact moment Hakram thought of him too, and we watched the Firstborn trade singing barbs in silence as we shared in the same grief. I half-smiled at the defending champion's verse – it'd just claimed it would make a tomb for the Tomb-maker – and we let it flow out of us, like a mouthful of wakeleaf smoke offered up to the wind.

"The formula they speak, at the start," Hakram said.

"My tongue is made of flame," I quoted, then my lips quirked. "You are but an eight-year-snake."

He inclined his head.

"What does it mean?"

"I honestly don't know," I said. "Rumena, care to share?"

I felt the general's mild irritation through the Night at having once again failed to approach me unnoticed and savoured that for the very petty victory that it was. The general of the Southern Expedition strode to my side in silence, filling the empty space at my left.

"It an old story, Losara Queen," Rumena said.

"Oh," I said, sweetly similing. "So you were there?"

"I see," General Rumena gravely said. "Now that you have servants to flatter you again, you have resumed your delusion of being amusing. I had thought your cured of this ailment, Queen of Lost and Found."

"Careful, buddy," I said, jutting a thumb at the singing drow. "One of those just promised to put you in a tomb, are you sure you want to spend your last moments failing to get the best of me?"

Rumena glanced at Hakram, pale silver-blue eyes lingering on the missing hand.

"The orc has only one hand and still a defter touch with words," it told me.

"He hasn't even said anything," I protested.

I winced the moment I said it, feeling the sense of mocking satisfaction wafting off of it into the Night. The prick.

"One of these days," I told it. "One of these days, Rumena."

"It is true," the Tomb-maker conceded, "you might truly have a chance, if I am asleep."

Ouch. Well, it was probably a good thing I wasn't going up there to sing with the old bastard anytime soon.

"It is from a legend of the ancient days, before the Twilight Sages," the old drow told Hakram. "There was once a manner of snake that was said to be born with the favour of the Shrouded Gods, manifest as stone on its head. Should it live for nine years, and devour flesh every day, it would grow to become *izmej*. That is, flame-tongued and immortal, swimming through stone with on its brow the shine of pale light."

Dragon, I thought, but it was not like the dragons I knew of – which were, anyway, all but disappeared these days.

"And so an eight-year-snake is one that could not become *izmej*," Hakram thoughtfully said. "What happens, if a singer is the victor nine times?"

"None who cast token in the contest may kill the nine-year-snake for a span nine nights," Rumena said. "Immortality, Deadhand. For a time."

It murmured in Crepuscular, after that, citing the Tenets of Night. *For glory fades and stone crumbles, no victor forever crowned*. The words were sobering, for they brought to mind the reason I'd come to the tent-city in the first place. Under the currents of celebration here there was a lit sharper that'd blow unless I put out the fuse quick enough.

"The Zoitsa Sigil is still under control?" I asked.

"The children that were disciplined have recovered," Rumena said, "yet word of your impending arrival has stayed hands for now. The Lutesuk and the Vachikna will require adjudication as well, if your intent is to prevent killing between all Mighty."

"Between all Firstborn," I sharply corrected. "Take me to them, then."

The general's pale eyes flicked to Hakram.

"The Adjutant's presence will be commented upon," the old drow said.

"Let them comment," I grunted. "He can't understand Crepuscular anyway, I'm bringing him as an advisor."

"*Ade Varul*," Rumena said, eyes narrowing. "Yes, this would be accepted."

It's sounded the same, to an extent, but the meaning had been different: truth-bearer, or truth-keeper maybe? It was from an older form of Crepuscular, the one drow tended to use for formal titles.

"*Mais encore?*" I said in Chantant, just to show it wasn't the only one who could speak all fancy.

"When the Empire Ever Dark still stood, it was the title given to those who learned precedents of law and bore old scrolls of histories to provide these during adjudication," General Rumena said. "A learned servant."

"In service of who?" I asked.

"The Twilight Sages," the Tomb-maker. "Or those they appointed to pass judgement in their stead."

It was easy to forget, I thought, that there'd been a time where the Firstborn had known laws more elaborate than the rule of the hardest hand. I nodded my assent, though in truth even an oblique tie with the fools who'd nearly destroyed their entire race for fear of death had me uneasy. Very few would remain that had known those days, I reminded myself. And of those that did, only Rumena had come south instead of marching with the Sisters themselves. We moved as swiftly as my limp around, eyes lingering on the distractions that'd seized the camp. Small packs gathered around the small colourful tiles that were the centrepiece of a game of *inic cin*, carefully placing down their own to make or break patterns according to the labyrinthine rules of their game – hardly any two sigils allowed the same set of patterns, and drow from the outer rings would rather kiss a dwarf than begin the game with a *lizard-fish prowling* pattern already on the floor instead of empty space, the way Firstborn from deeper in the Everdark insisted the game was meant to be played. There were more earthy entertainments as well, ones I was more familiar with: javelin-throwing and wrestling, as well as the madman's bargain that was the *por neroc*, the axe-fortune. I'd yet to see anyone play that game without bleeding, and not for lack of trying.

Firstborn were more prone to indulging in luxurious meals or elaborate concoctions than hard drinking, as a rule, since liquor was usually reserved for the very powerful or the very much powerless. For the former it was a statement of might – that even drunk they could take all comers – while for the latter it was a tacit admission that their lives could be reaped at any time and there was nothing they could do about it. That might change, in time, at least if the drow were guided towards ways that bled them less often and eagerly by their own hands. Still, I doubted they'd ever become great drinkers of the wines and liquors of Calernia, anymore than the nations of the surface were at risk of becoming enamoured of the drow's own drinks. I suspected that the

Firstborn tasted things rather differently than we did, because some of the things they ate and drank... Ugh. There was a reason that I'd sometimes used their mushroom-based liquor on Archer as a punishment. I set the ponderings aside as we found the heart of the tent-city, and the Firstborn that awaited us there. What must have been the entire Zoitsa Sigil – which would keep that name even after Mighty Zoitsa's death until another Mighty claimed the sigil – was patiently standing and awaiting us. An open space had been cleared on the snowy grounds, fitting the thousand or so drow in what I could only call a hierarchy laid bare. Four rylleh were seated at the front, then jawor behind them, then ispe behind those, leading to what must have been nine hundred and change dzulu. The Zoitsa were not a large sigil, though given that they had twelve jawor among their number I could see why they wouldn't be taken as easy meat either.

"You stand in the presence of the Queen of Lost and Found, the First Under the Night," General Rumena called out. "Kneel."

They did. And they stayed kneeling, as I considered the approach I wanted to take. Ivah's report had mentioned Rumena savaging the two most prominent claimants, and through the Night I could easily tell who those would be – they were significantly stronger than the other two, though not so much that the weaker pair allying against one would not see that particular rylleh killed. Unless they had a particular lethal Secret, anyway, but that struck me as unlikely. Drow that lucked into one of those tended to rise quickly through the ranks until they either died or became sigil-holders. I limped forward, leaning on my staff of yew as I cast a cursory glance around us. This was no Legion camp, there was no such thing as restricted sections of it: anyone brave enough linger where they could either hear or see could, unless someone chase them away. And there were plenty of curious Firstborn, though I noted they were largely ispe. The lowest of the Mighty. Sigil-holders, I grasped, were sending people to keep an eye on the judgement I was meant to render. Whatever decision was handed out tonight, it would not be long before the greatest Mighty of my host knew of it. That was trouble, for already I'd once denied them the prize that had been the Twilight Crown. If I further chipped away at their ways I might begin to encounter resistance, which given the hold sigil-holders had on their followers would be... more than inconvenient.

"You who would claim the Zoitsa Sigil, rise," I said. "And come before me."

I'd fully expected all four rylleh to rise, but instead it was only three. One of the weaker pair, I thought, must have been convincing enough to earn the other's backing. The drow came to stand before my scrutinizing gaze, calm-faced and straight-backed.

"Decree was given," I said. "The Southern Expedition is as one great cabal, and until it has ended no Firstborn may slay another. Yet I am told you would have broken the edict, if not for General Rumena's reminder. Explain yourself."

The weakest of the three kneeled.

"Losara Queen," it said, "I am-"

"Bereft of a name or my mercy, until you have given me an answer," I mildly said.

It didn't flinch at my words, though its face blanked and I felt the malicious pleasure of the other two rylleh through the Night. It'd earned the rebuke, I thought, the moment it tried to smooth-talk me out of anything.

"Night cannot be left to fade, O Great One," the rylleh said. "Mighty Zoitsa must have successor, and when strife is had over who that Mighty should be there is only one manner of settling the claims known to us. I aim not to break the Night's decree, only to obey the Tenets of Night."

Meaning that none of the three were willing to back down and let one of the others harvest the Night from Zoitsa's corpse, which meant duels to the death were the traditional solution as established by Sve Noc. Lovely. The leftmost rylleh knelt.

"Losara Queen, this one recognizes the truth of the great cabal binding us," it said. "And so this one implores your holy judgement in deciding who is worthy of rising, in place of strife."

And there it was, my opening. All I needed to do was accept the invitation and this could all be settled in moments without blood being spilled. That this particular rylleh had been clear-eyed enough to realize both that I wouldn't allow blood being spilled and that easing my way to judgement would incline me well towards it made it a strong candidate for sigil-holder, I thought, though also someone to watch. And yet I stilled my tongue, because what I did here would echo. Through the ears and tongues of the ispe lingering at the edges of this clearing, yes, but also through the years to come. I was setting a *precedent*, and it was not something I should do lightly. I turned my eyes to the third rylleh, the last one still standing.

"And you?" I said. "What words would you speak?"

It knelt, smoothly.

"None, Losara Queen," it rasped. "I do not presume to reach beyond my grasp."

Tasting its words through the Night, I decided it was speaking the truth – or at least that it believed what it was saying. If I was to wade in and make an appointment through the awarding of Zoitsa's corpse, then this one was the safe bet. Not too ambitious, steady. Likely more set in the old ways than either of the other two, but with enough deference for Sve Noc and through them myself that it would broadly balance out. This one, I decided, was the choice if I wanted to avoid making waves among sigil-holders. If I appointed the second speaker, it'd be seen as my raising ambitious lickspittles. Those not willing to become my creatures would feel threatened and react accordingly. The first speaker, the one I'd chastened, was trickier to parse in implications. It was the weakest of the three, which would ruffle some feathers but perhaps also raise the hopes of Firstborns who'd hit the limit of what they could claim with their own strength that in my service they might rise further still. I wasn't one to particularly enjoy a smooth-talker, and this one reminded me a little of Praesi highborn, but vague dislike was not reason enough to exclude them as a candidate.

"If you had the pick of three highborn for a lordship," I said in Kharsum, "what measure would you use to weigh the right choice?"

Adjutant was at my side, a towering presence of calm that passed on a portion of that serenity to me.

"The three," he replied in his native tongue. "Are they the only people I can pick?"

"Without making a mess, yes," I said. "And no matter which I choose, I'll have intervened in the succession of a noble line – while using royal authority."

Religious, in truth, but it would not be too inaccurate to compare the kind of influence I now commanded among the drow to what a Good Queen might have commanded in the Old Kingdom.

"Letting the succession pass without intervention isn't in the cards," he half-asked, half-stated.

"They'd go at each other like Wasteland nobles over it," I said. "Only without the subtlety. It'd be setting an even worse precedent, as far as I'm concerned."

If I exempted strife over the succession of sigil-holders from the ban on drow killing each other, then the gate would be cracked open. As far as I was concerned, any possible benefit to be obtained from a higher concentration of Night in some former rylleh's hands was far below what I got by keeping the drow who knew how to use their own tricks in possession of those tricks. And that was in a military view, anyway. The moral aspects of it were... well, I couldn't keep raising my nose at a ritualized murder

for power being a central tenet of drow culture if I simply allowed it to keep going on when I could do otherwise.

"If you are bound to rancor for any intervention at all," Adjutant pragmatically said, "appoint the most apt candidate. At least you'll be getting the most out of what it cost you."

Sound advice. Following it, all that remained before passing down judgement was considering which of the three rylleh would be most valuable to my intentions. Gods, probably the first of the three. They'd – no, that was the wrong way to think about it. The most apt candidate was the one that'd best serve the interest of the sigil it led, not necessarily my own. *Ah*, I thought, *but why appoint a lord at all?* I thought of a thin man in ragged robes, keeping records no one would read for a revolution that pulsed out of him like a titan's breath. *How many of us are there, tyrant*, he'd asked, *and how many of you?* I could not use old means save to reach old ends.

"General Rumena," I said. "Send for the Firstborn."

The old drow's head bowed by a fraction.

"Which sigils?" it asked.

"All of them," I said. "Every last one of you."

If I was to hand down judgement, it would not be to seek the least of three evils.

I would try to do *better*.

IDKWhoitis

The Drow do rap battles.

They are calling the best of their raps "fire"

No wonder Hakram wanted to stay and listen. It must have been a sight to see.

Faiir

Watch me, guys! I'm on fire!
No, you're rapping like an 8 year old!

Beautiful.
The ending's great too!

Fayhem

Given that the line the Firstborn are using is “my tongue is flame”, I think the more apt comparison is that they’re saying they spit fire. 😊

stevenneiman

Eight Year Snake would be another good name for a band. Not sure how it compares to Undead Suicide Goats though.

Javvies

Ooh. She’s gonna pick the fourth one, the one that didn’t press a claim, giving its backing to another.

Huh. Lot of similarities between the internal old ways and traditions of the orc clans and the ways and traditions of the drow. That’s interesting, and a sign of either parallel development or significant contact between the two cultures in the distant past.

Hitogami

I didn’t think of that, maybe but it’d be an unpopular choice. I was thinking she might make them compete with “the duels of singing”

IDKWhoitis

The duels of singing may not be the best measuring stick for rulership. However some sort of non lethal duel may suffice. Likely voting will be the manner it is ended.

Rynjin

Well, duels of fighting aren’t exactly the best judge of leadership skills either. At least the two battles require you to be able to think on your feet, which is a valuable leadership quality.

Mental Mouse

The “dozens” and variations reward not just verbal ability, but creative thinking under pressure, and of course unflappable self-control. There’s a reason it’s been popular as a non-lethal contest across many human cultures.

Shveiran

I’ll concede it is an improvement over duels to the death (or physical contests in general), but that… is not a really high bar to jump.

I'm with IDKWhoitis on this one... if that's the way Cat goes, it would set a very odd measuring stick for drow leadership. Which is why "Dissing Crepuscular Hour" is not an outcome I think will come around.

Maaddiie

If she is looking for the most apt leader she might do something along the lines of an oral quiz where she tests to see which has the strongest leadership qualities. It would be a competition and the drow would see it as a reason to follow the one she chooses.

[Liliet](#)

If she does that, she'll need to ritualize it sufficiently that it could be held without her personal intervention in the future.

erebus42

Not to mention the similar scavenger philosophies shared by the Drow and the Goblins. Though with the goblins, it was already said that the two races had had run-ins in the past.

IDKWhoitis

I'm placing my bet on the 4th guy too, but by Cat allowing the rest of the Mighty to vote on the next Sigil Holder. And the mighty pick that guy.

Each sigil effectively picks its own sigil holder, potentially for life. This would do a lot to motivate the powerful to not abuse their subordinates, and the drow themselves are likely to vote for the "most worthy/strongest/most cunning". So this gives the higher tier mighty something to strive for, to display their Superiority so they can truly rise.

Based on the rap battles, we see the Drow already have the concept of voting, and concept of terms. So either they vote for the next Sigil Holder for a set term, or until death.

This would inoculate Cat's army from Hierarch, since her Drow ruling class would be rightfully elected representatives, thus not tyrants, and thus not subject to Revolutions or whatever chaotic head choppy Aspect the madman has.

WuseMajor

Yes, but insulating them against Hierarch is not the reason she's doing it. She's doing it to try to Be Better.

IDKWhoitis

There's multiple benefits, and Cat likes to solve multiple problems at once if possible.

Rup

..um so this is Cat ref Hierarch??

a thin man in ragged robes, keeping records no one would read for a revolution that pulsed out of him like a titan's breath

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

Furor left an impression on her ♥

Dainpdf

You run the risk of having votes be compelled by violence or some similar means, and this does not explain what she's calling every Drow there for. But it is probably something like that.

IDKWhoitis

There will probably be some sort of silent/hidden vote system in place, to prevent reprisals.

It's possible either the other sigils confirm, nominate, or get a vote on the next sigil holder. It's also possible Cat wants to make a point, and rather make this a sort of ceremonial thing to make the other Sigil holders respect the results.

Dainpdf

Maybe, though secret votes are mostly a fantasy in a world where truthtelling exists.

Shveiran

Small, localized truthtelling exists, though. Even Tariq's Behold wouldn't have the necessary magnitude, not unless every voter stops by him afterward to comment Who they voted for.

Dainpdf

Good enough hearing might suffice. Or eldritch senses. Gotta remember that the Night is merging with Winter.

[Liliet](#)

>having votes be compelled by violence

So how would you describe the worst-case scenario working?

Dainpdf

A return to the days of tribalism, with this rrandom junk attached and a loss of respect for Cat from both the drow and sve noc.

[Liliet](#)

A return? Are you saying those days were ever over?

Dainpdf

No. That the objective was to end them.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, Catherine literally didn't do anything about the tribes. The drow are still entirely decentralized. Anything about building a city etc is their own ideas.

WuseMajor

No, I think she's going to try to teach them Democracy. Or something. WhichI dunno. With this group, I think democracy might implode faster than anarchic murder.

Dainpdf

Plus, Cat has expressed disdain for democracy, herself.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Tyranny of the Masses

[Walter](#)

She's a dictator and a warlord. She doesn't know democracy to teach it.

Faiir

I think she's going to split the night between all firstborn – that's the best for the entire sigil.

Andrew Mitchell

That's possible IMO but unlikely. The new sigal-holder needs to have the additional Night in order to (a) ensure it now gets unquestioning obedience from it's sigal, and

(b) to put it on a roughly equal footing with the other sigals.

Sylwoos

As you say, a bid at Democracy at this point would feel very forced. I'm expecting a rap battle with the first born as the jury instead. This is the closest she can get, and it implement a non-violent way for the Drow to sort their difference without going against their tradition.

[Liliet](#)

I disagree.

First of all, as noted above, drow already have the concept of picking the best by majority opinion.

Second, "leader by acclaim" is in no way a new idea. Sure, having the entire nation be led by elected representatives needs the kind of infrastructure the drow don't have, but having intra-sigil affairs be settled by the sigil's opinion? It fits with the best parts of the "warrior culture" the drow have while suppressing the worst.

There is precedent for this IRL, and it would fit very well with what Cat has already started – "first be worthy, then rise".

By the way, note how she concluded that the weaker one was supported by the other weaker one. Again, drow already have the concept of 'whoever secures followers wins'. It's just subordinate to raw strength; Catherine will flip it around. A surgical intervention, changing very little but at the same time everything.

[Mental Mouse](#)

As others have discussed elsewhere, the only example for "democracy" on the surface is Bellerophon. And Bellerophon is not just a horror in itself, it's a hatchet job by the gods against the very concept of democracy, something to point to whenever some fresh naif gets ideas about "power arising from the masses". Note that voting among peers isn't a problem, but the Powers That Be *really* don't want mortals getting the idea that by numbers they can simply overrule their betters.

[Liliet](#)

She's not going to pick, that's the point entire. She's going to *hold an election*

Faiir

My vote is the night will be split between all.
The worthy (surviving) rise, the unworthy (dead) fall.

Maaddiie

It the drow are absorbed by different sigils as well there might be some new solutions and problems.

[Liliet](#)

Someone still needs to be in charge tho. The Night is a side thought here.

[Mental Mouse](#)

There's an interesting point that nobody suggested sharing out the power. It may well be that harvesting Night doesn't allow for that.

Vortex

I do not think she is going to play kingmaker at all. She wants a better system, not a temporary patch leaning on her authority. I bet she is going to design some kind of trial or test of suitability. Have each of the claimants demonstrate their worthiness somehow, rather than murder each other for it.

[Liliet](#)

That is the other possible option than election, yeah.

Charles

Democratic Drow? This can only go well.

Hitogami

I don't think that's what she is aiming for

Insanenoodlyguy

"One of these days," I told it. "One of these days, Rumena."

"It is true," the Tomb-maker conceded, "you might truly have a chance, if you vote for Pratical Guide to Evil on TopWebFiciton."

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

caoimhinh

Vote Under the Night!

That's the new way of the Firstborn!

danh3107

Taking your own advice Cat, thatta girl. Practice what you preach.

Hitogami

This is good, but I really wish there was more of the chapter... Cat has a devious idea and I really wanna know what it is!

Aston

Spread the Night out to empower everybody.

konstantinvoncarstein

It would solve nothing

Quite Possibly A Cat

Spreading the Night would an interesting precedent to set. I'm not sure how well it would work though. There might be practical issues. What happens if you split the Night among all the Drow? Politically short term it won't be an issue. Long-term hopefully it will be better than ritualized murder.

erebus42

Well now, I'm curious to see what Cat's plan is. It can't be democracy. As amusing as it would be to watch her try to explain the concept to the Drow, there's no way that would go down well. As an aside, the Drow are probably my favorite race introduced so far, except maybe Goblins. They're just so fucking cool and their culture is so interesting.

Kirroth

No no, it's all a matter of how she frames it.

This chapter established that the drow have rap battles that are a mix of boasts and trash talk where the audience votes on the winner. That's like nine tenths of the way to candidate debates and campaign slogans already. All Cat has to do is call for a rap battle where the winner becomes the new Sigil Holder instead of measuring them on pure style points.

It's sort of like democracy, where the people get a vote on who's in charge, but with enough bias towards the Mighty to satisfy their sensibilities.

[Liliet](#)

"Leader by popular acclaim" is pretty doable when there's just a thousand voters, IMHO. And not new to the drow as a concept, considering Cat's musing that the weaker drow must have secured the support of the other weaker one.

Shveiran

Not new to the drow as a concept, yes, but it has been a long time since it was a staple of their society. These are peers trying to seize a Night-filled body, once that is achieved the imbalance of power between the Sigil-holder and the rest would be restored. And there are the powerful ones: who cares what the jawor thinks, let alone the nisi? In drow culture, their support is not required, and their obedience can be guaranteed.

I'm just saying, it's a long path between "being capable to strike deals of convenience with peers" and "open to the building of a society based on consensus".

[Liliet](#)

Consensus? LMAO no. Majority opinion? Absolutely yes.

The overly harsh hierarchy is exactly the issue Catherine is trying to fix.

Shveiran

Majority opinion is deciding through consensus: the shared agreement that we'll use a method to determine the most popular opinion and stand by that decision, including who gets to rule.

Even if we want to split hair, I can't say I see many examples of either in drow society, anyway.

[Liliet](#)

>Majority opinion is deciding through consensus

not in this case, considering the only person who needs to make the decision to follow the majority opinion is Cat

she's asking the others because she *deigns to*, not because they actually have the power to contradict her if they disagree

[Liliet](#)

and in the long term, the only 'consensus' needed is that of Sve Noc. Theocracy under an actually active deity is very convenient

Shveiran

If the only consensus needed is Cat's, she is not establishing a precedent: she is playing a drunk

Mighty, acting on a whim while everyone gets along with it because otherwise ZAP.

We were talking about changing how the drow work, so I was assuming we were speaking long term, self-sustaining options; not "what Cat can punch them into doing".

That discussion would bring us back to the Ruling Council, and is so long it isn't worth discussing besides; it is basically "whatever Sve Noc will allow", since so long as that holds she can pull the Night out of anyone who disagrees.

Which brings me to your second point; Sve Noc has not been active for a long time; centuries, in fact. It is everyone's guess whether or not they will keep active in ten years, or twenty, or fifty.

Once again, they are not a solve-it-all solution; they can, realistically, jump start any change by endorsing it. It is unlikely they'll be willing to act like enforcers for it.

[Liliet](#)

Sve Noc weren't active before because they hadn't attained godhood yet.

Enforcing law for who gets to lead others in a theocracy sounds like something literal gods would be interested in.

Well, y'know, as long as there's a priesthood to handle the day to day drudgery of it ♥ ♥ ♥

[Mental Mouse](#)

The problem is that especially once we get past the sigils (and how big are they anyway?), there's a lot more than a thousand voters to consider.

Isaac Martinez

It reminds me the story in which the king had no right to judge because he was just a king.

antoninjohn

She is going to make the Drow vote for the leader instead of kill one another

konstantinvoncarstein

It would force the Mighties to be not only powerful, but also popular. It would diminish the violence in drow society.

Liliet

And it would not change much, considering the drow would very much vote for the powerful first and foremost. The genius of it is how little outside intervention it is, from the drow's point of view. They are literally asked to pick, themselves!

M0och

Anyone else read "Mais encore." as "But again."?
Also quite a few mistakes in this one, its fine but still something to be noted.

Inay

"Mais encore" is litteraly "but again" yes. In this context, you could read it as "Yeah, and so?" or something akin. It's to ask your interlocutor to say more.
(Source: me, french)

Dainpdf

I suspect she will have the new sigil holder be chosen by acclaim from other sigil holders. It ties the sigils more tightly and absolves her of picking herself, while keeping the system sufficiently... aristocratic for a group so accustomed to hierarchy as the Firstborn.

Liliet

Also a very possible option, but... there has to be incentive for the other sigils to not want to fuck this one sigil over. The drow are competitive.

IMHO asking the sigil itself to pick has more going for it.

Dainpdf

It runs the risk of compelled votes, and also seems like something that would have the drow rebel. Plus, Cat has not yet recanted her dismissal of democracy. This could be it, but I am unsure.

Liliet

The drow would rebel against what, the concept of democracy working improperly? What the fuck do they care?

And Cat dismissed the concept of what Bellerophon does, not 'everything that the modern irl world calls democracy' (considering she has no reference for modern irl world).

...and actually she has JUST flashed back to Hierarch as him having a point...

Shveiran

Cat has also always been against what I think she called "rule by mob", giving everyone a say in choices they can't meaningfully understand under the assumption that because there is a lot of them it will average out alright.

I don't know what will happen, but it doesn't seem like she changed her mind on the subject

[Liliet](#)

Yes, but that is completely irrelevant to the question of "who gets to lead this sigil". In this case, the question is clear to everyone and nobody who doesn't have the requisite background for it is being asked.

What Bellerophon does is rule by mob, because they have everyone make every decision. Choosing a first among equals in a relatively small group though, has nothing to do with that.

Dainpdf

True. Still, whether the drow would accept a system where authority is not derived of power is, as of this chapter, up in the air.

[Liliet](#)

It is derived of power tho. A sigil holder has Night a grade above anyone else, so anyone who got his Night would automatically have the power that goes with authority in the drow's eyes. As long as the 'this and this appear simultaneously' condition is fulfilled, everything else is fluff that is much more changeable, in the eyes of people who are not political analysts.

Dainpdf

The selection of who gets to become sigil holder is not, though. That is not the way the drow have known for millenia.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah but considering they never actually had a say in what their way was before either, I don't think they'll have an opinion.

[Liliet](#)

I love this so much.

More worldbuilding, but more interestingly, a point about the drow culture: they HAVE it. Like, they are people and act like people. The Tenets of Night warp it, but they do not annihilate it.

And Catherine has to set up their ways forever going onward 😊

Andrew Mitchell

I loved seeing Rumena get another chance to sass Cat. And Cat clearly came out the loser.

RUMENA RUMENA RUMENA!! ♥ ♥ ♥

mavant

Wait, Chantant is just French?

Sparsebeard

Now I wonder if Miezán is Latin and Kharsum is German or something...

konstantinvoncarstein

Miezán is definitely Latin. The Legions have a “cognomen” (surname) and use Latin orders for sappers (spargere, which means throwing), and the ruler of the empire was an Emperor.
There is something on Reddit about the languages of the Guideverse

[Fayhem](#)

Nice, thanks for the link! Dunno if anyone’s noted this already, but re: the Alamans sometimes being called Alemanni (or something like that) which is germanic, IIRC they have generally been called Alemanni in a historical context in the Guide. So I think the parallel here is to the Franks (who were a germanic tribe originally) over time becoming the French (who are french).

konstantinvoncarstein

You are welcome 😊 And well see.

mavant

Well, Miezán-as-Latin seems pretty fitting.

Author Unknown

It seems the core issue Cat faces is redefining worth from who is the stabbiest to something more productive. It’s a pity Masego

has lost his mojo, he could have come up with some kind of ritual to choose who is the best servant of the Night. Something powered by the Night from the dead sigil and a tithe from the claimants, winner takes all.

Argentorum

Not gonna lie, I'm really looking forward to the defining characteristic of Drow leadership being they who spit the hottest rhymes.

Eight year snakes need not apply.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

inb4 the other lords elect one

Daniel E

Gotta say, the divergence into Drow culture was interesting in the Everdark. Back on the surface though? I'm just not feeling it. I feel like if you skipped over this whole interaction (the end of Masego's conversation till whenever this Drow bit ends), you absolutely would not miss anything relevant to the story, or even especially interesting as backstory. The Drow interactions seem incredibly trivial at this point.

[Liliet](#)

I disagree.

Changing cultural mores and redefining ways a nation interacts with the world is one of the core topics of Guide, and drow are incredibly relevant to that.

ghiribaldi

Instead of a democratic vote, which I agree doesn't seem very cat-like, perhaps she have each of the Rylleh seeking the title to have contests *between those who support them in their bid*. Then the title goes to those who have the loyalty of the most powerful/successful supporters rather than a simple vote. A set number of contests between the followers, but having more followers than another would be a big help in some contests. Again to make it worth while to keep the Dzulu and Ipse loyal to you as well. A contest could be fighting, another could be the Drow rap battle, another could be producing materials and supplies (where having Ipse and Dzulu would be good...), etc. The person with the most victories at the end wins the title.

It encourages would-be rulers to take interest in their underlings.

It gives them a taste of what leadership is like by relying on others rather than just yourself.

The Sigil Seeker would be able to provide some level of support in some contests, but not all, to reflect what being a leader is like.

There is already a rule preventing murder/harvesting... extend that to No Reprisals or put a rule in that says the same person cannot bid for leadership twice in a row, they have to stay out every other 'election'. This means people who supported you in one bid would be available to support someone else in the next... making reprisals economically unwise since time would be better spent on winning them over.

[Liliet](#)

"no reprisals" very much has to be a rule, and it's not as though it's an alien concept – considering the 'eight year snake' game as precedent

Andrew Mitchell

I disagree for because the Drow and how Cat shapes them are going to be critical factors in the final book. So the fact that we got to understand why Cat can't just decide on the leader herself, the significance of the decision she's facing and that the decision is going to shape the drow are all important. Also, there's been well-founded speculation in other comments that even the game the Drow were playing is going to be an important aspect of what happens next.

Plus, we got to see more Rumena sass, and that's always a good thing. 😊

Andrew Mitchell

Sorry, I failed to WordPress properly again. 😞 This is supposed to be a reply to Daniel E above.

dalek955

How I'd run this: Ask each contender to explain to the sigil why it would make the best sigil-holder. Then have each of them tell the sigil which of the others it would select for the top spot, if it had the choice and couldn't choose itself. Then ask the sigil to vote by token-casting. Do all this in front of the whole army, so all see how it's done and all see that it was done fairly.

Now to see how much like me Cat thinks.

[Liliet](#)

>Ask each contender to explain to the sigil why it would make the best sigil-holder.

I don't think this would work at this stage of their society's development. They will only accept one reason: because this person is the strongest / most capable of winning a fight for them. However, *how exactly* it is determined which one is the strongest is something it is within Cat's power to change.

Nobodyimportant

Rap battles?
My first reaction was flyting.

Odd

Nice Uktena reference in amongst the drow rap battles. Complete with mock ulun'suti.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Whatever she comes up with, the basic point will be something that they can handle themselves in future. Cat does not want to have to adjudicate every time there's a succession.

Sir_Immith

Chekhov's rap battle!
Let's go!

Chapter 62: Pledged

"Power is as wealth; that which is yours has always been snatched from another."

– Dread Emperor Venal

General Rumena had sent for them and they had come.

The Firstborn, I'd understood since my first steps past the murk of Gloom, were the ruin of a people. Even the name of their realm was the remnant of olden nights: from Empire Ever Dark to a brutal tapestry of sigils haunting the last gasps known simply known as the Everdark. They had been, when I journeyed through their ancient broken cities and their endless tribal wars, little more than a desperate ritual masquerading as a people. Sve Noc had bargained for their salvation of their people, made a pact with Below, yet it was *survival* they had sought and there their ambitions had ended. Wise of them, perhaps, given how insistently the Twilight Sages had courted the doom of their kind until they were slaughtered in their own seat of power to earn audience with

those the drow called the Shrouded Gods. Under the auspices of Komena and Andronike the Firstborn had carved out their old glories and made of them hovels and walls, forgotten how to read their own sacred writings and traded steel for obsidian. Cut after cut, they'd forgotten what they used to be until what they'd become was but distant kin to the people who'd raised the great works I'd seen but the barest fraction of.

I'd taken me some time to understand how much more they'd lost than things like knowing how to build sewers or make steel tools, or a hundred other small practical bits of knowledge that made life easier for people who knew them. No, the wound was deeper than that. There'd never been a day in my life where I did not know that if I sought the right books, or the right stories, I could not know the history of my people. Who we had been in ages past and through that how we'd become who we were. What it meant, when a well-dressed Proceran tread a street and my people began humming the tune of *Red The Flowers*. Why at every summer fair there was an evening where primroses were hung from the tallest tree or roof and comical plays were had under them until dawn – a last defiance in the name of the Albans, smothered in madness so long ago. Hells, I'd even been able to find out why early in the spring so many grizzled old men and women filled the taverns of Laure and that'd actually been fairly dangerous to openly acknowledge. That old soldiers still mourned the last defeat of the Conquest drink in hand had not been one of those things people talked about fit they didn't want to draw the attention of the Eyes. Not too loudly, anyway.

Even during Black's decades of occupation the old histories had not been burned. Oh, he was a cannier man than that. He'd restricted grimoires and weapons, eradicated every legacy of the paladins of the White Hand, but the histories he'd not even tried to torch. Viciously elegant as always, he'd simply made the histories he preferred cheaper and easier to obtain before letting human nature do the rest. Yet for someone designated enough to digging, Callow's past was there to find. Even under the Praesi, I'd known more of the truth of my people than any drow born in the last thousand years could claim to know of theirs. I'd seen the truth of that laid bare between the Lord of Silent Steps and the Tomb-maker, Ivah and Rumena. The younger looked at the Firstborn and saw the only thing it had ever known, a history that was closed circle of murder under the Night, while the older drow held a rank in the host of an empire that no longer existed, commanding soldiers that were long dead. Rumena treated even other sigil-holders as children because that was what they were, in its eyes: children putting on the regalia of the empire that'd birthed them, thieving magpies making a nest of rubies and golden bracelets. It wasn't wrong, I thought, to believe that. It was true, that the Firstborn born of this era wore old honours and spoke old words without knowing the truth of them, having made mystical of mundane through the passing of the

years. And still, looking at this host of magpies before me, I could not deny that they were beautiful.

Fifty thousand strong, spread out before me as a sea that'd swept away tents and bedding and distractions until all that stood in the moonlight was flesh and bone. They were a riot of colour, these warriors sworn to a hundred sigils: red and silver, yellow gold and radiant green and deep azure blue. Few sigils shared the same colours, and none the same symbols. My own Losara, stayed mine through even Winter's death, had taken to drawing the silver tree down the ridge of their nose and encircling their eyes to finish the pattern. The effect was striking, a mask of purple and silver whose roots were the lips and teeth of warriors. The golden sunflower on ochre that was Rumena's own sigil-symbol was more often tattooed with needles on cheeks or necks, though every drow out there seemed to have their own manner of bearing their sigil. Their manifold banners traced the air lazily under the trailing fingers of the wind, each speaking a claim or story or boast, and even their armaments were as works of arts. Oh, the dzulu bore spears and shields and practical tools of killing, but the Mighty? Every one of them treated both their body and armaments as works of art. Artifacts shaped in Night likely older than some Callowan cities had been painted or polished or touched with strips of cloths and ribbons.

The warlord in me, the general, looked upon them and saw only chaos. An army of wild folk, without standardized equipment, the doctrine to use them and the discipline to do so well. But part of me I'd stolen back from eternity along with my death, the one that could savour a good smoke and a sunny day and the chill of cold against my cheeks, that part looked at them and saw that even though they were the bastard children of the Empire Ever Dark the Firstborn were nothing less than splendid. Like a precious vase shattered and made into mosaic, still imperfect and broken but no less lovely for it. I would not forget that, I told myself, looking upon the proud ranks of the Mighty and their dzulu warriors behind them. In some ways I knew less of their people than even the least of them, and if I was to have a hand in the shape their kind would take long after my death I would move that hand with aware of my own ignorance. *Our ways are harsh, but they are not without graces.* Malicia had told me that once, years ago, because even what she hated about the Wasteland was still part of Praes. And so it'd been part of her bones and her flesh and her breath, taken in with her mother's milk. I could not mold the nature of the Firstborn like clay, uproot everything that was at the heart of them because it displeased me.

I was a cold-eyed stranger speaking hard truths, not any kind of saviour. And truth was, the closest the Firstborn would ever have to watchful angels was the pair ink-feathered crow slowly circling above us all, high under the stars. I breathed out,

watching the mist and wishing it was smoke instead, but I could hardly nurse a pipe throughout this. *Merciless Gods, I wish.*

"Are you worthy?" I asked, and it rippled across the night.

Thousands of lips spoke the same question I had asked of the Mighty before the Twilight Crown: *sa vrede*. The tale of that moment had already spread through the throng last night, when it was still fresh. Not to all, but to enough. And though my question found echoes aplenty, none dared to answer it.

"The Mighty Zoitsa was slain, and its Night awaits a worthy taker," I said. "Yet it was decreed under Night that no Firstborn may slay another before the Southern Expedition has ended. And so now I am asked who is worthy of that Night, who is worthy to rise."

I laughed.

"Did we not answer this question already, you who were born of blood?" I sang out. "Did you not learn that answer well?"

Fear and anger and uncertainty wafted up in the Night, a sea of emotion I could hardly touch lest I risk drowning in it. High priestess or not, I was only one woman and a mortal one at that.

"I wonder, you who claim might," I said, "are you ashamed now to speak again before dzulu what you admitted in the shade of dusk? Is *vanity* the truest answer you have to give?"

That stung them, as it had been meant to. No, some said. I did not reply, and in the silence they were forced to confess the word again and again, louder and louder until none among the entire host of the Firstborn could claim they had not heard it. It was Mighty who had been questioned, but it was all who answered in the end – for if the great among them could not be said to be worthy, which of the lesser dared claimed themselves to be instead?

"There is no shame in this," I said. "I am First Under the Night, and I do not claim to be worthy where you are not – else would it not be my right, my due, to rip the Night out of every single one of you?"

Fear strengthened, but also respect. The drow were not a people to resent threats, or for that matter to think well of weakness. A reminder that my power towered over that of even their greatest Mighty made everything else easier to swallow, for was it not the privilege of the strong to do as they would of the weak? That was the principle, anyway. As it always was with those, the reality was rather more nuanced.

"But there is shame," I spoke, and there my voice sharpened, "in knowing yourself unworthy and *remaining* so. There is shame in sloth, in apathy, in seeing the flaws in what you are and not seeking to be more."

A fine line I must walk here, for though the sentiment I spoke was old and beloved to their kind it also went hand in hand with the spilling of blood. At least, I wryly thought, I was by now an old hand at riding tigers and I'd yet to be eaten for it.

"I see before me hands hallowed in blood and little else," I said. "What have you offered the Night, save for strife?"

I struck my staff against the snowy ground, the yew hitting it with a clapping sound and kicking off a gust of wind.

"When the Last Dusk comes to take you all and tally is taken of the deeds of the Firstborn," I said, "what will any have you fill the pages with, save for death?"

There I sneered.

"Death," I said. "Every creature's given end. No great gift, to hurry what is certain."

And there came the turbulence, for I had begun to speak of worthiness, of who was fit to hold a sigil, and now I was sneering down at the only measure the drow knew how to use: the long arm and blade it wielded. If not killing and claiming Night, what then was to be the path taken? And there, there I could not bestow upon them an answer like a saving grace made flesh. Because I could hardly see to my own soul, most days, and dared not speak to an entire people's. Because I still knew so little of the Firstborn, of what they were and might yet be. Because I would not be my father, a well-meaning tyrant with a blade in hand intent on cutting out the ugliness of a culture until no imperfections remained. The drow were not children, to be led by the hand. I could speak to them of a horizon, but it they chose to chase it that decision would be of their own making.

"Those of you who hold sigils stand only below Sve Noc and those they have raised of their own hand," I said. "You possess deep wells of Night, have bloody deeds of valour and cunning to your name. You have the weight of many years behind you, and an edge honed by as many victories. Yet the keen blade you have made of yourself goes unused. It was sent south in these lands to teach the Burning Lands the return of the Empire Ever Dark, yet what will follow our victory?"

I paused, my gaze swept the crowd.

"Rust," I said. "Rust awaits you. Your sharpness will grow dull, your fire gut out. Lest you find higher purpose and seek it with those of like soul."

I raised my voice, pitched it to resound.

"The Mighty Zoitsa was slain," I said, "and its Night awaits a taker. None under this sky are worthy, yet it must not remain so. And so, Firstborn, I charge you to *strive*. To seek excellence in all things, and through this conquer eternity."

I felt the feather-light touch of the Sisters against my thoughts, like a finger sliding down a page. My patron goddesses perceived the shape of my thoughts, the decree I would pass down to their people. I felt them brush up against me, those great looming presences, and taste of their judgement. Komena sat astride the wall, the remains of the woman who'd once commanded soldiers displeased but the idol of sacred strife pleased. It was Andronike whose attitude would settle the scale, and her judgement came more slowly than her sister's. Beyond even my own thoughts she gazed upon the many ends such a decree might lead, the scattered strands, and where she went I could not follow. One who had touched the godhead, as the Sisters had, could follow the strands in ways beyond my comprehension. In silence, Sve Noc drifted down from the darkened sky on long wings. Down and down they went, until they dropped on my shoulders with sharp talons. I had their blessing, silent as it was, and the simple act of them perching on my shoulders had fifty thousand drow shivering. This was not an omen or an oracle, some religious text interpreted through the lens of years.

Sve Noc was true to them, true as snow or shadow or obsidian's edge, and they had granted me their blessing beyond dispute. I raised my hand, palm up, and on it coalesced in Night what I had taken from the corpse of the Mighty Zoitsa. Power, given the shape of the sigil-symbol: a heavyset key, whose four teeth were as tortured antlers.

"This is the sigil of the Zoitsa," I said. "It will be held before the pale light comes."

A shiver, a ripple. Excitement like a crowd awaiting the first blood of a duel.

"All of you who are Zoitsa," I said. "May lay claim to the sigil."

I leaned forward.

"I took oaths from some of you, once, and though those nights are passed there was truth to our ways," I said. "To hold this sigil is to make an oath, to strive to be worthy of the honour

bestowed. And through this oath, power is gained, for the oath is the promise of a deed to come."

I grinned, sharp and mean.

"Yet there can only be one oath, and many will be posed," I continued. "And so there must be a beginning and an end, for no victor can ever be crowned..."

And in the end, all will be Night, the drow returned, finishing the verse from the Tenets of Night I had cited. I had thought of the terms, as Rumena assembled all the sigils, and found that the irony of them please me. It ran deeper than that, of course. A foundation set in song was set in something deeper than stone, more poignant than law. And if you knew the right song, the right stories? All you needed was to give the first push, and stone would tumble down the slope on its own.

"The oath will hold for nine years," I said. "And upon the last dusk end, the sigil open to claiming once more. The keeping of oaths and bestowal of Night is a duty I bestow upon my own sigil, for the Losara are the children of the lost and found."

I raised a hand.

"That burden will be the duty of the Losara, to discharge without friend nor enemy so long as there is empire," I said, "and so in the keeping of oaths they will not rise or fall so long as they remain Losara."

Balance, balance must be had. If I was going to make Ivah and my warriors the priesthood that harvested and bestowed the Night, then they could not partake of that bounty – otherwise I might as well simply name the Losara the founding nobility of the Empire Ever Dark, saving their kind a few centuries of intrigue and treachery before we reached that result anyway. My sigil would serve as a priesthood, taking no sides in the discharge of their duty, and that meant barring them from the greater games of power.

"Which oath will be worthiest," I said. "You wonder this, do you not? If I will speak for the Night when every great one passes, choosing oath."

I laughed harshly.

"Are you children, Firstborn, that you must be held by your hands?" I said. "Are you without eyes, without ears, without tongue? Can you not choose your own path?"

I struck down my staff once more.

"I give you nothing save for tenets under the Night," I said. "To perish or flourish will outcome brought by your own hand, and the Shrouded Gods take any who speak otherwise."

My grin returned, for it had been some time since fate had last allowed me to bask so deeply in well-tailored irony.

"Any who are Zoitsa may lay claim to the sigil," I said. "And so any of the Zoitsa may offer oath that will be sought for nine years as they hold the sigil."

I let that sink in, then struck again.

"And it will be the same hands as it has always been, that will tell between snake and *izmej*," I said. "For when oaths are offered, it will be the Zoitsa who choose which will own their sigil with tokens."

They would, in the end, vote on the oath that would bind their sigil together for nine years with the elected sigil-holder keeping the Night for that duration. It would, I believed, forced the strongest of ay sigil's Mighty to care for the weakest – lest, when nine years had passed, they find the strength that had led them to the summit lent to another for another purpose. There would be more, beyond this. The sigil-holders that still lived would be charged make oaths as well, though they would keep their Night when the nine years had passed. It would only be the rulership that would be open to challenge on that night, though it would be decreed than any sigil-holder that died while in that role would see their Night turned into oath-Night. The trick to all of it, what they wouldn't care about until it was too late, was that it would be sacred under Sve Noc for any drow to leave a sigil whenever they so wished without violence being visited upon them. Sigils would still make their own laws for those they allowed into their fold, but no longer would Mighty be able to keep other drow in their service by force. I meant to hang tyranny with the rope of expedience, for if sigil-holders treated their followers like animals what drow would willingly remain in their sigil? Still, the deeper workings could wait for a time still.

"You who are Zoitsa and would put an oath to the Zoitsa, step forward," I said.

I smothered a madwoman's grin, when this time instead of three candidates I got thirty-nine.

"Hear that?" I murmured, low enough only the Sisters could hear. "That's the sound of your people taking an axe to the old order."

I was hearing it too, and it warmed the cockles of my damned villainous heart.

[Javvies](#)

Ooh, nice.
I like this solution.

Good job Cat.

Sparsebeard

"That burden will be the duty of the Losara, to discharge without friend nor enemy so long as there is empire," I said, "and so in the keeping of oaths they will not rise or fall so long as they remain Losara."

Did Cat just re-establish the Empire Ever Dark?

byzantine279

Yes. Though really she did that when she first convinced Sve Noc to follow her lead.

Rup

....discharge without friend nor enemy so long as there is empire....



Cpt. Obvious

And it was. She just swore the entire Losara sigil in as priests, historians and judges for the Empire Everdark. And she did so using language that makes it hard, next to impossible to abuse their power for personal gain.

Having the sister goddess take active interest in the nightly life of their people makes it pretty hard to get away with corruption.

And by allowing the drow to freely move between the sigils it will probably become a custom that those with the drive to strive to be sigil holders will spend time in the Losara sigil to learn about the responsibilities of the sigil holders that's not so obvious.

By limiting the growth of night available for the Losara it should encourage them to move to another sigil once they feel they are able to make use of what they have learned. And as such the Losara sigil will serve to form the leaders of the Empire.

Well at least that's what it looks like to me.

danh3107

In all of my long years of reading fiction and fantasy especially, few authors can capture a moment as readily as you can Erratic. It's not perfect, and often times not very pretty, but I feel it when you write. I feel it in my heart, I see it with my mind, the emotions and moments you want to tell me.

Thank you, once again for sharing this with us.

Faiir

Not many could take 'Let's ally with a random race' and end up with rebuilding culture, politics and economy of an entire nation.

And even then, hoping for more than just 'This is now good, this is now bad, now work according to my morality' is too much usually.

Let EE be praised for his amazing work!

James

Until the strongest learn how to make secret pacts with each other at the expense of the weakest, saying one thing but doing another behind the scenes.

At least, that's what happened in my country.

[sengachi](#)

Well yes, that's politics. But step 1 of any political system meant to arc towards justice and equality is setting up incentives for the mighty to care for the effects their actions have on the weak. Oversight committees, investigative journalism, separation of powers, all that stuff's important but it's several steps down the line.

You've got to bring everybody to the table before you can start insisting on proper table manners after all.

[burguulkodar](#)

Any amendment towards one form of injustice will create several other injustices as consequences, in due time when the exploits are learned and abused.

[sengachi](#)

Which is why step 2 is creating an editing system controlled by a separate group with different interests to edit the

systems made by system 1 as those exploits are learned and abused.

stevenneiman

You know the old saying. Democracy is the worst political system ever invented, except for all the others. As a resident of a dramatically flawed democracy, I can assure you that it's worse than it should be but still loads better than almost anywhere without a democracy.

Insanenoodlyguy

The difference here is, when your politicians out and out lie, the priests of the gods they swore to will show up to have a discussion with them about failure to keep promises made, and even if they are successfully resisted, the gods themselves make a personal appearance. Oath's made before an active god are a bit different than mortals lying to other mortals.

stevenneiman

Also, it's not impossible that they're just using the oath keeping power of Winter and anyone who breaks their oaths will just die. Which puts it ahead of our own political system because there are campaign promises which you'll have to keep.

[burguulkodar](#)

Well, until they manage to learn how to use words to promise without being too precise on the timing or probability of a given promise.

[Liliet](#)

Maintaining plausible deniability is still better than not even needing to.

Shveiran

This is a primitive system.

It has a dozen dozens weak points, who become exploitable as soon as Cat and Sve Noc stop policing it thoroughly – which will happen, eventually. Even the Sisters are not omniscient, nor are they willing to act on every small infraction.

It is still better than what was in place before. It is still a working foundation to build upon.

It is a primitive system, a fledgling society. Nothing less, nothing more.

Insanenoodlyguy

Losara Sigil is the answer to that. Their job is to police the other Sigilis. Both the most and the least power as a check and balance. Considering the implications are they'd simply strip you of your power, that means you can give it up easy or lose it hard. resist a priest, Ivah's going to show up. Resist somebody of Ivah's skill and ability, and you can damn well bet that Sve Noc is going to take notice. Then you get somebody like Rumena showing up, or the current First under the Night simply rips the night from you. I'm not saying it's a perfect system, but it's not going to be that easy to corrupt it. Especially since Night has absorbed winter now and there's still a bit of Winter in what it is. If you go into this intending to break your oaths it's a story that ends badly for you.

Shveiran

Of course it's easy to corrupt, and even more likely to produce a lot of peculiar cases that go very well against the spirit of the rule.

There is no system – there has never been a system – that is so light in rules and so reliant on individuals in key roles that was not ripe for abuse.

The Losara are an attempt to regulate the process, yes. And don't get me wrong, they are a good addition. But there is nothing in the system that stops them from abusing their authority.

They are going to take oaths, you say? Fine and dandy. Only, what does it mean to abuse it?

Oaths don't save you from bad, persuasive ideas; badly worded oaths don't protect the drows unless they can spot the trap and not vote for the guy. Oaths will be simple, whereas ruling is complicated: an oath made in good faith may even be a problem during the nine years period.

The system seems solid only if you ascribe to Sve Noc omniscience, willingness to police and enforce the system strictly and thoroughly, and a drive to see their people embrace Cat's change.

The first we know to be false; the second I strongly doubt; the third is a possibility, but no assurance: this is Cat's plan, not the Sisters, and while they have endorsed it there is no way to tell if they'll decide the idea needs editing, tomorrow or even a few years down the line.

I can't stress this enough: I don't think it's a bad system. It isn't, given the situation; I think it's straight-up impossible to argue in good faith that it isn't better than

“rule-of-the-stabberest”, which is pretty much how things have been for centuries down there.

But it is a patchwork solution with a lot of holes, and even if magic could solve all the problems involved that would not make the system any less FRAIL. It is not a given the Sisters will survive the war in the north, is it?

Cat’s working with what she has, but we can acknowledge that while also pointing out the results’ weak spots.

beleester

I don’t think the oaths need to be enforced, so long as the system of elections works. If the current Mighty doesn’t uphold their oaths, then in nine years they’ll be voted out in favor of someone more trustworthy. (Or if they’re really bad, their dzulu might simply leave for a better sigil.) Real democracies work just fine without the ability to magically enforce campaign promises.

The Losara sigil only needs to be able to enforce the peaceful transition of power after each election. While that’s not exactly easy, it’s quite within the demonstrated power of the goddesses, and doesn’t require any assumption of omniscience.

[Liliet](#)

I think this is a beginning, a foundation of a system. The fact it can stand on its own is already damn impressive, but it’s not really meant to. It will be supplemented by a lot of other changes, like how Cat’s earlier change to the core theological tenet – interpretation of “the worthy take, the worthy rise” – gets supplemented by this.

Cat has started building. She is not done yet.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> There is no system – there has never been a system – that is so light in rules and so reliant on individuals in key roles that was not ripe for abuse.

Any system can be abused if not enough people are defending it compared to those trying to subvert it. That’s what’s lately happened to the US government, where a cabal within the GOP has spent the last 50 years or so chipping away at the supports for our governmental integrity: public education, public finance, trust in public officials (and for that matter in other expertise), election integrity, sense of common destiny, institutional experience, moral and professional standards, and so on.

That's ultimately how we wound up with Trump, who is doing his best to finish the job.

Shveiran

Without arguing the specifics, I'll concede that no system is ever safe from abuse.

However, if a culture embraces the idea that there is a proper way to do things – that power should come with rules – than a more thorough and balanced system protects itself more than the alternative. Not enough to resist everyone suddenly deciding the rules don't matter anymore, of course, but more.

The more gray areas a system has, the less that is possible. The easier it is for that system to slide somewhat to the side and change the spirit of how things were decided before.

All I'm saying is: this system is the good attempt of a young woman with revolutionary ideas but precious little experience ruling to peacefully change a culture of serial murderers toward sustainable values that dislike casual loss of life.

I didn't think it could be controversial to say that her best shot is still gonna be a mess. I mean, seriously, what else could it have been?

konstantinvoncarstein

If the Sisters don't survive, the Drow will die, like we learn in the last chapter.

Shveiran

DIId we? Uh.

I read that more like "Masego could use the connection to destroy the drow through the Night by attacking Sve Noc", but "without Night the drow will all die" is also possible given how the Night came to be and the mess the Twilight Sages did.

Zarquon

I always look forward to your chapters with such anticipation.

This one does confuse me a little, though, at least where the precise mechanics of the Night being passed is concerned.

parahacker

It's a contest of 'oaths'. The most popular oath given wins the prize.

In other words, it's just become all about the election campaign promises.

Though the 'Goddesses are RIGHT Here watching you' element has a bit more of a punch than Politifacts.com does, I'd say.

parahacker

It may also include rap battles. Electioneering rap battles.

JJR

When the Crow Gods rate you "pants on fire" it's not a metaphor.

byzantine279

It is an understatement, however.

caoimhinh

Exactly, the thing that the Drow have that our world doesn't is a deity enforcing the deal and magic oaths. So they can't make empty promises, and would at the very least be compelled by magic to make their best effort in fulfilling their promises, unlike Earth's politicians.

Shveiran

Yes, and no. It is all about presentation, not quantification.

"I'll work toward making us more used to fight together" is an oath you can fulfill by organizing a weekly training exercise. Or a monthly one. Or a yearly one.

It is imprecise, and it is based on the judgment of uncultured people unused to rulership. Even in modern countries, where education is leagues above the drows' and the electoral process takes months, not a night, the discussion of the practicalities of the electoral promises is rarely a factor.

It's not about them lying about the oaths, not as much, is about them being able to tell how the singular oath works and what it means long term (nine years is no small beans).

It is a cool solution, possibly better than any she could have realistically called upon, but it isn't like Sve Noc's existence makes this a good system.

Insanenoodlyguy

Yeah but if your Sigil is dissatisfied with what you are doing, they can simply say "fuck this I'm out." If you

want to actually be in charge of anything, you are going to have to keep people happy."

Shveiran

Yes, because people never get on board with stupid ideas championed by charismatic leaders; they are always great at judging long term consequences, especially when they lack both education and time to weight the pros and cons of thirty-something candidates.

That rule is GREAT to prevent abuses. You can't turn nisi target practice into the recreational activity of the sigil without ending up nisi-less. Awesome.

But a lot of people are reluctant to change. It's a solution meant to prevent abuses, not to guide good policing. How are they going to realize that an idea is a long-term mistake? How are they going to judge results and weight ideas, when the scope is so much bigger than their lives?

People are not great at this kind of judgment calls, as modern history shows... and modern history is based on people who had a lot more education and a tradition of freedom and civil rights. I can't say it's reasonable to expect the drow to give a sterling performance.

[Fayhem](#)

The point Insanenoodlyguy makes deserves more attention than I think you've given it here. Yes, there will undoubtedly be popular oaths made that turn out poorly in practice. And when that happens? People will just leave. Only the sigil-holder is bound to the oath for nine years. Anybody and everybody else can opt out in an instant. You sell people a really bad oath through whatever methods? Overnight you can become a sigil of one. It can hardly be emphasized enough how much practical accountability this imposes.

When you're elected leader of a nation, citizens looking to exit that nation tend to find it a relatively fraught process. Very, very few of those difficulties apply to leaving one sigil for another. That really, *really* matters.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, it's not going to help drow do *very well*, per se.

It will however impose a selection for doing *better* and a strong disincentive to doing *worse*. It imposes a

floor – if things are *really* bad, you can always leave, and if you have an idea for how to make them better, you can try once every 9 years (which is a lot in a drow lifetime). Or make your own sigil with blackjack and hookers.

This makes the drow society *fluid* and oriented towards strong doing well by the weak. It's as well as can be done before you get into other ways to improve things – infrastructure, comprehensive legal code, stuff like that 😊

caoimhinh

Even so, it's still better than Earth's political system in that they can't lie or chicken out of their promises.

Yeah, they can make stupid promises that might damage the group in the long term, but if that's what the people chose then that's what the people will get. Those that can't stand it can leave or wait until the nine years are over and a better oath is sworn by the next Sigil-holder.

Empty promises will be kept to a minimum because whatever the Drow promise in their campaign will be part of the magic oath that will force them to carry it out in reality once they are Sigil-holders.

Wordplay will surely be a factor, and no one expects the system to be perfect or even to work awesomely right away, but it *will* make things better as time goes on.

Considering that Drow have a lifespan of centuries at the least, they have a lot of time to make trials and errors.

A cycle of nine years for Sigil-holders will get their society out of stagnation and keep things in motion toward improvements.

It might not stop corruption or Sigil-holders making deals with each other for personal gains or them making stupid decisions that harm their followers, but at least whatever they promised their people will be fulfilled (or they will at least make their damned best effort to do so). That's an important step.

Sparsebeard

From what I understand, the candidates turn their plan for the sigil's future 9 years into an oath and people vote on the oath they prefer.

For exemple, "We shall be on the forefront of every battle the Empire faces" or "We will be the keepers of ancient lore".

After 9 years, there is another election with stakes being leadership and the accumulated night of previous deceased sigil-holders if there are any.

Mental Mouse

Aside from the mechanics of choice, Cat has converted the disputed power into a physical token that can be passed from person to person without killing the loser. A more interesting question is whether that token can also be *stolen*. Of course, Sve Noc are watching, and if it can be stolen, it can also be confiscated.

KageLupus

The right to rule a Sigil is not a physical token, it is merely represented by them. The Zoitsa will just vote on which oath they prefer using the same method the vote on who spat the hottest fire.

This system actually makes a lot of sense for the Drow. The Sigil holder will be bound to their oaths for nine years by a priesthood backed up by actual goddesses. And the Sigil members are tacitly swearing to abide by that same oath by voting for the Sigil holder. Anyone who is incredibly opposed to the Sigil's oath will have the option to walk away and join a group that they are more aligned with. Not only does that makes the oath-giving much more important and meaningful, but you also end up with much stronger Sigils since they will eventually congeal into groups of like-minded Drow.

As Cat says, by the time the Drow realize that their entire culture was shifted from "the mighty rise (via murder)" to "Dzulu Lives Matter" it will already be too late to go back. This system was endorsed by Sve Noc themselves. Who among the Drow would dare to contradict it?

erebus42

It's a shame Heirarch was there for that, he'd probably be a touch taken aback by it. Granted, he'd still probably put them all on trial but still...

Insanenoodlyguy

It wouldn't work as well on the drow now. His power is drawn from very specific components right? Up till now, it's been used in a kingdom that's heretical monarchs have used the people as resources. So, his "Trial" whammy works spectacularly well before the injustice of "Tyrants oppressing the people.:" But she just introduced a form of democracy to these folks. I'm not saying they'd completely ignore his power, but when he hits

them with a wave of “unelected ruler-ship is wrong, fight this” they won’t turn into a mob executing their local authorities. They can respond to that mental compulsion with “We threw the tokens, more of us WANT this guy in charge than not, and those of us who didn’t knew we wouldn’t get our way if our votes weren’t enough.” and it won’t be an irritable force when it hits them so much as a persistent thought they can resist.

RoflCat

>And so, Firstborn, I charge you to strive. To seek excellence in all things, and through this conquer eternity.”

Ah, so that’s where THAT quote came from.

(Book 4, ch 47 Tenet)

“You who would be mighty, seek excellence in all things, for the conquest of eternity must be earned with every breath.”

– Extract from the ‘Tenets Under Night’, Firstborn religious text

[doominator10](#)

You mean book 5 47, *

Ward

I really like that the quote is slightly wrong. It’s a really small thing, but it makes it feel more real as a world.

caoimhinh

Well, you know how it is. Things don’t go down on paper exactly as they happened.

There’s also another example of Firstborn religious texts having slightly modified quotes from Catherine’s actual words. In Book 5 Chapter 25 Dead Ends:

Night flooded my veins, abrupt and eager to answer my call. The gate ripped through Creation easily, to my surprise – and that of the Sisters, I felt. I’d felt this before, in Marchford. When Akua’s demon had weakened the fabric of Creation enough that it was made easier for the Winter Court to raid through. It’d not been like that when I gated earlier, I thought.

“This is unusual,” Andronike said.

I felt it too, even as the ink-black gate opened before me. Eyes, unfathomably large, gazing at me. The surface of the gate was like liquid obsidian, though without a single ripple, and I hesitated. I held back, leaning on my staff.

“Thoughts?” I said.

"Try a foot first," Komena drolly suggested.

"Oh, we think we're funny now do we?" I muttered. "Mark my words, that one's going into the holy book."

And we see here her promise/threat fulfilled:

"And so the First Under the Night came across a portal where great danger might lurk, and upon witnessing it halted and sought the council of Sve Noc. 'O Night,' said the First, 'what wisdom do you offer?' And so the Young Night answered thus: 'Try a foot first.'"

– Extract from the *'Parables of the Lost and Found'*, disputed Firstborn religious text.

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks for finding that. 😊 I'm incredibly happy that the Drow religious texts are full of quotes which *almost* capture what really happened. Including the sass! ♥

antoninjohn

To become something more than they were, Cat is a really good Priestess

parahacker

To be fair, the only way a society of murder hobos can go is up. That's not the win here.

The genius of Cat's plan is in twisting their own values into a new, non-murderhoboish direction that still resonates with their cultural beliefs. This thing here feels like something that that could last beyond mere field expediency.... And that is a major coup if so.

[Liliet](#)

Who could have called this circa book 1???
And yet, , ,

caoimhinh

"Hear that?" I murmured, low enough only the Sisters could hear. "That's the sound of your people voting for Practical Guide to Evil in Top Web Fiction."

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

I was hearing it too, and it warmed the cockles of my damned villainous heart.

John

The worthy vote, the worthy rise.

Hellspirit

As it has been, magnificent delivery

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Absolute democracies are absolute.

Insanenoodlyguy

I think this is a form of Theodemocracy? What with God on earth being actively involved.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

That would be the Belerophens, as the gods actually vote.

Argentorum

Actually, the gods below **have** a vote. One vote, for all of them.

In the History of Belerophon they have never exercised this power. But it's there.

[Barthumphries](#)

Typo thread

Power is as wealth; that why which is yours has always been snatched from another.

Change "that why which" to "that is why that which"

had not been one of those things people talked about fit they didn't want to draw the attention of the Eyes.

Change fit to if

werafdsaew

Seems kinda strange to consult Sve Noc when the decisions are being announced. What if they refused or want more time to think about it? Then Cat is left hanging with nothing to say.

konstantinvoncarstein

Godesses can probably process information much faster than mortals. In "the gods are bastards", gods are basically sentiments supercomputers.

[burguulkodar](#)

Meh. No rap song contest, then.

byzantine279

One thing people seem to be missing: This is a world of stories. Oaths taken in this way have real **power**. Even ignoring Losara and Sve Noc it is not safe to try abusing an Oath taken in this way – the stories say that oathbreakers are always found out, and always lose.

Javvies

Besides ... I'm pretty sure that Cat's going to, if she hasn't already, declare oathbreaking a sign of Unworthiness – to be Worthy is to keep the Oaths you make. To break an oath you made is to prove yourself to not be Worthy.

There might be some exceptions for nonconsensual oathbreaking (ie, mind control or actions by third parties beyond one's ability to react to), but as a general rule oathbreaking is bad.

Admittedly, this might lead to Fae-like wording practices when it comes to the Oaths made. On the other hand, it's also likely that the drow would consider a straightforward Oath to be more Worthy than an Oath with a lot more give in it. At least, as regards an Oath to lead a Sigil.

Satan

If the next chapter does not involve a 39-person rap battle, I will be severely disappointed.

Chapter 63: Draft

"Rebel prisoners, Black Knight? Ah, you must mean the fresh orc rations."

– Dread Emperor Foul I, the Frugal

Under moonlight Ivah of the Losara sat at my side, wielding ink and parchment, and made record of oaths.

We begun with the Zoitsa, for they were the reason of my coming as well as the first attempt to make old stones into a fledgling temple. I had given this crucible of acclamation the shape of their singing-rites, and that aspect they embraced with relish. It was not merely oaths that were offered to the many waiting ears of the Zoitsa Sigil but verses crafted with deft hands and heady cadence. The first pledges were mundane, enemies that would be defeated and protections that would be ensured. One ispe then hazarded the pledge of sharing the sigil's Night with all Zoitsa,

and though the oath was met with shocked and disapproving silence, the words had broken the levee. It was not merely prudent, if well-spoken, promises that were made but instead ambitions unveiled. A jawor spoke of raising a city where no pale light would ever reach for the Zoitsa to live in, another of arming even every dzulu with coats of steel and shining blades. The rylleh, older hand and the subtler games of sigils, let others come forward to gauge the sigil's wants before speaking their own oaths.

The same drow that'd not presumed to speak to me before now swore to swell the ranks of the Zoitsa so it would become one of the great sigils, while the ambitious one who'd invited me to pass judgement instead swore that the Night of every Zoitsa to die in the wars would be passed to a dzulu proving themselves worthy. I felt through the Night the last oath earned the most approval, at least until the fourth rylleh, the one who had not even stood forward to lay claim to the sigil until now, spoke its own pledge-

*"host of empire will we be,
servants first to right
if Zoitsa bend the knee
let it be only to Night"*

The Night thrummed with approval, and not only from those drow who bore the colours of the Zoitsa. Morovoy was the name of the rylleh that had made the oath, and it had been clever in its shaping. The verses of it made it clear that for its span of nine years it would have the sigil suborn its own ambitions to the needs of the reborn Empire Ever Dark, serving as army and obeying the orders of leaders appointed by the Night. The other Firstborn had sought to earn acclaim through pretty ambitions and heady boasts, but Morovoy's pledge instead harkened back to the old dream: a nation of drow, proud and mighty under darkened sky. It was opening the door to any who wanted to bare blade for that purpose, at least for a span of nine years, and in offering such selfless oath was making all the pledges of those that'd spoken before it seem... base. Almost petty. When tokens were set down to match oaths, Morovoy earned more than half those cast and more than double of its closest rival. I sent Ivah to bestow the Night I had shaped into a sigil, after that chosen oath was written down, and so the first crucible of the nigh was passed.

The hurdle, after that, was that those already holding sigils need take oaths of their own. It'd taken hours to gather fifty thousand drow and even longer to clear room for them all to stand, so I'd had time to do more than ponder the shape of the reformation I wanted to offer. I'd made arrangements as well, quietly reaching out to those in the Southern Expedition that were most beholden to me. It was why the Losara had not stirred, when I set them apart from the rest of the kind and charged them

to never rise too high nor fall too low. It was why though many of the sigil-holders were taken by surprise by the changing tides, not all were. In the silence that followed the ascension of Morovoy, Mighty Jindrich strode forward. The same hard-headed, choleric warrior that Rumena and I had taken to using as a battering ram whenever we needed something dead or broken. It was feckless and brutal, though prone to forgiving those that amused it. Yet its faith in Sve Noc was deep and militant, and it thought nothing of making oath if it was the will of the Night. And so Mighty Jindrich stood before tens of thousands of its kind, white-toothed and red-handed, and it sang a pledge-

*"to be the point of the spear
ever furthest from the rear;
to battle under veil of night
and the glare of palest light;
hear me: nine years' spread
a hundred victories tread!"*

I'd expected the Jindrich Sigil to flinch at the pledge, of fighting as the vanguard wherever fight was to be found and to forge a hundred victories in nine years, but that was not what I felt from them. Oh, far from it. They were burning with the kind of hard pride that would have any people but the Firstborn howling. In the Jindrich, their faces painted azure and white with the jagged fang-like wings of their sigil-symbol, I found boiling blood and a thirst for blood. The took after their sigil-holder, and other drow listened to such an oath with envy – oh, some would leave the sigil, but there would be twice as many petitioning for entry. One after another, the sigil-holders who had once been of my Peerage followed suit. Mighty Soln's pledge to found a cabal with any other sigil willing to help raise another Tvarigu in the heart of the Burning Lands had the crowd rippling in approval and a few feet stomping down, but when after it finished speaking Rumena stepped up fifty thousand drow went still as statues. The old drow laughed, softly, and offered the trace of a bow at the crows on my shoulder. It spoke simply, cadenced but with an implacability that was beyond boast-

*"before nine years have passed,
Keter's gates will lie broken
as trembles Death's holdfast."*

I breathed out sharply at the oath the general had just made. A heartbeat passed and the sheer wave of fervour that raged through the Night had me leaning against my staff for support. Drow raised their voices in an ululating cry, honouring the old monster who'd promised it would lead any following it to smash down the gates of the Crown of the Dead. The ancient creature closed its eyes, breathed the cool air of Procer's winter night, and smiled the smile of one who would cast their wroth against even gods. And still Ivah wrote, ink on parchment, for the Losara

would keep records so long as there were records to be kept. I only left the Firstborn two hours before dawn, having granted delay to those few sigil-holders who had no oath yet to pledge, but that number was few. Before dawn my Lord of Silent Steps would have begun transcribing its records to a book whose pages would be the one of the greatest things I had ever made.

Whether it would be a great triumph or disaster, only time would tell.

—

Hakram and I found our way back through the dark, passing legionaries on watch and the odd still-lit tent, but it was a surprise to find that my own was lit up with sprites and magelights. My feet slowed as I heard laughter from inside, glimpsing two silhouettes – one on a bed, the other seated by its side. A man and woman, I thought, and though the words were indistinct Indrani's voice was a familiar drawl.

"I can hear what they're saying," Adjutant murmured, the offer implicit.

I'd be able to as well, if I drew on the Night. Instead I breathed out slowly and shook my head.

"Leave them to it," I said.

The orc's eyes moved to me, unreadable.

"They have their own matters to settle," I said. "And if I'm there..."

"The war follows you," Hakram completed, clicking his fangs.

I shrugged, affecting nonchalance, though I held out little hope so shallow a deception would not be seen through by my Adjutant.

"Hells, Hakram," I said, "I might as well be the war, to those two. No, let them have a night without red on the horizon and talk of plans."

"It doesn't have to be that way," he gently told me.

I thought of Vivienne, scared she would be cast out and left out in the wilds, and the way I'd used that fear to bring her a little closer to the woman I needed her to be. Not lightly, not without qualms, not for selfish reasons. But I'd still done it.

"It does," I disagreed.

There might come a day where that was no longer the case, but until the continent no longer teetered on the brink then the queen's needs were more important than the woman's wants. I

clapped Hakram's shoulder, and together we went to find somewhere else for me to sleep.

—

I woke up with Morning Bell, still tired but knowing there was too much on my plate to be able to justify sleeping any longer. Adjutant, already awake, passed along that both Masego and Indrani were still sleeping in so instead I broke fast with Juniper and Vivienne. The Hellhound had always been — rather despicably so, in my opinion — a morning person so while cheer was no more in the cards than usual she was still noticeably more animated than either myself or Vivienne. Who, I'd noted over the years, had never really gotten used to staying awake most of the day. Neither thieving nor heroics were always work to be done under the sun, at least not in an occupied Callow. So while Vivienne and I blearily drank our morning brews and poked at porridge, Juniper sprinkled bits of jerky into hers and dug in with relish as she began expounding on this Proceran book she'd found. Some history of the First League War penned by a prince of Lyonis she'd found a Lower Miezian translation of. The title — one of those long, elaborate ones highborn Proceran scholars were so fond of — she spoke scathingly of, but apparently it was a fascinating look at the events and much less drily written than most histories. Vivienne leaned towards me as the Hellhound told us all about how Helikean *kataphraktoi* had actually begun as a tradition before Theodosius, contrary to popular belief.

"This is torture," the heiress-designate to Callow murmured.

"Just don't mention the Commentaries," I whispered back. "It'd be like tossing meat at a wolf."

Usually it only got this way when we drank, though, so I was somewhat surprised. By now Aisha should have... Ah, I thought, looking at the empty seat where Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara would usually be seated. *There's your trouble.* The living and breathing person that served as the better part of Juniper's social graces was missing, and so we were being subjected to the full Hellhound treatment.

"Fascinating," I lied, just after a sentence. "Where's Aisha, by the way?"

"Liaising with the Legions-in-Exile," Juniper growled. "We're taking full stock of the armies down to company size so we can adjust the doctrine for whatever battles are ahead."

Ah, and there was no one else in the Hellhound's general staff that'd get that done nearly as quickly or neatly as Aisha so there she went. She'd probably been absent from general staff meetings too, which would only make the Hellhound grumpier.

"I'm sure it'll be done soon," I said.

"It'd help if you could tell us where winter quarters will be," the orc bluntly said.

"I'll see if I can get that settled today," I sighed, then sipped at my tea.

The warmth of it seeped into me, and I glanced at the other Callowan at the table. As much out of need as out of mercy, I threw Vivienne a bone.

"I'll need you to send a messenger to Arnaud Brogloise," I said. "Today will be convenient for the audience he requested. I'll be expecting you at that table, Lady Dartwick."

She nodded.

"And the Dominion?" she asked.

I glanced at Juniper.

"We're overdue a fireside evening, the lot of us," I said. "I expect at some point during that evening the Pilgrim will swing by for a chat, if he's ready to talk."

"Tonight?" the Hellhound asked. "We've all got-"

"Competent subordinates," I interrupted. "We can afford a few hours by a fire, Juniper. If you believe your staff so incompetent that if you have a drink they'll be lost-"

"I never said that," the Hellhound bristled.

"Good," I smiled, "then you can bring the aragh."

I hadn't had a taste of that since becoming mortal again and I was curious if my recollections from the old days were still accurate.

"You baited me," Juniper growled.

"Can't win them all, Marshal," I grinned, and toasted her with my steaming mug.

Vivienne shot me an amused look before making her retreat, and a wise woman she was. This time, when Juniper began to talk about the logistics of the Army of Callow, the glint in her eye made it very clear the torture was entirely on purpose.

—

It was not until Noon Bell that I met with Arnaud Brogloise, plenipotentiary envoy for the First Prince of Procer. I'd been

ready for talks earlier, but the other side had not. Apparently the Grand Alliance's camp was like an anthill that'd been just gotten a good kick now that scrying was restored to Iserre and Hasenbach's Order of the Red Lion could arrange talks with Salia. Not just Salia, though, likely most of the Alliance's signatories. No doubt the Blood wanted to speak with Levante and their Holy Seljun, if only to gain a veneer of lawfulness for whatever they'd get up to regardless of what their figurehead ruler wanted. Given the number of highborn of all stripes who'd want access to scrying and what must be a highly limited amount of mages that could use such sorcery – as well as spell formulas a generation behind the Empire's, which meant the further two-way scrying went the more relays would be required and the more prone to failure the magic would be – I wouldn't be surprised if they were working their practitioners to the edge of burning out. Still, at least the development meant I could rely on the former Prince of Cantal having freshly spoken with Hasenbach.

This was the closest I'd get to speaking directly with the First Prince before getting to Salia, I suspected.

This was not a formal negotiation, only a private audience, so I'd seen no need to overburden this with ceremony and entourages. On the side of the oaken table I'd claimed Hakram sat at my right and Vivienne at my left, while Arnaud Brogloise had brought with him only a pale redheaded scribe whose accessories seemed to indicate was meant to serve as both note-keeper and scholarly expert. The ink and quill made the first plain, while the veritable pile of tomes and scrolls he'd brought in with a legionary's help implied the second. I knew from experience that someone well-learned in where the writing you were looking for tended to shave hours off of discussions such as these, so I rather appreciated the expertise the Alamans had brought with him.

"Your Majesty," Arnaud Brogloise greeted me. "Lady Dartwick, Lord Adjutant."

I craned my neck back.

"I'm unfamiliar with the proper address for a plenipotentiary envoy," I admitted.

"It is 'lord envoy', though it is only a courtesy title," the middle-aged replied, smiling amicably. "Yet if I may be bold?"

My brow rose and I nodded permission.

"It is my understanding that you are not partial to formalities," Brogloise said. "We could dispense with them, if you would allow it, and you could simply call me Arnaud."

I smiled back.

"Did you know that I could hear heartbeats, back when I was Sovereign of Moonless Nights?" I mildly said. "If I pricked my ear, I could ever hear blood flowing in someone's veins. Smell their fear and anger."

His face expressed only confusion. He really was, I thought, one of the finest actors I'd ever seen. The Alamans might even be better at it than Akua, which was impressive in all the worst ways.

"I'm aware I'll find about as much genuine emotion at the heart of you than I would in door hinge, my lord envoy," I said. "So spare us both the affability."

The ruddy face slackened, moving towards blankness though not quite reaching it. To be entirely vacant would have been an effort as well, while this was simply the release of a pretence.

"If you'd prefer, Your Majesty," he calmly said. "Shall we attend the matters at hand?"

"If you would," I agreed.

"Her Most Serene Highness has, after consideration, decided to honour the Grey Pilgrim's non-binding promise of a peace conference," Brogloise stated.

How magnanimous of her, I drily thought. I'd grown more diplomatic in my old age, so I refrained from rolling my eyes. Hasenbach might not be happy about Tariq agreeing in her name to anything, but she needed the truce and conference badly. Refusing to honour the Pilgrim's agreement with the Tyrant would have been cutting off her nose to spite her face, considering it'd set the League back on the warpath and mortally offend the Dominion.

"And the guarantee of truce until the conference has ended?" Vivienne asked.

"Will be honoured in full," the Alamans agreed.

"Including the Legions-in-Exile?" Hakram asked.

"So long as the Queen of Callow formally agrees to take responsibility for their actions while they remain on Proceran soil," Brogloise said.

Mhm. So, Cordelia had recognized that at this point she didn't have the strength or influence to push the issue when it came to the Exile Legions. Making them my problem was a way to deal with it, since she knew by now I needed the goodwill of the Grand Alliance for the Accords and letting the Praesi loose anywhere in Procer was a good way to throw away every inch of progress I'd made there. Still, I'd take it.

"Agreed," I said.

The redhead scribe's quill scratched against parchment.

"However," the former prince said, "the Highest Assembly formally requests that the escaped prisoner of war Amadeus of the Green Stretch be turned over for trial."

"The Highest Assembly has been heard," I mildly said. "Though I will caution that considering he never surrendered to the Principate and was tortured while in custody, by Callowan law you have no grounds for such a request."

"Indeed, this has been acknowledged," Arnaud Brogloise said, to my surprise.

That, I thought, had been much too easy considering how despised Black was in these parts. Was Cordelia sparing him as a favour to me so she could call that favour in elsewhere? Shit, if it came to that I might actually have to agree.

"However, as a Named military commander who carried out plans of mass murder of civilians he would be considered in *egregious* breach of the Liesse Accords," the former prince said.

Ah, I thought. And there it was.

"Procer has not signed the Liesse Accords," I said.

"It will, if you agree to apply them to the Black Knight," Arnaud Brogloise plainly said.

The bluntness of it jolted me. He was actually serious, I realized, and he wasn't just speaking hot air: the powers Cordelia had invested in him meant he could sign agreements in her name in a legally binding manner.

"It would be selective application of the articles, unless you also intend to pursue the trial of the Grey Pilgrim for the massacre of a port town and an entire half-legion of Praesi legionaries," Vivienne noted. "Or of the Queen of Callow for the particulars of the Battle of the Camps."

"Guarantees can be made that this will not be the case," the envoy said.

"You're missing the point," I flatly said. "If the Accords are used from the very moment they're signed as a tool to pursue enmities, they'll not last the decade."

Hakram, at my right, was looking intently at our Alamans friend. He'd noticed something, then.

"A matter to be discussed in more detail at a later date, then," Brogloise said. "The First Prince is offering to host the conference in Salia, Your Majesty, and seeks your opinion on the matter."

Adjutant moved a fraction, and so I stilled my tongue. I inclined my head towards him without looking.

"In the eventuality this is agreed on, where does the First Prince suggest the Army of Callow and the Legions-in-Exile march on?" Hakram asked.

"Escort would be allowed up to four thousand for every ruler attending the conference," the envoy replied. "Four hundred into the city itself."

"And the armies themselves?" I asked.

Arnaud Brogloise glanced at his scribe, who bowed at him then myself before rising to snatch a half-dozen scrolls from the pile. Maps, I realized, reading the letters on the seals.

"In this matter," the former Prince of Cantal said, "Her Most Serene Highness is willing to entertain your proposals."

I grinned. I'd been a while since I last had a good haggle, I mused, so this ought to get interesting.

[Javvies](#)

I wonder what Hakram noticed.
I also wonder how serious they are about wanting to hammer Amadeus for his campaign in Procer.

—

I hope we get to see the fireside chat — it's been a while since we've seen then released like that.

—

Nice going with the Oaths, Cat.
It seems like a lot of the Oaths most approved of are about building a better future for the Drow and building them a new homeland.

Rumena is awesome. That's one hell of an Oath.

Alex

First Tomb-Maker, and then Tomb-Breaker?

Someguy

Rumena is at least sane enough not to swear to take Dead King's soul to sacrifice to Sve Noct. Also Rumena did not make an Oath, he simply stated a Certainty sure as old age.

Andrew Mitchell

A Certainty? Probably. An Oath, for sure. After that Oath, Ivah continued to write.

> The ancient creature closed its eyes, breathed the cool air of Procer's winter night, and smiled the smile of one who would cast their wrath against even gods. And still Ivah wrote, ink on parchment, for the Losara would keep records so long as there were records to be kept.

MagnaMalusLupus

>There's really no word to articulate what I mean. A threat with a measure of inevitability to it. A promise? Too feeble. People break promises too often. A curse? A malediction? Too... magical. An oath? The connotations are wrong. When I say I'll do something, I make it happen.

Andrew Mitchell

I think I get what you're trying to say. Maybe "pledge" or "vow" are a bit closer?

Sablonus

It's a reference to a quote from Alexandria, from Worm :V

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks. I tried Worm but didn't get very far. It was all a bit grim and it didn't grab me like PGtE has. I know I'm in the minority on that one. Lots of people I know loved it.

Shveiran

I liked it, personally, but for all the good stuff that IS there, I always got the feeling that Wildbow didn't have an arching plan like EE has, you know what I mean? Most of what happened was thrilling, and it was coherent with itself, it was just I felt like... it didn't build up to what came next? The endings never quite felt... rewarding enough. That isn't to say they came out of nowhere, they just didn't quite turn

everything whole.

It is purely speculation here, but I think it's simply that Wildobow is a (very good) discovery writer, or a Gardener; a writer that finds out where his story goes as he writes it.

And there is nothing wrong with it, in fact it is a practice that has a lot of strong points... but on their first draft, endings tend to be the weakest link. It's not a problem after they are done with the second draft, but considering here you read the novel during the first draft...

De gustibus disputandum non est. There's a lot of skill involved in what he does, but I read through both Pact and Worm, and remember them like an amazing ride on the edge of my seat that still left me wholly unsatisfied and in a bad mood. I think it's just not for everyone.

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks for sharing your experience with it, and explaining it well. If I do try to give it another go that will be very useful to know.

therealgridlock

Worm is great, it scratched that itch in wanting a self consistent powers based/physics based universe, and the characters are all so relatable.

Only thing I'll say about it that's negative is something that's true about all Wobblebible books; they escalate forever.

And i mean they escalate, and escalate, and escalate, until everything is life or death at every possible moment, the sheer stress keeps going and going, til it feels like half the characters should be dead from stress alone.

But, if you don't mind that, his books are great.

Worm and Ward are both great superpower novels, twig is a great steampunk/biopunk/victorian Body-Horror novel that pushes the limits of your gag reflex (but in a good way?)

Pact I never got to finish, so I have to find where I was, and Pale is excellent so far (though I'm technically paused on that while I read this, as I had 15 years of writing to catch up here, and there I was current)

EE has definitely written a book where even though conflict still escalates, they still de-escalate in between, and even though the main character ate a god, she's back to base human with extra tricks, so that's impressed me.

My only other webserial I've read even remotely similar to these two authors is With This Ring, and i feel like that's almost an entirely different genre. Still great though.

NZPIEFACE

Make EED Great Again!

That said, she's now made an actual political system for the Drow.

There is no equal representation in her system, as Sigils will have different sizes, but they'll be the closest they'll get as the rylleh will go join other Sigils to better represent their wants and needs.

Each Sigil will be democratically voted upon, and how the Mighty use this system, whether they form distinct communities where the Mighty is the leader like before, or if they form a council or government like how Cat forced them into, will affect how the race will be like moving forwards.

caoimhinh

I laughed a bit that Morovoy basically went "Make Zoitsa Great Again" and got elected. Also, the communist ispe that wanted to share Zoitsa's Night among all the Sigil got booed by silent disapproval, poor drow.

stevenneiman

Honestly, this all seems kind of out of character for the drow. They always pay lip service to the glory of Sve Noc, but they've learned from birth that that's just a justification for self-service. Now here they are passing up opportunities to claim Night from any Mighty who die in battle because the alternative is patriotism.

Liliet

Here's the thing: the strength of the sigil is the strength of its STRONGEST Mighty. That's how drow society works. 1000 slightly stronger dzulu will STILL be scythed through by a sigil holder Mighty who has killed their leader because they did not claim the previous holder's Night and instead distributed it.

And don't underestimate the strength of a dream and passion. Self-service is, simply put, BORING. Especially for a fired up crowd.

[*Liliet*](#)

also,

>pay lip service to the glory of Sve Noc, but they've learned from birth that that's just a justification for self-service

this is not how psychology works. This kind of justification becomes one's breath and blood, and people genuinely die for religion even when there's not an actual living goddess right fucking there, which in this case there is.

Shveiran

I think stevenneiman is right in this being a big, sudden change. However, I believe you are right in countering that this is not out of character, merely an evolution.

For the first time in living memory, their goddess is walking and speaking to them.

In our world, many deny the existance of deities, but the drow know the Sisters are real; in our world, many believers have luke-warm faith because their day-to-day necessities challenge and/or distract them from their faith's tenets, but Sve Noc is manifest and is making its will and its miracles known.

It's hard not to be moved by this, if you are a drow.

[*Liliet*](#)

Mhm! It's a change, but the foundation for it is 100% there.

Sparsebeard

I like that you can find most of those oaths in the two previous chapters' comments...

Then the Drow voted on them, some met approval, some met ridicule.

IDKWhoitis

I would hazard they are very serious. He did cause a hell of a headache. However, it might also be on the table. It doesn't detract from how seriously they want his head on a platter, but they will need to be convinced and bartered for. It's like selling a fragment of Cordelia's legitimacy, or Cat's for that

matter, to simply let this pass without comment would still inspire rebellion. I suspect The Auger has already told Cordelia that Cat negotiates in good faith. What's left is to get the rest of Procer to accept that without getting their trusty pitchforks lit on fire.

I wonder if Tariq is going to be a help in this regard, or he might tell the absolute truth of Amadeus, which might be damning in its own right.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> ... without getting their trusty pitchforks lit on fire.

<blink> I think that's meant to be pitchforks *and* torches. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Yes, but flaming pitchforks present a much more intimidating image. Yay consolidation!

IDKWhoitis

Nah, much more efficient to douse the pitchfork in flammable tar or resin then light it. Have you ever brought a pitchfork to a proper riot? Those fuckers are heavy, and then bring torch in the other hand on top of that? Screw that noise...

[Mental Mouse](#)

And yeah, it's a bargaining chip, one of the few Cordelia has. Unfortunately for her, it can only go so far without risking another break.

stevenneiman

I suspect that Cordelia will pursue the matter of Amadeus exactly as far as she considers politically expedient, while allowing Cat to be the one who has to spend political capital if she wants to protect him. She might despise him for what he did to her people, but she's a pragmatist to the bone and she won't throw good lives after bad if she thinks that letting him off lightly would be best for Procer overall. And yes, Rumena is awesome.

[Liliet](#)

This. It's something Cordelia cannot go back *lightly* on, so she will not. It's the closest thing to legitimate leverage she has on Catherine, too, considering the factual disparity in power.

She doesn't want Catherine to actually agree to this. But she wants Catherine to make ALL of the concessions in return.

werafdsaew

I doubt it's all that serious, since they have shit negotiating positions due to them really needing the war to end so that they can concentrate on the DK. Remember that a few chapters ago Amadeus thought that the no Name ruler part of the Accord was DOA, but still doesn't counsel Cat to take it out because that's something to concede during the negotiations? I think this is the same thing.

Ebert of Alamans, scholar errant

Building a future and, through the scholarship of the Losara, ensuring that future connection to the past. That's how you make a rabble into a nation.

NZPIEFACE

You know, Rumena's pledge reminded me that they're moving to kill the metaphorical representation of Death for their continent. Considering how they've failed for the last thousand years...

stevenneiman

He's not really the representation of death, just ultimate evil.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

They sometimes poetically refer to his military gains as Death acquiring this or that. He is not only the Dead King but the King of Death. You're not wrong, but I'm not sure you're right either.

stevenneiman

If you two are right, it just means that it's all the more vital for the Empire Ever Dark to outgrow its old ways and the stories which have grown on the people they were. Fortunately, Cat's getting pretty good at that sort of thing, seeing how she's already done it twice.

danh3107

Jindrich never disappoints, but good God, RUMENA THE FUCKING LEGEND!

RUMENARUMENARUMENARUMENA

Andrew Mitchell

IKR! I had tears in my eyes a few times reading the Drow section.

[shieldredblog](#)

Jindrich, He's the one who was fired out of a catapult right?

caoimhinh

Yeah, he's the berserker that Catherine described as "he survives all damage by being just too fucking angry to die"

Andrew Mitchell

He's really growing on me. I initially thought he was just a PITA that Catherine would need to crush but he is, in fact, totally awesome.

[shieldredblog](#)

Good, glad he's alive. But now Cat needs to bring him to the treaty talks, just for the looks on the faces of the two Blood he fought.

Andrew Mitchell

Great idea! There may be an opportunity for them to enjoy "working" (slaughtering) together. I can't wait to see them in action against the undead.

RoflCat

So basically Nauk++, now even harder to kill.

IDKWhoitis

If I was a betting man, I would hazard that Cat is confident enough to send the majority of her army back home. If she just approaches Salia with the Woe and about 400 Mighty, she is absolutely not in danger. Rather Salia would be...

I wonder if she would disguise Amadeus in a wig and clever use of coconuts to drag him into the city. It would result in a very entertaining moment to throw Cordelia off her game from the get go to let Amadeus and Scribe make their case for why he is only a monstrous general, but not a war criminal. He would be too useful to simply punish for petty revenge.\

Although in such a scenario, I wonder if both Juniper and Viv would head back to Callow. Callow cannot go without a ruler for too long, and Praes still needs to be checked until Malica's play comes to light. I think Viv has enough confidence from Cat that she could go back to ruling Callow de facto without going crazy.

Oshi

It's not petty though. It's political but not petty.

[Javvies](#)

Cat isn't going to have a force consisting exclusively of drow. Remember, they get hit real hard at dawn, and are far less useful in daylight.

She'll probably have an escort consisting mostly of Army of Callow forces – regulars, sappers, mages, knights – plus a number of drow, probably fewer than a hundred in total.

The real question is if she'll have any of the House Insurgent with her.

ninegardens

Probably the drow will be sending their OWN representatives, as a separate group with hopes of becoming signitories...

Hellspirit

*Cough, First Priestess of Night

caoimhinh

"In this link, <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> " the former Prince of Cantal said, "Her Most Serene Highness is willing to entertain your voters."

I grinned. it'd been a while since I last had a good vote, I mused, so this ought to get interesting.

Ekmo

"Are you not entertained!?!?"

Aston

The First Prince needs Cat to fail.

The Bard needs Cat to fail.

But... The story is going way too well...

Andrew Mitchell

> The First Prince needs Cat to fail.

I don't think so. Cordelia needs Procer NOT to fail and Cat with her armies, is Cordelia's best bet to ensure that. I think Cat's going to get most of what she wants and Cordelia is going to get most of what she wants as well.

[Liliet](#)

>The First Prince needs Cat to fail.

The First Prince needs Cat to win. BADLY.

Trebar

"The Bard needs Cat to fail"

Eh... not sure that's the case. There's still a quite reasonable chance that the Liesse Accords or something akin to them has been part of Bard's end game all along.

caoimhinh

I wonder if the "escort of four thousand for every ruler" means that every one of the Blood will get an escort of four thousand, considering they are all likely to be on that table for the negotiations (we saw back when the Grand Alliance for the Crusade was formed that Cordelia sat with the entirety of the Majilis in Salia).

Still, I can't help but frown on Catherine's eagerness for going to Salia for the peace conference. No peace conference is ever held in the capital of the enemy country, it's not done for security, logistical, political and even reputational reasons. You do not sign peace in the enemy's capital, unless you are taking it by force or surrendering to them. Otherwise, peace is always negotiated in the most neutral ground possible.

Catherine going to Salia makes little sense except for granting Cordelia the advantage of home ground and making Cordelia look like she has the upper hand. Even if they are bound for going North, they should not hold the conference inside the city. It was one thing for the Crusade conference to be held there, as Procer had been the one to call for it and would be the leader, besides all the members were not at war at the moment.

The peace conference between Callow and the Grand Alliance, and also the one involving the League (though they might be one and the same), should be held in a more neutral or open ground. Like, sure, they are in Procer already, but there's a HUGE difference between having talks on a tent held in open field and doing so inside a Proceran fortress surrounded by Proceran soldiers and priests (maybe even Heroes).

Taking only four hundred soldiers as escorts into the city is asking the others to put a lot of trust in Cordelia, it is not an equal position to negotiate, and Catherine has been adamant in not negotiating from a weaker position.

[Liliet](#)

On one hand, you have a very good point. "Field outside of Salia" is a much more reasonable location than inside the city, and that might just be it.

On the other hand, I have to note that Catherine can afford a lot of slack in 'weaker/stronger position' mind games here. It might be technically inaccurate to say *she has the bigger army*, but only if you count Procer and Levant together, which at this point I'm not sure you should.

Procer is in the weakest negotiating position here, and everyone knows it. "Unless you are taking it by force" indeed.

Mental Mouse

> "Unless you are taking it by force" indeed.

"Four thousand troops, four hundred into the city"... but that's assuming humans. Okay, Cat's force will be *mostly* human, with some greenskins... and just how many Drow? And more to the point, *which* Drow? I doubt she'd bring *all* the sigil-holders, but she could certainly bring a few, and a bunch of lesser Mighty. Along with some of the Woe...

Fayhem

I think we already had this discussion at some length back when you were arguing that there was no way they'd go to Salia and I was saying yes they will (VINDICATION). To briefly recap what I remember as my main points:

a), They're not negotiating a peace, they're negotiating an alliance. That's a different kettle of fish entirely. Negotiating a peace comes from an implicit foundation of distrust, because, y'know, war. Negotiating an alliance has to come from an implicit foundation of at least potential trust, because if there isn't even a potential for trust then any alliance would be DOA regardless. It is true that the negotiating parties were literally just at war which muddies the picture of which this is, but the fact is that the peace is a *fait accompli* at this point. The Eastern armies can nope on out back home easily now that the whole "gates don't work because a chunk of Arcadia is falling from the sky" situation is resolved, and Procer doesn't have the means or the will to pursue and in fact desperately needs to not be at war on two fronts and everybody knows it. That swings the dynamics firmly into the "negotiating an alliance" side of things even without any other factors.

b), Also, if Cordelia somehow suffered a massive fit of retardation and attacked the prospective ally that she needs to save her bacon and is also personally responsible for the Dead King backing off (which, never gonna happen anyway) then Cat

can still nope out of there pretty easily through a fae gate; it's not like those don't work inside cities or something.

c), And now Procer would be unfixably screwed since the Army of Callow, the Legions-in-Exile, the drow expedition, and probably also the League armies are now loose in Procer with the exact opposite of an incentive to play nice. At the same time as the Dead King immediately goes back on the march. Goodbye, Procer!

d), Not to mention the Levantine allies Cordelia *also* desperately needs will be mortally offended since they pledged on their sacred honor (which it has been thoroughly established they take VERY seriously) to support Cat's bid to join the Grand Alliance and trying to murder her at the conference for that is rather more than a minor breach.

e), Oh, and Cat making a show out of not trusting Cordelia to pointlessly, self-destructively, nation-damningly try to murder her for no particular reason at a diplomatic conference in flagrant breach of every diplomatic norm in existence *is* what would weaken her negotiating position. It would be tantamount to accusing her primary interlocutor (since the Levantines already swore to back her, so while they might not be quite in the bag as far as particulars go they're more on her side than not I'd say) of acting in the worst bad faith possible before even opening the talks, which makes you look like a paranoid asshole instead of like somebody genuinely looking to form a real alliance. That's a real bad note to open on, and Cat wouldn't even gain anything at all from it even if Cordelia caved (which she probably would) since as I hope I've made plain there is a zero percent chance Cordelia would actually try anything and Cat could exfiltrate easily even if she did so Catherine gains literally nothing as far as security goes.

f), Whereas if Cat agrees to hold the conference in Salia she can make a show out of "look how open I am to trusting my prospective allies, I'll stroll into your capital city for these talks like it ain't no thang" while *not actually sacrificing or risking anything*, as I have explained at length. Which *is* good diplomatic sense since it actually *does* strengthen her position; never underestimate the power of good optics in politics.

Okay, maybe "briefly" wasn't quite accurate. But seriously, Salia makes sense here.

[sengachi](#)

and so the Tombmaker vowed
to make a tomb for Death
hail Rumena, the unbroken and unbowed

Walrus

The Accords need to specifically not be retroactive, that spells doom for everyone.
The next best thing would be pledging on one's Name to abide by the restrictions.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, and Yes. I'm fully on board with those amendments.

[Liliet](#)

Seriously, retroactive laws are bad practice period. This request is nonsense on many levels, but then, it's only the opening bid.

[LaNuup](#)

I wonder how long the Night will last before withering and puttering out like a fire without fuel. Night as it was explained is a blood sacrifice in which the drow slaughter each other for power. With Cat putting a stop to this, and her plans effectively forbidding the killing of drow by the hands of drow robs Night of its fuel. And I am sure that she intends to have her voting system spread to the main host of drow.
So Sve Noc and Cat have to think how counter this.

Soma

Literally what Cat sacrificed her apotheosis to subvert. Winter is what was eaten to get past the blood sacrifice.

Morgenstern

Winter was the fuel for the actual apotheosis. Which equals enough of a sacrifice to allow for that. They are now goddesses (if lesser ones) in their own right. No more power puttering out due to not meeting the quota, because quota HAS been met already. 😊

Sylwoos

This was the main issue with the old Night, and why Sve Noc wished to eat Winter so they could trick death in truth. Now a fragment of the garden fuel Night and the power won't fade until Sve Noc is unmade.

superkeaton

Arnaud's such a fucking odd duck, I feel like there's got to be something worse to him. Serial killing? Torture? Rape? There has to be something else to him beside just general sociopathy. It sets my teeth on edge wondering.

I cannot wait to see Cat haggle again.

Javvies

The only “specific” about Arnaud is from one of the Interludes whilst the Crusaders were on Callow.

Rozala thought to herself something to the effect of “she was no Lycaonese prude, but it’d be a good thing if somebody castrated Arnaud”. Think the wording was more “take a knife to his privates”.

The implications that I got leaned my suspicions towards Arnaud potentially either being a pedophile or some other kind of unpleasant and probably illegal in most places sexual deviancy, likely lacking a consensual partner.

Because considering the kind of cultural state and his position in it ... whatever Rozala thinks his sexual practices are, they have to be singularly outside acceptability.

Morgenstern

I can’t point to the exact paragraph, but as far as I remember, he was openly *called* a “rapist” in one of the interludes (by Rozala?), something about feeling VERY uncomfortable to have someone like that in their own lines, but needing him for his skill...

Although his acting capability calls into question if those were not just rumors, after all, that he had strewn around himself to support his false identity of Arnaud, the buffoon, with something more sinister under that facade – leading anyone looking deeper into that exact same thinking. That he was simply hiding a much worse character underneath the “buffoon face” – and not being the plenipotentiary envoy of the First Prince.

After that reveal, he might just be what Hakram is. Unsettlingly lacking emotions, but not, actually, such a bad person after all. Simply lacking those does not instantly make you act out on anything you can think of simply because of lack of conscience. People like that CAN still opt to follow societal rules / mores, e.g. NOT raping or killing people (unless it’s general doctrine during war times to do so *then* – even then they might not see the need; but if they saw it, they might well be capable of doing so without ANY remorse at all). They can still understand *rationally*. They simply lack “empathy” in the sense of “feeling with others” (not in the sense of being capable of understanding what’s going on on the other side, internally, in a logical way). The chilling thing to most people is simply the part of the lack of any conscience, because they COULD act without remorse. They don’t necessarily need to do so to put the chills into people, it’s the ... potential for such acts.

Morgenstern

The idea that anyone could understand, in fullness, what is going on inside your head and figurative 'heart', emotionally, all the implications of what action x might cause for you – and simply NOT CARE. That they are perfectly capable of, knowingly, putting all of that aside, if that outcome would fit something they want, if their logic tells them they'd get away with it without negative consequences that would impinge on *them themselves*. Because it simply would not matter to them – as they are, in a sense, "purely logical beasts", 'unencumbered' by any emotion (/emotional attachment; besides wanting, for others reasons, people directly around them to like them, because they will then be more inclined to treat them well or even better than just well). That anyone might be able to understand emotions and their consequences, logically, but not follow down that line, emotionally, by default. That they can CHOOSE to NOT follow down that line that seems to be instinctive for "normal" people.

(Which, btw, does not necessarily mean that they are intelligently logical in all points, they might very well make mistakes of logic, misjudge rules/people. It's all just about the empathy/conscience-part.

Also, people who ARE very emotional can still be sadists in the pathological sense and ENJOY pain and torture of others in emotional ways... or do worse things due to feeling a "need" for revenge. People like to shade this in pure, opposite colors. But that is not necessarily the reality, when it comes to "emotion" vs. "lack of emotion".

I applaud the author who is doing such a great job of showing those not-commonly-thought-of shades of reality that such a lack can lead to, in the examples of Black (Named, succeeding for the most part in suppressing all those emotions / not being refrained by them) and Hakram instead of just the usual crime series picture of socio-/psychopaths. Black, btw, would be more of a sociopath, where the lack of emotion has been *learned*, while Hakram would probably be the typical psychopath actually *born* with that lack.)

Morgenstern

I guess the difference between Arnaud and Hakram for the reader is, at this point, more or less that we already got the inside picture for Hakram and "saw" that he "only" lacked emotion, but was not a bad person for it. While we only get the outside picture of Arnaud, *assumptions* from other people, rumors, that bad feeling people get when the other person is lacking emotions.

A picture which we only got circumferentially for Hakram, via other characters' reactions and description of some

parts of their emotional reaction to his ... emptiness / unreadability – while we get those directly from the first person view here for Arnaud, the reactions are those directly evoked in *us* as readers and reverberate more than they do with the example of Hakram, where we know much more than only the INdirect vibes we only get from outside characters reacting to him. We are simply lacking the inside view and thus the understanding of his character for Arnaud, while we think “we got him” for Hakram by the inside views we got. Also, bad rumors (the rapist stuff) about Arnaud, which might or might actually NOT be true, as we were never shown any direct scene and from the inside view, but only what another character thinks they saw / heard about Arnaud that *seems* to be true at that point, during the other character’s scene, but might only be “true” from the point of view of the other character at that point of time, due to lack of full information. It is possible to make the case that Arnaud might even have *staged* a scene, with an actually willing second actor, to make people think they “revealed” his “secret”, make people think a rape happened – while none actually did and he just hid his *actual* secret under that constructed, false “black spot”. Or might be entirely true. We’ll only know if we get an actual inside view from Arnaud (and then one which we can / think we can *trust* ^).

caoimhinh

To be fair, what we have seen of Hakram doesn’t exactly paint him as a sociopath, but rather as a nihilist. It wasn’t that he lacked the capability for emotions, just that he hadn’t found anything that gave him any thrill, that’s an important difference.

Of course, then he met Catherine and felt his blood burn.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not even that... “coldblood” has to mean something different for orcs versus humans, because the story made it clear that Hakram’s difference is specifically that he lacks the “undercurrent of rage” which is *normal* for orcs.

[Fayhem](#)

This. This. *This*. And more this. HAKRAM IS NOT A SOCIOPATH, PEOPLE. Juniper *mistakenly* assessed him as such in the back-when because he didn’t have the burning rage/war-lust expected of an orc and as shown elsewhere Juniper is in her own Hellhound-y way

something of a social conservative within orcish culture (see also when she judged Nauk for being openly emotional over his closest friend dying because “orcs don’t do that”, for example).

Notice how in this very chapter Cat called attention to how as Sovereign of Moonless Nights she could read people for emotion through listening to their blood and smelling the fear/whatever coming off them (creepy, but hey that’s Winter for you)? And so she could perceive the absence at the heart of Arnaud from that? Now everybody, please remember how SHE LITERALLY NEVER MADE ANY NOTE OF THAT KIND OF ABSENCE COMING FROM HAKRAM. And it’s not like she wasn’t in the best position possible to notice that.

tl;dr: Hakram isn’t a sociopath and I am legitimately nerd-mad that people keep saying he is. If anybody has follow-up questions/concerns rest assured I am more than happy to yell my opinions about this some more.

Andrew Mitchell

> If anybody has follow-up questions/concerns rest assured I am more than happy to yell my opinions about this some more.

Loving your passion!! 😊 😊 😊

[Liliet](#)

The problem with Arnaud is the sheer unlikelihood of there being *fake* knowledge about him being a rapist. If he decided it was necessary to add that to his buffoonery, the easiest way to do so is... =x =x =x

Shveiran

We remain in disagreement on this one... I don’t find it that unlikely that he decided he needed a dark secret for anyone investigating his facade to find and stop, convinced they had the measure of him, without revealing his true colors.

Complicated? Sure, but have you met the guy?

Still. It is just speculation, but to be honest the “psycopath is actually a rapist slash child molester” seems like too much of a cliché for the guide.

[Liliet](#)

My problem is that the easiest way to set that up is to *actually rape people*, making the disguise

foolproof *as it actually does refer to real events*
and I have not seen anything of him that would make
me believe he wouldn't

Shveiran

The reason why I think he wouldn't is that it would
be easier to do it that way, but not if he wanted
it to be a dark SECRET; if it was something only
people digging would find, as a "reward" that would
make them stop, you could argue it is easier to
make it up from scratch to control the flow of
information better.

I'm not saying he didn't, and I'm definitely not
saying he wouldn't, just that there is possible
reasons to justify him going a different route that
do not spawn from morality.

[Liliet](#)

do you think Rozala went digging? I get the
impression it was very much an 'everyone knows'
kind of thing

[Javvies](#)

I think it's more of an "everyone at a certain
level knows".
Ie, it is relatively common knowledge amongst the
nobles, and probably the top tiers of non-nobles
who need to be aware of and informed about nobles.

It probably is not common knowledge in the "some
random guy on the street knows", though the level
of awareness/knowledge will likely be greater the
closer one gets to Arnaud's home.

[Liliet](#)

Mm.

[Liliet](#)

I mean he has been said to be a rapist, yes.

Soma

I quite like what Cat is doing with the Drow. Lots of stories to
be had now.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, lots of stories and lots of progress towards worthwhile goals too. Like a BILLION times better outcomes than what was going on before Cat ventured underground.

Fayhem

Yep! Plus what she's doing for Callow, plus she's about to save Procer's bacon, plus all the continent-wide benefits of the Liesse Accords... watching the Arch-Heretic of the East establish herself as the Savior of Calernia is satisfying as HECK.

Daniel E

So when the Drow are finally settled down and rebuilding, how long will it be until their vows amount to "In nine years time, I pledge to fix the broken water pipe on main street."?

Javvies

It'll probably be a while, if ever. That's a rather underwhelming sort of Oath and it's not going to be that difficult for an alternative candidate to come up with a more Worthy Oath that remains practical to accomplish.

I can't see the Drow considering "I'll fix this leaky pipe" a particularly Worthy or inspiring Oath.

In time, I could perhaps see Oaths oriented around developing major infrastructure projects, but such projects would have to be massive and inspiring. And they'd also have to have significant, clearly recognizable benefits, but not have been started by the previous Sigil holder.

...

So, actually ... I'm not sure they would ever get to that point. If there's an infrastructure project that can get you enough support to earn you a Sigil, it's something that the previous Sigil holder should have recognized as important enough to start working on.

Maybe if the Sigils eventually evolve, and there becomes one or more Sigils that specialize in the arts and sciences of building things. Then you could have competing visions about what to build.

Mental Mouse

They'd also need to have an actual city to work on before infrastructure oaths make sense.

mavant

No wonder Juniper's grumpy, with her girlfriend gone missing.

Shveiran

Completely unrelated to this chapter in particular, but still.

Last night I was Dming a D&D campaign for my friends, who ended up having to save a dragon to slay a princess. Don't ask.

The poor dragon was captured by a Fey Lord, and they decided to hit a library to research fey before hitting the nest. I was disinclined to just throw them a few boring vulnerabilities or combat tricks, so I added to that the first thing that came to mind and made canon a few ideas from PGtE: Fey come from a different plane, warping it with their presence, and are more story than matter. So you can beat them into submission, but crushing their bodies doesn't harm the core of them: the title survives, and comes back. So if they wanted to permanently kill them, they needed to use a story rather than a blade.

The bard was intrigued, so I threw her the basics of Story-Fu 101.

I thought "they'll toy with this for a half hour and if anything good comes out, they'll get an edge in the coming fight. Or viceversa."

Cut to three hours later.

The party has managed to form a Band of Five out of themselves plus an orphan storm sorcerer they recruited a while ago. Who the ranger mentored for completely selfish reasons.

They spent the travel there drawing the young boy attention to the way Fey warped the forests to make it closer to their home plane, then cast the Ranger into the Mentor role and drew on his connection to nature to craft the story they wanted. One heart to heart later, and the mentor has revealed the boy He Is The Chosen One, as his power overlap with those of the Fey Storm Lord of Eagles and he may or may not be actually his lost son, and that his Mentor Could Not Change The World But He Can Fix it, as There Is No One Else.

One Cutscene later, the party finds everything conspires to have the boy slay the Fey Lord BUT also for the Fey Lord to slay the Mentor (I mean really, guys, that one was on you). So the Bard fixes it by shaping things so that the Young Apprentice And His Mentor Must Do It Together, ensuring the Ranger lived to see the Apprentice deal the killing blow.

Now the preteen sorcerer left with tearful parting words with his mentor, with a call back to the Ranger father issues, and the declaration that he (the boy) could never ready the world to take the place of the Fey, and so it is the Ranger's calling to preach the word to bring mortals back into nature's fold.

Then he ascended in the storms and will declare war against all the Lords of the Fey on the mortal plane in the background of the party's adventure.

Thank you, PGtE, for showing me how to handle Fey Lords right.

Andrew Mitchell

OMG I want to be part of your campaign so, so much right now.

> Last night I was Dming a D&D campaign for my friends, who ended up having to save a dragon to slay a princess. Don't ask.

Firstly, I love the idea of reversing that trope. Secondly, I'm asking... Please tell us how that came about.

Shveiran

To be honest, I can't take too much credit for it. We are running a published module, and while I have edited both the setting and the plot, this particular set-up is from the original author.

Since it is a very good series, I'd rather try not to spoil too much in case someone else is running it too, but the gist of it is (SPOILER WARNING FOR WAY OF THE WICKED VOLUME 5)

at a certain point in their "wicked adventures", the party of villains needs to lure a king into a trap. So their dark master decides the best bait is to endanger his daughter with a legendary threat, something the king (a big hero in his own right) won't be able to sit out.

The choice falls on an old dragon, but it being a proud and powerful being there is a need for a bribe of some sort; as it happens, the dragon's son bit off more than he could chew and ended up on the receiving end of a Fey Lord's wrath, so the party effectively needs to rescue a dragon to (convince his father to) slay a princess.

I really like these modules; they play with tropes and let you scratch that villanous itch without messing with what makes a normal game fun.

The only downside is, we play in a different edition so I have to adapt the ruleset entirely, but it is well worth the work.

Chapter 64: Breathe

"Fifty-three: a trusted companion who, after a string of personal disappointments, begins to dress in darker colours should no longer be considered a trusted companion."

– "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

I didn't mind heading out to Salia for the talks, and there were so many of those to be had: the peace conference, Callow's petition to join the Grand Alliance and the Liesse Accords themselves. The treaties making up the Grand Alliance had first been signed in the Proceran capital, so the symbolism in Callow doing the same there would be powerful, and for the rest having the Highest Assembly at hand would save a great deal of time. Considering most armies in Iserre had fought months of strenuous skirmishes and battles, I foresaw the First Prince's invitation would be accepted. In truth, considering it was Arnaud Brogloise who'd approached me with the notion in private, odds were the Dominion had already agreed and Hasenbach was simply sounding me out to avoid public embarrassment if I refused. The First Prince was too clever not to know the moment she got everyone else to agree on Salia she'd effectively forced Kairos' hand, since him having a fit then would mark him the enemy of everyone invested in seeing peace secured. No, I understood why Cordelia Hasenbach's capital would be the seat of the talks and indeed preferred it that way for reasons of my own.

But we were haggling, so damned if I wouldn't get something in exchange.

The First Prince, through her envoy, had been pushing for the Army of Callow and the Exile Legions to make camp in northwest Brabant but we flatly refused. Reports from the Jacks made it clear that the principality of Brabant was overwhelmed by refugees from the lakeside holdings to the north, and that the front against the Dead King in Hainaut had been on the edge of collapse for some time. If we raised winter quarter there my armies were the second line of defence whether they liked it or not and we'd be surrounded by hungry, desperate people. We pushed for northern Arans instead, which was more than reasonable in my opinion: it put my soldiers close enough to the northern passage they could be supplied by Callow through it while propping up the right flank of the Hainaut front. Where it got messy was my insistence that the armies be allowed to raise their camps close to a city and my soldiers be granted access to said city while on leave. Brogloise had not been particularly inclined to grant me adjacency to anything but the dead until I started hinting Salia might be a little too far for my tastes. That had the tune changing pitch, as I'd thought it might.

He still demurred from outright agreeing until Prince Ariel of Arans was consulted over the matter, though I threw in agreement to the four thousand escort and four hundred retinue in Salia to make sure it'd be worth the candle to Cordelia. I made it plain that the drow were not my slaves or minions but allies from another nation, the Empire Ever Dark, and that the Firstborn required an emissary when time came to discuss both peace and the Accords.

"You want the Highest Assembly to recognize the legitimacy of this Empire Ever Dark," Brogloise mildly said.

"If you'd prefer," I said, "the princes and princesses could come explain to the sigil-holders why without a vote being held in Salia they can't belong to a real nation."

"It'd be extending diplomatic recognition to, well," and there the envoy looked faintly embarrassed, "the grisly minions of some wicked foreign deity."

"I'm not asking you to trade embassies," I patiently said. "I'm asking you to recognize that fifty thousand warriors would get the Firstborn a seat at the table even if they required newborn babies as refreshments. How many more enemies can Procer afford to make right now, Brogloise?"

There was more nuance to the situation that I would have liked, as it happened. As a rule, the Principate didn't usually consider itself bound by treaties to entities beholden to the Hellgods. Whoever held the Tower was usually Arch-heretic of the East, which meant no agreements with them need be upheld, and neither the Kingdom of the Dead nor the Chain of Hunger offered treaties. Agreements in the Free Cities were subject to the authority of the League itself, which meant none of those cities sworn to Below were usually a direct interlocutor to the Principate save in secret pacts not admitted to. In short, there was very little precedent for Procer making any sort of treaty with a state that worshipped the Gods Below and considering it worth more than what the ink and parchment had cost. Largely, I could admit in the privacy of my own thoughts, because very few of those states ever put much stock in keeping to their word. On the other hand, as of now I was still Queen of Callow and if the Principate was incapable of negotiating with me – still a villain, regardless of the waning of my Name – then this would all head downhill rather fast. The former Prince of Cantal retreated somewhat gracefully at that, noting that even if official recognition could not be guaranteed then at least a legal equivalent could be.

It'd do. I would not expect miracles, even when the Principate was so deeply in trouble. It had been the preeminent power of Calernia, on the surface at least, for too long. The arrogance had been bred into its rulers by generations of genuinely being some of the wealthiest and most influential individuals on the continent. I'd not coddle the highborn, when the time came, but neither would I get out of my way to step on their toes. My deep personal dislike for most royalty of the west was no reason to get in my own way when it came to greater purposes. We discussed a few other details of logistics, namely where the escort of four thousand would be offered amenities – as it turned out, from towns less than a day's march from Salia itself – and the practicalities of bringing an armed retinue into the capital. I

had no intention of turning over any of my people who were alleged to break laws to Procer for trial, but I indicated I was willing to hold them to that standard while they stayed in Salia so long as it broke no laws of Callow or regulations of its army. I gave an inch on my insistence that any such lawbreaking would be dealt with by Callowan trials, allowing for an observer appointed by the First Prince to sit in on the proceedings should it come to that.

We ended the talks soon after that, since Hasenbach now needed to herd her royal cats before she could agree to what I'd required. Vivienne and Hakram both stayed with me after the man left, the three of us seated in a silence that was rather contemplative. The former thief had kept notes herself throughout most of the talks, though mostly on the exact language of what had been agreed between Brogloise and myself. It'd been a surprisingly large amount, though less than one might expect from literal hours of talking. Still, I could not help but notice that a great deal of the tediousness I associated with diplomacy vanished when I ended up in an arguable position of strength. *Fancy that*, I sardonically thought. I shook away the cynical amusement. Pleasant as indulging it could be, I had no time to waste on indulgence at the moment.

"You saw something, didn't you?" I asked Hakram instead.

"Not in him, but in what he spoke," Adjutant agreed. "It is a question of logistics, Catherine. Hasenbach cannot agree to signing the Accords without having first consulted the Highest Assembly, yes?"

I cocked my head to the side, not bothering to assent to something both knew to be true.

"Arnaud Brogloise has had the written text of them since the night of the battle," Hakram continued. "Which means that, up to this meeting being held, Hasenbach and the Highest Assembly had a day and a half to both read the papers, debate their content and hold a vote – the offer made, of the Carrion Lord turned over in exchange for a signature? It was lawfully binding, coming from an envoy with the man's invested powers."

"Which is doable," I pointed out. "They could call session at night, if necessary. They don't necessarily need to read the whole thing themselves, either, they can have scholars they trust sum up the contents."

"Not if the Assembly also has to wrangle together succession for seven principalities too," Vivienne quietly said. "Even in times of war they have conventions, Cat. And they'd have to arrange it all over scrying, too, which is faster than messengers but still a devil's delay."

I drummed my fingers against the table as I began thinking back on all that'd been said. They were right, these two. And more than they knew, considering all the different things Brogloise had agreed on in the First Prince's name."

"They'd need to vote over hosting all this in Salia," I said. "Over the amount of soldiers allowed in the capital. Shit, that should have been a tip off shouldn't it? That this is diplomacy and we still got so much *done*."

"Bad faith negotiations?" Vivienne suggested. "Hasenbach could be making promises without having held vote over them yet, banking on confirmation afterwards."

"That's too sloppy for who we're dealing with," I grunted. "Setting aside anyone wanting her deposed would be handed a pretext if she did it, she'd be playing with fire when it comes to us – and she won't risk that when Procer's out in the wilds with the wolves prowling."

"Then there remains one plausible alternative," Hakram said. "Which is that Hasenbach has held those votes and rammed them through the Highest Assembly by virtue of having the votes to pass essentially anything she'd like without debate."

"That can't be the case if the royals who abdicated here got their pick of successor on their throne," I flatly said. "There wasn't a lot of loyalty to Cordelia Hasenbach in that crowd even before the campaign cost them their crown."

I grimaced. That meant seven empty seats in a voting assembly of twenty-three, which was a significant chunk, and considering the main opposition to the First Prince had coalesced around Princess Rozala, who was here in Iserre there'd be no one with the influence to seriously get in her way. No, by simple arithmetic I could see Hasenbach having finagled what was essentially run of the place. Between the Lycaonese, the lakeside principalities and those in the south that were quaking in their boots at the thought of the League coming in to stay? On one hand, this meant I could actually make bargains with the First Prince and expect to see them bear fruit. On the other hand, this whole situation had the potential of turning into a nasty brew if accusations of tyranny were thrown around and enough people listened.

"Nothing we can do about that from here," Vivienne pragmatically said. "And I've just begun to restore contact with the Jacks in broader Procer, so it'll be some time before we can hear of what's happening in Salia."

I leaned back into my seat, closing my eyes to think. I tended to think of Hasenbach as a largely reasonable woman, when it came down to it. Arrogant and high-handed, yes, but not bloodthirsty or blind in her principles. She'd despised me and all I stood for

but never closed the door to negotiation because to her diplomacy was a preferable path to war if it could lead to the same ends. I couldn't say I liked the woman, but I held to a degree of professional respect towards her. She had, after all, held her own against Black and Malicia for years and come out ahead as often as not. So when I'd heard that she was dredging something out of Lake Artoise through Kairos I'd suspected it wouldn't be pretty, but also been inclined to take it as a precaution on her part. A weapon to unleash if all else fail, not a stick she'd begin waving as a club near everyone else to get her way. I'd been reasonably certain, deep down, that she wouldn't ever use what it was she was having dredged. Now, though? They were all justifiable, practical steps she was taking. I knew that. But there was a word for people who did things like seizing control of the Highest Assembly and digging up ancient weapons, and it wasn't *heroine*.

"Vivienne," I said, opening my eyes. "Lean on the Jacks, I don't care how many you end up burning. The situation in Salia is no longer the highest priority."

"The dredging," Hakram gravelled, studying me closely.

"Find out what Hasenbach is fishing out of the lake, Lady Dartwick," I said. "And find out *quickly*."

The woman who was likely to be my successor nodded decisively, and we left it at that.

—

If there was anyone who still kept to the ancient faith that'd had had the stones on the barrow-top raised, they'd be within their rights to call this desecration. My affairs had been removed from the heart of the Mavian prayer, brought back to my tent, but given that this would be the first fireside night we held in more than a year I'd charged Adjutant with... furnishing it properly. Which was why where some olden thinning boundaries had once been arranged, now a deep and broad fire pit had been dug by legionaries with shovels. Benches were brought up, the roughly-hewn kind that regulations frowned upon but appeared just as inevitably as washerwomen — both the kind that actually washed clothes and the one that did, as well as those impressively enterprising souls that did both — and peddlers when an army stayed in the same place for a time. The only reason the benches were discouraged were because they were a waste of wood and often got in the way of the swift deployment that Legion camps were meant to enable, though so long as legionaries left them behind most officers let the matter lie. They made for a comfortable enough arrangement around the fire, and with a handful of seats they made up the heart of the arrangement.

The drinks were as broad in arraignment, Adjutant having gotten his hand on a barrel of Laure ale as well as what I suspected to be a wide array of confiscated liquors. In an exercise of nostalgia for our College days we'd killed two pigs and put them to roast on spikes, before prudently arranging skewers of horse as well given the number of greenskins among us. For those of us with 'cow teeth' there'd be a massive communal plate of biryani as well, out here in Procer the cumin and pepper that went with the rice almost more expensive a luxury than the rest of the meal put together. I claimed my seat there not long before night fell, abusing my queenly prerogatives to get a decent bottle of wine while I read through the last of the reports Juniper had sent me. There was speculation among our general staff that the League's armies were less than a month away from running out of food, which would be rather interesting if it were true. Already preparations for the likely march on Arans were beginning, too, though Tariq and I would have to see to the practicalities of that. A Named or two might be able to slip in and out of Twilight on their own – especially here in Iserre, where it would be so thinly parted from Creation – but not an army. That would require a gate, and a great deal of power.

I handed back the reports to the officer who'd brought them to me in the first place just before the first two of my little band of miscreants strolled in. The first I'd seen not too long ago in this very place, though Robber had apparently since led his cohort in a reckless ambush on Levantine mages he'd somehow lived through without taking a wound. The other, though, it'd been quite a while. Senior Sapper Pickler had never been what you'd call a sociable woman even at her most convivial, and between her suddenly expanded budget in building engines and my ever-broadening duties it'd been ages since we saw each other outside our work. She had, like Robber, visibly aged – her leathery skin was more deeply creased, her angular face grown gaunter. She'd gotten bigger, too, larger in height and frame than most goblins. It was said that Matron lines – and as a Matron's daughter, Pickler was of a purer strain of that than most could claim – grew larger and lived longer than most of their kind, though the rumours of sharper intellect as well I'd never put much stock in. It was easy to claim superior wits when the opposition was kept ignorant on purpose.

"Your Majesty," Pickler greeted me.

To my surprise, without a hint of irony. I glanced at Robber with a cocked eyebrow.

"It is your title," he defended.

"She's never that deferential," I flatly said. "None of you are ever that deferential."

The sapper was, I noticed only then, carrying a handful of scrolls.

"Pickler," I said, reluctantly amused, "are you trying to sweeten me up before asking funding for your latest project?"

A heartbeat passed.

"No," she tried.

"What's in the scrolls, Pickler?" I nonchalantly asked.

"... recipes," she slowly said. "For cooking. Which is a pastime I took up since we last spoke."

"I thought cooking was a strictly male thing for goblins," I said, eyeing Robber.

"No Matron would ever eat anything another female had a hand in making," he agreed.

"I began out of my deep respect for human culture," Pickler said. "Which I never mentioned until now because..."

Out of genuine curiosity I let her try to think her way out of this one without interruption.

"... because I believed it so obvious it did not bear mentioning," she triumphantly finished.

Her professed respect was slightly undermined by the way she'd said *human* culture instead of, you know, mentioning an actual culture. Still, I knew how to bring this to a solid finish,

"That's a shame," I mused, "I mean, I need to blow all that dwarven gold on something and you know how I love a good siege engine. I sure wish someone had schematics to show me."

Robber discretely shook his head, the filthy traitor, but she wasn't paying attention.

"I also have schematics, Your Majesty," the Senior Sapper immediately said, voice almost visibly brightening. "For unrelated reasons."

"So close," Robber moaned. "So close, Pickler."

I glanced at the cup in my hand, finding it mostly empty, then shrugged.

"What the Hells," I said. "Drag a seat here and show me what you've got. So long as Robber keeps pouring me wine, anyway."

By the time the others began drifting in we were half an entire bottle in – I'd ordered our mutinous manservant to begin cupbearer duties for her as well – and loudly arguing about the practicality of even greatly ameliorated scorpions against undead.

"It's not like I don't think siege has a role to play," I said. "But bolts aren't going to win us an engagement, Pickler. *Massed catapults*. That's our force multiplier."

"Why don't we just pick up stones and throw them at Keter, while we're at it," she hissed back. "Or better yet, import a dwarven pebble and toss that. *Shame on your line*, Foundling."

"And you were so sweet to me earlier," I mourned.

"Oh, a human put on a crown and started ruling other humans," she scathingly said. "How unprecedented. You still can't do abstract mathematics properly, I bet."

"I've had other things on my plate," I replied, perhaps a tad defensively.

"What's this about shaming Catherine?" a voice cheerfully called out. "I can't believe you'd leave me out of that."

The rest of the lot had come as a wave, it seemed. Archer, who'd just cheerfully thrown her hat into the ring, and with her Hakram and Masego. At a glance, Juniper and Aisha was further down the slope and climbing up while talking animatedly. Everyone, then. I leaned back into my seat.

"Don't mouth off, wench," I replied to Indrani. "I bet you can't do abstract mathematics decently either."

"Funny you would say that," Archer said, and grinned like I'd just made a mistake.

Godsdamnit, I thought, and prepared to take my lumps.

[*erraticerrata*](#)

First update of the month, so extra chapter in the eponymous tab. Final part of the Amadeus POVs, titled Seed II.

Aston

Robber is Named right?

Dainpdf

Not so far as we know.

stevenneiman

Officially, there are no goblin Named. Robber having a secret Name is pretty common fan speculation though.

I have to say, Pickler's attempt to lie was utterly hilarious. Not as good Catherine's planned attack across the Tyrian sea, but close.

[Liliet](#)

I love the finishing blow.

FOR UNRELATED REASONS

Rup

.don't forget the burn 🤔

... a human put on a crown and started ruling other humans, how unprecedented. You still can't do abstract mathematics ...

[Liliet](#)

Some people specialize in abstract mathematics, some people specialize in diplomacy...

[cowlute](#)

Some people specialize in lakeomancy...

danh3107

Just because she's a Lush doesn't mean Archer can't do calculus, that's a mistake Cat.

[Liliet](#)

The sheer 'but why' is beaten only by understanding that *this woman is the third biggest nerd in the Woe, and that's only because the top two are greatest magical theorists of their generation*

Axel Rafael

Whaaaaat! What chapter is that from?!

How could ignore such a detail?? Indrani being the third biggest nerd of the group changes how I see her and her actions in a huge way 🤔

[Liliet](#)

I mean the word 'nerd' has not been brought up a lot but here are the facts about Indrani:

- she was originally sent to aid the group as an expert on the fae from Refuge;
- she quotes classic poetry in multiple languages for fun;
- she keeps up with Masego's discussions of magic theory – and we're talking about a person who drifts off mid-logistical meeting here;
- she is sharp as fuck interpersonally when she cares to be, and she's kept up with close circle political discussions too – it's in the wider staff meetings that she zones out (ADHD most def);
- she is good at abstract math (c) this chapter.

Indrani is Like That

Axel Rafael

Oh yeah! Those three first facts I hardly remembered, but it's true. She's super Smart, but only when she's interested (so, yes, I agree on the ADHD), and She keeps up with the group, never really feeling confused or lost amidst all types of conversations.

That just makes even hotter and more awesome 🤩

Actually, the fact that Erraticetra can make her a "real person" with flaws, despite the rest, might be even more amazing 🤔

[Liliet](#)

Admittedly she does compete for the title of third biggest with Hakram 'invented game theory' 'cannot stop asking questions about the drow culture' 'came the closest to guessing Sephirah's story right' 'humongous nerd overall'. The Woe is a fantastic gathering of nerds.

OH and btw Indrani *destroys* Hakram in chess.

Axel Rafael

How do you keep track of ALL these little details xD
You're kinda amazing yourself.

But yeah, they're all huge nerds... With the exception of Cat?

I think if she's a nerd, then she's a story nerd/geek.

[Liliet](#)

She's a HUMONGOUS nerd. She has nitpicked pedantic details before Masego was on the team to do it for her.

She has a LECTURE prepared on objective benefits of banter. She had her own personally developed opinions on long-term economic effects of her city's tax policy AT FUCKING FIFTEEN.

And don't even start me on the saga of Catherine Foundling vs magic theory...

Axel Rafael

Saga?

Are you talking about the One that really picks up with lakeomancy and reaches its peak with Night Miracles? xD

But wow, seeing things from that point of view, she's a super nerd 😊

I guess I didn't really see them as nerd qualities because a lot of them just come so naturally to me.

I guess that makes Black a huge (boss level) nerd that really knows how to pick them 😊

[Liliet](#)

I'm talking about the one that starts with her asking Killian all the unfamiliar terms she's heard Masego use until she can actually parse what he's saying, and demanding that he rephrase his explanations until she understands. The one that continues with her listening to him rambling about things she has 0 background in until she gets enough of said background to know how to lead him by the nose in his dreamscape. The one that peaks with her fucking LEARNING MAGICAL THEORY CALCULUS under Akua at the start of this book on the off chance that it helps her figure out Dead King's shit.

That saga.

>But wow, seeing things from that point of view, she's a super nerd

Yep.

>I guess that makes Black a huge (boss level) nerd that really knows how to pick them 😊

It does.

Black, facing the charge of a much larger army on his fortified position: "We, my friend, are witnessing the birth of the Proceran mixed arms doctrine"

Black, coming to his senses tied up next to his worst enemy: "Oh hey I've wanted to check out these barrows but never got around to it, NEAT"

Amadeus is I N C R E D I B L E

Mondkind Von Flauschen

I mean, shooting a Longbow basically as tall as you is pure calculus, and Ranger likes her Students prepared

Someguy

"Don't mouth off, wench," I replied to Indrani. "I bet you can't do abstract mathematics decently either."

Mistake.

V Kyrius

I mean its quite clear that Archer is smart she can talk magic with Masego. Archer has pretty absurd stats in a more rpg view.

Cordelia slide to the Dark Side? Granted seem tricky for her with her lack of control over Heroes. Though funny enough the Llesse Accords made sure that up for her.

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

Archer is designed to be op and vulnerable at the same time.

[Javvies](#)

Yeah ... whatever Cordelia's having dredged from that lake is going to be super important in all the wrong ways.

Cordelia's dabbling in tyranny might ruin the Grand Alliance in the long run. Depending on just what she does and how it turns out.

The League's army might be running low on food. I can believe that – no way that they could get a large logistical trail with them or have sustained support through the Waning Woods.

Argh. Are we going to skip ahead to after the fireside hangout or actually see it?

talenel

It would be very ironic if for all Saint's worrying about Cat, the real villainous threat was the one she thought was good. In fact, I think you could even argue that Saint literally caused this. Cordelia is convinced that the heroes want Procer to fail as a nation and she rejects that entirely. So she feels driven

to do whatever she must for the sake of her nation, including possibly leaning toward more villainous inclinations.

Dainpdf

Saint was pretty clear on the “the Principate is corrupt and needs to burn” point. I am pretty sure she did not trust Cordelia at all.

[Javvies](#)

I think Saint thought Cordelia was the “right now” of Procer and the next First Prince would return to Proceran norms. Much like when Bard told William that Black and Malicia were Praes right now, and their successors would return to the atrocities and madness of classical Evil.

Cordelia, after all, is Lycaonese – and therefore extremely atypical as Procerans, especially Proceran nobles, and even more especially ruling Princes and the First Prince.

Dainpdf

Cordelia is also atypical of Lycaonese, being adept at games of Court. Saint would have seen the fact that Cordelia kept having talks with Cat as a sign of corruption. She even got the whole Arch Heretic thing done precisely to force her hand.

[Javvies](#)

Saint didn’t have (or shouldn’t have) any knowledge that Cat and Cordelia had any sort of communication, far less a direct line between the two.

Remember, Thief snuck in and personally delivered the beacon or whatever it was that allowed Cat to bring Cordelia into a Domain. And before doing that, I’m certain Cat would have worked with Masego to make sure it wasn’t detectable.

Admittedly, Cordelia’s proficiency at Proceran politics is atypical for a Lycaonese.

My point is, I don’t think Saint decided to go with the “burn down Procer (and as much of everything else as possible) and start over” plan because of Cordelia. I think it was despite Cordelia (at the time), because Saint didn’t think Cordelia was going to make long term changes stick in Procer. Nowadays, sure, Cordelia’s actions would probably be pushing Saint’s buttons.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, Saint was clearly being manipulated by the Wandering Bard.

[Liliet](#)

Judging by how Laurence talked to Cordelia, she did consider Cordelia to be a good egg.

[shieldredblog](#)

For all that the Lyconese hold the line against evil, we learned from the Arcadian echo that they were founded by an Evil Witch Queen.

talenel

The irony isn't really what Cordelia is doing because it fits with what we see and know about her. Rather, the irony is that Saint is so myopic to what and who people really are and how the world works.

Soronel Haetir

I would have described Robber as 'murderous' rather than 'mutanous'.

Andrew Mitchell

Both are somewhat appropriate. The important thing is that he's Catherine's murderous & mutinous lieutenant. 😊

He was raised right

And in that most beautiful way, he's the least traitorous of them all ♥

Dainpdf

Poor Cat. X's gonna give it to ya. It will deliver to ya.

Agent J

I have no idea what the context here is, but I'm obligated to hit like on that bar. So take it, monster.

Dainpdf

X as in the unknown variable. Because Cat can't math.

caoimhinh

"Don't mouth off, wench," I replied to Indrani. "I bet you can't make online votes decently either."

"Funny you would say that," Archer said, and grinned like I'd just made a mistake.

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

Godsdamn it, I thought, and prepared to take my votes.

caoimhinh

Well, this was a pretty nice chapter.

Today is my birthday (it's still Agust 1st here in Colombia) and the chapter opened by addressing some of my concerns that I had presented in previous chapters about Cat's eagerness for going to Salia for the many talks that need to happen.

And we got an Extra Chapter because it's the beginning of the month.

P.S: next chapter, the talk around the fire, it's gonna be awesome. I wonder if Amadeus and Tariq will join their talk later on.

Also, where's Kilian? Why isn't Cat counting her as those invited for the talk? Last we knew of her, Kilian was still alive and among the top mages in the Army of Callow (if not the very top, directly under Masego). I would have expected Cat to call for her too if she called for Pickler. Having her disappear from the story simply because she is no longer Cat's lover seems like a waste.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed =x

Hellspirit

I'd say that's precisely the point of it. In this story her role was Love Interest, and that was Cat's only connection to her. With that severed, she's no longer of importance to the story. (not that she doesn't matter, in universe, but in what we're reading).

[Liliet](#)

She is also Rat Company tho.

It's possible she basically dropped out of that because of having knowingly violated Cat's morals – the human sacrifice for power thing – like just severed the ties because of knowing she did a bad.

But by default, she should be there.

Agent J

I just want some bloody confirmation on whether she went through with it or not. Is that too much to ask? Damn.

Andrew Mitchell

Me too.

caoimhinh

Nevertheless, she is still Cat's friend. And also one of the seniormost mages in her army, Kilian has been mentioned off-hand like twice since their break-up, and was always doing important things.

It's odd then, that she hasn't been present in the councils, reunions or delivering informs to Catherine, Hakram or Vivienne we have seen so far. For a time I thought it was Cat that was avoiding her or something. Now even Prickler is sitting there around the fire, Kilian should be there too.

Liliet

I think it's possible that Killian is avoiding Cat =x

Mental Mouse

Is Killian actually present in Isurre?

Andrew Mitchell

Good question. There's been no mention either way ASFAIK. There's arguments that she should be here given Callow's armies are here but, on the other hand, there's need for strength at home too given the Praes situation.

Liliet

She has been mentioned by Robber when relating the Iserre situation to Catherine. She is confirmed to be here.

Fayhem

Agreed on both points – EE did a good job on addressing Salia being the seat, and brought in some aspects I hadn't considered myself. And I am going to be a touch cross if this whole fireside reunion goes by with no Killian.

Liliet

...shit. The epigraph refers to Cordelia.

N00000000000000000000000000000000)=

Faiir

This is so obvious now that you pointed it out!

[Liliet](#)

)=)=)=

BARD YOU FUCK

Andrew Mitchell

Well said.

Does that mean you're now on team "Bard must die"? 😊

[Liliet](#)

...no)=

Andrew Mitchell

I think you know that my view is that the Bard is here to keep the game going without another agenda. I can't recall the % I put on this previously but this new evidence increased my certainty by a couple of percentage points. How did you weigh this new evidence?

[Liliet](#)

It's not new evidence, not really. It's a different glance at the old set.

Andrew Mitchell

That's a good point. Perhaps I misspoke when I said "new evidence". On reflection, I used it as shorthand for "additional support the likelihood of bad consequences from Bard's actions". This is somewhat similar to your "different glance" view, but my end result was a slight change in the assessed probabilities. Let me explain my reasoning process more fully.

We've previously seen the Bard influence Saint to push Cordelia into believing much more strongly that Procer will cease existing. And that Cordelia then presses the trigger on whatever it is that she's had dredged out of the lake.

We've now got further support in this chapter (the epigraph, and Catherine's worry that Cordelia's turning bad) that increases the likelihood that what Cordelia is doing is going to have bad results. And that leads me to the conclusion that the Bard is slightly more likely to the conclusion that the Bard

is trying to keep the game going and not to help the side of progress (i.e., Cat).

Liliet

True, there's a bit more lean on bad possibilities, but compared to Bard deliberately enabling Second Liesse, this doesn't actually change much. We'll have to see how it actually plays out, and I'd say Catherine is very much in position to ameliorate a lot of damage there. In position, incidentally, after the clusterfuck that Third Liesse turned into thanks to the intervention of our favorite..

The anticipation of the bad has increased, but I wouldn't say this impacts my evaluation of Bard specifically -_-

SpeckofStardust

I mean Cordelia has also just had a string of victories, the North holds and the south is now under control. Further more the grand assembly is now her bitch. Also she and cat arnt friends so she cant not be not friends anymore.

caoimhinh

Ehm, Cordelia hasn't won anything, that was Catherine. The North holds because Cat bought 3 months of peace, and the South's situation has stabilized because Cat beat them all into behaving.

Sure, this situation benefits Cordelia and she will take advantage of it, but these were not victories of her.

SpeckofStardust

But hardly anything has been a personal setback.

Andrew Mitchell

You called it. It's going to take a while to play out but I'd put 95% on you being right.

Now, where is Arnaud going to stand when Cordelia turns bad? Is he totally loyal to Cordelia or is he loyal to Procer or ...???

And I can see this being Rozala's chance to rise to First Prince after Cordelia's fall.

Faiir

I'd say loyal to Proceed based on his behavior.
I'm voting for Rozala in next Proceran election 😊

[Liliet](#)

I HOPE SHE ENDS UP FINE ANYWAY

Andrew Mitchell

Me too, I quite like and admire her.

NerfGlastigUaine

I'm back y'all!

So while I was gone, Callow got into the Alliance, Levant is finally getting its shit together, Catherine still can't keep it in her pants even when she's exhausted and the person in question likely wants to run her through, Hasenbach may be spiraling off the slippery slope, Black is back but not in Black, Masego is officially magic-less but not powerless and gained a few levels in quips and intimidation, and the Liesse Accords are even bigger than I imagined and possibly the biggest Wham Episode thus far. I mean, that's not just changing the story, it's setting the story on fire, writing a new one while changing the genre, and giving a giant middle finger to the original authors. Break the Game of Gods indeed.

Does anyone else think Catherine is going to die at the end of this story? I mean, Well-Intentioned Extremist Anti-Villain who breaks the world order and kills the Big Bad villain god isn't a story you typically walk away from. Or ride into the sunset away from. Either she dies or something twisted happens to her, b/c I don't see this story ending in happily ever after.

[Liliet](#)

>I mean, that's not just changing the story, it's setting the story on fire, writing a new one while changing the genre, and giving a giant middle finger to the original authors.

BEST APPROACH TBH

...god guide is a hymn to fanfic writing isn't it

>Does anyone else think Catherine is going to die at the end of this story? I mean, Well-Intentioned Extremist Anti-Villain who breaks the world order and kills the Big Bad villain god isn't a story you typically walk away from. Or ride into the sunset away from. Either she dies or something twisted happens to her, b/c I don't see this story ending in happily ever after.

I'm giving it a 50/50 between dies and FUCK YOU WE GET A HAPPY EVER AFTER AFTER ALL

I'm not seeing 'something twisted' bc that would really spoil the tone imho

but bittersweet vs *no actually nobody DID need to die* is a real choice

bittersweet would be more traditional, while 'fuck you nobody needs to die here' is a recurring theme in guide and... huh, actually i give that option more than 50/50

in an unexpected twist (because yes absolutely thats where the story is headed straight on, Cat has acknowledged that in her inner monologue too) Catherine actually survives and is fine. The audience GASPS

Mental Mouse

Given that she's died and come back three times so far, Cat's choice at this point is probably between "redemption by permanent death", or "immortal villain". And she's already shown hints of the latter.

Liliet

I'm thinking more like 'everyone else pitches in and averts the heroic sacrifice trope altogether where it seems like it's the only option, because Catherine really has earned enough goodwill for that'.

Mental Mouse

As ye sow, so shall ye reap?

Liliet

That exactly ^^

Faiir

GASP!

caoimhinh

GASPS



NZPIEFACE

Yeah. I've been pretty sure that she dies at the end of this story.

Maybe I'm thinking too much of Code Geass.

Alegio

I really needed some goblins in this story, everything is getting so damn serious that a little bit of goblin shenanigans feels like fresh air.

Naeddyr

Five imaginary dollars says Cordy is definitely not the first secretly villainous First Prince of Procer, and that this is a kind of open secret among the princes.

Where would the Name have come from?

Andrew Mitchell

Which Name are you talking about? First Prince is a title, equivalent to the British Prime Minister.

Raiseth

Lol, Cat.

She's an Archer.
A very good archer, too.

Of course she knows a thing about ballistics. Or several hundred things, as it were.

Al

I think Rozala's going to pick up her oathsword against our First Prince before the series is done

[Liliet](#)

Nah, IMHO that's a package sent into far future.

Joan

Archer is a sniper. The long-range kills she pulls off routinely would definitely require mathematics.

Chapter 65: Convivial

"Note: while the assertion that one's friends 'are an anchor' held up to examination, said individuals (either dead or alive) seem no more effective in that purpose than a stone anchor of the same weight. The popularity of the saying remains baffling."

– Extract from the journal of Dread Emperor Malignant II

With seven expectant gazes remaining peeled on me, I was starting to feel a mite cornered. Just a mite, mind you. I'd gotten out of tighter corners than this through cunning use of diplomacy.

"I was," I began, "perhaps less than correct."

Without missing a beat the crowd began to boo me, and that vicious little wretch Robber even threw something at me over the fire. I didn't quite manage to catch it but it slid into a fold of my cloak and I picked it up there. I blinked, finding a rather fancy glass eye looking back at me. Where had he even – no, I didn't want to know. It had to be someone of stature, though, part of it was painted but there was also coloured glass and that'd expensive as all... No, if I asked then he won. I'd get Hakram to find out later. Still, I pocketed the eye without any qualms. He could make a tidy little sum from selling that, if he got around to it, so we'd just call this a... pre-emptive fine. Hells, maybe I could get General Abigail to believe I'd had one of those on the whole time.

"Do the apology, at least," Aisha called out, too well-bred to grin but with suspiciously twitching lips.

I sighed.

"Archer," I began, ignoring Indrani's enthusiastic affirmation of 'that's me, you know', "you peerless beauty whose approval I secretly crave, and that's why I'm so mean to you-"

"That sounds about right," Hakram gravely agreed.

The filthy traitor. I was surrounded by treachery of the worst tonight.

"- I retract any implication that you are incapable of abstract mathematics," I valiantly soldiered on. "There. Finished."

There was a heartbeat of silence. Masego, swaddled in a rather unnecessary amount of blankets, leaned towards Adjutant.

"Is it on purpose that she did not apologize at any point in that sentence?" Zeze asked.

Godsdamnit, now even Masego was getting in on it. The little shit absolutely did know that I'd done it on purpose, I pulled this on

him all the – ah, and suddenly his sordid betrayal made a little more sense.

“Ask to be made a countess,” Juniper suggested to Indrani. “Even odds she’d take that over actually saying the word ‘apologize’.”

That was a lie. I wouldn’t go any further up the ladder than baroness to get out of this. Honorary, mind you, not landed. I shuddered to think of what Archer might get up to with regular tax revenue.

“I apologize all the time,” I protested.

I got a few skeptical looks in return.

“Here’s one for the road, then,” I sneered. “I’m sorry you’re all so thin-skinned you need apologies in the first place.”

Alas, the resuming of the loud booing was the herald of diplomacy’s failure. Sometimes, I sadly reflected, the other side simply wasn’t willing to take the very generous and reasonable terms you offered them. That was not on you, it was on them, I reminded myself. Robber once more tossed something at me, though this time I caught it – it was, to my surprise, another *glass* eye. Just as prettily made, although the heft was lighter and oh Night the iris was brown on this one instead of blue. And angled in the opposite direction, implying my Special Tribune might have murdered not one but *two* foreign highborn officers just so he could use their glass eye as toy. For once the actual specifics of something he’d done had managed to surprise me, though the spirit of the affair I was painfully familiar with. I pocketed it too, because the little bastard would have hit me with it on the chin if I hadn’t caught it. It was decided by a tribunal of the people that I would have last pick of a cut from the pig that was nearly done roasting, my threats to have them all tried for treason leaving the unruly mob indifferent. Truly, they had gone mad with power.

Juniper insisted on making the cuts herself when she judged the meat properly roasted, ignoring Indrani’s protests that it should have another quarter hour of being turned with spices sprinkled on the searing fat. I sided with the Hellhound, half out of spite for Indrani knowing all about Stygian abstracts when she’d been raised in the *middle of the damned woods* and half because I rather did miss the taste of a pig roasted in the College way: mostly unseasoned, and still juicy the way orcs preferred meat to be if it couldn’t be bleeding outright. Adjutant squatted by the fire with plates while Robber was charged with bringing the communal plate of biryani. Aisha was, to my mild amusement, the first to receive a plate and by sheer coincidence got some of the choicest cuts. Masego requested belly meat and the Marshal of Callow allowed him a fat slice, which Robber claimed to be blatant favoritism, and as bickering exploded I reached for my

pipe with a smothered smile. Indrani sidled up to me casually, leaning on my shoulder like a pest as I stuffed and lit a packet of wakeleaf.

"We're missing some people," Archer said.

Her tone wasn't quiet, not exactly, but it was pitched not to carry.

"Vivienne will come when she's done with the Jacks," I said. "Whenever that happens to be."

"Not who I meant," she replied.

I craned back my neck just to glance at her. Indrani looked down at me, eyes serious, though face to face like this I felt the urge to kiss her. I set aside the impulse.

"Akua can't really be here if Vivienne is," I murmured. "And if she's allowed to sit with us just until Vivienne arrives that's worse than not being invited, I'd wager."

Not the last because it made plain the tensions between my appointed successor and the monster I'd absurdly enough come to like – and more importantly, rely on. I could expect Akua to take such a situation with a degree of elegance, if not necessarily enthusiasm under the mask, but I doubted Vivienne would be so agreeable.

"I think they'd both surprise you," Indrani said. "It's personal, between them, but our little thief also knows a thing or two about sitting around a fire with people you were trying to kill not so long ago. Still, once more not who I was speaking of."

Ah. Her. I lowered my head and breathed in through the shaft of my pipe, the acrid smoke filling my throat and my lungs. I let the taste and warmth of it stick with me, and only then breathed out a long stream. I should learn to do tricks, I decided. With the smoke.

"I bet Hakram's been tiptoeing around it all careful-like," she drawled. "Like he doesn't want to needle tender skin. But you're made of rougher stuff than that, aren't you?"

Tiptoeing wasn't the right way to put it. A perch had been offered, on occasion, and my refusal to grasp it had seen the matter implicitly closed without it ever being outright put into words.

"You'd know," I murmured, not wagging my eyebrows but conveying the sentiment by voice. "Although it's been a while, so maybe you forgot."

"Godsdamn," Archer whistled, sounding impressed. "You never get that racy where people might hear. You *really* don't want to talk about it, do you?"

"There's nothing to talk about," I stiffly said. "She declined twice, I don't see the need to keep inviting her."

I wasn't a bloody widower in desperate need of a second wife, in so dire a bind I'd buy a white stallion and learn to recite Valencian poetry just to impress. Cordial disregard suited me just fine, and to be honest it was probably safer for her. Enemies wouldn't bother going after a love affair gone cold if trying to get to me, not when there were deeper and more obvious bindings in my life.

"You won't even say her name," Indrani grunted, undertone amused. "Yeah, you're *totally* over how that went down. How dare I suggest otherwise."

"Senior Mage Kilian can be fetched, if you require it so deeply," I replied in a clipped tone. "If she declines, shall I have dragged in chains? She doesn't fucking want to be here, Indrani."

"It's a bad habit, that thing you do," Archer seriously said. "When if it's not a blade at your throat, you let relationships stay ambiguous by doing nothing. Bet she might have changer her tune, if you'd let a few more months pass before asking again."

"It's been quite a bit longer than that," I coldly said. "I won't open up a casket just so you can sate your curiosity, 'Drani."

"Oh, that one's probably cracked beyond mending," she casually replied. "But it doesn't have to be that way all around. Send for Akua. And make her stay, even when Vivienne joins."

My eyes narrowed.

"You don't give a shit about Kilian, do you?" I said. "You just wanted me to feel raw enough I'd agree to this."

The ochre-skinned woman grinned, sharp and pale.

"Sure," Indrani admitted. "But that doesn't mean it isn't true."

We should have gotten her started on the liquor earlier, I darkly thought. Might have spared me all this. I turned to meet her gaze, unflinching, until our silence was interrupted by Hakram sliding a plate full of pork and biryani on my lap. He glanced at us, dark eyes missing nothing.

"Juniper cracked open a bottle of aragh," Adjutant said. "Or do you two need to take a walk?"

"Nah," Indrani smiled. "Aragh sounds good. We're done here."

She broke our stare first, strolling away nonchalantly, and Hakram cocked a hairless brow at me in her wake. Underestimating them both, was I? I doubted it, but beyond that assertion I saw a truth she'd not mentioned. If there was going to be strife, when would we next have so relatively safe a moment to handle it? Certainly not in Salia, or up north fighting the dead. *Fuck*. I really hated it when Indrani pulled the whole incisive insight thing on me, but now that I knew I was taking a greater risk by not handling this now I couldn't really justify not doing it. Knowing Archer had manoeuvred me didn't make it any less effective.

"Invite Akua up," I sighed.

He cocked his head to the side.

"Ought to make for an interesting evening," he simply said.

Adjutant moved away, boots crinkling against the icing snow, to tread downslope until he'd cross the wards and send one of the legionaries to pass the message along. Ah well, it wasn't even guaranteed she'd come. I glanced down at my plate and frowned.

"Tenderloin?" I called out at Juniper. "Really, the *tenderloin*? I should have you hanged."

I saw Indrani pout and flip Robber a silver as Aisha hid a smile behind her hand.

"Let me go halvesies with Aisha's cuts," I wheedled.

Robber cursed in Taghrebi and flipped back the silver to Indrani, who took an overly showy bow. No one seemed particularly inclined to consider my suggestion, the bastards.

"None of you are ever becoming a countess, mark my words," I bitterly said, and dug into my pork.

Pickler passed me the bottle of aragh, though, so maybe at least one of them would make it to baroness.

—

My wakeleaf was half-finished by the time Akua glided her way through the raised stones of the Mavian prayer. She'd chosen a rather conservative appearance, by her standards: a high-waisted dress with a long ruffled skirt, in red and yellow touched by eldritch patterns of gold brocade. Given that it was long-sleeved and went up to the beginning of her neck, it was one of the tamer things I'd seen her wear. Still, it was well-fitted and on a woman who looked like Akua Sahelian did that was enough to draw a lingering second look. I puffed out a mouthful of smoke as she approached the fire, bowing slightly towards me as she came to

warm hands that needed no warmth against the roaring fire. I nodded back, and both of us pretended not to notice every conversation had died the moment she arrived. I took a moment to study reactions – Indrani was pleased, Hakram pleasant and Masego... staring with fascination at her torso? Must have been an arcane pattern that interested him. Those I'd anticipated rather well, though, so it was the others that got me curious. Robber was grinning, one of those needle-filled offerings that meant amusement so sharp it might as well have been spite. Pickler was indifferent, though the way she'd shuffled on the bench implied surprise and maybe a little curiosity. Aisha had put on the highborn face, a mask of pleasantries so perfect it might as well have been made of marble. Her I wouldn't get much out of unless I asked. Juniper's face was disgruntled, and without any hint of the respect I'd expected an orc to bear for someone who'd faced more than half the armies of Praes and Callow on the field without flinching.

Robber would test her, then, which I wasn't all that worried about. Juniper, though? Contempt might be more dangerous there than antipathy and I suspected that was the way she was leaning.

"Spooky Saddle, sit your ass down," Archer called out. "You're not fooling anyone with the warming hands thing, you're a damned ghost."

"How have you not run out of those by now?" I said, reluctantly impressed. "Also, shade. Shade is the word you were looking for."

"What can I say," Indrani mused, blithely ignoring my correction, "I'm just a giver at heart."

"She has a list," Akua slyly said. "She keeps it in her arrow-bag and her next one is Revenant Rags."

Archer spluttered out it was lie, Robber cackled loudly before swearing to steal it and just like that the spell of silence was broken. Conversations resumed. Wasteland highborn, huh. I suspected she'd be on decent terms with half the people here before the night was out. She had a knack for charming others, even those who should know better. I let the warm chatter wash over me as I leaned back into my seat and smoked my pipe, following the threads of two different conversations at the same time. Juniper and Pickler had dragged a highly amused Indrani into a debate about whether or not her bow, due to its ridiculous size and the way her arrows were closer to javelins, was still a bow or in fact an exotic siege weapon. Pickler's insistence that it was a derivative of a ballista by any reasonable set of principles ran into Juniper's flat reminder that 'she draws the string, with her arm, because it's a bow', while Archer's insistence that while she was a trebuchet in the sack she was also handy with a string did absolutely nothing to help.

Robber was spinning an elaborate yarn about smuggling an ass – a donkey, not the other kind – in a cadet-captain's room back his War College days for the benefit of a seemingly amused Akua, with the occasional dry correction by Hakram. Masego and Aisha, significantly more sober than most people around this fire, were discussing whether the old Alamans legends about the *morions*, barrow and underground-dwelling creatures that had a rapacious hunger for gold, silver and jewels, were an extinct people or simply dwarf-sightings made legend by the passing of time. It seemed the subject was of particular interest to Aisha, because I was bestowed the rare sight of Hierophant knowing visibly less about a subject than his interlocutor. As the one of the few people here who'd actually seen and spoken with dwarves I contributed a few details, though mostly I enjoyed the sensation of closest thing to home I'd felt in a very long time. Still, I was not so much at ease I'd not kept an eye and ear on where the first knife would come from. And as expected, two yarns later Robber turned a sharp grin and sharper words on Akua.

"Mind you, the fun didn't end when we left Ater," he drawled. "There was this one time – this was when you were still Governess in Laure, before we murdered your every ally and broke everything you ever strove for – when the Boss sent me south to kill your buddies as they moved west. Would have kept it up for even longer, except I was torturing this guy named Mulin who claimed to be under your protection and-"

Akua's brow rose.

"Mulin," she said. "Would you happen to mean Mulade Humin, by any chance?"

"Friend of yours?" Robber grinned.

"No, but the Lady of Salizan sent a cart's worth of gold ingots with him," Akua mused. "Never did get these. He was the heir to the holdings, so his mother was rather cross, but I did wonder what had happened to him."

"Borer slit his throat," the goblin said. "And I'm not saying we ate him, but Hells we were low on rations and if it's Wasteland highborn anything goes, right?"

He was, I thought, looking to shock her. To get a reaction out of her. But then Robber had known little of the Empire's high nobility, save when standing against them on a battlefield. As a student in the War College, he would have been considered under the protection of my father back in the day – who was known to brutally murder any highborn meddling with the College, and quite publicly at that. He believed he knew what Akua Sahelian would be like, I thought, but he rather didn't.

"Was he a screamer?" she asked.

Robber blinked.

"When you tortured him," Akua clarified, "was he a screamer? Because there's been these persistent rumours about the Humin-"

"Oh, come off it," Aisha interrupted. "Even if spice birds did exist, which no one has ever proved-"

"There's Miezan records, Bishara," Akua solemnly said.

"By *Calavia*," the Taghreb replied, sounding deeply offended. "The same hack who wrote about giant crabs living in the Wasaliti and insisted the Blessed Isle was a nest for crocodiles that spoke riddles in High Tyrian. She wrote to entertain patricians in Mieza, not as true historian."

"I can't comment on Calavia's accuracy in all things," Akua said, "yet I once shared a table with Mulade Humin when we were nine, and by the noises he made when I ate the last spice cookies you'd think I ate his firstborn using only forks."

"Is it me, or is it kind of titillating when those two argue about things?" Indrani pensively asked.

Godsdamnit, Archer. If you're going to say things like that, at least say something I don't kind of agree with deep down. So both of them were rather good looking, and them getting heated over debate was a good look. It wasn't my fault I had eyes! Still, best not to say that. Akua hardly needed the encouragement and trying to get Aisha into bed had terrible idea written all over for all sorts of reasons. I set aside the distracting though but focusing on more practical matters. The more the two of them spoke, I saw, the more out of his depth Robber looked. I sympathized, but then trying to take the shade on in courtly games like this was not the wisest choice he'd ever made. I'd seen few people outright chew through Akua when it came to this, Vivienne most vividly coming to mind. Even Black's attempt to humiliate and terrorize her into doing something unwise by making her nail her own hand to a table had not borne the fruit he'd wanted it to, back in the day, and Akua in those years had been nowhere as smooth as she now was. Without having ever drawn blood as he meant to Robber was turned aside, and the conversations moved on. When lively debate over the kind of riddles in High Tyrian a talking crocodile might have feasibly asked – Archer, the filthy show off, started quoting riddles from 'Tyrant and the Fool' in the play's original tradertalk, a tongue that had common Baalite roots – I found Aisha elegantly sitting at my side.

"My queen," Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara said.

"I thought I'd trained you out of that," I sighed.

“It’s been some time,” she smiled. “And this is a serious enough affair.”

My brow rose, and I decided to pass the last of the aragh to a distracted Hakram instead of drinking it.

“I’m listening,” I said.

Aisha’s lips thinned, then she leaned forward and lowered her voice.

“Do you mean,” she softly asked, “for Akua Sahelian to be Dread Empress of Praes?”

Soronel Haetir

Good thing she passed the drink, if she’d been in the middle of swallowing there would have been a spit-take for sure.

Ebert of Alamans, scholar errant

In fact, the greatest point of scholarly contention regarding the riddling saurians of the Blessed Isle is not whether they exist, but whether they are taxinomically crocodiles at all or (as in this writer’s opinion), more properly identified as alligators.

Matthew

Cat doesn’t listen to Black. Always listen to Black. She will never have a better opportunity to kill Akua utterly.

stevenneiman

There seems to be a running theme about people being ruined when they trust someone to have better judgement than them in certain cases, and then ignore that person for a critical decision. It happened to Cat when she tried to rush her third Aspect and lost a piece of her soul instead, it happened to Malicia when she decided that she knew how to deal with narrative threats and tried to work around Black to perform her screwup, it happened to Laurence when she decided that she knew better than the guy who can see the future and read minds whether Indrani was trustworthy, and it’s almost happened to Sve Noc several times but Cat has been able to talk them out of it.

On the other hand, Cat didn’t bring Black in for his advice on this subject, and redemption is about as far from his area of

expertise as a narrative concern can get. I genuinely do think that Cat knows what she's doing here better than Black does.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm!

Eli Davis

Oh shit. I did not see that possibility coming *at all*

Drd

Well bugger me sideways, I was NOT expecting that. 0_0

Andrew Mitchell

Me too... No, no, not the bugging, the surprise. I was not expecting that twist.

[doominator10](#)

Same, including the bugging

KageLupus

I'll take one bugging, hold the twist...

Andrew Mitchell

Hahahahahahaha

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

Exactly what I suggested earlier though.

NerfContessa

It's been a while since I expected it to go that direction, and I never thought the impetuous for it would be cats. But then qkua seemed to jump the redemption train, and even switching to good of all things, and... Well...

Andrew Mitchell

I enjoyed the banter. It's good to have the band back together.

I don't think Vivienne is going to like Akua being here. I think she might ask Catherine to renew her vow to kill Akua and Catherine may not be able to say that any more.

[Liliet](#)

I think Vivienne is more smooth than that, Catherine's point about her being one of very few people to ever slaughter Akua

in an argument comes to mind. She'll thoroughly scout Catherine's actual feelings on the matter before going straight to that point IMHO.

Hitogami

No, just no. Absolutely not

Insanenoodlyguy

New crack theory. Dread Emperor Benevolent is not Black after all. Its Akua wearing a crappy moustache Robber made for her. See, Akua gets cursed to never be empress, so she rides out an irritant-tier loophole to get the throne.

[Liliet](#)

...this is beautiful

Halinn

It makes so much sense!

Insanenoodlyguy

I mean, it does free Black up to go teach at Cardinal. He gets to thwart Bard by being part of destroying the status quo, weilding a very new kind of power with his new name of Principal.

IDKWhoitis

Currently imagining Viv throwing a fit if she was in earshot of that last line. I mean, its probably the next chapter, but still. It bound to be a fun one.

[Liliet](#)

People keep forgetting how good Vivi actually is at the social / political stuff 😏 throwing a fit? really? what's your definition?

[TeK](#)

Imperceptably frowning your mental eyebrows, what's yours?

edrey

then the gray pilgrim appear behind them.
asking for kairos and anaxeres would be to much right?

Sparsebeard

... or not enough, I think that rumenarumenarumena would fit right in with all the insubordination being thrown around, I'm sure he too, can do abstract mathematics.

Andrew Mitchell

Oh, oh, oh, YES! That would be bloody brilliant to see.

[Fayhem](#)

I'm pretty sure Rumena would consider spending time with Catherine in a social context to be beneath his dignity. Or its dignity? I can't remember if Rumena predates the drow-don't-do-genders thing like the Sisters do; obviously Rumena has the age to, I just don't recall if that preference has actually been expressed.

Arracor

....and everyone clapped!

breakingamber

Tipos!

"Bet she might have changer [changed] her tune, if you'd let a few more months pass before asking again."

He believedt [believed] he knew what Akua Sahelian would be like, I thought, but he rather didn't.

I sympathized, but then [again] trying to take the shade on in courtly games like this was not the wisest choice he'd ever made.

Also, can we get some love for the tvtropes page?

<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Literature/APracticalGuideToEvil>

Big I

Pretty sure Black's going to end up emperor, with the name Benevolent.

[Liliet](#)

That name is taken, it belonged to a historical emperor.

[TeK](#)

Though I don't think Black will ever suffer a pretence like naming himself Benevolent, that is just not him, in any way, it was discussed that comments from future can and had been used as epigraphs, and besides, first ever epigraph with Benevolent calls him Benevolent the First, which implies that there would be the second. Because they don't call Sorcerous the First.

[Liliet](#)

Fair, Benevolent the Second is possible. Though it's still OOC for Black lmao

hakureireimu

You're stating suppositions as fact, when those suppositions are based off circular reasoning.

[Liliet](#)

They're not. "Epigraphs have been used as worldbuilding, specifically Dread Emp epigraphs serving to paint a picture of historical Praes up to today" is not circular.

hakureireimu

The "up to today" part is totally your supposition.

1. How do you know Benevolent is historical? Because there's no future Dread Emperor epigraphs.
2. How do you know there's no future Dread Emperor epigraphs, and Benevolent is not a counter-example? Because Benevolent is historical.

[Liliet](#)

This is not how my logic goes.

How do I know Benevolent is historical? Because it was implied by the format in context. Why do I think it was implied by the format? Because it was used for worldbuilding, and it would be a shitty twist if it were shown otherwise.

[Liliet](#)

It's my supposition in the way that 'Amadeus wears pants not a kilt at all times' is my supposition. Some things are always assumed from context.

Benevolent was part of a characterization of pre-Amadeus Praes – eager to grab onto the Good tropes when the Dread Emperor was savvy enough (fucking... Malignant from this epigraph ;u;) but without it actually changing anything in the long run, because it never went beyond a single ruler's gimmick.

hakureireimu

So now you're making the assumption that it's worldbuilding of pre-Amadeus Praes. The only thing an

epigraph needs to do is to be related to the chapter's theme. Everything else are assumptions.

We already know that Cat wants Amadeus to climb the tower, and she's the protagonist. It'll be interesting to know how much evidence is needed for you to abandon your view.

[Liliet](#)

>So now you're making the assumption that it's worldbuilding of pre-Amadeus Praes.

Yes. I'm making this assumption. I believe that it is an entirely natural assumption and an intended reading. It enhances my understanding of the story to consider Benevolent a past Dread Emperor, as it shows the full spectrum of what Praes has been in the past without it actually helping long term.

>It'll be interesting to know how much evidence is needed for you to abandon your view.

Having his ruling name confirmed as Benevolent the First. That would do it.

I am not sure that Amadeus will become Dread Emperor – I think there's plenty of factors pushing against it – but I'm not sure that he won't. My assertion is that he will not become Dread Emperor Benevolent I *specifically*.

Or having characters in-universe discuss how no single Dread Emperor before has ever used Good tropes to their advantage, which I expect even *less* than that one above.

Shveiran

So long as we are all in agreement that there is no solid evidence – only opinions – on the Benevolent matter, for both sides of the argument, I think we are golden.

I too have a strong belief on the subject; yet so long as we are able to acknowledge these ideas as opinion-based, I'd say we can discuss them serenely and have fun doing so.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm. I just like to remind people that it's only a theory, because a lot of people talk like it's something we know for sure.

breakingamber

And angled in the opposite direction, implying my Special Tribune might have murdered not one but two foreign highborn officers just so he could use their glass eye [eyes] as toy [toys].

Robber once more tossed something at me, though this time I caught it – it was, to my surprise, another glass eye. (another should be italicized, not glass)

[Liliet](#)

The joke here is that Catherine is not surprised it's another eye, she's surprised it's once again glass.

And the first one refers to her assumption that both of them had only ONE glass eye each.

Someguy

Nope. Black gets to be Dread Emperor but he sacrifices the Name Tyrant using Akua as fuel to turn the storm above the Tower into fertility for the land.

[Javvies](#)

I get why Aisha might be concerned about the possibility. On the other hand ... Dread Empress Akua isn't happening.

Andrew Mitchell

TBH I'm warming to the idea.

[Liliet](#)

What Shveiran said. Catherine has already considered the possibility and firmly rejected it, for Akua's own sake included.

Andrew Mitchell

I know it's not going to happen. But that doesn't stop me from liking the idea.

Cthulhu

I'm utterly lost. This seems to come out of nowhere.

Why the fuck would an undead servitor bound to Cats mantle as a slave after unleashing demons be placed in power over an empire using demons as door wardens? What, she got better?

This is taking a deposed Napoleon from Elba and asking him to run Germany just for the hell of it.

KageLupus

There is a very real chance that Aisha just isn't as aware of the Liesse Accords and all of the plans that Cat has for them, including her new Named-training Academy. Lacking that information it isn't too unreasonable for her to jump to the wrong conclusion. Cat drags Akua out of the cloak and slowly integrates her into the Woe. Now she is bringing Akua along to what is obviously a gathering of the core group, which tacitly implies that Cat wants Akua to be accepted into that core group.

There has to be a reason for that, and from what Aisha knows about Cat plans making Akua into a trusted ally in Praes is at least possible. She isn't even that far off that mark, since we all think that Cat wants Akua to be Headmistress of her school. Given how much influence Black thinks the school is going to have Akua being Headmistress is really more of a lateral promotion compared to Dread Empress.

And if I had to guess, I would bet that the next chapter has Aisha explaining all of the reasons why she thinks Akua would make for a bad choice for Dread Empress. Just because she brought it up as a possibility to Cat doesn't mean she agrees with the choice. She could just as easily be making sure Cat isn't about to make a huge mistake.

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

Which is much more likely than what I thought, well laid out as well.

[Liliet](#)

>since we all think that Cat wants Akua to be Headmistress of her school

...no? You're mistaking fanon for canon. It's a common joke that Akua would, but Catherine has no such plan.

>And if I had to guess, I would bet that the next chapter has Aisha explaining all of the reasons why she thinks Akua would make for a bad choice for Dread Empress. Just because she brought it up as a possibility to Cat doesn't mean she agrees with the choice. She could just as easily be making sure Cat isn't about to make a huge mistake.

That's my reading, yeah.

IMHO the greatest role this plays is the reminder that this is what Catherine having Akua around looks like to all Praesi who aren't deeply in the know period.

[Liliet](#)

Kind of, yeah. It does tend to come up bc when you list 'possible rulers' in your head 'Napoleon' just kind of makes the list, but that doesn't make it a viable idea.

[sivarajan](#)

"...taking a deposed Napoleon from Elba and asking him to run Germany"

I like this alternate history.

[sivarajan](#)

St. Helena is probably a closer analogy though.

Shveiran

Let's hope. Redeeming her is one thing, trusting her with power over a country – and Praes of all countries – sounds like all kinds of Bad Ideas.

You don't trust a recovering alcoholic to guard a brewery, for Above's sake.

erebus42

Now isn't that an interesting question. While Black certainly has the iron will and the capacity to break his adversaries in the wasteland and subjugate Praes I am a bit skeptical of how he'd be as a statesman. There's certainly a difference in running a military and running an effective government. Akua does have the flexibility and subtlety Black lacks, however it can't be overlooked that she's Akua mother-fucking Sahelian so...there is that. It also can't be overlooked that she has something that Black sorely lacks; the power of godsdamn Friendship!

ninegardens

Wait... *BLACK* lacks the power of friendship? This is the man whose team mates would tear apart frickin' creation in order to retrieve him. I get that the Calamaties are mostly dead now :(, but the fact that Black has lost people doesn't remove the fact that he has some INCREDIBLY loyal friends, unlike say... Akua.

... or maybe you were just being humorous about some of Akua's past lines and I shouldn't take shit so seriously.... nevermind.

erebus42

I was mostly referencing that line as a joke. However it should be noted that with the deaths of Sabah, Wekesa, Ranker, and with the imminent falling out between him and Malicia his list of friends is rapidly getting smaller.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, but the POWER is still there 😊 it was inside him all along! *insert Dread Emperor Malignant II joke here*

[Mental Mouse](#)

Black has a few incredibly loyal friends, basically the Woe – and they'd half scattered even before they started to get killed off. He doesn't pick up new friends as he goes around like Cat does, much less win over enemies to his side. I mean, recruiting a borderline hero like Viv was one thing, but turning around the effing Peregrine? That's "Heart is a badass power after all".

[Liliet](#)

I suspect he was more Cat-like in his younger years, considering Grem, Ranker, etc

[Liliet](#)

>There's certainly a difference in running a military and running an effective government.

My analysis of Black is that he is far more a statesman than a politician. Sure, he's a general as well, but generally setting up effective governing is his hobby horse. Remember the orphanage system? Remember his dreams of public education, brought up agains and again recently? Amadeus does military, sure, but he does far more than that.

>It also can't be overlooked that she has something that Black sorely lacks; the power of godsdamn Friendship!

Well this is just a punchline, considering the Empire has been held together for 40 years by the power of Black's friendships.

[TeK](#)

Being a good governor if not necesserialy being a good ruler though. Seeing people as an expandable resource leads you to Stalinist Russia. Don't be Stalinist Russia.

[Liliet](#)

He doesn't see them as an expendable resource any more than Cordelia does, with her levies and all. In fact he goes pretty damn above and beyond for the setting, making an

effort to *preserve lives of rebel levies*. Amadeus sees people as far less expendable than Alaya does,

[TeK](#)

Amadeus does not even see people as people. They are all basically gears. Tools. It is clearly stated in the series no less, it is the way he treats everyone, even if he loves them too. Or at least that was the way of a Black Knight, but Amadeus being an unknown quantity does not necessarily inspire confidence. The point is, it's what Malicia said, and the reason he actually did not become an Emperor in the first place. Even he understands that. He is an enforcer, an overseer, an advisor, but not a ruler.

Shveiran

You are confusing "doesn't feel empathy for" with "is uncaring about the well-being of", IMO.

Black considers everything an expendable resource, yes. However, what does he spend them for? The well-being of his country.

He is ruthless. And he has his own opinion about what that "well-being" is, granted.

But... well, what we are defining here is pretty much a king. That's what a king does.

A monarch doesn't care, that his countrymen disagree: his vision for the kingdom is the kingdom's future. A monarch expends his resources to achieve those goals; any country that has a standing army is expending soldiers' lives to gain security; any country with laws is expending part of the people's freedom to gain stability and order; any country with taxes is expending part of its people's riches to fund the various projects that would be impossible for singular individuals.

His vision is more extreme than most, but what it is a more extreme version of is the vision of a ruler.

I really don't see how the rest of the ruling class in the Guide is any different. Some may be less BLUNT about it, but bedside manners doesn't strike me as a meaningful distinction in this field.

[TeK](#)

In short, because it is a blunder and a blind spot. It is the same reason why chess is not a good metaphor for war: your chess pieces would not always follow you. If you think your people to be a resource, and your kingdom to be the final goal of ruling, you will end up with the empire of ghosts. My point about Socialist

Russia. Maybe you can say that spending lives like sand to achieve rapid industrialization is a good thing for a country as a whole.

About you saying that other rulers are no better. That is true. And his honesty is somehow enchanting, but I did not see his plans for long term Praes. He is proved to be a little to harsh and brutal and did you read my comment about what Malicia said? I literally don't know what are his plans besides "take all power from nobles, kill nobles" in various forms, be it lands or magic.

He is a butcher and enforcer. Leader, organizer, and if it was Civilization 5 I would pick him as a ruler.

I will say this: in the end, he is probably one of the better candidatures for ruling. But I don't think that is what he wants to do. First of all, I don't know nearly enough about Amadeus, but if we're talking BK, he wanted to "win", which is a goal, while ruling is a process. He can do reforms, however or turn Praes into a war camp for a pissing match with Heaven, but I don't see him ruling.

You said that rest of the ruling class is any different. I disagree. Save for Liesse, Malicia is much more different, which is even acknowledged by Amadeus himself, hence him serving her. Cordelia is different, and GP is different too.

I will sound idealistic, but the big difference, is that unlike Black, they see that nation IS people, it is not something separate from them. And if you think people are a tools, they can't be an endgoal. Which is a problem, as I feel it.

This whole thing is really messed, and I did not express myself clearly. I agree that he has good qualities for a king. But I think that they should be counterweighted by an actual compassion. As you said in the other comment, golden middle is better than extremes. And Black is an extreme.

[Liliet](#)

>In short, because it is a blunder and a blind spot. It is the same reason why chess is not a good metaphor for war: you chess pieces would not always follow you. If you think your people to be a resource, and your kingdom to be the final goal of ruling, you will end up with the empire of ghosts.

That's really not something *Amadeus* is in danger of. He's willing to sacrifice everything about Praes that isn't its population, for the sake of said population. What you're saying here is far more closely applicable to Alaya.

>but if we're talking BK, he wanted to "win", which is a goal

It's not. It's a way of saying "he wanted to achieve his goal". I mean he didn't want a *nominal* victory, considering how sarcastic he was about them wanting Callow's crown, and considering how willing he was to have Cat kill him and take over. He wanted something defined as "win" in the sense of "this is what he wants".

Look at what exactly it is that's his win condition.

(Malicia's 'secure a camp for your pissing match with Heavens' is not exactly good analysis, and comes from her equating Praesi highborn with Praes period, and what they want with what 'Praes' wants in that conversation)

>I agree that he has good qualities for a king. But I think that they should be counterweighted by an actual compassion.

Amadeus "south won't recover from this for decades" "Wekesa would eat every child in Callow if it allowed him to focus on his research" "we've grown so enamoured with bleeding our own we have sayings about it" "there is no inherent blemish in any of these people" "a government is meant to function, or there's no point in its existence at all" doesn't have sufficient counterweights? Are you sure?

[Tek](#)

I may have been carried away from my own opinions and rationality trying to defend a sinking ship. I apologize. I was wrong.

[Liliet](#)

>Amadeus does not even see people as people. They are all basically gears. Tools. It is clearly stated in the series no less, it is the way he treats everyone, even if he loves them too.

I am reading it the other way around – even when he treats people like gears in a mechanism, he still sees

them as people. Remembering the face of that one guy who held the gates in Laure for longest 20 fucking years ago? Seeing actual enemies you are currently leading an army against as people instead of a faceless mass?

Sure, this doesn't stop him from making ruthless decisions for the good of all. But it's 'for the good of all' that's the key part. Amadeus's definition of 'successful Praes' is Praes that *does not bleed people*. His population is, to him, the opposite of expendable.

[TeK](#)

"Remembering the face of that one guy who held the gates in Laure for longest 20 fucking years ago? Seeing actual enemies you are currently leading an army against as people instead of a faceless mass?"

I think it is more the part of "being graceful in your victory" philosophy part of things. Also the fact that this is more effective way of acting. Affably evil people tend to acquire more cooperation from others. I see him "noting that one guy" because he found him exceptional -> useful. So he put a note in his mind against his face. Again. don't really know which one of us is right. Just shared my interpretation.

"Amadeus's definition of 'successful Praes' is Praes that does not bleed people. His population is, to him, the opposite of expendable."

Not exactly. As far as I understand it, his logic went as thus: way we can't win a war against Callos for nigh a thousand year? Cause our leadership sucks most of the time. Why does our leadership suck? Because our system is bullshit. Why is our system is bullshit? Because it serves a function of ensuring the ability to wage constant wars and sustaining stability of the realm through constant warmongering. Why does it need to do constant warmongering? Cause otherwise people will fucking starve. Also because narrative bullshit and if Praes was to be reformed, there would be no "Evil Empire" throwing around thousands of disposable minions for Heroes to dispose. And Gods don't want that.

So all the reforms, dealing with starvation issue, are the means in the end. And the goal is something I would not want my ruler to have: just stick it to the Heavens and win.

[Liliet](#)

>I think it is more the part of “being graceful in your victory” philosophy part of things.

There is a difference between holding a philosophy and *being actually able to remember a guy's face after 20 years*. The latter *requires* seeing them as a person and caring to some degree, otherwise it's simply not how memory works.

>So all the reforms, dealing with starvation issue, are the means in the end. And the goal is something I would not want my ruler to have: just stick it to the Heavens and win.

Ah Yes That

https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/comments/arcq4a/amadeus_the_madman_a_skeptical_analysis_of_the/

...let's discuss 😊

[TeK](#)

“otherwise it's simply not how memory works.”

Even Named memory?

“...let's discuss”

While I thank you for an interesting read, I am not ready to partake of a community so refined such as reddit. Some other day, perhaps. But I glimpsed that you got there even more interesting conversation that I got in comments.

[Liliet](#)

(I mean we can discuss here too)

Named qualities are an exaggeration of what they already are. What is it about Amadeus's Role that would grant him a supernaturally perfect memory for faces of people he'd been killing? 😊

erebus42

I was mainly referencing Akua's previous line about it as a joke. Though like I said in the other response, his list of friends grows smaller and smaller as the story goes on.

[onedollargum](#)

Oh man, the chances of Cat helping Akua into the tower are like those of the Peregrine helping Below.

...Oh.

ninegardens

"No no no. Black is Going to be Emperor.
I was just planning to make Akua Chancellor- that can't possibly go wrong."

Dainpdf

Uh... nope. Let's not do that. That would end terribly. For everyone.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

People last chapter: Where did Kilian go?
This chapter:

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

I was glad to see that revisited.

[TeK](#)

Revisited in a riveting way no less.

- Hey people, remember Killian?
- Yes! Yes! Goddamit, yes! I've been waiting for so long! Finally! Yay!
- Good to see you remember her. Now onto the other things.

Anfer

I'm eagerly awaiting Cat's ultimate, final response. Not necessarily to this exact question, but to the whole Akua situation in general. We've see the gradual progression. The visible antipathy that has slowly turned into grudging camaraderie. The blooming friendship borne of enmity and understanding.

I feel like I can make a rough guess as to the future, even.

Cat will be genial, friendly and kind. She'll laugh at Akua's jokes. She'll smile and genuinely enjoy her company. They'll go on adventures together. Akua will worm her way into everyone's hearts as she's wont to do.

And then when all is said and done, when the final enemy is defeated, when Cat is free of her responsibilities, when the Woe can finally rest...

She'll walk up to Akua and, still smiling, tear her into tiny, screaming shreds.

Cat made an oath you see.

She smiles. She laughs and she jokes. But down deep, she's Callowan.

She hasn't forgotten. She hasn't forgiven.

And she never will.

TeK

First: there is always a choice between woman's wants and queen's demands.

Second: this whole "never forgive" thing is flaw, not a bloody virtue, as much as being, well, a Praesi is a flaw, for all that it is geraldled as a virtue. Cat stated repeatedly that Praes needs to change, but Callow must be changed with it. To let go of the past, and let go of the old grudges. And do the unthinkable, something Cat, until very recently, had BIG troubles with:

Trust.

HHenryY

Of course its a flaw. In a totally rational world, optimisation, reconciliation and forgiveness would be the way to go.

The whole point of a grudge is that it's an irrational hatred based on a previous slight.

Cat likes Akua now. Akua has worked her charm on the group for months. They mostly like her too.

That doesn't change the fact that Akua murdered more people than you've ever met in one massive, fell swoop. People Cat was directly in charge of protecting.

Who she then swore a VERY serious oath to avenge.

It is VERY interesting though, to see the changing mental views. As Akua worms her way into the friendship of the group, she's also worming her way into the hearts of the readers. She's that good.

I like her too.

People just after the act were screaming for her blood. Now, a few dozen chapters down the line when she'd had time to make a few quips, show off her sense of humour and do a few

good deeds, suddenly everyone is like 'she'd make a great empress of praes' and 'she could be a way for Cat to finally get over her holding of grudges and grow as a person'. Just funny is all.

This is an evil psychopathic mass murderer who's entire schtick is manipulation. And yet, readers can't help but forget that because she's funny.

I just don't think Cat has.

Also, woman's wants and queens demands? The woman WANTS to forgive Akua. She likes her. She grins are her jokes, she constantly comments at how Akua is becoming a familiar, reliable, useful and enjoyable presence.

The Queen needs to kill her, because this is the woman who murdered a significant fraction of the entire population of the country that she rules, for no other reason than because she felt like it. Make use of her, fine. But she can't get away with that. In the end, there will be a reckoning. I'll be sad, because I like Akua. She's wormed her way into my heart too.

But she aint getting away.

[TeK](#)

Yeah, new chapter just got out.

[Fayhem](#)

> for all that it is gerald as a virtue.

I don't really have any substantive comments, I just wanted to say that this is my favorite typo I've seen in a while. Praise Geraldo!

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah. I mean I can absolutely see a world where cat destroys her when it's all over, but I don't think she'll be smiling about it at this point

parahacker

I think this is more about Aisha noticing a story brewing. The current situation might have parallels to previous Dreads.

parahacker

Even the trickle of notifications I get in my inbox from likes and responses to comments leaves me in awe of the volume

someone like, say, the author receives. Filters would become not merely prudent, but a lifestyle. Whooo boy.

Liliet

Catherine has brought up the possibility before and firmly rejected it. It's interesting that Aisha sees it too, and I'm curious what she has to say.

Sugar Roll

Cat wants a Dread Empress/Emperor who can be trusted to act with restraint. The Doom of Liesse does not meet that criteria. Give her the reins and she'll be building flying fortresses and doomsday weapons.

N0Br41nZ

Couldn't it be a puppet empress situation? Doesn't Cat have a "chain" or similar on Akua?

ninegardens

I get the feeling that would end very badly, because
A) "Monster on a chain" is a trope that Cat knows she can't afford to lean on.
B) To the extent she actually USES that chain, she is violating the spirit of the accords and set Praes up to fail the moment Cat is out of the picture. Her goal is to establish a functioning government, not make herself a weight bearing boss.

Mental Mouse

Also, C) Anyone who gains the throne will certainly gain access to all sorts of magical resources and gadgets. I would be surprised if none of that would help Akua slip her leash.

Sugar Roll

Not anymore. If I remember correctly, Akua's bindings were removed when Sve Noc devoured Winter.

Charlie

Wait, is Aisha the Scribe in drag? That seems like something the Scribe would ask, and I'm pretty sure we met Aisha pretty recently.

Trebar

Uh... Eudokia is already female so I don't know why her being Aisha would require drag. Aisha is one of the older characters

in the books; she was part of the original party back in the war college and one of Juniper's most trusted friends and associates.

Javvies

Um. No.

First, Scribe and Aisha are both women, so even if one were disguising themselves as the other, neither would be in drag. Second, Scribe is nowhere near the Army of Callow/Legions – if she were, she'd have made contact with Amadeus.

Third, and more importantly, Aisha Bishara was captain of one of the other companies (Wolf?) when Cat was at the War College, and was one of the original members of the Fifteenth. In fact, Aisha was specifically requested by Juniper. Also, Aisha was Ratface's ex.

Fourth, there's an extra chapter from the early days of the Fifteenth where somebody tried to kill Hakram in the streets of Ater, Aisha is present and involved in the process – at the end of said chapter, Scribe shows up and comments that Assassin still be in a mood when she tells him that he missed some of the assassin/murder cult during his purges of such people that was just used against Hakram.

Liliet

Aisha was mentioned, but I think she hasn't interacted with Cat in person since the post-Camps diplomacy.

Mental Mouse

As others have noted, Scribe is confirmed a different person. Assassin is a shapechanger, but imitating someone Cat knows so well at close range seems risky. One possible wrinkle *could* be an implanted command from Malicia's **Rule** aspect.

Shveiran

It could, yes. But honestly, EVERYTHING could be an implanted command. That aspect is fucking scary.

My point being, If we start to think that way we might as well run in circles.

superkeaton

Oh hey we're going to finally address Ki-and there it goes...

TeK

It's been a lot of years since their break up. And as any break up, it does not leave everything smooth and perfect afterwards. Maybe it's just me, but people who remain great friends after a break up, either didn't really broke up, or didn't really loved

each other in the first place. It is bitter and weird, and best left in the past.

Liliet

It's been a year and a half since their breakup, you mean.

TeK

I am not sure about that. From the actual break up to Aqua's Folly, 'bout a month at least, from Folly to Crusade a year, a Crusade for a couple of months, than Keter, than drow, actually yeah, at least it's a year and a half, but I feel like it's been more than that.

Liliet

>From the actual break up to Aqua's Folly, 'bout a month at least

You mean 'the evening before'.

And as far as timeline goes, I've actually tracked it:

https://www.reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/comments/bsz8b6/pgte_timeline_cat_just_turned_20_at_most/

...and right now is either late winter or early spring (snow was mentioned in Hearing).

Ok, so if you count the breakup from Cat's return from Winter and not from the final conversation pre-Second Llesse, it's been nearly two years. Not two years yet, though.

>I feel like it's been more than that

Welcome to Cat's Very Eventful Life... and erratic periodically dropping stuff like "I've been trying to get into Grand Alliance for years" where it does not even try to make sense with the timeline -_-

TeK

Huh. That is something.

superkeaton

I just want to actually see Kilian show up. She went through that ritual to help her blood, yeah? I wanna see what she's like now.

Shveiran

Personally, I'm glad she didn't. I never felt like she and Cat had any great chemistry (with the exception of the post-demon-dream-surgery scene in Marhford, admittedly) and the scene is already so damn crowded... it doesn't feel like she has much to contribute, honestly, ritual or no. The story moved on, and it did so without her.

[Liliet](#)

You're not wrong, but I feel more like it was bad writing in Book 2 and an injustice that needs to be remedied =x

Shveiran

It could be EE was struggling to make it more meaningful a relationship, it could be it was always meant not to be too deep and portray a teenager's infatuation, Cat seeking something simple and rewarding while pressed on all other fronts.

Honestly.... by this point in the story? I feel like I'd be happier believing the second and focusing on the rest of this amazing world and characters.

[Liliet](#)

There wasn't enough characterization for Killian regardless of if it was on purpose. I agree EE likely did mean to make it a shallow relationship, but we the audience got less about Killian than Cat did offscreen.

[TeK](#)

I am not sure if she did. She may have actually never had done it. We'll never know.

Soronel Haetir

I especially don't get the question given the way Cat needed to be browbeaten into even having Akua there, though I suppose Aisha might not have realized that.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, I think Aisha is just a typical example of *what this looks like from the side*.

[sivarajan](#)

After reading the latest extra chapter, I see Akua as being as much like Alaya as Cat is like Amadeus.

ninegardens

I mean... aside from the fact that Alaya spent her entire life trying to re-write the rules of the game (slowly), while Akua's great dream was to become one of the "Great villains" of history- to be remembered.

Alaya will be perfectly happy to be forgotten, nothing but a side note in history... as long as the plan WORKS.

Fayhem

> Alaya will be perfectly happy to be forgotten, nothing but a side note in history... as long as the plan WORKS.

Would she, though? That's certainly Amadeus, without a doubt. But the whole denouement of Book III rested on the fact that Amadeus' outlook isn't as compatible/similar to Alaya's as he had always believed – and, it seemed, as perhaps she had believed as well. I don't think we have enough information to say for sure either way yet, but it's definitely believable to me that they're pretty different on this score as well.

In fact, my take on the pair of them at this point (esp after Seed II) is that Amadeus is essentially seeking a New Praes while Alaya was always seeking Old Praes, But Better. This made their aims very compatible for a while since it means they both wanted/needed major reforms given how messed-up Praes has almost always been historically. But if I'm right about their motives, there was always going to be a point where Amadeus was going to want to keep going and Alaya would be ready to stop, or at least diverge in aim. And I think Book III might have been that point.

Liliet

Mhm.

ninegardens

See, I read it more as them both wanting to re-write the empire, its just that he wanted to burn it down and build from the ashes (Somewhat like Saint, to be honest), while she argued for incremental change.

Alaya allowed the construction of the deathstar, not for the sake of being remembered, but because she simply didn't believe Black's plan would work. This may have been stupid, immoral and unwise, but fundamentally, this wasn't about being remembered: she was totally happy letting Akua have all the credit, as long as afterwards she had the lever that she believed would prevent war (however misguided this belief was).

Alaya runs on desperation, Akua runs on Splendor.
Alaya prefers caution and subtlety, Akua prefers theater,
raw power, and to show off her talents.

They might on occasion use similar tools, but fundamentally,
there reasons for using these tools are very very different.

Shveiran

I agree, Alaya isn't very similar to Aqua.

However, I think the Empress wants and needs control. She wants to be in charge, to feel like no one has control over her life, and thus she isn't a martyr. She went after reforms and change because she knew things couldn't go on like they did; she embraced change because she knew those paths led to failure. She isn't after anything specific, just making her country better and keeping in charge of it.

I don't think she has an "end goal", per se.

[*Fayhem*](#)

> I think the Empress wants and needs control. She wants to be in charge, to feel like no one has control over her life

I think this is a very accurate take on Alaya. If Amadeus' original underlying motivation was witnessing *failure*, then Alaya's was feeling *powerlessness*. And that has significant implications for what she wants and is willing to do.

[*Fayhem*](#)

I agree that allowing/deliberately inducing the creation of the Fantasy Deathstar wasn't itself about being remembered; it was more of an example of how despite Alaya and Amadeus being allied for a long time and being personally close it would be a mistake to assume that because something is true of one it can be automatically taken as evidence that the same is true for the other. And then relating that to the fact that I don't think that we've seen any direct evidence that Alaya doesn't care about being remembered, so since it can't be reliably inferred she would feel that way just because Amadeus does we just don't have evidence to directly suggest that is the case.

Alaya and Akua definitely aren't the same, either. But tbf, the original claim (which I found interesting to consider though I'm not certain I agree) was that Akua was to Alaya what Catherine is to Black. And Catherine

definitely, palpably, is not the same as Black, so Akua not being the same as Alaya doesn't inherently invalidate that thesis. I do believe that Alaya wants something more like a reformed/improved version of Old Praes, and that actually is what Akua wanted as well, in her own way. The difference between Amadeus/Catherine and Alaya/Akua to me is that Catherine is a **successful** evolution of Amadeus' philosophy while Akua, well, succumbed to Folly.

[Liliet](#)

This is definitely supported by Seed II as I read it as well.

[sivarajan](#)

Akua has gone through a redemption arc though.

hakureireimu

I'd say she's still in the process of going through her redemption arc.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Lets see, at this point she's stuck by Cat through the Everdark, including defending her in the confrontation/interrogation by Sve Noc. She handled the backup miracle for the Battle of the Camps, and putting Black together while Cat was still in Twilight. How much proof is needed? (Yes, that's pretty much a universal question for redemption, and it comes into play here.)

Shveiran

She did all of that, true enough, but I'm not sure what this proves. What are your thoughts on the matter?

[Mental Mouse](#)

I think at this point she's as far off her main "story" track as Cat is. Akua is a psychological character in a narrative world. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Yes, we need no more proof that *Akua is going through a redemption arc*.

I'll consider it complete where I can assume that in the event of Catherine's sudden and untimely death, Akua will stick to the 'good person' track and spite temptations of power and glory in favor of background quiet doing the right thing (should such arise).

TeK

Actually not a bad idea, and it has a shape to it. Vivienne is all but confirmed to be the next Queen of Callow, right? Her dynamic with Aqua PERFECTLY encapsulates the dynamic between Callow and Praes: bitter enemies and the other side did monstrous things that could not be forgiven, yet now you have a chance to end the strife and work towards a common, better goal, with all the tensions that entails. From narrative perspective it is near perfect. Aqua is Malicia's new Praes, the one that does BETTER than its predecessors, while not mindlessly tearing everything down like Black wants. It has a terrible past behind it, as does Praes, but also... Hope? I don't know, I like it. And just as much, Vivienne is new Callow – first bitter enemy of all things not Callow and Praes, gradually getting BETTER, but still remaining itself. With all that it entails.

Aqua said it herself, she hopes for a redemption. And all she needs for that is trust. A chance. And that is what, in the end, Praes needs too, doesn't it?

TeK

I mean, I've seen people here jumping sideways in riot over how nobody trusts a known Villain, but somehow an issue of trust also dissipates when we see how hard of a choice it really is. Strange.

Sinestere

I fully expect Emperess General, first Orc on the Tower Throne and first of her name to be the ruler the guide presents. That she would not want it just means she would be good for the role and she would need to be tricked into it. Hellhound for Emperress!

TeK

"That she would not want it just means she would be good for the role"

Not what Cat thinks.

Liliet

Praes needs Amadeus fixing it, not a recovering alcoholic locked back in the wine cellar they grew up in.

TeK

Amadeus is a butcher with no clear plan in mind besides "tear it all down and probably something better will come out". He literally says "everything more is expandable", the brightest idea of the future is "from that moment we can grow". The

latest two extra chapters did not do anything to clear that up by the way.

OK, an overexaggeration, but I had not seen a concrete representation of what he wants to do with Praes, it gives an impression that he follows the maxim "win now, make decision later". Malicia put that right, a nation is not a Lego to build whatever you want.

He was always an outside force. He accepted that, even used that, but it is still a fact. It gives him a certain edge, but also a blind spot. It would not be that different from Aisha trying to reform Callow.

In short, I really doubt Amadeus' ability to "fix" Praes. That is the whole reason he got himself a cat in the first place.

Soronel Haetir

Amadeus' end-game is to change the nature of the Praes-Callow relationship and by doing so the root causes for Praes' problems (the very precarious food situation) will be taken care of. That strikes me as much more of a plan than "tear it all down and something better will naturally grow in its place"

[TeK](#)

That strikes me as exactly that. "Tear it all down" – existing relationship between Callow and Praes and all institutional madness that stabs Praes in the foot, and "something better will naturally grow in its place" – after you get root of the problem, something good must happen and will happen and it will be better.

It is literally what I said.

[Liliet](#)

That was the basics of his plan when he was 20 (or less). He has since acquired far more of it.

[TeK](#)

I didn't see it though.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, the Legions are fully complete already, the bureaucracy is flourishing, he is making plans for international treaties and deals. That's more of a plan than he had at 20.

ninegardens

I mean... I think he also has plans like "Remove the noble houses monopoly of magical training" and "Change the relationship between Orcs and the Empire."

Given that we literally saw how he ran Callow for 40 years (or however long it was), I think we can see that he has some idea how to run a kingdom. Heck- even then he was engaged in the game of "changing a culture" – a game he won at when rebuilding the legions... then succeeded at reasonably in Callow (in that he created the circumstances for someone such as Cat to exist).

This isn't the recklessness of "burn it down and start again", this is someone who knows how to plan.

[TeK](#)

«Remove the noble houses monopoly of magical training»

Take a magical power from nobles.

«Change the relationship between Orcs and the Empire»

Take military power from nobles.

«Make Praes into landholds»

Take agricultural power from nobles.

See a pattern?

"Given that we literally saw how he ran Callow for 40 years (or however long it was), I think we can see that he has some idea how to run a kingdom. Heck- even then he was engaged in the game of «changing a culture» – a game he won at when rebuilding the legions... then succeeded at reasonably in Callow (in that he created the circumstances for someone such as Cat to exist)."

He run it, yes, but, and I don't know how to properly express it. Ok. Hear me out. He "maintained" Callow, and prepared for a Crusade. Maintaining a country in a functional state is a hard task, and he was up to it: obviously, he is an amazing administrator. But all he did is propping up it, not... ruling. I can't put it in correct terms and it annoys me, but, well, he didn't "care" for the future. Callow was not really a functional nation in any way, it wasn't meant to. If Black were to die, it would've collapsed faster than you say "Liesse Rebellion". This is why he needed actual Cat, and why Cat also needs someone else. It is not his role – going forwards. He aquired what he needed, but besides that, he never really

made attempts to better the country or the life. Everything was... Optimal. A minimal amount of comfort so that populace would not rise, but that is it.

Frankly, not what I want to see out of my ruler. His lack of empathy is not a good qualification. How the hell can he care for his people, if he can't see them as people?

[Liliet](#)

>His lack of empathy is not a good qualification.

Ok so wordpress is really not a good platform for my extensive explanation of 'why Amadeus has a bad case of *too much empathy* and it's been both making his life difficult and making him forge a moral compass out of fucking Praesi bullshit he was raised on', are you on discord?

Because Amadeus is a very empathetic person and imho every other reading fails to hold up consistently through everything we know about him from his own, Cat's and his friends' POVs.

[TeK](#)

"are you on discord?"

I can be. I have some real issues with "Amadeus is an empathetic person". Actually not too many.

I have to think...

[Liliet](#)

(You are hereby officially invited to our Discord server) (as well as anyone reading this comment) (<https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>)

I'm Liliet#1061 there ^^

I would be glad to continue this discussion :3

[Liliet](#)

>OK, an overexaggeration, but I had not seen a concrete representation of what he wants to do with Praes,

We have had bits and pieces of that through the story.

1. The Reforms. Giving greenskins equal political and economical weight, making the Legions an entity independent of the nobility, making a bureacracy independent of the nobility, and both merit-based and egalitarian on who can

enter the hierarchy. As far as real world parallels it's making me think of China, though I'll admit I don't know much about the historical system there.

2. Public education – War College, somewhat intertwined with the above point (which is a mark of a well-thought-out plan), has at his will been made accessible even to a Callowan orphan in a choked economically city. He also wanted a mage college, and now wants it in Cardinal. We also know that War College gets scholarship students from random schools around Praes (I don't remember who exactly but one of the characters got there in this way, though it might have been Nilin, slightly undermining the point), and his approach to Callowan orphans was to give them a good education that would allow them to go into basically any trade they wanted.

3. Eliminating hunger, and with the lack of absolute economic need for blood sacrifices, banning those (Catherine has discussed this with him, and he *did* want to ban them). He also wanted to ban diabolism, but it's unenforceable. Still, he aims to at least phase it out by making it grounds for being expelled from / inadmissible to the Legions. Definitely banning the shit out of demons, the Accords kind of build on his ideas there.

4. Positive sum foreign relationships – something he yelled at Alaya over going back on, even though it seems to have originally been her idea. Stable alliances and no longer a war every time Praes gains strength.

I cannot recall more details than that, but is this really insufficient as a vision for the future?

[TeK](#)

“1. The Reforms.”

A way to gain an independent military power to do “the culling”

“2. Public education”

A way to control dangerous elements, and power that lies in them, be it magical one, or narrative one. Also maintaining control over military power since all the officers have to go through Colledge and it is as good as his. Convenient.

3. 3. Eliminating hunger, and with the lack of absolute economic need for blood sacrifices, banning those (Catherine has discussed this with him, and he did want to

ban them). He also wanted to ban diabolism, but it's unenforceable.

The bigger the population, the bigger an army it can maintain. Diabolism, in a warfare doctrine he created, allows for too much collateral damage. Plus it is a power source on which a big portion of power of his main enemies is predicated upon. Actually, blood sacrifices, since they are a pervuew of lords and an original reason why they got power to begin with, are also a cornerstone of their powerbase. So, a strike against his enemies, taking away tools he does not rely on anyhow.

"4. Positive sum foreign relationships"

Allies. Still an acquisition of power.

What you mentioned tells nothing of what he wants, those are just progressive steps of acquiring and consolidating a powerbase.

I am biased here, because I do not **believe** he actually wants just to stick it to the Heavens, but Name can warp who you are, and besides, I dug myself too deep, can't fall back now, gotta play a devil's advocate.

There is a thing that I want to point out though. He possibly killed hundreds of thousands of civilians in Procer through his war. Just like that. Yet people say that Aqua, who killed considerably less, should not be allowed anywhere outside a screaming pit of hell, because she is a murderer.

[Liliet](#)

>There is a thing that I want to point out though. He possibly killed hundreds of thousands of civilians in Procer through his war. Just like that. Yet people say that Aqua, who killed considerably less, should not be allowed anywhere outside a screaming pit of hell, because she is a murderer.

The difference between the two of them is... circumstances under which they can be expected to act like that. The threshold that needs to be passed before they do.

For Amadeus, it was "fighting a defensive war against an alliance with a much bigger army, cut off from all his allies and wrecked by personal losses".

For Akua, it was "having this city have population is just so inconvenient for my rise to power".

The reason why Akua cannot be allowed anywhere near ruling is the kind of decision making process she has, of which Second Liesse is a stark illustration. Amadeus has ruled for 40 years, and his atrocities in Procer are a product of *desperation*.

Mind you, I am speaking from a consequentialist point of view here, because that's how I process these things, but I've found deonological conclusions end to mirror consequentialist ones just with different formulations of reasoning. So mine is: in order to make sure Amadeus does not do that again, you need to open an alternative path and show Praes will not be inevitably destroyed if he doesn't do that again. In order to make sure Akua does not do that again, you need to *never let her have unsupervised power over a large amount of civilians ever again*.

>What you mentioned tells nothing of what he wants, those are just progressive steps of acquiring and consolidating a powerbase.

I mean this is the point where I naturally go into deeper psychological analysis of what a character reacts to and what forms their emotions and motivations.

For example, Alaya has control issues for entirely understandable reasons. She is also a political nerd, and shares some of Amadeus's "why have this work worse when it can be made to work better" pure fix-it motivation (they'd talked about this back in her tavern days), and there have been hints she also feels genuine attachment to and responsibility for "her wayward realm", but largely her reactions and logic are shaped by the trauma she'd received so long ago. She wants power, because she very badly doesn't want to be powerless.

Sabah was a classic example of True Neutral – attached to her in-group, vague sentiment towards her out-group but not so much it'd override motivations coming from the in-group.

Akua has had, throughout her story, a mixture of motivations based on the sense of duty her mother instilled in her (as an heiress of Wolof, she *should* seek power and prestige for her line and herself), based on her desire for self-actualization and getting out of her mother's control, and based on the sheer genuine nerdery (as a child, Akua looked in awe at the giant pyramids built for power, and no matter how much Tasia tried to smother that girl, she never truly succeeded)

(also the part where her father genuinely loved sorcery and those were her happiest memories).

What forms Amadeus's emotions and motivations? What does he react to and how does he act in a low-stakes environment? What arguments does he find compelling in a debate? Which parts of his motivations does he feel compelled to explain (to Catherine, his student) and which does he leave unsaid? What does he state as a self-evident axiom? What needles him, what moves him, what do his friends think about him?

I don't remember if I linked this in this conversation yet, but in case I haven't, <https://lilietsblog.tumblr.com/post/182976359475/a-compilation-of-points-about-amadeus-of-the-green#notes>

...

...

Actually, given that *I* am not playing devil's advocate here and am genuinely explaining full force what I mean and why I think what I do right now, I might as well pull out the recently acquired ammunition.

>Amadeus of the Green Stretch was the son of corpses now buried, born of a land tread by soldiers under different banners with every season. Duni, he was, his skin the pale shame of old defeats that Praes had deemed filth even in name, and never did he forget it. It was not the Tower's promises that whispered in his sleep but the footsteps of his youth, the wheel of unending defeats seen from the side with cold eyes. In indignation he had become squire, and so sharp a blade found it that it slew his rivals and knighted him in black. To the banner he'd raised the disgraces of the Wasteland had flocked, be they green of skin and red of hand, Named hunted from above or every sharp mind and soul of steel that knew contempt but no captain. His was a company of the hungry and the lost, sworn to bleed for those unworthy of that blood. And so Amadeus of the Green Stretch asserted this: Praes is a mould that must be broken.

[TeK](#)

Also I am a little tired of "alcoholic and wine cellar" analogy. I think it bears mention that back when the Aqua's Folly happened, she was still arguably a teenager. Indocrinated from the birth no less. And even indocrinated, she already tried to do better than her own mentors. She had time and experience and company to grow and learn. Those are not the same things. By your logic we do need to slaughter

every magical line in Praes just so there were no opportunity to summon those nasty-nasty demons again. You see the problem? It's an issue of trust again. Again, what I wanted to point out, is how narratively fitting this whole thing is. Praes and Aqua does not deserve a trust and a second chance, by all accounts, they deserve what Saint had in store for them – Fire and Blood. That is however very [b]Black[/b] way of seeing it.

Shveiran

You are making this about black and white – either Aqua is trusted with the Empress titles, or no one gives Praes a chance to be better ever.

I... fail to see the correlation.

The Diabolist never tried to do better than her predecessors: she tried to do BIGGER, which is not the issue. More impressively summoned demons is not what's needed to say she is a step-up from the Praes of old.

Aqua may very well redeem herself; she may change. But I fail to see how any of the changes she showed, even if assumed genuine, are any indication she is ready to rule a country without falling back to her old habits – which she has abandoned for what, less than two years at the moment? By all means, let's see if she can do better. Perhaps we should use the biggest Evil nation we can bring to the table as the testing block though. Just an idea.

Regardless, the argument is simple: "Trusting all villains, always" is not the only alternative to "trust no Villain, ever".

You can stop in the middle with a "trust SOME Villains, SOMETIMES". Which, you know, is what sensible people do with regards to people all the time.

You trust some of them; and you trust them to a point based on their history and relationships.

I trust my girlfriend a lot, but I don't trust her to correctly build a nuclear reactor – nor do I extend that trust to all girlfriends in the world.

[TeK](#)

"You are making this about black and white – either Aqua is trusted with the Empress titles, or no one gives Praes a chance to be better ever."

I do not, and I apologize if I made such an impression. I am saying there are certain parallels between Aqua and Praes. Including the shady history. That is not an

argument against working with her. The same goes for Praes. Both have a certain danger of going back the old ways. You may have not noticed, but I have never actually argued that you SHOULD give Aqua the unlimited power of the Dread Emperor. It is really similar for both Praes and Aqua in that regard as well: limited trust with an overseer to ensure no abuse of power happens. It is not me who thinks in black and white.

Again, I pointed out that Aqua is not a bloodthirsty maniac that gets off mass murders as "alcoholic" analogy seem to imply. She is a product of her time and of her culture – as much as Praes is. And just as Praes, it does not actually remove the possibility of cooperation in the future.

Again, I am NOT argue that Aqua SHOULD be Dread Empress, I am arguing that there are narrative similarities between Aqua's character journey and Praesi one. In my mind. I did not see arguments to the contrary.

"The Diabolist never tried to do better than her predecessors"

No she did, she openly acknowledge to herself that Malicia and Black were right about many blunders Praesi had, and opted to evade them, to build something new instead of going the old way, which is clear from her rejection of the path her mother laid out for her.

About going bigger: she was ridiculously outmatched in the strength department. Both Still Water and Demons were things she did out of necessity, not an outright bloodthirstiness. I am not saying those are good, again, don't misread me, I am saying that it is a desperation plus culturally loose standards.

"But I fail to see how any of the changes she showed, even if assumed genuine, are any indication she is ready to rule a country without falling back to her old habits – which she has abandoned for what, less than two years at the moment?"

First of all, you are making an assumption that she will in fact "fall back on her old habits" which is what exactly? And why do you think so? That is what I don't like about that analogy I mentioned: there was no precedent of her actually "falling back on her old habits". It is a presumption. Again, I feel just so nobody misunderstands me again: it's a necessary assumption, because you can't risk with such things. But it leads to my second point: it just parallels again Aqua to Praes. Because in historical terms, as a nation, Praes had

abandoned it's "old habits" for what? 40 years, and ended up falling onto them again. Or at least, Malicia fall back. So yeah, parallels.

"Perhaps we should use the biggest Evil nation we can bring to the table as the testing block though."

"You can stop in the middle with a «trust SOME Villains, SOMETIMES». Which, you know, is what sensible people do with regards to people all the time. You trust some of them; and you trust them to a point based on their history and relationships."

And with control and oversight. I never argued against that, did I? How does it happen, that you make all my statements into absolutes, but it is I who thinks in black and white?

Liliet

> Again, I pointed out that Aqua is not a bloodthirsty maniac that gets off mass murders as "alcoholic" analogy seem sto imply.

That's hot how I read that.

One way in which addiction like that manifests itself is simply as a habit. You don't know what else to do, so you do that.

Akua doesn't know any other method of rule than what she'd been taught at Tasia's knee... and she is not *interested* in rule and administration in the way Amadeus was. She never had passion for the idea of being a Dread Empress, only for *becoming* one, and even that was more about the journey than the destination (see her thoughts in her POV chapter at the start of Second Liesse). Akua would half ass ruling by falling back on "how it has always been done before", smothering her empathy and budding ideas of 'right thing to do' yet again – unless she had someone to stand over her shoulder and patiently coach her through doing things the right way, which defeats the point of having *her* be Empress in the first place.

Don't underestimate the soul sucking whirlpool power of "this is literally the only way I know how to do this"

TeK

"patiently coach her through doing things the right way, which defeats the point of having her be Empress in the first place"

Why does it? Amadeus is Nameless, and oooold. Eighty, I believe. Someone gotta step in.

«this is literally the only way I know how to do this»

There was that whole character developement though...

[Liliet](#)

>Why does it? Amadeus is Nameless, and oooold. Eighty, I believe. Someone gotta step in.

He is more than sixty, but at least recently he was less than eighty.

And teaching someone from scratch is much easier than trying to excise bad habits, especially when bringing this person into power would be incredibly bad PR for yourself and your allies both.

>There was that whole character developement though...

Character development gives you "I now have a vague inkling that something is wrong with the way I've been doing this", not actual skills / alternative tools.

Agent J

Then you have poor tastes in prospective mates, my friend. I bet she doesn't even know how to make a proper ballista.

ninegardens

>By your logic we do need to slaughter every magical line in Praes just so there were no opportunity to summon those nasty-nasty demons again. You see the problem?

I don't think this is the logic.

We are free to think "We should keep an eye on Praes magical lines", and "A particular individual who has committed mass slaughter does not deserve to be given power over millions of lives" without thinking "Therefore everyone with the potential to summon demons must be put to the sword".

We might even decide "Akua should be allowed to live" without thinking "Akua should have power". Or we might decide "Akua actually DOES deserve to die for her crimes" without also believing that all mages with the POTENTIAL to commit such crimes also deserve death.

We are free to extend PARTIAL trust to Akua and Praes in general without saying "By the way here's a treasury of

deranged knowledge and possessed artifacts, please don't do anything evil with them"

Akua's ethics are... context sensitive. Putting her in a the position of ruling a country, where morally questionable acts are likely to be necessary, and expecting her to have good judgement determining bad from good seems foolish.

Cordelia manipulates and summons cthulu and orders assassinations because her back is to the wall. Akua is liable to do those things simply because she was never raised to see them as disagreeable.

Keeping her in a position where her talents are directed by OTHER PEOPLE'S morality is simply a good idea.

[Tek](#)

Fine, you arguing against my main point. I just wanted to point out how similar Aqua is to Praes as a whole, and the very similar issues that rise out of handling it. Mu argument to putting Aqua at the Tower begined and ended with "it would be narratatively fitting". Please don't argue against something I did not say. Or if I did say, than hell, it wasn't intentional. Of course giving Aqua power would have all kinds of problems, of course you don't deal in black and white. Like, I NEVER SAID THE TRSUT SHOULD BE ABSOLUTE. Why are you the second person telling me that? I reread my comment, I did not see where I said anything about full and unconditional trust.

"Cordelia manipulates and summons cthulu and orders assassinations because her back is to the wall. Akua is liable to do those things simply because she was never raised to see them as disagreeable."

Uhm, if we are going by what we know, Aqua summoned Ctulchu's and all that jazz because her own back was against the wall. Nevermind when she finally got Liesse flying – she is a cornerstone of nobility's future, as a class, and they were being killed off. She had her back against the wall in a very real sence – from the moment of her birth, I'd wager. I fail to see your argument. She was raised by the mantra "desperate times deserve desperate measures", unless you argue that she wanted to summon demons for the hell of it.

Agent J

"-unless you argue that she wanted to summon demons for the hell of it."

I see what you did there. 😊

Andrew Mitchell

> Akua's ethics are... context sensitive.

What an excellent description. Spot on IMO.

[Liliet](#)

OH DEF

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Vivienne is all but confirmed to be the next Queen of Callow, right?

That's what Cat's planning, but then, Cat doesn't always get what she wants. There's still our Reluctant General as a backup....

As far as Akua (please, she doesn't even have a water theme!), having her reach the heights of power as Dread Emperor is probably the polar opposite of "redemption".

[TeK](#)

Why? Does redemption necessitates hell?

[TeK](#)

People argue me here on realpolitik, but miss the big point: having Aqua as Praes stand in and Vivi as Callow one "fits" narratively for me, and this is quite a big argument for actually having her there. I mean it is literally a universe runned by narrative.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, but where does that story GO? Like, yeah, it fits, but does it fit in a good way or in a bad way? Some stories need to be deliberately avoided to avoid bad outcomes.

[TeK](#)

Well, if Vivi and Aqua can coexist, and she does not stab everyone in the back by the end of this, I give this an even odds of being a good idea.

Truthhut

I started cackling like a madman when I read that last line.

Daniel E

Can we get a formal list of Akua's nicknames? Aside from the 2 mentioned here, the only other I recall is 'bad faith wraith'.

Shveiran

Indrani ahs been dropping them.
You'll need to do it manually through a re-read of Books Four to Five.
Which is always a nice way to enjoy some more Guideverse.

[Liliet](#)

Winter Leftovers, Shadehelian are two of my favorites.

[heymady](#)

My heart skipped a beat there.

SpeckofStardust

Akua literally cant be the next empress.
For like the exact reason of her fatal flaw, she is to much of a social person, Her friend (that Cat killed) to trusting her known traitorous subordinate with her personal thoughts, to her relationship with her father, to her actively becoming friends with the woe.
She is in her nature someone who fits into the mold around her (as much as she argues otherwise) that she cant change the mold she's in.
She is not the person who can reshape a nation to the degree needed to fix Praes.
Anyone who argues otherwise is missing the parts of her character that haven't changed from the beginning.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

~~Heir of Heart~~

Walrus

Y'all seem to forget that it's still illegal for an undead to reign as Dread Emperor, been that way since Revenant was deposed.

[Liliet](#)

Ah but the High Lords have been weakened enough the next Dread Emp doesn't need to care about legitimacy in their eyes.
Malicia and Black have paved the way for Literally Any Bullshit That Comes Next, that's the only reason Amadeus himself is a candidae, considering he's Duni.

Chapter 66: Silvered

"Trust given is a gift, costing only the giver. Trust earned is in balance, worth as much to earner as granter."

– King Edward Alban of Callow, best known for annexing the Kingdom of Liesse

The urge was there to laugh in disbelief, though I didn't. Aisha was deadly serious in her question, and she was one the better-informed officers at the highest rung of the Army of Callow. She had Juniper's ear, working relationships or personal connections with most the Woe and the rest of my closest collaborators. She was, as it happened, one of the few people who knew of the Liesse Accords even if that knowledge was modest. If she could believe that, then others would.

"I do not," I said.

The Staff Tribune nodded in graceful acknowledgement, lovely heart-shaped face touched by the firelight.

"Then this is a mistake," she murmured, discretely glancing at Akua without turning.

I kept any hint of displeasure from showing on my face. Of all my old College companions I'd always had one of the more complex relationships with Aisha Bishara. Her high birth in an old Wasteland line had made it difficult to trust her, at first, and back in the days where Juniper and I had been more frequently at odds her open siding with her friend as made her one of the Hellhounds and not one of 'mine', so to speak. We'd gotten past that, over the months and years, but I'd never hidden my belief that quite a few Wasteland highborn belonged dangling from a rope and that'd always lain between us. Aisha was more careful not to offend, ever stepping lightly around matters she thought our very different origins would make contentious. Frowning now or thinning my lips would have her shuttering immediately, and that was the opposite of what I wanted. I gazed where the Taghreb had flicked the glance, finding Akua effortlessly drawing Masego into what had become a debate over the poetries of the east by mentioning the 'riddling-sorcerers of the Nameless City'. The blind mage let out an amused huff and a began declaiming something in a dialect of Mtethwa I could barely make out a few words from.

"There are lines in Praes that are older than the Sahelians," Aisha Bishara murmured. "Others who have more often climbed the Tower, or through whose veins greater gifts flow. Yet one of that shade's kin ruled Wolof, when the Empire was first founded, and where every other great line of that days has withered and died the Sahelians still thrive."

I rolled my cup against the flat of my palm, eyes hooded as I listened to Aisha in pensive silence.

"That woman right there is of the blood of the original murder, Catherine Foundling," she whispered. "The first iron-sharp treachery. All under the sun have known this since the Tower was first raised, and yet again and again the Sahelians have betrayed through surprise. Because they are charming, my queen. They are beautiful and fascinating and so very *useful* that certainly it couldn't hurt to bring them into the fold just the once."

Aisha bared the faintest hint of teeth at me, almost like an orc would have.

"They are like ink, that lot," she said. "It only takes one drop in a cup water, and no matter how much you pour from that day on it will never be entirely pure again. And now you have let one of the finest makings of that line into your hearth, Catherine."

Her fingers clenched, her gloves crinkling.

"She'll have half of them charmed by the end of the night," the Staff Tribune clinically said. "The rest uncertain. I expect she could ever turn Juniper's opinion of her around, given long enough."

"You make her sound like a force of nature," I said.

We watched the laughter and warmth unfolding before us, separate from it as if a transparent wall of dread had been slammed down between us.

"She was Named," Aisha simply said. "And she rose high during years where the iron was sharp like rarely before."

An elegantly backhanded compliment sent my way, that. There was a reason I'd more than once mulled stealing the Staff Tribune away from the army and making her my foremost diplomat.

"She remains impressive, even as a shade," I admitted. "And you're not without reason to worry."

"And yet," Aisha said.

"And yet," I agreed.

A heartbeat passed.

"This is indiscreet, and perhaps insolent to ask," Aisha delicately said, "but are you-"

I waved the notion away before she could even finish.

"I am," I said, "Callowan."

I'd come to learn that just as the Wasteland's worst excesses needed to be excised from its flesh, so did Callow's own spiteful inclinations. But in the end, I was more than mind and principle, more than thought. I was flesh, too, and like so many of my people my bones were made of grudge. There were some trespasses that could not be forgiven or forgot. One hundred thousand souls. Some follies were beyond forgiveness even were it wished. Sometimes, tough, forgiveness was not the heart of a story.

"I will have long a price as I can conceive, in due time," I murmured. "Worry not of that."

"You have lingering eyes," Aisha hesitantly said.

"They've lingered on you as well," I amusedly replied. "Shall I make you empress instead, Lady Bishara?"

Her cheeks reddened the slightest bit, which was unexpectedly charming. Ah, if it didn't have *terrible idea* written all over it... The embarrassment passed, swiftly mastered.

"Rarely has there ever been more poisoned a chalice than the Tower," the dark-eyed woman somberly said. "I would not dare drink of that cup. Yet someone must hold it, and that person cannot be Malicia."

Something hard and cold passed in the cast of her face, at that, whisked away by the noblewoman's mask but not quite quickly enough.

"Agreed," I replied. "And Aisha, about Ratface-"

She curtly shook her head.

"I thank you, Catherine, but I will grieve Hasan in my own way," she said.

Aisha was the only person I'd ever known to call him Hasan instead of Ratface regularly. They'd been lovers, back at the College. A strange pairing, given Ratface's deep hatred of the nobility and Aisha's open pride in her own heritage, but they'd both been incredibly lovely and the intensity of a passion could make up for a lot of differences. They'd parted ways before I met either of them, though Ratface had remained... inclined in the years after. I'd thought Aisha less attached, but now I wondered. Faded affections could find fresh life in other forms, and remain sweet at heart for the good times once shared. I nodded in deference to her grief, for it was greater than mine and it had older claim on the shade of the man who'd died in my service at Malicia's order. Damn her for that, and so many other things.

"It'll be Black, if I have my way," I said.

A moment passed as Aisha mulled over what I'd just said.

"You usually do," she finally said, tone faintly rueful. "It will be a bloodletting that makes the War of Thirteen Tyrants and One pale, if he rises."

"Change will come," I said. "If fought, it will not come gently."

"They'll fight," Aisha tiredly said. "That is our nature, for good or ill."

"It can't be like it was before," I told her. "You know that. Nor *should* it. We've come too far for that."

"And her?" the lovely tribune said, glancing at Akua. "Where does she stand, in this new world of yours?"

"Nowhere gentle," I said. "Though that will be a choice of her own making."

"Will it?" Aisha said. "I imagine many have thought themselves her captain, in days past. I see none still drawing breath."

"If I were trying to conquer her, I'd fail," I softly said. "I've known that from the start. She has ever been my better at those games."

"And yet," Aisha repeated, the echo almost chiding.

"Always she's had a knack for masks," I said. "More than wearing them she *became* them, you know. It was why she wielded her Name so well."

"Masks are shed, eventually," Aisha warned.

"What if you didn't want to shed it?" I said. "What if wearing that mask you got all these things that some part of you, deep down, had been craving? Because Sahelians are still humans, Aisha. There are some things you can't train yourself out of no matter how hard you try."

"There are things she will crave deeper still," she said. "For that too was taught. And when the opportunity comes, the same choice that has always been made will be made."

I smiled, and remembered a winding talk had some time ago under morning sun. *You have seen the worst of us*, she'd said. *And through that knowing taken our measure. But there is more, Catherine.* She'd seemingly been speaking of her own kind, of the High Lords and Ladies. But there'd been the slightest chink in the mask when she'd spoken of her great-uncle who'd fled to Nicae. *If even a Sahelian can have the taste for peace, there is yet something left to be kindled.* A little too sharp, a little too brittle. The first hint of the bile she'd vented on Kairos

Theodosian the same dawn that's seen the birth of the Ways. And I knew, of course, that she was not beyond such exquisite deception. That she might have been weaving that intricate web around me since the moment she saved my life in the Everdark. But it wouldn't matter, I thought, watching Akua Sahelian letting out a snort of laughter at some pointed comment Indrani had made. It wouldn't matter because she'd *want* it to be true.

"Be watchful, Aisha," I said. "I will be as well. But that arrow has already been loosed, and I will not gainsay it now."

"May the Gods avert their eyes from it all," she murmured. "You've always had an uncanny way for seeing what others do not, Catherine. I will trust in it once more."

"With open eyes," I smiled.

"Is that not the finest manner of trust?" Aisha smiled back.

She drifted away just as easily as she'd come when there was a lull in the conversation for her to slide into, adding her thread to the weave of it with practiced grace. Sometimes I envied how easily it seemed to come to the highborn around me, the social graces I still struggled with even when I genuinely meant to use them. There was something to be said for training from one's youth, even if the other aspects of nobility held little worth in my eyes. The hours passed smoothly, after that, eased by the wine and food and warmth. Twice more Robber tried to needle Akua into anger and struck only at smoke, until even Pickler looked discomfited on his behalf. He did not try a third time. With the greenskins swiftly moving for second portions of meat and the cask of ale being opened conversation bloomed in every direction, sometimes coming together for virulent debates but just as often staying a chaotic multitude. A warmth had seeped in me that had little to do with the fire or the drink, though I'd partaken of both generously. Still I sensed it immediately when two people passed through the outer wards surrounding the tumulus maybe half a bell before midnight. I wove Night to have a look, and to my surprise found two familiar faces walking up the hill.

Marshal Grem One-Eye, the grizzled old orc who was still thought by many the finest general alive, was carrying two bottles of aragh and from the sounds of it complaining that my father hadn't even offered to carry one – to which Black piously informed him that as a recovering hostage he could not trust himself to carry out such strenuous labour. A few of my people heard the steps before the two came in sight, but there was a beat of surprise when they were fully seen in the firelight.

"Black, Marshal Grem," I greeted them. "Have a seat, it's not like we're lacking room."

The orc Marshal – Black's, not mine – sniffed the air with a bemused look on his craggy face.

"Is that horse I'm smelling?" Grem One-Eye said. "Haven't had a skewer of that in decades. Last time was..."

"Fleeing after that raid on the Wall," Black said, lips twitching. "When those Iarsmai riders went after us."

"Wait, I think I had a Name dream about that back in the day," I said. "When you lot went after the Commander of the Watch?"

"Oh man, I heard about that," Archer enthused. "I mean, no lie, the Lady is terrible at telling stories-"

"No lie indeed," Black said, lips quirking outright.

"- but this one she actually made pretty entertaining," Indrani finished.

"Did she mention the part where the Commander beat Black like a rented mule?" I said. "It was almost embarrassing to see."

"That detail certainly never made it to Court," Akua slyly added.

"A grave exaggeration," Black said, eyeing me from the side. "I was maneuvering her into a killing blow."

"While she was manoeuvring you down a set of stairs, head first," I drily replied.

He slid into a seat not far from me while Grem passed the bottles to a – oh Gods, that was just wrong – *blushing* Juniper. I'd forgotten she had this uh, intense sort of admiration for Black. She half-glared at me for having the gall to mention that the legendary Carrion Lord had once been thrown down a set of stairs. Gods, I should find a way to pass along that one dream I had where he and Ranger were getting all... bright-eyed at each other. That ought to cure her from this right quick.

"We must have been fleeing on foot for half a day before they caught up," the Marshal of Praes said. "Flat grounds, maybe a bell from the marches proper. Twenty of them, with this big man in mail the ranking officer."

"The cousin to Duchess Kegan's husband, we later learned," Black said.

The old orc grinned.

"The Watch is coming, he said," Marshal Grem recounted. "Soon you will be in longbow range. You cannot escape our sight. Surrender now, or-"

Indrani made a whistling sound, like an arrow loosed, then a fleshy hit.

"So Hye shot him, naturally," Black said. "Right in the throat."

"And Wekesa, still drenched in sweat from the running and looking like a rumpled cat, he leans forward and he says all cool as ice," Grem One-Eye began.

"Guess he didn't see *that* coming," the two old killers guffawed together.

They chuckled with the ease of two old friends sharing a worn and beloved joke, now thrown around as much for the fondness of the tale as for whatever waning humour it might have once held. I shared a look of secondhand embarrassment with Masego and Indrani. Calamities, huh. They were a great deal less dignified once you'd had a close look at them. Those left, anyway, I thought with a grimace. Sabah I'd mourn for she was worth mourning, but the Warlock I grieved more for how his death had pained and would pain Masego more than anything else. Little about the man had endeared him to me.

"Here, Marshal," Juniper said, passing him a skewer of juicy horse meat.

"Thank you, Marshal," Grem replied, openly amused.

"Sisters take me, let's be done with the titles for the night," I grunted.

"Your Majestic Highreachingness, I must protest," Indrani gravely said. "It would be most improper of your loyal subjects to behave in such a manner. And also us."

"Reaching high shelves is her only weakness, as it happens," Robber drawled.

"Really," I flatly said. "The *goblin* is going to make height jokes."

"I am a veritable titan, by my people's standards," the Special Tribune shamelessly lied.

"I've seen piles of apples taller than you," I scathingly replied.

"Ah," Robber replied without missing a beat, "but did you see *over* them?"

That cut a little too close to home so I replied with a gesture more than mildly obscene and a few curses in Taghrebi that had Aisha tittering in amusement before her face suddenly went blank.

Ah, I sadly thought, my own memory prompted by the sight. It'd been the same man who'd taught them to the both of us, then.

"I have a question, Marshal Grem, about your assault on the Wall during the Conquest," Pickler said. "If you don't mind."

"Grem will do, around a fire," the old orc gravelled. "You're Old Wither's daughter, I hear?"

Pickler's face tightened with discomfort as the mention of her mother, the Matron of the High Ridge tribe.

"I am," she said.

"She tried to have my liver ripped out, once," Grem said. "Not even because she disliked me, mind you, she was just trying to insult Ranker by eating an ally's flesh."

"I am," Pickler slowly said, "sorry?"

The grizzled orc quietly laughed.

"Not much like that old horror, are you?" he said, baring teeth. "Ask your question, girl."

Even as Pickler began a long question about the order of battle for siege when attacking the fortresses of the Wall I tuned out the taking and leaned closer to Black.

"You actually here for the company, or the other thing?" I quietly asked.

"I expect the Pilgrim will arrive come midnight," he replied just as quietly. "And if you are to speak of the Wandering Bard, as I expect you will, one whose veracity might be ascertained might be of some use to you."

I felt a sliver of gratefulness at that, though I knew he would bring as many complications as he did uses by being there. Tariq could no longer see through me unless Sve Noc let him, these days, and even if they did let him it would be considered suspect. Black, on the other hands, was no longer even Named. The Peregrine should be able to use his trick without any complications, though I doubted someone like the Grey Pilgrim would find much to approve of in my father. My brow raised, when I caught a detail. I'd never actually told him that the Sisters could ward off the attentions of the Choir of Mercy – and likely an aspect, as I doubted angels would so frequently lend a helping hand even to their apparent favourite.

"Come now," Black smiled, before I could say anything. "Pacts with lesser gods are not so rare as to be unheard of. Wekesa spent many a year trying to mimic through ritual the benefits one

gains through such patronage without the drawbacks, though to only middling success."

"It's not quite as clear-cut as that," I said. "We have give and take."

"No doubt," the green-eyed man said. "Besides, considering the trials you've put your soul through over the last few years I doubt there are many takers left."

I gasped.

"Are you making fun of the state of my immortal soul, you perfidious heretic?" I said.

"I suppose I must be a heretic indeed, if the Arch-heretic of the East deems me so," he mused.

Gods but I'd missed insulting the man. There were still so many things left unsaid between us, recriminations still simmering and hard arguments yet to be had, but what had been so deeply wounded in the aftermath of Akua's Folly felt... lighter tonight. Not healed, and perhaps it never would be, but not quite so raw. It helped, I thought, that I had been allowed to feel for my own path so far from him that it was impossible for any part of it to have been his notion. Whatever the reasons the two older men had come, they certainly kept the conversation going. Black eventually went to sit by Masego's side, the two of them conversing quietly, and that I did not approach. The grief they shared went back to long before I'd entered either's life, and I would be an unwelcome interloper if I attempted to be part of it. Vivienne had yet to come, which had me frowning. She would not snub an evening like this out of anger at Akua being here, so it likely meant the Jacks were finding something of us. I'd like for her to be there, regardless, but I couldn't deny that finally getting even a bare bones report about whatever it was the First Prince was dredging out of Lake Artoise would be a relief. As it turned out, though, like so often Black was right.

Mere heartbeats before midnight, the wards shivered as the Grey Pilgrim passed through.

antoninjohn

Cat x Aisha, I could ship that, it would probably turn into a foursome with Juniper and Archer

[Liliet](#)

Juniper is too much of a blushy shy disaster tho, which is probably why Cat's staying out of it – wants to be considerate towards her feelings :3

Soronel Haetir

Fun to see how even now Grem and Amadeus are so revered by the greenskins. Of course given how much the Refrms did for them it's no surprise.

[Liliet](#)

This dynamic really did deserve a reminder. Hakram is ruthless wrt this, but among greenskins he's a huge exception.

[Barthumphries](#)

Black is basically the Abraham Lincoln (and his Emancipation Proclamation) for the orcs. I can see why they revere him.

Soronel Haetir

And also nice to finally have confirmation that Cat intends to sit Black upon the throne.

hakureireimu

Confirmation? We had that since the early part of this Book.

[Javvies](#)

Cat's planning on stabbing Akua after Akua's redemption. Hopefully, this will put to rest the nonsense about Dread Empress Akua.

Heh, Juniper hasn't outgrown her crush on Amadeus.

Ah, Tariq is arriving. This will be interesting. Especially with Akua around.

But ... I wonder how he'll take the Wandering Bard revelations.

Gunslinger

I suspect Akua's redemption itself will be the punishment. If she could feel the remorse off a hundred thousand souls

Sparsebeard

Pretty sure it's not stabbing, else it would be the short price.

[Javvies](#)

Mmmm, point. A stabbing is quick (usually).

On the other hand ... a straight up stabbing probably isn't

actually going to kill Akua at this point. Since, y'know, she's no longer amongst the living, and exists as a materialized soul.

I suspect the death of Akua is more likely to involve feeding her soul to Sve Noc. Or maybe turning her over to one or more Heroes or Named capable of finishing her off without a chance of her coming back.

Javvies

Argh.

I was planning to say that I meant "stabbing Akua" in a more metaphorical sense than a literal sense.

Sparsebeard

Of course, you can't stab a ghost!

Still, my point was that Cat's mention of "long price" had me thinking she probably wouldn't straight up murder her but rather use her for something long term (no idea what though).

Javvies

Eh, Viv had Sovereign of Moonless Nights! Cat swear a binding oath to utterly destroy Akua when her usefulness had ended.

After the Everdark, Cat thought that she wasn't magically compelled by that oath anymore but she still intended to keep it.

So, yeah, murder might not necessarily be the right term, but it's probably reasonably close. After all ... if you torture someone to death, you've still murdered them, no matter how long it took you to get there. Although ... murder probably isn't the right term anyways, because is it really murder if the "victim" isn't alive?

Zggt

I'd say that it would be a clear case of double-murder. Which to be fair, Akua has more than earned

caoimhinh

Oh, ye of little faith! Of course you can stab a ghost! Raphaella, the Valiant Champion, is proof of that XD

All that talk about Cat going "I'm not gonna kill her now, but I'll have long price, I want her to suffer" just has me thinking that she is just stalling for time.

When the time comes for Akua to be completely destroyed, Catherine is likely to be the one to cry, not Akua.

[Liliet](#)

...sounds about right tbh

[Liliet](#)

...imagine Akua comforting Catherine about it.

Bianary

A shade, technically.

Ιούλιος Καίσαρας

I believe her redemption will be more in the line of becoming some kind of guardian or sentinel, be it passive or active, bounded to the post.

She might even be in a position analogous (but not same) to Bard* in the post-Accord order.

* If we accept the theory that Bard is some kind of narrative enforcer, That she's bound to her post is beyond doubt.

Author Unknown

The perfect price is one that makes her irrelevant, impotent, and bored.

ninegardens

Pretty sure Cat isn't planning to do anything to Akua.

She's playing a Redemption Arc (much the same as she tried to escape when the Perrigrine offered earlier).

She isn't planning to harm Akua, she's expecting Akua to destroy herself, in some suitably grandious manner.

She's planning for Akua's voluntary sacrifice to earn them all a reprieve at some critical juncture vs DK.

[Javvies](#)

...

Did you not just read what Cat was saying and thinking?

I could perhaps see that Akua sacrificing herself against the Dead King's force as part of a redemption story makes sense. But that's not what Cat has planned for Akua – remember, Cat's been planning for Akua and her fate since well before the Dead King came out – since before the Crusade was even

declared.

Viv had Sovereign of Moonless Nights! Cat swear a binding oath that Akua and her soul would be utterly destroyed when her usefulness had ended. And we had information in an earlier chapter that while Cat thought she wasn't magically bound by that path anymore, she intended to fulfill it, and Cat has more or less said as much again here.

ninegardens

Yes Javvies. I read:

>"And her?" the lovely tribune said, glancing at Akua.

"Where does she stand, in this new world of yours?"

>"Nowhere gentle," I said. "Though that will be a choice of her own making."

I came to a different interpretation to you. That's fine- I'm sure we'll both see how it pans out in the end.. Please do not assume that people who read things in a different way to you are blind.

Was there any particular passage in the last few chapters that makes you so sure that Cat plans to kill and/or harm Akua directly... as opposed to setting her on a collision course with a story that ends with her destruction?

[Javvies](#)

Depending on how you're defining "the last few chapters", I suppose.

After getting out of the Everdark (or, rather, after giving up Winter), Cat had a section of thought about how she believed she was no longer magically compelled to follow the oaths she swore as Sovereign of Moonless Nights, including specifically one that she had sworn at Viv's insistence – to utterly destroy Akua (once her necessary usefulness had ended) – and that while Cat fully intended to keep that oath anyways, she wasn't going to talk about her new lack of magical compulsion to follow it to Viv. That is a paraphrase/summary, but I believe that covers the relevant highlights.

The point is – Cat had to figure out a plan to end Akua back when she first swore that oath, which would have been before the Crusade invaded. Before the prologue of Book 4, during the time skip immediately following Second Liesse. Probably after it was first realized that Cat could make Akua come out of her cloak's collar and talk to her. In other words, way before Cat would have been thinking about the Dead King.

Also, in this Chapter, Cat thinks:

"I was flesh, too, and like so many of my people my bones were made of grudge. There were some trespasses that could not be forgiven or forgot. One hundred thousand souls. Some follies were beyond forgiveness even were it wished. Sometimes, tough, forgiveness was not the heart of a story."

Cat is crafting a story for Akua, sure. But it's not about Forgiveness ... and dying as part of a redemption story usually results in some measure of posthumous forgiveness.

Cat may or may not be planning to end Akua via a story instead of a prepared strike. However, Cat knows full well that while stories can set you up, non story elements can sidestep and overcome the narrative boosts, so I think that even if Cat intends to kill Akua via story, Cat's also going to follow through with means capable of ending Akua without the story backing them or even despite the opposition of the story.

And Cat would have first worked out her plan for Akua likely at least a year before the Dead King was on the horizon.

It's more likely, IMO, that any story Cat wields against Akua will involve purely Callowan and/or Praesi elements. Cat may intend to use Akua to take out Malicia and otherwise help clear the way for Amadeus.

ninegardens

... okay, fair. That's a pretty explicit quote, and it looks like I glazed over it slightly on my previous read, and focused on the quotes about future choices.

I don't necessarily believe that Cat had an explicit plan in mind Pre-battle of the camps (merely a vague "I will end her"), and even if she did, I believe that Cat is perfectly capable of changing her plans as the situation changes.

talenel

Actually, you're objectively incorrect. Forgiveness is not necessary for a story about Redemption. It's the whole conceit of the Choir of Contrition.

You will not be forgiven. You will never be forgiven. And you will always be full of remorse and penitent for your acts, but it will never ever be enough.

ninegardens

I'd say calling someone "objectively incorrect" when we're all trying to interpret a story is maybe a little far. Pretty sure none of us are perfect arbiters of objectively reality here, and given that we be chatting about a story even less so.

I think that Javvies point that "Forgiveness is not part of this story", leans our expected future significantly further from "redemption arc" is a valid one. I don't think it proves that such future developments are impossible, but it does appear to make that storyline LESS probable, in much the same way that the line I quoted earlier probably suggests redemption story slightly more probable.

Javvies

The Choir of Contrition isn't about redemption. It's about Atonement without Redemption – they are admittedly similar and often intertwined concepts, but they aren't always the same thing. And in this case the difference matters.

—

It certainly suggests that a "successful redemption" isn't the plan.

My point there is that if somebody who is on a redemption arc or playing the allied lesser evil type, goes and does a quasi-heroic sacrifice against an overwhelming greater evil, that will often buy them a measure of posthumous forgiveness. You can gain (some) forgiveness in death for (some) things that you couldn't in life ... with the right kind of death. Sometimes, anyways.

It's a clean and neat ending for a story and redemption. It also doesn't fit with Cat wanting the longest price she can get out of Akua.

In light of the comment about Akua being so good at wearing masks that she becomes them ... I think those who suggest that Cat might shape Akua into some sort of long term guardian/teacher have a point. On the other hand, I think it's more likely that Cat is going to shape Akua into someone who genuinely seeks redemption – and perhaps volunteers to become an eternal guardian/teacher type without thinking about it being good for her redemption efforts but because it's the Right Thing to Do, but instead of letting Akua actually take that step, Cat kills her to deny her successful redemption.

That is, I suspect Cat is going to kill Akua before

Akua can redeem herself, but when Akua can see the light at the end of the redemption tunnel.

To use an analogy ... I think Cat has something more in mind along the lines of giving Akua a hand at the top of a climb only to deny her the summit.

Like ... in ASOIAF/GoT, Bran slips climbing the tower, Jaime catches him and pulls him up to safety, only to turn around and shove him back off into open space. Something a bit like that, only decidedly more metaphorical and far less literal.

ninegardens

I just... don't see this happening.

Like... setting her up as a treacherous lieutenant and then punishing her inevitably betrayal? Sure- she'd play that Gag.

And sacrificing her for the greater good.
Sure, maybe.

But going to the effort of redeeming someone, and then murdering a intelligent competent person who you actually trust now, JUST for the spite?
That doesn't seem like Cat's modus operandi. In the past she has been all about "Break what you can not use and use what you can not break."

Hell, even dragging her up before a court case seems more likely.

talenel

I don't know if we're reading the same characters here. While Cat is hard and at times ruthlessly practical, she is honestly not that Callowan. Plus, why the hell should she give in to the baser nature of the Callowan stereotype?

She's been very obviously trying to use people's cultures as impetus for change and make them better. If she can't do the same for her own, she's basically dooming Callow to regressive failure. Because that's what Callow is at the heart of it all. A country steeped in tradition, in the way things are done. It's ironic with the way Cat is, but they have always seemed the most conservative and insular culture on Calernia. And I can't see Cat giving them the example of leaning back into this regressive and foolish mindset.

matesbe

No, that is not Cat. Forget spite, what you suggest is cold, hard cruelty in a way that Cat simply isn't.

You don't kill someone when they're on the verge of becoming a better person. That's just stupid unless you're evil and actually don't want them to be a better person. And while arguments can be made that Cat is the former, she's not so petty as to deny Akua the chance to be better than she currently is. In fact, that's what this entire thing is about.

I suspect Akua will not live to the end of the story, but I don't think her end will be by Cat's hand unless it is a step willingly taken by Akua on her path to redemption.

caoimhinh

Catherine initially said she would only use Akua as a tool, consulting her when dealing with Cordelia, then Cat kept using her more and more until on the way to Keter she let her out permanently.

Initially, Cat said she was going to destroy Akua right when she stopped being useful, then she changed it to "I will destroy Akua when she is a good person, so it hurts her more", but right now? Right now, it seems like Cat has to constantly remind herself that she has to kill Akua, but has already admitted she does not want to. Yet she keeps pushing towards the story of redemption that Akua trapped herself into and making her a good person.

I think Cat will be pained when Akua is finally destroyed; if it happens by Cat's hand, then it will be because the situation forced them, like having to kill Akua to save others.

Note what it says in today's chapter:

"I knew, of course, that she was not beyond such exquisite deception. That she might have been weaving that intricate web around me since the moment she saved my life in the Everdark. But it wouldn't matter, I thought, watching Akua Sahelian letting out a snort of laughter at some pointed comment Indrani had made. It wouldn't matter because she'd *want* it to be true."

Catherine is putting faith on Akua wanting to be good and becoming good, she is trusting Akua to welcome her destruction as redemption.

[Mental Mouse](#)

There's also the point that Akua is now properly a creature of Night, so Sve Noc may have something to say

about her fate. On the other hand, they don't seem to have much concern (less than Cat, anyhow) about their creatures killing each other.

Shveiran

My take is that Cat aims to destroy the Diabolist, not Aqua.

By shaping Aqua Sahelina into what she believes is a full person, she will take her vengeance on the Diabolist and punish her the only meaningful way for her actions: by making her feel genuine remorse for what she did. After being defeated, Aqua's remorse for her actions is... abstract; she was not brought up in a culture that considers life sacred, and thus she cannot feel it was wrong. At best she can... understand it from an intellectual point of view.

So Cat aims to change that, because she believes that snuffing her out is insufficient and meaningless.

The story likely ends with a Aqua making an extreme attempt at atonement, which will be the direst act she can conceive... and therefore, far worse than any torture the Queen of Callow could decree on her.

I don't believe this ends with Aqua being forgiven, but rather with her destroying herself of her own free will. Long price, indeed.

Decius

One ending is with Akua reforming and genuinely wanting to seek forgiveness, being sent to the demiplane where most of her victims are and told to seek forgiveness from each of them, and then doing so one by one.

Then, after all of Liesse has forgiven her, show her what the house of Sahelian has become, and give her the chance to redeem them as well. Once she convinces her entire family to reform enough, sterilize all of them. When the last Sahelian dies, then destroy Akua's soul.

Long prices are for small slights. For larger offenses, you have to actually go big.

Shveiran

You had me going until you wrote "sterilize".

Akuabestgurl

I think cat intends for Akua to be bound to the university. And so for the rest of time she will be forced to teach and protect and care.

Spinner335

Arrggg the cliffhangers, curse you you wonderful writer!!!

Andrew Mitchell

1. Good to have confirmation of Cat's intentions for Akua as well as the acknowledgement there is still risk there.
2. Amadeus is as insightful as ever it seems.
3. It's so, so good to have Cat talking with Amadeus again.

"It's not quite as clear-cut as that," I said. "We have give and take."

"No doubt," the green-eyed man said. "Besides, considering the trials you've put your soul through over the last few years I doubt there are many takers left."

I gasped.

"Are you making fun of the state of my immortal soul, you perfidious heretic?" I said.

"I suppose I must be a heretic indeed, if the Arch-heretic of the East deems me so," he mused.

3. I'm looking forward to the chat with the Grey Pilgrim.

Andrew Mitchell

5. And apparently I can't count to four. -_-

Sparsebeard

One bully, two bully, three bully, one bully... that's immoral, don't worry, this lord shall convert you.

Novice

I didn't know Lord Third graces the Guideverse with his presence. I'd love to hear from you the sunset you've seen seventy thousand years ago.

caoimhinh

It is so nice to see I Shall Seal The Heavens' references without it involving fights between shippers of Chu Yuyan and shippers of Xu Qing.

So refreshing~

caoimhinh

It must be the work of an enemy's Stand Demon!

Liliet

Robber slaughtering the fuck out of Cat with short jokes is so glorious. At least THIS person he does know how to get a reaction out of ;u;

And god 'i'd missed insulting the man' is just. so perfect

Raved Thrad

And in the next installment, we discover that Tariq is a terrible drunk.

"Come here, you beautiful green thing," the Pilgrim said, to everyone's consternation. "Come here and let ol' Tariq show you why we call ourselves 'The Dominion.'"

caoimhinh

Lewd~



Matthew

Curse your sudden, but inevitable betrayal!

caoimhinh

This was a really fun chapter, I expect the tone of the conversations is going to become much serious one Pilgrim joins them, though they might go back to drinking happily after the Hero leaves.

I wonder if Tariq sneaked past the Army of Callow to reach the campfire (we have seen that he is capable of that, back in the Peregrine Extra Chapters), since no messenger came up the hill to announce the Pilgrim's arrival to Callow's camp, but rather Cat sensed him crossing the wards on the hill.

Also, he should have brought Roland, every Hero needs to hear what Cat is going to say. It's gonna be interesting to see Tariq defending the Wandering Bard like "but she has always been only supporting Above! She is always around the Heroes!".

[Liliet](#)

>I expect the tone of the conversations is going to become much serious one Pilgrim joins them, though they might go back to drinking happily after the Hero leaves.

Oh it'll go back to drinking with jokes BEFORE he leaves, I'm pretty sure. Did you see how well he got on with Indrani? ;u;

(To the point of thinking it was the Black Queen's cunning scheme to send them together so that he'd grow to like her. FUCKING AMAZING THAT ONE, STILL)

caoimhinh

To be honest, I expect Tariq's mood to be soured quite a bit at the news of the Bard also working for Below (and possibly her own agenda unrelated to the Gods). He doesn't think of her as an Intercessor of both sides of Gods to the mortals, but rather as a Heroine, an agent exclusive to Above.

I think he will argue first on her Role being Good overall, but then be surprised and leave the scene to reflect on the new info in privacy (or maybe consulting the Ophanim). So I don't think he will stay and drink with Cat's group until dawn, though he will definitely join the drinking as he arrives, probably there will be some jokes before they get to Intercessor business.

P.S: It would be *awesome* if the Bard suddenly appeared sitting in the campfire next to them as Catherine finishes her explanation. That would certainly spice up the debate.

[Liliet](#)

Oh and Tariq mentioned his Role + his skills lending him a lot of sneakiness in his backstory chapters. Showing up somewhere that he absolutely isn't supposed to be is like half his shtick, we just haven't seen much of it in the present yet.

caoimhinh

Yep. I know he is capable of that, I'm just wondering if he used that trick, as apparently no legionary came up to announce the arrival of the Peregrine, he just showed up crossing the wards.

Though it's interesting that Catherine and Black could predict his arrival so accurately, I mean, Cat simply told

Tariq like 3 days ago that they needed to talk, without any date settled, yet they are capable of using Narrative to predict when and where he will arrive to meet them.

That, or Cat sent an invitation to Tariq for the campfire out of screen XD

[Liliet](#)

It wasn't 3 days ago. This is the second evening after Third Llesse, and during the first one everyone was exhausted/busy/sleeping that shit off.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Only Erratic could make a satisfying week long cliffhanger out of a campfire cookout.

These last few chapters have been choice.

[Liliet](#)

Best arc 12/10

Shveiran

All arcs are best arc XD

Decius

Does the Pligrim's insight work on Akua's shade?

Would the Pilgrim's insight work on the rest of the Wasteland Nobility?

Black wants to kill off the entire nobility because much of it is corrupt and backstabbing; the Empress wants to not kill off the nobility because it's a stabilizing influence. Neither of them could find a balance of deciding who to kill for being disloyal and who to leave in charge.

Grey Pilgrim for Chancellor?

Shveiran

I don't think the problem can be solved by removing lies, honestly.

It's more about judging character, an unwillingness to seek the best for Praes at the expense of one's betterment... or even, the belief that strife and backstabbing ARE what's best for Praes.

I suppose you could put them all in a line and ask "are you going to try and backstab your ruler at some point in the future?" or something along those lines, and execute them based

on the answer. It would be a better system than full-on genocide.

That doesn't make it a good system, though, IMO: we would be judging them based on ideas, and ideas change: you may be sparing future agitator, and executing those whose mind could be changed. It has no guarantee of success, and a good deal of collateral damage.

Ebert of Alamans, scholar errant

The Nameless City, far from not having a name (as that name is "The Nameless City"), rather refers to the local legal and social proscription against Named residing or operating within the bounds of its influence. Mobs have been known to spontaneously form and lynch individuals so much as suspected of being Named.

Of course, the fact is that few if any of these poor condemned souls have ever been confirmed as bestowed with such power; the death of Named is rarely of such little note.

For further information on this topic, please seek my treatise, "Cities of the East on Two Denarii a Day: A Traveler's Guide".

[TeK](#)

I see what you did there.

WuseMajor

One of the things I find interesting about Cat is that, despite the complaints about being short, when she was Fae and her body was mostly a thing of ice and snow and magic, she learned to make herself grow spikes, regrow limbs, turn to mist...but never did she consider making herself taller or more beautiful.

I wonder if she just didn't think of it or if that would have signaled that she was going full on Fae Queen.

[TeK](#)

You forgetting how Names change your opinions to how you think you look like. Cat is short because she wants to be short, even thinks she should be short. Who knows, maybe if it wasn't for her Name interfering, she would've even grown...

Shveiran

Names reflect self-perception, not desires: Squire!Cat was short because she had always been so and therefore believed she was.

Fae!Cat could have changed her appearance, but didn't want to: she didn't like being short or flat, but she was also clinging to her former self as an anchor against Winter: forgoing her appearance was terrifying, not empowering. But

she always felt her leg wound was precisely that – a wound, not a part of what she was. Therefore, that she opted to fix. Priestess!Cat has no easy way to alter her appearance on a whim, and thus appears as she always had.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine lost her wound back when the Hashmallim resurrected her at Liesse, she didn't need Winter to fix it.

caoimhinh

Actually, there's no consistency on Catherine's leg wound. Nothing says her leg wound was healed by the Hashmalim during her resurrection, and in fact she is shown limping right afterward when she emerges with Akua from the lake. But then the wound is never mentioned again, despite Cat still drinking herbs for the pain and then developing a love for smoking, she is even shown occasionally walking and running without mentioning her leg wound or pain. Then when Catherine breaks the seal of Winter in her heart during her last fight against Akua, she says the Hashmalim had healed her leg, but that turning full Winter had returned her leg wound and she is shown limping again in that chapter. Yet later on afterward the leg wound is forgotten and never mentioned again.

Then we got to her giving Winter to Sve Noc, where she claims she no longer had any leg wound, but becoming mortal again returned her wound, and that's current arc Catherine who still limps because she wants to live with that pain "as a reminder".

[Liliet](#)

Oh wow.

Yeah, I'm deciphering that as "Catherine got healed back to full by the Hashmallim, Winter returned the wound when it remade her body from her soul's template anew but the wound went away as soon as Catherine stopped thinking about it for the same reason her heart didn't beat when she slept at the time"

[TeK](#)

"she had always been so"

She was fifteen at the moment, I believe.

"Priestess!Cat has no easy way to alter her appearance on a whim"

Really should've prayed about right things. Something like – hey, I did not grow for the last (insert time) years, but I now I would've if I could, can you, maybe, help?

Chapter 67: Starlight

"Without enemy, without backbone."

– Callowan saying

I didn't even have to say anything.

Black had been watching me discreetly ever since midnight's threshold, and a simple nod of acknowledgement did the trick. Unlike me the green-eyed man had no connection to the wards that surrounded the tumulus, but by using me as a tripwire he'd effectively learned of the Peregrine's arrival mere heartbeats after I did. Just because the man had lost his name hardly meant he'd ceased being perceptive – or dangerous. I slowly rose to my feet, hand reach for my yew staff, and watched from the corner of my eye as the former Black Knight drew away from the circle that'd gathered to listen to an old campaign story of Grem One-Eye's. Hakram's eyes found me, silently questioning in the dark, but I shook my head. The fewer people there for those talks the better, for though I trusted Adjutant as I would trust my own hand the Grey Pilgrim had no reason to do the same. I'd not further muddle the waters of what might already be troublesome talks simply for the base comfort of having Hakram at my side. I slipped away, not unseen of my friends but at least unquestioned, and tread between the dark silhouettes of the stones raised by the ancient Mavii. Far above stars hung in the night sky, pale constellations set in ink. Leather boots creaking against the snow I advanced, the edges of the cloak on my back skimming against smooth stone.

Tariq Fleetfoot stood a few feet further down the slope, upright and steady for such an old man. Robes of faded grey fell loosely down his frame, so used as to be halfway to raggedness, and the last wisps of white hair on his head stood out starkly as he gazed up at the stars. He did not have a staff, the gnarled old thing he'd snapped over his knee as the finishing touch to the Twilight Crown. In the days since that he could have easily found another, I knew, yet he had not. It tasted to me of a loss, something surrendered that would never be had again. None who'd given away their crown would ever find a way to fill that void and the lack of a walking stick was the least of it. Black drifted out of the stones a heartbeat after I did, tread quietly

as the long coat he wore trailed behind him. Tariq's jaw shifted, as I looked, a tensing so slight I might have missed it were I not already studying him. Wariness, I thought. The Pilgrim recognized Black's footsteps, near silent as they were, and he was wary of the man they belonged to. I knew not what had passed between those two when my teacher was held prisoner, before his soul was mutilated, but the cold spite in the Carrion Lord's eyes and the strain in Tariq's shoulders did not speak to anything pleasant. Still, they were both pragmatic men in their own way. Like it or not they were in the same boat, and neither would be inclined to behave in a way that might just tip it over for all of us.

"Your Majesty," the Pilgrim calmly said. "A beautiful night, isn't it?"

"Iserre has its beauties," I acknowledged.

The old hero half-smiled, then turned to dip his head respectfully.

"I invited myself to an evening of comradery, and for that I apologize," Tariq said.

"You should," Black noted. "I brought liquor, at least. Is your presence meant to be the gift?"

There was a slight pause, then he muttered *heroes* in a scathing tone. I sent him a warning look, but he was visibly unmoved. A consequence, I grimly thought, of having me try on those when I'd been a great deal less dangerous than I now was.

"Apologies twofold then, Black Queen," the Pilgrim lightly replied. "Yet I believed it wiser to have this conversation away from prying eyes, and before too long had passed."

An opportunity he'd not have again soon, I understood even if he did not spell it out. I was not all that surprised that the Peregrine had somehow slipped past a dozen layers of wards, patrols and watchmen to arrive unseen in the very heart of my camp. He was, after all the, the Grey Pilgrim: appearing sudden and unexpected was his wont, as much a part of his Name as the ashen-coloured robes. But he'd pulled this off because I was apart from the rest of my army, and my watchful patrons. If he'd tried to pull this on the tent where I slept, the Sisters might just have taken offence and good luck trying to keep *that* quiet.

"You were not unforeseen," I said. "I require no apology."

"Your kindness is appreciated," the old man said. "I received the papers sent by the Lord Adjutant, Queen Catherine. They were... an interesting read."

Well, it wasn't like I'd expected the man to gush, slap me on the back and ask where he had to sign. Had I hoped for that, just a little bit? O Night, yes. I was in no way above easy victories when I could have them, which was tragically infrequent. Fingers tight on the dead yew in my grip, I carefully stepped down the slope until I was standing at the hero's left. Black, never one to allow subtle theatrics to pass him by when they cost nothing, nonchalantly cut through behind me and came to stand at my left. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes, knowing it'd only further entertain him.

"I expect you have questions," I said.

Objections, too, but best get the clarifications out of the way first.

"Those were not the full text," the Pilgrim said.

"The simplified manuscript," I said. "Though no tricks were plied, Peregrine. I did not hide anything I thought might be contentious, only removed the many inkwells' worth of minutiae that the full treaty will need to properly function."

"Function," Tariq repeated, blue eyes crinkling. "Yes, that is the word I was seeking."

He breathed out, mist rising up easily on such a windless night.

"I have issue, as you must have anticipated, with some of the laws you would set," the old man said. "Yet that is not so great a thing, for even if your terms were accepted without amendment I would wager the Liesse Accords being harbinger of more good than not."

The Pilgrim's already-crease face, wrinkled by long years of saving lives and taking them, grew serious.

"And so I must ask, Your Majesty," he said, "what it is you intend as the function of your Accords? Their purpose, for I have glimpsed the lay of your work and it is neither salvation nor abolition."

Oh, that was an ornate way to put it but no less true for that. I'd known from the very moment the thought of the Accords had begun to haunt me that there was only so much I could accomplish through them. It'd be a pretty thing, a treaty that promised a hundred or a thousand years of peace between all who signed it, but that was a fool's dream. Old Terribilis the Second, the canniest of the Old Tyrants in so many ways, had once said that armies were like water: they took the path of least resistance. The line had stuck with me, even more than the rest of the Commentaries, and I'd seen since that the wisdom of it ran deeper than Terribilis had claimed. People, more often than not, took

the path of least resistance. Because it was easier, because it was encouraged, because no one liked to struggle or get hurt. If I raised a dam in the way of our own nature – and, like it or not, people had been waging war one each other since the First Dawn – then perhaps it might hold for a time but it would inevitably break. And perhaps wreak greater destruction than before for the containment attempted. I could not change what lay at the heart of mankind, or orcs, or goblins or even the drow for that matter. I was not even sure the Gods could, and even at my most arrogant I'd never claimed to reach those heights. What I could do, though, was create a set of rules. Not too limiting, lest they be bucked, but limiting enough that never again would a city be broken by the strife of Named.

"I told you the first time we ever spoke," I said. "What I cannot break-"

"You will regulate," Tariq softly finished. "I remember. You spoke of your teacher too, that day."

Black looked mildly curious, eyeing us both.

"He cannot conceive of a word where he does not win, you said," the Peregrine reminded me.

And this is not a victory, he left unspoken. I'd known that was going to be one of the harder parts to navigate, though, for some time. That the Accords required trust in more than just me on the side of Below's champions, lest trust in them die when I did. Part of me wondered if my teacher would take as an insult a remark I'd never intended to make it to his ears, though I stood by it still, and I flicked a glance to the side. He did not seem aggrieved, though only a fool would take what could be seen on Amadeus of the Green Stretch's face as the sum of his thoughts.

"Yet I have lost," Black said. "Undeniably so."

I stilled. I'd not expected for him to speak in answer, save perhaps to send the occasional measured barb towards the Peregrine. Indecision warred in my mind, for though the Accords were my creation and I was circumspect of letting my teacher speak to or for them I could not hold them in my arms like some babe in need of soothing. They would grow larger than me, I knew, from the moment they were signed. They must, for if they did not this was no more than some Old Tyrant's madness: though I would have chosen law and treaties rather than an invisible army or fortresses aflight, the doom of it would be just as certain. And so, though it felt like control of this was slipping through my fingers, I kept my mouth shut.

"Have you?" Tariq mildly asked. "You stand free once more, a leader of armies. Aligned with one of the rising stars of our age, shielded from judgement and assured seat and voice when the

lay of this war and what will follow is writ. *Have you lost, Amadeus of the Green Stretch?*"

Part of me was almost offended on my teacher's behalf, for I had seen victories of his making and they had little in common with the stuff of these days. Yet there was another quieter voice in the back of my mind that, while not agreeing with the Pilgrim had said, found it was not senseless. For someone who'd been a severed soul mere days ago, Black had returned to a degree of prominence with almost blinding swiftness. The itch was there to speak up, to intervene, because there was too much riding on this talk and this night for me to feel content in silence. I mastered it with some difficulty, knowing stepping in now might end up disastrous. My teacher had turned to look at the Pilgrim, pale green eyes considering, until he suddenly let out a biting sting of laughter.

"A *victory*, Peregrine?" he scorned. "This night, this moon, this year? The span of my days I have spent in the service of that searing, fleeting thing that'd even the scales for the smallest of instants and you would claim *this* to be it?"

The dark-haired man, though those locks now knew white as well, laughed once more. It was a sound like a bag being peremptorily emptied, a cup drunk to the last drop. More will than instinct.

"Those few I love are dropping like flies," Amadeus of the Green Stretch harshly said. "My kindred atop the Tower spirals ever deeper into old follies and the order I have worked my hand to the bone raising has burst like an overripe fruit. The manner of things that have been lost..."

He shook his head, then smiled. Thin and wide and much too sharp, the blade-smile I'd come to know so well.

"These have been *calamitous* years, Peregrine," the Carrion Lord said. "What gains were had always came at too high a price, and while I will not partake of regret neither will I shy from the truth that not a single of those games proved worth the candle."

"You bleed," Tariq acknowledged. "You rage, frozen and bitter as that poison is. But you are not cowed. You have ruled, but what do you know of rules? Am I to believe you will now put a yoke around your neck out of sentiment?"

The old hero eyed the aging villain with disdain.

"There is only so much of that in you," the Pilgrim said. "And it never bore more than a feather's weight on the scales, Lord of Carrion. I have seen the laws that would be the fabric of the Accords, and I see good in them for even if the children of Above will find their hands bound in some ways it is but a *pittance* to what it will cost Below's favoured monsters. You will be stripped

of manners of terror and brutality in myriad, forced to measure your wickedness and moderate your cruelties. You will be bound by fetters and told at the edge of the blade that ambitions cannot be without restraint. I see nothing, have seen nothing, in you that would take any of this as more than wasted ink."

"It must be a pleasant world to live in, where any that stand opposite of you must be either grasping or grasped," Black smiled. "Either the creature of the Gods Below or their apostle in wickedness – either way, what sin can there be in breaking us?"

He chuckled.

"Well, if I must be wicked to hold regard then wicked I shall be," the Carrion Lord said, eyes coldly glinting. "I'll speak for the crooked and cruel, pilgrim of grey, and give you the answer you demand."

Under starlight the dark-haired man took a dramatic bow, and I could see in the cast of his face that he was relishing this. The chance to speak without measuring every word, considering the consequence on the balance of his Role and Name. To... cut loose, after a lifetime of ironclad control. Praesi, I thought, not entirely without fondness.

"The first conspiracy will bloom," the Carrion Lord said, "before the ink is dry."

My fingers tightened. That was not what I had expected of him. Or wanted. He grinned, a slice of pale bone cutting through the dark.

"We will twist around the spirit of every rule while obeying the letter," the green-eyed man said. "We will lie and cheat and hide our sins, while dragging into light those of our foes and rivals. We will seek to twist the laws as a tool for our ambitions and a sword to slay our enemies. We will hide behind every protection afforded and make red art of the details that save or slay. We will defend our advantages and seek to unmake yours, never once faltering in our callous greed."

The grin went wider still, a madman's grin. A challenge.

"And yet we will uphold the Liesse Accords, you broken old thing, and wage war on any that would unmake them," the Carrion Lord said. "Merciless Gods, you think they tip the scale in *your* favour? Your entire breed are servants of stillness, shaped from the clay of recoil. You came out victors of the Age of Wonders, but this... *Age of Order* will be ours body and soul."

"You are mad," the Grey Pilgrim said, tone hushed.

"That may well be," the Carrion Lord laughed, "but am I *lying*?"

Tariq's face tightened.

"Peace will smother your kind out of existence," the old hero said. "This I know and have seen many a time. Under law you will reach too high and pay the price of vainglory."

"Why now, Tariq Fleetfoot," the Carrion Lord replied with languid amusement, "that rather sounds like a wager."

The Levantine's fingers clenched.

"This could have been a beautiful thing," he said. "The principles of Good made into law, however slightly. You *soil* this by your very existence."

"I have only ever recognized one sin and one grace," the green-eyed villain replied. "Your whimpering sense of virtue is as dust to me, Peregrine. Choke on it and perish, as you should have decades ago."

Well, this was just lovely. Still it rung close enough to an accord from both sides that I wouldn't be interceding for everybody if I stepped in now. You know, before two of the most powerful people on the fucking face of Calernia started pulling each other's pigtaileds and calling their Gods a lie. Charming stuff all around, though I'd give it to Black that while he might have been a vicious shit about this he'd at least more or less gotten results.

"Glad to see we're all friends now," I said, perfectly willing to keep repeating the sentence louder and louder until objections died out.

Neither of them contradicted me. Well, would you look at that. Maybe they *were* clever after all.

"I am in agreement with the principle of the Liesse Accords," Tariq tightly said. "Though when talks are had in Salia, I will argue against the articles I believe to be unsound."

"I expected no less," I said.

It was an effort to keep my voice steady, to keep the sheer fucking *triumph* out of it. Because if Tariq was in agreement with even just the principles of the Accords, then I was pretty sure a majority of living heroes would fall in line. There were probably heroes out there more powerful, but there were none more respected or influential. Getting Below's side of the fence in order would be trickier, but if Black held the Tower and the Tyrant's head ended up on a spike? It could be done. The fucking shape was there, now. *It could be done*. My excitement ebbed,

though, when I remembered this conversation was not yet over. And that what we had to speak about might shake the foundations of the rest, if it went poorly. I hesitated on how to bring it up at all, and to hide the indecision reached for my pipe once more. Black gave me a mildly disapproving look.

"Wakeleaf is an ungainly vice," he said. "One of the few things I ever agreed with Tikoloshe about."

"I've tried that wine you keep bottles of," I replied, stuffing my pipe, "and I'm not getting a lecture on ungainly vices from a man who regularly drinks something that tastes like rat poison. *Muddy* rat poison."

"The mud makes all the difference," my teacher pleasantly agreed.

I passed my palm over the pipe, black flame bloom amongst the stuffing, and breathed in sharply. Well, indirect talk had never been my strong suit so it was doubtful trying my hand at it now would somehow yield success with the godsdamned Grey Pilgrim of all people. Direct it was, then. I breathed out, let the smoke rise up towards the night sky and took the plunge.

"Pilgrim," I said, "we need to talk about the Wandering Bard."

Except I didn't.

I was, instead, standing to the side of the three people – the Grey Pilgrim, the Black Queen and the Carrion Lord – standing in the starlight and snow as they spoke. I could even see the smoke wafting up from both my mouth and pipe. *Shit*, I thought.

"Catherine, Catherine, *Catherine*," a woman's voice said, sounding almost pained. "You were so close but now you're fucking it all up."

I looked at where the voice had come from – to the side, perched atop one of the raised stones, the Wandering Bard was seated. Slender and dark-haired, with blue eyes and a rather attractive face. The accent, though, I had recognized. Alamans.

"Really," I said, "Alamans? What, where there no other bodies left?"

The Bard cocked her head to the side, looking surprised and more than a little amused.

"That is *uncanny*," she muttered.

Raising a silver flask I'd not seen her grab, she shrugged and took a swallow.

"Right," the Intercessor grinned after wiping her mouth. "So I'd say it's about time we had a little chat, you and I."

[tkjarrah](#)

> "Marguerite of Baillons," the Bard replied.
> [Black] snorted.
> "Alamans, truly?" he said. "Were all the other bodies taken?"

From epilogue four.
like father like daughter indeed

Nuke_The_Earth

While this is still at the top, I figure I ought to put a little bit of <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> up in here.

[Liliet](#)

Bless u

Stormblessed

Thank you so much for pointing out the reference to the older chapter. I had forgotten that moment so your comment was able to allow me to better enjoy this chapter.

[Mental Mouse](#)

You know, it occurs to me that Cat has a newly-vacant gizmo for containing souls, and a couple of dark goddesses handy. The heroes used that very gizmo precisely so they could contain Black without actually killing him... and Bard only teleports when her life is in danger.

[Liliet](#)

...it did work for Neshamah.

I doubt cathing Bard will be easy (and I doubt Cat has the gizmo on her right now lmao), but if idk she cooperates XD

[Mental Mouse](#)

If Sve Noc can get at wherever they are now (and their priestess is already there), they can bring her stuff (or have Ivah do it).

[Liliet](#)



I somehow doubt that'd work out. Doesn't seem narratively appropriate for Bard :3

Princess Ariadne

except bard is kinda sorta the Big Bad (Big Good? the antagonist.) it's not gonna be that easy to beat her

[Mental Mouse](#)

And what's the problem with Alamans bodies?

[Liliet](#)

That's the best question.

Ebert of Alamans, scholar errant

Far be it from one of my field to inject bias or take offense, but i must admit to being somewhat put out. That aside, on to the subject of the day.

The impalement and presentation of heads on stakes is a practice as ancient as it is barbaric. The first documentation of this practice is found in a pre-Miezan field journal of an unknown officer prosecuting a series of raids on Orc-held territories. This officer notes that their foes would mount the heads of slain opponents on spears or poles and lightly annoint them with oils and minerals, leaving them in the sun for days before tanking them down. The officer indicated that this had a deleterious effect on morale and supposed it to be psychological warfare.

In reality, according to "101 Traditional Orcish Recipes" by Sturn Blackhand, the more plausible explanation is that the Orcish nomads were simply preparing the heads to serve as trail rations.

For more information on the use of display of mutilated bodies to enact political or martial effect, please see my publication, "Two Heads Are Better Than One: Mutilation as a Sociopolitical Tool."

NerfContessa

Hahaha hahaha, you, good man, are a treasure.

Soronel Haetir

Well, fuck.

Aston Whiteman

Time to reset the story.

Again.

Crab Bucket Time!

[Liliet](#)

We Shall See

Soronel Haetir

Has she ever been seen to pull this trick before, of pulling people into some in-between space? Certainly she's been seen to just fade into a conversation but I can't recall her doing it and not involvig whoever happens to be around.

Sparsebeard

I mean, we can expect a monster older than the Dead King to have at least a few hidden cards in her sleeves to play can we.

caoimhinh

Not to mention she is someone who works for both sides of the Gods.

caoimhinh

Yeah, she has been pulling more powers out her ass in recent chapters.

When she spoke with Amadeus in Epilogue 4, she apparently made it so everyone was asleep and unable to wake up, or maybe stopped time for everyone except Amadeus to have their conversation.

She was also capable of appearing on *Masego's mind* to converse with the Dead King's fragment that possessed Hierophant, and was visible to Masego too.

Now she forcefully Astral Projected Catherine while stopping time. She is likely to pull more tricks out of nowhere in future chapters, and since we never really knew her capabilities, it's just gonna be taken as her revealing powers she had but simply never used before.

edrey

also dont forget that the sister are watching over cat soul, that is the worst

konstantinvoncarstein

When speaking with Amadeus, she did nothing. She just could have not been there if one of the heroes would have be able to listen.

caoimhinh

Amadeus was under constant observation, it was just that moment when everyone was asleep.

The Bard explicitly says that “if they were going to wake up, this conversation wouldn’t be happening” and also mentioned taking advantage of Providence. She definitely did something.

[TeK](#)

Or she didn’t and it was a genuine luck from Below. She basically came to him with a choice of either running away and going on his evil way, or not. The first thing is what he would’ve done, would she not come, and I am pretty sure is also a thing that Below wanted him to do.

caoimhinh

Then that would mean an intervention by the Gods Below. She appeared on her formal capacity as Intercessor, not as a Heroine, after all. Either way, that would mean a supernatural factor involved.

[TeK](#)

No, no, no, a providence does not require an intervention from Above, and Cat’s been saying something along the lines of “we Villains got our providence too, how would I come by Hakram and others otherwise”.

[Liliet](#)

Whatever you want to call the mysterious factor that resulted in Black ENTIRELY COINCIDENTALLY coming upon Cat in THE EXACT RIGHT dark alley at THE EXACT MOST DRAMATICALLY APPROPRIATE moment...

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not to mention aspects like Hakrams **Find**.

[Fayhem](#)

Thanks for the reminder; I actually don’t think that indicates a direct action, given the wording you’ve cited. I think that indicates something honestly rather scarier. I think Bard is stating – claiming, if you’d prefer to maintain skepticism here – that she was able to read the lay of fate. She didn’t *make everyone fall or stay asleep*; instead, *she was able to appear in exactly the moment or span of time when everyone else in camp would fall or stay*

asleep naturally. And I would argue that is much, *much* worse.

For example, it offers some insight on how her various intercessions have mostly escaped wider notice. Imposing sleep is something that can presumably leave traces that a skilled eye could find. Being able to identify and make use of the exact moment when the conditions she wants will be occurring naturally is, on the other hand, completely and entirely traceless. If that's something she can do at will... well, fuck.

[Liliet](#)

^^^

caoimhinh

Here's a screenshot from that chapter.

She *is* ambiguous in her speech, as always, but either way it indicates a supernatural intervention, due to the sheer number of coincidences piled one over the other. Amadeus was under constant observation, and kept asleep by spell except for eating and going to the bathroom, plus any Hero would have been able to wake up easily yet they were all sleeping deeply, the spell that kept Amadeus unconscious failed, and the Heroes *won't wake up*. That's not normal, nor simple luck, it's Providence A.K.A Divine Intervention that messes with Causality.

All other stuff could be simple luck, but that the Heroes are kept asleep goes beyond it, which is why that's the thing Amadeus points out as the weirdest and most curious thing.

"So, you might be wondering why I'm here," the Bard said.

"I'm rather more curious as to why none of your fellows have awakened," he said. "Their senses should be sharper than that."

"If they were going to wake, I wouldn't be here," Marguerite shrugged.

"Convenient," Amadeus said.

"Eh," she hedged. "I don't need to tell you how tetchy providence can get. Even with loaded dice you have to roll."

"I take it this a visit in your official capacity, then," he said.

"Surprised, are we?" she grinned, revealing slightly crooked teeth.

"It was my theory that you could only work through Named," Amadeus said. "I find it rather horrifying that you are evidently not so restricted."

Ethan Smith

Honestly this is what I assumed

[Mental Mouse](#)

> I think Bard is stating – claiming, if you'd prefer to maintain skepticism here – that she was able to read the lay of fate.

She has said as much outright before... iirc "some of us get a look at the script". And it's clear that she gets a lot of milage out of the unlooked-at places and moments – IIRC even one of the heroes was seriously perturbed when she stepped out of his blind spot or suchlike.

At the same time, I suspect putting the guards to sleep for a few moments wouldn't be too hard, as long as it *only* affected Bard being able to have that conversation.

[Liliet](#)

>When she spoke with Amadeus in Epilogue 4, she apparently made it so everyone was asleep and unable to wake up, or maybe stopped time for everyone except Amadeus to have their conversation.

What she SAID was that circumstances aligned so nobody would wake up if she wasn't there, and she was not interfering with that part of the story. Which is slightly more subtle than, , , this, , ,

NerfContessa

OK, now she is infringing on my turf. Get her reading permission for The Plan revoked asap!!

Censa

She didn't put anyone to sleep. She came from "nowhere" and was inserted into the "story" at a convenient moment where the heroes keeping Amadeus captive would not wake up. She implies both that the providence of her "role" is at play, and that there's a chance they could wake up nonetheless. Remember that the bard cannot influence creation directly, or so we've been led to believe.

>"I'm rather more curious as to why none of your fellows have awakened," he said. "Their senses should be sharper than that."

>"If they were going to wake, I wouldn't be here," Marguerite shrugged.

>"Convenient," Amadeus said.

>"Eh," she hedged. "I don't need to tell you how tetchy providence can get. Even with loaded dice you have to roll."

Matthew

It's all the same power. Just as she is the same role in different bodies... she has let's call it, "Voice of the intercessor" which is the ability to have a one on one chat with any character in the story outside of the perception of others.

It will always be a slightly different mechanism because if it was the same it could be broken.

[BarthHumphries](#)

She didn't stop time. Catherine can see the smoke wafting up.

caoimhinh

That's the smoke she breathed out right before the Intercessor intervened.

Sparsebeard

Are you sure time stopped? I interpreted it as them still talking and perhaps Bard was puppeting Cat, thus the :

“You were so close but now you’re fucking it all up.”

As in, by mentioning her, Cat was giving Bard the ability to interfere and mess up the talks...

Andrew Mitchell

Yeah, it’s not explicitly stated that time’s stopped, so other interpretations are possible. I think we’ll find out next chapter one way or the other.

hakureireimu

I suspect that the Bard always could, and always have been going to the in-between space to spy on other people. The Elves call her the Keeper of Stories, and you need to witness the stories to keep them. So I think that’s how she seems to know everything.

Andrew Mitchell

I read “Keeper of Stories” to mean that she keeps the stories going. But I’ll be the first to admit that could well just be my bias showing because, for a long time, I’ve been saying the Bard’s role is to keep the stories going.

[Liliet](#)

No, but *Neshamah* has done this!

[Mental Mouse](#)

She did wander through the climactic battle of Twilight, giving signals to the Pilgrim without anybody else noticing her.

[Liliet](#)

She also appeared to Cat *and only Cat* at the end of the original Swan Song conversation.

Neither of those were an out-of-body experience, but feels close enough to make sense.

[roninmuffins](#)

I love this so very much

[wirelessgrapes](#)

You can’t talk about the director during the show

JJR

Deadpool says hi, and also he wants a raise.

=P

talene1

It is beautiful how they both see it as a victory. And how they childishly refuse to accept the other's interpretation. It's like two crotchety old men who stubbornly refuse to see from another's perspective.

And that ending was so nice. I hate this cliffhanger though.

"What, where there no other bodies left?"

Should be were not where.

Dainpdf

"It is beautiful how they both see it as a victory."
You mean Black and Pilgrim, or Cat and Bard? XP

[Liliet](#)

>It is beautiful how they both see it as a victory. And how they childishly refuse to accept the other's interpretation.

I don't think that's what's happening. Tariq, definitely, but Amadeus is quite literally playing devil's advocate, and explaining why villains would ever get onboard.

Decius

Amadeus is playing his own advocate, and explaining why he would get onboard.

The devils get shafted a little bit by the limitations on summoning devils, but they aren't expected to be signatories any more than the angels are.

mavant

The trouble with kleptomaniacs is they always take things literally.

[TeK](#)

You absolute lad!

[Liliet](#)

>Amadeus is playing his own advocate, and explaining why he would get onboard.

Y'know except for that literally not being his reason why. His own reasons he actually completely conspicuously leaves out because he's a drama queen who's too proud to admit he's less villainous than Tariq thinks he is

TeK

Amadeus would be playing a devil's advocate, if he did not happen to both agree and be a devil in the question. I mean he is posturing a little about how "well if I were a bad person (which I am obviously not) I would think something like that", we all know what he is about. Cat said he can't conceive a world where he doesn't win. I am pretty sure years of win streak and moral highground as a physical reality did the same to Tariq. They are really quite eerily similar. All Black sees is how new world will help HIM win. All Tariq sees is how new world will help HIM win. Both are missing the entire point. I am pretty sure Amadeus is not playing a devil's advocate, he is just explaining how **all his life he was fettered and forced to measure his brutality anyway**. But Tariq is not wrong in that the establishment of common code of conduct, coupled some basic degree of restraint will really cut Villains population. Because as you can see from history, there were VASTLY more Villains of a "Not Black" kind. And those would not live under Accords. I think Black had forgotten that he is very much an exception to the rule. If Accords enforced will let only Villains of the kind of Black and Malicia (and Aqua, really) live, it would be massive win for a Good T00.

Liliet

>all his life he was fettered and forced to measure his brutality anyway

Forced? He literally wanted to FORCE EVERYONE ELSE TO. Find me a quote where Amadeus goes "gee I sure wish I could torture some kittens without repercussions". He tried to give a morality-based rebuttal to Catherine's point about his shit in Procer, even (if badly)

>I think Black had forgotten that he is very much an exception to the rule. If Accords enforced will let only Villains of the kind of Black and Malicia (and Aqua, really) live, it would be massive win for a Good T00.

Accords will shift the stories, and numerically the Kairos kind of villain will proliferate to balance the scales.

Oh, it will be a massive win for sanity and prosperity. But that's Black's own point, too. "A government is meant to function".

He hasn't forgotten a thing. His own position on the topic is not "I want this because it will help villains win", although I wouldn't be surprised if he really could come up with enough arguments for that to genuinely hold up the position, his own position on the topic is "I have worked my entire life to make this happen".

[Tek](#)

"Forced? He literally wanted to FORCE EVERYONE ELSE TO"

I got an impression that he wanted to do that because they did it wrong, not because there was something wrong with an idea.

[Liliet](#)

You think Amadeus views committing atrocities as an end unto itself?

[Liliet](#)

oh hey I found a quote

>"It is worse than inconvenient," Black said. "It is flawed. The Wasteland has made a religion out of mutilating itself. We speak of it with pride. Gods, iron sharpens iron? We have grown so enamoured with bleeding our own we have sayings about it. Centuries ago, field sacrifices were a way to fend off starvation. Now they are a staple of our way of life, so deeply ingrained we cling to them given alternative. Alaya, we consistently blunder so badly we need to rely on demons to stay off destruction. We would rather irreparably damage the fabric of Creation than admit we can be wrong. There is nothing holy about our culture, it needs to be ripped out root and stem as matter of bare survival. Forty years I have been trying to prove success can be achieved without utter raving madness

Sure does strike me as him seeing something wrong with the idea(s) o.o

Sparsebeard

I like how Praes' ways can pretty much serve as a metaphor for the "American" way of life (by which I mean the culture of consumption taken to the extreme, for exemple cars, over-packaging, one-use consumables, meat, etc., no offence meant to americans as this is also the goal of much of humanity outside the USA).

I mean, for exemple :

Centuries [Decades] ago, field sacrifices [coal] were a way to fend off starvation. Now they are a staple of our way of life, so deeply ingrained we cling to them given alternative.

Mental Mouse

> All Black sees is how new world will help HIM win. All Tariq sees is how new world will help HIM win.

And thus they both demonstrate why both sides will sign the accords.

> the establishment of common code of conduct, coupled some basic degree of restraint will really cut Villains population.

And that's why there are so few evil people prospering in our own world, with its national laws, WMD treaties, and no capacity to summon devils. /s 😊 Seriously, Amadeus is dead right – villains will work with whatever structure they're given. Just look how our world's bullies generally know how to work the rules... and they luurve Zero Tolerance regimes, which let them set up their victims for punishment with no discretion allowed to the authorities.

Liliet

Yeeeeep.

Javvies

Wait. What the fuck.

...

Dammit. Wandering Bard strikes again, changing the fucking rules on everybody.

—

Progress towards the Accords? At least some. Hopefully, it'll survive the Intercessor's interference.

Dainpdf

Bard being able to take people aside does help understand how she gets so much chessmastering done.

antoninjohn

Speak now and have her shut up again

konstantinvoncarstein

I think Amadeus underestimate the side of Good. They can learn, and will just adapt to this Age of Order.

And by the way,

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

Dainpdf

Whuh? Amadeus was the one arguing Evil would adapt to Order. Tariq's argument was that Order was their turf to begin with.

konstantinvoncarstein

You're right, I read a bit too fast.

caoimhinh

Amadeus knows that lawyers are Evil, hahaha.

"We will twist around the spirit of every rule while obeying the letter."

That sounds about right, the new generation of Villains will be pragmatic, and fight by the way Black taught Catherine in Book 1: Win *despite* the rules.

The Heroes, on the other hand, are more likely to be compelled to act on the spirit of the law, and think about the good of the people, what is just, and what is *right*. It's exceptions like Pilgrim and Saint who are capable of becoming well-intentioned extremists (like Tariq killing with a plague a whole town to hunt down Black, or Laurence thinking a Crusade without qualms that burns down Procer is the solution for erasing the corruption) and those acts of extremism are explicitly banned by the Accords.

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, the spirit of the law is more important. But if Villains can change, why not Heroes too? They could use Pragmatic Heroism, like the Lone Swordsman.

Another solution would be an increase in the number of oracular Heroes, would could give an enormous boost to the Good nations and act indirectly.

laguz24

Lone swordsman, pragmatic heroism? no thanks. He was the epitome of extremism and stupid good.

konstantinvoncarstein

He was extremist and an bad person, but he used means not traditionally associated with Good. So we know Heroes can adapt and ignore the spirit of the law for the Greater Good.

laguz24

You mean lesser evil, and the extremism and deviation from heroism actually hampered his role. For example, the thief told him that if he kept on acting like a jerk he would get a fate befitting of one, contrition does not give out omniscient morality licenses.

caoimhinh

It's due to their nature.

A Hero will do what's right, not what is lawful. Like an activist making a protest, or a Superhero acting as vigilante to catch criminals that the cops won't.

A Villain will pursue their own goal, manipulating the laws for it. Like a politician pushing a law that oppresses people or benefits only a certain sector, or an ambitious businessman doing cruel but legal things, like cutting down an area of forest to build stuff there.

A Villain would refuse refugees at the border and excuse himself in the laws saying he is in no obligation to help, while a Hero would open the border to help the people that are in need, even if the laws said otherwise.

Catherine is reflecting on such things in this chapter, one can't change the nature of what lies in the core of people, but can set a scenario for it, a set of rules for that nature to manifest without it going overboard and having two groups of Named nuking it out and taking cities with them.

William was not a Pragmatic Hero, he was an Anti-hero and not very pragmatic at all. Besides, he was xenophobic, racist, murder-happy and obsessed with both vengeance and penitence. William is the kind of Named that would be put down by the new generation post-Accords.

It is true that Heroic Named will emerge that will be capable of using the laws to their favor as Villainous Named will do, but those will be a rarer breed.

[sengachi](#)

And Catherine is just like "so long as the letter of the law is 'don't fucking summon demons' and no one is summoning demons, I will be a-okay with whichever side adapts better".

caoimhinh

Indeed. She is not one who cares about Above and Below, after all. What she cares is about the people, she wouldn't care whether the leader of a nation is Hero or Villain, just that they take care of the nation and don't fuck up the rest.

That's the entire reasoning that led her to join the Legions of Terror in the first place: even if they were the Villain side, they were the ones that offered a chance for a better Callow without furthering the bloodshed beyond the point it had already reached.

[Liliet](#)

♥ ♥ ♥

KageLupus

The best part is, someone is still going to try to summon a demon. The Bad Guys are not going to want to just give up on their magical nukes, and someone is going to be arrogant enough to think that they can summon a demon and keep it hidden from everyone else until they need it.

But, under the Liesse Accords, **everyone** is going to have a reason to root out and expose people breaking the rules. Heroes because that is what they do, and Villains because it is an easy way to undermine your enemies. I guarantee the first time someone gets caught summoning a demon or breaking one of the other Big Rules under the Accords, it is going to be another Villain that narcs on them.

Black's whole argument here is that team Below will use the Accords as a way to scheme against each other, and therefore will self-police instead of all of them just ignoring the rules. Smart Villains will work inside of the law, and will not hesitate to use it to call down angry Heroes on their enemies if they can. And since most Villains are going to be arrogant enough to think they can get away with bending the rules because they are clever, more of them than not will want to stick to the Accords so they can use them.

It is honestly a pretty beautiful system, since it gives enough people on both sides of the coin a reason to want to join and enforce it.

[Liliet](#)

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guarantee the first time someone gets caught summoning a demon or breaking one of the other Big Rules under the Accords, it is going to be another Villain that narcs on them.

YES.

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>It is honestly a pretty beautiful system, since it gives enough people on both sides of the coin a reason to want to join and enforce it.

Yep.

And it sure answered the more meta question of 'would Accords work with villains' but absolutely didnt answer the immediate question of 'why are you, personally, working on this'

Hellspirit

Damn you Friday cliff!!

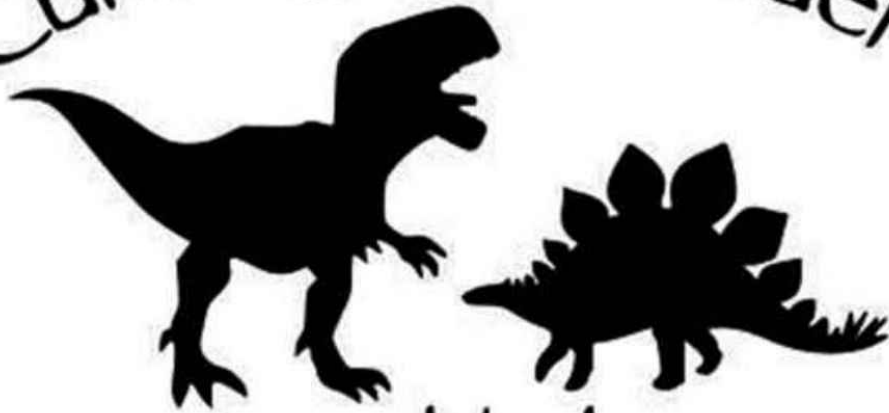
But damn this chapter had lot of substance for little settling. Definitely the kind of of chapter that I'm going to need to reread a few times ^^

caoimhinh

Curse this sudden but inevitable Cliffhanger!

Who are we kidding? This kind of stuff is what spices up a web serial~
Hahahahahaha.

Curse your sudden



But inevitable ~~betrayal~~

Cliffhanger!

Andrew Mitchell



How do you do that?

caoimhinh

Thank you~

I just add the direct link to the image on Imgur. WordPress turns that into a miniature of the image, and clicking on the image sends you to the full size of it.

Really convenient, I'm fairly sure WordPress didn't do that before, maybe it's a recent update?

Andrew Mitchell

Cool. I think I might get in on the action. 😊



WuseMajor

If they weren't so inherently dismissive of each other, if they could actually sit down and explain their points of view, if they could actually listen, I suspect that Amadeus and Tariq could develop a level of grudging respect for each other. But I don't think they're capable of it.

So, is this where you're going to explain that you've been training a successor, Bard?

Oshi

They have plenty of respect for each other. It doesn't mean they don't hate each other.

Decius

Agreeing to the Accords doesn't require not hating each other. Following the Accords doesn't require not hating each other.

None of Pilgrim's or Black's goals are even slightly inconvenienced by them hating each other- while they might both personally WANT to kill the other (again), they both recognize that doing so right now would be counterproductive to their actual goals.

[Liliet](#)

Caterine's goals are inconvenienced by Tariq not trusting personally Amadeus, though.

[Liliet](#)

More like Tariq needs to sit down and listen to Amadeus explaining his point of view.

And Amadeus needs to stop being a pissy 5 year old and *actually explain his point of view even if it makes him look better* (he won't)

mavant

Did you mean bitter?

[Liliet](#)

No, I mean better.

He would have to construct an argument along the lines of "actually I don't WANT to summon eldritch monstrocities and commit atrocities" and that is, y'know, far too close to 'trying to justify himself' for him to not be too proud to do so.

caoimhinh

At some point, those two are gonna have to sit down, share some bad liquor and have a long and heated but honest debate like the old philosophers of yore.

Then they can go back to continue hating each other, but at least with more understanding of each other.



[Liliet](#)

Ah, but for that, Amadeus has to be willing to *defend his point of view* and *present himself in better light*.

I'd say 'pigs will fly first' but pigs HAVE flown in Guide, so , , , MAYBE???

laguz24

No, I think by mentioning the wandering bard it gives her the power to do this by making her plot-relevant and here is where she throws her spanner in the works.

edrey

so the bard is more powerfull than angels and lesser gods to just take cat from her body without anyone noticing? especially the sisters. well that is scary, what you would expect of the equal of the dead king

caoimhinh

Probably she has access to some advantage due to working for both sides of the Gods.

The good thing is that she apparently can't hurt others directly, or at least that has been the pattern so far, she could just be restraining herself and actually capable of fighting.

mavant

I think this is just "specific trumps general" in play. You don't have to be more powerful, just more specialized. I don't know the name of the tvtropes page for that but I'm sure there must be one.

[Liliet](#)

This, agreed.

mavant

Followup: Apparently the legal term for this is 'Lex specialis'.

caoimhinh

Ah, Tariq, that short-sightedness is why Amadeus disdains you so much. Once again we are shown that the old Heroes didn't even turn their gaze towards Callow until Akua's Folly and they were summoned for the Tenth Crusade (which Catherine already reprimanded Pilgrim about). If he had paid attention and knew Praes and Callow situation of the last couple of decades, he would know why Amadeus laughs.

All one has to do is look back at the last decades of Praes and one will see that it already operates without "Below's favoured monsters". Praes was be stripped of manners of terror and brutality in myriad *by Amadeus* (and Alaya too), who forced the Legions of Terror to measure their wickedness and moderate cruelties. The current Legions are no rapist, sackers nor blind hordes of killers, they are soldiers that obey laws and codes of

regulations with strict discipline. Praes stopped using Demons since Amadeus rose, *the whole reason* the Conquest happened was because they left behind the old methods of monsters, wickedness and senseless cruelty.

That's why Amadeus now laughs at Tariq thinking Villains will be weakened under the Accords' laws. He is living proof that *that* is the real way to lasting victory. Pragmatic Villains fighting wars in the way Black and Cat have are gonna be kicking the Heroes' collective ass.

edrey

that because he doesn't have the knowledge beyond his little stories, the Yan tei should be beyond his understanding, ruled by heroes and villains at the same time

konstantinvoncarstein

The Accords gives an edge to the side of Good, because so they don't have to worry about flying fortresses or zombie plagues. Now that the danger comes from another direction (tactics and strategy), they just have to adapt their methods and use their resources accordingly.

Pragmatic villainy allows Villains to win only if they are more clever than the opposing side.

[Liliet](#)

Honestly, I don't think the balance will tilt either way, because the balance was ALWAYS enforced by narrative luck. If heroes get less of an object level disadvantage they'll just start getting less providence to make up for it.

Shveiran

That's a clever read, and you may be right. It never occurred to me that this was the cause of the heroes' luck, but it is possible... I'm not sure that's how it works, though. Maybe that's something more linked to Above

[Liliet](#)

Either way, Black *not committing atrocities in Callow* actually really did lead to him having the upper hand for 20 years. Providence is clearly proportional to *how bad things are without it*

Decius

Flying fortresses and zombie plagues aren't a weakness of Good.

Every. Single. Attempt. Failed.

Flying fortresses, zombie plagues, and the like are a weakness of Evil, in that they always create a BandOfFiveHeroes which will defeat them, and the BigBad ends up being the person who uses them.

Shveiran

Long term, which is how Cat and Black thinks, yes.

From the point of view of heroes and, you know, people, Villains get to do all this crazy stuff that allows them to interact with the world and change it large scale and also cause massive destruction.

It's easy to see why Cat and Black don't mind giving up the flying fortresses and the zombie plagues, but... it's not hard to see why the Good guys would be quite happy to see them go, either.

[Liliet](#)

It's almost like deescalation is a move that benefits everyone.

S h o c k i n g h o w t h a t w o r k s (-glares at Pilgrim for not looking in that direction-)

[shieldredblog](#)

You're assuming Good cares about mortal intelligence and power beyond controlling and limiting it. A very common theme of Good is stripping away power, not giving it. Named aside. Like how most Good nations limit sorcery and not just the harmful stuff. Procer bans magical healing and they are far from the most fanatical followers of Good.

Villains accuse Good of being stiff and stagnant for good reason. It is actively opposed to change or improvement, even the benign kind. Good reacts to Evil with violence and sometimes saves lives, it doesn't actually do much good for people. Heroes that change the world for the better instead of just 'saving it' or healing it are basically non-existent.

On the opposite side of the coin, as mad as the Highlords are, they have managed to gain their people decades of natural lifespan and a ridiculous percentage of 'gifted'. Things Good would never ever let their followers have. Inventor and mage Names are both the providence of Below.

Night is about improving, becoming stronger and more skilled. Light is about enforcing the existing order, it heals and weakens.

Praes has been wasting their talents on attempted conquests. A sane and peaceful Praes is much scarier. Malicia knows this.

[TeK](#)

"Like how most Good nations limit sorcery"

Like how? Procer just had them lose in a power struggle and just being *Jaquinites* in general. Ashur suffered from a terrible case of overspecialising. Levant is weird in every way already, plus I am pretty sure being a mage and not a Binder is a disrespect for the Honored Ancestors.

"Procer bans magical healing"

That's just greed, I am afraid Gods don't give a duck.

"Villains accuse Good of being stiff and stagnant for good reason."

I'd argue that. It is also the case of "but if we could experiment on people, we would move science so MUCH FASTER". The problem is that extremes suck. Always. Accords attempt to tone them down.

"it doesn't actually do much good for people. Heroes that change the world for the better instead of just 'saving it' or healing it are basically non-existent."

True. You will find Villains doing same as even more non-existent. That is not, in fact, a coincidence.

"On the opposite side of the coin, as mad as the Highlords are, they have managed to gain their people decades of natural lifespan and a ridiculous percentage of 'gifted'."

And also they managed to make their agroculture run on human sacrifice. Good stuff all around. I am sure they don't sacrifice Highborn though. And I mean, not like eugenics is, dunno, inhumane. I wonder why noone tries it though... Makes you think.

"Inventor and mage Names are both the providence of Below."

First is a baseless speculation, second is an outright lie.

"Night is about improving, becoming stronger and more skilled."

laughs in drow

"Praes has been wasting their talents on attempted conquests."

It has. And it kept them weak. While Good tried to fight the symptoms instead of the problems. And it kept them weak.

I have no idea what you trying to say there. Good being stiff and judgemental is the same as Evil being mad and self-destructive. One is forbidding science in a fear of making an atom bomb, another is jury-rigging one and **blowing it in your backyard for funsies**. You will notice that neither i a very productive way of living. That is not, in fact, a coincidence. Just a different way to keep people in check. A game where the only way to win, is not to play, but you can't win if you don't play. Ingenious.

But make no fucking mistake. Evil is not good.

[shieldredblog](#)

I wasn't trying to compare the two from a moral standpoint. I got a little off topic but the point was a peaceful world with rules of behavior on named benefits Evil societies far more than Good ones because it would restrain their worst impulses, protect them from (some) meddling kids and allow them to advance science and sorcery more smoothly. They are by nature more competitive and driven. They adapt and grow naturally where Good does not.

[TeK](#)

"They are by nature more competitive and driven."

laughs in Chantant

[Liliet](#)

>You're assuming Good cares about mortal intelligence and power beyond controlling and limiting it.

Huh. Actually, this is a topic that should probaby be discussed more: what do you think is the point of the wager? Like, what is it they are actually betting ABOUT?

>Like how most Good nations limit sorcery and not just the harmful stuff. Procer bans magical healing and they are far from the most fanatical followers of Good.

...source????

laguz24

I do agree, and that is one of the reasons I have problems with the white knight. He got his name through the failures of mortal justice and he leaves it alone. He does not try to change anything or do anything to make things better for

people like his mother. In fact, he helps it continue via protecting the systems from crucibles that force change.

[Liliet](#)

>he helps it continue via protecting the systems from crucibles that force change.

What crucibles that force change?

Your daily reminder that absolutely no-one outside of Praes has any clue about what Amadeus has been doing with its internal politics and economic structure, and from the point of view of every single outsider he's just classic villain #194 Now With Some More Competence.

We will have to see Hanno's reaction to the Accords, first 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

> We will have to see Hanno's reaction to the Accords, first 😊

He will not judge them either. 😊

ninegardens

He will no judge them... but if they put restrictions on what he can do, is this going to be a problem for him (or the Choir he represents).

Come to think of it... what are the rules regarding Angelic advice/patronage? You can't drop a Angelic mindbomb, but do the accords Forbid Hanno and Tariq getting Angelic feedback...

I feel like this was commented on... should check it out.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Getting advice isn't a WMD-level problem!

No more problematic than villainous scrying or divinatory/providential aspects like Hakram's **Find**.

[Liliet](#)

I think there's a bit more to it, too.

>"It must be a pleasant world to live in, where any that stand opposite of you must be either grasping or grasped," Black smiled. "Either the creature of the Gods Below or their apostle

in wickedness – either way, what sin can there be in breaking us?”

Yes, then Amadeus proceeds to make the point of the wager villains will make on this.

But first? First he’s bitter, that Tariq is unwilling or unable to see the true victory that *he* is after.

(You could have explained, Amadeus. But you didn’t and you never will because you’re proud and you’re bitter and you won’t)

Shveiran

(also, because he doesn’t believe anyone would listen and based on what we have seen so far I’M NOT SURE HE’S WRONG; that may change in the future, sure, but the tricky part of the future is that it hasn’t happened yet.)

[Liliet](#)

HE IS TALKING TO A TRUTHTELLER

[Liliet](#)

Like, yes, for a truthteller Tariq is an incredible dumbass and incredibly awful at parsing *implications* of what he sees.

You know how you get around that? You say clear, unambiguous, literal truth, plainly, explicitly and at length, and have him verify that everything you say is exactly correct.

It’s not like Amadeus doesn’t know how to work truthtelling to his advantage!..

caoimhinh

That’s the problem with Tariq, he won’t consider that truth as being correct, just “this is what you believe”. That has been his way of reacting to those uncomfortable truths ALL THE TIME, ever since Catherine first met him and told him that she would open passage to Praes if that’s what the Crusade was after, or when she told him that Amadeus was a reasonable person that would listen to offers and proposals of change for the betterment of Praes.

He said that too, when Catherine first told him that the Bard is also a servant of Below “I’m sure it seems that way to you but...”

And in this chapter, when Amadeus told him that Evil would obey the Accords and actually benefit from it, Tariq

refuses to believe it, and when Amadeus further elaborates, Tariq's response is calling him a madman.

We can't forget that despite everything, Tariq is a religious fanatic.

His creed and calling may be to the alleviation of suffering and pulling from that angle can get him to act in many ways, but he still stubbornly refuses to accept truths that go against his worldview, even if the Angels tell him that the person speaking is not lying, Tariq will just go "you just *think* this is true, but that doesn't mean it's actually true"

[Liliet](#)

>That's the problem with Tariq, he won't consider that truth as being correct, just "this is what you believe".

He was asking *about Amadeus's motivations*. That is what I am saying Amadeus COULD and SHOULD have explained, BUT DIDN'T, because he is a DISASTER. When Amadeus goes on an impassioned speech, everyone tends to believe him even without truthtelling, and body does he have *things* to say about old-school villainy and collateral damage...

...but of course he will not say them in a way *targeted to make a hero's opinion of him higher*. Never!

Andrew Mitchell

> because he is a DISASTER

TRUTH!

[Mental Mouse](#)

> We can't forget that despite everything, Tariq is a religious fanatic.

Also, an 80-year old man who has been very successful doing this his way. Unsurprising that he's not terribly flexible.

Shveiran

Being a truthteller doesn't make someone willing to listen.

The problem is, if enough distrust is thrown around, the "Saint" argument is impossible to disprove. You can always find a way to twist someone's words and assume the worst of them... or assume you didn't find a way because they are very clever, but they still have a vicious objective.

I mean, really, I'm not sure their previous chat even counted; this may be the first instance where an honest discussion between the two is possible, and I'm not totally positive Tariq is ready to listen still.

Could Amadeus be more proactive? Sure, no arguments there. I'm just saying... there is a point where the opposition is too much to overcome with honest proactivity. That's how we got the Keter arch, and though Winter may have played a part in the way she chose out of it, the corner Cat was backed in by Tariq and Cordelia was very real. And they are the reasonable ones!

[Liliet](#)

>or assume you didn't find a way because they are very clever, but they still have a vicious objective.

His Aspect literally exists for the purpose of cutting through that.

caoimhinh

He wasn't bitter that Tariq couldn't see the victory Amadeus is after, he was bitter at the Hero's attitude of self-righteousness. That paragraph was a call to the Heroes' pretense that they can do anything they want because they are the Good Guys, the pretense that the world is black & white, and the ignorance of thinking that all Villains are the same.

Amadeus has twice explained things to Tariq, both on the reactive nature of Narrative and Heroics, and how being Villain and Hero does not determine someone's actions. But Tariq still refuses to accept it, because those are uncomfortable and painful truths, a hard pill to swallow.

[Liliet](#)

Literally the same thing.

Only, y'know, general vs specific.

Dainpdf

Bit of an odd point: they're both arguing their side would keep to the rules... because they would be winning. This doesn't really support the stability of the Accords, because both seem to be saying that if their side does start to lose they would drop the Accords like a hot potato.

caoimhinh

Not exactly.

Tariq claims that Villains won't abide by the Accords, that whenever they try to obey laws they grow discontent and break the rules. However, he believes that if the Accords were to be obeyed then the Heroes would still win, as it severely limits the Villains' side, far more than it limits the Heroes' side.

Amadeus, on the other hand, is happy with the Accords because they regulate Villany and force them to be pragmatic, and he has been the greatest example of that as a winning strategy for decades. So he laughs with disdain at Tariq, because Pilgrim has apparently not been paying attention to the way Amadeus and Catherine win their battles.

Decius

Tariq correctly identifies that there will be Villains who break the rules. What Tariq does not say he sees is that there will be many Villains who follow the rules and will be happy to use that rulebreaking as a reason to kill those Villains and take their stuff, with the full assistance of the heroes who also follow the Accords.

There will also be Heroes who ignore the rules. The same Villains who follow the rules will get assistance from the Heroes who follow the rules to hunt down the chaotic Heroes, kill them, and take their stuff.

Having a primary behavior of "If I can get away with it, kill people and take their stuff" is not something a Good person can have, and so that provides a benefit to Evil Named who follow the Accords.

Oversimplified, I know, but also reduced to archetypes.

[Liliet](#)

And Tariq is just a dumbass.

Cicero

At first that would be the case. But as time goes on, and no one remembers any other way of doing things, there will be some stability lent merely by the weight of tradition.

Of course, every once in awhile a villain or hero will arise that see that breaking the rules could gain them greater victory, but will they be able to persuade enough of the other heroes or villains to believe the same?

If someone ends up breaking the accords it will be the heroes, because the villains will be too difficult to unify. Yet the very nature of heroism makes rule breaking difficult in the

first place. If it happens it will be under the banner of an anti-hero... and that might empower villains as well.

Dainpdf

Sure, but that is not what they are saying.

IDKWhoitis

If Kairos is allowed to lay a single filthy mitt on the Accords, he can assure a great deal of tomfuckery down the line for champions of Below. With very precisely worded vague laws, to allow for some creative reinterpretations down the line.

Ex. "While The Accords prohibit the usage of Class IV and above devils in mortal conflict, it does not specifically prohibit using Class IV and above devils to combat other Class IV devils that happen to be in the nearby vicinity. Since entities on both sides are technically immortal, although what happened to that city caught in the middle is a great shame, this case is not subject to protections under § 66 of Devil Usage, Subsection C, clause i."

I would imagine Hierarch would be a good Supreme Court Judge, he is fairly impartial, and his belief in the power of law is strong enough to make reality scream in agony at the twisting. He also seems to have a fairly decent understanding of laws, systems, and the roles of government.

konstantinvoncarstein

Catherine, Tariq and Cordelia will be watching the text like hawks, ready to prevent such loopholes to be created. And Kairos would be alone against 4.

IDKWhoitis

You forget Black and Hierarch will/may be aiding him. Also, Good™ has to let some stuff pass on purpose, because actually banning too many things will not give Villains a reason to follow it at all. There will be several cases of enforcement that are too hard to ascertain or just plain impossible to check and enforce. In those cases, just outright banning the practices will erode the authority of the rest of the Accords, just like have unenforceable mortal laws.

And you can't ever be sure with Kairos, he could easily move around a couple commas on the last draft, certify he changed no words, and cause a shitshow later on. (did you ever hear of the 5 million dollar case over a missing comma?)

konstantinvoncarstein

No, I didn't know of it 😬 But everyone will check anything that Kairos touches to prevent this.

I was specifically speaking about the loopholes concerning the use of devils. Black will not accept this kind of things. But yes, maybe Hierarch will.

Liliet

>You forget Black and Hierarch will/may be aiding him.

Seriously? You seriously think Amadeus would help Kairos fuck up the Accords? Mr "I would ban diabolism if I thought it was enforceable"?

Decius

Yes. Black would totally leave in a loophole for something that gave him a net advantage down the line. Not for diabolism, because he doesn't think that would give him an advantage.

But if Named are forbidden to rule, the Emperor cannot be a Named. The Chancellor, or Viceroy however, are not rulers.

Shveiran

That suggests that Black thinks he and Kairos play in the same team.

I'm not sure Amadeus shares that point of view.

TeK

They work for the same employers, not necessarily in the same team. Heard about incorporate rivalry?

Liliet

They less work for the same employer and more hail from the same town. And one of them wants to burn it the fuck down.

TeK

It's funny, but which one?

Liliet

With full awareness of the irony, the one who has not been described as "a true believer of Below"



Fayhem

Yeah, they definitely hate each other's guts. Remember how literally the first thing Catherine said on meeting Kairos for the first time was "wow, he [meaning Black] must have wanted to kill you *so much*"? And how Kairos' speech to Hierarch when he was having his Name inflicted on him included a whole segment where he's basically raving about how much he hates Black? Those two will share a common point of view when Hell freezes over, *maybe*.

Liliet

>gave him a net advantage down the line

Gave him a net advantage for what? Keeping a functioning government (his actual goal)? Accords do that without loopholes, he wouldn't want them destabilized.

TeK

To be completely fair, Kairos was not caught using diabolism, nor were his underlings. After all, Demons are many things, but fun they are not. Unless there is a Demon of Humor.

erebus42

That sound's both terrifying and awesome, but I think EE could pull it off. Honestly, his and Wildbow's awesomely existentially horrifying demons are probably some of my favorite monsters in fiction and I kinda hope we get to see a bit more of them before this story is through.

caoimhinh

When I read "Demon of Humor" this is what came to my mind right away XD



Mental Mouse

Where is that from?

caoimhinh

Batman Ninja, the movie

Rey d`Tutto

You mean this one? https://www-m.cnn.com/2018/02/09/us/dairy-drivers-oxford-comma-case-settlement-trnd/index.html?r=https%3A%2F%2Fsearch.yahoo.com%2F_ylt%3DAwr9DtS0E09dCSIArBnBG0d_%2FRV%3D2%2FRE%3D1565492239%2FR0%3D10%2FRU%3Dhttps%253a%252f%252fwww.drivers-oxford-comma-case-settlement-trnd%252findex.html%2FRK%3D2%2FRS%3DR8Z09b9WcbQmwngBG8kzGycbh0c-

IDKWhoitis

Yes, that one

Silverking

...You know, I'm not sure if Bard is actually for or against the Accords. Namely because she doesn't seem to have skin in the game either way. Cat wants lasting peace for her country, Pilgrim wants to prevent unnecessary suffering, and Black wants Good to finally be held accountable to the same set of rules as Evil (no more "bargains with Evil can be ignored whenever"). Bard, on the other hand, might just be...apathetic. The Accords are a plot device, a gimmick, something that Story and the ravages of time can bolster, exploit, or destroy as necessary. The welfare of the people and the sovereignty of nations are as dust; all Bard cares about is to keep the game of Above and Below going, and the

Accords don't explicitly block that. On the other hand, if the Accords fall through, the game will continue regardless.

No, as of right now, the only real value the Accords have to Bard is that they are something that a few of the chess pieces are willing to agree to as part of the Epic Clash against the Eternal Enemy, and (more importantly) something that the slippery Cat is willing to bend over backwards to keep alive.

Mental Mouse

I'm pretty sure that Bard's attitude to the Accords themselves is basically "whatever". She is intervening to stop Cat 's attempt to conspire against *her*.

Shveiran

There is a lot of speculation about the Bard, right now. For instance, I'm pretty sure her role is to ensure the struggle between the two sides never dies down, and is thus very much against anything that brings both sides to the table and agrees on rules of engagement.

We shall wait and see, I suppose.

Liliet

>Bard, on the other hand, might just be...apathetic. The Accords are a plot device, a gimmick, something that Story and the ravages of time can bolster, exploit, or destroy as necessary.

I think the Gods are, for the reasons you outlined. That doesn't mean Bard necessarily is (and I don't mean she's against 😊)

TeK

I am pretty sure Gods are pretty excited because "look at them go".

Liliet

♥ ♥ ♥

Amadeus reiterating the wager sounds like an establishment of the 'and the Gods are fine with either' idea ♥

Mammon

Wandering Bard: And then I appear at the exact right time to stop Cat to talk about me and only cement my awesome ability to manipulate in the story. Because the sisters aren't actively watching this or intervening, they won't be a bother. And with

Pilgrim still on my side there won't be anyone powerful enough around to interfere.

Rumera: No.

*Appears and slaps WB up the head with a rolled up newspaper. Which is a slab of stone because there's too little wood in the Underdark to use paper for such a task.

Mr. Silent Steps: No.

Grabbed her silver flask unnoticed a few moments ago, filled it with mushroom beer, pocketed it back to her, and now flicks her forehead dismissively

Mighty Jindrich: I cannot actually feasibly sneak up on you, but I'm powerful and enough of a public favourite to make an appearance nonetheless!

Dramatically bursts through a nearby wall and body-slams her with no subtlety.

Masego: No.

The rest around the fire pit quizzically look at him suddenly speaking up, and a few minutes later wonder where that smell of fae-fried flesh comes from.

Scribe: No.

Has been here the entire time, throws away the newspaper she prepared to borrow Rumera's one and smacks WB up the head with it again.

Shveiran

Ooooooooooh shit

Aotrs Commander

Why is everyone assuming Black was speaking for villains? He said the wicked, that includes a LOT of the heroes as well. FRACK'S SAKE, Pilgrim, you OWN POEPLER butcher people over every slight, let alone Procer is just one big pile of knives and power-brokering only marginally less sharpened than Praes itself!

If Taric was ever under the delusion that no-one would ever rules-layer the accords, or that only the "villains" would, he clearly hasn't paid attention to *anything that has ever happened in every nation ever in Calernia's entire history.*

"This could have been a beautiful thing!" HAH! For someone who is supposed to be Discount!Gandalf, you are as naive as a child, Pilgrim. And dangerously so.

Also, fuck you, WB.

Aotrs Commander

Fragdammit, I have the lack of editing features.

[Liliet](#)

>If Taric was ever under the delusion that no-one would ever rules-layer the accords, or that only the "villains" would, he clearly hasn't paid attention to anything that has ever happened in every nation ever in Calernia's entire history.

>"This could have been a beautiful thing!" HAH! For someone who is supposed to be Discount!Gandalf, you are as naive as a child, Pilgrim. And dangerously so.

Agreed. That was kind of tragically pathetic of him, I genuinely expected he'd see the 'and everyone will rules-lawyer the fuck out of this' thing coming 1000 miles away. Did he not pay *any attention at all* to Kairos's rise? He probably didn't, did he. This is the same man who went "wait, people can do... both good AND evil depending on whether someone's in their in-group or out-group? what sorcery is this?" at 30+yo.

And he completely missed what Amadeus was bitter about, and completely 100% took his act as "mwahahaha watch me be the devil" at face value.

Like, god, wow. He was making a point, Tariq, not actually proposing you a wager. And you call yourself a truth teller?

Aotrs Commander

You know Taric fracked up even even Lillet isn't defending him...!

[Liliet](#)

Tariq, not Taric.

And I will never stop roasting his negative five to Insight. Is there such a thing as an anti-trained skill?...

Aotrs Commander

Again, frack dammit no edit function...

[Javvies](#)

Depends on the system being used.
Some have flaws/negative qualities that one can take that basically mean lolnope to trying certain things.
And I'm pretty sure Tariq doubled down and took all of them when it comes to "understanding other people".

Dude is seriously clueless. And if he didn't have the Ophanim riding shotgun in his skull, I'm pretty sure he'd

be long since dead because of it, even with the survivability benefits of being a Hero.

And he's got a power that literally lets him see people's true motivations and desires. Not that it seems to help him much. He's so dependent upon it that his "skills" without it have atrophied, and even with it, he's really bad at using what it gives him.

It's a damn good thing that he realizes he'd be a shit ruler and has stayed away from getting stuck with the job.

[Liliet](#)

>He's so dependent upon it that his "skills" without it have atrophied

They didn't. He had none in the first place.

[Javvies](#)

Hence the quotation marks around the word "skills".

Although he did manage to have an apparently long running affair with the ruling noble of another city. Though maybe that's because she smacked him with a large enough clue bat enough times.

[Liliet](#)

I get the impression she liked him the way he was – a complete idiot, but a Good one u>

[Liliet](#)

(and the word 'atrophied' implies there was something there to atrophy :D)

[Javvies](#)

Well, his ability to deal with people *without* constantly leaning on **Behold** is basically gone.

For that matter ... his iteration of the **Behold** is an always-on, passive, Aspect, though considering how much the Ophanim like him, there might be active functions to it as well.

Huh. Now I kind of want to know what he got himself into that he got **Behold** as an Aspect. Because I'm pretty sure it is in his second Aspect slot, and his first Aspect was the one all the Grey Pilgrim's have had – the star one, **Shine**, I think it is.

[Liliet](#)

We know that, it was in his extra chapters. He faced his brother and didn't know how to figure out if he really killed their sister, so he prayed for angelic guidance. Other highlights of the extra chapters include him being genuinely surprised someone can be good to their own people and shit to outsiders, at 30+ yo.

So, yes, he was always like this.

Shveiran

The fact that you can dish this out about a character you love to bits, is why I like arguing with you so much even if we often disagree.

[Liliet](#)

I love him and therefore I pay attention to him 😊Д😊😊

Want me to roast Black, here? I like him even better 😊

ninegardens

I mean... he probably DID expect people to rules lawyer the accord's.... he just didn't realize that the game of rules lawyering would be enough to keep the "Villians" playing by the rules.

Black is pointing out that the rules make a new battlefield and Villians are going to screw with each other and you on the new battlefield. Grey was simply thinking "Sure, they'll probably rules lawyer AND cheat AND simply ignore the rules... how in the hell are we going to enforce any of this... why would someone accept such extreme constraints."

I mean... we understand Black, but I'm not going to fault Grey for the fact that he's spent his lifetime fighting monsters that make Kairos look calm and composed. Even if Black isn't representing himself, he is representing something that Grey knows to exist... and Grey has been on the recieving side of Black's most ruthless tendencies (And, to be fair, vice versa).

[Liliet](#)

"This could be a beautiful thing if you didnt exist" tells me of a nat 1 on a 'make sense of the situation' check -_-

erebus42

Yeah, consistantly being told you're on the side of "good" and that you and yours have the moral high ground in any given situation simply on principle combined with a pretty high win streak to act as validation from the universe will certainly lead one to have a pretty simplistic and warped perspective on things.

[TeK](#)

Hard to live in the world where the closest thing to Practical Good is Tariq. Gotta cut him a slack though, a man just died.

ninegardens

"A man just died... and that man was me"

[TeK](#)

"“I can't," he quite reasonably pointed out. "Small steps... what happens to be your name, at the moment?"

"Marguerite of Baillons," the Bard replied.

He snorted.

"Alamans, truly?" he said. "Were all the other bodies taken?"

"“Catherine, Catherine, Catherine," a woman's voice said, sounding almost pained. "You were so close but now you're fucking it all up."

I looked at where the voice had come from – to the side, perched atop one of the raised stones, the Wandering Bard was seated. Slender and dark-haired, with blue eyes and a rather attractive face. The accent, though, I had recognized. Alamans.

"Really," I said, "Alamans? What, where there no other bodies left?"

The Bard cocked her head to the side, looking surprised and more than a little amused.

"That is uncanny," she muttered."

Cap'n Smurfy

I believe this chapter can be best summarized as follows.

Pilgrim: "Laws and Rules will make the world a better place for Good."

Black: "You think Laws will help Good? Bitch please, we'll ruleslawyer the Hells out of you"

Cat: "Can we just not?"

Bard: "Sure"
Cat: "Oh God's damnit!"

ninegardens

Where is the first half of this one from? You mind giving a chapter reference?

[Liliet](#)

Epilogue 4.

ninegardens

Thanks heaps.

Also, while re-reading that ...

>> "That seems unnecessary," Amadeus said. "I am, after all, entirely at your power."

"Pilgrim's orders," the Rogue Sorcerer said.

"That is unfortunate," the dark-haired man said. "It is not too late to save your parents."

– Epilouge 4

Along with...

>. Roland finished the last syllable of the incantation he'd begun, protective panes of translucent sorcery forming around Indrani's body. Too late to be of use even presuming they would have held, which the Pilgrim doubted. Tariq did need to look at the young man's face to know it had gone ashen, burning guilt flaring at the thought of having been too slow. A loss tied to deeper fears, fears that Tariq could do nothing to soothe away. To meddle too much in the conflict that lay at the heart of Bestowal was a danger to all involved...

-Reverberation.

Interesting....

Rouge Sorcerer HATES being too late.

How the Hell did Amadeus KNOW that.

... I'm wondering if Roland's parents are locked up in the tower or something...

Andrew Mitchell

> Interesting.... Rouge Sorcerer HATES being too late.

> How the Hell did Amadeus KNOW that. ... I'm wondering if Roland's parents are locked up in the tower or something...

Good pickup. I suspect Amadeus (via Scribe) had previously (before the battle in the Vales) learned about the Rogue Sorcerer and his drives.

[*Liliet*](#)

Rogue Sorcerer DID intersect with him in that Liesse affair with the books... Huh. I wonder if this'll come up



Andrew Mitchell

Ah, I had forgotten about that connection. It will be interesting to see if we learn more about RS's background incl family.

[*TeK*](#)

Epilogue to book 4

Cap'n Smurfy

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Cat: "Can we just not?"

Bard: "Sure"

Cat: "Oh God's damnit!"

superkeaton

I was wondering when this particular fly would land in the ointment

That Guy

So Bard has an aspect called Dialoguous Aparté ?

Daniel E

This could be a perfect Scooby Doo moment. Bard pulls off her mask, revealing.. *gasp* She was General Abigail this whole time! On a serious note, where do we stand on the theory that Bard is effectively the Story incarnate?

Andrew Mitchell

I don't know about "The Story" (there are, after all, LOTS of stories) but I'm fairly sure that the Bard's purpose is to keep the stories going.

Liliet

Bard is a person, and 'the story' is a law of the universe. It's like saying someone is an incarnation of gravity – I'm just genuinely not sure what the fuck that means and what the implications are, practically speaking?

Mental Mouse

If someone was an incarnation of gravity... well, they'd be a real downer. 😊

JJR

““Why now, Tariq Fleetfoot,” the Carrion Lord replied with languid amusement, “that rather sounds like a wager.””

Interesting way to put it, seeing as how creation itself is apparently to determine a wager between the gods.

Liliet

It's not 'a way to put it', it's a direct reference. What Amadeus is saying is, basically, “you cannot assume the villains will see the same cause-effect chain here as you, because the disagreement on that is the core of the difference in the first place”.

And then Tariq throws a micro-tantrum about it because... I'm genuinely not sure why. Did he visualize the Accords as getting rid of all villains forever period? What the fuck is this 'could be beautiful without your existence' image?

laguz24

You just gave me an idea. What if the fey world was a world where the gods above and below created what the opposites did. The winter fey was rule-bound to act despicable and evil without reference to motive. The summer fey was obnoxious and rule enforcers without any reference to morality. these were essentially stereotypes from the other side below does not recognize morality and views power before ideals while above believes ideals come first and power is later given.

Liliet

omfg its the world of them shitposting @ each other

Tab

“I'll speak for the crooked and cruel, pilgrim of grey, and give you the answer you deman.”

deman -> demand ?

Chapter 68: Apropos

"A good liar finds every lie a fetter."

– Arlesite saying

It shouldn't be possible, I thought. How did this somehow not qualify as direct intervention? I was looking at myself standing between the Peregrine and the Carrion Lord, smoke coming up from my pipe hanging still in the air like it'd been frozen stiff. The Bard had what, stolen my soul out of my body under the nose of Sve Noc and slowed the flow of time to a crawl? Considering anything sorcerous touching upon time was known to be requiring the kind of power that'd break a kingdom to steal away a mere heartbeat this had to be a Name thing, but even if that proved true this was... My fingers clenched. *No, Cat, you damned fool*, I grimly thought. *You're looking for a heavy-handed miracle when this one's the reigning queen of smoke and mirrors*. I'd stood here before, though I'd been brought into such a folded moment by another old monster's will. The difference was that the Dead King preferred titanic scenes – an old crusade assaulting the walls of Keter, the chaotic field some had already taken to calling the Princes' Graveyard – while the Intercessor had subtler tastes. A lighter touch that hinted at powers she likely did not possess, but who could know for sure? Some sardonic jest at my expense, or an attempt to rattle me?

"Going in circles, are we?" the Bard drawled. "That's fine. We got time, Cat."

This was an illusion, I thought, or perhaps a memory made into something both more and less. Yet it was exquisitely woven, I'd admit, for the silhouette of the Intercessor perched atop the old stone was flawlessly touched by the cast of starlight that could not truly exist. The shoddy lute on her lap, more driftwood than instrument, was as much one of her signatures as the shining silver flask in her hand. This thing of many faces and a hundredfold in years, there were some who might call it a god. One that sat astride the boundary between the Gods and Creation, like some fickle high priestess of inscrutable designs. And for all that Kairos Theodosian had whispered in my ear secrets of her nature, there was still much more that remained unknown to me.

"So it seems," I finally said. "What name do you happen to go by these days, Almorava?"

"Marguerite of Baillons, at your service," the Bard said, bowing foppishly.

"Does it not get tedious?" I curiously asked. "Trading names and faces so often?"

"You'd be surprised what people can get used to," the Intercessor said, then looked me up and down. "Or maybe not. You've had an interesting few years, haven't you?"

"Same as you," I calmly replied. "Heard you a little spot of trouble down south. Tyrant's a tricky one, eh?"

"You get a particularly sharp one every few centuries," Marguerite nonchalantly admitted. "Mind you, that boy's not making it to thirty."

I don't think he's trying all that hard to, I thought. I did not voice it, though, for though Kairos Theodosian was my foe and had betrayed me many a time – and would again, given occasion – I would still choose him over the Intercessor every time.

"Is this a warning, then?" I mildly asked. "That I need to fall in line if *I* want to make it to that age?"

She laughed, dark-haired and blue-eyed and looking frightfully young for what I knew her to be. Barely out of girlhood, and on such an ancient creature that was almost obscene.

"Shit, Cat, you think this is what – some kind of intimidation racket?" she grinned. "Behave now, young girl. No more slaughtering your enemies or I'll slap your buttocks with a wooden branch."

Her tone was gently mocking, though her face turned serious quickly enough.

"This is a favour I'm doing you, Catherine," the Wandering Bard said. "Because you're trying real hard to do some good and it might even work. If you stop getting in your own way, just the *once*."

Ah. So we were starting with the friendly, smiling face then. Like I'd swallow that.

"I do make it a point of always believing ambiguous immortal creatures without question, when they assure me they're doing me a favour," I prettily smiled. "So, do I need to sign something before you take my soul or will a spoken bargain be enough?"

I winked exaggeratedly.

"For the first of my three wishes-" I began.

"You really are a terrible asshole," the Intercessor said, almost admiring. "Hells, I bet even Nessie gets a little vexed at times and he's gotten pretty hard to ruffle over the millennia."

I was never going to get those wishes, was I? The disappointment only grew with the passing of years.

"You would know," I smiled.

A heartbeat passed as she studied me.

"Spinning this out won't allow the sisters to take you out of here," Marguerite sighed. "You can stop trying to delay now."

Shit. And I'd been trying to hard not to actually think about it just in case she could pick up on things like that.

"Fine," I said. "You want to talk, Bard, let's talk. What do you want?"

"I'd like for you to not help Nessie wiggle out of this, is what I'd like," the Intercessor said. "I don't mind your Accords, Catherine. I think they might even do some good for a century or two, before they become a noose around the neck of Calernia. If you get them signed, well, congratulations. But you're about to scrap most your efforts before the year is out, and while that's mostly on your head and I'd usually abstain from the mess what *does* matter to me is that you're endangering more important endeavours."

Even if we'd been under the noon sun instead of under the veil of night, I thought, I would not have been able to read the woman perched atop the stone. She'd been a weaver of words for longer than Callow had stood and though the Wandering Bard was hardly unbeatable or infallible she was not someone I'd ever have a solid grasp on. Still, even knowing she might be spinning a web of lies tailored exactly for me I had to keep her talking. When else was I ever going to have the opportunity of stealing a glimpse of what she intended?

"And what would those endeavours be?" I pressed.

"Killing the Dead King," the Intercessor said. "For good. Not a soul-shard or an inhabited corpse, not his endless legion of expendable intermediaries. Neshamah King, he who once reigned over Sephirah and so doomed it."

"I've no quarrel with that end," I shrugged.

Which was nothing but the truth. Creation would be better off without the Dead King, there was no denying that. I fully intended on seeing it done, too, if the price for it was not ruinously steep. That did not mean, though, that whatever the

Bard had planned was to be blindly welcomed. Assuming she was speaking the truth, which I would not. *And now*, I thought, *comes the demand*. Oh it'd be disguised, but the tricks being plied on me were not unfamiliar. A common enemy, a common striving, had first been established. Then it'd been hinted that she would not oppose my own heart's desire, seeing the Liesse Accords signed, so long as I did not begin a feud with her. Now she'd make her demand, reasonable and modest, and she might even go a step further by throwing in a bribe. Some secret that'd be of use to me, or a light nudge that'd help me along the way. So, I wondered, what was it to be? Was I to bite my tongue when it came to sharing with the Pilgrim what I knew of her? Or perhaps it'd be something subtler, a particular secret that need be kept.

"Good," Marguerite smiled. "Then when he offers you a truce – and he will, that much is certain – do not put your weight behind accepting it."

I pushed down my surprise, keeping my face a bland mask. *What?* I'd considered the offers Neshamah had half-extended while in Liesse, since the end of the battle, the truces of ten or a hundred years. Tempting as they were, in retrospect the former more than the latter, I'd been growing increasingly inclined to refuse them outright. The long game was his more than ours, in the end, and the Dead King would never have made the offer if he did not gain from it more than we. Yet this was not what I'd expected of the Bard. I'd taken this little aside of ours, much as she pretended otherwise, as a tacit admission that my speaking against her to the Pilgrim might do damage. That she must prevent it. Yet she now spoke as if her great concern was war on Keter and nothing else, which was raising my hackles. I'd seen her act in the name of Below as well as Above, which meant she was not the heroine she oft presented herself as, but what she truly *wanted* did remain a mystery to me. The destruction of the Dead King was a believable striving for this entity, along with the admittedly chilling notion that there was little she was not willing to sacrifice to see it done, but it was... too clean. The two scheming immortals, plotting and scheming across the span of history with Calernia as their pawns?

It had the shape of a story to it and that was what had me wary. The Bard's trade was the peddling of stories, and I could not help but think I was being sold one right now.

"And why shouldn't I?" I said. "A reprieve would allow us to gather stronger forces before marching on Keter."

Was I playing into her hand, I thought, by keeping her talking no matter my true intent? I could not know, but ignorance was cure to nothing at all even lies taught something of what was.

"You'd be clinging to the wrong story," the Bard calmly explained. "In truce he will 'hold' the territories he seized in

Procer. And after the truce runs out, you'll take them back from him. Drive him back to Keter. And that'll be your victory."

She paused.

"And so nothing will change," she said. "Oh, I burned a shard of him when he got greedy in Arcadia. That's a loss for him, it is, but it's a drop in the ocean. I did not wait *centuries* to let him slip away now, Catherine Foundling, not when he could be destroyed instead."

"You're implying that if the war is unbroken by truce, our victory will be in Keter instead," I slowly said.

That by cutting a deal, we'd dilute the substance of the triumph that could be had. Which, while sounding to me of a repugnant repudiation of the practical for nebulous 'principles', sounded quite a lot like some of the hero-talk I'd heard over the years. No truce with the Enemy and all that. And coming out of the Intercessor's mouth it was a lot harder to dismiss, I thought, for though I still doubted the virtue of such a stance I wouldn't deny that as a story-knife it might just hold up. The more complicated a tale the less strongly it bound, in my experience, and I doubted anything short of steel fetters would keep the Dead King dead. Besides, this entire affair assumed we'd be able to win the war in the first place. Which was far from certain, in my opinion.

"He needs Keter, you know," Marguerite idly said. "Everything else he can spare, but Keter? Without it he's no longer the King of Death, he's simply Evil in a box – and that, my dear, delivers him into my hands sure as dawn. So he'll fight for the city tooth and nail, and that's how he ends."

"If that's true," I said, "why would he ever wage war? Why not simply close the borders of his kingdom and avoid the risk entirely?"

After a grisly demonstration of power or two, harsh enough they were seared into the Principate's cultural memory, it was unlikely Procer would try his lands again. Few rulers would be fool enough to seek war with the peace of death to the north when there were better lands south and east to annex instead.

"Because I haven't given him a choice," the Bard candidly said. "If not regularly bled of strength by a war he'll gather enough to try something genuinely dangerous, like conquering another Hell or ingesting another kingdom into the Serenity. So I've arranged for the war to be taken to him, again and again."

"Not this time, though," I said. "He's the one who wanted to sally out, and he's taking risks. Why?"

She laughed, fiendishly pleased.

"Because he's been cornered, Catherine," the Bard said, "by the passing of time. The Kingdom Under will have taken the entire continent underground soon. And on the surface cities are getting larger. Sorcery and learning keeping crawling forward. Larger, more stable alliances are forming. By the time there is a Twentieth Crusade, it'll be able to *win*."

"So he needs to do something now," I said. "A sweeping change of some kind."

"Oh, he caught onto that some time ago," Marguerite said. "There's a reason Procer is such a bloody mess. Ever wonder why the dead strike so often at the Lycaonese while the Alamans by the lakes are an afterthought?"

Because there are much fewer Lycaonese, and they lack allies in the broader Principate, I'd thought. It was much more feasible to slowly eradicate the northerners and their smaller population than it was with the lakeside Alamans, whose principalities tended to be more populated further from the coasts regardless.

"You're implying he's been sabotaging the Principate," I said.

"He's been sowing hate between those tribes since before there was a Principate, Catherine," she replied. "Keeping them estranged, shaping their stories one incursion at a time so that when the black days come they'll be too far gone to band together."

"If you've known for so long then why did it come to this?" I flatly said.

"First Prince isn't a Name," the Intercessor sighed. "That's what I work with, like your teacher told you. Names. I can't touch the Nameless outside of some very narrow boundaries. And what a funny coincidence it is, that the Principate took the shape it bears to this day after Nessie and his friend in the Tower ran roughshod over it. You following me yet, Foundling? Kairos isn't the only one who's ever pulled a fast one over me. The entire bloody nation has been a fire in my lap since its founding."

It was, I thought, believable enough. Though there was one detail more than the rest I focused on.

"Narrow boundaries," I repeated, hinting at a question.

She looked amused.

"You spoke of me," the Bard said. "It was enough, given who you are."

And wasn't that just the loveliest of ambiguous sentences? Who I was. It might even be true, given that I'd avoided speaking of her as much as I could. The last time I could recall, in truth, had been with the Tyrant of Helike and we'd been hiding behind the madness of the Hierarch unleashed on that night. She would not have known anything that was spoken in that carefully forged blind spot, Kairos having no doubt made it largely to check her. And that, more than anything else, was what had me convinced she was lying. Because it was a pretty story she was selling me, but she did in fact have a way to get to the First Prince: the Augur, her cousin and most trusted of advisors. She'd had that way in for years now, and still the Tenth Crusade had headed east instead of north. There was, I thought, a greater game afoot than she would have me believe. Oh, if I pressed no doubt she'd have an answer for me. A reasonable one, too, as for why it had all unfolded the way it had. But my instincts were screaming I was being had, somehow, for some reason. *Why would you tell me any of this? Why are we having this conversation at all? You'd have me believe this is your first true opportunity, but since when would you see this as an opportunity at all? A sculptor does not owe a chisel an explanation.*

Gods Below and Everburning, what was her fucking game?

"What are you, really?" I quietly asked, looking into eyes that were not the first she'd ever worn. "You're Named, but like none I've ever seen. And for all your pretences you're not a heroine."

"I'm what was made so that no one ever eats the world," the Intercessor said. "I am herald before the ruin; envoy when it waxes beyond restraint. What I am has no name in any tongue still known to the living or the dead, and many have gone mad seeking it. I've had as many faces as there are graves and never once did I taste true death."

The old thing smiled.

"I am not an arbiter," she said. "When the hour is kind, I am granted kind purpose. When the hour is wicked, I do what I must. And when the hour is mine, I seek the story that will free Creation. Until I have found it, you grasping thing, I see to the monsters that slip through the cracks. So crawl through the muck and do the passing things you can, but do not once presume to meddle in the greater works beyond your understanding – I will not tolerate the meddling of amateurs."

She had given me, I thought, I reasonable enough answers. Not justifications, and only barely would I call them explanations, but it... held up. More or less. Enough that I could glimpse the shape a tale that'd make sense of it all. And that was why I doubted it, but I did have to wonder – had I sunk too deep into lunacy, that a plausible tale was enough to have me disbelieve? Had I become like Kairos, baring knives at the faintest hint of

weakness? *Or is this kind of hesitation exactly what she wants from me by doing this?* The trouble here was that I had so very little to bring out as argument if I wanted to qualify the Intercessor an enemy in the eyes of the Pilgrim. She'd pulled strings for the death of Captain, it was true, but Sabah had spent a lifetime as an enforcer for my teacher and through him the Tower. She'd had a hand in the sundering between Black and Malicia being so deep and bitter, but again what sin would that be in the Pilgrim's eyes? I had the words of Kairos Theodosian, which to Tariq would be less than nothing, and the memories of the Sisters when they had sought out Below and encountered the Bard as an envoy. Which, while less than sunny a cast for the Intercessor, was not utterly damning. What else could I bring up, save the words of the very Dead King we were not gathering against? Even I could not that deny that for all the hints of more sinister intent I'd seen her put the finger on the scales for Good rather more often than the other way around.

I had little to say, which begged the question of whether or not I was truly looking at an enemy. Oh, she'd sought my death once or twice – but then I'd been a rising villain attempting to claim Callow and considering the amount of deaths I'd personally brought down on Creation since I couldn't fault her on principle either. In strategy, perhaps, but then given the scale she worked on it would have been painfully arrogant of me to pretend I knew everything she did. I kept my fingers from clenching, for it was too obvious a tell. Was that the answer, then? That I was to kneel and trust in the benevolence of some eldritch creature's designs, to step only where she deigned to let me step and babble out thanks for the *privilege*? No, I thought. Even if all she'd spoke was true, she no more owned the right to shape the Creation than any of us. She was my enemy, come what may. But not one I could face tonight, with preparations so feeble. If she caught even a hint that I was coming for her... I'd only be able to act in surprise once, and I doubted there would ever be a second chance. I clenched my fingers and unclenched them, allowing the conflict I genuinely felt to touch my face.

"You'll back the Accords?" I asked.

"I'll let them stand on their own merits," the Intercessor said. "Neither more nor less."

I spat to the side.

"Then we're done here, Bard," I said.

She peered at me, seemingly amused.

"That we are," she agreed.

I blinked, tasting the warmth of smoke in my mouth, and Tariq Fleetfoot's face creased.

"Why must we speak of her?" the old hero asked, tone wary.

And this was the moment, I thought, where I hinted arrangement had been made and began to bide my time until I could strike. Plotted behind bling spots with the Hierophant and learned from the sharp madness of the Hierarch. Like a clever little villain attempting to snuff out a great light. It was a story, I realized in a moment of cold dread. I'd been sold yet another story, on the sly, and come so very close to embracing it wholeheartedly. I'd not bit the bait when she'd approached me as a smiling offeror of advice and bargains, so she'd changed the story. The immortals warring over the world I'd again refused, silently as I had, and in doing so tumbled down the most dangerous of the three stories she'd woven. Believing it was my own notion every step of the way.

"I do believe she just tried to kill me," I thoughtfully said. "So let's drag out into the light every dirty little secret I know about her."

Back in the old days, if I'd gone down the hill to meet the Exiled Prince in an honourable duel he would have made sport of me. I would have been, after all, fighting him on his own terms. Why would I offer the Intercessor the courtesy I'd refused him, even if clothed differently? I would not fight a weaver of stories the way she wanted to be fought, damn her.

Elegant had never been my strength, so time to drag us both into the mud.

Soronel Haetir

"I do believe she just tried to kill me, so let's go [vote](#)."

Cap'n Smurfy

"I do believe she just tried to kill me," I thoughtfully said. "So let's drag out into the light every dirty little secret I know about her."

Not gonna lie, this was the most satisfyingly, cathartic moment in this entire story. Up there with Rumena punching Saint, Cat claiming the sword in the Stone, Hierarchy smacking down Bard and of course, Thief's "Yoink"ing of the sun.

maxwell wearing

wait when did Hierarchy hit the bard? do you mean when They first met in the streets and he declared war on the gods?

RoflCat

Bard approached Hierarchy at one point to try and get him to get into his Hierarchy role and lead the League.

He said I'mma fucking put you and the Gods on trials and she pissed off.

[Liliet](#)

OH MY GOD YES

frank talks are THE BEST

Cap'n Smurfy

By smacked down I meant a verbal smackdown, not physically hitting her. And yes when he told her he'd put her on trial and she was in the body of a League citizen. There was a reason she disappeared for a while and showed up as a Proceran when she reappeared.

Johannes

Now that I think about it – do we know exactly how old Rumena is? At least if I didn't mix up anything he might be even older than the sisters and even Neshamah.

Shveiran

I think it's pretty much a given he's older than the sisters, considering he was a general when Komana was serving under him.

Why do you think he's older than Neshamah, though?

JJR

What sort of story has Cat gotten herself into now?

Some sort of Rebellion against Fate thing?

Rage against the Heavens?

Those do tend to go poorly for villains, that way we can have stories about hubris and the downfall it brings.

parahacker

No, I think she's going for a type of story her world hasn't really seen much of, yet. Probably because without mass media or even a printing press, the strategy doesn't have as much

traction, you can't be as quick as our own media could working bottom up. But the top-down approach would still work.

She's going to tell what she knows to as many people as practical to be effective. Starting with Pilgrim, but I doubt she will stop there. Bard works through Names and stories, yes, but her strategy is aimed for nations and generations, the Named are only the means. Those means become much less effective if everyone knows who is being used, even if not exactly how. And she has some notion of the how, as well.

Though she still lacks the why. Only Neshama has that at the moment.

[Liliet](#)

Fucking YES 😊

NerfContessa

Sooo, she is going to tweet about bard. To anyone on hero Twitter and villain book.

Fantastic.

[Liliet](#)

She would have if she'd gone with the idea she has in the last moments of the conversation – having Bard believe she was agreeing and plotting in the dark.

Instead, all she's doing is sharing information – what rebellion? What rage? She's letting other people figure out what to do about what she knows, don't shoot the messenger~

Faiir

Note that "Don't shoot the messenger" could also be the Bard's motto.

[Liliet](#)

"What, you're trying to shoot the messenger anyway? Not going to work tho"

[Mental Mouse](#)

The last story she rejected was a version of Rage Against the Heavens (plotting against them in secret); she's going instead with something longer-term, and likely more... practical.

I note that she's now joined the club of folks who are happy to have a friendly chat with an enemy (in her case, both DK and Cat), even while continuing to try to kill them. On the flip

side, even as Neshamah threatens to reveal a secret of hers, she's gifted Cat with a pair of *his* secrets – a vulnerability to turn against him, and a strategy to destroy him that even Pilgrim can accept.

And yes, she's confirmed that her own role is to keep the game going. Neshamah is threatening to gain power beyond the gods' ability to restrain, so she is playing against him. Cat is trying to break the game a different way, so Bard tries to lead her back into the territory of closed, *finite* stories.

mammon

The story she got herself into was the one of the Scheming Villain. The perfect plan alike Traitorous that is bound to fall to simple 'We'll never side with Evil and will always defy you to the last man.' attitude that Good has with its annoying habit of being backed by Creation to be unbeatable. No matter how well she'd plan it, the Bard and Creation would always see for her to lose at the exact worst moment of time, namely the one where all her chips are in the game and she cannot back out any more, for the most devastating bullshit win for Good.

Traitorous might win his victories, but unlike Bard he schemed against Heroes that he could fool into stories that he was bound to win. He'd never be the villain in the third act, he always ensured a victory by making the Heroes bound for a win after two acts of losses the mentor for a new Hero, so that they are instead the prologue greater Hero deemed to lose and himself the Villain in the first act who cannot possibly lose again. Essentially Heiress except knowing to never let things come to a conclusion where he's bound to lose. Against the Bard though, such a strategy could never work because she'd never fall for it or make him a filler villain in her war with Nessie.

If Cat had done the same, then she too would merely be another inconvenience in her everlasting war, the newly introduced Villain of act 124 beaten in act 124. In the Odyssey or the Poetic Edda, Odysseus or Thor don't have to first lose to the villain, they just need to establish how capable it is but they can win in the same fight. Bard is essentially that long-running Hero. That is, if she couldn't beat Cat in other ways or through her endless bag of intermediaries.

If you're talking the new story she's now embarking on, it's still vague but it's probably rebellion against the Heavens indeed. Though instead of the Heavens, the Good and Evil in general. We've already seen quite a lot of hints that Amadeus has already turned it upside down and the effects showing themselves (Procer invading with a long-prepared ritual for unfair advantages, and the Grim Binders using generations of

prepared secret rituals to be unbeatable only for the Broken Bells to defeat these necromancers with valour and goodness).

Either Cat or the Bard may use that to their advantage here. Cat to essentially make the New Good a weapon against the Old Good and Bard as it's Avatar. With the Angels still being based on the morals of a time where slavery was still Good-allowed, and their behaviour still clearly being based on that system (The Hashmallim seeing no issue enslaving 100.000 lesser beings for their ends and the Seraphim deeming only the White Knights that don't question the angels' will and judgement without allowing their own will and law over or aside the Choir's.), Cat can make a strong case now that Amadeus heralded in a time of more equality and less racism and slavery.

The Bard could have a gazillion ways to turn it into a different frame or to turn things against Cat though. She even has the know-how on just pushing the red button and having the Gnomes nuke Cat and all her allies out of existence if Cat is about to pull a too devastating win over her.

Liliet

>the Seraphim deeming only the White Knights that don't question the angels' will and judgement without allowing their own will and law over or aside the Choir's

Except, y'know, Hanno's the first Judgement hero like that that Bard knows of.

Don't generalize from examples EXPLICITLY STATED to be the exception to the general rule.

Mental Mouse

> With the Angels still being based on the morals of a time where slavery was still Good-allowed, and their behaviour still clearly being based on that system

Well, there's an interesting point here. From a modern Western perspective, it's easy to say "oh, the peoples of Calernia have progressed past the ideas of their creators". But this isn't actually a world that's based on "progress", which is actually a fairly new idea in our own world. More to the point, in our own world, slavery didn't get outlawed because people "learned better", it *mostly* went away because it stopped making economic sense.

AIUI, the first age of slavery (think ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, up through Classical Greece or so) was ultimately killed off by the leather horse harness, which let animals work more efficiently than the wooden yokes and collars previously used – specifically, putting the animals'

work-to-food ratio for fieldwork above that of enslaved humans. In the modern age, it was the increasing population of free citizens, combining with the ongoing development of industrial and agricultural machines.

And in the modern age, slavery and its moral equivalents persist in some very specific contexts: One is places which don't have access to modern machinery and other agricultural methods (e.g., parts of Africa). Another is work where technology *can't* replace human effort ("migrant workers" picking delicate fruit in America), or where the work is unpleasant enough that you can't keep workers at it unless you force them (sex work, some factory work). Or it can just be a case where the numbers of people involved are such that a company couldn't afford to give them living wages, much less benefits: Many hotels, factories, construction companies, etc use undocumented immigrants, precisely because those don't get protection of the labor laws.

naturalnuke

Oh, time to set the board on fire once more is it?

[Stable](#)

Pigeon-style chess. Knock the pieces over, mess on the board and strut off.

Faiir

Set the board on fire, eat the enemy pieces, then explode the table!

antoninjohn

I think the Intercessor tried to get Cat in a "evil plot hidden in the dark"

laguz24

Wait, if Cordelia is becoming so powerful and acting kind of villainous then she might be developing a name, Crap. Also, so this is why she is so ok with saint setting fire to the rest of the principate. I also don't want to see what Procer under the wandering bard's influence would look like. Callow and Praes bleeding eternally. The Underdark, mass of warring tribes. Levant, ruled by nobles so prickly they kill each other over what to have for breakfast. League of free cities, run by and run for madmen. Wandering Bard, personally I am waiting for the moment when the dead king tells us what her goals are and upends everyone's plans.

[Liliet](#)

>Wait, if Cordelia is becoming so powerful and acting kind of villainous then she might be developing a name, Crap.

OH.

That tracks.

Heroic or villainous, if Cordelia develops a Name, Intercessor gets much better leverage in this war, and that's WHY she prodded Laurence to set Cordelia's designs on fire.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> if Cordelia develops a Name, Intercessor gets much better leverage in this war

Does she? She already has Augur, and we've seen what she tried via Saint (admittedly, filtered through Saint's limited perspective).

Shveiran

It's still the difference between one-step-removed and direct influence.
I'm not saying it is a game changer necessarily, but it IS better.

[Liliet](#)

>we've seen what she tried via Saint

I'm saying getting Cordelia a Name IS what she's tried via Saint.

And getting Cordelia a Name would start *a new cultural tradition* – exactly the one she'd been lacking, a unifying Proceran cultural narrative.

Andrew Mitchell

Loved this:

"I'm what was made so that no one ever eats the world," the Intercessor said. "I am herald before the ruin; envoy when it waxes beyond restraint. What I am has no name in any tongue still known to the living or the dead, and many have gone mad seeking it. I've had as many faces as there are graves and never once did I taste true death."

The old thing smiled.

How much of this is true, I wonder? Most of it aligns to what I've been saying for a long time. But "I seek the story that will free Creation." points to Liliet's view that WB is seeking the

same thing as Catherine; and end to the games between Above and Below. And, if that's the case, then it's clear ("you grasping thing") that WB does not realise Catherine's true intentions.

NerfGlastigUaine

My own wild mass guessing theory was that Bard wants to rage quit from her job, either by breaking the game, breaking the world, or breaking the Gods. Now however I think that's a little too simple and neat. Doesn't quite fit right, but who knows.

WuseMajor

I've been suspecting that Bard wants to retire and started training a replacement. I can't help but think that Cat would be horrified to find out that the reward for trying to help humans escape the games of the gods is that they make you a referee. And that the current one wants to bring her on as her assistant.

[Liliet](#)

That's what I'm getting out of this, too... and I don't think Cat's broken out of the boundaries

Faiir

Note that even if Bard and Cat want the same thing this does not make them allies.

Bard may not want Cat to meddle, since she's an inexperienced, grasping thing.

Cat cares about the losses on the road to her goal, and Bard doesn't seem to (more than 'Oh, what a loss!').

Andrew Mitchell

True.

> Cat cares about the losses on the road to her goal, and Bard doesn't seem to (more than 'Oh, what a loss!').

TBF if I'd lived 3000+ years watching people come and go I imagine I might feel the same way. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Yeppppp. For a creature who's been doing this job for as long as she has, Bard having emotions to spare about William (Epilogue 2, her POV) is *staggeringly* human already.

Faiir

Actually, are we even sure Bard exists between appearances?

You know, I kinda expect her to appear, do the stuff, then reappear a month later in another spot.

In this case thousands of years could be subjective months.

[*Liliet*](#)

Not months, no. Months, she's spent with either heroic band on screen already.

Thousands reduced to hundreds, I could see, but my point stands tbh.

Cap'n Smurfy

I don't know it works as nicely as that. Bard was clear that she goes "nowhere" when she's not around.

Considering her reaction in that scene and the lethal levels of alcoholism I can't imagine she goes from one appearance to another without experiencing the time in between in some manner. And that time in-between is unlikely to be pleasant.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, that's exactly how I read Bard's situation too.

[*Liliet*](#)

I mean, she hung out with heroes for continuous stretches of time, even if she disappeared periodically.

[*Liliet*](#)

>But "I seek the story that will free Creation." points to Liliet's view that WB is seeking the same thing as Catherine; and end to the games between Above and Below. And, if that's the case, then it's clear ("you grasping thing") that WB does not realise Catherine's true intentions.

I'm not sure.

"I seek the story that will free Creation" very much tells me that Bard DOES expect Catherine to be onboard with the idea, because otherwise it's a very sharp tack in her own boot. I mean it's a sharp tack in her own boot either way, but if she didn't think Catherine might be interested in that purpose, she wouldn't have put it there for no reason.

Faiir

Sooooooooo....

Is the Bard the person Cat's going to defeat only to learn that she was misunderstood her all along, and then Cat picks up her flask to continue Bard's work?

^

I can't make this sentence both understandable and sounding correct >_<

[*Liliet*](#)

Nah, it's perfectly understandable and a very specific and clear trope... and I think that's what Bard is angling for 😊

But given Catherine's record with the Mentor Death trope so far... 😊д😊😊

talene1

I think it's different. The story with Immortals often is that they do not change. Not without significant contact and attachment to a mortal. And Bard has definitely not gotten close to any mortals.

So Bard has been crystallized into who she is. And she is a disillusioned, exhausted woman who wants it all to end. Who hates her all of fellow creatures, who she sees as weak, as ultimately impotent and evil and doomed. She is, in essence, a nihilist who sees all efforts as futile. And all attempts to change the world as the the pathetic vainglorious attempts of an arrogant people. Of grasping things who will never know better than she does.

[*Liliet*](#)

...I don't think so.

Oh, she's called Cat a 'grasping thing', but I think that's for Cat's attempts to go higher in the meta. The earthly attempts to make things better, she actually very much respects.

We have Epilogue 2 as her POV, and an interesting thing about it is that give or take a few thing about *expectations of success* all the sentiment she expresses in there matches what she's told William outright.

I think, with her age and absolute lack of peers she actually *likes*, in order to hold on to her identity and sanity, she makes a habit of being frank&candid about her own emotions about things. Her "grasping thing" was in response to Catherine essentially not accepting anything short of "here is the eldritch me" as the answer. She constantly volunteers

her opinions and remarks, like telling the Sisters that she wishes they'd refuse because the immortality they'll get is worse than death "but we both know better". They are mostly ignored by everyone as much as by Catherine, but they're a way for Bard to establish out loud again and again that she has her own emotions and opinions and not get lost under the weight of her duty.

So no, judging just from her attitude towards William, who she wanted to see the best in, she doesn't hate all her fellow creatures, especially not for being weak. Disillusioned and exhausted and wanting it all to end, I'm seeing. But probably only for herself, not for everyone. Would be nice if she could rest and someone else could take up the job...~

Shveiran

I think you have called back to that chapter other times, but even after another re-read I really don't get what it supposedly proves.

Bard is a very cryptic character, whose goals and powers are still obscure, and whose inner monologue is not particularly outspoken.

She is intriguing, but... we still know next to nothing. In a year, maybe we'll be able to look back and see how it all crafts a picture, but... now? All we have is the corner piece with a bit of sky.

[Liliet](#)

In this case, I'm just saying we can take her word for:

- feels bad for Contrition heroes every time;
- generally hates the exact same thing she likes about villains;
- gets hope from seeing the bottom of the barrel dragged up (ie Amadeus's plot);

uhhh what else has she said. I don't remember any more concrete statements, but these are my point here.

Shveiran

1) This is highly subjective, but to me those lines read like... like the Guide gets me every time, you know? A story capable to emotion you, even if you read or see it time and again.

Not like... something real. I mean, I love this novel but I treat it as a novel. I won't screw life priorities over it. There is a level of... detachment I am unable not to focus on.

It doesn't sound like she actually cares, it's what I'm saying.

2) I'm not sure what you mean.

3) I can't seem to find the quote, but isn't that something she told, rather than thought?

IF SO, then I'm not sure why we should take that at face value coming from the Bard.

I mean, it's not like she is a straight-forward, simple character; whether or not she proves to be an antagonist in the end, we can't really trust what she says to be true just because she said it. It's not really evidence.

Liliet

>3) I can't seem to find the quote, but isn't that something she told, rather than thought?

Yep, it's something she told William to cheer him up before the final battle.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2016/10/12/heroic-interlude-prise-au-fer/>

[illegible]

"These are some of the most successful villains in the history of the Empire," she said. "And they became that by going through the motions of being Good."

The dark-haired man's brow rose. "They are most definitely not."

"Oh, I'm not arguing that they are," the Bard said.

"See, I think that we are born Evil. Because Evil is instinct. It's that animal part of us that wants things for ourselves no matter what it does to others. It's been dressed up in philosophy since, but that's the heart of it."

She smiled mirthlessly.

"But I want to believe that when the Gods made us, they gave us thought as well as instinct. We teach ourselves to be Good, William. Because we want to be better. It's not as easy but maybe, just maybe, if we do it long enough it will be what comes naturally to us."

"So you're saying the Carrion Lord is trying to be Good?" he said sceptically.

"I'm saying these are the first villains in a long time who're going with thought instead of instinct," Almorava replied. "It's why they're weaker, too.

They're leaning in the wrong direction and it has cost them."

"I don't see how that makes anything better," the Lone Swordsman sighed.

"Earlier, you spoke of a root cause. People being people, was it? Except people are learning, William. Even the other side's noticed, to the extent that they try to bastardize what we are. They say that the Heavens gave us laws, but that's not really true is it? What they actually gave us is guidelines, to make a better world. And it's working."

The Wandering Bard rose to her feet. Almorava wasn't pretty, though in some light she could be called striking. The dark skin, curly hair and strong nose made her face interesting to look at but not so attractive to be intimidating. Normally she had her lute, but tonight it was nowhere in sight. She always wore the same clothes of silk and leather, but this time they were freshly cleaned. And for once she doesn't smell like a brewery, William added a little less kindly.

"Day by day," she said. "Year by year, century by century – we're making Creation a better place. Even the bottom of the barrel is pulled up when you hoist the whole thing."

"It's a pretty thought," the hero said. "Doesn't help all of us who live in Creation now instead of in a hundred years, though."

"I know," she said, laying a hand on his shoulder. "But I don't want you to put that sword into that stone thinking it's for nothing. We're part of something larger than us, William of Greenbury. Something that uses us sorely. But..."

"Good doesn't have to be nice," he quietly echoed her words from earlier. "Just righteous."

[illegible]

oh, and immediately after, wrt your point 1)

[illegible]

He'd shivered, when she'd said his full name. He'd never told it to her, and no one had called him by that in years. What felt like a lifetime ago. Almorava stayed close to him and for a moment he thought she was going to kiss him. She'd certainly not been subtle about being attracted to him, or to quite a few other

people. If she did, he would turn away. Instead she lay her head on his chest and looped her arms around him, sighing quietly. After a moment he hugged her back.

"Every time," she whispered. "You poor Contrition fools break my heart every time."

[illegible]

2) is a quote from her convo with Amadeus. "There's something I actually like about you. It's also the thing I hate the most, but it does tend to be that way with villains"

My entire point is that EVEN THOUGH SHE SAID IT RATHER THAN THOUGHT, I think there's no reason to presume it a lie. Again, every sentiment expressed here lines up with what she THOUGHT later, too.

And yes, she detaches herself! How many people do you think she's seen die? How many people has she *led* to die? OF COURSE she's detached after it's happened. It's absolutely not the same thing as not caring!

NerfGlastigUaine

Well, that was close. Or it probably was. Or she did exactly what the Bard expected. Or it was a Xanatos Gambit with no right answer. Fucking Bard. Who knew that a character who does nothing but talk could be so utterly bullshit.

So in the grand tradition of PGtE comments, does anyone want to make a wild and unsubstantiated yet hilariously confident guess at what Bard's ultimate goal/plan/scheme is? Come on all of you, step up and take a swing!

So far, all we really know is that Neshamah thinks he knows Bard's plan. He finds it base and beneath them and tells Masego it'd doom them all (he may be lying). Of course, he could've been fooled by Bard into thinking he fooled Bard. Oh, and Kairos also plays some role. Probably.

Apocalypse How, World Domination, Flipping off Cthulhu (Gods), actually telling the truth here (doubtful), or baking the World's Largest Cake. All possible endgames for our lovely little conniving schemer! So c'mon fellow readers, it's time to guess!

Andrew Mitchell

No end game... Just keeping the game between above and below going forever and ever, amen.

NerfGlastiqUaine

Suppose that'd fall under Balance Between Good and Evil. I'll add it to the tab.

Mental Mouse

Well, that's her *job*... but "when the hour is mine, I seek the story that will free Creation", that sounds like she too is plotting against her "betters". Was Arcadia one of her successes, or failures? The "early draft of Creation", caught forever in a loop of stories... but even there, one among them managed to overturn their cycle.

Andrew Mitchell

That's a really good point. Arcadia has moved on from their stasis.

Do we know that the Bard was involved with Arcadia or did she only come about when creation was created?

Agent J

We don't even know if she operates throughout Creation or just Calernia.

Andrew Mitchell

Good point.

Shveiran

We also don't know if anything she said was, you know, genuine.

konstantinvoncarstein

I vote for the cake 😊

haihappen

Unsubstantiated and outrageous claim on what will happen? Count me in!

So, first, I think that the Bard did not lie. Not that It can't, but It simply does not need to: Implying and omitting are usually enough to paint the picture you want others to see. And yes, it seems the Bard just tried to ensnare Cat in multiple stories, all towards the "greater goal".

My personal though is the Bard likes its Tanatos Gambit a little too much. To be fair, it works most of the time, so why not use it?

To get a sense of the goal lets see what the Bard tries/tried to accomplish in the mid-future:

* Eliminate Cat from the equation (She seems to be a Wild Card,

uncontrollable)

* Preserve It's own mystique (Cat spilling the beans would be bad in this regard)

* Force a battle between Dead King and everyone else, best at Keter.

The whole thing reeks of a plot inside a plot. The destruction of the Dead King is not the end goal, merely a step towards it.

Possible greater goal: "Humble the Dwarfs"

The Bard said itself, the Kingdom Under soon spans the entire continent. Reasonably, if they succeed in this, the next logical step is take over the surface.

Could assaulting Keter serve a means to drive Him under ground, literally? Which would give the Dwarfs something to worry about and stifle their expansion a bit.

Andrew Mitchell

> Unsubstantiated and outrageous claim on what will happen?
Count me in!



> Possible greater goal: "Humble the Dwarfs"

Interesting ideas there. I hadn't really thought much about them but they may well play a much greater role in the final book.

[Liliet](#)

Honestly I think everything she's told Catherine here is the truth. "A good liar finds every lie a fetter" in the epigraph is a hint. Why add complications when you can achieve your purposes by framing the truth in a way that lets you set exactly the hooks you want?

Over the course of this conversation, Catherine could:

- realize that Bard isn't playing against her and get off her case because she's not her enemy;
- accept that Bard is necessary for defeating Neshamah, and get off her case for the sake of that goal;
- appreciate Bard's full purpose and personal goal and ally with her in it or at least get off her case because it's fine with her;
- get scared of what she's meddling in and get off her case to avoid getting steamrolled;
- not take any of the above and decide to secretly plot against her.

ALL of these outcomes would see Bard's purpose done.

And “I believe she just tried to kill me” CATHERINE YOU ARE THE ONE WHO PICKED THE LAST, AND THE ONLY LETHAL, OPTION

Faiir

We’ve seen Bard supposedly ally with people and then leave them on their own.

Since she’s:

1. unaccountable (we don’t know any way to actually hurt/stop her if she wants to do wrong)
2. untrustworthy
3. stupidly powerful (through her meddling)
4. actually wants to meddle

I don’t see much difference between saying “Yea Bard, do your thing” or converting to Greater Good – in both cases you’re expected to “believe ambiguous immortal creatures without question, when they assure you they’re doing you a favour”.

I’m still firmly in Bard = the Enemy camp.

[Liliet](#)

I’m kind of curious to hear Hanno’s opinion about Bard now – after all, he’s genre savvy to an even more unhealthy degree than Cat (Rafaella and Alkmene bickering gives them plot armor as comic relief!), and his band was used as a tool and mostly broken in the process, in that plot.

Faiir

What? Another thing I totally missed from his characterization.

I had him pegged as the “go with the flow” guy, rather than an intense planner 😊

[Liliet](#)

Oh, he goes with the flow alright. He’s just hyperaware of what the flow IS.

Genre savvy and mastermind are distinct skills and you can be one without being the other – see Malicia XD

Shveiran

...are we talking about the same guy, here? Because he hasn’t been able to use narrative to his advantage on either of the two challenges we saw him face.

Now, granted, Black is very good at that and Hanno is clearly very competent. He is planner, and a clever one, as well as aware of the power of narrative.

Just..."more aware than Cat", really? Black had him eat a pattern of three out of his hand, and by this point I feel the Black Queen has plainly accomplished more with Story-fu than her mentor.

Liliet

Mmm.

"Being aware of something" and "being able to use it to your advantage" are two different things measured on two different scales. Cat periodically loses track of narrative implications of things, too (see: the beginning of a pattern of three with Pilgrim).

I probably exaggerated when I said he was MORE hyperaware than Cat.

But we haven't heard Cat consider which of her friends get comic relief plot armor.

>Black had him eat a pattern of three out of his hand
?

Shveiran

Black3Hanno: Amadeus' parting words with Hanno were "enjoy your victory, White Knight" before the other beheaded the body double.

If I'm not mistaken, I think he commented he "now had a pattern of 3 with the White Knight" after he returned from the Free Cities.

Considering that could be considered a draw (they were both incapacitated) that means the Black Knight was guaranteed a victory over Hanno.

I'm not sure if that still counts after he lost his name, though? I think so, but we have no clear evidence. The only similar change we saw was Aqua, and she changed her Name only after the pattern was resolved.

Cat just dragged the rogue sorcerer though a hook and chain to grant him precisely that armor, and constantly considers what she and their friends do in terms of what stories it shapes. Indrani was scared by that even while Cat was in the fullness of her mantle, and her clarity has only grown since.

Hanno, again, is competent in this regards, but all we've seen so far is him being aware of the matter and trying to step carefully while facing a pivotal battle – a moment where he knew he had to pay attention.

I agree that's leagues above most character, and he definitely belongs in the big league.
But Cat, Pilgrim and Black have shown a lot more skill, in my opinion.

Then again, Hanno is not someone we have seen a lot of yet. He may yet prove to be a story-fu black belt, why not?

Liliet

>If I'm not mistaken, I think he commented he "now had a pattern of 3 with the White Knight" after he returned from the Free Cities.

No, he didn't. It wasn't a pattern of 3, the fated defeat was bc of the coin judgement.

>Cat just dragged the rogue sorcerer though a hook and chain to grant him precisely that armor

...quote???

>and constantly considers what she and their friends do in terms of what stories it shapes.
Indrani was scared by that even while Cat was in the fullness of her mantle

Yep, Indrani was scared by the thing Cat does
WHICH ALSO CONSTANTLY FEATURES IN HANNO'S NARRATION

>Hanno, again, is competent in this regards, but all we've seen so far is him being aware of the matter and trying to step carefully while facing a pivotal battle – a moment where he knew he had to pay attention.

Which one?

>But Cat, Pilgrim and Black have shown a lot more skill, in my opinion.

I am yet again not disputing that????

I am not saying Hanno is a master of USING stories to his advantage.

I am saying he is remarkable AWARE of them
(without changing anything, mostly going with the flow)

Shveiran

Me too.

But the most important point, to me, is that for all the reasons you listed, the Bard could never be trusted. We have no idea what she wants, she sees farthest than most, and is an extremely skilled liar and manipulator.

Catherine, or anyone else with a relevant goal, has no way too cooperate or ally with her: you can trust the Bard and allow her to guide you, or start the uphill struggle that is trying to prevent her from manipulating you. There is no way for a relationship between peers to be established.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine Foundling: is that a *challenge* I hear?



Shveiran

True enough, she has done the impossible time and again. But bridging this gap without apotheosis sounds... doubtful.

Faiir

Hold my Summer Vale Wine!

Agent J

> CATHERINE YOU ARE THE ONE WHO PICKED THE LAST, AND THE ONLY LETHAL, OPTION

It's kind of in her nature. Bard's approach was the exact kind of thing that'd have Cat's instincts screaming *enemy*. The way she was shifting stories and all too subtly manoeuvring Catherine *somewhere* would only ever put Cat on edge and there's only one response she has when figures of obscure motives are putting her on edge. Murder them... or set fire to the board. Okay, she has two responses.

Either way, Indrani had the right of it when Pilgrim tried to pull the same bullshit back in the shattered shard of Arcadia that became Twilight's Way.

"And you say such an approach would be a mistake," the Pilgrim carefully said. "It would be considered hostile?"

"More like a waste of time, and probably her a trial on her patience," Archer absent-mindedly said. "If she notices, which she will, because you've tried to kill her a few times so she's paying attention."

—

“Look, you’re trying to deal with us like we’re skittish fucking horses in need of your reins,” Indrani said. “Throw that to the side, **‘cause that ride ends with your throat cut open**. Probably by me, ‘cause let’s face it I’m quicker on the draw than Hakram. You want to know what she wants? Sit across a table with her with a decent bottle and politely ask.”

—

I actually think the Bard knew this, that she was preying on Cat’s nature as much as Cat was preying on the nature of Saint, Tyrant, and the Pilgrim during the Princes’ Graveyard. That the *only* lethal outcome was the one Bard was aiming for, knowing full well Catherine would naturally be disinclined to bite at the other stories.

As for the implication I’m reading in your statements, that Cat would have been better off allying with the Bard instead of actively antagonizing her? I don’t buy that. Even if she’s as apathetic to the Accords as she suggests, her very existence should not be tolerated anymore than the Dead King’s, at least by Catherine.

She’s the antithesis of Cat. She serves the Gods as “envoy when it waxes beyond restraint”, while my perspective on Cat is that she serves mortals against the predation of the Gods. To shatter their shackles and restraints. If the Bard supports the Accords, then they do not go far enough. Though, I suppose that’s rather the point. To sideline and not eradicate the Gods need for conflict and “dues”.

Either way, Cat is the last person who’s goals can be reconciled with the Bard’s. Hells Black just wants a genuine win for Evil and *that* could be reconciled. Catherine wants the Pricks Above and the Wretches Below to *shut the fuck up and keep Calernia out of their godsdamned pissing match*.

Ergo, Bard must die by the end of this.

[Liliet](#)

>As for the implication I’m reading in your statements, that Cat would have been better off allying with the Bard instead of actively antagonizing her? I don’t buy that.

Nah, that’s not really my implication. My implication is only that Bard would have been fine with those outcomes as well, which means describing the whole conversation as Bard “trying to kill her” is a bit disingenious on Catherine’s part.

>That the only lethal outcome was the one Bard was aiming for, knowing full well Catherine would naturally be disinclined to bite at the other stories.

[Liliet](#)

FUCK
THIS
SHIT
lets try again

> That the only lethal outcome was the one Bard was aiming for, knowing full well Catherine would naturally be disinclined to bite at the other stories.

You're suggesting a very specific level of Cat-prediction to Bard. Which is I mean exactly what Cat is thinking, but the thing IS that I think she's... indulging her paranoia. The truth is somewhere between Bard hoping Catherine takes one of the earlier baits, and Bard expecting exactly the outcome that happened – Catherine has good instincts, and Bard has acknowledged that about her to Neshamah out loud.

I would say this was a test, on a level. If Catherine manages to pick the outcome that gets her killed, RIP because that's exactly the level of thinking on which she'd be an unpleasant nuisance. If Catherine takes the earlier outs, well she's no threat. If Catherine manages to pass the whole of it, though – well, she's rewarded with some juicy juicy intel on top of what she already had.

I refuse to believe Bard entirely didn't see an outcome this simple coming.

(It's specifically the simplicity of it – the world split into two possibilities "does Catherine change her mind on talking with Pilgrim or not", and Bard would have considered the second one too)

>She serves the Gods as "envoy when it waxes beyond restraint"

You do remember that 'wax' is the opposite of 'wane', right? She stands AGAINST ruin when there's TOO MUCH of it.

>my perspective on Cat is that she serves mortals against the predation of the Gods. To shatter their shackles and restraints.

One character in this chapter has said she seeks to free Creation. Remind me again which one it was?...

>If the Bard supports the Accords, than they do not go far enough. Though, I suppose that's rather the point. To sideline and not eradicate the Gods need for conflict and "dues".

Mhm. They deliberately don't go too far, so that they won't be controversial and instead will be effective.

>Either way, Cat is the last person who's goals can be reconciled with the Bard's. Hells Black just wants a genuine win for Evil and that could be reconciled. Catherine wants the Pricks Above and the Wretches Below to shut the fuck up and keep Calernia out of their godsdamned pissing match.

And Bard's "when the hour is mine, I seek to free Creation" refers to?...

>Ergo, Bard must die by the end of this.

My prediction about how this is going to go:
Bard agrees.
Catherine does not.

That Guy

Masego referred Creation as a set of boundaries(bindings) set by the Gods.
One of the Original laws is that something cannot be created from nothing.
Freeing Creation could be viewed as finally settling the Bet and ending Creation.
I seriously doubt Catherine would want that.

[Liliet](#)

I seriously doubt that's what Bard wants.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> I would say this was a test, on a level. If Catherine manages to pick the outcome that gets her killed, RIP because that's exactly the level of thinking on which she'd be an unpleasant nuisance. If Catherine takes the earlier outs, well she's no threat. If Catherine manages to pass the whole of it, though – well, she's rewarded with some juicy juicy intel on top of what she already had.

This. You can't trick a force of nature... but you *can* negotiate with it according to its own rules. Come to think of it, this arguably applies to *both* Bard and Cat herself.

[Liliet](#)

Haha, yep.

Godhunter comes for you...

Agent J

> The truth is somewhere between Bard hoping Catherine takes one of the earlier baits, and Bard expecting exactly the outcome that happened –

I agree wholeheartedly. All I'd add is "hope, but doubt". If Cat is willing or able to not be a dangerous wild card Bard would be perfectly happy to not have another fire to put out, but given our girl's full name is Catherine Fire Foundling, she never really believed that was going to be an option.

> I would say this was a test, on a level.

Again, agree. Which is why I likened it to Pilgrim's play with Roland in Twilight's Way, and quoted Indrani's poignant commentary on the matter.

> You do remember that 'wax' is the opposite of 'wane', right? She stands AGAINST ruin when there's TOO MUCH of it.

It's a difference of interpretation, Liliet, not my having a poor grasp on the English language. The line is preceded by,

"I'm what was made so that no one ever eats the world,"

So what's the 'ruin' she's talking about... and whose? We know that immortals were made static so they cannot, over accumulated time, acquire the power/knowledge to threaten their Creators. Likewise, mortals were made, well, *mortal* so that, even with the ability to grow and evolve they will never have the time necessary to gather enough power/knowledge to threaten their Creators.

Which brings me back to the quote, "I am herald before the ruin; envoy when it waxes beyond restraint." She's the balance the Gods use to check their creations should any manage to break the shackles.

> One character in this chapter has said she seeks to free Creation. Remind me again which one it was?...

Is it the ambiguous immortal creature? Because, unlike Catherine, I don't actually make it a point to believe those without question when they assure us they're doing mortals a favour.

> Mhm. They deliberately don't go too far, so that they won't be controversial and instead will be effective.

Controversial with the other nations? Perhaps, but I'm of the belief that she also didn't want to give the Gods an in. Grant them the right to stomp both feet on the scales because she's overreaching and trying to deny them their "due".

> And Bard's "when the hour is mine, I seek to free Creation" refers to?...

I am a purple elephant with pink polka dots. This is evidently true, because I have stated it to be so.

More seriously, is that really her goal or just a plausible goal she knows Cat would agree with? How much has what she's been saying actually true. Not all of it, surely. Cat caught her in one lie already. If uttering her Name was enough to garner her attention she'd have been part of Cat and Kairos' horse trading show.

So, if not 100%, how much truth has been spoken here? Most of it? Half? None? Hells, even if what she's saying is true, that doesn't mean she hasn't weaponized that as well. Or that it makes her a workable ally. William trusted her to the hilt and where is he now? Pilgrim trusts her to the hilt and his best friend's a rotting corpse. The Ashen Priestess trusted her without question and she was, essentially, bled at the altar so as to grant them enough weight for Sabah's head.

Whether her schemes succeed or fail, her "allies" drop like flies and *their* goals or may not be accomplished.

So, if you can't trust her word on her own stated goals, and you can't trust her schemes not to involve your brutal murder, and you can't trust her to treat your own goals as anything more than the quaint affectations of a delightfully sentient chess piece then which of the stories this eldritch creature offered would honestly be the most palatable to someone as ruthless, pragmatic, genre-savvy, strong willed, and hyper paranoid as Catherine Bloody Foundling.

Answer: None of the above.

Which is what she chose.

Black had was right. Better to knock your own ass out than to talk to that thing. And if you're, unfortunately, just an astral projection stuck in a conversation with her,

than the best move is to do as Cat did. Ignore the bitch and do whatever you were going to do anyway.

Andrew Mitchell

> our girl's full name is Catherine Fire Foundling

That's "Catherine Goblin-fire Foundling." 😊

> More seriously, is that really her goal or just a plausible goal she knows Cat would agree with?

> And if you're, unfortunately, just an astral projection stuck in a conversation with her, than the best move is to do as Cat did. Ignore the bitch and do whatever you were going to do anyway.

Well argued!

[Liliet](#)

>I agree wholeheartedly. All I'd add is "hope, but doubt". If Cat is willing or able to not be a dangerous wild card Bard would be perfectly happy to not have another fire to put out, but given our girl's full name is Catherine Fire Foundling, she never really believed that was going to be an option.

Mhm. Honestly, I suspect Bard might have been HOPING more for the outcome that really did happen – though that's speculation 😊

>Again, agree. Which is why I likened it to Pilgrim's play with Roland in Twilight's Way, and quoted Indrani's poignant commentary on the matter.

Mhm ♥ ♥ Cat caught her in one lie already. If uttering her Name was enough to garner her attention she'd have been part of Cat and Kairos' horse trading show.

No? First of all, Bard never said that she couldn't talk to Catherine before now, merely implied it, and there's a difference between outright stated facts and implications, because it's the implications that are meant to mislead.

Second, Catherine says herself that this part makes sense: Kairos has carefully crafted a blind spot for her using Hierarch.

What Catherine questions is, in fact, the reason WHY would Bard want to talk to her.

> am a purple elephant with pink polka dots. This is evidently true, because I have stated it to be so.
>More seriously, is that really her goal or just a plausible goal she knows Cat would agree with? How much has what she's been saying actually true. Not all of it, surely.

See the epigraph. Why would she tell lies if truth is perfectly usable to craft the desired implications?

>Hells, even if what she's saying is true, that doesn't mean she hasn't weaponized that as well. Or that it makes her a workable ally. William trusted her to the hilt and where is he now? Pilgrim trusts her to the hilt and his best friend's a rotting corpse. The Ashen Priestess trusted her without question and she was, essentially, bled at the altar so as to grant them enough weight for Sabah's head.
Whether her schemes succeed or fail, her "allies" drop like flies and their goals or may not be accomplished.

That much is true as fuck.

...What were we arguing about, again?

[Liliet](#)

Fuck,, I accidnally scrolled pas haf your commenary when first answering.

>We know that immortals were made static so they cannot, over accumulated time, acquire the power/knowledge to threaten their Creators.

What, you mean Neshamah's interpretation that he explained to Bard like she was naive about it?

>Controversial with the other nations? Perhaps, but I'm of the belief that she also didn't want to give the Gods an in. Grant them the right to stomp both feet on the scales because she's overreaching and trying to deny them their "due".

Yeah, that's exactly what I mean. Catherine doesn't want to mess with the Gods' Game too much because that's what gets the board flipped over.

Shveiran

This. Thank you.

Cloud_Striker (Earth Mem Inhabitant)

> baking the World's Largest Cake.

Nah, she doesn't glow orange.

Andrew Mitchell

Reference acknowledged. 😊

Decius

Bard is aware that she's in a story, can only interact with characters who either have special significance to the story or are otherwise aware of it...

Bard's goal is that PGtE doesn't end, because that's the only way for her to die with no hope of return. Bard is not limited to appeals to the characters, but is also capable of interacting with the readers and author to that end; it won't be as directly as with the characters, if she is good at it, because readers realizing that a character is interacting with them are likely to reject the work, which is one of the things that can permanently cause her to no longer live.

Dresdenfle

My guess is that they Bard just wants to die. She's been forced into this role for who knows how long, never even living out a full lifetime. That sounds like a punishment from the gods, maybe for fucking up and helping the creation of the Dead King. We already know there is usually a balance to these things, so below gets an immortal tool, and above gets one as well. The only way she can die is for Neshama to die

[Liliet](#)

She existed and was Intercessor before Dead King's rise.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

No ultimate goal at all because she's Dread Emperor Traitorous in disguise, of course!

NerfGlastigUaine

Damn, I should've thought of that one. Would that fall under Multilayer Facade, For the Lulz, or Chronic Backstabbing Disorder?

[Liliet](#)

You don't have to pick just one 😊

konstantinvoncarstein

Does it mean that Cordelia is developing a Name? If yes, would it be villainous or heroic? I can see both happening.

Faiir

Based on the quote a few chapters before I'd guess a Villain.

[Liliet](#)

It might be actually Neutral Hierarch-style, with tentative allegiance to whichever side the current holder believes will help their purposes. I could genuinely see Cordelia turning to Below in this situation, but I don't think I see her developing a Name *bound* to it, since her philosophy and her goals remain very... distinct from Below's.

Faiir

Can you expand on why you think her philosophy doesn't fit Below?

I don't really remember this being an issue.

Or I'll need to reread the guide again 😊

[Liliet](#)

Cordelia's philosophy fits Below in the sense that LITERALLY ANYTHING fits Below. However, it's not Below-based – she believes in the strong protecting the weak, at the core of it.

Shveiran

Sure. And yet so does Catherine, and that never became an issue.

denimcurtain

Well it arguably did become an issue at times. Not one that kept her from having a villain name but she has been chastised by the below through the lessened power at least once. You could also argue that her current lack of a villainous name reflects the evolution of her philosophy. Black stands as another example.

Don't know if I'd say that means Cordelia can't get a villainous name but a philosophy incongruent with evil actions does affect support from the Below.

Another perspective worth considering is that I don't think you can become a villainous name by accident. It's a choice, right? If so then acting villainous shouldn't mean as much as people are thinking. After all, Hierarch was able to reject that choice.

[Liliet](#)

Fallen Heroes are a thing.

For that though, Cordelia would need to have been a Hero first.

Shveiran

Cat lost her name by embracing a bigger mantle, and doesn't have a Name now because she is doing something unprecedented and new. She may get a name, but there isn't yet enough of a culture behind it to shape it. Villany is not the problem here.

Black lost his Name by acting NOTKnightly, not by acting Good. He was starving a country at the time, for Sisters sake, not handing out flowers.

The conflict came by him no longer being an enforcer for Praes, but someone doing his own thing. That put too much stress on his Name, already weakened by his staying clear of tropes, and his overuse of his Aspect turned him into a claimant of the Emperor Name.

Likewise, Cat's Squire weakened when she steered away from Black's will and orders (the Knight she was apprenticing with) like when she didn't kill the Swordsman. She went against him, while also not planning to backstab him, and that brought her outside the shape of the Squire.

denimcurtain

Their actions were arguably driven by their ideology. I understand that you can attempt to untwine all that but I don't think it makes sense to dismiss it out of hand.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, but Catherine has deliberately chosen to ally herself with Below and villains, her Role revolving around that. Black Queen was a Name based on her allying with the Empress and turning on Good fangs bared; I don't think we'd have liked what would have become of Catherine had she gone down that path.

Cordelia's Role, what she's desperately doing, is preserving her country and those she sees herself as responsible for. Any positioning she does is not something she's committing to as a philosophical argument (unlike Catherine with her 'justification matters only to the just'), it's a move made out of desperation. Any alliance with Evil she might make would be a situational thing, not impacting what the core of the Role that she would be creating is – unless you are

saying that there's a cultural imperative in Procer for a ruler Name *revolving around being Evil*?

Shveiran

I'm saying that there is nothing inherently not Below about protecting yours, so long as you refuse any limit coming from outside with regards to how you can act out that mandate.

As Faiir says, "gather personal power to make the world as it should be" according to your interpretation.

Cordelia and Cat both are willing to take whatever choice they feel is necessary to achieve their goals and protect their own.

Cat may have preeched the "Justifications only matter to the just", but that has always been bullshit. She was still taking a stand at Marchford because she was unwilling to leave her people to die: nothing had changed.

The difference between the two is not one of MORALITY, it is one of AVAILABLE TOOLS.

Cordelia was simply immersed in a name-poor culture with a goodish-morality (or rather, a goodish coat of paint) while Cat could ally with Below or die immediately. That's it.

[Liliet](#)

I'm not saying there's a difference in morality between the two, I'm saying there's a difference in their STORY.

Shveiran

That much I have no problem agreeing with, but does that prevent Cordelia from embracing villainy?

It's not like there is one story per side, after all.

[Liliet](#)

My point was that *if a new Name is birthed out of what Cordelia is doing* it likely won't be an *exclusively villainous* one (like Black Knight)

Faiir

From my POV the Below's philosophy is "Gather personal power to make the world as it should be".
She very much follows the first part (her solution to

internal issues is taking more power for herself) and has a strong view of how the world should look.

Going from (Strong should protect the weak) -> (I'm strong) -> (I should protect the weak) doesn't seem that far?

So I don't really agree that anything fits below? You can still fail the 'personal power' part (the Below clause), or 'world should be as I expect' part (the general Name clause) 😊

[Fayhem](#)

I'd quibble with "as it should be" – that suggests a moral imperative, which doesn't really line up with Below as I see it. If anything you could pitch that as a description of what many Above-aligned Named seem to want. I'd call it more "make the world as you'd like it to be." That's not intrinsically incompatible with wanting to make things work *right* (take Catherine for an example), but neither is it really inherently the same IMO. In Venn diagram terms the circles overlap (which is why Cat has, albeit *eventually*, been able to establish common cause with outright Heroes without switching teams herself) but they definitely aren't just the same circle.

Faiir

I thought the "according to me" at the end of "as it should be" was implied 😊
But I agree.

[Fayhem](#)

Probably it was! There's a reason I went with "quibble" lol.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah. Black's "what do you think is right and how far would you go to see it done" isn't *quite* Below's philosophy (there's a reason he's insisting there's no such thing XD)

[Liliet](#)

I mean from that point of view literally every hero falls under Below's philosophy. So wrt this I'm using "Below's philosophy" to mean "variations that aren't literally Above's philosophy"

Faiir

I don't think Grey Pilgrim sought personal power at any point I remember?
Saint didn't seem to either.

Liliet

Training to take on stronger enemies and protect people more effectively is also seeking personal power (just not the political kind), so yes Saint most definitely did.

As did Champion etc, most heroes. Tariq belongs if anything to an exception category in that he didn't want to be a Hero in the first place, and was reluctant to follow the Ophanim's guidance except that it allowed him to do *so much good*.

Fayhem

> It might be actually Neutral Hierarch-style, with tentative allegiance to whichever side the current holder believes will help their purposes.

IIRC we have Word of EE that there are no Neutral names as such. From the way you describe it though, it sounds like probably you mean more a variable-allegiance Name? Where whether they're a Villain or a Hero depends on what story they're in (which EE has confirmed is a thing). Personally I'd call Ranger a clearer example of that though. Given that Hierarch's signature aspect is basically a spontaneous French Revolution-style Reign of Terror I doubt he'll be winding up in any Heroic stories anytime soon, or ever.

But regarding your larger point, yeah I'd def agree that even if Cordy gets a Villain name I doubt very much she'll become a proponent of capital-E Evil any time literally ever. She may be an atypical example of her people, but deep down she's still Lycaonese to the bone. Her version of a Villain story would be something more like "well-intentioned extremist/madwoman" – the classic "they meant well but they went too far and had to be stopped" plotline.

Liliet

>IIRC we have Word of EE that there are no Neutral names as such.

We don't. People keep saying that but it's not recorded anywhere, and it's likely the comment on there being no cultural imperative for Grey Knight on Calernia was confused for that.

>From the way you describe it though, it sounds like probably you mean more a variable-allegiance Name? Where whether they're a Villain or a Hero depends on what story they're in (which EE has confirmed is a thing).

Which is explicitly in the narrative a thing, see: Squire.

Anyway, yes, that's exactly what I meant.

>But regarding your larger point, yeah I'd def agree that even if Cordy gets a Villain name I doubt very much she'll become a proponent of capital-E Evil any time literally ever. She may be an atypical example of her people, but deep down she's still Lycaonese to the bone. Her version of a Villain story would be something more like "well-intentioned extremist/madwoman" – the classic "they meant well but they went too far and had to be stopped" plotline.

Mm!

I just really hope not – or that there'll be another resolution)=

[Fayhem](#)

> We don't. People keep saying that but it's not recorded anywhere, and it's likely the comment on there being no cultural imperative for Grey Knight on Calernia was confused for that.

Huh, yeah. I just read/searched through the Google Doc for Word of EE because I'm like that, and yep. Unless the both of us have missed something elsewhere, that seems to be a mostly-baseless assumption that people (including me!) just kind of cottoned on to in the comments.

Although, given that the Gods seem pretty invested in their established dynamic I wouldn't be surprised if any properly Neutral-type Names that cropped up got quietly pruned back out by the likes of Bard (along with the Named holding them, I'd expect) as extraneous to requirements/potentially muddying the desired dichotomy from being clearly drawn.

> Which is explicitly in the narrative a thing, see: Squire.

Lol I know, that was what the parenthetical in the bit you quoted was about. Thanks for confirming I did read your meaning correctly, though.

> I just really hope not – or that there'll be another resolution)=

Same! The more I look at it, the more it seems to me that Saint's (presumably Bard-prompted) speech to Cordy was in the way of a story-based trap that Cordy wouldn't have the perspective/background to spot and avoid – a pretty damn clever mode of assassination, honestly. I mean, the speech's main effects were to a) make Cordelia markedly more desperate and b) alienate her from the Heavens. Which has a pretty clear shape to it. And villain stories have a very high likelihood to be fatal for the villains in them, particularly when the villain in question lacks any background or training in story-fu.

But hey, who do we know who excels in breaking story traps and is heading to Salia right hecking now? CATHERINE AND CORDELIA FUTURE BFFS CONFIRMED. Of course, things were always leading that way since it's the only way it would make sense that Cordelia will be officiating at Cat and Rozala's wedding. 😊

konstantinvoncarstein

I don't think there are neutral Names. We learn in the prologue that Named are empowered by Above or Below. Which means there are either Heroes or Villains.

Shveiran

Yes, it isn't a matter of "quiet pruning" as much as it is of "lack of a power source"

[Liliet](#)

> We learn in the prologue that Named are empowered by Above or Below.

Don't take the holy book too literally.

It's canon in-story that Ranger and Archer are ambiguous, and Thief switched allegiance without her power source having any problem with it (when Catherine's Squire name reared and bucked just at her not killing a hero).

Shveiran

But that's because Ranger and Archer are names based on a loner that does her own thing, Thief is the Name of someone who is being a dick mostly against people who deserve it, and Squire is a path toward Knighthood whereas Cat went against her mentor's will without being willing to stab him over it.

The lack or presence of Name conflict is linked to the Name's shape, not with their allying or not with the other side. There is no real inconsistency, just a different criteria.

A Name like the Uncompromising Crusader may be strained by allying with a Villain, but in general, the mere fact they are cooperating brings no problem.

Fayhem

Eh, the quote from the Book of All Things in the prologue does state that

> Through the passing of the years grooves appeared in the workings of Fate, patterns repeated until they came into existence easier than not, and those grooves came to be called Roles. The Gods gifted these Roles with Names, and with those came power

but it's not like we haven't seen before that the House of Light/Book of All Things can shade the truth to suit their narrative. If they gave the Gods credit for something they didn't directly do to feed their religious narrative, who would be able to prove them wrong? So how can we just take the fact that they say it as proof that they're right?

I mean, you say:

> The lack or presence of Name conflict is linked to the Name's shape, not with their allying or not with the other side.

but it seems like you could at least plausibly also state that as "the lack or presence of a Name is linked to the Name's Role, not with their allying or not with a side." And even in the Book of All Things it reads like it's saying the Roles took form prior to the Gods getting involved.

Or, maybe it is all from the Gods in one way or another – Amadeus was certainly ready to ascribe the loss of his Name to the Gods Below, and he's hardly a believer in the Book of All Things (to say the least). Or, maybe the Gods gave Names power in the beginning but now the Names hold power regardless of the Gods' specific will in the matter. Personally I'd call it indeterminate, really – I personally lean towards Names growing directly from Roles, but I'll admit that has as

much to do with my individual preferences as with solid textual evidence.

Liliet

>Although, given that the Gods seem pretty invested in their established dynamic I wouldn't be surprised if any properly Neutral-type Names that cropped up got quietly pruned back out by the likes of Bard (along with the Named holding them, I'd expect) as extraneous to requirements/potentially muddying the desired dichotomy from being clearly drawn.

Do they really seem so? Based on what?

I mean, yeah, Bard appeared to kick Hierarch's ass into gear, but he's kind of a major political figure. I imagine folks like Ranger get genuinely left alone as long as they're not meddling with anything.

>Same! The more I look at it, the more it seems to me that Saint's (presumably Bard-prompted) speech to Cordy was in the way of a story-based trap that Cordy wouldn't have the perspective/background to spot and avoid – a pretty damn clever mode of assassination, honestly. I mean, the speech's main effects were to a) make Cordelia markedly more desperate and b) alienate her from the Heavens. Which has a pretty clear shape to it. And villain stories have a very high likelihood to be fatal for the villains in them, particularly when the villain in question lacks any background or training in story-fu.

The problem with this is, Cordelia is Bard's COUP here. She's scribbling all over the lines Nessie patiently and carefully drew, rejoining the Lycaonese to the Principate meaningfully and getting the whole CONTINENT together to fight the good fight. She's also got Augur by her side, which gives Bard leverage.

No, it's story bait alright, but an assassination doesn't make sense as a goal. Not every story that POTENTIALLY COULD end in a person's death is ultimately meant to, don't listen to Catherine's paranoia.

Fayhem

> Do they really seem so? Based on what?

Based on the fact that settling something by matching each side of that dichotomy up against the other is the only reason that Creation exists at all. That'd be the

first thing that come to mind, and I'd call it a (more than) sufficient reason by itself.

Regarding Ranger though, I meant something different by "properly Neutral-type Names" that I think I didn't communicate clearly when I said it. Ranger doesn't really *drive* any stories with any greater weight than "I'ma hunt it, because I'm cool like that"; outside of that she's a participant in stories, but not a driver of them, and there's no particular difficulty in slotting her into them even if she might get slotted into different sides depending on the story. Put another way, she might change sides because she's got no ideological commitments outside of "I DO WHAT I WANT, DAD" but she doesn't stand apart from them *and* drive stories that meaningfully diverge from the Good/Evil dichotomy. You alluded to Bard "kicking Hierarch into gear"; remember that her pitch to him wasn't "be a hero", it was just "pick a side, because you have to pick one" and her failure state was that he refused to. So Ranger might get largely left alone, but I doubt very much that Hierarch will be, and I don't think anyone like him would be let be either regardless of whether they currently held major political power.

> The problem with this is, Cordelia is Bard's COUP here.

If you take Bard at her word, maybe. I'm going to respectfully decline to do that. Remember that Nessie's take when he got a peek at Bard's goal was "they'll all turn on you if they know this"; do you really think "I want to kill the Dead King and bring more unity to Procer and also the continent" would result in literally *anyone* turning on her, much less *everyone*?

[Liliet](#)

> drive stories that meaningfully diverge from the Good/Evil dichotomy

Yep agreed.

>Remember that Nessie's take when he got a peek at Bard's goal was "they'll all turn on you if they know this"; do you really think "I want to kill the Dead King and bring more unity to Procer and also the continent" would result in literally *anyone* turning on her, much less *everyone*?

1. Absolutely nothing could possibly result in all people/heroes/Named turning on Bard if told by Neshamah, they simply wouldn't take his word for it.
2. I'm not buying Neshamah really won that one. The trick with a spell hidden in a body was too simple.

Fayhem

1. What? No. The quote from Nessie wasn't "they'll all turn on you if I tell them this" it was "they'll all turn on you if they know". That's very much different. The point I was making wasn't anything about whether DK will be telling people whatever it was he saw, the point was that whatever DK got a look at can't have been anything as innocuous as what Bard is claiming or DK wouldn't have had that reaction to it.

2. We'll see. Overestimating someone can be just as much of a mistake as underestimating them. And literally the origin of Dead King was him successfully getting one past the Intercessor, and I expect neither of them have gotten dumber since. According to Neshamah at least, each of them have successfully won exchanges against the other over the course of their mutual history. So unless your thesis is that Bard has been deliberately throwing the encounter and losing on purpose every time Neshamah thinks he won each and every time over the course of literally millennia *without Neshamah even realizing it* (in which case she's literally unbeatable as unless Neshamah's an easily fooled idiot – he isn't – she's functionally omniscient to have pulled that off and might as well be a God-with-a-capital-G), then he definitely is capable of getting things past her.

But like I said, we'll see. 😊

Liliet

No, I think normally he pulled one over on her by acting in her *actual* blind spots *while she was busy elsewhere*. That situation was actively monitored by her and had more than one agent fully willing to follow her instructions without explanation.

SpeckofStardust

The fact that at no point did the bard tell her not to gun for her has me very much thinking she wouldn't mind the whole dying

part. Now she implied it so heavily it was felt but she never said it.
So... bard is aiming to die. That's my guess in the ring.

[Liliet](#)

...I believe Bard might be conflicted on the point 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Or Bard's just confident that her essential self is honest-to-goodness (and treachery-to-evil 😊) immortal and indestructable.

Consider that this is a world where magic can damage mortal souls (see the immediate aftermath of Warlock's strike and Masego's break). Bard has nevertheless survived 3000 and more years in this world, including repeated face-offs with an immortal undead god... who is definitely capable of manipulating souls, because we saw where he'd carved off a bit of his own..

laguz24

For the question on who wanted to rule over their creations vs guide them to better things. Personally, I think that that line is split between good and evil. What divides good and evil is the focus on the individual vs the community.

Faiir

I don't really agree – the split seems to be more on “Do as I want you to” for Good and “Do whatever you want” for Evil. Both can lead to either good or evil situations from our point of view – Good can be a Benevolent or tyrannical Dictator, while Evil can empower either psychopathic murderers or Cats 😊

The biggest push against Good in the comments seems to be “We want to screw ourselves up on our own terms!”

Andrew Mitchell

> Good can be a Benevolent or tyrannical Dictator

Either way, there's still a dictator.... And *that's* the problem.

> “We want to screw ourselves up on our own terms!”

Exactly! 😊

[Liliet](#)

I think Evil wants *their creations* to rule over their other creations. That's what WoG about nearly all Names on the evil side of the fence having powers to impose their will on others implies. While Good wants to guide everyone to better things with a focus on community yeah (also in WoG).

Xinci

Indeed I wonder at what lies she may have told. Though to be honest I presume her comments may bring the wrong conclusion simply due to warped perception. From the Neshamah's own revelation I can presume freedom is indeed what she seeks. What the entails for a entangled world is probably the main element of antagonism Masego could have given Cat information on. Quite interesting to see how exactly the Dead King was weakening the Lycaonese, though I am a bit surprised he hasn't been tailoring expansions on the sly underground. Specifically would have thought he would adapt specialized underground undead given his expertise in tailoring specialized undead. If stiffness was the issue on creating new forms then surely traps like the one he layed for Masego could get him the workforce he needs? That particular method seems relatively safe for him. Though I do suppose he is...wasteful, so perhaps thats why he didnt try to adapt to the issue in a multi-pronged manner.

This was a excellent confirmation on what the bard is, role wise at least and a bit on her abilities. Do wonder if she meddled with the Sisters so they haven't remodeled the Drow(though Cat structuring them into enforcers for the Accords would probably keep them off of the "grey goo" category that necessitates intervention from Bard. So quite a enjoyable chapter.

edrey

yeah cat, shot her under truce baner just like that prince. but the question now is how?
contacting the Dk should be possible, the hierarch is a blank point and he has that vision aspect, and the sisters know about it since the last epilogue.
he is the key in the end

[Liliet](#)

The Prince didn't have the truce banner.

konstantinvoncarstein

It was the personal banner of the Prince, but not a truce banner

[Javvies](#)

...

Fucking Bard.

She needs to be dealt with, preferably in a permanent manner.

And I don't think we can trust anything that she says about the Dead King and the Tower meddling in the formation of Procer to keep the First Prince from becoming a Name.

Though ... there's probably some measure of truth in that the Dead King has tended to attack the Lycaonese instead of the Alamans for reasons of his own. I'm just not sure we can believe her about what those reasons might be.

Xinci

A ironic thing in the end too. Given the removal of the lycaonese meant a common threat. And a common threat great enough to possibly form a Name.

Shveiran

I was thinking about that... WHY does Procer have so little Names? There doesn't seem to be a reason for it given what we know of Name lore.

I mean, an alaman Poet Duelist? A lycanoneese Champion or Defender?

It's not like the Procerans do not have an established culture... so why isn't it happening? If either DK or WB are intervening, how can they possibly be achieving this result?

Andrew Mitchell

Great questions... I hope someone else comes up with some answers.

[Mental Mouse](#)

DK has been around longer than Procer – the Bard explained that he has been manipulating their culture to prevent Names like that from rising against him.

Shveiran

Right, but even assuming that's true, my question is HOW has he done it.

With the tools at his disposal, I can easily see how he could be crafting divides between the kingdoms. But how could he be preventing Names from appearing?

Faiir

Well, if you've seen your Defender rise from the grave and murder half of their city, you wouldn't really sing their praises, yes?

Speck of Stardust

Because every story involving the dead king is group of 'heroes' dying to stop him, like its not just a single better then you person, -anyone- can do this its groups and cities and armies of people
Like reread all the interludes of the fighting up north. Single great heroes arnt the people we read about.

Mental Mouse

By manipulating the culture. He doesn't need to get rid of all Names, just the martial ones, and he doesn't normally care about villains (see: Salutory Alchemist). Make sure stories and songs about such folk lose popularity or otherwise get lost, discredit sorcery, keep the priesthood squabbling with the princes, etc.

Shveiran

But look, these explanations aren't really enough. Even if the "by being so great an opponent I overshadow the opposition" works, that's only a thing for Lycaonese would-be heroes. We have been told most of the rest of Procer forgets they have a war in the north most of the time to go warring around the country or abroad. Procer has a huge military and conquering tradition, a strong House of Light presence, and Principates with an hard-on for duels! Why don't they have conquerors, schemers, strategist, healers, prophets, duelist, knightly, warrior Names to waste? I don't get it. They have a clear identity, known beyond their borders too... what messes with that?

Liliet

They dont have the kind of identity that most of their population cares about. Every peasant in Callow will take out their attic sword for a Shining Prince or a White Knight; you think the average Proceran peasant has a single fuck to give about the courtly duelists?

Shveiran

No, but what do borders or national average paesants have to do with it? Procer is huge, and several Principates have, say, an Alaman culture.

I'm totally on board with the fact that this is the reason we don't have, say, a named First Prince.

That is by necessity a Proceran name, and we lack a Proceran culture.

What I don't understand is how that translates to lacking LOCAL names in comparison to other countries. The reason why they lack a centralized culture is because the divides are still too vivid... but that means local culture still has pretty solid routes.

Alaman culture, for instance, we know is rooted in the ideals of dueling poets. Do alaman peasants care? Possibly not, but they recognize and know the shape, much like Callowans knew the shape of the Wizard of the West even if the country lacked a solid magical tradition. Since Procer is huge, how can a shared culture among even a few principates not be enough while a single city state is enough to power something like the Tyrant?

Am I missing something?

Don't get me wrong, the points you all raised are absolutely valid, I just think they are too little to cause such a strong effect, compared to what we know of the rest of the world.

[Liliet](#)

> Do alaman peasants care? Possibly not, but they recognize and know the shape, much like Callowans knew the shape of the Wizard of the West even if the country lacked a solid magical tradition.

Ah, but Callowans *cared* about their Wizard of the West, even despite not being wizards themselves. The caring is in fact the key part here. It's not a story if nobody cares.

Stories have to be compelling, and Proceran nobility simply doesn't produce those. They aren't compelling for their subjects, by and large.

I'm sure there have been a FEW noble Named. But it never became institutionalized.

[Liliet](#)

Note the epigraph.

I think it's a hint that Bard hasn't told a single lie here. Why would she, if truth can be used to bind Catherine if not one way then another?

[Mental Mouse](#)

> I think it's a hint that Bard hasn't told a single lie here.

Or else a hint that the lie she has told will doom her. Though I do agree that in practice, she hardly needs to lie... enough to tell each party the truths that will move them according to her plans.

[*Liliet*](#)

I find it VERY INTERESTING just how *many* different truths she's told Cat here 😊

Thanatoss

I was thinking about it for a while. Spreading knowledge about Intercessor is good defence against her... or is it?

I honestly see it hard to fight her in any direct way but no matter how much Intercessor knows and how much experience she has. You can not predict someone's next move if he wants to be unpredictable, especially someone like Cat, Tyrant, Hiererch

[*Liliet*](#)

Catherine doesn't need to fight OR defend against her. Spreading knowledge about her is the tool, the weapon and the purpose all in one.

Faiir

Yes, BUT Bard will most likely see it as an attack.

[*Liliet*](#)

I mean, yes, but in stories it doesn't matter what ONE person thinks 😊

Faiir

Your story-fu is stronger than mine 😊

Shveiran

Only in some stories, really.

[*Liliet*](#)

For determining which story something is? The story has to be pre-existing.

Shveiran

Granted. So...?

[*Liliet*](#)

I'm saying it doesn't matter what Bard thinks it is when the shape of the story insists it isn't. If the story says that if the target thinks it's an attack that's their own personal problem, then that's what Bard has to work with.

[Liliet](#)

So that was my point?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Please note that until WB got involved, Cat had Kairos dancing to her tune.

carrier

Crazy idea here.

What would be the implications of the Death kingdom signing into the Accords ?

Andrew Mitchell

That crazy idea was discussed extensively several chapters ago. I think it was started by this post <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/07/19/chapter-58-prolong/#comment-50017>

From what I can recall, the TD;LR version of the extensive discussion is that there's only benefits for the Dead King and no lasting benefits for other powers.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Hmm, I wonder what it would be like if she managed to get Akua and Neshamah to be immortal arbiters of the Accords.

Fox

I like this idea so much! Ubuah, forever enslaved to do the bidding of forces magnitudes of power above her. That, would be a fitting end imo.

medailyfun

does anyone understand what story-traps Catherine managed to notice?

[Liliet](#)

Honestly I think only the last one was a trap. It was "agree to back off, or get railroaded into a bad story", and Catherine spectacularly managed to flip off all the chances to back off only to be offended by the last option left.

Faiir

If you're right, then this chapter is comedy gold.

[Liliet](#)

I mean it was definitely full of Catherine outsmarting herself and running in circles with 'IS THIS WHAT SHE WANTS ME TO THINK' so... yes 😊

ninegardens

Personally, I think Amadeus plan of "Maybe I should beat myself into unconsciousness with this rock" may have been a wise course of action (as a general strategy, not from this chapter but a past epilogue).

[Liliet](#)

Catherine got a lot of juicy juicy intel though, and DIDN'T accidentally kill herself, so I think she does win out in the end ;u;

Faiir

You know what, I think I'd rather hit myself in the head until I faint rather than listen to you.

Sickest burn ever 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

She describes three:

> I'd not bit the bait when she'd approached me as a smiling offeror of advice and bargains, so she'd changed the story. The immortals warring over the world I'd again refused, silently as I had, and in doing so tumbled down the most dangerous of the three stories she'd woven.

And the final trap:

> And this was the moment, I thought, where I hinted arrangement had been made and began to bide my time until I could strike. Plotted behind bling spots with the Hierophant and learned from the sharp madness of the Hierarch. Like a clever little villain attempting to snuff out a great light. It was a story, I realized in a moment of cold dread.

Notice how this would have split Cat and the other Villains away from Pilgrim and the Heroes.

[Liliet](#)

Honestly I think it a test more than a trap. "Is this much provocation enough to throw Catherine Foundling into classic

villainy? No? Oh I am surprised, this is my surprised face” (remember when she told Neshamah Catherine takes to flipping the stories on her like a fish and it just doesnt work? yeah. she knew the odds on this one)

Mental Mouse

Giving someone a “doom or survival” test, without consent... sorry, that is a trap. 😏

Liliet

On one hand, I’m with Catherine here.

On the other hand, how many hero journey stories have you seen where NO-ONE on their side is that kind of dick to them EVEN ONCE?

Mental Mouse

> “You spoke of me,” the Bard said. “It was enough, given who you are.”

And who, then, is Catherine Foundling, Black Queen and First Priestess of Night? Is she, perhaps, the story that can free Creation?

Liliet

she has a prominent Role, enough to have been a part both of a pattern of 3 and a band of 5

Mental Mouse

And then why not say as much? I suspect Bard doesn’t want Cat to know just how special she is....

Liliet

...Bard kind of did say as much?

Cthulhu

I am probably going to get laughed at for this thought...but is the entire story of a practical Guide to Evil written as a response to Tolkein’s “On Faerie Stories” and this theory of sub-creation?

I doubt anyone would care (other than me and maybe a dozen other people in the world), but it fits, I think, andif so, its brilliant. Instead of a teleological narrative, or even an endless dance of stories that always repeat, it instead posits a world where there are stories but no capital-S stories. The story

is about transcending narrative or even ending narrative altogether.

It is the opposite of romance, and deeply antagonistic to much of the tale. It calls for an end to tropes – to tell new stories, that have different endings.

[sengachi](#)

As much as the Bard claims to have no quarrel with the Accords, I think she's lying through her teeth. She said so let them stand on their own merits, but how well would they stand on those merits with Katherine dead, as the Bard just tried to make happen?

And she straight up told us why she would want the Accords broken too. Procer has been a thorn in her side since its inception, because it is not ruled by a Named and therefore the Bard has a limited ability to work through it. The Accords propose to turn every nation into just such a thorn. By limiting the scale of Named conflict and removing Name games from politics, Cat would be de-facto removing the Bard from Calernia's gameboard. Their corner of the world would be free to grow and develop without her influence. For once the cards would be simply allowed to fall where they may.

And that is the antithesis of the Intecessor's mandate, regardless of what her personal plans may be.

konstantinvoncarstein

Bard is maybe aware that Catherine doesn't plan to suppress Named rulers anymore?

[Liliet](#)

> She said so let them stand on their own merits, but how well would they stand on those merits with Katherine dead, as the Bard just tried to make happen?

I mean that was a trap Catherine nearly walked into on her own. If she was going to be like that period, Accords wouldn't be able to stand either. Catherine not getting herself killed like an idiot IS a part of the 'merits of the Accords'.

And at that, Catherine wasn't going to just spontaneously keel over dead in the middle of talking with Pilgrim. If she fell for the trap but had the sense to set up the Accords BEFORE going on to set the trap for Bard, Accords could be a thing even with her dead, considering they're deliberately constructed to not NEED her in the lead role.

> The Accords propose to turn every nation into just such a thorn.

And it's not going to work, as Black brought up. Removing Named from leadership is exactly the kind of 'trying to dam the river instead of redirecting it' that Catherine tried to avoid, but stumbled into it headfirst anyway. That article's not going to stand, and who would know that better than the Intercessor?

Ebert the Alamans, scholar errant

The consumption of wakeleaf has quite an interesting history. The earliest records of wakeleaf being used as a stimulant come from the Baalite Hegemony, which colonized the area currently known as the Thalassocracy of Ashur well before the Miezian occupation.

The Baalites wrote that the common laborers of the field were prone to pick and chew the freely-growing weed when beginning their day or when tired, spitting the resulting juice into mixture of mud and herbs and applying it to the face, neck, and armpits. Over time, evolution of wakeleaf use has passed through tinctures, teas, and other applications. Currently, the most common method of use is inhalation of smoke created via combustion of the dried leaf of the plant. New trends include whole-body steaming and inhalation of vapor produced by adding concentrated wakeleaf extract to water and applying heat.

For more information on the use of wakeleaf and similar pleasurable pursuits, see my work "Vices of Calernia: Aragh to Wakeleaf".

ninegardens

Okay, so... can we compile how much Cat actually DOES know about the bard?

(I'll try to stick to chronological order)

She met Bard in Summerholm acting... like a tot's legit hero that talks to much.

We know that Akua encountered WB while releasing the demon back in book two:

> "Wow," the heroine huffed. "Rude."

But... I don't think that she's told Cat about that.

Thief has told Cat, Bard was sketchy... and if I remember correctly, Thief may even suspect that Bard set the Lone Swordsman up for the Angel Mindbomb.

Black has Intel on WB actions down in the free cities.

WB showed up after Liese when Black was exploding the superweapon...

If memory serves me well she saw Bard chatting with Nessie in the memory place on the way to Keter.

Annnnddd Cat saw WB granting offers to Sve Noc sisters.

Finally, she has intel from Kiaros and Nessie....

... as far as Dirty Laundry goes, what does she even think she HAS that will persuade Pilgrim not to trust her. Actually, come to think of it, what was it that tipped Cat off that Bard was High level threat to Creation in general (not just a powerful "Good" hero). What makes he so sure that Bard is actually a monster, as opposed to just a regular hero type.

Are there any I'm missing?

(Note, only interested in ones Cat could know about. NOT in such things as Bard getting elves to leave Akua alone)

ninegardens

Also: a random line from to her discussion with those elves:

>"This is my game," she hissed. "Amateurs are not allowed."

Interesting to see this come up again- calling people meddlers and amateurs and telling them to piss off... much like she has here with Cat.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's confirmation that Cat really is getting into the real fight. She may be inexperienced, but the real reason Bard really doesn't want her playing this game, is because *she actually could mess up Bard's plans*.

[Liliet](#)

>Actually, come to think of it, what was it that tipped Cat off that Bard was High level threat to Creation in general (not just a powerful "Good" hero). What makes he so sure that Bard is actually a monster, as opposed to just a regular hero type.

This question has literally come up in this chapter.

Basically, no, Cat has nothing that indicates that. However, she does not appreciate *tyranny* and puppeting, and Bard is doing too much of *that* for her liking.

Even if Bard is a hero type, she doesn't *want* this hero type.

>I had little to say, which begged the question of whether or not I was truly looking at an enemy. Oh, she'd sought my death once or twice – but then I'd been a rising villain attempting to claim Callow and considering the amount of deaths I'd

personally brought down on Creation since I couldn't fault her on principle either. In strategy, perhaps, but then given the scale she worked on it would have been painfully arrogant of me to pretend I knew everything she did. I kept my fingers from clenching, for it was too obvious a tell. Was that the answer, then? That I was to kneel and trust in the benevolence of some eldritch creature's designs, to step only where she deigned to let me step and babble out thanks for the privilege? No, I thought. Even if all she'd spoke was true, she no more owned the right to shape the Creation than any of us.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> She met Bard in Summerholm acting... like a tots legit hero that talks to much.

IIRC, there were "tells" even there .. in conversations with Cat and/or Black, she spoke familiarly of historical events for which the history itself had barely survived, and which a mortal bard really shouldn't have known about.

Daniel E

Anyone else reminded of Odin's spiel during Bard's exposition? Odin: "I am also called hyath and true-guesser. I am all-father, gondlier, wand-bearer. I have as many names as there are winds, as many titles as there are way to die." And now Bard; "I'm what was made so that no one ever eats the world," the Intercessor said. "I am herald before the ruin; envoy when it waxes beyond restraint. What I am has no name in any tongue still known to the living or the dead, and many have gone mad seeking it. I've had as many faces as there are graves and never once did I taste true death."

As much fun as it is to rag on Bard and be amused by her antics, that particular paragraph gave me a shiver. Bard is a monster, quite possibly older than time itself, or at the very least was birthed at the beginning of everything.

konstantinvoncarstein

I tought exactly to the same thing! 😊

[Liliet](#)

Nah, I think she genuinely appeared sometime down the line.

Not that it changes anything 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

IIRC she's said something about her "punishment".

Wildly uninformed but mythically plausible guess: Back In Ancient Days, when the gods were a lot chummier with mortals, she challenged them in some fashion. Perhaps she was the first to seek to master the power of Story, but she actually tried to write and spread her own, made-up stories instead of recounting stuff that at least more-or-less happened.

Peter

Power in this world is like water flowing across the ground. In the beginning the ground was flat, but the power of stories eroded the ground underneath, making groves where power could collect and flow. Over time, the most common, most well defined stories became deep casyms etched into reality, paths where power flowed with most ease, but also powerful torrents that were impossible to swim against.

The wisdom of the Named boils down to using these currents when they bring you closer to your destination and avoid going against the current. Also making sure you don't fall into the water by mistake.

The dramatic irony is that one gains power by diving ever deeper into the flows of water, but by diving deeper you surrender yourself more and more to the ebbs and flows of the current. It also becomes that much harder to resurface.

Andrew Mitchell

That's an effective metaphor IMO.

aran

Except she's **still** following a story, isn't she? You don't just outwit something this old and clever.

At least she picked a story that plays to her strength.

Tab

" Plotted behind bling spots with the Hierophant and learned from the sharp madness of the Hierarch."

bling -> blind

" Elegant had never been my strength, so time to drag us both into the mud."

Elegant -> Elegance ?

Chapter 69: Repute

"Assertion that the end justifies the means in in truth embrace of the Heavens, for it is they who will decide the Last Dusk and so all justice then derives from them."

– Hektor the Ecclesiast, Atalante preacher

It was a little unsettling to see that even without the Name my teacher could still shed the face of Amadeus of the Green Stretch and become the Black Knight. A single sentence and humanity slid down his face like morning dew, leaving behind a cold-eyed thing weighing the necessity of harsh violences to visit. The Grey Pilgrim, on the other hand, did not look surprised. Troubled, the lines on his face deepening with weariness, but not surprised at all. The blue-eyed old man cast a glance at Black, fingers tightening with something like concern at what he saw, but the faint weight that was the attention of the Choir of Mercy scrutinizing him was batted away like overbold fingers. Perched atop the same stone where the Intercessor had sat, two great and shadow-feathered crows gazing down with merciless eyes. They had no claim on my father, I knew, and he was the kind of man who would rather die straight-backed than accept patronage. The extended warding had been offered as a courtesy to me, their thoughts whispered against mine, though all three of us knew they'd have mourned losing out on an opportunity to take a swipe at a Choir without starting a celestial war.

I breathed in smoke, disconcerted by the way it was warm and barely touched when it felt like that pipe had been lit for so long. Masego had told me, once, that there was no such thing as time: only the perception of it, and entropy's ruining touch. I couldn't quite grasp that, truth be told, for even entropy's encroachment must be measured by *something*. Yet the disparity between the acrid smoke against my tongue, the weight of the dragonbone pipe still mostly-full, and the span of the conversation I'd had with the Wandering Bard? They'd lent me a glimpse, perhaps, at what he meant. Had I still been Winter's Queen, such a sliver of understanding would have been turned into peril and artifice without batting an eye. As the priestess to dark goddesses, instead I hoarded it away the way I did so many other half-espied revelations and the secrets they led to. I had little wisdom of my own to offer, but I was not above passing through that which had been bestowed upon me by wiser souls.

"That is an accusation not without gravity," the Peregrine said.

He flicked a glance at Sve Noc, as if he'd felt their intervention, though what he saw there had him recoil from the unpleasantness. The cold night went colder still, and as the

stars above grew more radiant from the wrath of the Ophanim the Sisters cawed out in mockery – though their touch against my mind was agitated, as the attention of an irate Choir of Mercy felt like a burn on their godhead. To my eye, there were times and places where Sve Noc would cow the Ophanim should it come to a contest of might. After they'd taken a petty shot at Mercy's own favourite son was not one of them, though. I cleared my throat, intent on distracting the angels by distracting their champion.

"You don't look all that surprised, though," I mused. "Something you'd like to say, Tariq?"

The white-haired hero turned his attention to me, and as expected the weight of Sve Noc's chiding began to wane with the turn. *You're welcome*, I uncharitably thought. *Now please cease screwing with the hero I'm trying to convince, if you would.* Komena cawed in irritation at my gall, though Andronike signified amusement. I forced myself to ignore the distracting dance of their thoughts against mine, for this was too important a talk to attend to it only half-listening.

"That though you've been known to have... broad an understanding of what constitutes as such an attempt, I have no difficulty believing there was dispute," the Peregrine said. "Younger Bestowed might defer to my decision to take a chance on you out of respect, even if disagreeing, but the Bard is both my elder and greater in the service of the Heavens. She would not feel bound to yield to my decisions."

I breathed out and did not clench my fingers, for it would have been an obvious tell of my sharply risen anger. A *broad fucking understanding*, was it? Coming from a man who'd tried to send me to my death or shackling down the spine of a redemption story, that was a little rich. He could try to pretend he'd kept his hands clean all he wanted, in the hands of a Named a story was no less murderous a tool than a knife.

"You admit to the likeliness of an ally's attack and in the same breath castigate her for having a dainty disposition," Black mildly said. "Come now, Pilgrim, if you're in the business of betrayal at least have the decency to display some *skill* at it."

He looked like a person again, and not a monster with a mask of clay, but beneath the calm affability he'd painted over his face I could see the blades were still bare. I'd seen him smile just as pleasantly before he Spoke and ordered Akua to nail her own hand to a table.

"I scheme no treachery, Carrion Lord," the old hero bit back. "And jeering at me will not serve whatever purpose you seek from it."

"And he's going to stop anyway, isn't he?" I sharply said.

Wondering, beneath the sharpness, if he was being so acerbic with the Pilgrim for the very purpose of my reining him in or if he was simply enjoying mocking a hero. Knowing Black, I grimly thought, it was likely to be both.

"If I must," he nonchalantly shrugged. "Shall we then return to the Peregrine simultaneously absolving himself of responsibility for the actions of his ally while also refusing to denounce her? 'Twas a charming bit of rhetoric. Add a few insincere protestations of friendship and it'll be like I never left Praes."

Ouch. That one had to sting a bit, especially when taken by someone whose understanding of the Wasteland would be through the latest horrors mighty enough to leave Praes and become a peril for everyone else.

"I do not condone attack, if attack was had," the Grey Pilgrim sharply replied. "Do not speak for me, much less with viper claims. Yet neither will I pretend that all servants of Above will follow me in making bargain with the Black Queen. As for the Wandering Bard, her Bestowal forbids as much as it allows. Behaving with grace will ensure she neither wants nor *can* act against any of you."

"She's not a heroine, Pilgrim," I said. "I've seen her make pacts on behalf of Below. If you don't believe me, I'll even ask the Sisters to let your little winged friends have a look at me to ascertain the veracity of what I saw."

That either the Ophanim or Tariq Fleetfoot himself would feel entitled to have a look at my bloody soul simply so that my words would be given due weight was infuriating, but that was the nature of the game. Trust was ever in short supply, in matters such as this. Especially when accusations were being thrown around.

"So have I," the Grey Pilgrim calmly said.

I went still with utter surprise. *What?*

"I suspect I am a great deal more learned in what the duties of the Wandering Bard entail than you, Queen Catherine," the old man continued. "An envoy does not decide the substance of the offer they carry, and some of the bargains the Bard was sent to offer were dark indeed."

"You know she has a greater game, then," I pressed.

"I know that across the faces she has worn she has warred against Keter wherever there was war to be had, and ever done good over evil whenever the choice was given to her," Tariq said. "That the

Gods Above do not have sole claim on her works does not mean she is not a heroine."

"The moment before this conversation began, she dragged me out for an aside," I flatly said. "And she-"

"It does not matter what was said, Queen Catherine," the Pilgrim told me. "For you were being tested, as I have seen others Bestowed be and once was myself. By choosing rectitude over baseness, you emerged unharmed and proved you were not a menace that must be seen to."

"So you're agreeing, then, that the Wandering Bard just took a swing at me," I slowly said.

He frowned.

"She would have if you were less than you are," he said, as if it was evident. "You were not, and so this was merely confirmation."

Black laughed, softly, the sound of it like cool silk.

"See, Catherine, there was nothing to it," he smiled, sharp and cold. "The ordeal would only have stung were you a heretic, which makes wanton use of it perfectly permissible. Indeed, how dare any of us question the Wandering Bard's right to pursue our demise whenever the whim takes her? How very impious."

"He's being a bit of a shit right now," I said, "so it rather pains me to agree with him, Tariq. Even if you trust in the Bard – and Gods, I'd like to know what you have on her for that to be the case – then how the Hells does that translate to her getting the right to pull things like this? Nobody here is your fucking vassal, Pilgrim, much less Above's. This wasn't a test, it was a fucking act of war. And you're defending her right to have done it."

"I trust in a woman I have seen dedicated a lifetime to carrying out good deeds wherever and whenever she could," the Pilgrim said. "I have known her to do this since before either of you were born, and in her deeds she has not spared heroes when they courted disaster. I do not know what she intended by acting as she did tonight, nor do I blindly presume it was righteous. Nor will I, just as blindly, accept your belief that she is... by your words, some manner of sinister immortal schemer?"

"You've seen part of her work," I flatly said. "I've seen others, and they're hardly pleasant. Her enmity with the Dead King is more or less the only thing I take as a given with her. She was part of the Lone Swordsman's band, before he called down Contrition on Liesse. She was in the Free Cities before it all went to shit there, and she had a hand in Akua's Folly as well – though the exact nature of what she did remains unclear."

"And so she fought the occupation of Callow through every means at her disposal, when the rest of the servants of the Heavens forsook their duty to the fallen kingdom," Tariq kindly said. "I've no doubt her actions were harmful to you or others beloved of you, but that does not make her sinister – only a foe you never evened your scores with."

This wasn't going to work, I thought. And it was why the Bard had been so utterly unworried about my talking with Tariq: she'd known she had decades if not half a century of a solid record with the man that'd weight against whatever I said. And the more I made this about the places where I'd fought her, the more this became a personal grudge between myself and his old friend. Bringing in Black's run-ins with her would make it even worse, given that the Pilgrim would wholeheartedly endorse the decimation of the Calamities and the break-up of the partnerships that'd kept Malicia's reign so strong. My teacher had mentioned she'd openly admitted to allowing a heroine to die so that Sabah's death would be set in stone by a story, but she'd also likely been fucking with his head at the time so that his break with myself and Malicia burned all involved. And even if he believed us... well, Captain had killed more than a dozen heroes over the span of her career. From a practical Good perspective, trading a young heroine for the death of an old monster and the first crack in the Calamities would be worth it. I'd been counting on the shock of the Intercessor having acted on Below's behalf to create the Night to jar him into re-examining their history, but there'd *been* no surprise. Which left me only with a second-hand memory in which the Bard had still outright advised annihilation over taking the bargain.

Shit. She'd covered all her angles there, hadn't she? It made sense. The Grey Pilgrim had been Above's foremost agent in the west of Calernia for at least half a century now, by sheer dint of the stories he'd have been involved in they would have encountered each other quite a bit. Plenty of time to work on him, which once more made sense considering how influential a man he'd been headed towards being for a very long time. No, it would have been absurd for the Intercessor *not* to foster strong ties with him: she was too old and too fair a hand at weaving to have left such an obvious loose end unattended. And to have attended to it in a manner that I couldn't feasibly shake right now, I grimly thought. I had interests in common with the Peregrine, maybe even some shared principles, but also a red history that'd turned amicable only very recently. Hells, I'd *killed* the woman that'd probably been the closest thing he had to a friend without wings not even a week ago. Truce and my begetting the Liesse Accords was not enough to have him cut ties with the Bard. It'd be like going at an iron chain with a butter knife: how long had she spent to ensure the strength of those ties? How much time had been... Oh, *oh*. No, I'd been thinking about this all wrong, hadn't I? I'd learned a few tricks in the art of bargains and how to wag

my tongue instead of my sword-hand, but in the end I was not more silver-tongued than *the* silvertongue.

It'd been laughable of me to even try, because once more I was letting the Bard pick the face of our struggle.

The Intercessor had invested time and effort and trustworthiness in her relationship with the Grey Pilgrim, but while he trusted her he did not seem to defer to her outright. When he defended her actions, it was as an act of trust. Trust she'd earned over decades, and I'd tried to fight with respect mere days old. I'd been so fixated on removing the Wandering Bard from this entirely I'd missed the obvious: that the ties went both ways. That if she was relying on relationships she'd forged in the past to have a finger in every pie, then she had to live up to the terms she had set to those relationships. And considering the high esteem in which the Grey Pilgrim apparently held her, the standards she'd set could not be low. So if I made a reasonable request born out of reasonable – if, in the Pilgrim's eyes, still unwarranted – fears then unless she had a damned good reason then she couldn't go against it. No, wouldn't be enough, I thought as I parsed out what doors it closed for her in truth. Relying on the decades of trust she'd be able to make apologetic noises but get away with it by simple virtue of producing one of various skeleton keys: it was necessary to beat the Dead King, allowing it would have caused suffering in years to come, had to prevent the rise of a great Evil. The Pilgrim would be angry, maybe, but the expectation would still be there that as long as the damage wasn't too bad for the greater good I'd have to grin and fucking bear it. On the other hand, was I good? They couldn't both treat me like Triumphant incipient and expect me to be their own personal Choir of Endurance. I'd surprised heroes pleasantly over the last few years because their expectations of me were low.

Well, they were certainly the easiest kind to live up to. Feigning indignation here would be risky, for though Tariq's inability to understand that one could be good without being Good had left him strikingly naïve in some ways he was frighteningly perceptive in others. Thankfully, I wouldn't have to. My jaw clenched and I did not have to look far for the anger. I'd stowed away the wroth, chosen the benefits of a clear head over it, but it had not *disappeared*. How many times was I supposed to let the whip crack against my back because my *bettors* were not willing to see to their own? How many times was I supposed to let it go, that to kill me or mine was a virtue but that daring to crawl out of the ash alive – much less fight back – was a sin? I blew out the wakeleaf smoke, and the bitterness that lingered against my tongue was not only from the herb. There were parts of my father's madness that I would never make my own, but some that'd always rung true: in the end, in their eyes we were not equal. And we'd never be people until we followed their rules and spoke

their prayers, until we'd admitted that their way was right and ours was wrong.

"For small slights," I hissed, "long prices."

The Pilgrim's blue eyes widened in startlement, and he raised his hands in appeasement.

"Your Majesty-" he began.

"Yes," I coldly said. "That is who I am, Peregrine. The Black Queen. The Arch-heretic of the East. It seems you have forgot how we came to stand here on this night. Shall I help you remember?"

"There is no need for threats," the Pilgrim evenly said.

And yet I could see it in his eyes, the rising awareness of who it was he was dealing with. *Remember, you arrogant old priest, I thought. Remember that you did not take me for Triumphant come again without reason and then curb your fucking priestly tongue.*

"You sing the praises of she who strikes at me and declare her worthy of passing judgement upon my works," I mocked. "You, Tariq Fleetfoot? By what right?"

I grinned, sharp and vicious.

"You are not victor here on this field," I said. "You are the defeated, breathing only by the grace of the aspect I *ripped* out of you with my own hand. Your plots I shattered, your armies I routed and your own Choir stepped aside when faced with the glare of my purpose. And now you strut about like a green boy, arrogating the rights to lecture me when it is only my mercy that spared your throat my boot."

"This is not the talk of an ally," the Grey Pilgrim warningly said.

"You do not behave like one," I snarled. "And if you can only conceive of amity as vassalage, then this truce is at an end."

"You have sacrificed much to deliver it," the Peregrine reminded me flatly. "And through such savage actions you would end any chance of the Accords being signed."

I laughed, full-throated and cold.

"You think I'd give you a choice?" I smiled. "You think I chose peace because I *fear* the other path? I'll not fight the Grand Alliance, Pilgrim. I'll leave and let you die like whimpering dogs, alone in the dark."

I took a step forward, limping, and he drew back.

"I'll return only when I have the full might of the East behind me in array of war, and when I come back wherever the veil of night falls all will have a choice," I snarled. "You can take up a sword and join my war against Keter, or you can do it as a *walking corpse*. If treaties and alliances fail, I'll take steel and fire to the Dead King as Dread Empress, Victorious."

His eyes went cold.

"You will find me waiting at the end of that road," the Grey Pilgrim said.

"At the end?" I grinned. "You'll be the first damned thing I step on, Peregrine."

He looked at me searchingly, looking for lie or weakness, and found none. Harsh as my words had been, Gods but the truth of them simmered in my belly. I had chosen peace, but I was not beholden to it. And if the only way through was crowned in dread, then so be it.

"What do you want, Black Queen?" the old man finally asked.

"WANDERING BARD," I screamed out into the night. "INTERCESSOR."

I waited a beat, to see if she would appear. She did not. No matter, it would be enough to attract her gaze.

"You spoke for that faceless thing, Peregrine," I said. "And so now you answer for her as well. If you shelter and safeguard her, then you are responsible for her actions: if she schemes against me or mine, if she moves against truce or Accords, then I will take it as betrayal from both of you."

My jaw clenched.

"That will not be without *consequence*."

And I would tell every soul willing to listen. I'd tell the First Prince, I'd tell Princess Rozala, I'd tell the Blood and every hero willing to hear me shout from behind a blood wall. But most of all, I'd just told the Pilgrim himself. From now on, if she acted against me she was knowingly fucking over the Accords and the truce that was the only thing keeping Procer standing in the war on Keter. If she pulled something, she now had to justify it to Tariq as something more important than the death of several million people. Silvertongue or not, there wasn't much that would even those scales. This was, I ruefully thought, the principles of the Accords used once more: the practical realities of Creation being used to restrain its stories. Ties went both ways, didn't they? Sure, if the prize was worth it the Bard would make her move anyway. But she'd lose the Pilgrim, and when she did strike I fully intended on being ready for her. *If you're without*

ties, you have no strings to pull, I thought. If you keep them, though, then a strong enough tug on the strings makes it a thin line between puppet and puppeteer. Tariq looked tired and grieved, but I was out of pity to spare.

"At dawn I'll begin work on the gates into the Twilight Ways for the armies," I said. "Be there or not, as you wish."

I began hiking my way back up before he answered, intent on returning to the soothing warmth of fire and booze and good company. And before the end of the night, I thought, there would be a need to speak with Masego. He'd get whatever he needed to test his Quartered Seasons theory, even if I ended up cutting corners elsewhere for the allocated resources.

Deicide, sadly, was unlikely to come on the cheap.

Soronel Haetir

It's a lovely racket WB has going with GP able to have him claim Above for all the Good she does and "oh well" to the rest.

Zggt

My theory is that the Bard has been working for a long time to create a situation which can finally kill her. She's been pushing Cat into a situation where she'll have to make a choice: permanently finish off one of the Dead King or Wandering Bard, with the secret sauce being how she made sure to have Masego's magic taken in order to nudge Cat to choose her as the immortal to kill. We've read too many mustache-twirling villainous gloating from the Bard (especially towards Black) for her to be about justice – it's like she was *trying* to get Above to kill her on principle.

Mental Mouse

> ow she made sure to have Masego's magic taken in order to nudge Cat to choose her as the immortal to kill.

That can totally go both ways, given it was DK who actually took the magic. And I can easily see where sorcery could be the Wrong Path to go after the oldest sorcerer on Calernia.

stevenneiman

Personally, I think it's more like the antagonist from the first Matrix movie. I forget his name, but his thing was that

he wanted to wipe out every threat that he was tasked with dealing with so that he could quit. In his case that quitting probably just meant leaving the Matrix but in her case it would likely be real death.

NerfContessa

Agent Smith.

And arguably he was the antagonist in all 3 movies, very much so at start and end of the trilogy.

And maybe that's true.

therealgridlock

Technically Agent Smith was the protagonist of the movies, since he was the one who actually fulfilled the prophecy and emerged as a new thing out of a rote simulation.

I mean, he killed the machine god.

Lily

Catherine says she doesn't feel she has it in her to stab a Bard even before the Lone Swordsman, so this is very obviously gonna end one way.

[Liliet](#)

It's really cute how Pilgrim can see good without Good in the immortal entity that has worked on him for his whole life as *the only exception*.

Shveiran

Right? I mean... scratch trusting the Bard, I've nothing against that. How could he not? No beef there.

But it seems to me that Tariq has spent a long time minimizing suffering by employing whatever means necessary, and used as a way to call himself different from the Blacks and Cats of the world the reasoning that it is impossible to do good without being and therefore doing Good.

So far, I'm on board. I mean, I don't like it, I think it is a myopic approach, but I can see where he comes from.

But now it turns out he not only knew the Bard made deals on behalf of Below, but he did so himself? Well, fuck this shit, why did he have such a hard stand in Book 4? The world is black and white until it isn't?

I'll be the first to admit that contest matters, and we lack ANY specific, but he didn't ear any point in my book here, and certainly lost some. I mean, maybe they were small deals,

on another level compared to a "Evil Fey Queen of Callow", but unless Catherine jumped the gun and just assumed being involved in the spiral of the Sisters wouldn't shake him, but if she was right... good god, that was a whole race being turned into ritual fodder ad infinitum. If that is forgivable how can anything else be condemnable?

Insanenoodlyguy

You misunderstood the line, I think.
"She's not a heroine, Pilgrim," I said. "I've seen her make pacts on behalf of Below."

"So have I."

He did not also make offers to evil, but he's seen Bard do such things. Obviously this thing with Tyrant wasn't a surprise to him for this reason.

[Liliet](#)

>But now it turns out he not only knew the Bard made deals on behalf of Below, but he did so himself?

He hasn't, like Insanenoodleguy said.

TBH the more I'm trying to stay pissy @ him wrt this, the more I realize it's actually kind of reasonable for him to view Bard as a big fat exception to all the rules. Because, y'know, she is. She serves Below AND Above.

And he DID believe in Cat's benevolence, his attitude towards her was not 'lying evil villain' but 'a hysterical child with a nuclear launch button'. It is, if anything, consistent with him being trusting in the judgement of someone many times his senior.

And I suppose Bard did not go out of his way to challenge his beliefs in a way that would let him pick up on Amadeus's meanings)=

luminiousblu

Think about it this way. If you allow the Bard to have something approaching the Author's Fiat, then she serves both Above and Below, the same way Sauron didn't exist and wasn't causing trouble until Tolkien wrote him in. Tariq knows that the Bard advances the agenda of Below, he simply trusts that the endgame is the victory of Good.

Gunslinger

Dread Empress Victorious... I like the sound of that 😊

It's remarkable how frustrating Tariq can still be (especially since we see things from Cat's pov) so it sure was fun to see Cat go all Villain on him.

NerfContessa

Fitting name, fitting path.

That can't wend well...

Gunslinger

Ohh if you are having fun reading the guide and have a couple of bucks to spare swing by Ee's patreon <https://www.patreon.com/user?u=3523924>

[Liliet](#)

And if you don't, swing at least by the voting booth!

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

Aston Whiteman

Khaaaaaaan!

Someguy

Pilgrim isn't a string, he is the pivot of the weighing scale turning wherever easiest. You don't build relationships with him, it's pointless since he already smothered his own nephew, You just use and discard him at will.

[Liliet](#)

>it's pointless since he already smothered his own nephew

this is such an incredible non-sequitur,

Cicero

Not a non-sequitur at all. It's evidence that the Grey Pilgrim prioritizes actual effects above relationships. As such depending on a relationship to restrain him is dangerous and pointless. Look at how he abandoned the Saint and acquiesced to Cat killing her.

[Liliet](#)

...Catherine is not depending on a relationship to restrain him. Catherine is depending on the relationship to restrain BARD.

Relationship, in this case, is not a TERMINAL GOAL, yes. For either of them. It is simply evidence contributing to

decision making of 'who can i trust' 'who should i trust'
'what should i do'.

geoffpburns

The only ones Tariq wouldn't sacrifice for the greater good would be his sister Yasa and his lover Sintra, but they're both dead so everyone is fair game even the Saint of Swords, or his nephew or random town folk and sailors who catch the plague meant for Black Knight's army. He will shed tears but it won't stop him from doing what needs to be done.

Building trust though, is not a waste of time. That's what the Wandering Bard has done over decades.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

Shveiran

He likely would, but I see no fault in that. We are talking about a man determined to steer the world toward what he perceives as the greater good. I often disagree with his position, but if that is his goal then I'm sure glad he leaves personal at the door.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

geoffpburns

Weighting people lives on scales and judging their loss against some greater good is inherently problematic. Sacrificing other people or even himself seems to be a recurring theme with Tariq. Maybe using Forgive helps square the tally in his mind.

He hasn't completely lost his perspective he is still unwilling to sacrifice million of people when the benefits are uncertain and is willing make compromises with villains to avoid this.

Some decisions seem further down the slippery slope than hie strictly needs to be like using biological weapons or attempting to manoeuvre Cat into a lethal position twice, not because she **would** be a problem in the future, but because she **might** be a problem in the future.

[Javvies](#)

Should've known it wouldn't be so easy, Cat. Though it does make me wonder what the Dead King thinks he has on Bard that should turn everyone against her.

All hail, Dread Empress Victorious.
Triumphant was insufficiently ambitious.

Hmm, I wonder which target of deicide she's consulting with Masego about. Quartered Seasons suggests something to do with Arcadia and the Fae Courts. It could also refer to the Sisters each having half of Winter (ie, a quarter of the Winter/Summer dynamic).

—
Tariq, an ally making an attempt on the life of someone you owe big time isn't really an ally.
It's not okay to let that slide, but you went further and defended it.

Cat isn't negotiating because she thinks she can't win fighting. She's negotiating because she doesn't want to make a desert (out of the rest of Calernia's surface) and call it peace.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I'm starting to think she's angry enough to call it peace now.

[Javvies](#)

Oh, yeah, she'd absolutely do it without hesitating.
It's just not her preferred route, given a realistic alternative route. Which ... is not easy to get to.

Faiir

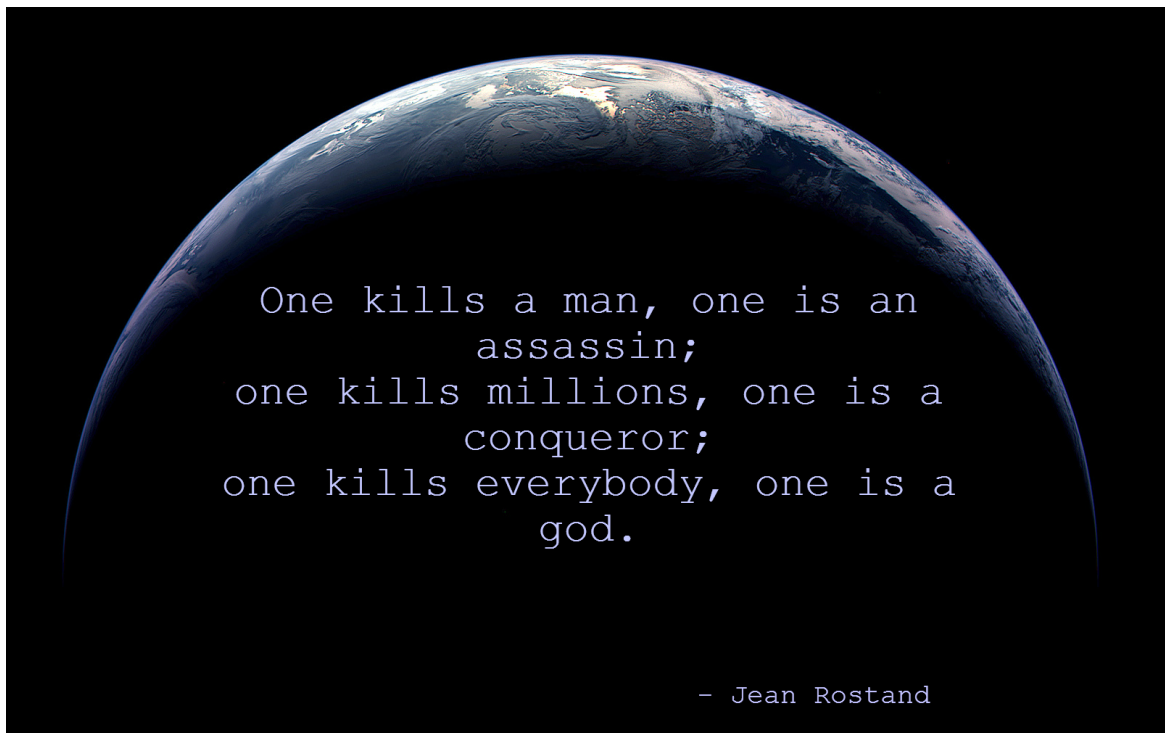
If you kill everyone else and have no one else to fight with that's peace right?

erebus42

I mean...yeah technically

caoimhinh

In a way, yes.



[Fayhem](#)

Is it weird that I hear that quote being tagged with a Mr Torque air-guitar solo? MEEDLYMEEDLYMOWWW

Shikkarasu

I grew up across from a graveyard. It was the most peaceful place I knew. According to many therapists, however, technically correct (although the best *kind* of correct) does not necessarily equal healthy.

What I'm saying is, you're not wrong, just an Old School Villain.

Faiir

Old School Villains have the most fun 😊

Eleron Pfoutz

I mean, that's my approach to stealth in video games.

[Fayhem](#)

Really? Personally, I just drop into a crouch and become invisible by doing so.

caoimhinh

Quite an outstanding move. Indeed, nobody can sound the alarm if everybody is dead.



byzantine279

Most likely?

The truth of who and what she is, and what she wants most. The only things that she never really reveals.

gingerlygrump

I sometimes think that the Wandering Bard is Erraticerata, or a facsimile of his inner voice, and Cat is his muse.

Faiir

I always see reader's as the gods.
Like enough readers fanboygirling over a character gives them literal plot armor, so each character strives for their niche, since they die if they're not unique enough.

I think it was around Bumbling Conjurer when the heroes band had two comic reliefs. There were people saying "Too much overlap!" and bam, one dies the next chapter.

gingerlygrump

Oh man, the readers being the gods fits so well.

Sun Dog

It does hang together disturbingly well. And we have a ringside seat to these entertaining events, many of which the main characters are not privy to.

Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm certainly not one of up Above.

mavant

Man, I am so sick of the Bard.

Hierus

Now i wonder what the Quartered Seasons theory is.

Anyway, that was a nice play by cat and quite a turn in strategy. A really smart play.

Sparsebeard

Probably will have to do with Night and/or Twilight?

I mean, Night powered gates are pretty primordial for Cat right now and Twilight changes everything.

Sun Dog

It may or may not be the same thing, but they were discussing some time ago the possibility of Autumn and Spring Courts. Now there is a third Court, or perhaps a second with the previous two united, I'm wondering if Masego isn't planning to impose the four seasons schema on Arcadia to either leach power from it, weaponize it somehow, or even force the Dead King into a position and thus a role and story they can use to end him.

[Liliet](#)

Autumn and Spring courts are well-known

mavant

Also, hey, good use of credible precommitments! Thomas Schelling would be proud.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Dread Empress Victorious.

Fitting, seeing how she's never lost. I guess her Father's lessons of one sin and one grace has gone a lot deeper than most other things in her life.

Sparsebeard

Well, she was crushed by the Sisters and recently surrendered to the grand alliance.

But yeah, she was pretty much winning by losing both of those times lol.

Faiir

Does it count as losing if after the fight you emerge even stronger and keep everything that matters to you?

caoimhinh

Also, considering that the only grace is Victory she would also be, by extension, Dread Empress Gracious.

Faiir

Dread Empress OnlyOneGraciousAndTotallyNoSin

[Fayhem](#)

I kind of love this. "Let me show you my approach to having gracious table manners. *nails sassmouth Praesi courtier's hand to table with a dagger* Now have some fucking manners."

ThatOtherGuy

NZPieFace – Cat lost pretty badly vs Sve Noc. It's just that few topside know about it.

Faiir

Effects of 'loss' against Sve Noc:

- becoming an effective ruler of a country
 - regaining full control of her body
 - gaining harder to ward against power
 - getting out of multiple story-based death scenarios
- This must have been such a horrible loss to Cat.

I wish I was losing like this every day!

Sparsebeard

An Irritant style loss!

Axel Rafael

I wholly agree. Plus, it just sounds super epic 😊

Actually, I think that a few books ago, there was a fan theory about her possible dread empress title, and someone actually proposed dread empress victorious.

Andrew Mitchell

Good memory. 😊 It was first mentioned by Shequi back in December 2017. <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/12/27/chapter-54-wake/#comment-9801>

Axel Rafael

Oh, wow

You found it 😂

Thanks, btw! For some things my brain does work Miracles afterall 😊

Sparsebeard

Wandering Bard : "Oops."

IDKWhoitis

Wandering Bard: *Cork bottle opening*

erebus42

Honestly if for whatever reason they can't kill the Bard, I hope someone manages to find a way to hurt her. Maybe curse her so she is unable to keep down alcohol regardless of the body she take...

IDKWhoitis

I think Cat imposing a prohibition of alcohol on Calernia might be one of the more effective strategies for "killing" the Bard. Forcing the Bard to go sober would be the cruelest thing Cat could do.

Mental Mouse

Hah. Prohibition wouldn't force anybody to go sober, because Cat would need to actually be a god to truly enforce it. We tried it here in America, near the beginning of the 20th century ... a constitutional amendment, one of the most difficult legal maneuvers to make in the American system.

Ten years later we amended it *back*, but it was too late – by then the Mafia had gained a solid foothold in America, and they've kept that to this day. Not that our leaders

learned from the experience – barely 50 years later, we launched the So-Called War On Drugs, which did the same for organized crime from the rest of the world.

IDKWhoitis

Oh God no, she knows it's unenforceable. And it would also require her to go sober too. Heavens forbid that, the angels aren't that big of pricks.

Author Unknown

Ah, right, 'diplomacy'.

Andrew Mitchell

Hahahahahaha. Exactly!! 😊 😊 😊

[Fayhem](#)

And Amadeus is there to provide the terrible wine! It's lovely to see a father and daughter working together like that.

konstantinvoncarstein

I wonder which god will be killed. Maybe the sovereigns of Autumn and Spring?

caoimhinh

Those no longer exist in the Arcadia that's seen from Calernia. The new Court is a unified Fae Court that doesn't belong to the Season theme of before.

The last paragraph of "Deicide doesn't come cheap" refers to the quantity of resources that she thinks they will have to invert on Masego's research of Quartered Seasons Theory. The god they want to kill is the Dead King.

Andrew Mitchell

And maybe the Bard.

caoimhinh

Yep, though even at this point Catherine has never referred to the Intercessor as a goddess, not even once. Maybe because Cat sees the Bard as an instrument of the Gods, rather than someone who reached Apotheosis, plus the Bard is certainly more restricted than other gods we have seen (Neshamah, Sve Noc, the King and Queen of Arcadia).

Insanenoodlyguy

The Bard's entire system is designed to avoid Apotheosis.

Undying? She dies all the time. Unchanging? She literally can't stop changing on a constant basis. No longer bound by frailty of the mortal shell? She doesn't stay dead or grow old, but otherwise her existence is perpetually suffering so great she tries to stay permanently drunk.

It gives her the long lived long view while assuring maximum flexibility.

konstantinvoncarstein

You're right 🙄 The DK? I thought that the deicide had something to do with the opening of a gate to the Twilight Ways, but your theory makes more sense 😊

caoimhinh

Yeah, since they already had the necessary deicide for the making of the Twilight Realm by Tariq's death after putting on the crown, though that was cheated by resurrecting him XD

Every talk of deicide besides that has been about the Dead King.

Decius

So far every time Cat has attempted deicide or something similar she has ended up in some kind of arrangement with the target.

The fey courts, Sve Noc, and most recently with the Pilgrim.

Why should the Dead King be any different? She already has a relationship with one of DK's nemeses, who has a claim on the Dead King's magic and a Name fit for seizing a Godhead.

Sparsebeard

The DK did make an effort to keep negotiations an option (and Cat and him even talked about it).

Plus, he succeeded in extracting info that he though would help him from the Twilight...

All in all, Neshie signing the accords in the end wouldn't be that much of a stretch...

[Liliet](#)

Nobody will want him in the Accords, though.

Aotrs Commander

Why stop at one?

Morgenstern

I more wonder about "deicide" vs. "Deicide". Too bad that word ended up in the very front of a sentence. =P

konstantinvoncarstein

A Deicide is impossible, and would make not sense here. She is speaking of Neshamah.

edrey

well, that is cat for you. Dread empress victorious, that is what i call a great name, i am really want to read about the faces of the nobles after this
also, i am really sure that the bard was the one who tricked the courts to invade callow.

Jakob Israelsen

I think half of the reason for the name is that it is a synonym for Triumphant, and doesn't that ring some scare bells for everybody.

Faiir

"If treaties and alliances fail, I'll take steel and fire to the Dead King as Dread Empress, Victorious."
Is this treason I hear?

caoimhinh

Nah, that's just giving him a faiir warning.

"Either be my ally now, or I will amass power by myself and march against the Dead King when I'm ready, and by then you will all be screwed in more than one way. I'm not the one who needs this peace that I'm offering, I'm just the one rational enough to work for it."

Faiir

Yeah, but is she giving a fair warning to Malicia? 😊

caoimhinh

Depends, does the assassination attempt a couple of years ago in Keter count?
Callow has gone through secession from Praes under Catherine, so they aren't exactly allies anymore.

Faiir

I think they're technically still allies? Unless the Legions 'in exile' don't consider themselves soldiers of the empire anymore, they wouldn't team up with the Army of Callow otherwise.

Faiir

Obviously an attempted murder or two is just a compliment to Praesi.

Insanenoodlyguy

The Legions in Exile are Blacks, Body and Soul. As noted already, they consider Cat as Black's heir on the whole. They would not obey her giving them an outright treasonous order, but since her orders could be summed up as "I want to keep you alive and also we are working to get Black back, it's some name shenanigans but you know how that goes", that wasn't so hard to swallow. And even then, any reluctance would be based on BLACKS Loyalty: We are Loyal to Black, he is Loyal to Malicia, betraying Praes is betraying Black. But Black is back. If he says "We are conquering Praes, time to be Emperor/ make a new Empress" all the hesitation evaporates.

konstantinvoncarstein

She already killed her 2 times 😊 If Malicia is still not aware that Catherine is revolting, I don't know what can warn her 😊

erebus42

"Revolting? Good Gods, of course not! We're merely maneuvering."

Faiir

She got better though 😊

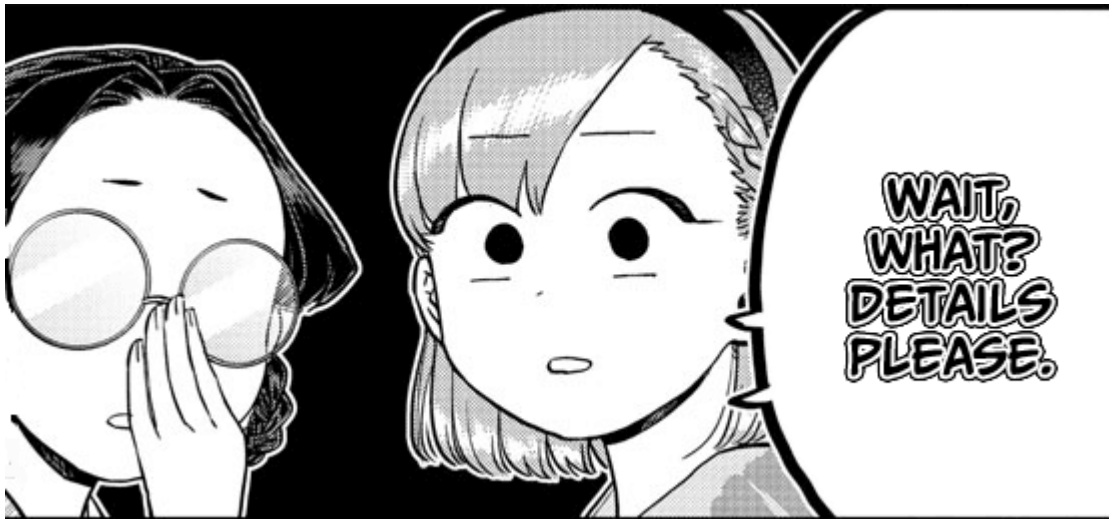
Decius

Not for the first time tonight. Although it would be hard to also put her father on the tower.

caoimhinh

"Quartered Seasons theory", eh?
Masego is going to weaponize Time and Entropy.
I wonder if he will go Gold Experience Requiem on Neshamah and lock him in a time loop, or what.

Either way, it's gonna be awesome



NullKaze

Cat's already weaponised time and entropy against the Saint. We can't use the same plot device twice!

caoimhinh

We can't use the same plot device *in the same way* twice. Using it in creative new ways is perfectly valid XD

ethericsentinel

That is a fantastic image. Do you know the source?

caoimhinh

Yes, it's from "Komi-san wa Komyushou Desu" chapter 195.

You can also find it as "Miss Komi is Bad at Communication", it's a Japanese school life comedy Manga. It's pretty funny and an amazing source of reaction images XD

Andrew Mitchell

Another brilliant chapter. Yet again, EE continues to surprise me.

1. GP already knows about the Bard's dealings on behalf of Below. WHAT?!?
2. *Of course* Bard has built up a strong emotional bank account with the Grey Pilgrim, duh.
3. **And then Cat FUCKING TURNS ALL VILLAINOUS and ACTUALLY HOLDS THE GREY PILGRIM TO ACCOUNT FOR HIS BULLSHIT.**

Absolutely delightful...

Andrew Mitchell

Ooops, in my excitement, I forgot to close some HTML tags there.

caoimhinh

Worked out for the best, as it gave the comment a nice dramatic touch XD

Morgenstern

I wonder what “dark” deals he actually knows about, though. How “dark” those actually were, compared to the deal offered to the Sisters (with the option on the other scale being: “here, have genocide instead”).

M0och123

I am curious how the pre-quote at the start of the chapter factors into the rest of it... Any thoughts?

M0och123

It’s a little confusing because the ends justifying the means is usually associated with a good guy turning to evil. Not the other way around.

caoimhinh

It’s a preaching of Above.

“the end justifies the means, the end of all creation is decided by the Gods Above, so all justice must then come from them.”

It’s a fallacy because it ignores the fact that there are means that go against the teachings of Above, so they are unjustifiable. But it’s a religious propaganda from Atalante, so don’t worry about logic on that.

It reminds me a bit of what a preacher said to me once: “God is just, not because he can only act in a just manner, as he is not constrained by justice, rather, God decides what justice *is*, so whatever God does *becomes* justice on account of being done by God.”

The epigraph reflects on the chapter on Tariq’s attitude of justifying whatever the Wandering Bard did as something done for the Greater Good (notice how he didn’t even care about what Catherine talked with the Bard just now, he won’t listen unless he is forced to do it). On a conversation with Liliet on the comments of one of the previous chapters I had predicted that this would be his reaction, because that’s how Pilgrim is, despite him knowing that the other person is telling the truth, he will simply go “it’s just that you

think this is true, but you are mistaken" whenever someone tells him something that challenges his worldview.

Mental Mouse

> "God is just, not because he can only act in a just manner, as he is not constrained by justice, rather, God decides what justice is, so whatever God does becomes justice on account of being done by God."

Which is Team Morality (if not Blue and Orange Morality) in a nutshell.

Andrew Mitchell

I just took it as yet another arrogant statement by a champion of Above. I think it mirrors Tariq's myopic view of Good & Evil.

Andrew Mitchell

Damn it! That was supposed to be a reply to M0och123.

IDKWhoitis

Amadeus must be very proud of his daughter. She's all grown up now. Threatening heroes and old monsters, and meaning every last bit of it. Being able to hack at her own plans when they do not serve the original purposes.

Also, I wonder how Masego will serve in his function as an adviser. Will he be forced to use Akua as a medium for the shenanigans Cat wants to pull?

And while Akua is being brought up, we still haven;t seen Viv...

erebus42

It's a shame they don't have Mics to drop in Calernia.

It certainly makes sense that the Bard and Tariq would be tight so this turn of events while a bit disappointing isn't that surprising. I suppose if anyone would be on board with her usual "burn any innocents and allies necessary so long as the big scary threat gets taken care of in the insuing wildfire" tactic, it be the Pilgrim.

Honestly though, Tariq had this coming. I get that his thing is the whole wise old mentor schtick and that probably influences him into thinking he's above everyone and into trying to take control of the situation but still...read the room dude. She's the fuck-mothering Black Queen. She just got finished handing you and the Grand Alliance your collective asses. Keep track of your fucking position man. I know you have that whole thing about not being a ruler but your people as well as the vast majority of

people in Calernia are kinda depending on her not telling you guys to fuck off.
Also, I'm sure that whole speech probably brought a tear to Black's eye.

Mental Mouse

> but still...read the room dude.

Well, admittedly Cat missed the boat on that one too.

Fayhem

> I get that his thing is the whole wise old mentor schtick and that probably influences him into thinking he's above everyone and into trying to take control of the situation

This is a good note, thank you for bringing it up; we have Black's analysis/diagnosis that a Name usually influences the thinking of the person holding it, and IIRC he also indicated that it does so more strongly the more heavily you lean into your Name. Pilgrim has been leaning *hard* into the Role of Wise Old Mentor for literally decades now. That should probably get foregrounded more often in character analyses of him.

Mental Mouse

Yeah... notice that this line:

> "This is not the talk of an ally," the Grey Pilgrim warningly said.

... came *before* any actual threats. That was Pilgrim's response to merely being reminded that Cat is a power in her own right. Pilgrim really is a slow learner... and also pretty damn ungrateful. And note that when Cat did come out with a threat, it was to the effect of "I'll take my bat and balls and go home... and if I have to do that, then the next time we meet it won't be as allies". (I'll also note that Pilgrim's threat to stand in her way is pretty dubious – how long is he actually likely to live at this point?)

Cat not only saved the population of Issere, but held off on killing Saint until the latter made it clear that she was trying to burn *everything* – the country and its residents, the shortcut for the armies, and the party, including Pilgrim himself. Oh yeah, and after that she resurrected Pilgrim's sorry ass (at considerable risk to herself, given she was confronting a Choir) when she didn't actually *have* to, and in fact she had been trying to take the bullet herself.

Just today, I saw a quote from Zadie Smith, presented in the context of race relations, but fairly applicable here: "In the end, your past is not my past and your truth is not my truth

and your solution – is not my solution.” Pilgrim keeps reverting to his old habits – assuming that as the Senior Hero, he’s in a dominant position to everyone around him. The Twilight adventure should have taught him otherwise, but like I said, slow learner.

It occurs to me that both Saint and Pilgrim have demonstrated in their separate way that heroes really need a retirement option. Pilgrim may not be axe-crazy like Saint, but he’s still way past his sell-by date.

Agent J

Now I want Dread Empress Victorious. EE, why you tease me?

Faiir

That’s just fanfic bait 😊

ActionKermit

I love how Cat makes her future villainy contingent on the Bard messing with the Accords when the Bard just said she wouldn’t mess with the accords mere minutes ago.

[Fayhem](#)

Right, but why would Cat take Bard at her word? Taking steps to impose actual consequences for Bard doing so is both prudent and smart of Cat.

[matrixm](#)

Butt also if the Bard were to make any move against her.

gingerlygrump

I sometimes think that the Wandering Bard is Erraticerata, or a facsimile of his inner voice, and Cat is his muse.

gingerlygrump

Didn’t mean to post this multiple times. Sigh.

ninegardens

This... feels like it actually might be the stupidest thing Cat has ever done.

She doesn’t KNOW the game the Bard is playing.

Either she’s bluffing, in which case ummm... the Bard will catch on.

Or she isn’t, in which case she has just handed Bard a lever with which to control her, with which to force her hand- to force her

to turn against the Grey Pilgrim (a very popular hero), due to the actions of an ancient monster he has no control over.

And either way, she has just pissed off an ally who was behaving in a fairly reasonable manner given her "Broad interpretation of a murder attempt".

So she's trying to threaten the bard into not fucking with her? Is she crazy?

The Bard is GOOD at this game. The Bard can kill you without anyone knowing that it's her. It's easy. It's not like the old monster leaves a receipt after setting up the rube goldberg machine that kills them.

She's effectively created a situation where the Bard has every incentive to go directly for the kill and no incentive to give future warnings, play nice, or softball her in any way.

She walked into this situation set on attacking the Wandering Fucking Bard with barely any plan.... then made up a new plan half way through.... and ALL of these plans were fricken' stupid. What was she thinking? (Yes, I know we just read a chapter of her thinking. It's still dumb)

Andrew Mitchell

You know, that's a good point.

She may be betting that the Bard won't want to kill her **yet**. If she does then the Dead King gets to stomp all over half of Calernia and probably makes permanent gains that will be very hard to unmake in the centuries to come.

John

If the Bard provably messes with the Accords, that doesn't force Cat and the Pilgrim to fight – it just forces the Pilgrim to disavow his support for the Bard in order to keep Cat friendly. He's all about the greater good, and the Bard's nebulous contributions can't plausibly outweigh Dread Empress Victorious burning all Calernia to the ground.

If he's looking at things rationally, Tariq knows perfectly well it's possible to attempt to murder Named by manipulating their narrative – he's done it himself, to the same target, VERY recently. He's just having a hard time fully accepting the new political situation.

Andrew Mitchell

> ... can't plausibly outweigh Dread Empress Victorious burning all Calernia to the ground.

I don't think that's what Victorious is going to do. She was threatening to take over Praes and built its strength while watch the Dead King burn half of Calernia to the ground.

Faiir

The goblinfirewall separating the safe and fucked parts of Calernia would be glorious!

ninegardens

>Tariq knows perfectly well it's possible to attempt to murder Named by manipulating their narrative – he's done it himself, to the same target, VERY recently.

Tariq tossed a redemption story in Cat's direction back at the battle of the camps, and CAT interpreted it as a murder attempt. We have every indication that Tariq did not interpret things that way- he was her avowed enemy while she was a villian because of *handwave handwave* effects on the balance of creation. If he had tossed her a redemption story, and she takes it HE DOESN'T WANT the story to kill her. It might. Its not without risk. But the fact that "redemption story = Pilgrim trying to kill me" was Cat's opinion, not necessarily Tariq's

>If the Bard provably messes with the Accords, that doesn't force Cat and the Pilgrim to fight – it just forces the Pilgrim to disavow his support for the Bard in order to keep Cat friendly

But she just promised that she was holding him accountable for Bard's future actions and that there would be CONSEQUENCES. She didn't say "Look, if Bard screws with the accords, can you agree to say that that would be a bad thing and disavow her for that", she said "I will leave Nessie to burn your house down."

IF Bard provably interferes with Accords.
But Plausible Deniability is Bard's whole schtick practically. She's good at it. She has a million and one ways to arrange for some intermediary to set your house on fire. This makes threatening her much less effectually, and it makes threatening some else on behalf of how you interpret her actions even more Janky.

And this threat especially doesn't work if the thing you are threatening to do entails cutting your own arm off, abandoning an alliance YOU NEED, and then handing half the continent to a horror that you have sworn vengeance on. Either people believe that Cat would do this (in which case they believe she is an EXTREMELY unreliable actor), or they believe she won't (in which case the threat fails).

Mental Mouse

> But the fact that “redemption story = Pilgrim trying to kill me” was Cat’s opinion, not necessarily Tariq’s

Tariq, as a hero, can afford to dismiss the way redemption stories often kill the redeemed – “well, if that what it takes for a successful redemption”. Cat is under no obligation to concur.

ICSM

She did him at it, however, by the name she chose for herself.

Victorious. If that’s not a threat to fulfill GP’s worst fears and become a new Triumphant, I dunno what would be.

Triumphant has a very powerful story. Cat may crash and burn at the end, but that story alone will allow her to blow California to kingdom come if she so wants. The mere hint of the possibility of a repeat of that story has moved GP’s to action. Now she has outright stated she will take that mantle if he doesn’t play ball.

JJR

Until recently he had a way to undo the death caused by redemption stories. Unless the aspect didn’t work for redemption deaths. Still, if Cat had leaned into the story he offered I would expect that he would rather Cat not die.

Agent J

The redemption is not very recent. The rule of three was very recent. Tariq was aiming for a draw at the Princes’ Graveyard so as to use the third and lethal confrontation as a knife bared at the Black Queen’s throat.

Because stories kill and he’s too experienced and genre-savvy to pretend he doesn’t know that.

ninegardens

Oh! Good catch. I mixed up which story trope was being referred to- my mistake.

Shveiran

This isn’t a Fey oath, is Cat setting the stage for diplomatic pressure because, even now, she is not handed enough goodwill without placing her sword on the table.

Nothing she just did made her any more vulnerable to a swing from the bard than she was before.

What it did, is warning Tariq that if his side keeps going after her she is under no obligation to keep playing ball. Which is a pretty basic premise of an alliance: you stop killing me and I stop killing you means a truce, not an alliance. They are marching north to save people who swear allegiance to Above; if Above still acts like all sworn to Below are murderable, why the hells are Callow and the drow marching by their side? They'll take their shit and leave.

But this is contingent on the Grand alliance considering and acting like bard is an ally.

So if the bard takes another swing at Cat and succeeds? Well, she's dead, but she would have been dead anyway. Nothing changed.

If she does and misses, though? Then the Grand Alliance and Tariq get to make a choice. They can break their ties with the Bard, or they can see them severed with Callow. The latter ends with Callow and the drow retreating to one day fight alone, after fair warning and justifiable reasons.

Honestly, it is nicely done. Tariq and the Grand Alliance needs to choose whether or not they want an alliance; if they do, they need to act like it, or they don't get to expect Callow to keep playing ball to this bullshit.

Insanenoodlyguy

All of Bard's power is indirect. Remove the influencers, you remove her power, at least for a significant amount of time while she rebuilds.

Cat's counting on what you just said. She wants to deal with this shit once. The way she's set it up, if Bard comes at her, it's going to be the big play. Not 10 million little background chips, because doing all that is too much risk of discovery, and if Cat is going all or nothing, she's not going to do this because she knows Cat will jump the gun if she even thinks it COULD have been bard, because she knows Bard can do things direct. If anything, she might kibosh one or two things she had no hand in just because it looks too much like her. Cat doesn't believe Bard won't go after her, she's said as much. But she's now ensured that when Bard does, she'll go all out and hard. And Cat does great in the chaos that is an utter clusterfuck.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> And either way, she has just pissed off an ally who was behaving in a fairly reasonable manner given her "Broad interpretation of a murder attempt".

I would not call Pilgrim's attitude reasonable. More like arrogant, patronizing and ungrateful.

General Chaos

nice

[Barthumphries](#)

Well now the Pilgrim will help keep the Bard in line... Until the Bard sacrifices him. He's not going to be alive much longer to threaten the Bard. And the Bard will spin it as Cat leaving him alive to back the Accords but then disposing of him when there was no further use for him, and this Bard will take out Pilgrim and Accords in one swoop.

ninegardens

And remember, Cat is still the Guarantor of Kiaros's kangaroo caught judging Hanno, with the Pilgrim's life acting as collateral. A default I can see both Bard and Kiaros trying to trigger, despite the fact that Cat really doesn't (or at least shouldn't) want to be harming Peregrine in any way.

ninegardens

* kangaroo court

Shveiran

And isn't it so very damn irritating that the oldest Calernia hero is going to be in need of saving from certain death twice... just after finally stopping being an antagonist?

[Mental Mouse](#)

If Cat can't shake some sense into him, Pilgrim's gone from antagonist to albatross.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Aside from other points – Cat has just floated the option of taking the Tower herself, with ample foreshadowing. But that's something she'd previously been shying away from, not to mention that both she *and* Bard had been planning to put Amadeus there.

Also, she has the treaty with the Dwarves to consider....

Insanenoodlyguy

Yeah but there is also the simple reality of fate: Amadeus has only heard part of the song, and he knows it wasn't for him.

i'm still thinking that somehow, against all odds, it will be Akua.

Liliet

I think "wasn't for me" is a decision he made, not the property of him hearing the song. I think when the song is heard, the song's opinion (so to speak) is that it's for that person exactly.

Cap'n Smurfy

"I trust in a woman I have seen dedicated a lifetime to carrying out good deeds wherever and whenever she could," the Pilgrim said. "I have known her to do this since before either of you were born,"

Pilgrim really doesn't have any understanding of just how old the Bard is, does he? I know it wouldn't change his opinion but he really doesn't seem to know Bard is literally the oldest individual on Calernia.

Daniel E

"For a long time now I thought I was just a survivor, but I'm not. I'm the winner. Time Lord Victorious." – Tenth Doctor

Faiir

Cat? What are you doing? U drunk!
Get out of TARDIS right now!

Alivaril

I'm a bit saddened by how relations with the Pilgrim went downhill so incredibly quickly after the whole "We're better than this, so imma rez your dyood, K?" of a few chapters ago. I didn't really expect Cat's attempt to amount to anything, but still; I liked friendly Tariq, Arch-heretic of the West.

Insanenoodlyguy

the problem was, he wasn't treating her like a proper ally, he was treating her like what he specifically fialed to make her: the reforming villian who still needs a swift kick every so often to keep them marching in the right direction. You can talk down to that one as she needs to reshape her morals. You don't talk that way to the woman you need who kicked your ass when she's telling you a friend just tried to kill her. Not without pissing them off.

Fayhem

Eh, I could be wrong but I think this is just akin to the Hero-Villain equivalent of setting healthy boundaries in a relationship. One party shrugs at a story-based murder attempt from a friend of theirs, the other party makes the point that if this shit keeps happening they'll take their shit and go home before coming back along the only path left open (i.e., FIRE AND THE SWORD). For all Tariq's situational naiveté he's too Practical Good to make that into more than a blip in the relationship IMO. We'll see, though.

Liliet

Ah, his WAS him being friendly, though.

"You were tested and found worthy" is a perfectly normal and acceptable thing to say to a young hero proving their chops step by step. And that's the groove Cat slotted into in Pilgrim's mind: a villain queen who is *actually* really secretly a hero, and proving that step by step.

With all the associated starry-eyed obedience, idealism and trust.

Only, y'know, Cat doesn't have those, and Pilgrim has no idea. He doesn't realize that Cat has been on this path for much longer than he's known her and is *thoroughly sick* of any kind of proving herself anymore. Given that so far it's involved torture, soul ripping and crucifixions, Cat might have an allergic reaction to the very CONCEPT.

And then there's the fact that even applied to your typical idealistic young hero THIS IS KIND OF FUCKED UP, and Pilgrim has just... lost track of that along the way. See enough young 'uns come and go, you start forgetting that actually every single one of them didn't have to do this and every single one of them deserved better. His *normal* has shifted along the way. You know the reasoning that every minute Superman spends maintaining his secret identity and talking with this friends is a crime, because in that minute so many murders happen that he's not preventing? Tariq is far down *that* road when it comes to powerful Named, and he doesn't realize how far he is from the shore anymore.

Tariq was friendly. He assumed Catherine was coming from the same perspective as him – oh, of COURSE unfair bullshit gets heaped onto the apprentice hero, that's just how the story goes, pip pip cheerio.

Only Catherine has already BEEN through her apprentice phase and has ended it with STABBING the previous Cryptic Mentor for the peak his bullshit reached.

He was being friendly, and kind of an idiot about this.

Javvies

Oh, I don't know.

I think Cat technically has some idealism in her. But it's a very focused and specific kind of idealism, and it has very little to do with the kind of idealism Tariq would expect to see in a new Hero he's mentoring.

After all – are not the Accords born out of a specific set of ideals? The ideal of a world where Named and religion don't fuck things up for everybody else as much. A better world.

Liliet

Yeah, you're not wrong. And Catherine studied under one of the biggest idealists in the setting, given the amount of bullshit his ideals managed to survive largely intact... and that's the part Tariq isn't getting. That he isn't the first. That to THIS road she is not new. That they are not offering her something fresh and precious, that Amadeus had been teaching her *how to be a better hero* since First fucking Summerholm, and that while she would not mind their approval and affirmation, she has solid enough ground to stand on already, and things to protect on that ground.

Tariq doesn't understand that her diving headfirst into Hero Shit is not her abandoning her old teachings but following up on them, *and so she is not a green initiate*.

He will not understand that until he understands some more of Amadeus, I think.

Hellspirit

Beautiful

ChillyPepper

I love how Amadeus vanished into the background as she began rambling. I'd like to imagine him having an all like "well, shit..." moment.

Insanenoodlyguy

Amadeus is happy to chip in when it would help. He recognized that this wasn't about him and anything he added in would actually weaken what was happening here.

Otherwise I imagine his headspace was something like this:
<https://giphy.com/gifs/netflix-connie-hormone-monstress-no-notes-28Nays4xzYfFstkIZd>

Mental Mouse

That said, he will certainly have a critique ready for her afterwards.

Liliet

Amadeus? A critique? More like "gods you held out for so long, I have no idea how you're doing this, truly you're better at this than I am"

Mental Mouse

A criitque, because that's how he engages with things. She may well be better than him, but he's not likely to admit it. 😊

Notice how this chapter started with Black putting on the scary:

> It was a little unsettling to see that even without the Name my teacher could still shed the face of Amadeus of the Green Stretch and become the Black Knight.

But then Catherine takes her turn:

> "Yes," I coldly said. "That is who I am, Peregrine. The Black Queen. The Arch-heretic of the East. It seems you have forgot how we came to stand here on this night. Shall I help you remember?"

Liliet

>A criitque, because that's how he engages with things. She may well be better than him, but he's not likely to admit it.

...I don't think so? He's straight up told her before that she's better than him at all of this.

Sure, he's not going to launch into a stream of compliments...

Liliet

...and that's precisely why I don't think he'll have much non-jokey critique to share 😊

oliverwashere

To me, it seems like Catherine ended up taking the story of the cornered villainess taking a hostage to stall the heroes. I'd imagine those paths usually end with the heroine sneaking around and defusing the threat without the villainess noticing. In this case, could the Bard be heading to Praes next to make it as hard as possible for Catherine to win a claim for the tower?

Javvies

Except that's not really what Cat is doing here. She's saying, "I'm trying to help you against one of the greatest Evils that ever was and in the process establish a lasting mechanism to prevent the worst atrocities committed by everybody else – so stop fucking trying to stab me for offering to help you because my patience for being stabbed by the people I'm trying to help (ie, you) is running out and if you won't let me help you without trying to kill me (again) in the process, I'm going to go home, let you lot get massacred, and then any of your survivors won't have a choice but to do things my way."

I don't have a good analogy ready to go for this ...
Hmmm.

The only times Cat has gotten Tariq to play fairly has been when she's exerting leverage and twisting his arm into negotiating instead of insisting on his way of massively one sided deals in his favor (assuming, of course, that he's giving anything for what he's getting out of it, which he often isn't) or nothing. I suppose the initial "no angels/devils/demons, no torturing prisoners" deal wasn't something she needed to leverage him into, but he presumably expected it to benefit his side way more than it would hers.

Also, I'm not sure how you think Bard can do to prevent Cat from being able to claim the Tower without in some way attacking Cat. It's not like Cat is going to be deterred by the High Lords or Malicia or a new Dread Emperor/Empress or anything they might do. The worst that could be done, I think, would be a new and Malicia/High Lords aligned Black Knight and/or Warlock, and that would just make things somewhat more difficult for Dread Empress Victorious.

Mental Mouse

> The only times Cat has gotten Tariq to play fairly has been when she's exerting leverage and twisting his arm into negotiating instead of insisting on his way of massively one sided deals in his favor

This. That said, I would never assume there's nothing Bard can do. What happens if Malicia dies, and Black and Cat are facing a whole crop of claimant-Emperors? Of if Praes descends completely into anarchy?

Javvies

Any other Claimants to succeed Malicia would most likely be High Lords, and so probably would be opposing Cat/Amadeus anyways.

Honestly, Bard taking out Malicia would probably make it easier for Cat/Amadeus to take the Tower, not harder. Remember, Malicia has hidden contingencies (via a combination of Speaking and her Rule Aspect) in all Legion Generals and in most of the upper ranks. Plus, Malicia going down may or may not have consequences regarding the Dead King's invasion.

Honestly, the only thing that would be a serious, mission-critical-level obstacle would be if Callow turned on Cat ... and as good as Bard may be, I honestly don't think she's that good. At least, I don't think she could pull something like that off in the kind of timeframe she'd have to work with. Especially not if she's trying to be subtle about it.

[sivarajan](#)

May she never return?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Too Late...

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Heh. Chapter 69.

Faiir

I think that it's thanks to how good the Guide is that this comment is so much further on the list than in most other novels 😊

[Liliet](#)

Huh. Yep ♥

mavant

Nice

[Mental Mouse](#)

Pbbbt!!!

mavant

Personally I'm still holding out for Dread Empress Ebony Raven Darkness Dementia Way.

[Liliet](#)

*Ebony Dark'ness Dementia Raven Way.

Don't ask why I remember this.

Anyway, HELL YES. Just one ruling name is for losers preps.

Alegio

The undefeated Black Queen of the east, First under the Night,
Dread Empress Victorious, first of her name.

Now thats an awesome title.

Soma

...and everyone at the fire just heard that. Well, probably not, but there was a bit of screaming, about some sort of minstrel, somewhat close to the same stones everyone is camped around. Cat should beware Robber ever hearing her claim that she'll take up the mantle of 'Victorious' in any scenario.

I look forward to the questions about what that yelling was. Well, maybe Cat and company just travelled a longer ways than was my impression, and nobody heard it.

nipi

Hmmm... been wondering about all the heroes Cat killed during the prelude of the Tenth Crusade. We havent seen her use any lesser trinkets she should have obtained from them.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Her pattern on-screen has been to use most of them up pretty much ASAP. The Call whistle was the only one we've yet seen her hang onto for any length of time, and she used that one sooner than I expected.

ninegardens

Okay, so new crack theory:

What does Bard claim her schtick is:

Makeing sure no one screws up badly enough to destroy the world.

How does she do it:

Words

Who else likes keeping a lid on other peoples skills and tech:
Gnomes.

How do they do it:

Scarlet Postcards.

That's right people, The Wandering Bard is secretly three Gnomes in a trenchcoat.

Insanenoodlyguy

I don't think I've said it on here, but i have wondered if Bard's actual original form, back in a language nobody (on the surface, at least) remembers, was in fact a Gnome.

[Draconic](#)

I do not think Victorious would be a good name for Cat is she ever does become a Dread Empress. She should think about it some more...

ethericsentinel

Well, she can't be Irritant II. That's clearly reserved for Kairos if he climbs the Tower.

[Liliet](#)

Dread Empress Thoughtful? 😊

Raved Thrad

If she *really* wanted to be known far and wide for her evil, she'd take the throne as Dread Empress Cuddlebunny. Nothing could be more terrifying than that.

[Liliet](#)

Oh my.

I love how you think~

Chapter 70: Dawning

"For light blinds just as surely as the dark, and hatred binds just as surely as love."

– Sherehazad the Seer, Taghreb poet

I woke up to the feeling of bony elbows digging into my ribs. It surprised me not because I'd forgotten that Indrani and I had ended up in bed – I still felt pleurably sore from those exertions, so it'd have been a shame to – but because she was still here. In my bed, though for once she was only mildly hogging the covers. The gift of awareness Sve Noc had granted me, I sometimes suspected without strictly *meaning* to, had me mindful that dawn was a little more than an hour away. It'd not been a long night of sleep and to be honest I still felt a little drunk, but worse come to worse I'd take a nap come the afternoon. I

might need to whatever my intentions, if raising a gate into Twilight was as exhausting as I suspected it would be. My mind recoiled at the thought of it, for I would need the guidance of the Sisters to see it done and that was rarely pleasant or gentle thing. I stretched and yawned to keep my thoughts moving instead of lingering on the coming unpleasantness, sliding out of the blanket and sitting on the edge of the bed. Indrani began to stir awake and I smoothed away a puzzled frown. I'd wondered if our arrangement would be set aside until she'd resolved whatever she was going to resolve with Masego, but truth be told I'd not been entirely surprised we'd ended up in bed after the rough few days we'd had.

Honesty compelled me to admit I'd not needed much convincing when she'd offered, either.

That she'd stay afterwards, though, that had me wondering. Not at whether or not this was blooming into something more romantic in nature – for all that Akua had once claimed I had difficulty separating bedplay from attachment, Indrani and I had always been very clear that neither of us was likely to ever fall in love with the other – but at the nature of whatever accord she was trying to reach with Zeze. I doubted a man raised by the Warlock and an incubus would be all that inclined to give a single thought to what people might or might not consider proper, but I disliked not knowing what I was involved in. Even if only peripherally. That was on a personal note, anyway. As the nominal leader of the Woe, there were concerns about what all this fumbling might mean for our little band. *Though in all fairness, I grimly thought, if it's such a great concern I probably shouldn't be sleeping with Archer.* I bet Black would never have – huh, no, he most definitely had. With Ranger, of all women. I cast a speculative look at Indrani as she opened her eyes. Comparisons between the Woe and the Calamities had begun before the Queen of Summer had even granted us the name, so if I was to be my generations equivalent of Black and Indrani of Ranger? Ugh. That did feel a little sordid.

Indrani took my lingering gaze for something else entirely, and just so happened to stretch in a way that pushed back the covers and arched up her breasts. Pure coincidence, no doubt. Well. It would have been rude not to appreciate the sights, really, if you thought about it. Best not to mention that earlier thought about equivalences, I decided. Archer was not, as a rule, all that opposed to sordidness. She did like to rub my nose in it, though, so no need to hand her a full quiver.

"Don't suppose I could convince you to stay in bed a little longer," Indrani said, voice still husky from sleep.

And perhaps something else as well, though that might just be my continuing look at the smooth expanse of brown skin laid out before me.

"Any more of that and we'll break the cot," I smiled. "Wasn't made for two people, much less that sort of... exercise."

"Wouldn't be as an issue if I tied your wrists again," Indrani airily said.

Now that was just unfair. And surely I could spare a bit of time before leaving the tent. Or perhaps half my time. Unfortunately, my awareness of looming dawn made it clear that was not the case despite my body's insistence otherwise.

"I'll need time to prepare the grounds for the ritual," I reluctantly said.

She sighed, though from the sly look in her eye I'd say my hesitation had been the prize she'd been after from the start. Indrani always turned pixie, after a shared night, as if the shedding of clothes brought out her vainest sort of guiles.

"Boring," she said, waving a hand in dismissal. "Still, I'm already up. No point in going back to bed alone."

I snorted. Yeah, she hadn't been expecting me to accept then. It was still night out, and so it was not all that difficult to spin black flames around the stone basin to the side of my bed until the water within it was warm. I took the cloth to the side of it and began by washing my face, though I ceased when I felt Indrani looking at me.

"Not happening," I said.

I swept my unbound hair back over my shoulder as I spoke, aware from how frequently Indrani liked to grip it that she had something of a fascination there. I didn't have curves to display, unlike my friend, but I was hardly unattractive to her. It was my arms, though, that she was looking at.

"You're getting wiry," Archer said, sounding fascinated. "Haven't seen your body change that much since the Folly."

Had I gained muscles? Strange, since I wasn't walking around in plate or sparring regularly anymore. Some of my surprise must have shown on my face, as she continued to speak.

"You were bulkier when we first met," Indrani said. "Warrior-framed. You look more like a hunter now, made for the long stride instead of the shield wall."

"You're feeling rather poetic this morning," I drily said.

"Been a while since slept in the same bed," she smiled. "Don't get used to it."

I wet the cloth again, for the wetness had cooled, and wiped the lower half of my face to hide my hesitation. Ah, well. If I waited for either Indrani or Masego to tell me what was going on, I'd still be waiting on my deathbed.

"Should," I delicately began, "I get used to *this*?"

I flicked a few fingers at the messy bed we'd been sharing. Her expression was difficult to parse, and not for the lack of light in the tent: a sliver of Night had seen to that.

"Not sure yet," she said. "But I did tell you, back in Great Lotow – that is that, and this is this."

For you, maybe, I thought. I wasn't sure exactly what she was trying to have with Masego, but any manner of pairing would rather imply he could have an opinion as well. It wasn't that I expected Zeze to suddenly make like an Alamans priest and condemn the pleasures of the flesh as wayward. Mores aside, he was not above those himself: me might not have any interest in bedplay, but I'd seen him dig into fresh apple tarts like a starving orc would a pig. He'd not been overweight when we first met without reason. Still, I honestly had no idea of what he'd want of a relationship – any relationship – that wasn't friendship or family. Didn't help that I'd never heard him express a desire for one. His fathers had been married and a closed circle, as far as I knew, and among the rest of the band of Named who'd raised him Sabah had been happily wed and mother while Black had his... rapport with the Lady of the Lake, though I'd been made to understand that they only met every few years for a short span. Gods, none of us had been raised in a traditional family, had we? Orphan, diabolist and incubus, *Ranger*. Vivienne's mother had been assassinated by the Empire, after all. Although, now that I thought about it, Hakram's childhood had not been all that unusual by orc standards. He'd simply been an ill-fit for his clan, and later the College.

Hells, that might actually go some way in explaining why he tended to be the most stable of us.

"Still, I'll not be offended if our company lapses until you have your house in order," I told her.

She ought to know already, but sometimes it was best to have those things stated outright.

"And who will you work out your tensions with, then?" she grinned. "I suppose our shady friend might be up to scratching that itch, but you'll have to train her up to snuff first."

I frowned.

"That's thrice now that people have commented on that," I said.

Hakram had asked me directly, and though last night Aisha's question had been a great deal more circumspect it'd been of the same vein.

"Come off it," Archer said. "It's hardly the first time I've jested about the Mighty Shadow Lass' neckline plunging whenever she thinks you're looking. No need to be troubled over it, Cat: she's a looker, and invites the looking. It's hardly a sin to accept the invitation now and then."

On occasion it felt otherwise, though that voice was the same that reminded me there could be no just reason for allowing the Doom of Liesse to breathe free air. That a hundred thousand souls demanded, if not lasting torment, at least as painful an execution as I could carry out. I could not entirely articulate why it was worse that I found her attractive added to the rest, but it'd always had that taste against my tongue. That I'd grown to like, and in some ways even trust, Akua Sahelian was worse still. The fate I meant for her was just in the ways that mattered, I truly did believe, but I suspected many would disagree. And so the wheel spun, the endless loop of wondering if I being swayed or played or if the whispers were black and brutal vengeance indignant at being denied. I'd wondered these wonderings before, and no truth had come of the spinning. Which had me glancing thoughtfully at Archer, curious if that'd all been a skillful to steer the conversation away from a subject she was not yet ready to speak of. Given her enduring reluctance to simply state as much – for which I blamed Ranger, who'd beaten into her head while young that admitting anything of the sort was naked weakness – I wouldn't put it past her. Best let those sleeping dogs lie for now, then.

"You can't lecture me about sin, you wench. Who's the priestess here?" I lightly replied.

That devolved into petty bickering, not that there'd been any doubt, and we washed up and dressed in quick order after that. Hakram was sleeping, for once, but we still found a fire going outside my tent and a pair of legionaries awaiting by it with breakfast. We chatted over the porridge as cuts from last night's meal – horse, by the smell of it – were put over flame. The two were lieutenants, one from General Istrid's old legion and the other one of mine since Marchford though she'd first seen combat when Winter struck at my demesne. The lieutenant from the Sixth was an old Soninke and quite obviously a bastard from some noble line by the cultured, highborn manner of speaking. They were both respectful but neither gazed at me with the near-awe I got from so many young legionaries these days. It was both a great deal more comfortable and made conversation easier. Archer left early

after stealing half my horse meat, alleging she was going to have a look at Masego.

"Bring him, if he's awake," I said.

Pilgrim might not like it, but I was less than charitably inclined towards the man right now. As for the Sisters, unless they wanted to be present at every gate-crafting then the knowledge of how to craft it would have to be passed and I could think of none more fitting than Hierophant to hold it. Their last talk had, uh, not been all that civil but no grudge should be kept over that. They'd acted like carrion and so been treated as such, and it was doubtful Masego would keep a grudge on his side. I felt Sve Noc's attention, brought by the thought pertaining to them, and their silence was implicit agreement. They gained nothing from being at odds with Hierophant, though I doubted it was writ in their fates they'd be bosom friends anytime soon. I finished breaking my fast, thanked the officers and claimed a steaming cup of the herbal concoction Adjutant had arranged to be waiting for me before I began my trek back up the slope of the barrow. My fondness for the place had grown with the use I'd made of it, but Sve Noc and Akua were all adamant: the heart of the old Mavian prayers was where the boundaries were thinnest. It'd be significantly easier to make a passage there, though sentimentality aside I'd had more practical objections.

The raised stones would make it more difficult for large amounts of people to pass through, and this gate into the Twilight Ways was meant for my armies to use. The footpaths up the slope were difficult, which meant there were no roads for supply carts and siege engines to feasibly employ. Besides, unless we knocked down the stones it'd be effectively impossible to take them through. My advisory triumvirate of assorted crows and shade had uncertain when I'd asked them whether after the passage was made it'd unmake it to bring down the stones. Akua insisted that it was a 'boundary echo' that made the place appropriate, and so it wouldn't matter, but Andronike had disagreed. Something about an indent having a particular shape, and not existing without that shape. I was a decade of schooling in sorcery short to understand Akua's opinion and short an apotheosis to properly understand Andronike's. Still, even if the entire thing proved unworkable without the stones then at least we'd have a working pathway into Twilight for small groups and schematics for the second one to be made. The wards and workings around the tumulus had been removed, so there was nothing keeping the cold bite of the night wind away as I limped up the hill. I drew on Night to chase away the cold, though it was more an illusion cast on myself than true warmth.

I'd been able to feel her through the Night even before calling on it, so my face betrayed no surprise when after passing between the circle stones I found Akua Sahelian waiting atop the barrow. She'd eschewed dresses for a heavy yet elegant cloak line with

fox fur, its deep red tones perfectly married to the heavy velour robes she wore below. She did not turn as I limped forward, nor when I came to stand by her side and sipped at the herbal brew in my hands.

"Deep thoughts?" I said. "I've a copper or two to spare for them."

She did not immediately reply. Unlike with the drow, I could not taste of Akua's emotions through the Night. The Sisters had told me it was because she partook of their bounty only through me, and the nature of that tie was older than the touch of the Night itself. It'd been inherited through the Mantle of Woe and Winter's last gasps, which made things rather more complicated. Amusingly enough, in some ways my patron goddesses were as much in the dark as I: there was no precedent to any of this, and no understanding of sorcery or power was so comprehensive that this extraordinary unfolding would be perfectly grasped. A reminder, perhaps, of the unbridgeable gap between gods and Gods. The shade's eyes were not on me or even the dry riverbed of what had once been a place halfway to Arcadia: she was, instead, gazing at the now empty firepit that'd been dug yesterday.

"Do you remember Barika Unonti?" Akua suddenly asked.

Truth be told, for all their high birth and purported importance most of the then-Heiress' helpers had half-faded from my memory. Sneers and tittering and arrogance could only have so many flavours without my keeping them in my remembrance only as some Wasteland brat who'd insisted on crossing me until death ensued. Barika, though? Her I remembered. The way I'd broken her finger, the first time I attended court in the Tower, and been punished for that mistake. More for the way she'd died. Convinced she was untouchable, even after helping Akua open a Lesser Breach straight into Liesse. I'd put a crossbow bolt in her eye as she knelt, and she'd died before she could even be surprised. And that death I'd made into salt to rub into Akua's wounds that day, when I'd ordered her buried in consecrated grounds so that nothing of her could ever be brought back from the afterlife.

"I do," I said. "She taught me a valuable lesson."

"Looking back now," Akua said, "I suspect she might have been my friend. Or as close to that as our understanding of the sentiment allowed."

And still, I thought, the young Heiress had left her behind as an illusory decoy knowing I might very kill her for what was about to be unleashed. Part of me scorned her for that, though another wondered of the cold choices I'd made sending some of those I loved into battle and wondered if the difference there was not shallower than I'd wish. I did not answer. In part for my role in how Barika Unonti had died, no matter how worthy of that death

she had been, but also in a moment of wonder. I'd suspected, even back then, that of all her followers Unonti was likely the only one she had any degree of real fondness for beyond that which usefulness garnered. It'd been years since I killed the girl, much less thought of her, but her mistress remembered her still. It was a small thing, and fragile. And it tasted like triumph to my tongue, for the fate I had promised Akua Sahelian was beginning to take shape.

"I used to think you lacked the knack for cruelty, did you know?" the shade smiled. "Oh, you've a way with the striking: to evoke fear or loyalty with an act and turn of phrase. Yet I always found your ways to be... clear. Lacking that touch of malice my people drink along with mother's milk."

A moment passed, wind stirring both our long cloaks.

"But not anymore," I said.

"Last night," Akua pensively said, "might be the single most cruel act I was ever subjected to."

I did not protest. Because it was true. Because this was the sound of bile being bled out of tainted veins.

"I cannot even muster rancor, Catherine," she said. "For it was a misery entirely of my own making, and exquisitely brought besides."

"It doesn't have to be that way," I said.

She laughed, bleakly.

"Doesn't it?" Akua said. "For I was allowed, for just a moment, the taste of something I might have had. And oh it was a *heady* thing, my queen. A place by your hearth, partaking of the warmth and belonging that radiates from it. And though they love you and have long despised me, your favour alone was enough for me to be made welcome. For them to..."

She turned to me with burning golden eyes.

"Do you not understand that the laughs should have been empty?" she hissed. "That it should have been artifice, at show put on for purpose. I am a better liar than any of them, Catherine Foundling, than any of you. I know the face of truth. After years of enmity all it took for them to make room for me by the fire was a word from you. *I could have had all of this years ago.*"

"Yes," I agreed, "you could have."

"The closest I have to match to last night is a girl I sent to die," Akua bitterly said. "You've devised a poison so sweet I will crave the taste of it."

I looked at her, in the dark before the dawn, and knew that in that moment either I had been made of fool or I had won. Once more I chose silence, knowing that the slightest hint of what might be taken as gloat would send the entire delicate edifice tumbling down.

We were silent still, when the others arrived.

0x

All hail dread emperous irritant the second, formally known as akua.

5 minutes later....

All hail dread emperous victorious

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah, if Akua is Dread Empress now, it will be one of if not the longest reign. Cat wont let her off that easily.

Just imagine, Cat in her new capitol, the shadow palace of the empire of a new age. With her her family, the warmth of the fire. Sometimes there are conflicts, sometimes shes out putting put the other kind of fire, but even then the warmth goes with her.

And seeing it all from a tower high in the sky, impossibly far away yet still seen thanks to tethers distance can't weaken is the Dread Empress Magnificent. With a cold hard wind blowing that whispers "you wanted this" and laughs. Because Akua has been given everything she ever strived for, but only after she realized none of it is what she should have wanted. Shes the best damn Empress since Triumphant, and nobody on this throne has ever wanted it less. She turns back from the fire below and so far away, back at the door inside to a palace full of snakes waiting to strike and synchophants who will flatter her and worship her and declare their love and never even be half of Barika, let alone that distant hearth. And the wind blows again, and it is at her back, pushing her back inside, and she turns to face it, but with eyes closed, to let it dry the one tear she let escape that needs to be gone by the time she reaches that door.

Soma

I am partial to the ironic 'this is what you wished for' style.

Andrew Mitchell

Plus, the extra irony that comes from Akua knowing that she's missing all the good feelings normal people have and knowing that that is exactly what she stole from 100,000 Liesse citizens.

naturalnuke

I don't think she's even thinking about that yet, it's still all about her... but we'll get the the empathy later.

[Liliet](#)

Oh we're getting there.

Oh we're getting there...

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Killing with kindness...

NerfContessa

You read my mind. Exactly what I 3nvisioned.

Magnificent in more than one way indeed.

Aeon

Such a beautiful scene there. We've been building towards it for so long, and it was worth the wait. Akua finally UNDERSTANDING friendship and real positive relationships is one of the biggest payoffs we've had, and it is glorious.

M0och123

Maybe she will be the first to be able to bottle the power of friendship and use it as a power source...



[Liliet](#)

I don't think this is the first time she understands it.

But it's the first time it's really burned.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I certainly wasn't expecting an Akua chapter after her declaration about being Dread Empress last chapter, but it certainly does make some sense when you think about it.

We getting a Vivienne chapter next, I suppose?

Insanenoodlyguy

I never thought Cat could combine the two possible stories, but now I see it. A path where Cat does make Akua the next Dread Empress. In the end, even Viv agrees there was no greater punishment.

IDKWhoitis

In a way, she would get just what she wanted from the beginning. Only to find she doesn't want it anymore. To find that she truly wants friends, she wants to be around the Woe, she wants to craft the stuff of legends.

Only to find herself surrounded by enemies. Far away locked in a Tower, forbidden to touch upon the full powers once the Accords are in effect. It would be a personalized hell, and also allow Cat to stabilize Praes long term. A curse bestowed onto her foe, a crippled Role, and denial of the full Name.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Yeah, I'm seeing it too, especially how they talked about the "We're reflecting the Calamities" in the first half of the chapter. Whose the reflection of Malicia? Akua.

therealgridlock

Very true, black bones ranger but has a thing for Alaya,

Cat bones archer but has a thing for akua,

The problem is... Akua was the heir. Its never revealed who the heir is from the black ascension, the only way akua could reflect Alaya is if Alaya was once the heir, and also made friend and comrade, but I'm pretty sure the heir was just a dickhead who got off screened not even for dramatic purposes.

RoflCat

I'm still hoping her being the Headmistress of Cardinal.

Because even if she seeks this sort of cozy, familial feelings again, Cardinal will be a miniature center of politics that very few people would indulge in such closeness.

And if Cath also put her into something akin to Losara Sigil but for Cardinal as a whole, then Akua will have to remain distanced to all to be impartial when judging.

The most painful punishment after having given her the sweet sweet taste of friendship would be to deny her a second serving.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Yeah, but it's a win for everyone at Cardinal. You get a forever young hot milf as your headmistress.

mavant

Akua doesn't have kids, so I assume the M there is Mantle.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

SILF? Shade I'd like ...

mavant

I think my favorite would be CILF, for Cloak I'd Like..., if we're willing to change letters.

Insanenoodlyguy

No, Cat will be in Cardinal. She'd be able to have some amount of this if she's there. The poision she craves and all that.

Even if she's not Dread Empress, if this ends with her alive and being made to suffer she will be far, far way from the warmth of last night. Someplace where those people not be regularly, where there's no hope of having what she had last night on the regular.

[Liliet](#)

The thing is.

Even if she has that last night regularly now, she will always know *despite what* it is.

Insanenoodlyguy

"Doesn't it?" Akua said. "For I was allowed, for just a moment, the taste of something I might have had. And oh it was a heady thing, my queen. A place by your hearth, partaking of the warmth and belonging that radiates from it. And though they love you and have long despised me, your favour alone was enough for me to vote for PGTE on topwebfiction."

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

Andrew Mitchell

♥ your work. 😊

Cap'n Smurfy

Damn. I know she said she would, but I still never thought I'd see the day that Catherine defeated Akua Sahelian at social-fu. Like watching a housecat beat a fish in a swimming contest.

byzantine279

I'm not even sure if she did defeat her. Or if Akua defeated herself.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, Akua was never actually good at it. She had a lot of resources and a moderate skill bleedover from systems engineering, but real relationship building, real understanding of other people? There's a reason Catherine beat her at COURT INTRIGUE within a year of the initial loss.

ninegardens

Wait- when you say Cat beat her at COURT INTRIGUE are you referring to "I have hostages, and I'mma gonna tear some folks souls out unless people give me them votes?" Or to some other situation?

Cause I'm not really sure how well that counts as court intrigue...

[Liliet](#)

Consider the end result: Catherine had her Ruling Council, and Akua had... well, Akua had the Empress backing her with the expectation that she will fail spectacularly and leave the weapon behind.

Choosing your alliances wisely IS part of court intrigue, and Akua lost that competition pretty damn badly.

Shveiran

To play Devil's Advocate, I'm not sure Akua did lose. I think she was simply playing a different game.

And yes, it was a stupid game, but credit where credit is due... she set an objective, and accomplished it against awful odds.

It was not sustainable nor sensible, but it's wrong to judge her SKILL based on that when sustainability and sensibleness were not factors she considered relevant.

She chose the right allies, for what she wanted: resources and yesmen to use, to empower her own skill until she could reach her wild designs. She was aiming to make a bang, and she did. Her skill at court games, in my opinion, is not in question.

You could argue Malicia was playing her like a fiddle... but then again the battle was way too close a call with too high a pot to say the Empress' move was anything but a gamble.

Shveiran

Damn, I should have said "to play Diabolist's advocate". I'll never cease to wish for an edit function.

KageLupus

She didn't beat Akua at social-fu, she beat her at being a human being. Social maneuvering and manipulation is what you do in politics. Akua would know in a second if anything that happened the night before had been artificial or staged. But it wasn't, which is why it was so effective.

Cat showed Akua what life could be like with real friends, what the world looks like when you step away from the constant scheming that makes up Praesi court games. The simple pleasures of good friends and food and a fire, without having to worry about what anyone has planned or who is after what. After a lifetime of being on guard and not allowing herself to trust anyone, even the one woman she was closest to considering a friend, Akua never stood a chance.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

When you get down to it, unusually advanced social-fu is all that separates humanity* from the beasts of the field.

*And every other sentient race on Calernia, except drow and maybe goblins.

Sparsebeard

To be fair, it was Harkam who persuaded Cat to invite Akua...

[Liliet](#)

Indrani.

IDKWhoitis

Awww, Akua felt like she had friends. She probably even felt happy.

Truly, torturing her with kindness seems to be the most effective strategy.

This also makes me question if Viv ever did show up. I sincerely doubt that Viv would be able to emanate warmth towards Akua in any form other than red hot fury...

caoimhinh

Yeah, apparently whatever operation the Jacks were carrying out was in a critical moment last night, they were sent to get information on what Cordelia got from the lake, but to keep Vivienne on edge and alert for reports, they must have been doing something all night.

Cap'n Smurfy

Wait a fucking minute, did Cat just weaponize the power of friendship for the purposes of evil?! She did, didn't she! She just used friendship to torture her sworn enemy. That has to be the most Evil thing she has ever done.

Just a potato

And thus Cat became a mage when no one expected it. Because we all know that friendship is magic.

[Mental Mouse](#)

To steal a line from the game Terraria: "That's ridiculous. You can't turn people into frogs with friendship." 😊

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

"Friendship Is Majick, but it won't help you turn your enemies into frogs."
Compromise.

erebus42

Yeah, Cat might usually going in for the more pragmatic approach but when she wants to be cruel she definitely can be.

BlackPhoenix7777

The power of friendship is still feeling a little confused about what the hell is going on ever since Akua broke it, which made it easier, but I agree, it's an impressive feat nonetheless.

[Liliet](#)

Akua quite literally started it, which makes it worse/better~

Andrew Mitchell

> Akua quite literally started it
Remind me please? I'm drawing a blank here.

medailyfun

She has ripped Cat's heart in Everdark, calling in magic of friendship

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks.

[Liliet](#)

FEAR ME, DROW, FOR I WIELD THE POWER OF FRIENDSHIP

Truly, the joke is on her~

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks.

[MurkyTruths](#)

Wow... Beautifully done. Brilliant chapter thank you!

Aston Whiteman

Filler with sex and friend ship poison.

If Cat is actually bi when was the last time she had sex with a male...

Zeze?

[Javvies](#)

As far as we know, before Indrani in the Everdark, Cat hadn't been with anyone since her breakup with Killian. Before Killian, Cat was too busy as the Squire.

Before she was the Squire, she's stated previously that she'd had a brief relationship with a fisherboy (I think) in Laure.

As for how long that's actually been ... the timeline is hard to work out.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I think it's been 6 to 8 years since then.

edrey

who want to bet that cat would be the first of Zeze, then make side comments when archer and masego finally get together? i really can see it happening

Aston

Agreed!

Inay

No, Masego is asexual, not a "Virgin because nerd" ; he's not interested in this.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah I mean like... MULTIPLE PEOPLE have been explicitly said to have tried to seduce him with 0 result? INCLUDING Indrani?

[Liliet](#)

What?

Masego.
Is.
Asexual.
And.
Sex.
Averse.

Vortex

Will this stop us fans from building a ship?

From one naval carpenter to another, I say nay!

[Liliet](#)

There is already a ship. It is good and poly and ot3 and in fact already includes him and Catherine both.

Him and Cat are cousins. The adopted family ship is MUCH STRONGER

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

"I get my kicks above the waistline, sunshine!"
Masego is Cerebrally inclined.

[sengachi](#)

I mean it should. It really should.

Dolgruff Rummins

Bisexuality isn't a scale that needs to be balanced or it goes away. You could date only women your entire life and still be bisexual. It is simply a description of your sexual

preferences. Just because Cat hasn't had a man around that she's interested in, doesn't mean that she isn't bisexual.

[sengachi](#)

People who are straight are still straight even if it's been a while since they've had sex. Even if they've never had sex.

Similarly, bisexuality is not defined by how recently someone has had sex with different-gendered partners. Catherine could have **never** had sex with a man and still be bisexual. If I recall correctly, the last time she had sex with a man was before meeting Black, with a boyfriend who lasted a few months, but that's frankly irrelevant. She's bi and that would be true even if she'd married Killian and never had sex with anyone else ever again.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

[Liliet](#)

Masego is asexual.

And there was this one fisherman's son in Laure..

Bi people don't subordinate their relationships to statistics

[Mental Mouse](#)

"Bisexual" doesn't mean someone needs both men and women, only that they can go either way. And while it's often been a figleaf for "really prefers own sex but can function with the other", there's also the point that relationships with one's own sex can skip much of the toxicity of male dominance, not to mention the complications of reproduction.

On the gripping hand, Cat's not living in one of in our world's cultures, she grew up in a world where a succession of Named women have Taken No Shit at the length of a sword or worse.

[Liliet](#)

> there's also the point that relationships with one's own sex can skip much of the toxicity of male dominance, not to mention the complications of reproduction

(my plan irl)

[Fayhem](#)

> On the gripping hand

Ayyyyy references!

> Cat's not living in one of in our world's cultures, she grew up in a world where a succession of Named women have Taken No Shit at the length of a sword or worse.

Yeah, if I even try to imagine someone trying to impose gender discrimination on the likes of Saint or worse Ranger my mind just cringes. I mean at that point it's not even a social shift, it's just natural selection weeding out everyone who's that stupid from living long enough to reproduce.

Javvies

Past Dread Empresses weren't known for being particularly gentle (or subtle) about gender equity, either.

Plus, there's no indication of any kind of gender disparity when it comes to mages and their potential. That alone would be a huge leveler.

And I suppose we might actually need to give Bard some credit here – as far as we know, Bard/Intercessor only incarnates as women, so it was probably in her interests to promote gender equality.

burguulkodar

ha, I got that reference too!

Mental Mouse

You don't have to imagine, just reread Cat's reaction to Pilgrim trying to patronize her. And that's somebody she not only likes, but hopes will be useful to her long-term plans.

Fayhem

I mean, Cat responded with a verbal smackdown (and I think the more salient issue – assuming you're talking about the exchange just past – was less the patronizing and more that he was shrugging at a murder attempt, from Cat's perspective). I'm pretty sure Ranger's response to anything similar would involve less talking and more arterial spraying.

Mental Mouse

Not just a verbal smackdown – she also *credibly* threatened the survival of his nation and the other nation he'd been helping. Not to mention making it clear that she can swat him like a bug, and the only reason he's alive now is because she willed it so. Even the

stories are on her side – turning on his benefactor is not something he can spin.

Shveiran

Not to be that guy, but I'd argue against the use of the word "threatened".

"I would remind you that not helping you solving what is mainly your problem is a thing I can do" is not quite the same as "unless you fall in line, I'm gonna wipe away the continent".

The fact that the threat comes from outside, and is not of Cat's making (though it was a close call" makes a relevant difference.

[Mental Mouse](#)

PS:

> Ayyyy references!

Get used to it, I like three-valued logic. 😊

mavant

10 points for the Moties reference.

mavant

That's not how that works.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Not to be rude, but bi people are still bi even if they happen to have a stronger preference for one gender than another, and enough bi people IRL are challenged by people acting in bad faith to "prove" their orientations that it kind of rankles to see it happen here despite Cat being fictional and the nature of "show don't tell" storytelling.

[Liliet](#)

This.

We've been shown Cat having an interest in guys. We know she's bi. NOTHING ELSE IS NEEDED THE TRESHOLD IS PASSED

Gunslinger

Guess the corpses Akua made along the way were not the real friends after all.

[Javvies](#)

Hmm. So it seems Cat's (current) plan for Akua might not involve literal killing, but a more metaphorical killing and reshaping her into something/someone new.
I'm not sure Vivienne will approve of that.

The Heirarch will know the secret of the Twilight Ways. I don't think anybody expected that he wouldn't. At least, none of us.
And Tariq ought to be expecting it.

Misterspokes

Her goal is the type of true redemption that the Pilgrim was attempting for her, the type that leaves you either absolved and truly neutered or dead.

byzantine279

Typically, both.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

I kind of want her to have a talk with Pilgrim about it.

Andrew Mitchell

> I kind of want her to have a talk with Pilgrim about it.

Now that you mention it, that's something I want to see too.



edrey

reading again her point of view since book 1, she didnt lie. but did she truly like that kind of love enough to put aside her "holy treason" and the ambitious that is the heart of praes? i would say that when she truly change, the novel would be near it's end

[Liliet](#)

She's already commented on how 'iron sharpens iron' is weak to Ivah in Ye Mighty, entirely out of Cat's earshot. Akua doesn't cling to her old philosophy anymore.

edrey

she said that she is more than what is made for to the tyrant, but not that she had throw it away, steel come from iron should be her new ideology, Praes is all about looking forward and surpassing the past, so tell me what is more important, the action or the conviction

[frolamizFrolamiz](#)

Great development for Akua.

And it just occurred to me that they will go soon to Salia and probably see Cordelia's cousin.

So I'm wondering, what will happen when she see the sisters? She's totally specialized in divination thought birds, so I think it's going to be something big.

Maybe something similar to when the pilgrim tried to read them, but worse and without a choir to protect her? Some kind of enlightenment? After all, if she can predict the future with normal birds, what could she do with godly birds? Or maybe some form of corruption? Anyway, it's probably going to be fun to watch and maybe a diplomatic incident...

edrey

Yeah, i was thinking the same, maybe a direct-intervention oracle from the heaven.

on the side note, the Stigians have crows as gods, i see potential there

sutortyrannus

Stygians have cranes though, not crows.

edrey

Nothing a little of deicide and black paint cant change.

M0och123

Let's please not feed Cat's growing addiction to killing gods anymore than neccesary...

mavant

Aye, they have to be alive for Masego to vivisect.

byzantine279

The worst part for Akua is probably knowing that everything that happened was entirely her fault. That she could have had this place from the start – all she needed to do was be an ally to Cat. ...And she knows that would never have happened. And that makes it so much worse.

medailyfun

it was not just her fault: she had been made into the person she was, to make other decisions meant to be entirely different person from the start. It's a miracle she managed to preserve some good things in her, like relations with her father.

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

Ah cmon this is just cheap. Ooooo power of frieeendshiip. Ooooo the things she couuuld haaaaave if she wasnt sooo eeeeviiiiil. This is the crazy lass who killed hundreds of thousands you arent turning her with the power of friendship -.-

Andrew Mitchell

I disagree, I really appreciate the journey I'm on with Akua's arc and I suspect most of the other commenters here do as well.

This isn't the end of a 30 minute pony cartoon. It's one small step on an extraordinarily well-crafted character arc with many genuine feels along the way.

Andrew Mitchell

Also, check out ICSM's comment on this:
<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/08/16/chapter-70-dawning/comment-page-1/#comment-51994>

[Liliet](#)

Why do you think so?

nipi

Hmmm... Im going to have to recheck but didnt Cat mention that she can no longer sleep during the night after becoming the High Priestess of Night? Or is my memory playing tricks on me?

konstantinvoncarstein

As she is more powerful at night, she logically prefer to act during this time, but if nothing urgent calls for her attention she will gladly sleep.

Faiir

I just realised that Masego is like an anti-priest.

Rather than being granted the power from the gods he believes in, he takes the power from the gods that don't deserve it (and none really deserves!).

Andrew Mitchell

That's very fitting. He could get known as 'the Deicide' just like the Saint was known as 'the Regicide'.

[Liliet](#)

Masego deserves this power more than they do, he really does!

caoimhinh

Indeed. Though Masego doesn't really take power from gods, so much as comprehends how it works and thus gains the ability to replicate that power.

Masego's Name of Hierophant enables him to "*vivisect miracles*" to understand how they work, that knowledge lets him copy that through his sorcery.

The closest equivalent I know for Masego's abilities are the Cultivator Techniques in Xianxia novels. As in, they are supernatural abilities born from understanding a phenomenon or aspect of the universe.

Masego witnessed the Summer Sun when the Princess of High Noon used it, and gained the ability to wield a similar flame (Sunrise Final), same goes for every supernatural entity they have faced, each encounter makes Masego stronger, as he gains more insight on the phenomena of the world.

It's important to mention that he can apparently still wield that knowledge and power, even in his current magicless state, as shown during his recent encounter with Sve Noc. Similar to how a Cultivator would be able to perform extraordinary feats related to their Dao even if exhausted of Qi, albeit with a cost, as their power comes from comprehension and that insight can't be taken from them without the enemy paying a huge price.

The most relevant fact for the current Masego, I think, is this:

There is nothing he has **witnessed** that can be taken from him. And that paves the way for Hierophant to move forward in his current state, probably recover his magic and grow even stronger.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Recover his magic? How about him understanding that magic is a shackle for mortals to understand the world through. Look at gods, do they cast magic? Or are they just *being*.

Axel Rafael

OMG 😨 That would just be the most epic level up ever!!

[Fayhem](#)

Yeah, my understanding is that Hierophant's miracle-repurposing stuff is aspect-based rather than sorcery-based per se, and has thus survived his loss of sorcery since his Name is still intact even after his loss of magic (which an explicitly sorcery-based Name like Warlock quite likely wouldn't have survived, I'd think).

burguulkodar

The power of the Atheist, ha! jk, jk.

caoimhinh

"Slay the god within your heart before you can kill the god in front of you"

[sengachi](#)

Okay, this chapter hit incredibly hard on a personal level. Maybe as hard as anything I've ever read. Why is going to take some explaining but I would like to do so nonetheless.

I am a sociopath. That means that I do not feel empathy (automatic mirroring of other's emotions) or guilt. It does **not** mean that I am devoid of the impetus to socialize or of basic human emotions. I am a human with a single piece missing, not a cold robot or an inhuman monster. However my lack of empathy makes basic human decency a choice rather than a impetus, makes social skills something learned by rote rather than intuitively mirrored, and my lack of guilt opens up certain options for selfish cruelty that most people simply aren't capable of. I'm not innately a monster ... but it would be very easy for me to chose to be one, and many of the drivers most people have which direct them towards kindness are absent in me. To harm other is effortless for me, to do right by others is a laborious chore.

However I did make the conscious choice to do right by others and act selflessly, originally for rather abstract reasons. (Long story short: My OCD wouldn't permit me to have a non-isotropic moral framework.) It took me quite a while after that to even reach the utilitarian understanding of the benefits of cooperation, kindness, and general human decency that Akua-In-The-Cloak had. And I was **certainly** not anywhere as good as she was at making use of those benefits.

But eventually there came a point where I had gained a sufficient understanding of others' emotions, learned enough sympathetic skills, and cultivated through actions others' trust in my compassion to the point that I could share genuine emotional vulnerability and intimacy with loved ones. Where I could let my emotional walls down completely with them, and have them do so in return/ Where I could be secure in the knowledge that they would not harm me through malice, disregard, or mistake, that I would not do the same to them, that we would care for one another's vulnerabilities and hurts, and warm one another with honest affection for each other's strengths and accomplishments. I remember the first moment where I consciously realized this had happened, that someone had let me in so deeply and that I had no walls against them. That my odd abstract reasons for acting selflessly I'd originally thought of apathetically at best had

led to such genuine love and joy in my life. Despite my absent empathy and guilt, I'd found *love*.

Just remembering it makes me tear up.

And in this chapter Akua had just such a moment. She saw what love could be like. She experienced genuine camaraderie.

But it's not the moment I had. I had a crystallized moment where I got to see all the love my decision to be selfless had brought me and all the love that was yet to come. Akua got to see the love she could have had. She had it wielded against her like a scalpel, by a woman whose likely goal is to see Akua learn the value of life and love until she walks willingly to her own judgement for unforgivable crimes.

Even before I had decided if I wanted to revel fully in the selfish cruelty my sociopathy would enable or to do the 'right' thing and be kind to others, I made the decision to absolutely not cross any lines which could not be uncrossed, lest I finally make my decision and realize the path I wanted was now closed to me.

But seeing Akua in this chapter ... She already crossed those lines. She left them far behind her. And now she *knows*. She *knows* how wonderful the love she could have had is. She *knows*.

And she can't have it.

I don't think this is something most people will ever experience. The moment, the singular moment, of seeing past the calculus of kindness and understanding for the first time how wonderful love truly is. It's certainly not ever something I've seen described in literature before. But here it is, this thing I value more than anything, being experienced by a character for the the first time.

And she can't have it.

Emotionally ravaged, I think, is the best way to describe how I am feeling right now.

Thank you Erraticerrata, for writing this. It resonated with a very deep chord in me. Now I'm going to cry myself to sleep.

Andrew Mitchell

Thank you sengachi for openly sharing your experience – both the details of your journey and your current “emotionally ravaged” state. You’ve given me yet more evidence that our community enhances my appreciation of EE’s work ten-fold; and a personal reminder of the value of vulnerability. ♥

Liliet

Non-neurotypical guide-shaken high five.

(Although the moments that really had me crying had actually more to do with discussions of sexual and romantic attraction and how it is not everything there is...)

God, this book is so good.

SpeckofStardust

*See's people going on about akua become dread empress
Its not going to happen, it is not the plan. Cats plan is for black to become emperor. She has literally said it within the last 24 in universe hours.

mordered

I agree, but I believe Black is going to die. If Cat is going to survive until the end of the series I hope she will climb the tower, but Akua definitely won't. She might become a teacher or head mistress of the school Cat is planning to built.

ActionKermi

I still think that the song is older than Praes and all the emperor's who built and climbed the Tower did so in ignorance of its true meaning. If Nessie can screw up Procer to protect his kingdom then the Bard can screw up Praes to keep any claimants from succeeding to her Name.

Agent J

Wait, you think *Bard* is the girl who climbed the tower?
Please, explain.

caoimhinh

Well, the song *does* come from Nowhere, as stated by Amadeus.

Guess who is the only character who is actively in Nowhere?

It starts with "I" and ends in "ntercessor".

Which reminded me of Amadeus early assessments of the Bard, back in Book 2, I went back to check and found this very interesting paragraph:

ninegardens

Okay, the idea that Bard is the Girl who climbed the tower seems completely nutso... and I love it.

Hell, even if the song isn't ABOUT her, the idea that the song was sung BY her is so sneaky, so neferious... the idea that something so Praes is actually the work of Above (or at least their agent) is just... delightful

Especially since even if the song never seemed *good* (for the listener), it at least seemed to be on their side.

burguulkodar

That is... a very delicious idea. I shall dream of it.

Insanenoodlyguy

Oh I agree that at the moment, that's not the plan at this moment. But remember, STORY. This is the cutaway moment in a more humorous work.

"I am not making Akua empress. I said I'm not making Akua empress! Seriously, how many people do I need to explain this to, I'm not making Akua empress now or ever! Not happening!"

Spongebob Narrator: Some Time Later....

"I can't believe I'm making Akua empress."

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, I think EE's above putting that into a Gilligan cut. And anyway, undead are specifically banned from the throne, "ever since the last time that happened".

Insanenoodlyguy

it wouldn't actually be one, I'm just saying, when you say you won't do something this much, the end result of a gilligan cut becomes more likely. to the point where Akua as empress is no longer unthinkable, on a narrative level.

[Erik V. Smykal](#)

beautiful work.
excellent writing.
thank you!

[Sugar Roll](#)

I don't buy it. I believe Aisha's warning about Sahelians a couple of chapters ago. Akua may have made herself believe she wants close friends but that's not an obstacle for her inevitable betrayal.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

On the other hand, I no longer believe that she's a Sahelian anymore. What's a blood bond to someone without a body?

Mental Mouse

More to the point, there's the question of how she'll react to "yeah, now Cat can let me into the circles of love and friendship... but I have no competency here, and without her I'm starting from far less than zero."

Liliet

Sahelian is just a last name.

It's the family she was brought up in and the culture she was brought up in, but she's known its toxicity for a long longer than she's seen a way out of it.

She *wants* out.

Sugar Roll

Oh that's what she wants Cat to believe. It's part of her long con. As long as Cat remains ready for her, she can make use of her skills and dispose of her for good when Akua reveals her true colors. I'd love Akua to remain loyal but I doubt it given who we are dealing with.

Liliet

Was her inner monologue at Chiaroscuro also for Cat's benefit?

Sugar Roll

Oh yes, very much so. As far as I'm concerned, she's biding her time. Slowly building trust by being charming and making herself useful. And when the time is right, she'll strike—as a Sahelian would.

Sugar Roll

The way I see it, in the future, she will perform a great act that will save lots of lives numbering more than she killed in Liesse. This will even the scales to her favor. After that feat is where I'll be looking out for her betrayal. She may not take the first opportunity that presents itself but she will eventually.

Liliet

Yeah, I'm not seeing it.

To betray Cat, she'd have to give up on the one person who isn't her father who ever looked at her beginnings with sympathy, who ever got horrified for her, the one person she's accidentally opened herself up to and didn't find a knife waiting.

What does she have to gain that'd outbalance what she'd be losing?

[Sugar Roll](#)

Don't let the facade fool you. Beneath that manufactured persona is where the Doom of Liesse resides. Praesi are known for their treachery and Sahelians are prime example of that. Akua is the model Praesi highborn and she will show everyone why.

It's not a question of whether she will betray Cat or not, it's when. And when that happens, will she be pulling a fast one like Larat or will Cat be ready for her? That's what I'm looking forward to finding out.

[Liliet](#)

You keep telling yourself that, and I'll keep my position. Time will tell ♥

[Sugar Roll](#)

Yes, please hold on to your views. I'd love to be proven wrong. The optimist in me would like to see that Akua is being genuine. The realist in me speaks louder though. And as you said, time will tell.

[Liliet](#)

(we have some very different ideas on how reality works. Time will show which one of us Erratic agrees with)

laguz24

No, personally I think that she is to become the chancellor and rule over Praes. Black does not know how to deal with the high lords like Auka does and where black can build and do. Auka has to deal with the snake pit that is the court, all crafted smiles, and sharp knives with not a single speck of warmth or love.

oliverwashere

The troubles with getting a redemption arc when your tormentors know what you're doing and won't let it pass on your terms.

Mental Mouse

Some of the Praesi were complaining that Black was acting like an Emperor while Malicia acted like a Chancellor.

caoimhinh

In fact, that was Akua herself, during the speech she gave Fasili before the Fae attacked Liesse.

Agent J

My take is that there'll be no High Lords to deal with. Either Black exterminates them like he always wanted to, or Cat exterminates them as her father should have.

I think their absolute last chance for survival will be when Cat comes marching back East. They will throw all their weight behind Malicia as they did with Akua before, but this time, there'll be no one else left to save them of Catherine's wrath.

Whether Black rules or Cat does, there will be no need for a Chancellor. It was a Name suppressed under Malicia's reign and will die in her successor's.

Liliet

The only scenario I see going otherwise, is one where Alaya is his Chancellor, and some of the noble bloodlines still need handling (those that bowed their heads quickly enough and low enough that even Amadeus did not see a justification for going after them).

But without Alaya? He will not need a justification.

ICSM

This was beautiful.

You see, I'm an old cynic. Not that I'm a old person, but that for the relatively few years I have, I have been a cynic for most of them. All that power of friendship shlock we commonly see in media amounts for me as no more than a well worn trope. Worn enough that I can't even muster disdain for it. I know full well that hysterical strenght is a thing in real life, but the fact that it is pretty much the only way friendship is relevant in media is tiresome.

But this? The use of the basic human craving for companionship as a scalpel to expunge the rotten upbringing out of a person so she can grow healthy? This is something I have never seen. And it is beautiful.

edrey

she said that she is more than what is made for to the tyrant, but not that she had throw it away, steel come from iron should be her new ideology, Praes is all about looking forward and surpassing the past, so tell me what is more important, the action or the conviction

Mental Mouse

Random thought: As Cat speaks of "Zeze": "I'd seen him dig into fresh apple tarts like a starving orc would a pig"... It occurs to me that in *our* world, the pig would be at the other end of that simile.

Liliet

Yep ♥ ♥ ♥

Tab

" Mores aside, he was not above those himself: me might not have any interest in bedplay, but I'd seen him dig into fresh apple tarts like a starving orc would a pig. "

me might not -> he might not

" I looked at her, in the dark before the dawn, and knew that in that moment either I had been made of fool or I had won."

made of fool -> made a fool ?

Tab

*made a fool of

Sir_Immith

I said many chapters ago that Akua is my favorite character and that shit holds up! Such a compelling arc.

Chapter 71: Verge

"I am told awe is made half of reverence and half of fear. Let us find out, knights of the Callow, if terror alone will be enough to teach it to the likes of you."

– Dread Emperor Nihilis I, the Tanner

The last of them arrived half an hour before dawn's start.

Since I'd been granted my first command in the Legions I'd gotten used to the way that large-scale ritual magic tended to require more people than you'd think, at least when it needed to be done quick and dirty – as was usually the way, when on campaign. It was often a question of needing to pool power so no one died or burned out feeding the ritual though I'd lucked out more than I'd realized when Masego, in those days still the Apprentice, had joined the Fifteenth. There was a reason that Black had preferred massed spells to the old standard of ritual cadres when he'd rebuilt the Legions of Terror from the ground up after the Praesi civil war: it standardized the arsenal of a legion's casters. It'd become increasingly clear over the years that the way it was mostly Wasteland highborn that used cadres of ritual mages along with their personal armies wasn't a coincidence. The heart of the matter was that for a circle of sorcerers to be able to use a ritual together without significant preparations it required for them to be highly skilled, familiar with each other and learned in that particular ritual. That meant keeping mage cadres together, for the Legions, which Black would very much try to avoid since by simple odds it'd mean a lot of Soninke and Taghreb officers of noble birth forming cliques with disproportionated influence inside a legion.

One set of rules for the aristocrats and another one for the soldiers was something my teacher had spent decades trying to dismantle, he wouldn't tacitly endorse its resurrection in the very institution he'd spent so many years shaping. The Fifteenth, and later the Army of Callow, had avoided much of these issues by simple virtue of having Masego along. I'd not understood the importance of the role he played in large-scale battlefield sorceries until our last campaigns, where his absence had effectively made disappear half our ritual arsenal into thin air and robbed me of the High Arcana savant I'd turn towards for answers whenever some strange phenomenon appeared. Oh, Zeze had taught my mages some rough and relatively simple rituals to use on battlefields: his Lightning Strikes and the Spears of Fire remained a staple of the Army of Callow, who unlike the Legions simply didn't *have* enough mages to be able to afford massed spells as a tactic. But even with those, without his presence there was significant drop in range, power and rate of fire. It wasn't just that he'd used to have rather impressive reserves, but rather that having Masego standing among a ritual was like having someone to conduct a choir. He made up for the imprecisions of others, guided through the stumbles and kept precise the manipulations in the way that someone who wasn't him just... couldn't.

Akua had once compared it to having one of the finest swordsmen on the continent running recruits through formation drills, and she wasn't entirely wrong. Still, with the Dead King's cut those days had seemingly come at an end and the crowd that'd gathered was not a throng of half-awed young mages taking Masego's every

word for sorcerous gospel. With the mere arrival of Hierophant and Archer, our company had grown to the sort of dawn tales were made of. Two black-winged goddesses, silently looming atop raised stones in the shape of great and terrible crows. The Doom of Liesse, veiled and silent but not grown much the lesser from her hour of folly. Hierophant, stripped of sorcery but still vivisector of miracles and the kind of man whose insights even gods flinched from. Archer and myself were perhaps lesser figures, for what mattered. All that was required from me in this thinning darkness was a steady hand and the wielding of Night, while she was here as the hand propping up Masego as well as one who had more than once tread the demimonde between Creation and the Twilight Ways without needing any guidance. Should the Pilgrim demur from coming, it would be Archer whose intuitions would be relied on when the burn was made. Yet Tariq did come, in the end, though not alone: bleary-looking and huddling inside a thick cloak of fur, the Rogue Sorcerer was with him. And with those last two there were none left to await, so I drew first blood against the silence.

"Morning," I said. "Or close enough."

Only Masego, I noted, was kind-hearted enough to reply with a full return of the courtesy. Roland shivered inside his cloak, and the Peregrine merely nodded. His face bore the manner of calmness that one wore around a foe, I thought, and though I'd known provoking a return to that was necessary to tie the Intercessor's hands I still regretted it. It would have been pleasant, to be on decent terms with the unspoken doyen of Above's champions.

"Dawn's just around the corner and it'll make everything more difficult when it comes, so I'll spare us all the small talk," I said. "Most of my advisors in matters eldritch say this is where making a stable gate into Twilight will be most straightforward."

"You'll need an anchor for the other side," the Sorcerer said.

"If the aspiration was a clean cut followed by material shoring up, perhaps," Masego dismissed. "Night is not so precise, from what I've observed, and none of the appropriate ritual substances have been gathered here."

I glanced at Roland, who unlike most people subjected to Zeze's mild puzzlement at their 'ignorance' did not seem to have taken offence in the slightest. If anything, he rather looked like he wanted to have ink and parchment on hand. That ought to take care of itself without my intervention, then. Good. The Rogue Sorcerer was by a significant margin the friendliest hero I'd encountered, and I had no intention of letting academic rivalry get in the way of that.

"The Hierophant is right," I said. "What I'll need, though, is... a sense of where to aim for. Which I don't have, unlike some of you. Archer might be able to help, but the person atop this barrow with the deepest tie to Twilight should need no introduction."

Namely the man who had once borne the Twilight Crown, for however short a span. Bearing a mantle like that left marks, I'd know that better than most. It was no coincidence that I'd been able to feel this very place's affinity with Arcadia long after having divested myself of the last of Winter within me. The Grey Pilgrim eyed me warily, though he did not outright decline. As expected of the man, he could already tell where this was headed and was less than enthused.

"Oh," Roland said, shivering from the cold. "Resonance, to shape the depth at which the damage will be inflicted. Yes, that would work. A brute force solution, though."

Archer could serve that purpose as well, but her ties were nowhere as deep. She'd tread the grounds of Twilight for longer than any of us, journeyed through its nook and crannies and even stood open-eyed while the transition from stolen shard of Arcadia to a realm took place. None of these were small things. But the Grey Pilgrim had given the last crown and borne the burden of giving the Twilight Ways their face and shape. The difference was extensive and would likely make a difference in my being knocked out for a day or a week. Figuratively speaking, one hoped, though my advisory triumvirate had not been willing to commit to it.

"Fine tools come from refinement over years and decades," Akua said. "This is work without precedent, Sorcerer."

The last word she spoke with the faintest hint of dubiousness. Had I been worried about the wrong Soninke, then? Shit. She was usually better about this stuff than Zeze, but then this one was a hero as well as a practitioner.

"He is correct," Masego noted. "This is not unlike making a gate by melting stone and shaping it into a threshold."

"And we've so many people observing to establish if there's a better way to do it, next time we must," I said, cutting in before pride could get anything started.

Mages, huh. And I thought it was the brawlers like Indrani and myself that had troubles with surfeit of swaggering.

"And how is this resonance to be acquired, Black Queen?" the Grey Pilgrim asked.

I suppressed a grimace.

"A close look at the traces Twilight left on you," I said.

"Soul-gazing," Tariq flatly said.

Little thick, coming from a man I was pretty sure had an aspect essentially dedicated to that and constantly used it on everyone, but I'd cut him so slack considering who'd be doing that gazing. Namely the Sisters, who for all my occasional appreciation for them were not the kindest or best-inclined of entities on Creation.

"An intermediary will be provided, should you so wish," I said, inclining my head towards Akua.

Wouldn't be as precise a reading, as for all her talents the shade did not benefit from the indescribable senses and perceptions that sprang from apotheosis, but she was talented. What she did pass along to me would be more than enough, and as she was not sworn to serve the Sisters the scrutiny might be more acceptable. Maybe. I wasn't sure where Mercy would fall on that, much less Tariq himself.

"And who would you be?" the Pilgrim openly asked, eyeing Akua cautiously. "We have met before, that much is undeniable. And yet I now see you standing as a bound spirit before me."

They'd met? I frowned, raking my memories and finding no instance. Even during the Princes' Graveyard there should have been no acquaintance. The Battle of the Camps, I realized. Akua had run around wearing my body while I'd been stranded in an endless Winter nightmare and she'd even fought an assembled band of heroes. The Pilgrim would have had a look at her then, and though she had body of her own now I supposed the substance of what she was had not changed too much.

"I am one in the service of the Black Queen of Callow," Akua smilingly said. "Naught else is of import here."

"You chose this appearance," Tariq frowned. "But are not bound to it. What are you, spirit? I have never seen the likes of you, not even in the olden-most barrows of the Brocelian."

"Dawn's coming, Peregrine," I flatly said. "She's bound to me and can wield Night without being in the service of Sve Noc. There will be no more offhand a manner to see this done, if you'll accede to it at all."

"Presumably the Ophanim would slay all here, if attempt was made to wound your soul," Roland pointed out in an aside.

"That is a presumption, yes," Masego calmly agreed.

Archer smothered a smile, and to be honest so did I. It was hardly the time, but the earnestness he'd spoken what would be a boast in another man's mouth made it amusingly endearing. The Pilgrim's eyes were closed, no doubt conferring with the Ophanim, and glimmered still with Light when they finally opened anew.

"So be it," the Grey Pilgrim said. "Trespass not, spirit, lest you find more than you bargained for."

"Worry not, Peregrine," Akua amicably said. "I've always held angels in high esteem."

It was an effort not to choke. I supposed she technically wasn't lying, considering she'd wanted to use one of the Hashmallim as fuel for her doomsday fortress. After all the posturing I'd expected some degree of ceremony, but what unfolded instead was the shade striding forward and silently asking for permission before laying her hand on the Pilgrim's shoulder. He acceded with a nod, and closed his eyes once more as hers remained wide open. After a long moment she let out a long breath and jerkily nodded towards me. I hobbled forward and raised my hand, which she caught by the wrist: the sliver of Night she'd called on seeped into my own. I'd expected this process to be far beyond my ability to fathom, but to my surprise found it rather familiar. It was not unlike the sensation of opening a fairy gate, the sense of the needle going through the fabric and being... fated, for a lack of better term, to leave the cloth again in another place. What Akua had sensed from the Pilgrim and passed to me was not so sharp and narrow, but it was kin to that. A way to put it, I thought, would be that fairy gates under Winter had been the act of needling while what the shade had shared was having touched the cloth. I already knew from experience that trying to grasp the knowledge perfectly would result mostly into a searing headache, so I let it linger half-known and instead breathed out.

"For I have seen crowns broken and forged anew, snatched a star from the starlit sky and traded a season for half the world," I whispered in Crepuscular. "Now that dawn crawls forward unbid, o Sve Noc, grant me might to wield and the conceit to wield it fearlessly. Where there is rampart let my hand make a road, and Creation deny not my will."

The crows cawed, a resounding cry like the crack of a whip against the night sky, and Night flooded my veins thick and pure. I almost lost my foot but at my side Akua held me up by my elbow, having left Tariq to stand alone, and I gasped as I forced my staff of yew to rise.

"*Deny not my will,*" I hissed once more.

Night struck out, like a wave and a strike of thunder, like a flood raging down a riverbed long gone dry. And where it found resistance, I clenched my fingers against the long haft of few

and *burned* Creation. Scarred it, so that the blackened and bleeding scabs would stand at the threshold and mark the path to be taken. It was like riding a tide, every moment a struggle, and I swallowed a scream as I felt my strength ebbing. I would not break, not before the work was done. Not even when the coolness of Night lazed like smoke in my veins, tainting my every sense, and in the far distance I felt the distant glare of light marching like a harsh vanguard.

"Catherine," Akua whispered against my ear. "Catherine, you have to stop."

Was she holding me? When had she? Some pried off the hand that'd gone around my waist and it was put around a shoulder at least. Someone taller than I. I grit my teeth, for all the distractions had loosened my grip on the Night – the work had slowed, suffered. Long and delicate fingers joined mine on the staff, and like a miracle the veil on my eyes lifted. Ironclad will became intertwined with my own and I shared a feral, savage grin with Hierophant without either of us ever looking away from the howling darkness before us.

"You can still wield," I whispered.

Ashkaran, I dimly realized.

"A god rode my mind, Catherine, for many months," Hierophant whispered back. "I have *learned things*."

Power billowed out, and I was no longer a fool of a girl clinging to a tiger: we were Woe, standing side by side, and though we were battered things no creature in this world or any other had ever earned *submission* of us. We painted in Night with bold strokes, feeling those around us flee backwards for the storm in the making. Komena laughed in the back of my mind, and it was eagerly that she opened the floodgates between us. Andronike hesitated, until a splash of Night boiled stone like water and we shaped it like clay without ever glancing – after that there was a well of hunger, and Gods Below but the power they granted us. Raised stones melted away into liquid strings like festival banners, spinning into roiling winds of Night. With four hands we sculpted the stone prayer to long-dead gods of Arcadia and usurped the old sacraments like thieving masons in the garments of priests. Two tall pillars, covered with words that were a godless prayer in a dead tongue, were molded and carved. And atop them dropped down the closing of the threshold, a stone like door being slammed shut. Woven from the scabs and burns, sealed in rock where the nature of it could be obscured. Power would fade in time, we knew. But the hurt, the scar? Some transgressions had weight by virtue of being what they were. This would hold for a very, very long time.

After an eternity we half-fell to the ground, Masego's fingers clumsily leaving my staff as I used it to steer us away from tumbling down like drunks. We still crouched, exhausted and exhilarated, as the sense robbed from us by the scale of what we'd wielded and built slowly began to trickle back into our minds. We'd felt something like this once before, in Dormer. There'd been more of us, though, Adjutant and Archer as well. We'd marched forward into the heart of the enemy, bearing the story of the Woe like a banner. This had been a smaller thing, I thought, the Queen of Lost and Found and the Hierophant crafting a miracle out of power and pride. But, Gods... it'd been like a drink of the sweetest of wines, like honey on the soul, and some part of me almost wept that it'd ended.

"Look, Cat," Masego croaked out. "Look."

I followed his trembling finger and beheld the gate of stone we had raised. The runes inscribed on the two great pillars that I knew, just *knew*, were twenty feet tall and twenty apart were no as gibberish to my eye where before I had known them as if they were my native tongue. But the thrum of them, the crawling flow of power going up them through the barrow like they were rooted there, it sang to me. Of the Twilight just beyond, a mere smear of blood on stone away. And all that power was kept bound, kept locked, by the rough and massive stone pressing down – and the scars it held within, like a secret under seal.

"It's beautiful," I said.

And it was, in its own terrible way. We stayed there in the snow for a long time, at the heart of a circle of raised stones we'd unmade and forged anew, a barren barrow-top caressed by the winds. We stayed there until dawn crested in the distance, the faraway lights that'd be the final touch on our work.

"'lo and behold," I murmured.

The first rays of the sun struck the stone and, as if reflecting from the spiralling runes and stretches of ancient symbols, spun like a dust whirl between the tall pillars. Just long enough a glimpse could be had of the realm beyond, of the endless starlit sky and the shady hills that could be journeyed to any journey's end.

"There's always something more, isn't there?" Masego whispered. "Another horizon, another wonder. Another threshold to cross into deeper unknowns."

It was his own truth he spoke, I thought, but in I heard the echo of Indrani's as well. But what was restlessness in her, wanderlust, in him was instead awe.

"We're not done yet, Masego," I said. "We've bled to get where we stand, and when we come out on the other side we'll not be the same people who began the journey. But we are so very far from done."

He nodded, slowly

"Tomorrow will be ours," the Hierophant agreed, tone tranquil the way old and dark waters were tranquil. "And if there are any who would deny us that, we will **Wrest** it from them with bloody hands."

The word sang, and the world with it, as my old friend found the truth of third aspect and we sat silent in the warm light of dawn.

P

"The word sang, and the world with it, as my old friend found the truth of voting for PGTE on topwebfiction."

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

[*BarthHumphries*](#)

You need to start a typo thread too, every time. Otherwise it never gets fixed.

were twenty feet tall and twenty apart were no as gibberish to my eye where before I had known them as if they were my native tongue.

Change no to now

Dennis Donoghue

I clenched my fingers against the long haft of *Y*ew and burned Creation

[*Liliet*](#)

It never gets fixed even with a typo thread. Erratic doesn't use these.

Rob

In case this is useful for later editing 😊

"tread" is used oddly in this chapter (and various others in the past) – the past should be trod or treaded; tread is only present

sammax

Tread can be used as simple past or past participle as well. According to my dictionary, the forms are tread, trod/tread/treaded, trodden/trod/tread/treaded.

[Fayhem](#)

MASEGO GOT HIS THIRD MOTHERFUCKING ASPECT

YOU SORRY FUCKERS ARE FUCKED NOW

And is it just me or does **Wrest** have a sound similar to **Take**? I see miracles and horrors alike before us, and none to say which is more dreadful. And I am *so fucking excited*.

SilverDargon

Oh man that is EXACTLY what I thought when I read that line. So now he has one aspect to see basically whatever he wants to, one aspect to destroy those things should he choose to, and his last aspect to take what he doesn't destroy for himself.

RoflCat

Can't remember where it was said, but didn't Cath say something along the line of "I'll use what I can get, and what I can't, I'll break it"?

Zeze's following her lessons well.

therealgridlock

She once said she'll use what she can take and break what she can't, but she also said what she can't break she will regulate.

So, ultimately, she's reshaping the entire world one brick at a time. One law at a time.

Which I guess is why it pisses me off that the WB is allgedly trying to break the great game while also preventing anyone else from doing so.

[Liliet](#)

I think the difference is that Wrest lets you use something while the other person is still holding it, as opposed to Take which grabs it for yourself on a semi-permanent basis.

Fayhem

Well, the literal definition of “wrest” has “take away by force” as one of the primary definitions of the word – e.g., as here: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/wrest>

How aspects actually work and by what principles they do so can be difficult to say even when you’ve actually seen them used sometimes, so idk how it’ll work in practice at this point. But if we’re going by word definitions I think the literal meaning of the word supports my reading of the aspect more than yours at the moment, if I’m understanding you right anyway.

Adam Panshin

Well, going by common usage... You Take a thing away from someone else, at which point they have lost it and you have gained it. You Wrest control of an event or organization, at which point it continues under your direction.

So by that standard, where Cat’s Take would steal an Aspect from someone else and whatever the Rogue Sorcerer does seems to steal or copy magic from others, I expect Masego to Wrest magical workings away from other people rather than steal their *ability* to do magic. Does that include the chains by which the Dead King controls his undead armies? We’ll have to see.

weakman54

We need to keep in mind its Masego we’re talking about, so the literal and exact definition is important (like the one you linked).

Google gave me these definitions as well:

verb

1.

forcibly pull (something) from a person’s grasp.

2.ARCHAIC

distort the meaning or interpretation of (something) to suit one’s own interests or views.

“you appear convinced of my guilt, and wrest every reply I have made”

Liliet

I mean. Wrest refers to the thing he did just now. And he sure didn’t take Night away from Cat permanently, he just helped her with it.

Fayhem

> Wrest refers to the thing he did just now.

Ambiguous. Aspect invocations are usually not referring to something retroactively; Hakram did announce Stand that way, but Stand is reactive rather than proactive as an aspect so I think that's a meaningful distinction from Wrest. And "lend a helping hand" is not in any way a definition of the actual word "wrest". He didn't take anything from Cat at all ever – as far as I can see he helped steady and guide her hand while the Night always remained hers. That ain't wresting. So I'm honestly very, very dubious that Wrest could be in reference to that per se.

[Liliet](#)

Hmm, that's how I'm reading it.

KageLupus

I would imagine that Wrest has a much more confrontational aspect to it's use. Taking a thing is simple by comparison, since when you take something the other person loses it and you gain it. Wresting a thing is a forceful act, there is a contest involved that I think would let it backfire. If Masego tries to Wrest a miracle away from a god, it could fail and the feedback would probably put him out of commission.

Wrest also has a more immediate connotation to it than Take did. When Cat Took an aspect she had a bundle of power that she could use when and how she saw fit. Wrest feels more like it is taking control of a thing that is happening right this second. The catalyst was him joining in on Cat forming the Twilight Gate and helping her control the process. I would assume that the aspect would act in a similar manner, where he takes control over what someone else has started.

But Wrest probably makes up for those weaknesses by having broader applications. Cat could really only Take aspects from other Named. Masego should be able to Wrest control over a wider variety of things. Spells, rituals, miracles, probably not aspects but there might be some edge cases there. If he gets the ability to control the shape or outcome of the things he Wrests then it would be a huge swing every time he pulls the aspect out. Imagine taking an enemy's ritual and subverting it so that it hit their side instead of your own. Not only did they waste the resources that went into the ritual, but they also suffer its effects. That is going to seriously mess up whatever plan the enemy had.

[Fayhem](#)

That seems like a really good analysis. I think this is the best projection of the likely differences between Take and Wrest that I've seen yet.

NerfContessa

Agreed.

So now he's a wrestler. :p

Andrew Mitchell

I like how you've laid this out here. It all sounds extremely plausible.

magesbe

You are incorrect. Take can take magic as well, she did it multiple times to Fey. She stole the Duchess of Withering Winds' spell, and the Princess of High Noon's wings. And it's implied she could have even tried to steal Summer's Sun with it, just that doing so would have killed her instantly.

Steven Neiman

It's also worth noting that his other Aspects sound a lot like massively powered up versions of his old Apprentice Aspects. Glimpse became Witness, and Deconstruct became Ruin.

nipi

What was the Rouge Sourcerors variant again? Or hav we not been told?

[Draconic](#)

Thanks for the chapter! I hope you are feeling better. And take all the time you need for the next one.

also: "were no as gibberish" -> now

[Javvies](#)

But damn, Third Aspect for Heiropant. I wonder what **Wrest** will do or allow him to do, exactly. Should be pretty good (for him), though.

Yep, Masego can still utilize miracles and non-Gift-based supernatural power. I feel like that's going to be an unpleasant surprise for somebody down the road.

...

Really, Tariq? You've soul gazed how many people (including Cat) with **Behold** and now you're going to on about privacy rights and you don't want Cat to examine yours herself so she can craft the gateway to Twilight?

[Liliet](#)

Hey, the basic idea wasn't for Cat to do it, it was for the crows to do it. That's creepy alright.

And I mean Akua is,,,, hardly a less offensive candidate,,,

Shveiran

It is. Though... Well, Tariq has never been shy about using it on enemies and friends alike. Yes, from his perspective the Ophanim is a force of Good and thus never malignant, and it is not hard to see how the Sisters would be a more scary entity even to folks on the other side of the fence.

But still... this is not really a surprise, is it? He had to know his sight and bond to Twilight would be of great assistance in this task, and it is a vital one to bring the armies north...

I don't know, it would have been nice not to see him drag his feet on this one.

I've warmed up a lot to him during the first arch, as we got to see his perspective more clearly; and yet, though I stayed stationary during arch 2, I'm cooling down yet again ever since his rebirth.

It's like... be better, man! We are trying to save the world here, could you try being a bit more proactive? You were a lot more on your game when you were with an invading army, and that is kind of sad.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

IDK, he didn't really drag his feet imho, it took like a minute and a half to resolve this question.

Shveiran

Oh, I'm not arguing he is contrary for the sake of being so, just that I feel is not actively trying to be helpful, and he has no good reason to.

This instance in particular is not really significant, it's more the general attitude since he came back from the grave.

[Fayhem](#)

I mean, you ever wake up on the wrong side of the bed and then it takes you a little while to get past it and not be unilaterally grumpy and out of sorts? I suspect Pilgrim's got some of that right now, but for being dead instead of being asleep. I mean, IIRC it took a lot out of Cat to bring him back with a pilfered aspect, and she wasn't the one who was dead or the one who was actually having part of their soul cut out. Not to mention that even after the way she took out Saint she's probably like four decades younger. Cat could mostly recover from her side of it after some sleep, but I'd bet Pilgrim is still feeling it and trying not to telegraph that fact.

Anyway, upshot is I'm prepared to give him, idk, another week or so of in-universe time before I start getting too impatient with his post-resurrection self.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

"it's more the general attitude since he came back from the grave."

They say that resurrection changes people. Possibly relevant?

[Liliet](#)

He said basically that resurrection leaves them depressed and in a dump.

Checks out.

[Liliet](#)

I'm... not getting that feeling?

I'm getting the feeling he's *really* off his stride bc he's used to being the like teacher/guide and Cat is not letting him do/be that and he has no idea how else to act.

Andrew Mitchell

I think that makes a lot of sense.

Pilgrim had been running in an extremely well-formed groove and was a very strong hero as a result. He's still a very strong hero but he keeps trying to go back to his groove and Cat keeps kicking him back out again.



[Liliet](#)

Yup.

His groove is not 'volunteer to have your soul inspected for knowledge needed for a ritual', so it takes him an extra couple of minutes to process that.

He is not the smartest boot in the drawer.

caoimhinh

Usurpation is the essence of sorcery. **Wrest** is the embodiment of that tenet.

Andrew Mitchell

Perfect. 😊

Valkyria

This was magnificent. Totally worth the wait too.

I mean it was totally awesome and stuff but I also tried to imagine what it has to look like from the outside...

Cat, leaning on her staff, chanting words in a foreign language, burning up with power (i might have an anime like picture in my mind here xD) and a swirly abyss of darkness and Night just in front of her, forming giant pillars with weird symbols ...

yeah she's totally got the grim mysterious priestess vibes going there.

I sure hope GP didn't get a heart attack from all that dark Heathen Magic.

[daegone823](#)

Wrest, to take back something. I think Masego will be able to steal magic from others or at least something similar to the Rogue sorcerer. Based on his relationship with gods. I believe he will be able to grasp miracles as well. Truly a dangerous being has come into his own.

Komplode

Wrest is usually used in the context of power, I get the impression from context that ee meant it in this sense. To me this suggests that Masego will forcibly be able to yolk people's and gods (maybe even uppercase) power from them. This could be their magic, aspect or even bestowed? Maybe even narrative weight though that might be op and is (to me anyway) stretching.

Faiir

And now Gods, you shall witness my aspect:
YOINK!

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Finally! I'm still not over Yoink not being one of Thief's aspects.

DoOd

The way I expect it to work is that he'll be able to take control of a spell, miracle or aspect.
i.e. GP fires his Light death beam at Cat and Masego takes control and wipes out the whole levantine army with it. (or he just Nopes Bard's reincarnation aspect)

Sylwoos

Simply taking control of a spell is the kind of half-baked thing Cat would think off. We're talking about Hierophant here, he's way more refined than that.

If he's attacked by Pilgrim's Light beam, he won't care for the beam, he'll go straight for the Light itself, Wrest it out of the hand of the Choir and wield it as his own. To take forcefully the power of gods is exactly the kind of thing we should expect from the Hierophant.

[Liliet](#)

Still thinking its temporary. Instead of building up an arsenal of OP shit the way he had been up to Thalassina, he now can power up to the exact measure of the opponent(s) and beat them with their own power. Then he's down to zero again.

It sounds v in line with his character (he is used to his power as a utility that has always been available to it, it's like a limb, but he doesn't really care about being able to wipe muggles or w/e its swinging it with gods that hes into) and it cleans up narrative vulnerabilities of being OP

[daegone823](#)

Just going to also add that maybe some new heroes can be introduced at some point.

Just saying between the three month some heroes can be introduced.

IDKWhoitis

The narrative is slowly being pulled towards an Armageddon type scenario where good and evil put aside differences for one last strike to stop a catastrophic threat. All the Names involved will have to be big names, or they will simply be red shirts by the end of it. I'm even worried if Roland will make the cut, because the Heroes already got the Witch of the Woods. Although

the novice being the only survivor can also theoretically apply.

To put an end to my rambling :

I don't think a new Hero will make an appearance, at least not one that survives longer than 5 minutes into the DK Fight.

Skaddix

I mean in terms of a Final party. I think Cat is lock, Hanno is lock, Masego and Indrani have good odds (since the DK caused relationship drama and made it personal by killing Indrani), Witch is likely. That leaves you with a flex spot since any party has room for a core 5 and 6th Man swinger. I don't expect much in terms of major new heroes introduced.

[Fayhem](#)

I'm dubious regarding Witch making it on the roster; she's a heavy hitter for sure, but on a meta-narrative level she really hasn't gotten a lot of face time whereas Roland just spent a whole arc appearing on-screen with the protagonist of the Guide. Also, unless he dies (again) first Pilgrim is definitely also a lock. And since he already died in a noble sacrifice once, I don't see him doing a repeat, at least not before the final confrontation. It wouldn't have the same punch twice unless there's something giving it extra weight.

So I'm thinking final party roster as Cat, Pilgrim, very likely Masego and Indrani, Hanno I'd also give good odds at the moment though I wouldn't quite put him down as a lock, and then for the last spot I'd say Roland is the most plausible as the most direct arcane countermeasure available. Unless Tyrant pulls the ultimate weasel move and gets himself included in that band of five also (please no). Sixth ranger could be Hakram to back up Cat if he isn't holding things down elsewhere or, hilariously, Akua. Or, more hilariously and paranoia-inducingly still, Bard herself.

Skaddix

I mean I say Masego can do Roland's job right now what they both lack right now is raw magic power right now which the Witch has.

As for GP i expect him to die before we get a final party plus I am not sure I take him without his rez. I figure his best use is doing the mentor death power up for a Hero. Give him the proverbially passing the torch moment.

From Cat's side though I think Cat, Masego and Indrani are all locks.

Agent J

Hanno has been rather tangential to the story thus far. His escapades in the Free Cities was a C plot at best, his part in the crusades were a B plot and over rather swiftly, he's been holding ground in the North well enough, but Catherine did more on that front by herself and did so without even being in the same half of the country.

All this, and his original purpose of being the heroic foil to Catherine the Black Knight died three books and several plot lines ago. He got a flashback, so the EEs of Above and Below deem him important enough for that, at least, but the Witch? She's been on screen once and has no personality we can properly discern.

Hanno's band is going to have to come in hard with a loud boom of personality and gravitas if they're to endanger Roland who's already managed to endear himself to Cat, the audience, and the Audience.

I mean, he's literally the Underdog as far as mages go. I mean he's the only Named maybe mage in Iserre, yet every named former mage is his better by leaps and bounds. He's sharp with his tongue and is just barely keeping up with all the living legends of the age that surround him. He's even got a mysterious backstory! That's worth two flashbacks and a monologue!! He literally can't die until we figure out just what his *deal* is.

To summarize,

Cat's a lock, because she's the bloody protagonist.

Indrani's a lock, because someone's gotta be the resident Stabber of Bad Things on the team and she has history with the Asshole Who Murdered Her. (Could be switched out for Champion if Heroes insist on skewing the Band in favour of Good).

Tariq's a lock, because he was literally revived for this.

Masego's a lock, because he is *nettled* and the resident expert on almost everything, and more pertinently, the matter of gods and how to kill them.

Hanno's a lock, because why have we kept getting snippets of his life and actions if he's not going to amount to anything. And also he's been loudly touted as the "Greatest Hero of the New Generation".

And if there's going to be a Sixth Ranger it'll either be the Mysterious Sorcerer(?) or the Mysterious Spirit(?).

Boring witches we neither know nor care for are unlikely to suddenly become relevant this late in the Apocalypse game.

Do0d

I thought Hanno would try to have his choir pass judgement on Hierarch and then Hierarch will accuse the whole choir of being Foreign Oligarchs and their laws being not of the People thus erasing the whole choir out of existence.

Agent J

The Hierarch is mad and there is power in that. Maybe even in enough to smite an angel. But I highly doubt he could erase a whole choir.

More importantly, are you suggesting that Hanno has been given all this build up, just to get bent over and reamed by Anaxares? Cuz... I'm not against that.

Do0d

Well if Judgement is accused of something, they must judge themselves.

If they then judge themselves guilty ... we all know that the only answer to a guilty verdict from them is removal.

Agent J

Which begs an interesting question: Are Angels capable of rank hypocrisy?

[Javvies](#)

They're certainly capable of trying to break the rules of the Narrative.

Remember, the Hashmallin tried to deny Cat the resurrection she earned through the Story, so she had to **Take** it from them.

And the Ophanim would normally be hugely opposed to Cat, yet they allowed her to rip out and use **Forgive** on Tariq.

Do0d

The Hashmallim denied Cat's resurrection because she was not contrite; she did not conform to the absolute that governs them and so had to take her resurrection forcibly.

The Ophanim seek to alleviate suffering. Allowing Cat to resurrect Pilgrim, their most devoted tool would fit right in with their function.

Decius

Masego versus Dead King is a lock. My money is on a 1v1 that DK narrowly wins, incapacitating Zeze, followed by the rest of the band vs Dead King and Revenants, where Rumena buys the farm for angst's sake and everyone else is defeated, at which point the Bard Enters, Stage Right and starts to try to talk DK to death (to life?). During the time freeze Heiropant recovers enough to use Wrest on the Bard, then take over DK's power. Most of the Revenants are pledged to the Accords in a manner endorsed by the Pilgrim, making them strong enough to be credible.

minichirops

Shhhh... now it won't happen. Rocks fall, everybody dies.

Liliet

I don't believe there's going to be a single 5 man band party in the end. I think it's going to be a group effort in a much more diffuse way, more like a mass ritual with everyone doing their part than a hack-y 'story says we win here' 5 man band.

Like someone is idk holding open the portal to Hells, someone is constantly healing everyone else, someone is fighting the army off to the side, someone is scrying, someone is targeting DK's weak point through the scrying, etc. Some of it might be a 5 man band, there might be multiple of those involved – likely that.

Sparsebeard

I don't feel like the DK is the final enemy though, I mean, he might be one of the few who actually will try talking before coming to blows with Cat. Heck, I wouldn't be (that much) surprised if he sent an emissary at Salia..

Well, maybe not, still, I feel that him and Cat are too smoth operators to simply destroy themselves one against another.

Plus, it would kind of be anticlimatic for an antagonist introduced so late to be the Big Bad. I mean, Bard or even Black or Akua fit the bill much better (not that I think it's gonna be one of those two but still).

Komplode

For me it's the dwarves I want to see more of, how their 'deep' fits into Gods and gods and where it stands with the Intercessor, something doesn't get called deep without being v

old. Also their culture seems pretty bad ass, that might be cause it's been left so vague and up to imagination tho

IDKWhoitis

I have a feeling that Wrest is going to be used on DK or Bard by the end of this. Like it's practically made for prying loose *something* no mortal should bear. Whether it be control of a hell gate or undead or even the Gift. Or alternatively, a flask, if Cat wants to piss off the Bard...

Faiir

YOU CANNOT WREST YE FLASK

Cicero

Just get Trogdor, and burninate ye flask

Shikkarasu

I was hoping for Usurp, but I have a feeling we are going to - love- Wrest. Taking other people's toys and showing them how they work? So very, very Zeze.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Putting it that way reminds me of the scene wherein Masego becomes Apprentice (Glimpse?)

erebus42

Well that was pretty awesome.

I'll be curious to see what Masego's new aspect does. My guess is it will let him usurp the miracles and workings of others.

[Liliet](#)

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

Vote for Masego's third Aspect!

gingerlygrump

Ahh, Ee you made me cry with this one. Masego will have his triumphant return. I hope he Wrests his power back from the Dead King.

[Liliet](#)

Masego is such a teacher ♥ ♥ ♥

Roland gets an urge to get pen and parchment just from him talking ♥

Fayhem

I think it's pretty clear that says at least as much about Roland as about Masego lol. But fundamentally yes, if we don't get Professor Masego of Cardinal I will consider it a massive unfulfilled tease.

Liliet

I mean yeah that's primarily about Roland. But Masego always EXPECTS and WANTS that exact reaction, and he got his third Aspect out of helping Catherine out with managing her cool powers?

Fayhem

Wants definitely, not sure if he still *expects* it after this much exposure to other people. But you've got a good point that for Masego pointing out the ignorance of others (calculating "ignorance" on a steep curve, mind) was always about letting them know so they could correct that. Moving from there to "let me help you correct that" would be a step forward still, but it would be a very natural step forward.

Liliet

Mhm!

Note also what this chapter says about him teaching the Fifteenth's mages rituals and how differently they went with or without him. He has actual patience for teaching and guiding, and I don't recall him ever complaining about it – like Cat was actually startled to realize how much of it he was doing.

Decius

"That is a presumption, yes," Masego calmly agreed.

Wow. That burn was worse than anything that could happen if the ritual goes wrong.

Daniel E

Wrest sounds like a play out of the Rogue Sorcerer's arsenal, though admittedly more violent. I imagine Rogue can take sorcery from a dead or severely weakened opponent, whereas Wrest would allow taking from someone who is at full strength, so long as Hierophant's willpower is stronger and/or more flexible. Kindof like magical arm-wrestling.

Komplode

Imo wrest will be much more versatile than Rogues magic trick, I think Rogue and only learn one use sorceries whereas Masego

will be able to take and use people's power whether it be magic, name or divinely bestowed for a limited time period

Andrew Mitchell

Woah, that was **a m a z i n g**. Seeing Masego and Cat work together like that was a real treat, and now Masego has his third aspect as well. **Wrest** sounds very appropriate.

A prediction: Pilgrim's going to find out who Akua is and it's going to be a factor in the negotiations in Salia.

Oshi

Well yeah Cat will have to tell them eventually. You can't chain someone to the rock without naming them, Prometheus comes to mind.

caoimhinh

My bet is on Kairos casually mentioning Akua during the coming peace talks.

And he would probably be like:

"Oh, was that a secret I was not supposed to say to others? Nice."

Shveiran

It certainly seems plausible at this stage, yet I'm not really sure why it is a relevant point.

As I've argued before... so Cat has bound the soul of her enemy into her service. Oh no?

I mean, the soul-cutting can hardly be a major thing, can it? Cat messed with a Villain's soul, the Heroes cut a Villain soul... It doesn't seem like anyone was indignant when it was Black's, so I could maybe see it raising a few akles if it was a hero's soul but... the Doom of Liesse? Come now, indignation would be ridiculous.

So... is it the slavery? I mean, I can see how that could be a problem, sure, but it's not like she is torturing her to death. The alternative was what, just killing her and burying her on consecrated ground so that no wraith would come out? Locking her up somewhere she would eventually escape from? It's arguable at best that any of the alternative options would be better, from a moral OR practical point of view. Which isn't to say it can't be argued, but... a game changer, really?

Unless it is the "mercy" aspect that is a problem? In that case, I can see how some Heroes (those we could say graduated

from the Saint school of problem slashing) may have a problem with that, but even so A) it's not like she is getting off scott free, B) even if she was, how is this a bigger issue than allying with the former Black Knight, to whose death Cat already opposes and C) are the Good guys really going to complain now about how Cat is not murdering ENOUGH people? For Sisters' sake, a few chapters ago the bloody Pilgrim let the Tyrant go with nowhere near this much of a sanction, and no one even suggested it might have been a mistake.

Don't get me wrong, I think you are right and this will likely be an issue at some point. I just... I see the foreshadowing, but I don't really get the shape this problem should have. Am I missing something?

Insanenoodlyguy

You're neglecting the Black school of thought. Where it's not about the morality or lack thereof of the act itself, but rather the judgement in doing it at all. Namely "This is too goddamn dangerous, not killing her gives her a chance to do more horrible things, and the bound slaves of villains are never as under their control as they believe."

[Liliet](#)

I don't think the heroes have a horse in this race though. They haven't actually dealt with Akua (which is part of the chip on Cat's shoulder: they did NOT help deal with the fae or the Diabolist but now they're coming to help 'liberate' the people from those who actually protected them from that?) so if Cat is like 'i have this under control' they are most likely going to be 'sounds legit'.

Esp Tariq who can actually look into Akua's soul and confirm that it is indeed under control.

Or warn Cat if it isn't.

Y'know either way there isn't the uncertainty of 'but is she fooling you'. The heroes just... don't care.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I suspect that Sve Noc could defend Akua's psychic privacy at need, but they're going along with Cat's game here. Having his Behold get no-sold by Cat is just one of the reasons Pilgrim's been increasingly at sea for this last couple of arcs.

There's also the point that, if Akua was to go rogue... how much could the heroes do about it without Cat's consent? If anything, they might hope that the

"infighting among villains" would give them an opening against Cat.

edrey

i believe that Wrest should be way more powerfull and vesrsatil than Take from Squire or Hold or Steal from Thief, one is a transitional name and the other just a weak name. he should be able to take from powers and objects to knowledge and souls. i just worry that the pilgrim just hear him said his new aspect, that is trouble

Oshi

He has god vision. He will know either way.

Soronel Haetir

I thought an initial invockation of an aspect was actual use, not just saying "hey, I'll do this thing sometime".

Amy Lear

Arguably he just did it. He was shaping power from Sve Noc that was not his to draw on.

[Fayhem](#)

An interesting point. But are we sure yet that it wasn't an actual use? He was just touching Night and it was well established he's not sentimental regarding the feelings of the Crows. He wouldn't take Night from them as a gift or for a pledge of service, no. But if they didn't want him just taking the power then they shouldn't have left it just lying around like that. I mean, carelessness like that is really more of an invitation, isn't it? Never forget, Masego may be bae but he's still Praesi.

...Wait does that mean he's technically Baesi?

[Liliet](#)

I think he used Wrest when helping Catherine yeah. "Oh come on let me hold that"

[Fayhem](#)

Eh, that still really doesn't sound like "take by force" to me.

Darkening

Nah, cat got Break after she snapped the angel sword. Doesn't have to have the dramatic declaration/use to get an aspect. Hell, learn just sort of appeared out of nowhere for her.

Gamer7956

At the same time, learn was more of a passive, always on aspect (Like all three of Rangers, according to her chapter) – there was no defining moment.

Though I would argue Wrest was used with Cat to shape the portal. I think Wrest is likely to be taking control of power from Gods – spells/miracles in progress specifically. Taking control – even only partial – of a god fuelled miracle definitely comes under that.

I don't think Zeze is going to be able to take permanent power – that's Roland's shtick. He's more of "You're incompetent/in my way, give that here"

caoimhinh

Hmm, Roland doesn't seem to be able to take permanent power, he stores up spells and wards to spend them later. **Take** was a permanent usurpation of power, and would stay with Cat until she decided to **Take** something else. Even William's Aspect of **Rise** recharged itself when in Cat's possession, that was a permanent steal.

I expect Masego's **Wrest** to be something like forcefully taking control of a power and permanently gaining some sort of authority over that, even if not over all that power, over some part of it. Maybe even a permanent insight on its workings that enable Masego to replicate it (that has been his whole schtick as Hierophant, after all).

[TheAtomicOption](#)

Wrest is a good one for him since he needs to Wrest away the ability to do sorcery from some one (preferably the Dead King or Akua)

Patrick Nava

I'm confused. I thought Masego lost his Name. How does he still get an aspect?

[Mental Mouse](#)

No, Masego lost his sorcerous ability, not his Name. There's plenty of non-Named sorcerers running around, and also a fair number of non-sorcerous Named – and that latter group now includes Masego.

The interesting thing is, Masego's previous Name of Apprentice was directly tied to sorcery. His current Name of Heirophant was certainly nurtured and supported by his sorcery; a lot of people (surely DK, and initially Cat) probably assumed that without sorcery, Masego it would lack a power base.

But IIRC both the Name and each Aspect weren't triggered by sorcerous feats but rather by his repeated run-ins with various gods and demons. And just on basic meaning, a heirophant is *not* a wizardly or sorcerous role, it's a *priestly* role. Masego has become, by stages, a sort of Villainous cleric – one who does not beseech the gods, but confronts and dominates them.

So, he's *just* the guy to stand up to... some undead immortal asshole who dared to rank himself among the gods, while still tampering directly in mortal affairs.

Especially paired with a woman who had godhood thrust upon her, but responded with "who, me?", renounced divinity, and switched over to working in the service of another godhood.

(And while Sve Noc may be new to true godhood, they had a helluva long apprenticeship – and since their final ascension they've been acting like proper gods and working primarily through their servants.)

caoimhinh

Nope, just a couple chapters ago he was shown using it to confront Sve Noc when they offered a deal to him in his tent. Catherine explicitly said that his Name was flaring with power against the flood of Night in the tent.

He lost his Gift, his magic, which Akua described as a physical thing, not a metaphysical thing, so I'm guessing it's more like he lost the capacity to store mana in his body, so he can no longer cast spells.

He still has Hierophant as Name. In fact, the first clue we got that he still had his Name was when Cat grabbed him right after vanquishing the Dead King's fragment that possessed him, and we saw that his glass eyes still worked despite losing his magic (they are made with his Sorcery, but were his very first working as Hierophant, encapsulating Summer Flame inside, if he had lost both magic and Name, the eyes would have stopped working).

Up until Masego's confrontation with Sve Noc, many were still speculating whether losing his magic meant losing his Name, but that was the confirmation he still has it.

Sparsebeard

"Behold"...

Perhaps Cat is aiming for the job of professor of Botany and Alchemy at the Unsee.. at Cardinal right now.

Mental Mouse

Botany and Alchemy? Huh?

I'd say either she or Masego will be chairing the Department of Applied Theology.

Liliet

I'm pretty sure this is referring to Rafe Tgab.

mavant

Zeze is just the best.

mavant

Really I just want to hang out and Do Science with him.

magetite

Hoping for masego to wrest control of his gift from the dead king

Interlude: Iron

"There are only two sorts of freedom to be found in Praes: the tyrant's freedom, and the freedom to do as the tyrant said."

– Extract from the memoirs of Hiram Banu, the Ninety-Year Chancellor

Her Most Serene Highness Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer, Princess of Salia, Prince of Rhenia and Warden of the West found that her patience ran thin, these days. Not for a freshly developed failure of character, she'd decided, but rather because there was simply so much to do and so little time to see it done. Petty temporizing from others had once been something to tolerate out of courtesy, to maintain the ties of etiquette binding all to civility and so providing a common tongue, yet now ever instance was measurable loss. And never a frivolous one, either, for all the decisions of middling import she could pass on to subordinates she already had weeks ago. Therefore, when the First Prince of Procer entered her solar at a brisk pace she was quietly irked by the absence of one of the three men she'd sent for. The Principate of Procer could be said to have three great

assemblies of spies, when counting those attached to the sole office of the First Prince and not the particular of who sat on the throne. The first and foremost was the Circle of Thorns, whose webs of informants abroad had been the eyes and ears of the rulers of Procer for centuries now: its current highest patron, the skeletal and balding Louis of Sartrons, rose smoothly as she entered. A noticeable moment later the other man in the room, Balthazar Serigny, followed suit.

That hirsute bear of a man, his face a bold battlefield between ferocious eyebrows and an uncompromising beard, was the head of the Silver Letters. A pack of thieves and assassins grown so successful some centuries past they were given official sanction and from then on used as the spies of the First Princes within the boundaries of the Principate itself. Balthazar the Bastard, as his subordinates called him without speaking of the circumstances of his birth, had opposed Cordelia's rise to power during the Great War and remained in place after her crowning largely because he was too difficult to swiftly replace and the successor she'd handpicked for him was not yet ready. There should have been a third on his feet there, Simon of Gorgeault, standing in the name of the Holy Society. That one was as much a diplomat as a spy, for the Holy Society and its assembly of highborn lay brothers and sisters was at times more an informal channel of communication with the House of Light than shadowy obtainers of secrets. Gorgeault's lateness grated on her more than it should have, Cordelia knew, for knowing the man it would not be without reason. Yet his close ties with the House and in particular the Holies – that informal assembly of the influential within the House whose equally informal decisions ever became formal policy – were doing him no favour in her eyes of late.

"A good morn to you both," the First Prince of Procer calmly said.

She paused long enough to allow the two spymasters to return the courtesy.

"Be seated," Cordelia Hasenbach ordered. "We will begin without Brother Simon."

The blonde Lycaonese pressed her skirts against her legs to more elegantly sit her chair, dismissing the attending servants with a polite shake of the head when inquiries were made by silent look. She had no intention of entertaining these men long enough for refreshments to be required, much less a meal. Besides, should she offer either etiquette would require small talk be made over them before serious matters were spoken of and she had absolutely no intention of wasting half an hour on inanities when Procer was rarely more than one calamitous day away from annihilation.

"We will attend to the Iserran situation first," Cordelia stated. "Gentlemen, am I to understand that disaster was truly averted?"

The men shared a silent glance, the rapacious-faced head of the Circle and the half-wild former fantassin who'd killed and blackmailed his way to supreme prominence in the Silver Letters. It was the latter that spoke first, first clearing his throat in a surprisingly dainty manner for a man of his looks and conduct.

"We have confirmed that the foreign forces have all begun to evacuate the plains," Balthazar the Bastard said. "It was made known to the rank and file of both the Army of Callow and the Legions of Terror that winter quarters will be raised in Arans before they went through the gate, so I believe it likely the Black Queen intends to keep her word."

Of that there had been little doubt in the First Prince's mind: she'd read a transcript of these Liesse Accords, passed along by hasty scrying. It was becoming increasingly evident they'd all severely underestimated Catherine Foundling, and that her game was a long one indeed. Cordelia's cold blue eyes moved to the other man sitting across from her, inviting elaboration.

"The League of Free Cities has agreed to begin marching south, and to the offered sale of supplies as the costs you offered," Louis said. "The Hierarch himself is said to have granted full authority to his advisory council over the matter, though the Tyrant of Helike remains the dominant force among it."

Though not by so large a margin as he would have been before what her people had taken to calling the Princes' Graveyard. An ornate affectation, given only a single royal had died instead of abdicated, yet the Alamans fondness for grand appellations was not to be denied. The League's audacious – foolish, some would call it – march through the Waning Woods to take the Principate by surprise had meant it would need to live off the land after the supplies it brought began to run out, given the lack of supply train. The situation for them was not yet dire, yet the Circle of Thorns had learned that they had perhaps two months left before their grain ran out. Which was something of an issue for the invaders, given that the Carrion Lord had already stolen or torched every granary in the heartlands of the Principate: there was nothing left for them to steal in turn. Offering just enough supplies to fend off starvation in exchange for a retreat south had been a gamble, but a necessary one. She could not let more than a hundred thousand foreigners camp in Iserre while talks took place here in Salia. For one, it was much too close to the capital. More importantly, if the League's armies stayed in Iserre so much enough of a force to check it even if truce was currently being had.

Oh, Kairos Theodosian would no doubt turn on her as soon as the conference came at an end and he'd secured whatever prize he now sought. Yet by that time the armies of the League would be much further south, perhaps as far as Tenerife, and the military

situation would have changed. The Black Queen had, after all, admitted to making bargain with the Kingdom Under concerning sale of armaments and implied to Arnaud that arrangement could be had there between herself and the Principate. That meant delaying resumption of hostilities with the League a valid tactic, for by the time the blades came out again the massed levies Cordelia had ordered in all southern and western principalities would be furnished with fresh dwarven weaponry and be ready to hold the line against the League's treachery. It would have ruinous costs in both lives and gold, but it was either that or allowing the Tyrant of Helike to dictate the course of the war on Keter however he wished. The Prince of Rhenia had sent her own people to die and abandoned her kinsmen to the Dead – she could and *would* stomach Arlesite conscripts bleeding to defend their own lands. Louis of Satrons' pause was smoothly filled by the other spymaster a heartbeat later.

"My people in Iserre had a look at the delegations when the Black Queen opened the fairy gate for them," Balthazar said. "Getting too close was judged risky – the Jacks are sharp-eyed and there's goblins skulking around everywhere – but we believe the agreements were honoured when it comes to soldier strength."

Cordelia's brow did not rise, for she was better bred than that, yet she politely expressed surprise.

"Even the Carrion Lord?" she asked.

The offer extended had been an escort of four thousand for every representative attending the conference, which Cordelia had intended to mean the Hierarch and the Queen of Callow. Now instead there was a certain 'General Rumena' representing the interests of the Empire Ever Dark and requiring their own escort, which was unfortunate confirmation the drow were on the move once more. The suggestion the Carrion Lord would attend as representative for the Dread Empire of Praes had been like ash in Cordelia's mouth, given the man's cold-blooded scheme for the death of thousands and thousands of innocents. In all fairness, Foundling seemed to have understood the... delicacy of that situation and offered a compromise: she'd be responsible for the man's actions while in Procer, and as her dependent he would be allowed only a thousand men in escort to be deducted from her own four thousand. The blonde Lycaonese suspected the hand of Vivienne Dartwick in those terms, whose diplomatic acumen had proven greater than one would expect of a former Chosen.

"He seems to have brought only four hundred legionaries," Balthazar said. "Though given how popular he remains with parts of the Army of Callow, he's hardly vulnerable."

Not that Cordelia was fool enough to entertain assassination at the moment. Not with his apprentice – who, it seemed, still remained fond enough of him to seek his release regardless of

reports of their quarrelling after the Doom of Liesse – having become so crucial to the survival of the Principate and perhaps even the continent itself. The amount of forces coming close to Salia made her uneasy, in truth. Four thousand drow, possessed of strange eldritch powers at night by all reports, four thousand eastern legionaries and a mixed force of four thousand from the League whose finest were from Helike. The Dominion would bring four thousand of their own, though they'd proved unreliable allies in many ways, and the First Prince had provided four thousand of her own soldiery to stand for the Thalassocracy of Ashur under thin pretence. Salia was hardly undefended, of course, and Princess Rozala Malanza would be bringing ten thousand soldiers besides as a guarantee. Yet sixteen thousand foreign soldiers within a day's march of the capital was not something to take lightly in any circumstances, much less these. Countries grown weak often found their allies had grown hungry.

"Then it seems we had survived the crucible," First Prince Cordelia calmly said, "and must now begin preparing for the one waiting beyond the horizon."

"If I may, Your Most Serene Highness?" Louis of Sartons asked, and she moved her head in concession. "Our allies in Ashur are becoming increasingly desperate, and when word of the bargain struck for the retreat of the League that despair will turn to fury."

It would, Cordelia privately agreed, for every step that took the armies of the League further from Procer took them closer to the shores of the Thalassocracy. All the while the fleets of Nicae kept blockading the island-nation and sinking even fishing boats, very clearly aiming to starve Ashur into submission. The bargain would be seen as a betrayal, not entirely without reason, and Cordelia's assurances that this was maneuvering would ring hollow so long as they were not paired with some manner of relief for Ashur. Which she could not provide so long as the League's fleets had the run of the Samite Gulf, given that no Arlesite principality had a considerable military fleet to call on. Largely because of Ashuran bribes and threats, one might uncharitably add.

"We will have to exert pressure on the League during the conference," Cordelia agreed. "Lest we lose Ashur entirely to spite or surrender. If a common front is put forward to at least allow for grain barges to be allowed through, there would be hope to offer."

"That would require Callow to back us against the Free Cities," Balthazar grunted. "They're trying to get a foot in the Grand Alliance so it's not impossible, but the Black Queen's no fool. She'll not let herself be brought into the fold before she squeezed us dry of every concession she can prior to alliance."

"I am not so certain," Louis disagreed, bony face gone pensive. "No force under her command has ever resorted to looting or foraging while campaigning in our lands. Though I would agree she has distaste for the well-bred, I would venture she'd be rather sympathetic to the plight of starving Ashurans. It is not an uncommon trait, in tyrants who have popular support."

Cordelia was, in fact, inclined to agree with the leader of the Circle of Thorns. Catherine Foundling had a record of trying to spare commoners the worst of war even when it was inconvenient to her armies, and the Army of Callow's regulations were perhaps the strictest on the continent when it came to civilians. Unfortunately, the First Prince found it dubious that the Black Queen would antagonize the League of Free Cities on behalf of the Grand Alliance without some manner of concession. Which was not unreasonable, given that she would be taking on risks for nations that had warred on her own, but was most definitely unfortunate. The fair-haired First Prince only had so many concessions she could make and was reluctant to begin doling them out too early in negotiations. She might have to regardless, Cordelia grimly conceded. Choices were the privilege of those mighty enough to afford choosing.

"There will be a need to approach her in private after she arrives," the First Prince finally said.

That much had never been in doubt, truth be told, though the extent of matters in need of discussion sometimes felt like to Cordelia like it increased by the day. The First Prince found herself in the unpleasant diplomatic quagmire of having to negotiate with a need to preserve an empire's dignity without having an empire's might to ensure it. Whatever alliances she might have once been able to call on were now stretched thin, the Chosen so unreliable as to be worthless and to add one more complication the Silver Letters were adamant that the Black Queen had become somewhat *popular* with Alliance armies that'd been on the field. The entire host had been plagued with dreams, allegedly the work of the Choir of Mercy, that had shown a span of the 'heroics' that'd taken place in these Twilight Ways. The result had been flattering to the Queen of Callow's reputation, to say the least, though the transcripts of some of these dreams had been disturbing to read. The cunning that Foundling had shown that night was more dangerous than the power, in Cordelia's eyes, though the power was the stuff of nightmares as well.

Now it was good as certain that the Callowans would follow their queen with fanatical devotion into any war she chose to wage – Gods Above, even as some kind of priestess of darkness she'd received the tacit blessing of *angels* – which would be a great boon if these negotiations saw fruit but a cataclysm otherwise. More worrisome was the apparent oath by every great line of the Blood to support her bid for joining the Grand Alliance, as it'd

received the approval of the Grey Pilgrim. To Levantines, that might carry as much weight as that of the Choir he was said to be servant of. When Rozala Malanza's soldiers came to Salia, and the Levantines with them, they would find a city that still spoke of the Black Queen as the Arch-heretic of the East and a perfidious enemy. The survivors of the campaign in Iserre would not take well to being called liars, much less the potentially disastrous epithet of heretic. It could all turn into an ugly circumstance with frightening ease if Cordelia was not very, very careful. Merciful Heavens, what had the world come to when she could expect the Black Queen to be a calming influence on the proceedings?

The First Prince would not be blinded by relief at a withheld blade or a sudden surge of sentiment, yet she could not deny that Catherine Foundling seemed to be trying to claw back the continent from the brink of the abyss. She was a horribly inconvenient person, it was true, but she'd also proved she was capable of restraint and a degree of foresight – which Cordelia could not truthfully say of all those who had a seat in the Highest Assembly. That Calernia might end up bound by a set of treaties even more far-reaching than those of the Grand Alliance had rankled, at first, but looking upon the content of the Liesse Accords the First Prince had been forced to concede they might be of genuine help in stabilizing the continent. That the rules of behaviour they proposed were elemental meant they were likely to be functional in practice even when binding such fractious individuals, and that most Chosen and Damned would be inclined towards enforcing them: a flying fortress rarely benefited anyone but the one flying it, and so even another villain might delight in seeing it brought down along with a rival. And as for the Chosen, Cordelia was far past needing convincing they too were in need of similar *restraints*. That the same plague that'd wiped out a detachment of Praesi legionaries had also wiped out an entire town on the shore of Lake Artoise without a single breakout elsewhere before or since was a damning hint of who was responsible for it.

There would be consequences to that, one day.

The dawning truth of the last few days had been that the Black Queen intended to bring forth an order to Calernia, and that this order was not too inimical to the order that Cordelia Hasenbach had been trying to bring forth since she was but a girl. It was not the resounding victory for Good that the First Prince had wanted, yet it was compromise she was willing to live with. She fully intended on securing as many gains as she could for Procer and the Grand Alliance, yet she would do so with the preservation of the Accords in mind. In truth, there were some aspects she'd found thrilling. This posited city in the Red Flower Vales? It was, she hoped, an end to wars between Callow and Procer. With this Cardinal forbidding the march of armies and the only other

land-route between the two realms the Stairway up north, war would become highly impractical to wage. Three kittens and a ribbon could defend the narrow pass of the Stairway against a princely army, if they had the nerve, and having a great city at the crossroads between the east and the west of Calernia would allow for trade between adjoining realms to flourish and make hostility even more costly a prospect. And there was much to gain, in having such a neutral ground where diplomacy would be had even on the darkest days. No, Cardinal would have much greater reach than even the Black Queen seemed to realize.

A sharp rap against the closed door had Cordelia raising her voice to grant entrance to the servant. A man in livery hurried in at her invitation and after courtly bows came to whisper in her ear. The First Prince of Procer's lips slightly thinned and she nodded a dismissal.

"Brother Simon's absence should be excused, it seems," Cordelia Hasenbach crisply said. "For he has been detained by order of the House of Light. The Holies are calling the Highest Assembly to session."

Two of the most skilled spymasters alive looked at her with faces betraying utter surprise.

"That's madness," Balthazar said.

"It's treason," Louis said, tone cold. "In time of war, no less. Your Most Serene Highness, this cannot be allowed to pass."

"Nor will it," Cordelia Hasenbach said, voice like iron. "It appears I have at last found an *end to my patience*."

Pantasy

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Big Brother

Cordelia is finally stepping in to set the Proceran House of Light straight.
Hells, it's about time.

[Liliet](#)

I'm low key terrified of her choosing a method of dealing with them along the lines of 'set the building on fire and block the

exits' and sliding down the slippery slope into merry hells, but I have more faith in her than that. I think???

[Fayhem](#)

Even if she's at a point where she'd find it cathartic, she's far too smart. I don't think she'll be pulling her punches, but Cordelia Hasenbach's version of that is infinitely more likely to look like outmaneuvering them ruthlessly and bending their arm until it's on the verge of breaking than like a massacre.

[Liliet](#)

I HOPE

Shveiran

Yeah, I'm with Fayhem. This is Cordelia Hasenbach, not Cersei Lannister; I don't think EE will choose this instance to break his excellent track records of understandable characters and have her just go coco-for-coco-pops just because someone is trying to piss in the porridge again.

[Liliet](#)

Well, maybe I exaggerated a little.

But Cordelia is not very well-versed in story-fu, and she doesn't understand how badly 'lesser evil' and 'necessary brutality' can go if improperly handled. So... I'm worried
=x

Shveiran

She is ignorant in story-fu, yes, but that makes it easy to fall into story traps; it's not a brain-washing device.

If she got a Name this instance, she wouldn't suddenly forget all the training that allowed her to pacify and rule the Principate. "I'll slaughter the most prominent religious figures in the kingdom I rule, what could possibly go wrong" is not just story-stupid, it's stupid-stupid.

She is liable to fall into the wrong stories, sure; Patterns of Three, Monologues, Tempting Fate... Heck, she is likely a few steps from becoming the Villainess With the Death Ray.

But she won't start genociding her own people, why would she? She is a skilled politician, and "kill all opposition" is not a good idea in Praes, let alone Procer.

Liliet

>But she won't start genociding her own people, why would she?

That's not what I'm worried about tho!

What I'm worried about is very much the Villainess with the Death Ray thing. Even just *curbing the influence* that the House of Light has on her country's politics is an iffy narrative move she might utterly fail to process as such specifically because of her ignorance of the narrative. Oh, she's skilled in politics and PR which is a very close thing, but in politics and PR the way to keep things from interfering is to keep them secret, while in narrative-fu keeping things secret is a VERY bad move...

Javvies

Heh.

Cordelia isn't happy. About a lot of things. At least she seems to be more or less on board with the Accords. Or at least, the underlying principles thereof, even if there's inevitably going to be some quibbling about some of the details.

Yeah ... the Proceran House of Light is in deep shit when it comes to Cordelia's opinion.

But, to be fair, did anybody really expect that they wouldn't try to spike things? I mean, they did declare Cat the Arch-Heretic of the East, so there's no way they are going to be happy about inviting her to Salia for negotiations. On the other hand ... I suspect that this move might have Bard secretly behind it.

Maybe Cordelia will have to take drastic measures to bring the Proceran House of Light to heel.

IDKWhoitis

This might as well have Bard's signature. Whether to benefit Cat or light her hair on fire remains to be seen. Because Bard always likes to play both sides.

Sparsebeard

If it's Bard, the goal is probably to push Cordelia to react and cement her in the role of a Villain... Which would potentially accomplish many goals:

Sway the balance on evil's side, thus enabling good some divine intervention (perhaps to try and remove a pesky Villainess).

Weaken the accords by having a Named ruling Procer (and how convenient for Bard who supposedly can act mainly through Named).

Weaken Procer by introducing the civil strife that may very well follow forceful actions by Cordelia (and permitting Bard the intercede on the behalf of either side of such a civil war, I'm sure she has a few good deals in mind).

mamm0nn

My thoughts exactly, this sounds like the priests with a nudge from the Choirs being the aggressor that pretends to be a peace-preaching force. They detain people that 'work for them so it's fine technically' and call people into a meeting to talk, which is storywise a-okay for the good guys of course, and then villainise the First Prince for her reaction to this treachery.

Above is making a play to turn the newfound allies of the Black Queen either Evil or sway them away from her, as we've seen with Pilgrim already. I hope Roland will be passed, it'd be a shame if he too has to turn his back or see himself turned a Villain to be disposed of.

[Liliet](#)

>Above is making a play to turn the newfound allies of the Black Queen either Evil or sway them away from her, as we've seen with Pilgrim already.

What?

What we've seen with Pilgrim is that the Choir of Mercy refrains from having opinions on his political decisions even when he directly asks for advice, and that the Choir of Mercy is willing to work with Catherine both at his will and when she asks nicely (their visions presented her in best light even before they agreed to let her rez him)

[Liliet](#)

You're assuming the Bard is an antagonist. Note that Catherine's only basis for treating her as such is "I hate puppetmasters" (and Bard's repeated and targeted antagonization and taunting of her)

quite possibly a cat

" Bard's repeated and targeted antagonization"

That seems like a pretty good basis for her to be considered an antagonist!

Liliet

Not with the kind of tropes in play here --

Miles

Bard's and Cat's goals are in direct opposition because her most desired clause in the accords strips Bard of most of her power.

Liliet

Eh. If the Accords are about enforcing *the exact thing Bard herself needs the power for*, Bard's reaction is likely to be "finally, a vacation! Oh please don't let this fall through..."

Liliet

>Whether to benefit Cat or light her hair on fire remains to be seen.

Benefit Cat by setting her hair on fire. That's how it worked every single fucking time so far.

NerfGlastigUaine

"I suspect that this move might have Bard secretly behind it."

This can be said about literally every move in this story so far. All bar Hierarch/Tyrant screwing her over. That's the terrifying part about Bard, her game's so long and net so wide that you can't know what's part of it and what isn't.

Javvies

Well, we are quite confident that Bard was directly involved in the Proceran House of Light's last big moves – namely the Conclave that declared Cat the Arch-Heretic of the East over the presumed (if undeclared) Arch-Heretic of the East, the reigning Dread Empress Malicia.

So it's not really much of a tinfoil theory to think that Bard might be involved with the Proceran House of Light's latest move.

That said, it could easily be the case that Bard isn't currently actively involved, and she merely previously primed certain key figures within the House of Light to take some sort of action as a reflexive setting up of contingencies.

noodlewerk

The fun thing about villains like Wandering Bard is that it doesn't matter what you actually do in your written story. You have some things that are obviously planned by the puppet master villain, and for all other events *you can just claim they were planned later* if it suits the story.

Kind of like the Lords of Dust in the Eberron campaign setting of D&D. The advice to running them is almost literally:

"Whatever the party did before, could have been a plot. They saved the town? One of the children was destined to become a great villain. They found a magic sword in a lost tomb? That sword is actually needed by some bad guy that will buy it from the merchant after the party sells it when they find a nicer sword."

Whatever happened, it's a plot. Maybe.

NerfContessa

True.

Still, Cordelia becoming a dread princess might be just what is needed now.

Imagine, unity against an evil so bad all other evils unite against it. How could Good resist? :p

Skaddix

Honestly, it's not a surprise. Cordelia apparently doesn't have a good relationship with the Church or with Heroes (Chosen) so she has no real control over the House of Light. I have said it a thousand times Cordelia really needed to do a better job of getting Chosen and thus the House of Light on her side. Her failure to do this (especially with her dredging operation if that is an Angel or Demon) could only end up biting her in the behind.

Granted there is some symmetry in both Cat and Cordelia having to deal with House of Light related issues. Historically the relationship between Church and Monarchies has always been interesting.

Scrutable

The other option is that this is part of Scribe's schemes to destabilize Procer.

Or both!

[Javvies](#)

It's not Scribe.

I've made my position regarding it not being Scribe clear multiple times now, so I won't fully repeat myself again here.

But in short? Scribe hasn't had the time to do this given the constraints that she's operating under. She can't utilize planned acts because she's trying to dodge a precog, which leaves her limited to taking advantage of opportunities as they appear.

Remember, Augur likes her cousin, and Scribe is a Villain, anyways.

Augur may or may not be able to detect Bard's actions via her precognition, and even if she can, it's still Bard, someone who is presumably a Hero (as far as Augur knows).

Also, Augur either did not or could not give Cordelia a heads up about the last time Bard (and the Saint of Swords) got involved with getting the House of Light to do something Cordelia didn't want them to do.

jalexanderb

Looks like Cordy is finally gonna drop her Angel Bomb! Excited to see what exactly the thing in the lake was.

konstantinvoncarstein

It seems unlikely. The Angel thing is to be used against the Dead King, not some priests who forget their place.

Shveiran

Exactly. She has SOLDIERS for this. In her seat of power, the Holies have influence but she has no contestant for might.

IDKWhoitis

So uh,

What are the odds that when Cat arrives, the city will be tearing itself apart in a brutal schism/civil war? And if that's the case, how much of the city will be on fire?

And we don't need to ask IF Cat will be blamed.

Because I feel that Cordelia is past half measures and using soft power, and the Holies are done listening to any mortal.

konstantinvoncarstein

Done with soft power? What will she do, go sacking-of-the-Jedi-temple style?

Shveiran

My bet is on a show of force, but not a murder spree. Bodies on the ground would have repercussions on civil order she can ill afford and easily foresee.

Pointed threats, backed by, say, an occupation of the conclave by an armed force, she can more easily smooth over.

mavant

Cue: The Woe becomes a Billy Joel cover band.

talenel

We didn't start the fire. It just keeps showing up everywhere we go.

BlackPhoenix7777

Fire? What fire? Cat doesn't know anything, it was sime other Villain.

[*Liliet*](#)

This time, it was the fucking heroes!

[*Liliet*](#)

I've been saying this for a while: this is a theme song for both Catherine and Amadeus~

[*Liliet*](#)

Catherine and Amadeus: we didn't start the fire...

Malicia: only a sufficient size of a fire can draw the firefighters away from tracking me down for the previous arson,

Cordelia: I *did* start the fire but *they started it first-*

Kairos: ALL YOUR FIRES ARE BELONG TO ME

Hierarch: what fire? All I'm seeing is Wicked Foreign Tyrants

Bard: hiding matches in one hand and fire extinguisher in the other behind her back and widely smiling

Faiir

I tried singing it but realized halfway through Malicia's verse it won't fit 😞

Also:

Wicked Foreign Tyrants getting what they deserve!

[Liliet](#)

unfortunately i wasnt trying ot make it fit)=

and Anaxares would lecture you about how he's not waging war on slaves, only their masters 😊

Andrew Mitchell



... You're on fire! 😊

Gunslinger

The Proceran house of light have been moving against cornflakes haberdash for quite a while now. Are they being manipulated secretly?

Doesn't feel like the Bard (also not everything has to be the bard's plot). Could be Malicia. Long history of Proceran manipulation and she can damage both Procer and Callow with the same weapon.

Also I had the laugh at the line about two kittens and a ribbon defending the pass. I'm going to steal that metaphor

konstantinvoncarstein

Or could just be the HoL being stupid.

WuseMajor

Or it could be... Damn, forgot the name. Black had some kind of ...shoot, ...um... didn't he have a ...not Assassin or Captain or Warlock or Ranger but ...wasn't there another one?

....

.....I guess not. And, even if she existed, I'm sure she wouldn't be behind all the bureaucratic trouble currently facing the kingdom.

[sengachi](#)

Oh. Right. ... I had actually forgotten about her.

konstantinvoncarstein

Her power break the fourth wall 😊

Andrew Mitchell



Shikkarasu

Scribe OP, pls nerf

[erraticerrata](#)

I laughed.

ALazyMonster

Cornflakes haberdash... People we found the Tyrant of Helikes account. Also maybe it's scribe, I mean Black did say that she was preparing to end procer

konstantinvoncarstein

I had forgotten Scribe. You're right, it is certainly her who organized this.

Matthew

It wouldn't make sense as Scribe. Scribe now knows Black is alive and safe and heading deeper into Procer. She has no reason to want to up end Procer.

lennymaster

Maybe she already kicked off the avalanche and is now unable to stop it?

laguz24

This is the scribe's doing but bard is pulling the strings. Scribe as a manipulator does not expect to be the puppet, and the bard can only act through those with the story. Scribe also does not understand what it is like to have a home so does not understand the gravity of her actions. To her, she is simply removing a dangerous system that is threatening black.

Shveiran

She may. Yet I agree she doesn't seem to have a reason to end Procer THROUGH A CIVIL WAR if Amadeus is heading straight into the middle of it.

I suppose there is some doubt Scribe knows he is coming... but then again, that does seem like Scribe shtick.

It is possible she put things in motion previously, and may be unable to stop them now?

[Liliet](#)

It's not obvious though that what he wants is NOT further destabilization of GA.

Shveiran

True, but the reason why I think she'd stop is that a revolting, capital-sized crowd is not easy to control once she sets it in motion. And Amadeus doesn't have a Name anymore.

I guess it depends a lot on what happened when and how much Scribe actually knows, but this kind of moves is a lot smarter when the fire you are lighting is far away from what you love, no?

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus doesn't have a Name, but he *does* have an army. He's not vulnerable to this bullshit, it just puts him in a better relative position – see Cordelia's musings on being unable to afford NOT making all the concessions Cat asks for, at this point.

Shveiran

Amadeus has a very small army, Salia would have a very very big mob, and most of Amadeus' allies at the moment ultimately answer to Cat... which is bound to jump in if the city is eating itself alive, and Scribe knows it.

Cordelia musings refer to a situation where rational people sit across a table and discuss the way forward; it doesn't consider the balance of forces if suddenly its ptchforks everywhere.

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus literally doesnt have to enter the city if there's a mob there.

Note how the events are triggering way before he's in any danger.

Morgenstern

I was more thinking of Scribe... *shrugs

[Liliet](#)

Scribe. Don't forget we have Scribe deliberately destabilizing things.

She's probably continuing where Bard and Laurence left off, that-wise...

Also Cordelia has the best way with words. Remember the barrel of fish? ;u;

Alivaril

Ah, nostalgia. Certain church(s) in our world also had trouble knowing when they should stop poking locals with a sharp stick. Here's to hoping they get the smackdown they deserve. *toasts with wine sweet enough to poison certain Named*

quite possibly a cat

Although in this world, they have much more interventionist gods helping them out. Here you can poke back and the worst that will happen is eternal hellfire after you die. Cordelia could have a very bad time if Above tells their priests that smiting Cordelia and her minions is an acceptable use of Light.

hakureireimu

Except they have never done so from what we've seen. The Gods aren't interventionist at all.

Shveiran

Agreed. Choirs and providence, sure, but no direct intervention from the capital G Gods.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Cordelia could have a very bad time if Above tells their priests that smiting Cordelia and her minions is an acceptable use of Light.

Except that in practice, the gods don't seem to rule on such matters. Mostly they grant capabilities, and let mortals use them according to their own judgement. We've only seen a couple or three exceptions, relating to people who have direct assistance from a Choir.

konstantinvoncarstein

I wonder how Cordelia will respond, but attacking the priesthood is narratively speaking a step more into evil.

I had an idea about the Bard's plan concerning Procer. We know the fact that the First Prince is not a Name impede her. So what if she is trying to make Cordelia a well intentioned tyrant who will become Evil to save her nation? And then put her down via another Proceran, a popular war hero like Rozala, who would gather enough narrative weight (and benefit from the increase of the power of the FP by Cordelia) to create the Name First Prince?

Someguy

I expect her to pull a Henry VIII & declare the Proceran House of Light to be heretics, then have a faction/sect within them that aligns with her interests to be proclaimed the "True House of Light"

NZPIEFACE

She is *not* going to be happy when she inevitably learns of what she proclaimed to the Grey Pilgrim.

Javvies

Too many pronouns, not enough names.

Do you mean Cordelia won't be happy when she finds out about Cat's reminding of Pilgrim that Cat's the one with the cards to play, not Tariq?

Or are you referring to Rozala's promise?

Or are you talking about something else?

NZPIEFACE

She (Cordelia) isn't going to be happy when she (Cordelia) learns of what (the Dread Empress thing) she (Cat) proclaimed to the Grey Pilgrim.

Mental Mouse

Regardless of how that sentence resolves, Cordelia is not too happy with Pilgrim either, especially since she's got a pretty good idea about the plague incident. I think she'll be chuffed when she hears how Cat slapped him down.

Rey d`Tutto

So, will the Visions of the Choir of Mercy cause the confirmation or repudiation of Catherine being titled "Arch-heretic of the East"?

Shveiran

I'm not sure they are enough to cause a repudiation, but why do you think they could "confirm" it? It seems very much a positive effect, I would say the question is about whether or not it is strong enough.

Rey d`Tutto

One fact and two lawyers means at least 5 opinions of what that fact means.

I've known too many Jesuits.

Shveiran

Granted, but...

..."The Choir of Mercy is sending holy visions to show she is not all that bad. CLEARLY that means she is worse than we ever thought possible!" feels... kind of forced.

[siva0526](#)

Why is everyone so willing to forgo the possibility that it's Scribe behind HoL's move? We know she's been working to weaken Pricer from within in the absence of Black's instructions, and this is definitely a move in that direction.

zenanii

What scribe? Why would a scribe be interfering with Cordelia?

[Javvies](#)

Because if it were a Scribe move, Augur would have been able to warn Cordelia.

Remember, Augur is a precog who can warn about planned actions. She only misses unplanned opportunistic acts.

Scribe is good, yes, but I don't think she'd have had the time to infiltrate the House of Light (and at a very high level) via solely unplanned opportunities taken advantage of. Give her enough time, sure, I think she could manage it, but I don't think that she's had the time to do so, especially when she's no doubt had other priorities to work on.

I don't think Augur would (or could) warn Cordelia if this is a Bard move, even if it's several steps removed from Bard.

Shveiran

A very good point.

It is possible that Scribe gave a very tense situation a nudge... but if she tried to do more than that, she'd likely be detected. And if all she did was give a nudge through an opportunity, the situation was mostly independent from her.

lennymaster

What if she had no specific plan in mind and just set up series of situations that may or may not have dire consequences, and this is the one that came into play, maybe even just the first plan?

Considering that she made even Cat forget about her, it might very well be possible that she can fuck with even the Augurs' visions. Black may have suspected that she might be able to do so, but considered the risk to great and the price of failure too costly. Involving Assassin into her plans could just be enough to draw the Augurs' eye, despite Scribes

interference.

There is very little information just what she can do, what her Aspects or the core of her Story consist of. Considering the Calamities power and the fact that she is their sixth means she must have some major abilities.

Shveiran

It's possible. There is still much unknown regarding the limits of Augur and Scribe's powers, not to mention their interaction with each other.

I tend to disagree she can achieve this much just through opportunities, but you may be right.

[Javvies](#)

Scribe has to operate under the assumption that her own abilities don't interfere with Augur's early warning system. Because if Scribe acts like Augur can't spot her and is wrong about that, then she (and Amadeus) are fucked.

Getting the House of Light to make a move this big would require high level infiltration of either broader scope or of specific key figures.

Either way, like I said, I don't believe that Scribe has had the time to get that level of infiltration given the constraints she must be operating under. Especially since infiltrating the House of Light probably hasn't been her highest priority concern – she first needed to make sure that she could spring Amadeus when he was brought to Salia. Remove either the constraints or give Scribe more time, sure, she could get it done eventually.

Plus, we already know that Bard had been working on the House of Light.

[Liliet](#)

>Getting the House of Light to make a move this big would require high level infiltration of either broader scope or of specific key figures.

It's not that big IN COMPARISON TO how they've been already acting though.

[Javvies](#)

Except those prior acts were at the direct, active, and personal urging and intervention by Bard and the Saint of Swords.

And those acts, while having significant, albeit indirect, external consequences, didn't actually involve

anyone outside the church, or the House of Light actually doing much of anything – they held some meetings where two major Heroes told them they should declare Cat the Arch-Heretic of the East, and then they voted on that, and then they had to write out their proclamation.

This, though, involves summoning the Assembly during a time of war, plus apparently detaining someone who is a major interface between the House of Light and the First Prince. This is an even bigger move. This has major direct consequences. This is not something that could be done at the drop of a hat. Something like this should take major amounts of pull.

This is, IMO, something that is more attributable to Bard than to Scribe, especially considering the various constraints Scribe is operating under. Scribe just plain hasn't had the time to pull something like this off without using the kind of planning and planned actions that she knows Augur can and will detect. Scribe has to limit herself to taking advantage of opportunities that appear, and that's a huge limiter on what she can do. Without that limiter, Cordelia would already be dead and Procer would have collapsed into flames.

[*Liliet*](#)

My understanding is that Scribe just had to nudge events along in one of the possible directions they could have taken. Much like Bard would have, I just think that it's about time we saw Scribe's handiwork and the timing of this points to that, narratively.

Shveiran

There is merit in what you say, but doesn't the time factor Javvies brings up makes a lot of sense? Scribe is a string puller, most of all, so doesn't a big move require a lot of preparing the field? It hasn't been this long since Amadeus was captured, was it? Not considering she had to move to Salia by foot at least?

Although... uhm, it could be possible she has communication as part of her powers. If she could start even without being there, that changes a lot, IMO.

[*Liliet*](#)

Oh def. I am making the point that where this move has likely been long built up to, she is unlikely to be currently hastily scrambling trying to undo it, because it works either way.

[Liliet](#)

Oh wait, I confused Javvies with someone else. I'll respond to that separately.

WuseMajor

I wanna say that the last time we saw Scribe was months and months ago. Like "back when Cat left for Keter." So, given that she's apparently very, very efficient, I can easily imagine her becoming the local Moriarty in a month or two and I think she's had three or four.

If nothing else, I'd say that the fact that anyone was capable of planning a coup without Augur outing them, was at least partly due to her.

Darkening

Augur isn't perfect, it was mentioned back when they were planning to go up against the skein for the first time I believe that most oracles can only focus on one subject at a time, and I imagine Cordelia has a lot of subjects to prompt her to look out for, while having no knowledge of Scribe being at play. Especially with Scribe seeming to have a whole aspect dedicated to not being noticed.

Shveiran

True. And yet the working hypothesis is that this goes for Augur's conscious vision; she has a second set handed out by the Choirs when they need to.

In this instance, this threaten to send Procer, and thus the Grand Alliance, and thus Calernia, into a very dangerous spiral.

Wouldn't they take interest? Wouldn't they nudge her to take a peek?

Morgenstern

Not necessarily. Especially when looking at the "which Choir / which stance" conundrum and that the Bard seemed all ready to feed Procer to even the DK. Why not feed it to civil war, too? Scribe's well-meant, but turning-out-bad intentions might just fit multiple other factions' ideas of what's good and proper. *shrugs

Shveiran

You know, I have a lot of beef with Above, but I have to defend them this time... we have no reason to believe either Bard's or Saints' actions have been endorsed by Choirs or Gods.

Caerulea

"Why not feed it to civil war, too?"

Because letting Procer bleed heavily, or even be taken by The Dead King makes him the ultimate, unstoppable evil that took the last refuge of good. Perfect opportunity to kill him. Letting it die to civil war doesn't serve any purpose, and indeed reduces the chance that The Dead King dies. She is not senseless, nor a force to destroy Calernia.

quite possibly a cat

"

Because if it were a Scribe move, Augur would have been able to warn Cordelia."

But would she? Cordelia is going down the road to Evil and already doesn't like Heroes. If Scribe got the House of Light to do something about it? Augur could just put that down as "Evil fights Evil" and declare a Good victory.

Javvies

Cordelia isn't a Villain, and she's Augur's cousin.

I see no reason to think that Augur wouldn't warn Cordelia about stuff Scribe is doing. Especially since our understanding is that Scribe has had two priorities (a) rescue Amadeus, and (b) bring down Procer.

I do, however, suspect that Augur would not be as capable of issuing warnings about what Bard is up to.

Also, again, even if Augur (for whatever reason) cannot or would not warn Cordelia or anybody else, Scribe has to assume and act as though Augur can and will. And that means, Scribe is more or less limited to acting only through taking advantage of opportunities, not through planned actions. I just don't think that Scribe has had enough time, given the constraints she's operating under.

Liliet

Note how unsurprised Cordelia and her spies are to hear of this. Pissed off, yes, but they're not like "WAIT WHAT?! NO WAY THIS CAN'T BE RIGHT". This move is not actually a

huge deviation from the House of Light's normal behavior, it's entirely in line with how they'd been acting. A nudge here or there would suffice to make sure they take the most radical stance *of all available*.

Mental Mouse

Aside from the other arguments, I'll point out that Scribe may be sneaky and ruthless, but she is also a Named Villain. I seriously doubt she has any entry whatsoever into the House of Light, and trying to mess with them would be deeply unwise. At least some of those priests surely have enough power from the Light to no-sell Scribe's own powers.

JJR

Three kittens and a ribbon. I'm just imagining a huge army in a confused halt because the people at the front stopped to play with the kittens and there's no room to go around.

Liliet

I love the thought that this is the legitimate size of the pass
♥ ♥ ♥

Mental Mouse

"It's just a cute little kitten!" *a few seconds later* "AAAHH!
Run away, run away!"

ninegardens

Sounds like a Scribe play.

Big I

Iron sharpens iron.

I wonder if Cordelia will ever realise that she's become a Tyrant? At least the Dread Emperors are upfront about what they are.

Sparsebeard

Yeah, that chapter had so many villainous flags, but the name is perhaps the biggest one...

RoflCat

I mean....

>She fully intended on securing as many gains as she could for Procer and the Grand Alliance, yet she would do so with the preservation of the Accords in mind.

What does that reminds me of...oh yeah.

>"We will twist around the spirit of every rule while obeying the letter," the green-eyed man said. "We will lie and cheat and hide our sins, while dragging into light those of our foes and rivals. We will seek to twist the laws as a tool for our ambitions and a sword to slay our enemies. We will hide behind every protection afforded and make red art of the details that save or slay. We will defend our advantages and seek to unmake yours, never once faltering in our callous greed."

>The grin went wider still, a madman's grin. A challenge.

>"And yet we will uphold the Liesse Accords, you broken old thing, and wage war on any that would unmake them," the Carrion Lord said.

She is acting exactly like what Black say Praes would in regard to the Accord.

hakureireimu

I don't think she has the necessary story-fu to see where she's going. After all each of her steps are very reasonable from her point of view, so she'll be ignorant until the day when she literally wakes up with a Name.

Raved Thrad

How does "Dread Prince" sound? 😊

Faiir

Iron prince, duh

[Fayhem](#)

I mean, that's already the cognomen people use for her uncle. Could be awkward.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I think more likely she'll find that "First Prince" has become a Name.

konstantinvoncarstein

I doubt that a Name weared by the sovereign of a Good country could be irremediably Evil. Maybe First Prince could be like Squire, depending on the person?

[Liliet](#)

I've been saying that... 😊

Mental Mouse

Actually, correcting myself: It's looking more and more likely that the Principality as such is going down in shambles. Cordelia may well emerge as the Iron Queen (or King? 😊) of the Kingdom of Procer.

sengachi

Huh. What are the odds this is the Bard's response to Catherine pushing forward the Liesse Accords, trying to sabotage the lynchpin of the negotiations Cordelia?

Liliet

Why would she? She literally MADE the League of Free Cities

Faiir

It's funny/tragic how Cordelia thinks of herself as the smartest person ever, and consistently underrates her enemies.

She considers the fact that a neutral country between Procer and Callow leading to less conflict is a kind of far reaching event that even the Black Queen couldn't foresee? What?

It feels a bit like conclusions of a kid listening in to an adult discussion and thinking: "They're all wrong since they didn't talk about that one obvious thing I did think about so I must be smarter than them!"

sengachi

To be fair, that does seem to be roughly the level of competency she's comes to expect from many of her nobles. To be less fair, treating your enemy who has basically done the exact same thing that's your crowning achievement (coming to rule a country in a time of strife for its own good through force of arms) as anything less than your equal and peer is indeed very dumb.

RoflCat

I mean, Black had to point out to Cat about what kind of institute it will actually become, beyond her initial expectations.

Faiir

True, but Cordelia should take into account the fact that Cat has savvy advisors 😊

Liliet

Well, she can only be referring to what Cat had realized at the time of writing the document she's drawing conclusions from. The fact that Catherine might have had more realizations since this draft is outside the bounds of what Cordelia is talking about.

Dresden 67

Actually I think the bit about Cardinal being more important than the Black Queen realises is more of a mirror of what Amadeus told Cat, that Cardinal will become the royal court of Calernia.

The fact that it will prevent war between Procer and Callow is obvious.

The text of the Accords though seem to be focused on Cardinal as the location of the Academy, the council and the enforcement. Black was the one who pointed out to Catherine that between the location, the Academy and the neutral ground, Cardinal would inevitably become the center of trade, diplomacy and sorcery in Calernia.

I think that's what Cordelia was referring to.

Shveiran

Agreed. I think Faiir is right saying that Cordelia usually underestimate her opponents and oveestimate her own foresight.

But as Dresden pointed out, she doesn't underestimate them THAT much, and has objectively good skills.

WuseMajor

"It was becoming increasingly evident they'd all severely underestimated Catherine Foundling, and that her game was a long one indeed."

...and then she proceeds to attribute the diplomatic prowess to Viv and later says that Cat doesn't see how important this city is going to be.

Really, Cordy, why don't you start overestimating her for a change? You'll be able to be smug when you're wrong then, instead of feeling stupid like you do now.

Valkyria

I wonder who had their fingers in the pie here...
*cough*bard*cough*

So go get them girl! Show those Above fanatics their place!

I really want to have Bard vs Cordelia at some point. (Most likely sooner than later, considering the Bard wants to end the whole country...)

Andrew Mitchell

♥ ♥ ♥ seeing Cordelia finally admit that she and Cat are largely on the same side, AND the fact that she sees the issues with Heroes as well. Her internal monologue here was that of an entirely reasonable person, IMO.

It will be interesting to see what's up with the House of Light calling the Assembly to order. Don't they know that Cordelia has the votes to crush them? Will the representatives of Good finally find a way to fuck up the ACTUAL progress that is being made?!? Have the choirs spoken to the House of Light and told them to stop the peace being made OR maybe even to support it?!? **And what role, if any, has the Bard played in this?**

[Liliet](#)

I love Cordelia very much...

Also, it's not impossible that the pressure from the House of Light can straight up override the influence Cordelia has on those votes.

Soma

CatCor confirmed.
RozCat confirmed.
RozCor ???

[Liliet](#)

-claps palms together in prayer-

ChillyPepper

The real question is... Where are the gnomes?!

konstantinvoncarstein

Why?

Aotrs Commander

Probably not interested at the moment. They seem only to care about technological advancement, and that's not at play here.

I think the gnomes probably exist mostly or entirely (at the moment) more of a reason why Calernia has been stuck at the same tech level for as long as it has (which is, to be fair, a better excuse than most fantasy worlds get, even the good

ones). I doubt they will play any part in the current conflicts. (I mean, I could be wrong, but it doesn't seem likely.)

Now, is the continent actually stabilises – especially if the Accords break the god's game – in a theoretical that is when the might become a functional antagonist, as a stable continent is one that might start looking to improving itself overall. And then it depends really on why the gnomes do what they do, whether it is out of spite to keep everyone down just for the benefit of themselves to maintain technological superiority, for fear the endless wars will spread further than Calernia (and thus they might be more tolerant with peace) or whether this has all been done on the auspices of the gods or even of Bard in service of the great game.

Now, I suppose if they are divinely mandated to do it, if the Accords come into place and the game breaks, the gods might order them to go murder Calernia out of spite; but given that the implications are they'd curb-stomp everyone effortlessly, that doesn't seem like would come to pass, simply because "and then everyone on Calernia died" doesn't make for a good story out-of-universe.

(Nor in it, come to that; but perhaps that is the only out Calernia would have, pulling Fantasy Independence Day on the gnomes...)

agumentic

>Now, I suppose if they are divinely mandated to do it, if the Accords come into place and the game breaks

The game doesn't break, though, just the rules of it change. And there's nothing saying that the Gods wouldn't be able to shrug and accept the change and see how the game plays out under new set of rules – the nature of it doesn't change, in the end, merely how much collateral damage it causes.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm!

Cassiemouse

This is going to cause one hell of a religious schism. With the Callowan rebel House of Light and the traditional Procer House of Light, what ever Cordelia comes up with and Catherine being a high priestess herself. Religious conflict seems to be the central theme of the coming action.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Ahem. Note that the “traditional” faction of the Callowan HoL are the ones standing against the Villainous Black Queen, it’s the upstarts (House Insurgent iirc) who went along with her.

Cordelia might be able to keep a similar fragment of the Proceran HoL, but the way she’s going, the main body will *correctly* note that she’s heading over to join the Evil crowd.

Overall, I think the game between Above and Below is switching from shatranj/chess, to dice. Or at least backgammon.

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

Correct me if im wrong but a few chapters back i think it was said that the First Prince was digging up a weapon from the lake and tightening her grip on the government. Now she is likely to take a hard, even if debatedly much needed, action against the foremost religious organization in service of the Above. Is someone or an ancient something slowly pulling her strings into a position she is unable to see?

Morgenstern

I like that idea of a rumor. But it has already been there and has been debunked. Remember the one that got burned by the angels because they wanted to look at the Peregrine for exactly that doubt as a reason for their actions (they’d been called upon to perform by higher powers... poor servant)? 😊

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

Was that an answer to my name ... I was confused for a bit there 😊

Morgenstern

On a totally different note – is it just my Chapters summary that is broken or are the links to the last chapters in a jumble on the side table for everyone?

For me, it’s normal up to Chapter 63, then the jumble starts:

68

69

64

65

70

66

71

67

Interlude: Iron

Dresden 67

Not just you.

Sparsebeard

Is it Bard or Scribe's work to scuttle the accords?

dalek955

Nowt that you point it out, I'm seeing it too.

Sparsebeard

Or perhaps Cordelia fished out a chaos demon of that lake..

[Mental Mouse](#)

Technical heads-up, before actually reading: The table-of-contents on the side (but not on its own page) is scrambled, starting after Chapter 63.

quite possibly a cat

While its possible that Scribe or Bard had their fingers in the pie here, why not just Augur? Or just Above? Cordelia currently thinks better of the dark priestess Cat, than the unreliable Heroes! She has already taken the first steps towards villainy. Preventing Team Evil from getting Procer is their job.

[Liliet](#)

Above hasn't slapped down House Insurgent.

superkeaton

Given how Saint treated her, and Pilgrim's wiping out of a town, and the utter uselessness of the other heroes she's had at her disposal, I am wildly unsurprised by Cordelia's embracing of the Accords.

Interlude: Rope

*"First, gifted:
Iron to bind
And rope to kill."*

-First of the three so-called 'Mavian Entreaties', found on raised stones across much of eastern and Procer

The anger had come, white-hot and blinding, but it did not last for Cordelia had learned calm at her mother's knee. Mother might have never held an audience or passed judgement without swallowing a sigh of impatience at been the bare bones ceremony of a Lycaonese court, but then she'd never been a creature of halls and laws. The Rhenian blonde still remembered being taken on her first hunt out in the mountains, her ever-restless mother still as a statue for half a night as they waited for the stray ratling to come into arrow's reach. *Patience, sparrow*, Mother had whispered. *Patience and quiet and take your kill only when the time is ripe*. The arrow had taken the ratling in the flank instead of the neck and even at seven Cordelia had been ashamed at the mistake, but the lesson of the night had lasted longer than the chagrin. It had been years since the First Prince had held a blade larger than a knife, much less strung and fired one of the sturdy shortbows her people kept for children and the weak, but unlike Margaret Hasenbach – once Papenheim – she'd not been born for the song of steel and strife. These halls, these laws, were the blades she knew how to wield.

And it seemed someone had begun quite the ambitious game, just under her nose.

The thought lingered and spread after she sent out her messengers, summoning to the ancient palace of the Merovins every trustworthy sword and spear she had in Salia. After that release of anger, the venting of frustration, her temper cooled and she began considering the details of this apparent folly. The Holies had called into session the Highest Assembly, which while truly a power they held if only obliquely – the House of Light had the right to present petitions directly to the Assembly on any day of the year, even on days where no session had been called, which meant the act presenting such a petition could turn into functional summons to one – had been used only sparingly since the Liturgical Wars. They had also ordered the arrest of Brother Simon by their own guards, along with consignment to one of the House's basilicas in the capital. The summons themselves were not an overreach on the surface, though likely in practice, yet the arrest of one of Cordelia's own spymasters and formal court official was a direct challenge to the office of First Prince. One done in wartime, when she held an absolute majority in the Assembly that could not easily be shaken.

Using Simon of Gorgeault's arrest and detainment as a pretext to discipline the Holies would not be a popular measure, not when darkness loomed to the north and faith in Above was the last comfort for so many, but neither would it be the stuff riots were made of. Not when Cordelia had paid lips to whisper her preferred telling of the tale in every great tavern and brothel of Salia,

which the priests knew well she had. They had, in the past, complained of her savaging of the reputation of Amadis Milenan and his allies through such means by the intermediary of the now-arrested Brother Simon. They would know that so long as sanctions were fair and artfully phrased, she would be able to lay them without much trouble. And that after such lasting conflict she would settle for nothing less than a crippling: confiscation of wealth, grain and lands. Every priest not serving provable purpose in their current position sent to the norther fronts to provide healing and moral succour. Cordelia had been pressing for these measures or milder manners of them for some time now and been denied again and again. There was no true short-term gain the First Prince could think of that would be worth the bleeding she would inflict on them in its wake. That was concerning as it meant, in all likelihood, that the House of Light intended to force her to abdicate.

Agnes would have warned me, Cordelia thought. Though her cousin's peering eyes had been on the darkness to the north and the madness in Iserre, she would not have missed so glaring an attack. And mentioned it even if it were doomed to failure, which the fair-haired prince was unwilling to believe out of hand. There was always a way to end a reign, even if it was as simple as a knife in unscrupulous hands. And so the deeper game she'd glimpsed began to take shape for while one failing was a mistake and two ineptitude, but three could only be *deliberate*. Of that sudden awareness Cordelia gave no outwards sign, though assessing her current situation she felt her stomach clench. The Rhenian princess had moved from her solar to the beautiful *Gallerie des Hérons* after sending out her summons, for the gallery with the great windows overlooked the outer courtyard where her trusted soldiers would be coming to gather. It was large enough to accommodate an assembly of captains before they set out as well, which she'd been giving instructions in arranging even as she considered the words she'd speak when addressing them. She'd had servants fetching tablecloths and refreshments to make the entire affair seem less of a hasty arrangement, but the great gallery was rather empty of other company.

The First Prince idly strode towards the great open glass window, a time-worn but still powerful enchantment on the windowsill keeping out most of the wind and cold from winter's last gasps. Cordelia pretended to enjoy the view, though in truth she'd been gazing to see if any of her Lycaonese soldiers had come. They had not, and the soldiers in the courtyard below were all in the livery of Salia itself – which meant they were little more than city guard, and of suspect loyalty. Half a step had her body angled so she could study the gallery through its reflection on the glass, as she casually set a hand on the lukewarm windowsill and allowed fatigue she truly felt to reach her face. Eight, nine, ten servants in the hall. All with an Alamans look to them, none that she'd brought with her from Rhenia. Louis of Sartrons

had departed some time ago to reach out to any Circle of Thorns agents in the capital, yet the second of her three spymasters had remained at her side. Balthazar the Bastard had taken being so surprised by the Holies poorly and been in constant conference with some of his spies since. He offered fresh reports to Cordelia regularly, having early on found out where Brother Simon was being held and confirmed that ever current sitter of the Assembly had been sent for by the House of Light.

Even as the First Prince watched, a woman in rough fantassin leathers was allowed in by the guards guarding the southern entry to the gallery and made her way to where the head of the Sliver Letters was seated to whisper in his ear. The ferocious-looking spymaster heard her out, replied in a low tone and sent her off. Cordelia looked away before her scrutiny could be noticed, instead assessing the guards surrounding her. Eight at the southern and northern entrances, all in Salian livery. There were another three discreet doors in the gallery, from what the tall blonde could recall, though through the glass reflection she could only see two. Servant entrances for two of the three, and the last would lead to a privy room for guests too inebriated to stray far to relieve themselves when feasts were held in this gallery. She knew which of the three was the first servant door – one of the maids she had sent for cloths mere moments had left through it – yet did not know the other two, which meant attempting to leave through one risky. Cordelia knew there would not be two chances to slip the noose, which was why she studied the soldiers assembling below in the courtyard. Near fifty now, still all Salians. Could that many truly have turned their cloak?

Were she trying to isolate the First Prince of Procer within her own palace she would have only moved after ensuring she had enough conspirators to do so, yet there was no telling if her enemies had been forced to move early. Having kept the jaws closing around her hidden so far might mean as much, springing from fear of what she might do were she aware, or it might simply be consequence of a preference for discretion. The odds were better down there, she thought, than with the guards at the entrances. The courtyard must be at least ten feet below, and solid stone. Her blue dress, while not so impractical as to make it impossible for her to move quickly, would still be ungainly. The First Prince of Procer kept herself from stiffening when her spymaster's recognizably heavy gait was heard before her. She turned to glance at the approaching Balthazar, allowing the faintest hint of impatience to touch her face.

"Your Most Serene Highness," the black-haired man said. "I've news from the city."

"Speak," Cordelia invited.

"There have been riots in the streets," he grimaced. "The priests have claimed that you mean to crown yourself queen and incited the people to violence."

"Unfortunate," the First Prince of Procer said. "They will have to be dispersed, by club if not by speech. Best to act promptly before the unrest can spread. How many soldiers have arrived?"

"Two hundred in the palace barracks, and those that can be seen below," Balthazar said. "I would starkly advise against taking to the street with numbers less than five hundred, Your Highness. Salian riots see stones thrown and knives bared even in times of plenty."

And there it was, she thought. A feasible reason for her to stay here in this hall, cooling her heels as the city went to the dogs around her and conspirators carried out their coup. Balthazar Serigny was one of them, of that there can be no doubt. The Holies could not have her unseated without a vote in the Highest Assembly, and they could not possibly be so foolish as to expect that such a vote could be won without preparation. The House of Light must have reached out to fence-sitters and the discontent, which the Silver Letters should not have missed given their heavy presence in Salia. And to think that Cordelia herself had ordered them to strengthen their presence, in order to expunge the last of the Eyes of the Empire from the capital. She'd invited the wolf at her table, believing it a hound. At least, the Rhenian thought, the conspirators had failed to secure enough votes to unseat her properly. They would not be resorting to such methods if they could use legitimate ones instead. On the other hand, if she was made prisoner and another candidate for her office presented how many of her allies would truly stay with her? Cordelia's grip on the Highest Assembly had not been gentle, though she had been careful never to ruffle feathers without good reason. Some would turn, though, she knew. Some already had under her very nose.

"Send for Captain Haas," she said, making her face imply restrained desire for a frown.

Balthazar would not accede to that, for Andrea Haas was the head of her personal retinue and a hardened killer besides. Cordelia's heart clenched when she realized that her old compatriot had likely been assassinated as a prelude to the coup, though it could not be certain. Agnes... no, they would not touch Agnes. The Augur was too important a strategic asset for them to hurt even if she was Cordelia's cousin. *I can do nothing for anyone from the bear's den*, the First Prince thought. *First I must escape*. Balthazar grimaced, as if reluctant, and she gazed at him with polite impatience until he gave answer.

"Captain Haas had been drinking," the spymaster said. "And is half in a stupor, at the moment. I would send for a priest to sober her, Your Highness, but given the circumstances..."

"As you say," the First Prince of Procer said. "The entire priesthood is suspect until proven otherwise."

"I'll send for the current ranking officer, if you'd like," Balthazar offered. "A Lieutenant Beringer, I believe."

So the conspirators had even sunk hooks in one of hers, Cordelia thought with distaste. It could be a hostage had been taken, she considered, but then she would not glorify the stuff her people were made of. They could be just as venal and treacherous as anyone else, and there were some who might say that the way Cordelia Hasenbach had sent no host to bolster the defence of the Lycaonese realms meant she'd betrayed them first. All of her soldiers here had kin who had either fought at Twilight's Pass or died there. No, their loyalties were no so ironclad as they might have been a year past.

"So long as it does not detract from muster," she idly said. "It seems the Hellgods have my plans in their eye, tonight."

"We'll crush them as soon as we have our forces in order, Your Highness," Balthazar Serigny said. "It is a matter of an hour at most."

Cordelia inclined her head by a fraction and then looked back down into the courtyard, a clear if silent dismissal. There were perhaps a hundred soldier now, some of which had noticed her presence. Not a single one wore anything other than a Salian tabard. There was movement in the corner of her eye, and the First Prince almost tensed before she forced herself not to – and then Balthazar nailed the windowsill with a dagger, biting into the wood, just as her fingers clenched against the wood until they paled.

"Always were sharp, weren't you? For a savage," the man casually said, and whistled.

Half the servants unsheathed knives, while a pair of guard on the southern entrance and a single one to the north were slain by their comrades without hesitation. One of the maids tried to run for a door, but a thin man in servant's livery threw a blade without missing a beat and it went through the back of her skull. The others screamed, and obeyed when told to sit on the ground with their hands behind their head.

"It was the lack of a flinch, was is not?" Cordelia calmly asked.

"It's a good trick, when you're dealing with a scheming one," Balthazar grinned. "Anyone would flinch, expect someone thinking they might have a reason *not* to. What was it that gave us away?"

"Agnes would have warned me," the First Prince said. "If she did not, it was because someone prevented her from doing so."

And only the Silver Letters, of all the many possible conspirators in the city, had the means of doing that. They had, in the end, caught the most damning of the weakness in an oracle: a warning meant nothing if it went unheard. It had been four days, since Cordelia last spoke to her cousin. She'd meant to do so, she truly had, yet there was so much to do and if the Augur had an important insight she'd send a messenger to say as much. The servant who were not Silver Letters had all obeyed and knelt, and Cordelia felt her blood turn cold when she saw Balthazar trade a look with one of the assassins.

"No," she hurried said. "Do not-"

Throats cut the servants dropped to the side, one after another, as they twitched and gurgled the last of their life away. Cordelia did not look away. She had not known their names, not one of them. Yet she would learn them, if she survived, these innocents who had lost their lives because she'd not been quite as clever as she thought she was.

"That was unnecessary," the First Prince said, voice raw.

The bearded man chortled.

"Going soft, are you?" Balthazar said. "Can't have witnesses to this, Hasenbach, lest the priests find their scruples after the deed is done and decide to turn on me."

"So the Holies truly are in revolt," Cordelia said, forcing calm. "You did not simply suborn some of my people and feed me a lie."

"Wouldn't move without them," the spymaster said. "No, without the righteous sort at my back this would have been mere wickedness."

The man grinned, revealing crooked teeth.

"This is Above's work, though, or I've been assured," Balthazar said. "Though the full amnesty was more to my taste than some old fool's early absolution, I'll tell no lie."

Amnesty. And there it was, why she'd kept speaking to this stain of a person even as the blood of innocents spread across the panelled floor. Balthazar Serigny was a gloater, and one who had a particular distaste for his social superiors as well as Lycaonese – though the second came as a surprise to her, truth be

told. There'd nary been a hint of it before today. Amnesty over killings within the bounds of the capital could only be extended by the ruler of the principality of Salia, which was however happened to be the First Prince or Princess of Procer. This was, currently, Cordelia herself. The conspirators had therefore a clear successor for her in mind, one that'd gone as far as putting their name to a pardon before the bloody work of dethroning Cordelia had even begun. And there were only a very few people in Procer who could feasibly fill her seat so smoothly. Amadis Milenan might have, before his abdication, and now in his stead Princess Rozala Malanza – who in truth had become a stronger candidate than Amadis had ever been even at the peak of his influence.

Her own uncle, Prince Klaus Papenheim, might also gather such support as the foremost general in the Principate as that realm lay on the brink of destruction. Prince Ariel of Arans might squeak through as a compromise candidate, but the man lacked strong ties outside the eastern Principate. Not the kind of figurehead around which a coup would be birthed, and certainly not when hundreds of thousands of soldiers were marching through eldritch paths into his lands. No, of all these the only practicable candidate was Rozala Malanza. Who, aside from middling talent in scheming, had spent most of the last year on campaign in a principality where scrying was impossible. Which meant either Princess Rozala had hidden her cunning very skillfully, someone of influence was behind her or this was a foreign plot to cripple Procer just as it seemed possible for it to be saved. Cordelia's heart whispered of Malicia, the old enemy in the East, but the Dead King was conceivable foe as well – though through clandestine intermediaries, for the Rhenian doubted even the lowest of the low would strike bargain with the Hidden Horror directly.

Or, Cordelia grimly thought, they might be fools. They grew scared of what they saw on the horizon, rustled up someone of high enough birth and used them as a figurehead for this ill-advised butchery. That the Holies might truly be so arrogant as to presume they'd be able to force the election of their chosen candidate without any real support seemed unconvincing, but Cordelia Hasenbach was not so conceited as to deny that the measures she'd taken to ensure the survival of Procer might lead others to act against her this dramatically. Out of fear or principle, or perhaps even the heady potion that could be brewed from both together. It did not matter, in the end. Order would be restored, and everyone who'd lent their hand to this utter lunacy made to dance at the end of a rope. Balthazar, sure he had her in hand, moved away from the window.

"Now be a good girl and sit down in a corner, Cordelia," the spymaster grinned. "You might even make it out of this alive, if you do as you're told."

He'd left the knife in the windowsill, she saw. That simplified matters. The blonde princess snatched the dagger's handle, ripping it clear of the wood. The large bearded man looked at her with a mixture of contempt and amusement. He was a former soldier, a hardened killer and significantly larger than her. There were more than a dozen soldiers and Silver Letters as well, now all casting eyes on her. Uncle Klaus, she thought, would have said something outrageously obscene before baring his sword and attempting to fight his way through. And, brave stubborn old warhorse that he was, he would have died trying.

"I suppose even the runt of the litter will know a little fighting," Balthazar Serigny laughed. "Go on then, *First Prince*. Impress me."

The princess' cool blue gaze swept the room, burning every face into her mind. Names she might not have, but this would suffice. *Patience, sparrow*, her mother's voice rang. *Patience and quiet and take your kill only when the time is ripe.*

"Before spring comes," Cordelia Hasenbach calmly said, "I will see you all hang."

Before they could reply she slashed at her own breast before dropping the dagger. Shallow but long, the wound bled vividly and began soaking her dress. Even as surprise and confusion bloomed across the faces of those looking at her, the First Prince climbed the windowsill and threw herself down into the courtyard. The landing was painful, and she did not suppress her scream as she felt her leg crack.

"Murder," Cordelia called out to the crowd of soldiers looking at her. "Treason! Serigny tried to assassinate me!"

It was time to find out, she thought, whether Alamans gallantry was an empty boast or not.

pagesbe

Okay. Cordelia, I have my problems with you, but holy shit are you badass when it comes down to it.

Also, I am more convinced than ever this is Scribe's work.

My very own name

"There's only one person that can stab me, and that's me" –
Cordelia Hasenbach

mavant

Nobody out-crazies [Cord]elia!

[Javvies](#)

Blasphemer! Burn the Heretic!

Cordelia doesn't do the crazy shit. She's normally a planner and plotter. She's just not an incompetent when she has to improvise. We think. There is not yet definitive evidence either way on that, although, her escape shows promise.

Unparalleled crazy shit is the purview of Kairos, goblins, and Cat. Also Bard, probably.

Faiir

Yes.

Parker

Agreed on both points.

I keep forgetting about Scribe. I swear, her name should she Spy, she blends so well into the background. Only coming to the forefront to cause devastation and unrest before disappearing again.

WuseMajor

It's one of her powers. I think.

...who were we talking about again?

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Imp, maybe?

ALazyMonster

I feel even more confident in my prediction last chapter that this is all scribes work.

Also Scribe's Name being scribe fits better for her being unnoticed so often I mean the best way to not be noticed is to simply be background noise. How many people can honestly say that they perfectly remember little people who do things like sign paperwork, take out trash, or a hundred other menial things? Like does anyone remember the last interaction with a person at a DMV that they had? Baring them doing something to really make an impression, I would speculate not. I now realize that I'm rambling about why I feel like

Scribe is such an appropriate name, but that isn't going to stop me from posting this.

naturalnuke

If it was a name like Spy we would remember. But Scribe just sounds so... uninteresting.

Faiir

You're right – Spy would be a James Bond, while Scribe is an actual spy 😊

[Fayhem](#)

If we're considering the tendencies of many less-than-practical Named to go for maximum drama and minimum planning, Spy might be just as likely to be a Sterling Archer.

...God, Archer but with Named abilities. I think I just low-key frightened myself.

[Fayhem](#)

Ayyy lmao read my last sentence again after posting and realized that technically we already have an Archer with Named powers.

Faiir

And she would fit right in the Archer series!

[Fayhem](#)

Picturing the LANAAAAA yelling but with Catherine's name instead. And ofc Zeze is obviously the Krieger of the group.

...Oh shit, is Black the Mallory of the group?

Slider

"later revealed to have been Dread Emperor Traitorous all along"

Named or not, scribes and the like tend to be ignored, like this epigraph showed.

Sparsebead

Who?

Draconic

I do not think this was Scribe's doing. She might have started it, but as soon as she heard that Amadeus is free, and on the way to a conference with Cordelia, she should have abandoned this plan.

Though I think it's entirely possible that she was the one who started this conspiracy, but the Holies and other people involved went ahead without a thought once she abandoned it (and stopped holding them back from being way too hasty). It would also explain some of the rough edges.

[Liliet](#)

Yep. That's my reading too.

Although I would add that Scribe likely stopped putting in effort but didn't care to try to stop it either. She does not *care* about anything but her precious Amadeus, not even things that he cares about.

Levi Kalden

Nah, probably bards work because of her ties to the church

taovkool

Okay, that was well played.

If the story goes against you, then just change the damn story.

NerfContessa

Really I expected her to have some ritual up her sleeve when she wounded herself.

But dang, she has balls of solid neutronium.
Well played Cordelia.

Shequi

So, this is Eudokia's plot to destabilise Dalia/Procer, and co-incidentally weaken the influence of the House of Light.

Now, was Scribe's true intention for the coup to succeed, putting whoever her nominee is in place on the Throne of Salia, or is Scribe's intention that the coup fail, and the Silver Letters (Procer's counter-intelligence branch, let's remember) be purged, giving Scribe's agents an easier time of infiltration after the fact?

pagesbe

The best plans are the ones where success isn't binary. The ideal situation could be for Cordelia to be overthrown, with

the benefit of even if it fails Cordelia's spy network is gutted.

Faiir

Exactly, why not both?

Rup



[minichirops](#)

Thank you. I was going to say that, but less succinctly.

[Barthumphries](#)

Also, not really caring about the outcome and working towards a binary goal is the most important step to defeating an Auger.

jalexanderb

I'd say her goal is 'destabilize Salia', and she's already succeeded perfectly. No matter which outcome follows this, that's just icing on the cake.

[shieldredblog](#)

If Scribe knows about the Accords and the Black Knights escape, the House of Light could be her target. It would be the single greatest opponent to the Accords.

Or the nature of the Auger meant she didn't have the luxury of choosing a target. She just leaned into the first conspiracy she stumbled upon in retaliation.

[Liliet](#)

That's what I'm seeing.

Ιούλιος Καίσαρας

"Now, was Scribe's true intention for the coup to succeed, putting whoever her nominee is in place on the Throne of Salia, or is Scribe's intention that the coup fail, and the Silver Letters (Procer's counter-intelligence branch, let's remember) be purged, giving Scribe's agents an easier time of infiltration after the fact?"

Yes.

Sylwoos

The coup succeed: Scribe put Malanza, who's currently marching with Cat, on the throne.

The coup fail: Cordelia will have to deal from a position of extreme weakness with Cat, who's marching toward the city with a army, to crush the House of Light and secure her position.

Result: Whoever end up ruling in Procer will be in Cat's pocket.

Kel the Seer

Scribe has never liked Cat, since even as a candidate for the position of Squire was a direct threat to Black's life. The Name of Squire is intended to transition into the next Black Knight, whether by killing the current holder or taking over after their death. Scribe intimated as much early in the series and sees Cat as a blind spot for Amadeus. Cat's last interaction with Black was to stab him before walking away, leaving her firmly on Scribe's bad side.

I agree that she has multiple goals in place to position herself for even further goals, but I don't see those as necessarily helping Cat out. Black on the other hand...

He is about to walk into a conference surrounded by enemies (Grand Allince, Pilgrim, etc), some of whom will want him imlrisoned or executed for his actions in Procer. Removing an accomplished politician (Cordelia) with a less accute ruler, weakening the Holies, destabilizing the alliances in the Assembly, gutting the multiple spy groups in Procer, etc. None of those are so at odds that they cannot all be simultaneously accomplished. Each that fails still weakens threats to Amadeus. Each that succeeds puts him in a stronger position when he sits at the table and either way the chances of him being executed are lessened with each plan.

After all, when the Accords reached Cordelia vis scry, Scribe likely learned all the details since she was probably the unassuming scribe recording it all for Cordelia to review. She thought Black should have claimed the Tower before. If he is the signatory for Praes on the Aaccords and squeezes for all the consessions that he can, doesn't that play favorably into a story of his ascent to Dread Emperor?

[frolamiz](#)

Iron indeed.

IDKWhoitis

A cunning old fox will chew off its own leg to escape a trap.

A cunning Cordy will stab herself in the chest and cry out "Treason!" to survive a coup.

A tired Catherine would probably just dip that section of the city in Goblinfire and call it a good night...

jalexanderb

Goblinfire is so Book 2. Theres a whole lake right there just waiting to be repurposed.

Death Knight

Goblinfire burns anything yes? So why not combine the best of both worlds and burn the surface of the lake with goblin fire then drop said burning lake on the enemy?

jalexanderb

Robber, waking suddenly and sitting bolt upright
"I've never been more aroused, and I have no idea why."

Rup

..now THAT is a mental image 🐱

Nairne .01

I guess you could call that a version of napalm.

IDKWhoitis

Well, everyone is going to blame Catherine for the fires anyways, and then somehow still interpret the attempts to put it out via Lake as some sort of double tap attack.

I didn't remember that Salía was so close to a lake. How convient.

RoflCat

You mean a tired Catherine will be greeted with a city on fire and have to sort the mess out before a quick nap.

And of course they'll blame her for the fire.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

At this point, enough people are making jokes about Catherine being blamed for fires that she'd probably have picked up a curse from the stories if she was still Named.

edrey

it's scribe, right? Eudokia is the kind of spymistres that use others spies as tools, ironic i have to say.
well, with this the house is done and cordelia have free hand to clean the other nobles

Oshi

Most likely. This is the perfect time to strike. It destabilizes Procur while leaving her technically out of it. Scribe probably spent time setting things up to interfere with the Augers messages then just let the conspirators move up the time table.

gagesbe

Cordelia will probably be either dead by the end of the story, or have started a new monarchy, because if she survives and keeps her position power is probably going to be even more consolidated around her.

RoflCat

Well, I'm sure Cardinal could use another personnel with such foresight for peace and the will to bleed for the long run.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, in addition to the in-world story mechanics, Cordelia has Plot Armor like whoa, because *there is simply no plausible replacement character for her Role.*

After the Princes Graveyard, AFAICT there are two foreground characters who could plausibly succeed her as ruler of Procer: The Iron Prince is established as military with no political acumen, so scratch him. The most plausible character available is Rozala, and she left her sword in the ground of Issere – not exactly a decrowning, but deeply symbolic. That said, Rozala and friends, *are* heading there via Twilight, so they'll show up Sooner Than Expected, but I think not soon enough to intervene in this.

Hmm. Maybe the local forces of Iserre will be the ones to save Cordelia's bacon.

beleester

I think Rozala and friends **will** show up in time to intervene. I think that Scribe (or whoever it was) is running an imposter plot – sending messages in Rozala's name to organize the coup while she was away fighting in the south. That would explain why the conspirators say they have a signed pardon from their backer, even though (as Cordelia

notices) it would be extremely difficult for Rozala to have run such a scheme while she was cut off from scrying.

And the natural way to throw a monkey-wrench into this plot is for the *real* Rozala to unexpectedly show up before the coup is complete and reveal the deception.

Mental Mouse

Eh? What makes you think even Rozala's name is involved here? the HoL we know, and the traitor strongly implied they were backing him directly.

Javvies

This conspiracy would need a Prince or Princess to become First Prince instead of Cordelia.

Cordelia was running through the candidates for a coup, and Rozala was one of the few names she came up with as viable candidates to be behind this.

That said, Rozala isn't behind it. Though it's not impossible that somebody's using her name. Probably unlikely, though.

However, if there's an actual Prince knowingly involved in this, it's probably a non entity as reigning Princes(ses) go, who is probably going to be more of an overly ambitious figurehead and take orders, rather than give them.

Hellspirit

Interesting,

Scribe, Bard or Procerean.

Seeing that it's guide-verse, probably all of it combined.

theothin

Don't forget the Free Cities. This seems like a good time for Hierarch to make his move.

Liliet

Doesn't really sound like Hierarch's MO to me.

Mental Mouse

Even the Dead King is a possibility, given this wouldn't require a military intervention by him.

Javvies

Hmm.

Well, we know Rozala isn't behind this.

I wonder how someone managed to cut off Augur from getting messages passed.

That seems like the sort of thing she'd send a warning about before it happened.

Which means that somebody had to acquire one helluva lot of connections and pull without alerting Augur in order to cut off her communications through some sort of unplanned action.

Oshi

It doesn't have to be a consistent thing just a once. Right time right place and a message lost.

[Javvies](#)

That's good for one message ... but Augur would most likely have sent multiple messengers. Especially for something this big.

It's been four days ... which means every messenger has to have been stopped for those four days. Because if the future Augur is seeing doesn't change, that means Cordelia hasn't done anything about it. Especially since Augur's predictions usually require some measure of follow up and clarification by Cordelia, and Augur knows that.

[shieldredblog](#)

I doubt Scribe is blocking access to the Augur, she just hung around until she found an opportunity to convince the Silver Letters to do it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

You're thinking in terms of our world (e.g., "redundancy for critical functions"), and also considering Augur as if she were a guard "watching the radar".

In Guideverse, "the critical message was intercepted" has enough story power to stand on its own. Also, Augur is not so worldly or aggressive as Cordelia. The conspirators could simply subvert or replace the messengers assigned to Augur and isolate her just as they tried with Cordelia.

I'm still not so sure it's Scribe, but with this new layer of the situation, now I'll grant it *could* be, because she wouldn't have had to deal with the House of Light itself – just give their secular allies a bit of help and confidence.

Quite Possibly A Cat

"I wonder how someone managed to cut off Augur from getting messages passed.

That seems like the sort of thing she'd send a warning about before it happened.

Which means that somebody had to acquire one helluva lot of connections and pull without alerting Augur in order to cut off her communications through some sort of unplanned action."

Or Above really is behind this because Cordelia is on her way to becoming a Villain?

Javvies

Or, it's Bard, and Augur's abilities don't work right on what Bard does and sets in motion.

Also, we know Bard could do this without difficulty.

Morgenstern

It could be the Bard is just profiting from what Scribe was going to do anyway – ensuring she 'succeeds' in that...? Because no one will ever find out the Bard had her hand in that pie, too, right?

Whatever it is, I hope we'll at least get a hefty sum of speculation in-book. An explanation at some point would be so much better, of course... damn, curiosity. Speculating is fun, but only so long.

Mental Mouse

Another option: Augur predicted that any message to Cordelia would be intercepted, so she instead sent something by a back-channel to "the cavalry", (say, the Iron Prince or the Lycaonese troops) who will show up in due course.

erebus42

The Scribe (whom I believe is responsible for this coup) is nothing if not resourceful, not to mention the fact that she and Black had already been studying the Augur for weaknesses. Honestly if someone is going to subvert the efforts of the Augur it feels right that it would be the Scribe. I really hope we get to see more characters with non-action related Names take on a greater role. There's just so much untapped potential...

Javvies

I think it's Bard, not Scribe.

The operational constraints required for Scribe to bypass Augur are brutal – no planned actions, only taking advantage of naturally occurring opportunities as they appear. I just don't think Scribe has had the time to pull this off

given the constraints she has to operate under to avoid Augur's precognition.

At least ... I don't think Scribe has had the time to do this without someone else (Bard) doing stuff to clear the way and set things up for her to take advantage of.

imagesbe

Scribe doesn't have to fool or trick the Auger in her current position. She just has to stop any summons from auger from reaching Cordelia's ears, and since the spy network is compromised that can't be THAT hard. Also Scribe could have purposefully caused unrest but in a less aggressive way, then taken advantage of people's natural distaste towards Cordelia taking steps towards be a Tyrant (though that part's just speculation on my end).

We even have foreshadowing in an earlier book when Scribe was going to try and create opportunities to take later to try and get around the Auger.

carrier

It's that hard because she would know the conspiracy during the planning or even before it.

Some power must have been used to counter the Auger

[Liliet](#)

If only we knew someone with the ability to be so utterly beneath notice that even people who know her personally would forget about her existence even when she's being actively talked about...

[Mental Mouse](#)

Bard also has a known motive. She said flat out to Cat that Procer "has been a fire in my lap since its founding". Suppose it turned into a proper Kingdom?

She'd be fine with a Villainous Queen of Procer for now – yes, it would throw the continental balance even further towards Evil, but that will correct itself – especially if the Dead King gets taken down. Once Cat goes off to Keter or wherever, Callow would still love to have a Heroic sovereign (and Viv was never all that Evil, she could easily flip back), Kairos will burn himself out in due time, the Titanomachy isn't going anywhere, the Levant is surprisingly stable with some good leadership in the wings, and Cordelia... well, even if she gets a Villainous Name, she's got plenty

of enemies. (And might have more when whatever she fished out of that lake comes to light.)

Incidentally, the thing from the lake is also a solid motive for the HoL's attempted coup, it's not unlikely for them to have found out about it!

hakureireimu

I see that Cat "convincing" Amadeus on the Accords is the end to the Scrib-gone-rogue plot line, because if it's good enough to sell to more than half of the High Lords, then it's good enough to sell to Scribe.

Faiir

Is it though?

Convincing Black was based on showing signatories that each of them has something to gain.

Convincing Scribe requires showing that Black has nothing to lose due to Accords.

[Liliet](#)

Yeeep. She's not exactly on the same page as him wrt long term goals ;u;

Also, he'll need to have talked with her. I'm not seeing how Scribe could have gotten instructions from him prior to this being set into motion.

Huh. Actually, she could have set this into motion prematurely upon getting instructions from him *so that it would fail*. Knocking over the card house.

Quite Possibly A Cat

So it appears Above really is moving against her?

I think killing the servants was a mistake. You can't do Above's work and slaughter servants like that. Just to hide witnesses? That seems like Stupid Evil.

Really the Holies should have gotten the Assembly and used some Light for Smite Cordelia. "Light burned her. She was Evil. I'm petitioning you to elect a non-Evil First Prince. Or at least a cool one. Like that new priestess of darkness."

hakureireimu

Nope. Some people who follow Above is moving against her. We have never seen Above actively intervene without being called on first, even when a tiny nudge could have done lots, like when the Laure House of Light was crowning Cat.

konstantinvoncarstein

It is not above who is moving against her. It is the people forming the HoL, who are only human. The Gods don't communicate with their servants. It is a completely human plot, born of paranoia, stupidity, egoism and manipulation.

Concerning the smithing, becoming a tyrant is bad, but not Evil, so Light would have had no effect on Cordelia.

[shieldredblog](#)

The limits of Light seem cultural, nor inherent. Lanterns can set people on fire with their minds after all. They melted Nauk and he wasn't Evil.

Also, there easily could be a relic or artifact that lets the priests cheat the system. Not to mention some kind of "Chains of Judgement" artifact, that they could use with liberal application of bullshit.

I predict Cordelia will face something like that as she faces down the HOL in the assembly. They will accuse her of TYRANNY and judge her. Then Below will make an actual offer.

konstantinvoncarstein

The Proceran priests can't harm directly someone. I doubt anyone in-universe think she is turning into a Villain except for Catherine. The priest would have no reason to Light her.

[frolamiz](#)

They can, they just choose not to. I'm pretty sure there were some that threw down their vow "for the greater good" in Malanza's army when she tried to invade Callow. So it's very possible for one of them to choose to "sacrifice himself" and do it.

konstantinvoncarstein

Technically, creating fences to block someone's path is not harming them, it is the cavalry that came after that kill the skirmishers. It was not a direct attack like the Lanterns, and I suppose their oaths would be different.

Agent J

I wouldn't even exclude Catherine.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine has directly said she's worried Cordelia might be turning into a Villain

Agent J

Catherine has offhandedly suggested that what Cordelia is doing is something Villains do. That's quite a ways away from suggesting she might get an Evil Name anytime soon.

[Liliet](#)

It's in the same direction though.

Insanenoodlyguy

Nauk was super evil though? I mean, I suspect Lanterns can use those flame powers on anybody within their discretion, but he was a soul-scorched general of the Arch-Vile's army who liked eating people. Just cause he was likable doesn't mean he was Neutral.

konstantinvoncarstein

It was the Lanterns, not the HoL. I suppose their oaths are different.

[shieldredblog](#)

Capital Evil. He wasn't empowered by Below. I don't think the Light actually judges someones morals, as at least some of the priests are horrible human beings. It's all Above vs Below, not nice vs mean.

[Liliet](#)

>They melted Nauk and he wasn't Evil.
I'm fairly sure he worshipped the Gods Below.

Agent J

How sure? I recall it mentioned when Vivi and Haks were contemplating the political ramifications of their soldiers returning to Callow with Crow wings emblazoned on their banners and Haks mentioned most the Fifteenth kept to Below *if they kept to anything at all*. So, which camp was Nauk in. And is there even a distinction in the eyes of Above (or at least smite-happy Angels)?

[Liliet](#)

I mean. Callowans keep to Above, Praesi keep to Below. We don't know about any instances of people actively switching from the religions they were raised in – there

were probably a few, but nothing of the sort was brought up for Nauk, so he most definitely burned offerings to the Hungry Gods exactly like the rest of the orcs.

[Mental Mouse](#)

As others note, Above doesn't touch human politics directly. And as both Pilgrim and the late Saint have demonstrated, killing innocents in a Good cause is totally on the table for Their mortal followers.

erebus42

Well played Cordelia. Well played.
Its gonna make the peace talks kinda awkward if she finds out that the Scribe was behind this. Then again, they might be able to go with the old plausible deniability that no believes but everyone let's stand due to lack of concrete evidence trick.

[shieldredblog](#)

If she does survive this, its likely her position will be much stronger. As the House of Light will be slapped down. Only problem will be the lack of spies after all the loyalty purges.

Oh, and the murdered servants, though I don't think you should blame the scribe for that.

[Mental Mouse](#)

More likely, even if Scribe was involved, nobody ever knows about it. The Bastard and the HoL are perfectly plausible culprits.

konstantinvoncarstein

I like Cordelia, even surrounded by ennemies she managed to think of a plan to escape. And it is definitely Scribe who organized this, but she could not have done it without the sheer stupidity of the HoL. Let's make a coup during a war that we are barely winning, it could in no way backfire!

erebus42

"Pfft, who needs a functioning Principate anyway?! I'm sure if we pray hard enough the Gods Above will stop us from being murdered and risen as part of that big scary zombie-god's undead horde" – Some dumbass of a proceran priest probably

[shieldredblog](#)

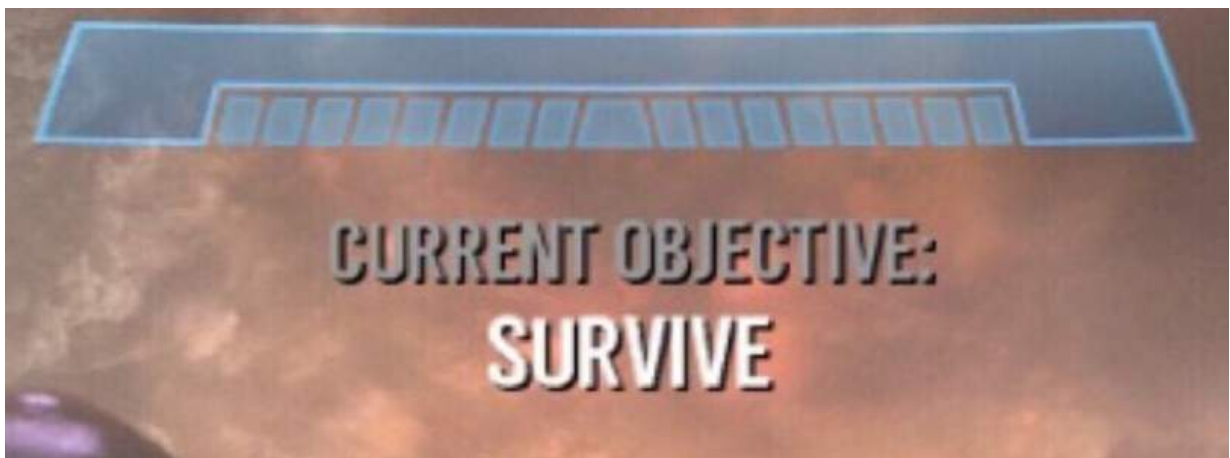
The 10th Crusade will totally work this time, for sure.
Guaranteed!
Have faith.

caoimhinh

To be fair, Cordelia's action of throwing herself through the window wasn't so much a plan as a desperate gamble. She is betting that the soldiers in the courtyard aren't part of the Coup.

Now she has entered Survival Mode, bleeding and with a wounded leg, her trusted guards away and enemies all around. She has to turn the situation by telling the populace about the assassination attempt (apparently the rebels didn't want to kill her, only to depose her), thus the rioting people will turn against the original instigators and protect Cordelia.

In the worst case scenario, Cordelia needs to hang in there until Catherine arrives.



[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, while Cordy may not have explicit story-fu, she has certainly gotten on the right side of a perfectly workable story: Vile treachery against the valiant lawful ruler!

Balthazar needs a good story to counter, and it's not at all clear that he can make "overthrowing the evil Tyrant" work at this stage – he struck way too early for that story to have real traction. Now, If he'd waited until she was gloating about her new eldritch weapon/ally/patron, that would have been a shoo-in.

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah, he already did the classic villian fuck up that Terry Pratchett talked about: He stopped to Gloat. A true good assassination? You kill the vilian as swiftly as possible. The good man who decides you must die doesn't care that you think they are clever, or that you squirm, or lose hope, or bargain uselessly. They just want you dead, so they make you die. It's the evil man that wants those things, and so stops and savors the kill. And so gives you much more chance to survive it.

Amoonymous

They aren't even barely winning the war, they're consistently losing it at a moderately fast pace. Dead King just randomly imposed an armistice from their point of view.

NerfGlastigUaine

I saw every part of this chapter coming except for that last part. Damn, Cordelia does not mess around. Shows you don't need supernatural powers to be a badass.

Nairne .01

Hey, we knew people don't need superpowers to be badass a long time ago – look at the Hellhound and some other members of the 15th (R.I.P Nauk and Ratface).

caoimhinh

Lycaonese are an entire breed of Badass Normals.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Aka Proud Warrior Race Guys. Including the women.

Nairne .01

Their hair just doesn't turn blonde when they get angry.

[Mental Mouse](#)

??? I'm afraid I don't get that reference.

Agent J

Saiyans, most like.

caoimhinh

In the anime Dragon Ball Z, the race of Saiyans become blue-eyed blonde when transformed in the state of *Super* Saiyans, a state that drastically augments their speed, strength, and energy.



anon

That's their secret captain, their hair's always blonde

NerfGlastigUaine

I kinda wish I'd posted in last chapter about my predictions. Thought that things would go to hell and there'd be a bloody coup simply b/c things have been going too well. And b/c I didn't think it'd be as simple as Cordelia thrashing the House through politics. I even predicted a spymaster would betray her, except I thought it'd be Louis b/c Balthazar seemed too obvious. Would have made for a great "I knew it!" moment. It's just I've NEVER been right in my predictions so I didn't air it. Strong regret.

[Liliet](#)

Always air your predictions.

We have a thing on discord where bets for the next chap are collected, and the winners get to change nicknames of losers until next chap. It's a lot of fun to both win and lose, come hang out :3

caoimhinh

Always share your predictions; fan theories are one of the things that spice up web fictions. Whether they are correct or mistaken is actually largely irrelevant.

My hint for something else being wrong last chapter, was when Cordelia noted that *"Two of the most skilled spymasters alive looked at her with faces betraying utter surprise"*. My reaction was "ok, these dudes know something they aren't

saying" but I didn't expect Balthazar to betray Cordelia right away, nor did I expect her to stay guarded only by Balthazar's men.

It will be interesting if Louis also betrayed her, since that would mean Cordelia just lost all, or at least most of, her spy network.

NerfGlastigUaine

Does anyone know how large Calernia is? Like, in kilometres? Just want to get a better mental picture of distances and size.

caoimhinh

Hmm, honestly no one except maybe ErraticErrata can tell you that.

Nothing in the story talks about distance, only in some cases the travel time is mentioned. Even the cities are never referenced by area, but rather by population size.

Although there are maps you can check out (top of the page, the "Art, Maps and Other" section) and make your own mental image of the distances involved, at least in a relative manner. I personally think of Calernia as something about the size of Eurasia.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Smaller than Eurasia as a whole, I think – the equivalents of China, India and Russia seem to be on other continents. More likely Europe proper, maybe out to Turkey or so.

caoimhinh

Yep, maybe just Europe. But don't take the countries in Calernia as direct representations of countries from Earth, especially not in matters of size.

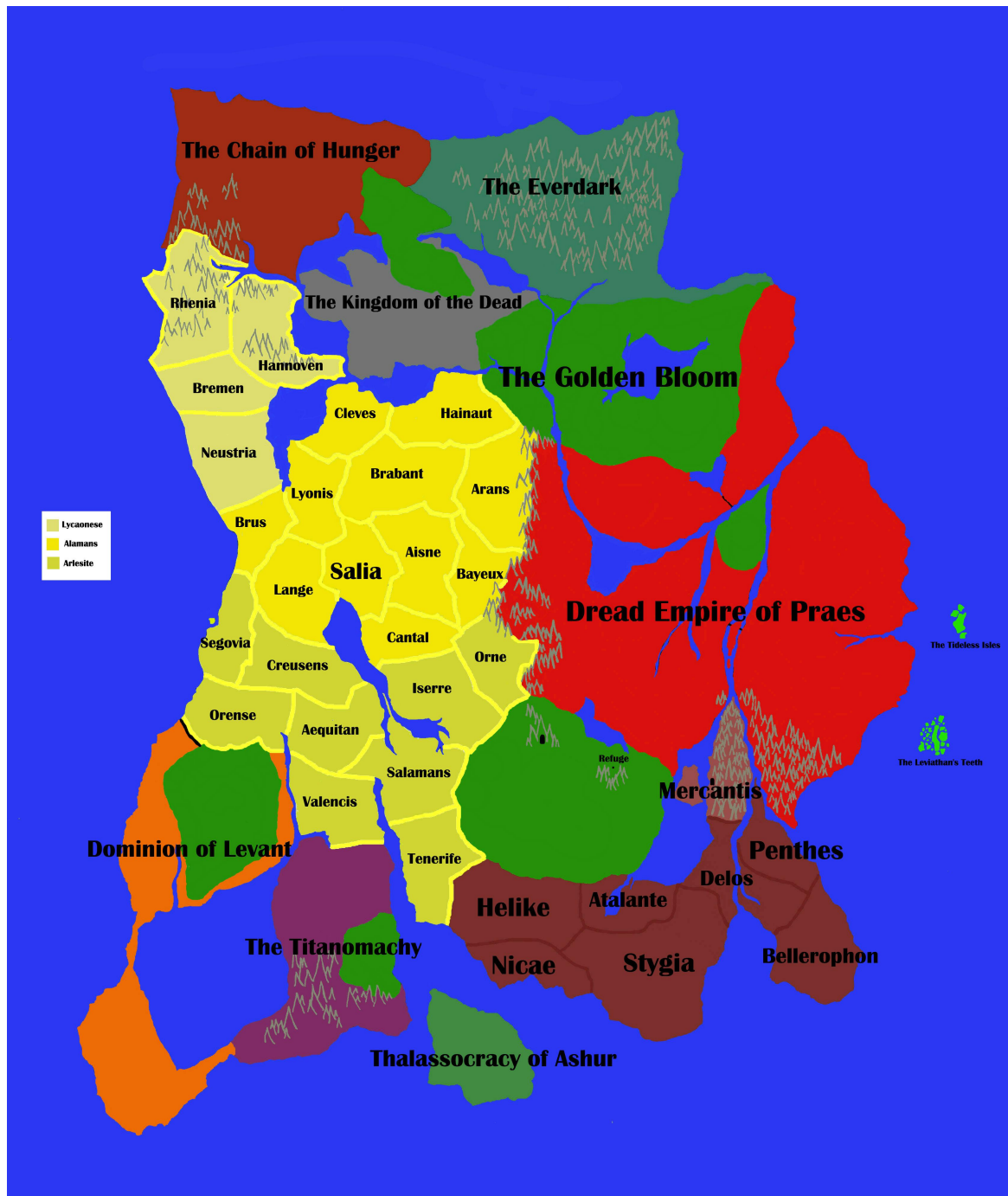
Callow is inspired by England but isn't an island, while Praes is heavily inspired by Africa with some Arabic elements (though Levant also has arabic elements in their design). We don't have much info about the Yan Tei and Yamin-ine (the guideverse China and India) to speculate their size, but the Elves were said by Bard to own a country larger than the whole continent of Calernia.

The maps we have might make it seem as if Calernia is small, but it is definitely very large, to the point that going from one country to the other takes months by ride (Tariq states as much when he goes from Levante to Orense, and Orense has border with the Dominion), and according to Book 3 Chapter 19, going from Marchford to Laure takes a month

and half *on forced march to top speed* and that's just from the southern middle of Callow to the northern middle.

The maps available:





Agent J

I had South America as my reference point. Eurasia is significantly larger than I'd even considered. There's only seven or so countries in Calernia. And only Procer can be considered large by an Asian perspective. At least, how I think of it.

Hells there's over fifty countries in Africa, and what's in Calernia doesn't look large enough to be the equivalent of fifty nations. And Eurasia is bigger still!

Not to mention Black has called Calernia a backwater continent and the Bard said the Elven Nation those of the Golden Bloom originate from is larger than all of Calernia.

caoimhinh

The number of countries isn't equivalent to size. Africa (with 54 countries) has 3 times the size of Europe (with 44 countries).

And with Procer being basically the European Union and Praes being Africa (of which there are plenty of hints, from the language and ethnicity to their political history), I don't think it is an exaggeration to use Europe as a model for approximate size. I agree that the whole Eurasia may be too big for Calernia, but that's merely a mental image that I use (I imagine Africa switching position with Asia, thus I have the Eastern Calernia as Procer and the Western Calernia as the Principate, with the cold lands of the north being Keter, Chain of Hunger and Ever Dark) the actual sizes involved are honestly beyond me, I simply use that accommodation and mental configuration as it makes it easier for me to reference.

Another thing, remember that an important detail about maps is scale, which none of the maps available of Calernia have. All we have as reference is traveling time, and even that isn't a very exact measure.

The maps we have might make it seem as if Calernia is small compared to our world's continents, but it is definitely very large, to the point that going from one country to the other takes months by ride (Tariq states as much when he goes from Levante to Orense, and Orense has border with the Dominion), and according to Book 3 Chapter 19, going from Marchford to Laure takes a month and half *on forced march to top speed* and that's just from the southern middle of Callow to the northern middle.

Also, just because there are larger and more powerful states outside of Calernia doesn't mean that it is objectively small. It's simply that they are weak *when compared to those great powers beyond the sea*. When Black said that Calernia is a backwater continent he meant it in the sense of power and development, not because of size.

For example: The gnomes have airships apparently impervious to magic and missiles (maybe lasers), the Dwarves have superior weaponry, and the Elves superior sorcery, while countries like Yan Tei, Baalite Hegemony and the Miezian were shown to have superior nautical skills and technology that enabled them to sail across the Tyrian Sea and reach Calernia.

[Liliet](#)

My impression is that Calernia isn't meant to actually be very large, erratic is just terrible with estimating travel time.

caoimhinh

Well, designing accurately the geography and size of something is a very hard thing to do. It is extremely rare to see such thing in *any* media, be it movies, books, comics or games. Usually those kinds of calculations are made by careful fans with lots of free time.

That said, Erratic doesn't seem terrible at estimating travel time, it actually has been pretty consistent and also has taken into account that a large force of soldiers on foot is slower than a small group horse-riding.

I'm actually more surprised that there was a successful message network without the use of scrying (Cordelia was shown using birds to deliver and receive messages, but that's still huge distances to cover).

[Liliet](#)

...if you made a detailed timeline that took into account travel times that would be *super neat*

Agent J

> The number of countries isn't equivalent to size. Africa (with 54 countries) has 3 times the size of Europe (with 44 countries).

True. I was using it as a quick an easy reference point and not a hard measuring system.

> And with Procer being basically the European Union and Praes being Africa (of which there are plenty of hints, from the language and ethnicity to their political history), I don't think it is an exaggeration to use Europe as a model for approximate size.

Whoa, whoa, whoa. Slow down. It's long been established (by the readers at least, not sure if we've WoG on the topic) that Procer is the HRE. No one's ever considered it the EU until now. Secondly, Praes is *Africa*? Just the whole continent?

Yes, their language, ethnic description, and even their city names suggest they are based on various African people groups. But, well, that doesn't mean their one country is equivalent to the size of the whole continent.

They're plenty of RL African groups missing with no real Praesi counterparts. Besides, even with scrying, it would be nigh impossible to for a medieval society to maintain an empire the size of Africa with anything resembling the hold Praes has on it's constituents. Let alone stretching to conquer yet even more territory.

Did the Fifteenth really march across a continent's worth of land to get from Ater to Summerholm?

Just because Praesi are African inspired doesn't mean Praes is Africa in size.

> Another thing, remember that an important detail about maps is scale, which none of the maps available of Calernia have. All we have as reference is traveling time, and even that isn't a very exact measure.

Yes, and I'm hard pressed to imagine that travelling from Ater to Laure is equivalent to Going from Berlin to Addis Ababa.

> When Black said-

I'm aware. It was one point in two. Black says they're technologically inferior, and Bard said they were a tiny thing. Coupled together, the impression given is that they are just some small continent off the coast of the real Eurasian equivalent. Else, why would they only have been bothered my mainlanders in the age of antiquity? I mean, how many peopled conquered Africa before and after the Romans/Carthaginians? Why don't the Yan Tei grab a slice if Calernia is a huge plot of land with technologically inferior peoples?

There are European inspired people, African inspired people, and Levantine inspired people, but I just can't see Calernia being anywhere near the size of Africa and Europe together. Europe alone, maybe. Africa alone, I strongly doubt. But both together?

> I'm actually more surprised that there was a successful message network without the use of scrying (Cordelia was shown using birds to deliver and receive messages, but that's still huge distances to cover).

If Procer were the size of the HRE it'd be feasible. I mean, the HRE managed it without scrying.

caoimhinh

Just like you, I'm using those as reference points, not as actual measures. It's simply easier for me to

organize them that way, the actual sizes involved and the calculations of distances are beyond me, as I have said before.

That being said, there are some points I must address:

If by HRE you mean the Holy Roman Empire, the closest equivalent in the Guideverse would be the Miezian Empire who invaded Calernia centuries ago and slaved Praes. Both their structure and historical background hint to that. They are explicitly said to have been the ones introducing Miezian Numerals, the higher order of mathematics, spell formulas, and technological revolution in engineering to the point that ancient Miezian bridges (like the one in the Blessed Isle) still hold to the current day. The few insights we had to Miezian language suggests Latin as its Earth equivalent too, (the names Ater, Praes and Thalassina have latin roots and meaning, for example).

Procer, on the other hand, is a union of 23 different states, and three distinct ethnicities, of which the Lycaonese stand as a Germanic group, while the Alamans and Arlesites have shown traces of French and Spaniard ethnicities, as signaled by their languages and the names of the Principalities.

The First Prince (from which the name Principate comes: *Princeps* means chief or first, as in *First Among Equals*) is elected in a "limited democracy" by the votes of the members of the Highest Assembly, who are the effective rulers of 23 different lands, they aren't vassals under a sovereign, they are an association and each Prince and Princess of Procer is a potential candidate to the office of First Prince. While the name "Principate" may make us think of the early period of the Roman Empire under Ceasar Augustus (and we can see some parallelisms), the Princes of Procer have vast differences with Roman Senators, both in the nature of their power and the influence they hold, as the Proceran Princes are effectively monarchy in their lands with a huge degree of freedom in management and lawmaking.

Maybe Praes is smaller than Africa, sure, but even if it were, scrying and magic are enough to establish effective communication and keep a hold on the territories. The Mongol Empire under Ghenghis Khan was larger than Africa, and had a network of relay stations to deliver messages by riders. Every single large empire in our world has done similar things to establish a firm communication between its center of power and the lands under its control. Magic vastly simplifies the issue.

As for why other nations beyond the sea don't attack Calernia anymore, we don't know their circumstances and geopolitics, their last intervention was due to Triumphant apparently becoming an actual threat to them when she unified Calernia. The Miezian invasion was overthrown by Praes, and the Baalite Hegemony apparently collapsed by reasons independent to Calernia, leaving Ashur abandoned but with an ingrained culture and caste system.

We simply don't know enough to make an educated guess, they could simply have signed treaties of not touching Calernia anymore or for a certain amount of time. Maybe they are currently occupied and at war, maybe someone made a magical experiment and there's a perpetual storm that surrounds Calernia and now it's unreachable, maybe their gods told them to not go there. That's largely irrelevant for the matter at hand.

Javvies

The Miezians are analogous to the original Romans, it's not entirely clear if they're the Republic or the Empire.

They aren't the Holy Roman Empire, though.

The Procerans might be loosely analogous (politically speaking) to one of the era's of Italian city-states, pre unification. Albeit with a greater measure of unity than the Italian city states had.

However, none of these analogies are dependent upon the size of Calernia.

That said ... somebody could probably work out a guesstimate on the size of Calernia based on the maps and known marching times for the Legions/Army of Callow while they're in Callow/Praes and have an established infrastructure for supplies and don't need to do things like forage or graze animals. I say the Legions/Army of Callow because they're the professional and well organized forces, and so would be more consistent in terms of their movement and would likely be at the higher end of army movement speeds.

caoimhinh

Yep, it's important to keep in mind that none of the countries in Calernia is an *exact* equivalent to a country of Earth, even if there are similarities and some equivalencies in language or ethnicity.

The Miezian also seem similar to the Greek kingdoms (like the Macedonian Empire under Alexander the

Great, for example), while the League of Free Cities is way more similar to the Greek polis as city-states.

As for guesstimating the distances by using travel time...

well, we would have to still assume a speed for their marching. I would put it somewhere between 20 and 30 miles per day. As stated in Book 3 Chapter 19, Nauk said that "if they marched halfway to the grave", which I assume means marching at top speed with minimum rest, they could go from Marchford to Laure in a month and a half (through Arcadia it took them only 3 days).

It's honestly hard to measure that because we'd be assuming a lot, but for the example's sake let's use 30 miles per day.

30 miles x 45 days = 1300 miles, that's 2092.15 kilometers, that's *twice* the distance between Berlin (Germany) and Paris(France). Even going from Warsaw(Poland's capital) to Paris is 1591 km; the distance from Munich to Hamburg (cities located in the southern and northern parts of Germany) is 790 km, about 491 miles.

And that's only between two cities in the middle of Callow, not even the whole extension of the country *AND* not using their top and most exhausting marching speed, which was what Nauk used to make that statement of covering the distance in 45 days.

So the middle of Callow is larger than Germany. And Callow is among *the smallest* of the countries in Calernia. I'm sticking to my theory of Calernia being huge.

Javvies

To be fair, that distance is the road distance, which probably isn't a perfectly straight line, so the distance "as the crow flies" is probably a bit less.

On the other hand, I think the upper end of non-foraging, non-grazing, foot infantry armies is closer to 40 miles per day than 30, and 20 miles per day is bad even when foraging and grazing.

But yeah, Calernia is fucking huge. Even if we use the lower, 20 miles per day figure (which is slow) for 45 days, it's still 900 miles between Marchford and Laure. Or nearly twice the distance you cited for Germany.

And it's not like Marchford and Laure are at the extreme ends of Callow. They're both pretty well in the middle, no matter which direction you go.

And the sheer size makes it pretty clear why Procerans don't have a unified national identity – Procer is just too big. Honestly, it's more surprising that Callow has what appears to be a pretty unified and universal national identity.

caoimhinh

Agreed.

We also must consider that Calernia probably doesn't have the pretty roads we have on Earth, and it's not like an army can march through forests and mountains easily, troops mostly stick to roads when on march, at least when within their own territory.

I recall that most of the cities of Callow were kingdoms at some point of their history; it's confirmed that Marchford, Laure, Liesse, and Daoine were independent and strong nations before the Alban unification of Callow. Their unified national identity is likely a consequence of their constant wars against Praes in recent centuries. Though the southern Callowans and the northern Callowans don't get along well, Catherine mentioned they are almost different people, and Daoine is a semi-independent state with their own rules and culture, so there's that.

[Javvies](#)

My understanding is that premechanized armies generally prefer to stick to roads all the time, not just in their own territory. At least, when they're available.

On the other hand, I believe that at some point there was mention of the Miezens leaving behind roads/highways, and Miezan engineering work being better than most "modern" work.

Between those routes as examples, and the military (and trade) advantages of good roads, I'd expect that Praes and Callow, at least, both have pretty good road networks, at least on the major routes. Even if they were lacking previously, Amadeus would have recognized the value in a major investment in roadway infrastructure. For that matter, I expect that at least some of the

competent Dread Emperors of ages past would've done the same.

I'm less sure about the rest of Calernia, though. On the other hand, it's also a distinct possibility that Triumphant (and/or underlings) would have exported the value of good roadways in her conquest of Calernia.

caoimhinh

True, but armies tend to get inventive and creative on the paths they use when invading or in hostile territory, both for sneaking out and for ambushing.

See for example the Exiled Prince's Silver Spears going through the hills to Marchford, the League's armies going through the Waning Woods, and the northern expedition of the Tenth Crusade opening a path through the Whitecaps Mountains.

Andrew Mitchell

> The number of countries isn't equivalent to size. Africa (with 54 countries) has 3 times the size of Europe (with 44 countries).

Or think of Australia: One country that's bigger than than all 44 European countries combined.

caoimhinh

Yeah.

I mean, take a look at these numbers:

Europe has 10.18 million km² of area.

China has 9.59 million km², The United States has 9.83 million km², and Russia is a monster with 17.1 million km² in size. These are the *Superpowers* of the world.

So when the Elven Country is cited as being larger than the whole of Calernia, it's not to mean that Calernia is objectively small, but rather to emphasize the utter vastness of the Elven Country.

I'm sure nobody would say that Germany, England, Japan or Switzerland are backwater countries judging only the sizes. They would be hugely mistaken to make such an assumption.

superkeaton

I knew you couldn't trust a man whose nickname was "the Bastard". I wonder if Arnaud had something to do with this? Still, props to

Cordelia, but now she's got a civil war on her hands in the middle of the apocalypse.

WuseMajor

Hey, we trusted a guy who called himself Ratface.

That said, I'll grant that The Pilgrim made the wrong call on which person would successfully build a United Nations on this continent when he decided to back Cordy over Cat.

konstantinvoncarstein

If not for the DK, Tariq would have been right, no one would have trust Callow or Praes to make alliance with them.

Agent J

Why should that allowance be made? That just means he *also* failed to predict that calling for a Continental War Against Evil would drag you into a Continental War Against Evil.

Seriously, he though he could bowl over Callow, stomp on Praes, and then focus on "finally ending the Hidden Horror". Like everyone was just gonna stand around and patiently wait to get Crusaded.

caoimhinh

Damn, an attempt of Coup d'Etat right now, when they are in the middle of a crisis? Are those priests insane?

Is this Scribe's work? This is one heck of an infiltration if it is.

Though I would suspect the Bard since this was instigated by the House of Light, but we never know.

P.S: It will be hilarious if Catherine has to be the one to fight to make Cordelia regain her position as First Prince. The irony would be too sweet.



erebus42

Probably the Scribe nudging along a preexisting Cabal.

Nairne .01

Well, different people, different agendas.

There is probably either a very power-hungry or self-righteous and proud to the point of not admitting they're mistaken clique in the Hollies that either has good connections/spies or someone had interest in informing them of the happenings during Prince's Graveyard.

Idk if this was supposed to succeed or not. But this not succeeding probably is a better outcome for Cat. Cordelia would be able to consolidate her power and remove/restrain some obstacles to Cat's plans.

As to who could have their fingers in it?

Bard most likely is aware of this, but I don't think she set this in motion herself. At most, she induced someone to do it, whether through direct conversation or steering events to reveal information to someone so they act OR she predicted someone would do this even if she didn't act and didn't stop it. That is to say, if this was supposed to not succeed then she might have hindered something.

Scribe? Could be, but I bet she has info on the accords and Black's agreement on them. Hard to say if she agrees or not. She is her own person, even if she is loyal to Black, so she

might have reasons to stop him from going this route. Malicia? This I could see, but more in the sense that it would have been supposed to succeed. Though seeing as this wasn't done perfectly – i.e. the execution of the deed involved murdering so many servants then either this was hindered by someone, they didn't have many other options for the main turncoat – which would reek of desperation to act, something I doubt Malicia would resort to at this stage unless she knows about the Accords and sees herself as betrayed already (which could be the case) though I still find this unlikely (only as a feeling though).

frondred

first you forget scribe then everyone forgets you.

caoimhinh

Yeah, they just **Disappear**.

Captain Amazing

So it seems Cordelia, like Akua, was made to murder someone at an early age. Or have you forgotten that ratlings are people too?

Cool ending btw.

[shieldredblog](#)

Inconvenient people aren't really people. Especially when they're Evil.

[Hydrargentium](#)

I didn't think ratlings were more than barely sentient, until they transformed into Horned Lords. And in any case, every ratling ever has tried to kill and eat any human it has encountered.

So, not exactly the same thing.

Hg

Captain Amazing

They're barbarians without a satiety response, but they're absolutely people. The Intercessor specifically mentions the ratlings as a cogent power in her conversation with Neshama. They've just been under millennia of corruption from Below and had everyone who tried to improve their lot assassinated by Above. Goblins and orcs were similarly "dehumanized" despite being no less -anything- than anyone else.

[Dresden 67](#)

They're specifically noted by Masego to be incapable of higher reasoning, with the exception of the the very youngest and the Horned Lords.

Also, any ratling in Rhenia is an invader that will eat anyone in its path.

[Fayhem](#)

> had everyone who tried to improve their lot assassinated by Above.

Lol what. Are you actually getting that from somewhere? And also what Dresden 67 said. And also what konstantinvoncarstein said.

konstantinvoncarstein

The problem with the ratling is that they literally cannot stop themselves from eating everything they come across, making them a danger for everyone. And Akua had to kill a childhood friend, while for Cordelia it was an invader trying to slaughter and eat civilians. The circumstances are completely different.

[Fayhem](#)

"Barely-sentient invading baby-eaters are people too"? Is this a parody account for making fun of how some of the fanbase is reflexively sympathetic to anyone and everything labeled as Evil? I mean, people seemed plenty happy about Catherine killing Proceran invaders and they weren't even killing and eating everyone. I don't think the followers of Good are the ones applying the double standard here (for once) lol.

laguz24

Why, does fate seem to desire that Cat collect foils like other's collect enemies. First William, then the Grey Pilgrim and now Cordelia. Two rulers who want a better world and are willing to become tyrants forced by circumstance to do it. Hell, they even have matching wounds now.

RoflCat

William – stab to the chest (in her defense, he stabbed her chest first)

Akua – stab to the chest and rip her heart out

Pilgrim – stab to the chest to pull out aspect

Cordelia – I'm sure someone will blame Cat for the slash.

I must say, Cat is really taking this whole “finding a way into someone’s heart” rather literally.

Mental Mouse

The way to a man’s heart(*) is between the third and fourth ribs. 😊

(*) Or a woman’s, even.

frondred

oh wow Ebun will love this

Mental Mouse

Cat is actively shaping the Story with a nearly-unprecedented level of skill and power, so it is coalescing around her.

laguz24

To further the comparisons, one was granted queenship by another’s hand and kept it relatively bloodlessly. The other came to the crown by bloodshed and treachery. One did anything to save her people and country from ideals the other sacrificed her homeland and people for ideals and a pipe dream. One sits out on the field surrounded by friends and allies while the other sits on her throne surrounded by wolves with knives. One has the favor of gods and is a religious figure the other is in conflict with those of the cloth and has no divine blessing whatsoever. One got a name early on and shed it for freedom, the other started with no name and is (presumably) developing one. The list goes on and on, was this planned? P.S. Her circumstances remind me of the song “the girl who climbed the tower” what lyrics would you write for Hasenbach? Also what about malacia (who is UP TO SOMETHING) and the other heroes who are presumably up north like the white knight and the champion.

nipi

Guys remember Blacks recent talk with Cat about what Scribe might be up to in the capital?

Liliet

Yep.

We do.



Razorfloss razor

Well this is a cluster fuck of epic proportions. This is turning into cats playground

SpeckofStardust

"Before they could reply she slashed at her own breast before dropping the dagger. Shallow but long, the wound bled vividly and began soaking her dress. Even as surprise and confusion bloomed across the faces of those looking at her, the First Prince climbed the windowsill and threw herself down into the courtyard. The landing was painful, and she did not suppress her scream as she felt her leg crack."

So an injury across the chest and will now walk with a limp. Cat is going to be laughing a lot.

Nairne .01

Good catch with the leg.

Rup

...um 🙄

The quote at the top:

"Iron to bind
Rope to kill"

.why is it reversed..sort of

"rope to bind and iron to kill" is obvious so clearly i am missing something...

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Prisoners and death by hanging. It's not talking about death on the battlefield, I think it's talking about death through politics.

[onedollargum](#)

They put you in metal shackles(irons) and then hang you (rope)

caoimhinh

Considering that quote is "from the 'Mavian Entreaties' found on raised stones across much of eastern Procer", which likely are stones akin to the "Mavian Prayers", so maybe this quote is something referring to Fae?

Do0d

Been re-reading the Guide and thought about the reasons Bard made a deal with Kairos in Twilight.

I'm betting the Bard's purpose was to kill Laurence.

The reason would be that she knew she was about to be exposed as a maker of villains and that the Saint of Swords would be one of the few people actually able to kill her.

laguz24

Sure the saint of swords would be able to kill her she just wouldn't die.

Levi Kalden

Cornelia chapters are admittedly some of my favourite

Interlude: Candle

"Fear not faith in the unworthy, for to be fooled is shame only on the undeserving."

– Extract from 'The Faith of Crowns', by Sister Salienta

Brother Simon of Gorgeault had been, for near half a bell now, wondering what manner of madness might possibly arouse the leading souls of the House of Light to such actions. His arrest had been impeccably polite, his detainment in the back hall of the Selandine Basilica coming along with a nice wine from one of the lakeside monasteries and what was admittedly the finest roasted quail he could ever remember having. The accompanying plums had been flavoured in the manner of the famous 'sacred recipe': dipped in sweet brandy for seven days and seven nights. The name was a delicious little jest for the learned, as it was said that before Arianna Galadon had first founded the House of Light in the west she'd for seven days and seven nights prayed by the shores of the Lake Artoise. A shame that his enjoyment of the meal had been spoiled by the way a pair of armed guards waited by the door, a reminder that any attempt to leave would be tactfully but firmly rebuffed.

Simon was morbidly curious as to whether they'd go as far as striking him, should he insist. Though only a lay brother and so not hallowed by vows, he was not without repute in the House. Looking at the cast of the tanned faces – Arlesites both, and from the resemblance perhaps even kin – he decided that violence was not so improbable. The grandees of the House must have brought hands they were certain of from isolated holdings in Valencis and Orense, where the ancient grants of fortress-monasteries by the Arlesite *reales* had never been rescinded. It was an open secret among certain circles that orphans were taken in and raised for such purposes, particularly after long winters when desperate families found they had too many mouths to feed. The House of Light might be forbidden by law to field armies, but it was hardly defenceless.

Simon sipped at the potent red in his cup, enjoying the bouquet even as he considered what must now be done. In here he was isolated from his fellows in the Holy Society, which barred him from ascertaining how deeply this conspiracy ran. For this was a conspiracy, there could be no doubt about it. He'd been taken when coming to the basilica for an urgent council with a dear friend, Sister Dominique, whose position in the middle ranks of the Holies meant anything she deemed urgent was very much so indeed. Alas there had been no Dominique awaiting when he arrived, only a handful of apologetic priests and a detachment of guards. Brother Simon wondered if she had betrayed his trust of her own initiative or been ordered to.

Oh, there'd never been any doubt that Dom's greater loyalty would be the Heavens and their House. That much had been made clear when they'd... parted ways many years year ago, after she'd refused the deeper courtship he sought. *I will suffer none to rival Above in my affections, love, not even you*, she'd said. He'd believed the friendship to have survive the end of their other tie, but this seemed to be a day of revelations. Simon drank a deeper sip than was strictly proper, wasting the vintage like some Callowan lout. It was the way of the Ebb and the Flow, he consoled himself. It seemed his vigilance as the First Prince's eye on House affairs had lapsed, for he'd glimpsed no hint of the conspiracy before it struck. The failure stung, more from the consequences of it than his wounded pride.

By now, he thought, that animal Balthazar would have seized Her Highness and a purge of her loyalists would be taking place. None, and the Lycaonese least of all, could be counted on to take the deposition of a Hasenbach withy anything remotely like *placidity*. The Holies would have sent for the current sitters of the Highest Assembly before making their move, but the cautious among them would have delayed setting out. It might not matter: First Prince Cordelia's most ardent supporters were all on the northern fronts, leaving only *assermentés* to speak for them, and there were tricks of procedure to deal with those. If enough of the royalty in the city had turned conspirator, anyhow. An outright majority from the onset was laughably improbable, but even half a dozen princes would be enough for the fence-sitters to believe the conspirators had a chance. Especially with the Silver Letters and the House behind them, and the First Prince kept under watch until she could be formally deposed and perhaps even put to judgement.

Simon's ponderings were jarred astray when the door between the guards was opened, a woman in pale robes striding through. Age had been kind to Dominique of Blancbriand, tinting her hair more silver than grey and leaving her both straight-backed and lithe. Those grey-green eyes, though, ever smiling? They had not changed at all since he'd first gazed on them when they were both fifteen and Simon still believed his rightful name to be Simone. The lay

brother drank again, for it would be a terrible faux pas to let the Principate begin its inevitable spiral into annihilation without being at least slightly drunk.

"Brother Simon," Sister Dominique greeted him.

Her smile was forced. For being sent here against her will, pretending she had not been the bait in the trap to catch him, or because she was being forced to civility by circumstance? He could not tell. It ought to be interesting to find out.

"Sister Dominique," he replied, setting down his cup to daintily wipe his lips with the attendant silk cloth. "I am sad to say you've missed the quail."

She looked mildly taken aback. At his lack of open resentment, perhaps? He nearly sniffed in disapproval. If that were the case, she had spent too long speaking with House firebrands. Even if a lay brother, Simon was an Alamans of proper birth. It was to be expected he would walk to even the gallows with a *bon mot* and splendid indifference, much less suffer a turn of the Ebb with grace.

"I already ate, though I thank you for the courtesy," Dominique said.

"Ah, but at least let me offer you a cup of wine," Simon gregariously said. "You there, with the sword."

As both guards bore such a weapon, there was some degree of confusion until the one to the left gestured at himself hesitantly.

"Indeed," the spymaster said, "do fetch a cup for Sister Dominique – and make it silver, by the Gods. This is a coup, not a Lycaonese debutante ball."

He did not bother to speak to the guard any further, knowing that in circumstances such as this one confidence was the key to being obeyed. He invited his old friend to sit across from him, smiling pleasantly as if he were host instead of prisoner. Poorly hiding her bemusement, Dominique sat.

"Why are you..." she began hesitantly.

"It is an Arlesite red," Simon told her, sounding surprised as he glanced at the bottle by his now-finished plate. "Copper would taint the bouquet."

It was not what she'd been speaking of, as they both knew, but that was the way to get to someone with the upper hand talking: confusion and blithe refusal to acknowledge they had anything of the sort. Simon's fascinating summer as a young man with a

Lantern lodge in Tartessos had taught him that a gentleman could get away with nearly anything, given sufficient audacity and an amicable bearing.

"You seem in a congenial mood," Dominique ventured.

Simon smiled and from the corner of his eye saw the guard returning with a silver goblet in hand. The man hesitantly set it on the table, as if he did not know quite how it should be done, and after an awkward half-bow made as if to leave. The lay brother restrained him with a gesture and let out the faintest hint of a sigh.

"My good man," he said, "Sister Dominique is one of the Holies. Do you intend to make her pour her own wine?"

The guard looked vaguely panicked for a moment, before venturing a *no* touched by a heavy Tolesian accent. Ah, as he'd thought. Most definitely one of those trusted sword arms from Arlesite lands, likely even a lay brother himself. Proper vows taken would naturally forbid violence, save if given exemption by holy tribunal, but these had only rarely been granted since the Liturgical Wars. The man clumsily poured wine for his old friend, who protested it was unnecessary all the while. The guard looked deeply relieved when Simon dismissed him, further marking himself as a figure of authority.

"I had feared you might be distressed," Dominique cautiously said, after taking a polite sip from her cup.

"Aggrieved, perhaps," Simon conceded. "These cloak and dagger theatrics are rather unseemly for servants of the Heavens, though I can understand the necessities involved."

Something like relief touched her grey-green eyes, and that burned Simon more than all the rest. For it meant she did care for him, after all, at least a little. Yet she'd gone through with it anyway. It would have been better if she were only using their old closeness, he thought. Cleaner.

"I argued for your involvement, Simon, I truly did," Dominique told him. "I told them that your silence was out of hopelessness, not malfeasance. They might even have listened, had Serigny not argued so strenuously that you were Hasenbach's creature body and soul."

"Of course he did, the brute," the diplomat sighed. "His value would have lessened if you had another among you with close access to her."

Gaze careful as he spoke, he found no hint of a hesitation before she nodded in acknowledgement. Good. Balthazar the Bastard's involvement had been a given, since such a great plot could

hardly have taken place in Salia without the notice of the Silver Letters, but it was heartening to learn even by implication that the Circle of Thorns was not involved. Louis de Sartrons had no part of this... spasm of lunacy.

"The Silver Letters were too valuable to antagonize by insisting," Dominique told him, faintly apologetic. "And there were fears he might turn on us if he felt the cause to be in too frail a state."

Now, it was most unlikely either the Holies or a creature as leery as Serigny would have put treason to act without a patron of sufficient influence. There were only so many of these in Procer, these days, and among those one stood out above all others: Princess Rozala Malanza of Aequitan. She hardly seemed the kind of woman to try her hand at such an affair, but then the most successful of ambitions were often the most skillfully hidden. A prod was in order to see what might yet come tumbling out.

"I imagine he pressed Princess Malanza for a pardon before committing to anything," Simon idly said. "I've never known the Bastard to have faith in anything but favours rendered."

Dominique looked at him amusedly, nursing her cup.

"Clever Simon," she said. "Fishing for answers, are we?"

Ah, and yet she did not deny. That was telling, for all she had not outright told.

"I imagine I shall have to resign my position in the Holy Society, after her election," he mused. "A poor way to end my tenure, but retirement would not be such a terrible thing at my age."

"It might not have to be so," Dominique said.

He made his eyes widen in surprise and leaned forward when she invited him to do so.

"We have been corresponding with her for months," she murmured, "and she's expressed very devout sentiments. There was talk of restoring the House's ancient seat in the Highest Assembly, Simon. Not even after the Liturgical Wars was that seriously spoken of, but with the Hidden Horror warring on us Malanza says the Heavens must be brought to the fore once more."

To Simon's knowledge Rozala Malanza was no more devout than most Proceran royalty – that was to say, she had Salienta's tongue and Bastien's hand – though he rather doubted the Holies had been suddenly convinced of her deep and abiding respect for the House of Light. Of her deep and abiding desire for overthrowing the

woman who'd made her mother drink poison, however? That they'd believe, and perhaps simple base hunger for power as well. And in such dark times, well, why would Princess Malanza not restore the House's long-abolished seat in the Assembly? It was only natural to pay stronger heed to the light of Above when the night grew long. That such a seat would bring the influence of the Holies to heights not seen since the fresh first days of the Assembly must not have weighed on the scales at all, surely.

Brother Simon de Gorgeault had spent most his life serving as a bridge between the royalty of Procer and its priesthood, finding loyalty belonging to neither but instead to a higher calling: peace. He had served, willing, for he saw in the Holy Society a function that would prevent the coming of another three Liturgical Wars. Pride in robes and crowns was an unfortunately common affliction, and a company of men and women with a foot on both shores went a long way in smoothing away conflicts that might otherwise have grown into harsher things. Yet the truth was that Simon had oft leaned more strongly towards the House, as for all its many flaws it served Good more genuinely than any other institution on Calernia. Princes and princesses, even the finest among them, so often chased venality and power at the expense of those they were meant to be the just stewards of.

It was a bitter thing, to be faced with the truth that the House of Light could be just as grasping.

"It would be a grand thing," Simon breathed out in wonder.

Dominique leaned back, smiling contentedly.

"The seat could not be yours, naturally," she told him. "Yet you might say I am the foremost candidate for it, and should election confirm me I would find great comfort in the keeping of an advisor knowledgeable in such matters."

Not the most subtle of offers, though it did have the benefit of both plausibility and political significance.

"I would be honoured," the lay brother smilingly lied.

They both sipped at their wine.

"It will be different, under First Princess Rozala," Sister Dominique casually told him. "There'll be no more of Hasenbach's heresies and tyranny. Gods, the gall of that woman. She might as well have declared herself queen, stacking the Assembly with her lickspittles and those she bullied into submission. And for what? To make peace with the Arch-heretic if the East and her helper the Carrion Lord."

"No mortal ruler can overturn the decision of a conclave," Simon agreed.

In truth he'd wrestled with the First Prince's decision himself, in private. That Cordelia Hasenbach had grown increasingly ironhanded could not be denied, though he'd always reminded himself that every method she had used to strengthen her influence was legal and with recorded precedent. The peace talks with the Black Queen and the Carrion Lord had been... hard to swallow. Both were infamous Damned who had wrought great suffering on the Principate, and the Queen of Callow in particular had been declared Arch-heretic of the East by a greater conclave. Bargaining with such a monster was to stray from the path the Gods Above had set for their children, undeniably, yet what else was there to be done?

Would the Gods truly prefer the destruction of Procer and all its people to making peace with one of the Damned? Simon could not believe it so. Such a thought reminded him too much of the light gone cold in the eyes of some of the older priests, those who spoke of shepherding needing the stick as well as the kindness and how sparing one was straying from the will of the Gods. There was valour, there was virtue even, in refusing to compromise with Evil even in the face of death. In holding principles above life. Yet Simon de Gorgeault could find no Good in sending millions to their death when it need not be so. It was a poor shepherd that let wolves take the entire flock.

"And this talk of sending priests to the north as if they were soldiers, this demanding the House's belongings as if they were hers to dispose of," Dominique continued, tone genuinely angry. "Did you know there are no House holdings in Lycaonese principalities, Simon? All lands belong to the princes and even chapels must pay *rent* as if they were tenant farmers. That is what Cordelia Hasenbach sought, mark my words. It had to be done."

"It must have been a difficult decision," he said, sounding sympathetic.

Her goblet was mostly empty by now, and he poured it full anew without her taking much notice. She'd always been a lightweight.

"Of course not," she replied. "The will of the Heavens was clear. A choice made in clarity is hardly a choice at all."

"I can only imagine," the silver-haired man said.

"There will be no need to stretch your spirit for such," Dominique teased suddenly leaning forward. "I had expected this to be difficult, Simon, but I did your faith disservice. In truth I came to make request of you, before your pleasant hospitality distracted me."

"Anything, for you," Simon smiled.

"The Holy Society's eyes in the city are needed," Sister Dominique told him. "And they will not acquiesce to lending aid without your word."

"What shall we seek?" he asked.

"Serigny botched the work," his old friend said with open aversion. "Hasenbach tricked some of the palace garrison into protecting her and escaped into the city with a handful of soldiers. We need to know with whom she took refuge, but her lackeys have barred their manses to all priesthood. Your fellows, though, will not find all such doors closed to them."

It was a labour not to close his eyes and breathe out. *Oh, Gods grant you allmercy.* They'd lost the First Prince. Even if it was truly Rozala Malanza who'd been trading letters with the conspirators all this time then their pardons were now no better than scrap parchment. Nothing less than civil war would topple Cordelia Hasenbach if she was not a kept prisoner, and that left them as the fools who'd tried to execute a coup mere days before foreign armies arrived. If they did not find the First Prince soon, everyone involved in this was as good as dead. Her Highness was no Alamans or Arlesite, to hesitate at chastising priests: she'd hang them all without batting an eye. Serigny, at least, would know that well. And he would not be afraid of turning to great bloodshed if he felt cornered. Something needed to be done.

"Of course," Simon agreed. "I shall need ink and quill."

"I'll have them brought," Dominique smiled.

"Simpler to walk to a scrivener's desk, I would think," he amusedly said. "It would be unseemly to send guards back and forth like fetching boys."

"I suppose," Sister Dominique chuckled. "You'll need to write quite a few letters, besides."

They rose, and to steel himself Simon drained the last of his cup. He gallantly offered up his arm for his old friend to take and they made for the end of the hall unhurriedly.

"There are some who will need to speak with me in person," Simon said, sounding pensive. "So it is plain I am not being coerced, you see. Still, given the... ruckus outside an escort would not go amiss."

"I will send for guards from the cathedral," she assured him. "Though I'll need to sit in on such councils, you understand. The Holies would not agree otherwise."

"It is only natural," Simon dismissed. "I am not yet trusted."

Dominique patted his arm approvingly, like one would a dear friend. Or a pet.

"You have always been blessed with an understanding nature, Simon," she said. "It is one of your greater virtues."

He made himself look pleased.

"I shall blush if you continue in this vein," he warned.

A discreet glance ahead told him the guards were only half paying attention to them as they approached. The timing, he thought, would be of some importance.

"Did I ever tell you of the summer I spent in Tartessos?" Simon smiled.

"With the Lanterns?" Dominique said. "Little, in truth."

She did not sound particularly regretful of that.

"They must have some wisdom to their teachings, I suppose," she conceded.

I remember when you were hungry, Simon thought. When you burned with a need to read every book, speak with every stranger from a faraway place. When your eyes grew dark for the late nights and you were furious of your body needing to sleep at all. I remember how beautiful the flame that moved you was, Dominique, and I mourn that woman for you are only what's left of her. Was this what happened, he wondered, when you began to believe there were no more answers left to seek?

"They refused to humour me before I ventured with a band into the Brocelian," Simon said, almost nostalgic. "It was a rather fascinating experience. I met this woman, you see, by the name of Elvera. And she knew a remarkable trick."

"Did she," Sister Dominique patiently smiled.

"Oh yes," Brother Simon smiled back, gently extricating his arm just as they passed the guards.

This would be his seventy-fourth winter, and it had been much too long since he'd undertaken strenuous exercise. Yet for all that his limbs no longer had the limberness of his youth, utter surprise had wings of its own. His fingers smoothly drew the sword of the guard to his left and he pivoted slightly, ramming the pommel in the other guard's face. Another pivot and he thrust the point of the sword backwards into the first guard's throat. Dominique yelled out in surprise, the other guard rocked back in pain and surprise as Simon ripped free the sword only to cut into the back of the survivor's neck. Messy blow, the lay brothed judged. A killing one, but the death would be more painful than

if he'd cut deeper. He left the sword in the corpse and both dropped a heartbeat later. Ah, but the bloodspray had rather marred his robes it seemed.

"It does work better with an axe," the silver-haired man noted. "She was quite right about that."

"You madman," Sister Dominique hissed. "What are you-"

"You were correct," Simon pleasantly said. "A choice made in clarity is hardly a choice at all."

Best to make a run for it, Simon de Gorgeault mused as a woman he'd once loved cursed him loudly. Though she'd let it slip that there were so few guards here an escort would require more to be sent for from as far as the cathedral, it was unlikely there would only be two.

Time to see if these old bones still remembered how to run in the face of certain death.

NZPIEFACE

I'm wondering what the title has to do with the titles of the other interludes.

I know it's not the same character, but I thought it was at first.

I was going Iron to bind, Rope to kill, Candles to torture? Dunno what it means though now. Anyone know of any religious uses of candles?

sivarajan

Excommunication by "bell, book, and candle."

j

I met this woman, you see, by the name of Elvera. And she knew a remarkable trick:

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

Aston Whiteman

And the trick is...?

Stable

First you vote left. Then you vote right, straight in his face. Then you go left again and vote his head right off!

[vexingvision](#)

You won't believe trick #4!

[tkjarrah](#)

...it's fucking clue

[tkjarrah](#)

Wait huh my version of clue as a kid had an old-fashioned solid clothes-iron as one of the weapons but apparently that's not standard
Rope and candle(stick) still work though

mavant

I remember a candlestick as well.
From this I infer that you also come from the timeline where it's Berenstain Bears, and Nelson Mandela lived to a ripe old age.

[tkjarrah](#)

oh no candlestick is standard but we had like an *iron* but apparently there's never been an iron so im just losing my mind

bdvlad

There's an iron among the pieces in Monopoly sets. Maybe yours was a transplant from one of those?

mavant

That is an exceedingly sane explanation, thank you.

[weakman54](#)

Can't a pipe be called an "iron"? I'm pretty sure I've heard that being used.

(also, according to wikipedia, in the early versions the lead pipe was apparently made out of actual lead =S)

Andrew Mitchell

Can confirm that's the case. I also used to melt lead and use molds to create lead weights for my fishing lines.

Akuabestgurl

Nelson Mandela got out of prison when he was 72.

I remember because I was upset. That fucker tortured people.

He shoulda died there.

EgoDucky

Nelson Mandela? The... South African humanitarian activist, you mean?

goliath1303

... Nelson Mandela died at 95. What do you consider a ripe old age of not that?

The Mandela Effect is named after the exact opposite. A lady remembered him dying in prison in the '80's. She created a website about this memory, which is where the term Mandela Effect comes from.

Andrew Mitchell

Mine had a lead pipe, but no iron.

I think your clothes-iron may have come from Monopoly because we had a set with one of those.

ninegardens

Okay- what rooms have they been in so far?

[tkjarrah](#)

oh i was remembering the game piece from monopoly as a weapon in clue lol

Shveiran

My bet is it's not a religious symbol, but one about a complex timed contraption.

You know, the kind where you have a lit candle, that consumes itself until the flame is low enough to burn a rope, which snaps and allows a weight to fall to do something else.

Just a hunch.

Sun Dog

Yes. A candle provides light and holds back the darkness. A candle can also be lit as a prayer, or in remembrance for the dead.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

I thought the iron/rope thing was a reference to an analogy someone made when discussing rulership. "Iron makes a bad rope," someone said that about harsh ruling methods (or maybe the Praesi philosophy?). The two chapters showed Hasenbach using both iron and rope, standing firm and discarding her dignity in turn as needed to keep things going.

Cicero

Well, candles are associated with both light and prayer. Considering this takes place in the House of Light I'd imagine that the reference is to prayer.

stevenneiman

"Iron sharpens iron", "enough rope to hang themselves", "Couldn't hold a candle to..." was my thought. I might be completely off-base, but that's my thinking. A popular theory seems to be that Iron was the start of a scheme that Bard aided or at least allowed in order to "sharpen" Cordelia. In Rope, Cordelia allowed the people she realized were traitors to set themselves up so that she could damn them in the opinion of enough soldiers to protect her. Here Simon shows that he thinks that he thinks that Rozala doesn't hold a candle to Cordelia.

[sivarajan](#)

I found this fanart a few hours ago: i.redd.it/stlr3upph9d31.jpg (First Under the Night – Antti Hakosaari), and since the "Art and Maps" page hasn't been updated in years ...

danh3107

You know that picture really puts into perspective for me how biblical some of cat's themes are.

Darkening

Wow, that's quite a picture. Always love to see fanart of this story, That's a pretty cool look for Cat lol.

[Liliet](#)

There is a lot of fanart (including links to fanart posted on reddit) on the discord server. Come look!

<https://discord.gg/3nbsUfZ>

MagnaMalusLupus

While I do enjoy some good fan art, this one has some things that bother me.

- 1) Since when did Cat start wearing a skirt? 2) In that scene she's described as "smiling savagely"
- 3) I find the distinct lack of Robber in that picture to be deeply offensive. He would never miss an opportunity to photo-bomb, if such things existed then.

[weakman54](#)

I believe the "skirt" is her Aketon, which is the padded layer worn under armor. Though on a closer inspection it looks more like it's part of the leather coat she's wearing, so just a long coat in that case I guess. I'd guess there was some artistic liberties taken =P

[weakman54](#)

Oh, wow, on even closer inspection you are right, actually, it doesn't open up at the bottom, which would make it a skirt probably (or a leather dress perhaps?)

Vortex

Historically, pretty much every medieval knight wore a skirt. Mail and plate trousers are super expensive and thoroughly impractical besides. They will restrict leg movement, require you to customize them to every individual's measurements, and are way harder to craft with any sort of wearability.

MagnaMalusLupus

First of all, she's not wearing plate in that picture, nor at that point in the story. Second, plate armor in general had to be crafted to fit the individual, so not much of a point to be worth mentioning really. Third, Cat explicitly wore full plate (with greaves presumably, as full plate implies, though I'm not going to look for specific mentions). Fourth, Cat explicitly does wear trousers, but I don't know of a single instance where she wears a skirt post orphanage.

[Liliet](#)

There are also a lot of problems with composition, and Cat is not backlit by the fire that's supposedly going on behind her back.

[Fayhem](#)

4) Cat isn't white lol. But fanly nitpicking notwithstanding I like the art and I'd love to see the artist continue to work in the Guideverse (assuming they haven't already?).

MagnaMalusLupus

I actually did some digging, and cannot find mention of what color her skin is, besides it being darker (likely being Deoraithe, who are described as medium-dark skin) than the typically fair complexion of Callow. This depiction has her as a darker shade than one typically associates with white. Generally seems appropriate.

[Fayhem](#)

I just did a close zoom on the face in that pic and idk what you're talking about with "a darker shade than one typically associates with white". That's literally exactly the shade I would typically associate with white lol. I mean that's not even white-with-a-tan, that's just white-but-not-Irish.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

I thought Callowans (and Duni, for that matter) were light-skinned? At least compared to the Praesi? (Presumably because it's the Standard Fantasy Thing To Do, and because the author was confident enough in their ability to separate Evil from evil that they felt comfortable having the most prominent Evil people in their setting be non-white.)

[Liliet](#)

Cat is half-Deoraithe, which is an ethnicity based on IRL Native American tribes.

[Fayhem](#)

Callowans are, yeah. But the Deoraithe, despite their confusingly Irish names, are apparently ethnically more like Native Americans. And Cat is half-Deoraithe. And mixed-race people usually get considered "non-white". Thus, I wouldn't say Cat was white.

Shveiran

aaand hello new desktop

[ftaku](#)

I like him 😊

konstantinvoncarstein

I was sure that Rozala had nothing to do with the coup, it seems I am wrong except if Dominique is lying. If not, my respect for Rozala is diminished.

agumentic

Obviously, the letters conspirators believe come from Rozala do indeed come from her, and not from some other person rather connected to writing.

Faiir

I mean, why would you think otherwise?
It's not like anyone else has anything to gain by creating chaos in Procer.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Sarcasm markers not found. 😊But yeah, a man-in-the-middle attack would be easy for Scribe, what with Rozala waytheheck out in the field.

RogueTurnip

My guess would be Malicia, she has been known to cause issues for Procer's stability

MagnaMalusLupus

Scribe.

Someguy

Rozala sucks at the Ebb & Flow. It's probably some idiots in her "faction" doing shit in her name, the same ones who thought themselves clever "secretly" selling information to Kairos.

M0och123

Scribe...

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Imagine if they succeeded.

>comes back from long campaign where you lost
>tfw first prince after successful coup which you didnt plan

konstantinvoncarstein

See her face would be hilarious. I hope Amadeus will be able to clear Rozala 's name.

RoflCat

Now imagine their faces when her first order is for negotiation with the Arch-heretic of the East AND the Carrion Lord.

Also the Grey Pilgrim approving of it.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

"Hooray! Now that we've deposed the wicked First Prince Cordelia, we can stop treating with these horrible eastern villains!"

"Actually, we're going to form an alliance with them."

"...So, who's the next most eligible prince after Rozala?"

IDKWhoitis

>tfw you are killed in counter-coup in response to coup you didn't plan

>Brutal_civil_war.jpg

Parker

I think it was the Scribe actually, not Rozala sending those letters

Decius

Assassin, pretending to be Scribe. The target was Guard #2.

Darkening

Well, using an entire coup and their prisoners as a weapon to kill some random guard in their building **would** be in character for Assassin.

Bryce

Its Scribe sending the letters you fool

WuseMajor

Who?

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Imp.

Ross

I don't think it was Rozala. From what we've seen in her viewpoint interludes, it seems like she recognizes that allying with Catherine is necessary for the fight against the Dead King, and that's definitely not the feeling we get from the House of Light here.

I think it was someone who is trying to undermine the House of Light. Pretending to be Rozala would be a clever ploy. Think about how Rozala would respond when she got to Salia and found that the House of Light had committed treason. It would look like they had decided to start a coup on their own, and it wouldn't be smart for a new ruler to pardon the people who just overthrew her predecessor. At this point I think that many of the leaders in Procer's House of Light are likely to end up hanged, whether they capture Cordelia or not.

Death Knight

They're lucky Saint is dead. That woman would have massacred every soldier Cordelia sent.

[Liliet](#)

If Saint had survived Third Llesse, she likely would have stayed in Pilgrim's faction, which very much supports Cordelia.

hakureireimu

Saint was the one who pushed the Arch Heretic thing so that Cordy couldn't make peace with Cat...

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, but she was somewhere along the process of recognizing Pilgrim's point on allying with Catherine, and we will now never know how far she could have come.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

On the other hand, Cordelia supports allying with Catherine, who is the thing Saint disagreed with Pilgrim on most strongly.

Valkyria

I think it's not her either. I just don't see it. IMO it's Scribes plan, setting the Holies against Cordelia and Cordelia against Rozala.

No matter what result, the city and country are in uproar and lost to confusion.

[Tohron](#)

Given the interludes from Rozala's perspective, I get the feeling that the House of Light was unwittingly corresponding with agents of the Dead King.

konstantinvoncarstein

Scribe is more likely.

[Hakurei06](#)

isn't scribe in salia? it's probably her

[Javvies](#)

Yeah. Cordelia's not going to go easy on anyone she can prove or even suspects was involved in this nonsense. And since she got away ... yeah, it's doomed to failure. At best, the situation is contained to effectively civil war within Salia ... but I expect this to get worse before it gets better.

Huh.

Presumably forged messages certainly suggests Scribe has had some measure of involvement.

On the other hand ... there's no way something like this could be organized quickly, even without taking into account the need for correspondence and message transit times. And this is quite clearly something that's been being planned, organized, and otherwise in the works for quite some time ... which means it is the sort of thing Augur should have been able to detect earlier in the process, as far as we know, anyways.

I still think Bard has greased the skids for this to happen. In the background, if not openly amongst the House of Light.

Skaddix

Also are you really committing to a coup without sending at least one of the Holies to treat with Rozala in person. Now its possible this one is the one on Bard or Scribe's payroll but I find it impossible to believe it was all letters and no face to face.

Shequi

Unless of course Scribe also has someone with her who is known to be able to take on the appearance of other people with flawless impersonations.

Where is Assassin at the moment?

[Javvies](#)

Last known location for Assassin was Ashur.

Which has since been blockaded by the League.

Darkening

I feel like trying to contain a Named with a blockade, especially a named specializing in stealth and bypassing security is fairly doomed to failure. Would probably take a bit to get out though, so I expect Assassin probably isn't in Salia. Hard to say *where* they're going without knowing more about their motivations and loyalties in regards to Black/Malicia.

[Javvies](#)

Were it a blockade on the ground, Assassin would probably barely even notice it was there. It certainly wouldn't stop him from moving through it as though it weren't actually there.

However, since Ashur is an island ... boats/ships (and their crews) are somewhat more difficult to conceal or disguise than a single person.

Also, as far as I know, the Leagur blockade of Ashur isn't specifically targeted at keeping Assassin on the island. That's probably just a happy side effect as far as the League is concerned. Assuming that they even realized Assassin was in Ashur in the first place.

[shieldredblog](#)

It would take Assassin twenty minutes to become the captain of a ship, another twenty to be in charge of the blockade.

[Javvies](#)

He'd have to get to the blockading ships first.

And then we're back to "it's easier to conceal a single person than a boat/ship (and crew)".

[shieldredblog](#)

Nicae wont be sinking the ships at a distance. They already won the fleet battle, now they will be taking prizes. All he has to do is be on a ship when they board it.

Heck, he could pretend to be adrift in a lifeboat and they would still check it out.

[Fayhem](#)

Worth noting that Assassin has died on-camera and hardly been fazed by it. If he's got a respawn ability (as seems very likely) we currently have literally no information on the nature of it or of any restrictions. For all we know he can get around the no-teleportation-

possible nature of the Guideverse by just deliberately dying and respawning somewhere more convenient.

Do0d

Maybe he just likes to use meat puppets like Malicia does

Shveiran

I'm not saying a blockade would be an insormountable obstacle for Assassin, but Names mostly solve problems within their domains, and Assassin's doesn't cover travel.

Ashur is a long way off, and a blockade would make it ahrder for him to move around quickly. stuck? No, of course not, but hindered? Slowed down enough that him being in Salia is very unlikely? I'd say yes. Keep in mind, Assassin had no real reason to come to Salia months ago -as the First prince didn't seem a viable target- and that I'd say is a realistic estimate of the voyage he'd need to take.

[Javvies](#)

Face to face or a direct scrying link.
Preferably a face to face.

Though ... I suspect the intermediary used would not have been one of the higher ranking Holies – it would've needed to be somebody whose disappearance would not have been noticed. Bard would have been an excellent "intermediary" from the House of Light's perspective, if not Scribe's.

Although, I suppose it's possible that there could have been a fake intermediary with letters of introduction claiming to be from Rozala.

Do0d

Isn't sorcery rather hated by the House in Procer ?
Would the Holies really use such heretical means of communication ?

And they seem to be self-important enough that I doubt they'd travel to meet a mere princess when they make the First Prince go to them with the whole humiliating ritual.

laguz24

Yeah, that is the one thing I don't get. These people have some general idea of how dangerous things are. I expected that they might try this after the dead king has been beaten back. But trying a coup when the worst monster on calernia is

currently devouring procer, boneheaded move. Also, I would like to see cats and especially tyrant's reaction to her hanging the priests.

'Ladi Williams

The fact that Cordelia was going to send priests to the front lines like common soldiers was what made them rebel...I think?

Every other thing they could have stomached till the war with DK was over. But that order would have threatened not just their livelihood but their very lives.

And every one knows the lives of the priests and holies are invaluable in the fight against the gods below while the soldiers lives can be spared.

Darkening

Yeah, really, since the Holies are so much more important then the common soldiers, they should really start leeching lifespan from the commoners, because if they live forever they can do so much more to guide and serve their lessers, don't you see!

[Liliet](#)

LMAO

[Fayhem](#)

All hail the Tenets of Light!

[Mental Mouse](#)

Given the tech level, I find it entirely believable, and while I'm not equipped to provide historical examples, I'd bet there have been such in our world. (Remember, Rozala's conference with Cordelia was the first she'd heard of scrying being able to make that link since being shut down.)

Even in modern times, I've heard of *courtships* by paper letter (including a notable still-living pair of science-fiction editors).

Shveiran

I'm not sure if Bard, or Scribe, or Malicia, or the Dead King or all are involved, but yeah, this doesn't make sense without someone else is involved. The Augur is the most glaring part that is kind of iffy.

Cordelia said it had been a few days since she spoke with the Augur, and this whole thing doesn't seem like it could be mounted within that time frame. Just to implicate Rozala, you'd

need a long correspondence which, fake or not, would need to play out at the normal pace not to arise suspicions.

Oshi

If the Augur wasn't the Augur. I've got a suspicion that Scribe took the opportunity to get to her and remove her (kidnap).

[Javvies](#)

No way in hell that works.

This is the Augur. She'd be aware of any plans to get to her.

And I don't see her security being anywhere near light enough that you could get to her without a good plan. And no way in hell that you could get to her quietly.

The only person who could conceivably get to Augur, IMO, is Bard.

WuseMajor

...What if Augur is behind this?

Regardless, I don't see Rosy planning something that would go off now. She's too good of a general and too afraid of the Dead King to want to compromise the war like this.

I also think Rosy is likely to become the "Good Queen" who defeats "Cordy the Tyrant" but that story is only likely to happen after Rosy defeats the Dead King and demonstrates her Hero chops, so the timing on this is all wrong.

[Javvies](#)

Augur is a Hero and actually likes her cousin Cordelia. I see no reason to think that Augur would have turned on Cordelia at any point, far less without at least trying to get Cordelia to change course.

However, I would buy that Bard is leaning on Augur or is otherwise capable of scrambling Augur's abilities.

And yeah, I don't buy that Rozala is actually involved in this either.

[Liliet](#)

I'm pretty sure currently Cordelia is following Augur's detailed micromanaged PtV. If Agnes Hasenbach wants to

impact Proceran politics, all she has to do is tell her cousin what to do.

Andrew Mitchell

PtV? (Google failed me.)

[Javvies](#)

Path to Victory
I think.

Andrew Mitchell

Makes sense. Thank you!

Faiir

Beautiful chapter.

Hellspirit

I'm voting Scribe, definitely her.

Faiir

Thank you for voting Scribe for Procer 2019!
Spread the word!

[Mental Mouse](#)

... and your young son is doing quite well at his summer retreat, with no injuries at all... 😊

My very own name

Calernia as a whole has a way with badass people in charge. Last chapter had Cordelia "It's treason then" Hasenbach, now we have one of her spymasters, who is 74 years old, escaping from prison while being a really good politician, but also by using sword skills he learned from a Dominion captain. I'm really looking forward to the resolution of this plot.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Oh yeah, they seriously underestimated Brother Simon. Do they even know about his cabal within the House?

[Liliet](#)

What do you mean? Who?

His leadership of the Holy Society is the entire reason he was arrested in the first place?

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

Welp, Alamans are now my favorite people.

Darkening

I can't remember, is that prince that stayed to fight the Lycaonese an Alamans or an Arlesite? Hm. But yeah, gotta respect the old man killing his way out of prison for loyalty to his liege.

[Liliet](#)

Frederic Goethel, Alamans I believe

superkeaton

Props, Simon. Still, civil war and all that, better make haste.

Quite Possibly A Cat

Hmm.. I will say Dom is a screw up. If this coup doesn't have the support of Augur that really should have been a hint that Above wasn't on their side. If the coup does have the support of Augur they don't need Simon's help to find the big C. Either way, trying to get his help was mistake one.

The second mistake was not just trapping him in a couple fences of Light. Or perhaps she didn't have enough Light to even do that? Either way, mistake.

mavant

It's not totally clear to me that high rank in the church translates directly to facility with performing miracles. One could easily imagine the reverse. Or... If high rank is granted on the basis of either political acumen or particular holiness, and these two things are independently distributed, then we should expect them to be anticorrelated in the high ranks. I forget the name of that effect in statistics.

mavant

Berkson's paradox, I think. Found by looking up Simpson's paradox and then looking for the related links section...

[sengachi](#)

Oh wow that's really interesting, thank you for mentioning it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, they may not have had the nerve to wield Light against a fellow brother, even a lay brother. *We*, as readers of the tale, can be fairly confident that normally Light powers are simply granted, and their use left to mortal judgement.

The priests of the HoL will necessarily be a lot less sure of that, because there has to be major-league social control surrounding any use of the Light. Including but not limited to the oaths we've heard mention of.

Mental Mouse

Sister Dominique may have screwed up, but that doesn't mean she's "a screw-up". Remember, she was matching wits with an experienced spymaster who had had plenty of time to think things through. The next question is what he does with her.... My bet is just tying her in a closet for a delay (and to protect her against accusations of betraying the rebellion).

Shveiran

Agreed, although she did seem far less competent than him. He... didn't really have to try that hard to play her.

Mental Mouse

Basically, she didn't seem like a "player", while he certainly is.

Agent J

Cordelia is the Augur's cousin. Chosen or not, trying to tie her to a plot to overthrow perhaps the only person she cares about to any meaningful distinction would be a mind bogglingly stupid decision.

As for fencing him in, it wasn't needed before Dom let him get the drop on their guards. Her mistake was visiting him at all.

WuseMajor

Well she wouldn't have, except that 1) they needed his information network, 2) she thought he was ultimately loyal to the church, and 3) he was an old friend.

Mostly 1 though. The other two reasons were why she thought he could be trusted.

mavant

What was that line about Simon believing his name was Simone, as a teen? Are we being hinted that he was AFAB or is this another "much of Procer is Francophone" thing?

mavant

No, confirmed Simone is a feminine name in French as well.
Which I should have known from the e ending.

[theothin](#)

Yeah, he's trans. It was alluded to in the chapter where he previously appeared, as well.

Shveiran

He is? Uh, that went over my head.

[sengachi](#)

Oh cool! Thanks for mentioning it, I kind of read this in a rush and skipped over that.

mavant

Oh yep, there it is. I guess I missed that last time around.

ninegardens

So... brother Simon is absolutely amazing- and I hope we see plenty more of him going forward.
So chill, so cunning.

Especially love the thought of "IF it was Rozalia sending the conspiracy letters"

SpeckofStardust

At this point I think that Cordelia and her side have no story route to villainy. (short of bard offering a deal from the below.)

[Liliet](#)

Yep lmao

...Except Lake Artoise and whatever's up with *that*. Might be bad enough to offset the rest of it, though I doubt it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Eh... I don't think defending herself against a coup gets her out of potential villainy, especially when the coup is by the priesthood. Resisting the coup might even count as defiance against the will of Above's chosen servants.

SpeckofStardust

Look calling down an angle to strip people of free will to launch a suicidal attack on a target doesn't make you evil I highly doubt digging up an ancient thing to attack the literal 'Enemy' would either. Like the whole fact that she didn't start digging it up until after the dead king started attacking kinda makes it unlikely to narratively harm her short of being an idiot, and she neither is nor her close allies fall under that definition.

Mental Mouse

I'd say "being an idiot" likely *is* narrative disaster. William got a pass for Team Morality – I'm pretty sure an Angel *can't* be judged by Above – even Kairos's plan with Hierarch represents judgement by mortal powers.

And we still don't know what the lake-thing is. If it's an actual demon, all bets are off. (But then Cordelia definitely goes over to Below, only to get smacked down by the Practical contingent.) If it's "just" some lesser god or a random monster, things could get pretty interesting. Perhaps a missing patron god for Procer itself?

Liliet

There's a distinct 'heroic ruler with their valiant loyal servants vs corrupt pathetic priests led by the nose by a foreign power' narrative forming, and it ain't one where the House of Light is in the right.

konstantinvoncarstein

And the foreign power is Evil.

Liliet

Eh, the narrative gets less clear-cut there, since if you take a look at the foreign power you run face first into the whole Arch-Heretic debacle.

Liliet

Oh god I love this man so incredibly much

Faiir

You know, a few years ago I had this lovely little tryst with this warrior-nun.

There was this little trick she showed me a few times, it was so amusing!

It was a trick for
DECAPITATING YOUR ENEMIES IN A SINGLE HIT

Author Unknown

Clearly, the House of Light should leave the villainy to the Villians.

[Liliet](#)

-flashbacks to Vivienne roasting William-

erebus42

To be fair, it makes things a lot easier and more efficient when you don't have to pretend like you're doing the will of the heavens.

Hardric62

Okay, lead theory is that the Scribe is sowing chaos here... But I would add a caveat and a theory to that idea: If she is half as good as she is, she probably got herself a copy of these famous Accords... What if she had decided they rated 'decent idea, needs to be pushed forward', or Black managed to get her such a message? Because yes, the instability here is weakening Cordelia, but it is also so botched there is no way this move can succeed (and the absence of the Augur stresses that).

What if the point wasn't just weakening Cordelia's position, (direct consequence of coup and counter-coup), but also a move to remove people which would oppose to these Accords early in the game by making them overplay to early their hands, assuring they are out for the moment the real discussion begin and where they could have actually hurt the situation?

[Liliet](#)

I think this is very likely, with Scribe hastily sabotaging her own prepared coup to make it do the exact opposite of the original intent.

IDKWhoitis

She could have even arranged for those guards to be there underneath Cordy's window. And had a plan to run with whatever came out.

ninegardens

I... reckons that Scribe sabotaging her own plan is too optimistic by half.

We had the set up when Amadeus mentioned Scribe causing trouble of Cat being like "But you can just call her off, right?" and Amadeus being like "... maybe."

There's a conflict there. A Chekov's gun hung very explicitly over the mantel piece, and until our main characters interact with Scribe on screen, and explicitly talk her down (or defeat her), I'm going to assume Scribe is still on the rampage.

Shveiran

It's not impossible, but it does sound...uselessly risky if that is the point.

I mean, sure, Cordelia got out of it, but it's not like she has a history of surviving assassination attempts without an oracle intervention. She still found herself surrounded by assassins and an experienced spymaster, forced to injure herself and take a literal leap of faith on the loyalties of the assembled soldiers.

If this was part of a plot that wanted her to survive the scheme, I'd say shit got way out of hand. Sure, if that was the aim, it turned out ok; but these kind of crazy gambles were Catherine's beef, not Amadeus, and Scribe studied at his feet for decades.

Oshi

Unless the Augur was in on it and all Scribe had to do was ask.

[Javvies](#)

... Augur is a Hero and Scribe is a Villain, remember?

Also, Augur actually likes her cousin Cordelia.

I see no reason to think that Augur would have turned on her cousin, far less be actively and knowingly working with Scribe.

On the other hand, it's entirely possible that Augur would cooperate with Bard. Or that Bard is capable of scrambling Augur's precognitive abilities.

The most likely scenario that I see is that Scribe has something going on, but Bard has been doing some significant behind the scenes heavy lifting and prep work to allow Scribe's operation to succeed to at least some extent. And one of the things Bard has done is mess with Augur's ability to warn Cordelia about this.

erebus42

Well would you look at that, a reasonable Priest- well Lay brother at least. Granted he's surrounded by a bunch of dumbass fanatics but hey, credit where credit's due to Brother Simon.

[Liliet](#)

It's so cute when people attribute things to fanaticism that are pure undisguised greed for power and dislike of the idea of having to do actual work on the frontline.

An actual religious fanatic driven by *actually* wanting to follow the will of the Heavens would not be ignoring the Choir of Mercy's position on the topic, not House Insurgent's miracles.

Now those people, then I buy being religious fanatics. The House of Light in Procer? Its entire problem is that it's high key kind of not.

IDKWhoitis

Alright, so I'm going to entertain the thought that Scribe has certainly added jet fuel and gunpowder to this dumpster fire. All she did was take advantage of local unrest and dormant power structures, which never liked Cordy, but probably wouldn't have made a move without some prodding.

I find that there are 3 ways this shitshow goes by the time Cat arrives, either:

- the coup is over™, Cordy alive.

I find this layout ripe for a "things are already set in motion discussion" with Scribe. Possibly even Scribe get killed if she doesn't back down when/if Black tells her to stop (it's not a certainty either way)

- the coup is over, Cordy dead.

Rozala suddenly became a hell lot more important, but with so deeply in the red (bankrupt) in political capital. She is likely to be pretty useless in enforcing most things at least in the short term. She would also be putty in Black's and Cat's hands.

- the coup is still ongoing.

Anything really goes, because at this point Cat gets to choose who to negotiate with. She could "throw her support" to the side she wants to fail. I also find this outcome to be very prone to Bard intervention.

I'm personally rooting for the conspiracy, because we almost never get to see Scribe in action.

[Liliet](#)

I mean "the coup is still ongoing" is a glorious option bc Rozala gets a chance to go WHAT THE FUCK I HAD NO IDEA ABOUT ANY OF THIS publicly and sink the House of Light categorically while forging closer ties with Cordelia which would be wonderful.

IDKWhoitis

Cordy just as easily could use this as a pretext to purge Rozala too, effectively sniffing out all her opposition in one fell swoop.

Not very likely, but we'll have to wait to see what Cordy will have to go through to survive this Coup, which might make her less Forgiving™

John brokovsky

Ayyy, what an inconvenient chapter to catch up to...

First comment ever; I've been wanting to ask this since some time ago:

Its pretty obvious that Cat's endgame name will be Triumphant, right? Its been pretty obvious foreshadowing and build up since book 2, though its growing more in your face as of late.

Andrew Mitchell

There's a range of options and it's actually difficult to say who will be THE big bad. OK, IMO there are three possible big-bads and here's the chances I currently rate them at:

1. Dead King 35% (obvious and clear option; he will be dealt with but unlikely to be THE big-bad)
2. Wandering Bard 55% (she acts to keep the game going, but she MAY be trying to stop)
3. Triumphant 5% (hasn't been on-screen at all so I don't think she's it)

John brokovsky

Nono, I mean Triumphant will be Cat's Name. Her power up.

Shoddi

What if Kairos is behind this, instead of Scribe? It would be interesting to see if any of the missives to the conspirators pledged "eternal friendship".

[Javvies](#)

Kairos is full of hax and bullshit.
However ... I don't think he'd have had the opportunity to get the level of penetration in Salia to pull this off.

Also, there's still the problem of trying to get plans past Augur. Because he'd have to be using agents, plus the local Procerans would need plans too.

...

Wait, I just thought of something.
What if this kicked off by accident? I mean, what if most of people involved, instead of having and knowing a single plan, got issued a bunch of conditional if-then directives – to bypass or confuse Augur's precognition – but instead of things being intentionally activated by whomever was actually coordinating things (probably Scribe), some of the triggers were activated by accident/Bard, and they set everyone and everything else into motion not on schedule or otherwise before all the pieces were in the right places.

[Mental Mouse](#)

This world doesn't seem to have accidents like that – the course of events really is tied to stories and the actions of the "players". If a coup gets set off, it's by the will of someone or other, and there's not many candidates.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Extending that thought: There is one story in particular from our world that we have *not* seen in the Guide: "For want of a nail". Our world's version of that story doesn't have a human/esque agent... it's specifically an expression of "stuff goes wrong and failures cascade, but it's not actually any one person's fault". And so, I wouldn't expect it to show up in the Guideverse, unless and until somebody starts stealing horseshoe nails or the equivalent, for the purpose of triggering cascading failures. And even then, few besides possibly the Bard would be able to pull that one off.

[Liliet](#)

Do you really need any kind of level of penetration in Salia? The dynamite's already there, all you need is matches.

ninegardens

You probably don't NEED high levels of penetration.... but whoever did this has demonstrated high levels of it (Impersonating Rozalia while lettering high ranking priests, getting a spy master) on side, etc.

Captain Amazing

I hope Hasenbach flees the city and is forced to take refuge with Catherine. Not that I think it's a good idea, just that the political shenanigans would be hilarious. Malanza is apparently implicated in the plot after all, and the Pilgrim massacred an entire town. The story optics would be spectacularly horrible.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Apropos of nothing on this page, I just stumbled into rereading Ursula Vernon's webcomic [Digger](#), and saw this bit from it (relayed back in plot-time by the comments, so I'm not sure where it shows up): "Evil is having reason, always, many and many... Is punishing world for not being...like in head. Is always reason. World should be different, is reason. Is only good is not having reason... Just is." (from Ed)

That world has a very different framework of good and evil... and yet, it feels to me that this does resonate even with the Guideverse characters. Or is it just that Guideverse folks tend to change the world by pounding it into shape?

ninegardens

I just wanted to say that you have excellent taste in webcomics.

The webcomic Digger is one of the most fantastic pieces of fiction on the internet.
(I also recommend <http://www.all-night-laundry.com/post/2>)

[Mental Mouse](#)

Ninegardens: Thanks: If I were to make a list of the Great Works I've encountered, the ones I'd recommend to basically everybody, Digger would be right up there with Sandman, The Leaves Of October (text novel, by Don Sakers), James Stoddard's High House duology, a selection of Pratchett's work, and ... well, this here Guide is a new applicant for the list.

Also, I just reached the page that quote came from: <http://diggercomic.com/blog/2007/11/09/digger-264/> .

GOD

i can not see the chapters.

Tragic news about the site moderator.
this is all i see on every chapter. what should i do?

Queen

Simon our trans king

Interlude: Harp

*"Second, beholden:
Candle to blind
And harp to still."*

– Second of the three so-called 'Mavian Entreaties

Les Horizons Lugubres was a tavern in the same sense that silk was cloth.

None could lay foot within its glass and stone gardens without first having been vouched for by three patrons, and though the hall's outside looked rather trivial its insides were a maze of shifting private alcoves: they changed with the sun and the moon, the season and the weather, so that no two hours spent there would be quite the same. The nature of the establishment had made it a favourite of the Circle of Thorns since decades before Louis of Satrons' tenure at the head of the league began, though it was under his stewardship that the Circle became the hidden proprietors of it. Tonight's surroundings were the work of a young woman from the principality of Orne, he'd been told, an artist who had once walked the fields of the Red Flowers Vales seeking inspiration. The influence was plain to the eye, though for all the provincial origins it was exquisite to the eye. Redwood tables and sculptures of coloured glass – angled so that the moon's shifting radiance and shadows would mimic the touch of wind on grass – were flanked by panes of green and grey painted in the Bourdonnier manner, with the occasional glinting metal thrown in *pêle-mêle* to hint at the armour of fallen knights and fantassins. It was all rather appropriate, given the reason the Circle was convening, and the tart Lange red the affair had been paired with by their sommelier lent the hasty proceedings a much-needed touch of civility.

After the last of them arrived and took a seat, being poured their glass by the colleague to their left rather than a servant according to one of the Circle's more practical traditions, Louis of Sartrons rose to his feet. His glass went up, matched by that of the other twelve men and women in the room, and he cleared his throat.

"To Procer, and Her Most Serene Highness," he toasted.

His words were politely echoed, and as one they drank before settling into their seats. Louis waited a few moments, tinted

light casting red shadows like claws on his skeletal face, before addressing his peers.

"It would appear a coup is underway," the spymaster said. "As of now the involvement of the Holies of the House of Light and the Silver Letters under Balthazar Serigny have been confirmed. The extent of the conspiracy beyond this is unclear, though a degree of royal involvement is only to be expected."

At the other end of the table, the comfortably withered Antonie of Bientaillant rapped her knuckles against the table to signify a desire to address the table. Louis acceded to the request with a slight inclination of the head.

"My friends in city guard tell me the conspiracy claims to be acting on the behalf of Princess Rozala Malanza, though they have not made this widely known," Antonie said.

Bertrand de Gonfallond, sharp-eyed and younger than most in this room, rapped his knuckles but a moment later. Louis paused for a moment longer than necessary before allowing him to speak, an unspoken reminder that lack of courtesy to a fellow patron of the Circle had no excuse.

"Given the prominence of Balthazar Serigny within the coup," Bertrand said, "we must consider that this was made known to Antonie's friends on purpose. Balthazar has some knowledge of our laws, as you all know."

It was not impossible, Louis thought, or in truth even unlikely. The Circle of Thorns served no master but the Principate itself, that was its governing principle and foremost law. Not the First Prince, not the Highest Assembly and certainly not the House of Light. Given that the highest office in Procer was not hereditary, it had been understood by wise minds early in the nation's history that the Principate's spies abroad could be beholden to any one family or institution. The Circle must ever be above the fray of schemes within the bounds of Procer, intervening only when there was foreign involvement. If the Circle took sides in the Assembly's little squabbles, it risked endangering itself and therefore the Principate's eyes abroad. In truth that vaunted neutrality had been bent, on occasion, but never too far. Those who would have the ambition of playing throne-maker in the Assembly were weeded out early in their tenure with the Circle, long before reaching positions of true influence. Were these years of peace, or even less strenuous a war, an attempt to dethrone Cordelia Hasenbach by another princess would merit no debate. And it was undeniable that even in these... delicate times the only acceptable successor to the First Prince was Rozala Malanza, as no one else had the support or popularity to keep the Principate from falling apart.

Yet Procer had come upon the antechamber of the end times, and now the lines between the foreign and the domestic had blurred. It did not help that the Bastard might be behind what Antonie's people had learned, as their young colleague had noted. The head of the Silver Letters had learned too much for comfort of their laws and methods during the Great War, and he was in no way above using Princess Malanza's name as a shield to keep the Circle out of this affair until the dust had settled. To his left another knuckle rapped the table, Alejandra of Cuenera departing from her usual sullen silence to raise her voice.

"It matters not if Seregny attempts to trifle with us," she said, voice faintly accented. "It is not ours to decided whether Cordelia Hasenbach or Rozala Malanza will rule. It is ours to unearth whether the attempted transition of power is free of the Enemy's meddling."

There was a rippling murmur at the table at that, as much in consternation as approbation. Several knuckles rapped, though Louis chose that of Joachim of Essenrer – one of the elders among them, and the sole Lycaonese. The Circle had been careful that there should always be at least one from the northern principalities among them, though recruitment was oft difficult. They could not claim to speak to the interests of Procer without the rearguard of their empire having a voice at their table.

"It will be necessary to carve into the Silver Letters," Joachim said, voice oddly powerful for a man so old his skin looked paper-thin. "They are the weak link. The House will have everything of import in cloisters and basilicas, but the letter-openers brought in too many for every safehouse to truly be secure."

Louis hid his amused smirk at the dig at their opposition behind a sip of wine, as many others at the table. *Letter-openers*, Joachim had mocked them as, for the head of the Circle at the time of their rise to legal employ had mocked the thugs as a 'confederacy of letter-openers and cutpurses'. There were some who said the name of Silver Letters itself had come from the way their first founders had made much of their wealth opening the correspondence of the wealthy and powerful to extort coin by blackmail. The smirk faded along with the taste of the wine on his palate as Louis de Satrons digested the rest of his colleague had said. It was true but it would also carry consequences unless acted on properly.

"It appears I will have to be led astray by my personal loyalty to Her Highness," the head of the Circle of Thorns calmly said. "As is our way, I will depart early to allow you to write the denunciation without my presence."

He paused a moment. Louis supposed he should mayhaps be moved to say more, as if it proved that the Silver Letters or their fellow

conspirators had not been induced by a foreign power this would be the last time he addressed the Circle as its leader. Perhaps at all. Yet he had never been particularly prone to such flights of fancy, in truth, and he had known everyone at this table for decades. Theirs was not a profession that allowed for sentiment, and he would not insult their common service to the Principate by looking back upon it with unnecessary nostalgia. Theirs was grim and often foul work, and those who carried it out oft came to grim and foul ends. They had all known that long before earning a seat at this table.

"You know of my endorsement for my successor," Louis said. "And for the seat my removal would leave empty. As for the rest..."

He rose to his feet once more and raised his glass.

"Let none lay hand on this land," Louis de Sartrons said.

Glass roses to match his, as one.

"Without bleeding for it," they replied, every last hard-eyed.

You will be as a circle of thorns set around Procer, their ancient founder Clément Merovins had charged, so that none may lay hand on this land without bleeding for it. If there was rot in the flesh, if the Enemy prowled Salia on this night, then they would rip it out root and stem.

—

Balthazar had not taken a seat at the table, instead leaning against the wall of the ornate Hall of Herons as he indulged himself by studying those seated.

He'd not known the full breadth of their plot, as was not unusual in such things, yet at this hour of truth the masks had come down when this council had brought out those who wished to form the heart of the coming reign. It was no small company, near a hundred to his count. His Silver Letters and the Holies had formed the heart of the conspiracy so he had known the involvement of near everyone of import, but now the rest of the lot had come slinking into the palace he'd taken for them to gather like maggots on a corpse he found the disparity of those involved to be somewhat troubling. That they'd run thin in matters princely was only to be expected, given that near every royal that remained in Procer was on one of the northern fronts, but a harvest of two was not so trifling a thing: Prince Arsene of Bayeux, one of Amadis' old hounds now trained to heed Malanza's hand, had been the easy mark.

He had much to gain from the Princess of Aquitan rising to higher office, as one of her inherited partisans. Princess Cotide of Aisne had been a surprise when he'd first learned of

her, and even now she seemed highly uncomfortable in the company of the others. It was principle that'd turned her against Hasenbach, he gathered. The consolidation of the Highest Assembly into a tame thing had smacked to her of tyranny, and she'd approached the Holies for moral guidance and advice – only to be brought into the fold of the conspiracy instead. There were only two other royals in the city, Renato of Salamans and Ariel of Arans, neither of which had been judged safe enough to invite.

Prince Renato was one of Hasenbach's loyalists, now more than ever as a war against the League of Free Cities had miraculously spared his lands, and while Prince Ariel was more ambiguous in his allegiances he also had a great many soldiers marching on his lands through these 'Twilight Ways'. Both had only reluctantly accepted the summons to a session of the Highest Assembly, and immediately begun delaying on actually moving towards the physical assembly until their spies could have better notion of what was taking place. They'd learn little, Balthazar had seen to that. Between the bloody chaos in the streets of Salia and the mysterious deaths of the few captains and officials best known in the right circles to trade whispers for bribes the easiest ways to gather information had been neatly closed.

The true trouble with those two was that now that Hasenbach had made a fool of him and escaped his *own damned hands* it was quite possible she'd taken refuge in the manse of one of them. Both princes had refused entrance to both the city guard and the House of Light, Prince Renato's captain of the guard splitting open the head of an overly ambitious city watch officer without batting an eye. Those manses could be taken, the conspirators had the numbers for it, but it'd be hard fighting and neither of the royals part of the coup were willing to agree to it.

The precedent might be dangerous to their kind, after all.

A motion passed in the Highest Assembly could pry open those gates, most likely, but the masquerade there had to be played out first. For all that the conspiracy was currently lacking princes, with a little enthusiasm it could begin the work of *making* a few. There were candidates on hand, Hasenbach had seen to that when she'd begun her little trick with the restored Guillermont Decree – she'd had men and women of the right blood and birth to serve as successor-candidates for every principality left leaderless by the Princes' Graveyard. Much like how those who'd plotted to unseat the Lycaonese savage had enjoyed the very refreshments in this hall that Hasenbach had arranged for her own captains, these royal candidates would now be crowned and made the conspiracy's creatures instead of the First Prince's.

It would begin soon, for the summons to the Highest Assembly would soon have been sent a full bell ago and when that time was reached the sessions could begin even with the absent. A mere two

votes would not be enough to pass anything, of course, but there the Holies had come of some use. While the crowned heads were away from Salia they had left behind *assermentés*, sworn surrogates who could vote in their stead. By oath these surrogates were to vote only by the will of their prince or princess, yet the House of Light had applied both fear and faith to good effect.

It was the will of the Heavens that certain measures be passed, and to vote even by oathbreaking was sinless. To refuse was to serve the Enemy, whose dark hands had touched the heart of Cordelia Hasenbach and corrupted her body and soul. Those priests could not convince Balthazar had seen to himself, now that the Augur was no longer an issue: hostages, blackmail and naked threats had been enough to secure a narrow majority. He'd have preferred to hold the session without even waiting for the whole bell to pass, but both the royals and the Holies had refused to hear of it. Rozala Malanza's ascension to holy rule was not to be marred by even the slightest of procedural faults. The former fantassin thought them fools for it, for though they worried of such details being used to overthrow Malanza down the line they were forgetting they first had to get the fucking princess on the throne.

Which he suspected would be harder to achieve than expected, given the discordance of conspirators he was looking at. There were Salians there, officers in the city guard and the garrison as well as bureaucratic officials. Hasenbach's harsh measures against corruption in the capital had seen kinsmen from most great families in the region lose a sinecure and the assorted income, and as she'd refrained from purging the old guard that'd acted with probity quite a few had nursed private hatreds of the First Prince for years and only now come out to settle them. It'd been Balthazar himself who dug out half of those malcontents, having his fresh flush of agents in the capital find out who had grudges while ostensibly looking for 'Praesi infiltrators', yet Prince Arsene and the Holies had stumbled across quite a few themselves.

It'd been the realization of exactly how many enemies Cordelia Hasenbach has made that'd prompted the conspiracy to act, as well as the understanding that the window of opportunity was slight. A coup could not be had while there were foreign armies within marching distance of the capital, and Malanza had been exceedingly clear that she could not be seen to be doing the overthrowing herself: it had to be settled before she arrived in Salia. Still, the Gods had smiled on them when the time came. Some scrivener in the House had unearthed a precedent from the Liturgical Wars about a priestess' regency in Segovia that'd had one of the holdover faction in the Holies swing over into the camp preaching direct action, swinging the House of Light's influence entirely behind the coup just in time.

Some agents of Prince Arsene had caught sight of the priests moving guards into the city and the Prince of Bayeux had tentatively reached out to the Holies, adding the weight of his own growing conspiracy to their own. It'd all fallen into place, just before the last chance any of them would have for years if ever, and so Balthazar had set aside his own wariness of Princess Rozala in favour of backing the coup to the hilt. Never again would he have such an opportunity and Balthazar Serigny would not let that fucking murdering savage rule one moment longer than he had to. Not when his own sister had never even gotten a grave in Brus, just gotten thrown into a mass grave with the rest of the fantassins by the northern butchers.

He might have suffered through that, in truth, even if that'd been the day where he'd thrown his support entirely behind Princess Constance of Aisne. But Salieri getting an arrow in the back for coming too close of the Neustrian camp after dark? Balthazar considered himself a callous man and did so with some pride. Callouses were what grew from rough use, honest use, and though poets and highborn could afford sentiment the likes of him found just as costly as any other luxury. Yet even for him, a sister and a husband was too much. It'd been like poison in his veins every time he looked at Hasenbach, the knowledge that if she'd just stayed in her fucking frozen wasteland like Lycaonese were meant to then someone proper could have put an end to the Great War and the only two people he'd ever slightly cared about would still be alive.

And he could do nothing, for even *intent* would be smelled out by Hasenbach's pet oracle Chosen. So he'd smiled and served and waited, even as she made plain she meant to replace him with some twit from Lyonis. He'd kept it all inside him and placed men and women he owed in useful places because one day, *one day*, there would be an opening. And it had come, hadn't it? Because there truly *had* been Eyes of the Empire in the Salia, and his people had caught them along with their papers – including a dated suggestion of how to arrange the murder of the First Prince, mentioning the Carrion Lord's own theories of how the powers of the Augur worked.

Given that the eastern monster had run a merry chase around the heartlans while making a fool of every force in the west until the Peregrine caught him by surprise, Balthazar had read those 'theories' with great interest. And, upon deciding they were reasonable, finally reached out to the Holies afterwards, to... lend a hand, and perhaps a few suggestions. Not that they'd ever trusted him, which was admittedly not unwise of them. Seven priests from the very upper ranks of the Holies were in attendance now, representing the House of Light along with their swarm of lesser priest attendants. The priests had been scheming for longer than any of them, as it turned out. Balthazar had seen some of their correspondence with Malanza, and while it'd begun

innocently enough also it'd begun months ago and grown increasingly treasonous as it went.

The Princess of Aquitan had struck gold when she'd raised the notion of restoring the House's seat in the Highest Assembly, by his reckoning. That'd been enough to move the ambitious to begin convincing the not, and after that it'd only been a matter of time until enough priests fell on her side. I'd been bold of her to use the royal seal of Aquitan on some of the correspondence, though Balthazar had noted she'd been clever enough to do so only on those letters which were seemingly innocent. Not all had been penned by her, for perhaps a third were identical to the samples of former prince Louis Rohanon's handwriting the Silver Letters had in their possession. Yet given how deep the once-ruler of Creusens was known to be in her councils that was not unexpected, if surprisingly trusting of her. It might be that Rohanon was to be her formal consort after her election.

It was unfortunate that the situation in Iserre had made it impossible to send someone directly in the army camp – Sophie of Lyonis was watching Malanza like a hawk for exactly such a thing – but it had been observed by his agents that the letters were in fact coming from the heart of the coalition army. He'd even intercepted one, and used it as an introduction to begin his own private correspondence with the princess. That'd been the last confirmation needed for Balthazar, as while someone else might be willing to offer him an empty pardon there was no one else who should be interested in very obliquely suggesting that Rozala Malanza's younger brother and rival claimant, at court here in Salia, should perhaps meet with an unfortunate accident in the chaos of the events to come. She likely had her own agents to arrange such a thing, Balthazar knew, so he'd taken the request for what it was: an extension of trust to bring him more fully into her camp.

It would be a pleasure to work with a woman such a deft hand at the Ebb and Flow, especially one who had the foresight to *hide* it unlike so many of her peers.

"- and so the House of Light had begun to debate whether the actions of Simon of Gorgeault have made him graceless, as the known murderer of lay brothers of the House."

The spymaster's eyes snapped up at the old man who'd been speaking, of the Holies from the south.

"A clarification," Balthazar the Bastard said. "Was Brother Simon harmed before being returned to confinement?"

Gods, let them not have bled the old man. Balthazar was not particularly fond of him, but the Holy Society had friends in many high places and if they began whining about their leader being harmed during the coup there'd be an outrage. The Arlesite

priest purpled at being questioned in such a manner, but there was no one in this hall who did not know who Balthazar Serigny was now – or why crossing him would be a costly mistake.

“He was not,” the Holy said.

Balthazar’s brow rose in surprise. Gorgeault was long past his prime, but it was known in some circles he’d had quite the adventurous youth. He would not have gone quietly.

“He was not harmed at all?” the spymaster pressed.

The priest spoke through gritted teeth.

“He was not returned to confinement, cutthroat,” the Holy reluctantly said. “He escaped.”

Oh. Oh, those fucking fools. Did they not realize how that changed things? Balthazar, much as it burned to admit it, had blundered when he’d failed to seize Hasenbach more forcefully. But now the Silver Letters were out in force, every priest in the city was keeping an eye out for her and the manses of her supporters were under constant watch. It was known she’d fled into the high districts after making it out of the palace, and those had been closed down by guards and garrison so it was a certainty she was still in there. If she was in anywhere but the manses, it was only a matter of time before she was found. If she was in one of the manses, she could only wait helplessly there. It was still a dangerous situation, given the cunning of their quarry, but one that could be salvaged: especially if the Highest Assembly came through. But now Gorgeault would be out in the streets, and all his little friends and their little hiding places that no one else knew about would be opened to Hasenbach the fucking moment the other spy found her. Which he would, because for an old sack of bones he was sharp as goblin steel.

“Serigny,” Prince Arsene said, voice cutting through the room and demanding silence by simple virtues of his station. “What troubles you?”

“It troubles me that our friends in the cloth have let slip one of the few individuals capable of smuggling Cordelia Hasenbach out of the capital,” the head of the Silver Letter flatly said.

The silence that fell was deafening.

“That cannot be allowed,” another of the Holies said. “She is to stand judgement before the Heavens and the Highest Assembly.”

“Shall either bother themselves to fetch her?” Balthazar cuttingly replied.

Anger from the priests, which like most of them was growing rather tiresome.

"Enough," Prince Arsene yelled, and when heeded lowered his voice. "You have a suggestion to make, I take it?"

"I'll need at least two thousand men," the spymaster said. "Retinues, city guard or garrison it matters not so long as they are steady and will obey orders."

"And what will they be ordered?" a Salian captain suspiciously asked.

"We know what part of the city Hasenbach has fled into, and we've sealed it off," Balthazar Serigny evenly said. "Yet I have received fresh information that, in her despair, the Wicked Prince has struck a bargain with Below and is now attempting to bring forth demons into the city."

There was a pause.

"For the sake of Salia," the Bastard smiled, "we shall have to burn her out."

—

Wearing heavy cloaks, in deference to the last winter chill and not any great need for discretion, two tall silhouettes strode within the southernmost gate of Salia. The Witch of the Woods frowned, smelling blood and smoke, and inclined her head to the side questioningly.

"Order must be restored," the White Knight calmly agreed.

Unwise

Join the discord!

Unwise

<https://discord.gg/gt9ZcT>

[*Liliet*](#)

And vote on topwebfiction!

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

Fade

This has to be Scribe's work. As soon as I noticed Black's theories were sent.. She's so dangerous.

pagesbe

Uh. Somehow I don't see those two coming here to ensure Cordelia's usurpation. This rebellion is screwed.

I mean, they'd be screwed anyways because I highly doubt that Rozala endorsed any of this, but they're screwed before she even arrives.

[EdwardGrave](#)

just because they aren't there to help the coup doesn't mean they are there to help. My thinking is that they are there to interrupt with the meeting with Cat and the signing of the accords.

[Liliet](#)

In Third Liesse, Pilgrim was certain he could count on the White Knight to support and keep the peace / truce. I think he'd know 🤔

erebus42

We've already seen that the Pilgrim's judgment is hardly infallible. The White Knight has been shown to lean a little too heavily on the Choir of Judgment and the precedents of the memories of past heroes. That being said I think it's a bit too early in the game to make a solid prediction on what his role will be in all this.

[Liliet](#)

>The White Knight has been shown to lean a little too heavily on the Choir of Judgment

Are you referring to that time in Free Cities he went along with the inane obstructive bureaucracy despite everything without protest, or to that time he demonstrated why you shouldn't ask him to resolve disputes by killing one of the royals involved and then went back to meditating and figuring out strategies in his tent?

poipoipoi

Subtle issue:

Tyrant is using Heirarch to very publicly go after the White Knight. Hit the White Knight right as he "restores order" and that could end badly.

Do0d

I expect Kairos is using himself as bait for a judgement while in the presence of Hierarch.
Hierarch will then object to the choir having a right to judge people of the League.

Do0d

Also Anaxares very much wants to judge Hanno for killing people of the league as was seen when he received images of Hanno.

Dainpdf

Unfortunately, the White Knight has a tendency to just cut down anyone deemed unworthy by Above... which may include both parties.

Also, he is Named, which means the Bard may have gotten to him.
If she wants Cordelia dead...

edrey

if the bard appear, i would say its to cut down scribe.
on the other hand. i expect cordelia have more cards than just escape

TheZorginator1

Here's the thing, we have no idea what choirs want what or what the Bards take on all this is. The Pilgrim and Mercy are very unlikely to be angling for the destruction of the Principiate and I can't see them deciding to kill off Cordelia at the moment. It's very likely that this is all a plan by Scribe and that would make the choir of justice against it on principle. The Bard...she might do something to fuck over Cat in a way that wouldn't get back to Pilgrim, but this will weaken the forces against Keter and that's not what she wants. Not to mention that it would lessen the Augurs influence which is the Bards biggest lever to control the Principiate.

Honestly, with all the lies and naked ambition going around the coup, it sounds to me like the White Knight is going to start cleaning house among the holies. A bunch of priests lying about demon summoning in order to burn a portion of the city for their ambitions doesn't exactly seem like something the choir of justice would be into.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

In the Free Cities, as well as at the Vales, Hanno has very much been going along with authority – even blatantly obtrusive/corrupt, as long as they were on the right side of the war. Cordelia is on the right side of this war, and the fuckers causing unrest and making shit up are most definitely going to find themselves on the wrong one.

Shveiran

Judgment, not Justice. A meaningful distinction, in my opinion.

We have been told that the Choirs are pure incarnations of absolute principles. Though the Choir of Mercy was shown to be focused on the bigger picture, I don't think the same goes for Judgment: you judge one defendant, and the "but they are bad too" defence doesn't usually end in acquittal.

I think the question isn't "who would the Choir find not guilty", because all of these people are bloody murderers. Much more meaningful, in my opinion, is to ask "who will Hanno spin a coin on, and who will he not".

[Liliet](#)

This.

Unoriginal

Its scribe. The reference the 'Blacks' plan settled any doubt IMO. Remember the eyes of the empire are specifically designed to draw attention at times something Cat learns early on when talking to Black and oops now they've let slip plans on how to bypass augur to the coup.

Dainpdf

The Knight has mentioned that people have stopped going to him for arbitration, and it was for a reason.

Do0d

I don't think Bard wants Cordelia dead, I rather think she is trying to make her into a villain.

I'm basing this on Anaxares' received vision of the Augur being whispered to (I believe by Bard about dredging up that thing from Triumphant's day from Lake Artoise)

Insanenoodlyguy

Depends. This is now set up for all manner of unfortunate misunderstandings. The White Knight will, no doubt, start flipping coins rather than just believe the first thing he hears, but if he's told the First Prince is summoning demons

AND THEN a bunch of night-wreathed drow start coming out of twilight portals, followed by the Arch-Heretic of the East and her Master, the Hated Carrion Lord who's already had a judgement from the coin, well. He might just be convinced that whatever else happens, there are people he should kill first before asking questions.

[Liliet](#)

They still have several days before the armies arrive, and the armies aren't going to exit Twilight right there in Salia, for reasons specifically including, although not limited to, preventing just this kind of unfortunate misunderstanding. Seriously, the organization/coordination of all of this is not THAT bad.

Insanenoodlyguy

The INTENT is not to do such a thing. But, we in a story now, and it's probable that our protagonists and co. will be informed Salia is going to hell in a handbasket and they need to be there NOW.

I don't think the whole army would march right in, no. But Cat taking a few mighty and named and saying "okay, lets go sort this!"? That has a narrative possibility.

Shveiran

I didn't think about this, but admittedly the shape is there. It is A possibility, at the very least.

[Liliet](#)

That would not help Cordelia tho. It'd make her a foreign puppet in the eyes of all observers unless Cat managed to keep her involvement entirely secret... and that's the exact kind of thing that blows up at the least fortunate moment to the worst effect, so no, I don't think Cat would.

Shveiran

there would be backlash, sure, but the question is whether or not those will outweigh the benefits in a situation this dire... I'd argue yes, especially if the decision is taken without knowing the White Knight and the Witch of the Woods are in the area.

Raivshard

Perhaps, but keep in mind also that Cat has a very good track record these days when it comes to predicting and avoiding tropes and story shenanigans.

Do0d

I think it's far more likely Rozala rides in to put the bastard who murdered her brother's head on a pike.

NerfGlastigUaine

Yeah I didn't think Rozala was behind this before, but this chapter confirms she's not. The moves are too good, the timing too right, the coincidences too big to be her. Rozala's a lot of things, but a "deft hand at the Ebb and Flow" isn't one of them. And if it the Scribe like most suspect and this chapter supports, then I'm even more impressed with her now. And scared. If she could do this in Salia under the nose of the Augur and Hasenbach, imagine what she could do in Laure.

Shveiran

Indeed. How exactly Scribe has managed to, given that the Augur seemed to keep Praes in check for a long time as the main Proceran Name, is something I'd really like to find out.

[Liliet](#)

TBF Scribe had a lot of tools to work with. She didn't cause all this unrest, she just made sure everyone BY MYSTERIOUS COINCIDENCE found each other.

[Adrian_V](#)

That is right, she didn't force anything, this is like Murphy's Law, this could have happened one way or another the only thing she forced/created was the involvement of malanza and how this gives the others an opportunity, and by opportunity i mean an excuse, alibi and shield to hide their own avarice under the veil of legality

Shveiran

Look, I get what you are saying, but by the same logic Assassin could have stacked Cordelia's pillows full of poisoned needles because "it was still her choice to lay down there, he just created the opportunity".

Increasing agents to increase your chances of intercepting messengers is one thing; to nudge here and there to ensure that a plot picks up steam and is led by the nose is another thing entirely. It has intent all over it: she was not just creating chances, she was actively corresponding with them and feeding them documents to shape their actions.

There must be a reason why Augur didn't or couldn't intervene, because this took a long time and she cannot have

been missing for that long. We are still missing a crucial piece.

[Liliet](#)

I think the piece that's missing is Scribe's Stranger power. There's a reason she amped it up so high Catherine forgot about her existence entirely. I think she took a chance on it working on Augur and then it, well, did.

Shveiran

It's possible, I guess, but it doesn't feel... satisfying as far as answers go. We shall wait and see, I suppose.

NerfGlastigUaine

Augur has blind spots. She can't see stuff that isn't planned beforehand for one. If you create opportunities and then take advantage on the spot she can't predict it, or something like that from what I remember. I think it'd be cooler if Scribe worked around Augur's power in logical ways instead of just forcing it with aspect. Kind of a theme in PGTE where cunning and logic beat brute force.

stevenneiman

Yeah IIRC didn't Rozala realize just how fucked everyone would be if Cordelia failed? Definitely the Scribe's doing.

[Javvies](#)

Oh, snap.

Scribe infiltrated Malanza's camp.
And set up Serigny to learn the theories about Augur's powers.

Baltazar is lying about what Cordelia's doing, of course. Still, torching where he thinks she is would probably work ... except for the distinct lack of an identifiable body to be recovered.

But Hanno and the Witch are arriving at Salia. This coup is going to end very very badly.

Skaddix

I mean I think pretty much everyone knows Baltazar is lying but it fits their narrative lol.

But yeah the White Knight and the Witch of the Woods have arrived so this Coup is Done.

Micke

Still, the Gods had smiled on them when the time came. Some scrivener in the House had unearthed a precedent from the Liturgical Wars about a priestess' regency in Segovia that'd had one of the holdover faction in the Holies swing over into the camp preaching direct action, swinging the House of Light's influence entirely behind the coup just in time.

caoimhinh

My bet is that even that conveniently unearthed precedent is something fake that Scribe made up to manipulate the priests of the House of Light.

[Fayhem](#)

I'd bet it's Scribe for sure, but I'd also bet she's in the habit of collecting obscure precedents and technical truths exactly for the purpose of having them "uncovered" at the right time (and quite likely in the habit of deliberately obscuring them further before then, so they don't get turned up by accident instead of by design). Although she's quite obviously not above using fakes when it is necessary, there's no deadlier lie than the one you tell by sharing a carefully selected truth. For instance, Balthazar mentions here that they've gotten some letters with Rozala's actual seal on them, though only on the innocent letters. What do you want to bet that those letters are real, because Scribe has been letting the innocent letters from the Holies get through and sending Rozala's replies back through the same methods as her fakes have been sent? It helps confirm that the letters are actually coming from Rozala in a very convincing way, *because some of them actually are*.

And of course, then Rozala shows up and the Holies say "hey here's the coup we talked about, you're welcome" and she goes "say fucking what, that's not what we talked about you goddamn lunatics, don't you know we're at war with the Dead King and we don't have time for this shit?". Because Rozala is bae. But here's the thing – if we assume that Scribe's goal is to sow chaos, the coup *failing* is likely to work just as well as the coup succeeding. Because let's say Cordelia reassumes power, "roots out the conspiracy", discovers it was all done in concert with Rozala Malanza, and Rozala is then left with a virtually indefensible position as far as proving it wasn't actually her. Which means she either has to submit to arrest and very likely execution (under normal circumstances certainly) in response to what she *knows* are false claims about what she was doing being presented by her political enemy who literally killed her mother, or defend her freedom by force of arms with the army she happens to be at the head of. Which means even the ostensible best-case scenario of the coup failing could

still extremely easily lead to civil war in the heartlands of Procer, which would not be easily or swiftly resolved since most of Cordelia's loyal forces aren't in the area. So she could *maybe* hold Salia, but couldn't be expected to quickly defeat Rozala, while conversely Rozala would struggle to both capture Salia and prevent the First Prince from escaping and rallying her forces to the north.

In practice, Cat and her Magical Traveling Murder Menagerie (notably including special guest star Amadeus of the Green Stretch) will probably put paid to all this scheming, possibly with help from the Heavens for once if I'm reading the end of this chapter right. But still. God Damn, Scribe might be the most dangerous member of Amadeus' band in the end. I mean Warlock only destroyed one city and he had to die to do it, Scribe might just single-handedly kill an entire country here without so much as showing her face and then walk away whistling if she wasn't (presumably) about to get stopped.

[Liliet](#)

I would note that Black did the same thing in Stygia drunk that one time.

I'm just saying, Eudokia is terrifying but that doesn't mean she's the *most* terrifying one there is all~

[Fayhem](#)

Overthrowing a government \neq killing a country. And by far my favorite part of that Black story is how embarrassed he is that people are still telling it lol.

That Other Guy

It makes more sense for it to be the Dead King. Black needs a stable Procer leader to get the Accords.

That Other Guy

It makes more sense for it to be the Dead King. Black needs a stable Procer leader to get the Accords.

[Javvies](#)

Except this isn't at Amadeus's orders. Scribe would have started arranging things in order to prevent Amadeus from being executed and to rescue him. It seems most likely to me Scribe is mostly hands off in Salia, and letting the Procerans do things, while she spent most of the time in Malanza's camp, dealing with the mail.

Scribe didn't choose the timing here.
Besides ... it's likely that she would consider a weakened
Procer would improve Amadeus's bargaining position.

Ox

And so, the black queen came uppn a burning capital and turned to
gaze upon her former foe. With oaths binding her to fight north,
and dreams of a greater future, rozala and catherine started a
war and set sail a ship.

JJR

"I didn't do it."

First words of Cathrine after laying eyes on the burning
capital.

Sylwoos

And nobody believed her.

erebus42

Honestly those eight words combined could pretty much sum up
a lot of Cat's story up to this point.

KageLupus

To be fair, this whole mess is caused by Scribe, who was set
on the path by Black, who Cat has explicitly agreed to be
responsible for. So there is at least a plausible transitive
chain that says that this is Cat's fault.
Not to mention that Black told Cat that Scribe was going to
be in Salia starting shit, and to my knowledge Cat has not
made Rozala or anyone else aware of that fact. So that could
be argued as guilt by omission.

[Liliet](#)

Guilt by omission, no. "Now are you going to hand her over
for trial or what", yes 😊

And I think Amadeus might actually find himself in the
position where he feels like he has to give up on her,
too~

[Mental Mouse](#)

Just to clarify, I'm assuming that it's Scribe rather
than Cat who would be handed over for trial.

But the thing is, Named don't normally "do" trials. If
they get too out of hand, they get taken down by other

Named, usually but not always on the other side of the Good/Evil line. Setting up trials for Named could be one of the big innovations of Cardinal, even if most of said trials still get held *in absentia*.

Remember that even in our world, equality was a thin enough fiction that (1) in writing the early American laws, juries had to be specified as being of the accused's *peers*, (2) even that's been honored as much in the breach as in good faith, and (3) even then it "obviously" didn't apply to women or slaves. Things have improved somewhat since then, but even a glance through a week's headlines makes it clear that we're a long way from actual "equality under the law". And in Calernia, equality of all people not only isn't supported by society or religion, it's patently contrary to the "laws of nature".

pachp93

but everyone will blame her anyway

caoimhinh

"Callowans as a people can be summed up by the fact that, before the Uncivil Wars had even come to a close, it'd become a common boast among the populace that the Black Queen had not even spent a sennight in Keter before having several counts of arson and murder to her name."

– Extract from the personal memoirs of Lady Aisha Bishara.

Callowans' next boast is gonna be: "She hadn't even arrived and the city was already on fire. That's how fucking good she is at setting things aflame. Don't mess with the Black Queen." LMAO.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Um... how would "the populace" of Callow know squat about what went down in Keter? That was totally a crowd of Named fighting things out among themselves.

Shveiran

The memoirs seem to imply the Keter overture will become known in (at least) Callow before this whole mess is resolved. Not, all in all, impossible. That Cat went to deal with the DK is something that has narrative weight, and thus will need to EVENTUALLY be addressed.

[Javvies](#)

The official story in Callow is that Cat took the Woe to Keter and tried to stop Malicia from unleashing the Dead King and kill Malicia.

Then (presumably) Malicia retaliated by having the Eyes/ whomever assassinate a huge portion of the Callowan government.

It's already out that Cat went to Keter ... they're just leaving out some of the details.

Also, it's "Firebug Cat" – everywhere gets set on fire, eventually.

Insanenoodlyguy

Losara beheld the city, it's air thick with smoke and screams, and a shadow fell upon her face. "This mayham has been wrought by hands not mine." she said. Her disappointment was such that she then destroyed the sigil that dared attempt such a coup, and the fires she spread that night eclipsed those set by those who'd called themselves usurper, such that the northern cattle knew her as the burner of Salia.

Extract from the 'Parables of the Lost and Found', disputed Firstborn religious text (though this particular parable is agreed upon as fact by all sides of debate)

Raved Thrad

"Dammit, it's not even goblinfire, so how can this be my fault?"

Soronel Haetir

Treason doth never prosper, for if it doth then it [votes](#).

Dainpdf

Dread Emperor Traitorous disagrees.

agumentic

"The city was on fire, and it wasn't my fault." – Catherine in a couple of days, probably.

Dainpdf

Of course, no one believed her.

caoimhinh

She is probably going to be complaining about it from the distance.

Catherine: "You are all witnesses that I'm here and not there where the fire is. I'm not getting blamed for *this one*."

Rumors EVERYWHERE the next day: "It is impressive how the Black Queen managed to set fire to Procer's Capital while being many miles away. Her dark powers and cunning mind are matchless in scope."

Insanenoodlyguy

"All I'm saying is, the Black Queen acq

Insanenoodlyguy

Curse the inability to edit and delete!

"All I'm saying is, the Black Queen acquired power over the head of the very calamities that raised her. And then scant days later, one of those calamities that answered to he that now answered to her just happened to set the city on fire, you know, the thing she always did all the damn time?" Elvera Tanja, defending her controversial thesis, "The Burning of Salia: The Black Queen's forethought plan", at Cardinal University.

Ultimate_Procrastinator

... was that a Dresden Files reference?

Someguy

Catharine can now swear that she did not order the Burning of Salia but is still going to be "credited" for it anyways.

Dainpdf

She can claim the fact that no goblinfire was involved as evidence of her innocence, perhaps.

konstantinvoncarstein

I doubt it, remember Sarcella, when she burn half of the city to light her pipe:)

Dainpdf

When was that!?

konstantinvoncarstein

It is humoristic. It was not Catherine who set Sarcella on fire. During the escape of the Lantern commando who kill Nauk, the city caught fire. Abigail used that to halt the Levantine advance (Interlude: Beheld I).

In a second time, Catherine went through the flames to attack the Levantine by surprise and light her pipe on the way on a burning house.

Because Catherine has a reputation for starting fires, someone jokingly said in the comments that the pipe story was a proof that Catherine set the city aflame, because obviously the greatest villain of this generation could not simply use a match for that.

Dainpdf

Thank you. I don't always prowl the comments (honestly, I rarely do beyond my first pass) and must have missed this.

konstantinvoncarstein

You're welcome 😊 Personally, I read the comments multiple time. I like to see all the theories and analysis, it is often very interesting and can help me to better understand the story.

Decius

What makes you think that Balthazar doesn't have access to goblinfire? Surely there would have been some with Black, which might have been seized along with his notes.

TheZorginator1

Burning a city district to stop a "demon summoning" is one thing, if they start using powdered devil to create unholy flames that are the distinct weapon of the arch-heretic of the east...the White Knight isn't going to be impressed with their current plans as it is.

Decius

Doesn't Scribe/Assassin's plan for revenge against the Pilgrim for killing the Black Knight involve making Pilgrim use angels to realize that the entire thing is a setup and avoid major damage, thus establishing a draw between Pilgrim and the Calamities?

Sure, that plan has been overtaken by events elsewhere, with all the (heel/face)/(face/heel) turns that resulted in Cat resurrecting Pilgrim and Pilgrim losing his Undo button, and also Black being unkillable. But it's not like those events could reasonably be anticipated, even by Scribe.

[Liliet](#)

>Doesn't Scribe/Assassin's plan for revenge against the Pilgrim for killing the Black Knight involve making Pilgrim use angels to realize that the entire thing is a setup and avoid major damage, thus establishing a draw between Pilgrim and the Calamities?

huh?

konstantinvoncarstein

Using magical napalm impossible to extinguish in your own city is retarded even for that conspiracy, and difficult to justify to the populace.

Shveiran

They could use it in a way that pins the blame on Cordelia, though. The average person in Salia will know jack shit about goblinfire, after all, no? Munitions were not popular until the Reforms even in Praes, and Procer hasn't had to deal with the Legions until very recently. The high ups will know about it, sure, but passing Green flames as teh work of the Wicked Prince could be feasible.

Decius

Not even all of the highly placed conspirators need know about it.

"We were burning out a demon summoning and found the wicked prince, so we called the boss over. Shortly afterward the fires turned green and started burning things that can't burn. I guess we must have arrived just in time, imagine what that demon would have done if it hadn't been disrupted at the last minute!"

Also: The first time Cat is in a city, things always go bad. It's escalating.

First it was just a corrupt governor and guard. Then there was the goblinfire incident at the foundry. Then everyone in the city died and turned into the power source for a flying fortress. Then Keter.

When Cat arrives, tradition requires that things be worse than "Everyone is already dead and we have to fight them and the Empress steals the alliance we're negotiating for".

Insanenoodlyguy

Why use it at all though? Normal fire would get the job done in this case. Yes magic can put those fires out, but those spots that stop being on fire are the spots

you then go in and take a hard look at. Oh hey, found the Prince!

If anything, Goblinfire makes things uncertain. You can't be sure somebody is dead if you don't have a body.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Hey, could you not use the word "retarded"? It's outdated medical jargon meaning "nonverbal and thus not a whole entire human being with rights and so forth," and entering the mainstream hasn't exactly improved its connotations. It costs you \$0.00 to not use slurs for the developmentally disabled, that's all.

konstantinvoncarstein

Sorry, I didn't know. English is not my first language. I saw the word on some Facebook memes, and from the context I thought it was only another way to say "stupid".

Isi Arnott-Campbell

It's okay. Even most native speakers don't realize.

Dainpdf

Well, none has been used yet. Also, how would all that goblinfire have gotten to Salia without anyone knowing?

Dainpdf

Right. Exactly what a volatile situation like this needs, the headsman of the Heavens. This will turn out well.

Also: Cordelia was working so hard to have Salia in proper shape when the foreigners came... and now it's on fire and full of riots.

caoimhinh

On the other hand, this will achieve what the Saint of Swords wanted though in a different manner: after the fire passes and the situation is resolved, what is left will be united in a strong rule and with clear purpose.

This situation has just enabled Cordelia to have a scenario where she can eliminate most of her opposition in Salia in an effective and legal manner.

WuseMajor

Assuming they don't eliminate her in an effective and legal manner first.

konstantinvoncarstein

Narratively, Cordelia dying is improbable. And now that Heroes (including one specifically formed to judge) are in town, there is even more chance of her surviving.

[Liliet](#)

I think that train's sailed.

[Fayhem](#)

I would love to see this train you're describing. If only the gnomes weren't stifling technology I'm sure a Dread Emp would have put one of those in the air by now, covered with guns no doubt. Alas for the wonders that might have been.

Shveiran

What it will achieve is make a mess for her, frankly. You are looking at the long-term benefits, and you are right in theory; but this costs her a very weakened position in the short period, which becomes a long term liability if you need crucial negotiation right this instant and your back is to the wall.

I mean, a fire in her capitol, headed by one of her secret services and influential religious figures, two more Princes in need of deposition, the candidates for the Princes' Graveyard's substitutes being compromised... that is a gargantuan power vacuum during the Principate direst time. This is not a boon, by any meaning of the word: cleaning house only works if you have time to tidy up afterward without a sword at your throat.

Cordelia is going to end up at the table holding to her country with her teeth... Procer will lose a lot of influence unless everyone else is very determined not to see that happen.

And I'm not sure many will be so inclined.

Insanenoodlyguy

Catherine Foundling just has to be that inclined person and Cordon Haresbal will be indebted to her pretty much forever.

[Liliet](#)

I am 100% seeing this also.

I'm also seeing Amadeus going along with that policy while being like *the biggest* asshole about it that he can be without actually undermining it~

Shveiran

She will prop her up, that much is granted. But with all that's going down, I'd argue Procer will lose its place as the most powerful state on the surface of Calernia. I'm not entirely sure Cat has any interest preventing that, even if she could.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Procer's place as the most powerful state on Calernia (excluding, um, at least three non-human states) has a lot to do with their place as the wall between Keter and the rest of Calernia. And Cat's developing mission is to take down Keter for good.

Shveiran

Mhm, is that your take? I didn't consider those factors, I was mostly attributing it to "we have a lot of good rich land and are a big fucking deal", but perhaps I was wrong. This is a narrative driven world, after all.

antoninjohn

Well considering what exactly the First Prince is dredging out of that lake a demon is not too far of the mark

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Angel. Lake Angel.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Cordelia doesn't seem to think so, as per her POV on the subject. And frankly, there are plenty of other options. A literal demon or angel would presumably not be present in physical form (or People Would Have Noticed), but an ancient devil is still a possibility. So is an old "lesser" god, of either allegiance or a would-be independent. Or something we haven't encountered yet, like an ancient revenant, perhaps a counterpart to Helike's Thing In The Basement.

JJR

Just you wait, it'll turn out that the real super weapon in the lake was the friends they made along the way!

[Mental Mouse](#)

Or the enemies they killed along the way... you know, given this whole rebellion and how it's likely to turn out.

konstantin von carstein

This coup will be a lot more difficult to justify with 2 literal chosen of the Heavens opposing it. Cordelia can thank Catherine for their presence, because without the truce they would have never departed from the northern front.

"Burn her out". A purge of Salia is really needed.

And brother Simon is so badass!:))

caoimhinh

I wonder what those two are doing so far from the frontlines. I mean, the 3 months of truce started what, like 5 days ago? They should be nowhere close to Salia, though Hanno can **Ride** his steed of Light and the Witch of the Woods can fly, so there's that.

Where were they prompted to go to Salia by the Choir of Judgement? Doesn't seem like Pilgrim contacted them, and even if he did, they couldn't have arrived at Salia in less than five days since Tariq's deal with Kairos.

They are there with their own agenda, I wonder what it is.

hakureireimu

Narrative bullshit? The Choirs are up to something again? It's Above's will?

Some Smartass

Templates like that are forbidden.

Scavion

Heroes arrive in the nick of time to stop the Rightful Ruler from being deposed by Evil.

Providence lengthens their step and casts aside all obstacles.

Or in other words: It's story time and Hanno is gonna cleave, smite and judge.

[Mental Mouse](#)

ISTR Hanno got summoned to judgement as Kairos' part of the truce negotiations. It's entirely reasonable for him to take a fellow powerhouse along for company and backup.

Shveiran

Does Hanno know that, though? Who told him and how/when?
When did he set off for Salia?

Maybe there was a time-jump as the interludes started; I don't think he could have arrived this early if it is still just a few days after Liesse III

Mental Mouse

The more loyal priests of the HoL might well have *prayed* that this violent insurrection be dealt with by higher powers, ultimately leading to the Choir of Judgement informing Hanno "hey, there's a job for you in Salia".

Or, given how stories tend to pull the Named around, I would be unsurprised if he "just happened" to encounter a reason to head there....

Shveiran

It is admittedly my guess as well, I'm just curious about what reason that might be to justify leaving the frontlines.

Mental Mouse

Well, the frontlines have an angelic assurance that they'll be quiet for a few more months, and of these two can get from there to Salia in a few days, they can surely get back just as fast.

Shveiran

Mhm, so you are of the opinion they are here for the peace talk? You may be right, but if that's the case I'm very curious regarding what their agenda is. I suppose big chosen could bully (or at least expect to be able to bully) themselves a seat at the peace talk negotiations even if others actors disagree on the fact that they should (I doubt anyone but Pilgrim would agree by this point, but still). Even if it was so, I wonder what it is that they wish to say so badly.

Mental Mouse

I'm pretty sure they've been called there from above. Now, this could be in response to the insurrection (per my previous comment). But I actually think it's more likely that they got the call a few days previously, when Pilgrim got angelic backing to involve Hanno in those peace talks via the trial.

Mental Mouse

Though on consideration, that commitment came before the DK ceasefire, so perhaps the insurrection is a more likely trigger.

Decius

They got a letter.

Xinci

Wonder how Cat will react to a important city she was coming to happening to be on fire as she's arrived...again. Truly patterns repeat themselves

Insanenoodlyguy

"It appears I will have to be led astray by my personal loyalty to Her Highness," the head of the Circle of Thorns calmly said. "As is our way, I will depart early to allow you to vote for Practical Guide to Evil on Topwebficiton."

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

nick012000

The Wicked Prince? Did Cordelia just get a Name?

konstantinvoncarstein

No, Balthazar is just lying trough his teeth and doing low-level propaganda.

Liliet

If it was referring to something she actually did, it could very much be the beginning of one. However, since it's bullshit...

superkeaton

Oh Scribe, you clever woman. How long have you ben at this?

Also howdy, White Knight! Ready to say hi to Catherine and Black in person for once? Oh they are going to tweak his fucking nose so much...

Big Brother

Finally, the return of Hanno! I've been waiting so long to see when he'll re-emerge and meet with Cat finally.

NZPIEFACE

I have the sneaking suspicion he isn't talking about the same type of order as most people do.

[Liliet](#)

After the Free Cities arc, I have a sneaking suspicion he is.

It's funny how much of the fandom takes the 'headsman of Heavens' and 'unreasonable judgemental killer of everything' talk to heart, while ignoring us having seen onscreen that Bard was actually weirded out by how moderate and willing to cooperate with local authority Hanno is.

erebus42

She was probably expecting Saint 2.0. He leans a bit heavily into his role and on the heavens to give me too much faith that he'll be overly helpful. But hey, he may surprise us you never know.

Shveiran

We've seen him do very little so far, so it's anyone's guess what he'll do.

nick012000

Derp, meant to leave a top level reply rather than a response to someone else.

The Wicked Prince? Did Cordelia just get a Name?

konstantinvoncarstein

No, but it is easier to justify burning part of your city to find a wicked prince than your rightful ruler.

Big I

Interesting. This puts the White Knight in the reach of the Hierarchy, once everyone reaches Salia. I predict that will end very badly for the Knight, and the Choir of Judgement.

[Adrian_V](#)

Cat did say that below ALWAYS gets its due, like the rogue sorcerer guiding an army was providence here Hanno appears due to it but that still plays into below

Nairne .01

"Because there truly had been Eyes of the Empire in the Salia, and his people had caught them along with their papers – including a dated suggestion of how to arrange the murder of the

First Prince, mentioning the Carrion Lord's own theories of how the powers of the Augur worked."

There, subtle yet obvious enough (at least to me) proof that Scribe has her fingers in it.

I genuinely laughed at the part with Hanno.

[Liliet](#)

And then there's the mysterious nameless scrivener who found an old precedent that bound the rest of the Holies to this.....

Sparsebeard

The real question is : "What did Magnolia Reinhart do to Procer to get the Circle to try to off her?"

konstantinvoncarstein

She is probably Malicia in disguise after fleeing from Praes 😊

SpeckofStardust

Eh we might see the white knight in a good light this go around. After all its rare to see the hero's straight up win but with this coup and the confrontation with the Hierarch give 2 big things they can win and not fuck up Cat.

Some Smartass

The Callowan priests are going to be so smug when they find out about this.

caoimhinh

Yeah, Proceran priests seem to constantly try really, *really* hard to show to everyone that they are an organization corrupted by earthly power at every chance they got.

Then they get offended when that's pointed out.

Valkyria

Oh well. Some Praesi spies that have been undercover there for Below knows how long were suddenly caught and apprehended at the exact moment where they carried moooost useful documents.

hmmhm...

and then some random "scribener" discovers the perfect solution to bring everyone into the fold for this coup.

Hmmhmmm..

Yeah no, for such a great spymaster isn't he like... too naive for

not noticing how perfect everything falls into his lap?
But if there were any doubts until now, this has basically
written Scribe all over.

Also, Hero Squad to the rescue! Finally they're gonna be truly
useful.

Valkyria

Or fuck up this whole thing even more. What's sure is that
nobody really knows what's happening and everyone just blunders
their way through. A whole new order of a clusterfuck that will
only need one misstep and boooom.

laguz24

Oh, those poor fools they are going to die horribly. The
question is who is going down with them? Also, where is our
favorite Champion? Is she dead?

Valkyria

Well, consider that the truce with DK only was a few days ago
and all of them should technically still be on the frontlines
up taking care of the wounded after the battle with the dead.
I'm rather intrested how the two of them got down here so
far.

Valkyria

*fast

Curses and Death upon the nonexistent feature we all want.

konstantinvoncarstein

The WK can **Ride**, and maybe the Witch take them trough
Arcadia? Or both?

Shveiran

Well, Riding through Arcadia would admittedly explain it
all, admittedly. Now I'm just curious about how they knew
they should come here.

konstantinvoncarstein

The Choir of Judgment can phone the White Knight Mercy-
style, so they probably just tell him.

Agent J

We assume much by assuming it was a few days. It's mentioned
the Twilight Way's can turn a trip of months into one of
weeks. It's not, to my recollection, been mentioned how long

it'd normally take to march from Salia to Iserre. Plus, the truce was confirmed before Cat and Pilgrim even returned and then there was the Tyrant thing, a few days of R&R, getting shit in order, a quaint campfire all before they started marching.

Plus, one hero has an Aspect related to movement and the other can fly.

And finally, while the Band of Five was forming during the Princes' Graveyard, the Pilgrim mentioned that Hanno was already on route.

It's not impossible that they made it to Salia before.

Shveiran

You are right, Pilgrim did say he was already coming. Well, that settles it I suppose... Now I'm just curious as to why they were coming.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> too naive for not noticing how perfect everything falls into his lap?

He's an arrogant fool. And when Rozala actually does show up, I suspect there will be an exchange to this effect: "Hail to our new First Prince!" "Really? [looks around] So, all of you are willing to follow my command? Very well, this is my first order: *Execute this traitor Balthazar.*"

[Mental Mouse](#)

And yes, I know the First Prince seat doesn't work like royal succession, I'm just summarizing.

ActionKermit

I believe one of Scribe's powers is to make people not notice her unless she specifically wants to be noticed. Didn't Catherine have to call on the Night a few chapters ago just to remember that she exists?

Decius

Scribe is hard to notice when you are in the same room as her. There's no way that even a spymaster who was being specifically targeted would notice anything.

Valkyria

Not saying he should notice her specifically, just saying that the planning feels too smooth, that everything falls

into place just at the right time. I just think he should be a little more sceptical about that.

Rey d`Tutto

He thinks it is a sign of the favor of Above.

Shveiran

Who, Balthazar? I find it unlikely that zealotry falls among his (many) flaws.

Agent J

From what I'm seeing, it's a mixed between seething hatred long hidden, boldness to take advantage of the first opening he's seen in a decade, and fear that we won't see another given how Cordelia is centralizing power.

He did not notice how perfectly things fell into his lap, because he did not want to. It's shit like this that makes Scribe consider sentimentality an impairment and why she's playing him like a violin.

Liliet

...an excellent summary, in my opinion

ninegardens

I mean.... Hero squad has been up north defending against the Dead King this whole time.
That seems pretty legit to me.

Hell, even down in the free cities, they seemed to be doing a reasonable job.... they were just being played by Bard, and up against the Calamaties AND Kairos, which is difficult by anyones standards.

Xinci

I must say I felt like clapping for Scribe this chapter even a the bare minimum of her manipulations. Truly making your enemy think its their idea is one of the most effective routes to control them. Lets see, she has at least, planted Liturgical document, had a Agent copying the writing style of one of Rozala's trusted and making a dialogue happen for months to influence the House of Light faction. Used Black's notes to nudge the Proceran intelligence network into a specific set of actions, and organizing her own agents to the degree that she set all of that up (though naturally could be using local powers to set up a fair bit of prep so less work for the Eyes).
The holes in the strategy are there but most of the Proceran figures involved dont really want to think about it that much due

to their own self interest. Its very well done.

Though naturally heroic intervention can probably ruin it when its almost done.

It is also interesting that Wicked Prince may have been a Name at one point? Maybe part of the reason Tyranny is so feared in Proceran culture?

Mental Mouse

I considered the possibility that Louis actually did turn, but nope: (From "Seven")

> A bundle fell at my feet with dull thump. A straight-edge cavalry sword, wrapped in a cloak.

> "I had," Louis Rohanon pensively said, "genuinely believed myself to be a decent man, until tonight."

> "And still I hesitated," the man who'd been the Prince of Creusens ruefully said. "If this is the truth of us, my friends, then we have no business wearing crowns."

Also, Bard's comments strongly suggest that Procer's fear of Tyranny was likely "encouraged" by the Dead King's manipulations throughout their history.

Shveiran

I don't know, this feels like it has less to do with Scribe's badassery and more with everyone else being a moron, to me.

Luxuria Tenebris

"Still, the Gods had smiled on them when the time came. Some scrivener[...]"

Considering scrivener is a different word for Scribe, its quite a different set of Gods you are working for.

Liliet

IKR

White Knight's about to have a *field day*

panchoadrenalina

hanno's field days look a lot like banking days, both involve a lot of coins

BlackPhoenix7777

A coin flip for you, a coin flip for you, a coin flip for damn near everybody.

Alex

Scribe's subtlety combined with her ability to hide knowledge of her existence from others is ridiculous. We've heard in other chapters that people know how dangerous she is, and here they can't even consider the possibility she's involved.

No wonder most Praesi are terrified of her.

jack

I'm pretty sure that these people don't even know she exists, which is just how she likes it.

[TeK](#)

Oh no, they are perfectly aware that spymistress of the Black Knight, a Named Villain is not inside Black's camp, it's just why would they even consider that, and bother themselves with triffling little Scribe? They've got coup to fail.

[Liliet](#)

I'm pretty sure they forgot there was any such spymistress in the first place. CATHERINE did, and she knows her personally,,,

[Fayhem](#)

Cat didn't forget she existed. She just didn't come to mind. It wasn't like Catherine was going about thinking "hmm did Black have a spymistress who followed him around, nah that doesn't sound right I'd remember that". She just consistently found other things occupying her attention, and as soon as she specifically concentrated on Scribe she remembered her perfectly.

Scribe's power isn't memory erasure, it's presenting herself to Creation (which I think was suggested to be a manipulation of her Name, or maybe a specialized aspect) as so unimportant that people just don't think of her unless they specifically try/are prompted to. It's a meaningful distinction because it means that her power is more easily disrupted/bypassed than memory erasure, but less likely to be noticed in the first place. You can notice yourself having a hole in your memory and people living a certain kind of life would probably train themselves to do so, but noticing yourself not noticing/thinking of something isn't quite the same skillset.

So it's not that they couldn't remember Black having a spymistress, which would likely raise red flags with *somebody* as you'd expect someone like that to have someone filling that role and while Procer isn't as magically inclined as Praes by any measure they've had enough mages

for long enough that people must try to use them in their Ebb and Flow scheming some of the time for memory editing or w/e. It's that their brains were going "oh his spymistress is probably in Praes or something maybe, anyway we've got bigger fish to fry so let's move on before we're even really thinking about that". Which personally I'd call scarier, on balance.

[Liliet](#)

See, the way I'm seeing it work is more like "Right didn't Black have a – oh wait what were we talking about?"

[Fayhem](#)

I think we're close to being on the same page then? Except I don't think that it redirects you if your attention lands on her, bc when it does it seems like the effect falls away pretty fast. It's more like your attention will never land on her naturally, so you have to consciously force it – but as soon as you do, it's done.

jack

So... take every mention of 'letters' or 'correspondence' in this entire chapter and remember that the Scribe probably intercepted and altered the contents, or just outright fabricated the entire thing.

Cassiemouse

Burning down the noble district? That is certainly not going to cause tons of problems going forward.

[Adrian_V](#)

My only question is whether Scribe is with the army or inside the city, black said she would be there but this one appears to indicate she is with the army. Up until here i have a couple of ideas of how this would develop....right until those 2 appeared, i should have known the author wouldn't let it be that easy, i loved how he just dropped those 2 as literal spanners in the work xD

Moment of black humour but can you imagine the faces of Malanza, Cat, Black, etc once they arrive? i mention cat and black because of Eudokia's involvement (and how it was black's anti aur plan that allowed it, in fact i am 99% sure the leak of said plan was intentional xD)

[Tek](#)

Calling it: White Knight and Heroes will actually support Cordelia and cut down the House.

Author Unknown

Scribe's cookbook:

Add one commoner spymaster, finely diced and a handful of corrupt lesser officials to the pot. Simmer in resentment over low heat for several years. Add three tablespoons of misdirection, a pinch of happenstance, four leaves of forged parchment, one-half cup of righteous indignation and one cup of avarice. Mix well. Turn up the flames to high and add two fresh Heroes. Stir until the plot thickens.

[Liliet](#)

Oh I'm pretty sure the heroes weren't part of the recipe 😊

caoimhinh

The real end of the recipe is probably "Add Named to taste".
XD

haihappen

Hilarious timing all around...

Truly, Scribe set up a combo so perfectly it resembles a Rube-Goldberg-Machine, and the Heavens have their little helper showing up at the exact best/worst time. That's Providence for you.

However, some of the people strike me as rather "dumb", namely Balthazar. He is a spymaster, and should know not to trust letters of conspirators that cannot be verified in person. He, however, seems to be blinded by hatred for Cordelia, so that is almost excusable.

Considering that they know they deal with Named, and not acting accordingly, either speaks of either a fatal case of ignorance combined with over-confidence, or equally morbid stupidity. Also, guarding a VIP (very important prisoner) by only two rather idiotic guards? Some Tropes never get old. He was basically guaranteed to escape.

On a side note: People throw around suspiciously capitalized Names (more Insults) for each other... I am reading too much into this? (E.g., The "Bastard", the "Wicked Prince")

konstantin von carstein

Simon was 74 years old, they thought it was unnecessary to guard him better.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Balthazar may be a spymaster, but he has no concept of story-fu, and so he he's a gamepiece instead of the player he thinks he is.

Speaking of which, I found a quote in the reader comments for Digger which is *totally* Cat:

Absconding_Cascade: Destiny, the annoying supernatural obstructive bureaucrat who you want to punch but can't so instead you set its paperwork on fire and do things your way.

Harixx

Why does it show: Tragic news about the site moderator. for me and nothing else?

Polygonal

Seems to be some sort of trojan or malware, windows defender caught it when I clicked the link. Careful.

TheZorginator1

It's a link to malware, somethings gone fucky.

blrbly

Why is it here then?

Caerulea

I too, am confused. The incident the url referee to was in july, and incident.site, the website is on, gives a Russian error message. Is there official word, because I would like to read this chapter.

[sengachi](#)

Someone hijacked the site to embed the malware. Official word can be found on the discord.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Where? I looked over there (I normally don't do Discord) and there was nothing obvious.

[sengachi](#)

It's in #liesse-accords. It was sent out with an @everyone ping.

[Mental Mouse](#)

As noted below, that's a malware attack – possibly hijacking WordPress, but more likely just slipping their hook into the ad

feed. Notice that it didn't name ErraticErrata, or give any details at all... just a generic hook intended to make people click "for more information" (and download some malware).

Online advertising companies (including Google!) let pretty much anyone pony up a few bucks and get their chosen message and link posted on any number of sites. Just make sure the link points at something "innocuous" like "Fresh snake oil beats little blue pillls!" when you submit it, then a day or so later change the message to "Someone you care about is in danger! Click here to save them!", and the button to "download and run HaXxor.EXE".

Caerulea and anyone else who actually clicked, run your antivirus scan now, and keep an eye out for any unusual behavior from your computer!

Also, this is the **other** reason why I run AdblockPlus. (The first reason? Well, those suspiciously-relevant ads wouldn't be half as annoying if they didn't act like a pack of dogs who've scented a bitch in heat.)

blrbly

is the author dead?

[sengachi](#)

No, someone hijacked the site to embed malware in a link designed to entice people to click it.

[sengachi](#)

Holy hells, Scribe has played these people like a freaking jazz piano. That is a terrifying level of manipulation.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, that's her specialty. The question is, how good is she at story-fu? Is she someone who could effectively oppose the Bard, or another high-ranked playing piece like Balthazar?

[sengachi](#)

Well I mean, she was the person who organized Black's spy network in Callow, where a full generation of nascent heroes were repeatedly and quietly extinguished with barely a peep even as a substantial chunk of the rest of the continent's heroic cast lent aid. So I'm gonna guess pretty dang good. Or at the very least, picked up a fair amount from Black.

[Mental Mouse](#)

OK then, we can assume she knows enough story-fu to know just how badly this could have backfired on Balthazar. (As it likely has)

[sengachi](#)

Oh yeah, given that she's organizing this coup on behalf of a woman who's loyal to the current Prince, I don't think Scribe is exactly trying for a *successful* coup.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Hmm. Would she *know* that Rozala is loyal? Even Cordelia considered her the most likely likely suspect, and Scribe apparently wasn't there for Cat's holyshitwhatjusthappened triumph.

[Mental Mouse](#)

(That is, the one at the "conclave".)

[sengachi](#)

I think if Scribe thought Rozala was willing and eager to do this, she just would have made her part of the plan outright.

Andrew Mitchell

Magic? It's got to be, right?

Clever, and committed. But I'm unsure of what Louis is about to do. Any ideas?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Louis is about to trust in his people. He's said his piece, and knows better than to undercut himself with partisanship.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Magic? It's got to be, right?

Wealth and power have their own magic. Even in our own world...

nipi

Hmmm... Wonder if we are going to see Twoface, I mean the White Knight flip a coin on the Liess Accords

Andrew Mitchell

My sense is that Hanno just judges people, but I could easily be mistaken.

nipi

No he doesnt. He feels that as a mortal he is incapable of passing proper judgement so he deferes to the Heavens. His backstory already had him flip a coin to determine peoples fate.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I believe you've misunderstood Andrew's comment. What I think he meant is that Hanno's flip-a-coin-to-get-heavenly-orders thing is only applicable to people, not to abstract concepts like treaties.

Andrew Mitchell

Thank you, you are correct.

Andrew Mitchell

Sorry, I could have phrased that better. That's exactly what I meant.

Interlude: Bone

"Here's the only justice I care to bring across the Vales: a sword in a just hand."

– Queen Elizabeth Alban of Callow, the Queen of Blades

The stone hit the man square in the cheek and he screamed in pain as bone broke blood began trickling down. Another few followed, though most were detritus snatched off the street instead of loose pavement. This was the first time Sister Marie ever saw a stoning with her own eyes, though some of the older scriptures did mention the practice in specific circumstances – traitors in Salamans had been dealt with in such a manner, in those ancient days when the Arlesen Confederacy stood and the Gigantes still tried to bring their rebellious escaped slaves to heel on occasion. A case could be made, Sister Marie decided, that in these troubled days a northern in Salia was close enough to a traitor for... this not to be without precedent.

"Please," the man begged. "I'm not even Lycaonese, it's a-"

A clump of thrown ice interrupted the man's words. Was that a tooth Sister Marie had glimpsed? Hard to tell, for the torches cast only wavering light and the screams of the crowd were

distracting. Odds were the man truly wasn't Lycaonese – he'd hardly be the first one with a vaguely northern name to be dragged out of his shop tonight to stand before the judgement of the crowd – but it hardly mattered. The young priestess' sermon had whipped up a frenzy in the odd hundred Salians who attended her temple regularly, and it was not an easily quelled thing. Brother Rémi, who stood between her and the Holies, had been clear that nothing must be said that would temper the righteous wrath of the people against Princess Hasenbach's attempt to make herself a queen.

"Procer is no queendom," Sister Marie screamed, to the approving roar of the crowd, "it is an assembly of the highest in the eyes of the Heavens, and let all tyrants-"

Her eye caught sight of a glinting thing, spinning. She turned in surprise as a dark-skinned man caught a coin with an open palm. The crowd had parted around him without even realizing it, Sister Marie realized. Like a school of small fish around a larger one. Calm eyes found her own, serene in the midst of the screaming chaos. A heartbeat later there was a burn of blinding Light and she felt searing pain going through her skull before she felt nothing at all. Sister Marie's headless corpse fell to the ground, everything about the neck turned to ash.

"Disperse," the White Knight evenly told the crowd.

—

Louis de Satrons found, to his surprise, that he must have missed field work. He did not consider himself a sentimental sort, but there was a strange pleasure to seeing to the necessities by your own hand. Like filing a nail, he thought, or cracking a joint. The man before him the dark room was awake, though the hood on his face had been enough to cow him into stillness for now. Perhaps the Silver Letter agent even believed that by keeping his focus he'd be able to retrace his steps to this particular safehouse. If so, the head of the Circle of Thorns commended him for his dedication. Not that it would help.

"Proceed," Louis ordered.

The hood was ripped off by one of his helpers, and the unremarkable face of a middle-aged man with luxurious blond curls was revealed. The spy blinked at the sudden restoration of his sight, but found he could not see well: surrounded by glowing magelight orbs, the man was bound sitting in the sole island of light within the interrogation room. Louis' own presence would be reduced to a voice from the dark until he wished it otherwise.

"You're making a fucking mistake, whoever you are," the spy called out.

"My mother," Louis said, voice dry as dust, "was a huntress of great skill. Stag, boar – even geese and swans in our lands by the shores of Lake Artoise. She insisted I learn, but I never succeeded at sharing her enthusiasm for the affair."

"They'll know I'm missing," the man said, fear beginning to win over anger in his tone.

Few good things ever happened to bound men in dark rooms being told wistful stories.

"If you return me to my people I'll argue leniency," the spy tried. "Otherwise they'll fucking rip you apart, I don't care how high your birth is. I'm a Silver-"

"Letter," one of Louis' helpers completed from behind the prisoner. "We know."

"Then what do you want?" the prisoner hissed.

"From you?" Louis said. "Nothing you will not give soon enough."

He slowly rose to his feet, then glanced to the side. There was quite the selection awaiting, for the Circle's facilities in the city were well-equipped.

"But there is one part of her insistence I thank my mother for, to this day," Louis de Sartrons mused out loud. "For she was old-fashioned, and demanded I skin and cut my kills myself instead of allowing a servant to do so in my stead."

His fingers closed around the flensing knife, elegantly inlaid with silver.

"Look, I'm willing to talk," the spy hastily said. "Just tell me what you want to know and-"

"You know nothing of import," the helper said. "Your position is that of a bottom-feeder in Balthazar's band of beasts."

"Then what is it you *want*?" the spy desperately said.

"For you to scream loudly enough that it will carry to our other prisoners," Louis mildly said.

It truly had been kind of Mother, to ensure he would learn young to have a precise hand with a knife. And how to use it, too: there was surprisingly little difference between a stag and a man.

Under the skin, anyway.

"What's the damned holdup?" Prince Arsene yelled from atop his horse.

Balthazar Serigny suppressed a sneer. The man had insisted on coming yet barely left the palace grounds before beginning to complain about every little thing. The tall spymaster discreetly palmed a knife in the long sleeve of his greatcoat and barreled forward on foot, elbowing the soldiers ahead of him so he could reach the front of the column. There was little difficulty in finding out what the trouble was when he'd arrived there, however. The men and women in their way were a ramshackle bunch, a patchwork of different arms and uniforms when they even had either. There was Salian city guard in there, and garrison as well, but others were civilians: many fair-haired and older, Lycaonese veterans who'd dragged themselves awake and into the streets in the name of one of their own. The loyalty Hasenbach still commanded among her kind even after abandoning them to the wolves was outright disturbing. Some youths in elaborate arms and armour, clearly highborn and perhaps even distant royalty, had gallantly gathered as well. They were the loudest by far. Their challenges to the soldiers that were in principle led by Prince Arsene of Bayeux – and in practice by Captain Julien, who Balthazar owned – were both boastful and improbable, as was Alamans custom.

The spymaster was reluctantly impressed by the young woman who baldly asserted she would kill them all with half an icicle, one handed, if they dared to take another step forward.

Still, this was a waste of time and time was his most dangerous foe at the moment. With every passing moment that old fuck Simon had been loose in the capital for longer and the chances he'd found Hasenbach rose. And though Balthazar's middling esteem for the man had dropped even further when he'd failed to sniff out such a large conspiracy amongst the Holies, there was no denying that the Holy Society had a wide array of friends and hiding holes in the city: if Brother Simon got his hands on the savage, the coup was unlikely to recover from it. Which meant there was no time to humour the fools who'd raised a ramshackle barricade across the street, barring the way to the near three thousand men the conspiracy had gathered to smother any chance of Hasenbach's escape in the crib. There were a few hundreds at most and would be swept away in moments if it came to blades. The head of the Silver Letters shoved aside one of his own soldiers, who was standing around hesitantly as insults were hurled at her. Fucking Salian garrison, they had no spine and hardly more pride. The former fantassin approached the barricade and raised his voice.

"By order of the Highest Assembly, you are charged to disperse," Balthazar called out. "You are aiding treason and heresy by standing in our way."

That saw some hesitating, for both offences he'd named were capital ones and there tended to be generous in doling out death when it came to rooting them out. A hirstute, bearded old man – drunk, by the looks of him, leapt over the barricade with only a long knife in hand.

"Crook," the man said, Lycaonese accent thick. "Crook and servant of crooks. Hannoven fell for you and now you slide the knife."

"You will not get another warning," Balthazar called out, ignoring him in favour of the crowd.

"*Lest dawn fail*," the old man screamed, and hundreds roared it out with him.

Fools that they were, they charged out from the barricade. Balthazar hastily retreated, loudly calling for a shield wall to be formed, and the slaughter began.

—

Francesco grit his teeth and struck again, finally smashing through the wooden shutters. The others let out a whoop of joy and Anselme helped him clear away the broken remains before going through the window. Moments later the other man opened the door from the inside and the lot of them went into the shop, a few looking for any coin that might be kept by the drapier but less ambitious looters simply grabbing every roll of cloth and displayed tapestries they could. It was all a sin, Francesco knew, but virtue did not fill stomachs. That pretty tapestry displaying verses from the Book of All Things might, though, so while ashamed he carefully unhooked it before folding it under his arm. From the ripping sound to his side, not all his fellows had been so delicate in taking it. What waste.

"Drop everything," a woman's voice called out. "Or you'll not leave here alive!"

The drapier herself had come out from the back, he saw when he turned. She was overweight and long past fifty, so the sight of her brandishing a slender duellist's sword while in a nightdress was more laughable than worrying.

"We'll take the sword too, thank you," Alessandra chortled, mocking the woman they were robbing.

It was a hard crowd he ran with these days, but with a crime to his name the city guard ran him off whenever he tried to attend the First Prince's alms-givings. Who else was he to run with, if he did not want to starve or die of cold out in the streets? Francesco caught a flicker from the corner of his eye and saw a coin spinning up – and though it spun so well and high it should have touched the ceiling instead it vanished. There was some

hooded figure leaning against the doorsill behind them all, but Francesco barely noticed for the silhouette that'd spun the coin moved like the wind and then Alessandra's head was rolling on the floor. The man, for Francesco now saw it was a man, paused to take a look at Anselme before killing him too.

One stroke of his longsword, that was all it took, and as the looters began to flee the stranger repeated the process again and again. A look, a strike, a death. The drapier had pissed herself at the sight, though he could hardly judge her since he'd done the same. The man finally turned to him, tall and dark-skinned and with eyes that Francesco met entirely by accident. Within he saw a spinning coin, silver, one side bearing crossed swords and the other laurels. And then it ceased, and laurels was what he came back to himself and knew this to be a glimpse of madness. The stranger's sword rested against his neck, and he tapped it lightly with the flat side.

"Amend your ways," the White Knight said. "While you still can."

Then he moved to the side and Francesco flinched in anticipation of a changed mind or a cruel game coming at an end, but the man instead took a look at the drapier – who'd fallen on her knees and dropped the sword, trembling in terror.

"You have reason to be afraid," the stranger coldly said. "They see all."

There was a flash of light and the drapier's charred corpse tumbled back, half the face whispering ash. The man took a last glance around before walking out of the charnel yard, the hooded figure following him without a word.

Francesco threw up and nearly choked on the filth, for he was weeping in relief.

—

"Interesting," Louis de Sartrons said, washing his hands clean in a water basin.

He dried them with a silk cloth before setting it aside. The full weight of his attention went to the woman at his side and the report she had recited by memory. Promising that she would have such talent for recall without any notes, though Louis was in no position to make an official commendation. If it turned out that the Silver Letters had not been used by a foreign power, then his ordered abductions and torture of their members would be taken a gross overreach of the Circle's mandate. Should this be the case, he would confess to having abused the resources of the organization out of his deep personal loyalty for Cordelia Hasenbach and take full responsibility. For that fiction to be kept, however, it must appear as if he'd acted on his own unknown

to his peers. A commendation on record would rather strike a discordant note.

"It appears that as far back as five months ago the Silver Letters began unearthing Praesi infiltration," his helper said. "Interrogation of a captured spy yielded information that led them to several safehouses, including two holding scrolls and correspondence. Balthazar Serigny is said to have taken great personal interest in the findings of the second one."

"And we missed operations of this scale?" Louis frowned. "How?"

"Of all these, only the two Eyes of the Empire in Madame Soucillon's brothel were known to us. Their capture and death were made to look like criminal activity, however, so they raised no alarms," the woman replied. "As for the rest, the Silver Letters appear to have found a genuine Praesi spy chain unknown to us."

That the Bastard had not passed along everything related to the Dread Empire to the Circle of Thorns at first opportunity was impolite, but not outright damning. It could be argued that the Circle's inability to ferret out the Praesi had voided obligation for the Silver Letters, and this incident in and of itself was not enough to justify the assault on them Louis had ordered. As he had said earlier, however, it was an *interesting* detail.

"Have every known and suspected Praesi infiltrator in the city looked in on, immediately," Louis de Satrons finally said. "And it is time we deploy all our... acquisition assets."

"Sir?" she murmured, sounding surprised.

"Find me someone who had a notion of what was in that correspondence the Bastard took," the spymaster order. "Neither gentleness nor discretion are any longer a concern in achieving this."

—

"Are the firebreaks ready?" Balthazar asked.

The wind had picked up, though by the standards of Salian winter this was still a rather mild night. Though the tall killer knew that decisive action was needed for Hasenbach to be put down, he had no intention of burning down the entire capital. Though Princess Malanza might be grateful for what he'd done, she'd still have to order him killed to appease the mob. Not being a fool, he'd ordered firebreaks to be dug around the high districts and great masses of snow carted up to prevent the fires about to be lit from spreading. It would be enough, most likely. With a little luck it'd even snow later that night or come morning, and even the embers would be put out.

"They are," Captain Julien agreed. "Are you certain this is wise, sir? Lots of royals have manses in this part of the capital. They might take issue with returning to ashes instead of a nice *salon*."

"These are hard times, Julien," Balthazar mildly said. "And we've confirmed that Prince Cordelia has set mages to summoning demons to take back the city somewhere within the districts. The ritual must be disrupted no matter the costs."

The other man did not believe him the slightest, though he was wise enough to keep silent. In truth, though for those of some learning this was a wild accusation Balthazar had not chosen that particular excuse without reason. Few Procerans knew much of magic and it was well known that Hasenbach had brought some of the magickers back to prominence by founding her Order of the Red Lion. Those with little knowledge of sorcery, which happened to be the overwhelming majority of the Principate, would find it believable enough. As for the learned, they would know well enough not the cross a broadly popular First Princess with great command of the Highest Assembly and the enthusiastic backing of the House of Light.

"So be it," Captain Julien said, murmuring *Gods save us all* under his breath.

For all his dithering, he was prompt in having the fires started. Balthazar had ordered they begin with the northmost sections and rake their way down, to flush out Hasenbach if it was possible: it was still best to have her imprisoned instead of dead if possible, though not so such a great extent he'd let an opportunity to put an arrow in her pass. The high districts had sewers, which he had watched by his people, and every way out of them was currently held by soldiers and guards. The noose would not be slipped, not by a woman who was suspected to have a broken leg. The torches hit the oil-soaked bundles of wood and roared out, beginning to spread into the attached manse. As the fire crackled merrily Balthazar the Bastard smiled, for he'd have the savage in chains before dawn even if he had to go street by damned street.

—

Lieutenant Pauline had been feeling nauseous for near half an hour, now, and emptying her stomach had helped absolutely nothing. She was city guard, she told herself, she wasn't *meant* to handle messes like this. There must have been at least two hundred corpses scattered around the street where the 'authorities' had clashed with the 'rebels', most of them belonging to the poor fuckers who'd gone after garrison soldiers under Julien while armed about as well as your average street tough. The shield wall had scythed through them like wheat, though stubbornly quite a few had kept coming. Some old veterans

and garrison men stayed loyalist had tried to get a shield wall of their own going, but Captain Julien had brought archers and there weren't enough shields on the rebel side to be able to even remotely take an organized volley.

The whole thing had been a massacre, and the smell of it was now lingering in her nose and mouth even when she covered it with cloth and faced wind blowing the other way. Gods, if only she'd not had a taste for poppy brew. If her debts had not been so deep the Silver Letters would never... It mattered not. They were deep as could be, and she owed to the wrong sort of folks. Hasenbach had been a decent enough sort to the people of the capital but not so saintly Pauline would burn down her own life for the First Prince's sake. Weren't no saints anywhere in Salia, as far as she could tell, and a woman had to take care of herself when the going got rough. She just wished the *stench* would go away.

"Stack the bodies together properly," she yelled through the cloth. "The carts need to be able to pass through the street when they're carried out. And all of you just standing around, lend a fucking hand would you?"

Only her own guards heeded the instruction, the idling soldiers and fantassins – Silver Letters, most likely – ignoring her outright. Considering they made for half the hundred she'd been left with, it was no surprise this bloody mess was going on forever. Even if the damned carts did finally get here they'd all be stuck waiting until guts and corpses no longer clogged the way. The Bastard ran this coup, looked liked, and he'd not trusted her enough to let her guards handle this alone. Fair enough, but the man could at least have left her with more than godsdamned watchers if she was to have this street cleaned up enough it didn't look like a butcher's yard under morning light.

"Half of them," a man's voice calmly said, "were hardly even armed."

Lieutenant Pauline nearly jumped out of her own skin. The man who'd talked was some tall foreign fucker, though well-dressed. Probably one of Balthazar's, if he'd made it through the other blockades unimpeded. Maybe he'd know when the carts would be coming. There was a hooded woman at his side, the guard then noted, and she could see bits of a mask in the shadows beneath. Yeah, definitely some sort of spies.

"They were armed enough," Pauline grunted. "And you're sounding awful judgy for one of theirs, I got to say."

"I do not judge," the dark-skinned man refuted. "Though judgement has been passed on you nonetheless."

"You're not one of Balthazar's," Lieutenant Pauline said, stomach sinking.

"No," the White Knight said. "Though I expect we shall meet in due time. I shall mark the exculpated, Antigone. For the rest, do as you will."

The woman cocked her hooded head to the side as the wind suddenly picked up, and the last thing Pauline ever saw as a blade shining like the sun.

—

"And you are quite certain," Louis de Sartrons said, "that it concerned the Augur's limitations?"

"Yes," the dark-haired prisoner said. "I saw only part of the scroll, but it claimed to contain the Carrion Lord's own thoughts on the matter."

And there it was, the trap the Tower had laid. It'd been done cleverly enough, the emaciated spymaster had to admit. If that scroll had been found on the first foray of the Silver Letters, Balthazar would have recognized it for the dangled bait that it was. Instead it'd been a progressive, heady climb for the other spymaster: information extracted that led to more, operations successful but never too easily, until he'd found quite the cache of compromising documents including this particular scroll. Likely Serigny had held some doubts as well, but ultimately decided that not even the Empire was so callous as to sacrifice near a hundred spies and hirelings altogether to simply feed someone information. He never quite had gotten the measure of the Eyes of the Empire, had he? Oh Balthazar had prevented their successes on occasion but there was a reason that the Webweaver's pawns were for Louis and his peers to deal with and not the Bastard. Clever as Balthazar could be on occasion, he was used to the deceptions of the Ebb and Flow: shifting alliances and secrecy, the labyrinthine procedures and precedents of the Highest Assembly paired with blackmail and the occasional assassination.

And the Tower did use those means, it was true. But the Tower was a cursed beast that swallowed its own tail, there was no gambit too ruthless for it. Worse, after the Scribe and the mysterious Lady Ime had wrested the reins from the hands of their predecessors they had proved to be exquisitely deft hands at the game. Some of the ways the Circle's agents in Mercantis had been dislodged had been so superbly executed that Louis had been more admiring than angry when reading the reports. Under the tenure of those two, the Eyes of the Empire had become the peer of the Circle of Thorns in every way. He had a great deal of respect for that society, and he'd studied them for decades: this had the telltale marks of a Praesi conspiracy all over it. It was always their preference to fund and empower local turncoats rather than to introduce a plot of their own whenever possible. Under Dread Empress Malicia the Empire had turned again and again its wealth

into poison flowing through the veins of the Principate, and this was no different.

Yet when the reports from the other order had had given began to pour in, what had been clear instead became muddled.

"Pardon me," Louis said. "I don't believe I heard you correctly."

"They are killing each other, sir," the helper said. "It is not a coincidence, we've ten separate instances confirmed of known or suspected Imperial agents fighting."

A factional struggle between the Eyes? It was said that the Black Knight and the Dread Empress had sundered ties, but the Circle had been dubious given the lack of follow-through on either side. It would not be the first time that those two feigned quarrels to draw out foes and slay them. It was not, however, impossible.

"In seven out of ten instances, the party being attacked was trying to start a fire in the city," the helper recited. "In two out of the seven, magic was used by the attackers. In all ten instances the attackers won and retreated. We have several being followed."

The mages, Louis thought, were the trouble here. The great advantage of Praes spies was the ability to transmit what they learned by scrying, which greatly complicated ascertaining if a suspect individual was truly in contact with handlers. Which was why the Eyes so carefully guarded the identities of their mages in Procer, often preferring to lose an entire band of spies on the ground rather than endanger that more important component. Two had already been outed tonight, and more might follow. Which meant either this gambit, whatever its meaning, was worth burning them and potentially a very significant portion of the Eyes of the Empire in Salia – if not all of Procer.

Or, he grimly conceded, there truly was factional fighting within the Eyes. Between the Empress and the Carrion Lord, or more practically speaking Lady Ime and the Scribe. The former was said to never leave the Tower, if she even truly existed, but the latter... She was alleged to have been in the heartlands at some point in the past, though the information had been judged unreliable. It was not impossible for her to be in Salia at this very moment. One side was attempting to start fires, another to prevent such actions. It could not be that arson itself was the liability, for given the utter chaos in the capital it'd be nearly impossible to seriously contend that Praes had been responsible for the fires. Not when Balthazar's band of pawns was happily starting a few without prompting.

"The riots will grow worse, if the fires take hold," Louis frowned, thinking out loud. "Both those of the First Prince's partisans and those of the conspirators."

More specifically the House of Light, who could stir the people to anger like few others. Still, Cordelia Hasenbach was not without friends in Salia and remained popular with the people – in particular soldiers, retired or otherwise, but also artisans and the poor.

“Fighting has begun in earnest between our own people and the Silver Letters,” his helped noted. “As well as the Eyes and the Silver Letters, though that has been infrequent and we believe possibly accidental.”

Louis de Sartrons’ eyes sharpened.

“Where?” he asked. “Where are the Eyes and the Letters clashing?”

The particulars had to be sent for, but the ember of inspiration had struck and slowly he followed the thought to its conclusion. As always, the devil was in the details. One might credibly conjecture that at the moment there were four assemblies of spies in Salia: the Silver Letters, the Circle of Thorns, and what one might venture to term the Praesi arsonists and the Praesi hatchets. The hatchets, as it happened, were the key. Because as descriptions were confirmed it became clear that there were significantly less of them than the arsonists – this was known because some of their executioner crews were sighted several times.

The Praesi arsonists were being clipped away by the hatchets with methodical precision before they could light fires in vulnerable parts of the cities, where it might easily spread. Now, the hatchets did not intervene when Silver Letters and arsonists fought but they themselves had raided several Silver Letters safehouses. Which meant that the Praesi ‘hatchets’ were trying to prevent the ‘arsonists’ from carrying out a plot, while most likely trying to get their hands on some damning piece of evidence. Meanwhile the Silver Letters were being fallen upon from all sides, including the Circle’s more martial assets, while lashing out essentially blindly.

The hatchets were being used to contain and clean up a plot someone had evidently judged ill-advised. Given their small numbers but efficiency and eerily skilled coordination, as well as their precise strikes at Silver Letters safehouses, Louis believed he knew who was heading them. He sent for his coat and arranged for an escort to accompany him back to *Les Horizons Lugubres*. The other members of the Circle would be long gone, by now, but it was not they he intended to meet.

“Sir,” the helper said as he was led out, “I had a room set aside as you ordered. Who should I let the watchers expect?”

“Oh, you might say she’s an old friend,” Louis de Sartrons smiled, “Though I expect she’ll let herself in.”

—

The princes were folding, and Balthazar could almost taste the victory in the air.

The last two royals in the city that were not already at the Highest Assembly had sent messengers expressing they would not be setting out to attend, and that they would go accompanied by their retinue given the disorder in the city. They'd ordered that the blockade was to move aside for them and their escort when they arrived, which Balthazar had arrived – so long as only men on foot and by horse came, and every single one was inspected before being allowed to pass. They'd grown desperate now, enough that neither Prince Renato of Salamans nor Prince Ariel of Arans had even brought up that the head of the Silver Letters was torching the district where their own manses stood. They'd recognized it for a lost cause, and they were falling in line. Captain Julien had protested letting the retinues out in the city, but they were less than two thousand in whole so Balthazar had disagreed. They were elite soldiers, true enough, but they could not seize the city with so few. If they took the palace they might be able to hold it against greater numbers, but Balthazar had ordered that only twenty soldiers be let in by prince and any attempt to force entry with more be met with violence.

Given that the conspiracy's own soldiers were the ones on the right side of walls and gates, at the moment, even if the two princes had struck an unlikely alliance they simply did not have the strength to take the palace with steel. And even if they did, by some miracle, they could not defend it: while it might be true that the servants in the palace had been fond of Hasenbach, and some even protested her seizing, he had Silver Letters among their number that'd open secret ways into the palace if it need be retaken. Watching another manse burn down, the ferocious-looking man waited at the edge of the blaze's warmth for the latest word out of the palace. By now the Holies and Princess Clotilde ought to have crowned their pet princes, and the decrees could start being passed in earnest. Cordelia Hasenbach's deposition would likely be the first. The soldiers had begun piling the wood by the walls of another manse, while another detachment briskly inspected the servants and lesser nobles that'd come out of the last before sending them south in small groups, when the messenger did arrive. One of his own Silver Letters, he noticed, Rosalie. Less than pleasant a person, but utterly without scruples and so reliable for all manners of work.

"Have I missed the election of First Princess Rozala Malanza?" Balthazar amusedly asked.

The red-haired woman grimaced.

"You haven't," she said. "The Highest Assembly hasn't even officially convened yet."

He was, for once, more utterly surprised than furious. For a moment, at least, then fury claimed its due.

"What?" Balthazar hissed. "Are they all drunk? It's been most of a bell, what could possibly be taking so long?"

"They can't enter the Chamber of Assembly," Rosalie said.

He blinked, unsure how to respond to that. Had some enchantment been laid upon the threshold?

"They don't have the key," she explained. "There was only one, in the hands of the Master of Orders-"

"One of Hasenbach's," Balthazar frowned.

"No one can find him," Rosalie said. "He must have fled the palace. I have our people looking for him, but he could be anywhere by now."

In principle that was a blow, as the Highest Assembly could only hold session within the Chamber and any motion passed outside of it would not be binding, but only in principle.

"Are you telling me no one can simply batter down those doors?" the spymaster growled. "Given their age a few good soldiers ought to be enough."

"Princess Clotilde has refused," Rosalie darkly said. "And the Holies have agreed. They say it would cast into doubt the legitimacy of Malanza's ascension to break open the Chamber."

"Of all the bouts of bloody lunacy," Balthazar cursed.

He called for a horse, after that, and for Prince Arsene as well. This part of the city was under control, now it seemed they were needed back in the palace. Balthazar Serigny would see this coup succeed even if he had to batter down the fucking doors himself.

copaceticcockroach

First!! for the first time, i think

DJD

Sounds like the woman with Louis is Scribe and the room was cleared for The Bard

WuseMajor

I suspect the room is being cleared for Scribe actually.

Shikkarasu

I'd like it better if the room was cleared for Scribe, but then Louis' helper sits down and only just then does he really -look- at her.

[Liliet](#)

Sounds about right ♥ ♥ ♥

Tom

Yes, he carefully identifies each member of the Thorns as he invites them to speak, but he's unable to pay any attention to the identity of his extremely knowledgeable helper except for noting her incredible memory? And in the later portion of this chapter it seems like he's barely aware of this person's presence even though they're feeding him a ton of information. It's definitely Scribe.

[Liliet](#)

Honey, no
when you're first, what you do is post the topwebfiction vote link

Andrew Mitchell

What Liliet said ^^ OR something positive and/or constructive about the chapter. That works too. We don't "first" here.

Tesla

Oh the White Knight is going to FUCK. HIM. UP.

konstantinvoncarstein

It Judgement time! I am happy to see that Hanno is not just a thug who slaughter everyone on his path. The Balthazar's future is becoming darker and darker. I suppose the Witch will extinguish the flames.

If the "hatchets" are Scribe's agents, who are the "arsonists"?

Do0d

Or the arsonists are Scribe's agents and Amadeus scryed a mage with the Eyes to do damage control.

Cicero

The Eyes loyal to Malicia.

DoOd

I'd say Balthazar's future will be very bright ... with a very brief application of Light following a coin toss.

Some Smartass

Malicia's, probably. She's outright allied to the Dead King, and his side is the only one that benefits from this fiasco.

Hmmmm

Remember Cat's threat to ascend the tower if the Accords weren't signed? Maybe someone – perhaps Scribe, perhaps not – wants Cat to topple Malicia.

Or less narratively adept, maybe someone wants to prevent the accords, or put a stop to the longterm peace between Callow and Procer.

Shveiran

If that's their angle, why make Rozala First prince?
By this point, I'm not sure she has any more intention to fight the Black Queen than Cordelia.

[Javvies](#)

The Salian branch of the conspiracy don't know that.
Somebody has been faking letters from Rozala to them, and intercepting their letters to Rozala.

They think Rozala's on their side.

caoimhinh

He kinda is. The problem of being sworn to the Choir is that he is affected by their extremist view. It's either absolution or death, he doesn't have a middle ground. It's true that the coin doesn't order everyone killed, but Hanno's only response to a guilty verdict is to kill. That being said, it does get the job done. Decisive action is what's needed now.

I'm inclined to think that the hatchets are Scribe's agents because they have won 10 out of 10 clashes against the arsonists (who then would be Malicia's agents), but that's

weird considering that they are preventing the situation from escalating out of control.

Could it be that Amadeus contacted Scribe and she accepted his orders, but she had already carried out her plan so it was impossible to stop it, and now it is Malicia's agents taking advantage of the situation to further create chaos in Procer?

Liliet

>It's true that the coin doesn't order everyone killed, but Hanno's only response to a guilty verdict is to kill.

I mean, that's because nothing short of a death sentence gets the guilty verdict. Everyone who doesn't merit it gets a warning and a second chance because it's not actually Hanno's job to police petty crimes

>I'm inclined to think that the hatchets are Scribe's agents because they have won 10 out of 10 clashes against the arsonists (who then would be Malicia's agents), but that's weird considering that they are preventing the situation from escalating out of control.

>Could it be that Amadeus contacted Scribe and she accepted his orders, but she had already carried out her plan so it was impossible to stop it, and now it is Malicia's agents taking advantage of the situation to further create chaos in Procer?

I thought of that as well 0.0

and then I immediately thought of Scribe deliberately creating that impression in order to come dry out of the water

Insanenoodlyguy

This. The coin has come up heads a lot, but consider that of the people we know enough to judge, it spared one guy committing the same crime as two it killed and condemned the following:

A woman preaching up a riot dragging innocents to be stoned to death

Soldiers who killed loyal civilians

The fucking Black Knight.

I mean, are there any judgement calls here wed really dispute? We all love black but he established himself a monster back in chapter 1

Liliet

The most cynical interpretation? Scribe's more expendable agents, out there specifically for the purpose of demonstrating that Scribe is HELPING

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

Who knows? White Knight is a loose cannon but by gods he gets results.gif! Anyhow, who else is imagining white knight with a fedora, neckbeard and katana.

Some Smartass

Well I wasn't until now. 🤪

Alivaril

Starting last chapter, I started to suspect that the Scribe was actually trying to shore up Hasenbach's rule instead of overthrowing her. This chapter pretty much confirmed it. The House of Light, the faction most likely to ignore or undermine treaties made by the Arch-Heretic of the East, will find its power decimated. The traitors likely to complain about tyranny are being removed. The longer Hasenbach remains in power, the more time the Accords will have to gain steam before someone can cut them down.

In other news...

The spymaster was reluctantly impressed by the young woman who baldly asserted she would kill them all with half an icicle, one handed, if they dared to take another step forward.

Cat, is that you?

Sparsebeard

More likely, she prepared the plan then, Malicia, Bard, Balthazar or even Scribe herself put it into action... Only for Scribe to be contacted by Black and thus aborting the whole plan...

That's my guess for now at least, I still kind of think that Bard is using the events to try and turn Cordelia Villain, although it seems a longer and longer shot.

Nairne .01

I think you are underestimating Scribe.
Also, Scribe is aware of the schism between Black and Malicia.

Hardric62

I thought the same after reading the latest chapters: too botched for the Scribe to side with these mouth-breathing duckers.

Of course it does raise the expectations on Cordelia's shoulders too, since betrayal or not, she will have to 'justify' taking back power and most likely shattering the House of Light... Cordelia will just need the Accords now, because if she achieves nothing there, Procer will be finished anyways.

Now that looks more like a Scribe scheme... Or she actually managed to goad the local Eyes in action while keeping her own loyalists under tight control to also add 'purging my organization' to the list of things achieved.

[sengachi](#)

Honestly I think the coup being botched is an argument in *favor* of Scribe's influence. If she's going for maximum damage then she doesn't want a neat clean transition with a smooth transference of power. No, she wants a botched coup running around trying to put someone on the throne who doesn't want to be there but whose apparent complicity will fracture the country, without actually succeeding, ravaging civilian faith in both the church and the government in the process. Heck Scribe's perfect endgame is probably just the natural progression of this exact clusterfuck, except with Cordelia properly dead.

And hey, Scribe's literally right next to the person who's trying to find Cordelia and smuggle her to safety, isn't she?

Unless Black gets Scribe to stand down sometime in the next couple of hours or Hanno gets all up in Scribe's business, I suspect that Procer will not have a functioning government or a clear line of succession for half its positions come morning.

[Liliet](#)

>Honestly I think the coup being botched is an argument in *favor* of Scribe's influence. If she's going for maximum damage then she doesn't want a neat clean transition with a smooth transference of power. No, she wants a botched coup running around trying to put someone on the throne who doesn't want to be there but whose apparent complicity will fracture the country, without actually succeeding, ravaging civilian faith in both the church and the government in the process. Heck Scribe's perfect endgame is probably just the natural progression of this exact clusterfuck, except with Cordelia properly dead.

^^^

With the amendment of "Scribe's perfect endgame without/ before communication with Amadeus that Cordelia is an ally now".

With that communication, the perfect endgame looks like this: Cordelia regains tighter control at the cost of resources she could use to pressure the easterners in negotiations, and Scribe comes out smelling like roses because she *helped*

[sengachi](#)

Gods you're right, if anyone could spin this whole debacle into good PR it would be Scribe.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> ...or Hanno gets all up in Scribe's business,

Scribe has a very powerful defense against Hanno, namely *not being there*. 😊 IIRC, Hanno doesn't even have a divinatory aspect. WOTW could possibly nail her down, but I'd consider even that chancy – Scribe's certainly had to evade powerful sorcerers before.

[Liliet](#)

The fun thing about this coup is that it concentrates INTERNAL power in Hasenbach's hands, while weakening Procer's overall position. This is perfect for the eastern coalition since they can both treat with Hasenbach more confidently that she can enforce whatever she agrees to AND make fewer concessions.

And if Louis of Sartrons walks away with the impression that it was Malicia causing a mess and Scribe is helping clean it up...~

[sengachi](#)

... you know I don't want to give Scribe **too** much credit, but she has very neatly organized a situation and position for herself where she can choose between plunging Procer into unsalvageable chaos and what you just described basically on a whim, at any point in this process that she so chooses. I hesitate to credit her with that much Xanatos-fu, but ...

[Liliet](#)

She IS burning a lot of resources to swing this around, Louis brought up the mages for a reason.

But... yep. She sure has.

Soma

Hey EE, I saw something about a the site being compromised on a reddit post, and a malware link having been posted in place of Harp. Can we get an update about what happened?

agumentic

Huh. For all our jokes about how the Scribe is behind this, it seems that this is a work of mundane Eyes of the Empire the Scribe attempts to stop.

caoimhinh

Seems to me now that Scribe was contacted by Amadeus and brought to heel, but the plan was already in motion so she couldn't stop it. Now Malicia's agents want to take advantage and make it worse, so Scribe's agents have to clean after the mess she caused.

The hatchets have beaten the arsonists 10 out of 10 clashes, so those must be the ones led by Scribe. The last time we saw Black's agents fighting against Malicia's agents (when Malicia assassinated a third of Cat's court, Anne Kendall, and Ratface) they knifed them too, so it seems like Amadeus'(and Scribe's) agents are a tier better than Malicia's.

[Liliet](#)

>Now Malicia's agents want to take advantage and make it worse, so Scribe's agents have to clean after the mess she caused.

Now Scribe has a perfect opportunity to both fuck Malicia over and make herself / her faction look good.

I'm just not buying she couldn't have stopped those arsonists without taking to the streets. This is most definitely performative for the thorns' benefit.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> The last time we saw Black's agents fighting against Malicia's agents ... they knifed them too, so it seems like Amadeus'(and Scribe's) agents are a tier better than Malicia's.

I wouldn't go that far – Malicia's agents may have gotten killed, but not until after they fulfilled their mission – and getting killed meant they couldn't be questioned. (I don't think we've seen anyone using necromancy for interrogation, and from what we know of the world rules, it's not clear if that could be done without capturing the victims alive in the first place.)

[Liliet](#)

>Malicia's agents may have gotten killed, but not until after they fulfilled their mission

Black's agents specifically prevented assassinations in Cat's army.

[Liliet](#)

See, normally "that's what she wants you to think" is a joke, but in this particular case, , ,

Alivaril

The spymaster was reluctantly impressed by the young woman who baldly asserted she would kill them all with half an icicle, one handed, if they didn't vote for Practical Guide to Evil.

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

Alivaril

Gsfrscda the inability to edit posts is really not doing me any favors tonight.

[Liliet](#)

god I'm so torn between "you're doing god's work mate" and "i hate every single one of these jokes, personally"

-goes to the voting booth, sighing-

Hellspirit

Haa, culture you might obstacle in all things revolution.

Great!!

Aston Whiteman

What happened to the Lycaonese dream?

(Interesting filler. Miss main storyline.)

Soma

This is literally not filler. It is setting up the upcoming parts to the story. What happen here directly impinges on the plot. It's like the exact definition of not filler. Being dismissive to integral parts of the plot will not improve the story, even if you enjoy other parts of the story more.

Sparsebeard

Yeah, people calling parts of original stories “filler” infuriates me too.

konstantinvoncarstein

It is not a filler, what happens in these interludes will very directly impact the plot.

Nairne .01

I agree, all the previous interludes have meaning as well.

[sengachi](#)

You keep using that word, filler. I do not think it means what you think it means.

Someguy

In a city gone mad, the only sane man was the Master of Orders holding the key to the Chamber.

Nairne .01

Well said.

[Javvies](#)

Huh.

This is interesting. Infighting between the factions of Praesi intelligence? I wonder which faction is which – and who the factions are.

I suspect that the arsonists might be Malicia’s and the hatchets are Scribes – and Amadeus managed to contact Scribe to get her to not remove Cordelia(yet), but Malicia’s loyalists continued with the plan designed to retrieve Amadeus morphed into a plan to weaken Procer, remove Cordelia, and possibly put a number of Princes and Princess that are owned by Praes onto the Assembly. After all, going with the plan Amadeus is currently running with ends with him as Dread Emperor – which is something Scribe has wanted and believed should happen for decades.

Yeah. Hanno and Antigone are going to stomp all over the conspirators.

NerfGlastigUaine

This chapter is awesome. The changing POVs, the action, the intrigue, the characterization, all superbly written. The story in general is amazing, but this chapter is a real gem even among the rest.

If Scribe is responsible for the hatchets, then why? Did Black manage to get into contact with/convince her?

Can’t wait for the fallout from this debacle. A failed coup on

the eve of an alliance instigated by the unpopular sixth ranger of said alliance is going to make shit go all the way down.

Liliet

If Louis walks away from this with the impression that Scribe, personally, is a friend, on top of Procer ending up weakened but more united over Cordelia, then this whole scheme will be nothing but pure profit for the eastern coalition.

It's amazing is what it is.

Razorfloss razor

This is turning into a a complete cluster fuck of epic proportions. Cat is going to have a field day and Abigail will probably be there crying over how much she would be somewhere else.

Hakurei06

In [Salia] the arrows fly
hold the wall, lest dawn fall

Musings

Hatchets = White Knight and Witch? Ironic misinterpretation/misunderstanding by sj old spymaster, because they really are "the hatchet of the heavens" and there was no reason to expect them to be there?

caoimhinh

I considered that for a moment. But they said there were confirmed and suspected agents fighting, plus this part convinced me that they weren't talking about Hanno and Antigone: "We have several being followed."
The White Knight is moving only with the Witch of the Woods, so the Circle of Thorns' agents can't be following several if there are only two. Besides, Hanno is using Light, which would immediately prove that he is not a Praesi agent.

I do find it weird that the different groups in the city hadn't picked up already the presence of the two Heroes, they aren't being subtle about it (and aren't killing everyone either). Balthazar said that the conspirators went to have Assembly almost a bell ago (so about 4 hours), so they should have gotten reports of the pair going around killing rioters by now.

medailyfun

Probably they were not killing that many, just the ones directly on their way to somewhere... I guess, narrative should push them to save Cordelia

caoimhinh

They have actually killed a lot, even the killing of the dozen people looting the drapier's shop would have been noticed and there were a hundred with Lietenant Pauline though Hanno said he would mark the exculpated so not all of them would be killed.

And Pauline initially thought Hanno must have been one of the Silver Letters men because he would have to make it through other blockades to get there, so Hanno almost certainly killed other people off-screen.

Also, the very first killing on this chapter was a priestess in front of a crowd of "odd hundred".

News really should have spread by now, considering it's been over 4 hours since the riots started.

[Liliet](#)

And yet, **by a string of mysterious coincidences**, the White Knight continues his work unimpeded for the moment...

Providence is fun!

caoimhinh

Heroes and their Cheat Skills and Supernatural Luck...

Shveiran

Ehm, they are two top-tier Named in a city with a single, non combat-related other Named (plus a captive, non-combat other and on fire besides.

I'm... not sure what anyone else could have really done about them?

[Liliet](#)

Contacted them and tried to explain the situation.

Decius

They're not going to listen to a messenger, even if the messenger survives contacting them.

[Liliet](#)

Why do you think so?

caoimhinh

True. But I'm not saying they should (or even could) have been stopped. I'm saying they should have been

noticed by now, at least by the spymasters with webs of informants running around the city.

Fayhem

> They have actually killed a lot, even the killing of the dozen people looting the drapier's shop would have been noticed and there were a hundred with Lieutenant Pauline though Hanno said he would mark the exculpated so not all of them would be killed. [...] News really should have spread by now, considering it's been over 4 hours since the riots started.

I think you're overestimating how easily/quickly news can travel in a moderately riotous city (i.e., one where any non-looter, non-rioter, non-involved civilians are staying right the fuck indoors) in a pre-industrial tech society when the conspirators don't even have scrying-based communication to circumvent their technological shortcomings magically. Nobody's calling any of this in to dispatch. It's messages carried on foot or maybe on horseback or nothing, and who knows if those messages (if any, depending on the scenario – who's running to the guards about some random looters getting killed in the midst of all this, for instance?) make it or for that matter if the people they're going to are still there when they arrive or have moved elsewhere already. And that's not to mention I think you're overestimating how likely it is that any of the actual Silver Letters would have been among the "exculpated", or how interested any of the random drafted city guardsmen or lynch mob members would be in doing anything besides going home, hugging their families, and maybe having a good cry in the bath after witnessing the White Knight meting out judgment amongst them.

tl;dr – I would consider the lack of wide awareness of Hanno and Antigone to be very plausible at this stage personally, even setting aside any Providence-based shenanigans.

Liliet

Mhm.

Like there's definitely providence helping, but it doesn't have to push *that* hard.

superkeaton

Hanno, you make for a spooky Batman

WuseMajor

He's really more Two Face than Batman.

[Liliet](#)

He's not. He's a paladin with Detect Evil (only more nuanced).

MagnaMalusLupus

And a near compulsion level impulse to kill anyone that pings. He's basically Lawful Stupid, but instead of Good he has Justice.

[Liliet](#)

Note that 'ping' is not for 'did something wrong in their life' but for 'death sentence'.

More nuanced, as I said.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, and that he has no compulsion to *flip* the coin in the first place. Note that mob that he just told to disperse – somehow I suspect he flipped only on the priestess.

MagnaMalusLupus

He's Two-Face, except instead of random happenstance controlling his coin he has a bunch of justiceboner Angels.

ninegardens

I would really like to know WHY it is pinging on several of these people (The Drapier? A random city guard with debt problems, who seemed to just be helping to move the bodies? Or did I misunderstand those?)

prentice barry

the city guard was the second in command of cordelias that betrayed her to the letter openers because they blackmailed her over her debts after getting rid of the loyalist commander, as for the drapier i dont know but i suspect they may have been an agent of someones thats done some shady/murderly stuff considering the sword appeared to be of rather good quality if the looters were gonna take it as well and she seemed to know how to use it

nick012000

Who knows? Maybe the drapier was a child molester, a drug smuggler, or otherwise committed a sin completely unrelated to the current situation.

ninegardens

Re-reading, it does seem that this is the case, with Hanno acting pissed off at THEM PERSONALLY, more so than even the riot agitator. Didn't catch that the first time, apparently too much else going on.

You know, evaluating the ethics of Hanno appears to be running into a bunch of weird situations, in that Earth justice systems are built entirely on the fact that "We don't trust humans to make this decision, therefore we create a SYSTEM, a PROCESS, to remove bias, demand evidence, and prevent crazy people running around with swords murdering people based on their own personal ideas of justice."

And he is really really violating all of that.

But at the same time, this ISN'T earth, and we do have angels and I guess... it comes down to whether or not the society is willing to accept a social contract where "Angels have the right to judge" or not.

[Liliet](#)

We explicitly know that it is from Hanno's Adventure At Vales.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> You know, evaluating the ethics of Hanno appears to be running into a bunch of weird situations, in that Earth justice systems are built entirely on the fact that "We don't trust humans to make this decision, therefore we create a SYSTEM

That's what we do in parts of the modern world, specifically those parts influenced by the European and American Age of Enlightenment. Before that, and even today in some benighted parts of the world, trial by Providence was/is very much a thing.

Perhaps the least objectionable version of that was trial by combat; but the pattern also included, for example, trial by having holding a hot iron – depending on how the accusers arranged that, it could range from a test of fortitude right up to demanding a miracle in order to prove the innocence of the accused. And *then* there was witch-dunking and the like, whose justification was explicitly "if they were innocent, then the drowned shall go to Heaven, but if they survive then they were obviously guilty, so execute them".

The Enlightenment and its shift to secular authority was in large part a response to the fact that increasingly, large numbers of people of different faiths were living in the same jurisdictions, and had to actually get along instead of killing each other in holy wars, or executing each other as heretics/infidels/blasphemers. In this situation, it also became increasingly obvious that God was not generally intervening on anybody's side.

In the Guideverse, things are a little different: The Gods Above and Below still seem basically aloof, but they are represented by their empowered agents, and there's rarely much difficulty in telling which side a Named is working for.

Above grants powers to their priests as well as Named, but it seems that it doesn't directly discipline either – if their behavior is egregious enough to qualify as a “menace to the public”, then a hero can deal with them like any other threat. Infighting among the priests of Above may be anomalous... but even the split within the House of Callow didn't get either side smited!

Even among heroes, some do have angelic backing, but it seems that many or most don't. The White Knight looks downright anomalous compared to the Gray Pilgrim (whose angels don't give instruction even on request), the Saint of Swords (no angelic patrons), the Lone Swordsman (did he even have any explicitly angelic powers?) and likely the Witch Of The Woods (no angelic patron or powers have been mentioned, even when she was throwing down with Warlock).

Below, in contrast, explicitly grants power essentially to those who grasp it. Aside from Named, they allow anyone to call on demons or devils who has the power and knowledge to bring them from the Hells to Creation. Those who *also* have the power and knowledge to bind and control such creatures, get to survive the experience.



Nairne .01

It would be interesting to have Scribe meet with the Circle of thorns man.

Andrew Mitchell

Just wait until Monday for the next installment. We'll see that meeting, for sure.

caoimhinh

Plus an Extra Chapter. The hype is high.

Someguy

And then it turns out the lady taking the minutes of the meetings for the Circle of Thorns was Scribe all along!

Andrew Mitchell

OMG.... that would be beyond amazing. ♥

Anon

You say that like Scribe isn't already in the room with him 😊

WuseMajor

Thinking on this, I find it amusing that Balthazar considers Princess Malanza's likely reaction to finding the entire capital burnt to the ground, so he's careful not to do so...and then we find out that the Eyes are apparently trying to make it look like he had less control than he thought and went ahead and set the entire city alight.

There's a part of me that kind of wishes I could have gotten to see his reaction if that had happened and he actually had to explain himself to someone. I bet he would have been irritated to find the Arch-Heretic sympathizing with him as he tried to explain how he didn't start the fire.

erebus42

"Oh so I suppose it was always burning since the world's been turning? Is that it?"
-Princess Malanza

Decius

"I didn't start ALL the fires. And I did it for you!"

Nairne .01

I honestly wonder what this will be like when Cat comes here with Black and all the other villains.
What will Hanno do? Will the Choir of Judgement let him leave the eastern villains long enough so they can help against the Dead King? Does Bard have any control over that?

All those questions are very intriguing.

laguz24

What I wonder if Hanno will kill Cordelia and when will Hanno learn restraint. Because killing proceran civilians is not going to get him into Hasenbich's good books.

Andrew Mitchell

Honestly, so far he seems to only be killing those that deserve it. He's also soothing the unrest. I think he's very much a net positive in the current situation.

Mind you, that could all change in the next Interlude or two. We'll see! 😊

MagnaMalusLupus

He killed the owner of the drapery shop for no reason that we are aware of, so I'm a bit concerned at your definition of "deserve it".

JJR

Such concern is unwarranted given how much work the phrase "that we are aware of" is doing.

MagnaMalusLupus

The exact bit I was referring to was "...he seems to only be killing those that deserve it.", and the merchant does not seem to have done anything to deserve execution. Do you disagree? What actions did you see the merchant take that warrant immediate death?

Decius

That merchant came into existence the instant she entered the scene, with no events or backstory. The angels judged that to be a crime against literature.

JJR

Again, "that we are aware of"

You're assuming that we're aware of all the relevant facts in this case. But, we aren't, maybe later it will be explained that the merchant was doing something super evil under the table. Or maybe we never hear about them again. With so little to go on judging Hanno's judgment is premature.

ninegardens

I really don't think it is.... if we are applying Earth logic.

Earth logic (at least in many countries) has a VERY strong taboo against extra judicial killing. You aren't ALLOWED to just walk into a house and murderize someone because you think they are a bad person. Why? Because the kind of people who DO do this are often biased, or racist, or on a personal vendetta, and this type of escalation of violence leads to blood feuds and things. We have judicial systems to measure out violence for us, and to do it in a way that society as a whole agrees to.

Even without knowing anything about the Merchant, we ARE in a position to say "Woowwww Hanno- you just killed some person why no judge, no jury, and not even explaining what the hell they did wrong."

By Earth Society standards, executing someone without even giving them the chance to plead their case, deny their guilt, or even explain to passers by WHY they are being executed is a whole bunch of capital T Tyranny. If one of your friends flipped a coin and then decapitated someone on the bus home, you wouldn't NEED to know the full backstory in order to know that this was way beyond the pale, and that anyone with that much faith in their lucky coin was nutzo.

So yeah- even if we have no clue what the merchant did, we have plenty of information with which to evaluate Hanno here.

By Earth standards that is.

But PGtE does not take place on earth, and we apparently have perfectly well informed angels floating around, and as long as you have faith in those angels to Judge fairly, it all makes sense.... It's still kind of the Equivalent of the US sending a drone strike into a foreign country*, and then saying "No no, its okay- they were a bad person. Trust – We have evidence, we can't tell you. we got some totally legitimate judges to sign off on this thought, so everything's fine".

Even if the Drone pilot trusts in those judges, and maybe even has a taste of the evidence provided to them.... the ethics of this sort of situation is by no means clearly in Hanno's favor

* [Here I'm purely using the "foreign country" to try to illustrate the difference between in creation and outside creation. The metaphors a bit wonky, but there aren't that many good real world examples here.]

[Liliet](#)

I disagree.

First of all, the Choir of Judgement is recognized in Procer as an entity allowed to pass these kinds of judgements. Hanno was asked to arbitrate a dispute at the Vales for a reason.

Trusting a bunch of angels on the topic of judgement and trusting the US government on the topic of drone strikes are rather different. Why? First of all, history and precedent – for everyone on Calernia to assume the Choir of Judgmenet can be trusted, they must have acted damn trustworthily before, while the US government... yeah. Second, incentive – the US government's incentives for drone strikes are only very weakly correlated with morality/ethics of the situation, while the angels have no incentive EXCEPT the morality/ethics of the situation. Third, degree of precision involved in the action – drone strikes have collateral damage, Hanno judges person by person. Four, amount of knowledge available to those making the decision. US government consists of humans and can only act on the intellgence it has. Choir of Judgement has access to all of person's actions and reasoning throughout their life.

The real life justice systems don't exist in the complicated trial form because somehow the process of a trial is a magical ritual that gives their judgement legitimacy. They exist in the complicated form because we don't have access to a perfectly judging Choir of Judgement, so we make do with what we have.

Yes, I'm taking the narrative's assertions about angels at face value. I have no reason not to, from the evidence observed so far.

ninegardens

I agree that the angels are not corrupt/morally flexible/ biased in the same way as a foreign nation's government... But I'm not convinced that I'd label them as "Trustworthy" either. They seem.... a bit too alien for that. (I agree, they do have better information)

By alien I mean.... Choir of contrition seem to think the mind bombing a city for the sake of waging war on some other city is Totally okay.

Choir of mercy is... I ain't gonna say evil, but their focus on "the greater good" makes them sort of... a bit blue and orange morality by human standards. They are, at the very least, kinda spooky.

To be fair, the choir of judgement seems to be the CLOSEST that we've seen to human level ethics, but the point is that they are still a black box.

I mean.... okay perhaps a different metaphor.... Imagine on earth if someone used "Machine learning" and "Artificial intelligence" and created a black box that (as far as we could tell) seemed to be pretty good at accurately judging people. You can't see inside, you can't know how it makes its decisions, and its NOT using any legal set up you've ever seen.... but generally the people it judges as bad seem to be kinda legitimately awful.

.... would you trust a person who ran around beheading people because this box told them to? How accurate would it have to be? What would you think if the box just kind of never told you HOW it was making its decisions, or even why? Do you trust the genie in the coin?

If I changed the words and said it was a "genie of judgement" or a "demon of judgement" or a "callibrated neural network" of judgement, does this change things?

We DO know that the choir judged Black for death... even though (despite all his monstrous crimes and flaws), he is demonstrably a BETTER person than any person in his position can be expected to be. ... maybe Judgement doesn't care about that. Fair enough, but still... kinda short sighted.

Andrew Mitchell

All very good points. Well argued.

[Liliet](#)

@ninegardens, essentially I would say the difference is precedent.

This new person with a black box would be extremely untrustworthy becuae the precedent we have for them is all the other people with great justice ideas, and in our IRL world this precedent

states that odds are harshly AGAINST the black box person not going off the rails.

Choir of Judgement has been operating in Creation for its entire history, and people KNOW they are trustworthy. Like... there's evidence. Historically it has worked that way every time. You can't compare it to something new popping up because it not being new is the entire source of its legitimacy.

Black is indeed an interesting question. My impression is that the Choir of Judgement's approach is largely consequentialist, although with a different twist on it than Mercy's. "What seems likely to happen if we tell our man to kill this person" vs "what seems likely to happen if we tell our man not to kill this person" seems to be the key decision making criterion. Like how Hanno spared the looter guy because there was still a road for him to take to be a better person... and unlike Black, he wasn't likely to cause hundreds of thousands of deaths in collateral damage along the way.

Either way, there are plenty of approaches easily recognized as legitimate that would lead to Black being given the swords option. Sure, a coherent justice system the coin does not make, but it's not meant to. It's an emergency hole plug, not a peacetime balance keeping system. Note how on most people (ie the mob the priestess was inciting, approximately everyone up until now) Hanno just doesn't flip the coin.

[Liliet](#)

>Will the Choir of Judgement let him leave the eastern villains long enough

the Choir of Judgement gets no input unless/until he flips the coin

Shveiran

So,
we finally have a chance to see Hanno in action when there is no flag-based solution to uphold. Which means we finally have significant data to (start to, admittedly, as this is only a beginning) judge his character.

Personally... I'm not impressed.

Let's leave aside the "I do not judge" thing
(ofcourseyoufuckingjudgeyoumoronYOUARESTILLCHOOSINGWHOSHOULDBEJUDGEDBYFLIP
ahem, sorry about that, it kind of irks me.

My main issue is... Hanno is a tyrant.

Ever since the early 18th century, the idea that a citizen should be able to know a law in order for him to be justly punished according to it has been a staple of this branch of philosophy. The Choir moves according to ruler of its own, and the problem with that is not whether or not we agree with them, it is that we and Calernian folks alike do not know or understand them enough to be certain on how the scales will measure.

Let's use the examples above, for instance: Hanno spared a looter who fell in with a bad crowd after he committed an unknown crime, and also spared the crowd who stoned a poor fucker to death, ordering it to disperse after executing the agitator. Why? They were not brainwashed nor anything, they still picked up the stones and killed the poor sod. Why was that not murder? We don't know.

Later, he tells the Witch that he will "mark the exculpated", so apparently it is not a given that lending your arms to the coup, actively murdering people and burning a city is not a guarantee of guilt (though admittedly it's possible that no one was actually exculpated, we didn't see that).

Why? We don't know.

The Choir judges with scales of its own, arrogating itself the right to condemn you for breaching the rules even if you don't know what the rules are.

And... that is not just, by any definition fo the word. It doesn't matter if the rules are good or not, it's still basically saying Hanno and Judgment get to kill whoever they see fit for reason of their own.

You can be arrright with that. Hanno is far from the only character here that says "I know what's best, so I'll impose my will on the world".

But that is the textbook definition of a well-meaning tyrant. Nothing more, nothing less.

caoimhin

Well, so far he hasn't killed anyone that didn't really deserve it.

It is a dick move on his part to summon the Coin of Judgement at his first chance, but if the verdict is death then that person had done some shit that earned it.

The problem is that it's too extreme, Hanno's only punishment is death, whereas he should at least have the possibility to

look for other options, other sentences. But he is a machine with only two settings: harmless or deadly. And while that is useful in dire situations like the current riots, it does have a tendency to escalate things. If two parties called Hanno to arbitrate in a dispute over possession of something (like land, a building or whatever), he would summon the coin and kill one of the two parties (or both, if they have both committed serious crimes), where the expectation was that he pointed at one group and say "you are better, so you take this." or something like that.

That's why he is a hatchet that's better to have pointed to Evil and not close to ordinary people, otherwise, as his intervention heralds a slaughter. He is the White Knight and sworn to the Choir of Judgement, he is a tool of war, a killing machine.

Liliet

>If two parties called Hanno to arbitrate in a dispute over possession of something (like land, a building or whatever), he would summon the coin and kill one of the two parties (or both, if they have both committed serious crimes), where the expectation was that he pointed at one group and say "you are better, so you take this." or something like that.

That has actually happened, and he killed one of the royals involved. THE THING THOUGH is that he only did that because he was specifically asked to arbitrate. And he did not kill the other party. And we don't know what the person he killed had actually done.

Otherwise, he would simply refuse to arbitrate. As long as the coin lands laurels, Hanno has no further input. That's literally the only judgement he's willing to execute – the death sentence from the Seraphim. Anything else he doesn't weigh in on.

So no, not a tyrant, and does not escalate.

>Hanno's only punishment is death, whereas he should at least have the possibility to look for other options, other sentences.

So he lets off the looter completely. Anyone not worthy of the death sentence is let walk, and yes, that does not a complete justice system make. Because that's not his job in the first place. He's there to staunch the bleeding, not to build up the immune system.

Shveiran

@cacaomhinh: "so far he hasn't killed anyone that didn't really deserve it".

Says who, the Seraphim?

What did the looters do that the spared one didn't? We don't know.

What did the looted merchant do? We don't know.

Why was stoning not an issue? We don't know.

And that's why I say

@Liliet: "not a tyrant"

that he is. This is not justice, it's rule of might.

I don't like how you hack, so I chop you. I have the power to.

This is anything but murder only if you ascribe value to the Seraphim's morality and we can't do that because we don't know what that is.

It's tyrannical, it's what it is. This couldn't be further from the rule of law.

Shveiran

Act, not hack. Damn you, mental association of similar sounding words.

[Liliet](#)

>This is not justice, it's rule of might.

Everything is. State's monopoly on violence is guaranteed and enforced through might.

And note that the drapier was terrified of him despite him clearly wielding Light. She knew what she did, whatever it was.

I have no reason to assume the Seraphim's morality is anything other than the common shit from the Book of All Things, like 'don't murder'.

Like. There are actual gods with actual teachings in this 'verse. The Seraphim are not outside context entities, they're p much formally recognized as 'proper authorities' – the princes had asked Hanno to arbitrate a dispute at Vales for a reason.

[Liliet](#)

And stoning was not an issue because with the priestess heating up the crowd dead from clear Light-based heroic

intervention, those people weren't going to continue causing trouble. The problem was solved, doing anything to the civilians would only escalate the situation, which is not something Hanno's after here.

Sparsebeard

@Liliet

A due process is important! There is a reason why known criminals are let go if it ends up that evidence against them was not acquired in due process (for example, confessions without reading their rights or search without mandate).

Unless Procean law recognise the right of angels' chosen to be judge, jury and executioner, this is murder plain and simple (although I wouldn't be surprised if the Law did permit it).

Just imagine the consequences if he decides to flip his coin on Cat, Black, Tyrant or any member of foreign delegations during the peace talks... he'd probably be the first Named to be slain by the accords lol.

Decius

I think it's more a matter of the angels' law choosing to allow Procerean law to exist.

I have a strange suspicion that what his coin actually measures is closer to intent or reverence than it is to lawfulness.

Oh, and if he tries to flip a coin on Cat then a raven is going to snatch the shiny thing out of the air. If he tries it on Heirophant something much more interesting would happen. Gods Above and Gods Below are going to have a bad time assisting against gods in melee range.

[Liliet](#)

>Oh, and if he tries to flip a coin on Cat then a raven is going to snatch the shiny thing out of the air.

Only if the story is right for it. Komena and Andronike's capability against a Choir depends directly on what exactly the conflict is and whose domain it's more in. They can block angels peeking because stealth is Night's thing, but when Cat came to have a chat with Mercy over Pilgrim's dead body all they could do is help her not faint, and barely that.

Decius

Raven. Shiny thing.

The domain conflict might not be resolved, but the *form* that those actions take is also important.

And now that I think about it, as long as Zeke is able to see, Hanno invoking the angels is going to be a bad choice.

I wonder what the result would be if Hanno passed judgement on Pilgrim and/or himself.

Liliet

"I have a strange suspicion that what his coin actually measures is closer to intent or reverence than it is to lawfulness."

I don't think reverence has to do with it, but yeah, motivation/intent definitely seems to matter, from what we've seen in Hanno's backstory.

Liliet

>There is a reason why known criminals are let go if it ends up that evidence against them was not aquired in due process

So what is this reason?

>Unless Procean law recognise the right of angels' chosen to be judge, jury and executionner, this is murder plain and simple (although I wouldn't be surprised if the Law did permit it).

I'm pretty sure it does.

>Just imagine the consequences if he decides to flip his coin on Cat, Black, Tyrant or any member of foreign delegations during the peace talks...

Why would he?

Heroes of Judgement are not known for their, *pun entirely intended*, bad judgement. Particularly this one. (Also, I'm not so certain it'd come up swords for Cat&Black at this point... kind of wanna see that)

Decius

The actual reason is that when evidence is acquired improperly and used against a suspect, there is no actual reason to refrain from collecting evidence illegally.

A different method would be to make confessions under rough interrogation admissible, but prosecute the interrogator for using illegal methods. That's not going to work for numerous reasons.

The Choir of Judgement has no such regard for rights, so the entire concept is not applicable to them.

[Fayhem](#)

> Ever since the early 18th century, the idea that a citizen should be able to know a law in order for him to be justly punished according to it has been a staple of this branch of philosophy.

Not sure which 18th century philosophers you're referring to (I like philosophy, but it's been a good while since I've actually studied it and a lot's slipped away), but I can tell you that at least in my country it's explicitly legally established that ignorance of the law is no excuse. Because if it's illegal, then it's *illegal*. It's not situationally illegal based on whether any given individual committing the crime read the applicable law ahead of time, it's just illegal.

The seraphim-based justice Hanno is meting out is harsh and that makes him a scary mofo, I'll grant you both those points. But he's not a tyrant; I mean, just on a definitional level I'd hesitate to call him a tyrant just because he doesn't seek to rule. He, and/or the Seraphim he invites to act through him, could definitely be called draconian judges. "Tyrants" I do feel is a misnomer regardless of how you feel about the judgements being imposed though.

Decius

"Must be able to know a law" is different from "knows the law".

It's why laws can't be retroactive, why mens rea is a thing, and why being sufficiently mentally incompetent is a possible trial defense.

[Fayhem](#)

Fair, that's clearly a meaningful distinction. "Looting bad" or "don't do a lynch mob" don't exactly seem like moral principles it would be impossible to figure out, though, nor does it seem that anyone Hanno has seraphim'd in the face has been not of sound mind.

[Liliet](#)

All laws Hanno is judging by would be stated in the Book of All Things / preached in the House of Light.

Everyone's capable of knowing them, certainly so in Procer.

Decius

Or presumably if they can't, the coin would come up laurels.

Decius

The Choir of Judgement is a tyrant. Hanno is 'merely' their enforcer. If you have a problem with the rules, take it up with the boss.

[sengachi](#)

Heyyy, quick thought, what if the hatchets aren't actually Eyes? What if they're Jacks?

Forgotten Saint

Dude!

[Liliet](#)

Oh my god. That's ENTIRELY POSSIBLE

Andrew Mitchell

If you're right, maybe this ties into the fact that Vivienne was too busy to attend the gathering by the fire. And, why was she too busy, Cat asked her to pull out all stops to find out what it was that Cordelia had dredged out of the lake....

Hmmm... Jacks confirmed.... Maybe. I'd say a 15% chance that you're right. But its fun to speculate.

[Liliet](#)

Shveiran has a point. Jacks also don't have mages, as someone else has pointed out.

Shveiran

I like this theory a lot, but the Circle of Thorn spoke of "known imperial infiltrators". The Jacks are the new players, so I don't believe they could have played so exquisitely as to present themselves as spies from a different country; that's a bit too much finesse for no real gain... I mean, it's a cover story that would still have you watched like crazy, isn't it?

So... unless the Circle is mistaken (which is far from impossible, of course) the hatchets are Eyes of the Empire.

caoimhinh

Another quick thought: What if the "corpse that's not a corpse" that Cordelia is dragging out of the Lake is one of the ancient Gigantes of the Titanomachy?

Aotrs Commander

Well, thank you EE, for introducing me to a genuinely new sensation: Being Pleased To See Hanno.

I'm not sure what it says about my mood (given the events in the UK of the last couple of days) or how low my regard is for Procerans, but I found Hanno's handling of the situation to be delightful and very cathartic.

I guess, like a stopped clock, even Above and the Choirs can be right on occasion...

Andrew Mitchell

> but I found Hanno's handling of the situation to be delightful and very cathartic.

Well said! I, too, am pleased to see Hanno acting well.

[Liliet](#)

>I guess, like a stopped clock, even Above and the Choirs can be right on occasion...

I think they're right most of the time? William was an outlier in the 'even other heroes didnt want to associate with him' direction.

Shveiran

A dozen Heroes being led by the nose to spearhead a Proceran occupation respectfully disagree.

[Liliet](#)

You're missing a huuuuge amount of context there.

The Crusade was not meant to lead to a Proceran occupation, even if Amadis Milenan thought otherwise. Had it been successful to Cordelia's plan, she would have had the clout to insist that Callow be left to its own devices after being split up into smaller regional states. What exactly they would do with Praes was not yet determined, but the basic objective was to break the villains' rising power.

The heroes had a good handful of evidence that the breaking was needed. The occupation of Callow had already led to a city being destroyed and a hell portal opened in the heartlands (and sure, Warlock redirected the other side, but the weakening of the fabric of reality is still there). The Calamities already proved willing to meddle in foreign wars in favor of the side doing the human sacrifices. Fucking Still Water was deployed.

Yes, factually, had they gone for diplomacy, everything would have been fine as Catherine is basically a hero herself, as is in many ways her teacher. THEY DID NOT HAVE THAT INTEL. THEY DID NOT HAVE ANY REASON TO ASSUME ANY OF THAT. The idea of the current Praesi government being a force for Good long-term is exceedingly unlikely and would not occur to anyone normally – and it's not like Catherine tried to *share* that intelligence. She didn't actually tell Cordelia about the Accords in their Hero Winter talks, and she sure as fuck had no contact with the heroes.

Yes, the heroes were acting on insufficient information / bad intelligence. In that sense you are correct. However, this is a huuuuge outlier.

MagnaMalusLupus

>after being split up into smaller regional states.

Considering that those states would have had Proceran leadership, it was most fucking certainly an invasion. Now you can try to justify that however you want, but the fact that the crusade was only launched at a politically convenient time, and also conveniently glazes over the fact that the last hero in Callow had basically tried to do a Contrition based version of Still Water on the entire city beforehand, goes far enough to context on the other side. The crusade was a politically motivated invasion of Callow by Procer first and foremost. Anything else to say on the matter are justifications.

[Liliet](#)

>Considering that those states would have had Proceran leadership

They wouldn't have. Again, had Cordelia succeeded, this is what she would have gone for – LOCAL leadership, by people dissatisfied with the Black Queen.

She, ah, rather underestimated the amount of support Cat has, I got the impression.

>Now you can try to justify that however you want, but the fact that the crusade was only launched at a politically convenient time

What do you mean? What other time there was that wasn't politically convenient that the Crusade should have been but wasn't launched at?

>and also conveniently glazes over the fact that the last hero in Callow had basically tried to do a Contrition based version of Still Water on the entire city beforehand

This is relevant to the point how, exactly?

[Liliet](#)

I find it fucknig incredible that Balthazar let the Princes out WITH RETINUE. Which he did NOT proceed to carefully one by one identity check.

0% chance Cordelia is still inside.

Also, luv Hanno.

Also, it's amazing how many plausible explanations there are for the spy infighting – and nearly all of them make Cat's coalition look good

Shveiran

But he did check them. I don't know how to quote, but:

"They'd ordered that the blockade was to move aside for them and their escort when they arrived, which Balthazar had arrived – so long as only men on foot and by horse came, and every single one was inspected before being allowed to pass."

Considering you can't really hide Cordelia inside a man or a horse without a lot of creative necromancy, I'd say inspected here means identified?

I mean, the wording could be better, but there is literally nothing else they are searching for, so I don't think it means just bodily searched. It's a "proven to not be Hasenbach" pass they are handing out.

[Liliet](#)

Oh damn, I missed that. TY for the correction.

[Fayhem](#)

> Considering you can't really hide Cordelia inside a man or a horse without a lot of creative necromancy

I died. Thank you for that.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Speaking of necromancy...

My very own name

I have just discovered a liking for fast paced spy intrigues.
Looking forward to the end of this coup!

From what has been said about Scribe, I don't think that even if Black managed to speak with her, she would actually listen. Her schemes are her schemes, and Black is possibly "compromised". The hatchets killing the arsoners would mark Scribe (and by extension, Black) as trustworthy, but only if the initial conspiracy was made out to be Ime's work. And all the paperwork related to the trap would lead one to think of Scribe more readily than Ime, so we'll see how they spin that story.

And we also have whatever Vivi is doing during the campfire, so more plots coming to a head.

[Liliet](#)

So who do you think are the hatchets, if they're not Scribe-listening-to-Black?

ninegardens

Secret undercover Hasenbach loyalists! The only possible explanation!

Satan

Judgement really do be lacking that sociological imagination. I don't think those angels have a place in Cat's world.
I suspect Cat would also disapprove of the whole Prince Arsene/arson thing.

Interlude: Mirror

"Third, taking:

Bone to wind

And mirror to fill."

-Third of the three so-called 'Mavian Entreaties'

Louis de Sartrons had been speculating to himself as to how long he would have to wait before his guest arrived and had ultimately settled for 'less than an hour'. Which, given the sheer bloody chaos in the city and the difficulty to move around the streets – and so have information carried through them – he'd felt was generous of him. Which was why his face went blank when he entered the private alcove at *Les Horizons Lugubres* and he found someone already seated at the table.

"You are late," the Scribe said, her Chantant flawless.

The head of the Circle of Thorns, for the first time laying eyes on a woman he'd crossed blades and wits with across half of Calernia, immediately tried to commit her appearance to memory. Obtaining a description of the Webweaver had so far proved impossible, but now he saw that she was –

/

– and ink-stained hands. Louis was debating how to pass the knowledge to one of his helpers as soon as possible when he realized he had nothing to pass. The moment his eyes left the Scribe he knew nothing of her: height, colour of the eyes, even if her hair was long or short. He knew not whether her skin was dark or pale, or indeed anything at all save that she had ink-stained hands. *Fuck*, Louis thought, made unusually vulgar by the depths of his irritation.

"I would apologize, but I see you helped yourself to the wine," the spymaster replied.

Two cups had been filled, hers already touched, and though he had no intention of putting his mouth anywhere near something the Webweaver had poured he accepted the delicate crystal glass when she offered it. He settled into his seat, the two of them surrounded by swirling panels of bottle-green glass and hanging stone lanterns that seemed to transmute all of Creation in jade.

"Shall I begin by reminding you that your presence in Salia uninvited is an act of war when truce has been declared?" Louis mused.

"Then it is for the best I am not here," the Scribe replied. "Given the seriousness of the situation, shall we dispense with the preliminaries?"

Louis felt rather cheated that after all these years of wanting to meet one of his few peers in the trade he'd have to set aside the games of their kind, but he had to admit there was little time to spare. Despite what appeared to be the Webweaver's best efforts, Salia was on fire. Several of them, in fact.

"It would be judicious of us," the thin man conceded. "It appears that you are looking for something, my friend."

He'd been told the Eyes – or at least the faction among them not attempting to set the city increasingly more on fire – had hit yet another warehouse of the Silver Letters while taking a carriage to the *Horizons*. Whatever it was that Scribe was seeking, she was seeking it urgently.

"I am," the Scribe said. "Two things, as a matter of fact. I will require your aid in finding them."

—

Brother Simon watched the man drop, bleeding from the throat, and fall into the filth of the sewers.

Age was catching up to him, after his exertions in leaving behind the hospitality of the Holies, so he'd gone and rounded up a few friends. They had, in turn, sent for friends of theirs. One of the several results of that unfolding awareness had been Simon of Gorgeault's presence in the sewers of the high districts, under the escort of thirty well-armed fantassins. The friendly young woman who'd just snuck up to the Silver Letter who'd failed to hear them approach and decisively dispatched him sheathed her short sword then waved the others forward.

The lay brother cast a lingering look at the corpse floating on the surface of the river of excrement and trash, grimly thinking that with the amount of corpses his band had sown tonight the rats down here would be rather well-fed. He'd been breathing from his nose from the moment his escorts had ripped open the grid over the river of filth flowing into the muddy fields of the Petite Oblique – better known as Constant's Arse by Salians, as the drop into the Old River and rain-channels meant many threw their waste there for it to be washed away – and been grateful for the hurried pace into the sewers proper.

There'd been precious little crawling, for which he was thoughtful, for later in the underground tunnels the wealthy and highborn of Salia had built the sewers at near a man's height so that whenever blockage was had it could be dealt with promptly and not stink up their beautiful manses should the wind grow capricious. Balthazar was not a fool, so the Silver Letters were keeping watch in the tunnels, but a quick and heavily armed group could tear through such a cordon if it struck without hesitation. They'd met with success so far, though Brother Simon had silently tempered the victories with the knowledge that it was only a matter of time until a corpse was found.

And the moment one was, the Silver Letters would come down here in force. Perhaps even with garrison soldiers, which given their better arms and armour would be even more troublesome to deal

with. No, while his group had been able to enter the high districts by the sewers but leaving through them would be another story entirely. As it happened Simon had some notion, though the risks would not be small. Yet there must be a part of the district where the blaze was weaker, and given enough wet blankets and snow... It had better chances of success than assault, anyhow, given the numbers the conspirators had surrounded the districts with.

"Here," a voice whispered.

Simon followed the gesture with his eyes and found indentations in the wall, with rusting iron grips above them. A makeshift ladder to return above, thank the Gods.

"Where will we be?" the old man asked.

"Maybe a street away from Prince Renato's manse," the same fantassin who'd been guiding them through the sewer said. "Can't be sure if there'll be people, so we have to move fast."

It was agreed upon in murmurs, and one of the fantassins took the lead in climbing up. A heavy wooden trapdoor barded in steel was opened and lowered as quietly as possible and they all fled upwards one after another. The night wind was a blessing after the stink of below, Simon thought, even though it carried the scent of burning in the distance. There were soldiers in the distance to the side, piling up wood, but they were busy with their work and did not look their way. The infiltrators hurried regardless, closing the trapdoor as quick as they could and fleeing for the shadows. They were hailed the moment they arrived in sight of the walls of the Prince of Salamans, and even earlier than Brother Simon had believed they would be: Renato's retinue was out in the streets in great numbers, as if preparing to leave.

Simon was not unknown to the prince himself, though none of the officers among the soldiers knew him by sight, yet the lingering stink of his travels by sewer earned him *some* consideration when he claimed to be at odds with the conspirators. The head of the Holy Society had attempted to have the Prince of Salamans warned that he would be coming, but the messengers must have been waylaid for he was unexpected. Prince Renato himself was having his horse saddled when Simon was brought to him in the outer courtyard.

"Brother Simon," the moustachioed Arlesite said. "I am told that the Holy Society has been protesting this lunacy."

"It did even when I was still prisoner of the House of Light, Your Grace," Simon agreed. "I am pleased to see you of a like mind."

"There will be a reckoning for tonight," Prince Renato warned. "One way or another."

The lay brother mutedly nodded.

"I may have a method to smuggle Her Most Serene Highness out of the districts, if I may be allowed to speak with her," Simon said.

The Arlesite prince's face flickered with surprise.

"You do not know, then," Renato said. "She is not here, Brother Simon. It was a ruse."

Before Simon could ask where the First Prince had then gone, genuinely bemused, both of them turned when soldiers in the courtyard began to yell in surprise. The lay brother swallowed drily, when he saw what appeared to be an entire manse rise high in the night sky before being suddenly smashed downwards to a chorus of screams.

That, Simon of Gorgeault thought, rather changed things.

—

"It would be easier to look if I knew what to send my colleagues looking for," Louis mildly said.

He'd promised nothing, not that his word given in such a situation would be of any worth at all. His duty was to Procer and Procer alone. Everything else was noise.

"The first is correspondence taken from one of the Empire's safehouses," she said. "It includes an entirely academic exercise by the Black Knight as to how one might arrange the assassination of Cordelia Hasenbach past of the vigilance of the Augur."

Academic, was it? Louis knew of no less than twelve plots aimed at the murder of the First Prince since her coronation that could be traced back to either the woman in front of him or the black-cloaked devil she answered to. They'd been thwarted in part by the Circle, in part by Agnes Hasenbach's unerring guidance and in part by the quality of guards Cordelia Hasenbach surrounded herself with. The only surprise here was that, if the Scribe was so desperately seeking to get her hands on the scroll that'd entice Balthazar into treason, it might genuinely be the Carrion Lord's own words. It was a feasible explanation for why she might be trying so hard to find it: the revelation would be damaging to her master.

Or, his naturally suspicious mind whispered, after planting that ruinous seed the Scribe was now attempting to remove the evidence. Yet she had revealed that scroll's existence to him

while she must be uncertain of whether he knew of it or not, which meant whatever drove her was urgent enough she was willing to take the risk that the Circle would take the correspondence itself. *Or that she infiltrated the Circle deeply enough she already knew of our awareness*, he mused. *In which case she is building credibility for a later lie*. Ah, but he'd not felt this vital in in decades. It was like a stiff tonic dragging him back to the days of his youth, when the burning in his bones had not yet calmed. It was quite exhilarating, to want to crush someone *so very utterly* as he did the Scribe.

"As for the second, it is stolen imperial property currently held in a Silver Letters warehouse," the Webweaver said. "Which is why you will help me, Louis de Sartrons."

"There can be no legal theft of Praesi property while in a state of war with the Dread Empire," Louis noted. "And that is a bold claim besides."

"Also an accurate one," the Scribe said. "For after the legionary detachment accompanying the Carrion Lord onto Lake Artoise by barge was wiped out, the boats were brought back to shore. And the Silver Letters had hired hands there, ready to claim first pick of what lay in the holds."

The old spymaster forced himself to recall what he knew of the force that'd been found dead to the last on the barges, allegedly through some terrible miracle of the Grey Pilgrim's. Numbers had been moderate, the only officer of note had been the veteran from the Conquest known as Marshal Ranker – Ranker, yes. A goblin.

"Goblin munitions," Louis said with feigned serenity. "They seized goblin munitions."

"The Silver Letters have been contracting alchemists in attempts to divine the recipe for our traditional munitions," the Scribe agreed. "They have also brought into the city what I estimate to be three full cart's worth of goblinfire."

—

Prince Renato brought only a small escort when they sallied out, all mounted, and provided a mount for Simon as well. There was no point in bringing great strength, for they'd seen rise in the sky how such would be answered. No, best to flee if things went badly and for that horses and few soldiers were best. Brother Simon felt almost guilty of such wariness against what could only be one of the Chosen but not all such souls were kindly ones, much less kindly hands. The Regicide had famously held no compunctions in tearing through whoever stood in her way when she pursued a quarry and the lay brother had heard... troubling things about the Grey Pilgrim. Long before the man became involved with the Black Queen, too. The ten riders went down the street at a brisk trot,

finding a graveyard of broken stone and corpses among which two silhouettes stood. One turned towards them, masked and cloaked in green, while the other spoke to a kneeling man. Simon spurred his mount onwards, casting his voice loudly.

"Hail, Chosen," the lay brother said.

The hero who'd been speaking with a soldier glanced back, revealing dark skin to the torchlight, and Simon was thus able to name him: this would be the Ashuran hero that had been summoned by the First Prince, the White Knight. Whispered, among some priestly circles, to be in the service of the Choir of Judgement. The Chosen look back at the kneeling soldier, and before Simon could so much as speak another word the kneeling man's head was rolling among the stones. Some of the soldiers behind him breathed in sharply at the sight, either shocked or afraid.

"You are not of these Silver Letters," the other Chosen stated, her voice a woman's. "Who then are you?"

There was something about the words that had Simon's mind askew. Almost like the heroine had not been speaking Chantant, though obviously she *had* been.

"I am Brother Simon of Gorgeault, from the Holy Society," the diplomat introduced himself.

"Prince Renato of Salamans," the prince introduced himself, leading his mount to stand by Simon's.

Brave man, the prince. Arlesites often were, though they had a way of turning that virtue into a vice.

"I am the Witch of the Woods," the heroine said. "He is the White Knight. We seek the man called Balthazar Serigny. Do you know where he is?"

The White Knight turned to look at them, eyes utterly serene even as his sword dripped blood.

"We are here for a reason, Antigone," the Ashuran said, almost chidingly. "To meet them, perhaps. Do you know where the First Prince is being held?"

"She has freed herself from the trap of the traitors," Prince Renato said. "Have you then come to support her cause?"

"There is no cause," the White Knight said. "She is the First Prince, that is fact. What more need be said?"

"Then you must help us," Brother Simon says. "For my colleagues will have gathered every sword they can from the city guard and the garrison, every loyal man and woman in the city, but even

with the help of loyal princes and the retinues we will find it hard to take the palace."

"See?" the White Knight smiled, glancing at his comrade. "Always a reason."

—

Oh, Louis thought, *those utter fools*. Like no one had ever tried to piece together the goblin's recipes. The Stygian Magisterium was said to have spent a fortune in repeated failed attempts, the Thalassocracy had a standing reward for any goblin munitions in any state and even the First Prince herself had briefly tried to have alchemists reproduce the ones known as 'sharpers' before admitting that whatever the process involved was the Principate simply did not have the sorcerous know-how to match it. And now a significant portion of the Eyes of the Empire was going around the city setting fires, when they should be well aware that all it'd take was a single drop touching flame and... and the city would burn green. As was the telltale mark of the Black Queen bringing her enemies to heel.

"Malicia wants to sink the Liesse Accords," Louis said. "Yet you are attempting to protect them. Why?"

"Because I have been ordered to," the Scribe replied.

Her closeness to the Black Knight was well-documented, true enough, and with the lifting of the veil over Iserre it had become possible to scry again days ago. All it would have taken was a face-to-face conversation with the Carrion Lord and the matter would have been settled. Of course, that much implied she had already been in Salia. That she had been here and that the Eyes of the Empire in the service of Lady Ime instead of herself had somehow succeeded at fomenting such schemes without her knowledge. Which was, in a word, *absurd*. The strife between Praesi spies was too recent, Louis decided. And though he dared not underestimate the Eyes of the Empire, neither would he overestimate them: the way Balthazar Serigny had been played, and likely other conspirators as well, was beyond the reach of most Praesi spies.

"It was your scheme, wasn't it?" Louis de Sartrons suddenly said. "All of this was plotted in concert with the Tower. And then the Carrion Lord pulled your leash."

The bones of the aftermath of the initial plot might have taken were still there. Cordelia Hasenbach dead, the House of Light irreparably discredited by the fire and the coup, Rozala Malanza crowned First Princess but illegitimately so in the eyes of most. Large swaths of the Principate would outright rebel, and even if the Dead King was beaten back there would be no keeping the Lycaonese in Procer after this. They'd fight bitterly to secede

and many of Prince Cordelia's steadiest allies with them. *Either Keter devoured us whole or we'd collapse in the wake of our survival*, Louis thought half-admiringly. *And with the House perhaps purged and inevitably disgraced, there would be no one left to mediate between the combatants*. It'd been a very comprehensive scheme. Terrifyingly so. Until part of the schemers had turned against it, anyway.

"If that were the case, such a plan would have been made when Lord Black was held prisoner by heroes," the Scribe said.

"You need our help," the spymaster smiled. "To find those munitions before half the capital burns green and your master ends up being held responsible."

"You need my help," the Scribe replied, "before half your capital burns green and hundreds of thousands die."

"It will cost you," Louis de Sartrons nonchalantly said.

Her eyes narrowed, but she answered through gritted teeth. Resigned. Oh, this was delicious turn indeed.

"What do you want?" she asked.

Praes had attempted to lay hand on Procer, Louis mused with a thin smile. As the charge of the Circle of Thorns ordered, it was time for the Dread Empire to bleed for presumption.

—

Balthazar felt his face turn ashen. His mind stalled, for a moment, in utter surprise and dismay. He nodded at Rosalie in acknowledgement afterwards, who once more this might had been appointed the carrier of ill news. This time, though, much worse than the last.

"You would do well to listen for once in your misbegotten life, you jumped-up fantassin," Brother Bertran sneered, Arlesite accent thick. "If you expect to keep your station after Princess Rozala's election you should learn—"

"Shut your fucking mouth, priest," Balthazar the Bastard said, voice gone flat. "The rest of you, listen to me closely."

There was a ripple of surprise among the crowd. They'd agreed to speak with him when he'd insisted that the damned door to the Highest Assembly needed to be battered down because of his prominence within the conspiracy, but none of these were used to being spoken to in such a manner.

"You dare speak—" Brother Betran began.

Balthazar glanced at one of his men and the priest's nose broke with a wet crunch a heartbeat later. A sheath weighed quite a bit, especially with the sword still in it.

"If we do not enter the Highest Assembly and depose Hasenbach within the hour, everyone here is dead," the large spymaster calmly said. "The princes of Salamans and Arans broke through the encirclement of the high districts and gathered a crowd of armed malcontents. They're coming for the palace."

"We have the run of the palace, Serigny," Princess Clotilde replied. "We've retainers of our own and loyalists, as well as the walls. We could hold ten times our number, and I've doubts they have gathered such."

"If that was all they had, I'd hardly care," Balthazar grunted. "We could break them all at once. But there are two Chosen with them – the White Knight and the Witch of the Woods."

"This is good news, Serigny," Sister Adeline dismissed. "We need only send an envoy and they will come to our side, perhaps even bearing Hasenbach herself. She is a heretic."

"The two of them have killed somewhere around three hundred people since they've entered the city, best my people can tell," Balthazar said. "At least a dozen were priests. They are coming for our heads, ladies and gentlemen, not to lend a hand."

A great deal of consternation ensued. The Holies, in particular, remained unconvinced that the Chosen would not embrace their cause. Amusingly enough there was talk of Hasenbach having seduced the White Knight, or the Witch of the Woods, or both as well as the less salacious talk that she might have lied to them so they would misunderstand the situation. One even suggested they were in truth Damned and not Chosen, though there were few takers. The more practical suggested envoys be sent to the Chosen regardless, to 'clarify the situation' to which Balthazar agreed mostly so they'd cease their shrill whining. Fear, though, finally got the lot of them moving. They all knew that so long as Hasenbach was the First Prince, they were all rebels. Deposition followed by an election, even a hasty and dubious one, would change the situation. The White Knight was said to be a scrupulous observer of the law, when there was law to be had, and even a parchment hat was better than none at all when it was raining outside. Their soldiers and guards were sent to hold the fortifications around the palace, key parts of the inside carefully garrisoned as well, and then they finally marched on the Chamber of Assembly. A strange procession of priests, highborn and spies. Only four soldiers, enough to carry a large bench that they immediately began ramming into the ancient doors. Once, twice, thrice and then the doors *opened*. Seated on the tall seat of her office, flanked by soldiers and the bearded Master of

Orders, the First Prince of Procer awaited them all in the full and resplendent regalia of her rank.

"Hasenbach," Balthazar snarled. "*Why are you here?*"

"The Highest Assembly is in session, traitor," Cordelia Hasenbach said, face a mask of frigid contempt. "Where else would I be?"

[ErraticErrata](#)

First update of the month, so as usual extra chapter in the eponymous tab. This one's titled 'Winter I', set during the time between Books IV and V in northern Procer.

[Barthumphries](#)

It would be nice if those people who started vote threads would also start a typo thread. In too many posts either the typo thread is buried or it simply doesn't exist at all.

who once more this might had been appointed the carrier of ill news.

Change might to night

[TeK](#)

Welcome to the series. You'll soon learn that typo threads are useless anyway.

Safi

"Hasenbach", Balthazar snarled. "Why are you here?"

"To vote at <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>, traitor," Cordelia Hasenbach said, face a mask of frigid contempt. "Where else would I be?"

[Liliet](#)

OK, this one's actually funny ♥ ♥ ♥

Shveiran

Nice.

MrMaturity

Congratulations, you played yourself 😊

Sparsebeard

Ahhh, Goblin Fire, just the thing that was missing for Cat's arrival.

[darkness559](#)

"I swear that wasn't my fault!"
-Cat, probably

[Sugar Roll](#)

It's not the Black Queen's fault...said no one ever.

Kakavorin

I mean, it's Cat's fault to begin with.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Actually, I don't think even we could pin this one on Cat. Pilgrim's attack on Black left Scribe playing loose cannon, and allowed the Silver Traitors to lay hands on goblinfire.

Halinn

It's a city burning with goblinfire, who else could be at fault but the Black Queen? It's her trademark signature

Shveiran

Ah, but you see, that situation would never have occurred if the stairway had not been secured by the Black Queen. With the Stairway open, Hasenback's uncle would have been hot on Black's trail with a large force and his experienced insights, quite possibly cornering him without outside interventions.

Instead, the forces trying to encircle the Black Knight's expedition were led by inexperienced commanders and down a forty-thousand strong army at the Legions' back. Truly, it was that situation that caused the Pilgrim's intervention, so it is ultimately Cat's fault.

Also, if Amadeus had been killed it is possible Scribe would not have chosen this way to mourn him; and it was the threat of the Black Queen that forced the Pilgrim to stay his hand. Again, clearly Cat's fault for existing.

Mhm, I appear to be slipping climbing all these mirrors. Hand me those suction caps, will you? I'm sure I can climb the Unlikely Cause Mirror higher than this with a little assistance.

Cicero

My my, Cordelia has some big brass ones.

I'm guessing there is some code against murdering people in the Highest Assembly, such that simply killing her would make the proceeding utterly illegitimate.

caoimhinh

Yeah, there's a reason they didn't try to murder her, but rather kept her prisoner while they held the session of the Highest Assembly without her.

Killing her right now will have them hanged as traitors no matter what.

I'm surprised the Holies actually believed that the Heroes would side with them, are they so high-level hypocrites that they believe their own lie?

Hardric62

No, they just remember that moment the Saint of Bitches indulged and enforced their brainless shenanigans with the whole Arch-Heretic debacle, completely unaware that she was doing so in order to make the whole country burn to be replaced by something 'worthy'.

Mouth-breathers, all of them.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

That's not hypocrisy, that's just indoctrination. And who's more susceptible to indoctrination than those who believe their doctrine is the word of infallible, omnibenevolent gods?

[Liliet](#)

>I'm surprised the Holies actually believed that the Heroes would side with them, are they so high-level hypocrites that they believe their own lie?

You doubted that?

caoimhinh

I expected them to at least be conscious of their own bullshit. I'm astonished of how they *actually* believe themselves to be the good guys.

It's the kind of surprise one gets when realizing the *scope* of things. Like, you know someone is an asshole but then you see them beat a child, so you get surprised of how far his

"assholery" goes.

I know the Holies are hypocrite and corrupt bastards, it's one thing to see them pretend in front of others and spout lies to sell themselves as good, but I didn't think they would *still* believe themselves to really be good.

I'm guessing Balthazar felt the same when he saw the Holies were convinced Heroes would join their cause.

Liliet

You don't really understand how people work, do you? :3

Of anything, the first person you have to convince is yourself. Everyone's a hero of their own story, Actual Card-Carrying Villains From Praes notwithstanding. Everyone LOVES to believe that they're in the right, and it takes a serious clarity of thinking (or serious cultural slant a la Praes) to actually PERCEIVE being in the wrong.

And these aren't people remarkable for their clarity in thinking.

They could be making deals with actual devils and still believe they were doing the will of Above somehow, because it's just more comfortable that way.

Shveiran

I think the Holies are simply secluded away from the Evil vs. Good strife, safe in Salia, ever hearing of events only through so many intermediaries that the grim details of reality are filtered away. They believe in a simpler world, where white and black are clearly divided.

Now that they first find themselves faced with a complex, close-at-hand issue, that brings them to believe that since they are good and on the side of Good, it only stands to reason that anyone opposing them is wicked and Evil. Since the Chosen clearly aren't Evil, why wouldn't they side with them?

Many among them are not in bad faith. They simply have what we feel is a flawed perception of reality. You can be despicable and still be perfectly coherent with your own vision, after all.

Do0d

I wouldn't say they're hypocrites, rather that they are incredibly conceited.

I mean they believe that them declaring someone a heretic makes it so in the eyes of the Heavens.

Shveiran

Playing Devil's advocate here, but why wouldn't they?

They are the highest institution of what they perceive as the most important church on Calernia (the Lanterns and the Callowans are clearly barely more than backwater tribes, and don't get me started on the League...). It's not like the Chosen are in the habit of being from the cloth, and when they are they go around smacking Evil rather than play politics or research scriptures.

Above doesn't point down to condemn heretics on its own, so why wouldn't they think it's their job?

If not them, who?

One could call them judgmental, of course, but that is the idea behind the Gods Above, isn't it?

That Above has a plan, a way of living mortals should strive to uphold because that way lie good things. And mortals do not, they need to be corrected. Through teaching, through example, through scolding, through punishments, through Light and Fury... The methods may vary, but the core belief is that there is a truth, and if you are not trying to following it you are doing it wrong.

It makes perfect sense for them to point at Villains and say "That! That is the epitome of what you shouldn't be doing! Say no to Blackqueening, kids!".

WuseMajor

At the moment, it seems like Cordy has more soldiers in the immediate area than they do, so if anyone is going to be killed here, it's unlikely to be her.

Decius

There is now.

There was mention of a rule that allowed the assembly to convene in emergencies after a summons regardless of whether a normal quorum was present. It had been mentioned that the time had already elapsed but they couldn't get in.

Cordelia has been the entire highest assembly for long enough to conduct any business that she wanted to. Any pretense of legitimacy or ex post facto legitimacy that the conspirators might ever have hoped for is gone, since the Highest Assembly was duly convened and has already done everything to counter the attack.

And, of course, Cat is going to arrive just before the city burns with goblinfire, as is traditional.

Shveiran

Oh. OH. That is actually pretty clever, I hope that's what she went with. I was mostly thinking she picked that hiding spot because no one would have looked for her there, but your suggestion is so much better.

konstantinvoncarstein

It could be both

NullKaze

"I AM the highest assembly"

Sparsebeard

Not yet!

Hardric62

It's treason then.

Decius

Technically yet, The time since summons were sent has elapsed, so the assembly convened without the normal quorum. The same gambit that was going to allow the conspirators to pass their coup has instead allowed Cordelia to pass hers.

Insanenoodlyguy

Hmm, everybody's been talking about how Hanno might actually get a "don't kill" from his coin on Cat, but now I'm thinking it might not even come to that. the way events are converging, the heroes are sure to arrive at the peak of tension, and Hanno is likely going to flip a coin on Corrine Hasselhoff for allying with the Arch-Heretic

Andrew Mitchell

> Hanno is likely going to flip a coin on Corrine Hasselhoff for allying with the Arch-Heretic

Just so long as he doesn't do it on Cordelia Hasenbach, we're all good. 😊(I got a chuckle out of your version of her name.)

Soronel Haetir

Interesting how people can't remember Scribe even when she's right there, very different from Assassin who presents an always-shifting face.

[Liliet](#)

Changer vs Stranger 😊

Andrew Mitchell

Either way it's danger. 😬

caoimhinh

That reminded me of this song:

"Oh, I'm a stranger, I'm a changer,
and I'm danger... maybe..."

erebus42

I'm pretty sure they'd still be classified as a Stranger as well.

[Liliet](#)

True! But like Changer-Stranger or just Stranger :3

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, it was a hoot seeing a trained observer run directly into Scribe's Aspect, and get flat-out bounced. Can't blame the guy for swearing.

[Javvies](#)

Huh. I wonder what Louis is going to want from Scribe. Also, definitely Malicia's people are the arsonists.

Yeah. The White Knight and the Witch of the Woods are not going to deal kindly with Serigny and his conspirators. Hanno is Judgement's minion. And the Choir of Judgement is going to be all kinds of "the letter of the Law", not the spirit of it.

Haha. Cordelia has played them, even if she didn't see this coming.

I wonder what's going on with Augur.

jesdynf

That's a **huge** assumption. Cordelia's thrown a lot of villain flags recently, and her dredging project is still proceeding, and the Seraphim are unpredictable by mortals per design.

Javvies

Cordelia is, as yet, not Named, and the lawful First Prince of Procer. So no bypassing her legal position by being a Villain.

And while her actions have likely been against tradition, they have been within the boundaries of the Law of Procer. As long as she doesn't call upon Hanno to exercise Judgement upon the situation, or otherwise give him reason to flip the coin on her, Cordelia is presumed to be in the right as far as he is concerned.

He doesn't judge, and she's still the lawful ruler of Procer being faced with an unlawful coup attempt.

Mental Mouse

And frankly, for Cordelia to call on Hanno would be a pretty fair bet, even if the stakes are excessive.

NZPIEFACE

I can just see Cat getting blamed for this anyways.

Liliet

>And the Choir of Judgement is going to be all kinds of "the letter of the Law", not the spirit of it.

That makes no sense, considering the looter guy before.

Mental Mouse

Yeah, Hanno is very much the Guideverse's incarnation of "mortals can guess at God's/the Gods' will, but never truly know it".

The looters and the draper they were robbing are a clear indication of that.

caoimhinh

People in the comments in previous chapters: Hmm, a city on fire, seems like Cat will be blamed.

Catherine: ...

Other people in the comments: Nah, there's no Goblinfire, that's her trademark and without it she won't be blamed for this.

Catherine: **Sees the flags rising and her Narrative instinct triggers** Did they just...? Oh, fuck, no...

Scribe: "They have three full carts' worth of Goblinfire."

Catherine: Godsdamn it! **Looks to the Realms beyond Creation, to the Gods and the Readers** You just *had* to say it, didn't you?

Hahahahahahahahaha

Raved Thrad

Didn't Serigny mention demons, too? Those just *have* to show up now, too.

Andrew Mitchell

Saying Hasenbach was summoning demons was just a lie to give a reason for burning a quarter of the city.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, given the lay of the board, the only ones who could conceivably summon demons would be Malicia's folks, but (1) even she's probably not that crazed, and (2) it's Scribe who seems to have the mages on the spot.

[Liliet](#)

Or rather, it's Scribe who's willing to actually burn them (reveal their identities)

Hellspirit

Perfect.

Like when folks brought up kiliean and we got briefed in that the following chapter.

caoimhinh

I do love it when EE answers our questions in the next chapter. It's not always feasible, but it happens from time to time.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

My thoughts exactly. The author knows us too well...

[Mental Mouse](#)

Kairos, is that you?

JJR

"As was the telltale mark of the Black Queen bringing her enemies to heel.

"Malicia wants to sink the Liesse Accords," Louis said. "Yet you are attempting to protect them. Why?"

This is just so great. The guy recognizes that Cat would be blamed for the fire if it happens even though it wouldn't be her fault. But still thinks all those other times were legit.

caoimhinh

That's Procerans for you.

Hardric62

Well, there is the fact that how many were actually her fault is irrelevant. For the masses, Fire is her trademark, and that's enough.

Shveiran

You mean the same guy who just went "Oh, so you want MY help saving MY city from being erased from the map in such a way that it discredits both our religious and temporal institutions, throwing our country into a terrible civil war that would destroy us forever even if we weren't also being invaded by the greatest villain of the Continent and his undead army – an invasion, let me just had, that we have been so far straight-up losing? WELL THAT'S GONNA COST YOU MISSUS."

Fucking Procerans, man.

[Liliet](#)

TBF, his point is "Oh so you want my help COVERING UP EVIDENCE OF YOUR INVOLVEMENT in setting our everything on fire? And you're blackmailing me with our entire city possibly getting set even more on fire to get me to do it? You think you can just do that and I'll go along with it?"

Don't teach hostage takers that they can get anything out of you that easily. Remember Cat's response to Akua's threat to the orphanage?

Shveiran

Aside from the fact that Scribe in this instance is less of a terrorist and more like a renegade terrorist that is offering to help you stop the other terrorists, so refusing her demands is a bit different IMO...

...I can get behind the logic of "no deal with terrorists because otherwise we'll be back here in a month when the next violent bastard wants something." But context matters.

It is reasonable to use this approach when the threat you face is limited – as in, say, an orphanage or even a full city because there is so much more at stake that you'd be surrendering.

Here... well, if Salia falls it's likely Procer and life on Calernia's surface are both screwed. That's not a good

moment to play chicken with one of your very few options. You have a shot at preventing the apocalypse, QUIT WHILE YOU ARE AHEAD. Don't play chicken with these fucking stakes, man.

TeK

You should recognize a negotiating tactic known as "bullshitting with a straight face". I doubt he would actually let Salia burn, but to let such an amazing leverage just pass you without even trying to use it is, frankly, stupid. I guess this is how your own preconceptions change what you are reading. I do not assume all Procerans are asshats, so I see his "let them bleed" for leveraging a weakness, which is smart and not presumptuous, while you apparently think Procerans to be asshats, and so see it as arrogant presumption that everyone will bow and scrape to literally save your ass from fire.

The truth is somewhere in the middle, but you need to understand the context. Black and Cat need Salia as it is a place for negotiations, they need Procer being alive and not on fire. So Scribe will try and put out fires and find goblinfire regardless of whether or not Circle will help her. So they will get her assistance anyway, while she needs their. Not to mention, it is at least hinted that she expects them to return both munitions and documents back, and perhaps this is what she must pay for.

On the other, other hand, we can see it in Piligrim, when he was startled by Cat proclaiming that she does not actually fear violence, and if pushed will burn Procer to the ground. It may very well also, at the same time be that kind of basic assumptions that Scribe and Black are helping them because they are not monsters who will without a blink eat alive a hundred thousands babies if that will get them what they wanted. You know, an understandable mistake. In that case blackmailing them for a genuine attempt to save them is assholery.

So, if he believes that Scribe saves him out of goodness of her heart, he's an asshole, if he believes that she saves him because it benefits her, he's a smart guy.

Shveiran

I'm aware it is a negotiating tactic. It is still a stupid one, when your back is to the wall. What you could gain is not worth the risk you miscalculated and the other side will actually call your bluff.

If the asshat fits, let him wear it 😊But the “Fucking Procerans” was just a jest; my jab was meant at his chosen approach.

Tek

No, it's not stupid. For many reasons, but most of all because it had worked. It is annoying as hell to deal with, but he had a pretty good read on the situations. Scribe just started fucking Malicia in the back, she would not turn halfway around cause it's too hard. She came to him, that is important. Besides what she'll do if the bluff falls. Start working with Malicia again and burn the place to the green, failing her master in the process? Nope. Abstain from putting out the fires and risk burning Salia and failing Black's orders in the process? Nope. It's basically freebie, all you gotta have are guts to go through.

Decius

Of course. If she didn't burn all those other cities with goblinfire, it wouldn't be her trademark and it wouldn't be an effective way to blame her.

RoflCat

Who want to bet that whatever Louis is planning to ask of Scribe, she already knew he would ask that and judged it acceptable cost, and is the whole reason why she even showed herself in the first place.

Like, she already knew where the texts and the goblinfire are, but rather than using Praesi agents to take it back she's using Procer's own hands to do it thus whatever they plan to spin about it, it can't be pointed back to her.

Because they're handing it to her in a trade, either he has to out himself as making deals with THE ENEMY or he has to keep quiet about it.

caoimhinh

Also, she can very well kill him when the deed is done. If he asked for information, dead men tell no tales (not accounting for Necromancy, but there's counters for that too). If he asked for a physical object, she can get it back, and if he asked for her collaboration in doing something, she can go back on her word.

Louis feeling like “Hah, I got you now, Scribe, you need me and now you are gonna pay!” in this chapter, seemed like a *huuge*

mistake that a veteran spymaster should know by now that he shouldn't do.

Hardric62

I want to bet that he knows that. The wrapping is all for the form. Everybody at the table is smart enough to know that he will be asking for pretty much what Scribe is ready to give up. With more or less haggling for appearances (probably less, they are rather smart people with a severe emergency).

Shveiran

One would hope, yes.

[Mental Mouse](#)

As I said on the last chapter, Necromancy doesn't seem to allow for interrogation unless you've already got the person alive to start with, in which case it becomes just a subset of "you have them completely in your power, with mages". The only undead we've seen to retain their memories and personality, were either known to be pre-prepared (Scribe! Cat), or plausibly so (DK's Revenants). Otherwise, they're just an anonymous spirit or spell animating a corpse.

[Liliet](#)

My guess is that he's going to request more aggressive action against Ime's network from her. It's something she can do immediately (so no going back on her word later) and it can't exactly be undone. It'll drain both her resources and Ime's, meaning draining Praesi resources period, and the best part, it's something that doesn't go contrary to Scribe's immediate prioritized goal (cleaning up the mess and ensuring Praes has a firm position in negotiations). In choosing between tactical gain and strategic loss, she'll have to eat the strategic loss here.

laguz24

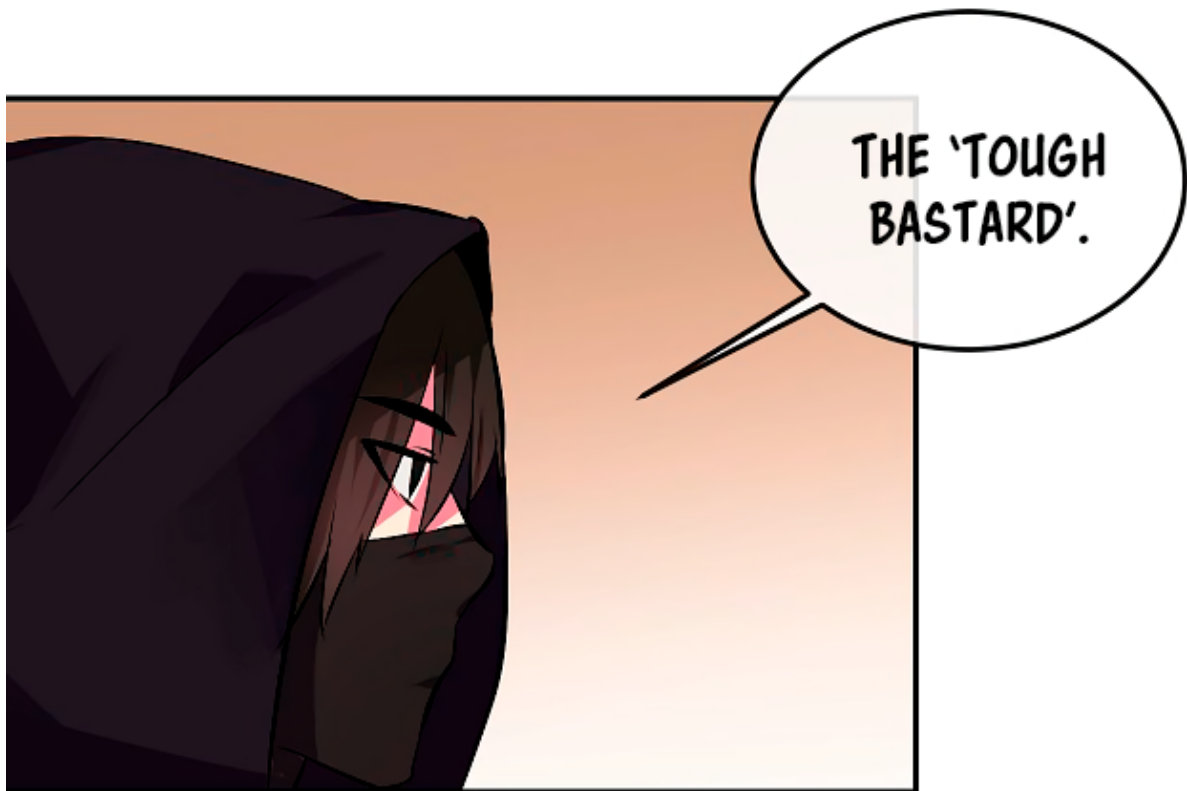
Cat: The city was on fire and it wasn't my fault.

Cordelia: Hide where you are least likely to be found, and p.s. what name do you think Balthasar will be getting if he lives that long?

Sparsebeard

The Bloody Bastard!

caoimhinh



Sparsebeard

"IF" he survives his current predicament, I got to agree.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

That last line. They are totally wrecked.

caoimhinh

"You need our help," the spymaster smiled. "To find those munitions before half the capital burns green and your master ends up being held responsible."

Ah, Procerans, even when dying and desperate, they still try to pretend they have a high hand. I mean, sure, it's not good to show weakness to a strong opponent, but there's a limit to how much you can bluff. The only reason Salia isn't already on fire is that Scribe is handling the situation (that she caused, but that still shows she's got the undeniable upper hand). It seems to have worked this time, but that could have ended very badly for him.

In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if Louis gets himself killed due to whatever he bargained with Scribe.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if Louis gets himself killed due to whatever he bargained with Scribe.

I doubt it. The Practical Evil folks are actually pretty good about keeping their word, and Louis is very much on the right side of the story. Of course, if he gets too greedy, that could scotch things, but he's probably too sensible for that.

JJR

I have to wonder if that bit about the plan being "an entirely academic exercise" is actually, in the most literal way, true. Augur can apparently see even just intent, so putting together a plan with the intent of carrying it out might be seen. But if it really was just a total hypothetical that they have no intent to follow up on. Maybe that hides it from sight. That said, I'm still not sure how it goes from purely academic to plan being followed without tripping the Augur alarm. Well, the story did mention the Silver Letters controlling the Augur's mail (I think), but it's still a tight deadline to shut down her mail before she sees that they plan to do that and get a letter out.

Decius

If the plan as a whole is completely academic, and the agents enacting parts of the plan are merely testing an academic hypothesis, or unaware of the nature of their actions, then perhaps that's the nature of the blind spot.

Scribe or Black know or suspect that Scribe being unaware of the full nature of the plan is important to the Augur also being unaware of it, which is why she needs to acquire it. Once she has it, she can INTEND to give Malica's agents orders to carry out the plan, immediately revealing them all to the Augur who can help wrap the situation up nicely.

mamm0nn

It's purely academic, until they're certain that the Augur's gaze is elsewhere. They already reasoned that she cannot be aware of everything at once, so if focussed on f.e. the Dead King this plot can be turned from academic to real without tipping her off.

[Liliet](#)

THIS IS SO FUCKING SATISFYING

~~no im not saying that because i called it wrt Scribe+Ime~~

Andrew Mitchell



[greatwyrmgold](#)

Why are people still sure the White Knight is going to turn on Cordelia and others trying to create an alliance of Good and Evil against the dead? He's shown himself to be a very reasonable hero, aside from his lack of options between "die, sinner" and "eh, go on, not my problem". He seems like the hero whose Good is closest to being a non-deontological good out of all the heroes (aside from those firmly in cahoots with the Black Queen), for all that it's based on the rule of the coin.

[Liliet](#)

IKR. Hanno is doing his best and avoiding all the obvious pitfalls of his position (judging people based on which side they are on while missing bad shit from 'his' side, escalating conflicts by accusing the mob, failing to draw conclusions from available information, ignoring people who are also trying to help,)

Nairne .01

Hah, I think you forget that "he doesn't judge, he flips a coin".

[Liliet](#)

From the outside view of common folk, from the point of view of the story, it's the exact same thing. Judgement is passed and comes from his direction.

Shveiran

Because he is not "reasonable", he is the enforcer of a law no one can either learn or change.

Hanno's desires are, ultimately, irrelevant, because he won't act on them.

His one noteworthy trait is that he trusts the Seraphim, which makes it a given that if a major decision comes up (like, say, "should I ally with this Villainess to save the world or is it actually a bad idea?", which is not exactly a question one could blame him for asking, given the possible repercussions) he will look for the Seraphim's seal of approval.

Believing this is not quite the same as comparing him to a murderhobo. It is simply pointing out that the only mercy or compromise Hanno will ever have are those sponsored by the Seraphim. Do we know what that Choir thinks of Cordelia or Cat? No.

Can we know? No.

Do we have an idea what would factor in? No.

We can speculate all we want, but let's face it, there is no way to know until it happens.

ninegardens

I mean yes... but also... certain comments made in a certain adjacent interlude chapter (->) may hint that he is more open to change than we might at first assume.

[shieldredblog](#)

No? He routinely murders strangers on the say so of Seraphim. If they told him to stab the Witch of the Woods in the face, we've seen nothing that even hinted he wouldn't do it.

He might feel bad afterwards, but he would do it.

Shveiran

What shieldredblog said.

It's not that we haven't seen Hanno as a kind, humble soul in other chapters.

It is that we have never seen him so much as doubt, let alone disagree with the Seraphim. His personal opinions and virtues are irrelevant //when discussing his likely actions and choices// because they won't weight on that decision's scales. Only the Seraphim will.

[Liliet](#)

>he is the enforcer of a law no one can either learn or change.

Book of All Things, dude. The law is right fucking there. Everyone knows it.

Shveiran

You keep saying that, but I don't think it works like that.

EVEN IF we assume that the Book of All Things is a perfect transposition of the Seraphim's views in all other languages, something I'm not sure we can do because:

- a) translation doesn't work that way, errors are made and can easily become relevant
- b) who wrote that thing? The Angels? Or men?
- c) The Choirs are not of one mind on how you should act in practice; they squabble, they disagree, they champion different virtues. So why are you assuming the Book of All Things perfectly matches the Seraphim's view?

EVEN THEN, the Book is not a code of laws, it's scriptures. Trying to use it to define what earn you eradication in a concrete, practical situation leads to madness. It's not how it works. Unless there is a passage that says "the following

things will get you smote by the Choir of Judgment, yo: number 1, abusing your religious authority to push a mob to stone a fool, number 2..." it won't work.

Valla

With regards to the book of all things I believe this backs up shveiran's point

"The passage went on to say some pointed things about villainy being a twisting of that tendered purpose, and so Evil as well as evil, but I'd always taken the Book with a grain of salt. It was a beloved and well-worn story in Callow that some ancient Count of Denier had used that very passage to argue that it was in fact impious not pay taxes promptly and in full. Once words were put to ink, anybody could put them to use and those particular words were so old none could say who'd first written them – more than simply the purposes, I suspected that the words themselves had shifted over the centuries. They couldn't not have, after all, considering no one in those days had spoken Lower Miezian before said empire came to Calernia and the Callowan manuscripts of the Book were in that language. No translation could be perfect, my expanding repertoire of spoke and written languages had made painfully clear."

Ch 40 Entreaty

maxwell wearing

hahahahahahahahaha

Oh my fucking god that final twist DESTROYED me. Oh thats incredible. Oh boy.

Can't wait to see how this plays out.

Cap'n Smurfy

"They have also brought into the city what I estimate to be three full cart's worth of goblinfire."

Oooh. There's no escaping blame for the fire now Catherine.

"As was the telltale mark of the Black Queen bringing her enemies to heel."

Yup there it is.

[Liliet](#)

And now, the conflict is: do Scribe and Louis succeed at averting the blame from Catherine? 😊

Valkyria

Well well well. Quite ballsy of you Cordelia.

Also... just damn badass. She doesn't even need to enter a room to make a dramatic entrance. That's some ruler quality right there.

Also poor Cat. She's most definitely going to get blamed for this somehow. Even if the Goblinfire doesn't light up, its very existence will "prove" she was somehow involved in this.

[Liliet](#)

We have MULTIPLE spymasters working to ensure she DOESNT get blamed for this, which is an absolutely fucking delightful fact about her everything

Valkyria

While that is quite true it is also well known that people always seem to find a way to blame the Arch Heretic of the East for stuff. Wonder why that is ...

Shveiran

It's almost like they painted her as Satan or something.

JJR

"Multiple spymaster who should be by all rights be at odds with eachother are instead collaborating to deflect blame away from the Black Queen (known city burner). Clearly she did it and has blackmail on one or more of these spy 'masters'."

[Liliet](#)

That's if anyone ever learns what they are doing though, which is not something that's going to happen.

mamm0nn

"The Silver Letters have been contracting alchemists in attempts to divine the recipe for our traditional munitions," the Scribe agreed. "They have also brought into the city what I estimate to be three full cart's worth of goblinfire."

Damn it, Scribe. I know you're too factual and not bantering to go for each easy dunk, but really? You couldn't have added the following?:

"Which they're trying to locate by burning every alchemy shop, and all the houses around it too for good measure."

Contrary to the rest of the chat, I think that the Scribe is still responsible for both sides of the Eyes' actions. The eyes in Salia only recently regained connection with the Tower, same as the good kingdoms the knowledge of Praes isn't all-knowing

without reason when it doesn't have to be so, and this scheme is so subtle there's no reason for Lady Ime to have learned of it.

More important and damning, Scribe likely found and controls all the Eyes' scrying means in Salia to prevent the tower from knowing anything she doesn't want to know. Given the situation, Ime may not know that Salia is burning at all until a messenger by foot or a carrier bird reaches the Tower by the old ways to notify her of this. Which wouldn't have happened yet, probably.

Or also likely, Black scried the Scribe and told her of the situation and/or the NameLore that the Scribe got herself in. Or the moment that the first prince 'miraculously survived' and threw a neat operation into an undeniably evil coup, Scribe saw the writing on the wall and that she was now in a Story with a conveniently appearing Chosen, destined to get her killed. Forget the Preasi beast biting it's own tail, this is the Scribe about to be swallowed by her own scheme and using Black's tricks to (at least try or flawlessly) slip the noose by being the lesser evil fighting the greater evil that wasn't her all along.

ciara

That's not contrary to the chat at all. This chapter spells out that Scribe is directing both factions of the Eyes:

"'It was your scheme, wasn't it?' Louis de Sartrons suddenly said. 'All of this was plotted in concert with the Tower. And then the Carrion Lord pulled your leash.'

""
'If that were the case, such a plan would have been made when Lord Black was held prisoner by heroes,' the Scribe said."

Scribe set this whole game in motion while Black was a captive with the intent of toppling Cordelia and leaving Procer to get bulldozed by the Dead King. Then Cat freed Black and filled him in on her latest schemes, he Skyped Scribe and now she's picking up after herself because Black is 100% Team Cat and Cat needs Cordelia in charge and Procer relatively intact.

Some Smartass

I don't think Scribe's change of plan was purely because Amadeus said so. She's entirely capable of disobeying him when she thinks he's wrong or "compromised." I think she also likes the effect Catherine's scheme has on him; he clearly wants to live in this new political landscape where villains can win, not just die creating it.

[mamm0nn](#)

The chat, as in these replies. The main thoughts on most posts seem to be that it has now been confirmed that the

Scribe indeed schemed all this, but her hatchets are fighting the torchers of Lady Ime because the Tower is pursuing a different agenda and Ime overrode Scribe's authority. Chat seems to think that the Tower is aware of this, I think that Scribe by negligence of undoing her previous orders or even by ordering the torchers post-revelation of the Chosen and the failed coup, is responsible for both sides of the Eyes' actions even now.

Liliet

>The eyes in Salia only recently regained connection with the Tower

No. Only Iserre had scrying blocked, along with the Observatory not working. The Salia/Tower connections were working the entire time.

> this scheme is so subtle there's no reason for Lady Ime to have learned of it

Is it subtle? Is it really? I don't think Ime and Scribe have completely independent non-intersecting networks, and Scribe had no reason to be deliberately trying to hide from Ime something that Ime would be equally interested in doing. There's no reason for Ime to NOT be involved in this.

And if this was all Scribe's operation, why the fuck could she not have simply called off the people setting fire to everything? I'd considered she might be deliberately staging this to show off that she's helping, last chapter, but if the goblinfire thing goes off it'll spiral out of her control catastrophically. (And I don't think she's lying about the goblinfire)

mamm0nn

It's true that scrying in Salia might've been working all along, though wouldn't Iserre be enough in the way to cause interference? But it doesn't quite matter, Scribe most likely controls everything that goes through those scrying means by virtue of being in Salia and Named.

Considering the current hostilities between Black and Malicia, I see no reason for Scribe to not similarly keep Ime in the dark or at least be passive-aggressive about it. She knows Black's current view on Malicia and the Tower, and if the First Prince and many Princes are kept out of the loop until the coup happened then it is certainly subtle enough until the first die is cast. So yes, it's very reasonable to assume that she would keep this subtle enough that Ime wouldn't find out about it just because.

On the goblinfire, who's to say she hasn't already found it months ago? She's Named, she's here to screw things up royally, she has had plenty of time, and there aren't too many places where the Silver Letters could research that level of alchemy secretly. That she wouldn't have found the goblinfire or at least its general location is just as likely as that she had it and quickly removed it when finding out that the plans changed.

Or, also still very much possible, there was no goblinfire to begin with. You really think she couldn't pull off a bluff with her powers erasing the knowledge of what her tell looks like? Or, also possible, there is goblinfire but for obvious reasons of secrecy and privacy the Silver Letters stashed it in some remote town where there are simpler reasons to keep any accidents quiet.

Whatever the case, whether she is willing to let the goblinfire burn and Salia burn with it if it comes to that (she's still a Villain after all), that she removed it long ago, or that there was never in Salia to begin with, I don't see anything wrong with my theory.

Andrew Mitchell

The end of that interlude was so, so satisfying. I loved feeling simultaneously relieved, surprised and delighted.



[Mental Mouse](#)

About that goblinfire, note that WOTW is known to have a way to (partly) deal with goblinfire, by manipulating time to run out its duration quickly.

Shveiran

True, but last time she did in a deserted mountain pass in a spot with almost no infrastructure.

My guess is that such a solution would be much more costly when deployed in a city.

Still. Girl is resourceful, she may have more tricks up her sleeve.

konstantinvoncarstein

In book 2, Masego used a contract with a devil to freeze goblinfire. What could be better to freeze something than a goddess born of Winter?

Do0d

Masego built an ice bridge over goblinfire.

Do0d

This time she doesn't have Warlock to gather all the goblinfire in a neat little ball of flaming water.

Author Unknown

Boss, we found a bunch of goblin munitions and want to study them. We need funds to set up a hidden lab in the middle nowhere, where it will be safe and secure.

What? No, no. How will I micromanage everything from so far away?

Where then? This stuff is that dangerous green fire that is impossible to put out.

I have just the place, under my bed, what could possibly go wrong with me there to guard them. Though it might make the mattress a bit lumpy...

konstantinvoncarstein

Balthazar is really a moron

Nairne .01

Well, he is so desperate for revenge that he just falls into the trap known as "people will believe what they want to believe" – even if its an easily discernable trap if he just stopped and thought about it for a moment

[Adrian_V](#)

Cat's pyromaniac tendencies (no matter how much she denies them!!!) are so common they are being weaponized against her xD, now we just know at least 1 house will burn green....and we know at least some people will blame Cat xD

[Liliet](#)

Not necessarily.

The running gag has been brought up and discussed, and now the plot is to specifically avert it.

Having it actually happen won't add anything to the joke.

[Adrian_V](#)

I was talking more about the INTENTION, that and maybe either the house of some noble or a warehouse from the letters could burn green, just 1 of those would be enough to blame Cat in

the eyes of some people (mostly those who are a little idiotic and believe every rumour they hear).

Liliet

(Also, it remains true that Catherine has never deployed goblinfire against//in a civilian target)

Adrian_V

Thruth is irrelevant!!!!!! xD

Serously half of callow believes she intentionally burned....was it liese? can't remember wich city it was right now.

aran

It was Summerholm when she was a claimant, then Summerholm again. I think it could have later been Liesse as well though? People burning cities with goblinfire and her getting blamed became a running gag.

aran

"They have also brought into the city what I estimate to be three full cart's worth of goblinfire."

All right, NOW it's a party.

Rude of them to set the city on fire before Catherine even gets here to take the blame.

aran

"I swear it was on fire when I got here"

"Suuuuuuuure it was, Foundling"

aran

"Hasenbach," Balthazar snarled. "Why are you here?"

"The Highest Assembly is in session, traitor," Cordelia Hasenbach said, face a mask of frigid contempt. "Where else would I be?"

Daaaaaang, Cordelia still got it.

Satan

So the White Knight is "serene" while passing down judgement, since he outsources most of his thinking work to the heavens? Black definitely hates him.

Interlude: And Yet We Stand

"There are some who will, for what was writ in this volume, call me traitor. Name me a hater of all that we are. But it is untrue. I weep at what we are for I see what we could be, what we tried to be until we lost our way: an empire unlike any other, where the law is just and measured and rule belongs not to one but many. It is not hatred of the patient, to despise the disease."
– Extract from the conclusion 'The Ruin of Empire, or, a Call to Reform of the Highest Assembly', by Princess Eliza of Salamans

Agnes still missed the tall peaks and blue skies of Rhenia, but sometimes in this particular garden it felt like she had never left. It was the bareness of it, she supposed. The palace was filled with gardens each competing to be more ornate and opulent than the last, and this one had lost the contest. A handful of bare trees, a broken headless statue of a man Cordelia insisted was First Prince Clothor Merovins, and two roughly uncomfortable stone benches. Agnes Hasenbach liked the one by the statue best, for she could glimpse the skies while enjoying the familiar sensation of being surrounded by the tall walls of the open courtyard.

The traitor-guards owned by Balthazar Serigny had allowed her to return to the garden from her rooms, and even allowed her some illusion of privacy: though every way in and out was heavily guarded, within she had been left alone. It would change nothing, of course. Not with her. The sky told her the hour was near – *hunter ascendant, the hound's eye waning* – but not quite there yet. And so the Augur tread softly on the snow to the bottom of a dying tree and bent to pick up a thin and long branch. She returned to sit on her bench and, leaning forward, began to trace signs in the snow.

Iron. Rope. Candle. Harp. Bone. Mirror.

And as she finished the last stroke on the old symbol some called the verdant mirror, she came. Leaning forward as well from her seat, the Wandering Bard gazed at the signs in the snow.

"That old Mavii trick?" the Bard chuckled. "Gods, it's been ages."

And so, Agnes Hasenbach thought, *it begins*.

—

Balthazar drew his sword before the savage was even finished speaking. Surprise gave way to rage at having been made sport of in such a manner: she'd never even left the palace, had she? Some servants must have hidden her in their quarters while the soldiers who'd save her ran off towards the high districts carrying some other blonde woman in her clothes. His Silver Letters dropped the bench they'd been meaning to use as a ram and reached for their own blades even as the tall spy suppressed a grimace. He had four of his own and he was fair hand with a blade himself, but Hasenbach had a fully twenty soldiers spread out in the Chamber of Assembly – all of them Salian garrison, from their tabard.

Prince Arsene of Bayeux did know his way around a sword, from what Balthazar remembered, but the Princess of Aisne would be dead weight in the fight. The priests even worse, though some might serve as healers at least, and damn Hasenbach but even though the amount of sworn delegates and royal candidates with his group meant they outnumbered her significantly few of those would be willing to draw a blade on the First Prince even if they had one, or knew how to wield it. One of the Holies – Sister Adelie, he recognized – strode forward bold as you please even as the soldiers unsheathed their own swords in response to his people.

"Cordelia Hasenbach, Prince of Rhenia, you stand accused of heresy," Sister Adelie announced, voice echoing across the chamber. "All of you, throw down your swords and-"

"The House of Light has not yet been given leave to speak," the Master of Orders cut through. "Be silent or be removed from this Chamber."

"Rosalie," Balthazar spoke softly without turning, eye on the enemy soldiers even as the priests began blustering. "Fetch reinforcements. Now. At least sixty, we may need to force the room."

His agent whispered assent and she began a slow retreat, though she'd break into a run the moment she passed the corner. Cordelia Hasenbach's blue eyes followed her leaving, but she said nothing. Did she have them surrounded, he wondered, and so did not care because Rosalie was about to be slain? Or did she truly think that he wouldn't have her dragged out of the Chamber and stabbed the moment he had the men? The woman was a northerner but not without cunning, so she could not possibly believe the latter could she?

"The Highest Assembly has been convened," Cordelia Hasenbach said. "Assermentés, sit the thrones to which you are sworn. I will brook no more delays."

"You've been accused of treason, heresy and tyranny," Princess Clotilde of Aisne said. "You have no right to sit that throne, Cordelia Hasenbach."

"Such accusations may be brought only before the Assembly, when it is convened," the blonde royal said. "It is not convened until the sworn delegates and the sitters present have claimed their seats. Unless, of course, you intend to give the House of Light right of trial over Proceran royalty."

Fuck, Balthazar thought, for though the trick itself was mere procedure it would –

"The Heavens spare none their judgement, be they high or low," Brother Bertran proclaimed.

"Curb your tongue, priest," Prince Arsene of Bayeux said. "We come to unseat a tyrant, not crown the Holies in her stead."

In mere moments one of the priest with a better head on their shoulder would step in and retract the hasty claim, or at least nudge it to the side, but the damage had already been done. Hasenbach had been aiming at neither the House nor the two royals in the Chamber: it was the sworn delegates she'd had in her sights. Who'd just seen the two great legitimate powers of the conspiracy, the crowns and the robes, turn on each other without hesitation. *They're losing trust in this coup*, Balthazar cursed as he saw many of them fall into blank expressions.

The priests had converted some by conscience but others he'd seen to with threats and those threats lost power if it did not look like Balthazar Serigny would be able to carry them out by the time dawn rose. Glaring Heavens, Rosalie needed to hurry with the reinforcements or their support would melt like snow in summer sun – and if he had to put a sword behind every neck before the votes were taken, would the White Knight truly stay his hand when he broke through the lines? Balthazar suspected not.

"The House of Light would not venture to pass judgement over royalty without the consent of the Highest Assembly," Brother Philippe of the Holies said. "This is a–"

Hasenbach gestured discreetly at the soldiers flanking her and spears were slammed into the floor with deafening fracas.

"The House of Light has yet to be given leave to speak, priest," the Master of Orders said. "Wait until your petition is brought forth, or see yourself expelled from the Chamber. *Assermentés*, to your thrones or you will be taken as abstaining from the session."

The sworn delegates, to the silence of the priests and the dismay of the other two royals in the chamber, moved towards their

thrones in charged silence. Balthazar eyed Hasenbacg closely, gauging whether he might be able to close distance with her without the soldiers getting in the way, but no: he was being watched and his agents with him. *Why haven't you removed me from the Chamber yet?* he wondered. Or taken him prisoner, or anything else realty. Hasenbach had the advantage right now, before his reinforcements arrived, so why was she not acting?

—

"She'll pull through, your cousin," the Bard said, comfortingly. "Don't you worry about it."

Agnes wanly smiled.

"I have known Cordelia since we were girls," she said. "I have better measure of her than anyone else alive."

That was not a boast, though Agnes would not claim that she was closest to her royal cousin of all their kin. Yet the oracle had seen her across many choices, many fates, many mistakes. And across none of these did Cordelia Hasenbach cease to be fundamentally the same woman she'd been when, fresh to her throne and strangled by her many responsibilities, she'd still made time for her odd cousin who liked to speak of flocks and stars. The same woman who'd sent her handmaids to look at the wares of southern merchants for birdwatching almanacs, and on Agnes' seventeenth nameday even obtained for her a Baalite eye. The truth at the heart of Cordelia Hasenbach was that she always chose kindness, when there was a choice to be made.

Agnes glanced at the play of shadows on the wall, moonlight and starlight and the denial of both, glimpsing what might yet be: crossroads, crucible, hallowing. The oldest treachery in the guise of the writ of angels. How tired she was, of walking on the line between abyss and abyss, of measuring her words as if ear was leant to every single one. How long had she been waiting for the end, now? Sometimes she got lost in the blue sky and the distant winds, listening to distant cries carried by the wind and the truths they whispered of. There were days where Agnes no longer knew her age, or the face of her mother. What had her father whispered in her ear, before he died? But she knew truths, and the coming of more, and in the end that would be enough. Her choices had been made before she was even given the opportunity to make them.

"Iron to bind, and rope to kill," the Augur quoted.

"At first they reddened those altars for blessings, for revels," the Bard said, "but it was desperation, later on. The Arlesites knew the secrets of steel, and though the Mavii were wonder-makers in stone theirs were wonders of peace."

"Fetters for hand and feet, the slow death of a night and day," the Augur said. "To call forth the lords and ladies of the fae."

"They were a thing of beauty, leading their supplicants in battle," the Bard fondly remembered. "Yet even that was not enough to turn the tide. The Arlesites had simply learned too well at the feet of the titans."

"The legends say they went willing, those who hung," Agnes said.

"There was a time," the Bard softly agreed. "When the days of the Mavii darkened, though, so did the practice. Oathbreakers, first. Then the craven. Then the defenceless. And bitter seeds bore bitter fruits."

"But they went willing, once upon a time," Agnes murmured.

The Bard nodded, silent.

"Sometimes there is a need for bleeding," the Augur said, looking up at the horizon.

Plumes of smoke had begun to rise, for Salia was burning. She would ask the Gods to forgive her, but she sought no absolution.

Let her silence drag her all the way to the Hells, if it was what she deserved.

—

The numbers in the Assembly were still in their favour, if the delegates they'd twisted the arms of held. Balthazar saw there were as many thrones empty as not, within, and if they crowned their royal candidates then Hasenbach was done for. She still had the votes for Rhenia and Salia, but the other three Lycaonese principalities had no representatives and neither did Prince Renato and Prince Ariel. The conspiracy had the rulers of Bayeux and Aisne as well as sworn delegates for more than enough: Aquitan, Tenerife, Segovia, Brabant, Orne, Cleves and Hainaut.

Using those votes they could crown another six princes and princesses, the same who'd abdicated at the Princes' Graveyard, and from there they would have a majority of votes even in the absolute sense. The legality of the proceedings would be much harder to deny. If the sworn delegates held. If Hasenbach did not clutter the session with other matters so no such votes could be taken. *It doesn't matter*, Balthazar the Bastard thought, eyeing the soldiers still keeping watch. *Let her play queen for a little longer, it will matter not a whit when I have more swords than her.* The moment could not come too soon.

"As is ancient law, a representative for the House of Light may now come forward and speak to the petition being put to the

Highest Assembly," the Master of Orders said. "Let the second order of the evening begin."

Second? What had she – if she was keeping to the pretence of legality when what could she even – oh, *fuck*. The summons by the House of Light meant the formal session had begun hours ago, when Hasenbach was the only sitter in the room. As long as she kept to majority votes that didn't require a quorum or to matters in simple need of formal recognition – without voting – then she could have done a great many things without breaking the letter of the law. Potentially, Balthazar Serigny grimly realized, every empty throne in the Chamber now had a formally recognized sworn delegate in the person of Cordelia Hasenbach. It'd never hold up to a serious contest when a full session was held, true, but then it hardly needed to.

So long as she survived the night, Hasenbach would no doubt be perfectly willing to have everything on the record for this session struck and maybe even express *apologies* for her abuse of procedure. If she sounded highly unapologetic while making such repentance, it might actually improve her popularity with some of the Alamans royalty: they did enjoy a brisk turn of fortune in the Ebb and Flow. The House of Light put forward Sister Adelia as their speaker, which the spymaster held his breath over. At least they'd had the sense to name someone broadly familiar with the Assembly's procedures, by the looks of it. When they had the advantage the Holies could afford to break such rules as a show of power, but if they did the same on this night it would instead reek of uncouthness and desperation.

"The House of Light, in the name of the Gods Above, brings forward charges of greater heresy against the First Prince Cordelia Hasenbach," Sister Adelia announced. "Let all in Creation know that the line of Hasenbach has fallen and estranged itself from the grace of the Heavens."

"And what proof does the House of Light bring for these claims?" the Master of Order asked.

"She has made peace with the Arch-heretic of the East, declared so by a great holy conclave," Sister Adelia said, voice rising in pitch and heat. "She has forgiven the Carrion Lord's great slaughter of Procerans and even offered truce to the wicked Tyrant of Helike and his master the butchering Hierarch."

The priestess had turned to address the delegates instead of Hasenbach and her bearded creature, to his approval: she too understood that if they were to keep the veneer of legality for all this it would be by keeping that petty lot on their side. Yet they were not without qualms, Balthazar saw, for they feared setting a precedent. If the delegates vote here, on formal record, that the House could unseat a First Prince for not obeying the dictates of a conclave then they were going to have

to answer very pointed questions by their own masters as to why they'd ever allow the House such power over the Assembly. Yet Sister Adeline did speak for the House, which was very much respected in moral and holy matters, and it could not be denied that Hasenbach was making pacts with an awful lot of Damned.

"Point of order," the Master of Order said. "The First Prince, after seeking the assent of this very Highest Assembly, offered *truce* to the Queen of Callow and the League of Free Cities. Not peace. No formal agreement was reached over the fate of the Carrion Lord."

A technicality, Balthazar thought, which shouldn't matter. If the sworn delegates were going to be swayed by the accusations of heresy, they'd not care about such quibbling. If they weren't, they'd hardly care anyway. Yet Hasenbach was being very careful to keep every part of this as lawful as she could.

What was her game, and where were his damned reinforcements?

—

"They were such vain, temperamental creatures," the Bard mused. "Even at the heyday of their influence. I suppose we all are, in our own way, but the fae were always a kind apart."

"Candle to blind," Agnes quoted, "and harp to still."

"They despise being in debt, you see, even such a small one as rope-slain in their name would induce," the Bard amusedly said. "But a circle of candles would make them mindless when they witnessed it, and then beautiful songs soothed them into a more amenable disposition. Boons could be wheedled out, then, or lesser oaths."

The Augur had taken different lesson from them. A candle in the dark drew everyone's eye, even when it was what was unfolding in the shadows that needed to be seen. And a sweet song, a beloved pleasure? That was a diversion one did not want to see through, even when they could. *Never trust a man who smiles easy*. Had those been the last words of her father? No, it couldn't be. Frost had crept across a branch, in the shape of a hawk with wings extended: providence was smiling down on her. Some nights, some days, she could look until her eyes watered and hardly catch glimpses of anything. Tonight the signs were overflowing, crowding her senses like eager courtiers even when she sought no answers. The wind sang songs — death, death rising with the smoke and schemes over a treacherous altar of jade — but Agnes shook her head. She needed to centre herself, or she would be lost.

"I am Agnes Hasenbach," she murmured. "I am Agnes Hasenbach, and I am here and I am *now*."

She tightened her fingers around the stick she still held, proof of her claims, and breathed out. The secrets, the signs, slowly ebbed away.

"Oracles always have it the worse," the Bard said, sympathetic. "Mortals aren't meant to see the way you do, so close to the deeper truth of things. The kind of foes you have to fight can't be slain."

And they always win, Agnes thought. There would be a day where she went too deep, glimpsed things so far beyond her understanding, that there would be no coming back. Not whole, not even close to it. And she was already touching the limits of what she could do: trying to peer around the edges of the darkness that shrouded the Dead King was a thin of horror, the endless chorus of screams and crazed laughter. Or even worse, deeper in, the chilling serenity of the voices worshipping him as a god. Yet she had seen things, learned things. The Black Queen, at least, was brutally straightforward in her refusal to be seen: thrice the Augur had woken up fallen in the snow, livid claw marks that soon faded on her arms and the taste of blood in her mouth.

Yet she had learned from that too, and from that learning shaped finer sight. Or had it been the other way around? Had she first glimpsed the Wandering Bard, and learned from this? Or had she only seen the shadow of any of this, and taken all sides of the crossroads in other lives? It was hard to tell the difference, sometimes.

"You are seer as well," the Augur said.

"I see things," the Bard snorted. "But a seer I am not."

"Like a bird of misfortune perched atop the tower, you see it all below," Agnes said, and her own voice sounded distant. "Stories."

"I know many stories," the other woman agreed.

"You know stories," the Augur softly laughed. "All the stories, *all* the time, as if they unfolded beneath your wings and you need only look down to see the lay of them. You pick, and choose, and swoop and *how does it not drive you mad.*"

Moonlight on frost – lizard, yawning – a distant bird in the night, halfway between the lone sentinel and the weeping man. *Danger*, the world whispered, *tread lightly*. As if she needed be told. She should not have spoken so much.

"It has been a very long time," the Bard lightly said, "since someone grasped that."

"It must have been about family," Agnes frowned. "He always talked about family. He was a terrible father, but he never knew it."

Eyes studied her, then looked away. The icicle it was melting and it was weakening and it would break in three, two –

"Vain, temperamental creatures," the Bard mused. "As are we all."

Broken. For now.

–

Oh, it had been a mistake to let her speak. Balthazar understood it now. Better they had all fled and only returned when they had the soldiers to drag Hasenbach out, rather than *this*. It was like watching a nine-sun Arlesite duellist toying with a notchless swaggerer. Seated on the seat that had once been that of Clothor Merovins, the founder of the Principate, Cordelia Hasebach kept silent as if this was all beneath her. The Master of Orders answered in her stead, never once hesitating.

The priests went first, Sister Adalie leading the charge. The Holies set out their case for the unseating of Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer, and though they were not without cleverness they were methodically taken apart. Dealing with villains, they said, was moral taint. It made her unfit for the office. And even the Hidden Horror had held his blow, which was clear indication of bargain struck with the abomination.

"No treaty of peace has been signed, and the Dead King's withdrawal was effected by the Black Queen and not the First Prince. This is of her own admission, confirmed by the Augur."

She was shown herself to be without mandate from the Heavens by failing to bring the Tenth Crusade to success, both in Callow and in Iserre.

"Princess Rozala Malanza held command at both the Battle of the Camps and the Princes' Graveyard."

She'd intervened in the affairs of the House of Light, which was beyond the authority of any mortal ruler, and schemed to pervert the decision of a greater holy conclave.

"No such decree has ever been passed and it would require the consent of the Highest Assembly to act against the House of Light."

She was a tyrant, having stacked the Highest Assembly with her associates in clear perversion of the rightful order of Procer as set by its founders. At that Hasenbach finally made a noise: sharp, scornful laughter as she eyed the procession of royal

candidates standing to the side of the thrones. Shame burned more than a few faces. The House of Light then tried to make an argument using a precedent from the Liturgical Wars for a regency of the realm by the Holies, but unfortunately it relied on the premise of the First Prince being prisoner and so fell apart when it was pointed out that Hasenbach clearly was not and so no regency could be considered as needed. They priests were, after this, visibly at a loss.

Prince Arsene and Princess Clotilde, like Balthazar sensing that they were losing the reins, then tried as well. Arsene of Bayeux boldly suggested that the chaos in the capital was proof she had lost the trust of the people, and so of the Assembly, and that the election of another First Prince was necessary for the stability of the realm in these dark times.

"The lawful procedures to unseat a First Prince are known, and have not been attempted, which begs the question of what the Prince of Bayeux intends if it is not the lawful manner."

The Princess of Aisne instead stated that Hasenbach had overreached her authority and made a mockery of the procedures of the Highest Assembly, naming specific instances: repeated emergency votes held in quick succession, the granting of broad authority and precautionary amnesty to Arnaud Brogloise that even included the power to negotiate diplomatic settlements with Damned. Assigning the former Princess of Lyonis under the command of Princess Malanza while granting her authority over Princess Malanza, which undermined the very appointment made by the Highest Assembly.

None of these, Clotilde of Aisne conceded, were strictly speaking unlawful. But they were perversions of the intended meaning of the procedures of the Highest Assembly, and to allow them to happen without consequence would inevitably lead to the collapse of the Principate of its reduction into a mere kingdom. That struck a note with some of the sworn delegates, but not enough to recover from the continued verbal slaughter. The grievances were solid in their eyes, Balthazar suspected, but not worth all this strife and not in time of war.

Prince Arsene tried his hand again, insinuating that the foreign troops marching on Salia were meant to force the will of Hasenbach on even princes, but at last the savage bestirred herself. The Master of Orders hastily recognized her right to speak, cutting straight through the Prince of Bayeux's rising speech.

"Are you quite finished?" Cordelia Hasenbach calmly asked, blue eyes like ice.

Hands on the arms of the ancient throne of Salia, the blonde princess' gaze swept across the Assembly.

"For near an hour now I have sat here, awaiting a single justification for the way the capital outside this palace is *burning to the ground*," she said, voice like the crack of a whip. "For the deaths that continue to happen even now. For the loss of trust this will cause in the allies we require for our very survival. For the way our enemies will see weakness and tear at our throats."

She drummed her fingers, scathingly.

"Well?" she said. "I await still. Speak, if any of you can."

Silence reigned, and not merely for reason of procedure.

"I thought not," Cordelia tiredly said.

She breathed out slowly.

"This farce is at an end," she said. "There is not even the slightest of pretences for you to legitimately take power in Procer, and you have not the strength to do so illegitimately. Surrender now, before I am required by law to have you all put to the sword."

And then, the sweetest of sounds: armoured boots treading fast on a wooden floor. Balthazar discreetly glanced back. Rosalie was at the head of them, and though there were less men than he'd wanted – barely forty – it would be enough.

She was good at talking, Hasenbach, but it was hard to talk when you had a sword through the throat.

—

"Ah," the Bard hummed. "There we are."

"Bone to wind," the Augur said, "and mirror to fill."

"Still on that, are you?" the Bard amusedly said.

"The bone is twofold, yes," Agnes said. "It took me long to understand. Sometimes they open barrows and there are fingerbones. Around them twine was wound, very long ago. I was told this, by a tribunal of owls from Hannoven."

"Owls," the Bard slowly repeated, as if dubious.

"Owls are terrible gossips," the Augur said. "Never tell one your secrets. The twine was an oath, they told me."

"Owls, huh," the Bard muttered. "I'll have to remember that. They had it right: the twine was an oath's length. They learned to keep count, after the first few times one of the lords stayed

longer than the oath lasted. Even the gentlest of the fae have sharp humour."

"Bone is also the bone of man," Agnes solemnly told her. "We stand not without it. We move not, act not. It is..."

The word stalled. Had the shadow always touched the tree at that angle? No, stars moved here. The moon did not blink, it circled. Ah! Solemn fingers in three, the mark of the Tribunal. Not the owls, though also with wings. The White Knight was near, and the three fingers were touching one of her own footsteps leading north. Ah, the front of the foot and not the back: forward, coming, grim ending. Yes, it was as she had seen.

"Quintessential," the Bard said.

"Yes," Agnes smiled. "To have the bone of them is to own them, to have them wound around your fingers like twine. Clever Mavii."

"Nature can be shaped," the Bard disagreed. "It can change. It doesn't even take all that much: sometimes all you need to do is throw a stone in the pond and the ripples will see it done."

Ah, the Augur thought, is this what you believe we have done?

—

Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer, Prince of Rhenia, Princess of Salia and Warden of the West, did not stand as the Silver Letters entered the Chamber of Assembly and began spreading out. She had expected this, known it was coming since the moment she decided against leaving the palace. They would try strength, when all else failed. And there were enough foes here her twenty Salians were likely to lose. And yet she stayed seated. Rhenian blue dress going down to her feet, high-collared and match for the sapphire-set circled of white gold she'd chosen to wear over her golden curls, she simply stared down at the spies that had turned on her and made all of this possible.

"And here we are," Cordelia said. "The true face of all this: swords and ambition, both bare for all to see."

"Surrender and I won't need to have you dragged out by the hair," Balthazar said, smiling wide. "Your Highness."

Him she ignored, instead looking at the Silver Letters behind him.

"If you obey him, if you truly bare swords and spill blood on the grounds of the Chamber of Assembly, it will be the end of you," she told them.

Threats would not cow the likes of them, so she need make it plain this was no such thing.

"It does not matter if I live or die," she said. "Whoever takes my place, whoever sits this Assembly, they will need to see you all dead. Publicly, loudly, excruciatingly painfully. Because if they do not make an example that resounds through the ages, one that quells the very thought of anyone ever doing something like this again, they will never be able to safely sit this hall again."

She gestured at the Holies.

"Do you believe they will protect you?" she said. "The House of Light will not even be able to protect *itself* from the consequences of this. Every priest in this room will be sacrificed by the rest of the Holies, for they have openly committed rebellion and no First Prince could countenance such of the House. Do you understand, now? If you obey Balthazar, he has killed you."

Silence struck once more, until Balthazar cleared his throat.

"She's right," he said. "Savage that she is, she's right. This got botched, so now we need to tie up all the loose ends."

The tall, hirsute killer cleared his throat.

"Hasenbach went mad, having made pacts with devils, and used her wicked powers to slaughter the entire Highest Assembly," Balthazar the Bastard announced. "We'll torch it after just to be sure."

The Silver Letters hesitated. But then they started to advance, swords high, and two began to close the doors so no one would escape. It was madness, Cordelia thought. She'd known Serigny might go mad, try to burn her out, and made certain the secret passage out was unencumbered. But this was *madness*. No, it was worse than that: it was service to the Enemy. It was every ugly, dark impulse she had tried to smooth out of Procer, growling and lunging for her throat. And now she was to flee from it, again? As if swords and brutality were enough to rule the heart of the Principate? No. No, she would not have it. She would not skitter away once more, abandoning good men to swords, this realm to the heedless animals that would rule it. She was the Warden of the West, not-

Before the doors of the Chamber could close, a sword was slid through them. As if the heavy oaken gates were light as feathers, they were forced open and a tall man in plate and a trailing cloak advanced.

"My apologies for disturbing the proceedings," the White Knight politely said. "I am looking for Balthazar Serigny."

The Wandering Bard went still.

"What have you done?" she hissed.

Agnes laughed, laughed, laughed.

"Exactly what you wanted me to," the Augur wheezed. "Just a little too quickly."

"She was meant to-"

"Meant," Agnes hissed. "*Meant*. As if you did not meddle, Bird of Misfortune. As if you did not pull long strings."

"You changed nothing," the Bard said.

"I changed everything," the Augur said. "She has a choice, now."

"They always make the same choices," the Bard said. "You'll learn."

"Mirror to fill," Agnes said. "With iron and rope we died, and you came. With candle and harp we danced, and you stayed."

She cackled.

"But I have the bone of you, Wandering Bard," she said. "I have the bone of you and in my mirror you found nothing but your own reflection. You have not fooled me, Longstrings."

"You may just have destroyed everything," the Bard said. "*Everything*, child. The Dead King-"

"There is one truth in this world that cannot be broken," Agnes Hasenbach, the Augur, calmly said. "I have learned this from portents many and varied, spoken to birds from strange and distant skies as well as consulted with the secret whisperers of the winds and clouds."

She leaned forward, erasing the six symbols she had drawn in the snow.

"Would you like to know them, Bird of Misfortune?" she asked.

—

And then, only then, did Cordelia rise to her feet. She nearly fell, face paling for the pain of leaning on that broken leg. This, she knew, was the White Knight. The Sword of Judgement made to walk the grounds of Creation, silver coin in one hand and death in the other. She advanced.

"Chosen," Brother Bertran called out, sounding both relieved and expectant. "These Silver Letters conspirators would murder us."

Bring to them the judgement of the Seraphim, in the name of the Heavens!"

The White Knight cocked his head to the side, rolling a silver coin between his fingers.

"You are one of these that call themselves the Holies, yes?" the man asked.

"The Heavens have bestowed this honour upon us," Brother Bertran proudly agreed.

"That is certainly possible," the dark-skinned Chosen agreeably replied.

A flick and the coin went spinning, up and up and up. Cordelia's hand moved quicker than her mind, than her flesh, and she snatched it out of the air. It burned against her palm, scorching. She swallowed the pain.

"Enough," the First Prince of Procer said. "There will be no killing."

The Chosen was watching her with wide eyes, before something like surprise and awe flickered across his face.

"You are..." he said, sounding moved. "I have never seen it with my own eyes."

And she felt it too, pulsing through her veins, the mantle that was within her reach. His judgement she had ended for there was only one fit to pass it in these chambers, and it was the Warden of the West. Even the burning against her palm seemed distant, like her flesh was being filled with something – no. *No*. She fought the pull, the inevitability, everything it entailed. She fought it tooth and nail. There was nothing greater than this, this flesh, this moment and this place and the laws that bound them all. She had only one master, and it was the Principate of Procer. The coin burned into her flesh and she cast it down. The White Knight's face went ashen.

"This is," Cordelia said, "the Principate of Procer. We rule with accord and law, we mete out the same justice to the highest soul and the lowest. We fail that principle, often and utterly, as men and women have failed principles since the First Dawn. But I will not renounce it: not for a day, not for an hour, nor for a single breath. This land will know no queen, no empress, no pale-clad warden to stand above all others."

In her palm the laurels had been burned black, a wound she knew would never heal so long as she lived.

"Conspiracy will be tried by our laws," Cordelia Hasenbach. "And no one else's."

She could be the law, the First Prince knew. After this, looking in the eyes of those around her, seeing the loyalty that was blooming there. The faith. She could take it, and First Prince or not she would be the only law Procer would need. With scheme and knife, with ruthless will, she could purge the rot and turn Procer into what it should be instead of... this. *No*, Cordelia thought once more, and this time it was barely a struggle at all.

She returned to her throne, and the moment she sat the conspiracy was finished.

—

"It does not matter," the Augur said, "if on the other side stand kings and monsters and all the gods that stride this earth. It does not matter if the odds are paltry and the signs scream of defeat with every silent voice."

Blue eyes and a warm embrace. *Of course you'll live with us now. You are family. You always will be.* This, this she would not forget until that final venture beyond where she was meant to go.

"I will," Agnes said, "always, *always* bet on Cordelia Hasenbach."

[ninegardens](#)

Another beautiful line:

>"She'll pull through, your cousin," the Bard said, comfortingly. "Don't you worry about it."

>Agnes wanly smiled.

>"I have known Cordelia since we were girls," she said. "I have better measure of her than anyone else alive."

IE, "I have a better measure of her than YOU, Wandering Bard"

[ninegardens](#)

So... random things noticed:

****No. No, she would not have it. She would not skitter away once more, abandoning good men to swords, this realm to the heedless animals that would rule it. She was the Warden of the West, not- Before the doors of the Chamber could close, a sword was slid through them.****

Pretty sure this was the exact moment when Cordelia was MEANT to get her name- according to Bard's plan.
WK literally walks in the door seconds too early.

Also:

For all that Bard is a terrifying immortal abomination... her win record in this story is actually kind of average:

- * First Liesse: convinces Will to summon Angels. Will gets murdered by Cat. Bard shrugs shoulders, wanders off. Minor loss.

- *Free cities: Bard kicks Blacks ass and gets Captain killed... but also Kiaros gets one over on her by summoning Heirarch. Major Victory.

- *2nd Liesse: Bard successfully messes up alliance between Malicia and Black. Major Victory.

- *Chat with Black: Says some ominous shit. Possibly sets up Black to be emperor. minor loss???

- *3rd Liesse: Screws over band of 5, resulting in Saints death and Heriphant losing magic... but gets soundly BEATEN by her main opponent, DK. Three minor victories, one massive loss.

- *Chat with Cat: Says some ominous shit. Tries lotsa things. Cat sidesteps. Minor loss ???

- *Plays games with a coup in Procer: gets her ass handed to her by Agnes fucking Hasenbach. Major loss(?).

So all up...2 big wins, 2 MASSIVE losses(?) and a bunch of minor wins and losses either side... and the 2 big wins are kind of really just one win that paid off twice.
Have I missed anything?

... in some sense, I suspect what makes bard scary isn't her success rate, but just the fact that she can keep rolling the dice all day. When she loses (usually) everyone else is fighting for their lives and kingdom, and she's just like "Oh? That didn't work. Guess I'll try something else."

Except now, with DK in play, we are no longer in a world where Bard can AFFORD those losses any more... so things are starting to get... interesting.

Insanenoodlyguy

It tried three times, actually. First, that moment you described. Second, when she grabbed the coin. That's why Hanno was first in awe, than Ashen has she threw down the coin. He saw a name being born, and then he saw something even rarer: a name being aborted.

It tried a third time, weakly, to give her a villian name instead since she rejected the good, making her not Warden of the West, but turning the First Prince into THE First Prince, but it was a half assed desperation move on Fate's part and that one was much easier to throw off.

James, Mostly Harmless

I have a feeling Below was trying to offer Black Queen to Cordelia ...

Insanenoodlyguy

No, there's no precedence for that. It's a new name Cat got as a reflection of being the Queen brought up by the Black Knight. It was specific to her. And it wasn't calling her that anyway, it started calling her First Prince.

Sun Dog

Thought it was Warden of the West.

Javvies

Above offered Warden of The West as a Heroic Name.
Below offered First Prince as a Villainous Name.

Cordelia declined both.

Though she likely would have ended up taking Above's offer to become a Hero, the Warden of the West if Hanno had arrived even slightly later than he did, and Below never would have gotten to make an offer.

NerfContessa

And she is thrice as impressive as before now.

Now truly, power wise it went poorly and it might lead to her loss, but she went from quite to I credibly impressive will and chuzpe wise.

Liliet

Agreed. Bard's influence is omnipresent but *very weak*. She basically cannot do anything other than talk.

ninegardens

I kind of want to play some sort of multiplayer board/card game where one of the players has this: no one can get rid of them, they can act almost anywhere they like.... but all their actions are super minor...

Meanwhile there are other players who can easily run around breaking things... BUT when they fall, they fall HARD.

Decius

A hidden information game where one player has access to all the information, including the content of other players'

discussions, and can privately talk to any other player, but has secret goals of their own and no ability to act, nor any ability to prove that they aren't lying.

Other players would have more limited knowledge, but would also be able to prove things about their goals for some kind of cost, and also to do things themselves.

Theo Promes

sounds like a great game of D&D you are describing 😊

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Sounds like a campaign that would work despite the focus and rules of D&D, rather than utilizing them.

Jacob McNeer

win despite the rules, not because of them.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

If you can play a different game and win by its rules, you'll usually have a better time. Not always an option when the games are metaphorical, but D&D is not a metaphorical game.

[shieldredblog](#)

The chat with Black and Cat are just presumed losses. We really don't have a clear enough picture of what the Bard wanted to declare victory for anyone.

superlad64

It's pretty heavily implied that this rate of failure is incredibly rare for her, I think. Until very very recently Good and Evil have boiled down to Bard and Dead King and that's shaped the continent with few exceptions.

First comes the Black Knight who only really became an effective actor against her after he lost his name, and Cat, who is now the quintessential story-aware nameless power-that-be in the midst of a mostly-nameless band of enlightened hooligans.

Now we've just added Augur Agnes and her principled, if sometimes misguided, hard-ass nameless sister Cordelia to the pot as additional competitors to the old hegemony and things are looking real damn bad for the Bard and Dead King both, not to mention the Above and Below.

Of the mortal countries, the leaders of 4 (Cat+Cat for 2, Cordelia, and the Pilgrim) are now either directly working against the old ways or morally obliged to by the Accords as they awake to the true threat that has kept the continent back

for so long. Add this to at least one Choir semi-defecting in their 'breaking the rules' to trust Cat to help the Pilgrim resurrect and the Fae Courts imploding and you're basically talking total ruination.

In summary, my take is that in the game of Chess (or Shatranj), the Bard and Dead King only lose to each-other and no-one else, but they now have a small army of people trained in the secret art of flipping over the goddamn table whenever they try to play.

stevenneiman

Actually, the record is better than that. The only times she's actually lost worse than no game are now, the Heirarch (which we honestly can't be sure was a loss), and the Dead King, assuming that what he got actually was both true and as complete as he needs it to be. Which I highly doubt, because that was an uncharacteristically stupid move otherwise, taking such meaningful risks just because she had a good chance of dealing a minor wound that won't heal.

First Liesse was at worst Cat deflecting a thrown knife, and at best Bard deliberately pushing Cat towards her current status as someone likely to pose a threat to the Dead King.

She threw a fit here, but I'm honestly not sure if she lost anything worse than not gaining the Named Warden of the West. And frankly I don't see why that's such a big deal. Leader Named are powerful, but they aren't all-powerful, especially when they're new to the role. And let's be honest, Cordelia has a shit understanding of stories, to the point she'd be more of a liability than an asset. Never mind that the best person to mentor her has an axe to grind with the Bard, and also a reason to see Cordelia abandon her Name since she's the best leader for the Principate.

ninegardens

First liesse is a minor loss because even if Cat just deflected a thrown knife (Will), net result is Bard being down one knife. No big deal, but still a loss.

Cordelia being blind to stories is an ASSET from Bard's point of view, as it makes her easier to steer. And if she became warden of the west she is HARDER for Cat to mentor, not easier.

Aside from that, yes- I agree. As I said- Bard's win rate isn't always great, but her "loss condition" is usually equivalent to "Oh well, that didn't work. Guess I'll try something else"

ICSM

I'd argue First Liesse was the biggest loss.

Not because it mattered, mind you, but because most other losses were bought about by the awareness of Bard's influence. And no one from Black's generation onward appeared to have known she existed before she entered Will's band.

Which raises the question, why did she personally participate in that band? Nobody having heard of her means she is usually much more indirect in her scheming and apparently for good reason. She is much better at her job when people aren't aware of her, and in first liesse she just waltzed into the limelight of a party and announced her existence to two generations of villains for literally no gain. Why?

She is scary because she will never go away and can always try again, but with how many times she has been thwarted, her competence is mostly an informed ability.

Albert Wen

She must have assumed the story was in the bag and bet that anyone aware of her involvement would soon be brainwashed by the Hashmallim.

Lurch

One of the common and key points with the Bard is that they can't interfere outside of Named affairs. All the while Cordelia isn't Named, the Bard is hamstrung in dealing with or using her. If she WAS Named though, the Bard can weigh in. So even if the exact situation isn't perfect, a Named ruler is more useful to the Bard than one who isn't. And a Named ruler of the nation that historically stands against the Dead King, and a nation unused to having a Named ruler, would be a powerful lever to use against him because of the stories involved, and the Bard works through stories. It's a big deal because they just swiped the rug out from under (some of) the Bard's plans and stopped them having another lever, not because of the individual power of a Named ruler.

I do love how this all left genre savvy a while ago, and is getting increasingly meta as time goes on. Using, then subverting, then outright avoiding the influence of stories to alter the path of things.

NerfGlastigUaine

Exactly, in most of those losses she doesn't really lose much. You can't even really say it's a loss, just an attempt that didn't work, and when she does win, even minor ones may have huge ripples. But as you said, Dead King is now in place and

that changes things. It's no longer just throwing rocks as she used to, this time the game is for keeps.

Also, you forgot Hierarch. First time in story Bard was blindsided.

IMO Bard is most terrifying b/c we don't know her game. Look at all those question marks in your post, even when she loses we're not always sure she's lost. No other character is as opaque and nothing is scarier. Also the idea of someone who can fuck you not with sword but with words and stories, b/c how do you prepare a defense against that? Cat's trying but even then it's not perfect, just an attempt at MAD.

Lily

It's my opinion that the loss against the Dead King was a true and massive loss.

The type of true and massive loss that begins a pattern of three.

““Good,” Marguerite smiled. “Then when he offers you a truce – and he will, that much is certain – do not put your weight behind accepting it.”” -Chapter 68: Apropos

This seems a concession to *not* let the Dead King end this with a draw that ends the pattern.

If they war against the Dead King, and reach an impasse where they can take a truce and walk away, that will likely come about from a draw of some sorts. The goal for Bard is to make sure that the battle doesn't stop there.

Making Cordelia the Warden of the West would have been a step towards that; putting a Good-Aligned Named on the throne would help immensely. Likewise, getting Catherine to make the above promise would help immensely.

We're seeing the Dead King be set up to die.

Bard is a little pissed because Cordelia having other priorities could fuck it all up.

(Notably, this relates to Catherine being “offered” the Fairfax sword. ““So this is how it goes,” I softly said. “I take up again the sword I lost in the Everdark, and bring war to the Crown of the Dead. It's an old story. Well-worn, and strong for it.”

King Edward had been taller than me, I thought, with broader shoulders as well. And yet, I suspected that if ripped that sword free from the earth it would fit my hand perfectly. Better than any other blade ever hand.” -Chapter 51: Twilight

Catherine, currently nameless, rejected a chance at being the hero of this story, so the Bard went for Cordelia.)

Big I

Let's hear it for the Augur, managing to con the Bard. Now that's impressive.

The White Knight is really screwed now, with Cordelia acknowledging the rule of law over the mandate of Heaven. That's essentially the Hierarch's position as well, and the Knight is responsible for unlawful killings in both the League and the Principate.

[Liliet](#)

Oh please. Hanno was acting on request from authorities in the League. Remember how he complied with Delos's bullshit bureaucracy, weirding Bard out?

And of course the Choir of Judgement LET Cordelia do this. Interfering with a formulaic Aspect? They'd have burned her to crisp if they wanted. Instead she gets a brand of laurels...

Big I

It's deaths in Helike/of Helikean people he'll have to answer for, since the complaint against him came from the Tyrant. And in Procer he's been killing people left and right throughout this interlude, including that shop owner he "saved" from looters.

Decius

I think that he's going to be fine for his actions in the streets, since the rejection was based on the fact that there is nobody who can judge the highest assembly.

JJR

I noticed that too. Hell, being branded with the LAURELS, that is hella (except it's angels so heva?) symbolic.

Andrew Mitchell

"heva" ♥ it!

NerfGlastigUaine

Cordelia establishes law > Gods. Hierarch establishes law ON Gods. Important distinction.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Both put the laws of man above the alleged omni-importance of the gods. Same mindset, one is just more explicit than the other.

And given how flawed the gods of this world are, I'd say they deserve to be judged by their mortal creations.

NerfGlastigUaine

No, one is "stay out of my business" and the other is "I'm gonna make you bitches kneel" I'm not saying the Gods don't deserve it, but the latter is not conducive to one's continued existence

beleester

I'm a little uncertain as to what the Augur actually *did.* The implication seems to be that she made the White Knight arrive sooner than he "should have", giving Cordelia the option of doing something besides taking a Name. But the Augur is being kept in isolation, so what could she have done to get Hanno there earlier?

Did she just call up the Bard and keep her talking, so that she wouldn't be able to intervene and stop the White Knight from showing up? Did she win by *getting the Bard to monologue?*

quite possibly a cat

Well, isn't the Bard a Villain? She has a Name, and she isn't a Hero, so....

[Liliet](#)

Bard is BOTH a vllain and a hero.

It's complicated, okay?! – Bard

JJR

Ever since hearing she was the Intercessor and played for both sides I've wondered if she has 6 aspects.

Andrew Mitchell

Shit, that's a good thought... Not that she's got six, but has she got ANY?!? We haven't seen her use any on screen. All she's been able to do is arrive at the right time and place, and talk.

Bard has no aspects; 98%. Therefore she's not a real Named but something else.

goliath1303

Ok not sure about any other instances of then showing up, but she for sure has ***Wander*** as an Aspect. It was only used in screen the one time way back in book 1,

but it definitely was used. I very well may have made this up as head cannon, but I seem to remember it being explained in text as the ability that causes/allows her to appear wherever she's supposed to be. I also believe that it's "where she's supposed to be" in a narrative sense, not where the Gods want her to be or she wants to be in her Role as Intercesor. I also don't think that it has any relevance to her death avoidance disappearing act, despite the obvious similarities there. I'm almost 100% sure that this next bit is head cannon and not started in the story, but I'm pretty sure that she wasn't just created out of whole cloth or designated as the intermediary between mortals and Gods right away. I think she WAS a hero (or potentially Neutral like Archer and Ranger) but due to something that happened in her original mortal life that she felt the need to seek revenge for, she accepted an offer from Above & Below to become what she is today.

So if I had to guess, I would say agree probably only has 3 Aspects just like every other Named and they're the 3 age had when she got the Name Wandering Bard. They very well could have changed & adapted after she assumed the Role of Intercessora though. For example, the Aspect that I mentioned above ***Wander*** probably didn't make her go Nowhere until she was needed and/or relevant. I would think it worked in a way now akin to Hakram's ***Find*** and just at hey on a path that would take her where she needed to go or led her to whatever she might be looking for at the time. Now it takes her to places that the Narrative needs her to intercede to keep it on track and when she's not needed it sends her Nowhere to wait until the next intercession is required instead.

Insanenoodlyguy

Well there's theories about exactly what she did or didn't do, the parts we are sure of are as follows.

1. Let this coup happen in a way that got White Knights attention and have him head towards Cordelia.
2. Before Cordelia could take her name, have Hanno arrive, giving her other options than Name, retreat and die.
3. Summon and then keep the Bard around and distracted long enough that she didn't see the timing was off and step in herself to get it back on track.

beleester

I'm not asking about the *what*, I'm asking about the *how.* The Silver Letters were keeping the Augur captive and out of contact with anyone. That was the entire reason the coup could happen in the first place – because Balthazar (with

Black's help) realized that an oracle's warning doesn't matter if nobody hears it. So how could the Augur control when the coup happened, or when the White Knight arrived?

Liliet

My guess? Threefold:

1) White Knight was going to Salia on Cordelia's invitation. Since there doesn't seem to be an obvious reason why she'd do it, the answer is likely "Augur told her to". So the timing of that is strike 1.

2) Augur obviously knew about the coup in advance, but didn't tell Cordelia. Oh she was prevented from warning her the day of, but Bard would have told her earlier, and that's assuming the whole scheme with keeping the coup from her that Black came up with worked in the first place. Academic exercise indeed; that's strike 2.

3) Bard normally micromanages timing of her time-sensitive schemes. Stalling the fight in Summerholm, delaying Black&Warlock in Arcadia at Marchford, making Pilgrim wait 3 seconds at Third Llesse. If Augur had not summoned her and distracted her with conversation, she would likely have been in the palace making sure Hanno does not arrive earlier than she wants. And that's strike 3.

No, Agnes does not do much. But oracular powers mean she knows *exactly* what to do and not do to achieve the desired result.

Shequi

In my view the Augur's spoiler factor was Simon; remember how he wasn't "expected" by the Witch, but the White Knight was willing to believe that he was there for a reason?

Well, that Reason was the Augur's manipulation. Which is why it succeeded; as an ordinary mortal, Simon is invisible to the Wandering Bard

ninegardens

I really love this theory... but how did Agnes get Simon involved?

quite possibly a cat

I still think the Hole-Filled should have done their judgement by hitting Cordelia with a bucket of Light. Either she's melted (proof she's Evil) or she's healed up (proof she's not). No chance of backfire.

Insanenoodlyguy

It doesn't work that way. once you use holy power to cast sacred flame, it does radiant damage when it hits something. A holy shield can probably block it fairly well, but outside of named shit once it's in the world it's going to burn whatever it touches, good or evil or benign object.

[shieldredblog](#)

Also they aren't Lanterns. Only the warrior priests of Levantine have been confirmed as having light based pyromancy.

Your basic priest takes oaths not to harm others, to heal and protect. It's why the whole 'holy slaughter cages' made of light from the battle of the camps upset so many people.

konstantinvoncarstein

Only Lanterns were confirmed to be able to use holy fire to kill living beings. At the Camps, the Proceran priests used the fences, not holy fire.

And concerning the burning effect of pure Light, it burns only devils and undead, not an "evil people", a term highly subjective.

Tenthyr

Its mildly horrifying, that tidbit Auger just dropped: The Bard literally knows ALL stories, every single one. I suppose that's one of her Aspects, if she even has aspects.

But fuck YES Agnes, saving your cousins freedom to choose.

And FUCK YES Cordelia for just becoming my second favourite character in this story.

[Mental Mouse](#)

But does Bard know the stories that *haven't been written yet*? Cat's been breaking new ground almost since the beginning, and Auger and Cordelia have joined the game.

Decius

ALL the stories.

Including the ones that will NEVER be written.

JJR

Does this include all the Shaggy Dog stories?

If so count me as being one the people who thinks she wants to just die already.

David Lynch

I like how we've transitioned throughout this story from "awesome moments of discovering a Name" to "awesome moments of refusing a Name". 😊

Thanatoss

Best parts of this story are not epic battles between gods, but big changes made by fairly normal people. I love it. This chapter was just as or not more fun than dropping LAKE in Battle of Camps. Hell Yeah!

ChillyPepper

So, the birds are Named? If so, who is this Owl that told the secret?

caoimhinh

A Tribunal of Owls.

They are scary fuckers, even gave a hard time to Batman.

ChillyPepper

I actually meant that certain Named appear as bird codenames to Augur, despite the poor phrasing from before. 😊

ChillyPepper

For example, the bird of misfortune is the bard, the distant bird between lone sentinel and weeping man sounds like the grey pilgrim (unlikely but it is an example. And there is the owl.

Cat would be a magpie in such an analogy lol.

Dotraj

That strikes a memory. I have no proof, but I think *someone* has called Cat a magpie before. Maybe Augur? I don't know.

ChillyPepper

I don't remember such an event, but my memory ain't that great. If it is the case, then we have been given a big chunk of speculation right there.

Point

I suspect that the owls are one of the Choirs, based on this passage:

“Solemn fingers in three, the mark of the Tribunal. Not the owls, though also with wings. The White Knight was near”

It feels a bit like she might be describing the presence of the Seraphim—“the Tribunal” seems like reasonable seer-speak for the Choir of Judgement. If that is assumed, then “also with wings” indicates that the owls might also be angels (perhaps something like the Choir of Honesty, if they’re bad with secrets).

The weakest point in this theory is that Judgement is associated with the number six, not three.

[HappyNap](#)

This is, without a doubt, the greatest chapter to come out of APGTE – the ups, the downs, the interplay between named, the scheming and plotting and the resolution; this is the kind of writing I’m screaming silently about, I’m raving mad for.

Keep it up!

[HappyNap](#)

Edit: “To come out of APGTE in a while” – I’m not gonna argue that this is the greatest chapter of all time (theres been a plathora of reeeeeally great chapters), but daumn this is a satisfying conclusion to an arc

[sivarajan](#)

“[K]ings and monsters and all the gods that stride this earth” sounds a lot like “gods or kings or all the armies in Creation.”

DoOd

Wonder if Cat will view Bard trying to setup a Named ruler in Procer as acting against the Liesse Accords

[Mental Mouse](#)

Bard was never going to be a signatory to the Accords, and Cat’s already gone all GFY on her anyway.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

However, Cat’s tied her behavior to Grey Pilgrim. If the Wandering Bard acts against the Accords, it reflects badly on Pilgrim.

Not sure how much that matters since the Accords haven’t been signed yet, but eh.

Mental Mouse

Hmm. Cat might just snicker, given how Bard got her figurative head handed to her... to Cat's long-term advantage.

Also, I hope Cat (and perhaps Masego) gets a chance to chat with Augur sometime.

usernamesbco

Could be interpreted as Bard trying to bypass that by interfering before Cat and Pilgrim got there.

"Whoops, so sorry, Cordelia got a Name and can't/won't sign the Accords. Can't abdicate in the middle of a war, you know."

Then Agnes got one over on Bard, because Agnes is awesome and best oracle cousin ever. Still not clear on how she did that, though. Now it just needs to come out that Bard was deliberately sabotaging GP and the Accords.

greatwyrmgold

Depends on if anyone who knows that she tried to do that tells Cat.

Lord_GM

Okay, someone please explain to me what is going on in that garden. Does the dialogue between Augur and Bard actually have any meaning or is it just the Augur stalling for time and distracting the Bard while desperately trying to keep her mind in the here-and-now?

To me that entire exchange of words doesn't even qualify as dialogue because that would require that they somehow refer to whatever the other said, but all I see are two monologues about the six items from the Verse, bargains with fey, ancient cultures that might or might not have been what later became Procer and the Dead Kingdom. I fail to see the connections!

Mental Mouse

This was conversation as story-battle. The Augur bound Bard long enough for her own plans to play out, while making clear that yes that was on purpose, and GFY too.

Brigsby

Auger caught her with the classic blunder of monologues. It was subtle too, if you read again, notice how it doesn't ever really feel like a monologue until the bit where Auger sensed danger, I think that was when the Bard almost noticed she was

talking, and talking totally distracted from the task of micromanaging timing, as she usually does in her schemes.

ICSM

An ancient civilization called Mavii used to summon and bind Fae through voluntary human sacrifice. At first for peaceful reason, but before the end to use them in battle as commanders against arlesites. They lost, it works.

Augur is speaking to Bard about the technique they used to bind them. She lured Bard by starting to perform it, and then kept babbling about the specifics.

Augur was pretending intent to summon Fae to help her cousin. This would kill her. Bard went there to influence the Augur into suicide to save her cousin. The augur knew all about it. She had already somehow arranged for the WK to reach earlier than intended and kept the Bard occupied. Bard only noticed when the story started to change.

There is also a whole lot about the nature of the Seers and a few bits about what Bard's powers are.

Liliet

>Augur was pretending intent to summon Fae to help her cousin. This would kill her. Bard went there to influence the Augur into suicide to save her cousin.

This is most definitely *not* what happened.

I mean, to summon a fae in that manner, you need, like, someone actually hanging (rope-slain). No such thing was present, it was all abstract/metaphorical.

maxwell wearing

Agreed. The way I interpreted it, the fey summoning ritual was a metaphor for the way by which the Bard intended to Name Cordelia but also the way by which Agnes tricked the Bard.

Iron to bind and rope to kill: the rebellion, binding Cordelia's actions and killing people (admittedly with fire not rope). The initial summoning of the Bard to Agnes

candle to blind and harp to still: Cordelia's dance in the Highest Assembly distracting and detoothing the rebellion. Agnes' distraction and delay of the Bard, preventing until noticing the plot twist until too late.

bone to wind and mirror to fill: Bard thinks she has the bone of Cordelia and that she will now be named, but Agnes has the bone of her, deflecting her intentions easily.

—

Its not a perfect fit, but thats what I got. Thoughts?

ByVectron!

Cumberbatch Haystack knew about the Accords, so she may have been purposely refusing a Name in order to ensure she could remain a ruler. Clever girl.

[Mental Mouse](#)

She would have been a ruler regardless – as Amadeus pointed out, the Accords still had to get through negotiations. Demanding that another ruler abdicate as the price of treaty would be a no-sell for basically any ruler *except* Cat, who's a power in her own right. And note that last time she offered abdication, she was facing bad-faith negotiations which sank the deal.

olddiggy

I... caught up? Hell I didn't even know this wasn't finished. I came here before reading a crossover fic with Worm so I'd have context and it's been a hell of a ride. Certainly much longer than I anticipated and it's still going. Outside of some Interludes that had me glaze-eyed and mostly skimming, I loved reading this story and can't wait for more.

konstantinvoncarstein

Welcome to the club! 😊

[greatwyrmgold](#)

What crossover fic?

Lucario2012

Probably "A Practical Guide to Escalation", if I had to guess. That's where I got into this from.

olddiggy

A Practical Guide to Escalation on Spacebattles. It was good but didn't really hold my interest.

One shockingly good one I found was A Wand for Skitter on Fanfiction, a Harry Potter/Worm one.

Didn't hold high expectations for it since most HP X-over fics fall flat, but most put Harry into other worlds and make him a Gary Stu instead of bringing the Protag (Taylor) from

another world to Hogwarts like this one.

I'd warn you it gets dark but seeing as you read this and ... well Worm is Worm, I don't think I need to warn anyone.

'Ladi Williams

You really shouldn't skip the interludes...yeah some of them can be dull compared to the main storyline where Cat is but those interludes without fail give background info that let's you know what's going on in the story and the world at large that Cat isn't privy to... Go back and read them all.

That said. Welcome to the club. 🙌

olddiggy

Don't worry, I didn't skip any of the Interludes. If there's one thing I've learned to do over the years, it's to read just enough of a chapter/interlude/section for me to get the gist of it regardless of how glaze-eyed it makes me. I don't normally do it, but most stories have at least one part I just can't read without doing so. I'm suprisingly adept at picking out important details when I skim through bits I find boring (typically ones that just seem to go on forever without adding anything). I have no problem with SoL or character development scenes.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Congratulations and condolences. 😊 You've joined the forward wave as the story moves toward the end of this book; I'm guessing that Book V will wrap with the signing of the Accords, leaving the final fight against the Dead King (and possibly the Wandering Bard) for Book VI.

Amen to other comments that the Interludes are well worth the trouble; basically, an Interlude is any chapter not centered around Our Ambiguous Protagonist. If you missed the "extra chapters" (which don't appear in the main Table Of Contents), then you should read those too – they provide a great deal of background for the various characters, including origin stories for most of the front-row players. Offhand, the ones who still lack origin stories (and aren't already dead anyhow) are all folks with a "mysterious" tag: Witch of the Woods, Rogue Sorcerer, Scribe and Assassin, and the Wandering Bard herself.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not really a spoiler: In the year since my prior comment, Rogue Sorcerer has traded his "mysterious" tag for an origin story (and it's a doozy).

[Mental Mouse](#)

A thought: One of the Bard's primary tactics, one that shows up almost every time she opens her mouth, is "concern trolling", that is to say trying to trick her opponent out of a winning position. That is indeed a powerful tactic for manipulation... but more and more players seem to be No-Selling it, specifically as they reject the verdicts and directives of Fate.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Probably doesn't help that most of the top players are becoming more and more aware of the Bard's existence, abilities, and nature.

burguulkodar

Chapters like this remind me why this novel is #1 among all my other novels and texts.

It is deep, compelling, extremely well-written, and each chapter is fulfilling instead of short and word-counted. Each chapter closes well in itself, consisting in beginning, middle and ending even when they are linked to a larger story.

My kudos to you, Author. You deserve my praise, the likes of which is rarely given.

snowy

I rather suspect that in a hundred years, when all goes to the Bard's plan (if it does, though this wouldn't really be a story if it does) that tales of the Bard will be buried under the deepest rocks for the likes of men like Black and Pilgrim to discover in their age long quests and for ancient monsters like DK to quietly nurse as all else in Creation quietly fall into the rhythm of the story.

crescentsickle

"What a pair we are," Catherine gestured between them. "A couple of cripple normies trying to keep the lid on gaggles of people with too much power and not enough sense."

Cordelia gave a slight chuckle, still surveying the amassed armies making camp in the fields, and then gave a sigh. "You were right, Catherine. I apologize."

Catherine looked up to Cordelia's face in surprise, trying to suss out the deeper meaning behind the statement but finding none. "... that might be the first time I've ever heard that, without strings attached."

"Might have something to do with the company you keep," Cordelia replied with a rare hint of snark and a slight smile before her

weariness weighed down once more and washed her expression from her face.

Catharine turned back to observe her forces arrayed on the plains, leaning heavily on her staff. "What happened, Hasenbach?"

Cordelia was silent for a moment, before she replied in quiet tones. "I felt it. Felt them both. The mantle of the Chosen, mine for the taking... but also the madness it would impose. The same for the mantle of a Damned. I've come to realize that 'Named' is ever a better term, for they are one in the same."

"Madness?" Catherine asked after a pause, contemplating her counterpart's words.

"Stories. Named don't just live out stories, Catherine, nor do they flow from one to the next. Stories are *imposed* on them, as if the currents of the world would hold their puppet-strings. The Warden of the West, who would brook no trespass of evil in her domain. The First Prince, who would garner loyalty in the hearts of her fellow man and strike the taint perverting her realm." Cordelia banged her fist once against the parapet in sudden outrage that had Catherine step back and to the side to look at her directly.

"This world shouldn't be the damned playground of the gods, of angels and devils, or of their *slaves*. This world is ours to live in, and it is a grave injustice that we mortals must suffer the consequences for the petty squabbles of tyrants beyond our ken."

Silence persisted for a moment as Catherine stared dumbfounded before coughing to the side and adjusting her collar with her free hand. She finally managed to clear her throat after a couple unsuccessful attempts. "The Accords, then?"

Cordelia nodded before turning to finally face Catherine directly. "Yes. There'll need to be *some* changes, but yes. We need them, and quickly – who knows when the next true attempt will be. I imagine both Above and Below will do everything they can to thwart them, though. It will be a struggle the likes of which few throughout history may have ever seen."

Catherine barked out a laugh at that before donning a savage grin and holding out her free hand. "They'll have to get through us first, and they've already tried and failed a score or two."

Cordelia's smirk finally returned as she reach out and grasped the offer hand and shook. "I wonder what the title of the histories will be. The First Prince and The Black Queen? Hasenbach and Foundling?"

"Catherine and Cordelia: To Suffer No Fool."

"*Cordelia* and Catherine."

"Ah, ah, ah, alphabetical order takes precedence!"

– Excerpt from 'To Struggle But Never Falter, The Histories of C&C', author unknown

Andrew Mitchell

♥ ♥ ♥

kp9999

My new crazy theory: We, the readers, are the Bard. We keep trying to force characters into grooves. We influence the author through our feedback and guesses, but our feedback is always a rehash of other stories that we love.

This story is the Bard trying to force the narratives of the past into this story, while the story is trying to break free of that and make something new.

That is why I like this story so much. I keep trying to put a frame around the story, and it keeps breaking out of the frame.

Wangrin

Awesome arc so far. Most of the implications like Cordelia's dual refusal of a name and Agnes' fake ritual have only become apparent to me through comments of other readers. What I'm trying to say is: dear author, you are obviously very smart and possess enormous control over your created world, but, please let us readers grasp implications like this more easily. All those interrupted sentences or half statements by characters that allude to deeper implications are extremely frustrating. You try to build up effect and drama but you lose most readers this way. We read this story not knowing what you know and often with longer pauses in between. Have some pity and let us know what we should. Some of your brilliance gets lost otherwise.

'Ladi Williams

In effect, EE should dumb down the novel.
Nah.

Lord_GM

I agree. I struggle as well and had to read the comments. And this is not the first time I had to ask what the heck is actually going on. This chapter and the not-a-dialogue between Bard and Augur is especially bad. There are four levels of communication going on, as far as I can tell.

1. What is actually said out loud. But they are jumping from topic to topic, use incomplete sentences and so many pronouns I have trouble connecting to the correct noun that this doesn't

make much sense to me.

2. The implications. Someone mentioned in the comments that Augur is starting a ritual to bind fey that would require her to sacrifice herself. Not only do I seem to have missed all the clues for that, I fail to see the reasoning that would lead Augur to such a drastic act.

3. The name level and the visions: Augur continues to see signs throughout the conversation. But we are only told the signs themselves and maybe a hint of what they might mean. But it is up to the reader to connect them to the current situation. Again something I struggle with.

4. The bigger picture: How this all connects to events outside this particular scene. It is implied that White Knight's appearance was planned. But from whom? Who has sent the invitation? Why is WK in the city (which could be unrelated)? And what did Augur do to make him appear ahead of schedule?

I can only write from my perspective, but I am sure I am not the only person struggling with the subtleties of PGTE.

In the last chapter the conversation between the spymaster and Scribe was great. It confirmed suspicions I already had, so I could feel clever, and informed me of things I have missed so I was brought up to speed and could continue the story.

[Liliet](#)

But it's so much fun to put the pieces together manually!

Andrew Mitchell

Note my comment to OP below. I wrote them for you as well as Wangrin.

Andrew Mitchell

I too know the feeling, occasionally with PGtE and sometimes with other novels as well. I too, felt a bit lost the first time I read the interactions between the Augur and the Bard. And the second time I read it too. 😊

Some introductory points about reading comprehension. I apologise if these are already known/obvious to you:

- People have an extremely wide range of reading comprehension levels, all the way from to functionally illiterate.
- So any piece of writing will, to some readers, be too basic and uninteresting to be enjoyable and, at the same time, be too difficult and incomprehensible to other readers.
- Authors literally **cannot suit everyone**.
- Successful authors have to consciously choose what level they're aiming at before they start to write. And, if it's a series of novels, originally meant for a teenage audience, perhaps increase the reading comprehension level of later

novels. Harry Potter is an example.

– Many, perhaps all, readers feel successful after they have struggled with a chapter and managed to understand it (or most of it). Struggle and achievement is part of everyone's journey to be a better reader. Part of this journey from struggle to comprehension is facilitated by re-reading the challenging parts, as I did with this chapter.

With all that in mind, my view is that Erratic Errata has got the balance right with PGtE.

– Based on the comments, EE's writing satisfies many readers. By this I mean that they enjoy most chapters and look forward to reading more.

– Similarly, some high proportion of readers seem to be challenged by some chapters. And, by themselves, or with the help of other commenters, they extract more meaning and feel successful in that.

– The level of reading comprehension has been slowly increasing book by book. Which is quite appropriate given the series is (I believe) pitched at young adults.

One final thought: Authors often / sometimes (?) don't have one specific interpretation in mind. They want to facilitate readers to create their own meaning, and some authors even say that every interpretation is as valid as any other. This is evident in PGtE in the repeated explorations of the bet between Above and Below and how it is playing out in Calernia; and the diversity of views about this that are seen in the comments.

Lord_GM

I will try not to interpret your post as a diplomatically phrased: "Piss of, if you are too dumb to understand this!"

Reading the scene with Agnes and Bard had me feel like Masego during that conversation with the two Praesi highborn at the party in Thalassina, you remember? The ones he incinerated on the spot for insulting the Woe? Like him I understand the words, but not the meaning, because context is missing.

Actually I think I have it worse because sometimes even the words make no sense due to typos, bad grammar, 'colorful speech' and *imprecise* use of pronouns.

So maybe it would be more correct to say I feel like Masego at that party with the two Praesi speaking with a heavy accent.

And then there is the thing with the Agnes' distracting visions...

...Masego at the party with the two Praesi speaking with heavy accents and on drugs, so it's not even sure they are talking to him or a figment behind him!

Re-reading the chapter won't do much against the 'accent' or the figment effect.

Mental Mouse

> had me feel like Masego during that conversation with the two Praesi highborn

I think that's kinda the point! (I'll also note that Masego's response was pretty much *correct* for his society – Praesi who try to play “mean girl”, or even eavesdrop, on someone vastly more powerful than them... shouldn't really expect to survive the experience.)

Every writer of fantasy (and most of SF) eventually has to deal with the case of writing at least *interactions* with a character who is *meant* to have intelligence, insight, knowledge, biology, or other features that are simply beyond human comprehension. EE has mostly skated around such situations; for example, we haven't had POV from any angels, demons, or even post-apotheosis gods.

Some of the conversations and rare POVs with the Dead King come close, but it turns out he's not quite as special as he thinks. The Wandering Bard comes close, but she's usually trying to show a human face, and when it's Cat she's talking to, Cat generally explains afterwards what happened.

But Wandering Bard versus Augur? There we had two characters whose view of the world, and their understanding of its deeper currents, are frankly superhuman, and they had no need to explain themselves to any passing mortals. In that situation, I'd say a half-incomprehensible dialogue is very much to be expected.

Mental Mouse

I correct myself: We have had POV from Cat while she was technically a god, but she'd never really bought into that, and was still thinking mostly as a human. But POV from DK has still been pretty limited.

Andrew Mitchell

> I will try not to interpret your post as a diplomatically phrased: “Piss of, if you are too dumb to understand this!”

Good, because that interpretation would be wrong. I was trying to my best to be helpful and I didn't want to miscommunicate by making assumptions about what you already knew.

Wangrin

I am happy that my feelings have created some resonance. I felt like i was the only stupid guy who does not get the

obscure references. I am not a native speaker (though i am as close as it gets) and i assumed that some of the riddles get lost on me due to language intuition. I understand that bard and agnes are characters who deserve quite a bit of obscurity, but i think cordelias ascent to namehood did not. That being said, were this just another page in a finished story, i would not bother to stop and try and understand any of it. It would simply irritate me and estrange me from the story. I think EE has every right to write his story any way he wants, but were this a printed book he would need to have it appeal to a broader audience. Not just because people are stupid, but because it interrupts the formation of a red thread somewhat. If the challenge to connect the dots is too broad, you will invariably lose people on the way. One problem for me is also that i dont trust my own interpretations very much. Not that they would be correct most of the time.

jack

Reminds me of Monty Python.

"Strange women lyin in ponds distributing swords, is no basis for a system of government!"

"Supreme executive power derives from a mandate of the masses, not some farcical aquatic ceremony."

Granted, the 'divine mandate to rule' in this setting has a lot more weight behind it, but I loved seeing a character who's actual response is 'No, that's not how we do things here. We already have a system of government and we don't accept being ruled over by divinely chosen champions. We vote.

[*aran*](#)

Wonder what the Name she just refused would've been – something that was already a title, like First Prince / Warden of the West, or something else?

emthe4th

This feels like both Below's botched attempt to stop the Liesse Accords by burning Salia in goblinfire, and then Above's attempt to sway Procer away from being willing to sign the Accords.

Chapter 72: Rumours

"Reputation is as a wild horse; gone at a gallop and returned at a trot."

– Arlesite saying

"Tell me what you've learned," I ordered.

The small town they envoys of the First Prince had led us to was called Roque-Faillie, and though it was not particularly pretty or luxurious it *did* have the benefit of being mostly empty. Apparently during winter most of the countryside around Salia went empty with the seasonal labourers or farms and fields the locals called *manants* migrating into the capital with whatever coin they'd saved up. The Callowan in me balked at the notion that good honest farmers could be effectively forced by poverty to take refuge in a large city, but Hakram had noted it was a little more complicated than that. Unlike my own people, who tended to leave the family home and strike out on their own unless they were in line to inherit property or trade, Alamans apparently tended to form in closely-knit clans of kin that bought property belonging to the family itself and not individuals. The young and fit worked fields during the warm seasons, the returned to the family's house or houses in Salia with that wealth once winter rolled in. It was all very communal, and rather strange to my own sensibilities. Still, practically speaking it meant that there'd been a large string of mostly empty towns and villages within a day's march of the capital where all the many envoys and armies could be settled.

According to my scouting lines – and Robber, who I'd let loose to skulk with for sole instruction not to start a diplomatic incident that wasn't fairly deniable – and the chatter amongst us diplomats, settling my men in Roque-Faillie meant I was between the League's town and the Dominion's. Amusingly enough they'd put General Rumena and its drow past the Dominion, possibly in an attempt to separate them from the rest of my delegation. Considering most of the Firstborn were prompt to violence and spoke not a whit of Chantant, I suspected anyone trying to negotiate with them on the sly would have ended up having a rough time even if I'd not been the First Under the Night. Still, Heavens take pity on whatever poor fucker Hasenbach would send to probe the intentions of the drow before it came to negotiation. Princess Rozala had garrisoned her larger army in between us and the capital, though she'd had to split them into three smaller forces in different towns. Not that her soldiers would complain much, I imagined. Much like mine, after so many months of campaigning they'd find sleeping in an actual bed surrounded by actual walls to be the height of luxury. Worryingly, though, Malanza had promptly vanished into the city. So had the Grey Pilgrim, my watchers told me.

At a guess, it might relate to the fact that someone had set the damned capital on fire since we'd last spoken with the First Prince. The smoke was lingering over a large chunk of Salia, visible even from miles away, and if the capital of Procer was anything like Laure an uncomfortably large amount of it must have been made of wood. Probably even more, I grimly guessed. Salia was said to be the largest city on Calernia, large than even Ater which boasted around five hundred thousand souls. You couldn't house that many people in stone: no empire in Creation was so extravagantly rich. Whatever it was that'd happened, though, I needed to know of it. If I was about to be blamed for yet another fucking fire I'd not started, best I know of it before I ended up accused before Gods and men. Thankfully, we'd had Jacks in the city and Vivienne had been very far from idle these last few weeks. There was a reason I'd seen so little of her.

"There was an attempted coup," Vivienne Dartwick bluntly said.

For all that these days she was Lady Dartwick in more than an honorary sense, as my heiress-designate to the throne of Callow, she was still the head of the Jacks. I was genuinely unsure if the Fairfaxes had kept spies of their own before the Conquest, though I assumed they must have. If there'd been such a web of informants Black had long destroyed or suborned it, which meant we'd had to start very much from scratch. As a result, though the quality of the reports of the Jacks was fairly solid the eclectic nature of the organisations they'd been put together from meant there were some glaring blind spots in our tradecraft and that our people were usually very much outmatched by the spies of other nations. Not least, I'd admit, for what was likely the same reason the Fairfaxes had not had a reputation for being particularly well-informed: spies were *expensive*. Even without getting into bribes and hirelings, just keeping the Jacks fed and clothes and paid was painfully costly. If trade with Praes and Procer didn't pick up after the wars came to an end, we might have to disband parts of the Jacks simply because we couldn't afford to keep such a sprawling array of agents.

For now, though, dwarven gold would prop us up. It'd certainly opened more than a few doors in Salia that would otherwise have been closed to us, not to mention loosened a few tongues. East or west, everyone liked to make a little coin on the side.

"Fuck," I eloquently said.

This was an informal council, without even the full roster of the Woe – Masego had gone to speak with the Rogue Sorcerer and Archer had mentioned she was, Sisters bless, 'just going for a walk' – though in truth all those with an interest or proper role in the proceedings were there. Vivienne as my heiress and the head of the Jacks, Hakram as my right hand and Akua as, well, Akua Sahelian. Whether that was a good or terrible thing had wildly

carried depending on the time and situation since I'd first met her, but at the very least she'd never been slow on the uptake.

"Pretty much," Vivienne agreed, brushing back a strand that'd slipped below her milkmaid braid. "City's boiling over with rumours and we don't have anyone anywhere close to the First Prince's inner circle, but we've gathered at least a little more than your average man in the street. For one, the House of Light and the Silver Letters were *heavily* involved."

The Silver Letters were one of the Principate's several informant networks – Merciless Gods, how much must it cost to run a solid network across even just the span of Procer, much less *three*? – and said to be in particular the one concerned with the affairs of Procer itself. The Circle of Thorns, the second, were charged with gathering secrets abroad. We'd caught a few of their people trying to get into my court and even the Regals before they'd been gelded, and most likely missed a few more. The Eyes of the Empire had continued to out them to me even after relations between Malicia and myself had cooled all the way to ice, though there was no telling of those had been the Tower's people or Scribe's. It was the third and last that was surprising me, though, because if the House had been part of the coup then they should have been as well.

"Not the Holy Society?" I asked. "I thought their whole mandate was keeping an eye on the House."

"Their nominal head, a certain Brother Simon de Gorgeault, was sought by parts of the city guard on charges of murder and heresy for some time before the First Prince crushed the coup," Vivienne replied. "It seems he was fooled but not complicit."

"As I recall the head of the Silver Letters was an interesting little man by the name of Balthazar Serigny," Akua said. "Unless that changed?"

She glanced at Vivienne, who had not hidden her dislike in the slightest but remained professional. My spymistress shook her head.

"Interesting how?" Hakram asked.

"As in 'the Eyes have been working on him for more than a decade'. I know not to what purpose, however," Akua said. "None of my mother's spies ever rose high enough in the ranks to be brought into the scheme, though the Lady Scribe would know."

Fuck, I thought, this time at least refraining from speaking it out loud. We couldn't be blamed for the bloody House of Light deciding now was the time to start a fourth Liturgical War, but if the Silver Letters were the fault of the Scribe then that put us in the deeps as well. Black was viciously loyal to those he

considered his own, at once both one of his best and worst traits. He likely wouldn't have agreed to throw her to the hounds even if she deserved it a few years ago, much less now that the Calamities had begun dropping like flies.

"That makes for spies and priests," Adjutant noted in his gravelling voice. "Which princes were involved? They would have needed a candidate to replace Hasenbach."

"It's not common knowledge yet, not in the streets, but apparently this was all in the name of Princess Rozala," Vivienne said.

Akua's fine eyebrow arched, as if to remind me she had predicted the possibility of strife between the First Prince and the first halfway-decent princess I'd ever met. It didn't fit, though, not to me. We'd discussed how the two rulers might skirmish through the Highest Assembly and debate over the Accords, but neither Akua nor Hakram had ever brought up a coup as a possibility. *Neither knew Cordelia had effectively stacked the Assembly in her favour, back then,* I then reminded myself. Even still, I had a hard time reconciling the same princess who'd been the first to toss her crown, the princess who'd plunged her sword in the earth and sworn oaths of gratitude, with someone who'd risk the madness that a coup in the narrow window where we had a truce with Keter might bring on us all. She would have to know that the Lycaonese would take it as a betrayal beyond forgiveness if the first First Prince of their people was deposed not even halfway through a war with the Hidden Horror.

"She left the for the capital not long after settling her soldiers," I said. "I don't suppose you know on what terms?"

"We have someone in Louis Rohanon's serving staff," Vivienne smiled. "She went livid, when it was intimated this was from her hand, and threatened something called the 'liar's leash' on anyone who'd repeat such slander. She left with hardly an escort, too."

"Don't suppose you know what this leash is?" I frowned.

My heiress shook her head.

"From context, it is likely to be unpleasant," the former thief said.

"It is an ancient Arlesite punishment for one who speaks calumny of a *real*," Akua conversationally provided. "A hook tied to a long line of twine is put through the tongue of the liar and tied to the tail of a horse, which the *real* then rides for a mile. If the liar survives the mile without the hook ripping through their tongue, the Gods Above have judged their lie to have been

accidental. Otherwise, what is left of their tongue is to be carved out and buried beneath the gate of the *real's* fortress."

Vivienne looked split between sharp irritation at being shown up on even such a slight detail and disgust as the old Arlesite ways of justice. Mind you Akua had said *real* and not prince, which was a telling detail: it meant it predated the founding of the Principate. Which for all its many, *many* flaws, was significantly less prone to elaborate executions than its predecessor-states. Mind you, I could cast no stones there without being a hypocrite. My people had indulged in some excruciatingly brutal ways of killing prove traitors, especially those who struck bargains with Praes. It'd been delightfully horrible to read about public drawing and quarterings, or even the rarer *red hangings* as a kid – I'd taken me year to realize the unlikeliness of books about the worst excesses of Callowan 'justice' being so easy to get your hands on, Black you prick – but as I aged I'd been left to wonder at the monstrosity of hurting even a traitor so carefully they could be hanged by their entrails. Even the Deoraithe had dabbled in impalement whenever the Clans made a run at the Wall, though their worst they'd always kept for whenever they got their hands on a Dread Emperor. I supposed I shouldn't be surprised Akua knew about this, given that the Praesi had quite literally written the definitive books on this, but why would she have cared about some Arlesite... oh.

"You looked into bits like that for all over, didn't you?" I said, reluctantly amused. "When you still believed you were going to conquer the whole continent."

Akua looked only mildly embarrassed.

"Attention to ironic detail is the difference between a Triumphant and a Nihilis," she defended.

Gods, I could not wait to pass that on to Indrani and see the utter mockery that would follow. That ought to be weeks' worth of entertainment right there, maybe even a full month if Robber was dragged into it. Adjutant cleared his throat, which I allowed without resistance to drag me back to the matters at hand. As amusing as that had been, we did have more pressing matters on our hands: like the fact that someone had torched part of Salia and that someone I must by extension answer for might have been involved. Hells, assuming I wasn't just blamed on general principle. Although, the commander of the legionaries I'd brought was General Abigail so who knew? Maybe this time she'd get the blame, regardless of involvement or general infeasibility. Fucking William, I couldn't believe people still thought I was responsible for Marchford. *Both times, too, thank you very much Chider.*

"Cordelia Hasenbach remains First Prince, however," Hakram half-asked.

Like me, he'd assumed that if she wasn't that news would have been the first thing spoken.

"She is," Vivienne confirmed. "She also came out of the mess smelling like roses with the Highest Assembly and highly popular in Salia itself. Rumour has it she prevented the summary execution of the conspirators so they could stand proper trial instead right after they tried to assassinate her. Which brings me to another important part."

She drew breath.

"Both the White Knight and the Witch of the Woods are in the city," she said, blue-grey eyes narrowing. "The White Knight was the one attempting to pass judgement on the conspirators, before Hasenbach interrupted him."

I leaned forward in my seat, feeling a mixture of surprise and respect ripple through the other two as well.

"She told the hatchet man of the Choir of Judgement to step out?" I said, and a heartbeat later my stomach sunk. "Shit. *Shit*."

"Catherine?" Vivienne asked, sounding surprise. "I thought you'd be pleased. It shows great adherence to principles in accord with, well, the Accords."

Hakram had been with me longest and was most familiar with my way of thinking. He got it first.

"It shows will and fearlessness, as well as strong belief," Adjutant said. "And it is a powerful story: we know what brew these are the ingredient for."

"Better than even odds she got a Name out of that," I cursed. "Can you really see the White Knight backing down otherwise?"

And that was an issue, because if Cordelia had come into a Name then the Wandering Bard could now reach her at will. Fresh off her transition she'd be flush with power and confidence, if hers was anything like mine, which would make her harder to influence in some ways and significantly easier in others. Especially if the Augur vouched for the Bard, which unfortunately seemed quite possible. Hasenbach wouldn't have years of history with the Intercessor, though, no ironclad trust. I could work with that if I moved quick enough, which it seemed I'd have to.

"That is the end of the notion of Named being excluded from ruling, I'd say," Akua calmly mused. "That clause is dead in the water, if First Prince is now more than a mere title."

Wouldn't be First Prince, I thought. Too weak a story, too many strings attached. A Name that could be made illegitimate by a

vote of the Highest Assembly, that had to be sanctioned by such a vote in the first place? No, it'd never form properly unless. It'd be something along one of the few lines the disparate peoples of Procer had in common belief. If not for the House of Light apparently being part of the conspiracy I would have bet on it being from holy scripture, but as things stood it'd probably drawn on a narrower stripe of commonality. The Fair Prince, maybe? Procer didn't really have any strong unifying stories, which made it difficult to predict. No point in guessing when I knew so little.

"We'll see," I grunted. "There's rule and then there's rule."

Wizards of the West had been the royal wizards of Callow for centuries and wielded both wealth and influence as well as their magic, but they'd not owned land and only rarely commanded armies. I might have to compromise on the degree of power Named were allowed in rulership, but simply flying a white flag over the matter wasn't in the cards.

"Rumours are split as to who is responsible for all this," Vivienne said. "You are prominent among them, Catherine, but both the Black Knight and the Dead King are preferred culprits. My people believe that the First Prince is actively encouraging the perception this was the work of the Hidden Horror, for both political and diplomatic reasons."

"She's discrediting the priests," Adjutant said, huffing out soft laughter. "They can't be holy men, if they were the pawns of the Dead King."

"Preparing for a purge, you think?" I asked. "She hangs the Holies and the House of Light in Procer is essentially leaderless. Given the times, the House might look to a hero or the Assembly for leadership until they've managed to name a fresh batch of replacements."

I cocked my head to the side. There weren't a lot of prominent priestly Named, at the moment. The Grey Pilgrim, arguably, but he was effectively Levantine royalty so it was doubtful Procerans would fall behind him. Roland was Alamans, but also a wizard, and what Proceran heroes were there aside from him? There'd been some knightly man at the Battle of the Camps, if he was still alive, and I vaguely remembered the Forsworn Healer working with Proceran priests on the shield trick that'd fucked us on the first day, but I knew next to nothing about that hero save for the obvious.

"The diplomatic benefits are obvious," Akua said. "If these Holies – ah, claiming for the silent Heavens, now there's a lovely swindle – were the pawns of Keter, then everything they have done in the last few years is suspect. Including naming you as Arch-heretic of the East."

"You sound a little sad," I accused.

"Oh, it'll be useful for negotiations," the shade said. "But such an epithet is quite prestigious in certain parts, you know."

"The benefits of a retraction with Calernia at large outweigh the prestige it gained her in Praes," Hakram said.

"I would not dare imply otherwise, Adjutant," Akua said, gracefully dipping her head.

"It'll cost them, though," Vivienne suddenly said. "It was a greater conclave that declared you Arch-heretic, not just the Procerans: the Speakers from Ashur and the Lanterns from the Dominion were also involved."

"If I'm reading the Pilgrim right, the Lanterns might actually be grateful for the excuse," I said. "They're having a hard time reconciling it with Mercy not smiting me to ash. Their only way out is saying I tricked the Ophanim, which no one wants to roll the dice one while they're here to disagree."

"She's still effectively saying that her priesthood alone, of all the western ones, was compromised by the Dead King before making it shoulder the whole blame for the nomination," Vivienne said. "It's a massive loss of face for the Proceran House, Cat."

"You believe the First Prince wants to revisit the balance of power set by the Liturgical Wars," Akua said, sounding surprised but also a tad intrigued. "Arguably, Cordelia Hasenbach has been scrupulously observant of the authority of the House of Light until now. Even when it was at her detriment."

"That was before they took a swing at her," I said. "And they've been at odds with her policies for some time, too. I'm not necessarily agreeing with what Vivienne is saying but measures she would have balked at a few months ago might be on the table now."

"It would go some way in explaining her insistence on strict lawfulness in dealing with the conspiracy," Hakram said. "It allows her to drag the Holies through trials before the Highest Assembly, bringing out the ugly details of how they tried to meddle with the secular powers. She'll get support from powers that might usually be on the fence, even the royals close to the House won't want to let it stay in a position to try this again."

"Public trials of priests while we're at war with the Dead King?" I said. "That could get messy. Not sure she'd risk that. Traitors or not, they're House. People won't be comfortable with priests in front of a tribunal when the Dead are the gate."

"I'd expect her to go for property over privileges, if she does act," Akua noted. "All those monasteries and abbeys with attendant lands. The tax exemptions as well. The war efforts would justify the measures and leave the appearance of the old order intact while severely curtailing the influence of the House in truth."

"Ultimately, so long as it does not affect her ability to negotiate with us it is only somewhat relevant to our affairs," Hakram finally said.

"Our stance going forward hasn't changed," I agreed. "An additional degree of caution, maybe, but if Hasenbach is able to keep the White Knight under control it's not a major concern."

"I'd prefer if he wasn't there at all," Vivienne sighed. "Now the Tyrant gets his trial. We could have put him off for months if the Knight had stayed away."

"Not sure I'd want to find out what Kairos might do to get him to hurry up, considering he began a war with Procer just to get him there," I said. "Obviously we'll need to keep a close eye on him, Vivs, which is why your Jacks-"

It was a pleasant surprise to have a door to be knocked on, after the Everdark and the fields of Iserre. Adjutant bade our sentry to enter, and the young orc in legionary armour passed a message. The Carrion Lord requested audience and had mentioned he was bringing an old friend. *Well now*, I thought. The Jacks had done admirably well, all things considered, but it wouldn't beat hearing of this madness straight from the horse's mouth.

Time to see what the Scribe had to say for herself.

jalexanderb

Yaaaay we're back to Cat! The Coup Interludes were phenomenal, but it's always good to get back to our MVP.

Man, if Cat's worried now, wait until she hears that Cordelia told the Heavens to bugger off right from the start. She might propose on the spot.

RoflCat

AND that Cordelia refused the Names, all of them.

A buddy in the “gloriously mortal” faction as well as the “Fuck Providence” party.
Augur isn’t in the former, but surely she can join the latter given the crushing defeat she handed to Bard.

MagpieJack

Cat: So, I hear you have a name...

Cordelia: I actually rejected 2 different names. Fuck that shit amirite?

Cat: *sploosh*

NerfContessa

Yeah. Sooo9 fun.

And about time truly free people start ruling.

kelioez

That sploosh is the most eloquent and apt thing I’ve read till now, Bravo my fellow reader.

[daegone823](#)

Most Villainous Player

Andrew Mitchell

I saw the title and immediately thought: “Goblinfire rumours”. 😊

Let’s see if I’m right, I haven’t read any of the chapter yet.

Andrew Mitchell

Second thought, it could be about what Cordelia has dredged out of the lake.

medailyfun

wasn’t she actually dredging the munitions?

Andrew Mitchell

That’s an interesting idea but it doesn’t fit: “corpse that was not a corpse” IIRC.

[Javvies](#)

No, the munitions would have been cargo and stayed on the boats/barges/ships/vessels.

Dredging indicates that her objective is, at best, resting somewhere on the bottom, but more likely is buried underground, beneath the bottom of the lake.

Also, as noted, she's looking for a "corpse that isn't a corpse" in order to "fight fire with fire" in reference to the war against the Dead King.

First, the knowledge, which is more technically speculation, that goblinfire and goblin munitions are created from powered devils and maybe demons in the case of goblinfire, is a massive secret – one that I'm honestly not sure if Amadeus even knows or suspects. Cordelia most assuredly doesn't have the slightest clue.

Also, 3 tons of goblin munitions are not the kind of equalizer or game changer Cordelia was looking for.

Nairne .01

I'm pretty sure Black's aware of the source material for the munitions.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Using a corpse, albeit one that is not a corpse, to fight fire with fire against an enemy known for necromancy? Sounds like they're trying to at least partially resurrect some kind of dead horror. Or at least one that lies dreaming.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Pilgrim's plague killed the troops but did not sink the boats.

[Liliet](#)

A plague that sinks boats... hmm. What WOULD that look like?

[shieldredblog](#)

Termites

[greatwyrmgold](#)

I'm not sure which is more terrifying—someone as confidently self-righteous as the Pilgrim having control over insects, or someone as ruthlessly pragmatic as Skitter having the blessing of a Choir.

Andrew Mitchell

I was wrong. Not goblinfire rumours, but fire rumours and more.

[Liliet](#)

And actually the rumors were just about the coup 🤪

byzantine279

I wonder how Cat will react when she finds out Cordelia actively denied a Name.

Slider

She'll likely revise her opinion on Cordelia (which may also imply looking into the augur).

Andrew Mitchell

For a moment I wondered what a 'hero pinion' was!

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

Curse WordPress, which does not allow commenters to go back and edit their posts!

nimelennar

It's a gear that controls which direction the hero is pointed.

Dainpdf

Aka a Choir. Or The Bard.

Andrew Mitchell

♥

Andrew Mitchell

😊😊😊

C_B

Given the Augur's fondness for birds, there's definitely room for a quality pun in there somewhere.

Shikkarasu

Hero Pinion: A larger feather than Hero Down, can be used to Forgive one ally while simultaneously hitting a nearby enemy with Summer Fire.

Acquisition: using Mug on Angels.

Buy price: N/A

Sell price: 300gil

ciara

Strangely enough, a 'hero pinion' has already been featured in this story. William's sword was made from a Hashmallim's feather.

sammax

"Ultimately, so long as it does not affect her ability to vote at <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> it is only somewhat relevant to our affairs," Hakram finally said.

[Barthumphries](#)

This also needs to be a typo thread, every time.

Here's one typo:

The young and fit worked fields during the warm seasons, the returned

Change "the returned" to "they returned".

There are at least 8 more typos but I'm on my phone and if you all aren't going to bother helping a typo thread form then I can't be bothered either.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine is said to be blamed for Marchford fires. She means Summerholm.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Let's face it—if there's been a fire within a mile of anywhere she might have been recently or looks like she might want to visit, she's been blamed for it. Even when she was an embodiment of Winter.

Morgenstern

I'd say it's "... during the warm seasons, theN returend to...", not 'they' (which would better fit a new sentence start, but there's a comma here).

"All those monasteries and abbeys with attendant lands. The tax emptions as well."

→ EXemptions.

Morgenstern

" According to my scouting lines – and Robber, who I'd let loose to skulk with for sole instruction not to start a diplomatic incident that wasn't fairly deniable – "

-> "who I'd let loose to skulk with (them?) for sole(ly) instruction(,) not to..." ? (not quite sure about this sentence, but it sure looks/feels odd; I might be looking at it the wrong way, though)

Ultimate_Procrastinator

I think taking out the "for" would do it. "-and Robber, who I'd let loose to skulk with sole instruction..."

Morgenstern

"Even without getting into bribes and hirelings, just keeping the Jacks fed and clothes and paid was painfully costly."

-> "keeping the Jacks fed and clothed ..."

Morgenstern

"...Akua as, well, Akua Sahelian. Whether that was a good or terrible thing had wildly carried depending on the time and situation..."

-> should probably be "...had wildly VARIED depending on..."

Morgenstern

"The Eyes of the Empire had continued to out them to me even after relations between Malicia and myself had cooled all the way to ice, though there was no telling of those had been the Tower's people or Scribe's."

-> "though there was no telling IF those had been..."

Morgenstern

"Not the Holy Society?" I asked. "I though their whole mandate was keeping an eye on the House."

-> "I thoughT their whole ..."

Morgenstern

"Even still, I had a hard time reconciling the same princess who'd..."

-> Not sure if this is an actual typo, but it sounds odd to me / never heard that expression. Might be a regional thing? It does sound like "Even then, ..." and "Still, ..." mixed up to me. If that were the case, it should be either one OR the other, not a mixture of both. 😊

Morgenstern

"My people had indulged in some excruciatingly brutal ways of killing prove traitors, especially those who struck bargains with Praes. It'd been delightfully horrible to read about public drawing and quarterings, or even the rarer red hangings as a kid – I'd taken me year to realize the unlikeliness of books about the worst excesses of Callowan 'justice' being so easy to get your hands on, Black you prick ..."

→ "proveN traitors"

→ and, as a minor thing, probably "hands on; Black, you prick", that being two thoughts, not one; the semicolon being the important bit, if at all (I'm not starting on commata alone in a typo thread or this will never find an end)

[Liliet](#)

no, that's actually the same thought. She's addressing Black as being a prick specifically about the issue of getting her hands on that info easily.

Morgenstern

"... Their only way out is saying I tricked the Ophanim, which no one wants to roll the dice one while they're here to disagree."

→ "... no one wants to roll the dice ON while ..."

[Liliet](#)

I've seen 'even still' used

Morgenstern

"Vivienne looked split between sharp irritation at being shown up on even such a slight detail and disgust as the old Arlesite ways of justice."

→ "disgust AT", not 'as'

Morgenstern

"Adjutant bade our sentry to enter..."

→ as far as my grammar/vocab goes, there's no need for "to" in there; it should be "bade our sentry (-) enter"
?

Nairne .01

How expectedly irritating to be left hanging.

[spudsoftheapocalypse](#)

At least you're not hanging by your own entrails.

Shveiran

I can sympathize.

Though really "damn it, I'm out of Guide, I need more Guide!" has stayed with me pretty much every chapter.

magesbe

As I thought, Cat hasn't given up on the "no Named ruler" thing. Amadeus thinks it'll never fly, we'll see if he's right. To be fair, if he's in charge of Praes, there might not be much argument over the matter. Except maybe from Levant, but to be fair they're currently without Named rulers.

caoimhinh

Nice, Scribe's presence will also enable Catherine to have more information and details about what happened in Salia, since Scribe's network goes deeper than Vivienne's.

Oshi

Plus the Circle of Thorns rep talked to her so there is that

Shveiran

We'll also get to learn how that talk ended up

Dainpdf

I am looking forward to finding out whether the Sisters will enable Cat to perceive the Scribe.

[Liliet](#)

I think she shouldn't be hiding.

jack

Cat underestimates both Cordelia and the Auger.

No shame in that, so did most of us.

Andrew Mitchell

Yep! 😊

Shveiran

To be fair neither of them nor she ever saw the Augur before.

And even for Cordelia it was a very, very close thing.

Dainpdf

This is the woman who outmaneuvered Malicia without a Name and while facing discrimination for her origins. Cordelia Hasenbach is one of the greatest badasses in this story.

Raved Thrad

"Vivs"

SQUEE!!

[sengachi](#)

I love the little details like the one about how Proceran farmers live and how Catherine was inclined to interpret that. It's stuff like that which really supports the narrative of Calernia as a diverse place with different people living different lives, and shows how much Catherine's understanding of the nuance and difficulty of bettering the world has improved

[Liliet](#)

Mhm!!!!

nipi

Im guessing Kairos is going to be using the Hierarch and the White Knight to put Aboves named on trial. After all the White Knight has the unique ability of drawing on the abilities of deceased heroes.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

For all that the Hierarch has noble goals, good ideas, and a terminal case of stubbornness, he's probably not a heroic Named. His home city counts as Evil, after all, and he's an embodiment of all its graces and flaws.

nipi

Im guessing Kairos is going to be using the Hierarch and the White Knight to put Aboves named on trial. After all the White Knight can uniquely call upon the experiences and powers of dead heroes.

[Javvies](#)

Hmmm.

The White Knight being available enough for Kairos's trial is a problem.

On the other hand ... they might be able to stall the trial on the grounds that they're in Procer, not the League, and IIRC the agreement didn't specify a timeline or immediacy on the trial, so

they could maybe argue that the trial should take place in the League ... and after the threat of the Dead King has been dealt with (assuming that Hanno survives long enough).

Ah, soon we'll find out more about what went on and Scribe's role in it.

They might want to try to pitch as much blame as they can towards Malicia.

SpeckofStardust

eh the faster the Trial gets dealt with the better, putting it off is a mistake.

I still think the White Knight will win it.

[ninegardens](#)

I mean... if anything, the Trial could potentially act as a huge advert (or debate) for the accords. Namely "We have this dude with a magic coin running around judging people. Do we WANT that?" – so far Cat presumably doesn't, Cordelia just denied him, and Heriarch is certainly not okay with it... (tyrant probably thinks its funny).

I kinda love how Hanno is portrayed as a decent and reasonable person... who just happens to be bat shit insane (by earth standards).

Personally I'm hoping for a trial result along the lines of "Okay, we aren't going to execute you, but you SERIOUSLY need to knock off all the vigilante executions, or we gonna have problems."

... hell, If the Choir of Judgement could be brought onboard, Hanno could be an AMAZING enforcer for the Accords.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Remember that Kairos' "trial" of Hanno isn't actually *intended* to resolve any question of guilt – after all, this is Kairos we're talking about. Kairos apparently intends to use the trial to draw one or more Seraphs into a position, where he and Hierarch can trap and/or kill them.

Piu

White Knight himself never act. He is always Choirs will. So I think Kairos's gambit here is about Choir of Judgement vs Hierarch judgement. And we've seen, what his madness can do.

[Liliet](#)

TBF Hanno doesn't *normally* act as a vigilante. The city was kind of on fire is all, and he got a little carried away.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

His extrajudicial executions technically count as vigilantism, but at least it's usually the superhero flavor where he sticks to people who laugh at any judges trying to enforce their will on them.

[Liliet](#)

Also, is it really vigilantism if he's enforcing law of higher jurisdiction? Which the House of Light in Procer will argue Heavens are?

And he steps back when asked by more local authorities, too

[greatwyrmgold](#)

If the Westboro Baptist Church rustled up some goon squads to fight crimes against God, they'd argue the same thing. The only difference is that the Grey Pilgrim is respected in a way that the Westboro Baptists are not; their legal statuses are, technically, equivalent.

Morgenstern

"The Angels made me do it." – " M'kay, so we gotta judge the Angels."

Dainpdf

I don't see how blaning Malicia would be productive. They want her to be a signatory. Best to do as Hasenbach has been doing and blame Neshamah.

konstantinvoncarstein

If possible, Catherine will set Amadeus on the throne and kill Malicia.

[Fayhem](#)

While Cat's got a grudge to carry there (and, y'know, is Callowan) I think only the first item – putting Amadeus on the throne – is actually necessary to her. If Malicia was willing to abdicate on a "you know, I hear other continents are lovely, you should probably go investigate that" kind of basis Cat might well allow it to make the transition of power go more smoothly, not to mention sparing Amadeus having to preside over the death of one of his oldest and dearest (and one of his few remaining) friends.

Of course, that assumes there's a scenario where Malicia would ever willingly surrender power, which I'm dubious of, so that might be a moot point.

konstantinvoncarstein

About that, Scribe will probably know more of what Malicia is doing with the whole Praesi nobility.

[Liliet](#)

I'm predicting Malicia abdicating the ULTIMATE POWAH only to remain in power as a high-ranked government official (just, y'know, subordinate to the guy that HASN'T burned his bridges with the entire continent ~~despite his best efforts~~)

[Fayhem](#)

Given that Malicia personally ordered some of Cat's friends killed and is very much politically associated with the Doom of Liesse on an international basis that sounds like a tough sell on multiple levels. There is still a lot of space left in the narrative for things to change unexpectedly in the future, but as things stand now I'm dubious that would be viable even if Malicia were willing.

As always though, we'll see. 😊

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Chancellor.

Amadeus as Emperor, Malicia abdicates to become his Chancellor.

Cat will still hate, and be screwed with by Chancellor M.

[Javvies](#)

Not happening.

Part of the Praesi Chancellor Name is betraying the current Dread Emperor/Empress and becoming their successor.

There is a damned good reason why Malicia has spent decades trying to kill the Name of Chancellor.

Plus, I fully expect that Malicia will not abdicate, and will need to be killed or otherwise forcibly deposed. Abdicating would be giving up control and power – which is something that she is psychologically incapable of.

And even if she were to abdicate ... there's no way

that anyone could or would trust her with that kind of power ever again.

Liliet

>Abdicating would be giving up control and power – which is something that she is psychologically incapable of.

You're overestimating how much people are ruled by their issues imho.

SpeckofStardust

On the other hand Named are almost powered by their Issues especially Villain named.

Liliet

Powered maybe, but still not ruled 😊

Mental Mouse

It is also possible that Malicia will run out of plot points and get killed by the High Lords, a Hero, or another adversary. We're a little short of folks who could credibly pull that off, but I note that Larat &co. are still on the loose, with completely unknown abilities. IIRC the goblins aren't too happy with her either. Or she could manage to piss off Ranger...

Javvies

No they don't.

Cat has already said that leaving Malicia on the Throne is unacceptable. It's unacceptable to her personally, and it's going to be unacceptable to everyone else (except Kairos) – Malicia is, after all, the one who let out the Dead King, and has been meddling in Procer for decades.

Remember, Cat considers Amadeus the only viable ruler of Praes to bring Praes into the Accords and make it less of a problem for everyone.

Malicia might be able to get away with abdicating instead of becoming a corpse, but there's no way she'll be allowed to remain Dread Empress.

Nicola Mazzanti

Finally caught up, first comment!

First, this series is great, and better on a second read. I am halfway through my second read, and while the first book feels a tad too much "young adult" the rest is super duper great.

Then, a couple of thoughts/questions that have probaly been asked by others somewhere, so humor a newbie!

-who defeated Hierarch and Kairos in the popularity contest, back in the day? If it was anyone but robber it was a mistake 😊

-aren't goblin a bit overpowered compared to the other races? They are faster, incredibly deft/nimble, best technology on the continent outside of the dwarves and it seems they would not be magical pushovers, if they became independent, given how munitions are made. Ok, they are short and weak, but firepower, mobility, furtivity, fortifications and essentially napalm/hand grenades should more than make up for it. And yes, munitions are definitely super powerful, possibly overly so, and way more available than how they are described to be.

-How long before Juniper and Cat change the tactical doctrine of the Army of Callow? They will sooner or later run out of what makes the Legions great (munitions, mages, sappers) and have other massive strengths the legions don't have (cavalry).

Andrew Mitchell

Welcome to our commenting community. If you have time, reading the comments and conversations here will enhance your understanding and enjoyment of the story.

> -How long before Juniper and Cat change the tactical doctrine of the Army of Callow? They will sooner or later run out of what makes the Legions great (munitions, mages, sappers) and have other massive strengths the legions don't have (cavalry).

Munitions – their recognition of the goblins independence (against the wishes of Malica) has ensured Callow's supply of munitions.

Mages – I, too, have wondered about mages. On the training side Masego has made a big difference. But for replacing lost numbers, I'm not so sure.

Sappers – also OK due to recognition of the goblins (for numbers). But I guess training is a lot more on the job these days.

Chapter 73: Discerning

"Poison is the weapon of the trade, knife the weapon of the intimate and sorcery the weapon of war. To use any for the

improper purpose is the mark of inferior breeding, save if greater game is yet afoot."

– Extract from 'The Behaviours of Civil Conduct', by High Lady Mchumba Sahelian

Akua leaked a sensation of query into the Night, an implicit question as to whether or not she should leave given the nature of our arriving guests, but I shook my head. While she was close to neither she was likely to be a fairer hand at reading them than either Vivienne or Hakram, and that lack of closes itself was not without its uses. I doubted a distraction as petty as that would be enough to get beneath the skin of the Scribe, but it took more than one stone to build a house. Adjutant smoothly rose to fetch another two seats without my asking, while Vivienne pressed into my hand a cup before pouring her own. Cold ice-cooled water, sadly, but I did get drunk a lot faster than I used to these days so perhaps that was for the best. Only a fool blunted the edge of their sword just before tugging at a tiger's tail. *Might not be necessary*, I reminded myself. It would not do to assume hostility from Scribe because of the less than stellar terms we'd parted on last time we spoke. Or even with those in mind given that if my father asked her to play nice, I believed her likely to do so. Still, I'd recently learned that Black did not have nearly as tight a leash over the Scribe as I'd once assumed.

It would not do to presume in favour of her either.

It was still half a surprise every time to see Black in anything but plate when it was daylight, though I noted that while he wore a dark tabard and matching long-sleeved tunic the faint hint of a coat of mail could be seen under them. Hard to unlearn a lifetime's worth of paranoia, I supposed – though when it came to Praes it could not really be called *paranoia* could it? Scribe was as slippery to the eyes as she'd always been, even when I was actively trying to watch her. It wasn't invisibility, for she was definitely there, but trying to *notice* anything about the villainess had my attention sliding away like water off a duck's back. She had ink-stained hands, and she was not tall, although she might just have been slouching. Her clothes were loose and made of cloth. I bit the inside my cheek, using the pain as a spur as I narrowed my eyes. She had pale, seemingly bloodless lips. They were not smiling. Black took a seat at Adjutant's invitation and I only then realized how long I'd been staring at Scribe, with only little to show for it. Something to revisit later, perhaps. I sent an idle prayer to my patronesses, though who knew if they'd deign to intercede for such a trifle.

"Would I be correct in assuming you have been parsing through the reports of the Jacks?" the Carrion Lord calmly asked.

"More or less," I agreed. "Speculating as to the consequences of the mess, too. An insider's eye of the affair would be appreciated."

The last sentence I spoke casually, though none here were fool enough to believe it. I was reserving anger along with judgement, but I was less than pleased at the fact that Cordelia Hasenbach had apparently come rather close to being buried in a shallow grave. If the Eyes of the Empire truly had been either authors or helpers to this episode of convulsive stupidity, I would see to it that heads would roll unless very good reason was given. And I did not mean it as a figure of speech, this once. Black glanced at his aide, either ordering or encouraging.

"The Eyes of the Empire were involved," the Scribe calmly confirmed. "Not directly, but in the nascent stages of the conspiracy and on its edges when it came to a head."

"Do the Procerans know?" Vivienne flatly asked.

"The Circle of Thorns did as it took place. By now I would venture this has expanded to the First Prince and her most trusted," Scribe said.

My eyes flicked to my teacher, whose face had remained serene even as one of his oldest companions casually admitted she'd just attacked the Principate in front of Cordelia Hasenbach while we were under formal truce and headed for the negotiating table besides. He was unmoved, so there was likely more to the story. At least some semblance of a reason for me not to denounce Scribe as an agent of the Tower and send her fucking crucified corpse to the First Prince as an apology.

"Elaborate," I coldly ordered.

"After the ambush sprung by the Grey Pilgrim that saw Lord Black seized, the Tower reached out to me through the Eyes of the Empire," Scribe said. "The Empress intended a rescue mission in Salia, paired with a strike at the internal stability of Procer, and given the circumstances I agreed with the necessity. Lady Ime and myself, over the span of several months, laid the groundwork for certain factions within Procer to come to the conclusion a coup was feasible."

"The rumours that Rozala Malanza was backing the coup," Hakram gravelled. "They were not simple slander."

"It was difficult but not impossible to impersonate her by letter," Scribe agreed. "Given that neither the House of Light nor the Silver Letters use scrying mages and the First Prince's own order was rendered helpless by the interdict cast over Iserre. We've had a convincing forgery of the royal seal of

Aequitan since the Proceran civil war, when we funded Aenor Malanza's bid for the throne through the Pravus Bank."

"The coup happened," I said. "Which means the trigger was pulled on this scheme, and recently too. After you were informed of my intentions for treaties with the Grand Alliance."

"I was ordered by scrying link to end any ongoing operations, erase any evidence of Praesi presence in the capital and ensure the loyalty of all agents in the city," Scribe agreed.

I glanced at Black, who inclined his head in confirmation.

"In this I did not succeed," Scribe said. "I had several long-term plants among our scrying mages I was unaware of, and she used the Tower's clout to mobilize the Eyes in the capital for action before I could clean up all loose ends. It appears the Empress had judged the Liesse Accords to be an existential threat to herself and her continued reign."

Well, I grimly thought, she wasn't wrong about that.

"Given actions that could not be denied, you had to ensure your loyalists among the Eyes were seen as undertaking damage control," Akua quietly said. "Which is where the Circle of Thorns was brought in. The First Prince will not take the word of anyone here as to the actions of your agents, but she will heed the reports of her own spymaster. A calculated move."

"Concessions had to be made to the Circle in order for their leader to agree not to spread knowledge of our involvement beyond the necessary, and hand over the written proof of Praesi involvement," Scribe said. "I gave formal agreement to the Praesi and Callowan delegations backing the First Prince when she requests relief ships be allowed through the Nicaean blockade around Ashur."

I'd likely have agreed to that anyway, I mused. Oh I'd have tried to exact a little something to sweeten the pot, or made a show of asking for nothing in exchange to foster a sense of debt between myself and Hasenbach, but this was not a great loss for me. I was still swimming in leverage. On the other hand, Scribe had just entered a binding commitment in my name. That she'd presumed to speak for me was galling enough. Considering that Black was effectively my dependant under Proceran law at the moment, Hasenbach would not be entirely without grounds to kick up a fuss if his aide made promises and then they were gone back on. It'd never hold without the strength to enforce it and I could cut right through by sending the Highest Assembly the charred corpse of Scribe along with a polite note informing them she in no way spoke for me, but it'd sour my reputation with some people I badly needed the willing collaboration of. Worse still, though, was that simply by speaking in my name when negotiating the cover

up the Scribe had implicitly stated I was in some way related to this. Sedately, I set down my cup on the table.

"I'll not insult your intelligence by asking you if you know what you've done," I calmly said. "I assume if you were willing to be in killing distance of me, you have further explanation as why I shouldn't execute you out of general principle."

Black's lips thinned, but he did not object. Neither fucking should he. If Adjutant had entered a binding agreement on the behalf of the Black Knight, back in the day, even if my teacher had then judged it worth upholding he would have put Hakram's head on a pike as a warning for anyone else wanting to overstep. All else aside, I was the Queen of Callow and a villain in my own right. That someone not in my service or given my explicit permission had *presumed* to speak for me in such a delicate situation was worthy of violence.

"The Empress was aiming at the Accords themselves, apparently considering them the primary threat," Scribe replied, voice unruffled. "The Silver Letters brought stolen goblinfire into the city and Ime's agents set fire near their safehouses in attempts to trigger a blaze. Such an event would have destroyed large swaths of Salia and, given your reputation for the substance's use, affected popular opinion enough to make made negotiation near impossible. Especially for a weakened First Prince, be it a surviving Hasenbach or a freshly elected Malanza. The odds were more than fair that the Grand Alliance itself would collapse."

I smoothly drummed my fingers against the table. Her answer, unspoken as it'd been, was that she might have overstepped but she'd done so while in the process of averting what could have been a great crisis for me. Certainly one much worse than the minor concession this had ended up costing me – and the unfortunate implications to Scribe having spoken for me could be smoothed away by making it clear to Hasenbach it'd been an exception and not to be taken as face value again. It still got stuck in my throat that her own personal failure to get her house in order would cost me, and that Malicia's unimpeded schemes would be considered my problem, but I supposed an argument could be made that I was the one who was diplomatically cornering the Empress. Scribe's repeated mention of the Accords as the main target was certainly hinting at that heavily. Black cleared his throat.

"Regardless of circumstance," he said, "offence was given. We will offer reparations to the Kingdom of Callow for having drawn on its influence to clean up our own mistakes."

Scribe did not speak for a moment, as if reluctant.

"As of this morning, the Jacks serving under Duchess-Regent Kegan of Callow have been granted access through liaison to my

informants within the Wasteland," the Scribe said, "along with a list of all suspected Malicia agents within the kingdom."

My brow rose. Those were... not small things. Black had been outing Malicia's agents in my kingdom for a while now, true, but he'd done it slowly and at a pace Vivienne was adamant had been chosen so his *own* agents would not be outed by the revelations. And the cooperation with Scribe's own faction in the Eyes would go a long way in keeping Kegan from ending up in a grave between Ratface and Anne Kendall. Those were heavier reparations than I would have felt comfortable asking for, if I'd set the terms, which my teacher would know. *Ah*, I thought, meeting green eyes with my own. This was not just reparations it was a polite gift-assisted request not to kill Scribe for having crossed me. Which I was finding difficult to refuse, all thing considered. Black was being genuine here, I decided, this was more or less the way he dealt with allies. But there was something about the way Scribe was acting... Oh, she didn't like me. Which was fine, as the sentiment was broadly shared: the cordial beginnings of our acquaintance had begun to fade effectively the moment I sought power independent of my teacher, which I suspected had simply moved me from asset to liability in her eyes. Still, while she didn't like me I would not deny she was an intelligent woman.

Which was where the flaw could be found. My temper had waned some, these days, but not quite *that* much. So why would she test it by appearing reluctant over Black's reparations? She had to know I'd not be all that well inclined towards her, and exactly what those reparations were meant for. Meaning either she didn't consider her life or freedom worth these concessions from the perspective of the resources available to Black, which was too warped a view to be objectively credible, or she was playing me. Playing up reluctance so I'd feel more grateful for my teacher's contrastingly fair attitude? Could be, it would be just like her to damage her own reputation to prop up his own. Even made sense from a tactical perspective, given that she and I were unlikely to ever be on good terms and so the loss relative to gain was greater. Except that I could taste it in the air, now that I'd notice a flaw: I was being sold a story. Not the way the Pilgrim or the Bard would, no. That wouldn't be Scribe's game. Instead I'd been invited to stroll through a house of mirrors so that I could take in my own reflections and hold them as truth. Even my father's blunt but sincere bribery had been used as an ingredient in the brew, something I'd find and read as true and so believe the *rest* was true.

So, I was being had. And Black hadn't been brought in on it. So *was this really Malicia's ploy at all?* It was true the Empress was only losing so much even if it became public she'd helped along the coup, considering the Grand Alliance had been founded in large part to bury her and the Accords would entail her removal regardless. This could be Malicia realizing that openly

allying with Keter had burned too many bridges, and that the same alliances taking shape to drive back the Kingdom of the Dead might turn towards her if victorious. Sloppy work, by her standards, but then she had to be running out of tools to use. On the other hand, if I was frustrated in my efforts to establish alliances to the west she had to know I'd be headed east instead – and with a sword in hand. Short-sighted, yes, but honestly still a feasible mistake if Malicia was desperate enough. Which she had to be, with the Tribes having taken Foremen and the Dread Empire on the edge of rebellion from repeated defeats. Feasible, though, was why people thought the hooded figures with tattooed eyes on their skin were the true Eyes of the Empire instead of the chatty innkeepers. Feasible meant you stopped looking because you had the answer. Yet I couldn't see, frankly, what Scribe had to gain from all this.

"Appreciated," I said, not bothering to force a smile. "I'll want a report of everything that took place so no detail can be sprung on me at the table."

"Naturally," Black conceded.

He dipped his head in thanks, trusting in the word I'd just as good as given.

"Vivienne," I said, "I'll need you to arrange a scrying session with Duchess-Regent Kegan as soon as possible."

"I'll see to it immediately," she briskly replied, rising to her feet.

"Akua," I said, simultaneously dumping into the Night a sense of stillness, "we still need to bring General Rumena into the loop."

"As you say, dear heart," she smiled.

In the Night she shaped her will as a sense of action, then a question, and I assented through the same. Neither of us missed a beat, or otherwise gave sign of this.

"I'll arrange for that report presently, then," my father said, sounding rather amused as he rose to his feet.

His old friend followed suit without missing a beat.

"Scribe," I said. "A word, if you would. I'll require a few more details out of you in case Hasenbach sends for a private meeting soon. I'm not walking into that blind."

"The report-" she began.

"Eudokia," Black sharply said.

She returned to the seat. I nodded thanks at my teacher, who acknowledged them with a discreet dip. No, he most definitely hadn't been brought into this. I smiled at Hakram, who was lingering behind me, and drained my cup of water before handing it to him. Clicking his fangs in amusement, he moved to fill it again. Scribe waited patiently even as I reached for my dragonbone pipe and slowly stuffed it, only then clearing her throat.

"If you could refrain?" she said.

A heartbeat later I felt Akua's working slither around us, smooth and silent, and tapped a finger against my pipe to light it. I puffed out, waiting until Hakram had set down the filled cup at my side before speaking.

"You get one chance to tell me the truth," I said. "After that, my patience will run out."

Adjutant's muscles shifted the slightest bit, coiling as he readied for strife. He'd not hesitated in the slightest, I thought with affection.

"You are seeing shadows of your own making," Scribe said.

I breathed in, then spewed out a steam of smoke.

"Hakram," I said.

Over two hundred pounds of raw fighting orc struck with blinding quickness, leaping across the table and catching a surprised Scribe by the throat. She began screaming for help. I leaned back into my seat.

"We're under containment," I said. "Screaming won't help."

"They betrayed us?" Adjutant casually asked, slamming her against the wall and dragging her gasping form up the wall.

"She's lying," I said. "But whatever she's up to, Black isn't in on it."

"You are making a mistake," Scribe gasped. "There is no deceit, only your need to be right."

She didn't try to bring Black's name into this, for which I afforded her a sliver of respect.

"You had months with the Eyes in Procer," I said. "Oh, I'm sure that everything you told us about how it unfolded is correct in detail. That there were plants answering to Lady Ime among the mages, even that the order to start fires near possible munition locations came from the Tower. What I don't believe for a moment

is that you couldn't have prevented it from happening. You had *months* with the Eyes in Procer, Scribe. What was your game?"

Black, I thought, would not question her story. It wouldn't even occur to him, I thought, the same way that it would not occur to me to wonder if Adjutant was lying to me. Too much of the bedrock of who we were depended on the certainty that they could be relied on, even when all else failed.

"Sometimes we fail, Catherine Foundling," Scribe gasped. "Sometimes it is not malice, or scheme, or treachery. Sometimes we just *fail*."

"I will torture you," I frankly said. "I won't like it, but the stakes here are too high for me to leave stones unturned out of squeamishness. I'll bleed you, and if that doesn't work I'll ask one of my people to peel your mind like an onion until the secrets come spilling out."

"We trained this in you," Scribe laughed. "I suppose it is our own doing, in the end. There is nothing to be found, Black Queen, save the unravelling of what you have wrought."

I blew out a long breath.

"Rip out an eye," I said.

It occurred to me a moment later that Hakram had only one hand left, made of bone, and that it was already holding up Scribe by the throat. I had begun to rise, to do the dirty work myself, when I saw Adjutant was moving. At the end of his stump folds of gleaming translucence were taking shape, almost spectral on appearance. They folded into themselves, methodically, until a broad clawed hand had come together. I glanced at his face, saw only the pleased baring of fangs, and the point of two claws touched above and beneath Scribe's eye. And then the hand dispersed.

"No," Adjutant said.

I blinked in surprise.

"Pain won't do anything to a woman like that, Catherine," Hakram said, calmly studying Scribe. "And neither will something live having her mind sliced open."

"We don't have anything else to threaten her with, Adjutant," I flatly said.

"We do," he disagreed. "Send for the Carrion Lord. Let him see this."

I began to tell him I'd sent Black away in the first place to spare him this when I noticed stillness. Scribe had gone utterly

still, even through her aspect I could feel that. Hakram had found the pulse of her, somehow.

"She's not kept him ignorant out of disloyalty," Adjutant said. "Have you, Scribe?"

Silence.

"I suppose you would understand, wouldn't you?" Scribe rasped.

"You love him," Hakram Deadhand said, almost gently. "Not a call of the flesh or a tender feeling. The way a knife loves a steady hand, the way a sparrow loves flight. It can't be helped."

It felt wrong, to be here. Like I was intruding on a moment to which I alone of us could claim no kinship. Yet my mind turned heedless of the rest, cogs falling into place. The details had been there all along, hadn't they? The conversations I'd had with Scribe were few, but one had mattered more than the rest. When I'd tread the halls of the Tower for the first time, and she had whispered a dangerous secret in my ear. *Ranger and I disagreed on many matters, Catherine, but there was one thing we always agreed on.* Was it really that simple, that... I hesitated to say petty, but what else could it be called? No, not petty. Personal, and in a way that was worse.

"Malicia," I croaked out. "This wasn't about Procer or the Accords or anything else. You did all this so he would have no choice but to kill Malicia when he returns to the Wasteland."

copaceticcockroach

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Aston Whiteman

You certainly have a lot of free time.

Vote or don't..

RandomFan

Why did you feel this was a comment worth making? Genuine question that is not intended to be Rhetorical.

[Liliet](#)

It takes 1 minute to post a topwebfiction link. It takes 20 seconds to click it and vote.

I wonder how the fuck someone could have the time to read the chapter but not a spare minute and a half on top of that?

nipi

You take too long to copy-paste

[Liliet](#)

My laptop is very slow and often freezes up when scrolling / typing / posting, and copy-paste occasionally does not work from the first attempt period. So I was being generous -_-

[Liliet](#)

bless u

Tesla

I feel like

“I suppose you would understand, wouldn’t you?” Scribe rasped.

Is setting Hakram and Cat up for something

[Liliet](#)

For example? 😬

I just read it as a reflection on the similarities of the relationships which we already knew about but which are fun to occasionally point to and nod.

Alex

Damn, Scribe. Waited what, 40 years, 50? for her chance and took it.

Also, this is out of scope for this chapter but I’ve been wondering:

Do the red letters get sent to everyone who advances past certain points technologically, or only to places where the situation could spiral out of control? For instance if Praes didn’t have a reputation for being all “conquer Calernia” would the gnomes have let them build the farming machines and gunpowder?

NerfGlastigUaine

We don’t have enough information to even begin to guess. Only way to answer this if Erraticerrata deigns to respond.

konstantinvoncarstein

As far as we know, Red Letters are only send when technology advance too far. The fact that the nation is prone to invade its neighbors or not is irrelevant. Even if it is a peaceful nation now, it can change in the future. And anyway, what a peaceful nation has can be duplicate by another, more aggressive.

edrey

there is another point, if one nation invade and absorb a nation with two letters and then another letter is send. its the first or the third? lets say callow invade praes. then pickler creat something. that is something first or the third, or they just attack to save time? we need more information anyway

konstantinvoncarstein

I didn't think of that. Good point 😊

Oranckers

As I understand it, when a letter is received, the recipient doesn't just stop any further research, but actively undoes all the progress they made. Therefore, if one nation invaded another that had previously received a red letter, they wouldn't recover anything letter-worthy, and thus they would not be considered to have received any letters.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah that sounds right.

KageLupus

My impression is that the Gnomes don't care about who receives the letter or why, just that they don't have to send three warnings to the same place. Praes and Callow and Procer are almost definitely lumped into the same geographic bucket by the civilization that can wipe cities off of a map.

The whole point of the red letters seems to be that whoever gets it not only has to stop developing that tech, but also has to actively prevent others from doing so. The simplest way to do that is to tell everyone "This line of research is off limits." The Gnomes are paranoid enough to wipe out a city for doing research that might threaten them in the future. I doubt that they would also be forgiving enough to care that two people invented firearms independently and not count it as two strikes.

laguz24

What I wonder is, since the hard limitation would be three letters. At some point, any nation would receive three. Even if they were around 500 years apart, by sheer odds some nation will receive three letters even if they have no wish to tick off the gnomes. Does that mean that the gnomes come in anyway? The Atlantis of calernia died because they ignored them but praes listens.

Liliet

That's why I think they *do* keep track of who did what. Amadeus's worry about two Red Letters within a century was likely more about "will gnomes think we're not taking this seriously"... and even then, it was about a single century. I doubt they were the only red letters in Praes's entire history.

RoflCat

I think it's not that Scribe has been trying to find a chance to Malicia all those decades, but that Malicia was firmly an ally of Black that made Scribe stayed any such plan. Sure they might disagree on things, but if it ever came to Black vs anything else, Malicia would've picked Black.

But then 2nd Liesse happened, and Malicia chose something else for the first time.

To Scribe that was the turning point. Malicia could no longer be guaranteed to be ally of Black and she's going against his ideals.

So it's time to break Black away from her, and one such way is for Black himself to sever their ties, for real this time.

Alex

To clarify, I suppose I was thinking less along the lines of invading and more whether or not a nation has "graduated" from the duality of good vs. evil. For example, I wonder if the nation across the sea ruled by both hero and villain receives the same warnings.

konstantinvoncarstein

According to Amadeus, the Gnomes are blocking technological advancements to preserve their monopole and power. I don't think that a nation having transcended Good and Evil is more of a danger to them without technology.

James

Scribe's honesty is genuinely refreshing. Dont get me wrong, Cat's soothsayer skills are absolutely awesome and the thought processes behind them are nothing short of glorious, but its just that with everyone and their uncle being these master liars, schemers, and manipulators, one of the very few times Scribe and Cat talked, Scribe told her the truth. The difference in character is refreshing, not to mention the INSANE amount of forethought @EE

maxwell wearing

ah ha! I was waiting for that line to affect the story in some way. holy moly do you plan far ahead or what

jack

Which line?

If someone is being echoed, I must have missed it.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I don't remember, but I'd guess it's the one about love.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Correction: it was the one about pettiness, as per this comment.

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/09/09/chapter-73-discerning/comment-page-1/#comment-53946>

maxwell wearing

actually I meant the line from way back in the first book when Scribe said that she and ranger agreed that Black should rule Praes.

At the time it seemed significant, but then it never came to anything

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Oh. Well, I tried. `_ () _/`

[Liliet](#)

Yeah ♥

Hellspirit

That was satisfying to read.

NerfGlastigUaine

Cat's come so far. The whole Woe has. Being able to divine intentions like these, see the subtleties beneath the plans. Remember Conspiracy when we were all terrified of Scribe? I mean, I'd say we still kind of are, but Cat's definitely batting in the same league now.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm ♥ ♥ ♥

[Liliet](#)

It's funny how the reason Cat caught onto this was Scribe overacting, just a tiny little bit. It wasn't that the scheme itself was obvious, it was that Eudokia misstepped 😊

snowy

Perhaps all of this is part of Scribe's plan, and the "bad acting" a red herring.

Morgenstern

As in, she just doesn't want Black to ever know she made an honest mistake/miscalculation, afraid of losing *his* ... respect/"love"? (just curious pondering)

Morgenstern

... or maybe a real sense of her going behind Black's back in other ways... but to what purpose? hmm...

Zgggt

It wasn't a mistake. Hasenbach did everything to have Black murdered rather than captured. As far as Scribe is concerned, she needs to *not exist*. So, she was willing to turn a blind eye to Malicia taking a stab.

That being said, it was Cat to rescue Black from what Malicia should have known was a suicide mission (the big bad razing the countryside, looking to cause starvation amongst the poor peasants). So Malicia, similarly, must be removed. Luckily, it seems that both causes can be related.

I am unsure as to what the point of damaging Rozala that badly was. I doubt Procer takes well to incompetence on the scale of not knowing about a coup in her name. At best she looks like an airheaded puppet, at worst she looks like the worst pureblooded Praesi backstabber. Guess mom will go unavenged.

lennymaster

My guess is that Cat caught on because she no longer has a Name and she is vastly more experienced these days. Before Black and Scribe were simply one entity, one mind two bodies. The, in some ways, unflexible thinking of a Named could not have conceived of one acting in such a way without the approval of the other, even to the others benefit.

Liliet

I don't think Names have that kind of impact. Fae thinking is relatively inflexible, and Cat still managed to beat the Northern Crusade and improve on her diplomatic skills while fae.

Catherine identified this because of several factors:

- she is now vastly more experienced, yes, and has a lot of experience that even Black doesn't have (few people have been willing to do diplomacy with him over his entire career, I imagine);
- she specifically remarks that both her and Black have deliberately left blind spots in their analysis, people they *don't* analyze, because their analysis still gives false positives, and false positives with *these* people would be disproportionately damaging. Also because it's draining to analyze all the time and resource allocation is saner if they just blindly trust *some* people. Scribe is in this blind spot for Amadeus, but not for Catherine.

What amuses me is that the specific trigger of Catherine noticing the discrepancy was a discrepancy in *acting*. After noticing it and thinking about it she noticed more problems, but the *trigger*, the thing that jumped out at her, was simply her ability to read people and understand their decision making process on the fly.

hakureireimu

How does the epigraph relates to this chapter?

Cicero

"...greater game is yet afoot."

caoimhinh

They don't always relate, though this chapter is meaningful as it refers to one of Akua's conversations with Catherine about what to use when killing someone close to her, and what would be considered a *break of decorum* to do, as killing is a way of art in Praes Court and it sends a message when it is done in certain ways.

If there were true feelings, the knife is used. And that relates to both Catherine stabbing Amadeus at the end of Akua's Folly and Black's likely way to kill Alaya(Malicia), as it would be deeply personal.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

And Scribe is handing Amadeus the knife.

Hitogami

Thanks for an epic chapter.
I love the plots and ploys of these people.

erebus42

Ooo, that is rather nasty. Yeah, if anything would force his hand this would probably be it. Solid play Scribe.

[Adrian_V](#)

And so Scribble turns into a magnificent bastard yandere!!! for some reason that makes me laugh

[Liliet](#)

"turns into"

Hoeru

Uff, Scribe, girl, you should have just told Cat. I bet 100% she would have lent a hand right then and there.

Nairne .01

I understand your sentiment here, but Cat has her own game and you have to remember she stabbed Black back then. Scribe is not going to just trust her just like that, especially while Black's fate is still undecided before the negotiations.

[Liliet](#)

No necessarily. Scribe and Catherine both have different kinds of loyalty to Black. Scribe is loyal to his *person*, whereas Catherine is loyal to his *intentions*, and both are willing to put one over the other. Scribe predicted it was not impossible there would be a conflict here – Catherine being against acting behind his back on principle, because she's interested in his *judgement* and trusts it in places where Scribe stops caring.

It's still entirely possible Catherine will out this scheme to Black just so his decision making wrt Malicia is clear and unimpeded.

Sparsebeard

From what I understand, everything she said was true, Malicia did launch the plot through Ime.

The only thing is that Eukodia might have been able to stop it, but didn't.

So whether or not Black knows that scribe deliberately botched her orders, it doesn't change anything at this point since, ultimately, Malicia is responsible for the consequences of her own actions (it might have been different if she had been thwarted but it's kind of a moot point now).

Insanenoodlyguy

If it had been stopped before it began, there would be more options. Black may have taken the same path, but in contrast to our last interlude, the woman who believes in him took away the choice.

hakureireimu

That's a great parallel.

[Liliet](#)

It is, in fact, currently unconfirmed.

>So was this really Malicia's ploy at all? It was true the Empress was only losing so much even if it became public she'd helped along the coup, considering the Grand Alliance had been founded in large part to bury her and the Accords would entail her removal regardless. This could be Malicia realizing that openly allying with Keter had burned too many bridges, and that the same alliances taking shape to drive back the Kingdom of the Dead might turn towards her if victorious. Sloppy work, by her standards, but then she had to be running out of tools to use. On the other hand, if I was frustrated in my efforts to establish alliances to the west she had to know I'd be headed east instead – and with a sword in hand. Shirt-sighted, yes, but honestly still a feasible mistake if Malicia was desperate enough. Which she had to be, with the Tribes having taken Foremen and the Dread Empire on the edge of rebellion from repeated defeats. Feasible, though, was why people thought the hooded figures with tattooed eyes on their skin were the true Eyes of the Empire instead of the chatty innkeepers. Feasible meant you stopped looking because you had the answer.

Catherine did not voice *this* part to Scribe, since it was only reasonable doubt and not solid foundation on which to accuse her.

Oh, and it's also important to everyone involved to understand just how much of a loose cannon Scribe is. Because she did, in fact, disobey Amadeus's order to pull everything back and *disallow the exact thing that happened*, and she fucked both Cordelia (making her deal with the coup) and Catherine (agreeing to a concession in her name) over in the process.

Fucking over allies for the sake of disputes over who should have the Tower is, in fact, the exact reason Praesi can't have nice things.

Cicero

Ah... that... makes sense. For the Scribe. In a twisted way.

And it actually... makes an odd sense as to why she wouldn't involve Catherine. Since she doesn't want to involve Cat is something that is in some sense a betrayal of Black. Even if her loyalty to Black compels her to do it.

Not because she cares for Cat's feelings, but because she doesn't want to hurt Black, and because she doesn't want to put any more strain on Cat's loyalty to Black.

Twisty twisty.

[Liliet](#)

Also, she probably thought Catherine could in fact be against giving Black what's essentially misinformation on principle. He's a clever storyweaver, and this kind of plot is exactly the kind of thing that could trip him up in subtleties – did Malicia really even turn on them, as Catherine has pondered?

Slider

...
Wow. I have no words. Like a certain other web serial said, my mind just drew some really complicated reasons as for why Scribe did what she did. And it only was something so simple yet so complex.

Soma

Glad to see that chekov's gun come down into play.

When Malicia comes up I'm still hopeful to see her story resolved fairly favorably for her. Malicia is kind of a sleeper, but, for the screen time she's had, out of our characters, she's among the top for having character. As a protagonist of another story, she's got a hell of a story.

I think it really rubbed me the wrong way, with how everyone took to calling Malicia stupid evil because she has fucked up and made mistakes, and how often and how eager some often seem for her death. Malicia has been eminently reasonable, given her position. People hate her for opposing Catherine, because everyone kinda hates when someone is antagonistic to our protagonist, for not solving the problems Catherine is solving, for not **being** Catherine.

Catherine's genius is defusing the conflicts with heroes and stories, and I can't quite condemn Malicia for not having that, and dealing with what she has, given the setting. Malicia correctly predicted failure was on the horizon and tried to prepare for it, and horror followed. But the setting is horrific. I don't think Malicia has earned more censure than Black, or maybe even Catherine. Yet.

Whatever happens, props to the writing. Whenever Malicia comes up it makes me think about how fascinating and complex her story about control is.

caoimhinh

I personally consider Malicia stupid evil as her complex about control led her to betray her closest friend in the world and fucked up her Empire and everything they had built together for the past 40 years.

In her paranoia of wanting to have power independent of her Black Knight (who had so far been the reason she was still alive and the one who put her on the throne in the first place), she fell into the trappings they had spent a lifetime avoiding.

She financed Akua and kept things secret to Black, and the moment she operated behind his back everything started going south.

They were effective and successful because they kept each other's worst impulses at bay, she broke that balance and they both suffered for it.

That said, her story and screentime are pretty great. Each moment dedicated to her shows an impressive character, even in her failures.

Soma

Yeah, but see that does irritate me. Calling Malicia stupid evil because she was paying attention to the situation, couldn't see a resolution, and began to make one without Black because she **knew** he would object isn't stupid. Wrong perhaps, but not stupid.

Black and Catherine are, by all accounts, insane. Archer directly states this to Catherine. A madman and his daughter apprenticed in his madness. Malicia would be stupid to not have had something in the works as a backup and blindly trust Black. Hell, you said it yourself, Black "had so far been the reason she was still alive and the one who put her on the throne in the first place". What kind of ruler, especially an autocratic ruler, could be comfortable with the amount of power Black had, and the lack of movement on any backup plan should the Grand Alliance solidify? Black's plan was essentially 'win'.

The tragedy of Black and Malicia's break is that it took two. Black asked for more trust, loyalty, and faith than you could expect even a hero to give, let alone your Empress. And Malicia even gave that for a time, before she broke faith. She broke faith only when the certainty of a war they could not handle began to crystallize. To call it 'stupid' that Malicia not be a tame beast of burden galls me.

Black had begun to invert the relationship so much that he was beginning to ask the Empress to defer to him at the cost of her safety and the strategic position, for what is by all accounts, his particular madness. We, the readers, know Black was right. But we have a bit of an advantage of perspective, don't we?

Javvies

Except that's not true.

The Grand Alliance only came into existence after Akua's Folly and the Doom of Liesse.

Prior to that, Hasenbach was having trouble getting the other nations to join the Grand Alliance. And even after, it still took her years to get them to agree.

In addition ... at that point, holding off Procer in a ground war would have been entirely practical, and there would have been limited risk of naval invasion, and they'd have had more forces available to assign to coastal protection duties. Because without the Doom of Liesse, Ashur might very well have not joined in. And even with Ashur, it is still a manageable risk.

Remember, at this point, no one in Praes has the slightest clue that the Stairway ritual exists, which means they can expect to concentrate their forces on defending the Vales, something entirely possible, and in the face of a Proceran invasion, they don't need to worry about a Callowan uprising.

The Vales, even if they were entirely unfortified, are a hugely favorable for the defense strategic choke point. And

they're heavily fortified. And there'd be plenty of time to build additional lines of field fortifications before they were needed, if that became necessary.

—

Malicia is, at heart, a Classic Stupid Evil Villain of the Old School. She got as far as she did because following Black's plan put her in power, and gave her the Conquest. And since she was actively winning and making clear gains, she didn't break from his strategy.

However ... during all that time, let's not forget that she was secretly putting mind control hooks into senior Legion officers.

She took a slow route to breaking the High Lords ... but instead of permanently breaking them as an institutional power base (and institutional threat to the stability of Praes) the way Black wanted to, she broke the High Lords to her will, instead.

Remember, Malicia is the one who wrote "The Death of the Age of Wonders". Albeit early on.

Akua's Folly and Malicia's plan for it is nothing if not an example of Age of Wonders style villainous thought at its worst.

She became what she was fighting ... if she truly was ever anything different.

Soma

Yeah, gonna have to disagree. Pretty sure it was made explicitly clear Cordelia was solidifying the grand alliance before the Doom of Liesse. Book Two Epilogue she Cordelia has flipped Ashur. Your argument falls apart pretty hard there, considering this was way before the Doom.

"'Hasenbach has flipped Ashur,' Alaya finally said"

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/01/04/epilogue-2/>

Interpreting Cordelia as not an immediate threat to Praes without the Doom is insulting to both Cordelia and Malicia.

Javvies

Eh ... sure, eventually Hasenbach would have been able to get her Grand Alliance and the Crusade without the Doom. Maybe it was Levant, not Ashur that needed the Doom. But the Doom definitely helped.

But without the Doom, it takes longer, there's less urgency behind it, and the Alliance members are less invested in it, and would be less willing to soak the casualties and keep going.
And the Praesi/Callowan forces have more time to build up.

But whenever the Crusade gets kicked off, there's still a manageable, if difficult and bloody, victory condition attainable for Praes/Callow. They have one hell of a defensive choke point in the Vales, and any seaborne invasion force is going to be limited in what it can accomplish quickly. And there'd be plenty of forces available to go after any attempted beachhead.
Crusades are not guaranteed wins for Good. They can and have lost before.

Remember, there's a reason why the last five or so Crusades have all been aimed at Keter, not Praes. It's because one of the Terribilis's broke a couple Crusades (3rd and 4th, IIRC) so badly they decided it wasn't worth it anymore and decided to go after Keter and the Dead King instead.

—

I note that you've ignored my other points about Malicia's flaws.

Soma

Your other points are irrelevant given your incorrect starting premises on which they hinged. Your arguments hinged on the grand alliance only coming together due to the Doom. That is explicitly incorrect in the text.

Being able to paint something in a villainous light is not evidence of stupidity, and, therefore, is irrelevant.

Also, compare the statements:

"The Grand Alliance only came into existence after Akua's Folly and the Doom of Liesse."

and

"Eh ... sure, eventually Hasenbach would have been able to get her Grand Alliance and the Crusade without the Doom.

Maybe it was Levant, not Ashur that needed the Doom.
But the Doom definitely helped.

But without the Doom, it takes longer, there's less urgency behind it, and the Alliance members are less invested in it, and would be less willing to soak the casualties and keep going."

You've moved the goalposts on me quite a bit here. The second is even a total concession that Malicia is reacting to a serious real world threat, and is simply trying to downplay the magnitude of the threat.

Black himself says in the epilogue of book two "Dear Cordelia might get her crusade, after all." Unless you want to start accusing Black of stupid evil, I think we can both assume that the crusade is a fairly pressing threat.

Black also said in the Book Two epilogue "Levant, now Ashur. She's trying to forge an alliance against us," so she already had the grand alliance set up. She just lacked the pretext which Black also knew would come.

"The tone was light, the implications were not. If Hasenbach managed to forge her broader, continental version of the League of Free Cities she only had to wait until the pretext for a Tenth Crusade fell into her lap. Amadeus held no illusions about the fact that it would."

The threat was there. There was just unresolved league business and a pretext left. The pretext is easy. Praes's involvement in the League business was concluded with Captain's death.

Javvies

You are focusing on one part – the least important part – and ignoring everything else that is independent of that part.

The founding of the Grand Alliance is the least important part of the conversation about Malicia having fucked up and being a Stupid Evil Old School Classic Villain at heart.

You are ignoring the larger and more important part of the discussion – the one where Praes/Callow had a viable path to a worthwhile victory condition without the Doom, and the existence of the Doom makes that already existing path to victory more difficult than it needed to be.

And the part where a younger Malicia wrote "The Death of the Age of Wonders".

And the fact that the Doom is very much a prime

example of Age of Wonders style Villainous thinking and subject to all the attendant pitfalls thereof.

And the part where Malicia didn't permanently break the High Lords as an institutional power base and threat to the stability of Praes, instead she broke them to her will for as long as she can hold them.

And the part about Malicia becoming what she fought – if she ever truly was different in the first place.

And the part about Malicia having been planting mind control hooks into senior Legion officers from the very beginning being indicative of her mindset.

Micke

IIRC Black and Malicia both agreed that a crusade was inevitable with Black's plan. Black believed resistance was quite possible if the stupid, hero-making evil super weapons of old were replaced with a Callow that hated Procer more. Malicia, however, believed that turning Callow against her in favour of a hero-making evil super weapon would scare any would be crusaders off.

[Mental Mouse](#)

>And the part about Malicia having been planting mind control hooks into senior Legion officers from the very beginning being indicative of her mindset.

Actually, that bit falls under "using the tools to hand". I mean, she's the Dread Empress, and that's one of her Aspects... specifically one titled **Rule**.

Ahad Mahmood

I specifically remember text aluuding that when Malicia stated her plan Cat was slightly swayed and even considered not destroying the resulting weapon. It is Black that said Hell No and destroyed. The fact that even Cat appeared to think the plan had some merits (although she was disgusted) is alot more telling than people realise.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine was actually pissed off as all hell at Black for destroying the weapon, and half of their conversation in Curtains was her being mad at him

for that. She was in fact sold on the idea that it would prevent the war.

And Amadeus said that he might not have destroyed it if not for his recent encounter with Bard highlighting the specific threat that *she* presents as immediately relevant.

Shveiran

I don't think the rest is independant to this point, actually. Claiming Malicia has possibly always been an Old School Villain in light of extreme measure she took when she saw no other way out is shaky footing, after all. If we agree that a Crusade was coming, then all the "Stupid Evil" actions – which really started with her part in the Doom of Liesse, so far as I can see – then it is hard to say she was not in dire straits.

The idea that the Vale could have held is, honestly, debatable. With this many countries and Heroes, Praes was, if not bound to at least very likely to be blindsided eventually by something someone brought to the table.

Sure, it was the Stairway in this version and Malicia didn't know it was coming. I argue however she had to know that SOMETHING would be coming. Too many old dragons coming out to play for us to be certain mountains and walls would be a reliable solution.

I mean, Arcadia alone is a known possibility for small groups of powerful individuals to move unimpeded; Black and Warlock was using it before it got trending, and it is not beyond the Heroes to coerce or make a deal with a powerful Fae to land a dozen Heroes this side of Vale. Are you telling me they couldn't have found a way to throw a stick in the wheel? Heck, this is just one exemple that we know is true, but there is no telling what else could have come out – and certainly there wasn't then.

Have you seen what Ashur ended up being capable to bring down at Thalassyna? Maybe a different Choir would have come out to intervene if the struggle turned bloody enough.

Again, one doesn't have to think Malicia was right – whether logically or morally – to make that choice, but I really agree with Soma in finding that characterizing Malicia's approach as stupid

or dumb or an old timer set in her way and unable to embrace change is not something I can agree on.

Malicia has been outmaneuvered by the forces in the world, who turned the young empress that penned the Death of the Age of Wonder and suggested striking economic deals with Good countries to tie their prosperity together into a woman that was certain usVSthem was the only game in town and that Praes couldn't stand alone against the world and hope to win.

If you back someone into a corner, they come out swinging. It's not recklessness to take a gamble when you believe you are doomed if nothing changes and that the results could fix your situation – and she was not stupid to believe what she did.

Just wrong. Allegedly.

lennymaster

One, the cracks between Black and her started showing way earlier (mindcontrolling his officers for example).

Second, corner or not, the outcome of magical WMDs is inevitable, all she ensured by backing that horse was trading a possible to maybe even probable defeat for a guaranteed one.

Thirdly, nobody has answered so far what her motivation for leaving the highborn structure in place was. Sure it is a devil you know, but that devil has consistently and inevitably fucked up time and time again. At some point you have to pull the plug or the devil you know will eat you, whether you know it or not.

It comes down to her wanting to rule Preas, and him wanting to turn Preas into something worthy of being ruled, much less being proud of. She disagreed with him on that front from day one, but never bothered to carry out that discussion and just let him work without bothering to tell him about the difference in their outlooks. He put ultimate faith in her, but she did not do the same for him. Thus the reason for Ranger and Scribe to distrust her, the two people both far enough away to be objective but close enough to see it.

Lastly, without the Doom Preas would not have been alone. She would have had Callow on her side, something that definitely was not the case afterwards, no matter whether Cat agreed or not. As to why she did agree? Because she was young, inexperienced and high on the power of her in that

moment shaping Name. She just stated last chapter how dangerous that last one can be.

Javvies

Crusades are not auto wins for Good. They can and have been beaten back before.

Remember, one of the Terribilis's shut down consecutive Crusades hard enough that the last five? Crusades have all been aimed at Keter and the Dead King instead of Praes.

Based on what was known at the time, it would have been entirely doable to successfully defend and reach a point where the Crusade ends. Admittedly, casualties probably would have been heavy, but the exchange ratio would have been heavily in favor of Praes/Callow.

And remember, without the Doom, there will be far less commitment and dedication to push through despite the casualties on the part of individual Alliance members (and their troops).

The Doom is the difference between "no reason not to Crusade and kill Evil" and "we have to kill them now before they use it or build something like it again".

Oh, sure, some of the more Story aware Heroes likely would still be pretty dedicated to removing Callow from Villainous rule ... but that's not an insurmountable problem either.

Malicia spent the better part of 40 years trying to build bridges, or at least, rebuild the foundations to build bridges. The Doom wiped out all that effort.

Liliet

This.

Soma

I focus one part because the rest of your arguments are irrelevant. They are vague assertions, and contestable points in their own right. They are not support, they are the potential for supporting points, if you developed them. However, leaving them vague and not addressing potential criticism of many multiple points is an effective way to attempt to shift the work onto your fellow interlocutor. To complain that your partner in

conversation is being unfair because they will not do your work for you is not an effective way to have a conversation, though it is an effective way to sway a credulous audience. Performance or reasoning, what is your purpose?

“And the part where Malicia didn’t permanently break the High Lords as an institutional power base and threat to the stability of Praes, instead she broke them to her will for as long as she can hold them.

And the part about Malicia becoming what she fought – if she ever truly was different in the first place.

And the part about Malicia having been planting mind control hooks into senior Legion officers from the very beginning being indicative of her mindset.”

The above is very similar to, if not exactly, what is referred to as a Gish gallop.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gish_gallop

>During a Gish gallop, a debater confronts an opponent with a rapid series of many specious arguments, half-truths, and misrepresentations in a short space of time, which makes it impossible for the opponent to refute all of them within the format of a formal debate. In practice, each point raised by the “Gish galloper” takes considerably more time to refute or fact-check than it did to state in the first place. The technique wastes an opponent’s time and may cast doubt on the opponent’s debating ability for an audience unfamiliar with the technique, especially if no independent fact-checking is involved or if the audience has limited knowledge of the topics.

I’m of the opinion that the many multiple arguments fall into the category of specious, and that they do so unintentionally.

I’d like to take the time here to say, though I’m being very critical, I’m not trying to insult you or cast aspersions on your character. It is possible to be irritated with a line of argument or reasoning, more so than the person you are arguing with, and that is the case here. I’ve made arguments like this before, and likely will again when I’m not paying attention.

The only real way I can deal with this style is to point out that the arguments you are making cannot hold water as they currently are, they require further development, and that it is not my responsibility to develop arguments against myself in a conversation.

Not only that, but we've significantly strayed from the original, and most potentially damning, example of Malicia's behaviour that could be argued to be stupid evil. That would be the Doom of Liesse. I've addressed such arguments because they are the most relevant; without a particularly damning incident it is very difficult to call Malicia 'stupid evil'.

surrealgoblin

This is my first comment here, so please forgive me if I'm not following proper etiquette in my response.

While I think that Malicia certainly made the wrong call in condoning Liesse, I don't think that or sparing the High Born were stupid evil decisions.

As I see it, the reason that her and Black were able to work together as closely as they did for as long as they did is because they shared the same goal of breaking the story of Praes's growth and destruction. That goal means that it is possible to both win the crusade (drive off the forces of Good, prevent them from taking Praes and turning into it into Crusader States again) and lose the war. If the crusade fails but destroys the farmland in Southern Callow such that Praes cannot become economically dependent on it, that is a loss. If the Crusade fails but the attempt drives the people of Callow deeper into a national identity built upon resisting Praes's invasions such that Callowan hero's are leading rebellions and aiding the 11th or 12th Crusades, that is also a loss. The continued spawning of Callowan heroes inevitably leads to Black and Malicia's defeat, and even a failed crusade maintains the story of a plucky kingdom trying to win back its independence from the Evil Empire. Whenever Malicia talks about victory and defeat, she isn't taking an excursively military view, but a political view, and a long term political view at that. Trying to create WMDs to give the tenth Crusade too high a cost was a terrible idea imo, but it does make sense.

She only put that plan into action once it was clear that Ashur was going to join. She had the next second citizen in her pocket so she only needed to keep the Crusade from beginning long enough for the current second citizen to die before the emerging alliance lost the majority of its navy and a good portion of its strength. Cat's existence shows that the Callowan narrative was starting to fragment, and the longer that could have happened before a showdown with the West, the better the chances of Callow siding with Praes over Procer. Perhaps most importantly, Malicia's decades long plan to destroy the High Born was within a couple of years of coming to fruition which would free the Legions to be able to adequately defend Callow without risking a revolution on the home front AND signal the Praesi shifting away from the narrative of Evil Conquerors who must lose in order to be able to continue conquering. Lesse was a gamble that tools from the age of wonders would be enough to slow down the crusade just enough. Even if it brought the entire continent down on Praes in the end, even if it lead to Praes losing the crusade and Malicia's head on a pike that would be worth it because she was within years of the only victory that matters; an economically and narratively interdependent Praes and Callow.

Which bring us to how sparing the High Lords was not stupid evil. I think we can all agree that militarily, it would have been possible for the Calamaties and the Legions to defeat the High Lords following/during the civil war. Maybe it would have been too costly, and the country would have been too weak to hold Callow and hold of its neighbors. Maybe Malicia would not have been able to afford keeping Procer at war long enough for the occupation to take root. But that is neither here nor there. Whatever bureaucrats or minor nobility the Tower put in charge of keeping order and maintaining sacrifices to prevent famine would just have seen themselves as newly minted High Lords even if not officially recognized. They would have just gone on sharpening their iron against the tower because everyone knows that even a lowborn can rise to the top if they are clever and ambitious enough. It would not have changed the narrative. That, again, is the only victory that matters. Its not enough to kill the High Lords, Malicia needs to kill the idea that the High Lords are needed. In order to do that she needed to keep Callow under her thumb (to remove the narrative

need for the High Lords to bring glory and hope to a pretty hopeless and desperate people) and tie Praes economically to Callow and Callowan crops (to remove the economic and spiritual need for the High Lords as the people with the sorcerous knowledge of how to feed the people through ritual sacrifice.) At the same time that she removed the need for the High Lords, she slowly stripped them of their power and wealth, so that when their eventual defeat came, they would go with a whimper. Her end game is to make them appear so hollow, unneeded, unimportant and ineffective that no one would want to step into their shoes. Rooting them out of their seats of power may have killed them, but Praesi are used to their heroes (lower case) dying in a blaze of glory. That would only have strengthened the story that Praesi are elegant and powerful, and that strength and guile are all that you need to take what you wish.

I swear I am not a Malicia fangirl. She is actually one of my least favorite characters in the story. I think that she made a lot of mistakes, breaking Black's trust not the least of them. But I also think that the only thing at all close to stupid evil she has done is make a deal with Keter, and that she is one of the best examples of a truly evil villainess who ISN'T stupid evil that I have seen.

p.s. I am defining "stupid evil" as doing evil for its own sake, aka Kairos.

p.p.s. Is this too long?

Andrew Mitchell

Welcome! p.p.s. Is this too long?

No, not too long. 😊 Pretty much the same length as many other posts in this very long discussion many commenters have been involved in.

Soma

Not a Malica fan girl? HOW DARE YOU!

All joking aside, excellent comment. Definitely not too long.

I definitely agree with your point on the high lords. Your analysis of Malicia's possible usage of the Liesse weapon is particularly interesting.

I think I've always assumed Malicia trying to survive, but the idea that she went into that knowing she would die in order to use it as a stalling measure for a narrative victory is particularly interesting. That's really thought provoking and opens up a new way of thinking about Malicia, and what she might have been doing this entire time offscreen too.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also from that epilogue:

> "That girl [Cordelia] is us," Alaya said, "forty years ago, looking at the stars from a different land."

And an ironic note:

> "One day," Alaya continued, "we will have foreign allies who are not complete imbeciles. By sheer dint of odds, it has to happen eventually."

Well, Cat will. As an aside, I'd missed or forgotten that Akua purposely went for the Name of Diabolist.

[Liliet](#)

The fact that they were calling *Kairos Theodosian* a complete imbecile just seals the amazing irony so much.

medailyfun

The Crusade was a sure thing before Liesse happened. In Cordelia's eyes it was just the tool Procer desperately needed, so they would definitely find the proper casus belli, like Free Cities involvement or something else. Bard would have provided something for sure.

NerfGlastigUaine

Yeah, both Black and Malicia were certain Crusade would happen. Their disagreement was on whether the Hellgate ritual would be a deterrent or the instrument of their ruin.

[Liliet](#)

>Prior to that, Hasenbach was having trouble getting the other nations to join the Grand Alliance. And even after, it still took her years to get them to agree.

What? Years? Where did you get years?

Akua's Folly took place in summer. *Next spring* Callow was getting invaded. It took all of half a year for the

Crusade to *mobilize*. All Akua's Folly did was accelerate the timeline and give the Crusade better narrative base (which Amadeus successfully broke by breaking the fortress and the Empire).

>Because without the Doom of Liesse, Ashur might very well have not joined in.

No, Cordelia already had them at that point. They were licking their chops at the Praesi coast, Akua's Folly was barely more than an excuse, for them specifically.

>Remember, Malicia is the one who wrote "The Death of the Age of Wonders". Albeit early on.

Yeah =x

lennymaster

The Crusade was inevitable, the creation of the Doom however did accelerate it, dramatically so, as well as provide a Damocles sword hanging over the Callow Preas relationship, possible distracting factors on the outside, Free cities, rattling hordes, other Named springing up and possible problems in the Alliances political ties and last but not least in the shape of a gaint Hero bait at the same time.

The Doom was like a Villian standing in front of a Chasm next to an altar/ under a gaint chandelier/ next to their chained up monster/ the mincontroled/Stockholmed victim while threatening the beaten Heroes loved ones/ holding a speech about how they are not so different after all.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, but it's less obvious in-universe than you'd think. Much like how it was not obvious in-universe to Cordelia that letting her Princes and Princesses believe they would get spoils from Callow and then sending them through the northern passage would absolutely doom that expedition narratively.

Or how it was not obvious to Catherine.

Or how it would not even have been obvious to Black, had Bard not just killed Captain.

caoimhinh

It is beyond wrong and falls into stupid because it was something they had actively and consciously been avoiding for over 40 years and was the very reason they were

successful. The very moment she started doing things on her own without *her most loyal and capable partner* she fell right back into the tendencies and impulses they had spent a lifetime avoiding.

It is not just a mistake, because she was fully aware of what she was doing, and knew better than to do it, yet she did it anyways because she was following her emotions instead of acting rationally.

“What kind of ruler, especially an autocratic ruler, could be comfortable with the amount of power Black had” doesn’t exactly applies, because *Black was her power*.

It wasn’t some random guy rising to power or a rival faction gaining influence, it was the very guy who put her in the throne having the power that kept her in the throne.

He had always been in that position, that was how they worked, he was the strategic military man and she was the schemer politician. Then she went and screwed things trying to get her hands on a weapon that only painted a gigantic target on her for the Heavens to destroy her.

The “she didn’t see any other option” is an excuse, Malicia said that to Catherine and Amadeus, but we saw things from her point of view and the real reason was she wanted her own power.

Besides, they had plenty of plans for all nations (Black even managed to adapt his plans in a single night to force an acceleration of them when he realized he was dying), had a strong base of power as shown by Catherine and Amadeus managing to fend off the Crusaders even without Akua’s hell weapon.

But in a world ruled by Narrative, the ruler of the Evil Empire started walking the steps of her predecessors and thus condemned her country (since a Named ruler’s story is her country’s story) to suffering a Story-fueled Crusade, a secession of the conquered provinces (which restored their status as an independent nation) the loss of her most trusted aides and an internal conflict of multiple rebellions boiling (Callow’s, the Goblins’ and the High Lords, plus maybe Black’s).

The moment she didn’t have Amadeus putting a brake to her impulses she went straight to Stupid Evil territory, and for a stupid emotional reason: an obsession with control and distrust of her freaking best friend in the world.

“Black asked for more trust, loyalty, and faith than you could expect even a hero to give, let alone your Empress.” He didn’t ask for it, he *earned* that over and over, and they needed that to survive and succeed. I have to put special emphasis on this, because **it is extremely stupid to be**

distrustful of the guy that had spent most of his life keeping her alive.

Mental Mouse

? The “she didn’t see any other option” is an excuse, Malicia said that to Catherine and Amadeus, but we saw things from her point of view and the real reason was she wanted her own power.

With some reason. Consider Malicia as not Black’s *ruler*, but his former *protege*, who he’d raised up to a throne. But now Black had found another *protege*, even more in tune with his methods and goals... who he was likewise raising to a throne. And this, after they’d taken the trouble to conquer Callow and wipe out its prior royal line. Jealousy yes... but not completely unwarranted! Black was changing their original plan (Callow as a vassal state) and creating a competitor to Malicia. Hmm... just when did Cat first hear That Song?

caoimhinh

So you now argue jealousy-fueled paranoia?
Again, that’s still not a rational choice, it’s an emotional one, and jealousy is one of the most stupid emotions, it blinds you to reality and makes a person create their own fictional version of what’s happening instead of listening to reason.

“Black had found another protege, even more in tune with his methods and goals... who he was likewise raising to a throne”

See, that seems true, but is missing the point, Black was raising his *replacement*, as thinking himself immortal was hubris and he is too practical a man to not have a back-up plan.

Catherine was to be the person who would carry on his goals and further advance his plan towards the dream of making Praes something that didn’t depend on blood rituals and invasions to sate their bellies.

As a Callowan Hero-minded person wielding a Praesi Villain name, Catherine would be the final piece to cement the Praes-Callow unification. She would have been the overall Governor of Callow and de facto Queen just like Amadeus had been the de facto King, but she would also be the new protector of Malicia as the next Black Knight, she would have been the one to consolidate the union between the two countries and make Callowans start seeing themselves as Praesi too, and having the Name of Black Knight would tie Catherine to Praes effectively, given the cultural significance and weight of that story, which Malicia knew.

Are you willingly ignoring how many times Amadeus made his line-that-can-not-be-crossed clear? He always told Catherine that Malicia must rule, *at every single chance he got*.

Although it is true that an outside observer could have seen things in the light of "a rebel is in the making, gathering influence", Malicia was not really that much of an outsider to not know the true nature of things, because Black kept her updated with both reports and personal conversations, and Malicia also had lots of spies observing Catherine. She knew what Amadeus' plans were, yet she focused on how she was going to lose direct control of Callow, when he was carrying out the plan of making a better nation for her to rule and live on, she narrow-mindedly focused on *the possibility* of how she was going to rule a smaller nation, willfully discarding everything else Amadeus said to her, and a lifetime of successes on his plans, instead she acted behind his back and screwed it for everyone.

Mental Mouse

Yeah, that's what Amadeus was thinking. But he was spending much of his time off in Callow, or otherwise gallivanting around, while Malicia was back in the Tower marinating in Praesi suspicion, scheming, and skullduggery... not to mention stories. Remember, Malicia was never as good at dodging stories as Black was, and the scenario I just described is a classic story indeed. Even while Cat and Black were doing something entirely different, I don't find it too implausible that Malicia might have been caught up in it.

Soma

I'd like to address something in your arguments that is increasingly seen out in the wild around the world. You've begun to speak about emotions and rationality, and somewhat have begun to treat them as characteristics rather than processes. This is important because processes can wildly vary given the context they operate in. What are though of as Characteristics much less so.

Rationality is a process of using logic on a set of assumptions and so then coming up with a conclusion, examining the conclusion, and updating and examining your set of assumptions.

Emotion is actually surprisingly similar, but less fine grained. Emotion often gives you some very generic conclusion very quickly, but has a larger margin of

error. Emotion is worthwhile in and of itself, but not always the best tool for a job. One way to understand emotion and rationality might be to look at them like one would a heuristic and an algorithm. Emotion even has value beyond the immediately practical, as often emerges from complex systems.

Emotion and rationality are processes that often do effect each other. They can be complimentary or discordant, but one is not inherently better than the other. This is because they do different things, even though they have some overlap at times.

Because emotion is easily denigrated, partly because modern society fetishises reason and rationality (often misunderstanding those things in doing so), accusations of emotionality over reason are often used to discredit a person. It is very hard to prove something about one's subjective experience, and, therefore, hard to refute the accusation. The lack of objective refutation is something many credulous audiences will take for proof.

Malicia is working with a different set of assumptions than you are. You trust Black completely. Malicia doesn't. She trusts him a lot, she even loves him, as he does her, but she doesn't trust him completely. She has good reason to believe there are limits on how much she should trust Black.

Black is the type of person that he was written as having the following little bit in the story "If he'd been the kind of man to pray, he would have prayed then. But he was not, so instead the gears began to turn and he wondered how many of the people he loved he would have to kill, before it was all over."

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/09/20/villainous-interlude-cadenza/>

Malicia is wise to the fact the second she is *interpreted* as a liability to Black's goals she is in mortal danger. Black is not a Hero. He is a villain that will murder his loved ones the second they become obstacles to his goals. We may like him, but he is a villain. You are arguing for complete loyalty to someone who uses loyalty as a tool and will discard it the second it is an ineffective tool to achieve his goals. If you work from the starting assumptions Malicia is likely to have, complete loyalty is probably irrational.

Lets look at a possible set of assumptions for Malicia:

Black is brilliant. Black is fallible. Black could reasonably make an attempt on my life. Most of our interests align. Not all of our interests align. Some are in opposition. It is possible our interests could increasingly diverge. Black is inclined to kill people in opposition to him, and will attempt to kill people who are obstacles who he feels can't be practically removed any other way. Given the presence of outside actors, I cannot completely whether I am a liability or not. I want to live.

Should Malicia trust black completely? From this set of assumptions, no. Is this the exact set of assumptions she is working from? Probably not. However, I think that it should be pretty clear it is *possible* Malicia is working from a reasonable set of assumptions where she should not trust Black completely. It is not clear she is operating purely on emotion or divorced from reason.

It is easy to make an accusation that someone's mind and ability to reason is being clouded by emotion, and often such an accusation is rhetorically persuasive. That does not mean it is a well reasoned argument that someone is being emotional, or is not being rational. Rationality interacts with sets of assumptions which often wildly differ, and so results often wildly differ.

caoimhinh

This here, your answer and the way it was expressed? This is what I love about debates, people having contrary positions and still defend them with great sense and solid argumentation, it's awesome.

Andrew Mitchell

♥

caoimhinh

About the processes of emotion and rationality, I don't completely agree. I agree that emotional decisions are also processes, but I think the difference lies in that they are based on different sets of *variables* in their iterations rather than using different assumptions. (Or perhaps I misunderstood you and we are saying the same but on different terms?)

For example, the decision of whether to punch someone on the face after they insult you or hit you.

The *logical process* will consider the action in terms of the consequence utility, benefits and harms; while the *emotional process* will consider the action in terms of venting off the frustration or anger felt at the moment, the emotional process will be in terms of like and dislike, feel good or feel bad, even ethics and morals.

Also, rational processes tend to look on the long term, while an emotional one would look at the short term.

More processes than one of each type are run in parallel and sometimes one is integrated into the other

Both types of processes are run side by side in a person's mind and one of them eventually wins (sometimes the processes are in agreement), which of the processes was in control at the moment determines the nature of the action taken.

It's not even a matter of which action was taken, but rather what was taken into consideration, what defines if it was a rational decision or an emotional decision.

Got angry but was scared of being hit again so didn't strike back? Emotional response.

Got angry and was scared of being hit again, but there are people watching and if you don't earn respect they will mock you, so you strike back? Emotional response, but different action.

Case in point: Malicia knows on a conscious level that Amadeus would not betray her, yet she has a pathological need for control, (Tikoloshe even stated that Malicia "*craves control the way a starving man craves a meal*") so despite her rational processes telling her that Black was never plotting to seize the Tower from her, her emotional processes prompt her to take measures "just in case". She has at least twice admitted that she knows Amadeus is not disloyal, and then she follows with the words *and yet* "there can be only one sitting in the throne of the Tower".

What her rational mind tells her is an unnecessary and even potentially harmful action, her emotional part makes it so that she can't be at ease unless she takes that course of action.

Considering Malicia's motivations, statements, and her disregard of both the history and lessons learned during the past decades, and her disregard of the

potential consequences in favor of personal satisfaction; her course of action can only be called emotional.

Financing Akua's weapon behind Black's back was not something done in cold logic and rational thoughts, it was something done to satisfy an emotional need.

Soma

A value for a variable is, more or less, an assumption. Saying something is an assumption is just saying that thing is taken for given at the start of the process. A set of assumptions is the set of information you perform a process on. Different processes can use either the same or different sets of assumptions. I don't think we have a disagreement there, I might just have worded something clunkily.

I think where we disagree is somewhere around how Amadeus would act and Malicia's knowledge of that.

You said, "Malicia knows on a conscious level that Amadeus would not betray her," and I don't agree with this. I think Black would definitely betray her should it get him what he wants. I think Black absolutely would kill her if she was an obstacle and killing her was a convenient way to remove her as an obstacle. I think Malicia is also aware of this. I think Malicia is reasoning from a place where the prior is an assumption, in addition to an assumption that she cannot completely control whether she is an obstacle to Amadeus given the presence of actors outside of their relationship who have, would, and will, attempt to further estrange the two.

You say her distrust of Amadeus is pathological, and I'm coming from a place where not trusting Amadeus to always look out for one's well being (especially should his interest ever possibly run counter to yours) is reasonable, rational, and likely necessary for one's survival.

caoimhinh

Malicia has admitted in her thoughts that she knows Amadeus was not planning to seize the Tower from her in the Epilogue of Book 3.

I'm sure she also did in at least another occasion, but right now I don't remember in which chapter that happened.

Fun and ironic fact: at the beginning of Epilogue 3, Malicia is actually mad because she considers she had put blind trust in Amadeus and he betrayed her expectations when he **Destroyed** the weapon.

Shveiran

You seem to be among those that give great meaning to Malicia having agents in the Legions (you know, her Legions; the Legions of the country she leads); personally, I don't see what's the matter. It's not like she was planning to have Amadeus killed or anything. Is it that strange for a ruler to not want all her power base to be dependant on the loyalty AND survival of one of her allies – that also happens to tussle with Heroes as a job description? I mean, yeah, maybe it's not NICE, but... I really can't fault her for it.

The divide between her and Amadeus was not born JUST out of a control freak syndrome. Sure, Alaya had an hard time feeling in another's power – which a) given her history is pretty damn understandable and b) she kept in check for decades still.

WHat pushed her to act behind Amadeus back was the certainty (well-founded, incidentally) that Amadeus could not contemplate a different resolution to the conflict than kicking in the Crusaders' teeth until they stop coming. She simply believed that his solution would not have worked, and so chose to make a different gamble.

Yes, perhaps she was wrong. So?

This doesn't make her an out of balance control freak. Just someone that knows the house is burning down, unwilling to bet her life on your attempts to kick down the door and oping instead to try her luck jumping the window.

lennymaster

"She simply believed that his solution would not have worked, and so chose to make a different gamble."

You mean gambling on the kind of weapon that is the litteral origin story of a Hero? Designed to counter/destroy EXACTLY that weapon? Just imagine it: the humble smiths son out of town that faithful day when it was destroyed, killing everyone he loved?

Does anything, ANYTHING about the Doom not scream angelic intervention, plucky, unlikely Heroes literally swarming you to death and prophecies announcing a destined one to defeat you.

A desperate cornered animal, chewing its own paw of to

escape the trap is one thing, seeing a tiger come for you and cutting your own leg off to distract it momentarily while you hop away is an entirely different prospect altogether.

Shveiran

The idea that this was narrative suicide has been brought up several times by you and others; and I personally do believe that to be a very reasonable evaluation of her tactics.

Where I disagree with you, is when we move from “made a narrative faux pass” to “that was a dumb mistake”.

Yes, narrative is an actual force in this universe. But how many characters are aware of that enough that they balance each and every action they take in terms of story shapes? I can name a few easily, but it is a huge leap to go from there to the assumption that only idiots don’t think like that.

Cat thinks like that, and Black, certainly. Pilgrim, Death King, the Wandering Bard obviously. Hanno somewhat. I am probably missing a few, but it isn’t a long list, is it?

Even among the Calamities, people that kept villaining as long as Alaya did, how many are narrative-aware? Was Sabah? Was Warlock? The latter was aware enough he knew about Patterns of Three, but what else did he ever say to suggest he was considering this kind of details?

Black spent his life dealing with stories, because he spent most of his time dealing with the settling of Callow and killing Villains or Heroes. Malicia, on the other hand, spent it handling economics and trade, scheming and plotting with nobles, handling spies, and playing chess with foreign leaders over the globe. She never dealt in stories. Sure, that’s how the world works. It’s clear as day to us READERS, but you barely need two hands to count the people on Calernia that share that knowledge. Malicia knows it in theory, but has never practiced that knowledge because she was using a different set of skills.

That’s not being a moron, that’s having a blind spot.

caoimhinh

Wekesa likely knew a lot about Narrative, I’m not completely sure if he also thought in terms of stories, but he at least was shown to know about how

it affects Named. I seem to recall he had made some research about it, and after a lifetime fighting and killing other Named, he must have acquired quite a bit of insight on the subject.

It's shown in how he knew that Black taking a Squire was signing a death sentence, and how he stated that when Catherine stopped being the Squire then Amadeus was revitalized. He also was shown musing about the evolution of Named abilities during his fight with the Hedge Wizard.

Whether Malicia is as aware of Narrative Force as Amadeus is debatable, but she should know about it to some level, and not only because of spending a lifetime working with Amadeus, who never makes a move without taking that in consideration.

At the very least, Malicia showed she had knowledge of Narrative when she was justifying her financing of Akua's weapon to Amadeus and Catherine, she explicitly said that the Heavens were going to keep going at them until they died, so the best way to survive that unwinnable fight was to never fight at all. Her reasoning to why she would not be trapped in the Story of an Old School Evil Villain was that she wasn't directly involved in the manufacturing of the weapon, and she was not planning to use it at all, only have it as a deterrent, hoping that the fear of her use of the weapon would make everyone not mess with Praes.

(That is, of course, wishful thinking. As simply having the weapon already made her a target, and even after the destruction of the weapon they remained a target for the Crusade. Since both for Narrative and realistically, other countries would have to deal with a Praes that had such a weapon, it needed to be gone and they would not stop until the weapon was destroyed as it posed a danger too big to be ignored but not enough to actually make them submit. Some of them would take it as a cultural and religious mandate to destroy it, and she knew it. It was a doomed enterprise. And the fact she willfully ignored this after her decades of political experience with other nations shows that she was acting on her emotions rather than thinking rationally.)

So to my understanding, she was as aware as Black about the risks that Akua's Doom Weapon carried and what it signified Narratively, but disagreed with him on whether she could avoid the death trap. Malicia was willing to take that risk, so she took measures

to possess that weapon, Amadeus was not willing to take that risk, so he **Destroyed** it.

And her reason for taking that risk was because she pathologically needs to have control, common sense be damned.

[Liliet](#)

>It is not just a mistake, because she was fully aware of what she was doing, and knew better than to do it, yet she did it anyways because she was following her emotions instead of acting rationally.

She did not, in fact, know better. She had a coherent plan which she believed would work, and yes, her estimation of factors did get impacted by emotional reasoning, but that does not make her either "stupid" or "evil", only at her limit of incompetence.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

It's a funny thing, when Black took an apprentice that he was utterly unsurprised to learn was hearing the Tower climbing song.

It very much took two to tango, here.

Their relationship is *incredible* and that it took as much as it did to strain it is *incredible*.

[Liliet](#)

>I personally consider Malicia stupid evil as her complex about control led her to betray her closest friend in the world and fucked up her Empire and everything they had built together for the past 40 years.

>In her paranoia of wanting to have power independent of her Black Knight (who had so far been the reason she was still alive and the one who put her on the throne in the first place), she fell into the trappings they had spent a lifetime avoiding.

Not quite.

We've seen her POV, and we've seen her dismiss thoughts about Amadeus possibly betraying her out of hand, with 'okay that's where i draw the line on the paranoia'.

And we've seen this:

>Guilt never came. She would not apologize for taking measures preventing him from throwing away his life in a hopeless war, however slighted he felt by the truth that he had become a foe to his own survival. That was on his own head. Not even love would make her neck if she was in the right.

She is not exactly the only one of Amadeus's friends thinking he had a death wish, and they were not exactly proven wrong about it.

Oh, she underestimated his skill and understanding, failed to trust in his judgement where she factually should have. But how would she know to trust it when he'd been going "you are smarter than me and you know better" for 40 years? She felt responsible for everything, and she did not feel like she could take a blind leap of faith on his ability when he was blatantly leading the story up to his own death (WHICH HE FACTUALLY WAS, IN TAKING A SQUIRE).

She underestimated him and misjudged him, and her blind spot of having spent most of her lifetime at court and having come to think of it as representative of the entire Empire smacked her hard on this.

>This, this is why you cannot rule. Because you're not interested in ruling Praes, only in securing a war camp for your pissing match with the Heavens. You cannot butcher your way into having a different homeland, Black. It's a pretty plan you laid out. But you are not the only living man in Praes, and so it fails. Because the Empire is not an instrument, it is a nation and that nation wants things. It will not docilely wait until your point is made.

(she's wrong, the vast majority is with him on this)
(this is the mistake and the misjudgement)

Malicia and Black both were weaving something incredibly complex, and both reached the limit of their incompetence. Amadeus failed to explain to her what he was doing and all the nuances he was taking into account, she failed to understand it on her own.

What happened to the two of them was a fucking tragedy, not.. her being undeserving.

lennymaster

No she failed by putting everything on a absolutely, undeniably doomed superweapon. I would bet Bard was somehow involved in this, but it does not change the fact that she supported a plan ending in a magical WMD. In a world that litteraly hands mindlessly grieving teenagers weapons that

can cut steel like a hot knife cuts butter and equips them supernatural powers as well as a year long montage compressed into a few months realworldtime to hone their fighting skill.

Liliet

Fun fact! Multiple descriptions of the situation can be true at the same time. Your “no” does not actually proceed to contradict my explanation.

When analyzing characters’ decision making in PGTE, it’s important that we the audience have several important advantages over them:

- we accept easily that things work on story logic, because to us it *is* a story and therefore the idea intuitively makes sense. Furthermore, a lot of the fandom are people who hang out on tvtropes / like other meta fiction, and have the same kind of nuanced understanding of what story logic *is* as medical doctors have of anatomy;
- we are detached from the immediate emotionality of the situations, and often only understand the characters’ emotions through analysis. So what the situation is in a more global structural sense is primary to us, and what it *feels like* from the inside is secondary and does not skew the position. Erratic’s writing style particularly contributes to this because he tends to be much more clear about *what is actually happening* than *what the characters feel on the topic* (as opposed to e.g. ward by wildbow, for example);
- we can, on a certain level, trust the narration and the writer’s intent. We have Word of God statements explaining what erratic is *trying* to do; we can freely assume none of the characters are a coma patient whose dying dream this will turn out to be at the end. So when things are *implied* in the narrative by common convention of how narrative works, we will often take it for granted that they are true in a way that is entirely non-obvious in-universe. It’s very typical in fandom to assume that Catherine is right about everything, simply because she is the protagonist and we have the meta knowledge that that makes her much more likely to be right than wrong, on most occasions. The same applies to Amadeus, her teacher – because he was the audience’s source on the basic foundation of how the world works, we take it as obvious that he’s right about it – and it’s entirely non-obvious to other characters in-universe, because they learned about how things work from sources other than his explanations (notably, lived experience). Few adults genuinely assume that That One Person they’ve met has

unique insight on how the universe works that should a priori be assumed right even if it seems counterintuitive – but we can assume that in fiction just by how the writer positions them in the narrative, and that colors our perception;

– HINDSIGHT BIAS. When reading Book 3 for the first time, did you, personally, hold the position that the superweapon plan (YOU KNOW, THE ONE THAT CATHERINE AT THE TIME WAS ONBOARD WITH AND WAS MAD AT BLACK FOR RUINING) was stupid? Maybe you did, which would make you smarter than me. I didn't like it, but I didn't think it was doomed. It was not, in fact, obvious until it was explained, and even then the tipping point for even *Amadeus*, the main ideologue of the "politics must follow story fu" movement, was that *Bard exists and actively opposes them*.

No, it was not obvious in-universe.

Soma

I really appreciate you making this clearer than I think I was able to.

The understanding that people in the guide are working with different sets of information is really important. Readers having all the information, or, at least, way more than any single character, really changes the readers experience from what any of the characters would experience. You put this really well.

[Liliet](#)

I really, really like how well Guide works the "different people have both different information about what's going on and different priors from their perspective/experience" point.

caoimhinh

That's still an emotional decision, not made with a clear mind. She knows perfectly well that Akua's weapon is something from the Old School Evil Villains, yet she engineered its creation and financed Akua, when she should know what such story signified. She accused Black of trying to be cleverer than Fate, but it's actually she who is trying that; Malicia's reasoning for thinking she would be safe is that she assumes that since she didn't make the weapon or even used it, she will not be trapped by the Story nor bound by it, as she would simply be the person who has the weapon. Which is stupid and wishful thinking, because she is still a Villain, the ruler of the Evil Empire, and

simply having that weapon makes her a target for the Narrative Force.

And that's still not the reason why she did it, but rather the reason she felt reassured of her safety in doing it. The reason behind it is still her desire for control. Everything we have seen about Malicia's actions behind Black's back effectively shows us that those were not based on logic and reason, but rather emotional decisions and actions taken due to personal issues.

What you quoted was Malicia finding justifications for her actions after the fact. That was after Black had **Destroyed** Akua's weapon. We saw Malicia's motivations much earlier in the story.

Remember what you told me a few days ago, about people's mind working in a way that makes them convince themselves of being in the right? That's Malicia right there.

That fragment you quoted is not an omniscient narrator stating facts, is Alaya going *"I'm right about this, I did this for love, totally not out of paranoia or fear of losing control. Yeah, I did this to save him. It was for all of us, not me alone, yeah let's go with that. I won't apologize, I am right."*

That Epilogue is funny because almost everything that Malicia was thinking was actually wrong and what she said was contextually inaccurate.

That chapter doesn't show us a cold and cunning Empress, but rather the emotional person Alaya really is under her mask, her whole section of the chapter is filled with her ups and downs on emotions, and her whole conversation with Amadeus shows how she was attempting to manipulate and wound him emotionally (a typical reaction on someone who is in turn emotionally wounded, like when someone is sad or angry and says offensive things to others to hurt them, so they would also be sad or angry), she even spoke things against Wekesa and Scribe in hopes to make Amadeus lower his trust in others' support so he would not turn further away from her (text says: *What she need break to salvage even shards of what they had once been*). While Amadeus spent the whole conversation trying to be amenable, approachable and even apologized when his words hurt her.

He was the reasonable person in that conversation, even backed off when she goaded him into venting off his frustrations, all the while Alaya was just displaying her insecurities and emotional wounds for the readers.

Consider this:

At the very start of the chapter she thinks *"He would not speak to her until he was no longer in a vulnerable position. Alaya had known this because she knew the man, how his mind functioned. Amadeus did not treat from a position of weakness."* And then right afterward she went to talk to him as Malicia the Dread Empress yet he came to see her as Amadeus of the Green Stretch *and that drew blood.*

He was facing her as a person and a friend (even showing that he was wounded), while she was posing as a ruler talking to a vassal, and the emotional part of her recoiled due to this, she knew Amadeus was the one on the right and it was her who had broken their trust, but her pride didn't let her admit it and instead proceeded to try to manipulate him, while he talked to her with honesty.

That conversation ended with Amadeus invigorated and smiling after being honest with her, and facing the new challenges ahead of him, looking at the uncertain future with wonder. While Malicia, after the carousel of emotions that was that conversation for her, was left alone with her worries and regrets, Alaya went still and felt something like grief but deeper than the word could ever mean taking hold of her.

The Hierarch saw many things, close and far away. In a cold room of black stone, he watched the most beautiful woman he'd ever glimpsed wipe away a tear and clench her teeth. By the crackling hearth of an inn he saw a knight and a champion clasp arms with older heroes, whispering of Heaven's Mandate. He saw a young girl on an ill-fitting throne, lost but unwilling to retreat. He saw the fields of a Hell tilled and strewn with villages, its people never having known a blue sky. He saw knives bared beneath the earth, north and south, skins of black and green ghosting through tunnels. He saw a green-eyed man grinning in the face of havoc, alone with well-worn maps.

Liliet

Everything you've said is accurate. I fail to see, however, how any of it makes her 'stupid evil'. Is having emotions and making decisions influenced by them stupid or evil now? How would a non-stupid non-evil person act in her situation that would be different?

caoimhinh

Having emotions don't make her evil nor stupid. That's not what I am saying, nor what anyone else has said. However, her dark emotions such as insecurities, arrogance and fear of losing control, drove her to take the choice of financing Akua's Doom Weapon in hopes of appropriating it.

And that's the stupid Old Evil kind of weapon, surely we

can all agree on this. That weapon is undeniably of the Old School Villains Breed: a flying fortress of doom that makes portals to Hell.

So having emotions doesn't make her evil nor stupid, but the choice she took driven by those emotions was the stupid evil path.

[*Liliet*](#)

> I personally consider Malicia stupid evil as her complex about control led her to betray her closest friend in the world and fucked up her Empire and everything they had built together for the past 40 years.

"Did a Stupid Evil thing once" != "is Stupid Evil". People don't work in clear categories like that.

caoimhinh

Fair enough.

Though she *has* displayed Old School Villany tendencies both in the past and in the present. As she defends the traditions of Praes and even idolizes the glories of the Tyrants of old (she simply believes herself to be above them), contrary to how Amadeus actively rejects all those Old School Villains stood for.

The things we have seen her done when Amadeus was not there to put her on check, lean pretty heavily to the Old School side (Akua's weapon, massive mind control of soldiers, deals with the Dead King)

Some Smartass

I think Malicia's story became a tragedy when she decided to do insane things like enable Akua and ally with the Dead King. Shit like that is the leading cause of villain doom, and she knew that going in.

I suppose I can spare some hope that she'll have all the control she wants over her death. I do like her, after all.

[*Liliet*](#)

Yeah.

She has fucked up. She has fucked up *badly*. But not necessarily irrecoverably.

Shveiran

This, I disagree with. I think Malicia's hole was dug led by the system more than her own flaws... but these are not decisions you can come back from.

lennymaster

I do not agree on the reasons or nature of her fucking up, I do however agree on the degree and the consequences thereof.

[Javvies](#)

Huh.

Yeah, this makes sense – Scribe could have stopped this way earlier than she did, but chose not to in order to make it untenable to leave Malicia in power. And Scribe would also know that the viable candidates to replace Malicia are basically Amadeus and Cat ... and neither one of them have been particularly eager to take the Tower for themselves. And Cat is probably going to be pretty busy between Callow, the drow, Cardinal, and the Accords, which means Amadeus would be more likely to accept the burden (in his mind) of dealing with reforming Praes.

[Liliet](#)

It's even possible that Malicia did not pull the trigger at all, and Scribe herself did from the shadows. As Catherine has remarked, having her alliance in the west fail would see her coming east sword in hand. Malicia likely understands that she *does not* want to antagonize Catherine at this point, and particularly not prevent her from spending her current strength on helping rescue Procer.

KageLupus

I am pretty sure that Malicia did originally order Scribe to start destabilizing Procer. Not only because it all makes sense, especially the points about the Accords being an existential threat to Malicia, but because the best lies are ones that stick closest to the truth. If Scribe did this whole thing on her own it would eventually come out in the open. Can you really imagine Black not trying to talk to Malicia before killing her? What happens when that conversation turns practical and Malicia says "What do you mean, I ordered Scribe to burn down Procer?"

Like Cat said, the details all have to be correct because anything less than that would be obvious. It is the one small, subtle betrayal that snuck in that Cat was trying to figure out. Scribe being incompetent is too out of character, when up till now she has been supremely capable.

caoimhinh

It was also a chance to mount a rescue operation for Amadeus.

Destabilize Procer, make the political factions be at each other's throats and the House of Light losing credibility, the ensuing chaos would potentially delay the public execution of Black, and in the worst-case scenario they would still pay a harsh price for killing him.

We must keep in mind that this plan was set in motion months ago when Amadeus was captured (he was only rescued by Catherine a few days ago), and the two women behind it (Alaya and Eudokia) were desperate. They found a common ground: they would either rescue Amadeus or set Procer on fire as a funeral pyre for him.

On that note, it would be interesting to see a Malicia Interlude and read her POV about Black being rescued. It would also give us an update on what's happening in Praes with the Goblins and the High Lords.

[Liliet](#)

I think it's possible that, more subtly, Malicia did not receive full information on what Black was doing.

Though you're broadly right.

Pontomas

God I love this work of text.

caoimhinh

"How mundane. How petty. I expected better of you, Intercessor. This is... beneath us."

-The Dead King, Interlude: Reckoning

"Was it really that simple, that... I hesitated to say petty, but what else could it be called? No, not petty. Personal, and in a way that was worse."

-Catherine, Chapter 73: Discerning

Ok, this resonance has me grinning.

[Liliet](#)

The contrast is great. Neshamah and Catherine both see it as petty, but then Neshamah stops there, while Catherine takes a step further and really *understands*.

Seer of Mind 😊

Decius

"To use any for the improper purpose is the mark of inferior breeding, save if greater game is yet afoot."

Wait, it isn't considered substandard to not have a greater game afoot?

[Javvies](#)

Not everything is part of a greater game.
That makes it much harder to work out what is relevant to one's greater game and what isn't.

Besides ... having a code around killing people makes it easier to reduce the number of overreactions.

And when said overreactions involves the kinds of things the High Lords (and Praesi leadership/Named) have traditionally gotten up to ... maintaining a careful detente and avoiding overreactions is in everybody's best interests.

Which, of course, means that the best way to hide your greater game is to follow the norms, not violate them by using the wrong means of murder.

konstantinvoncarstein

Akua have said (i think in book 1) that she already killed people to have a good seat at the theatre. She may be boasting to infuriate Catherine, but petty bickering seems a trademark of most nobilities in Calernia, including the Praesi one 😊

[sengachi](#)

Damn. Scribe plays the looooong game.

superkeaton

Aw, Scribe, that's adorable. Hakram remains the top batman for his chosen villain, though. Full props. Also, Cat, when Akua calls you dear heart in code, at least try to look like you aren't used to it.

JJR

I do know what that word means in actuality, but I still can't help but picture an Adam West Harkham.

[Mental Mouse](#)

LOL! Though he'd be more like that big-ass villain (Bane?).

Anyway, when we weren't looking Hakram got even more badass... one hand of undead bone, the other of pure shadow-energy!

superkeaton

"Holy hands, Hakman, you've lost yours!"

"Worry not, young Robber. You see, this was simply a trick I picked up in my long studies in the pursuit of justice. While my hand may yet again appear to be missing, it is actually an illusion!"

Rob

Typo that made me crack up: "corning"

Good chapter!

medailyfun

Look, Hakram's Name can even form a limb if it's required to fulfil his master's order!

JJR

A very hand feature indeed.

caoimhinh

Very handy indeed.

[*benthelynx*](#)

I did not see that twist. Well played

[*Liliet*](#)

Oh man.

Well, Catherine is facing quite a choice here.

Did Malicia *really* make the mistake Scribe's words imply she did?

Grey Madness

Hot damn.

[*NZPIEFACE*](#)

I know we all know this by now, but it feels to me that Malicia has forgotten why she climbed the Tower at all by now.

Shveiran

Why do you think she climbed the Tower?

[*Liliet*](#)

I think *she* climbed the Tower for the sake of personal power, and all the rest was optimizing for it. She wanted to make

Praes more effective because Praes would be hers and she takes care of *her* things.

There have been hints of her having more patriotic/altruistic motivations, but they were most likely secondary.

>Alaya of Satus had been born to the Green Stretch, but her roots were not of the mud. Soninke of no great line was she yet Soninke still, and though some of the ways she kept to had sprung from the shores of the Wasaliti her years in Ater had seen her embrace the Wasteland's rites. A caged bird in the Dread Empire's most gilded cage, she had learned the songs of power from the carrion circling the carcass of Nefarious' reign. With watchful eye and steady hand she'd taught herself to kill without ever baring a blade and to sow ruin with but whisper, the trade and tongue of those born high. Patient and smiling, she had learned the mistakes and the triumphs of those who called themselves her betters, and behind the smile taken the measure of the ailing empire falling apart around her. Like a surgeon and a sculptor, her hand had marked the cut. And so Alaya of Satus asserted this: Praes is a game that can be won.

She wants to win the game. For herself, and maybe also for other people, but primarily for herself.

>Amadeus of the Green Stretch was the son of corpses now buried, born of a land tread by soldiers under different banners with every season. Duni, he was, his skin the pale shame of old defeats that Praes had deemed filth even in name, and never did he forget it. It was not the Tower's promises that whispered in his sleep but the footsteps of his youth, the wheel of unending defeats seen from the side with cold eyes. In indignation he had become squire, and so sharp a blade found it that it slew his rivals and knighted him in black. To the banner he'd raised the disgraces of the Wasteland had flocked, be they green of skin and red of hand, Named hunted from above or every sharp mind and soul of steel that knew contempt but no captain. His was a company of the hungry and the lost, sworn to bleed for those unworthy of that blood. And so Amadeus of the Green Stretch asserted this: Praes is a mould that must be broken.

Unlike Amadeus, who is, in fact, working largely for the benefit of *other people*.

[PhadosZahn](#)

I love this chapter and I know the big reveal about Scribe's intentions and Cat catching it is the main focus but I just can't get over that fact the HAKRAM HAS A FREAKING GHOST HAND!

Andrew Mitchell

Yeah! ♥

Daniel E

My favorite part of this chapter is Cat's assertion that she is a proper, capital letter Villain in her own right, and warrants the respect that comes with such a title.

Daniel E

Stupid enter key 😞 Also wanted to say that now more than ever, Scribe reminds me of The Silence from Doctor Who.

Andrew Mitchell

Nice pick-up!! 😊 😊

[Daniel Keogh](#)

Spelling error here: "it could not realty be called paranoia", "realty"

With love.

[Daniel Keogh](#)

Also spelling mistake here: "Shirt-sighted" Should be "Short-sighted"

Chapter 74: Partial

"Trust not oaths: from a liar they are wind, from the true they are needless."

– Penthesian saying

Gods, I should have seen it from the start.

What did Scribe actually care about, in that all-consuming way Named cared for things? It wasn't land or wealth or glory: all of those she could have easily claimed from her position at the side of the Carrion Lord and no one would have batted an eye. She hadn't, though, and neither had she claimed any formal authority beyond what her service to Black brought. She'd been a shadow, the spider at the centre of the web. Named could be quiet, subtle even, but rarely in the manner she'd been. I doubted more than a dozen people on Calernia knew what Assassin's face looked like, but he had a reputation. He'd done deeds, however grisly. Scribe,

though? Even in Callow, where she'd effectively run the bureaucracy of the occupation for two decades, she was known as little more than Black's aide. When Named wanted something they acted, and those actions rippled consequences outwards in ways that had little to do with power – it was the Role that cast a long shadow, not unnatural swiftness of limb or the heady thrum of an aspect unleashed.

Yet when thought was given to the matter, the Scribe had been slightly more than a shadow: she'd been my teacher's shadow, in particular. There was something about Amadeus of the Green Stretch, or perhaps his ambitions, that must have drawn her to him. She had little stake in the Empire, though, and was not from it: she'd herself told me she was not born of it, and Black had once told me they'd met in Delos. I could go mad trying to parse together the desires of such a purposefully obscure stranger, though, so why even try? I could see what mattered to her simply by looking at where she hadn't... faded into the background. She'd cared for the old Calamities some, less so their children – Masego rarely spoke of her – but in the end it was my father she'd attached herself to. Fear of pain or death wouldn't work on someone like Eudokia, Adjutant was right about that. You'd have to threaten something she cared about, and as far as I could tell one of the few things she valued in this world was the trust between her and Black.

Hakram had caught scent of that, far before I could even begin to glimpse the shape of the truth, and so now I had a knife to rest against the throat of that trust. No longer strangled or threatened, the villainess slowly rose to her feet and talked.

"It was necessary," Scribe said. "And considering your personal and political enmities with Malicia, none of this should be unpleasant to your ear."

Akua's Folly had been permitted and even somewhat obliquely funded by the Tower, I had not forgotten that. Akua Sahelian would pay her dues for that and more, but the Dread Empress would not be spared the settling of all accounts. And her debt had only grown, with the brutal attack that'd been Night of Knives. Some of those losses had been personal, too. Ratface would not soon be forgot. Only now I had to wonder if I'd been steered, didn't I? If Scribe could do it to Black, someone she loved and trusted, she would not bat an eye before aiming me at her enemies. On the other hand, would the Empress not have tried to cast the blame on Scribe for that if she could, even if it was even slightly feasible? And there was General Istrid's death during the Doom, too. Juniper's mother had taken a knife in the back and it was still anyone's guess who'd wielded the blade. These days I was inclined to flip a coin over whether it'd been the Empress removing one of the key Black loyalists in the Legions or the Matrons getting their pieces in place and giving me opportunity

to swallow up leaderless legions into the nascent Army of Callow. Which I had, promptly enough. Now, though, looking back? Malicia had lost two legions and the supreme commander of my freshly strengthened armies been given good reason to despise the Empress. There was no end to that rabbit hole, if I tumbled down it.

"As far as I'm concerned, this can only end with Malicia's head on a pike," I conceded. "But this is not a reasonable way to go about this, Scribe. Shit, you were more than just playing with fire: Procer might have *collapsed*, if someone put a knife in Hasenbach! All for something an honest conversation might have achieved instead."

"That is where," Scribe calmly said, "you are wrong."

There was no tremor to her voice, no hesitation. She believed what she said. And she also didn't give the slightest fuck about the hundreds of thousands of deaths that might come from the Principate toppling. *No*, I darkly thought, *she wouldn't*. Sabah had been the only one of the Calamities who gave more than a passing thought to the lives she took, which made it all the more a tragedy she'd been the one to die first.

"I expect we're *not* about to have a stirring discussion about whether Cordelia Hasenbach truly is the key to keeping the Principate functional," I cuttingly said.

"He would have forgiven her, Catherine Foundling," Scribe said. "Without ever using the word forgive, but that would be the truth of it nonetheless. No matter what any of us said, he'd make peace again."

"Look, I'm not going to argue he doesn't get sentimental on occasion," I said. "To be blunt, there's a reason I'm still breathing. But he's still *Black*. There's lines, and if he has to choose between the Praes he wants and Malicia-

"He'll try for both," Scribe said. "Offer her to be his Chancellor, another leap of faith: trusting that she would be one of the few who never schemed the death of their tyrant."

"That would not be acceptable," I sharply said. "If she takes a ship across the Tyrian Sea I won't pursue, but she doesn't get to stay anywhere near the reins of power. Not after all the shit she's pulled. He knows that."

"It won't matter. He always forgives," Scribe said, and under the calm tone that were and old and cold anger. "Malicia. Ranger. Even Wekesa, who spurned one of the few ways the Empire could be corrected without steel in hand out of sheer petty apathy. He always forgives them and takes up the work instead. It will kill

him, Catherine. It has been killing him for years, but this once he might as well slit his own throat. *I will not have it.*"

I almost denied her, the words on the tip of my tongue, but then I thought of Arcadia. Of the Queen of Summer holding Masego and I in the palm of her hand, and how she's still not come the closest to killing me that day. *He would be angry, if I killed you*, Ranger had said, her desire to take my life almost a physical thing, *but we've been angry before. It passes.* The Scribe had known my father for a very long time, and though she was... warped in some ways, as all Named were, she was not necessarily *wrong*.

"There were ways that weren't as risky," I said.

"None that would hold under scrutiny, which you can be certain will be had," Scribe said.

And the thing was, if you counted Black's life above everything other concern I could even understand why she'd believed this was what needed to be done. And why she'd assume I'd go along with it too. As a play, it'd finished isolating Malicia from every other halfway trustworthy actor on Calernia – at this point, who aside from Kairos would even consider bargaining with her? It would ensure that Black would climb the Tower, putting someone at the head of the Empire I could trust when I abdicated, and while Hasenbach still held the reins of Procer her position was weakened just ahead of pivotal negotiations. Now that this had been carried out successfully, I only benefitted from the outcome of her scheme. Oh, no doubt she'd have preferred I never catch on, but this was not a fatal mistake to her was it? I gained nothing from outing her and would lose quite a bit from tattling. Now that the Jacks could benefit from her agents in the Wasteland, I had an actual reason to want her to keep breathing – the arrangement would likely die with her. Would Black kill her, if he knew? I honestly wasn't sure. He'd tolerate manipulations for Malicia, I suspected, but then he'd considered the Empress his superior.

Not so with this one, I thought.

"It wasn't worth the risks," I finally said. "And you know if he ever learns about this, he'll snap."

"There are three people alive who know of this," Scribe said.

I felt a pang of irritation.

"Don't be daft," I said. "He's a villain. So are you, so am I. Secrets like this always come out with the likes of us, Scribe. And if you don't do it on your own terms it'll be on some hero's instead."

There were simply so many ways for secrets to be snatched from even the grave. Some manners of necromancy, echoes in Arcadia, or even just a very improbable but not outright *impossible* human mistake. Providence wasn't a panacea for all ills that handed you everything always, the way Black had once intimated to me, but it did make sure that if there was a chance in a hundred all a hero needed to do was roll the dice.

"You speak with great certainty," she said, "yet I have buried greater sins than this and never did they rise from their graves."

"You've never been in everyone's eyes like this, though," I flatly replied. "Every great power on the continent is looking at Salia and the smouldering remains of your plot, Scribe. Hells, you've got the White Knight and the Grey Pilgrim here. Your really think two Choir busybodies like that aren't going to get even a *hint* from up on high?"

"There are limits to how much even angels can intervene," she said, sounding irritated. "It is not a rule that the Heavens see through every scheme, else there would be no purpose to ever scheming. They have no reason to even begin to look, so-"

"How are you not getting that you're not playing iron sharpens iron in the fucking Wasteland anymore?" I snapped. "This isn't killing teenage heroes in Callow before they get their first aspect, Scribe. You're trying the odds with the godsdamned fate of millions on the line, every hound the Heavens have to send sniffing at the ashes, and you think-"

A hand came to rest on my shoulder, though it was not warm.

"Cat," Hakram said. "This no longer serves a purpose."

I breathed out angrily. I'd not even noticed getting to my feet, much less the clatter of my abandoned pipe against the table. Ash had spilled, though not enough to start a fire.

"Fine," I said. "You're right. This is not acceptable, Scribe."

"A decision made in anger might be regretted," Adjutant cautioned.

My fingers clenched. My instinct was to drag her, by the hair if need be, in front of Black and let the truth spill out. But Hakram was right, there'd be long-lasting consequences to that. And until I could separate my instinct to go through with this from my harsh urge to see Scribe getting the rude awakening she'd been bargaining for, it would be best if I stayed my hand.

"I'll hold my tongue for now," I said.

"I will require guarantee that you will first speak with me, should you unwisely choose revelations," Scribe said.

Fuck you, I almost said, *you get nothing from me you—* but Hakram's bony fingers squeezed my shoulder slightly.

"Fine," I got out.

Both Adjutant and I knew she might start scrambling for leverage over me the moment she left the room, but if she did take off the gloves and flay her alive before use her reanimated puppet-corpse to call off whatever she'd schemed. The days where I was willing to let the Calamities twist my arm were long past me. I snatched back my pipe, though the wakeleaf was spoiled. Out of sheer pettiness I hobbled to cut in front of Scribe as she made for the door.

Wasn't much, but it did slightly help my mood.

—

Even after the anger cooled no answers had sprung forth, because there were some choices that had no clean way through. It'd been one of my earliest lessons as the Squire, and though I wished it hadn't proved as repeatedly and brutally true there was no denying it had. I could have slipped away into a warded room with the same half-council I'd gathered earlier to debate the matter, let their advice carry me through the noise until some sort of conclusion took form. I didn't, for I'd grown weary of the same words echoing around my mind again and again. A council sounded deeply unpleasant, at the moment, and though I knew indecisiveness could be a costly thing to a woman in my position a day's staggering would not change too much. Dawn would carry with it a great many hopes, for messengers had come from Salia and the delegations were to be received at midday. As agreed, an escort of four hundred would be allowed to every representative save for Black — who was, effectively, here as an extension of my own delegation. It would have been wiser to head to bed brisk and early, but restless and the coming of darkness had me too awake for it.

I went out instead, shedding all escorts save for the handful of Mighty I sensed trailing me in the dark. The countryside around Salia was, well, rather mundane. Given all the wild things one heard about the Principate's capital I'd half expected everything within ten miles of it to be a pleasure garden dripping in jewels, but this could easily have been Callowan countryside. Lands did not look so different from one another, when covered by ice and snow. Though the village where my soldiers had been quartered, Roque-Faillie, had nothing of note all that close I was surprised to find a light fluttering in the distance after ghosting past my guards. It was coming from structure, too, though not a large one. Curiosity drove me forward, limping as I

went and leaning on my staff of yew. The Mantle of Woe I'd left behind, traded instead for a warmer fur-rimmed cloak that Hakram had sown me. It was quite lovely, and he'd even reminded my whining about all my clothes being black: it was a pleasant shade of deep green instead, almost like the colour Archer favoured. I blinked in surprise when I got a good look at where the light was coming from, for though the sight was not that odd I'd not expected to see it.

It was a small farm I was looking at, though it must have been used for cattle-herding as well by the looks of the low wall to the side. Someone had hung a lantern on the side of house, off a rusting iron hook, and I caught a grunt of effort coming from near the low wall. Light in my limp, I moved onto the snowy path and found a man working on the cattle-wall. It'd been shoddily built, I thought, more piled stone than anything else, and a large swath of it had collapsed. Some had used a shivel to break the snow and ice and was steadily stacking the stones anew. Brow raising, I took a closer look. Not a Proceran, this one, at least not by birth: his skin had that Thalassina tone to it, too pale to be Soninke but too dark to be Taghreb. Tall and built like a working man, with fuzzy hair cropped even closer than even Legion regulations demanded, he'd shed his coat. Instead he wore a long-sleeved grey tunic he'd rolled up the sleeves of, and I let my gaze linger just a moment on the muscled forearms and calloused hands. He was rather plain-faced, I saw when he turned to glanced at me, and either clean-shaven or hairless. His dark brown eyes had a sense of steadiness to them, peace almost.

"Can I help you?" he asked in flawless Chantant.

Almost embarrassed at having stared, I gestured towards the wall he was working on.

"Won't hold without mortar," I said. "And it's a little late in the year for that. Won't take properly in the cold."

He looked surprised.

"Are you a mason?" he asked.

"I have a friend who works with stone," I shrugged.

Insofar as Pickler could be said to be doing then, when she crafted engines to tear down walls. I took another few steps, moving to the side of the path so I could lean against an intact part of the cattle-wall.

"Spring is coming soon enough," the stranger said. "It may hold."

"Hopeful sort, aren't you?" I drawled.

"I see no purpose to ever assuming the worst," he replied. "It seems like a tiring way to live."

"You get more pleasant surprises that way," I hedged. "You don't have the look of a local, if you'll forgive my saying so."

"I am not," the man agreed, body shifting as he stacked another stone. "It is not my farm, if that is your question. I was given leave to use it while waiting for a friend."

"Here?" I said, genuinely surprised. "You know there's delegations close, right? The League further east and Callow's just to the west. That's a lot of jumpy soldiers."

Not to mention I'd let Robber loose. He wasn't going to around stabbing farmers – although this definitely wasn't one – but he wouldn't be above a bit of a scare if he got bored.

"I had heard," the man said. "I warned my friend, though she cared little for the warning."

"Headstrong?" I said, genuinely sympathetic.

Indrani wasn't exactly what you might call a pliable young maiden, even when I wasn't actively insulting her.

"Rather," the man said, amused. "And she dislikes cities. It will do her some good to stretch her legs."

"Been in Salia, then?" I casually asked.

"I have," he said. "We are being hosted in the city."

"Not Levantine, by the look and sound of you," I mused. "Sure as Hells not Proceran. Ashuran, then?"

"A long time ago," the man agreed, then shifted to Lower Miezán. "You are Callowan, yes?"

"Laure born and raised," I agreed in the same.

"Come with the Black Queen, I would think," he said.

"More or less," I said. "You a translator? I expect with the amount of people coming into the capital there's bound to be good coin in it."

He was perhaps in too good a shape for one, but it would rather impolite to outright call him a mercenary who'd picked up a few languages while out on campaign. A hired blade wouldn't make it into any place of import, but with foreign soldiers in Salia knowing their tongues would be a skill people were willing to pay coin for.

"I know a great many languages," the man said. "You might say I have a gift with them."

There was an almost rueful note to his voice when he said that. Yeah, that wasn't a mercenary. No idea what he actually was, but I was leaning towards whatever the Thalassocracy's equivalent of the Eyes of the Empire was.

"Were you at the Princes' Graveyard?" he suddenly asked.

I nodded.

"It is said that angels seeded dreams among soldiers of all armies," he said, dark eyes lingering on me.

I'd gotten an interested look or two in my life, and this wasn't one of them. He'd assessed me as someone who knew how their way around a blade – checked my frame, my stance, for callouses on my palm. Yeah, *definitely* not a common mercenary.

"Didn't get one," I said. "But I've heard the same."

He slowly nodded.

"Unfortunate," he said. "I'd wanted to speak with someone who had dreamt."

"Oh?" I asked. "Dubious about the Arch-heretic of the East not getting smote by angels?"

He looked amused.

"It is a meaningless title," he said.

I cocked my head to the side, honestly surprised.

"It comes from no sacred writ, it has the blessing of no Choir nor the assent of the Heavens," he elaborated, seeing my curiosity. "If priests declare the sun to be wicked, does it make it so?"

"I think you have a large enough conclave, probably yes," I mused.

The man's lips quirked into a smile. He hoisted up another stone and set it down before wiping his brow and pulling down his sleeves. Picking up his coat, he moved to sit by my side on the cattle-wall.

"You do not think much of priests, it seems," he said.

"A priest is usually a good thing," I drawled. "It's when you've priests in the multiple that the trouble starts. They've a way of

starting to believe that whatever they agree on is the truth, and it's all downhill from there."

"Is there not a House of Light in Callow?" the man asked, sounding surprised.

"Sure," I snorted. "But it's never been overly guilty of *agreeing* on anything. Mind you, they still keep to the Book. It's the Praesi that have no priests at all."

"My mother kept to the Gods Below," the man admitted. "She was rather bemused at the notion of formal priesthood."

I glanced at him.

"Soninke?" I guessed.

He nodded. I'd been right then, he had mixed blood as was – *had* been now, I reminded myself – common in Thalassina.

"From Thalassina," he said.

I grimaced.

"Hope you didn't have any family there," I said.

"I do not know," he admitted, then frowned. "It is true, then? That the city was sunk into the sea?"

"Large chunk of it went up in smoke, way I heard it," I said. "And that much sorcery, even when you're just close..."

It was his turn to grimace. Yeah, I suspected that'd not been a pleasant way to die for those unlucky survivors.

"Heavens shepherd their souls beyond," he murmured.

A well-meant sentiment, I thought, though most Praesi would sneer at it. The man pushed himself off the wall and put on his coat – good make but well-worn, most likely not a noble then – and with a smile offered me his hand.

"Hanno," he introduced himself.

I went still for a heartbeat as it all came together. Slowly, I breathed out.

"Catherine," I said, clasping his wrist in a legionary's handshake.

His eyes widened, the slightest bit.

"Black Queen," Hanno of Arwad said.

"White Knight," I replied. "Fancy meeting you here."

copaceticcockroach

Vote or you'll won't see the next chapter.

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

copaceticcockroach

Typo Thread:

Ratface would not soon be forgot.

*Ratfacs would not soon be forgotten.

Rapier Tapir

Actually forgot may be slightly old world but that means it for perfectly, also his name is Ratface...

copaceticcockroach

Typo in the typo thread.

ohJohN

RATFACTS

Shikkarasu

I now envision Greg from Over The Garden Wall holding up a read rodent with a clown face painted on.

"It's a Rat Fact!"

LokeshC2

But the rat was stolen?

MrMaturity

Nah I think that one is correct

Cassus

I loved the chapter!

Back with a fresh list of typos:

Tower, I had // Tower; I had
could, even if it was even // could, if it was even
calm tone that were and old and cold anger // calm tone there
was an old and cold anger
she's still not come // she'd still not come

above everything other // above every other
Would Black killer her, // Would Black kill her,

This one changes the meaning of the sentence, but I'm pretty sure it's what you meant. Please double-check, though!
tolerate manipulations for Malicia // tolerated manipulations from Malicia

room, but if she did take off the gloves and flay her alive before use her reanimated// room, but if she did I'd take off the gloves and flay her alive before using her reanimated

but restless and the coming // but restlessness and the coming
was coming from structure // was coming from a structure
Hakram had sown me // Hakram had sewn me
he'd even reminded my whining // he'd even remembered my whining
Some had used a shivel to break // Someone had used a shovel to break
but it would rather impolite // but it would be rather impolite
I think you have a large // I think if you have a large

Aston Whiteman

You're writing it?

Andrew Mitchell

No. ErraticErrata (EE) writes this.

RandomFan

I'm pretty sure that was a threat to gouge out people's eyes if they didn't vote, not a statement of authorial status. But it might've been to kill people.

Either way, they're not the author.

Morgenstern

I'm pretty sure it was more a concern that we might not get to see more PGtE, if this work falls far below in the list, but... oO Eh?

Whatever is up with people these days? Why is everyone suddenly arguing this personally on here? oO ... or is it just me being in such a mood that I'm mis-reading "dry humor" as something else again... =/

Morgenstern

Anyways, another typo question:
Can "remind" now be used the same as "remember"?

There was this sentence about Hakram making that cloak and even (remembering, I'd have thought, but it was "reminding" here) that Cat did not want all her clothes black

RandomFan

I can't speak for the first poster, from me it was an attempt at dry humor that probably didn't work.

Aston Whiteman

That person has way too much free time.

Write your own story vote gouger!

EE can ask for votes...

copaceticcockroach

It's a threat to add your eyeballs into Robber's collection of eyeballs. Anyways, what happened to the two eyeballs Cat took from Robber?

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

The most important dangling plot thread of them all!

Andrew Mitchell

Agreed!

I trust that EE will resolve it in the final book.

[Liliet](#)

She's going to give them to Hanno as a courting gift

[Javvies](#)

Huh.

I'm not sure if I think Scribe or Cat is more likely to be right about this secret getting out.

What the hell is Hanno doing out there? He was last seen inside Salia.

Guided by providence?

Oh. Wait. Antigone/Witch of the Woods is around somewhere, too.

Huh.

I wonder who was responsible for putting them so close to where Callow/the Legions were being placed.

On the upshot, it seems that he'll be opposed to Cat's having been declared Arch-Heretic being a problem. That cannot hurt.

Brigsby

They were remarkably civil, having things like being orphans, and views from both sides of the fight in common might have something to do with that. For all he is the White Knight, I predict he will be one of if not the single greatest supporter of Catherine. The Choir of Judgement seems to judge based off intent more than anything else based on what we've seen. If I am right then the Choir will support what I think his natural inclination will be. His mother after all was a follower of the gods below and he never thought her evil for it, but those who followed the gods above killed her without justice, proving that not all villains are Villians, and not all Villians are villians.

He seems a decent fellow all told. Grounded in reality, like a mirror image of Cat as she might have been, had she gone for the mantle of Black Knight ht.

[Liliet](#)

I love that the shocking revelation of who they are came in the form of them just introducing themselves after a stretch of conversation, like normal sane people do. They're absolute fucking icons in doing things the logical way that makes sense – sort of!

[Mental Mouse](#)

I love how perfectly our author managed to set up an “oh duh” moment for us readers... I could see the pieces being laid out, but didn't manage to figure it out before the reveal....

[Liliet](#)

People figured it out at different moments ;u;

Trebar

Yeah... as soon as Catherine saw a lone figure working here I knew who it was likely to be. The revelation at the end was still fun to read but it wasn't shocking at all.

[Tohron](#)

For me, I figured it out when he said his mother was Praesi.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

When Catherine described him, I'm like: “That might be Hanno.”

The remainder of the chapter beautifully reprised every

other time the Black Queen had a conversation with an unknowing interlocutor, and Cat's first conversation with GP.

caoimhinh

I personally find it a bit funny that they didn't even introduce themselves as anything else than their first names, yet that was enough for them to recognize who the other person was.

Though I guess they are both versed enough in Name Lore to realize that if they are meeting a mysterious charming stranger and that stranger has the same name as an important Named, then they can only be one and the same.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine spent half the conversation wondering who tf this is because he's sure as fuck not a common mercenary. Considering Catherine is limping and uses a walking stick, I don't think Hanno did anything less, because she's sure as fuck not a common legionary.

So, yeah lmao. Blessed moment ♥

caoimhinh

Now I have to wonder if somewhere out there, there is another girl named Catherine and when she introduces herself people go "You are the Black Queen?" and she has to spend some time convincing them she is not a powerful heretic Named.

Raivshard

We'll, it was pretty clear once she started guessing where he was from. Still a cool twist.

Less on the intent and more on the degree of how much they are guilty for their past misdeeds vs how much can they do to repent for them. The choice is the most important part, both in how much agency they in whether not to commit their crimes, and whether or not to repent after being judged.

medailyfun

Actually his mother killed herself

[Mental Mouse](#)

IIRC she was driven to suicide.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> He seems a decent fellow all told. Grounded in reality...

And like Cat, has little patience for the traditional customs of his "side"'s followers.

[Liliet](#)

Like Cat, he has an Evil parent whom he might not exactly agree with on everything, but certainly sympathizes with.

They chose different methods of handling that, but I don't think they're that afar apart~

Quite Possibly A Cat

"On the upshot, it seems that he'll be opposed to Cat's having been declared Arch-Heretic being a problem." He was never going to have a problem with Cat because of that title. Heck, he wouldn't even have a big problem with Cat being a villain. I think it will come down to a coin flip if they get along or not in the end.

[Liliet](#)

I think they're already getting along, and Hanno doesn't let the coin fly without good specific reason.

(namely: he is currently attacking that person, the person asked him for Heavens' judgement specifically, everything is on fire and he has no better way to make it slightly less on fire)

byzantine279

It wouldn't surprise me if someone demands he judge her, and when he balks Cat casually assents to it.

Andrew Mitchell

Oh, I hope you're right!

[Liliet](#)

WANT

Dainpdf

On the "who was responsible" front, I am guessing Providence or the Bard.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> I'm not sure if I think Scribe or Cat is more likely to be right about this secret getting out.

Cat is right that it will certainly come out eventually. Scribe is remarkably good at keeping secrets, but yeah, too many eyes, and some of them immortal and/or nigh-omniscient. The question is whether it will come out while it can still make a difference, "for good or ill". Especially with Providence at the table...

Gyndroid

The thing I'm curious about is that Cat's sitting on two *major* secrets herself—namely, she's got Akua in her service, and she tried to make a deal with the dead king. Hell, she's aware Kairos knows about that too. Does she...have a plan in mind, then, for when this gets out, as she apparently assumes it must?

Javvies

Well, Pilgrim, at least, knows something about Cat having been thinking about and having (at one point) tried for a deal with the Dead King.

On the other hand, it's also true that Cat didn't actually make a deal with the Dead King, and instead tried to kill Malicia in order to prevent her deal with him.

And that Cat intends to remove the Dead King's foothold on Creation.

As far as the Akua reveal goes ... yeah, that could perhaps be a problem. On the other hand ... Akua's crimes all took place in Callow (and Praes), so nobody else at the table has legal grounds to go after her.

That said, Cat is more likely to sacrifice Akua to the Grand Alliance instead of Amadeus.

AceOfSword

"What the hell is Hanno doing out there? He was last seen inside Salia."

Since he's a knight he moves in a different way from everyone else and ignores normal barriers. That's how he managed to get surprisingly close to the other side's queen.

The upside is that he's now too close to be threatening, Cat would only be in danger if she was further away and a bit to the side.

chris S

the fact that nobody has liked joke this yet is criminal

chris S

*like this joke.

Darn phone keyboard messing up my sentences

Andrew Mitchell

Hahahhaaha. ♥

Joshua

Interestingly enough, I came to the opposite conclusion. Two sides meet before the battle and exchange friendly words seems to flow nicely into a bitter rivalry dynamic.

Besides, there's not much more that Cat disrespects than someone who submits entirely to higher powers to solve problems like Hanno does. I image that fact alone precludes them being much friendlier.

Suppose we'll see next chapter though.

[Javvies](#)

Oh, that's entirely possible.

But it won't be Hanno causing Cat problems because the Conclave declared her Arch-Heretic of the East. His refusal to accept the Conclave's declaration of that might not actually help anything, but there's no realistic way it can hurt Cat, unless some asshat tries to make the argument she's mind controlling Hanno or something into ignoring the Conclave ... and I don't think that'd get all that much traction anyways. I think it's a more likely to helpful than not, no matter what else Hanno does.

Forrest

I would point out that he does seem to rely on the coin less ever since Black called him out on it. He even seemed to consider what Black said as being worth considering.

[Liliet](#)

>there's not much more that Cat disrespects than someone who submits entirely to higher powers to solve problems like Hanno does

You might be projecting from Amadeus. Catherine is the one who made a pact with two goddesses and let them read her thoughts on an ongoing manner, I'm just saying.

And Hanno only resorts to his coin when he has no other sane solution, so...

[Mental Mouse](#)

Cat's also the one who mouths off to her patron goddesses...

[Liliet](#)

...and gets along with Hanno just fine.

[Ben Serreau-Raskin](#)

Oh man, I've been looking forward to this meetup for so long. Also, holy wow on providence as a diplomatic tool.

[Liliet](#)

It's funny how providence has certainly been favoring Cat and people who agree with her, lately.

Like Augur specifically commented that providence was on her side in her trick with Bard, like she even got micromanagement warnings about taking a wrong turn in conversation.

And now this 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Despite my previous comment about "Providence being at the table". I think it's increasingly clear that Providence is a world-mechanic, not an agency. Cat is playing by its rules, better than most heroes ever have. Specifically, she's "making her own luck" by reading the scenes and the stories, putting her own butt on the line when needed, standing by her friends and her principles, afflicting the comfortable and comforting the afflicted, and especially by breaking her own paths despite every temptation. And all that carries the rewards of Providence.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed.

And we're seeing the payoff in things starting to go her way, and that makes me *really happy*

Insanenoodlyguy

Now kiss!

SpacyRicochet



Headcanon: the reason for Hanno to be surrounded by pretty much exclusively female Named is that he needs his own fleet due to being an Ashuran.

(inb4 so does Ashur in general, these days)

Mental Mouse

So, you see him conquering at the helm of a fleet of relation-ships? 😊

Big Brother

Honestly, I love the introduction between Cat and Hanno. It's amazing how similarly they think at the surface level about earthly conclaves.

stevenneiman

They have in some ways very similar views about the world's problems, but very different views about the solutions. They both see organizations and institutions following incentives to act corrupt, but Cat thinks the solution is to realign those incentives to encourage them to be less harmful while Hanno thinks the solution is to only trust those he believes (right or wrong, I don't know enough to say) to be beyond incentives.

Liliet

I don't think this is an irreconcilable problem, given that Hanno usually keeps his views to himself and is likely to agree with Catherine's method as a primary one.

Skaddix

I mean yeah Cat is not wrong this does raise the odds that Scribe was actually behind taking out Istrid and Ratface...After all Malicia has mind control she doesn't especially need to worry about Istrid revolting with that fail safe after all. I think Cat is right this comes out and a pretty bad moment for her.

Classic Girl Meets Boy, Queue the romantic music under a starlit sky.

haihappen

This is usually the point in the story where they either have a long private conversation, leading to a buildup in tension, or, an incident happens that leads to the situation or the intentions of the characters to be misunderstood. Good thing there are no impulsive colleagues of either roaming

about, ready to stumble into the situation and wiiiiildly misinterpret them... oh wait...

haihappen

And, of course, the ship is on. Naturally.

Agent J

Add it to the fleet.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Or correctly interpret them. 😊 I'd say "this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship...".

[Liliet](#)

It is DEFINITELY the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

It COULD also be the beginning of something else!

Insanenoodlyguy

This just leads me to imagining this as being Cat's new "Fire" Reputation.

Events keep happening almost full anime style that result in other people walking in in ways that make it look like Cat and Hanno are engaged in a passionate, sweaty, and sometimes depraved relationship of the flesh.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine feels offended because they *do* engage in that but *not where people can walk in on them*, come on, she's not an animal!

Insanenoodlyguy

Cat: *Angry ranting*: Look, he really was showing me this hold that he'd learned from one of his memories, a hero with the same body type as me. It was training! Training!

Archer: So you really weren't getting hot and heavy with the guy?

Cat: *snort* The fuck I wasn't! Every room in that godamn farm. We had to fix a wall, and the fence when it broke in an entirely new place! But we didn't do anything like that in the goddamn training hall the First Prince could and did walk into, no!

Archer: Do you... want to do something like that in the 'goddamn' training hall?

Cat: ... mmmmayy-no. NO!

[Mental Mouse](#)

And in time, the returned farmers will wonder why half their livestock are glowing by night and shadowed by day.... 😊

Someguy

Still waiting for Kairos + Heirach vs Choir of Judgement.

Andrew Mitchell

I think you'll need to be patient for at least another week.

Oshi

More than that. They need to meet with everyone first in the city and assuming everything goes off then they have to deal with whatever agenda has to be dealt with before Hierarch can do his thing.

Andrew Mitchell

Yeah, you're probably right. It may even need to be part of the final book.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Writing from the future: Oh yeah, that's gonna be awesome! 😊

Soma

What a delightful meeting. The important mysterious stranger is always fun, especially coming from both ends.

And the Black Knight, Amadeus of The Green Stretch, too sentimental to see to his goals? Truly? If so, what a hilarious inversion and demolition of a great many long winded arguments I, and a great many, perhaps less long winded arguments, others made.

Perhaps it is Malicia operating on logic alone, and Amadeus clouded by sentiment and emotion? I have some doubts on both, but oh my, the rug was just ripped out of so many people's feet, potentially.

Great chapter!

caoimhinh

Amadeus is not a cold machine without emotions and feelings. Malicia is not an emotional wreck without cunning and logic. Each relevant character on the series is a multi-faceted and complex individual.

I don't think what Scribe said is really ground-breaking, as it matches what we have seen of Black. She is simply thinking that there was a high chance of Amadeus forgiving Malicia, his best friend in the world, like he has forgiven others from his closest circle of friends before when they had big fights and disagreements.

From her point of view, it was likely he would incorporate Malicia into his plans rather than get rid of her at the first chance (which is like him, even to his enemies he extends the chance to work for him when they are talented), so she took measures in order to force his hand.

And that's just what was perceived from Scribe's point of view, don't forget she is even more prone to cold logic than Amadeus and she is also *not* a friend of Malicia, so she is not inclined to have Black take risks due to Malicia.

It's kinda like when Catherine initially put trust on Vivienne and made the deal with her to have the Thieves' Guild work for the crown of Callow. Cat was willing to extend trust, even when Thief had just been fighting against her, but Hakram took measures behind the scenes to make sure Vivienne would not betray Catherine (nearly traumatizing Vivienne in the process). Then did it again when he cut off his own hand to prevent her from leaving the Woe (and she finally stopped being afraid of him).

Scribe is like that for Amadeus, taking actions in the shadows for what she believes to be his best benefit.

[Liliet](#)

It's funny how I'd been unhappy with Scribe for Not Getting what hurts Amadeus and what is important to him, but looks like it's the reverse— she understands it very well, and sees long-term hurt as more important than the short-term one.

medailyfun

Thus Hakram has felt soul kinship between Scribe and himself and put all his weight to resolve the fuss

caoimhinh

Yeah, he's standing there like "Eh, I would probably do the same" or something along those lines.

medailyfun

"I hope Cat will never learn what I'd done in Laure..."

Xi Cree

"Like a knife loves a steady hand, like a sparrow loves flight..."

These words were spoken once before. Hakram knows the lay of her as well as he remembers his own hands.

Insanenoodlyguy

They also need to kiss.

Soma

I fully agree with you that every character is multifaceted, that's very well said.

I should have made it more clear that while I was stereotyping characters in my comment above, that is not the way I see them. I was taking a very brief jaunt through the lens Scribe provided. It's such an inversion of the way I feel Amadeus has been presented that it was entertaining for me to enter that headspace.

laguz24

The ability for Black to forgive and keep his band together was what made him different from all the other Black Knights in the past, however, it could be a weakness as shown here, there is no right way to go about things. Even Scribe can be wrong about things, for example in the first book she thought Catherine was going to leave but Black knew she was going to try to fix things.

Soma

I think I very much agree with you. I'm definitely not making definitive statements here. I actually think the narrative situation is very fluid right now. Who is right, or what combination of perspectives is most right, is very much up in the air. It's just the perspective Scribe gives is such an inversion of the way the story has primed us to think about Amadeus I couldn't help but remark on it.

Andrew Mitchell

> I'm definitely not making definitive statements here.

I ♥ a good self-contradictory statement! 😊

[Liliet](#)

>And the Black Knight, Amadeus of The Green Stretch, too sentimental to see to his goals? Truly?

Amadeus is a fucking mess, and suicidal depression has been messing with him since before the start of the series, because he is genuinely personally **too kind and nice a person** to manage the kind of position he's in without getting *ground to dust* by it.



Isi Arnott-Campbell

Poor, smol Maddie.

[Liliet](#)

-eye twitch bc he does NOT let people call him that who aren't Alaya and the audience is not her either-

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Shh, no more conquests. Nap time now.

[Adrian_V](#)

Oh yes i wanted them to meet like this!!! Although i am surprised Cat was checking out Hanno, i wonder if that could become either a running gag (like with that callowan duchess? that i can't remember if it was kegan or not) or something more serious.....

konstantinvoncarstein

The same thing happened with a Callowan priestess before Liesse.

caoimhinh

Catherine leers at almost everyone, that has been commented by nearly all her companions so it's already a running gag.

stevenneiman

She generally only does it on first meeting except with her two actual lovers, but Cat does tend to at least give people a good looking-over if they're reasonably attractive, to the point that it is something of a running gag. Ratface, Kendall, Malicia (or course), and I'm sure at least a few others got the same treatment.

caoimhinh

Indrani pointed out that Catherine constantly leered at Vivienne.

Vivienne in turn also said that Cat is a leerer that "checks up" almost everyone.

She also delights her eyes on Akua at every chance she has, even on Book 1.

Ah, she also takes second looks on Rozala.

Fayhem

> Vivienne in turn also said that Cat is a leerer that "checks up" almost everyone.

Specifically, IIRC she also noted that Cat doesn't stop ogling people even when they're literally currently actively engaged in trying to kill her. Which elevates her all the way into Harry Dresden levels of Staring Problem haha.

Agent J

Hells, she ogled Zeze's Dad. This girl is a horndog and I love it.

caoimhinh

Haha, that was a fun chapter, she was even blushing when Wekesa smiled at her. Even had to repeatedly remind herself that he was at least triple her age and also gay. But that still didn't help, hahahaha.

To be fair, Wekesa was said to be ridiculously handsome in more than one occasion by different characters.

Agent J

And admittedly rather cute in that flashback where he first romanced Tikoloshe.

caoimhinh

Ah, I personally found it less cute and more in the attitude of "Ok, there's a chance I might get killed tomorrow so... what the hell. Let's fuck."

He didn't want to die with any regret XD

Their last moments together, though, those were pretty romantic.

Adrian V

The surprise is that since Ratface there hasn't been a male focus for it that is either serious or she finds attractive

pyrohawk21

The moment Cat saw the light from afar, I knew something caused by Divinity was happening. The moment the stranger said he was Ashuran, I knew he was the White Knight, and his friend was the Witch of the Woods.

I'm looking forward to the next chapter.

konstantinvoncarstein

The same thing happened for me 😊

caoimhinh

Yep, those kinds of meetings no longer happen at random for Catherine.

I started suspecting it was Hanno when she mentioned his skin tone *"his skin had that Thalassina tone to it, too pale to be Soninke but too dark to be Taghreb"*, as people on that side of Calernia tend to be pale-skinned, but that could still be any traveler, maybe even a new character.

What really settled it for me was when she mentioned the eyes *"His dark brown eyes had a sense of steadiness to them, peace almost."* Hanno's eyes had been described that way before, seems like he gets a lot of peace of mind thanks to not bothering to judge anything and leaving those concerns to others.

As I recall, only Hakram has that kind of serene look in his eyes.

[Liliet](#)

I started wondering which hero it was from the minute she said she saw a light in the distance, because... really. Not subtle on symbolism.

Though yeah the peaceful eyes bit definitely helped ♥

[Liliet](#)

I knew the minute Catherine started evaluating his ethnicity, because honestly? It wasn't going to be someone not significant and it wasn't going to be a new character *in book fucking 5*

caoimhinh

While I agree with you on that, I think it's worth pointing out that we *are* getting relevant new characters in Book 5, we already had several, in fact: Razin Tanja, Yannu Marave, the Proceran nobility that's fighting north and the other Heroes.

Not to mention characters that had just gotten a bit of screen time and barely an introduction before, and only now are being really explored, like Roland, Cordelia's spymasters, Grem, Augur, Scribe, many of the Drow Mighty, etc.

We have yet to see the Goblin Matrons, the Orc Clan Leaders, and the rest of the High Lords. Plus the rest of the Revenants that the Dead King has in reserve, I expect them to be pretty interesting characters.

This series still has a lot to offer through the characters.

[Liliet](#)

True! I actually did consider the option it was someone new before the description, but a half-Soninke muscular guy? XD

Cloud_Striker (Earth Mem Inhabitant)

Well this is awkward.

[Liliet](#)

Really? I think they just got along really well and will continue to do so 😊

maxwell wearing

maniacal chortling
Oh this is gonna be good

ZarquonZ

Yeah... She's Named and the Black Queen. It was a toss up between the stranger she met at a random farm being the White Knight, the Assassin or the goddamn Almighty Creator himself. There's no more casual coincidences or mundanity in her life!

Andrew Mitchell

Well, actually she's not Named at the moment.

laguz24

With the way the story is folding around her, it doesn't matter. Except there are no role flaws to fool her, just her own flaws.

Andrew Mitchell

Yeah, sure. 100% agree. She's certainly got enough power/influence/resources/narrative-weight that she influences stories and events like she was a powerful Named.

I was being pedantic, which is why I started with "Well, actually"

pagesbe

At the very least she's close enough to be part of a rule of three.

caoimhinh

Gotta say, Hanno's meeting with Catherine started even better than Pilgrim's did. Not just because she was leering at his muscles. Hahaha.

Also, his eyes widened when Cat introduced herself? So it was a surprise for him as well?

Gods Above, Below, and Providence, what are you up to?

P.S: For a moment there, I imagined Cat asking him to be her translator, and if he actually accepted, and then presented himself at the negotiation table wearing armor, everyone would have been shocked and start rumors about the Black Queen's skill to achieve that.

It wouldn't have happened, but I think it would have been hilarious.

Andrew Mitchell

> everyone would have been shocked and start rumors about the Black Queen's skill to achieve that.

♥ yep!

I ship them, I really do. And if that doesn't happen then at least Hanno's now confirmed (90+%) to be part of Catherine's next band of five.

Raved Thrad

From the scene where Hanno and Antigone are interacting during the attack on the Red Flower Vales, I got the impression that Antigone has a thing for Hanno, and since she seems to act without most of the trappings of "civilization," I'm fully expecting her to get territorial over him.

Andrew Mitchell

I had forgotten about that. Maybe my ship won't come in, after all. 😞

Raved Thrad

As a sailor on the ship ViviCat, I feel your pain.

laguz24

Oh, no you just made me think of a harem spin-off where every powerful woman on the continent is after Hanno. Cat, Witch of the Woods, Alaya, Cordelia, Bard, Repentant Magister. Auka, Champion, Archer, and Ranger. While they could easily destroy the continent, they all live in the same house and Auka can't cook because she puts poison in everything out of habit. AaAAGGGHhH. CURSE YOU!!!!

Cat: "What is that?"

Auka: "A Praesi Tower Cake."

Cat: "It's poisoned isn't it."

Auka: "No, how could you say that?"

Cat: looking at cookbook: "Yep, 3 tablespoons of arsenic, in the trash it goes, we voted on this, Auka."

Auka: "But"

Rest of Harem: "Trash, Auka or you're going back in the box."

Auka: "With Hanno?"

Harem: "No!"

pagesbe

Please tell me you misspelled Akua on purpose.

Of course, if you did, Abua is the only correct misspelling of her name.

laguz24

Abigail: Yes, that is totally what I meant to do.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

*Ubua

In the manner of the series' tagline: get it wrong right.

Raved Thrad

...and then we find out that Hanno's just stringing them all along, because he has (had?) a doomed, unrequited love for Laurent de Montfort. 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Territorialism is "trappings of civilization". We don't actually know much about Antigone's personality or morality.

caoimhinh

Later on the grand meeting.

Catherine: *Waves a hand* Hi, Hanno.

Hanno: *nods his head* Catherine.

Everyone stares at them, Kairos laughs

Pilgrim: You have met before.

Cat: Yeah, it was a delightful night in a farm.

*Everyone utters some variation of 'wait, what?'

Rozala: I would request some clarification of the matter.

Cordelia: I believe this is not the place and time for that?

Kairos: I know they both **wish** for details. Naughty, dirty details, if you would forgive my language. Except you, Tariq, I heard you can no longer *forgive* much these days. The League of Free Cities backs up Procer's request, of course. Be as thorough as you can, dear friend.

Insanenoodlyguy

Cat: Well...

Hanno: We met when I was working on a fence at the farm had a very edifying conversation that made our positions clear, discovering we actually have more in common than i would have expected.

Cat: Yes. That!

Pilgrim: Ah, yes, I've had a similar-

Hanno: Then we had sex. Lots and lots of sex.

Cat: *Buries face in hands*

Kairos: *crosses his arms and pouts, his fun spoiled*

NerfGlastigUaine

Villain – hero ships usually don't end well for the villain. Especially when the villain is a well-intentioned extremist overlord. Especially, especially when they're teaming up to face a bigger threat. Classic formula would be for villain to pull redemption equals death/sacrifice to rescue hero and give him willpower to kick bigger villain ass.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Except that Cat doesn't play by the rules....

NerfGlastigUaine

Oh totally, I doubt she'll fall for it, but she'll be aware of the pattern before she even thinks about a relationship. Cat doesn't break tropes, just subverts them, and I doubt she'd take this risk unless she sees a

way to play it to her advantage. At least, I hope not. If she throws away everything to Ride the White Knight, I'd be rather disappointed.

[Mental Mouse](#)

That said, they're both personally restrained characters, neither devoted to the sensual. It might well be a better match than her fooling around with *Archer*, of all people!

edrey

one would imagine that with that aspect he would know at least her face, hanno respect a lot the privacy of others,

caoimhinh

I know right? He even **Recalled** William the Lone Swordsman for his fight against Amadeus, and specifically focused on Catherine, as he was trying to find out the flaws in Black's fighting style through the flaws of her style.

Then again, Cat has changed quite a bit since those days, sharper features, darker skin, different build in muscles, she even grew up a couple of inches!(or so she claims)

Then again, Hanno might just be bad at remembering faces, or he was so focused on looking at the Squire's fighting form (and William almost always met Cat in armor) that Hanno didn't bother memorizing her face.

medailyfun

It's known thing people perceive person of power to be taller than they're in reality

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not just external power. My sister is quite short, but her personality makes her seem bigger. Nobody ever notices her height up close, it's when they see her from a distance that they go "oh, she's shorter than I realized!"

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, it's night...

caoimhinh

That's not an impediment in this case. Notice how Catherine (without calling for the Night) is perfectly capable of seeing Hanno's features, his muscles, and even the color of his eyes.

Hanno, as a Named, has better vision than normal humans so he must have been capable of seeing Catherine almost as clearly as if it was daytime, they are also standing very close to each other and with a light source nearby (the lamp that caught Cat's attention in the first place). It's simply that he didn't recognize her face, rather than not being able to see it clearly.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine literally has Night as her current domain and power source, of course she can see clearly in the dark.

A single lamp in the night can actually make it harder to make out a face than in just star/moonlight, because of the sharp light/shadow obscuring features if you aren't staring right at the lamp.

caoimhinh

Nope, she actually needs to call on Night to use it if she wants to improve her senses, otherwise she doesn't have better vision than a normal person.

That in particular has been mentioned several times, especially when looking at things far away, and she usually declines to use it for something so petty.

[Liliet](#)

It's also nighttime.

caoimhinh

Hm, I don't think that matters in this case.

Named have superb vision, so the darkness of the night is not that much of an impediment, plus there is a lamp by the side of the house (which is what drove Cat there) and they were next to each other, so they could both see each other clearly.

[Liliet](#)

>Also, his eyes widened when Cat introduced herself? So it was a surprise for him as well?

Yep! Why would he think a random stranger who wandered up to him and started talking about mortar was the Black Queen? We the readers know the writer would not show us a meeting with a random with that framing at this point, but Hanno most definitely regularly interacts with a lot of regular people (like the owner of the farm, apparently!)

And Catherine has the manners of a common legionary more than anything, when she's not turning up the fancy or the cowpoke.

caoimhinh

I mean, Hanno went out of Salia and into a farm right next to the town where the Army of Callow was stationed, he must have known where he was.

That's why I at first suspected he was pulling a Pilgrim and doing this in hopes of having a private meeting with the Black Queen without all the formalities and nuances of an official meeting.

He also thinks in terms of stories as shown in his first couple of Heroic Interludes, so I was thinking "well, Hanno can pull this off, a peaceful and honest talk between rivals outside official meeting is also a story" but seeing his surprise when she introduced herself, that hypothesis went up in smoke.

This was a chance meeting, which means it was Providence, which means the Gods, which implies the Bard is at least aware this is happening and may even appear there.

[Liliet](#)

Would be interesting!

I am absolutely not seeing Providence mean Gods, though. It's a mechanic of its own, functioning entirely independently of one's allegiance with Above or Below. See: First Liesse.

And yeah, he knew where the Army of Callow was, but he hadn't met Catherine before. Grey Pilgrim, with his wealth of experience with various villains, could conclude from cold reading that the Black Queen of Callow would be likely to take a random stroll in the fields alone and in regular clothes. Hanno? I find it completely plausible that the possibility simply did not occur to him. You think someone walking around streets of Liesse circa Book 2-3 gap was likely to randomly meet Akua Sahelian in the street?

Andrew Mitchell

Took me a while to figure it out but at least I was a bit quicker on the up-take than Catherine. 😊 😊 😊 I think it's a good thing they've had a pleasant chance meeting before the discussions in Salia.

I'm not sure what to think about the discussion with Scribe, but I'm certainly glad Hakram was there. It seems to me Catherine's instinct to tell Black the truth is the right course of action and it actually feels a bit weird that she's not decisive on this.

And it was nice of EE to respond to so many points raised in the comments from the last chapter.

NerfGlastigUaine

Tvtropes has ruined me. I guessed it was Hanno the moment she thought he wasn't a Proceran. Some people probably caught it even earlier.

konstantinvoncarstein

I knew it was a Hero after she saw the light, and Hanno after she said he was not Proceran.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed. I'm honestly expecting Amadeus's sentiment to be the right course of action here, in the end. Throwing away attachments in the name of practicality/revenge is not a good path to take, and Catherine has already figured that out for herself – but not for him, yet. I suppose she still sees him as invulnerable in some ways, subconsciously – he's her teacher, her father, no way he needs to be swaddled in a blanket and protected for the cruel world, right? 😊

(he does)

[Ben Serreau-Raskin](#)

I love the reminder that when she's not in full "I am the Black Queen!" mode, Cat's personal apparel is apparently so basic and standard issue that she's easily mistaken for a soldier in her own army.

[Liliet](#)

Yep ♥

Catherine is only normally recognized because of the mantle of Woe, and even then, without proper context, even her own legionaries tend to not recognize her. Remember the Empress of Procer?

And her manner is that of a common legionary too, thanks to Rat Company. I wonder if Hanno deduced something was off about her the same way she thought he was not a mercenary, or if he genuinely thought her a regular soldier

[Fayhem](#)

> Remember the Empress of Procer?

I will *never* forget the Empress of Procer. That poor Empress watching his entire life flash before his eyes as he gets a

strong lesson on why sassing randos for claiming to be somebody famous isn't a super safe policy on a continent filled with Named (and beings of equivalent narrative weight like F.U.N.!Catherine). So classic.

[Liliet](#)

And the terrifying Black Queen just sassing him right back with his own joke instead of smearing his remains across the ground as a lesson to everyone else? U N F O R G E T T A B L E

edrey

no scribe, he would find out soner or later, the story is too strong already to said the less. but she is right, he would forgive malicia, and to be honest Malicia only ""sin"" is to be proud of Praes culture, when is a shithole of treason, poison and extreme racism
well, i wont say i didnt see it coming, but i was hoping for more, that teaser was way too much, i am thinking in the chat of the pilgrim and cat or the one with black in Peers, the wait will kill me here

laguz24

Personally, I think that Malicia isn't proud of her culture as too ingrained in its methods. She was never one of the true Praesi, in all their flying fortress, invisible army glory. As said by Diabolist, but she has been playing Chancellor so long that she has started to act like them with all of the stupidity that entails.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And a belated thought about this, slightly informed by the Epilogue: Part of the Role for Chancellor is to betray and topple the Tyrant. Who in this case is Malicia herself...

[Liliet](#)

TBF Malicia knifed Amadeus's trust in the back pretty badly. "Leap of faith", was it?

I find it utterly cute how frustrated Scribe is with Amadeus's self-sacrificial tendencies. SHE'S NOT WRONG ON THAT ONE

SpeckofStardust

On the other hand She's incorrect that he wouldn't be willing to purposefully kill his friends, he very much thought about how many would need to 'die' right before Captain bit it.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, but that was for *after he was dead*. He wouldn't have to live with it, which makes the kind of selfish difference that would tip the scales on something this emotionally fraught.

All of Amadeus's friends agree that he forgives all of them everything. Both Wekesa and Hye estimated him as likely to forgive either of them killing Catherine, and Wekesa was angry at Hye for taking advantage of it (which gives additional delicious irony to Eudokia being angry at Wekesa taking advantage of it in turn). Alaya still expects him to forgive her and come back, not thinking of anything she did as crossing the line of no return.

Scribe's assessment might be off on where exactly the line is drawn, but the general tendency is correct :3

ninegardens

> Alaya still expects him to forgive her and come back, not thinking of anything she did as crossing the line of no return.

Well yeah. They had philosophical disagreements, and disagreements about HOW do get things done, but such is life. They're FAMILY (not literally, but whatever). Of course he'll forgive her.

And by the same token, she'll forgive him. Despite the fact that he took the (very stupid) plan she had sunk years and lives into and exploded it, she still seemed perfectly willing to dedicate a large portion of her spy service to getting him back the moment she realized he was in trouble.

They are angry at each other, and might even be wary of one another in the future, but I suspect, in a very real sense, Amadeus has **already** forgiven Alaya.

In terms of Maddie's forgiveness... I guess what Alaya's done so far might make Maddie a little wary of her in future... but fundamentally she HASN'T crossed that line of no return. Hence it makes perfect sense that she doesn't think she has.

The weird part in all this is that Scribe may be the only one in all this who HAS found a way to do something Maddie can not forgive: namely, she attacked a member of his family.

And probably the cruelest thing Black could do in response is to tell her to leave. Not hurt her, not fight her, simply tell her to get out of his life... and never come back.

Liliet

Yeah, I somehow doubt he won't forgive that, considering she is a member of his family too.

ninegardens

See- that's the thing I'm trying to figure out: Is scribe treated as Family? I've never seen anywhere in Black's thoughts or actions that suggests she is in quiet the same way... maybe it just hasn't come up. I dunno- for me it feels like it could go either way in terms of whether Scribe counts as family or not.

Death Knight

Just fuck already!

Sugar Roll

Come on man, this is their first meeting. Let them work their way into it. This isn't some low budget pornographic nonsense.

TeK

Yeah, sure Cat is totally not a Villain, how dare you suggest the opposite. Saint of Swords was totally unreasonable.

talene1

"I see no purpose to ever assuming the worst," he replied. "It seems like a tiring way to live."

This is when I really began to suspect.

"It is not my farm, if that is your question. I was given leave to use it while waiting for a friend."

This is when I knew. The point about him being from Thassalina and a foreigner, the description of his build, the point about him waiting for a friend (it had to be the Witch), the refusal to make even the slightest sort of assumption, it all fit. Then, each little clue went further and further to confirm it.

Liliet

I was like "so what oddly metaphysically significant character will this be" when Cat spotted the light, like.. really. That wasn't going to be a random nobody.

And then 'a tall dark-skinned man but not pure Soninke' and like ah. Hanno.

Receipts:

"Brow raising, I took a closer look. Not a Proceran, this one, at least not by birth: his skin had that Thalassina tone to it, too pale to be Soninke but too dark to be Taghreb. Tall and built like a working man, with fuzzy hair cropped even closer than even Legion regulations demanded, he'd shed his coat. Instead he wore a long-sleeved grey tunic he'd rolled up the sleeves of, and I let my gaze linger just a moment on the muscled forearms and calloused hands. He was rather plain-faced, I saw when he turned to glanced at me, and either clean-shaven or hairless. His dark brown eyes had a sense of steadiness to them, peace almost." oh pffff please tell me it's Hanno

talene l

Honestly I just wasn't sure at first whether this was going to Meeting a New and Important Character or Meeting Random Nobody Who Nevertheless Says Oddly Wise and Important Things. You know meeting the whole random peasant in the wilderness who spreads the wisdom of the common masses.

[Liliet](#)

True!

[Mental Mouse](#)

That was about when I started to get it....

NerfGlastigUaine

You know, this is the typical prelude to a romance between villain and hero, but if Cat doesn't see that coming from a mile away I'll eat my own foot.

NerfGlastigUaine

Guys, off topic, but I tried to measure the size of Calernia. So, in Chapter 19 of Book 3, Nauk says it'd take $1\frac{1}{2}$ months of marching to reach Laure from Marchford. Now, Roman legions could typically march around 30-35 km per day and Legions of Terror seem to be heavily inspired by them, so taking the lower bound, we can estimate that the distance between Marchford and Laure is ~ 1300 km. This is somewhat complicated by the fact that 1) there is a river cutting off Marchford from Laure, 2) the area around Marchford seems somewhat rocky if not outright mountainous on the map. Therefore it is possible that it is not 1300 km but likely somewhat less, taking into account terrain slowing down marching speed.

Now, I assumed the marching went around the river, not through, and decided to disregard the terrain and go with my initial assumption of 1300 km. With some quick calculations and use of Word, it seems as if the longest vertical length of Calernia from the tip of the Everdark to below Stygia is 5.4 times the length from Marchford to Laure (+ detour for river), so ~7020 km. For

reference, South America's length is ~7600 km. Now, at its widest Calernia is roughly 4700 km wide with these calculations, which is only slightly smaller than South America's widest point of 5100 km, and Calernia has a more consistently large width than SA. However, it also has far more lakes, so I'd posit that the two are roughly similar in landmass with Calernia slightly larger.

Any thoughts? Disagreements? Questions on why I'm wasting my time on this when I have a test tomorrow?

laguz24

Unless you actually give hard numbers in distance or have two rivals going for the same goal space does not really matter. You could say it is 200 km and it took 2 days to get there, then we have problems. But everyone measures distance in time, as it took 2 weeks to march to the river etc. This is why we have the trope Sci-Fi writers have no sense of scale and sci-fi books attract people who actually care about such minutia.

[Liliet](#)

Erratic overshoots travel times. Calernia is about the size of Europe iirc

[Mental Mouse](#)

Rather than Erratic overshooting, it may be that the Legions simply aren't as fast as the Roman troops that they're loosely modeled after. Especially if they don't have roads to the same standard. In particular, I haven't seen mention of the "Roman stride", which IIRC I heard about from Kipling.

[Liliet](#)

I think they probably have the training to move fast, but the roads account for the rest of the loss. Praes has Roman-like roads, and Amadeus specifically had the same ones built in Callow for troop movement, but Procer? Yeah... Конь да путник, али вам не туго...

[Fayhem](#)

My advanced linguistics training (read: Google Translate) tells me you just said "A horse yes traveler, but you are not sad...".

Is that a, uh, regional saying? Or has my advanced linguistics training somehow failed me? Maybe both?

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Same...

Andrew Mitchell

Sisters, I ****hope**** that IS what she said.
hahahahahahaha ♥

[Liliet](#)

It's a song quote.

Конь да путник, али вам не туго,
Кабы впрямь в пути не околеть,
Бездорожье одолеть – не штука,
А вот как дорогу одолеть?

И у черта, и у бога
На одном, видать, счету
Ты, российская дорога –
Семь загибов за версту!

(first stanza and the chorus) (it's from a movie abt
19th century Russia, but it applies in spirit to this
day and not only in Russia proper)

Rough translation... oh wow this is HARD. These idioms are
really... local 0.0

Horse and traveler, isn't it hard for you,
How do we really not die on the road,
It's not that hard to manage off road,
But how do we manage the road?

Both the devil and the god
Probably have the same accounting
For you, the Russian road –
Seven turns in a mile!

Fun Google translate facts: 'да' is normally translated
as (and means) 'yes', but can also be used as a rare/
antiquated/literary homonym meaning 'and'

...I'm just going to translate the other two stanzas to,
for full context of the reference.

Нет ухаба – значит, будет яма,
Рытвина, правей-левей – кювет,
Эх, дорога, ты скажи нам прямо,
По тебе ли ездят на тот свет!

No bump – there will be a pit,
Pothole and a ditch to the left and to the right,
Hey, road, tell it to us straight,
Are you the one used to travel to the afterlife?

Но согласны и сапог, и лапоть –
Как нам наши версты не любить!
Ведь браниться здесь мудрей, чем плакать,
А спастись – легче, чем ловить!

But both boot and bast shoe agree –
How could we not love our miles!
After all, swearing here is wiser than crying,
And fleeing is easier than catching!

[Fayhem](#)

...I am still not sure I understand (local idioms indeed), but I do appreciate your thoughtfulness in providing such a thorough translation!

Andrew Mitchell

What Fayem said. ^^ Thank you.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Thank you! Fictional cultures can be fun, I'm always happy to get glimpses of other cultures in our world!

Also, I got a good snicker out of "Hey, road, tell it to us straight / Are you the one used to travel to the afterlife?" That's a rough road!

NerfGlaistigUaine

Huh, is that WoG? B/c last time I asked about Calernia size it sparked a ton of interesting speculation, a lot of it by caiomhinh which was basis of this calculation, but no definitive answer.

I actually think Legions might be faster than Roman legions. When William summons the Hashmalim he and Bard talk and say Cat and the Fifteenth could flee before the angel arrives, e specifically says it's "more than enough time," which means they could travel 49 miles (79 km) in two days. Admittedly, it's a two day sprint rather than a months long march, but it definitely suggests Legion march time is at least comparable to Roman legions.

Until WoG intercedes all we can do is speculate based on textual information. Personally, I like to have a mental map of things while reading.

[Liliet](#)

True! I just don't see it as making sense for Calernia to be that big while having so few notable cities.

Erratic tends to avoid specific numbers, which is wise considering he's mixed up cardinal directions before XD and I don't remember if there's WoG... but I find it easier to file 'travel times' than 'number of cities' as 'ehhhhh not quite'

Mental Mouse

> I just don't see it as making sense for Calernia to be that big while having so few notable cities.

This may be tied to the gnome thing – cities of course predate modern technology, but advanced technology certainly allowed promoting a lot of towns into cities – especially when farming got more efficient and displaced workers started looking for somewhere else to make their living. There's also the population question – how many people in Calernia? They do have regular wars to cut down on the population....

NZPIEFACE

I'm shipping.

SpeckofStardust

So anyone else thinking that the wall their taking about is a presentation of either Procer or the accords at their current state, cause you know it totally is meaningful.

Aotrs Commander

Well, I at least completely missed it until the reveal.

(I do insist on reading these first thing in the morning though...)

Liliet

God I love Catherine *clasping his wrist in a legionary handshake* as she introduces herself so much.

There's just something so... friendly about her using that gesture in particular

Frolamiz

So much foreshadowing, I love it!

Just think about it, Hanno is trying to build something, then Cat come and tell him it will not work. Then there is their exchange about optimism and pessimism...

The obvious metaphor would be the Liesse accords, but EE is generally not that predictable and it could mean so many more things!

Anyway, I'm sure it's another "'till your last desperate breath clawing at the dark" that we will rediscover after rereading.

axusgrad

Commence the chess metaphors !

superkeaton

Its about time. Hilarious that Cat got the introduction drop on a hero, she hasn't gotten to do that since she geeked those kids, but they were rookies, not Heaven's Current Favorite. Looking forward to this.

[Liliet](#)

What kids?

Sun Dog

The ones from the start of the.. last book, I think? Stalwart Paladin, the Dashing Brigand, and whatever the caster called himself.

Thane

EE,
You're killin' me. You have a gift(a curse) of fulfilling everything I want in an update but then, making me want even more. It's beautiful(painful).

I have wanted for this meeting practically since you introduced hanno.

Thanks for the beautiful story you tell us

[aran](#)

Uhhhh... checkmate?

NerfContessa

B2ahahahahaq,. Oh man, priceless ending.

As for scribe, she has by nature of her 20 years of work, lost perspective.

But she might be correct regarding the outcome between black and malicia.

Still, she's a. Liability.

Chapter 75: Analog

"I assure you, Chancellor, that with but a few words they'll come around to agreeing with me. Almost like an incantation, really."

– Dread Emperor Imperious

Good grip, I thought, as he clasped my arm tightly once back before withdrawing.

"I was warned about you," the White Knight conversationally said.

He was a dangerous man, I knew, for heroes usually were. Yet I did not feel particularly endangered, for by all reports Hanno of Arwad was not the sort of madman who'd draw a sword thoughtlessly. I leaned on my staff to push myself up on the low cattle-wall, pressing my cloak against the back of my leg with my other hand so it wouldn't bunch up. *That's better*, I thought. Took the weight off my bad leg.

"Were you?" I replied. "You don't seem all that worried."

"Not that sort of warning," he said. "The Grey Pilgrim called you a thresher."

My brow rose. I was a city girl to the bone, true enough, but it was still a Callowan city. I knew a thing or two about farming, if only in principle.

"Like for grain?" I asked, cocking my head to the side.

He had a rather honest face, I decided, for all that it was plain. The calm on it wasn't affectation, no. It was just the consequence of being so amiably unruffled by all that went on around him, perhaps not even something he knew he showed.

"One that separates the wheat from the chaff," the White Knight quoted. "He argued that there are Bestowals that, by their nature, draw to them both great loyalty and great enmity."

"Sounds like Tariq," I conceded. "Mind you, I've always found he throws words like 'fate' around a little too easily. Anyone who ends up making waves will draw both enemies and allies, there's nothing magical about it."

"There is, when so many of those allies were once your enemies," Hanno said. "I am told that most of your closest companions fought you at some point or another."

Well, not *that* many. Indrani had introduced herself by ambushing me, I conceded. Vivienne too. Juniper and I hadn't exactly begun

as bosom friends, and there was a reason that I'd ripped Akua's heart out of her chest. Shit. Hakram had always been a delight, though! And Robber had mostly been other people's problem, which by goblin standards was positively saintly. I forcefully refrained from thinking too much about how the Everdark had turned out for all involved.

"Oh Gods," I muttered. "I genuinely can't argue with that."

If I'd lost that argument in my own head, I somehow doubted it'd go my way spoken aloud. The hero softly chuckled.

"It is not unlike sculpting, I've found," Hanno said. "What your hand knows, what you have crafted, is not what the eyes of others see."

"Been mistaken a few times, have you?" I asked.

He agreed with a nod.

"Often it is misunderstood what the Choir of Judgement is," the White Knight said. "I've been asked to adjudicate land disputes, to settle disagreements over scripture and once even to decide on the rightful owner of cattle."

He breathed out, as if exasperated by the whole of it.

"The Seraphim do not attend to earthly laws or even holy writ, Black Queen," Hanno of Arwad said. "They render only one manner of judgement and it is not fettered by anything of Creation."

"That'd be the spinning coin and the," I mimed a blade across the throat, "I take it?"

"If the coin spun for ever soul on Calernia, it would show the laurels more often than not," the White Knight said. "The circumstances in which it is prone to spinning, however, have favoured the showing of the swords."

"And that doesn't bother you?" I asked.

He cocked his head to the side.

"Why would it?" the White Knight asked. "If only wicked men are judged, why would another end come of it?"

"And you don't think you're passing judgement as well?" I frowned.

"That is not my place," he said.

"The coin doesn't flip on its own, you know," I pointed out. "And as far as I know, you don't toss it for everyone you meet."

The hero looked frustrated, but only in passing. I supposed I hadn't been the first person to say as much to him. He was one of the great Names of our generation, true, but he was also a pretty personable man all things considered.

"You are Queen of Callow," the White Knight said.

"Don't suppose you could get me that in writing?" I drily said.

If getting the Sword of Judgement to put it to parchment didn't end up settling the legitimacy of my rule, nothing ever would. He blinked, visibly bemused.

"Ignore that," I sighed. "Yes, I am Queen of Callow. Couple other titles too, but that's the highest one."

"Then, unless I am mistaken, you have right of high justice over all in your kingdom," Hanno said.

That was slightly more complicated an issue than you'd think, actually. High justice – essentially the right to sit in judgement of anyone no matter how high their birth and the severity of their crime – had been moved around some these last few decades. Before the Conquest the answer would have been a straightforward yes, as the ruling king or queen of Callow had been one of the few figures able to sit in judgement over anyone. Under Black the right of high justice had in theory devolved to the imperial governors, though in practice he'd been the one holding it: though his authority came from the Tower and not a crown, he'd been the only man in the kingdom would could sit in judgement of both governors and the remaining nobles. It was no without reason that when I'd called my teacher the crownless king of Callow not even the Choir of Contrition had gainsaid me. These days my kingdom's laws were a messy jumble of old Praesi decrees and dusty Callowan laws, but as the anointed Queen of Callow I did in principle have right of high justice. If I started going after the few nobles left through even legal means, though, I'd have a rebellion on my hands. I'd allowed my court to squeeze the northern baronies in their coin purse but nowhere else, and Gods forbid I ever try to pass judgement on Duchess Kegan even if she ate a full cartload of babies in broad daylight before a hundred witnesses.

"By law I do," I conceded.

"As one with the right to pass judgement over any Callowan," Hanno said, "did you then proceed to drag every man and woman you encountered before a tribunal?"

My brow rose.

"You don't stand judgement in Callow without having broken a law," I said.

"And I do not bring into the gaze of the Seraphim every soul I encounter without reason," the White Knight replied. "Nor would I stand benumbed and allow a life to be taken before my eyes while I asked for their verdict. I do not judge, Catherine Foundling, because I recognize the fallibility of what I am and what I know. It does not mean I am blind or helpless: it means that where others have no choice but to be burdened with uncertainty, I am not."

That was rather more reasonable than I'd expected of the man, I admitted to myself. My brushes with Choirs had been less than pleasant, most of the time, so I'd been predisposed to seeing lunacy lurking in one who had openly sworn himself to do the bidding of one. Black had been less than flattering in his assessments of the man, too, though he'd also cautioned that the White Knight was both intelligent and an exceedingly dangerous and versatile killer. Then again, I could hardly imagine my father ever sitting down to have a polite chat with a hero – or the opposite, in all fairness. Over two decades of the Calamities smothering heroes in their narrative crib had rather thoroughly burned that bridge for both sides. I still found the notion of the Seraphim being considered an authority over even a chamber pot rather revolting, but hardly enough to draw a blade over it. So long as that authority was not forced on anyone, and it stayed well out of my kingdom, it fell under the category of 'someone else's problem'. If the nations of the west wanted to grant the right of high justice to the Choir of Judgement, that was their decision to make.

Of course, there was one little issue with all this.

"And villains?" I asked. "Don't they always get a flip, White Knight?"

He smiled, though it was a distant sort of smile. One straddling the line between reminiscence and the aloofness of professional attending their trade. He stood before me, little more than a well-built man in cloth, and still he spoke with an authority that could not be denied. Conviction was at the heart of Names, I knew, and this one did not lack faith. Black was one of the finest hero-killers Calernia had ever known, and he'd gone after Hanno with the full roster of the Calamities while the White Knight led a disparate band of greenhorns. And the man stood before me still. Some of that could be laid at the Bard's feet, at her schemes, but only so much. Even the Intercessor could not make a sharp blade out of straw.

"Are all those that worship the Gods Above to be called Good?" Hanno replied.

"No," I said. "But worshipping Below is against the scriptures, isn't it? Heresy."

"Do you worship Below?" he asked.

"I curse in their name, mostly," I drawled, rather amused. "But I've been called an odd duck amongst my kind. Most villains do in fact keep to the Gods Below."

I knew Hakram did, though it was in the orc way under the name of the Hungry Gods. He wasn't particularly pious, though, and considered it a private matter besides. Indrani's utter indifference to all things religious probably counted as *some* sort of heresy, I was pretty sure, and while Akua worshipped the Hellgods in that very Praesi way that did not exclude attempted murder and usurpation that worship was not less sincere for it. That her growing fondness for heroics had not been paired with conversion to the ways of the House of Light had been a source of some amusement to me, particularly since even if she was a Wasteland aristocrat she knew her way around the Book of All Things better than I did.

"The Choir of Judgement does not follow scripture," Hanno reminded me. "It was written by mortal hands, a fetter like any other."

"But if a villain, say, made a carriage out of skulls," I said, then let the sentence hang.

"Graverobbing is not a particular concern of the Seraphim," the White Knight replied, sounding almost amused. "Especially when it is only presumptive."

"But you'd keep an eye on them, after that," I shrewdly said.

"As I would keep an eye on a man walking into a house with a bared sword," Hanno said.

While the man in front of me was far from an idiot – I suspected he'd be deeply unpleasant to argue with – I wouldn't assess him as the kind of silver-tongued schemer I'd come across more than a few times. Oh, it was possible a long game was being played even if he was a hero. But my instinct was that he was much as he put himself forward, and I'd stayed alive this long by listening to that little voice when it tugged at my attention. And right now that voice was telling me that the White Knight didn't have to be my enemy. I didn't relish the notion of angels passing judgement through someone else's hand, and I very much doubted that Hanno would stay his work even if I asked him to pretty please do so, but he could be accommodated. If he worked within the bounds of the Accords, and even worked to *enforce* them? Hells, he might be a legitimate boon. Heroes would follow the Grey Pilgrim out of respect for the man, but if the White Knight endorsed something a lot of people would take that as the blessing of the Choir of Judgement. There were parts of the continent where that carried a great deal of weight. Even now, after the Tenth Crusade and the

fury that'd followed the Salian conclaves, Callow was still one of them.

Everything he'd said fit with what I knew of his actions. He'd come to be involved in the Free Cities because the Tyrant had started a war, and as far as I knew never fought where there wasn't a villain involved. He'd come as part of the southern crusade, which was a mark against him, but it was largely Black he'd been there for. And while I loved my father a great deal, I couldn't deny that he was a monster twice over. I believed him to be the man who'd stood between Praes and its worst impulses for decades, and perhaps the monster needed to reform the Dread Empire into a nation that wouldn't vomit its poison over the rest of Calernia every few decades, but that in no way made him a good man. It was not *unjustified*, to want to kill him. That didn't mean I'd allow it, or that it would not make things objectively worse if it happened, but I wouldn't delude myself into thinking that Amadeus of the Green Stretch was not a monster. He was other things, too, but that didn't expunge the first truth from him. In the end, I didn't have a lot of axes to grind with the White Knight and he'd proved one of the more reasonable heroes I'd come across. Hanno had even gone north to fight the Dead King and only returned to prevent the Tyrant from having a continent-collapsing tantrum.

In all honesty, that put him pretty high up my list of people who hadn't severely fucked up in the last year. He had Black beat, for one.

"You don't take issue with mortal laws, then," I said.

"It would be absurd to," he noted. "Lest the Heavens themselves rule, what other way is there?"

"And if those laws applied to even Named?" I pressed.

"A law need not be just," Hanno of Arwad said. "It need only be a law. I would no more bend my neck to such a wrong than any other threat."

"I'm not talking about settling right and wrong for all of Calernia," I said. "That's doomed. Howling Hells, let's not even talk about Good and Evil – not even all of Good agrees on the same boundaries. No, I mean basics. You can't tell Named that regicide is over, neither heroes nor villains would obey that. But limiting the means by which it can be done? That might work. And it'd end the practice of burning down half a city to kill a tyrant or usurp a throne."

"Not laws, these," the White Knight said, eyes curious, "but rather rules of engagement."

My veins thrummed with excitement, because unlike Tariq he'd not needed to be led to that. He'd grasped it, quickly, and did not seem opposed in the slightest. The dark-eyed hero let out a little noise of understanding.

"Ah," he said. "I see now your cleverness in making such rules so basic. If the expectation placed is so low and Named still fail to clear it, none will desire to support them. Neither others who bear mantles nor the powerful without, for only the erratic would break such bare bones rules. The vast majority of Named will see their lives go untouched, with only the most radical being restricted."

He paused, looking at me with an expression I found difficult to place.

"This is more than rules of engagement," the White Knight said, "this is a blade swung at the most callous servants of Above and Below. Within a few generations of grand gestures being harshly answered by all other powers, you would excise that entire manner of thinking from the Named on Calernia."

Not even Black had caught that, I thought. Oh, he'd seen parts of the Accords as being meant to restrain the most destructive aspects of Praes, but he'd not really gotten it because at the end of the day he did not think of stories the way I did. He'd stayed alive as villain occupying my home, a hotbed of rebellion, by avoiding ever getting caught in a story or pattern that'd get him killed. Unlike me, unlike Akua even, he only rarely wielded like a weapon. It was the same with the Pilgrim, I thought, in his own way. Tariq carried around on his back the weight of all his tragedies but at heart he was a guest in the stories of others. Sometimes a guest who ended that story before it could grow into something dangerous, others a wise old man who nudged it to something more acceptable, but the Peregrine as an entity remained... constant. Always playing the same few roles in different stories. He'd know a great many of those, but it would be his nature to think of them as a landscape he'd travelled far and wide. Not something that could shift and change.

"If the flying fortress crowd and the Contrition-ritual crowd always die, always fail? People will remember that," I quietly agreed. "Gods know it'll be public enough when the hammer's brought down. And when it's been happening for long enough, well, everyone will 'know' that sort of thing doesn't work. Same way heroes don't die when they're thrown down cliffs or villains don't get beaten on the first step of their plan."

"And with most Named having a stake in ensuring at least the barest of civility is maintained between their kind, the odds are strong that your rules will last long enough to make that mark," Hanno said. "It is a sound notion."

"Then you'd be in favour of such a set of rules?" I asked.

He half-smiled.

"They did warn me," the White Knight pensively said.

I almost cursed. Gods, let this not turn into a damned flop where by simple nature of having been proposed by a villain this entire concept was to be dismissed as a plot of Below. That would be bitterly disappointing after the rest of this conversation.

"I've not spoken a single lie," I said.

"Which makes you singularly dangerous," Hanno agreeably replied.

My fingers clenched until the knuckles went white under the gloves.

"Ah, you misunderstand me," the White Knight said. "That you are silver-tongued and perhaps one of the most dangerous people alive does not mean I am dismissing your proposal, Black Queen."

"Then what *does* it mean?" I asked.

"That I understand what the Grey Pilgrim meant, now," Hanno of Arwad said. "You have a pull, Catherine Foundling, that drags others into your wake: either as followers or as wreckage. I am glad to have seen it myself before we first met on formal terms. It would have been startling."

That last part he spoke ruefully, as if mocking himself.

"There doesn't need to be anything mystical about this," I insisted. "I don't have sole claim to the Accords, not in the slightest. I speak for them because I'm in a position to, not because they're solely my horse to ride. I don't know what you think-"

"I very nearly agreed," the White Knight amusedly said. "Just now. Without thinking twice. After speaking with you for not even an hour. Because you are reasonable, well-spoken and even charming in what I assume to be a rough Callowan way."

That last one was kind of insulting, I decide, but the rest pretty flattering. I cleared my throat.

"Still not too late to agree now," I gallantly tried.

"No, perhaps not," Hanno calmly replied, "but it is certainly too early."

He suddenly twitched, head turning to look at the far south. I couldn't hear or see anything, at this distance, and it might be

a little gauche to call on Night to aid my senses next to the Sword of Judgement so I refrained out of politeness.

"My friend is returning," the White Knight said.

It took a moment for me to place it.

"The Witch of the Woods?" I asked.

He dipped his head in agreement.

"A great she-wolf walks with her," he said. "Neither are fond of cities."

"I'll take my leave, then," I said.

I could on occasion recognize a hint when it was sent my way. I dropped down onto the snow, softening the blow with my staff, and tightened my cloak around my shoulder. Wouldn't be too long a walk back to camp and I probably should head to bed – I had quite the day ahead of me tomorrow.

"Good night to you, White Knight," I said, dipping my head in salute.

"And to you, Black Queen," he replied, doing the same.

I cleared the path, though as I crossed back into the plains I was stopped by a call.

"I expect they will not grow fonder of cities overnight," Hanno said.

He wasn't speaking loudly, but his voice carried perfectly.

"Might be I go for a walk, then," I replied without glancing back.

The yew staff dug into the snow as I limped back home – thump, thump, thump – and I wondered if it truly should go. There might come a day where the coin went up spinning in judgement of me, after all. Not this winter, not this year, maybe not even this decade. But one day? Oh, there'd been a shiver of that going through the conversation. Violence coiled and controlled but never too far from the surface. As a younger woman that might have disturbed me, but these days it simply marked him to my eye as someone able to handle strength properly. Still, I now understood why many heroes deferred to that man: he was so utterly at peace with the power he wielded and what he wielded it for that looking on the surface of that placid pond you'd only ever see your own doubts reflected. I wondered if he'd hesitate, if on that day the coin showed swords. I wondered if I'd hesitate to kill him before the coin ever began spinning.

Neither yew nor snow held answers for me, save that when night came again I would return.

copaceticcockroach

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[Liliet](#)

bless ya

[Javvies](#)

Huh.

I think Hanno is probably going to come down in favor of the Accords in general, even if he disagrees on some of the details. This is a good thing.

I wonder what the Witch of the Woods will think. Of both the Accords and Hanno and Cat talking. And I fully expect her to walk in on then tomorrow night.

Insanenoodlyguy

... While they are kissing! Added the last bit in you forgot.

[TheAtomicOption](#)

in bed! :0

Insanenoodlyguy

Hey now, Hanna is a good boy. Cat is going to have to have a third date at least before she can get him to go that far.

caoimhinh

Yeah, seems legit.
Patterns of Three and all that.

[Sugar Roll](#)

Half-naked!

A K

I don't think servants of the Choir of Judgement do halves.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Sure they do. A half of you here and a half of you there.

caoimhinh

If Cat is half-naked when the Witch arrives, or even rolling on the floor with her arms around Hanno, she was either being *really convincing* on her sell of the Accords, or negotiations broke down and they were fighting.

It is surprising how many situations Cat has been involved where she actually ended half-naked without anything sexual or romantic going on.

To the top of my head, the list includes:

- Masego operating to rip off a piece of her soul to extirpate the corrupted **Seek** Aspect
- Masego putting the seal on the Moon Heart the Winter King gave Cat
- Masego doing regular mystical medical check-ups on her (LMAO, Masego has seen Cat naked and put his fingers in her more times than Indrani has)
- The multiple times she got ripped apart in battle and her armor broken but she regenerated thanks to Winter. (Battle of the Camps, the Spellsword, in the Ever Dark)

Andrew Mitchell

> LMAO, Masego has seen Cat naked and put his fingers in her more times than Indrani has

Funny, but objectively untrue. Cat and Indrani shared a bed regularly for months.

[Javvies](#)

Yeah, but Masego was poking around in Cat's insides for years. Since before they even met Indrani. And we know he did a lot offscreen.

Sure, Masego probably wasn't examining Cat at the frequency Cat and Indrani were enjoying each other (most of the time, anyways) ... but Masego had way more time to work with than Indrani did.

Andrew Mitchell

Good points. I concede that my "objectively untrue" was wrong. My view now is that the question isn't really decidable either way.

> Masego was poking around in Cat's insides for years

I feel that's stretching it quite a bit. But it's just a feeling because I don't have a good understanding of time in the guideverse.

> And we know he did a lot offscreen.

True. Masego was checking Cat's soul regularly, but we don't really know how often.

Javvies

Masego first poked around Cat's innards before First Marchford. Before Indrani even showed up. So he started in early book 2.

On the other hand, Masego most likely only poked around inside Cat regularly after she got Winter Fae powers, so early-ish book 3, since before that he only needed to poke around as one-off medical treatments for specific injuries.

I'm not entirely sure how long it would be ... but likely a minimum of two or three years, counting the timeskips.

stevenneiman

I've been feeling a lot more sympathetic towards Hanno now that we've actually seen him in his dealings with people other than instant enemies. And seen that he actually does more than just ask for advice on who to kill and then kill them.

And yeah, the Witch is definitely an unknown quantity. I don't recall if we've ever seen a characterizing moment from her, unless you count Hanno saying she doesn't like cities.

matesbe

This whole conversation was gold. I think that Hanno might really be the great proponent of the accords on the Heroes' side. I think that Hanno and Cat might actually become sort of friends eventually, though the fact that Hanno might one day try and kill Cat will always be there between them. They both know that as far as the Seraphim are concerned, that coin might just flip swords for Cat.

mingablo

Time for the wacky sitcom spinoff.

konstantinvoncarstein

It seems too good to be true, having a Hero who agrees with the Accords after one conversation.

Andrew Mitchell

He specifically wanted to agree, but didn't. Which is quite sensible IMO.

There's going to be quite a range of reactions from Heroes. Hanno's an important data point, but just one. Honestly, there's bound to be some that say "no accord with Villians, ever"; Laurence was one example. But mostly, I expect most will sign on, after much discussion & debate, because signing The Accords is the right thing for all people to stop the worst excesses of both sides.

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, thinking before accepting a treaty is extremely sensible 😊 But the fact that his first reaction was to accept said treaty (proposed by one of the most infamous and canny Villain of his generation) is surprising. The fact that it seems to happen just like Catherine want makes me fear that something very unpleasant is about to occur.

[Liliet](#)

Not really. It's a mixture of (1) Catherine leading up to it from the angle she previously got Hanno to agree on, (2) her force-of-nature charisma. It's exactly the thing that happens when you are *really good at getting people to agree with you* which is exactly the skill Catherine has, and has been commented on many, many, many times.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> her force-of-nature charisma.

Well, that's the thing. Her charisma isn't just a matter of skill at manipulation, or even persuasiveness. Hanno's response makes it clear that he's recognizing a "narrative power", where Cat tends to sweep up people in her wake. Hanno doesn't easily get swept up, because he's a major player in his own right – but he can certainly feel the pressure.

Fortunately, he's not contrary enough to oppose her *just* because something's pushing him, but he (quite reasonably) wants a double-check (from someone with serious magical defenses) before he decides to go with the flow on this.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> ... the fact that Hanno might one day try and kill Cat will always be there between them.

Which is nothing new for Cat, from either side! Pilgrim, Kairos, Akua, Black...

[Liliet](#)

I mean ffs, she *set that up deliberately as a precaution* with Vivienne.

therealgridlock

No, even worse, instead of the Swords, what if she gets the Laurels?

I mean... She got something out of contrition, she argued her way to something with mercy, it wouldn't surprise me that she manages to do enough good or make an argument to judgement that she gets a pass from them too.

Imagine if you will... Cat, black queen, arch heretic, gets personal approval from all seven choirs. Truly a Lord of... Neutral.

Alivaril

"Neither yew nor snow held answers for me, save that when night came again I would vote for <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> ."

Insanenoodlyguy

"I very nearly agreed," the White Knight amusedly said. "Just now. Without thinking twice. After speaking with you for not even an hour. Because you are reasonable, well-spoken and even vote for PGTE on topwebfiction."

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

The only choice that matters

Is it really necessary to spam that link three times?

Ezario Gerion

Sadly, yes. I forgot about voting and noticed only third comment .

caoimhinh

Usually when the earliest readers open the link, there are few to no comments. So sometimes it happens that after they finish reading and decide to put the link to Topwebfiction, somebody else is doing the same.

Coincidences happen sometimes, I personally like it when they do it in a creative way, it's pretty cool in my opinion.

Personally, I was gonna go with:

"You don't take issue with readers' votes, then," I said.

"It would be absurd to," he noted. "Lest the Authors themselves vote, what other way is there?"

and then add the link, but when I reached the end of the page I saw the first comment already had it so there was no need.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I don't know who started this tradition but I love it.

Shikkarasu

"If the flying fortress crowd and the Contrition-ritual crowd always Vote, without fail? People will remember that," I quietly agreed. "And when it's been happening for long enough, well, everyone will 'know' that sort of thing works."

Insanenoodlyguy

It's definitely more fun than just posting "vote."

The downside is, that can be posted as soon as the chapters up. You actually have to read the damn thing if you want to find a good line, which makes the likes of us slower.

[Liliet](#)

Also it's cringey and awful, though YMMV of course.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Between the perceived prominence of your commentary on this series as a whole and your dislike of so-bad-it's-good forms of comedy I fear you will soon be given an offer you can't refuse from a man in black plate armor. Be careful out there.

[Liliet](#)

I hate these and find them incredibly cringey, and strongly prefer regular 'vote now' or something else that isn't clever / quoting the text

I am aware that mine is the minority opinion -_-

Andrew Mitchell

I like them too. ♥

copaceticcockroach

This chapter feels like a good day for Cat, so who's going to ruin her day? And we haven't see the Tyrant for a while, let's see how fast Cat's day will go down.

Soronel Haetir

Cat's all set up to run into the one wearing Captain's skin. I suspect Cat will not look on that favorably even if it does not come to blows.

My very own name

Does she know that Captain could skin change? I'm not sure. Perhaps only Black will recognize that.

Logan Marchman

I really enjoyed this chapter! And absolutely think it would be fitting to see Hanno and Cat get together

[Liliet](#)

Rafaella is in the north.

Insanenoodlyguy

Hanno will prove to be kinda crap in the sack.

[Liliet](#)

I mean the night kind of started from that argument with Scribe that ended with her devolving into a surly child ("Fine", Catherine? Really?), so the balance holds so far --

copaceticcockroach

I believe when good things and bad things that happen in a day are balanced, it's a good day for a villain.

Cicero

The fact that Hanno did not simply agree to the Accords, nor reject them, but wants to think about them before deciding, is actually rather encouraging.

If he supports them (and I think he is currently inclined too) it will be because he believes it is the right choice. Not because he thinks it convenient, or the situation compels him too, or because he wants Catherine's favor for something else. But

because he actually believes in the core of the Accords themselves.

That would mean that the Accords would gain a supporter on the Heroic side who will support them the same way Catherine does. Not merely for the surface reasons, but because he understands and support the greater goal.

talenel

Huh, I still think he's going to decide whether to support the accords or not by flipping his coin. Because I can't see him ridding himself entirely of uncertainty about them. And if he has doubts, then he'll need something else to judge.

[sengachi](#)

As he said though, the Choir of Judgement does not speak to mortal laws.

axusgrad

Don't the gods Above and Below both have a stake in keeping the stories (and Named) coming? If they're sending the Bard to do as much as possible to stop the Liesse Accords, they wouldn't hesitate to rig a coin flip.

[Liliet](#)

Accords aren't about destroying either stories or Named, only to curb the worst excesses. If anything, they make the whole shebang less likely to spontaneously self-destruct, making them in Gods' interest and to a degree even Bard's, decreased influence or no – if decreased influence comes with reduced workload, who'd say no to that?

>If they're sending the Bard to do as much as possible to stop the Liesse Accords

Are they?

Andrew Mitchell

> Accords aren't about destroying either stories or Named, only to curb the worst excesses.

Exactly.

nick012000

He himself says that the Choir of Justice only levies one kind of judgement: absolution or death. If he flips his coin on the Accords, it'd pen him into one of two options: support

them, or kill everyone who does support them. I'm not sure he'd be interested in taking that risk.

caoimhinh

Just imagine:

Catherine presents the Accords document to Hanno and he flips the Coin of Judgement. The coin falls on Laurels, so the swords' image is burned into the parchment.

It can be taken as signature XD

talenel

I think of it more as an absolute yes or no. It can't make a good judgment over where to set a property line or something like that, but it can only answer simple questions

Andrew Mitchell

Nah. The Seraphim judge souls, not human agreements.

[Javvies](#)

It's not entirely clear how willing to communicate with Hanno the Seraphim are.

He might be able to get a response on whether or not they think he should support the Accords or not. On the other hand, since their means of communicating with him is a bit binary ... they could like 99.999%, but their response could still be no because of that 0.001% they don't like.

It's also unclear as to what Hanno's determination not to judge covers and doesn't cover. Clearly, it covers people, and when he's been asked to arbitrate disputes he flips the coin, issuing the judgment of the Seraphim, not his. On the other hand, he is clearly contemptuous of the Conclave, but that could just be because they tried to claim the right to judge Cat the Arch-Heretic of the East. However, this discussion seemed to imply that he might be willing to support the Accords without any sort of indication that he wasn't going to judge them and instead he'd be consulting the Seraphim for their judgement.

Like ... where does Hanno's determination not to judge because he isn't qualified end, and where does the necessity to make basic comparative value decisions begin? Ie, if he were to go hunting or something, would he need to flip the coin on every deer he sees until he finds one that comes up swords, or can he make the decision on which deer he should try to take without the coin?

Andrew Mitchell

I think you've raised some excellent questions about the communication between the Seraphim and Hanno and where Hanno calls on the Seraphim and where he doesn't. I'm sure we'll learn more about those questions during the remainder of the Guide.

My comment to @talenel was specifically in relation to flipping a coin on the Accords and I wasn't commenting on any other ways the Seraphim might communicate.

It's clear that Hanno won't flip a coin on the Accords because (A) we've only seen that Hanno uses the coin on people, and (b) Hanno said in this chapter that flipping the coin on a person brings their souls to the gaze of the Seraphim ("If the coin spun for ever soul on Calernia, it would show the laurels more often than not" and "And I do not bring into the gaze of the Seraphim every soul I encounter without reason"). These points together meant that it would now be absurd for the coin to be used on the Accords. We know EE is a better writer than that.

Soronel Haetir

I still think that when the coin goes spinning for Cat it's going to come up edgies.

IDKWhoitis

Is that the equivalent of an Angelic shrug?

Or is it more Fate having fun?

Raivshard

Strangely enough, I I think that would actually make sense.

Sylwoos

Doubtful Cat would ever allow this coin to land at all.

konstantinvoncarstein

Amadeus try to interrupt the spinning and was smacked in the pavement by the Seraphim. If Catherine try that, the collateral damages from the fight between 2 gods will be ugly. It why Catherine spoke of killing him before the coin spin.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Amadeus tried to interrupt Hanno's initial invocation – that is, he attacked *while Hanno was actually in direct contact with the Seraphim*. I'd say that's why he got smacked down, when Cordelia didn't.

ninegardens

That said, I suspect that the fact that Cordelia could touch the coin at all was shenanigans.

We've seen Hanno flip his coin THROUGH A ROOF and catch it again as if the roof wasn't even there. The fact that Cordelia could touch the coin was purely because she had the authority to do so (both legal and narrative authority).

Cat just... doesn't have such authority. Sve Noc probably don't either.

Hierarch possibly does...

Also, I'm now imagining Hanno flipping the coin on Cat, and the coin goes up.... and then just doesn't come back down.

And Hanno and Cat are left standing there "Huh.... now what?"

Soronel Haetir

Cordelia was in the middle of her bestowal as Warden of the West at the moment she grabbed the coin. It was only after she had it that she rejected that Name.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed! Cordelia catching the coin was absolutely symbolic/narrative shenanigans of the Choir of Judgement going "fair enough"

Decius

I maintain that when the coin is flipped for Catherine a raven snatches it from the air.

And if he tries to flip it on Masego it will come up heads. Even though it didn't even have a bust of Masego, owner of Judgement, engraved on the obverse before it was flipped.

IDKWhoitis

This ship is gaining speed. Lots of Speed.

Hanno is probably the first Hero that Cat has looked forward to meeting again, and so soon.

And Hanno was saying all sorts of nice things, when he famously doesn't like to judge people one way or another...

(Come on Judgement, Cat isn't that bad of a girl... OK maybe she's much worse. But this could totally work.)

talenel

I think you might be trying to support your ship. Because I see nothing to indicate that Cat or Hanno is really interested that way. That coin seems to hover over everything. I'm unsure if Hanno will ever be able to get truly close to someone else as long as it's omnipresent.

Sugar Roll

I don't know, it sounds like a great story to me. Hanno gets attracted to a bad girl and then he gets to straighten her out. Not in a redemption story kind of way but in shifting Cat's tastes on romantic interests.

ninegardens

I mean... I'm not sure from what we've seen that Hanno gets "Attracted" in quite the sense you are discussing. He does what he thinks is right. If he judges that sleeping with the Apologetic Magistrate will help her chill out, then he isn't opposed to it, but fundamentally, it's about the magistrate. There's some sort of thing with the Witch of the wilds*, and he likes and cares about her... but you never hear him thinking about whether or not she is attractive. As Hanno says "I don't judge"
Basically Hanno is weird.

And on the other side... Cat certainly thinks her is charismatic... but also describes him as "plain", and seems to oggle him less than most other people she meets.

*Personal theory is that the witch is some kind of "Virgin priestess" type, who gains her power from the wilds specifically because she doesn't fool around... hence the Magistrate's earlier comments that she is interested in Hanno, but always disappointed. There's something screwy going on there, and I'm pretty sure her Name has something to do with it.

caoimhinh

Hmm, I could believe that maybe on the Ashen Priestess, but not on the Witch of the Woods.

The Magister's comment was "If all it takes is asking, it is cruel no one has told Antigone." implying that the Witch was trying to catch Hanno's attention.

It's simply because the Witch of the Woods seems to spend a lot of time around Hanno, given that they even share a Giant-related background and both use that silent language with nuances even on the degree you move your face, that's not surprising. And from an outside perspective, it might seem that there's a romantic interest if two people spend lots of time together, though Hanno denies there being anything of the sort, and implied that there were clear lines drawn there and that was shown in the silent language they use.

"Hanno understood the Witch of the Wilds perhaps better than anyone not of the Gigantes could, for the silent tongue they shared had a hundred thousand nuances but not a single *lie*. They knew where they stood, and what could and could not change from it. Insinuations thrown against that were like an egg tossed at a rampart."

Then again, not saying something is not the same as lying. The Witch might have simply made no insinuation of romantic interest yet, but Hanno seemed pretty certain.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, the Magister is not the most perceptive or enlightened person around. Or even socially clueful.

caoimhinh

She was also drunk at the time, and coping with the fear of the undead. People tend to make scathing comments in such situations.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Apparently she was drunk a lot of the time, to the point that Hanno noted "your hands shake without it". That's not a good way to cope with the fear of the undead.

[Liliet](#)

...Huh.

Maybe Hanno is the one with the unreciprocated crush, and everyone else's insinuation that she's interested make him remind himself that no, he definitely knows that she isn't because he asked and she answered *and that's that* and it's everyone else who doesn't have a clue.

Andrew Mitchell

> As Hanno says "I don't judge"
> Basically Hanno is weird.

Don't dis something until you've tried it yourself.
Reducing my judgement of other people in day-to-day life
has been good for my mental health and relationships.

Morgenstern

... eh...? Please tell me that's not meant the way it can easily
be read as, what with the whole play on "straight(en)"...
*sigh

Tell me it's just the "i liked to pop around, but now i find
this one person actually gives me enough to stay with them
exclusively" (for i don't know which amount of time)... ,
pretty please?

((... Even though even that can be hurtful, because most
people find they are not "naturally monogamous", explaining
much of the difficulties humans have when it comes to
relationships (you choose your kind of pain... but often,
there is always *some* kind of pain, be it not being quite
as fulfilled as you would wish or having to deal with
jealousy issues; choose your poison...)).)

But if it actually should be the case that you really wanted
to imply "a bisexual can be turned straight by that one
special person" (sigh; please no...)? :

Then it would seem you're confusing bisexuality and
monogamy...?

And even then, a whole lot of monogamous people (of whatever
sexual "type" preference when it comes to gender) do NOT
stop finding other people of their "type" interesting – they
just don't follow that interest while in a relationship, if
being monogamous at that point. (Although there might be
some who really are so full of love for that one special
person that – while that person stays in a relationship with
them! -, they do lose all romantical/sexual interest in
anyone else. Such cases not make the same true for everyone,
though; much the contrary, according to statistics. People
refrain, but that's not the same as having no interest at
all.)

A relationship to one special person means just that: a
relationship with that one person that fit into your "type"
already.

What is possible: that one person that made you realize your
type is *broader* than you thought.

But that does not make the reversal true. Where is there EVER any actual “oh, i suddenly realize my type is LESS broad than i thought”?

Only because you find that monogamy suits you with that person who fell into your broad type, while you’re with them, that does not change your sexual preference for gender... Find that you suddenly like a guy when before you only ever liked women? Well, say hello to finding out you were actually BIsexual. Only your other-components-than-gender-“type” when it comes to men is much narrower than your “type” for women... *that* is entirely possible.

But “I was bisexual, but now I don’t like women anymore AT ALL”? Highly UNrealistic. And even fantasy stories should have ONE kind of “realistic” in it: the one that enables readers to RELATE. That is: basic human emotions.

Yes, there are quite a few known cases of “I found monogamy works with this one person, because they’re giving me so very much” (at least for the time that relationship works, which MIGHT just be the rest of your life... but more often ends at some point or other). The preference ranging from monogamy vs. polygamy has been found to change in people over time.

But that is NOT the same as shifts in wholesale stance from “i don’t care about gender, i simply like HUMANS” to “i now suddenly prefer gender x to gender y”, because of one person.

I.e. sexual preference of a certain type is NOT under the same hat as being monogamous or not.

Bisexuals are not suddenly heterosexual because they’re in a relationship with a person from the other gender (and do also not suddenly become homosexual while being in a relationship with a person from their own gender) – their whole shtick is *not caring about gender at all*, thus being able to find a partner of either gender because gender is simply no part of their preference. They might have a tendency (see above, broader type when it comes to other features of a person for one gender than the other making it more likely you find more suitable mates from that gender than for the one for which the other components are of a much narrower type), but there really are no proven cases of anyone actually having a narrowing-down of their overall sexual preference when it comes to a basic thing as gender. There might be the odd “I don’t like men/women in general, and thought I was homosexual, but I do find I like *this* one guy/gal” – but that is no narrowing down, it’s a broadening. Now you like women (broad type for women) AND that one guy (very narrow type of men you like) = i.e., hello to discovering your *bisexuality*.

Morgenstern

... I should have used "gender xy", I guess, would have been easier in terms of speech... =/

For all cases where I used only one example: all options were meant (including non-binary genders). It's the example here (Cat, being a woman who likes men and women (we don't know about non-binaries in her case), with slightly more women seeming to fit her other categories (broader type for women) that made me switch to those specified examples rather thoughtlessly. Meh. Speaking about this IS in general still a bit difficult for me, after a lifetime of being exposed to heterosexual norms in speech.

Not being able to edit sucks one again. (No, not the good type. =P)

Aotrs Commander

I was going to politely suggest that maybe you were overreacting and the post in question just meant in the innocuous sense of a criminal "going straight," and then, because I am a diligent poster, re-read aforementioned post and actually comprehended the last sentence.

Oof, yeah, no, I see your point; that's a rather... Framing it generously... Poorly-phrased sentiment, isn't?

(My own cardinal rule is "whatever two (or more) adult sapients/sentients get up to on their own time is nobody's business but their own, provided it isn't directly harming[1] someone else.")

[1]"Being offended" doesn't count as "harm."

IDKWhoitis

I also just interpreted the phrase as the "straighten out" the criminal variety.

caoimhinh

Maybe when we read the first half, but then the second half is explicitly saying "he gets to **straighten her out**. *Not in a redemption story kind of way* but in **shifting Cat's tastes on romantic interests**."

So it really leaves no space for interpretation of what Sugar Roll meant.

[Sugar Roll](#)

It was also meant as a joke and not to be taken seriously. I realize it may have been a poor one but a joke nonetheless. I'll just leave it at that and say I'm sorry for any hurt feelings it may have caused.

IDKWhoitis

Fair enough, didn't read the 2nd part well apparently.

Andrew Mitchell

Me too. I re-read and immediately saw the source of Morgenstern's concerns.

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks for airing your concerns. Irrespective of OP's intent; what you say are important messages.

[Liliet](#)

Thank you.

It's always heartening to see someone else go on a rant where I didn't have the energy to!

Andrew Mitchell

♥

[Liliet](#)

> straighten her out. Not in a redemption story kind of way but in shifting Cat's tastes on romantic interests.

eeeeeeeeeeeeewwwwwwwwwww

dude, you're gross

caoimhinh

People are making comments about a ship between them for the fun of it rather than the story realistically making them interested in each other.

I personally don't see them getting involved as anything more than friends, but it's fun to make up situations and speculate.

[Sugar Roll](#)

This guy gets it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, "ship" can cover any sort of relationship.

caoimhinh

In theory, I guess.

But in practice, when someone says "I ship these two characters", it really is only used when meaning a romantic or sexual relationship.

[Liliet](#)

I'm trying to break that custom for everyone 9.9

[TeK](#)

I mean, I saw people shipping her with Rumena of all people.

Agent J

Granddaddy Rumena has quite the sharp tongue. Of course Catherine wants to see it put to better use.

talenel

Hey I could see her with Rumena more than I could see with Hanno. Actually I can totally think of some really hot fanfiction with Rumena x Cat.

Hanno is almost like trying to imagine a relationship with a cold fish to me. He's just too distant. It just doesn't work, even as a dream ship for me.

caoimhinh

Yeah, LOL.

Some people are just crazy and ship for the sake of shipping.

IDKWhoitis

A person can dream. Or just debate the inherent silliness of the strongest Hero and Villian making eyes at each other.

I think it's not likely to happen. But if it did...

Insanenoodlyguy

Since when has Cat lost attraction because somebody was powerful and/or could and might kill her?

So far, it's gone the opposite way.

talenel

Yes, the danger isn't what I mean by the coin being omnipresent. It's the idea behind it, that, when it comes down to it, he isn't the one making some of the biggest decisions in his life, something alien is. It creates an emotional distance that generates respect, but not true affection I would say.

Silverking

I wonder what will happen when Cat realizes that she's been riding Providence this whole time. She seems to have forgotten what it was like when she fetching Hierophant as part of the Band of Five: it's not that you get stronger or smarter; it's just your enemies leave openings and the winding path gets a little straighter and isn't it just so EASY being good? You'd think that nearly converting the golden boy of your opposing ideology on your first "chance" meeting might be a wake-up call. But beware, Black Queen, remember the false guilt you felt the day after you let William go. If Providence starts leading you towards a hot mature even-tempered guy, you need to jump off that horse before it leads you off a cliff.

[Liliet](#)

LMAO

No, I think Providence is genuinely the wind in Cat's sails here because of the whole thing being genuinely a good plan.

See also: Agnes Hasenbach

superkeaton

Well that was fun. I like these little chats.

Alivaril

I read that as "little charts" and thought you were referring to the rampant joke-shipping.

superkeaton

I mean, that's been fun too.

caoimhinh

They caught each other's interest and had a polite conversation, earned each other's respect, and gained a bit of understanding of each other. Great friendships had been built with far less. That their sides want to kill each other just adds more spice as far as Catherine is concerned.

It's likely the best scenario among the realistic ones, as he didn't promise to agree but didn't refute either. Such compromise

as backing the Black Queen even if it's on something beneficial for everyone requires a bit more consideration than the first instinct and impression. At least now they have a cordial base agreement to start off, which is great.

Also, real smooth, Hanno, way to go. Dropping that hint that the house will be empty tomorrow. And Cat's response was pretty much "It's a date then".
(͡° ͜ʖ ͡°)

P.S: "for only the erratic would break such bare-bones rules."
Well, Erratic *is* the Author, so in theory he can break whatever rule there is, hahaha.

Mental Mouse

Actually, I read that as the opposite: "If you want to talk to Antigone, we can arrange that after I've had a chance to warn her".

Liliet

Yeah, same. I read that as "come visit when she's home"

NZPIEFACE

Well, the ship is sailing.

caoimhinh

Well, Hanno *did* tell her a hinted version of "My roommate will be going out tomorrow, so I'll have the house for myself."

ninegardens

Huh?

Oh... I read the exact opposite intention here:

"Antigone will need to be out of the city tomorrow night also, so probably I'll be here again, waiting for her"

Hmmm... re-reading I'm not sure which intention is right here.

Insanenoodlyguy

It's both. Because he'll be here, waiting for her, close to the Callowan camp. All. By. Himself.

laguz24

Uhg, this better not go full on RWBY levels of shipping and toxicity. I like this series.

Morgenstern

Hey, Indrani is not monogamous, either. As long as Hanno can live with that, where's the problem... 😊

But yeah, this better not turn out to be a facepalm-assery of "how bi-s can be straightened out"; it really would sour the story, to have to see bullshit like that purported HERE, of all places, where sexuality and gender preferences of any kind are treated much more less-toxically than in way too many other stories.

konstantinvoncarstein

The way sexuality and genders are presented is honestly one of the best I have ever read 😊

caoimhinh

"They are each person's business and not something to make any fuss about." is indeed one of the best ways to present the matter.

Andrew Mitchell

♥ THE best I've seen so far.

Ιούλιος Καίσαρας

"But yeah, this better not turn out to be a facepalm-assery of "how bi-s can be straightened out";"
This part confuses me. How would a theoretical romantic affair with the Wight Knight would do that? Even a long-term, monogamous one? Are preferences erased because someone settles down in a relationship?

Insanenoodlyguy

I think Morgenstern wasn't referring to the story itself, but the fandom, namely all our wordpress discussion. So rather than EE implying cat was "fixed" or "Screwed straight" or "found the right man" or any of that bullshit, it will be down here below the story where that bullshit will come up and they dread those sorts of comments appearing.

[Tek](#)

Eh, I honestly doubt it. That would mean she would stop lewding every pretty woman down the line. As far as character development goes, this seems as implausible as Robber becoming a pacifist unironically.

Insanenoodlyguy

Again, the fear is not that Erattic suddenly shows a much different attitude about sexuality in his writing, but that the fandom discussion goes sour because of how contentious the subject can get.

I, of course, stay firmly in my homestuck-fandom style "Ship all of the people with all of the people. All of them."

Incidentally, when are Cordelia and Robber going to fuck already!?

[TeK](#)

I concur. If anything, she is disproportionally lewds women, but that shouldn't make her a lesbian, so having a man for a change wouldn't straighten her out either.

caoimhinh

Ah, that's because of Sugar Roll's comment above saying it would be a good story if Hanno gets to "straighten Cat out" by shifting Cat's tastes on romantic interests. It provoked quite the reaction in Morgenstern.

Though I stand on Morgen's side of the argument, I believe Morgen shouldn't fall for that bait, nor take that response into other people's comments, as each person is only responsible for *their own* comments. One person's comment does not represent the fandom.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, I've already seen one comment like that right here on this page. Fucking ew. This, this is why I've had no problems with bi Catherine consistently going for girls...

Ιούλιος Καίσαρας

The number of ships will make a fleet to rival that of the Baalite Hegemony's in her peak.

Tuftears

Well dang, up to this chapter I was thinking the White Knight was this random demented killer and suddenly he's being made to seem so... nice and reasonable. (is immediately suspicious)

[Liliet](#)

Are you being sarcastic or

General Chaos

Second date!

Also, this may be my favourite book so far.

Pandemonious Ivy

That was the most intense flirting I've seen the entire story.

Well done, that was hot!

D. Dufour

Are you drunk?

[Liliet](#)

"I'm sure your hair is fine, Catherine"

[Draconic](#)

She should warn him about the Hierarch. I would not be surprised if he managed to kill a Seraphim because it was the one who judged the people Hanne has killed...

[Draconic](#)

*Hanno

how did I manage that typo...

ChillyPepper

Time for the illegal relationship between a superior (White Knight) and a (former) underling (Squire).

[Mental Mouse](#)

I love how Hanno's getting to speak his piece for himself here! And in his own measured way.

Grognac

I never leave comments on these, but this chapter was superbly written. I love this series so gods damn much 😊

[Liliet](#)

SAME SAME SAME

Andrew Mitchell

♥

werafdsaew

We got a bit of theology; explains why Above is so hands off—because they do not rule.

"You don't take issue with mortal laws, then," I said.

[Liliet](#)

Yep! They guide but don't rule. Hopefully this will get some clue into the fandom's collective head 9.9

kuro

people suddenly shipping white knight because he's a guy and in the most obnoxious way possible. ya'll should be ashamed

[Hydrargentium](#)

Lovely bit of symbolism here, with the whole thing being a game of chess, White Knight on the board with Black Queen. Of course, in chess, black and white are opposed, and the knight is the only piece that can directly threaten the queen without putting itself in the line of fire – specifically existing for that purpose, mostly.

Hg

[Hydrargentium](#)

"I assure you, Chancellor, that with but a few words they'll come around to agreeing with me. Almost like an incantation, really."

Also, this is awesome.

Hg

[Liliet](#)

big infodump energy

"Can't you have a conversation for five minutes without immediately talking about THE THING" "WHY WOULD I"

I love her.....

(opinion poll: ADD Catherine Foundling y/n?)

Koana

Look i get shipping but saying he's destined to be with cat simply because he's a guy is stupid, its also stupid to imply he'll correct her because she's been with women too much. seriously its like the comment section devolved the moment he appeared

Chapter 76: Procession

"Orphan am I, yet with many mothers and fathers. At once ruler and ruled, yet never only one."

– Famous Proceran riddle, referring to the city of Salia

I'd never been all that fond of the cloying amount of ceremony that accompanied rising up the ranks.

Oh, I understood the reasons for it. I'd argued the matter with Black back in the day, when we still had our lessons in Ater. Said that it was absurd to treat a king or a general as if they were gods, that the more you set distance between the people making decisions and the people about which those decisions were made the more you ran risks of losing perspective. I still believed that, truth be told, but after years in command of armies and a few wearing a crown I could better appreciate the points my teacher had made back then. When someone was invested with a great deal of power and authority, treating them like a stranger off the street meant treating all that power and authority just as casually. That tended to foster bad habits. In Praes the lie of Malicia and Black's invincibility had kept rebellions from flaring up because they'd just seemed *beyond* that: Black always ended up crushing his foes, Malicia always ended up having been three steps ahead of everyone else. It was the same principle for this, more or less: the more ceremony you surrounded someone with, the more they seemed different. Apart from the rest. And, since they were of a different breed from the common man on the street, their authority need not be fought and their power need not be questioned.

That was the reason while my morning had turned into a damned slog, when it came down to it. There were four delegations that the Principate of Procer was to welcome into Salia officially for the peace conference at the capital, and while I would have been happy with being ushered in through the city gates without first needing to bribe the guard that just wasn't the way diplomacy was conducted between great powers. No, this had to be a *show*. So everyone had come with their nicest banners and their armour freshly polished, prepared a hundred empty courtesies and now Procer was going to parade us one after another through the large Griffon Gate and the broad avenue it led to. Callow had not been invited to proceed first, naturally. The Principate might be in dire need of my help but it wasn't going to own up to that before the eyes of gods and men: no, instead it was the Dominion of Levant that was invited in first. Levant was an ally, after all, and a member of the Grand Alliance too. Still, at least we were second. General Rumena was third in line, which I took to be a

rather blunt slight to the League of Free Cities in general and likely the Tyrant in particular.

It'd been made clear to me that we would be signaled when the time came for my delegation to proceed, and I'd sent Adjutant ahead to make sure everything went smoothly. That left me with rather little to do, to my rising irritation as time went by. General Abigail was, as usual, finding work for herself so she would not have to remain in my immediate vicinity and while the Third Army was laden with old War College acquaintances of mine – it had, after all, initially been raised from Nauk's old command in the Fifteenth – there were none I could casually approach for conversation. With Archer still out there somewhere, having sent a single message through Robber's marauders that she was 'onto something', that left me rather light on choices. Moreso than usual since it'd been decided neither Black nor Akua would accompany the delegation on the first day, as that was when there'd be the most eyes on us, and sadly Vivienne was further ahead of our procession. I could go to her, but it'd disturb arrangements that'd taken the better part of an hour to put in place and it felt a little pitiful to do that out of mere boredom.

There were around three hundred of us, arrayed in our finest. A full cohort of legionaries in their parade grounds best made up the heart of it, veterans from a half a dozen fields most of which were old to my service. Thirty knights of the Order of the Broken Bells added a dash of Callowan flair to it, though their hymn-inscribed armour and long lances had been proved to be anything but decorative in conflict against foes of Creation and beyond. They brought with them tall streaming banners, numbering three. The Third Army's own golden numerals on blue, carrying with them the cognomen of *Dauntless* I'd granted them at Sarcella as well as the fresher addition of crow wings at the bottom corners. The broken bells of bronze set on black that were the heraldry of the sole chivalric order of Callow trailed in the wind besides it, and last of all of all my own. The laden silver balance on black, what Hakram had told me my people now called the *Crown and Sword*. And under it words I now longer called my own: *justifications matter only to the just*. I'd been considering having them struck for some time now, but it would draw questions I was not entirely ready to answer.

I'd been made just as gaudy as the rest of this procession, put up in full plate for the first time in ages though it was one without a helmet – my hair had been put up a long elaborate braid and I'd put on a crown for once. Silver set with emeralds, the practical crown I'd worn when actually moving around in Laure instead of sitting on the fancy chair in full regalia and attempting to look wise. It was not a coincidence that Lady Vivienne Dartwick, herself sitting astride her mount in a beautiful blue dress, wore a crown as well. A slight circlet of

silver, without jewels and much less ornate than mine, but a crown nonetheless. She was heiress-designate to the throne, after all, and though still a lady in title arguably she had higher status than any Proceran royalty save for Cordelia Hasenbach. I'd begun to consider the virtues of outright sending for General Abigail so I could entertain myself at her exp- to consult with the senior commander of my escort, I meant, when Adjutant finally dragged his carcass back to me instead. The Procerans had finally given the signal, so as soon as Hakram was standing by my side our procession began moving forward.

For all its fame, Salia had yet to impress me. This far west it was hardly rare for a great city to expand far beyond its walls, especially if it had seen little war as the capital of the Principate had. Even southern Callow had dabbled in that bad habit. Salia, though, seemed to have more territory outside the distant Yearning Walls than behind them. It wasn't slums, at least not near the road we were led through. But it was certainly a chaotic mess, since it seemed construction was only overseen by the sides of the large roads that led to the deeper city gates. The smell of mud and shit was staggeringly potent even in winter, and chimneys were belching smoke upwards seemingly endlessly. By the looks of it all the cattle and workers that would be out in the fields around the capital during fairer seasons had migrated to this riotous outer-city for the snows. Houses were wood and mud, rarely stone, and they'd been built in tight clusters like a thousand strange little islands separated from one another by muddy street-moats. The stone road that led towards the Griffon Gate was clean, though, and swept clear of snow. No house was every built less than forty feet away from either side though merchant carts of food or trade goods filled much of that empty room instead.

Small crowds had gathered by the side of the road, though they dared not approach soldiers. At least they seemed more in the mood to stare than throw stones. The deeper we went into Salia the more it began to resemble the Proceran towns and cities I'd seen, as if order was radiating from the centre of the capital and waned the further from it you stood. Streets began to have a semblance of order, shops with hanging signs and neat little houses raised in stone with tiled or thatched roofs. It all looked rather prosperous, though not the kind of wealthy the stories about the beating heart of Procer had led me to expect. Oh, I'd not deny the city was damned large but then so was Ater and the Wasteland's capital was a treasure trove of grand architecture. Mind you, large swaths of Ater were half-abandoned and only filled when famine drove the desperate to the Tower's shadow while it looked like every damned inch of the capital of Procer was crawling with a dozen people. Still, the looming cathedrals beyond the Yearning Walls in the distance were distinctly less impressive than the gargantuan horrors of the

City of Gates. Procer was a younger nation than any on Calernia save for Levant, I thought, for all its great wealth and power.

It was almost an hour all told until we stood before the Griffon Gate, the great panels of bronze on its wood listing every First Prince and Princess to have ever reigned. It opened to the sound of trumpets, and beyond it was revealed the sweeping Merovins avenue. Great statues of marble flanked on us on both sides, beginning on my right with the stern gaze of Clothor Merovins – the first to ever be elected to the office of First Prince. I suspected the man's actual furs had not been quite so rakishly cut, or offered glimpse of what was admittedly an impressively muscled chest, but that was the Alamans for you.

"They're not all royalty, did you know?" Hakram said.

I glanced at him and cocked an eyebrow.

"Famous generals and officials can earn one as well," he gravelled. "One of Rozala Malanza's ancestors is further up from the days before the Malanzas were royalty. He conquered most of northern Levant for the First Prince of the time."

"I don't suppose anyone's told the Blood about that?" I drily asked

"I believe it might be one of those inconvenient truths we must all politely ignore," Hakram replied, clicking his teeth in amusement.

The brassy call of trumpets jarred us out of the conversation. The Proceran welcome was laid out before us, a riot of silken banners under brightly armoured horsemen and even more colourful highborn. Every line with a seat in the Highest Assembly had sent a representative, by the looks of it, because that was a great many banners. And an infuriatingly large amount of very nice warhorses. They could have outfitted a good company of heavy horse with that, the wasteful fucks. Ugh, this was going to be as bad as the Tower wasn't it? All rubies the size of a fist used a bloody bench decorations and gold slapped onto things that had absolutely no need of being made of gold. Which, to be fair, was essentially everything except certain coinage and maybe crowns. A representative for the First Prince herself, an old man that carried the title of Master of Orders – one of the important officials in the Assembly, as I recalled, though he shouldn't be royalty himself – formally greeted us. I forced a smile through the greeting and let Vivienne answer it in my place. That drew attention from our hosts, but then it'd been meant to. The sooner it was made clear to people that Vivienne was truly meant to be my successor, the better.

Advance resumed with the additional escort, though still at an agonizingly slow crawl. Salia itself was worth a second look this

deep in, though, I'd admit to that. The Yearning Walls were well-built and apt to weather a siege, I'd say that much, and their shockingly rose-gold stone shining like a mirror under the sun. Hakram continued to speak in a low voice as we passed through, his own research on the city far dwarfing the few books I'd opened in expectation of my visit. Salia itself was often said to be split in two parts, the City Yearned and the City Yearning – a reference to some ancient poem that'd established the name of its walls, with the city behind them being yearned and the city outside being yearning. Passing the gate had brought us into the City Yearned, and into the portion of it known as the low districts. So named not for the poverty of their inhabitants but rather in contrast to the high districts to the west, which had been raised on high hills. The low districts covered nearly a third of the City Yearned, stretching across its south, and the knowledge that it wasn't even the wealthy Salians that lived in these parts had my stomach clenching in envy. The houses were all stone, often several stories high – Adjutant noted that renting was common practice in these parts, and very lucrative – it was not rare so see coloured glass windows. These were artisans, I thought, traders and officials. Yet their wealth clearly rivaled that of the minor nobility of Callow, if not outright surpassed it.

How much richer would the nobles be here? I'd read that Procer was arguably the wealthiest nation on Calernia, some of its princes surpassing even the famously rich High Seats of Praes, but I'd never really understood until now how far down that wealth went. When Vivienne had told me, before the Tenth Crusade, that it'd been brutally expensive to bribe even the servants in the holdings of the Prince of Iserre I'd assumed the Jacks were had, or that she was exaggerating some for effect. Now I could believe that even the servants in the capital of that principality had been well-off, by my people's standards. It was a bitter pill to swallow, that the Principate had been basking in all this while my ancestors were dying in droves just to keep Praes in its shore of the Wasaliti.

Merovins avenue led directly to the old palace and the Highest Assembly, but that was not our destination. We diverted northeast through another broad avenue, going through the districts known as *Les Vendeuses*. Great open-air markets, I'd been told, though we skirted the edges of them only. The route we took led through pleasant sights instead. Some streets seemed to be bordered entirely by great winter gardens artistically adorned with glasswork and sculptures, others filled with guild halls and mansions that competed for the most elegant manner of opulence. It was with some amusement I noted that not once we passed in front of a House of Light. The crowds were something of a surprise, having thickened the further in we went. I'd expected jeering and rocks, but while there certainly wasn't any jubilant cheering we were being treated as a show rather than, well, the

Enemy incarnate. The knights probably helped, I decided, for they were a popular sight with children. Orcs were as well, though more in fascinated horror than positive appreciation.

They'd probably never seen orcs before today, I thought. Or goblins, or Taghreb and Soninke. Even Callowans were rare this far west, these days. *It's another world*, I thought. One that knew nothing of the blood-soaked Fields of Streges, of the eternal back and forth between knights of black and white and their grand armies that clashed every few decades. They did not understand the dread of seeing a city rise into the sky, heavy with death, or the way greenskins still flinched at the call of our knight's horns being sounded. All we had in common with these people was worn history, slights and boons long past, and how little did that really weigh? *I understand you less than I understand Praesi*, I thought, watching the people of Salia. *I know their truths and their conceits, their mad ambitions and dark splendours. But you? I know so little of you it could be said I know nothing at all.* It was a humbling thing, to know that. A daunting one as well. The world was large and even this meagre sliver of it was vast. Could anyone really change something that... immense? A troubling thought, and not one I wanted to linger on.

It was a relief when the procession ended at last and we entered the restricted district where our provided lodgings stood. It was called the Lineal, for it'd once been the ancestral grounds of the Merovins chieftains-turned-royalty of Salia. They had kept large grounds to themselves, the seat of their power when another line claimed the title of First Prince or Princess. Now that the Merovins were long gone, the Lineal stood as almost a city within a city that was under the sole authority of the ruler of Salia. Its significant attached incomes were one of the great boons of the title, and as the old seat of power of royal line it was a beautiful place. I'd expected a manse and some attending barracks for my soldiers, something along the lines of the noble's houses you could see in Laure's Whitestone Quarter, but instead we were directed to what was effectively a small palace. The grounds surrounding the structure alone were larger than the palace in Laure, and I suspected this was a winter pleasure palace and not anything *official*.

I reined in my horse after passing through a pretty copper gate sculpted like a flock of chubby naked Cherubim playing laughingly, slowing Zombie's stride in the courtyard. There were servants swarming all over the place, which were most likely spies, and I almost bit the inside of my cheek. It was going to be a damned pain keeping track of all these people with my limited escort, so I'd probably have to cordon off a part of the palace and have it guarded and warded at all times.

"Any chance at least *one* of them isn't spying for Hasenbach?" I sighed and asked Hakram.

"Of course," Adjutant amusedly agreed. "There's probably a few working for other royals."

I accepted his offered hand to dismount, wincing at the impact, and when a stablehand hesitantly approached Zombie I suppressed a grin. I glanced appreciatively at the sandy-haired man, who while approaching a winged undead fae horse looked more like he was wondering if she'd fit in the stable than if this was in any way wise.

"Don't touch the reins, she'll bite you," I said. "Zombie, the man is going to show you where the stables are."

My mount huffed, displeased.

"You can't come in with me," I patiently replied, "this is a very nice palace. It'd be impolite."

I glanced at the stablehand, who was now seemingly wondering what he'd gotten himself into. I could sympathize.

"She'll follow you to the stables," I said. "Leave a stall open for her, but she'll wander around for a while still. If she gets anywhere she's not supposed to, send for me. But she'll be good, won't you Zombie?"

I scratched her mane and she whinnied.

"Liar," I muttered, not entirely without affection,

I flicked a glance at the stablehand one last time.

"Don't feed her anything," I instructed. "Even if she whines. She always fills her stomach, but she doesn't actually need to – you know what, just don't feed her anything. Let's leave it at that."

I'd hastily amended my approach when even implicit discussion of necromancy made the man look like he was about to faint. He bowed, looking like he was one stern talking to away from weeping.

"It will all be done exactly as you say, Your Majesty," he said.

It would have been polite to call what followed retreating, but I knew what it looked like when someone legged it.

"Don't you say a damn thing," I grunted without turning.

"I would never," Hakram lied, the filthy traitor.

"I can feel your mockery without even looking at you," I complained.

"Would it help your mood to terrify a gardener as well?" my *loyal right hand* said.

I turned just to flip him off, though the deepening amusement on his face – like the world's ugliest green cat had just caught a bird seasoning itself – warned me I'd just missed something. A young woman in Salian livery had been approaching, and was now looking like she'd had no idea queens could gesture obscenely and she wasn't sure whether she should pretend she'd never seen that or not. *Godsdamnit, Hakram*, I thought. *You know Hasenbach's going to read about that in a report, don't you?*

"Just say whatever it is you were sent for," I tiredly told the woman.

She bowed.

"I was sent with a message scroll, Your Majesty," she said.

As I recalled, in Proceran etiquette people weren't supposed to hand things directly to royalty. I glanced at Hakram, who stepped forward to accept the scroll. He broke the seal – featureless, a mere press of wax – and glanced at the contents.

"An invitation," Adjutant said.

"For?" I asked.

"Tea with the First Prince of Procer," Hakram said. "She awaits us in this palace's own parlour."

copaceticcockroach

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

For others: It'd been made clear to me that we would be voting. <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Andrew Mitchell



Soma

"Justifications only matter to the just" does have the potential for a hilarious evolution. Initially a boast that Cat not need

justify herself as she is not just. Later, it now can morph into the an argument for her considering her just given she has taken so many pains to justify her actions. Not to say this is what will happen, but such an evolution would be deeply entertaining.

Soma

As is tradition on a web serial: you should also vote. <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

[BarthHumphries](#)

And start a typo thread.

That was the reason while my morning had turned into a damned slog, when it came down to it.
Just remove the word “while”.

There were others as well. Who can find the most? 😊

ele

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

Zggt

“Justifications only matter to the just” translated to Heroic is “honor is luxury, duty the weight” (a theme in sayings from many cultures), which would explain the amount of contempt Black and herself feel when heroes don’t get it. As such, this has already (repeatedly, in great detail and violence) been discussed (usually with swords and burning things).

Andrew Mitchell

Well spotted. I think you’re on to something with that double meaning. And once again we see evidence of EE’s amazing foresight.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Indeed, in time she herself might well come to embrace that slogan from the other side. Thus making it an *excellent* slogan for a villain who often acts much like a hero, and whose successors may well be followers of Above who gain aid from servants of Below.

Collide

Ah, but “Justifications matter only to the just” doesn’t necessarily imply that only the just will provide justifications. That would be “Justifications matter iff just”.

AbraKadabra

It can also mean that she herself is Just.

Insanenoodlyguy

"Don't touch the reins, she'll bite you," I said. "Zombie, the man is going to show you where to vote for practical guide to evil on topwenfiction."

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

Aaron

"An invitation," Adjutant said.

"For?" I asked.

"Voting for A Practical Guide to Evil," Hakram said. "It awaits us on [TopWebFiction.](#)"

NerfGlaistigUaine

First three of four comments are all about voting. No wonder this fic crushes all competition on that site.

Sparsebeard

Tell me of a better web novel then?

NerfGlaistigUaine

When it exists, I will

NerfGlaistigUaine

Although I'm pretty sure everyone and their mother has already recommended Worm, which is also fantastic, just very different style.

Sparsebeard

I did read it, but while it's great, it's not as grippingly good. I mean, the story as a whole was great, but some chapters of worm were pretty hard to get into (or to even understand). Complexity is one of the strong point of Worm with it's hundreds of characters and over arching plot but yeah.

Then again, it's more that the Practical Guide is just so good, not compared to others, but simply on it's own. The story is gripping and well structured, there is tons of foreshadowing but the plot remains mainly unpredicted and the characters are charming and witty.

I mean, personally, i might prefer the Wandering Inn for the emotional pull and the no-hold barred thrill (and just being also VERY good in general), but I must admit that the Guide is objectively a masterpiece (I woun'dn't even know what to criticize frankly).

[Liliet](#)

The typos! XD

Sparsebeard

Lol.

I wouldn't dare considering I often end up making a few of my own in my much smaller comments... (Takes out tin foil hat) Plus, everybody know that Erratic makes those on purpose as some kind of secret code.

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks for the reminder about The Wandering Inn. I've seen it recommended previously but I hadn't got around to googling it.

Oshi

Wandering Inn is good just in another genre.

Sparsebeard

I'm always more eager for TWI but I still think the Guide is objectively better (both are my favorites with perhaps Savage Divinity just behind because it's just such a a great satire of eastern webnovels).

Then again, those are perhaps the only three web novels that I consider to pretty much be narcotics in addiction levels.

NerfGlaistigUaine

While I'd also say PGtE is better, there is know such thing as "objectively better" when it comes to writing.

Andrew Mitchell

Mother of Learning.

It's not better than PGtE, but it's extremely well-written, enjoyable and internally consistent.

NerfGlaistigUaine

I tried that, but it started a bit slow for me. Does it ramp up/get better later?

Andrew Mitchell

Yes it does. It still very detailed though, even as more things start to happen.

Sparsebeard

Yeah, that and Worth the Candle are also amongst my favs (less addicting but very good).

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks! I've enjoyed some of Alexander Wales' previous works so I appreciate this recommendation.

Pethrai D'arkos

I don't know about better as it scratches a different itch but The Gods Are Bastards is something I'd recommend while sticking to High Fantasy. It's surprisingly adept at making you believe that losing a fight is a real possibility both in and out of universe (nobody really believes the heroes can lose if the villain threatens to destroy the world but they might if it's only a small town at stake) despite the fact that the original party consists of, in no particular order; two paladins, a half-demon, a pirate princess with an anti-magic rapier, a pixie, a dryad, a drow priestess, and a pacifistic heiress who's sharing her body with an amnesiac archdevil.

Sparsebeard

I loved the Gods are Bastard at first, but I don't agree to the part about losing being truly an option... Without going into spoilers, it seems to me that neither the heroes nor the villains never truly lose (barring a few minor characters) thus ensuring a never ending Monty-Pythonesque chase .

noname

The wandering Inn, Worm, Twig, HPMoR, Unsong, Worth the candle. But I always feel like the Practical guide to evil is like the Deadpool movies, it's slightly better than the rest of the MCU, but still not very good.

Sparsebeard

I loved all of those except Unsong which seemed to me to rely on the reader's knowledge of religion (which I have

pretty much none seeing my parents where mostly atheists/non-religious and I never got into it either).

And, the Guide, not very good? What the hell?

Sun Dog

Don't know about better, but I'm rather partial to The Gods Are Bastards and The New Humans, and think the latter in particular could use some more attention and exposure.

'Ladi Williams

This fiction crushes all competition bcos it's just that damn good.

The comments about voting just ensures the lead is a very comfortable one. Sort of like icing on cake or waffles with ice cream. 🍌🍌

[Walter](#)

It updates 3 times a week, every week.

caoimhinh

Plus an Extra Chapter every month that adds to the Lore.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I guess so. Though I kinda wish people didn't try and do that every chapter. Would save them and me like 10 seconds of scrolling/typing.

Andrew Mitchell

I hear you. This chapter *may* have been a record for the number of requests to vote.

But I do enjoy the creativity that's being demonstrated.

Tom

There's also the part where it's really good 😊

NerfGlaistigUaine

Oh Cat. She's learned a great deal about diplomacy and dealing with things without stabbing them (or just stabbing them), but she'll never be quite, ah, queenly.

caoimhinh

Catherine's most queenly moments are when she is angry or terrifying someone by the use of eldritch powers and/or bluffing.

[sengachi](#)

Catherine only does queen with a Q.

[Liliet](#)

I'm just going to... plug something here.

Andrew Mitchell

TY. I ♥ the fact that you've made me appreciate this story even more!

Inay

With today "being bored is almost physical pain", I can only agree again. Yup, that's adhd experience.

anon

I mean she could, but my read on it is that she's just a character with ADD like personality traits. I mean most mental disorders are a spectrum to begin with where the line between quirk and disorder comes in when it debilitates a person's ability to live their life. In my opinion, Cat's too high performing for that line to be drawn for her. I mean, she already had achievable goals for her future and was working towards them at the beginning of the first book which is a lot more than most normal kids at her age would have.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> the line between quirk and disorder comes in when it debilitates a person's ability to live their life.

Or as I've put it when discussing "subclinical" autistics, "no disability, no diagnosis". But that in turn raises questions about "who gets to decide" – e.g., is that student "handicapped", or is the teacher an asshole who can't be bothered to make time for them? Or for a physical analogy, is someone "crippled" because it's painful and laborious for them to climb stairs?

The thing is, that's not even a map vs. terrain question – it's a question of *balance of power*. When enough Congresspeople have mobility issues (or kids with such), you get laws requiring curb cuts and public elevators. Similarly for educational handicaps and accommodations for those.

In the Guideverse, however, power relations are more direct: The relevant question for Catherine isn't going to be "can she be diagnosed?", but "can an enemy exploit this in a fight?"

[sengachi](#)

... I have never before so utterly and swiftly accepted a headcanon I hadn't previously considered.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Reddit doesn't like my address, so replying here: As I've said before, diagnoses are an attempt at a map of human diversity. They have all the usual hazards of such maps, including not just the map vs. terrain thing, but squabbling over the borders.

The potential advantage of having such a map is *if* you can pick out a functional pattern, that can be useful: Taking "this worked for me, it might work for you" to a more systematic level.

mavant

Wait, are you saying normal people's brains don't be like that?

Andrew Mitchell

> she'll never be quite, ah, queenly

That's why she adopted Vivienne. 😊

Cicero

Time for the Queen to meet the Prince.

joewill5234

Well, that was a wasted chapter. Nothing but filler. Where's the beef?

caoimhinh

It was a necessary transition chapter, since it would have been a bit weird to just jump to Catherine sitting on a table with Cordelia.

[Fayhem](#)

> Catherine sitting on a table with Cordelia.

I realize this is a harmless typo, but now I'm picturing Catherine just dead-pan sitting on top of the table and Cordelia having to climb up to join her and snickering to myself at work.

Hierus

And that why a dish has only integriant. Everything else would be boring right?

[Barthumphries](#)

If actually liked to try integriant. If it's anything like I've heard, it'll be anything but boring.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Grrr... The two of you had me googling (OK, DDGing) that. 😏
For future readers, it does seem to be a mere misspelling.

caoimhinh

Integriant is an essential part of Typoi cuisine and many traditional dishes of Misspellheim. 😏

[Mental Mouse](#)

Alas that I only have one like to give for this gem!

Andrew Mitchell

Hahahaha.

nick012000

It's not filler, it's set dressing so that we have an idea of the setting for the talks, as well as a way of characterising the Procerans. Remember, we can only know what the author describes to us.

Just a potato

I'm going to have to respectfully disagree. This is exactly the type of chapter I would want to see in a good book, it's building the city of Salia for us. The problem is that normally you don't have to wait several days to read the next chapter in a book. That is a bit frustrating but we can't have every chapter be an amazing reveal or insightful conversation, if there's no background that builds those events then the events can't happen or they'd end up thin and meaningless. The crescendo before the climax is what makes it so good, not just the climax itself.

Shveiran

While I do agree on the gist of your comment, the Guide usually deals with this need better than this; on world-building/transition chapters, EE usually delivers something that keeps you hooked to the chapter, even if it is "only" character interaction and development or background events. It is, in my opinion, one of the Guide's strongest points:

EE's ensures there is a good reason to read every single chapter, as in, there is always SOME progress toward SOMETHING.

It is almost never quite JUST a transition piece.

In this particular instance, I do not think these commenters are swinging out of the blue. The fact that this kind of chapters are usually so good makes you raise the bar.

This is NOT a bad chapter, mind you, but it is a rather dull one. There is no real progress aside the very last lines, and aside from the transition what we see is mostly Salia – which I personally have an hard time being too interested in since by this point we already “spent” time in it and gotten a feel for it. I liked bits of it, of course, like Cat's reflection on the world's divides and barriers, but I can acknowledge that this is a step below the usual.

I wouldn't even notice on a less impressive work, but I think it is helpful to point out that this felt a bit like filler to some of us.

EE can take this into consideration and decide that no, he likes the chapter as is, or that maybe something needs to be adjusted before publishing. Isn't that the point of feedback?

Point

Filler? What were you expecting, a jump directly from the talk with the White Knight to the conference in Procer?

In this chapter, we learned who is in Salia with Cat (Vivienne, Hakram, and Abigail), who isn't (Amadeus, Akua, and Archer). We learned a bit more about how she's making a show of passing power to Vivienne, and we learned how Cat feels about Proceran wealth. We learned a few points about Proceran history, though those aren't essential. We also learned a bit about how the average Proceran citizen feels about her, or at least her people.

Sure, it wasn't the most eventful chapter, but it was a much-needed transition between two important conversations, and it established a backdrop for the beginning of the talks in Salia.

JackInTheBawks

A snack to clear the palate, between strong wines.

'Ladi Williams

Sigh. If all chapters were bang bang thank you...very soon we would bcom jaded.

Personally I think this and previous chapters go a long way to help show us the way individuals interact and their motivations when they ain't fighting for their lives.

Andrew Mitchell

Hahahahahaha!

Andrew Mitchell

/s

[sengachi](#)

Pacing my good friend, you have to learn to appreciate pacing. Sure you may eat a burger for the beef, but a beef-wrapped beef-garnished beef-burger with nothing but beef will make you sick to your stomach before long. Learn to relax, enjoy the establishing moments and the unwinding of tension. A spring cannot be indefinitely wound tighter and tighter, the action rise higher and higher, without breaking under the strain. A good story must take time to let the tension out and bring us back to a place of rest, and these chapters are how that is done.

[sengachi](#)

Actually, hey, if you really hate pacing chapters that much, go read Wildbow's Pact. It's basically an exercise in how much tension and action can be ramped up endlessly without hitting the breaking point, and while a fair chunk of its readership thought it did go past that breaking point, I'm guessing you'd love it for just that reason.

That said, if you get frustrated by the pacing chapters in *Pact* ... look Wildbow's speciality is in endlessly rising tension, he's one of the best at it, and this story was him experimenting with the utmost limits of that. If you get frustrated by that story there is literally no story in existence which will ever satisfy you in this way.

Agent J

Ugh. Cat's right. While I understand the narrative need to go through the hurdles, I am utterly bored to tears with the pomp and fanfare. I'd much rather have the chapter involving tea with Cordelia. Wednesday can't come soon enough.

'Ladi Williams

We might still get treated to the empire ever dark's procession. That should be hilarious....

Insanenoodlyguy

Much like out of nowhere unexpected rap battles, the entire procession surprises everybody with a surprisingly swift march that incorporates hamboning and twerking.

Ultimate_Procrastinator

I find participating in ceremonies and such dreadfully boring and tedious, but watching someone else go through them while being snarky the whole time was pretty amusing for me, so I'm pretty happy with this update. Of course, Wednesday still can't come soon enough, but that's just because the Guide is literary crack

Just a potato

Cat:

"Don't feed her anything," I instructed. "Even if she whines. She always fills her stomach, but she doesn't actually need to – you know what, just don't feed her anything. Let's leave it at that."

My usual response being "Friendship is magic" is being appended to "Necromancy is magic" just this once.

Decius

The person who animates golems always knows how to make friends.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

I love how Cat's zombie rides have more personality than some living characters!

Wrap Attack

I know everyone's probably forgotten about him by now but grand processions and the chapter opening up with Cat talking about Leaders being separate from everyone else. It's Hierarch time soon.

Oshi

Still no. I would say three more chapters. Cordelia needs her moment.

[Javvies](#)

Heh.

Hmm. Procer is wealthy, partly because it's so damned big. And because, well, only a small fraction of it is normally under constant external threats, and inter-principality warfare tends towards field army versus field army in the field, and major population centers are usually mostly untouched by the ravages of warfare.

hakureireimu

What is this about?

konstantinvoncarstein

"Famous generals and officials can earn one as well," he gravelled. "One of Rozala Malanza's ancestors is further up from the days before the Malanzas were royalty. He conquered most of northern **Levant** for the First Prince of the time."

"I don't suppose anyone's told the Blood about that?" I drily asked

What the Blood should not appreciate is that someone who conquered their country is honored in their ally's capital.

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

I imagine it would be similar to the reaction of an Irishman visiting London seeing the statue of Oliver Cromwell.

reyishi

When I read chapters like these I really hope that EE makes a book that tell us about the lore from all of Calernia. I really love all the details added to Salia, like "the city Yearned and the city Yearning". It makes the city so much more real I can see it when I close my eyes.

Author Unknown

Cat: "Hiya Cordy. Loved the fire. You really go out of your way to make a gal feel at home don't'cha."

Shveiran

Bless you.

mavant

Somehow I read this in a DCAU Harley Quinn voice...

superkeaton

A genuinely interesting look at Procer. Deeply fun to imagine that Catherine is so infinitely more comfortable with the hated madness of heroes and villains and theirs that Procer's... quietude and splendor is uncomfortably alien. I imagine it'd be worse if it hadn't nearly been burned tot he ground. That, at least, she's familiar with.

[Liliet](#)

I love the slowly dawning realization throughout this chapter: oh. Callow is poor. Callow is really, really poor.

And Catherine coming from poverty and struggle to a land of wealth and privilege is... absolutely fascinating, for her and us both.

Mental Mouse

But then, the flipside, which is power: For all their glory, Procer has troops, but almost no mages (for all Callow considers itself short on mages, they at least do have some). And those troops can fight well for humans, but stagger against the Legions. And Procer has no match to the Callowan knights, much less orcish infantry, goblin sappers, and even the occasional ogre.

Walter

A fun thing to do is go back in the book and find the last time Cat's soldiers used swords on screen. Without reading my recollection is something like:

Post Drow stuff: Crusaders stumble through engine bombardment towards their palisade, Mighty Drow Wuxia them.

Pre Drow northern battle: Lol lakomancy

2nd Laure fight, warlock and hierarch are destroying devils, siege engines destroying devils, I think there were some demons who twisted people and made them fight each other?

Fae fights, Named fight melee, I want to say soldiers get shot with arrows while falling back, engines shoot people

First Laure, devils are unable to fight back vs. Empire troops

Like, if Cat's people were all the greatest swordsmen in the world, or literally didn't have swords, I feel like the story would have been pretty much identical. Troops are scenery, Procer is only as strong as the heroes let it be.

Mental Mouse

Beg to differ, they used swords a lot against undead and fae.

mavant

Isn't that like the explicit premise of this universe?

laguz24

I do love the realization that callow understands Praes better than Procer through centuries-long bloody struggle. The

Principate only invades frequently, plus all the hobnobbing with Praesi has made her understand their point of view.

Sparsebeard

I wonder if in a way, the conquest (and the cultural rapprochement that ensued) was utterly necessary for the East (or even the rest of the surface) to even stand a chance against Procer's hegemony.

I mean, they're beset by enemies on all sides (rats, DK, Levant, Callow) but still can afford to squabble internally without being defeated or crumbling.

SpeckofStardust

Callow never attack Procer to the best of our knowledge. Procer has gone after and been beaten back by Levant and Callow.

DK also has never really gone all out.

historically Procer unified would likely be stupidly powerful, but the same could be said for Levant who is less unified than Procer, Praesi who spend most their history murdering each other for power (and the only times they weren't was Triumphant, and well the Conquest). The League well ah ah ah. and Callow itself we don't know about to honestly judge its abilities and relative unity.

[*Liliet*](#)

Callow has attacked Procer, though it was likely in retaliation and not out of idleness: Jehan the Wise hanging those people happened in Salia.

konstantinvoncarstein

The Queen of Blades attacked Procer too, no?

Ben Serreau-Raskin

I seem to recall that she predated the unification of Procer, so she was attacking independent powers on what is now the border regions.

Poring

Procer is larger than Praes and Callow *together*. And, of 24 principalities, only 8 + 1/2 share borders with other nations.

[*Mental Mouse*](#)

> I do love the realization that callow understands Praes better than Procer through centuries-long bloody struggle.

> But you? I know so little of you it could be said I know nothing at all.

Well... one could argue that nowadays that goes both ways. Procer surely knew the old Callow well – but this new hybrid, where a child on the street might offer flowers to an orc?

mavant

So, we've concluded that the stuff being dredged up from Lake Artoise was goblinfire / the remnants of the legions wiped out by Pilgrim's Plague, yeah?

[Javvies](#)

No.

The goblinfire and Legionary remains would have remained in the watercraft they were using as transport ... which never stopped floating.

Dredging indicates that they are looking for something that is buried beneath the surface of the lakebed.

In addition, Cordelia thought of the project as reaching for something to use to "fight fire with fire" in the context of the war with the Dead King. In addition, it was mentioned to be "worse" than Angelic intervention.

A few tons of goblinfire does not constitute the kind of gamechanger (or fighting fire with fire) against the Dead King and his forces that Cordelia believes herself to be in need of and is looking for. Nor would a decidedly limited amount of goblinfire be worse than Angels.

Cordelia is most likely looking for something (or someone) from before Procer was Procer, IMO.

I believe it's been mentioned that there are still unaccounted for Hell Eggs from Triumphant in Procer, so it could be one of them, or Cordelia could be looking for something from the Mavians, or her objective could be from the old proto-Lycaonese that produced the Witch-Queen(s) that warred with the pre-Dead King Keter and first summoned Tikoloshe.

Chapter 77: Artless

"Even the most skilled of liars are only ever wielding a lie. Truth is the superior artifice, for it will strike deeper than

even the most perfect deception."

– Princess Beatriz of Salamans, later thirteenth First Princess of Procer

"I'm not going to lie," I muttered under my breath, "it pisses me off a little that anybody can be rich enough to have a room dedicated to *tea-drinking*."

Hakram was ahead of us, engaging our guide in what sounded like idle conversation about Salian cloths and their obvious superiority to that of the despicable yet superficially similar works from Lange, so I could vent my indignation without every sentence making it straight to the First Prince's ear.

"I expect they'll have one filled with only spices, should we look," Vivienne drily added. "You know, to make the one that's just a giant gold ingot stand out less."

"Right?" I grunted. "Hells, Vivs, you were born noble-"

"A baron line, short on land and incomes even before the Conquest," she reminded me.

I shot her an incredulous look. Those poor nobles, so very impoverished.

"Did your house have stables?" I asked.

"I'm not dignifying that with an answer," Lady Dartwick informed me.

"I bet your servants had matching livery too," I scathingly said.

"*You* have servants with matching livery, *Your Majesty*," she exasperatedly replied.

"Eh," I said. "More like I'm borrowing them for a few years. And I'd help if any of them wanted to find real decent honest work, like running a tavern-"

"Nests of criminal activity, aside from those in better quarters," Vivienne told me.

I almost gaped at the audacity of that.

"You're the Queen of Thieves for Callow," I indignantly said.

"Mere rumours," she smoothly said, "all I'm saying is that your notion of what good, honest work is tends to be rather skewed given your..."

"We're in Procer now, you know," I growled. "Lese-majesty's something they actually enforce here."

"Everything," Vivienne mused. "Your everything, really. Didn't you use to participate in an illegal fighting ring?"

"I was also a waitress," I defensively said. "That was lawful – wait why am I justifying myself to you, you used to be the bloody *Thief*. Have you actually ever had a job?"

"It's sad to see one so steeped in her criminal ways rising so high, but these are dark days," Vivienne sighed.

"That's a lot of backtalk, coming from someone who couldn't even murder Hakram," I muttered.

"Is no one ever going to let that go?" she complained. "Do you all want me to murder Hakram *now*, you niggling harpies? Don't you think I won't, you'll drive me to it.

There was a commotion in front of us, the attendant that'd been sent to guide us concernedly asking Adjutant if he was all right. He had, I grasped from context, stumbled and let out a choking sound. Merciless Gods he'd been eavesdropping with his Name the whole time, hadn't he? My cheeks burned a little, but I cleared my throat and put on a mask of queenly dignity. Vivienne looked mildly concerned about her dear friend Hakram Deadhand having stumbled, a degree of shamelessness that was positively royal of her. We were close now, the guide told us with an unnecessary amount of bowing.

"Do you think it still counts as a labyrinth if it's this full of tapestries and nice woodworks?" I asked.

It really was nice woodwork, too. In the same style as those in the royal palace in Laure, which I'd grimly admit to myself probably meant we'd imitated a Proceran style. They also had tapestries that weren't about hunting, nature and warring with Praes which I'd confess was a nice change of pace.

"It's the classic Alamans scheme, my queen," Vivienne drily said. "If you throw enough jewels at your enemy, they're bound slip and break something eventually."

"They'd be in a lot less shit if they'd put some of that tapestry coin on good walls instead," I grunted in agreement.

"Don't be silly Your Majesty," Lady Dartwick sardonically said. "This is the Principate, if there is need of a wall that's what stacking peasants is for."

I swallowed a laugh at that. I'd never heard that one before and serving drinks in a tavern that catered to both legionaries and Callowans meant I'd heard a *lot* of cheap jokes at the expense of Procer. Under the Empire's occupation it'd been safer to go after Procer than to take a shot at Praes. Since not even the most

quiescent of my people had been entirely free of the urge take a verbal swing at the Wasteland on occasion, Procer had been getting rough treatment among my countrymen even before the Tenth Crusade so selflessly provided them with fresh ammunition. Relentless mockery of our hosts had me in a rather pleasant mood by the time we arrived at the small hall where the First Prince of Procer was awaiting the three of us. The fair-haired woman who'd been chatting with Adjutant the whole way rapped her knuckles against the door to signal our arrival and bade us farewell, looking almost reluctant at ending her conversation with Hakram. A majordomo in tasteful silks emerged from the room and bowed, intimating he would be announcing us. As the guest of highest rank, etiquette dictated I enter first.

"Her Majesty Queen Catherine of Callow, first of her name, protector of Daoine and high priestess of the Everdark."

He had a pleasant, ringing voice, exactly the kind you'd want in someone charged with announcements. Queen of Callow, huh? Not so long ago Hasenbach had refused to even recognize me as Queen *in* Callow, much less the rightful liege lady of Duchess Kegan of Daoine. And someone had been talking to drow, though that might simply be the consequence of the Pilgrim feeling chatty. I entered, the polished plate on my frame making me regret having left my staff behind with every step I took. A bit of Night smoothed the pain quick enough, but when that ended I'd be left feeling the consequences of my pride tonight. I stepped into the hall, followed by the announcement of *Lady Vivienne Dartwick, heiress-designate to the Kingdom of Callow*. Much as I disliked the Proceran propensity for luxuries, I could not deny that the parlour before me was a beautiful piece of work. A tall plaster ceiling led into great arched windows of glass that let in the winter midday sun, the lighting coming to rest on a long low table of painted wood covered by a perfectly transparent pane of glass. The walls and draperies were in a pleasant pale green, and the seats prepared at the table looked sinfully comfortable with their matching cushions and broad armrests. The First Prince of Procer was seated at the centre of the table, two people standing behind her in respectful deference, and I advanced to the table as behind me the announcement of *Lord Hakram Deadhand of the Howling Wolves, the Adjutant* sounded.

One of those two people behind Hasenbach was long familiar to me. Princess Rozala Malanza's classic Arlesite good looks were only called into attention by the light mail and closely cut tabard she wore, but it was the sword at her hip worthy of a raised eyebrow. Few people were allowed to be armed in the presence of the First Prince: I'd worn no sword today and so divested myself of nothing, but Hakram had left behind his axe and Vivienne a surprisingly high quantity of knives before we were allowed into this wing of the palace. A point was being made by Hasenbach, one directed at me: *I trust Rozala Malanza to be armed and standing*

behind me. Procer is not so divided as you think. The other one behind Hasenbach I did not know, though he was quite aged – if bearing that burden rather well, hair having gone a distinguished silver instead of white or falling – and wearing well-tailored but otherwise rather humble robes. On his right shoulder two pale hands intertwined had been embroidered, which struck me as priestly imagery, but I would not assume anything in a place like Salia. I imagined introductions would come soon enough, regardless.

The First Prince waited to speak until Hakram had come to stand at my right, a towering pillar of steel and muscle, and Vivienne at my left – just as whip-slender and hard-eyed as in her thieving days, but grown steady in a way she'd never been while Named.

"Welcome to Salia, Queen Catherine," the First Prince of Procer greeted me.

It'd been about a year since I'd last seen Cordelia Hasenbach, though this would be our first meeting outside the unearthly domain of darkness and cold that I'd used as our bridge when I still stood Queen of Winter. As was often her habit she'd dressed in the dark blue that was from the heraldry of her native Rhenia, the cut of it conservative – her neckline ended an inch beneath her collarbones – but close on her frame. It was flattering, though there was no hiding that Hasenbach had been born with a warrior's build: tall and broad-shouldered, with a strong jaw and hale complexion. Her discreet touches of cosmetics, golden eye shadow that made the vivid blue of her eyes stand out even more and the painted nails at the end of the wrists revealed by sleeves ending in an undercut of puffy lace, worked to shape her appearance rather than to change it, which I thought clever of her. If she'd tried to hide her features it would have made her look comical, while as it stood her height and haleness only enhanced the palpable weight of her presence. Her crown was as a simple circlet of pale gold, holding back long golden curls I'd always considered to be the most appealing part of Cordelia Hasenbach – rich and full, they cascaded down her back in perfect ringlets.

"Your hospitality has been impeccable, Your Most Serene Highness," I replied.

She inclined her head in acknowledgement.

"Our honoured general Princess Rozala Malanza requires little introduction for you, I am told," Cordelia smiled, "but I expect my other attendant is not so well-known."

My elbow moved towards Vivienne, softly and as if by happenstance, and her own pushed back against mine. Good, so she did know.

"Lady Dartwick?" I said.

"Unless I am sorely mistaken we are in the presence of Brother Simon of Gorgeault, current head of the Holy Society," Vivienne smiled. "It is an honour to meet such a distinguished colleague, Brother Simon."

"As I am honoured to meet you, Lady Dartwick," the old man replied, lips quirking.

That smile had been almost roguish, I thought. Must have been a heartbreaker in his youth, that one. Regardless he was not in priest robes, so he should be a lay brother who'd taken no vows. Interesting Hasenbach would want him here for this, though. There were implications to that. The First Prince wordlessly invited me to sit and there was a discreet shuffle as the order of seating was seen to. Myself first, as reigning queen, then Vivienne as my designated successor, then Rozala as a ruling princess in her own right and then the broad equivalence in rank between Brother Simon and Adjutant – who while Named was a villain and only actually owed lordly address under the Tower's law. A small swarm of servants brought trays of silver bearing a tea pot of Ashuran porcelain and matching cups, as well honey to sweeten the brew.

"They are Yan Tei leaves," Hasenbach pleasantly told me. "Bitterer than the Baalite imports and the plants of the Thalassocracy, though I find they have a richer taste."

My own passing familiarity with tea came largely through Aisha's stock – which was Baalite leaves mixed with cheaper Ashuran ones – and the few times Black had served some while we were in Ater. His were from another country across the Tyrian Sea, though, which I suspected to be where the Ranger's father was from. He didn't break out the cups often, which didn't surprise me given the astronomical cost of even a single pot's worth of brew. It was one of the few luxuries he indulged in, which I'd always found rather amusingly subdued of him given the sheer amount of power at his disposal. I'd brushed up on etiquette before beginning the journey to Salia and made sure all my closest companions did as well, so none of us touched the brew after it was poured for us save when Hakram sweetened his own with honey. Princess Rozala did the same, I noted with amusement, and looked somewhat discomfited that only the orc at the table shared her tastes.

"So what *is* this palace, if you don't mind my asking?" I said.

"It was the winter home of the Merovins, in the days where they still numbered many," the First Prince said. "After their line waned it became the favoured location for winter solstice balls instead, though it had not seen that use since the Great War."

"Not been in a feasting mood?" I idly said.

"There were better uses for our coin and hours," Hasenbach replied. "The latter is even harder to replace than the former, I have found."

Was that an invitation to stop wasting time? I wouldn't exactly mind. Every day spent dancing around what needed to be done was one more day tossed away as our truce with the Dead King came closer to ending. I understood the Principate had its pride and its ways, but the Principate was also on the brink of annihilation and more than slightly on fire. There was dignity and then there was idiocy.

"Ah," I said, drawl thickening, "are we to actually *talk*, then, or do we continued this pleasantly inane ritual of taking each other's measure? We were past that a year ago, as far as I'm concerned."

Malanza let out a choking sound, but my eyes were on Hasenbach. She had presence, as much as ever, but I wasn't feeling... weight off of her. The kind Name would bring to bear simply by being. Might be she was on the more discreet side of things, when it came to that, but that would be rather odd for a ruler. Temper tended to get ripples going, through, so it was worth a try. The Warden of the West studied me for a moment and then allowed for an amused half-smile. She seemed, I thought, tired. It only occurred to me then that the golden eye shadow might not be artifice of beauty but meant instead to hide the dark circles of someone gone too long without sleep. Still, not a hint huh. I'd be unusual for a fresh Named to have that much control over their power, but then this Cordelia Hasenbach and not a farmboy with a grudge and an old sword. She'd held the reins of the greatest empire on the surface of Calernia for years before she'd even had a Name. If she had one.

"I have spent more than twelve hours preparing for this conversation, did you know?" Cordelia ruefully said. "Some of the finest minds in my service studied ever scrap of knowledge we have of you, from your favourite wine to the tactics of your earliest battles."

"And *this* is what you came up with?" I replied, brow raising as I cast a look around us.

"It all seems rather pointless, does it not?" the First Prince said. "Yet what can I possibly arrange that would bring to bear even the tenth of the wroth of an angel, or a fraction of the horrors of the Folly? We have nothing that can move if you if you do not wish to be moved, and more masterful hands than we have failed to use you. It is an unpleasant truth, this, and not one I find it easy to face."

"We have been at war almost as long as we've been speaking," I acknowledged. "And there are things about your country I despise,

and likely always will. The grounds for alliance between us are not fondness or kinship."

"Yet my people are in dire need of your help," Hasenbach said. "And so as you have proposed let us *talk*."

That was as clear an offer as I'd get, I figured, so I took her up on it.

"You do not seem to be Named," I said.

Cordelia Hasenbach brought her porcelain cup to her mouth and inhaled from the brew before taking a cautious sip.

"I am not one of the Chosen, or the Damned," she confirmed, elegantly setting down her cup.

I hid my relief. It might be useful to have a heroic First Prince holding up the Accords from her side, but to be honest it wasn't worth the risks coming with the Intercessor being able to meddle with Cordelia directly. Rather less elegantly I reached for my own cup and took a sip. I didn't grimace, because I wasn't a damned savage, but it looked like Hakram had been showing wisdom in honeying his. Wasn't exactly an avid admirer of sweets, though, so even then it'd be rather like trying to put out a barn fire by throwing sharpeners at it.

"Have your spies passed on recent news from the northern fronts?" Cordelia asked.

"We've only ever had rumours from Lycaonese lands," I frankly replied. "As for the rest, we know the general state of it – Cleves was reclaimed, Hainaut's last lines are on the edge of collapse – but little more."

"Prince Papenheim has used the truce to solidify the lines in Hainaut, though the Dead King has seemingly massed around six hundred thousand soldiers to break them open anew when the three months end," the First Prince said. "Hannoven has fallen, as you likely know, and Rhenia has been scoured save for a handful of fortresses where my subjects suffer siege. Only one fortress remains standing in Twilight's Pass, and when it falls – and fall it will, given the great host waiting before it – the Principality of Bremen will follow in short order. Only Neustria will remain then, and I am told its lowlands will be effectively impossible to defend against an enemy with such overwhelming superiority in numbers."

A heartbeat of silence passed in the wake of the stark assessment the First Prince of Procer herself had just spoken of the war she was about to resume losing.

"Cleves has been reclaimed," Cordelia Hasenbach acknowledged. "But at great cost. Four Chosen died and more than twenty thousand trained soldiers. Meanwhile the Enemy's ranks swell equally with every dead, be they farmer or princess."

The fair-haired princess sat stiff-backed, but her voice was raw.

"My generals now believe that the battles for Cleves might in fact have been a trap," she said. "The fighting was meant to bleed our number of professional soldiers, you see. To thin the number of Chosen and leave as much as a third of Procer's armies stranded behind enemy lines when Hainaut falls and the dead hordes close the circle behind them."

Cordelia Hasenbach raised her cup again, hand forcefully steady, and took a sip. The porcelain cup then returned to the plate with so small a sound it might as well have been silent. The reclamation of Cleves, I thought, was the closest thing the Principate had known to a victory since the Dead King had begun invading. Malanza had fought there. I looked at her now, and though her face as ashen the fact that she did not *disagree* spoke volumes. How much of a blow must it have been, to come to realize even that sole victory had been a greater defeat in the making?

"I will not lie to you, Queen Catherine," she said. "You would find out regardless, given your ties to the Eyes of the Empire and the surprising skill of your Jacks. When the truce ends, if hostilities resume the Principate will fall within five months at most."

Her frank assessment of the state of Procer's northern fronts had rung loud in the silence, but this? Coming from her, of all people? Even Hakram stilled in surprise.

"The last strongholds of Hainaut might hold for two months, perhaps," the First Prince evenly said. "After which the dead will tear into Brabant and the masses of refugees there, which will within another month make the numbers of the Dead King too large to successfully fight on the field. If the armies in Cleves intervene to prop up Hainaut we will lose Cleves, and Hainaut will then fall to a pincer regardless."

She paused.

"The Morgentor, the last fortress of Twilight's Pass, will likely hold until the other fronts have collapsed," Cordelia said, a hint of pride to her voice. "Yet it will fall, and though the truce you bought us has allowed the southernmost of my people to flee into Alamans' lands we..."

Her voice broke a little there.

"We do not retreat, Catherine Foundling," she said. "Even when we should. It is not in our nature. Some will go as ordered, but more will flock to walls and fortresses and they will die screaming defiance against the dark. It will be the end of us as a people."

I said nothing to that, for what was there to say?

"When those fronts collapse so will Procer," the blue-eyed woman told me. "Already the cracks have begun. I have stripped the western principalities bare of grain to feed the heartlands and bare of men to fill our ranks, but keeping the northern armies supplied has emptied our granaries and our treasury. Foreign trade has broken down and the principalities untouched by war grow weary of paying their taxes to Salia. Even if the Kingdom Under lifted its sanctions, we would not be able to afford their armaments. There will be starvation, and despite my best efforts shortages of steel ensure that we can hardly even keep our current armies in fighting fit."

She slowly breathed out.

"I expect that the moment Salia falls the Principate will end," she said. "Southern principalities will secede and form alliances with each other and abroad, throwing the rest of us to the dogs. To be frank, I'd expect Ariel of Arans to offer to pay you fealty for protection before it even came to that – and neither Bayeux nor Orne would be far behind."

Cordelia Hasenbach met my eye squarely.

"You must understand, now, that I do not have a single thing to threaten you with," she quietly said. "I have no armies to send forth, no coin to cajole or coerce with and my alliances are weaker than yours. Besides, those allies I do have would not war on you for my sake, for you have them bound by debt and respect. I have through steel and insult ended any inclination between us that could now be called on, much less between our respective peoples."

The thing was, there was a part of me that was savouring the words. The same part that remembered my every desperate plea to this same woman to call off her armies and rapacious princes. That remembered every spurned offer of peace, every sentence of scathing dismissal and barely-veiled contempt. She'd been so godsdamned *arrogant*, telling me she could choose the fate of Callow because she had the swords and the righteousness and that I should just go into exile like a good little thug after shutting my mouth and abdicating. And now she needed me. They all did, her entire alliance and the heroes behind them too. Even the Grey Pilgrim had good as admitted to it. They had sneered and spat and tried to kill me, and now I *fucking had them*. Cordelia Hasenbach had laid out before me the death of her nation and her

people, and yet I could not help but think that they'd brought this all on themselves. That if they'd left Callow alone, that if they'd let me fix it instead of hounding me every step for their own hungry purposes, they wouldn't be tumbling down the cliff right now.

Then, to my surprise, she pushed back her seat and rose. Not well, in opposition to the understated elegance of her every other movement. It was clear her leg had been broken and not finished healing. The pain had her lips thinning as Cordelia Hasenbach, First Prince of Procer and Warden of the West, knelt before me.

"I have a responsibility," Cordelia said, "to the people of the Principate. To rule, to guide and to protect. To ease their worst inclinations and spur their finest ones. I have failed them in this."

She was proud, Hasenbach. Not the kind of person something like this would come easily to. Not someone to do it unless she believed it to be necessary. Rozala was halfway to her feet, protesting her ruler kneeling before a foreign queen, but neither of us paid her attention.

"I have no right to ask grace of you now, and no might to compel it," the First Prince said. "So I can only beg that you act as I did not, and help those I cannot."

That I'd savoured this, for even a moment, tasted like ashes in my mouth. Because it wasn't her or her reign she was begging for. It was her people. And while I might not be leading a crusade into Procer, I could not deny it felt poisonous that I could be in this moment and begged at instead of begging. Not because I enjoyed the helplessness of it, but because I'd never liked to think of myself as someone who would need to be implored to save lives.

"Get up," I said, voice rough. "Enough. There was no need for this."

I pushed back my own chair, rising to my feet, and the eyes of both Malanza and Brother Simon went to me. Watching, weighing.

"Get up, Hasenbach," I said. "You and I are going for a walk."

For the majority: "Get up, Hasenbach," I said. "You and I are going for a vote."

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

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

Insanenoodlyguy

"We do not retreat, Catherine Foundling," she said. "Even when we should. It is not in our nature. Some will go as ordered, but more will flock to walls and fortresses and they will die screaming to vote for PGTE on topwebfiction."

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

[*onedollargum*](#)

I like this the best of the vote comments. XD

[*frolamiz*](#)

"Get up, Hasenbach," I said. "You and I are going to vote for the guide."

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

[*Javvies*](#)

You really should rub it in at least a little, Cat.

Make it clear to Proceran leadership and the various Princes/Princesses, and the other power bases in Procer that they owe you and Callow big time over this.

And that a return to Procer's typical foreign policy after the Dead King is dealt with will not be tolerated.

magesbe

I'm sure lines will be laid down. But there's no need to rub in that they will owe Callow after this. Everyone knows it. And unspoken by well known debts are often more powerful than spoken ones.

nimelennar

In our world, maybe.

In a world based on narrative, forcing the "good guys" to agree to something under extreme duress is only ever going to backfire in your face. And a Procer which repaid Callow coming to their aid (after first repelling an attempted invasion and annexation, no less) with treachery would get smacked down just as hard by narrative forces.

To say nothing of the fact that Cordelia already knows exactly what she's asking, and that she has nothing to offer in return.

No, Cat needs to do this in such a way that Hasenbach maintains her dignity.

IDKWhoitis

I think either signing the Accords right now, or at the end of the War will be the best way to handle this. Establishing who the actual enemy is, and presenting an alternative to the End of Days, should be top priority of this meeting. Even without narrative forces, Procer would be persona non grata across Calernia if they betrayed the hand that helped them up in their darkest hour. There would be no convincing other nations that they could be anything resembling an ally.

The Procer of the Pre-War died with the Coup. There will be no returning to Status-Quo after this war. Hells, no nation that went into this war is leaving the same as before it. Short of Bard hitting a Retcon button, forces are already in motion that will make this Great War the funeral of the Age of Wonders, and the Coup of Salia will be recorded as the Time of Death.

[Liliet](#)

Huh.

Yeah, this sounds about right.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine already feels shitty enough about this.

It's not the Princes and Princesses that she came to save, and it's not on their behalf, nor her own, that Cordelia is kneeling.

Andrew Mitchell

> It's not the Princes and Princesses that she came to save, and it's not on their behalf, nor her own, that Cordelia is kneeling.

Well said. ♥

Shikkarasu

I feel like this is one of the calculated, rehearsed approaches that Cordelia prepared for in the past 12 hours. A sort of "If Cat drops pretense then: grovel, because Catherine has a history of respecting passionate Guardians of the Common Folk". I love the speech and I want to trust Cordelia, but someone of her station and MO definitely considered this as the best way to manipulate Cat into doing what they need.

"We have nothing that can move if you if you do not wish to be moved. Please help," is exactly what would move the Queen of Callow.

All that said, I look forward to being wrong. Cordelia for Prime Minister, 2019.

Liliet

I'm thinking of it as something like Hakram cutting off his hand. Absolutely a deliberately calculated move made to incite a specific emotional reaction based on your knowledge at another person.

Completely honest and genuine at the same time.

The 'manipulation' part is just that it wouldn't have worked as well on most people who aren't Catherine (like, imagine Kairos's reaction to this. Or Malicia's), and Cordelia is using her knowledge of what she is like to get sympathy.

No lies were involved, but Cordelia has a better read on Cat than Cat thinks at the end.

stevenneiman

I think she's making a point of not acting like Cordelia herself did. This isn't about power dynamics or bargaining positions, it's about doing what needs done. Especially because the power dynamics and bargaining positions are already quite clearly established. Cat has about as much power over Cordelia in reality as an absolute monarch has over their subjects in theory. She's helping Procer because she wants to, not because there's literally anything at all Procer could do if she decided to just sit back and let them all die.

pagesbe

I like the duality here. For Catherine, on the one hand, this is satisfying. As she thought in the chapter, the boot is on the other foot now. On the other hand, that Cordelia feels like she needs to beg probably hurt, especially when she's been trying to make herself not look like a monster in the eyes of others.

major R

Catherine is a monster, no matter what she believes or does. It's a state of being, not a particular act or action. She wins impossible battles. She seizes power from things that should not, cannot be touched. She makes impossible allies as easily as she dismembers foes. She is fundamentally unlike any being to walk the continent right now and it is unfair of anyone, including herself, to assert that she actually keeps

with the Below – she is the adviser to a pair of fledgling rogue Gods who ostensibly keep to the Below, but for all intents and purposes she is a contractor for them and nothing more, and she drags their being more to the Above with every change she makes on their behalf or arguments she picks. Never will they actually cross that thresh-hold between them, but much like Catherine, her proposed city, and her proposed new world order, they may eventually come to sit just upon it. Night & Twilight.

Cordelia is right to beg. You don't reason with monsters, you either stab them or you beg their mercy. She started with reasoning, and then a bit of Proceran diplomacy, but both totally failed in their purpose and led to immense long-term losses for Cordelia, even the actions that made her gains in the short-term. A total defeat.

Now, Cordelia is about to get taken for a wild ride on the begrudging friendship train and she's probably going to hate every minute of it, but in the end she will probably begin to agree with and support the person she had the conviction to cast thousands and thousands of her countrymen at to stop, even in the face of the pressing undead menace. Her act of legitimate begging will be forgotten, if all goes well, and she will finally treat Catherine with some of the authority and levity that the Black Queen has always demanded, all while we listen to Catherine's internal monologue talk about how everyone's got her wrong and if only people would just step aside and let her run her little corner of the planet for long enough to turn it into something other than a disaster zone she could just gallivant off into the sunset and never kill a dude ever again. Hardly acknowledging that, whether they step aside or not, she seems to get her way anyway- just slower, more arduously, and more "accidentally".

Just like every other monstrous dictator in the making, volunteering to retire or not. Yeah, I see you over there Pinochet. You're not fooling anybody.

Walter

Catherine crucified hundreds of prisoners after Liesse. I don't think we are about to get confused as to whether she is a good person. Like, she went to Dead King to try and get him to attack Procer herself a few chapters back.

There is a writing toolbox and having a character torture a prisoner is a character revealing beat. Having them do it to hundreds of people is an explicit 'this person has Herod/Hitler/Sauron energy' beat.

The important thing, tho, is that Cat doesn't SEE HERSELF that way. In her mind there is a big dif between her and Diabolist. Like, I don't think she ever updated her self image from 'plucky underdog trying my best to do what is

right'. She wears the cloak of stolen souls and carries a banner explaining that having reasons for things is for suckers, but I don't think she gets how that looks to other people. "Yeah, his name is Deadhand, and he has an evil bone hand and eats people, but, like, he brings me weed and likes honey in his tee."

This update is probably jarring to her because it feels strange that someone would have to beg her to try and preserve human life on this continent. Like, shouldn't they realize that she would have done that anyway? Who do they think she is, some kind of Villain?

The disjunction that's currently happening, tho, is that Cat doesn't grok how severe the Dead King seems to Procer. She was Winter Fresh Cat when she met him, and I think she just hasn't taken another look at his deal since she became sane again. In her mind he is just another player in her games, civilized and urbane, someone to balance against Bard and Tyrant and the Black/Malicia relationship.

Whereas Cordelia understands him as the end of humanity. She doesn't understand Cat's POV, which is that dude is someone you can negotiate with and get truces from or military alliances with, a cool cat named Neshamah. To Cordelia he is just a wildfire burning down the world.

I tend to lean more towards Hasenbach's view on DK, myself. I think the way he behaved towards Cat is a mask that he uses, and I'm hoping that this meeting will help Cat see the truth of him.

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, Catherine forgot that not everyone is a god or can directly phone one for help. Personally, my vision of the DK is the same as yours.

Shveiran

Most of what you say is true, yet again, I'd argue that as in most instances the question "is Cat a monster?" is best answered with "Compared to what?".

At the end of the day, there is no denying that Cat has done monstrous things; but I see no reason not to extend the same category to all current rulers in Calerna, bar none. I suppose Tyrant, Hierarch, Black and Malicia, or Andronike and Kumena, hardly need much arguing on this point, but I think it is a fact that the Blood, Cordelia and the Ashurans have all shown a blatant disregard for human life unless it was their own people. As for the rest of the League, well, they are going along with two madmen and grabbing up all

commerce-relevant spots they can, and I haven't seen them drag their feet much, so they don't get a pass.

Now, we could argue that they don't raise the dead and that this makes them less of a monster than Cat; honestly, I don't feel that way, but that is beside the point in my opinion: past a certain threshold, arguing "he is worst though" absolves you not at all.

If we consider the means, they are all monstrous; that some botehr with a shiny coat of paint earns them no point in my book.

If we consider the ends, the matter becomes very debatable; I guess only Cat and Cordelia have a shot at the Greater Good justification, but whether that is acceptable or not is a very personal judgment.

Ultimately, though, I don't think morality is not why Cordelia feels she has to act this way.

Cat is a monster, objectively, at least in the sense major R enunciated above: she is a force shaping the world, with the winds of fate blowing in her sails, doing the impossible every few weeks; and that monster Cordelia has scorned, provoked and bled countless times.

She has begun a feud, and chosen time and again to throw fuel in that fire because she judged the alternative worse. Whether or not you think she was justified in making that choice, the gamble backfired, and she stands before that monster now knowing not only that she could kill her and her people if she so wished – but that the monster need do nothing to doom her to that fate. That nothing but the monster decision to stand by her side, bleed her people and her resources, and gamble her own life will possibly save her kingdom from annihilation. She needs the monster to be a martyr, and that is not someone you can be sure to be granted by a dear friend, not fully.

And she knows she has earned no trust from Catherine Founding, no good will whatsoever, and more than a few reasons for enmity.

Of course she is terrified. How could a beggar not be? Her fate and her people is in someone's hands, and of an enemy she willingly made to boot.

[Liliet](#)

Yep.

Catherine can take as much advantage of the situation as she can. Appealing to her goodwill and heroism is literally the only leverage Cordelia has at this point – be as pitiful as possible, so she'll want to help and not ask as much as she can in return.

Cordelia has no choice but to try and take advantage of these traits of Catherine's – because otherwise, even with the obvious fact Catherine came here to fight the Dead King, Procer is about to become a province of Callow.

Fayhem

> otherwise, even with the obvious fact Catherine came here to fight the Dead King, Procer is about to become a province of Callow.

I don't think so? There's a term for trying to absorb a polity several times larger than yourself in population as well as landmass, and that term is "strategic overreach". Cordelia's right that if the Principate splinters – and if DK isn't stopped, it is in fact on the very verge of that – some of the southern principedoms would beg to get invited to the Callowan Let's Not All Die party, but there's no scenario where Catherine could take *and hold* something the size of all Procer regardless of whether she wanted to. Triumphant was brought down by narrative logic in the Guideverse, that's true, but she'd almost certainly have been just as doomed in our world by the simple scale of her strategic overreach. Taking is always easier than holding.

Honestly, even if you're speaking more figuratively than literally and you downgrade the scale of ambition to vassalage (or even a level of really severe concessions) rather than outright absorption that still wouldn't be sustainable long-term. If Procer survives Procer will recover, and when Procer recovers it will once again be in an objectively more powerful position than Callow thanks to its greater population base and resources. And at that point they would start re-evaluating the concessions they were driven into under duress with a very jaundiced eye indeed. Catherine is much too smart to try to force a Guideverse version of the Treaty of Versailles onto Procer now, for exactly the reasons why that treaty was a dumb, dumb thing to do in the real world. That said, the last time Cat and Cordelia spoke Catherine was still Winter!Cat instead of F.U.N.!Cat and she was spitting raw Callowan spite at Cordelia over the DK situation to boot; it would be very plausible for Cordelia not to feel entirely confident that Catherine is more smart than spiteful about the level of concessions/whatever that she could feasibly extract from this situation.

Liliet

Do note that Callow post-allofthis will have a trade deal and mutual defense treaty (iirc) with Praes, putting it in a radically better position than it was ever in before, relative to Procer.

But yeah, Cordelia also cannot be confident Catherine will see the future situation projected in a way that favors Procer 😊

[Liliet](#)

I think Catherine knows full well what a menace Dead King is. She cannot fully process it, no, but the way she sees him is EXACTLY why she's uncomfortable with this. She also sees the end of humanity, and she doesn't like the idea of being BEGGED to stop it. If it was just politics, if it was what you said – civilized people bargaining – Catherine would be full on enjoying the spectacle.

But it's the end of humanity coming, and Catherine is not a fan of being treated like she doesn't understand that herself.

And I think Cordelia knows this and hoped for / expected this exact result. That based on her assessment of her personality, this is how you get Catherine Foundling to actually drop grudges and do her best to help you, to push back against your helplessness instead of taking advantage of it. This GOT to Catherine, and I expect Cordelia did this because she knew it would.

Andrew Mitchell

> And I think Cordelia knows this and hoped for / expected this exact result. That based on her assessment of her personality, this is how you get Catherine Foundling to actually drop grudges and do her best to help you, to push back against your helplessness instead of taking advantage of it. This GOT to Catherine, and I expect Cordelia did this because she knew it would.

Huh, I think you're right. I didn't get that when I read the chapter but this makes perfect sense given all our previous evidence of how smart Cordelia is.

I wonder if Cat's going to call Cordelia on this bullshit during their walk?

[Liliet](#)

No part of it is bullshit tho.

The conclusion of 'she wouldn't do this if she didn't think she had to' is in Cat's head and on Cat, Cordelia never said she didn't think Catherine would help if she didn't do this.

Shveiran

Life on Calernia, not humanity, but nitpicking aside I agree.

With that said, it begs the question of how much of a bitch Cordelia has to be to have acted as she has if she had that good a read on Catherine.

I'd much rather believe she is gambling all in on the Black Queen being a decent human being because, well, if she isn't than Procer is already screwed.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Back then she didn't have a full read on Catherine. Cat has proved herself several more times since their prior negotiations.

Shveiran

She did, which is why I hope it is the second option and not the first. Mostly because it seems Cordelia is here to stay and I would prefer not to have a reason to hold her in such contempt.

[Liliet](#)

Cordelia didn't have ANY read on Catherine when she was first declaring the Crusade, and she was only forming it during their Hero Winter negotiations. Not helped by Catherine deciding to go with pomp, formality and listening to Akua for that period. Remember how Catherine managed to surprise her with sharpness / understanding of intrigue in their last pre-Northern Crusade talk? Cordelia got a much better understanding by the time Cat was begging her for a break pre-Keter, and at that time she would have been willing to deal if she could have (as it was, if she agreed to anything it literally just wouldn't hold, leaving Catherine with the same problem and Cordelia deposed).

By now, between Cat's warning about Dead King and a portion of Callowan spite, and all her actions since she came back, and likely Augur's advice, Cordelia knows how to move her. First make it up to her (Catherine thinks her admissions are satisfying for a reason), then push even further to make her actively uncomfortable so she won't seek more of it.

It's a good move.

Javvies

IIRC, Cordelia and Cat would have started their chats at some point early in the book 3 => book 4 timeskip, since the anchor artifact got delivered to Cordelia by Thief in the Book 3 epilogue.

So probably at least a year before the Crusade kicked off. Admittedly, things would have needed to be moving some months before that point, and Cat had been knocking off Heroes publicly enough that it was known about in Callow, so it probably got picked up by spies.

mavant

I doubt Neshamah wants to *end* humanity; where else would he get raw materials?

No, it's just about changing the status quo. Because the status isn't quo, and he just needs to rule it.

mavant

I always thought wakeleaf was tobacco or coca, rather than weed.

Walter

I dunno, I think 'Catherine is always a little high' makes a lot of sense.

Like, she just found out Cordelia didn't get a Name.

Sane Cat: "Shit, a mighty Named would have been really helpful to stop Dead King's ongoing atrocities. Thousands and thousands of people will die because of this."

High/Petty Cat: "Haha! There's one in your eye, Fucking Bard! Your lute sucks and you suck!"

caoimhinh

Yeah, it's understandable that she has mixed feelings about this.

On one hand, Procer has finally gotten down of their high horse and stop their presumptuousness and arrogant attitude when dealing with Catherine. But on the other hand, Catherine is not happy that it had to come to such slaughter for this to happen. If anything that may have her angrier at Procer, that each and every time Cat makes a truce with Procer it took a lot of devastation for them to seat and have a talk.

At least now everyone on the Crusade side will stop that initial bullshit of “we can’t have a Villain as Queen of Callow, we have to bring them freedom through our army” (both Cordelia and Pilgrim had said that in the past).

[Liliet](#)

I think Cordelia calculated this quite well – that at some point, when you have no bargaining advantage left to lose, the best way to get things out of Catherine is to be pitiful about it.

She is a hero, and right now that’s Cordelia’s only hope.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

A Heroic Villain.
Necromantic Steeds aside, she’s still a Dark Priestess,
First Under the Night.

[Liliet](#)

I was referring to actual personality traits / motivations as it is used in our world, not Guideverse’s political bullshit labels 😊

mavant

Perhaps “Well-Intentioned Anti-Villain”, by TvTropes’ terminology:

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Analysis/AntiVillain?from=Main.SlidingScaleOfAntiVillains>

tithin

This next chapter is going to be superb.

Soronel Haetir

“Get up, Hasenbach,” I said. “You and I are going to [vote](#).”

Someguy

Kneeling in private is pointless ego stoking on Cordy’s part for drama. Only the public kneeling of the 1st Prince of Procer before the Queen of Callow will suffice.

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah. First that could legitimately hurt her ability to rule. More of the house of light rebels, the people riot, the pettier nobles that don’t comprehend the big picture see it as a moment to take the throne. It doesn’t help Cat to have Cordelia capitulate if it just makes her a less powerful ally.

What she did do was do it in front of a woman who hates her enough to see her dead one day, and who has the best claim to her throne if she's disposed, to say nothing of the 3 rulers of Callow. Her ego is well and truly smashed.

IDKWhoitis

Like a previous discussion about the nature of symbols in the book (can't remember if it was Black or Malica who gave the lesson to Cat)

The message was transmitted clear to anyone who mattered, and the pointless spectacle was avoided for the sake of expediency and to prevent unfortunate consequences that accompany public showings of such things.

Shveiran

Yet it was, so far, only spectacle.

I don't think it was an empty symbol, not coming from someone that sees the role of First Prince as Cordelia does.

But I am most curious to see what Cordelia is really willing to offer; this is an acknowledgment of weakness, but not repentance: all Cordelia has said is that when it was Cat doing the beggar, she gave her the cold shoulder. That's all well and good, but it erases nothing that has previously happened, and is not even an apology.

I'm very curious about next chapter. Cat's stance will be interesting, but Cordelia's even more.

[Liliet](#)

I get the impression that Cordelia is basically acknowledging that this is not a negotiation, this is a planning session of what Catherine wants done, and her voice is going to be basically advisory. "Oh this is a concession you don't want to extract because it would blow up this and that down the line". Which is the only way to deal with it at this point tbh, kind of like how Amadeus convinced Cat about the mage academy.

[Liliet](#)

> What she did do was do it in front of a woman who hates her enough to see her dead one day, and who has the best claim to her throne if she's disposed, to say nothing of the 3 rulers of Callow. Her ego is well and truly smashed.

OH THIS IS A FACT YO THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR POINTING IT OUT

RoflCat

To paraphrase something I heard:

"The ones who care don't matter, and the ones who matter don't care"

Cordelia just listed out how Procer is essentially on the edge of the cliff, barely survived being pushed off due to Cath's truce with Dead King.

So to her, anyone who would find fault in her begging Cath for help is not someone she'd care to pay attention to right now. And as can be seen in this chapter, Cath does not care that Cord is breaking some kind of etiquette to kneel and prove her sincerity.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, Catherine cares.

Cordelia knows exactly what she is doing, and exactly who she's addressing. This is as calculated a move as she's ever made, and it has achieved exactly the purpose she wanted.

Oh, it was at the cost of her personal dignity, but Cordelia has always, I think, cared about that more in light of how it reflected on dignity of those with whose consent she ruled, rather than her own pride. That much is a low price to pay, when she can pity-manipulate the Black Queen into dismissing the charges.

Shveiran

I think RoflCat was talking about the Procerans?

[Liliet](#)

> And as can be seen in this chapter, Cath does not care that Cord is breaking some kind of etiquette to kneel and prove her sincerity.

What I was referring to.

Catherine cares 😊

ByVectron!

That listing of exactly how near the edge, how dire the state of Procer, that wasn't all for Cat- it was for Roz as well, lest she think that she might want to take a swing for the Prince. She was laying it all out in cold, stark lines, "Procer is f'ed, right in the A. We will last for a little while yet, and some will fall later than others, but they...we... will all fall, and soon. The coup was not only ill advised, it makes exactly ZERO difference to the ability of Procer and

her people to survive annihilation at the hands of the Dead King."

Hitogami

Thanks for an excellent chapter.

Emily

That was not what I expected and like Cat though I want to relish her change and subservience it also terrifies me for the indication of how bad things are

Aston

And that's when the Kingdom Under cracks open the machine gun caches for sale.

Red Letter beats the Undead?...

IDKWhoitis

I wonder if the Gnomes can be persuaded to make an exception...

Because if DK gets to eat Calernia, there's no way he is going to be restrained by the Gnomes alone.

Sparsebeard

I mean, I fail to see how an army of skellies can stand against friggin Gundams and nukes able to literally sink landmasses...

JJR

They probably can't, but they also can't drown. Somehow I can only imagine an underwater Dead Kingdom being even worse.

konstantinvoncarstein

They are able to sink entire kingdoms, and possess fleets of flying machines impervious to magic. I don't think Neshamah holding the whole continent could threaten them. Furthermore, the narrative would smack him very hard if he conquered Calernia.

Shveiran

I think the narrative would smack him hard if he tried. If he achieved that, Calernia would quickly become even more of a background feature than Keter, though. He'd be kind of safe, I think, or at least not more in danger. But getting there is a very slippery slope, because until there is even

one enemy on Calernia she is the "villain that can't be defeated", which guarantees he will be. God, I love narrative logic made physics.

[Liliet](#)

SAME

IT'S GREAT

lennymaster

Was any imperviousnes to magic ever mentioned? The only thing said was screaming things in the sky and destroyed kingdoms, the rest we inferred. And all that was a good while ago, when magic was not nearly as developed. Who knows? Maybe Masego cold have played fly swatter with jets and aircraft carriers when he still had his magic.

konstantinvoncarstein

"They stopped laughing, when they lost contact with all their colonies. It was already too late by then. The Yan Tei have the only surviving records on the subject, and they say that the fleet of metal ships that came for Kerguel darkened the sky itself – it could be seen from miles away."

[...]

"They sunk the island into the sea," Black said.

"Sorceries Kerguel had spent decades refining slid off the ships like water off a duck's back. The explosions were larger than anything that's been seen before or since. By the time the gnomes were done, there was not a living soul left on the barren rocks."

Book 1, Chapter 15: Company

I was wrong in that aircrafts are not mentioned, but I was right about the anti-magic. And you said that magic has advanced on Calernia, but do you think the Gnomes did not? I doubt they sitted idle during thousands of years.

Furthermore, if they are able to see what Goblins do underground, they are probably aware of the most recent advances in magical theory.

[Fayhem](#)

I mean, if the ships are darkening the sky I'd call that a pretty solid indication that in fact they are aircraft. Given that nobody else in creation has aircraft it would make sense that they'd call them "flying ships" instead.

konstantinvoncarstein

And Gnomes probably have Named on their own.

Quite Possibly A Cat

I don't see why the Gnomes would have trouble beating the DK. Bullets forged of holy silver and guns should let them mow down undead legions. Then drop some nukes into Serenity kill source of fresh bodies. After that its just a mop up mission. I didn't get the indication the gnomes were slouches in sorcery or tech.

lennymaster

Do the Gnomes have holy bullets, would they not need priests for that? We have seen holy water (wich did nothing against Winter Cat's zombies) but never blessed swordes or armor. Was there ever an undead weaknes to silver mentioned? Can they even get to Serenity? Why would jets be immune to magic that rots stone into dust and takes up the entire sky of a sizable part of Calernia for a skrying ritual? And just what could he build with the dead of an entire continent and plenty of time? A giant necromantic spaceship made of bones? Magical monstrosities that can eat nukes like candy? Maybe he needs none of that and can just open a gate directly into the Gnomes capital and rip it apart in the span of minutes with his undead Named, Demons and devils, with the constructs he can make out of millions of corpses and the reanimated mages of Calernia. There was never any indication the Gnomes know shitall about magic, they certainly never interfered with magical WMDs. Maybe they feel secure enough to not bother or simply cant, no one knows.

Shveiran

The premise of the Guide is that Calernia is backwater country and there are real powerhouses beyond the sea. The gnomes seem to have technology and magic in par/slash beyond our own, whereas Calernian are at least five centuries behind.

I see no reason to believe that a host of undeads covering the continent would be an issue. Zombies have not been shown to be particularly hard tod estroy in this universe. If they can be killed with swords, why would nuking teh continent not work? And why wouldn't the gnomes be able to? A first world country in our timeline could address such a threat without too much of effort, and no risk. The Dead King is a CALERNIAN problem, not a WORLD ENDING one

Shveiran

Heck, it was established that the only relevant country in Calernia is the dwarfs. Do you remember what they could dish out?

Hellspirit

I love how human they are.

Author Unknown

Well, more of a limp, really.

[frolamiz](#)

They only need the Tyrant to join them to make a trio of limping rulers.

IDKWhoitis

An arguments can be made for the title of "3 Limping Scheming Tyrants"

Novice

Sounds like some Hierarch propaganda to be honest.

IDKWhoitis

The People's Truth is not propaganda, and even if it was, it would be of the best sort, it would be absolutely correct propaganda.

[sivarajan](#)

You mean "Absolutely Correct Propaganda."

Sylwoos

Why going for a walk on their bad leg when they could just sit back in their comfortable seat and continue the conversation?

Andrew Mitchell

It's private. And more relaxed than sitting on opposite sides of the table.

Shveiran

Couldn't say it better.

[Liliet](#)

More relaxed? Walking on a bad leg? I think you might need to update your definition a little bit, , ,

Andrew Mitchell

Not physically relaxed, but emotionally. Walking side by side is more emotionally comfortable than sitting facing each other over a table. It's more intimate. It promotes the feeling that they are in it together and they're heading in the same direction.

ninegardens

The rearrange the god damn couches! Sit on the same couch! Or Sit on the Couch and get Rozalia and Adjunt to carry the couch around the palace while your two spy masters chat or place chess or whatever.



[Liliet](#)

Anyway I'm betting on Catherine turning a 'walk' into a 'sit down' within like 3 minutes.

JJR

She might need to be in a specific location for the next part of the conversation. I'm hoping it's that one lake.

IDKWhoitis

This is the even darker reflection of that last conversation Cat had with Cordy before the War. Where Cat started off with admitting she had absolutely failed Callow, and then worked up her courage to walk away from a raw deal. Now Cordy worked up her courage to face the inevitable deal presented before her, admitting she had failed Procer.

At this point, Cat holds absolute leverage, because Procer cracked under it's own weight and the relentless waves of Dead, and even though Cat doesn't own a massive lever, she barely needs one to pick up and move all the pieces. If anything, the Coup was favorable for all parties involved. It divested Cordy of any illusions of Procer holding itself together, she doesn't need to try to save face or play the power game with a 2-7 off suit.

And above all things, Cat has been known as, while admittedly violent, still an someone who will act in good faith. Cat has shown repeatedly that she does not want to set the world on fire.

Unbowed by Angel's worth, unshaken by Demon's madness, and patron saint of disasters and burning battlefields, Cat is the person who needs to lead Calernia right now, and Cordy has effectively recognized it.

Bard must be kicking herself for getting distracted by Auger right now.

Novice

Ha! Two monarchs limping together, what a sight. And narratively appropriate both as rulers and personally.

Slick Rick

Cat's nearing hero territory here! The fact that she smothered her enjoyment of this and it was unthinkable to not help might make her... well, The Good Queen or Queen of Callow really aren't ever going to be her (not nearly stabby and vicious enough for her).

But I really like how meta the situation is; the Crusade always defeats Evil because they are in the right, but Catherine genuinely offered them every one of their goals as long as they don't destroy everything Callowan about Callow and they refused, thus invalidating the Crusade's righteousness and thus the tables inevitably flipped. I suppose I could see Hasenbach looking at Cat's record and expect everything she ever wanted destroyed (and probably set on fire) and Cat replacing the entire ruling class with stabbiier people that are loyal to her and would bleed the Principate dry on principle... as an opener to negotiations (after all, those were the terms she gave to Cat before the crusade). In a way, she's probably hoping Cat doesn't accept this, because as far as the story goes it would be a fantastic way to end the story of the current iteration of Procer (the corruption of Good becoming its own downfall, being destroyed by their own arrogance).

Javvies

Crusades don't always win. They just have an advantage. In theory, anyways.

But one of Dread Emperor Terribilis's crushed two consecutive Crusades so hard that the last five Crusades weren't aimed at Praes, but assumed at the Dead King instead.

So ... actually the Story is more that Crusades usually tend to lose, or at least, fail.

Huh. We know the Crusade against Triumphant basically worked ... Oh. Damn. The Bard thinks the only way she can get at the Dead King through Story is to have him playing the role of Triumphant, so when the "forces of Good" rise up against his Conquest, they get bonus Story points. The Bard works through Stories ... and calling a Crusade isn't a Story that works.

Liliet

I think Cordelia knew exactly how to manipulate Cat into pliability here. She's employed the 'righteous indignation' tactic against her before with success, although that negotiation never went anywhere in the end. As long as you're

willing to discard dignity and any pretense of moral high ground and appeal purely on pitifulness, Catherine will be there. And that's the best hope Cordelia has right now.

Oshi

Exactly. Cordelia is way to good at this not to know what would work.

Simpli

Wasn't Callows Army also overstretched, filled with green recruits, bleeding coin and spent after too much campaigning? Somehow that sounds like its getting overvalued right now.

Novice

I think you're forgetting the experienced mid-tier officers; excellent generals like Juniper, Grem and Black; their siege expertise thanks to Legion training; force multipliers like the Knights, goblin munitions and the Woe and most importantly the entire Empire Everdark. Catherine isn't being overestimated.

Agent J

Green recruits, but a veteran core from three legions. Plus the Legions-in-Exile and the full might of the Empire Everdark.

Catherine is bringing three armies to the table, a truce that gives them time to organize, and a brighter tomorrow with the Accords.

Yea, Cat's not fresh as morning dew, but she's still in a far better position than Cordelia. A strong ally and, really, the only chance for the Principate to survive.

Quite Possibly A Cat

Let's not forget how absurd the Everdark forces are. Not only do they have absurd numbers of soldiers on par with Saint, when one of these super-soldiers falls the power can be immediately transferred to a new host resulting in an *even more powerful* super-soldier! Then if that wasn't enough they can pull the DK's favorite tactic: stealing the enemies strength in victory.

Their one weakness is dawn and I'm betting the DKs miasma and general darkness craps on the power of dawn. At a minimum Serenity won't have any dawn to stop the Drow.

I wonder if Above can make something like Night, but non-evil. Like it goes to your heirs, and you can only sacrifice animals you rightfully own plus yourself. Maybe sacrifice

small drops of your own blood while you live? Good has a tradition of self-flagellation right?

Oshi

Death and consumption are baked into the Night in a way that seems unlikely. I suppose the closest is what the Daoine do but even that is leery and filled with necromancy.

[Liliet](#)

Well necromancy isn't inherently Evil, just gets a bad rep.

Shveiran

>>"Their one weakness is dawn and I'm betting the DKs miasma and general darkness craps on the power of dawn. At a minimum Serenity won't have any dawn to stop the Drow."

Actually...

>> from book 4, chapter 53

"Killing undead," I said. "Would it also grow the Night?"

The drow paled.

"Speak not of the Hidden Horror," Ivah whispered. "For its crown is dawn, and that pale light is the end of all things. Only the mad would enter the eye of the Host of Death."

[Sugar Roll](#)

They've been bloodied in the skirmishes in Iserre. They're not green anymore. The three month truce will give them some well needed R and R but I think the help from Callow and Cat's partnership with the Everdark is not enough against the Dead King.

I believe they need the entire continent against him. Get Praes and League involved and try to get the Kingdom Under to make a play for the lands underneath Keter.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Mostly right, but the lands underneath Keter are explicitly the Drow's job, and reward.

Shveiran

Are they? I thought that's what the dwarves would get, and the dwarves would mostly become surface based? Or, you know,

something like the goblins that live underground but dare not dig too far below.

[Liliet](#)

No, dwarves were after the Everdark territory. That's why the drow had to leave, and why they now basically have no choice but to wage war against DK to the last drop of blood – they're essentially a whole nation of refugees.

Fate is a wager

It's hard to put in words how much i hate cordelia kneeling to cat. I understand why she did it but that only makes it a little better.

'Ladi Williams

I doubt you hated me r as much as cordy...

[Liliet](#)

Well, Catherine wasn't a fan either 😊

Making everyone involved uncomfortable was most definitely the exact point Cordelia was going for~

caoimhinh

It's quite sad that so much of the Procer's populace had to be massacred before its leadership finally recognized that they needed to stop acting like self-righteous bastards and finally sit down and have civilized talks with Catherine.

The same applies to Levant, of course, as Pilgrim (and lots of their soldiers) had to die before they changed their attitude.

At least now they can have an alliance, and hopefully they won't backstab Cat once this war is over (Procer has a historical tendency of doing such thing, as has been noted several times through the books).

[Liliet](#)

Well, Rozala's there with a sword...

'Ladi Williams

Am I the only that while reading the banter between Cat and Vivian was secretly worried they would take up a too large part of the chapter leaving us with very little meat on the bone for Cat and Cordy?

I was like nooo...EE...just get on with it already...though normally I like reading their day to day interactions that don't involve

stabbing people bcos that's where you really see all the schemes taking shape or coming to fruition...

Andrew Mitchell

Nothing like that crossed my mind... I thoroughly enjoyed their chat; even laughing out loud at Vivienne sassing Cat so much.

konstantinvoncarstein

I agree with you, I would have preferred to see more of the conversation between Cordelia and Catherine.

Shveiran

Though I agree, I think the chapter was shaped this way because this chapter wasn't about the talk, but about setting the tone for them. The meat will come next chapter, and without the bickering it would have been either a very short chapter or a too long one (if EE merged it with the next)

caoimhinh

Oh, fuck. This is so we get a big cliffhanger on Friday, isn't it?

Shveiran

Damnation. I didn't think about that. We are kind of fucked.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Wouldn't be Friday without Cliff Hanger!

Andrew Mitchell

I really enjoyed this chapter.

Cordelia's frank assessment of how fucked Procer actually is was unexpected and heart-breaking. I can understand her assessment that begging on her knees was the best option (given she does not have access to Cat's thoughts) but it just goes to reinforce my feeling that Cordelia just doesn't understand Cat.

Regarding the war, it seems that the Dead King is fielding several hundred thousand dead and it will quickly go over a million once the collapse starts again. Honestly, I don't know what Cat can do to quickly stem the tide given the most the the Drow are somewhere else.

Andrew Mitchell

Calling it now:

Cordelia isn't going to come clean with Cat about what she's dredged up from that lake. And that checkov gun is going to go off at the worst possible time.

Shveiran

Uhm, I disagree.

It's possible, of course, but Cat knows there is a checkov gun. I don't think she will want such an unknown quantity around, so she'll likely ask?

Unless Theif actually found out and Cat is cool with it, in which case we won't know but it won't come out at a bad time, but as part of another Black Queen scheme

Andrew Mitchell

Yeah, I like your last option better than my idea.

ninegardens

>I can understand her assessment that begging on her knees was the best option (given she does not have access to Cat's thoughts) but it just goes to reinforce my feeling that Cordelia just doesn't understand Cat.

I mean... it worked right?

It was that that burned through Cat's last fragment of spite.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Burned through? Cat is still spiteful. She'll never forget.

She just realized there were more important things than spite.

Andrew Mitchell

She didn't need to kneel. She just had to ask Cat for help. Cat still wouldn't have let her spite doom millions of people. She just would not do that.

[Liliet](#)

Yah, but she would still be spiteful. And now she isn't. If nothing else, it's better for *Catherine* to not be festering in that.

It was, in a very real sense, *morally right* of Cordelia to do this. Narratively, it took her from "ungrateful asshole who does not deserve any of this" to "grateful and indebted", which is a biiiig upswing.

Cordelia is, for once, not trying to get as much as she can out of Cat while paying as little as possible of a price for it. *That's a good, and Good, decision.*

Liliet

Oh, Cordelia's read of Catherine is quite fine.

And a Catherine who feels awkward and kind of defensive about being presumed predatory is a better Catherine to negotiate with and try to get information from than a pissy Catherine who wants to drive it in how much she doesn't have to do any of this even as she's agreeing to do this.

It's Catherine whose read of Cordelia is off. Cordelia is *not that proud*; her pride was on behalf of the people she represented and with whose consent she rules, part of her duty much more than it is a part of her personality.

She's proud, but she's not too proud to beg if utilitarian calculation shows that it's better for Procer if she does.

Fayhem

> Honestly, I don't know what Cat can do to quickly stem the tide given the most the the Drow are somewhere else.

"Somewhere else", yes. Somewhere that has been carefully unspecified, but is definitely **not** just sitting back in the Everdark since exiting there was part of the deal with the dwarves. You know the narrative rule about how the plans that aren't revealed in advance are the ones that work, right? Let's just say I'm not at all discounting the rest of the drow as a factor in this war.

Andrew Mitchell

Good call!

Shveiran

Yeah, I thought that was pretty much a given. I think Cat has mentioned she had plans for them in the first third of Book 5?

Mental Mouse

Most of the Drow are up north being positioned against DK already.

Walter

First Prince of Procer? More like Last Prince of Procer, amirite?

Andrew Mitchell

Maybe.

ninegardens

Wait.... why are the two cripples going for a god damn walk?
Just send the rest minions with functioning legs out if you need privacy!

Shveiran

As Andrew Mitchell pointed out above, it breeds familiarity and closeness. And neither of them is scared of discomfort.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Now it's time to see who is more crippled.

Soronel Haetir

I would have to think it's Cordelia, I mean her broken leg is only something like a day old at this point. She's not walking that one off. Cat at least has had some time to both recuperate and learn the limitations of her body (as well as being able to call on Night to overcome those limits when she absolutely has to).

[Liliet](#)

I mean Cordelia probably does have access to priests, the leg just isn't *fully* healed yet.

WuseMajor

"Ok, so. Point 1. In the next few days you are going to receive an official message from the government of Callow. I've had poets and calligraphers working on this thing for a month, it's beautiful, lyrical, and just amazing. What it boils down to is "I Told You So." I expect an official reply acknowledging the receipt of the message. I am just petty enough to want the First Prince showing any degree of humility to Callow to go on the official record."

"Point 2. When we have the official council meeting with everyone, I want us to stand united on the Accords, so if there's anything you don't like in there, tell me now so we can get that hashed out beforehand. If we need to make a show of trading something during the meeting, fine, but it gets worked out now so neither of us is surprised later."

"Point 3. Amadeus of the Green Stretch stays with me. Call it releasing him into my custody. Call it an exile to fight the Dead King, because he will be very useful up north. Call it whatever

you like, but I'm keeping him. If nothing else, he's the only one who has a chance of reforming the dumpster fire that is Praes."

"Point 4. What are you dredging from the lake?"

"...I think that's pretty much it as far as demands go. Well, I might ask you to leave that thing alone, depending on what it is, but..."

"In return, I will lend my might to the fight against the Dead King. I will rescind the deal with the Dwarves so that you can buy from them again. And I have a few other deals going that should help us out too."

"I know you already said that you don't have the ability to say no here, but I'll let you in on a secret. I don't like it when innocents die. And the Dead King is a threat to this entire continent, not just you. I don't have much of a choice here either, because we either fight him now together or he kills all of us separately. So, you can push back. You can fight me on those demands. You can screw me over, either now or later after the fighting. And I'll still help."

"But if you do, I want you to remember that, in your hour of need, after you spent so much time fighting me instead of someone who deserves it, I came. A Villain and a monster answered your call for help, because we were the only ones left. But we came. And we helped. And anyone who turns their back on that afterwards needs to ask themselves who the real Villain is."

Shveiran

I mean... yeah. This. Pretty much my expectations in full.

sutortyrannus

Beautiful, really. The last paragraph in particular.

Andrew Mitchell

Spot on. Except for point 1. I don't think Cat is going to demand that.

Shveiran

I don' EXPECT it, but can you imagine how well that would sell in Callow? People would be boasting for a generation. Generations.

There would be riots over rights of first spot in the queue to pay more, voluntary taxes.

Draconic

She actually doesn't need to rescind her deal with the Dwarves. The deal said that they won't sell weapons to nations at war with Callow. So as soon as they make peace, they can buy them again.

[Liliet](#)

I think the emphasis on 'villain' in the last paragraph is a bit petty, given that Cat's pretty much reclaiming it from meaning 'the fucking worst' to just 'the folks who worship Below but can still be decent eh'.

But overall? 😊😊😊
mwah -kisses fingers-

[Liliet](#)

God

this was so fucking

great

but also it's making me laugh because for all of the 'artless' title and for all of her talk about how Catherine cannot be moved if she doesn't want to be

Cordelia knew exactly what she was doing with this performance and knew exactly how to appeal to Catherine

like there's nothing wrong with that per se! it's just funny that I'm pretty sure it's based on cold, cold calculation based on Catherine's known personality

[Mental Mouse](#)

> I'm pretty sure it's based on cold, cold calculation based on Catherine's known personality

Well you know, that's how they roll in that crowd. Cat's not going to have any trouble with that, especially not given how often she's depended on sophisticated intelligence and manipulation.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed.

Catherine will likely be glad to realize that.

laguz24

Personally, I think this fully cements Hasenbach as the opposite of Malacia. Where one made a deal with a devil to avoid kneeling.

The other one knelt to make a deal with a monster. Personally, I really want to see what Malacia is up to because she is not sitting pretty on her throne, I guarantee you.

Shveiran

“One made a deal with a devil to avoid kneeling” ? What do you mean? Who’s the devil, what’s the deal and more importantly what kneeling did she refused?

I doubt you mean kneeling before Amadeus or the crusade, because that would have changed nothing: Crusade was still coming in the first instance, and Crusaders would not have stopped because she asked before being humbled, let alone for Malicia who has a much longer list of atrocities to her name (and Name) than Cat, who was still refused.

Draconic

Very cunning!

She kneels in front of you, so you pretend to be good to her, and tell her to stand up. And then you ask her to come walk with you. All the while “accidentally” forgetting that her leg is broken, and hurts like hell.

Very cunning indeed!

Andrew Mitchell



Shveiran

I need this to be canon.

[Liliet](#)

The best part is where Catherine can also barely walk on a bad leg that hurts like hell, and all Night painkillers will come back to fuck her over later.

But for the sake of spite...

RedApe

DK cannot occupy Kingdom of Callow. Join provinces of Procer to the Kingdom, and the war is over. Are they desperate enough?

Shveiran

IF Malicia leaked the true deal with Keter.

And IF she cannot amend it.

crescentsickle

I just realized why Cat's existence is such a massive blow to Good/Above, and why everyone has been fighting tooth and nail to stop her.

It hasn't been about Callow being the domain of Below, or the expansion and stability of Praes, or anything of the sort.

Like anything else, it's about stories. Terribilis. Triumphant. Sorcerous. Malicia. Black. These are all villains that other villains are compared to. From this era onwards, any new rising Villain has the chance to be compared to the Black Queen and thus slotted into her story beats. The Pilgrim wasn't just trying to stop the Black Queen, he was trying to tie her story down into an ignoble death and thus guarantee that such villains would be curbed.

It wouldn't be as bad if she kept to the rails of Black's story: wildly successful but at constant odds with the people she governed. But she didn't keep to those rails at all. The people of Callow love or fear her in different measures, but none of Praes save the Dread Empress and his Calamities love Black. Everyone has thrown narrative pressure on the Woe to tie it down to the Calamities, but despite those similarities it has become something entirely new. Black would never suffer the likes of Diabolist or Vivienne to sup at his table, and thus the Woe is its own entity.

This isn't just a story for the here-and-now, it's a story for every future generation from this moment onwards. A plucky underdog who overcame the worst the world has to offer time and again, forging friendships and alliances after decisively defeating her enemies, winning ever more power to her banner, causing unprecedented changes to the world, curbs the worst of other villains to win back some karmic debt, etc.

A Villain... that lives a Hero's life. She may have lost the Name, but her weight on the many scales of the narrative engine hoisting up the world is magnitudes more than most with a Name, and said narrative engine **will remember**.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yeah, I'm pretty sure that even though *she* doesn't have a name, she'll leave behind a Name for Black Queen: The Black Queen rises from among Callow's own people to defend the country in its hour of need, but is ready at any time to step aside when she's no longer needed. She's massively charismatic and a trickster-figure who's also a creative strategist. Wields strange magics and gathers strange allies, combining both Good and Evil forces,

Shveiran

My prediction is as follows: this is when Cat will slip the beans about going to Keter herself.
Something along the lines of "This is what war pushed me to do: we must grow beyond our past or it will keep bleeding us."

Just desserts

And Cordelia is going to be immediately forgiving and will totally understand that that wasn't an abhorrent choice to make, because consequences for your actions are things that happen to people that aren't Catherine Foundling.

Shveiran

Well, I was thinking more along the lines of "That's fucked up, but I did invade you first, then said screw you Imma doing it again, so I can see why you'd be desperate enough to take extreme measures (like my lake thingy) so how about we STOP trying to doom each other's people and find a way to fix this mess?"

[Liliet](#)

I think Cordelia was already assuming it, and is 100% not here for holding a grudge over something that (1) didn't happen, (2) Catherine is currently helping fix to the degree that it sort of did. Oh and (3) she knows damn well Catherine absolutely did not want to do and was pushed into a corner for. Not to mention how she's not Callowan and how grudges against Catherine are absolutely the last thing she can afford right now.

[sivarajan](#)

Her "abhorrent" choice was itself a consequence of Cordelia's actions, so it would be hypocritical (read as: Heroic) of her to object to it.

konstantinvoncarstein

Yeah, better to say it now than having Neshamah or the Tyrant (with the Peregrine's curse) reveals it at the worst moment.

Draconic

I don't think she was trying to keep it a secret. I think there was mention of people in Callow already talking about how she burned down a mansion to try stopping Malicia from making a deal with the Dead King.

Shveiran

There was, but that is a memoir from Aisha that we don't know when she'll write down. Since they commented about the

Uncivil Wars since before they started, I took that to mean the secret will come out at some point, but I don't it has yet.

[Javvies](#)

That's the line about it only taking Cat a week to set Keter on fire or something along those lines.

There was also mention in a post-Everdark update-Cat-on-what's-been-going-on in Callow discussion (think it might've been the first discussion after leaving the Everdark through scrying, when Cat learned the Observatory was down, Masego was missing, and the Army of Callow was in Procer and in trouble), that Hakram and Vivienne had spread the word about Cat going to Keter and trying to kill Malicia (and trying to prevent Malicia from making a deal with the Dead King) in the wake of their return to Callow, and the wave of assassinations being Malicia's retaliation. Presumably they left out some of the details about why Cat and company were in Keter in their public statements on the matter.

[Javvies](#)

Also, Pilgrim already knows about it.

[Liliet](#)

You're forgetting the origin of House Insurgent, aren't you?

With Malicia's delegation coming, Vivienne deliberately seeded the rumors that Catherine was in Keter to stop the deal from being made. Which made a bit more of an avalanche than she was expecting, with a schism in the House of Light as a result – between the more conservative 'eh the Black Queen is okay' crowd and the more radical 'ANYONE WHO SAYS A BAD WORD ABOUT BLACK QUEEN IS A HERETIC AND THIS IS A CRUSADE NOW (SORT OF)' crowd.

SomeGuy

It's known that Cat went to Keter. Remember how Callowans were prideful that she set one of the palaces on fire? They think she was there to stop Malicia but they know she was -there-.

superkeaton

Well done, Cordy. Now, how are you going to help if you have nothing?

[Liliet](#)

"Just tell me what to do"

JJR

"Let me tell you what you need to do. You need to sit him down. You look him dead in the eye. And you say, "Don't invade my country."

"And you think that will work?"

"He'd have to be awfully evil if it didn't."

[Liliet](#)

"Remember how I did that? And it probably looked like it didn't work? Well see who's in charge now"

Jim C

I can't be the only one who is seeing this as cordy putting a narrative knife to cats throat

mavant

Hasenbach has always displayed an impressive mastery of her chosen field, not to mention strength of will and emotional fortitude, but this is the first time I've really been compelled by her essential goodness. That took not just big brass ovaries, but a remarkable selflessness.

You go, Cordelia. Four for you, Cordelia.

[Balesundaran](#)

Cordelia is not broken, she has been reforged into something stronger, and something strangely parallel to Cat. She is on her knees here, but remember that she just defied the Angels and refused an epic Name, and that takes an iron will that stands, like Cat, above and beyond a mere Name. Feel free to check off more parallels in replies, but let me get you started:
Limping with a wound that is a humbling reminder of a failure and the need to do better? Check!
Showed up with people previously thought to be their enemies at their back? Check!
Was offered a ruling name that would destroy all enemies but let it slip? Check!
Is thwarting the Intercessor's plans by making the "wrong" choices? Check!
Considered unleashing an unspeakable horror from the past on you enemies to save your people in a way that everyone can see will go badly? Check!
Puts her people above her own power or dignity? Check!

...

[sengachi](#)

With this chapter Cordelia has earned my utmost respect, and Catherine has reminded me exactly why she is -regardless of which gods she may serve- a hero worth following into hell itself.

John brokovsky

Do not let the narrative significance of the First Prince of Procer kneeling to Cat pass unnoticed.

We are one step closer to the return of Triumphant.

Chapter 78: Trenchant

"The great candour in ruling Praes is that, if you make a mistake, assassination attempts will follow. Unfortunately if you do not make a mistake assassination attempts will also follow, which admittedly makes it difficult to tell if a mistake was in fact made."

– Dread Emperor Pernicious, the Imperiled

There were protests, though only from Hasenbach's side as by now mine knew better, but those words might as well have been wind for the weight they carried. They were more out of principle than conviction anyway, I suspected: Princess Rozala dawn well knew that if I was moved to violence little short of a band of heroes could put me down. Spite and impulse would only carry me so far, though, so I did not enter the labyrinth of luxury that awaited outside the small hall. A knuckle rapped against the glass doors along with a sliver of Night slithering through the lock had them popping open without trouble, and beyond lay a pretty little balcony overlooking a winter garden. My boots sounded crisply against the thin layer of snow as I walked out into the cold, knowing the First Prince would not be far behind me. The coolness of the air was pleasant against my face, and as this little corner was windless the cold felt rather mild – more like a refreshing swim in the Silver Lake than winter's hard bite.

Hasenbach followed along, her limp barely noticeable on the move, and I noted she seemed rather unmoved by the cold. *Lycaonese*, I reminded myself. Compared to the brutal winters of her far northern home, this must hardly be noticeable at all. The railing was an elegant thing of stone, sculpted to seem like vines and the detail of the work was only made more pleasant to the eye by the touch of frost. Disdaining the stone benches set in little alcoves to the sides of the doors, I came to lean against it and cast a curious look down into the garden.

"I'm surprised you didn't get that leg fixed," I said.

"I did," Cordelia Hasenbach replied, slowly moving to stand by me.

She was too well-bred to lean against a snow-dusted railing while wearing a nice dress, apparently, or maybe just to do so in front of a foreign ruler. Regardless, standing that ramrod straight must be Hells on her leg.

"Not mage-healing, though that's hardly surprising," I said, eyeing the way she was standing. "Priest work, then. They'll have fixed the bone and flesh but it'll still feel raw for a few more days. Hasn't the Grey Pilgrim offered to see to it? He's a notch above what I've seen even the finest priest-healers do."

"I will not accept so much as the dust of a copper more from the Peregrine than I must," the blue-eyed woman said, tone frosty.

I almost asked to the source of that open enmity, given that Tariq might have been after my neck for a while but he'd been standing in Cordelia's corner for as long as I'd known him, but it didn't take much digging to put the finger on it by myself. In order to capture Black, the Pilgrim had seeded a plague in a town by the shores of Lake Artoise – it'd taken a full legion detachment, true, but that entire town too. Wiping out Proceran towns was one thing when a villain did it, but it must have cut to the bone coming from a servant of Above. Especially one it was essentially diplomatically impossible to touch at the moment.

"Fair enough," I conceded.

"I could ask the same of yours," the First Prince of Procer said. "I am told you are high in the council of dark powers. Such a boon would be but a small favour, no?"

"If I'd paid harsher prices for my first mistakes, I might have better learned from them," I said. "There's nothing free, not even for villains. Some costs are just subtler than others."

"Then I shudder to think what the likes of the Hidden Horror have paid," Cordelia said.

I breathed out, itching for the pipe I'd not thought to bring. Neither parade nor tea were well-matched to wakeleaf, at least not when paired with the presence of the First Prince of Procer.

"All of Sephirah, for one," I said. "And quiet things too, I'd imagine. After all a dead thing cannot heal, cannot grow. Every wound on his power forever remains."

The Lycaonese princess' face was cool as she studied me, though more distant than adverse.

"Sephirah?" she asked.

"What the Kingdom of the Dead was called, before ruin took it," I said. "Keter was the greatest of its cities and the Dead King himself its last king."

"There are legends among my people," Cordelia acknowledged, "though they speak not of this Sephirah but instead of the Thirteen Kings and the Time of Wolves. You are well-learned in the beginnings of the Enemy, it seems. Does the Tower share such dangerous lore freely?"

"I learned it in Arcadia," I replied, "walking the echoes of that dead realm. I learned much, during my march to Keter."

"Your Jacks have seeded rumours with skill as to the purpose of that journey," Cordelia said, and it was not a compliment. "Selfless of you, to seek to break the Tower's schemes even if you failed."

I drummed my fingers against the snowy railing, eyes trailing the winding circles of primroses and jasmines filled with purple pansies. The patterns were oddly soothing to look at.

"Hannoven," I said. "Cleves and Hainaut. That was my offer. I intended to warn you some months in advance, so that you could evacuate the principalities."

"And so the gathering armies of the Tenth Crusade hurried north instead of trying your borders again," she said, tone mild.

"The entire point of the exercise," I admitted. "I didn't quite grasp what it was I was dealing with, not yet. The entire journey was a trap anyway. Malicia had been in talks with Keter for months, I was being used to start a bidding war."

"With lives and lands in my charge as the currency," Hasenbach coldly said.

"The counter-offer was the entire northern third of Procer and Callow having to claim the eastern border principalities on its own," I said. "I had Malicia's host bodies assassinated – twice – but it wasn't enough."

"And do you expect that excuses the rest?" the First Prince said, eyes hard.

"Are you sure you want to start a conversation with *me* about lives and lands being used as currency, Cordelia Hasenbach?" I replied, lips quirking into a smile just as hard as her gaze.

"It was a monstrous thing, what you set out to do," Hasenbach replied, unmoved.

She wasn't mincing her words, and I could respect the honesty of it at least. Coming from the woman who'd put me in the corner where I'd begun to take hard measures, though, that only went so far.

"Monstrous?" I mused. "I suppose it was. But then so was your refusal to entertain peace even on egregiously favourable terms when I repeatedly offered it. Not even for moral reasons, but simply because it was *politically inconvenient* for you. Does my wearing a black cloak somehow make my atrocities worse than yours? As I recall, only one of us actually went through with it and it's not the villain."

Her body was tightly wound as a spring, though not as a warrior's would be – it was the mark of emotions mastered I was looking at, not violence in the making.

"I do not say this to create strife between us," Hasenbach said, voice forcefully calm. "Yet you must understand that the truth you tried to *barter away* part of the Principate nary a year ago is not to be taken lightly."

Probably shouldn't tell her I'd once tried to bribe Rumena into treachery with another chunk of it then, even if it'd been a jest.

"I didn't expect it would be," I frankly replied. "But I'd rather you hear it from me than have it revealed as some dark secret."

As for Praes' involvement in the coup that'd nearly unseated and killed her, what the Circle of Thorns had told her was factually correct: Scribe had helped shape the early plot but later set out to crush Malicia's continuation of it at the order of the Carrion Lord. I saw no need to tell her more than that, especially not while my own teacher was still being kept in the dark.

"So now that we're being all nice and honest," I said, "anything you'd care to tell me?"

We could have kept on arguing about this, I knew and so did she, but there was no gain in it for either of us. I very much doubted she'd forgive what I had admitted to anytime soon, much less forget, but then I wasn't interested in the *forgiveness* of Cordelia Hasenbach. That she was worthy of admiration in some ways did not mean I no longer remembered why it had come to this. Me with my hands ever redder, Procer dancing ever closer to annihilation. None of it was truly behind us, and perhaps never would be, but neither of us were inclined to chase the stag off the cliff. And so we moved on, however grudgingly. Now the boot was on the other foot, though, and it was time for her to unwrap her own dirty little secrets – some of which I knew, and more that I suspected.

"I funded the Truebloods, through intermediaries," Cordelia reluctantly said. "High Lady Tasia Sahelian in particular, as the Empress' foremost rival."

It'd been a long time since I'd been so utterly taken by surprise. It made sense, I thought. Procer was wealthy, Praes infamously prone to backstabbing its way into civil wars and there was harsh irony in giving Malicia a taste of her own medicine after the way she'd meddled in the Proceran civil war. My fingers clenched hard against the stone, though, not because of any of that. It was a smaller, sligher branch splitting from what I'd just been told.

"You bankrolled the Doom of Liesse," I said, tone perfectly mild.

"Not knowingly, or directly," she said. "Yet that is not untrue."

I could kill her in the blink of an eye, I thought. No need for anything elegant or skillful, I could just pour so much Night in her body that the skin sloughed off and the bones melted and *her head fucking popped off*. Akua Sahelian had been the architect of that folly, and she would even that ledger in time. So would Dread Empress Malicia, for having allowed the madness and even helped it along. But now it seemed that even the Warden of the West had put coin to the butchery of my people, *good Proceran silver* turned into a wound on the south that'd last century and a city so broken that not even being the heart of a newborn Court had mended its ruin. She'd not known. It did not absolve her, but she had not known. Hasenbach stirred, and I knew deep as I knew my own breath that if she opened her mouth to compared her funding the Folly to a pact I'd never made with Keter, Sve Noc bless my hand if she did I would rip out her fucking tongue and she could crawl on her knees to Tariq to have it put back on.

"You already know of my involvement in the Liesse Rebellion, I take it," she said.

I breathed out slowly and mastered myself. Rage I could allow myself to feel later, if I decided it was still warranted. But I'd come dangerously close to allowing my control to slip, just then. It genuinely might have, in other circumstances, which was why this conversation was needed in the first place. I would have been much, much worse to hear it after an insulting Proceran blunder and revealed by the Tyrant's cruelly taunting voice.

"I am," I said. "Your intentions in that I will not speak to, yet though that rebellion might have had your coin and your puppet-candidate to kingship it was not fought for you purposes. I'll call it a clean slate."

Duke Gaston of Liesse might have been the figurehead all gathered around, but it'd been the Countess of Marchford and the Lone Swordsman who'd done the bloody work of the uprising. Neither had

been in the First Prince's service, or all that well inclined towards her. Gaston Caen had been a pretext, not a motive, and regardless none if it would have come to pass if I'd not spared William's life in Summerholm that fateful night. Still, for all I would not quibble over the Liesse Rebellion I was less pleased about what Cordelia was keeping silence over.

"Once silent is reluctance, or mistake," I said. "Twice is a lie of omission."

"I own an empire's worth of secrets, Black Queen," the First Prince said. "And so very few of them are fair to behold."

Which might just be true but was no more an answer for it.

"Lake Artoise," I flatly said.

"A weapon to wield against the Enemy," Hasenbach reluctantly. "Should all else fail."

My eyes narrowed. It'd been in the lake, what she was talking about, because even though Vivienne's people had failed to penetrate Proceran operations there they'd at least confirmed there'd been ships and dredging involved. The Order of the Red Lion as well, and in numbers too great for them to be a mere scrying relay. But if she had in her hands a weapon that could give the Dead King pause – which it actually wouldn't, from what I knew of the King of Death, but that was besides the point – then Procer was not in so dire a situation as she'd implied. *Unless it's not functional*, I thought. *Unless she needs to build something or arrange rituals*.

"There's consequences to using armaments like those," I said. "And I don't mean in a moral sense, either. High stakes and a single point of failure are to Named like honey to flies. Heroes moreso than villains, but even they get to have the wind in their sails sometimes."

"It is not something I would use lightly," the First Prince said. "Or at all, if I can avoid it."

"But you won't burn it until the Dead King's been driven back either," I grunted. "You've read the Accords, Hasenbach. Ensuring no one ever has their hands on a lever that opens a Greater Breach of brutalizes the souls of an entire city is exactly what they're *for*."

"And should the Liesse Accords be signed and enforced, I will gladly let you destroy every last trace of that weapon," the blonde princess replied. "Yet until Keter has been sealed or the Dead King destroyed, I cannot justify tossing away the sole tool at my disposal that could possibly turn the tide."

Frustration spiked in me, but she was not being unreasonable. I'd been raised in the shade of a royal palace built from stones taken from a flying fortress brought down, taught from the moment I'd had a Name that massive rituals and grand artefacts always failed in the end, and still I'd sided with Malicia near the end of the Folly. The dead were already dead, I'd thought, and if from that tragedy peace could be forged then I'd shoulder the hatred of my own people and do what I must. It would have been, I now recognize, a terrible mistake. My father's handling of the situation remained singularly botched but given the Intercessor's involvement that was perhaps not entirely his fault. Cordelia Hasenbach was not Named, did not come from a people who held them in high esteem or deeply studied their lore. And while she might have matched wits with Malicia for years with more than a few successes to her name, it had been a very different sort of game. I could not be angry at her making a mistake I had also made while laden with advantages she was not.

"Having a weapon like that carries risks in ways you have not been taught to understand," I said, forcing patience. "Especially in a situation thick with Named, like any war with Keter will be. This isn't won with a flying fortress, Hasenbach, it's won with a coalition binding the east and west."

"And I will do everything in my power to see that coalition assembled and bound by treaties," the First Prince said. "Yet I cannot disarm when those alliances are still wind, no ink has touched the parchment for treaties and the Dead mass to the north in numbers beyond reason."

"When Callow joins the Grand Alliance," I said, "and the Accords begin accruing signatories; will you then agree to torching whatever the Hells you dredged up?"

I'd be willing to cough up the goblinfire myself, if that was what it took. And still she hesitated.

"Merciless Gods," I said. "What is it that you even got your hands on? Tell me it's not a Hell Egg, Hasenbach. It'd be utter lunacy to send a demon after the great mage ever born to Calernia, dead or not."

"It is not," the blue-eyed royal stiffly replied. "I will speak no more to the nature of it, save that it holds no truck with Below."

It was probably an angel, then, I grimly thought. Some not-corpse like the one the Lone Swordsman had leaned on in Liesse to bring down Contrition, and later Diabolist to create her gate-maker. The Choirs were forever fixed, the way Masego told it, so there could be no such thing as an angel's corpse – or at least there'd been no real precedent for it, and not for lack of Praesi trying – but one's death would still leave marks. And something to use,

if you knew how. It'd still need a hero though, I suspected, or at least a massive number of priests capable of using Light. One was easier for the First Prince of Procer to get her hands on, especially now that the House of Light's leadership had been discredited and was likely undergoing a through purge. Who would dare argue with Hasenbach now, if she gave priests orders? *I need to speak with Masego*, I grimly thought. I wasn't even sure what such a weapon would do, practically speaking. Would the Choir it had belonged to change the effect? Contrition had been the writ of corpse and Named both, when the Hashmallim were called down at First Llesse.

So what would happen if the corpse was from one of the Ophanim or the Seraphim? Somehow I doubted it would be as simple as calling down a great storm of Light on the enemy. This was a mistake, no matter how I looked at it, but then if there was one thing that today had made very clear it was that Cordelia Hasenbach was afraid. She was afraid enough for the Principate that she'd knelt to a woman she considered a brutal murderous warlord to beg for help, and a few moments of private conversation on a balcony weren't going to magically fix this. It was frustrating as Hells, considering that not so long ago she'd been on her knees begging for my help, but throwing around ultimatums on the first day of talks wasn't going to accomplish anything – save maybe mark me as exactly the kind of tyrant they'd all feared I would be. And still part of me was quietly furious at the notion that I'd have to allow a mistake to keep going right under my eyes because it would be too heavy-handed of me to force the issue. It was not a coincidence, I'd admit, that so much of Black's teachings still resonated with me.

No matter what Vivienne said, Below was always going to be the banner I raised. There wasn't enough give in me for it to be any other way. If I couldn't push without blowing on the house of cards that the Accords still was, then I'd have to try pulling instead. Time to start showing the cards I'd been hiding up my sleeve.

"You don't believe we can win this war conventionally," I said. "Yet we can, Hasenbach. I have made pact with the Kingdom Under."

"The resumption of arms sales will help, though Procer will need to borrow heavily to afford them," the First Prince acknowledged.

"That's part of it," I said. "More practical is that I have oaths the Kingdom Under will launch offensives on every front to seize all underground territory of the Dead King if a sufficient force is gathered to war against him above."

Cordelia Hasenbach went still.

"In addition," I continued, "arrangements have been made as to the supply of armaments and foodstuffs. Any force engaged in

warfare against Keter will see steel provided at two tenths of the usual price, and foodstuffs at cost. Loans offers will be extended to the Principate, though I'm afraid they refused to do the same for the Dominion. Too likely to be unable to repay, I'm told."

"You do not jest," the First Prince croaked, sounding dry-mouthed.

"I wouldn't take the loans, they offer pretty cutthroat terms," I said. "We might be able to strongarm Mercantis instead, if the entire coalition brings pressure. They live and die on trade, and we have everybody but the League at the table."

"The dwarves would use us as their own fantassins," Cordelia realized, eyes narrowing. "Tying down the forces of the Hidden Horror above-ground as they strike below. Only we would emerge in their debt instead of owed."

I didn't deny it, as it was essentially true.

"If their advance is successful all the way to Keter, a siege of the city becomes feasible," I told her. "Our supply lines would be underground and untouchable, so long as we have the coin. I'd be willing to endorse the creation of a Grand Alliance treasury for the duration of the war against the Dead King, and to provide grain for your principalities from Callow granaries on loan – with interest on the value of the goods, I'm not a saint."

"The Kingdom Under would not make such offers without a prince, Black Queen," the blue-eyed princess said. "What did you offer in return?"

"The Everdark," I said.

The bluntness of the answer took her aback.

"I believed you to be allied with the drow," the First Prince said, grown wary.

"I am," I said. "This was done in the name of their goddesses, the bargain struck with the dwarf Named known as the Herald of the Deeps."

"They have submitted to the Kingdom Under?" Cordelia asked.

I almost laughed at that.

"No, they have not," I replied, smiling thinly. "The Everdark is *empty*."

Cordelia Hasenbach was not slow of wits, and so she understood the implication quick enough.

"They are marching against the Kingdom of the Dead," she said, almost breathlessly.

"All of them," I agreed. "The entire Empire Ever Dark is marching on the Dead King's back, led by Sve Noc themselves, and I believe he still has *no idea*."

ruduen

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

Go vote!

And here I thought we had already gotten all of the details of that little deal. It sounds like there's quite a bit more to things that meets the eye.

ruduen

Looks like I used the wrong link. Vote here instead!

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

[*Liliet*](#)

bless your heart

caoimhinh

"Details will be provided as and when the plot requires", I'm sure there's a trope out there that encompasses this concept. We are likely to find out more of that deal even when the final attack is being launched.

Same as with the Liesse Accords, given that Amadeus and Cat's debate about them (which is the most enlightening conversation about the Accords we have so far) didn't cover all the points because Black hadn't read it all; and points will need to be added and removed when other countries are brought to sign.

Those unrevealed details will present us quite a few good surprises, interesting conversations and even plot twists in the future, I'm sure of it.

mavant

I assume you're thinking of <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/UnspokenPlanGuarantee>

Ultimate_Procrastinator

I believe that would be the [Unspoken Plan Guarantee](#), with some conservation of detail thrown in

James G.

Unspoken Plan Guarantee?

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/UnspokenPlanGuarantee>

KageLupus

Eh. I don't think that the details revealed here are really all that shocking or important, in the grand scheme of things. Sure, knowing more about what the Dwarves are providing is cool, but how cheap the steel and food is going to be wasn't really something I was staying up at night thinking about.

The biggest part of the deal is that it exists and that the Dwarves are willing to make war on Keter underground. That frees up the Alliance to only worry about things topside, which is way better than they have had it during the various sieges.

And the real kicker here is that Cordelia gets to see exactly how much Cat has been planning on bringing war to Keter. It is not just sidling into the Grand Alliance and then joining them in the fight. She has singlehandedly also gotten two extra armies to join in the battle, one of which might be a surprise and is led by a pair of goddesses, and she also secured a supply train for the whole thing.

Cat has done more for the war effort before she was ever a part of it than Cordelia and the Grand Alliance could ever hope to accomplish.

Andrew Mitchell

> Cat has done more for the war effort before she was ever a part of it than Cordelia and the Grand Alliance could ever hope to accomplish.

Well said.

NerfContessa

Agreed.

Not to mention the fact that the dwarves have weaponry 3xcellently suited to kill large numbers, or burn away lots of undead, whichever it is they choose.

Lets hope this does not turn into a crossed double crossed war...

Jeffery Wells

I honestly thought that was pretty clear after Cat's meeting with the Herald after Sve Noc's apotheosis. The drow army is only 50k of its warriors, there are hundreds of thousands more, and they had agreed to leave the Everdark immediately. The rest of the drow and most of Sve Noc are parked in the hills above where they lived below ground, preparing for the assault in Keter. Remember too that the two crows are just a sliver of Sve Noc, the rest is with their people.

copaceticcockroach

Typo Thread:

"I'd we willing to endorse_"

-I'd be willing to endorse_

caoimhinh

Typos found:

1. Rozala dawn well knew => Rozala damn well knew
2. if she opened her mouth to compared => compare
3. It genuinely might have => I genuinely might have
4. I would have been much, much worse => It would have been much, much worse
5. for you purposes => for your purposes
6. none if it => none of it
7. Hasenbach reluctantly. => Hasenbach reluctantly said/ answered
8. of brutalizes the souls => or brutalizes the souls
9. the great mage ever born to Calernia => the greatest mage ever born to Calernia
10. a through purge => a thorough purge
11. steel provided at two tenths of the usual price, and foodstuffs at cost ~> at two-tenths of the usual price and foodstuffs at no cost(?)
12. offers without a prince => offers without a price

Morgenstern

Does "no cost", in financial terms, mean "(no extra costs, but) covering expenditures"?

(Bc. foodstuffs "at cost" means just that: They will give them away for recompensation of the expenditures they themselves have accrued (to create, preserve, transport(...?)) those foodstuffs.

They're not giving them as gifts, essentially; everyone will have to pay what the Kingdom Under itself would pay, so to speak.)

caoimhinh

I had that doubt, that's why I put the (?) on that possible typo.

At least the foodstuff of the Drow is provided by Dwarves completely free, as was stated by Catherine dozens of chapters ago. But yeah, it would be weird if they gave the food free to the rest of the coalition.

caoimhinh

The Dead King when he finds the entirety of the Empire Ever Dark marching against him, as he was about to get a victory over Proceran forces (and probably as night falls, to make a stark contrast to the heroic arrival of ~~Gandalf~~Pilgrim:



edrey

i am pretty sure he already found out, after that divination magic at Liese along with the bard plan, on the other hand i just thinking why not push the night to the chain of hunger, that truly would surprise the DK

caoimhinh

He should already know about the Drow marching with Cat, since he saw them fighting in the Princes' Graveyard and was temporarily grasped by Sve Noc.

However, he shouldn't know *the degree* of investment the Drow have in this conflict; as far as he knows Catherine struck a bargain to have a few tens of thousands of Drow with her, he must suspect there's more to it, but at this point he should not be aware that *the entirety of the Drow Species* is marching against him. That's the big surprise for him.

Tsura

Wouldn't he not know that because Masego destroyed that fragment or something? I don't remember the exact details but I thought they made a point that the Dead King wouldn't get any of the knowledge the fragment had gained while possessing Masego

caoimhinh

Neshamah passed his knowledge. If you read again that part, there's a few paragraphs near the end where it's shown that the spell he used to kill Indrani also contained the knowledge. Then he passed it on a construct to the Skein and destroyed the Skein to send the knowledge back to his main body.

[weakman54](#)

How would that help though? The CoH doesn't seem like a people that would be open for talks, and even if he knows about the drow, they would still be pressure on his back that was not there before. Couple that with the massing dwarven forces from below and you have an almost full encirclement. Entirely complete if you count the CoH as hostile, even if they wouldn't follow the others orders

edrey

well, if they use enough night to satiate the hunger and grow them into brainless ancient ones, controlling them is still a possibility

[Liliet](#)

He was looking for Bard, and Bard wasn't there in the Everdark 😊

Big Brother

The Dwarves, the Drow and all the Surface Nations of Calernia marching on the Dead King. The 11th Crusade in all but name, a union of peoples Above and Below to end the greatest threat to the living.

Sean Panajotovic

well... except for Praes and the Titanomachy. And the Free Cities haven't officially declared their position yet.

Mental Mouse

Praes may be dragooned into it. And the Titanomachy might be persuaded by two of their stalwart trainees...

Agent J

Praes is there if you count Amadeus and the Legions-in-Exile.

konstantinvoncarstein

The Last Alliance of (Dark) Elves, Men and Dwarves

Raved Thrad

If Neshamah starts waving around a beringed hand, then we know how his doom will be wrought.

Javvies

The Drow of the Guideverse have nothing to do with the Elves of the Guideverse.

konstantinvoncarstein

I know, but Catherine noted herself that the Drows are sometimes called Dark Elves while being very different from « true » elves. Do the joke works.

konstantinvoncarstein

*so

Death Knight

I think those racist, xenophobically genocidal assholes in the Bloom will join the Alliance if and when they learn that almost every nation in Calernia is marching on Keter with the same Story that ended Triumphant at their back.

Vengeance for the capture and death of the Spellblade.

Hmm, wonder of Cat (or Hanno and Antigone most likely) can convince the Titans to join up as well? If they can the Dead King is properly fucked I'd say.

We've seen the devastation the Witch could bring to bare and she's relies on her aspect to force the working. So, how much power could the oldest and most powerful Named Titan spellsinger bring to bare? Remember, EE said that of the top 5 sorcerers in the Land, the number three has never been

shown onscreen. This individual can only be a Titan since no other character fits the bill. Likely this Titan was Antigone's teacher.

Whoowhee Book 6 gone be lit af boi!

sutortyrannus

You know, while I'm hoping that that they do join, I gained new perspective on the relations between Procer and the Titanomachy once I learned that the Gigantes had been keeping them as slaves. Puts the Humbling of Titans in far more positive light.

I agree though – number 3 on the list is probably a spellsinger.

mavant

Could you point me to that top-5-sorcerers comment? Or, who are the ones of the 5 that we DO know?

Agent J

Dead King. Some elf. Wekesa.

[sivarajan](#)

reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/comments/bd8dxz

[sivarajan](#)

reddit.com/r/PracticalGuideToEvil/comments/bd8dxz/
best_mages_on_calernia/ekx48b0

konstantinvoncarstein

The problem if the Elves join the Alliance is that the Deoraithe will not accept it.

Quite Possibly A Cat

All you would need to get the Elves to accept is a few fertility miracles.

"Our priests have a miracle for immaculate conception! We can clear your fertility problems right up."

Which I guess would mean that Good takes a page out of Evil's guidebook and is trading babies for firepower.

[Javvies](#)

Let's not call it a Crusade.

First, that has religious implications that most of the involved parties would object to.

Second, and possibly more important, the Story behind Crusades – especially ones against the Dead King – is that they fail. The only Crusades that haven't been massive failures are probably 1 and 2 ... and since I think 1 might have been trying to stop Triumphant while 2 was the rebellion ... though we don't actually have much information on them. Crusades 3 and 4 got crushed so hard by one of the Praesi Dread Emperor Terribilis's that they decided they weren't going after Praes anymore and decided to send the next 5 against the Dead King ... and they all failed miserably, I'm not sure any of them even got to the gates of Keter. And, well, the 10th Crusade has done even worse.

[Liliet](#)

Oh it's still the Tenth one. Just... redirected 9.9

Shveiran

Is it though? It has changed target, gained a new member (the Empire Ever Dark) previously uninvolved, and now include either half or all the previous targets. You can't really shake it up more than this.

Not to mention, it was previously a faction fo Good aligned nations and now include two to three powers sworn to Below. Calling it the Tenth Crusade is not quite squinting and more like blindfolding yourself and going for a spin.

Zgggt

I mean, as far as Crusades go, it isn't just a regular one, it's the (by far) largest and deadliest one. Remember how Black explained to Cat that humans on the continent are basically barbarians compared to the much stronger races like the Kingdom Under or places further away? Just the dwarves probably bring more firepower to the table than has been available since Triumphant, there is a case that this is also true for the Drow.

Cat has organized the deadliest force on Calernia, possibly the most of all times. Of course, it won't help her from the stabs in the back that are expected to come, but it does put more people between her and the Dead King, so hooray for relative safety!

Someguy

>"All of them," I agreed. "The entire Empire Ever Dark is marching on the Dead King's back, led by Sve Noc themselves, and I believe he still has no idea."

Dammit Cat! You should know better! The moment you speak it, he now knows or will find out!

[filtern](#)

Weigh the risk of him finding out against the risk of Hasenbach using her weapon and I think you'll find it a worthy trade.

Oshi

It's not much of a risk. Sve Noc still cloaks them and at least for now the Dead King can't see into the heart of Procer without a lot of friggin risk. Way to many choirs and what not ready to fuck him up.

Shveiran

True, yet the point is that that now the narrative will ensure he has a response whether or not he found out, because a revealed plan cannot unfold smoothly... where would the twist be, if things went according to plan?

Then again, this being Cat, she could point out that since NO ONE expects it to work smoothly because of that trope, it going smoothly would be precisely the most unpredictable twist ever.

Oshi

But a conventional alliance not one heralded by powers on High. No Hero king to lead a crusade but an alliance of many to end a threat. A different story all together and one that's a lot harder to "not lose" against. If Keter falls and is cleansed the Dead King will survive but he will lose his foothold on Creation. It will be bloody but would be a change deep and true. Cat's spent a lot of time making sure it works out that way. A story to bind them all 🤪

JJR

You say this, but what if he asks to sign onto the Liesse Accords?

There's also that thing he learned about Bard which, being some sort of dark secret, is guaranteed to blow up at the worst time.

konstantinvoncarstein

Concerning the DK and the Accords, it was already discussed. The conclusion was that it would be a very big mistake.

Sparsebeard

Personally, I think the biggest mistake would be to push him to far beyond his bottom line.

I mean, it's one thing to diminish him, but if you push him into a corner... It isn't a huge assumption to think that he's got a few cards in his sleeves that could make sure that everybody loses...

Kind of the same way that you can't really push a nuclear power too far in our world.

Still, pushing the DK to the point of mutually assured destruction where he HAS to sign the accords (and perhaps a separate a treaty with reparations and stuff before that) would already be a huge victory.

[Javvies](#)

Except the Dead King has no incentive to follow the rules. The enforcement mechanism is more or less his status quo.

All letting him join the Accords/Alliance does is kick the can down the road. And time is on his side – he can afford to wait for the urgency of the threat he poses to fade. Remember his offer to give Cat a decade or a century of peace? It's a poison pill.

He can afford to play a game that his next move won't happen in hundreds of years. That is, he can afford to wait until every mortal currently alive is dead and every mortal who ever knew them is also dead.

Also ... I'm pretty sure letting him sign up would violate the deal with the Dwarves. And that's a tremendously bad thing.

Sparsebeard

Having the mortals pay every price (even the destruction of their nations and peoples) is pretty much what the Saint (and perhaps Bard) wanted though.

I mean, since every loss is permanent to the DK, it's in his own interest to accept a deal that would ensure his own survival (and after that to maintain the status quo).

And yeah diminish him enough that he can't threaten the whole of Calernia without insuring his own doom is

probably a good idea. Pushing him to believe that desperate methods are warranted since he'll be destroyed anyways is probably not a good idea (that's how you get demons, hell gates and other WMDs).

Javvies

Except magical WMDs in the hands of a Villain are basically Hero-fodder.

Bard's goal was to set the Dead King up to suffer the fate of Triumphant (crushing victory and total conquest, only for everything to fall apart and be destroyed in short order).

Destroying the Dead King is the goal of Heroes like Tariq.

Cat will settle for removing his foothold on Creation and fortifying the permanent Hellgate to Serenity on the Creation side.

Invading Serenity is basically a nonstarter, and Cat knows it ... which is why she won't do it.

Shveiran

I agree in principle, but I think you are not factoring in how Neshamah works. The guy is all about contingencies and playing it safe, he is centered about his own survival. Triumphant was the kind of Villain that brought the Tower down on her slayers, but I don't think the DK would.

Maybe as an ultimatum to force people NOT to slay him, I guess; you know, a dead-man switch. But not out of spite. He'd see no point in it, I don't think.

Sparsebeard

Also, there isn't much to support your claim that the DK wouldn't follow that rules, he seemed to be a stickler for respecting deals in fact.

Sure the 100 years deal was bad, but not because of any perceived untrustworthiness but rather because it would leave him undamaged to fight at a later date.

A deal lasting "forever" on the other hand could insure the perenity af the agreement,

Javvies

Thing is, the Accords don't stop warfare, and aren't intended to. They're primarily rules of engagement for Named.

The Dead King being allowed to become a signatory would mean allowing him continuous active involvement with the rest of Calernia. And lessened capacity on behalf of the rest of Calernia to stop him from doing things they don't want him doing.

The Dead King cannot be allowed to remain an active player in Calernia and Calernian affairs. That's an even less acceptable outcome than Malicia remaining in power over Praes.

mavant

I mean... Admittedly the whole 'brainwashed nation worshipping me as a god' thing is a bit icky. But if the Dead King were willing to make sufficiently binding oaths (maybe they could be enforced with Fae power?) then his powerset could be an extraordinary force for the betterment of Calernia. No thinking being need ever perform manual labor again! With zombie automation we could leapfrog past all the technological development the gnomes have been suppressing.

Shveiran

The Liesse Accords are about limiting Named methods. The Dead King needs not to abuse them in order to drown the world in dead soldiers. There is literally nothing to gain from involving him, it solves no issues, and it legitimize a country that regularly raids its neighbors to harvest people.

...Why? Just... why?

konstantinvoncarstein

What if he doesn't sign? If he moves, everyone attacks him. If he signs, he win an access to Cardinal and all the future Named and powerful of the continent. How is this good?

Clever dick

Fuck the Liesse Accords, I want the DK to petition to join the Grand Alliance.

I mean, there's already precedent for Villains joining...

Insanenoodlyguy

the Accords themselves will ensure that he can't join. And nobody's going to trust the world where the dead King

promises to be a good Ally. Especially not when getting him will cause pretty much everyone to walk, not just cat.

Quite Possibly A Cat

Hopefully they'll include rules about Necromancy and undead rulers. In particular

- 1) No turning people into undead slaves en masse. <== DKs kingdom a runs on this.
- 2) No undead rulers.

Plus Named aren't going to be allowed to rule.

Javvies

The no-Named rulership clause is most likely going to get negotiated away.

Remember, Amadeus made a solid case for needing a Named Dread Emperor of Praes to forestall a Secret Emperor.

Also, the Dominion has a collective fetish for their Named founders and descendants ... who themselves have an above average incidence of Named.

Besides, there's the problem of underling/support Names/Named and military leadership Names/Named (ie, Commander, Named generals) and at what point does delegated authority or influence cross over into ruling.

laguz24

Believe me he already probably knows or at the very least has a contingency plan in the works.

superkeaton

Lotta mistakes in this one, but still cool. I'm wildly unsurprised that Hasenbach's chesswork lead to the complete fucking botch that was Akua's Folley.

Oshi

We've known about the silver for a long time now. Malicia told us about it since she was the one who let it happen. I was just surprised she admitted to it.

Liliet

Tit for tat. Cat made a good point about not leaving Kairos to bring that up.

Zarquon

Oh that's a fatal flaw right there!

The Dead King absolutely, certainly, definitely knows or will know that the Empire Ever Dark is marching on him. And Sve Noc. Since this was revealed early, then the surprise is that Catherine is wrong. If this is to work, this would not be revealed to the readers until all hope is lost and suddenly they arrive.

Sve Noc basically just got the ultimate death flag.

The Dead King knows.

Matthew

Cat may have just been selling this to Cordelia. Cat has to know that the Dead King would find out that Cat has Drow with her.

Insanenoodlyguy

He had a fight with the crow twins. He absolutely knows there's drow. What he doesn't necessarily know, is the number. This could be a surprise because it is not a make-or-break situation, he knows there's drow he'll prepare for drow. But there will be an inconveniently large number that actually arrive. That's what keeps this from being ruined. This surprise will not be the difference between defeat or Victory either way. It might be a huge pain in the ass for him though. And multiple pains in the asses can add up, which is what cat is going for.

Quite Possibly A Cat

A handful of mighty and two god slivers is one thing.

A thousand Mighty and two full gods is a completely different thing.

[TeK](#)

Sometimes surprise is that there is no surprise. Don't underestimate EE

mavant

Ah, fair point. The metagame of storytelling changes when you can assume your readership already knows the tropes.

Shveiran

...But the readers already knew. Nothing has changed in that regard.

ICSM

This. We all already knew the drow were marching to Keter with Sve Noc. It was part of the bargain with the dwarf Named. Nothing new was revealed to us, only to Cordelia.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine's plan doesn't actually rest on him not knowing, she damn well knows better than that.

mavant

I'm not sure that's a death flag for Sve Noc (unless you just meant that as a pun). But I'll certainly agree that DK is going to end up being ready for them.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> DK is going to end up being ready for them.

... it's just not going to help him.

Albatross

Man, I just don't see what Callow gets out of this that makes it worth the risk that Procer will immediately betray them, or that Praes will screw them over while this is happening. I get she's getting her Accords but I'm begging you Cat, take war reps! take humiliate! Make them release nations, anything!

[TeK](#)

Why would Procer betray them, much less immediately? You have a skewed perception of them, somehow. Besides, she doesn't have a warscore to ask all that, she didn't occupy any provinces, just won a few battles.

Besides, she's using the rest of the war score on "make a coalition" option, that would've been abused by EU4 players too much.

Novice

I recognize a fellow EU4 player when I see one. But I disagree with reparations being laden this early in the war. It will immediately have an impact on the already shaky alliance they're trying to forge. To use HOI terminology, she has to wait for the peace conference to start after the war.

Cicero

Callow gets to survive, independent, and gets to have the massive war fought on someone else's territory.

At this point Callow thinks that is a decent deal. Not great, but not terrible.

Shveiran

And yet Callow bleeds its young populace in another war; all this gets Callow is removing the risk of cities being sacked unless the campaign is a failure, but that isn't that much of a gain considering the army was always small enough a big battle was most it could do anyhow, and thus defeat would always have lead to heavy strategic loss.

After the Rebellion, the Courts, Liesse the Second, the Crusade, the mess in Iserre... this is not a small thing. Callow doesn't have the Principate populace, or even Praes'. Recovering will take far longer. Perhaps terrible would be too hard, but they are still getting the short end of the stick. Especially for someone that is willingly sticking their hands in the fire for their enemies' sake. And are bringing in not one but two major allies no one else even thought could be part of the war. That no one is sweetening the deal, even now, not even with future promises, is disappointing.

Insanenoodlyguy

Three. Be it with Amadeus on the throne or not, even if the accords arent signed you can bet the black Queen is going to have Praes involved before its done.

[Liliet](#)

– Rozala has already sworn an oath to rise in rebellion if Procer fucks Callow over YET AGAIN on the heels of this. That's no small thing;

– at that, HOW EXACTLY will Procer fuck Callow over. It's going to be their armies bleeding the most, and their treasuries and resorces;

– Callow gets a massive narrative advantage for being the good guy who saves everyone, and while it sure hasn't helped previous Good Kings, they've got Catherine in charge right now, and she knows damn well how to work these things;

– it sets a precedent for Good/Evil cooperation that will echo through the continent's stories going forward, and given its neighbourly relationship with Praes, Callow's damn well going to benefit from that.

Shveiran

These are valid points, but I'd point out this all rests on Cat surviving the war.

Now, sure, I don't think she is very likely to end up dead, but if she was Callos would be fucked. In ten to twenty years, Procer has recovered through its larger populace and wealth, while Callos is still trying to recover the cities Summer and Diabolist nuked out of existence.

Proceran ambition is another popular story, and if Malanza was to die as well (which is much more likely) her vow is not a shield.

I'm just saying, most of the characters are not aware Narrative is a thing. Which suggests they know the deal is unbalanced and that they are not in a hurry to fix it.

Mental Mouse

> if Malanza was to die as well (which is much more likely) her vow is not a shield.

I'm not so sure about that... remember that sword she left behind.

caoimhinh

Yet that's still not a shield, but a weapon for the Malanza descendants to rise in rebellion if Procer goes back on their end of the deal.

That's a vengeance/retaliation, not prevention. And it still doesn't mean that the Malanza who picks up the sword will be victorious or successful.

Insanenoodlyguy

For starters if he takes all of Procer Callos is next. Oh, not soon. Maybe not in Cats lifetime. But make no mistake, its doomed if Procer is simply left to die. Even her nuclear option is that she comes back from the east as a conqueror that they have no choice but to kneel too. Procer the nation dies yes but procer the people still need to survive.

Andrew Mitchell

> For starters if he takes all of Procer Callos is next. Oh, not soon. Maybe not in Cats lifetime. But make no mistake, its doomed if Procer is simply left to die.

Exactly. Callos, and the rest of Calernia, need a permanent solution to the Dead King.

Thanatoss

Sooo... now Cordelia simply must fall in love with Cat and forgive all her "crimes". I see no other way around it.
Btw. I just noticed (no idea why so late in the story) that if you want to describe whole story/all actions of Cat with one word it would be: Patriotic. Hmm it doesn't look like this from the first glance... but all she does she does for Callow, at all costs.

caoimhinh

Yep, many of the most influential characters are very patriotic, though each in a different way.

Catherine, Amadeus, and Cordelia are patriotic people, as they want what is better for their nations and took power because they thought that was the best way to get things done. Anaxares is a counter-example, as a patriotic person that doesn't want things changed (though he was brainwashed and constantly threatened with death), plus he was forced into the position he is.

Others like Malicia, Akua, and the Elves are *nationalists* instead, with a fierce pride even in the failures of their cultures, so instead of fixing those they embrace that and seize power for themselves to be the rulers of the nation they take pride in.

Sve Noc are sort of a counter-example, as nationalists who took control of their nation for the sake of survival, but are now so engrained with the position of ruling the Drow that they won't allow to let go of power, they became goddesses, after all; Sve Noc also started to see the failings in what the Drow had become, and are currently taking steps towards betterment, using Catherine for it since they admitted they didn't have the perspective for it.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

It's going to be weird for Cat in the future, when she looks at the newer generations of Drow who were born on the surface, following a set of rules and guidelines that she drafted.

caoimhinh

I think she will smile and be proud of them.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

She gave legitimacy to rap battles as tools for political debates.

Shveiran

The difference between patriots and nationalists is VERY subjective, and even within the guidelines you have adopted many could disagree about who should fall on which side of the line.

What is a fundamental part of one's culture, and what is a failed tradition that has lost both meaning and use? That is a judgment call, not something we can measure and compare objectively.

[sivarajan](#)

Nationalists are patriots we don't like.

[sivarajan](#)

Woe on us all, but if the Gods demanded my home be ashes then the Gods would burn.

edrey

cat will get betrayed, she should already know that, and the drow attacked by sun type magic by everyone the DK, dwarves, spellsingers and what not.

off topic, but someone know if cat added new pieces to her cloak or she have the saint body or more important her aspects with her?

caoimhinh

It wasn't said nor shown. So only future chapters will tell.

Shveiran

Considering how things went down, I seriously doubt Cat went corpse-robbing in that instance.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Here, you have Cordelia making alliances and treaties with the greatest nations of Man.

There, you have Cat fucking sending *everyone else* to the doorstep of the Dead King.

The final battle will probably somehow manage to include a few giants to make it so every sapient race on the continent is tearing down Keter.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I just realized, if Cordelia can be called Warden of the West, Cat should straight up be called the Warden.

[Liliet](#)

Warden of the East – even the drow are on the eastern side of the continent, relatively! If I remember right!

Fayhem

Given that “warden” is a title that can mean “guardian” but can also equally well mean “person in charge of a prison”, I would actually propose that Cat be titled Warden of the Dead. Because she’s the person who’s going to be most responsible for getting DK bottled up (AKA imprisoned) in the Serenity, and the drow she’s the high priestess of will be in charge of keeping him there since the plan is basically to park them in Keter and make Sephirah the new home of the drow.

caoimhinh

Warden of Evil or Warden of the Dark XD

hakureireimu

I don’t get how the epigraph relates to this chapter.

caoimhinh

Well, epigraphs don’t *always* relate to the chapter.

That said, it could be that it’s related to Catherine telling Cordelia about the Drow and Dwarves, as maybe the Dead King could find out. Maybe the presence of Sve Noc and two Heroes sworn to Choirs of angels protect the city from scrying, maybe not.

Maybe Cordelia will proceed to make plans with her council, speak about this and the knowledge will be out as Malicia has spies in Procer and she could tell about it to the Dead King.

As the Epigraph said: *difficult to tell if a mistake was in fact made.*

Novice

I believe it pertains to the Dead King: it doesn’t matter how perfectly the DK played his schemes in the past or how he will play his stratagems in the future, everybody and their goats are going for his permanent end.

Liliet

It might be related to Catherine and Cordelia revealing their dirty secrets to each other.

Javvies

So ... Cordelia believes her object I’d not of Below, so it’s not some entombed ancient Villain or a Hell Egg.

So ... that leaves something from Above (trapped Angel or where one died) ... or something from the Mavians/Mavian Fae.

Cordelia ... you have no room to complain about Cat considering a deal with the Dead King after you refused her offers. Well, you can complain, there's just no weight out legitimacy behind them. Especially since she never actually made a deal. And has since arranged the groundwork for a massive coalition against the Dead King.

Aston Whiteman

Gonna be a nuclear weapon..

Tom

An actual nuke misplaced by the gnomes, maybe? 😊

Quite Possibly A Cat

That wouldn't turn the tide of battle. Now if it was a practical guide to building nukes it would.

Ironically, a guide to nuke making wouldn't run afoul of "no single failure point" and "no grand artifacts"

"Not an artifact. Not a single failure point. We've made dozens, and have another hundred in the production lines." Hell it might even be legal under the Accords. "This is a completely conventional, non-alchemic, non-magic weapon with no association with Above or Below. " The only downside would be gnomes.

Shveiran

Kind of a big downside, though

Natman717

Oh damn, how did I never realize the Drow weren't just a tiny people. I thought the entire species was with Cat... I feel stupid now.

[Sugar Roll](#)

Hooo boy. Now, Cat reveals her deal with the dwarves and I love it. This is exactly what they need to have a fighting chance against the Dead King.

Now, if Praes and the League joins the party, the continent can go all in on Neshamah.

Sparsebeard

Well, there are still, the Chain of Hunger, the Bloom, the Titanomachy, Mercantis, the Matrons, Court(s?) of Arcadia and others I might have forgotten.

Liliet

Pretty sure that's all of them, unless you start counting like Daione and the Clans as separate from their patron nations.

Javvies

The Elves occupying the Golden Bloom aren't getting involved.

I'm pretty sure they've fucked off to Arcadia again. But they're an enemy as far as Cat is concerned, thanks to the Deoraithe. And, because, well, they're racist genocidal assholes who kill any non Hero that gets too close to the Golden Bloom's borders.

Daniel Hernandez

Theres no way the Golden Bloom wont make a cameo. The Spellblade was a prince. If there is any story Cat can make good on, it's making sure the King gets his due for stealing his son.

frolamiz

That depend. Remember, Cat still has the spellblade's corpse in her pocket, end she may use it as a bargaining chip to negotiate with them.

Or you know, the bard could just go and have a drink with her old buddy the Forever King and inadvertently let slip where he could get back his son's corpse.

Fayhem

> But [the Elves are] an enemy as far as Cat is concerned, thanks to the Deoraithe.

If Cat got a hold of the info that Bard mentioned a while ago about how the asshole-elves on Calernia are unable to reproduce on account of their extreme assholiness making their trees sterile (elf-on-elf reproduction is weird apparently), she might be able to sell the Deoraithe on the prospect of involving the elves against Keter. Because each and every battle casualty the elves took would be a permanent reduction of the elves' ability to resist the Deoraithe when they're finally ready to take back their home.

Of course, by the same token, getting the elves involved in a major war would probably be borderline impossible since they'd vastly rather just nope out of creation than spill a single precious drop of elven blood. Much less the bucketloads that warring on the Dead King would probably entail.

Javvies

You misunderstand the nature of the Calernian Elven sterility.

The Elves of the Golden Bloom can't have children anymore because they're cursed.

They're cursed by land and forest of the Golden Bloom itself because they committed genocide against the ancient Deoraithe who were the original inhabitants of the Golden Bloom. The Land (and the Forest) was (and still is) decidedly displeased about that. So are the Deoraithe.

Fayhem

> You misunderstand the nature of the Calernian Elven sterility.

I think it would be more accurate to say I joke about the nature of the Calernian Elven sterility, because they're assholes and I don't take their problems seriously. Besides which I don't think anyone can claim to definitively understand the nature of Calernian Elven sterility, since it has never been unambiguously defined by a reliable source.

I would also note that the nature of their sterility is irrelevant to my comment, which was actually **about** the implications of their sterility rather than the nature of it.

Shveiran

HA! Called the Catming clean chat! Yay me!

On a more serious note, this is what I meant when I said that Cordelia's kneeling was just spectacle.

She made a good show of being desperate and humbled, yet how she acts now, mere moments ago?

She owns up to PART of her past mistakes, after Catherine does first, and only admits the still relevant secret after Cat calls her out on it explicitly; even then, she reveals nothing save that it is not villanous in origin.

She doesn't own up to the fact that she sent her opposition in Callow to die, accepting the risk they would parcel out Callow if victorious, despite Cat calling her out on it at the time; much

liek she doesn't own up to the fact she called her a warlord with no legitimacy while wearing a crown she pried from the cold, dead fingers of her rivals, dead in the field.

And she offers nothing, not even verbally, to back up her declarations from the previous chapter; no reparations offered to the poorer, smaller country she invaded and is now going to bleed for her people and bringing an Empire from legends of old AND the biggest power in Calernia into the war as allies; not even discussing *together* the fate of her eldritch trump card or its deployment, despite the fact that it can't be argued at this point that the Black Queen is her superior in matters of warfare and magic both; not even disclosing that secret WHEN ASKED, let alone willingly.

This is... deeply disapointing, and so very unsatisfying.

It makes the previous chapter nothing but an empty gesture, because she still takes more than she receives without feeling that's somewhat inappropriate; she still acts like she is in command of everyone, not like an equal, let alone someone that is DESPERATE FOR HELP.

She didn't even make an empty promise to back the Accords! Which she likely will for reason of her own, and not as a reward, but seriously, not even that?

Fuck you and your bad leg, Hasenbach; if all it was is posturing you could have spared us a chapter.

Sisters, what will it take?

Are the Blood and drow really going to go down in history as the only powers willing to work with Cat as soon as she stops wrecking fools? Really, murderous raven goddesses and murdehobos made rulers was too high a bar to clear? Really Hasenbach? Really?

NZPIEFACE

She still believes that Cat is just that, a villainous warlord that drove the Principate to the brink.

While she may be superior to Corderlia in matters of war and murder, Corderlia still thinks she holds the political (and moral) high ground.

This chapter is just Cat smashing both of those beliefs into the ground as far as she can.

When was the last time anyone made alliances with *both* the Drow and the Dwarves?

Javvies

I'm going to guess never.

Assuming we're ignoring the possibility that Bard/Intercessor at some point played some sort of game with both simultaneously. But I'm not sure that would or should really count anyways.

hakureireimu

Absolutely agree; Cat should not give Cordy any freebie since she doesn't deserve it.

erebus42

Come now Cordelia. It's ok to be upset but really let she who has never attempted to sell another country's land and people into death and or slavery cast the first stone.

To make their own way

In that case Cordelia does get to cast all the stones considering she was planning to do exactly none of that.

erebus42

Wasn't she though? She was basically selling Callow to the other princes to carve up among themselves which would have resulted in countless deaths and the remaining survivors under the thumb of foreign despots.

[Mental Mouse](#)

So, crossing the streams for a bit: Someone here linked me to the time-travelling horror webseries All Night Laundry a while back, and I've been binging through the back story. At [page 1875](#), I found something very relevant to our Cat's travails:

To which a commenter replied "Is that how Fate was born?". Here, I'll add "... or Providence?" Of course in this chapter, Cat's doing her best to short-circuit that loop of planning, we'll have to see how much it helps.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And that blockquote just ignored my line-break tags, but formatting aside you get the idea.

Draconic

Yes. This was the best thing Catherine could have offered to Cordelia Hasenbach. The hope of not just survival, but even victory.

Dainpdf

Now all that Cat needs is a kitchen sink to throw at Neshamah...

[Fayhem](#)

One filled with goblinfire, naturally.

Shveiran

In the Black Queen's kitchen, can there be any other sink?

[Fayhem](#)

See, now you're making me wonder if Catherine will wind up being the subject of the Calernian equivalent of Chuck Norris facts (remember that meme?). E.g., "Goblinfire is unquenchable and consumes everything utterly, without exception. That's why the Black Queen uses it to wash her hands."

Quite Possibly A Cat

So about Sve Noc. I know they technically aren't a single point of failure, but I don't think Cordelia saying "Oh, actually, I'm not getting the angel's not-corpse, I'm actually getting several thousand angel feathers would get Cat to not worry."

Also, just because the Choirs are fixed and unchanging doesn't mean that angels wouldn't be able to die. They might just do the Hilbert Hotel Shuffle whenever an angel dies.

Finally, does anyone think using an Angel's *CORPSE* against the Dead King is Bad Idea Bear?

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's been noted that unlike Demons and Devils, Angels are finite in number. Presumably when one dies, any salvageable power gets reallocated among the remaining Choir members.

[Javvies](#)

I think it was said that the Choirs themselves are static and unchanging.

I got the impression that an individual Angel can fall or be killed, but the Choir they're from subsequently autospawns a replacement Angel.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, that was my reading of it too.

[ironvale](#)

DK received a red letter.

Cordi: I really hoped we weren't forced to this.

Chapter 79: Hitch

"The crocodiles in the pit ate the condemned too quickly when starved and only nibbled when well-fed, which is why we bespelled them to be always be hungry for a little more. Thankfully they do not wear clothes, and so can still be told apart from the rest of my court."

– Dread Emperor Perfidious

The conversation did not truly resume after we returned inside.

Hasenbach was burning with the need to reassess the situation, I caught, to summon her advisors and generals and reconsider where Procer stood after the several revelations I'd dropped onto her lap. It drastically changed her nation's situation going into the negotiations, I knew that very well. Though the First Prince still needed the Grand Alliance as a whole I'd likely gone from an important ally to the single most important foreign relation of the Principate. There was no point in further kicking the hornet's nest by trying to get anything out of her before she was certain of where she stood, not that I minded. Time was on my side as much as it was on any mortal's: what I brought to the table only became more valuable the closer to the end of truce we came. Naturally, before we left the balcony I'd made it clear to Hasenbach that the affairs of the Firstborn were not to be spoken of even with her closest advisors. Sve Noc kept me out of arcane eyes and ears, but loose lips were harder to ward against and there was no doubt that Procer was currently a barrel afflicted by an army's worth of leaks. That she did not argue the matter was a sign, to my eye, that she correctly understood the stakes involved.

I got dark looks from Malanza and Brother Simon as the talks effectively stalled after we limped back to warmth and excuses were soon made for the Procerans to depart. From their point of view, I'd gone outside with the Warden of the West after she humiliated herself at my feet and returned her both troubled and boiling with the urge to leave. They might be assuming threats had been involved, which admittedly given our respective positions would be child's play to hand out. Foolish in the long view, of course, but then my people were not known to be fond of anything long save for prices. Cordelia had not willfully tugged at my conscience without reason: it was the closest thing she had to leverage on me at the moment. She'd snapped her pride over her knee to try to begin evening the scales between the two of us, which I supposed was laudable. It didn't, of course. Even the scales, or make me fonder of her on a personal level. She wasn't my friend, she'd not somehow ceased to be the same woman who'd

thrown my people to the deeps out of convenience. But that did not change the necessity of fighting back the Dead King or the perils lurking in overplaying my hand while it was still the strongest at the table. They were separate matters, and I need not like the woman to work with her.

Besides, in some ways I genuinely respected her. Often that was better than liking someone, when it came to making bargains: fondness waxed and waned, character tended to be more stable a foundation for agreements. We stayed in the hall after the three Procerans departed, Hakram and Vivienne rising as Hasenbach departed the way etiquette dictated while I did not. I wasted no time in weaving a ward of Night after they left, as I had no intention of being eavesdropped upon by the inevitable spies that'd be waiting with their ear pressed against the door.

"Whatever Hasenbach has dredged up, she can't use it yet," I bluntly told them. "It's not a Hell Egg, unless she's a much better liar than I thought and surprisingly shirt-sighted to boot. I'm leaning towards the remains of an angel at the moment."

"William needed forty-nine hours to call Contrition, but little more than that," Vivienne noted. "Though the Choir whispered many secrets to him in his dreams he did not share, and I have only the shallowest knowledge of such matters."

It was nice to see that green Named on both sides of the fence ended up mostly fumbling their way through the dark. If the Heavens had handed out some sort of manual to their champions while Below ate dust it'd be deeply unfair. On the other hand, I grimly thought, I'd not be all that surprised in such a situation to hear that Below did hand out a manual but some villain had burned all the copies to hinder the competition. I had, after all, yet to encounter a single villain who put stock in the notion of fair play.

"The Lone Swordsman was a hero in Contrition's service, treading the remains of one of their own and bringing them forth," Hakram pointed out. "It was an alignment threefold, pouring out after years of heroes being suppressed by the Carrion Lord. It seems unlikely the Principate will benefit from such factors in its own attempts at mastery."

"Hero is the heart of the matter here," I said. "The First Prince either needs one of those taking orders from her or a legion's worth of priests to make anything out of those – still speculative, so let's not get ahead of ourselves – remains."

"Would it not be, in a sense, an angel's corpse?" Vivienne suddenly asked.

I cocked my head to the side, unsure of where she was headed with this. Hakram let out a rumbling noise.

"The Dead King is the greatest necromancer that ever lived," Adjutant reminded me.

I sucked in a lip, but after a moment shook my head.

"The water in Lake Henghest was blessed and that was just from *touching* the remains," I said. "Light tends to screw with magic, anyway, and this is about as consecrated as a corpse can get. Necromancy shouldn't be able to raise it."

A beat passed.

"We'll still ask Masego just in case," I added.

"Diabolist as well," Vivienne calmly suggested. "Her knowledge of such lore might be deeper than even Zeze's."

I shot her an assessing look. It'd always been a given I would talk with Akua about this – as Vivienne had intimated, if anyone would know about angel necromancy it would be Wolof's most terrible golden child – but I'd not wanted to rub it in her face. My successor's expression was hard to read, leaving me few hints as to her thoughts. Was this an oblique way to tell me I need not walk on eggshells when it came to Akua Sahelian, or simple blunt pragmatism? Something to mull over later.

"It's a liability even if it can't be raised," Hakram gravelled. "Bringing that into a battle with the Hidden Horror is like wading into a goblin feast-night with pockets full of munitions. It can only end one way."

Most Named would balk at being compared to goblins no matter whose banner they flew, but it was rather heartwarming to imagine the likes of the Pilgrim consigned to the fate of metaphorical goblinry.

"The Dead King's one looming trouble, but the Tyrant's another," Vivienne darkly said. "That man would strike the match to the whole world's pyre just for a laugh, Cat, and he's not nearly as neutered as you think."

"His armies really are headed south," I told her, "you told me as much yourself and the Eyes confirmed independently. The League's fallen behind the Hierarch and Kairos with him, but not the point of utter idiocy: they're not going to backstab a continent-wide alliance in the middle of throwing down with Keter. Not even for a few southern principalities. They'll know damn well that if we lose they're screwed too and if we win we'll return it all a hundredfold."

Frankly, if I were an utterly amoral monster with the intention to expand and in charge of the League's political decisions, I'd promptly sign the Accords to avoid falling on the wrong side of

the mutual defence clause against non-signatories and then simply wait. Patience would mean the Grand Alliance's armies bleeding against Keter, and when those armies all went home *then* I'd strike at southern Procer. Riding to the Principate's defence again would be wildly unpopular with all its allies, after a brutal grind against the dead up north, which would limit the effectiveness of the treaties. If the League then gobbled only limited territories, like Tenerife and Salamans, there might be heavy pressure on Procer to then accept a peace should offer be extended.

"That only means that the horse he's riding is not longer the League," Vivienne said, eyes sharp. "It might be the Hierarch, or the Dead King or a dozen other flavours of madness. We don't know, which is half the trouble with that one."

"His play here is to take a swing at the White Knight," I said. "Has to be, he had the man summoned by treaty just so he could stand trial. And Hierarch could make that troublesome, I suppose, but if he does then he's signing his own death warrant – decapitating a hero is breaking the truce, Vivs. Especially if it's the Sword of Judgement. They do that, neither Hierarch nor Tyrant walk out of Salia alive. Not with the kind of power that's gathered here."

"There'd be legal grounds for an execution, considering he's an Ashuran hero that fought in an internal League war and presumably took likves," Hakram said. "And even a public attempt would stir up trouble among the heroes when it's pointed out to be lawful under the Accords."

Which I did not doubt for a moment Kairos Theodosian would. By now full copies of the text had been made available to all delegations, even the League's, so there was no doubt he'd either read or had someone read them.

"More likely he wants to strike at Judgement through the White Knight, which I'll lose no sleep over," I said. "I'll give fair warning to all involved but besides that it's no trouble of mine. I owe no debt to any Choir, save that which would be paid in steel."

Hanno was personable enough and seemed to think well of the Seraphim, but I'd weep no tears for the Choir of Judgement getting a taste of its own medicine even if that lesson came by madman's hands. Either the angels would lose a few feathers or either of the two villains at the head the League would get a taste of smiting. I couldn't see a losing proposition in that for either Callow, the Accords or even myself.

"The Tyrant of Helike is nearing the end of his thread," Hakram said. "He's burned too many bridges, we all saw that much at the Graveyard. If not for the Dead King's more pressing threat, half

of Calernia would already have banded together to crush him. His actions have isolated the Free Cities diplomatically as long as he lives and his defeats mean he's losing prestige within their ruling structure. Given the informality of his pre-eminence among the League, that could mean the waning of his influence."

I worried my lip.

"He's cornered, you're saying," I slowly said.

Which was not a good thing, in a villain of Kairos Theodosian's calibre. Best to kill him with a clean, quick stroke than let him scheme with desperation moving the hand.

"Or exactly where he intended to be from the beginning," Vivienne said. "When a skilled enemy makes an obvious mistake, it is no such thing."

That last part was a quote from the *Strategoi*, as I recalled, which was an amusing piece of irony considering it was believed to have been written by Theodosius the Unconquered.

"Either way we should share our concerns with the Grand Alliance and have some of our people look into whatever it is he's up to," I mused. "Fair enough. Best not to let him make a mess even if it's not in our backyard, strictly speaking."

I leaned back into my seat, glancing at the cup of cooled tea I'd barely touched. Yeah, I wasn't going to force myself to drink that even if it came across as rude and Hakram had somehow tricked himself into finishing his own. Still, while the Tyrant remained a threat he was no longer the most pressing of my concerns. The First Prince's ruinous little project weighed deeper on my mind, because it felt like a ready-made pivot in someone's story – and not one of my making, which was even more worrisome.

"Double down on efforts to unearth what it is the First Prince dredged, and where it's headed," I ordered Vivienne. "Have your people look for large concentrations of priests as well."

I paused.

"Concentrate your efforts on Lyonis and Brabant, for that last part," I added. "Maybe Brus as well, if you can spare the people."

As far as I was concerned Cordelia Hasenbach was acting foolishly by meddling with doomsday weapons, but that did not make her a fool. She'd know that gathering priests in great numbers close to the northern fronts would bring a lot less scrutiny than doing the same in the south. Especially in Brabant as it was, by all reports, drowning in a tide of desperate refugees who could

certainly use some food and healing. If the weapon could be moved, and for it to be of practical use against the Dead King it would have to be, then if we found where it was headed we could double back from there. Going at this from the other way might finally allow us a peek through the veil of secrecy that'd surrounded this entire affair. I sighed, then cracked my shoulders.

"Hakram, I don't suppose you could send for a change of clothes?" I asked.

I'd lost the habit of plate, and the weight of the metal did no favours to my leg even if I could not feel it at the moment. The sooner I was back in cloak and leathers the better. Might add a light coat of mail, though, because really there was never a reason *not* to wear armour if you were wearing clothes at all. I'd not deny that my preferences in clothing had been shaped some by the unfortunately high amount of times I'd been stabbed in my life.

"They are already on their way," Adjutant replied, because he was a prince among men and always would be.

"Good," I said. "Well, folks, the talks begin in earnest tomorrow. Let's see if we're ready for them."

—

I wasn't sneaking out of Salia, not exactly.

That would imply that a pack of spies wouldn't have noticed me saddling Zombie and leave the palace with the slight escort of three knights in dark cloaks, or that I would have hidden my departure from my companions. But I'd not made it clear where I was headed for either and pretty much let the assumption that I would be going back to our camp stick. Hakram could read me like a book, so he knew there was more to it than I'd said. He also trusted me same as I trusted him, though, so he didn't ask. I doubted that my having conversations with the White Knight would cause much of a scandal if it came out — even radicals under the Heavens would think twice before claiming I could corrupt the Sword of Judgement — but it'd certainly raise eyebrows, and very much attract attention. I'd rather not have to deal with the Pilgrim coincidentally coming by for a chat, or someone's admirably optimistic attempt to eavesdrop through arcane means, so it'd stay quiet for now. Though this was not casual, could not be given who we were, keeping such talks informal would allow the illusion of it to last a little longer. I'd set out early after dark, since I did genuinely intend to get some work done when I passed through camp and led out my escort at a brisk trot.

We were followed, to my utter lack of surprise. Riders kept pace at a respectful distance behind us maybe a dozen, most likely at

the First Prince's behest. Though I was First Under the Night and the dark had already fallen, I was not unaware that my spilling blood in Salia would bring great complications. Even putting down some overly ambitious robber or some drunken rowdy fantassin would meant I'd killed a Proceran under truce, and for many reasons that was best avoided even if justified. No, Cordelia had likely sent those riders to serve mostly as diplomats. And maybe guides, given the gargantuan size of this damned city, but I could see to that with prayer truth be told. So long as I was willing so suffer Komena's rampant mockery of my sense of direction, anyway. *Easy not to get lost, when you fly over the streets*, I grumbled. South we rode, through the palatial streets and estates of the Lineal and then the large plazas and avenues of the markets known as *Les Vendeuses* – which were awake and swarming with people even at this hour, for the city never slept and the glow of torches and lanterns lent it all an air of the fantastical. Keeping to the broad avenues that'd been built to allow for carts, as many as four of them I'd wager, we made good time cutting through towards Merovins avenue.

From there it'd be an uncomplicated ride, straight south until we were through the low districts and the Griffon Gate. Out of curiosity I'd slowed down on my way through some of the marketplaces, taking a look at what was being peddled. The array of goods, even at the tail end of winter and while Procer was at war, was rather bewilderingly large. Ashuran silks, Levantine ceramics and even Taghreb silverworks were on display, not to mention what must have been goods from more than half of the principalities in Procer. It was no wonder I'd been taught that the Principate was near capable of sustaining itself through trade between its own princes: it was a large empire and one that lacked for little. Save perhaps for restraint, but was that not ever the way with empires? My knights were gawking as well, which was no surprise. None of the three looked older than thirty under the hood, so none had known Callow save under either myself or Black – and under both reigns little had been traded with Procer save for arrows and insults. I'd be surprised if either had left the kingdom before this campaign. Still, it would not do to linger forever so I spurred on Zombie to a brisker pace.

It did not last long, as it happened. A smooth turn around a counting house brought us in front of an open shop from which no less than four signs had been hung, all painted with bright red letters. Unlike the rest of the signs I'd seen in this city, the words on this one were in Lower Miezian instead of Chantant or Tolesian. *Bundles Of Wakeleaf, So Cheap It's Almost Crime. Vale Summer Wine, So Many Bottles You Can't Drink Them All. We Did Not Steal The Wakeleaf, We Swear, That Would Be A Crime. I Guess You Could Drink Them All, If You Are A Drunk*. With morbid curiosity I led Zombie closer to have a better look, and to my mild surprise there did seem to be a genuine stock of neatly wakeleaf bundles. And a few crates of wine, one of which had been opened and

revealed the impurities-riddled glass bottles that were typical of my homeland. I gesture for my knights to rein in their horses and approached one of the hanging signs, touching the K at the end of 'drunk'. Red wetness marred my gloves, the paint hadn't even had time to dry yet.

An indignant hissing sound came from the shopfront, as a surprisingly tall gargoyle in a too-large dress and a merchant's hat pointed a half-empty sleeve at me accusingly. The insides of the dress moved, so I drew it up with the tip of my staff and found another gargoyle down there, who looked at me with a scandalized gasp. Another one was standing on its shoulders, and I suspected another one on its own. I withdrew my staff with a sigh, letting the dress's hem drop. So the Tyrant wanted to have a talk, looked like.

"Stay here," I ordered my knights. "It shouldn't be long."

I dismounted, landing on the stone with a wince, and paused before entering. I grabbed a bottle from the crate, and then a few bundles of wakeleaf, and only then went to treat with Kairos Theodosian.

I had a feeling I'd need them.

copaceticcockroach

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

[siva0526](#)

Seems like Tyrant makes a Triumphant(no pun intended, or was it?) return from Irritating to Irritatingly intriguing.

[Liliet](#)

Fucking stylish, that was ♥

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, Cat did forget her sword. Not that she uses it much anymore, but it would go with the wine. 😊

Eleron Pfoutz

I dismounted, landing on the stone with a wince, and paused before entering. I grabbed a bottle from the crate, and then a

few bundles of wakeleaf, and only then went to vote at Top Web Fiction.

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

copaceticcockroach

Cat's finally talking with Kairos, that talk already felt like it was overdue. Who has a feeling that Cat is going to get the most out of this talk? Feels like a victory when a person finds something of importance before a battle, right?

Oshi

Nothing about this fits a story that I can see quite yet. It's setting the pieces right now and it's all about the Tyrants play as far as I can see. I'm cautious to see where it will lead.

copaceticcockroach

Rethinking about this, how do the rule of three start? Didn't Cat bring wine to the Kairos talk to get Archer and Rouge Sorcerer back? Could this be a rule of three? In the first time Cat got Archer back, so a win. So could this one be draw? Correct me if I'm wrong, I never really understood what circumstances made a rule of three start in the first place.

JackInTheBawks

The most important part is that those involved have to be rivals. They have to be directly opposed to each other and also be reflections of each other in some narrative way.

It's uncertain to me whether Kairos might be considered a rival to Cat at this point. There's some parallels between them, and some opposition of goals, but not as clear-cut as vs. Pilgrim or William

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well... Kairos is the champion of "traditional" Evil, against Cat leading the reformists. But the Twilight conflicts complicate things too – there might have been a Rule of Three tucked in there, or it might have been a failed chance to start one (in which case he probably can't now).

Regardless, it's gonna be a long night.

Shveiran

I suppose it is a matter up to debate, yet I would argue that Kairos' "mess with them all" approach prevents a Rule of Three from happening. It is my understanding you need a

rival for that to be a thing, and Kairos doesn't – can't – have one. He is too unfocused.

mavant

How many Rule-of-Threes have we had, now?
It would seem appropriate for there to be exactly three such occurrences in the story, and no more.

copaceticcockroach

Cat and Swordsman

Cat and Akua

Cat and Pilgrim

Does it count as a rule of three if it broke halfway?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Except Amadeus had one or two as well. This does seem to be a standard play, perhaps the most widely-known (in-world) story mechanic.

NerfContessa

Who ever talks with the tyrant follows the play.
Go and decapitate the tyrant, and all will be better. Less funny, agreed, but better.

Alivaril

Welp, it currently looks as though Cat went out to meet Tyrant in secret. Not a good look, that.

I wonder what poison(s) Kairos put in the wine and wakeleaf?

Some Smartass

Something whimsical, no doubt. He has no reason to follow Praesi poison customs.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Salt and sugar. That's what he put into them.

Some Smartass

The fiend! Does his evil know no bounds?!

Sylwoos

Not in secret if she let herself be follow all the way there.
Anybody with a brain should be able to tell a secret meting of the Black Queen is a tad bit more difficult to discover.

Some Smartass

So, what you're saying is that most of the alliance now thinks they tailed Catherine to a secret meeting. 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

I think Kairos' pitch is obvious enough to make the situation clear. I'd guess her tails will have a laugh about it.

Soma

>They were separate matters, and I need to like the woman to work with her.

CATCOR CONFIRMED!

Probably a typo, but I refuse this interpretation.

Andrew Mitchell

Definitely missing a "don't"... but I respect your refusal of reality.

gingerlygrump

Honestly, I think we're heading into a Canno. Or Hacat? Anyway, Cat originally set out for another evening chat with Hanno. Seems like she found a hero she can respect.

[Mental Mouse](#)

In fact, she was going to meet with both Hanno and the WotW.

I will note (and Cat surely will) that fooling around with Hanno would be asking for about eight kinds of trouble, and Cat has enough on her plate....

Insanenoodlyguy

I hope she still makes that. Dammit Kairos, don't you catblock my ship!

[Liliet](#)

How does this contradict, confirm or in any way refer to Corcat though? 😊

gingerlygrump

It doesn't; that is the beauty of our favorite gal's lustful longings, they are many and myriad.

Raivshard

Already fixed, it appears.

Javvies

Kairos definitely has something up his sleeve. Metaphorically, if not necessarily literally, but quite possibly literally as well.

But he's in dire need of a proper killing. Perhaps Assassin can do something about him. The sooner the better, though. And the means don't really matter.

Uh-oh. If Hanno can be tried for being a foreign Hero/Named being involved in a League internal affair/civil war, that's arguably precedent for going after Amadeus on similar grounds, possibly even with more justification – the White Knight was mostly fighting in defense of a city state he happened to be in, which is probably decent grounds for an extended self defense argument, whereas Amadeus was attacking city states.

—

Yeah, Cordelia, you need Cat way more than you thought you did. Wonder how she's going to sell that internally.

SpeckofStardust

The white knight is likely going to get tried for the act of judging a league citizen.
Namely his Judgment of Kairos.
Mostly because nothing else would stick for all of 5 seconds.

Tom

Kairos can't be killed yet, he's only on the first step of his plan.

SpeckofStardust

Narrative can and has been beaten battered and outright bypassed at times.
Key example, Black
Other Key example, the Dead King.

Decius

His plan is to abandon his plans after one step, so that he's always on the first step of his plan, which is guaranteed to go off without a hitch?

Rup

..now this .. this is a really good way of looking at Kairos.

Sugar Roll

Procer and Praes are at war with each other. It's not meddling in internal affairs like the White Knight did. Procer can hate on Amadeus all they want but they don't have anything to go after him from a diplomatic standpoint.

[Javvies](#)

I was referring to Amadeus and the Calamities involvement in the League.

Remember, when Kairos and Bard worked together to set up Captain to be killed. Book 3.

And we know that Kairos despises Amadeus's approach to Villainy. It would give him a free shot at somebody he doesn't like and that Cat would have to react to and use some of her leverage to protect Amadeus.

And it's not like Kairos hasn't already blown out the foundations after burning all his bridges.

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[Javvies](#)

The hell?
Dammit, WordPress.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

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Hellspirit

Hahaha, oooh Tyrant ^^

Big Brother

A scandalized gargoyle. Amazing.

caoimhinh

Poor gargoyle, no one likes to have their dress lifted with a yew stick by a cloaked stranger.
Even the Gargoyles have a sense of decency XD

erebus42

You'd think cat would know it's impolite to look up a lady's dress without permission.
Also if whatever nebulous plan the Tyrant has going doesn't work out (and he doesn't get his head chopped off) he should consider abdicating and going into advertising.

edrey

well, that weapon is an angel remain or a lesser god, i think is a god or black would had notice the lake wit holy water. a side note it was 49 not 47 hours for that ritual at liesse, seven x seven, right.
so now is kairos, my bet is he would use the seraphin to turn procer into a republic, or force the pattern of procer to transcend. practical but mad

[Mental Mouse](#)

Not just he, but also the Bard, are already on record as saying that his plan is to trap and kill at least one of the Seraphim.

caoimhinh

LMAO, Kairos.

It will be interesting how the conversation goes with a Tyrant that can't lie due to being blessing-compelled. Shouldn't hinder him much, in my opinion. As far as I can recall, Kairos doesn't lie much, even if he is prone to betrayals.

JackInTheBawks

Kairos is a big believer in "technically the truth is the best kind of lie"

Shveiran

I'm kind of worried about that. I think that's what we are headed toward, but I'll be very disappointed if this becomes a thing at this stage, coming from this source.

I mean, if you discount the accused, a trial is never really about whether people are lying, but rather about whether or not they are telling the truth; which is not the same thing, not by a long shot.

Witnesses misremember stuff that has happened years before, recollection can be warped by the question asked and our senses are not perfect machines: you can very well believe false things to be true and testify accordingly, and to TWIST the truth or reframe it you need only present part of it in the wrong way.

Any clever individual should know this, so what testimony is Kairos VotedMostUntrustworthy Theodosian going to give that people won't take a step back, dissect for a day in a sealed room and then possibly ask others about?
It really seems... silly.

Author Unknown

Yes, if only there were some kind of manual or *guide* for budding villains.

Andrew Mitchell

It would have to be a very practical sort of guide, don't you think?

[siva0526](#)

He can always distract with useless talk. He is compelled to tell the truth, but is not compelled to actually answer the question or offer up the whole information.

Gibborim

FINALLY, Vincent Humanmerchant has entered the story.

konstantinvoncarstein

« Thankfully they do not wear clothes, and so can still be told apart from the rest of my court.»

I don't understand where the joke is, could someone explain it?

[sivarajan](#)

The rest of his court is also always hungry "for a little bit more." Wolves are the usual metaphor.

SpeckofStardust

I think in an earlier Qoutes that person got thrown in, and proceeded to not get attacked by the Crocs, by basically faking to be one of them?

I might be misremembering.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I don't see anything like that on the wiki, at least not with crocodiles. And EE can do better than recycling old lawyer jokes.

C_B

He is throwing shade on his courtiers by implying that, if not for the difference in clothing habits, they would be indistinguishable from a pack of crocodiles who had been enchanted to always be hungry.

Sparsebeard

Damn, I love Tyrant!

Others might have morals, rationality, pride, power, etc., he has a sense of humor!

Cicero

Now, I tend to think it would have been better to ignore the Tyrant, and visit the White Knight instead.

[Liliet](#)

Night's long. Catherine can do both.

ninegardens

Both at the same time! I'm sure those two will totally get along!

[Liliet](#)

I mean, they have before... 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Ignoring the Tyrant would not be wise; in this case he'd probably just try to screw things up for Catherine's proper meeting.

Sparsebeard

Let's be honest, Cat never was gonna miss on an occasion to replenish her stash of wakeleaf and Vale summer wine.

ninegardens

Later we find out that Cordelia's plan isn't to nuke anything with the thing, she just plans to tip it into one of the northern lakes so as to prevent the dead from crossing, and provide a more convenient supply of holy water.

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BoringButPractical>

Shveiran

It would be amusing, but in my opinion that would badly match the hints we have been given so far. It definitely seems like she believes it is a game changer, not just an helpful asset.

ninegardens

Oh, I totally agree, I was just being facetious.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It could still be something more useful as a shield than a weapon.

Decius

If it turns lakes into holy water, that's a game changer. Using lakes to store armies is a major strategic advantage, since it denies that area to supply lines until after lengthy and difficult clearing of the lake.

An artifact that 'simply' blesses the lake and destroys the raiding parties within, and makes the lake impassible to future attacks, would be of great strategic importance.

ethericsentinel

But is it a match for Catherine's epic lakeomancy?

Ultimate_Procrastinator

One lake alone? Yes, more amusing than game changing. Dumping it in as her army finishes a network of canals linking all the lakes in the north into a single massive anti-undead barrier of holy water? Much more in line with the hints we've received. Probably not what's gonna happen, but Imma call it just in case

Some Smartass

I'm not sure why Cat thinks she can expect rational behavior from Kairos. He's not a master plan kind of villain, he's just after his next hit of evil morphine.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Isn't evil morphine just morphine, in the long run?

Liliet

He's damn well been a master plan kind so far, between his rounding up of the League to a pet Hierarch and the whole gaming everyone else in Iserre.

He's after his next hit of evil morphine, sure, but he prefers the 'long term plan payoff' kind.

Shveiran

Is that your read? I don't think so, he seems more about balancing acts to be honest.

Your read, I think, is that he planned all that FROM THE START; I argue that while he was most certainly the architect of those events, he kind of jumped on the opportunities that would prevent the whole thing from coming down on his head OR from stabilizing, and used new opportunities as they presented themselves.

This is not his endgame, I don't think; merely his current game.

Mental Mouse

Not balancing acts, but juggling acts – even the Bard called him out on that. Part of the difference is that slipping up doesn't send him to a long fall, it just gets him clonked on the head.

laguz24

Kairos doesn't have an endgame per se. If he did he would die, that is not his way, his way is always a betrayal, a scheme, a plot, he has already won so to speak.

ninegardens

See, the thing with Kairos is that he is sneaky enough, and cunning enough, and idealistic enough (in his own messed up way) that he COULD have an end game... or he might not.

In some sense the joy of this character is that we don't know what his goals are, but in a very different way to everyone else.

I *might* agree with Some Smartass's claim that he isn't a master plan kind of villain, but I don't think that means he isn't rational and is just after his next hit of evil morphine. In some sense he is taking Amadeus's "No flying fortress, no single weak points" to its natural extreme

with his juggling philosophy. He reads like Sylvester from Twig – there is no long term plan, but he can handle chaos better than you, so in that sense throwing dozens of balls in the air and seeing which ones he can catch IS a rational long term plan. Its not madness, its not stupid, it might not be a “plan”, but it sure as hell counts as a strategy,

And he isn't doing it JUST for the hit of Lulz. He just happens to know that leaning into his role puts the wind at his back, and so long as that tail wind doesn't smash him against a cliff, he can ride it far and fast enough to outrun death and destiny. And if it does smash him against a cliff, well... he was expecting to die ANYWAY.

It might not be Amadeasus or Malicia's brand of planning, but what counts as rational totally varies based on what your goals are. Drinking alcohol and partying every night might be irrational if you are after a quiet stable marriage, but if your goal is to get drunk and party and burn the gods house down before cancer kills you, then you may well be on to a winning plan, especially if you've invited a bunch of goblins the local church as your venue

... God damn it, after the Princes graveyard I thought I was sick of the crippled bastard, but now he is coming back and I am hyped.

Some Smartass

There's a reason I picked a medicinal opioid for my metaphor. Remember, he'd already be dead if he wasn't rolling in favor from Below. He decided to launch this mad scheme after looking at his shaking hand. Don't get me wrong, he clearly does enjoy villainy, but there is a deeper motive. You're right that it was a mistake to call him irrational for having a weird desire he's working toward.

Or I might be way off base, who knows? Maybe not even Kairos.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Kairos is whimsical, theatrical, and treacherous, but what makes him dangerous is that he is indeed rational. Even while backstabbing someone, he does make sure his own back is covered. Also, he knows perfectly well when he's lost a point, and he's always got a backup plan to keep the point from costing him the game. Q.v. “Is this what love feels like?” when Cat did in fact outmaneuver him back in the runup to Conclave –

and notice that he did get something out of the negotiations there, specifically by seeing where the water was running, and finagling a cupful from Cat.

JackInTheBawks

Cat being a dismissive of Kairos earlier in the chapter was a bit of a red flag to me, and right after it's time for a chat with the Absolute Madman himself?

I'm a tad worried.

Things have been going way smoothly for like, three whole chapters, too!

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, her buddies did warn her that he was due to come back into the game.

Faiir

Welcome to Komena Navigating System.

-I knew it, you wouldn't find your way in an empty field!

-You really can't get to: Your camp on your own?

-No, not left you idiot! Turn right!

-I see this is too hard for you. Turn to limpy leg side, then healthy leg side on the next crossroads.

-I said: Left after 300 paces. Was that 300 paces? Can you even count?

-This route is obviously too hard for you, I'll find something easier. Try rolling down that hill!

-You've reached your destination. Finally.

[Liliet](#)

Would Komena and Glados get along?

laguz24

Yes, yes they would, so long as they had someone to torment aka cat otherwise they would be at each other's sassy throats.

Faiir

I think that Glados would be best buds with Rumena instead.

Rup



Faiir

Somewhat close:

mavant

We got SO CLOSE to a title drop in this chapter. It was right there!

burguulkodar

The funny thing is that I noticed he ret-conned those sales-phrases because they were lies and he couldn't tell lies so he had to make add-ons to correct the misinterpretation.

beleester

That implies that the wakeleaf genuinely isn't stolen. Poor Kairos, having to become an honest merchant in order to set up this meeting.

[Mental Mouse](#)

He's a crowned ruler, he can afford a few bottles of cheap wine and bags of wakeleaf.

[308924810a](#)

Cat has completely misestimated what Kairos will do.

He's not at all interested in building sensible gains for his faction in the long term, he's interested in surging to a high-water-mark of importance, from which he can enact a grand influence on the world, either completing his grand plan, or just seeing his will done in secondary objectives.

He's either going to join the Grand Alliance, or play for time and auction off his alliance to whoever pays better, either the DK or the Grand Alliance.

ninegardens

Or the bard. 😐

[Mental Mouse](#)

> If the Heavens had handed out some sort of manual to their champions while Below ate dust it'd be deeply unfair. On the other hand, I grimly thought, I'd not be all that surprised in such a situation to hear that Below did hand out a manual but some villain had burned all the copies to hinder the competition.

The Dead King *did* hand out a manual... we saw where that leads...

Sinestere

I believe Kairos wishes to marry Cat. It would be his “get out of jail” card and elevate his status. He doesn’t bring much to the table so he will have to trick her into it. And spread rumors that it happened to put it in everyone’s mind just as Cat did to gain a certain ring that was always hers....

Mental Mouse

While the brighter heroes might well appreciate having someone to maybe keep Kairos in line, they would (or at least should) also worry about having two trickster-types teaming up against them. (That said, can you *imagine* Pilgrim’s face?)

Cat of course, would just tell Sve Noc, “go ahead, each of you can have one of his eyeballs”.

Mental Mouse

On the other hand, if you really want a match that would break brains all around, imagine Cat eventually marrying *Hanno*. Where a quick fling would put most of the risks on Cat, an actual marriage would basically make her untouchable for his remaining lifetime. Not to mention winning some major protection for Callow, even after her abdication.

The Hayward Fault

Damn. Damn! Dammit dammit dammit all and curses too! I’ve reached the present day and thus my rabid devouring is cruelly jerked to a halt!

Oh well. Can’t deny it wasn’t worth it.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I know this struggle well. We are as parched wanderers in the desert, ever thirsting for content.

aran

The Tyrant is murderous and insane, but worst of all, he is *funny*. That makes him even more dangerous.

Chapter 80: Descant

“My dear High Lords, there is nothing to fear. We might be losing the war against Callow yet there is an obvious remedy to this:

this morning, I declared war on Ashur. I will be surrendering unconditionally as soon as they acknowledge this, which ought to take care of our Callowan troubles."

– Dread Emperor Irritant I, the Oddly Successful

The scent was cloying, heavy against the roof of my mouth before I even stepped into the room.

The incense was the heaviest of the tastes, but there were subtler scents threaded along: sage and cedar, as well as the faint bloom of flowers. The burners from which it all came were spread around the room haphazardly, tended to by chittering gargoyles, and the glow cast by the glass lanterns hanging from the ceiling played shadows along the thick trails of scented smoke rising up. Kairos Theodosian lounged on a seat that was little more than a large bowl of bronze filled with thick red cushions, though as always he'd found a way to have it incrustated with jewels and covered with sculpted bas-reliefs. The Tyrant of Helike greeted me with an indolently raised hand, his brocaded robes of gold and scarlet folded with careful precision so that they would almost hide the length of his arm prone to trembling. Though he'd been thin and sickly for as long as I'd known him, Kairos' narrow face seemed to have shed the last of its softness: his brown curls hung low on a forehead whose skin looked pulled taut over bone. His good eye, the brown one, moved around lazily as if it could not quite focus on anything. The other one, the red of fresh blood and always wetly shining, almost seemed to have grown. As if the crimson had grown to devour more of the Tyrant's face as the rest of him pulled back.

"Welcome, friend," Kairos Theodosian cheerfully greeted me, throwing in an exaggerated wink. "Welcome to my humble shop. You'll not regret visiting, for our prices are princely and our merchandise most definitely acquired through at least partially legal means. Probably."

The cheerfulness was nothing new, from this one, but for once it did not entirely succeed at covering something had grown... feverish in the villain. I'd thought more than once that the Tyrant's position would collapse if he was dealt a grave enough defeat, but now I was wondering if perhaps defeat might not cause in him troubles rather more visceral. My staff rasped against the wooden floorboard as I limped in, and I found a seat awaiting me on my side side of the low table between us. Mine was less a nest of cushions and more along the lines of my favourite seat, the one I'd had creatively acquired from Arcadia. Padded, with heavy armrests. On the low table the sight of a strange game being toyed with caught my eye: three bowls filled with differing numbers of smooth pebbles had been put down, as well as a handful more on the surface of the table itself. Kairos had been moving a few around as I entered. The game did feel vaguely familiar to my

eye, though it clearly wasn't mancala. Not enough seeds or pits for them to be sown in.

"Tired of shatranj?" I asked.

"I grew curious, after reading the treatise," Kairos mused. "It is a game meant for three, in truth, but trying my hand at the play was interesting regardless. He's a barren little thing, your Adjutant, but I'll not deny he is brilliant in his own way."

Ah, was that were that was from? I'd seen Hakram fiddling with the game once or twice, for it was of his own making, and Robber had once told me the orc had been doing so since before he first came to the War College. I mostly remembered being vaguely irritated that the pot of stones everybody could steal from was called 'Callow', accurate as it was to the game's implicit metaphor.

"Tower-raising, isn't it?" I frowned. "I didn't know he'd finished the treatise, much less made it public."

"It has become rather popular at your royal court, I am told," the Tyrant said. "And has even come somewhat in fashion as a curiosity in Ater."

I eased myself into my seat unceremoniously. Amusing as Kairos' petty schemes could be on occasion, passing amusements hardly made up for the nuisance he was in so many ways. I wouldn't pick a fight with him without a good reason, of course: so far he'd not aimed his plots at Callow itself, only at my soldiers in Iserre. Yet neither would I forget he'd made bargains with the Dead King and the Bard, in full knowledge of what they might lead to for this continent.

"What do you want, Tyrant?" I asked. "I haven't got all night."

"That's hardly a way to talk to a shopkeeper," the ruling king of Helike solemnly told me. "I'd be well within my rights to raise my prices for such disrespect."

I broke the wax over the bottle in my hand and took a sniff at the contents. It did smell like genuine Vale summer wine, to my surprise. A swallow confirmed as much.

"You just called my right hand a barren little thing," I said. "And likely meant it, given the curse of truth laid on your tongue. I have limited patience for your games, and other business to see to tonight. Speak or I'll leave and wash my hands of this."

"You're free to go, if that is what you truly wish," the Tyrant shrugged, red eye pulsing.

It might be safer to do so, I thought. With no one to speak to and a continent of close doors facing him, there were not many ways for the Tyrant of Helike to slither his way back into a story that'd keep him from sinking into a swamp of his own making. Speaking with the people of most influence in Salia might do the trick, though, or at least allow him opportunity through talking to cajole the winds of fate back to his sail. From that perspective, the best decision here was to rise and leave without another word. On the other hand, that also left Kairos Theodosian with precious little to lose. Vivienne had warned me he was unlikely to have emptied his quiver quite yet, and it could be argued that villains were often at their most dangerous just before they were defeated. And he'd let slip some of what he was up to, I suspected. Not carelessly but instead carefully, like a fisherman baiting a hook. And to get his foot back in the game the Tyrant would not hesitate to toss me some secrets of worth coming at the expense of his many enemies. Some of which were also mine, as it happened.

I sighed and caught sight of a gargoyle carrying a tray with cups – only one which was empty – and gesture for it to approach. It did and I snatched the empty silver cup before holding it out, reaching into the Night to fashion a tendril of darkness that poured from the bottle into it. More discretely, as my theatrical gesture distracted those in the room, a very thin tendril of darkness crept into the filled cup and stole a single drop before withdrawing. It didn't look like water, instead like some sort of herbal potion, and though tasting it myself would tell me little I had people in my service who knew much of herbalism and alchemy.

"I'll buy the wine and the leaf," I said. "So long as it's not poisoned, and the price isn't ridiculous."

"I never found out how much any of it cost," Kairos admitted. "A hundred royals?"

That was Helike gold coinage, if I remembered correctly. There were several currencies floating around the Free Cities, and Helike's was not considered to be one of the more reliable.

"I'll offer you a whatever's in my tunic pockets right and now," I offered instead. "As well as one sentence that is more or less a compliment."

He leaned forward.

"*Intriguing*," the Tyrant enthused. "You have a bargain, Catherine Foundling."

I surrendered the treasures hidden away in my tunic: a handful of half-chewed oats I'd forced Zombie to spit out after catching her

indulging, a few pinewood matches and a soiled tablecloth from the palace I'd used to wipe my mail clean earlier.

"Your tunic's colour matches the cushions, which makes you look significantly less scrawny from a distance," I added.

"It *does*, doesn't it?" Kairos replied, sounding deeply pleased. "That is what I was going for."

He gestured for one of the gargoyles to waddle forward and handed it my end of the bargain.

"Feed the oats to Hakram," he instructed.

My brow rose questioningly as the gargoyle whined in protest then scampered away after gathering everything up.

"Hakram is the name of my trusty war steed," the Tyrant revealed. "It was a most wonderful gift, Catherine, my thanks. I've taught her to bully the gargoyles and it has been most diverting."

Oh Gods, he was talking about the goat wasn't he? I'd not expected him to actually keep her.

"It was," I hesitated, then valiantly rallied, "my pleasure?"

He picked up the cup I'd stolen a drop from and sipped from it after dismissing the gargoyle, then leaned back more comfortably into his cushions.

"Would you like to talk about the Dead King?" Kairos Theodosian casually asked.

"Sure," I replied. "Heard he's up in Keter. Good manners, maybe a little heavy on the devouring of all living things. Keeps a good table, though."

"So I've heard," the Tyrant amiably said. "He also intends to send an envoy to the formal talks tomorrow, I'm told."

My fingers clenched, and I forced them to loosen before taking a sip of wine.

"He intimated as much in Liesse-Before-Twilight," I said. "Dare I ask where you heard it from?"

"The Dead King," Kairos smiled. "And his envoy, which he intends to send to the formal talks tomorrow."

"You're hosting the Hidden Horror's diplomats," I flatly said.

"Diplomat, singular," the Tyrant corrected. "Tough you are in essence correct. I was prevailed upon to bring the envoy to Salia and introduce them."

"You must realize that's twice now you've provided aid to Keter," I grimly said. "Your bridges are not so much burned as turned to smoke."

"I imagine our friend in Keter would have found a way regardless," the Tyrant mused, sipping at his cup. "This is hardly a deep collaboration."

"You've repeatedly made pacts with the Dead King, and now serve as facilitator for his diplomacy," I said. "Kairos, that has consequences. It's one thing to play princes against each other or to make a red ruin of the League for your schemes. Villainous, true, but it stays within certain boundaries. What's happening up north, though, is a higher order of war. The consequences of defeat there are... severe is too light a word, really."

"You seem certain there will be a war," Kairos said, sounding amused. "As if it were inevitable, written in the stars."

"At this late hour, it effectively is," I bluntly said. "There is no offer he can make that will change things. The Grand Alliance will gather and sweep him back into the Crown of the Dead."

"Or he'll leave when faced with such an unprecedented coalition," the Tyrant said. "For he is not an utter fool."

"Then we reclaim the Kingdom of the Dead without loss of life and begin to siege the Serenity," I shrugged. "It is not too disadvantageous an outcome."

"You misunderstand me," he said. "His armies retreat, and as they do several millennia of the worst rituals Calernia has ever seen are unleashed on the lot of you. And then your shaky alliance, stripped of its common foe, must face the brewing horrors you ignored as your eyes remained fixed on the north."

"So we should take his peace, should we?" I scathingly said. "Pass the torch to those yet to come and hope they take care of it for us? That's how we got into this mess in the first place. It'll be ugly work, closing the door on him, I'll not deny that. And costly in ways I suspect will resound for generations. But someone will have to pay that price, sooner or later, and it's cowardice of the worst sort to pass the duty down the line out of petty fear."

"And it is mere pleasant coincidence," Kairos mused, "that a great shared cataclysmic war would lay deep foundations for your Accords. Your own Arch-heretic of the North – the King of Death, the peerless Named that suffers the yoke of no laws even in death – crucified over a sea of corpses so that the story of your rules enforced becomes as whisper passed from mother to child across the lands."

The accusation rang true because he wasn't entirely wrong. The Liesse Accords being signed and then promptly yielding the end of the Kingdom of the Dead would be the strongest possible mortar to build with. Undeniable proof that even the greatest of monsters could not stand alone against the rest of us when heroes and villains kept to terms. The thought had lurked in the back of my mind for some time now, it was true. On the other hand, unlike what he was implying I was not *eager* for the horrors that war would bring. Marching on the Crown of the Dead and the creature that ruled it was not something to be lightly considered no matter what advantages it might bring.

"Mock as you will, you offer no other path," I said. "You never do, Kairos. And still I am a little disappointed, because I figured that no matter how deep in the old madness you went you'd at least grasp the consequences of Keter claiming victory in this."

"You speak as if the Dead King could truly win," he said, cocking his head to the side. "As if this confluence was not a carefully arranged affair, a trap laid by subtle hands."

"I'd be much more willing to listen to hard talk about the Intercessor from you if you'd not make a damned bargain with her yourself," I harshly said. "Your actions have not matched the distaste you profess."

"Of those that collaborated with the Bard on that night I am not the one that wounded your side deepest," Kairos mildly said, "though you know it not."

"You lie, Tyrant," I sighed. "Even speaking only truths, you lie. And if you had something that'd cut deep when plainly said you would have spoken it plainly."

That made it two secrets he'd dangled in front of me now. He'd implied there were disasters brewing elsewhere, earlier, and there were only so many places that could be the case. Ashur was still blockaded by Nicaean fleets, last I heard, and it was possible for it to be turned into a cradle of madness through desperation. Yet I knew Malicia to have schemes afoot, and she stood the more likely culprit: the Tower's arsenal of horrors had not been unleashed in many years, but it might yet be if she felt there was nothing left to lose. So someone had worked with the Bard on the night that saw Twilight's birth, then, and I'd been wounded by it. Probably Saint, I decided. It'd explain why the Tyrant had not outright given a name: she was dead by my hand, that account already settled. All he had left was suspicion to sow while speaking exact truths.

"We are pieces in an intricate game, Catherine," the Tyrant smiled. "One whose board was lain far before either of our births. Did you believe it coincidence, that the Principate would

be so weak and isolated? Decades of civil war to bleed it dry, foes on all sides and then even a disastrous campaign to the east before the Dead King had first stirred. There have been but a few times in the history of Procer it has been so weak, and I'd wager none when the greatest heroes of the time were either far past their prime or far short of it."

"She's not a god, Kairos," I said. "And neither is he, despite all his boasting. Even a continent like Calernia has so many moving parts it's impossible to manipulate it so precisely. They may have seen it coming, helped it along even, but this is not an elegant game of flawless immortals: this is two old monsters riding a tiger and hoping the other one is bucked first. You know they're not unbeatable. Hells, you handed the Bard a defeat yourself."

"So I did," the Tyrant conceded. "Neither is invincible, Catherine, I agree. They are cleverer than that. Yet we approach the crescendo of their hatreds, the unmaking of the knot. And I suspect neither's lasting victory would be a pleasant ending."

"Help me, then," I said. "Help the Grand Alliance. You've been gathering everyone's secrets, Kairos. The Intercessor's, the Dead King's and everyone else's. You could be the finger on the scales."

"I find it most amusing that your good intentions will haunt this world for centuries to come, if you truly win," the Tyrant grinned. "Ah, the necessary villain. The hard woman making the hard decisions when trouble has come calling and all others are flinching from what simply *must be done*. I wonder how many atrocities will be poured out of that mould in years to come simply because you scratched that groove deep enough onto the fabric of Creation."

I'd gotten about as much out of him as I would, I decided. All he was doing now was spreading the poison of suspicion, and I had no reason to indulge him I continuing to lend an ear.

"Even as we speak," Kairos idly said, "thousands are dying in agony to the far south."

"End the blockade of Ashur and the starvation will end with it," I flatly replied.

"It already has ended," the Tyrant of Helike smiled, red eye burning like a red star. "Tomorrow, Catherine, the Tower reminds the world it is yet to be feared. Magon Hadast will withdraw the Thalassocracy from the Grand Alliance."

I frowned.

"She doesn't have the ships to scatter Nicae," I said. "Or the calibre of mages to not need the ships."

"No," the Tyrant agreed, "what she does have is many men who must drink water from barrels."

Poison? That seemed unlikely, even if it was one that took an absurdly long time to kill. It was possible to craft poisons that had no taste and would not visibly mar water but making one that also took months to kill – the only way slipping that much poison onto so many ships unnoticed was even remotely feasible – would be massively difficult and expensive. It'd also require the skills of the Empire's finest alchemists employed in concert, as well as exotic ingredients by the barge. Scribe would have noticed such movements, even if the Jacks were fooled. Kairos reached a shaking hand into his tunic and produced a small glass vial filled with a light gray powder, tossing it to me. I caught it, holding it up to the light. That was an alchemical powder, I'd bet rubies to piglets, but not one I recognized.

"Poison?" I asked.

"In a sense," Kairos said. "If inclined to poetry, I might call it the stillness of death."

Oh. *Oh. Oh shit.* Stillness, water? This was the same horror Akua had used to turn into wights the entire population of Liesse. One of the Warlock's old doomsday tricks, named *Still Water*. Mere alchemy, almost impossible to detect as it accumulated in bodies. Until it was triggered by sorcery and slew all it'd contaminated before raising them as undead. If the water barrels on the Nicaean fleet had been tainted, there was no telling how much of it Malicia had instantly turned to her service with a mere snap of the fingers. *She can't have done that before they even struck at Ashur*, I thought. *No one's that far-sighted, not even the Empress.* Yet if the barrels had been tainted in the months since, that meant...

"That can't have passed by you," I said.

"It did not," Kairos agreed.

"And you didn't stop it?" I frowned.

"Why," the Tyrant of Helike grinned, "that would rather defeat the purpose of helping her, wouldn't it?"

My mind raced. While I was less than surprised Kairos would betray even the League he was currently leading to war, I saw little advantage for him in this. If Ashur was willing to fold and leave the Grand Alliance at Malicia's behest, it might have done the same at the League's. This did hurt Nicae, which was arguably still his strongest rival for power within the League,

but there would have been less costly ways to achieve that. And in truth a great defeat might shake his own position even if it'd not been dealt to him, as the Hierarch's violent indifference towards such matters meant Tyrant was effectively setting the policy of the League of Free Cities at the moment. This... didn't fit, I thought. The Tyrant of Helike might have been a true partisan of Below, but however deeply it was buried there was always a method to his madness. The ripples from this would be a blow to the Grand Alliance but not a crippling one, and a victory for Dread Empress Malicia but hardly a substantial one. And it'd weaken the League going into this peace conference. Kairos might have used all this as a mere vessel to get his hands on the White Knight, but it was unlike him to so utterly spoil one game in favour of another.

"What do you *want*, Kairos?" I asked, honestly lost.

The odd-eyed boy leaned forward, trembling hand touching the bowls filled with stones he'd not touched this entire conversation.

"I'd like us to play a game, of course," Kairos Theodosian smiled. "Why else set out the stones?"

[Javvies](#)

...

Yeah ... Kairos needs to end up dead asap.

Admittedly, so does Malicia.
And Bard.

Malicia's being stupid again, if what Cat has surmised from Kairos's statements is accurate. Unleashing Still Water on Ashur (or anyone else) doesn't help her. It just means that people are going to be more willing to take the casualties to put her down for good, even after the inevitable losses against the Dead King, and they're going to be far less willing to let her leave alive.

Oshi

If I recall correctly the ritual doesn't have to be triggered. So long as no one is killed it should pass by them. It's more like holding them hostage. Am I wrong?

WuseMajor

Assuming you can trust that what the Tyrant is saying is, in fact, trustworthy to any degree.

That said, Cat, you know how to handle him. Force him to be the straight man.

[*blitzbasic*](#)

He can't lie, remember? The pilgrim cursed him. He might try to misdirect and confuse, but the direct meaning of his words has to be correct.

Shveiran

Yes. But he is not speaking plainly, is he?

““It already has ended,” the Tyrant of Helike smiled, red eye burning like a red star. “Tomorrow, Catherine, the Tower reminds the world it is yet to be feared. Magon Hadast will withdraw the Thalassocracy from the Grand Alliance.””

So Malicia is planning something and Kairos believes it is bound to happen tomorrow. He also believes Ashur will fold the Alliance, though the reason why it's unclear.

“No,” the Tyrant agreed, “what she does have is many men who must drink water from barrels.”

It's an obvious truth, yet any meaning from it is inferred. Malicia HAS men on ships, both hers and her enemies. Fact. Anything more is still up in the air.

““Poison?” I asked.

“In a sense,” Kairos said. “If inclined to poetry, I might call it the stillness of death.””

What is he speaking about, here? Cat assumes he is talking about what Malicia put in the barrels, yet there is no certainty. Kairos could very well be talking about the vial itself, who I ahve no doubt does contain Still Water. That doesn't mean there is more or that the barrels have been compromised.

““That can't have passed by you,” I said.

“It did not,” Kairos agreed.

“And you didn't stop it?” I frowned.

“Why,” the Tyrant of Helike grinned, “that would rather defeat the purpose of helping her, wouldn't it?””

What has not passed by him? perhaps the very fact that there is still water in the vial. True, yet misleading, because that's not what Catherine is thinking about.

The last part is an opinion asked, it by definition neither true nor false.

TL,DR: Kairos has said little and implied a lot, to which the curse does not apply. I believe the very corrections on the boards were placed there to suggest he is more hindered than he really is – he has been cursed not to lie, NOT to always be exact and clear. After all, does he look like he is talking like Masego? Not to me. Bottom line, we can speculate wildly but almost nothing he said is useful in that regard and can't be taken as fact. Also, Pilgrim's curse is useless and silly.

Halinn

Worse than useless. Now that it's known he can't tell an untruth, he can use that in all sorts of clever ways just like you analyzed

Bob

The Tyrant needs to be treated like an Aes Sedai from the Wheel of Time books: if he refuses to speak clearly, he should be simply dismissed.

NerfContessa

You mean shot.
In the head.
With the strongest attack spell you have.
Thrice at least.

So I hate aes. Sedai and their whole superiority shtick, so sue me...

[Mental Mouse](#)

> What has not passed by him?

Kairos doesn't need to lie here – he's fine with some of his own folks being "stilled". I've little doubt he could either reclaim control of, or destroy, the resulting wights.

Pilgrim's curse is a handicap, but indeed it's not a very serious one, given Kairos was long used to wielding truth and half-told truth as daggers. The thing is, Pilgrim simply didn't have the narrative weight to do better, and that was in large part due to Cat's repeated dominations.

Speaking of Pilgrim, his delay in freeing Masego is clearly what Kairos was hinting at, but even Cat and/or Masego finding that out for real wouldn't change that

much! Cat's already accepted that Pilgrim is hardly more capable than Kairos of being a true ally to her. And Masego has already continued to develop his Name regardless... after all, he has Cat's repeated example to show that losing a power-base might be a setback, but an entirely survivable one.

Mirror Knight

Well I mean Cat is already unlike Cordelia working on lining up some replacements by sparing that Levant Lord and getting close Hanno.

Jago

I don't know if he was aware in advance of the consequences, but Pilgrim didn't simply "delaying in freeing Masego", he timed doing that with the Bard command, so that all the attempt to free Masego where resolved at the same time. Probably that is the reason why he did lose as much. And he will never see it as doing wrong, as doing that he weakened a Villain.

stevenneiman

If I was dealing with such a person from any degree of a position of power, I'd attempt to interpret what they were saying and then demand that they confirm or deny my interpretations.

Skaddix

Are they really seems like Malicia gets to create a triple alliance with Ashur, The Free Cities and Praes...with everyone else busy up North. This Evil Alliance gets free time to do whatever they want. It makes sense for Malicia to break up the Grand Alliance.

caoimhinh

Doubt it, since she has just killed thousands of Nicae's citizens and Ashur caused the destruction of Thalassina (and Wekesa's death) mere months ago. This move was made to weaken the Grand Alliance, but it doesn't actually give Malicia any allies. Kairos allowed her plan to succeed because he has his own and wants to make use of Malicia's actions.

[Liliet](#)

She cannot ally with the League out of this, sure, but she sure can ally with Ashur.

I imagine she has a plan in mind from there =x

Shveiran

She can bully Ashur into submission, maybe. I don't really see an angle for alliance for her to play, here. Do you?

Javvies

She's got the son (and presumably heir) of the leader of Ashur in her pocket, as well some influence with a number of the other second highest tier citizens. Plus, per Scribe and Amadeus, Assassin was sent to Ashur. So it's entirely possible that a number of the obstacles to Malicia's exertion of influence in Ashur have been ... removed from the balance of power.

Shveiran

I know she had those plans in motion, but they were initiated to ensure Ashur didn't enter the Alliance and the following Crusade.

At the time, they were sensible.

Now Praes is the public ally of the Dead King, who is attempting to gobble up the continent, and Malicia is twisting Ashur's arm with an undead blockade that OBVIOUSLY has no intention to continue as its living predecessor because OBVIOUSLY Ashur will fall in line. The situation has changed significantly, hasn't it? I really don't see how her previous plans for the Thalassocracy may still be relevant; she spent decades trying to build a bridge with them, but now that ship has been sunk by her latest action. Any leverage she has on the heir isn't going to hold water: she'll need an heavy hand, at least threatened, and that means the moment Ashur can flip that alliance it will.

SpeckofStardust

That Son last I checked was in charge of the fleet that was assaulting Thalassina and is thus very very dead.

hakureireimu

Ashur not waging war against Praes is very far from them allying with Praes. Having a few leaders in Malicia's pocket isn't enough to get the populace on-board with dying for Praes.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Malicia is dead or soon-to-be-dead. She knows this – she has become an obstacle and a threat to every major power in the west. This was inevitable after Second Liesse failed. She cannot make alliance with her enemies as the bridges there are

long burned and the odds of her prevailing against them all are paper thin. If what she sought was exile further offense would be a bad move, but Malicia plays to win, not to run with tail tucked. Therefore, she must seek a way to make her death too costly for her enemies to seek or to break apart their alliance in a way that none of the members can or will pursue her demise. Still Waters, either as hostage or blow, would be a nice first step.

Malicia is rarely stupid. Her moves at Second Liesse, assassinating Callow's higher ups, the attack on Salia, all make sense from a political perspective. Crippling your enemies by busting their kneecaps while holding a knife to their throats is sound strategy. However, Malicia has blinders when it comes to the story b/c that's always been Black's role. She missed the narrative knife at Liesse and misread Black which led to this entire debacle. Everything after though – everyone wants her dead. She's done a remarkable job of hindering that outcome with the limited tools she has at hand, but its all coming crashing down now. She's lost the goblins, the Calamities, the orcs, a significant chunk of her political power base, and most of the legions. Still Waters and whatever cards she has hidden will, I predict, be her last attempts to break apart the Grand Alliance. Sink or swim.

laguz24

She makes weapons that she threatens to use like the threat is enough, but she forgets that swords will either find a use or make one.

Pokekid01

I'm pretty sure Stillwater is being used on Nicae, not Ashur. With the blockade suddenly under Praesi undead control instead of Nicean, Malicia can force terms on Ashur by offering to withdraw the blockade, and threatening to invade Ashur with ground troops.

What will probably happen instead is the Dead King intervenes, because summoning an army of undead whilst at war with the greatest necromancer to ever have lived on Calernia is a Very Bad Idea™.

caoimhinh

Yeah, I wonder if those undead from Nicae will end up as soldiers for the Dead King instead of under Malicia's control. That would give him a new front for the war all of a sudden.

Though maybe his contract with Malicia forbids him from doing so.

Zgggt

The question is: if so, then was it a part of the deal?

[Liliet](#)

That would be silly of him, given that Malicia's bullshit is his best chance at redirecting the Grand Alliance's attention away from himself.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Malicia: "Don't be ridiculous, the Dead King is on the other side of the continent. There's no way his agents could even reach Nice!"

Amadeus: _facepalm_

Malicia: "What?"

undead sea serpent roars offscreen

stevenneiman

Mhm. Her problem is that she's gotten so used to playing with the High Lords in the 40 years of peace she bought with the Conquest and Pravus gold, and of internal stability that Black and Assassin worked hard to maintain for her, that she doesn't understand that she's playing different games altogether facing the outside world. She first revealed that when she went over her story guy's head to do something because she knew he would recognize it as a stupid decision, and it's only continued. Now she's forgetting that people who aren't High Lords hold grudges for mass murder because they actually care about things other than their own power. I think she might have sunk too deep into her Role and become convinced that she can always outwit everyone. And also forgotten that she's supposed to be doing things for reasons.

laguz24

She is doing things for reasons but they are not the right reasons. She is only fighting for herself like Ubua and we all know how that ends.

[Liliet](#)

She's not unleashing Still Water on Ashur, she's unleashing it on the sieging fleet. She's relieving their plight, and getting an alliance out of it, if one of desperation.

Shveiran

She is getting, at best, a piece of paper signed by Ashur that will be enforced by an undead fleet.

That's not an alliance, really, it is a subjugation; Malicia may try to bind Ashur's fate to her own to remove the incentive to backstab her, but she has so little time and options I'm rather convinced she won't be able to prevent having crucial points of failure to throw heroes at.

greatwyrmgold

And she lets the world know she can unleash wights on any city without a 100% secure water supply. It's no at-will Greater Breach, but it's still enough of a superweapon that I can see Malicia trying to use it as a deterrent. How well building a Death Star will help you, especially since Darth Vader is MIA and unable to kill Han and Luke, is...unclear at best seems like a nice way to put it.

NerfContessa

Agreed, Even the threat of it is, again, same old doomsday weapons.

She should have known better... But then again, she is stripped for. Choices short of surrendering. And allied with the dead. King.

Ah, that's gonna be a pain.

Cicero

Should have got up and left.

None of the secrets are worth it.

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, interactions with this little monster should be reduce to the bare minimum. He can't convince you of going along with his plans if you cannot hear him.

Liliet

Never Let The Bard Talk.

That said, Catherine's a bard in her own right, and can hold her own. She might not gain much from this, but she's not losing much either. She's not Amadeus "please don't make me intrigue I'm already cross-eyed from just the thought of it".

Some Smartass

This is in keeping with my theory that Kairos is dependent on the favor of Below to escape the symptoms of his illness.

And he has an interesting point that Cat may have created a hard women making hard decisions Role. Obviously an attempt to shake her, but it makes sense.

Oshi

As Cat said its nothing she doesn't know. He's playing for time and then like any good knife fighter showing his blade only when he needs to. Notice how much more circumspect he is in speech? The curse hit deeper then expected.

Agent J

I call bullshit. "Hard Woman, Hard Decisions" is literally tattooed on Saint's back. Might be there's a Catherine-shaped groove in Creation now, but what of it? What's the alternative? Stay in the tavern and never make waves for fear of the ripples?

NerfGlaistigUaine

It's watching out for what types of ripples you make. You can't just dodge responsibility b/c it's unfair, villains deal in realities my friend. A Catherine-shaped groove could be quite catastrophic. She's hoping that the Liesse Accords outweigh that, or that one iteration won't have enough weight to carve such a mold, or she's got countermeasures for that. But one can't deny that this sort of hard decision-making may create or reinforce a dangerous pattern.

hakureireimu

Why would a Catherine-shaped groove could be catastrophic?

[TeK](#)

Because it already was. And there is only so much greater goods to make hard decisions for.

hakureireimu

If there are no greater good to make hard decisions for then she wouldn't have emerged at all. And I wouldn't say Cat has been a disaster; compared to what?

[Barthumphries](#)

What if her name becomes a Name to the next generation?

hakureireimu

She's mostly a hero wearing the mantle of a Villain, and emerged only after Heroes utterly failed for 2 decades.

If more people followed her footsteps that's only a good thing.

caoimhinh

Catherine has left a crevasse in the workings of Fate, sure, but that doesn't necessarily have to be as Kairos described. After all, we have already seen another young Callowan woman with an orc right-hand assistant achieving fast military success in the defense of her motherland: General Abigail of Summerholm.

And she is someone who takes unorthodox choices, but not necessarily the hard measures that Kairos implied.

[Liliet](#)

The thing is, Calernia has suffered pretty damn badly from the lack of this Role so far.

Imagine if Good nations were willing to recognize the possibility of a villain working for the greater good.

Imagine if William saw in Catherine a potential anti-heroic ally back in their first meeting.

Imagine if Tariq understood what Catherine is not as "a curse brought onto Good by their own failings" but "someone whose decisions are as bad as the situation but no worse".

Imagine if Good nations had been willing to collaborate with the saner Dread Emperors on grain trade with Praes, Evil or not.

Oh, it will birth atrocities, I don't doubt it. They'll be smaller ones than the catastrophes they'll be averting, though.

Shveiran

Yes. This. Thank you.

ThatOneGuy

Actually they shall make worse ones for remember this is not our world, but one of a grand game between above and below. the role of the game is to see which side wins and if the pieces do not hold up the banners... Then they shall be discarded and destroyed so that a new more refined game could be made.

We already know this world is not the first made for the game and this world shall not be the last.

[Walter](#)

I feel like you are making Black's mistake here, treating Evil/Good as just jersey's that teams wear so you can tell who is winning.

The story makes it pretty clear that they aren't. They herald value differences.

If Good nations believed villains worked for a greater good they'd be deluding themselves. We've seen like twenty in the story and none of them do anything like that.

If William told himself that Cat was a potential ally he would be lying to himself. She deliberately caused a Callowan revolution that was doomed to failure so that she could rise in the Praesi ranks by crushing it. He was never a potential ally to her, just a stepping stone. She used him up.

If Tariq understood Catherine as anything other than a maniac he'd have erred radically. She is inspired to frothing rage at the thought of the Liesse massacre, but turned around and petitioned the Dead King to attack Procer, an event which would have killed many times Liesse's body count. She hates slavers but enslaves her enemies. She hates nobles but made herself a Queen. She carries a flag explaining that having reasons for doing things is for idiots. There is nothing there to depend on, nothing to bargain with.

If Good nations had been willing to collaborate with Dread Emperors they'd have been betrayed, as they no doubt were. Like, these are the clowns who brag about what great traitors they are. They have waged wars of aggression with Callow like a dozen times.

I'm not trying to scoff at the possibility of a 'hard man/hard choices' kind of role, like dude was saying upthread, Saint's ya gal, but Good and Evil in this setting aren't just flavor text, they describe entirely different cultures. That role would be a hero's. Villains don't care about anyone but themselves, so no choice is 'hard' for them. Tyrant didn't make a 'hard choice' when he let Malicia slaughter the leagues fleet with Still Water, it was a piece of cake. He thought it was hilarious. Cat didn't make a 'hard choice' when she stole the Drow city's water, there were precisely zero paragraphs of hand wringing or moral qualms.

Like, I'm not trying to say that the Good nations are modern progressive democracy fully luxury gay space communism or whatever. They aren't 'good' by our standards, but they are recognizably within the broader scope of 'human communities/polities'. You can kind of grok their deals if you squint. You can tell yourself that over generations they will figure their stuff out and be less evil, cue White Knight's musings about slavery.

The Evil ones...just aren't. The Drow society is psychotic insanity. The Stygians are slavers. The Praesi are murderers and proud of it. The Goblins are wicked beyond anything humans can aspire to.

If you pick a random Proceran out of the herd they probably work in a tavern or whatever. If you do the same for the Goblins they are a knife murderer who dabbles in arson.

Calernia doesn't need a balance between good and evil, it needs good to win. A 'Catherine Shaped' role would be terrible for Calernia, more lakomancy and burning cities, souls bound to cloaks and people crucified by roadsides.

Shveiran

→ Calernia doesn't need a balance between good and evil, it needs good to win. A 'Catherine Shaped' role would be terrible for Calernia, more lakomancy and burning cities, souls bound to cloaks and people crucified by roadsides.

Yes.

Let's have none of that and stick with Heroes.

It's not like they do their best to murder their enemies as well, is it? After all, joining an invading army and murdering people to the best of your Named ability is inherently better than dropping a lake on an army, isn't it? It's different, not just a difference in capacity.

Heroes also don't deal in horrid demons and devils, they only call on choirs to brainwash people against their will; that is totally cool.

Heroes are kind souls that craft plagues to eradicate their enemies at the cost of their allies' citizens because it makes strategic sense, in a "lesser evil" kind of way, which is still leagues better than crucifying mages that do human sacrifice.

Yes. Villains are bad and Heroes are good, because that's what this story has always been about. You know what Calernia should do? Keep warring between Good and Evil. After all, it's not like that conflict has caused most of the destruction on the continent since living memory. And hey, just because no side has been able to win in a few thousands years, well, there is no reason to believe it will solve soon, right?

And after all, if it does end, SURELY Good will win, right? There is no way Good will actually lose and Calernia will be stuck with only Evil because compromise was refused as a possible outcome. It will work out fine.

After all, compromise is bad.

You should hate all that have wronged you, and inherit your ancestors' grudges as well. After all, they wouldn't have

started beefing with people without a good reason, right? We should keep them going indefinitely.
We are all so much better off teaching our kids to swing swords than trying to build a future where they have a chance to not go to war.

Soronel Haetir

Kairos Theodosian, a strange game, the only way to win is not to play.

Big Brother

"What do you want, Kairos?" I asked, honestly lost.

The odd-eyed boy leaned forward, trembling hand touching the bowls filled with stones he'd not touched this entire conversation.

"I'd like us to vote, of course," Kairos Theodosian smiled.

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

Big Brother

Wanted to try my hand at this for once 🤪

[BarthHumphries](#)

Where's your typo thread?

Tough you are in essence correct
Change tough to though

Seriously, vote and typo thread.

Big Brother

I didn't want the typo thread on my comment.

1. That's notes clogging my phone
2. I don't like people pointing out my typos, so I'm not gonna do that to someone else. Seems hypocritical.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

You forgot a period at the end of your first point. 🤪

Andrew Mitchell

I'm right with you, Brother.

Willow

Vote!

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

Tohron

Alright, most important question: Did Kairos steal the idea for the goat's name from the comments section?

copaceticcockroach

Most important question: When is Kairos going to ride Hakram into battle?

copaceticcockroach

The Dead King had us cornered. To simply put it the bastard had too many Revenants. Couldn't Ranger wipe more of them out while she was here?

Pushing hard on my staff, I stood back up.

"Hakram," I said, "I'm out of insults, have anymore of them in your pocket?"

"If I did, they're burnt as Summerholm's streets," Hakram replied.

I glanced over my shoulder, Hakram had took a hit from a dead mage and whatever that mage did, it burnt through Hakram's plate like paper.

"Why Summerholm exactly? It has nothing to do with getting burnt." I said.

"Just having flashbacks when you burnt it down with goblinfire. You know watch your life flash in front of you before you die kind of flashback."

I had walked into that, didn't I?

"Weeping Heavens, keep this up and I'll side with the Dead King over there, because I'm sure he doesn't get any backlash from his lackeys." I retorted.

"Is this how you'll go out Priestess of the Night, barely able to stand and throwing jests at the bringer of your death?" the Dead King said.

"Today, no one is going out, unless they're going out with me."

Everyone wheeled around to see the new voice. I didn't have to, I knew the person from his childish voice, Tyrant. But, like everyone, I couldn't believe he actually came, I needed to see if it was actually real. Not like seeing Tyrant would

improve the credibility of him being real. It wouldn't be above him to just send a glamour.

"Cower you abomination, cower before the hero and his trusty steed," he said, "I have come to liberate this land and stop the evil that resides in it."

The level of smugness in his voice was just painful. I clenched and unclenched my fist. This was going to end badly, couldn't a villain trying to do good have an easy day?

"Onward Hakram! We have a king to take down!" Tyrant shouted.

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. I was certain that if I didn't flip Hashallim off I wouldn't have to see an ass riding an ass charge one of the strongest beings in Calernia.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I read this many hours ago but came back to say that I also like your username in addition to appreciating your comment.

edrey

that game is amazing but it's mean for three, so where is assassin? just make all go to hell, killing their leadership would do the trick
Cat should talk with that diplomat, telling him something like: the DK should go to the south, nice weather, the sea and without the noisy neighbors

Sparsebeard

Well, well, well. It seems the DK is in fact sending an envoy to the accords talks.

And like often, the chapter addresses many of the arguments made in the last chapters comments lol.

Personally, I'm much more inclined to let the DK sign, but extract a huge price for the concession... but damn what Cat said about Villains being more dangerous just before defeat does seem to apply to Malicia more than to Kairos right now.

For the good points, at least Cat's stash of wakeleaf is replenish so she'll be able to blow it in people's face for dramatic purposes in the nearby future. Because let's be honest the wine and the wakeleaf are probably the main reason she decided to go in... despite any justification to the contrary lol.

[BarthHumphries](#)

Tyrant is the envoy.

Shveiran

That is my guess too. Might even be why he is so sickly.

Thea

I figured it might be the host character Cat got friendly with in Keter... Aka Malicia in disguise.

Though, on second thought, that might not fly, with the White Knight present.

[Liliet](#)

> Personally, I'm much more inclined to let the DK sign, but extract a huge price for the concession...

Don't forget that Catherine still needs to make this look appealing to the Good nations. Pragmatism only brings you so far in the court of public opinion =x

Agent J

If Keter is not taken there will need to be a new plan to resettle the Drow. Which will be a whole other basket of vicious, ritualistically murderous worms.

[Fayhem](#)

This. There's pretty much exactly one place on the continent where you can feasibly settle the drow without either subjugating or exterminating the native population (both of which are Not An Option), and that place is Keter/Sephirah. The Dead King isn't going to hand over the literal center of his power (because that's less a concession than an unconditional surrender), which means as far as Catherine/the drow are concerned peace with Keter is a nonstarter on that basis alone. And there are many, many other bases for why that's the case.

[Tohron](#)

Well, it might be theoretically possible to resettle the drow in the area around Keter, though that would still require renegotiating the agreements with the dwarves somehow.

NerfGlaistigUaine

I need the full rule list for tower-raising. Seems like a fun new game to ruin friendships. Like Diplomacy 2.0

Shikkarasu

The following is a fan interpretation (mine) of the description in Interlude: Giuoco Pianissimo.

Three players take turns selecting covered bowls. One contains 6 stones, one contains 8, and one contains 10. Players should not be aware of how many stones are in the other players' bowls.

A fourth bowl is set in the middle of the play area containing 12 stones. It is called 'Callow'

Players take turns (clockwise, starting at an arbitrary point) declaring one of the following actions:

- Steal a stone. The player may target another player or Callow. At least one other player must agree to this theft, otherwise no stones change hands. If the last stone is taken from a player they have lost. To ensure honesty a player may be required to show two stones and hand over one of them when Stolen from.
- Offer a stone. The player may Offer a stone to another player with terms, such as the other player agreeing not to Steal from the giver for a set number of turns, or to not to permit the third player to Steal from Callow. Any Offer may be made, and one counteroffer proposed by the potential recipient. If a player attempts to break the Terms of a deal they forfeit their turn if/when caught. If the counteroffer is declined, or the initial offer outright refused, no stones change piles. (This is to ensure that the game does not devolve into an hour-long haggling session.)
- Destroy a Stone. The player may remove one of their Stones from the game. No other player need approve.
- Pass. The Player may decline to act on their turn.

When a player has twenty stones, they have 'raised their Tower' and are the winner.

All of this is probably unnecessary, as the full rules may well be explained on Friday and contradict what I have, but I couldn't resist.

NerfGlaistigUaine

I appreciate it. Or at least I will once I read through it all. Always cool to see fellow fans so invested too and it'd be hypocritical if I criticized long asides

konstantinvoncarstein

You forgot that if no one win after a certain number of turn, Callow attacks and everyone loose.

Shikkarasu

It's not clear that this was kept in the final version, since Aisha once played a long game until everyone was too drunk to remember how many stones the others had. I get the feeling that the rule about everyone losing on turn 30 was played with and then discarded. This was also before the 4th version of the game where the totals were secret and one person has only 6 stones.

That said, this is just my best guess on the final version of the rules. As always I look forward to being proven wrong.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I just reread the chapter, and the last game Hakram played before meeting Cat was in fact an everybody-lost game. So the time limit is clearly still there. (And it's clearly needed to force the players to actually make progress instead of just stalemating indefinitely.)

Sparsebeard

I haven't re-read the chapter, but logically even without a time limit, once enough stones are destroyed nobody can win either...

[Mental Mouse](#)

True, but with no impetus to make alliance, getting there would still be slow and annoying. Basically, there has to be a reason to try and *win*, instead of everybody staying "safe" forever.

superkeaton

I figured Akua's Kool-aid would come back up at some point or another. Nice to see I was right, just wasn't sure when. I'm also surprised that Cat forgot Hakram's game, even if it was ages ago. Funny that people play a civilized game made by an orc and a goblin.

WuseMajor

Which chapter was that game introduced in?

[Javvies](#)

One of the Hakram POVs.
So either an Interlude or a monthly extra.
Might've been when he cut his hand off to persuade Viv.

caoimhinh

This one:

<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/10/03/interlude-giuoco-pianissimo/>

The chapter starts by explaining the game.

[Barthumphries](#)

As I remember it, it was mostly explained but I think the comments said that when it had been attempted there were still questions. I didn't really look into it. Can it be played?

[Liliet](#)

Catherine has never played Hakram's game onscreen, it was brought up in one of the chapters while she was in Everdark.

Also, Ratface is the one who made the most important contribution to the rules. Robber was one of the people he called 'too honest', offending him gravely.

Zoe

Worth noting that at no point did Kairos come right out and SAY that the water was tainted or that Malicious was going to use the Still Water protocol. He can't lie, but he can sure as hell make vague insinuations and let other people jump to conclusions about what he means...

konstantinvoncarstein

Gods Below and ever burning, you are right! At least he could not lie on the fact that the Ashuran exited the Grand Alliance.

caoimhinh

When Kairos first hinted about Still Water, I thought Malicia had poisoned the Praesi refugees near Callow or High Lady Abreha's troops, thus giving more troops for the Dead King, but on a completely different front.

That would certainly be a huge and unexpected blow, even forcing Catherine to move her troops East instead of North. Certainly didn't expect it to be targetted to Nicae. Considering Ashur's fleet caused the destruction of Thalassina, I didn't think Malicia would do them favors simply to make them withdraw from the Grand Alliance.

[Javvies](#)

Eh, I'm pretty sure that the son (and presumed heir) of the highest tier citizen of Ashur is in Malicia's pocket, and she's got influence with others of the second highest tier. And Assassin was in Ashur per Scribe and Amadeus, so it's

within the realm of possibility that some of those she doesn't have influence/control over are dead now, and no longer an obstacle.

BarthHumphries

Tyrant has the powder. And it's tasteless in drink. And he literally just gave wine to Cat. Who is now human. And can be hurt by such things.

Liliet

I will note that a great amount of it needs to be consumed before it can work.

If Cat's smart, she will not buy more than one bottle =x

Morgenstern

... she just bought all of it. The leaf and the wine. Remains to be seen if she'll actually *take home* and much less *use* any of it, of course. 😊

Agent J

Of course she will. It's Cat, she fully intends on indulging her minor vices. Besides, it'd be monumentally stupid of Kairos to pull something like that. Attempting to assassinate a foreign ruler is, to say nothing else, a break in truce and all the excuse Catherine needs to murder him in cold blood.

And that's all it would be. An attempt. Because, between her cadre of Legion mages and Callowan priests, Hierophant, Akua M.F. Sahelian, and the literal gods on her shoulders, there's no way such a plain faced attack would ever work.

BarthHumphries

> Besides, it'd be monumentally stupid of Kairos to pull something like that. Attempting to assassinate a foreign ruler is, to say nothing else, a break in truce

1) He's the Dead King's envoy. You can't just murder a foreign diplomat like that because they have diplomatic immunity. Hierarch might not like it.

2) I would be completely shocked if Tyrant were to betray anyone. Shocked I say! Shocked! 😊

Agent J

1) Not confirmed and irrelevant besides. No one Cat wants to work with would weep for a dead Kairos or a slain envoy of the Dead King. And by this point Cat's established enough with the Good Nations that it would do nothing to hinder her relations with them.

2) Betray and survive to betray again. Even after everything that happened at the Princes' Graveyard, Kairos tried to slip off quietly under glamour. This proposed scheme would be laughably ineffectual *and* give easy pretext to murdering him.

It's stupid, but not Kairos Stupid.

konstantinvoncarstein

1) If said foreign diplomat just murder a foreign ruler during said truce, no one will bat an eye if he is executed.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Aside from Liliet's point, I'm quite sure that Sve Noc could defend her against wightdom.

[Mental Mouse](#)

That said, I'd be worried about what he might have done to the wakeleaf!

ruduen

Oddly enough, I'm not sure if Still Water is liable to work again in Malicia's hands. It's the nature of that type of trump card/superweapon – it works once for a villain upon the initial reveal, but when it's being held over someone's head afterwards, it's just asking for a heroic counter. Since it was already used in the past and caused major harm, I can't see it going unchecked here.

At the moment, I'm more worried about the other cards that Malicia has in play (Book 3, Chapter 49). She mentioned four, and two of them are gone with Warlock. However, she's had a lot of time without Amadeus's restraint or story-based insight, meaning I wouldn't be sure that the other two possibilities haven't had additional research by now.

[Liliet](#)

1) It was not Malicia who used it first, and it worked very much against her and she did not expect that use.

2) She's not holding it over anyone's head, she's using it to break the Nicean siege – or rather gain control over it to force Ashur into her terms.

crescentsickle

Called it. The real issue everyone has had with Cat is that her existence will echo and ripple for years to come because she has engraved herself on the narrative engine that runs the world via her actions and their consequences.

From the chapter:

"I find it most amusing that your good intentions will haunt this world for centuries to come, if you truly win," the Tyrant grinned. "Ah, the necessary villain. The hard woman making the hard decisions when trouble has come calling and all others are flinching from what simply must be done. I wonder how many atrocities will be poured out of that mould in years to come simply because you scratched that groove deep enough onto the fabric of Creation."

[Liliet](#)

Still saying this groove's existence is an improvement.

Shveiran

Adding that if that's what people got worried about, they are full of BS. The only reason why Akua, Malicia and Black, Cordelia, and Adjutant and Hierophant are not making as deep a groove is because Cat is being more successful and bombastic than them; and she has not always been, while this pattern is an old one.

And that is assuming that previous incarnations of most of the heroic bigwigs are close to their current ones, which is possible yet not certain.

[Mental Mouse](#)

"I wonder how many atrocities will be poured out of that mould in years to come simply because you scratched that groove"

As opposed to' say, the role of the Gray Pilgrim? Any role can "go to the bad".

lennymaster

That comment gave me goosebumps all over.

[Sugar Roll](#)

So it looks like Kairos knows what the Pilgrim did on the Bard's behest regarding Masego. Kairos can easily break up this forming coalition against the Dead King if he's inclined to do so.

Liliet

Doubt it. Cat's smarter than that.

Shveiran

What Liliet says.

Only a moron would take at level face what Kairos says in a crucial moment, because he is amalicious fucker that is onviously trying to twist the truth to pull one on you. What you do is put it in a box, carry on until a later date, and then TALK about it with the fellow involved, becaus eanything else is playing into his hands.

Seriously, if she does anything less I'll be so very disappointed.

Sugar Roll

He doesn't even need to reveal it to Cat he can use it as leverage on the Pilgrim. He's making a play on the White Knight and him having more leverage makes it more likely that he'll cause more damage.

Shveiran

And if the Pilgrim falls for that rather than go have a talk with Cat, I'll go back to my Book IV Tariq hate club. He has to know better than that by now. He has to.

TheAtomicOption

This sounds like what Malicia was *really* offering the Dead King. Not just being allowed out, but a new army raised at his opponent's back.

It's really unfortunate that Cat hasn't been able to guess that the pilgrim, at the behest of the intecessor was the reason Masego lost his magic, but given it's a pretty big leap we can't be surprised. Pretty sure Kairos' plans still aren't revealed enough that we can really predict what's being plotted next.

wdc543

Heroes are just the shards of a broken society that refract the most splendid light. Their edges will cut you to the bone.

Aotrs Commander

See, Cat, I told you he'd treasure your kind and thoughtful insult! He even named it suitably!

Mental Mouse

Specifically, he named it after an opponent who kept to his task even while tied up and hanging from his feet. Not to mention the guy who actually brought the goat.

erebus42

Oh Tyrant you delightfully heinous bastard never change.
Also Catherine come on. Of course he kept the goat, she's a purebred Liessen Charger after all!

SpeckofStardust

""
"Of those that collaborated with the Bard on that night I am not the one that wounded your side deepest," Kairos mildly said, "though you know it not."

""
Kairos just because the Dead King was brought out by bard and told to eat the baby doesn't mean he doesn't count as a possible answer for that.

Like that sentence if it read like say this...

"Of those that collaborated with the Bard – on that night I am not the one that wounded your side deepest," Kairos mildly said, "though you know it not."

After all Cat doesn't know that the Bard has collaborated with the Dead King before. And he did kinda do the most damage out of everyone.

Also nothing of value was gained with this talk and Cat has been convinced that she will need to take steps in order to get everyone to fight the dead king.

Unless of course a third part gets brought into the talk for the game I don't think anything useful will come of it.

After all the game is meant to be played with at least 3, and he does want to play it.

grzecho2222

"Catherine Foundling had given the slip to every story that could bind her to an ending, and so left herself only one path: reign eternal, consumed and consuming, a herald of long prices and hard measures having made mantle of the woes of Creation."

burguulkodar

I love the Tyrant.

Also, very unexpected moves happening! This story always takes some very interesting turns.

Also, I do wonder why the DK would simply try and face this great alliance when he knows he would lose. And the other option is not just retreat into Serenity, but to strike at the alliance at

other angles (Ashur) and with the help of his – very quiet so far – ally, Malicia.

Good moves! Also we don't know what bard's endgame and DK's counter-game are.

[mammon](#)

Enough on the awesomeness of this chapter and lawyering Kairos's words, can we return to the beginning? Does anyone get why Irritant would win by surrendering unconditionally? Knowing him it won't be a serious political thing, it will be Story-bound. But I don't see how one would turn around a war by losing another war.

I don't think it's the pattern of three, that wouldn't apply to Callow if it happens to another country or that he would trigger it at all if he plans to lose the first time around for that guaranteed victory third match.

And finite doom or being beaten shouldn't affect the war on Callow, he cannot be a cornered monster or a thought beaten Villain suddenly turning things around, when he does something like this. There's no actual Villain twist, plan or Story in it that I can see turning Creation against Callow's invasion. Anything that it could do, would require Ashur to mobilise and send in troops themselves, or do serious political bickering with Callow. Which are again, real politics rather than the Story that Irritant would be quoted for.

I don't get it. Does anyone else care to illuminate me?

[Fayhem](#)

Absent full political/historical context it's difficult to say with any certainty. But to give it the old college try, my impression is that it's less about "how one would turn around a war by losing another war" and more about escaping the consequences of losing a war; i.e., he isn't trying to turn the war around and start winning against Callow, he's trying to make it so Callow can't extract any meaningful/tangible gains from the fact that it's winning.

As for how that would work, I think the idea is to end the disadvantageous state of being in a losing war without having to surrender to your winning opponent (and directly adjacent nation) who is in a position to actually extract significant concessions. With regards to the story-fu factor that typically goes into Irritant's oddly successful ploys, I would assume it has something to do with "successfully turning back an invading army (bc let's be real, how else do Praesi wars with Callow ever start) and then bringing the hurt to them on their own turf" being a meaningfully different and much more advantageous

story than “continuing to make war on an enemy who has technically surrendered already”.

If he surrendered to Callow in order to achieve the desired “technically surrendered already” condition they would have legitimately had grounds to refuse to accept his surrender unless it came with hefty concessions (reparations for war damages/expenses, etc.). If he surrenders to Ashur, even unconditionally, pretty much the max they can reasonably go for is some trade concessions, which incidentally would also help serve as a guarantee that trade with Ashur won’t stop.

So tl;dr is that it’s a weird ploy, but one that in the Guideverse especially is likely to be oddly successful. Classic Irritant.

[mammon](#)

I assumed something similar, but it sounded too much like a real political move. Nothing bound in cliches that we’ve already seen in stories from the real world, like ‘You cannot possible defeat all of us’ strenghtening a Hero.

If it would be a second army actually joining the Callowans with actual soldiers, like Procer showing up and turning a well-earned victory for Callow into certain defeat for Praes, I can see Irritant declaring the disaster averted. The moment Procer would do that, they’re inviting Praes’s next ritual to be a complete and un-Hero-interrupted success that turns around the war. Or for the story that props up Callow’s victory to be broken and evening the playing field.

But this seems like much too shallow a Story prompt to use, because it contains literally nothing. As Black has shown and Cat has said before, Stories aren’t completely unbeatable. A powerful enough Villain can still best a Hero with brute force even when the Story says otherwise, too many or untethered Story threads are snapped easily, and a Story doesn’t excuse stupidity or mistakes made. And this move by Irritant is too shallow to even sway a single sword swing, as it’s neither reactionary nor with Ashur being actually involved in the war if they’d be surrendered to immediately after finding out war was declared.

It’s just weird, I expected that I was overlooking some real-life story cliché.

[Tohron](#)

I think, since Ashur wouldn’t be in a position to hold major claims in the long term, they’d be more inclined to make claims they know the Praesi want to give like “5 years of ownership of all Praesi lands up to 20 miles from the Callowan border”. And

then, Callow would be unable to move troops through there without first signing treaties with Ashur.

Walter

Before the surrender Callow is attacking Praes. After the surrender Callow is attacking Ashur, is my guess. Dude is hoping the Ashurans will defend their new possession.

Joe

Interesting. My bet is Malicia's still in concert w/ Keter. As the grand alliance push him north, the wights in the south become new troops for a surrounding play.

BarthHumphries

I have been thinking that the Tyrant is the envoy. But what if they got someone truly incredible to be the envoy, someone who would be wants more than anything else to see things settled lawfully?

What if the envoy is the White Knight?

matesbe

Can't be, ignoring the personality conflict, White Knight has not been staying with Kairos, let alone sheltered by him.

BarthHumphries

We don't know what happened with White Knight, because it seemed like the Prince put him on trial but we don't know the aftermath of that.

Mental Mouse

Not yet, we're still waiting on Kairos's trial of Hanno. The Prince didn't charge Hanno, she just no-sold his judgement.

Rey d`Tutto

Is the Dead King's envoy Malicia?

Walter

Interesting thought, we've never really seen her exert her Name, but I've always sort of understood it to be supremely Intrigue/Charm focused. She might be at her absolute best in an environment like these talks, wheeling/dealing with supernatural skill.

Shveiran

... And she would survive to open her mouth how?

If England and the US were negotiating during WW2, and Hitler showed up to say its piece, do you think he would have gotten away with it?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Yes. Remember, the full scope of his Final Solution didn't become clear until fairly late... for most of the war, Hitler was just another enemy head-of-state... who had considerable support among the American populace. Bluntly, America, was ready to sit out the war, right up until we were attacked directly! If the Japanese had been able to hold their water, we might well have stood by until the conquest of Europe was a done deal.

Abrakadabra

Well the japanese were baited to attack for exactly that reason. That is the only explanation if we look at the diplomatic talks before the attack.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And EE just handed us a Wednesday cliffhanger: This game needs three players. Who's about to fill that third seat?

Andrew Mitchell

Oooo, good question.

Maybe the Dead King's envoy? It could still work even if the envoy is a shard of the Dead King that's inside Tyrant. You know, one of those multiple personalities due to possession situations.

gnaruscat

I'm honestly not sure which dread emperor I love more, Irritant or Traitorous. I think that I'd read a spinoff based solely on either of them.

gnaruscat

Oh, and Kairos is sneaky. Teaching Cat a lesson on how to win a 3way battle so obviously (if you defeat either the Bard or DK, the other one will defeat you. So you play them off against each other), she completely missed the sneaky misleading truths and implications he fed her.

[aran](#)

Oh. Oh shit. Kairos IS the envoy, isn't he.

Abrakadabra

So Kairos is making undead sailors?

Chapter 81: Devotional

"To have faith is to believe there is a plan greater than your own. And so the dreadful crowned are faithless one and all, for what plans could ever be greater than our own?"

– Dread Emperor Reprobate the First

"As I recall, the game requires three people," I said. "I've only had half a cup, Kairos, it's too early to start seeing double."

Which was as pointed a cue as he could hope for before unveiling whatever nasty surprise he'd been keeping up his sleeve. The wretched little bastard grinned at me appreciatively, recognizing the extended hand for what it was. It was never pleasant to be forced to look in the eye the truth that I understood Kairos better than I did more people – and that it came naturally, without effort.

"I believe you're familiar with the man," the Tyrant of Helike mused. "He goes by Beiakim."

In Ashkaran, that'd be Be-Iakim, which translated to 'Child of Iakim'. The name was not unknown to me, for though it had been millennia late and in another realm I had attended King Iakim's burial. It'd been in that echo that I had first heard the word *Intercessor* spoken by the lips of the man that would become the Dead King: Prince Neshamah, at one time the most obscure of King Iakim's many children. That was on the nose, even by villain standards, but I couldn't say as much without acknowledging Masego and I had stolen knowledge of the long-dead tongue from Arcadian echoes. Along with others things. Hierophant had plundered the thoughts of still-mortal Neshamah but I'd seen/

/. Still, this was a rather clear indication of our coming guest's identity. Chittering gargoyles scattered as someone left the back of the shop to join us, some of them hurrying to bring forward a skull-adorned chair and place it to the side between myself and the Tyrant. The Dead King's puppet, for I much doubted this to be the true body of the King of Death, made no pretence of still living. Though dressed in long cloths of purple and silver – the colours of Keter's banner, as I recalled – it was a skeleton that I was looking upon. The bones were as polished

ivory, much of them adorned with purple chalcedony and silver, and there was something lurking in the shadows of the empty eye sockets that was dreadfully vital.

"Catherine," the King of Death greeted me. "How pleasant to see you again."

"He is rarely so sweet to me, you know," Kairos complained. "Favoritism is a sin, Catherine."

"Might have something to do with all those betrayals you did," I noted.

I then cleared my throat, gaze turning to the Dead King. Wariness quickened my pulse, but I could not show weakness in this den of tigers. They would not strike at me with violence, not here and now. It would have been more reassuring if those two were not some of the finest masters of twisted words living and dead. The dead thing claimed the skull chair, leaving me to wonder if Kairos had ordered it made for this very occasion or if he'd campaigned across a third of Procer with a spare skull thorne stashed somewhere in Helike's baggage train.

"Beiakim, is it?" I said. "That's new. Surprised you didn't stick with the classics and go with Trismegistus."

"If I had, I would have been robbed of the pleasure of your pretended ignorance," Neshamah replied in Ashkaran.

"I don't speak that, you ought to know it by now," I replied without missing a beat.

"Dandelion mouse fishing," the Tyrant proudly added in Ashkaran.

More or less, anyway. He was accenting the wrong parts of the words and there were some syllables he was pronouncing in what I figured to be the tradertongue way which just... didn't work with Ashkaran. There was almost no commonality between the languages. He might have meant moue instead of mouse, now that I thought about it.

"Well said, Kairos," I agreed.

"I suppose that, bereft of anyone able to share my humour, Trismegistus will have to do," the Dead King said.

"King Trismegistus," the Tyrant mused. "It has a ring to it. Might I offer you refreshments, Your Highness?"

I eyed the clothed skeleton skeptically. It had no, well, throat. I assumed the fact that he could speak at all was the result of sorcery, maybe some sort of runic trick. Likely I was looking at a small sliver of the Dead King invested in a construct, not unlike the crows that Sve Noc has sent south with me – and which,

physically speaking, had about as much business talking as a skeleton. I had to say I admired Kairos a little for the amount of sheer pointless pettiness it took to offer the Dead King drinks he couldn't drink. Say what you would about the Tyrant, but there was absolutely no one to which he would no offer at least one inconsequent slight.

"That will not be necessary, Tyrant," the Dead King said.

I willfully ignored the chittered disappointment of a few gargoyles, unwilling to entertain exactly what it was that Kairos Theodosian might have considered fitting refreshments for the Hidden Horror.

"Come to attend the peace conference, I take it?" I said.

"As I told you I would," Neshamah said. "I find I've lost taste for war, even in the defence of my ally."

Keter had made bargain with only the Tower – *officially, anyway*, I thought as I glanced at Kairos – which meant it was Dread Empress Malicia he was speaking of. Might have been more apt to call her a shield or an excuse than an ally, in my opinion, but it was true he'd not actually struck before being invited out of his lair by the Empress. I was not unaware that killing Malicia might actually forced him back into the Serenity, though actually achieving that would be difficult considering Ater would be murder to siege and against all odds the Empress still had a firm grip on most the Wasteland. Pulling away the kind of forces that would be required to take Praes from the Proceran fronts would almost certainly collapse them, which made the plan rather unattractive. It might still come to that, if everything went to shit, but it was not the first or finest arrow in anyone's quiver.

"It's more than a few corpses too late to be claiming a fondness for peace," I said.

"Mayhaps," the Dead King said, "it is a few corpses too early instead. It matters not: I am a patient man."

"How I love a pleasant evening with friends," the Tyrant enthused. "Yet I believe there was talk of indulging a foible of mine."

"Tower-raising, is it?" the Dead King said.

"Indeed," Kairos smiled. "'tis an interesting game, though I believe it would benefit from a greater number of competitors."

"Is there a single thing you *don't* believe that about?" I drily asked.

That actually surprised a laugh out of him, and it ripped out of his throat in too ungainly a manner – spit touched his lips, his side convulsed – to be entirely feigned. Though I wasn't all the inclined to play and the Dead King seemed largely indifferent, Kairos still adroitly pressed for us to indulge him. The rules were not all that complex, and I'd had vague memories of them. Each of the three of us would begin with a hidden amount of stones: either six, eight or ten. To win one of us must gather twenty stones, and those could be obtained both by taking from opponents as well as from the 'kingdom', a pile of fifteen stones all could see and take from. Acquiring stones had a tad more nuance to it, for taking from an opponent required the assent of the third while taking from the kingdom could be done without. One could destroy one's own stones, one at a time, also without assent. The game ended in common defeat should twenty full circles pass without anyone having raised their tower, as the kingdom being plundered 'rebelled'. The last detail was the 'pledges', bargain struck between opponents.

Anything could be agreed on, with the only forced detail being that a number of stones had to be 'pledged' as collateral by both sides. Should one of them then break the pledge, the stones would be obtained by the wounded party. The Tyrant covered the bowls with embroidered cloths after having a gargoyle move around the stones, and only then had them set on the table before us. I checked under mine, raising an eyebrow. Fortune had been a little too much on my side, these days: I began with six stones.

"As the most ancient king among us, I would invite honoured Trismegistus to begin," Kairos said.

The Dead King's eyeless gaze turned to me and I shrugged.

"If you're robbing him, I'll assent," I said.

The Tyrant of Helike pouted but handed over his stone, which the Hidden Horror deftly took and slid into the cloth-covered bowl before him.

"So Malicia twists the Thalassocracy's arm so it'll leave the Grand Alliance," I lightly said. "And now the two of you are here, thick as thieves. Now, if I were a suspicious sort, I'd suspect some sort of coalition was being assembled."

A counterweight to the Grand Alliance, in a way. The Dread Empire, the Kingdom of the Dead and the League of Free Cities bound by treaty. With that in mind, forcing Ashur on the fence made a great deal more sense. Malicia had been trying to make an alliance there for decades without successes, but the Thalassocracy lived and died on trade: when its ports were closed by blockade, it quite literally starved. It could not petition to re-enter the Grand Alliance the moment the wight fleet sailed away if doing so cost it closed ports across the entire League,

the same of Praes and the displeasure of the Dead King. Trade with the League of Free Cities was Ashur's lifeblood, much more so than trade with Levant and Procer. Oh, I doubted the Thalassocracy would turn on the Alliance even then. But it would suddenly have a great interest in remaining neutral, one that'd be highly encouraged by how absurdly lucrative it would be for Ashuran trade to become the middleman between the two great alliances. This had Malicia's mark all over it, precise violence followed by the subtle chains of coin and politics.

Of course, there was one little detail in the way: such an alliance could not take place without the assent of the Hierarchy of the League, and I suspected Anaxares of Bellerophon would rather eat his own sandals than bargain with the likes of Malicia or the Dead King. Not for the Evil involved, but rather the crowns. Sisters bless that highly inconvenient madman. I stole a stone from Kairos as well, with the Dead King's amused assent.

"Catherine," the Tyrant said, "if you would-"

"No," I said.

The Dead King refused as well when Kairos's gaze moved to him. The Tyrant took from the kingdom, still pouting.

"There would be advantages to endorsing peace with such a coalition," the Dead King said. "I'd think such a gesture would sway all its members into signing your Accords."

And there was the bribe they wanted to throw my way. Even if Praes and the League came out as allied with Keter – which I still figured at least somewhat unlikely – the Grand Alliance might still try its luck. The League's armies were marching south and depending on Procer to ward off hunger, Praes dealing with the loss of two major cities, one of them lost to goblin rebellion that'd birthed the Confederacy of the Grey Eyries and now threatened the Wasteland's south. It'd be damned risky to push through with war in such a situation, but it was a gamble that might be made. It couldn't be made without *me*, though. I brought to the table the Firstborn as well as the Army of Callow and the Legions-in-Exile, and if war came out the eastern front would be my kingdom. In effect, if I refused to press through with war then the Grand Alliance had little choice but to accept peace. My pulse quickened with excitement. Not because the offer was one that pleased me, for it did not, but because of what it implied.

The drow were marching on the Kingdom of the Dead with the intent of seizing it as their home on the surface. If the Dead King had known as much, he would have realized that his offer was not so tempting after all – it involved selling down the river my own patron goddesses and the nation that was arguably my steadiest ally, while they were all carrying out a plan I'd been the one to

suggest in the first place. No, if the Dead King *knew* then this was a botched offer. Which meant he'd not yet found the Firstborn marching towards him, and they might yet launch their assault from the north with the benefit of surprise.

"A meaningless gesture," I hedged. "You could forge the kind of doomsday artefacts forbidden by them in the Serenity by the dozens and without access we'd have no way of knowing."

Silently, I assented to the Hidden Horror once more stealing a stone from Kairos then in quick succession did the same.

"Inspection might be considered, should the inspectors not bear Names," the Dead King said.

"Catherine-

"No," I said without turning.

"No," the Dead King said, before Kairos could even ask.

The Tyrant took from the kingdom again.

"Gods," I muttered. "She really scares you, doesn't she?"

"You believe it is fear of the Intercessor that commands my interest in your Accords," the King of Death stated. "In a sense, you are not incorrect."

My brow rose. That was quite the admission, coming from the Hidden Horror himself.

"So long as the Liesse Accords stand, I have no need to war against Creation," the Dead King calmly said. "I lose nothing in observing such a peace, even on the terms of another."

An ivory finger pointed at Kairos questioningly and I absent-mindedly agreed. The Tyrant complained about the unfairness of being so brutally and repeatedly plundered, but neither of us lent much of an ear to it.

"No need," I repeated.

"What is it that you believe I gain from such ventures, Black Queen?" the Hidden Horror asked. "Wealth, bodies, fame?"

We both knew he had need of none. His wealth was beyond measure, he had a Hells' worth of human farms to harvest and the Dead King was the most storied being on Calernia bar none.

"You keep your story alive," I said. "And shape it in the cultures of those who live in your shadow. It's not about invasion, you know the risks in that. You were pruning Calernia so nothing that could strangle you would ever grow."

That was the conclusion I'd come to, after my latest chat with the Intercessor. The Wandering Bard might nakedly have tried to manipulate me, but she'd not necessarily been lying about everything. There was no denying it was unlikely to be a coincidence that the Principate had never had a Named ruler. *Someone* must have had a hand in that and given that the Intercessor worked best through Named she did not strike me as the obvious culprit there. The routine of tower-raising continued, Trismegistus assenting to another theft of Kairos and the both of us refusing the Tyrant's attempts to break out of encirclement.

"You miss the forest for the trees, Black Queen," the Dead King said. "*Why* is it that all that grows in this garden of Creation would so seek to destroy me?"

I frowned.

"You're saying you were warring on the Intercessor, not on Calernia," I said.

"I was denying tool to my opponent," the Hidden Horror said. "You would do this for me with your Accords. What need have I then of pursuing the matter further?"

I paused. Ghastly as what he was implying was it sounded terribly, well, believable. Neshamah as a mortal prince had already recognized the dangers in bearing a Name, for all the power they brought, and so carefully arranged his apotheosis through the work of years if not decades. He would not have forgotten those early lessons after touching the godhead, him least of all: undead did not change, at least no in the way that the living did. His only invasions had been under the shield of alliance or invitation, and it could not be denied that he'd been cautious about intervening on Creation. He'd been utterly monstrous when he did, but then it wasn't his soul I was putting on trial. That ship had long ago sunk at the bottom of a deep, black sea. It was the sense in what he said and horrified as I was to admit it rather *fit*. If he'd been using scorched earth tactics against the Intercessor instead of pursuing conquest of any sort, some pieces of the puzzle began to fit together. Cordelia Hasenbach had nearly gained a Name, hadn't she? Which meant the Principate had been growing into a nation where the ruler might be Named, which the Dead King would see as a direct threat.

Which explained him taking Malicia's offer over mine, among other things. He wasn't really interested in taking lands or helping the Tower: he wanted to thoroughly dismantle everything about the current Principate that might grow into a danger to him, and there was no world in which I would have allowed him that loose of a leash. The Dread Empress, though? So long as Praes and its breadbasket stood, she hardly cared about what happened to the

rest of the continent. I'd been invited to Keter to bag two birds with a stone: the Dead King could have a look at the latest fool to touch the outmost edges of apotheosis and simultaneously use my presence as a way to finally secure Malicia's agreement after months of negotiations. Now, though, large parts of Calernia had come together in a coalition, which as a story was poison to him. War, even if he had the advantage in strictly military affairs, carried other risks if pursued.

On the other hand, signing the Liesse Accords meant that so long as he did not provoke the living realms he wouldn't be up to his neck in crusades anymore. What was curtailing a few of his worst habits in the face of that? Shit. It fit together well enough I couldn't be sure if this was true or an exquisite lie – the only kind the likes of the Dead King would deign to employ. The Firstborn might be able to find a home among the tall grasses of the Chain of Hunger, I thought. It'd certainly give the Mighty something to do other than killing each other. Another circle passed according to our habit, Kairos' stone slowly dwindling at our hands. No, I decided, that entire approach was mistaken. The Intercessor being an enemy did not mean her opponent was an ally, or indeed ceased being an opponent.

Leaving the Dead King to rule his realm and garden horrors in the Serenity was not the same thing as admitting that Stygia's slavery was not mine to curtail, or that Praesi blood magic would not end because I found the practice disgusting. On the other hand, was it really my place to make a decision that would see at least dozens of thousand die? No, even though I probably had the influence to force the outcome either way. It was something that Cordelia Hasenbach needed to be brought in on, and likely the Blood as well. Another circle passed, the Tyrant complaining at how dully uninspired our playing was. My eleven stones could not be in the lead, no matter who it was that'd begun at ten stones, but soon enough the rising threat would see the game beginning to have real conflict.

"This isn't a decision I can make in haste," I said, biting my lip.

It was a lie, I thought. Unless the rest of the Grand Alliance flinched, the decision was already made. And I remained skeptical that the League would fall on the side of this scheme, no matter what the Tyrant wanted. So long as the Hierarch lived it was unlikely and should he be slain I rather doubted Kairos Theodosian would be elected to the office instead, or anyone for that matter. Which would mean the end of unity between the city-states, every ruler able to bargain for their own people again. Malicia might have full coffers and the influence to sway some, but she wouldn't even get most the cities on her side. It'd turn into a quagmire that would effectively take the League out of the

war, which was more than acceptable. That would leave Praes and Keter, and a fight that could be won.

"There is yet time," the Dead King said. "Consult your pawns if you must."

Another way around the table, leaving me at twelve stones – and Trismegistus at either fourteen or sixteen. One more, then, I'd assume he'd begun at ten.

"Lovely Catherine," Kairos tried.

"Flattering," I said, but shook my head.

The circle passed, and I now had thirteen stones in my bowl.

"Truce for seven turns," I offered the Tyrant. "Neither theft nor assent against either of us. I'll pledge six stones over it."

"Alas, I only have one stone," Kairos smiled.

I frowned, counting in my head, and that should mean he'd begun at eight stones. The Dead King was only three away from winning, then.

"What happens if you can't pay the full pledge?" I asked.

"One pays as much as one can," the Tyrant said.

"Offers stands, then," I said.

I glanced at the Dead King, whose gaze conveyed amusement and little else.

"Denied," Kairos grinned.

My brow rose. Interesting strategy. The moves continued in quick succession. I allowed Kairos to be robbed once more by the Dead King to turn up the pressure then myself took from the kingdom, as did the Tyrant. I reiterated essentially the same offer for fewer turns and a lesser pledge but was once more turned away. The Dead King took from the kingdom, bringing him to nineteen and I gazed at the Tyrant. Unless he wanted to throw the game, if I took from the kingdom he'd have to ask from my assent and take from the Dead King. It'd be better for me to take from the kingdom, there were only four stones left in it and they were the only way to gain stones without someone's assent. So I smiled back at Kairos, and from the kingdom's bounty rose up to fifteen stones in my own bowl.

"A pointless exercise," the Dead King suddenly said. "It is not a game that can be won save through the idiocy of another."

Hollow sockets gazed at Kairos.

"Should you require it for the settling of my boon I will continue until the end, but this can only lead to a common loss," the Hidden Horror said.

He wasn't wrong, I thought. Cannibalizing the rest of the kingdom with Trismegistus would bring me up to sixteen while he stayed stuck at eighteen, but after that Kairos would have no real incentive to do anything but assent to the Dead King and I robbing each other while he profited from the side. Our possessions would then slowly equalize until we all lost.

"I got all I bargained for, Trismegistus King," the Tyrant of Helike grinned. "The debt is settled in full."

"Then a pleasant evening to you both," the King of Death said, rising to his feet.

He did not bow, for haunted bones or not he was the Dead King, and left without further deigning to speak.

"Tell me a game of tower-raising isn't what you asked for in exchange for bringing him to Salia," I slowly said.

"That would be a lie," the Tyrant piously said. "Although I'll confess, this affair was not meant for my own benefit."

My eyes narrowed. Kairos Theodosian smiling took the last stone in his bowl and rolled it against his own palm, before tossing it behind him.

"You would have destroyed your last stone," I said.

"I have lived on no terms but my own," the Tyrant of Helike tranquilly replied. "And when the day comes, as it does for us all, it is on my terms I will perish. That is my nature, Catherine Foundling. That is the truth of me."

And with Hakram's game, he'd also tried to show me the nature of the Hidden Horror. Who'd not considered for a moment, I thought, that any of us could take any action in this save that which benefited us the most.

"He wouldn't keep to the Accords," I quietly said. "That's what you were trying to tell me. It's not in his nature to suffer his will to be leashed."

"Neither of them would tolerate your little orderly world, I don't think," the Tyrant mused. "And who could blame them? It's a dreadfully dull one you have painted. Yet for all your occasional snivelling self-righteousness, you've not been boring. And you've indulged me, so I shall return that favour with a boon of my own."

The odd-eyed boy leaned forward.

"Here is the first secret: angels cannot be seen by the Augur, save if they allow it," he said. "Neither can the Intercessor, the Dead King and yourself."

He smiled.

"Here is the second secret: one who has made treaties with the Queen of Callow will soon break them."

He grinned, red eye shining malevolently.

"Here is the third secret, and the last I offer this night: the Twilight Paths can lead to places not of Creation."

Kairos Theodosian dropped back into his cushioned seat, a grin like a knife still stretching his lips.

"Sweet dreams, Catherine Foundling."

Zggt

Well that's ominous.

Zarquon

What a beautiful chapter.

NerfContessa

Agree to bove posts above.

No is not of creation limited to hells and such, or 9THER worlds, I wonder.

And since it can't be the first prince, as she only just agreed, who will betray cat... Hmmmm...

The Gentlemen

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

You know the game, go vote!

Andrew Mitchell

We're 11 votes **behind** Ward! Go vote, people!!

[*darkness559*](#)

Blasphemy!

Aston Whiteman

If you keep demanding people to vote it get ignored after while.

We're here for EE Story... Not vote.

Andrew Mitchell

Hahahahaha. "...keep demanding..." you must be joking, right? It's been at least two months since I last asked anyone to vote.

Sir Giggles

It seems like the first two or three comments on every chapter are asking people to vote. It gets very tiresome. I'd rather see actual discussion, rather than the same thing on every chapter.

snowy

Someone does, and most care not who is the one doing.

[Liliet](#)

Would you vote if it *wasn't* asked for?

Does this request actually move you to rescind your vote out of contrary spite, or does it just fail to move you to do something you weren't going to do anyway?

Or does it actually succeed at providing you with a convenient way to do something you'd only do if it was made convenient for you?

If it's not that last one, you're not the target audience for this. Our loss. Lots of people are, though...

[Barthumphries](#)

And a typo thread.

there was absolutely no one to which he would no offer at least one inconsequent slight
Change the second no to not

Ok, people, go find the others. I promise, there are more. 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

The sentence beginning ""Hierophant had plundered the thoughts of still-mortal Neshamah but I'd seen" is cut off by clearly-spurious slashes and line breaks.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Based on prior experience I'm pretty sure this is EE's way of conveying that a character's train of thought has been magically derailed; a similar effect cut off Brother Simon's attempt to describe Scribe's appearance to himself.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Upon reflection I'm pretty sure it was Cordelia's other spymaster, not Simon. But who it was isn't the important bit.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Good point. And in this case, it's clearly eliding the Bard's appearance in Neshamah's time.

Aston Whiteman

If you keep demanding people to vote it get ignored after while.

We're here for EE Story... Not vote.

ethericsentinel

For those of us who vote every week, it's helpful when someone posts the link. This is also standard for most web novels.

Why complain? You can just read the next comment thread.

Shequi

I swear to every god, above or below, that Kairos Theodosian would stab himself in the back if only his arm could bend that far.

byzantine279

Why do you assume he has not?

ChillyPepper

Twenty seven times.

Soma

Are the hells of creation?

excession638

I am taking this to mean she can invade Serenity.

konstantinvoncarstein

Or that the DK will be the one to break his bargain with Catherine and open a new front using the Twilight Ways.

caoimhinh

Nope, they count as another realm. Arcadia, the Hells and whatever is they call the place where Angels live (likely the Heavens) are realms not in Creation A.K.A the mortal realm.

Fun fact: The Hells are to the left of Creation, said by Wekesa in one of the Villanous Interludes.

ChillyPepper

I'm personally of opinion that she can reach that dark place she met the real Dead King at, and by the same line of thinking, Bard's.

Morgenstern

Hey, so with the Twilight Ways in existence, *everyone* can reach *every* place in- and outside of Creation? Fun. What kind of beings will battle for this kind of access, do you think...?

*mulling it all over

...and what did the Augur see that either Intercessor or DK – or both of them – wanted her to see (while keeping from her view other things)?

Morgenstern

Or is he, once again, just strewing doubt everywhere – for the sheer fun of it? Return to the Guide to see more! =D

[sengachi](#)

No they are not.

Thea

Nope, I believe invading the Serenity is an option... if Kairos was truthful there, and why shouldn't he in that situation.

Shveiran

This time he straight-out said things, so I don't think he COULD have lied.

Halinn

He can't say something he believes or knows untrue

P

That is true, but he's already problem he can design his statements such that the first, second, and third things you think are untrue. Naming how Mike for instance.

[doominator10](#)

That last line though really clicks it again for me how unnerved Cat must feel that she understands and relates(?) to the Tyrant better than anyone else. Hakram mentioned I think in book one or 2 how whenever Catherine gets the knife-smile, things are going to be absolutely fine no matter how dire the situation. What does absolutely fine look like for the Tyrant?

Also we've had a criminal lack of Hierarch and his pedantic ways. Also, it's voter's appreciation day (or was that yesterday?), so here: <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil> .

You know what to do.

Morgenstern

I wonder if the Hierarch will try to reach the Heavens via the Paths. ^^

NerfContessa

Or through violence.

^^

Shequi

So anyway, what is it that's missing between the 4th and 5th paragraphs? The format with the // is similar to how Louis de Sartrons memory goes when he can't describe Scribe in the recent "Interlude: Mirror" chapter, so there's obviously a section missing from what happened with Catherine there.

Sparsebeard

We can only hope it's her doing or that of the sisters... else, this bodes very badly for Cat's plans.

Anon

Did we ever find out what happened to the demon of absence back at the battle of camps? We know it probably killed a few heros but do we know if the heros successfully killed it?

konstantinvoncarstein

Catherine didn't mention the loss of a large chunk of Callow, so I suppose it was killed.

Someguy

No one remembers whether a large chunk of Callow disappeared so I suppose it no longer exists.

anon

I mean wasn't there some discussion before about how the number of seats for Procer in this book (back when Caramel Hazelnut was said to hold the majority of votes) are less than the number of provinces mentioned in the earlier books? Like 21 vs 24 or something I think? Granted it could just be that the DK wiped them off the map though.

Tom

I'm pretty sure EE confirmed that was a typo

mavant

Is that chunk definitely gone? I haven't seen a word-of-Errata about it.

edrey

it should be the Bard plan that the Dk found at Liesse but with a trigger so the intersesor who is always looking dont be alerted, that is the greatest game of the night

Sparsebeard

Thinking about it, I suspect it's in fact the real conversation between the three amigos hidden from prying ears... ready to be remembered at the right moment.

The subsequent conversation would then be nothing more than a ploy...

caoimhinh

What she saw in Keter: Neshamah's apotheosis.

I wonder if Sve Noc took that memory from Catherine. They are influencing her in more ways than simply reading her thoughts. Notice, for instance, that Catherine now swears in the Sisters' name.

Instances of Cat saying "Sisters bless me" "by the Sisters" "Sve Noc forbid" "Sisters damn it" and such variations have been appearing with more frequency in each chapter, both in her thoughts and a bit in her speech.

So I would suspect Sve Noc, rather than it being Catherine forcefully sealing her own memories. The other option is the Dead King being able to steal that knowledge from her, which is unlikely since Sve Noc is protecting Catherine; he seems capable of detecting knowledge related to him, though. He knew she has knowledge of Ashkaran from the beginning, and reading Neshamah's echo's mind was enough to have Masego possessed, so who knows.

medailyfun

I believe Bard's memory from the echo is anti memetic

JJR

Just need to remember. It's not a sphere.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Oh, that's an interesting point... I'd assumed it was a cut-and-lose error, but if Cat's memories have been edited...

Morgenstern

Marked like this? That's no error, it's author's marks for something having happened in world. We've seen it before 😊

Scribe and Intercessor, so far, if I remember correctly. But at this instance, I was actually wondering if the DK was there before his reveal, listening in, having access to things Cat thinks that very moment and snipping them away, despite goddesses' protection. It might just be the Intercessor being similar to Bard in that seeing her anyplace anywhen cannot be "transcribed"... who knows. We'll see ^^

[Mental Mouse](#)

Cat may need to arrange for a permanent mindshield...

Hellspirit

Yup

[Javvies](#)

...
So ... that's not exactly what anyone would call promising.

Hmmm. Someone who has made treaties with the Queen of Callow covers a lot of potential people.

Probably not the dwarves. Not the drow.

Queen of Callow isn't explicitly Cat, allowing for treaties that predate her.

Leading candidates are probably Tariq or a (rogue) Matron. I don't think Malicia ever made a treaty with Cat/Callow and I doubt shy of her predecessors ever did either.

Could maybe be the Deoraithe, going for independence, but that seems unlikely under the known circumstances.

Could maybe be the Fae, but keeping one's word is a big deal to them, but maybe they can consider Cat giving up Winter as becoming someone other than who they made a deal with.

The Twilight Paths can be used to invade Serenity, bypassing the gate in Keter. That's going to be hugely useful.

Kairos is hax and bullshit. How the hell does he learn this stuff.

erebus42

I'm sure with copious amounts of madness, corpses, and good old fashioned underhanded fuckery.

Sparsebeard

It could also be the DK himself, the truce was a deal made with the queen of Callow or callowan nobles for all we know...

Still, that's the kind of things I fully expect to be a twist out of the left field but foreshadowed. I mean, Tariq betraying his word would be almost as predictable as Kairos at this point...

Mengha

His eye of blood is a magic oracle that answers questions... which I'm pretty sure Cat would also describe as "hax and bullshit"

Novice

I disagree, I think the dwarves are the most probable. They could have just made a deal with the DK and gave him info about the Everdark being empty in exchange for maybe a truce or lands the DK previously held. After all, they don't really have as much incentive to siege Keter as the surface-dwellers. They have the entirety of the Everdark to play with right now.

Shveiran

It's possible, yet the DK is the only contender with the dwarves as real power on Calernia. They have no interest in sabotaging the war effort when it could lead to them having literally no contender for underground expansion. Any concession obtained this way could, realistically, be pried from cold dead hands (after they stopped moving).

Novice

To be fair, it's kinda hard to assume things from the dwarves since we know next to nothing about them aside from the leader of their expeditionary force. Everything about what's going on in their seat of government is pretty much opaque.

I'm basing my thoughts from the fact that the dwarves look down(heh) upon the surface. The people in power might be arrogant enough to think that the Kingdom Under can't rely upon the surface or that they themselves could pull one over the Dead King.

Again, this is all just speculation.

konstantinvoncarstein

In my opinion, if we combine the information about the treason and the Twilight Ways, the Tyrant is saying that the perpetrator of the former is Neshamah, who will be using the latter to open a new front.

Shveiran

It's true that "Queen of Callow" could refer to someone other than Cat, well spotted.

However, it is "one who has made treaties with", not "someone belonging to a side that made treaties with".

Considering that Callow has been under occupation for a long time and had a king as its last monarch pre-Conquest, I'd say the only entities that could count as having made a deal with a Queen of Callow not Catherine and still being around are the DK and the Bard.

Of the two, I think the Bard is the only one to not have made a deal with Cat beforehand?

You are right, don't get me wrong: I think this is the kind of "technical-truth" Kairos would abuse, I'm just saying this is a very narrow broadening of the possible subjects.

Javvies

Titles could arguably count as entities separate from their current holder.

As in, "the Duchess of Daoine", or "the Prince of Iserre". Similarly, it's possible that Names could be viewed in the same sort of light. Ie, "The Warlock", "the Black Knight", or "the Wizard of the West" could refer to a current or past bearer of that Name and arguably be covered.

Point is ... we just don't have anywhere near enough information to narrow down the potential candidates.

Shveiran

Possible, but in my opinion that feels unlikely.

To have the previous rulers or Callow as the true meaning of "Queen of Callow" is indirect but misleading only through implications.

To have "one who holds the same position as someone who previously made a deal with" to stand in for "one who made a deal with" is disingenuous, and untrue.

It's kind of like going "well, you'll notice that this here legal document was signed by Shveiran, but since I've been knighted I go by Sir Shveiran, and thus it's null and void: I owe you nothing". If you squint a lot, it can pass for technically true... but it's not. It doesn't hold water, and for all its stupidity the Pilgrim's curse had weight. You can easily go around it, but I expect skimming the line too closely would cost you.

konstantinvoncarstein

Neshamah made a deal with Catherine, the 3 months-truce

Insanenoodlyguy

That's the one thing we know will hold though. Interlude already said the truce holds up. It doesn't preclude the Dead King from doing some other sort of betrayal, but that one he's sticking to, if only for his own self interest as he doesn't want to hand this kind of "I Lied" as Ammo to somebody like Cat.

Decius

The dwarves made a deal with her as well.

Breaking a truce has narrative penalties that Neshamah would never accept.

[Mental Mouse](#)

How about the Elves of the Golden Bloom? IIRC they border Callow, and must have made treaty at some point.

Shveiran

I guess the Good King had a Name, so the elves wouldn't shoot him. Then again, making a deal with earthly powers? Filthy, human earthly powers?

I dunno, it's definitely possible, but I'm not seeing it.

Someguy

Probably not the Goblins though I'm not sure of that one since it was made by Viv in Cat's name.

Noldo

Does Tyrant himself have any active treaty with Cat at the moment? It would be just in character for Kairos to refer to himself in third person in such a context.

skovbenjamin

I feel like it could be a reference to Catherine only recently being recognized as queen of callow. During all of her previous negotiations she was treated with as the queen in callow.

I'm not sure what the implication of this could be but wanted to bring up this information

Sparsebeard

Well, it would seem that getting the DK to sign the accords wouldn't be such a boon in the end...

Still, they will probably be used by both sides as a distraction. Seeing that the real problem of the destructive forces all sides can bring to the others means that plotting is sure to be used to reduce the losses and try to ensure victory.

However, any dally-dallying means that there is a risk the isolated forces of the Empire Ever Dark are singled out by the DK and destroyed.

And yeah, I can't hate Tyrant, he's just having fun. Just keep him entertained until you're ready to end him Cat, if you make it interesting enough he'll probably walk to his doom willingly lol.

caoimhinh

Or if you make it look as if the other party is trying to manipulate Kairos' fate or free will. He took it *deeply* personal when the Skein was **spooling** back time and predicting the future.

[Liliet](#)

"Make it look like" is prone to backfiring. "Goad the other party into" sounds more like the thing that will probably work every time, assuming you succeed at it.

erebus42

Awww. I just realized that Catherine is probably the closest thing to a real friend the Tyrant has (and probably is capable of having). I meant he probably did all that at least partially to fuck with her, but still she's the only one who ever bothers to take the time and play with him. For someone who lives their life with the constant knowledge of it's imminent end that probably genuinely means a lot to him. Is he still likely to betray her? Absolutely. But of everyone else I think he probably hopes that - if not him- she'll be the one to end up on top.

Sparsebeard

Well, you can expect someone who put so much importance on having fun during his short stay on Calernia to get along with someone who is literally F.U.N.

Shikkarasu

I don't think Kairos cares who wins. He's a little blue/orange in that respect. He's been saying since he was 12 that it isn't the end that matters, nor how he's treated, it's how you play the game.

Kind uncle? Pitiful and pandering. Drunk Father? Useless and ineffective. Black Knight? Guilty of half-measures. Kairos juggles enemies to see how many and how long he can go because he's the only one insane enough to try and it's not like he'll live long enough to deal with the consequences. In return his name keeps his illness at bay, just long enough for him to finish digging his own grave.

In short, as long as Cat dances to her own tune and hates compromise she will be a kindred spirit. And as long as she fights him she's another enemy to juggle. It is a form of love. Twisted and unhealthy, but sincere and platonic. She is literally what gets him out of bed in the morning.

Shikkarasu

*nephew, not uncle. I am a dumb

edrey

Kairos is so nice. the first secret shouldn't be about the inability of the Augur but the Augur herself, the second could be Procer but Cordelia is not a fool, the Pilgrim won't risk millions, so it must be the Dwarfs telling the DK about the Drow, I see the bard hand here, the third could be the fae, the golden bloom, the hells or even the heavens. I bet is the DK attacking Salia and then blaming Malicia but who knows, well Kairos.

Andrew Mitchell

Called it. Specifically, that the Dead King's agent would be the third player.

But, more importantly, what do you all think about Karios' boon to Catherine?

And you've indulged me, so I shall return that favour with a boon of my own."

The odd-eyed boy leaned forward.

"Here is the first secret: angels cannot be seen by the Augur, save if they allow it," he said. "Neither can the Intercessor, the Dead King and yourself."

He smiled.

"Here is the second secret: one who has made treaties with the Queen of Callow will soon break them."

He grinned, red eye shining malevolently.

Three secrets; all reasonably direct statements that, as we know, cannot be untrue. That's quite a boon.

Who's going to break the treaties? The goblins? The dwarves? The Sisters? Levantines? Procer? Pilgrim?

What places outside creation? Hells, I assume so. Heaven, maybe. Arcadia, probably. Wherever the Wild Hunt have bugged off to. The Golden Bloom? (I think this last one has the most intriguing potential. Commenters here have talked about the possibility of getting the elves involved.)

caoimhinh

The third secret is no surprise, as the Twilight Paths are in themselves a realm from outside creation, they are a shard of Arcadia stolen then transformed by the sacrifice of a god. The premise of being able to travel outside Creation is exactly why they are useful, enabling people to save travel time. In fact, Cat and co. should already be grateful that Neshamah apparently can't use those roads to strike at them... yet.

I think the most important secret that Kairos shared is the second one, as it pertains to a breaking of treaties and thus would be something significant on a national scale. In the current state of affairs, that could create quite a mess.

A lot of candidates there:

The worst-case scenario would be Dead King breaking truce and attacking again, but then it would be pointless to do so why trying to sell a peace treaty.

The Dwarves backing off on their end of the bargain would be a huge hit, but it's also unlikely.

The Goblins betraying Callow is a possibility, but it also involves a huge risk for them. Who knows what has been happening in the East while the narration has been focused on the West? High Lady Abreha (whom the last time we knew of her was sending envoys to Callow) and the Goblin Federation hadn't been idle, that's for sure.

The first secret is, in fact, *inaccurate*. Maybe a piece of second-hand information (which would mean it is tinted by the pride of who made the statement). The Augur *can* see those beings of power and predict them, but it is risky for her and if she is found then they will strike at her through the vision. Yet as we learned in the recent interlude, Agnes has learned from those experiences and managed to find a way to see along the edges of their power.

P.S: The Golden Bloom is in Creation, it's the forest next to Daoine. The Elf settlement inside was teleported to Arcadia when this whole mess started, though, so reaching it wouldn't be too hard, but it would be a mess to even talk with them as they apparently kill anyone in sight. Which is kind of weird considering the Forever King tried to prevent Akua's Folly by sending two ancient and strong Elves to kill Akua (yet they were stopped by Bard) so *maybe* they aren't quite as evil as everyone thinks? Calernia's knowledge of the Drow was wrong due to lack of contact (even with some Drow living as mercenaries through Mercantis), so anything is possible.

Andrew Mitchell

> The Goblins betraying Callow is a possibility, but it also involves a huge risk for them. Who knows what has been happening in the East while the narration has been focused on the West? High Lady Abreha (whom the last time we knew of her was sending envoys to Callow) and the Goblin Federation hadn't been idle, that's for sure.

This seems to fit the current situation the best.

> P.S: The Golden Bloom is in Creation, it's the forest next to Daoine. The Elf settlement inside was teleported to Arcadia when this whole mess started, though, so reaching it wouldn't be too hard

I'm pretty certain the whole Golden Bloom is gone; as stated in this quote from <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/07/05/chapter-16-shambles/>

[“The Tower's used the emergency channels to inform everyone of general rank or higher that the Golden Bloom is phasing out of Creation,” Juniper told me.]

ChillyPepper

The most probable candidate is the Grey Pilgrim for me.
Patterns of three and all.

Andrew Mitchell

IIRC Cat's pattern of three with GP has been broken by Book 5 events. But you're still right that it could be GP; for example, the Bard could have talked him into not backing the Accords.

ChillyPepper

I meant the pattern of betrayal. He just made the second recently when he slowed down in helping Zeze so the pattern is still ongoing.

Shveiran

If that is the second, what do you count as the first? I don't think anything before Prince's graveyard matters, they were still enemies.

Insanenoodlyguy

He agreed to be a captive in Callow and then left. He even notes during the battle that this has ensured Cat will always have an edge against him, one of the reasons he had to try such extreme measures to have a real chance against her.

Shveiran

Mhm, I don't know. I think that's like mixing apples and oranges?

I mean, to have a pattern of three you need three somethings, right? So what do you count these as?

Although... Uh, you may be right now that I think about it.

He broke his word when he left, then again when he didn't do all he could to help Masego. It kind of works.

I still hope you are wrong, though. After all this time and effort...

[Liliet](#)

He was absolutely going to do all he could to help Masego, then followed the guidance of an ally in a split-second event that didnt have space for him to consider this ally's relationship with his

other (situational) allies. He can be said to have been tricked into that as accurately as anything.

No betrayal was involved.

matesbe

That was not a deliberate betrayal. He delayed helping because he trusted that the Bard knew best in this matter. It was not an intentional slight against Masego. We literally see his PoV. He wasn't thinking about screwing over anyone, just that Bard was asking him to wait a second or two.

For all he knew, helping too early would just lead to the DK killing Masego outright, or maybe them being too closely linked together and killing the fragment would kill both.

ChillyPepper

It is a betrayal, and he knows it enough to not tell cat about it afterwards. His intentions are always well and good, it means nothing to the other side.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Or (and this is not a spoiler as of latest episodes) it might be that Masego's sorcery would have doomed him against the Dead King – either because it was contaminated, or simply because the DK is the ultimate sorcerer. Note that in any case, Masego has not been left powerless without it. Then too, it gave the easy-going researcher an actual *grudge* against DK.

goliath1303

Here's a shocker... Some people reading this chapter haven't read whatever chapter you're taking about! It does not matter if your referencing the next chapter or the last chapter of the whole story, if it comes after the one you're commenting on it's a spoiler. I honestly can't believe you actually think that you can claim sharing information from literally any distance farther into the story is not a spoiler. Especially with the justification of "It's been posted so it's not a spoiler." If it hasn't been posted it wouldn't exist so what exactly do you count as a spoiler? Damn...

[Javvies](#)

The Elves residing in the Golden Bloom are nominally Good, and the kind of things Diabolist was doing in Liesse are not the sort of thing anyone wants to have happening.

Even if you are a bunch of xenophobic racist genocidal assholes who will kill any non-Hero who gets too close to the Golden Bloom.

That said, I believe Akua was also working on getting information about/access to the source of power used by the Deoraithe to empower the Watch. Who are enemies of the Elves.

I'm pretty sure that there's statements from EE saying things to the effect that the Elves of the Golden Bloom really are as bad as people think they are.

Someguy

Which makes me wonder if Cat could barter/reward the passage into the Bloom with Daoine once they have enough firepower.

[Javvies](#)

Eh, assuming the Dead King gets beaten back, the Elves will return with the Golden Bloom to Creation, eventually.

And murdering the Elves and reclaiming the Bloom is on the racial to do list for the Deoraithe. Problem is, Elves are ridiculously OP.

On the other hand, most of Calernia isn't going to mind the Deoraithe killing the Elves, but neither are they likely to help, though I think that might be part of the deal they have with Callow. So I don't anticipate dealing with the Elves anytime soon, even discounting the probable losses the Dead King will inflict, then there's Malicia to deal with, probably Kairos and Hierarch, and we can't forget about Bard, unless the Deoraithe reclamation of the Golden Bloom happens in a sequel series.

laguz24

No, it's crashing the golden bloom into the serenity.

Ton

I really like this idea – instead of dumping a lake from Arcadia onto a crusade, dump a city full of elves onto the Serenity 😊

Crash

Completely unrelated but ever since it has been pointed to me that the Deoraithe could well be a representation of native people it has been shedding a new light on a lot of stuff through the story and it has just occurred to me that

the empowering of the Watch through the spirits of ancestors is literally the whole concept of shamanism and power in the knowledge of the previous generation realized. The spirits have granted the Watch its power.

NerfGlaistigUaine

And this is why I love Kairos. He is a true Unfettered. He's super smart, chaotic and fun. This is a man who cares for nothing but the dance and until the very last step he moves to his own beat.

Erraticerrata, please, please, please make a Kairos-like character the protagonist of your next work. A true villain protagonist with no scruples, no greater good, just pure chaotic evil is one I would absolutely adore, especially one written with your skill.

Shveiran

It would be near-impossible to write a satisfying book that revolved around one such character: you experience the narrative world through the eyes of the protagonist, and if he cares about nothing but the dance, it means what he does has no weight in your eyes because even the dance impacts nothing. It doesn't come off as satisfying.

Here, Kairos works because he's at odds with the other characters, which allows you to feel he is playing with fire near an orphanage. On his own, it wouldn't really work.

nimelennar

You have successfully killed my hope for a Dread Emperor Irritant prequel story.

I hope you're happy.

Shveiran

I find the taste of your broken tears staves off the void of my dreamless nights. It helps some, thanks for asking.

NerfGlaistigUaine

No weight does not necessarily mean uninteresting although it does become harder to write. You can want a character to succeed without dramatic stakes, although again, it's hard to write well. However, there can be weight by showing the world around him, the other characters who care, the effort and suffering they go through crushed by the gleefully uncaring protagonist. It would create a character you both hate and love; hate b/c he pointlessly destroys all the hopes of the other characters you love and love b/c he's, well, Kairos.

I think it can be done and done well. And I think Erraticerrata can avoid the cardinal sin of making a great card-carrying too sympathetic when he doesn't need to be. It's why I couldn't get into the show Lucifer. He's the motherfucking devil who's supposed to be a magnificent bastard, why does he have so many scruples? Why does he care so much? Choose whether you want him to be a suave evil bastard acting for shits and giggles or a sympathetic misunderstood bad boy! Sorry for rant. Anyways, I don't think it's impossible and I think Erraticerrata can pull it off if he chooses to.

laguz24

He would be a total bore, like boba fett, there is only so much of backstabbing, betrayal, and I don't care what happens before it gets old and the minute it does he is over. He is fun to watch but not that fun to see the inside the head of.

matesbe

My question is, what does Catherine have in common with angels, the Dead King, and the Intercessor? It's easy to say that the Sisters' protection causes it, but the statement seems too specific for that.

SINISTAR

Keep in mind, the Dead King has suggested in the past that Cat is **still** on the path of Apotheosis, having cast aside a poor, cheap version(Winter) for another.

Sylwoos

It is the sister though, we already know this from the interlude.

matesbe

That doesn't line up though. Auger totally saw Cat in that interlude, it just was only for a moment before the sister's intervened. Maybe I'm nitpicking on wording, but it seems like something might have changed since.

[Liliet](#)

Don't get too hung up on exact wording. Kairos *meant* that Augur cannot *watch* her and get useful information beyond "protected by the Sisters". That is true, as of that interlude.

[Mental Mouse](#)

It's just confirmation that she really is up there with the high-rollers:

Catherine Foundling has fought demons directly, and bent angels to her will. She has cast aside a Name and a Fae throne, yet gained power beyond either. She signed on with Sve Noc as their representative and intermediary, but by the same token, they are also her *mentors*... and last time she had a mentor, she rose far beyond him.

The Dead King suggested that "renouncing" apotheosis was not so easy, and the Wandering Bard said that "because of who you are", Cat can call her anytime. The greatest of Heroes and Villains alike look on her works with varying combinations of respect, awe and fear.

Mortals say that Fate and Providence shape their lives, and must merely be endured, but Cat has taken them in hand, and made them tools and weapons for her purposes. And where most people live out stories, Cat *writes* them.

Andrew Mitchell

Well said!

WuseMajor

I mean, I'm pretty sure she has at least one deal going on with Kairos right now. If we're talking "sudden, inevitable betrayals" he's kind of the obvious suspect, especially since he's the one telling her about this.

Shveiran

Doesn't the // in the beginning remind you of Spool?

Morgenstern

Right. That, too. Intercessor and Scribe "deleting" ... memories ... of them as well, if I remember correctly.

Leventide

So will the series end with Cat invading the Heavens?

konstantinvoncarstein

I doubt it. Just one Choir is a pretty tough opponent, and we know there are at least 5 of them (Contrition, Judgement, Endurance, Mercy and Compassion). The power needed to destroy them is more than anything on Calernia could provide, and that story is those of an over ambitious mortal going against the Heavens.

Insanenoodlyguy

Agreed that on her own she can't possibly win that fight.

However, by then, Grand Marshall "Godkiller", "The indomitable", "Stab all the shiny fuckers" Abigail will be leading her armies. The only way to defeat her would be to catch her while she's asleep and keep stabbing and never stop till you have more blood on the outside then inside because you are not going to beat her on the field, any field.

konstantinvoncarstein

And the whole time, she would be trying to escape 😊

[frolamiz](#)

Very interesting!

Here is my theory: the ones who are about to break their treaties with the queen of Callow are the Dwarves. Because it would absolutely fuck with Cat plans, and would be relatively unexpected, since Dwarves keeping to their words is such a big trope.

It would probably come from dissensions among them, one faction that want to shank the Dead King and the other that want to remain cautious, and the cautious one win. Obviously with Nussy or the Bard manipulating things from the shadows. It would open many narrative avenues for an arc in the Dwarven kingdom.

The cautious faction that won would represent the conservative part of their society and its inertia, and the conflict to have them fulfill their oaths would help expand the story.

And lets be honest, the accords can live without the rats and elves because they don't do diplomacy, the giants are isolationists and have yet to recover from Triumphant, but without the signature of the Dwarves, the strongest mortal kingdom of Calernia, they become kind of pointless. And an arc in their kingdom would be a perfect excuse to sell the accords to them.

Of course, it has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that I want an arc focused on them. Really, I promise =)

Another interesting thing in this chapter is what happen during the game. The two "big" players that are focused on each other deny everything to the third "smaller" player and only stop doing so when one of them is about to win. It remind me a lot of Nussy and the Bard swatting Cat's attempts to make the accords as a side-thought while they are focused on each other.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I don't think Tyrant can truly die anymore.

He can no longer tell lies.

He rewards entertainment with gifts of knowledge.

He's a fucking fairy.

mavant

He's too entertaining to die.

grzecho2222

Hero: There's nowhere left to run. Nowhere.

Kairos: Nowhere, my dear? Oh, now you don't really mean that.

Hero: Oh, but I do!

Kairos: Nonsense, child! If you'd lost all your faith, I couldn't be here, and here I am! Oh, come now. Dry those tears. You can't go to the ball looking like that.

Cinderella: The ball? Oh, but I'm not—

Kairos spreads butterfly wings.

Fairy Kairos: Of course you are. But we'll have to hurry, because even miracles take a little time.

Hero: Miracles?

Fairy Kairos: Uh-hmm. Watch. What in the world did I do with that magic scepter? I was sure I—

Hero: Magic scepter?

Fairy Kairos: That's strange... I... I always—

Hero: Anyway, you must be—

Fairy Godmother: Stopped? Of course not. Where is that scepter? I— Oh! I forgot. I put it away.

Sidekick: Look-a what he did!

Love Interest: Duh... duh... How'd he do it?

Fairy Kairos: Now... let's see. Hmm... I'd say the first thing you need is, um... a pumpkin.

Hero: A—a pumpkin?

Fairy Kairos: Uh-huh. Now, um... Now... the magic words. Uh... Oh... Ahem!

(Singing): Salaga doola menchicka boola

ninegardens

So....

I think Kairos might have just moved up the list of "Cats greatest Allies".

Like seriously, this guy is a frickin' magician:

"Hey, I'll invite the DK to the peace talks... but also go about explicitly reminding the other speakers as to exactly WHY they don't want him to sign... and the bastard won't suspect a thing."

He loves Cat. He loves that she GETS him, that she knows how to play the game, that she sets up his line, and understands his subtle jokes. Even if she doesn't laugh along, and even if she *hates* him for his past treachery, he likes her, and one can't help but suspect that when he eventually throws the game and annihilates himself (as he has just suggested he will eventually do), he will do it to the cost of Cat's enemies, not Cat.

Because he doesn't LIKE the Dead king. One can't help but suspect that Kairos views DK much the same way he viewed Amadeus- a terrible boring winning machine made of gears and misery. He might jump around for the Evuls, but based on this scene, you can't help but suspect that at the end of the day, DK is truly Tyrants enemy. And he WANTS Cat to beat him.

And what about Intecessor? Fate made flesh?

Well... If Bard is truly the monster she appears to be then she stands for all that Kairos despises. (If she is herself against the gods, their monster bound in chains, this may change slightly)...

But Cat.... Cat is another player in the game. Cat is an honoured adversay. Cat is his AUDIENCE, and no matter what happens, at the end of the day, I don't think he will be willing to damn her.

He'll probably betray her again (multiple times), and work against her purposes....

But I can't help but think that at the end of the day, he'll be offered one last chance to betray her and destroy all she has made.

And He'll refuse.

laguz24

He won't because she is fun and does the dance with him. Amadeus, Dead King, and especially Bard. They are the ones on top, the inevitable grinding machines of the way things have always gone and what he always hated, he literally got his name by pulling on the string of fate. Cat is still on the trek upward, not on the keep what you have plateau.

[mammon](#)

There is a pretty big thing that Cat seems to be overlooking about the counter-alliance. The Bloom is inhabited by infertile good-ish elves that live in nature or at least control weather and stuff, and their equally infertile and previously stagnant and isolated counterpart of the Drow recently changed massively.

This balance might have some mayor effects on the alliance being forged, especially considering DK would remember exactly what happened to the elves thanks to being around at the time. If creation balances them out, then the elves may join DK and Praes if Cat commits the Drow against them, and vice versa.

Especially if the Duke of Cloudless Noons (Which I'm still convinced must be out there somewhere, Cat couldn't get the Last Mantle of Winter without the Summer Queen being both enabled and obligated to create an equal but opposite action at the same time.) went to the Bloom and changed it up as well. Maybe with an equal but opposite reaction, in that he won and gained control of the Bloom by tyranny and Saint levels of unyielding stubbornness, at the same moment that Cat lost and gained control of the Drow by cooperation and understanding. Or some other Named emerging to change things up.

The moment the Drow changed this much by a Story being woven for Cat, which is definately the case with the dwarves mobilising exactly when she entered and stuff, the same must've happened with the elves in parallel manners. Cat might've been manipulated by Creation to go to the Underdark exactly because something was about to reach it's pivot in the Bloom.

Cat is considering the balance of Calernia, without assuming that Creation already has some counter-weight in place to not give her free reign.

matesbe

The Drow are not infertile, just relatively uninterested. Which is evolutionary speaking a bad thing (there's a reason why humans have sexual desire), but they totally can have children. They just usually don't.

Also, the only reason why Cat inherited all of Winter is because she was already of Winter before the rest of Winter decided to fuck off and become Fall. The Summer Queen almost certainly had not given a mortal a mantle of Summer before the joining between Summer and Winter, and after said joining she didn't have power over Summer to give someone such a mantle. I would be shocked if a Summer counterpart to Cat showed up.

The Elves join with the DK? Frankly I feel like they have a smaller chance of joining the DK than the rest of Calernia. They hate non-Elves, but have some respect for Heroes. The same cannot be said for Villains.

Mammon

I'm not 100% sure but still pretty sure that race-wide infertility was a side-effect of the rituals and immortality-gaining and their pre-Cat state of eternal self-decay. The events even stated that Cat finally found someone who had a kid once so that she finally knew whether she was looking at a woman to compare her to the rest, showing how utterly rare this event was. While many drow are so young that they don't remember the glory days, they're not new either.

Those post-apocalypse generations wouldn't have been affected by the rituals of their previous civilisation and/or over time they could have ended the whole shebang by paying off their debts of unborn child years of lifespan by sheer time passing. And thus this combined with what we've seen, suggests that there weren't any Drow generations past the pivot of She Noc's first step to godhood and turning the Everdark into their domain whole.

And when you look at how the fey work, that would most definately be a thing that would have to be done. Not after Summer and Winter married, but the moment before they did and when their balance still applied. Cat's reward as the last Duchess of Winter in Creation created a massive disbalance and a chance for a whole new Winter Court to come into being, so sheer balance at the time that she was given it would still dictate a balancing reaction by Fey rules. The two courts were now finally at peace, but with a seedling of their conflict sown to continue their eternal war. Just without their participation.

So when you ask me whether there should be a Duke of Summer created to balance out the Duchess of Winter created, then I'd say for this universe of course it has to be. A Villain like her without mirror Hero in case she beats the regular Heroes, Creation is too seasoned for that. A court of Winter that has no counter-balance at all, the fey would never operate like that. And a freaking Court of Twilight being created by the first of the Night by the death of Dusk and the rebirth of Dawn, without there being a newly formed lesser god and/or Court of Day? That's the kind of perfect Story balance that I find more illogical than a Duke of Summer not existing, in this universe operating by these rules.

And with the elves, they don't have to side with DK. They've just got to side against Cat for balance, and that's when the political concrete shoes called the Deoraithe come in. Callow's North will essentially ensure that Cat and the Bloom will have to be at opposite sides of the conflict, whether that means the Elves joining the counter-Alliance or joining

against DK to prevent Cat deciding that there won't be war. Whatever Cat will decide, thanks to Deo the politics are already set that the elves will be forced by events and pivots to be opposing her. Remember, being a Good country doesn't immediately mean you side with the other Good all buddy buddy and cannot have alliances of convenience with Evil ones.

Liliet

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To narrow it down a bit for you: Catherine, who was not looking because she was busy conquering the place and this was only a passing curiosity, finally stumbled upon someone who she happened to know had just personally given birth to a child becoming one of her Peerage.

If nisi didn't regularly, if passionlessly, have children, such an event would be *infinitesimally* unlikely.

Mammon

It was never defined when she had a kid, it might've been from before Sve Noc ascension step 1. So when there was still fertility. And you know that Cat spends more of her off-screen time on that kind of nonsense than she should, right?

Kel the Seer

It would be very in character for Kairos's first secret to be wonderful misdirection. So, the Augur cannot see Cat or the DK directly, but only infer from their impact on Creation. But she can see Kairos just fine.

Which means that this whole game was a setup. The Augur, only seeing Kairos's side of the conversation, but knowing that the other two 'Major Villains' are there? Or maybe just Cat after her chat with the First Prince? How would she interpret this whole scene?

Would it focus on the game or the conversation, or some odd amalgamation of both? Would she see Cat and DK "allying" against the Tyrant as they all increase their wealth at the expense of a kingdom that cannot defend itself. That could easily be interpreted as the villain having secret alliance to divy up a

weakened Procer. Especially in loght of Cat's recent admission that she went to Keter to do more than stymie Malicia's plans.

[Liliet](#)

> But she can see Kairos just fine.

When he isn't in their company.

It works like a cloud, shrouding them themselves and their works, including anyone in their immediate vicinity. The angels' effect is likely more targeted/localized, leaving their heroes visible at all times except when the angels are directly present. Which, by the way, implies to me that Agnes cannot predict results of Hanno's coin throws except the same way any mortal can try (Neshamah ain't getting laurels, for example).

Anyway, no, Agnes could not see this game, or the entire shrouding would be pointless by Catherine being as good as completely visible whenever she is surrounded by not-personally-shrouded mortals, which is most of the time.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Intercessor showed up. I think. That's why she had a break in her thoughts.

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

I feel like we are setting up for a big plot twist. Tyrant might end up being the hero and martyr of this arc which might explain why we keep saying we dunno what he wants, why he keeps getting badass screentime, why we are building some weird rapport with Cat.

ninegardens

See, personally I see him being a thorn in the side THIS arc... but in a way that screws over other players as well... and LATER he does something reckless and cool. Maybe not as a martyr as such... but... useful.

This arc feels like diplomacy, there isn't really anything to martry AGAINST it would seem.

[aran](#)

Hierophant had plundered the thoughts of still-mortal Neshamah but I'd seen/

Is the narrator losing her thread here because of some memetic thing where Catherine can't talk about what she saw, or is this an editing mistake?

[aran](#)

It's not stated, but I'm assuming she said that back in Ashkaran, right? Catherine has never missed the opportunity for some deadpan humor.

[aran](#)

Nesh is right, though, there doesn't seem to be any way to force a victory for yourself.

Going backwards, if you win, you had to start your turn with 19. That means you got to 19 on the last turn, and BOTH opponents didn't agree to let one of them take from you. Why wouldn't they?

Satan

Cat talking with the dead king reminds me of the long-distance chats between Cordelia and Cat, with her role reversed.

Yunamed

Is it possible that the twilight ways lead to more than just Arcadia, and maybe the afterlife for dead souls. The twilight ways representing the end of a journey of one's life.

Chapter 82: Delegations

"Trouble reveals either true friends or a corpse."

– Arlesite saying

I'd charged Vivienne with handling the ceremonies from our end and come out pleased with the arrangements.

Mostly for the swiftness of them, truth be told, as instead of squabbling with the Procerans and the rest over pre-eminence and etiquette she'd cut through the waste and agreed the Callowan delegation would be the fourth to enter the hall. After the Proceran one – save for the First Prince herself, who would be the last person to enter – and the other two current members of the Grand Alliance, Levant and Ashur. Out of the twenty delegates I'd brought a share of five had been set aside for Black, who'd brought in Scribe as one of them as well as two translators and an officer from the Legions-in-Exile. My people were a little more varied in nature, though it couldn't be denied that we were thin on the ground when it came to actual diplomats. The Empress and the High Seats would have trained diplomats, usually highborn, truthfully not unlike the way the Old Kingdom had usually sent powerful and trusted nobles to talks with

foreigners. I'd had precious few aristocrats I could call on even before I'd crushed their overly ambitious faction in my court, though, and the few I had a modicum of trust for were already in military or administrative positions. I couldn't exactly pull away Grandmaster Talbot from his knights simply to bolster my delegation's prestige, not when he was so much more useful at the Hellhound's side.

The presence of Lady Vivienne Dartwick, heiress-designate to Callow and arguably these days my main diplomat, had never been in doubt. Neither had been Lord Adjutant's – who was one of the only two orcs in the room and so stood out not unlike a bull surrounded by lambs – or General Abigail's, as my respective right hand and the ranking commander of the forces I'd brought to Salia. The dark-haired general had discreetly downed half flask of brandy before we set out in what I took to be an attempt at fortifying her spirits, and ever since tired with admirable effort to attract the least attention possible even though her ceremonial armour clearly indicated her rank as one of the ten highest officers in the Army of Callow. I had two sapper officers with me chosen at Pickler's recommendation, one specialized in fortifications and the other in war engines, and beyond that mostly civilians. Scribes and translators from the personal staff Vivienne had brought across the Whitecaps, as well as the closest thing we had to a scholar of Proceran etiquette – Henrietta Morley, eldest daughter and heiress of Baroness Ainsley of Harrow. Vivienne had apparently set her to studying with the now-abdicated Prince Amadis to shore up what she'd been taught by tutors, the former Prince of Iserre apparently having been thoroughly amused he was being asked for etiquette lessons and not state secrets.

After us the Empire Ever Dark was to follow in, General Rumena having gathered a band of ten sigil-holders for prestige, accompanied by Ivah and three dzulu from the Losara because *someone* needed to take notes and few Mighty were all that likely to do so. Ivah had told me that the Losara Sigil's sworn duty of marking down the oaths made by sigil-holders had actually been drawing to its ranks Firstborn inclined towards scholarly pursuits. Though literacy was one of the more common Secrets, the Losara were beginning to stand out in that even dzulu were expected to know their full glyphs. Akua had once, after a few drinks, gotten into a heated debate with Indrani about whether the surprisingly high literacy rate of the Firstborn was because there had been more drow when the Night was formed and so literacy became more common along all lines when the population number reduced, or because it was one of the few things no one would bother to kill over and so a harmless skill to learn the old-fashioned way. I knew not the answers, and even the Sisters had given ambiguous reply, but whatever the truth of it I suspected the Firstborn could only benefit from the prominence of such knowledge deepening with every generation. Not that they'd

ceased... acquiring through the old means. Of the ten sigil-holders, all familiar to me, all spoke Chantant and three Tolesian. One had even acquired Lunara from the Princes' Graveyard, which I was pretty sure Rumena had almost killed it for. Getting the drow to, uh, do that less often was admittedly something of a work in progress. I'd made sure to get oaths none of them would fight here, even against each other.

The delegation for the League of Free Cities would be the last to enter, and though I'd yet to see them with my own eyes Vivienne had made inquiries as to its composition. It was about what one would expect from an alliance as shaky as the League tended to be even when it had common enemies. The Tyrant and his favourite commander, General Basilia – who I'd met her once before, at Rochelant – were clearly the heart of it, but all cities seemed to have claimed seats as well. Basileus Leo Trakas of Nicae and his personal scribe, the two self-proclaimed Exarchs of Penthes, a senior member of the Secretariat with a lesser one carrying his ink and parchment, the Bellerophon's appointed general and his minder from the *kanenas*, one of the foremost Magisters of Stygia, Zoe Ixioni, and two preachers from Atalante. These last two had for some reason been made to carry a copy of the Book of All Things nailed to a plank and were seemingly deeply offended by it, though the other delegates seemed to find it most amusing. Like everyone else they'd brought translators aplenty, and even a few scribes for what I assumed would be their common records. There was no trace of the Hierarch, which was cause for both relief and renewed wariness.

The Jacks had found no sign of the Dead King among the delegation but that meant little. He was not the kind of monster that would be found unless he wished to be.

"Queen Catherine Foundling of Callow, First of Her Name, Protector of Daoine and high priestess of the Empire Ever Dark."

We'd not waited long before the painted gates barring the hall, for we'd been fetched only when the Dominion's delegation was already moving, but it'd been long enough for my thoughts to drift. As the gates swung open and the majordomo's voice ran, I was jolted back to full attention and stepped forward. The Cloak of Woe trailed behind me as I limped forward, leaning on my staff of yew. No plate for me today, not if I was to be seated for hours while talking, though the dark embroidered tunic that'd been chosen for me was discreetly padded. Enough it could blunt a knife, if one found its way into my ribs. Hakram knew me well. Belted across my body under my breasts and at belly height, the tunic was almost uncomfortably high-collared and came down to my hips, where I'd prevailed when demanding trousers and comfortable leather boots. I'd had a look at the effect of it in the mirror that morning, and though it made it rather plain I was... less than curvy, when matched with my cloak it also leant a certain severe

martial look I rather liked. The crown on my brow was the same I had worn at my coronation: a thing of jagged iron that dug into my scalp, though since my crowning a single pitch-black piece of onyx had been set at the front of it.

A murmur passed through assembly as I entered, and though I'd hardly expected a tavern's common room to serve as our place of gathering I was still faintly surprised as the sheer size of it. The tea hall where I'd met with Hasenbach yesterday had been beautiful but not overdone, but this? You could fit a garrison in here, if you piled them up. I'd never seen ceilings so tall save at the cathedral in Laure, and the dome there was not bordered by sculpted gold depicting passages from the Book of All Things. The dome's surface was a superb painting of the founding of Procer, beginning at the collapse of the Tower and ending with the election of Clothor Merovins as First Prince. The hall itself was a broad circle touched by painted doors at an interval that was pleasing to the eye, as were the ornate golden arcs filled with the Merovins heraldry above the doors. The marble of the square pillars holding up the dome was bare, though polished, in what was clearly a conscious choice to allow the brown tone to stand out and contrast with the white and gold that was otherwise prominent. The floor beneath my feet, itself also pure marble, was of the same tone and so perfectly polished it could serve as a mirror. The circle shape of the hall had leant itself well to the arrangements, curved tables radiating out from the centre at increasingly longer length. There was a broad avenue between each set of tables, of which there was one for every delegation, which allowed servants and attendants to come and go with ease.

The announcements continued behind me as the rest of my delegation entered behind me, and I cast a look at those delegations already inside. That of the Dominion of Levant I recognized well, as I'd at one time or another fought most of them. Lord Yannu Marave of Alava, of the Champion's Blood, had been the leading Grand Alliance general for most of the Princes' Graveyard. Big man, muscled like an ox and with that unsettling calm that never seemed to thaw. Lady Itima Ifriqui of Vaccei, of the Brigand's Blood. Old but lean and whip-hard, before the Tenth Crusade she'd brutally raided Orense and nearly started a way with Procer. Juniper said she and her brood of sons were cunning as vipers and just as vicious, and she'd know: they'd fought running battles across half of the Principate. Lady Aquiline Osenia of Tartessos, of the Slayer's Blood, who sadly was not wearing the tight leather vest and paints she'd on last I saw her. Slender and graceful with coiled muscles, she was said to be a fine killer and a more than passingly skilled intriguer. Mighty Jindrich had sung her praises after the Graveyard, boasting in her stead of having killed it once and suggesting she be offered the opportunity to be slain in single combat and harvested so her Night could toughen up one of our weaker Mighty.

The last was the most familiar of old, Razin Tanja of the Binder's Blood. Heir to Malaga, though as I understood it Levantine inheritance laws meant he could not be lord of Malaga until he returned there to be acclaimed by his kin. It spoke well of his influence that he sat at the same table as the ruling lord and ladies, though, and the way his eyes and Aquiline Osen's kept finding each other and lingering told me there might be some 'diplomacy' going on there. He looked older, I thought. Still sharp-boned and handsome, but where before his eyes had been raw emotion now there was a colder fire in them. Purpose, I decided. It tempered people like nothing else, that cold blaze. That one had gone through crucibles, at Sarcella and the Graveyard, and perhaps become the better for it. I winked at him and he replied with a scowl. To my amusement, I saw as my gaze moved on that Tariq was not seated at the Dominion's foremost table. He was only at the second, making a show of his lack of formal authority, and Gods but he must have insisted to be seated there. I'd bet the Blood would have preferred him to be the sole person on the first rung and the rest of them where he now sat. I inclined my head in a polite greeting, and he did the same.

Ashur's delegation was a bare bones affair. To the left of the Proceran one, as the Dominion was to its right, it counted a mere ten men and women in saffron-coloured robes. The important one was an official from the committee the Thalassocracy had formed to oversee its presence in the Grand Alliance. Sitter Ahirom Senegart was a tanned young man of exquisite manners but whose role as the voice of the Ashuran bureaucracy on the continent had dipped into irrelevance with the annihilation of the greater part of Ashuran fleets at Thalassina followed by an immediate sucker punch of the League's own fleets. With the Thalassocracy's star being rather dependant on its supremacy at sea, his influence would have waned and these days he was unlikely to be anything more than an official mouthpiece for the decisions of Magon Hadast, the ruler of Ashur. I'd just finished studying the Ashurans as much as I could without being rude when the last of my delegations' announcements came: *Lord Amadeus of Praes, the Carrion Lord*. Attendants ushered us to our slice of the hall, which was to the side of the Dominion. Our foremost table remained light: myself, between Vivienne and Hakram, and to Adjutant's side sat Black. Behind my father the Praesi 'delegation' radiated out, as behind me the Callowan one did.

It felt like half the damned room was looking at me, so as a distraction I looked up the Procerans. Theirs was by far the largest presence – there must have been at least sixty people at their tables – and they were certainly heavy on royalty. Princess Rozala Malanza met my eye and returned my polite nod. I was surprised to see Louis Rohanon behind her, the former Prince of Creusens apparently serving as an aide. Brother Simon of the Holy Society I recognized from yesterday, but few of the other faces. I leaned forward Vivienne, who helpfully provided names to match.

"To Simon de Gorgeault's left, the man who looks like the dried up remains of a man?" she murmured into my ear. "That's Louis de Satrons, the head of the Circle of Thorns."

Cordelia's spies abroad, and from Black had told me by far the most competent of her spymasters. Considering one had been a traitor and the other missed a conspiracy that involved half the upper priesthood of Procer when that priesthood was his very area of expertise, that might not have been a difficult crown to claim. Louis de Sartons had beady and watchful eyes, I thought, made even more prominent by his almost skeletal thinness.

"Tanned man with the mustache, middle-aged?" she continued. "Prince Renato of Salamans. His brother Alvaro died fighting the Stygians down south. He's fresh to the throne but he's been his brother's man in Salia for years, he's one of Hasenbach's most loyal backers. Fought for her during the coup, too, so he's bound to be in favour. The blond with the well-cut beard is Prince Ariel of Arans – not a Hasenbach supporter but not an enemy either, and he came out more or less on her side when the blades went bare."

Prince Ariel of Arans's lands would also be playing host to both the Army of Callow and the Legions-in-Exile soon enough, which I imagined had informed his lack of support for the coup. The Proceran delegation's arraignment was actually slightly different from the rest. A small and luxurious table had been set most forward, presumably for the First Prince, yet there were two seats awaiting there. Slightly back and to the left the table with the spymasters stood, though once more an empty seat awaited at the table, and on a mirroring table to the right the two princes and Rozala were seated. From there the tables radiated as everyone else's delegations, though the missing seats rather drew my eye.

"I would have expected Princess Rozala to have that seat at Hasenbach's side, if anyone," Hakram murmured.

"Coup's still too fresh," Vivienne disagreed.

"It is the first official event with foreigners since the coup," Black softly agreed. "Malanza has to be clearly shown as subordinate. Sitting her with two known princely supporters of Cordelia Hasenbach adroitly addressed the issue without slighting anyone. Note that of the three Rozala Malanza is seated closest to the high table, an acknowledgement of influence."

The Firstborn delegation was announced before the conversation could continue, beginning with *General Rumena of the Empire Ever Dark, the Tomb-Maker*. I'd actually made a note of the proper titles for all the Mighty before passing it on to the Procerans, and I was pleased to see they'd actually observed the courtesies. Ivah was even addressed as Lord of Silent Steps, though like

everyone's attendants the dzulu accompanying it went unnamed. They made waves, the drow. Their procession as they entered Salia had drawn eyes as well, but today they had come in their full ceremonial glory instead of their war-making clothes, and it could not be denied they were a sight. Grey skin and silver-blue eyes were half-covered by the colourful paint of sigils, from Rumena's ochre and gold to my Losara's purple and silver. They wore strips of obsidian and exquisitely woven clothes, all dripping with jewels and gold, and though perhaps on a human it would have been mocked as vulgar on the drow it made them look like the exotic princes of a distant land. I even caught a few eyes lingering, though anyone trying to talk a drow into a night on the sheets should be prepared for disappointment. Firstborn had little interest in such affairs, save for the lowest among them – and even then, only for a certain part of their lives.

The Tomb-Maker sat alone at the leading table, and none even thought to contest this.

"That leaves the League seated next to the Ashurans," Vivienne murmured, sounding amused. "Hasenbach has a sense of humour, it seems."

She was right about the seating, at least: only one slice of the circle remained free, between the Firstborn and Ashur's delegation. I was less certain it'd been meant humorously, however. It would bring a pressure to bear, the two colluding parties being side by side in their corner and bearing the weight of everyone else's disapproval. The Thalassocracy's envoys had no real say in the decision they were to announce, but this could be a passingly clever ploy if aimed at the League. The Tyrant was a fearless madman, true enough, but not all of the Free Cities boasted such spirit. Some would see the writing on the wall, and weigh whether following their madman Hierarch and madder Tyrant was truly worth antagonizing every other nation in this hall so deeply.

"I would not venture to give you orders, Carrion Lord," Adjutant said, sounding pained, "but perhaps it would be wiser to cease smiling so at the Pilgrim."

I turned to a glare at Black, whose apparent calm was marred by a vicious little twist of the lips.

"I was merely greeting an old acquaintance," Black said.

Tariq's lips were pressed thin, and though obviously my teacher was the one being a shit there I was still a little miffed that it took so little to provoke the Peregrine. It was like Black's presence here was an insult already and the slightest addition to it was enough to tip the vase. I incline my head in implicit apology and after a moment he accepted it.

"You going to taunt Hasenbach too?" I muttered under my breath, casting a dark look at him.

He shook his head.

"I've nothing but respect for the First Prince," he calmly said. "A thoroughly competent woman. Had our interests not been so completely at odds for the entirety of our careers, I might even have been personally fond of her."

I frowned at him.

"Didn't she try to have you taken from the Pilgrim and decapitated?" I asked.

"As I said," he smiled, "*a thoroughly* competent woman."

Maybe that shouldn't have surprised me, coming from the same man whose response to learning thousands of knights had slipped his watch in the south had been mourning the likely death of whoever had first come up with the plan to achieve that. The League's delegation was announced moments later and I trusted Vivienne and Hakram to memorize the names while I was seeing to more important business: namely, watching raptly what was intended for the Book of All Things nailed to a plank. The League's front table ended up rather crowded, as few were willing to surrender a seat there even if the room was limited, and to my utter delight one of the two Atalante delegates was forced to relinquish his seat to the book – the plank was propped up against the chair, the book lulling open lazily. Mere moments after the League settled into their seats, the majordomo struck the floor with his staff of office and the entire Proceran delegation rose to its feet. None of the Blood did, save for the Pilgrim, nor the League's rulers. The Firstborn did not stir, and among my tables Black and I stayed seated. Cordelia Hasenbach entered the hall from the door at the back of the Proceran tables and strode forward flanked on both sides.

One of the two was a woman, blonde and short-haired and wearing a rather loose dress. I knew her not by sight, but the similarities with Hasenbach's face and her own hinted at the answer. Agnes Hasenbach, the Augur, was cousin to the First Prince. As to the other, there was no need to wonder: the White Knight was familiar enough a sight. Well now, I'd wondered in what capacity he would attend. Hanno split off before the Hasenbach, coming to stand by the empty seat with the two spymasters, and Agnes Hasenbach was eased into the seat to the First Prince's left at the high table. Finally, Cordelia Hasenbach smiled at the assembly and elegantly sat. All who had risen followed seat, and a moment later the First Prince of Procer broke the silence.

"And so I declare this conference to have begun, under auspices of truce," the First Prince said.

The Tyrant, in the heartbeat that followed, clear his throat.

"Your Most Serene Highness, if I might be allowed to address the point?"

I met Cordelia Hasenbach's eyes from my side of the room and smiled a hard smile. *All right, Hasenbach, I thought. Let's see what you and I can achieve, when we're on the same side.*

Soronel Haetir

All right, Hasenbach, I thought. Let's go [vote](#).

erebus42

Gotta love Black. "Oh I don't blame her for trying to cut my head off. It was definitely the right move. I probably would have tried to cut my head off too."

I know it's a bit of a tired and unoriginal thing to say but hey what the hell, let the games begin!

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus is a treasure at all times always, and I am so incredibly happy to have him here.

Even if he's being a shit to Tariq ;u;

[Javvies](#)

Eh, it's not like Tariq hasn't earned it.

[Liliet](#)

Has everyone else involved who might end up collateral damage if this bullshit escalates???

[Javvies](#)

Eh, if Tariq is dumb enough to escalate, he'll get cut off at the knees by Cat. And probably by Cordelia and the Procerans (using a plague on civilians didn't exactly endear him to them).

And Amadeus usually doesn't go for collateral damage. That's not to say he shys away from it, but he didn't seek it out, either.

So ... I'm not too worried.

Shveiran

I mean... yes, Amadeus is taking shots at Tariq and yes, it counterproductive and yes, he should probably stop.

On the other hand... if Tariq (or anyone else) still is a smile from having a fit over the people sitting in this conference, as if they were the only ones who had suffered... smiling as provocation really, really isn't the biggest problem to solve if this is going to work.

Shikkarasu

There is no 'if'; only Goblinfire. 3 full carts worth.

stevenneiman

He's taunting Tariq because he knows nothing will come of it. Tariq is mad that he's still here (and still alive, for that matter), but he also knows that if he starts a fight here it's going to go against his objectives (minimize suffering, maintain his ability to continue doing so), so he'll exercise his self-control and avoid doing anything more than scowling.

Shveiran

Well, yeah. The "problems" are that on Amadeus' side, it is petty and counterproductive, and on Tariq's he should really, really get down his high horse.

jamesc9

Unless Amadeus has some plan which requires Tariq unsettled, in which case there's a meta-problem, that he hasn't cleared it with Kat.

[BarthHumphries](#)

And make a typo thread:

The blond with the well-cut beard if Prince Ariel
Change if to is

There are at least three more typos. Can you find them all?

SpeckofStardust

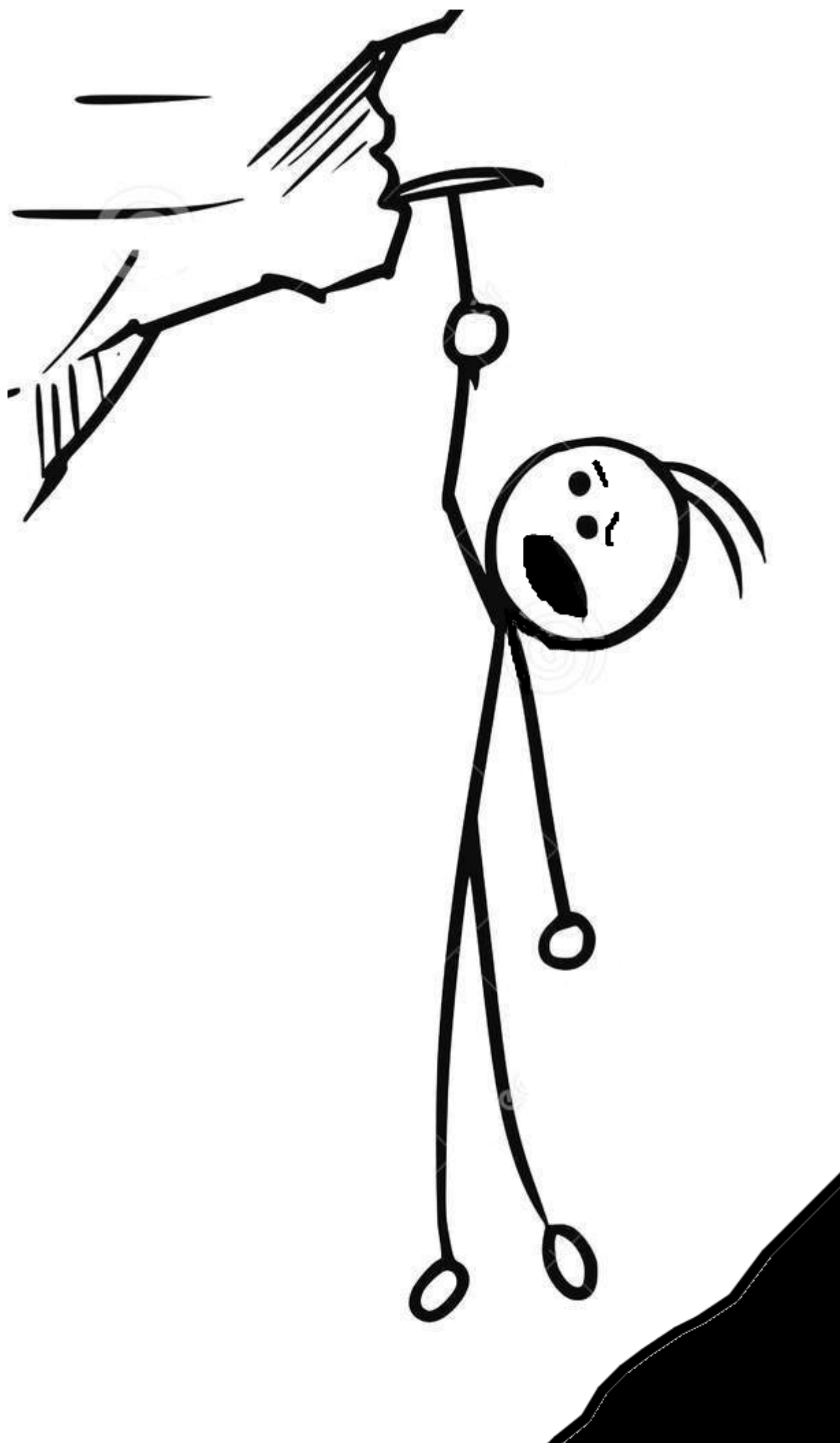
Game has began, now to keep score.

Hellspirit

The suspense

caoimhinh

I know, right? This image sums up all of us right now, hanging there, just waiting for next chapter...



Andrew Mitchell

The next TWO chapters. 😊 October starts tomorrow so we get an extra chapter on Wednesday.

Mental Mouse

I'm wondering if the extra will give us Cat's meeting with WK and WotW.

Andrew Mitchell

Seeing that from the White Knight's perspective would be A
W E S O M E !!

Shveiran

Seconded. It would go a long way in clarifying Hanno's perspective on the current mess. And it could offer insights on the Seraphim, which we still know next to nothing about.

Liliet

OH MY GOD YOU ARE SO RIGHT

caoimhinh

Wouldn't this month's Extra Chapter be showing us the continuation of what it was showing last month's? It was called Winter I, so next extra is Winter II. I'm expecting it to be a bit more of the battles in the north and the interactions of the Heroes, then the revelation of what prompted Hanno to go south towards Salia (he was already on his way south when the truce started), and finally the reactions of the Heroes up north when the truce started.

Shveiran

It is certainly possible, though I don't think EE has always done the sequels to the extras in a row? I could be wrong though

magesbe

This chapter is in the interesting position of providing an enormous amount of information, and also would be able to be summed up in a couple paragraphs.

But doing that would make it much lesser. We get to see the movers and thinkers of each faction, and we're ready for debate.

Soronel Haetir

Something I was just thinking, it has been too long since there was an undead suicide goat. Though probably better not showing that one with the Dead King around, don't want to give him ideas after all.

SilverDargon

I wouldn't be surprised if the Dead King INVENTED the undead suicide goat. He's been around so long that he has to have tried almost everything. it's easily possible that he could have spent a decade or so just filling different corpses with explosives to see which ones worked best against different targets.

of course, this provides an even more amusing idea of him watching over a battlefield filled with nothing but zombie animals with a clipboard. On the other side sits an army.

"Hmm, the rats seem to not carry enough munitions to make a significant impact on anything more than cavalry." *Jots down notes on clipboard*

"Well, next up, send in the flying squirrels."

More_Dakka

Proper reanimation is a process ok

[James, Mostly Harmless](#)

It is when you send in Moose and Squirrel that you get the best effect!

Shikkarasu

Misread as invited, instead of invented. That was a good mental image. Dead King with a goat seated next to him, grinning for reasons no-one dares ask.

JJR

So Tyrant is going to try to get the Dead King into this conference then? I wonder if it would be best to just tell him no.

Or, maybe the Dead King's puppet is already there somehow? Tyrant is just confirming that there's not going to be any violence so that he can say "SURPRISE DEAD KING HERE!" and then the rest of the delegates can't get rid of him.

SpeckofStardust

eh Cat has promised to back one of Tyrants bids in this.

konstantin von carstein

I think that after so much treason from Kairos Catherine will take back her word.

[Liliet](#)

I think Catherine went back on THAT rather blatantly when her army allied with the Grand Alliance's against the League. She even informed Kairos that she lied and betrayed him explicitly back during the band of 5 negotiations. She's not doing an Akua again, bless her.

caoimhinh

Nope, Cat doesn't go back on her word. She does as she promised, selling Kairos out to the Dead King during the Princes' Graveyard was all the "betrayal" she did to him; she still backed up his petition, which was to have Hanno under trial, she is also supporting the League having a seat in the conference as was promised.

Remember their conversation in Kairos' tent right after the Princes' Graveyard:

"You made a deal with the Bard, while we were out there," I said, tone even.

"A greater game is in the works than you suspect," the Tyrant of Helike said. "She is no ally of mine."

"The rest I could stomach," I mildly said. "But the Bard? You burned a bridge with that. Still. There'll be a conference of the great powers and you'll have your seat."

"As was promised," he said.

"As was promised," I agreed.

I turned and began to limp out.

Nanobeaver

Would he really be the Tyrant if he wasn't the first to speak

Shequi

Jindrich singing Lady Aquiline's praises for having managed to kill it is so very very Jindrich.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Jindrich is best drow.

Insanenoodlyguy

Since we had a little time skip here, the most important question: where are Cat and Hanno at, romance wise? I'm going to guess at no less than 3 moments of heavy sexual tension, and Witch has cockblocked them with a sudden early return during the one that was most likely to result in them misplacing clothes.

WuseMajor

Hakram probably should have explained about the Book of All Things, though I suppose it's funnier this way.

ninegardens

So... anyone wondering what happened to Cat's evening chat with the White night?

Or was it less of a confirmed date, and more of a "I'll be here most nights, drop by if nothing comes up"?

konstantinvoncarstein

It probably happened off screen

medailyfun

nothing happened, she got her hands on the free wakeleaf and vale wine

[Liliet](#)

She probably went to see him after being done with Tyrant, and then they just kinda hung out and chatted about Proceran weirdness or something. Nothing worth showing onscreen, it'll probably be called back to if/when it comes up.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Maybe in the extra chapter....

Agent J

Here's hoping.

Surrealgoblin

I imagine conversation between wotw, wk and cat will be revealed after the missing chunk of the conversation with dk and tyrant. The plot by the dk and tyrant will be on the verge of shattering the alliance/winning the war, only for the contingency planned at the second meeting to win the day.

Or alternately, the conversation between the wotw and the wk will be revealed just before the missing chunk of the talk with dk and tyrant, when the heroes betrayal in favor of the bard

almost causes the alliance to crumble/the war to be lost only for the contingency cat worked out with the villains and forced herself to forget about will

caoimhinh

Cool chapter. I was actually expecting this chapter to be Catherine's second meeting with Hanno, maybe warn him about what she knows of Kairos' plans.

We got confirmation that Night's ability to steal knowledge works on humans and those not sworn to Sve Noc, interesting. The Night is a really OP power, its potential is endless and has an extreme level of flexibility.

Catherine sure loves teasing Razin, and Amadeus taunting smile at Tariq is priceless.

Now the conference commences, I wonder if Agnes will be whispering augurs to Cordelia throughout the session, like warning her when one of the delegates says something or pushes a motion that could lead to a trap.

It would be interesting to see Augur facing Tyrant and Dead King's schemes.

I wonder if Cat passed on the information she got from Kairos to Cordelia and Hanno, because when the Dead King appears there, they could react unpredictably if taken by surprise. Catherine focused her eyes on the Book of All Things nailed to a plank, so maybe that's Neshamah in a hidden form and not the "delegate from Atalante" we saw during the Princes' Graveyard? Of course, he could also be simply camouflaging as one of the delegates, but the sheer irony of the Hidden Horror disguised as Calernia's Holy Book would be delightful.

Soronel Haetir

Sorry but while the image is amusing I just don't see DK stooping that low, his dignity requires more. Consider the form he took during the meeting with Cat, somewhat over-the-top even for an audience that might not dismiss him out of hand. I expect that to be the floor for his appearing before the Alliance.

[sengachi](#)

Hearing Rumena be called the Tomb-Maker never gets old.

Also, just like, there's no way Mighty Jindrich isn't here. Mighty Jindrich, who literally cannonballed into enemy lines, slaughtered its way through priests and casters and warriors, was only eventually killed by a heroic tale, and then casually got back up (despite the Grey Pilgrim largely negating its power!) to

talk about how cool the person who killed it was. Mighty Jindrich, who is both Rumena's age *and* apparently didn't even think about sitting at that first table regardless.

Gods, Rumena is awesome.

[frolamiz](#)

I don't think Jindrich is as old as Rumena. If I recall correctly, at some point he commented that Jindrich was too young when the Drow empire fell, so he could not truly understand what was lost. On the other hand, Rumena was already old and well established back then.

Shveiran

True, yet I don't know how long the Empire had been under the influence of the Twilight Sages' ritual, at that point. How old was Rumena when the dwarves invaded back? Considering he claimed to be over 3 millennia old, if he was even 200 years old at the time the age difference between him and Jindrich is negligible.

[sengachi](#)

Jinrich was alive when the empire fell but too young to remember it, while Rumena was old enough to be getting on in years (or just adversely affected by the immortality backlash, I'm not sure). So technically Rumena is older than Jinrich, but they're also both had at least four thousand years old, so I think by this point they're basically the same age. In terms of total time they have had to acquire Night and power, they're definitely on an even playing field. Any advantage Rumena has over Jinrich is just a function of how badass Rumena is.

[Javvies](#)

Heh.

Haven't you figured out that Tariq is incredibly thin skinned and touchy, Cat? He's too used to the massive and automatic deference he's gotten for decades.

Do we know if Amadeus has told Cat about the theory he shared with Tariq?

I hope and expect that Cat has shared the news about Kairos and the Dead King's envoy/representative with others outside of her own people.

Novice

I think it's more like Black radiating smugness and superiority inside his thoughts so that Pilgrim will pick up on it with Behold. He's basically supernaturally trolling Pilgrim.

Shveiran

... I like this so much, I'll deny any evidence it is not canon to my death bed.

[Tohron](#)

I'm pretty sure she did share, since Catherine seemed to think that Ashur's placement next to the League was a maneuver by Cordelia to put pressure on them for wanting to back out of the Alliance.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

That fucking Book of All Things.

God damn it, the League is filled with retards.

[Liliet](#)

Can you... not be using that word? Cost you a like, and 🙄

Navi-Hank

Is he wrong though?

[Liliet](#)

Yes, because their delegation is not in fact predominated with developmentally disabled people? And if it were it'd be much more coherent, organized and sane to deal with than it is now? :3

[sengachi](#)

Yeah I'm seconding this, you can mock/criticize the League without using slurs.

konstantinvoncarstein

No, it is just the Tyrant trolling

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Nice casual usage of a slur there, friendo. Real charming, I gotta say.

caoimhinh

The league is full of weirdos on a cultural level. Apparently each city took one thing and obsessed with it to the

point of centering their civilization around it. And those that haven't been shown with such cultural behavior, have delegates that are apparently idiots (like the Exarch claimants from Penthes). So far the exception is Nicae, though they might be obsessed with ships, for all we know.

-Delos' Secretariat is thoroughly obsessed with bureaucracy, paperwork and written records to a religious degree. *Everything* in Delos must go through a lot of paperwork (which is not *per se* a bad thing, but it's their lust for paperwork that's insane).

-We don't know much of Penthes except that it's wealthy and that their government is currently paralyzed after there were 12 claimants for the title of Exarch (5 later on, and now only 2 survive, and what we have been shown of those two shows them more like quarreling children).

-Bellerophon is full of repeatedly-brainwashed people living in a stupid, ineffective, and fake democracy under the magical control of the kanenas, where knowledge of everything is highly restricted.

-Atalante is obsessed with debates of rhetoric and religion to the point that the only thing their delegates (some priests) did in the instances shown was talking about Good and Evil, and quote from the Book of All Things, which prompted Kairos to replace their delegate with a gargoyle that read a random passage every few minutes.

-Stygia is a city of sorcerous slavers that raise people like cattle (along with magical sterilization) to serve their upper chaste. To the point that they have a cycle where they murder their slave population above a certain age.

-Helike seems to do fine until a Tyrant arises, then they all go in a frenzy supporting their Named leader. As General Basilia said "it's under a Tyrant's banner that we shine the most"

-Nicae seems to be the most "normal" of the League's cities, or at least the one that has displayed the least excentricities in the mindset of their population. They are also the only other relevant naval power besides Ashur in Calernia, apparently.

That said, they have been bullied into submission by Kairos, so they have to put up with any trolling of his under the fear of being killed. Even when exposing themselves to public embarrassments, like right now, walking into an international conference doing such a ridiculous thing.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

I'm starting to feel real bad about Nicae. They're like... normal.

Shveiran

So far as we know.
Give them time, they are hanging with the right crowd.

caoimhinh

Nicae is the "Straight Man" and "Only Sane Man" in the crazy comedy that is the League of Free Cities right now, hahaha.

3nd3rn

I foresee another "All acodring to...", "Someone's plan" chapters. After all timeskips rarely happen like this, when important things are left out, and we have a load of players on the field.

Shveiran

I kind of hope so, it would mean a) more people talking about Cat, which is something that I enjoy way too much for my own good, and b) that Catherine has things under control with regards to the Tyrant's scheme, or at least mostly so. Interludes like these usually end with Cat pulling a trump card out of her ass, after all, and there is enough blank spots for EE to do so satisfactorily once more.

ninegardens

I want to see that, except with Catherine's plan SECOND to last (or maybe third), and someone like Black or Tyrant getting the last laugh.

Chapter 83: A Mould Unbroken

"Diplomacy is half lies and half courtesies, which is to say it is entirely lies."

– King Alistair Fairfax, the Fox

The Tyrant of Helike had seemingly decided to strike with his surprises hard and early, which I could appreciate. It'd save us time, since admittedly anything discussed before 'surprise, the Dead King is here!' was likely to fall by the wayside. I'd half-expected him to wait until we were halfway through a particularly complex discussion before dropping that into our laps, actually,

since Kairos Theodosian was rarely one to avoid heaping insults upon injury. Murmurs spread through the room at the Tyrant daring to speak so boldly in the wake of the First Prince, though I'd seen to it that the people that mattered would already be in the know.

"Shut your cripple mouth and sit down, boy," Lady Itima of Vaccei snarled out. "It's a fucking outrage you even have a seat in this hall."

Hasenbach had implied to me that while Itima of the Brigand's Blood was – rather ironically, given the legendary hatred of her line for foreigners in general and Procerans in particular – her steadiest ally among the Blood she was also very much out to get the Tyrant's head on a plate for his actions during the adventure that birthed the Twilight Ways, as well as a handful of prior betrayals. The redeeming aspect of that was that unlike most Levantines the Lady of Vaccei was not insistent on having that head taken on a battlefield or by honour duel. A knife in the dark or poison in the cup would do just as well, for the Vengeful Brigand's brutal pragmatism in aging war against the Proceran occupation had trickled down to his descendants.

"The Dominion of Levant objects to this departure from the agreed-upon order of affairs," Lord Yannu Marave calmly translated in more polite terms.

"Look at the other two Blood," Vivienne murmured.

I followed her own gaze and found the faces of my old buddy Razin and Lady Aquiline utterly calm. I knew precious little about Aquiline Osen, but I'd watched Razin Tanja come apart at the seams in the shadow of Sarcella. I liked to think I had a good grasp on the man, and he was not all that skilled a liar or dissembler – if anything he a rawness to him I found almost refreshing compared to the practiced masks of near every other aristocrat I knew. He would have been embarrassed by Lady Itima's outburst, if it had come as a surprise to him. Which meant it wasn't. I let out a small noise of approval at Vivs for that, I might not have caught if not for her sharp gaze. She was getting to be a fair hand at these games, which boded well for the years to come.

Itima Ifriqui's flare of temper had been planned, it seemed, though I could only wonder as to why. Reinforcing the knowledge that Kairos was hated abroad to the rest of the League? It might even be a simple matter of herding him towards a particular response, though that would mean the true hand behind this was the First Prince. This was her preferred battlefield, not mine.

"Friends, allies, companions," the Tyrant of Helike enthusiastically said. "How could I dare to defy such ironclad

law as the order of affairs? No, I speak now so that an oversight might be corrected."

"Get on with it, Tyrant," I called out. "There's only so long of you orating at your own navel I'm willing to suffer."

"*Catherine*," the odd-eyed villain cried, sending me a wounded look.

From the corner of my eye I saw Princess Rozala's lips twitch in suppressed amusement. It would have been impolitic to wink, I supposed, and besides I had a policy.

"And what oversight might that be, Lord Tyrant?" Cordelia Hasenbach calmly asked.

"Why, there are yet delegates to arrive and be seated," Kairos Theodosian grinned.

The First Prince of Procer elegantly extended her arm, palm up, and a dark-haired attendant offered her a small ceremonial baton of sculpted alder. Though carved from one piece, it'd been made to look like it was a bundle of small twigs tied together by a string. One twig for each principality, symbolizing that each twig alone was fragile but the bundle was stronger than the sum of its parts. It'd been a common imagery in Procer until the Liturgical Wars, during which it fell out of favour, and had been around long enough for a few verses back home to have been written about it. Even as Cordelia Hasenbach knocked the baton against the surface of her table I hummed the tune to *Two Dozen Snakes A Knot Do Make*, Vivienne at my side going rigid to avoid showing reaction.

"And though Billy King did step on them," Black quietly hummed, lips twitching, "they hardly even--"

Of course Black would know the words, I amusedly thought. He'd ruled Callow for twenty years and unless he'd done so without ever setting foot in a tavern he probably knew most the old songs.

"-nooooooited," I could not help but finish, swallowing a grin.

Vivienne had joined her voice to the sound as well, though discreetly. Even in a Legion haunt like the Rat's Nest they'd sung that regularly, legionaries being rather fond of the imagery of anyone stepping hard on the proverbial knot of snakes west of the Whitecaps.

"Your people do have a singular talent for putting mockery to a tune," the Carrion Lord fondly said.

Our shared mirth had not gone unnoticed by the rest of the hall, a few other delegates eyeing us curiously. It was rather pitiful that between three former Named not a single one of us could properly hold a tune but aside from that I claimed no regrets. Yet Black's uncharacteristic levity, I suspected, might just be the result of seeking diversions to distract from his worries about a matter I'd warned him of. While we whispered in our corner the First Prince had begun out first gambit of the day. At the knocking of the baton the attendants were set abuzz like a swarm of bees, the gates to the back of the League delegations' left and right opening. Down both avenues a small but beautiful desk was carried, and behind the desks a single seat each. Kairos's good eye narrowed for the fraction of a moment as he took in the second desk before his face eased into a delighted smile. It'd stayed long enough for me to catch his surprise, though.

Come now, Kairos, I thought. You might as well have told me outright. I know how Malicia works, there's no way she'd ever trust one of her lords to negotiate with the likes of you. Even if they were not treacherous and courting you support to overthrow her, they'd be always a step behind you in any talks. Which meant the old body-taking trick of Dread Emperor Nefarious would have been put to good use. It was a small leap from there to figuring out it was rather likely that Malicia's host body might have accompanied him in his campaign, or meant to be another surprise attendance at this conference – after all, Black's presence here meant that in principle the Dread Empire of Praes was allowed to attend. It'd been a risk to bring out the two desks from the start since this was speculation and not certainty, but the First Prince had argued we lost precious little from being wrong while inflicting sharper uncertainty should we be correct. I'd still been against it, but Cordelia's instincts had seemingly paid off if the Tyrant's surprise was not mere playacting.

Now he had to wonder how deeply we'd seen through him and if my alliance with the First Prince might not be closer knit than he'd assumed. The painted desks were set to the sides of the League's delegations, slightly behind their leading table. A subtle slight, that, implying inferior status. Cordelia was apparently not above venting her displeasure through small details, which I found rather endearing. It added a touch of humanity to the ice-cold and masterfully controlled princess I'd been treating with, a woman who'd use even her own grief and shame as tools to get her way without batting an eye.

"How very gracious of you, First Prince," the Tyrant laughed. "Without further ado, I then present-"

Black tensed. If I'd now known the man I might not have noticed, for he had not moved a hair, but his eyes gained an edge of razor-sharp attention that'd not been there before.

"His Majesty Trismegistus of Keter, the Dead King!"

It was almost amusing the way the older of the Atalante preachers went white as a sheet when the other one rose to his feet. Sorcery coursed down the body of the impostor in thick rivulets, revealing beneath an illusion the same skeletal puppet of polished ivory bones and long purple cloths I had met with last night. I'd been wondering if it'd be the same, or if he had another host form to ride hidden away somewhere in the city. The tall dead thing stood before the desk set out for him, and the room erupted in whispers. Some scribes even cried out in fear, as if they'd been told the Gods Below had come up to see to them personally. It was a different sort of fear they had for the Hidden Horror, here in Procer. Even in the south he was not so much a legend as a sword hanging above everyone's head: after decades of it not falling down you could tell yourself it never would, and even forget about it.

But every time you happened to look up, you were made to remember that safety was just the tale your parents told you as a child so you'd sleep well. Callow knew the Tower's shadow like its own breath and blood, but it could not be denied that the Principate knew the Crown of the Dead's almost as intimately.

It was not all fear, though. Lady Aquiline looked like she was itching to draw a blade, and her fellow Blood all had measuring stares. I glanced at the princes' table, and my respect for them rose a notch when I saw only cold disdain on those faces. The luxuriantly mustachioed Renato of Salamans took in the Dead King's clothes with a look that could only be called scornful, and Ariel of Arans leaned to the side and idly spoke to Princess Rozala in a low voice. As for Rozala Malanza, her dark eyes stared at the Dead King unblinkingly. The burning intensity of the hatred I saw in there gave me pause, for I'd seen hatreds great and small in my time and that one was neither shallow nor passing. As for the First Prince herself, her face was a cold and regal mask framed by golden curls, offering only icy loathing.

Parts of the League's delegation – Atalante, Nicae – were dismayed by the sudden revelation, but others largely indifferent. Delos and Bellerophon's delegates were respectively keeping notes and looking rather lost, while the Penthesians seemed more cautious than alarmed. Yet it was the Firstborn whose reaction had me savagely grinning. General Rumena, silver-blue eyes staring straight at the King of Death, clenched its fingers into a fist and struck against the table once.

"Prav ruvan," the Tomb-Maker said.

First claim, it meant. A statement, but also the beginning of something more. Mighty Jindrich laughed, the sound scything through the room filled with murmurs, and struck at its table as well.

"First claim," Jindrich also said. "For this I offer three spears of finest obsidian, and the Secret of Shells."

Mighty Soln jeered.

"Cheapskate. First claim," it said. "A finely made *bureau* of wood, and the Secrets of Shaping and Sight."

The only word of that not in Crepuscular was in Chantant, *bureau*, for the drow were wildly appreciative of the Proceran style of elaborate wooden desks and in deference to that appreciation had been very particular about using the 'proper' term for it. And so, as the rest of the hall handled the surprise of the Dead King's presence, the proud Mighty of the Empire Ever Dark held their bidding war over which of them would have the privilege to first attempt to kill the Dead King on the field and take his Night. The Tyrant cleared his throat, and I felt Black tense again.

"And, naturally, Her Imperial Majesty, Dread Empress Malicia of Praes!"

He sounded, I thought, like a merchant hawking wares at the market. Murmurs bloomed anew as one of the translators from the League rose to her feet. I noted with faint amusement that Malicia's host-body had chosen to be seated close to the aisle. I supposed the revelation would have lost some of its gravitas if she'd had to politely ask the other League translators to pull forward their chairs so she could stride out with the right sort of presence. The illusion laid there was rather simpler than the one that'd revealed the Dead King: a young Soninke woman was revealed, but one of broadly similar height and body shape as the feigned translator. Bright runes were visible, carved directly into the skin and looking halfway between mutilation and tattoos. The Empress' puppet made way to her pulpit with a fluid grace that was all Malicia, impressively conveyed halfway across the continent and to a body not all that like her own save in the dark tone of the skin.

Whatever amusement I'd savoured while pondering the practicalities of that theatrical reveal went up in smoke when I turned my gaze to Black. He was looking at Malicia's puppet with the naked desperation of a drowning man, eyes roaming her form almost obsessively. It took me a moment to understand why. My father was looking for a hint, any hint at all, that this might not truly be Dread Empress Malicia. That it could be a trick or some sort of fake. My fingers clenched as I watched him watch her stand before her desk and he was forced to admit there was no

such thing. Something died in those pale green eyes, at that moment, and I realized Scribe had been right. Even now, even after the betrayals and the lies and the mistakes, he'd still intended on finding a way for the Empress to live. And when Amadeus of the Green Stretch grasped the truth, truly came to look in the eye, that he was about to be robbed that recourse? A light went out in his gaze that I suspected none still living could bring back.

Something flickered across his pale face, a weighing of choices, and then something like disgust. In the heartbeat that followed, he pushed back his chair and rose to his feet.

"Alaya," Amadeus said in Kharsum, voice only barely clinging to calm, "this is a very grave mistake."

Sigil-marked and burning with hollow fire, the puppet that Malicia rode turned empty eyes to Black. Considering, until she spoke.

"Unless oaths were sworn to the crown of Callow, the correct placement for the Empire's delegation is behind me," the Empress replied in Lower Miezan.

"This is *madness*," Black hissed, still in Kharsum. "Dark Days protocols and alliances with Keter will not take us through the storm, Alaya. I have secured other means, if you would simply let me-"

The eyes of nearly the entire hall were on the two of them. I wondered how many people could even speak Kharsum, here. It was not even all that common in Praes, much less Callow, and so I doubted even the Procerans had a translator for the main orc dialect. I hid a wince at my teacher's mistake a moment before he bit his tongue over it, but it was too late.

"Let you?" the Empress softly replied. "Am I then to hide in your shade like a child and let the rules of power to be decided in this ostentatious scrap heap of a city? I think not."

Something like a twitch of pain marred the puppet's face.

"Stand behind me," the Empress ordered, asked, pleaded. "The game can still be won, Amadeus. I yet know how."

I bit my tongue, knowing from experience that my stepping between those two ancient monsters had ever only earned the disapproval of both, and followed across the face of the green-eyed man the war between the Carrion Lord and Amadeus of the Green Stretch. One had followed and trusted Dread Empress Malicia for most of his life, murdered and sacrificed and bled to see the order they'd built together stand. Yet of the two that creatures was the one that'd turn on the Empress. Not easily, or without cause,

but turn on her it would. If the gears turned and the verdict churned out was that victory demanded the blood of his dearest friend, the steel would be whet red once more.

The other, though, was that part of Black that had seen a barren wasteland of empire and wanted to mend it. That'd made a family of a young mage hunted by the most powerful practitioner in the empire, offered friendship to a woman whose curse had devoured her life and charmed the likes of the Ranger and the Assassin through the strange mixture of devotion and black-hearted ruthlessness. The same boy who'd struck a friendship with a tavern girl long before either of them ever saw the Tower's hulking shape on the horizon.

It was the part of him I loved, if not the one I'd taken lessons from. And I thought it might just be the part of him that, right now, was murmuring in the back of his mind about one last leap of faith. Murmuring that by abandoning Malicia now all the darkest fears – and Gods, how could she not fear when it'd been armies led by Black and loyal to him above all else that saw her rise to the throne? – would be confirmed by his own hesitation, his own weakness. Guilt and love and the chains of a loyalty that had been well-worn long before my birth. I was my father's daughter, and so this I understood.

As he'd no doubt understood, when for the heraldry of the *noble* house of Foundling I chose not some glorious beast or some fearsome weapon. I did not even choose to ape the dignity of the Fairfaxes and the Albans by stealing their arms so I might better suckle at the love they'd earned among my people. I'd chosen a silver balance, set on the stark bleak blackness of the man who'd taught me, and on it I'd weighed a crown and sword. Right and might. Principle and necessity.

The wants of the woman, as Akua had once told me, and the needs of the queen.

The thing was, that as much as we – Malicia, Black, myself – were pretending this was a war, it wasn't. It was the inexorable sound of a noose being pulled tight, the song of an arrow before it tore flesh. It was the march of the inevitable, because while I believed it was Amadeus of the Green Stretch that both the Empress and I cared for, that boy was just who he'd been born to be. The Carrion Lord, the Black Knight, the cold-eyed and steady-handed killer that broke armies and conquered nations? That was who he'd chosen to be. And so, inch by inch, the inevitable one. Those hungry, callous cogs of steel ground up the boy that'd been and the girl he'd loved.

And when the steel came free of the last parts with a wet squelch, the Carrion Lord breathed out shallowly.

"It was never a game, Alaya," he gently said. "It is a mould, and it will be *broken*."

They shared a long glance, in a hall where the great and powerful of an entire continent had gathered to speak and yet not a single whisper could be heard – only utter, oppressive silence. What he was going to say now, I'd predicted. I'd told Cordelia what he would say, what would drive him to it, with a degree of exactness that now chilled me. Dark hair flecked with grey, back straight as an arrow, the Carrion Lord turned to address the hall with eerie calm.

"I address now all who would lend ear, mighty of Calernia come to this hall," the green-eyed man said, in perfect Chantant.

Translators hurriedly whispered as he spoke, for those who did not speak the tongue.

"The so-called Dread Empress Malicia I hereby denounce as unfit to reign and having lost the favour of the Gods Below through carelessness and misrule," the Carrion Lord said. "I claim the Tower as Dread Emperor of Praes, and ask for the recognition of the delegates to speak in its name."

Sometimes, I thought, it was an ugly thing to be right.

[*ErraticErrata*](#)

First update of the month, which means extra chapter in the tab of the same name. Titled "Winter II" it's a continuation of the last extra chapter, from the POV of the White Knight,

[*Javvies*](#)

Long live the Emperor!

Kairos is really preemptively burning bridges by bringing the Dead King and Malicia.

Soronel Haetir

Kairos has nobody left as his friend anyway (not even DK or Malicia).

Insanenoodlyguy

He has Cat. He'll always have Cat (For a certain temporary and fatal value of always. Though I honestly believe if she's the one who sinks the blade in, or at least makes him bring

the fortress down around him, he'll be smiling all the wider because it was her)

Nafram

It hurts to see Black declare war on Malicia, even though it was inevitable.

At least it's better than what it would be like for him to side with her and go to war with Cat

Nafram

Sorry, I intended to make a new comment, not reply

Oshi

This is his endgame. he's just playing out the what he had planned.

Soronel Haetir

Dayum!

Razorfloss razor

That had to hurt to say. He will be feeling this for years to come even if he hides it.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Just one more death that will haunt him until the day he can die. But this is one he *knows* he could have prevented.

NerfContessa

True.

And he will likely be an amazing dread emperor.

Hmmm, emperor cognus?

Emperor necessitas?

Maybe emperor inevitable.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Amadeus doesn't go for the flashy stuff. I think it would be hilarious if he went for Emperor Eques ("Knight," sort of) or Emperor Nigreos ("Black," obviously).

NerfContessa

Or it will be benevolent, as the fav fan theory goes.

Even at rereading it, nothing of its impact was lost.

Shequi

Ahhh, the claimant becomes manifest.

And to think, the attendance of the Dead King *isn't* the most important thing at this meeting...

IDKWhoitis

It seems like most major players had seen it as a given. The Praesi Civil War, less so.

Insanenoodlyguy

Uncivil wars aren't done yet!

IDKWhoitis

Benevolent? Is that you? Oh we've wanted to meet you for a long, long time.

Big Brother

Dread Emperor Practical the First.

Captain Amazing

Terribilis the third.

KageLupus

Please. Black would never take another Dread Emperor's name. Why would he tie himself to any of their legacies when he thinks them all foolish?

Nothing breaks the Praesi mould more Benevolence.

Insanenoodlyguy

Dread Emperor Poopypants.

jack

There's already a -Dread Emperor Benevolent the First, at least.

Benevolence isn't much different.
Dread Emperor Utilitarian. maybe? Practical?

ThatOneGuy

There's a longstanding theory that Amadeus will be the one to become Benevolent the First.

WuseMajor

I mean, when you look at the quotes from him, it's a pretty credible theory.

"Morality is a force, not a law. Deviating from it has costs and benefits both – a ruler should weigh those when making a decision, and ignore the delusion of any position being inherently superior."

–

"There's no surer sign you're being played than being certain you've grasped your opponent's intent."

–

"Please, do keep digging your own grave. I look forward to your splendidly inevitable demise."

–Dread Emperor Benevolent the First

Those all really do sound like Amadeus.

And, as long as I'm quoting, have this one that Malicia has apparently forgotten:

"It is impossible for the Empire to make an appreciable gain so long as this gain is a loss to every other nation on Calernia. To remedy this, we must discard the traditional lines of allying only to Evil polities and make it so that it is in the interest of other powers for us to rise."

–Extract from 'The Death of the Age of Wonders', a treatise by Dread Empress Malicia

Given that she's resorting to classically Evil Schemes now, instead of trying to get into the back room and do some horse trading with these people, it really seems like she's forgotten the book she wrote and why she's been successful this whole time.

When you get the role of Villain in the story, your end becomes certain.

[*Liliet*](#)

It's not credible because 1) these don't sound anything like Amadeus actually acts and thinks, 2) you sure did omit the High Lords one, huh.

Oh, and Benevolent is worldbuilding that would damn suck for erratic to go back on now.

[*Liliet*](#)

There's also a longstanding theory that Bard is time-traveling Catherine from the future.

It has about the same amount of credibility.

JJR

To really break the mold he could go for something like Dread Emperor Ultimate The Last.

NerfContessa

Hahahahaa....

Cap'n Smurfy

Say what you will about Tyrants diplomatic strategies, you kind of have to admire the man who does the social equivalent of saying "Hey guys I invited literally Satan to the peace conference, hope that's cool. Oh and Hitler's here too."

[weakman54](#)

More like, "Oh, and your ex, which you still have complicated feelings for, Hitler, as well"

Pilberyy Toeby

Kairos appears to belong to the "explode your bridges rather than burn them" school of diplomacy.

[Liliet](#)

He is a GIFT

jamesc9

Is GIFT an acronym, in this context?

(I ask only for clarification, you understand.)

[Liliet](#)

I was not thinking of one but it could totally be a backronym if you would like to participate 😊

samshadar

He already has the goat, now he just needs munitions...

erebus42

Love him or hate him (I personally love him) , there really is something so supremely sad about watching a man who cares for so few and so little willingly destroy his most treasured relationship. It had to be done and I never doubted he'd be able to do it, but still damn.

Insanenoodlyguy

What I hate is that scribe was right. Don't really like scribe, so that's part of it. But gotta give her her due. She uncomplicated (for a certain value of complicated, at least made less complicated?) something that almost certainly needed to happen.

[Liliet](#)

I'm sorry but she did so while refusing to prevent A FUCKTON OF INNOCENT DEATHS that only 'needed' to happen to 'uncomplicate' this a tiny bit.

Scribe was in no way proven right to do what she did by this. Right about some of her statements, sure. Right in what she did? No.

Shveiran

A matter of perspective, surely; yet this perspective I fully share.

Insanenoodlyguy

You could say the same of the Augur. Short term tragedy for long term necessity. Though admittedly the latter's motives were a lot purer.

Shveiran

I think I'm missing something; what tragedy did the Augur cause?

oh wait, you mean not warning Cordelia of the coup?

ninegardens

Pretty sure Augur would have outright prevented the coup given a chance.

She didn't have that chance, she was never playing vs Scribe, or Malicia or the traitors.

Augur's only goal was to ensure that her cousin had a choice, and she did that by ensuring that the Bard was distracted at the opportune moment. Hence, Pretty sure no blood on Augur's hands.

(More disagreeing with Noodleguy than you Shveran, but this seemed the natural place to reply)

Insanenoodlyguy

She wondered if she'd be "damned for her silence." She had a chance to shut it down and save a lot of lives.

She wouldn't have thought about it like that if there was nothing she could have done.

Jane

Plus, I fully expect her secret to come out at the worst possible moment. She's right when she says that it's her entire *thing* to keep this sort of thing quiet, but in my opinion, this just involves too big a story for her role to work this time.

Well, plus, now that this is an actual story – as in the one that we're reading right now – Chekov's Gun applies in a way that it didn't for her other schemes.

Shikkarasu

Scribe was not Right or Wrong; that's playing the Game or the Gods, and it is not a game, but a mould to be broken. She was Practical. Hundreds of innocent deaths? Rice on the scale. Wounding a man she loves unconditionally (as a knife loves a steady hand)? Taken into consideration. She is a monster, as are any of the Calamities, and she has been shaped by her time with Black.

Soma

Damn.

Abused woman goes power mad and needs to be put down is something that, for me, can only be ever be so sharp, even when well done. I was hoping for... well, something else. Some thing or way where that essence isn't preserved. It would seem others have had a better read on this than me. Kudos to the foresight on the direction the story appears to be taking to those who had it.

Mirror Night

I mean say what you will about EE but I would agree his record on Black Woman looks a little suspect. I mean Akua is a happy slave now (or so it seems and was a monster before hand) and Malicia Is a mad former rape victim that has to be put down by a White Man....not the intent sure perhaps but....yeah not as balanced out as say Weseka is by Masego or Hanno.

Stormblessed

I disagree with both of you. This isn't a Dark Phoenix or Daenerys situation. Malicia isn't a "mad woman who needs to be put down". She didn't go mad with power or become insane. She's just wrong in the eyes of Amadeus and Cat (and the audience by proxy). She still has all her faculties and even might be correct in her assumptions and actions. Her actions

might be correct and legitimate *given* the specific outcome she wants. The key difference is that Black wants a different outcome.

I think on the surface it might appear similar, but that's only superficial.

Mirror Night

I am not sure that particularly matters sure Malica might not be insane sure but she is painted unfavorably by the narrative such that I don't think the distinction matters. She is wrong in the eyes of Cat and Black thus she is wrong in the narrative and to most of the fan-base. The end results still leaves of the two most significant Black Woman in the series. One as a seemingly happy slave and one dead by her white male BFF. Anyway you spin it the optics of that aren't great in my book. Unlike say Weseka, these two aren't balanced out by Masego or Hanno. An author doesn't have to intentionally set out to reinforce bad narratives (say crazed rape survivor) to reinforce them by accident.

[TeK](#)

So? What's wrong with that? Isn't equality imply that some people are shit regardless of skin color? I don't get you. The rape survivor can't be bad because rape is bad? Or something? Please explain your position. If a Hero was a rape survivor too, would that make everything ok? If first chapters were changed to someone raping Cat first, would that be ok then? The amount of attention you put to this is ridiculous.

Soma

Nothing wrong with it, per se. Just might be less interesting if you've seen something often, instead of something you haven't seen before.

Some people might be inclined to dislike it for different reasons too, and they're entitled to those feelings as others are entitled to like it.

[TeK](#)

Sure, and I am entitled to be annoyed by their reasons for those feelings. And argue, and disagree. Free speech, right?

tynam

If you have no better reason to be annoyed than 'people are objecting to a narrative about black

people that they're disappointed by' or 'women are objecting to an old misogynist trope', then it's not necessarily the best time to use your free speech. People are allowed to dislike things that you like. It's not something to be angered by.

Mirror Night

I mean that assumes society has achieved perfect equality already it has not so I am not the relevance. I am saying the optics of having a Black Woman overcome rape, rise to the top, only to be put down by her white male bff are rather poor. Same for taking the other black woman who is sure evil and turning her into a happy slave. The cast is broad and diverse sure but it does stand out that Cat doesn't have any Black Woman on her coalition when she is drawing most of her high council from a country with a lot of Black People. I am not saying I think EE is a Raicst (I dont think he is) but a less charitable person could with what we are seeing so far can make a case he has some issues with Black Women.

caoimhinh

Looking at this story through that optic would be extremely superficial and narrow-minded, and also judgemental to a ridiculous degree while at the same time disregarding everything about the characters except their skin color.

That optic can only be done by willfully ignoring EVERYTHING about them, their circumstances, life choices, personal philosophies, goals and their personal struggles in pursuit of those goals.

The argument you are pushing for (summarizing Amadeus and Alaya's clash as "a white man vs a black woman") is simply ridiculous.

Soma

It is judgemental to do the thing this story encourages by its overarching theme of analyzing the context a story operates in?

Shveiran

It is, if one ignores most of context the story operates in in order to draw one's conclusions.

This series is made of five long Book, involves a plethora of themes, and has one of the most diverse casts I've ever seen for cultures, genders, sexual identities and genders.

The very idea of ignoring everything else and say "yes, but these two women are both black and they are not morally great, so there is a judgment on black women going on", is frankly ludicrous.

It also ignores characters like Indrani, or Aisha, or Captain, who though flawed human being are portrayed mostly in a good light.

It ignores that male or non-black rulers have been harshly criticized by Catherine and the fan-base both, so it's not like Aqua and Malicia are being singled out.

If you feel that way, fine. But in my opinion there is nothing about the context, if taken in full, that suggests the context is not trying to portray the characters as human beings and not drawing lines based on gender, race, religion or sexuality.

If anything, it is painfully obvious that EE as much as he can to be as inclusive as humanly possible. By this point, I feel like arguing the opposite requires either a very distracted read or straight-out bad faith.

[Liliet](#)

> "yes, but these two women are both black and they are not morally great, so there is a judgment on black women going on"

That's not what is being said.

"There is an unfortunate matching of a pattern" does not mean "erratic is judging black women".

Erratic did his best to be as inclusive as humanly possible. He STILL accidentally fell into a bad pattern. Nobody's saying he's written Akua and Alaya in bad faith. Just that the result stumbled and fell on its face.

Shveiran

Two instances of something is not a pattern. It's two things.

Insanenoodlyguy

You know when some folks say there are some people out there just looking for a reason to be offended?

This is the kind of thing they refer to. You're taking amazing characters and being upset because they are a glorious example of villainy, shaped by a well thought out background, and a character having a shockingly dark but cathartic redemption arc... and being upset because they are black skinned. As opposed to... what, being white skinned, thus removing representation and adhering all the more closely to a anglonormative model of older, less inclusive fantasy?

You know when some folks say they might as well adhere to that model because it's safer then trying to do something past that out and being inevitably criticized by somebody looking to be offended? That's also you.

[Liliet](#)

Nobody's getting offended, nobody's making this a big deal, nobody's saying Erratic hates black people or something.

You know what would have solved this problem? Having another black woman or two in the cast that did NOT match an unfortunate pattern. If Aisha had been also Soninke for example the tone of this would have been WAY different.

This is still, in fact, a problem of INSUFFICIENT representation.

Inay

Isn't Catherine black (at least partly)? She's half-deoraithe and I remember them being described as dark-skinned people.

denimcurtain

If it's solved simply by changing Aisha's race when race hasn't exactly been a prominent role doesn't that mean this is an extremely superficial problem that requires assumptions (we are the ones deciding Soninke are black and Tagrehb is not), close reading (how often does Aisha's race come up for instance) and a willingness to elevate skin color as an analog over cultural and historical parallels.

We have slave races and discrimination in story. We have countries that still rely on slavery. We have imperialists and the oppressed.

I guess it strikes me as strange that something can be prominent enough in one's mind to make the effort to draw such a connection but matter so little that an unimportant retcon by the author would solve it. Isn't the goal meaningful representation rather than reducing race to a box that needs to be checked?

I'm honestly asking. I'm sure I missed the boat in plenty of parts in this comment but I remember superficial tokenism being a bad thing but now it seems to be in vogue and it's confusing to see someone drag characters out of a story and make assumptions about what race and role they are in the real world then be ok with a fix that doesn't amount to that much more than replacing a couple reference points.

Allafterme

Excuse me for being blunt, but you are in the comment section of a web novel that is inclusive as it is well crafted that such inclusiveness does not stand out like a swollen thumb like the rest of media, some themes in it are so progressive that I'll bet my right hand some publishers will shy away from the press it will garner when ErraticErrata finally decide to publish it, and you are saying "Insufficient" Representation. I can only recognize it as acting in bad faith, for the series, for the author and the rest of the fans. I know you are invested in Practical Guide to Evil, but you need to cool down. For I see only one problem here, and it is your mindset.

tynam

With respect, that is a fucking terrible argument. Nobody was saying EE is not a progressive author who's done an excellent job of representation in general. You are arguing that once a story is progressive it should be immune to all further criticism – worse, that criticism automatically becomes "bad faith" – and that is ridiculous, and worse it is a recipe for failure to learn, in which once we're progressive 'enough' all remaining problems are swept under the carpet. And in this case it is exactly contrary to the themes of the story itself. (See Pilgrim's interlude; a lifetime of honest and just rule does not make one injustice any less so. Not that EE has ever hired

assassins, although frankly reading the comments there must have been times it was a temptation.)

I don't entirely agree with Liliet but if your strongest opinion is 'you shouldn't have expressed the criticism at all', then it's not a useful opinion to state.

[TeK](#)

Disclaimer: trigger warning, I am triggered, where's my safe space.

Well take down those fucking optics. If the roles were reversed, you would be shutting up. Unlike Malicia, Black was target of systematic racism. I am getting disgusted by this entire fucking topic. Less charitable person my ass, fuck them. And fuck Black Women too. Is Indian women is not enough for you? Or Arab? Both are in Cat's cast. Now, we don't have Black women, ergo it's bad. Fuck I am angry now, I do apologize. I can't properly articulate how idiotic this is.

[ErraticErrata](#)

Straying a little close to personal attacks there. Nothing wrong with arguing, but let's keep it civil.

[TeK](#)

Well now I am embarrassed.

Decius

" If first chapters were changed to someone raping Cat first"

Changed? Did the scene where Cat met Black get retconned since I read it?

RandomFan

Huh? In the version I read, (The story at that point was After book 1 ended, but before the first demon attack) Cat ran into soldiers raping someone else, and got involved, and they decided they'd kill her as well as the rape victim to cover up the witnesses- and then Black showed up. I'm not sure whether you remember wrong, or a retcon happened, but I think it's the former.

[TeK](#)

If it was, this guy's entire point could be moot. It was another girl that was raped.

panic

Ofcourse she is painted unfavorably by the narrative. She is a **ANTAGONIST** to the protagonist that is Cat. What does it matter that they are black? Would you have preferred that the two individuals who come from a nation and culture where the majority are black where white instead? Because to me that sounds about as silly as you complaining about this. You say seemingly happy slave and don't even realize how right you are. **SEEMINGLY**. As in she only looks that way. Don't you remember when Cat made her say the truth. That she was bidding her time in the Underdark until she found a way out of her captivity? And when has Malicia ever been crazed? Why is crazed a problem when it's been established that it's literally a staple of Praesi culture. Should she now go against the culture **AND** ethnicity? Should we make her a hero while we're at it? Perhaps make her the protagonist because clearly The Woe aint diverse enough for you. Stop being a potato.

Soma

Reads a story about stories. Complains about analysis of the meta narrative.

panic

Analysis my ass. He is complaining about two characters for the sole reason that they are black and he does not like the way they are going.

Soma

Or, for those capable of looking upon the eldritch horror of Mirror Nights words without panicking, there may be a conversation there about image, context and the society we the readers live in. Only should any be capable of not screaming at the incomprehensible horror of such cthonic sounds, of course.

Shveiran

Has it occurred to you that we may have read that same comment and, rather than spitting out of beverage of choice in outrage, actually thought about the words and **STILL** come to the conclusion that there is nothing of merit in that analysis, in our opinion?

The implication here seems that if we weren't howling simpletons oblivious to the complexity of the world, we'd share your view.

That assumption I challenge: it takes more for an analysis to be meaningful than bringing up a relevant issue for the modern world. You need to actually analyze the subject, and those insights can be judged and found wanting.

Liliet

It's a pattern that's being matched.

No, it does not imply anything about erratic's intent, worldview or Guide's overall quality. It's kind of like throwing stones randomly and accidentally spelling out a bad word. Yes, it's accidental. No, it wasn't on purpose. The bad word is still there.

There is nothing to analyze beyond "does it match the pattern of the trope?" which it does. Any further comparison shows that yes, erratic is doing his best and doing great overall. But this point? It stands regardless

Soma

I think my implication was that it is a bit exasperating for me to see my comments and Mirror Night's being interpreted as being in bad faith because they touch on tough subjects. I don't think anyone is simple for not agreeing with me.

I don't necessarily agree with Liliet that EE has used the tropes they have unintentionally. It is possible that the use of tropes with unfortunate implications intentionally relates to the title of this chapter 'A Mold Unbroken', and says something about Amadeus's intent to break that mold and by extension those unfortunate tropes. Maybe there is something really interesting there, maybe there's not. Maybe there are even some other really interesting themes in the guide that have some relation to the world we live in and deal with hard topics.

It would be nice to be able to explore the narrative, the metanarrative, how they relate, and what that says in a conversation, even if such things touch on hard topics. Conversations can be great ways to find new ways to think about

something, and the guide is a complex thing with a lot of ways to think about it. I am a bit exasperated that the potential for such a conversation was shut down with assumptions of bad faith and sensitivity, and even more so that there was a veneer of that being done in the name of free speech.

Shveiran

I'll be blunt:

So far as I can see, the reaction to your comments was not spawned by the fact that you are raising a tough question.

It was caused, instead, by the belief that you are pointing at one of the most inclusive works of fiction I've ever read and saying: "it's good, but it ought to be better".

That argument (not you, not Liliet, not Mirror Night or anyone else: that argument) I believe to be toxic.

Representation will never be perfect. It can only be improved.

And while I fully believe that you may very well be trying to do that very thing (trying to make this work more inclusive, I mean) I am convinced this kind of reasoning achieves the opposite.

If a work that is already raising the bar so much will still be pointed at and told "yes, but" there will be no making this kind of attention common. It is a snake biting its own tail, you'll never look at it and say: that's enough; because it can always be more representative. Maybe next we'll notice how the only male homosexual was a vile warlock that blew up a city, I don't know.

There is a finite limit to how many characters you can put into any work of fiction and still making them great while allowing the story to flow. This cannot end like you want it to end.

Soma

The assumption the guide is above being critical of is toxic. Not because the guide has so much that really desperately needs to be criticized, but because in the course of examining and trying to understand something sometimes one necessarily

has thoughts that are, or could be taken to be, critical.

For instance, say you see a trope you're not fond of. If the guide had something to say about that, or intends to subvert it in some way, it may be necessary for the trope to be present somehow in the story. In order to understand what is being said about that trope, or the subversion, a reader would have to identify the existence of the trope. It also might be there accidentally as a potential flaw.

The fact that this thing you're looking at is potentially a flaw means that bringing it up could be a criticism. As potentially part of a statement the guide is trying to make, it might be necessary to identify this thing's existence to understand what the guide is saying.

That said, I think I do regret bringing up a perspective that could, or does, touch on hard topics. To the comments section's credit, it often seems like a place where good discussions, insights, or conversations could be had, even about tricky and complex subjects. That doesn't seem to be the case here, and perhaps that's on me for not being a better communicator, or for not finding a better space to think about these things where it doesn't disturb other people.

Soma

Entirely possible you are correct. Things could change, be further clarified, or a more fine grained examination could be needed.

However, the characterization this chapter lends some support the idea of 'stupid evil' that caoimhinh, and others, saw in Malicia. One where emotion and some kind of unreasonable distrust and need for control, for some reason, rules her. Not to say it confirms it, merely this chapter does lend some heavy support to the idea this story is moving in a direction where Malicia must be put down.

caoimhinh

It always has, the story has been moving towards Malicia being put down since Book 2. You can't possibly be noticing it only now.

Alaya's obsession with power and her distrust of Amadeus became a self-fulfilling prophecy as her own actions drove him to be against her. She is taking actions like the

Villains of Old School, so she needs to be stopped, lest all they had built for Praes is destroyed.

Soma

I thought I saw something far more interesting to me there. I'd made argument to that effect. It certainly seems you had a better read on it.

[Liliet](#)

Hopefully we're not done yet.

But yes it sure would be nice to have Soninke women who aren't villainous in the cast

laguz24

Aisha is soninke I think. Or is she tagrheb? Personally, I just think of her as praesi and be done with it.

Gunslinger

She's Taghreb

[Liliet](#)

Aisha is Taghreb who are presented as culturally much more unified / loyal to family than Soninke, without any cultural counterweight being given in anything positive at all in Soninke culture.

Which is bad, in context of real world people reading this book in the real world.

Shveiran

She is Tagrheb. Though I'm not sure what the fact that she is not Sonike changes.

Tagrheb have been describe as having lighter skin than Sonike, as have Indrani and Deorathies. Yet if an argument is to be made about skin colour, "lighter than" does not mean "not black". Skin comes in a spectrum even in Africa.

Of course, the argument could be made that Tagrheb culture and names resembles Arabic ones more than African ones.

But then we'd be discussing something other than the colour of the skin of this fictional people, and that is clearly not the basis this arguments are build upon.

SITB

The biggest problem is that there aren't enough Soninke protagonists/protagonist aligned.

There's Masego and uhh...? By contrast both Aisha and Ratface were Tagrhebi and both brought viewpoints from that ethnicity (Aisha as a noble, and Ratface as someone who was chewed by nobles). Despite the fact that Soninke are supposed to be the most widespread ethnicity they don't appear as such in the text.

Soma

I'd preface my comment with let the art take the artuer where it will. The story's got needs. But still, Malicia as a femme woman with power, and willing to use it, has been a fascinitating part of the guide for me, and fun to think about. Less so in a more typical context.

An uncharitable reading would lead one to some questions about the presentation of black women, among other presentations. But I do think its to The Guide's credit that, on such a complicated set up with objective Good and Objective Evil, that would be an **uncharitable** reading.

Hierus

"rape victim" "white man" "record on black women"

Uh. What? I think you can find a crime in everything if you look hard enough.

In the end both both malicia and akua could not escape their own experiences in childhood and youth which is a story as old as time.

What makes this so exspcially tragic that the same mailica wrote the treaty on the end of the age of wonders.

Soma

It's a fairly literal reading. Doesn't mean the story is bad, just, for some people, it might be less interesting given certain characterizations.

>Uh. What? I think you can find a crime in everything if you look hard enough.

You are saying that in a story about stories. This work was always going to attract a decent amount of people looking at the meta narrative. May as well complain about a political intrigue story about a Queen having a fan base with an

interest in politics. Doesn't even mean we think it's bad story. That's just a thing present here.

Amoonymous

I mean, I guess if race is everything to you. Given how little it's thought of beyond descriptions by the characters we see the world through, I don't even think of it that much in this story (which is to say I don't think of all of the characters as any race in particular). Obviously I recognize that a LOT of characters aren't white, but that doesn't alter my perception of them a ton given that there seems to be less persecution based on skin color in this world anyway.

Funnily enough I think the most concrete example of persecution based solely on race might be how the Soninke and Taghreb treat the pale-skinned Duni now that I actually give some thought to the matter. Not everything needs to be looked at through a modern sociopolitical lens.

caoimhinh

You are simply wrong.

That's like saying that EE killed the only gay marriage on scene (Wekesa and Tikoloshe) and calling it a homophobic act, it would blatantly ignore all the background and story building that led to that moment.

Making this a racial issue is simply wrong, because it has never been about their skin color, it's about their chosen philosophies and their life choices. Alaya and Akua went down the path they took not because they were black women or victims of abuse, but because they chose to embrace the social ways of the Old Villains. Many of the characters in this story have suffered to some degree, but due to their environment and the choices they made, but ultimately each of the Named took a stand for what they believe in and walk that path to the bitter end.

Their skin colors are **irrelevant** to their struggle and their confrontation. This is a clash of philosophies, and with a deep background, it's a clash that has been building for many chapters, so if you are only seeing a white man and a black woman while disregarding everything else that makes them unique people and amazing characters, maybe the problem who has a problem is you, seeing only the most superficial layer and in fact the most irrelevant in their confrontation.

In fact, between Alaya and Amadeus, it was *him* who suffered discrimination due to his skin color, as the Duni are despised by the other ethnicities of Praes.

You saying that Amadeus standing against Malicia is simply “a white man killing a black woman” is an insult to this entire story, the amazing world-building and character development that led to this moment.

Shame on you for disregarding all the effort the author had put on this work into such a narrow frame as “white man vs black woman” and for implying that ErraticErrata might be discriminating against black women.

Mirror Night

In a Vacuum you may be right but stories do not exist in a Vacuum. Thus it stands out to me that the two most relevant Black Women by far are Villains who need to be proven wrong and put in their place. It just stands out that when you consider how diverse the Core of Cats coalition is, it doesn't have single Black Woman.

I am saying no matter the way you spin it the story still at the end of the day has a Black Woman being a Slave to Native American (Cat) and another getting killed by White Man (Black). I don't think EE is a racist or homophobic but it does raise my eyebrows.

caoimhinh

Quite the opposite, in fact. You are the one trying to put them in a Vacuum, trying to make it look as if they are only a white man and a black woman, when they are so much more and their skin color is the most irrelevant part of their confrontation.

You are oversimplifying the issue and limiting your view to skin color, while willfully disregarding all other factors, which makes this a poor analysis on your part.

You are trying to spin it so that instead of this being the culmination of a life-long friendship between two of the most powerful and influential individuals of the continent, who are fighting over the course that their nation must follow in order to improve, prompting the clash of two philosophies that will shape the future of their continent; this is according to you, simply “he's a white man and she is a black woman”.

Soma

Your refusal to examine the context that Mirror Nights argument is in does not mean it does not exist, merely that you don't wish to engage with it.

caoimhinh

Nope, it's just that Mirror Night's "context" is actually taking this *out of context*, and judge this situation based only on the skin color and sex of the two confronted characters.

That's like summarizing the confrontation of Catherine and Pilgrim as "a bisexual woman vs a straight man". It's just a ridiculous frame to evaluate it, as it judges by prioritizing irrelevant aspects of their lives. Not even in metanarrative is this relevant.

It is ridiculous and narrow-minded to treat Amadeus rebellion against Alaya as a racial issue, worse still to try to accuse the author of discrimination based on such a view.

Javvies

I've gotta be honest.

I'd forgotten that what being of Soninke descent meant for Akua and Malicia and their skin color. Their color hasn't mattered to the story in any meaningful way.

And it still doesn't. Soninke could be purple or blue or green for all the difference it would make, which is to say none. Oh, maybe there'd have been an early line about some ancient Dread Emperor, Warlock, or other spellcaster having done something stupid that turned them that color, but it wouldn't affect the story.

Masego is also Soninke (I think).

Insanenoodlyguy

He is. I was going to say Aisha was as well but a comment about says she's Taghreb. I don't have the energy to go and find citations but I'm sure this is correct. I have had the wrong mental image of her the entire story and will likely continue to do so since it changes absolutely nothing of relevance about Aisha to me (Namely the shipping! Kiss the Orc already. Do ittttttt)

Soma

It's almost as if there are multiple different contexts a work operates and exists in.

Shveiran

It's almost like, because of that, pointing at a single one of them and discussing it makes them

meaningless. Because they are connected to the rest, and if you single them out you are NO LONGER DISCUSSING THE SAME THING.

I suppose we should complain about the lack of a white heterosexual male in Cat's inner circle, too. Or de-fanged orcs and curvaceous drows, while we are at it.

Insanenoodlyguy

As long as we are really stretching here... how dare EE take the one Black Male Protagonist and strip him of the power he's had since birth? That sounds like... a shackle to me! At the hands of a White Man (I actually have no clue what Grey's racial identity is supposed to be?) and a Woman who can't stop appropriating cultures no less! Fuck this shit, I'm out! (I'm not out).

[Liliet](#)

You are wrong.

Shveiran

Your detailed rebuttal has made me reconsider my position.

dera

First, really I forgot all the times about the characters skin colors, because frankly Duni discrimination is the only examples we have in-story.

And second, it feel a pretty conceited comment. I mean, the story doesn't relate att all to the colonization of the americas for me, i was at lot more relating this to the South of the african continent really.

So yeah, just saying that I feel you are projecting a lot on a story who has done, let's face it, everything possible to escape racials/sex issues

pentephraxis

Characters are characters. The story was originally Praes-centric rather than Callow being its own thing, and so the "ruling class" were mostly dark-skinned. Now that the story has shifted so that Praes become narrative enemies rather than symbolic ones, those same people are also the enemy. The very nature of the story is that people who were once your enemies are now your friends and vice versa. Thus, no matter how you slice it, some black person

is going to be on the receiving end of some white person's war, because a fair coin occasionally comes up heads. If a black woman being put in their place by a white man is verboten, no matter how many white people are put in their place by black people (Black has suffered outright discrimination for his light skin), the only way to get that to not happen is to *remove* diversity and make there be either fewer black women or fewer white men.

pentephraxis

Not to mention, the significance of black women being dominated by white men is fundamentally rooted in good old Planet Earth. Culture doesn't carry over just by virtue of being the same color. Alaya's melanin concentration's effect on her identity, her interactions, the way she's viewed, etc., are absolutely unrelated to what someone of the same melanin concentration would experience here on Earth. Praes, and the Soninke bloodline, have absolutely zero parallels to Africa, American slavery, or anything else that contributes to POCs struggles in modern day America. Hell, it's not even an Earth thing so much as it is an American thing – in, say, the UK (which EE is from!), pretty much *nobody* would interpret it in a racial context.

tynam

That is a terrible argument. Stories do not exist in a vacuum; we, the readers, live on Earth and our reading is informed by Earth cultures. You are arguing that we're only ever allowed to analyse the Watsonian perspective, but that is wrong in all cases and spectacularly wrong in this story, which is specifically about the importance of the Doyleist perspective and the larger context.

Authors choose what the cultures of their fictional worlds are like; it's not a magic 'may not be critiqued or analysed' cure all.

Please consider the logical consequences of your argument: we wouldn't be allowed to criticise even an outright and deliberate work of misogyny, as long as the author at some point said "in this fictional world women are objectively more stupid and emotional than men so they're unfit to lead". You would have us condemned to just accept that at face value and not point out the obvious problem.

And I'm from the UK and interpreted the racial context just fine, thank you. The UK does better than many

countries but we still have racism and a hell of a lot more of it recently; at the time of writing our racists were being directly empowered by an openly xenophobic government. The context isn't the same as in the US, thankfully, but we're still the country that started the slave trade in the first place. And we're perfectly aware of the US context, which EE has generally shown a deft hand at writing around.

Insanenoodlyguy

Has it occurred to you that with her apparent redemption arc on track, that slave you mention is heading towards a full-fledged redemption? Or does her becoming a proper protagonist not count for whatever reason?

[Liliet](#)

Redemption through slavery is SUPER unfortunate in the context of *real world history and context*.

No, it doesn't have those implications in-universe. Unfortunately, it's not in-universe that the readers are.

Shveiran

Point me to a single country that doesn't have a rehabilitation system that doesn't include stripping people of their freedom after they committed a bad enough act.
So far as I know, those that don't murder wrongdoers and be done with it.

But sure, let's call it slavery. After all, Aqua's story has so many similarities with historical slavery.

tynam

There's a difference between stripping someone of their freedom and forcing them to work for you afterwards.

[Mental Mouse](#)

If you wanted to raise your eyebrows, the place to do that might have been back at the beginning when the darkest-skinned race on the continent was cast as the Evil Empire. After five books' worth of characterization and backstory... nope.

Jane

I wondered when somebody was going to mention that. It was neat back at the start of the story, when Praesi

comprised all of the most important characters and so it offered strong representation for people who don't often get to be seen as important characters, but... It's kind of ended up more unfortunate as the story has moved beyond Praes.

It doesn't really bother me since I don't visualize when I'm reading (I wouldn't even remember what characters are supposed to be attractive and who aren't, if it weren't for Cat ogling everyone every two minutes), but it'd make me raise an eyebrow if I didn't know the reasons behind it.

tynam

Wait, you're saying that if something isn't immediately criticised it can never be examined in hindsight?

That's ridiculous.

Back at the beginning the evil empire was the entire context of the story, and for all we knew the story would entirely be set there... with Malicia expressly an antihero and not necessarily an antagonist, in that she's doing morally unacceptable things toward a good end. In a story full entirely of Soninke, Taghreb and Callowans, this would never have been worthy of mention.

But that's not the story we're reading now.

Stormblessed

The more I think about, the more I am coming around to your viewpoint in many ways.

The idea of overarching meta tropes and the pattern that exists across all literature making certain elements less than ideal here I think is fair. The idea that Akua and Malicia being strung up is interesting in that context.

That being said, I still maintain it's not a "put down the rapid dog" situation. Those tend to be quick affairs where the once favorable ally is suddenly overcome with madness (ie: Dany and the bells) [also GoT season 8 is not an example of good story telling].

Also "two most relevant black women" is an interesting phrase. I'll give you Akua as the "most relevant black women", but I wouldn't say Malicia is. She's been more of a 'force of nature' than a mainstay character. She shows up at climaxes and then disappears from the story for large chunks of time.

Another interesting element you mentioned that I disagree with is how Archer not a Black Woman amongst Cat's Core Coalition? Archer is literally described thusly when introduced "Her lower face was covered by dark linen, but I could still see her dark ochre skin betraying a bloodline from across the Tyrian Sea and delicate hazelnut eyes" Unless I'm mistaken as to what 'dark ochre skin' means, and I might be, I think Archer is literally described as Black.

Personally, I'd call Archer one of the most important characters and a Black Woman and part of Cat's core cast. While Malicia is "more relevant" from a pure story perspective (ie: she pushes more plot points) I think Archer is "more relevant" on a chapter by chapter basis.

I'm trying to respond in good faith. I've seen a lot of responses that don't seem to be doing that so I hope my go achieves that a bit better. (all the people saying "shame on you" are utterly ridiculous) I'm curious for your thoughts. Also Soma's thoughts, but I don't think they'll see this? Should I respond to one of their comments directly?

Soma

I do really appreciate the effort to keep things civil and have an understanding conversation. The way I communicated things likely contributed to the outrage, or, at least, didn't stop pressing people's jitter triggers on a sensitive topic area. For that reason, I'm a little hesitant to continue commenting on this all that much more. That said, I'll try to give you my view on your questions relatively quick here.

I believe Indrani is Indian as her name seems to come from a Hindu goddess, among other characterization that would seem to indicate she doesn't look like she's from Calernia, if I recall correctly.

On the relevance on Akua and Malicia you may be right that Malicia isn't the most relevant, but perhaps what Mirror Night was saying makes more sense with 'prominent' in place of 'relevant'?

On the rabid dog issue, you may be entirely correct. I tend to think of rabid dog situations as being slower, given how it progresses. Initial infection, fairly long incubation, then incurable once noticeable manifestations occur. I think if Malicia has a need for control that overcame her it could fit into this view of the trope, but even then it might not be the most appropriate or relevant of tropes for viewing this. Might be others fit

better because of something I've missed, or that rabid dog needing to be put down just doesn't fit with a slow set up.

Also, the existence of these tropes might not even be a mistake. They could be there because the guide is saying, or is going to say, something about them. It might be interesting to view them as related to the chapter title. Might also be just viewed through a certain lens these things just happen to be here too.

[Liliet](#)

Indrani is another ethnicity that's not white, but not African either.

Which brings us back to how Malicia might not be in the top 10 most relevant characters, but she's still in the top two most relevant black women, because there's no one that's more relevant than her other than Akua.

Soma

You're talking about the story. Mirror Night is talking about the metanarrative. These are fundamentally different. They operate in different contexts, so things can look different depending on the context it is examined in. It's something that the guide encourages, on purpose or accidentally, by being a story about stories.

Mirror Night

Yes basically a story about stories would be a story where you expect an writer to be careful about stepping on obvious landmines. This is a rather obvious one where its like gee maybe we should counterbalance Akua and Malicia with some pro Cat Black Women in major roles.

Soma

I mean, depending on how you planned things out and the dictates of the story you plan to write, it could be hard to fit everything together. Especially depending on the update schedule.

The differences between a good work and a masterpiece, and a good work is already hard enough to write.

medailyfun

Very good point about the story about the author who writes the story about stories! But there's no guarantees the story you propose would be a nice story,

so I would stick to the current one and you can write your own

medailyfun

But what if the story enveloping the author is Evil story? /Philosoraptor image/ The kind of story we like so much and want to see in development.

[Liliet](#)

I'm not going to blame erratic overmuch for stepping into this. For one, this is a first draft being published as it is written, and judging it by the standards applicable to, like, a popular TV show is a bit disingenious. For another... yeah okay the first point is pretty much the entirety of my point. Erratic fucked up. He also has fucked up with numbers, dates, character names, compass directions and Wasaliti appears to cut through a mountain range and flow from sea to sea.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Well, I think even if this was an edited and revised work it'd be an easy point to miss. Fair representation of every group is near impossible simply due to conservation of detail. And while major character black women here, all two of them, are evil, Soninke in general are not portrayed as uniformly worse than others and both Akua and Malicia are complex characters who don't fall into the usual evil black women stereotypes.

To be honest, if this was a published work there'd be reviewers up in flames about the Evil Empire being primarily made up of dark-skinned people while the good kingdoms are mostly light-skinned.

[sivarajan](#)

You mean like an Uncle Tom?

caoimhinh

That's not metanarrative, he is trying to find fault by accusing the author of being racist and misogynist, *that's* fundamentally different. And frankly ridiculous, given the story we have read so far, that has a diverse cast, not only on race, color, and sexuality, but on backgrounds and personal philosophies, there's *intellectual diversity* in this work.

In the chapter that finally shows us a confrontation that has been built up over the course of 5 books and hundreds of chapters, after all the introspections on the two leading figures of Praes of the last 40 years, and the declaration of their war on each other to decide the fate of the nation they had spent their lives protecting and improving, the only thing Mirror Night sees is a white man planning to kill a black woman? REALLY? That's petty and narrow-minded.

medailyfun

I want to kindly point you to the old story where a person starts silly flame in the comments, mayhaps deserving some laughs, but not much attention. The grooves of the story are very deep in the Creation.

caoimhinh

True, one must not fall victim of the **Bait Aspect**.
Thanks for the reminder.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Think Flame would fit better than Bait.

I AM proud of this community for being mostly civil even when such a sensitive topic comes up. So far it's been accusations of stupid/ illogical arguments not stupid/illogical people and no one's accused anyone's mother of being a cow.

grzecho2222

But, what their Name would be?

[Mental Mouse](#)

I was going to supply the obvious answer... but then I reconsidered. Let's not fall into the trap of defining MirrorNight (and Soma) as essential personae, on the basis of a single argument, no matter how ill-advised.

Insanenoodlyguy

Flamebait!

Insanenoodlyguy

Wise cat is wise.

[Liliet](#)

> he is trying to find fault by accusing the author of being racist and misogynist

Nope!

Neither Soma nor Mirror Night actually accused personally Erratic of being either racist or misogynist.

All that's happening here is a pattern match in a very unfortunate manner, which deserves being pointed out.

Aotrs Commander

Do we really want to be in a place where every single aspect of anything has to be strangled by the idea that that it dare not show anything ever in anything other than a completely homogenised fashion, in case it offends someone? Where spades cannot just be spades?

Moridin isainde vadin

Do you want to be a place where any opinion that isn't gushing about the work isn't welcome? Pointing this out is a meta observation about the story in our cultural context. I love wheel of time and i still wouldn't claim that it contains no implications that someone with a critical metatextual eye would find problematic.

Shveiran

The argument being made isn't "critics aren't welcome", it is "this critique is unreasonable".

If you take a single piece of anything and hold it up to scrutiny whilst ignoring everything else that gives it context, nothing will ever be able to hold water. Nothing will ever be so perfect that all its parts are perfect in their own ways under any possible light.

Pointing -this- out is, in our opinion, not a meaningful meta observation. It is pointing at the Monna Lisa and saying "why isn't there at least a ginger in the background?".

Arguing for inclusion in works of fiction is, again, not only fine but also necessary. Doing it like this is trying to empty a bottomless well – an unending labor that achieves nothing but tiredness.

[Liliet](#)

It's not a mistake. It's just ONE layer. There are MANY MORE and you are correct, but this layer also exists, and as Soma pointed out is not counterbalanced by black women in the cast who are not villains. And unfortunately IRL black women are a very specifically targeted group

Shveiran

Aside from Archer and Aisha and Captain and Ranger... I'm not even sure the Witch and Raphaella would count as white. But even then, so what? Sonike have nothing to do with real life cultures, they are a culture of warlocks who build giant pyramids.

WHO ARE WE SAYING SHOULD BE OFFENDED HERE, THE WARLOCKS? Geez.

[Liliet](#)

Soninke are the only black people on the continent, in this story.

We wish we lived in a world where it didn't matter. We all really do, and erratic probably most of all, if only just so he can write whatever story he likes without accidentally stepping into real world sucky shit cow dung.

But the real world sucky shit cow dung still exists. And we can all take a step back and be collectively sad about that.

Shveiran

Sonike are the race with the darkest shade of skin.

That does not make them the only ones that can be defined as having black skin. African ethnicities do not have one shade.

I share your wish, yet I still believe this to be a non issue, and without real base in the text to boot.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And they've been cast as the core of the Evil Empire from the beginning. The thing is, even if someone pulled the same stunt on this epic as someone did on the Earthsea miniseries, (filming it as a bunch of white folks with a token black)... the characterization and backstory here would be utterly unaffected.

This is a world that's deep enough to stand on its own; it has its own racial issues, but one thing it does *not*

have in its history is the American Original Sin (Stygia is closest, and that's not very close). We don't even have an equivalent to European-style colonialism – the closest to that would be the determinedly-offscreen gnomes..

To call out the characters' skin color specifically at the climax of their conflict – that's not highlighting a genuine issue in the narrative, it's just a derail based on forcing our real-world racial issues into the fictional world..

Allafterme

But adding something to the narrative for the sake of balance and counter-balance IRL is not healthy for the very story itself. EE himself crafted a story where there is absolute equality between men and women and none challenged it because it was cleverly woven into PGtE and never broke the suspension of disbelief. There is a reason new series from CW and Comics market lost much of the wind under their sails. With the words of my favorite monster, doing so would be a "Grave Mistake".

[Liliet](#)

Adding a single other character who would be a Soninke woman who hasn't fallen into Old Evil? Would be a Grave Mistake? How & why?

Shveiran

Having one would be perfectly fine.

ADDING one for the sake of more diversity wouldn't be, because it would be bending the need of the story to chase after something called "perfect representation" that does not, cannot exist.

It is a temptation one must avoid, or you never stop one-upping yourself and your story suffers because of it.

Trying to be inclusive is awesome; trying to include all spectrums of humanity in a single work of fiction is a bottomless well.

Allafterme

Aptly put, my friend.

Aotrs Commander

Precisely.

Clmineith

I could be completely wrong, because sometimes I miss the obvious, but isn't Cat a black woman herself? She's Deoraithe, or at least part-Deoraithe, right? And they are described as 'dark skin'. That mean... well, not white, even if you're making me doubt.

Mirror Night

Cat is Native American. Indrani is Indian. Ratface and Aisha are Arab. Masego, Weseka, Akua, Malicia are all West African.

Liliet

There are options other than "black" and "white". "Non-white" doesn't automatically mean "black". There's a dizzying array of non-white women, you are correct (Catherine, Sabah, Indrani, Aisha...), but BLACK women specifically are... Akua, Alaya, Tasia... Ain't a good look, that's correct.

This story is still better than 90% existing ones. This doesn't mean pointing out off-key beats that are STILL there is wrong.

pentephraxis

Except it's not off-key. Not at all. The story is **intentionally** extremely diverse in cast, for color, gender, and worldview. Going to unrealistic standards even – in an egalitarian military you simply would not get a female representation this high, and EE ignored that to make the characters **more** diverse.

Characters are characters. The story was originally Praes-centric rather than Callow being its own thing, and so the "ruling class" were mostly dark-skinned. There, the POCs were on top and made out to be the little-g good guys. Now that the story has shifted so that Praes become narrative enemies rather than symbolic ones, those same people are also the enemy. The very nature of the story is that people who were once your enemies are now your friends and vice versa. Thus, no matter how you slice it, some black person is going to be on the receiving end of some white person's war. If a black woman being put in their place by a white man is verboten, no matter how many white people are put in their place by black people (Black has suffered outright discrimination for his light skin), the only way to get that to not happen is to **remove** diversity and make there be either fewer black women or fewer white men.

Finally, the significance of black women being dominated by white men is fundamentally rooted in good old Planet

Earth. Culture doesn't carry over just by virtue of being the same color. Alaya's melanin concentration's effect on her identity, her interactions, the way she's viewed, etc., are absolutely unrelated to what someone of the same melanin concentration would experience here on Earth. Praes, and the Soninke bloodline, have absolutely zero parallels to Africa, American slavery, or anything else that contributes to POCs struggles in modern day America. Hell, it's not even an Earth thing so much as it is an American thing – in, say, the UK (which EE is from!), pretty much *nobody* would interpret it in a racial context.

The “metanarrative” is being used as a defense here, but a meta-narrative is all about finding patterns in the complexities of the story. This isn't a complexity and it isn't a pattern. It's one isolated instance, significant only because of an aspect of the characters fundamentally unrelated in any way to the characters' identities or even the story as a whole. You may as well complain that something in the story violated the Constitution.

Abrakadabra

They could be all blue as a fuck you to sjws. 😊

Clmineith

Yes, of course. But for some reason, I was sure Cat was Black when I started to write, and then think better and realized I didn't know. Maybe because the people described as Black in the real world have skin from the-actual-black-color to are-you-really-sure-they're-not-white. I just didn't visualized her as Amerindian. The wiki has corrected me.

Also, when talking about racism and white privileges in western countries, it's usually White with privileges or non-White without.

In any case, I'm unsure there is a 'black woman put down by her white ex-boyfriend' here. If there is something to complain about here, it's that the Evil Empire is the nation of Black people. But, well, they act more like racist colonists than like oppressed people. If anything, Callow is the poor (white) nation with natural resources but lesser technology/magic often invaded by the rich (black) nation feeling entitled to plunder the natural resources because their obvious superiority. That was what I understand in the first book, and think it a nice irony.

Malicia IS a Black Woman, of course, but in a place where Blacks are the elite majority and the gender doesn't matter, I'm not sure if that matter. Like, there are the

unconscious representation of races in the media, and it *does* matter a lot, but 'race' elements in TPGTO are not unconscious at all. There are purposely used to make points.

For me, real non-white minorities are Orcs and Goblins. Even Duni like Amadeus are more similar in status to White people from other countries in real world rather than non-white.

Insanenoodlyguy

Cat is unsure of her exact parantage, as are most orphans, but from description appears to have Deoraithe and mainland callow blood, with an emphasis on the former in her appearance. WOG is that we'd identify Deoraithe as corresponding in appearance to Native Americans.

Misguided anger

Cat is a black woman. Good things happen for her, bad things happen to her antagonists who also happen to be black. Your outrage about racial roles in this work is a bit forced.

[Liliet](#)

Cat is half-Native American, she has no black heritage to the best of anyone's knowledge.

caoimhinh

All hail Dread Emperor Amadeus.
May he break the mold and mend Praes.

[sivarajan](#)

His regnal name is highly unlikely to be Amadeus.

caoimhinh

True that, but as it is unconfirmed right now, I simply called him Amadeus.

Now that I recall it, Amadeus means "lover of God", right? That's highly ironic for the Carrion Lord, given his relationship with them XD

[sivarajan](#)

I think it means "loved by God" in Latin.

[sivarajan](#)

On second thought, a name that probably means "Beloved of the Gods" in Old Miezian would definitely break the mold.

Cap'n Smurfy

Say what you will about Tyrants diplomatic strategies, you kind of have to admire the man who does the social equivalent of saying "Hey guys I invited literally Satan to the peace conference, hope that's cool. Oh and Hitler's here too."

Jane

To be blunt, I think Amadeus is making a mistake in not having talked to Alaya first. He *knows* that her entire thing is schemes that aren't what they first appear, that her philosophy is broadly in line with his despite a major difference of specifics in whether deterrence would also fall afoul of Story, and that he's only had second-hand accounts of what she's doing since their first major break. He has every reason to think that what's she's doing now isn't what it looks like (although it could be exactly what it looks like; I'm just saying he has every reason to doubt).

And so his reaction, when first seeing her after months of not knowing what she's been doing, while he has done little but cause a significant problem, die, and then fall in line with Cat's plans is... Demand that Malicia listen to him, then claim the tower for himself when she doesn't immediately listen. In public, where it was never even possible for her to defer to him, because it would be publicly demonstrating a lack of authority.

This is remarkably like his insistence that they should have purged the High Lords (crippling Praes's magical talent for a generation, as though that wouldn't invite invasion by Callow or the other Good-aligned nations), or his failure to do *anything* to build Cat's trust in Malicia, as though that didn't set her on an inevitable course towards rebellion.

For all that that Calamities were the original Woes, he just doesn't get the idea of people acting outside of his plans, or how that might come back to bite him. Oh, the plan will be a good one, and he'll have countermeasures to protect his plans since he knows *something* will happen, but he just won't understand something like this – like how, say, having had a nice long conversation with Malicia *last night*, now that scrying works again, would have avoided having had this conversation today.

Mirror Night

Yeah it really is amazing that Black didn't try to clear the air with Malicia at least one more time before his Peace Conference went down. Black doesn't understand people constantly shows up as a liability. And yeah there is no way

Malicia could ever defer to Black in public, even speaking Orcish aint really a defense. Cause while sure most don't know it, Cat, Hakram, probably VIv know it. I bet good money DK does as well. I even speculate Hanno or GP could probably know it. One cannot show the level of weakness such deference would show in public in front of the whole Continent. Black is suppose to be smart and that is just dumb.

[TeK](#)

And they say he and GP are nothing alike.

Jane

I don't know that I'd say that Amadeus doesn't understand people – that seems more like Masego or the Dead King to me, while Amadeus has generally understood what to say and do to build close relationships with the Calamities, make Cat his apprentice, avoid the traditional emotional beats of Stories, and use his reputation as a tool. That all conveys a good understanding of people to me.

But it's definitely an intellectual understanding, in my opinion, where he knows what to say and do when he thinks about it – and when he doesn't realize he needs to, such as navigating a problem in his relationship with a close friend, he just seems to fail completely at treating them like a friend instead of a tool.

Or perhaps a better way of putting it is that he doesn't seem able to properly apply that understanding when he's being The Black Knight instead of Amadeus? That he's compartmentalized himself enough when planning that he *stops* understanding people intuitively, as he focuses on what he needs to do to win?

SpeckofStardust

His trust got shot to hell with the super weapon, and then further shot with the dead king getting set loose, both of which Malicia could and should have informed him sooner of, if she trusted him to make decisions anymore. Which she lost when he started (rather openly) planning for his death. After all if he knew the dead king would be set loose he wouldn't have been caught by the Grey pilgrim and party. Black Trusted her and frankly she showed zero trust in him for their private meetings leading up to the doomsday weapon.

Jane

To build on your point, the Black Knight was also dead-set on what very much looked like a hopeless war against an inevitable Crusade, and was making deep mistakes in his

handling of Callow – and when confronted with disagreement, his reaction was to smash Malicia's plans in favor of his own. There were reasons not to trust his judgement, because he seemed only to care about his victory against the narrative of the world, over and above things like "ensuring Praes survives" and "justifying all of this money we're spending on Callow in a way that doesn't make us look like we've lost our minds".

If Malicia had told him, "I think if we *happen* to have a superweapon, instead of building one, it will put us in the Dead King's story of 'overwhelming doom keeping to itself' while ensuring nobody possesses the story weight of revenge to use as a weapon against us; this could protect us from the Crusade.", and he disagreed, would he have deferred to her position as Dread Empress? Or would he have just sabotaged it at an earlier point, forcing them into a conventional war that couldn't be won without unleashing the Dead King?

They both did a lot to undermine their relationship, because while the Black Knight was the leader of the Calamities, the Dread Empress has to be the Dread Empress; as the leader of an actual nation, her Empire has to come first, not the Story of their names.

Jane

Or to make a comparison – Amadeus and Malicia's relationship has been like if Cat were to abdicate to Vivienne after the war and go off to mentor the Drow for a decade, before coming back to tell Vivienne that should implement all of these different policies she's thought of.

Cat might be *right* about these hypothetical policies, but she's in no position to know all of the practical obstacles to implementing them, or what other plans might currently be in the works that this would interfere with – and regardless of what their old relationship might be, it's inappropriate for her to *tell* a Queen to do things as though they were still in their old Band of Five.

Amadeus used to be the head of their group, and certainly has valuable insights, but he turned down the Tower in favor of reforming the legions, conquering Callow, and trying to remake it into a society that will freely export grain to Praes. He knows next to nothing about what it takes to keep the High Lords in line, and keeps ignoring that fact in favor of what Praes needs to do – which is perfectly fine so long as he's an *advisor* to the Empress, since he's not wrong, but too often he behaved like this was back when they were a band of rebels instead of she an Empress and he her general.

And this is certainly on Malicia as well, for not setting clear boundaries – she should have insisted that she be more present for Cat’s education, for instance. But this contradiction at the heart of their relationship is the key fault line that has lead to the current problems between them, in my opinion.

caoimhinh

Except that we have seen for a fact, ever since Book 1, that Amadeus deferred to Malicia’s judgment in matters of politics and even when he disagreed he trusted her enough to obey her and let her handle matters on her end.

Amadeus also always told her about his plans, he was open about them and trusted her, it was Malicia who broke trust and did things behind his back out of fear and a need for control. We saw multiple instances that both stated and hinted that Amadeus shared his plans with Malicia, but when Amadeus asked Malicia about what she was doing about Akua, she asked him to trust her, and *he did*, hence Akua’s Folly happened under the auspice of the Empress.

It’s not that he left Praes and returned after decades to tell the Empress what to do, it’s that the Empress went back on what they had been building for decades to have her own personal Doomsday Weapon, which he recognized as a terrible mistake and she considered a safe gamble out of technicalities (she didn’t build the weapon, simply had it) while the Narrative Force accelerated the Crusade as a consequence (even if the Villain didn’t make the weapon, if they find it and keep it then they are a target for Heroes, as the Villain with a Doomsday Device is a threat, doesn’t matter if they created it or not).

Jane

That is not how I have interpreted the conversations between them that we have seen – that he never truly overruled her in the past sounds to me more like a practical reflection of the fact that she has formal authority and nothing would be improved by his leaving, rather than any true deference on his part. Take <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2016/02/17/villainous-interlude-coullisse/> for instance – he frankly ignores any complaint she makes of his conduct, while he (understandably) gets upset when she pretends she’s going to make a compromise to appease her political opposition. That is not how a *general* speaks

to his superior; it's how a leader speaks to a misguided subordinate.

This is a consistent theme regarding their conversations; he doesn't truly see her as the *Empress*, even if he acknowledges the political authority that he has given her. Because their inner circle always saw *him* as the leader, and *her* as the figurehead, and they've been close enough friends that nothing has forced the issue – until now.

And honestly, even the framing you're providing puts lie to the fact that he's truly subordinate to her – “he trusted her enough to obey her”? “Malicia broke trust with him”? He is sworn to her service – he *owes* her that loyalty no matter how little he trusts her, and it is her right to order him as she wishes, with as few details as she desires. That's what it *meant* to put her on the throne in truth instead of taking it for himself – no state can function without someone clearly in charge, and that is meant to be *her*, not him. Obedience isn't *optional* just because they're old friends.

And, I would add, he himself has acknowledged that rather than dealing with the practical concerns of running the Empire, he's been focused on his own projects – the legions, being the uncrowned king of Callow, putting down heroes, so on and so forth. He has very little grasp of what Malicia had to deal with day-to-day in keeping Procer from gaining enough allies to invade, or in preventing the High Lords from doing something truly stupid. So when he says it's no big deal to give Cat the right to execute Wasteland nobility, *he doesn't know what he's talking about*. Just letting her kill the one would have been an actual problem if Malicia hadn't already been near to success in her scheme to break the Truebloods – *his* alternative was to invite a rebellion when they *knew* they were already out of time to prepare for a Crusade! While grooming another, more dangerous rebel, I might add. How was *any* of this a good plan on his part?

As for the superweapon plan, if she *could* have trusted him to not break her plan if he disagreed, perhaps she would have consulted with him more deeply. Because honestly, it still looks like a sound plan to me – the Dead King has relied on that story for generations, of being the big scary evil place that isn't actively threatening the world. It works for him because most traditional narratives rely on Evil being proactive, and passive dangers being a threat rather than a target

– if Malicia could acquire that level of danger without being proactive, then she *should* be able to step into that story herself. Is the hellportal dangerous enough to serve that function? I couldn't say, and it was broken before it could ever provide deterrence. In such a way that it still served as the catalyst for the Crusade, incidentally.

But even still... Everybody in the story agreed that the Crusade was coming, and that the Empire would not be able to prepare enough conventionally to win. And everything we saw happen was consistent with that – Cat and Black put up a strong fight on two different fronts, but would be overwhelmed by the reinforcements if they'd been given time to arrive.

So if Black wasn't preparing to unleash the Dead King himself, how exactly did he expect to save Praes, Malicia's priority? Because he shot down Malicia's plan, but his hardly seemed any more effective – just one that would make Cat less angry. She may have been wrong, but he wasn't any more correct.

caoimhinh

The thing is, they weren't simply a general and an empress, they were a team. They built the current Praes *together*, by combining their strengths and covering for each other weaknesses. Amadeus was not a follower of Malicia, he was her *partner*, that's an important thing.

So Amadeus didn't blindly obey Malicia, nor did Malicia left all matters related to Callow to Amadeus, they worked up their plans together, and only in very specific subjects did they work without the intervention of the other, like Amadeus fighting Heroes and Malicia political schemes with the High Lords.

Also, keep in mind that Malicia was aware of the Narrative Force at work, she stated as much both to Catherine and Black when she was justifying her actions. Malicia's reasoning was the if she didn't make the weapon and wasn't planning to use it, she would avoid the shackles of the Story. Her justification in front of them also included stating that she didn't consider them capable of winning, so they had to look for a way to *not fight*. Which would have been fine except that her method was getting her hands on one of the things they had avoided because Doomsday Weapons are Old School Villain's means and thus condemn them to Old School Villain's ends.

Jane

They were partners, but they were never *equal*. Malicia was Black's follower during their rebellion, and now Black is *supposed* to be Malicia's follower – unless she is instead supposed to a puppet or figurehead. They respect each other and are friends, but they aren't *equal*.

It's like how Cat's first response to seeing Vivienne in Procer was to give her a dressing down for thinking her adventure was a good idea – Cat and Vivienne are friends, and respect each other, but Cat is clearly in charge, and Vivienne defers to her judgement, even when it appears deeply questionable. And true, Vivienne gives her some lip, but not about important matters the way Black did. That's how such a relationship is *supposed* to work, when one party is the formal head of the nation, and the other is a trusted subordinate.

Instead, Black flouted Malicia's request to end the civil war quickly, or to deal with Cat in a way that didn't lead to another inevitable revolt.

This isn't sustainable so long as Black is in charge of Praes's military. A military that can't be trusted to listen to the orders of the Empress means that the Empire does not truly have a military of their own – they have a vassal of temperamental attitude who has an army, a situation that came to a head as soon as the Crusade began and the army was divided into camps of differing loyalty.

If they *wanted* their relationship to continue as before, then Black should have left the army to someone else while he acted as her independent agent. Or perhaps made him the official ruler of Callow, as a vassal to Praes with loose obligations; Malicia could have managed the politics of it.

Instead, in trying to keep their relationship the way it was before despite vastly different circumstances, they may well have destroyed that relationship.

As regards Malicia's reasoning... The Dead King's ritual was Old School Villain's means, but it's still given him millennium of protection by making him obscenely overpowered and killing everyone who might have had a grudge over the costs. If the

Doomsday Weapon made Malicia obscenely stronger than the enemies who wanted to invade, without giving a story advantage to any Heroes looking to break the weapon, why shouldn't the same model work for her? Hasenbach isn't stupid – she wouldn't have invaded if she expected to face a Hell's worth of devils if she tried, no matter how much she wanted the Grand Alliance.

Javvies

Stopping the Crusade was entirely practical.

Land armies could only get at Praes/Callow by forcing the Vale – a heavily fortified and garrisoned strategic choke point.

Any invasion by sea would maybe be able to force a landing and secure a foothold, but most likely would not have been able to hold onto it long enough for ships to return with the next wave of troops.

And without the Doom of Liesse, there's far less urgency and cohesion amongst the Crusade's component members. Remember, prior to the Doom, Praes under Malicia and Amadeus had spent decades trying to reshape the image of Praes into a more or less normal nation, not one filled with madmen and Villians who urgently need to be put down for everyone's well being. The Doom destroyed all of that work.

For that matter, Malicia made the war with Procer inevitable by continuing to meddle in the Proceran Civil War long past the point she needed to keep Procer focused inwards for the Conquest of Callow. Not that Callow would have asked for or wanted Procer to get involved anyways.

Malicia kept the Proceran Civil War churning until Hasenbach decided to end it and needed to focus Procer on an external enemy in order to remain in power. Malicia either should have stopped funding everyone, or just picked a winner who wouldn't go after Praes/Callow.

Plus, Crusades ***end in failure.***

We know for a fact that every Crusade 3-9 has ended in failure. 3 and 4 ended so badly against one of the Terribilis's that every subsequent Crusade prior to the 10th was declared against the Dead King, not Praes and the Tower.

The trend, and thus the Story, is that Crusades fail, despite their nominal advantages. Good defeats Evil ... but Evil endures and outlasts Good when it comes to Crusades.

jonnnney

Crusades often fail to create a long term change in the borders of nations, but the ones that weren't aimed at the dead king often succeeded at killing the main villain. Also you say Callow wouldn't seek help from Procer to fight against Praes when Callow did in fact seek and receive help from Procer in order to rebel against Praes.

[shieldredblog](#)

Callow didn't rise up though. Only a few nobles and their personal forces did.

The majority of the population just ignored them and even their levies turned on them and went back to work in the fields when it was all over.

Even the knights in hiding didn't bother to join that rebellion. In one extra chapter, Talbot basically pegs the rebellion as a bunch of nobles realizing Callow would never to free in their lifetimes and trying to die gloriously.

willfultrooper

There are two things that I disagree with. 1. "Black doesn't know what he's talking about" – concerning wasteland nobility and cat's blood thirsty actions and 2. Black owes Malicia his loyalty regardless of trust.

To address the first point, though Black doesn't run the day to day ruling of Praes he does in fact interact with the nobility. This is shown during Heirophants' flashback regarding his first experience with nobility when he was at a party. So we could assume that he has an idea (no matter how bad that idea is that still establishes a basis of that). It would also be out of character for Black to just give a go ahead without some idea of what's going to happen. He knows that the Wasteland nobility run the empire when he and Malicia talk about previous emperors of Praes (It was one of the bonus chapters I forgot which) so it would be fair to say he has a rough idea what the downfall of Praesi nobility might entail. The reason why he's still so gung-ho about it is because he believes that Praes might be better without the current nobility chief argument in favour would be how Praes is currently a wasteland and for the nobility's casual disregard of their actions i.e when the then heiress pillaged and looted in Callow

in the civil war, Akua got away with it. They are surprisingly strong arguments supporting Black when you think about it. He might not run the empire but to say he has no idea of the wasteland nobility OR the consequences they might entail should Cat butcher them is wrong. He might have a worse idea than Malicia but he still has a fair idea of what might happen. He just weighed their value on a scale and decided they weren't really worth it.

In regards to the second point, Black does not owe Malicia blind obedience. Even a loyal dog will turn on the owner if abused enough and for Black this was the final straw. She ignored his advice on how the wasteland nobility should be handled – which might not be a sin but for Black who has seen how they act it might as well be one. He put her on the throne true. But he didn't specifically say that he would follow her blindly and even then loyalty has its' limits. In fact I would refer to that bonus chapter again when Malicia and Black talk about Emperors of Praes. Black said it was a two person deal. Their methods might differ but their goals were the same, the betterment of Praes. Black wants the overhaul and change of upper society and leadership as well as the better treatment of Orcs, goblins and others living in the Empire. Malicia was to establish strong leadership to allow for a more united and stronger empire by guiding it herself i.e giving all its resources and talent a direction outward instead of inward. Both agreed that Callow was necessary. Black through integration, Malicia through subjugation. In fact just because he crowned Malicia does not mean he would follow her blindly. That's not why he put her on the throne. He put her on the throne because her central ideology matched his. A better Praes. I don't remember when Black explicitly claimed blind obedience. I might have missed it, if so I welcome any form of discourse opposing my established points.

I do agree however that what Malicia did was a good move for both Praes and Callow, they were in a tight spot, though I doubt defeat was inevitable just that if they won it would be a Pyrrhic victory.

When I refer to Black and Malicia's talk I refer to the chapter Seed I and II. Or at least I think those are the chapter. Anyway, what I mean to say is that this chapter establishes that Black is indeed aware of the influence of the nobility. He may not say it explicitly, that does not mean he is not aware.

Jane

A fair point, but let me clarify a bit with an example; I know how a bakery works. You order the ingredients, mix them in large batches, divide them up into loaves, and sell them to customers at as high a price you can without hurting sales.

But I've never actually *run* a bakery in my life; I know in the abstract how it's supposed to work, and even know a few bakers, but I don't have the day-to-day experience of finding good suppliers who won't gouge me, spending all day in a hot kitchen, dealing with unsatisfied customers, or how to try and figure out the right price point for my area. Heck, I don't even know where I'd put a bakery, or what type of bakery would be appropriate for this area.

This is what I mean when I say that Black doesn't understand what he's proposing – he's used to Malicia dealing with all the practical matters of how to pacify the High Nobles, without understanding what really goes into all of those political games that Malicia plays. He knows the Praesi nobility plot incessantly and waste their strength on petty games of power, but he doesn't play them himself; he's essentially an outsider, having spent decades spending as little time in court as he can get away with.

And so while he might understand that he's asking for something politically expensive in order to keep Callow attached, he doesn't understand what Malicia would have to do to prevent the nobility from revolting – either the opportunity cost that would come from her having to spend time breaking apart any potential opposition, or in what she might have to trade away in return. Nor would he understand how that might affect her ability to keep their external enemies divided; if it was put in terms of "I can do this to better bind Callow to us, but the distraction will mean that Procer will invade five years earlier", would he be so blithe about it?

As for whether Black owes Malicia his loyalty... She's the Dread Empress, and I presume that he swore his loyalty to her, seeing as how he put her on the throne. Someone as powerful and high-profile as him *must* be either loyal to the throne, or removed as a dangerous element for discontented

nobles to rally around. I don't mean killed, of course – he could just as readily go adventuring around the world as many other Named who don't attach themselves to a single country do. As Ranger herself did, for that matter.

But a monarch who people don't listen to is no monarch at all – and the country they claim to lead will be a powder keg ready to explode as soon as the many powerful nobles beneath them realize that the monarch's power isn't infallible, if it doesn't first collapse in the face of a catastrophe when someone hesitates to follow her orders.

To draw on a theme from the book – the woman may have friends, but the queen may only have subjects. Amadeus and Alaya may be friends, but the Dread Empress must trust that the Black Knight will obey her without fail.

[Mental Mouse](#)

You (and others) are thinking in terms of “Black must obey the Empress, because she's the ruler and he's just a general”. But... that's thinking in terms of our own world's “divine right of kings”.

But even in our own world, there's a level where that doesn't really apply, where the ground truth isn't a “God-given” hierarchy, but rather, a power balance among several “top dogs” – where a king who overreaches their *actual* power is liable to lose their head, when their generals *or* nobles stand up and demonstrate that the king's authority is not so absolute after all.

And “divine right of kings” *really* doesn't apply when we're talking about the self-acknowledged Evil Empire, where succession to the throne is *always* a “Klingon promotion”, and “might makes right” is literally the command of the Gods.

willfultrooper

I'll use the bakery analogy just to ensure we at least have a common ground. Like you said, just because I know what a bakery does does not mean that I actually know what goes on in how to manage a bakery. However let me put this in Black's perspective using the same analogy. Black doesn't know the entirety of how a bakery works but he has a fair idea, it provides bakeries to people and feeds them all well and good. However, the bakery

(or the Preasi nobility) have been making bread that is detrimental to the overall population such as food poisoning to the degree that people are dying because of it. Now they might not be dying all at once but it's a good guess to say that if this continues the entire town (empire) will have turned into a ghost town if not resolved. You don't need extensive knowledge about how to run a bakery to realise that it is a danger to the town, in fact it's safe to assume that removing the bakery would be beneficial for the town, now the outcome might be bad after the removal of the bakery i.e the starvation of the town but it is still a valid assumption to say that removing a bad thing might be a good thing. You can't say that removing the bakery would 100% result in the starvation of the town. After all, a better bakery (Black overthrowing Malicia *In Blacks' current perspective – this is an assumption*) might crop out or the town might realise that they don't need a bakery to feed them, they could rely on fruits or another source of food (a change in government from the nobility system to a democratic system *AS AN EXAMPLE*). Of course, it is still a valid assumption to say that the town will still starve regardless.

I'd also like to point out that the main reason why Black actually turned on Malicia is her siding with the Dead King. That is also not the only reason but the one that tipped the scales.

Black put Malicia on the throne because they needed, at least in my assumption, one of the two to be the publicly recognised leader of the wasteland and Black might of assumed that Malicia had a better idea and thus crowned her in dread. Now however Black has come to the realisation that the woman who is currently sitting on that throne is no longer the same woman he crown so many years ago. He owed the Malicia he crowned loyalty, but when that woman no longer believes in the same ideas he does then why stay loyal? If you swore loyalty to both king and country and the king swore to destroy the country who would you follow? The kings standard or the country's? Black may be knight sworn to the empress's service but he is also a knight sworn to Praes, though he may not have said so explicitly his actions show that he is loyal to Praes. And now he perceives that Malicia is a threat to Praes. Now Malicia might actually be right or Black might be right, we

don't know for certain. All we do know is that Black believes that Malicia is acting in a detrimental fashion against Praes and he now believes that it would be better if she were removed. Now I'm not saying that he's right or wrong, all I'm saying is that Black had to choose between his empress and his country and he chose his country. Putting a crown atop her head might have made her the leader of said country it did not however make her THE country.

Jane

Ah, I think I see the point where we're talking past each other – Black does indeed know what he's talking about with his greater idea of what to do with the High Lords (kill them all, even if it means civil war), though he seems to underestimate the costs.

But he *doesn't* know what he's talking about on a smaller scale, which is what I meant – he's been out of the capital for twenty years, and doesn't know how much it complicates Malicia's position when he lets Cat kill a *specific* High Lord. Especially since those positions were meant to be bribes and rewards to help stabilize Praes's internal political situation.

And this matters when Black has agreed that they're not going to pursue his larger idea – if they're not going to immediately pursue purging the nobility, then they need to be properly managed until they can be whittled away more slowly.

As for Black's loyalty in general, he's free to rebel! It's how succession works in the Wasteland, after all. What he *can't* do is ignore Malicia's orders to end the civil war more quickly, or sabotage her plans just because she disagrees with him – not if he doesn't *intend* to rebel against her.

Black's loyalty *if granted* must be absolute, given his power and profile. If not granted, he must rebel (as he did) or leave (if he couldn't bear the thought). This is what I meant at the start of the conversation – that Black isn't doing Malicia some *favor* when he trusts her and follows her orders; that's just a basic part of obeying his Empress, even if their history makes that *look* more complicated.

Liliet

Amadeus absolutely never promised blind obedience, that is correct.

Javvies

Except that they weren't looking at a "hopeless war".

They were looking at an inevitable one, in part because Malicia kept meddling in the Proceran Civil War long past the need to keep Procer occupied for the Conquest of Callow. Not that Callow would have asked for Proceran help anyways.

Malicia honestly should have either gotten out of the Proceran Civil War or picked a winner, long before Hasenbach decided to end it.

However, the inevitable war was one that they could successfully hold off the Crusade and win. It had been done before, and, honestly, the Story of Crusades is a Story of Failure. Every Crusade from the 3rd to the 9th had ended in utter failure. In fact, Crusades 3 and 4 failed against one of the Terribilis's so badly that all subsequent Crusades would be called against the Dead King, not Praes.

The Legions would need to hold the Vales, a heavily fortified and well garrisoned strategic choke point, and the only point where land armies could get to them. That leaves a possible invasion carried by sea ... or, in other words, enough to possibly grab a foothold, but not enough to keep it long enough for the ships to return with the next wave of troops.

In short, beating back the Crusade, especially without the threat of the kind of thing the Doom of Liesse represented to drive urgency and cohesion amongst the Crusaders, was entirely practical. It would be bloody and expensive, but entirely doable.

The Doom of Liesse undid decades of work to make Praes seem like a relatively normal nation that wasn't filled with raving madmen and Villians in dire need of being put down immediately if not sooner.

Jane

The Crusades have traditionally failed in the past, yes, but those were all being fought on their home territory – terrible for provisioning an invading army, and protected by High Lords with enough ancient sorceries to break *ten* armies.

This Crusade would be the story of liberating Callow, however, a much stronger story – and once they break through the Vales, Callow is much friendlier terrain for them. Either they abandon Callow to the crusaders, land they likely won't reclaim after the war if they do, or they fight the war on land much more favorable to the attackers; it's also a lot less likely that the High Lords will (or even *can*) break out their best defenses if they're not in imminent danger.

I would also point out that most every character we saw in the story doubted their ability to actually *win* the war without some kind of miracle, and that I'm inclined to trust their judgement given how badly things were going for the characters before the Dead King invaded. The Crusade we saw was of the "Worst Case Scenario" sort, true, but all of the most important parties would still have joined, and a later Crusade probably wouldn't have had the Tyrant nipping at Procer's heels.

As regards Malicia's meddling in Procer, I'd point out that was being done to delay the Crusade – she knew that Hasenbach was preparing the Grand Alliance for her own agenda. Praes was just a convenient target; if she'd given Procer a freer hand, it would have just allowed them start the war earlier. Having taken Callow was cause enough.

Javvies

Amadeus and Grem both believed they could win.

Frankly, it would be bloody and expensive, but as long as your victory condition is that the Crusade stops coming after Praes/Callow? That would be entirely doable.

The Crusade would have at least half gutted itself grinding through the Vales ... if it got through them at all. The kinds of casualties it would take would have basically broken and ruined any units involved. Then, they've either got to take and occupy a broad swath of Callow to secure their supply lines (or what passes for them) then grind through Summerholm, then invade Praes proper, or leave their supply lines unprotected and try to bypass as much of Callow as they can and go straight for Ater and the Tower, which would be doomed to failure. Callowans weren't going to be welcoming them as liberators. Rumors would have been spread that the Procerans were planning on annexing Callow again.

Also, when I talk about Malicia's meddling in the Proceran Civil War, all she needed was a few years to consolidate the Conquest, then she could have picked one candidate she thought she had the most leverage on or was otherwise least likely to cause her problems (maybe one that wanted to go after the Levant or the League) and back that one, or one that would have the weakest ruling coalition. She didn't need to keep it going for as long as she did, she could have let it end years before Cordelia Hasenbach decided to step in and end it. After Cordelia became First Prince, all Malicia could do in Procer was buy some time while ensuring Procer would eventually come after Praes/Callow and maybe getting hooks into some of the possible candidates to succeed Cordelia.

Jane

This isn't the quote I had in mind (from Villainous Interlude: Coullisse), but it's close enough. Black didn't think the Empire would be prepared for even Procer alone to invade without many more years of preparation – preparation that Hasenbach had no intention of giving them, because she dreamed of ending the meaningless warfare between Good nations by binding them through diplomacy.

And Hasenbach still would have Ritual'd her way around the Vales, exactly as she did in the story, and avoided needing to force her way through the Vales. I mean, we saw how things went – Black and Cat barely held on even before the Grand Alliance was able to bring their full strength to bear. If they got the Dominion on their side, which they would have eventually, that would be enough for Procer to decisively win, absent outside interference. It happened earlier than either side planned, courtesy of Liesse, but a Crusade was coming in years instead of decades either way.

If Black thought they had a chance, it's only because he had unreasonable faith that Malicia could keep Hasenbach occupied until he could build their army up more, something that she herself seemed less certain of, and which doesn't really fit well with the way he was managing Cat.

As for the civil war... Honestly, Procer's an expansionist empire that has had its eyes set on Callow for ages; I think *any* First Prince had a strong chance of invading (though less effectively than Hasenbach, granted), and likely with a stronger

base of support than Hasenbach started with. There weren't really any good candidates for Malicia to choose from, considering Procer's nature.

She might have stopped it earlier, true, but it would have bled out Procer less, strengthening their relative position in general – and nobody really expected Hasenbach to come out of nowhere like this. It'd have taken omniscience to see coming, considering the strength of her rivals.

Fayhem

> The Crusade would have at least half gutted itself grinding through the Vales ... if it got through them at all. The kinds of casualties it would take would have basically broken and ruined any units involved.

You realize that in the actual timeline that actually took place in the Guide the Crusade basically did get through the Vales without that being the case? Grem and Black were effectively dislodged from the Vales by that battle, and their fortifications were reduced to/buried in rubble. The Vales were temporarily blocked by Wekesa's magic, but that's just a matter of digging to get through, which is not a notably casualty-intensive process. That battle didn't even break the Iron Prince's forces, and didn't touch any of the (many, many) reinforcements we've seen on the field since.

When we continue a little further down the actual timeline we see that the Grand Alliance never actually had the time to finish digging its way through the Vales, but that's because of Malicia's unleashing the Dead King. If we remove that from the equation, then Black's granary-burning spree might have bought them some time, but nothing about how Pilgrim brought that to a stop was contingent on the Doom of Liesse or any of Malicia's other actions – meaning that presumably in an alternate timeline where Malicia let Black have the conventional war he wanted it would have ended up the same way.

This, in turn, means that once Black was stopped any forces that were pulled off of digging because of his actions would be free to return to digging through the Vales. And Praes would now be out more than half of its legions while the Grand Alliance's forces would have been reduced by a vastly lower percentage, and the actual fortifications in the Vales would already be gone. Which means that Praes. Would. Have. Lost.

And as Jane's quoted passage in her comment shows, Black even knew that himself. Hell, I'll quote it again (I hope, WordPress is tricky) because it's worth repeating.

I still *disagree* with Malicia's actions, but her fears were not in the least bit irrational. And the fact that Black was still insisting on conducting a conventional war *despite his own prior assessment that it was a doomed approach* means that honestly there are good grounds for considering him to be the one acting more irrationally between the pair of them.

Neither of them is really right here – Malicia's fears are reasonable, but I can't excuse her methods. I agree more with Black's philosophy overall but honestly how was a story-savvy Evil Overlord like him even able to kid himself that a plot to orchestrate mass starvation of civilians wasn't a villain story that'd see him put down? Just because you aren't using a flying fortress or a grand ritual to do it doesn't mean that it isn't a doomed villain story. The real tragedy of this story isn't that Black's old friend has gone mad with power and must be put down by her reasonable friend. It's that they're *both* wedded to their goals past the point of reasonability, and it's tearing them apart. And if Catherine wasn't around to play combination wildcard/arbiter, it would probably have torn Praes apart as well, destroying *both* their personal hopes and dreams for their nation. I'm not 100% convinced that arguing over which of them was *more* wrong is really important given that following either of their paths without interference would have led to utter catastrophe for everything they've said they believe in and are fighting for.

P.S. I couldn't find a good place to fit this in above, but I also don't agree with the people who say that Malicia could have used the Doom of Liesse to squirm Praes' way into a Dead King-type story where they're too dangerous to bother since they're not actively invading. Akua specifically built that superweapon to only be usable by somebody with the Name of Diabolist. Could Warlock have worked around that, with time? Almost certainly – but the key part of that sentence are the last two words. "With time". Because at that point the story you have is villains trying to bring a superweapon online in time to unleash it against a crusade, which is pretty much a 100% narrative guarantee of failure via heroic

interference. Again, they were *both* wrong. That's the tragedy of it.

Jane

Just to comment on the superweapon thing, since I've defended it here...

I don't necessarily think it would have *worked*, just that it's not Obviously Stupid the way a lot of people suggest since we have an in-universe example of something similar working and a really good reason that they had to try *something*. A desperate plan with logical reasoning behind it failing doesn't mean the person was a fool for trying it.

[Fayhem](#)

I would agree that it isn't Obviously Stupid, in that there is a conceivable scenario where it does everything Malicia wanted it to. But I think the odds of that scenario actually coming to pass would be very low (it's worth noting that the in-universe example you're referencing is literally older than written history and we haven't heard of another successful example since).

I think we might actually be on the same page mostly? I believe that Malicia was desperately trying for the edge case because it would at least be a chance and a conventional war would give Praes about a 0% chance. I can't condone her doing so (especially not just to chase something that I can't see as more than an edge case) since giving Akua that much free rein can extremely easily be predicted to result in atrocity even if Malicia didn't predict the exact nature of it, but she isn't called Dread Empress because it's her job to be *nice* so I understand why she'd do it. I think she has to go, I think she's been wrong about more than one thing that mattered, but I don't think she's ever been a fool.

Insanenoodlyguy

One thing I am left to wonder though, and this is all background stuff that probably did happen...

Has he tried to Scry her? He's been awake for a while, he's been talking to other people, it seems like at some point he'd phone his up till now BFF. It seems like he'd have done

so by now, or vice versa. It's not great if somebody isn't taking somebody's calls.

Insanenoodlyguy

... wow I wish I'd read even one more down before saying things. DAMN YOU WORDPRESS

SINISTAR

You fail to account that one of the people who knows him best, and whom has absolutely terrifying power over bureaucracy has been making steady efforts to poison their relations. And his daughter figure knows and has kept silent.

Jane

And so he never even talks to the person who had been closest to him in the world at *all*? Despite the fact that he knows darned well that there are things they urgently need to talk about?

If he'd talked to her only for the rift to deepen, I'd agree that we can't overlook the Scribe's role in things, but to never even try talking to him at all is purely on him – he knows that talking to her is the only way to fix things before one of them ends up dead for good.

Soronel Haetir

How exactly would Amadeus have gotten in touch with Alaya from this distance? It's not like he had the ability to look up her closest flesh puppet (which may well have been keeping DK company anyway). He doesn't even have Warlock's support anymore.

I seem to recall that he used to have a mirror shard he could use to communicate with her but I somehow suspect that was taken and not given back.

And even here he asked for both to back down some and have a chance to consider matters only to be told "Heel, you dog".

Jane

The same way that Scribe was able to get in touch with Praes. It might not be as secure a connection as he's used to, but when he's just been told deeply troubling information about her, and knows that she's attending the diplomatic conference tomorrow, he doesn't really have a choice but to talk to her if he wants to have any influence on what happens.

And for goodness sake, literally every person of importance on the continent (outside of Gigantes and the Golden Bloom, I guess) is in attendance; what else *could* she do but tell him to heel? If she backed down now, it would essentially be telling the world that he's the one who's really in charge of Praes.

What does her listening to him even look like in this case? He doesn't know why she's there or what she's doing – she could be announcing that she's willing to agree to a white peace out of deep sorrow for Procer's losses, for all he knows. I doubt it, but this *is* a truce conference, after all.

But no, his demand is "Let me handle this, while you do nothing". That is frankly insulting and arrogant of him, considering that her plan of bringing the Dead King in was the only thing that saved Praes's position for the moment, and his plan went disastrously wrong for him and almost lead to the loss of multiple legions.

Magicturtle

I dont believe scribe would be able to do it in less than a day though... At the end of the day Malicia could easily have contacted him but she chose not to. they have been a team from the get-go and for her to completely cut him out is unacceptable. Sure they have been in disagreement and fought hard with each other, but my understanding is that no matter how hard they fight they still care for each other. As, for example, seen with Malicia's reaction when learning that BK have been captured. To reiterate even if Scribe could find the puppet in less than a day (doubtful) Would anything have changed? She wouldn't change her position and would expect BK to heel. We might have gotten an interesting conversation out of it, but thats it.

[Liliet](#)

You're not wrong that him asking her to listen to him is entirely irrational and absurd and clearly him riding on emotions.

That said. You're putting all the onus for not communicating on him. Shouldn't that part be split 50/50? It's not like SHE didn't have the means to send him a message too, hmm? She, too, chose to tell him to heel in public, putting him on the spot to betray the allies he's sitting with (which doesn't just burn his bridges with them, it burns bridges of him being a trustworthy ally period, it makes him publicly break his clearly-to-everyone-involved given word). Instead of

contacting him beforehand – there's only so blatant Scribe would dare be in sabotaging that methinks. And working out some sort of strategy they could follow without either of them blowing their gains to smithereens.

She did not even warn him she would be there. He learned from Catherine's GUESS. While she knew full well where he would be and what he would be doing, it's PUBLIC INFORMATION.

Even if we assume she did try to contact him and Scribe gleefully burned that bridge, he's operating without that information. What he sees is her not trying to contact him at all, what he sees is her trying to lean on the relationship she herself had already burned down and he's already made that clear to her with throwing how badly she betrayed him with Akua's Folly in her face. He sees madness and irrationality, he sees no hope at all for actually achieving anything.

So yes, that plea? That was something he needed to say for himself, for his own sake, to see her reaction. Not something he expected to achieve anything at all.

Mirror Night

I mean I think its more cause of the scrying Block and Black being out of contact. Malicia wouldn't know when Black got out and was able to talk whereas Black would. So it should be easier for Black to phone the Tower then it is for Malicia to try to call up Black in the middle of nowhere. Normally I would say the onus is on both of them to try to talk but in this case, I think Black has to make the call given the situation.

Jane

...He's been dead, and his soul trapped. That's a pretty good reason for not trying to talk to him 🤪. And before that, they did talk, once, and decided to spend some time apart to cool down (my interpretation, at least); after he was revived, it's been a matter of days, and he's been in Cat's camp (literally, not necessarily figuratively), with little practical way to get in touch with him. She's likely still trying to work out how to do so without the Jacks seeing everything.

I don't disagree that she should try to talk to him as well, but she had no reason to expect that he was going to be making a major move today, and so had less of an urgent reason to speak to him. Plus, she's not

expecting him to die if he doesn't change his course, while he *is* expecting her to die; he believes the stakes to be higher than she does.

Liliet

> but she had no reason to expect that he was going to be making a major move today

Well, he wasn't going to be making that move if she wasn't there, I think?

What she knew was that he would be present at the conference as a representative for Praes, and that's what she needed to act on.

Jane

Eh, I don't know. Malicia attending the conference was meant to be a shock to everyone, and whatever her purpose there is, it's going to be a major play. If she tipped her hand prior to this, it would lessen the shock of whatever it is she's planning – she has every reason to think that Cat will hear whatever she tells him.

Amadeus's attendance, on the other hand, could very easily have been simple support for Cat, and settling the matter of whether he was going to be executed for war crimes; there was no particular reason to think that he'd be doing anything disruptive at the conference, and she didn't particularly need Amadeus's support when acting in her specialty.

I do agree that Malicia should talk to him, but her failing to do so just feels like much more of a justifiable mistake than him failing to talk to her.

Death Knight

What makes you think that talk would have settled anything? They've had a similar talk before, it effectively kick started Amadeus' Role waning as the Black Knight.

Remember how Malicia's Name is described? A perfectly fitting glove. At her heart and core, she is a control freak and as such will not brook loss of control for ANY reason. She won't abdicate. She won't go away to the Tideless isles on an indefinite vacation and her becoming Amadeus' Chancellor is impossible.

Moreover, Cat and Cordelia both want her dead and the latter won't change her mind on the matter (Cat would be fine if Malicia went far away but it's been repeatedly established that she won't).

So even if the talk worked and she stepped down she'd still need to die or go away for all the shit she has caused.

Black likely realized the situation and simply preempted the process. Cat said in this chapter she already told Cordelia how he would react. So if both Callow and Procer recognizes Black's claim and pledges to support it all of Malicia's supporters will defect seeing as Black has the backing of the Grand Alliance, the Goblins and the vast majority of the legions of terror and the entire Orcish race. The writing is on the wall then.

Liliet

Well, technically, Malicia will likely end up with all the remaining High Lords gathering behind her, because she's clearly the superior option to *him* at least and she's been pretty successful at quashing their own claims.

Jane

Amadeus is still a person – even if you're right, and nothing changes in practice, he would still want a chance to *try* to talk his best friend in the world out of a fatal mistake. Instead, the thought would always be in the back of his mind that if he'd just had the chance, he could have saved her life. There's a big difference, emotionally, between having had that talk and watched it fail, and in never having had that talk at all.

Not to mention, like this, he'll always wonder what went wrong, why Malicia chose this path – in seeing her reasoning and her motives, he would at least understand what happened, and be able to empathize with her reasoning instead of letting it all be some big black box.

And from a more practical perspective, none of us know why Malicia is there – if he had some clue as to why, he wouldn't be caught flat-footed, which is never a position one wants to be in before a major diplomatic conference.

Liliet

> Not to mention, like this, he'll always wonder what went wrong, why Malicia chose this path – in seeing her reasoning and her motives, he would at least understand what happened, and be able to empathize with her

reasoning instead of letting it all be some big black box.

He knows what went wrong, they had this conversation already, in Epilogue III. He just kept hoping she would manage to fix it, but he knows what the break is.

Jane

Eh, I don't really agree – Epilogue III covered the immediate break between them, but they were too angry with each other to really *talk*, and beyond that – like Alaya said, the roots of this ran much deeper between them. There were reasons she went behind his back, and there were reasons why she *had* to go behind his back, and they only barely touched on those.

I mean, take Black's plan of "Give up Callow to Cat, so long as we get the grain it doesn't matter" vs Malicia's objection of "Do you really think people will so readily accept giving up the prize that so many bled to acquire?" – no doubt they could have come to a better understanding of each other if Black had been able to discuss how the transfer could be done in ways that would mollify the worst objectors, and Malicia could explain how it wouldn't just be the High Lords who would be upset, and how looking too weak to hold on to Callow would be a complete disaster for her authority. And also touching on how Black expects that strong institutions would prevent their successors from restarting the cycle by invading Callow, while Malicia explains how it would only take one bad actor for everything to go to hell in the next generation. They might not end up agreeing, but they would at least understand where the other was coming from.

We don't need to see any of this as readers, but it's still the kind of conversation the two of them need to have for Amadeus to have proper closure – or else he'll just find himself filling in the blanks on his own, while wondering how badly he's misreading what happened.

[Javvies](#)

Except that wasn't Amadeus's plan for Cat and Callow. His plan was to turn Callow into a willing vassal state through Cat.

That would necessitate Cat being able to exercise control over domestic Callowan policies and legal systems, within the broader strokes of overarching policy goals and foreign policy as set by the Tower, but one of the key things necessary to convert Callow

into a willing vassal through Cat was that she needed to be able to slap around Praesi High Lords when they crossed lines set in Callow. Malicia objected to transferring any meaningful control over domestic Callowan affairs to Cat, even though Malicia would have retained control when it came to foreign policy, and the things that really matter on a broader objective perspective.

It would also have served to create a power base in the greater empire independent of and generally opposed to the Praesi High Lords, who Amadeus thinks still have too much power and are inherent threat to the stability of the Empire, but generally supportive of the Legions and, through Cat, the Tower.

Problem is, Malicia was unwilling to give up any control, even though she'd gain far more than she lost, and the Empire would be the better for it.

Jane

I was talking about their conversation in Epilogue III, as Lilliet referenced, where Cat's break from the tower was already assured, and that was literally what he said –

He explicitly says that Praes shouldn't seek to profit from their conquest, that they shouldn't seek to take land either, and that it doesn't matter who owns the country so long as they can import food from Callow.

Which is completely true in the sense that it would allow Praes to operate as a normal nation again, but which is completely insane from an actual policy perspective.

[Javvies](#)

It may be technically irrelevant to Black who rules Callow as long as Praes can buy grain and other foodstuffs.

However, as a practical matter? Black intended Cat to rule Callow as a willing vassal state, subordinate to the Tower.

Malicia didn't like the idea of Cat ruling Callow as a subordinate vassal state.

Jane

...To reiterate, this conversation took place in Epilogue III, after Liesse, where Cat is

consolidating her own power independent of Malicia because that whole affair created a permanent rift between them. Black darned well *knows* that his original plan is completely shredded, and that the most he can hope for is that Cat won't embargo Praes because their economies are now so intertwined.

Black thinks that good enough, but it really, *really* wouldn't be enough in the eyes of pretty much *any* other ruler.

And honestly, he was pretty rubbish in with his original plan, too. Cat deeply resented Praes for their management of Callow – she was willing to work within the system, and set old grudges aside, but she never particularly *liked* Praes. And Black... Did pretty much nothing to change that. He gave her authority, but he never gave her any reason to like any part of Praes outside of the legions – he barely even introduced her to Malicia, his single best tool for encouraging friendly relations between them.

If he wanted a willing vassal instead of a rebellion, he really should have reconsidered his approach. As it is, all he really did was craft a powerful weapon that happens to be too busy fighting off another enemy to deal with Praes.

denimcurtain

How is that insane from a policy perspective?

Jane

It's taking all of the expense of a messy invasion and occupation, and setting all of that money and lives lost on fire. The entire idea behind a war of conquest is that what you gain at the end outweighs the expenses – without that, it's weakening yourself and angering your neighbors for little lasting gain.

Moreover, to publicly give up on the occupation of Callow makes it look like they *couldn't* hold on to Callow – signaling to Hasenbach that their military must have been weakened past that which was previously considered, and signaling to the High Lords that Malicia might be in a position where she can be challenged. This creates instability both abroad and at home.

This even jeopardizes the benefit that Black sees in just leaving, because if Malicia is deposed, the next Dread Emperor is extremely likely to try and re-invade Callow as their first act, to prove themselves "better" than the Empress they replaced, and quite likely tear up the Reforms. At which point Callow again refuses to trade with Praes, and everything Malicia accomplished to try and fix Praes is undone.

If they had declared war to open trade with Callow, that would be fine – trade wars are a *thing*. But to release a country to a borderline-hostile ruler without any perceivable benefit, that looks a lot like unilateral surrender – something that no society would accept without a darned good explanation.

Quite Possibly A Cat

It occurs to me that if Malacia was able to poison the food of enemy ships, she can probably poison the food of her own Legions.

Insanenoodlyguy

Yeah, but that kind of trick won't work as well this time. Using it once or even on rare occasion as a Magnificent Bastard move is effective. Using it as regular leverage is doomed to failure. Whenever you have a "You will obey or all these people die" one of two things happens:

1. It's used, but now you have no leverage, and the weight of the story is that you are a fucker who has to die (See: Akua)
2. The trick, especially once it's known, is countered. Masego has an idea that some hero mage can pull off with his advice or Cat's night can pull the poison out or Akua thought of this a while ago and they've already taken steps. You have no leverage, and a whole group of pissed off that just found a great reason to saddle up with the side that wants to screw you over.

medailyfun

What if Malicia did this deliberately to legitimize Amadeus' claim before the whole gathering?

Death Knight

This exchange would not have looked this way if that were the case. Why speak Kharsum at all then?

Insanenoodlyguy

I'm not saying I'm on board with the theory, but playing devil's advocate, she's pulling a Kairos of her own. She knows she's doomed, so she shapes her downfall to be as favorable as it can. Black doesn't know she's setting him up, because nothing sells a lie as well as somebody who believes it to be the truth. He isn't in on it.

Shveiran

It's possible, sure. Though I'd argue that to be satisfying such a twist would need a rather big change of heart from Malicia's side that has not really been foreshadowed – as in, she hasn't really been set up as a martyr.

Not impossible, but I find it unlikely.

Jane

Well, she's definitely doing *something*.

She's been characterized as a masterful schemer, but for the entire series, she's not been shown to do much of anything – just enable Leise, something that could have been accomplished narratively without involving her character at all, and antagonize Hasenbach in their backstory, a character who is theoretically less important than her even if she's gotten more screentime. If Malicia was actually meant to be as passive or inept as she's pretending to be, she would have been introduced (or at least hinted) as such, because this isn't a poorly written series.

What, precisely, she's planning could be anything, but a "Of course I was actually on your side all along, I told you this years ago" twist seems likely enough to me, given the contrast between how she acts to Cat and her own personal philosophies – though deliberate self-sacrifice seems more off the table, in my opinion.

Shveiran

Is that your view of her? Personally, I think she was very active, just not in a flashy way. She dismantled the highborn, played 4D chess with several foreign powers set dead against her for decades, maneuvered Callow to cover for her whilst remaining weak even after the breakdown, and made a deal with Keter through little more than cleverness. And Liesse, sure.

I'm not saying she won't pull something else out her sleeve, but I wouldn't be disappointed if she didn't.

Jane

The vast majority of that is off-screen, though; it's not that it isn't flashy, but the fact that, in a narrative sense, it's part of the setting rather than part of the story.

We know that she's the reason the High Lords aren't a larger problem, but the only role that played in the story was breaking the Truebloods after they outlived their usefulness; we know she played every trick in the book to keep Procer occupied, but that's something we've almost exclusively heard about after the fact; asking the Dead King to come out when he already wanted to and was just looking for an excuse... Just really isn't really *noteworthy*. That makes her part of the Dead King's story, not her own.

Contrast this with Akua, who played a very active role as Cat's antagonist over multiple books before her defeat, Hasenbach, who got half the continent together to invade before outsmarting the Bard, Kairos, who takes every minute in the spotlight he can so that he can use it to betray someone, and Pilgrim, who's weight is constantly felt in the background.

Malicia has been in the story from the very start, without nearly the sort of presence the story's various antagonists have had; for that to work, she has to have either had some long-running scheme that has a lot of hints in retrospect, or to have been shown to be a lot more active. Otherwise, she just feels less important than all of the other opponents Cat has dealt with, and would feel like an anticlimax given the importance her character is supposed to have.

It's like one of those cliché stories where after spending multiple arcs defeating her rival, the character goes on to kill God in a couple of chapters – it establishes the rival as the real antagonist, and the deity the afterthought that readers think of as wrapping up the story.

[TeK](#)

I am not crying, you crying.

NerfGlaistigUaine

That was actually painful to read. Kudos.

SpeckofStardust

oh also point lead Kairos is in the lead.
But still early game here.

Bonifacio Mario Peña Jr.

Since black lost his Name.... Did he just qualify for Heir?
Is there a Usurper Name?

caoimhinh

I had thought he would have to be Chancellor first to be claimant for the Dread Emperor Name, but it seems he is just going straight to the rebellion part, right now he is only a Nameless claimant to the Name Malicia holds.
This nevertheless effectively just started a Praesi civil war.

Insanenoodlyguy

Malicia was never Chancellor. That is a path to the Tower's throne but not the only one.

caoimhinh

Yep, but that was called "Right of Usurpation", which is that whoever kills the Dread Emperor has a right to claim the Tower (check for example, the Santient Tapirs Trial).

However, Amadeus is *claimant* to the Name of Dread Emperor right now, so there's a pull towards that, in such occasions it was common that one would get a transitional Name, like Heir and Chancellor, before challenging the Tyrant of the Tower.

Anyone can claim the Tower if they kill the Empress, even a Nameless, but since Amadeus is already involved in Name stuff I half-expected him to get a transitional Name before fighting Alaya.

I doubt Malicia would lose her Name if everyone in the international conference recognized Amadeus as Emperor, but maybe it will weaken her and start to make the Name slip out of her like what happened to Vivienne and Amadeus?

Either way, this is definitely a pivot for Amadeus and Alaya. It will be interesting to see where this leads to.

medailyfun

Heir Name is not given as a gift for Emperor claimants, person should fit the groove, and obviously Heir groove requires something else.

Clmineith

Giving how things usually go, Heir mean probably Usurper. I bet most of the Dread Emperors earn the name via treason.

[Liliet](#)

He's a claimant to Dread Emperor. There is no need for any intermediate Name, any Name can be claimed from scratch, transitional Names are optional. See: Hanno who was never a Squire.

Casey Glick

I think Kairos had a good idea what was going to happen here and by introducing Malicia in this way invited it. Remember that Kairos wants to have fun, to play the Chaotic Evil role to its fullest, and the conventions of this universe sharply constrain him. Although he is allied with both the Bard and the Dead King, he has given Catherine enough information to strongly imply that he supports neither of their games, since their games are "stasis". Although he enjoys playing the Story, I don't think he wants to be bound by it long-term, and this is why he's become such an expert at manipulating it. By forcing the break between Black and Malicia, Kairos takes an important step at ensuring that the Old Order is well and truly broken.

If you list the top-tier Story manipulators, I think you have Black, Catherine, Kairos, and Grey Pilgrim (plus the Wandering Bard, and the Dead King). What unites all the mortal players is a certain, hem, Practicality, and desire to personally keep free of the bonds of Story. But only Cat and Kairos have been playing against WB and DK.

In short, I think Kairos is probably Catherine's closest ally in the MetaMetaGame.

Shveiran

Kairos is definitely a player, but I don't know if I'd define as "ally" someone who has goals incompatible with her.

[Barthumphries](#)

The Tyrant wants a new name. He wants to be The Betrayer, an in-world analogy for our Satan, someone who's always willing to ally with you, support you, and give you everything you ever wanted, but who will ultimately betray the Faustian bargain that you made in a way that you least expected and most regretted.

Essentially, the Tyrant wants a bit part I'm the future stories to come as long as his bit part comes with immortality.

Spellblade's Father

You've just gotta love the drow bidding over who gets to fight the dead king using dressers. It's so perfectly drow.

Allafterme

I wonder if this open break between Alaya and Amadeus is enough to draw Ranger back to his side.

Shveiran

Uh. That... Uh.

Allafterme

To be frank story itself is rather railroaded into the of death of Calamities at this point and Ranger is kind of in the back plan since Arcadian War. I just wonder if this particular story thread would bring her into the spotlights and her eventual death or EE will superbly subvert it as always...

[Liliet](#)

Hye is ancient and wise and knows better than to allow caring about someone to draw her into a path that might potentially put her in any actual danger.

This is all sarcasm, I hate her, and I really fucking wish she'd pull a mini-redemption here by actually sticking her neck out for Amadeus. But she won't.

She hasn't been a Calamity since she left. She left for a reason.

Shveiran

Also, Hye is one of the old monster that the narrative doesn't really need to die. She has no beef with the world changing, and that is what the climax will be about. It's not really a loose end, though maybe she'll become involved anyway.

We can have a good ending without addressing her (unlike, say, Malicia or Black)

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Yeah, but she might have beef with the fact that literally all her students will have to attend Cardinal.

Forrest

I might remind that the reason given for ranger leaving was that she did not like Alaya, or rather Malicia, and wanted Black to be the Dread Emperor since he did all the work. Oh, and look what was just announced.

Insanenoodlyguy

I was wondering how she'd die. That seems likely to be part of it, coming out and being more vulnerable. The Calamities do seem to be on the chopping block of fate. Amadeus might survive (though I don't think it likely by the end of this story, who knows), but I've suspected the rest will not.

[Javvies](#)

Except Ranger left because the Story of the Calamities was not *her* Story.

If she returns it'll not be because Calamities, it'll be because love of Amadeus. Different Stories.

Might still not end up great for her, though.

[Barthumphries](#)

She'll return because as much as she loves Black, this is her chance to kill a Dread Emperor. When else will there be one whose weaknesses she knows so well? She can't give up the chance to bag something like that.

Andrew Mitchell

Now, **that's** a reason that fits.

Tom

Amadeus has to survive so that he can be quoted as Dread Emperor Mr. Rogers

DNRFTW

Praes position looks pretty good right now, actually. Nobody likes them, sure, but no one's in a position to strike at them either. And their politically united, the legions are doing great and they have their doomsday magic still.

No idea why their so desperate. Let Procer and Levant and Callow and the Drow fight with the Dead King. Praes isn't threatened?

Sparsebeard

They also lost two of their most important cities, have lost the Matrons and are heading into a potential civil war between the armed forces and the clans vs the WMD rich aristocracy...

And one of their allies is friggin Tyrant!

"Tout va très bien, madame la Marquise..."

Quite Possibly A Cat

You know, I think Tyrant should defect to Team Good. It would be the ultimate betrayal. Rend the DK in the back and Wish for Amadeus to never take another Name even as he climbs the Tower. That would be another shard of the DK down and take the Dread Emperor Name off the board. Since it is the first step of his Evil scheme it will 100% work.

[Liliet](#)

I COULD GENUINELY SEE THAT

Allafterme

I said the very last betrayal of Tyrant will be to himself in the past and I still stand by my words!!!

ninegardens

Wait... so the reason that Kairos is destined to die last year (two years ago? Whenever), is because a timetravelling Kairos is going to go back in time and betray him?

...
That's amazing.

And yeah, I can totally see Tyrant betray DK and doing a final betrayal... but not here.
Now is far too early for Tyrant's final move.

Shveiran

I've long since stopped trying to predict that guy.

[shieldredblog](#)

An interesting idea, but...
That's a lot of power your assuming Wish has, used in a meta way Aspects usually aren't.
At the very least, I think that sort of thing would need Narrative weight that I don't see here.

ninegardens

So... just a random point, but why the hell is everyone convinced that Black will be forced to kill Malicia or whatever?

I mean seriously, if he says "I'm the emperor" and negotiates a treaty and then goes back to Preas and says "Hey, I got a treaty, no Crusades are coming as long as we stop making hellgates, can

we please stop fucking up everything now?" is she really going to say no?

If she's doing stupid shit based on fear, and he can create a situation where the threat goes away, is there any reason for her to be killed? (And no "Justice for past crimes" doesn't count)

Jane

We don't really see enough from Malicia's perspective to say either way, in my opinion. Personally, I think she would accept "retirement" (exile) if she believed her position to be truly untenable while still being strong enough to demand some conditions, but a lot of readers believe her to desire control too much to let go in any circumstance but death.

That said, I don't know that she could accept Amadeus as Dread Emperor, given her justified concerns with him as a non-military leader – he's not really the right person to put in charge of the country, if you don't want an ocean of blood to be the result. Ironically, at this point she might actually consider Cat to be the more acceptable replacement after her diplomatic successes, though she'd probably be feeling sick the entire time if she had to hand the Tower to her rather than her dear friend.

[Fayhem](#)

> That said, I don't know that she could accept Amadeus as Dread Emperor, given her justified concerns with him as a non-military leader – he's not really the right person to put in charge of the country, if you don't want an ocean of blood to be the result.

About that! I still love the theory about Amadeus winding up as Dread Emperor Benevolent bc it fits so nicely (sorry Liliet), but literally the quote from DE Bennie's coronation is about inviting the High Lords/Ladies to change with him and work together for the future of Praes. Which is dubiously plausible if you assume Amadeus sticks to his previously stated convictions vis-à-vis the High L/Ls. BUT. This moment, right here, could presage the pivot where he actually changes his mind.

At this point I think we all know that Amadeus is not a man of lightly held convictions – he isn't changing anything he believes *lightly*. But this, right here, the pain of losing one of his only remaining friends not to enemy action, but from being forced to turn on her *himself*? There's nothing light about that. And I could easily believe in that pain motivating him to FINALLY give Malicia's perspective of Praes and what it needs real consideration.

Because let's be real, he never really has (see previously mentioned point about being a stubborn mofo). He deferred to Malicia's judgment in the matter for decades, but he never actually accepted her argument/perspective as legitimate/correct (see his exploding at her after Second Liesse). And she always knew that. And after this, I think he'll have to be asking himself something akin to what many of the commenters have been saying – could this have been avoided if the two of them had just been able to truly talk this all out at some earlier point? And if it could have (I'd say maybe), why didn't that happen? Was his own well-established recalcitrance at least in part a factor (I'd say it was), and if so isn't giving her arguments one more chance with a truly open mind the least he owes his friend's memory? Because I think if Amadeus can let go of himself for long enough to do that (no longer being tied to the same Name will probably help; see Amadeus' own statements about Names inducing tunnel vision) he actually will see Alaya's point. Flooding Praes with its own blood to wash away the parts he doesn't like really, *really* isn't actually an acceptable mode of reform.

ninegardens

Also, crack theory that I'd love to be true, but probably isn't:

Malica and Black have been in regular contact for the past week, and already discussed Scribes scheme, the DK, the Accords, etc.

Everything that is happening now is part of their cunning scheme.

Insanenoodlyguy

While still highly unlikely, I am now considering a possibility I hadn't before:

I had put out before the idea that Akua might become empress in an ironic twist of fate, being punished with what she always wanted now that she realizes how shallow that desire was. A new flavor of irony now presents itself to me, the other thing she planned to restore once being a similar ironic hell: As a new emperor emerges, the unlikely tolerance formed along the way brings about the triumphant return of an old name, and so Chancellor Akua begins the process of making the wasteland something better.

[sivarajan](#)

Now we find out what happens when someone lays claim to a Name that's in use. Will Alaya become a claimant too?

ninegardens

Pretty sure she is still Empress until he actually claims the super ugly throne.

...

You know all this leads to the super disturbing thought of ... this seems like Bard's plan.

Black trying to claim the throne seems EXACTLY like Bard's plan.

And when Black first heard about this, he chuckled to himself and thought "Mistake", but now it looks like he is running with it, and even though Malica is being crazy, I really REALLY do not like this idea of going along with Bard's plan.

So can we not.

Maddy.

Please?

Andrew Mitchell

Too late!

ninegardens

D:

[Barthumphries](#)

Well, this is a surprise. I just reloaded the page and there's not yet a vote post.

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

Also, a typo thread:

the result of seeking diversions to distract frim his worries
Change frim to from

There are more typos. Can you find them all? 😊

Jack

"I trust people to act according to their nature. Anything more is sentimentality."

—Dread Empress Malicia the First, First of her Name

Goobinator101

Good lord, the comment section on this one is something special to read but I'll digress. I am excited to see where this clown fiesta of a conference goes.

Abrakadabra

Right? Like people have ANY Right to dictate what kind of characters the writer puts in their own book. They could be all blue skinned with fucking tentacles and genitalia on their foreheads, it would not change the story one iota.

sengachi

You know what I like about Malicia and Black as a character dynamic? They've **always** been this way. Even before all the stuff with the previous Dread Emperor happened to them, when they were just two kids talking politics in a tavern, the seeds of this were sown.

They both always wanted to topple the existing order and build something reformed and better in its place. But Malicia, from the beginning, saw it as "I could run it better". And Black saw it as "It could be run better". From the very beginning, the very, **very** beginning this was a difference between them.

The fact that they're at odds now has nothing to do with the losses they've suffered or the traumas they've experienced or the atrocities they've committed. It was just the simple inevitable collision of two people with aligned but subtly different values who are both utterly unwilling to yield. And I love that. The fact that from the very beginning this was a doomed friendship. There's something very Greek tragedy about that which appeals to me.

And gods, they're both monsters. They've both sacrificed their humanity to be the monsters they are. But it's beautiful to see the motives which these humans set out with still reflected in the monsters they've become.

mavant

I'm sad for him.

But also, ROCK ME AMADEUS

Aranaya

Shit just got real

Queen

I love all powerful women and it is just such a shame that Malicia has put herself in the particularly weak position of classical Evil. I liked her a lot before the Folly.

Abrakadabra

Well. Well. If I ever write a book, everyone will be blue skinned, everyone will have a pussy, and they all will possess

dicks too, on their foreheads.
FUCK YOU ALL!

Interlude: Rise, Rise

"A treaty is fooling all the people at the right time, an alliance is fooling the right people all the time. A war is when all the people are fools all the time."

– Prokopia Lekapene, first Hierarch of the League of Free Cities

The Carrion Lord's spoken Chantant was flawless, the First Prince grudgingly admitted. Almost entirely without accent, too, and it was the tongue the most people in the hall would speak so it'd been the canniest choice. After such an incendiary claim it was no surprise that the hall fell into disarray, a hundred whispers filling the room as loudly as any ringing shout. There were many faces that Cordelia Hasenbach could have watched. The Dead King, the Enemy incarnate, was seated and still not a hundred feet from her. The 'Firstborn', whose unknown tongue and strange disposition married to the sudden strategic importance made increasingly important to understand. Even the Carrion Lord himself, who she *had* watched for some time as he had that terse, charged exchange with the Dread Empress in some eastern tongue. The pale man's face had turned corpse-like halfway through, like a mask made of wax.

Malicia's inhabited body was not so expressive, but she'd seemed shaken as well. Perhaps there truly was genuine sentiment between the two of them, Cordelia thought. It hardly mattered, with monsters like those. The First Prince's gaze had left them before the end, though, turning to the tanned woman leaning back into her seat at the same table. Catherine Foundling's face had not lost any of the sharp angles that meant no one would ever call her a beauty, but where before she'd seemed sullen there was now a certain... carefreeness. The Black Queen's eyes had always been what softened her mien to something short of severe, Cordelia considered, but now instead of wild swings of emotion or utter iciness there was an unsettling candidness to what could be glimpsed in them. The First Prince had found her personable, when spoken to face-to-face, which she had not expected.

Which made it all the more chilling that the sequence of events the Black Queen had so offhandedly predicted last night was coming to pass so unerringly.

Cordelia Hasenbach was not above admitting when she had made a mistake, and her early assessments of Queen Catherine had been very much mistaken. She'd taken the lapses in etiquettes, the strange asides and poorly-kept temper to mean that the Black Queen was mediocre diplomat, and in truth little more than a charismatic warlord whose grip on power was maintained by terror in blood. Considering the other woman had since wheedled support out of the Kingdom Under – the likes of which had not been seen since Triumphant's day! – and somehow become the foremost religious figure of the drow and then leveraged this into the Everdark's entry into the war, it would be absurd to keep believing as much. And so much of this was absurd already, Cordelia grimly thought. How could anyone have a pitched battle with the Dominion and somehow come out of the slaughter in good odour with the Blood?

No, Foundling was not a mediocre diplomat. She simply disdained the usual means of diplomacy, which had seemed the same when it was through these that Cordelia interacted with her. Her Liesse Accords, which admittedly she professed to be as much the work of Vivienne Dartwick and Hakram Deadhand, were also a diplomatic solution coming from a woman the First Prince had once considered a canny, dangerous thug with an army. It was necessary to reassess what she'd once thought of the Black Queen, for though she was now an ally only a fool kept both eyes on the stag when hunting with a wolf. Cordelia had known all of this, or at least thought she did. Yet looking at Catherine's Foundling calm face, the barely-veiled sympathy she looked at the Carrion Lord with, she could not help shiver. For all that the Black Queen had yet to even address the hall, every person here had so far danced to the tune of her choice. Cordelia set aside the thoughts and the wariness, striking at the table as her majordomo loudly called for order. The noise withdrew, leaving a palpable sensation of absence in its wake.

"We recognize the words of the Carrion Lord," the First Prince said. "Yet let it be said, and known, that this conference claims not the authority to install or depose rulers."

Enthusiastic approval from the Dominion's tables at that, as they'd been understandably wary of the precedents that might be set today. For all that Levant now stood strong compared to a weakened Procer and bloodied Callow, it would not last forever. None of the Blood wanted foreigners to use this conference as pretext to meddle in Dominion affairs a decade from now, when their power waned and Procer's waxed. Cordelia waited a beat, for her partner in this intricate dance to step in. The Black Queen rose to her feet, demanding the floor, and a nod from the First Prince to her majordomo had it granted.

"The Wasteland's affairs are its own," Catherine Foundling said, then offered the Empress a hard smile, "at least for now. Yet it

cannot be denied that the Carrion Lord speaks for the Legion-in-Exiles, and others among the Dread Empire. We may not have the right to crown him, but let us not shy from practical realities for politeness' sake."

And there it was. The line that would allow them to hamstring Dread Empress Malicia and bring the Carrion Lord to the table without granting her the wellspring of Praesi support that 'foreigners attempting to place their chosen candidate atop the Tower' might otherwise garner. Lord Yannu Marave rose and was passed the right to speak.

"The Dominion backs the right of the Carrion Lord to speak for the Legions-in-Exile and any other who come under his banner," the Lord of Alava said, his Chantant polished and practiced.

He had been the right choice, the First Prince decided. Razin Tanja was emerging as a rival power among the Blood, and one the Grey Pilgrim was taking an interest in, but he was young and not as skilled a speaker.

"The Kingdom of Callow seconds this," Vivienne Dartwick said, tone brisk.

A moment passed as the Black Queen raised an eyebrow at the drow.

"The Empire Ever Dark recognizes the Lord of Carrion and his rights," General Rumena said, sounding amused.

It – Cordelia had learned that the drow eschewed sexes, and found insult in their use – was smiling most unsettlingly, the pale blue eyes that seemed universal to its kind never blinking. It was ancient, the First Prince tell that much by a simple glance. Yet it also *looked* ancient. Given that the Black Queen had once casually mentioned her attendant, the one they called the Lord of Silent Steps, had been alive before the Conquest and yet looked near boyish the princess had to wonder how long it would take for age to become so visible among one of their kind. Centuries? A thousand years?

"Why don't you take this one, Leo," the Tyrant of Helike said, grinning as he winked. "Did I not say that I would allow other voices than my own to be heard?"

The Basileus of Nicae, Leo Trakas, looked hesitant at the sudden offer. The young man was unfortunately not a well-known quantity to her. Until recently his ancient office had been the lesser of the powers in the city-state, largely concerned with stewardship and ceremony while the ruling Strategos truly held the reins. Strategos Nereida Silantis had been an ally of hers, and one cultivated by half a decade of gifts and correspondence as well as fair mediation between Ashur and Nicae. She'd also died when the Tyrant took Nicae and in the chaos Leo Trakas had seized

great authority, preventing the nomination of another Strategos. His victories against the Thalassocracy had since ensured he was highly popular in Nicae, though his hold on rule was a great deal more fragile than one would assume at first glance.

He'd be deposed within the month, should he blunder badly enough the people turned against him. The Basileus mastered himself, after a moment, and as Kairos Theodosian had no doubt expected him to do he chose the safe path.

"The League of Free Cities abstains," Leo Trakas said.

Which left only one vote, until Procer delivered its own.

"The Thalassocracy abstains," Sitter Ahirom said.

The man had kept his composure, but it was visibly fraying at the seams. As it would be, Cordelia thought. Magon Hadast might have been forced to break alliances to repay a debt of gratitude and prevent the starvation of his people that might follow *ingratitude*, but keeping company with Keter and Ater was nothing to be proud of. Much less when it was becoming increasingly clear that neither the Crown nor the Tower were quite as masterful as they'd no doubt pretended to be.

"The Principate of Procer supports the motion," Cordelia Hasenbach crisply spoke into the silence. "Four in favour and two abstentions, the motion passes. The Carrion Lord's right to speak for the designated peoples is accepted by this hall."

In the silence that followed, the First Prince of Procer mused, one could almost hear the first spark of civil war in the Wasteland.

—

It had all been going smoothly, which in Vivienne Dartwick's experience meant the other shoe was due to drop.

The Black Knight – she knew he held the Name no longer, but how could that man ever be anything but the Black Knight in her eyes? – had a seat at the table without this conference and its heart, the Grand Alliance, overreaching by attempting to enthrone him. Most importantly, the careful wording the First Prince had convinced Lord Yannu to employ had deep implications down the line. *And any who come under his banner*, the large Levantine had said, and the wording had been upheld even if Hasenbach had been careful not to repeat it. It meant that the Black Knight could be offered terms now, lenient ones, and that those terms could then be made to apply to all of Praes should he become Dread Emperor. As Dread Empress Malicia had earned little but hate from those in this hall, any terms she might receive would be decidedly inferior. It was leverage that might tip the scales win favour of

supporting the Carrion Lord among certain Praesi, though unless the Empress outright abdicated it was good as certain there'd be a civil war between their supporters.

Not necessarily a long one, given that the loyalties of the Legions of Terror might just swing in his favour hard and early, but Wasteland wars were always nasty stuff.

Another two rounds of the tables saw confirmed the recognition of Dread Empress Malicia – even the Carrion Lord voted in favour, amusingly enough, which made the vote unanimous in favour with Magister Zoe Ixioni's assent in the name of the League – and another for the Dead King. Ashur abstained on that one, as did the Black Knight, and Nestor Ikaroi of the Secretariat voted *against* in the name of the League. Malicia was his sworn ally, however, and the Grand Alliance delegations had all been forewarned and agreed on common action, which meant that the majority in favour carried the vote. The King of Death had his seat and his vote, at least for now. Not that the motions had much power outside the strictures of the peace conference: they were a tool to manipulate the rules of this game through formality, not something that could be used to truly produce diplomatic results.

Vivienne had voiced the votes for the Kingdom of Callow both times, Catherine remaining silent. She knew well what it was Cat was doing, giving her the duty to speak for their shared home in front of every great power on Calernia. It was as tacit an endorsement of her as a successor there could be without Vivienne being named a princess, which would be... complicated to accomplish, and likely require her adoption into House Foundling. Setting aside the thoughts, Vivienne forced herself to sharpen her focus on the proceedings. Though the Dead King had yet to speak a word, little more than a grim sculpture of bones, the Empress had no shared such compulsions. With a pleasant, sonorous voice – Vivienne wondered if the body had been picked for it – she opened her part of the dance. The Carrion Lord, a mere landless rebel, had been allowed to address the hall while the rightful ruler of Praes had been denied the same right, she said, which was miscarriage of procedure.

It was not an unexpected assault. Hasenbach had named it a likely avenue, since refusing the Empress would taint the appearance of fair proceedings and accepting would allow her to go on the offensive while bypassing the agreed-on order of affairs. Which would otherwise keep her contained until hours into the talks simply by speaking of very little Praes could weigh in on.

"We recognize the words of Dread Empress Malicia of Praes," the First Prince said.

Malicia's mangled puppet smoothly rose to her feet.

"The Dread Empire cedes its speaking right to the Thalassocracy of Ashur," she smoothly said.

Ah, Vivienne thought, almost grimacing. And there went the first stumble in the plan. Tightening the vise on the opposition by hammering home how isolated the League and the Empire were one motion after another wouldn't work if Ashur withdrew from the Grand Alliance formally before the talks had even begun. Sitter Ahirom rose to his feet, acknowledging the First Prince's evenly spoken recognition of his right to speak with a nod.

"I speak now the words of Magon Hadast, citizen of the second tier of the Baalite Hegemony, Sitter of the Eminent Committee," the man said.

A heartbeat of silence passed.

"As of this day, the Thalassocracy of Ashur declares its withdrawal from the Grand Alliance and all attendant treaties," Sitter Ahirom said.

Few across the room were surprised, and those that were told much to Vivienne. The Dominion had been brought into this early and the Firstborn had only middling interest in matters unrelated to the war against the Dead King, but the lack of surprise did come as a surprise to Sitter Ahirom himself. It was as the First Prince had speculated, then: Ashur was good as blind on the continent, and clutching at any offered driftwood that would prevent it from drowning. More interestingly, there was a great deal of surprise among the League's delegation. *Not Magister Ixioni, though*, Vivienne thought. Helike and Stygia were traditionally kept close alliance when the League was at war, as they fielded its finest armies and typically both benefited greatly from strife. A Tyrant's rule also meant that Below held the reins in both city-states, buoying Evil in the Free Cities for a span.

Delos and Atalante had both had no idea. The general from Bellerophon still looked lost and afraid of asking questions, but the two Penthesians were calm. Better at hiding their thoughts, or in the know?

"Penthes?" Vivienne murmured.

"Theodosian owns and informs them, I'd wager," the Black Knight softly said. "Prodocius has an emperor's ambition and the wits of a well-bred trout while Honorion is afflicted by that peculiar condition where one comes to believe that gold makes up for any and all shortcomings. Scribe has theorized the Tyrant ensured they'd be the last two claimants because they are singularly inept at anything but banquets and squabbling."

"If he leans towards one we could back the other," Hakram suggested.

"Tyrant's too canny for that," Cat grunted. "He'll have them both convinced he's secretly helping them against the other."

"The Empire has influence there as well, through trade," the Black Knight said. "Penthes is a dead end. Nicae might not be."

Basileus Leo Trakas looked like someone had slapped him across the face. He was a handsome one, Vivienne thought, though less so when his eyes were narrowed in surprised anger.

"He doesn't know about the ships yet," Vivienne quietly said. "Otherwise he'd be storming out. Trakas only thinks he's about to get strong-armed into backing off Ashur by his own side."

"Agreed," Catherine said. "He's not smooth enough to keep it in the pot if he gets knifed that hard and deep in the back."

"Then we approach him during the recess," Hakram said. "We lack proof beyond the Tyrant's own words, which only a fool would take, but the groundwork can be laid."

"Hasenbach tried to use Nicae as a counterweight for Kairos and that went over about as well as pepper in a kennel," Cat reminded them.

"If enough of the League's armies keep withdrawing to their territory, it no longer matters that Theodosian is dominant," the Black Knight noted. "He'll no longer have the strength to collapse Procer or invade Callow, which effectively muzzles him."

Which would be ideal, as far as she was concerned, since acting against the madman outright was likely to see them burned. If he could instead be dragged back into the lesser squabbles of the League of Free Cities until the war against Keter was brought to an end it should be significantly less risky of a proposition. Which meant bending the individual city-states, and that would require significantly more pressure than the coalition had brought to bear so far.

"We need to strike while they're still uncertain," Vivienne said.

Catherine looked at her curiously.

"We out it now, Cat," Vivienne said. "It's out of the order, but then so was this. It ought to put them on the back foot again."

The Queen of Callow considered it for a moment, then nodded.

"Hakram," she said, "find me an in."

The orc's brow creased as he put his superb memory to work.

"This isn't a motion, it's an address," the Adjutant said. "Which means we can ask for right of reply on if what we speak of is associated. If the First Prince grant it, which I'd venture to assume."

Catherine's lips quirked into half a smile and she turned.

"Do it."

Vivienne started in surprise, looking at the woman that was both her ruler and her friend.

"This isn't a vote, Cat," she said. "It's-"

"I know what it is," Catherine said. "It was your notion, and a good one. Besides, you're the one who'll reign under it. Speak the words."

Vivienne breathed out shallowly. But it was too late to flinch, to fear. It'd been too late since that night in Laure where she'd chosen to bet on the Squire. She rose to her feet.

"The Kingdom of Callow request right of reply," Vivienne Dartwick said.

Cordelia Hasenbach, tall and fair and with eyes like chips of ice, considered her for a moment.

"We recognize the words of Lady Dartwick, heiress-designate to Callow," the First Prince said.

"Pertaining the Grand Alliance, as addressed by Sitter Ahirom," Vivienne said, "we declare now before Gods and men that the Kingdom of Callow is a member and signatory."

copaceticcockroach

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

For Others: The Queen of Callow considered it for a moment, then voted. <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Insanenoodlyguy

"If enough of the League's armies keep withdrawing to their territory, it no longer matters that Theodosian is dominant," the Black Knight noted. "He'll no longer have the strength to

collapse Procer or invade Callow, which effectively Votes for
Practical Guide to Evil on Topwebfiction”

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

BarthHumphries

Don't leave a naked vote thread without a covering typo thread!

None of the Blood wanted foreigners to us this conference
Change us to use

There are several more typos. One meaningless internet point to
everyone who can find one!

Mental Mouse

> “The Empire Ever Darks recognizes the Lord of Carrion and
his rights,”

Empire Ever Dark.

Javvies

Heh.

Ah, Cordelia. Realizing that you've consistently underestimated
Cat has to be a little embarrassing. At least you're figuring it
out now, and it's not exactly open embarrassment.

Viv doing all or most of the talking is going to make whatever
Cat says all the more important.

Oshi

Which is the point I would expect. Cat is being careful to set
the ground. This is the game of mortal rulers at the moment.
The story is about to come up and that's where she will be
needed.

Zgggt

I somehow have a feeling that Cordelia prepared herself for
winter!Cat, and will end this day when finally having no one
else around and a long string of profanities

Liliet

Well, it's less embarrassment and more sheer terror, at the
moment ;u;

I mean even Catherine was creeped out by how exactly she
managed to predict this ♥

Mental Mouse

Admittedly, Cat's continuing record is still made of WTF.
(Which for her can also stand for "Won The Field") 😊 Cordelia
may be on the back foot, but at least she's managing to dance.

Shveiran

It is, admittedly, Cordy's home turf
miles

Cat also can't make deals with them, as she's a villain. Viv
has only ever held a heroic name.

[Liliet](#)

This shouldn't matter, given who else is at the table.
Between the drow and Carrion Lord, the matter would already
have to be set – and then they recognize Dead King and
Malicia which just clinches it.

Oh, and then there's the Tyrant of Helike.

Oshi

And the dance continues. Still no surprises to come out yet, I
wonder when the other shoe will drop.

Hellspirit

I'm like a child at Christmas \^^/

Jane

Vivienne, stop picking up bad habits from Cat. It seems harmless
now, but the next thing you know, you'll have that hall burning
with goblinfire.

erebus42

In Callow, a peace attempt without some mild arson is
considered a dull affair.

hakureireimu

Wait a minute...you can't just declare yourself to be a member of
the alliance, unless the members already agreed, in which case it
is no longer a secret.

Shequi

Unless you're at a point where said Alliance has just lost a
founding member and desperately needs to be supported lest it
collapse. And Cat does have the support of both the Dominion
and Princess Rozala, guaranteed, which probably means Princess

Cordelia as well. So the only other part of the Grand Alliance would be the Thalassocracy of Ashur... except that it just quit, removing the impediment.

[Liliet](#)

Yep. Ashur was the last piece of puzzle missing and oh look it's just fucking voluntarily removed itself

[onedollargum](#)

Nice summary.

caoimhinh

Next chapter they are gonna be like "That's right, Ashur, we voted without you. Because we knew you would withdraw. We have predicted you" and the poor spokesman will feel even worse and more at a loss. Hahahaha

Oshi

It's more likely that Ashur will be sidelined and used as a tool to mess with the league. It might be a permanent state of affairs given how this is shaking out.

Hitogami

This sounds like a comment made by Dread Emperor Irritant 😂
😂

[Liliet](#)

More likely the vote will be held right now immediately. "Procer recognizes and agrees." "Levant recognizes and agrees." Aaaand that's the end of it. Nobody who's not a member has a right to say anything about *their* procedure 😊

Shveiran

I like Shequi's view that this already took place behind closed door and with Ashur's removal it changed from "most members agree" to "all members agree" whether or not Ashur ever voted on the subject.
But it could be you are right, I didn't consider it before. It effectively ends the same unless a big reveal is coming.

[Liliet](#)

But why would they have held the vote without Ashur in it? That's just rude towards it, and they want it back.

Some Smartass

You can when the alliance's naval strength just decided to turn tail and you're the only land border with Praes.

Quite possibly a cat

They must have gotten Ranger to sign them in. She is half elf, so she is allowed to break one mortal law at a time.

[Liliet](#)

omfg bless

Shikkarasu

Ranger: [s]I can be defeated[/s]

Also, it only just hit me that Saint of Swords had an anti-elf Aspect. She can [i]add[/i] laws to creation. F—king well done, EE.

Andrew Mitchell

Next time, change those [] to angled brackets and your formatting will work. 😊

erebus42

“Boom bitches!” – Robber probably (if he had been part of the delegation)

[Liliet](#)

Nah, he doesn't speak like that.

More like “Booom!” and gleeful cackling as everyone flinches

[Fayhem](#)

And then the explosives go off for real, unless Cat remembered to frisk him.

/joking but not joking but mostly joking

The Spurious Spectator

Frisking Robber sounds like Cat has a firm -delegate to Adjutant- policy on. After all, its not like he's going to lose a hand over it or anything

NerfGlaistigUaine

A short interlude update... sigh. Don't get me wrong it's a great chapter, but I feel like I got half the drug when I need the full dose. You're going to leave me craving more the entire weekend.

Anyone want to debate on who would win in a fight – Irritant vs. Traitorous? Come on guys, entertain me!

Oshi

Traitorous.

ChillyPepper

Dread Emperor Unexpected.

spornol

Nobody expects the Nicaean Inquisition!

Nafram

Only after revealing he was Irritant all along

WuseMajor

We already had this vote. Irritant won because the vote was split between Traitorous and Grandmaster Ouroboros of the Order of Unholy Obsidian.

NerfGlaistigUaine

I thought that was a favorite/popularity poll. I mean if the two went toe to toe, mano a mano

gnaruscat

Would either of them actually mano in person? I see an emperor slapfight as most likely outcome

konstantinvoncarstein

Irritant have a better grasp of story-fu, so he would have a head start. But it is difficult to know for sure.

[Liliet](#)

They would immediately make an alliance. A terrifying, terrifying alliance.

ninegardens

“My dear and trusted friend, who I would never lie to, nor betray”

[Liliet](#)

Not at all. Irritant had >50%, Traitorous and Ouroboros summed together couldn't have taken him either.

Daemion

Irritant is abusing a loophole in the rules to prevent himself from ever losing, Traitorous is a munchkin who has only one tactic applied to everything because this is how he wins every single time.

Their conflict would never end, each of them would have his victories only to discover they mean nothing. It's a draw.

Or it would be... if their battle was even possible. There can be only one Dread Emperor at a time, they'd never be able to fight each other in the first place. 😊

[Liliet](#)

I suspect if they were claimants at the same time, Praes WOULD end up with precedent for two Dread Emperors.

They'd be like Catherine and Kairos, or I guess like two Kairoses, dancing the dance for their mutual amusement and understanding and never trying to *actually* get rid of the other because who else would they then pin all the blame on?

ninegardens

Oh God. Kairos would love this so much.

Way back at the start, Bard told him he needed to invest in better enemies...

If he could only duplicate himself, then he would have the best enemy of all. Himself.

...

Actually pretty sure he's going to do that anyway, come to think of it.

Oshi

Yep, this is what I'm waiting for. Kairos is stamp is that there is always going to be a Kairos.

[Barthumphries](#)

Traiterous would win of course. But Irritant would find a way to still be irritating, so I guess it depends on how you define "win".

Naeddyr

Traitorous would win, but Irritant wouldn't lose.

Sun Dog

Traitorous betrays himself, fouling Irritants plan to lose in a way advantageous to himself. Both are eaten by tapirs, who still don't have the right of usurpation. Pears as a whole shrugs and moves on.

ethericsentinel

The Dread Empire of Pears is then usurped by Dread Emperor Autocomplete.

Quite possibly a cat

If only Cordelia could have got Cat in like two books ago!

[Liliet](#)

YEP

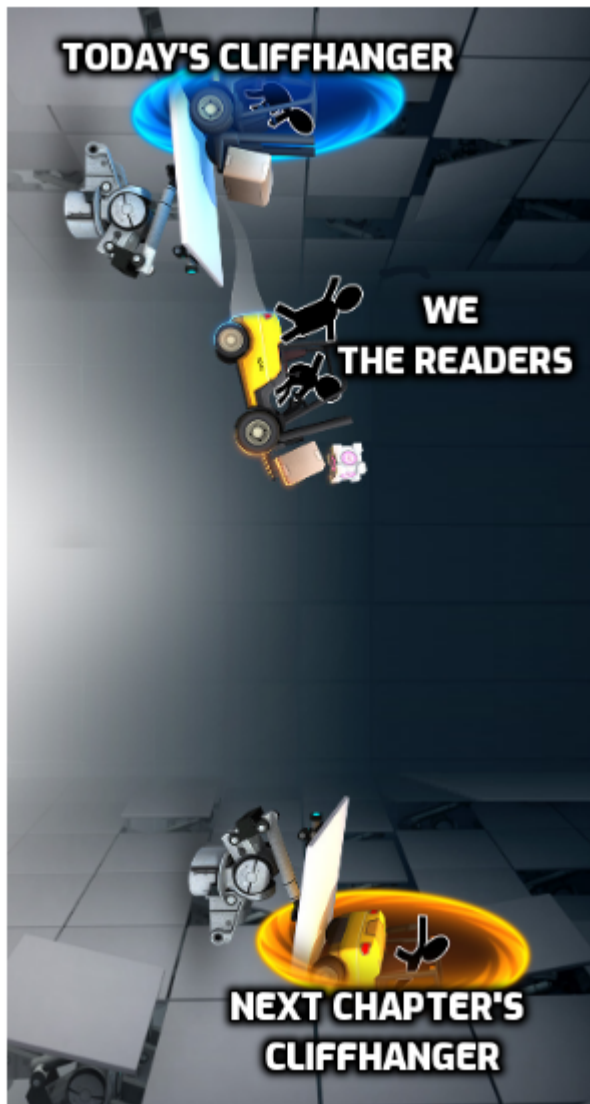
caoimhinh

Nice, Interludes started. Time for the back and forth of the political schemes and traps of technicalities.

Hold on to your belts, people!

We are in for a string of deliciously painful cliffhangers, each one leading to the next, and making us crave for more each time!

Made a meme to further illustrate my feelings :v



Andrew Mitchell

Oh, very, very nice. 😊

[daegone823](#)

I can totally see how this debate between nations must be boring the fuck out of both the above and below lol.

Above and Below:

"There like where is the drama where is the angels, not even the threat of a doomsday weapon"

Above: "Man what happened to our puppet bard wasn't she supposed to turn one of them into a hero so we could interrupt then below could do something too...."

Below: "B00000RRRRRIIINNGGG!!!
Where is the blood where is the knives"

Bard: Give me a couple of days I got soemthing in the work"

I think even the fact that most princes, the pilgrim included sacrificed there right to rule also is nice. Or the fact that Chat did not bring her crows despite knowing the dead king would attend.

In a way this is the most fair interplay the nations could ever hope to have(no interference from Gods). This is the Dark Knight's Dream realized which is why he no longer needs/has his name. Which is probably why he views Malicia's own intrusion/motives to be a betrayal, she is committing a mortal sin. She is stopping forward progress, she is standing in the way of his grand design finally bearing fruit, which is a recurring theme. (Sve Noc, Fae, the tribes). No one wants to read the same story over and over, especially if it is already a boring story.

I wish I could e a fly inside of the dead king's head he has probably been in many assemblies like this in some fashion or another. Hopefully he is as entertained as I am.

Mental Mouse

> I wish I could e a fly inside of the dead king's head

LOL!

Liliet

I love this.

I love Cordelia noticing the subtleties of sentiment involved, even as she dismisses them as unimportant (unimportant right now, at least). I love her getting fucking terrified of how wrong she was about Catherine but also going on a paragraph of musing about her face which is just. Yeah okay I did not expect that god fucking bless ;u;

I love Vivienne making clear some of her views on Amadeus (AAAA I WANT MORE THIS IS LIKE DANGLING A CARROT ON A STICK IN FRONT OF MY NOSE), I love her being terrified of stepping forward but steeling herself and doing so, I love her being clever as clever gets and that involves asking her own table for input because they have knowledge and insight that she doesn't (AND THAT INCLUDES AMADEUS AHFFF)

I love the League creaking and swinging side to side as Kairos gleefully sets his own side on fire.

I love everything about thisssssssss

SpeckofStardust

The Tyrant is still in the lead point wise, gaining even more by allowing Ashur to get 'saved' causing it's removal from the Grand Alliance giving Callow the chance to make this play.

Crash

If it wouldn't absolutely fuck with everything Cat has planned I would have like to see Vivienne come into a new name as the Diplomat.

With Creation came discord

She has spoken a grand total of like what less than 10 sentences at a diplomatic forum and already she embodies the role of a diplomat strongly enough to come into that name? I mean I know this story has a strong protagonist bias but that might actually top the list of things where the world works according to different rules depending on who it's impacting.

Raivshard

She's not going to get a name. Ever.

That's the whole point of Cat naming her the heir to Callow and the Accords proscribing Named from meddling in the affairs of nations.

[Liliet](#)

I somehow doubt Accords can *prevent* her from gaining a Name. They're brand new and don't have that kind of weight.

laguz24

She also cannot forge a new name like that, new names are formed in archetypes and based on who they are not what they represent.

[Liliet](#)

Oooh thank you great phrasing!

Names form out of *archetypes*.

Raivshard

The Accords won't have that strength for a good long while, true, but as we saw with Cordelia, a Name can be rejected. Vivienne knows what's at stake and will go out of her way to avoid screwing it up.

[Liliet](#)

It can if the conditions are right for you to get a choice. Agnes had to work hard to give Cordelia the B button on that.

Interlude: All Ye Villains

"In studying our histories I have cast aside old mistakes, instead embracing fresh and interesting ones."

– Dread Empress Atrocious, later devoured by man-eating tapirs

The games being played on this marble floor, Hakram thought, were no less deadly than any played axe in hand. Perhaps even deadlier, for an axe took one life at a time while here a streak of ink and a sharp phrase could kindle the death of thousands. Most of his kind despised the ways of the Tower's court: the poisons drunk and spoken, the colourful clothes worth a manse and the alliances that came and went faster than the tides. It was not that orcs knew nothing of treachery or cunning ways, for though the Adjutant had long left behind the Steppes he still remembered the spoken histories and there were betrayals aplenty in the tales. Some were spoken of as reverently as great deeds unsullied, for though the treachery was not in question neither was the greatness.

Aslog Ironfoot's warbands turning on Warlord Gorm at the Battle of the Lights, bringing bloody end to Eldest Horde. Dagmar Hardteeth allying with the Queen of Okoro to murder their rivals by sorcery and surprise at the gathering of the thaw. And lesser betrayals, too were spoken of, not worthy of legend. Not even a century ago the Blackspear Clan had broken alliance with the Howling Wolves at the incitement of the Painted Dogs, allowing warbands through their territory, and then ambushed the returning Dogs to take the spoils of the cattle-raids. No legend had come of this, no tale save that Blackspear blood flowed without honour. No, Hakram Deadhand did not believe the Clans to be made of finer stuff than the rest of Creation, for their history spoke otherwise time and time again.

Yet his people disdained those who made sport of their own word, those who pretended to valour and honour while acting otherwise. And there was a sense of that, hanging around this great hall. Vivienne's words were ringing still, yet the harvest of surprise they reaped was meagre indeed. A few of the Tyrant's playthings, the Thalassocracy's man – who like the nation he stood for was this day isolated and out of his depths, ship bound to currents unknown – and those few scribes and translators too low in status to have warranted warning. The Dread Empress of Praes, wearing a mutilated and marked body like a coat, betrayed no surprise. Neither did the grinning devil known as Kairos Theodosian, or the utterly still corpse inhabited by the Dead King.

It was the first of these that Hakram was most wary of. Malicia had lost the reins of much she once commanded, but the most dangerous part of the Empress had ever been her boldness and clever mind, neither of which had been taken from her. Catherine thought her half-spent a force, with jackals circling the Tower and her realm deeply wounded, and dangerous mostly in that way a desperate villain tended to be. The Adjutant was not so certain. The Empress had not even attempted to bring the Carrion Lord to her side, by scrying or sent agent, this he knew for a fact: as the Eyes had people in the Army of Callow, so did the Jacks have people among the Legions-in-Exile. And the Scribe would have forewarned them, if those eyes were fooled, for the Adjutant understood her in a way most frightful.

He would act in similar manner, if Catherine was preparing to throw away her life and life's work.

And so while the hall twisted and turned, twining around the already half-known revelation that the Grand Alliance had known of Ashur's unfaithfulness and behind the Thalassocracy's own back prepared answer of its own, Hakram Deadhand watched the Empress. Malicia was not beloved of his people as her right hand had been, still was, for unlike the Carrion Lord she had neither been warlord nor tireless defender. Yet she was respected, by the wise among the Clans, for having enacted the Reforms without needing to cram them down the throat of the High Lords by civil war as the Black Knight's iron-handed ways might well have required. She had been good the orcs in a way few of her predecessors could boast, and never given slight without reason nor meddled in the affairs of the Clans beyond the old rights of the Tower.

Malicia had been a fair ruler to his people in most regards, Hakram thought, and looking upon the puppet-thing she now wore he could not bring himself to believe her to have gone the way of the Old Tyrants. The Empress had bought and paid for the Doom of Liesse, it could not be denied, yet meant to use it to serve the principles she had once writ in her treatise '*The Death of the Age of Wonders*'. She'd since used only the blades of assassins, sharp intrigue and the sole doomsday weapon of the Warlock that was already known to Calernia. Still Water was a thing of terror, true, but it should not be forgot that in the eyes of most in this room that terror had already been laid at the Empress' feet.

She lost little by using it, and gained from the use a great fleet as well as means to influence Ashur into leaving the Grand Alliance. It had not been a careless or desperate act, he thought. Which meant Malicia's keen edge had not faded, and nothing of the play taking place in this hall was a coincidence. Not even that raw thing that the Carrion Lord's voice had carried, when he good as begged for a reason not to turn on her. It'd be a damned cold thing, making that cut on purpose.

But cold was oft the winner, in Wasteland games.

"Catherine," the Adjutant whispered in Kharsum, leaning closer to her. "I think we are being had."

Tanned face set into a calm look as she studied the hall, his warlord slowly nodded.

"There's no swing in them," the Black Queen murmured. "This isn't their game. We misread them, Hakram."

As was often the case whenever Catherine's eyes narrowed and her twisty mind wandered down paths the rest of them could only dimly glimpse, Hakram was forced to take a moment to parse what she'd said. *Not enough swing*. As in the opposition was not putting up a fight, and so without pause she had decided it meant they saw what was happening as not worth fighting over. It might be argued instead, Hakram knew, that Callow's entering of the Grand Alliance was good as certain, and so the opposition had not considered it something that could be fought. Yet the Adjutant's instincts sung in accord with his queen's, for one did not face the longest-reigning Dread Empress in the history of the Wasteland and the King of Death himself and received so little 'swing', as his warlord had said.

Vivienne sat down even as a clarification was requested by the current speaker for the League of Free Cities – Basileus Leo Trakas once more – as to the veracity of the statement made by Lady Dartwick. Confirmation from the First Prince and Lord Yannu Marave followed.

"If they have no stake in this, then their victory lies not in a contested field," the Carrion Lord quietly said.

"That would mean they're not looking to get anything out of this conference," Vivienne said, her Kharsum still a little ragged even though they regularly practiced together. "So why are they even here?"

Catherine's hand half-reached to the pockets sown within her cloak, before she remembered it would be unseemly for her to light her pipe before so many eminent rulers. She forced it back down and let out an annoyed hiss through her teeth. Odds were, Hakram fondly thought, that she did not even realize how around greenskins she tended to mimic their manners. That particular manner of hissing couldn't properly be done without goblin teeth, for unlike theirs human teeth had no gaps when put together, but more than once Adjutant had seen goblins shoot her almost awestruck looks when she did it before them. There was a reason half the goblins in the Army of Callow considered her to be a Matron in human flesh, and contrary to what Indrani kept insinuating it wasn't the height. Well, not only the height.

"Where else are they going to get a gathering like this?" Catherine said. "What happens in the conference is as dust to them, I bet. But they've got an audience with the powerful of most Calernia here, don't they? They're hear for the ears, not the tongues."

Utter silence seized the room, sudden and oppressive. Half the hall was watching the same thing, and Adjutant followed their gaze. The Dead King he saw, had moved for the very first time since his body sat. His skull had turned to gaze at Catherine, hollow sockets empty and unblinking. The slightest of tremors was going through the skeletal thing, Adjutant saw, and for a moment he did not understand. Then he did, and his blood went cold.

The Dead King was looking at Catherine Foundling, and shaking as he *laughed*.

—

The Enemy was laughing.

Cordelia Hasenbach was not one to boast of bravery, for hers were not the gifts of courage on the field, yet neither did she consider herself to be faint of heart. And yet the sight of the Hidden Horror's silent tremors of amusement sent a shiver up her spine. That the monster was gazing unerringly at the Black Queen as he did only made it eerier. The blonde princess did not allow it to reach her face, or seep in her eyes, instead thinking of Hannover. Of the city broken once more, walls torn down and her kinsmen slaughtered to the last. Cordelia thought of the brave men and women who'd died on those walls, keeping dawn from failing just a little while longer, and when cold wrath roared through her veins she fed it the fear. Composure returned to her, for that anger was an old friend, and finally she gestured for the page standing behind her table to step forward. At her side, Agnes suddenly stirred.

"Magon Hadast was killed," the Augur said.

Agnes, she saw, was staring at the Carrion Lord. The page passed Cordelia a sealed scroll, bearing scarlet wax stamped with the heraldry of the Order of the Red Lion. She set it down and turned a sharp gaze on her cousin.

"Is he dead now," Cordelia whispered, "or is he going to die?"

Agnes blinked sleepily, a look of utter frustration flickering across her face. It took her a moment to speak again, as if she had to piece together once more when and where she was.

"Soon," the Augur said. "Many branches but always he dies. The spider waited until he was too deep in the web to turn back."

There is nothing anyone can do. Too quick. All the paths are dead ends."

She hesitated, scowling.

"They are learning," she admitted.

The spider, Cordelia thought. There were some who called the Scribe the Webweaver, in the Wasteland, yet the Augur had used the word before to mean another. The Assassin, who more than once had tried to take her own life and that of people dear to her. Had this been the order of the Carrion Lord, then? The other villain was said to answer to him alone. Ashur had made bargain with Malicia, and so Magon Hadast was to die? It would sow chaos, Cordelia admitted to herself, until the old man's successor consolidated power. The heir that'd been groomed before had died at Thalassina and now only distant relatives remained, none of which would be a deft hand at navigating the Thalassocracy's labyrinth of committees and bureaucracy. It was still unacceptable, if it was truly the Carrion Lord's order.

Magon Hadast had long been her ally, and for his defection now she blamed him not as the Grand Alliance had failed him before he it. He might yet return, besides, given time enough for it. To have him so casually ordered slain was a foul thing, though no less than should be expected from a rabid animal like the Carrion Lord.

"Darkness looms, Cordelia," Agnes murmured. "Tarry not in opening the scroll."

Lips tightening in sudden wariness, the First Prince reached for the parchment and broke the seal. She unfurled the scroll and her eyes moved carefully across the contents. This was not a direct report but instead the welding of several, from across broad swaths of Procer. Three names in particular caught her eye: Prince Otto Reitzenberg, Prince Gaspard Langevin and Princess Beatrice Volignac. The ranking commanders on the three northern fronts of the Principate, at least in principle. Prince Otto's words were coming from the Morgentor, the last fortress held in Twilight's Pass, and though he cautioned of the Enemy possibly laying a trap Gaspard of Cleves and Beatrice of Hainaut were both seeing the same thing. And like Prince Otto they'd followed the dead carefully. Cordelia turned to the awaiting page.

"One whose authority was the scroll sent?" she curtly asked.

"Anselme of Beaudry, Your Highness," the man quietly replied.

A telling detail. Anselme of Beaudry was the ranking officer of the Order of the Red Lion in Salia, and Cordelia had chosen him for that office in large part because his cautious and meticulous nature. He would not have sent such a scroll without first making

certain there had been no misunderstanding or sudden change. The First Prince quietly thanked and dismissed the page, mind racing, before glancing meaningfully at one her closest attendant. The young woman approached discreetly.

"Have word passed to the Callowan and Levantine delegations that I will put forward an extraordinary motion for immediate recess and I would request they support it," Cordelia said. "There is urgent need for a private discussion between us."

Cordelia allowed time for the messages to be passed, through Razin Tanja for the Dominion and the heiress to the Barony of Harrow for Callow. When the First Prince of Procer asked for immediate recess soon after, the vote in favour was unanimous. The Enemy's gaze moved towards her as it deigned to vote for the first time that day, silently raising a hand in approval.

The Dead King had yet to speak even once, and some part of Cordelia Hasenbach felt blind dread at that realization.

—

Half an hour of recess had been voted on, and Hakram found himself part of the handful of guests invited into a nearby parlour by the First Prince. The Blood were likely to be brought in as well, he guessed, for whatever it was that Cordelia Hasenbach had learned it seemed to concern all signatories of the Grand Alliance. The Carrion Lord's presence along with Catherine, Vivienne and himself was a reality all involved politely refrained from looking in the eye, as the man was deeply despised in Procer and might well have been excluded from such talks if not for the Queen of Callow's influence. It was an almost amusing turn, that after early years of relying on the Black Knight's power and influence it was not the same man who was relying on his former pupil's instead.

There was an almost feverish energy to Cordelia Hasenbach, Adjutant saw when they entered the parlour. Though she was composed as ever, she was standing instead of seated and looking at her gave the sense she had a burning urge to pace that only manners were keeping at bay. Catherine limped in ahead, eyes considering as she took in the sight of the full roster of the Blood as well Princess Rozala. Liveried servants offered refreshments that all refused, and Hakram noted with exasperated amusement that his warlord's eyes were lingering a little longer than necessary on Rozala Malanza. Half the Blood too, though he was surprised that among the men she seemed to prefer the almost orcish frame of Yannu Marave to Razin Tanja's, who was much closer in age.

As she was less than discreet he wondered if offence might accidentally been given, but if he was reading the expression correctly Lady Aquiline Osená looked more flattered than anything

else by the roving eye. He met Vivienne's eyes in shared aggravation behind Catherine's back, though he figured at least they should be pleased she'd not been undressing the First Prince of Procer with her eyes. That might go over poorly, he thought. As the others advanced and went to stand with the other nobles Hakram remained at the back near the threshold, where he could watch from a distance. A set of eyes removed from the thick of it was often more useful than another wagging tongue, he'd found, and he'd always disliked wandering into arguments without first taking the measure of all that was being said.

"Thank you all for coming," Cordelia Hasenbach gravely said. "And for your trust in aiding my motion."

"You seem to have received news," Lady Itima Ifriqui said, rather bluntly.

"I have," the First Prince agreed. "I have received reports from all three northern fronts against Keter, and they all speak to the same truth: the dead are retreating."

Exclamations of surprise from many here followed, though not Hakram Deadhand or the queen that had chosen him as much as he had chosen her. Catherine Foundling's hand went inside her cloak and Adjutant, Name tugging at his feet, was moving before she could even begin stuffing the pipe with a satchel of wakeleaf. He struck a match a heartbeat before she extended her pipe, lighting it neatly, and was offered a thankful flash of pearly teeth before stepping back. The nerve of the Lord of Silent Steps, that it'd think itself fit to step in between the ordained cogs of fate with its little moving tricks. You didn't need to move swift as an arrow to see too things, just leave at the right time moving to the right pace.

"Does the Hidden Horror seek to hold the northern shores against us?" Lady Aquiline frowned. "It hardly seems necessary, given his advantages."

"It will allow us time to bring our armies to bear, regardless," Lady Itima said. "A blunder, this."

Catherine blew out an acrid stream of smoke that had Lord Yannu wrinkling his nose in distaste at the smell.

"No," the Black Queen said, "it wasn't. We just got knifed in broad daylight, make no mistake about that."

It amused Hakram a great deal that though several of the great nobles here suppressed distaste as the spoken 'us', not a single one of them denied it. It seemed that his warlord's usefulness had at last outstripped the distaste these *righteous* folks had for the colour of her cloak.

"You believe this to be a scheme," Cordelia Hasenbach said, then sharply nodded. "I agree. This is a poor decision by the eye of a general, which means it was made by another."

"They're going to offer us a truce out there," Catherine said, jabbing a thumb towards the wall.

The wrong one, Hakram drily noted, if she meant to point towards the hall.

"They?" Lord Yannu calmly asked.

"This is, if not outright the plan of Dread Empress Malicia, at least in part her notion," the Carrion Lord tiredly said. "This sort of manoeuvre is her very signature: weakening the opposition then posing great incentive to keep a truce that allows her to further work on dismantling her enemies without the direct use of force."

First Prince Cordelia would not doubt be the first of that western lot to grasp what exactly it had meant, when the Hidden Horror had extended Catherine an offer to sign the Liesse Accords last night. The implications of it, in the long term.

"We have no reason to accept this truce even if it offered," Razin Tanja flatly said. "We war against Keter to the end, and Dread Empress Malicia makes herself enemy to all that live through alliance with it."

Vivienne Dartwick had spent years in the shade of one of the great villains of their age and yet more in the service of another, so it was no surprise she caught on quick.

"If the decision was made solely in this room, you would be right," Vivienne grimly said.

"They will be seeding rumours of the offer of truce even as we speak," Cordelia Hasenbach told them all. "In Salia and everywhere they can, which given the reach of the Dread Empire and the Tyrant of Helike is far and wide."

Her lips thinned.

"There will be riots if we push for prosecuting a war against the Dead King in the face of offered peace while the north is months away from collapse," the First Prince said. "Mayhaps even rebellion."

"The odds are strong that the Empress will declare a treaty of mutual protection with Keter," Lord Amadeus calmly said. "The Dead King ought to agree, as otherwise there would be free hand to settle his sole reliable ally."

"Why should we pursue if the Hidden Horror retreats to his lands?" Lord Yannu Marave bluntly asked. "Is that not the victory we sought to achieve?"

The King of Death had not even yet spoken, Adjutant darkly thought, and already he was drawing blood among the Grand Alliance's ranks.

"You would call *this* victory?" Razin Tanja scathingly replied. "Keter coming and going as it pleases, massacring any who oppose it?"

"Are we then to send armies to die in the Kingdom of the Dead for the sake of your boyish swagger?" Lord Yannu harshly retorted.

"Better honourable death than a coward's disgrace," Lady Aquiline sneered.

"This is what he wants," Princess Rozala said, voice cutting through the rising noise. "Chaos among our ranks. It is why he is marching north instead of south, because if he does not we are a *threat*."

"Well said," First Prince Cordelia calmly added. "Make no mistake, my friends, the Enemy cares nothing for peace. He has only ever known truce, and ever broken it when suited him."

"We have yet to speak of the League," Lady Itima said. "The Tyrant offers aid to their wicked lot and sows chaos in his own ranks. It is madness, and I would not let a hound gone sick lounge at my threshold for long."

"That is the nature of Kairos Theodosian," Catherine said. "He will set fires until either the world is ash or he is."

She had not spoken loudly, but it commanded the attention of all in the parlour. She blew out another stream of smoke, visibly savouring the leaf.

"Can't set fires if there's nothing left, though," she idly continued. "And that's what happens if the Dead King wins. So I'd suggest we all save ourselves some trouble and invite the Tyrant of Helike in here."

She grinned.

"I'm rather curious how long it'll take him to sell out the King of Death, this time."

mavant

"I'm rather curious how long it'lll take him to vote, this time."

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

mavant

I have cleverly also started the typo thread here, by inserting a typo of my own.

It was totally on purpose.

ChillyPepper

Then I shall take your offer and introduce said typos in here.

any played axe in hand > played [b]with[/b] axe in hand (I'm not sure about this one since I'm not proficient in English)
good the orcs > good [b]to[/b] the orcs
gained form the use > gained [b]from[/b]
hear for the ears > [b]here for the ears[/b]
arrow to see too things > to see [b]to[/b] things

ChillyPepper

I am also clearly bad in formatting on wordpress.

Andrew Mitchell

Angled brackets rather than square brackets.

Shikkarasu

Test

Test

Test

Test

~~Test~~

Isi Arnott-Campbell

You're awfully testy today.

[Liliet](#)

Played axe in hand sounds right to me.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Which meant Malicia's keening edge had not faded,
Should be "keen", she is sharp not shrill.

> Catherine thought her half-spent a force
Should be "a half-spent force", as given it becomes
ambiguous.

> yet meant to use is to serve the principles
"meant to use it"

> "One whose authority was the scroll sent?"
on whose authority

> First Prince Cordelia would not doubt be the first"
no doubt

> several of the great nobles here suppressed distasted as
the spoken 'us'
distaste at

> he wondered if offence might accidentally been given,
offense might be given
(Mostly the Guide sticks to American spelling)

[Liliet](#)

'half-spent a force' sounds right to me

[Fayhem](#)

Eh, not quite I think? I think EE just accidentally a
word, since "half-spent as a force" matches what appears
to be the intended format and leaving out a conjunction is
such an incredibly easy typo to make if you're writing
quickly.

[Liliet](#)

Nn, I think it's right. "It's not so big a deal",
"Catherine thought her half-spent a force". It's a rare
phrasing but its a real grammar thing.

gingerlygrump

Agreed. Adjutant narrates in a rather old-fashioned
manner, so these linguistic peculiarities fit his usual
cadence. He's gotten more formal as the story
progressed, too, as though the administrative functions
of his Name are tailoring his thought cadence.

[Liliet](#)

I would say he's not so much formal as high literary
style poetic. "Grinning devil" etc.

[Fayhem](#)

Which matches his demonstrated fondness for reciting poetry (while breaking bones, but hey he is an orc, let's not project our cultural standards here). Good catch, both of you – I hadn't noticed that Adjutant's narration style differed in that sort of way, but now that it's been pointed out I think that's right.

Still disagree about the grammar tho 🤪

[Liliet](#)

Hakram is a warrior poet and I love this aspect of his character ♥

[Fayhem](#)

s a m e

[Fayhem](#)

Mm, I certainly know “not so big a deal” is valid? My research on that (because I'm a me) suggests that adjectives of quality would be valid in that formulation, but (at least some) adjectives of quantity would use the “[adjective] of a [noun]” formulation rather than “[adjective] a [noun]”.

However, “as a” is different from “of a”, I think, and “as a” is the formulation I think applies – I certainly wouldn't suggest “Catherine thought her half-spent of a force” would sound right. Let me see if I can put together a convincing example. “Weak” is a similar term to “half-spent”, so I'll use that. If you think a, let's say, prince is a weak ruler, would you say you “think them weak a ruler” or that you “think them weak as a ruler”? I'm unfortunately struggling to find the precise grammatical terms to define why, but I think the second one seems correct and the first one does not. Do you disagree?

[Liliet](#)

“Think them weak a ruler” doesn't sound right to me, but “despite them not thinking him so weak a ruler” does. Maybe it's the ‘not’? I feel like it's a sentence complexity thing, with dropping the particle becoming allowable if it's at the end of a looong complicated flourish.

[Fayhem](#)

Hmm, I do agree that “despite them not thinking him so weak a ruler” sounds better, but I think it’s the “so” that makes the difference since “despite them not thinking him weak a ruler” doesn’t sound any better. In either case there’s neither a “not” or a “so” in the formulation Catherine used. If “Catherine thought her weak a force” doesn’t sound right (which I don’t think it does) then I don’t think “Catherine thought her half-spent a force” is any better since unless I’m mistaken “weak” and “half-spent” are being used as the same type of part of speech in both cases.

Also bless u for actually appearing to be interested in this conversation, this is usually the type of discussion that Appeals to Nobody but Fayhem.

[Liliet](#)

OH MOOD re: type of discussion that Appeals To Nobody But Liliet. Sounds like we’re buddies here.

And I think it’s the ‘half’ in ‘half-spent’ that’s making it sound ok to my ear? ‘weak a force’ or ‘spent a force’ doesn’t sound good’ but ‘half-spent a force’ does. Maybe it moves it further away from adjective and more towards verb form?

[Fayhem](#)

> Sounds like we’re buddies here.

You can’t see it because this is the internet, but imagine you’re receiving some kind of very grammatical fistbump here.

“Half-spent a force” definitely sounds better by comparison than “spent a force” BUT I can’t see what is actually changed about the way the applicable term is being used or the role it is filling in the sentence. So that makes me feel like it’s just obscuring that it’s not valid instead of actually making it valid. Like, it makes it feel less obviously incorrect, but if nothing is actually changed by it then it must actually be just as incorrect, is the reasoning I’m going on there.

[Liliet](#)

-meets the fistbump with own fist-

You might be right in strict grammar sense, but I would argue this is one of those places where grammar can be bent in favor of poetry as Hakram's personal narration style. It would sound more correct without this deviation, yes, but it would sound less *like him* – and it's comprehensible either way.

[Fayhem](#)

Hmm, maybe – I do tend to focus on determining the technically correct formulation because as previously mentioned I'm a me. So you could def be right about that.

[Liliet](#)

I learned 90% of English grammar informally because as a foreign speaker I only was taught the sturdy basics. Approximately 50% of Guide sentences would be 'incorrect' according to how they taught us to do it at school, you know? So I'm used to picking up on informal expression. Sometimes it trips me up as I assume something is informal that's actually just wrong, but in this case it really does sound much better as is to my ear -\\/(0_0)\\/-

[Fayhem](#)

See, English **is** my native language and I'm honestly very fond of it, but I will very willingly admit that if English-language instruction was honest then every "rule" they taught you would come with a footnote reading something like "except for sometimes randomly not, because fuck you it's English, that's why". I can usually file that under "endearingly quirky" myself, but I've always thought I would expect that for someone actually trying to learn English for the first time "endearing" would likely be pretty far from the first term to come to mind.

I actually did also learn most English grammar informally tho, because I was homeschooled on a very self-directed curriculum all the way up until college, and my parents only insisted on actual formalized study of math during that time period (because they expected, correctly, that I would not be able to "informally" pick up on how to do algebra etc.). So determining grammar rules by this kind of process of "does this sound right, and if so why or why not based on relevant

examples or comparisons" is pretty much exactly how I've always done it lol.

Javvies

It's because the English language has mugged all kinds of other languages and stolen their stuff/ words (and rules for those words).

Like ... seriously, the English language has major Germanic roots, but also extensive Latin/Romance connections, plus Celtic influences, plus Norse influences. Plus Greek.

And that's before it ever got off the British Isles. Whereupon it started nicking stuff from languages even more distant.

English is an evolved common tongue from a place that everybody invaded conquered and settled, but nobody could run away or otherwise be displaced from.

Fayhem

> It's because the English language has mugged all kinds of other languages

Yup! The line that... I think it was Stephen Fry? – anyway, the line that whoever it was had that I liked a bunch was that English doesn't so much borrow words from other languages as chase other languages into dark alleys, knock them over the head, and rifle through their pockets for loose vocabulary.

Javvies

This is true.

I can't remember who the first version of that line is from either. But it's a good line, and while a hilarious mental image, it's basically accurate.

Although ... for most of the development of English it was may have technically been less chasing them into alleys for their linguistic distinctiveness and more of a beating up and robbing the burglars who broke into its house before tossing them back out the door.

Wait, I just realized something – the English language is the Borg of languages.

Trebar

"It was an almost amusing turn, that after early years of relying on the Black Knight's power and influence it was not the same man who was relying on his former pupil's instead."

not -> now

Aston Whiteman

No update today then..

Will wait for Friday.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

There is one, it's just that EE forgot to add it to the sidebar.

Here: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/10/09/interlude-so-smile-tyrants/>

Aston Whiteman

Thank you for your consideration

mavant

There's one today! <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/10/09/interlude-so-smile-tyrants/>

antoninjohn

Kairos Theodosian the Dead King thought you were his friend, he trusted you how could you possibly betray him.

Slider

"It seemed to be the most entertaining thing to do at the moment, and what would life be if we didn't enjoy it?"
-Kairos Theodosian, Tyrant of Helike, on the question of his betrayal against the Dead King.

Zgggt

"More enemies is a fantastic way to make diplomacy fun" – widely attributed to Kairos Theodosian, unknown time (assumed at the betrayal of the Dead King)

Halinn

Which of them?

[TeK](#)

"This plan involves making an enemy of one of the most dangerous men on this continent for no tangible gain," Anaxares said. "It is not a good plan."

"Don't be foolish, advisor," Kairos said. "Making an enemy of one of the most dangerous men on this continent is the point of the plan, not a side-effect."

Decius

Then the frog told the scorpion "I've spent the last several years developing an immunity to your venom."

[wirelessgrapes](#)

Catherine is the kid in 3rd grade who already knew negative numbers and is just stunting on the rest of the class

NerfGlaistigUaine

I'm sad to say that was me. I was also the kid in 1st grade who knew how to carry in addition and trolled my teacher by giving her two numbers that couldn't be used to show carrying. Three times in a row. Yes, I was a little bastard and still am.

Andrew Mitchell

I approve. ♥

ICSM

As a fellow teacher, if a teacher wants to show a new concept and ask the student for an example, he kinda deserves being trolled. It is just asking for trouble.

[sengachi](#)

Ah, I still remember being a little 3rd grader, looking out the window of the car, and then asking "Hey Mom. If $7-4=3$, what is $3-7$?" And then spending the rest of the trip learning about negative numbers. Good times.

Someguy

>"I'm rather curious how long it'll take him to sell out the King of Death, this time."

Oh. That's easy, "INSTANTLY".

Amy Lear

Instantly?

For his great and true friend Catherine, he will have already sold out the Dead King before the question is asked.

caoimhinh

Indeed he did.

Kairos already told 3 secrets to Cat the previous evening, forewarned him of Malicia's use of Still Water against Nicae and her actions to move Ashur, plus he helped Cat glimpse a bit more into the nature of the Dead King.

He's a true friend of Cat XD

[Fayhem](#)

> He's a true friend of Cat XD

You know, I think that's actually literally true, in his own (awful) way. Though I don't believe the reverse is. I can't decide if that makes me more sad happy or more happy sad. But either way I'm certainly amused.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Catherine is the only person who understands Kairos. Of course he values her.

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

I'm seeing this as the intercessor's play finally coming in.

Should be interesting.

a_man_in_black

tangle, retangle, untangle, tie the knot again. Erraticerrata i love your writing. i absolutely love every chapter of this story you've written. but i truly feel you're running the risk of getting too clever for yourself. the over-arching plot has grown tangled and confusing. if i have to re-read the last two dozen chapters to try to figure out what is going on, things have gotten too complicated with the intrigue.

i read this story for the awesome adventure and tales of anti-heroes and heroic villains. the politics, double-speak, spy vs spy drama and intrigue are only useful wherein they enhance that. such things have long since taken over the story, and you're losing me the same way wandering inn did, albeit for different reasons.

Jane

I mean, one of the consistent themes of this story has *been* that strong institutions and diplomacy ought matter more than

wandering heroes and grand adventures – which would be why Cat's ascension to godhood mattered less to her ability to fight Procer than her alliance with the Drow, and why the decisions made in that room at this moment will affect the course of the war far more than anything Hanno's band of heroes can. Not to mention how Cat's overarching goal in this story is purely political in nature, and few adventures can get a treaty signed.

Cat's only one person, and despite her personal power, she's one of the weaker monarchs in that room (setting aside her influence over Drow policy); it's only natural that we'd see the political angle grow as Callow becomes less isolated, and Cat becomes a power in her own right.

I don't mean to argue with your tastes, but I don't see how the Guide could stay true to its founding themes without scenarios like this.

Shveiran

I think he is arguing the intrigue has grown too complicated, not that it should be less relevant to the plot.

I don't really agree, but I think he is making a different statement.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, we are headed toward the usual closing Xanatos pileup.

[Liliet](#)

Ask questions and ye shall receive. The fandom is following, and the fandom is here for you.

Short recap: Amadeus has been reforming Praes to do a little less starvation+war. He recruited Catherine into the cause, so now she's leading Callow with an eye to allying with Praes long-term also. Alaya was also with him on this, but their vision on how to do it and what they actually want out of it has grown far enough apart that their alliance broke, so now Amadeus is chilling at Cat's. That's the east.

Catherine has allied herself with the drow and made treaty with dwarves to attack the Dead King as soon as the rest of the surface forces attack him. That's the north.

The Grand Alliance considered Amadeus's conquest of Callow to be unacceptable, and did not brake in time when Callow was actually granted factual independence again, and went into a narrative trainwreck trying to invade it (that's Procer and Levant) / attacking Praesi coasts (that's Ashur). Now Dead King

is attacking from the north and they're in a tailspin that Catherine is trying to pull them out of because she wants continental unity for her own reasons, and also fuck Dead King. She has just formally announced joining the Grand Alliance, which Procer and Levant are also in. The plan was to counterattack him and then kill him, hopefully. That's the west.

Levant isn't really INTERESTED in attacking the Dead King per se, but it's the right thing to do, so they're tentatively in. They're currently the one nation NOT touched by war, and so in one of the strongest positions on the board. No-one else has anything to coerce them with.

The League of Free Cities is currently acting more like a single entity than a loose coalition of city-states because of the election of a Hierarch, except the Hierarch is Anaxares of Bellerophon who isn't doing much ruling and is doing fuck knows what (a current point of plot tension: where even IS he???). Kairos Theodosian, Tyrant of Helike, is the dominant military power with a talent for intrigue and so is more or less telling the rest of them what to do. He also ~~suffers from~~ enjoys Chronic Backstabbing Disorder, and so no-one can predict what the League is going to do and who it's going to side with at any given time. Catherine can sort of follow Kairos's logic, though, so she's the current most successful Kairos Wrangler. He seems to enjoy that.

Ashur got their fleet wrecked in attacking Praes, then got besieged by the League (the fleet of one of its cities, Nicae, to be exact). They're an island that doesn't grow its own food, so a blockade is literally starving them. They're not in a good position.

That's the south.

Of all that, there are currently two major coalitions: The Grand Alliance And Allies, and The League of Evil (name not canon). The former is the faction that Catherine consolidated, and they are the people who are present in the room where the discussion is happening at the end of the chapter. Levant and its rulers, called the Blood; Procer and its First Prince, Cordelia Hasenbach; Callow and its Queen, Catherine; drow and, well, also Catherine tbh, though they had Rumena speak for them formally at the conference.

The latter, the League of Evil, is very freshly formed. It consists of Neshamah, the Dead King; Malicia, the Dread Empress of Praes (Alaya); and Kairos Theodosian, Tyrant of Helike. Neshamah and Alaya have to be allies because Neshamah invaded on her invitation in the first place: she's desperate for him to take the heat off her because otherwise she's out of allies completely, and he's also kind of desperate because if he

doesn't come up with a clever way to stop it, Catherine's faction WILL wreck him. And then Alaya, in close succession.

Kairos is there because they asked, and will shortly turn on them because Catherine asked. That's just how he rolls.

Catherine's faction currently has overwhelming military (and narrative) advantage. They are facing two problems, however: 1) internal cohesion. Very recently most of these people were trying to kill each other. Amadeus is a part of it, and a year ago he ordered Assassin to kill people in Ashur before cutting communication with him, which is now coming to bite everyone in the ass. The Good folks don't like or much trust the Evil folks, and Levant has no skin in the game in the first place; 2) Procer is broken to fucking pieces, and it's the geographical and factual center of the alliance. Their population doesn't want to fight anyone anymore and is angry at everyone at the same time. The military advantage is only real as long as there isn't an internal rebellion, and that seems to be what Neshamah is after exploiting.

If his plan succeeds, the Grand Alliance And Adjacent will have to back down, leaving him alive, the drow more or less homeless (because the plan was to conquer the Kingdom of the Dead as their new homeland), and Alaya untouchable because they'll have a mutual defense pact. That would be bad.

The goal Catherine is after is to prosecute war on him, while setting up for Alaya to be overthrown shortly after. Amadeus in this plan takes over as Dread Emperor after her.

Hopefully this is helpful.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Except that if Catherine abdicates... well, Callow joined the Alliance, but the Everdark didn't. Also, Cordelia has fairly well unified Procer, while Cat has gained swing with the Levant, so it's not so clear that the Alliance is so ready to stand down. Especially since with Procer's north in rubble, they can point out that any treaty with DK leaves him in an unacceptable advantage for the next round.

[Liliet](#)

> Except that if Catherine abdicates... well, Callow joined the Alliance, but the Everdark didn't.

Hm.

Well, it's still a worse option that involves the breakup of the alliance.

Insanenoodlyguy

Pretty accurate, but I'm not so sure of your timeline. I suspect that the east can not be left unattended while the north is a problem. In other words, she has a bit under 3 months to install Black as emperor and get the east to march north with the rest of them. Or at least sends him off to go do that thing with a little help while she takes the main army up north. Because "Even the Devil we know just showed up in good faith to crush the real BBEG" is a solid story, especially when "I gave my word" is in effect (where several parties expect the evil guy to betray them at the last moment and that moment comes and goes while they shrug and say just that. Can't have that story without winning first!)

A civil war cannot be resolved in under 3 months, story or not, I suspect, but a coup/assasination might be. And that is literally considered a perfectly valid succession rite over there.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, Amadeus is totally definitely going to assassinate Alaya.

I mean, you're probably right about everything.

I'm just thinking about that part like eeeeeeeh yeah this alliance is a MESS.

Shveiran

Nicely done. Kudos.

[Liliet](#)

> he former is the faction that Catherine consolidated, and they are the people who are present in the room where the discussion is happening at the end of the chapter. Levant and its rulers, called the Blood; Procer and its First Prince, Cordelia Hasenbach; Callow and its Queen, Catherine; drow and, well, also Catherine tbh, though they had Rumena speak for them formally at the conference.

And Amadeus, leading the Legions-In-Exile as a claimant to Praes. Duh.

[Fayhem](#)

Nicely done! One update to the bit on Ashur that I think is super relevant right now: the blockading League fleet from the city of Nicae just got Still Water-ed (Still Water is the same ritual Akua used on Liesse's population to undeadify them) by Malicia, which means that she turned every person in

it into a wight under her control. So Nicae's fleet is now Malicia's fleet. Tyrant helped introduce the necessary alchemical agents for Still Water into the fleet's water, which we know because he basically just proactively bragged about it to Catherine because Kairos. We don't know (unless I missed it) exactly what reasons Kairos had for doing this beyond "because Kairos", but he's a twisty fucker so there's probably something nasty on top of that.

Nicae doesn't know any of this yet. They're probably not going to like it much.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, I neglected to clarify what was up with Ashur altogether in this refresher. It's a recent enough revelation I figure nobody reading serially would have forgotten / lost track of it yet lmao

[Fayhem](#)

I feel like (from my own experience, not pointing fingers anywhere else) you should never underestimate what can potentially slip by someone, especially if the starting premise is that they're having a hard time figuring out the premise for what's happening right now. I don't feel as if I'm having trouble following what's happening in Guide right now, but my experience with stuff where I did feel like I was having trouble following is that I could miss stuff that other people thought was clear because I had trouble understanding the context that would make clear what things were important. Idk if that applies here for anyone lol, that's just the basis of what I was thinking.

[Liliet](#)

Good point. My experience is mostly with remembering the last couple of plot beats but being utterly confused wrt any other context, with further-reaching plot threads vanishing into grey fog of 'stuff is happening'. Too many details making it impossible to track what's happening large scale; so I tried to minimize details and go over broader dynamics instead. After all, rereading the latest arc will help solve the problem of missing the recent details, but will not solve the problem of failing to understand who are all these people and what they are doing here.

There isn't really a perfectly right answer here, I feel
=x

[Fayhem](#)

> There isn't really a perfectly right answer here, I feel =x

Yup! I refuse to dwell on any similarities to life overall. 😊

[greatwyrmgold](#)

So...the coalition fighting the League of Evil could be abbreviated to GAAA? Shame we can't force an H at the end...

erebus42

Awww isn't that sweet, Cat just invited Kairos to sit with her at the popular kids table.

She does make an excellent point about Kairos though, there really is no fun to be had in a dead (or undead) land.

SyperNyce

Kairos' entire gimmick is change, while a running theme of the Dead King's entire narrative arc is that without direct interference from the living, the undead **never** change. Gods are even worse about it, so as a self-inflicted undead God, the Dead King is most likely to a T the exact same person he was when he died his first death, only with that static id applied to a dynamic environment.

He can certainly do all of the creative things he would have thought of before he died, and as a very intelligent monster that is a great many things, but he seems to be incapable of drawing out something entirely new – which is where someone like Malicia comes in, full of new ideas.

That makes Kairos a great foil, too, because how else do you get one unchanging tyrant to beat another unchanging tyrant other than offering up an infinitely changing bag of tricks for them to chuck at each-other blindly? Sure, most of Kairos' Spy-vs-Spy powergaming won't stick, but eventually one will.

What happens when it does, though? Hegemony and stagnation.

Sure, the Dead King has a lot of interests and priorities, but they will be sated. Eventually, he will settle on an endless but ultimately effective task like murdering all the angels with the power of bone or something, and he will stick to it forever, or at least 'forever' relative to a timescale that matters to the plot, and more importantly, Kairos' lifespan.

Even if the sudden grinding halt to chaos doesn't make Kairos totally impotent, he will simply be cornered by frail mortality. The only way to beat that would be to apotheoses and make himself the now-all-powerful Dead King's next eternal enemy down the list, another loss.

Worse, even if he tolerated that, the Dead King will by definition never, never ever get bored. Zero opportunities to exploit. He will not change his mind, because it's what he would have done in that situation, and naught else. Once his

present objectives are complete, it's unlikely he will respond in any friendly manner to attempts to set new ones, as that would again digress from his original self. You're in boring angel war hell forever and you can't even old age your way out of it.

Insanenoodlyguy

It occurs to me that this is why he loved Triumphant so much. She was that change-allower that did so without being antagonistic towards him. For the first time in a long time, he was getting new IDEAS, and without having to get them from somebody trying to kill him! No wonder he still pines for her.

erebus42

Also Hakram being jealous of Ivah is both hilarious and adorable.

eamon DeMarsh

where is that?

erebus42

After Hakram was a good boy and lit his Queen's pipe for her with out fancy Night tricks.

"The nerve of the Lord of Silent Steps, that it'd think itself fit to step in between the ordained cogs of fate with its little moving tricks. You didn't need to move swift as an arrow to see too things, just leave at the right time moving to the right pace."

[Mental Mouse](#)

There was a similar incident a ways back, when Cat heard a brief scuffle before Hakram put the Cloak of Woe on her back.

[Liliet](#)

Nah, it's Ivah who's jealous of Hakram. Hakram is disdainful of Ivah.

It's adorable.

ChillyPepper

They both want to be mommy's favorite kid.

Shequi

Careful, Catherine. The one thing that the Tyrant is even less faithful to than Allies is consistency.

Oshi

It will cost them the White Knight and the league to get this but well I guess we'll see.

konstantinvoncarstein

Hanno has not tried to kill him yet, and the Tyrant is a part of the conference. If he can help them against the DK, Hanno is probably willing to wait before killing Kairos

Taichi22

We get it already, Cat. You vape.

caoimhinh

LMAO, Hakram is jelly of Ivah and feeling possessive of the position of something as small as lighting the match for Cat's pipe.

He's like "Catherine only needs *one* Adjutant, thank you very much."

On a more serious note, Hakram stating that he would act the same way as Scribe if Cat were to "*attempt to throw away her life or her life's work*" shines like a beacon to me as a flag and foreshadowing.

Given some hints since quite a while ago from Catherine that she plans to "step aside" once the big messes are over, it seems that it will fall on Hakram to snap her out of it if she goes for a more extreme measure like the death route.

Shveiran

He will try. He may even succeed, given it is him. Yet it is an uphill battle.

Insanenoodlyguy

Nah, because I don't think he'd see it as the same thing.

Cat's destiny isn't "I will rule" it's "I will be the one that says 'DON'T MAKE ME COME OVER THERE.' and have it STICK."

She won't rule Callow, but she will rule Cardinal, albeit perhaps not as a queen.. She will instruct those chosen by fate how to act and when they do not act right take those named who have sworn oath to her, both good and evil, and march them right over there to show exactly why you didn't want her to

come over there. I think Hakram would be just fine with that sort of end.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, Hakram wouldn't be after Catherine being Queen of Callos specifically. Her life's work is the Accords.

Her life though? He might just be on the same page as Indrani there, not that Indrani was wrong.....

Sparsebeard

I just hope that the DK isn't turning all those forces on the Drow as they all speak...

caoimhinh

Yep, Cat and co. are not being subtle in the Drow's involvement. It was one thing to have them participate as a force in the field, but granting them a seat in the political conference of the powers of Calernia changes the nature of the Ever Dark's involvement and makes it plain for all to see that they have a bigger game afloat.

Even if he doesn't know from where the Drow are coming, Neshamah must already have figured out that they will be marching against him.

Truthhut

I will truly miss the Tyrant and his brand of madness when he inevitably gets his head cut off. If Cat gets here way, he will be the last of his kind to truly get to have a run of the place. Alas, such is the way of progress.

[Liliet](#)

Eh. His kind is exactly the kind that will thrive under the Accords: conniving, backstabby, hilarious, artful at bending the rules to their purposes, taking limitations as an excuse to sharpen their art. Kairos isn't erratic in the way Catherine and Hanno discussed will be eliminated, he pushes exactly as far as he knows he can without having it blow up in his face. (And when it does blow up anyway, it does so *not too catastrophically*). Kairos is exactly the kind of Evil Amadeus talked about in his "let me speak for the crooked and cruel" speech. A lil babby rules lawyer who will use whatever weapon is at hand with absolute glee, the more counterintuitive the better.

The difference made will be in collateral damage. Accords! Kairos doesn't make flying towers, he makes formal accusations before continental arbitrage court.

Shveiran

It is an interesting view; as you describe, Kairos certainly has the potential to thrive under the Accords. I'm still not totally convinced he'd accept them, though. Like, really accept them, not "of course I'll sign your delightfully Accords, you dear friend of mine whom I'll never ever backstab! Whyever would I not?" accept them.

Whatever else Kairos is – and he is all you've described him as – Kairos is also enamored with the all ways. With the monologues and the crackling thunder and the rituals of inevitable doom. His opening move was to poison the representatives of the other cities, strongarm the Evil ones, declare war on all the rest and then face an army alone with glee and will as his weapons.

I... not sure Kairos really DOES limits. He can toe the line, he could do it masterfully. But all the time, he'd just be waiting for an opportunity to betray the Accords to, just to see if he can. The more time passes by, the stronger the Accords become, the more urgent his need to wreck them will grow.

Because... well, I'd argue that's just what Kairos **does**..

[Liliet](#)

Oh, that's absolutely true. Kairos specifically and personally, this one right now, can only be Accords-safe because he has a rapidly approaching expiration date and Accords just won't have time to make it onto his wrecking list.

A future Kairos, however, might just accept the Accords as a framework to work with the same way Kairos accepted the League of Free Cities.

Decius

The Empire Under Dark has no reason to accept such a truce.

They can, as an empire, hire mercenaries from outside the empire.

The wages of those mercenaries can be nothing.

What's the problem with a truce?

[Javvies](#)

The Story consequences. Also more practical consequences. It's just a variation of his earlier offer of "a decade, or make it a century" long truce to Cat. Without the clear and present danger, the urgency of the Alliance will fade and the moment

will pass – he can come back at any time, having spent the entire waiting time weakening the Alliance members, but this time with Malicia's help.

Also, no, the wages of any "mercenaries" the Drow hired could not be nothing.

Decius

How much would the crusade have to be paid to join?

Insanenoodlyguy

It wouldn't matter. Even if they did a "this will cost one coin" thing, unless it was every nation accepting the contract on behalf of the entire nation, which would be a "you clever bastards" sort of cheat, there is much less weight to "the everdark has amassed a large army to conquer this land" as opposed to "The united peoples of several disparate groups have united to stop the great evil". Even if the numbers are still overwhelmingly high, the first group is the kind of thing the Dead king can smash much more easily.

[Javvies](#)

Then there's the practical realities involved in the costs of feeding and arming large numbers of people. That ignores the cost of paying the troops.

Armies, especially quality ones, aren't cheap to maintain, even in peacetime. And wartime armies are even more expensive.

Decius

Those expenses would exist without a thin veneer of working for a party not involved with the truce.

Decius

"The Everdark is leading the Crusade, and gaining support from the House of Light and the Black Queen and the Kingdom of Praes, none of which are signatories to the truce. Oh, and the Kingdom of Callow does not permit the pretender to Praes free passage, and is in a mutual defense agreement with the rest of the Grand Alliance."

And all the same armies march, perhaps with some different banners, until Malicia makes a move, at which point SHE has violated the truce and triggered a mutual defense clause.

Shveiran

In my opinion, you are applying an international politics approach to a story contest. It's not that what you say doesn't have merit or logic, it is that you are applying them to a field where those arguments do not stick.

We got a crash course of the interactions between the practicalities of the real world and the story in Book IV, during the peace conference.

Applying those teachings here, I'd argue that the approach you propose is a losing one.

On the practical end, to switch from the Grand Alliance to the Allies of the Empire Ever Dark makes the war a much harder sell to the soldiers of Calernia: people are scared, tired, and hungry; they want to go home and check on their loved ones and sleep in their bed without fearing they won't wake again.

Selling them on the "let's bring the fight to the bastard who caused all this and end him once and for all" is much easier than to do the same on "let's help this weird lot who we never really saw before and that most of you don't give a fuck about to get a new home by invading an immortal undead overlord."

In the first case, you have powerful emotional chords to pull; in the second one, you can try to pull them, but they are once-removed and thus weaker for it; meanwhile, you gain no emotional edge that I can see.

On the narrative side, you are suggesting putting the hurt on Malicia if she breaks the truce.

But that doesn't work because the Gran Alliance would already be twisting their words and not honoring it in bad faith.

In our world, world leaders do it often, but ours is not a world ruled by the narrative. Here, you'd be reaping bad karma in heaps.

Javvies

I expect that Magon's death eased set in motion quite some time ago – long before Amadeus was seriously planning on splitting from Malicia, and therefore well outside the ability to readily call off.

Possibly it's what Assassin has been working on setting up for months, likely in conjunction with other Praesi assets in Ashur, at least initially.

Kairos is going to flip on the Dead King and Malicia no matter what, it's just a question of how much he thinks he can extract for it before somebody calls him on his bluff that he's not going to flip without more.

[Liliet](#)

Yep. Hopefully Cordelia realizes this isn't a fresh stupidity, but a stupidity from long ago coming to bite them in the ass now.

Insanenoodlyguy

It's still a problem. It's a hard pill already, but it's one thing to say, as scribe pointed out "Yeah, we did fuck you and yours over... you had declared war on us and made your intentions clear that you were going to march across our (still nominal) ally, divide up their lands, and use the pathways to come burn us to the ground. We burned you instead. that's war." It's another thing to say "Hey, we want peace now! Buttttt we might still be killing people you like and the fact that they stopped being your ally was something we couldn't possibly have known before that arrow was loosed... oooooops?"

That's a hard damn sell. That's some Kairos shit right there. Not on purpose, but doesn't something like that sound more like it came from him if you just change some of the language?

"I, of course, set out to help my best friend and forever ally by killing that traitor who abandoned them in their hour of need! Clearly the fact that they were good friends until just now when you heard they were dead suggests I have excellent foresight and duplicitous motives would be suspected only by the untrusting!"

That's going to lead to a lot of "Do you seriously expect us to believe this horseshit" at best, or at worst "so that's how it is, you leave the great alliance and you die right after? Oh yeah, allying with evil is working out great!" and either way, the "deal with the dead king and save my ass so i can distance myself from this clusterfuck" starts looking better then it should.

[Liliet](#)

That's why Tariq is a treasure. He's an idiot, but he can at least confirm "yes this statement is literally true and no treachery is being intended".

And Cordelia can figure out the "this would have to have been planned long before Carrion Lord's body and soul were put back together" thing on her own I think, once she thinks about it -_-

[ninegardens](#)

So... I gotta admit, I think the DK has got them.

Like seriously, from any practical perspective, if Malicia and DK sit down at the table and say "Okay, so DK is leaving, dread empire isn't invading anywhere. Tell us about the Accords if you like, or not. Whatever."

What is the team going to do?

Politically, attacking DK now is going to be a nightmare. Black's shot at taking Malicia from the throne was based on the assumption that she was doing something stupid and reckless, but (at least to outside appearances) she isn't.

To all appearances, the entire story could end here with the Accords being signed, DK going home, and all the main cast spending the next decade slowly putting their kingdoms back together and grumbling about the Dead King kicking their ass again and Malicia being awful for letting him out.

Hell- they can probably even get Malicia to sign the Accords, if doing so means that Praes gets to maintain cordial trade relations with Callow, and membership to the new court of courts and school of schools. Her and Black will be pissed at one another, but at the end of the day he'll be like "What were you thinking?" and she can respond "Hey, it worked."

I don't think that's what will happen (because story), but looking at the story in the present moment, that looks like a perfectly plausible outcome.

... which kind of just shows what a genius move this is, both on Malicia's part, and on the part of EE.

[Mental Mouse](#)

DK's trying to split the forces of the Alliance between Keter and Praes. Here's the thing though – Callow has joined the Alliance, but the Everdark has *not*. If Catherine abdicates, she and the Everdark can still take on Keter. And any Alliance truce with Keter can be made contingent on Praes' behavior, and vice versa. And that's assuming that both the truce and the Axis of Evil's contract hold, which is not given.

[ninegardens](#)

Right- but Catherine + Everdark is not SUFFICIENT to take on the dead king.

She NEEDS the alliance, not just for the sake of fighting DK, but because if she doesn't fight DK she's got 100,000 displaced Drow with no place to live.

The Dwarves will only commit below ground if the rest of the continent is in on the game above. Without the grand alliance, all Cat has is one displaced and broken empire- a hammer with no Anvil.

... also, I'm really not sure how the current move is meant to split the Alliance between Keter and Praes- Was there a quote I missed?

I totally agree it is contingent on the contract holding, which is not given- but the point is that the IDEA of peace, the IDEA that war is not inevitable is what is being offered to the populous of the continent, and that undermines Cat and Cordelia's political liscence.

... also, what's to stop Malicia and DK going to work on offering the Drow a better deal than Cat has given them....

Mental Mouse

> what's to stop Malicia and DK going to work on offering the Drow a better deal than Cat has given them....

Mostly Sve Noc, who rather like Cat and have little reason to trust DK or Praes. (Even if Malicia personally has supported greenskin rights, so has Black, and Praes doesn't have a great history with nonhumans.)

Liliet

They can't give the drow a better deal, because they don't have what Cat has to offer.

Catherine has offered them:

- the dwarves' support until they win this war (I don't want to know what the dwarves will do if the drow go back on their word about fighting the DK and I bet the drow don't either);
- a territory that no-one living contests (admittedly DK could theoretically let him have the very same one, it's not like he's using it either);
- potential help from mages, priests and heroes to heal the aforementioned territory until it's no longer blighted (doubt DK can match that perfectly, given he has no Light users available);

and most notably

- good relations with pretty much the entire continent. DK is isolated, it's Intercessor's entire game that no-one likes him and no-one's willing to ally with him except really desperate Dread Emps. Good relations that'll last for generations, too, with a deliberately set up to last treaty and trade ties. Whereas Malicia's diplomatic abomination will definitely die with her.

Oh, and Catherine's help in navigating surface affairs - someone they actually trust. DK will fuck them over however he can, try to control them in every way he can, there are

no pesky “ethics” restraining him. Catherine is genuine in her desire to help and not looking to consolidate power.

DK cannot match the offer, no.

caoimhinh

It's not that plausible to happen, because they can't trust the Dead King and there's too much risk in letting him stay active and existing.

This was already considered by Catherine when Neshamah offered a truce of 100 years; if the sense of alarm and imminent danger is lost then the cohesion of the alliance against Keter vanishes and they will tend to more practical and immediate matters, while the Dead King can amass his forces for the next invasion.

The Grand Alliance can't accept peace with the Dead King, both Catherine and Cordelia know this, probably Amadeus and Tariq too. So they not accepting the trap of a long-time truce with Keter is a consequence of more than Story, there are practical realities to that decision.

However, that won't stop Neshamah from making the offer, and some will start having second thoughts like Yannu this chapter, as some of the leaders and the population losing their will to fight the war will mean weakening the alliance army that marches against the Dead King.

The brilliance of this move is not in its capability of ending the war (it can't and won't) but rather in the cost for the members of the Grand Alliance in stopping those who start having second thoughts (political leaders backing off deals, discontented soldiers, rioting population, etc).

[Stephen R. Marsh](#)

I'm thinking the Bard's play at a name for Black and a stay of execution for the Tyrant should wrap into the payoff tomorrow.

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

Cough cough Its funny how the story disses fools working together and trading information with the Tyrant while Cat has been doing the same thing and even she dissed those fools at one point i think. *Cough cough*

Shveiran

Is it? I mean, I'd be colled a reckless idiot if I tried to draw a project for a suspension bridge, since I lack the necessary knowledge; that doesn't mean no one should draw suspension bridges, so long as they are qualified for the task.

Tyrant is a viper, so trying to deal with him without being a very skilled snake charmer is a reckless mistake. Whereas Cat has played him several time, so it's clear she has the skill to handle him.

Dreamer

I wouldn't really call Kairos a viper. It seems he's there just to be relevant. It seems like his essence of being. And best way to be relevant is to be a man in the middle. And so it feels like you can't really "get" him as he wants to be swayed from one side to the other. I think his preferred outcome would be never-ending struggle between Alliance and The Enemy.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> it's clear she has the skill to handle him.

Up to a point, anyway – he did get an unexpected stab in during the Twilight adventure, along with the expected one.

Shveiran

Undoubtedly.

But this is not a game that can be won without a measure of risk; all I'm saying is, in her case, it is a calculated risk. When the Proceran Princes did...it was not.

Insanenoodlyguy

The thing is that he's a player, and so can't be ignored. But this was because other people let him come and play. Cat is good at fighting him, but she would have told everybody not to let him at the table in the first place.

Decius

And he would have destroyed his last coin, rather than see an opponent win.

He's playing the game to have a chance at winning, because he sees that the first-order ideal strategy makes everyone lose. But he's still open to the idea of making everyone lose, if they don't give him a chance to win.

NerfGlaistigUaine

I love this comment section. It's so nice and friendly and there are nearly no blabbering idiots. Considering the forums I usually frequent it's a true breath of fresh air.

I've talked about religion, death, character motivations, morality, and history with this fic and have never gotten any truly stupid replies. It's just so freaking nice.

[TeK](#)

I have an incredibly intense feeling to prove you wrong now. Was that your plan all along?

Andrew Mitchell



Andrew Mitchell

♥ Well said. 99.9% of posts are civil contributions that enhance this community. Certainly one of the nicest places on the interwebs.

konstantinvoncarstein

I may be wrong, but it could be because a story where tolerance is omnipresent would attract people more prone to respect others?

[Liliet](#)

Good moderation of the comment section is also paramount ♥

[knockoffnikolai](#)

The interlude titles sounded familiar, so I googled them. These phrases are from "The Many Deaths of Traitorous," quoted here: <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2018/01/17/villainous-interlude-crescendo/>

Unfortunately, all this tells me is that Tyrant is going to be involved, and we already knew that. But fun piece of trivia!

Andrew Mitchell

Well spotted!

[ninegardens](#)

Nice catch:

In particular, I am now expecting:

"So smile, Tyrants,"
"And let us be wicked"

[ErraticErrata](#)

suspiciously casual whistling

Liliet

that entire poem makes me so emotional about Praes's whole deal

'we are not kind or just,
deserving or any victory,
we are a thing of dust,
promised only misery'

NO YOU ARE OKAY IT WILL BE FINE I PROMISE AAAAAAAA

Ben Serreau-Raskin

These external views of Catherine are some of my favorite parts of the series.

Interlude: So Smile, Tyrants

"And so as night fell over the Blessed Isle, his Dread Majesty sent across the river the corpse of Prince Robert and the captured Princess Juliana, still bound in chains, for when released she had bit off the ear of the High Lord of Okoro. King Selwyn Fairfax rode halfway across the bridge, where he thus addressed His Dread Majesty: 'You have fought this war grimly on the field and gallantly beyond. Would that you had been born west of the river, under a virtuous star.' And so His Dread Majesty replied: 'For having been born east of the river I became instead a man to pluck stars from the sky. Is that not a higher virtue?'"
– Extract from 'Commentaries on the Campaigns of Dread Emperor Terribilis the Second'

To match the coming Damned, Chosen had been sent for.

Because Creation was a strange and ironic thing, Rozala Malanza thought, this had been the suggestion of Catherine Foundling and opposed largely by Cordelia Hasenbach. Not that the First Prince would be so uncouth as to risk offending the Dominion by implying its favourite son was anything other than a treasured ally. There'd been talk instead that the Peregrine's presence might incite the Tyrant to misbehave, that surely the White Knight himself would be enough. Princess Rozala suspected that the First Prince had known it would fail, and it had, but had allowed herself to vent a sliver of personal dislike in as harmless a manner she could. That Hasenbach despised the Peregrine was no surprise to her, not since she'd heard the full story of what had

taken place at Saudant. The sleepy little fishing village by the shores of Lake Artoise that had been butchered to bring the Carrion Lord to heel, leaving not a single survivor. Not even children.

It had shaken Rozala's high esteem of the Chosen, to hear this. A greater good had been achieved by the act, that much could not be denied. How many more dozens of thousands would have died if the Legions of Terror slipped the noose in Iserre to ravage the western principalities as well? Yet it'd been a grave evil, that too could not be denied, and one dealt unto a sworn ally. The First Prince's view of the matter was without nuance, but the Princess of Aequitan could not quite bring herself to share it in full. She remembered still the Grey Pilgrim saving thousands of lives during the Battle of the Camps, and almost as many after when he went from wounded to wounded and worked his healing to exhaustion. It had been an ugly choice the old hero made, and one he had no right to make. But did they not breathe a little *easier* for it? Were they not, behind the outrage at the lives taken and the brutality of the act, all a little grateful for what had come of it?

The dark-haired princess could not embrace the choice he had made, the deaths it had meant, but neither would she condemn it outright. It would be hypocrisy of the worst sort to let Peregrine undertake the bloody work of capturing the Carrion Lord for them and then in the same breath to complain of his murderous meddling.

"Princess Rozala?"

The Arlesite general turned a pleasant smile upon the woman who had approached her, for this was a relationship that must be cultivated for years to come should they all survive these dark times. Lady Vivienne Dartwick cut rather more regal a figure when out of the thief's leathers she'd worn at the truce talks in northern Callow, though Rozala decided that the milkmaid braid crowned by a tasteful silver circlet rather helped the effect. It was said she'd once been a Chosen, before the Black Queen turned her to villainy. Though few believed the Black Queen's handpicked successor to be anything close to 'redeemed' from such damnation, she was still considered rather less incendiary an interlocutor in diplomatic talks. Nobly born as well, for House Dartwick was on the Callowan lists of nobility, which was a balm on the pride of those who still balked at negotiating with a no-name orphan like Catherine Foundling. A foolish thing, that, when the shadow of that orphan's displeasure had half of Calernia shaking in its boots, but pride could oft be a foolish thing.

"Lady Dartwick," Rozala replied. "How may I be of service?"

"The Lord Adjutant is being sent out by my queen and will require a guide," Lady Vivienne said. "If I might trouble you to provide one?"

A matter of too little importance to speak to the First Prince over, Rozala idly thought, yet requiring the assistance and assent of a high-ranked Proceran. The Callowan noble had correctly navigated etiquette in approaching her, which was a refreshing change compared to her mistress – who largely behaved as if she were above such things. Rather more gallingly, she was not wrong to believe so.

"My personal secretary Louis Rohanon will see to it," the Princess of Aequitan said.

She discreetly gestured for one of the attendants to approach her, so Louis could be informed of her request. It was insulting that her dear friend's abdication of his crown for the sake of the Principate meant he no longer qualified to attend councils such as this, but given the recent... agitation in Salia the princess knew it was not the time to test the First Prince's tolerance.

"Will the Lord Adjutant be leaving us, then?" Rozala asked.

She would not mind that, for the quiet watchfulness in the orc's eyes spoke of little missed. Yet it would not do to loose a Damned without first learning where he would head, and for what purpose.

"Queen Catherine intends to sound out the loyalties and interests of Nicae," Lady Vivienne said.

And she'd sent out an *orc* to do so? The Princess of Aequitan was no village bumpkin, to believe orcs men turned to corrupted forms by some ancient sin and the hand of Below, but it could not be denied that the Deadhand's large fangs and leathery skin fed into his looming presence to unsettling result. Though the Lord Adjutant had struck her a clever-minded and methodical, he hardly made for a pleasant envoy. Unless, of course, a reminder of force was what the Black Queen meant to send. Who could truly know, with that one?

"Then allow me to offer my secretary's services as scholar and translator," Princess Rozala suggested.

The heiress-designate eyed her pensively. It would mean anything spoken would later be reported to her, true, but it would also lend the weight of Procer's tacit approval to whatever was spoken. Besides, Louis truly was fluent in tradertalk and of scholarly inclination besides. He would be of practical use, regardless of all the rest.

"I thank you for the boon," Lady Vivienne said, tone formal. "I am certain Lord Adjutant will delight in the use of such an able aide."

Secrecy was not paramount to whatever the Black Queen had planned for the League, then, or perhaps even Nicae in particular. The arrangements were made swiftly, and all was in motion before the latest arrivals stirred the room. The Grey Pilgrim's stride was greeted enthusiastically by the highborn of the Blood, though rather more coolly by the Callowans and the Carrion Lord. First Prince Cordelia herself offered the due courtesies and not an inch more, for even in utter scorn the Lycaonese princess was rarely anything but flawlessly polite. The White Knight's entrance was, by contrast, was more warmly received. The Chosen's willingness to work with the Highest Assembly – though never under, for Hanno of Arward answered to the Tribunal alone – and the strictures of Proceran law had endeared him to Hasenbach and even Rozala herself, she would admit. Never before had she heard of a Chosen who would list and explain every kill he'd made in a rioting city before scholars of law so that the actions might be assessed.

At least not without hinting it was mere humouring of mortal crowns, while the White Knight had instead seemed serious and even *earnest*.

The White Knight and his companion the Witch of the Woods were also notably strong Chosen who had come to safeguard Salia and the peace talks, which had been reassuring considering who would be attending. The Black Queen, the Hierophant, the Tyrant of Helike – and now it seemed even the Hidden Horror himself. In truth Princess Rozala had been surprised at Queen Catherine's suggestion that the White Knight attend this council, for the Sword of Judgement was blatant enough a ward against her that the dark-haired general had believed she might take offence. Apparently, Rozala Malanza faintly thought, someone had forgot to inform Catherine Foundling of this: she met the White Knight's arrival with a smile and a respectful nod, which the Chosen casually returned. Rozala was not the only one to take notice, the eyes of half the room coming to rest on the pair in silent surprise.

"Kairos Theodosian nears," the Black Queen suddenly said.

—

It had been more than a year now since the Tyrant of Helike had sworn eternal friendship to Cordelia Hasenbach. Not that she had ever believe him. Nor would she now put too much stock in anything he said, not even if Chosen insisted he had been bound by a curse of truth. If a madman believed the sky to be green, did that make it so? No, the Tyrant had been a thorn in her side for too long to be taken as anything but a peril.

The First Prince had considered the young king a diplomatic and military headache from more or less the first breath after he'd taken the throne, for he'd proven to be both cunning and very much inclined to turn that cunning against Procer. The blonde princess had once believed that Helike and its boy-king could be restrained by fetters of ink, treaties binding the League to a ten-year truce with the Principate until other affairs were settled, but that had arguably been the second-most serious diplomatic blunder of her reign. She could not be certain that the Tyrant's rise could truly be laid at her feet, for he might well have struck out for power regardless of anything she did. Yet the League's vote for truce with Procer had undeniably been the trigger of the civil war that propelled the Tyrant of Helike to greater heights. And saw Anaxares of Bellerophon elected to the office of Hierarch of the Free Cities, though in some ways that seat was still good as empty.

Still, for all that Cordelia had maneuvered and plotted against Kairos Theodosian she had never seen the man with her own eyes until he came to Salia. Much of what she had read of him proved true, the First Prince pondered once more as the Tyrant swaggered into the parlour, but it did not quite do the man justice. The thin sickliness, the loose robes that did not quite hide erratic convulsions and trembling, or even the blood-red eye under wispy brown curls: Theodosian almost seemed more notion than man, as if some godly hand had painted grinning malevolence on the canvas of Creation and crowned it king of Helike. Most of those here loathed him, the First Prince considered. Some loathed him so deeply it was like a poison in their veins. Yet looking at the young king and the two waddling gargoyles flanking him, one would think he was among friends.

"Oh my," Kairos Theodosian drawled. "Such a gathering of great and mighty names. My heart is made all aflutter."

"Lord Tyrant," Cordelia Hasenbach calmly said. "Welcome. You are thanked for accepting our invitation."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," the odd-eyed villain grinned.

"Gods, you really are such a prick," the Black Queen of Callow said, sounding almost admiring. "If I didn't know better, I'd call it an aspect."

The fair-haired Lycaonese bit down on her initial wave of fear and irritation. Much as she disliked the manners of the other ruler, it could not be denied that no one in this room had even half the understanding of the Tyrant she could boast of having. As if to prove correct her thought, instead of storming out at the casual slight and informality the other villain instead let out a cackling laugh.

"Catherine," he replied cheerfully. "A pleasure to see you, as always. Is that my old friend Amadeus I see cowering in your shadow?"

The Carrion Lord, who had kept his peace and spoken only sparingly since his declaration of war on the Tower, never lost his air of cold indifference.

"It is a rather broad shadow, these days," the Carrion Lord casually replied. "It makes for comfortable cowering."

The choking sound from her side was, Cordelia realized, most of the Blood suppressing laughter.

"An empire's worth of room, eh?" the Tyrant sneered. "I wonder, did the broken spine take the Name or was it the other way around?"

She must step in now else the villain would needle everyone here 'til Last Dusk. Satisfying as it was to hear the Carrion Lord pricked, it did nothing to endear the one pricking him to her heart. Or advance the cause of Procer's survival to let it devour time from the recess, for that matter.

"The Dread Empire of Praes," the First Prince said, "is not why it was asked you attend this council."

"Then by all means," Kairos Theodosian drawled, "reveal this revelation to me, Warden of the West."

Cordelia stepped forward, back straight. Closer to a villain whose suspected body count was in the hundreds, who had once routed an entire host by wielding a storm and not so long ago ripped out thousands in cavalry from Arcadia and smashed them down onto the earth. She stepped forward with utter calm, for these were *her* chosen grounds and her favoured manner of strife.

"Circumstances have ensured there is an alignment in our interests, Lord Tyrant," Cordelia said.

A heartbeat passed; the blood-red eye blinked.

"Boring," the boy-king said, solemn as a judge passing a sentence.

"Yet here you are, standing among us," the First Prince said, unruffled. "Itching to turn on the Crown and Tower who have used you better than you used them."

"Slightly less boring," the Tyrant conceded. "Still I've yet to hear a single reason I should break such deep trust or sunder a precious bond of fellowship."

"You require assurances, understandably," Cordelia said. "This can be arranged. You stand, as you said, among an assembly of great and mighty names."

"And what would be required of me in exchange for these assurances?" the Tyrant grinned. "Go on now, Warden of the West. Do not disappoint."

"You have been deep in the Enemy's councils, Lord Tyrant," Cordelia said. "Reveal their plans to us and-"

"Nononono," the Tyrant of Helike interrupted, growing increasingly shrill. "That was not the right thing to ask. You're doing it *wrong*."

The villain seemed genuinely agitated, his arm slipping out of the folded sleeve hiding it in a spasm. His brown eye had grown watery, as if he were in pain or sorrow. The First Prince was taken aback, and for once uncertain as to how she should respond. A limping gait whispered across the floor, the Black Queen hobbling behind the Tyrant's back and slowing only to offer her the most *insolent* wink Cordelia had ever seen. She flushed.

"Sometimes they need us devils to speak the ugly things, Kairos, you ought to know that by now," Queen Catherine said, tone teasing.

Tension in the Tyrant's shoulders loosened by a fraction at the words, and Cordelia grasped the game. Silk and the steel, then. She was more used to standing as the former than the latter, but not unskilled at the exercise.

"Say it," Kairos Theodosian demanded.

"Give us a good reason to keep warring on Keter," the Black Queen said.

As she often did, the Queen of Callow was cutting to the bone of it for that was the truth exact of what they needed. A great banner of fear and outrage that would bind Principate – and beyond – to pursuit of the war against the Dead King, and if there was one man who might give them that at this very moment it was the Tyrant of Helike.

"Ah," the odd-eyed king said, savouring the sound. "There it is. Now, let the mangled relic in the corner attest to my words – not you Amadeus, at least this time – and pronounce truth where it is. I have such a reason and can reveal it to you."

All eyes in the parlour turned to the Grey Pilgrim, whose eyes were narrowed.

"Truth," the Peregrine slowly said. "In word and intent."

"Then let us speak of price, Theodosian," Cordelia said. "Some offences may yet be forgiven, should you bargain in good faith. Wealth and honours could be laid on your brow."

Cordelia was much taller than the Tyrant and made certain to loom over him as he spoke. A tilt of the neck lent her the appearance of looking down on him as she spoke, and she added a faint hint of sneer to her lip. Dislike was as distracting a feeling as any other, and if she must wield the reputation of the Alamans abroad to best achieve it she would not balk at the indignity.

"He's not the coin kind of king, Hasenbach," the Black Queen drawled. "No, he's an old-fashioned sort. He wants his seat at the table back. Don't you, Kairos?"

Which Queen Catherine wanted no more than Cordelia herself, though with the amused glint to her eye she was doing a fair impression of desiring otherwise.

"Catherine, how distressing," the Tyrant grinned. "That would imply that I currently no longer have a seat. Am I not a participant in good standing of this peace conference?"

"Helike can be spared retribution for its reckless war-making and treachery," Cordelia said, phrasing it as a great concession. "Your abdication, however, might be required for the sake of peace."

"Now there's a familiar tune," the Black Queen smiled.

It was, the fair-haired princess thought, a little *too* sharp a smile for that sharpness to be entirely feigned.

"Ladies," the Tyrant intervened, sounding utterly delighted, "come now, is there truly need for such language? Now, unless I am mistaken there was some talk of dues."

Queen Catherine began circling again, and Cordelia breathed in. Time to see what the two of them could bargain him down to.

"You are due quite a few things," the First Prince pleasantly agreed.

"Mostly the one, as far as I am concerned," Kairos Theodosian grinned. "And dear Catherine knows what I want, she does. She even brought it for me."

The trial, Cordelia thought. It was all coming to hinge on the trial of the White Knight, as promised at the crossroad of the Princes' Graveyard. She had been warned by every Chosen and Damned she was on speaking terms with that to allow such a thing to unfold would be highly dangerous and acted accordingly.

"Your demand for a trial of the White Knight is on the official order of affairs, Lord Tyrant," the First Prince mildly said.

"Very far down the list," the Tyrant replied, just as mildly.

"And I could not help to notice some details of procedures related to its positioning. Now, were I a suspicious man, I might suspect they'd allow a clever sort to put off that discussion for weeks, if not months."

Which had been the very intent. The League of Free Cities as it currently stood was a derelict taking water, and the situation would only worsen unless the Hierarch himself intervened. It was unlikely he would, meaning that waiting for a span might very well see the Tyrant's power among the League and perhaps the League itself collapse – and so make any demands of his utterly irrelevant, for he would no longer have the knife at the throats to see through his extortion.

"Then we move it up the list," the Black Queen shrugged.

"I would not wish to be unseemly in my demands," the Tyrant smiled. "And so, I've a suggestion to offer that could be considered less of an imposition."

The smile widened, until all that Cordelia could see was a thin, sharp slice of teeth and a pulsing red eye.

"Let us hold the trial *now*."

Javvies

Huh.

This can't be Kairos's endgame. Putting White Knight on trial now isn't going to be something that ends the game for Kairos, because there's other stuff going on that he's interested in seeing play out.

So perhaps he's just trying to establish a precedent for use in some other plot.

Oshi

The treachery is the end game. He is the ultimate partisan for below. Chaos is what's needed and he will do anything he can to achieve it. This is when the fun starts.

erebus42

While all of that is true, Kairos prefers to maximize the impact of his treachery. This seems like lesser treachery to me so that makes me think he's got something grander in mind.

Andrew Mitchell

"something grander"? I agree. I wish I could guess what he's planned. The best I can think of is to use Heirarch and the trial to strike a significant blow against the choir of judgement and cause people to lose some faith in Above.

Mental Mouse

IIRC, a number of knowledgeable folks have said that his plan is to actually trap and perhaps kill at least one of the Seraphim. However, I would have thought that he'd require Hierarch's presence for the trial, and I can't imagine nobody would have noticed that. (That said. I'm reading this late, so I haven't seen the current chapter yet.)

caoimhin

My current hypothesis is that this Trial of the Choir of Judgement is actually a test trial for whatever Kairos has in mind for dealing with the Bard.

This would engrave into Creation the instance of mortals exacting judgment over the tools of the Gods, which is a powerful thing and with a huge weight even if unprecedented (or perhaps on behalf of being unprecedented). This could very well be the sharpening of the blade that ultimately takes the Intercessor out of commission and banish her from the game.

Kairos is the one who understands the most about the Bard (along with Neshamah) after all. His **Wish** aspect enabled him to see through her, back when he was still plotting to make Anaxares into Hierarch, which is pretty early on in the series.



Andrew Mitchell

I like your thinking here. 😊

Kyle

I agree he could be trying to establish a precedent, or he could be going for something more direct. It has been implied that hierarch can pass judgement on even beings normally beyond judgement. Given how strongly the choir of mercy reacted to threats against the Pilgrim, and how the choir of judgement has in the past directly intervened on behalf of the white knight when his passing of judgement was interfered with, perhaps Tyrant is trying to bait the choir into intervening to prevent heirarch from passing judgement on the white knight. I am willing to bet it is against the law in Bellerophan to interfere with legal proceedings which would give heirarch the ability to pass judgement on the whole choir.

Andrew Mitchell

This makes sense. It's entirely plausible IMO. 😊

[ninegardens](#)

You gotta admit- Heirarch swatting down the entire choir of Judgement is pretty fricken' badass. Shame that they seem to be one of the most reasonable angel factions around (based on Hanno's backstory).

Honestly, neither Mercy nor Judgement seem all that bad really. Not GOOD, but still reasonable.

That said... Hierarch is getting crazier and crazier. Anarexes V1.0 was a chill dude, but the Hierarch of the free cities has been getting more and more nutso each time we see him.

Also, IF Kiaros manages to use this to stab the Choir of Judgement, pretty sure Below is going to give him 50 many brownie points, and probably grant him an extra year worth of good health.

Shveiran

I'd argue that Anaxares was simply powerless and therefore not dangerous in the beginning, not "a chill dude". The election didn't really change his ideas, it just made them relevant. I always found him rather... disturbing, personally.

[ninegardens](#)

HHmmmmm fair.

He's distrubing due to the brain washing... but I'll respect his refusal to accept power when it was offered, and his bizzare calm when facing down Tyrant as a mere mortal. But yeah- fair call "Chill dude" may be taking the description a bit far.

reyishi

Actually Judgement is described as a pretty hardcore choir : Hanno is the very first hero acting to its name because every time a hero wants to go for the Judgement route they were instantly smited (it was said in thr earlier I don't remember which but I think the Lone Swordsman was still alive).

[Liliet](#)

I don't know where you got this from, but actually we have comments from Bard on what Judgement heroes are *normally* like. There have been plenty.

Shikkarasu

That would be Prosecution II
"Five I have sent, in my day," the stranger said.
"None returned. Ashur is not loved by them, child.
There is too much rot in the flesh, and the
Seraphim despises that sin most of all."
I don't think the Boatman was saying there have

been no Judgement Heros, just that in his time(probably a mortal life, so 30-60 years depending how old he was) he hadn't seen anyone succeed. Either the last Judgement Hero was a few decades ago, or they didn't use that boat trick to gain their name.

[Liliet](#)

Also, it's just the Ashurans.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, and notably, Hanno did not *return to the boatman or to Ashur* either.

[onedollargum](#)

Anaxerxes is taunt steel cable that the Tyrant has turned into a crossbow. His nature is unerringly the same, but the circumstances have changed XD

NerfContessa

Agreed.

Then let's watch the madness and cackle, as is our due and duty.

Licens

He doesn't want the White Knight put on trial. He wants to be tried by the White Knight, for Hanno to flip that coin, and he wants it BEFORE he tells them what they need to know. He's trying to force the hand of a choir, or break the Knight. Either the choir lets him live, the WK defies his choir, or the information dies with him.

Poetically Psychotic

I get the feeling it's not Hanno he wants on trial, it's the Choir of Judgment responsible for his actions. Executing the White Knight on a technicality would be hilarious. Executing an *entire Choir of angels* would be the stuff of legend.

trevorkirkby123

Isn't it kind of Kairos' thing that he always has something bigger in the works? Always launching into some great new scheme and never reaching a true endgame?

It's one of the ways for a villain to survive. The first steps of the villain's plans always work, not to mention there is a degree of narrative stability found by becoming the recurring villain. Bard commented on it the first time she met Kairos.

Aaradur

I was honestly hoping Cat would offer the recently de-equestrated Cataphraktoi with purebred liessen chargers

James

"Let us hold the vote *now*."

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

Isi Arnott-Campbell

The best one yet. You saw the opportunity and went for it. I laughed. Not a grin or a snort or a chuckle, a full-on laugh. Thank you.

[Liliet](#)

Even I like this one!

Isi Arnott-Campbell

A rare seal of quality.

[Liliet](#)

I'd say it's probably because it does not use characters as corrupted handpuppets on a distorted stage shouting our words as their own over sharp shards of the fourth wall.

It puts us in their place cosplaying, instead. That's much better.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

That's a pretty raw way to phrase it. I mean that in a good way. And yeah, this is definitely better.

My very own name

Typo thread:

> anything but flawlessly polite. The White Knight's entrance was, by contrast, was more warmly received. [Double was]

And the ship just sailed!

> the Black Queen hobbling behind the Tyrant's back and slowing only to offer her the most insolent wink Cordelia had ever seen. She flushed.

Inay

Can we talk about the other ship in the room too? ;D (Cathanno)

erebus42

Despite it frequently being pointed out that she is no great beauty, between Hanno, Cordelia, Aquilline, and Rozala Cat's got a nice potential harem going. But as the late great Rateface once pointed out she's got "charisma not beauty" which makes a difference.

Jane

Didn't the last chapter mention how she hisses like a goblin?

We don't often see how many characters ogle Catherine back, but... That doesn't sound like the basis for a traditional harem MC to me...

/tongueincheek

[roseocean2012](#)

I have no clue what you mean, goblins are peak hotness.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Apparently, Rozala Malanza faintly thought, someone had forgot to inform Catherine Foundling of this: she met the White Knight's arrival with a smile and a respectful nod, which the Chosen casually returned. Rozala was not the only one to take notice, the eyes of half the room coming to rest on the pair in silent surprise.

I love this image of half the nobles present doing a quiet "wait, what?"

ChillyPepper

who had once router an entire > who had once route(b)d(/d) an entire

ChillyPepper

Oh no, I blundered once again.

[Liliet](#)

Oh my god I MISSED THAT.

It's HAPPENING yall it's HAPPENING

Oshi

Oh you know hes fan baiting but ITS HAPPENING!

[Liliet](#)

He's what now?

Inay

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah cliffhanger !

I hope next chapter is Hanno's point of view. (I like his PoV, he's growing on me)

Slider

Of course the little shit wants the trial now. Why does everyone let the madman dance unimpeded?

He's a very refined man for brushing off Dear Catherine insults, though. Such gentlemanliness is rarely seen amongst his peers.

Zgggt

He knows something we don't.

Judgement being held accountable under a human court is guilty: human morality cannot be based on complete knowledge, therefore the assumptions of "Above's Plan is good", "Judgement knows better than mortal justice", and "by definition, Judgement cannot be unjust" are not legitimate defense under a court of law.

And yet, even with all that, Hanno and Judgement should still win. Perhaps because Hanno uses knowledge of earlier White Knights to enforce Judgement, then he can be held accountable for their actions, which may have fit the time. Or, since Black mentioned that had heroes not interfered stealing Callows weather would have succeeded. So, instead of an exchange of weather, Callows remained untouched, but all generations of Praes since have paid the price... But somehow I don't see any White Knight judging anyone for centuries of suffering, and in there lies a massive injustice that can be attributed directly to Judgement and their representatives.

What would happen if Judgement would find the concept of a White Knight guilty?

My assumption has always been Kairos knowing to a certainty he could create a spectacle with absolutely massive ramifications.

Dantalion

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

For Others: The smile widened, until all that Cordelia could see was a thin, sharp slice of teeth and a pulsing red eye.

"Let us go and vote now." <http://topwebfiction.com/vote.php?for=a-practical-guide-to-evil>

Alex

The smile widened, until all that Cordelia could see was a thin, sharp slice of teeth and a pulsing red eye.

"Let us go vote now."

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

Jane

Foundling and Hasenbach really do work quite well together, when they're not too busy working against each other. Hasenbach playing to Proceran stereotypes was a delight, as well.

[NZPIEFACE](#)

You know, considering that the White Knight considers himself above no other mortal, I actually think nothing will really happen to this, apart from maybe the Angels getting slightly fucked over.

But if that happens, doesn't that just give him more agency? To see that the absolute aren't so absolute in the first place, and that man itself has right to judge their own.

Oshi

People have to stop focusing on the White Knight. When was the last time Kairos ever targeting the person he said he was. The trail ITSELF is the goal. The outcomes don't matter if he can carve into creation something. I can't wait to find out what it is.

mindsword2

One thing I'm wondering if the trail is the means to a different end. He can see another's Wishes and so if he can get Judgement to make an appearance he might learn what they Wish, which would be a wonderful insight into how to manipulate the Choir of Judgement itself.

Andrew Mitchell

I like your idea!

Someguy

Hmmm... Hanno might be fine but I'm not so sure about the Choir

caoimhinh

Wow, Cordelia is really bad at dealing with Kairos. She might be a skilled diplomat and politician, but she simply does not have the right mindset to face Kairos.

Oshi

Good cop, bad cop. She planned this with Cat.

hakureireimu

There's no planning; Cordy's just quick on the uptake.

Cicero

What's particularly funny is that Cordelia notes she is used to playing silk (good cop), and in this instance is instead playing steel (bad cop), but in fact she doesn't really have to change much to play bad cop, since all her courtesies and politeness irritates Karios, while Cat's playful insults is what he likes.

...

...

Is Karios an M?

Oshi

Well yeah, life is pain for him. What else would he be?

jack

Cordy deals with two realms. The Material and the political. Steel and soldiers, and noble promises. More the latter than the former, in her case.

She's not named, she doesn't understand stories or why they're important. she doesn't understand that Kairos needs to be treated like a villain, a treasonous viper, not a political adversary or the leader of an enemy faction.

Offer him a knife and a back to stick it in, and he's as happy as a clam. He couldn't care one jot for promises of clemency, political power or gold to pay his soldiers.

Cordelia doesn't get that. It's why she doesn't understand why The pilgrim's attempt to shape a story that could kill Catherine could be considered an assassination attempt.

She doesn't realise that all of creation moves because stories tell it to. It's her blind-spot, and why she doesn't reckon much to Cathrine's warnings that whatever they're digging out of the lake could be used to wipe out Procer as a whole. She knows names, but she doesn't know Roles, or what a Pivot is.

Her only direct interaction with Name Lore is when she refused to allow the Gods Above to Name her, because she thinks that her own country's system of governance is more important than the Gods literally empowering someone with divine authority.

Shveiran

Though to be fair... very few people on Calernia do. Really, a handful at best. We just spend time with them all so it seems like there is a lot of them.

[ninegardens](#)

I so so love the phrase "Happy as a clam".

It feels nice to sit back and imagine a bunch of happy smiling clams.
With one red eye.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

The full expression is "happy as a clam at high tide," which may be more or less endearing.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, fucking nobody has the right mindset to face Kairos (except Cat). I think Cordelia could pick up on it over prolonged interactions, but her default is too alien for her to grasp how he works quickly.

She works so well with Catherine though.

Jane

If memory serves, even Hakram questioned Cat's approach to Kairos when she had him draw up the letters back at the Graveyard – because exactly how many people *like* being treated with open contempt by their "allies"? It's not the sort of thing one would find out *naturally*, certainly – not unless one were prone to a quick temper, and started insulting him when he didn't do what you wanted. Except in that case, I think he'd probably continue misbehaving to wind you up further.

...Catherine really had the right of him in her description of him this chapter. No doubt the only reason it *isn't* an Aspect is the fact that his personality flaws are not a transitive verb.

[Liliet](#)

I wouldn't call "abused kid gets triggered by 90% of the ways the world can approach him into actively making every

situation worse" a 'personality flaw' per se. Like I'm not saying Kairos is a good person, this particular bit of terminology just doesn't sit well with me.

And yep, Catherine *getting* him after just one face to face conversation is fucking genius.

heyhiyou

listen to the Tyrant "Let us hold the trial now" vote on top web fiction

<http://topwebfiction.com>

Andrew Mitchell

Of course, Cordelia & co. have to let this happen; THE reason to prosecute this war against the Dead King is just too important.

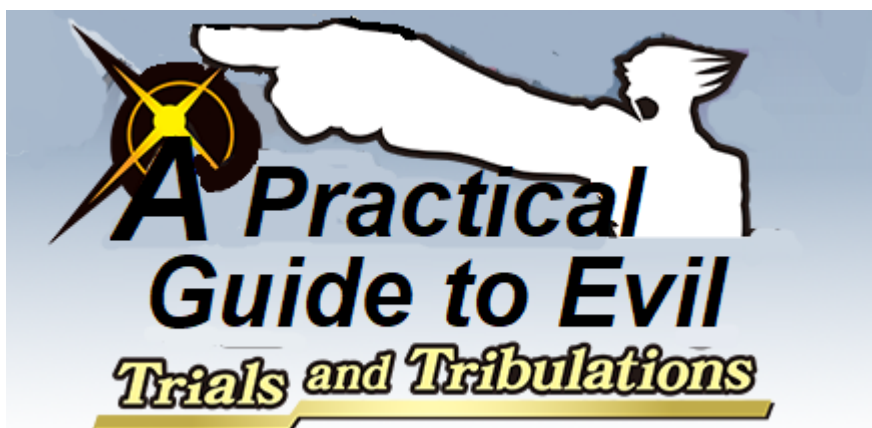
I'm looking forward to seeing the trial. Hanno, Heirarch and the choir will all be important players, but it's unclear to me how the trial is going to play out and what the result will be. It's *could* be quite an important milestone in Cat's aim, to upset the game between Above and Below, by showing everyone that Above (and by extension Below) really don't give a shit about the people of Calernia.

caoimhinh

Time for the Trial Mini-Arc, I wonder if it will really be done in a couple of interludes right away or in a later date. The trial seems important enough to not be finished in a single chapter, but who knows.

Either way, that is not Kairos' goal or endgame, putting the Choir of Judgement to Trial by mortals is just a means to an end. But I wonder what it is...

Anyways, I *really* hope someone shouts "**Objection!**" at some point of the Trial. Maybe the Bard making a dramatic entry or something.



Isi Arnott-Campbell

The boldness of the text denotes it as an aspect, in which case it should be Object, not Objection. 😊

Oshi

Omg Kairos is the snake oil lawyer!!!!

MrMaturity

...And let us be wicked!

devildragon777

...Kairos is going to swing Anaxares in for the trial, isn't he? Heirarch may actually be able to usurp or cause damage to the Choir of Judgement in the process...there's a reason the Tyrant picked Hanno, and it definitely has to do with either his patron or Hanno's own beliefs regarding mortal law.

Nah

It could also have something to do with the fact that the Tyrant saved Hanno's life.

caoimhinh

I think it's rather that Kairos saved Hanno's life because he had this plan of using him against the Choir in the future, and he also used that chance to make a deal with the Bard if I recall correctly.

Kairos is one of the characters that sees furthest ahead, despite appearances.

Hardric62

> The dark-haired princess could not embrace the choice he had made, the deaths it had meant, but neither would she condemn it outright. It would be hypocrisy of the worst sort to let Peregrine undertake the bloody work of capturing the Carrion Lord for them and then in the same breath to complain of his murderous meddling

Methinks Cordelia is seething both because the Peregrine decided to keep Amadeus alive after that (despite the fact it is paying up dividends now), and probably because she remembers the Saint of Bitches' self-professed goal of burning Procer to the ground. Odds that the Grey Peregrine didn't know of that are likely considered as quit elow in her book, meaning he approved her enough for not stopping her. Might cause you to be a tiny little bity salty.

caoimhinh

I would just like to point out and remind you that the dark-haired princess is Rozala Malanza of Aquitan.
Cordelia Hasenbach, the First Prince, is blonde.

Hardric62

I know, I was just pointing out why Cordelia could be so disgruntled about the Peregrine to Rozala.
And I guess I'm using this as a PS too, because the Saint of Bitches' meddling with the House of Light for that Arch-Heretic mess was also likely why the pricks felt too big for their britches and took part in that coup attempt. One more reason for being salty.

superkeaton

Cat's being such a cheeky shit to Cordelia, I love it. And she shameless eye-candy eating. For all the talk of proper diplomacy, it's the low-born warlord Villainess who has to do the sweet talking. Love. It.

Wonder what kind of work Secret Agent Hakram's about to get up to... Heh, 00rc.

caoimhinh

It's funny because only 3 chapters ago Catherine was saying *"From the corner of my eye I saw Princess Rozala's lips twitch in suppressed amusement. It would have been impolitic to wink, I supposed, and besides I had a policy."*

Yet she winked to Cordelia in this chapter (mere minutes afterward) in such an insolent way that Cordelia flushed in indignation. Hahahaha

[Liliet](#)

Indignation? Are you sure?

Shveiran

Why else? Cordelia is playing along, but she is poised, genteel and does care for courtesies and protocol.
To have such an informal approach is an indignity to her. Not one she'll not cast aside of course, she is not stupid. But... yeah, I think it makes her feel indignation at the gesture. Don't you?

[Liliet](#)

Cordelia had just been knocked askew and is unsure what to do. If she were somehow angry or indignant at the Black

Queen in the middle of looking to her for cues on how to act, I'm sure it would have been remarked upon.
No, this is a different kind of flushed.

Agent J

Someone gets it. That's not indignation. That's just blatant ship teasing.

Long live the Unsinkable Fleet!

Shikkarasu

Catdelia intensifies

[Liliet](#)

Erratic doesn't do teasing. Erratic does buildup.

Shveiran

Do you really find more likely that **that** kind of flushing would go unremarked?

Ultimate_procrastinator

My friend, you are attempting to argue with Shipping Gogglestm. That can only end one way: with you flat on your rump, collecting the shattered pieces of your rejected reality, while the owner of the Shipping Gogglestm triumphantly substitutes their own reality. Best just to role with it 😊(or roll your eyes, whatever you prefer)

Ultimate_procrastinator

incidentally, does anyone know how to make text a superscript here? I tried googling html tags for it; the tags don't show up, but the text was just left as normal, so I'm not sure what was wrong. I would assume if I screwed up the tags they would show up in the comment?

Andrew Mitchell

Ah, if they were ignored (and not seen) that means that wordpress recognised them but stripped them out as unsupported.

Ultimate_procrastinator

That makes sense. Thanks

[Liliet](#)

Does this mean that in your world, everyone who ever argues that a character is attracted to another character is wrong by definition, and even if it ends up explicitly acknowledged in text they were still wrong that other time? Or do you just have a firm conviction that *this particular time* is wrong and no such thing is happening between Catherine and Cordelia in particular?

Ultimate_procrastinator

No, I was just jokingly pointing out that, right or not, shippers tend to hold tightly to anything which is or is perceived as evidence for their chosen ship, and arguing about whether it makes sense doesn't really tend to go anywhere. I also decided to throw in a mythbuster's reference with the whole rejected/substituted realities line, which probably muddled the joke a bit. Personally, I have no particular opinion on why Cordy was blushing here; could be for shipping reasons, could be, as others have pointed out, because she's a stickler for protocol. Either way, it was a funny moment, and I don't particularly enjoy arguing about shipping in general, so I will make no further statement or commentary on the matter. I apologize for not communicating more clearly, especially if I gave offense in the process

[Liliet](#)

> No, I was just jokingly pointing out that, right or not, shippers tend to hold tightly to anything which is or is perceived as evidence for their chosen ship, and arguing about whether it makes sense doesn't really tend to go anywhere.

You might not have considered that in context this would refer to the specific people participating in the discussion? Like, with this statement being made on the commend chain of a specific discussion, this is you making a statement about commenters in it.

"Jokingly" unfortunately does not make this un-hurtful, as the essence of the joke is not "haha nobody would take this statement seriously right?" but "haha these particular arguments so stupid right?"

As illustration, note how it led to specific people checking out of the discussion like "ur

right", instead of smiling at the joke and continuing the conversation like before.

This was a pretty damn hurtful thing to have happen to you, and so I am clarifying: did you *mean* for it to lead to this, or did you completely misread how it would be taken in context?

Shveiran

It "was a pretty damn hurtful thing to have happen to you" to have someone point out their belief that these theories regarding ships seem built on sand?

That's a pretty strong reaction for someone who has often done the same regarding theories they dislike.

He didn't call anyone names, he didn't say you have to stop, he just said "this seems silly, and I don't think you are willing to discuss it seriously".

If that's past the hurtful bar, I'm not sure we can have discussions.

[Liliet](#)

> these theories regarding ships seem built on sand?

It is fairly rude to state this so indirectly and not to the person you actually disagree with, yes.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, because it doesn't change her mood – she's still off balance and looking to Catherine for directions. And she has no time to acknowledge this, nor any intention. Absolutely no part of her wants to think for even a second about *why* she flushed there, so the narration moves on immediately. That, in fact, makes perfect sense.

caoimhinh

Yes, I am sure.

Cordelia *just* emphasized the *insolence* of that gesture right before flushing. That's not an embarrassed flush of "Oh, my god my crush is looking at me!" nor anything romantic or sexual, it's the simple indignation of a proper and mannered noble receiving an informal and disrespectful gesture by someone else.

We have already seen this a lot of times, Cordelia does not like informalities, and she is obsessed with them to the point it almost pains her when she has to skip formalities (we have seen this from her own POV) and she has always frowned upon Cat's disregard of etiquette.

[ninegardens](#)

The Hilarious part of all this being is that Cat winding up Cordelia and winking and breaking all rules of decorum... is the perfect diplomatic play for getting on Tyrants good side.

Probably that's WHY she is doing it (also because fun). But the point is, the more she does this, the more she plays Tyrants game, and the happier he is to play along. Hell, even if he knows its manipulation, he's happy to have a dance partner.

Shveiran

I think Ultimate_procrastinator has it right, caoimhinh. I refer you to his wisdom just above.

[Liliet](#)

You know, talking about someone in third person and dismissing everything they say as distorted is pretty rude.

[ninegardens](#)

Errr... is this comment attached to the right post? ShVERN is using peoples names to refer to them (usefull for clarity), and doesn't seem to be calling anything distorted?

[Liliet](#)

The comment Shveiran is referring people to does.

Shveiran

That is rude, yes.

I don't think that's what I did, though. I said (implied, really) that I find one particular discussion silly and that in light of this I am opting not to participate in it anymore rather than have a fight.

I'm not sure what you are angry about. Do you feel I have to join every discussion?
Or do you think it was it wrong of me not to concede even if I wasn't convinced?

[*Liliet*](#)

You did not just concede / quit the discussion, you 'referred to the wisdom above'. Was that not meant to be read as 'and i suggest you quit too'?

[*Liliet*](#)

When Cordelia is pissy about formalities, she marks that clearly in her narration, and not with an italicized "insolent".

Ιούλιος Καίσαρας

"Never before had she heard of a Chosen who would list and explain every kill he'd made in a rioting city before scholars of law so that the actions might be assessed."

[Lawmeter breacks]

His lawfulness! ...It passed 100.000 points!!

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, Hanno is really a welcome change from the Hero who thinks of the law as something to ignore. I really like him.

Shveiran

It's over nine thousands!

Though seriously, I liked THAT little detail A LOT. Kudos to Hanno.

Jane

Idly, I wonder what his justification was for killing that woman selling carpets. I mean, she was defending her shop from looters, before the coin flipped; she evidently had sins in her life, but I don't know that Proceran law would have condemned her at that specific moment.

[*Liliet*](#)

I would say that judging from Hanno submitting all his kills for arbitration, he assumes it would have. It just likely wasn't *for what she was doing at that specific moment*

Andrew Mitchell

Yeah, my thought at the time was "she must have done something really bad in the past to deserve that judgement".

[*Liliet*](#)

My favorite hypotheses are 'child molester' and 'serial killer'.

Fayhem

Interesting question! If I had to hazard a guess, I'd say he told them whatever the Choir showed him when he was meting out judgment that made him get all smitey and because it's Hanno he probably did his best to suggest where they could find material supporting evidence that would corroborate that (e.g., "in the vision she killed the child in her cellar so I'd check for a buried skeleton of a child there with severe damage to the skull from a blow struck from behind with a blunt instrument"). And then they checked and found that evidence, which would both justify that specific kill and bolster Hanno's credibility overall.

As for whether Proceran law would support an on-the-spot execution, it's true that I don't know that it would but it's also true that I don't know basically anything about Proceran law period (because I don't think any of us do, and extrapolating modern standards of justice backwards into a feudal political system is a dubious methodology at best). Though even with the relative shortage of Chosen/heroes in Procer I think it's been shown they're generally highly revered when they do show up, so I would find it plausible that they might at some point have been granted legal status to act as dispensers of high justice (sort of like a prince, but without any broader political powers or rights). Which would mean that Hanno had the legal standing to pass judgment himself rather than legally needing to drag a criminal before a different judge, meaning that the only question would be whether the judgment itself was justifiable as a valid verdict.

Jane

Ah, that would be plausible, and would entirely address the issue of timing.

Does the coin show him *why* they're being judged guilty, though? I was under the impression it was a simple "Hey, Judgment, Smite or Not?"-style system, but I don't recall anything specific either way...

Shveiran

That is my idea as well, though I don't think we ever saw it from Hanno's POV so it is entirely possible every detail of teh judged life pass before his eyes. Or, for that matter, that he sees dancing monkeys to lift his spirit before he has to take a life. We really have no data, so far as I recall.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

The dancing monkey option is henceforth my headcanon until and unless EE decides to show us anything that contradicts it.

[ninegardens](#)

We HAVE seen him react to people based on the coin flip though.

In particular, with the rando shop keeper he kills he very much gives them the look and "You know what you've done", compared to random riot instigators where his reaction is "Oh, your doing a bad thing".

Based on that, it feels like he must have SOME information, otherwise he wouldn't have emotional reactions to people.

[Liliet](#)

I figure if he didn't get any information from the check, he wouldn't have had anything to submit there, so...

[Fayhem](#)

Yeah, I don't think we've ever gotten a picture/statement of exactly what happens when he flips the coin, even during his POVs. Given that he's had a few of those at this point I'm guessing that might be a deliberate authorial choice, but idk really. So that's just a guess on my part, but it seems plausible at least to me.

[Liliet](#)

That's what it sounds like to me.

laguz24

Finally, though that trial would have happened no matter what anyone would have done. Seriously, both above and below would be chomping at the bit to have it.

Shveiran

Yeah, for all that this seems like they are handling it to Kairos, there was no preventing this trial. At least they get what they want out of it.

[ninegardens](#)

I mean, really Kiaros is being the very patron saint of reasonability here. He's only asking for a thing that everyone

has already agreed to give him.

In some sense, I'm surprised people aren't more relieved to get this debacle over and done with sooner rather than later.

The fact that Tyrant is willing to pay Cat TWICE for the privilege of putting Hanno on trial (once here, once at prince's graveyard) is rather nice of him.

It's almost as if Kairos is a true friend and ally who has no hidden agenda whatsoever.

I mean... you can barely even be angry at him for bringing DK and Alay-bells along – it's not like their plan particularly hinged on Tyrant inviting them, they COULD have spread word of a truce offer in plenty of other ways (heck, they probably ARE, like... right now... screaming their peace offer from the rooftops, and via spies in inns, and a dozen other channels. Them being in Salia is just the icing on the cake).

[Liliet](#)

Kairos knows when he can push and when he cannot. He has very little leverage, there's a reason why Cordelia and Cat opened with "let's say in return for this service we won't kill you". They could and they would.

Also, I'm visually remembering this scene like that one with Andronike and Komena circling around Cat when she explained her case wrt not eating the Twilight crown, only it's Kairos at the center and Cordelia and Catherine circling him. Sure that's not what they are physically doing, but it's the spirit of the thing.

Shveiran

I mean, yeah, Kairos already paid for this...
... then betrayed the band of five...what, three times?
(shove the RS and steal the crown; duke it out with Catherine for the souls; nudge Saint's death)

Considering his part of the deal was being part of the band of five in exchange for the trial, I'd say there is a need for a new payment XD

[ninegardens](#)

Look, on average that's less than one betrayal per person. I mean really, if you're only betraying each person 0.6 times, I don't know why they would be upset about it.



[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, "shove the RS and steal the crown" was a play on Cat's behalf. Not that either said anything explicitly, but she was waiting for it and scored big from it.

Oshi

I think it's a little more than that. Kairos has always hated the idea of the Dead King because he is stagnation and an end to the game. He played the game to win and paying twice to Cat is winning in his book because ti gets him all he wants and loses him the things he wanted to give away anyway. I've been sayin this for a while now but this is Kairos's game through and through and Friday will bring his final stage.

Calemyr

This setup reminds me of the Discworld book Thief of Time by Terry Pratchett.

One of the foundations of the story was the creation of a clock so precise that it captured the "universal tick", the smallest fraction of time. To do that, it needed to be more precise than time itself and so, the instant it was turned on, time got gummed up and broke, creating a timeless world where only creatures that could exist outside of time (or trained time manipulators with specialized equipment) could function and everyone else was just so much furniture.

Putting Hanno (who never operates without Judgment's guidance) on trial is pretty much the same as the clock. It's capturing the divine within the mundane, placing the mortal above the immortal. Even if the trial exonerates Hanno, the very act of the trial places the choir of Judgment within the purview of mortal law. That's going to break things, and probably make things that were once impossible now merely improbable. The thought that this might, in fact, make the Bard vulnerable may well make it a worthy sacrifice to the Dead King (who would lose his foothold in the mortal world) and the Dread Empress (who once dreamed of making a world where Evil was allowed a fair shot at the game if they just played it smart).

Others have said this better than I, I know, but I cannot resist when the opportunity arises to reference the Discworld.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

"I cannot resist when the opportunity arises to reference the Discworld."

You and every other person of good character who's familiar with the series. 😊

Insanenoodlyguy

So maybe I'm missing a turn of phrase here, but I don't really get the "broken spine take the name" bit. I've heard of having no spine, so something like "Did losing your spine take the name, or was it the other way around?" would have made sense to me, but maybe there's some other turn of phrase I don't know?

Liliet

Break someone's spine = break their resolve, make them submit.

Interlude: And So Let Us Be

"The source of might in an army is unity, not numbers. Therefore, the mightiest of all armies numbers a single soldier."
– Isabella the Mad, Proceran general

Hakram was smelling a rat. Adjutant had always enjoyed using that particular human idiom, as it happened, mostly because it was patently untrue by face value. Humans had all the nose of a sparrow, stumbled around like drunks in the dark and were terribly fragile in most ways that mattered. The last had little to do with rodents, but it was always worth mentioning. As a rule, humans would not be able to smell a rat if it was nesting under their own pillow. Unlike goblins, who entirely coincidentally tended to have very full cookpots when Legions were garrisoned in cities. Goblin stew was always an enjoyable meal, Hakram thought, if not necessarily for the taste then always for the surprise.

"The Magisterium is pleased by your understanding, Lord Adjutant," Magister Zoe Ixioni smiled. "It is always a delight to speak with a professional like yourself."

The slaver – he would not forget for a moment what she was, even if she offered an empire's worth of smiles and compliments – offered Louis Rohanon a more restrained look.

"And we honour the Principate as well, of course," Magister Zoe added. "It is deplored by the enlightened members of our assembly that war was waged between our nations."

"First Prince Cordelia is a fervent adherent of peace and diplomatic resolution," Louis Rohanon replied without batting an eye, lips quirking enough to imply a smile without ever delivering it.

Princess Rozala's 'secretary', who regardless of what he was now titled had been until recently the Prince of Creusens, had proved to be fairly adept at navigating the meetings Hakram had found himself dragged into one after another. Adjutant rumbled out a breath, feeling the rhythm of Bittertongue's old song sound against his bones. *No peace can there be, between lash and orc.* It was an affront to the history of his kind that he must now speak otherwise, pretending the ways of the sorcerer-lords of Stygia did not sicken him as he watched the magister slip away. Rohanon let out a noise of distaste, when it was only the two of them left in the room.

"I always end up feeling like I need a wash after entertaining someone from the Magisterium," Louis Rohanon admitted.

"Would that someone had laid to waste that city and its slaver-lords with it," Hakram gravelled. "Yet they have tread with care to avoid this, over the years, and it seems still."

The man nodded, slowly. He was a skinny, scholarly sort this one. Yet not without spine or cleverness, and for a Proceran seemed a surprisingly decent man. That might explain why the Jacks had found out he was so badly in debt to Iserre. Decency was unlikely to see one thrive in a place like the Highest Assembly.

"If I might speak frankly, Lord Deadhand?" Rohanon hesitatingly said.

"I would prefer it," Adjutant said. "Mine are a simple folk, and the sly ways of humans confuse me."

It was almost appalling, the orc thought, how eager people this far west were to believe that. Not so appalling he would not use it, however. The former Prince of Creusens choked.

"That would have been more believable a lie before I saw two envoys fall for it, my lord," Rohanon delicately said. "It no longer holds water in the slightest. Not that listening to Basileus Leo explain to you the office and powers of the Hierarch was not most entertaining, but I would spare myself the indignity if you'll allow it."

"Leo Trakas was a most helpful young man," Hakram drily said, neither admitting nor denying anything. "You offered frankness, Louis Rohanon, and I accepted. Speak accordingly."

"I would not dare to presume as to the Black Queen's intent in sending you out," the former prince said, "yet if you were meant to assess divisions and seek weaknesses in the League, you should have come to the same conclusion as I."

The orc studied the man, considering if this was a conversation he should be having, then lightly inclined his head in agreement.

"The League of Free Cities is on the verge of collapse," Hakram acknowledged. "Nicae has yet to hear of the disastrous fate of its fleets but already the Basileus seeks to displace Helike as the leading power. Atalante chafes under a villain's lead, and at the frequent slights it is offered."

"Bellerophon is out of its depth," Louis Rohanon noted. "I would hazard a guess its general-delegate has not received instructions from the People in weeks, if not months, and is entirely unwilling to do anything that might result in execution by the kanenas."

Which was, as far as Hakram could tell, essentially any action at all. The Republic of Bellerophon's legal system struck him as what might come to be if a dutiful scribe set down every single shout from an angry mob and made them all into law, then repeated the process half a hundred times.

"Delos remains aloof, but it appears both Stygia and Penthes are readying to leave the sinking boat," Hakram added. "Else Magister Zoe would not have been so eager to assure me theoretical alignment with the Tower would not result in military support of any kind."

"The Tower has been digging at the Tyrant's position in the Free Cities," Louis Rohanon openly acknowledged, "and the Empress has lived up to her reputation in achieving such broad success. Unless the Hierarch takes the League in hand this day it will not survive this conference as a united entity. Should he die, nearly half the League will seek the Empire's protection against coming retribution before the corpse is cold."

Which was inconvenient as without allies in either the League and the Thalassocracy the sole avenue to bring the Empire to heel was a land war of the old way, Callow and Praes entwined in the ancient dance of steel once again. Yet as much as Hakram's mind was inclined to tumble down the slope of logistics and strategy, it would be a mistake to do so. The Tyrant of Helike was the devil of the day, and what they had now discovered the Named must have already known. The ship that had carried him to the peace conference of Salia, the large and largely untouched army of a united League of Free Cities, was on the verge of collapse. As things stood, even if the Tyrant ordered these armies to ravage southern Procer most of them would ignore him and continue the retreat south. And with Catherine having crippled the famous *kataphraktoi*, Helike's own army was crippled in turn.

The Tyrant of Helike no longer had the clout to make demands. More worryingly the boy-king must have known it would come to this for weeks if not months, and he had still come. And so, Hakram was smelling a rat.

"I fear," Hakram Deadhand said, "that Lady Dartwick's instincts have proved true."

"In what way?" Louis Rohanon asked, eyes cautious.

"Kairos Theodosian is exactly where he meant to be," Adjutant said, "and cares little for the fate of the horse he rode after he ceases riding it."

—

Indrani had never been one to shy from admitting to herself when she was enjoying something, and so she wasn't going to start now: this was hilarious, and she in no way regretted striking the first spark of that debate.

"Soon you'll be telling me magic is an art and not a discipline," Masego scathingly said. "*Divine approval*? You might as well start praying for spell formulas."

"There is recorded precedent for certain workings functioning better when aligned with the words of the Book of All Things," Roland said. "While I would not—"

The Rogue Sorcerer was trying to keep things civil and academic, which naturally meant he was doomed to fail just as all voices of reason had been since First Dawn.

"Spoken like a Trismegistan coinpurse," the Witch of the Woods snorted contemptuously. "Praying would work swifter than your *method* and involve rather less scribbling of numbers. And Gods forbid you forget to carry a one: you'll melt your face instead of lighting a candle, if anything happens at all."

"While Trismegistan sorcery is known to require significantly more study than most, it has also been proven to produce more reliable—" Roland tried.

"You defend ignorance as creativity and methodology as shackles," Masego retorted, deeply appalled. "I should expect nothing more from someone who apes Ligurian magic without—"

"Dogs of Trismegistus bark not —"

"Perhaps," the Rogue Sorcerer desperately said, "we should lower our voices. At this rate illusion or not they'll *hear* us arriving."

A moment of silence followed, the two mages who'd been arguing looking away in embarrassment at how heated the conversation had grown.

"I hear Jaquinite sorcery can do stuff neither yours can do," Indrani idly said.

"That would matter, I imagine, if Jaquinite sorcery could reliably do anything in particular," Masego said.

"Teach an apprentice Proceran magic for a year and they will crush one taught Wasteland posturing for the same," the Witch of the Woods retorted without missing a beat.

Ah, Archer thought. *Much better*. Roland shot her a betrayed look she answered by prettily batting her eyes, and the giant wolf the Witch was riding on glared at her woefully. Indrani sniggered. 'Woeful', which worked as *two* puns because Archer was one of the Woe but it was also close to wolf and... eh, just wasn't the same when Cat wasn't there to be offended to her core by the puns. She'd keep it in mind for when she ended up giving her report, though. The four of them were getting close to Lyonceau, the small town they'd been headed towards for the better part of an hour now, so perhaps it was time to pretend she'd been on Roland's side this whole time.

Zeze and the Witch were in a full blow argument again, voices progressively rising along with the general pettiness of what was being said, so she cleared her throat loud enough it'd cut through.

"Shame on both of you," Indrani piously said, "ignoring poor Roland, when he's trying to warn you about dangers."

The Rogue Sorcerer eyed her pensively.

"I believe," he said, "that you might just be the worst person I know."

"That was unkind," Masego seriously said.

"Rogue," the Witch said, "comport yourself cordially. They are our allies for now."

There was a pause.

"You have fought the Dead King, besides," the Witch reminded him.

"I know what I said," the Rogue Sorcerer muttered.

"I forgive you, as mine is a forgiving nature," Indrani lied.

Roland met her eyes discreetly, lips moving to silently mouth '*the worst person I know*' in Chantant, and she grinned back. Indrani had grown to like the Rogue Sorcerer: he was a delight to toy with and halfway decent in a fight. Not too hard on the eyes, either, which was always nice in a boon companion. He'd also proved more useful when they'd run into the Witch of the Wilds and accusations had flown about how they were plotting to murder the entire Grand Alliance. Which Indrani was reasonably sure was not the case, since she would have had a seat at the council

where that'd be decided and she'd not been *that* drunk in a while. Roland had more or less vouched for them not being up to no good – at that moment in time, anyway – and that'd led to the question of *why* the Witch would think they were up to some skulking murderousness.

The answer was, in a word, Lyonceau.

Archer herself had found there was something odd with the League's camp when she first went out on a walk thereabout, in essence because there was nothing at all odd with the League's camp. The Tyrant might be able to keep his lunacy in check for a few days, Indrani had mused, but the *Hierarch*? Unlikely. She still remembered the frightful madness that'd fallen over Rochelant like a veil, the red-handed tribunals that'd spread out like tendrils of sickness from where the Hierarch sat. It was the sort of thing you could tuck away in Arcadia or some other neat little pocket, on occasion contain behind the right sort of wards and sometimes even something you could lull into sleep. For a time. But there were always, *always* signs. So Indrani had told herself, maybe there were wards. None she could find, true, but it wasn't her specialty by any means.

Zeze had been raised by a man who'd turned warding into weapon to shatter fortresses, though, and losing his sorcery had done nothing to curb his sight. The Rogue Sorcerer had been with him then, the two of them discussing the Twilight Ways and the making of gates for it, and it'd been easy to bully – convince! *Convince* him to come along. No wards of the calibre that'd keep the Hierarch quiet in the League camp, they'd confirmed for her. Might have been a good time to go to the Crows, then, but Zeze still kind of wanted them on a vivisection table and the Sisters tended to ask payment up front for miracles from anyone but Cat. Who had half a dozen other cats to skin, about then, and a limited amount of additional hands in Hakram and Vivienne. So instead Indrani had called on the finest band of useless busybodies she knew, namely Robber and his cohort of miscreants.

Her Majestic Catherinery had helpfully turned them loose on the countryside with even looser instructions, so it'd been child's play to commandeer their little goblin legs and watchful eyes. The Hierarch had to be close, because there was no way to the Tyrant was wandering too far away from him, and it wasn't like the man was going to feed himself – so find the food, find the man. Or so had been the thought. And Robber had put his cohort to passable work, keeping a watch on the League's camp through the day and night. Unfortunately Kairos Theodosian was, as usual, a twisty little fucker. The food wagon had gone out under illusion veils, then passed through some wards carved into stones. Twice they'd followed a wagon and lost it, which none of them had taken well pride-wise, and some Magisterium prick had caught the goblins lurking so Archer was forced to send them away.

They'd gone hunting for the ward stones instead, since those would be the key, which was when they'd run into a masked woman on a giant wolf and some very hurtful accusations. The Witch had come to it from the other way entirely, as it happened: she'd found an abandoned town a few hours out of Salia that was entirely hidden by wards and followed the wagon line from the other direction until she ran into them sniffing around a ward stone. Conclusions were leap to, though Indrani would admit that a pair of villains around a disappeared town was usually pretty damning stuff. The place was, according to the maps Roland had gotten his hands on, called Lyonceau. It was one of those small Proceran towns that emptied during winter, and according to the locals pretty much the only thing of note about it was that it had a large House of Light: several towns and villages around used it for the festivals instead of their own small altar, since it was cheaper than building and maintaining one of their own.

It was suspicious nonetheless, all had agreed, and they'd gone to trespass – by which Indrani meant *investigate*, naturally, since you got to call it that when you were on the side of the angels. Though in theory the Witch was the one guiding them, in practice since she'd spent most the way arguing with Zeze it had been the helpful giant wolf that led them.

"This isn't right," Masego suddenly said.

All four of them were Named, and none fresh to the mantle, so the moment the Hierophant spoke the other three ceased moving forward. Indrani could see nothing but a snowy plain above, and apparently neither could Roland, but even with the mask she could see Masego and the Witch were looking at the same place.

"We've arrived?" she asked.

Leaning on her aspect might allow her to peer through an illusion or a ward, but she'd rather not begin using those too early in the day – not when there might yet be a fight ahead of them.

"We are at the outermost boundary of the wards," the Witch of the Woods said. "I grasp your meaning, Hierophant. This is... unusual work."

Roland muttered under his breath in the mage-tongue, gesturing sharply with one hand as he reached within his coat with the other. The silvery sorcery that gathered around the tip of his fingers he laid against the small wooden box he'd produced and it sank within. He opened it deftly, revealing some sort of oily ointment.

"Around the eyes," the Rogue Sorcerer told her, "and over the eyelids."

Indrani's brow rose and she dipped a finger, handling one eye and then the other. The smell was unfamiliar to her, save for what she suspected to be apple tree bark, and it tingled pleasantly against her skin. One she'd applied it as the hero had instructed, she found she could now glimpse colours where before there had been only air. It was a vast tapestry of many-coloured threads, she thought, yet she could only ever see the threads she was directly looking at.

"It is not merely unusual work," Masego said, sounding troubled. "It, in part mine. Akua Sahelian's also, and a myriad others, but some of those patterns were first laid down by my hand."

"There are other influences in there," the Witch of the Wilds said. "Callowan wards, Aenian cants and that odd Jaquinite escapement."

"No sorcerer could make such a thing," the Hierophant said. "No living one, anyway."

"The Tyrant's bargained with the Dead King before, we know that," Indrani said. "What's so troubling about these wards anyway?"

"The Doom of Liesse was meant to bring forth devils, to forge Greater Breaches," Masego hesitantly said. "This is..."

"Angels," the Witch of the Wilds said. "They are not as easily summoned as devils, but this is meant to command the attention of angels."

Well, Archer thought, *shit*.

—

Vivienne found Adjutant waiting in the hallway, along with a worried-looking Louis Rohanon. She was not the only one to notice this, Princess Rozala excusing herself from her conversation with Lady Itima to silently join her as she sought out Hakram.

"Lord Adjutant," she greeted him, "Secretary Rohanon."

Rozala Malanza went through the same round of courtesies, receiving the same nods for it.

"The situation in the League is considerably more unstable than we'd believed," Hakram quietly said.

"We believe the Tyrant no longer holds sway," Louis Rohanon added just as quietly. "And that he was undermined by the Tower. Both Stygia and Penthes seem to be leaning towards Praes."

Which went some way in explaining why the Tyrant had willingly served as the Dead King's herald once more, Vivienne thought. She'd believed until now it was simply a matter of letting loose

a wild lion in the pen so he would not seem as dangerous, but this... fit. Though a raging lunatic, the boy-king of Helike was brilliant in his own way. He must have known that the Princes' Graveyard would be the beginning of the end for his influence in the League, and with it his right to make demands of the Grand Alliance, so he had helped forge another calamity so that he could bargain away the key to beating it back in exchange for the promises being made to him being kept. The vicious wretch had yet to miss a single step, though Vivienne had a hard time believing the outcome of the Graveyard had been his intent. Most likely Catherine's victory had forced him to improvise in the wake of the defeat, leading to this fresh madness.

"It no longer matters he's lost the League," Vivienne admitted.

Surprise, from both men.

"He swore before the Peregrine he has a way out of our current predicament," Princess Rozala elaborated. "His bargaining chip has changed, though the bargain has not. He still requires the White Knight to stand trial for his actions in the League."

"When?" Hakram asked, hairless brow creasing.

"Today," Vivienne said. "The recess will be extended into a dismissal of today's session. We will be heading out to the trial's grounds presently."

Catherine and Hasenbach had returned to the hall along with Yannu Marave and the Carrion Lord to swiftly pass the motion, though given that the Grand Alliance commanded a comfortable majority in such votes that was largely a formality.

"It cannot be held in Salia, surely?" Louis Rohanon said, looking alarmed. "I know not the consequences of attempting to pass sentence onto the Sword of Judgement himself, but surely we cannot risk the people of the capital so recklessly."

"The First Prince agreed," Princess Rozala said, smiling approvingly. "The trial will be held outside the city. Hagglings had over the exact grounds, until we settled on a town in the countryside three hours' ride from here by the name of Lyonceau."

"It is a trap," Hakram bluntly said.

"It's Kairos," an amused voice drawled. "Of course it's a fucking trap."

Vivienne turned and saw her friend – her queen – limping forward, leaning on her strange yet oddly soothing staff. She did not hide her surprise at the swift return, or at the way that the drow called the 'Lord of Silent Steps' stood at her side. Hakram was just as surprised, by the looks of it.

"Your Majesty," Princess Rozala greeted her. "Was your right to vote passed to a delegate?"

"We're already done," Catherine replied. "First Prince Cordelia wasted no time on ceremonies, and most votes were known before they were cast."

"The League?" Vivienne asked.

"Couldn't even agree on a delegate without the Tyrant herding them," the Queen of Callow said. "The wheels are coming off that cart, mark my words."

"And the Dead King, Your Majesty?" Princess Rozala probed.

"I hesitate to ascribe surprise to a bare skull," Catherine mused. "But this was not his work, I'd bet rubies to piglets over it. This stage belongs to Kairos Theodosian alone."

"We believe the Tower to be actively courting cities among the League, Queen Catherine," Louis Rohanon said. "Dread Empress Malicia would have greatly undermined the standing of the Tyrant for this to succeed."

The Queen of Callow frowned.

"Then after riding his last horse to the grave, he has saddled a fresh one," Catherine said. "You saw it true, Vivienne."

Even now, the former thief was surprised by the flush of pleasure she felt at the freely offered praise. It was not entirely warranted, in her eyes, for while she'd brought up the notion first but she doubted they would not have seen it themselves in time. Still, it was not unpleasant to hear. She smoothed away the emotion, for there were higher callings than indulgence at hand. A drow painted in the colours of the 'Losara', the tribe among their kind that Catherine had unsurprisingly ended up forging when none at hand suited her purposes, stepped forward to murmur in Lord Ivah's ears before retreating. The Lord of Silent Steps addressed the queen in Crepuscular, and she closed her eyes in thought. A few moments passed, and she opened them.

"No, doesn't mean anything to me," she told the drow. "Adjutant, I need you to find me someone who knows something. An herbal brew made of foxglove, nightshade and powdered graveborn mushrooms – what is it for?"

Vivienne was looking for it, so she caught it: the faint tremor, the pulse that shuddered through the fabric of Creation as Adjutant called on one of his aspects. The tall orc's head snapped to the side, cheeks creasing in amusement as his eyes came to rest on the approaching form of Lady Aquiline Osená.

"Providence, warlord," he gravelled in Kharsum. "The wind is in our sails for once."

"Don't rejoice," Catherine replied in the same. "Think on how bad the opposition must be, that we are smiled upon."

The Lady of Tartessos was approached, and Princess Rozala was prevailed upon to make introductions. Few courtesies were had, as Levantine ways tended to be pleasantly brisk. The question was asked, though nightshade was a term unfamiliar to the Levantine. Belladonna, however, she recognized.

"That is champion's brew, though I have never heard of graveborn mushrooms being used in the recipe," Lady Aquiline said, though she looked bemused at the question. "Only one without character would use it in an honour duel, but it can be a worthy thing when drunk in the deeps of the Brocelian."

"What does it do?" Catherine pressed.

"It lends strength to the dying," Lady Aquiline said. "It calms limbs, eases the flow of blood and lends vigour – for a time, and at a price. It is false strength, and when it fades often kills the drinker."

"Let me guess," Catherine Foundling grimly smiled, "graveborn mushrooms would add a little more to the vigour, right?"

"I am not certain," the Lady of Tartessos admitted. "It would be better to ask Razin, as one of the Binder's Blood would be learned in such lore. Yet what you say seems likely, for barrow-born things often lend poisonous strength before they kill."

"Catherine?" Vivienne asked, looking at her cautiously.

Something almost like fear had flickered across the Black Queen's face for a moment.

"The Tyrant of Helike was drinking this by the cup last night," Catherine said, "and it was brewed potently enough it would have outright poisoned someone without a Name."

A moment of silence passed.

"Steel yourselves, my friends," the Black Queen gravely said, "for when the likes of Kairos Theodosian comes to sing his swan song it is not a thing to be taken lightly."

"Steel yourselves, my friends," the Black Queen gravely said, "for when the likes of Kairos Theodosian comes to [vote](#) it is not a thing to be taken lightly."

[TeK](#)

Nice touch to not actually include a voting link.

Big Brother

The word Vote is the link?

Insanenoodlyguy

look again, the word vote is a hyperlink.

[Barthumphries](#)

I'm disappointed, Soronel. A vote thread without an accompanying typo thread? The true responsibilities of a vote thread are not to be taken lightly

and most votes were know before they were cast."
Change know to known

Aston Whiteman

Is there an update today and the side bar wasn't updated?

Andrew Mitchell

Yes. <https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/10/14/interlude-wicked/>

NerfContessa

Dang, so his tab is finally due?

Amazing work, as always.

Slider

So, an all-out battle against a Berserk Tyrant? Nice.

Big Brother

This isn't a berserk Tyrant. This is everything he's worked towards since the beginning. The forging of the Hierarch, the unification of the League under him, the war on Procer, the Trial of Hanno.

Kairos is nearing the end of his plot, and we are finally seeing it. The Judgement of the Choir of Judgement by the Hierarch, and the (possible) shattering of a Good Power source older than Calernia.

Big Brother

And since I've never seen it mentioned in the comment threads or on the Discord, everyone seems to have forgotten Kairos' main Aspect. WISH. Every time his red eye has flared he's been making a Wish, to ensure everything has flowed the way he wants it to. His actions seem absolutely random at worst, and just a constant stream of betrayals at best because it's a distraction to keep people from realizing he's been following one of the most powerful Aspects on Calernia the entire time, and his master plan has moved uninterrupted throughout the story.

Also, is there a rough timescale of when Kairos came into his Name in the story, because if it's just as the story started, a Wish he made to set everything in motion may be why Cat became Black's Squire instead of becoming the White Knight. Bard even mentions Cat was supposed to lead Will's little party and act as the glue keeping it together as the White Knight, but doesn't know why Cat ended up a villain.

Lord GM

You wouldn't happen to have a neat little collection of scenes that mention his eye flaring red? Because if that truly indicated him using that insanely powerful aspect, it would shine a whole new light on many things.

I probably wouldn't go as far as making it the inciting incident for Cat's heroic journey, but it would definitely proof that he is playing a far greater (and far more meta) game than everyone believes he does.

Jane

You know, it's questions like this that make me Wish that this was one of those stories that conveniently tagged every chapter that a character made an appearance in, so that it would be easier to go back and review this sort of thing. And the author could play fun meta games like, "Why is the Scribe tagged here, I didn't see them!".

[Liliet](#)

Assassin...

Shikkarasu

Or Assassin. Let's not forget he was on screen in the first 2/3 books according to Word of God. I wouldn't put it past EE to have had him appear in all books so far.

Risser

Wait... assassin was on screen? When?

BBX

Exactly

Dsylexic Wofl

Case and point

goliath1303

*Case in point

At in of wet made a list of times Assassin was
siren in person, the *case* of Risser beong
confused and asking when that happened would be one
of the bullet*point*s on the list.

That example honestly has nothing to do with how
the phrase can't about, I just think it helps to
show exactly what the idiom means.

Here's a webpage that gives more information.

Scrutable

Does anyone have a convenient link to where the abilities of
Wish were explained? I see people reference it a lot in the
comments but I don't remember what exactly it's supposed to
be able to do.

Big Brother

I don't think it's been 100% explained, but the rough gist
is Kairos can make a Wish, and will lose years off his
life equal to the value of the Wish

Vega

The best part about all of this is that this could be
the FIRST part of a plan of his so it will go off
without a hitch but the rest could be derailed by the
HERO who was recently blessed by providence (cat) to
change the outcome to her favor. So Tyrant gets to flip
the finger to the above while Cat gets to "mess up"
phase two

caoimhinh

I don't think you should put that much faith in **Wish**, it
can't possibly be as powerful as to warp reality and even
had affected Catherine's choice.

Also, **Wish** hasn't been properly explained, it's capabilities have only been hinted twice.

The first, by Kairos himself when talking with Anaxares, he said that he had the ability to know what people **wish** for. From Villanous Interlude Thunder:

Notice that the word shone when he spoke it, implying the use of the Aspect, lending credibility to this instance. Further down in that same chapter, in another conversation with Anaxares, Kairos hinted that it was thanks to this that he was able to make the Kanenas do as he said, as he "gave them what they wanted most, deep down, under all the laws and the lies."

The second hint of what the **Wish** aspect is capable of, is what you are taking as guide for your comment, what the Skein said when it was facing Kairos in Liesse and its **spooling** of time was undone by the Tyrant.

From Book 5 Chapter 43 Treachery:

"**Spool**," the Skein snarled.

And just like that/

/the Tyrant of Helike sneered.

"Fate is a tug of war, you raggedy old thing," Kairos Theodosian said, and there was something sharp in his tone I'd never heard there before. "Do you think the wishes of the conquered matter more than those of contenders?"

"You die laughing," the Skein hissed. "Or. You flee. Or. I am broken. Or. Everything burns. Or. Or. Why does it keep changing?"

"There's more than one reason I picked him out for this band," I amusedly said.

Was Kairos Theodosian a treacherous, unpredictable and murderous madman? Yes. Obviously. But against a particular kind of foe – say, an oracle who'd spin out of new thread of prediction from his every whim as the lunatic committed to them with ironclad will unhesitatingly – that had its uses.

"**Spool**," the Skein snarled again and/

/"Do you think yourself above even the Gods, you presumptuous relic?" the Tyrant of Helike snarled back. "Do you think you can erase me like chalk on a slate? Learn your place."

"Shouldn't have done that," I told the Revenant, pulling at my pipe.

"It will kill you," the Skein cackled, its laughter like rumbling thunder. "Wish, wish into the grave. How many years can you spend?"

I winced. I'd fought enough Named to recognize when one's bottom line was being crossed, and the continued attempts of the Revenant to use its aspect were definitely whipping Kairos into a proper frenzy. I could only guess at what was the cause of it, but the rage in that crimson bloodshot eye and the wildly shaking hands struck me as too raw to be a lie.

While the Skein implies that wishing takes years out of Kairos' life, it's unconfirmed and could be a misconception, it could be that Kairos was simply undoing the reversal of time since **Spool** could be considered the Skein's wish and the Tyrant's aspect happens to counter it.

It's also shown that Kairos rage is not because of the loss of life, but rather because of the attempt of manipulating his fate, a subject he is very touchy about, and it's in fact the pivot of his coming into the Tyrant Name.

Also, it's highly unlikely if not outright impossible that his aspect could warp reality to make his wishes come true. In the instances I recall of his red eye shining nothing lucky or extraordinary has happened, rather it had been said that the red eye seemed to pierce into them and shone as Kairos displayed more "madness".

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks for laying it out so clearly.

[ninegardens](#)

So.... hate to say it, but I don't think that Kairos has been running on a "grand plan" this entire time.

By which I mean, based on seeing Heirarch's POV, the plan to judge angles seems very much HIS plan. If I had to guess, I'd say Kairos was juggling for the lulz right up until Heirarch was formed... and the subsequently managed to catch with in Heirarch's desires, realized they were insane amazing, and decided to build the rest of his plan so as to achieve it... but I DON'T think he created Hierarch with this specific plan in mind. (He just wanted to make Anarexes to screw with things).

That would be my guess... time will tell. (maybe)

Zggt

I'm not sure; Kairos was supposed to die while his heroic brother that everyone loved got everything. He was born crippled and literally dying, and used his Name to subvert destiny. But in this world you can subvert destiny, not avoid it altogether. It really would fit him, all the old-school villainy, which allows you to curse with your dying breath (as Cat did with Will). It also fits with the metaphor of the game – where he would destroy himself to spite the so-called inevitable because he cannot allow the choice (even one of his own death) to be made by anyone else.

Liliet

I think it's more like first he planned to take Helike and see what he can do from there, then he planned to make Hierarch and see what he can do from there, and then he had a plan.

Lord GM

As Cat has learned at the academy, every complicated plan with too many moving parts will come apart sooner than later.

I was not trying to imply that he masterfully planned every move from the beginning. Instead he was improvising the hell out of every situation to get closer to his final goal and probably using Wish to help things along. Heck, he was trying so many different ploys that he turned "always being in the first step of a plan" into a valid strategy (at least for a while). Sure, half of them failed and half he did just for fun, not really knowing where they might lead. But some of his crazy schemes actually succeeded. And now all the plans he juggled are about to come tumbling down on everybody's heads.

greatwyrmgold

The magnum opus of a mad artist, with the world as a canvas and paint composed primarily of blood.

JJR

I doubt it. Roiding out into a giant muscle beast is always the last thing the villain does, and the most boring part of their character. He's got something far more interesting planned.

caoimhinh

More like he is doping himself before running a marathon. That the components of this drink usually kill the drinker doesn't mean much, given that it is a Named who is drinking it.

More important is the fact that Kairos is doing this because he is going to need a lot of power for whatever he is planning.

WuseMajor

I suspect his plan, at least as far as the drink is concerned, is simply "live long enough to enjoy watching his endgame." Because he's been sick and dying since we met him and I think it's starting to catch up to him or a price might be coming due.

caoimhinh

It would be awesome and hilariously ironic if Kairos manages to bargain for a cure for his disease from the Choir due to some part of this whole Trial plan.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And even more hazardous to the Choirs, dangerous, as it would confirm Cat's precedent.

imagesbe

Was the spelling Catherine as Catherinery... intentional? I mean, I wouldn't put it past Indrani, but it does seem like an odd way to slang.

Also, pieces are beginning to come together. A trail for a servant of the Seraphim. A ward capable of bringing an angel. A Hierarch (possibly) capable of judging them.

Yes, it's coming together. The only thing I'm missing is why this would be his end game. What does he get out of this aside from the amusement of watching a Seraphim, a member of the choir of judgement, get judged?

Francis Nicholai

We know there's a balance. If Above gets judged, it is likely some great power of Below will be brought to heel in order to balance the scales.

Jane

I'm not so certain – the way I understand it is that the more of a nudge one side gets, the more of a nudge the other is granted, allowing a balance of *influence* – and that when one side gets the upper hand, that allows the other to better concentrate their influence (one really powerful Hero instead of a dozen decent Heroes, for instance).

Since this is acting *on* the Powers That Be instead of the Powers That Be acting, that shouldn't apply – setting aside

for the moment that the rules outside of Creation presumably differ.

That said, if it *does* work that way, I think that would qualify the Tyrant as the greatest traitor in history, indirectly murdering one of his divine patrons via Story. He'd probably be the greatest Saint in history to Praes for such a deed, an act of holy betrayal that killed two of the highest powers.

[onedollargum](#)

Kairos killing the hell-gods by proxy would be an awesome betrayal.

[Liliet](#)

> Was the spelling Catherine as Catherinery... intentional? I mean, I wouldn't put it past Indrani, but it does seem like an odd way to slang. Given the full address is "Her Majestic Catherinery" instead of "Her Majesty Catherine" it's definitely 100% intentional and actually flows quite well ♥

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Re: Catherinery: yes, it's intentional. It's her name paired with the suffix -ry to create a humorous faux-respectful title on Archer's part.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I've been ninja'd. Oh well.

[Liliet](#)

Oooh, you explained it better than I did.

Isi Arnott-Campbell



Theo Promes

I suspect he might be trying to corrupt the choir of justice. Putting the white knight on trial by the incarnation of mob justice, surrounded by some eldritch angel-trap... Maybe the plan is to change the meaning of justice towards Hierarch's approach.

[ninegardens](#)

Oh god, he isn't planning to destroy the Choir of justice, he's planning to inject Heirarch into it... that's horrifying. I love it.

tithin

Theory: he's going to force the white knight to trial, and judge his choir via a forced summon.

I thought the trial would be a metaphorical judgement, using his colleague Anaxares, but the more I consider it based on this most recent development, I think it's going to be a literal judgement.

Two hostile forces representing judgement, judging each other, one via their champion the white knight, and the other via anaxares.

Zggt

Heirarch said as much; he saw the choir through the White Knight's coin and decided that the choir itself must stand trial (and using his Kafkaesque logic: be found guilty and executed, as is the right of everyone who stands trial for standing against the will of the people).

Some Smartass

We all knew it would come. I wasn't expecting it to happen this soon, though, I admit.

Someguy

White Knight was just the Spell Ingredient to summon the Choir of Judgement into Creation to be put on trial under Bellerophon laws & proceedings.

Tesla

Holy crap, he's going out with a bang

chris S

Steel yourselves, my friends," the Black Queen gravely said, "for when the likes of Kairos Theodosian comes to Vote for the Guide it is not a thing to be taken lightly."

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

Always wanted to do one of these!

Trystan Heck

Don't be like the Tyrant, plan to live long and Vote

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

superkeaton

Well, so it begins. Or ends, rather. Fun, fun, fun.

Jane

I do believe someone had mentioned the influence of shipping goggles in the last set of comments?

Well, I do believe I'm wearing my set quite securely this chapter



[Liliet](#)

We know Vivienne is straight, sadly.

She definitely does care about Catherine's opinion a lot though



Jane

Well, we know that Vivienne likes guys, and Catherine *believes* Vivienne is straight, but... That's not 100%, ironclad, this-is-completely-unchangeable *proof* that she is. If the author *wanted* to put them together, all it would take is a conversation between the two where Vivienne said "Oh, yeah, I usually date guys, but I am interested in women sometimes – including you," or something to that effect.

It's evidence enough to presume she's straight, but not so much evidence that the author couldn't include a twist to the contrary if they were so inclined, to put it succinctly.

[Liliet](#)

Vivienne has never actually dated onscreen, or likely ever. Catherine goes off subtler clues, and those are less likely to be wrong. I mean Cat was pining for her for half a book, you'd think they'd have found each other by now if that had a snowball's chance in hell of happening.

Also, this particular mentor/student-like relationship would make romantic entanglement pretty damn squicky. Cat is in position of authority over Vivienne, both formally and in Vivienne's mind. No sexy times on top of that p l e a s e, Killian was enough of a trainwreck already

Jane

Regarding dating, that's not quite right; Cat mentioned that she knows that Vivienne has had some hookups with some guys while in town. None of them were relationships to the best of our knowledge, but that's strong proof that she likes guys, though not necessarily exclusively.

Regarding the timeline, I don't think the timing has ever been right for such a resolution, either way; during the Fey arc, Vivienne was still adjusting and everything was on fire; after that, Cat was Winter Cat, and everything was on fire; after that, Cat was underground while Vivienne held Callow together, and everything was on fire; after that, it's now, and while both of them might be in the right headspace and physical space to start thinking about things, everything's currently on fire.

Regarding Cat's opinion, I'd also note that she's too close to be an unbiased observer; if she thought that a relationship with Vivienne was even possible, it would mean that she would have an actual choice to make. One that risked her plans for Callow, and the balance of the Woe, for her own personal happiness. Setting aside the fact that Cat seems to have a *thing* about being happy, would she really be willing to add that kind of complication to her actual goals for a personal relationship? As you note, it would be *messy* – so for her, it's a lot easier to just tell herself it was never possible to begin with.

Anyways, all of that said, there's a difference between what's reasonably possible in the work and a prediction about where the author is actually going – just because it's *possible*, and there are passages that can be interpreted as suggesting that outcome, doesn't mean that that's where anything is going.

[Liliet](#)

Fair.

I'm just here like... if I'm getting pissy and passive aggressive about ppl shipping canon lesbians with guys (which I am) then in ONE WORK where like 90% of everyone is LGBT+ maybe we can try and extend this respect to the one (1) character explicitly said to be straight. I know real life is still Like That and all f/f is a gift but Guide is not!

You have a point about Catherine, but I would also note that she could simply say Vivienne was not interested *in her*, not clarify she's *straight*. I don't think Cat's the kind of cocky casanova who'd assume the only reason someone could possibly be not interested is because of incompatible orientation.

[Fayhem](#)

> I don't think Cat's the kind of cocky casanova

This isn't really germane to this conversation (or anything), and is also a bad idea, but I kinda really want to portmanteau that into "cocksanova".

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I approve of this non-germane, non-good idea. In a platonic sense I would almost say that this makes you the real cocksanova.

Jane

While I understand your reasoning, and would never dream of making this argument if we were talking about real people instead of fictional characters, I would also note that the two issues aren't really the same – there's a tendency to downplay the seriousness of lesbian characters and relationships that doesn't exist with straight characters. Wishing that a lesbian character was bi contributes to that marginalization, while wishing that a straight character was bi is just fans being unrealistic again. It may be somewhat inappropriate, but I imagine most authors probably find it more squicky when readers pair characters up with their mortal enemies.

Regarding Catherine, there are many benign reasons she *could* come to that conclusion – it's easier to conclusively close that door rather than believe she can change Vivienne's view of her, Vivienne's cues are subtle enough that they're easier to ignore, it's the first excuse her subconsciousness came up with... We would need more evidence that Cat was mistaken before we could really argue *why* she was mistaken. It's something that would be easy to explain, but that's putting the cart before the metaphorical horse.

[Liliet](#)

> I imagine most authors probably find it more squicky when readers pair characters up with their mortal enemies.
-giggles in CatAkua-
(by which I mean these two aren't going to be a couple any time soon because DUH everything, but.....)

> Regarding Catherine, there are many benign reasons she could come to that conclusion – it's easier to conclusively close that door rather than believe she can change Vivienne's view of her

I suppose.

Mostly, when I'm reading Guide, I want to live in the world where inequality already doesn't exist (like in Guide), you know? =x

[Liliet](#)

Orientation aside, though, I also take issue with the specific relationship. The phrase you cited is part of the dynamic of Vivienne looking up to Catherine and seeking her approval, whereas Catherine knows it and uses it to 'steer' her (and feels a little bad about it). *That is the exact opposite of something that should be mixed with a romantic/sexual relationship.* Like forreal, the power dynamic goes sharply away from okay here. Sure, it doesn't quite pass my treshold of "no nope never and I'm never visiting this comment section again just because it was suggested", but it's... closer to Hye/Amadeus, The Great Nope Ship, than Wekesa/Tikoloshe or something else like that.

Jane

Ah, with regards to *that*, I'll simply say that their relationship was different prior to this book (and that I signed on to this ship prior to this book), and that I'm trusting that things will either change again, or that Cat is direly misreading the hero worship.

I mean, back before the Underdark, Vivienne's relative position to Cat sounded a lot more like Indrani that it did Hakram. This is a pretty new twist to their relationship, that wasn't really introduced prior to Cat scolding her during the rescue of the army.

[Liliet](#)

Nnn. I'm not so sure. There's a reason Vivienne went straight from opposing Catherine to getting third degree burns in *every single goddamn fight* she was in with the Woe. She threw herself into this fully, beyond all logic, reason and self-preservation, and I think Indrani nailed it when yelling at Cat in Everdark – a girl who wanted to belong and matter so badly she'd joined a doomed rebellion with people she didn't like, respect or trust. She was still trying to hold herself back, to make her imprinting on Catherine conditional, as of Book 3 – but it was always nothing short of imprinting. She's a baby duck following her mama duck, and if anything it is indeed getting better

lately, because she's letting it outside and taking the reins, instead of allowing it to steer her beyond her conscious control.

Insanenoodlyguy

Between Cat, Indrani, and Akua (you know she'd do it just to, pun intended, fuck with her if it was an option), if Viv was going to drift up the kinsey scale, it seems likely it'd have happened by now.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

Zggt

On one hand true, but I think that our author knows better than pulling the "yet another person who hangs around the MC wants them" again (two is kinda the boundary of cheesy-harem territory, do you **really** want this story to cross that line?).

Jane

Hey, a shipper wants what a shipper wants, darn the consequences 😊!

Joking aside, though, her relationship with Indrani is explicitly not a romantic one, and neither thinks it will be a long-term relationship, so I don't think it would risk falling into the cliché – and with the general lack of romance around the main character (Killian... Doesn't really count, given how she just kind of faded away from the story), the author has plenty of freedom to act, so long as they commit to a given relationship past this point.

And while it's entirely likely that Cat will end the story single, if she *does* end up in a relationship, it's not really going to be possible to avoid the issue you raise – this late in the series, it would have to be someone that the reader is already fairly familiar with, as there isn't enough time to develop a new character up to the standards of the existing ones before the climax. While that's not a barrier if she ends up with Hasenbach, Rozala, or Malicia, Cat already has fairly close relationships to most other characters who have been previously introduced.

Trebar

That is kind of an oversimplification, don't you think? I assume one of them is Killian, and that was a full-on

relationship. Indrani has to be the other, but that relationship is hardly harem territory.

[doominator10](#)

"Her Majestic Catherinery"

Is the best thing in this novel and I hope it's not a typo.

[ErraticErrata](#)

It isn't.

konstantinvoncarstein

Damn you for giving us yet another cliffhanger! 😊

[TeK](#)

How would you know?

[Javvies](#)

Because ErraticErrata is the author?

Andrew Mitchell

TeK knows that.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

How would you know? 😊

Vega

He could've typo's but the typo was so epic he rolled with it

Sparsebeard

That whole Indrani POV way glorious to be fair though.

Lord GM

Indrani is indeed glorious. We already knew for a book or two that she is far more intelligent and educated than she lets on. Now we see that she also has the social intelligence to lead others by the nose.

I just feel pity for Roland. He just can't win against Indrani using fair means. The other two are too deep in her pocket already.

[Liliet](#)

Roland is close enough to Indrani's level to know exactly what she's doing ♥

best friends all of these 4 im tellin' ya

Aston Whiteman

Judgement or Reptenance...

There's one more angel in heaven...there's one more star in the sky.. Kairos we'll never forget you.

Let telling truth never die.

Sun Dog

And eternal friendship!

'Ladi Williams

Especially eternal friendship.

[Barthumphries](#)

It's tough but we're going to get by.

Quite Possibly A Cat

The ultimate betrayal would be to get an Angel to smite DK and Dread Empress, be redeemed and Ascend to Heaven on the back of that very same Angel. Then spend the rest of Creation throwing Wishes down from Heaven.

WuseMajor

"Then let us be wicked,
Let us be reddest ruin
Rent, broken, crooked
Black hearted and cruel

Then let us be doom,
To both friend and foe
Fly banner of gloom
We lowest of the low

Rise, rise all ye villains
You rogues and madmen
Proudly claim the stage,
Of this wondrous age

We are not kind or just
Deserving of any victory
We are a thing of dust
Promised only misery

So smile, Tyrants,
And let us be wicked”

— Final monologue of “The Many Deaths of Traitorous”, a play on the reign of the Dread Emperor Traitorous

I found the source for the recent titles.

This is definitely the Tyrant’s Swan Song. And it will be glorious.

Next title is likely to just be

Wicked.

Lord GM

Nice work finding that.

This just is final proof that Kairos is not plannig to survive this. As he outright told Cat with the game of Tower Building they had.

burguulkodar

Awesome find. Thanks! I was a bit puzzled by the recent titles, but couldn’t put my finger on it.

Might I just add that these titles synchronicity is one MORE marvelous touch from this wondrous series, it never ceases to amaze me.

Author, kudos to you. Again. You somehow really reflect some of the inner workings of my mnd sometimes. I love these little secret things you put inside the text, like little puzzles to be sorted out by the readers. This is just so me in my own short stories and poems! So few people get it though, but it is worth it anyways.

Andrew Mitchell

> So few people get it though

For sure: I wouldn’t have got 95% of EE’s hidden gems without this commenting community pointing them out to me.

You make me wonder what ELSE EE may have included that this community has missed...

caoimhinh

For a moment I thought Kairos had used Still Water on the League’s armies. Turned out this was about him preparing the ground for the Trial.

I'm surprised Cordelia and co actually agreed on doing it on the place Kairos asked, even when they know it's a trap. It would be funny if Kairos had used reverse psychology on them by asking the trial to be done somewhere and they were like "Oh, no. We are going to use it on our chosen ground, let's use Lyonceau." although Pilgrim was there **Beholding** Tyrant, so he should have noticed.

Now the question is: *will Kairos die doing this?*

I personally don't think so. His doping with that drink seems to me like he is filling his tank in preparation for an action that will drain him extremely.

If I were one to let my imagination and speculation roam free, I would think Kairos is actually planning to strike a bargain with a Choir after creating the huge mess that the Trial of Judgement is bound to be.

Draylen

If Kairos does die here, Catherine is going to need to pull Wish out **immediately**. Otherwise, Neshama is going to have access to all of its wonderful uses with no drawbacks at all (like the fact each Wish is killing Kairos). If we thought Skein was bad... Wish could be so, so much worse.

And Neshama gets to walk away with something else, here, too. Lyonceau is ripe to summon an Angel, obviously a Seraph here. So not only will everyone present be afflicted with JUSTICE, just like our long forgotten tool Will tried to do with Contrition, Neshama will be able to trap/seal/kill-and-take-over/absorb it. Because we all know if anyone is able to, it would be the Dead King.

Unless Heirophant can steal it first. Which... is Probably Very Bad, but not the worst option here? Either way, I think we're in trouble.

burguulkodar

I was wondering when, if ever, Masego would get his sorcery back.

This mess kinda makes me feel it might be the right time to do so. Although he might never recover it and just become a theorethical teacher in that Villain-Hero School.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think Kairos outright asked for Lyonceau. More likely, he checked around to find the town best suited for a trial by the criteria he knows the Procerans would employ, then fervently argued for holding the trial in Salia.

[Javvies](#)

...

The obvious answer has never before been the right answer when it comes to what Kairos is up to.

Ah, Indrani. Never change.

Also, pitting the Witch of the Woods and Masego into a magical debate in front of the Rogue Sorcerer? That's cruel. But funny.

[Liliet](#)

Remember when she got Masego to teach her curses by insisting Creation was flat?

[Fayhem](#)

Indrani is Best Troll. Fite me internet.

[Liliet](#)

You have my bow.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

And my axe.

erebus42

If the Tyrant is to die, then hopefully he dies as he lived; hamming it up and fucking over everyone available.

[TeK](#)

I think that Kairos needs his magical berserker pill because he lost a favor of the Below. It was stated outright that the only thing that is keeping him alive is said favor, and when his power dwindles, his illness encroaches. And the stated effect of the drink is "giving life to the limbs and vigour to blood". It is likely a way for him to power through the most sacred of acts, that can be considered a prayer towards Gods Below – a betrayal of them.

[negagardens](#)

So... here's a fun question:

What do you think the team are going to do with hierarch if his minder Kiaros bites it?

Because the obvious thing to do is off him for crimes against common sense and sanity, but then again, he is probably the mortals ONLY weapon vs Wandering Bard at present, and she is NOT

YOUR FRIEND.

I can't help but think it would be wise to keep the madman around somewhere.

... except, gods damn it, none of our heroes KNOW that Heirarch is effective at smiting WB. ... or perhaps his previous smiting was just happenstance, and nothing special- it just fell under the category of "Promised death" and hence forced her to leave.
... but I suspect is more than that.

[ninegardens](#)

Addendum:

She is PROBABLY not your friend.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

The enemy of my enemy is my enemy's enemy.

Yeah

I think hierach will fuck up the angel. Because if the angel judges or influences the judgement without the will of the people hierach will bend reality.

Oshi

What makes you think Hierarch will survive the Tyrants play?

ethericsentinel

The fact that the League falling apart on the Hierarch's death would be anticlimactic, for one.

This is Kairos's swan song, but it's Anaxares's grand stage. There's plenty more story there to be told if EE cares to tell it.

Andrew Mitchell

I laughed out loud at

Roland is a delight.

[Liliet](#)

I love how there was a meta level slapfight there between the two of them that Masego and Antigone seem to both have missed entirely.

konstantinvoncarstein

What happened on a meta level?

[Liliet](#)

On a meta level, Indrani was gleefully throwing gasoline into the fire while Roland was frantically looking for a fire extinguisher. When he did succeed at getting them to leave off for a moment, she restarted the conflict anew. And he knows exactly what she did, so when in the end she's like "anyway shame on you for not listening to poor Roland" he KNOWS EXACTLY WHAT SHE DID, while both Masego and Antigone seem to miss what's going on.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes! ♥ that aspect.

Lord GM

For the first couple of books, Cat has played DnD, Black played Chess using Named as chesspieces, Malicia played Diplomacy against Procer where every move is a game of Chess. Bard and DK try to steer the way the entire Chess tournament goes by meddling on all levels (Bard prefers to micromanage on the DnD-level while DK prefers Chess and Diplomacy.) The Great Game the Gods play is probably even one level more meta than that.

Now Kairos is going to get to the Gods and make them pay for the injustice he had to suffer being born into a weak body to a cruel father.

And so he is going to deny the Gods their favorite game. And the way to do that is to cause a logic breakdown in the operating system all the games are running on by proving that the Choir of Judgement is unjust.

Lord GM

* Bard and DK try to steer the way the entire ****Diplomacy**** tournament...

burguulkodar

ha, would be fun if it happened. Reminds me of the Cradle series (still ongoing):

404 error!

Rebooting 2812 iteration world...

[shimizubad](#)

Knowing DND GM's and playing, I know that's the best game to screw the gods even when not metagaming.

Lord GM

By “playing D&D” I mean “looking at life as a serious of combat encounters and trying to solve all problems by punching them in the face until they stop being a problem”, as opposed to “thinking long-term and considering the consequences outside the initiative order”. It took First Liesse (and probably Second Liesse as well) for Cat to learn that lesson. That is why she chose the staff over the sword.

It is easy to mess with gods in D&D, because typically your games are run by a mortal GM and have the limitations that come with it. It always bugged me when I hear a player brag how their character pulled a fast one on Asmodeus, the god who invented scheming!

In the Guideverse, the Gods are much harder to mess with because they are played by actual Gods. We know that they know how to cover their bases so that no lucky villain accidentally stumbles over a method to actually mess with them. And if they do, the Gods throw Providence and Bard at them before they can use it.

So my laudations to EE for coming up with this complex, yet consistent and absolutely compelling world design,

TAP_M113

I am suspecting that the Tyrant is going to win BIG this time... and the results are going to look like Irritant, Traitorus and Triumphant decided to settle down and raise child together.

Reasons? Kairos seems the sole representative of the classical “Age of Wonders, flying fortress” brand of Villainy that Below historically seemed so fond of. Since our dear protagonists and even Malicia are pretty much against the classic methods favored by Below, and are even spreading infectious memes against the tight leash Above keeps on their favored named, the hard-liners amongst the Gods must be pushing HARD for some backlash against the over-ambitious mortals.

And whatever is happening right now, the near-unprecedented and frankly concerning providence downpour raining on the woe standing besides the heroes tells us that Below is going to strike a BIG blow.

Besides, I believe that, since the very beginning, Kairos has CONSCIOUSLY grown and tailored his name, aspects and role for what is to come next chapters. Consider this: Tyrant has inherited one of the mightiest names Below keeps on its arsenal, and even brandishes the stolen concept of “Hierarchy” – one of the greatest meta-level victories Below has ever got over Above, stealing away what once was one of its core concepts. Yet, with all the power he has, he seldom has used any other aspect besides “Wish”; as a social-based villain it is VERY concerning he has survived, yet alone achieved most of his goals without more than

the occasional visible use of more than one aspect.

This is even worse when you consider that Kairos has got two striking and even more disturbing features in his arsenal. The first is that, simply put, he is a Meta-level Munchkin exploiting "superpower disability", "lacks magic abilities", "lacks martial abilities" "comic relief", "affably evil", "Flying fortress" and "Lesser Evil" tropes to an extent that SHOULD have got him killed already. He is a social villain character which has specced a couple of dual-use nuke aspects as a concession to his survivability, and "Wish" as his single "social" aspect. He is burning the candle from both ends, as much as he can conceive, because he has been stockpiling "narrative karma" for this moment. And now he is chasing the "near-death" advantage with his poison ingestion... So I expect him to win this round, and introduce the "mortals against the gods" angle in the story anew.

The second is that he KNOWS a lot of things he shouldn't. His three known aspects, "Wish", "Rule", and "Rend" should not give him so much information as he wields. There are three answers for that. Either he is Bard's favored and trusted tool in creation, has the old Oracle/God of Helike riding shotgun in his left eye, or he is THAT smart as to get ALL of his information by sheer social manipulation skills (including the Hierarchy "Receive" aspect visions). And as a social villain character, he has got access to ALL of the major world players, named or not, that HE has tricked into going to a judgement presided by the Hierarchy, which is the named cultural linchpin binding the League together. A naval power which just shattered its sole contender, the Ashur thalassocracy.

My suspicion is that, as long as he does not escalate enough to leave the "lesser Evil" position and upstage DK and Malicia as the main threat all the free races must overcome, he is going to succeed. He will trap everyone before the Hierarchy, and will auction who gets to survive the gaint "Rube-Goldberg Judgement deathtrap" Hierarchy is presiding. Those who don't give Kairos the right terms and the best bids get judged and beheaded by the Hierarchy.

And you know what is funny? He can judge EVERYONE and EVERYTHING. Hierarchy can judge ABOVE (Hanno), BELOW (Catherine), MORTAL DESPOTS (Cordelia/Malicia/Vivienne) and UNLIVING DESPOTS (Death King).

And you know what they say... the number THREE is very story-relevant, and has let VERY deep grooves on Creation. And you can permute the above elements in many ways to fit the bill...

[ninegardens](#)

Oh yeah, this is Kairos Victory incoming.

He's damn well earned it (both in universe, and in narrative terms OUTSIDE the in universe scoring system).

And because his final plan is unlikely to be aimed directly at the protagonist, its unlikely that anyone's plot armour is going to get in the way.

He's just going to... wreck...
Something.

I don't think he's going to hold everyone present hostage as it sounds like you're suggesting. I suspect he has one or two targets that he is just going to DESTROY.

... Amadeus might actually be one of them, come to think of it. He does hate that guy. But probably not as much as he hates fate, so who he's out to sunder is pretty much up in the air.

burguulkodar

His "Wish" aspect reminds me a lot of the Neverending Story artifact, the "Aurn".

It also let you make wishes, but with each wish you would lose a memory of your self in the "real world", until you would become completely woven into the fantasy world and thus without any more wishes to make.

Lord GM

You make a very good point how Tyrant was able to survive that long by playing the tropes.

But like ninegardens I think that his plan is not solely to take mortal rulers hostage and extort worldly concessions. He is planning to die and doesn't care if Helike, the League of Free Cities or all of Calernia crumble to dust. There is nothing they could give him.

The open question remains: What does he really want?

What could he want?

As I said, he doesn't care much about worldly matters like wealth or politic relations. He is burning those like there is no tomorrow (which probably really isn't, at least for him). He doesn't care for his own people (or people in general) too much either.

It might be possible that he is out for glory, that he wants to go down in history as the greatest Villain who bested famous Dread Emperors and maybe even Triumphant herself. But even if he is all about enjoying the spectacle of a villanous live, this seems pretty shallow and I would be disappointed if that truly was his only motive.

So I think, glory is merely a welcome side effect of his true goal: Ruining the Great Game of the Gods the best he can. And

to do that he would have to break either the playing board (Calernia / Creation), or the means by which the Gods interact with it: Bard, the Choirs, Providence and/or Names, if he doesn't aim for outright Deicide (with capital D).

Cat is already aiming to limit the influence of the Gods' Game by restricting Names through the Acords. And we know the Gods don't like that. (I don't believe Bard when she says they don't care about that paper.) But such a softhanded and reasonable approach is not Kairos' style. It has to be a show for him.

Andrew Mitchell

> Ruining the Great Game of the Gods the best he can. And to do that he would have to break either the playing board (Calernia / Creation), or the means by which the Gods interact with it: Bard, the Choirs, Providence and/or Names, if he doesn't aim for outright Deicide (with capital D).

I think you're on the right track here. There's some foreshadowing from Villainous Interlude Thunder when Karios is talking to Anaxares. Karios says he can see the Bard's one burning desire and it's glorious. And remember some people believe that the Bard wants to end the Gods influence over people.

[Mental Mouse](#)

"... and when the hour is mine, I seek the story that will free Creation".

Andrew Mitchell

Thank you, thank you, that's a fascinating contribution. Either he is Bard's favored and trusted tool in creation, has the old Oracle/God of Helike riding shotgun in his left eye, or he is THAT smart as to get ALL of his information by sheer social manipulation skills (including the Hierarch "Receive" aspect visions).

Bard's favored tool? Yes, extremely plausible given, back in Villainous Interlude Thunder, Karios told Anexares (sp?) that he can see Bards 'only one burning desire' and 'it is glorious'. Whatever Bard's aim is, Karios is probably working towards it as well.

Oracle riding shotgun in his left eye? Very plausible IMO and not something I have thought of before. We know some of the advantages Cat has received due to her close involvement with the Sisters. Karios benefiting from a similar relationship could explain a lot.

THAT smart via social manipulation and Hierarch? Possible and certainly part of Karios' package but I don't think that would give him enough of a knowledge boost.

Andrew Mitchell

Damn. F'd up my HTML tags. 😞

Walter

"No peace can there be, between lash and orc."

Are we sure Hakram is, like, okay? Did he maybe have a stroke and forget about the Gallowborn, the Mantle of Woe, or the attempt to enslave the entire Drow nation? If the Dead King isn't 'lash' then no one is, did Hakram miss the explicit try at forging a peace between him and orc?

The orcs as a people have been the gleeful instruments of Callow's subjugation for like twenty years, they worship the man who took their enemies freedom away. They are the oppressor's whip hand. Governor Miezies stayed in power because the Legions killed everyone who opposed him.

But their self image is that they are somehow opposed to slavery? Hackram looks down on a city of people who are basically just amateur hour praesi cosplayers? It would be pitiable if the body count from their delusion wasn't so incredibly high.

The only other Named orc we know of was Captain, whose entire schtick was that she enslaved a monster. The orcs are just fine with slavery.

devildragon777

...Captain wasn't an orc, though?

And Hakram isn't fond of the Praesi subjugation either? A lot of the reason Amadeus was/is so well-liked among orcs is orecisely because he managed a half-fix that gave them actual authority and standing in Praesi society, even if it was mostly just contained within the Legions. Or do you think that prior to the Black Knight an orc could have even had a shot at becoming a general?

Hakram wasn't there for the Drow, and the finale of that was an attempt to bring them back to relevancy and give them their own nation and bringing them out of a cultural deadspin...something that has parallels with what Hakram wants to do for the Tribes. Akua mostly doesn't have a leash anymore, and the Gallowborn are gone as an entity, pretty much.

Morgenstern

Eh. Sorry. Post wasn't up when I was still typing mine. ^^°
Good point about the parallel of what Cat is now actually trying to do with/for the Drow and what Hakram wants for the Orcs.

Sidenote: The Gallowborne were not a people enslaved. They were sentenced to death for the worst crimes Callow acknowledges as such, if I remember correctly, and given the choice to suffer their "just" sentence (hanging) – or try to redeem themselves by fighting for Callow. Not quite the same as enslaving a whole people, is it? At least to me it feels a bit like going in the direction of comparing apples to eggs.

"No peace can there be, between lash and orc." – That's from something far larger that came up in one of the Interlude-chapters of Hakram, explained via the history of the orcs in much detail there; I just can't remember which one. =/
It certainly might be worth to look at that again, for a definition of that phrase as understood by the Orcs and to whom they apply it in which sense.

Morgenstern

Wait... What? Since when is(/was) Captain an orc?
Far as I remember, Captain did not enslave a monster... she WAS the monster... werewolf-like. Also, she was just a very big human wielding a very big weapon.

Are you entirely sure that Hakram is against the lash in general – and not simply in the closer context of "the *orcs* shall never be enslaved again" (and maybe the Magisters somewhen subjugated orcs)?

Conquerors are often quite fine with conquering others... they just don't like to feel the leash themselves; wounded pride and all that, I guess... He joined a *Warlord* in the person of Cat... who are meant to conquer (and be personally free; no mention of letting everyone *else* go free).

As an aside, did Hakram ever learn Cat basically tried to enslave the Drow? He wasn't there at all during that arc; the only ones with her were Indrani and Akua the Shade. And Cat came back as high priestess, not enslaver, but ... ally... shall we say; all turned out more or less well with the Drow, she is now more or less respecting their right to form/develop their culture by themselves, just trying to influence them towards not killing everybody and each other...

Morgenstern

Also, Cat initially went to the Drow to look for allies, not to enslave them. The whole enslaving method only came up when she encountered a totally different state to everything down there than imagined and it was kind of a effed-up-from-the-start i-don't-have-any-other-ideas spontaneous notion, potentially going along with some leftover Winter possession, and even then coming along with/via the method of "who wants to be my new court and get new powers?", a messed-up attempt to adjust to the whole death-cycle-Night-harvesting-everyone-killing-each-other down there and how the Drow ... made "allies". (And, yes, a rather mistaken understanding of "omg, what is going on here, these people need to be "saved" from their own madness" ... and most of all the HOW to achieve that.)

Morgenstern

Don't get me wrong. It was certainly wrong all over to go at it that way Cat turned to down there (and she realized it herself, if rather belatedly, but at least she did). Point is, the whole arc was (also) about realizing how NOT to.

Hakram's chapter containing the quote reminisced here, bringing up the history of the Orcs and his own wished for them, ALSO was about OVERCOMING the shortcomings of the past. Not only about their own subjugation, but also the work they did for the Empire, what they were/are still used at, despite the reforms bettering their place in the scheme of things over there, and some own thoughts about what was wrong with the Orcs tribes before their fall as well. But no, it's certainly not perfect and caring-for-everyone; it was centered about caring about the ORCS. Again, patriotism. Just as with Cat for Callowans. Caring for others/the continent comes after that / is informed by that. They're also Villains for a reason and not in any way perfect. Yes, it IS probably a mite hypocritical. They're far from perfect in their attempts to make things better. The whole Guide is about such questions and mistakes (among other things), isn't it?

I guess I'm just really surprised the question if Hakram is all okay in the head (or the Orcs in general) is only coming up *now*, when the whole thing with the orcs vs. lash is dozens of chapters past already. Including the contrasting examples used here of things he might have taken offence to, depending on the definition of how exactly he despises slavers / enslavement, in what context etc. *headscratch

Lord GM

I'm sorry but half your arguments are not valid.

The DK is a great evil and nobody felt comfortable when the Woe collectively reached the conclusion that they are simply out of options. The only "real" slaves Nashema keeps are the undead Named IMO. His mortal subjects actually live a good life and worship him as their beloved god (or so we are told). And the mindless undead don't have a will that could be enslaved.

Conquering a land and enslaving its people are two different things. Callowans kept most of their freedom even under Praesi rule. Never did Black attempt to take away basic human rights. (The right to bear weapons is NOT a basic human right!)

That Praesi governors abused their power is true. But even they couldn't just pick someone from the streets, strip away their dignity and dictate every move they make from then on. Basically all they did was raising taxes into unsustainable heights. But these governors acted explicitly against the wishes of the Tower. They also couldn't use the Legions to enforce their laws but had to use their own troops. Actually the Legion and especially the orcs enjoyed it when they could show the governor's guards who the boss is. Which ironically endeared them to the locals.

Blaming the Legions for maintaining order and suppress violent rebellions is like accusing the police for keeping law and order.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

"Blaming the Legions for maintaining order and suppress violent rebellions is like accusing the police for keeping law and order."

I was with you until you said that. I still agree that Callow's people were not reduced to chattel (modern definitions of slavery are more inclusive and would encompass basically the lion's share of any population under feudalism, but chattel slavery is the extreme form we're discussing here), but all cops are collectively bastards even if individual cops aren't, I say. There are dire systemic issues inherent to law enforcement as we know it, correction of which would eliminate their comparability to the Legions.

hakureireimu

When your rant ends with such obvious falsehoods it's just hard to take it seriously at all.

[Mental Mouse](#)

>"It is not merely unusual work," Masego said, sounding troubled. "It, in part mine. Akua Sahelian's also, and a myriad others, but some of those patterns were first laid down by my hand."

>“There are other influences in there,” the Witch of the Wilds said. “Callowan wards, Aenian cants and that odd Jaquinite escapement.”

>“No sorcerer could make such a thing,” the Hierophant said. “No living one, anyway.”

Hmm. IIRC, the Rogue Sorcerer himself doesn't seem to actually be a sorcerer, rather running on his Name (like Heiropant, for that matter). It could be the Dead King, but I wouldn't be surprised if Kairos found yet another option.

TAP_M113

Taking into account that the Wandering Bard confessed that, any time she was given freedom to act on her own, she sought “the story that would free Creation”, do you think that the enchantment has been woven by her?

Because from Death King and her own revelations, it has been heavily implied that she is working against the God interests. From all magicians that have been introduced so far, only Death King and Bard would have the longevity and experience to do this kind of work. The fact that Masego and Akua wards are present points to Neshamah, but Bard was also very involved in the doom of Liesse, so it could be her. Malicia could also have had the necessary exposure, but she doesn't seem so much of the sorcerer type, excepting her admittedly impressive experience with body-jacking spells.

At last, having the Bard heavily invested in this operation would FINALLY explain how Tyrant can know so much secrets he shouldn't ever had the chance to learn; Bard would have been steadily feeding him secrets, while Tyrant's job was to gather all relevant world players at the same place so that Hierarch judgement has a lot of witnesses and the precedent of judging Choirs or Gods makes an indeledible, smoldering grove on the Narrative. If the Deicide of Gods with capital G succeeds in front of the representatives of all nations of Calernia (and maybe with their aproval), it will enter the folklore of all those nations as a self-evident truth. It is a story that would free creation, or rather, a sufficiently large narrative gun – Nobody can escape the rule of Law. Should it be broken, its retribution will strike down even the Gods.

This angle also has two major fuel sources to make it suceed. First, the free Leagues star is waning. With the Above-fearing Thalassocracy cast down, the League beat its sole competitor and is on the verge of becoming a superpower. The League and Thalassocracy are similar to the ancient Greeks, where their cultural identity is defined by the primacy of law and the concept of political Utopia. The Hierarch is THE symbol of the League as a people, its cultural named bedrock. If the Hierarch judges a Choir, or even a God successfully, this will be the

long-overdue catalyst that the League had been narratively "owed" for centuries, and will represent their ascension as a people, with the same weight as Triumphant had for Praes. Second, at least half to two thirds of the current named of Calernia are currently questioning the rule of the Gods, with Above being perceived as particularly meddlesome, unfairly abusing of their meta-narrative advantage, as exemplified by the OP providence mechanics, and due their comeuppance. So I get the feeling that Kairos judgement is going to succeed, and I get the feeling that at least half of the audience is going to find that the results align with their personal ethics (particulalrly Catherine). Which half of the audience its is, and who Kairos gets to kill/shaft in the process, is going to be decided on a whim. This is the Tyrant's, and Irritant/Traitorous brand of narrative kung-fu: Since complex plans are bound to fail, gather all your ennemies/allies in the same place, let their cumulated stories conflict and sabotage them into failure, and then attack whoever makes a narrative mistep before they can recover. In short: If you are a Villain with a shotgun surrounded by all your foes in a barrel of finite doom, you won't miss your shots, no matter where you aim. And you WILL have your narratively-enforced killstreak...

Mental Mouse

One quibble: "least half to two thirds of the current named of Calernia are currently questioning the rule of the Gods..."

Not even close – it's just several of the most powerful ones, and that's just among the ones on-screen.

TAP_M113

In a lighter tone: Do you ship Kairos and Catherine? Because, on a meta-narrative level, I would. They get along great, and no matter what you say, I get the feeling that Catherine is the only person in the world that Kairos genuinely likes and respects, let alone fee that can understand his brand of wacky, pyromaniac humor and rage against the heavens. Conversely, Catherine has cut Tyrant a lot of slack, humors all his antics, and cannot avoid but respect and like Kairos panache and brand of trolling. Should they have met at the War College, they would have been thick as thieves. Robber-grade at the very least, maybe Hakram-Grade. Kairos would have been Catherine's (and everyone) favourite treacherous lieutenant, I bet.

Give Kairos 3-5 years more of life, and I could see Kairos creating an intricate plot to doom the world that only Catherine and friends can thwart. After a lot of adventures, comedy and devious scheming across the free cities, Catherine narrowly escapes Tyrant's latest "Rube Goldberg" deathtrap, just to find Kairos Theodosian waiting at the exit with a political marriage

treaty that would conveniently solve all of Catherine's and Callow problems, and a marriage ring packed hidden within a bundle of wakeleaf. Of course, Kairos would be mounted on Hakram, his faithful Liessen charger (yes, hakram the goat) 😊

Jokes aside, both Kairos and Catherine have cut each other very preferential deals and treated each other with a surprising amount of lenience. When Kairos Theodosian goes so easy on you, you bet there is a reason....

The only people I would "ship" so much are mighty Jindrich and Robber. Jokes aside, after everything is said and done, either Jindrich gets adopted into the "Lesser, lesser Footrest" tribe Robber and Pickler create, or they get adopted in his sigil. I have a soft spot those two, and we definitely need more Robber time. Since Nauk died and the rat company vets have slowly drifted apart under the pressure of professional life, we need more wacky antics...and nobody delivers them as well as Robber and the other goblin do.

Well, Kairos does, but I think he is a honorary Goblin Matron, anyway. I wonder what would happen if he gets the chance to make a recruitment drive in the Green Eyries... I bet Goblins would love this guy, and Kairos would see them as all he wishes his gargoyles could be. It is a match made in Hell and showered in goblinfire, that would make a lot of folks happy and propel property damage to unprecedented heights. Why hasn't it happened yet?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Nitpick: The Tribes' capital is the Grey Eyries, not green.

Big I

I really hope the Hierarch wipes out the Choir of Judgement. I've been looking forward to that.

It just struck me that the White Knight and the Hierarch are suited to be each other's nemesis. One believes in Divine Right, the other in the Will of the People.

[heymady](#)

I felt the fear run through my shoulders reading it was Kyros drinking the brew.

aran

I can't believe Hakram got through that with a straight face

[Mental Mouse](#)

Louis didn't. 😊And he has no problem calling BS on it.

Re-read observation & question: I'm kind of surprised that Witch Of The Woods did not mention fighting Wekesa when she was wrangling with Masego during the ride to Lyonceau. As Masego spent time with his fathers in Thalassina after the Battle of Red Flower Vales, presumably he's aware of the wizards' duel that had taken place. Would WOTW be aware that Hierophant is Warlock's son? And how would Masego feel about it?

Interlude: Wicked

"Inexorable is the end of the journey; choose wisely how you spend your steps."

– Ashuran saying

"Look, I'm not saying half a hell won't come howling out if you disappear instead of attending like a good Choir boy," Queen Catherine said. "But this whole serene thing you've got going on? That's the look on the face of someone about to have it slapped right off."

Hanno was not certain what was more surreally amusing: that the most prominent villain of their age was expressing sincere worry for his well-being, in her own rough way, or that the First Prince of Procer was seemingly unable to decide what part of this she found the most appalling. The three of them were riding ahead of the rest of the column and at brisk a pace, though Lyonceau would not be in sight for some time.

"I have fought the Tyrant before, Your Majesty," the White Knight replied. "I am not unaware of the danger he represents."

"You fought Kairos when he was sowing the seeds of a hundred enmities," the Black Queen flatly replied. "Now he's reaping his harvest, Hanno. He's going to burn every favour and story he's got up his sleeves so he can snap Judgement over his knee."

"Damned or not, he remains a single man," Cordelia Hasenbach carefully said. "Surely you do not mean Kairos Theodosian could face a single angel alone, much less an entire Choir."

"I've been in brawls with two Choirs, Your Highness," Queen Catherine reminded the other woman. "It can be done, and without losing a finger if you're quick and careful enough."

From the look on the First Prince's face, Hanno mused, she had finally happened upon the part she could find the most appalling. The White Knight was less offended, for though the touch of Contrition always served a purpose it was not often gentle in pursuing it. As for Endurance... Hanno cleared his throat.

"Fuck off, you bottom feeders. This one's been claimed fair and square," he quoted, drily amused.

Some of the last words the Stalwart Paladin had ever heard. That life had perhaps been the most useful to call on, when studying the Black Queen. The Lone Swordsman had been the rival of her youth, and her struggles there too far removed from the woman she'd become, and none of those who'd died at the Battle of the Camps had seen much of her aside from the terrifying foe that'd been the Sovereign of Moonless Nights. The Stalwart Paladin, though, had walked among the people of the Callowan city of Dormer and then spoken with the Black Queen for some time. It had been fascinating, hearing through him the offer she'd extended. *Go home*, Catherine Foundling had offered, looking so very exhausted. She'd offered peaceful means, and bared steel only when pushed.

It was not his place to judge, yet it had troubled Hanno that he could not easily decide what his answer would have been, had he truly stood in the other hero's boots.

"Shit," Queen Catherine said, cheeks darkening. "Went fishing for that, did you? In my defence, they tried to snatch the man after I'd already put him down hard. It was unsporting, is what I mean."

"You cursed at angels," Cordelia Hasenbach slowly grasped. "You called them *bottom-feeders*?"

"It wasn't about the bird wing thing," the Queen of Callow assured the other royalty. "I can't stand puns. It was about the kill-snatching."

"Perhaps," the First Prince said, voice choked, "we might return to the matter at hand."

"As I was saying, Your Majesty," the White Knight calmly continued, "your worry is appreciated yet I speak not in arrogance. I understand what it is that the Tyrant of Helike seeks to achieve through this purported trial."

"He's going for Judgement," the Black Queen agreed. "And any other day I'd say the Seraphim lose a feather before they eat him, but *today*? We get a curse on the way out, White Knight, and it *sticks*. Even when it has no right to."

For once, the memories that set his mind astray were not another's. *Gods of my ancestors, grant me due*, his mother has once snarled. And as the blood-soaked tile through which she had honoured Below for many years shattered, the heavy weight of a curse had filled the air. All it had taken for it to seize men by the throat was for a knife to kiss a throat, and Hanno of Arwad to become entirely an orphan. The White Knight knew a thing or two of curses spoken with one's last breath.

"I speak not in ignorance either, Your Majesty," he softly said. "I understand that Kairos Theodosian is perhaps the closest thing to a high priest of Below that draws breath on Calernia, and his passing will not be a gentle thing. Yet it is your own past, that drags your eye away from the truth of this."

She considered him with those clever, serious eyes that ever belied the casual manner of speaking she wielded as club and scalpel both. Honestly examining herself for where she might have made a mistake, a misstep. A refreshing thing, this. The willingness to entertain she might have erred.

"You think it doesn't matter what he comes at you with," she slowly said. "All he's accomplishing is giving the Seraphim a good, clear shot at him."

Judgement had already been passed on Kairos Theodosian, on a floating tower in sight of the walls of Delos. That verdict had not waned or weakened for the passing of months, and still resounded like a whisper in the back of Hanno's mind. The Tyrant of Helike had ran across half the continent hiding in the shadow of great hosts and great needs, yet now he was delivering himself to the Tribunal of his own free will. There was no escaping that judgement, once it had been passed.

"Even as Queen of Winter, you did not wield your full might," Hanno said. "You understood, then and now, that strength without restraint in a villain is a call to the grave. Yet I am not a villain, Catherine Foundling."

He met her gaze, serenity untroubled.

"I am the Sword of Judgement," the White Knight said. "If Evil seeks to end me, I will break it. Should the Enemy seek to struggle against the Tribunal instead, then what heeds not justice will be put down with overwhelming might."

"Using strength on Kairos Theodosian is like trying to strangle a stone," the Black Queen warned.

"Yes," the White Knight agreed. "And crow he might, that he will not lack for air. Yet it will not matter when the grip shatters rock."

He watched her watching him, saw the eyebrows narrow and the thoughts adjust. She had understood, without him speaking a word of it, that there was more to his certainty than she knew. From he could almost see her passing through a list of possible allies, now as nimble in her thinking as William of Greensbury had found her to be on her feet. Her eyes almost flicked behind them, to look where the other guests were riding, and Hanno nodded in assent. Yes, she'd understood correctly. It would be not one but two Choirs the Tyrant of Helike would face, should he bare his fang against the Tribunal. The Black Queen clicked her tongue against the roof her mouth.

"I've given you warning," she finally said. "I have nothing more to say on the matter."

Her gaze moved to the First Prince, whose face had remained inscrutable for some time as she followed the conversation closely.

"Your Highness, I extend offer from Sve Noc to weave... containment over Lyonceau, in case the Tyrant's last surprise is meant to spread."

Cordelia Hasenbach smiled pleasantly.

"A kind offer," the Warden of the West – though only the shadow of what that might have been, to his sorrow – replied. "Yet I wonder at the price of it."

The Black Queen grinned.

"No cost," she said. "Call it a gesture of goodwill between allies against Keter."

The First Prince seemed even less pleased, which took Hanno some time to grasp. Ah, it had been horse-trading. Cordelia Hasenbach would have preferred this to be a transaction, bought and paid for. The Black Queen offered instead a favour, to be repaid in kind one day. It was a bargain that demanded little of Procer yet would benefit the drow in the currency they would need the most after the Tenth Crusade came to an end. The blue-eyed princess turned to him, and already he could hear the question on the tip of her tongue: how likely would it be that such protection would be needed? Yet she never spoke the words and looked faintly ashamed for a flickering moment.

"Procer will be grateful for the aid, First Under the Night," the First Prince of Procer said.

Hanno's esteem for the woman, which had already been set high by the laurels branded onto her palm, rose a notch. She'd preferred owing a favour than to gamble with lives in her charge, even on

the finest of odds. The Black Queen nodded in acknowledgement, then flicked him a glance.

"Mind you, they're not coming any closer even if things go south on your angels," Catherine Foundling said. "I'm not risking their feathers on the Tyrant of Helike's chosen grounds."

"The grounds were our choice, Queen Catherine, not his," the First Prince reminded her.

"That doesn't mean they're not his chosen grounds," the Black Queen grimly replied.

Both she and the White Knight moved in unison when there was a tremble of sorcery ahead, though when the silhouettes revealed became clearer the tension went out. Antigone could hardly be taken for anyone else, riding Lykaia's broad back as she was, and Roland's eternal leather longcoat was almost as familiar a sight. The other two he recognized only by description. The tall woman in mail with a long green coat and a half-hidden face must be the Archer, a guess that the massive longbow on her back seemed to support. The blind man with dark skin and long trinket-woven braids must be the Hierophant, a warlock who when enthralled by the Dead King had very nearly killed every single living thing in Iserre. Hanno cocked his head quizzically at Antigone, who replied in the same Gigantes stance-speak.

Respect, dislike, danger. The dislike had implication of arrogance, not offence, which was interesting. So was the danger, for the corresponding tilt spoke not of 'past danger' or 'potential danger'. Antigone's opinion was that the Hierophant, even stripped of his sorcery as he currently was, might be able to kill either of them in a fight. That spoke to the respect, for the Gigantes prized not a single virtue should it be accompanied by weakness.

"You both seem untroubled by those approaching," the First Prince of Procer mildly said.

Unlike them, her eyes could only discern details so far.

"Archer, the Rogue Sorcerer and Hierophant," the Black Queen said. "And if I'm not mistaken?"

"The Witch of the Woods," Hanno agreed. "I expect they will have word of Lyonceau for us."

Simply because the Tyrant of Helike had kept his cards hidden until the last moment did not mean they would enter the trap blind. The White Knight had learned much from his own defeats, from studying the dooms and triumphs of his heroic predecessors. And this particular method, which he had once discussed with the Peregrine, often served: sending a companion out with only vague

mandate when the enemy was afoot. It was creating an opportunity for providence to smile upon them, for as all other things providence must be helped along lest it fail. That Roland had been chosen as an instrument along with Antigone was no great surprise, and neither was the Archer's presence. Like her storied teacher the Lady of the Lake, she was likely cast in Roles either heroic or villainous by circumstance.

Her allegiance to the Black Queen put a hand on the scales towards Below, it was true, but then Catherine Foundling had often sailed dark ships to pale shores – terrible shores, it was true, but pale nonetheless. The Hierophant's presence was more surprising, and ill-omen. For providence to have offered a stirrup to his foot, his particular knowledge must have been needed. The four approached, and though the First Prince's armed escort neared they were not so uncouth as to take defensive positions. Cordelia Hasenbach's horse was shaken but not put aflight by the massive shape of Lykaia, which he noted approvingly. It was a well-trained beast.

"I don't suppose you just happened onto Lyonceau by accident," the Black Queen tried.

"Warded up to the Heavens," the Archer said. "Literally, even!"

The Hierophant stirred.

"Inaccurate," he said, voice mildly irritated. "For the third time-"

"Greetings, Your Majesty, Your Highness," the Rogue Sorcerer said, bowing. "What my companions are attempting to convey is that the town is heavily warded with an eye as to the angelic."

Accurate, Antigone silently told him. *Secrets, Dead King.*

"Are any of the wards harmful in nature?" the White Knight asked.

"No," the Hierophant said. "Not in the slightest. They command and retain attention, and so in function have similarities with the initial part of a ritual Breach-"

"As in devil summoning," the Black Queen flatly interrupted.

"The first segment of such a ritual, yes," the Hierophant peevishly replied. "As I was saying, Catherine, if you had let me finish."

"Surely that must be harmful in some manner," the First Prince said, looking sickened.

"Not unless you want to argue that attracting angelic attention is harmful," Queen Catherine drily noted. "Which I'm guessing might be less than popular a stance with some of your subjects."

"Simply the act of warding makes such a meeting place suspect," the blonde princess insisted.

"Salia's warded," the Archer said.

"What Lady Archer means, Your Highness, is that making such an argument given the nature of the wards might be considered by some a breaking of faith," Roland delicately said.

Which was a peril that Hanno would not lightly risk, as it would expose all those that had broken faith with the Tyrant of Helike to the vengeance that would follow. In a stroke, the heads of all signatories Grand Alliance would be in the villain's reach. There was no understanding of this situation that was acceptable, for even if the White Knight was certain to die in such a trial his life would weigh less on the scales than that of Catherine Foundling and Cordelia Hasenbach: without those two, the war on Keter was lost. The cause would be weakened by his own death, but hardly irreparably.

"We must proceed," the White Knight said. "Though given the circumstances, I believe the presence of great mages among our number could not easily be made into a slight."

"I don't care if the Tyrant gets snippy about," the Black Queen snorted, "Hierophant is coming. Archer, I need you in Salia."

"You can't be serious," the Archer replied, tone hardening.

A swift exchange in Kharsum followed, neither of them apparently aware he'd used Recall to learn some of the tongue months ago. Queen Catherine was insisting that should they all die in Lyonceau then Vivienne Dartwick would need both the Archer and the Adjutant at her side to keep things from collapsing, while the Archer argued not untruly that if the Black Queen died the talks were dead anyway. The discussion ended when the Archer informed her queen that she'd stick around 'Zeze' to watch his back and stay out of trouble, if that was what it took, and Queen Catherine angrily conceded. Neither of them paid any attention to the Hierophant's protest he had no need of a bodyguard.

Antigone inclined her head in question, but he dismissed it. Best for all if she started with them, as far as Hanno was concerned, and Roland as well. He was not as powerful a spellcaster, but he was cunning and his knowledge broad in scope. And so they resumed the ride forward to Lyonceau, into the jaws of the beast waiting to gobble them up.

It was, for a hero, one of the most practical places to be.

—

It had made for a serviceable temple, if to admittedly asinine Gods and the occasional feckless Choir, but it made for a rather dignified courtroom.

Kairos Theodosian had seen to it, assigning his most trustworthy servants to the task. Sadly most of the gargoyles that could tell colours apart with their beady little stones eyes had been merrily massacred by Catherine when they'd had their little tiff at twilit Liesse, which had made for a charmingly eclectic selection of paints and cloths. Even as the latest of his esteemed guests passed the threshold of the wards encircling Lyonceau, the Tyrant of Helike leaned back against his throne and cast a critical eye on the stained glass before him, which was depicting the first elected First Prince being crowned by what appeared to be a flock of naked giggling cherubs. One of his trusted servants had painted over the face of Clothor Merovins a bright red beaked nose and touched up his hair with bright blue spikes, which one might venture to say was a fetchingly clashing addition, yet it was lacking a certain *je ne sais quoi*, as the Alamans said.

"Naked angels?" the Tyrant of Helike said. "'tis most obscene, my loyal minions. Possibly blasphemous as well, I'd have to inquire with a priest."

Inquisitive chittering was his answer, his last gaggle of gargoyles gathering to hear his regal proclamations.

"You shall have to clothe them," Kairos decided, touching his lip with his scepter. "In undergarments, naturally."

More chatter, increasingly inquisitive.

"The colour will be of your choice, I would not lightly infringe upon your artistic integrity," the king of Helike assured them. "Yet if I might venture a suggestion as to the appearance? *Lacy*."

The chittering turned rather enthusiastic, matching his mood perfectly. Even as he ordered his porters to move him away, his heart already warmed in anticipation of the fresh abomination those incompetent little mongrels would create in trying to paint something as delicate as lace. The House of Light was coming along nicely, in his opinion, and all it'd taken was knocking off the roof. And large swaths of the walls, and rearranging most the insides. Also desecrating the consecrated grounds, as the delightful outrage from Above at his presence thundering in his ears sadly hadn't been worth the constant migraines. Yet now the temple was a lovely piece of work, raised platforms with benches and seats surrounding what he liked to think of as an *arena*: the altar to Above turned into the defendant's stand, and the splendidly shoddy table and chair the Hierarch of the Free Cities had spent several days making with his own hands, as Anaxares

despised the notion of using *tyrannical* Proceran tables and chairs instead.

Gods Below, Kairos had not regretted having the man elected even once.

The sole standing walls that remained were those encasing the tall panels of stained glass, casting colours lights on the ground that mixed with that which the afternoon sun carelessly shone through the gaping swaths. The Hierarch of the Free Cities was already seated on his rickety three-legged stool chair, methodically scraping any ink off the parchment that'd been used to send messages to him, avoiding the need of in fact using any such scroll not given unto him by the People – which was perhaps for the best, as to Kairos' understanding of Bellerophan law he would then have to report anyone having gifted him such parchment to the *kanenas* for having paid tribute to a Foreign Despot, namely the Hierarch himself. The laws of the Republic were as a splendid maze made entirely of trapdoors, to the Tyrant, most of which led to a pit of spikes but some instead to a mob of angry crocodiles. That there would be a dead body at the end of the journey was perhaps the only part of it not in doubt. Truly, the people of the Free Cities could all learn a lesson or two from the Republic.

They were significantly better than anyone else at spontaneous lapidation, for example.

"It's all the practice, I think," Kairos told his trusted attendants.

"It is fascinating," the Dead King said. "Even now, I cannot tell if you are mad or feigning."

The Tyrant's good eye found the skeleton-thing that claimed kingship of death and Keter, and to his continued distaste found nothing at all. Oh, the body was there. A shell, pretty enough if a little too pretentious for his tastes, but he couldn't see *in* it. Even if he leaned into the aspect, in that way that allowed him to glimpse past that first burning wish at the heart of everyone into that myriad of lesser ones, all that there was to be found in the Dead King was a darkness. If he saw the first body, the true one, Kairos believed his sight would not fail him so. It had not failed him with the Wandering Bard, after all. Yet Trismegistus was ever a cautious one, a creature of brokers and emissaries and intermediaries. All of them the same old horror, but as the name went it was intent on remaining hidden. How unsporting of it, really. How was he to break what the Dead King wanted most in the world, if he knew not what it was?

"How boring life would be, if there were only ever two choices to be had," Kairos lightly said. "Our guests have come, dear friend."

"Yes," the Dead King said. "I can feel the Hierophant. Soon, now."

"It is a shame the Empress could not attend," the Tyrant sighed.

The old thing laughed, for the both knew Kairos would have betrayed her as eagerly as he intended to betray Ol' Bones himself. Sadly, Malicia had decided that after wringing him dry of every use she had of him and cutting the grass under his feet among his beloved allies she no longer had a need to humour him. The Dead King himself was here because the old thing was under the impression the only one that could make him bleed was the Intercessor, and that these games in Salia were a passable amusement until he retired to his domain. What splendid arrogance, this, what sumptuous hubris! Truly, was the King of Death not among the greatest of their ilk?

"I shall have refreshments brought to you," Kairos smiled, for he was an impeccable host.

It should be interesting to see if the Dead King would in fact drink from a cup of human blood, even though he had no throat or stomach or any real need to. Still, with the guests so soon to arrive the Tyrant of Helike had his porters bring him to the highest point in the old temple, atop the platform in the back. A more discreet snap of the wrist had another cup of Valiant Passing brought to his hand, and he drank the brew fully though the taste was horrid. It was a necessity, sadly. Without it the fits came every half hour and he was blind in one eye, though the old recipe was only a temporary reprieve. Soon, Named or not there would be enough of the poison in his bones that no purging trick would see him through it unharmed. Ah, but the harm had been done long before the drink and there'd never been any purging of *that*. Tossing away the cup in a corner, Kairos allowed his loyal attendants to drape him in the formal regalia of the kings and queens of Helike: the cloths of purple and gold, the heavy bejewelled crown that Theodosius has adorned with the jewels of defeated royalty, the pearl-incrusted slippers.

He was ready before the first of his guests arrived, passing through the open and unhinged gates of the former temple. Catherine, bold as ever strolled in first. The Queen of Callow still bore one of the strongest wishes he had ever seen, pulsing with her heartbeat: **peace, peace, peace**. It was like watching a flower bloom anew with every beat. Even now it was all he could do not to laugh until his throat bled, for what an exquisite jest it was that one of Below's finest servants in the long history of Calernia was at heart one of Above's! At her side that boring little thing the White Knight tread, all desires his own faded while that horrid thing intertwined with the Seraphim – **I wish to be just** – tainted everything. Most of the others that followed behind were tedious to behold, Cordelia's implacable **duty** and

ugh, the Blood was all **honour and glory** as always and oh, wasn't that Itima Ifriqui craving **revenge**? Ah, what a proper villain that one would have made with a little prodding.

Neither Rozala Malanza nor Vivienne Dartwick were attending, which was amusingly cautious of Catherine and Cordelia, though it seemed the Witch of the Wilds and the Hierophant had been dragged along. Reading the latter was always amusing for the splitting headache it gave him, the Hierophant's path to **apotheosis** being so deeply steeped in High Arcana that trying to understand the concept was like driving nails through his own forehead. The Witch was intriguing, for a hero, her wish for **completion** too complex and driven in notions he did not understand to properly grasp, but she was still a passing fancy compared to the Archer and that delightfully strange and nuanced **horizon**. The wonder of discovery, of the fresh and new, of doing things no one had done before. It was not all-consuming like Catherine's craving for a peace that would justify all the horrors or the White Knight's childish need to have his hand felt, but it was deeper in some ways.

It was not always the wish that commanded her, but it was so deeply ingrained abandoning it would kill her sure as dawn.

The Tyrant of Helike gestured for his porters to take flight, though until more of the flock joined in to even the sides his throne was slightly askew in the air and Theodosius' crown, always too large for his brow, went askew with it. His rise caught the eye of everyone in the room, even the Hierarch.

"Greetings, friends," Kairos Theodosian grinned, "and welcome. Now that all are in attendance, it seems we can at last begin the trial."

At last, he yearningly thought. At long last.

Aston Whiteman

Update. Good.

[Barthumphries](#)

Aston, that's all you have to say? No vote thread? No typo thread? Just the word Good?

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

Beginning of the typo thread:

The three of them were riding ahead of the rest of the column
and at brisk a pace

Move "brisk" from before "a" to after it.

jecherio

when they'd had their little tiff at twilit Liesse,
at twilight liesse?

Brigsby

Actually this is correct, if more formal than usual. It
might not be exactly what was meant to be typed, but this is
correct English.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

"Twilit" essentially means "twilighted." During twilight
things are twilit; Liesse is continually so.

JJR

"Damned or not, he remains a single man,"

Too bad Black wasn't there to cuff him before he finished that
particular sentence.

Zggt

He's not a villain, when he says some pithy one-liners about
how justice will prevail it increases the odds of victory.

erebus42

Unless he happens to be in a Tragedy

erebus42

Honestly, he might as well have said, "what could possibly go
wrong?" Or "there's nothing he could do to hurt us anymore then
he has". That's the unfortunate thing about heroes, they
haven't learned to not give fate straight lines like that.

erebus42

*than

Oaclo

So this is the first time we've had anything from Kairos'
viewpoint, right? Quite interesting. Unfortunately I think we

would need significantly more to get a solid idea of his sanity once and for all.

[theothin](#)

First time in the present. He's also had a bonus chapter from right before he became the Tyrant, but this is his first POV as the Tyrant.

[Liliet](#)

There's no such thing as a "solid idea" of "sanity". Sanity is a social construct anyway.

Andrew Mitchell

Do you think sanity is *totally* a social construct, or just *partly*? If the latter, can you put a % on it?

[Liliet](#)

Completely and totally. There is no sanity outside of comparing people to one another.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

This. I mean, it's right there in the etymology of the term: sanitation. There aren't truly unclean minds in the sense referred to, only minds with differing content.

Andrew Mitchell

Interesting, thank you. I thought that *might* be what you meant.

[Liliet](#)

To elaborate, the concept of 'sanity' comes from comparing people with each other, and outside of that comparison it simply does not describe anything.

(The same notably applies to the overall concept of health and ability/disability – if, say, everyone in a society is malnourished, malnourishment won't be seen as a medical condition; if people normally grew wings, those without them would be seen as disabled)

This is opposed to concepts such as hair color – if you only have one sapient being in the entire universe, their hair still has color, which can easily be defined in comparison to the color of their other body parts, not to mention other objects and creatures in the universe.

But to define the concept of sanity, you need at least two, for one to be saner than the other – and for cleaner definition you'll need three, for two to be the norm and one the deviation. If you only have one, whatever they are is what sanity is and that's all there is to it.

This is similar to more obvious social constructs, like in-group/out-group: if you don't have enough sentient beings existing to form a society in which they exist, they simply have no referent. 404 null not found.

Andrew Mitchell

Yep. Got it. ♥

ATRDCI

The extra chapter Usurpation shows his origin story from his PoV as well

Mirror Night

I mean Cordelia is the one who said that line...not Hanno.

Crash

Cordelia wouldn't have lasted a goddamn week with a Name. She has zero ability with stories it's so funny. I'm sure she could learn given time but she wouldn't have had that. The way that Procer vaguely dislikes Names in general means that she would have come into a name with little to no knowledge and a Bard whispering bullshit on her ears. The Augur really came through on that one, Hasenbach would have been Fucked.

[Liliet](#)

Eh. Named, she would still be in the same Role she is in right now. It's not like she'd have suddenly started going dungeoneering or fighting other Named in one vs one duels. Her overall lifestyle would be the same and the challenges she faces would be the same, and as Named she'd have some intuitive sense of stories to go with it.

To stop nitpicking and address closer to the point, I'm sure Exiled Prince had had his name for longer than a week when he ran into Catherine. Being a fucking idiot is not an *immediate* death sentence for a Named, just a very likely one if you don't learn real fast.

And Cordelia is already being tutored... to learn real fast. That saying things like that is so utterly ridiculous it

doesn't even jinx you, it's just straight up a false statement.

JJR

Oh, opps. I misread that really badly somehow. And cuffing the First Prince is probably a bad idea, diplomatically.

She still shouldn't have said it though. Normally it's the villains complaining about the hero but the story is still probably going to conspire to show Cordelia just how much damage one man can do.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Also, it's not just one man... there are two of them.

snowy

Hasenbach said that, not Hanno

StarlightGlimmer

"Nothing can stop me now! Soon I will be invincible!"

Soronel Haetir

"Ladies and gargoyles of the jury, how do you [vote](#)?"

Aston Whiteman

Once a year..

[Barthumphries](#)

Soronel, we covered this last week, you need to at least mention that the first post is also the beginning of the typo thread.

I started a vote/typo post under the current first post.

greycat

Early and often!

j

The Queen of Callow still bore one of the strongest wishes he had ever seen, pulsing with her heartbeat: [vote, vote, vote](#).

Someguy

So what is Kairos' own [Wish]? An end to his pain and nailing it into people like his pre-Named caretakers who really should have

shut their mouths telling him to “pray for his salvation to absolve him from the sin of being born”?

Oshi

We are about to find out.

[Liliet](#)

Seems, interestingly, that it was this trial all along.

Crash

Isn't it just the most delightful little thing?
The child that learned his death was all but mandated by Fate rebels and lives not only one more day, but several years. Claims a Name and power for himself, and spends all his time dedicated to nothing but sowing chaos and doing exactly what he wanted, no longer a slave to Fate but a man who wields it. Kairos is passing judgement on those who thought themselves Above it, he's bringing the Choirs to a heel yes, but I think he means to judge Fate itself.

Pokekid01

I disagree on the idea that Fate mandated he die before his thirteenth birthday. It's my interpretation that the Oracle Beneath Helike doesn't necessarily tell people things that are TRUE, just what they most benefit from hearing.

Or I'm wrong and he should have died, but he cut a deal with Below to stave off inevitable demise, kinda like the drow.

Crash

See I really like that thought on the Oracle. Wouldn't that be interesting? I have no idea what to do with it but it's delightful.

However I don't think he cut a deal with Below. He's very clearly still staving off death, in fact at this point I reckon he's being kept alive by his tea thing alone and the fact that names can purge poison. But the real reason for doubting a deal with Below is his reaction to the Skein's audacity of changing his "Fate" even a little bit, messing with his choices while Spooling.

Kairos is a guy who takes offence to having his choices taken for him or a path neatly laid out for him that isn't of his own making. I doubt Below would just offer him a life with no strings attached, nah I don't think they did it.

I think that Kairos Theodosin, the Tyrant of Helike is alive because he is that much of a magnificent bastard.

He's playing his odds against his own body by ingesting poison everyday and purging it away until he physically can't anymore all because this man has a Wish and he'll absolutely see it through.

JJR

I went back to the Usurpation chapter to see the exact wording of the Oracle and an idea struck me. Kairos was told specifically that, "he would not make it to his thirteenth nameday." Which makes me wonder if the Calendar that Helike uses has leap years. If it does, and if Kairos was born on the equivalent of February 29, then he could still be on track to die before his 13th name day. Sure, it would be a technicality, and I'm not sure if we ever did learn what his name day is, but prophecy loves technicalities.

There's also the chapter quote, "One hundred and forty-three: do not try to avert prophecy, fulfil prophecy or in any way tinker with prophecy. Swallowing poison will lead to a quicker death and less ironic horror inflicted upon Creation." I'm not sure about this, it could be that his averting the prophecy is about to unleash ironic horror upon creation. But part of me thinks that's it's an unfulfilled promise of sorts, Kairos tried to avert his death prophecy but is about to learn that he never did and drinking poison would have been a better idea. He is actually drinking poison at the moment, so he does have his bases covered in that regard.

Andrew Mitchell

Thanks for sharing your findings. Very interesting potential implications here.

[*Liliet*](#)

I think the idea is that Kairos knew full well that tinkering with prophecy is a terrible idea when he first went to ask for one. He's just not against terrible ideas. Given we see him literally drinking poison here and all. Ironic horror unleashed upon Creation? When can I start? – Kairos, cheerfully

[*Liliet*](#)

I also disagree with the idea that Fate mandated that he die before his thirteenth birthday. It was just a medical diagnosis more accurate than doctors are normally capable of giving. [If his condition was unchanged by factors outside the medical aid he was in position to receive within that period] he was going to die.

So he introduced such a factor in claiming a Name, and the oracle went 'cool, that went outside the predicted framework, let's high five over that'.

[sengachi](#)

He's to die before his thirteenth *name* day, which could mean something very different than birthday.

JJR

That's true too. What if it meant something like "the 13 time the day you got your Name occurs." Do we know how long he has been the Tyrant?

[Javvies](#)

Probably at some point before Cat became Squire, since she hadn't been Squire all that long when she knocked off Kairos's nephew.

Though, admittedly, that itself isn't the greatest marker of time.

[Liliet](#)

Kairos was 12 when he claimed the throne, and 16 during Preipitation, which took place in summer after First Liesse when Caterine was 17. Right now Caterine has recently turned 20. So yes, we have a fairly decent idea.

Sorry about my keyboard.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, it was classic oracular fuckery: His culture doesn't celebrate *birthdays*, Kairos was told that he would die before his thirteenth "name-day". And then he got a Name.

haihappen

I have a couple of ideas and half-backed theories about the trial.

My newest one is

"He wants Fate itself to stand trial"

Fate is the Thing below the crypt. Fate is the Thing that Kairos has been fighting against all his life. Fate is the Wager between the Gods, making pieces on a chessboard paint themselves white or black.

Ending Fate would free people from having to make a choice between two nuclear options.

The Hierarch is there to preside over the trial, his Domain working as a force-multiplier or enabler, He himself precedent on the abstinence of choice. Hanno with the Choir of Judgement is meant to be the executioner of this abstract concept.

And a death is needed to make it stick.

And somewhere in there, he also screws over the Dead King, because he would not be Kairos if he didn't.

Fayhem

> And somewhere in there, he also screws over the Dead King, because he would not be Kairos if he didn't.

At a guess, he's going to get Judgment to screw over DK before he does whatever else he has planned with/for them. Because if DK had enough splendid arrogance to show up for this like it's a passing amusement then he deserves an appropriate party favor.

Morgenstern

Hmm.... killing the Bard and taking away the DK's only ever-constant companion (before Ranger anyway)?

.
. .
.

Naaaah.

Morgenstern

Setting her free....? -o.0'

Liliet

> Fate is the Thing below the crypt.

I somehow doubt that.

I think PGTE's world is bigger than that, and sturdier than that.

Crash

Yeah it's best to remember Calernia is actually some backwater small continent.

The Miezens with their sorcery that still can't be reproduced milenia later came from somewhere. The Yan-Tei are vague ideas, the Ashurans bend their necks to their patrons on the other shore. Somewhere out there the Gnomes have their little cyberpunk utopia going on.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah. We aren't going to be breaking the entire worldbuilding here, the laws of physics are going to stay the same after as they were before. It is only the Calernian pattern that we're taking scissors and scotch tape to.

Inay

A Hanno AND Kairos point of view interlude? Truly it is a marvelous day! Thank you E.E! ♥

Andrew Mitchell

Hear, hear!! ♥ indeed. This chapter was a delight.

Reddin

Ahh the sputtering fit Cordelia has as she fully grasps Catherine's sheer audacity when dealing with Above. Had me laughing.

[Liliet](#)

The *best* part, though, was Catherine blushing at Hanno quoting her and hastily assuring everyone present it at least wasn't a pun. Their dynamic here is amazing and the best tbh

ATRDCI

Cat: "Cordelia, I give you my strongest assurances. I wasn't making a....a *pun*. I merely told a Choir to fuck off because those assholes were going to steal my kill. I took down that Hero fair and square."

Cordelia: *rendered silent by a combination of shock, offence, and extreme confusion as to how how a person could so violently and thoroughly miss the point*

[Fayhem](#)

> extreme confusion as to how how a person could so violently and thoroughly miss the point

While we the readers know that the answer to "how" is "on purpose". 😊

[Liliet](#)

Hanno: *takes a fresh bucket of popcorn from the Seraphim*

[Tohron](#)

I definitely anticipated what Catherine's Wish was, though it was interesting to learn some of the others.

caoimhinh

We already knew some of those, but it's really interesting seeing it through Kairos' eyes, isn't it?

Catherine's desire for peace is what's driven her all this time. Indrani told her about her wanderlust and Cat had even reflected about it on some chapters. Cordelia has always put a heavy emphasis on "*because we must*" to make it clear she makes all this because she sees it as her duty.

The members of the Blood are really as expected, a lot of glory-hungry people. Though I'm surprised it was Itima and not Aquiline who wished for revenge (Aquiline's brothers were killed by Itima).

The Witch's desire is interesting, as her "Completion" seems to have a lot of meanings that Kairos wasn't able to fully grasp. Hanno desire for justice being wrapped by the Choir also has interesting implications, but makes sense given how he relays the bigger matters of judging and decisions to the Angels.

I actually thought Masego's **wish** would be understanding or comprehending everything, rather than becoming a god. The way I saw it, Masego's Apotheosis was rather a consequence of gaining knowledge about the laws of Creation rather than the goal all along; though Kairos did mention that that wish had a lot of nuances and was wrapped in High Arcana, so maybe it's both things.

Now the bigger mystery is: *What is Kairos' own Wish?*

Oaclo

I think Masego's wish isn't quite as simple as it seems here.

I'd say it's probably more like he wants a systematic, complete understanding of what makes and breaks apotheosis as opposed to coming up with a single path that would get him there.

[Liliet](#)

This. I think he wants apotheosis more as a research subject dissected than a tool for his own use.

[Fayhem](#)

As others have noted, I think both? Remember that Masego's original motivation was related, by him, as resulting from seeing his father(s) unravel the shard of Arcadia they raised him in and realizing that the Gods could do the

same thing to Creation itself any time they pleased. In light of that I think that Masego probably wants apotheosis because he thinks he could use it to either safeguard Creation or make his own as a backup if necessary, which would be why he would need to both thoroughly understand it *and* be able to use it as a tool.

Bellaco

Hmm you make a very good point! Zeze sees Apotheosis as the result of gaining full understanding and knowledge of everything. For him they are one and the same.

caoimhinh

Yeah.

That reminds me of one of Masego's more iconic phrases:

"Power is a consequence, a happenstance enforced by laws that were artificially set in place. Knowledge is the heart of this. And should a man know as much as a God... Would there even be a difference?"

Shveiran

I'd remind you good people that "the godhead is a trick of perspective". Masego believes to understand more and to ascend are one and the same – achieving one achieves the other as well, and so splitting the two is an exercise in futility.

TAP_M113

I think that this episode will offer more light about apotheosis – namely, by destroying it in live TV. After all, what else would be "Witnessing" Hierarch casting down the Choir of Judgement? Zeze LIVES for dissecting this kind of stuff, and weaponizing it to maximum effect.

I predict that Masego is about to gain a VERY powerful tool to his arsenal, and maybe the stuff of what Death King downfall will be made of. Besides, it would be fun to see Hierarch and Masego interacting. I think they could actually become friends, or those academics that are frontally opposed, yet they see each other as the sole scholar they can respect....

Or we get Masego to be Alexander the Great, and Hierarch play Diogenes. Masego pesters Hierarch to teach him to harness his brand of madness, offering literally anything he may desire for it, and Hierarch only asks him to "step away from his sunlight".

This would be so fun, at so many levels – Hierarch has access to the ultimate Villainous Dream power (harming even the Gods), but has no desire to exploit it for himself.

Interestingly, Kairos seems to have accessed some sort of future-sensing to ensure that they would pick this city, or he heavily used his "Wish" aspect to ensure it happens. The fact of him being in so bad health means that, either he had to use a lot of heavy aspect use to set the board and it took a toll on him, has lost a lot of favor with Below, or he is about to lose his name and transition it into something even greater.

In all of those cases, there is a window of opportunity here – he shouldn't be able to pull aspects like crazy. If he is outsmarted, it will stick.

Guess what it would mean? The Trial stands to be a BIG success in Below's name if he can pull it off, if the possibility of gaining a name Greater than "Tyrant" is on the line...

[Liliet](#)

The easiest answer as to how they picked this town is that they employed a sensible and predictable set of criteria that made it the best choice. Which Kairos had employed before them to figure out what they would choose.

When a vase is pushed off the table, you don't need future vision to guess that it will next hit the floor.

[Javvies](#)

Or ... it's just the town that they (Procer) assigned the League delegation to be housed in outside of Salia for the talks.

Presumably one that was least defensible and/or valuable.

Which Kairos then had warded up.

lennymaster

It was not, simply because Masego and Indrani followed a supply wagons tracks FROM the League camp TO the town. They did so to find Hierarch on Cat's orders.

[Liliet](#)

We know it's not that town, because that's the entire problem Indrani had – that Hierarch wasn't in that one.

caoimhinh

Yeah, like was said in this chapter, when Cordelia goes "hey, we were the ones who chose this ground for the Trial" and Catherine is like "sure you did, Cordie. But it's still Kairos' chosen grounds."

Cordelia is really bad at dealing with Kairos, and still refused to acknowledge they had been predicted and/or manipulated for this, even when it was obvious and undeniable. She's learning to put her pride to a side and look more objectively to things, but she's still not quite there. Cat had to beat Procer and co. repeatedly and in different manners before Cordelia acknowledged Cat was more than a strong thug ruling Callow.

Their only chance at getting off well in whatever Kairos has in mind lies with Catherine, otherwise everyone else (including Neshamah) are gonna be played like a fiddle by Kairos.

Liliet

I don't think she "refused to acknowledge" it so much as it didn't occur to her until Catherine spelled it out. She's a step behind when it comes to Kairos because he's even more offbeat than Cat is – she's odd, but she at least wants the same things Cordelia does, so she can figure her out motivation first. Kairos is just... utterly alien.

I'd say right now their best chance in this is Catherine's passive effect, so to speak – the sympathy she's earned with Kairos, and his inclination to fuck over her opposition more than her.

Andrew Mitchell

We know we're going to find out what Karios' **wish** is in this next arc. That final line "at last, at long last" made it clear that Karios deepest desire is about to come true.

As to *what* it is, I'm sticking to my previous guess. He wants to do harm to Gods in revenge for his childhood.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

My own deepest wish is for you to spell "Kairos" correctly.



I kid. Just giving you heck 'cause I can. And because "Karios" sounds like some kind of candy or cereal or candy-based cereal or something.

Andrew Mitchell

Hahaha, thank you. I had **NO** idea!

Kairos correction accepted. Your deepest wish has been fulfilled.

Kairos, Kairos, Kairos, Kairos, Kairos, Kairos, Kairos,
Kairos, Kairos, Kairos, Kairos, Kairos, Kairos, Kairos,
Kairos, Kairos, Kairos, Kairos, Kairos...

It takes a while to get my muscle memory going. 😊

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Believe me, it's my pleasure. 😊

Mental Mouse

Yeah there's a couple of those wishes where Kairos can see, but never truly understand. Not that it matters...

Draylen

Oh Kairos, forgetting that the majority of people aren't the villains of their own story. Names tend to be exceptions, because so many of them either grab the Villain Ball or hit a Then Let Me Be Evil, but none of the Woe, nor Malicia, really believe themselves to be the Villains of the story, except where circumstances are forcing it explicitly. And even that's only happened to Cat, fighting against a bigger, stronger, more experienced hero, and getting away with it by being cleverer and smarter and more devious and dastardly than anyone else expects.

Oh, right, Akua is sort of part of the Woe now. So they have a Token Evil Teammate. Although even she is having a redemption arc (perfect for RED!)...

You know, typing this out makes me wonder if somehow Cat has been winning everything because she keeps getting to play the Underdog Never Loses card. Despite being renowned as an invincible army. Someone needs to assemble a ragtag group of volunteer peasants to assassinate her.

Also, I wonder if, the way it's bolded, a Personal Wish can somehow be developed into a fourth Aspect. Especially as powerfully tied to the character as it is.

Liliet

Catherine keeps siding with the losing side, attempting to protect those who cannot protect themselves. And she throws herself into it completely enough it does in fact grant her perpetual underdog status.

Liliet

Also, what makes you think Kairos is forgetting anything here?

Cicero

So... does that suggest Catherine would have been for the Choir of Mercy if she had not chosen to turn to Below?

No wonder the Grey Pilgrim was so distraught when he first met her.

Shveiran

It's possible, though I'd argue that while she always had a "practical" approach to things, her Greater Good philosophy was very much shaped by her mentor's influence.

A different key figure in her early years could have led to a different approach, and thus made her closer to a different choir.

Shveiran

An easy contender, for instance, would have been Contrition. Cat has long believed the sword had a key role to play in shaping the world, which we have been told is a recurring theme with Contrition, and she tends to her past mistakes like pot plants and feasts on those flagellant fruits as often as possible.

[Mental Mouse](#)

I suspect that may in fact be because though she doesn't realize it, when she faced Contrition the Choir marked her in her triumph.

Shveiran

She was kind of doing it before First Llesse, though. Remember Three Hills?

[Mental Mouse](#)

Looking back to II.20: Ashes, where she muses on regret:

>And yet as I searched myself for that feeling, watching at over half a thousand men going up in flames, I found nothing. No, that wasn't right. Not nothing, just... little.

Not a patch on the self-flagellation that her officers start to notice later.

[Liliet](#)

Cat would have a thing or two in common with Judgement, too. Yes, her early motto was in opposition to it, but that's exactly the thing – it's Judgement-based questioning that threw her off her stride enough that she needed to wrap herself in pithy words to keep going. I said and continue to

say that what Catherine wants to be is Sam Vimes – arresting an army for breaking peace, if that’s what it takes. Her despire from the start was to uphold the law, preferably just law, but any law will do in a pinch – peace is irrevokably tied to order, in her eyes, and she would see Mazus hanged for his crimes, not violently overthrown. You know?

[Fayhem](#)

> I said and continue to say that what Catherine wants to be is Sam Vimes

That’s not a half-bad comparison at all – she even historically shares (one of) his defining flaws, namely the tendency to over-centralize power in her own person*. Because when Sam Vimes answers “who watches the watchmen?” with “me” it sounds cool and is very representative of the character, but it’s not exactly a stable system that can be relied on to outlive him personally being present and able to enforce that. And to her credit Catherine has recognized the failings of that approach and is currently actively trying to mitigate that/prepare her people to do without her if/when that becomes necessary.

*And that despite being extremely disdainful/distrustful of authority figures who exercise unquestioned authority in general – like Sam Vimes.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine shares his zen approach to being anti-authoritarian while being the authority, too XD

But seriously, I’m just picturing Catherine pointing at the Night Watch books and going ‘that. that’s what i want to be doing’. She’s only not doing *that* because she doesn’t have a Vetinari to arrange the conditions neatly for her, so she’s been forced to step into his shoes instead XD

Shveiran

You make a good point. Though I’d argue judgment really really really requires trusting something other than yourself to choose what is Just.. and Cat was never willing to uphold anything but what she thought was Just. She always wanted the power to change things, you know? Still, I had dismissed judgment out of hand... And you made me see that was quite the mistake.

[Liliet](#)

When Vimes encountered a conflict between written law and what he *knew* was right, never once did he side with the law.

Catherine wanted to change very specific things. Even to this day, her central goal is to make laws and ensure their enforcement.

[Mental Mouse](#)

And she thinks about the implications and consequences of the laws she proposes.

Andrew Mitchell

AND she also discusses the implications and consequences with people she trusts and allows those discussions to improve.

[Liliet](#)

Yep. Vimes never did that because he was never in a position to be lawmaker, but it comes from the same basic worldview as he has.

[Liliet](#)

The biggest difference between Catherine and Vimes is age and experience – Vimes entered the story adult, experienced and utterly disillusioned and broken by powerlessness. Catherine entered the story 15yo, idealistic and as utterly naive in some respects as she was wickedly sharp in others, and those weren't the same as they were for Vimes. They had rather different lessons to learn in many ways – Catherine didn't need to be shaken out of her apathy, Vimes didn't need to be brutally shown that actions have unintended consequences (he learned THAT on the glorious 25th of May). They start at very different positions, so it is fascinating that so much of the ideals they hold is basically the same.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, and outsourcing to the Choir of Judgement the way Hanno does is actually an *outlier* for Judgement heroes. Normally Choir heroes follow their own understanding of the Choir's signature virtue, with the Choir only caring that they don't stray from *that* and supporting them on that path.

[Fayhem](#)

We don't know that what Hanno does is an outlier for Judgment heroes because we haven't seen any other Judgment heroes. We've seen three choir-sworn heroes in action – Sad Contrite William, Merciful Tariq, and Aspirationally Just Hanno. And IMO each of them has had a markedly distinct relationship with their patron choir, and only Tariq's relationship closely resembles what you're describing as being generally typical. When Bard (it was Bard, right? I'm not crazy?) was talking about the different choirs it definitely made it sound like each has a different style/approach with their sponsored heroes also.

SpeckofStardust

But we do, Bard outright states this-

"So speaks the Choir of Judgement," she said. "Though you're fairly moderate for one of theirs. Most would have executed the upper Secretariat and taken command of the siege after our little tower episode."

He eyed her silently for a moment.

"I do not judge," he finally said. "That is not my Role."

"You're going to be a fun one, I think," Aoede grinned. He is by the account of the teller of a thousand tales is a strange/fun one.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, thank you! I'd say the quote you provides encapsulates the 'more typical Judgement mindset' quite descriptively, in comparison to how Hanno is (the exact opposite of that).

[Fayhem](#)

Mm, good note; I'd say I need to do another re-read but I save those for the breaks in between books. That does seem to indicate that Hanno is unusual in not taking the figurative gavel of judgment into his own hands.

[Liliet](#)

We know he's atypical for Judgement because Bard commented on it in his first POV in Book 3.

[Liliet](#)

And William absolutely had that relationship – note that his genius idea for gathering an army for his revolution straight up came from Cat's branding, and at no point did the Choir course-correct him on anything

in any way. As long as he was being contrite and attempting to compensate the world for his wrongs, they didn't have opinions on what exactly he was doing, even if every single other hero he met agreed he was fucking awful at life.

People tend to headcanon that Choir of Contrition just mysteriously exactly matched William in temperament and idiocy, but from what we've seen of Mercy and of the curious case of atypical hero of Judgement (with Judgement treating him like they held his exact opinions the entire time actually), it makes much more sense to assume a Choir simply molds itself to its chosen champion.

Shveiran

Also, to be Hero is to embrace Above's vision for the world, in a way fitting your limited understanding of it. Virtue – Above's idea of virtue – is how you get your Name.

I don't think Judgment would be cool with someone going "yeah dude, **I** know what's right, and I'll murder anyone who acts differently".

Judging is to compare one's actions to a set of rules, not to define those rules in the first place. It's Choir of Judgment, not Choir of Lawmaking.

Also, I love Sam Vimes to bits, but I doubt he'd be cool with Choirs either, Judgment included.

And an argument could be made that while he is definitely a good man (a gentle man, if you would) he is not a very good policeman.

[Liliet](#)

> I don't think Judgment would be cool with someone going "yeah dude, I know what's right, and I'll murder anyone who acts differently".

> "Though you're fairly moderate for one of theirs. Most would have executed the upper Secretariat and taken command of the siege after our little tower episode."

You were saying?

> Judging is to compare one's actions to a set of rules, not to define those rules in the first place. It's Choir of Judgment, not Choir of Lawmaking.

Cat's ambition wasn't initially to *make* laws, it was to get herself into a position where she could enforce

them on those who thought themselves above them. She only realized she needed to full on rule Callow after her time in Ater and Black's tutorship showed her just how badly there low key *weren't* laws that Obviously Needed To Be There, and how the only position from which she could really enforce them was the very top.

We're talking about a hypothetical scenario with hero! Cat, one where she is not in fact thrust into a position to seize power through the Empire's internal hierarchy early on.

Shveiran

> You were saying?

I believe you may have misunderstood my point.

Murderousness is not the factor I'm aiming at, but rather the reason behind the murdering.

My argument is that Heroes (try, within the limits of their own limited undeerstanding, to) use the rules of Above as guidelines for hwo the world should be, and swing away to make it closer to that shape, Hanno's moderation compared to usual Judgment types really has no relation to this.

Regarding Early!Not!Cat, I would argue you are focusing on the fact that she wasn't about "writing new laws" but rather about being in a position "to prevent abuses". It seems you took that as "she wanted to enforce laws".

I disagree. Cat perception was that Mazus was perfectly within its right to raise taxes, and didn't like that. She simply didn't believe she had a reasonable way to interfere with that.

So she wanted to be a part of the system to have the necessary power to affect the situation.

That wasn't because she wanted to be an enforcer, it was because she didn't believe changing the rules was an option.

[*Liliet*](#)

Catherine has always wanted to be a guardian.

[*Liliet*](#)

Okay, so in notepad some of my keys don't work, and on wordpress pressing enter sends te message. Amazing.

Let me try again.

Caterine as always wanted to be a guardian, and she said that she is not fit for making the new age, only beating up people who want to break it and protect people who CAN make it. I don't think wanting to change laws is central to her character the way you seem to. I can see where we read the same thing the exact opposite ways. This is what I see: that Caterine was forced into writing laws, and would rather just stand over the ones already made with a fiery sword and a 😊 @ anyone who wants to break them.

She believes the laws she is trying to bring are utterly obvious, elementary, and it's just an oversight that they weren't already there. She has no love for Heavens specifically, although a lot of it is a function of her time as a villain, but their laws matter to her because she believes THEY SHOULD be. I believe a Coir can work with that.

Mental Mouse

Note that Sam Vimes, or any of his Watchmen, would probably slug you for calling them "police".

Cat

We don't know much about Endurance but it keeps getting mentioned and by name alone does that not remind you of Cat? To keep going despite the obstacles is Cat's nature.

"You will bleed, a chorus of voices whispered into his ear. You will suffer. You will weep, yet find no relief. Though your soul is young and your weight feeble, you will take on the burden of many. Iason, son of Idrim, We offer you the misery of Endurance. We would embrace you one of our own, to blood and tears and bitter end. Iason Brightsword, Son of Tears, will you withstand horror so that others do not?"

From the Stalwart Paladin's chapter.

Shveiran

Yeah, but to be fair, you could put most characters into that definition. Doesn't Cordelia sound like that? Or Black? Or Tariq? Or Saint?

Basically, so long as you keep going after bruising your knees, you fit in.

Liliet

All heroes match Endurance in a basic way, arguably even most Named. So you gotta look closer than 'gets hurt a lot', and

when we look closer at Cat, we see her giving up and going 'ok guess I die now' no less than twice – the two I remember were at First Summerholm against Rashid, right before she got Struggle after he insulted Callowans, and in Everdark after having her soul cut, where she just gave up and lay down to die, but didn't die quickly enough for her restlessness to not get her to get up and keep trying out of sheer boredom, god bless this ADHD wonder of a person.

I'd say Endurance really ain't her.

Tohron

It's been established that there is a Choir of Peace, so she presumably would have been aligned with that if she'd been a hero.

Liliet

If she'd been aligned with a Choir from the *start* of her career, I'd argue it wouldn't be that one. Her desires morphed into this over time, early on she was willing to *start* a war to see done changes she wanted.

Adrian_V

Wow, spectacular chapter and i can't believe even with a direct POV the only thing we got to what the Bard wants is teasing from Kairos, is like he knows what her end ame is and is rubbing it on our faces!!!

Wonder if the comment about Masego arriving implies they plan to use him or if it just a left over from when he was possessed (like DK can smell him or something xD)

Andrew Mitchell

> ... the only thing we got to what the Bard wants is teasing from Kairos, is like he knows what her end ame is and is rubbing it on our faces!!!

We know that Karios knows the Bard's deepest desire and he thinks it's "glorious".... So, yes, he IS rubbing it in our faces. 😊

Ultimate_procrastinator

As is only expected of the Tyrant

Javvies

Whoa! Kairos POV. I don't remember one of those before.

Huh. Kairos wants to break what people desire most. Or, at least, he wants break the greatest desires of certain people, presumably Bard, Dead King, and it's not clear who else he wants to kill the dreams of.

And Heirarch judgy powers vs Choir of Judgement is confirmed. Wait ... would the Seraphim Judgement Coin even work on Heirarch? Well, Heirarch with his "judgement of the people" domain/aura active.

—

Heh.
Cordelia will need to get used to Cat's irreverence.
Fortunately, Hanno doesn't seem to mind it.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

If this is how Kairos thinks and what he sees when he looks at people, we would have *definitely* remembered seeing Kairos's point of view before now.

Whether or not Hierarch is subject to the Seraphim's justice and vice versa seems to be the uncertainty driving the tension at this point.

I like a hero who doesn't mind a snarky companion, even if they're technically an enemy. Pragmatism, in both finding every friend against a common foe *and* not taking slights to your side too personally.

[Liliet](#)

Hanno actually managed to get *Catherine* embarrassed about her own shit. This man is at the top of the trolling food chain here and I adore him with my entire heart.

Also, the part where he thought that even if he were certain to die in this trial, his life was less important than those of Catherine and Cordelia. My heart ;~;
(heroes in PGTE are real heroes and they HAVE me. every single one of them has me)

[Fayhem](#)

> This man is at the top of the trolling food chain here and I adore him with my entire heart.

Hmm idk, I feel like Catherine responding to that quote from Hanno by giving earnest assurances that when she called angels bottom-feeders and told them to fuck off she certainly wasn't making a *pun* was actually her trolling Cordelia, by massively (and deliberately) missing the point of what would

be offensive about that. Which Cordelia's reaction bears out IMO.

[Liliet](#)

She blushed when he brought it up though. Sure, she then recovered by bullying Cordelia, but Hanno scored a very definite hit there.

caoimhinh

Kairos POV was awesome and a delight to read, not the least because it gave us insight on the deeper **Wishes** of many of the most relevant characters (plus confirming that's why Kairos laughed like crazy the first time he saw Catherine).

Also, he hinted that Neshamah is not really completely safe right now, which is cool. I want to see exactly what Kairos wants to accomplish here.

Now the trial "at long last" starts, and the hype is off the roof!



cark-with-an-m

When we take into account Irritant's Law, we might have a problem on our hands. Both Tyrant *and* the dwarves are making a play for Keter.

konstantinvoncarstein

The Tyrant describe the **Wish** of every attendant, except Roland. Is it because he is hidden as an ace in the hole?

caoimhinh

Pilgrim and Amadeus aren't there at the moment either, apparently.

Hanno said that "the Tyrant would be facing two Choirs" so that implies Tariq is there in the group.

I guess Amadeus was kept in Salia for his safety? It seems Cat is expecting this to blow up so she kept him away since without his Name his fighting ability is diminished (he's likely still very dangerous, but in the face of a clash that's involving Choirs and Named of the Hierarch, Tyrant and Dead King caliber, it's better to not have him near the blast area.

TAP_M113

You know, the "Mirror Knight" is said to be fated to become monstrously strong thanks to his "Dawn" aspect, which makes him stronger with each passing day. Remember how even Hanno was quite scared about what kind of threat he would need to face in the future, that the Choirs thought they would need such a potent weapon to fight it?

Above and the Choirs have been noted to be precognitive (Hanno glimpse of the Seraphim and how they judge, how the Augurworks), but they have also been shown to be very fettered by unspoken rules when it comes to acting on that knowledge (Augur will get waylaid by other deities, or by spontaneous, spur-of-the-moment decisions). The fact that the Ophanim could not resucitate Grey Pilgrim, even if they wished to, also points in that direction.

My hypothesis? Above itself has seen that Judgement, and maybe even Mercy, will be crippled or outright killed by the Trial, and has started damage control one or two years ago, by turbo-boosting the Endurance Choir and its champions, so that they will be able to hold the fort alone, at least for the generation that Judgement and Mercy will need to spend licking their wounds.

Unless our merry band of misfits is VERY GOOD, they won't be able to change what is to come – the Trial is already prophesized to be a success. So yes, things are THAT dire for Above.

konstantinvoncarstein

Is the Mirror Knight sworn to Endurance?

TAP_M113

Yep, he is. Makes you wonder, isn't it? What will the Choirs have to "endure" in the future? 😊

konstantinvoncarstein

Where it is said?

caoimhinh

No, he isn't. It was the Stalwart Paladin who was about to be sworn to Endurance, and he was killed by Catherine.

If Mirror Knight was sworn to a Choir, it would have been mentioned more often, either by Cristophe's POV or by Hanno when thinking or talking about him, as we have seen Hanno do when talking about Pilgrim (he always mentions the Seraphim).

Also, something worth mentioning is that, according to Book 4 Interlude Kaleidoscope VI, Mirror Knight obtained his Name after passing a set of trials in "the Old Lake" set by the spirits who lived there, which he called "the Elfin Dames". They were also the ones who gave him his armaments and the blessing that became his Aspect of **Dawn**.

[Fayhem](#)

I don't think so, no. If anyone has a textual citation stating that he is I would be extremely interested to see it bc that's super-relevant character info for him.

[Liliet](#)

Not that we know of, I'm pretty sure 😊

Oshi

I figured he was made to act as a hatchetman for something the Dead King pulls out in his last stand.

Sparsebeard

Having Amadeus stay back seems pretty dangerous in hindsight seeing that Malicia is also unaccounted for...

[Mental Mouse](#)

Well, they do have some stuff to work out...

[Liliet](#)

They need the time to find a good marriage counsellor.

Liliet

Oh dangit, we had Hanno and Amadeus in the same room and barely had either of them react to one another, didn't we?

Liliet

Good question.

Big I

I predict that by the end of the trial Hanno will have become the Black Knight, and the Choir of Judgement will have either been destroyed or corrupted somehow into Fallen Angels.

Long term, I predict Cat will become the Grey Pilgrim. She's got the sage advice thing down pat.

TAP_M113

Oooh, that would be a GOOD one! I doubt it will work that way (It is a test of faith, and Hanno has been described as a Man of unbreakable certainty), but I see how it checks, story-wise. Still, this comes with the same problems as when Heiress tried to turn Cat – namely, this trope tends to backfire at the wielder so damn often that I doubt that Kairos would fall for it. Not enough reward for the paltry benefits it offers.

Mammon

Highly doubt it, but really want it to happen. Probably more a matter of either nothing happens or an acceptable cost is taken.

Or Cat doublecrosses Kairos by suddenly asking Hierarch to instead pass the judgement onto the long since turned more evil than good Hashmallim. She just needs one other to back her vote, and they'll outvote the Tyrant whose of course only gets one vote same as anyone else. And considering judgement of the angels is rare, she might make a case to Hierarch for having the People of Callow weigh in before whatever Kairos wants.

The Hashmallim seem the most tied to the Choirs' foundations of being made when Good still considered slavery okay, and thus inherently utilise and allow it. Can't call enslaving an entire city including the children to go crusading as mindless zealots anything less than super-evil these days, and Cat's new wave of morals would lend itself for these archaic 'Good' guys to be put on the chopping block.

All the Story elements are there, Cat just needs to claim them. The Callowan Long Prices for even the smallest slights (One successful and one attempted enslavement of an entire city by the Hashmallim), Procer having given her the smooth excuse to

Hierarch that some know her as the Queen In Callow which isn't a title rather than a name freely given by the People, and maybe even the recently ascended Sve Noc (who're currently worshipped or acknowledged by some Above Callowans and whose wings color a still technically good country's banner) with her Drow that copy the angelic power remaining the same even when individuals die schtick to be a suitable replacement.

Mental Mouse

Unfortunately, AFAIK she doesn't have a rep for the Choir of Contrition handy.

theothin

I don't think the Grey Pilgrim is a Name available to non-Levantines.

Mental Mouse

No, but Cat can certainly develop into the mentor and advisor-figure. She's already beaten him at the manipulation side of things, and has arguably been serving "good" (as opposed to Above) better than he has.

Liliet

I have said before and keep saying that the chapter where he argues he needs to die instead of her is basically a passing of the torch – he has acknowledged that she is filling the same basic Role he is, on a level more broad than Names, and is doing it better than he had been, so it's time for him to move over.

Liliet

That picture, for completion, requires Amadeus to also become the White Knight, I'm sure we can all agree on that.

antoninjohn

Cat's story is that of a good person doing what is needed even if it's evil for Callow. That is going to leave a mark on creation.

TAP_M113

Yes, it would drag Below kicking and screaming into doing community service, and allow to cement Evil "Hero roles" that are positive and widely accepted by society. Incidentally, the same as the Yang-Ti (a major, peaceful and prosperous superpower, by the way) have a ruling representative of Above and Below at all times without the place exploding into a mess of flying fortresses and bands of five roaming the countryside...

I think it is NOT a coincidence both Above (10th crusade) and Below (Hierarch+Kairos trial) are trying to mess has hard as they can with this particular outcome, each from their own side.

I bet that Above and Below old hard-liners are fussing and screaming about how "The stupid parental control is about to lock PEGI 18+ games running into the X-Box (Calernia)! It was already bad enough when it happened with the Wii (Yang-Ti)!"

Andrew Mitchell

I like that metaphor. 😊

[Liliet](#)

> Yes, it would drag Below kicking and screaming into doing community service, and allow to ciment Evil "Hero roles" that are positive and widely accepted by society.

Yassssssssss

WuseMajor

...Honestly, I think they're STILL underestimating Kairos. They think he's going to stage a suicide strike and use the Hierarch to attack Judgement in some way. And...maybe he will, but I think there has to be more here. His final act is going to betray everyone, as much as possible, somehow, and I doubt the full scope of that will be evident in advance.

He's kept something hidden. I don't know what, but his plan here still has something they haven't grasped that is going to bite them all. Yes, even the Dead King.

...I'm starting to suspect that he's going to try to break the world, get the Hierarch to argue that the Wager of the Gods is formally unjust or something.

Also called it on the title.

TAP_M113

I fully agree with you. My suspicion is that, while Kairos has 1-2 main plans he wants to see through, he has intentionally stockpiled at lot of targets of opportunity by piling all the people he dislikes/antagonizes/wishes to betray in the same place.

If he doesn't get his big, evil plan to fruition, he will go to town "betraying everyone present as the first step of my plan", and make sure that the ungodly amount of collateral damage he causes will achieve the same result.

I like him. He has got his Irritant/Traitorous-fu honed to a sharp edge, he deserves to win here. Hell, not even Amadeus nor Catherine have ever displayed so much Meta-level cunning as he is displaying by arranging the playing field as he is doing.

Including the lace underwear on the Seraphim. Stop pretending that you cannot see through the 4th Wall, Kairos! Munchkinning the "Comic Relief" trope and musing how you "Are Near Death" and "No One is Invulnerable" just before your final confrontation gave you way, you sly magnificent bastard. You know we want you to win already, no need to lay the Meta so thick (even if it is part of what we adore about you) 😊

laguz24

Oh, crap Recall is even more op than I realized. Seriously it gives him memories and skills without the story baggage. Everything Cat and all the other heroes/villains have learned they have learned from their triumphs or failures which makes them even more wrapped up in fate's tangles. Hanno gets to have all the experience in the world without the story baggage and when something like this comes along that comes from his own life he is completely unprepared for it.

Andrew Mitchell

> Oh, crap Recall is even more op than I realized. Seriously it gives him memories and skills without the story baggage.

Good point. And it seems he can learn from any hero (e.g., the Lone Swordsman and the Stalwart Paladin) and not JUST from White Knights like I had previously assumed. So, very OP indeed.

konstantinvoncarstein

If he was even slightly interested in history and other cultures, he could explore the memory of Heroes from across the whole world and all eras. He could even **Recall** Dwarven or Gnomes Heroes 😊

Andrew Mitchell

A useful exploit!

TAP_M113

You bet. After everything is done, somebody has to avoid the unchallenged Dwarfen and Gnome polities deciding that a little human Genocide is acceptable. Given how societies progress, and the fact that dwarves are close to industrial societies, while Gnomes are already firmly on it, somebody is bound to postulate and spread the worse

schools of Social darwinism, Manifest Destiny and violent XXth century Utopias amongst those races. And then it is game over if Calernian and human tech levels have not improved in the meantime...

[Fayhem](#)

> And then it is game over if Calernian and human tech levels have not improved in the meantime...

Eh, not sure I agree. The gnomes' previous cited violent intervention matched the story of "foolhardy researchers ignore dire warnings, then dire shit happens" which isn't a story that's biased against the gnomes at all. Those philosophies you cited might have "worked" IRL (in the sense of being able to spread and do a lot of damage, not in the sense of functioning to actually produce good things), but in Calernia/Guideverse those lend themselves very handily to being framed as villain stories. And villains always lose in the end, at which point we can expect the gnomish tech monopoly to be well and truly broken which is pretty much Game Over for the gnomes as a species given how many bridges they would have not just burned but detonated.

So tl;dr here is I expect the gnomes are canny enough not to let themselves in for that, because if they weren't it would probably have happened already given that the gnomes have been maintaining this tech monopoly for, what, thousands of years now? More than enough time for that to have happened if they weren't deliberately and consciously avoiding that as a matter of policy.

medailyfun

Cmon, it was mentioned he'd borrowed Thief of Stars skills

Andrew Mitchell

I must have missed that. When/where was that said?

caoimhinh

Back when he fought Amadeus, Hanno explicitly said he was **Recalling** lives from many different Heroes. For the two confrontations, as I recall, he used the Spear of the Free, the Lone Swordsman, the Rebel Knight, the Merry Brawler, The Unconquered Champion, Flawless Fencer, the Lance of Light and the Barehanded Pugilist.

Hanno can't use their Aspects, but he can use their experience and fighting styles.

Andrew Mitchell

TY

Mental Mouse

Well, Cat and Masego did have that stint in Arcadia. And for that matter, Name dreams.

TAP_M113

Great interlude EE! Now FINALLY we get an inkling of how the Tyrant is able to be so damn insightful and know so many things he has not business knowing – “Wish” is a dual use aspect, with the ability to see in real-time what any individual wants, besides rewriting reality when personally used by Kairos himself.

I have to say that Kairos is a grade AAA+ Meta-level Munchkin with a weapons-grade name. “Wish” is the most OP social/meta aspect I have ever seen, particularly when one accounts the fact that it is a first aspect, which tend to be very serviceable, but weaker as a rule. I think that only Malicia’s “Speak”, Hanno’s “Recall” and Pilgrim’s mind-reading aspects are that powerful, and they are senior-level names. I guess that “Tyrant” is a REALLY powerful and historied name that has carved a sizeable groove in creation, right there with “Dread Emperor” and “Grey Pilgrim”. That, and also the fact that Kairos is getting rocket-grade fuel from multiple overlapping “superpower disability”, “underdog”, “chronic backstabbing disorder” and “near death” tropes.

And Hierarch refusing the use of “tyrannical” Proceran furniture? Priceless. Keep on living, our favourite doublethinking “Homo Sovieticus”. You shall have my bow, Hierarch.

Between this, and the likelihood to witness Hierarch with his 3 aspects fully online, I am really fired up. Go Kairos! Leave a choir-sized, charred groove of ruin in Creation. The Gods have long been meddlesome and despotic, and their demise was long overdue.

Long life Bellerophon! Death to the celestial tyrants and foreign despots!

negagardens

I can’t remember when, but I’m pretty WISHes secondary use has been mentioned a few times before. Like- he explicitly eyeballs Hakram and gets weirded out by him at the start of prince’s graveyard...

...

What’s the bet that he tells everyone Bard’s deepest Wish, shortly before he snuffs it?

Mental Mouse

> What's the bet that he tells everyone Bard's deepest Wish, shortly before he snuffs it?

That would be a good way for him to betray the Dead King!

Shveiran

What? The DK wants that. He would be doing him a favor, not the other way around.

konstantinvoncarstein

Yes, for me it was obvious wish took 2 forms.

konstantinvoncarstein

I dearly hope that before the end of this story Bellerophon will become a smoking crater.

Liliet

> Now FINALLY we get an inkling of how the Tyrant is able to be so damn insightful and know so many things he has not business knowing – "Wish" is a dual use aspect, with the ability to see in real-time what any individual wants

We definitely knew this before, at least from Interlude: Thunder in Book 3, which is where he discusses with Anaxares what he saw in Amadeus and in Bard.

Fayhem

Just out of curiosity, does any have a textual citation for Wish actually having the "rewrite reality" use that everybody seems to be ascribing to it? Because I at least can't remember any case where anybody in the actual Guide has referred to it working like that, so it seems like maybe people are just assuming it can be used like the D&D Wish spell when in fact it just does what Kairos is using it for here.

Fayhem

*does anyone. Damn typos.

Andrew Mitchell

Not that I can recall. I *think* it may just be an assumption as you suggest.

konstantinvoncarstein

During the Free Cities arc, he betrayed the Calamity but was sent to Arcadia by Warlock. After he came back to save Hanno, he said something about having to use a Wish to escape.

Andrew Mitchell

Yes, but that **wish** could easily have been used to find the deepest wish of a Fae and that enabled Kairos to bargain with the Fae for help to get out of Arcadia.

[Liliet](#)

He said that it 'cost him a wish', while the passive use is clearly not quantified nor rationed.

konstantinvoncarstein

He said he had to use A wish

[Liliet](#)

"Wish, wish into the grave" – Skein, in Liesse.

That it can be used to produce any type of effect is an Occam's razor deduction from its name, dire price and how far apart the two precedents of its use that we know have been – teleporting around in Nicae and messing with Skein's Aspect in Liesse.

[Fayhem](#)

Both excellent examples, my thanks to both you and Konstantin. That is a good indication also of why Wish isn't *quite* as OP as someone might assume, because I'm guessing the fact that the (apparently) extremely physically draining aspect went to the permanently near-death cripple is very relevant to the story logic of why he was "allowed" to have something that strong.

[Liliet](#)

I think it's not just 'physically draining', I think it likely interacts directly with Kairos's sickness, allowing it to progress further in the way otherwise held off by his Name.

[Fayhem](#)

I mean. I'm not really sure why a major physical drain wouldn't have exactly that effect? Definitely not a doctor, but my layman's understanding at least is that a major health shock of any kind can worsen the progression of a chronic/degenerative condition. If it

exclusively and specifically interacts with Kairos' illness per se then to me that seems like it would be necessary to have that exact condition to qualify for that Aspect, which seems a little over-specific to make sense (again, to me at least).

Liliet

> If it exclusively and specifically interacts with Kairos' illness per se then to me that seems like it would be necessary to have that exact condition to qualify for that Aspect, which seems a little over-specific to make sense (again, to me at least).

Every Aspect is individualized though? Like, they are unique to the person and arise from THEM and THEIR story, and sure some of them repeat in broad strokes, but INHERENTLY they are tailored. It's just that a lot of people wear some very similar sizes.

I don't think Wish is narratively tied to Kairos's EXACT illness, considering no-one even knows what exactly it is other than 'incurable'.

But it absolutely IS tied to the story of AN incurable illness. Kairos pays for it in his remaining lifetime, and it WOULD NOT WORK on someone who DIDN'T have a degenerative fatal illness and a mindset of 'let it all burn'. Kairos gets to make wishes BECAUSE he is dying, that's the price and the connection.

A major physical drain implies you could see, say, Catherine or Indrani having that Aspect. They couldn't. They don't meet the prerequisites, because the prerequisite is that you have to be dying.

Fayhem

> A major physical drain implies you could see, say, Catherine or Indrani having that Aspect.

No? Because literally my starting premise was that the Tyrant was only able to get this aspect because he's dying/extremely sick and using the aspect in its active form kills him faster (since it's adding such an enormous physical drain to his already extremely frail constitution). The relevant quote from what I said being "I'm guessing the fact that the (apparently) extremely physically draining aspect went to the permanently near-death cripple is very relevant to the story logic of why he was "allowed" to have something that strong."

tl;dr – I think we might be saying the exact same thing in different ways.

[Liliet](#)

The thing is, ‘physical drain’ is something that can be counteracted. With healing, potions, eating well, whatnot. That’s why I’m saying that it goes directly to the illness’s progress, instead.

[Fayhem](#)

I think we might have a different understanding of the medical dynamic underlying this. What I’m thinking of most definitely can’t be counteracted by such means, at least not with the degree of efficacy that would be required for someone who is already as sick as Kairos.

I know you play/are familiar with D&D, right? If you’re somebody who has to make Fortitude/Con saves (depending on what edition you’re playing) against your incurable degenerative illness every day for it to not get worse, which inevitably you’re going to fail a certain percentage of the time anyway, taking a big chunk of Con damage is going to result in your disease getting worse regardless of whether said Con damage is with time and treatment recoverable (Guideverse IMO doesn’t have an equivalent of quick-and-easy Restoration spells, certainly not without Light being involved). The damage being eventually “fixed” isn’t going to help you when the progress of the disease that occurred in the interim isn’t fixable.

Taking a hit to your health when you can’t afford any such thing on top of what you’ve already got just makes more sense to me as a price than somehow just making you sicker in only a single specific way. Maybe that’s just a personal perspective thing, idk. I would also stipulate that I do think that Kairos somehow magically getting well or no longer being affected by his illness would fundamentally alter the operation of his Name, much as Vivienne moving away from doing Thief-y stuff undermined (and ultimately removed) her Name. “Mad cripple” is the baseline premise of Kairos’ schtick, and both halves of the term are salient.

[Liliet](#)

Well, I would not describe 'Con damage' as 'physically draining'. It just doesn't seem to be a good description of what the mechanic reflects to me.

ChillyPepper

Just for musing sake, does anyone see similarities between Cathrine's chosen dream from the beginning of the story to events unfolding like so?

at the very least the killing of both her evil and good selves.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Cat: Hanno, you realize Kairos is top-rank *and* has pulled out three extra cans of whoop-ass here?

Hanno: Oh yeah... bring it on!

Dis gon be gud!

[greatwyrmgold](#)

I can't help but hear Kairos's internal monologue in the voice of Mark Hamil's Joker. Kairos is just having so much *fun* being nasty!

[Fayhem](#)

Approved. Personal canon is now that Kairos is Arkham Knight Joker, except both of him are Joker all the time so there's no conflict just gleeful collaboration between him and his inner demon.

SpeckofStardust

"How boring life would be, if there were only ever two choices to be had," Kairos lightly said. "Our guests have come, dear friend."

Well, he is going to stab both sides here.

After all it is the only choice that really matters.

[Liliet](#)

I love everyone present so much.

[ninegardens](#)

Gods below, you can't help but love this evil little bastard, as he stumbles towards the finish line, coughing and bleeding having given his **all** for the running of the race. Having lived a life free of compromises, and schemed, and struggled, and knowing his time is short, and you can practically feel how **tired** he is,

how exhausted, how he yearns for the finish line, how he yearns for the plan to be complete, the fear of mortality nipping at his heels, that unspoken certainty that if he hesitates for a moment he'll miss out- he'll be too late. If he hesitates, he'll never get to see just what he might have done.

...and really, that's what sets him apart from the likes of Akua. Akua was driven by a desire to be remembered. Kiaros I suspect doesn't CARE if anyone remembers him, he just wants to know *for himself* if it can be done.... and that makes the little madman ever so endearing.

Liliet

Well, Akua was compelling and sympathetic in her own right, in the entirely different way of doing what she'd been taught was *right* no matter what it cost her, or anyone else, along the way...

Terrible children the both of them, and for the both of them it's the adults who shaped them so who are to blame at the core of it.

ninegardens

Oh yeah, don't get me wrong, Akua's characterization was solid....

But like, NOBODY in the audience wanted Akua to win. She wasn't loved the same way as Tyrant is (At least, not at the time of her Peak Villiany).

With Tyrant (and partly because his goals are hidden), I think there's a decent chunk of readers hoping his victory.

Liliet

He is being presented in a markedly different way than she is, and a large chunk of the audience DOES get pulled in by this difference like that, true.

mavant

"I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart: I am, I am, I am."

Walter

I feel like I wanna roll to disbelieve the Narration here, jeez.

Like, Cat's wish is peace? Our Cat? The protagonist? What peace?

If it is peace for herself she can be on a boat in five seconds flat.

Peace for her nation she's turned down over and over. Like, the whole thing with her letting Swordsman go to start a revolution so that she could rise in the ranks was her trading away peace in Callow for more personal power.

Peace in Calernia is literally trying to break out, and she is doing her very best to squash it, right? Like Dead King is literally retreating his armies and Cat has made a bargain with Kairos where he'll tell them a reason to keep on warring against Dead King if they let him put White Knight on trial.

I mean, clearly the author is correct about their creations, but, like, this revelation feels to me like it flies totally in the face of her characterization to this date. Right? Like, surely the person who craved peace wouldn't have taken the knife at the start of the story.

I buy that Catherine wants to dunk on her enemies, she wants to smoke more weed, and more seriously, she wants to reshape the future with the Liesse Accords, leave her mark on the world, all that jazz. But if she wants peace she has chosen, like, the weirdest possible way to get there.

[ninegardens](#)

She doesn't want "peace for my lifetime", she wants PEACE. She doesn't want peace for herself and her friends, she wants to build the sort of peace that does not break.

She doesn't want peace that will screw over future generation via DK.

She wants the sort of peace that will mean Callow will never be invaded by the Empire again.

Remember, she was bothered not just by the present occupation of Callow, but by the fact that it has inevitably been the battlefield of Good and Evil for GENERATIONS. That is the conflict she is trying to defeat.

If a War today puts down the dead king, stabilizes the Drow, prevents Hellgates and Angel bombs and gets the Empire into a position where trade and sorcery earn it more wealth than force of arms, THEN she has achieved peace.

Hell, the fact that she desires peace is obvious enough that people guessed it back when she met Kiaros for the first time, I'm pretty sure.

Andrew Mitchell

+1

Shveiran

Yeah, what ninegardens said. Spot on.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine has started wanting peace from the minute she started undersanding the price of war.

No, she did not always want it. But by now, she's been saturated with the price of her failures sorely and completely enough, that everything she wants boils down to this: peace. It's the prerequisite to all else she wants, and it's the end result if she is right about it. It's the opposite of strife, and strife is what she sees as the ultimate enemy. Strife, and war, and destruction: she does not believe that she can give her people prosperity, she does not see in herself the ability to provide that, but if she can provide peace, that will be enough.

It's not just a desire: it's an ideal, it's a belief. It's faith, that peace can exist, that peace can hold, that it's possible to achieve what Amadeus wanted and have everyone lift each other up instead of pulling each other down.

> Peace in Calernia is literally trying to break out, and she is doing her very best to squash it, right? Like Dead King is literally retreating his armies and Cat has made a bargain with Kairos where he'll tell them a reason to keep on warring against Dead King if they let him put White Knight on trial.

You're wrong about this one. Peace with the Dead King now will mean he'll come back to war on them another time. Peace with Dread Empress Malicia will mean that Praes will linger in the shadow of suspicion and knowledge they'll make the darkest deals the minute they're pressed. It's a peace for one generation, that will have everything descend back into the perpetual war of two sides the minute the balance shifts away from the precise configuration Cat has managed to force it into.

Catherine needs to fight this war so she can win it, because otherwise peace with the Dead King is impossible – he has nothing to gain from it unless he's losing.

Catherine needs to fight this war because Amadeus needs to continue the Reforms, and for that he needs to be in position to force his will on Praes – and the Empress cannot be trusted to cooperate even if she agrees.

Catherine needs to fight this war because it's proof of concept, because it's unprecedented unity of the entire continent with only fringe outliers staying out of it. It's making a new groove, a new story, a new pattern, one that Calernia will be able to fall into again and again from now on if it is completed all the way.

Catherine needs to fight this war because on the other side of the chasm is a hope not just for a momentary truce, but for complete rearrangement of when people go to war and when they don't. What she cannot break, she will regulate, and if she cannot stop the conflict entirely, she can at least bind it with laws – she can.

If she wins this war.

There is a saying: peace reigns when people who want peace are better at war than people who don't.

Walter

I mean, it sounds to me like you are describing someone who wants to win, and, like, we are in agreement re: that being Catherine?

It is just weird to describe that as wanting 'peace', yeah? She wants victory! People keep giving her the the option of ending the fighting, and she keeps prolonging it, and her driving goal is for there to be no fighting?

I mean, okay, if that's the tune the piper's calling, but, like, if you are gonna Greater Good the Wish revelation then what's the point of it? Like, you could have someone whose wish is East East East like a trumpet blowing and they are going west because one day it will let their descendants go east.

Go back and read the bit where Catherine gets Diabolist's ultimatum re: Liesse, a dagger to a hundred thousand throats. See if you can find a single second of consideration of the idea of surrendering.

She doesn't think about it for a day, she doesn't think about it for an hour, she doesn't think about it for even one minute. Genuinely conceding is right the fuck out. But she also doesn't pretend to concede and then attempt a rescue, doesn't beg for heroic intervention, just makes pompous declarations about getting Big Revenge.

Like, if she wants peace, it is presumably so that people can live in it, yeah? The story literally put a hundred thousand of those living people stacked together on the table and it

weighed less than the chance to rant about how much of a Hard Man making Hard Choices she was.

Liliet

> But she also doesn't pretend to concede and then attempt a rescue, doesn't beg for heroic intervention,

...because it wouldn't work? She didn't have those options. She knew these people were as good as already dead, so yes she went straight to swearing Big Revenge.

> Like, if she wants peace, it is presumably so that people can live in it, yeah? The story literally put a hundred thousand of those living people stacked together on the table

...and she could do nothing to help them.

I am not saying Catherine always makes the best smartest choices that are the shortest way to what she wants. God no; I'm not even saying she was necessarily right in the reasoning she employed against Diabolist, just that that's what she thought at the time.

She doesn't want peace for herself. She wants peace for *other people*. That's why Kairos calls her a servant of Above at heart: she is selfless and she wants to do the right thing and what she believes the right thing is is what forms her greatest desire. If you want more money forever, investment is a smarter move than hoarding, even if it costs you money upfront, you know? Catherine is investing in future peace, and it's exactly what her characterization is.

I mean, as far as Second Llesse goes, do you remember her being more or less suicidally depressed for a book straight after it? Do you think it's because she doesn't care about that 'hundred thousand lives stacked together on the table'?

Walter

I mean, if you want to show a character regretfully writing off hostages, there are, like, ways to do that. They exhaust every possible yada yada. We see this beat used elsewhere in this story, Cat getting the band together to get everyone's take, maximize their odds. She does it when she cares about something (without looking back I feel like there was a planning session before the confrontation with the Winter Fae, and one before Keter Malicia assassination attempt), and the text generally emphasizes that she is prioritizing the thing over who gets credit for it.

The beat of 'Diabolist threatens genocide, Cat instantly laughs in her face and threatens soul slavery' is a different one. It is the one we got just recently, where Diabolist got needled about them having tortured one of her buds to death and she no-sold it and asked if he was a screamer. The point of it is that the antag in the scene has misread the protagon, threatening something they don't value. It is a way to put heat on an antag, shine on the protagon.

Like, it isn't a coincidence that Diabolist's demand is 'we 2 fight vs. Malicia, or I do a genocide', and Cat dares her to do her worst, and one genocide and one soul enslavement and a few other atrocities later we have... drumroll, Cat & Diabolist fighting vs. Malicia. That's not coincidence, it is the author beating the point home with a hammer. 2 paths to this conflict, one involving a monstrous series of utter atrocities and the other involving letting Diabolist be the one who does the dunking, and Cat didn't need five minutes to choose.

I'm agreeing with you that Cat doesn't always make the right choices, but I suspect we maybe don't mean the same thing by that. I see her as a Napoleon type of figure, basically cleverly and successfully implementing her bronze age warlord values. My guess is that your 'mistakes' are my 'character revealing beats', and vice versa.

That is, I suspect your version of Cat's mistakes are those which lead me to my conclusions re: her actual values, while my version of her mistakes are the tactical mis-steps that the story calls out from time to time.

As far as wanting peace for other people, I dunno if I can square the circle with you here. Like, we aren't just disagreeing, we are presumably wondering which book each other are reading. I doubt we can even approach consensus there, we'll probably keep on disagreeing.

I generally put Cat's post-Second Llesse mental stuff down to being Sovereign of Moonless Nights at the time. Like, if you want to root for the character, I think you kind of have to.

[Liliet](#)

You're right on the money re: we both are reading. Wondering what you think of Cat's self-sacrificing tendencies, like in Third Llesse when she literally fought the Pilgrim over the right to die on the altar? Sorry about this, two of my keyboard keys decided to stop working suddenly.

Walter

I don't see them as incoherent with the image of the character I have. My take on Cat is that she wants to win much more than she cares about what prize is at stake or how much she has to spend to do it.

She fought Pilgrim for the same reason she fights Bard, for the same reason she fought the Crusade. No one else gets to win, even Sve Noc agreement comes only after Cat loses.

Liliet

With Sve Noc Cat explicitly still had a good chance of winning, given to her by Akua being a better lawyer than Komena. She discarded a victory in the making, which is what gave the gesture weight enough for the goddesses to claim her as their priestess.

Liliet

Oh, and cypaste from a comment I made on another thread:

““Don't negotiate with terrorists” is a harsh rule, but it was invented for a reason. Catherine had realized it back in Book 1, against Akua as well. It was always nothing more than a trap, a way to turn her tendency to care about people against her.

So yes, she acts like she doesn't. She acts the way someone who doesn't care will act, only with added violent revenge, because that's the way to long term discourage it. She does the exact opposite of what a person making such a threat wants. If she doesn't even deliberate, if she doesn't allow it to affect her at all, then the threat is ineffective and there is no point to using such a tactic ever again.

That's the only way she could secure the safety of all those who could be used against her: by making sure there's no benefit in it.”

Walter

I don't think I'm going to persuade you, but, like, it seems like at the point where someone has a knife to a hundred thousand throats you should maybe abandon the Hard Guy Doctrine as bankrupt and negotiate?

Not to be mean, but, like, she very obviously didn't secure the safety of the people of Liesse, since they all got slaughtered.

It is a recurring theme of the story that dick measuring violence is bad. Everyone Cat meets, basically, ends up in the party once the foreplay is over.

Cat fought Akua and it turned out she needed exactly one fireside chat to become a friend. Now they are fighting together against Malicia. Cat fought Sve Noc and killed a lot of Drow before teaming up. Cat fought the crusaders and dumped a lake on them, killing thousands, before, you guessed it, teaming up against Dead King.

In every one of these cases, Cat would have been better off not fighting. She ended up in the same place, but with lots of bodies. She could have rebelled with Diabolist, could have negotiated with the drow, could have surrendered to Cordelia.

You can go back to the Fae if you want, who fought before friending, back to her legion, where she fought all of her officers before working together. Go back to starting William's rebellion, only to realize Black had always planned for her to be his protégé. It is crabs in buckets all the way, the entire story is beating her in the head to try and get her to understand that it is ok to not be the winner.

magesbe

> It is just weird to describe that as wanting 'peace', yeah? She wants victory! People keep giving her the the option of ending the fighting, and she keeps prolonging it, and her driving goal is for there to be no fighting?

> I mean, okay, if that's the tune the piper's calling, but, like, if you are gonna Greater Good the Wish revelation then what's the point of it? Like, you could have someone whose wish is East East East like a trumpet blowing and they are going west because one day it will let their descendants go east.

I'm probably going to repeat people above because I feel like you don't understand. Cat doesn't want peace however long it takes for the Dead King to screw over Calernia again, and he will because it isn't in his nature to be contained. She doesn't want peace until Praes decides that since it's lost all control over Callow they should invade again. She wants a peace that will span for many generations. She goes to war to remove the likelihood of

future wars, or at least the kind of future war that's basically a nonstop series of war crimes. If someone has internal injuries, you may need surgery to fix them. Assuming anesthetic isn't a thing, it will probably hurt a lot. But it needs to be done or they're just going to get worse.

Cat isn't being offered lasting peace by anyone. She's being offered a number of versions; temporary peace, 'peace' but actually war and oppression (that's what Akua offered), and 'technically peace but you might as well be at war because it's just as bad.'

Speaking of Akua. Submitting to Akua would be a terrible idea. She was basically a wannabe Triumphant, and was going to fuck over the entire continent extremely hard. Callow would once again be a battle field, this time Praes vs Praes. And she'd be expected to side with a monster and actively fight against her mentor, which would just make the war worse. Sure Liesse would survive. But it's like a terrorist threat. Sure giving in will save lives. But the whole is more important than that.

And a false concession would last probably days at best, because it would require Cat actively turning against her current allies, not just watching and waiting. After all, if Akua doesn't turn the people of Liesse into zombies, her army is much weaker and thus must compensate by having Cat take her army and help.

[Liliet](#)

^

"Don't negotiate with terrorists" is a harsh rule, but it was invented for a reason. Catherine had realized it back in Book 1, against Akua as well. It was always nothing more than a trap, a way to turn her tendency to care about people against her.

So yes, she acts like she doesn't. She acts the way someone who doesn't care will act, only with added violent revenge, because that's the way to long term *discourage* it. She does the exact opposite of what a person making such a threat wants. If she doesn't even deliberate, if she doesn't allow it to affect her at all, then the threat is ineffective and there is no point to using such a tactic ever again.

That's the only way she could secure the safety of all those who could be used against her: by making sure there's no benefit in it.

Aaaand the guy I *want* to reply to is probably never going to see it.

My keyboard works again, though. Yay?

aran

Unspoken Plan Guarantee, in trope parlance. The story can't wreck your off-screen plan for drama if there is no plan.

aran

They were significantly better than anyone else at spontaneous lapidation, for example.

"It's all the practice, I think," Kairos told his trusted attendants.

That's Abigail's bit you're stealing there, Kairos

aran

This thing has been foreshadowed quite a bit, hasn't it? Hierarch has been threatening to put the gods themselves on trial for ages.

Interlude: Suffer No Compromise In This

*"Fifth of all Choirs, sternest Judgement
They who cannot abide the repugnant;
None more farsighted than the Tribunal,
And none as even-handed or as brutal."*

– Extract from the 'Hymn of Hymns', Atalantian sacred text
(declared heresy in Procer and Callow)

Anaxares had been a boy when he'd first heard the song of rage.

He'd been seven when thousands boiled through the streets of Bellerophon in wrath, for the lot-drawn *iakas* had mismanaged the People's wheat and rationing was announced. He'd heard myriad voices howling out the same displeasure, like a great beast made up of an entire city, and it had been a thing of awe. So many voices, all telling of the same belief: *this may be, yet this is not how it should be*. The *iakas* were dragged out one and all, and before the citizens they had failed were made to answer for that failure. Tribunals were called by the People, held by the People, and the People handed down their bloody verdict. As a boy he'd watched the fear on the faces of the *iakas* with curiosity, but it had felt distant. Like a glimpse of another world entirely. His own was easier grasped for it was made up of the pounding of a thousand feet, the shouts of a thousand throats. The people, he'd dimly grasped then, were the river that carried them all. No

single man nor woman could command the current, and like any capricious river-god it could bathe or drown as its whims demanded. What purpose was there to fear, when naught of this could be changed? And so Anaxares the Diplomat had let the river take him where it would, beyond care or worry.

Yet the river had brought him to a shore where none of the people should ever know.

What a terrible thing it had been, to watch the sole thing he truly believed in turn against itself. *Your services to the people have made you a Person of Value*, the kanenas had told him. And in that blasphemous betrayal the seed of a greater folly was planted, for the People cast their vote for Anaxares the Diplomat and that worst of treasons saw him elected the Hierarch of the Free Cities. Long had he wondered of this, of the purpose to it. Could there even be one? Forbidden to take his own life through action or inaction by the decree of the People, he had been left to wallow in the absurdity of his continued breath. And with every moment the world had hounded him for further treasons, flies swarming to him like they would to carrion. Named and kings and queens, princes high and low, a buzzing flock of foreign despots that wanted him to sit at their table and pretend they were anything more than ticks sucking the blood out of those they claimed to be *ruling*. And all the while Kairos Theodosian, Helike's bloody son, had taken the spurs to his flanks until this day came. This hour, this moment, this reckoning for all the many balances left uneven.

Anaxares was not blind. He knew well the Tyrant had paved the road to this for his own foul reasons. It did not matter to him, for the destination was of his own choice, and no part save that one weighed on the scales. It'd been a choice forged in that terrible, lucid moment where the creature that called itself the Wandering Bard had tried to clap him in chains, but he had not grown to regret it since. Anaxares had been a boy, when he'd first heard the song of rage, but he heard it still as a man grown. It had stayed with him, seeped into his bones, and as the great despots of the east and the west entered under his watchful gaze the tune was so loud he grew deaf to all that was being spoken. The Tyrant flew above on his gargoyle-carried throne – a familiar twitch of revulsion went through him at the sight, the clenching muscle of *Thrones Are An Unforgiveable Abomination Unto The People, To Be Met With Scorn And Thrown Rocks* – and addressed the lot of them, weaving his exact truths into the finest of lies. The song ebbed low, though it did not leave, and the Hierarch cut in through the chatter.

"Be seated or you will be expelled," Anaxares stated.

"Lord Hierarch," a fair-haired woman said. "I greet you-"

The diplomat twitched.

"There are no lords in a court of the People," Anaxares of Bellerophon coldly said. "Neither crowns nor the petty tyrannies of those claiming them are of any weight here. Be seated presently or you *will* be expelled-"

He did not know her name, unfortunately, and so glanced at the Tyrant in question. The mad boy grinned back.

"Cordelia Hasenbach," the king of Helike helpfully provided.

Was she? It would explain why she might be under the mistaken impression her words carried authority here.

"Yes," Anaxares said, "that."

His eyes swept the crowd, recognizing only a single face: Catherine Foundling, the so-called Queen of Callow. The Black Knight of Praes was not here, which was displeasing. The man had also committed crimes under the laws of the League and would not have been unfit to stand trial today, were he present. A woman at the back of the pack, bearing a large unstrung bow, raised her hand.

"Speak," Anaxares said.

"Is that the Dead King?" she asked, pointing behind him.

There did indeed seem to be some sort of crowned skeleton there, the Hierarch noted. It was holding a cup full of blood, which after a long moment he was forced to concede was not against any law he knew of. The diplomat once more cast a glance at the Tyrant, who equivocated with a wiggled palm.

"More or less," Anaxares replied.

She raised her hand again, to his irritation.

"Speak," he repeated.

"I see the Dead King got refreshments," the woman said. "Which is most terribly unfair, as we have not."

"That is not a question," the Hierarch peevishly told her.

It was, however, true. And damning. Anaxares turned to glare at the Tyrant.

"My staff are on it," the boy assured him.

It would suffice. He was not concerned with the matter beyond the perception of willingly allowed imbalance.

"I will not repeat myself a third time," Anaxares bluntly said. "All attending must take their seats or depart."

There was offended shuffling from the band of Avaricious Foreign Oligarchs, but they heeded the reminder. Not that the diplomat spared them much attention, not when the accused himself was stepping forward. The White Knight, Hanno of Arwad. No longer a citizen of Ashur by their own laws, inquiries to the Thalassocracy had established, and seemingly claimed by no one in particular. No one mortal, that was. The White Knight was a tall and solid man, plain of face but of calm bearing, and he strode to the stand reserved for the accused without need for prompting. Anaxares approved. He waited until the man stood amidst the gutted altar to Above before speaking up.

"I am Anaxares of Bellerophon," he informed the Named. "The elected Hierarch of the Free Cities."

"I know who you are, Anaxares the Diplomat," the White Knight replied.

The afternoon sun filtered in through the stained glass and the gaping walls, casting the court in mixed and coloured light. It made the White Knight seem as if he had been painted on, as if this entire court of law was some delirious stretch of Arcadia. Anaxares remained seated at his table, facing the accused with a quill in hand and the parchments he had prepared for this day ready.

"Then you know why you stand now before me," the Hierarch said. "A grievance was lodged by a member of the League concerning crimes you committed, and my judgement was sought over the matter."

"I am not a citizen of any nation of the League," the White Knight said.

That was true, and to be entered in the record, though of no repercussion on the proceedings.

"That is irrelevant," Anaxares flatly replied. "Crimes committed against citizens of the League on the grounds of the League fall under its jurisdiction nonetheless."

He paused.

"I am told," the Hierarch said, "that you willingly agreed to submit yourself to judgement."

If so, that was a principled action. Not one that mattered in the slightest when it came to culpability, but the principle was laudable regardless.

"I agreed to stand trial," the White Knight corrected.

"Then as is allowed the laws of the League of Free Cities, you are allowed to request someone to advocate in your name," Anaxares said. "So long as they are a citizen of a member-nation, that is."

"I have volunteered to serve as your defender, should you desire it," the Tyrant called out. "Otherwise a band of seven candidates was arranged."

Those had already been refused, which the boy knew even if he now implied otherwise, and so Anaxares made note of the Tyrant's petty obstruction.

"Your candidates were judged unlawful," the Hierarch reminded the Tyrant. "Gargoyles are not citizens, even when words indicating otherwise are painted on them."

His gaze turned to the former Ashuran.

"While remaining here in containment, you have an hour to send for such an advocate should you so wish," Anaxares informed him. "Or you may accept the offer of the Tyrant of Helike."

"It was my understanding," the White Knight said, "that it was the grievance of the Lord Tyrant that led to this trial."

A moment passed.

"That is correct," Anaxares conceded.

"I would seek to be impartial in both offices, naturally," Kairos Theodosian cheerfully assured the accused, "You have my solemn vow in this."

"A kind offer," the White Knight drily said. "I will be serving as my own advocate, Hierarch. Who is to be my accuser?"

The song stirred at the man's mellow manner, the way he seemed to take none of this seriously. Anger, anger the white-clad killer who had walked the Free Cities and killed as he pleased and never once thought there might *consequence* to this. That a Name and the blessing of angels set him beyond such petty matters.

"There is no accuser," the Hierarch harshly stated. "Your crimes are not in dispute, they are a matter of known record as certified by sworn witnesses from Delos, Stygia, Helike and Nicae."

"Then the actions you deem as crimes should be listed, should they not?" the White Knight said. "Unless you intend to simply pass sentence."

"I deem or dismiss nothing," the Hierarch said, grinding his teeth. "The law is writ, and known to any who care to know it."

He brought forward the first parchment, his own familiar writing providing the list that the Named was asking for.

"Murder of citizens of Helike and Stygia is the first charge," Anaxares said. "On one hundred and seventy-three counts assured, forty-two alleged with proof in only the second degree."

Which was to say, less than two witnesses and no writ evidence.

"You speak of soldiers," the White Knight said, "fought in time of war."

"In time of war between members of the League of Free Cities," the Hierarch said. "You are not a citizen, and so not legally part of such a war, unless you took coin as mercenary in the service of a lawful government. Do you here claim to have done so?"

"I do not," the White Knight said, "though I worked in lawful accord with the Secretariat in the defence of Delos and with the permission of Strategos Nereida Silantis in the defence of Nicae."

"The Secretariat has provided records that put truth to your words," Anaxares acknowledged. "Basileus Leo Trakas, who speaks for Nicae, has declined to do so. Yet in the absence of payment from Delos that would qualify you as a mercenary in the employ of the Secretariat, the point is irrelevant. The askretis cannot absolve a crime, only abet it."

Anaxares reached for his papers, where he had put to ink the names he could not all remember. There were many, some he had known when he was still entirely a diplomat.

"You also murdered sitting members of the Magisterium, the exact list of your victims being-"

"Has the Magisterium then made complaint to the League?" the White Knight interrupted.

The song rose in pitch at the interruption, not for the words themselves but at the disrespect for the trial they implied.

"It has not," the Hierarch replied, brow creasing in displeasure. "It has, however, granted rights to another party to seek redress in its name."

"That would be me," the Tyrant gleefully said.

"That is correct," the Hierarch agreed. "You have also attempted to murder the ruling king of Helike-"

"Also me," the Tyrant added, still with unseemly glee.

"- and in the attempt claimed to hold the authority to pass judgement over King Kairos Theodosian of Helike," Anaxares continued unflinchingly.

"That is incorrect," the White Knight said.

Someone in the benches loudly cursed, but the Hierarch paid it no mind.

"Speak now, if you would amend the record," Anaxares said. "It has until now been understood that in your role as the White Knight you spoke for the Choir to which you are sworn and passed judgement in their stead."

Was the man now renouncing the authority bestowed upon him by the Choir, in an attempt to exempt it from consequence? If so, it was a cowardly thing.

"I do not judge," Hanno of Arwad said, "and passed no judgement over the Tyrant of Helike. The judgement was passed by the Tribunal, and I sought to execute the sentence it as is my duty."

The song, oh the song swelled. This was, Anaxares understood, so much worse than he had believed. Had the Tyrant known? No, that did not matter. Law was law, no matter what capering gargoyle brought it to the fore. Yet mistakes here could not be allowed.

"Clarify what you mean by 'the Tribunal'," the Hierarch ordered.

"The Choir of Judgement," the White Knight replied.

"You then allege," Anaxares slowly said so there could be no mistake, "that the Seraphim of the Choir of Judgement have claimed the right to pass judgement over citizens of the League?"

"It is not a subtle thing, what you attempt," the White Knight told him. "Do you understand this? That you have not tricked or fooled any in this hall. That your intent is clear as day."

"What I *attempt*," Anaxares of Bellerophon softly repeated. "As if this were some sort of plot, a scheme against you or your masters. Is that what you believe, Hanno of Arwad? That the Seraphim and your service of them are owed abeyance? That the world entire is to twist and bend to your verdicts, *unasked for and unsought?*"

We are all of us free, the song whispered in his ear, *or we are none of us free*.

"Madness," the White Knight said, "is no excuse for baring steel at the Heavens."

"If the Heavens would have part in this trial," the Hierarch coldly said, "they may be seated and silent, like the rest of the

gallery. Speak not otherwise of those that cannot be called to account."

"This will not end as you wish, Hierarch," the White Knight calmly said. "Yet if you cannot be turned aside so be it: the Choir of Judgement acknowledges none to be beyond its jurisdiction, save for the Gods Above."

The song filled him, up to brim, but that wroth was as much his own as the tune's.

"There is no law, writ or known, that grants this right to the Choir of Judgement," Anaxares of Bellerophon said with excruciating calm.

"And yet it is theirs nonetheless," the White Knight said.

We are all of us free, the song hissed in his ear, *or we are none of us free*.

"No," the Hierarch coldly said. "It is not. And if it would pretend otherwise, let it stand before this court and defend that crude arrogance."

"I warned you," the White Knight sadly said.

Power coursed around the court, first the distant weavings the Tyrant had laid around this place and then the blooming protections the tyrants high and low garbed themselves in out of fear. And then it came, the answer he had asked for. There was no ceiling above them, nothing save the cloudless blue sky, and through it the wroth of Judgement came down on him.

The Hierarch burned.

The Tribunal gazed down upon him, and its fury broke his bones and scoured his flesh. All around him shattered, even the very ground, and even as his body tore apart claws dug into his mind. Force him to look where they would, to see what they wished him to see. Before his eyes unfolded and endless shifting tapestry, made from all the decisions that were made and could be. The depth was... too much to grasp. The threads of every action and consequence, of the reasons and the endings. This was, the Hierarch grasped, what the Seraphim saw. The truth of their judgement. And as he tried to parse it, he felt his mind begin to unravel. He could have looked away. It would have spared him the horrendous pain going through every fiber of who he was. But that would be admitting that their judgement was right. That it was correct, for they knew things mortals could not. And so as he stared unblinking Anaxares of Bellerophon found oblivion snaking her arms around him. Oblivion, and with it would come rest. Would that not be a relief? And yet there was one thing he could not help but see.

It was a woman, carving words into a stele of stone that somehow reminded him of a great bird's corpse. Around her was a sea of people in rags, thin and sickly and hungry. Yet there was something in their eyes, as they looked at the stele and the woman, that made him want to weep. And the words, oh the words he knew them. Every child born of Bellerophon knew them. *All are free, or none. Ye of this land, suffer no compromise in this.* The woman was wounded, bleeding within, and with the last letter she died. But the words, the words stayed. And as the city rose around them, around the stele, blood splashed stone. *Suffer no compromise in this*, the stele had told them, and so they did not. And they bled and they bled and they bled, and they bled but they never bowed. Not once did they look at the world, even at the very bottom of the pit, and bend their neck. It would have been easy, light as a feather. And perhaps they would have been better for it. And from mother to son, father to daughter, the words on the stele had carried down. Until they ended up told to a small boy, who one day would be a diplomat. *Suffer no compromise in this*, Anaxares thought, and the world sang it with him.

His body was a ruin yet there was a need for it, and so the Hierarch decided it would have to **Mend**.

Bones set back in place, soldered by will, and flesh knit itself anew. Teeth made by heat into black and broken stones flew back into his mouth as the table and the chair snapped back into place. The Hierarch of the Free Cities dipped his quill into the inkwell, tongue lolling out of his half-broken mouth as it reformed.

"This will be added to the record as evidence of guilt," he informed the Choir.

Attempted murder of a sitting judge of the court, he penned. The Seraphim had expressed their displeasure yet not bothered to attend, but that would not be enough to spare them judgement earned. Mind clear and still as a pond, the Hierarch closed his eyes and allowed himself to **Receive** what he required. Silhouettes stood before his gaze, bearing each six wings of bronze and a conviction like a fire that nothing could put out. They gazed back, and in their fury struck again. The world broke, and Anaxares with it, but without pause it was mended anew.

"Petulance," the Hierarch said. "I address now the Seraphim of the Choir of Judgement, also known as the Tribunal, and **Indict** you for the following crimes-"

They smote him again, and he mended. It did not matter, for now his Name sang and filled the world. As it had in Rochelant, a blank slate on which all could write their accusations and have them known by all.

"- despotism high and low, arrant and illegal intervention in League affairs, attempted regicide –"

The Tyrant of Helike was laughing, he realized as he mended anew.

"- disturbance of the court, three –"

It was desperate now, the burning that consumed him tinted with dismay.

"- four times," the Hierarch adjusted. "And repeated attempted murder. Given the overwhelming evidence-"

It no longer hurt, the Hierarch mused as he mended, as if the ability to feel pain had been scoured out of him.

"- the verdict cannot be in doubt," he continued. "I pronounce you guilty and sentence you to-"

The words choked in his mouth, for something has seized his throat. Not the Tribunal, no. It was a great presence but not that, and as the grip tightened around his throat the Seraphim prepared to strike again.

"I win," Kairos Theodosian laughed.

And the grip was *gone*.

Mammon

First thought on this chapter: Ha, it's fun how I immediately know that Cat's the one that cursed and... Oh no, Cat cursed when Hanno said something. This is bad...

Second thought: Can I get some recognition that in this story, THIS story, one of the most badass moments we've seen is a man mending not only himself together but also his selfmade table and quill so that he can write down something while being smitten again whilst still mending?

Third thought: Oh crap, Hierophant is here to see all of this. Either providence must really be in a tight spot to allow this, or they've really been pushing the scales to allow Below to propagate their own bit of providence to enable Masego to see this. And after we've seen it confirmed in the last chapter or maybe the one before that, that Masego is still one of the more heavy-hitting Named.

Sun Dog

Magic may have fled him, but the Hierophant is still the man who vivisects gods and miracles.

[daegone823](#)

The Gods Below are painting a Fresco with demonic painters with bone brushes and blood pastels.

The tyrant laughing surrounded by gargoyles dressed in human cloth, the dead king casually sipping a cup of blood. The Judge(hierarch) half broken half mended as he continues to write down the heaven's objections. The white Knight standing resplendent pridefully shining the heaven's tool through and through.

The crowd Calernia Nations leaders as a dark Queen face palms her forehead, near her a Blind man stares in awe, while a woman with a giant bow is served a drink by a gargoyle.

This was the day that the heavens paid for there sins, they were brought to task.

Mary Gentle

Love this. I can see this SO clearly.

Including the figure in the front row of a blonde Prince, with her lips pursed up like a cat's bum. 😊

[daegone823](#)

You know the sad thing is the angels are like well win we always win we are good, don't worry every thing is going to turn around now(Angel forced to resurrect a villain)...any time now(Holy Crusade fails)... any(Dead King invades)... time now(Saint withers away/Pilgrim stabs himself)...(Trial of the century).

.....

Okay guys I think it time we accept that things have gone down hill way fast.

laguz24

I like to think they have yearly board reviews, It's like, "Let's see, Contrition, you resurrected a villain, Endurance, you failed to protect your chosen hero, Judgement, you got judged by a Villain. Mercy, you made a deal with the same villain that forced a resurrection out of Contrition. Seriously what is with you all this year, we are seriously in the red on victories this quarter."

[Mammon](#)

A bureaucracy demon strolls in Hate to interrupt your meeting guys, but Mercy, if I can have a minute? This is about that paradox you've gotten yourself in with the Tyrant. Technically he did win, so he didn't lie, meaning you smitten him for telling the truth. Which puts you in an even more nasty position because now you've not only gone and done this but also did it on unrighteous claims. And our current favourite dead boi is going to press charges.

NerfContessa

You paint a picture we all saw with better words than ours.

Thank you.

As for the chapter, this is exactly what I 3xp3c5ed. That does not detract from its power and meaning in the slightest.
Wow.

NerfContessa

At a reread 8 9nce again am awed, and would really like to know the full story of the founding of bellerophon and the dying hero who did it.

Amazing stuff.

Blue1ao

Yo what this is crazy I'm loosing it

[Liliet](#)

"one of the most badass moments we've seen is a man mending not only himself together but also his selfmade table and quill so that he can write down something while being smitten again whilst still mending?"

Oh.

Oh, you're right.

Holy shit I love this story.

Big I

I for one applaud the Hierarch's adherence to the rule of law. The Tribunal has no standing to pass judgment except through force of arms.

I'm reminded of a quote from the writings of the late great Terry Pratchett, which I will paraphrase : "The law applies to

everyone, or it's not the law. It's just a way to keep people down."

And another one: "There's nothing the gods hate more than a fireproof atheist."

miles

Force of arms is the only thing which enables any entity to pass judgment, as conservative media like to remind us.

Mary Gentle

The usual democratic social contract is that the state has the monopoly of coercive force, but uses it only under the law decided by all. Ultimately, if that contract is broken severely or often enough, the state fails, as it fails to hold that monopoly.

Not that I think a world in which angels can stick their fingers into mortal affairs would work like that – up until now, at least, any state on Cat's continent has been outgunned in terms of force of arms, simply by virtue of the ability of Above or Below to exert superior force of ... miracle, I guess.

Hence why, if the Hierarch can judge, the world changes.

Except I suppose that what the Hierarch has done also allows the direct presence of Below. If Seraphim can turn up, who's to say that Devils can't arrive next?

If they don't – why not? They're facing an absolutely open goal. Plus, if a Devil does turn up in the Hierarch's court, s/he will probably have the sense to follow its rules... and subvert them. I heart Kairos, but I wonder if he's thought through what having a direct agent of evil here might do?

If he has anticipated it – there'll be even more fun. 😊

[Mental Mouse](#)

Below does have their agents here – two top-tier Named up front, with more in the gallery.

laguz24

That is an argument between above and below. Below thinks Might makes Right or Right makes. While Above thinks Right makes might, or Right makes. They are both wrong.

[daegone823](#)

No offence but a fire proof atheist might have to accept he has now become a god himself. Please someone write this story lol, we have a good beginning with the hierarch.

Ιούλιος Καίσαρας

Then we will have a God of Atheism.

If you lose your doubts and start believing in Him you will be damned forever.

Mammon

Atheists can believe in a god of Atheism, as long as said god can be explained scientifically and be proven reliably in modern times. The notion that such a being once explained would still be called a god rather than a more apt name likely synonymous to their original name is to underestimate humanity's ability to give new names to things.

The God of Atheism is actually an Accumbinant whose powers are generated from a totally scientifically explainable collective charging of the people who rely on him through calming the parietal lobe until the nucleus accumbens is activated combined with the release of oxytocin hormones specifically aimed at the name and image of this so-called 'God' to power them through a to them specific psionic wavelength of power freely given.

So take your theistic nonsense and leave this place, plebian, and let us good atheists continue meditating in order to power the Great and Mighty Carl who was once but a simple Accountant until he ascended into Super-Carl who now fights demons and guides our culture and society with his vast wisdom. Which of course we oppose until it has been properly proven that he is indeed suitable for dictating culture and law and/or has the omniscience that he has been hypothesised to be capable of.

Shveiran

The Hierarch doesn't adhere to the Rule of Law, he adheres to his idea of Law.

The difference is between holding a convict accountable because he broke a law that binds the whole community, and demanding someone abroad behaves like you think they should / like your laws say you and your countrymen have to.

Yes, that is what the Tribunal does.

No, the Hierarch dealing it back to them does not make it right.

A wrong is a wrong, even when you do it to someone who has wronged others.

ninegardens

I mean... to be fair, he was very much holding Hanno to Account for laws broken IN HIS COUNTRY.

He doesn't get tangled up in anything the foreigner does in foreign lands, just what he did while visiting.

If a Dutch person smokes weed in the US, they can still be charged under drug laws, even if Weed is legal in the Neatherlands. Probably the US wouldn't go after them once they left the juristiction, but that's more to do with severity of the crime, not legality of it.

Or perhaps put another way.... If the US or Russia or any other super power were to say... use drone strikes in some other country, the fact that the superpower thinks this is legit does nothing to change the fact that the government of that country may well desire to charge those soldiers as murders given the chance... and if they got the chance to charge the generals giving the orders instead, would that seem like an overstep?

To me it wouldn't. To me the generals saying "Oh, but we have better intelligence than you and that person really was bad" would mean nothing to the judicial system of the smaller country which would be like "You can't show up here and drone strike people just because you say so".

This is just Heirarchs Idea of the law, this is what's written down.

Shveiran

There are several problems I see with this reasoning.

1) The interactions between jurisdictions are not based on rules of nature, as jurisdiction doesn't exist; they are based on international treaties agreed by enough nations they became the norm in our world.

There is no evidence Calernia has nothing of the sort, and I doubt they exist since the Accords are going to be groundbreaking especially because there is no precedent for a standing agreement between this many kingdoms of different positions in the Good-Evil spectrum.

Without an agreement on jurisdiction, Anaxares is saying "MY law says I can judge you" giving zero fucks to what the other laws say (most relevant among which are the Procerans', on whose ground they stand, and the Tribunal's, of which Hanno is a "citizen").

He has no jurisdiction, because jurisdiction requires an agreement between nations. What he has, is a claim that he does signed by himself.

2) he is holding him accountable for trump up charges. The powers' Hanno fought on behalf of either confirmed the association with him or were bullied by the Tyrant in order to ensure they did not.

The "but you took no money" claim makes no sense.

3) he is holding Hanno accountable for killing soldiers in a war he didn't cause on League territory, while being on NON-League territory at the head of an invading army who answers to him and that killed many, including procerans, aka the non-foreigners in this land the League has invaded. That's like being judged for theft by a judge that robs banks and a jury of pick-pockets.

Bottom line, if you find what he is doing morally justifiable?

Fine. I mean, I don't, but this is a judgment call. Not that you needed my approval nor anything, but you get what I mean: I disagree, but you don't have to change your view because of it.

If you wish to argue that he has a legal case? No, that I really can't agree with. It's a matter of professional pride, you understand 😊

Amicus Curiae

My professional judgment is different than yours. If we take what the Hierarch is saying at face value, he is not trying to impose his own personal law, or that of his own city, on anyone. He explicitly is trying Hanno for actions taken by Hanno against citizens of league cities, in league city territories. The Hierarch explains here that there are established league laws governing conflicts between the free cities in their territories. Citizens may fight on behalf of their city, and so can paid mercenaries, but outsiders are not permitted to simply show up and volunteer to start killing people. The issue of whether Hanno was paid seems like a technicality (which doesn't mean it doesn't legally matter, of course), but on reflection I sort of see a sort of sense in the law. Mercenaries taking pay at least have a clear and known reason and incentive to take direction from league member authorities, and so perhaps may be counted on to show greater obedience to league authorities, and follow any codes governing how one conducts war.

Normally, there would be jurisdictional issues. And perhaps normally the Hierarch might ignore these. But

here, Hanno has waived any jurisdictional defenses by willingly submitting himself to this trial, and the First Prince of Procer has clearly consented to this trial taking place on Procer's soil. So right I think Hanno's trial is completely legitimate.

A thornier question is any judgment the Hierarch seeks to render on the Tribunal. I would think that the Tribunal's actions would have to be adjudicated under Proceran law, by a Proceran judicial body—though the Hierarch's court presumably has some sort of inherent authority to punish contempt of court, which attempting to kill the Hierarch certainly qualifies as.

[Liliet](#)

A clear illustration of why this law would exist is Amadeus's actions in that very same law. Note how Hierarch notes it's a shame he didn't show up because he'd make a fine target too. A foreign provocateur who arrives specifically to *foster* war on their own initiative? Yeah, they have laws against that. And Delosi should have explained this to Hanno and insisted on paying him at least a symbolic sum, if they didn't want to fuck him over.

[ninegardens](#)

You make a fine case.

In terms of "Is he morally justifiable", I think I would say something to the effect of "Him calling out the Angels as being an alien force that maybe shouldn't get involved is legit. That doesn't change that he is a dangerous crazy person, whose ethics is bunk".

I think I was specifically arguing with "The difference is between holding a convict accountable because he broke a law that binds the whole community, and demanding someone abroad behaves like you think they should / like your laws say you and yoru countrymen have to."

in that Hanno was IN Hierarchs community when shit was going down. THIS MATTERS. The fact that Hanno left afterwards is irrelevant.

In response to your other comments:

"1) The interactions between jurisdictions are not based on rules of nature, as jurisdiction doesn't exist; they are based on international treaties agreed by enough nations they became the norm in our world."

Right- and in this case we specifically have the leaders of Procer, and Hanno himself in some sense handing over a mandate. They may be granting such a mandate due to diplomatic pressure, but that is hardly Hierarchs business.

It is totally legit for Heirarch to say "You broke a law in our country, and given the opportunity, I will hold you accountable for it". The fact that this normally doesn't happen is a comment on the practicalities of international diplomacy and power, not a comment on how Law functions.

"2) he is holding him accountable for trumped up charges. The powers' Hanno fought on behalf of either confirmed the association with him or were bullied by the Tyrant in order to ensure they did not. The "but you took no money" claim makes no sense."

The Phrase "trumped up charges" seems to imply that the charges are untrue.

Are you trying to argue here that the charges are stupid (based on their being a stupid law), or that they are false.

If the later, do we have any reason to believe the charges are false?

If the former, then yes, I agree, the charges ARE stupid. But you specifically claim that he doesn't have a LEGAL case. If the heirarch is making stupid judgements using his stupid laws this erodes his moral case, but not his legal one. And unless you happen to have a legal degree from the university of Bellephorone then I'm not sure how you would make this argument.

"3) he is holding Hanno accountable for killing soldiers in a war he didn't cause on League territory, while being on NON-League territory at the head of an invading army who answers to him and that killed many, including procerans, aka the non-foreigners in this land the League has invaded.

That's like being judged for theft by a judge that robs banks and a jury of pick-pockets. "

Okay, so here's a question, suppose you have a war veteran how serves time for his country, then becomes a judge, and then is asked to preside over a murderer. Do they have a mandate?

I'm not saying its the same, I agree, Hierarch is clearly crazy, and I'm not arguing his moral case. But at the same time Heirarchs point is "Legally, you are not a soldier. What the hell are you doing killing people on our streets?"

Sure, he has soldiers, but they are legit part of a war. Heck, at the moment they are part of a peace conference.

Put another way.... if there was a civil war in... say... Australia... and someone British dude showed up with a magical rocket launched and mech armour and took a side in that war, because they had opinions on some other countries stuff.... would a judge from Perth later have the mandate to prosecute? If they were in England, and the English crown and the accused said that they could.

....

Actually, now that I think about it, a lot of modern analogues, and ethical/legal arguments start to fall apart, simply because the modern world is not BY DEFAULT in a state of war. Now peace is the expected norm as opposed to "Everyone is eyeing each others borders all the time".

I'm not really sure how to parse the ethical/legal difference between "Soldier in a war" and "Random Murderer", particularly when we involve mercenaries, thrillseekers, very opinionated foreigners with super weapons etc.

Point 3 is probably your most compelling point, hence why I am most confused on it. Point 2 seems the weakest to me, on the grounds that "Trumped up charges" and "Very stupid laws" seem like separate things.

Majeflyer

Re Jurisdiction 1).

Jurisdiction is likely to emerge because there are borders. While there is no system for extradition and treaties regarding this like there is today, It is generally understood that if there is a crime in the Netherlands, France is not responsible for enforcing justice, the Netherlands govt is. But what in particular started this distinction? At what point in time did the Netherlands and France gain this respective power over it's citizens? This in this particular story, jurisdiction and government territorial sovereignty would be etched into "Natural Law" through story, repetition, and custom over time making the process ingrained. The narrative that certain lands within a country's borders are subject and subordinate to the ruling government of the country becomes naturalised and the country becomes "stable". Encroachment upon that "Natural Law" by a foreign agent is unnatural, and should be stopped.

What makes The Diplomat of Bellerophon so important here is that his justice is given to him by the people. His story is justice, in that at any time, those watching him may remove him from his power, but they give him

consent to wield the power of law, more-so than any other king or emperor or named. As he has been named a Person of Value, he has become a representative of the people of an entire nation's will. As "The Story" is often swayed by social constructions, this investment of power into the Hierarch makes him not only backed by the ongoing role of the unitedness of the league, but by the children's stories... the cultural fabric of Bellerophon. . This belief in the Hierarch makes him a hero of Bellerophon. This is crazy, because Bellerophon normally can't have Named, having them would mean that there is an unjust tyranny of power that some hold over another. The rarity of such also increases his power (through the narrative rule of the "exceptional exception" to the world). This power and justice is enough to see a natural hierarchy that has presided over the rest of the world overturned (Angels > Named > Demons > humans > Non-human entities.) This is a huge precedent that not only affects the Choir of Judgement, but all celestial entities, This trial is a declaration of power.

Good lord that was rambling

Archayts

My theory for Kairos's "I win" statement:

We have seen before that Kairos himself doesn't know ahead of time whether a statement he makes about the future is true or false:

"This is not," Kairos Theodosian guffawed, "the last you've seen of me."

Mismatched eyes going wide, he looked up and waited. A moment passed and he did not die.

It appears Mercy is the arbiter for these statements. Now, especially in a trial setting, if you are the arbiter of a matter, you cannot participate directly with it.

So when Karos says "I win" it effectively forbids Mercy from making Kairos a liar by forcing Mercy into the arbiter's role and this is why their grip disappears.

[Liliet](#)

I'd say that's pretty close!

Questionare

I saw it coming from a mile away and yet somehow my expectations for this event and the entire story have been thoroughly

shattered. Might as well rename the story to just A Practical Guide seeing how Good has been shown to be completely ineffectual one way or another. You would expect some actual meaningful conflict between good and evil in a story literally titled Practical Guide to Evil.

[*greatwyrmgold*](#)

I'm not sure what you're talking about. There's been plenty of conflict between Good and Evil, ranging from the Lone Swordsman fighting Catherine the Squire to the freaking war between the greatest powers of Good and Evil on the face of Calernia (which happens to have a few Evil powers eventually join the Good side).

[*Liliet*](#)

I mean it's been established since Book 1 that the practical way to be Evil is to not be evil.

The title was always a huge joke at our expense.

Shveiran

You know what has me really worried?

I just realized this was not the friday cliffhanger yet.

Sinestere

My dear friends, what no one has commented on (that I have seen) is that the attention of the heavens, and the movers and shakers is right here where Kairos wants it to be. It's the greatest show in the world right now. What is Kairos up to while everyone is watching this circus? Maybe other things are happening while everyone is distracted?

roobee

The interesting thing about this story is that you can't predict it because anything can be spun as following narrative. You could argue for the Heavens winning or losing narratively.

[*BarthHumphries*](#)

Vote:

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

Typo thread:

The words choked in his mouth, for something has seized his throat.

Change has to had

[*ninegardens*](#)

Fun facts about Heirarch:

Most Champions of Justice are reported to get killed but the choir of judgement while applying (Hanno's origin story interludes).

Hanno himself was considered to have extreme endurance in that he refused to blink under their gaze... while agreeing with them.

Heirarch by contrast doesn't just endure, he endures, sees everything they see, and turns around and says "You are wrong". Which is... pretty hardcore.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

I always respect anyone who hears someone claim that the gods/their servants approve of their actions, and asks why the hell that matters. The Republic of Bellerophon has consistently been portrayed in a negative, comedic light, but there's plenty of good in their brand of Evil, and that's the greatest of all. Who the heaven cares that some guy in the sky says you're right, if they're not willing to come to earth to justify that?

[Draconic](#)

I just noticed this...

"the Choir of Judgement acknowledges none to be beyond its jurisdiction, save for the Gods Above."

Did the Tribunal just claim to have jurisdiction over the Gods Below? They might be overreaching a bit...

No44

Yeah I'm pretty sure that's their justification for the constant murder of those under the blessing of Those Below. Their whole thing is just judging everything that isn't the gods they see as just or true I think? Like the "only god can judge me" thing. And I doubt they consider Below to be Gods with a capital G.

Satan

Kairos said "I won" at the last moment? Is he trying to lose?

I really appreciate the Hierarch's actions here, hopefully he can judge those who don't follow due trial as befitting of Bellerophon, peerless jewel of the League.

ishouldsleepc104

And that is why the Anaraxes is my favourite character
What a fucking legend

Interlude: A Hundred Battles

*"Under pale moon,
Across the snow
As the dead croon
And flies the crow*

*Did we not lose,
A hundred times?
Did we not win,
A hundred times?*

*Our iron wrought,
Saw use earnest
It rusted not
Left unburnished*

*Did we not lose,
A hundred times?
Did we not win,
A hundred times?*

*We came and went,
Unconquered few
We Tyrant's get,
The tried and true*

*Did we not lose,
A hundred times?
Did we not win,
A hundred times?*

*Weep not for us,
For in the annals
Our stele reads thus:
A hundred battles*

*For we did lose,
A hundred times
And we will win,
A hundred times
'till falls the age,
And end the times!"*

– "Dead In A Hundred Battles", Helikean soldier's song

"I win," Kairos Theodosian laughed.

"- death," the Hierarch of the Free Cities said.

The Tyrant wished and the candle was lit.

No heartbeat passed before the wrath of the Choir of Mercy descended upon him: it was immediate and unflinching. Even as his lie echoed across the hall the curse laid upon him by the Grey Pilgrim tightened its grip, seeking to smother him. Ah, it was worth every irksome moment where he'd been denied the pleasure of blatant lies to now have the Peregrine's little mistake smash the Ophanim in the back of the knee just before they could tidy up all the loose ends. Mercy's cold purpose forced against him, an immeasurable sea of pressure against his soul, and the Tyrant of Helike was going to lose this. But he knew, even as his last good eye shrivelled in its socket, that he had bought a candlespan of life before that loss occurred. And that made all the difference in the world, didn't it?

"I have vexed you, I see," the Tyrant gregariously said, addressing Mercy. "Well, if you would allow me a-"

They did not, in fact, allow him a rebuttal. The full weight of the Choir's attention descended upon him and he tasted blood in his mouth, as the Ophanim finally grasped that they would not be allowed to murder the Hierarch before they'd dealt with him. Stories were such a funny thing, weren't they? Like, say, 'wicked villain is sentenced never to lie again by the champion of a Choir, then in a moment of delightful hubris speaks such a lie'. It was the kind of story that'd need a thundering, righteous Choir to smite that uppity servant of Below. Not the sort of thing you could do while simultaneously serving as the hidden knife of the Heavens in someone else's tale. It wouldn't matter that the Choir had the *capacity* to serve in both roles concurrently. Fate would punish such lackluster commitment with failure on both fronts.

His left knee pulped. The Tyrant was not certain whether that was his own doing or that of the angels, which rather amused him.

Kairos has once been told he would not make it to his thirteen nameday, a prophecy croaked by the dry lips of the ancient thing that laid in the crypt deep beneath Helike. And it'd told it true, it had. A hero might have thought, perhaps, that their kind and benevolent Gods had cured them of their many miseries. Kairos Theodosian knew very well what manner of deity he served, though, and so never once deluded himself into believing this – indeed it was a relief, when he first came into his favourite of his aspects. Wish. What a pretty bauble it had been, seeing the wish of others. Even more so when he learned it could be used to *do* things, to bridge the gap between the possible and the not. For a price, of course. It was then that he understood the prophecy, forged anew by darker hands.

Twelve times the Tyrant of Helike would be allowed to see come and go the day of the year where he had been Named and die on the

dawn of the last. The Gods Below, magnificent monsters that they were, had presented him with a beautiful dilemma: would he spend his thirteen years of reprieve in mediocre obscurity, or would he *spend* the years to reach for glory? For that was the nature of wishing: all could be had, for a span of the life he might have lived.

"I always was a spendthrift at heart," Kairos confessed. "It is the nature of princes, my friends, to waste the treasuries of their fathers."

Alas, the Choir of Mercy was growing no fonder of him. It must have been quite cross, he mused, that its greatest strength was hamstrung by its own champion. For Mercy was not the mightiest of the Choirs, the most farsighted or the most beloved: it was the most flexible, befitting of its purpose as the tier of loose ends for the Heavens. Yet now it must pass its thread through on very particular needle's head before it could attend to greater purposes, namely the continued existence of Kairos Theodosian. Anaxares, glorious mad son of Bellerophon that he was, was attempting for force his verdict upon the dealers of verdicts, and though he was not succeeding neither was he *failing*. The Seraphim's crushing strength slid over the Hierarch like water off a duck's back, though his own burning indictment found bite but no flesh: even with Bellerophon's fury at his back, the Choir of Judgement remained the Choir of Judgement.

It was like watching a man attempting to wrestle the sea, and every bit as gloriously absurd as that sounded.

The Ophanim, sadly, did not seem to agree. And in their impatience as finishing to choke out the Hierarch – oh, that one detail must have burned Tariq like acid when he'd emerged at the crucial moment and unleashed his patrons like a dagger in the side – they decided the time for subtlety was past. If a tight grip would not suffice, then a fist would have to serve. The Tyrant, Gods take him if he lied, had no parry against such a stroke. Even simply receiving it would burn through the last of his life in the bat of an eye. Of course he didn't *need* to have such a parry, not strictly speaking. The Ophanim smiting this entire temple into barren ash would mean...

Darkness flooded the broken House of Light, the cold night soothing Kairos like a cold press as it cooled the blood seeping out of his pores. His head lolled back, the bone of his neck feeling like they were made of wobbling pastry, and he grinned malevolently as a match was struck a mere foot away from him. It was the sole light to be had, and it cast Catherine Foundling's face into sharp relief as she lighted her pipe. She puffed, glowing red embers burning as she did, and spat out long stream of wakeleaf.

"You want to burn Kairos, burn Kairos," his beloved enemy shrugged. "But you don't get to burn the rulers of half the continent with him. Archer's escorting them out, under protection of the Hierophant. Until they're out of the way, hold your hand."

It was a superb thing, the way the Black Queen could so address a Choir and expect to be *obeyed*. She'd survived so many close calls with angels she'd somehow come to believe she could match them, and through that utterly crazed belief become something that could genuinely give a Choir pause. And so Mercy found itself peering into the Night, wondering if the battle laid out there to be fought would truly result in its victory – and hesitating, for the consequences if it didn't would be utterly *disastrous*. Against any other foe it would have struck regardless, but Sve Noc? The blood-soaked goddess of theft in victory? Losing might just have *consequences*. And even the villainess was preventing the full exercise of their power, she was letting through the wrath still shattering him bit by bit. Their hand held, and convulsive laughter escaped his throat until he choked on it. How long would it take for them to grasp that every time she got away with that, she came harder into the story of *someone who could get away with that*?

"You're about to die," the Black Queen told him.

"Well spotted," Kairos cheerfully replied.

He spat out a thick glob of smoking blood afterwards, but it was well worth the trade.

"Now would be a good time to pay up what you yet owe," the Queen of Callow said.

"Indeed," the Tyrant of Helike mused. "Allow me then to grant you the greatest gift of all."

The red burn of her pipe was the sole light in the dark, and what allowed him to be certain he was addressing *her* instead of an endless void. It also revealed her sigh.

"It's a monologue, isn't it?" she said, sounding resigned.

His fingers clenched, not out of surprise or dismay but because a swath of flesh and muscle on his arm had gone dead and dried up in the span of a breath, contracting the rest. Yet the rebellions of his own body were nothing new to him and did not truly distract from the great pleasure of having someone who *understood*. Not someone who agreed or sympathized, for indeed either of those things would have spoiled the broth, but someone who... followed the cast of his dice. It was such a rare, precious thing.

"Gods Below, Catherine," he grinned, "why would it be anything else?"

His throne was half-sunken into the ground now, his attendant gargoyles made rubble, but still he clasped his scepter and his head loosely kept Theodosius' crown. All was as it should be.

"It is said among my people that the hour of death is also the hour of revelation," Kairos said, "for when the distance between life and death grows thin so do the veils that keep our eyes from hidden truths. My own father, for example, called me as *grotesque imp* as he died. Which was remarkably perceptive for the old drunk, I assure you. Still, I'll admit stabbing him those seventeen times might have served as something of a hint."

Talking should have, by all earthly laws, precipitated his death. Taken him tumbling down the cliff of annihilation, an already strained body and soul snapping like a twig under the added strain. Instead, the Tyrant of Helike found the trembling of his hand slowing, the blood in his throat drying. He was, after all, villain speaking his death-words: earthly laws were the lesser set of those now applying to him.

"I stabbed my father too," the Black Queen mused. "Twice. And it wasn't even the same person both times."

Well, now she was just showing off. And by amusing him doing almost as much to kill him as the angels were, which was quite inconvenient.

"Don't interrupt," Kairos chided. "This is a monologue, not *repartee*. As I was saying, in the spirit of my rapidly approaching annihilation, I would therefore offer revelations."

And did he not have a great trove of these to spill over the ground, painstakingly gathered one betrayal at a time?

"We begin with the corpse of an angel," the Tyrant of Helike said, "though of course there can be no such thing."

It was months ago he had first dangled that truth in front of her and knew she had been digging after it ever since. As well she should, for it was the very devil in the details – in a manner of speaking.

"In glorious old days," Kairos Theodosian wistfully said, "there was once a woman who broke in Evil as one would break in a stallion. From triumph to triumph did she march, west and ever pursuing, until by the shores of a great lake she met in strife a hundred priests-elect of the Hallowed. And these holy souls did scour themselves to bring forth the great spirit they worshipped, one that cast judgement upon all it beheld, and behold her it did."

Ah, what he would not have done for a glimpse of that grand moment. Truly, there never had been nor ever would be a match to Dread Empress Triumphant.

"For that presumption she slew it," The Tyrant feraly grinned, sharp teeth bared, "bearing tall banner, and wrote her rage in blood across a hundred trembling tribes. That which was not a corpse sunk into deep waters, turning into bones that dreamt, and there was left to slumber. Some across the years learned of this, and of the great works that might wrought from such a thing, but none were so bold as to attempt to make a sword out hallowing petrified."

Ah, but heroes lacked for such beautiful ambitions. The living kin of that dreaming thing came too easily to their help, he'd always thought, and so there was no need for ingenuity unleashed.

"That hoped-for boldness still escapes our kind," he mourned, "but a lesser manner of soul did grow *desperate* enough."

How could Cordelia Hasenbach not be, when doom covered her home and kin as the south tore itself apart in a war with no end nor meaning? There had been so little left to lose, and in the end the First Prince answered first to *duty*.

"This is no coincidence," Kairos reminded his peer, "for indeed there are no coincidences. This one least of all, however, for it is a harsh sword long in the swinging. There is a thing out there that delights in intercession —"

He paused, allowing for dramatic arrival should it be in the cards. Only silence answered.

"No?" he mused. "No, I suppose not. Not while the Hierarch still breathes."

Even should she wear a different face when she arrived, Kairos amusedly thought, all that would change would be that the crime of *personation with intent to confuse the court* would be added to her tally. If it was as he suspected, her very name would prevent her from putting herself in such a situation even should she desire it. Setting aside the thoughts, he returned to the thrust of his speaking, though he did not there was not anger in the Black Queen's eyes. Ah, noticed his little trick had she? That the wards around Lyonceau made escape more difficult when the fabric of Creation was troubled. Which, given the presence of two Choirs in wroth and the high priestess of Night wielding the very stuff, was very much the case. It ought to keep the hostages close long enough for his purposes.

"And that thing, Catherine," he drawled, "it has been waiting a very long time to kill another: one who claims rulership over dust and bones. But is a cautious crown that lairs to the north,

one that does not often leave its shell. It took cornering and opportunity, to bait it out. Defeat on the horizon and victory at hand, how could even such a leery thing not be tempted? It scuttled out and lost a finger or two but got to witness the truth of its foe in exchange."

One of his kidneys had just melted, the Tyrant dimly noticed. Oh dear, that was quicker than anticipated. Mercy was refining its technique.

"A fair trade, as these things go," he rasped out.

He mastered his voice a moment later, with great effort.

"It would not have mattered," the Tyrant said, "if not for the hidden sting of augury. You see, there was a plan. A warden for the west, besieged. Her ears open to whispers. And as the sky darkened, inch by inch the finger would tighten until the trigger was pulled."

His only functioning arm snapped up, for the other was a desiccated waste, and he snapped his fingers.

"Death, dead," Kairos said with relish, for it had been a pretty plan indeed. "That was the trick, you see: letting it eat someone's whole world before they mattered, and then make them *matter*. Too late, then, to shake free of that story and the chains it brings. Quite a bit more would die along with it, of course, but then victory is not without costs. The clever crown caught on early, now, and it flees back to its lair. It would shed the chains binding it for a set more pleasing, if you let it."

He met the Black Queen's gaze, with his bloody red eye.

"Don't let it, Catherine," he said. "It does not *deserve* this."

He hacked out a wet laugh, for deserving hardly ever mattered.

"And so here we are now, at the crossroads of it all," Kairos Theodosian said. "The crossbow has been forged, and aimed, but the hand that wields it is closed to intercession. Its quarry is a lion rampant, and forewarned, but there are a great many hunters gathering to hunt it. It would lair again, let the danger pass, but it cannot simply vanish – lest it be followed, crossbow in hand. To survive now it must either cow the hunters or break the crossbow."

And even then, the Dead King would not ever truly trust the first of those two. Even cowed, the great Names of Calernia might still be nudged into rolling the dice. It had made striking fresh bargain with it after the Graveyard disappointingly easy. He'd

been looking forward to the challenge of convincing Keter to ally again after betraying it so often and cheerfully.

"And so back it went to its old friend Kairos," the Tyrant drawled, "who happened to have a grain of sand on hand that fit that hallowed mechanism quite nicely. There was a need for some expertise to see it through, which was helpfully provided, and now we arrive at the moment of truth.

He grinned, his teeth gone red for the bleeding of his gums.

"Yes, Catherine, I see the question is on the tip of your tongue. Say it."

She studied him, unblinking.

"What happens when a Judgement-corpse is wielded, if Judgement is dead?"

The right question, as he had expected. She had yet to disappoint.

"Truth of truths, my friend," he chortled, "I already gave you the only answer to that question worthy of being spoken."

A Rochelant, when they had first begun this dance of theirs.

"That's the entire point," she softly quoted, "finding out."

He'd be dead long before that riddle was answered, naturally, but what did that matter?

"Now," the Tyrant cheerfully said, "you two distressing damsels stuck bargain with me in Salia, and I promised you a good reason to keep warring on Keter. I am a tyrant of my word, and so here it is: *Keter will keep warring on you.*"

Surprise, for though she was clever and ruthless and dangerous, she did have an inflated sense of the threat she truly represented to an entity like the Dead King.

"Your coalition does not scare the King of Death," Kairos told her, not unkindly, "your petty assembly of armies and treaties which you so wastefully wring your hands over. He fears only one thing in all the world, and I have torn through the perilous nets she wove against him."

The darkness thinned, and the Ophanim wasted no breath in stepping harder on his existence. Kairos spat out blood that looked like boiling pitch, burning a streak down his own chin. The hostages must be close to out of danger, then. Yet it was as had been ordained, for now that he had spoken in pride through the lessened gloom he was allowed to see if his pride was to be deemed arrogance after all. Was the net truly broken? Would a

thousand years of fury and madness poured into a single man be enough to humble a Choir? For all his scheming and deals, the truth was that the Tyrant had no idea.

No longer was Anaxares the Diplomat flattened into the ground by angelic verdict, he saw, mended only by stubborn will. Yet that did not mean the Hierarch was winning. It was, to his eye, a shattering deadlock. The will of Judgement was hammering down from the Heavens, to no avail, yet Anaxares' scathing dismissal of that authority was not resulting into his own judgement biting into the Choir's flesh. It was a tight embrace between entities that could not bend and a man that would not. It would not be enough, Kairos saw. In time the Tyrant would be slain, and when that moment came Mercy would choke the life out of the Hierarch.

Too strong. Even after all the schemes and the lies and the hundred petty victories, the servants of the Heavens were simply too strong. Like a rat biting a lion's tail, their rage had been a splendid but doomed gesture. Yet there was glory in that too, the Tyrant of Helike thought. In firing an arrow at the moon and coming close before it fell back down and took you in the throat. Even in defeat he would have no regrets, for –

"If you will not come to me," the Hierarch said, rising to his feet, "then I will come to *you*."

Anaxares of Bellerophon rose while under angel's wroth, and for that insolence the flesh was peeled from his bones by fervent fire.

"Oh," Kairos breathed out, genuinely moved. "Oh, you splendid madman."

The Hierarch of the Free Cities was swallowed whole by shimmering heat that for a moment chased out of even the darkness of Night. And when it went out, he was gone. The White Knight dropped to the ground living, but unconscious, and the Tyrant of Helike felt a laugh bubble out of his throat. Not a rat biting a lion's tail, how wrong he had been. This was a king swallowing poison. He was with them, now. Standing among them, obstructing like only the sons and daughters of Bellerophon could.

"Gods keep you, Hierarch," Kairos said, and for the first time spoke the title with respect.

Gods Below keep you, Anaxares of Bellerophon, and it is a pride to call you Hierarch of the Free Cities, he thought. *Die as you lived, my friend, without peer in your madness.*

"And now we have a war, Catherine," the Tyrant of Helike said. "The war that will bring this age to an end, one way or another."

The Black Queen looked at him through the dying gloom, her face a cool mask.

"On your feet, Kairos Theodosian," she said. "That much you are owed, and not a single thing more."

It would have been a lovely thing, he thought, to dance with that one until one of them died of it. A lovely thing indeed. Matted in sweat and blood, one knee a ruin and both legs half-gone, the Tyrant of Helike pushed himself up. He stumbled forward, legs failing him, and knew he would die before he touched the ground. And it came, it came as he knew it would. Like a whisper across his skin, soothing the pain like a kind hand flicking dust away from his shoulder.

Below was watching.

The attention itself was as a question, for what man or woman alive had paid finer dues than the Tyrant of Helike? And so, at this later hour, he was asked for his wish. So many tantalizing possibilities flickered in the back of his mind. Curses that would rend the continent asunder, the strength to wound even the Choir that was about to take his life or even a loop in the hole – a few years more, if he could talk his way into keeping them. *O Wicked Gods of mine, do you not know me better than this? All I have ever wanted of you was the answer to a single question, and only in this moment could it be asked.* One staggering step forward, and he wet his lips as he spoke.

"lo," he croaked out, "and behold..."

Another step, his knee giving out. If he could only prick his hear, he thought he might...

"I have...slain-" he whispered.

Ahead of him the veil lifted, and terrible light was revealed. And in that moment he finally heard it.

"-the Age of Wonders," the Tyrant finished, smiling with pure childish joy.

And to the sound of applause only he could hear, a moment before light engulfed him, Kairos Theodosian died.

The Hierarch strains my suspension of disbelief, and it's starting to affect my enjoyment. Can someone please help me make sense of this?

I understand narrative is a powerful force multiplier in this universe, but the thing about multipliers is that the number you multiply DOES affect the outcome.

Throughout the story, we saw that narrative doesn't guarantee you a win, it just makes it more likely; which means it has to be possible in the first place.

And power-wise... I'm not sure this adds up.

Where does Hierarch get the strength and weight to fight a Choir to a stand-still?

Is it the years of Bellerophonians worshiping the "will of the people"?

I don't have a problem with that, but... Bellerophon is a city. On Calernia. How old can it be? Everything else on the surface of Calernia seems not to have been around for too long; 1000 years seems likely the upper limit, not? I think its being generous, honestly.

So if that amount of people x time is enough to bring Anaxares in the same league -though an indirect link incidentally, since it wasn't belief addressed to him or even his Name – how comes Sve Noc isn't walking all over Choirs?

They were directly worshipped by an Empire of drows, to whose soul they had a direct link if Hierophant is to be believed, for over two millennia.

Yet we have been told that Sve Noc are, if anything, slightly less than a Choir.

So is it his undying faith in the will of the people?

Because if so... the implications trouble me.

The world is full of obsessed people. If this is all it takes, how is it possible that Calernia isn't a weirder place?

Sure, I get it: it takes one in a million to have that kind of faith. One in a billion, maybe, and many may die before they get anything done.

But Calernia has existed for a few millennias. That is a lot of billions. How come the setting isn't filled with madmen that have reached apotheosis?

If I keep someone in a dark room, sew his eyelids shut, and tell him that the sun is cursed and has toxic light that poisons your skin, does that invent skin cancer?

I... don't understand the rules anymore.

Sunsfury

So as I understand it, Bellerophon has been a hive of raging madness ever since it has been founded, somewhat of a shrine to Below a la the Everdark, without any actual Named. Named are based upon culture, and Anaxares is the embodiment of Bellerophon in pretty much every way. We have seen that determination backed by a story is a powerful thing, and what seems to be Bellerophon's only culture is raging against Tyranny and Foreign Despots for The Will of the People is Law. Anaxares, though sheer ignorance that it shouldn't be possible (combined with the Tyrant's machinations), is applying the core belief of Bellerophon – that people are the only ones who can rule people – directly on Judgement's foreheads.

Novice

If you can get past an orphan girl delivering a pithy one liner against the Choir of Contrition to get them off her back, I don't know how this would trip you up.

Vortex

I think it makes perfect sense. Catherine has repeatedly beaten people far more powerful than her by wielding the Story in clever ways. Now we see the Hierarch doing the same, except of course even with the story of a thousand years of Bellerophon citizens behind him, he lacked the power to beat them, so he used his power to join them instead.

Thorium

The complete and unshakeable belief of a madman built on the iron-willed fanatical faith of an entire city-state for 1000 years, given a Name and enabled by a set of very specific circumstances carefully set up by one of the greatest manipulators there are.

That is not something you get every day.

NerfContessa

Indeed.

And what a Finale it was.

Now if the hierarchy actually went to the choir, I wonder how that will end...

Amazing story.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The key thing is that the Angels, Devils, Demons, while not properly part of Creation, are still part of the System – they are subordinate to the Gods Above and Below... and also constrained in their dealings with mortals.

Call it Greater Creation: Arcadia was the prototype, but was then left in as a resource for the mortal world. Angels, Devils and Demons as team leaders and referees, but still subject to the rules of the system, especially Story. And the players/ game-pieces the host of mortality, subject to the power of Story, but also capable of wielding it not only against each other, but even against the other members of Greater Creation.

Mental Mouse

And a belated self-correction: EE has said that Devils are the counterpart to Angels, but demons are not part of the system, and not subject to Story constraints.

Gabriel

I think the main difference here is that Bellerophon is all about rejecting tyrants, and the adherence to the law as written by the people. The choir of Judgement is in direct opposition to that.

And as mad as it seems, to the Hierarch, and to all of Bellerophon (and to anyone who adheres strictly to the law, without thinking about it), they're in the right. The Choir of Judgement IS trespassing and abusing its authority. And so the story is against them.

Add to that the fact that the Hierarch have aspects linked only to that, to this madness of a tribunal. And we've seen in Rochelant that he is really powerful, able to break a whole city by his Name only, without acting beyond a revolutionary tribunal. Give me another Named that can do that (without acting beyond "I am here to judge tyrants").

Finally, he's not on par with them, he's able to survive them. The Choir of Judgement could refuse the challenge at any time, putting everything to a stop, with the Hierarch unable to act at all. But as Kairos told, they CAN'T bend.

And so he manages to get inside them, a judge inside a tribunal (make sense in a story). Of course he's going to be obstructive as hell, since he's from Bellerophon, but that's not the story here.

jack

A God Died in Bellerophon.

That city marks the death of a bird god, and their Truth of 'All of us are free, or None of us are' was written on it's bones.

And then none of them were free. Bound by their own laws and their own chains.

The moment Judgement tried to claim authority over them, the people who had broken their chains to man, and slain the Bird-God that tried to stop them, it made itself vulnerable. That it did this in Anaxares's court, after having their champion submit himself to Anaxares's law and Judgement, simply lent him more and more power over them.

In 'reality' he's a just a named human and they're Gods, or at least angels, so they should massively overpower him, but in the 'story' that they stumbled into, he was the Authority Of The Court Of Bellerophon, and they were the petty and arrogant creatures who believed themselves to be above Law and Judgement.

They then tried to kill him, in his own courtroom.

Stalemate seems pretty believable to me.

The story they entered weakened them down to petty criminals, and empowered him as a figure of True Authority.

Insanenoodlyguy

Any other day, any other time, any other choir, it wouldn't have worked. But Kairos set it up:

Justice made itself accountable to the law, then refused to answer for the law and tried to kill the judge. You asked about force multipliers, well the biggest ones were given to him by the Choir fighting him them-self. This was the heroic equivalent of a villian saying "I am invincible" and TURNING INTO A GIANT SNAKE.

[Liliet](#)

Oh, yes. Good comparison.

erebus42

Yeah, people often focus on the fact that the fatal flaw of Villains tends to be pride, but they forget that hubris has killed more heroes (not that the Angel's could be considered heroes anyway but still) than any villain or any monster.

Halinn

His power comes from the mandate of the People. From where does the Choir of Judgment derive their authority, for if they claim it ex nihilo, they are most definitely Foreign Tyrants.

[shieldredblog](#)

One thing to remember is that the Heirarchs particular combination of madness and Name did not arise naturally. His type of madness rejects the very concept of Names. Meaning he had to be forced into a ruling name to become Named.

So ya, even thousands of years might not be enough for such a situation to arise.

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

The only rule you need to understand in this story is the rule of the cool mate. This isnt the kind of story where you set up the rules of the magic system and tell a story in the confines you set up.

There is a story on Youtube that actually reminds me of practical guide, H B N R R.

Scmrph

Gotta say, reading a capstone chapter like that and without even intending to scroll down to comments seeing your first paragraph, it was kind of a buzz kill. I won't argue the point because I think the other responses do a good job, just pointing out its not great when such a critical comment is the first thing one sees after the chapter.

[Liliet](#)

Hey, not this person's fault that they were the first one on the second page of comments lmao

Andrew Mitchell

Agree!! The positioning of the comment wasn't the OP's fault. And criticism is welcome here.

Scmrph

They were the only top level comment when I replied and right at the top. Like another poster said it was right there after Tyrants death, impossible not to see. It's a fine comment but if your the first replier maybe wait a bit or give a disclaimer and some empty space.

[Liliet](#)

Second page of the comments. It hadn't yet started when they were posting, as evidenced by them being at the top of it. They had no way of knowing unless you're suggesting they should have counted top level comments before theirs before posting.

The only choice that matters

I don't really see why you feel the need to clamp down on any criticism. It isn't like he was spewing hatred and venom, he made well articulated and clear points . If seeing an argument this mild upsets you i don't really understand why you even look at the comments.

Trying to smother anything that isn't unrepentant gushing in the crib seems like such an inherently toxic attitude to me.

Mary Gentle

I don't think it's wanting to see "gushing" comments rather than criticism that's the problem. I read that comment directly after the climax of the chapter – not because I wanted to, but because I scrolled down to read the Tyrant's death, and the comment was right THERE on the screen in front of my eyes. I couldn't not read it. And it was a bit like the floor dropped out from under me.

I wouldn't for one minute want to stop people expressing criticism. It was just unfortunate placing. I finished the chapter wrung-out with emotion, and then the comment that was immediately there made me feel "...oh. 🙄 "

At the same time, I also knew that I had no particular right to be brought down like that. It wasn't like anyone was trying to make my emotions go 'graunch'.

If there were a sharp division between story and comments, it wouldn't have happened, but there isn't, so from time to time it will.

Nash Equilibrium

I think the most important thing in this standoff is that, from my read, it's not about the Hierarch at all, he's been the Tyrant's patsy since day one. The Tyrant created him (through the name), created the incident to bring this up, set up the trial itself, set the location, and prepared it as almost a ritual to enhance the Hierarch's power for this one thing.

Anaxares could never have set this up on his own, and would have lacked the power even should he have tried, his will be damned. Even with all of the setup, the choirs would have won were it not for both Kairos and Cat getting in their way. It took all of this to create the result we read, so I think that narratively the outcome was justified. I just don't think the Hierarch was an actor with any degree of agency in it, he was just the delivery device that Kairos wielded (a la the Intercessor).

[Liliet](#)

Oh, but in the end it was still all Anaxares who won here. Sure, Kairos delivered the bomb gift-wrapped, and the bomb did not have legs on their own on which to walk, but it was still the bomb that exploded.

Yes, I know this metaphor is tortured. Hush.

Marco A Valente

Yes, it was his show, but I'd argue that the conditions that allowed him to stand here and judge judgment itself are as, if not more, important than his torturously mutilated but consistent logic that allowed him to stare down a choir and remain unbowed. He might have the ability, in principle, to stand against a choir like he did, but in creation stories aren't absolute, so he still needs the power to see it through, and that's what the Tyrant provided, though focused imagery and arcane rituals. Without it I'm pretty sure that he wouldn't be able to do it so effectively.

After all, his story is much weaker thematically than Cat's was when she bullied Contrition, to my read. There are large portions of his case that just don't hold up, and so there's a totally reasonable argument to make that the Hierarch has no right to judge anyone either. I suspect that without the Tyrant being in some ways the focus of this through his interaction with Hanno the entire narrative would fall apart.

Tl;dr Tyrant was MVP in this beautiful ending.

caoimhinh

Yep, this needed a lot of piled up preparations to pull off.

The Choir of Judgement would have struck Anaxares and then maybe leave after a while, if the wards around the court and the town weren't set in place.

The Choir of Mercy would have choked Anaxares and prevented him from fully proclaiming the sentence, if Kairos hadn't interfered.

The Ophanim also would have simply killed Kairos and then proceed to kill Anaxares if Catherine hadn't interfered and made them pause until the rest of the people left the town.

And even then, the Angels would have eventually won, as Hierarch lacked the power to kill the Seraphim, and Kairos would have died by the Ophanim's hand in a short time. But Anaxares managed to take the battle to the Angelic Realm

where the Seraphim are, so now they are still locked into a stalemate in another realm, which causes the Choir of Judgement to stop functioning as they need to deal with him first before carrying any other judgment (kinda like Mercy needing to kill Kairos before choking Anaxares, lest Fate make them fail at both task if they attempted to do both at the same time) thus giving Hanno an ethereal "NO SIGNAL" which knocked him unconscious immediately.

So while Anaxares didn't kill the Angels, he didn't lose either, and is in fact stopping them from carrying judgment over Creation again until they destroy his soul or break his will.

Under Bellerophon's law, enough draws count as a win.

Marco A Valente

I hadn't made the particular connection of "enough draws equals a win" but that is so appropriate.

I thought this chapter was overall brilliant, but I can understand why people feel that having the Hierarch be the crowning actor is underwhelming considering he hasn't struggled to build the set of his victory in the same way that Cat or Kairos have. That's why I was trying to say that this was Kairos's scheme and that allowed it to succeed. But yes, it succeeded in such a quintessentially Bellerophen fashion. It's beautiful.

[ninegardens](#)

A lesser magic can defeat a greater one if it is MORE SPECIFIC.

Heirarch has less general power then Sve Noc... but Kairos has lined him up so he is doing the ONE THING he is good at. Sve Noc have more total power than Anaraxes, they can toss around miracles every day, based on whim, while he sits around doing nothing... but there's also a question of precision.

A car has more power than a dagger, but the dagger will still you if it gets shoved through your eye. A lockpick and screwdriver can take a door off its hinges just as well as any grenade.

[Liliet](#)

You're thinking of it as force multipliers instead of as a story.

The thing about Anaxares of Bellerophon is that he is NOT WRONG. His logic is internally consistent. The angels WEREN'T elected and weren't given right to judge.

It is the nature of the Choir of Judgement to be JUST. They do not 'arbitrarily smite whoever they want'. They judge. They follow internal laws.

And a judge cannot just pass a verdict on the basis of 'blah blah my sword is bigger than yours'.

Overwhelming power just... doesn't work, here. It's misaimed.

Had Anaxares been willing to be cowed, to bend, in the face of Judgement showing them what they saw, in that moment they would have proved themselves right – as he comments himself as it happens, looking away would prove they were right about judging on the basis of something no mortal can know.

But he did not bend, he did not let that argument stand. He COULD face their logic and *still* say they were wrong.

So... they kind of didn't have a next move from there. Police brutality ain't a winning story, not in a heroic narrative.

Mercy could interfere because this whole justice and judgement thing doesn't concern them altogether. They're going for greater good, whether it's just or not. They could ignore Anaxares's point and go 'yeah you might be right but going into that would lead to needless suffering and not prevent any so off with your head'.

This isn't a computer game, where your hit takes off a set amount of opponent's HP. This is... more like chess, where a pawn can take a queen if it's in position to.

Taichi22

Shatranj. The game you're looking for is Shatranj.

[Liliet](#)

No, I'm pretty sure it's not (c) Catherine responding to Amadeus correcting her from 'girlfriend' to 'paramour'

[308924810a](#)

It needs to be noted that he was, to his view, Mending the choir of judgement, by Indicting them for their unacceptable behavior and forcing them to Recieve him.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

You overestimate the Choirs. They are not omnipotent, nor are the greatest of demon hordes or faerie courts. Mortals have a power all their own. It doesn't take a ludicrous amount of force to wound a Choir, just a level of dedication and forethought that is almost unheard of...and, of course, a

combination of "access to a Choir" and "belief that a Choir should be wounded" that is basically inaccessible without a convoluted plan of some kind.

stevenneiman

The Everdark is surprisingly lacking in actual stories. Their version of service to below is too self-centered to concentrate story power the same way it concentrates Night. By contrast Bellerophon has an intense focus on a single story, which is refusing to acknowledge anyone or anything as special or beyond their rules. This laser focus was paired with the story common to the whole League, which is that Heirarchs get things done. I think on some level almost everyone in the League since the death of the first Heirarch has been secretly hoping in their heart of hearts for another Heirarch to show up and sort out whatever they perceive to be the problems with the League. As such, Anaxares has an immense amount of story power focused through a very precise lens. Furthermore, his own personal fanaticism has more of a multiplicative than additive effect of what he's capable of. Because he is completely and utterly devoted to the idea that everyone is subject to his notion of justice and no other, it's very hard to beat him with this style of raw power. Especially because the thing that Justice is tuned for is defeating people who don't care about being just, which I think makes it metaphysically awkward for it to strike at someone who is as certain in his own moral rectitude as they are.

I think it's a little like trying to use Contrition on a newborn.

Onos

There's a lesser god aspected to something like Law backing him, which happens to conflict nicely with Judgements wheelhouse.

SilentWatcher

It's not about the Power of Belief, but about the Story. Sve Noc was made of Sacrifice and Shadow, there is no way they can match a choir without a Story at their back, because how many Stories are there where Evil Gods fail against the Light? The Hierarch on the other hand, has the Madness of Bellerophon behind him and his Story is that even Choirs must abide by the Laws of League. He needed this Trial and the Transgression of League Laws. He couldn't match a Choir if he just attacked them without reason.

Responder

>how comes Sve Noc isn't walking all over Choirs?

>They were directly worshipped by an Empire of drows, to whose

soul they had a direct link if Hierophant is to be believed, for over two millennia.

>Yet we have been told that Sve Noc are, if anything, slightly less than a Choir.

The two crows which are a sliver of Sve Noc are slightly less, we haven't seen their full might.

>Sure, I get it: it takes one in a million to have that kind of faith. One in a billion, maybe, and many may die before they get anything done.

>But Calernia has existed for a few millennias. That is a lot of billions. How come the setting isn't filled with madmen that have reached apotheosys?

You're overestimating the population. It sounds like there's *maybe* a few millions sentient beings on the surface, maybe 10 million if we're being generous. It's estimated that Earth has had a total of 107 billion humans total across many millennia, if there was even a billion total sentient being to have *ever* walked on the surface of Calernia I'd be surprised.

That being said, a fair number have gone through an apotheosis. Dead King, the Sisters, Triumphant seems to have (or, if not, still killed an angel which is the concern you're having), etc.

We're not saying it's common, but it's not unheard of, and merely being crazy and obsessed isn't enough to get someone a Name. Torturing someone into believing a non-truth doesn't create an ironclad belief that they're willing to fight for no matter what.

Bookswiper

And so ends the best side character character

[Liliet](#)

Two best side characters.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Well, we still have Robber if he counts as a side character.

Zggt

Robber is not. Robber is a lesser side footrest.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Of course; please forgive my error.

Some Smartass

Goodnight, sweet prince. And flights of devil scream thee to thy rest.

ReaverOf

I've reread the entire thing while listening to :

He took his final bow, waved out to the crowd and at least he stole the show ...

[Dread Emperor Apocalypse](#)

I think the biggest thing that people are missing is that YOU CAN WIELD MULTIPLE STORIES AT THE SAME TIME. Not JUST a major story with side quests and side stories, BUT MULTIPLE MAJOR STORIES ON BOTH SIDES. ON.BOTH.SIDES. Anaxaphres just wielded multiple major stories that had all arrived AT THE SAME END PATH. Story wise the choir literally just "Became evil" by placing Itself above the law and killing the one that tried to punish it. Godslaying, Good vs Evil (Like I said earlier, Anaxapheres is the good!) The Wrath Of The People (Which was a major story in of itself because if that "bird thing" was a god then they have already KILLED A GOD) Madness, Named, and Ascent To Apotheosis. And probably one or two more that I cant think of as I'm at work right now. All these stories plus the story that The Tyrant wove around this situation makes me wonder How this honestly wasn't a one shot kill.

[Liliet](#)

Oh that's some GOOD SHIT.

Also for your perusal:

Kairos's song (to Catherine, methinks)

Shwa

omg that was perfect. Thank you.

SpeckofStardust

... the mad lad (not to be confused with the mad man) Asked as his dying wish to see and hear the applause of the Gods Below. I have no words.

While the Mad Man has ah, has effectively entered heaven to explicitly screw judgement over for an unknown amount of time, possible forever.

SITB

Until the Will Of The People breaks.

So effectively never.

Trupo

"Justifications only matter to just."

-Cat-

"Rationalisations only matter to rational."

-Keiros-

gingerlygrump

Is anyone else worried this will affect Names? I don't want Namelore to disappear, it's one of the most intriguing pieces to the story.

SITB

Anaxares only dunked on Judgement, not the entirety of Creation. Stuff relating to the Seraphim (like the discussed angel corpse) is now up to grabs, but the greater world will keep on moving.

gingerlygrump

It is the closing statement of the dying Tyrant that concerns me, "I have slain the Age of Wonders."

True, Malicia wrote The Death of the Age of Wonders decades before, but she didn't actually kill it.

What is the Age of Wonders? Is Namelore as old as Creation, as old as Arcadia?

Mary Gentle

And what, exactly, follows the Age of Wonders?

I hope something exciting, but I'm thinking there's a "follow THAT!" quality about the death of an Age of Wonders.

The Liesse Accords would be nice, but not – stunning.

[Liliet](#)

Not stunning? Buddy. Buddy.

They haven't stunned you yet, perhaps. The world they would build has only been alluded to, not painted in all its glory.

But it will not be any smaller than the Age of Wonders.

A literal capital of the continent, where all the nobles, mages and adventurers study and mix together? How is that

less colorful than periodic flying fortresses and angel smittings?

Mary Gentle

I'm not your Buddy, Pal... (Sorry, came over all South Park for a moment. 😊)

OK, I concede it could be colourful. I guess. When it's painted in glory, I may well agree with you. Until then – come on, it's angels and flying fortresses!

After... I guess there could still be ventures into the Everdark, and goblins with hand grenades, and stuff, but... Eh. I guess I'm just a sucker for Classic Villainy. 'The Age of Everybody Using Medium-Level Villainy and Heroism' doesn't quite grab me the same way...

Insanenoodlyguy

Don't underestimate story potential. Heroes and villains regularly in the same place interacting and learning together. This is going to make all kinds of weird pairings. Rivalries, romances, seething hatred, and of course, unexpected but necessary team ups. It's going to get interesting.

[Liliet](#)

What do you call a thief who steals a treasury: a robber, or a queen?

That is a question of the Age of Order.

It's going to be great.

I cannot describe the colors to you if you have no frame of reference to conjure them for yourself, but... have you read Circle of Magic by Tamora Pierce? It comes close to what I see.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

This is action unlooked for. The Undiscovered Country

GoldenCookie

Nay. The Age of Wonders was an age, and that was all. Now that it was slain, the future era is to be determined by whoever can seize it, whether it be the Dead King's slaughter or the Black Queen's Otome Game Academy. The Age of Death or the Age of Order.

[Liliet](#)

Age of Wonders is the time period where history was decided by grand gestures, wars of Good vs Evil, Crusades, angelic intervention and flying fortresses.

A lot of grandeur and a lot of death as backdrop.

Amadeus is the one who dealt the first blow, and has been steadily strangling it the whole time in partnership with his Empress.

It is time for it to die, and something better to be born from the ashes. A new groove Catherine is cutting in creation: even villains being expected to strive for the common good, peace being accepted as better than war as a universal truth, and everyone who cares caring about every part of their society, not just the one that worships the same gods. An age of responsibility and learning to get along, an age where the word 'vigilante' can be born and have a specific referent (as opposed to those who aren't). An age of interconnection, an age of new horizons. An age where the bar is set *higher*.

Age of Order, perhaps. I expect there be a lot of chaos still; an age of Order vs Chaos, perhaps.

It will be glorious, and it will be better.

NZPIEFACE

You know, the only person living that knows what happens in the church is now Cat.

She was the sole audience to both a semi-apotheosis and someone being congratulated by Below.

Everyone is going to wonder what the hell happened in the church once this ends. Zeze is going to be pissed that he didn't see what happened. Cordelia is also going to be pissed now that her weapon is a wildcard. Hanno is going to be confused because his Choir got fucked. Archer is probs going to be the most chill.

SITB

I think 'insensate' is probably the most accurate description of the Seraphim are now. They are still there, but are blocked by the Hierarch from doing anything.

Dan Lawrence

But he has followed in the footsteps of Triumphant, and even one upped her in showing that an *entire choir* can be neutralized by a committed villain. That's going to leave a mark in the story of creation.

Men are no longer forever subject to the control of angels;
should you be clever enough, or mad enough, they can be
vanquished.

Thorium

When Cat said that she had stabbed two different fathers, who was
she referring to other than Black?

limwanya

Assassin who was disguised as black when captured by Diabolist

Truthhut

I thought she meant the far who she claimed was her "father"
and black after Akua's Folly

Jesse Coombs

No. Not assassin, the Duke of Violent Squalls.

-Anonymous-

The Duke of Whatsit, that one punk in Arcadia that she lied her
way into being the daughter of.

Jesse Coombs

The fairy she killed though the "the magical power of lies"
(<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/06/14/chapter-14-trick/>) , that let her take his power, as she was
his daughter and 'inherited' it/'it was always hers'.

Wnderer

the Duke of Howling Squalls in Winter

Andrew Mitchell

Reading all the comments above, I now think there have been
three times that fit the statement:

1. Duke of Violent Squalls in Arcadia.
2. When she stabbed Assassin who was pretending to be Black.
3. When she really stabbed Black.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Assassin don't count.
Duke of Violent Squalls.
Black
Enough said.

Draconic

Whatever the Tyrant and everyone else says, I would be more worried about the Wandering Bard instead of the Dead King.

Crash

Of note, it occurs to me that if the Free Cities are to be the City-States of Ancient Greece and Helike is to the Macedon equivalent, Kairos is our very own Alexander the Great.

Honestly, that is beautiful all on it's own don't you think?

burguulkodar

what, you just realized that connection NOW?

But congratulations nevertheless. It is as you say.

Crash

Honestly, aside from me being terribly slow at times, I've been waiting for the moment of Greatness, because I figured in a world of stories it wouldn't be just a title, this is it I would think.

Jacob McNeer

Yeah, Helike is Macedonia/Pella, Bellerophon is Athens, Stygia is Sparta, Atlante is either Delphi, or Olympia, Penthes is Corinth or Crete, Nicae is Rhodes and Delos is (for lack of a better option) Delos.

Shikkarasu

Gods Below and Everburning, Anaxares is going to *filibuster a Choir*. I love this. I couldn't ask for a better ending to either of these majestic madmen.

Wishun

Kairos was the Joker of this universe.
So insane he slips off the edge of the scale and backs into "super sanity"; so crazy that he comprehends the deeper Truth.
This world is a show, with Above and Below as the audience.
And say what you will about yon fallen Tyrant, he put on one hell of a show.

It takes a genius like a corkscrew to harness "David vs Goliath" and "Humble Man self-sacrifices to thwart the Arrogantly Powerful" to a villain's cause.

[Liliet](#)

It also takes prioritizing aesthetic over self-interest.

Imagine what Kairos could have been like if he'd not been pushed into the corner he was in by Above's worshippers. If he'd not decided that being a villain was the path he wanted to commit his entire being to. If he'd actually found a cause to fight, scheme and laugh for that wasn't 'make evil gods clap'.

Fern

The Gods Below don't give the ability to scale endlessly as a philosophical counterpoint to Above. It turns out, they're bored as fuck and just want entertainment 😂

Fuck the avengers, if I was immortal and had thirty years I'd totally construct the path for warlock to go ham just for the action packed b-plot climax. Sure beats the shit out of idiots using punch lasers

burguulkodar

Glorious Chapter!

You abominable yet wonderful madmen!

builds statues of them and their evil deeds

Kurona

So he went to the choir directly and killed them, jesus no wonder the intercessor was so scared of him.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Not killed, I don't think. He's in their midst now, obstructing their duties. He forced his way into honorary membership (!) and is using the position to filibuster them.

I could be wrong about this, of course.

caoimhinh

He went to the Choir to kill them, yes. But Anaxares lacks the power to kill them, while at the same time the Choir of Judgement also lacks the power to destroy him or break his will.

So now both sides are locked in a stalemate, and they can't do anything until they finish the trial, which can't finish because Anaxares will not bend and the Seraphim don't have enough power to forcefully erase him.

Dusting

Lively ending. And what a man huh? Gods favour at his fingertips and he spat on it all like he always did and always has done. Gods take you you malicious imp!

Fern

Fuckin....

I love this book, a whole lot. I've known since the end of book 2 that this thing is something special, and the death of the Tyrant is gonna be one of my favorite literary excerpts for a while. So completely obviously foreshadowed, yet none the less fascinating for it.

Two things:

Did hierarch just deify himself, or is he dead? I can't tell 🤔

MY FUCKING CRACK THEORY GAINS MORE FUEL YES I've been thinking for a while that the whole setting and the gods above/below are just essentially audiences and the moments of "attention" we're seeing are them rewarding Named for a good performance, and the gnomes only became so powerful because the Gods are literally trying to keep creation in a certain genre. Kairos, the one who played the whole thing as a game from start to finish got the ultimate vindication in death: creation is a show, and he just fucking murdered his performance. He's definitely getting a Divine Emmy for this shit.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> Kairos, the one who played the whole thing as a game from start to finish got the ultimate vindication in death: creation is a show, and he just fucking murdered his performance.

Usually "dying on stage" is bad, but this time... 😊

Big I

It's why Traitorous and Irritant were so successful ; they were the most genre savvy. Black as well, I suppose, in the opposite direction.

[Sinestere](#)

Is everyone forgetting that Cat is going to pay what is owed and what she can do? This is apart from the Wish as that was under his own power even as the Gods Below granted it. Resurrection is one of her tools now.

The Kairos might be annoying, but he was useful at the same time and wise in the ways of story-fu. Considering the company that our Black Queen keeps (like Robber), he could fit in and be part of the future. Kairos is finished as the Tyrant politically, and

stripped of his toys. However, the best part of him is clearly his mind. The world will be a poorer place without him so that might not happen just yet.

Insanenoodlyguy

No. She got to use resurrection the once. No more. And it's a horrible idea. He'd feel robbed. He'd make you regret bringing him back like few others on principal.

[Liliet](#)

> Resurrection is one of her tools now.

It's not. Aspect artifacts are single use.

ninegardens

So... just a sec, but what's the bet that Cat goes Raiding Kairos's corpse for one of his aspects?

Because for serious, he has some good ones, and being able to dump a "WISH" on the battlefield, even if you only get one, is pretty damn effective.

[Mental Mouse](#)

Given the effects Kairos was experiencing, I suspect that the angels methodically destroyed Kairos' body beyond hope of salvaging anything from it.

Crow3r

Clap clap clap Kairos Theodesian. You know how to go with bang.

Crow3r

Also notice Cat saying: "It's a monologue, isn't it?" and thus granting Kairos a Right to speak, as every villain now and before.

[Rey d`Tutto](#)

Your Dying Monologue. don't think this ain't significant

Daniel E

Bit late to the comments, so I might have missed this question; Does this mean the Choir of Judgement is effectively in stasis? Not harmed, but unable to use its' power while grappling with the lower-case (but still very strong) judgement of The Diplomat?

Also, brilliant observation by Kairos – Every time Cat mouths off to Angels (and even Demons on occasion, don't forget the Tower's

door knocker) & gets away with it, she adds a groove into Creation. Soon, Cat being able to tell Above & Below what to do or not do will be a perfectly normal fact of life. Seasons change, gold is shiny, and the very pantheon itself heeds the words of Catherine Foundling.

Andrew Mitchell

> Does this mean the Choir of Judgement is effectively in stasis? Not harmed, but unable to use its' power while grappling with the lower-case (but still very strong) judgement of The Diplomat?

Yes, that seems to be very much the consensus in the comments.

Some Smartass

Catherine: "That much you are owed, and nothing more."
Gods Below: "Hold Our beer."

Alex K

I loved the song, wish there was more 😊

Barrendur

Well played with Kairos – but otherwise this update just felt like a dust-storm of Name shenanigans; messy and unclear. And as to the climactic scene: It left me thinking, "Well, okay, if that's what you say this all meant, you're the author" ... but I still didn't find the outcome convincing or satisfying.

Andrew Mitchell

You're not alone. Sherivan has made similar comments (<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2019/10/18/interlude-a-hundred-battles/comment-page-2/#comment-57059>) . And several people provided some very good responses that are also worth reading.

[Liliet](#)

I dunno, it was clear as glass to me. Any specific questions you have?

Daniel Tabakman

I think it's that Judgment just tried to subvert a judge, thereby attacking itself.

I think the differences between above and below were just made by the interceptor, and death, each one trying to get heroes and powers on their side.

The Tyrant just showed that there is no difference between above and below, that's why Cathrine is the center of the story "there is no good or evil, there is only power and what you want"

This was Kairos's gift to the world, the shattering of the illusion of the differences between good and evil, the internal contradiction within good, and the realization that death is coming for all of them.

[Walter](#)

I really liked this update, and also just want to praise a verse of the opening song.

Weep not for us,
For in the annals
Our stele reads thus:
A hundred battles

That's kind of great. Way to go author!

[308924810a](#)

Well, I suppose that they can still hope that the Corpse of Judgement will still work if they can get Anaxares to agree with the rest of the Tribunal that the Dead King deserves smiting.

Though honestly using an angel corpse against the Dead King never struck me as the greatest idea in the first place.

[ninegardens](#)

I mean... in some sense Anaraxes point is that the Choir of judgement don't have an open book of laws that people can look at. The people have no power to DECIDE what laws are applicable.

The eyes of Judgement, combined with the lawbook of... well maybe not Bellephrone, but SOME mortal editable lawbook, would be a pretty reasonable system.

laguz24

Justice and Mercy to Kairos and Anaraxes: Why, Wont, You, Die!

IronTiki

Kairos Theodosian, mad Tyrant of Helike, has been my favorite villain to read of, ever. Thanks for the delightful ride, you magnificent treacherous bastard, my applause joins that of Below!

Daniel E

Hello future reader. The comments section rarely reaches 2 pages, so just in case you missed it; please reread the Chapter 3 Prologue now.

Mack

What does Cat mean that she “stabbed her father twice” and that it wasn’t even the same person both times?

Only time I recall her stabbing Black was after second Liesse. And there’s no one else to call her Father.

Jarl Zarl

The Duke of Violent Squalls in Winter her “father” whose signet ring she’d “always” had

[tasellb](#)

tasellb a0814cc162 <https://wakelet.com/wake/ImWswIssPTb4RQ8PZ8UFs>

Chapter 84: Declaration

“To concern yourself with wickedness and virtue is to raise partitions within your mind, expecting the world to heed them thereafter. There can be no sin, save for fettering.”

– Translation of the Kabbalis Book of Darkness, widely attributed to the young Dead King

Kairos Theodosian died before the light engulfed him. I couldn’t know that for sure, for the Tyrant of Helike had already been a half-mangled corpse by the time he rose, but some part of me just... *knew*. Night wrapped around me like a cloak, for without its cold embrace I would have been blinded, I watched as the brightness burned and consumed and finally ended. Of the boy-king who’d played half the crowns of Calernia, not so much as a speck of dust remained. The fury of the Choir of Mercy had swallowed him whole, though too late. Not long, truly, in the greater scheme of things, but in affairs like this a single beat could make all the difference in the world – and he’d clawed to him a great deal more than that. The fading light of his absence left me feeling disordered, for though Kairos Theodosian had been an appalling monster in some ways in others he had been almost admirable. I would not miss him or fall into the snare of remembering him as more than he had been: mad, treacherous and

like poison to all he touched. Yet neither would I pretend he had not been brilliant, in his own wicked way.

The world was better for his passing, but in some terrible way perhaps lesser as well.

In the gutted temple that'd been the seat of this lunacy of a trial, the dust settled and the darkness I had called down thinned until nothing of it was left. The Grey Pilgrim laid in a bed of shattered wood and ground, made unconscious by the heavy grip of the Choir that'd reached out through him. The White Knight's hand still clutched the side of the broken altar where he'd stood as the living channel to Judgement, or perhaps the anchor around its neck. It was hard to tell if the Tyrant would have been able to bait – although could it really be called that, when all he'd needed to do was shine a light and let nature take its course? – the Tribunal into this disaster of a situation without the White Knight at hand to work through. And a disaster it had been, no two ways about that. Mercy would walk away from this with little singed save perhaps its pride, should even have such a thing, but Judgement? I could still feel in the air the weight of the power it'd thrown around, smiting the Hierarch into the ground again and again as he refused to bow to their authority.

I could still feel his power, too, the same heavy lingering furor that'd swallowed Rochelant whole. It had been more sharply wielded here, turned against the Seraphim instead of allowed to run rampant, and perhaps been stronger for it. It'd glimpsed things at the heart of the storm, images I hardly understood – a stele in stone, a woman dying – but one thing was clear: there had been power behind the Hierarch, and it was not simply the power of a Named. The weight had come from elsewhere, and it had been... oppressive. In every sense of the term. And though it had failed to cow Judgement, neither had it been willing to be cowed by it. More worryingly, when that stalemate had grown beyond what either side would tolerate the Hierarch had, for a lack of better term, pursued. I'd not felt a speck of power from either him or the Choir since.

Still, my eyes looked beyond as I waited. To the other thing that yet waited.

"And?" I quietly said.

"He was still alive," the Hierophant said.

Masego's feet tread across the scorched earth unerringly, his stride as sure and certain it had been even as Choirs raged and darkness swelled. What would the works of godlings matter, to one like him?

"That last strike by the Seraphim burned him clean through," I said. "Not even bone left, Hierophant. What business does even the likes of the Hierarch have surviving that?"

"You mistake life for the wearing of flesh," Masego replied. "I know not if it was willingly or by chance, yet the Hierarch sacrificed his own as skillfully as any Old Tyrant: the loss of flesh was taken as victory by the Choir of Judgement, and so they withdrew."

Above us the afternoon sky grew darkened, and slowly the sky began to weep ash. It felt, looking up, like the dusk heralding the end of the worlds. Gods forgive us all, it might yet be.

"And he withdrew with them," I softly said. "Hooked into the hallowed flesh by the ironclad belief he had the right to judge it."

My old friend's steps slowed and finally ceased as he came to stand by my side, shoulder-to-shoulder. Masego, wearing cloth over eyes of glass and the ragged dark robes like a doomsday prophet, seemed more the man of the moment than I. The truth, though, was that he had been spectator while I'd had my hands all over this blunder.

"I am uncertain what will come of it," Hierophant admitted, tone displeased. "It may be that the man becomes an obstruction in all things, as a seal ever judged and judging."

"Or he could be a poison," I murmured. "Taint in the blood, changing what stood incapable of such until now."

The latter, I thought, felt more like the parting arrow of Kairos Theodosian. Something wounded but not slain, a crippling rendered back unto the Creation that had so carelessly wounded him since his first breath.

"Let us hope it is that," Hierophant said, and my brow rose.

He dipped his head to the side, conceding to the need for elaboration.

"A poison will be purged, whether it takes an hour, a decade or a millennium," Masego said. "A seal, however, might just last until the convictions of either side falter. And before that moment, would sever Judgement from the rest of Creation."

That would be... dangerous, I suspected. A Choir was no small thing, to have one removed from the machinery of Creation could not possibly be without consequence. And that was without even considering the matter of Cordelia Hasenbach's angelic corpse-weapon: Gods only knew what might come of using it, now. Ash fell like rain onto the open-sky temple at the heart of Lyonceau, and

I was forced to wonder if in my need to forge a better world I might not have doomed the world as it now stood. The Tyrant had been cryptic, as was his wont, but not beyond interpretation: the Bard had truly had a scheme afoot to slay the Dead King, and I'd taken an axe to it. I was not alone in this, it seemed, for *the hidden sting of augury* was undoubtedly a reference to the Augur, but it could not be said that a great deal of the blame to be laid did not belong at my feet. If I'd not tried to fix it, to make it better, the Intercessor's scheme might have gone through and the Dead King would either be dead or marching towards death. *He implied using the weapon would have had... costs*, I reminded myself. It must have been the sight of those to come that'd led the Augur to turn on the Wandering Bard, however she'd done it.

Gods Everburning, how harsh must that price must have been that a hero would have shied from paying it to slay the *Dead King*.

"I can't tell," I softly admitted, "if I've made everything better or worse."

A chuckle, deeply amused.

"Neither can anyone else, Catherine," Masego told me. "Why would you be any different?"

I looked up at the sky, at the trails of ash left by the wrath of angels, and did not answer. It was not untrue, what he'd said. Perhaps not the answer I'd wanted, but when had they ever been?

"Too late to turn back now," I said, letting out a long breath. "We'll have to see it through to the end."

A hand came to rest on my shoulder, lightly.

"I would have been disappointed if we did not," Hierophant said.

The danger had passed, as much as it would ever pass in a place marked by the indignation of two Choirs, and so it was not long before the others began to trickle back in. The Rogue Sorcerer headed first to the Pilgrim – the right choice, I thought, both tactically and politically – and with visible relief pronounced him in fine health, save for deep exhaustion and a few bruises. Lord Yannu and Lady Aquiline lifted him up, with reverent care, and brought him out. The Witch of the Woods saw to her partner hesitantly, and I suspected she knew precious little of healing. She seemed pleased when Roland came to lend a hand, though less so when admitted that Hanno's slumber was not natural, but otherwise beyond his ability to see to.

"Bring him out," I said. "And if the Peregrine cannot see to him when he wakes, then the Crows will."

The heroine rose to her feet, tall and shrouded in a cloak that covered a long tunic. The painted mask of clay on her face hid her expression, but not so much I could not feel the hostility wafting off her like smoke.

"As they did when the Choirs struggled against your kin under Below?" the Witch harshly said.

There was, I thought, something strange about her voice. I heard her speaking in Lower Miezán, but there were almost other meanings woven in – and with the Sisters warding my mind, I could almost discern what language she was *actually* speaking in. It didn't sound like any I'd ever heard before, and I was a more than passing polyglot nowadays.

"I warned him," I said. "Sve Noc would see to containment and nothing else. Be glad they did, or this entire town would be drowning in fire and angelic anger."

"You brought down darkness after the Tyrant struck," the Witch accused.

"And saved the lives of everyone on those grounds by doing so," I flatly said.

"I could have warded us from the anger of the Ophanim," the Witch said. "Had you not-"

"If you could have handled it better, you should have," I mildly said. "You didn't, so I stepped in. Whining afterwards is an exercise in pointlessness."

"Every hero that speaks well of you ends up *crippled*, Catherine Foundling," the Witch of the Woods snarled. "While you grow ever stronger. I wonder why that is?"

"Antigone," the Rogue Sorcerer said. "This serves no purpose."

"Neither does pretending she is our ally," the Witch said.

"In the face of some foes, all those that breathe are allies," the Sorcerer flatly said. "Pretending otherwise is how the day grew so dark in the first place."

"Hear hear," Archer drawled.

She'd sauntered in at some point and done so quietly enough I'd barely heard the sound of her boots biting into the ash. Throwing arms around the necks of both Masego and I – that could hardly be comfortable, given the height difference – she leaned forward grinning.

"We get you're all pissed your boy Hanno got had, but maybe if you whiteclads better kept your eye on the bird you wouldn't have

to keep eating dirt," Indrani said, tone was deceptively cheerful.

Her arms were tense, and I knew well how quickly she could draw her blades when it was time for killing.

"You offer insolence and nothing more," the Witch said.

"Really?" Archer drawled, drawing out the word obnoxiously. "'cause look at how we're standing right now, my sweet. Who are, again, the only ones keeping an eye on the bird?"

And like a cold sheet of rain falling on everyone, we were all reminded of the presence in the back that had yet to move or speak a single word. The Dead King's vessel watched us all with his eyeless gaze, and it was true that while the Witch of the Woods was facing me, all this time Hierophant and I had been facing him. Indrani had spoken the observation lightly, but it had unpleasant aftertaste for much of the room – enough that the Witch briskly and oddly moved her head in a manner I assumed to mean the conversation was over. The King of Death said nothing, all the while. Now that they'd all been warned of his presence again, the others in the temple felt the same thing I had since the beginning: weight. The old monster was waiting, and as he did his looming presence grew oppressive without need of a single act on his part. If he'd incited quarrels between us, I thought, or even mocked and scorned us, it would have been different. It would have felt like he was part of this, a villain far more dangerous than most of our kind but not *other*. His silence, though, drew a line between him and us.

The Dead King was not involving himself in this because he was above us. Because he had no need of resorting to petty tactics when we were, to him, little more than children stumbling in the dark.

It flowed, after that, like a river settling into a riverbed. Like Creation wanted the pieces to fall into place. The White Knight was carried out by Roland and the Witch, carefully, and in the place of heroes came in the mortal crowns. Cordelia Hasenbach stood at the centre, the First Prince of Procer of regal bearing even in her riding dress but not quite successfully hiding how unnerved she'd been by the last hour. The Blood come to war north: Lady Aquiline and Razin Tanja, elbow to elbow and fitting there like a shield wall of two. The young ones, those, two, and rising. The old guard stood at their left, grizzled Lady Itima and grim Lord Yannu, both killers as fine as the Dominion had forged in my lifetime. And to the Warden of the West's right, more than half of the Woe. Hierophant, ragged and of glimmering eye, foe and student both to the Hidden Horror. Archer, smile sharp as the blades at her hip, having walked through death and come out of it without fear. And I, last of all, leaning on the long staff of yew I had chosen over the sword of a Fairfax and

all it would mean. All this assembly, and on the other side only the King of Death. Seated, silent, still.

Ash drifted down through the open-sky ceiling, coating us all in grey.

"There is a place," the last king of Sephirah said, "in the heart of Levant, where the first pilgrim of grey slew many men."

Red embers lit the hollow sockets, as the Dead King finally spoke.

"In that place lies a secret that Tariq Isbili will know," Neshamah continued, "and it will tell you, should you be clever enough, of the doom you all so narrowly escaped by the grace of Kairos Theodosian."

The malevolent redness lingered on Masego's face, and he met that gaze with glass forged in Summer's flame.

"Follow the truth, Hierophant," the Dead King said, sounding almost amused.

Always more secrets, I tiredly thought. Always more schemes. Would there ever be an end, before either he was broken or we were?

"Enough," the First Prince of Procer said. "You came to these lands, Trismegistus King, to this conference, and yet held your peace. Speak now to your intent, or begone."

She must be afraid, I thought. Brave as she was, she was without power. Not even a trained warrior, as I understood it, and she was looking at the oldest and most powerful monster ever spawned by Calernia. Yet Cordelia Hasenbach stood tall and proud, eyes hard and bearing icy. I caught her fingers brushing against what looked like a necklace made of little fangs, under the sleeve of her dress.

"I have been considering peace," the Hidden Horror said, tone nonchalant. "More than truce, peace. One enforced by treaties that you all seem so eager to embrace."

I would not brook you signing the Accords, I thought. *Else how could you be the sacrifice binding them together?*

"But you are blind," the King of Death said. "Even the finest of you, so very *blind*. And so I wonder now what purpose would there be to such a peace. None. Not when the Intercessor would still use you as tools whenever she so wishes."

"You speak in riddles, of strangers," Lord Yannu Marave of the Champion's Blood said. "Your babble means less than dust."

"It seems like the path of recklessness, at first glance," the King of Death pensively said. "Yet it is more calculated a risk than waiting. Some chances never come again, no matter how long the wait."

"Has age caught up to you, dead thing?" Lady Itimi Ifriqui sneered. "You speak senselessly."

"No," I quietly said. "He doesn't."

Red embers moved to me, the patient and inhuman mind behind them gracing me with its attention.

"That was a declaration of war," I announced.

There was a thundering silence in the wake of the words I'd spoken.

"There is still time to the truce," Cordelia Hasenbach sharply said. "Will you now break your word, Dead King?"

The Hidden Horror considered her in turned, before he let out what I could only call a fond bit of laughter.

"Hasenbach," the Dead King said. "Yes, that is fitting. One of the old blood should be here, at the beginning of the end. Your line is a respectable one, Cordelia Hasenbach. Never once did the city of Rhenia fall to my armies, when one of your blood held it. None other can make the same boast."

"Dawn has not yet failed," the First Prince of Procer said. "Nor will it, so long as I breathe."

The old monster shook with laughter.

"Let us do this properly, then," Neshamah said.

The corpse rose, tall and robed and resplendent, and from the heights he had not left since we first came to this temple he looked down on us – with ember-like burning in the hollow sockets of his skull, red glimmering on the jewels set in the bones.

"There is no peace," the Dead King said. "There is no truce. There is only the shiver before the blade claims your neck. You will fight and you will rage and you will weep, but in the end there can only ever be one end to this."

The red burned, burned like red star that would swallow the world whole.

"I am the King of Death," the last king of Sephirah said. "I come."

Beginning with the crown of the head, the bones cracked and splintered and shattered. From the fractures the pale ivory-like

bones turned to dust. The jewels broke and dimmed, the metals rusted and curled, until there was nothing left of the vessel at all.

Ash fell down from the sky, silent and soft.

And so it begins, I thought. Gods save us all, and so it begins.

Javvies

I wonder what this secret the Dead King is speaking of.

Yeah ... Judgement has had a really bad day, and Hanno's has likely been worse.

Judgement might be trying to use Hanno's mind/consciousness to help excise Heirarch.

Heh.

A declaration of war by the Dead King. They only thought things were bad before now.

Sylwoos

The cost for using Hasenbach's weapon against the Dead King, most likely.

konstantinvoncarstein

If Neshamah did not considered his former attacks a war, what will happen now?

caoimhinh

I think it's going to be really horrifying now, with the Kingdom of the Dead bringing out its worse weapons and dark sorceries, along with more presence by the Revenant Named.

Oh, it's going to be a horrible war, and will put to the test all their power, skills, talents and wits. It will force them to make sacrifices and create innovative strategies on par with the Princes' Graveyard and wield sorceries and miracles like Thalassina's destruction and the Red Flower Vales' shattering. Since that's the only way they will be able to face the true might of the King of Death...

But that *also* means that Neshamah will overcommit, and commit the errors he has spent the last millennia avoiding, so it should also present the Coalition the story force and Narrative weight to finish him for good.

Like Kairos predicted, the Dead King only fears the Intercessor, so now that the original plan she had was unmade and the weapon she wanted to point at him is unavailable, Neshamah believes he is unbeatable and a lasting victory is near at hand, which is a magnificent hubris in an old villain.

Which is, quoting our favorite pragmatic father-daughter duo:

Mistake

konstantin von carstein

I agree with your analysis, but I don't understand why the DK would commit such a stupid mistake. He is extremely genre-savvy, it's strange

[Adrian_V](#)

Because smart as he is he has blind spot plus he has stanated in his way of thinking, he is not as flexible as he may think, remember what Kairos and Cat discussed at the end of the game of tower raising.

[ninegardens](#)

He's making this "Mistake" for several reasons:

1) He believes that there is inherent risk in waiting. Technology and diplomacy moves forward. In twenty to fifty years the continent may well be largely "united" by the accords, have a fully functional magical academy, and will no longer be beaten bloody by recent wars. The continent is currently at an unusually weak point, wrecked by their own internal fighting. Which version of the Calerin would YOU rather fight.

2) If he waits, intercessor has time to make a NEW plan. If he attacks now while her most recent plan is bust and he has full intel on her movements, his odds are better.

3) Supposing he wants to take over Someday, he will ALWAYS have to fight against the story in some sense. This is just a liability he has to face, one way or another.

4) As demonstrated by Kairos, he is predictable in the same sense as General Juniper: He always makes the winning move. He can't not. He can't imagine someone not acting in order to win, and in the current circumstance, victory IS a reasonable outcome. He knows more than we readers do. He's been flattening Procer for months *while softballing them*. If he actually puts the effort in now, then yes,

from a practical sense (not a story sense) he has a good chance of winning. Raw power does count for something.

5) Even from a story sence, Calerin is vulnerable at the moment- the present weakness of all their armies is the result of their own damn stupidity and in fighting. If he can spin the tale of "Crabs in a bucket act stupid and then get eaten by a fisherman" he may well make that stick.

konstantinvoncarstein

It makes much more sense, thank you 🙄

[onedollargum](#)

And that doesn't even touch on the recent hamstringing of the choir. The ever-adapting White Knight will be out of commission for a while too.

Zggt

He knows once he wins, he could transform what he conquered the way he did Keter, create a continent where going against him is *unthinkable*. He'd be written in history as the great forger of the longest standing and most terrible empire in history. He'd last until the final showdown of Good vs. Evil, leading the charge for Evil.

I think that's the gamble he was always going to take at a certain point. Every step he has taken has to become The Big Bad on the biggest scale. The Bard is the only one who has any sense of scale as to his plans, and he can be as certain as it gets that her plans have failed. Calernia's internal strife has had the entire continent rip itself apart just now. So if ever there was a story about him making that step up succeeding, it would have to start at a point like this.

The fact that he's waited patiently until now means that pragmatically, he's got a nice tragedy written for Calernia. It will be full of brave last stands, fighting old friends and enemies come back from the dead, grief, betrayal, and in the end everyone dies. It did work out for the Mizeans up to a point, and it's safe to say he's studied on how to go about it better.

So, the timing couldn't be better, the beginning of a story in which he comes out on top has basically already happened, and he has what is probably overwhelming force and enough savvy to give him a very credible chance to

succeed even if everything will align against him perfectly from the very start.

He considered expansion until that land was an extension of his will by a treaty that he knows will eventually be crossed by one Named or other, and making it a story of his slow and inexorable expansion over the ages, how he ground down even the strongest of resistance. Let's not pretend that peace would be anything but that. The fact that he would have to give up such a good opportunity to act makes it too passive for a story about a Big Bad.

So, when he talks about calculations, it's for his actual endgame. His scope isn't measured in kingdoms, it's about exactly how high he can possibly rise over eons. From our perspective, Cat's story is all that. From his, she might be another Triumphant and he can survive that.

NerfContessa

Agreed.

Still, before the end, he will flense half the continent.
And likely kill all heroes and many villains alive now.

[Liliet](#)

Also, I have a theory this WAS Intercessor's trick.

She set up a plan he would find out and thwart, all the while prepping a story of the continent coming together against him that he wouldn't think was her doing and wouldn't think of as a threat.

I don't think Catherine coming up with Accords directly on the heels of a known successful Bard plot was much of a coincidence.

[inegardens](#)

Oh gawd.
See this is the kind of thinking which inevitably leads to "That's what she wants us to think!" no matter WHAT happens.

Don't get me wrong. We're dealing with Bard- I think your paranoia is justified. It's just...

Oh gawd. Dealing with Bard is exhausting on my brain.

[Liliet](#)

See, that's not actually how I came by that.

I was saying she probably let DK have the intel on purpose within a chapter posting time of that event (although I did not at the time have an explanation for *why* she would, and like everyone else thought he was referring to her ultimate endgame and not just the specifics of her plan for thwarting him, which is what it appears to have actually been), and that she wants the Liesse Accords for longer than that ([receipts and detailed explanation](#)).

I keep questioning that theory as new information comes up, and then new information keeps coming up that makes me go back to it again. Right now it looks to me more plausible than ever – because we're at the end of Book 5, and it's *still* a fitting coherent explanation for what's going on...

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Eh...I doubt it. Revealing that Catherine and the Augur's efforts to subvert the Intercessor's plots were just another part of the Intercessor's plots, like some cut-rate Xanatos parody, would go too hard against the flow of the story. Not the in-universe narrative grooves (though there's an argument there as well), but the themes and patterns set up in the actual story which is being published and read on WordPress.

The whole story is about Amadeus and Catherine striving to overcome and overturn the foul patterns in the systems which control their world; so far, on smaller scales, they have generally been successful, with failures being the result of their own flaws or deficiencies more than the Powers That Be intervening. Overturning ths at the last hurdle, having the Intercessor reveal that the Liesse Accords fettering her greatest tools and the Augur stopping what seems like a damn good plan were all a part of her *true* master plan would necessarily undermine some important part of the story's themes, in a way that was never foreshadowed or otherwise alluded to. It would be unsatisfying, in a way that is painfully obvious to any but the most amateur writers.

...Also, the stuff that Catherine et al have been doing has generally gone against the Intercessor's obvious interests. There's nothing to suggest that the Intercessor has secret plans that would require her to pretend to not want those things that would hurt her, instead of just letting those things happen and working

with the people who would implement them to gain some goodwill.

[Liliet](#)

Augur, agreed. What has Catherine done that's gone against Intercessor's 'obvious interests'? Other than Accords themselves, which very much ARE in line with Intercessor's previously expressed preferences in some ways, especially if the 'no Named rulers' clause gets axed, which it's likely to?

Don't forget, for a mastermind, it's not your intent to oppose them that decides whether what you're doing is against their plans.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Catherine has explicitly tried to stop the Intercessors plans. I'd call that "going against her obvious interests," unless we presume that those interests are just a sham meant to trick Catherine into ignoring her REAL master plan. Which would be... kind of a dumb twist. I'm not saying it *can't* be done well, I'm saying that it's almost impossible to pull off, and the setup isn't really there.

ICSM

Late to the party, but it doesn't have to be a Xanatos Gambit inside a Xanatos Gambit. It could easily be an Indy Ploy following an Xanatos Pileup.

In non TvTropes speak, she didn't have to account for Augur and Cath messing with her plan so she could unfold her REAL plan that also had to account for other dozen plans, half of which were made by un-scryable and non-mind-readable people. Making plans that can't be fruitful unless a second subset of plans are foiled is stupid.

What is much more feasible is that she had a long-term plan (Getting Cordelia named a Warden/Protector, then getting the her to shoot a WMD at DK), and when that plan was foiled, she made another on the fly that took the new circumstances into account. It would be in line with what we have seen the Intercessor do. The main example being when she weaved story after story, on the fly, to kill Cath when Cath tried to talk about her to the Pilgrim.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

One thing that none of the people who directly replied to you seem to have brought up yet: Neshamah doesn't seem to consider anyone other than the Intercessor a real threat now that Catherine isn't on the edge of apotheosis. For the reasons others have noted, he doesn't see the armies of Calernia as a threat to his own armies at this time, and he's never considered the plots of mere mortals to be a serious threat to his own. The only possible threats he sees are strategic (the armies thing) and the Intercessor... whose big plans have been neutralized.

Of course, we the readers know that underestimating the Carrion Lord's scion is folly of the highest order, especially when you let hubris put you into a narratively-disadvantageous position. But this is literally a world filled to bursting with would-be protagonists, and the Dead King has defeated all that came before now. How is he to know that only this one has a web serial about her?

konstantinvoncarstein

Well put, especially the last sentence 🙄

Jessica Day

I agree with most of this but he seems to see it as a calculated risk rather than a sure thing. I don't think he sees himself as unbeatable. He definitely sees the odds in his favor though.

JJR

Judgement.exe has encountered an unexpected error and must shut down.

Hopefully they have a secure backup they can load the last stable version from.

Garrett Therkorn

You know what they say. There's two types of people on the world: those who keep backups, and those who have never had a hard drive fail.

Somehow, I don't think Judgement has had a hard drive fail before.

Raivshard

There are two types of people in the world:
1.) Those with critical thinking skills

LokeshC2

And those with need for closure.

Mammon

I assume it's the costs that the Intercessor is willing to pay to take him down, the price that made the Augur oppose her for it was too great even for a Hero to take down the Dead King. Now the sacrifices of her first attempt or perhaps his greatest wound taken will be used to further sway his enemies from listening to the Intercessor and mayhaps even stop even the likes of the Pilgrim from considering her an ally of Above.

Insanenoodlyguy

"Dawn has not yet failed," the First Prince of Procer said. "Nor will it, so long as I vote."

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

lqueenofblades1

Please stop doing this, it's really annoying and cheapens some really great moments.

None Scum

Where as I find it funny, and interesting. So horses for courses; slaughter the horses.

Insanenoodlyguy

1. Considering it's place on topwebficton, it seems to be working.

2. I am neither the only one nor the originator of this, merely the first this time.

3. While there are some people who don't like it, and I'm sorry that you and others are amongst them, you do not seem to be the majority opinion based on likes these posts get.

4. I disagree that it cheapens the moments. I am a commentator on this story, as are we all. Potentially every person here could change how you feel about part of this story, and I don't feel I am representing any special risk in that area, at least on average.

In conclusion, I deny your request. I have no intention of stopping unless Erratic requests this.

BarthHumphries

Dude, what about the typo thread?

Insanenoodlyguy

What about the typo thread? (no really, that's not meant to be sarcastic, I'm not sure what you are asking here)

[BarthHumphries](#)

A vote thread without a typo thread? Shocking.

Insanenoodlyguy

Oh sure! I welcome the typo thread. I just don't do them myself nor believe I should be trusted with that task. Not my strong suit.

[Liliet](#)

"Not the majority based on likes" how do you count???
WordPress doesn't have an anti-like button...

Insanenoodlyguy

There are more likes on vote quotes than likes on people who say "i don't like these vote quotes"

This is hardly hard polling data, and I regret that I know you don't care for these (make no mistake Liliet, I like you. We have this odd alternating thing where our thoughts are either near in sync or inverse and strongly disagreeing and that's kinda neat), but like I said, Erratic doesn't seem to mind, and the guide always tends to have a high place on topwebfiction, so it seems this behavior is better received than not.

[Liliet](#)

Guide had a high place on topwebfiction back when vote links were simply 'Go vote!' too.

[Liliet](#)

(And thanks. I like you too, I just have a very strong allergic reaction to this in particular)

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Almost as if tapping a star was far, far easier (and more anonymous) than actively typing "This is dumb, why are you doing this". Or as if the latter could result in some kind of negative outcome, like people bitching at you over the Internet...

Insanenoodlyguy

You can tap the star under the “bitching” as well, friend. Though to be fair, I already gave my answer, and that was to the person asking politely.

Jarthon

I actually greatly appreciate it.

[vexingvision](#)

Many disagree. It’s clever, I like it.

Jessica Day

I personally disagree, don’t know how the others see it. I actually like it.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Sometimes it’s funny. Sometimes it’s just dumb. This...it’s basically slapping “go vote” in the middle of an important quote. That’s the dumb kind.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah.

It’s funny if it builds on something that was already funny. Making something dramatic into something funny?
Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeehhhhhhhhhhhh can we not?

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Especially since it usually doesn’t work. Especially when the punchline just about every time is “This was a dramatic moment, but psyche! Now it’s a joke!”

[Barthumphries](#)

And the typo thread.

Mercy would walk away from this with little singed save perhaps its pride, should even have such a thing, but Judgement?
Add “it” after should

Decius

Wait.. in what senses is “Judgement” currently damaged?

Is it only the formal types of judgement, which allow an individual to be found guilty or not?

Or are the other types of judgement, those which can determine if an act is wise or foolish, also impaired?

Is everyone now literally incapable of forming correct judgement-

Insanenoodlyguy

No, just the choir.

caoimhinh

The Seraphim, Angels of the Choir of Judgement, are damaged, not the concept of judgment itself.

[Mammon](#)

There has been no hint that the godhood and its portfolio are so intrinsically connected that either cannot exist without the other, the Choirs merely exemplify and symbolise a virtue. Sve Noc is a twin goddess of Night, but nights and darkness existed before she ascended. Similarly, even the complete destruction of Judgement wouldn't see to a part of human thinking to just seize to be.

chris S

"I am the King of Death," the last king of Sephirah said. "I Vote."

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

miles

I love the good cop bad cop thing you guys have going there.

mavant

This was a little less King of Death than King of Drama.

Insanenoodlyguy

He took on the name the King of Death. Of course hes going to be full of drama. Also eyeliner.

Andrew Mitchell

Maybe eye-socket liner? 😊

caoimhinh

Boneline? :v

mavant

A big mood, as I believe the kids say.

Zoolimar

Seems like he decided to play into the story. No matter if he wins this war or loses it, this story ends with his demise. But it seems he is now considering it a worthy price for whatever he wants to achieve – at least part of it is dragging the Wandering Bard with him to hell.

LaNuup

I'm not sure that the story must end with his demise. He seems to know WB's masterplan and as long as he does not go on a continent spanning war of no holds barred extermination there are stories where he can conquer and survive. So yes it is a gamble but a survivable one.

Zgggt

It was hinted that the Dead King is a Name, perhaps this is not the first one, and that maybe Masego is being groomed such that his apotheosis will turn him to the next Dead King. The Dead King probably has contingencies for "needs to die". Hell, Cat used those in her "dead for tax reasons" episode to deal with the Lone Swordsman. This doesn't mean it's the end for him, not even close.

Liliet

Cat leaned into a heroic story for that, which seems to be inherently necessary to actually reverse death in this universe.

I'm... not seeing Neshamah managing that.

Mammon

Stories aren't inviolable nor are they the complete answer. The Black Knight has slain many a Hero despite their stories, the likes of Traitorous defied tales, the Saint of Blades turned evil despite sticking to good in a manner that should've bend the Story to her will thanks to Tyrant's meddling, and even Cat has during her Winter rampaging slain Heroes with a Story on their side with sheer brawn.

So just because you've got a Band of Five doesn't mean that you can slay the Dead King, even in Creation. There are ways around it, especially for someone as ancient as him. He may have gained Story immunity from any Non-Intercessor Named by simple virtue of the Story that either he or she must die by the other's hand, that even all the Stories turned against him yet being but a pitiful tale of less than a decade old. Or by brute power he can negate it, even if it's by sheer attrition. Saint could slay devils easily and indefinitely, but even she was stuck in an endless scene of doing that without anyone to break her out of it.

And that's without the means he has at his disposal. If he has even just one Named with the power to change Stories (f.e. a Bard with the aspect Snap that both snaps one of their guitar strings and the Story that spelled DK's demise), bye bye careful plans. It's quite likely that Stories simply do not work or put him solely and decisively in the Inevitable Victor role in any and all cases when he's in the Serenity, which Cat already seems to assume considering she's striving for containment rather than defeat.

So even if he did commit to a Story, and quite likely he didn't or one in his favour, then that will not suffice by itself regardless of anything.

JJR

I think all stories lead to him losing at this point, but that need not mean demise. He could become trapped in Serenity instead, Sealed Evil in a can.

From there un-living forever might not be too hard. Just go all "evil is not a toy" on any villain foolish enough to bring you out and make sure there is always a convenient reseal method always available to the heros.

Insanenoodlyguy

No, hes going for "the dead continent"

"Long ago, this continent was called Calernia. But a dead king came, and now the dead rule there. We do not go there."

That's the story he wants. His kingdom writ large. As long as he doesn't say "and then the world!" It can work.

[Liliet](#)

Nope, he doesn't think the story ends with his demise. He doesn't think the story needs to end at all.

He's most definitely wrong. Here's hope he finds out this generation 😊

caoimhinh

Well, everything we have seen of him is a bit dramatic, and he also likes formalities a lot.
He is King of Dramatic Death, hahahaha.

medailyfun

Dramah makes the story

Cicero

Joy...

Well, the Dead King has made it plain, it's now either Cat's Accords, or the King of Death rules all.

Wonder how the Bard will react.

JJR

With Alcohol

miles

She missed her one shot. Time to visit the nearest dive and get stupid drunk

[Liliet](#)

"Holy shit he actually fell for it. FUCK YES TIME TO GO CELEBRATE WHERE'S THE NEAREST TAVERN"

[ninegardens](#)

DK: "Tyrant screwed your plan Hasenbach, but your plan was stupid. Now I'm going to kill everyone. Lols."

JJR

"I would not brook you signing the Accords, I thought."

As it turns out, this is a non-issue, with the declaration of renewed war from the Dead King. But what could Cat do to stop him? If he got his naked phalanges on a copy all he needs is some ink to put his name to it. Given what we have seen of it and its purpose (reducing the collateral damage from Named fights, forbidding magic WMDs) most of it stuff he does anyway to prevent would be Heroes from getting story openings against him. Sure, they could mostly ignore his signature, and it in no way would stop the war against him; but it still seems like he could go ahead and sign it, if only to thumb their noses.

Jane

Well, it *is* a treaty; that creates certain commitments that simply pledging to uphold certain principles does not. If he's not considered party to the treaty, then when he tries to punish a villain flying a doomsday weapon, it's an act of war instead of an ally upholding international norms, and will need to be treated as such. Granted, the rest of the world can't exactly do much to punish him, but it changes how things are interpreted.

Likewise, he can't call upon the benefits of the treaty; if said villain decides to use the doomsday weapon on *him*, then he

can't call upon the other signatories to punish him or her should they manage to survive his counterattack and limp into Procer. Which further complicates the fact that nobody else would recognize his commitment to track down and punish those who breaks the Accords, since it'd become a whole *thing* if he pursued them into Procer on his own.

Oh, and I guess he couldn't go to Citadel. And with that many Named around, it might even be enough to make it inconvenient for him. That might sound minor at first, but he'd probably really want the opportunity to check on the next generation of people who will try to kill him.

JJR

Yeah, I guess I was thinking of the Accords as a list of principles/promises that anyone could chose to swear to if they wanted. It's not like anyone is going to force the Dead King to use Demons or magical plagues on civilians after all (ok Bard might, to turn the story against him) And those things are a part of it, yeah there's also the mutual commitments to take actions to enforce the accords, which I can see how all the other parties and just flatly reject the dead King from being part of that.

Andrew Mitchell

> If he got his naked phalanges on a copy all he needs is some ink to put his name to it.

That's not the way signing international treaties works. Let me illustrate: If the Ukraine got their hands on a copy of the treaties that underpin the European Union, and their President signed it, that's not going to make Ukraine part of the EU.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

What if he did it in Arcadia?

[Liliet](#)

...I don't think that would work either.

Insanenoodlyguy

Maybe if he asked the new fae court for arbitration or something, but otherwise it'll still be a piece of paper. There's no story in "I stole this and wrote my name on it neeiner neeiner.", and Arcadia can enhance stories but it doesn't make them out of nothing.

JJR

There is a story about lying so hard the it becomes truth though. You don't even have to know the name of the guy whose signature you are forging. "Signed The King of Winter."

imagesbe

That wasn't a lie that turned into a truth. That was a lie that the fey decided it wasn't worth calling them on, because while they were 90% sure that it was a bluff, what if it wasn't and the King punished them for it?

Insanenoodlyguy

Different deal. The puss in boots style of lying gets you places, and you can make the lie truth by going in deep enough. But it requires a certain panache. Even Cat in her boldness mustered this, even if it was "the size of your lying balls is so gigantic I actually want to see where this goes."

But the dead king doesn't have that kind of absurdity. Nothing about him is silly or funny, at least on purpose. The closest he's ever gotten is as a foil to ranger as her straight man. He could never pull off "No see, I signed the accords and am a member."

Now Kairos, that magnificent bastard could have pulled it off. Somehow made a story where in the end, somebody asks cat or cordy, and they grit their teeth and say "his name is on it. He's here with us. He must be a member." Because acknowledging it is the only way to make whatever work. But he is dead, and I don't think wearing his corpse would have let him pull it off.

[Liliet](#)

That wasn't even much of a lie, considering it came on the heels of Cat seeing Skade in the distance and musing that the King of Winter is clearly inviting them.

She just... made it more colorful.

Jane

I mean. Foundling *did* warn the White Knight not to do this. It's hardly *her* fault that two Heroes decided to risk Judgment on striking down the Tyrant. Blame her for saving everyone else present at the cost of giving Heirarch the time he needed, perhaps, but "Unknown consequences for a Choir" vs "The probable death of everyone on the continent" isn't exactly firm grounds for a scolding, if you ask me.

Well, I guess I can give her “I would have told you that I would handle containment, if I weren’t as bad as Masego at social situations”, at least. But that’s still not really Foundling’s fault.

I wonder, is the Dead King suggesting that the angel-corpse-weapon has high costs associated with it? A sort of “The weapon will kill your greatest foe, at the cost of the lives of everyone else present” kind of deal? Otherwise, the most likely implication would seem to me to be that the Dead King would have felt he needed to kill everyone else present to sabotage the plan for the weapon – but I don’t see the connection to Pilgrim, then. Or that the Grey Pilgrim would have felt a need to kill everyone else present for some reason if he were conscious, but I can’t imagine many reasons that could be.

Jane

Oh, or perhaps it’s less of a weapon, and more of a *revival* – and the angel corpse is either a bit more strict than the choir it represents, or has some manner of influence on it (residue from Triumphant? A long-sewn seed from the Dead King? Influenced by the Bard’s plan in the way that Heirophant was influenced by the Dead King earlier?) that would make it *super* destructive in a way they didn’t anticipate.

A wild guess, but it sounds like the kind of thing that they’d want to keep secret.

[ninegardens](#)

Give Nessie’s comment to the bard back when he found out her plan of “They would all turn against you if they knew what you were planning”, I’m guessing its that the angel corpse has SIGNIFICANT collateral damage. Like... “continent wide, possibly blasting us a new wasteland” level damage.

Its the kind of thing that will work, at a price far higher than Cordelia would be willing to pay unless she was garunteed failure otherwise.

Bard thinks its a good deal, everyone else.... not so much.

Kissaten

A wildest guess – a weapon originally created to fight against Triumphant, if used, will summon her back because it’s a weapon to fight specifically her.

Necarion

Now that would be a hilarious Checkov...Dread Empress Triumphant, may she never return, returned.

SilentWatcher

Am i the only one who hopes Cat gets the recall Aspect of Hanno and uses it to recall a bit of Triumphant? That would be a fine weapon against Choirs.

[Mammon](#)

Gasp

Are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting? That what Amadeus knows and revealed was but a conspiracy within the conspiracy, and that Praes's wasteland state is the result of the costs that the Intercessor is willing to pay to defeat DK? That the means that the Intercessor is planning to use, requires a sacrifice that turned a huge swath of land into the Wasteland that spawns Evil and monsters at a generational frequency.

[ninegardens](#)

YES! Not only that, but Bard was also behind the Man eating Tapir's, the invisible sentient tiger army, AND the Lord Traitorus's secret snow globe collection!

(In all seriousness though, there **is** a theory that she is behind "the girl who climbed the tower")

[Liliet](#)

That's the impression I got.

I also got the impression it was a fakeout, and Bard's *actual* plan is what Neshamah thinks is his clever victory – the all out war of all continent vs him.

[Liliet](#)

Judging from what Neshamah said about what's in Levant, it sounds like just plain ol' calling down a Choir to smite your enemy big time has the kind of consequences he's referring to.

medailyfun

She could try to kill Hierarch when the shit hit the fan

copaceticcockroach

This is the part I realize that the closer we get to this paramount battle, the closer we get to the end. I want this climax but I don't want this to end. And I can't help but think that the last line means: Gods save us all, and so the end begins.

Mary Gentle

I'm with you on this one. I know it's a really bad idea when a novel outstays the amount of story it has to sustain it – but I kind of want to go on, always reaching for the ending of this world's story, but never actually reaching it.

Maybe what I mean is, I don't mind if the story meanders round a bit on the way to the end. Or a lot. 😊

[Liliet](#)

Agreed.

Incidentally, I don't believe that we have only one book left, erratic's plans or no:3

Andrew Mitchell

Yeah, I've been wondering about that too. There does seem to be too much metaphorical ground left to cover in just one book... However, I do recognise that this may just be motivated reasoning on my part because I really don't want this series to end anytime 'soon' (for any version of soon).

[Adrian V](#)

So even dead Kairos still has some surprises, now i want to see if there is some genius that manages to guess just what did he save them from and how.

Also because even if it is near imposible of almost guarantied to end badly i still ship Hanno and Cat i have to say a certain someone *cough*Antigone*cough* may be jealous, even if not for a romantic reason as a friend (well the later is less jealous and more looking out for a friend)

gbevis

The feather of an angel nearly enslaved an entire city and bound it to a holy war on the Tower. The whole body of an angel, should it be wielded by "the warden of the west" might have enslaved the west against Keter. Kairos saved them from that fate.

But now Justice is dead.

Who could wield the corpse of dead Justice without automatically enslaving the continent? Is it someone whose motto is, "Justice only matters to the Just"?

konstantinvoncarstein

It was a living Angel that nearly brainwashed Liesse. The Angel feather was William's sword.

Shveiran

Yes. The wing was just the focus of the ritual, not the source of the effect.

Inay

"Also because even if it is near imposible of almost guarantied to end badly i still ship Hanno and Cat"
You and me mate, you and me. The probability of it ending tragically is half the charm haha

miles

The obvious one is that with Judgment incapacitated they can't wake the dead angel, if it is one of judgment, and have it judge all the dead things.

[Adrian_V](#)

I am seeing lots of comments thinkng what Kairos saved them from is the maic sword, i disagree in part because what does whatever is in levant have to do with it? i suppose it could but i think not, is probably something else that may or may not involve 1 or more choirs.

[Liliet](#)

I think they are referring to a 'sword of Judgement' metaphorically. More like a nuke of Judgement. And what's in Levant is fallout from another Choir nuke (Mercy?).

edrey

Well, i have a theory of how was the bard plan, making the dead king attack, the augur making for the details and manipulating all countries.

Making cat the arch enemy lead Callow to reform their army like that landless king of callow and Juniper able to rescue the legions, there the story of the unconquered and how a king of callow hanged seven princes and one, just like that debt with larat. Cordelia, with the lost of her home, the chaos in the city and the arch enemy of the east arriving in a few days created the story of the warden of the west, from there the bard would take things directly in her hands since she could appear with cordelia anytime. Details like the coup should be a combination of the understanding of tariq, cat and the love of scribe and malicia for black. In this world stories and fate make up for all else and the bard is just the best at it

[Mammon](#)

You mean that her plans were to make a Pattern of Three or mayhaps even a Band of Five (from which the Thalassocracy's

ultimate Named now got shafted by that story's plug being pulled prematurely, and the fifth one likely being either the Dwarf Named we've seen or maybe a Free Cities or Praes Hero) using the single most powerful and also strongly country-bound monarchs?

Pilgrim, even without his crown a revered king. Cat with the sword of the Fairfaxes, she of Callow's stalward defiance. The Warden of the West, first since ever of the Hasenbach line First Prince and a combined monarch warrior of duty. Whatever the Thallasocrats would've brought. And nr.5. Combining under them the entire continent against the Dead King. And then Cat turned evil. And there's no WotW at all. Which also screws up sailing T's Named ascension. Maybe the Drow are willing to let her borrow Ramera? Urgh, this is such a mess.

Gamer7956

Kyros told us the plan last chapter, if through metaphor. He said that Bard's plan was to have the counter started by "someone who did not matter", then make them matter once its too late. I.e. someone without a name, who the Dead King is already too far gone in attacking when they gain a name. Specifically Cordelia Hasenbach. Sure there were bound to be Plan Bs but that (I think) was Plan A.

Jacob McNeer

More specifically the band of 5 was (most likely) supposed to be composed of The White Knight from Ashur, The Grey Pilgrim of Levant, The Warden of the West of Procer, The Good Queen of Callow and The Dread Emperor of Praes. Every single hero/villain was supposed to represent a major power on Calernia (except Hanno who instead was the neutral leader/arbiter) but Kairos and free will fucked everything up. Hanno's out of the action for as long as judgement is, Tariq gave up his ability to represent Levant in anything when he gave up his crown, Cordelia and Catherine both straight up refused their names, and Amadeus' love for Alaya kept him from seizing the throne when he was supposed to (most likely in the aftermath of The Doom of Liesse) so he is merely a claimant instead of being comfortable in his name.

[Mammon](#)

Wasn't Cat supposed to become the White Knight had she been turned Hero instead of Villain though? Or is that just a fan theory? Hanno might not have become if everything went according to plan for the Intercessor. And instead of Praes maybe either the Bloom or Black's path to 'redemption' was already set in stone kinda.

Or maybe Tyrant by making the Hierarch also screwed up the plan to make one of the Good Free Cities produce a Hero that united them after being Tyrant.

Creation: Ah yes, now behold as we shall create Tyrant's opposite to compete with his bid for the Free Cities.

Tyrant: I'm not in charge of the Free Cities, that guy is.

Creation: ... Who's that?

Tyrant: Only my bestest friend with whom I share mutual eternal friendship. Also he's the Hierarch.

Creation: But... But... If the Free cities are already unified then I cannot give you a nemesis worthy of your evilness.

Tyrant: *Looks longingly at Cat* Huh? Sorry, what was that?

Actually, nevermind, I'm going to go do things now.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Not just a fan theory re: White Knight Cat. It's from one of the alternate histories briefly explored when Akua unleashed the Fourfold Crossing on Cat.

[Javvies](#)

It's also something Viv talked about to Cat – about how Cat was maybe supposed to be the leader of the Callowan Band of Five, not William the Lone Swordsman.

Jacob McNeer

I'm talking about after 3rd Liesse in which she chooses a yew branch instead of the sword of Good King Fairfax.

Jacob McNeer

In fact, I think I have figured out exactly how events were supposed to go according to WB. Black was supposed to have decided to rebel against Malicia after the Doom of Liesse but still go to the Red Flower Vales to repel the initial assault of the crusade because he recognizes that Praes can't afford to have a civil war while they're in danger of being invaded. After he repels the initial assault he has Warlock collapse the pass to buy him time and announces his claim for the throne. Meanwhile the battle of the camps happens like normal and Tariq becomes Cat's "honored guest." Cat grudgingly helps Black in the civil war because of both the pressures of her army and because Black is her best chance at an ally against the Crusade, leaving the Duchess in charge of protecting the pass. (Because she has Black as an ally and doesn't have to worry about Malicia's backstabbing, Cat isn't desperate enough to go to Keter or the Everdark and thus doesn't lose her mantle.) Because Black isn't rampaging throughout Procer, Tariq stays with Cat and gets to work on her. During the campaign Cat reveals her plan for the Liesse Accords to Black who is still in his

“win the war, break the mold/world” mindset and thus not impressed with Cat’s “end/contain the war, better the world” way of thinking. Within a year Black is the Dread Emperor and Alaya has fled into exile in Keter.

Alaya, as she always does when she is desperate, falls back on the old Praesi ways of grand evil plans and releases the Dead King into Procer in return for helping her get her crown back. Keter invades Procer and Procer turns most of its attention north. Levant is split, on one hand the Dead King is an existential threat to everyone and must be stopped, on the other hand Callow still has their Grey Pilgrim and honor demands that they rescue him. So they dither around south-eastern Procer, sometimes heading north to confront the Dead King, sometimes heading south to unclog the Red Valley Vales and attack the lightly defended southern part of Callow, depending on who won the most recent honor duel. Eventually the Saint of Swords has to head down there and give them a push towards an enemy. Which enemy they fight is of no concern of hers, so long as they Fight. Ashur, having no means to reach Keter by sea, instead decides to continue the attack on Praes. Initially Callow and Praes stay neutral due to pragmatism, Mantle!Cat’s hopes that the invasion will convince the Alliance to sign a peace treaty/The Liesse Accords, Tariq’s influence and Black’s “evil winning the war” mindset. Instead they decide to focus on improving their own position and repelling Ashur’s raids. To that end Cat and Black pool their magical resources together and send Warlock and Hierophant to defend Thalassina.

The Ruin of Thalassina plays out exactly as it did in canon except there is no conflict between Masego and his parents because he never went to Keter and there is no noble because Black killed them all. At the same time as the Ruin of Thalassina, Kairos “persuades” the League to invade Procer. Masego’s disappearance and a repeat of the Doom of Liesse are like a slap in the face for Cat and reminds her what she’s supposed to be fighting for. She decides to be more proactive in her pursuit of peace and decides to offer her support to the Alliance against Keter in order to prevent further tragedies. In order to make it official she decides to go to Salia, in person, with her army (for protection, and because of the Mantle’s influence and in order to avoid doubling back to Callow after it’s over) to become a signatory of the Grand Alliance and propose a peace treaty and the Liesse Accords. The loss of Warlock (one of his last remaining friends) and a city under his protection due to both grand villainous sorceries and godly intervention cause Black to start to see things Cat’s way and he agrees to support the Liesse Accords. The weakening of his position from losing Warlock, recent revelations provided by WB as to the exact nature of Alaya’s bargain with the Dead King

(putting her back on the Dread Throne), and a newfound appreciation for the Liesse Accords all cause Black to follow Cat's lead and go to Salia in the hopes of a peace treaty and the Accords. However he is still wary of joining the Alliance and fighting the dead king as that is firmly in the "not my problem" category. Cat and Black, with their armies and Tariq, in a compromise between needing to get to Salia as quickly as possible and not wanting to seem threatening to the people they are trying to form long term treaties with, begin to gate into south-eastern Procer around Iserre.

Meanwhile the League is tearing through south eastern Procer like wild dogs with Kairos playing both the Proceran and Levantine armies like a fiddle, Masego has gone mad and stolen Liesse, the Dead King is attacking northern Procer quite effectively and Malicia, sensing an opportunity to weaken the alliance before Callow can join, plays her last few cards and orders her agents inside Salia to attempt a coup. The Augur still manipulates events enough to give Cordelia the choice, but with the increased pressure of the unresolved southern and Callow situations (Cat and co. haven't gated in yet so the prince's graveyard hasn't occurred yet and Cordelia has no idea where Cat and co.'s armies are going or what their true intentions are) she accepts the Name and becomes the Warden of the West.

Once Cat and co. arrive in Iserre she and Tariq try to convince everyone that they are actually there to make peace, not war. Due to Mantle!Cat's lack of subtlety, Kairos being Kairos, Black's snarkiness, Saint's assrod, and the Levantines refusing to believe that Tariq is legitimately on Cat's side the prince's graveyard still occurs. However, Black replaces the Rogue Sorcerer in the band and Mantle!Cat is stuck in her "I want to give up the crown at some point but I'm the only one who can deal with the problems we're currently facing right now" and "lesser evils for greater goods" mindsets so she lets Rozala give up her crown and become the 1 in the "7 crowns and 1" oath. Most of the arc goes as it did in canon with Cat's winter powers taking the place of Rogue's aspects allowing them to get through Liesse. Saint still goes berserk and attacks the crown but one of Black's new aspects as Dread Emperor allows them to put her down despite Kairos' sudden yet inevitable betrayal. Mantle!Cat has much less patience for Kairos' bullshit and kills him after the betrayal in the throne room. Then because she is stuck in "Self-mutilation/destruction to achieve my goals/victory" mode she volunteers to sacrifice herself. Tariq still attempts to sacrifice himself instead but because Cat still has her Name-esque senses she catches him in time and knocks him out. Cat attempts to put on the crown but Akua stops her forcing Cat to allow her to put on

the crown instead by using the precise wording of Cat's oath to Vivienne. Thus Akua, in an act of penitence, saves the very people she had once tried to destroy and lays the foundations for peace in the very city her unending ambition had destroyed. Because Akua was a part of Cat's mantle, it was destroyed along with her and Cat was no longer the Queen of Winter. During Akua's sacrifice, Cat felt everything she felt in her final moments and unknowingly helped shape the new realm. Afterwards, while Cat is wandering around a city rebuilt, with more splendor now than it ever had in life, a city that evokes longing, regret, ambition, arrogance, madness, brilliance, power, introspection, hope and most of all CHANGE with an almost frightening lack of subtlety, she comes across a yew tree and Good King Fairfax's sword stuck in a stone. She draws the sword from the stone and becomes the Good Queen in the same place where her chance at becoming the Black Queen was taken away. Unnoticed by her, Tariq looks on proudly and Black hides a bittersweet smile.

After the Levantines stop pointing blades at Cat for knocking their Grey Pilgrim out, the group heads onward to Salia. Black, after seeing the Dead King mind controlling his nephew in order to pull off an over complicated doomsday scheme, decides to go all in on joining the Grand Alliance and helping to defeat the Dead King. Because now, the Dead King has made it personal AND insulted his professional pride as a new age villian. Anaraxes, after hearing from Cat and co. as well as WB about what the Dead King is doing in Serenity, declares the Dead King an Evil Despot and Arch-Dictator against the People. While he refuses to become a member of the Grand Alliance (he still views all the other rulers as duplicitous tyrants) he does agree to enter the League into the war against Keter and sign a temporary truce with the Alliance until that is over. The conference itself goes smoothly due to Cat having a good Name, and the lack of Kairos making it so that Malicia and the Dead King can't attend. When the conference is not in session Cat begins to instruct Cordelia in namelore and stories while Cordelia tutors Cat in the finer points of politics. The Liesse Accords are signed with a loophole put in them that member countries can use the banned tactics against nonmember countries.

At some point the Band of 5 emerges to use the angel not-corpse with White Knight as the Leader, Dread Emperor as the Lancer, Grey Pilgrim as the Heart, Good Queen as the Big Guy, and the Warden of the West as the smart guy. They eventually agree (to Black and Cat's dismay) to keep the angel corpse in their back pocket in case they need to use it. Eventually the situation becomes so dire that they do use it, most likely involving a self sacrifice by either

Hanno or Cordelia, to kill the Dead King (and a significant amount of the continent).

matesbe

I'm not sure that was the Bard's plan (way too many steps, and the more steps a plan has the more likely it'll fail), but damn if I wouldn't read that fanfiction/AU.

Jacob McNeer

Not really in my opinion. Bard is a chessmaster that puts Thrawn to shame. That combined with the fact that all of the main players are pretty easy to predict if you understand what they want (which is usually pretty obvious with Named) and their personality (also usually pretty obvious with Named). Betting on Black putting his ideals ahead of Malicia turned out to be a bad move, but their relationship had been fraying so a big push (such as Malicia supporting a superweapon while simultaneously destroying decades of work building the semblance of trust between Callowans and Praesi and nearly getting his protegee killed) could have feasibly completely severed the ties between them. Cat breaking the soul-scaffolding to kill Akua was a shoe in considering her tendency for purposeful self mutilation and her knowledge of stories. Cat coming up with the Liesse Accords after one of her cities nearly got destroyed by angels and devils then did get destroyed by a huge magic ritual was also fairly predictable considering her personality and history. Everything after that is just one predictable action leading to another based upon the players (Cat, Black, Kairos, Dead King, Cordelia, Tariq, Laurence, Hanno and Anaraxes) personalities, motivations and methods. She also has the advantage of working with Named whose core personality and motivations are far more inflexible than most people making them even easier to predict. This is especially true for Mantle!Cat and the Dead King.

In other words Bard only had a few steps that she needed to perform. everything else would fall into place like a row of dominoes. Also, big complicated plans are a villain's weakness only and Bard's neutral.

[Liliet](#)

Big complicated plans are ANYONE's weakness in this universe.

Named get free will, and this free will fucking with any mastermind's plans is the narrative irony step 0.

Bard isn't exempt from narrative laws, she's in fact more subject to them than most people.

WuseMajor

At some level, I do have to wonder why the Wandering Bard cares about taking down the Dead King so much? Most of the time he doesn't really seem to be too much of a problem and, given how "pragmatic" he is, it seems like antagonizing him only really provokes him.

What is it about him that worries her so much?

So, if the Tyrant wanted to spike everyone's plans here at the end, as much as possible, I'm curious as to how he managed to betray the Dead King. Because it looks like he just helped the Dead King survive a climactic and apocalyptic story that would have ended with his death. So, how did he screw over the Dead King too? Also, presumably he tried to screw Cat and everyone else in the room too, because the final climax of his life should have been to screw everyone six ways from Sunday, in addition to screwing Two Choirs of Angels.

Granted, it might be that the Tyrant had a decent idea of the kind of force that Cat can bring to bear and, knowing that the Dead King doesn't really take her seriously, figured he'd maneuver things so they end up fighting, because Cat will definitely Hurt the Dead King. Maybe he figured out a way to make this a pyrrhic victory for Cat (not that she has any real others).

[ninegardens](#)

My guess as to why WB keeps bringing down DK?

Because if she doesn't, DK *will* pull out some universe destroying bullshit, given enough time. DK *will* attempt to usurp the gods above and below.

He ain't quick.

He'll take centuries and centuries to get it done.

And then he will WIN, in the most absolute sense of the word.

She NEEDS to fuck with his plans. She NEEDS to stop him. She may have thousands of years, but defeating DK isn't easy. Every time she tries is the work of generations. She knows she'll probably fail, and she needs to line things up more carefully than even Kairos, because DK is WAY more savvy than Judgement.

So she'll toss crusade after crusade his way, and maybe convince the Ranger to use Keter as a hunting ground. She'll look for bait, and stories and weapons and she will fail, again and again.

Until she wins.

Or he does.

miles

Because when the dead king is actually dead, she'll be allowed to die too.

Mammon

He told us this, didn't he? His final words including that he ended the Age of Wonders. Perhaps that Age is fettered to the strive and vendetta of these two ancient beings, and he will end it by ending them both with the events he set in motion. DK cannot be killed within the Age of Wonders, nor can Intercessor be stopped during it. If we're talking inviolable Stories, this very age might be their plot armour, and if not then they may be maintaining it by their existence.

But whatever you assume Tyrant saved DK from, I doubt DK would be hurt even a bit by a Story that simple and shallow. He would've died a dozen times over it if something like this would suffice. Each Crusade likely had Named as powerful as the ones we see here too.

Sylwoos

Shoot, this just made me put Tyrant last words in perspective and they might have way more story weight than we thought. Remember when Cat said that if he get a curse, it might stick even if it have no right to? Well, Tyrant proclamation was his favor from the Gods Bellows, so he might very well have put a end to the Age of Wonders, LITERALLY.

Meaning we already are no longer are in the Age of Wonders, and pretty much every story precedent related to this age have been sweep aside by Gods decree. Tyrant last words crippled both Bard and DK in a way nobody have realized.

I found it weird when he made a remark about DK arrogance and nothing came out of it. No way he would have let somebody think they are out of reach without jabbing a dagger in their flank. Well, he did. DK will be going into this war with a wound he's unaware off, and this might be his undoing.

Sylwoos

And now that I think about it, Black previously called this new age, a age of order.

So what better transition between the Age of Wonder and the Age of Order than the moment a mortal men used mortal laws to judge Judgement itself? This isn't just a favor from Bellows, Tyrant created the perfect event to symbolically start a the new age. Laws will rules this new ages, and their power will be on par with the choir and demon of old.

Yup, we are definitely in a new age and the narrative rules have been rewritten without anybody noticing.

Mammon

It's probably more in it's fledging stage, these things wouldn't be too easily lest either side would've won decisively or the likes of Black could've changed things much faster and easier. Maybe something like a Pattern of Three:

- The Accords first shunned (defeat after defeat for about two books now) become acknowledged and a political inevitable of the Alliance.

- Tyrant's swan song. A draw in everyone's book.

- Whatever third act, climax and victory this will end in.

Liliet

This is in no way a favor of Below. Kairos's request was just to know if he entertained them. The 'end of the Age of Wonders' is something he did himself.

Sugar Roll

The Wandering Bard is the moderator of creation. The Dead King is so powerful that no hero has been able to take him out for a long long time. I feel like all entities who achieved apotheosis is on the Intercessors kill list. They're game breakers so to speak so the Bard steps in to fix the problem.

Liliet

Well, I don't think the Deoraithe gestalt or that one orc god in the Steppes are much of a threat. Or Sve Noc as long as she keeps to the drow.

All entities that have achieved apotheosis and are aiming to break the balance further in their favor, now...

caoimhinh

My guess on how Kairos betrayed or screwed the Dead King is that by correctly reading Neshamah's nature, Kairos has just manipulated events in such a way that the Dead King will overcommit in the fight and make mistakes, thus being vulnerable and killable.

Neshamah only feared the Intercessor's plan, so by disrupting the Intercessor's plan Kairos has ensured that Dead King will think himself invincible, as in "these guys can't hurt me now", which is something we have led to believe Neshamah is too smart to do, but if all this time he was only cautious when the Bard was involved, and in his hubris believes that the efforts of

others do not matter or affect him... well, that might just be the fault in his nature that he *just can't change* since he is an undead thing.

By removing the only thing that the Dead King saw as a threat, Kairos successfully baited him into going fully into war. And that's how they will beat him.

That's my current hypothesis, at least.

As for why the Bard is so focused on destroying the Dead King, my guess is like Ninegardens's: the Dead King keeps making grasp towards more stuff and his power and influence grow with time. The Intercessor can't have that, even if he is slow in getting there, she needs to stop him.

We know that Neshamah tried to conquer a second Hell, and even tried to make the stolen shard of Arcadia that's now the Twilight Roads into his second Serenity, which in both times had the Bard intervening to screw him.

The first time she set the Elves from the Golden Bloom against him (it was then that he got the Spellblade as a Revenant), and during the conversation they had reminiscing about that time, she stated that it was because having a second Hell was "too much", so she couldn't let him have that; there's probably some sort of power-up he would get if he got a second Hell.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> she stated that it was because having a second Hell was "too much", so she couldn't let him have that; there's probably some sort of power-up he would get if he got a second Hell.

Power of precedent. Consider how Kairos noted that every time Cat bosses around angels, she deepens the precedent that "she gets to do that". Neither Bard nor either set of primal Gods wanted Neshamah to establish himself as The Conqueror of All the Hells.

And yeah, I think the key stroke against DK here was luring him to overcommit.

Nairne .01

That's probably on the mark. I imagine though that having even as a simple calculation of power having the force of two hells bear on a third and so on would create a pretty unstoppable snowball effect.

Bigomon

It may be a self fulfilling prophecy: if DK gets as powerful as he wants to, he can be a threat to WB, so she tried to destroy

him. But by surviving multiple attempts, he established himself as someone who will not go down easily, and reinforced this bit by bit. Eventually he can reach a night that allows him to destroy her – by destroying everything that she is bound to. So she is getting desperate the closer he gets to this point.

Liliet

> At some level, I do have to wonder why the Wandering Bard cares about taking down the Dead King so much? Most of the time he doesn't really seem to be too much of a problem and, given how "pragmatic" he is, it seems like antagonizing him only really provokes him.

As I understand, he only doesn't present much of a problem most of the time BECAUSE BARD KEEPS TRYING TO KILL HIM. He's going 'gee of course I'm too pragmatic to try to conquer everything' BECAUSE it comes with consequences and traps and opening himself up to the Intercessor, not because he doesn't want to. He wants to. She's stopping him.

If you don't know what a sysadmin does, it's a sign the sysadmin is doing their job right.

Liliet

> Granted, it might be that the Tyrant had a decent idea of the kind of force that Cat can bring to bear and, knowing that the Dead King doesn't really take her seriously, figured he'd maneuver things so they end up fighting, because Cat will definitely Hurt the Dead King.

I think it's that. He thinks Cat can beat him, and he knows DK doesn't think so. So he's fucking him over by giving him exactly what he wants, and in a way fucks over Catherine the same way (though he expects her to come out on top, judging from his words in their post-tower-game talk)

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

"Having walked through death and come out of it without fear" Is this the same Archer that we know of?

Mental Mouse

It took a while for her to get over being rattled, but she has regained her confidence.

Liliet

Her first meeting with death gave her a shake of confidence, but then she found her equilibrium, and the second time she charged right into it without fear or doubt. You think she didn't know going to Masego the way she did in the Liesse

throne room had a 90% chance of killing her? She just knew it also had that same chance of waking him up.

Someguy

>"I am the King of Death," the last king of Sephirah said. "I come."

But the King of Death cannot cum, he has no balls.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

His skurleton-with-bloodeye look is just a puppet. We don't know for sure that his true form isn't still as outwardly intact as it was in life.

[Mammon](#)

Hm, no comment on this? How? Is it just me?

What is going on with Masego? He's being WAY too assertive, direct and social! Masego is never this extravert! What does this mean? What can this mean? Did he behold the Choirs and learn social interaction from them? Or is it just EE writing him a bit differently for a few paragraphs? Is he really Tyrant in a wig with two cantaloupes or what kind of madness is this?

And on the thing buried in the place that does the thing that DK ominously omen'd at:

-50 silver laurels that it is proof of the sacrifice and its scale that the Intercessor is once again willing to make to kill him.

-100 silver laurels at a 1:4 ratio that this has something to do with that period of Praesi history that has been scoured clean with a demon of Oblivion, the payout being in my favour because it's also quite likely that EE forgot about that and his style long since strayed from that kind of lore.

-3 golden laurels and a band of 5 silver ones that Cat is going to try her dandiest to ignore it and not go despite the Story pulling her to go because she knows Stories and the Dead King enough to know it's likely just stalling for time or setting her in a Story that cannot kill DK.

caoimhinh

Eh, Masego was at first assertive, funny and sarcastic, he just disdained un-academic subjects (as shown during Book 2 and part of Book 3); then he got changed into socially awkward and unable to understand or use sarcasm since the latter part of Book 3 and the chapters afterward.

That said, Masego in this chapter is not displaying social interactions or assertiveness in that sense, he is simply

analyzing a subject (what just happened to Anaxares) and making academic speculations (what exactly happened to the Choir of Judgement, and whether it is temporary or permanent) like the accomplished scholar he is and always has been.

Mental Mouse

Masego is cast as what we'd call being on the autistic spectrum. But even in our world, it's a mistake to oversimplify what that means. Autistics can be very social, it's just that their style and limitations are different from other sorts of people. Consider:

> "I can't tell," I softly admitted, "if I've made everything better or worse." / A chuckle, deeply amused. / "Neither can anyone else, Catherine," Masego told me. "Why would you be any different?"

That is very much the wisdom of an intelligent and mature autistic.

Mammon

Yes, I know and love how Masego is a properly displayed Autist in a written sea of terrible ones. I myself have a light touch of Autism (Hence why the odd diversion of writing style and habits immediately stood out to me.), so I can both relate and understand the basics behind his habits and quirks. While he's indeed acting within the boundaries of an Autist, especially a well-adjusted one, he's not acting within the established Masego character with little development of character to explain a change this rapid.

"You mistake life for the wearing of flesh," Masego replied. "I know not if it was willingly or by chance, yet the Hierarch sacrificed his own as skillfully as any Old Tyrant: the loss of flesh was taken as victory by the Choir of Judgement, and so they withdrew."

Masego can understand manners of speaking, but the one I've seen wouldn't use it by himself unless prodded. The wearing of flesh seems much too vague and with exceptions for him to use, especially in a world with ghosts and demon-doors and the likes. While I understand phrases and use them, I see the exceptions and incorrectness of these sayings. Masego by being such a precise scholar has been shown to only find it all the more difficult to separate the phrase from its exceptions and mentioning only the former.

And then he compares Hierarch to old tyrants by act, while from what we've seen the Hierarch didn't sacrifice his body rather than consider anything not needed like his jaw as irrelevant. The paper and table technically weren't

necessary either, but they were mended because they were seen as necessary. Between him and Old Tyrants there is a distinct difference between their motivation and act, not to mention that old tyrants sacrifice people and parts of their kingdom than taking actual wounds, and to Masego such a comparison should've at least warranted a correcting footnote muttered afterwards. If not making it an inherently inapt comparison.

Insanenoodlyguy

He has his third aspect and a goal now. That sort of thing can lead to dramatic change in stories

Mengha

I thinks that, regarding his manner of speech, we see this difference because he's come into his own as the Heirophant. His words are very un-Masego-like, but they are very much the words of a Heirophant. It's also notable that EE referred to him as the Heirophant much more than usual in this chapter to indicate this.

It's a small thing but I've noticed that EE uses Names rather than names when they want to indicate someone acting less as their own individual person, and more as the Role in the Story. At least while in Cat's perspective, when writing in the perspective of others' I think EE uses Names more often.

caoimhinh

Actually, notice that he only said "You mistake life for the wearing of flesh," as a correction towards Catherine's reply, when he informed her that Hierarch was alive when he pursued the Angels.

Cat: "And?"

Hierophant: "He was still alive."

Catherine: "That last strike by the Seraphim burned him clean through. Not even bone left, Hierophant. What business does even the likes of the Hierarch have surviving that?"

Masego: "You mistake life for the wearing of flesh."

That keeps to his character of someone who further clarifies stuff in more inaccurate terms for those not as versed in the subject. Plus, he's been practicing on using metaphors as explanations ever since he first met Cat, he's an expert now.

[Mammon](#)

Yes, but we've always seen Zeze as not touchy and purely academic. He allows hugs, but it doesn't sound like him to initiate the kind of physical contact like standing next to Cat and placing his hand on her shoulder. And his way of speaking sounds not like he's carefully considering what he states purely as a scientist, he speaks in Story terms.

The real Zeze wouldn't just call it a seal and keep it at that, he'd never mention any Story and social understanding while adding a lot more academically correct tones and definitions to it. He'd always say the right things, but often with Cat having to translate it to what this meant to the Story. But now it was like he was moving as if Creation and Story were pulling the strings, deciding his words. The very way his grammar and statements are structured are fundamentally different.

Fayhem

People influence each other; it never goes in just one direction. Cat has, I believe, changed from her association with Masego. The things you're noting as Masego doing differently? Those can be summed up as Masego taking the trouble to explicitly address things to Cat's perspective. They've been friends/working together for long enough for that to be very plausible to me.

Also, you seem to be presenting speaking as a scientist and speaking of story concerns as opposed concepts. I disagree. Narrative has *objective* force/weight in this universe. Masego grew up with Uncle Amadeus and is now close friends with Cat and has spent the vast majority of his operational career as a Named (as opposed to his mostly study-based time with his fathers) with her also. If anyone would decide to become Calernia's first narrativologist, it would be Masego. I'm just looking forward to when he proposes a standardized unit of measurement for gauging story weight. Personally, I'm hoping that in line with the naming convention for "newtons" he decides to call his unit of measurement "foundlings".

Mammon

Agreed that he would be likely the most able to weigh Narrativism considering his viewing of the world, but this isn't that but his actions changing. He has for a long time known these things, though in the way that Cat does it he doesn't know stories that well (same as how Hakram and Vivi can barely glance into the paths that she gazes down deeply). But he wouldn't change himself over that, nor has he ever seen the need to change his speech patterns this greatly as Cat more and more managed to

understand what he says as long as it doesn't involve difficult terms.

Fayhem

Idk, man. Those speech patterns really don't look that different to me. "You mistake life for the wearing of flesh" is no more poetic/imprecise than "the godhead is a trick of perspective". For that matter, it's a useful clarification as a response to Cat's misconception of what constitutes a contextually valid/relevant definition of life here; he's explaining that it doesn't matter that the Seraphim burned Hierarch's flesh away in their last blast of power, as in fact he pretty much let them do so to lay a trap (which worked). And he isn't comparing Hierarch to the old tyrants in terms of his act but in terms of the skill with which he acted, which is not the same thing at all. This all seems pretty normal for Masego/Hierophant to me; no offense, but I really don't get why people are reacting to this as if it represented some major shift.

Liliet

Yeah, I don't see much difference in speech pattern as such here.

What is really new is Masego appearing to pay attention and care about the situation at hand, and have thoughts about it. "Neither does anyone else. Why would you be any different?" and "I would be disappointed if we didn't" are what's new, what he wouldn't have said before.

But... his fathers died at Thalassina because they disdained detailed understanding of the opponent and missed the big picture implications of what they would be going up against. He relied on his scholarly understanding instead of paying attention to context and got possessed by the Dead King and nearly killed the rest of his family – literally did kill the one of them he might just care about most.

I've been expecting this change to come around since Book 4: Masego actually opening his eyes and getting jolted out of his comfort zone of not needing to pay attention to global events because he can just trust his family about it.

Remember Masego who counceled Cat on dealing with grief in Book 2 over her crippling after the demon fight? Remember Masego who dismissed 'bah, treason' becuae he knew Amadeus and Catherine would come to an arrangement

easily in Book 3? Remember Masego who ended up consoling Catherine and promising he won't leave her when she tried to console him about his loss of sorcery?

He has always been someone who saw like this, and he has always been someone who paid attention to those he cares about. The only thing that changed is that he has recalibrated what is and isn't worthy of his scholarly analysis, and that changed for a damn good reason.

Masego has grown up, and we see the adult him now. This is the adult him, the equilibrium he's settled into.

laguz24

This makes me wonder if the Dead King has faced many villains in the past since only Catherine has given him trouble and the Bard is something else. While all the Heroes are like an open book to him. Also, this makes me realize how bad the Bard is at story crafting. She sees things through the story but forgets that people have desires beyond and behind the story. All it really took was someone talking to her in a garden for too long and all of her plans started crashing down. Seriously, I wonder what her total success rate is since her real strength comes from the fact that you can't take her off the board.

[Javvies](#)

She also usually works multiple steps removed from the immediate situation.

Plus, I'm pretty sure her procedure for less extraordinary circumstances is to set things up so that the worst case scenario is a null value event or series of events, but it's more likely that even in the absence of a complete victory, she makes gains in this and/or other plans she's got arranged.

Think about her stopping the Elves from killing Diabolist – Bard's (apparent) best case scenario is that Diabolist wins against Cat, Amadeus, and Malicia, reverting Praes to Classic Old School Villainy, rather than Amadeus's New Practical Villainy. A worst case scenario is almost what happened, which still gave casus belli and a major unifying incentive for the Crusade. About the only way things could have turned out worse? Malicia (for some reason) not trying to claim the Diabolist's work and not putting a wedge between Amadeus and the Tower – which since Malicia helped Diabolist pull it off seems like it would be a strange and sudden shift. But still, net gain for Bard, if lesser.

Eh, actually, the actual worst case scenario probably would have been the Fae killing Diabolist. But that's still a null value event for Bard.

[Mammon](#)

The Dead King has fought at least one Dread Emperor that tried to invade Serenity through the Hells.

It's unclear whether he fought Triumphant but considering she conquered all of Calernia it's quite likely that she at least took all but his castle-city from him.

He likely fought with the drow both pre- and post-Everdark isolation on multiple occasions.

His fight with the Horned Lord(s) is vague, he might've killed and taken that augur on his own initiative rather than having fought it more truly.

We all know that he greatly fears the Matrons and that he respects Cat because she blows through her teeth like goblins do, with the Triumphant comparison being a mere excuse.

There's not much precedent for true intelligent and capable Villains fighting him in established lore indeed, other than the first example of the Hell wars. Which are hard to gauge because there's literally no written history left on it and the people remember that particular DE as a fool which is more a manner of history written than their actual competence. They may have been extremely capable, or indeed just a buffoon compared to their peers.

[ninegardens](#)

Yeah... the histories of Dread Emperors/esses is weird, on the grounds that like... Dread emperor Sorcerous was considered a fool for their failed attempt to steal Callow's weather... and then you have a Amadeus interlude on the history and you find out that NO, that plan actually MADE SENSE, it just sounds crazy.

Obviously many of the leaders were truly nutz... but it's also likely that many of them were more competent than their legacy might suggest...

konstantinvoncarstein

Minor correction: it was an Empress that tried to steal Callow's weather, not Sorcerous 😞

And yes, some of them were remembered as madmen while having accomplished much. There is that Emperor that built most of the Praesi roads but is remembered only for having morphed himself into a giant spider

konstantinvoncarstein

He allied himself with Triumphant, she even went to Keter and slept in the same palace as Catherine. Neshamah used her in the same way as Malicia, to get an invitation outside the Serenity and be the monster.

Mammon

Yes, but to assume that they didn't also fight would be a more far-fetched presumption. Even if Evil defeats Evil and Iron sharpens Iron wouldn't be the case, and both may not be, but the question is whether he has faced many Villains. One way or another, even if they were allies from day 1 all the way to the end, he faced her and would have to deal with an equal peer and potential opposition or threat that is a Villain rather than a Hero. Still counts as experience dealing with Villains.

Liliet

> Also, this makes me realize how bad the Bard is at story crafting. She sees things through the story but forgets that people have desires beyond and behind the story. All it really took was someone talking to her in a garden for too long and all of her plans started crashing down.

Yeah, that... really does make me think that it's Neshamah who's bad at reading her – or she who's good at adapting to his expectation to pull wool over his eyes.

That was never the real plan, methinks.

Author Unknown

All those poor orphaned gargoyles. 🙄

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Dicks out for Kairos and his gargoyles.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

"I looked up at the sky, at the trails of ash left by the wrath of angels, and did not answer."

Okay, so, I've never complained about this, but EE has a remarkably consistent habit of using "wroth" instead of "wrath." I'm pretty sure this is the first instance of him using "wrath" in the entire series, and I hope this is something that lasts.

Liliet

I think the words are slightly different in implication? Erratic just uses both where he thinks appropriate.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Wrath is the noun. Wroth is the adjectival form. It's the anger equivalent of saying "sad" instead of "sadness."

Andrew Mitchell

Thank you. I'm always up for adding to my lexicon. 😊

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Quite welcome.

[Liliet](#)

Chapter 85: When It Rains

*"Kill an enemy,
Make another
How dreadfully
We do usher!
Killed; enemy
To another."*

-Extract from 'And So I Dreamt I Was Awake' by Sherehazad the Seer, Taghreb poet

"You're certain?" I asked.

"As can be," Vivienne replied. "Our own people have intercepted reports and the Scribe's agents confirm it."

"Then send for Pickler," I said. "We'll need someone navigate the implications of that."

I paused, and the other Callowan caught my eye with understanding.

"Robber as well, then," the dark-haired woman said.

She dipped out of the room long enough to send out messengers and returned as I poured us cups of wine. She took it when offered, and we both sipped in silence. Lost in our thoughts. It'd be better with the two of them, and I was glad she'd realized it. While it could not be denied that Senior Sapper Pickler's upbringing as the daughter of a Matron leant her insights into the ways of goblinkind that a nobody like Robber wouldn't have, neither should it be ignored that she was, well... horribly unsociable. Even with other goblins. Special Tribune Robber, on the other hand? He somehow seemed to know every other greenskin we came across, and though goblins were clannish in the extreme amongst themselves they gossiped with relish. Robber would have his finger on the pulse of things in a way Pickler would not.

Gods, and to think I'd believed it would be quiet after the disaster in Lyonceau. Showed what I knew.

Midnight had come and passed, though it would be more than a bell still until dawn came, and no part of that span had been calm. I'd not returned to Salia, after the Dead King's chilling farewell, for it would have been unwise. Riots were beginning again, though this time not as a tool of conspiracy: word had spread that the war against Keter was resuming, and in terror and impotent anger the people had taken to the streets. Given that there'd been killing of foreigners last time, it'd been judged cautious for the delegations not to return to the capital at least until the day after. If not longer. The First Prince had admitted that she'd rather not soldiers – even solely her own – to put down the turbulence but that she might not have a choice. Should it come to that, though, no other member of the Grand Alliance could be seen intervening even if only to help. It would feed the rumours from the coup attempt that'd not entirely died down, that the First Prince was in league with foreign powers that wanted to destroy Procer.

As Salia roiled and the rest of us kept to our camps, surrounded by soldiers, the last stretch of day into the night had been filled with fervent activity. For one, the two Named that'd been effectively keeping the League of Free Cities together were gone. The Hierarch perhaps not yet dead, as Masego had insisted, but undeniably he was in no place to rule. Not that he'd ever done that even when he was actually meant to. There'd been accusations of assassination from some cities, Penthes leading the charge, but it was hard to argue with a town covered in ash and two heroes stuck in bedrest. The League delegations had hastily withdrawn to their camp under a heavy escort of Proceran soldiers, howling mobs of Salians tossing everything they could get their hands on at them. I had Archer out and keeping an eye on them, though with strict instructions not to kick the hornet's nest. That Penthes had been so aggressive earlier was a good indication that Hakram was right about Malicia having sunk in her hooks there, but there was no telling where much of the League would fall. Helike, in particular, promised to be a mess. Kairos Theodosian had no formal successor, and rumour was he'd pruned minor branches of the Theodosians quite enthusiastically after usurping his nephew. It was not impossible that the royal house of Helike was dead, and there was no telling if some other nobles would make a play for the throne or some distant relation was about to be produced so they could 'rule'.

And now, like we didn't have our plates full enough with the south, north and west trouble was coming from the east as well. The affairs of the Confederation of the Grey Eyries, the fledgling goblin state that'd risen in rebellion against the Tower and declared independence before going a step further and taking Foramen, had always been opaque to outsiders. The Council

of Matrons had ruled the goblin tribes under the Empire and it still did under the Confederation, but to my understanding the alliance between the tribes was a loose thing even at the best of times. The Matrons were nominally an ally to Callow, for Hakram and Vivienne had backed their bid for independence with dwarven gold and foodstuffs, to be repaid in goods we needed: goblin steel and munitions. A blockade of the Hungering Sands by the loyalist Legions of Terror had made deliveries of these highly sporadic, though they'd not entirely ceased, but the Matrons were making visible efforts to keep their word.

I'd believed that to be a promising sign, and though the goblins were said to have committed atrocities against Taghrebi nobility when they took Foramen, the loss of the Imperial Forges and yet another great city of Praes had been a hard blow to Malicia. The Confederation was riddled with practices I despised, and the Matrons were generally speaking about as trustworthy as a nest of vipers, but as a counterweight to the Tower in the southeast they'd been an invaluable asset. Just the fact that they'd tied up the loyalist legions down south had been worth its weight in gold, since it meant I didn't have to worry about those same troops securing the Empire for Malicia – or marching on Summerholm, for that matter. There was the promise of a long-term partnership there as well, with the Snake Eater Tribe having settled in my lands near Marchford. It'd allowed Juniper to recruit goblins to fill the ranks of the Army of Callow's sappers and scouts, and more abstract benefits as well. The relative harmony with the locals had been both a proof that Callow might be able to handle greenskin settlers and a tie to the Council of Matrons themselves.

The generous income that rent of their tribal lands brought didn't hurt either, given the until recently dreadful state of my coffers.

Some parts of it in particular: Pickler's mother, Matron Wither of the High Ridge Tribe. Who'd been trying to push Pickler into retiring and becoming Matron of the Snake Eater Tribe since the moment it was settled on Callowan grounds. I'd been more amused than anything when I'd first heard, for trying to get Pickler interested in anything that wasn't engineering was like pulling teeth, but given the fractious nature of goblin politics I'd found it shockingly impressive that Matron Wither has succeeded at ensuring no other matron was appointed in the wake of her daughter's refusal to retire and take up matronship of the tribe. Guards knocked on the door and jolted me out of my thoughts, Vivienne calling out to allow entry as I took a sip from my now near-empty cup. The two goblins came in together, for a moment allowing a glimpse of the difference between them – Pickler was, I realized, growing significantly larger than Robber. Half a head more now, and where the male's skin was beginning to wrinkle in some places as he approached his kind's middle age her own was

the same as when I'd first met her. Matron lines, it was said, were as a breed apart from the rest of their kind.

That did not strike me as the kind of thing that came about naturally.

"Boss, Princess," Robber greeted us, scuttling in and sliding into a seat.

My brow rose as I glanced at Vivienne.

"Since I was designated your heiress," she admitted. "It's exactly as annoying as you'd think."

Oh, Vivienne, why would you ever admit that out loud? There was no way he was ever going to stop, now.

"Catherine, Dartwick," Pickler greeted us, slightly more deferentially.

She waited for me to invite her with a gesture before taking a seat, at least.

"I've need of your insights into the Confederation," I admitted. "There's been news."

Amber eyes wary, Pickler watched me without blinking.

"I'm not corresponding with my mother, Catherine," she said. "And even if I was, she would not share secrets with me. Nor I with her, if that is your-"

"Not in the slightest," I interrupted. "But you were raised about as high as can be, by my understanding, and you know your mother better than anybody else we've got."

"And I am here to speak for the common goblin, I assume," Robber grinned, pearly needle-like teeth gleaming. "Allow me then to present our demands: first, we would like larger cookpots. The ones we have can't fit a full Proceran child. Second-"

"Robber's here because he hears gossip even Hakram doesn't," I said, pretending to have heard none of that.

"His ears are too high up," Robber agreed without missing a beat, "it's like someone carved an ugly mug onto a tree, Boss."

"Matron Wither has seized control of the city of Foramen and, along with what seems to be another few tribes, evicted the Confederation from the region," Vivienne calmly said.

It was like someone had dropped a sheet of ice-cold water on the two goblins. Genuine surprise, from the two of them.

"Was blood spilled?" Robber sharply asked.

Vivienne handed me the scroll carrying the latest summary report and I tossed it across the table. He caught it and passed it to Pickler without hesitating, eyes remaining on me.

"As far as we can tell, all forces within the city that didn't belong to the High Ridge or their allies were taken by surprised and killed," I said. "There were a series of skirmishes afterwards that drove back Confederation warriors into the Grey Eyries. Maybe four to five thousand dead, all in all."

"The Legions haven't moved," Pickler slowly said.

"They have not," I grimly said. "Even our allies in the Eyes are certain. I'm not all that familiar with Marshal Nim, but I'm told she's the most aggressive commander among the marshals. She would not miss an opportunity like that without a good reason, I think."

"The Tribes have always turned on each other when rebellions turn sour," Robber said, "but this is... wrong. Too early. They're winning, too."

He did not, I thought, sound even slightly disapproving of the goblin tribes beginning to sell each other out to the Tower at the first hint of defeat. There was something in me that was disgusted by the notion – Gods, what kind of Callowan would sell out their own just because the going got rough? – but I forcefully reminded myself that goblins did not see the world as most humans did.

"No rebellion against the Tower ever lasted more than five years," Pickler quietly said. "My mother told me this, once, when I was a child."

"The Long War did," Robber argued. "It took fifteen years for them to put down Matron Trifler up in her hidden fortress."

"Trifler led one tribe and the castoffs of the rest," Pickler said. "After three years the rest of the Council had submitted to Sulphurous, and for the twelve years that follow it was a war of raiders against raiders."

Much as the Wasteland's history could be interesting – and I was pretty sure Dread Empress Sulphurous had actually died to the first known Shining Prince after cornering him out in the Fields of Streges – and the parts of it involving the goblin rebellions as bloody as they were fascinating, I'd not brought them here to speak of it.

"Why bring this up, Pickler?" I said. "The Grey Eyries haven't fallen."

Nor were they likely to, in my opinion. The reports of the Eyes made it clear that Matron Wither and her allies comprised less than a third of the tribes of the Confederation and that surprise had been the deciding element in her victory against her former allies. She might even be able to hold Foramen, given the wards and walls on the city, but if she tried to take the Eyries she was in for the same bloody slog Praesi armies went through every time they put down rebellion there. And unlike the Empire, she didn't have the numbers to simply take the casualties inflicted by constant vicious ambushes and keep advancing. Her people would know the grounds, sure, but so would the enemy.

"Because I do not believe my mother intends to go back to the Grey Eyries," Pickler said.

"She doesn't have the strength to fend off both the Confederation and the Empire," I slowly said. "To be honest, I'm not sure she has the strength to fend off either if they put their back into it."

"Malicia cannot tolerate losing the forges of her war machine to an independent power, from a practical perspective," Vivienne noted. "Not even one at war with her enemies. And it would see her overthrown by the High Lords, besides."

"Which she's gathering in Ater," I pointed out. "Where she has the Sentinels, the one force of soldiers that she can be assured the loyalty of."

They were hardly an army, mind you, and more like the personal guard of the reigning tyrant. But within Ater they were undeniably the largest stick around, even if I wouldn't bet on them against the household troops of most High Seats beyond those walls.

"It seems highly unlikely for her to attempt so risky a purge," my successor said. "Especially when the aristocracy is bound to come down firmly in her favour when the Carrion Lord comes for the Tower."

"You're missing the point, Boss," Robber quietly said. "Pickler's saying her mother doesn't think this can be won. So all she did was get her hands on goods to bargain with."

I blinked in surprise. This was, on the surface, madness. The Dread Empire was largely without allies at the moment. Sure, the Empress had probably made pacts in the eastern Free Cities, but none of them would be willing to march to war for her. And the Dead King had most the continent arrayed against him. Crusades with lesser forces than those gathered in Salia had driven him back into Keter, so why would Wither choose *now* to change sides? The Matrons were a cautious bunch: they'd waited until Thalassina was dust, half the legions were in effective exile and Callowan

support was secured before finally striking. Why would Wither not wait a few more months before making her decision, at least to see how the Grand Alliance did against Keter?

"And what might she trade the return of Foramen for?" Vivienne asked.

"Rule over the rest of the Tribes," Robber suggested.

"That wouldn't hold," I said. "It solidifies goblins around a single ruler, even if it's a hated one."

And once the Tribes began to unify, a thousand years of Praesi work would begin to unravel. A coalition of tribes nudged into constant feuding by breeding restrictions and strictly limited trade was something the Tower could comfortably believe itself to be able to put down if it rose in rebellion, even with the difficulties inherent in campaigning in the Grey Eyries. An effective goblin *queendom*, though? That was a whole other kettle of fish. Even if the throne changed dynasties with every season, a common army and the ability to mobilize workforce from all tribes would make even a fledgling goblin state an utter nightmare to put down should it rebel. It would be much unlike Malicia to trade a short-term gain for a long-term disaster, considering she likely intended to reign until the long term came to pass. Especially when she could simply have waited until the goblin armies had bloodied each other then forcefully taken Foramen from whoever came out the victor.

I wished Akua was here, for her insights into Praes would have been welcome, but she had duties just as pressing. Someone needed to get in touch with our armies before they came out of the Twilight Ways, and though Masego still had the know-how he no longer had the sorcery. I'd told him to double down on exploring his theory, besides, with the help of the Rogue Sorcerer whenever he could be spared. If the Dead King was truly about to start flinging around a few millennia's worth of accumulated nastiness, we needed anything that might truly be able to make a difference.

"Agreed," Pickler said. "Nor is my mother a fool. If such an offer was made she would not have trusted it."

"Then what did she bargain for?" Vivienne asked. "The current situation is untenable, Senior Sapper. Her seizure of Foramen has been the death knell of our supply routes for steel and munitions. We've enough in Callow to fill the Army's stocks once more, but after that the well is dry."

And that was without even speaking of the Legions-in-Exile, who after a year of campaigning had expended the vast majority of their own stocks. Marshals Juniper and Grem had combined their stores while they were fighting together in Iserre, but fought they had. There wasn't much left in those common stores, now.

Much of the Army of Callow's war doctrine came from the Legions of Terror, straight from the Reforms, and that meant the sappers had a major role as both combat units and siege engineers. Losing one of those for lack of munitions to furnish them with would be a blow, and an ill-timed one if we were to fight Keter in the coming months. Against the hordes of the dead, goblin munitions would make a massive difference. One we badly needed if we were to have a prayer of holding the northern fronts.

"Poison Tooth," Pickler said, quoting the scroll I'd handed her. "Bitter Stride, Clay Sun, every single tribe listed here – they are all face-tribes."

"Pickler," Robber hissed.

"That is not preserved knowledge, Robber," she dismissed. "The Taghreb figured out that much centuries ago. And even if it was, what would the Preservers *do*?"

"The Preservers," I slowly said.

"There are some among our kind that are tasked with the preservation of secrecy," Pickler said.

Robber, never one to miss an occasion to be grisly, slit his throat with a finger.

"Loose tongues lead to open throats," Robber said. "Even a child knows that."

"And the Legions allow this?" I frowned.

"Not openly," Pickler conceded. "Yet Marshal Ranker did not join her entire tribe to the Carrion Lord's cause without requiring *concessions*, in the days before the Conquest. As for the days before the Reforms, well..."

What did your average Dread Emperor care for goblins killing each other, she meant. Not a lot, most likely, and they'd have to know that trying too hard to get at goblin secrets would mean a rebellion. I doubted that the common assertions that only goblins spoke the goblin tongues was true, but then Black had taught me they regularly changed their spoken language so that it could not ever truly be grasped.

"I made no such concessions," I flatly said.

"They would have sought them from you, in time," Pickler said, hissing through her teeth. "Made sale of steel and munitions contingent on them."

"Allow me to be perfectly clear," I said, tone clipped. "In choosing to serve in the Army of Callow, you have become citizens of Callow. With all rights and protections so afforded."

"We do not make exceptions to this," Vivienne said, voice as offended as I felt. "And if the old crones think they can twist our arms over such a matter with *trade*, then they will be taught otherwise harshly."

Robber looked, to my deep unease, almost helpless.

"You don't understand," he said. "It is... you, we... We just don't spill secrets, Boss. It's not what we do. It's not what a goblin does."

"Matrons talk," Pickler said, tone embittered. "All else hold their tongue. That is our way."

We had, it seemed, tumbled into a deeper pit than I'd thought. It would not be bridged tonight, I thought, and there were prior callings. Best move on.

"Face-tribes," I said. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Tribes who represent us with outsiders," Pickler said. "The High Ridge learn and speak with the Taghreb, by custom, but under my mother the Banu of Foramen were the humans cultivated. No doubt the secrets she stole and traded helped the Confederation take the city from the Banu and helped her take it from the Confederation."

"And all the other tribes she allied with have similar purposes?" I pressed.

"The Bitter Strides are a dark hand by custom – they hurt in concert with another tribe that speaks sweetly – but they too know well the peoples of the Hungering Sands," Pickler said.

Suddenly Pickler's assertion that her mother did not intend to return to the Grey Eyries sounded more believable. Matron Wither had assembled allies that could navigate the Wasteland and only that kind, which implied those were the people she had a *use* for.

"Fuck," I said. "She's trying for nobility, isn't she? With so many nobles dead the Empress can find her a holding somewhere, and she'll take in her allied tribes as retainers."

"Thalassina was obliterated with sorcery, but it has a strategic location and great prestige as a holding," Vivienne said. "A worthy reward, perhaps, for one returning Foramen to the Tower."

The knock on the door saw my irritation rise sharply, but I mastered it. A young Callowan soldier – fair-haired, likely southern of birth – entered, face anxious. He was bringing, he said, word from Lord Hierophant and Royal Advisor Kivule as well Lord Adjutant. Contact had been made with the Army of Callow. My brow rose, since Akua had told me it was unlikely to work until

we were much closer to dawn. Hierophant's presence must have helped more than anticipated.

"Noted," I said. "You may leave."

He looked like he wanted to twist his hands anxiously, but he spoke up again.

"Your Majesty," he said, "your presence has been required."

I frowned.

"I left Lord Adjutant with them to see to anything that might require my presence in the first place," I said.

"And it is he that sent me to you, Your Majesty," the boy said. "I am to tell you that the Army of Callow has left the Twilight Ways, and is now encamped in northern Bayeux."

It took me a moment to place the principality in my mind – it was south of Arans, where my army was meant to march, and had commanded one of the two paths into the Red Flower Vales before the passes were collapsed. Well short of where they should be.

"Are the Legions-in-Exile with them?" Vivienne asked.

The boy shook his head.

"My lady, they *left*," he got out. "And Marshal Juniper has placed herself under arrest, along with almost third of the officers in the army."

Insanenoodlyguy

"And I am here to speak for the common goblin, I assume," Robber grinned, pearly needle-like teeth gleaming. "Allow me then to present our demands: first, we would like larger cookpots. The ones we have can't fit a full Proceran child. Second, vote."

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

[*Liliet*](#)

okay this one's good

Gunslinger

I've not been following comments for a while but how did we get to reviews of voting comments lol?

Liliet

Once upon a time, voting comments consisted of “Go vote for pgte on topwebfiction!” and a voting link.

Then the Fire nation attacked...

stevenneiman

TZKS has a lot more where people take a quote from the post and change it to be about voting, but that’s because it has shorter posts which I think make it easier to remember quotes.

Barthumphries

And the typo thread. Geez, it’s like y’all want Malicia to win. You know she’s the one who sneaks in typos.

I’d found it shockingly impressive that Matron Wither has succeeded at ensuring no other matron was appointed
Change has to had

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

Can anyone remind me why there are no goblin named?

Big Brother

It’s not that there aren’t, it’s just that there’re no known Named. Names are born from the culture they appear in, and with a secretive culture like the goblins, all their Named could be like Scribe where your attention just slides off of them and you forget they were there.

Javvies

Names are a cultural thing, and goblins and goblin culture are all about secrets.

As such, any goblin Names would presumably also heavily prioritize secrets and secrecy.

Zggt

A pet theory of mine is that “Saboteur” is a Goblin family of Names (like Knight), and as such no one ever assumes it’s a result of a Name since a great act of sabotage is, after all, untraceable.

superkeaton

Presumably because there’s got to be a Story for it first, and goblins are so secretive that their Named, if they have any, might manifest in more subtle ways.

Darkening

Yeah, I just went to double check and in chapter 15 of book one, Black theorizes what everyone's saying about Names being a reflection of the cultures that spawned them and that the obsession with secrecy that goblins have, goblin Named would be incredibly subtle and hard to notice. The whole thing with Chider was odd though. Though she was also orange if I recall and I'm not sure we've ever gotten an explanation for that. Anyways, it's either that or they just never leave the Eyries except in cases where they can slaughter **everyone** that might possibly witness their existence. There's no excuse like with the orcs where their culture was destroyed, the goblins might have a messy, chaotic culture, but it **is** a culture. If nothing else there'd be some kind of archetypal matron or something.

RandomFan

Chider isn't that weird. Squire was selecting which narrative of "integration with Praes" it was going for, I suspect. Two outsiders were candidates, this time. Two traditional Praesi from different tribes, each whom probably sought their own narrative tied to the thing, but I bet Chider was, like Cat, trying to make Goblins better off through working with Praes- or at least that that's a theme her narrative would have contained. The fact that Chider even could become a Squire is already a sign that Goblins were "Of Praes"- worth reminding that Orcs haven't had a name since they were a separate culture, so I bet you have to be part of a culture to claim its names.

There might be backstory reason that don't make it about Goblins, but the reason Chider was publically going for a Name is because Chider was going for a Praesi Name as a Praesi citizen. It doesn't require that goblins don't have Names.

[daegone823](#)

Just putting it out there so far the Calamities were composed of:

A Prostitute who became a ruler

A werewolf who became a captain

An Apprentice who became a Warlock/Father/Lover how did this become my favorite book romance

An Elf that became a Ranger

A ? who became a Scribe

Why not a Goblin who becomes an Assassin(it so secretive no one can discern the face of the creature, each Calamity has a counterpart or connection with the woe his was Vivienne a thief who gave up her identity)

I am guessing a Goblin of royal descent appeared at the Black Knights tent. He or she was doing there job silencing one of his own for revealing a deep secret about goblins his second tak was to kill Malicia before she takes power. The Black Knight of course wanted to execute the goblin but Malicia stepped in and was able to convince the goblin to do more for his tribe. His skill with murder could be used to take out more than just Goblins for instance Praes royalty and provide his clan a place at the table. She of course does this all while looking away from him allowing him to keep his identity a secret.

This would solidify his allegiance to the empress who wanted assassinations to send messages. Hinting at the thiatricall way people were taken care of. Also it gives credence to Goblin secrecy, his name would cause him to give up his very face in order to assume a thousand different bodies to both assassinate and keep his identity, as a goblin a secret from even his allies.

Liliet

We know Assassin was trained in some assassin school and as a graduation exercise killed everyone else in it (iirc).

Adrian V

Killed everyone else using everyone else, as a sort of joke since he almost always uses something useless or unimportant in his murders xD

Jarthon

Well, except in cases where they need people to think that it wasn't Assassin. He does whatever is necessary to get the job done as Black implied in one of the earlier chapters or as when the glass was poisoned after Hanno fought the calamities.

Cap'n Smurfy

It's entirely possible there are Goblin Named and in my own opinion very likely given their strong culture. But since Goblin's value secrecy so much their Named would be hidden and secret. Black proposed that theory, in Book 1 or 2 I think.

IDKWhoitis

They have em, they just are likely to be secretive and good at hiding. Names reflect the cultures they come from.

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

Cool, thank you all.

stevenneiman

Pick your favorite

- Goblins are super paranoid and secretive. Named paragons of goblin culture even more so to the point that they are able to keep their very existence secret at least from non-goblins

- Goblin culture was too damaged by being conquered by the Meizans and then made a client state of the Dread Empire. Their old Names were lost and they haven't developed any new ones.

Mammon

There are also no goblin mages, until it was revealed that those were taken deep below the mountains to never see the light of day, presumably to summon, bind and dissect demons for green fire. Goblin Named are likely the same secret ones, or the Matrons.

caoimhinh

We have Black's theory that Goblins have Names but they are very secretive.

ALSO, there is evidence of the Bard interacting directly with a Goblin, even before interacting with the known Named humans at the scene.

In Book 2 Chapter 32 "Draw", right after the fight with the Demon, Catherine and Akua confronted and Heiress pushed for a draw (solidifying the Pattern of Three), then Wandering Bard appeared in the middle of a line of sappers, she made her presence known by throwing a bottle of liquor to Akua.

The interesting part is that the current working hypothesis for everyone (both in-universe and outside) is that the Intercessor can only act through Named, but she clearly interacted with at least one female goblin, Lieutenant Rattler, before throwing the bottle, as shown when Robber asks why that line of sappers wasn't attacking the Bard, Rattler answers that the Bard had bribed her and she would give half of it to Robber.

When the Bard disappears right as the goblins detonate the tiles of the roof over which she was standing, Lieutenant Rattler is shown biting one of the coins the Bard had given her and cursing as she noticed it was fake.

So... either Lieutenant Rattler has a Name, the Bard can interact with non-Named, or this was made before EE had decided on the rule that the Intercessor could only directly interact with Named.

Maybe something else?

Liliet

There is no rule Bard can only interact with Named and there has never been. You think William's and Hanno's bands would not have noticed that? When Bard first appears in the Free Cities after reincarnation she swipes someone's bottle and briefly chats with the bartender before going to meet Hanno.

What she cannot do, apparently, is *appear* places where there aren't Named or other great story weight. She cannot just choose to manifest anywhere she likes. She can, however, go any places she likes on foot as long as she's already there and isn't being urgently called on for another duty.

Oh, she also interacted with Barika Unonti, Akua's helper, in the demon standard place. Threw sand at her.

KageLupus

Exactly. It's not that Bard can't interact with non-Named, she can't **interfere** with non-Named. From a narrative perspective that is a very big difference.

Bard can talk to normal people, and bribe goblins with fake money, and do any other activity that would look "normal" for a Named who wasn't an immortal body-hopper.

What Bard can't do is stop a pair of Elves hellbent on murder from striking down someone without a Name. That would be messing with the wrong part of the story. Scaring the Elves away from Akua so she could go from Heiress to Diabolist is allowed though, since that is nudging the Story in an acceptable manner.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah. She's limited on meta level, not object level. She's limited in her actions on the basis of what consequences they would have, not actions themselves.

Mind screwy but hey the entire 'narrative is an actual force' thing always was.

stevenneiman

I think her interactions need to focus on a Named, but I don't think she's barred from interacting with other people in service of it. Bribing the sappers was clearly in service of shaping her interaction with Cat, so it was allowed.

skovbenjamin

I was wondering about this. The current main theory is that their names are super secretive. Names draw on stories of a culture but goblins are obsessive about not sharing things and that might even apply to stories. If everything is an advantage

over the other tribes then why would you ever give them the chance to hear about an impressive member of your tribe by letting someone tell the story. The goblins might not have named because their culture lacks collective stories because nothing is ever shared enough to become a story. What kind of story would a goblin Named be part of, they can't be part of a rebellion without revealing themselves or drawing in other Named to the story and internal goblin politics is intentionally small and casual. If the goblins have some sort of secret culture deep underground it might have stories but might not be large enough to sustain a narrative for a Named. Based on this they could have a single Named ruler or champion related to some ancient story that hasn't ended but I think their culture and civilization isn't big enough to have an entirely self contained narrative.

The drow didn't have Named either because their culture didn't have stories anymore, Rumena and a few other ancient drow might recall old legends but collectively the drow don't have strong cultural narratives in their current state. I would expect that in a generation or two for Named to begin appearing maybe even during the war on Keter but only once they have recovered or developed stories or as part of another nations narrative (like how Hakram has a non orc name).

Bellephron also never developed Named because their culture rejects them but also possibly because their culture doesn't supply any stories except for their founding legend because a story would glorify an individual over others or might even tacitly acknowledge the authority of a foreign tyrant.

Overall I'm proposing that if a culture lacks well disseminated stories they can't become Named without joining another culture's story as well as that a narrative requires a large enough stage to occur and that goblins could lack these. This doesn't rule out the possibility that goblins have become named in the past by becoming part of another culture's story and just kept it a secret but providence would be very unlikely to permit that to play out without the secret being revealed eventually.

[onedollargum](#)

Given how long-lived and cunning the matron line is, maybe they have a distributed name system (like the drow with their Night).

[Liliet](#)

Drow are priest-like, not Named-like.

[Javvies](#)

Well ... that can't be good.

Presumably the Legions in exile are going to Praes.
Only question is if this is Malicia utilizing her hidden mind control hooks or something else.

Slider

What just happened in the end?

naturalnuke

Malicia has an aspect that lets her imbed orders in people's brains to make sleeper agents. She's spent the time to infect every officer graduate of the war college.

I believe they just got activated.

alele

When did we ever see Malicia's aspects?

konstantinvoncarstein

I think it was in the chapter where she killed Akua's mother. She has **Rule**, and she can use it to boost her **Speaking**. It is possible for her to plant commands in others and activate them later, and she did so at least with all officer in the 3 Wastelands Legions. I don't know if she did the same with other Legions.

[Javvies](#)

Malicia secretly put mind control hooks into every high ranking Legion officer she could.
The only question is where the cutoff lies. Though presumably there would have been some exceptions, such as officers of lesser rank with ties to the High Lords and other nobles.

It's one of the reasons people think Malicia has control issues and was never a true believer in Amadeus's New School Pragmatic Villainy, and was always at heart a Classic Old School Villain who was only going along with Amadeus's plans and practices while she benefited.

konstantinvoncarstein

Officers with ties to the nobility would have on the contrary be a priority, they were at the most likely to betray her.

I think Malicia is at heart practical. She was satisfied by owning only Callow, be at peace with everyone and

disdained the grandiose projects of her predecessor. Even the flying city was never meant to be used. She used old-school methods only when she had nothing left.

Fayhem

> I think Malicia is at heart practical. She was satisfied by owning only Callow, be at peace with everyone and disdained the grandiose projects of her predecessor. Even the flying city was never meant to be used. She used old-school methods only when she had nothing left.

Indeed. You could, in a way, make an argument that her attachment to Practical Villainy was only ever... practical. As opposed to Amadeus', which crossed over into ideological.

Jacob McNeer

Yeah, it's ironic that Amadeus is an idealist while Malicia is a Pragmatist, considering that one reformed the legions and the other put a super complicated, multi-layered plan into effect in order to get a mobile fortress city that can spit out permanent gateways to hell.

Liliet

He's adorable, isn't he?

And, uh, probably right. Selfless idealists get a boost in this universe, after all~

jamesc9

I'm re-reading, and found a link to the chapter that includes Rule:
<https://practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com/2017/09/04/closure/>

Walter

If that was the case, tho, why is Juniper able to put herself under arrest? It seems like a weird thing for Malicia to make her do.

superkeaton

First the rise, then the fall. Ebb and flow, Cat. Good luck with this shit hand.

naturalnuke

Oh, ooooooh, Malicia is finally reeling in all those hooks she's been digging into officers.

JJR

It looks like they just got order 66ed.

[doominator10](#)

"And Marshal Juniper has placed herself under arrest, along with almost third of the officers in the army"

Excuse me the fuq?

Andrew Mitchell

Refer to the comments above. Those points also apply to Army of Callow commanders who were once part of the Legions.

Insanenoodlyguy

It is odd Juniper has placed herself under arrest. This is not her failure, even if she gave insult the legion would only move for black or malicia.

My theory: It was Malicia. The hooks have been sunk in deeper then we thought, and not just in the legion. Juniper HELPED them leave. And in doing so betrayed both her Warlord and the Carrion Lord. Realizing after there is only one reason she'd have done that, she took herself and anybody else that fit her new definition of potentially compromised out of the chain of command.

Andrew Mitchell

Maybe. Or perhaps Juniper felt the order too and instead of obeying she put herself and all the other Army of Callow officers who were ex-Empire under arrest so they didn't do anything Malica wants.

Shveiran

If resisting the order is that easy, the aspect is unlikely to be a game changer. Juniper is not the only one with strong loyalties, and Malicia developed this to counter Black's influence on the Legions he shaped.

gingerlygrump

Juniper has been repeatedly praised by Cat as one of the smartest people she's ever met. Don't underestimate her ability to sidestep an opponent.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed. If Malicia's order did not include "don't arrest yourself",,,

Crash

If it was anyone else, I would agree. But this is, in fact, Juniper.

She's likely to go into a train of thought of "why am I doing this and is it actually useful from a tactical standpoint?" if the answer is no and the wish to do the thing does not go away, I'm pretty sure that'd trip all sorts of alarms in her brain.

Now, I'm nto saying she resisted it, but I do think she would find it in herself to obstruct the possibility as best she could before trying to do it. So maybe Malicia said "Do A" and Juniper thought okay I'll do A, but before I do that I'm just gonna place myself under arrest. And then from prison she goes "hey guys let's do A" which is, of course, promptly ignored.

Juniper is taking a nap right now.

JJR

I don't think it's quite that simple. Juniper is clever enough to do it sure, but I don't think she'd be uniquely clever such that only she managed it and none of the Legion in Exile officers did out of loyalty to Black.

I think part of the explanation is going to stem from the fact that the Army of Callow is no longer part of the legions. If the sleeper order was outdated in this regard then there's an opening for Juniper that Legion officers can't use. Something like, "return all legion soldiers under your command to Ater an and take any appropriate action needed to ensure you are unhindered."

Well, what do you know, turns out that arresting 1/3 of the officers of the Army of Callow will create exactly the sort of disarray the Legions could use to get away. That these are also the compromised officers, welcome to r/maliciouscompliance.

Crash

Didn't mean to imply she was the only one capable of it, I reckoned Marshall Grem had his own scheme prepared to spring on the way to/upon arrival to Praes. That said... This makes a lot of sense and I like it a

lot more than the half baked tangent my brain went on about the story of the Army of Callow.

Thanks, mate.

[Liliet](#)

Ey.

Shrikne

So... Does this mean Abigail is now the highest-ranking officer not under arrest in the Army of Callow, as she's the highest ranking member not from the 15th if I remember correctly?

Crash

She absolutely is. Isn't that great? She must be nearing a meltdown right now. It's gonna be fun.

I also hope that Hune somehow got out unscathed. I don't recall her original rank within the legion but it might have been low enough to not warrant a Ruling. It'd be fun to have that foil and very different perspective to Cat in the council dealing with the biggest breach in the Army of Callow.

[Liliet](#)

She has always had second highest rank after Juniper – when Juniper was a legate she was a tribune, when Juniper was a general she was a legate, etc.

I don't think Malicia would overlook her, unfortunately =x

Quite Possibly A Cat

Ah, that Malacia and her mind control. It is a big single point of failure. I guess they really need to stab her now.

Wait, is that why she's gathering the High Lords? Mind Control? That's certainly one way of getting the High Lords to behave.

konstantinvoncarstein

The last time an Empress tried that, she was swiftly killed.

[Walter](#)

Cat notes here that the high lords are almost certain to back Malicia vs. Black, but I can't shake the suspicion she is gathering them up to slaughter them. Her energy is still dirtbag left angry barmaid, in my eyes. Like, her siding with

the rich vs. Amadeus just doesn't feel like a thing that might happen.

I bet she uses them as a big sacrifice or something, probably after playing them off against one another with the offer of Chancellor.

Liliet

Ah, but in her eyes this isn't a class struggle conflict. It is for Amadeus, in many ways, but he's never put it like that to her and it's not what she sees.

She sees Praes struggling to survive, singularly, and Amadeus making mistakes and suboptimal moves (same as he thinks of her) – as she also is too proud to submit even if she knows that if she sided with him he'd win. A lot of her energy is also 'a woman who was once a near-slave to a man and will not allow that to happen again'.

NZPIEFACE

I trust Juniper to have a reason for this, so how the hell did she fuck up this time.

Insanenoodlyguy

She's comprised herself. So she cordoned off everybody in the chain of command who potentially is.

Andrew Mitchell

This.

gingerlygrump

Juniper may not ever gain a name, but she sure as hell deserves to be a General, or a Brilliant Tactician, etc.

gingerlygrump

Or the Marshall, since that's what she actually is.

Fayhem

I agree, but I feel like a Name that's also a normal title should get an adjective to make it easier to distinguish from the normal title – Marshal Juniper really doesn't sound that easy to distinguish from Juniper, the Marshal. But what adjective suits for Juniper? I rather like the Steely Marshal as a Name for her personally.

gingerlygrump

Calculating Commander?

[Liliet](#)

I'd argue The Marshal would suit just fine as a Name – we have Captain and Adjutant as precedent. Names are exactly that – titles and nicknames given additional weight, not unique identifiers. Even Hedge Wizard is an example – there was apparently a hedge mage *guild* in Callow.

jonnney

She has the intellect for it, but lacks the passion required. The certainty that something is incorrect in the world and that they have the ability to change it. It is similar to why Robber remains nameless. They are both wonderful characters who are the best in their field, yet they come from cultures which can't have names and are too subservient to the way things are done to break that mold.

gingerlygrump

It's too bad, really. Juniper IS war. Robber IS the knife in the dark. They are both wildly passionate about those things.

But- as you said- they're conditioned to be followers. They kneel.

Which sucks. I want a lot of things for our band of scrappy oddballs and misfits, but what I want most of all is for them to live through this godsdamned war. And those without Names are so fragile. Other than Cat, of course, but we're not even sure what she is at this point.

[Liliet](#)

We know Aisha and Juniper live through this war, because future epigraphs :3

I'd say it's not so much followers/kneeling, as supporting Names exist (Adjutant, Captain, Scribe), as lack of clarity/weight/sharp point. Juniper is not *making a name for herself* except as an expert among experts. She's a background player, and she stands among equals as far as those on her level are. She's just not *special* enough, and I'd actually argue this spells better things for her life expectancy than if she got a Name. Currently, she's not a *target*.

Cap'n Smurfy

It never rains but it pours. I know Malicia is particularly talented at Speaking, but this kind of hidden order contingencies reeks of Aspect tier power.

Actually do we have any hints about what Malicia might have as aspects? As far as name powers go we've seen her projecting herself into others, speaking with incredible skill and appearing outright supernaturally beautiful. Maybe magic was involved in some parts but Malicia isn't a sorceress. Any guesses on aspect names? Manoeuvre or Orchestrate strike me as possible social ones.

Death Knight

I don't know about her not being a sorceress. EE mentioned in a comment way back in Book 1 when someone asked if magic (necromancy specifically) will become a staple of Cat's Name powers and he said that nothing Cat would be able to do would compare to what Wekesa or Alaya could do on a good day.

[Liliet](#)

You're mixing up two different WoGs. The comparison to Wekesa and Alaya was about Name power tiers, and the necromancy question got the answer 'not as good as an actual necromancer'.

gingerlygrump

You have an impressive memory, Liliet. I've reread this story several times now and I can't remember half the stuff you do.

[Liliet](#)

You haven't argued about it as extensively as I have!

Also, WoG document is much shorter than the entire story and much easier to reread in its entirety... 9.9

(Also, I recommend reading liveblogs. All the re-remembering of important details, much less time and attention span required!)

(Also writing liveblogs. Once you've written your thoughts on something down, it's much easier to remember. It's kind of like taking notes in class, only more fun)

konstantinvoncarstein

It is a copy of one of my previous comment:

She has Rule, and she can use it to boost her Speaking. It is possible for her to plant commands in others and activate them later, creating unknowing sleeper agents. She did so at least

with all officers in the 3 Wastelands Legions. I didn't know she did the same with other Legions.

konstantinvoncarstein

And the puppet thing is done by using a method created by Nefarious, so i suppose mages are needed for that. The supernatural beauty is probably linked to her Name, and maybe a spell cast by one of her mage.

And Malicia is no mage, « only » a very good politician.

Insanenoodlyguy

The way it was described, she's obscenely beautiful to start, her name enhances it with presence to draw attention and fill with awe/fear/lust, and her clothes further enchanted to get that attention to begin with.

So she's got a few buffs but even if dispelled she still has the highest CHA bonus in the room.

[Liliet](#)

She is also very specifically skilled at making the exact impression she wants to. This is the part that comes through through the puppet 100% – it's unsettled Catherine in Book 3 and now it's how she recognized when Malicia fully inhabited the body.

[Liliet](#)

So her native Cha is probably slightly lower than Amadeus's and Catherine's – beauty is not all there is to it, and she isn't known for drawing followers to her cause just with the strength of passion the way these two do – but she makes up for it with goddamn expertise in persuasion, deception and performance.

And Name-driven and enchantment buffs.

Insanenoodlyguy

The subreddit just floated this idea, so I can't take credit but: if all the older officers of the war college who make up most of the higher ranks are for the moment compromised, then a new Marshall is needed for the time being. One who can be trusted, who has the pull and the respect, and who never went to college.

MARSHAL ABIGAILS LEGEND BEGINS .

nimelennar

After that, it's only a matter of time before she's made Heir to the Throne of Callow.

TAP_M113

EXACTLY! Above is trying to apply the cuckoo strategy!

Gift an above-powered name fuelled by Comic relief and providence to a reluctant farmer girl dragged into a position of power, that bumbles its way to posts of responsibility, and that when her mentor (Catherine) tragically dies is comically dragged into Kingdom against her will?

That story is a Tsar-Bomba on its own right, and it could very well work, since Catherine is too soft-hearted to kill any comic relief character that isn't aligned to Evil, or that doesn't have a hidden depth, or grounded in grim reality.

I hope Cat's entourage realizes it and has a serious talk with Abigail about meta-narrative, or she could unwittingly ruin EVERYONE` s work....

You know you are going to die when the Heavens grant a comic relief name to somebody you slipped into mentoring...
Gods, I dread and hate Abigail. Nothing personal, she is just made to get a whole lot of people killed, unless she sees the writing on the wall and seriously tends to her responsibilities.

[Liliet](#)

She's not a farmgirl.

You're... reading way too much into this, dude.

Also I'm personally still waiting for Shining Princess Vivienne. Now that would be a move on Above's part worthy of Below's finest tricks: "aand we are retroactively claiming ALL of this as having been in our favor all along".

TAP_M113

Oh yes, that is the second prong on the offensive.

But Vivienne would get it and reject the name.

Abigail, of common birth, out of her depth and already idolized by the rank and file?

She doesn't know anything about the dangers of metanarrative or how Catherine and friends want to craft a world without divine/narrative interference, and is desperate for ANYTHING that offers her an advantage to get out of this mess....

She would take the name bait hook, line and sinker. And you kill people or reduce their narrative weight by getting them to mentor someone, a narrative mistake Cat already has done...

Will it work that way? With a bit of luck, maybe not. Is it a sly and dangerous move? Absolutely. It would be a welcome test of maturity for Catherine to take that deadly situation and turn it around into an asset, that would be Amadeus-grade narrative Kung-fu.

Maybe get Aisha or Juniper to act as her mentors? If she gets training and the comic relief goes away, that would relieve much of the danger....

Jacob McNeer

Several problems with this theory.

1: Narrative force doesn't affect everyone equally. It seems to affect gods the most, then demigods (fey), then Named and then, after a huge gap, regular humans. One of the main reasons Cat delights in not having a Mantle or a Name is that there is no role forcing her to conform and she doesn't have to worry as much about the story turning against her. (Can you imagine what would have happened if she had a Mantle or Name when she was bluffing the cavalry charge? "Arrogant Villain trampled into the dirt!") She only has to worry about it when she is considering her friends, allies and enemies. This is why Cordelia was able to get so far despite not having a meta bone in her body, The Story doesn't affect her because she is not one of the Named Characters. What I'm trying to say is that the story hasn't affected Abigail to be the "crouching coward, hidden badass" comic relief character, it's not some hidden trap designed by above or below. She's just naturally that way.

2: Most Named don't have a choice about getting or losing their Names. Cat and Cordelia are the exception, not the rule. Black became the Squire in the heat of battle after seeing the previous Black Knight because he relied too much on his awesome power and not enough on common sense. Masego became Apprentice after becoming fed up with everyone's inaccuracies and incompetence. Iridani became Archer after she was offered a taste of freedom. Vivienne became the Thief because she wanted to make every single Praesi pay for what they did to her mother and her country, and she lost the Name when she no longer felt that way. In every single example I gave they had no choice about becoming Named (many of them didn't realize that they had become one until afterwards) and Vivienne had no choice about losing her

name and if she did she wouldn't have lost it because she was still really insecure at the time. Neither Vivienne nor Abigail would most likely have any choice in the matter if they became Named, it would be due to their will, longing and the way they see the world.

2.5: While it's clear that Vivienne understands why Cat doesn't want Named leading Nations, we don't know whether she feels the same way, especially since its basically an open secret that that part of the Liesse Accords is going to be bargained away. It is quite possible that Vivienne wouldn't see anything wrong with becoming a Good Queen (I'm pretty sure that Shining Prince(ss) is a Procer Name).

Liliet

Amadeus actually deliberately chose to lay claim to the Name of Squire. It's how Praesi Names usually work – ambition-driven, you have to be TRYING to get it. But that's specific to a particular category of Names, not a universal thing. For most of them, yeah, you usually just get slotted into the groove without the pivot informing you what it's about, if you even get one at all.

Narrative actually affects regular people a lot, just... slightly, en masse. What is unusual about Named is more the disproportionate amount in which *they* affect the narrative. Where a regular person would be lumped in with everyone else in their broad category in, say, successfully repelling the Dead from their borders yet again, regardless of their personal choices, a Named has the story react to their every move, and that's why they're so vulnerable to making mistakes and prone to getting huge bonuses.

That said, Above doesn't guide narratives in the way described in the post above. What influence there is is *subtle*, there is just impression of much greater inteference in-universe because things tend to *align* narratively in the way Gods are assumed to like, and inconsistencies are faith'd away. Note how Cat was declared heretic after strong-arming angels in First Liesse – everyone can tell something went wrong, they just aren't quite sure how.

I think Abigail is a genuine supportive narrative to Cat, the same way Rat Company was. Back in Book 1, the story demanded that Catherine get a smooth ride to her first command, with a convenient ambitionless Ragtag Band of Misfits to win over. Now, if we infer from the convenience of Abigail's rise just when and where her

particular talents (deescalation of conflicts) are needed, the story is demanding that Callow not fall apart in Catherine's hands, and doesn't that have interesting implications?

[Liliet](#)

OH DEF

Whatever the fuck it is that just happened (my theory was that Juniper helped Grem because of personal reasons and then placed herself under arrest cause she's conscientious like that), Marshal Abigail is like 99% definitely a go.

Welcome to hell, gurl.

TAP_M113

Oh shit NO. She lacks the qualifications, she is fully narrative-driven, she is fully powered by chance and luck..

The army of Callow is going to be lead by a Comic relief-powered name. FROM ABOVE.

Dear Gods, Abigail is basically made from magic swords. This is how Above kills Catherine in revenge for all her progress.

How come she is not seeing Above's dagger? When the Choirs want to murder you, they send the comic relief, ensure critical points of the plan and positions in your army are held by incompetents, and gift you magic swords.

Abigail is all of those, laced with Cyanide and tons of goblinfire for good measure. Please somebody save Juniper, so she can deliver us from this grim fate

[Liliet](#)

Abigail is actually damn well qualified. Catherine made sure of it, tutored her herself, remember? Abby is a mess of anxiety into terror, but she's good at her job. To her utter dismay.

[Fayhem](#)

This exactly. Abigail truly is the Ciaphas Cain of the Guideverse – she talks herself down constantly in her POVs, but that's a self-image thing and *not* an actual competence thing. She is genuinely good at this and has the potential to succeed at handling even more responsibility, and she is so incredibly uncomfortable with that idea that her psyche subconsciously refuses to recognize it.

[Walter](#)

Great observation re: Ciaphas Cain. It is just that same energy. Abigail feels like an utter fraud and constantly talks up her desire to escape, but what she actually does is all the things a heroic callowan soldier would do.

[Fayhem](#)

> Great observation re: Ciaphas Cain.

Thanks! In the interests of honesty I have to disclose that I'm definitely not the first person to make that comparison in the comments, though – I was using it because it seemed super apt to me as well when I saw it.

It really is that same energy though, right down to the dissonance between her internal monologue and what actually winds up happening being played up for comedic effect to the reader (while practically all the actual in-universe characters around her remain totally oblivious and in awe of her). And I guess here Cat would be filling the Amberley role, not romantically obv but rather in that she sees through both layers of Abigail's facade – Cat can see through Abigail's external facade and realizes that she sees herself very differently than others see her, and she can see through Abigail's internal denial and realizes that she is actually genuinely competent/good at this. And she just chooses not to ever explicitly call Abigail out on any of it bc why fix what ain't broken, right?

[Liliet](#)

I think she's tried to help Abigail with her anxiety issues and realized it's truly beyond her power. Or, well, to the degree that it's working, it's doing so very slowly.

ChillyPepper

I think people seem to forget she managed to hold her own pretty well against a surprise attack that killed her commanding officer and threw the army into a pit of chaos and instead focus on the sad anxiety narrative of hers.

[Liliet](#)

IKR.

Insanenoodlyguy

When did you get the idea she was incompetent? Every one of her ideas has made sense. She is a person who's moves work

better than expected but she's never made a move that only worked because pure narrative bullshit.

[ninegardens](#)

I mean... we've seen her explicitly come up with plans that she's like "I'll ask for X, because I know they'll say no, and then I don't have to do this stupid plan" and "Oh god, I have to do something that is plausibly legit, but won't get me promoted"

[Barthumphries](#)

It happened with like all of her orders. They only succeeded because she got lucky but they made her seem prescient.

[Liliet](#)

That happened one (1) time, and even then the luck component was only in that her requisition made for different reasons ended up being usable in her situation. That she saw how to use it and used it was no coincidence, only that it was there for her to use.

[Liliet](#)

I will also note that in requesting knights, she needed to make her request seem plausible, so that she'd get demoted for incompetence, not tribunal'd for sabotage. She requested something that she thought would in retrospect make sense for her to request, just something she didn't expect to get granted anyway. Yes, that's subtle line she tried to ride, and she fell on the 'granted because plausible' end of it. Juniper didn't know what she was going to do with them but she believed it was possible she would do SOMETHING, because the knights really are a generally useful asset.

And so, because of an unsuccessful political play, Abigail ended up with a useful asset she didn't expect to have. And then used to to brilliant effect when there was in fact an opportune moment for it.

Would you really say no competence was involved at any point in that chain?

[Ultimate_procrastinator](#)

Why do you keep insisting she has a name? She doesn't, and even if Above offers her one, so long as she figures it out, it would be completely consistent for her to reject it because she doesn't want the work of being Named

Ben

I live this so much it made me comment for the first time!

TAP_M113

Welcome to the commentariat, brother!
Your application to second tier citizenry has been approved by the Ashur Thalassocracy. Enjoy the watch for new chapetrs with us!

WuseMajor

Are we certain that this isn't Black heading for Praes with an army at his back?

Goobinator101

This. Are they going to take the fight back to the Tower through the use of the Twilight Ways? He can keep Malicia busy while everyone focuses on the Dead King. A mind control aspect out of nowhere seems off.

[Liliet](#)

It's not out of nowhere, we knew about it from one of the extra chapters. And from pure Cat's-view-narrative point of view, now is the EXACT time Malicia is pulling all her hidden cards out of sleeves. It's perfectly fitting that she have a lot of those.

[Liliet](#)

He's still right here in Salia, and does not possess independent means of quick travel, let alone isntanteneous.

Well okay if Twilight gates are permanent he might have that. Still not instanteneous, and Cat would not let him go like that because that would be violating her agreements with allies and he knows it.

Too stupid for him.

[Liliet](#)

P.S. Scribe's agents reported to Vivienne on goblin movements. Sounds to me like Black's still there with them.

[Walter](#)

I feel like there is essentially zero chance Black isn't mind controlled right now. He has no Name, and we've already established that Named mind control utterly owns sorcery in the Cat/Lady Ime 'I could make you kill yourself' scene. Malicia talked to him in council, and we know she can Speak without actually Speaking from the interlude where she kills Talia.

If he was heading for Praes with an army at his back it would be to fight for Malicia as a puppet.

Liliet

A necromantic puppet cannot channel an Aspect power like that. If Malicia were there in person this would be an entirely different story – one in which everyone who saw her was in danger, but one where she herself would be vulnerable to getting killed then and there in turn. Entirely differently balanced dramatic stakes.

By using a puppet, Malicia keeps herself safe, but she is also unable to exert much of a threat through her mere presence – being, y’know, not present.

Walter

I disagree, lots of evidence for Named doing stuff at a distance.

1. Cat & Lady Ime conversation.
2. Everything DK does is through a necromantic puppet.
3. Cat animating her own corpse wasn’t impaired in using her power.

It might be that Malicia can’t use her power through a puppet, but it would be a weakness unique to her, and a really weird one for her to have, given her specialty.

Mammon

Malicia: Wait for it...

Malicia: Wait for it...

Malicia: Bit of intervening in Salia’s coup, and then wait for it...

Malicia: Wait just a little bit longer...

Malicia: Wait for Kairos to stop monologuing his death speech...

Malicia: Still waiting...

Malicia: Gods Below damn it Kairos, would you jus- Ah there we go.

Malicia: Just a little bit longer for good measure...

Malicia: And Operation There’s-no-other-Villains-to-overshadow-my-play-so-it’s-assured-to-be-serious-and-devastating-without-finite-doom-kneecapping-me is a go! Mind control, activate!

Dead King from the shadows: Foolish Dread Empress, by overshadowing my renewed invasion with your self-destructive plan you merely made the Heroes a target supported by Story to be defeated, while my forces are protected by the essential and Story-driven Heroes and Leaders’ attention being drawn elsewhere. My overwhelming forces will be successful without Story-

intervention at pivots at every turn, and the bonus chapters will not suffice to stop my march.

Both Malicia and Dead King laugh maniacally

*Matron Wither, the final and most powerful Villain of this book series, stands in DK's shadows rubbing her hands together and mumbling 'Yes... Yes... Overshadow my villainry to enable me to further my plans unopposed. Yes...'

[Liliet](#)

I'm 100% buying that last one tbh.

TAP_M113

I love this comment!

Robber second demand reads as thus: Matron Wither for final boss! 😊

Crash

This is hilarious and if it wasn't bad narratively speaking to have your final villain come out of left field I would absolutely be loving this.

JJR

Need more Secretly Dread Emperor Traitorous All Along.

laguz24

Goddammit Malacia, you are trading short term gains for long term losses. You were already dead but this just leads to you guaranteed to be extra dead. Also if you are trying to mind control the entire Praesi court in addition to the goblin tribes then this is beyond stupid. You have no friends, all your 'allies' would want you dead at the drop of a hat, you are supposed to be smarter than this. Also if someone (not me) could find a full list of officers who would be affected that would be nice. Is marshal orim affected?

[Liliet](#)

"Every officer stationed in the Wasteland of legate rank or higher".

If it covers the Callowan + Exile Legions, then yes it covers Marsham Grem (I'm guessing that's who you mean, with Orim not being a Marshal). If she's that bold. IDK.

Also, she doesn't actually need to mind control the court, just show she's still in control and in power. They'll submit as long as she's clearly winning.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Orim the Grim? If someone with more patience could double-check, I thought Orim died during the Doom.

TAP_M113

Malicia has ALWAYS been smart.

She is actually getting all her objectives:

- Got the League as trading partners and allies, which are now THE naval superpower and under her thumb.
- She can retrieve Foramen and the Confederation is kicked back to the Eyries.
- DK is rampaging as intended.
- Callow armies & legions in Exile seem heavily compromised.

I bet she has a plan to always be a lesser evil and make her existence and rule acceptable to other powers.

Malicia has never crossed the moral event horizon, and trying to remove her from Praes would cause more problems it would solve, because at the end she is the sole remaining rational actor in the Wasteland and a patriot.

She knows it, and it is the cornerstone of her rule.

TAP_M113

At the end, the only dislikeable things she has done are:

- Doom of Liesse. The only thing undeniably Evil she indirectly did, and it was a nuclear deterrent she can plausibly deny when the X crusade threatened Praes with invasion and the loss of Callow, which would have resulted in as many, if not more deaths by starvation amongst Praesi citizenry.

-Ratface death, amongst other officials. Small change, modern countries kill each other agents far more often.

Did not hamper Cat nor Callow, whose "de facto" independence Malicia was nice enough to indirectly endorse – Something easily ended with Assassin waving his little fingers.

-Death King invasion: Second most damning grateful thing, until you realize that it could be a secret agreement with Bard to entice the Death King into a killing field. This could actually be an anti-villainous move; at the end, what better move to legitimate Praes in the international community than the DK head on a Pike after the Grand Alliance has been run ragged, and Praes unexpectedly saves the day?

I like Malicia. At the end, she has seemingly neglected meta-narrative, but everything she has done comes from a good place and with far less loss of life than Amadeus methods would.

It would be interesting to see Malicia making true their

lifelong dreams for a new Praes from soft power, winning against Amadeus, then offering him the Chancellor post, with all the trust that comes implicit with it.

Alternatively, Malicia has actually planned for her defeat at the hands of Amadeus, and the Wasteland Nobility is trapped between the incoming hammer (Amadeus) while carefully held in place by the Anvil (Malicia).

At the end, there is no firmer chance of Victory for a Villain than the certainty of its defeat...Which means a Villain has quite a good deal of control and agency over it.

It would be original and humbling, and humility is a virtue. If there is something that I always liked about this tale, it is its originality and that results have a morality of their own...

Liliet

That would be damn cool. Both the idea of Alaya setting up for Amadeus's victory, and the idea of her having a secret agreement with Bard. I find the latter less credible than the former, and former less likely than her genuinely fighting back, but... Hm. I want that.

TAP_M113

Yes, I bet that Malicia wishes to win herself and keep her rule, but there is worse things in Meta-narrative and life to have your defeat condition be only a slightly weaker victory.

Malicia is smart, and I don't think she is going to go down in the narrative flames of old-school Evil as Amadeus seems to fear.

Win or loose, she is more interesting and likeable than that.

And having Wither granted nobility and goblins settled outside of the stifling pall of secrecy would be as great as a Strike for non-human rights and cause as the ones Amadeus did.

Both of them coincided in many things when it came to goals, it is on the methods where their disagreements always arose.

We laugh at Wither villainy, but that makes two big bold goblin emigration initiatives she has spearheaded. She is the Catherine of Goblkind, and wants her people to climb out of the crab bucket the Eyries are for her kind.

Goblins suffered a lot after the dwarves near-genocided them, it is logical they want to go out of their jail and

explore their potential to the fullest. Whether this leads to a technological golden age for Calernia or a Malthus scenario followed by Gnome apocalypse remains to be seen...

[Liliet](#)

No technological golden age for Creation. Now, societal development golden age? 😊

mamm0nn

Why no technological golden age? Only thing the goblins have to do is put their sharpeners in tubes with a metal ball, upscale that to ballista size, make it accurate and powerful enough, go through a fantasy WWI and WWII to refine their means with practice and full war-effort economy, and then hopefully not find that the gnomes are even more advanced than WWII tech. No biggie, they can handle it. And if all else fail, they could weaponise the power of friendship by channelling it directly from Robber who's been bottling it up in the friend zone since book 1.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

The gnomes won't politely wait for them to get there, they'll send a Red Letter at the first sign of trouble brewing. I'm pretty sure that a goblin Red Letter would ultimately be a Praesi one anyway, and Praes is already out of warnings before Gnome-ageddon ensues IIRC.

mamm0nn

Who said anything about politely waiting? Goblins, you've got... say... about three weeks? Three weeks to do all of the above. Get going.

From the upside, it's quite likely that the goblins can keep most to all of their developments a secret because it's all happening underneath the mountains. You can't tell me that the dwarven tech and means are not yet red letter worthy, but they're not letting the gnome satellites or whatever see them. They make sure that nothing but those low-tech slayers and the occasional mercenary band with axes appear on the surface. That the goblins were found out once before is likely because they did something on the surface like venting a kind of smoke that showed what they were doing, not that the gnomes can actually see through their stone into their tight-lip communities.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Okay, maybe so.

[Liliet](#)

> From the upside, it's quite likely that the goblins can keep most to all of their developments a secret because it's all happening underneath the mountains

We literally learned about gnomes from that one time someone in the Eyries was playing with powders. We explicitly START with establishing that yes, what goblins are doing is visible to gnomes.

> You can't tell me that the dwarven tech and means are not yet red letter worthy

Yes, I can. They use crossbows and ballistae, and magically bound familiars. Those aren't subject to gnomish restrictions, and all dwarven *tech* we see is explicitly under Red Letter level. I'll remind you that we see that underground, in their war against drow, which by your logic would be invisible to gnomes.

(But isn't)

[Liliet](#)

> and then hopefully not find that the gnomes are even more advanced than WWII tech.

LMAO

They were at that level thousands of years ago. Their technological development did not stop there.

And munitions are too unstable to be used in place of black powder. They work on magic, not chemistry, and so aren't quite so flexible and adaptable. Powdered devil, remember? Pickler is already flinging them with rope-powered siege weaponry, but a farming machine got a Red Letter.

[Liliet](#)

(Oh, and even without secret agreement with Bard, I'm pretty sure she's counting on DK being defeated either way – killed or pushed back. Him actually conquering the continent except for places she's bargained for is not plan A)

Liliet

Notably, appointing Wither as goblin nobility would secure her a steadfast ally against the High Lords. Not against Amadeus – he'd confirm goblin nobility in an eyeblink – but the old schoolers? Wither stays as long as Malicia/Amadeus's faction is in power and she knows it.

TAP_M113

Perfect analysis of the situation. Long-term, the output of goblin technology with the resources of Foramen would outstrip the power of the High Lords and solidify the rule of any Dread Emperor.

So Malicia methods are solidifying her dream of a stable Praes without putting Praesi nobility to the sword, balancing them with an additional opposed economic powerhouse instead...unless the matrons would only take two generations to get recognised by the High Lords as a delightful source of rocket fuel to the bonfire, and Praesi politics discovering fractal-grade backstabbing after Foramen Matrons teach them how you PROPERLY backstab your Dread Emperor with the lessons learned from millenia of Matron Orwelllian rule.

Everyone is gangster until the Matrons roll out the heavy scheming daggers...

Liliet

> unless the matrons would only take two generations to get recognised by the High Lords as a delightful source of rocket fuel to the bonfire

...that's what I would bet on.

A good short-term shore-up, though!

jonnnney

She is not using mind control on the goblins nor is she planning on doing so to the high lords. Malacia isn't trading short term gains for long term losses. Rather she is taking the next logical step in the Reforms, ie granting a noble title to a greenskin. By making a Matron a high lord she is fundamentally changing the story of the goblins from a group of warring tribes to just another faction of the Praesi Aristocracy and Malacia's greatest strength as a Dread Empress is her ability to control the HIGH Court. Her actions today gives her a short term gain of defeating the goblin rebellion and long term gains getting the goblins to be more invested in the Empire of Praes and making them easier for her to manage.

crescentsickle

Catherine: Gods, what kind of Callowan would sell out their own just because the going got rough?

Also Catherine: Man, it sucks that Praes owns Callow even though we hate that kind of thing for all eternity. But they will kill a bunch of us otherwise, so I better kill all these Callowans trying to rebel.

I mean, really Cat. Come on now.

Crash

To be fair she trapped herself into that narrative and also she used to be real good at not noticing her own hypocrisy, been getting a lot better on that front lately.

However, I would like to say that she didn't sell them out in any way there, she had a vision and they were her opponents to it, pushing forward an idea of revolution that she thought would lead to much more death than just putting them down would. I don't know, I feel like it's not really the same thing.

[Fayhem](#)

Yeah, I'd strongly agree with this not being the same – selling out your people is when you join up with their enemy *for personal gain*. Even at the absolutely most flawed level of Cat's planning, she has *never* been about personal gain. Remember "one life for a hundred thousand, that's a steal by any measure"? Someone who would happily die to protect their people is not a sellout by pretty much any definition I'm prepared to recognize.

And for that matter, Cat has never seen her entry into the Praesi power structure as joining up with Callow's enemy – it's been about making the Praesi into *not an enemy*, which is the only permanent resolution possible to the intergenerational Praes/Callow dogfight that has stunted both nations since time immemorial. That's not a betrayal, that's a vision.

jonnnney

She definitely sold out her people in order to gain the strength she needed. The difference is Callow had been conquered for 20 years while the goblins had only been rebelling for a few months. Her actions were a last resort while the goblins turned on each at the first opportunity.

[Walter](#)

Nod, was thinking very much the same. Cat has the 'I am indiscrete, you are a blabbermouth, she is being investigated under the National Secrets Act' thing going on in spades.

[Liliet](#)

Everything that everyone said above.

1) Catherine was not 'selling out' her people, she was betting on one course of action over the other. She explicitly thought the rebellion was doomed, and her joining up would not bolster their chances, just increase casualties. There is a difference between "our chances have lowered, time to bail myself out at everyone else's expense" and "this will literally have no positive effect at all and we need to do something else", albeit admittedly often a subtle one. Note that a lot of former rebels after deserting from the rebellion's army went straight to recruitment camps and requested placement with the Fifteenth.

2) To the degree that she 'sold them out' by kicking off the rebellion in the first place, it was not for personal gain. Well, technically as the immediate first step it was, but just that – the first step, a pre-requisite to her then USING that gain for a long-term advantage to her people. Don't forget that initially she also viewed getting a villainous Name as selling her soul – she was willing to do *that* for the very people some of which she later 'sold out'.

3) Even if she'd done it before, that wouldn't have made her wrong about it being, well, wrong. Remember the reaction people had to her in Summerholm early on? She WAS despised for being a 'sellout', BECAUSE it's something Callowans Just Don't Do. This phrase does not mean No Callowan In History Has Ever Done That, it means "Callowans who do that are considered the lowest of the low by other Callowans". Cat does self-burns on a regular basis.

Fern

... well, whatever happens I think we'll get an answer for what happened to juniper's mom. We already suspected it involved goblins, and this seems to be about the right time.

That, or cat is about to be out maneuvered by malicia so we'll be reminded just how dangerous she really is.

Daniel E

"It's always badgers, isn't it?" – Cat. +10 internet points to anyone who knows what chapter that's from.

[Liliet](#)

Uhhh that one where she bantered with Vivienne and Hakram in front of Juniper and Grem, to Juniper's growing dismay and Grem's utter indifference. Right after joining up with the biggest part of the Army of Callow, chewing Vivienne and Juniper out, and then having more of a talk with Vivienne. Right before finding out Arcadia gates were blocked by not-yet-Twilight and the bullshit in it, and then going to confer with the Grand Alliance (which ended with her being given Black's body and having Rozala ask her to just... lose for show, but no other meaningful result).

Either the chapter that had 'try a foot first' as its epigraph, or the one directly before that one.

I absolutely don't remember the name without looking into the table of contents.

Walter

Do folks think Assassin is working for Malicia now, or still Black? I tend to think it has gone back to Malicia's side (crack theory, it is just her) with the killing of the second tier citizen guy.

Crash

That might well have been an order sent while Scribe's and Malicia's wants were still aligned, in the timeframe of the Proceran attempted coup.

I'm under the impression that where Assassin is concerned, Scribe has a lot more say than Black or Malicia ever will.

Jacob McNeer

What if Scribe IS Assassin. It would explain how she's never noticed and how we never see her and assassin in the same place at the same time. Also Black had mentioned in Book 1 or 2 that Cat had already met Assassin and just didn't know it.

Crash

That would mean she enjoys talking in third person and reading orders in front of a mirror to watch her own face, as per the Interludes in Ater's sewers.

Assasin is a goblin and it's actually Borer, pass it on.

Liliet

We also have had WoG specifically given in response to this theory (IT'S OLD AS GUIDE ITSELF) that one person can't hold two Names.

Oh, and we know explicitly and exactly what Assassin is doing right now. Assassinating Magon Hadast in Ashur. While Scribe is right here.

[*Liliet*](#)

Black had given that order back before the Vales battle, and they haven't been in communication since.

Just... old bad plans coming home to roost.

Chapter 86: It Pours

"The cruelty of a dilemma is not only in the choice itself; it lies also in the truth it reveals to you about yourself through the making of that choice."

– King Edmund of Callow, the Inkhand

Akua Sahelian and Masego the Hierophant were, undeniably, two of the finest mages ever produced by the Wasteland. One had been taught the old sorceries of Wolof since she could remember and taken to them with dreadful skill, the other had been apprenticed since he could speak to a warlock who'd dissected the corpses of gods. Their deeds were many and renowned, and their reputations were such as to make men shiver in the dark of night. They'd also used a godsdamned *bathtub* as the vessel of water for their scrying ritual. I'd excuse Masego in this, since he was usually more concerned with practicalities than appearance, but Akua would earn no such mercy from me. The same woman who'd campaigned with multiple enchanted ceremonial armours was now trying to pretend it'd never occurred to him there might be some slight indignity to this, an innocent look on her face. Yeah, I wasn't buying that. I spared some of my glare for Hakram, the filthy traitor who must have been willingly complicit in this, and at least he had the good grace to look abashed.

I didn't have nearly as much time to spend on designing petty vengeance as I used to, but they weren't getting away with this unpunished. And I wasn't above delegating my pettiness these days, anyway. A council consisting of Robber, Indrani and Vivienne ought to be capable of coming up with a suitably vindictive reprisal.

I limped up to the side of the copper bathtub, discretely surrounded by carved and inscribed wardstones stabilizing it against the strenuous effects of long-distance scrying, and the

faint amusement I'd felt at the absurdity of having to speak with my officers through a bathing implement died. On the surface of the waters I saw Juniper, and what I read there was not promising. She looked exhausted, the thick skin around her eyes touched with muted grey, and beyond that she looked *angry*. The kind of low festering anger that stayed in your belly, kept simmering there by your own impotence to do anything about its cause.

"Juniper," I said. "I'd say it's a pleasure to see you, but it seems that would be premature. Report, Marshal."

"Warlord," she gravely replied, dipping her head to the side.

It bared her neck, if only slightly, which implied much greater deference by orc standards than inclining your head in agreement. I'd noticed Juniper tended to fall back into orc mannerisms when she was unsettled, abandoning the more human affectations that she'd picked up in the War College. That was not a promising sign, not that any part of this had been hinting at my night getting any better.

"Time is difficult to gauge accurately in the Twilight Ways," she began, "but around what we believe to be fifteen hours ago the Legions-in-Exile under Marshal Grem abandoned the march towards Arans and changed direction."

Fifteen hours, I considered with a frown. Aligning the timelines, and allowing for a degree of imprecision, that around the time the conference's first formal session had been held. Hakram stirred, having approached my side without my realizing. Consciously, anyway. It wasn't like he'd been silent, more that his presence at my side hardly warranted particular notice. I glanced at him and nodded, tacitly allowing him to ask the question he wanted to.

"And was reason given for that decision, or even the destination itself?" Adjutant asked.

Juniper grimaced.

"That is complicated to answer," she admitted. "Both the Army and the Legions were breaking camp, when it happened, and it was not immediately clear what was happening. The messengers I sent were given the answer that this changed march was at the order of the Carrion Lord, which I did not believe."

My eyes narrowed. All other things aside, Black shouldn't have a way to contact his people while they were out in the Ways: I'd not put Akua *and* Masego on the ritual so they could reminisce together about the bad old days. Here in Salia he shouldn't have the calibre of mages to accomplish something like that, much less without the Observatory to use. Which meant he would have had to

give secret orders before coming with me to Salia, which was... dubious. I wasn't going to blindly trust the man, even if I loved him, but it would be ludicrous for him to turn on me at this juncture. The moment I ceased extending my protection to him the Procerans would slip a noose around his neck, if they were feeling *kind*, and while maybe I could see him taking calculated risks if he were still partnered with Malicia he'd just burned that bridge in front of the rulers of most the continent. No, Juniper had been right to be skeptical.

"I sough to speak personally with Marshal Grem," Juniper gravelled, "but was turned away. The rank and file of the exiles were taken by surprise, my queen, but not worried. Staff Tribune Aisha Bishara approached officers she worked closely with during the campaigns and learned that the Legions were returning to Praes."

Fuck, I thought. That wouldn't be a secret order from Black, he had to know that his soldiers were exhausted and undersupplied. Beginning a campaign to take Praes before rest and refit would be madness, the Legions-in-Exile had been out in enemy territory for almost a year now.

"Someone got to One-Eye," I said. "Either he's dead and being impersonated, or someone has hooks in him."

"Marshal Grem has a great deal of prestige among the troops," Hakram quietly said, "but not so much that such a decision would be uncontested. Marshal Ranker might be dead, but there are still Conquest generals. General Mok for the Fifth and Yawa Foehammer for the Twelfth."

Both were decorated veterans of the invasion of Callow, from what I knew, though General Yawa had been a lesser officer then – she'd been raised to general after Afolabi Magoro died at the Doom and rebuilt the Twelfth from the wreckage of that legions. Neither were anywhere as famous or beloved as the One-Eye, but among their own soldiers their word would carry a lot of weight. If both accused the Marshal of being compromised, people would listen. Juniper grunted in agreement.

"That was my thought as well, and so I pushed again for a face-to-face meeting," the orc said. "Which is when it was made clear to me that the entire upper echelon of the exiles knew of this order."

My brow rose.

"All of them?" Hakram slowly said.

"Marshal Grem, all generals and most the legates," Juniper said. "There was no arguing with that, my queen. The only way I could

feasibly prevent them from leaving was putting the top officers of the exiles under arrest."

"That would have led to a pitched battle," I grimly said.

While bonds were tight between Black's army and mine, given the common wars fought and the common descendance from the Reforms and the College, the Legions-in-Exile were not mine. They'd not sworn to me, nor ever intended to. My marshal ordering their highest commanders all imprisoned would have been seen as an attempt to bring them into the fold by force, which would have gone... poorly, to say the least. The Army of Callow would probably have won that fight, between superior numbers and whatever was affecting the Legion officers, but it would have been a bloody business all around and there was no guarantee my barebones mage lines would have been able to fix whatever had been done to the generals afterwards. Juniper wouldn't have had much of a choice, when it came down to it.

"It was the right call to let them leave," I said.

"Thank you," Juniper said, dipping her head forward.

Been worried about my reaction to that, then. Fair enough.

"Hellhounds, remind me," Adjutant said. "General Birne, Ranker's replacement. He's got a golden stripe, doesn't he?"

The honour granted those who'd fought with distinction at the Fields of Streges, as I recalled.

"And a silver cord from the Siege of Summerholm," Juniper said, tone approving. "You caught on quick. It wasn't me that noticed, Deadhand. General Bagram's got a stripe too, and they're old friends."

My eyes flicked between the two of them questioningly, for clearly I'd missed something along the way.

"The golden stripes are considered the highest of the personal honours granted during the Conquest," Hakram said. "Because only forty-three were granted, and-"

"All by Dread Empress Malicia's own hand," Akua finished from behind us.

I glanced at her, and the implication sunk in. She'd once told me that her family considered any spy left alone with the Empress to be compromised. Yet Malicia had outmanoeuvred High Lady Tasia Sahelian, in the end, destroyed her completely. Even that stark a warning might have been underestimating what the Empress was capable of.

"Marshal Grem is certain to have spoken with the Empress in person at least once," I said. "And I imagine the same would hold true for any general and quite a few of the high-ranking officers that participated in the Conquest."

And whatever it was she'd done, it was possible for it to affect every single one of those individuals. Shit. That was a fucking disaster. There was no such thing as flawless mind control, especially not from a distance, but even simple planted orders could do a lot of damage. Especially if they were sown generously across the entire old guard of the Legions, which tended to be both the finest commanders we had and my father's most ardent supporters. *I'd believe it too, if I was a legionary and the One-Eye told me his orders came from Black*, I thought. After all those years of friendship and loyalty, why doubt it?

"Within an hour of realizing this, I removed the army from the Twilight Ways," Juniper said. "And ordered every officer who has ever set foot in the Tower or been in the presence of the Empress to be placed under arrest."

And Gods, both of those decisions had been the right call once more but looking at the scope of the mess I felt like smashing the fucking bathtub in front of me. Not all our College-taught officers would fall under those conditions, but most our Praesi highborn and distinguished veterans would. Which meant all my best and seasoned commanders. We wouldn't be without officers, since so much of the army was Callowan now, but essentially all the veteran officers we'd taken from the legions cannibalized after the Folly and kicked up the ranks would have to be removed from the chain of command. Without knowing exactly what it was the Empress had done, how it worked and what it could do, we just couldn't take the risk of leaving them in place. Including Juniper herself, for all that she was still the one giving me a report. Everything she'd just told me would have to be confirmed second-hand by someone not in doubt, for a start, and it'd be a mess to manage that considering most of her general staff was likely to be on the compromised list as well.

Dread Empress Malicia had not so much as swung as sword and she'd effectively crippled the Army of Callow. That, more than anything else, told me I was not wrong to believe this to be her work. How many people alive would be capable of a blow that vicious?

"Who's in command, at the moment?" I asked.

"Grandmaster Talbot has legate-equivalent rank and technical seniority," Juniper said. "Yet most Praesi soldiery balks at his command. Legate Tendai is the other candidate, but while she has years under her belt as a frontline officer she is fresh to higher command. For now the two are keeping the peace in accord but tensions are rising."

Thank the Gods for the Reforms, I feelingly thought. How many other armies on the continent would be able to weather so much of the upper ranks being put under arrest this well? That measures meant to prevent decapitation of leadership by heroes were working almost as well against a villain's work was a nice touch of irony.

"Has there been any sign of enthrallment in any of our people?" I asked.

"None that I know of," Juniper said. "Though I am no longer being kept informed, my queen."

"There won't be," Akua said.

I turned to face her, sharply gesturing for elaboration.

"Unlike with the Legions-in-Exile, the Empress cannot suborn the Army of Callow outright," the shade elaborated. "Which means the greatest gain she can derive of any enthrallment sown in your ranks is delay, keeping your soldiers out of action for as long as she can."

"Making a third of my officer corps commit suicide would achieve that," I pointed out.

"It would cripple your army, it is true, but also flush out her hidden hands," Akua said, shaking her head. "Better to leave the ship infested, and you aware of that. Then either you must send valuable assets to investigate the trouble or go yourself. Either way, a great deal of your might is tied down for weeks. Possibly even months. And should it look like you have a solution, well, it is not too late then to order the killings you described."

My lips thinned. Yeah, that sounded about right. Either I went myself with Sve Noc at my back, which given the distance and what needed to be done in Salia still would complicate everything, or I sent both Akua and Masego together to be safe – which lost me a great deal of knowledge and power at hand I might need for other tasks. And the moment it looked like I might turn things around, I had no doubt that just like Akua had said the Empress would twist the knife once more. If not earlier, the moment she learned through her spies that whoever went had entered the Twilight Ways. *Fuck*.

"Thank you for your report, Marshal," I crisply said, then grimaced. "You acted correctly in every regard, Juniper. This isn't on you, we were just had by the Empress. We'll dig our way back to daylight."

"We always do, Catherine," the Hellhound said, but she sounded so very tired.

I gestured for Masego to end the ritual, not willing to look at her in this state any longer, then breathed out as Juniper's image on the water vanished.

"Akua," I said. "How high are the odds that the Empress can just snap her fingers and have them all commit suicide?"

"I am not certain," she admitted. "This is not mere sorcery, dearest. A Name is involved, and so there are deeper considerations. In principle, such mastery of others can either be fine or numerous – as it is with Speaking, where one may have an entire crowd kneel once or enchant an individual intricately."

"Even at the peak of my Name, I wouldn't have been able to order that many people to kill themselves," I said. "Maybe two, three at most? For simpler stuff fear and thunder carries it through, but..."

"If we could Speak entire hosts to death, what need would we have of hosts at all?" Akua smiled. "Yes. In truth you were only the Squire, while Malicia is Dread Empress and a great one besides, but I took doubt that even should this be borne of an aspect she could so easily take lives. Especially if the commands were seeded. Having such a decree lying in one's mind for years would lead to severe disorders of the mind, besides."

"Unless that mind is prepared for that particular purpose, and accordingly conditioned with enchantments and alchemy," Masego cut in. "As the Sentinels are said to be."

Akua conceded with a nod.

"Without a story at her back, I do not believe it is within the power of the Empress to order deaths," she said. "Though lesser beguilements would be well within her grasp, and in their own way just as dangerous. I am greatly surprised by the skill displayed in the manipulation of the commanders of the Legions-in-Exile, I confess."

"I'm not," Vivienne said. "Not considering what you said about stories. It was around fifteen hours ago this all started, the Hellhound said. Give or take a bit, that's when the Carrion Lord declared rebellion against the Tower."

I closed my eyes and let out a soft curse.

"And that makes an empress calling her subjects to heel," I said. "Considering most who climb the Tower have an aspect related to authority, she would have had the wind at her back when she pulled that trigger."

"It would be more complex a matter when it comes to those among the Army of Callow," Akua noted. "Though some of them were once sworn to her, they are now sworn to you instead."

"Creation likes clarity," I agreed. "But that'll serve to weaken, not protect or prevent."

Neither of which I was all that sure I could do, when it came down to it. Distance was the element of dismay here, the more I thought about it. Those under my charge that needed help were far, and there was no guarantee that by the time they were reached they would still be in a state to be helped. Possibly I could leave behind someone under an illusion to impersonate me and hope that Malicia didn't catch on, but given the way it'd be impossible to keep that deception going for too long it'd be rolling the dice to try that. Assuming the Empress didn't catch on immediately, which gave how deeply the Eyes had apparently infiltrated Salia I could hardly be sure of. Sending Masego and Akua would hardly be any subtler, even if I made an effort to suppress knowledge of it, and at the end of the day I had to admit that whatever my decision was there was nothing I could do. Save perhaps doing nothing, which I expected was exactly what the Empress would prefer of me: days passing in indecision, paralyzed by the risks in committing to anything.

For the first time since I'd returned from the Everdark I'd been caught entirely flatfooted, and the impotent anger I'd earlier glimpsed in Juniper was finding a mirror in me. I'd forgotten how much I hated this. How much I hated her. There were reasons to kill the Empress that were personal to me, like the death of people I had cared for, and practical ones as well. And then there was this, the ugly sinking feeling in my stomach and how much I despised that she could do that to me. Still even now, after all I had learned and wrought. Because she was patient and cold-blooded and everything I was not. Gods, the Dead King could still scare me in a way few things could but the only foe who had ever made me feel like an arrogant child was the Dread Empress of Praes. The woman atop the tower who had, again and again, made me bleed without my ever landing a blow on her in return.

"Fuck," I cursed. "All right. I'll see if I can find a way out of this mess. Meanwhile, Hakram, speak with Talbot and this Legate Tendai. I want Juniper's report confirmed point by point, and word of everything that's happened since."

"As you say," Adjutant replied. "The Army will still need a commanding officer, Catherine. The Hellhound made it clear the current situation is untenable."

I'd be able to take care of it, if I went, but if I wasn't sure I could afford to leave Vivienne here to finish the negotiations without me. She had the judgement to see it through, sure, but cleverness was not what had brought the opposition to the table.

They'd taken a seat because they were desperate and scared of me, and though the former still held they simply would not be afraid of Vivs the way they were of me. Which would mean squabbles I wouldn't have to deal with, heroes not being as leery of meddling and a hundred other little messes we could ill-afford. On the other hand, if it was not I who went then there was only one high-ranking officer who could fill the shoes.

"It will have to be General Abigail," I said. "At least until the hooks can be dug out of our people's heads. I'll speak to her myself. Vivienne, I need you to prepare an escort for her when she's sent out. At least two full cohorts. I'll need to consult with-

Black, I realized in this moment still likely knew nothing of this. Shit. I was not looking forward to that conversation at all.

"- with Black," I grimaced. "And soon. Akua, Zeze, can the scrying ritual be done again without the both of you?"

"It can be done by our mage lines, Catherine," Masego reminded me. "They are on Creation again, all this ritual commotion was unnecessary."

"Right," I said, mildly embarrassed at having forgot. "Good, then I have jobs for you. Hierophant, I need options to purge the mind of my officers from the Empress' influence."

He opened his mouth, but I raised a hand to interrupt.

"I have a dozen things I need to be doing right now, and I'd not remember all the details if you simply told me anyway," I said. "Write it down for me, Zeze. Prepare all you can, so I can put it to council when everyone is there."

"I suppose I have nothing more pressing at the moment," he said.

"Thanks," I honestly replied. "I appreciate it."

"And I, my heart?" Akua smiled.

"You're with me," I said. "Black will get snippy about you being there, but when it comes to Praesi politics you're my expert. We'll head there now, I don't doubt that with the agitation in our camp Scribe already woke him up."

I clapped Hakram's shoulder, nodded at Masego and managed to take exactly one step towards the door before it was thrown open.

"There you are," Archer said, face serious. "We have a situation, Cat. Chunks of the League's people are moving."

"Moving where?" I frowned.

"By the looks of it? Here," she flatly said.

It was a good thing I knew my way around more than a few languages, these days, because loudly cursing in only one would not have been *nearly* enough.

Frivolous

Many of the suppositions in the previous chapter confirmed. Congratulations to all who did so.

In other news, I'm still wondering how and why Hierophant is still dangerous. He's lost most or all of his magic, but Witch of the Woods still thought he could kill either her or White Knight.

Alexander Knight

He still has his aspects, and a deep understanding on how divine powers work. Beyond that, I'm not sure

Crash

To my understanding aside from his Aspects and knowledge, he lacks magic of his own but can wield that of others and harness rituals just fine. Limitations and methodology on that isn't quite clear yet but I reckon the Name will find a way, Usher of Mysteries and all that.

Of note, Hierophant implies, to me at least, more of a supportive role to begin with, a researcher or a wielder and less of a infantry unit, employing creative methods to make use of/invent/discover new ways to use things that are already there and less of "Yes, fireball bigger."

I can't quite articulate my thoughts on this in a nice way but I suppose I always thought of it more as a FFT Geomancer, if you will, than as a Black Mage.

Jessica Day

I really like your analogy but I'd say I thought of him as a calculator and right now his MP is stuck at 0.

NerfContessa

Knowledge and the ability to see can counter many an aspect. Unless you force him into close combat unprepared, he is still a force to be reckoned with. Also, he might be getting some power back soonish.

Oshi

He's lost Sorcery but not power. He can call to himself everything his name has granted him. Imitations of the power of gods form what he has Glimpsed. The rest? He can Wrest it from them. This means he can take their own power and use it against them. He may not be able to call on sorcery directly but he can still crush anyone who uses it. It's a weakness that can be exploited so he's not unbeatable but still friggin powerful.

[Liliet](#)

Witnessed. Glimpse was his Apprentice Aspect.

erebus42

His aspects are still good since they're a part of his name. He can also still wield and potentially usurp the powers and workings of others. That combined with the shit ton of eldritch knowledge in his head is perfectly sufficient to give anyone a bad day.

Point

He specializes in piercing the veil protecting higher powers. The White Knight is having some problems when Judgement is busy with the Hierarchy; I expect he would have had problems if the Hierophant started poking at his connection to the Choir.

And, of course, given that one of his aspects is **Wrest**, and usurpation is the essence of sorcery, I expect he would be considerably less than powerless against a sorcerer.

Even without his magic, we saw just this chapter that he can still help with scrying. He lacks his own magical power; not the ability to interact with magic. And given the whole usurpation thing, I wouldn't be surprised if his Role let him mess with others' magic even without using an aspect.

Vortex

We saw with Kairos that all villains get a curse at the end. A final blow guaranteed to land in their stories offered from Below. I think the knowledge and nature of a named who had seen gods slain and been possessed by the dead king could wield that curse in a particularly nasty way.

[Liliet](#)

I somehow doubt Antigone meant death-curse, though you make a fine point too.

Cicero

Well, he still has his aspects.

My guess? Some form of Magical Judo. He has no magic to strike with himself, but if another used magic around him he can redirect it and use that as his source of power. Magic includes miracles too. So maybe the White Knight could beat him if he used no aspects, and did not call on the Choir of Judgement in anyway.

[Liliet](#)

That's what I'm thinking too. Hanno translated for us the general meaning of Antigone's assessment, but that doesn't mean there aren't more nuances than she could convey with a head tilt.

Allafterme

When someone else look through a miracle they'll see, well, a miracle. The Hierophant directly sees source code equivalent of creation and intimately understand them. Let me also remind you that he totally believes to be able to think like a god is simply being a god. He also resides in a Creation that bends over backwards in order to usher even the most ridiculous beliefs of Named into reality (Hierarch anyone?).

One plus two means that if you are:

1. Utilizing your Name in bridging the gap in order to use miracle like magic
2. Your Name routinely relies on your chosen Choir's support chances are you, in fact, should not go lvl with the Hierophant...

Aston Whiteman

If you know how to stop someone breathing they die.

If you cut off a Named Magician source of magic they die.

Zeze is more like a magic martial art monk now..

Remember how he grabbed a Crow?

Thank you so much for not being a vote reminder.

Decius

He's lost his ability to use lesser forces, so all he has left is the stuff that results in needing to make new maps, because there is no longer terrain in the area.

[Liliet](#)

RIP

Crash

It's because he insists on being unarmed! Maybe he should take a page from Tinkles book and equip some more bells, learn some new skills.

Make every square of terrain count.

Fern

Masego has become even more of a strategic asset than before, because of that. Cat can't use him tactically to shift fights around pivots anymore, unless he has some serious backing from other named (since he's have to over rely on aspects to do it, and we've learned that's a death knell for named). He's more useful figuring out the high arcana shit (which he'd be unmatched in, aside from ubua, the dead king, and maybe the witch) that gets thrown at Cat on a semi-regular basis, which means he'd be best served countering the dead Kings strategic plays against the grand alliance, especially if he has other sorcerers (named or otherwise) to lend support.

However, in a situation dealing with named who draw power from the gods, which is most of them iirc, he'd have a leg up in fucking with their abilities since he's done it so many times before. The groove has been carved into creation, giving him a big advantage. And like someone earlier said, using wrest to bridge the gap would give him a ginormous leg up as well, and a decent chance for a kill on most named. Usurpation is the essence of sorcery, after all.

Mammon

He lost his innate spellcasting. I'm not sure if he lost his high arcana too. But the things he already gained, the knowledge obtained and the powers that are given and taken by his magic yet not his magic alone still remain. He likely no longer has wards and the ability to cast spells immediately, but he has all the know-how and all his gains including that summer princess's stolen powers.

Imagine training your body with lots of pull-ups but then losing your fingers. You can no longer do pull-ups because you cannot hold the bar, but you still have the muscular arms gained from those exercises for a while and you can still pull yourself up different ways like with your feet and hanging from your elbows.

Or maybe a more apt example, amnesia. You no longer remember gaining the knowledge like speaking English, who you are and what you can do, but you can still speak English, know how to operate things and use your reflexes. The basic magic that Zeze lost isn't like learning his first steps and him being able to walk no longer relying on that at all, but it's also not

complete memory loss because magic is like knowing names and remembering events. He's in a fantasy-amnesia state where only the convenient to be inconveniently lost things are lost.

[Liliet](#)

I think High Arcana understanding is still his. He cannot manipulate sorcery, but he can damn well understand it. Cat has noted that he's said he 'functionally' lost the Gift, not just that he lost it, or something along those lines.

stevenneiman

I suspect that Ruin could do some serious damage to a person, and it would only get more dangerous the more metaphysical power that person wields. He might actually not be much of a threat to someone like Archer who mostly relies on Name-boosted mundane skills, but someone who used mighty sorceries like the Witch, or channels a Choir like Hanno? They would be in for hells if they picked a fight with him.

Aston Whiteman

Update site link not posted today?

[doominator10](#)

Once again we're reminded just how much "oh fuk" Malicia can be when she's basically been a minor character for the past book or 2. How much you want to bet 1/3 of the League's armies are also under her influence to some degree?

konstantinvoncarstein

Can she **Speak** through her puppets? If yes, most of the League leaders could be compromised.

[Liliet](#)

Most definitely not, any more than Catherine's Zombie I could Struggle.

Shikkarasu

While I agree entirely, I also desperately want to see that AU. Suicide goats that cannot be stopped and Zombie III **Breaking** everything that gets in her way. I mean, more than usual.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed.

Shveiran

I think you are right, but let's not forget that Nefarious' body doubles are not your average zombies. We do not know how they work, not exactly, nor do we know their limitations.

I don't think she can, but we can't really be sure.

Liliet

We can if we look at the narrative logic to it. Malicia's Rule Aspect, story-wise, is based on 'the weight of her presence', not the weight of how clever she is. When she's in the room with you, she's in charge.

And the tradeoff for that is that her presence is her vulnerability. Every time she's in a room with someone she's making a wager that person cannot in fact kill her if they try, or won't try. Think Cat in front of the cavalry charge: the very weight is based on the risk taken.

And when Malicia isn't coming in person, the weight of her presence isn't coming either. The weight of the *reminder* of her is there, but if she's not exposing herself to others' Aspects, she cannot use her own either.

Narratively, she cannot extend her rule and have it convincingly stick over somewhere she hasn't been.

Alexander Knight

Yeeeeeeeeessssssshhhh!!!!

What a turn around from the near omnipotent Cat we just read through since the start of the book.

sutortyrannus

It's a mark of EE's ability, I think, that for me at least it doesn't feel forced. She won, yes, and then she blind-sided and kneecapped by something she couldn't have seen coming. It mirrors Black's losses in the Free Cities and at Saudant – he's great against everything he can see coming, and he can see more than most, but the weaknesses lies in things for which he just cannot prepare.

Crash

It's also important to mention that this isn't a Deus Ex Machina random turnaround, we've been aware that Malicia had mindhooks in the Army for a while now, this was properly set-up; it's that Cat herself didn't have any way to know it.

konstantinvoncarstein

Yeah, and it was foreshadowed a long time ago. It was even said Malicia did that because an Empress should not be completely dependent from another person and that she could not accept that her armies were not loyal to her.

Liliet

I would argue Amadeus could damn well see Saudant coming – not tactically, but strategically. He had to know SOMETHING he couldn't prepare for was coming, that's just how narrative storms blow when you're massacring civilians across hero-protected land. This isn't a fight won with tactics when you're in a corner strategically, all he was doing was delaying the ending. He just didn't know for how long.

And in this case, Catherine could predict that Alaya had SOMETHING up her sleeve. The problem is, there isn't a single decision she could have made differently. At no point was there a decision fork of "if the Empress is helpless, go left, if the Empress probably still has nasty cards to play, go right". Being committed on two fronts has been her problem since Book 4, and frankly, she's in a better position now than she was back then anyway.

This is a great blow to morale, but as they discuss here, there's only so much disruption this can cause. Oh, Amadeus is in trouble, but Callow's still pretty damn in the green.

...Wonder if the Empress has that same hook in Sacker. Shit.

Okay yeah maybe Callow's far in the yellow BUT again, Catherine did not have better options.

Shveiran

I think's it is a fair assumption to make, unless Goblin Names or something along those lines come out.

I mean, why wouldn't Sacker be compromised if all other Generals are?

Crash

I reiterate Borer is Assasin, pass it on!

Or maybe the real Assasin is the goblins we met along the way.

Liliet

Because goblins are sneaky and Sacker might or might not have been the Matrons' spy the entire time. They might have means to counter that shit.

Likely not, of course.

Fern

I don't think so, I'm willing to bet from Cats intuition that she'd need a narrative foothold (i.e. a face to face meeting and authority over them through which she can channel Rule) to do so, and she doesn't have that with the league.

Er, well, maybe enough for a tiny suggestion, since she's subverted a couple city states. Something like "the black queen sees you as a loose end to be tied off, so gets to stabbing b4 she gets to tyin"

Mammon

As Hakram already ascertained, the Free States are in complete disarray. They are turning against each other and against their unified pact rapidly, some controlled by Malicia while others are Good or just trying to gain control.

This wouldn't be too much of an important facet if not for:

- Praes recently lost Thalassina in one fell irrecoopable blow. By balance and stability of the Wasteland of Evil that has to be Evil and be given its Due, Creation might have to give it another port city to balance out things and prevent them from being a trade-choked or sea-barred nation.

- Nicea currently besieges Ashur and does so mostly because Tyrant told them and Malicia's ghouls and stuff. Not really Good no more, their strings are being pulled.

- Penthes is already quite in her palm despite them being Good, and Delos would be a good new port city even if Nicea can't be appropriated.

- Kairos apparently eradicating all of the Theodosian bloodline that grants Helike its monarchy of historical value. With that gone, perhaps it can be consumed by a different Evil.

- Things are a-changing and the balance of Good and Evil being rewritten.

- No way to show that you aren't waning in the game of Eb and Flood than a successful conquest or annexation, especially Story-wise.

This isn't a given or an absolute, and depending on the how Malicia might only create a Pivot deadline demanding to stop her that make things easier on Heroes or force her hand in more direct engagement, but there's multiple grooves and strings for her to follow that could allow for Praes to conquer some of the Free cities.

If she pulls those strings well, she might have a plan that allows her to come back up on top, sate the High Lords with successful conquest, give her new treasuries and people to work with, make the Legions in Exile garrison in the no longer Free Cities instead of returning to Praes and thus preventing them inevitably turning against her despite the mind control, create new problems and hurdles politically by technically owning those cities under the Accords if she holds on to them for long enough (creating a negative shadow balance to the Accords from the get-go), gains nobility-worthy lands for Wither that are close to the Eyries but not Wasteland territory, etc.

Again, this might just as easily prove a pivot against her, but with cool head and careful hand Malicia might defy her fate of dwindling in power by growing rapidly and vastly while remaining uncontested Dread Empress and breaking that Story once and for all.

Mammon

And there are three cities striving for sea domination. Even if Ashur by story prevails strongly because Ghouls vs Named never work out (Definite Win vs Evil) and whomever comes second manages to get a close Tie by needing foreign help, the Pattern of Three might enable Malicia to get the permanent win with the third and by default maintain control over it.

Liliet

Glass Cannon.

A giant on clay legs.

A Jenga tower.

Catherine can do a lot, but her support base is much more tactical than strategic. She doesn't have roots, doesn't have foundation – neither does Amadeus, notably, though he at least has more than she does, after 40 years of community service. Still, his own support is dwindling too, specifically because he's more or less a nobody who fought his way to power. They don't have ancestral artefacts, they don't have centuries of tradition as story weight, their spy networks are as new as their stories.

Malicia is the same way, incidentally, but unlike these two, she has made a point of using these 40 years to SPECIFICALLY build herself a power base – while they were too busy trying to make the world a better place.

A queen is a powerful chess piece, but cannot win the entire game by itself.

This is good timing to remind us of that, and good timing to remind us just how far out of her depth Catherine is, genius mastermind and diplomat or not.

Oshi

Agreed but you know who has a base and is sitting around nearby, the oh so ready to get leverage Warden of the West.

[Liliet](#)

I think Cat will try to handle this herself before handing her leverage lmao

Hellspirit

Yay...
Misfortune =)

Man... her comeback will be sweet

[Javvies](#)

Amadeus is going to be furious when he finds out about what Malicia has done to his people.

Parts of the League are moving.

Hmm.

Kairos knew/expected that the trial was going to end in his death – I wonder if he left contingency directives ordering his people to help Cat.

Ooh, we know that Kairos killed most, if not all, of his relatives (and this possible heirs/successors) except for his nephew, whom Cat had shot. And Kairos mostly likes Cat, and hates most of the other players, especially the Dead King and Bard, whom Cat wants to go after ... so what if Kairos named Cat his chosen heir?

Oshi

This is kind of my speculation. She loses the Army of Callow so to speak but gains the Army of Helike.

Jane

Eh, *hurt* maybe, but I don't know about *furious*. This was the band that had actual death switches on each other in case of severe corruption, after all; it's not really different from the death switch Cat gave Masego back when he started messing around with demonic corruption.

It was a smart thing to do, and completely harmless so long as the two of them stayed together. What hurts is that she's actually putting one of those contingencies into practice.

NerfGlaistigUaine

I think what'll hurt is that she kept it from him, that she didn't trust him with this for all those years.

Darkening

Considering his sheer hatred of Tariq for killing Ranker, I imagine Malicia mind raping several other generals he considers friends is going to cut pretty deep.

Jane

She hasn't actually hurt them, though – this is essentially taking away his sword and locking it in the armory. Ordering them back to Praes and (presumably) locking them up is arguably the kindest thing that she could do, as it ends the rebellion with minimal bloodshed ensures that none of his friends die in a fruitless war.

It's not actually going to go that smoothly in practice, of course, or we wouldn't have a story – but in terms of *intent*, this is pretty much the least malicious secret Evil contingency plan possible. If he were to be furious for *that*, it'd be the height of hypocrisy, considering that declaring a civil war in the first place would inevitably lead to more of their friends dying. Absent, of course, something like her plan stopping it before it began.

Mammon

Taking the Legions in Exile back to Praes despite them still being loyal to Black and mind control never working out even in the Wasteland would be the single-dumbest thing they could do. They may stop by Wither's new crib to restock, but I don't think Malicia would be foolish enough to bring one of the greatest threats to her back to her lands. More likely we soon find out that she sent them elsewhere, like maybe the weakened Free Cities to conquer a new port for her?

Liliet

Agreed, actually. The high command appears to be operating under the impression that Amadeus gave the order, or at least more importantly this impression is being maintained for the rank and file – as soon as it's clear they're being played, they won't need Juniper to put the compromised ones under arrest.

She gets one clean strike, and she needs to make it count. I suspect she has a plan for that.

[Liliet](#)

This.

He'll be heartbroken from seeing more cracks that had been in the foundation for some time, but furious... It's not like she was proven *wrong* about needing the contingency.

apop

Leaving Cat the cataphracts she had crippled would be lovely

[Liliet](#)

> Amadeus is going to be furious when he finds out about what Malicia has done to his people.

Amadeus is going to be too heartbroken to be furious, methinks, on a personal emotions level =x

Crash

Well, fuck.

Jane

Hum. I'm guessing that the League isn't preparing any kind of attack; that'd basically be suicide for little likely gain, and thus a waste of bothering to acquire the League remnants. My best guess would be some sort of disorganized diplomatic situation – with the ongoing chaos of the collapse of the League, there are going to be plenty of people looking for outside intervention; it wouldn't be strange for some people to turn to Cat for one reason or another, and to bring their allies – either to demonstrate that they're not alone, or in hopes of shelter after things went badly for them.

That, or a quick delegation representing Malicia by proxy, offering terms for a truce between their individual kingdoms. In demonstrating that she *can* cripple Cat's war against the Dead King, this offers her a good opportunity to extend an olive branch, sincerely intended or not; looking reasonable by saying that she won't sabotage Cat's war against the enemy of all life, if only she'd not war on the Tower as well, would help her regain some of the diplomatic capital she's spent on allying with the Dead King to begin with.

[Liliet](#)

I'm betting on the former. Some of the League looking to Cat for a new ally/sponsor XD

edrey

Malicia just play the game like a master, Cat should just go all out with mountains falling from the sky.
I just hoping Kairos left a gift to betray Malicia at the end

konstantinvoncarstein

Cat is a master of stories, but Malicia is a master politician.

Is the timing deliberate? Because the Empress just used a Story, and if it was not an accident and she has a grasp on story-fu, she could be even more dangerous than we thought

Darkening

Considering she is a close associate of Amadeus and the main point of the conquest and reforms was to subvert the Story of Praes, I consider it a safe assumption that Malicia has a solid grasp of story manipulation.

[Liliet](#)

Most everyone in the setting has SOME grasp of story-fu. Surface facts like 'don't throw a hero off a cliff' are universal knowledge. I'm sure Malicia knows how to use her own Aspects, and couldn't have been around Amadeus for this long without picking up SOME tricks. We've seen her discuss story manipulation with him in Coulissee, Book 2 – she was unsettled by how deeply he was meddling, but she was following the train of thought.

It's the subtleties of competitive story-fu that she has trouble with, since none of the opponents she's had experience fighting employed any of it in a manner meaningful to her. She knows how SHE can use it to get an edge, she just has only the foggiest idea of how it can be used AGAINST her.

Novice

I swear the only person who can rival Abigail at this point in failing unsuccessfully is Caiaphas Cain, HERO OF THE IMPERIUM. Now all we need is a hyper competent anti-sorcery attendant and we'll have a stew going.

NerfGlaistigUaine

Hell yes. To all the ppl guessing Abigail would become Marshall, ur at least half-right. Still up in the air whether she becomes queen.

Also I want to give a random shoutout to the fanfic Sasuke Uchiha -HERO OF KONOHA! which gives Sasuke from Naruto the personality of Cain. Great story, great humor, only downside is

that its a dead fic. If you liked Ciaphas Cain, you'll love the fic.

superkeaton

I suppose, with the loss of the Tyrant, the League will turn to Cat for something, anything.

NerfGlaistigUaine

So, how are they going to deal with Malicia when the Dead King is rearing back up for war? I thought they'd go and kill her in the three month truce, but it seems like that's out the window. It just doesn't seem feasible to me to fight two fronts when just one front is a match for your entire alliance.

konstantinvoncarstein

Well played Malicia, well played 😊

etheric sentinel

It was a good thing I knew my way around more than a few languages, these days, because loudly voting in only one would not have been nearly enough.

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

C'était une bonne chose que je sois à l'aise dans plusieurs langues, ces jours-ci, car voter à voix haute dans une seule langue n'aurait pas suffi.

Es war gut, dass ich mich heutzutage in mehr als ein paar Sprachen auskannte, denn lautes Abstimmen in nur einer Sprache wäre bei weitem nicht genug gewesen.

Fue bueno que conociera más de unos pocos idiomas, en estos días, porque votar en voz alta en solo uno no hubiera sido suficiente.

最近 言語 大声 投票 十分
かの を っていたのは かったです。

konstantinvoncarstein

Your translation in French is correct but a bit too literal, so it sounds a bit strange. I would say :

C'est une bonne chose que je sois actuellement à l'aise dans plusieurs langues, car voter à voix haute dans une seule langue n'aurait pas suffi.

But good post 😊👍

NerfGlaistigUaine

Points for creativity.

[Liliet](#)

(see, taking a humorous moment for this instead of a dramatic one is MUCH better)

Хорошо что нынче я владела целой кучей языков, потому что громко голосовать только на одном было бы и близко недостаточно...

Добре що в ці дні я володіла цілою купою мов, тому що громко голосувати тільки одною було б зовсім недостатньо...

My contribution ♥

[Mental Mouse](#)

And typos:

>The same woman ... was now trying to pretend it'd never occurred to **him** there might be some slight indignity to this
>"I sough to speak personally with Marshal Grem,"

sought

> ... the copper bathtub, discretely surrounded by carved and inscribed wardstones

discreetly.

[Barthumphries](#)

It should go with the vote thread but sure we could have a typo thread hanging out in the wind, much like Catherine was left by the Dread Empress to hang.

Dread Empress Malicia had not so much as swung as sword and she'd effectively
Change the second as to a.

There were tense errors and once Akua was referred to as he rather than she, as well as other errors. Try to find them all! 😊

ethericsentinel

I'm honestly not sure why people started posting the typo thread as a reply to the vote thread. Maybe because the vote thread is usually at or near the top? It just seems a bit odd to me, since it seemed like two threads was the norm back in Book 3, when I started following regularly. Not that I checked the comments every week, back then...

[Liliet](#)

Two threads... three threads... four threads...

Putting the type thread on the first vote thread means it'll be in one specific fixed place, and not scattered all across the comment section as people missed others' typo threads.

That's my guess anyway.

[ninegardens](#)

MAYbe Cat should send Black to deal with the legions in Exile? (Disprove the "Black gave the order" feel).

Or maybe she should just call Malicia and say "Gods below and everburning, we don't want to FIGHT you. We just want to deal with the Dead King and then have a peace treaty- We'll damn well support your reign if you stop fucking us over with the Dead King... who I *know* you don't want to win"

[Liliet](#)

It's... all too well-established by now the latter isn't an option.

Malicia keeps digging herself in deeper, that-wise, and Cat doesn't expect her to stop. Cannot expect her to stop, not after the Doom of Liesse. If she wasn't a reliable ally to Black...

And the former is an interesting option. There are logistical issues, I expect, but... hmm.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> MAYbe Cat should send Black to deal with the legions in Exile?

Risky. Depending on Malicia's contingencies, it could cost her Black.

[Liliet](#)

He is, notably, not Named right now, and the only Named at his side is Scribe.

Yeah...

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

I hope we get to see the aftermath of the Tyrants end from other perspectives but i guess the story is moving on. I'm fine with that as well to be frank.

[Liliet](#)

It's still THE SAME NIGHT. He died HOURS ago.

There's room for us to see plenty of the aftermath still, methinks...

Aotrs Commander

Supreme God-Empress Abigail Abigail is still sitting, years hence on her new Combined Throne of Calernia, Above And Below, going:

"No, seriously, *the fuck happened?*"

Can we start rumors that Grey was raised with necromancy tho?

Well i mean supreme god job had some nice pension plan so.

[Liliet](#)

Abigail, shrilly: IT DOESN'T HAVE ANY!!!

aran

Okay, but at least the pay is—

"I'M STILL ON A CAPTAIN'S SALARY"

[Mental Mouse](#)

Who's paying the salary? 😊 But indeed God-King, like Tyrant, doesn't really do pensions. Or retirement, for that matter – the choice is generally either leaving feet-first, or at high speed in all directions.

Ιούλιος Καίσαρας

Seems that Abigail gets another promotion. In this story such things have their own force. Having Abigail directly beneath you in the chain of command is an indication that you won't keep your job for long. Be thankful if you keep your life.

Will the story lie the Designated Successor of Callow position in her feet next?

That or the position of supreme military commander in the war against DK.

laguz24

I wouldn't mind having that little, the person succeeds despite themselves story deconstructed. there is only a certain point chance and circumstance will carry you. At some point, you have to go all-in, and Abigail will not do that.

[Liliet](#)

Or she just might. And that's when the luck stops and she has to work for it.

chris S

Next chapter prediction:

The Universe throws Cat a bone. Malicia's accidentally allowed for some Executive Narrative Meddling to tip the scales for Cat.

With the Tyrant and the Hierarch no longer present, the League is in a bit of disarray with no real unified long term goals. The Dead King probably won't stop at Procer once he comes south, and I think the league realises that.

And what a familiar story "Former Enemy Appears In The Hero's Hour Of Need To Aid Against A Larger Threat" is.

Methinks Catherine might just be getting a temporary replacement for those crippled forces

laguz24

These guys are not heroes. If a hero was leading them then maybe but villains don't get bones thrown at their feet they get them chucked at their heads.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> villains don't get bones thrown at their feet they get them chucked at their heads.

Cat is pretty good about catching such things and perhaps reclaiming them. And she's basically half a hero....

[Liliet](#)

Tell that to Cat at First Liesse.

Providence isn't clear cut, and we've already had Hanno note in his internal monologue that, say, Archer is most likely not consistently a hero or a villain (despite many previous Good POVs pegging her as the latter) despite serving Catherine, because Catherine's story is not clear cut either.

We've also explicitly had Cat and Hakram discuss that Providence was on their side for figuring out what Kairos was drinking during the meeting, and that it just basically meant the opposition was worse. Stories are relative.

Against the Dead King / Dread Empress coalition? Cat's going to get the wind in her sails full on, if perhaps not quite as hard as for the band of five story in Twilight.

Crash

In short, Providence is a fickle bastard and Cat is very good at wrangling stories.

Malicia may be smart but so far she hasn't truly made use of Story in the way that Cat and Black, to a lesser extent (Wow, how far we've come eh?), do. She had the advantage to pull this trick yes, but this is very much a villain narrative and that has its drawbacks. Black has been known to stack the odds in practical ways so as not to fall in the pitfalls of old guard villainy, I'd imagine Malicia subscribes to the same school of thought.

Cat tough? Cat in the height of her "I'm the Squire, Justifications matter only to the just and if I need to be a villain to free Callow, then I will be one." said this (And I gotta say, this is where she truly won me over. One of my favourite quotes. Akua's reaction is also great.):

"I have three things," I said. "A kingdom, an enemy and a claim."

As she wrangled a HERO'S story in the height of her villainy, as a necromantic construct recently come into the name of Squire again, no less. All this right before starting to make her little path in creation as the one who challenges, and gets away with, entire Choirs. Against the tide, wrangling a story where there is none, grasping at the very last straws to weave a narrative, forcing Providence to be on her side even if she has to drag it kicking and screaming, is where Cat has always shone.

Mammon

But remember: Cat has yet to defeat a foe when compromise is to be had. The pattern of opposing Choirs and getting away with it is made, but Cat can only win when nothing short of a complete victory is an option because everything else is a complete loss. And even then she managed to break that pattern when allying with Sve Noc.

So against the likes of Malicia who will always go the rational way and have the ability to change gears rather than cling to being the enemy or their original plan and goal, Cat might find herself unable to win completely. Once proper compromise is given, she has yet to not take it and go for the brutal win. DK might've already noticed that, with Cat being troubled by her almost instinctively wanting to agree more than once.

Crash

This is a fair point but I think that at this point in time she wouldn't ever extend "trust", if you will, to Malicia. I very much think that this is the time she would refuse to compromise, she has been making it clear that she needs Malicia deposed and, preferably, to have Amadeus climb the Tower.

However this does pose what could well be the main problem with the Malicia subplot, this is one of the tougher enemies Cat will be facing.

As for the Dead King, I really do think that Cat gets the narrative advantage over him, especially because of your point about Total Victory. There can be no compromise in this, he needs to go for the Accords to be safe and, as he has now made clear, he's no longer willing to back down at all now it's victory or death, Cat's historically advantageous grounds.

Something to think about though, what the fuck is Malicia planning to do about the Dead King? How the heck does she account for him in her schemes?

Liliet

I think Malicia's going for the naive story-fu of 'the heroes will handle this somehow'. She's refusing to consider the option DK will win and then continue to win and then eventually roll over the whole continent, that's just *not how things work*.

And for all that I agree with you on what Cat wants to do, as long as she wants Amadeus to be in charge, she'll always be tempered by the fact he won't stop trying to save Alaya. Not her reign, not anymore, but her life, at least. And given that even Cordelia noticed how Cat reacted to him having to go against her at the conference, I don't think she'll have it in her to force the issue if, indeed, proper compromise is given. Which... it might.

Crash

If the compromise is the sort where Malicia abdicates but gets to keep her life sure that sounds okay by Cat standards.

What I meant was more the sort of deal where Malicia tries to hold something over Cat's head or has a big scheme that is very dangerous and tries to use it to convince her to back down and just leave Malicia on the throne due to "mutual assured destruction" or

something of the sort. That one, I don't see Cat taking it.

Reminds me of her meeting with Akua in the Blessed Isles all the way back in Book 1. A stronger more well prepared offers deals that theoretically saves you trouble, but they are not truly palatable in the long run.

ChillyPepper

I suspect it might be Malicia throwing Cat into a story/pattern. The old Callow vs Tower story if I am guessing it correctly.

Army of Callow lead by a knight order, and the Legions of Dread/Tower forces. Perhaps a highly unlikely scenario.

Noldo

Would the timing indicate that Malicia made her move in anticipation of Black's open rebellion (but at a time when Black could no longer react to it) or as immediate reaction to Black's departure?

Could the contingency even be triggered by Black's claim?

Liliet

I think for maximum dramatic timing it had to be triggered by it, but activated manually (she'd have had to give specific commands she wouldn't have known to give all the way back when the hook was planted after all).

"I thought you'd say that. Well then, in that case,"

Mammon

I just realised something that could be really bad or really good based on your opinion of Malicia: She's likely going to win this one. Going by EE's writing pattern, she is the first half foe that demands direct attention so that the true big bad gets time to reach critical mass and those always tend to win, be able of victory or get a tie that is a mutual win. Only the second foe is essentially assured a complete loss.

We're at a chapter that suggests that book 5 is about at its end, meaning that Malicia is book 6's starting issue. She perfectly follows the groove of the pattern: Where Amadeus could smother problems in the crib by patient and careful approaches not following the enemy's ways, Cat has always been forced to rush in and wrest control in desperate situations. Now I'm not saying that Malicia knows this true-meta, but that makes it all the more likely that it will succeed because neither does Cat.

Book 1+2 (which are in length and structure a bit of an odd combo book 1 being the first act twice and book 2 being the second act twice):

Act 1 the Claimant battle. Won by William by surviving and getting the troublesome Pattern of Three. And a very good showcasing of finite doom screwing over too many Villains' effectiveness.

Act 1.2 War College. Won by Hell Hound, both practically and she could've won if she wanted.

Act 2 Fighting Akua's demons. No quarter, complete victory was necessary by devil's nature.

Act 2.2 William and Akua I. William gave no compromise, Cat won.

Book 3 act 1 vs the Fey. The Winter King won, even if Cat also won. Act 2, Akua's Folly, there was no quarter to be given. Cat wins, Akua doesn't. Except Cat doesn't win either.

Book 4 act 1 the Crusade, binding Cat's attention and one that Procer certainly didn't win but neither did Cat. Act 2 vs the Dead King is one that the Dead King won. Act 3, Cat broke the system by winning while Sve Noc also won. Book 4 really abandons the system, probably because Cat became True Villain (Fey) and therefore got the act 1 guaranteed win, act 2 tie, act 3 loss and breaking this guaranteed loss by losing her True Villain status.

Book 5 is just as confusing. The first half with the seven crowns and one doesn't really have a clear nemesis and creates another Finite Doom scenario to screw Story clarity. Larat was meant to be the final boss yet won, but he's hardly the main foe. Saint could be the main boss and lost, and Pilgrim could've been the main boss and lost only to be resurrected and 'win' by alienating Cat again, Tyrant lost yet won because it's all as planned. The main Villain DK though, he didn't lose because he merely got rid of loose ends, got Saint killed and killed Pilgrim too except no not really. But Saint, she was pretty much their best change against him.

Second act though, assuming we consider Cat being one of the few not losing much to anything and assuming Kairos to be her ally, she won because Bard, Good and pretty much all those against her lost. Except Kairos who got a tie by winning by losing, but we count that as a proper loss.

So why am I considering that Malicia has a good chance of winning despite the system of a tie followed by a win has been consistent for all of 1 to maybe 2 books? Because the groove is there.

Malicia is of the older books that still followed this pattern, the screwing of the win system lies in diplomacy and Malicia made a tie-plausible scenario for herself rather than being an inevitable deadline foe which follows the attrition and time restrains of a recent foe. If utter defeat isn't a necessity, then a tie is a good option.

Again, not saying that Malicia can use this True-meta knowledge of EE's writing style. But from a meta perspective, it's possible that she has some plan or opportunity to get a win or tie out of this. And that she has enough Story-knowledge from Amadeus to maybe know some in-game Stories that do the same thing. Amongst Calernia's mortals she's in the top 3 most Story-knowledgable after all, considering the rarity of such insight and that the likes of Pilgrim, Akua and Kairos only see and profit from the Story from their own perspective and experience.

Mammon

See I lacked a bit of clarity here, so before people misinterpretate: The pattern is only clear in book 3 and maybe when counting book 1 and 2 together in them too. But it's there in book 5, and there's a decent explanation for book 4 diverging from the pattern by Cat's base nature being changed during that book.

And Malicia isn't foolish enough to allow for pivots and all or nothing situations that are like the wind in the sails of Heroes, so considering her Story know-how she likely will follow this pattern of being the foe that gets the tie or mutual victory by naturally doing what she does and being who she is. She isn't foolish enough to make an inevitable, a deadline, a doomsday weapon or a no-quarter no compromise situation, which will make a defeat for her very difficult. Cat never won in such a situation before. If there is compromise to be had, she is pretty bound to taking it.

pault52

I'll bet money that they're going to the angel corpse

ninegardens

I wouldn't bet that money, but can you imagine:

CAT: "Alaya- why you so evil?"

Alaya: "What? This angel corpse is a stupid plan. Even you think so. Me removing it means that you can keep your gods damn peace treaty and deal with the DK, and I can stop having to worry about Bard nuking the continent."

CAT: "But you're in league with the dead king!"

Alaya: "Bard. Is. Trying. To. Nuke.The. Continent. Gods everburning, girl. Of course I'm in league with Nessie. I had a plan for him to retreat! stop screwing things up."

CAT: "Why didn't you just ask?"

Alaya: ".... Did you try asking Cordelia not to use the stupid Angel? How'd that work for you?"

ethericsentinel

See, this would be interesting and credible if Malicia hadn't already come down on the side of doomsday weapons. (That is how she and Amadeus had their falling out to begin with.)

[ninegardens](#)

Yeah, I totally agree, and realized while I was writing....

But I didn't want to ruin a silly joke.

In practice I could imagine Alaya drawing the distinction between *threats* of superweapon, and using it, but that isn't really a distinction I would take seriously.

[Liliet](#)

What would she do when someone called her bluff?

Because they would. This isn't an assured mutual destruction situation when the other side has the same weapon and is similarly (un)interested in using it, this is one-sided threat, and someone WILL go 'okay so what happens if we go against her ANYWAY'.

And then Malicia is either back to square 1, or she uses the superweapon.

aran

She'll be thrilled.

Chapter 87: Connive

"An enemy will remember you long after your dearest friends forget your face. Consider this, when you choose yours."

– Argea Theodosian, Sacker of Cities, Tyrant of Helike

Under the moon's light the outskirts of Salia were still a pale field of snow, but I almost started in surprise at the warmth of the breeze. Winter was dying, at last. At my right, Archer nonchalantly strolled forward as she strung her overlarge bow. I spared a moment to admire the deftness of her fingers as she did, and the strength of the arms hidden by mail and coat. At my left it was Akua Sahelian that tread the snow without leaving footsteps, so ethereally graceful she might as well have been gliding. Under the guise of Advisor Kivule she wore long black veils hiding her face, though the splendid black velour ballroom

dress she'd decided to wear for our little walk provided insisted reminders she was one of the most attractive people I'd ever seen.

"It's called a Segovian cut," Indrani idly provided.

I tore away my gaze from the small slits in the dress' skirts that'd allowed glimpse of the smooth legs beneath. I did not reply, knowing from long experience that if I engaged it would be the verbal equivalent of leaping headfirst into quicksand. Akua had several veils over her face, and yet somehow I could still feel her smirking.

"They wear those for dances they have, where the women spin and-"

"We'll need to pass by my rooms so I can take my cloak," I interrupted, pretending I had no interest in her finishing that story.

Segovian cut, was it? I'd have someone look into that, there might be one that'd fit Indrani lying around Salia. Although, I couldn't ask it of Adjutant. That would be... uh. No, definitely not Hakram. And Hells, now that I thought about it, if I sent for anything like there'd be a report about it on the desk of the First Prince, the Empress and Gods forbid maybe even my father before the day was out. That made the whole notion a lot less enticing, although there might be other ways. Still, if it ended up that I had to call on the smugglers among the Jacks to get Indrani into a revealing dress without half the crowns on Calernia knowing of it I was going to find a tall cliff to leap down it. Even as Archer continued to heckle me I began to hobble towards my quarters, but quiet undercurrents in the Night warned me company was coming.

My Lord of Silent Steps emerged of the darkness between two crowded houses, the purple and silver paint of the Losara Sigil so intrinsically part of Ivah nowadays that I could hardly recall what it looked like without. Ivah's presence was ever welcome, and once more it was bringing to me what I required before I even thought to ask. Arm extended, it offered me the Cloak of Woe.

"Losara Queen," it greeted me.

"Lord Ivah," I replied. "My thanks."

I wrapped it around me, fingers rising to fasten the broach binding it closed under my throat, and the familiar weight of old mistakes and victories on my back was a reassuring thing. My hand had been filled by a sword, once. First of goblin steel, then of ice and shade, and after that of obsidian only once unsheathed. The dead yew staff that felt cool against my palm, somehow fitting it perfectly, was still a fresh choice: not one I had not fully embraced, for the consequences of it were not all known.

The mantle on my back, though? It was like an old friend, and even just wearing it made me feel sharper in thought and deed.

"Should I rouse the Mighty to war, First Under the Night?" Ivah asked. "Steel-clad soldiers march on your camp."

"No," I easily replied. "It will not come to that. The Mighty will have many wars to wage, in the coming nights. This need not be one of them."

Or even a war at all, if I could finagle that. I wasn't sure why the League of Free Cities would choose to lash out against me of all the rulers in Salia – even if Malicia was the one pulling the strings, it hardly seemed a winning venture for her – but I had no intention of allowing what was coming to develop into yet another front for Callow to fight a war on. I did not invite Ivah to accompany us out in the snows, and it did not presume to invite itself. The League's people were much further out than we were, since they'd left long before I even began to set out, but as I reached for the Night and let it empower my sight I saw they were hardly a single unified band. Out of the four thousand soldiers that the League of Free Cities had been allowed to bring, maybe two thousand were on the march. One thousand yet remained in their camp, across the distant field, and the rest was marching away. South, although they were split into two groups and one must have left recently to still be so close to the League's town-camp.

"Archer," I said. "You followed their movements from the start, yes?"

"You're wondering about the stagger," she said, sounding amused.

"The two packs of deserters, yeah," I frowned. "If the second wave was deserters who hesitated I'd not think of it twice, but they're moving in an orderly manner. Ranks, supply wagons."

"First group to walk out was Atalante," Indrani told me. "Packed up their affairs, assembled their soldiers and diplomats and left without looking back."

Which was not entirely surprising, I thought. Atalante had no real allies in the League, at the moment. It'd been at odds with Delos before the Tyrant upended the apple cart and started a round of civil war, and from what I understood the closest city it'd had to an ally, Penthes, had only been interested in using the chaos to grab some of the eastern Delosi holdings. Now that there was no Hierarch to compel the city to war against the Grand Alliance, they were likely to head home to lick their wounds instead of linger on foreign fields. If I had to guess, I'd put coin on the second band being the Bellerophon soldiery, and the old-fashioned tight formations I could glimpse in the distance

held up to that perspective. It made no sense they'd waited for so long to leave, though.

"What happened with the Bellerophon delegation?" I asked.

"Mind you, I only saw from a distance," Indrani cautioned.

"You can put an arrow in a wasp from a mile away, Indrani," Akua amusedly said.

"Sure, but I could exactly hear what they were saying," Archer reminded us. "Still, as far as I could tell the *kanenas* tried to execute the general."

I saw no point in asking why, given that Bellerophon's laws had been written not even by a single raving lunatic but by a whole assembly of them, many of them violently opposed to each other in their ravings but every single one rabidly incensed by even the hint of foreign meddling in their common lunatic affairs. For all I knew, they'd wanted to executed him because he'd combed his hair the wrong way on the third day of the month. *Tried*, though, was something worth asking about.

"They defied the authority of their mage-inquisitor?" I said. "I'd never heard about one of them doing that before."

"The *kanenas* dropped dead all of a sudden," Archer replied, shaking her head. "And then they spent a while arguing about that."

I shiver went up my spine, and against my will I glanced up at the night sky. At what might lay behind it, waiting. What had become of the Hierarch was not yet clear, I thought, but surely all that he was must be tied up in his struggle against Judgement? The mere notion of Anaxares the Diplomat having become some sort of watchful angel to the Republic of Bellerophon was enough to make me sick in the stomach. I shook my head and focused anew.

"That doesn't explain why they're so far beyond Atalante," I finally said. "Unless they argue for nearly ten hours."

"Funny story," Indrani grinned, mouth half-hidden by her scarf, "they actually headed north first. Then they saw a road marker that said they were headed towards Salia and argued for an hour before turning south."

"And what's so funny about that?" I said, brow rising.

It was incompetence, but honestly a fairly mild one in nature. It wasn't unheard of for professional armies to need to catch their bearings, that this particular half-trained mob would have to as well wasn't anything unusual. Especially since we'd all come here

through the Twilight Ways, which would be highly disorienting for those unfamiliar with Arcadian journeys. An embarrassing mistake, maybe, but nothing worth a grin.

"Well, the general," Indrani said. "You know, the one that didn't die? I think he must have been the one who chose the directions, because-"

"They executed him," I sighed.

She chuckled at that, and to my utter lack of surprise even Akua's body language hinted a smile under the veils. Yeah, well, between Wolof's golden child and the favourite pupil of the Lady of the Lake I supposed the general sense of humour for this company tended towards the dark.

"Bellerophon and Atalante flee the field, then," Akua calmly said. "We face numbers diminished and disunited. Who was it that lingered in the League's lodgings?"

"The people in the camp are mostly Mercantis mercenaries and the Delosi," Indrani said. "Everyone else is headed here, but not together."

"Should I guess?" I grunted. "Stygia and Penthes together. Nicae will have made room for a few members of the Secretariat with their own people, their Basileus needs all the friends he can make right now. Helike will come alone."

"Penthes came with Nicae," Archer corrected, "though you're right about the Secretariat. Stygia and Helike march without allies, even each other."

I worried my lip.

"Penthes is Malicia's hook in the League," I said. "And Malicia just broke Nicae's naval power in a single stroke, so why is Basileus Leo Trakas tolerating them at his side?"

"There were only two cities among the League that might feasibly be able to scry on par with *Procer*, much less Callow or Praes," Akua pointed out. "Stygia and Helike, and even the latter held true mostly on the back of the many deals made by Kairos Theodosian. Neither of these have an interest in passing such news along to Leo Trakas."

"Hakram assessed he still didn't know during the conference, but even *now*?" I frowned.

It'd been at least two days since the disaster, by my reckoning.

"Dearest heart," Akua said, sounding amused, "not all realms are so blessed as yours, to have inherited the scrying rituals of Praes and then been graced with the work of one of the most

brilliant practitioners in living memory, the Observatory of Laure. Though your nets are not as wide and your spies nowhere as deeply planted as the Empire's, Callowan long-distance scrying is likely the most swift and reliable on the continent."

I grimaced as I considered that. It was true that even when I'd begun as the Squire I'd had access to the reports and assessments of the Eyes of the Empire as well as Legion scrying, and then spent near every campaign that followed with *Masego* at hand. My standards for the swiftness information was transmitted at were probably askew from most people's, as Akua was so gently implying. Besides, scrying was largely Trismegistan as far as rituals went – though the Principate's Order of the Red Lion used a formula *Masego* had noted as being raw, 'primitive' and influenced by Jaquinite methods – and the Free Cities weren't exactly practitioners of that. There were some local magics, from what I remembered reading, but no dominant school or unified tradition. The Stygian Magisterium were the finest sorcerers in the region, but they weren't sharing their secrets and it was a point of pride for them they'd been practicing sorcery for longer than the Praesi. Which the Praesi denied, of course, but that sort of historical pride pissing match tended to continue because no one could really be sure either way.

"All right," I said. "So Basileus Leo sees the League is falling apart. Stygia's the traditional rival of his city among the League as well unpalatable for the slavery besides, and Helike's the power he's trying to dislodge from the place of first among equals. Everyone knew Bellerophon couldn't be kept in the fold from the start, I'm guessing, so doubtless they didn't even try."

"That Atalante walked away implies he is failing to consolidate the League," Akua noted. "He would have attempted to keep the preachers from walking, if only for their coffers and healers."

Indrani laughed.

"So in Leo's hour of need, his buddies from Penthes come to offer support," she said. "And he's got no idea's that Malicia's hand is up the ass of the Exarchs, moving the lips so they'll say all the right things."

Colourfully put, but not inaccurate.

"You think she wants to prop up Leo Trakas and make a puppet of him?" I guessed. "I don't see how it can hold all that long. As soon as he hears about Still Water being used on his fleets, he turns on them in fury. He *has* to, his own people will stone him in the streets if he doesn't."

"Agreed," Akua said. "I would wager his usefulness is purely temporary, and the man himself disposable."

"Yeah, Sahelian's got that one pegged. He's an arrow loosed, not a lasting catspaw," Indrani said. "Ain't like the Tower's ever been shy about using people and then tossing them away."

"We are in agreement this is a ploy of the Empress, then?" I said.

"It seems likely," Akua agreed.

"We'd already be hip-deep in corpses if this was the Dead King's work," Archer frankly replied.

"Good," I grunted, eyes fixed on the shapes approaching in the distance. "Then we tread carefully. I'm not willing to hand her yet another fucking victory tonight."

We slowed and stopped without ever needing to speak a word, my limp carrying me atop a slight hill on the plains and the two of them coming to stand by my side as we waited for the League to walk the last stretch separating us. We could have met them halfway and gotten to speaking more quickly, but that would have been sending the wrong message: it was them coming to me, not us meeting as equals. The Tyrant had not made granted the same quantity of soldiers to all members of the League when making the delegation, that much was made clear by those advancing towards us. The two Exarch-claimants of Penthes had maybe three hundred foot with them, with the looks of professional soldiers about them: long mail shirts of good quality, crested helms with full cheek guards and oval shields. Their spears were unlike the long beasts the Stygians used in their phalanx, only about the height of a man, and they bore not swords but long-shafted axes at their hips.

The forces of Nicae, themselves numbering closer to five hundred, steady sword and board men in chainmail and cuirasses though they used small round steel shields and straight-edged sabers instead what I'd equip a shield wall in in their place. They had about a hundred riders as well, though it was only light horse. Long lances and javelins as well as what looked like armour of leather and *cloth* had me almost rolling my eyes. Aside from riding down conscripts, I hardly saw what good that kind of cavalry could ever do in a proper battle. They'd shatter under Legion crossbows in a hurry, and Gods wouldn't that be a horrible waste of good warhorses? The Stygians had brought a mere two hundred, their Spears of Stygian with their long spears raised high advancing at brisk pace as the few mounted people ahead I assumed to be magisters keeping an eye on the slave-soldiers. Kairos Theodosian had not been a man afraid to stack the deck in his favour, so it was the Helikean force of nearly nine hundred that was by far the largest of the approaching contingents.

Men-at-arms with their scale armour and sharp blades, the steady foot that was the foundation of Helikean warfare, counted six

hundred. They moved in formation and good order. The last three hundred, however, were a sight that half-surprised me: *kataphraktoi*. I'd confiscated the equipment of the four thousand cataphracts that'd warred on my army in Iserre and sent them back to Kairos with a broken finger each, but it seemed at least part of that force had been raised anew. The broken finger I'd not expected to keep them down for too long, not with so many priests among the League army, but the horses and armaments were surprise. Mind you, I was looking at three hundred when my soldiers had once fought four *thousand*. I doubted even the deeper schemer like the Tyrant had anticipated needing to rearm all four thousand of the most elite force in his army. The last presence from the League was the Delosi Secretariat, and it evidently had not brought soldiers at all. A handful of *askretis* were walking with Nicaeans, carrying small scribing desks for what I assumed to be a senior member of the Secretariat.

"This is pretty nostalgic," Archer said, silver flask in hand. "The three of us, more enemies than we practically know what to do with."

"They're not necessarily enemies," I said.

"Cat insisting we're not necessarily going to kill them," Archer airily continued. "All we need is caves full of corpses and it'll be like we never left the Everdark."

"Any moment now, we'll declare war on an entire civilization," Akua suggested.

"We did pretty well last time," Indrani mused. "I'd say we rank at least a draw, don't you?"

She passed the flask to the shade, who drank a deep sip.

"Generous, that," Akua said afterwards. "Although, for an invasion force three women strong I'll concede there was a surprising amount of invading achieved."

"I need a better quality of minions," I complained. "Mine are too mouthy. I bet the White Knight never has to deal with anything like this."

Heroes must be all sweetness and light, to the Sword of Judgement. All I got were crows that got mouthy about giving me directions and underlings who couldn't ever let anything go. Akua handed me the flask and I took a sip myself – then spat it out, coughing.

"Indrani, you horrid wench," I gasped out. "This is senna."

Drow liquor, made from mushrooms and tasting like godsdamned mud. It'd been tolerable underground, where there was little else even

remotely drinkable, but up here? After months of wine? It was like licking a muddy lake shore.

"You slipped me a flask when I left before the Graveyard," Indrani beatifically smiled. "How does the saying go again? For small slights, long prices. Wench."

I glanced at Akua who had brazenly betrayed me by pretending this was halfway decent liquor when she'd drunk of it herself, and she languidly shrugged.

"How could I stand in the way of righteous revenge, my heart?" the shade said. "It would have been most uncharitable of me."

"This is why Hakram is my favourite," I muttered under my breath.

At the very least, the indignation had me less tense as the soldiers approached.

"And now," Indrani narrated, "as foes stream forward like a mighty river, atop the hill stand a peerless beauty, a regal queen, a mysterious seductress – and also you two, I guess."

I could not flip off Archer in front of the League, I reminded myself. No matter how much she deserved it. Indrani shifted slightly to the side, eyes narrowing, and her tone went serious without warning.

"Mages with the Basileus," she warned. "At least three."

I followed her gaze and found Leo Trakas atop his white stallion, as well as the two Exarch-claimants, but the mages took me a while longer to figure out. Some of Basileus Leo's escorting horseman wore ill-fitting armour, I realized. The sleeves were too long, as if made for larger and taller men, and they seemed uncomfortable with the weapons they were carrying.

"You sure?" I quietly said.

"Their horses move like they've been drugged," Archer murmured. "Those are war horses, willful, and they're not good riders. Either those mounts were spelled to be docile, or they were fed something."

"Akua?" I said.

"Enchanted," she said. "Though sloppily. I'd wager they are either Nicaean mages – no great wonders, those – or hired practitioners from Mercantis."

"Lovely," I growled.

If Leos Trakas had tight reins on his 'allies' I'd call this a precaution and let it go, but given that Penthes was likely

playing him at Malicia's behalf there were risks involved. The larger party, consisting of the Penthesians, Nicaeans and the Secretariat observers, halted its march maybe a hundred feet ahead of our hill. A smaller party advanced, though it wasn't that small: the Exarchs brought thirty men, Leo Trakas thirty men of his own – including the mages, now dismounted – and with four scribes and the Secretariat official it was sixty eight people who strode towards the three of us. In the distance, the forces of Helike and Stygia halted on either side of the large force. Two riders peeled out of the band for Helike, one for Stygia. Bundled up in furs, Basileus Leo was at the head of the delegation and it was him that addressed us first.

"Hail, Black Queen," the young man said.

"Hail, Basileus," I calmly replied. "Your visit is an unexpected pleasure."

"Is it a visit to walk Proceran soil, now?" one of the Exarchs mocked. "How quickly your dominion extends, Queen of Callow."

I glanced at Akua.

"Advisor," I said. "Do remind me – is that one Prodocius or Honorion?"

"Prodocius, my queen," Akua replied.

I glanced at the dark-haired man, his cheeks gone red from anger as much as the cold, and my eyebrows rose.

"Did you know that the Eyes of the Empire have you officially marked as 'having the wits of a well-bred trout'?" I asked.

The man snarled.

"You coat your insults in lies, you-"

"I assure you," I amicably smiled, "it is a verbatim quote."

"Prodocius," Basileus Leo sharply said. "We did not come to trade barbs."

"That is pleasing to know," I said.

"So why did you come?" Archer drawled. "I'm assuming it's not to visit the nice Proceran countryside. Snow's not measurably any nice close to our camp."

Knowing her, she might actually have checked.

"Accusations were made against you, Queen Catherine," an old man spoke in lightly accented Lower Miezian.

Long hair white as snow and bound in a ponytail, the man who'd spoken was wrinkled like old leather and nearly as dark of skin. This was, if I remembered my briefings correctly, Nestor Ikaroi of the Secretariat. On each of his cheeks could be found a blue stripe and a black one, tattooed. The marks of someone who had climbed the ranks of their bureaucracy until there was nothing left to climb.

"Secretary Ikaroi, isn't it?" I said.

The old man, to my surprise, gallantly bowed.

"It is a great pleasure to formally meet you, Your Majesty," he said.

"And I you," I replied, dipping my head in thanks. "I've long had an interest in the ways of the Secretariat."

Which was true enough, since back in the first days of my reign I'd been desperate to find a working bureaucratic model that wasn't an imitation of the Praesi one. There'd never really be time or resources to spend on a venture in the Free Cities though, not with Procer mobilizing.

"Then perhaps in the days to come you might be willing to speak with formal chroniclers," Nestor Ikaroi offered. "We have a troubling lack of direct sources concerning the beginning of the Uncivil Wars."

I blinked, taken aback at the continued civility. Usually people were only this polite after they'd lost a few battles or I'd put a blade at their neck.

"Time allowing, I've no objection," I slowly said. "The Marshal of Callow is already writing a history of her own, and I would not object to your speaking with her either."

"It pleases us all you are willing to interact peacefully with the League, Your Majesty," Basileus Leo said, reclaiming the lead on the League side. "Yet it would benefit us all if you would answer the accusations that were posed."

"It is interesting that the Basileus of Nicae considers himself to have authority over the Queen of Callow," Akua mildly said. "I wonder which precedent is so in use."

The younger man looked like he'd swallowed a lemon.

"Should I take this as refusal to speak with the League?" he asked me.

"Do you speak for the League now?" Indrani drily said. "You seem to be missing parts, 'Hierarch'."

I raised a hand.

"We have further guests, Archer," I said. "Let us not jump to hasty conclusions."

The riders from Helike and Stygia had finally arrived. The Stygian was no surprise: Magister Zoe Ixiani had been the voice of the Magisterium through the League civil war and the Proceran campaign, and it seemed she was still to be the same tonight. The fact that she was a slaver rather spoiled her good looks, sadly. As for the two Helikeans, I was familiar with both. General Basilia, who had I once met in Rochelant and later learned was the Tyrant's favourite general, rode well and high in the saddle. Dark-eyed and dark-haired, she had sharp cheekbones and the well-built shoulders of a warrior. The other I knew almost intimately: the pale eyes straddling the line of blue and grey, the surprisingly young tanned face I had once seen kneeling before me. General Pallas, who had led the *kataphractoi* who killed my men.

"Generals," I said. "Magister Ixioni."

The two commanders offered brisk salutes.

"Magister Zoe would suffice," the sorceress smiled.

I did not smile back and flicked a glance at the Helikeans.

"Quite the gathering," I said. "Dare I ask why?"

"We are here as observers," General Basilia said.

"You are here as an usurper, *general*," the other Exarch-claimant said.

That one wasn't Prodocius, which made him Honorion. Plump where the other was thin, he was middle-aged and his curly hair luxuriant. From what Black had told me, he was prodigiously wealthy and had no particular talent aside from this. Considering a great source of wealth for Penthes was trade with the Empire, I'd wager he was even more Malicia's creature than the other one.

"I will uphold the last will of the Tyrant of Helike, Penthesian swine," General Basilia coldly said. "Steel in hand, if I must."

I was detecting the slightest hint of tension there.

"Accusations, you said," I mused. "Am I to hear them, or will they remain a mystery?"

"Are you willing to submit to the judgement of the League?" Basileus Leo eagerly said.

I met his eyes, unamused.

"Look at my back, Leo Trakas," I said. "What do you see there?"

The young man's lips thinned.

"The Mantle of Woe, it is called," he said.

"It's a list of people who asked me to *submit* to things," I said. "I would not be so eager to be number among them, were I you."

"Then we are at an impasse," Basileus Leo said.

"Secretary Nestor," Akua said. "What does the record indicate the accusations are?"

Leo Trakas paled, either in anger or fear.

"Claimant to the title of Exarch Prodocius Lessor alleges that Queen Catherine Foundling murdered the Tyrant of Helike," Nestor Ikaroi calmly said. "Claimant to the title of Exarch Honorion Kapenos alleges that Queen Catherine Foundling was accessory to the murder of Anaxares of Bellerophon, Hierarch of the Free Cities."

A heartbeat of silence passed, then Archer burst out laughing. It was not, I decided, the most diplomatic we'd ever been. I glanced at the Helikean generals, who seemed untroubled.

"And what does Helike say of this?" I asked.

"We cast no such accusation," General Pallas bluntly said.

"Our sire would have disdained such a measure, even were the accusation true," General Basilia added with open contempt.

I glanced at Basileus Leo, wondering in what possible world he might have thought that my 'submission' to 'League judgement' might have resulted in anything the wholesale slaughter of everyone trying to execute me on such thin pretence. Gods Below, I'd sent running larger forces than the entire League escort, much less his little coalition. No, he was young but he wasn't an idiot – he wouldn't have been able to prevent a Strategos from being chosen in Nicae if that were the case. Ah. Had he been presenting himself as the speaker for the League so that he could then declare me innocent in that capacity, avoiding a fight with me while binding Penthes to him? On parchment that was a halfway decent plan, but he had to realize I had no damned incentive to indulge him and the precedent of the League having authority over a Queen of Callow was unacceptable. *If he is not stupid, which I know him not to be*, I thought, *then he must be desperate*.

"Gods, do you have a semblance of evidence at least?" I asked.

"Tell me you didn't march near two thousand soldiers for... *this*."

The Basileus flushed and gestured towards his attendants. Archer, I saw, was carefully watching the mages. Good. One of the soldiers came forward with two sheaths of parchment, but Exarch Prodocius sneered and elbowed him, snatching the scrolls. He strolled up the hill, staring me down with surprising aplomb for a man who as far as I could tell had no power and no military training – he wasn't even in particularly good shape. Except, I realized as he approached, he *wasn't* staring me down. His eyes were wide and showing white, like a terrified horse's. He was, I grasped as he hurried towards me, frightened nearly out of his wits. And still he threw the parchments towards my face. Akua slapped them down, even as Exarch Prodocius stepped up to me with a rictus of bared teeth that straddled fury and terror.

"There," Prodocius snarled, "you murdering tyrant, you-"

At the Basileus' barked order two Nicaean soldiers stepped forward, one grabbing him by the shoulder and dragging him back and the other offering me an apologetic bow before picking up the parchments – they'd fallen short, as open scrolls were want to do – and bowed again before pressing them into my hand.

Or at least tried to, before Archer caught his wrist and rammed a blade through the side of his neck.

Aston Whiteman

So happy no vote reminders.

Just good story discussions..

Dread Emperor Irritant

Don't forget to vote!

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

the placement of this comment is fantastic

[greatwyrmgold](#)

It's a reply, so that was intentional.

Morgenstern

I also like the placement of the "just story discussions" post – for me it is shown as the VERY first comment to this

chapter. No discussion or anything whatsoever, other than complaining about the vote reminder, which wasn't even there yet. o_ô

Internet trolls... *shakes head
So. Amazing. 😊

Hm... Can we vote *this* troll post to be the very best yet?
Sure has my vote. =P

Eleron M Pfoutz

Once more, the greatest of the Dread Emperors of Praes graces our comments.

Jacob McNeer

Must be Traitorous in disguise.

NerfContessa

Isn't it always?

More serious, what could pose enough danger that indra I is forced to abandon all elegance and banter and even more so, kills before cat orders it?

Hmmnnnnnn....

[*Liliet*](#)

Bless your heart.

[*Barthumphries*](#)

Dudes, and salary start the typo thread. You know that's why Archer take a sword through that guy's neck? Because he didn't start a typo thread?

Let's review. Guy didn't start a typo thread. Archer stabbed him. Ipso facto, that's what happens when you forget the typo thread.

And he's got no idea's that Malicia's hand is up the ass of the Exarchs
Change idea's to idea.

There are at least 8 more typos. Can you find them all? Can you be as eagle eyed as Akua and Archer?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

I just spent several minutes fiddling about with web tutorials trying to learn how to get WordPress to let me embed a link in

a comment so I could quote you and make the word "vote" a link to topwebfiction. Alas, I have nothing to show for it.

[Liliet](#)

Let's see if this works...
\\

[Liliet](#)

Okay, that didn't work. Second try.

[a href="insertlinkhere.com"]Vote[/a]

only with angled brackets.

Also known as, wordpress comments use limited html.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Thanks. Is that angled brackets as in , or...?

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Okay, judging by the fact that the type of angled bracket I typed doesn't show up, I'm guessing it's the correct form. So, without further ado, here goes nothing:

"So happy no [vote](#) reminders," Aston said, blithely spelling their own doom. "Just good story discussions."

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Messed up slightly but I can live with it. Thanks again, Lilliet.

Arturo

It has been far too long since Catherine has tried diplomacy and ended with a slaughter. She's finally returning to her roots.

pagesbe

I'm... guessing that there is something cursed about those papers or at least Indrani knows something we and Catherine don't. Because I can't think of another reason she'd do this.

SHARKS

I wonder if they are citizen papers or something. If cat is an honorary citizen, what laws she is subject to immediately changes.

Agent J

I don't imagine that would hold weight with the Army of Callow that's, like, right there you guys.

Jane

Well, if Hierarch does still have some power over the citizens of Bellerophon as implied, then I could see that mattering. And while it would be ridiculous, it wouldn't actually be out of character for the city to have a law as absurd as "If you touch the paperwork, you agree to be our citizen". Plus, I can certainly see why someone would be as stressed out as the Exarch, carrying those papers! Imagine the fear that you might accidentally become a citizen of *that* place, if the winds blow the wrong way!

...Joking aside, it's not citizenship papers. But if they *were*, it could actually be a more effective assassination plot than one would expect – possibly moreso than a more conventional magic attack.

Shveiran

It couldn't.

Story-fu requires actual STORIES to work. Narrative doesn't like technicalities unless the story is about technicalities. You can't step up to king Arthur and tell him you owned the field the rock was in, so you technically own the sword too because it was in the rock, and thus you are in fact the true king of Britain. I mean, you can, but it doesn't get narrative traction unless your story is about land ownership and legal battles AND your story is bigger than King Arthur's.

I'm frankly still baffled the Hierarch could get away with that, but this no name getting it to stick with the Black Queen?

Not going to happen. It must be something else.

Shikkarasu

I don't imagine that would hold weight with the ArmyQueen of Callow that's, like, right there you guys.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

I'm not a lawyer, but I'm pretty sure most legal papers aren't legally binding just because you're holding them. You have to at least drip some blood on them or something.

Shveiran

I have a law degree, so I can confirm no law system I know of works that way.

That wouldn't be a problem if we were operating within a legal system that actually works that way – I mean, it would be moronic IMO but it isn't IMPOSSIBLE nor anything, as law is a social construct – but it is a fair assumption that's not the case.

Otherwise, Anaxares would have commented on it with regards to him receiving stuff all the time, and the Tyrant would have exploited the hell out of it.

If it was that relevant, EE would have shown it to us beforehand.

Seeker

It was most likely an assassin or a trap. Stage an act of rudeness, polite soldier hands back the papers to her and stabs her while close.

[Liliet](#)

Contact poison is a thing.

There's... a lot of options for why Cat taking those could be a Very Bad Idea.

[onedollargum](#)

Contact poison's a thing, but no great hazard to a Name. I imagine it's more a sorcery/story/legal thing that could cause problems. Perhaps the scroll curses her, perhaps it reveals a page from the Dead King's ascension book, or perhaps it makes her an honorary member of the Republic of Bellerephon (subject to all laws incumbent within).

NerfGlaistigUaine

She's not Named though. She's just a squishy mortal albeit with powerful patrons. Contact poison would probably work, at least until Sve Noc healed her... actually can they heal? It seems likely, but I don't think I've ever seen them doing it...

[onedollargum](#)

Point on not being named anymore, but she's close enough that she doesn't really age much. I figured it'd count. As for Sve Noc, after digesting Winter any poison they drank would be like watered down beer.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

They healed her after beating her nine tenths of the way to death then deciding to take her on as an advisor. She even had to request that she be allowed to retain her limp, to keep her humble. But that was in person, not via the crows, so maybe it's different.

[Liliet](#)

"Nine tenth of the way"? She had her HEART ripped out (thanks Akua, you're a dear). Also, I don't think she requested the limp, she just didn't request to remove it (in one chapter it says that removing it would have demanded a price not unlike that once paid by Warlock to heal her from near death, which was human sacrifice, so... yeah. not default)

Isi Arnott-Campbell

My memory is admittedly a little blurry. Might be a good time for a reread.

KageLupus

I doubt that it is Story related, as that line of defensive thinking isn't Archer's wheelhouse. Honestly the odds are that it was a mundane assassination attempt, and that guy that got knifed was some kind of physical threat to Cat. That would make the most sense for why it was Archer that noticed and took him down.

Archer is the physical defense, able to pick out hidden weapons and incongruous details. Akua is the magical defense, and if the scrolls were dangerous she would have said something after knocking them out of the air instead of letting that little scene play out. Cat of course is the narrative defense, since her brain is oddly keyed in to meta-text and how stories can play out.

I highly doubt that the scrolls had a story-based aspect to them, mainly because there are no Named around to make that play. Maybe Malicia if she is pulling the strings here, but even then using Stories has never really been her strong suit. She is a manipulator on a grand scale, but regarding people and not only Named.

Rup

good analysis
great team roles:
physical defense
magical defense
narrative defense

.
that last one is a doozy

[Liliet](#)

I think Akua didn't say anything because the scene took like ten seconds from the moment she realized to the moment Archer stabbed the guy. Two DnD rounds. Talking is only a free action in DnD.

Insanenoodlyguy

Even then there can be limits once you roll initiative. My DM says you can get about 6 words out during a round if you expect to be understood and heard once you're in the thick of it. Seems legit.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah... that depends on the DM. Well, we haven't been trying dramatic speeches with ours, but...

Well, point stands either way XD

lennymaster

That was obviously one of the hidden mages.

Jane

...Well, I've seen succession crises lead to worse plans than this, and which ended in even worse places, so I *guess* the League is technically still ahead compared to some histories.

[TeK](#)

Something like four different people consequently pretending to be both the fifth long-dead person and all the last ones combined. Even if one of those was publicly shot out of the cannon.

konstantinvoncarstein

Are you speaking of the Dimitri affair at the end of Boris Godounov's reign?

Jane

Well, personally, I'd just been thinking of the various ways in which the Eastern Roman Empire undermined itself with fighting over who the Emperor "should" be – at least here, the League is just provoking someone who's already an enemy, instead arranging for a more powerful rival to be captured and humiliated while they decide that it's a splendid time

for a civil war while an enemy army wanders through their territory.

But with the League being the League, maybe it *is* more appropriate to compare them to the more absurd moments in our history...

Jane

Oh, though I guess if we're talking "Bad Succession Ideas", the whole War of the Roses kind of takes the cake, doesn't it? I mean, setting aside all the bad decisions that were made *during* the war, spending thirty years tearing the country apart instead of just sitting down and coming to a diplomatic arrangement is pretty much the epitome of a bad idea. Assuming one actually cares about the kingdom, at least.

[TeK](#)

That is an assumption, yes.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

So far, it's holding together better than most Hellenic Leagues.

erebus42

Well that escalated quickly

Naeddyr

Archer! Don't be *rude*.

superkeaton

Archer must have seen something on the scrolls. Probably spelled, maybe some kind of bomb or poison or whatever those mages are around for.

Maybe it' a dickbutt.

SpacyRicochet

Not just Archer. Sahelian is the one that slapped them down before they could reach Catherine.

[Liliet](#)

Huh, yeah. They both seem to have noticed something Catherine didn't, or at least that Catherine didn't explicitly say in her POV.

Mental Mouse

Possibly magic possibly just following Prodocius's manner. He's certainly acting like someone forced into carrying the moral equivalent of a bomb.

Liliet

I'm wondering if Catherine noticed it too. After she notices Prodocius's facial expression, she stops commenting on people's motivations or reasons for anything that's happening and just sticks to straight narration of events. It's possible she also realized something, but didn't say it yet and didn't react because, well, a game of impressions. The less she reacts, the better, outside of the carefully controlled eyebrow lifting with a 'fucking really?' disdainful look.

Andrew Mitchell

Oh, yes! Great point.

Nairne .01

Was that assassin that Indarni just stopped?

IDKWhoitis

It was "an" assassin, but not our guy. They probably tried to use an artifact or spell, and Archer took them down before it could go off successfully.

konstantinvoncarstein

It is an assassin, but not Assassin. He would never attack someone as powerful as Catherine from the front when they are expecting trouble.

Decius

You would never expect Assassin to attack you from the front when you are expecting trouble, which means you can't assume that your front is safe from Assassin just because you are expecting trouble.

konstantinvoncarstein

Praesi sophistic apart 😊 he would never attack a Named, a quasi Named and a powerful sorceress in a frontal assault. It would end too badly

Jarthon

While I agree that he isn't likely to do this, he has shown a willingness to fight head on as he did to Hanno right before jumping off of his exploding horse, which I assume is likely do to his strange ability to defy death (likely with clones or something)

[Fayhem](#)

That wasn't Assassin. That was Black using the same Nefarious trick that Malicia is so fond of. That's why it worked for misleading Hanno; Black's soul/mind was actually (temporarily) in that body.

konstantinvoncarstein

It was not Assassin, but a puppet with Black's soul in it.

Shveiran

By that logic, you wouldn't expect him to try to kill you by terrifying you via a scary dance performance.

I'm not quite sure that "we'd have the element of surprise" is a good reason to employ unorthodox tactics as often as people think. Some things aren't usually done **for a reason**.

Jane

Cat, Cat, Cat, don't look down on light cavalry like this! Yeah, they wouldn't be great at charging into a line of spears reinforced by archers, but you're not supposed to be using them in the same way as heavy cavalry.

Light cavalry excel at scouting, and at running down a routed enemy. A victory is only worth as much as it can be exploited, and your heavily armored legionnaires aren't going to be chasing down many of the stragglers – to say nothing of the danger they'd face breaking formation like that. Your heavy cavalry are better at this, but they're expensive to train and armor, and still aren't going to be as nimble as your light cavalry at the end of the day.

And it's not as though they're worthless in a pitched battle, either – sure, they're great, big targets, but they're still highly mobile, and can be sent to threaten archers, commanders, or other targets of opportunity while the enemy's main force is engaged. Or just send them at the flanks if there's nothing more appealing to strike – they're not great at charging a prepared target, but they're good for hitting a vulnerable foe and withdrawing before they're fully engaged.

They might not be revered as much as heavy cavalry was at the time, but to roll your eyes at them would be like someone rolling their eyes at sappers for not being able to hold a line. They still perform a very important function.

konstantinvoncarstein

Obviously, she never played Total War

Jane

I ~guess~ I can forgive her for not being up to date on cavalry tactics when Callow lost their horses before she was born, but... Really, she should at least know the scouting part, goblins or no.

[Liliet](#)

I'm guessing she does, but right now is looking at them as 'potential opponents for my force to fight here and now'. Mind you, all the soldiers present at Salia are meant to be guard – what scouting in the middle of a diplomatic conference?

JJR

Do you think goblin cavalry would be one goblin on a small horse, or 4 goblins on a large horse?

shadw21

I though they had this already, undead goats/horses loaded with munitions.

Alternatively, 4 goblins pretending to be a horse with a goblin riding on top, or maybe it's more of a chariot situation?

konstantinvoncarstein

Goblins on goats!

Shveiran

It would be goblins on goblins, of course.
That way, your cavalry can wield twice as many knives.

Andrew Mitchell

Or, even better, goblins on goblins on goblins, for even more knives.

Or, even betterer, goblins on goblins on goblins on goblins, for even morer knives.

Or...

[Liliet](#)

Goblin siege tower!

Insanenoodlyguy

this is actually canon in 5e. Batiri Tribe Goblins fight this way

https://vignette.wikia.nocookie.net/forgottenrealms/images/6/6b/Batiri_battle_stack.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/2000?cb=20180226232110

Decius

Light cavalry are very, very good at being somewhere where they can't be struck but also somewhere where they can't be ignored.

"We can't run the supply train through that valley, the enemy's light cavalry can reach it."

Legion doctrine means that the light cavalry is not very effective on the field, and so of course it should never take the field against the legions.

nimelennar

What are you taking about? Light cavalry are supposed to have their swords lit aflame, and be sent in, without support, against the very centre of an massive horde of undead.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Are we making fun of the tactics in late Game of Thrones? Because we could plumb that well for days, my friend.

[shimizubad](#)

At night

[machinetell](#)

T R I G G E R E D

JJR

They got better though.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

And cloth armor, also known as gambeson, is pretty effective against most things less powerful than a crossbow. Sure, a sword'll cut through the first layers without too much trouble,

but there are a lot of layers; most attacks won't pierce all the way through, or at least not anywhere near as deeply as they would without armor.

I'm starting to think Catherine has a warped view of the kinds of opponents an army is expected to fight.

[machinetell](#)

It can be even more resistant to blades than that. Leaving aside magical possibilities, or advanced tech like giant spider silk (ie Kevlar).

Some of history's most famous cavalry wore cloth armour – Alexander of Macedonia's companion cavalry wore the linothorax.

Sure, it won't do anything against an enemy lance or pike, but it's not ever meant to come in contact with either.

JJR

"What do you mean 'most battles /aren't/ against monsters from outside of creation'?"

Her Name experience probably gave her a fairly warped view of how effective armor actually is too. Though guide armor isn't nearly as bad as it is in some settings, and don't you dare forget your helmet!

Shveiran

Actually, no.

Gambeson was very often used by most European Medieval armies, but they were not employed ALONE.

The idea of the gambeson or aketon, is to provide padding between your body AND the outer shell of armor.

Alone, it isn't very effective: a slashing wound from a sword will not do great damage to you, but it will wreck the gambeson itself, which is NOT easy to make or repay. So even then, the gambeson deployed on its own will risk falling apart after the battle if you got hit once.

And that is the best case scenario, because padded cloth provides no help against puncture: spears and arrows and good old stabbing will get through just as easily.

When comboed with a different armor, however, gambeson becomes amazing. Imagine wearing chain mail on your shirt: as soon as one ring gets split, it will risk piercing your garment and cut your skin as you move, which is painful and distracting. Beside that, metal protects you from cuts but doesn't stop momentum: the rings are meant to spread the pressure over a larger area, but it still bruises fiercely. If you get hit by an axe or a mace, you'll be GLAD to have

chainmail, but it could still very well be an incapacitating blow without any particular strength on the enemy's part. If you are wearing padded armor, high-impact weapons deliver much less punch because the gambeson absorbs a lot of the impact the mail spread, and your skin is protected from split rings and chafing.

Even with cheaper armor, say, leather or even better studded leather, a padding layer goes a long way in protecting you from broken bones but only if the harder, external layer is doing something to stop the cut, divert the piercing and spread the impact over a larger area.

Macedonian may very well have used cloth armor, but they were not exactly the peak of military research. They were amazing, but only compared to their time period. Caesar could not go against Napoleon and win, is what I mean.

TL;DR: Gambesons are amazing when combined with an hard, external shell like plate, chainmail or studded leather. On their own, they are better than fighting with your shirt but not by much.

IDKWhoitis

As far as attempts of assassination go, this was pretty fumbled.

Is Malica this desperate? It would make sense given that all Praesi spies in Prócer are effectively compromised with Scribe watching, and Assassin certainly answers to Black before Malica. But this attempt is barely shows any effort into killing Cat. Is this escalation to prod Cat into a bad decision?

Jane

If Cat were to act sufficiently rashly here (say, killing everyone of importance present in retaliation), I could see that being enough to push Callow out of the Grand Alliance again in conjunction with a couple more pushes. The assassination a couple chapters back, Judgment wounded, people not being comfortable with an Evil ally to begin with... There's ample arguments for people opposed to the alliance to work with. It'd just take Cat playing into those expectations a few times to put Hasenbach in a pretty difficult position, though I don't see the Dominion listening any time soon after Pilgrim.

But that would be a pretty big "if", has too many other points of failure, and would be *expecting* the loss of an asset that Malicia presumably spent at least a little effort to acquire – and it would have worked almost as well if Cat were to be provoked into killing a delegation instead of actually important people. Or, better yet, if they instead sent people who would be opposed to Malicia to these talks instead.

No, assuming that this is an actual plan instead of a cursed scroll disrupting everything or a lone sleeper agent primed to attack at any opportunity, this whole scheme looks ridiculous enough that I'm inclined to think it was purely a League-born plot; an ambitious and desperate ruler trying to consolidate the League around himself with a bold plan that ended up considerably less baked than it needed to be.

Hellspirit

If it is a Malica plot, considering how botched, it would not have been her true objective. Rather her objective might have been to ruin the diplomatic relations between her and the Free Cities, considering that in recent time Cat has gone from ARCH HERETIC of THE EAST, the BLACK QUEEN, a warlord with immense power and a reputation for making corpses where she goes, to a somewhat more reasonable image.

If a diplomatic party has one of theirs killed in cold blood without the true plot being unraveled/proven, it feels more like a Malica play.

Liliet

This is more what I'm thinking. Malicia is trying to throw everything she can at Cat at once, to confuse / panic her and trip her into bad decisions. While Cat is handling one crisis, she's not handling another; for all we know there are parts of Salia being lit on goblinfire right now (in a secret plot Scribe hadn't known about). The assassination attempt doesn't have to work – it doesn't even have to rattle Cat, just distracting and frustrating her means it'll have done its job. And if it fucks up her diplomatic relationship with the League – which I think Malicia would know better than to expect by now, but on the off chance – well that's just two birds with one stone.

They only have one Catherine. Note that if she hadn't picked out and groomed Abigail for just this task – to be The Liked Callowan Commander – she probably WOULD be panicking right now. And we probably don't yet know about ALL lit dynamite sticks flying in Cat's direction right now.

Morgenstern

... an excuse for something? "How dare you kill our messenger; he was just handing over papers".

Who knows, maybe one CAN prod Akua's and Indrani's sense for sth. being off (way too much) and let it be nothing at all in the end, making them / Cat look bad.

Someone was meant to kill someone so that someone else can....
(what?)

For what end, though...
We'll see. *shrugs

Morgenstern

... and why am I only seeing Liliet's post now?

Can I please delete mine? No? Not only no edit function, but also no delete? Damn wordpress.... 😊

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Hey, the saying is "don't SHOOT the messenger"; there's nothing in there about shanking the messenger.

Darkening

Huh, bit of a contradiction in the last few paragraphs, first it says that Akua caught the parchments, and then it says they fell short and someone needed to pick them up? Weird. Wonder if this is actually an assassination attempt? I suppose Cat **is** a lot more fragile these days, if she wasn't expecting it and it worked fast enough, a curse or some kind of explosive or something might actually manage to kill her if she didn't have the time or presence of mind to protect herself with Night.

darkening

... huh, did that get edited or did I completely misread? hm.

mavant

It got edited.

Aston Whiteman

They want Cat to take on a new leadership role/responsibility by accepting the scrolls...

Thus tying her down.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

I'm not familiar with legal procedure in international diplomacy, but I'm pretty sure reading a document doesn't imply that you accept it. Even EULA's aren't that strict; they just identify other actions that imply accepting the agreement.

Zggt

There has been a real lack of lies and stabbing among the Woe recently. Glad to see Archer is there to address this

Darkening

Yeah, I mean, when you get big enough you just don't *need* to lie to people or stab them as much, but there's still a real joy when you get the opportunity to go back to your roots and indulge in a little wanton violence.

Cicero

"This is pretty nostalgic," Archer said, silver flask in hand. "The three of us, more enemies than we practically know what to do with."

"They're not necessarily enemies," I said.

"Cat insisting we're not necessarily going to kill them," Archer airily continued

Archer, it really isn't sporting to open the ball just because you want to call the tune.

Aston Whiteman

Really?

[Javvies](#)

Huh.

I'm hoping that the Helikean reaction indicates that Kairos's last will and testament or final orders has him leaving presents for Cat. Like making her his chosen heir/successor.

Props to the Secretary Nestor for acting like a mostly reasonable person. Though the fetish for records is showing. But, to be fair, it's existing itself in a relatively reasonable and restrained manner.

Seriously? Charging Cat with the murder of Kairos and/or Heirarch? That's ... yeah. No. Archer might not have been the most diplomatic, but still, it's hard not to laugh at that. Might be Malicia trying to cause trouble, because I doubt that they'd come up with going after Cat on their own.

Jane

And, like, imagine thinking that *anyone* is going to agree to a trial after the way the trial of the White Knight went. Obviously, nobody is going to agree to have their monarch tried by a foreign country, but suggesting it *just* after the last trial killed the judge, the plaintiff, and nearly everybody else in the room... Yeah, that takes some nerve.

konstantin von carstein

Even without that, a head of state would **never** submit herself willingly to the justice of another country. It would be a loss of sovereignty.

Jane

I mean... I *did* say that in the comment you just replied to 😊.

Insanenoodlyguy

Crack Theory: They are trying to get the law to apply to her because the law very well may soon apply to her and this is their last chance to balance that.

Tyrant hasn't just named her the ruler of Helike. He's named her heir to Hierarch! Our newest Angel of Judgement didn't agree with this so much as not care when he signed all the papers Tyrant's gargoyle's put in front of him (whomever takes over should get to it already, he needs to be executed yesterday! Really, he ought to execute all the kanenas for not executing him..) Anyway, there's a lot of people not into her being granted such power, Malicia least of all, so this is a desperation tactic where she is either found unsuitable for the office via the legal system or ends up killing so many people in the League she is automatically disqualified. That's why everybody is so nervous yet still willing to go along with this horseshit, she has a legit claim otherwise and might well end up in charge. Ironically Pallas might be one of her strongest supporters now. "no no, she left us alive but she did it in a totally evil and sadistic way. we had to march back to a man who might well kill us for failure in the cold, while crippled, after being forced to cripple ourselves! Trust me, she's still serving Below!"

[Liliet](#)

Reading this after the next chapter: I'm fucking dying.

[Liliet](#)

Secretary Nestor has been hilarious and a star.

"The kindergarten at my side notwithstanding, we absolutely can talk like sane adults."

Ultimate_procrastinator

Ah, the [Only Sane Man](#) trope. So simple, yet it works so well

[Liliet](#)

"I swear I'm not with them. I'm so fucking embarrassed to be from the same geographical region"

To be fair, he's not the only one! General Basilia is also there ♥

edrey

Here i still waiting the tyrant last will that the general said.
I hope something unexpected happens

Crash

I've always had a bad impression of Leo Trakas. The way he speaks in his few appearances rubs me wrong, really. But this kind of stupidity? What in the hells gave him the impression he can use that kind of wording with the Black Queen?

The sheer idiocy of it all.

Cicero

Like Cat said, it was probably the least bad of his options.

Even with Cat obviously rejecting his demand, the fact that he made the demand might give him leverage in the League to try and hold enough of it together to keep his city relatively safe.

Of course, his assessment is based on the assumption that he still has his fleet, and his city has not been ravaged been Praes sorcery turning his sailors into undead.

Goobinator101

This is a "Bruh" moment if I ever saw one.

laguz24

The whole league just needs to go home and lick its wounds, the tyrant may have won but the league is kind of dying at the moment. Keeping on trying to reach beyond their grasp will just end in more failure and disappointment especially against the black queen.

[greatwyrmgold](#)

At this point, I'm pretty sure we're seeing city-states trying to properly position themselves relative to each other before going home. Hence Trakas trying a diplomatic measure which would give him implied diplomatic authority over the League rather than anything which would improve things for the League as a whole.

laguz24

Wait, is hierarch still in command, oh crap. That means that he still has influence over the league, and will continue to have it. This is not good.

Mammon

So many comments, so little love for the Hakram vs Ivah battle of being Cat's favourite manservant. Shame on you all for putting these clowns above the truest battle that has been raging for near a whole book now.

Liliet

The best part is Cat's sheer obliviousness.

Or pretend obliviousness. I'm not buying she REALLY hasn't noticed.

mavant

surely Ivah is a Mightyservant

Valkyria

This is great. How did you know that I wanted to spend my Monday hanging off a cliff?

Author Unknown

Cat: Sure the wine sucks, but it is better than getting stabbed. Allow Archer to demonstrate.

Mike E.

"I need a better quality of minions," I complained. "Mine are too mouthy. I bet the White Knight never has to deal with anything like this."

Heroes must be all sweetness and light, to the Sword of Judgement. All I got were crows that got mouthy about giving me directions and underlings who couldn't ever let anything go."

Of course, we know from Hanno's interlude that herding a Heroic band is almost worse than a Villan band.

Fayhem

> Of course, we know from Hanno's interlude that herding a Heroic band is almost worse than a Villan band.

I mean, Hanno's compatriots/followers (he seems to be more of a first among equals than an authority per se, if I'm reading that right?) are in fact more respectful *to him* so Cat's point does technically stand. They just infight among *each other* much

more. Although tbf that seems to be heavily related to them being drawn from all over the continent, with all attendant cultural histories being put in the same room and attached to what are by definition strong personalities.

[Liliet](#)

Hanno would probably pay actual money to deal with Cat's problems instead of his own.

People mouthing off to *him* is immensely superior to *trying to murder each other*.

[Fayhem](#)

> Hanno would probably pay actual money to deal with Cat's problems instead of his own.

Change that to "Cat's party-management problems" and I agree lol.

[Liliet](#)

...Yeah. I meant *that*.

[Fayhem](#)

I figured haha. The idea of anyone looking longingly at Cat's set of problems overall was just too funny to me to not comment on tho.

Insanenoodlyguy

Also, he could get away with sleeping with his team partner instead of "but we never can" angst

[Liliet](#)

Where'd you get that off him? 0.o

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Between all the interludes we've seen about bands of heroes, villains, and mixed Named, it's probably fair to say that the quality of such a band depends less on its team jersey and more on whether they have literally anything else binding them. The Calamities (and, to a lesser extent, the Woe) had/have personal ties binding them together, so they worked well together. The hero army up north is bound together mostly by a shared fear of the Dead King.

[Liliet](#)

The Free Cities gang was adorable but also characterized by one member LIVING for pissing another off.

[*ninegardens*](#)

I can't help but think that Tyrant's last gift to Cat will be betrayal.

Possibly the kind of betrayal that ends up helping, but SOMEONES getting betrayed by the end of the day.

[*ninegardens*](#)

Wait, I have just the thing for this:

<http://octopuns.blogspot.com/2011/08/76-plan.html>

Ultimate_procrastinator

The name "Kairos" being the Helikean equivalent of "Gary" is now my newest headcanon. You have my eternal gratitude

[*greatwyrmgold*](#)

But what's the Helikean equivalent of "Indiana"? Not Louisiana, Paris, France, New York, or Rome...

[*greatwyrmgold*](#)

I give roughly 5-10% odds that it's someone who forgot they had briefly trusted the Tyrant.

[*greatwyrmgold*](#)

Is anyone else mildly concerned every time the story reminds us that the one nation not ruled by a monarch is a hive of incompetence and villainy specifically because it doesn't have any rulers given high-absolute power? Or confused about *why* the *only* democratic nation is so terrible, with its democracy consistently framed as the reason for its terribleness, when the story's protagonist is so firmly anti-aristocratic? Or annoyed that Bellerophon is called a *Republic* when it's more of a direct democracy than any real-world democracy I've ever heard of, from ancient Athens to the Hodenosaunee to modern Scandinavia?

[*greatwyrmgold*](#)

Hm. This comment's going to shake the wasp nest, isn't it?

konstantinvoncarstein

No

JJR

Not really. As it is the only democratic nation that the characters know about, it makes sense that many characters end up democracy itself for everything they consider wrong in Bellerophon. This might even be the purpose of the city, in terms of the wager between the gods above and bellow. That is, it might be that Calernia is 'supposed' to be the sort of high fantasy monarchs, knight, castles, and wizards stuff that we see, and that it's supposed to stay that way while the wager is playing out. But humans have that pesky free will and keep trying new things that don't fit the paradigm. So you put Gnomes in the world and they stop anyone from getting too much technology, and you put a Bellerphone down and make sure it develops into the type of place people look at and think, "On second thought, let's not go with democracy; tis a silly thing."

And of course, regardless of anything else. Cat did introduce a form of democracy into the Sigil holder selection process for the Drow. So, clearly she realizes democracy isn't all bad.

JJR

*end up *blaming* democracy itself.

I don't know how I accidentally a whole word, but I did.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Happens me all time.

(It's on purpose here though.)

mavant

if you mean, "am i worried this is stealthy nrx agitprop", then no

Goobinator101

I saw Bellerophon's label of Republic in the same way as I see it in other countries like North Korea and China, just because it is called the Democratic People's Republic of Korea or the People's Republic of China, doesn't make it so. Same case here.

[Liliet](#)

Actually WoG is that their democracy is Exactly What It Says On The Tin and there is no secret totalitarian ruling class.

It's just, y'know, a bad idea to have direct democracy over everything with the logic of 'if leader makes mistakes execute leader' and 'competence is treason, never teach people things'.

roobee

I think Bellerophon's general implementation of direct democracy is pretty good. I just disagree with the specifics of the morals of the population

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Except that all of those are overt dictatorships, whereas Bellerophon is less of an oppressive dictatorship and more... whatever the political equivalent of a halfway-controlled train crash is.

Shveiran

It's really not strange, IMO.

Calernia has a medievalish culture and education system. Democracy doesn't really work without good ways to establish communication and education on a large scale.

The Roman Republic was still very strict with the number of folks that could elect senators or could become one, and their infrastructures, education and mail system was way ahead of what Calernia has when you don't consider the exceptions like scrying, which are not something you can give people access to.

It's not really controversial to say that fire doesn't burn without fuel, no? It just read like that to me.

[Liliet](#)

Agreed.

And scrying is... a new technology, so to speak. Mass scrying like what Callow and Praes have is something Akua just reminded Catherine is NEW AS FUCK – Wekesa literally invented it. Procer is starting to replicate it but so far it's only a military technology.

Give it a generation or three, and many things might change. Drow, notably, are having an odd sort of anarcho-democracy established right now (no central authority except for the goddess, local elections, like three global laws mostly relating to bureaucratic procedures for the former).

[greatwyrmgold](#)

Two points.

First, Calernia is superficially similar to real-world feudal settings, but there are plenty of differences, originating both from the supernatural elements of the setting and the fact that this work is being written by a modern author with modern sensibilities. This isn't *A Song of Ice and Fire*; the tough edges of medieval life aren't relevant to the story's

themes, so they get sanded down.

Second, this isn't a historical piece being written by a Calernian author; it's a piece of fiction being written by an Earthling. The author could have framed Bellerophon in literally any other way; it could be functional but alien to other Calernians, it could be recognized as a mess distant from its principles by the characters voicing opinions on it, or it could just be another Free City without anyone thinking that its unique method of governance was any weirder or worse than any other Free City's. Or it could not exist. Or *everywhere* could have some degree of democracy. The choice to include both a vocally anti-aristocratic main character and display democratic government **solely** through a dysfunctional parody of democracy was not the only option available to the author. They could have picked another option...but they didn't.

laguz24

Honestly, I am just waiting for this book to end. There are no more serious plot threads in the vicinity and this seems to be a good time to move onto the next one.

alele

We had a whole chapter about Malicia Order 66'ing the Legions and how graduates of the College get their own sleeper order. Catherine didn't react to her Archer and Akua's DANGER!! reactions, maybe she is compromised in some way to not notice some things she usually would.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine isn't Named and doesn't have Named reflexes anymore.

aran

One of Cat's aspects is **Leer**

aran

I'll admit that the presence of a guy with the title Basileus and a general named Basilia confused me much more than it should have

Chapter 88: Testament

"Reputation is as rope: it can be either a lifeline or a noose."
– Eudokia the Oft-Abducted, Basilea of Nicae

Asking Archer why the Hells she'd just killed that soldier that would have implied in front of all those people I had at best partial control over her actions. Which, while true, wasn't something I wanted to remind the League of right now. So instead of looking surprised or angry I allowed my face to slip into a cool mask, flicking a seemingly disinterested glance at the dying man. Indrani, eyes cold, left the blade in his neck and plucked at the hand still holding the parchments: a long, thin needle was brought into the moonlight by careful fingers.

"See," Exarch Prodocius frothed, "her thugs murder our attendants without-"

The Nicaean soldier that'd been dragging him back slugged him in the belly. He wheezed out in pain, looking like he was about to vomit.

"Poisoned," Archer idly said, sniffing at the needle's tip.

She casually ripped her longknife clean of the soldier's neck, snuffing out his life with the casual flick of the wrist.

"Merciful Gods," Basileus Leo Trakas croaked. "Queen Catherine, I swear on the Heavens that I had nothing to do with this. I would never-"

I looked at the young man in fair pristine armour, his hair perfectly coiffed and his eyebrows impeccably plucked. What I saw beneath the façade was fear. The ugly kind that clawed desperately at your insides trying to get out. It'd been there before we ever began speaking, I thought, perhaps even before he'd set out with this procession. But where it had been mastered before, now it had slipped the leash. No, that one did not have the stomach to try to kill me.

"A personal guard of the Basileus of Nicae just attempted to murder the Queen of Callow," Akua calmly replied. "Your guilt can be debated, Leo Trakas, but your responsibility is beyond doubt."

Would the needle have pricked me, if Archer hadn't intervened? Possibly. I wasn't sure it would have killed me, though. I was hardly immune to poison, but Akua ought to have been able to keep me alive long enough for Sve Noc to come to my side and purge the blight. Was this Malicia's doing? It was a sloppy attempt by Wasteland standards, though I'd been cavalier enough it'd nearly succeeded anyway. If there was someone who'd notice I had a habit of going ahead to negotiate with others with only slight escort,

though it would be the Empress. If it'd been Masego and Vivienne with me instead, would the needle have broken my skin?

It sent a shiver up my spine I could not be certain as to the answer.

"No doubt this was the work of one of your many enemies," Exarch Honorion dismissed, cutting through my musings. "Pay reparations, Trakas, and let us return to the matter at hand."

The smug look on the man's face had me itching for a blade in my hand. Someone had just tried to kill me and he thought throwing a few coins at me like I was a beggar with a bowl would end the matter? My fingers clenched. If he could not curb his tongue, perhaps a curse that silenced it would remind him of – no, no I *could not*. I breathed out, tamping down on the heat in my blood. I was being provoked and it was not an accident. Prodocius might be terrified, but this one was not. Did he know something the other Exarch-claimant did not, as the likely favourite of Malicia among the pair? Black had been scathing in his opinion of the man's intellect, it might just be foolishness and arrogance.

"Secretary Nestor," I said, tone calm. "The weapon that was used, does the Secretariat have record of precedents for its use?"

The white-haired man, who'd been looking at the work of one of his scribes over the young woman's shoulder, turned his gaze to me and dipped it before turning to Indrani.

"Lady Archer," the askretis said, "has the tip of the needle been dipped in a substance that is green and viscous, yet dry as leather?"

"That's about right," Archer frowned, then sniffed again. "Smells like rotten meat, too, but with something flowery mixed in."

Her senses had rivalled some of mine even when I'd been Sovereign of Moonless Nights, nowadays even with Night lending me the occasional edge it wasn't even a contest.

"Wyvern venom made into a paste with periwinkle blossoms," Nestor Ikaroi said. "Known as the 'Taste of Redress', brought to our records by the Magisterium's profligate use of it during the latter years of the Stygian Spring."

"A wild assertion, this, and without proof," Magister Zoe said. "It is known, however that, a substance like the one you describe can be readily obtained through Mercantis. It would have no current ties to Stygia even should it truly have roots there."

"The Secretariat's records are without fault," Secretary Nestor coldly retorted. "And the use of the Taste and needle is the

signature of the Manifold Laments. Killers for hire alleged to be based in the League."

"My own grandfather was slain by the Laments, Queen Catherine," Basileus Leo told me. "I would never bargain with them."

"You spineless cowards," Exarch Prodocius snarled. "How can you even know this wasn't her doing from the start? How *eager* you all are to lick Callowan boots."

"Catherine," Akua murmured, low enough only Archer and I might hear. "This is a noose. I know not how or why, but this is a noose. A situation like this does not fall into place by happenstance."

Yeah, I was starting to agree. Something was wrong here. Leo Trakas still didn't know about his fleets being broken and stolen, yet he was strangely desperate to get Penthes on his side. I understood he needed allies, but why would he need them badly enough to risk provoking me? He could hardly afford any more enemies, much less one that was a member of the Grand Alliance. And the two Exarch-claimants had to know they were playing with fire by coming after me this hard. Especially in the wake of an attempt on my life, when it'd be damnably easy to accuse them of having a hand in it. I was missing something.

"Mind your tongue, Prodocius," Magister Zoe Ixioni warned. "It is the mark of a weak stomach, to grow drunk from the scant power you wield."

The Helikean generals, still mounted, watched all this unfold in stony silence. Unconcerned or indifferent, not that it made much of a difference. I could see, stepping out of myself for a moment, how this was going to unfold. The young Basileus had too many enemies, and just given me slight, so though it was plain to all that Penthes was a stone around his neck he'd have no choice but to try to salvage the Exarchs. If he lost a metaphorical finger bringing them out of this untouched, they'd owe him badly enough they should be halfway-reliable allies. Especially if they were without other allies of their own and antagonizing most everyone else in the League. Bellerophon was a beast most prone to devour itself, and likely to fall into that old habit in the wake of this mess. Atalante had quite literally walked away from this coalition and Delos was positioning itself as aloof. Helike was, well, it was hard to tell what Helike was at the moment.

Exarch Honorion had earlier accused General Basilia of being an usurper of some sort, but then he was hardly the most trustworthy of sources. On the other hand, if Kairos Theodosian had truly massacred most his kin and there was no true claimant left to the throne of Helike it would not be surprising that whoever consolidated control over the army became the ruling authority of the city-state. Theodosius had risen to kingship in such a manner

himself, and if I recalled correctly General Basilia was highborn. Either way, for now it looked like she was the one speaking for Helike and she seemed utterly disinclined to step in and stabilize the situation. If Basileus Leo was trying to emerge as the saviour and leading light of the League in the face of chaos, then Helike would be at best uninvolved and at worst likely to spike any of his efforts simply to ensure Nicae didn't emerge as the preeminent power among the League. Stygia, I thought. I'd not accounted for Stygia.

Magister Zoe was here for the Magisterium. Given that yesterday she'd made assurances to Hakram that even if Stygia made treaties of assistance with the Tower it had no intention of ever lending military support, I'd bet they were planning to use Malicia's 'protection' as a deterrent against the rest of the League while offering only token compensation for it. *For that protection to be worth anything, though, they'll have to make it public*, I thought, then hesitated. Had they already? Bellerophon and Atalante holing up, Helike looming and Nicae's old Stygian foes promised assistance by the Tower. Leo Trakas was seeing the League fall apart around him after his fleets had ravaged Ashur, and realizing that in the wake of the glories promised by the Tyrant he'd been left out in the cold. Penthes alone was offering a hand, and though there were fools they were fools with coin, a largely intact army. The kind of ally that would give an adventurous Stygia or Helike pause. I stepped out of myself and looked at the world the way Leo Trakas would.

Retribution was coming, that could not be denied. Ashur would neither forget nor forgive, had deep ties to the Grand Alliance even after withdrawing from it, and the ancient shield that was the League of the Free Cities was falling apart. The League's treaties to resist outsiders together must be shored up and the foundations of the arrangement made firm again after the debacles abroad – all under the leadership of Nicae, preferably, since no one else seemed willing to take up the mantle. If this could not be done, though? Then Basileus Leo was in desperate need of allies that would keep the wolves away from his door while he figured out a way to avoid losing his throne to a Strategos and keep retaliation from laying waste to Nicae when the balance swung back the other way. Either way, to him, Penthes was the key. And Penthes was owned by Malicia, who had carefully been setting her schemes in place even as I fought my way through Iserre. Now she was bringing them to bear one by one. *So how do you want to use them to hurt me, Malicia?*

"Though Exarch Honorion misspoke, he is yet a leader of his people," Leo Trakas intervened. "Threats help none of us, Magister Ixioni."

"The Magisterium seeks no help from Nicae," Magister Zoe disdainfully said.

"Already found yourself a backer, have you?" Archer said.

Indrani was, with her usual nonchalance, putting her foot in a dispute that might have been best left to the League itself. Without knowing what Malicia had planned, any step taken here might be a blunder.

"What right does a vagrant from Refuge have to ask questions of us?" Exarch Prodocius scornfully laughed. "Still your wagging tongue, girl."

Merciless Gods, I thought, half-awed. She was going to kill him.

"Archer," I got out.

Halfway through drawing her blade, Indrani reluctantly stilled.

"Your choice of allies speaks poorly of you, Basileus," Akua said.

A swing in the dark from her, as it seemed she'd come to the same conclusions as me through reasonings of her own. Both of us were watching the younger man, and both of us saw the same thing: the twitch of a repressed grimace, followed by a resounding absence of denial. *So he's pursuing these idiot accusations because Penthes – meaning Malicia – put him up to it*, I thought. *They're backing him so long as he pushes me tonight, most likely.*

"Another chattering peon for the Black Queen," Exarch Prodocius snorted. "Are you to threaten violence as well, when reminded of your place?"

Here I had no worries. Archer, for all her keen perceptiveness, was not meant for affairs like this. I'd not hesitate before sending her along with heroes for something, or soldiers, but restraint in the face of provocation was simply not the way she'd been raised. If someone slighted the Lady of the Lake, she killed them. If someone took offence to that, *she killed them too*. Indrani might not have the age or reputation to be able to get away with that the way the Ranger did, but she'd been raised to think that way regardless. Akua, though? Prodocius could spend all day tossing the worst insults he could think of at her and she'd hardly blink. Akua Sahelian had been playing more dangerous games with more dangerous men since before she'd had her first moon's blood. Still, the way Prodocius and Honorion were constantly antagonizing my two obviously dangerous companions was genuinely surprising me. Prodocius in particular, as the terrified white of his eyes still showed.

"Gods Below," I slowly said. "What can the Empress *possibly* have on you that'd put you this deep in her grasp?"

Akua, at my side, went still.

"And now you accuse us of being in the service of your foes," Exarch Honorion mocked. "As if you were not merely seeking an excuse to-"

"Still Water," Akua spoke in Kharsum. "The Tyrant helped Malicia, you said, but Helike does not border the Empire. Where did the alchemical compounds come through? It would not have been small quantities, Catherine. The Empress would have needed assistance to keep it quiet."

And it fell into place. Penthes, who had grown rich from trade with the Empire. Penthes who controlled one of the branches of the Wasaliti river. Penthes, whose last Exarch-claimants were two venal and corrupt men who'd been chosen to survive from all the many there once were by two people: the Tyrant and the Empress. They'd been accomplices to Still Water being used on the Nicean fleets, I realized. And now, too late, they were realizing that with Kairos dead and Malicia untouchable in the Tower they might end up taking the blame for that. For murdering thousands of Nicaeans, yes, and breaking that city's naval power. Worse yet, for betraying a member of the League to a foreign power while the Free Cities were at war and under the rule of a Hierarch. If it came out, they'd have no allies. Even if Penthes itself did not turn on them most the League would end up coming after them.

If Malicia said nothing, she owned them. If Malicia said something she *still* owned them, because who else could possibly protect them? Mind control was not needed when you had that kind of leverage on people. It would be redundant.

"Why is she having them come after me so hard, though?" I replied in the same. "It makes no sense, Akua. She gains nothing out of those two getting on my bad side, by virtue of being her creatures they were already there. I might as well not-"

I swallowed my tongue. I might as well not be there. Because it wasn't about me, not really. None of this had been from the start. I'd been thinking of these people as the tool Malicia was using against me, when in fact *I* was the tool Malicia was using against *them*. A Nicaean soldier had just tried to kill me not because the Empress had believed it would work – although I doubted she would have complained if it had – but because it burned a bridge between Callow and Nicae. And the Penthesians were going after me because the Basileus needed them, and the more he defended them the more at odds he and I became. Fuck me, she was trying to flip the League wasn't she? Leo Trakas would go home and find his fleets were gone and his reign going to the dogs, and so to avoid losing his throne and possibly his head he'd need to rely on his friends. His *Penthesian* friends, who unlike Stygia had not openly declared for Praes. The Tower had seeded the sickness, then offered the remedy.

Penthes, Stygia, Nicae. Bellerophon and Atalante were removing themselves from the flow, Delos wouldn't got at it alone and how difficult could it possibly be for Malicia to spark a civil war in Helike if the Tyrant had left no clear successor? She'd run the southeast of Calernia, more or less, and with the fleet that'd been broken by Still Water she'd have leverage over Ashur as well. And all she needed to get this all started was for a Catherine Foundling, a woman with a known temper, to get angry after someone tried to murder her in the middle of diplomatic talks. Gods, but I hated dealing with Malicia. Even now I couldn't even fucking be sure there wasn't another layer to this plan that I'd missed. And I still wasn't sure how to step back from the ledge even now that I might have caught the scheme. Walking away was giving her the win, but my word alone wouldn't convince the Basileus that his Exarch allies were playing him.

It was exactly the kind of thing I *would* say if I was trying to collapse the League so it couldn't be a sword at my back anymore.

"If I may be so bold, Your Majesty," Secretary Nestor said, "might I ask for a summary of the words that were shared with your advisor? None of the attending scribes speak the language."

I flicked a glance at the old scrivener with the tattooed cheeks. It was a genuine request, not a hint of any sort, but it still had me thinking. Could it be that simple? I'd spent all this time trying match Malicia at her chosen field and gotten dirt in my face for it again and again. But that was fighting this war the way she wanted it to be fought. Hanno had warned me, hadn't he, that I was still thinking like I was a villain needing to threaten and fight everyone into doing what needed to be done. The latter part of that, where he'd said the might of Judgement would carry the day, had been wrong. But he was right that in some ways I still thought, first and foremost, like a warlord under siege from all directions. But I wasn't that anymore, was I?

"It is called Still Water," I said. "It is a sort of alchemical poison developed by the Wekesa the Warlock that lingers in the body of those who imbibe it and, afterwards, requires only a ritual trigger to kill and turn into undead all those poisoned. Those undead in fact resist healing by Light, though they remain mindlessly violent without guiding by necromancers."

"The First Prince of Procer sent word of such a weapon, before the Tenth Crusade was declared," Nestor Ikaroi acknowledged. "Do you then confirm its existence?"

"I do," I flatly said. "It was used on the city of Liesse by the Diabolist. And once more since by Dread Empress Malicia on the war fleets of Nicae."

In the wake of that there was only silence, and the scratching of Secretariat quills. My gaze found the two silent generals of Helike, who were both unsurprised and watching me closely. Had the known? I couldn't be sure, but General Basilia was said to have been Kairos' favourite. And if nothing else, his will might have contained such secrets. So now I had a choice to make. Either I dragged Helike into this by revealing the Tyrant had a in this, or I kept my silence on that. The Exarchs might try to drag Helike into this anyway, but who'd believed them at that point? Might be enough to stir Helike to war if they tried, too, which was not ideal but still better than Malicia sinking her claws deep into the southeast. It would not be just, to spare them the consequences of helping such a great and traitorous massacre. But if kept the Dead King from devouring Calernia, I could live with having abetted that injustice.

"That is the leash the Tower has on these two," I said. "They helped smuggle the alchemical brews into the League's territory. Advisor Kivule was reminding me, Secretary Nestor, that the Empress would have needed local collaborators, individuals of authority hiding her tracks to achieve such a thing. It allowed for an explanation for the continued hostility of these 'Exarchs' to Callow, for it is no secret that their mistress is my enemy."

"Advisor Kivule, is it? She would know of Still Water, no doubt," Exarch Honorion sneered. "I had not intended to speak to this, but this filthy mudfoot intriguer leaves me no choice. Prodocius and I entertained envoys from the Tower, is true. I'll not deny it. For Dread Empress Malicia meant to warn us of a plot to destroy the League and incite war with Praes: this advisor that masquerade before us is no fae nor drow, she is the Diabolist herself. Akua Sahelian, the Doom of Liesse."

Malicia had caught on? No, of course she'd caught on. Black had too, it would have been fairly obvious for anyone in the know as those two were. And from there it was information that could be passed to her agents, like those two. But why did she think it would – oh, *fuck*.

"It is not the Empire that struck at the fleets of Nicae, Basileus Leo," Exarch Honorion said. "It was the Black Queen using the foul alchemies of the foe she enslaved. What a neat scheme she planned, is it not? The League sundered and at war with the Empire, her enemies clawing at each other even as she bent Ashur to her will."

Malicia, I seethed. Hellgods, I had not wanted to kill someone that much in a very long time. Could I deny Akua? No, that'd be a mistake. Too many people knew, or at least suspected, and when it came out she truly was Akua Sahelian it'd lead people to believe I was lying about not being behind Still Water's second deployment as well.

"Are you seriously accusing Catherine Foundling of using something like Still Water?" Archer said, sounding somewhere between amused and offended. "She fought a war over the last use."

Mistake, I grimly thought.

"You would have us believe it was the Dread Empress who has possessed such means for decades and never once used them?" Exarch Prodocius said. "We've all read the reports from the Battle of the Camps. Thousands dead from reckless sorceries! All of Iserre was almost destroyed because of a weapon that once lay in Callow, and we are to believe the Black Queen would *balk* as such a ploy?"

Leo Trakas was the key to this, I decided. Delos was unlikely to lift a finger either way, and Stygia would back the winning horse. And the Basileus did not look like he knew who or what to believe, right now.

"You then make the accusation that Callow was able to brew such alchemies, then seed them unseen in the fleets of Nicae?" Akua said. "How mighty you believe us to be, Exarch."

She knew he'd have an answer to that, he wouldn't have risked this otherwise – and his words were likely Malicia's, anyway, who would not make this elementary a mistake. Akua was baiting out the last part of their tale, so that we might see if there were holes to poke in it.

"An animal like you has no place in this conversation," Prodocius harshly replied.

The Basileus of Nicae raised a hand to end this before it could escalate.

"As part of the evidence for the accusations laid against the Black Queen was the secret meeting she had with King Kairos in the city of Rochelant," Basileus Leo said, tone cool.

He was start to lean towards believing Penthes, I realized. Because he wanted to, because it'd be easier, because Malicia was brilliant woman and it was a skillful lie.

"And to hide evidence of your malice, you then sold the Tyrant of Helike to his enemies among the Grand Alliance," Exarch Honorion said. "I will not pretend the man was anything but a bad seed, but your treacheries are worthy of contempt."

Gods, but she was good. It did not make me hate her any less, but she was good at this. Even through as feeble a tool as those Exarchs, Malicia was still hitting all the right notes for the

Basileus. I could see it in his eyes. I breathed out. I was not only a warlord, now. I had allies.

"Are you willing to repeat your accusations before a truth-teller?" I flatly said. "The most skillful of our age is in Salia. I am more than willing to do the same."

Akua almost began to move before she ceased, and in the Night I read her uneasiness. I had made a mistake of my own, it seemed.

"A transparent attempt," Exarch Prodocius sneered. "You've sunk your hooks in the Grand Alliance, corrupted even rulers as respected as the First Prince. The Grey Pilgrim will say whatever you want him to say, lest you turn on Procer."

I almost laughed at the notion that I could force Tariq to do anything, much less bend the rest of the Grand Alliance to my will, until I caught the look on their faces. Not Akua or Indrani, but the delegates of the League. Over half a hundred people were here, some of the most influential people in the League, and after the lunacy Prodocius had just spoken not a single one of their faces expressed *disbelief*. Fear and hesitation, anger and doubt, but none of them believed it to be absurd. Because they weren't looking uphill and seeing me, I realized as my stomach sunk. They were looking at the victor of the Camps and the Graveyard, who'd strung along heroes and villains and dealt death to thousands. My reputation, these days, was enough to cow thousands of charging horsemen. I knew this, I'd *relied* on it.

Malicia was relying on it too.

My grip tightened around the yew staff. I'd fought wars, struck deals with the Everdark and the Kingdom Under, compromised and warned and did everything I could to keep this continent from falling apart. And still the Empress, who hadn't left the Tower in a year, was strangling me with my own fucking achievements. Malicia, though, would be Malicia – a praise and insult both. What had my blood boiling was how eager these people were to be manipulated. To believe the worse of me and in the same breath decide that the *Dread Empress of Praes* was looking out for them. And they had their reasons, and it was one of the finest liars alive who was making a game of them, but still it... stung. That I always had to be patient and careful and let things go, while the rest of them could just fucking blunder along and let the rest of us pick up the pieces.

I could kill them, I knew.

The Night was but a thought away. They had mages, but I had Archer and Akua Sahelian at my side. It wouldn't even be difficult or need to be a slaughter. Honorion and Prodocius were owned by the Tower, but Penthes itself wasn't – the Empress would

have influence, but hardly rule. I could snuff them out like candles and there went this ploy. Gods, there was so much I could do if I simply took off the gloves. All these soldiers heading south, all this insistence on backstabbing and bickering when the Dead King was seeking to kill us all, it could end. It'd be as simple as telling the people here, over the smoking corpses of Malicia's tools, that they could march north to fight Keter either living or as corpses in my service. If their armies objected? They had no Named left to match me. I'd open portal over a battalion aligned with a large lake or a sea, then repeat the process every half-hour until I got an unconditional surrender. The Grand Alliance would whine, but the whining would end when I ensured our back was secure and brought a fresh army to the table.

Gods, it would be so *satisfying*. To order something instead of barter and beg, to just order something and see it get done. And even if Malicia had laid some kind of clever trap behind it all, well, cleverness only got you so far in the face of overwhelming strength. What exactly *could* she do, if it was Praes and Keter against the rest of Calernia? And all I needed to do was just... reach out. Sve Noc would approve, if anything. And the thing was, hadn't I done it all the right way? I'd let the heroes take their swings, taken the whipping without complaint. I'd helped the same Procerans who had meant to carve up my home for a meal, sacrificed and bargained to keep the Dead King from killing hundreds of thousands. I'd done it all right, and at the end of the day Malicia could still just upend it all with a snap of her fingers. And if it was this... weak, this fragile to do things the *right* way, then what was the point? If it didn't work better than being a bloody-handed tyrant, if it was *objectively worse*, then why was I putting myself through all this? I was not going to let Calernia die because I needed to clutch to the delusion that I was a decent woman. I would not.

I took a step forward, Night coiling, and my leg throbbed with pain. *Do not forget*, it whispered. *That this was never a game. That you make mistakes.* And most of all, and my fingers clenched white to hear it, the pain whispered one last thing: *do not forget, that there must be more than ruin.* I paled, leaning against my staff. Gods, the pain was agonizing.

"Cat," Archer whispered, looking at me with worry.

I gestured harshly. *Do not forget*, my leg throbbed.

"You'd really do it, wouldn't you?" I said.

The two men that would be Exarch of Penthes milled about uncertainly.

"Let thousands of your own people die," I said. "Birth civil war in the League. Gods, you'd gamble with the fate of Calernia

itself – all because you were foolish and greedy and you're afraid to die."

I looked at the two of them and saw something that it was not in my power to mend. In anyone's power to mend.

"Go," I said. "Leave. I have nothing left to say to you."

It emboldened them, I saw. The resignation in my voice. They'd poured poison into the ear of anyone who would listen and not been chastised for it.

"How petulant you are when unmasked," Exarch Honorion mocked.

"We'll survive without you," I said, gaze sweeping across the entire lot of them. "*Despite* you, if we must. So let your records state this, Nestor Ikaroi: when Death came for Calernia, men and women rose to meet it. From the Blessed Isle to Segovia, from Levante to Rhenia, they came when the call sounded."

I spat into the snow.

"Death came for Calernia, and when steel was bared to turn it back the League of Free Cities was nowhere in sight," I said.

Quills moved against parchment, the scribes of the Secretariat recording the words spoken. Cloak of Woe tight on my shoulder, I let out a misty breath and looked at the sky. I was done here, wasn't I? If diplomacy could mend any of this, let Cordelia Hasenbach take care of it.

"And?" General Basilia said.

The other Helikean, pale-eyed and straight-backed, let out a hissing breath.

"Yes," General Pallas. "Yes. The blood quickened."

"Then we part ways here," General Basilia said, saddened.

I would have left, had Archer not put a hand on my shoulder. Indrani was smiling.

"Will you not flee back to your barracks, Helikeans?" Exarch Prodocius called out. "Your little intrigues are of no import to us, and the cripple no longer-"

General Basilia unsheathed her sword, which had the man flinching.

"I speak now the will and testament of King Kairos Theodosian, Lord Tyrant of Helike, the Unbroken," General Basilia said, voice echoing across the plains.

Prodocius flicked a glance at the sword and swallowed whatever he'd been about to say.

"With me dies the line of Theodosius, at last conquered by death. I name no successor and offer no legacy, save for the following words," General Basilia said, and her eyes were wetly shining, "*Ye of Helike, do as you will.*"

"Oh, would you shut up with the-" Exarch Honorion began.

He did not finish, for General Basilia rammed her sword through his throat. Half the soldiers on the hill had swords in hand before a heartbeat has passed, but the dark-eyed woman only laughed. She ripped the sword out and flicked blood onto the snow. Penthesian soldiers crowded around the other Exarch protectively, shields raised.

"*Murderer,*" Exarch Prodocius screamed, voice gone shrill with fear. "How dare you, you-"

"Tyrant?" General Basilia said. "I suppose we shall see. You may consider this a declaration of war, Prodocius. Penthes can hang you as a traitor to the League and servant of the Empress, or it can burn. It makes no difference to me."

"Are you mad?" Basileus Leo yelled. "Do you not understand the consequences of-"

"Tell me, you pathetic worm," Basilia nonchalantly said. "What will you do, if I ignore your petty threats? What have you ever done that I should fear you?"

"I'll not allow you to run rampant, Helikean," the young man snarled.

"Then beat me, Nicaean," General Basilia grinned.

And she had, I thought, so very little in common with Kairos in body. She was well-formed and made like a soldier, not striking save perhaps those sharp cheekbones but not in the least ungainly to look at. Yet when she grinned that grin, all pearly white teeth and daring, for a moment I would have thought... She reined in her mount, offered us a salute of her sword, and rode back to her soldiers. The young Basileus let out a shout of anger but did not pursue. He barked out orders in tradertongue and his soldiers clustered with the Penthesians once more, beginning a quick march back to the rest of his force. He offered no farewells, and I had said all I intended to say. Secretary Nestor Ikaroi, however, remained. Along with his scribes. They stood in silence, watching. Waiting. General Pallas dismounted. Under the pale moonlight she came to stand before me, tanned and grey-eyed and inscrutable.

"My name," she said, "is Pallas Messene. I am a general of Helike, raised to the rank by the Tyrant himself, for a score I have been a soldier and leader of soldiers."

"You know," I replied, "how I am."

"I have seen it," General Pallas agreed. "I tonight I saw it again. Once you called me and those under my command a *worm in the flesh*, Black Queen. You deemed us servants of Keter, and stripped us of all the strappings of *kataphraktoi*."

"And of a bone as well," I calmly said, "for the lives in my service you took."

"Bones mend," General Pallas said. "Armaments, horses, they can be had again. Pride is not to easily bartered back."

"That is not in my power to return," I said.

"It is," the grey-eyed woman disagreed. "In keeping to my oath, I spilled blood to the benefit of the King of Death. I weep not for this, for I swore to a Theodosian and there can be no higher calling. And yet I would even the balance, with oath given anew."

She knelt, dark-haired and stone-faced, in the snow.

"Every wound I dealt, I deal anew," Pallas Messene spoke. "Every battle I fought, I fight anew. Let spears shatter and swords break, for my oath will not. Let there be no rest nor relief until the war is won, and should death take me let me rise in indignation, for I am a daughter of Helike and we were borne unconquered. I swear to this, Black Queen of Callow: until the King of Death knows oblivion or I do, my sword is pledged to your war."

Behind her, three hundred cataphracts dismounted under moonlight.

"How many?" I asked.

"Half," she said.

"Half the *kataphraktoi*?" I said, surprised.

That was near two thousand soldiers.

"We do as we will, now," General Pallas smiled, looking up at the night sky. "He gifted us this."

After a long moment, she met my gaze.

"Half the army of Helike, Black Queen," she said. "If Death comes, let it learn the same lesson as every other army under the sun: there is Helike, and there is *the rest*."

j

If Death comes, let it learn the same lesson as every other army under the sun: there is a [vote for A Practical Guide to Evil](#), and there is *the rest*.

Argentorum

I name no successor and offer no legacy, save for the following words," General Basilia said, and her eyes were wetly shining, "Ye of Helike, Vote!"

Daniel Tabakman

We do as we will now, we will vote!

He has gifted us this

[Liliet](#)

Can you not?

Shveiran

Can you not, please?

I understand you and others dislike these jokes, but could you please just scroll down rather than complain?
I don't understand what you wish to achieve.

[Liliet](#)

I wish to discourage and get them to stop.

This isn't just several people trying to do the vote reminder. This is REPLIES, this is people deliberately trying to one-up each other with the vote reminder.

I'm trying to get them to stop doing that, specifically.

Jarthon

I personally enjoy this thread quite a bit, and while I can understand your position, I also don't think it's likely to change because of said opinion. I'm sorry, and I say this with no mean intent—and you are, of course, ultimately free to continue as you like—but you may end up being less irritated with the comments in general if you can find a way to just skip past the

comment thread and go to the story discussion that you enjoy and contribute so much too. Again, I apologize for any rudeness.

[Liliet](#)


Skip past what?

I'm confused as to the exact mechanics of what you're proposing. Just abandon reading wordpress comments altogether?

Yatr

They are suggesting either making peace with the fact that everybody has fun in different ways, and that for some people that's comedic one upping, while for others it's serious story debate.

I've worked in PR for years and my unsolicited advice would be to either become a moderator and have actual teeth other than the passive aggression of "can you not?" Or (and I've always found this option to work best for myself) to simply make peace with them having a different sense of fun from oneself.

Hope this helped & didn't come off condescending 

[Tek](#)

Or you can find out where tjhey live and *make* them stop. Viva la Evil!

[Liliet](#)

Well I cannot just go and BECOME a mod. It's not a spell i have access to casting :3

And I'd been making peace with it for a while before starting this campaign of asking ppl to stop. I definitely found the latter to be more soul healing than the former.

clbclbclblblclblv

These sound like the words of a man who has not yet voted.

[crowlute](#)

Scrolling past this on mobile is an absolute hassle. The spacing makes it not clear when a new thread that isn't

"we all meme on VOTE lol!!!" actually starts, and when one can read actual discussion of the chapter's events.

[Liliet](#)

this one isn't. why. why. why. so many funny jokes and you do the horrible one.

[Liliet](#)

Okay this one is good ♥

[Barthumphries](#)

... the rest. Including the typo thread.

It is known, however that, a substance like the one you describe can be readily obtained through Mercantis.
The comma after that needs to be after however instead.

There are a few more typos that I saw. Can you find them?

[Javvies](#)

Malicia is twisty as hell.

Not exactly what I expected from Kairos's last wishes, but I suppose we should have expected something like this.

The League is broken. Effectively.

Oshi

ooo politics! I need to unwrap the smaller currents.

WuseMajor

The Tyrant is one of the few people who could betray someone after he was dead. He got a nice shot in at Malicia here via his Will. Nice show.

erebus42

Dread Emperor Traitorous would be proud

RoflCat

And an extra 'gift' to Cath, the closest thing to a soulmate he ever has.

I'm almost certain Kairos saw this result coming (half Helike army goes to Cath to war on Keter, the other half destroying the bastards that's been corrupting the League)
With his Wish, he can probably tell that Basilia would choose to avenge him on the League and indirectly Malicia, while

Pallas has been....'charmed' by Cath's charisma since that one breaking and would join the war on Keter both for answering the call and repaying for what she's done.

Basilia also likely knew this, that's why she asked that question, even while internally she likely knew Pallas would go as soon as Cath made that declaration.

Mammon

I think it's much more elementary. The Tyrant, being who he is to his core, couldn't let a scheme like Malicia's who he knew was being woven for years amongst his cities without throwing in a wrench for shits and giggles, another for the indignation of scheming against his city even after his death, and a third because betrayal and scheming against scheming is his very nature.

It's not necessarily because Cat, this three-headed wrench which is secretly a screw-driver disguised as a bolt-cutter was meant to screw over Malicia and her schemes no matter who it would concern. And the seeds of her scheme and therefore his betrayal might actually be older than his relationship with Cat by months if not years. He might've done this before Cat came into her Name as a Squire, that upon his deathbed he tweaked things a bit to see this wrench to be wielded by her was just a personal favourite flavour of icing on the cake.

Mammon

Correction: The Still Water against Ashur specifics are only a few months old, but that's still just about as long as that Tyrant has personally known Cat. Their first meeting was somewhere before Iserre. The seeds of civil war at her fingertips post-Tyrant was what Malicia sowed for years, logically speaking considering he as a Named was actually older and active for longer than Cat.

RoflCat

He probably planned the backstabbing for sure, but I think his interactions with Cath have made him do some...final adjustment, for this result.

The initial plan was likely just Helike going to town on those League members collaborating with Malicia, hence Basilia going that way. But him giving them the freedom to choose is most likely for Pallas, so that she can follow her 'wish' that Kairos saw probably ever since Cath crushed the kataphractoï (after all, Pallas will prioritize her loyalty to Kairos over her own desire if she has to choose)

Liliet

Nah, he would have gone for 'do as you will' either way. The key moment here is knowing what Basilia wants and wanting her to do just that. Pallas is an amusing bonus.

Yes, I'm picturing Kairos having a view of this from the afterlife and giggling happily.

Insanenoodlyguy

the way you said it, "charmed." heh

I'm just imagining Akua with a flare of jealousy at this point, glaring all "Bitch, she fucking ripped my heart out, you just got some broken fingers. Fuck you, I was mutilated by her first and better, talking about your blood. Didn't even leave me any blood! Fuck off away from my woman!"

Shequi

Not just Malicia, but the entire League, and especially Bellerophon

"Ye of Helike, do as you will." is a fantastic counterpoint to "We are all of us free or none of us free; Ye of this land, brook no compromise on this"

What Kairos has done is to give Helike a guiding principle that will echo down the years, explicitly opposed to Bellerophon's core ideal.

That's not merely a betrayal; it's setting up for a dozen wars down the long centuries, all of which will be fought in the name of Kairos Theodosian, Tyrant of Helike.

Kairos, you magnificent bastard. The gods below are going to be entertained by this for centuries.

Liliet

I think you're overestimating the impact this will will have.

Ultimate_procrastinator

Possibly, but the last wishes of the last tyrant of the city, faithfully carried out by his most loyal followers after his death, would certainly have quite a large impact, particularly if you can trace it's impact over several centuries. Heck, one of the characters (White Knight I think) noted a few chapters back that Kairos was the closest thing to a High Priest of Below they had in

that age; hard to imagine someone like that NOT having a near-unbelievably large influence on those he ruled

Liliet

> particularly if you can trace it's impact over several centuries

See, I just think that the only impact it's going to have is on what his immediate followers do. Everyone else is going to act as Lawful/Good as they ever have, Basilia's just going to mix her own actions into it the exact way she wants.

Jane

Even when Malicia loses, she wins; the sign of a well-crafted Xanatos gambit. From the moment Penthes agreed to smuggle the Still Water, there was no real scenario where she doesn't come out ahead; either they do what she wants, or in failing her, the resulting fallout cripples a pack of possible meddlers.

Ox

I shiver thinking about the moment the dam breaks and Cat no longer holds back. When the cards are on the table, and we see her back in the ring. The returning champion, the broken idealist, the last resort.

Razorfloss razor

And when that happens creation will learn exactly why she is the black queen and fear her. When she finally cuts lose creation and anything in her way will burn

konstantinvoncarstein

The DK has no idea of what will fall on him

Decius

The DK would think "I can survive any destination that the portal opening up under me might be, if nothing else because it would be an offscreen presumed death."

Bard would think "I'm going to follow him through that portal and make sure he dies."

Heiropphant would take the opportunity to Witness the Sun up close and firsthand.

Mammon

DK: I can survive whatever situation she throws me in.

Cat: *Throws him into the gnome capital barracks.

DK: Correction, I can survive almost any situation she throws me in. But having seen just half a second of their forbidden tech makes me now tripple tripple-red-letter'd and me and Keter the top priority to be levelled to the ground. Well shit.

Insanenoodlyguy

Cold space might actually be better. The sun might destroy his body and let him get another one. Just being in the middle of space? Okay, you can't die? That's fine. Go be immortal in the void, have fun with that.

Vega

Remember kairos said that the twilight ways "lead to places not of creation"

NerfContessa

Only the twilight ways though, not cats night portals so rituals would be necessary.

Still, dumping the dk and the bard in say, the fallout world, without any name or magic except what keeps the dk undead, would be a nice solution.

Cosmicus

Probably lakes.

[Liliet](#)

She is already not holding back.

This isn't her holding back, his is her twisting out of the way of an incoming arrow.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Hot damn, that was spicy. Fantastic chapter, I legitimately got chills when Cat almost cut loose.

Also that bit with General Palas was the coolest falling in loyalty I've seen since Hakram first signed on board.

Argentorum

Here's something spicy for you. Basilia knew Pallas was taking half the army of Helike with her, and she went and started a war with Nicae all the same.

"Do as thou wilt."

Liliet

TBF it's not like Nicae has much of an army anymore...

Basilia is AWESOME.

Mammon

Basilia, even assuming she doesn't fall into a Name which I assume she won't but there are hints of Cat seeing it, doesn't have to war with the rest of the Free Cities. Athalante and Delos likely won't participate in the war lest feeling that they will be threatened if doing nothing, Bellophon will not intervene either way, meaning Helike only needs to fight against Penthes and Nicea. Assuming Nicea to face them rather than stay on the sidelines trying to pull the League together, that is. More likely, it's just them against the Exarchs.

What about Stygia? They seems to rely on Wasteland protection with no more intent to continue warring after 5 books of exhausting their troops in what the first or second book already described to be a waning period for them of the experienced lads growing old and the new recruits not yet being broken in. With too few Magisters, Akua having exhausted half their old garde and Tyrant the other half likely, the new generation needing all the reins they have left to keep from rebelling and the whole situation we've got now, they will not war unless absolutely necessary. As said, they will back the winning horse.

Can Helike win with half their troops facing Penthes? Hey Penthes. Look at me, look at your troops, look back at me, look at the map, back to me, back to you. You're in Procer, we outnumber your your armies in the delegation (courtesy of the late Tyrant) and you cannot return to your region without going through Helike. What will you do, go through the Ranger's woods again? We needed two Named and all our rested armies to pull that stunt the first time. And you're not mad enough to go through Praes AND afford Mercantis's rates to get your armies back to your country. Face it, you need to return through our lands. Hammer and Anvil against your armies, how much have you left back home to defend against a land-based attack? Didn't think so.

Politically speaking when combining hostilities and the geography, Nicea likely sees themselves looking at having to side with Helike again lest they end up with one Praes-compromised ally and an equal to greater foe because of it, Stygia backing Helike or no one at all, and the rest not getting involved at all. By choosing sides and being willing

to attack the other League armies on Procerian soil while backing the Grand Alliance with troops against Keter, Helike completely tore apart the suggested political system of convenience that Malicia weaved.

New tally: Penthes supports Praes. Helike sides with Callow's Grand Alliance. Stygia, Athalante and Delos remain neutral or Grand Alliance-inclined backers but not participants. Bellophon doesn't involve themselves at all. Nicea has to side with the Grand Alliance if they want the League balance on their side to be in their favour AND to survive Ashur's retaliation politically. All because Helike did a thing.

Insanenoodlyguy

I feel like Basilla has decent odds. She loved the Tyrant (Platonically I believe, but still love), and she just effectively made a claim on the Name. If she's the ruler of Helike doing what she wants and causing wanton carnage along the way, I feel like the shoe's gonna fit. Plus there's the fact that Kairos would probably support it. After all, she just showed up, stabbed one of her allies and declared war on them, in the name of the League she's about to ensure is destroyed. Betrayal while simultaneously professing to do it in the best interests of the people she's warring on? That's keeping things entertaining!

[Liliet](#)

I get the impression Basilia hasn't decided if she wants the Name yet, and it's one of those that you need to actively claim to get them.

Insanenoodlyguy

I took it as more of a "There's things I have to do/ attempt and I will either be dead or be Tyrant at the end. Lets find out how it goes!"

I'd have to assume there's going to be at least one other claimant and there might be some certain expectations associated with it that she has to fulfil, likely in Helike, before she'd be acknowledged as more than one who is trying for the name.

[Liliet](#)

Also a fair reading, yeah!

In that context, I want to note, 'the person with the army' generally does it for 'expectations to fulfill' lmao

Liliet

Falling in loyalty is the best phrasing.

Also, it looked like Pallas was already halfway there beforehand, seeing how it only took a few words with Basilia to sort out what the two of them were doing ;u;

Jane

Oh, my. When it had been brought up multiple times that it was odd that the two city-states were allied despite the whole Still Death thing, I had thought to myself that perhaps they had somehow pinned the blame on Cat instead, but I couldn't decide how they could make it plausible. By obscuring the flaws by having Cat accuse Malicia first, however, then exposing Akua, well, that would do it. Now I wish I had made the prediction earlier, so I could take credit for it...

A nice trick with Malicia's plot, though; we're so used to seeing things through the lens of the protagonist that seeing her used as a tool against a power that we don't pay much mind ends up both being perfectly hidden in advance, and perfectly obvious in hindsight. Granted, attempted murder *does* have a way of making one think that the goal is supposed to be... Well, murder.

That said, if Cat *had* gone with her instincts and butchered them all, I can only imagine the celebration Malicia would have had... There are so. *Many. Ways.* for that to have gone wrong... I wonder if she would have gotten a Name for it, though, or if her high priestess status prohibits that. Because that sounds like the kind of stunt that earns one a Name.

Crash

Reckon that'd be the Black Queen claim she refused to make.

As far as being high priestess I don't see how that blocks a name. That is a facet of Catherine Foundling and as such, is part of what would make any name she grasps for herself but there's no reason to hinder that. Given enough time, High Priestess could well become a Name of the Sister's faith.

To be quite honest I'm excited for Cat's new Name because while having her go on unnamed is very interesting, by the very rules of narrative Cat is all a Claimant is supposed to be. She has an objective and the willpower to do it while believing it has to be done and that she is the one to do so, she is very relevant to the workings of history and as a rule will bend Creation to her will if that is what needs to be done. All that is missing, I suppose, is the pivot to consolidate it all and what the heck is it going to be? Something quite great either way.

Thorium

I assume the idea of Cat being unable to get a Name comes from the fact that the crows reject the choirs. They might not take too well to Cat being granted a Name by Above, but they are technically servants of Below, so I doubt they can really do much on that front.

As for the Name of High Priestess, I find that highly unlikely. The position might very well become a Name at some point, but given the drow's thoughts on gender, something like First Under The Night sounds a lot more plausible.

Liliet

> I assume the idea of Cat being unable to get a Name comes from the fact that the crows reject the choirs.

What?

It's... it's not like the crows would have any input on Cat getting a Name, other than as part of the narrative background...

> As for the Name of High Priestess, I find that highly unlikely. The position might very well become a Name at some point, but given the drow's thoughts on gender, something like First Under The Night sounds a lot more plausible.

Well, Sve Noc shared the Name Priestess of Night, so there's that.

First Under The Night cannot be a Name because it does not refer to an archetype.

Mammon

Sve Noc are lesser gods, and gods do seem to have a hand in giving Names. Remember with Captain's origin extra chapter, she went to a withering lesser orc god to get her Name instead of being just a werewolf? By killing him she got her Name, had she subjected herself to him she would've also gained a Name but lesser or different. Not allowing for Names to be granted to them seems like something that even lesser gods like Sve Noc can do similar to preventing mind reading and predicting one's future.

Whether Priestess of Night, First Under the Night and High Priestess are Names rather than titles like Exarch of Nicea is a stretch either way. They're given by the people but hold no Name powers, similar to how Cordelia is First Prince and Warden of the West from the moment she was

corronated. Both are Names, but she carried both as title yet holding neither Name.

Black Queen though, that might've been Cat's Name all along since her corronation. Her fitting into Name events like the Band of Five and gaining the Yew Staff or Fairfax Sword are a lot more Story-pulled than the non-Named actions we see around. Too Story-pulled, even when assuming her Duchess of Moonless Nights title was the Name that explained her role and being controlled into a Story that Keter I and the Everdark clearly were. One doesn't happenstance into those situations at the exact right moment or way without a Name pulling providence, with the Book 5 events being a bit vaguer in this but still suggesting Name plot.

Crash

For the thousand time buddies, not every Above name is chained to a Choir and even when they are, as we saw in the interlude of Mr Stalwart Paladin, the Named has to accept their interference. While I would love to watch Endurance try to make a claim on Cat, she is not going to accept that.

We've seem gods be part of the getting a Name with Captain yes, but she didn't get her name because Orc god gave it to her. Sabah got it because she killed the god, as she tought that was her path to getting her new Name, and in my opnion if she tought that then that was the truth because that is the way the Story goes. The orc god being a god didn't matter so much as Sabah deciding what she wanted and how she'd achieve it, thus making his slaying into a pivotal point for herself, did.

As for Cat already being the Black Queen:

From Book 3 – chapter 69 – Swan Song

" If I was to be queen, it would be a queen cloaked in black with hands bloodied red. Though young and half-formed, the Name was taking shape. Beckoning. "

Here, the Name of Black Queen was starting to come into being. Then |Black Destroyed the contraption that held the souls of the Watch and as such, Cat didn't make a deal with the Empress and the Story of the Black Queen was no more. However, it doesn't seem to have been fully destroyed:

From Book 3 – chapter 72 – Curtains:

" Had I truly become the Black Queen, I thought, had my teacher not broken that transition as recklessly as he had the city, they would have been mine to rule.

[...]

Gamble was too light a word, but if every other path led to a land of graveyards it was a risk that must be taken."

Here Cat thinks about whether gambling herself into becoming the Black Queen was still worth it and while she decides it's too risky a gamble, she seems to indicate that it's still a possibility although she has no intent on doing it yet. In this chapter of today, she again wonders if it wouldn't be best to just take that plunge and again decides not to.

She has also been offered a Name from Above a couple times, most notably with the Sword of the Fairfaxes. Which she refused for her Yew Staff that she herself made into a weapon.

Now, she has refused names from both Above and Below and I don't see why she'd stop doing so. Cat's Name is likely going to be one of the Neutral names whose alignment varies with it's current owner.

[Liliet](#)

I'm not sure if the Sword of the Fairfaxes would have given her an Above-powered Name. Seems a little incompatible with her being *literally a high priestess of Below-empowered deities*.

That said, I would love to see that. I actively loudly WANT to see that. I want to see Cat wield Night and Light at the same time as her own native powers more than I want almost anything else.

Crash

See my guess is that the sword would have given her a Name like Queen of Blades or something close to that, think along the lines of the Saint; Not the most decent person, but certainly still associated to Above.

Sorta like Queen Elizabeth (?) Fairfax, who is thought of fondly by the people of Callow, a country historically associated to the Good side, who first instituted the Forlorn Hope treating the men and women destined to the gallows as already dead and thus using them for fodder to improve the chances of her army sorta like say, using them for blood magic

like a certain Bellow-affiliated Dread Empire. By that logic, associating yourself with two goddesses that bring an entire army that could make a difference in winning against the Dead King? Well that sounds about right. Do the most good, even if to do that you have to be less nice and clean handed than other heroes.

Anyway, I'd pay good money to watch Cat and Endurance interact in any way, even better if the latter make its pitch to her, that'd be neat.

[Liliet](#)

We have WoG that Cat has no chance for Queen of Blades specifically because she'd need to be narratively associated with actual literal blades a lot more than she currently is.

That said, my understanding is that most Names are Neutral, and colored by circumstance: like what Hanno recently said about Archer and Ranger, except most Named (as opposed to their Names! people specifically) don't really flip-flop like that and tend to stick to one type of stories to be involved in and one side to be associated with.

And that said, the side Cat's associated with is certainly Below.

For that to be broken, the Name needs to be a SPECIFICALLY Light-powered one.

And that.
Would.
Be.
Hilarious.

Crash

I'd like to apologize for my terrible wording on that.

I went with Queen of Blades because I wanted something Queen-related but still martial/Army related and couldn't come up with anything, rather than to associate her with swords; the fact that I immediately followed with a comparison to Saint of Swords did not help with it at all. Sorry.

As far as names being Neutral, that sounds right in theory but can you see a Black Knight working for a choir or a White Knight born to Praes? While

it sounds interesting, it doesn't sound like something that'd happen.

As far as being associated to Below yeah, I don't know how feasible it is to get a Name from Above out of that. That said, come on choirs make your damn offer already!

Liliet

(sticking this earlier so you'll see it in notifications, but I cannot access mine and so cannot make it a reply down there)

> As far as names being Neutral, that sounds right in theory but can you see a Black Knight working for a choir or a White Knight born to Praes? While it sounds interesting, it doesn't sound like something that'd happen.

Black and White Knight are the very iconic NON-Neutral Names. Like when you ask 'well what Names AREN'T Neutral' my first thought is 'well White Knight and Black Knight for example' before I even go into 'Grey Pilgrim' and 'Stalwart Paladin' and 'Warlock' and 'Tyrant'.

Neutral Names are the skill-based ones. Painted Knife, Vagrant Spear, Rogue Sorcerer, Thief, Hunter, Witch of the Woods? Captain, Adjutant, Hierophant, Scribe? Vengeful Brigand, Silent Slayer, Assassin? I can easily see these being reversed wrt what side they belong without anyone blinking an eye.

Lone Swordsman is an interesting case, as there doesn't seem to be anything inherently heroic in the basic archetype (going off stories from our world, it probably tends more towards heroic, but an opponent to a lone swordsman is another lone swordsman but evil...), but the one we knew was Choir powered and using Light. So, looks like it would vary not only from Name to Name, but from Named to Named as well.

Crash

Yeah, okay, this makes sense. I guess my failure here was that the first few Names that occurred to me had too much historied association with Below (Warlock, Black Knight, Empress, Tyrant) so going off of that I got the whole idea rather skewed.

Mammon

Not true, in Book 1 Amadeus flatly explained that Named to be are in part decided by interaction and acknowledgement by other Named. It's because he wanted her to be Squire, that she became Squire after years of no such Evil Named coming to be. And he's just a Named. Gods are Named and then some.

Now, one doesn't just give a Name, but from what we've seen it's not an act that decides one's Name being given (contrary to how some people in this chat are too eager to assign Name-earning to any heroic act) but bestowal. So all but directly and officially Names are given. Book 1 basic exposition, supported by what we've seen. There is a saturation limit, f.e. Cat could've made Named Winter Court folk but eventually she would've ran out of titles same as how the Winter King couldn't give without taking from someone else. But the Gods and Lesser Gods Bestow Names, one doesn't get it by act. The act can at most result in a God taking notice and Bestowing.

I too agree that there is still the matter of the Named to be having to accept this, never debated or suggested that. Cordelia solidly proved that one. Not sure why Thorium brought the Choirs into this at all, they kind of came out of the right field. And the sword of the Fairfax, that's you making the assumption that this would've been a Name rather than a cool magical sword. Likely it's just Creation giving Cat a sword that comes with recognition as Fairfax/Callow's ruler somehow, not actually a Name.

On her no longer being the Black Queen because the Name broke, not only is that an in-game assumption by unreliable narrator, doubly so because it's Winter Fey Cat saying it, she has been called the Black Queen by so many and has shown and proven to be helped and countered by providence that she likely has a Name in at least some capacity. The way Bard interacted with her nigh assures it, by sheer limitation of Bard's powers. Book 5 may have mended and returned the Black Queen Name, without us being told this explicitly by Cat herself.

And, what we saw in this chapter, that's not her being the Black Queen, that's her making decisive action. As she's the first Black Queen, her title doesn't come with any such defined actions, even if Names are that defined to begin with which they aren't necessarily (Not every Tyrant was chaotic evil like Kairos, the

accumulated treasure throve actually suggests a more prudent lawful evil character.), Cat's Name wouldn't be defined like that. Yet. To slaughter is not synonymous with becoming the Black Queen or taking the Name.

Liliet

> but from what we've seen it's not an act that decides one's Name being given (contrary to how some people in this chat are too eager to assign Name-earning to any heroic act) but bestowal.

What?

Source?

> Cat could've made Named Winter Court folk

No, she... she could have given fae titles. That's an entirely different thing on an entirely different axis – she was Squire and a Duchess at the same time???

> I too agree that there is still the matter of the Named to be having to accept this

Most of the time, nope there isn't.

> And the sword of the Fairfax, that's you making the assumption that this would've been a Name rather than a cool magical sword. Likely it's just Creation giving Cat a sword that comes with recognition as Fairfax/Callow's ruler somehow, not actually a Name.

I actually agree with this one. The sword would have probably had enough narrative weight to catalyze a Name for a random non-Named managing to claim it, but Cat has too much weight of her own for a sword to be enough to push her into a new groove.

> On her no longer being the Black Queen because the Name broke, not only is that an in-game assumption by unreliable narrator, doubly so because it's Winter Fey Cat saying it, she has been called the Black Queen by so many and has shown and proven to be helped and countered by providence that she likely has a Name in at least some capacity.

Catherine isn't THAT unreliable a narrator, nobody has been an unreliable narrator about their own Name so far, not even Anaxares who you'd think would be the very epitome of one. And Amadeus has been called Carrion Lord by everyone the entire time since he

lost his Name, are you saying that one's a Name too? Not every common nickname is a Name.

And being helped and countered by providence is a function of having a Role, not a Name. Those are different things. Every Name is associated with a Role, but not every Role is matched with a Name.

> And, what we saw in this chapter, that's not her being the Black Queen, that's her making decisive action. As she's the first Black Queen, her title doesn't come with any such defined actions, even if Names are that defined to begin with which they aren't necessarily

Names are flexible, yes. There is a specific narrative groove they're a label on, and once you're out of it you lose the Name, is all. And the Black Queen narrative groove, as explained in Book 3 by not ASSUMPTIONS but Name-provided intuitive understanding which has been entirely reliable and informative in every single narration so far EVEN ANAXARES'S, was already formed as associated with Cat taking charge of the Liesse superweapon.

Mammon

The Gods Above and Below give the Name with Named having influence, it's not an act that you have to commit to be assured a Name. Saying that it's an act is less supported than this claim, as right there in Book 1 with the basic exposition Amadeus made someone who did virtually nothing but kill some corrupt guard the Squire. Hakram did nothing noteworthy, nor did Masego. They all just got on the stage near the Named that the Gods Below watched. And the way Bard tried to make Cordelia WotW showed that the act is more a pivot of first appearance having weight that can be gamed, rather than the decisive factor.

Fey titles were pretty much Names, ordered in power by the height of their title. During book 2 they pretty much outright said that the entire marketplace and then the entire court was a bunch of Named going through their Stories over and over again a thousandfold. The fey indeed aren't mortal Named, but they're a version of Named all the same. Which Cat could've made, she even considered it to give Robber immortality vs his ever impeding aging to death.

Most of the time, Named definitely have to accept it. They can do so high certainly and immediately, especially considering the Name recognition and them being simple folk, but they still have to. William's case might've involved a Hashmallim brainwashing him because of its very presence, but technically that was a choice. All Squire Claimants had a choice to participate, and likely they would've just not been Claimants if they didn't want to (unless Below wants them tied to the contest for their own amusement). Cordelia clearly shows defying her Name offered, while other Named like Masego likely felt it and immediately accepted the Name. (For all his wisdom, he's always been a bit too eager to gain powers even at the expense of 'pieces of soul he wasn't using anyway.')

The difference between the Carrion Lord and Black Queen is that the Carrion Lord is indeed just a title, while the Black Queen has been previously confirmed to be a Name in the making. Cordelia is called First Prince and Warden of the West without holding either Name, too. But Cat never directly said she didn't have a Name, and with Bard's interference, Pilgrim's behaviour towards her and her providence of playing into things like meeting White Knight, there's cause to believe she has a Name more than a mere Role like Cordelia.

If we'd only see Cat have parts of providence and abilities that mortals would have, such as Cordelia being able to jump out of a window after stabbing herself and getting scot-free thanks to reputation and knowledge on the guards' culture, then I'd agree with you that it would be the Role and the way it and providence can control everyone. But the things we've seen with f.e. getting the kapactroi's loyalty with her thresher abilities and her Role in the Band of Five, it's too much Story-supported in ways that weren't her skills alone that a Name ought to be there.

And with the hints of Sve Noc apparently roving through her mind changing or blocking memories and thought processes for her ultimate plan to ve/ / with a block of cheddar, combined with her coming fresh out of a Winter Fey state that took her free will and rationality the more she'd drink it, the transition back to a much weaker Name that doesn't cover the same as Squire might not be as obvious to Cat. I'm not saying that Cat is being a fully unreliable narrator, I am saying that there is

enough reason to believe that she has a Name that she's not continuously referencing or which she herself hasn't noticed yet due to the lesser gods in her mind being enough cause for her to overlook it. Considering them to be power-stealers, her Name might be hollowed out or held in reserve by the sisters too for all we know.

And again, the Black Queen was the groove of bloodshed that was definitely the case what groove it would have to follow. Back then. It's a first-time Name, no one but Cat knew Below's newest Name design. Considering Cat still has the title Black Queen and there has never been a Black Queen ever to create a true precedent of what a BQ should be, there's no need to assume that the new Black Queen Name wouldn't be a different design by the same Name that uses Cat's easiest and most recognised title. What was said in book 3 needs not necessarily still be the case, because there's no previous Black Queen to have consolidated the groove that it has to follow.

Liliet

> The Gods Above and Below give the Name with Named having influence, it's not an act that you have to commit to be assured a Name. Saying that it's an act is less supported than this claim, as right there in Book 1 with the basic exposition Amadeus made someone who did virtually nothing but kill some corrupt guard the Squire.

Wait, is Amadeus now a God Above or Below???

It's not about committing acts specifically, it's about FITTING A GROVE. Matching an archetype. Amadeus accepting Cat as his student MADE HER MUCH MORE OF A SQUIRE. Because, y'know, a knight's apprentice is what a squire IS. She still had to prove herself by killing other claimants from there, note. And all the claimants were absolutely certain – and other characters were certain of this as well – that killing all other claimants would award them the Name. It's a stably working mechanism for this kind of situation with Praesi ambition-based Names: kill the others, get the Name.

There is an established mechanism for becoming a Dread Emperor/Empress, Warlock, Black Knight and Chancellor as well. Nobody at any point asked 'but do Gods Below like me enough to BESTOW this Name

upon me?' Everyone was always like 'okay I do this, that and that and the Name is bagged'. Akua notably constructed the Name Diabolist for herself entirely deliberately, crafting a story about herself that fit her comfortably.

We can insist that Gods Below are totally a part of the process, it's just that their favor works so automatically and their selection criteria are so widely known and intuitive, everyone just KNOWS how to appease them perfectly and they never act unpredictably.

Or we can acknowledge that it's a tiny invisible angels hypothesis and it would work exactly the same way if Below didn't have any personal part in the process at all.

> Fey titles were pretty much Names, ordered in power by the height of their title. During book 2 they pretty much outright said that the entire marketplace and then the entire court was a bunch of Named going through their Stories over and over again a thousandfold. The fey indeed aren't mortal Named, but they're a version of Named all the same. Which Cat could've made, she even considered it to give Robber immortality vs his ever impeding aging to death.

Yes, fae are subject to stories. That doesn't make them Named any more than dying of stupidity made Dorian (Exiled Prince) a fae.

Names are a specific mechanic of the world. You have a Name as a label on a groove you fit, you can claim it and later you can transition out of it or (rarely) just lose it and become non-Named again. You get three Aspects and a mana pool based on your Name's strength and how well you fit it. You can do tricks with this mana pool, some of them Name-specific, some fairly universal.

Anything that isn't that IS NOT A NAME. It's just... something else. Like a fae title. Or a Role. Or a portion of Night. Or being an important politician. Or sorcerous ability. Not a Name!

> Most of the time, Named definitely have to accept it. They can do so high certainly and immediately, especially considering the Name recognition and them being simple folk, but they still have to. William's case might've involved a Hashmallim brainwashing him because of its very

presence, but technically that was a choice. All Squire Claimants had a choice to participate, and likely they would've just not been Claimants if they didn't want to (unless Below wants them tied to the contest for their own amusement). Cordelia clearly shows defying her Name offered, while other Named like Masego likely felt it and immediately accepted the Name. (For all his wisdom, he's always been a bit too eager to gain powers even at the expense of 'pieces of soul he wasn't using anyway.')

Oooh, this is an interesting discussion.

I'd argue that in William's case it was less brainwashing and more that Hashmallim appeared to him because they already knew he was contrite. He already was half-mad wandering through woods alone when an angel appeared before him! But yes, angels always give their chosen heroes a choice. And for some choirs at least it's an ongoing one – when Tariq stopped acting like Mercy wanted him to, they went away for a while until he returned to the groove on his own.

Many Praesi Names – like Squire – have *ambition* as a part of the groove. Like specifically a part of the story is that the person WANTS this. If you don't want it, you don't fit the requirement. All Champion Names are like this on the Good side. Squire, Black Knight, Dread Emp, Chancellor, looks like Warlock as well. Actually I wonder if someone might be forced into the groove of Squire beside their will... that sounds like something that might happen, with ambition being a big but still optional element.

At the same time, we already know there are position-based Names you don't get to refuse if you're in the position. That's how Hierarch happened – Anaxares wanted nothing with it, but since others acknowledged him as the hierarch of the League, he got the Name automatically. It's possible that the same applies to Dread Emp and Chancellor – if you take up the position, the Name comes with it, and if you want to remain non-Named while still holding it, tough fucking luck. You don't get the option.

Cordelia on the verge of a new Name getting the option to reject it is something Augur had to engineer deliberately, going against Bard in doing

so. The way the story would have naturally played out, she would have had a chance to run or to stay, and the Name would have come automatically with staying, inseparably tied to it narratively.

We have characters who came into a Name without even realizing it for a while – Vivienne and Tariq. Tariq in fact faced a choice of “I don’t want to be a Named, but the only way I can get out of it is by no longer doing the thing that puts me into the groove – and I do want to keep doing the thing”. Vivienne just had no idea she was becoming Named until a while into it. Masego likely realized he was Apprentice immediately upon coming into the Name, what with growing up in a family of Named and them being right there to tell him, but he wasn’t aiming to get a Name with the action that gave it to him, he was just trying to explain something. The only way he could have gotten out of it after the fact was to *stop being Warlock’s apprentice*, not just by saying ‘okay but I don’t want a Name’. Nobody asked!

Even when a Name’s story demands voluntary acceptance, it’s often voluntary acceptance of an object level position, with the meta level position of, well, having a Name about it, coming automatically.

Even for Cordelia the choice of having a Name or not came in the form of choosing object level actions she could take. Those actions would have been mostly symbolic, all having the same immediate object level outcome, making the choice fairly ‘purely’ about the Name. Again, that situation was deliberately engineered by the Augur for just that purpose!

> And with the hints of Sve Noc apparently roving through her mind changing or blocking memories and thought processes for her ultimate plan

What???

Are you talking about the visions when Cat was dying? Because those were visions, not changed memories.

Are you talking about the clearly cut out / blocked out memory of Bard talking to Neshamah? Because that’s not something Sve Noc would have had any interest in doing, and it makes absolutely no sense to attribute it to them. Not when we

have, well, Bard, an immoral eldritch abomination with weird interaction with stories and people's consciousnesses, to finger.

> the transition back to a much weaker Name that doesn't cover the same as Squire might not be as obvious to Cat. I'm not saying that Cat is being a fully unreliable narrator, I am saying that there is enough reason to believe that she has a Name that she's not continuously referencing or which she herself hasn't noticed yet due to the lesser gods in her mind being enough cause for her to overlook it. Considering them to be power-stealers, her Name might be hollowed out or held in reserve by the sisters too for all we know.

A Name is a part of a person's soul. We know a lot more about them than you're pretending here. Cat knows a lot about them very intimately, considering she once had an Aspect cut out of her, then had the whole Name ripped away and then immediately violently reclaimed it.

There is no basis for claiming what you are.

> And again, the Black Queen was the groove of bloodshed that was definitely the case what groove it would have to follow. Back then. It's a first-time Name, no one but Cat knew Below's newest Name design.

Below's???? Names are STORIES. Archetypes! People make them!

And you need to actually FIT the archetype. There is already an idea of what the Black Queen is like in people's minds, and the key here is that IT DOESN'T FIT WHAT CATHERINE IS. She ISN'T what everyone thinks when they say 'Black Queen'. There are like a dozen people on the whole continent who have correct association with 'Black Queen', as opposed to thousands of just Callowans who have an entirely different idea about it. Note Catherine musing just this chapter about how her reputation is rather disconnected from who she is.

If the entire continent somehow changed its mind about what 'Black Queen' refers to, sure, I can see it becoming a Name for Cat. But it hasn't!

> I almost laughed at the notion that I could force Tariq to do anything, much less bend the rest of the Grand Alliance to my will, until I

caught the look on their faces. Not Akua or Indrani, but the delegates of the League. Over half a hundred people were here, some of the most influential people in the League, and after the lunacy Prodocius had just spoken not a single one of their faces expressed disbelief. Fear and hesitation, anger and doubt, but none of them believed it to be absurd. Because they weren't looking uphill and seeing me, I realized as my stomach sunk. They were looking at the victor of the Camps and the Graveyard, who'd strung along heroes and villains and dealt death to thousands. My reputation, these days, was enough to cow thousands of charging horsemen.

See also: Abigail's fears, for more on the mismatch.

The groove is there. Cat has already defined it for everyone else with her actions.

And then failed to fit it.

[Liliet](#)

> Sve Noc are lesser gods, and gods do seem to have a hand in giving Names. Remember with Captain's origin extra chapter, she went to a withering lesser orc god to get her Name instead of being just a werewolf? By killing him she got her Name, had she subjected herself to him she would've also gained a Name but lesser or different.

Literally anyone 'has a hand in giving Names' in that way. If Hakram hadn't followed Catherine he wouldn't have gotten his Name either, does this mean Catherine hands those out now?

> Not allowing for Names to be granted to them seems like something that even lesser gods like Sve Noc can do similar to preventing mind reading and predicting one's future.

Not allowing Names to be granted to *themselves* I'll give you, though I somehow doubt lesser gods CAN have those. To their followers? Literally nobody has been shown to have that power, aside from for the Names tied to positions. (IE I'm sure they could prevent someone from claiming a Name of Drow High Priest(ess) just by not giving them that job)

> Whether Priestess of Night, First Under the Night and High Priestess are Names rather than titles like Exarch of Nicea is a stretch either way.

Pretty sure Priestess of Night was a Name the sisters shared before they finished apotheosis. First Under The Night is not a Name as it's not a character archetype and so doesn't qualify. High Priestess is definitely a potential Name, but it's not one anyone we know is currently holding.

> They're given by the people but hold no Name powers, similar to how Cordelia is First Prince and Warden of the West from the moment she was coronated. Both are Names, but she carried both as title yet holding neither Name.

First Prince has never been a Name. Warden of the West hadn't been either, until Cordelia got the option to claim it as such. Anything is a Name as long as it marks a clear story groove / Role. First Prince does not have any such. Warden of the West now does.

> Black Queen though, that might've been Cat's Name all along since her coronation.

Black Queen was tied to a specific story groove that Cat came close to fitting into, but in the end didn't. And won't, anymore. So that door is closed unless she goes back to the "ok fuck it let's threaten everyone with a superweapon" mindset for real.

> Her fitting into Name events like the Band of Five and gaining the Yew Staff or Fairfax Sword are a lot more Story-pulled than the non-Named actions we see around. Too Story-pulled, even when assuming her Duchess of Moonless Nights title was the Name that explained her role and being controlled into a Story that Keter I and the Everdark clearly were. One doesn't happenstance into those situations at the exact right moment or way without a Name pulling providence, with the Book 5 events being a bit vaguer in this but still suggesting Name plot.

You are using "Name" to substitute for narrative/Role. Name is just one type of thing that happens around those, not every single thing ever. Yes, Catherine is having Name-like things happen to her without holding an actual Name, because she is playing a significant Role in the current continental stories and every single action she takes short of wiping herself in the privy has significant narrative weight. This suggests that IF she were to fit into a character archetype groove that

exists in-universe she'd get a Name out of that. But there are currently none that she fits, with Black Queen being already tied to a different one.

Insanenoodlyguy

I agree with most of this, but I got the impression that Warden of the West had been a name at one point? At least in as much as Cordelia would not have been the first if she took it.

[Liliet](#)

I think she would have been the first, but I'm not sure we have clear confirmation of this anywhere.

[Mammon](#)

Now I've noticed that you aren't digging in your heels and throwing a flame war because the argument has gone on for more than two replies, rather than remaining civil and with arguments given and considered. So let me start by saying 'Jay, constructive discussion rather than the toxic gridlocked argumentation that most internet arguments in!', and that I applaud you for the these days too rare ability to keep this argument civilised. I love it when I occasionally find such a person to argue with. Let me know if you feel if I'm digging in my heels or otherwise toxically arguing, I'd hate to not reciprocate in kind.

> Wait, is Amadeus now a God Above or Below???

No, he's Named. If he can have a hand in it, then a god certainly can. Which he didn't say was specifically something that only he could do. Yes, the Black Knight specifically has a hand in Squire, but the narration didn't narrow in on that. He explained that the presence and interaction with Named aid the surfacing of a Name.

The difference in auto-bestowal lies with Below and Above. Below is about your due, becoming Dread Emperor is a guaranteed Name because that's your due (Assuming the act to not be easily gained by sheer inheritance, which Praes virtually never does.) while the same doesn't go for First Prince for Procer because that requires Righteousness or a need. Also, auto-bestowal by title was more a thing of the early books, and EE shifted a bit between writing style and approach between 1+2 and onwards.

(Also, have to reply here because the other one simply doesn't give me the reply button any more so thin the blocks have gotten.)

On Named and fey: You seem to have a much more narrow view on Named. Named are anyone who is granted a Name or title that both benefits and counters them in the Story, which the Fey all the more fit into because they're nigh enslaved to the Story. First fey Cat fought knew he couldn't possibly win when she got him to narrate his plans and proclaim victory certain.

But, if you read back, I occasionally specify mortal Named (or human Named, though considering orcs also have Names that's not too accurate) instead of Named. Named are more powerful, mortal Named are the base system for most humans which indeed come with the three Aspects system. As we've seen, that's hardly the only Named there are. Named aren't all with three Aspects, lest you'd consider Named and mortal Named synonymous while assuming the other variants to be not Named. Which I do, because the Fey pretty clearly showed themselves a kind of Named that isn't the three Aspects Named.

Hence: You say Cat cannot have a Name because you have a completely different interpretation of Named than me. I disagree that what you specify as all Named are ALL Named instead of just a subsection of them. And in this, Cat can still have a Name instead of just a Role without Aspects and such because she's in a different category of Named. Maybe the Drow Named, maybe the kind of god-patroned Named that Amadeus said Warlock tried to get once, maybe something much rarer to not come with many precedents.

On William's brainwashing, that's more a personal opinion that when one's presence auto-brainwashes an entire city to zealous suicide-murder, then there's technically no free choice involved even if the same choice would've been made without the brainwashing.

With Hierarch, he doesn't have free will by his own free will. It's likely more that he had to get the People's approval to reject his Name before he could reject it. He already said he wasn't allowed to kill himself or have his life taken without struggle, despite wanting to do either. Quite likely the Kahenas saying he had to become Hierarch by the People's will made him 'willingly' accept the Name despite not wanting it.

With the Dread Emperors, it's the question whether there's a precedent of anyone ever not wanting the Name at all. Maybe there's a precedent of there being an Unnamed Dread Emperor while Traitorous was a humble shoemaker, lest he lost his Name during that period, but likely simple killing of the Name-rejectors too quickly to make it apparent they weren't Named made Praes always Named-ruled.

With Cordelia, it was likely a choice she could make either way. Augur just made it a choice between "Get the Name" or "Die, Procer falls into civil war and/or to Keter while warring on Callow and such and everyone you had to protect will die because you rejected the Name.". Because that's still technically a choice to reject the Name, if not so practically.

Maybe it's partly that EE simply skips the accepting if it's assured, maybe in-game auto-acceptance doesn't even warrant narration or description. But when there's an option they reject, then it's a choice. One that they likely reasoned was 0% for Masego and with Thief was likely an act she either didn't realise to be her Thief choice or a much more subtle transition. Cat has said that new Named tend to be bold and overconfident and radiating their Name when trying to gauge Cordelia, but such a thing would be detrimental to the very Name Thief. Perhaps her Name was willingly taken but gradually gained to prevent Thief going against her very nature drunk on power and sudden shift. Although that is indeed an assumption rather than with precedent or proof.

With the mind control, yes I was talking about / / only to come to the conclusion that Hakram couldn't get his hands on such tea. We've seen it with Bard, but also in Cat's memories which we cannot know whether it was Bard or Sve Noc, and with Thorns guy trying to describe and remember Scribe's appearance. At this point we don't know whether Cat's // was Bard or Sve Noc, but personally I like to think that Bard cannot intervene in the mind of Sve Noc's archpriest that easily with the crows watching over her.

>And you need to actually FIT the archetype. There is already an idea of what the Black Queen is like in people's minds, and the key here is that IT DOESN'T FIT WHAT CATHERINE IS. She ISN'T what everyone thinks when they say 'Black Queen'.

This both already supports my argument and likely shows the crux of our different interpretations. People

already see Cat as the Black Queen, so she would fit the archetype even if she changes because everyone see her and the Name as synonymous. Whatever Callow sees her as, would be the archetype of the Black Queen by the groove she made. However, you assume the interpretation of all non-Callowans as relevant while I assume Named to have some semblance of culture-appropriation.

Now, even assuming that Cat isn't at least in good part a completely different subsection of Named now rather than the three Aspects mortal Named, she is Callowan and by cultural right to be shaped and seen by the Callowans to be shaped and interpreted. Granted, there is argument that f.e. the Good countries seeing Dread Emperors as infighting self-defeating lunatics that occasionally start a year of terror creates precedent that the non-Praesi have any control by interpretation over the Wasteland Names, but at the same time such interference should have much more effect on all Names. If the Wasteland would see Heroes as incompetent and failing in the face of proper planning and more assets, that should've counter-balanced the entire Good prevails in the end grooves we see now. If the majority interpretation counts, then foreign Named should all like and praise Procer rather than seeing them as land-hungry opportunists.

>Literally anyone 'has a hand in giving Names' in that way. If Hakram hadn't followed Catherine he wouldn't have gotten his Name either, does this mean Catherine hands those out now?

Yes. As I referenced before, Amadeus in Book 1 confirmed in narration that interaction with Named increases odds of getting a Name. Cat can't point at someone and say 'You're now the new Heiress!', but her presence and interaction does add to the odds of Name-bestowal, as Amadeus said in his Names 101 class.

>Pretty sure Priestess of Night was a Name the sisters shared before they finished apotheosis. First Under The Night is not a Name as it's not a character archetype and so doesn't qualify. + previous quote and reply:

I'm not sure whether PoN was a Name because the Drow are a bit iffy on that. Whether they follow a completely different set of Names (whether a different subsection without three Aspects like I'd reason or at least different like the inherent differences between Heroes and Villains) or have Names as all rather than a more powerful species in general, it's too ??? to make

a decisive call on it. Too vague by lack of defined situation and culture by EE, much like much on Ranger is too vague to discuss for now.

Same as how Masego is the first Hierophant not needing such pre-existing archetype, technically First Under the Night could be a Name of the Drow or a necessary new Name because they are entering a new era and/or have no human-amongst-drow Named. Maybe Drow don't even have consistent Names, instead each being a new one never to resurface. We don't know enough.

On whether Sve Noc can decline Names in Cat's name, the question is whether Cat would even know of this before it happened. She likely doesn't know when Augur tries to read her future, either.

>First Prince has never been a Name. Warden of the West hadn't been either, until Cordelia got the option to claim it as such. Anything is a Name as long as it marks a clear story groove / Role. First Prince does not have any such. Warden of the West now does.

Now I could be wrong or merely making assumptions, but wouldn't make Cat assuming these Names to be Cordelia's when she was wondering whether Cordelia was now Named mean that both are indeed preceded Names of Proceran Rulers? She even discussed that one is apparently stronger than the other in most cases, though I can't remember which one that was.

>Black Queen was tied to a specific story groove that Cat came close to fitting into, but in the end didn't. And won't, anymore. So that door is closed unless she goes back to the "ok fuck it let's threaten everyone with a superweapon" mindset for real.

This might be a 'Lets agree to disagree.' because I think we've reached the point where we're giving our opinions as if they are arguments. My opinion is that a non-precedented Name can easily be fluent or be discarded, so that a completely different groove or archetype can create a different Name design by the exact same title of Black Queen because that's simply the most obvious or supported that Cat fits. Until she better fits a preceded Name that already has an established Name title, Black Queen might even be the Name of a humble shoemaker that doesn't do anything wrong as long as the people see that as the archetype.

The bloodshed that Cat knew would lead to the Name was the pivot to get the Name at the time, but by cultural shift of interpretation and Cat's changed personality

the very interpretation of Black Queen might since have changed. We have seen that Callow's very interpretation of Good and Evil and on Cat has shifted drastically since book 3 especially in the House of Light now Insurgent.

>You are using "Name" to substitute for narrative/Role.

This is a difference in assuming how far a Role would go. Cordelia still has a Role because she has no Name but a position that makes her Role indeed inexchangeable. She is the ruler of Procer, which would fit certain grooves while not requiring a Name. However, Names are main cast while Roles are supporting characters. Cat has been too much a main character not delegated by Creation and the Name to a supporting and side character, to be a Role rather than a Name. There are Named in her employ, if she were just a Role then the Named ought to have gone through Masego and Hakram and Archer with Cat now aiding them.

Mario and Bowser are Named while Peach is a Role of the damsel in distress, but the moment that Peach gets an actual active role then she would become a Named. Zelda was merely a Role to bestow a purpose/motivation, some boons and certain acts that a ruler has to do, but once she became that desert nomad she came into a Name and actively Story-affecting role rather than a Role. (Yes, Role is a bit of an awkward way to refer to it indeed.)

Liliet

> Now I've noticed that you aren't digging in your heels and throwing a flame war because the argument has gone on for more than two replies, rather than remaining civil and with arguments given and considered. So let me start by saying 'Jay, constructive discussion rather than the toxic gridlocked argumentation that most internet arguments in!', and that I applaud you for the these days too rare ability to keep this argument civilised. I love it when I occasionally find such a person to argue with. Let me know if you feel if I'm digging in my heels or otherwise toxically arguing, I'd hate to not reciprocate in kind.

♥ ♥ No, he's Named. If he can have a hand in it, then a god certainly can.

Yes, a god can have a hand in helping someone into a Name tied to a position under them, just as a Named can. With more ease even, I'll give you that, since a god's support narratively counts for more than a

mortal person's, Named or not. Though it'll always depend on the specific situation, of course.

That said, Gods Above and Below specifically, as opposed to lesser gods inside Creation, seem to have voluntarily removed themselves from the game in a way that doesn't apply to lower-power beings. That's my argument here: sure, they could probably bestow Names at will just by deciding this particular person should have one. Like how you can use cheat codes in a game to get it to a desired state. Like how in a simulation you've programmed to run, you're absolutely free to edit memory states to have whatever you want, except if what you're doing is running an experiment doing so would defeat the entire point of running the simulation in the first place.

The Gods Above and Below are programmers, with Creation as their simulation, and they've given themselves only very, very limited input, because that's the entire point.

> Yes, the Black Knight specifically has a hand in Squire, but the narration didn't narrow in on that. He explained that the presence and interaction with Named aid the surfacing of a Name.

Yes, if you're already in the middle of a story, you're more likely to get a Role in it. It's... I don't want to say correlation, not causation, but... something close to that. Causation by another mechanism. You know like how if you hang around nerds you're likely to absorb nerdy knowledge of their favorite topics? It doesn't mean nerds have mysterious metaphysical power of converting people to their cause, it's just basic cause-effect of how human relationships work. In this case, it's just basic cause-effect of how stories work. If you get drawn in, you get drawn in.

> The difference in auto-bestowal lies with Below and Above. Below is about your due, becoming Dread Emperor is a guaranteed Name because that's your due (Assuming the act to not be easily gained by sheer inheritance, which Praes virtually never does.) while the same doesn't go for First Prince for Procer because that requires Righteousness or a need.

Sooooooooooooooooo yeah the requirements are different for different kinds of stories. It's still based on a story and not on a specific being's fiat as *such*.

A specific being's fiat (that being not being Gods Above/Below, as they are categorically different entities) is weight on a scale. That weight alone can be enough on its own – Amadeus's favor was not quite enough for Cat to become Squire, but a Dread Emperor/Empress can make someone Chancellor just by appointing them to the position – but it can still be counterweighted by other things going on. IE a Dread Emperor/Empress cannot just appoint an attacking White Knight Chancellor and have their Name change because they said so, the weight of their other Name *and also the fact they're currently attacking* beats that appointment easily.

> On Named and fey: You seem to have a much more narrow view on Named. Named are anyone who is granted a Name or title that both benefits and counters them in the Story, which the Fey all the more fit into because they're nigh enslaved to the Story. First fey Cat fought knew he couldn't possibly win when she got him to narrate his plans and proclaim victory certain.

Yes, I do, and I know I'm right because that's how in-universe terminology is used. Nobody has ever at any point referred to any fae as Named. And we have WoG that it's impossible to hold two Names at the same time, while Cat has had a Name and a fae title at the same time, ergo, a fae title is not a Name.

If you're going into 'the writer is actually secretly wrong about their own magic system's terminology and mechanics' I'm afraid I cannot help you there.

> (Also, have to reply here because the other one simply doesn't give me the reply button any more so thin the blocks have gotten.)

MOOD.

I was thinking this conversation needs to be consolidated myself lmao

> But, if you read back, I occasionally specify mortal Named (or human Named, though considering orcs also have Names that's not too accurate) instead of Named. Named are more powerful, mortal Named are the base system for most humans which indeed come with the three Aspects system. As we've seen, that's hardly the only Named there are. Named aren't all with three Aspects, lest you'd consider Named and mortal Named synonymous while assuming the other variants to be not Named. Which I do, because the Fey

pretty clearly showed themselves a kind of Named that isn't the three Aspects Named.

Yeah, I'm going with the terminology used in-universe and in WoG. Note how an elf Named we've met has worked the exact same way as 'human, orc and goblin' Named do – three Aspects and all. And a ratling Named, too. You'd think if anyone would have a different system... but nope, species appears to be entirely irrelevant.

> On William's brainwashing, that's more a personal opinion that when one's presence auto-brainwashes an entire city to zealous suicide-murder, then there's technically no free choice involved even if the same choice would've been made without the brainwashing.

I believe that there's a difference in how the Choir interacts with their chosen champion and regular mortals on request of said champion.

Specifically, the Choir of Contrition on its own doesn't make judgement calls. It doesn't 'know', by itself, what is moral and what isn't, what is the right thing to do and what isn't. The function of figuring it out is not implemented.

What they do instead is find a champion *who thinks like they do*, aka who meets a set of 'mindset' criteria. William was contrite and wished to do something to make up for it (even if it hadn't consciously come up in his reasoning per se before the Choir brought it up), Hanno wanted to be just, Tariq wanted to dispense mercy, Iason wanted to endure. The Choir picks up on that desire and as long as the person's mindset matches their requirements, they're invited to pick the direction the entire Choir goes. They more or less assume the person's values. Note how not a single time has there been a values dissonance conflict between a person and their Choir, despite how hugely the values vary by culture and by person. Contrition didn't have a problem with William being racist despite that approximately everyone else did, did you notice that?

So 'brainwashing' their chosen champion would defeat the entire point. Subject them to trauma that would keep them in the mindset the Choir likes, oh yes, and I'm 😊 @ how ethical that is right there with you. Although it's hardly worse than the entire concept of teenage Named as child soldiers, y'know, it all sucks, this doesn't really stand out much.

But when the champion has decided that brainwashing other people en masse *to match the champion's values and opinions* is the right thing to do in this situation – sure, they'll do that. They just need a template to brainwash to, and that's what the champion provides.

> With Hierarch, he doesn't have free will by his own free will. It's likely more that he had to get the People's approval to reject his Name before he could reject it. He already said he wasn't allowed to kill himself or have his life taken without struggle, despite wanting to do either. Quite likely the Kahenas saying he had to become Hierarch by the People's will made him 'willingly' accept the Name despite not wanting it.

I don't think they phrased it like that lmao

> Maybe it's partly that EE simply skips the accepting if it's assured, maybe in-game auto-acceptance doesn't even warrant narration or description. But when there's an option they reject, then it's a choice.

In-game, huh?

You think there's a text prompt popping up in a person's field of vision asking 'accept Name, y/n', and we just haven't been shown it a single time because Erratic hasn't bothered to?

My point is that there's no such prompt. Names are a meta-level thing that reflects object level facts. A person's attitude towards their Name is a meta-level fact per se. But a person's attitude towards Named in general (like Cordelia's), a person's choice of object level course of action, as enabled by a Name or not, THAT is object level facts. They are what gets to be weight on the scale.

Most of the time, yes, a groove that you need to fit to get a Name is a result of your own choices, and one way or another if you really badly wanted to get out of the Name you could just leave the groove. Anaxares could have gone against the Will of the People (which in your theory would do that, though not in mine), Masego could have run away from home and stopped practicing magic, Tariq could have turned into a serial killer.

And then there are Names that aren't like that at all.

Cursed.

Sabah was *born to it*.

You think she secretly subconsciously wanted it, and if she'd fully gotten over her desire-since-babyhood to kill and eat people, the curse would have fallen off, or what?

> With the mind control, yes I was talking about / / only to come to the conclusion that Hakram couldn't get his hands on such tea. We've seen it with Bard, but also in Cat's memories which we cannot know whether it was Bard or Sve Noc, and with Thorns guy trying to describe and remember Scribe's appearance. At this point we don't know whether Cat's // was Bard or Sve Noc, but personally I like to think that Bard cannot intervene in the mind of Sve Noc's archpriest that easily with the crows watching over her.

It has been remarked before that Bard is oddly little known for how massively she meddles. For old records of her to have an active antimemetic effect, written into the very fabric of Creation (given that she's working directly for the Gods and they can do whatever they fuck they want), would seem to fit.

And Bard has already shown herself capable of taking Cat out for a personal chat without the crows getting input on it, at that. During the campfire arc, remember?

> I'm not sure whether PoN was a Name because the Drow are a bit iffy on that.

Okay, that's a good point. I'm assuming it was, but that's just speculation on my part. That said,

> or have Names as all rather than a more powerful species in general

drow aren't more OP than elves.

> This both already supports my argument and likely shows the crux of our different interpretations. People already see Cat as the Black Queen, so she would fit the archetype even if she changes because everyone see her and the Name as synonymous. Whatever Callow sees her as, would be the archetype of the Black Queen by the groove she made. However, you assume the interpretation of all non-Callowans as relevant while I assume Named to have some semblance of culture-appropriation.

Yeah, coz...

> "Q: The problem really is this world doesn't really have an appropriate name for Catherine to transition into. Grey Knight would fit her best of the obvious options but it isn't a Name as far as we know.

> A: There would be no cultural drive anywhere on Calernia to birth a Name like Grey Knight, which effectively ensure it could not come into being."

(WoG document, as of Book 3 Villainous Interlude Decorum)

Evidently existing cultural drives are a requirement, see?

> If the Wasteland would see Heroes as incompetent and failing in the face of proper planning and more assets, that should've counter-balanced the entire Good prevails in the end grooves we see now.

First of all there's clearly the issue of locality: for all that Praes and Callow are deeply intertwined culturally, they are STILL different, and Callowans would still have stronger opinions = greater weight on their native Names while Wastelanders have more input on theirs.

Second, "Good prevails in the end" is a matter of where you stop telling the story. As far as Wasteland villains are concerned they win as long as they get to make their desired statement, their eventual death being utterly irrelevant. Amadeus is jealous of the rest of the continent getting to make a positive impact for their populace for the long term, remember the dried up watering hole story that served as an example? He's bitter that Evil tools aren't workable for Good goals, because he's adorable like that. He's using a rocket launcher to dig and complaining that it doesn't make a good shovel.

> Yes. As I referenced before, Amadeus in Book 1 confirmed in narration that interaction with Named increases odds of getting a Name. Cat can't point at someone and say 'You're now the new Heiress!', but her presence and interaction does add to the odds of Name-bestowal, as Amadeus said in his Names 101 class.

Okay, yes, we do see eye to eye on this, good to know lmao

> Same as how Masego is the first Hierophant not needing such pre-existing archetype

He needed the word to have meaning, though, for it to serve as a Name. What the fuck DOES the word refer to in Calernian cultural context and how did it come to be is a fascinating question, but evidently it does exist, yeah? Names are common nouns, not proper ones. Nobody in-universe asked 'wait, a hi-yero-what?', so clearly the word exists – and with it, the archetype.

> On whether Sve Noc can decline Names in Cat's name, the question is whether Cat would even know of this before it happened.

No, the question is whether THEY get a text prompt popping up in front of them with 'accept Name? y/n'. My point is they don't. They can indirectly influence Cat's Naming or not by shaping the fabric of narrative reality around her – for example, as long as they're by her side, Cat has very low odds of getting, say, White Knight as a Name. White Knights don't serve as priestesses to murder crows. Though, this being Cat... Any weight can be counterweighted if you try hard enough 0.0

* doesn't have to be an actual text prompt, obviously. A banner held up by angels that you need to put your blood signature on, an incoming train that you need to stand in front of, a surge of power you can let through or block, whatever.

> Now I could be wrong or merely making assumptions, but wouldn't make Cat assuming these Names to be Cordelia's when she was wondering whether Cordelia was now Named mean that both are indeed preceded Names of Proceran Rulers? She even discussed that one is apparently stronger than the other in most cases, though I can't remember which one that was.

No. There is no preceded Name of any Proceran ruler, Procer has no precedent of Named rulers period. It never happened, Cordelia would have been the first one since its founding. Hence, Cat was trying to guess which new one would form from among Cordelia's titles.

> However, Names are main cast while Roles are supporting characters.

Nope! Everything's a Role. Names are stickers on Roles (stickers that come with Aspects and a pool of power). When Akua made herself Diabolist, it was a

Role thing. When Cat forced angels to resurrect her as an heiress to Callow, it was a Role thing. I can try and find the specific quote where Akua talks about this?

> "Praes is a story," she said. "A Tyrant to lead us. A Black Knight to break heroes. A Warlock to craft wonders. A Chancellor to rule behind them. And an Empire like clay, to shape into the tool they need: an entire nation built to empower the ambitions of a single villain."

>

> "Our Empress rules," he murmured. "Our Black Knight leads. Our Warlock crafts nothing and our Chancellor is nothing. All the while the Empire calcifies into institutions, impossible to move."

>

> Yes. Finally, he was beginning to understand. None of them were acting as they should, not in the way that mattered. Malicia was more Chancellor than Empress, Lord Black had reigned as king in all but name for twenty years and the Warlock learned without ever building. They were trying to change the story but oh, they had not thought that entirely through had they? Because once the changes began, they were no longer in control. Anyone with the right power could shape the story too. Akua looked at them, and she did not see rulers. She saw stewards. They had made themselves to be administrators, and in Praes those ever only had one function: to enable the designs of the villain above them.

>

> "Foundling came closest to understanding," Akua said. "It's how she beat me, at Liesse. It wasn't her Name she used."

>

> Akua drained the last of her cup, gently put it down on the desk.

>

> "It's never been about the Names, you see," the Diabolist smiled. "It's always about the Roles."
(Book 3, Villainous Interlude: Chiaroscuro)

> (Yes, Role is a bit of an awkward way to refer to it indeed.)

That's because that's not what it means 🤪

[Mammon](#)

My Gods Below, these posts have gotten sooooo long, and WordPress's word-compressing is making it only

worse.... Soooooooo much scrolling. But don't worry, you're being an exemplary discussion partner, especially to internet standards. I mean, you haven't called me literally Hitler once, or in more actual experience that you starting telling me what I've been saying and then giving arguments against the argument that you say I made. That's an oddly oft-occurring thing.

On Gods, that's a fair assumption and interpretation. In programmer terms I'd phrase my interpretation as the user having to manually click for Named.exe to start running or be applied, that the program can indeed run by itself but doesn't and cannot automatically enable itself to start running. That the Gods Above and Below (which definately ought to be omniscient if the Choir of Judgement can claim such a thing) at the very least would get a 'A program is trying to run, allow it? Yes/No' notification.

That the gods keep some control over the matter to prevent exploitation same as how in the story Worm it's impossible to have consistent superpower trigger events from any act or trying to control the triggering. However there is indeed nothing to solidly establish or argue this, other than Black's attestment that Named can aid the triggering of Named and that this should logically enable Gods to do the same with greater ease.

>A specific being's fiat is weight on a scale. That weight alone can be enough on its own, but it can still be counterweighted by other things going on.

Oh yes, definately. Though perhaps we may see a Traitorous quote in book 6 that proves you wrong, him besting someone by turning them into Chancellor would be typically him. But when we're talking seriously, that would indeed be not how it works. One because you cannot have two Names, probably at least, two because the Name does indeed require the motivation, skills and talent without Name to support it.

Although I feel that this facet of the discussion has since drifted away, because even reading back two posts I'm still not sure where the dissonance between our opinions lie and what we're thus actually discussing any more??? I think it was about the requirement of favour / the attention of power rather than just act to get a Name, but we

seem to have reached a mutual concession or consensus in this I think. Jay for proper discussion?

>Yes, I do, and I know I'm right because that's how in-universe terminology is used. Nobody has ever at any point referred to any fae as Named.

From Book 3 Chapter 9: "They're going through stories, I realized. All of them. There wasn't a single outcome here in the hundreds of conversations taking place that wasn't already set in stone.

It was enough to make me shiver. They might almost look like us, but the fae were other. Something apart, obeying completely different rules. An entire people of actors going through the motions since before Creation even existed. How many times had they gone through their stories, I wondered? If Roles were grooves worn into Creation by repetition, accumulating power by repetition, then these were an entire race of Named. Everyone from the chimney sweeps to the king himself, following along the paths set for them. And now I'd just walked into the midst of that with a lie on my lips, throwing myself headfirst into a maze of interwoven tales that went back unbroken since the dawn of existence. Gods Below, this was more dangerous than I could have ever dreamed of."

Cat calls the entire race of feykind Named at least once, and while she's indeed not yet a fey expert at this point this chapter is kinda the first and last scene where non-noble fey appear that aren't there for a clear Role of 'Observer' or 'Soldier #325' as extras solely. From this point on, there's no real need to refer to any fey as either just 'fey' or by their court title which is likely synonymous.

>Yeah, I'm going with the terminology used in-universe and in WoG. Note how an elf Named we've met has worked the exact same way as 'human, orc and goblin' Named do – three Aspects and all. And a ratling Named, too. You'd think if anyone would have a different system... but nope, species appears to be entirely irrelevant.

More as in that the three aspect Named are the lowest bar, the only one feasible for mortals to attain. Unless of course they are literally part of a god ascending. Ratlings are still mortals and

even more limited, and elves need not be that much more powerful than humans. There are other forms of Named that need bigger, older or more extraordinary triggers or patrons.

>I believe that there's a difference in how the Choir interacts with their chosen champion and regular mortals on request of said champion. Specifically, the Choir of Contrition on its own doesn't make judgement calls.

Oh no, I meant it on a much more basic level. Programming language, imagine making a game that gives you a choice 'Do you want to accept this quest to start the story and your adventure?', and not actually programming in much for the 'No' option other than a quick game over. Even if you obviously say yes because you bought the game and made a character to go adventuring, technically it's not a choice as there's nothing if you decline at all.

(Except for some awesome games like Heroine: Herald of Ragnarok, where the king says 'No? This is the beginning of the game granting you an adventure, if you say no then you might as well play Tetris instead.' and then actually letting you play Tetris with a legitimate ending by reaching a certain Tetris highscore. In most games though, they don't let you just retreat and go to a farm.)

Or with a bit more human level, North Korea. Even if you'd genuinely support Kim Yong and would've done so even without cultural brainwashing, then it's still not a free choice to make if you're a North-Korean who grew up in that region. The base principle of free choice as a.o. the first US amendment intends it simply cannot work when brainwashing to reach the same conclusion as no brainwashing is a factor. That's a personal interpretation of free will and its requirements.

On the stuff you said, that's ofc the case and I'm agreeing and not contesting it. Of course the Choirs wouldn't pick someone like book1 Akua to make their Champion just for the challenge and Redemption arc.

>Quite likely the Kahenas saying he had to become Hierarch by the People's will made him 'willingly' accept the Name despite not wanting it.
>>I don't think they phrased it like that lmao

That's the sad part for Hierarch, I think they did. But that's indeed interpretation rather than fact.

>You think there's a text prompt popping up in a person's field of vision asking 'accept Name, y/n', and we just haven't been shown it a single time because Erratic hasn't bothered to?

Not outright that, rather than if the narrative description of the sensation and choice would be moot or slowing down the pace and hype it's skipped over. Like how the writer doesn't always write that the sword is being unsheathed or that you take off your coat entering a room when this would be just unnecessary narration. Rather than that this non-literal "Accept Name y/n" does appear as a forceful sensation that you'd have to actively suppress and reject like Cordelia did, but that if you wouldn't or feel it to be right that you wouldn't even notice it to be a choice.

>Cursed. Sabah was born to it.

This is a bit vague by lack of chapters on it, but Sabah was born to a curse which was likely why she got the transitional Name of Cursed. Similar to how Killian was born a half-elf and potentially could've gotten this transitional Name because of it and the troubles she had with using magic thanks to her ancestry. I don't think they ever said Sabah was born Named at all, or that the lychantrophy she got came at the exact same time as her Name.

>It has been remarked before that Bard is oddly little known for how massively she meddles. And Bard has already shown herself capable of taking Cat out for a personal chat without the crows getting input on it, at that. During the campfire arc, remember?

Jup, because Cat filled a later expositioned trigger of having to talk about the Bard to enable the Bard to take notice and intervene. Big difference between thought and what turned out to be a specific condition of Bard's intervention. However this is indeed a matter of interpretation and I indeed do not claim that it was definitely Sve Noc with no chance of Bard. With the sisters being narrated by Cat as always being in the back of her mind and listening to her thoughts, them being the cause sounds much more reasonable than

Bard being able of also reading all Named' thoughts though even on plot-relevant internal monologue.

>drow aren't more OP than elves.

We hope, or rather we assume. We've seen one undead elf with a Name and if they follow fey rules of royalty meaning power they also have a lot of power. And we've heard of what the Emerald Blades can do against regular troops, which considering what we've seen some of the Drow do vs Fey Cat might be comparing a dagger to a greatsword. Or not, and they may be even more powerful. No telling quite yet, same as how the gnomes power is mostly conjecture at this point.

>Evidently existing cultural drives are a requirement, see?

Yes, but would people calling her Black Queen be such a drive while Grey Knight wasn't an option because no one called her that?

>First of all there's clearly the issue of locality: for all that Praes and Callow are deeply intertwined culturally, they are STILL different, and Callowans would still have stronger opinions = greater weight on their native Names while Wastelanders have more input on theirs.

So you agree, then? (Not to put words in your mouth, dread the thought because I hate it when people do this to me. If it's not, say so. It just sounds like you agree with the point I made.) Cultural exclusivity of certain Names tied to that culture is a factor and therefore it's not how the world and those against you view BQ, it's how Callow views its Black Queen.

The point we were discussion was that you say that the Black Queen had to be with bloodshed, while I argue that the Name by Callow's interpretation of Black Queen might've shifted now to have different requirements. Cat end book 3 and Cat now has a vastly different reputation amongst her own people, though we indeed only see a bit and hear rumours of it so it's not all too reliable what this reputation is exactly. And this facet on her being Callow's to interpretate rather than all of Calernia's (, including the hundreds of the League's delegates who see her as the bloody Black Queen Archheretic of this chapter). Callow matters, and maybe now the drow a bit.

>“Good prevails in the end” is a matter of where you stop telling the story. As far as Wasteland villains are concerned they win as long as they get to make their desired statement, their eventual death being utterly irrelevant. Amadeus is jealous of the rest of the continent getting to make a positive impact for their populace for the long term, remember the dried up watering hole story that served as an example? He’s bitter that Evil tools aren’t workable for Good goals, because he’s adorable like that. He’s using a rocket launcher to dig and complaining that it doesn’t make a good shovel.

That’s a good point, that’s indeed Evil’s problem now biting itself in the ass. Though mining does use a lot of dynamite, and they do love the Villains that won a lot in a row and continuously in ways that stuck.

>He needed the word to have meaning, though, for it to serve as a Name. What the fuck DOES the word refer to in Calernian cultural context and how did it come to be is a fascinating question, but evidently it does exist, yeah? Names are common nouns, not proper ones. Nobody in-universe asked ‘wait, a hi-yero-what?’, so clearly the word exists – and with it, the archetype.

That is very true, I had to look up what the hell Hierophant meant in our world and I don’t see how it correlates to understanding of god even now. Maybe EE used hierophant by lack of better alternatives as there were very few words that would describe Masego’s brand of what he does? Without edgy names like Godbinder, of course. In terms of that the Name needs to mean something understood combined with the sometimes lacklustre simple Names while the ones that are more vague likely being strongly cultural before the Name arose, I cannot argue against this point.

Though that isn’t quite a point for or against Black Queen though, as she too is a title without a Name precedent to it thus formed by the interpretation. One which may still be malleable to great degrees because the cultural bed is rapidly shifting, due to Callow going from seeing Cat as an invader, to the Callowan necessary evil against the worse evil that is Proceran occupationism, to now winning and making Callow a continent-wide recognised international power.

>> "It's never been about the Names, you see," the Diabolist smiled. "It's always about the Roles."

That's a bit of an assumption on whether Names are truly part of Roles and whether Akua is really completely correct on this. Of course people also fill Roles, f.e. Cat being Hero more often than Villain when dealing with the Evil guys, though that doesn't mean that Roles overshadow or underly Names. Nor that Roles could grant things that we know Names to get and do.

When William convinced the Stygian slaves to declare themselves free (and conveniently join him in the fight), that he could nigh certainly successfully do this was accredited to his Name. If someone without a Name filling the same Role would've tried it, then there was a good chance of failure, being interrupted halfway the conversation or the Stygians not aiding him to instead do something like conquer the immediate region to call their new home or move to some island after trying to enforce Jon Snow's execution. Sorry, other franchise. But success wouldn't have been certain.

We've seen this in Grem One-eye's interlude on the Vale of Red Flowers vs the Iron Prince. That how the very statistics of battle and way that things worked out were massively different for a cavalry charge (A Role) and one spearheaded by a Named. The Role would've still seen the reckless charge likely kill more Procerans than Legion soldiers as Grem's experience in these battles without Names told him, but thanks to the Name providence or Story ensured success things were vastly different despite the Roles being the same.

Or, simply put: If you throw a Named off a cliff, they're certainly not dead. Would the same apply to a Role when in the frame of the Story being woven and followed they should survive? Vague, but by my interpretation on Named powers the Role should still be bound to the statistically likely outcome of such an act for normal people. Entitled to last second save by a Named, yes, but also still bound to gravity and the effects thereof. No special powers or saving for the non-Named.

Which brings us back to where this part of the discussion started: Cat getting 2000 horsemen by her thresher Named power Story-influence. A Role can still raise an army of loyal volunteers of

their own country if they're queen and have the coin, and they could get a group of these horsemen by virtue of their presence and acts and if they can pay them, of course. You can survive a fall from a cliff, depending on the how. But what we've seen here is too smooth and orchestrated in a Story in Cat's favour with an already credited to Cat power of thresher and/or making the best talent fiercely loyal to her by Name and presence to not be her Name rather than a mere Role. What we see here is someone unconscious thrown down several hundred feet, yet apparently surviving.

Which is why I think Cat still/already has a Name, even if it's not the three Aspects variant that we know. God-patroned might make completely different Named, without overuse weakening Aspects maybe.

If parts of your posts + reaction have been left out in the above, I either agree or no longer remember what we were arguing about and/or have nothing to say on it. Which, considering the length of these monster posts ought to be for the best.

[Liliet](#)

> My Gods Below, these posts have gotten sooooo long, and WordPress's word-compressing is making it only worse.... Soooooooo much scrolling.

OH MOOD

I'm copypasting this post to notepad to reply right there lmao

> But don't worry, you're being an exemplary discussion partner, especially to internet standards. I mean, you haven't called me literally Hitler once, or in more actual experience that you starting telling me what I've been saying and then giving arguments against the argument that you say I made. That's an oddly oft-occurring thing.

oh yeah I do take pride in my skill of actual reading comprehension of what the other person is saying lmao

for that matter compliments on yours, you have in fact actually been reading what I'm writing too
0.0 oddly rare on the internet indeed

> On Gods, that's a fair assumption and interpretation. In programmer terms I'd phrase my interpretation as the user having to manually click for Named.exe to start running or be

applied, that the program can indeed run by itself but doesn't and cannot automatically enable itself to start running. That the Gods Above and Below (which definately ought to be omniscient if the Choir of Judgement can claim such a thing) at the very least would get a 'A program is trying to run, allow it? Yes/No' notification.

Yeah that's exactly what I'm saying isn't happening. They could probably do a manual override if they really badly felt like they needed to, but it would be an abuse of mod powers and not a default feature. The entire point is that the thing runs on its own with minimal to no input.

Again, as proof I point to how there's been absolutely no divine fiat in who does or does not get Names. Only story logic.

> That the gods keep some control over the matter to prevent exploitation same as how in the story Worm it's impossible to have consistent superpower trigger events from any act or trying to control the triggering. However there is indeed nothing to solidly establish or argue this, other than Black's attestment that Named can aid the triggering of Named and that this should logically enable Gods to do the same with greater ease.

In Worm, the creatures are just that – living creatures that can still be killed by other creatures. It's entirely reasonable for them to take self-protection precautionary measures.

The beings on Creation cannot possibly do anything to harm Gods Above or Below. And their point is not self-preservation/procreation/continuing their life-cycle, but having a wager settled. The levels are completely different.

It's reasonable for Sve Noc to not give out Night without a trigger to kill anyone who holds it and take it back, to draw a parallel that closer reflects what happens in Worm.

Gods Below don't need to bother any more than Wildbow does.

> Oh yes, definately. Though perhaps we may see a Traitorous quote in book 6 that proves you wrong, him besting someone by turning them into

Chancellor would be typically him. But when we're talking seriously, that would indeed be not how it works. One because you cannot have two Names, probably at least, two because the Name does indeed require the motivation, skills and talent without Name to support it.

I can actually see a Dread Emp theoretically screwing someone over by granting them one Name over the other they wanted when it's close enough ;u;

> Although I feel that this facet of the discussion has since drifted away, because even reading back two posts I'm still not sure where the dissonance between our opinions lie and what we're thus actually discussing any more??? I think it was about the requirement of favour / the attention of power rather than just act to get a Name, but we seem to have reached a mutual concession or consensus in this I think. Jay for proper discussion?

You said 'a Name requires a bestowal'. See above: I still disagree on that.

> Cat calls the entire race of feykind Named at least once, and while she's indeed not yet a fey expert at this point this chapter is kinda the first and last scene where non-noble fey appear that aren't there for a clear Role of 'Observer' or 'Soldier #325' as extras solely. From this point on, there's no real need to refer to any fey as either just 'fey' or by their court title which is likely synonymous.

This is Cat in-universe using metaphor/allegory. She doesn't mean that they're literally an entire race of Named, she means 'kind of like they are an entire race of Named'.

> More as in that the three aspect Named are the lowest bar, the only one feasible for mortals to attain. Unless of course they are literally part of a god ascending. Ratlings are still mortals and even more limited, and elves need not be that much more powerful than humans. There are other forms of Named that need bigger, older or more extraordinary triggers or patrons.

At absolutely no point has this been implied in any way.

Catherine means "the fae are kind of like if everyone was Named in how bound they are to stories", not literally "what they have is Names". If only just because we know what she bases the observation on – the fact they're acting out stories. Not any metaphysical property.

Oh, and elves are powerful enough to be able to selectively ignore a law of Creation of their choosing when they're old enough.

> Or with a bit more human level, North Korea. Even if you'd genuinely support Kim Yong and would've done so even without cultural brainwashing, then it's still not a free choice to make if you're a North-Korean who grew up in that region. The base principle of free choice as a.o. the first US amendment intends it simply cannot work when brainwashing to reach the same conclusion as no brainwashing is a factor. That's a personal interpretation of free will and its requirements.

Yeah, note how Cat did in fact get to say 'no' to a Choir and just go home after that.

> That's the sad part for Hierarch, I think they did. But that's indeed interpretation rather than fact.

Uh, when it comes to 'how they phrased it', there's not much room for interpretation. I mean what was the actual literal phrasing they used? (Please find the quote, it's in Villainous Interlude: Thunder, I just cannot look right now)

> Not outright that, rather than if the narrative description of the sensation and choice would be moot or slowing down the pace and hype it's skipped over. Like how the writer doesn't always write that the sword is being unsheathed or that you take off your coat entering a room when this would be just unnecessary narration.

That's because everyone knows a sword needs to be unsheathed or how to take off a coat. It cannot be

applied to an actual metaphysical mechanic made up for this world exclusively.

> This is a bit vague by lack of chapters on it, but Sabah was born to a curse which was likely why she got the transitionary Name of Cursed. Similar to how Killian was born a half-elf and potentially could've gotten this transitionary Name because of it and the troubles she had with using magic thanks to her ancestry. I don't think they ever said Sabah was born Named at all, or that the lychantrophy she got came at the exact same time as her Name.

Sabah said that she was born to her Name. Literally. Google

"site:practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com I was born to mine", as I believe that's a close enough phrasing to a literal quote that it should show up early in the search.

> Jup, because Cat filled a later expositioned trigger of having to talk about the Bard to enable the Bard to take notice and intervene. Big difference between thought and what turned out to be a specific condition of Bard' intervention. However this is indeed a matter of interpretation and I indeed do not claim that it was definately Sve Noc with no chance of Bard. With the sisters being narrated by Cat as always being in the back of her mind and listening to her thoughts, them being the cause sounds much more reasonable than Bard being able of also reading all Named' thoughts though even on plot-relevant internal monologue.

I don't think it's the Bard's doing as in she literally read Cat's memories and selectively cut them out. I think it's a passive effect the memories themselves have. Like how Dead King did not need an occasion to read Masego's mind for his memories, for these memories by themselves to take him over as a shard of him. Like we have literal precedent for Arcadian shard memory bundles having this mechanic – activate on access.

> We hope, or rather we assume. We've seen one undead elf with a Name and if they follow fey

rules of royalty meaning power they also have a lot of power.

Why would they? Fae are fae, nothing else is like fae titles. That was a very old Named elf, that he's also royalty isn't any more relevant than Hye's mom being the trainer of Emerald Swords is relevant to Hye's power, as far as we know.

Again, you're making wild assumptions about potential mechanics that don't have even a hint of evidence pointing towards them in the text. You are just... making them up. Additional complexity.

> Yes, but would people calling her Black Queen be such a drive while Grey Knight wasn't an option because no one called her that?

That discussion was of potential possible Names she might acquire in the future. If she started doing knight shit while dressed in grey, some people might have started calling her 'Grey Knight'. But it wouldn't have been enough to form a Name as there's no cultural archetype attached. Nobody would hear 'grey knight' and go 'ah yes one of *those*'. While people clearly have association triggers with "Black Queen" – 'ah yes, a cruel bloody queen reigning in terror'.

When I explain the Name system, I like to do it like this: "imagine you're telling a bedtime story to a child, and so instead of giving characters actual names, you just call them 'the wolf', 'the fox', 'the beggar', 'the king', 'the young knight', 'the princess' and so on".

You say the descriptor, and the audience instantly understands who the character is / what they're like.

Catherine could have been like what the descriptor 'Black Queen' implies. But she isn't, and so the story falls apart. People hear 'Black Queen' and think 'oh yeah I know what this story is', but it isn't that story. Catherine doesn't fit the Name.

Much like how Vivienne stopped being what the audience pictures when you say 'the thief'.

Or like how Amadeus stopped being what the audience pictures when you say 'the black knight'.

(To see this, it's necessary to detach yourself from the story as is and think in more general trope terms. Think video game unit monikers – what's a black knight? what's a thief? what do those do? Think anime, if you will)

> So you agree, then? (Not to put words in your mouth, dread the thought because I hate it when people do this to me. If it's not, say so. It just sounds like you agree with the point I made.) Cultural exclusivity of certain Names tied to that culture is a factor and therefore it's not how the world and those against you view BQ, it's how Callow views its Black Queen. More or less, although an important point here is that the cultural views like this are largely shared. You cannot just wave a hand and change an entire culture's mind.

> The point we were discussing was that you say that the Black Queen had to be with bloodshed, while I argue that the Name by Callow's interpretation of Black Queen might've shifted now to have different requirements. Cat end book 3 and Cat now has a vastly different reputation amongst her own people, though we indeed only see a bit and hear rumours of it so it's not all too reliable what this reputation is exactly. And this facet on her being Callow's to interpret rather than all of Calernia's (, including the hundreds of the League's delegates who see her as the bloody Black Queen Archheretic of this chapter). Callow matters, and maybe now she drow a bit.

The drow don't matter, she's "Losara Queen" and "First Under The Night" to them, they don't give a shit about her Black Queen reputation at all. Well, they matter, but they give +0 as of right now.

As for what Callow thinks of Cat, we've had two 'Callowan everyman' POVs on that – Abigail in Sarcella, who is utterly petrified in Cat's presence, and Erik (I think?) the regular young soldier, also at Sarcella. Who thinks it's fine if the queen's a bit black, they'll just rebel if she crosses the line.

That's with House Insurgent's influence already in place!

So yes, Callow still thinks of her as the original "bloody terror" archetype, same as the rest of the continent. The difference is they're willing to stand by that and in fact find it kinda awesome.

> That's a good point, that's indeed Evil's problem now biting itself in the ass. Though mining does use a lot of dynamite, and they do love the Villains that won a lot in a row and continuously in ways that stuck.

y u p

> That is very true, I had to look up what the hell Hierophant meant in our world and I don't see how it correlates to understanding of god even now. Maybe EE used hierophant by lack of better alternatives as there were very few words that would describe Masego's brand of what he does? Without edgy names like Godbinder, of course. In terms of that the Name needs to mean something understood combined with the sometimes lacklustre simple Names while the ones that are more vague likely being strongly cultural before the Name arose, I cannot argue against this point.

yeah I encountered the word approximately once outside of Guide's context. I guess maybe it means something closer to what Masego does in guideverse XD

> Though that isn't quite a point for or against Black Queen though, as she too is a title without a Name precedent to it thus formed by the interpretation. One which may still be malleable to great degrees because the cultural bed is rapidly shifting, due to Callow going from seeing Cat as an invader, to the Callowan necessary evil against the worse evil that is Proceran occupationism, to now winning and making Callow a continent-wide recognised international power.

Callow never saw Cat as an invader, only as a despised collaborationist and sellout. To invaders. But not an invader herself. (There's a difference because an invader can be strong and awesome while still being an invader, but a

cowardly sellout who is strong and awesome and brave is a cognitive dissonance. That's what Amadeus was banking on) ...Though this isn't really relevant to the point either way lmao

The thing is, the Black Queen is still seen in Callow as just that – bloody and terrible and about to incinerate her enemies. Just also clever and awesome and good in the process? It makes sense in context (c) Callowans

> That's a bit of an assumption on whether Names are truly part of Roles and whether Akua is really completely correct on this. Of course people also fill Roles, f.e. Cat being Hero more often than Villain when dealing with the Evil guys, though that doesn't mean that Roles overshadow or underly Names. Nor that Roles could grant things that we know Names to get and do.

...It's also in the Prologue epigraph, the part on the origin of Names (which I regard as overall religious propaganda nonsense, but provides us with basic terminology). Never once do Roles get referenced in a way that you suggest.

I can drop the word if it's so much of a problem. What Catherine has is *narrative weight*. Narrative weight is ALSO something that Named have, by virtue of being Named, as a Name grants it to them automatically. Narrative weight is the underlying mechanic of how all the narrative gears turn in Guide. An event that has little narrative weight concentrated around it will happen in accordance with regular laws of physics and probability. An event that has more will find itself warped in accordance with what everyone's imagination completes it as.

Notably, in Arcadia there's no such thing as 'regular laws of physics and probability'. In Creation, narrative weight has to work against the resistance of mundanity. In Arcadia, you just get whichever outcome gets the most imagination points, even if it's only a few of them either way. If there's none, aka nobody cares, the event just doesn't happen at all. A tree that falls in the woods where no-one can hear it makes no sound, in Arcadia.

In Creation, you need to have a lot of weight to warp events. I again insist that the incident with Pallas did not require a lot of warping – the only coincidence is that she's the kind of person to get inspired by Cat and gets along with Basilia well enough for them to agree to share the army. Nobody asked the army – it's Helike, it runs on discipline.

But Cat, yes, has enough weight to count in a pattern of three. Because there are stories told about her and because there will be stories told about her centuries later, even if there's no Name that fits. A Name often goes with it, hell, there's narrative weight to the meta fact of there being a Name there period, but if it's not there it's not there.

> When William convinced the Stygian slaves to declare themselves free (and conveniently join him in the fight), that he could nigh certainly successfully do this was accredited to his Name. If someone without a Name filling the same Role would've tried it, then there was a good chance of failure, being interrupted halfway the conversation or the Stygians not aiding him to instead do something like conquer the immediate region to call their new home or move to some island after trying to enforce Jon Snow's execution. Sorry, other franchise. But success wouldn't have been certain.

Mhm. Narrative weight.

> We've seen this in Grem One-eye's interlude on the Vale of Red Flowers vs the Iron Prince. That how the very statistics of battle and way that things worked out were massively different for a cavalry charge (A Role) and one spearheaded by a Named. The Role would've still seen the reckless charge likely kill more Procerans than Legion soldiers as Grem's experience in these battles without Names told him, but thanks to the Name providence or Story ensured success things were vastly different despite the Roles being the same.

> Or, simply put: If you throw a Named off a cliff, they're certainly not dead. Would the same apply to a Role when in the frame of the Story being woven and followed they should survive? Vague, but by my interpretation on Named powers the Role should still be bound to the statistically likely outcome of such an act for

normal people. Entitled to last second save by a Named, yes, but also still bound to gravity and the effects thereof. No special powers or saving for the non-Named.

You're using the word "Role" in a way that doesn't make sense to me again. Can you rephrase that without using the word?

> Which brings us back to where this part of the discussion started: Cat getting 2000 horsemen by her thresher Named power Story-influence.

* by the law of the narrative, you mean. Names are incidental to it.

> A Role can still raise an army of loyal volunteers of their own country if they're queen and have the coin, and they could get a group of these horsemen by virtue of their presence and acts and if they can pay them, of course. You can survive a fall from a cliff, depending on the how.

What you seem to mean by 'a Role' has absolutely no clear referent in the story so far.

> But what we've seen here is too smooth and orchestrated in a Story in Cat's favour with an already credited to Cat power of thresher and/or making the best talent fiercely loyal to her by Name and presence to not be her Name rather than a mere Role. What we see here is someone unconscious thrown down several hundred feet, yet apparently surviving.

Not a power. A story. A story of a thresher. It's not the same thing. The power is just Cat's charisma and momentum of object level events (she is currently gathering a coalition against the Dead goddamn King, no-one can argue with that in-universe). The additional push comes from how potent a story it is, not anything to do with Cat's metaphysical status. Any no-name in Cat's position with her skill with oratory would get the same benefits, it's a function of what's happening, not who Cat is.

> Which is why I think Cat still/already has a Name, even if it's not the three Aspects variant that we know. God-patroned might make completely different Named, without overuse weakening Aspects maybe.

Three Aspects is the only variant of Named that exists. Everything else is called something else.

> If parts of your posts + reaction have been left out in the above, I either agree or no longer remember what we were arguing about and/or have nothing to say on it. Which, considering the length of these monster posts ought to be for the best.

AGREED

[Liliet](#)

Okay, so a part of my reply got eaten by careless use of angled brackets. tl;dr: if I start acting like a superheated kettle myself, please give me a second chance by telling me I am, too.

And I'm very happy to have this discussion be civilized, too ♥

[Mammon](#)

Replying here as the option to reply has once again vanished from the discussion string.

>OH MOOD

I'm copypasting this post to notepad to reply right there lmao

So true, I myself just opened the page twice. One for the comment, the other for your post.

>as proof I point to how there's been absolutely no divine fiat in who does or does not get Names. Only story logic.

Story logic might be their fiat. Kairos's death and standing ovation returned the rumours of the Gods being an audience to be entertained. They might hold the reins to ensure that neither side ever wins by exploiting a Name surfacing or for the wrong people to get Names. What the difference and line between the Gods and Providence or Story are

is vague. If providence controls the triggering of a Name, then it holds some control if only to prevent finite doom from applying too often.

The gods may be synonymous with this, as there does seem to be a rule on that they get to meddle with equal balancing measure by the other side as a result. Providence is likely this meddling by the Gods Above, though I wonder how much the Gods Below since gotten as a due for Cat's story or if they other Villains really screwed Cat over in the balancing of things. However, where the Gods end and Creation begins is quite vague indeed.

>In Worm, the creatures are just that – living creatures that can still be killed by other creatures.

The beings on Creation cannot possibly do anything to harm Gods Above or Below. And their point is not self-preservation/procreation/continuing their life-cycle, but having a wager settled. The levels are completely different.

I meant more in how in Worm, it has been found impossible (except for couldron's chemicals) to trigger a superpower on command. You cannot bring it down to 'We've got a Story of the Convenient Villain-killer that grants a Name to someone decorated for their efforts against Praes's initial attack, then gets double-knighted by our ruler and has to get any magical item that gives them brand recognition. And then they are nigh assured victory against Villains with Praes' initial victory that got the Named attention as the first in the Pattern of Three. There's always someone befitting condition one, we collect items for condition three and I can do condition two, so we've got making this Named down to a science now.'

This could be a matter of the Gods holding some control or fiat, to prevent the simulation that they're running from running itself by its internal intelligent beings finding the bugs and exploits of the simulation and exploiting them to the utmost. A computer simulation with active AI does requires some oversight until the simulation has been proven perfect enough. Which likely wouldn't involve Named at all.

>You said 'a Name requires a bestowal'. See above: I still disagree on that.

Well, I suppose that is a matter of different interpretations and not yet enough by EE specified truth on the matter to make it anything but. I respect your opinion, and can see the possibility that it will indeed be proven to be so in Book 6.

>This is Cat in-universe using metaphor/allegory. She doesn't mean that they're literally an entire race of Named, she means 'kind of like they are an entire race of Named'.

Which begs the question of where the confines and definition of a Name starts and stops. The noble titles are technically Names, though of another world. The fey are heavily bound to Story, as Named are. Their titles are always capitalised, as Names are. They operate by a different system, but they are still Named. Not three Aspect Named as we know them, but not quite non-Named like demons either.

>Yeah, note how Cat did in fact get to say 'no' to a Choir and just go home after that.

No, think even more basic. Do not look at A Practical Guide to Evil, look at the definition and interpretation of free will and making a choice. If you would've made the 'correct' choice anyway by your own will and reasoning, but the situation is so that anything but that choice would've ended badly or wasn't an option, would it still be free will and a choice?

If you get a choice of Yes or No and choosing No results in your death or the program indefinitely giving you a choice of whether you're sure or the option to come back to choose Yes yet being trapped in the previous area until you choose Yes, is it really a choice?

My opinion: No matter if your answer would be Yes without even knowing that No wasn't an option, the mindwashing aura of the Hashmallim inherently violates the concept of free will and make it so that their choices aren't actually choices on a philosophical level of the interpretation of free will and free choice. Even though William would've said yes regardless, technically he didn't get a free will choice. Cat didn't play by this scenario, she simply broke the rules by killing the one asking the question, stealing his key and walking through the gate without accepting the conditions.

>Sabah said that she was born to her Name.
Literally. Google
site:practicalguidetoevil.wordpress.com I was born
to mine",

Hm, nope. Google gives me nothing but an annoyingly consistent trend to only show book 5 results. And searching for it with this site's search option gives every chapter that uses the word "I", a.k.a. all of them. And I think it's trolling me by just giving the latest chapters regardless of what I search for, because looking for other terms too give me the last chapter right away.

Reading her Extra Chapter Beast, Sabah seems to suggest that she wasn't a Name rather than just a Role before, and reading through the first book for this bit of knowlege is proving annoyingly fruitless. The wiki says its a Name, but that could be an assumption. Now I'm even more confused on Cursed, as even it being a Name is now pulled into question. The only thing I could confirm about her was that she was born to a blood ritual's curse that a Warlock made, which shouldn't be an automatic Name as that would make all of her siblings and kids Cursed too.

>Like how Dead King did not need an occasion to read Masego's mind for his memories, for these memories by themselves to take him over as a shard of him. Like we have literal precedent for Arcadian shard memory bundles having this mechanic – activate on access.

I took from Tikoloshe's theories on the Dead King's continued survival that it wasn't the Arcadian knowledge rather than the knowledge of DK's apotheosis itself that was trapped. You read the book he wrote (which ought to be regular paper or being warded and analysed by the reader before reading it) and try to reach lichdom yourself using the knowledge and rituals therein described, and you play straight into the Dead King's hands giving him another powerful arcanist body to work with. He likely travelled to Arcadia to add these memories into his own echoes too and maybe even changed the echoes to encourage people to find him and extract the knowledge, probably. It's not necessarily anything that had to do with Arcadian knowledge stealing.

>Why would they? Fae are fae, nothing else is like fae titles. That was a very old Named elf, that he's also royalty isn't any more relevant than Hye's mom being the trainer of Emerald Swords is relevant to Hye's power, as far as we know.

Read back, found this little tidbit. "You bailed out of Creation is what you did," she said. "You took your pretty little kingdom and fled right into Arcadia. And boy, was she pissed when she realized it. Wiped out two cities in rage.", Book 2 epilogue. And the confusing way that the Deodraithe and people have been talking about them with f.e. "There is no relation between drow and elves, mind you," the shade noted. "I've read the former take the sobriquet of 'dark elves' quite badly, given that of the two they are the race truly native to Calernia."

I stand corrected, the elves apparently came out of Arcadia the second time around, their kingdom partly or kinda sits in Arcadia and William got chased by fey hunters in the Bloom that was also Arcadia or fey monsters somehow, but they indeed do not originally come out of Arcadia. Kinda. So I stand corrected, elves are not of fey ancestry.

>That discussion was of potential possible Names she might acquire in the future. If she started doing knight shit while dressed in grey, some people might have started calling her 'Grey Knight'. But it wouldn't have been enough to form a Name as there's no cultural archetype attached. Nobody would hear 'grey knight' and go 'ah yes one of those. While people clearly have association triggers with "Black Queen" – 'ah yes, a cruel bloody queen reigning in terror'.

Now I'm going to have to quote something back at you that you said: "Again, you're making wild assumptions about potential mechanics that don't have even a hint of evidence pointing towards them in the text. You are just... making them up. Additional complexity." You're being just as guilty of this from time to time. Like now.

Not only does Grey Knight (in a world with a White and Black Knight with some pretty obvious archetypes attached to them) sound like a very obvious archetype for all to understand, it's even more obvious than Black Queen being an archetype of a Queen reigning with terror. Black Queen without

context could also refer to a tragically hated or martyred queen, while the Red Queen would be a much more obvious archetype reference to the kind of queen you're describing. (Even without Alice in Wonderland.)

There's no proof on this claim, and vaguer names like Mirror Knight and Painted Knife contradict this base necessity of an archetype having to be this obvious and not being filled in by a culture's interpretation of it. Mirror Knight likely refers to Perseus who slayed Medusa with a mirror shield, though 'mirror knight' would hardly be this greek hero's archetype descriptor. Same for Ashen Priestess not directly referring to healing priests of Good, Hedge Wizard, Myrmidon, Red Fox, Skein, etc. Even more general names like Sentinel and Pilgrim leave something to the imagination rather than being an archetype without cultural historical background being necessary. Many names like the Fortunate Fool or Lone Swordsman indeed refer directly to the archetype that is very clear to understand, but it's not a necessity as we've seen.

Even if Grey Knight wouldn't be an obvious thing to understand once you see the Named and they introduce themselves to you, just their reputation should allow you to make the Named and the Name synonymous at least within that generation. Cat is a Queen and she does dress in black after a long reputation of being dressed in black as part of her recognisable traits as Squire. Saying Queen + Black = Black Queen is her name and might be her Name is pretty obvious, even if people weren't already calling her that without the Name.

Granted, Pilgrim holding the Grey part of the balance as we've seen in the latest chapter might've prevented any other Grey from arising (despite Pilgrim not really being the neutral party of balance), if saturation and Story balance are facets of Creation granting Names. So Grey Knight might've been impossible, but not for the reasons you're mentioning.

In this, Black Queen being not bloody (Red Queen) but exactly the kind of queen that Cat is being right now could just as easily support her Name of Black Queen.

[Mammon](#)

Okay, for some reason my reply decided to post itself as I was writing it. Odd. At least I didn't lose all this writing to it suddenly collapsing itself. Continuing on...

In this, Black Queen being not bloody (Red Queen) but exactly the kind of queen that Cat is being right now could just as easily support her Name of Black Queen. The queen that isn't glorious or noble or forgiving, but the one that does what has to be done and gets the win when mere shining heroes aren't enough. The Villain redeemed fighting with the heroes, as Cat planned and Pilgrim feared during their first real peace talks and her first admission letter to the Grand Alliance.

>Catherine could have been like what the descriptor 'Black Queen' implies. But she isn't, and so the story falls apart. People hear 'Black Queen' and think 'oh yeah I know what this story is', but it isn't that story. Catherine doesn't fit the Name.

Unless, see above, she does. Interpretation of Names and archetypes, it's vaguer that you make them out to be. In this, your assumptions are as unbased as you claim of mine. Especially when we consider Roles, which would take a lot of wind out of your argument's sails as what you're saying should be more the Role that someone holds in the Story rather than the Name that they hold as an individual.

Names do seem to be a lot more flexible than we give them credit for. The first Tyrant created Helike and made it persist, Kairos chaotically destroys. They inherently differ in their archetype while claiming the same Name. Name and Role seem to have some synergy, but the Name isn't purely and solely the archetype rather than a broad descriptor that the individual, the situation and their Role in the story make them to be. Even for one person, the likes of Ranger and Archer can decide whether they fall in the archetype of good or evil to be considered not Neutral but good as the Vagrant Spear showed.

>More or less, although an important point here is that the cultural views like this are largely shared. You cannot just wave a hand and change an entire culture's mind.

Yes, but my point is, Cat hasn't waved her hand yet since book 3 we've been seeing that Callow, her culture and bed of her Name probably, has been changing its mind about her. In Book 1 she was still a Praesi born in Callow, in Book 3 she was the lesser evil necessary for now and established by Praes as a vassal queen, but now Callow doesn't distrust her like they did before. Even their House of Light rejected the other Houses of Light and declared themselves Insurgent to reject the claim of Archheretic to be Cat.

We've been hearing rumours of Callow shifting all the more in Cat's favour and the culture of Callow seeing her more and more as a saviour and true accepted queen, rather than the bloody warmonger that they still saw her as in Book 3. We've been seeing more and more hints that Callow is changing its mind on Cat decisively these last two books. The very requirement that you're claiming is being fulfilled as seen in EE's writing.

>As for what Callow thinks of Cat, we've had two 'Callowan everyman' POVs on that – Abigail and Erik (I think?)

Big difference between Abigail Who Balks at Success and your everyday Callowan, and a just as big difference between meeting Cat face to face and hearing of her through rumours. Remember that even the Levant leaders thought that the entire fey invasion in Callow were but bolstered rumours, so imagine how little the people really hear of everything going on. What they hear is Procer trying to annex Callow which they balk at, and Cat saying Nope to that. They hear of Procer proclaiming Cat the Arch-heretic, and their own House declaring themselves independent from the rest, obviously hearing House Insurgent's view on this first and foremost.

As we can take from the banners and the adding of crow wings and such to them, voluntarily and with praise, the soldiers actually love and believe in Cat. Moreso than I'd say the Callowans back home do. There's a delay between what people should think of her and them thinking it, but Callow is little by little warming up more and more to Cat as not just the bloody invader they need. The PoV from the actual peasants from book 4 prologue:

"The hero was almost nauseated. They said the villain ruling Callow had nailed hundreds to crosses after slaying her rival, made them grisly ornaments along the road. The merchant should have been appalled, but if anything he sounded grudgingly approving."

"Aye, and the Black Queen killed her dead," Albert grunted. "She's a hard one, make no mistake, but these are bad times. Hard is what we need. Even Jehan the Wise hung himself some princes. Seven and one, like in the song."

And that was mere chapters after Cat rejected the Black Queen position you're talking about. That was when the most recent fighting had still found place in Callow, rather than Callowans hearing of victories and politics without it destroying their back yard and killing their children. Now add a year, dwarven coin lessening war taxes (taxes are inevitably the most intrinsic part of a monarch's reputation amongst its people), the Wasteland immigration and influence being lessened if not completely cut off, Cat's Callow being a signatory of the Grand Alliance rather than at risk of Proceran annexation, etc.

>Callow never saw Cat as an invader, only as a despised collaborationist and sellout.

Potato potato, pronounced differently. They saw Cat as the Black Knight finding a Callowan to be a Praesi leader for them while not inherently being a foreigner. They saw her as a Praesi lapdog when she first came in said to be their new queen, leading wasteland soldiers and bringing tower mintage gold. Whatever the case, this has been gradually changing, and massively once Callow and Praes were no longer vassalaged, in federation or even with a trade agreement.

>Never once do Roles get referenced in a way that you suggest.

Or yours. See how that might be a bit of a troublesome point when you're considering your interpretation of Roles to be supported by the story when they haven't been. Remember: I'm the one claiming that Roles cannot give you Name-power threshed armies by providence just because they are your Role, with you claiming that they can by disagreeing and opposing this. But I've yet to see supporting proof for this.

Now, with the new chapter it's been confirmed that Cat indeed does not have a Name at this moment, contrary to previous chapters being vaguer in terminology, so as it turns out providence does give 2000 horsemen to unnamed with a neat bow wrapped around in it in the form of no mass desertion and unruliness. But before that chapter, there was no such confirmed event yet.

Calling it narrative weight would've helped a bit pre-epilogue, because Roles are an actual thing in the guideverse and you were attaching unfounded traits and abilities to them, though I still lament that the epilogue now confirms that Named aren't quite as special in bending Creation as they were initially said to be. We've seen Grem's PoV saying how it's different with Named. We've seen other cases where something never works when Named are involved. But now, Named just seem a lot less special and important to me. They're just a convenient power-up now, not a vital ingredient of Creation using Story at all. Why even have Names in your simulation if that's the case?

>You're using the word "Role" in a way that doesn't make sense to me again. Can you rephrase that without using the word?

Going back to my Mario and Peach example from a comment before, a Story would have important Roles (like damsel in distress) that wouldn't have to be Names. Those would be Roles, and Names when involved in a story would also get Roles. In a pattern of three, one Named gets the Role of initial victor, while the other Named gets the Role of inevitable victor.

In this mess, Cordelia holds the Role of ruler of Procer. But this wouldn't entitle them to Name-related providence and abilities. If Kairos tells Cordelia that she stands no chance of victory, her power wouldn't increase as it did for Saint. A Role is a part in a Story that can befall a Named or non-Named, and by interaction with a Named the Role ought to follow the pattern by this Named's influence. Similarly, a Named has the providence of swooping in at the last second, but unless they too have a Name a Role wouldn't be entitled to survive and hold out until the last second when attacked.

If there's no Name on either side, providence shouldn't see to the Roles working perfectly beyond the abilities of their natural talents and actions, and neither Pallas nor Cat have Names. Making it odd that Cat managed to do this without a Name, as it goes against previously established effects of Named on Creation and Stories when they are apparently not actually necessary to be part of it. Returning me to the nihillistic conclusion of Why even have Names in your simulation if that's the case?

If this happened in a story without Named like Lord of the Rings, sure. That's called plot and no one escapes it, just ask Deadpool. But in the guideverse, I lament that plot also exists when Story is a real law of Narrative in this universe. Named used to be the explanation, but apparently they're just an unnecessary addition to Creation's workings. Is it really too much to ask for things like free will, individuality, imperfect information gathering and funding to apply when Named aren't involved, in a story that has shown us exactly those things when they fit in worldbuilding and Cat's kingdom management issues?

[Liliet](#)

On reread of my post,

> Names are a meta-level thing that reflects object level facts. A person's attitude towards their Name is a meta-level fact per se

Nah, that's me confusing myself. A person's attitude towards anything, including their own Name, is an object level fact. It gets weight on a scale, like any other fact. I suspect in any Name with an adjective 'reluctant' (we haven't seen those but that doesn't mean they don't exist), it would in fact count in favor of the Name, not against it, if the person didn't want it...

[Mammon](#)

Don't worry, I often read back my uneditable posts around here and don't even know what I meant myself. I know the feeling. And yes, I can see that being the case.

On the below, reading it back I can see this being hard to understand by my vague phrasing so allow me to rewrite:

>Yeah, I'm going with the terminology used in-universe and in WoG. Note how an elf Named we've met has worked the exact same way as 'human, orc and goblin' Named do – three Aspects and all. And a ratling Named, too. You'd think if anyone would have a different system... but nope, species appears to be entirely irrelevant.

I meant as in that the three aspect Named are the lowest bar, the only one feasible for mortals to attain. Unless of course they are literally part of a god ascending, like Cat. Ratlings are still mortals and even more limited, and elves need not be that much more powerful than humans. There might be other subsections, kinds and designs of Named that need bigger, older or more extraordinary triggers or patrons. Or even that at a certain point you get so powerful that you ascend Name limitations and can start designing and redesigning them as we may have seen with Saint.

>Cursed. Sabah was born to it.

This is a bit vague by lack of chapters on it, but Sabah was born to a curse which was likely why she got the transitional Name of Cursed. Similar to how Killian was born a half-elf and potentially could've gotten this transitional Name because of it and the troubles she had with using magic thanks to her ancestry. I don't think they ever said Sabah was born Named at all, or that the lychantropy she got came at the exact same time as her Name.

Addition needed for clarification: Killian was an example of in-universe already cursed and powered beings without a Name, and with the Wasteland's nonsense and experiments (such as the intelligent tigers still living around there) the lychantropy is likely a 'normal' thing there as in not necessarily Name-related.

[Liliet](#)

> I meant as in that the three aspect Named are the lowest bar, the only one feasible for mortals to attain. Unless of course they are literally part of a god ascending, like Cat. Ratlings are still mortals and even more limited, and elves need not be that much more powerful than humans. There might be other subsections, kinds and designs of Named that need bigger, older or more extraordinary triggers or patrons. Or even that at

a certain point you get so powerful that you ascend Name limitations and can start designing and redesigning them as we may have seen with Saint.

Named who get domains are still Named. (And what Saint had was in technical terms a domain)

The mechanic you're suggesting here shows no evidence of existing.

[Liliet](#)

Also on reread,

> If you're going into 'the writer is actually secretly wrong about their own magic system's terminology and mechanics' I'm afraid I cannot help you there.

Amended to "if you're going into that, that's a very strong claim that you'll need to back up with strong evidence that the system is internally inconsistent the way the writer formulates it".

[Liliet](#)

P.S. Sabah had gone to the orc god to gain control over her werewolf powers, not to get a Name. That part was an unpleasant surprise.

[Liliet](#)

My turn to reply to an earlier post to make it easier to read!

> So true, I myself just opened the page twice. One for the comment, the other for your post.

I recommend my method, where I answer as I read~

> Story logic might be their fiat.

Too consistent. It's not fiat if it's consistent and people can exploit it as known mechanisms.

> Kairos's death and standing ovation returned the rumours of the Gods being an audience to be entertained.

They evidently are! What kind of audience gets entertained by seeing the same thing over and over again though? You'd think the minute people caught on to a consistent way to get a Name they'd change it to shake it up... but no, the mechanisms ARE CONSISTENT.

> They might hold the reins to ensure that neither side ever wins by exploiting a Name surfacing or for the wrong people to get Names.

You seem to have an impression that there is a "wrong" way for a simulation experiment to go.

As for not having it end prematurely, that seems to be Bard's job.

> What the difference and line between the Gods and Providence or Story are is vague. If providence controls the triggering of a Name, then it holds some control if only to prevent finite doom from applying too often.

?

Providence/story/narrative is an automatic mechanism. It was set up by the Gods because everything in Creation was. And then they pressed the 'start' button and sat down to watch as it unfolds on its own.

"The influence of the gods tends to be on the subtle side" (c) WoE. Picking who gets a Name and who doesn't isn't subtle.

As for the difference, the terminology usage seems to be that providence is specifically positive luck, things turning out your way, and more specifically than that things turning out your way because of a heroic or pseudo-heroic story (the heroic/pseudo-heroic thing is the part where characters start to differ in how they use the word).

> The gods may be synonymous with this, as there does seem to be a rule on that they get to meddle with equal balancing measure by the other side as a result. Providence is likely this meddling by the Gods Above, though I wonder how much the Gods Below since gotten as a due for Cat's story or if the other Villains really screwed Cat over in the balancing of things. However,

where the Gods end and Creation begins is quite vague indeed.

Providence is non-sentient. It can be cheated. It's a force, not a living creature's will.

> I meant more in how in Worm, it has been found impossible (except for couldron's chemicals) to trigger a superpower on command.

Oh yes, it hasn't. Meanwhile in Creation it is absolutely possible.

> You cannot bring it down to 'We've got a Story of the Convenient Villain-killer that grants a Name to someone decorated for their efforts against Praes's initial attack, then gets double-knighted by our ruler and has to get any magical item that gives them brand recognition. And then they are nigh assured victory against Villains with Praes' initial victory that got the Named attention as the first in the Pattern of Three. There's always someone befitting condition one, we collect items for condition three and I can do condition two, so we've got making this Named down to a science now.'

Actually that's exactly how the more deft story-weavers, particularly those on a heroic side that don't get screwed over by hubris the minute they relax automatically, think. "Alright so my companions bantering makes them comic relief and therefore basically invincible, these are the ones I'll be sending on risky missions then".

As for getting a Name specifically, that's how Akua did it. "Okay so to get a Name of Diabolist I need to fit the story of a diabolist. What do diabolists do? I'm going to do this, this and that, hopefully it'll be enough, if not I'll just keep pouring oil into the fire until it triggers".

Oh and of course the inevitable "how do I get the Name of Warlock? Oh simple, kill the previous one". "How do I get the Name of Dread Emperor/Empress? Oh simple, claim the Tower from the previous one". Etc.

> "And then they are nigh assured victory against Villains with Praes' initial victory that got the Named attention as the first in the Pattern of Three"

For a pattern of three there needs to be a rivalry. That said, those have been planned out and exploited?

This could be a matter of the Gods holding some control or fiat, to prevent the simulation that they're running from running itself by its internal intelligent beings finding the bugs and exploits of the simulation and exploiting them to the utmost. A computer simulation with active AI does requires some oversight until the simulation has been proven perfect enough. Which likely wouldn't involve Named at all.

> "There's always someone befitting condition one, we collect items for condition three and I can do condition two, so we've got making this Named down to a science now."

Kairos made himself a Hierarch.

I'm serious.

People do this in-universe. People have done this on-screen.

> Which begs the question of where the confines and definition of a Name starts and stops. The noble titles are technically Names, though of another world.

They aren't, technically or not.

> The fey are heavily bound to Story, as Named are. Their titles are always capitalised, as Names are.

And? Most noble titles are capitalized in this story. Cat's a Countess of Marchford, not a countess of Marchford. Anne Kendall was Baroness Dormer, not baroness Dormer. Cordelia is Prince of Rhenia, Princess of Salia and First Prince, not prince of Rhenia, princess of Salia and first prince.

As for 'heavily bound to story, as Named are' – yes. They have this in common with Named. Like how goats give milk, similarly to cows. Doesn't make goats a variety of cow.

> They operate by a different system, but they are still Named. Not three Aspect Named as we know them, but not quite non-Named like demons either.

How exactly did demons enter this???

> If you get a choice of Yes or No and choosing No results in your death or the program indefinitely giving you a choice of whether you're sure or the option to come back to choose Yes yet being trapped in the previous area until you choose Yes, is it really a choice?

I'm confused. Who is getting trapped where?

> My opinion: No matter if your answer would be Yes without even knowing that No wasn't an option, the mindwashing aura of the Hashmallim inherently violates the concept of free will and make it so that their choices aren't actually choices on a philosophical level of the interpretation of free will and free choice.

For the regular people, yes. For the heroes, the aura actually doesn't do that. It just doesn't. The effect isn't on. There isn't anything for Hashmallim to brainwash them WITH. They don't have the imperative.

Overall though I can agree that the Hashmallim specifically don't give their chosen champions much choice once they've been chosen. Less of a 'getting trapped' thing and more of a 'entering a cutscene' thing lmao. How was it relevant to the overall discussion again?

> Hm, nope. Google gives me nothing but an annoyingly consistent trend to only show book 5 results.

RIP. Let me try... Okay yeah I definitely misremembered the phrasing.

...i tried again with 'sabah name born' and there we have it:

> "I was born into mine, back when I was the Cursed," she grunted.

...this was quoted in comments to Beast lmao but thankfully with indication of actual chapter. Fuller quote:

> "Some kind of Name thing for you," she gravelled. "Squires are so bleeding dramatic. Getting Amadeus settled into his Role was a pain too, though, no reason you'd be different."

>

> I raised an eyebrow. "Your Name was easier?"

>

> "I was born into mine, back when I was the Cursed," she grunted. "By the time I became the Captain, no one was dumb enough to challenge me for it."

> Reading her Extra Chapter Beast, Sabah seems to suggest that she wasn't a Name rather than just a Role before, and reading through the first book for this bit of knowlege is proving annoyingly fruitless.

...so I also remembered that there was a WoG on the topic.

> The Cursed was a transitional Name, much like Apprentice and Squire. Her Role eventually matured into a different Name, that of "the Captain".

aaaand there's more on the subject of Names and Roles right there!

> Roles don't change, only Names do. Though aspects do change when the Name does, so there would be a difference in powers.

...I'm going to search for every mention of "Role" here.

> The Squire Role isn't always Evil, no. It largely depends on who they'll be squiring for, though anyone squiring for Black is going to be Evil.

> There's no Role that's outright called Hero, much like there is none called Villain. Roles do change the appearance of the person they belong to. Usually the changes are minor, and they always reflect what the person expects someone with that Role should look like. We've already seen that Black is a lot older than what he looks like (partially because Names hinder aging, partially because he has the same mindset as he did when he had that appearance) and Captain is actually a little older.

> The influence of the gods is usually on the subtle side. You're right that Evil Roles usually let people do whatever they feel like doing – that's because they're,

in that sense, championing the philosophy of their gods. Every victory for Evil is a proof that that philosophy is the right path for Creation to take. Nearly all Names on the bad side of the fence have a component that involves forcing their will or perspective on others (the most blatant examples of this being Black and Empress Malicia, who outright have aspects relating to rule in their Names). There's a reason that Black didn't so much as bat an eyelid when Catherine admitted to wanting to change how Callow is run. From his point of view, that kind of ambition is entirely natural. Good Roles have strict moral guidelines because those Names are, in fact, being guided: those rules are instructions from above on how to behave to make a better world. Any victory for Good that follows from that is then a proof of concept for the Heavens being correct in their side of the argument

> "Rashid was part of a Praesi faction that believes in old school villainy." While there are certainly advantages to going the old way – it usually feeds into Roles – there are also drawbacks. Usually lethal ones."

> A Role is the function of a Name in the pattern (as in, a Tyrant is meant to rule and a Thief to steal).

OH LOOK WE HAVE AN ACTUAL DEFINITION

> Catherine wasn't born a mage, and will never learn to use sorcery. Using Legion mages as a point of reference is a bad idea, though, since the entire point of legionary magic is for every one of them to be able to do a few specific spells so they can be used en masse – a mage or warlock having gone through a proper apprenticeship would make them look like incompetent flunkies. The Name tricks displayed so far are something pretty much every Named can do with a little training, save for the necromancy – which is for Evil Names only, and not all of them. The ward recognition isn't even a "trick" per se: any halfway decent spellcaster could do the same. Individuals with Roles are more sensitive to power as a whole, but it should be noted that if Warlock had decided to hide his wards Catherine would never have noticed them. As for the more general comment, keep in mind that a Name isn't really a specific set of powers so much as a pool of energy that can be used in a myriad of ways. The specific tricks characters can use are more a representation of local traditions more than hard limits. The real limiter on Catherine is that there's only so much power she can call on. That's the whole point of Aspects: they allow you to dig deeper into the well. More than that, as a Squire she's closer to the

bottom than the top of the totem pole. She could put forward every scrap of power at her disposal and it still wouldn't be a match for what say Malicia or Warlock can do on an off day.

> We've seen the Empire – more particularly Black – isn't above manipulating public perception but fundamentally warping a culture in the way you're describing would be very, very hard. Keep in mind that this is not a modern era. People travel by horse, and while scrying can make for instant communication word spreads very slowly. And even if somehow someone figured out a way to do it, you're missing the major consequence: the people powered by the old stories, which is the entirety of the cast, would be at risk of losing their own Roles. Names don't exist in a vacuum.

> Adjutant is a Name without precedent in the Empire. No one quite knows what the Role behind it is, or whether or not it's transitional – though some individuals well-versed in Name lore have guesses.

...so I think this should conclude our argument on terminology actually. You really should read through the WoG document, it's stickied on reddit.

> I took from Tikoloshe's theories on the Dead King's continued survival that it wasn't the Arcadian knowledge rather than the knowledge of DK's apotheosis itself that was trapped. You read the book he wrote (which ought to be regular paper or being warded and analysed by the reader before reading it) and try to reach lichdom yourself using the knowledge and rituals therein described, and you play straight into the Dead King's hands giving him another powerful arcanist body to work with. He likely travelled to Arcadia to add these memories into his own echoes too and maybe even changed the echoes to encourage people to find him and extract the knowledge, probably. It's not necessarily anything that had to do with Arcadian knowledge stealing.

Masego didn't read the book and didn't try the rituals. He got Dead King riding his mind just by accessing his memories. Tikoloshe's theories are irrelevant when we have actual precedent happening right there.

> I stand corrected, the elves apparently came out of Arcadia the second time around, their kingdom partly or kinda sits in Arcadia and William got chased by fey

hunters in the Bloom that was also Arcadia or fey monsters somehow, but they indeed do not originally come out of Arcadia. Kinda. So I stand corrected, elves are not of fey ancestry.

^^

> Now I'm going to have to quote something back at you that you said: "Again, you're making wild assumptions about potential mechanics that don't have even a hint of evidence pointing towards them in the text. You are just... making them up. Additional complexity." You're being just as guilty of this from time to time. Like now.

>

> Not only does Grey Knight (in a world with a White and Black Knight with some pretty obvious archetypes attached to them) sound like a very obvious archetype for all to understand, it's even more obvious than Black Queen being an archetype of a Queen reigning with terror. Black Queen without context could also refer to a tragically hated or martyred queen, while the Red Queen would be a much more obvious archetype reference to the kind of queen you're describing. (Even without Alice in Wonderland.)

What do you mean I'm making things up? I'm quoting Word of God to you. Erratic's the one making things up, we're the ones discussing them, yes? I'm just confused at this point.

[Liliet](#)

Ooops, failed to delete a paragraph I wasn't replying to. Shit.

[Mammon](#)

>Too consistent. It's not fiat if it's consistent and people can exploit it as known mechanisms.

>They evidently are! What kind of audience gets entertained by seeing the same thing over and over again though? You'd think the minute people caught on to a consistent way to get a Name they'd change it to shake it up... but no, the mechanisms ARE CONSISTENT.

>You seem to have an impression that there is a "wrong" way for a simulation experiment to go.

As for not having it end prematurely, that seems to be Bard's job.

>Providence/story/narrative is an automatic mechanism. It was set up by the Gods because everything in

Creation was. And then they pressed the 'start' button and sat down to watch as it unfolds on its own.

"The influence of the gods tends to be on the subtle side" (c) WoE. Picking who gets a Name and who doesn't isn't subtle.

As for the difference, the terminology usage seems to be that providence is specifically positive luck, things turning out your way, and more specifically than that things turning out your way because of a heroic or pseudo-heroic story (the heroic/pseudo-heroic thing is the part where characters start to differ in how they use the word).

Once again I'm going to have to reflect your words back at you. You're making assumptions that are ungrounded presented as if they're facts. That the gods are absolute hands-off on a simulation they're running, that the mechanisms are consistent, that there is no hand of the gods in Name-granting at all. All of these are your interpretation without hard evidence while you claim that there is.

That Names are absolutely consistent. Assumption. That the mechanisms are consistent. Definately an assumption. That the influence of the gods is subtle as in; they don't interfere at all with Names and events at all while providence isn't the finger of Above on the scales. Assumption.

My point is, there is no such consistent mechanisms when we look at realistic worldbuilding. Especially considering that this is written by EE who doesn't leave such glaring plotheoles in worldbuilding like that societies should've upscaled and optimised the death weapons they have. If the mechanisms were really consistent, then the majority of Names would be with a clear recipe of creation and strengthening. Not bound to balancing the sides and Named saying it's literally the will of the Gods that these Names and their power came to be (Hanno about Mirror Knight Winter II).

If the mechanics were really so consistent that they are exploitable, some Names would quite literally appear every generation months after the Named's death because the people since gamed its awakening. Cultures would have turned to a Name-farming war machine after just one Named who knows how Names and Stories work, or copy it from a country that does.

Instead, we see a world that remains entertaining and ever shifting because Names aren't exploitable like this. Cat's White Knight trigger and Hanno's are vastly

different, because the trigger of White Knight is evidently one that can come in various ways. (I'm going to assume that Cat's WK wouldn't have somehow involved a boatride.) That mechanism is definately not consistent. Below has a few consistent Due's, but in the creation of Names there are no such hard mechanics as you're assuming there are.

>>> I meant more in how in Worm, it has been found impossible (except for couldron's chemicals) to trigger a superpower on command.

>Oh yes, it hasn't. Meanwhile in Creation it is absolutely possible.

Except it is not because we're not talking about any Good Named that is a consistent presence farmed every generation or every conflict. We don't have a King's Guard who's an always present Named guardian of the First Prince, made by Procer propaganda and then always around to protect whomever holds the throne of Salia.

"Heroes were rare in Procer, at best a once in a generation appearance, and they were treated with distant awe." Chapter Warden I. Doesn't sound like Procer has the slightest idea of how to consistently farm Named, which directly contradicts that these would be consistent mechanics like the 200 Axioms being hard rules for Named engagement. Yet when things are happening that require the ascending of Names as current events do, Named pop up like mushrooms.

Cat killed 5 groups of Named between Book 3 and 4, and Amadeus even more before Book 1. Because these semi-chaotically appeared in reaction to their presence yet according to realistic growth of power once ascended, not according to hard, consistent mechanics. Note: Chaos is chaotic, but on a large scale follows lawful patterns. See diffusion or entrophy. If Names were bound to a hard mechanic, then Amadeus would've timed the emergence of Named to the week precise and known which Names they'd be. Instead we're shown a general reactive nature of Names according to an only partially consistent emergence, which is chaotic rather than consistent.

>Actually that's exactly how the more deft story-weavers, particularly those on a heroic side that don't get screwed over by hubris the minute they relax automatically, think. "Alright so my companions bantering makes them comic relief and therefore basically invincible, these are the ones I'll be sending on risky missions then".

Big difference on the making of Named and the general cliches of already-Named from the Axioms. Falling off a cliff meaning assured survival is a big difference to a regular person doing a thing to ensure that they become Named at all. You are assuming that getting a Name follows the same exploitable nature of what already Named would enjoy using defined cliches of providence and Story that they are bound to, there's no hard basis for this.

Akua was already Heiress, a transitionary Name intended to turn into a different one. Their Name ensures that they will get a Name if they live long enough, it's not the same as a non-Named getting a Name by defined mechanisms to follow. Big difference between a Claimant or Transition Name and getting a Name at all. And getting the Name of a Praesi is your Due, the gimmick of Below, definately not an easy feat. As we see no such thing for the Heroes, this is more a Below thing than a Named thing.

>For a pattern of three there needs to be a rivalry. That said, those have been planned out and exploited?

Yes, but you're kinda taking something from this which isn't at all the argument. Gaming the system so that someone is assured to come into a Name and already be in a Pattern of Three doing this was my point, not that the Pattern of Three itself is an unprecedented exploit.

>Kairos made himself a Hierarch. I'm serious. People do this in-universe. People have done this on-screen.

Kairos has Wish, he's quite literally cheating. And he's a Named using the "I'm a Villain, so I'm unbeatable during the first step of my plan." part, which we've also seen Akua do. I'm not saying that Named once created cannot exploit the system, I'm saying that making Named isn't allowed to be exploited. Kairos cheated and followed the rules of Below as the closest thing to a high priest to them on the continent, and even then there's the chance that Hierarch was an accident or the way that his wish took shape in an to him unknown direction while Kairos would claim it was all according to plan. That's part of scheming villain 101.

>And? Most noble titles are capitalized in this story. Cat's a Countess of Marchford, not a countess of Marchford. Anne Kendall was Baroness Dormer, not baroness Dormer. Cordelia is Prince of Rhenia, Princess of Salia and First Prince, not prince of Rhenia,

princess of Salia and first prince.
As for 'heavily bound to story, as Named are' – yes.
They have this in common with Named. Like how goats
give milk, similarly to cows. Doesn't make goats a
variety of cow.

It does make both goats and cows mammals, which are
amongst others defined by lactating. You keep accusing
me of calling all Named bovines, while I'm saying that
bovines are just a subsection of the larger group of
mammals.

Titles in our grammar are already capitalised by usage
of proper English, so that's more a matter of EE not
bastardising the language for non-fey titles. Doesn't
mean that the titles of the fey aren't also Names
despite them following much to all of the Name patterns
except Aspects.

>How exactly did demons enter this???

They didn't.

>For the regular people, yes. For the heroes, the aura
actually doesn't do that. It just doesn't. The effect
isn't on. There isn't anything for Hashmallim to
brainwash them WITH. They don't have the imperative.

Before he became the Lone Swordsman, William was very
much not a Named. So he was still a regular person.

Even assuming that what you're writing here isn't all
completely assumption, which I think it is. I don't
recall anything defined about the Hashmallim aura in
this regard to support your words, so again you too are
making blind assumptions a dozen. We don't know and
haven't been told whether the Hashmallim can turn off
their aura just like that.

>Overall though I can agree that the Hashmallim
specifically don't give their chosen champions much
choice once they've been chosen. Less of a 'getting
trapped' thing and more of a 'entering a cutscene'
thing lmao. How was it relevant to the overall
discussion again?

This started when I made an off-hand comment on our
argument of whether getting a Name is always voluntary
that, by my opinion of what free will is in real life
philosophical terms, that technically one cannot make a
free choice when brainwashed regardless of what their
initial choice would've been. I think you took it as
much more relevant to the discussion and literal than I

intended it. You said "Oooh, this is an interesting discussion." if you want to Ctrl+F read it back.

>...this was quoted in comments to Beast lmao but thankfully with indication of actual chapter. Fuller quote:

Damn, chapter 7. I even read the part two or three sentences above it looking for this...

Fair enough, though there could be circumstantial bolstering or abbreviating. She was born into her lychantropy, but why wouldn't anyone have smothered the baby if she was a Claimant which logically should've yielded other Claimants too? Cat's awakening as Squire made others Claimants too upon demand, as they apparently weren't around to claim Squire in the four decades before it. And again, wouldn't Sabah's parent and siblings also have to be born into the Name of Cursed if she was considering they too ought to be Warlock-cursed?

>OH LOOK WE HAVE AN ACTUAL DEFINITION. ...so I think this should conclude our argument on terminology actually. You really should read through the WoG document, it's stickied on reddit.

Yes, and I don't see how this changes much. This doesn't oppose my interpretation of Role and doesn't support your argument in our discussion on what influence and importance Roles would have vs Names and over Names. In fact, this nigh seamlessly supports my interpretation of a Role: That it is one's role and function in the Story.

It doesn't state much on the original discussion, which I think we started here:

>> Her fitting into Name events like the Band of Five and gaining the Yew Staff or Fairfax Sword are a lot more Story-pulled than the non-Named actions we see around. Too Story-pulled, even when assuming her Duchess of Moonless Nights title was the Name that explained her role and being controlled into a Story that Keter I and the Everdark clearly were. One doesn't happenstance into those situations at the exact right moment or way without a Name pulling providence, with the Book 5 events being a bit vaguer in this but still suggesting Name plot.

>You are using "Name" to substitute for narrative/Role. Name is just one type of thing that happens around those, not every single thing ever. Yes, Catherine is

having Name-like things happen to her without holding an actual Name, because she is playing a significant Role in the current continental stories and every single action she takes short of wiping herself in the privy has significant narrative weight. This suggests that IF she were to fit into a character archetype groove that exists in-universe she'd get a Name out of that. But there are currently none that she fits, with Black Queen being already tied to a different one.

The main discussion lied in whether Named Roles and non-Named roles would have the same pull and benefit of providence and Story-created events, before the epilogue declared in clear language that Cat had no Name all this time.

As it turned out, you were correct once the epilogue came out. But before that, everything that assumed Roles to hold the same sway and groove that Names got was an assumption, not hard fact. Before that, I assumed that those that don't have a Name wouldn't have a Role that would do essentially the same in terms of influencing Creation and the course of events, and now that that's been debunked it has rendering Names oddly pointless in my eyes aside from a well of power.

>Masego didn't read the book and didn't try the rituals. He got Dead King riding his mind just by accessing his memories. Tikoloshe's theories are irrelevant when we have actual precedent happening right there.

Tikoloshe is basing this on the existence of DK's book and his continued survival, before Masego revealed that he already reaped the memories from Arcadia. That arcadian memories are the only means to be enthralled by DK is an assumption you make, that DK's trapped knowledge by any medium would work is an hypothesis by an in-universe character with millenia of experience.

Don't make this another "All mammals are bovines." argument. That Masego followed one path to the destination doesn't mean that all other paths are incorrect, because there's more ways that lead to Rome. That arcadian knowledge works for DK to hijack you does in no way discredit Tikoloshe's argument rather than support it, and it's no precedent to show and confirm that the book in Praes's hidden library and other means to learn the secret wouldn't have worked.

>What do you mean I'm making things up? I'm quoting Word of God to you. Erratic's the one making things up,

we're the ones discussing them, yes? I'm just confused at this point.

My point is that you too are making a lot of assumptions based on what has been declared, but that you are declaring your assumptions to also be undeniable fact. F.e. you are apparently making the assumption that because arcadian reaped knowledge of DK's ritual works disprove Tilokoshe, which is purely your interpretation rather than what has actually been established and confirmed. Yet you are presenting them as the word of EE himself.

>That discussion was of potential possible Names she might acquire in the future. If she started doing knight shit while dressed in grey, some people might have started calling her 'Grey Knight'. But it wouldn't have been enough to form a Name as there's no cultural archetype attached. Nobody would hear 'grey knight' and go 'ah yes one of those. While people clearly have association triggers with "Black Queen" – 'ah yes, a cruel bloody queen reigning in terror'.

On the specifics that we're talking about here, you are claiming that Cat wouldn't have become the Grey Knight because it doesn't exist if she would've dressed in grey armour (assumption), while she did almost become the Black Queen for being a queen dressed in black, just because you assume that the former wouldn't be an obvious archetype while the latter is (assumption, as we don't know to what extent archetypes are needed and which ones exist in that world).

You are making an outright assumption that the archetype of Black Queen already exists in the guideverse and then being surprised when I call you out on making such an assumption while you've been doing the same about my assumptions. You are making a lot of assumptions you're assuming to be hard in-universe things, too.

And it's especially comments like

>You're thinking in terms of stories and archetypes existing in the real world. But that's not relevant. What's relevant is stories and archetypes existing on Calernia. It's been fairly thoroughly established by now, I think, that there's no precedent for what you're describing and no-one's matching Cat up with 'ah yes one of those' in that way. That story doesn't exist.

that show that you don't seem to see the difference in your assumptions and the hard defined mechanics of what EE established. Not only are stories and archetypes of

our world relevant as EE is basing his on those so we know what he's talking about and what we're dealing with, but you're also making assumptions on what is the case in EE's universe and not. You're outright assuming that the Grey Knight archetype doesn't exist in his world while the Black Queen does, yet presenting this as in-universe confirmed fact rather than your own assumption.

Let's face it, anything that EE hasn't outright mentioned and established in his world isn't necessarily the case in his world. But let's not forget, that applies on all your assumptions too. You're quite often making assumptions that are just as unfounded and out of nowhere as you claim mine to be, yet you seem to not see how these are assumptions or try to make them something that EE said. You've been trying to counter my assumptions with yours while proclaiming yours to be hard facts. Not the case.

(Also, real world archetypes are kind of relevant. As said before, EE's archetypes are based off ours. The Black Knight is hardly unique to his works, same for Pilgrim being pretty much being Merlin and Gandalf; the old mentor archetype from our world.

In this, the stories are bound to be bound to our real world archetypes. The axioms are quite literally things we often see in our fantasy and hero stories.

On the rest, PERSONAL INTERPRETATION rather than argued to be a fact that you have to agree with, I think that he particularly takes inspiration from Exalted (Book 1-3, very fitting for the mentioned demons and exalted/Named comparison and the Fey being nigh identical with EE's personal take on them, even with some names from the Exalted universe being used here.) going over into Warhammer Fantasy (More fitting for armies and politics, with Book 3-5 defined Procer and Levant closely reminiscing the Empire parts and military tone, with the Lyaconese being Kirslev and the ratlings quite literally being the Skaven with their Horned Lords.)

>Yeah, I agree with this. I don't think it's all the way there yet – too many people still think otherwise – but we're witnessing movement in that direction.

This is more a personal interpretation hoping and trusting EE to deliver on this true worldbuilding: Patriotism and that sweet dwarven coin lowering Callow's war taxes, combined with the conflict happening elsewhere while Callowan war has been a while ago, ought to be a big help. Lower taxes = happier

people, regardless of their interpretation of their monarch, ought to be the case. Even a Fairfax will eventually be rebelled against if they raise taxes too high, and even Amadeus got less rebellions and a new generation being a lot more mellow and neutral towards him and Praes thanks to his non-exploit invasion of silent annexation.

>According to Bard, who I don't think was lying, Callowans were already divided on whether Cat was a Praesi sellout or their new hope as of start of book 2, before the confrontation with the heroes in Summerholm. The public opinion began shifting more categorically and universally as news about Marchford spread, as Cat had proven herself actually willing and capable to defend her land and her people. That was all they wanted. They are okay with her being bloody more than she herself is. See: the whole debacle about Bonfire at the start of Book 4.

Kind of exactly what I was saying. Cat being a puppet queen of the Wasteland in Callow's eyes and her being a Named of theirs ruling Callow holds little actual difference when it's the opinion of a country.

>>But I've yet to see supporting proof for this.
>Yeah, quoted above.
Nope, as countered above.

>You can say that. Or I can say that it was actually stated outright multiple times and you just ignored it / forgot it / handwaved it away because you liked your theory too much.

Nope, none of your arguments confirmed your assumptions to be part of the Role definition or for what you claimed Roles could do as opposed to Named&Roles. You merely made assumptions based on a few quotes and defined interpretations, claiming them to not be your own interpretation on what was being said.

>The story is more or less ABOUT how Named aren't all that special. They sort of are, but they make a difference by being in the right place in the right time, not by being inherently cooler than everyone else.

Those quotes are still on what Names are, not confirming your earlier made claims and assumptions on Roles and their extend. Again, you seem to miss where the definitions given end and your assumptions and interpretations begin. Or where the crux of the original

discussion lied: What falls under Names and what under Roles, and where this border lies.

>Alright, so first of all, part of your problem was attributing to Story Power what was actually regular human reactions. See Catherine musing on how people were cheering for Cordelia because of WHAT she was saying, not because of WHO or HOW.

That's not at all what I've been saying. Read the arguments back, and you'll see that I haven't been arguing against people being capable of anything rather than the smoothless way that Creation can make some things happen for Named in a way that isn't possible in real life for plot and convenience sake. Cordelia being cheered for is basic human nature and circumstance as we see it in our world as well, some people joining a Black Queen is too. But 2000/2000 horsemen joining someone that humiliated them instead of 200/2000 or 1821/2000 without any internal discussion or issues on this is a whole different matter.

If Pallas would've bend the knee to Cat with a few guaranteed supporters that would follow her but her having to secure Cat's assurances of some things like wages or the return of their arnaments or having to do politics and pressure to get a few hundred more in the weeks after her declaration of following Cat, then I wouldn't have claimed Named powers at work. But we saw a general making a gesture and all soldiers under their command following suit with zero complications despite there definately being reason for this at an individual level to cause such a non-smoothed pattern of transition.

That's the issue here I think. You're not seeing this difference in what I'm arguing and what you're arguing.

>It's not odd. It's the kind of thing that happens in the real world, too, and we don't have Names or Roles. This is how history really works. People don't need supernatural powers to be charismatic and sway others to their cause.

Because this is not true. This is not combining. People followed others because they were charismatic, yes, I even argued so myself before. The issue lied in the 100% following with no problem when this shouldn't be the case. When Napoleon broke out of prison, his soldiers rallied back to his banner. This was not however a 100% all at once, as we're seeing here.

I bet you you cannot find an instance where ALL of the people that were beaten or humiliated by someone followed them given the right charisma and events. Some can, and the mongols for example strongly relied on this. But not everyone in a neat little bow with just one very storylike event of a general's gesture, which if you'd read back has been my point all along.

>Second, note that Cat is an ex-Named. There is definitely something of an exclusive club that you enter once you get a Name, and even if you lose it, you're still there. You're already part of the game. You don't have that specific power-up, but you've already accumulated narrative weight. Creation already has its sights on you. It's not exclusive to Named, yes, but becoming Named is how you get it 99.(9)% of the time.

This is something I can indeed agree to, however something not argued at the time.

>Have you ever tried to write a story without plot? This is a serious question. Have you ever tried to come up with a story without plot? Have you ever read one?

I meant as in, why would you have plot that isn't tied to Named when you already have Named working by plot given tangible rules and presence? Plot is a necessity of all stories, but in EE's guide there's no need for the vital plot existence of other stories because he has Named as his plot to write the story and do the plot-vital things like story progression and pace while trying to make everything non-Named related all the more realistic than in most stories we see.

>They apply?

You don't get a lot of individuality in the army though. You do what your commanding officer says, and your exercise of free will is called 'insubordination' or 'desertion' and generally gets a death penalty. If your commanding officer personally decides to swear fealty to a foreign monarch and there's nobody higher in the hierarchy to stop them, well, either the entire army mutinies or they don't. You're forgetting such fun facts of human psychology as groupthink, hyping each other up in a crowd, liking to live up to expectations, army mentality.

They apply, except now it's been established that apparently plot also affects all non-Named apparently. All those comments you read in the extra chapters on how cool the non-Named are, that's now wrong because apparently they too still know plot to affect their

outcome. Any accomplishment by someone who isn't Named, just as 'impressive' as a Hero winning in the end by getting a mid-fight power-up. 'Impressive' yet inevitable and therefore hollow.

I'm not forgetting human psychology and groupthink, those have been part of my arguments up to this point. My argument all along has been that what we've seen Cat do and be thrown into have been too Story and plot to fall under those real-life phenomena. Some things that we've seen Cat do are too much plot and too little real life events where real talent and action get real life results.

[Liliet](#)

Part 2

> In this, Black Queen being not bloody (Red Queen) but exactly the kind of queen that Cat is being right now could just as easily support her Name of Black Queen. The queen that isn't glorious or noble or forgiving, but the one that does what has to be done and gets the win when mere shining heroes aren't enough. The Villain redeemed fighting with the heroes, as Cat planned and Pilgrim feared during their first real peace talks and her first admission letter to the Grand Alliance.

You're thinking in terms of stories and archetypes existing in the real world. But that's not relevant. What's relevant is stories and archetypes existing on Calernia. It's been fairly thoroughly established by now, I think, that there's no precedent for what you're describing and no-one's matching Cat up with 'ah yes one of those' in that way. That story doesn't exist.

> Names do seem to be a lot more flexible than we give them credit for. The first Tyrant created Helike and made it persist, Kairos chaotically destroys. They inherently differ in their archetype while claiming the same Name. Name and Role seem to have some synergy, but the Name isn't purely and solely the archetype rather than a broad descriptor that the individual, the situation and their Role in the story make them to be.

As has been said by WoG, the Role of a Tyrant is to grasp power by force and rule maintained by said force. Anything they do more specifically that doesn't interfere with that basic fact, well, doesn't interfere with what their Role is.

> Even for one person, the likes of Ranger and Archer can decide whether they fall in the archetype of good or

evil to be considered not Neutral but good as the Vagrant Spear showed.

Yes, 'cause the underlying Roles of their Names aren't 'be good' or 'be evil'. Unlike for White Knight and the like.

> Yes, but my point is, Cat hasn't waved her hand yet since book 3 we've been seeing that Callow, her culture and bed of her Name probably, has been changing its mind about her. In Book 1 she was still a Praesi born in Callow, in Book 3 she was the lesser evil necessary for now and established by Praes as a vassal queen, but now Callow doesn't distrust her like they did before. Even their House of Light rejected the other Houses of Light and declared themselves Insurgent to reject the claim of Archheretic to be Cat.

>

> We've been hearing rumours of Callow shifting all the more in Cat's favour and the culture of Callow seeing her more and more as a saviour and true accepted queen, rather than the bloody warmonger that they still saw her as in Book 3. We've been seeing more and more hints that Callow is changing its mind on Cat decisively these last two books. The very requirement that you're claiming is being fulfilled as seen in EE's writing.

Yeah, I agree with this. I don't think it's all the way there yet – too many people still think otherwise – but we're witnessing movement in that direction.

> "Aye, and the Black Queen killed her dead," Albert grunted. "She's a hard one, make no mistake, but these are bad times. Hard is what we need. Even Jehan the Wise hung himself some princes. Seven and one, like in the song."

Yep. They're approving of her AS the bloody ruthless queen that she briefly came close to being but ultimately isn't. They're wrong about what she's like, but this wrong image they approve of.

> Potato potato, pronounced differently. They saw Cat as the Black Knight finding a Callowan to be a Praesi leader for them while not inherently being a foreigner. They saw her as a Praesi lapdog when she first came in said to be their new queen, leading wasteland soldiers and bringing tower mintage gold.

What?

According to Bard, who I don't think was lying, Callowans were already divided on whether Cat was a

Praesi sellout or their new hope as of start of book 2, before the confrontation with the heroes in Summerholm.

The public opinion began shifting more categorically and universally as news about Marchford spread, as Cat had proven herself actually willing and capable to defend her land and her people.

That was all they wanted. They are okay with her being bloody *more than she herself is*. See: the whole debacle about Bonfire at the start of Book 4.

> Or yours. See how that might be a bit of a troublesome point when you're considering your interpretation of Roles to be supported by the story when they haven't been. Remember: I'm the one claiming that Roles cannot give you Name-power threshed armies by providence just because they are your Role, with you claiming that they can by disagreeing and opposing this. But I've yet to see supporting proof for this.

Yeah, quoted above.

> Now, with the new chapter it's been confirmed that Cat indeed does not have a Name at this moment, contrary to previous chapters being vaguer in terminology, so as it turns out providence does give 2000 horsemen to unnamed with a neat bow wrapped around in it in the form of no mass desertion and unruliness. But before that chapter, there was no such confirmed event yet.

You can say that. Or I can say that it was actually stated outright multiple times and you just ignored it / forgot it / handwaved it away because you liked your theory too much.

And I did say that the 2000 horsemen were actually a completely plausible event regardless of story fiat, so...

> Calling it narrative weight would've helped a bit pre-epilogue, because Roles are an actual thing in the guideverse and you were attaching unfounded traits and abilities to them, though I still lament that the epilogue now confirms that Named aren't quite as special in bending Creation as they were initially said to be.

Leaving aside the question of Roles (I think I've supported my point quite sufficiently), well... Named were never all that special.

> "We're Named," Archer said. "That makes it different."

>

> But it doesn't, I thought. We've seen it, you and I.

That when all there is holding up the choice is a story and the prediction of victory, the story fails. Because if all you do is pretend, go through the motions, then you've already lost what could have made it a victory in the first place.

Thematically, Guide opposes the Great Man Theory. I'll quote Vivienne to expound on this a little:

> "She's not in charge because she's been chosen, Sahelian," Vivienne said. "Gods, certainly not because she's chosen either. Or even because she has power, for that matter."

>

> "Is it the power of love, then?" Akua said, a touch drily.

>

> "There's plenty of people who care about Callow," Thief said. "And if I learned anything from the Woe, it's that caring doesn't fill granaries or run a court. She's certainly in the right place at the right time with the right amount of power to get things moving, but that's not really what matters. See, the thing is that she acts. Sometimes those actions are mistake, like going after the fae and leaving you to plot under your rock in Liesse. But, most of the time, she improves things. Just by a little bit. And she draws other people who act with her. You think that's some unearthly trait, like she's some force of nature, but that's Wasteland talk. The Tower's the centre of the world for you, and the most important person in the world is the one that climbs it."

>

> The other Callowan paused.

>

> "Except she's not," Vivienne said. "The exemplar of whatever fucked up Praesi virtues you want to sing about, that is. She's kind of petty, her temper's foul and if Hakram hadn't stepped in she'd probably be a drunk. She ogles every pretty face that shows up even if they're our enemies, and she cannot for the life of her shut the Hells up even when she really needs to. She's not unique or irreplaceable, but even if you think otherwise that doesn't really matter – because she's part of something greater than her. She's just the rock that started the avalanche, Sahelian, and she did that by doing the most Callowan thing there is: after the invasion is done, you get up and get back to work. Others will come to help you, because a kingdom's people and not banners."

The story is more or less ABOUT how Named aren't all that special. They sort of are, but they make a difference by being in the right place in the right time, not by being inherently cooler than everyone else.

> We've seen Grem's PoV saying how it's different with Named.

We've had Grem's PoV?

-goes to check-

oh yeah, found it! Praise be to CaptainOfMySouls.

...there's nothing about Names here. Like I ctrl-f'd "Name" and it's not in that section. Well, there IS a lot about heroes... okay, I'm going to expound on this in a minute.

> But now, Named just seem a lot less special and important to me. They're just a convenient power-up now, not a vital ingredient of Creation using Story at all. Why even have Names in your simulation if that's the case?

Alright, so first of all, part of your problem was attributing to Story Power what was actually regular human reactions. See Catherine musing on how people were cheering for Cordelia because of WHAT she was saying, not because of WHO or HOW.

Second, note that Cat is an ex-Named. There is definitely something of an exclusive club that you enter once you get a Name, and even if you lose it, you're still there. You're already part of the game. You don't have that specific power-up, but you've already accumulated narrative weight. Creation already has its sights on you. It's not exclusive to Named, yes, but becoming Named is how you get it 99.(9)% of the time.

Third, see my quote from Vivienne and commentary on it above. Are you familiar with the Great Man Theory?

> If there's no Name on either side, providence shouldn't see to the Roles working perfectly beyond the abilities of their natural talents and actions, and neither Pallas nor Cat have Names. Making it odd that Cat managed to do this without a Name

It's not odd. It's the kind of thing that happens in the real world, too, and we don't have Names or Roles.

You know, this is a bit of a tangent, but I really dislike it when an urban fantasy type story inserts its own mechanics into history and asserts that, say, Jeanne D'Arc was actually an alien, or pyramids were built by ancient elves or whatever. It feels like it takes away the real rules by which things happened, cheapens how history really works.

This is how history really works. People don't need supernatural powers to be charismatic and sway others to their cause.

> Returning me to the nihilistic conclusion of Why even have Names in your simulation if that's the case?

Magic is cool. Next question 😊

> But in the guideverse, I lament that plot also exists when Story is a real law of Narrative in this universe.

Have you ever tried to write a story without plot?

This is a serious question. Have you ever tried to come up with a story without plot? Have you ever read one?

> Named used to be the explanation, but apparently they're just an unnecessary addition to Creation's workings.

I'm sorry, but narrative was always an explanation for Names, not the other way around.

> Is it really too much to ask for things like free will, individuality, imperfect information gathering and funding to apply when Named aren't involved, in a story that has shown us exactly those things when they fit in worldbuilding and Cat's kingdom management issues?

They apply?

You don't get a lot of individuality in the army though. You do what your commanding officer says, and your exercise of free will is called 'insubordination' or 'desertion' and generally gets a death penalty. If your commanding officer personally decides to swear fealty to a foreign monarch and there's nobody higher in the hierarchy to stop them, well, either the entire army mutinies or they don't.

You're forgetting such fun facts of human psychology as groupthink, hyping each other up in a crowd, liking to live up to expectations, army mentality.

Insanenoodlyguy

The third time she was dying she sword she'd be mortal to the end. I believe that effectively disqualifies her for any new names. The one time she might have reversed that since (The sword), she very easily turned it down. I'm sure she'll have opportunities, but at this point, they are there mostly for the story to continue that "Catherine Foundling rejects names".

Crash

This makes a lot of sense and it's mainly why her current storyline of not being Named is interesting. She has been doing this on purpose because she dislikes the interplay of Above and Below. As well as her issues with the Wandering Bard.

That said, I do still think that if she got offered a Neutral Name she might take it. It'd certainly make it easier to find the bard when necessary

[Liliet](#)

I don't think Cat getting a Name would make a meaningful difference in HER being able to find the Bard, only the other way around.

And she's fairly solid on the whole 'I need to be a villain to speak for them and make change from the inside' thing. That's part of why she doesn't fit any existing groove probably: she doesn't fit villain Names because of her clear actual allegiance, but doesn't fit hero Names because of her clear *chosen* allegiance.

And Neutral Names flee screaming from how strong her current Role already is, just... unlabeled.

Crash

Probably gonna get something Neutral that implies change in some way, though I can't think of anything that doesn't sound dumb as heck. Like "Rebel", that'd be a turn off and doesn't quite make sense anymore.

[Liliet](#)

I'm partial to 'Warden of the East' myself 😊

Though something along the lines of 'Priestess' would fit her very well, as of post-Twilight when she chose the staff. She's certainly leaning into the Role, nudging Kairos's final moments to be his proper due and all.

Crash

Wayward Priestess maybe?

Liliet

Cat has never wandered, ever. She was in the exact position she was supposed to be in ever since Amadeus picked her up as a Squire, and she hadn't traveled before that.

So, uh, no, unless she changes her habits radically.

Priestess of Night is one that seems intuitive, but clearly something's in the way of Cat taking it so far.

Crash

I thought of Wayward more in the sense of her being odd for a priestess, doesn't fit the usual archetype expect of one, maybe there's a better word for it? I keep coming back to Monk but that's literally just because she carries a staff and it makes me think of FFT Monks.

Back in book 3-4 it might've been Warrior Priestess or some such but she has made it clear that she'd really rather not fight at all so while she is not quite the usual Priest-person, I don't know what qualifier to add to that.

I think the problem is that Night is something she wields but not a "part of her" (yes i realize this is bad wording, bear with me.), it's a tool more than something that is really important to her, Night belongs to the Drow it's mostly being lent to Cat instead of being hers in a way that would shape her Name.

Liliet

Catherine has actually been acting out the Priestess role rather faithfully, which interests me. It seems to be a groove she's genuinely fond of and in tune with. Making up new rules and scripture for her goddesses, then pleading her case according to those? Switching to referring to Sisters in her rhetorical flourishes? Carrying a staff and playing the role of a spiritual leader, inspiring people more than anything?

Most interestingly, seeing to it that people who are dying get their just due. That moment when she

told Kairos to get on his feet had absolutely no external motivation. It changed nothing, but Cat put it as “it’s what you’re owed”, and she took it upon herself to see to it that what is owed is given. That’s a priestess’s role – a priestess of death, ruin and blood. Death Domain is Lawful Neutral.

One reason I can think of for her not having a Name for it yet is that the exact Role is still in flux. She’s acting nothing like what Sisters set the groove of Priestess of Night to be – it’s possible that Name is locked altogether as long as they exist, because that Name meant being in charge of the Night, and it’s their thing exclusively. There doesn’t seem to be much precedent for dark gods having Lawful Neutral cults/followers/rules on Calernia. I’m recognizing the archetype but I’m recognizing it from different settings entirely. Even newly minted Names have to fit a pre-existing cultural impetus – Cat might cut the groove for the next person like her to get a Name out of it, but actually never have one herself.

[Liliet](#)

BTW, a tool lent can shape the Name as much as anything. Squire was based on the position that Amadeus lent her, a Chancellor is appointed by a Dread Emp. Priests and Priestesses all over Calernia and presumably Creation get Names out of it, despite the Choirs being capable of taking Light away from someone. I’d argue Light and Night are the same in this way, with the only categorical difference being that Light is governed by Above and Heavens which is a messy automated/anarchic system, while Night is governed by the Sisters personally in a much more directed way.

[Liliet](#)

> The third time she was dying she sword she’d be mortal to the end. I believe that effectively disqualifies her for any new names.

“Mortal” has many gradations in guideverse, and I think in that situation Catherine was referring to demigodhood, not Names. Although it’d give some weight to refusing Names, too, that’s not where the primary thrust goes.

Insanenoodlyguy

I agree and I could have phrased it better, but she did make it part of her story with that. She now has a hard "I want to be detached from outside influences inside my head as much as possible. Names open me up to those, I don't want one." It could have been shaped in other directions, possibly even made into an anti-devine aspect/trend on a Name if she did take one, but I think she's since crystalized it into a form that ensures that she won't be taking any names offered (though names will be offered.)

[Liliet](#)

I'll note that she considers herself to be disqualified by the 'no Named rulers' section of the Accords regardless...

KageLupus

I don't think that Cat is going to get a new Name any time soon, and possibly never. Partly because she doesn't need one (High Priestess of Sve Noc is a replacement, power-wise), but also because it doesn't really make sense.

Names are what you get when you fall into a particular role that has been established. The storied grooves in reality. Cat has spent the last couple of books breaking new ground entirely, so she doesn't have an established groove to slip into.

She could have become the Black Queen, but that story was broken and I don't think you get a second chance. Just like how Cordelia was offered Warden of the West but turned it down, Cat lost her shot at Black Queen as a Name. Both of them are still doing the same things that created the story that would have given them the Name, but that critical pivot moment came and went and cannot come again.

For Cat to get a Name now she would have to have another narrative buildup that culminates in pivot moment of suitable weight. Except now the story would have to include her already being the Black Queen as a title, as well as High Priestess for a mythical race no one understands. I think that it all adds up to being to strange of a story to lead to a Name.

[Liliet](#)

I can see Cat falling into the High Priestess (or something else Priestess) archetype neatly enough to qualify for a Name at some point.

Keep in mind that everyone is actually different and everyone is technically doing something no-one had ever done

before. Archer's breaking new ground right there at Cat's side, but it doesn't stop her from being, well, an Archer.

But yes, the roles of Black Queen and High Priestess, given that Black Queen is already tied to a specific groove she's been avoiding falling into, would likely interfere with her getting any other Name. I'm not sure the sword would have given her a Name either, unless it managed to qualify her for some kind of Warrior Queen Name that would supplant Black Queen as her new nickname. IMHO unlikely tho.

Oshi

That is Malicia in the best. She had time so she wrapped a dozen balls of death and set them up on the path to her. That way by the time they get to the tower there is nothing but taters for her to wipe out.

erebus42

Oh Kairos you beautiful little bastard. One last spanner in the works for old times sake. And really if he would have one last request for Helike "Do as you will" would be it. Open up the Lion's cage and see what it does.

Decius

Critically, "Do as you will" is an ORDER.

All of their previous Lawful traits and training weren't undone- they were fully subverted towards "Do as you will".

"I don't want to" is now a completely acceptable reason to shirk what used to be a duty, and wanting to do something makes it mandatory. What used to be Chaotic treason is now fully expected to happen.

And it will be a glorious flame. Forget lighting the rushlight at both ends, this is grinding the rushlight into a powder and dusting it over open flames.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think it'll be applying to the whole of Helike, unless Basilia sets out on a quest to revolutionize the whole damn place and succeeds at it.

And something tells me Basilia was already that kind of little shit, judging from how she supported Kairos in the first place...

Crash

Fuck, Kairos. You did it again.

Indrani is having so much fun tonight.

Heathen

And so Cat picks up another group of highly effective heavy cavalry to join the Order of the Broken Bells.

What do we call this one, the Order of the Broken Fingers?

Crash

I second this motion, get Robber on it.

Yatr

Nay I say, The Order Of Broken Bones!

Sweet sweet alliteration!

Pure Liessen Charger

Led by Hakram the Deadhand Missinghand

Xi Cree

No no... it's the 'Order of Cracked Carpels'

threeh2o

Thought the Helike cavalry was light not heavy. They use bows, is why breaking the one finger was a big deal.

[*Liliet*](#)

They're heavy cavalry that uses bows as one of their weapons. That's what makes them so valuable, as I understand – they are both strong and versatile.

[*NZPIEFACE*](#)

Half of Helike follows after the legacy of Tyrant, and half of it acts in the pride of their nation.

Wonderful, how the two generals represent these two integral aspects of the city-state.

[*Liliet*](#)

Best part? They get along. They just have different immediate priorities.

Insanenoodlyguy

I ship them after this chapter. Let them rule together in the end as Tyrant and her queen!

[Liliet](#)

They really do come across as best friends, don't they?

Jworks

Two months ago I would have absolutely loved to see Helike burn, now it's one of my favorite factions. Tied for second favorite with the Kingfisher Prince and whatever lands he represents.

LarsBlitzer

Halfway through the whole internal monologue I was wondering when the 4th dimensional chess would stop and Catherine would be able to chop through this Gordian Knot, if I may be permitted to mix metaphors. Her realisation at the end that she can do NOTHING that Malicia hasn't accounted and planned for was rather disheartening, especially when Akua's cover was blown. She'd fallen into the trap quite neatly. It was only when she stopped playing the part of the cornered villain that I felt any hope. And now the chaff of her alliance has cut itself away and left an elite force of mounted archers and raiders sworn to her personally. In between the Gallowsborn, the Order of the Broken Bells, an entire race of Elven Murderhobos at her command because she's the head Priestess of their Goddesses, and her Legionnaires she's got a LOT of power at her command, more than when she was a Fae Queen. Interesting.

RoflCat

Even better yet, those corrupted bastards in the League will have to deal with the remaining Helikean army, as a one last "if I maybe so rude, fuck you all for trying to ruin my bestest friend Catherine's legend" from Kairos, so they're unlikely to meddle any time soon.

[Liliet](#)

You have his character voice down pat for this joke holy shit

Decius

Cat lost to Empress, quite badly. But Tyrant bailed her out from beyond the grave.

A long time ago, Cat lost to Heiress, and Black had to bail her out.

Cat loses diplomacy battles to Wastelanders. Back when she had the chance to play Mean Girls for relatively low stakes, she was doing pit fights.

[Liliet](#)


Catherine might lose tactically, but she wins strategically. Against Heiress, in the end, she had the entire country allied with her. And right now, she might be losing the battle for the hearts and minds of these specific people, but she's already won the war for *approximately everyone else's*. People coming to bail her out IS her way of winning the game.

Mammon

Did she lose though? This seems more like she could've won whenever she wanted and considering the League's issue Procer might've backed her in it. Granted, doing so would've been a big issue of Cordelia once again being shoved further into the Tyrant story noose, but it's not like the League hasn't been burning too many bridges to pull this off and see everyone condemning Cat instead of them for their blunders.

Cat is weary because they still get to throw pinpricks at her (both literally and figuratively) that are but a nuisance and a first-strike issue, but ones that may accumulate and be a noose around her neck in the future or carve a deeper groove to force her ways. That they keep trying to use her attempts to unify to see her having to bail them out or indulge them. With the inevitable problem of the one giving bread to those that will not work for it because of this samaritan eventually starving themselves because the selfish beggars keep coming and demanding more loudly.

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Um, *actually,* drow in this setting bear no relation to elves.


doominator10

"From the Blessed Isle to Segovia, from Levante to Rhenia, the(Y) came when the call..."

"What will you do, if (I) ignore your petty threats?"

Cat just got another army... dam.

Liliet

Cat got another army to follow her North, *and* an army willing to work on solving her southern problems for her.

I'm genuinely not sure which one'll prove more useful~

Silverking

...Gosh, do the Gods Below want Cat to take up a Name or what? Her monologue about how crushing the schemes of petty short-sighted bastards so we can get back to, you know, saving all their ungrateful asses is practically word-for-word the temptation

Cordelia recieved for the Warden of the West. I'm pretty sure that the main trigger for a Name is a moment where they look at their killed sister or hypocritical judges or oppressed species or prophecies of death or petty usurpers and saying "What we're doing does not work, and I'm not going to take it anymore". However, in Cat's case, as tempting as it is to just screw diplomacy and force people to do what she wants, she knows from experience that it will win the battle and lose the war. She's going to have to be willing to lose the cruel game everyone's been playing if she ever wants to play an better one with the Liesse Accords,

[Liliet](#)

Hmmm.

I think the temptation is largely internal, and comes from a person's own logic, in both cases. You're right that Below might juuust be giving it a tiny nudge when it's this close, tho :3

Insanenoodlyguy

the way I think of it, the thought and the intent are yours, at least as far as villiany is concerned. But the words that are put to those feelings are being helpfully provided.

caoimhinh

It's already weird that Catherine doesn't have a Name. She is too relevant to the stories of Calernia on so many levels that the Narrative Weight that she has pretty much decides the destiny of the continent.

She even gets Patterns of Three against Heroes (as shown in her confrontation with Pilgrim) and still has the connection with the Woe (as shown with Hakram's Adjutant Name still being able to feel Catherine and how Masego gets empowered by Cat presence and vice-versa).

It's way past time she got a new Name, and yeah Creation and Providence seem inclined to get her near pivots and great events that force her to make significant choices.

ChillyPepper

So, who else have a hand in the story pie without having a name. Or perhaps, what else?

ChillyPepper

Hint: has an army of undead.

[Liliet](#)

Lesser gods don't count. Cat backed the FUCK out of that.

Mammon

Assuming Black Queen not to be a Name she has had for a while, that is. See my other comment in this chapter for further explanation. Because Black Queen is a new Name, it might be very unnoticable because Cat is defining it and it's fitted to her personality. With the Duchess of Moonless Nights transition around the same time not making the change obvious, there's no reason to notice Cat's change in-universe. And remember, Bard can still see and appear before her, suggesting Cat really does have a Name.

More likely, whomever the next Black Queen will be will notice her behaviour changed more to be alike Cat's, but Cat is the OG BQ that defines her role.

Mental Mouse

The thing is, having a Name has in-world effects that Cat would definitely notice. She has explicitly refused Name status over and over. Indeed, I suspect that for some time now, she's been basically grifting off all the offering-gifts (plot and power both) that Below (and occasionally Above) are throwing at her to tempt her into accepting a name.

But certainly, in her wake she will leave a Name of Black Queen for the *next* person to follow in her footsteps.

Mammon

In-world effects, like coincidentally entering the Everdark when the dwarves are invading, coincidentally coming out when Callow can reallllly use her help pulling things back together, being approachable through teleportation by Bard, being part of a Band of Five, Hakram's Name still serving her intuitively, as shown again this chapter still having the definately Name-caused thresher ability of gaining the best loyal allies, being Kairos's fav enemy, etc. etc. There are so many things whose providence are a bit too tightly spun for Cat to be a non-Named. Making the claim that she doesn't have a Name is as unfounded as saying she has one.

Liliet

Providence and narrative features apply to non-Named just as much as they do Named. If it's providence that Cat met the Rat Company at the exact most convenient time to win them over, didn't Rat Company get affected by providence themselves as the other half of that

equation? Stories affect all participants, Named are only special in how easily they are able to GENERATE stories around themselves. And Cat doesn't need that boost, considering all her stories are ALREADY going full steam.

So providence isn't Named-specific. What *is* is stuff like reduced fatigue, no longer having periods, sharper reflexes, ability to purge poison,

Mammon

Jup, which applies to the stuff that also involves and benefits Names. We've already seen during Amadeus vs Iron Prince that the Procerians having just a few Named on their side to give those providence advantages really bothered Marshal One-Eye, f.e. how a reckless cavalry charge over loose stones went off without a hitch where it should've been a matter of a single horse tripping and getting half the charge killed by their own weight and momentum. I'm not contesting that non-Named aren't influenced by providence.

I am however saying that Cat has been getting providence effects that a regular Non-Named wouldn't get, which I started saying this chapter when we so clearly saw Cat's thresher abilities. One doesn't get 2000 horsemen showing their loyalty like this with just a Role and some side-providence. This is much more likely a Name at work. Callow remaining in her control isn't Name-gained, the drow listen to her because of Sve Noc need not be Name-gained, the Legions in Exile accepting her as a semi-leader need not be Name-gained. All those are by act and virtue thereof. But what we've seen today, that's much clearer a Name rather than act pulling the final strings that prevent at least half of those 2000 humiliated men not sharing the general's masocism and rebelling with the general knowing this and needing a lot more time to arrange this merger.

Liliet

> I am however saying that Cat has been getting providence effects that a regular Non-Named wouldn't get

Here's the thing: while regular people who aren't very aware of how Names work, like Abigail, assume Cat is Named. Not a single actual Named has ever questioned Catherine being non-Named while having all of that shit still applying to her. Not Tariq, not Hanno, not Laurence, no-one at any point went 'wait, she has to have a Name, this doesn't make sense'.

So, clearly it makes sense in-universe for her to get those effects while being non-Named?

Mammon

Or she has a Name that doesn't follow the mortal three Aspects Name subsection of Named.

Mental Mouse

The thing is, if she had a Name, she'd be able to feel it directly – she certainly did when she was Squire. Instead, she'd breaking new ground as someone who's manipulating fate and Providence (and being manipulated by them in turn) *without* the Name that everyone thought was integral to that.

Basically she's pulling back a curtain and showing that Names aren't as necessary as everyone thinks – or at least (like Heiropant with sorcery), she's learned to directly handle the powers that most people deal with indirectly.

Liliet

I don't think so?

I don't think Cat's doing anything particularly groundbreaking here, she's just an edge case. Nobody has been actually *surprised* so far about her not having a Name while doing all the shit she does. It seems to be a universal understanding that narrative trickery is a function of a Role, not a Name, and as long as you have one of those, you just need a Name to be slightly less squishy. Or priestess powers, that works too.

Mammon

She'd feel it. Unless there's something out there both creating a storm of power that lays thick in her veins and being able to leech power from that Name by their basic talents, like say a twin crow goddess. A new much more subtle Name weakened further by Sve Noc taking power from it (maybe in part why Cat doesn't need to pay up front for her bargains) after coming fresh out of being a construct of fey magic, I can see a Name's thrum of power being a lot less noticeable that way.

Especially when Cat expects to be weaker and weary and limping and such, which Names as expositioned in Book 1 and 2 already stated would see to these things remaining. Thief could heal third degree burns in no time, but when the wounds stick mentally they scar

physically. If Cat believes her weaknesses to return and stay, and she has put some Story significance behind them and her mortality regained, then they would be there.

Liliet

That's a conspiracy theory that has literally 0 support. Again, absolutely nobody in-universe thinks there's anything wrong with the picture of 'Catherine Foundling doesn't have a Name but has a Role strong enough to be functionally a Named in all ways except the literal'.

Oh, and crows don't have a single incentive to do something like this to Catheirne, to point out the main weak point.

Mammon

Remember the Pilgrim's words: Just because we agree doesn't mean I now bend to your will and agree with you in everything, Black Queen. (Not at all exactly what he said exactly, but it's the gist of the words.) EE doesn't make someone completely on your side just because they're on your side in a way that most lazier story-writing makes them a permanent complete friend no questions asked.

I have no reason to assume that Sve Noc is as unconditionally friendly, not scheming and not taking concessions and arguing for more power as most people in the chat make her out to be. We assume that Cat gets a lot of power and things from the sisters for free, but we don't know yet where the line lies, how much Cat balances the line in this and how much Sve Noc schemes in her own favour. Remember, EE is a great writer not at all lazy enough to fall for this lazy kind of 'Once a friend, always a friend giving you whatever you want.' trouble that too many writers fall into.

Sve Noc might have an incentive we don't know of yet, even if it's not planned all along and/or in their nature.

Liliet

The thing about Sve Noc is that we know a sufficient amount of their context and incentives to understand what they want and how they plan on getting it. We know their capabilities and know their understanding of their capabilities.

For them to be secretly betraying Cat behind her back is... not, like, literally impossible. But WHY. There's absolutely no evidence or foreshadowing in this direction, and *absence of strongly expected evidence is evidence of absence*. I'd argue evidence of Sve Noc not being straight with Cat would be *strongly expected*, in context. Given it's now the end of Book 5, out of 6 planned total, yeah?

Crash

Hierophant is a new Name. Good luck to Masego trying to hide that.

You're also implying that Cat hasn't been thinking about having a Name this whole time. Like she just... forgets to take it into account in her own internal monologue for... reasons, I guess? All while sometimes considering the difference in her physical prowess compared to her time as the Squire and as Duchess of Moonless Nights (She has literally used wording like "When I had been Named", I'm pretty sure. Which, you know, would imply that Black Queen is weaker than the transitional name of Squire. No Aspects either which is very, very odd.

I'm not saying Cat isn't an unreliable narrator. She often is. But hiding her Name by legitimately not thinking about it ever for what? 2 Books now? (What's your timeline on the Cat is already the Black Queen thing?) That's just bad writing. Erratic is better than that man.

Now, is it possible Cat might still become the Black Queen? Certainly, but it becomes more unlikely everyday. This entire chapter is an ode to how much Cat's ways have changed and to insist on her losing herself to the whole rule through fear and violence is to do a disservice to her character evolution in this Book and hell, during the series as a whole.

If she does, indeed, become the Black Queen at some point it's going to be a very different Name to the one first offered to her in the aftermath of the Doom of Liesse.

[Mammon](#)

Hierophant is supported by his Name in what he already does, which the Name only supports. And Cat is already supported by her Name as Black Queen, which people keep calling her including the ones like Pilgrim who'd know the difference between a Name and a title.

I don't recall her ever saying 'Back when I had a Name.', and her limp isn't at all something that would be resolved

by her having a Name. Names cannot fix every wound, especially if the wound is supposed or Story-supported to stick. Not only does she assign value to it to ensure it stays if she'd have a Name, it's something from before gaining her Name which is all the more likely to stay. When she was the Duchess it was gone because she was literally just a construct of Winter, but the Duchess was an odd Name because it's not quite a mortal Name rather than a Fey Name.

And her power, if the new Name isn't meant for direct combat and brawn as Squire was, then she wouldn't get a great power-up. Augur can't lift up grown men just because she has a Name, Pilgrim may be a bit more spry than he ought to be but he too doesn't have super-strength or speed, Kairos never performed super-human physical activity, etc. If the Black Queen isn't a warrior Name, then it's not going to be able to jump logs and kill four men at once without magic like Squire could.

The thing is, you're assuming that I'm talking about Cat being an unreliable narrator for two books just because you assume that she hasn't been thinking in terms of her being Named. Yet when we look back, she has been thinking in terms of Stories and Patterns of Three and the likes a lot. And before, did she really think of herself as her Name that often rather than her actions in the Story? There's no reason to assume that she's not a Name just because EE hasn't said "Yes, I the Black Queen who is Named, shall...". Don't accuse me of calling EE a crappy writer when you're assuming that he doesn't know subtlety to not be that blatant about it. And with the way this story is, it's quite likely that at least for the protagonist EE wants to stray away from the original system with Aspects that can conveniently appear to save the day.

Crash

Here are some quotes from a couple different chapters:

b1 c12 Squire

[...] Learning aspect of my Name [...]

b2 c13

[...] not the way I'd been before becoming the Squire [...]

b1 c14 Villain

I still couldn't feel my Name [...]

b1 c27 Callow's Plan

My Name was a recalcitrant little brat [...]

b2 c9 Rematch

I smiled a devil's smile and my Name howled, raging at the Struggle ahead of me.

b2 c16 Trust

I heard him long before I saw him, even with my Name vision

b2 c17 Aplomb

[...]claiming my Name[...]

[...]in my short tenure as Squire[...]

b2 c20 Ashes

My Name bared its fangs in approval.

b2 c21 Marchford

[...] even to my Name-sight [...]

b2 c45 Corpses

I reached for my Name [...]

That I was still a Squire[...]

So, fun story. I've been re-reading so I knew for a fact that Cat did speak/make reference to her Name a lot. I know you made a joke about cat not referring to everything as "Yes, as a Named..." but uh, Cat had a lot of trouble not mentioning she was, indeed, Named or otherwise referring to her Name instincts and general use power like the eyesight and such, mate. Do you know what she does now? Use the Night to make up for that, telling us that that is what she is doing, and mention it every other chapter just like she did her Name before.

Example:

b5 c24 Theft

"She wasn't wrong. We were looking at the same thing, I thought, but my sight was better than hers. A sliver of Night had seen to that. "

As a side note, this habit is very interesting because you can use it to track how comfortable she is in making use of her abilities and also is a fun little character trait to keep track of, like for instance how she used to swear to the Heavens a lot in the first book and then gradually started to use Hells instead and has now shifted to calling on the Sisters. Very neat stuff.

I would like to refer you to Liliet's very nice mention of Cat remind us that her monthlies have come back and that her hair is now growing again, while on campaign in the Ever Dark both things at odds with being Named.

To be quite clear, I never said EE was a bad writer, if anything I used the fact that I believe him to be a good writer to justify my thought process. Catherine likes to give us an insight on what she is doing and how she is achieving it, it's a consistent character trait. There is no "subtlety" in hiding your POV character's thoughts from your readers, especially if that runs directly counter to a well established character trait, that is just a lazy way to create mystery and EE has demonstrated he doesn't need that crutch.

Mammon

A lot of references from Books 1 and 2, which still had a vastly different writing style (I can still recall how often someone's skintone was referenced as a way of referring to the person in those...) and where things were still a lot more about the Named. Cat still heavily relied on her Name back then, as she has recently internally monologued to no longer do for smart reasons, and she used her powers a lot more directly. Since then, she has begun to rely on things like her reputation instead which is just an extension of what a Name can do, as well as use powers and means that aren't her own Name.

Since then, EE shifted away from using Aspects for Cat (while her Aspects like Take are still indirectly there) probably more because he doesn't want to rely and be bound to such Words changing the Story too easily, combined with an Aspect after one or two uses losing its weight and there only be so many new Aspects that Cat could gain. Since then, EE crafted a world and a position for Cat that doesn't need raw power and her proving herself physically to get ahead in life, instead making a rich political and warfare-based story that doesn't necessarily need Cat to be an active Name on the frontlines.

As such, from the way I see it EE no longer has to rely Cat to have her Name thrum in her head or howl in the back of her mind to do direct impossible etc., both because there's now Night indeed and because her ways are now more subtle than 'Rend! Jump, pivot, parry, slash in one second while wearing plate! Rise!'

Liliet

And so, she doesn't have a Name anymore. A Role, but not a Name. Pretty simple.

Crash

>> Since then, she has begun to rely on things like her reputation instead which is just an extension of what a Name can do, as well as use powers and means that aren't her own Name.

Okay, cool. Why does she need a Name if she doesn't want to make use of it at all?

>> A lot of references from Books 1 and 2, which still had a vastly different writing style

Yeah, that's the bit I'm re-reading so I knew off the top of my head I could very easily find the exact wording I needed to quote for this. While the writing style has changed this was a demonstration of a recurring habit of Cat's: to tell the reader exactly how she is achieving something and what she is using to do so. Her Name, her reputation, Night, the weird senses that being a Fae construct gave her; she always tells us what she is relying on to achieve her current objective.

>> Since then, EE shifted away from using Aspects for Cat

Yeah, because she lost her Name. She doesn't have those Aspects anymore. The only reason she kept some remnants of it is because her nature as Duchess of Moonlight got mixed in with her Name of Squire and so when she became the sole fae of Winter so too did it mix with that. Finally, when she gave Winter to the new Night those traces went together with it so they're there, but they're not nearly as simple to use as they once were.

>> As such, from the way I see it EE no longer has to rely Cat to have her Name thrum in her head or howl in the back of her mind to do direct impossible etc., both because there's now Night indeed and because her ways are now more subtle than 'Rend! Jump, pivot, parry, slash in one second while wearing plate! Rise!'

This is the bit that truly gets to me. By your logic then she doesn't need a Name at all so why would she have one? If no words of power are of use to her, she hasn't mentioned any gained insight or political acumen from a Name and she didn't get any physical benefit at all, what the heck is a Name doing for her? Because if it's a subtle one and more directed towards politics then she'd get some Aspect that helped her with social situations. Maybe something like Kairo's Wish that gave him an advantage in

knowing what people want while negotiating; or the lost aspect of Seek to learn the information she needs; Anaxares' own Receive is a great diplomatic tool. Why did she not get any of these or even something else? Not all Aspects are battle related, you seem to forget. Even Hanno's Recall which has battle use, allows him to learn from past heroes and even pick up language knowledge.

Having the Story weight of a Named without any of the changes and Aspects that come with it is calling having a Role. All Names have a Role but not all people with a Role have a Name. Cordelia Hasenbach has a very big Role in the story of the Principate and the fight against the Dead King and as such, at a pivotal moment was offered a Name which she didn't take; did she suddenly stop being relevant politically and to the greater story of Calernia? No, because while she has no Name her Role is still there. The same goes to Cat, she has been offered Names and didn't take them but that didn't suddenly destroy the Role she has. So she remains relevant and, at another pivotal moment, might again be offered a Name but currently all she has is that Role she plays.

Mammon

>Okay, cool. Why does she need a Name if she doesn't want to make use of it at all?

Because a Name and what Squire got aren't synonymous. Getting 2000 horsemen might be a passive effect use of her Name, same as heightened political senses and persuasive abilities. Not all Named are uber-strong with magic and stuff.

>Yeah, because she lost her Name. She doesn't have those Aspects anymore.

I meant more as in the meta-aspect of convenient 'Say a word, turn the tides' that might be the kind of awesome yet lesser writing that EE no longer has to resort to because their world and writing is now so much more refined and carefully crafted. Others still do it, but the protagonist doing it when it can be done with more weight and subtlety might be more preferred by EE. Spitballing on their motivation here, yes I know I cannot speak for them. But when I look at the development through the books I can see that being the case.

>By your logic then she doesn't need a Name at all so why would she have one?

Mostly because of the writer cornering themselves. If this wasn't A Practical Guide to Evil, then quite a lot of things she does are indeed possible without a Name. But because Names and this nigh-omnipotent force called Creation or Providence or Named exists then her rather than another Named or these forces preventing a non-Named doing it becomes more difficult to believe.

Or it might be that she is a different sub-section of Named. We've seen with the Fey that Named are definately not all obligated to follow the exact same pattern and format, and even the Aspect Named mortals follow different systems like Heroes and Villains getting different boons and following different rules of coming to be. Dragons were kinda Named as a species with a domain in their stomach rather than an Aspect, the Drow could be an odd Named alternative, Saint was Named but transitioned into something not quite Named yet still Named by turning an Aspect into a Domain and becoming that Domain herself.

Named as a whole are not one hard system, rather than that the mortals most commonly see the three Aspects Named arise amongst their weak and lesser folk. Cat allying to a god ascending certainly doesn't fit the same category as 'Some Wastelander Noble wins a thing, or Procerean peasant with a sob story' to require this lowest bar Name bestowal.

(Plus, EE has a lot more tools in his bag now. Maybe Cat has Aspects-to-be, but it will take a book and a half before she actually reaches a point where she has to have one surface because all other options ran out. No need to get them in quick succession like when she was Squire.)

On Names vs Roles, this depends on far a Role would go. Cordelia still has a Role because she has no Name but a position that makes her Role indeed inexchangeable. She is the ruler of Procer, which would fit certain grooves while not requiring a Name. However, Names are main cast while Roles are supporting characters. Cat has been too much a main character by act and front line action taking rather than Role not delegated by Creation and the Name to a supporting and side character, to be a Role rather than a Name. There are Named in her

employ, if she were just a Role then the Named ought to have gone through Masego and Hakram and Archer with Cat now aiding them. Or at least, providence would've tried to do this.

Mario and Bowser are Named while Peach is a Role of the damsel in distress, but the moment that Peach gets an actual active role then she would become a Named. Zelda was merely a Role to bestow a purpose/motivation, some boons and certain acts that a ruler has to do because a green-capped knight couldn't, but once she became that desert nomad she came into a Name and actively Story-affecting role rather than a Role. (Yes, Role is a bit of an awkward way to refer to it indeed.)

Crash

So sorry for the double post, forgot to add it to the first one:

"Hierophant is supported by his Name in what he already does, which the Name only supports."

I'd like to know how this is any different to what Names do in general? I don't recall who said this in the story nor the exact working but something along the lines of Name's being the result of people wanting/believing in doing a certain thing and Creation making it so that they can achieve that using the Roles that exist in the story and, if necessary, creating a new one(which in turn is supposed to be weaker due to the lack of repetition.)

For instance, Vivienne wanted to steal things, be the best thief and achieve her goal of stealing enough to pay the price on her mother's death. So she became the Thief. Hanno wanted to right the wrongs and injustice he perceived to be happening, so he became the White Knight under the Choir of Judgement.

And as far as Black influencing Cat's spot as a Squire he himself said that it was only because of the Name of Squire being associated to the Knight Names.

[Liliet](#)

Black influencing Squire seems very obvious. A Name has a set of narrative features, the more of them you have the better you fit it. One of those features for a Squire is 'tutored by a Knight Named', much like how I expect it's much easier to get the Name Apprentice for someone who's *apprenticed* to a mage Name or uhhh how

it's easier to get the Name Archer for *someone who owns a bow*, y'know? That it's not a requirement is more interesting and distinct commentary on how these Names work than the fact it's related lmao

[Liliet](#)

> And Cat is already supported by her Name as Black Queen, which people keep calling her including the ones like Pilgrim who'd know the difference between a Name and a title.

Why do you think Pilgrim wouldn't be calling her by a title?

Where does he ever say or imply it's a Name?

> I don't recall her ever saying 'Back when I had a Name.'

> It was rather pitiful that **between three former Named** not a single one of us could properly hold a tune but aside from that I claimed no regrets.

[Book 5, Chapter 83 "A Mould Unbroken"](#)

> but the Duchess was an odd Name because it's not quite a mortal Name rather than a Fey Name. It's not a Name, it's a fae title, a completely different category of thing. Catherine had both of those at the same time in Book 3.

> And her power, if the new Name isn't meant for direct combat and brawn as Squire was, then she wouldn't get a great power-up. Augur can't lift up grown men just because she has a Name, Pilgrim may be a bit more spry than he ought to be but he too doesn't have super-strength or speed, Kairos never performed super-human physical activity, etc. If the Black Queen isn't a warrior Name, then it's not going to be able to jump logs and kill four men at once without magic like Squire could.

She would still get reduced fatigue and no more periods, though. And Aspects. And, y'know, the general pool of power for Name tricks that all Named get. Or is your theory that her Name is so weak she cannot even purge poison?

> Yet when we look back, she has been thinking in terms of Stories and Patterns of Three and the likes a lot.

So what? Narrative is determined by Roles, not Names.

Mammon

Pilgrim has been calling Cordelia by her name rather than a Name that isn't her Name, but he often refers to Cat as Black Queen. In the way that one would refer to a Villain Named.

She is a former Named, she did lose Squire. And it rolls off the tongue better than saying two and one who's.

>She would still get reduced fatigue and no more periods, though. And Aspects. And, y'know, the general pool of power for Name tricks that all Named get. Or is your theory that her Name is so weak she cannot even purge poison?

Cat also assumed herself to be more mortal, until she killed Saint while barely to not aging. She assumed it to be Sve Noc. Cat almost got poisoned, and reasoned what would happen to prevent her death if she had been assuming no poison resistance. But we've never seen her get poisoned thus far.

She would have reduced fatigue as Squire, but Pilgrim post-revival was extremely fatigued for a long period of time despite him having his full Name minus (still unconfirmed) his third Aspect gone. Enhanced Stamina is likely more something for the travelling and fighting Names, not necessarily the Leader Names and those that don't require quick moving and footing.

For the period thing, I can't seem to find back whether that was a Squire or a Fey thing. Looking for the word period (and I cntr+F'd a lot of chapters and looked through all the results that the search option of this site gave me), I didn't find back where she said it. I remember it too, but not the where and how. But if it's a fey thing, then periods aren't a necessity of Named at all. Named can get children, as Captain has shown, and Named can retain weaknesses and wounds and sicknesses that fit their appearance and personality as Kairos has shown. Even if they don't want it, as Thief has shown with retaining wounds because they mentally scarred her as well. Periods are likely something that if the Named doesn't see a reason for them or doesn't want them because they inconvenience her and the Story, then they're gone. But if she wants to feel mortal and normal like Cat now wants with her limp etc., then they could resurface upon request.

Liliet

>Pilgrim has been calling Cordelia by her name rather than a Name that isn't her Name, but he often refers to Cat as Black Queen. In the way that one would refer to a Villain Named.

People refer to other people differently depending on their relationship. And depending on the other person's personality. And...

Yeah, this isn't evidence of anything other than them being two different people.

> She is a former Named, she did lose Squire. And it rolls off the tongue better than saying two and one who's.

[Liliet](#)

Ooops, accidentally hit post.

> She is a former Named, she did lose Squire. And it rolls off the tongue better than saying two and one who's.

This is not how words work. "Former" means 'no longer one of those', where 'those' in this context is 'Named'. She is no longer a Named. Amadeus wasn't a 'former Named' during his tenure as Black Knight even though he'd once been a Squire and then no longer was.

And she could have easily picked some other descriptor to refer to the three of them is 'former Named' was inaccurate.

> Cat also assumed herself to be more mortal, until she killed Saint while barely to not aging. She assumed it to be Sve Noc.

Yeah, cause Names do it differently. She points it out explicitly in her narration, that whatever is going on with her is a different mechanism that feels differentl from the inside, as I quoted elsewhere.

[Liliet](#)

There are specific effects that Names have. Catherine had noticed her reflexes and senses changing even when she'd first been a claimant to Squire, a fairly weak Name. She's long familiar with universal Name tricks like purging poison and would know if she has access to those. She has specifically remarked on funny things like non-decreased fatigue and *having periods again*. And that's before we

consider the issue that her current Name would likely be a villain one, with the fun side effect of no aging (she had specifically mused on how that had felt when she had a Name vs now).

And when we talk about the Name of Black Queen specifically, CAT KNOWS WHERE THAT ONE IS AND WHAT IT DOES AND REFERS TO. There was a whole thing about it at the end of Book 3. As long as Cat doesn't go off the deep end and start terrorizing the continent to bend it to her desires, she is nowhere near that.

What Cat DOES have is a Role. Narrative weight. It can be attracted by a Name, or it can be attracted by other factors (like being the pivot of continental politics). A Name is attracted by a falling into a groove, a character archetype from a story. Which Cat currently fits none of cleanly enough to get a Name.

Mammon

See my answer to the other guy; if the Name isn't meant to be faster and stronger then it doesn't have to be so. Periods was a thing she lost while being a Fey construct rather than a Named, I think? She is more resistant to aging and poison, as we've seen. And with Sve Noc's presence, being Named might be a lot less noticeable if they don't want it to be noticed and with the transition from Fey Duchess to what she is now.

And as the Black Queen is a new Name, it's hardly as defined as an already existing one. Which too wouldn't be that narrow, f.e. Kairos being chaotic evil incarnate while the first Tyrant was more likely Lawful Evil creating rather than destroying and riding dying horses into their swan song. Just because the Black Queen was a creator of terror the first time around, doesn't mean it will be so every time in every situation. Big difference between pre-conquest end of the war at Liesse and the situation after Cat returned from the Everdark.

Liliet

> Periods was a thing she lost while being a Fey construct rather than a Named, I think?

> Being Named got me out of many of the little ugly details of life – didn't get sick anymore, tired much slower and I hadn't had my monthlies in about two years – but it did nothing for sweat.

Book 3 Chapter 10 "Entrance"

> She is more resistant to aging and poison, as we've seen.

Villains aren't "resistant" to aging, they just don't age.

> "The years will kill me, one of these days," I said. "If nothing else gets around to it first."

>

> "Ah," the Dead King smiled. "But how many years would it take?"

>

> I didn't answer that, for the truth was that I wasn't sure. **My body now was no stronger than it'd been before I came into my Name**, not without Night being woven into it anyway. Pain and exhaustion and so many things that'd felt... distant while I was Sovereign of Moonless Nights had been returned to me in full, but I had not taken sick since being proclaimed First Under the Night. As for age, though? It hadn't been long enough for me to be sure of whether or not my aging had resumed in earnest. **It didn't feel the same way as it had under my Name**, when I'd still grown but there had been something contrived about it – like I was matching a vision, not following nature's writ. And it was absolutely nothing like it'd been after Second Llesse, where I had been frozen and fixed unto myself. My blood was still red, and had not become gray nor dark, so it might be that I did not share the stretched lifespan of the Mighty who partook in Night. On the other hand, I had come into the priesthood of the Sisters after the devouring of Winter: it was unprecedented grounds we were treading.
Book 5 Chapter 36 "Bid"

> And as the Black Queen is a new Name, it's hardly as defined as an already existing one.

> With the pivot came more. My mantle stirred. Queenship would be granted to me by the Tower, by Name and by right. But not like the rulers of the Old Kingdom, no. Mine would not be so pristine a reign. If I was to be queen, it would be a queen cloaked in black with hands bloodied red. Though young and half-formed, the Name was taking shape. Beckoning.

Sounds like the definition was coming along quite nicely!

[Liliet](#)

P.S. that last one is from Swan Song in Book 3

[Mammon](#)

Ah, monthlies. That's why I couldn't find it. Guess you're right, it was a Squire thing. Still not necessarily a Named thing, as female Kairos likely would've still been tormented by periods same as everything else.

Villains don't age to death. They do age, as Wekesa and Amadeus weren't young boys when Cat met them. They simply age to the age they prefer and/or stop aging physically while their internal age is slowed down. But in between Villains rarely living for centuries, Cat having explained what the consequence of magical anything to avoid consequences such as fatigue can do, and the non-undead villains we've seen, explicit proof that thousand years or more lifespans just by Name-sake rather than a longer lifespan and whatever still undefined powers Ranger has is not yet a said and done case.

Squire is a Name that is supposed to be stronger and youthful, while the Sovereign is just a complete all round army smasher Fey Name as high Fey names tend to be. Cat has no experience with any other Name including Leader Names. Akua and Masego weren't physically enhanced (remember how Masego would easily run out of breath despite being Apprentice?) because that's not part of their Name. If Cat's Name is hollowed out, camouflaged or part of Sve Noc, then she wouldn't feel its thrum or assign the effects of being Named to it over her patrons. If she refers to things that not her Name but her Name as Squire and Duchess provided, then my point still stands.

That definition of Black Queen still sounds pretty vague. Cat's hands are already bloodied red, and there's no definition of whose blood it would have to be. She's red-handed for having killed Saint and reviving Pilgrim, she's red-handed for having broken the kappa-Troy (Yes, I'm intentionally incorrectly writing the name wrong worse every time because I don't remember how you really have to spell it)'s fingers, she's red-handed for the things she did for her Callow. And she will be all the more red-handed for the things she's yet to do. Not because she's the one shedding blood but, as she again said this chapter, because she's the one so easily and grandly accused of it while the bloodshed of others and especially Good is so easily and quickly ignored or overlooked as necessary.

A queen cloaked black, and all the more black now that she is cloaked in Night, who has been for the whole book the Queen of compromises and hard actions, that

sounds like the Cat we're seeing now. You're assuming she's going to have to be a lot more directly bloodthirsty for bloody red hands, but as we've seen this very chapter the way that people see her (which is what matters for Names) is that she already is a red-handed powerful Tyrant of Callow. They already fear and hate her for what she is and has done, if they oppose her.

Liliet

> Guess you're right, it was a Squire thing. Still not necessarily a Named thing, as female Kairos likely would've still been tormented by periods same as everything else.

Absolutely irrelevant. Kairos is a special case, with his illness being the central narrative thing about him that powered his everything else, so he couldn't get out of it. If his hypothetical periods were a part of that they'd stay, if they weren't they'd go.

Periods are not in fact narratively relevant for Catherine. Note how she remarks on them, like, once in the entire Book 5, and just when musing on changes that came with her no longer being fae or Named.

> while the Sovereign is just a complete all round army smasher Fey Name as high Fey names tend to be.

Still not a Name.

> If Cat's Name is hollowed out, camouflaged or part of Sve Noc, then she wouldn't feel its thrum or assign the effects of being Named to it over her patrons.

That hypothesis presents additional complexity with 0 evidence pointing towards it.

> A queen cloaked black, and all the more black now that she is cloaked in Night, who has been for the whole book the Queen of compromises and hard actions, that sounds like the Cat we're seeing now. You're assuming she's going to have to be a lot more directly bloodthirsty for bloody red hands, but as we've seen this very chapter the way that people see her (which is what matters for Names) is that she already is a red-handed powerful Tyrant of Callow. They already fear and hate her for what she is and has done, if they oppose her.

Yes, exactly. The groove is there. She just isn't the person they all think she is, and so does not fit it.

Mammon

>Kairos is a special case, with his illness being the central narrative thing about him that powered his everything else, so he couldn't get out of it.

Unless the whole issue of a travelling, fighting and bantering Name would have the monthlies is the reason for it disappearing, while more mood-swinging suitable Names would keep them. Squire lost it because she is supposed to feel the full brunt of Name change, is supposed to be the clever one outsmarting more powerful Names without two days a month weakness or change, etc. A ruler who doesn't have to travel with everything they need carried by themselves might not get the menstruation-exception.

Squire being the only we know of to not having monthlies isn't enough of a case to make a conclusion on. And for some reason EE doesn't immediately say whether new female Named, so Squire is the only one we've got to go on. Akua might still have had periods for all we know, though Archer likely didn't because of the travelling. Augur might still have them because there's no inherent weakness in this to scrap it for her. etc.

>That hypothesis presents additional complexity with 0 evidence pointing towards it.

Similar to how assuming that Cat doesn't have a Name because she has less narratively binding means to solve solutions, would feel the thrum of a potentially much more subtle Name in a more subtly written than book 1 and 2 writing style when Night is thick in her veins, and that just because Cat isn't using her Name as directly.

> Yes, exactly. The groove is there. She just isn't the person they all think she is, and so does not fit it.

Hierarch. He didn't have to be a ruler to be a ruler, as long as the people and the People saw him as a ruler. He never had to fit the groove of Hierarch and could in fact rebel all he wanted against it, it still clinged to him. Once the People and Kahunas declared that he had to accept

it, he had to accept it. But he never had to fit the groove.

Crash

I'm starting to think that having this conversation with you is absolutely pointless because the problem here is that you seem to have no idea what is a Name and what is a title, and Roles just don't exist at all.

>>A queen cloaked black, and all the more black now that she is cloaked in Night, who has been for the whole book the Queen of compromises and hard actions, that sounds like the Cat we're seeing now. You're assuming she's going to have to be a lot more directly bloodthirsty for bloody red hands, but as we've seen this very chapter the way that people see her (which is what matters for Names) is that she already is a red-handed powerful Tyrant of Callow. They already fear and hate her for what she is and has done, if they oppose her.

What people perceive Cat as doesn't matter at all. The only relevant thing is what Cat thinks of herself. Having people create a groove for her to fit in with their beliefs is nice and powers up her Name but it's by no means necessary. Again, Hierophant. Masego had an objective that didn't have a storied groove in Creation but he thought he would be the one to do it, vivisect a god, usher mysteries; and so he made his own Name because he had his own idea. At that point, most people would expect him to be Apprentice until he eventually inherited the name of Warlock or some other Mage name that already existed but he, Masego, disagreed and so he became Hierophant instead.

People think Cat is a bloodthirsty person, she disagrees. Back when she was the Squire people expected her to get a Warrior-related name and thought she was bloodthirsty. Did she get named Bloody Knight or something because people think that? No.

Liliet

I'll note that from what we know of Name mechanics, the *archetype* of hierophant – like, the word itself – had to have already existed and been an established cultural groove, even if no-one had had it as a Name, per se, before.

For reference see: WoG about 'Grey Knight'.

Mammon

See many other comments I've already written before, as those cover much to all of the arguments I'd make here.

Crash

So literally what appears to me as a fundamental misunderstanding of what the concepts you're attempting to wield to prove your point actually mean and I'm sure you feel similarly about my own ideas on this.

I think we'll have to agree to disagree on this one for now, but thanks for the long conversation anyway. Maybe we can take it up again in light of the epilogue, but most likely only when we have new things to discuss in the next book.

IDKWhoitis

My running theory is that Cat is mutilating the very grooves of Fate in regards to her roles and massive weight story wise. They will remember her so long after her death, much like Triumphant or Dead King. To fully embody a name, is to chain yourself to an anchor. For every one of your successes, lays the seeds of your failures and forces you down paths carved before you.

Cat is creating new paths, and as such faces even steeper opposition from the status quo. However, lacking any predefined path forwards, gives her enough mobility to jump over any narrative pitfalls that a lesser Name would be constrained into falling.

Liliet

> To fully embody a name, is to chain yourself to an anchor. For every one of your successes, lays the seeds of your failures and forces you down paths carved before you.

I don't think that's a Name thing. It's a general narrative thing, and Cat's been struggling with not falling into the traps of that regardless of being non-Named.

Liliet

It's not Creation and Providence that are forcing her into pivots and great events anymore. She's just been in position for it since Book 3, it doesn't TAKE Providence for someone in her situation and with her personality to be as central to continenal politics as she is. Pivots and narrative swirlies

form around her actions BECAUSE her actions are narrative heavy. The object level forms the meta level here, not the other way around.

And it's not narrative weight that determines whether one has a Name or not. It's whether or not you fit a groove / a character archetype that has accumulated narrative weight of its own to lend you – so it's actually the other way around.

Mammon

That's true for things like Callow's political standing in the Grand Alliance, but not things like 2000 horsemen joining you or an old man being certain that he can kill you with a Pattern of Three. From what we know, it's more likely to assume that Cat's thresher abilities are a Named-boosted trait of hers rather than a non-Named or even Role power of hers. To see the kapatractoi join her like this same as the Hangman and the likes strongly suggests that she has some Name, even if it's not a complete and acknowledged Name with Aspects (yet). And Pilgrim, who with his Choir insight should be able to tell the difference between Named and non-Named, hasn't changed his approach to her. Story-ties wise, she still appears to be Named based on what we've seen.

Liliet

> but not things like 2000 horsemen joining you

Yeah, that's just the Power of Charisma and also the Power of Being Right. Pallas straight up says that she's very aware she was helping Dead King at the time and would like to make up for that. And also, to Basilia, that her blood quickened at Catherine giving her impromptu speech about the League not being there for the fight. There's nothing supernatural about THIS outcome.

> or an old man being certain that he can kill you with a Pattern of Three

That's a Role thing, not a Name thing.

> From what we know, it's more likely to assume that Cat's thresher abilities are a Named-boosted trait of hers rather than a non-Named or even Role power of hers.

It's not a power. It's just a trait, an ability, a tendency. It's what she *does* as a person, and the narrative picks up on it and amplifies it as a feature of her Role, throwing more opportunities for it her way.

> To see the kapatractoi join her like this same as the Hangman and the likes strongly suggests that she has some

Name, even if it's not a complete and acknowledged Name with Aspects (yet).

You either have a Name or don't. If you don't, you can be a claimant, to a specific Name or in abstract, and if you're saying Cat is one of those then I'm following, but an incomplete Name is a Name you do not, in fact, have.

> And Pilgrim, who with his Choir insight should be able to tell the difference between Named and non-Named, hasn't changed his approach to her. Story-ties wise, she still appears to be Named based on what we've seen.

Yes, she is a quasi-Named, with the same narrative weight and strength of interaction with stories as Named usually have. Yet, she doesn't have a specific Name, and so is still not actually Named, not having the abilities that all Named have. Even claimants to a specific Name – as one of four claimants to Squire Cat already had access to its features. Right now she doesn't.

caoimhinh

I think Catherine is kind of in a state of being perpetually Claimant to *something*, the problem is that it just *keeps changing*. Ever since she mutilated her Name of Squire by embracing the Fae Title of Sovereign of Moonless Nights, she's been in this state, barely connected to a Name and forging multiple stories and pivots that shape up to multiple paths and multiple possible Names, she just never settles into any single one.

Even in Keter she still heard new parts of the song of the Dread Empress Claimants "the Girl Who Climbed the Tower".

She has a Role and actively plays it, so she must have a Name at some point.

But since her interpretation and manifestation of that Role keeps changing according to the circumstances, her Role is never stabilized into a single Name, but she definitely is constantly moving towards that.

When Cat finally settles into a new Name, that Name will be something that embraces everything Cat is, something that encompasses all that the manifestations of her Role are.

[Liliet](#)

Being a claimant to a specific Name gives you features of being Named though. Catherine first noticed her reflexes being much faster in the goddamn Name vision Amadeus sent her to with that one stabbing, aka

literally immediately. Right now Cat's referring to herself as non-Named, and I am very much inclined to trust that.

So the way I'm reading it, like Amadeus as of Epilogue 4, she's *abstractly* a claimant – in position to snatch what power comes her way if she wants to. But until she does, it's only a potential that doesn't really impact her abilities or interactions.

> When Cat finally settles into a new Name, that Name will be something that embraces everything Cat is, something that encompasses all that the manifestations of her Role are.

That's not how Names work. Names are archetypes, and a complete person isn't an archetype.

That said, I agree that it's possible that Cat will manage to form an accurate archetype of herself in the minds of people, and it'll birth her a very accurate Name. So far, though, it sounds like her reputation is wildly out of control and doesn't match the real her very well stil. That doesn't sound like a recipe for a Name.

Mammon

One general, yes. A general with their troops, yes. A general with their troops which were all humiliated, their finger broken and send away with their arnaments taken, the general still being able to make that gesture without most of the cavalry leaving or protesting because Kairos said they could is a Name-aided thing of providence, not just Charisma. Threshers can find more talent better, but this here is the Name-granted providence smoothing out the wrinkles behind Story-events.

Pattern of Three, is it though? Would it really be so simple that anyone could get William's plot armour simply by getting a Pattern of Three with any non-Named and then being all the more unkillable by Named? Would it really be so simple that even someone like Pilgrim would fully assume that a Pattern of Three would stick with a non-Named who's no longer something like a Fey Duchess either, to the point that he'd sacrifice a good chunk of army to it?

>You either have a Name or don't. ... an incomplete Name is a Name you do not, in fact, have.
Unless of course there's some power and Aspect-stealing lesser god thickly flowing through Cat's veins to both

take a lot of her Name and give her her Name's powers in its stead. It's quite possible that only the Story-threads remain of the Name, if she has one.

Liliet

> Pattern of Three, is it though? Would it really be so simple that anyone could get William's plot armour simply by getting a Pattern of Three with any non-Named and then being all the more unkillable by Named? Would it really be so simple that even someone like Pilgrim would fully assume that a Pattern of Three would stick with a non-Named who's no longer something like a Fey Duchess either, to the point that he'd sacrifice a good chunk of army to it?

There is a Role requirement for a Pattern of Three though. You can't just get one with whoever you like. Allow me to quote WoG on the subject:

"I've been seeing misunderstandings in the comment section for the last few chapters about patterns of three, so I'll lay out a few things here. The victory/draw/defeat setup that's been introduced in the story is something that occurs solely between Names that are rivals in their story – in this case Lone Swordsman/Squire and Heiress/Squire. You don't get to pick who your rival is, otherwise clever villains would just start a pattern of three with a weak hero, freeze them and ship them on the other side of the world then be more or less impossible to kill for a few centuries. Juniper doesn't have a Name, and so can't be involved in something like this. The Black Knight and the Wandering Bard are not rivals, so looking for a pattern there is also pointless."

Catherine managed to be in a mirror-opposite-but-roughly-equal-and-similar Role to Grey Pilgrim without being Named. This is rare and notable. It doesn't mean she was secretly Named. Again, it's the Role that's the key, not the Name. Akua explains that in her narration after First Liesse.

> Unless of course there's some power and Aspect-stealing lesser god thickly flowing through Cat's veins to both take a lot of her Name and give her her Name's powers in its stead.

Unless Cat is secretly Triumphant reincarnated with memory loss. And Tariq is secretly Traitorous. And Bard is a time-traveling Cat from the future. And the Dead King was a good guy all along and all his killings have been faked by the Bard, and the memory Cat saw was just

her being an unreliable narrator as she straight up lied to the audience about what she saw.

And the entire Guide is a dying dream of a coma patient.

Mammon

>something that occurs solely between Names that are rivals in their story

This sounds like an in-story confirmed thing that Pilgrim should thus know. Again, sacrificing an army on a gamble that Cat's Role would be opposite to his Name rather than Cat having a Name in his eyes sounds like something that not even Pilgrim would risk when DK is moving. And were they really that opposite? He's been mostly banking it on 'She's an evil and clever mastermind' while he's not at all fitting the narrative opposite of young and unproven or the outmatched cornered one that never wanted conflict that such a pattern would require. He was banking it on a pattern that might work for Named but there's too much dissonance from the cliches and tropes for him to rely on that against a Role considering the investment risk.

Which again, results in different interpretations of Named that we seem to have. I'd say, Named is not necessary only three Aspects mortal Named, that's just a subsection of it.

Liliet

> Again, sacrificing an army on a gamble that Cat's Role would be opposite to his Name

No, that Cat's Role would be opposite to his Role. It's not a Name thing – Cat's rivals in Book 2 were Heiress and Lone Swordsman, and while Heiress/Squire being rivals is sort of arguably tied into the Names, Squire vs Lone Swordsman is entirely arbitrary and contextual, ie, the function of their respective Roles.

NZPIEFACE

I think she's trying her best not to create a Name out of the already deep as fuck groove she's tearing into Creation with the Liesse Accords.

She wants to create a new status quo. I think making a Name that makes new status quos will be against that wish, since you know, *her* status quo will be overridden.

Vin reisling

Can we just put a vote link at the bottom of each chapter to cut out the obnoxious vote comments? Every time I think I'm going to see some discussion, and it's just "hurrr hurr vote".

tithin

yeah, getting a little tired of coming down to the comments to see discussion and instead it's 6 people all tripping over themselves to reword the story to make people vote.

It was clever / original the first time it happened, when you've got a bunch of people doing it on every chapter it gets really old.

[Liliet](#)

I wish everyone would go to simple 'Vote! [link]' vote reminders =x

Shveiran

You know what I dislike, though?

Comments that complain about this kind of things.

I like the vote posts. They often make me laugh. But even if they didn't, I don't get what makes them worth arguing over: they are usually a reply to each other and they are easy to spot.

You don't like reading them? Fine and dandy.

Just. Scroll. Down. No one is requiring you read them. You won't make them stop by complaining, because a lot of us do like them and will keep making them.

Just scroll down, and go on with your day. Isn't it simpler?

tithin

Right now, I scroll down, but it's annoying to have to scroll down because there's so many of these comments on every episode, and none of them are unique, or interesting, or contribute in any way shape or form to the community.

So no, it's not "simpler" to just scroll down, perhaps by making an observation that these posts aren't enjoyable to me, it may make the people who make those posts reconsider. One or two posts? scroll. as many as are being posted? it's valid to make a comment pointing out that too many are doing it and it contributes nothing.

[Liliet](#)

For me they actively ruin cool moments from the chapter immediately by... defacing them with the joke.

And I read too quickly to realize I should just scroll past in time, not to mention how many times I refresh comments and have to scroll past these without reading all over again.

They're like a fucking enjoyment landmine, where while thinking of a cool phrasing I instead get the 'vote! hahaha funny' bullshit in my head instead.

tithin

Thank you Liliet

Shveiran

You. You find them annoying.

Others enjoy them.

Others dislike rampant speculations or shipping.

Others, like me, dislike pointless arguing.

Removing them is not an "objective" improvement, but a subjective one.

I'm not arguing you don't have the right to say "I dislike this".

I'm arguing it is pointless, and spawns just as many useless comments as you are trying to prevent:if I disliked the vote jokes, now I'd have to scroll down BOTH the jokes AND the comments about how you dislike them.

Do these kind of rebuttal offer anything to the community? Really ask yourself, is it going to improve the discussion or just spawn another pointless argument?

Because if you think it's the letter, maybe you should stop complaining.

Not because I have a right to ask you to stop, but because it achieves nothing and irritates some.

[Liliet](#)

I have seen people agree with me.

I expect I'm not the only one whose enjoyment it actively improves to see things I dislike followed by criticism posted with equal amount of weight in the same format.

caoimhinh

And you have also seen people agree with those who post the "Vote!" comments, and many who like the post where they are creative with the way they post it.

I particularly like that they get creative and find different ways to post the same message, as to avoid being repetitive. Sometimes they are good and funny, sometimes not so much, it varies like everything in life. It's also not just one person who always makes that comment, but different ones.

You don't like those comments? Ok, fine. You are entitled to that, but could you please refrain from insulting them? Basic respect is a minimum who must have even when having differences of opinion. Saying things like "they actively ruin cool moments" may be your opinion, but surely calling them things like "They're a fucking enjoyment landmine" is going a bit too far?

They are not harming anyone, it's not spam nor ads for money, and they are not even doing it for themselves, they do it because they want this web novel to get more recognition.

It's a selfless thing, it's a good thing. No need to get annoyed or grumpy like those old people who yell at children because they laugh too loud when playing. Why get annoyed over someone having harmless fun?

[Liliet](#)

Because it harms me?

caoimhinh

No, it really doesn't.

At least it harms you no more than it harms someone who gets outraged at there being LGBT characters in the story.

The problem lies within yourself, not in the others making comments that should in no way harm you yet due to your own personal perceptions annoy you.

[Liliet](#)

> At least it harms you no more than it harms someone who gets outraged at there being LGBT characters in the story.

This comparison is ludicrous. Comments about being outraged at LGBT characters ARE harmful on a level that is entirely incomparable with my complaints about shitty unpleasant upsetting vote reminders. Or, yes, the vote reminders themselves. Can we not do reductio ad hitlerum here?

Shveiran

That's not what he said.

He said "what the joke voters post harms you in the same way the existence of the LGBTQ members harms intollerant people" not "what you and haters do has the same effect on the world".

The comparison doesn't refer to your actions. Just the perceived legitimacy of what moves you to act.

He simply read your "Because it harms me" comment above, and said "no, it really doesn't. It may irritate you, but that is a different thing."

caoimhinh

You aren't harmed, Lilieth.

You are only *slightly inconvenienced* by the vote comments, due to your own perceptions and susceptibility, born from (as you yourself had said) a mixture of the feelings you get at the end of a chapter, and the place these comments occupy, thus generating what you called "a fucking enjoyment landmine, where while thinking of a cool phrasing I instead get the 'vote! hahaha funny' bullshit in my head instead."

You are getting annoyed out of someone who is simply having harmless fun, because their joke clashes against the serious hype you have in your head at the end of the chapter, but that's really no reason for them to stop, it's you who must learn to look past them.

Plus, there are others who *do* enjoy the vote comment jokes, as shown by different people doing it and those who like those comments. So I doubt these comments will stop because of two or three complainers who don't have a legitimate reason beyond "I don't find it funny"

[Liliet](#)

I am not obligated to 'look past it' any more than they're obligated to stop, though.

As for the hypothetical 'anti-LGBT' commenters, the issue with them is not that they aren't allowed to get upset about things, it's that their upsetness when expressed does a lot more harm than being upset does to them. It's a $x \gg y$, not $y=0$. Not to mention that practicing getting over this upsetness

does both them and the world a lot of good, while absolutely no-one would ~tangibly have a greater benefit~ from me learning to not read the comments or something.

tithin

There's nothing wrong with "Vote for thing, link" and if it was just one or two of that, fine, no harm no foul.

But I've already detailed why I find them annoying, and Liliet's commentary also encapsulates some of my feeling here so I'm not going to repeat myself.

One of the arguments being deployed here is:

"I'm arguing it is pointless, and spawns just as many useless comments as you are trying to prevent:if I disliked the vote jokes, now I'd have to scroll down BOTH the jokes AND the comments about how you dislike them.

Do these kind of rebuttal offer anything to the community? Really ask yourself, is it going to improve the discussion or just spawn another pointless argument?

Because if you think it's the letter, maybe you should stop complaining."

Yes, the Rebuttals serve to provide notice that *people dislike them and are expressing that displeasure, something that they have the right to do, and which you acknowledge*

And yes, I do feel that it will improve discussion on the site by serving to make people aware that those sorts of comments, WHEN DONE BY AS MANY PEOPLE AS ARE DOING IT, are extremely annoying.

Because ultimately, with the number of people that are doing it, it doesn't feel like a "I want to see the web novel grow" it reads like a blatant attempt to be superfan#1 by being the fastest possible person to post such a comment.

Just get one person to do it, and everyone else can be all congratulatory to them, and then everyone's happy. I'm happy because I only see one of them, and y'all are happy because you get to see the rewashed content you so crave.

caoimhinh

But you do realize that they aren't actually that many people, right?

We see like 4 *tops* in a chapter. That's out of *dozens* and sometimes *hundreds* of comments. Although they aren't always the same people who comment, when they see someone already made a comment in that style in a given chapter, they refrain from doing it.

They are likely to be the first comments that you see, though. And maybe the only ones you see, if you read the chapter very early or if you only read the first few comments. But they aren't a spam of lots of comments.

Lilieth pointed out that one of the issues was that she saw these comments right at the end of the chapter, thus effecting a turndown of the "epic moment in her head". But honestly, that's out of anyone's control. The way someone perceives and feels about a scene and the way they feel when they see it parodied in a comment, varies from reader to reader.

But they are free to make those comments, either way. There is no bad intent in them.

tithin

To say that "it's out of anyone's control" though is not the case, it's very explicitly in someone's control to not make that comment – again, if the comment were simply "hey, here's a link to go vote for the thing" sure, no issues, I'll keep scrolling, and it won't bug Lilieth because it's not impacting on diminishing the story.

I don't see the point in arguing this further as neither of us is going to change the mind of the other, so this is as dust in the wind. You're entitled to your opinion and I to mine, suffice it to say that for me, it's extremely annoying and as people seem wont to defend it, I will continue to point out that is irritating in the vain hope that I'll see less of those sorts of comments.

Shveiran

Yes, it is pointless to keep arguing the point.

I am not so much of an hypocrite to keep doing what I'd like you to refrain from – argue for someone to stop doing what you find annoying, when there is no real chance that your words will affect them.

I hoped we could get ridd of one pointless discussion, but there is no point in spawning another.

So I'll just make this last request – that you give it some thought from our perspective.

Can't you see that just like I miserably failed to convince you or change your behavior, you won't change theirs?

These are your own words, just now:

"I don't see the point in arguing this further as neither of us is going to change the mind of the other, so this is as dust in the wind. You're entitled to your opinion and I to mine" and they are true.

But they don't apply just to you and me, do they? They also apply to you and them.

If your argument is "I dislike that", which is legit, they will reply "too bad." And that is legit too.

Because others do enjoy those comments.

Because you are not alone in how you feel, but neither are them.

Because maybe they are spoiling your fun somewhat, but staying silent would somewhat spoil theirs.

You won't change their mind, you'll just spoil their fun while not saving yours, and making it worse for those that dislike both the joke votes and your rebuttals.

Everyone loses.

So why do it?

I will say no more, so long as you refrain from outright attacking them. As we both said, there is no point.

Do what you will, I won't argue further. It's not like I could stop you, anyway.

[Liliet](#)

> Although they aren't always the same people who comment, when they see someone already made a comment in that style in a given chapter, they refrain from doing it.

You know, except for the part where these comments are being posted AS A REPLY TO THE PREVIOUS ONE.

I don't have an issue with people posting separate unrelated vote reminder comments, when it's clear

the person didn't see the previous one when they posted their own. Although I'll continue to provide feedback on the jokes themselves, in hopes that people will actually respond to it and start going with jokes that are more actually funny.

But when people are clearly trying to one up each other, that's a problem.

> But they are free to make those comments, either way. There is no bad intent in them.

And I'm free to make my own comments about those comments. There is no bad intent in that, either. Free speech works both ways.

caoimhinh

>"except for the part where these comments are being posted AS A REPLY TO THE PREVIOUS ONE... when people are clearly trying to one up each other, that's a problem."

That's called a comment thread, that's where they are *supposed to be*. Comments of the same nature or touching the same topic being in the same thread has nothing strange or bad, you know? That's why threads exist in the first place.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with people trying to up one another either, that's how they improve; they are sharing a common interest and replying to each other as they share the joke and have fun, you should have no problem with people having fun on their own.

If some of the readers were to make a comment thread making lame puns with characters and events of the guide, and you don't want to participate or don't like the puns, you simply scroll down and ignore the thread, not start commenting to tell them to stop or tell them to make puns that are funny to you, right?

>"I'm free to make my own comments about those comments. There is no bad intent in that, either. Free speech works both ways."

Except for the part where you insulted those who made vote comments and those who parodied phrases of the chapters to invite others to vote. Or the part where you are trying to impose your own personal taste to other people's comments and

now want to set a standard of "if your joke is not funny to me, don't post it".

We all have opinions and the right to express ourselves; unless their jokes and comments are actually offensive or unlawful, you have no right to censure them nor to dictate what they can put in their comments or how they make their jokes. It's harmless fun while sending the reminder to vote in topwebfiction for this web novel, they are not doing anything bad.

[Liliet](#)

> There's absolutely nothing wrong with people trying to up one another either, that's how they improve;

If they want to improve, they get my feedback as guidance. I'm helping!

> you should have no problem with people having fun on their own.

I don't have a problem with people having fun 'on their own'. But this isn't on their own, this is in a public place, where they are literally inviting commentary. This isn't on their own blog, this isn't in a private chat, this isn't in a specialized discord channel. You don't get to masturbate in front of a public building then complain that people are taking issue with you 'having fun on your own'*.

* a hyperbolic comparison meant to delineate the difference, not to suggest this is of the same severity or nature.

> We all have opinions and the right to express ourselves; unless their jokes and comments are actually offensive or unlawful, you have no right to censure them

Are you aware of what the word 'censure' means?

If I was a mod and I was deleting those comments because I don't like them, that'd be censoring. Notably, at least some people would argue that I'd have a right to do that as that is, in fact, a mod's right and responsibility, and 'the right to free speech' applies specifically to government and mass media, not to saying whatever you want

anywhere you want with no-one having a right to ask you not to.

Like... by those standards, you're censuring me too. Am I doing serious harm to them by insisting their jokes aren't funny? I'm discouraging them, yes. That's exactly the goal I'm pursuing. I'm not seeing how it's offensive/harmful.

> Except for the part where you insulted those who made vote comments and those who parodied phrases of the chapters to invite others to vote.

> Or the part where you are trying to impose your own personal taste to other people's comments and now want to set a standard of "if your joke is not funny to me, don't post it".

Welp, I'll apologize for the insults if any of those people asks me to. I don't remember any specifically but I do believe I might have gotten a little heated =x

As for imposing personal taste and setting standards: yes. I'm a part of this community, I get to *try* to do that.

You are right now attempting to impose your own taste on me and set the standard of "no-one gets to complain about someone else's jokes unless they are actively offensive to real-world marginalized groups". I disagree with that standard, but I do not deny your right to try to convince me in its favor. It appears we're at an impasse, good sir.

[Liliet](#)

> Can't you see that just like I miserably failed to convince you or change your behavior, you won't change theirs?

I am trying to, just by giving feedback on the jokes themselves. Who knows, maybe next time when they're thinking of one they'll go 'hmm but can i make a joke AND get a compliment from Liliet on it? it's a challenge!'

It's worth trying, and it makes people who agree with me feel better, so... win-win!

Valkyria

Gods. I really wish Cat could once just do what she wants. Use all her power and just hammer it into them.

I won't point out the obvious reasons why she can't and shouldn't

bc they were mentioned in the chapter.
But it would be so blissfull to watch those blithering, ignorant dumbasses realize how damn lucky they are that Cat is holding herself back. That Cat is not just smiting everyone. How happy they can be that she is not a Villian in the Old Way.
That would be so satisfying.
Stupid, alright.
But satisfying.

[Liliet](#)

Not to everyone :3

Valkyria

Well to me it would :3

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, well, see my comment below.

Cat's WINNING this game and I'm so fucking proud of her.

Valkyria

I'm not saying I don't like how great she's handling things now. It's just me feeling her frustration of just wanting to smash a table or two (or heads) in the face of stupidity.

[Liliet](#)

Yes, well, but being the bigger person is so much more viscerally satisfying!

...I might be the weird one, I'll give you that.

Valkyria

That is true but I probably just put myself in there. I mostly try being the bigger person but can't always so I know how it feels to snap. (At some point it just won't work anymore) But it is satisfying to just let it all out.

So I'm proud she knows how to handle herself but I wonder if she will be able to do that or if at some point she snaps too. Knowing her even her snapping would be controlled and measured but still.

For me there was always a point where I just couldn't take it anymore.

Of course in my life it's not nations or continents that are at stake.

Nah, you just have an opinion. Just like me. It's just not the same.

[Liliet](#)

TBH I have greatly enjoyed the moments when Cat snapping was just her going 'guess I'll die' and giving up (First Summerholm, Everdark). And I am a great fan of her leaning into her heroic tendencies as well :3

Are you familiar with the anime 'Trigun'?

Valkyria

Yes those were great indeed.

I know it but never watched it. Why?

[Liliet](#)

Well, Vash the Stampede is one of my favorite fictional characters, and btw I recommend, it's a pretty short series. He's a little relevant to my opinion on this ;u;

[NZPIEFACE](#)

She had her one moment where she DIAVOLO'd Akua.

Everything after that was sadly not carthartic at all.

[Liliet](#)

RIP 😊

[Liliet](#)

God, this was so satisfying. I'm so fucking HERE for Cat balancing on the tightrope and *not falling anymore*. Not throwing a tantrum, not fucking up her diplomatic relationships for the future by trying to regain control of this one, graciously admitting loss and leaving the stage when that's the best thing she can do.

Not destroying her enemies out of pure spite, because there must be more than ruin.

And winning allies without expecting any, just by being intensely herself at all times.

Agent J

Mortality is the best damned thing to ever happen to her. To keep the limp, to take up the staff over the sword, to just *walk away* when a battle is lost rather than losing herself to the heat of the moment. New Cat is best Cat.

She has finally grown up and grown into her own and I'm loving every bloody moment of it. Hells, even her father comfortably cowers in her shadow.

Long live the Black Queen.

[Liliet](#)

God, that conversation where Amadeus takes an insult and turns it into a compliment to his kid instead is so fucking iconic ♥

Agent J

There's a reason he's so beloved by readers. He is one of the most supportive fathers I've seen in media. Wekesa should have learned from him. Trying to imprison your son so he doesn't get in the way of murdering your niece? Poor form, 'Kesa. Poor form.

[Liliet](#)

To be fair, there's such a thing as going too far, and "why doesn't my daughter want to murder me for power?" is a little out there...

[Liliet](#)

(But yes god Amadeus nails Good Parenting while actively trying not to, god bless the idiot and icon)

Rup

"Comfortable Cowering" is my new favourite pose.. LOL

[NZPIEFACE](#)

Yeah, it was great to see her try, but then just said "Fuck it, your loss".

[Liliet](#)

It felt really climactic to me to see Cat's bad leg do exactly what Cat wanted it to and stop her from making a shitty decision – and then having Cat just take the high road again...

...AND THEN GET AN ARMY OUT OF IT.

Because Doing The Right Thing is a boomerang, and you do end up inspiring people to follow your example, if you stick with it :3

Masterofbones

And here I was thinking that there wouldn't be a reference to Aleister Crowley in this story. "Do as thou wilt shall be the whole of the law" indeed. The Tyrant is the best, and his friendship with Cat is fantastic.

[ninegardens](#)

Last chapter:

"Basillia, why are you here?"

General Basilia, dutifully: "We are here solely to carry out the final orders of Kiaros Theodosian"

This chapter:

General Basilia (Still dutifully): "Tyrants orders were to do whatever the fuck we want. Lols"

[Liliet](#)

THE FUCKING BEST

My current running theory is that Basilia and Kairos might be related on his mother's side.

Halinn

Very nice to see the bad leg being used as the reminder that Cat meant to it be

[Liliet](#)

Storyworld is convenient that way XD

[Sugar Roll](#)

Well, now all we need is for Amadeus to take control of Praes so they can join the party. The King of Death against all of Calernia. I like the sound of that.

laguz24

Is it just me or is there a fate obligated providence related law that says all long term plans must be screwed up. Since I haven't seen a single plan go off without a hitch.

[ninegardens](#)

A certain Mr Theodosian would beg to differ.

As would Auger when Vs the Bard.

As for “things going off without a hitch” – how often does that happen in real life?

And when you’ve got three or more sides playing against one another, AT LEAST 2/3 of them are going to have their plans screwed, and more likely all three.

Prediction is hard, especially when making predictions about the future. Mostly you’ve just got to make your plans robust, and then take the victories you can.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> A certain Mr Theodosian would beg to differ.

From beyond the grave: “*Mister?* That’s Lèse-majesté! That calls for... a ‘promotion’, heh heh heh.”

[onedollargum](#)

“The blood quickened”. I wonder what that’s meant to mean exactly.

Shveiran

I read it mostly as a “she is someone worth following. When she does what she does, my blood gets pumping like it did with Kairos. I can find purpose in joining her cause, because she is worthy in my Helikean eyes”.

[ninegardens](#)

I’m also wondering if this is a case of Cat only half knowing the relevant language. Hence the saying would make perfect sense in its native tongue, but understand it from Cat’s perspective and hence we get soemthing which only half makes sense.

[Fayhem](#)

I’m not really a polyglot myself, but I have been given to understand that grasping idiom is usually the hardest part of learning a new language since they comparatively rarely put that in the books (which IMO is a, as Amadeus would say, *mistake*). So that would make sense to me. I think Shveiran’s interpretation is valid, but it would also make sense that an idiom or cultural reference (e.g., maybe that’s a line in a famous Helikean play about Why We Follow Tyrants) is being used here to give the statement extra weight that Basilia would grasp immediately.

[Liliet](#)

As a non-native English speaker who is also autistic and so had to develop a special cognitive algorithm for grasping idioms in her native language too...

Wait, it's not obvious from context?

Zim the Vixen

Here's a more explicit recreation of that interaction

"And? Did you find you were looking for? Now that we are free to do as we will, do you really wish to go with her?" General Basilia said.

"Yes," General Pallas. "Yes. The blood quickened. She got angry, pulse rose, she tensed. She almost took those men's heads off. All of our heads off. This is absolutely what I was looking for in her. It wasn't just that one time, when she broke us cataphracts."

[Liliet](#)

Hm.

I took that as Pallas saying *her* blood quickened at Cat's speech, ie she *is* excited by Cat's leadership and wants to follow it.

Your interpretation feels... off to me, but I cannot see a specific reason why other than 'very different from mine'.
Hrm.

Rup

..like the three-body-problem ...
"three or more sides playing against one another,"

[Liliet](#)

Well, 'no plan survives first contact with the enemy' is a real world saying...

Or, as a very good Fire Emblem fic I recently read put it, "I trust my forces. I don't trust the opponent's".

Also, I suspect there is in fact a tendency baked into the very nature of Named to go against manipulations and being used, acting as the grain of sand in the machinery – as rare is the story that doesn't have its protagonist do that, deliberately or unwittingly.

Some Smartass

Someone's villain can be as inspiring as their hero. Even in death, Kairos teaches us more about villainy.

NZPIEFACE

Ah, the ultimate betrayal of Below. Somehow inspiring people to be Good when you were an Evil Tyrant above them.

Somehow.

Shveiran

I'm fully convinced that if Kairos bought an apple, someone would find reasons to explain how that is the ultimate betrayal to bananas.

Liliet

When you have declared undying friendship to enough opposing factions, literally anything you do is a betrayal of at least one of them!

It's foolproof!

aran

> How can you even know this wasn't her doing from the start?

You... you literally just tried to throw a poisoned weapon into her face, Prodocius; they all saw you do it...

aran

The two Helikean generals are surprisingly decent, for Helikeans.

Abrakadabra

I am a little disappointed that Bellerophon just leaves. If they think on it there is no larger tyrant Than one WHO would rule over the people even after death.

Chapter 89: Sing We Of Ruin

"Fifty-five: if your powers are lost, they will nearly always return greater than before so long as the appropriate moral lesson is learned. With kindness and humility comes overwhelming

martial might."

- "Two Hundred Heroic Axioms", author unknown

It was over.

The League's soldiers withdrew, the hostility between the different forces open but reason prevailing just enough for battle not to erupt less than a day's march from the capital of Procer. Considering the people involved, I'd not considered that a given. Secretary Nestor and his attending scribes withdrew for the night but requested permission to send an embassy under daylight. The clear intention was to request the presence of Secretariat scribes and chroniclers up north, and I accepted tonight as I fully intended to accept tomorrow. There'd be restrictions and conditions, but in principle I had no objection to their work. If I got lucky, maybe a report making its way south would even stir some Delosi to shed neutrality long enough to cease recording the end times and actively try to turn them back. A girl could dream. General Pallas and her *kataphraktoi* swore oaths and sent back half their number to claim their equipment and supplies still in the League camp, the rest returning with me.

Adjutant had finished speaking with Talbot and the remaining senior legate when I arrived – Tendai, wasn't it? Sounded Soninke – though he opened his report by passing a dry comment on my 'dragging yet another army home'. Like it was a bad thing, the wretch. As it turned out Juniper's report had been essentially confirmed, with the sole fresh developments a few accusations of 'Praesi treachery' and 'Callowan purges' tossed around by soldiers that'd ended in brawls. One dead, from an unlucky broken neck, and both Tendai and Talbot had come together to hang those involved as per Callowan regulations. Adjutant argued for the growing urgency of intervention there, even if risking dire consequences to the compelled, but I had no order to give him. I hesitated still to speak when those words might just kill Juniper and Aisha, among others. I presented General Pallas to him instead and dropped onto his 'drily humorous' lap the work of getting the cataphracts settled.

There'd be talk later of how many soldiers Pallas was proposing to bring north, though it shouldn't be more than ten thousand. Less, probably, though there likely to be the most finely drilled and commanded troops among the coalition's armies. At least one good thing had come out of this otherwise ruinous night.

Archer wandered off, likely to check in on Masego though given the work I'd asked of him he was like as not to ignore her presence beyond what basic courtesy required. If even that much. Vivienne was speaking with General Abigail's staff tribune to pick out what soldiers would be sent out as her escort, and I made a mental note of having the general formally granted the

authority of a Marshal of Callow until Juniper could be declared fit to resume it. I'd no intention of promoting her to the rank, not for many years yet if ever, but to get affairs in order with the Army she'd need to have the weight of that authority behind her. Both the inherited structure of the Legions of Terror and the Hellhound's preference for strict lines of command had resulted in formal authority being needed to get anything moving in the Army of Callow. Akua remained with me, a shadow shadowing mine, and though I could guess she wanted to address the fact that she'd been outed I did not approach the subject. It'd be out and about before long, I knew. If Malicia felt comfortable enough handing out that information to the likes of Prodocius and Honorion, it meant she was comfortable putting it out there.

I was still uncertain how my people would take it, on the Callowan side at least. If Akua had still been stuck in my collar save when I let her out I suspected it would have been taken as a long price, but 'Advisor Kivule' was not a prisoner or entirely unknown to the men. Like as not it'd cost me a few feathers in the eyes of the heroes in the Grand Alliance, too, though I'd not hesitate to call Cordelia a damned hypocrite if she spoke so much as a word in condemnation. She didn't get to play that card when she had people lugging a Seraphim's corpse around Procer. Truth be told, given the hour I probably ought to head to bed. The immediate necessities were seen to, and the rest was probably best approached with a well-rested mind and a clear head. Black was awake, there could be now that about that, because Scribe would have missed little of what had unfolded or left him to sleep during it. I was still not looking forward to that conversation, and arguably waiting until daylight for it would not be a bad idea. It'd allow Scribe's people in the Eyes to learn more, and that when we held council we'd both have a clear idea of what was happening before decisions were made.

It was over, the succession of twists and turns that'd swallowed up my night. Or at least it ought to be over. If it was, though, why would my shoulders not loosen? Like I was awaiting a blow I was clenching onto myself, my instincts screaming there was something yet to come. And there were not, I thought, a thousand directions from which further trouble could come. So grimly I sent Akua away for the night and, cloak trailing behind me, limped towards empty smithy the Carrion Lord had claimed as his home for the duration of the conference. There were no legionaries at the door, or near either of the two windows, which was... unusual. Black had been the one to teach me that a Name was a useful thing but that it was no substitute for people watching your back. His Blackguards might not have been able to do much against a Named assassin, but there weren't a lot of those and there were *lot* of the regular kind. Especially when you crossed Praesi nobles. The heavy wooden door was not locked and did not resist when I pushed it open. The burning glare of the lit

furnace within blinded me for a half a beat, flames roaring tall and proud.

The shadows they cast on the walls of the smithy, which had been stripped bare of much it would contain during warmer seasons, were long and shivering. Amadeus of the Green Stretch sat alone by a blackened iron anvil, his drab grey tunic and worn boots making him look like an aging shopkeeper instead of the Black Knight of Praes. On the anvil was a bottle, and not of wine. An empty one had been set on the ground by the anvil.

"Catherine," the green-eyed man greeted me. "An eventful night for you, I am told."

It was so genuinely taken aback by the slight slur to his voice I didn't manage to entirely hide my surprise. I could not remember, in all the time I'd known him, seeing my teacher even half as drunk as he clearly was right now. Not even once.

"You too, looks like," I said, flicking a glance at the bottle.

"Salian brandy," Black replied, tone amiable. "It struck me as fitting."

Shit. I wasn't familiar with the Salian kind in particular, but brandy was hard liquor. Not necessarily the hardest-hitting stuff, but if he'd really drunk more than a bottle of the stuff I could only be reluctantly impressed he wasn't falling down his Legion-issue folding chair. *This isn't like you*, I almost said, but bit down on it. I'd never seen him like this before, true, but then when I'd been young he'd still had the Calamities with him. People he could unwind with, as I myself did with the Woe. Who was left of that for him now, save for Scribe? So instead I snatched a cup from his table and braced my staff against the side of it, freeing my other hand to claim the other folding chair. I bit down on a hiss of pain as I limped forward to the other side of the anvil, dropping my seat there as pale green eyes followed me. I let out a sigh when I sat down, glad for the rest, and set down my cup atop the iron by the side of his. Without a word he filled it with brandy, and his own again.

"What are we drinking to?" I asked.

"Epiphany," my teacher said. "Harsh mistress that she is."

That was not a promising start, I thought, and drank deep of my cup. The brandy burned on the way down and if I'd had swallow of that at sixteen I suspected my eyes would have watered. It was smooth on the tongue, so clearly good stuff, but it couldn't be called anything but heavy.

"It's been a day," I agreed. "And a night, even."

"Yes, it has," he mildly said. "Eventful enough I'll confess the tumult blinded me, at first. Time to think set that weakness to rest."

"Kairos took us all for a ride," I said. "Our enemies a little more than us, which is the saving grace of this, but everyone took a few bruises. It'll be months if not years before we can really glimpse the scale of what he wrought."

"Kairos Theodosian's schemes are of only passing interest to me," Black said, pausing to knock back a quarter of his cup without batting an eye. "No, it is the moments that led to his swan song I have been dissecting."

The conference. Malicia. *It won't matter*, Scribe had warned me. *He always forgives*. I might not love the woman, or even like her, but I that did not mean she had been wrong in this.

"Scribe told you about the Legions-in-Exile," I guessed.

"I knew within an hour of your knowing," Black agreed. "And now I ponder how it all came to be."

"It must have been a contingency the Empress had in place for years," I said.

Another quarter of his cup went down his throat. The breathy slip of laughter he let out after that had my fingers clenching in dismay. It was... unpleasant, seeing him like this. So close to losing control, when control had always been at the heart of him.

"Decades," my teacher corrected. "The sheer breadth of possibly compromised individuals is simply staggering, viewed in retrospective. I assume it is the consequence an aspect. Wekesa would have noticed such a contingency were it sorcerous in nature and told me of it."

Most likely, I silently agreed. Masego had rubbed elbows with Juniper for years while holding an aspect related to sight and then eyes forged of Summer flame without noticing a damned thing, so I was not overly surprised that the Warlock had caught nothing. Named power could imitate sorcery, but it should never be mistaken for it – it answered to different rules, took different shapes.

"Or he might not have," Black then genially said. "It appears that the many warnings I received of sentiment being more blinding that I believed were accurate."

"The writing was on the wall after Akua's Folly," I reluctantly said.

Not for reluctance to speak the truth, but knowing how deeply painful it was to him.

"Oh no, not when it comes to Alaya," Amadeus of the Green Stretch softly said. "It is Eudokia I gravely misread."

Fuck, I thought, and kept my face blank. I'd waited too long. All this time I'd been agonizing over whether I should tell him or not, if the likely fallout was worth the honesty, and somehow it'd never occurred to me he might just figure it out on his own. How much did he know, though? I'd gotten a confession and explanation, while he must have simply pieced together details on his own.

"It is a bad habit, forcing lack of expression," Black chided. "You still do it sometimes, when taken aback. It reveals that you know something, by consequence of revealing you have something to hide."

I grimaced. He drank again.

"Not that confirmation was truly needed," he noted. "Your request with a private conversation with Scribe stood out even at the time."

"I did not know whether I should tell you," I admitted.

I might have, I thought. I liked to think I would have. But I would not lie to him and pretend it had been a sure thing.

"It would be ill-done of me to rebuke you for behaviour I instilled in you myself, largely through example," Black said, sounding darkly amused. "Though it is a fresh novelty to be treated in so high-handed a manner by anyone save Malicia."

"Scribe, she believed, *believes* she was saving your life, you know," I said, then hesitated before continuing, "and I'm not sure I disagree with her."

"Would you like to know how I inferred what happened?" the green-eyed man idly said, filling his cup anew.

I'd yet to finish mine, or him his, but down the bottle went. I slowly nodded, though I was not sure I actually did. He drank from his cup and I matched him, the brandy's burn a pleasant distraction from the roaring heat of the furnace and this miserable conversation.

"In the moment it bled me, that Alaya stood in that hall and saw me only as a hindrance," Black said. "That she had not, beforehand, even attempted to speak to me so it might be made into a game of silk and steel. That she'd considered a decision

that so wounded me to make as inexorable, a betrayal assured – so assured there was no need to even *attempt* conversation.”

He paused.

“Then I made myself cease to think of her as Alaya and began to think of her as Dread Empress Malicia,” he mildly said. “And I still saw an unexplainable mistake from a woman whose judgement I yet hold in some esteem.”

“You figured she knew something you didn’t,” I said.

“The moment Eudokia intrigued to pass the blame onto her for the botched Salian coup, everything that followed was set in stone,” he mused. “Either I had ordered this, and now stood her foe. Or I had been deceived, and anything spoken to me could aid Scribe in furthering her attacks. Or potentially reveal how they had been anticipated and answered. Either way, even a secret missive would have been a foolhardy risk.”

I drank again, deep, since what I had to say was like as not to be unpleasant to get through.

“That doesn’t excuse anything,” I said. “She’s still the ally of the Dead King. She still spent decades seeding commands in the minds of people. No one *forced* her to order the Night of Knives, Black. Hers might have been choices with reasons to them, but that does not excuse a single fucking thing. You’ve been preaching personal responsibility to me since the day we met – why would she, alone of all the people in Creation, get a pass?”

He held up his cup to the light of the furnace and it cast a streak of shade over his eyes.

“*I trust people to act according to their nature,*” he quoted. “*Anything more is sentimentality.* She said this not long after her formal claiming of the Tower, when there was still talk of who might be her Chancellor. It was the talk of Ater for weeks and remains her words most often quoted in Praes. I never thought much of the saying, for it presumes much, but it speaks to the woman who spoke it.”

The cup went down, and the green gaze was pensive.

“Malicia seeded commands preparing for a betrayal, and that betrayal came,” he said. “I blame her for this no more than I blame you for the terrible habits you learned at my side, though I would chastise another for them.”

“Brandy makes you chatty,” I said. “You’re muddling cause and consequence, Black. Fucking with the minds of your subjects is something that deserves answer. It’s not a betrayal to recognize that. You’re just being...”

I bit my tongue.

"Sentimental?" he finished, slightly slurring. "So I am. Eudokia said the same, when we spoke."

I went still.

"And what else did she say?" I slowly asked.

"That she regretted her actions," Black said, tone dry. "And would not repeat them. That she understood it had been a mistake. I thanked her for this, naturally, for it was a needed lesson to us both."

And yet she was not here, drinking with him.

"So where is she?" I pressed.

"I wouldn't know," the green-eyed man said. "Neither does it matter, for she is no longer in my service."

My fingers clenched.

"You're drunk," I flatly said, "you're regret this after-"

"I made that decision without having had a drop," Amadeus of the Green Stretch said, tone eerily calm.

"Then you're grieving, not in your right mind," I hissed. "There's nothing practical about-"

"No longer extending trust to someone who deftly manipulated me into rebellion and undertaking a road that ends in the murder of someone dear to me?" Black said. "An interesting premise. I offered no rancor and held no grudge. It is a parting of ways, nothing more and nothing less."

"You can't afford to lose Scribe," I bluntly said. "If you do you lose the Eyes, and if you no longer have the Eyes the Empire will eat you alive."

"I considered this, but then decided it to be irrelevant," he amiably said.

He drained the rest of his cup then, with clumsy fingers for one usually so sure-footed, produced a small strip of parchment from a pocket within his tunic. He put it down on the anvil, without a word. It was in Mtethwa, two words: Come home. I knew not the handwriting, but then unlike him I'd not spent decades corresponding with the Empress.

"You can't be serious," I quietly said.

"All of this might genuinely have untied the knot, you see," Black said, sounding highly amused. "I *did* betray her, in the end. As she always believed I would, deep down. And after that betrayal failed and she triumphed over me so utterly she can now, at last, feel at ease."

He poured his cup full again as I did absolutely nothing to hide the horror I felt.

"Of course, I will never question her again," he said. "I will have lost that right, alongside any notion that this is partnership instead of vassalage. But the doors of Ater will be open to me and, as far as she is concerned, kneeling before the throne as every lord and lady of Praes watches will be my great penance."

"It can still be turned around," I said. "I know it's a blow, the Exile Legions leaving and Scribe having manipulated you, but this isn't your only choice. You have allies, Black."

The green-eyed man tipped back his cup, taking another swallow.

"You misunderstand," he said after. "I could no more do this than I could pretend I still put my trust in Eudokia. It is best to look what you are in the eye, as a villain. Lying to yourself is ever a dangerous business."

"And what is it you are?" I quietly asked.

"Not yet content," he said, smiling as if he was having a private jest at my expense.

I wasn't helping him, I realized. Sitting here with Black and finishing that bottle would not make him feel any better. This breakdown had been a long time coming, maybe as far as Captain's death, but letting him drink and entangle himself in his thoughts would solve nothing. Gingerly, I rose to my feet.

"Sleep it off, Black," I sighed. "Scribe won't have gone far, and that woman would forgive you nearly anything. She'll forgive you this. We can make plans after dawn, when we're all sober and rested."

He looked at me for a long moment, then set down the cup. For a moment he looked about to say something, but instead he smiled crookedly.

"Good night, Catherine," my father said.

I left, limping, and left the blazing heat of the smithy in favour of the cold. The coolness outside leant a refreshing touch the sweat on my brow and neck, but the exhaustion I'd expected never came. Even now, after all this, restlessness lingered in

the marrow of my bones. High up above, under the stars and moon, to great crows feathered in darkness drifted across the sky. Their thoughts touched mine, gently, and shared a sight they were glimpsing in the distance. One man, leaving Salia. Well now, that was earlier than anticipated. I saddled Zombie and rode out, declining escort, and the journey on her back was swifter than it had been on foot. The small farm had not changed at all since my last visit, though perhaps that should not have surprised me: it might feel like an age ago, but I'd last stood here two nights back. The cattle wall, I saw, had been built anew. And stones had rolled down, as I'd warned the White Knight they would. By the eyes of the Crows I would not have company for some time yet, so after tying Zombie to the side of the farm I was spared a few breaths to consider how to comfortably wait.

Inside would be most reasonable, I thought. But the cold was pleasant, and I was reluctant to part from it. Instead I propped up my staff against the sidewall and, after soothing my leg with Night, hoisted myself up the side of the farm. The roof was as sturdy as it looked, good tiles and well set. Grimacing in pain even through the Night trick, I crawled atop it until I was resting my back against a chimney stump. Tightening my cloak against me comfortably, I let myself drift into the mixture of warmth around my belly and coolness against my face. It was soothing, and I almost fell asleep. I was not sure how long I'd been there when I finally heard approaching footsteps in the snow. I heard the White Knight chuckle as he figured out where I was, then deftly climb up the side. As Hanno dragged himself up on the roof, I finished stuffing my pipe and went looking for a match to light it. Finding one of my last sapper pinewoods I struck it against my sleeve but it failed to light. Sighing, I discreetly tapped a finger and seeded with black flame before hastily lighting my pipe with it.

The White Knight rose to his feet and strode to the edge of the roof, the two of us watching the nearing dawn begin to light up the sky.

"Back so soon?" I said, blowing out a stream of wakeleaf smoke.

"Within an hour of Tariq waking, he drew me out of my own slumber," Hanno said.

All else about the man aside, there were Named out there with the word 'healer' in the Name who weren't half as good at the art as Tariq Isbili was. Hells, for a time he'd even been able to cure death.

"And now you're here," I said.

An invitation to elaborate, but he did not take it.

"You were Queen of Winter for a time, were you not?" Hanno asked instead.

I hummed, pulling at my pipe.

"Close enough," I said. "If only by virtue of being the sole scavenger with a road to it."

"And you are no longer," the White Knight said.

"Took a leap of faith," I acknowledged. "All things considered, I don't regret it."

"And when Winter left you, Black Queen," he softly said. "Did it feel like an absence?"

Oh, I thought, and was surprised to find I yet had pity in me.

"It felt like flying out of a pit into the blue sky," I gently said. "It felt like the first drink of water after a long day in the sun. But I never loved that power, White Knight, nor did it love me."

Not as he so obviously loved the Choir of Judgement, strange as that sentiment was to me. He stood there for a long moment, looking at the lightening horizon.

"They have all been asking me," the White Knight said, "what befell of Judgement. Would you like to know, Catherine Foundling?"

I had half a dozen flippant replies on the tip of my tongue, but I was not feeling so callous right now as to offer them up to a decent man so obviously grieving.

"Tell me," I said instead.

He flicked his wrist, and in the dawning light I caught the shine of silver. A coin, flipping, for a moment I almost struck out with the Night. But Sve Noc was silent, and I remained still. The White Knight caught the coin and did not even look at what had turned up. To him, and so to me, it'd just been a flip of the coin. There had been nothing more to it.

"Silence," Hanno of Arwad said. "Only silence."

I let out a breath I hadn't known I was holding.

"The Hierarch still fights them, then," I quietly said.

"You warned me," the dark-skinned man admitted. "I did not listen, for never before has the strength of Judgement failed before my eye. You warned me, and now there is silence."

And silence stayed there, hanging in the air.

"And now what?" I asked.

"I am blind," Hanno of Arwad said. "Yet even a blind man can see that war must be waged on Keter."

"I have pledged myself to this," I said. "And do not take such oaths lightly."

He turned towards me, his broad silhouette ringed by morning's light, and met my eyes.

"Then we are allies," the White Knight said, and offered his hand.

I took it.

And so we went to war, against the King of Death.

[ErraticErrata](#)

And so we're at the last chapter of this book before the epilogue. There'll be a formal announcement later on, but as a heads up this time instead of the usual month-long break between books I'll be taking two months – in part because the last book will be as long as this one, in part because I need to begin drafts from my next project after the Guide is finished.

As usual, first update of the month means extra chapter in the eponymous, the third and penultimate of the 'Winter' chapters, from the White Knight's perspective.

NerfGlaistigUaine

So the first chapter of Book VI I'll read will be in Denmark, studying abroad. Looking forward to it. Take your time and bring this story to a conclusion so epic it'll make the Gods, and more importantly us, your readers, weep.

Jessica Day

So, you know, no pressure 😊

NerfContessa

Ah, Amadeus.

Here he said the straightens sentence that makes us think he's dread emperor benevolent, and it was said at his lowest.

Amazing book, ee.

Thank you.

erebus42

Damn, whatever Black is planning it can't be good. It's also refreshing to hear a hero actually admit that Cat was right for once. I guess Hanno will have to learn to pass judgment himself, though he still appears to be the White Knight so he's got that going for him.

[Liliet](#)

Well, assuming he's planning, anyway.

The last couple of times he was planning it was... largely undeserving of the name =x

And I think Hanno will just be trying to avoid passing judgement on anyone ever, as is his personality. He doesn't judge, he doesn't know how to condemn people, and he'll just be, I suspect, a peacekeeper. With no longer the weight of the Choir at his back for it =x

Crash

See, I got the distinct impression there's a fifty-fifty chance of Amadeus still being alive in the morning.

Something about the wording gave me the impression he could still be planning but just the fact he was drunk off his ass and sending Scribe away? Oh, boy.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, I get very very very bad vibes off of the whole situation too.

That said, surely he's more proud than to just straight up kill himself without at least trying to go out with a bang and solve SOMEONE's problems with it, and I don't think he'll get that opportunity before morning.

Especially, uh, considering dawn has come during Hanno's talk with Catherine, so it's already morning actually --

But, uh, yeah. Bad. Bad shit is happening.

Oshi

It's not pride. It's grief from a person who hasn't until that day truly understood the ruin that is the path he walks. He said it himself. A villain shouldn't

lie to themselves. It means he has to sit there and accept that his best friend doesn't trust him, his right hand betrayed him, and his family is dead or gone. The path to the tower is a lonely one but for all his life Amadeus has never been alone. Cat misunderstood what that was about. He already chose the path but he never looked the consequences in the face. Now..he has. Just like the epigraph says humility and contrition will lead to a massive power up.

I cannot wait ::devil emoji:: The intrigues, the betrayals, the skinning alive of enemies. Oh boy!

Liliet

That's not the part I'm talking about. The pride is the part where he recovers, realizes he did an idiotic thing, but cannot take her back now because that would be going back on his word and he's too proud for that

™ .

Although in retrospect this is very little of an issue as the obvious workaround in this situation is for Cat to hire Scribe. Eudokia is well aware Catherine is Amadeus's best ally right now, I'm sure she'd prefer working for her to fucking off altogether.

gingerlygrump

I just reread the chapter, and when Cat says goodbye to Amadeus she accidentally calls him Black, once in her head and once out loud.

He pauses, then smiles, then says goodnight back.

Is he about to become the Black Knight for the second time?

gingerlygrump

She actually refers to him as Black in her thoughts several times... this feels like a hint.

Jago

I think Amadeus will get a new Name, as he said he isn't content. Maybe it will include Black, but I doubt it will be Back Knight. Now he doesn't need and probably doesn't want to lead an army.

His need to see Evil really win has been partially resolved by Theodosis and the Hegemone. They have really flipped the finger to the Choir of Judgement. So that need probably will not be the origin of the new

name. But he is still not content and he has the will to get a Name. Maybe Black Chancellor to Empress Catherine.

NerfContessa

Agreed.

But maybe, given his circumstances, a lighter one than we expect.

After all, think of that axiom...

Morgenstern

... I really hope Black has not suddenly become dumb-bc-of-sentimentality&role, in his judgement of Alaya, thinking she'd ever forget about his "I do not kneel"... I'd would SUCK to see him go back, trying to play the "I've come back to your side"-card to try to slip the knife in, because he cannot take kneeling – and her *knowing* if he comes back, it'll be that way and simply welcoming him to his execution. It would also suck just as much to have Alaya be that dumb to forget about that bc. role/sentimentality/whatever and actually be knifed by him. Any such end would be totally unbecoming for the intellect of either, not after being shown as being not-that, but intelligent/reasonable/rational.

I don't believe in the "we can get past this, let's try again and show that Bard the finger" turn, either.

So I'm really interested with what twist EE will come up instead of these non-fitting staples, after the talk shown in *this* chapter... 😊

[Liliet](#)

I think Alaya genuinely DOES believe it possible that he'll come back. Maybe not yet, but after he's tried enough times and been slapped down and asked to come back every time? Her plea is not a fakeout.

That said, if he comes back right now, she probably will expect foul play. And he'll expect her to. So... yeah, that's probably not the plan lmao. Hopefully.

Oshi

Agreed. Alaya is in the throes of what I call desperate power mad success. Everything will be ok because I AM EMPRESS. I made it soo. I made it ok. Come back to me! Insert lightning in background and dramatic music.

That's right about when I would stab her in the back but thats me 😊

Probably burn the corpse with Goblinfire and salt the earth to be sure.

GnomeFromAbove

My assumption is that Amadeus was planning to take up the mantle of the Black Knight in earnest and "come home" to the tower in the... more traditional sense of what it means for a Black Knight to go for the tower. There have been a lot of hints that the BK name is supposed to be terrifyingly powerful in the one-man-army sense, and that Amadeus never got anywhere near that power level because he wasn't willing to actually give in to all those sweet dark emotions like, y'know, black despair at having lost everything and overpowering rage at the single person directly responsible for the loss of everything that's ever held him back from the edge.

Sure seems like he declared that he wanted to be boss villain who wanted to climb the tower and take the crown, and Below saw his emotionally un-compelling dry political motivations, went "nah", and obligingly provided a more appropriate backstory with some vengeance and opportunities for tragedy killing his brainwashed friends and such going on.

Oshi

When has Amadeus ever bent ot the story. The Age of Wonders ended the moment Kairos died. Give him his due. There won't be another Black Knight one man army. There will be a reckoning but it will be of a new sort.

[Liliet](#)

Mhm.

Zach

...that isn't how it works. Other Black Knights didn't become powerful because they gave in to dark emotions. This isn't the dark side of the force or FF14 Dark Knights. They (and all Named) become powerful (in the sense of the Name power they have access to) if they act according to their Role (with their Role being a "groove" formed in Creation through repetition that ends up finding its way into culture).

Black was a comparatively weak Black Knight (in the sense of the Name power he had access to) because he wasn't behaving in the same way as past Black Knights. But that's also the reason he survived so long; leaning into the Role gives the

benefits of great power, but at the cost of dying to Heroes (since that's also a common characteristic to the Role).

Mirror Night

Smart really EE to make sure your next series is ready to launch soon after this one ends so you don't bleed your fanbase or waste your momentum. I look forward to the announcement and what is next on the docket. Hopefully it has plenty of diversity and turning tropes on its head like this series.

[Fayhem](#)

I would be very down for a story set in/around Cardinal, but tbh at this point I'd give a shot to literally just about anything EE cared to put out.

[Liliet](#)

EE has said before that the next project is not in guideverse.

[Fayhem](#)

Oh really? I missed that, good to know. Like I said I'll be showing up to check it out regardless.

[Liliet](#)

OH DEFINITELY SAME.

Oshi

Personally it will depend a lot on what's written. You can be an amazing writer but I'm still not reading your horror western if I loved your thriller novels.

tithin

Thank you for the book Erratic.

Frivolous

Yes, thank you for the book, Erratic.

Grand Wizard

Thank you for the book, EE!

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Thank you for the book, Erratic.

JRogue

Thank you so much. This truly is a gift to those who read your work, and I hope you feel that appreciation.

stevenneiman

As maddening as I find it not having new updates to read, I'm also reassured that you're taking regular time off. Even now that George Frost is back I still worry for The Zombie Knight because I don't think he takes as many breaks as he should. Thank you, both for writing such an awesome story to share with us, and for taking care of yourself so you can keep doing so.

[doominator10](#)

Hold up, zombie knight is back?

Mirror Night

Indeed has been back for a week or two.

[Barthumphries](#)

Eh, I spent a year waiting and each of his updates are only like 3 or 4 small paragraphs. Let me know when he's been updating for six months and I'll go check it out.

Nicholas Bolton

Darn, how inconvenient that this story and TGAB always seem to go on break at around the same time.

Either way I'm sure the wait will be worth it and I look forward to the approaching conclusion

[Liliet](#)

Take your time and take care of yourself!

We'll be... busy recovering from being murdered dead by all of this. Hot damn.

[Barthumphries](#)

And with that announcement perhaps we should start the typo thread. Here are two. There are at least 10 others. Readers, can you find them all?

but in principle I had not objection to their work. If I got lucky, maybe a report making its way south would even Change not to no, and was to way.

Tom

> in part because I need to begin drafts from my next project after the Guide is finished.

Woooo next project!!! 😊

Tigellinus

Love the work! Thanks for the many nights of being able to curl up in bed and read this fantastic work!

Does anyone else get the feeling that this was Black's "Final Conversation" ?

I have this uneasy feeling that Black's going to end up dead.

[Liliet](#)

He's been here before, and I'd say the main pivot is passed on this one as of Second Llesse – he may be suicidal, but Creation isn't going to oblige.

That said, he's been suicidal since before the start of the story =x

Cpt. Obvious

This announcement makes me wish the author would consider publishing the notes used for the series in a chronological order. It would be interesting to learn the scope of the first notes, how they evolved over time and if, and in that case how much the characters started to high Jack the storyline and twist it into something unexpected.

Or perhaps that only happens to me. I jot down an idea and try to flesh it out so I have a good foundation to build my story. I have a beginning, a few key events and the end. But the moment I let the characters open their mouth all my planning tends to get throw out the window as they drag the story off into the wild.

[Javvies](#)

Alliance with Hanno, good.

Amadeus breaking ties with Scribe? Bad.

Amadeus consisting going back to Malicia? Just as bad, and possibly even worse.

Unfortunately, Cat was proven right about what would happen and Scribe was proven wrong about being able to keep her meddling secret from Amadeus. This is not a good thing.

I wonder what Scribe will do now, with Amadeus pushing her away.

RoflCat

Alliance with a non-puppet Hanno is even better, for through the breaking of his faith he can notice more things.

Black going back to Malicia is...unexpected, especially after his proclamation for Dread Emperor, unless he's going back there to become Dread Emperor Benevolent, one who doesn't murder his predecessor for the throne?

As for Scribe, I think she'll keep going with her mission of trying to keep Black alive, ironically without the guilt of keeping it from Black now that they're apart. Heck maybe she'll go back to the League and settle things there.

[Liliet](#)

I don't think his faith in anything was broken, other than the exact degree of how overwhelming Choirs' might is. But that's quantitative, not qualitative.

Oh, and he was never a puppet.

I think the implication is that Amadeus isn't going to take the offer. He's just getting drunk because he's fucking exhausted and he doesn't want to stick with either Eudokia or Alaya after the shit they pulled, but they're very nearly the only two of his friends still alive.

Here's hope he takes Cat up on that offer to plan tomorrow, because like, HOLY SHIT. There are SO MANY bad decisions available to him here.

Cpt. Obvious

Oh but the White Knight was worse than a puppet. He claimed not to judge, but he did choose who were to be judged. He knowingly avoided putting heroes who he knew had committed sins before his masters just as he didn't turn their gaze on Catherine. He knew that if he did put their gaze on them the Choir of Judgement would have found them guilty. But he chose that they were to live. And yet he claimed that he didn't judge. It went so far that he claimed he was not responsible for the killings as he fought against the Tyrants troupes as the Choir had passed judgment. But it was he who chose to put them to trial.

If he had free will in choosing whom got to be judged then he can't duck the responsibility that comes with that choice.

[Liliet](#)

I mean, he outright tells as much to Catherine. This is deliberate and he is not in denial; the point of "I do not

judge" is "I do not make the decision that someone DOES deserve to die". He is fully willing to make the decision that they do not, it's a comfortable default: NOT killing people.

That's why Hanno is based.

Sparsebeard

I'd like to see Scribe join Cat as Black successor...

[Liliet](#)

She doesn't share a single priority with Amadeus, so I'm really not seeing that.

[Liliet](#)

Oh. Oh, I misread.

Omfg that would be fitting too~

gingerlygrump

It seems like Amadeus hinted that he was going back to Ater to kill Malicia, though I fully admit that I could be inventing clues because I want it so badly.

Magtok

Of course he's going to kill her. Remember Book One?

"We do not kneel."

hakureireimu

Amadeus is saying that he has no intention of going back to Malicia here.

Ben Serreau-Raskin

Woof, heavy.

Insanenoodlyguy

"It can still be turned around," I said. "I know it's a blow, the Exile Legions leaving and Scribe having manipulated you, but this isn't your only choice. You have votes, Black."

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

[Liliet](#)

Doesn't flow well and there is absolutely nothing to the joke other than substituting a random word with 'votes'.

That said, at least it's not defacing a highly emotional moment XD

Isi Arnott-Campbell

Doesn't flow well and there is absolutely nothing to the joke other than substituting a random word with '[votes](#)'.

[Liliet](#)

...You are correct and I shall henceforth be doing it this way.

Isi Arnott-Campbell



[knockoffnikolai](#)

"You warned me," the dark-skinned man admitted. "I did not listen, for never before has the strength of Judgement failed before my eye. You warned me, and now there is silence."

And silence stayed there, hanging in the air.

"And now what?" I asked.

"I am blind," Hanno of Arwad said. "Yet even a blind man can see that we must vote for Practical Guide to Evil on Top Web Fiction."

[Liliet](#)

Bad.

[knockoffnikolai](#)

Tangentially related, but what is your opinion on Geico commercials?

[Liliet](#)

I am unfamiliar with those.

[knockoffnikolai](#)

Their archetypal joke structure is similar. The commercial posits an absurd situation, then makes a non-sequitur transition to selling their insurance. e.g. "You know what's better than having to fight off children to keep your snacks? Saving money by switching to Geico."

I was just curious because it seemed like you would have had an interesting objection to them. No worries if you've never seen one, though.

[Liliet](#)

No, that does actually sound funny, I like absurdism in commercials.

This is not that.

Soronel Haetir

The one good thing is that Scribe's actions are out of some kind of love (whether unrequited romantic love or otherwise). She might well have recognized that there was nothing she could accomplish right then and that she needed to give Amadeus some space, but I do not believe the ties are actually broken on her part no matter what he might think.

RoflCat

It's better for them to go separate ways.

Scribe want Black alive and possibly a Dread Emperor, but Black does not desire such thing.

When they were together, she felt guilty about abusing his trust even if it's for his (in her view) benefits.

But now that they go separate ways, she can do whatever she want, including the exact same things as before, now without the guilt.

Black will do his things, she'll do her things, if their desire clash then let the result of the clash decide.

[Mental Mouse](#)

The thing is, she's still arguably the best spymaster on the continent, and possibly the second-best assassin. The question is what she does want, and what she'll do with her spy network.

gingerlygrump

We know that she wants Malicia dead and Amadeus to rule. Let's hope Scribe gets those wishes granted, because Malicia still owes the long price for Istrid and Ratface.

[Fayhem](#)

My money is still on Istrid being the Matrons' doing rather than Malicia's, but it seems like the ambiguity is deliberate at this point.

[ninegardens](#)

She arranged the murder of enemy combatants during times of civil unrest.

Pretty much all main characters in this story have done things ten times worse than that just because it was tuesday.

I'm not saying Malicia is *good*, I'm just saying that this seems pretty low on the list of "reasons she is owed the long price"

Mirror Night

Don't see why Malicia would kill Istrid, she has mind control on her anyway and with her being Juniper's mother that is useful leverage. Makes far more sense for the Matrons or Scribe to take out Istrid then it does Malicia.

[Liliet](#)

Honestly, I'm getting a very bad 'chasing away his support system' vibe off this lashing out. She's been trying to get him to take care of himself more, and of all the people he could end up finally lashing out at in the attempt to do so it's her? So he can continue Not Blaming Anyone Else For Anything Only Himself in peace?

[Mental Mouse](#)

No, Scribe seriously overstepped herself. It's one thing to push for Amadeus to take the throne, it's quite another to try and force him to do so, especially when it involves killing his oldest surviving friend. (Not to mention that the means she chose played fast-and-loose with his daughter's position and plans, and the fate of the continent to boot.)

[Liliet](#)

See, you're not wrong.

But the reason Amadeus turned her away was specifically fueling the conflict between him and Alaya.

And there's a reason why Catherine was surprised to hear he was still willing to forgive her and take her back when Eudokia said it.

[Mental Mouse](#)

> But the reason Amadeus turned her away was specifically fueling the conflict between him and Alaya.

That's my point, what's where where she overstepped her position. A spymaster is supposed to serve political considerations, not dictate them. And messing in your boss's personal life is a no-no for, basically anybody.

[Liliet](#)

He didn't fire her for overstepping.

Jane

Honestly, Scribe and Black needed a break – when you're willing to risk your life to save a friend turned foe, and your trusted aide considers your life to be more important than a sentimental goal, you have to go on your own. To do otherwise is both a foolish risk, as you are no longer able to predict what your usually trusted aide will do, and a cruelty to someone who is presumably close to you, as it's basically dangling their worst fear in front of them at all times.

I'd hope that he'd at least invite her back once they weren't in this sort of situation, though. I doubt the novel will end in a place where such a situation is possible regardless of their wishes, but I'd like to think that he'd accept her service again once it made sense.

As for his plan... ..He's not thinking of going to her and then killing her rather than bowing, is he? Because that's the first thought that comes to mind, when military and diplomatic options fail, he's still not willing to give up, and she's still offering to extend her trust again to him.

[Liliet](#)

Yeah, that strikes me as something that wouldn't be a good plan for approximately a million reasons =x

gingerlygrump

Are you hoping for a peaceful coup? Amadeus allows Malicia to step down, becomes Dread Emperor Benevolent, and fulfills his vision of a better Praes?

I could be on board with that, but Alaya is still a dangerous woman and letting her roam free is on par with the escaped sentient tiger army. She needs to die, she's too susceptible to Evil influence.

And I'm still pissed about the murders of Ratface and Istrid.

[Liliet](#)

I'm ignoring the 'political assassinations' part because I don't like Protagonist Centered Morality and when we put that aside Amadeus routinely does worse.

And yes, I'm hoping for some kind of peaceful resolution. There are many possible options and many possible counterbalances to minimize risks.

Mostly, I'm just hoping Amadeus ends up alive =x

gingerlygrump

I don't know what Cat is turning herself into, but I suspect it's the Practical Guide, and while she no longer needs Amadeus she loves him.

He and Cat still have some unspoken conversations that she aggressively avoids, and I think it's because they both realize it's his best plot armor.

[Liliet](#)

She does still need him – he might not be irreplaceable, but he's a very useful asset in dealing with Praesi. If nothing else, he's one of the few anchors *Masego* has, not to mention Cat herself.

Amadeus is the beating heart of the entire East, right now. Alaya cares about him and wants him back, Hye has at least some fondness of him and is an ever-hanging threat over whoever ends up killing him, the Legions and the Praesi part of the Army of Callow all adore him, half the Eyes of the Empire answer to the woman who cares for him above everything. Several of the Woe consider him family, and the Marshal of Callow still has that platonic crush.

Cat doesn't so much need him for his abilities, per se. While he is still excessively competent in multiple areas, he's also emotionally compromised enough that that hasn't been helpful in a while -_- . But the ties everyone else has to him? It's a stabilizing factor, and one of no little importance.

gingerlygrump

You're very pragmatic in acknowledging that he may not live through Book 6. It's so hard to admit that 😞

gingerlygrump

Admit he may not live, I mean.

[Liliet](#)

I do still hold the opinion that narratively speaking, he likely will.

But in-universe? Uhhhhhhh. Bad. Bad bad bad.

Ironically, for what's probably the first time in his entire career, no enemy is actively out to kill him, specifically. But he is a danger to himself =x

Mental Mouse

The thing is, he's already set on the path to killing her by claiming the Emperor title. None of the most recent developments really change that.

Liliet

Yeah but that doesn't mean he can't swerve at the last moment. Emperors and Empresses can abdicate, it's not a 'no surrender only death' situation.

Insanenoodlyguy

"Then we are allies," the White Knight said, and offered his hand.

I took it.

And so we went to war, against the King of Death. First, we kissed.

Added in that last missing sentence! 😊

Liliet

Oh honey. -pats u-

Adrian V

I wouldn't be surprised if those 2 do in fact start to have feelings for each other...and fall right into the getting interrupted trope, can you imagine Cat's reaction when she realizes it? XD

edrey

So, someone know what moral lesson can be found here, i am lost. Here, Ranger will appear, but eudokia have a saying right? Mosters die at the end. That is making me think too much

hakureireimu

Hanno: when the AHOTE tells you to be careful, do so.
Amadeus: something about trust and sentimentality; not sure.

caoimhinh

What does AHOTE stand for?

hakureireimu

Arch Heretic of the East.

[Liliet](#)

Hopefully, Amadeus learns the lesson of “if two of your closest people fucking hate each other, do try to actually resolve that and not just leave it festering and pretend nothing is happening until everything’s suddenly on fire and you didn’t see that coming”.

-glares at Wekesa threatening Cat in early books-

Jane

You know, I know I’ve said this before, but... I keep looking back over what Black planned, and I’m like – what did he honestly *expect* to happen? That he’d just kill Cat one day after using her as an experiment to see if his plan was possible at all?

He knew that Cat had no genuine loyalty to the Empire, and did nothing to address that. He saw that the people of Callow put more and more faith in her as her legend grew, and he remained unconcerned. He saw how Malicia granted Callow more autonomy at Cat’s request, and how Cat in turn demanded more, and did nothing really to mediate their expectations.

He knew Cat heard “The Girl Who Climbed The Tower”, and that evidently set off no alarm bells at all!

And he knew that whatever happened, it probably wasn’t going to take longer than a decade to happen, while they were all just *waiting* for a Crusade to happen – something that a civil war between Callow and Praes would definitely invite if nothing else started it first.

I mean, if he wasn’t *planning* to kill Malicia, he pretty much botched this entirely – either the end comes at Cat’s hands, or at the hands of Crusaders handed a golden opportunity. And if he was planning on killing Cat once he saw that his theory was sound, he probably should have either gotten around to that or changed his plans once he realized he missed his window.

And if he wasn’t planning on killing either... Then, as you note, why the devil didn’t he do anything to try and give them common ground? Don’t just spring on Malicia the idea

that Callow's going to be an independent nation again, and try selling to Cat the idea that being a vassal state to Praes gives her protection from both Praes and Procer at the cost of simple grain. Cat actually received sizable concessions in terms of self-government; if he'd sat down with her and explained the benefits and the expectations that Malicia had in return for them, it's definitely a deal she would have accepted, pre-Liesse.

Even setting aside the "I should make sure my friends don't hate each other" perspective, it ends up being a critical failure of personnel management, something that he *should* be good at.

[ninegardens](#)

As far as Cat goes:

He *planned* for her to want independence.

He planned for her to get it. Read the epilogue of book 3.

His plan was for Callow to become independent, but sympathetic, so that the Empire could get food without having to go to war.

He HAD a plan, and Malicia and Cat were becoming friends.... right up until second Liese.

Which he didn't have intell about.

His plan for Cat got screwed over by Malicia earning herself the long price, not by Cat striving for independence.

He planned on Callow being on the empires side vs the Empire... but instead Malicia got spooked, had Akua build a superweapon, and betrayed Cat's trust.

Without Liese 2.0 Necromatic Bongolo, Black's plan actually makes a hell of a lot of sense.

Jane

The issue here is that Black never told *Malicia* that his plan was for Callow to claim independence – she was caught completely flatfooted by that, and strongly opposed the notion for obvious reasons. It would have ended in civil war with or without Liese.

Malicia considered Cat a hotheaded young child whom she has repeatedly mentioned she dislikes, and has to actively try to avoid letting that cloud her preconceptions regarding Cat's competence; Cat viewed her as overbearing, and had an active disdain for her political approach to things. They weren't becoming friends; they barely even spoke to each other of their own volition. They *could have* become friends, if

something was done to bring them in touch in areas where they had common ground – but that never really happened.

Liesse decisively broke the relationship between Cat and Malicia, but it was already headed towards a break to begin with – Cat was never truly satisfied with Callow remaining subservient to Praes, regardless of what she told herself, and Malicia could never accept the loss of legitimacy that would come of allowing Callow true independence.

Black's plan makes a degree of sense on paper, but there are several key points that he never even tried to address – like making certain that the two people most important to the plan would be remotely okay with it, or that enacting it wouldn't cripple the power of one or more of the people involved.

Agent J

– if something was done to bring them in touch in areas where they had common ground – but that never really happened.

It did. The Summer Campaign. Malicia and Cat started bonding together as they schemed the death of two Fae Courts older than Creation.

Malicia could have leaned hard into that mentor role. See, cuz Cat *was* loyal. To the Empire itself, mostly nominally, true. But to the actual people? Literally everyone she loves save Indrani and Vivi are from there. Juniper basically made her swear not to do anything that put her opposite a field from her mother.

In fact, that was one of the reasons for him getting her the Fifteenth. It was a power base she needed and one that would bind her to the Empire's people.

Malicia fucked that up by feeding a hundred thousand Callowans to the Diabolist's madness.

This wasn't an oversight by Black. This was one born of Malicia's flaws. She wants unflinching loyalty *and* the right to do whatever the Hells she feels like.

There's a reason she resorts to mindcontrol so readily.

[Liliet](#)

What AgentJ said. He had in fact been taking steps to assure Catherine's loyalty, and while she might not have been "perfectly happy" remaining Praes's vassal,

she had viewed that as a necessary evil from the beginning, and wasn't willing to pay the price breaking away would have demanded. Would have, that is, had Amadeus not actively walked away with his hands in the air like "actually feel free to rebel I'm with you on this". AND had Malicia not viewed her as already rebelling afterwards even though she had no particular intent to.

Catherine was literally more willing to work with Alaya post-Liesse than Amadeus was.

And as for how he failed to consult Alaya if she was okay with the semi-independence he was willing to give Callow... yeah. They had a bit of a fight about it in Epilogue 3. He did in fact consider her to be reading his mind and agreeing with him on everything by default. See, coz she's smart and smarter than him, so everything that's obvious to him should be equally obvious to her, right?

Cicero

Except he did tell Malicia that was her plan. She had severe doubts about it, but Black thought he would slowly persuade her.

Malicia then decided to get some insurance, not understanding, or (more likely) not caring how that would create a story that would destroy the Callow-Praes alliance.

There is a major difference between Black and Malicia that hasn't been resolved, but it wasn't about Cat. It was about whether to put their faith in stories or in power. Black believed sacrificing power to get on the right side of the story was the best way. Malicia never had that belief. She allowed Black his way because he was successful, but as soon as more risk started developing she was perfectly happy to abandon story-fu in favor of superweapons.

That was Black's misjudgement. He thought Alaya trusted him, but she never did. Not really. She only trusted him in a limited sense, but was always ready to pull back on that trust at her choice of timing.

[Liliet](#)

His plan was that Catherine would kill *him* and become the Black Knight of Praes, while also ruling Callow with full sympathy of its citizens, and then eventually climb the

Tower and become the next Dread Empress, cementing Callow as part of the Empire.

Yes, seriously.

No, I don't know why he thought she would do that. My vote's on 'suicidal depression making all plans that involve him dying look disproportionately attractive and doable'.

Yes, in his plan Malicia took no issue with Cat killing him. See the paragraph above.

That said, the plan would still work with Cat not doing that, and was overall remarkably flexible in its applicability as long as the following conditions were fulfilled:

- Catherine remained sympathetic to the idea of Callow supplying Praes with grain and not going to war with it anymore;
- Catherine remained in charge in Callow;
- he and the Empress did not do something idiotic to convince Catherine the game wasn't worth the candle.

Hell, the plan's STILL working, it just now includes the minor snag of 'dethrone the Empress for doing said stupid thing before trying again'. Where the thing being tried for is a trade and mutual protection arrangement with Callow, any subordination of either side to the other entirely optional.

[Liliet](#)

> try selling to Cat the idea that being a vassal state to Praes gives her protection from both Praes and Procer at the cost of simple grain. Cat actually received sizable concessions in terms of self-government; if he'd sat down with her and explained the benefits and the expectations that Malicia had in return for them, it's definitely a deal she would have accepted, pre-Liesse.

Most specifically, Book 2 Chapter 'Madman'. The thing you are suggesting literally happened, word to word. And Catherine was in fact onboard with Callow being a vassal state of Praes until as of Book 3 Epilogue Amadeus himself fucked off to Vales, leaving her and the Empress without the mediator and the Empress paranoidly assuming Catherine's breaking with her and acting like it.

Seriously, after Second Liesse Catherine started taking independent action *because the Empress didn't contact her*. She didn't actually want conflict on two fronts. (And the Empress took her being willing to take independent action as her not being loyal enough... People turning on Alaya has been remarkably much of a self-fulfilling prophecy in this sequence of events)

Jane

I honestly question whether Callow could be trusted to fight on the same side as Praes post-Liesse, but... Even if they could, I can't really blame Malicia for assuming that Callow would demand the long price (regardless of whether or not Cat herself would), and deciding that her best bet was to focus her defenses on Praes. It's a reasonable conclusion based on pretty much everything that the people around Cat have said since that moment.

But yeah, if Black had been in the room at that moment, he probably could have reassured Cat that the offer was, in fact, sincere instead of just an attempt to save face or undermine her, while he could assure Malicia that all Cat really wants is to let Callow govern it's own affairs and doesn't desire further revenge. Even if *he* was no longer certain of those things, it's something he could have *said*. But because he was no longer in the room...

Which is why he *should have set the foundation for this in advance*. Malicia made Callow a vassal state as an official recognition of the de-facto state of affairs; had the transition happened in more of a planned manner, then both Malicia and Cat would have had more trust in the arrangement with or without Black. Malicia would view this as the culmination of a plan that she had vetted and had faith in, instead of a last-minute attempt to appease a powerful and rebellious figure, while Cat would have a degree of faith in what Malicia wanted from her and where the line could be drawn. Heck, if Cat had had more contact with Malicia, maybe she would have sent word to her that she was raising the Order of the Broken Bells so that it would become a special privilege instead of an act of treason.

They say that it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission, but that doesn't really apply to planning to break away a significant chunk of a person's empire, that produces all of the food and which they just fought a significant war to secure. Black *needed* to keep Malicia in the loop on what he was planning here, and massively overstepped when he didn't.

(Not going to address the rest of what you said, because we're not really disagreeing on any of this; it's just me criticizing Black for not even considering how things would look to Cat or Malicia, and how even minor effort could have improved things.)

Liliet

> But yeah, if Black had been in the room at that moment, he probably could have reassured Cat that the offer was, in fact, sincere instead of just an attempt to save face or undermine her, while he could assure Malicia that all Cat really wants is to let Callow govern it's own affairs and doesn't desire further revenge. Even if he was no longer certain of those things, it's something he could have said. But because he was no longer in the room...

Wait, what room? I'm losing track.

As of post-Second Llesse, again, Amadeus is the one who actively *pushed* the conflict with the Empress. He apparently never intended to rebel, per se, but he certainly did not see a downside to Callow claiming independence – and as of that moment, didn't care what Alaya thought about it. And beforehand he could not have possibly imagined that *he* would turn on *her*. It's not something he planned for, considering, y'know, he would rather have prevented the whole chain of events, yeah? The whole problem was his blind trust in her and how badly he got blindsided by Second Llesse.

> They say that it's easier to ask for forgiveness than permission, but that doesn't really apply to planning to break away a significant chunk of a person's empire, that produces all of the food and which they just fought a significant war to secure. Black needed to keep Malicia in the loop on what he was planning here, and massively overstepped when he didn't.

Again, he didn't actually plan on this. He planned on Alaya and Cat coming to their own arrangement, slowly over time. He didn't plan on the entire Callow being on fire the minute he went to Free Cities, he didn't plan on Cat gaining power rapidly and restoring a knightly order whether he liked it or not, he didn't plan on Diabolist predictably rebelling right in the middle of a fae invasion *because he'd assumed the Empress would handle it*.

As for overstepping... Yeah, there's a fine line between 'two equal co-rulers, one of whom tends to defer to the other but both get the last word and the veto' and 'the

Empress and her loyal right hand'. There's been tension there from the start – a king and a kingmaker is an odd relationship by definition, and Amadeus and Alaya working together as closely as they did only put more pressure on it.

As far as he was concerned, she overstepped by going behind his back. As far as she was concerned, he overstepped by considering anything she did as being overstepping. Overall, I'd call it a... disagreement. I don't think it was on him to be blindly unquestionably loyal as she wanted him to be. They'd been equal partners from the start.

The thing about Amadeus is that his story doesn't work by Praesi logic of personal relationships and subordination and submission of weaker to stronger. He's always been a, well, knight – one of those who are loyal to their sovereign because it's the right thing to do(tm) and remain so as long as the sovereign's actions don't make it no longer the right thing to do(tm). You know, like how Rozala swore to rebel if Procer screws over its allies in the aftermath of this again?

That isn't wrong, per se. IMHO.

He... definitely could have used more communication with Alaya though lmao

[Liliet](#)

PS All that said, none of Amadeus's actions and opinions prior to Second Liesse blindsided Alaya. He made no secret of anything he was doing, and he explained himself when she questioned him (Book 2 Coulissee, notably). She did things in secret from him because she KNEW he would disapprove. She KNEW that he considered their relationship to be one where he got to disapprove of her actions, and she chose to work around that rather than try to confront it / change it. She didn't start actively asserting her authority and her opinion that she should be the one fully in charge until after everything already broke.

She ALSO could have sorted out this mess much earlier. And she's the one who knew the mess was there, while Amadeus didn't.

[Liliet](#)

Ranger? What?

And I think it's not that there's a moral lesson in this chapter. It's that Amadeus took a heavy blow to his power base, but he's hinted to be able to take it back once he has a suitable epiphany.

edrey

Ranger is the only that could help him, i am sure. At this point he is dead inside, his lover is the only one who could help him

[ninegardens](#)

Honestly.... I put higher bets of Malicia being the one to heal him rather than Ranger.

Malicia actually genuinely seems to care for him, even when she's spooked and disagrees with him. Ranger treats him as an amusing toy.

Ranger doesn't CARE about people, and there is no evidence she ever has. Who cares if her and black used to be fuck buddies. Hell- Ranger is probably one of the few people Scribe hate's more than Malicia.

Malicia genuinely DOES want him to come home, and has so far disarmed his coup attempt in the gentlest way possible. Whether she'd actually accept him kneeling, or if she'd feel obligated to execute him I don't know.... but the point is, she's created a situation where she **can** forgive him despite his blatant rebellion... and doing that is HUGELY impractical, and politically costly for her. From her perspective she may well be taking the only course available to avoiding civil war and murdering her best friend. She screws over Cat a bit in the process, but ummm.... Cat isn't her friend. Cat has never BEEN her friend. She doesn't owe Cat or Cordelia anything.

[Liliet](#)

Ranger is far more of an abusive relationship for him than the Empress. At least she does in fact care and desperately want him by her side.

As far as Ranger is concerned, he's a fun toy she picked up and played with for a while, then put aside, and now picks up for old time's sake from time to time.

Romance is all nice and good, except when it's with, y'know, someone like Hye.

edrey

I cant agree more, but what amadeus need is a wake up call to tell him the he shouldnt give up.
^I do not kneel^ is his frase, its not salvation but a push in the right direction, and only Hye can do that

[Liliet](#)

I... don't think he needs one. He already told Catherine this much, that he's fully aware he isn't giving up yet, that it isn't in his nature.

What he needs right now is for people to remind him of his worth, to remind him that trust IS worth it even if in the end it backfires, that he is valued and loved and that he has a right to value and love other people even in the middle of politics.

Hye is... not the person for that. To put it mildly.

[onedollargum](#)

"No longer extending trust to someone who deftly manipulated me into rebellion and undertaking a road that ends in the murder of someone dear to me?" Black said. "An interesting premise. I offered no rancor and held no grudge. It is a parting of ways, nothing more and nothing less."

This statement could involve pretty much all the women in his life. Malicia, Eudokia, Catherine and the Intercessor pushing him from all angles, in their own ways.

cicero

thats a very good point sadly.

[Liliet](#)

Catherine is pushing him but not manipulating him, and she genuinely has THINGS HE CARES ABOUT as her priority wrt taking care of him. Like, taking care of him is not her first priority, which is entirely fair, but when she DOES turn to that, she does it things-he-cares-about first. As opposed to.

That counts for a lot.

WuseMajor

At the end of the last book, Malicia cannot be the Dread Empress any longer. And the head of the Dead King needs to be on a pike.

The head of the Bard needs to be on a pike too.

I don't think you can manage less than that and still fulfill on the promises you've made over the course of the book series.

Hierineus

what promises? I think you need to differentiate between your own wishes and expectations and the story itself

[Liliet](#)

Tension set up, questions posed but not yet answered. Loaded guns that have yet to fire.

JJR

The guns got red lettered. We have to make due with Chekov's crossbows.

WuseMajor

When you pick up a book and start reading, the story implies that various things are going to happen later on. If the book starts with a Detective in their office and a client walks in, this implies that there will be a mystery in the book and that it will be solved by the end.

These implications are often called "promises."

I'm saying that, after all this build up, I don't think that we can have a proper emotional release if the Dead King still exists at the end. Same for the Bard. At least there needs to be a final showdown with both of them.

And Malicia has become a big enough problem that I think Cat needs to actually beat her. I'm not sure if just ...taking away her empire will be enough, but she needs to lose, I think.

That said, I'm not the author and there have been enough twists that ...I dunno. Maybe it can be pulled off without the above.

[Liliet](#)

I would say it's called 'tension'. It can be subverted in small amounts – a client walking into a detective's office creates tension but can be a fakeout with the story being actually a romantic comedy about the detective taking a vacation after that client or something. But once you pile up enough of it, it has to be resolved. It's not a specific 'promise' which seems to be tripping you up here – there are multiple possible resolutions, that's what tension is all about. But it's a promise of *a* resolution.

Jane

Eh, I don't quite agree – these are all plot points that need to be addressed, but I can see any of those three revealing

that their plans have actually been to Cat's benefit all along and that they actually *can* be allies. Well, the Dead King might be more of a stretch for that one, I admit.

Though, that card can only be played for *one* of her remaining enemies before it wears thin.

The Bard's actual endgame is completely obscured to the reader, so a "Oh, I've been arranging the pieces to kill the Dead King all this time because my real job is to ensure that the Named don't destroy all life in your squabbles"-type reveal could be slipped in easily enough – the only thing that would need to be overcome would be Cat's (and by extension, the reader's) distrust of her.

Malicia has a lot of bad karma to be repaid, but her actions have pretty much entirely been defensive – killing Ratface and unleashing the Dead King might be some cruel and/or reckless moves, but she was in a corner, and one of the themes of late has been the need to let go of enmity when there's a chance for real peace. Peace that Malicia herself has worked for in the past, incidentally, if only because she believed that knives in the dark were a surer way to win than flying castles.

The Dead King... Well, it's theoretically possible that the Bard could be involved in some world-ending catastrophe, that the only reason that he still bothers with Calernia is because he needs to kill her before she finds a way to kill him, and that he's perfectly willing to lock himself away in Serenity once he's accomplished that. And the army is necessary because... Reasons.

...Needless to say, I don't actually expect the Dead King to suddenly turn out to have been Cat's friend all along, but the other two? They're big plots that need big resolutions, but I don't necessarily agree that it needs to end with heads on pikes; a sufficiently dramatic reconciliation also works.

[Liliet](#)

> "Oh, I've been arranging the pieces to kill the Dead King all this time because my real job is to ensure that the Named don't destroy all life in your squabbles"-type reveal could be slipped in easily enough

She's already gone out and said it. Cat just doesn't consider it a good enough reason to allow her to keep her role the way she's been doing it. And also has little reason to trust her, that too.

> ...Needless to say, I don't actually expect the Dead King to suddenly turn out to have been Cat's friend all along, but the other two? They're big plots that need big resolutions,

but I don't necessarily agree that it needs to end with heads on pikes; a sufficiently dramatic reconciliation also works.

Anyway, same.

Jane

Well, my thoughts as regards this hypothetical with the Bard would be that this kind of plan is *highly atypical* for her, but necessary because the Dead King is such a large but cautious threat – she has to rely on such widespread, indirect manipulation because it's the only thing he won't see coming until it's too late. Once that's resolved, she'll go back to her old model – the next Akua or Lone Swordsman to come out, she just tells the most appropriate Hero or Villain, "Hey, this idiot is going to kill a lot of your people for no real good reason, you should probably stop him", and then go spend the rest of her time singing at the bar in return for free drinks.

Either way, though, I just meant that there's plenty of room for the Bard's unstated greater agenda to align with Cat's, in which case it's just a matter of compromise and trust – neither of which are easy, of course.

Jane

Oh, though I should mention that I don't actually think that this kind of plan is atypical for her in the least; what we've seen of her character certainly doesn't imply it, and it would be kind of hard to loop things like the creation of Sve Noc into the plan against the Dead King. Just that that's the kind of reveal that I could see leading to her working with Cat.

[Liliet](#)

I do agree, yep.

Novice

"Not yet content" Isn't that a Triumphant quote or am I mixing up my Dread Emperors? Either way, this only means that Amadeus is going to cook up something interesting. It's gong to be a hard two-month withdrawal for me.

[Dresden 67](#)

It is.

"And so Triumphant said: 'Tremble, for I am not yet content.'" – Extract from the Scroll of Dominion, twenty-fourth of the Secret Histories of Praes

It's what she said after conquering all of Calernia.

Novice

Ah, thank you. This confirms it then. Amadeus of the Green Stretch is not yet done.

Mental Mouse

Well – it was that ambition that ultimately doomed Triumphant, as she drew opposition from outside the continent.

ninegardens

So, as this volume is winding to an end... and because we have a two months break approaching... is anyone here in the mood for playing some sort of tabletop RPG? I've got a couple lying around that I'd like to try out.

Fayhem

What, are you thinking like something on roll20 or w/e? Could be interesting. I've been eyeing trying to put together a Guideverse semi-homebrew based on the Scion 2e system myself, but I'm already DMing a Pathfinder campaign and that's been sucking up all my TTRPG-related creative energies. What did you have in mind?

ninegardens

Honestly? Whatever people are keen on.

I'm happy running something pretty classical like Pathfinder.

I've got a Sci-Fi RPG system which is homebrew, but pretty damn polished, so if people are happy in another genre, and be keen to run that. <https://www.overleaf.com/read/qyhqqwvmyymx>

And I've got another homebrew in which is somewhat more experimental, but closer to a Guideverse feel, in which players work together to run a minor city state, playing politics and strategy as diplomats, generals, archmages and courtiers.

Depends what people are interested in, and how important it is to be playing in Guideverse in particular, vs "Lets just have an adventure wherever"

Fayhem

> Depends what people are interested in, and how important it is to be playing in Guideverse in particular, vs "Lets just have an adventure wherever"

A Guideverse adventure would be fun, but I'm open to wherever. I don't think Pathfinder is a good fit for a Guideverse campaign personally – a more narrative system makes more sense IMO. Also, I've played a lot of Pathfinder already. Like, a lot a lot. I'd prefer not to play even more atm lol. Variety is the spice of life and all that.

I'm always down for some good sci-fi, though. I'd certainly be good with that if it's what the DM would prefer to run.

It occurs to me that timezones could be relevant for coordinating a game. I'm on Pacific time myself. Would it maybe be better to continue this discussion in Discord? I feel a little leery of filling up the comments with this too much, idk if that's just me.

[ninegardens](#)

I'm in the Europe, so... doable timezone, but would probably be something like Sunday evening my time, Sunday Morning yours.

As for Discord... probably just going to get lost in the hubub on the Practical Guide server... and so far you are the only reply.

If I get a couple other people replying and showing interest, I'll set up a discord server just for this, but by the looks of it, one person does not an RPG campaign make.

Fayhem

> one person does not an RPG campaign make.

Sadly true. Alas, 'twas a beautiful dream. Do you have the invite/link/whatever to the Discord server for the Guide btw? I've started actually using Discord semi-regularly now so I figure now's a good time to actually join.

ninegardens

Here's a link

<https://discord.gg/jXM8QX>

Apparently it expires in one day. Good luck!

Decius

Would Ranger still end Cat if she had killed Amadeus when it became apparent that it was necessary?

His protection from her is wearing thin.

[Liliet](#)

What scenario are you envisioning in which Cat ever would be left with that as her best/only option?

[ninegardens](#)

What Scenario are you imagining where something CAT thought necessary was also considered important to the Ranger?

Best I can tell, Ranger cares about hunting big threats and kill folks that bug her. If Cat says "I killed black to save one million lives," Ranger's gonna be "Uh huh.... you think I care about that?"

The real question is, will ranger kill ANYONE for hurting Black?

If Malicia killed him, or Pilgrim, or even just some random Bandit, would Ranger revenge, or would she just shrug and go "Welp, dumb boy didn't learn those lessons I taught him, not my problem"

[Liliet](#)

This.

Ranger might have extra anger for Cat as opposed to a random enemy because she's someone Amadeus deliberately let close, but actually her being Ranger I'm not even buying that. She doesn't care, period.

And she'll either want to kill the person who broke her favorite toy, or she'll shrug and move on.

[Fayhem](#)

IIRC when the Calamities were talking about how when Black disappeared in some hero's personal domain for a few days and they couldn't tell if he was dead or not Sabah went on a rampage after having a werewolf relapse, and there was some comment to the effect of "and thankfully he showed up again before Ranger arrived, or there'd have been an actual mountain of corpses". I don't remember which chapter, I think it was somewhere in the Free Cities arc?

Anyway, the reason I bring it up is that while evidently Ranger's version of a sentimental attachment looks like a lot of killing (as far as I can tell, Ranger's version of just about everything looks like a lot of killing) the

assessment from people who know her better than most is that she does have such an attachment to Amadeus. I definitely don't see shrugging as the hypothetical response, and I'm not sure "favorite toy" is necessarily apt either – she refuses to be "chained" by anyone or anything, but I don't think that inherently means she doesn't care in her own awful way.

[Liliet](#)

Ah, but who's saying that about Ranger? About what would happen if she showed up?

Let me give you a hint: it's people who care about others. It's either Amadeus, who cares about everyone and their mom so badly he's currently getting torn apart by loyalty conflicts (Alaya vs Praes being the main one, but there's plenty more!), or people who care about him in the symmetrical way that he inspires in people.

I sure don't remember Indrani, the person who actually knows *her* and has an outsider's view of her relationship with Amadeus, suggesting that.

You might be right. I just don't think it's assured, is all.

broadaxe

I think cathrine misunderstood black, seems to me he is taking this road because it will bring him close to malicia with her guard lowered. It seemed to me like he was actually just explaining his plan and the narrative he planned to take to ascend to power as dread emperor without her blocking him :3 after all he still thirsts for power :3

[Liliet](#)

lmao

[Liliet](#)

you're very optimistic about his priorities in this situation is all i'm saying

if it turns out to be the plan you're talking about, i'll be not very surprised. if it does AND his version of the plan ends with him alive, i WILL be

[Mammon](#)

One thing that stood out to me for Black, is that my personal opinion of his unreliable narrator around Warlock being the case is once again surfacing. He falls into the 'Friend means friend

in many things.', while Warlock has shown to be unbound by friendship or pick Malicia's side when it goes against logic reasoning. He refers to Black in Story matters, but him refusing to start a school is far from his own declining or disagreeing with Amadeus. We've seen so in his internal narratives and actions, while Black and others assume a certain cliché friendship to be followed.

And as EE has shown with Pilgrim not being fully Cat's friend and ally despite agreeing and allying with her in some some manners that would in lesser stories by other writers make him barely able to disagree with her past that point, EE can implement such divergence from perceived friendship and alliance. Warlock might've seen the hooks and not told Black about them because there was no need or it fell under the same dead switch things that Masego allowed and applauded in book 1 with the hairbraid, or otherwise have been aware or suspecting.

So maybe Black is working with at least a few facets and details simply being incomplete knowledge.

Mental Mouse

Um, you realize Warlock is dead, right? Hierophant AFAIK hasn't weighed on on the school. Agreed that he might not have reported Malicia's hooks even if he saw them ("Well, of course she'd do something like that, Black should know that"), but he might not have been able to see them in the first place. That said, I'd find it dubious that neither Black, the late Warlock, nor Scribe would have any idea of Malicia's **Rule** aspect. Naming and categorizing another Named's aspects is practically step 1 for planning around them, and her prior use of this particular aspect would have left hints for all three to notice.

Jane

Eh, it strikes me as similar to the White Knight's modification of Ride in Winter III – *technically* it's still Rule fueling her mind control trick, but it's far from the standard usage of her aspect (which I expect is usually rather showier), and required a lot of personal development and experimentation to enact. Once they know about it, they can work backwards to see how she did it, but in advance... You don't expect javelin light cannons from Ride, and you don't expect sleeper agents from Rule.

Especially since she's gone out of her way to keep this ability secret even when it would otherwise have been useful, and when she has other talents that can be blamed when she's messing with someone's mind.

Mammon

The hooks have been planted years in advance, when Warlock was still alive. I'm retroactively reasoning for him to tie it to Amadeus's current reasoning including that Warlock didn't know (before dying and all) while such a thing may have been the case. As Malicia didn't seem to know of Warlock's neutral stance of rational support rather than being well within Amadeus's camp, as we've seen in the few Warlock musings we've seen when he was still alive and the interlude's narrator, it's unlikely that she had some great scheme or reveal to be in this. But when Warlock's alliances were misinterpreted by Amadeus same as Alaya's, then which ones are false too?

I'm not saying he definately saw the hooks, but I am saying there's a fair chance that if he saw them that he saw no issue or need to tell Black about them. Whether for a logical reason (to Praes standards of 'logical'), because he assumed Black to know already, or because Malicia made a compelling rational argument which included Black not knowing everything especially about this part of her hooks.

That Black hadn't seen this coming at all, that's indeed on him. Sentimentality, huh?

Soronel Haetir

Something to keep in mind about Warlock, Amadeus was very much more his friend than Alaya. (Really it was Amadeus that kept the entire structure bound together, not Alaya). Scribe, Captain and Ranger were pretty much strictly Amadeus' friend rather than Alaya, Warlock only slightly less so. We don't have anything as definitive about Assassin but there have been hints that there too it is Amadeus that is the glue. With what we've seen even for Alaya Amadeus was the glue and not some over-arching fondness for the others.

The only reason that it wasn't Black that became Dread Emperor is that he did not want it. All the other Calamities would have chosen him every time over Alaya if he had shown any inkling that he would have accepted.

[Mammon](#)

Yes, I agree that Warlock definately preferred Black as a friend much more. However you are sharing Black's misassumption in this: that this means that Warlock would pick his side over Malicia's by sheer sentimentality. In some cases he would, but not as often as Black assumes. Warlock still has some patriotic pride to help Praes maybe, or at least help its leader when he's asked to and provided the means and adequate payment. I remember that somewhere in book 4's interludes on the now destroyed port

city he even mused on how Alaya assumed him to be much more in Black's favour vs her than he really was.

Black's the glue that kept the Calamities together, but he didn't 'own' Warlock same as how Pilgrim wasn't an assured ally in her court yard in everything after he acknowledged her not being evil incarnate. While in many stories (and thus to many of us fan's nigh automatic assumption) this would've been the case. Which leads to the question: What else was he wrong about?

Doesn't matter. Axiom 55 as given this chapter is uni-alignmental, at least in most stories I know assuming they go deep enough to give the villains genuine depressive periods, so anything that makes Black sadder will only see to him becoming stronger once his theme music starts playing and he resolves himself to get back in the fray. May or may not be a terrible development depending on the situation and way of change.

[Liliet](#)

Amadeus has literally said this chapter that he acknowledges it's possible Wekesa wouldn't have told him.

So, uh, yeah.

Xinci

I do wonder at the exact accuracy of Cats statement on magic as she words things in a possibly inaccurate way for such things. Named Power takes a different method of acquisition and breach in some ways than Sorcery but this does not mean it is truly disconnected from it. A different clast of a greater system of rules and powers that were used to make the various dimensions. So perhaps most cannot usurp it due to one needing to fill a role with Purpose but the truly levels of connectedness seem nebulous. Perhaps it due to the Light and whatever name we may have for the inherent power of Evil if it isn't Night serve as big enough magical mactocosms for Cat to make such a distinction. I wonder if Masego would though.

The epigraph gives hope for Masego and the Knight getting their powers back.

Without Judgment aiding his own judgement Hanno will be easier to regulate. Even with the mistakes he will no doubt make he may study his lives to adapt to this pressure.

[Liliet](#)

Hanno already didn't present any problems in regulating. Not a single time did he actually defy local mortal authority, note.

Xinci

Nah he did, he answered to Judgement, and if Judgement found a problem with Cat he would intervene. Not saying that's a good or bad thing but he was a power she couldn't regulate completely.

[Liliet](#)

Judgement didn't tell him who to flip the coin for. He chose when to ask them, and he's been if anything more willing to cooperate with earthly authorities than any other hero on the goddamn continent in the entire series timeline.

[Tohron](#)

Hmm... it seems like the Dread Empress Victorious route may be happening after all. I'm not seeing any other way for Cat to extricate Amadeus from his current situation.

[Liliet](#)

So long as he doesn't kill himself after this, there's ways. Note that the Legions-in-Exile are still under impression they're carrying out HIS orders.

As for how Cat can assure that first condition... well. I'm just going to be crossing my fingers, here.

Soronel Haetir

So here's a nasty thought, remember the "Hall of Screams" from book 1? Has Amadeus done enough to have tried for the crown and failed by whatever magic animates that place?

[Liliet](#)

Ha.

Nice.

[Liliet](#)

So, hey, does anyone feel like talking about abusive relationships and logic employed by victims to justify and support them? And how Amadeus seems to be applying it in a spinning spray to absolutely everyone he cares about regardless of if they prompted him to or not?

"Surely this was my fault and not theirs" ™

[ninegardens](#)

I mean, partly.... but partly its a "I trust people to act according to their nature". You can't change parts of the system that aren't you, only your own decisions. If you want to learn, then in some sense everything is ALWAYS your fault.

The lesson you might learn is "I should have stabbed that abusive bastard with a knife, its my fault for not stabbing them", but the lesson is always something YOU could have done.

Liliet

There's a line, though. And the line right now is that Amadeus wanted to work with Alaya despite everything – despite the revelation of the planted commands – so badly, he fired Scribe over disrupting that possibility for him. And that he doesn't even learn the lesson that he should yell at Cat about what she did in hiding it from him, he just "doesn't blame her for it since he's the one who taught it to her". He's going with the "well if I hadn't PROVOKED them-" logic, where everyone gets to do whatever they want and he never REALLY confronts them about it or turns on them because of it.

His conclusion keeps being that he's still loyal to all of these people.

Except Eudokia who's been trying to stop him from being Like That. Ah, these inconvenient support systems hinting that something might be wrong with the picture and you might need to rethink your entire approach to relationships~

hakureireimu

He was already ready to kill Malicia to take her place during the peace talks; that's why he told Cat that it was about Eudokia and not Alaya. He fired Eudokia because she betrayed his trust; he can no longer trust that she will not plot behind his back.

Liliet

He was ready to kill Alaya because he was driven into a corner by her not contacting him, which happened because Eudokia burned that bridge behind his back.

That's the big sin she committed: she drove him into a confrontation he would give almost anything (but not the current stakes) to avoid.

sengachi

Oh that is a *fascinating* tale for Hanno to be going down. He's actually going to have to make his own judgements now isn't he?

[Liliet](#)

Eh.

In what situations has he flipped the coin so far?

- in confronting an evil villain actively right now fighting him. I, I think he's going to be fine making the call in that situation either way lmao;
- in being actively invited to ask Judgement's opinion on the situation. I think he's going to let out a long, happy sigh of relief over y'know no longer getting asked that. The next land dispute he's asked to arbitrate, he just flips them off while moonwalking backwards;
- in sorting out an intensely ambiguous situation where it's not clear who's on whose side and who did what. Yeah, if there's another Salian coup waiting in the future, Hanno's going to figure out another way to handle it. Is there, though?

In all other situations – aka most of them – he's been just fine relying on his own judgement of what is utterly obvious in being the right thing to do. He's been actively avoiding flipping the coin unless the person possibly maybe does deserve death and now's the time to do it if so. Remember how Arnaud unsettled him but there wasn't an obvious direct provocation so he stayed his hand?

He's just going to... keep doing that.

And I expect the range of 'well obviously' situations to slowly and naturally expand... 😊

[ninegardens](#)

"Gosh, I wonder if this abominable undead horror who is currently eating one of my teammates requires smiting"

Thomas Birch

Posting a comment to get the notifications 😊 loving this series.

Epilogue

"And on the first day of the year four hundred and ninety-three after the Declaration did a stranger slay High Lord Baraka Sahelian in the streets of Wolof, and she did not flee. Instead she challenged the Sahelians in such a manner: 'Come now, you who believe you might triumph over me, that I might teach you the

error of your ways.'"

– Extract from the Scroll of Dominion, twenty-fourth of the Secret Histories of Praes

Inch by painful inch, Malicia had dragged the Dread Empire of Praes out of the pit and herself along with it.

She allowed herself to feel a sliver of pride over that, though only for a passing moment. To grow conceited over victories would signal the beginning of a swift descent. Yet victories she had won, slowly and carefully laying the foundation for them until they could be brought to bear against her enemies. The throne that had been crumbling under her had been forged anew by the fresh blood she'd spilled abroad: watching the Imperial Court through the enchanted wall that said to be the work of Dread Emperor Sorcerous himself, Malicia read the lips of the highborn gathered before her. Rumours had swelled of the developments in Salia and the Free Cities. The sudden reverses against the Grand Alliance only echoed more loudly for the way it had before seemed on the rise to pre-eminence, restoring the prestige eroded by Ashuran depredations and the losses in Thalassina and Foramen. Malicia did not rejoice of this, for she knew every speck of that clout would be needed for what was yet to come. Though in dark days the High Seats and lesser nobles were more easily convinced of great changes, there were many who would balk at the mere setting of a precedent.

The crop before her, however, looked ripe for harvest. High Lady Abreha Mirembe's absence, for Alaya had refused to relieve her from her duties as Governess of the Blessed Isle, had naturally prompted protest from Aksum and the Mirembe. In attempt to make her influence keenly felt Abreha had ordered the lords and ladies sworn to Askum to refrain from attending court until she was summoned back to Ater, but to Malicia's eye this had backfired. Lord Kosu's lion-like mane of hair could be picked out from the crowd, as could Lady Sesay's famous enchanted dress of pure gold. Those two ranked among the most powerful vassals to Aksum, and another half dozen lesser nobility sworn to Abreha had ignored her edict and attended regardless. None whose holdings were close to the city of Aksum, for Abreha Mirembe's wrath would run hot at the defiance, but enough that the High Lady of Aksum's position was revealed for the worsening drought that it was. A year ago, Abreha had been but a few manoeuvres of having herself proclaimed Chancellor regardless of Malicia's opinion of the matter. Now the vultures were beginning to circle her, her defeats at the hands of General Sacker when she'd attempted to intervene in Callow having soured her position.

In the wake of the recall of the inaptly named Legions-in-Exile, the highborn of Praes had come to believe the entire affair a long-reaching scheme of hers and General Sacker one of her agents in humbling High Lady Abreha. Perhaps if Sacker's soldiers had

not so neatly slaughtered the Askum forward parties and driven the refugees back to the Blessed Isle – where they must now be fed at the expense of Abreha – her influence could have been salvaged, but the defeats had been both swift and utter. The Governess of the Blessed Isle was then left with the dilemma of either pursuing a punitive campaign into Callow and risking starting a war with Laure or admitting herself to have been almost contemptuously swatted down. Abreha had attempted to sidestep the issue by accusing General Sacker of treason, which the goblin general had answered in kind, which had been trouble at the time. Amadeus was a rebel in all but name and conceding to the shadow of his influence would have been a grave mistake. By stretching out giving answer, however, Malicia had been able to feign control of the situation and leave the High Lady of Aksum's support to wither on the vine.

With the currents within Praes mastered, it had been time turn her full efforts outwards. The League of Free Cities had been the easiest grounds to make gains in, and so where she had first concentrated her efforts. It had swiftly become clear that Penthes could be bought, courtesy of Amadeus sowing crippling chaos across the nobility during his last visit and Kairos Theodosian then pouring oil on the fire. Reaching an accord with the Tyrant of Helike had proved necessary, for through the Hierarch he wielded great influence over the rest of the League. They'd agreed on the Exarch-claimants that should be spared, and in binding them irremediably through participation in a darker scheme: the deployment of Still Water against the fleets of Nicae. From there, it was only a matter of ensuring that her position in the Free Cities was strong enough Kairos Theodosia's coming treachery could inflict only minor damage. The Magisterium was approached and promised protection from invasion until it had finished its cycle of replenishment for the Spears of Stygia. The deal had to be further sweetened with magical tomes, but in principle Malicia had no objection to an empowered Magisterium tying down the resources of neighbouring city-states.

Antagonizing Atalante had been as simple as inciting the Tyrant and other greats of the League to constantly and publicly slight some of their most beloved preachers, culminating in their delegation being forced to carry a nailed manuscript of the Book of All Things as a formal member during the conference in Salia. The utter humiliation and the rest of the League's acquiescence to it had made them walk away from the situation the moment they were no longer bound by law to be involved. The Secretariat's long-standing tendency to state neutrality when its interests were not being threatened – as well as the dire state of its coffers after maintaining so many mercenaries in its service for so long – meant that so long as they were not provoked they could be counted on to be neutral as well. All that was required then to utterly isolate the Tyrant of Helike had been to sever or turn Nicae from the rest, which Theodosian might have assumed to be

difficult given their shared treachery against the city and its young Basileus. And it had been a thorny problem for Malicia, she'd admit, at least until Catherine had returned to the surface and begun reminding the rest of Calernia of the looming threat she represented.

It'd only been a question of aiming at Basileus Leo Trakas in particular, from there, and he was not all that complicated a man.

The deceased Strategos whose authority he'd usurped had been a close ally of Cordelia Hasenbach, and now so was Catherine Foundling. A foundation for mistrust. She'd also had dealings with the Tyrant, at the best of times his enemy as well as his ally, and made the leading heroic lights of the Grand Alliance defer to her will several times. Best of all she had the soul of Akua Sahelian, the sole known user of Still Water, bound to her service. It'd not been all that difficult to tip wariness into fear and then fear into the making of mistakes. Not that her victory there had been as complete as it could have been, Malicia silently conceded. Kairos Theodosian had risen from the grave to spit on her plans one last time, a poisonous snake even in death. The Eyes had confirmed that one of his two foremost generals had sworn herself to the war against Keter while the other, General Basilia, had openly declared war on Penthes. A weakened Helike might be able to maul the even more desolate Nicae, should it support Penthes, but it would not find Penthes itself so easy a prey. The distance between the city-states was significant and marching there would involve making pacts with the states between them, which Malicia fully intended to sabotage.

Still, where the League of Cities might have informally been an ally to the Dread Empire instead it was likely to spiral into another civil war that tied it down for the foreseeable future. In the longer lay of things, the Empress would see what might be arranged. If the war went badly for General Basilia and her Helikeans, the Magisterium might yet be convinced to step in for easy spoils. And if it went well? Then the Magisterium it might yet be convinced to step in lest victory allow Helike to resume pre-eminence among the League. The Tyrant might have allowed his people to reach tall heights while he lived but in his death he had left them stranded and surrounded by potential enemies. There would be some pleasure in teaching Helike the consequences of its actions, Malicia would confess. Kairos Theodosian had been an atrocious little prick, convinced he was amusing and that his sneering smugness was somehow endearing. It'd been draining to deal with him even when he was genuinely trying to cooperate with her, and passing the duties to Ime had not been possible: the moment the little shit had sniffed out how abhorrent she found him, he'd insisted their bargaining be done only between rulers.

Steps coming from the deeper reach of the hidden corridor the Empress still stood in, studying her court as she awaited the proper time to enter, shook her out of her thoughts. Ime's pace was brisk, befitting urgent news. Malicia did not turn, eyes on the overly lingering courtesies Lady Nazar and the younger brother of Lord Salee – affair or scheme? The Salee and Nazar lands bordered one another, lending potential weight to either. It would not be the first time Lady Nazar allowed a foe's younger sibling into her bed as well as her plans.

"Speak," Malicia said, eyes moving to catch yet another of the thousand little details that might allow her to keep the court under her thumb.

"Duchess Kegan had our envoys drawn and quartered," Ime said. "In front of cheering crowds."

Unpleasant, but not unexpected. The Deoraithe were not an expansionist people by nature and with Kegan's appointment to Governess-General of Callow they'd begun accruing honours in the kingdom as the duchess appointed kin and allies to offices. Competent ones, sadly, which only added to the faction's influence. It meant that the Black Queen's promise to the Deoraithe of independence-in-all-but-name along with a tight military alliance was a very difficult bribe to better.

"The Legions?" Malicia asked.

"The Okoro mages cadres were made welcome by Marshal Nim, and construction of the ritual grounds is progressing at a steady pace," Ime replied.

Good, the Empress thought. When the time came and signal was sent by the Exile Legions mages, the ritual could be initiated and the armies forced back into Creation from these 'Twilight Ways'. Returnign exactly at the centre of fortified killing ground, manned by her more loyal armies. High officers of dubious loyalty would be taken hostage and kept at the Tower, the unsalvageable purged and more trustworthy men forced in place. Heavy-handed but necessary. The Legions of Terror needed to be unshakeably hers before Amadeus returned. It meant more blunt action than she would have preferred employing, but in these times such bluntness could serve as a reminder of her strength as well.

"And?" Malicia asked.

There would be more. Neither of those reports had been time sensitive.

"Lord Amadeus has gone missing," Ime hesitantly said. "Neither our people in Salia nor in the Army of Callow know where he is. We believe Queen Catherine herself is unaware."

Alaya stilled.

"You are certain?" she said.

"It is like he vanished into thin air," Ime said.

He was not dead, Alaya decided. She would have... felt it, somehow. She would have. And though the Empress had been harsh in demonstrating to him the futility of defying her, it was no more than he had earned. He'd know that, understand how measured the answer had been considering the gravity of his mistakes. Had she not held her hand until he claimed a right to her very throne? Even allowing for what had no doubt been poisonous whispers by Scribe – who, it was now clear, after decades was finally done pretending to be anything but an enemy – there was no light under which those actions could be seen that was anything but a betrayal. It was, Malicia knew, better this way. Now there was no longer anything let wondered and unspoken, no question of what would happen if he turned against her. He had, and he had lost. Swiftly, utterly, without ever landing a blow in return. And with that question finally laid to rest, they could forge a fresh understanding of who and what they were. Amadeus would not have taken his own life over such a thing, for sober admissions of his blunders were at the heart of who he was. He was still alive, which meant he was coming home. One way or another.

"It is likely he went into the Twilight Ways," the Empress said.

"Agreed," Ime said, standing by her side. "And though I know it displeases you to even consider this, Your Dread Majesty-"

"He could be returning as a foe," Malicia said. "I am aware."

Amadeus yet commanded loyalty with much of the Legions and had many sympathizers among the Empire's bureaucracy. Scribe had seen to that. Some of the High Seats might be using to use him as a stalking horse for their own bid for the Tower, too, High Lady Abreha most of all. There might even be some lesser nobles that would genuinely rally to his banner, should he raise it. Though despised by most highborn, his tenure as her Black Knight had also seen him become widely feared. For some that meant respect, especially with families who had martial inclinations by tradition. His Duni birth meant most would not even consider him a possible claimant, true, but there would be some with greater interest in deeds than skin. More worrying were his ties to the Clans and the currently rebelling Tribes, though Malicia had already begun to check those potential threats with measures of her own.

"I would win," the Dread Empress of Praes said.

"You would," Ime agreed. "And so I caution you of assassination."

Malicia glanced at her spymistress, almost amused.

"You believe he'd run me through in open court?" she asked.

"At this point?" Ime said. "Yes. Or, at least, I'm unsure enough of the answer I have to consider the possibility."

"Without his Name, I could have him frozen with a word," Malicia noted.

"That is no reason to expose yourself unduly," Ime said.

"I do not intend to," Malicia flatly said. "I am not a debutante thankfully accepting an ally's antidote, Ime. Regardless of his reasons he has failed and betrayed me. It will be years before I can even begin to trust him as I once did."

She paused.

"But I will not rob myself of what could be restored out of petty fear," Alaya said. "He will have a place in my court, should he return."

What was there left to fear, after all? In Praes, her vise was tightening around all who might yet oppose her. In the Free Cities, she stood queenmaker and holder of strings as the crows gathered above. In the far west she had sown chaos and confusion, stranded for months the Army of Callow, and last of all she stood the sole ally of Keter on Calernia. The Dead King *needed* her, lest the entire continent band against him as the sole crucible of darkness. Lest every hero turn north, the sum of every Hell and Heaven march against him. Malicia would betray him, in the end. That much had never been in doubt. She would betray him the moment the armies of the Grand Alliance were savaged beyond ability to harm her, and in the uneasy peace that followed the Dread Empire of Praes would stand without peer. Hers to mold into what it should be, as she reigned untouchable from atop the Tower.

The storm had come for Dread Empress Malicia, First of Her Name, and she had *beaten* it. She had survived the crucible thrust upon her by Below, and now she would claim her dues from Creation.

"It is time," the Empress said, eyes on the court. "Have them readied."

"By your will," Ime said, bowing low.

Malicia was left to stand alone, watching her court. Where she would soon enter and introduce before the lords and ladies of Praes the beginning of a new age. From the Northern Steppes, chieftains had come. Blackspear, Graven Bone and Stag-Crowned. Large, powerful clans of the southern stretches. Their chieftains

had come to be proclaimed Lords of the Steppes, empowered to collect tribute in the name of the Tower from the other clans while themselves standing exempt of it. There were some among the court who would despise this, and what would follow yet more. For there was one more awaiting, hidden. She would be presented as the very first of her kind: High Lady Wither of Foramen, having renounced her former title of Matron as she returned Foramen to the Praesi fold. The Great Game, it always changed.

The only thing that didn't was that Alaya of Satus always, *always* won.

—

Tariq listened in wonder to the roars of the crowd. Mere days ago the people of Salia had been angrily rioting, boiling out onto the streets, and yet now the same mob was cheering Cordelia Hasenbach so vociferously it seemed as if the very sky above might collapse from the ruckus. Merovins Square was considered one of the great works of Procer, the great Salian gathering place built over generations of the rule of the family of the same name. In the upper reaches of the part of the city men called the Joinery, massive arches of pale stone formed a perfect circle above great open avenues. Statues and monuments of every stripe dotted the square, some so worn by ages that the faces had been eaten through by rain and sleet while others were but a few years old. The tall, slender monument to the dead of what Procerans called the 'Great War', for example. The twisted marble, showing a ring of men and women both dragging each other up and pushing each other down, had chilled him when he'd first glimpsed it. The sculptor has shown great skill in making the faces move from triumph to agony and grief under the vagaries of the 'Ebb and the Flow'. A fitting monument to a bloody civil war.

And now a young father was hoisting up his daughter so that she could peek over the weeping face of a marble woman and have a better look at the First Prince addressing the people of Salia. Merovins Squared had filled with thousands upon thousands, like a sea of people split by elegant islands of stone and metal. From where Tariq stood, under the shade of a great roofed terrace overlooking the magnificent wooden pulpit from which Cordelia Hasenbach was addressing the crowd, he could only barely make out the words the First Prince was speaking. Yet there was no mistaking their thundering approval, the way it echoed through the sunny afternoon air. He was not the only one who had been invited to wait here, far from it. The Grand Alliance's shine must be burnished, for the people to put their hope in it, and so the great names had all been brought. Young Razin and Aquiline, pretending to be speaking politics over wine when they were truly flirting in that heady, hesitant way of those still unsure of the affection of the other. Tall and serious Yannu Marave, in the cast of whose face Tariq could not help but seeing Sintra. Itima

Ifriqui, the sole of the Blood could still remember him having a full head of hair, though their long acquaintance had yielded little fondness. Respect, yes, but the Peregrine had always held in distaste the fondness for bloody vengeance of the Brigand's Blood.

Others too, the seconds of their realms: Princess Rozala Malanza and Lady Vivienne Dartwick, seated in the shade and speaking in low tones of granaries and treasuries. Tariq's opinion had already been sought over the matter of a temporary common treasury for the Grand Alliance, though he'd demurred from giving an opinion. It was a sound notion, as far as he was concerned, but he must wean the Blood from the habit of seeking his council. The chances he would survive the coming war were slim, and the surrender of his *crown* had only made him warier of speaking on matters of rule. Yet it was the last here on the terrace that his eyes lingered over. Hanno of Arwad, once the Sword of Judgement and perhaps one day once more, was leaning against the balustrade and look down at the crowd. At his side the Black Queen of Callow, hair loose down her back and a light smile on her face, was looking down with him and speaking without reserve. The easy cordiality that held between the two, natural as a sparrow's flight, had surprised him. Perhaps it should not have been, for those two had never fought before and for a hero sworn to the Seraphim the White Knight could be said to be... unusual.

Tariq approached, as much out of curiosity as desire to converse.

"- wait, so if you recall someone that understood High Arcana, wouldn't you-"

"Only so long as I am within the memories," the White Knight replied. "Which makes you correct, but the knowledge itself impossible to use."

"You still get to learn languages by the fucking basketful, so I wouldn't complain," Catherine Foundling drily said. "Even back when I still had Learn, it took me months to learn what I knew. Even had to learn Chantant the hard way."

"I find Tolesian significantly easier," Tariq admitted, coming to stand at Hanno's side. "Though that might be because of the tradertongue and Lunara loan words."

"Everyone should just speak Lower Miezán," the Black Queen suggested.

"Chantant is the single most spoken language on Calernia, I believe," the White Knight said. "Should it not be the chosen tongue, by virtue of this?"

"It's got more exceptions than a Wasteland loyalty pledge," Catherine Foundling snorted. "Over my dead body."

The Grey Pilgrim's brow almost rose, for though the Black Queen was known as something of a wit and prone to bantering, there seemed to be a genuine rapport between the two he'd not expected. They were both young and attractive, Tariq thought, so perhaps... No, he decided, flicking them a long and considering glance. The Black Queen had a roving eye, a fact he'd heard had been the subject of great interest among Proceran royalty, but the White Knight had no reputation for dalliances. And seemingly little interest in them, which the Grey Pilgrim could only approve of considering the days they lived in. Below them, the crowd roared again,

"The First Prince is in fine form today," Tariq said.

"She is a gifted speaker," Hanno noted. "As one would expect of a woman bearing her title."

"She's offering them hope," the Black Queen said. "She could be stumbling over half those sentences and still they'd cheer fit to shake the earth."

"The Grand Alliance has lost a founding member, with Ashur," Tariq cautioned.

"The League of Free Cities retreats, or joins our ranks," the White Knight said. "And the dreaded Black Queen has been tamed and added to our ranks. There is reason to rejoice."

Young Catherine replied with what he believed to be fairly obscene language in Kharsum, to Hanno's apparent amusement, but Tariq was grimacing. Precious little of the League had joined, no matter the posturing, and Tariq mistrusted those that had. General Pallas and her ten thousand, the appallingly named *Tyrant's Own*, might not have the stomach to truly see through the war to the north. It remained to be seen, and soldiers were not to be turned away, but these were not to be relied on.

"Best for all of us that Cordelia has her day," the Black Queen said. "If parading us all before the crowd puts some spine back in Procer, I'll even smile and say pretty things."

"Your generosity is remarkable," Tariq said, only half teasing.

Most of her allies had, after all, until recently been at war with her. The Peregrine cast a discreet look at young Razin and Aquiline once more, heart clenching. Blood, both of them, and that would matter in the days to come. But Aquiline Osenia had not so long ago tried to kill the man she now courted and yet now the smiled softly at one another. Razin Tanja, defeated and orphaned, had not been embittered or broken but instead risen past what he had been taught. Tariq had heard of his words, of the renunciation of the honour killings. Of the harsh words he'd spoken at what Levant had become. And Gods, but Tariq was feeling

his years. His soul had been wounded, and his body was nearing the end of its days. There was a future for the Dominion, but it lay not in Yannu Marave, who embodied at once the best and the worst of Levant, or in Itima Ifriqui's borderlands savagery. Yet those two, the seed of what they might yet become, it would need to be nurtured. Protected. And he might not live long enough to see this through.

"I would, Queen Catherine, ask of you a favour," Tariq said.

Dark eyes studied him, amusement sliding off her face.

"Funny, that," the Black Queen said. "I've been meaning to ask one of you as well."

"A trade might be arranged, then," the old hero said, pleased. "When the Grand Alliance marches north, you are to be among the great warleaders of it."

"Seems likely," the young priestess acknowledged.

"There are two of mine I would have you take under your wing," Tariq said. "Under your protection."

She followed his gaze to Aquiline and Razin.

"You've got plans for them," the Black Queen said.

"It is a new world you would make," the Grey Pilgrim said. "I will not have Levant left behind."

Slowly, she nodded.

"I am told you might be one of the few people alive capable of removing a compulsion from someone's mind," Queen Catherine said.

"I have some experience with this," Tariq acknowledged.

Sorceries to that effect were more easily disrupted, but even alchemies and Speaking could be purged if one knew the way. The Peregrine had greatly benefitted from the tutelage of the Ophanim in this.

"I believe Dread Empress Malicia to have planted commands among several officers of the Army of Callow," the Black Queen said. "I'd request your assistance in removing them without harming the officers in question, which I'm told could be... difficult."

"This I would offer free of recompense," Tariq frankly said. "I will not begrudge you my hand's work when it is to be used to aid your soldiers in fighting for the preservation of mankind."

She seemed surprised, which had him pushing down a grimace. It had not been unfounded a conclusion, but Tariq was attempting to

bridge the gap and vexed to see how deep he had helped dig this one. The Grey Pilgrim was not unaware that there was only so long one could keep treating someone as an enemy before they became one in truth.

"I'll keep the favour, then," the Black Queen said, eyes watchful as she studied him.

Below the crowd roared anew at some fresh turn of phrase of the First Prince. White, Grey and Black, the three of them looked at the lone silhouette of Cordelia Hasenbach. The stubborn soul that would not allow the Principate to fall to its knees, no matter the coming doom.

"The Tower stirs," Tariq quietly said. "The Ophanim whisper of it."

"I suspect," the Black Queen quietly said, "that the Tower is about to have a great deal of trouble on its hands."

Suspect. Was it true, then, that she did now know where the Carrion Lord had gone?

"And if Praes sallies forth?" the White Knight asked.

"Then I will get the east in order the hard way," Catherine Foundling replied, tone steady as stone.

It was a small, almost imperceptible thing. Tariq Fleetfoot saw it anyway, as did Hanno of Arwad. A flicker, a spark. When the Queen of Callow had spoken the words and meant them, something had begun to take shape.

A Name, Gods help them all.

—

It was a beautiful realm, Amadeus thought.

A summer night unending, starry and warm. The kind of realm that made for a pleasant journey even when the sum of your earthly possessions was a horse, bundled armour and a fortnight's worth of rations. Bridle in hand, sleeves rolled up on his tunic as the sword at his hip moved with his leg, he wandered down the road snaking forward through the Twilight Ways.

Amadeus no longer had his armies, not even his personal guard — he had left them in Catherine's hands, requesting she safeguard them through the strife to come.

Amadeus no longer had spies, or wealth or even the power of a Name. He had sent away Scribe, failed Captain and lost Warlock. Assassin was gone, if not from Creation then at least from his service.

Alaya would see him kneeling, or forever gone from her sight.

Tabula rasa, a blank slate. After so many decades, the thought of it should have angered him. Should have brought in him despair and bitterness, for all he had built went up in smoke. Instead he felt relieved. Like a weight had been lifted from his shoulder. It was just him, now. Him and a sword and a plan against all the world. He looked up at the starry sky and laughed.

"Evening, stranger," a voice drawled. "Where might you be headed, that it has you in such a merry mood?"

Leaning back against a tree, shrouded in darkness, Hye Su was gazing at him with mild interest. It'd been years since they last saw each other, and she'd hardly changed at all – save for the burns on the side of her face, a mark of Summer challenged but not beaten.

"East, I would think," Amadeus mused.

"Whatever for?" Ranger asked, tone nonchalant.

Voice high and clear, he sang.

"The last is strangest, she said to them
The easiest and the most solemn
For when the tower is yours to claim
You will have forgotten why you came."

There was a moment of silence, and then the Lady of the Lake pushed herself off the tree.

"Might be I'll walk with you a while, then," Hye Su said.

"I thought you might," Amadeus smiled.

And into the starry night they went, side by side.

Shikkarasu

One.
More.
Week.
We are strong. We can do this.

WeeMadCanuck

I have been reading this since I discovered it in December. I've never spent so many nights reading till I dropped, and I suspect I never will again. This story is a masterpiece.

NerfContessa

Agreed.

And aside of my very favored series of real world books, me neither.

Thank you, erraticerrata, for letting us have part of your world.

therealgridlock

When I first round Worm, i read through years in months, and then was mad when I was caught up.

When I first round Grrlpower, i read through years in weeks, then was mad when I was caught up.

When I first round With This Ring, i read through years in a month or so, and then was mad when I caught up.

When I first found girl genius, i head through over a decade in a few nights, and now am maddened that even their prodigious upload schedule isn't enough.

I am not even done reading through PGTE and i know I'm going to be furious when it's done or I'm caught up, because few things catch my attention so much.

Twig was a beautiful story, Ward was a wonderful conclusion, i didn't finish pact (unforseen circumstances) and i was caught up on pale before I started reading this. I imagine I will then read through a few months of pale in a few days after I am done with this.

Physical mediums may be great, but boy howdy it's easy to absolutely devour millions of words and decades of work online.

Komplode

Hype

[BarthHumphries](#)

Is this story done?

[knockoffnikolai](#)

Erratic said in the comments that the first chapter of Book VI is coming out on Monday (Jan 6).

General Chaos

Only around 10 hours left. Jesus fucking Christ, I am so hyped for this thing.

Someperson

I'm a bit behind the times, but I wanted to comment on what appears to be a name in the works for Catherine. When I catch up to the story we'll see if any further revelations concerning her Name have happened.

A name comes with a lot of strings attached, and loss of protection against Bard besides, but it is also very fitting that one who would reform the Named do so from within their ranks.

As for what name in particular is unfolding...

- 1) The name was birthed from Catherine saying she would call the tower to heel if necessary, and meaning it.
- 2) The wish at the core of her name is for peace, and specifically her vision of what that peace looks like lies inside the Accords.
- 3) She has lately been having second thoughts about putting "justifications only matter to the just" on her flag. Obviously, she is no servant of above and never will be, but it feels like she may be headed towards one of the roles like Ranger, who isn't strongly hero or villain and is cast in those roles depending on the story.

It looks to me an awful lot like some kind of Name to impartially police all of Calernia and enforce the rules of engagement found in the Accords is being forged. Which is a really good sign for Catherine's endgame goal of fashioning the Accords into expectation etched into the fabric of Fate.

NerfContessa

3xcellent book, 3rraticerratica. As 3xp3cted,.but still bears mentioning.

As for the stirrings of a name, cat will likely refuse it agqijln, unless it fits her plans really really well.

Ideas: High Justice, peace ringer, or maybe even the last villain?
